



THE BOOK OF EXODUS

A STUDY PREPARED BY

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Adult Education Series: The Book of Exodus

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Introduction

Every social group has core stories, customs, and histories – factual or otherwise – that contribute to its character and serve as the building blocks of collective identity. Growing up in the United States, stories about the Revolutionary War and the writing and adoption of the Constitution are just two examples of our core stories. There are others, of course, and not all of them are shared in the same way across our overall culture. Our core stories about the Civil War, and slavery, are inevitably understood and interpreted differently by many by virtue of our race, our geography, and the experiences of our families of origin. Similarly, Frank Yamada, the Assistant Professor of Old Testament History whose Exodus study series is the basis for our study, inherited stories about the struggles of his father’s family during World War 2, when more than 120,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans were removed from their homes, businesses, and property, and relocated into internment/concentration camps.

The Book of Exodus tells two such core stories: the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt, and the establishment of God’s covenant with Israel. These stories serve as the core of Israelite identity. The stories of God’s deliverance of Israel from the bondage of Egypt and the establishment of God’s covenant is also foundational within our own Christian faith. These stories have also served as the core traditions upon which Latin American, Black, Feminist, and Gay Liberation theologies were formed and developed. At the heart of the book is God’s self-revealing purpose. God is made known to Israel through the liberation of the people from bondage and oppression and through the establishment of the covenant with Israel at Sinai.

Structure, Context, and Major Themes

When considering the exodus of the Israelites, it’s important to note that God liberates the people from their slavery for a purpose – to be able to worship their God freely. Given that, the entire book divides into two parts:

- Exodus 1:1-15:21 Liberation from Egypt
- Exodus 15:22-40:38 Liberation to serve God

The first section begins with a description of the Hebrews’ life of bondage in Egypt and the story of Moses’ call. The main conflict in this section is between Pharaoh and God, which culminates in Exodus 14-15, where Pharaoh’s armies are destroyed and the Hebrews escape. The second section begins with the Hebrews’ entering the Sinai region. The geographical shift also marks an identity shift for the people as they transition from a life of slavery into the covenantal relationship as the “people of God.” In both the first and second parts, the reality of the abiding presence of God is a key theme.

Throughout the book, these central themes are tempered with human responses of faithfulness and disobedience. Importantly, the covenant – the treaty – God makes with the people calls for the people’s faithfulness.

Interpretive Assumptions

Every study of scripture is done from within the viewpoint of the individual. Participants/interpreters in this study session can, and undoubtedly will, arrive at diverse interpretations. Their race, ethnicity, life's experiences, gender, sexual orientation, and other considerations will have an impact on the way they understand and relate to the texts. As we continue through this study, I welcome hearing all participants' reflections and interpretations.

Reflections

1. How does your own gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, race, and/or social class affect the way you interpret the Bible? What kind of differences in reading and interpretation might that lead to, compared to the interpretations of others?
2. The exodus tradition was very important for African Americans in the context of slavery. As we continue through this study, consider how other people who have experienced oppression interpret the exodus.

Session 1

The Family Story Continues – Exodus 1:1-1:22

The course of history can change with the smallest of events. A solitary act can often have profound effects that redirect the flow of human life. The opening chapters of Exodus narrate such a shift. Three distinct movements can be traced within this opening:

- The explicit link between the ancestral traditions of Genesis and Israel's life in Egypt;
- A changed reality from favor to oppression
- The resistance of faithful women within the community

At one end of the chapter, God's promises to the ancestors are remembered through the lineage of Jacob's family (1:1-7). In the middle scene, the paranoid Egyptian empire strikes back against the growing Israelite multitude (1:8-14). The resulting slavery and oppression provide the setting for the last episode in the chapter, in which the Hebrew midwives respond with faithful courage in the face of hostile authority (1:15-22). On either side of the oppression, hope and loyalty remain strong. Though the new realities of tyranny threaten to undo the Hebrew community, the promises to the ancestors secure the people's hopes to God's faithful actions in the past. Similarly, the courageous actions of devout people in the present, in this case the daring noncompliance of the Hebrew midwives, serve to give strength and salvation in the present. Divine and human faithfulness work together in the beginning of the book to counter oppression.

Ancestral Traditions

Chapter 1 opens with a brief accounting of Jacob's family lineage, pulling attention back to the stories of Israel's ancestors as found in Genesis (Gen. 46:8-27). It also hearkens back to the language of creation:

“But the Israelites were *fruitful* and prolific; they *multiplied* and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was *filled* with them.” (Ex. 1:7). These are the same verbs found in Genesis 1:28 when God blesses the human beings.

This intentional connection between Exodus and the world of the ancestors serves two purposes:

- It has implications for the way one thinks about God. It connects Israel's sojourn in Egypt with God's past promises. The children of Israel have yet to enter into the good land, but they are well on their way to becoming a great nation that lives under God's blessing.
- It says something about Israel's continuity with itself. The Israelite numbers have become so large that the people's presence threatens the pharaoh's sense of national security. The genealogical reference to Jacob's family marks the transition from family to nation. It also reaffirms the fact that the nation's roots emerge from the humble beginnings of Israel's ancestors. Remembering one's roots is an important key to identity. An empire always seeks to have dominion over the minds and hearts of its subjects, nullifying the particularity of different people's cultures and histories. Memory acts as an agent of

resistance to such imperialistic tendencies by keeping alive a particular group's connection to its past.

Reflections

1. The biblical witness often portrays human life as being caught between God's promises and the harsh realities of life. How does a person live in this tension between God's past faithfulness and the present struggles?
2. There are many events in our personal and collective life throughout history that create an abrupt change in the way that we view reality. What are some examples of this that you can think of? When the world as we know it turns upside down, how do we feel? How do we respond?

From Favor to Oppression

Exodus 1:6 recounts Joseph's death, marking a generational transition – the first generation of Israelites in Egypt has passed away. The next verse notes a similar generational passing for the Egyptians, noting a new king “who did not know Joseph.” In the previous administration, Joseph and his family received honored status. The new king, however, decides to enforce a policy of oppression upon his Israelite subjects removing them from places of honor and subjecting them to slavery and oppression. Pharaoh's policies are based on his lack of knowledge of Joseph and the Israelites (v. 8) and his fear of the people's increasing numbers (vv. 9-10), eventually escalating to a national scale. (v. 12). By the end of the chapter, all of Egypt has become afraid of the Israelite population growth. With increased fear comes a more ruthless form of slavery. However, as the persecution intensifies, the Israelites continue to multiply and spread.

When the ruthless work of slavery fails to inhibit the growth of the Israelite people, Pharaoh resorts to more drastic measures, instructing (v. 15) the Hebrew midwives to kill all of the male children who are born to the Israelites. The language here is ambiguous – “Hebrew midwives” or “midwives of the Hebrews” could mean that the women were either Israelite or Egyptian – but in either case, the midwives act as heroic agents on noncompliance in the face of the empire's decree. In spite of the royal order, these women choose to fear God (v. 17, 21), siding not with Pharaoh but with God and the oppressed.

Reflections

1. How can memory be used to resist the imperialistic tendency that seeks to erase the particular expressions and histories of diverse cultures? Can you think of any examples?
2. In the U.S., many have used the metaphor of the “melting pot” to talk about the inherent unity/homogeneity within the nation. This image, however, often does a disservice to the many distinct cultures that have come to the States. What are some potentially harmful effects of grouping all people into a more unified but homogeneous whole?

The Resistance of Faithful Women

The faithfulness, ingenuity, and courage of the Hebrew midwives remind us that human actions matter in the face of an oppressive culture.

God is not overtly present in these early chapters to deliver Israel from its oppression. The only time that God is an active subject throughout Ex. 1:1-22 is in v. 20, when God deals favorably with the midwives. Beyond this one reference, God appears only in relation to the women's conscientious resistance.

In times of oppression and suffering, God may seem passive or only minimally present to act. Even when God's promises are recalled, the present realities of a ruthless empire can overwhelm people at any point in history. The opening chapter of Exodus reminds its audience that God remains present with those who act faithfully on behalf of the oppressed. Shiphrah, Puah, and the rest of the Hebrew midwives remind the contemporary audience that moments of liberation can take shape in the faithful living of those who fear God.

Reflections

1. Give some contemporary examples of people who sought to right the wrongs of oppression. How did/do such people make a difference in society? How can a person live a faithful life of working for liberation/justice today?