

“Exodus”

*Exodus 2:23-3:6; Exodus 13:3-5; Exodus 13:17-22;
Exodus 14:30; Exodus 16:3-4; Exodus 20:1-2*

This is THE salvation event of the Hebrew Scriptures, remembered and reflected upon in the many centuries to come. God has rescued them and is bringing them back to Canaan, the land promised Abraham centuries before. This is God’s work—God is in motion!



After the lengthy family stories in Genesis, the book of Exodus opens differently than we might think it would. A couple of centuries have passed. The Israelites are enslaved and God is largely absent, staying so until the closing verses of chapter 2, when God “remembers” the Israelites and acts. It seems odd to us that God would need to remember anything—that is a clue that something else is going on. For the Hebrews, speaking of God “remembering” was a way to say that God is now taking action. It is fruitless to wonder why not earlier or later; all the text tells us is that God is now ready to act at the end of chapter two. Thus, at the beginning of the third chapter, God calls Moses to an unexpected vocation. Walter Brueggemann elaborates for us:

The startling moment of this narrative is when the silence is broken. Israel cries out. We are not told why. No theological reason is given; the cry is neither God-induced nor God-directed. The beginning point of the exodus is rooted not in any explicitly theological claim, but in this elemental fact that human bodies can absorb so much, and then will rebel, assert, and initiate. The crying, groaning bodies of the slaves found enough voice to say that their circumstance is not right, acceptable, or sustainable. . . . Only now, after the cries, is there a sustained statement about God. God is now the subject of four crucial verbs: God *heard* (שמע (ע די šāma’), God *remembered* (זכר zākar), God *saw* (ראה rā’â), and God *knew* (יָדָא’ yāda’). God heard their groaning. These were not groans addressed to God, but the hearing caused the remembering. The voicing of pain drives God back into the book of Genesis, to the ones to whom God is already committed. . . . The text does not say, as the NRSV has it, “God took notice of *them*” (emphasis added). It is only, “God knew,” without an object. We are left to imagine what God knew. God knew that these slaves were connected to the people of Genesis. God knew that promises were yet to be kept, requiring powerful intervention. God knew, because of old memories, abiding promises, present pain, and audible groans. God knew and so had to act. All of chapters 1–2 have built toward these powerful verbs that witness to God’s powerful, sovereign purpose.¹

The Hebrews might have felt that God had forever abandoned them, but no, God would rescue them, break their chains of bondage. For God is faithful and God had made a covenant with Abraham and with Isaac and with Jacob. God had made promises to them and, through them, to all the world. Now, at the end of chapter 2, it is time to get on with it.

A burning bush?

Moses had grown up with mighty Pharaoh, the god-king of Egypt (see beginning of Exodus 2). But now he was tending a flock in the Sinai wilderness, after having fled Egypt. Moses knew that he was a Hebrew and when he had seen an Egyptian overseer beating a Hebrew slave, Moses had lost control and struck the slave-master, killing him. So Moses had fled across the Red Sea, settled into a new life, and had married. But the flock he tended wasn’t even his own; the animals belonged to his father-in-law. Nonetheless, Moses looked after them as they walked in the shadow of mighty Mt. Horeb (also known as Mt. Sinai).

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 1994–2004

One day, Moses noticed a burning bush in the distance and went to check it out. As he approached the bush, he saw that even though flames licked upward, the bush wasn't being consumed by fire. Then he heard a voice calling out "Moses, Moses!" And so began Moses's education at the feet of God. Even from those first moments, it was clear that this one calling him was holy and that Moses was not. He was told to remove his sandals, for even the ground on which Moses stood was now holy ground. And as this god identified himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses hid his face in fear. Can a mortal, sinful man survive an encounter with the Holy One? Terence Fretheim, a very helpful Old Testament scholar, takes us a little deeper into Moses's encounter with the God he would come to know:

Moses hides his face, but certainly not for long. For the next few chapters, Moses and God engage in what can only be called a *face-to-face encounter* (cf. Num. 12:8), during which Moses is anything but deferential. God's word to Moses is of such a character that it draws the other into a genuine conversation. The exchange with God moves from worshipful deference to animated dialogue. Divine holiness does not inhibit human response, even on the part of one who is "slow of speech" (4:10). Moreover, the word of the holy God now articulated (vv. 7–10) bespeaks, not distance and judgment, but closeness and concern. The holy God enters into the suffering of the people and makes it his own (3:7). As in Hosea 11:9 and Isaiah 12:6, God is "the Holy One *in your midst*."

The emphasis throughout is *on the divine initiative*. It is God who confronts Moses and calls him to a task. Moses does not prepare for the encounter, nor does he seek it. He is surprised by what happens...God's creative work in Moses' life to this point has shaped a human being with endowments suited for the tasks ahead. While the specific encounter with God brings new insights and a changed direction for life, an informed creation theology will affirm many continuities with Moses' past.²

God is so patient with Moses, who offers up reason after reason why he is not the man for the job. This encounter may be about the divine initiative, but Moses wants a way out. He wants to know exactly who it is that is sending him on this mission. So God reveals his name.³ What if the people don't believe me? Moses asks. So, God gives Moses the power to do miraculous signs. But I don't speak well, Moses reminds God. God assures Moses that God will be his mouth. Finally, Moses admits he just doesn't want to do this, "O my Lord, please send someone else." Understandably frustrated with Moses, God gives him Aaron, his brother, to speak for him. This is to be Moses' vocation and there is just no getting out of it. These are God's purposes and Moses is God's choice.

God is patient, but, nonetheless, God gets angry with Moses' endless excuses (4:17). In fact, even in this initial encounter at the burning bush, you wonder why God doesn't just move on. But this episode reveals a deeper truth about God. *God's patience is born of God's love*; his relentless pursuit of his people over the centuries demonstrates God's doggedly patient determination to rescue first the Israelites and then all the world from sin and darkness. Why such patience? Because God is love, plain and simple.

When it doesn't go well

You've probably seen the movie. How does it go when Moses and Aaron confront Pharaoh? Not well is an understatement. The Egyptian king scoffs, "Who is the Lord, that I should heed him and let Israel go?" Fretheim notes that Pharaoh asks the right question; indeed, it is the question we are asking:

Who is Yahweh? Ironically, Pharaoh gets the question right. This question will go ringing through the pages that follow. Pharaoh's (and the Egyptians') knowing is a divine goal (cf. 7:17; 8:10, 22; 9:14, 29;

² Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 56–57.

³ YHWH is the common English transliteration of the Hebrew name God reveals to Moses at the burning bush. This name was so sacred to the Jews that it came to be spoken only by the high priest, only in the temple, and only on one day each year, Yom Kippur. When Jews read their Scripture and came upon the name of God they would say *Adonai* instead, the Hebrew word for "Lord." In keeping with the Hebrew tradition, our English translations substitute LORD (all small caps) in the Old Testament at each place YHWH appears. Thus, "the LORD God" in our Old Testaments is actually "YHWH God" in the Hebrew.

10:2; 11:7; 14:4, 17), at least in part fulfilled in 9:27; 10:16; and 14:25. As we have seen (1:8), knowing has an effect on doing, and Pharaoh's not knowing Yahweh has disastrous results on God's creation. Even more, a goal of the narrator is the readers' knowing. The readers are invited, not to assume that the answer to Pharaoh's question is clear, but to build up an answer as they read and ponder and explore the nuances of the narrative. The very name of Yahweh, "I will be who I am," promises that the identity of this God of Israel will become more fully known as events unfold, both to Israel (10:2) and to Egypt.⁴

But all that is to come, for Pharaoh orders that the Israelite slaves now must make their bricks without using any straw supplied by the Egyptians; they will have to gather their own, making their task impossible. Not surprisingly, the Israelites turn on Moses and Aaron; so far, they have only made things worse. Again, not surprisingly, Moses then confronts God, "Why did you mistreat these people? Why did you send me? . . . You have done nothing at all!"

We might expect that God would respond in anger again, but he does not. Instead, God reassures Moses that God will lift his "mighty hand" and elaborates on what is to come. But it is too late for the Israelites, their spirits are broken. So God sends Moses and Aaron back to Pharaoh.

The Confrontation

The story of the plagues often confounds people. What are they really about? What is this "hardening of the heart" business. The best way to understand is to see that this is a confrontation between pharaoh, who views himself as a god, and the God of Moses, YHWH. It is god v. God. Not really, of course, for there is only one God, but pharaoh doesn't know that. Like all peoples at the time, pharaoh is polytheistic. And in this contest, the one true God will not let pharaoh out of the ring until he admits that YHWH is the mightier of the true and all the world can see the truth. So, it goes on and on, plague after plague, until, in the end, Pharaoh relents only when God sends death to strike all the first-born of Egypt. However, the death passes over the homes of the Hebrews who have marked their doorways with the blood of a lamb.⁵

In their commentary on this "passing over," Ryken and Hughes share some valuable insights:

To make sure that his people would never forget their salvation, God gave them a special memory aid: Passover, or the Feast of Unleavened Bread. This feast was meant to be an annual celebration. . . .

The Israelites celebrated their first Passover in Egypt. They continued to celebrate it during the forty years they spent wandering in the wilderness (Num. 9:1–5). Once they entered the Promised Land, they still kept the feast, for God said, "When you enter the land that the LORD will give you as he promised, observe this ceremony" (Exod. 12:25). No sooner had Joshua led the Israelites across the Jordan than they celebrated Passover in their new homeland (Josh. 5:10, 11).

Passover was an annual reminder of God's saving grace, in which Israel's deliverance from Egypt was commemorated and celebrated. The Exodus was not repeated, of course, but it was symbolically reenacted with blood and with bread. The feast that God's people shared was something they could see, taste, touch, and smell. By reliving their escape from Egypt, they preserved the message of salvation in their collective memory. Passover was given so that future generations would know the salvation of their God.⁶

⁴ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 86.

⁵ Jews commemorate this "passing over" every spring. In the last week before his crucifixion, Jesus arrived in Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. The last supper of Jesus and his disciples was a Passover dinner; Jesus is the Passover lamb, essentially inaugurating a new Exodus. Jesus is the one whose sacrificial death makes our own salvation possible.

⁶ Ryken, P. G., & Hughes, R. K. (2005). *Exodus: saved for God's glory* (pp. 336–337). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

But the story of the Passover feast does not end there. Though the Israelites cherished God's law and kept the stone tablets in the Ark of the Covenant, they proved unwilling to live as God had taught them. They proved unwilling to live in right relationship, truly loving God and loving neighbor.

Nonetheless, God, through the prophet Jeremiah, promised his people that the day would come when his law, his instruction to them, would no longer be written on the tablets of stone given to Moses, but on the very hearts of his people. God's people would no longer have to teach other about God, for they would all know God. God would forgive their wickedness and not even remember their sin. This would be God's new covenant with his people.

The New Covenant

Which brings us to Jesus. Symbols can be emotionally powerful, sometimes enormously so. In his ministry, Jesus' actions were often powerfully symbolic. He ate with the oppressed and despised to demonstrate that all persons were welcome in the coming of God's kingdom. He healed the sick to demonstrate that in God's kingdom the lame would walk and the blind would see. When Jesus came to Jerusalem for Passover Festival in the days before his death, he went to the temple overturning tables and invoking, in words and action, Jeremiah's judgment on the temple system. In sharing the Passover meal with his disciples, Jesus would reshape cherished Jewish symbols and hopes, applying them to himself and his ministry.

Jesus had come to Jerusalem a few days before, entering the city as a returning king, to waving palms and chanting crowds. Because of the large crowds in Jerusalem⁷ for festival, Jesus and his disciple had stayed in Bethany, a "suburb." Now, after sundown on Thursday, the evening of his arrest and trial, Jesus gathered his disciples together so they could share the Passover meal within the city walls.

The Passover meal was eaten by a family. On that early spring evening in Jerusalem, Jesus and the twelve disciples make up the family. The head of the household would offer thanks for the "bread of affliction,"⁸ (Deut 16:3). Now, Jesus identifies the bread (which had replaced the meat of the lamb) with himself – with his suffering for his disciples. The Passover lamb (bread) was seal of the covenant between God and his people, a covenant that had been written on tablets of stone. Now, Jesus reminds his disciples of the new covenant, to be written on hearts, which had been promised centuries before in the scroll of Jeremiah. Jesus is the "mediator of a better covenant . . . enacted through better promises" (Hebrew 8:6), a covenant sealed with Jesus' own blood. Is it any wonder that early Christians came to embrace the sacredness of the Lord's Supper? (See 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 for the tradition about the Lord's Supper passed on to Paul. Paul's letter was written before any of the Gospels.)

And so we share this feast of the new covenant, this reshaping of the Passover meal around our Lord. As John the Baptist exclaimed, "Behold! The lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

Back to the story

After the final plague, the death of the first-born, Pharaoh lets the Hebrews go, but then changes his mind and chases after them. God parts the Red Sea (or "sea of reeds") to let the Hebrews pass, but the Egyptian army is drowned when they follow the Hebrews into the parted waters. And God, in a pillar of fire by night and of cloud by day, would lead them back to the mountain where God had first come to Moses, Mt. Sinai.

God's people, the family of Abraham, had been rescued from bondage to pharaoh. They had been saved and now they walked through the Sinai wilderness, a free people, God's people.

An ungrateful lot

Food and water is pretty essential stuff. Enough so to make the fleeing Israelites forget everything God had done for them. What is freedom from bondage when you are hungry and thirsty? A lot really . . . but we can

⁷ The population of Jerusalem was about 60,000 in Jesus' day but could swell to nearly 200,000 during major festivals.

⁸ God instructed the Israelites to use unleavened bread at Passover to remind them of their hasty departure from Egypt. Unleavened bread is bread made without yeast. It takes time for yeast to do its magic, making the bread rise.

picture them crossing the wilderness, complaining and whining, even threatening to return to Egypt. So, they learned more about this God-Who-Saves, that he could also be called the God-Who-Sustains.

When the Hebrew slaves reached the safety of the Sinai wilderness, they realized that choosing gold over food had perhaps not been the best decision and they began to complain, “you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger” (Exodus 16:3).

But of course, they were completely wrong. They were God’s people and God would provide for them. Soon, God began raining “manna” upon them, the “bread from heaven,” a flakey, nutritious substance that could be gathered off the ground each morning. When the sun grew hot, this bread from heaven melted, but there was no need to store any food. God provided them with fresh manna every day. A powerful reminder that God provides every day. It is so easy to forget that God is deeply involved in our daily lives, not just the occasional “big” moments. Terence Fretheim writes:

How common it is among the people of God that a crisis, whether of daily need or physical suffering, occasions a crisis of faith. Material and spiritual well-being are more closely linked than we often care to admit (see 6:9). The discernment of the people of God has often been so clouded by physical difficulties that they cannot see that God is much involved in providential ways in their everyday lives. Israel’s situation is not unlike a community of faith whose understanding of “act of God” has been largely determined by their insurance policies. **The connections of God with daily affairs has, for all practical purposes, disappeared** [emphasis added]. The resolution is not to stress the extraordinary acts of God one more time but to keep God linked with everyday blessings. And, as with Israel in this text, it will be in discerning the presence of God in connection with daily needs that they will be able to return once again to the confession: Yes, we now know, Yahweh is the one who brought us out of Egypt; Yahweh is God indeed. God’s dramatic acts of creation are of one piece with daily blessings. The confession of the one is tied closely to the confession of the other. Moses’ task is to instruct the people such that the divine factor in every blessing is made apparent.⁹

It is this story that Jesus draws on in the Lord’s Prayer. To pray for our daily bread is to acknowledge the discipline of “daily-ness” that is God’s way. In ways large and small God provides for us. All we have comes from God, even our lives – and Jesus’ prayer teaches us to be thankful – daily, in all things and at all times. We humans can be fiercely independent, resisting the very notion that we are dependent on God. But, every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer we acknowledge that God provides for us every single day. God always has and God always will.

This “daily-ness” isn’t the only point of the manna story. This is also a story of abundance. So much food that it covers the ground. So much food that everyone’s needs are met. This too is God’s way. Can anyone doubt that in this century we humans are capable of growing enough food to eradicate hunger and starvation? Of course we can and probably do. So why does starvation still stalk the planet? Because of war, greed, fear, theft, indifference, and so on. Though that is our way, it is most assuredly not God’s way. God is gracious, sustaining us in all his fullness.

A patient God

God’s patience with his people, with all humanity, is displayed across the entirety of Holy Scripture. We could dip into almost any page and find God’s Divine patience on display. I chuckle to myself recalling Jesus’ seemingly limitless patience with his own disciples. Here is a bit on the virtue of patience from Karen Swallow Prior:

N. T. Wright says that patience is required in order to attain the other virtues. “Patience is one of the places where faith, hope, and love meet up,” he writes. Augustine describes patience as the virtue by which “we tolerate evil things with an even mind.” The patient person, he continues, chooses to bear evil rather than to commit further evil in response to it. Patience keeps us from yielding to evils that

⁹ Fretheim, T. E. (1991). *Exodus* (p. 183). Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.

are “temporal and brief” and from losing “those good things which are great and eternal.” Patience is a high virtue, that’s certain. No wonder patience is traditionally understood to be a subvirtue of courage. Indeed, all the virtues, Aquinas says, “are directed to the good of the soul.” He continues: “Now this seems to belong chiefly to patience; for it is written (Luke 21:19): ‘In your patience you shall possess your souls.’ Therefore patience is the greatest of the virtues.”¹⁰

Though patience may be a virtue with which many of us struggle, our efforts remind us of God’s relentless and endlessly patient love. The more we come to know the biblical story from Genesis to Revelation, the more we are humbled by this Divine Patience.

Further, God is utterly faithful, to the point of taking on human flesh to keep promises made. And somehow, God must exercise this faithfulness in the face of uncertainty and human weakness. For we are not robots; we are free to love and not love. God’s people are free to go on and to turn back. Somehow, God’s purposes must work forward through all these freely made decisions. Terence Fretheim, helps us to see this even in the story of the Exodus.

This divine concern for Israel is important in that it shows that God must take into account prevailing sociopolitical forces as well as people’s emotional makeup in charting a way into the future [13:17 ff above]. One might expect that God, with all the power at the divine disposal, would not back off from leading the people into any situation. God would just mow the enemies down! No, the human situation makes a difference regarding God’s possibilities and hence affects the divine decisions. The exercise of divine power in providential activity is thus shown to be of such a nature that it could not ignore or override whatever obstacles might come along. Divine planning in view of such human circumstances is necessary, and so God’s guiding hand leads Israel on a route that has less potential for difficulty. In fact, this divine concern suggests the possibility of failure; the people could decide to return to Egypt.¹¹

¹⁰ Swallow Prior, Karen. *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books*. Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

¹¹ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 150.