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# “Exodus”

## Fall Series 1 Lesson 1 “Introduction - Exodus”

**Objective:** To examine the account of the exodus from Egypt and to learn as much as we can about the nature of God, His mercy and what He desires for His creation. We will seek to do this by examining the historical background of the Exodus account, the interpretive history of Exodus amongst both Jewish and Christian scholars, where helpful. We will seek to understand the message of Exodus for us as Christians living in the 21st century American context.

**Materials:** The Bible, Ancient translations, Commentaries, both ancient and modern, Books, journal articles, dictionaries, the internet, and other resources as may be appropriate.

### **Procedures**

- 1.** To explore the message God of hope that the original audience will have understood from this text.
- 2.** To understand how this text has inspired, challenged, and educated people down through the centuries guiding them not only in their personal lives, but the destinies of governments and nations.
- 3.** We will seek to find out how these beliefs have played a role in the history of Christianity and how they continue to impact our existence and service to Jesus Christ today.
- 4.** We will provide a sheet to take home as a reminder of what has been examined and to provide additional opportunities for consideration of these truths and their application in our daily living out of our eternal destiny beginning now. This sheet can be used as a discussion guide for small group discussion. We have several groups using this effectively.

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As we begin this study on the Book of Exodus we need to note that interpretation of this book is hotly debated at virtually every level. There is someone out there who will dispute practically every aspect of this ancient book as indeed there is over practically every other book this ancient. So often it seems that Bible study and Bible study tools have become the domain of the skeptic rather than a place to build and develop greater faith. A lot of the disputes regarding Exodus have to do with methodology of interpretation and speculation. For Exodus though, there is dispute even over what to call the book. The commonly known Hebrew title is *Shemot* (“the names”), which is a shortened version of *ve’elleh shemot* (which means - “these are the names”). This title follows an ancient, and widespread practice, from the NearEast of naming a literary work using the initial words in that writing. Another ancient Hebrew title is *sefer yetsi’ at mitsraym* (“The Book of the Departure from Egypt”).

I point out these disputes, that may seem trivial, because they are in some sense indicative of the subjective and speculative nature of many of the disputes regarding even the smallest details of Biblical study. As we move to that time when this work is



translated into other languages we find ground that is perhaps more familiar to the modern reader. In the Jewish community that lived in Alexandria in Egypt, during the centuries prior to the Christian era, the book is referred to using the title *Exodos Aigyptou* (“departure from Egypt”). This title became standardized in the Septuagint (the Old Greek translation), which was the Biblical text used by the early church, and was picked up in the translation of the Latin Vulgate (pre-fourth century A.D.) in the form more familiar to us as *Exodus*. This title then passed into a number of European languages, from Latin, including into English, which gives us the title that we are most familiar with today - “Exodus.” There were other titles used, but we will not discuss those here.<sup>1</sup>

As much disagreement as exists over the name, even more disagreement can be found over nearly every other aspect of the interpretation, date, and authorship of the book. As I said before this is not unusual for modern scholarship as little meets the criterion often set out for a near absolute certainty that is sought, but almost never found satisfactory among modern scholars.

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<sup>1</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Exodus* (Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p. xi.

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Traditionally (by those who are of the community of faith), the author of Exodus is seen as Moses, though there is certainly not absolute agreement regarding this. The date of the writing is also highly contested. Some would date what we call *Exodus* to the time of the exile to Babylon (586 B.C.), or even afterward. Those writers would then date the events described by *Exodus* to a time possibly one thousand years earlier than the final editing of the book into the form that we are familiar with today, this time is thought to be around the time of the Babylonian captivity (606 B.C -586 B.C).<sup>2</sup> Some scholars would go so far as to dispute that any aspect of the story of the Exodus is anything other than fiction and yet interestingly enough modern archaeological finds give validity to the claims of Exodus.

One such piece of evidence is the Stele of Merneptah that was created in 1208 B.C., inscribed on granite, written in Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphs. This Stele was discovered in 1896 at Thebes and is now housed in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. The text of this stele is largely an account of Merneptah's victory over the Libyans and their allies, but the last three, of the twenty-eight

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<sup>2</sup> William Johnstone, *Exodus 1-19*, in the Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary series (Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Inc., 2014), p. 8.

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lines, deal with a separate campaign in Canaan. At the time of that campaign Canaan was part of Egypt's imperial possessions. In this section of the stele most scholars believe Israel is mentioned.

Here is the translation of the words from that part of the stele inscription: "The princes are prostrate, saying, "Peace!" Not one is raising his head among the Nine Bows. Now that Tehenu (Libya) has come to ruin, Hatti is pacified; the Canaan has been plundered into every sort of woe: Ashkelon has been overcome; Gezer has been captured; Yano'am is made non-existent. **Israel** is laid waste and his seed is not; Hurru is become a widow because of Egypt."

This stele represents the earliest extant textual reference to Israel from ancient Egypt. This is one of four known inscriptions from the Iron Age that mention ancient Israel under this name. The others are the Mesha Stele, the Tel Dan Stele and the Kurkh Monolith.<sup>3</sup>

The arrogance of people that think they are so intelligent as to deny things that we lack what they consider credible evidence for betrays a belief system that bases far too much authority on current scientifically oriented methodology and current

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<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merneptah\\_Stele](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Merneptah_Stele)

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archaeological finds. Such people deprecate the intelligence, and often the integrity, of the ancients, and modern people of faith. There is certainly much that we still need to discover and uncover in order to understand the ancient world. However, an overly negative skepticism does not aid in doing that either critically, or taking into consideration all of the evidence. Certainly faith is not something that makes sense to the extreme skeptic and such skeptics have and will continue to exist until the time when Jesus returns. We must take great care to recognize that a belief in the Bible, and its stories, does require faith in the modern world; as it has always done in the past as well.

Traditionally, by the community of faith (i.e. Judaism, and by Christianity), the Book of Exodus has been seen as composed by Moses, as mentioned earlier. The dating of the events of the exodus are open to a great deal of controversy even in the faith community. Much of that controversy comes from our understanding and interpretation of Scripture itself while some is based on our understanding of Egyptian and Canaanite history. Some might date Exodus to around 1550 B.C. based upon the 430 years for the length of time the Israelites had lived in Egypt as

found in the text of Exodus itself.<sup>4</sup> However, we are not unambiguously told when this period commenced and the dates for the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) are still a matter of considerable scholarly dispute. The one apparently unambiguous date for the exodus account is the one found in 1 Kings 6:1<sup>5</sup> which gives the time between the building of Solomon's Temple and the exodus as 480 years. The beginning of that temple can, with a reasonable degree of certainty, be dated to 960 B.C. This then would place the exodus in the middle of the fifteenth century B.C.<sup>6</sup> This, according to the Biblical text, seems the most likely date for the exodus (around 1550 B.C.).

It is obviously the case that scholars have found problems with all of these dates. We cannot be absolutely certain about the dates as our understanding of the details of ancient history are very sketchy and continually new discoveries are being made with each passing year. Some scholars choose to break the text of

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<sup>4</sup> Exodus 12:40 **The time that the Israelites had lived in Egypt was four hundred thirty years. At the end of four hundred thirty years, on that very day, all the companies of the LORD went out from the land of Egypt.** NRSV.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Kings 6:1 **In the four hundred eightieth year after the Israelites came out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month of Ziv, which is the second month, he began to build the house of the LORD.** NRSV.

<sup>6</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Exodus*, p. xiv.

Exodus down into a variety of what they consider to be earlier sources (JPED), for which there is not anything close to a consensus among such scholars. All of these issues and theories, and more, are particularly hazardous procedures for people who want to understand the Bible as the word of God. It may actually be the case that these books (Genesis and Exodus) lack concrete indicators of their origin in order that they not be tied to a particular context the way that Kings and Chronicles are.<sup>7</sup> Whether, or not someone in the twenty-first century world accepts that Exodus was written by Moses, during his lifetime, means that an interpretive decision is being made before beginning to try and comprehend the meaning of the book. For those who choose to preempt their interpretation by disputing its veracity there is little chance of their understanding Exodus as it was intended to be understood.

It is very important that the book is set in an actual historical context and is seen as addressing real promises to real people by a real God in order to be taken seriously and understood as it was intended to be understood. It seems to me

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<sup>7</sup> John Goldingay, "Introduction to Genesis and Exodus," in John W. Rogerson, R. W. L. Moberly and William Johnstone, *Genesis and Exodus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2011), pp. 9-34.

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that to approach the book as a work of fiction then risks making the promises of God a work of fiction unless one has some form of rather sophisticated faith that deems this not to matter. Exodus, however, more naturally expects its audience to take its words to be about genuine history dealing with genuine people and a genuine God. If Yahweh made no promises to Abraham and was not seen as fulfilling those promises in the exodus to his descendants then this would certainly change dramatically our interpretation and our understanding of who, and what, God is. Such a perspective leaves God as a mystery, and the purpose for the composition of Exodus then becomes clouded in obscurity?<sup>8</sup> Is it this then to be considered a work like Virgil's *Aeneid* trying to give Israel a historical national myth as a context for their nationhood, or is it something more, something greater and far more significant? Perhaps what it is, is what it purports to be, an account of God helping people, calling people, forming people into a cohesive society of people in covenant with Himself? Certainly it has been the case that throughout most of the last three millennia Exodus has been understood as something more than a work of

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<sup>8</sup> John Goldingay, "Introduction to Genesis and Exodus," in John W. Rogerson, R. W. L. Moberly and William Johnstone, *Genesis and Exodus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2011), pp. 9-34.



fiction, something far more than a philosophical treatise, a work of cleverly contrived human origin, or a national historical myth.

Exodus has been understood as the word of God, inspired by Him, that revealed His nature and how He deals with people and how He desires for them to interact and live together in covenant with Him. Our concern in these lessons will be to focus upon the plain intention of the text, with it being understood as the word of God, and we will not give credence, or time, to interpretations that seek to see the work as something else, or something less than this. We will leave that task to others who have such an inclination and a desire. “The Book of Exodus is not only a sublime religious document; it is also a literary masterpiece, and our understanding of any literary work depends on our understanding of the artistic criteria which governed its composition, and our appreciation of the beauty with which it is imbued.”<sup>9</sup> To be sure many who would seek to study Exodus would pick up a commentary in order to help in their understanding, but I would express that great caution must be exercised in doing this always, but even more caution with

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<sup>9</sup> U. Cassuto, trans. by Israel Abrahams, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Skokie IL: Varda Books, 2005), pp. 2-3.

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Exodus. If this is not done then the agendas of the commentators, often atheists and agnostics, or at least modern skeptics, will dominate the discussion to such a degree that the beauty and the power of the composition are veiled, or even destroyed by them.

Without a doubt there are differences between various manuscripts of Exodus that cause some concerns for the modern mind, but we must not forget the great antiquity of this work and how many hands have tried to preserve it down through the centuries before the advent of printing presses and photocopiers. Truly it would be a point of great suspicion if there were not indeed differences in those many manuscripts. I, and many others, are convicted of the truth that what is preserved is sufficient for us to serve as a witness of a God who seeks relationship with a people; people that He created and called to Himself and continues to call to Himself.

Hallo, professor of Assyriology and Babylonian Literature and curator of the Babylonian collection of Yale University, also calls for a degree of caution when using “skepticism.” He says, “Skepticism” is the particular purview of the humanist perspective such as can be found in the *Skeptical Essays* of Bertrand Russell.

The work of Richard Popkin, entitled *The History of Skepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* lays out this history of this type of thought process. From these skeptic's perspectives "Belief or credulity is little more than a euphemism for gullibility; ...."<sup>10</sup> We (those that believe Exodus is the word of God) are perhaps those that can be described as gullible by those that deem themselves to be wise in the ways of men. If so, then let it be so, but let us remember the words of the Apostle Paul as he quotes from the Prophet Isaiah (29:14) - " <sup>19</sup> **For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."** <sup>20</sup> **Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?** <sup>21</sup> **For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe.**<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> William W. Hallo, "The Limits of Skepticism," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 110:2, pp. 187-199.

<sup>11</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:19-21. NRSV.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks describes Exodus in these terms, “The book of Exodus is the West’s meta-narrative of hope.”<sup>12</sup> As we undertake this study we will not be too concerned with the intricacies and questions of the skeptic, but we will approach this text from the perspective of the “believer,” the one who accepts the sanctity, holiness, and value of this work. We will trust in a God who redeems people who were ignorant and enslaved and who seeks to bring them out of ignorance and slavery into the freedom and enlightenment of relationship with Him. Certainly we do not want to be simply ignorant and naive, but it surely is better to be ignorant and naive in the eyes of men rather than to be ignorant and naive in the eyes of God.<sup>13</sup> So much of what passes for wisdom today comes from the elevation of humanity and the individual above all other authority and power. Such is not good for us as individuals and certainly will prove devastating to your society as a whole. Nations are defined by a shared moral code and that code in the West has been continually eroded for at least several centuries now. For the last several decades the West has

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<sup>12</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation Exodus: The Book of Redemption* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2010), p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Acts 5:29.



wantonly adopted a set of cultural habits predicated upon the idea that the individual is all that matters.<sup>14</sup>

Such a perspective will ultimately lead to the destruction of society as a whole and the world as we know it. Our cultural structure in the United States is built upon a foundation of Protestant Christianity. Without this basic foundation our nation will not survive in a form that is recognizable to us. At the heart of the society that has been predominate for more than two centuries, in the United States, there has been a belief that there are moral imperatives that were laid down by God. At the heart of those imperatives stands the Book of Exodus, which lays out the vision of a people united by a covenant directly with God, held accountable by the terms and expectations of that moral God's nature. It is in the Book of Exodus that we first see so many things that we now take for granted and indeed many have chosen to reject. Not least among those things being rejected is the concept that our responsibility is not first to ourselves, but first and foremost we are responsible to God.

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<sup>14</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Home We Build Together* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), pp. 5-6.

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Belief in this God of Exodus stands at the core of our nation's culture and history. To reject it is to set us adrift on the seas of individual freedom and responsibility to no one, but self. Such a path will ultimately lead to the loss of what we have known as our nation. It will also lead us to a place where the Church is more and more on the margin of our society. Such a place is not unexplored, many have gone there before us and found it to be a barren, empty place devoid of landmarks of morality and of safety and security. One of the great legacies of this place of barrenness and darkness is the Holocaust and the ethnic cleansing that took place in Europe during the last century. The story of the exodus is the story of the supreme power (God) intervening in history in defense of the powerless and the weak. The message of Exodus has acted as an inspiration to those who would stand up against injustice, even injustice committed by a King, or tyrant. The message of Exodus was engraved on the hearts of the Pilgrim Fathers as they set sail across the Atlantic; it was this message that was used by Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson as they

drew their proposed designs for the Great Seal of the United States.<sup>15</sup>

Benjamin Franklin wanted the Great Seal of the United States to have an image of Moses parting the Red Sea. He chose an allegorical scene from Exodus, described in his notes as “Moses standing on the Shore, and extending his Hand over the Sea, thereby causing the sea to overwhelm Pharaoh who is sitting in an open Chariot, a Crown on his Head and a Sword in his Hand. Rays from a Pillar of Fire in the Clouds reaching to Moses, to express that he acts by Command of the Deity.” His Motto was then, “Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God.” Jefferson also suggested a depiction from Exodus: His suggestion was of the Children of Israel in the wilderness, led by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night for the front of the seal.<sup>16</sup> Congress, however, was not impressed, and on the same day ordered that the report “lie on the table,” ending the work of this committee.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation Exodus: The Book of Redemption*, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.greatseal.com/committees/firstcomm/index.html>

<sup>17</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_Seal\\_of\\_the\\_United\\_States](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Seal_of_the_United_States)

Despite this rejection of these designs for the Great Seal the Book of Exodus still lies at the heart of our own American society as it does at the heart of Great Britain, from whom our nation gained its freedom in the eighteenth century. If we are to continue in the mission of God to free people from slavery to sin and self, we must understand the heart of the God who came to earth, entered into history and fought for those too weak and powerless to fight for themselves. God calls us to be people of moral standards and defenders of the weak, the marginalized and those that are ignorant of His nature and His call. We are to be His agents bringing order and safety into a dangerous and chaotic world where people have reverted, as they always do without God, to their baser natures.<sup>18</sup> We are to be beacons of light in the darkness. We are to be agents of a God who does not sit idly by in the face of oppression, injustice, and suffering and do nothing. He calls us to participate in His mission, to suffer and bleed and die for others as He did for us in Jesus Christ. We are called to live in covenant with our God and with all humanity. Even though it may be marred and distorted, humanity is created in the image of God

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<sup>18</sup> Judges 17:6 **“In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.”** NRSV. Judges 21:25 **“In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.”** NRSV.



and we are called to participate in the restoration of that image to reflect His glory and His plan for His creation.

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# Synopsis

There are a great many modern scholars who would challenge and dispute almost every aspect of Exodus. Often this skepticism proves to be unhelpful and even damaging to those who choose to see Exodus as the word of God. For people of faith Exodus displays the nature of God, His desire for relationship with human beings, His heart for the powerless and the weak. God keeps His promises and His power is without measure as is His mercy and graciousness. He is a God of justice that provides “hope” to people that had none redeeming, educating, and inspiring.

God establishes moral standards that are based in His nature and are for all people in all times. It is upon this set of moral standards that God chose to build His people into a cohesive community that could be used to reach out to all the people of the earth. The Book of Exodus played a crucial role in the founding of the United States, and Great Britain and if we are to survive as a nation and a people we must be reminded of the foundational human principles to which all men are called to by their creator. A



failure to remain anchored in the moral imperatives of God leads to horrific consequences for humanity. We are called to be defenders of the weak, to be people who free those who are enslaved, and to be defenders of justice. All of these things are defined by the nature and word of God and not by arbitrary standards such as personal opinions and majority votes.

We are challenged to be His agents in this world, to be beacons of light in the darkness of uncertainty and the despotism of individualism. We are called into community by God and we are called to be community builders. We are called to be a part of God's restoration of this world to the fullness of His design and plan, loving and sacrificing for others as God does for us. We are called to bring glory and honor to God.

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# Questions

1. Why do you think people in our time have become so skeptical?
2. Why do you think there is such a tendency to attack the Bible today?
3. What do you think it would look like to know something with absolute certainty?
4. What are some of the things that you hold to be foundational beliefs?
5. How much information do you have about your family members that lived in 1865? How do you know that information?
6. Why do you think it is so hard for human beings to look at history without a bias?
7. Why do you think we pay so much attention to dates (i.e. 1776, 1865, 2001)?
8. Why is history important?
9. How does our view of history affect our faith?
10. How does our view of Exodus as reflecting actual historical events affect our view of God? Why?
11. What bias do you have as you approach Scripture? Is it possible to approach Scripture, or really anything else without some form of bias? Why, or why not?
12. How does it affect you personally that God would redeem a helpless and enslaved people from slavery in Egypt?
13. How do we balance skepticism and curiosity in our lives?
14. How would you define “wisdom?”

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15. What do you believe is the shared moral code of your community?
  16. How are your personal opinions impacted by what you read in Scripture?
  17. How does your understanding of God affect what you see as important in life?
  18. What are some ways that you balance your individual rights and beliefs with the beliefs and rights of others?
  19. What do you think it means to be called to be an image-bearer of God?

# To Take Home

## **What is Important to know?**

It is important to know that the way we approach the Book of Exodus makes a huge difference to the message that we find there. The skepticism of our modern world often makes it difficult for us to comprehend that the message of Exodus was in the past, and must be today, seen as the Word of God and not just some piece of literature. For Israel, the words of this text formed their worldview and their identity as a community of faith. What are some things that make it challenging for people today to accept Exodus as the Word of God?

## **Where is God in these words?**

God is in the words of Exodus calling people into covenant with Himself. He challenges people to grow into a community of trust, a community that trusts God to keep His word and to be involved in the lives of His people in powerful ways. God challenges the people in many ways to unite not only with Him, but with each other and to become a beacon of the proclamation of the nature of God, and the love of God. In Exodus we find God conveying His love in their rescue, sustenance, and entering into covenant. What are some ways that the nature of God as displayed in Exodus challenges your perceptions of who God is?

## **What does any of this mean for how I live my life?**

The Book of Exodus challenges us to understand that God seeks relationship with us, but also that He expects us to be our best self and not to live to our lower nature. We are to be defined as a community and even as individuals by the call of God as defined in His word. We are challenged to recognize that our relations with our fellow human beings are to be defined by the expectations of God and not simply by what we think is right and correct. What are some things that you find in God's word that challenge you to treat other people differently than you might otherwise?

## **What is the word of God calling us to do?**

Exodus calls us to understand more fully the nature of God and what it truly means to live in relationship with Him. It calls us to recognize that the way we treat others is directly tied to the nature of God Himself. We are called upon to continue to live as image-bearers, reflecting His nature and His will. God defends the helpless, rescues those that are enslaved, and brings justice to the innocent. What are some ways that in your daily living you seek to reflect the nature of God in your relationships with other human beings?