

“Exodus”

Fall Series 2

Lesson 1

“Exodus 13:17-14:21”

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.

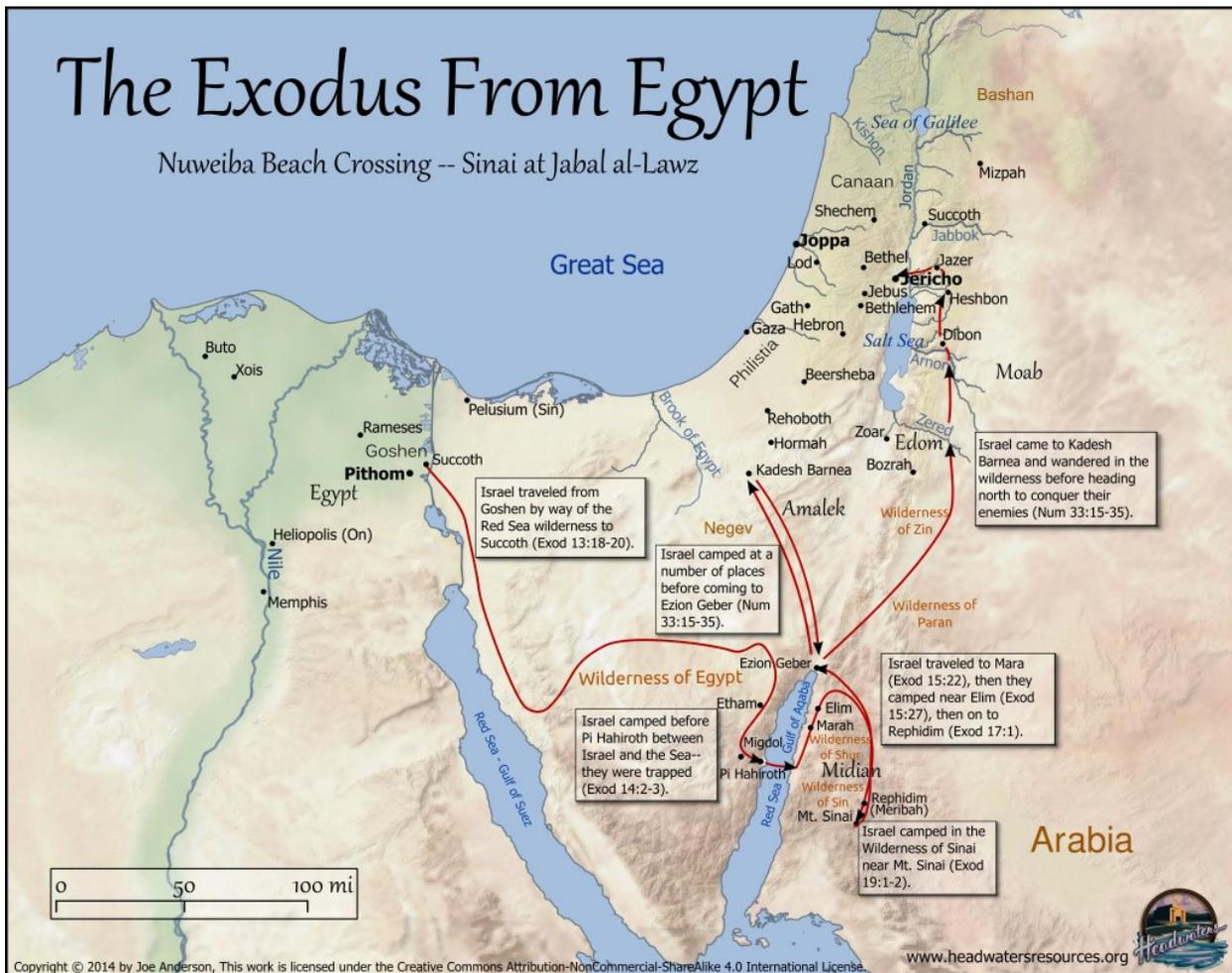
Procedures

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.

With the time of the Passover past and all the firstborn of Egypt having been killed we are told at 13:17 that "...when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines even though that was nearer, because God said, "Lest the people relent in seeing war they return to Egypt." God is very much aware that the faith of the people is not yet strong enough to withstand the obstacles that might be faced. So often it is the case that when a person in our day accepts Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior there is a feeling of relief and joy on the part of the church, but sometimes there is also a lack of wisdom in recognizing that this is the beginning of the journey and not the end. Beginnings are tenuous and difficult. A great beginning is important as it sets the direction of travel, but the journey still must be undertaken and extra care must be taken especially at the point of beginning in order to insure that the journey unfolds properly; that it is oriented in the direction of travel that is desirable and purposeful. Much will be learned on this journey and those that are further along on the road should give special attention to new travelers and recognize that they are vulnerable and may turn back if they face tremendous hardship too early in

their journey, especially if they are not supported and encouraged. We that have traveled longer and further on this journey must not forget our own beginnings and how important encouragement and guidance are.

God chooses to take the Israelites on a longer route, one that would give them time to grow in faith and confidence, but also this route would make it more difficult for the Israelites to return to Egypt if they became discouraged, as they would be much further away and separated from the land of Egypt by a harsh wilderness.



There are in fact many proposed routes suggested for Israel's departure from Egypt. Each one tries to interpret the data from the text and then apply it to a modern map calculating the route of travel: no one knows for sure the exact route, because so many of the ancient place names no longer apply to known modern locations. I give you this map as one possibility and as an illustration of the fact that they are going on a very circuitous route to arrive at their final destination. Often the journey is as important as the destination; much can be learned on the journey that will then prepare a person for arrival at their final destination. This is at least one of the lessons to be learned from the account of the Exodus. Despite the fact that God seeks to choose a route that would not take them into battle too early we are told that, "The sons of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt armed for battle (13:18b)." The process of preparation has begun.

The route they took was toward *Yam Suf*, which for some reason has been translated as the Red Sea, but is more properly to be translated as the "Sea of Reeds." The question we ask today is, "where is the sea that is talked about here?" In a review of the English translations of the Old Testament, one finds this body of

water called “the sea,” “the Red Sea,” and the “Sea of Reeds.” This diversity of translation is a reflection of the uncertainty found in the Hebrew and Greek versions of the Old Testament (in the Septuagint, Old Greek translation it is “the Red Sea” - ἔρυθρὰν θάλασσαν). Hoffmeier says, “The nature of the sea and its location are problems that can only be resolved with a careful examination of the biblical text and its various manuscript traditions.”¹

Hoffmeier provides a detailed analysis of this issue both in regard to the various manuscripts and in examining the etymological issues of the words in the Hebrew text particularly. He proposes that *Yam Suf* may have been the Hebrew proper name of a region in Egypt; a marshy region of the eastern Delta. Alternatively, *Yam Suf* may simply be a descriptive term that applied to any of the marshy lakes in the Isthmus of Suez. There is no certainty to be found on this issue with our current level of knowledge and discoveries. The crossing of the sea signaled the end of Israel’s sojourn in the territory of Egypt and it certainly was the end of the Egyptian army’s pursuit of the fleeing Hebrews (Exodus 14:23-29; 15:4-5). One final literary observation needs to

¹ James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 199.

be made here. The eighth plague in the cycle was comprised of swarms of locusts that devoured the vegetation of Egypt (Exodus 10:3-20). This plague ended with *Yahweh* sending a strong west wind to drive the locusts into *Yam Suf* (Exodus 10:19). Elsewhere in the Old Testament, locusts are symbolically seen as representative of ravaging armies (cf. Joel 1:4, 2:25). The drowning of the locusts, of the eighth plague, in Egypt may have foreshadowed what God would ultimately do to the Egyptian army in *Yam Suf*.²

As we transition to 13:19 there is this wonderful verse that shows us the great faith of Joseph. He had required a solemn oath from the Israelites to carry his bones with them when they departed from Egypt. The text here reproduces almost verbatim the dying request made by Joseph at Genesis 50:25.³ The *Mekhilta*⁴ notes that while the other Israelites were engaged in plundering the Egyptians, Moses was occupied disinterring

² James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, pp. 214-215.

³ **25 So Joseph made the Israelites swear, saying, "When God comes to you, you shall carry up my bones from here.** NRSV.

⁴ The *Mekhilta*, or as it is sometimes spelled *Mekilta*, (Aramaic: מכילתא, a collection of rules of interpretation) is a halakhic midrash to the Book of Exodus.

Joseph's body and keeping faith with him.⁵ Joseph trusted that God would keep His promise and he would lead His people out of Egypt. He left his legacy of his faith for those who would come after him. What a wonderful legacy to leave to his family and people. They remembered this oath and carried his body with them. The Israelites set out from Succoth (13:20), we are not told how long this portion of the journey lasted, or how long they remained in Succoth. They then proceeded onto Etham, a place that is not with certainty known to us today.⁶

They had no need of a map, or of GPS because we are told that *Yahweh* travelled in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. So I assume, they always had shade during the day and light at night supplied by the pillar of fire (13:21). This gave the Israelites the ability to travel during both the day and the night. The pillar would serve as a constant reminder to the people of the presence of *Yahweh*. They were not left alone, God was with them constantly fulfilling His promise to Abraham. Up to this point everything seems to be going

⁵ Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary Exodus* (Philadelphia PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p. 69.

⁶ U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1987), p. 157.



amazingly well and the faith of the Israelites is not being tested in the least. There is no indication of any complaining, or of any problems at this point either. Certainly this will change as things become harder and as the newness and uniqueness begins to wear off with regard to their new situation. Even having God going before the people in a pillar of cloud and fire will not stop the complaining of the people as things begin to go in a way other than how they think it should go.

It is interesting that even standing in the shadow of God's presence there will be complaining and what I call armchair quarterbacking on the part of the Israelites. People will try to tell God how to do things. They will complain to Moses, God's chosen instrument and they will therefore fall into the same sin that led to the fall of humankind in the first place. The way that the serpent tempts Eve is by intimating that if she eats of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil she will have an understanding like that of God. She desired to be wise.⁷ She desired to be like God, to have a place that is truly only God's place. The same saga happens over and over again throughout history. The image-

⁷ Genesis 3:6.

bearer of God forgets the place that has been set for him, or her, and reaches out for what is beyond them. Sin is surely to be found in failing to trust in God, in God's representatives, and instead to trust in our own knowledge, wisdom and abilities. Certainly there is a balance to be maintained here, but we are called to follow God, through His chosen way and not to follow what we think is wise. The entire Book of Job addresses this as does the Book of Ecclesiastes.

At 14:1-4 we see *Yahweh* giving Moses new instructions. Rather than moving rapidly away from the land of Egypt the people are instructed to turn back and to camp at "Pi-hahiroth." The plan is that Pharaoh will think that the people are wandering aimlessly. Although Pharaoh had demanded that the Israelites leave Egypt, he thought they were leaving for a three day trip. Even if they had no intention of returning after three days, the experience of the plagues should have so terrified Pharaoh that he would not have dared to make any demands, or have any expectations of the Israelites. This should have been especially so because of the plague of the firstborn. It would seem to be sheer insanity to try and bring them back by force. However, God

wished to demonstrate His power and to “gain glory” (אֶפְרָיִם) at Pharaoh’s expense. God wished to demonstrate conclusively, for all time, to both Jews and to the rest of the world, that He is Master of all. When the wicked are punished for their wrongdoing, God is glorified.⁸

How is it possible to trust someone who will not do what is “just.” One of the really important lessons that God is seeking to teach to the Jews is that He keeps His promises. This will seem like a truly wonderful thing when the keeping of the promise is in their favor. When covenants are made, however, there are conditions and consequences specified for not keep the covenant. Sometimes this aspect of the covenant is referred to as “blessings” and “curses.” Everyone loves the blessings, but equally of importance in judicial parlance is the penalty for non-compliance. A party will be judged by the terms of the covenant and this includes not only the potential of blessings, but it also includes the potential the consequences, or curses that come from failure. A party that failed to keep the terms of a covenant would be considered unreliable and unrighteous, this includes both to

⁸ Rabbi Nosson Scherman and Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *The Chumash*, The Stone Edition (New York NY: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 2000-2014), p. 368.

provide blessings for compliance and consequences for failure to comply. Many Israelites in the Biblical period, and thereafter, believed in the “responsibility” of God to call the whole world to account in the end.⁹ God is righteous and will apply both the good things as well as the bad, the blessings as well as the curses.¹⁰

At 14:5 we are told of the change of “mind,” “heart,” or “will” (לִבָּ) of Pharaoh and his “officials.” This is just as was foretold to Moses. As a consequence he had his chariot made ready and he took his army with him (14:6). He took a massive force with him that included six hundred “chosen” (בְּחֹרָ) chariots. At 14:8 we are informed specifically that *Yahweh* hardened their heart and they went out “boldly.” The old hubris had returned once again and they overtake the Israelites at their encampment by the sea. As you might imagine when the Israelites see Pharaoh coming with his chariots and his army (14:10) they cry out to

⁹ N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Books II, III and IV (Minneapolis MN: Fortress Press, 2013), p. 802.

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 30-15-18 - **See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.** ¹⁶ **If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.** ¹⁷ **But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them,** ¹⁸ **I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.** NRSV.

Yahweh “in great fear.” They began to complain to Moses asking why he had done this thing to them (14:11).

Their complaints come to the point where you would think that Moses had kidnapped the whole nation. They claimed that they had not wanted to leave Egypt and had even told Moses to leave them alone (14:12). They had resigned themselves to living as slaves to the Egyptians. They no longer recognized the smell of the sewer because they had lived in it so long. They like most people demonstrate the cowardice that is their nature. They are afraid and in their fear they are willing not only to live as slaves, but abandon their offspring to the same fate. They would rather live in the safety and certainty that comes with slavery rather than risk the uncertainty and danger of freedom. They are content to allow others to be responsible. They have become attuned to letting others determine their destiny and to take responsibility for them. They were still enslaved in their hearts and souls, which they had willingly handed over to Pharaoh.

At 14:13 Moses seeks to calm the fears of the people and he tells them to “stand firm” and “to see” the deliverance that *Yahweh* would accomplish. He promises that the Egyptians that they see



today they will “never see again.” He tells them that *Yahweh* would fight for them (14:14) and that all they need to do is to “keep still.” It appears that Moses himself was really deeply concerned too, and he was crying out to *Yahweh* (14:15). Moses is instructed to tell, the Israelites to move forward, presumably toward the sea and thus logically they would be even more trapped. Moses is told to lift up his staff and to stretch out his hand over the sea and to divide it in order that the Israelites might cross on dry land (14:16): What incredible instructions; all of which defy human logic. Moses is then informed that *Yahweh* would harden the “hearts of the Egyptians” (14:17) and not just the heart of Pharaoh this time. He will gain glory for His name through all of them and they will serve His instrumentality.

At 14:18 there is this incredible statement that the Egyptians would come to “know” that He is *Yahweh*. The reference here is not to those that would die in the sea, they would be dead and know nothing. The reference here is to all of the Egyptians left in the entire country of Egypt.¹¹ The stage is now set for the drama to unfold and once again the confrontation

¹¹ Rabbi Nosson Scherman and Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz, eds., *The Chumash*, p. 372.

between Egypt and *Yahweh* is ready to become reality. Then we are informed (14:19) that “the angel of God” (מַלְאֲךְ הָאֱלֹהִים) who had been going in front of the people now moved to a position behind them. It came between them and the approaching Egyptians (14:20). Israel is protected all through the night by the angel. Then Moses stretches out his hand over the sea and a strong east wind comes and turns the sea into dry land, dividing the waters (14:21). For those familiar with the creation account in Genesis they might be reminded of God’s control over the waters there as the Creator.¹²

This section leaves us poised on the precipice of one of the greatest events in history. The battle lines are drawn: on one side is Egypt and its great and powerful army, on the other side there is a group of slaves who have no chance except to rely upon *Yahweh* and His help. God will truly gain glory for Himself in this event that will last throughout all eternity. Perhaps you too have found yourself with your back against the sea and nothing between you and your enemies except hope? If that hope is in *Yahweh* then it is hope that is well placed indeed. Next week we will see the

¹² Genesis 1:6-10.



outcome of the event that is unfolding, but truly we already know that *Yahweh* did gain glory through this event, a glory that still stands as a remarkable monument to covenant faithfulness to this very day. Abraham, believed God and it was credited to Him as righteousness.¹³ God blessed Abraham because of this trust.

¹³ Romans 4:3, 9; Genesis 15:6; James 2:23, Galatians 3:6.

Synopsis

With the time of the last plague now past and the Israelites having begun their journey out of Egypt we find that God chooses a longer route for their journey because He knows that they may still change their minds and turn back to Egypt if they are drawn into battle too early. We are also in this section reminded of the great faith of Joseph who made the Israelites promise to take his bones with them when they depart from Egypt. He had confidence that God would keep His promise and that He would lead His people out of Egypt. *Yahweh* went in front of His people in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

After they begin the journey God then gets the Israelites to turn back and to camp in a place before the sea. God is going to use this erratic travel in a way that will make Pharaoh think the people are wandering aimlessly. God will once again harden the heart of Pharaoh and He will use him and the Egyptians to gain glory for Himself. He will use them to make a proclamation of His might and power to the whole world for all time. This story would become a hallmark of who and what *Yahweh* is.

Pharaoh calls up his army and his choice chariots and takes off in pursuit of Israel. He must have been overjoyed to find them with their back to the sea, trapped and without a path of retreat. As the Israelites catch sight of the pursuing Egyptians they began to complain and attack not only Moses but also God. They are afraid and in their fear their selfishness and lack of faith comes to the forefront. God tells Moses to tell the people to move forward toward the sea and to stretch out his hand over the sea to drive the waters back in order for them to be able to cross. Moses does as he is told and the stage is set for one of the greatest stories ever told. God will save His people when there is no hope other than in Him.

Questions

1. What are some things that give you hope when life is hard and things look bleak?
2. What are some things that you do to prepare for hard times in your life?
3. What keeps you from giving up when life is really hard?
4. What are some stories of faith that inspire you?
5. Why do you think Joseph wanted his bones taken out of Egypt?
6. What do you think it would be like to be able to see the presence of God as Israel did in the wilderness in the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire?
7. What are some of the ways that you make important decisions in your life? Who do you consult and how confident are you in your ability to make good decisions?
8. What does it mean to have a “hard heart?”
9. What are some of the things that you trust in for your security? Why?
10. What are some things that cause you to be afraid?
11. Where do you turn when you are afraid?
12. Why do you think people begin to blame their leaders as soon as things begin to go wrong?
13. How do you think it makes leaders feel when they are bombarded constantly by complaints?
14. Why do you think people want to be leaders?
15. Why do you think people are so afraid of the unknown?

16. Do you believe the Lord fights for you today? In what ways?

17. Why do you think pride blinds us so completely to the truth?

To Take Home

What is Important to know?

It is important to that we are not alone in the universe. Even when we feel that we are vulnerable, frightened and without any ability to handle a situation. The Israelites were slaves to the most powerful nation of their day. They had no hope through the wisdom and understanding of man of being able to get out of their situation. God our Father and Creator is always there if we will trust Him and reach out to Him. When are some times that you feel closest to God?

Where is God in these words?

God is in these words demonstrating His trustworthiness in keeping His promises to Abraham. He fights for His people when they are too weak and powerless to fight for themselves. He demonstrates His great power and His great wisdom in protecting the people from battle too early in their journey and in having a plan for their deliverance. God leads His people in ways that have never before, or since, been seen. What are some ways that you have been able to grow in your confidence of God in your own life?

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

Sometimes we look at the stories of the Bible and we find them interesting, or perhaps even inspiring, but they are intended to be more than just interesting, or inspiring stories. These stories of the previous encounters of people with God are meant to change the way we see our world, our life, and our hope. So often today we are so skeptical about everything that we can demand levels of proof that are just not there. Sometimes our skepticism destroys our plans and our lives. The Bible is a book of hope and of people doing impossible things against impossible odds because of a God who has no limits. How are you inspired to take risks because of your faith in God?

What is the word of God calling us to do?

As we read this account of God rescuing the Israelites there can be a tendency to distance ourselves from what is happening here as something that is both interesting and yet irrelevant to my life today. The fact is that we all need to be rescued from slavery. We may not be slaves in Egypt, but we are all slaves to sin and to our selfish desires. God created us for something greater and more important than these things. The call of the Exodus is still a call for us today. How do you hear God calling you to come to the promised land today in your own life?