

Study 3: The Birth of a Nation

Introduction. With Abraham, God laid the foundation of His plan for our happiness. With perfect freedom He chose one man and made a promise to him. In this study we will see how God begins to make good on His promise.

Keep in mind that the fulfillment of God's plan, from the very beginning, is Jesus Christ in His Church. All that Moses did for the enslaved Hebrew people, Jesus was to do for all men and women enslaved to sin. Our task, then, is to become familiar with the great saving act of God found in the pages of the Book of Exodus. Doing so will also deepen our understanding of the great saving acts of Jesus Christ and His Church found in the pages of the New Testament and in our daily lives.

Reading. Now open your Bible and read: Exodus, chapter 2 through chapter 14, verse 22.

Background. Sometime around 1850 B.C. Abraham heard God's call and received the promise. Isaac, the child of this promise, passed the torch of faith to his son, Jacob, who settled in the land of Goshen in the northeastern Egypt around 1700 B.C. This fertile country was ideal for raising sheep and the members of Jacob's tribe, along with their servants, settled down under the protection of Egypt's Hyksos dynasty. Before "returning to his fathers" Jacob blessed his grandson, Juda, and announced that the Messiah would be born of his line.

In this secluded corner of Egypt there was less danger of the little tribe's losing its new-found monotheistic faith. At the same time their contact with the ancient Egyptian civilization helped bring out in this clan those elements from which a nation, the People of God, could be formed.

The Hyksos dynasty was not Egyptian at all. The Hyksos pharaohs, like Abraham and his family, were Semitic in origin. They had conquered Egypt during one of its periods of internal decay and weakness. But later, when the Egyptians, under the Rameses, overthrew the Hyksos, they wasted no time punishing the friends of their former masters. This is why the Jews first found a haven and then slavery in Egypt.

Key Sections. Highlight these parts of Exodus in your Bible by writing these key words in the margins.

† Ex 3:2-4:23. *Call of Moses.*

† Ex 12:1-13:22. *Passover*

† Ex 14:1-22. *Crossing*

Key Passages.

† Ex 3:1. *The mountains of the Lord.* Note that the scene of Moses' Call, Horeb or Sinai, is the same place where he later received the Law from God. That God is represented in the vision by fire is fitting as, among the ancients, fire was thought to be the least material of the elements.

† Ex 3:14. *Holy name.* The divine Name, Yahweh, expresses the perfect and complete independence of God, The ancient Hebrews were not at all philosophical and likely did not fully understand the metaphysical implications in this name which God gives Himself. That God simply exists, that He always has and always will, that He is existence itself and is in no way dependent on anyone or anything, would have been too abstract an idea for the Hebrews. They probably understood God's independence concretely in reference to His independent activity on behalf of His chosen people.

† Ex 4:21. *Pharaoh's free will.* The frequent references to God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart is due to the sacred writers' practice of looking to the primary cause of things, God, while lessening the emphasis on secondary causes, in this instance, Pharaoh's pride and greed. The Hebrew expression might be better rendered, "Pharaoh became stubborn." To the Hebrew mind, when an apple fell from

a tree because of gravity and the fact that it was ripe, the Hebrew would say, “God plucked the apple” from the tree. Not only is this more poetic, but it actually makes good sense in that nature’s laws, including gravity, are really just an expression of the divine Will.

- † **Ex 12:1-20. *The Passover Meal.*** The details of the meal’s preparation are significant: “roasting” as the quickest way to prepare the lamb and “bitter herbs,” probably wild endive and wild lettuce, to point out the bitterness of oppression. Eating the meal, standing with staff in hand, indicates readiness for a quick departure. The bread is unleavened because there is no time to wait for the dough to rise.
- † **Ex 12:37. *How many people left Egypt?*** The number of Israelites departing from Egypt seems too large to have crossed by a ford in a single night; and yet, elsewhere we are told the number of Israelites was too small to settle the whole of Palestine. Some scholars assume the number was miscopied. I prefer to believe that with God all things are possible.
- † **Ex 12:43-13:15. *A perpetual reminder.*** The Passover and Firstborn Laws are a perpetual reminder of the great saving act God performed on the eve of the Israelites escape from bondage. The presentation of Jesus in the Temple [Lk 2:22-38] was in obedience to this law of the firstborn, and St. Paul speaks to the law of Passover when he refers to Easter as the new Passover [1 Cor 5:7-8].
- † **Ex 13:16. *A pious custom.*** In this verse we see the origin of the custom of wearing phylacteries, small leather boxes containing little scrolls of scripture. During prayer they were bound to the forehead and arm with leather thongs [see Dt 6 & 11]. Jesus criticized the Pharisees, not for following this custom, but for their ostentation and hypocrisy in observing it [see Mt 23:5].
- † **Ex 14:1-22. *The great miracle of the Exodus.*** The miraculous crossing of the Red Sea (or Reed Sea) made a great impression on future generations of Jews, and is constantly referenced throughout the rest of Sacred Scripture. To the Jews, it is the symbol of God’s special care for His people. For Christians, it has long been understood as a “type” of Baptism.

Old and New Testaments. Thoughts on the unity of the Old and New Testaments as found in Exodus.

- † **People of God.** God’s call and formation of the People of God in the Old Testament foreshadows the unity of the People of God, the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church. This early unity had its impact on the individual, for the individual Jew was freed from bondage in Egypt precisely because he belonged to the People of God.
- † **God’s Power and Love.** Consider the awesome power of God’s will that “all men be saved and brought to the knowledge of salvation.” In the great miracles of Exodus – the plagues, the crossing, the manna and water in the desert – we see how wholeheartedly God has committed Himself to His plan of bringing humanity back into His friendship.
- † **The New Moses.** Moses’ vocation was to be the mediator between God and His people. Jesus Christ, the “New Moses,” perfects this vocation [See Jn 1:17 & Heb 3:1-19]
- † **The Law of Moses.** God’s law, given through Moses, remains valid but possesses a new meaning for the Christian. Christ, on the Mount of the Beatitudes, like Moses on Sinai, interprets and expands the law [Mt 5:1-48].

Questions:

1. What new development does God’s plan for our salvation undergo in the Book of Exodus?
2. How does the Book of Exodus foreshadow the Christian life?
3. Why should today’s Christian read Exodus? Does it have any real application for the Christian life?
4. What was God’s purpose behind the events described in Exodus? Did He succeed?
5. Discuss the character of Moses. What kind of man was he?