God Hears, God Remembers, God Sees, and God Knows

Exodus 1:1–7

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Archaeological Moment: Israel in Egypt

One of the persistent questions that scholars bring to the book of Exodus is a deceptively simple one: is there any evidence outside the Bible that the Israelites were ever in Egypt? For many years, critics pointed to the silence of Egyptian records as reason to doubt the biblical account. But the archaeological picture has grown considerably more interesting.

The Merneptah Stele — sometimes called the Israel Stele — is among the most important ancient inscriptions ever discovered. Dating to approximately 1208 BC, it contains the earliest extrabiblical reference to Israel by name, recording Pharaoh Merneptah's claim to have defeated a people called Israel in Canaan. The stele is remarkable not only for what it says, but for what it assumes: that Israel existed as a recognizable people group at that time. Working backward from that fixed point, the biblical chronology of the Exodus and the wilderness period fits within a coherent historical window.

There is also growing archaeological interest in the Nile Delta region — ancient Goshen — where excavations at sites such as Tell el-Dab'a have uncovered evidence of a large Semitic population residing in Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period, including domestic structures and burial practices distinctly different from Egyptian norms. These Asiatics in Egypt, as Egyptian sources sometimes call them, inhabited the region in precisely the period that aligns with the biblical account of Israel's sojourn. The material evidence does not prove the Exodus, but it places the story squarely within a historically plausible world.

The Most Important Book You May Have Underestimated

If you were asked to name the most important books in the Bible, you might gravitate toward the Gospels, or perhaps Genesis. But consider the testimony of an unlikely coalition of voices: philosophers, political theorists, legal scholars, historians, and religious leaders across centuries have argued that the book of Exodus is among the most consequential books ever

written in the history of the world. No other ancient text carries within it such a concentrated weight of ideas that have shaped civilization.

The book of Exodus is the origin of principles we still reach for today. Slaves become free people — and that liberation is not merely political but theological, grounded in the character of God himself. Equality, justice, and law are not human inventions here; they are gifts from above. Leadership is redefined not as the domination of the powerful over the weak, but as service rendered under divine commission. Extend the story into Leviticus and Numbers, and you find principles governing economic responsibility, land ownership, and the extraordinary institution of the Year of Jubilee — a divinely mandated reset that prevented permanent poverty and the permanent consolidation of wealth. Standards of right living are not imposed arbitrarily, but flow from a covenant relationship with a holy God.

Exodus is an extraordinary book. It is the redemption story of the Old Testament, the event to which everything else is tied: the plagues and the Passover, the crossing of the Red Sea, the giving of the law at Sinai, the building of the tabernacle — that tent of meeting where heaven and earth touched. The book ends with the glory of God filling the tabernacle, with the visible, luminous presence of God dwelling among his people. And for us, reading with eyes trained on Christ, the book of Exodus sets the stage for our own redemption. The God who brought Israel out of Egypt is the same God who, in the person of his Son, brings us out of something far deeper than Egyptian slavery.

The Unexpected Beginning

Knowing how remarkable this book is, it is a little startling that it begins with a single word: *and*.

> *"And these were the names of the sons of Israel who came into Egypt with Jacob; they each one came in with his house." (Exodus 1:1, Green's Literal Translation)*

It is, at first glance, an underwhelming opening. But that word — *and* — is doing enormous theological work. It reaches back across the book of Genesis and says: this story is not beginning here. It is continuing. The *and* refers back to God's purposeful covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob — a purpose from which the whole world is to be blessed. That blessing, if you follow the biblical narrative, is the blessing of life: a knowledge of how to live now, and the means to live in relationship with God that extends far beyond the now, into eternity. It is a blessing that began in God's promise of land and nation to the patriarchs, and that culminates — is fulfilled — in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

But the book of Genesis ends with God's people not in the land of promise. They are residing in a foreign country. Joseph, one of the sons of Jacob, the man who once preserved the whole known world from famine, has died and been embalmed like an Egyptian, sealed in a tomb in a land that is not his own. It is, in many ways, a cliffhanger. What will become of God's promise of life? What will become of God's purpose — not only for this family, but for the entire world?

Four Hundred Years of Hard News

When we turn the page from Genesis into Exodus, things are not going well.

Four hundred years have passed. The people of Israel are still in Egypt. They have settled there, raised families there, and as the story of Exodus gradually reveals, have absorbed the Egyptian world around them — their ways of thinking, their images of the divine, their habits of the heart. The golden calf incident, still chapters away, will make that painfully clear. They are living in a place that was never meant to be home.

And then things grow dramatically worse. A new pharaoh rises to power — one who has no memory of Joseph and no gratitude for what Joseph once did for Egypt.

> *"Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, 'Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.'" (Exodus 1:8–10)*

> *"And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves." (Exodus 1:12–13)*

> *"Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, 'Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live.'" (Exodus 1:22)*

What drives all of this? Fear and ignorance. Not statesmanship, not wisdom, not even rational self-interest — just fear and ignorance. And the consequences are catastrophic. The people of Israel are enslaved, ground down under forced labor, and subjected to what can only be called the first recorded genocide of the Jewish people.

A Prince Who Became a Shepherd

Into this story walks Moses — an Israelite by birth, an Egyptian by upbringing, a man of profound privilege and profound confusion about his own identity. Raised in Pharaoh's palace, educated with the best Egypt had to offer, accustomed to wealth and power, Moses had never known slavery from the inside. He had read about suffering; he had not lived it.

In Exodus chapter two, he takes matters into his own hands. Watching an Egyptian beat a Hebrew slave, Moses strikes the Egyptian down and buries him in the sand — perhaps imagining that this act of violence would announce him as a deliverer and win him the loyalty of his people. Instead, he is rejected.

> *"One day, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and looked on their burdens, and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his people. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. When he went out the next day, behold, two Hebrews were struggling together. And he said to the man in the wrong, 'Why do you strike your companion?' He answered, 'Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?'" (Exodus 2:11–14)*

Moses flees. The prince of Egypt becomes a shepherd in the wilderness of Midian — a vocation the Egyptians considered beneath contempt. Whatever he once imagined for himself, it is now ash.

If you had been living in that time and place — if you were one of those slaves in Egypt, watching the years accumulate into decades and the decades into centuries — you would have had every human reason to conclude that God was absent. That he had forgotten his promises. That he did not hear your prayers. That he did not know your suffering.

The Question That Reaches Across Three Thousand Years

Have you ever felt like that?

We are separated from the Exodus by roughly three thousand five hundred years. We do not know the particular horror of watching our children taken and thrown into a river. But the underlying experience — that aching suspicion that God is absent, that he has forgotten, that our prayers are rising into empty air — that experience is not ancient history. It is Wednesday evening.

This past week I watched the Hatfield and McCoy miniseries — a well-crafted piece of television. Throughout the story, Randolph McCoy lived in a kind of raw theological

expectation: he waited for God to appear and vindicate him, to strike down Devil Anse Hatfield and repay evil with justice. But the intervention he demanded never came the way he wanted it. By the end of his life, after losing so much of his family, Randolph McCoy lived in bitterness and felt abandoned by the God he had counted on. He cursed God for his silence.

That is an extreme case. But the pattern is not uncommon. Life has a way of accumulating weight. A loved one dies. A job disappears. Loneliness sets in — not just ordinary loneliness, but the particular loneliness of a holiday when everyone else seems to belong somewhere and you do not, or the loneliness of a room full of people where no one quite sees you. Then there are the deeper pains: prolonged illness, financial strain, the slow grind of a situation you cannot find your way out of. Rejection. Betrayal. The shame of personal failure. The burden of guilt over things that cannot be undone.

The list is long, and it is honest, and it is yours to fill in. Today, you may be in that place — quietly wondering whether God is present, whether he hears, whether he remembers, whether he knows.

The Fourfold Answer

At the end of Exodus chapter two, the text answers that question directly.

> *"During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel — and God knew." (Exodus 2:23–25)*

Four verbs. Four movements of divine attention. God heard. God remembered. God saw. And God knew.

Growing up, I remember hearing those words used as something close to a warning. God sees you. God knows what you're thinking. He hears everything, and he remembers everything — so you had better be good. The implication was surveillance, not love. A divine record-keeper cataloguing every wrong thought and misstep.

But that is not what we find in this passage. Not even close. What we find here is a God who hears the cries of the suffering and is moved by them. A God who is faithful to what he has promised across centuries of apparent silence. A God who sees his people in their struggle — not to evaluate them, but because he loves them. A God who knows their situation not as an omniscient data point, but with the intimacy of one who is fully present in the middle of it.

This is the story of Exodus: God is present among his people, and he has never left.

Grace That Was There All Along

There is a temptation, reading the first two chapters of Exodus, to conclude that God took something like a four-hundred-year vacation — that he checked out somewhere between the death of Joseph and the burning bush, and only at the end of chapter two decided to re-engage. But a careful reading of the text will not support that conclusion.

From the very opening of Exodus, in the thick of the suffering and the forced labor and the genocide of male children, the fingerprints of God's sustaining grace are visible — if you know what to look for.

The Israelites thrive. Under crushing oppression, subjected to the worst conditions their captors can devise, the people of Israel multiply. The text presents this as something that baffles and frightens Pharaoh, and rightly so — because it is not merely demographic. Something is sustaining these people.

At the moment of greatest crisis, when Pharaoh orders the death of every Hebrew son, two women appear in the narrative: Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives who fear God more than they fear Pharaoh. They protect the children. They are not accidents of history. They are instruments of grace.

When Moses is born, his mother places him in a basket and commits him to the Nile. He drifts into the arms of Pharaoh's own daughter, who takes him in. His own mother is brought back to nurse him. The coincidences stack up in a way that stops being coincidental.

When Moses flees Egypt as a fugitive and arrives in Midian, a stranger in a foreign land, he is welcomed into a family. He is given shelter, and eventually a wife, and the wilderness years that will ultimately form him into the man God needs — none of that is accidental either.

God was always present. He was always hearing, seeing, knowing, and remembering. The silence was not absence. It was patience. It was preparation. It was grace operating below the surface of what anyone could see.

The Evidence of Grace in Your Own Story

Right now, you may be asking the same question Israel was living inside for four centuries: where is God? Does he see what you are going through? Does he know your pain? Does he hear your prayers? Does he remember the promises he has spoken to you in Christ?

The answer the text gives is unambiguous. Yes. He is present. He does see. He does hear. He does know.

And if you pause long enough — if you resist the pull toward Randolph McCoy's conclusion and look honestly at your own story — I believe you will find the evidence of a grace that has been there all along. The suffering that has not destroyed you. The godly person who appeared in your life at precisely the right moment. The providence that, looking back, seems almost too precise to be coincidence. The preparation for something you could not have anticipated.

The contrast between Randolph McCoy and Devil Anse Hatfield is worth sitting with. McCoy spent his life demanding that God appear on his terms, and when God did not, he hardened into bitterness. Hatfield, the villain of the story, the man whose name became synonymous with violence, was persuaded one evening by a friend — Preacher Dyke Garrett — to attend a tent revival meeting. And something broke open in him. His cry to God was not a demand for vengeance. It was a recognition of his own need. At the age of seventy-two, Devil Anse Hatfield received Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior and was baptized in the waters of Island Creek near Logan. It is widely believed that his conversion helped bring the feud to its final close — and the ripples of that moment have touched generations of Hatfields and other families throughout this region.

That is what it looks like when someone stops demanding that God appear in the form they expected and begins to recognize the grace that was present all along.

This Table

This morning we come to this table, and this table is itself evidence of God's sustaining grace. It is a reminder that God did not remain distant. He became flesh and walked among us. He remembered his great love and mercy, and he acted on it — not from a safe distance, but from within our suffering, bearing it himself, dying to end the oldest feud of all: our separation from God.

As you take the bread and the cup this morning, do so with that awareness. He is not absent. He hears. He remembers. He sees. He knows.

He is here.