

Set Free

Exodus 1–14

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Archaeological Moment: Israel in Egypt

When Genesis closes, it does so on a high note. The family of Israel is together in Egypt, forgiveness has been extended, Jacob has seen Joseph, and the old patriarch has spoken his blessing over his sons. But the book also ends with questions hanging in the air. As foreigners in a foreign land, will this family hold together? Will they remember the covenant God made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob? Will they retain their identity as the people of God, or will they gradually be absorbed into the life and culture of Egypt? Jacob's blessing, I believe, was crucial — it knit the family together, anchored their identity in God, and gave them something to hold onto through the long centuries that followed.

To understand what those centuries looked like, we need a piece of historical background. As we discussed last week, a people group known as the Hyksos were active in this period. They shared the same broader ethnic and cultural stock as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob — Semitic peoples from the ancient Near East. The Hyksos actually invaded Egypt and gained control of the southern region, known as Upper Egypt, ruling there for several hundred years before the Egyptians eventually defeated and expelled them. The Hebrews were not the same tribe as the Hyksos, but they were of the same general people group — and that similarity was enough to make the Egyptians view them with deep suspicion.

That is the historical backdrop against which the opening chapter of Exodus must be read. Listen to how well the biblical text fits the context:

“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)

What Scripture describes here is historically credible. And archaeology confirms it. We have images, grave sites, and material evidence that corroborates the kind of forced labor Exodus 1 describes. The slavery is real. The suffering is documented. When verse 11 tells us that the Egyptians “set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens” and that they built

for Pharaoh the store cities of Pithom and Raamses, we are reading history — history that has left its mark in the ground.

The Anatomy of Slavery

I want to linger over this picture of slavery that Exodus 1 gives us, because I think it is more important than it might first appear. Read the text again carefully, beginning at verse 10:

“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. Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves.” (Exodus 1:10–14)

Notice what slavery looks like according to this passage. It has a mental component: oppression works by keeping its victims confused and contained — “let us deal shrewdly with them.” The enslaved are afflicted. They carry heavy burdens. They are viewed with dread and contempt — those dirty Israelites. Their lives are made bitter. Their labor is rendered meaningless, in service of someone else’s glory. They have no peace, because they are worked ruthlessly. And, as the text goes on to show, this bondage ultimately aims at death — with Pharaoh eventually commanding that Hebrew infant boys be thrown into the Nile.

That is the portrait of slavery that Exodus 1 paints: blindness, oppression, affliction, heavy burdens, rejection, bitterness, meaninglessness, the absence of peace, and finally death. Hold that image in your mind. We will come back to it, because it matters more than you might expect.

God Hears, God Acts

Because of this slavery, and because of the brutality that accompanied it, the people of Israel cry out — and God hears.

“... 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)

God knew. And because God knew, he acted. He called a man named Moses — a Hebrew child who had been marked for death, hidden by his mother in a basket among the reeds of the Nile, drawn out of the water by Pharaoh’s own daughter and raised in the Egyptian court. It is worth noting that historians generally identify the Pharaoh at the time of Moses’ birth as Thutmose — which is almost certainly the name behind Moses’ own Egyptian name. Moses fled Egypt at forty after committing a crime, spent another forty years as a shepherd in the wilderness, and then, at eighty years old, encountered God at the burning bush and received his commission:

“And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.” (Exodus 3:9–10)

After considerable reluctance, Moses went. He confronted Pharaoh. And over the course of what was probably roughly a year, God sent a series of plagues upon Egypt — ten in total, escalating in severity and scope. Throughout this entire sequence, God makes his purpose unmistakably clear:

“And the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it.” (Exodus 7:5, NIV)

“Let my people go, so that they may worship me, or this time I will send the full force of my plagues against you and against your officials and your people, so you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth.” (Exodus 9:13–14, NIV)

This refrain echoes through the plague narratives again and again: *the earth is the LORD’s* (9:29); *you may know that I am the LORD* (10:2). Even when Pharaoh’s army races in pursuit of the fleeing Israelites and drowns in the sea, God declares that he is acting so that both Egyptians and Israelites will know who he is.

There is a compelling argument — one I find persuasive — that each of the plagues corresponds to a specific Egyptian deity. The god of the Nile, the god of fertility, the god of the land, and so on, each fall under the power of the God of Israel. The plagues are not random catastrophes. They are a systematic demonstration that Israel’s God is sovereign over every power Egypt worships. When the Lord says, “*I am doing this so that you may know that I am the LORD,*” he means it in the fullest possible sense.

The Passover

The tenth and final plague is in a category of its own. The plague of death — the death of the firstborn — differs from all that preceded it in one crucial respect: it will come not only upon the Egyptians, but potentially upon the Israelites as well. God, however, provides a way of escape. On the night of the plague, Israel is to take a lamb, slaughter it, and apply its blood to the doorposts and lintel of their houses. When death passes through the land, that blood will cause it to pass over. This is the Passover — and the imagery is everything.

The next morning, grief broke open across Egypt. Every house had a firstborn child dead. In their anguish, the Egyptians sent Israel away. Regarding the historical identity of the Pharaoh of the Exodus, one strong argument points to Thutmose II, whose reign was brief and prosperous before ending in sudden collapse, with no son to succeed him — a detail that aligns suggestively with the biblical account.

Israel fled. And then Pharaoh changed his mind.

The Sea

The Egyptian army set out in pursuit, and the Israelites found themselves in an impossible position — the sea blocking their way forward, the army closing in behind them. Their response was entirely understandable and entirely faithless:

“Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: ‘Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.” (Exodus 14:11–12)

And Moses answered them:

“Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.” (Exodus 14:13–14)

What followed is one of the defining moments in all of human history. The sea parted. Israel crossed on dry ground. The Egyptian army pursued them into the sea and was destroyed. The Exodus — the literal deliverance of Israel from bondage — was complete.

On the question of where the crossing took place, archaeologists and historians have proposed numerous competing locations. One detail I find intriguing: on both sides of the body of water traditionally associated with the crossing — in Egypt and in Saudi Arabia — two identical pillars have been found, with Hebrew inscription reportedly dating to the reign of King Solomon. Whether or not that identification holds up to further scrutiny, it points to the enduring impulse to mark and remember this event.

More Than History

The Exodus is one of the most important events in all of the Old Testament. It is retold in psalm and proclamation across the entire Hebrew scriptures. It is the defining event in the identity of this people: they are those whom the LORD brought out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. That is who they are.

But this story is more than history, as important as that history is. The Exodus is also a template — an image, a shape, an outline — of something that God has done for every one of us.

Let me drop into some theology here, because this matters deeply.

How would you define sin? At its most basic, sin is missing the mark — doing what God does not will, failing to do what he does will. It is the breaking of God's law. It is a debt owed, a trespass committed. All of these are genuine biblical categories, and none of them is wrong.

But there is one understanding of sin that encompasses all the others, and it is this: sin is a power that holds people in bondage. Sin is not merely a single act of lying; it is the condition of the heart from which that lie comes. Many people think of sin as a matter of legal fiction — as if it were simply a product of a law that was broken, and if there were no law, there would be no sin. And so they conclude that since they reject the law, or since they believe there is no real truth, sin is not really their problem — it is something that belongs out there in some theological realm that has very little to do with everyday life.

But that is precisely backwards. Sin is a power. Sin is a bondage. Sin is a slavery. The whole purpose of the law, as the Apostle Paul argues in the book of Romans, is not to create sin but to reveal it — to open our eyes to the bondage that already has us. People are blind to this reality, and the law is what breaks that blindness open. That is why Paul can say that the law is good, even though it condemns him. The condemnation is not the bad news; the condemnation is simply the recognition of the slavery he was already in.

And now go back to Exodus 1. Remember what slavery looks like? Blindness. An oppressive power that seeks to keep one enslaved. Affliction. Heavy burdens. Rejection. A bitter life. A meaningless life. The absence of peace. And death.

That is the power of sin.

The Greater Exodus

But the good news — the genuinely good news — is that God has heard our cry, and has done something to free us from this power.

“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:21)

We are accustomed to speaking of Jesus receiving our punishment on the cross — that he took what we deserved, that he bore the penalty in our place. And that is true. But notice what this verse says. It does not only say that Jesus received our punishment. It says that Jesus *became sin*. He takes our place not just in the courtroom but in the bondage itself. He inserts himself into our slavery. He stands where we stand, under the power that has held us captive — and he says to that power: *take me instead*.

Because Jesus becomes sin, because he steps into that bondage in our place, we are released. The power no longer has its grip on us. And so when we look at the cross, we should not see only a payment being made. We should see the power of sin reaching out and seizing hold of Jesus — his shame, his affliction, his burden, his rejection, his bitterness, his suffering — all of it the weight of that slavery pressing down upon him. He falls under it. He dies under it.

He becomes the Passover lamb whose blood causes death and slavery to pass over us, because they have taken hold of him instead.

We are free. “*If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*” (John 8:36, NASB)

But that is not the whole story. What is remarkable is how closely the cross and the Exodus mirror each other. The disciples on the day Jesus died were very much like the Israelites standing at the edge of the sea, with Pharaoh’s army bearing down on them — terrified, doubting, wondering whether freedom was really possible after all. And into that moment, God speaks the same word he spoke through Moses: *Fear not. Stand firm. See the salvation of the LORD.*

The stone is rolled away. The tomb is opened. Jesus rises from the dead. That is the sea being split. That is God destroying death itself. Because he rose, death is not merely escaped — it is defeated, just as the army of Egypt was swallowed up in the sea.

This is why we practice baptism. We say it follows Jesus — dying with him, rising with him. It is an outward sign of an inward reality: we have been set free.

Live as Free People

So what does that mean for you?

It means you are no longer a slave to sin. Live like it. Take joy and delight in the Lord who has delivered you. When the old bondage reaches out for you — and it will — remember who you are and whose you are.

Stand firm in the freedom that has been won for you. Paul puts it this way:

“It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.” (Galatians 5:1, NASB)

And use your freedom for what freedom is for: to love, to forgive, to serve. Not because you have to — but because you are free, and free people can finally choose to love in a way that slaves never could.

The Exodus was real. The deliverance it points to is more real still. God heard the groaning of his people in Egypt, and he acted. God has heard the groaning of his people under the power of sin, and in Jesus Christ, he has acted again — more decisively, more finally, more gloriously than even the parting of the sea.

You have been set free. Now live like it.