

Study 31: Exodus – Brief Introduction

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 moves past those early beginnings described in Genesis and continues 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 God did through Moses 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 the Book of Exodus, from the beginning through chapter 14, verse 22.

Background. Sometime around 1850 B.C. Abraham heard God's call and received God's threefold promise of the covenant: (1) Land - Gen 15; (2) Royal Dynasty – Gen 17; and (3) Worldwide Blessing – Gen 22. Isaac, the child of this promise, passed the torch of faith to his son, Jacob, who along with his sons eventually settled in the land of Goshen in 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, Judah, and announced that the Messiah would be born of his line. (See Genesis 49.)

In this secluded corner of Egypt there was less danger of the little tribe's losing its newfound 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 (Egypt's Fifteenth Dynasty) was not Egyptian at all. The Hyksos pharaohs, like Abraham and his family, were Semitic in origin. They had conquered much of Egypt (primarily lower and middle Egypt) during one of the country's 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. Many scholars believe this is why the Jews first found a haven and then slavery in Egypt.

Prophetically, this period of slavery was revealed to Abraham by God long before: *"Then the Lord said to Abram: Know for certain that your descendants will reside as aliens in a land not their own, where they shall be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years"* [Gen 15:13].

As in Genesis, God's plan is the key to understanding Exodus. God's plan moves ever forward. The wisdom and foolishness, the goodness and sinfulness of those who play key roles in the realization of the plan all work toward its fulfillment. God's will cannot be defeated by the resistance of men, even the world's most powerful men. God always prevails. It's important to realize this: that even in the midst of seemingly devastating circumstances – e.g., the long slavery of God's People – God will keep His promise.

It's also worth noting that God often makes use of the least likely among us to carry His plan forward. Of all the thousands of His people living in Egypt, God selected Moses, a man who had murdered an Egyptian and then fled the country to avoid prosecution. Years later, when God personally called Moses to be the means of Israel's liberation, how did Moses reply? He said, quite rightly, *"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"* [Ex 3:11] Who indeed? And later, during this same dialogue with God, Moses again resists his call

and says, *“If you please, my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and tongue”* [Ex 4:10]. In other words, Moses claims he lacks the skills to convince either the people or pharaoh to do God’s will. But God chooses Moses nonetheless, just as He had chosen Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; and just as Jesus will later choose twelve unlikely men, a collection of first-century blue-collar workers, to lead His Church. It is not the power of men that is manifested in God’s choices; but rather it is the power of God that shines through the weaknesses of those he chooses.

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 manifests His presence to Moses through the medium of fire is particularly fitting as, among the ancients, fire was thought to be the least material of the elements. This manifestation, then, reinforces the understanding that God is a spiritual being. As Jesus instructs the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s Well: *“God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and truth”* [Jn 4:24].

In his reception of the Law from God on the mountaintop, Moses foreshadows the work of Jesus who also ascends the mountain to explain His fulfillment of the Law of Moses. Through his Sermon on the Mount we learn what God expects of us, how we are to live the Christian life in Jesus Christ. 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. Read Mt 5:1-48.

† **Ex 3:14.** *Holy name.* When Moses asked God to reveal His name, the Lord replied: *“I am who I am. Then he added: This is what you will tell the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you”* [Ex 3:14]. This divine Name – *Yahweh* and expressed by the Tetragrammaton YHWH – expresses the perfect and complete independence of God.

The ancient Hebrews were not a particularly philosophical people and likely did not fully grasp the metaphysical implications in this name, which God gives Himself. That God simply exists, that He always has and always will exist, that He is existence itself, an eternal existence, and is in no way dependent on anyone or anything – all of this might have been too abstract an idea for the early Hebrews. They probably understood God’s independence concretely in reference to His independent activity on behalf of His chosen people. Moses, however, as an educated member of the pharaoh’s household, likely had a deeper understanding of the transcendence implicit in God’s revealed name.

The Jews certainly understood that God’s self-expressed name was holy, and would not dare to utter it. Indeed, the Catholic Church also does not include the name of God revealed in its rites. In 2008, Pope Benedict XVI, citing the authority of ancient Jewish and Christian practice, reminded the Church that the Tetragrammaton YHWH (in Hebrew, יהוה) is not to be pronounced in Catholic liturgy or in music. The pope recalled the "church’s tradition, from the beginning, that the sacred Tetragrammaton was never pronounced in the Christian context nor translated into any of the languages into which the Bible was translated." The

Vatican reminded bishops that the name "Yahweh" in Catholic worship should be replaced by the Latin "Dominus" (Lord) or a word "equivalent in meaning" in the local language.

- † **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 remarkable scene in which Luke describes the infant Jesus' Presentation in the Temple [Lk 2:22-38] shows how Mary and Joseph acted 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:

"Clear out the old yeast, so that you may become a fresh batch of dough, inasmuch as you are unleavened. For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" [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 Jewish men bound them to their foreheads and arms with leather thongs [see Dt 6 & 11]. Jesus criticized the Scribes and the Pharisees, not for following this custom, but for their ostentation and hypocrisy in how they observed it: *"All their works are performed to be seen. They widen their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels" [Mt 23:5].* This is a fitting lesson for us as well. Our religious devotions should be centered solely and humbly on our worship of God, and not as a means to show others how "holy" we are.
- † **Ex 14:1-22. *The great miracle of the Exodus.*** The miraculous crossing of the Red 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. Indeed, the crossing of the Red Sea is considered by the Jews as one of God's greatest deeds. In Psalm 78 we read: *"He split the sea and led them across, making the waters stand like walls" [Ps 78:13].* And these words of Psalm 77 have always gladdened my heart:

"With your mighty arm you redeemed your people, the children of Jacob and Joseph. The waters saw you, God; the waters saw you and lashed about, even the deeps of the sea

trembled. The clouds poured down their rains; the thunderheads rumbled; your arrows flashed back and forth. The thunder of your chariot wheels resounded; your lightning lit up the world; the earth trembled and quaked. Through the sea was your way; your path, through the mighty waters, though your footsteps were unseen. You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron” [Ps 77:16-21].

For Christians, it has long been understood as a “type” of Baptism. In the Church’s Rite of Baptism, the blessing of the baptismal water includes these words: “Through the waters of the Red Sea you led Israel out of slavery, to be an image of God’s holy people, set free from sin by 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.
- † **Baptism Foreshadowed.** St. Paul understands the crossing of the Red Sea as a foreshadowing of Baptism: *“I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea, and all of them were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. All ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they drank from a spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was the Christ” [1 Cor 10:1-4].* And the Catechism of the Catholic Church states clearly that *“...literally the liberation of Israel from the slavery of Egypt, announces the liberation wrought by Baptism” (CCC 1221)*
- † **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” [1 Tim 2:4].* 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 His Chosen People and ultimately all of 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. St. John, as he concludes the Prologue of his Gospel, writes: *“while the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” [Jn 1:17].* And in the Letter to the Hebrews we read:
Therefore, holy “brothers,” sharing in a heavenly calling, reflect on Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, who was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was “faithful in [all] his house.” But he is worthy of more “glory” than Moses, as the founder of a house has more “honor” than the house itself. Every house is founded by someone, but the founder of all is God. Moses was “faithful in all his house” as a “servant” to testify to what would be spoken, but Christ was faithful as a son placed over his house. We are his house, if [only] we hold fast to our confidence and pride in our hope [Heb 3:1-6].

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? Why should today’s Christian read Exodus? Does it have any real application for the Christian life?
3. What was God’s purpose behind the events described in Exodus? How did He succeed?
4. Describe the character of Moses. What kind of man was he? How did he change?