

Chapter 2: Your Life According to Exodus

Exodus as a Story of Testing

Paul alerts us that the story of Exodus serves as an allegory for our own spiritual journeys, defined by the baptisms of water, spirit, and testing¹. The story starts with the descendents of Jacob, who had become numerous enough to be called “a nation” but had been enslaved by the Egyptians. God enlisted through a miraculous bush an exiled convict and cultural half-caste named Moses to carry notice of his intent to free the Israelites and establish a more defined God/worshippers relationship with them. God accomplished the first part of his goal by terrible acts of divine judgment upon the Egyptians and by drowning their army in the sea while miraculously bringing the Israelites through. The second part was more difficult. The Israelites were not faithful despite marvelous signs of God’s solicitude, and forty years passed until a generation grew sufficiently God-loving to complete the journey.

Traditionally, interest in this story has focused on the liberation aspect. The Egyptians were Bad Guys because they practiced slavery, so God had to punish them and rescue the Good Guys. The trouble is, this interpretation does not hold up to thematic, detailed or **global** scrutiny. A closer reading of God’s stated intentions shows liberation to be a secondary and prerequisite goal to his main effort of recovering a wayward nation. At certain specific points, his judgment for standing in the way of that goal threatened the

¹ 1 Cor. 10:1–13

Israelites as much as any Egyptian. By the end of the story, probably more Israelites died than their former captors.

The worship aspect is established early, at the non-burning bush. When Moses asked for a sign of authenticity, it is remarkable that God selected none of the amazing miracles and wonders that later occur. Rather, he selected the transformation of the Israelites into a worshipping nation. It's a typical God-proof—given only after the faith we presume a sign will create has already been exercised **and impossible to confound with the works of other spirits or events of nature**. It's an admission that miracles ultimately have no power to convince, but conviction is the ultimate miracle. Nevertheless, that no accusation of harshness or unfairness could be made against him, God gave Moses the Word and three miraculous signs to mediate.

The first sign was God's turning Moses' staff into a serpent and then back again. The symbol of snakes is used for evil spirits throughout the Bible², so the sign indicated God's authority over spirits through Moses. It corresponds to the part of Jesus' kingdom ministry where God drove out demons through Jesus' disciples.

The second sign was God's having Moses heal his own hand of leprosy. This indicated God's authority over sickness and corresponds to the part of Jesus' kingdom ministry where God healed many (of leprosy and a great number of other maladies) through Jesus' disciples. The first two signs and message therefore illustrated the ministry of the Messiah to come.

² Gen. 3; Matt. 10:1; Mark 16:17–18; Luke 10:17–20, 11:11–12

“These should be sufficient,” said God, “but in case they *aren’t*...” the third sign was the water from the Nile becoming blood when poured on the ground³. Now, the Nile is considered the Lifeline of Egypt, and blood on the ground is the ancient price for bloodguilt⁴. So the sign of the River of Life being poured as blood for the atonement of sin pointed all the way to Jesus’ crucifixion.

In all, the signs and message perfectly predicted the ministry and sacrifice of Christ, but to the Israelites who witnessed them thousands of years beforehand, they were just meaningless wonders. Nevertheless, the account goes, “the people believed and... bowed low and worshiped” when they heard of God’s love for them. So powerful is the Gospel that, even when the majority is not comprehended, it can convert an entire nation!

This point in the story should have made a good ending. After all, it is the point at which we typically end our stories of peoples’ salvation, blubbering at the altar when they’ve realized God’s infinite mercy for their worthless selves. Problem is, here we’re only as far as the fourth chapter out of forty! The more significant portion of the story, as always, is post-conversion. Belief and worship, like the rest of a person’s self and life, must yet be purified of corruption and divorced of one’s Self-centeredness and control.

Consider the story of Cain and Abel. On the surface both were worshiping the Lord equally, but Cain had not really given up his Self-interest. He ended up showing who he really thought was god by taking the life of his brother. His grain offering, moreover, betrayed no consciousness of dependence on God’s provision through a bloody sacrifice to

³ Ex. 4:9

⁴ Gen. 9:5–6

make him acceptable. His offering showed he believed he ought to be accepted on his own merit, not by God's requisites, and again pointed to his actual idolatry of the Self.

If belief and worship can be so corrupt and insincere, what reveals their true nature and perfects them? This is precisely the functional role of baptism of any kind. It challenges the Self, shows how helpless the Self really is, and leads the way to overcoming the Self.

This challenge is apparent in the very next verse of our story, where God has Moses inform Pharaoh that the Hebrew's presence is requested at a feast...in the middle of the wilderness! This message was at face value pure nonsense. There were no banqueting facilities or caterers in the desert of Sinai, so the people would have had to carry their own food, drink, families, and equipment there—not just to the border, but three days' journey in. Why would anyone carry all the food for a religious feast into the middle of a wilderness, when plenty of temples were conveniently located near by? The answer, of course, is no one, save those who are so trusting of and loyal to and in love with God that they'd go anywhere for him. Only threatened privation can separate the faithful from those who worship God only when he provides for them or they are able to provide for themselves (even by getting whipped for a living).

Privation didn't take long to find the new worshipers. The very next day, God's servant Pharaoh denied them the materials for their manufactures without reducing their quota. The Israelite leaders went from using God's name in worship to using it for curses, and even Moses' faith failed him momentarily, and he rebuked God. "You didn't do what you promised!" But here's the witness to the quality of Moses' faith: in spite of these apparent failures and the fierce anger of those on whose behalf he was sent, he obeyed when God sent him back, and God sent him back not once but many times. He kept going back when the court magicians could mimic God's signs until they no longer could. He kept

obeying despite all Pharaoh's pointed refusals, until they turned to tricks and phony conversions then waverings and half measures. He was a man, as God later witnessed to his brother and sister, of very little Self.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of all his countrymen. A bit of God's suspicion showed up in Moses' first message to Pharaoh. Moses begged to let the Israelites worship "otherwise He will fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword."⁵ In other words, the Israelites were threatened by the same judgment that was later to befall the Egyptians. It was like the plagues were a judgment looking for a guilty party to punish, and the first suspicion fell on the non-worshippers themselves. Why didn't they worship God in the land he assigned them from their beginnings? Because the Egyptians had enslaved them? But what were they doing in Egypt to begin with? Why hadn't they returned to Canaan after the famine, as their ancestor Abraham had done before them⁶? Their hearts had been plainly seduced by the wealth and convenience of Egypt until the inevitable enslavement for those things. So while we may ask, "Why did God allow it?" God asked, "Why did *they* allow it? Why didn't they listen to the message their slavery sent them? If I free them, will they worship me OUTSIDE of Egypt?"⁷

⁵ Exodus 5:3

⁶ Genesis 13:1.

⁷ While God had prophesied that the Israelites would linger in Egypt (Gen. 15:13), the fulfillment is described in generally censorious terms. For example, their multiplication there is not described as a blessing (as preachers often claim), but as a reptilian sort of reproduction (Ex. 1:7). See also Ex. 13:38 for a "mixed multitude" resulting from their heedless "spawning." Their stay in Egypt, hence, can't be seen as God's will (no more than God's foretelling of Israelite cannibalism in Leviticus

As a reminder of their guilt, God instituted the practices of Passover and redeeming the firstborn by sacrifice. Unlike the other plagues, the Death of the First-Born did not threaten Egyptians and not Israelites, for it is the universal and timeless plague of bloodguilt-by-association which requires a life for a life. Universal because the ones spared were spared not on the basis of ethnicity but on the basis of believing in the efficacy of the sacrifice⁸. Timeless because the Israelites were to continue seeking the redemption of sacrifice for the rest of their existence⁹, and indeed practice it up to this very day. Because the guilt of putting one's Self before God did not end when the Israelites were liberated from Egypt.

There were much simpler ways that God could have used to free the Israelites, if freedom were all that the story was about. He could have simply killed off all the Egyptians, as he mentioned himself before sending the hailstorm of ages¹⁰, but he didn't for at least two reasons. Firstly, it would have allowed the Israelites to choose to stay in Egypt, a temptation too great for them, certainly, if slavery did not deter them.

Secondly, this story is as much about the non-Israelites as about the Israelites (who recorded it for both groups!). Note that God's stated reason, "to proclaim My name through all the earth," is the same he gives to the Israelites¹¹. So one could show that God's call to

26:29). The prophecy was more God's cynical take on the faithfulness of Abraham's descendents and the appointed limit of his patience.

⁸ Exodus 12:13

⁹ Exodus 12:24, 13:13

¹⁰ Exodus 9:15

¹¹ Exodus 6:3,7

worship was not just to the Israelites but to the non-Israelites. It shows that God intended to redeem all people of the world from the beginning.

Amazingly enough, the person who comprehended this Word the quickest was none of God's people, but Pharaoh! He immediately sensed that Moses was but a go-between, and knew that the real issue was, "Why doesn't Pharaoh worship God?" Pharaoh was also astute in that he wasn't about to worship based on a mere message from the spiritual realm, of which he could command massive amounts, but he demanded a relationship. "I do not know the Lord," he says. Of course, the irony is that God had just dropped his calling card.

Perhaps Pharaoh was unwilling to accept that relationship precisely because he chose to remain in Egypt (pretty understandable, since he was king!). In that land of professional spirituality, he routinely called upon thousands of priests to spy on God and needed to beg no grace. In contrast, if his heart had been rich soil for receiving God's Word, he would have heard Moses and immediately said, "You, a nobody, are going with nothing into nowhere to celebrate a feast to the Lord? Take me with you! Please! Pleeeeeease!" But Pharaoh couldn't pass through this needle's eye precisely because he was *somebody*, and not a slave or outlaw. In this light, the Israelites' suffering was a blessing in disguise because it didn't leave them the option to imagine they were priests or kings.

In a sense, Pharaoh in the story is but the full expression of Israelite Self-subservience, the Mr. Hyde to the Israelite Dr. Jekyll. Both were called to worship on pain of judgment. Both heard the Word and witnessed the power of God. But Pharaoh refused even at the cost of his land, people, and family, while the Israelites saved themselves by running like lemmings into the sea! In the end, Pharaoh's determination to worship himself (however much he gave the appearance of recognizing God's lordship) cost him everything,

including his very life, but those who were willing to throw their lives away found salvation—at least so long as they *stayed* willing to throw their lives away.

It is in this sense that running through the Red Sea was their water baptism¹², even though they didn't get wet! It was baptism in the sense that they were running from their imagined ability to fend for themselves and appealing to God for their salvation¹³. They were ready to fight, but denied themselves and followed their Divine Savior¹⁴, thereby choosing to leave behind all they had previously become slaves to enjoy (which they might have imagined they could reacquire through bloodshed). It was night when they went into the sea. They were going where by nature they could not see but by God's light could travel, walking out the definition of faith literally ¹⁵. And they reemerged from the dark womb of the sea as if reborn¹⁶, stripped of almost everything they had acquired in their first lives¹⁷. They were willing to do this because they believed God when he promised a better, God-powered way that would make them richer than they could imagine. And it wasn't the promised riches that motivated them so much, because God's report that the grass was greener in Canaan was uncorroborated. They were not only choosing two birds in the bush over one in the hand but birds that they hadn't even detected yet. So they must have trusted in God's word and power over their own eyes or ears. For the moment, at least...

¹² 1 Corinthians 10:2

¹³ 1 Peter 3:21

¹⁴ Matthew 16:24

¹⁵ Acts 26:18, Hebrews 11:1 (and many others—search “eyes”)

¹⁶ John 3:3ff.

¹⁷ Job 1:21

For though the Egyptians had refused God and received their judgment, the Israelites were still on trial. The testing by privation that God had started from Moses' first interview with Pharaoh continued after the passage through the sea. First the fresh water ran out; then the food had to be rationed. The Israelites' belief system, which had seemed so solid when they had danced on the farther shore, collapsed like a termite-ridden house, and they regretted leaving Egypt. Still God withheld judgment. He did not test them beyond what they could bear, but always provided a way out¹⁸. Sometimes it was naturally with an oasis, but more often it was supernaturally through a miracle.

Two famous sayings come out of this period of testing. One is "man does not live by bread alone." In its New Testament context, it's easy to overlook the historical and textual contexts of testing and grace and to interpret the saying to mean something like, "We really should read our Bible more." Here's the original context:

"You shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you in the wilderness...that He might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart... He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna... (that) you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD... The LORD your God was disciplining you just as a man disciplines his son."

This is no casual admonition for greater piety but a promise of sufficient deprivation and humiliation to make us cry out in total defeat. More than the clamor of worship, acclamation, and platitude when things are going well, the Lord is very interested in what we would cry out at the moment of need. He wants to bend close to our parched lips to hear

¹⁸ 1 Corinthians 10:13

what we whisper. Do we still worship him, or curse him and die¹⁹? But the truth is that though the Fire easily overwhelms our senses and ability to save ourselves, He never allows it to actually harm us²⁰. What harms us is solely our response to God, the direction of our deep held loyalties that only the truth serum of Fire can reveal.

The other famous saying from this period is, “Do not put God to the test.” Out of its context, this saying becomes ripe for abuse, having been applied from everything from discouraging tough questions about doctrine to a pious excuse to refuse God’s lordship. In Isaiah 7:10–13, a king name Ahaz invoked this saying when offered supernatural certification of the message the prophet had brought. Ironically, such false piety violated the very ideal he quoted. The test, as the context makes clear, is to *insist* on disbelieving despite God’s generous provision of signs.

One might have thought, at this point, that the Israelites had given proof of their incorrigibility sufficient to be condemned, but there was one more baptism to undergo—that of receiving the Word at Sinai. After all the rigors of taking two months to travel three days’ distance, after extensive preparation on the outskirts of the mountain, the people were for the first time to hear the Lord speak to them directly. This was the main purpose, as we’ve seen, for which God brought them out of Egypt in the first place, the goal for which he had turned whole nations upside down. Now there was no longer the excuse of having an intermediary named Moses. As God points out, “You yourselves have seen that I have spoken to you from heaven.”²¹

¹⁹ Job 2:9

²⁰ Daniel 3:25

²¹ Exodus 20:22

It's worth sitting back a moment, at this point, to consider what exactly it was that the Israelites received at Sinai. Because most religions depend on a "sacred" text given to a special person who later died, it is tempting to think of the message at Sinai that way. The logic is: this was a unique experience in all the world, never to happen again, so while he's here, God may as well give his instructions for all people forever to follow. Consequently, after God leaves again, the words must be treated with utmost care and respect, in order to make eternal and to be counted as Holy in his place.

The problem with this perspective, of course, is that the Speaker was not planning on dying or leaving to go anywhere. God's message at Sinai was a reaffirmation of relationship, that he had always been there, was there, and would always be there. The implication being that with a Holy God still living and speaking, there is no reason to give any static word more than its due of having once been spoken by him.

This dynamic view of God's word started from his commission to Moses. He gave very little instruction about how to accomplish such a complex mission, so Moses felt a great lack of confidence. Instead of providing exact details for how everything was to go—a static word—God promised an active word. "I, even I, will be with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say."²² In other words, God promised his Word would dwell with Moses, come directly through Moses' mouth and not by his interpretation, be generated upon need and therefore perfectly appropriate to every situation, and incapable of being lost or corrupted.

²² Exodus 4:12. Also, consider the New Testament parallel in Matthew 10:18–19.

The Israelites' assignment at Sinai seems simple enough—"Listen to My voice and keep My covenant,²³" but they failed in spectacular fashion almost immediately. When the people first heard God's voice in the power of his holiness, they refused to listen any more²⁴. We assume that it was the awesome event that cowed them, but given their subsequent behavior, perhaps it had more to do with the changes they would have to make to their lives in response to his nearness.

The covenant hardly fared better, the people giving themselves up to an orgy to a handmade god while Moses was still on the mountain getting the Word they had refused to listen to²⁵. Notice that although Moses was away, they still had the static word that they had just promised to follow in book form²⁶. It was a bad sign, made even worse when the Word God had literally written in stone was just as quickly smashed to pieces²⁷. It was a visible demonstration of the vulnerability of the static word and those who rely primarily on it.

After the Sinai generation had passed away, God reiterated the covenant to their descendants. The terms and emphases were somewhat different, but entirely consistent. Buried in it is the same promise that God had first made to Moses, but now he made it to the entire nation: "The word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart."²⁸ Again, God's Word is not fixed geographically on paper or stone, nor is it to be heard and

²³ Exodus 19:5

²⁴ Exodus 20:19

²⁵ Exodus 32:8

²⁶ Exodus 19:7

²⁷ Exodus 32:19

²⁸ Deuteronomy 30:14

interpreted, but ready to be spoken. Basically, God was calling the entire nation to prophesy continuously!

What is this dynamic Word that came down like a flame over the people at Sinai in order to empower them to live holier and prophetic lives? In a sign of God's revelatory intent for his people in Numbers 11, it is identified specifically as God's own Spirit²⁹. So we see that just as the Israelites experienced things analogous to being baptized with water and fire, so they experienced something like being baptized with the Spirit.

For a summary, some comparative statistics. Of the adults that God pretty much forced out of Egypt, hundreds of thousands were reborn out of the sea to a new life, somewhat fewer received the Living Word, but only two survived the Testing to receive what God had originally promised. Is the Fire too much for mortal flesh to bear? Isn't God being rather harsh?

God's defense is: "I have led you forty years in the wilderness; your clothes have not worn out on you, and your sandal has not worn out on your foot."³⁰ What really went on there? Can we really call it Testing? Was it a time of real deprivation or of miraculous demonstrations of grace? In a way it can hardly be called "Testing" save for those who insisted on having things their own way. If they had not focused on the corrupt pleasures and possessions of Egypt, perhaps they would not have even felt under duress in the desert. The Fire, it seems, burns only what is consumable, and Salvation sits even nearer than the flame, if we but take notice of it.

²⁹ Paul plainly makes this same equation in Ephesians 6:17.

³⁰ Deuteronomy 29:5

Only two survived the Fire, but with them walked hundreds of thousands who were born since Egypt. In a sense, they were born of Sea, Fire, and Mountain. They were the success story; the Replacements of the Egypt-centered Israelites. They were the ones for whose sake God took on this tremendous exercise to begin with, before most of them even existed. The generations that suffered Death by Fire can be numbered on one hand; the ones that still live by it number a thousand.