

Chapter 7 Exodus 1-14

Yahweh is: “I am who I am”

Moses said to God, “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?” God said to Moses, “I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” Exodus 3:13-14

God’s salvation history is not an ancient myth nor a bygone tale. The story may be old, but it is by no means over. The Lord God is not the God of the past alone, but the God of the present and future, as well. The same God who worked through Moses to save his people is the God who gave himself to save us. The exodus is not legend but lived history. The same salvation offered to Israel three thousand years ago helps us to understand God’s salvation today. “Our salvation text,” writes Eugene Peterson, “doesn’t provide us with a dictionary definition of salvation; what we get is a salvation story, frequently remembered and often told. The Hebrew way to understand salvation was not to read a theological treatise but to sit around a campfire with family and friends and listen to a story” (170).

God is not some abstract, generic concept that we can study in theory or develop into an ideology. “For biblical people, God is not an idea for philosophers to discuss or a force for priests to manipulate. God is person—a person to be worshiped or defied, believed or rejected, loved or hated, in time and place. . . History is the medium in which God works salvation, just as paint and canvas is the medium in which Rembrandt made works of art. We cannot get closer to God by distancing ourselves from the mess of history” (Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 139).

The exodus of God’s people from ancient Egypt is not a paradigm for political revolutions but an introduction to eternal redemption. Yahweh is the Lord of History and the essential fact of human existence is not oppression, but atonement. The focus of Salvation History is not on the Pharaohs of the world but on the God who is; the God who saves us not only from the world but from our sinful, evil nature. Reading Exodus saves us from politicizing and spiritualizing salvation. It is neither a call for political revolution nor a myth to inspire spirituality. Some see exodus as a legend inspiring oppressed people to rise up against their oppressors and others see exodus as religious myth inspiring and creating Judaism, but the biblical exodus is much more than either of these reductive models. The Book of Exodus bears witness to God’s strategy for redemption in history.

As the story unfolds we were meant to see God’s saving action running like a thin red line through human history. As civilizations and empires come and ago, Israel’s exodus may not show up as even a blip on history’s time line, but what God did for Israel is what he seeks to do for all people. The message of Exodus is that Yahweh is. The Lord God is working out redemption for time and eternity.

Exodus begins by reminding us of Genesis. The first six words are an exact quotation from Genesis 46:8. The story is about the same family, but things have changed. In the intervening hundreds of years the powerful influence of Joseph was lost entirely and the family had grown into a nation. “The Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them” (1:7). Perceived as a threat, the Egyptians “made their lives bitter with hard labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all their hard labor the Egyptians used them ruthlessly” (1:14). Since the more they oppressed the Israelites the more they multiplied, Pharaoh the king of Egypt, ordered Hebrew midwives to kill all males at birth. Remarkably, two of these midwives’ names are given, Shiphrah and Puah. They are named because they “feared God and did not do what the king of Egypt had told them to do; they let the boys live” (1:17). After all these years the first sign of true faith and holy fear is found in Israel’s midwives, who have the courage to stand up to Pharaoh. Their fear of God reminds us of Joseph; their clever rationale to Pharaoh reminds us of Jacob, “Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive” (1:19). Since two of Pharaoh’s not so subtle behind the scenes strategies, oppression and male infanticide, had failed, he resorted to a blatant edict. “Every boy that is born you must throw into the river, but let every girl live” (1:22).

The unfathomable pain and suffering this brought to Israelite families is not even mentioned. Such an absence emphasizes that the point of the story is not the recital of the atrocities, but the hope that lies beyond the evil. The storyteller does not allow us to dwell on the evil, but quickly gives us a sign of hope in the birth of Moses. The juxtaposition of fact and faith, despair and hope, is found as well in the birth of Jesus and the Bethlehem massacre, when Herod gave orders to kill all the boys who were two years old and under (Mt 2:16). In both instances our attention is intentionally diverted from an almost unbelievable tragedy to a single birth that holds tremendous promise for the future. Is this not a lesson for those who dwell upon past atrocities, in the hope that a vivid memory of evil will prevent future atrocities? Biblical hope does not rest in remembering evil, but in depending upon God’s promise.

In spite of what appeared to be Pharaoh’s absolute power, the king of Egypt was no match for the providence of God. Two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, quietly defy Pharaoh’s orders and place baby Moses in a waterproofed papyrus basket, literally an “ark” (the same word used for Noah’s ship). Instead of drowning, Israel’s future deliverer was rescued by none other than Pharaoh’s own daughter. Naturally she gave the child an Egyptian name, which literally meant “boy child” (derived from the verb “to give birth”), but to Hebrew ears the name “Moses” sounded something like “to draw out.” God had saved him and would empower him, so that he could save others. As the adopted son of Pharaoh’s daughter, Moses “was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7:22). To most Israelites it must have appeared that the Lord God was doing nothing that would produce deliverance. Israel felt forlorn and forgotten, but the covert, subversive work of God had already begun supplanting the overt action of Pharaoh.

Revolution or Redemption?

The storyteller refuses to dwell on Pharaoh’s atrocities nor hold out any hope for insurrection. When Moses was grown, his well-intentioned attempt to defend his people ended in failure. His

indignation over the oppression of his people was shared by God (2:24-25), but his method was entirely his own. We were meant to contrast his secretive and impulsive pursuit of justice with God's call to boldly and deliberately confront Pharaoh. Divine deliverance required human surrender, not human initiative. Moses learned the hard way not to take matters into his own hands. "Glancing this way and that and seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand" (2:12). This was not how God was going to accomplish his victory over the powers of oppression. Working from below to accomplish heaven's purposes is not the same as acting surreptitiously on one's own authority. The next day it became obvious that what he thought he had done in secret was well known. He had to flee. Since Moses was raised in Pharaoh's palace, he was a stranger to his own people. He had no community to call home. He could not trust his own people and they could not trust him. To the Egyptians he was a fugitive, guilty of murder.

Moses seemed especially sensitive about defending the cause of the weak. His introduction to life in Midian immediately involved a confrontation with some shepherds who were keeping a group of young women from watering their father's flocks. Moses came to their rescue and drove away the bullies. When the girls arrived home early, their father, a priest of Midian, inquired as to why and they explained, "An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds. He even drew water for us and watered the flock" (2:19). Questioning their lack of hospitality, he asked, "Why did you leave him? Invite him to have something to eat?" The identity and spirituality of Moses' host family may be obscure, but they received Moses graciously. They became God's provision for his life in exile. The story moves quickly from the encounter at the well to marriage to Zipporah and the birth of a son. Moses named his firstborn Gershom, saying, "I have become an alien in a foreign land" (2:22). Wherever Moses was, whether in Egypt or Midian, he was a foreigner. Now Moses, the Israelite, educated in Pharaoh's court, found himself herding sheep and enjoying his family. He must have felt like he had lived two separate lives, one Egyptian and the other Midianite, but he knew he was an Israelite.

The apparent gaps in the story, the hundreds of years between Joseph and Moses and the silent years of Moses in Midian shepherding his father-in-law's sheep, do not disturb the storyteller. Everything happened at its appointed time. The pace of the story moved along according to God's command. While a whole generation of Israelites languished in slavery and cried out to God, Moses lived the solitary life of a shepherd. He was not a political revolutionary in exile, but a humble shepherd in the wilderness. When Moses was forty years old, God called him to return to Egypt (Acts 7:30), but God didn't replace Moses' shepherd's staff with a warrior's sword. Instead of leading sheep to pasture, Moses was called to lead his people to the promised land.

This was true of Jesus' disciples as well. We remember Jesus calling Simon and Andrew, two fishermen, when they were on the Sea of Galilee casting their net. "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men" (Mt 4:19). God changed the course of history with shepherds and fishermen, not warriors and crusaders. Moses is in the world, but not of the world (Jn 17:16). "For though we live in the world," wrote the apostle Paul, "we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world" (2 Cor 10:3-4).

A Burning Bush

On a perfectly ordinary day, Moses was on the far side of the desert at Mount Horeb, better known to us as Mount Sinai, leading his flocks to pasture. Suddenly the Lord appeared to him "in the flames of fire from within a bush." Moses didn't know it, but he was in an extraordinary place, the mountain of God. He was in a famous place before it became famous, and his ordinary life was about to undergo a radical change. Drawn to a burning bush that wouldn't burn up, Moses was startled to hear his name, "Moses, Moses!"

"Here I am," he answered.

"Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." We are told that "at this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God" (3:5-6). Little did he know at the time, but the burning bush would become an apt symbol for his life. God was about to set Moses on fire, but instead of being consumed, he would be energized and empowered.

The God of Genesis, who called creation into existence out of nothing, calls Moses out of the wilderness for the sake of redemption. The mystery of God, was revealed in the wilderness, because of the mess of the human condition. "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering...So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt...I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you. When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain" (3:7-10).

The thrust of the story is not about Moses, whose reluctance borders on resistance, but on God, who meets every objection with reassurance and revelation. The story makes no attempt to explain a psychological transformation in Moses from shepherd to liberator. Moses is Moses, with all his feelings of fear and inadequacy, but God is God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of new beginnings and the Lord of deliverance. God's bottom line response to all of Moses's objections was basically, "Moses, this isn't about you. It's not about your qualifications or your abilities. It's about who I am and my power to deliver."

The focus of the story is on the *personal* presence and power of God. The message is clear. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, a title repeated for emphasis (3:6,15,16; 4:5), is not the God of the past alone, but of the present and future. God is God, from generation to generation. There was to be no doubt about God's identity. Moses was given a clear message. "I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you'" (3:14). This is what Exodus is all about. Yahweh is: "I am who I am." "The sentence is seismic," writes Eugene Peterson. "I AM THAT I AM, this verb-dominated, life-emphatic sentence by which God willed to be understood, was shortened to a verbal noun of four letters, YHWH, probably pronounced Yahweh (and usually translated as Lord in English). This name "...marked the definitive revelation of God as present to us and personal with us—God here among us, a living God in relation with us. No more gods of sticks and stones. No more gods to be appeased or bribed or courted. No more gods decked out in abstractions for philosophical speculation. No more gods

cast as major players in a cosmic war and sex myth dramas” (Peterson, 158).

As the story unfolds this personal, self-revealing God, who defies being boxed in by definition, makes a believer out of everyone, including Pharaoh. But there are different kinds of believers. There are believing unbelievers, unbelieving believers and believing believers. In the end the God of Exodus becomes impossible to deny. Everyone, whether believer or unbeliever, must acknowledge the God who is. The truth of the early Christian hymn becomes evident not only at the end of history but throughout history. In the end God will not be denied, "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:10-11). Eventually everyone will acknowledge that God's salvation history is the truest of true stories. But many, like the demons, insist on remaining believing unbelievers (James 2:19). Like Pharaoh they shudder at the thought of the God who is.

God made a believer out of Moses, but not without some dramatic moments. The God of creation could touch an ordinary bush, a shepherd's staff and Moses' hand, and transform them at will. But none of these signs compared in intensity to the night God nearly took the life of Moses. In obedience to the call of God, Moses set out for Egypt with his wife and sons. "At a lodging place on the way, the Lord met Moses and was about to kill him" (4:24). For whatever reason, Moses had not circumcised his son, and God "was about to kill him." Since he was too weak or incapacitated to do it himself, Zipporah took a stone knife and circumcised their son and touched Moses with the piece of skin. "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me," she said. This stark narrative leaves us groping for meaning. We might wish that the storyteller had left out this part of the story. Clearly, the Lord meant to impress upon Moses the fact that the sign of circumcision continued to be a crucial physical, earthy reminder that God means to be Lord over our entire existence. Moses and his family were to be in the world, but not of the world, and they were reminded of it in a very specific, particular way. First, circumcision and then baptism, were meant to challenge the reduction and abstraction of authentic belief from becoming mere ritual and tradition. On that wild night God showed Moses that if he couldn't touch his life in the way he had commanded he could just as easily take his life!

A Hard Heart

God used a burning bush and a narrowly averted tragedy to convince Moses that he was indeed, "I am who I am." Then God through Moses got Pharaoh's attention with a series of horrendous plagues. Such supernatural phenomena may divert skeptics from the story's central message and in the end harden their hearts, as Pharaoh's heart was hardened. What convinced Moses and Pharaoh of the presence of God now is often dismissed by modern skeptics as legendary embellishments.

The miraculous is problematic in any age and in every culture. When Aaron threw down his staff and it became a snake, Pharaoh summoned Egyptian sorcerers and magicians and "each one threw down his staff and it became a snake" (7:12). Even though Aaron's staff swallowed up the other staffs Pharaoh was unimpressed. If his sorcerers could duplicate the same phenomena Pharaoh felt no need to listen to Moses. Pharaoh found Moses and Aaron's claim unbelievable on

supernatural grounds; moderns find Moses and Aaron unbelievable on secular grounds. The sorcerer and the secularist have their own ways of discounting the miraculous power of God. Any attempt to strip the story of the miraculous power of God, whether through competition or contempt, is bound to empty the story of its real meaning. The whole episode is about the unmistakable presence of God. All naturalistic and humanistic explanations for the phenomenon that occur in the story are beside the point. For God is clearly at work in ways that defy rationalistic explanation.

The reason for the ten plagues was obvious from the start. Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'Let my people go so they may hold a festival to me in the desert.'"

Pharaoh said, "Who is the Lord, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go" (5:1-2). The ten plagues were designed to prove to Pharaoh and the Egyptians that Yahweh is. The God of creation and the God of the Exodus were one and the same. Moses didn't need to feel the pressure to convince Pharaoh of anything. God's message didn't depend on Moses' "faltering lips" and sagging confidence (6:12,30). In these miracles of uncreation, God threw creation into chaos. First, the water of the Nile turned to blood; then the land was overrun with frogs, gnats and flies. The fifth plague devastated Egyptian livestock; the sixth afflicted both people and animals with festering boils. Before sending the seventh plague of thunder and hail, the Lord reiterated his purpose, "so that you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth" (9:14).

Each plague was preceded by a warning, "This is what the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, says: 'How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me? Let my people go, so that they may worship me. If you refuse to let them go, I will bring locusts into your country tomorrow'" (10:3-4). The ninth was a plague of utter darkness and the tenth was the plague on all firstborn sons. "At midnight the Lord struck down all the firstborn of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh, who sat on the throne, to the firstborn of the prisoner, who was in the dungeon, and the firstborn of all the livestock as well" (12:29).

As difficult as it may be to comprehend the severity of these divine judgments, Pharaoh's hard heart is even more incredible. The refrain running throughout the story has the Lord God claiming responsibility for Pharaoh's hard heart. "I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to you" (7:3; see 4:21). Even his advisors and magicians agreed that "this is the finger of God," but "Pharaoh's heart was hard and he would not listen, just as the Lord had said" (8:19). It is worth noting that Pharaoh's heart was said to harden after each plague was removed. "When Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart and would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had said" (8:15; see 8:32; 10:20). But, by itself, relief from the plagues does not explain Pharaoh's hard heart. One would think that by the tenth plague announcement, Pharaoh would have accepted Moses prediction about the plague on the firstborn, but he didn't because "the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart" (11:10).

Besides affirming the sovereignty of God, the Lord's responsibility for Pharaoh's hard heart

pointed to the *goodness* of the plagues. These are "the mighty acts of judgment" the Lord used to redeem his people (6:6; 7:4), and to prove to the Egyptians that Yahweh is; so that "the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it" (7:5). The apostle Paul saw this for what it was, the freedom of God to boldly do as he saw best in bringing forth his salvation. In the book of Romans Paul quoted from Exodus. "For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: 'I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.' Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Rom 9:17-18).

Pharaoh had asked, "Who is the Lord, that I should obey him and let Israel go?"(5:2). And each plague answered his question, "By this you will know that I am the Lord..." (7:17). We may forget that the Lord makes himself known through both a blessing and a curse. God promised Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (12:3). Both salvation and judgment prove the presence of God, "I am who I am." God made a believer out of Pharaoh, a believing unbeliever, who in the end beseeched Moses and Aaron for a blessing (12:32). However, the story of Pharaoh's hard heart doesn't end there. No sooner had the Israelites "boldly" marched out of Egypt than Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds about them and said, "What have we done? We have let the Israelites go and have lost their services!" (14:5). Once again the Lord God used Pharaoh's evil for his glory. "The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen" (14:18).

Moses, the one who was spared some forty years earlier from state sponsored genocide, led his people through the Red Sea on dry ground. But when Pharaoh's army tried to cross, the Lord told Moses to stretch out his hands over the sea "so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen" (14:26). This dramatic narrative ends with this testimony: "That day the Lord saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore. And when the Israelites saw the great power the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant" (14:30-31).

Yahweh's Passover

If Moses was a believing believer and Pharaoh a believing unbeliever, then the Israelites may be best described as unbelieving believers. Unlike Pharaoh, they had believed when Moses and Aaron "told them everything the Lord has said" and "performed the signs before the people." In fact they were greatly moved. "When they heard that the Lord was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped" (4:29-31). However, after Moses' first visit to Pharaoh the people quickly turned on him. Pharaoh ordered the slave drivers to stop supplying straw to the Israelites for brick making, yet he required them to maintain the same work quotas. Immediately the Israelites spoke against Moses, "May the Lord look upon you and judge you! You have made us a stench to Pharaoh and his servants and have put a sword in their hand to kill us" (5:21). This led Moses to complain, "O Lord, why have you brought trouble

upon this people? Is this why you sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble upon this people, and you have not rescued your people at all" (5:22-23).

If Pharaoh had trouble grasping the truth of Yahweh in spite of God's power displayed in the plagues, then the Israelites had trouble grasping the truth of Yahweh in spite of God's blessing. Although spared the full brunt of the plagues, and saved entirely from the horror of the tenth plague, their confidence in God was shaky at best. You would think that after 430 years of bondage, and ten plagues of judgment against their oppressors, along with the eagerness of the Egyptians to give up their silver, gold and expensive clothing just to get rid of them, the Israelites would be ready to trust in God and his servant Moses.

But as Pharaoh approached with his army, they were terrified and cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians?' It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!" (14:11-12). Moses responded to the people in a way that clearly showed the difference between believing and unbelieving believers. "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still" (14:13-14).

The biblical storyteller showed no interest in bolstering the image of the Israelites nor lionizing Moses. Exodus is not propaganda, but proclamation. Everything testifies to the truth that Yahweh is: I AM WHO I AM. Israel didn't earn or deserve God's attention, but received God's mercy purely by grace. Behind the history of Exodus lies the mystery of God who chose Israel, a small, beleaguered people through whom to bless all peoples on earth. His choice defied human calculation and convention. From a humanly impossible source God created his providential plan for salvation history.

In all that has gone on in the story it is possible that we have missed the warning prophecy that came at the beginning. Moses was instructed to say to Pharaoh, "This is what the Lord says: Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, 'Let my son go, so he may worship me.' But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son" (4:22-23). Egypt had to either bless Israel as God's firstborn through whom the entire human family was meant to be blessed, or experience the wrath of God (see Gen 12:3). And in spite of the proven powerful presence of God, Pharaoh chose not to humble himself and receive God's mercy. Yahweh's Passover brought grief and despair to Pharaoh and his people, but to Moses and the Israelites it brought grace and deliverance. They did not earn this mercy, but received it because they believed in Yahweh and obeyed his word. They chose a year-old male lamb or goat, without defect, and sacrificed it. They took some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they ate the Passover. They ate the meat, along with bitter herbs, with their traveling clothes on and their staff in hand. They ate it in haste; it was the Lord's Passover. On that night the Lord brought judgment "on all the gods of Egypt" and proved beyond any doubt that Yahweh is (12:1-13).

Yahweh's Passover with the blood of lamb is in the tradition of Abel's sacrifice and Abraham's experience on Mount Moriah. Redemption, not revolution, is the controlling theme of God's story. The meaning of the Passover pointed forward to Christ our Passover Lamb (1 Cor 5:7), who is "the firstborn among many brothers [and sisters]" (Rom.8:29). It is through Christ and his atoning sacrifice that all peoples on earth will be blessed. "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation...the firstborn from among the dead...For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross" (Col 1:15-20). The Exodus is not a paradigm for political revolution, but a powerful picture of the propitiatory sacrifice God made through his one and only Son to deliver us from evil. That is not to say that God's redemption holds no political significance. On the contrary, believer and unbeliever alike, will bow before "Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth" (Rev 1:5). Those whose hearts have been "hardened by sin's deceitfulness" (Heb 3:13) will receive judgment and those whose hearts have been healed by his love and mercy will receive salvation.