

TRANSFORMATION: THE EXODUS EVENT

STUDY 2: LIBERTATION THEN AND NOW

Introduction

The Exodus is the great salvation event of the Old Testament and one of the most dramatic events of human history. Lesslie Newbigin describes its importance and relevance in these words:

In the Old Testament the primary model of salvation is provided by the exodus from Egypt. Indeed, this is much more than a model: it is God's supreme saving action. God's revelation of Himself to Moses is in the form of a call to go and liberate captive Israel. God makes Himself known as the liberator God. God's cause and the cause of those exploited immigrant workers are the same. The exodus from Egypt and the deliverance from Pharaoh's pursuing army are not described in the record as signs or even as illustrations of God's saving work. Instead, there is a simple identification: this deliverance is God's salvation (Exodus 14:13, 15:2)

Yahweh is forever afterwards identified as the one 'who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.' (1978, p. 108)

This study examines the Exodus event and through that, encourages reflection on the issues of oppression and liberation today. The Exodus can be divided into four phases – the conditions, God's concern, Moses' call, and the cost.

Read Exodus chapters 1-14 to review the sequence and significance of the event.

The Conditions

The conditions in Egypt about 1290 B.C. Were extremely harsh for the enslaved Hebrews. They suffered in several ways.

1). A Whole Nation Was Kept in Slavery. The Egyptians had clearly developed a strong racial prejudice against the Hebrew people. Their ethnic discrimination took many humiliating and hurtful forms. It was an extreme example of apartheid. The Hebrews, through Joseph, had brought salvation to Egypt and her neighbors many generations before. Now they were slaves with no rights or liberties. As the years passed and the twin cities of Python and Ramses rose above the desert sands increasing numbers of Hebrews were buried beneath them.

2). They Were Oppressed by Hard Labor. Stories of the working conditions for prisoners in Hitler's concentration camps or in Russian Siberia are foreshadowed in this ancient story, as are the experiences of some bonded laborers in India today. Men, women, and children all worked in the torrid north African heat (1:8-14). When Moses appealed to Pharaoh to release the Hebrews, their labor, already ruthlessly oppressive, was increased.

3). They Were Mercilessly Beaten. The cruelty to which Moses reacted (2:11) was one of countless such incidents. "In all their hard labor the Egyptians used them ruthlessly" (1:14).

“The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out” (1:23). “Moses watched them at their hard labor He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew” (1:11). The Israelites had no rights of freedom, wages for work, or appeal against brutality.

Finally, Pharaoh instructed his people to throw all Hebrew male babies into the river. But this also failed in the case of Moses (2:1-10). While many babies were saved with God's help, thousands of babies and adult laborers must have died.

Contemporary Parallels

Describe a situation which is similar to the conditions under which the Hebrews were forced to live.

From magazines and newspapers, research the plight of another group of oppressed people. This project could be spread over one or two weeks. Articles should be cut out and pasted on paper and illustrated. Underline important points and add comments.

God's Covenant

As in the creation story the central figure in the drama of Exodus is God. Is it He who takes the initiative to rescue the people from slavery. This story reveals God's character and concerns which led to actions on behalf of the oppressed.

1). God is Responsive to Human Suffering. Moses who had once burned with indignation at the injustice handed out to the Hebrew people by their cruel taskmasters had settled down in rural Midian and was quite happy to forget the plight of his brothers. But God did not forget them. At the burning bush, He said to Moses “I have seen...I have heard...I am concerned...” (3:7) – complete this verse. “The cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them.” The language used is anthropomorphic (speaking of God in human terms) but His seeing, hearing, and concern for people who are hurting is graphically expressed.

2). God is Opposed to Unjust Laws. When the Hebrew midwives were told to kill the male babies they refused. What reason is given for their refusal? See verse 1:17. They knew God, the creator of life and author of justice, would not approve of such action.

Moses' parents too, disobeyed the law to drown all male babies. No doubt many of their neighbors and friends were aware of their civil disobedience. Yet God blessed both for their opposition to Pharaoh's decrees. The midwives were blessed with children and Moses' mother was paid for nursing her own son after his rescue by Pharaoh's daughter.

Quote an example of a law you know about which should be disobeyed. Does this contradict Romans 13 where it says leaders are ordained by God and are to be obeyed? Yes or no? Why or why not? See also Revelation 13 where the ruling power is evil.

3). God Delivers From Oppression. When Exodus declares that God has seen the problems and heard the cry of the oppressed Hebrews it continues, “So I have come down to the rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians...” (1:8).

When Dr. Martin Luther King was in court appealing against racial discrimination in the United States in the early 1960's, a Supreme Court decision was handed to the magistrate who announced to the court that bus segregation was illegal. A black man, stood up and shouted, "God Almighty has spoken from Washington D.C.C.!" There was no doubt in his mind that God had rescued them! IN the celebration that followed huge crowds of blacks sang, "Free at last, free at last! Praise God Almighty, we are free at last!"

When the Israelites heard God was going to deliver them what do you think their reaction was?

4) God Prepared His Servant to Share in the Work of Liberation. Moses' preparation consisted of 40 years training in the palace followed by 40 years of living in the wilderness. The first period prepared him to confront Pharaoh while the second gave him the skills and knowledge to enable people to survive in the inhospitable desert where water, food, and protection would be in short supply.

Mohammed once said "He will never be a prophet who has not first been a herdsman." Unknown to Moses and despite feeling unworthy, God had been preparing him throughout his life for the task of liberation.

The contrast in Moses' life experience between the first 40 years when he was a prince, favored, educated, rich, powerful, and well fed and the 40 years when he was in the wilderness surviving as a shepherd and struggling against the elements, is illuminating. It means God may be using the experiences of a good home, education, wealth, and influence to enable men and women today to liberate the poor. He may also use such experiences as being an orphan, living in a poor village far away from the city, being poor and having to struggle as necessary preparation to help uplift the poor. Moses had both backgrounds.

In your life what experience so far has best prepared you to understand and help the poor?

Moses' Call

The call of Moses is recorded in Exodus 3:10-4:17 (Figure 2:1). It is a dialogue between God and Moses with four cycles of command, excuse, and promise. Fill in the verses in Figure 2.1.

If God had not called Moses at the burning bush he would no doubt have spent the rest of his life happily raising sheep and children. He certainly did not volunteer to liberate the poor. IS a call from God a necessary starting point for such work today? What different might having a sense of call make?

The Cost

In the Exodus drama the stakes were very high. Everyone had to pay a cost to change the tyranny of a generation of racial discrimination and oppression. Many lives were lost. This section examines the dynamics of this in relation to the major groups involved.

1). The Cost to the Prophet. A prophet of the 20th Century Dietrich Bonhoeffer, theologian and pastor of the Confessing Church in Germany at the time of the Second World War, wrote

a book called The Cost of Discipleship about the hard decisions a Christian must make in the face of injustice. Bonhoeffer's discipleship led him to speak out against Hitler, to join an aborted assassination attempt on Hitler's life, to minister to fellow prisoners of war, and six days before Flossenburg concentration camp was liberated, to lose his life. Bonhoeffer chose the way of the cross and of conscience rather than the path of 'cheap grace', that is, accepting salvation from God but doing nothing to achieve salvation for others.

Moses too had to take the difficult road. He was often, as modern Jews say, "Between a rock and a hard place." For him the cost of obedience and involvement in God's liberating work included:

1. Giving up his quiet country life.
2. Taking Risks.
3. Accepting enormous responsibilities
4. Leading extremely tough negotiations.
5. Trusting God completely
6. Winning and keeping the confidence of the people

Note verses from the reading in Exodus chapters 3-14 to support these points. If you were the pastor of a church and became aware of and concerned for a group of exploited people, what advice do you think the following people might give you? Your fellow pastors, your congregation, your family, the exploiters, the oppressed group, and God. Within the church, opposite decisions may be made! Consider the following examples.

Case 1: The Church in South Korea

During the struggle of the Korean war in the early 1950's and in the reconstruction of a devastated country immediately after, the church became the voice expressing the hopes of the people. It was totally involved with the poor in the struggle to survive and build a better future. The poor saw the church as their advocate and friend and joined in vast numbers.

Case 2: The Reformed Church in South Africa

With a few exceptions the church and clergy have endorsed the legitimacy and actions of the minority Afrikaans government in its suppression of the majority black population. Blacks have formed their own churches but have not been allowed to join the white churches. The church is an instrument of oppression rather than of liberation.

Why do you think these two churches have adopted such different attitudes and actions?

2). The Cost to the Poor. The poor also had to face a struggle and cost. Liberty is never cheap or easy! For them to achieve freedom from their oppressors they had to:
Overcome their defeatist attitude.
Work harder during the freedom struggle.
Exercise faith and perseverance
Face danger.

The following quotations illustrate these points. Write 1, 2, 3, or 4 after each verse to indicate which of the above categories it belongs in:

Exodus 5:4 "The king of Egypt said, 'Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away

from their labor? Get back to work.” ()

Exodus 5:6-8 ”He gave this order to the slave drivers and foremen in charge of the people. “You are no longer to supply the people with straw for making bricks; let them go and gather their own straw. But require them to make the same number of bricks as before; don't reduce the quota.” ()

Exodus 5:9 “Make the work harder for the men so that they keep working.” ()

Exodus 5:15 “The Israelite foremen appointed by Pharaoh's slave drivers were beaten and asked, “Why haven't you met your quota of bricks yesterday or today as before?” ()

Exodus 5:18 “Get to work, you will not be given any straw, yet you must produce your quota of bricks.” ()

Exodus 5:21 “The Israelites said to Moses and Aaron, ‘May the Lord look on 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.’” ()

Exodus 6:6 “Say to the Israelites: ‘I am the Lord and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them and will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.’”

Exodus 6:8 “ ‘I will bring you to the land...and give it to you as a possession.’ ” ()

Exodus 6:9 “Moses reported to the Israelites but they did not believe him because of their discouragement and cruel bondage.” ()

Exodus 8:25-26 “Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said ‘Go sacrifice to your God here in the land’ But Moses said, ‘That would not be right. The sacrifices we offer the Lord would be detestable to the Egyptians. And if we offer sacrifices that are detestable in their eyes, will they not stone us?’” ()

Exodus 14:10 “As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up and there were the Egyptians marching after them.” ()

Exodus 14:12 “‘Didn't we say to you in Egypt leave us alone; it is better to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!’” ()

Of the four barriers to liberation located within the poor themselves and mentioned in this section, which do you think is the most difficult to change? Which would you try to change first? What other costs for the poor might be involved in a modern liberation struggle?

1). The cost to Pharaoh and the Egyptians. In the prolonged liberation struggle Pharaoh too paid a cost. Losing the Hebrews meant:

- a) Losing cheap labor.
- b) Losing power.
- c) Losing money.
- d). Losing Egyptian lives.

Pharaoh made the decision to unconditionally release the Hebrews only when he had no other choice, when he was absolutely forced to do so, and when the cost of keeping them had become too great! Pharaoh suffered through ten plagues before he gave in and agreed to their release. His replies after each show his gradual facing of the inevitable fact that his slaves would not serve and obey him forever.

(Figure 2.2)

The Bible says Pharaoh released the Hebrews only after death had come to every Egyptian home. In the Bible, oppression is not limited to the cruelty of Pharaoh. Thomas Hanks in God So Loved the Third World says it is “a fundamental structural category of Biblical theology.”

He supports this claim with four pieces of evidence:

- a) There are 20 Hebrew words to describe oppression
- b) They are used 555 times in the Old Testament.
- c) They appear in many key passages (Exodus 1-5, Psalm 72, Isaiah 53, Isaiah 58)
- d) Liberation from oppression is at the heart of Israel's creedal confession (Deut. 26:5- 9).

Use a bible dictionary or use the references above to discover how these words are used.

Liberation Theology

Thomas Hanks also provides a succinct summary of liberation theology's common themes, perspectives, and structural elements:

1. Oppression as the fundamental cause of poverty.
 2. The poor as the primary focus of the church's praxis
 3. Class struggle, both as a socio-economic and ecclesiastical reality.
 4. Agape-love as a conflictive response.
 5. The paradigm of the Exodus as the original revolution
 6. Salvation biblically understood as integral liberation
 7. The socio-economic dimension of justice seen as implying democratization in the ownership and control of the means of production.
 8. Land as the fundamental biblical substratum (agrarian society) for human life and economic productivity.
 9. The wrath of God as the appropriate response of indignation against oppression and injustice (expressed in prophetic proclamation of judgment).
- (1983, p. 62)

There are now many books on liberation theology. Most come from Latin America where the majority are Christians but there is a large gap between the few rich and the many poor. These books are listed in the bibliography. From a library, choose one to read.

In your estimate what percentage of people in your country are:

Very rich (own many businesses, houses, etc.).

Rich (own their own house and have a good income).

Middle class (own some land or have a secure income).

Poor (own a marginal farm or earn just enough to buy food, clothes, etc.).

Very Poor (don't own any land or earn enough to live on).

The Question of Violence

In Egypt many people died - Hebrew because of slavery, Egyptians in the process of liberation. Christians are divided on whether violence is ever an option. Before reading what others have said about this issue, respond to this question: on the basis of the Exodus event, who has the right to kill: the oppressor only, the oppressed, both, neither, only God, no one? Chose one and state the reasons why.

Here are some statements expressing different points of view. Discuss these as a group or

use them as data for a debate.

a) Some liberation theologians see in Exodus only God's liberation of an oppressed people and miss the fact that God also acted to fulfill His promise to Abraham, to reveal His will and to call out a special people" (Sider, Unpublished paper, "Evangelical Theology of Liberation", p. 3-4).

b) Liberation is a glorious biblical word. The Bible frequently speaks of liberty, freedom, and release: the year of release; the liberty of the sons of God; when the Lord liberates you, then you are truly free; the truth sets us free; God liberated the Hebrew slaves from bondage. In biblical thought, the human race is in bondage to sin and is liberated by belief in Jesus Christ. Paul was bound and in prison but he never exhorted his disciples to liberate him. Nor did he advise the Jews to throw off the Roman yoke. Paul lived in days when, among the Jews, liberating the homeland was the compelling national cause; but he never mentioned it. Neither did the Lord Jesus Christ. (Glasser & McGavran, 1983, p. 56)

c) If the Exodus were to be used as a model rather than as a mere slogan, it would suggest withdrawal rather than change within the existing society. The Israelites did not change Egypt by remaining in Egypt. They left Egypt. Over against the paradigm of leaving Egypt and destroying Pharaoh on the way, we find in the old Testament, more often, another model of how to live under a pagan oppressor. It is the way of diaspora. This is the model taken over by the New Testament church and the model as well for two millennia of rabbinic Judaism. The form of liberation in the biblical witness is not the guerrilla campaign against an oppressor culminating in assassination and military defeat, but the creation of a confessing community which is viable without or against the force of the state. (Yoder, 1972, p. 101, 134)

d) Liberation theology tells us that we are on the wrong side and that if we do not change sides, things will be very rough for us in the future. But we immediately realize that if we do change sides, things will be very rough for us in the present. (Brown, 1974, p.124)

e) Let me remind you that liberation is about victims...Every family that is undernourished is a victim. Not only the unemployed, but every man and woman whose work is underpaid, irregular, or insecure are victims. And every child born of unions of such men and women are doubly victimized; for they do not only have to suffer malnutrition, disease, overcrowded living conditions or actual homelessness, desertion by parents or orphanhood, ignorance and talents stunted by starvation, but they also suffer the crippling effects of insecurity and the deprivation of love. Every person who has been denied equality, who has been treated with less than full regard, who has been maimed or killed because of race or religion, is a victim. (Michael Manley, Prime Minister of Jamaica, 1975)

f) Before the suffering of our people, humbled and oppressed for centuries we feel called by the word of God to take up a position, a clear position on the side of the poor, a position taken in common with all those who commit themselves to the people for their true liberation. (Brazilian Bishops, 1973) (Neal, 1977, p. 27)

g) God is a God who takes sides rather than remaining neutral and aloof; God sides with the poor, the dispossessed, the slaves, rather than with the Pharaohs, the powerful, the influential people in society. Those, therefore who are the poor and the dispossessed can be confident that the alleviation of their misery is one of God's concerns. God calls them to work with Him

in overcoming injustice. Since god is a living God, this means that what was true for Israelites back then can become true for their modern counterparts today, i.e. their liberation from oppressive structures.

Consequently, the story of the Exodus is a story of good news today, the good news that God is a liberating god. Religion and politics don't mix? On the contrary, they are mixed up all the way through the story. (Brown 1978, p. 88)

h) Marx believed that violent revolution is always necessary when wresting power from those who control the resources of society since none give it up willingly. The violence occurs because of the exploitation prior to the day of accounting and the resistance to its correction. (Neal, 1977, p.106)

Figure 2.1

God's command

1. "Go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people out of Egypt" (3:10).
2. "When you have brought the people out of Egypt you will worship God on this mountain" (3:12).
3. (3:16)
- 4.

Moses' Excuse

1. "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (3:11)
2. (3:13)
3. "What if they do not believe me or listen to me?" (4:1)
4. "O Lord, I have never been eloquent...I am slow of speech and tongue." (4:10).

God's Promise

1. "I will be with you" (3:12)
2. "I am who I am" - the living God. "The Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" - the God of history. (3:14)
3. "I will show my power through you" (4:2-9)
4. (4:12)

Figure 2.2

The Plagues

Pharaoh's Response

- | | |
|-----------------|---|
| 1. Blood | He took no notice. (7:23) |
| 2. Frogs | Pharaoh said, "Stop the plague tomorrow" (8:10) |
| 3. Gnats | He would not listen. (8:19) |
| 4. Flies | He would not let the people go. (8:23) |
| 5. Livestock | His heart was unyielding. (9:7) |
| 6. Boils | He would not listen to Moses. (9:12) |
| 7. Hail | "This time I have sinned. I will let you go; you don't have to stay any longer" (9:27-28) |
| 8. Locusts | "Go and worship the Lord, but only the men" (10:8, 11) |
| 9. Darkness | "Go and worship the Lord. Even your women and children may go with you; only leave your flocks and herds behind" (10:24) |
| 10. Oldest Sons | During the night Pharaoh Summoned Moses and Aaron and said, 'Up, leave my people, you and the Israelites go worship the Lord as you have requested. Take your flocks and herds as you have said. And also bless me'" (12:31-32) |