

Israel's Story, God's Story, Our Story

Exodus 1:1-7

Among my handful of guilty pleasures in life, superhero movies rank toward the top. And apparently I'm not alone, as anywhere from one to three of the five top grossing films of the year have been superhero movies for five years straight.¹

One of the staple features of superhero movies is the so-called "origin story." In fact, origin stories tend to dominate the field—the tale of how a hero gained his or her powers and decided to fight crime. *Batman Begins*, *Iron Man 1*, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, *Man of Steel*, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, *X-Men Origins*.

And even when a movie is not focused on the hero's origin, it's often filled with flashbacks to that origin, because who they are and what they must do is often shaped by where they came from. It's the origin story that shapes the identity and mission of the hero—the tragic events, the freak accidents endowing them with power, It gives them meaning and direction and motivation to be the hero they must be. With great power comes great responsibility.

Even in real life, one of the ways counselors help people is by exploring and understanding their past. Family of origin, wounding events, core lies. Where we come from has a powerful impact on who we are and what we do, for better and for worse.

And so when we come to the book of Exodus, what we have before us is in many ways ancient Israel's origin story. As one author describes it, "For Jews it is the story that defines their very existence, the rescue that made them God's people."² Another explains that "the Exodus profoundly shaped Israel's social structures, calendars, remembrance of the ancient past, and hopes of future restoration."³ Still another writes, "Virtually every kind of religious literature in the Hebrew Bible—prose . . . poetry . . . and prophecy—celebrates the exodus as a foundational event."⁴

So you might entitle the book of Exodus, "Israel Begins." Before Exodus, Israel was a person—Jacob. Or at most an extended family—Jacob and his twelve sons and their families. That's how the book starts: "These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household . . ." (1:1). By the seventh verse, Israel is now a great people. By the middle of the book they are a *redeemed* people. And by the end, they are a *covenant* people—a holy

¹ See <http://www.the-numbers.com/market/2014/top-grossing-movies>.

² Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God's Glory* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2005, 2015), 15.

³ R. E. Watts, "Exodus," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, T. D. Alexander, B. S. Rosner, eds. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000).

⁴ R. Hendel, "The Exodus in Biblical Memory," *JBL* 120/4 (2001): 601.

nation. And the rest of the Old Testament will look back on the events of this book to answer the questions of who Israel is and how they ought live. Exodus is Israel’s origin story—a *true* story⁵ of how one family became a mighty nation, rescued from slavery that they might serve God.

But of course Exodus is more than the story of Israel—her beginnings and history. It is more than anything the story of *God*. He is the main character in this book. As one scholar writes, “Throughout Exodus God always takes the initiative, revealing himself not only through words, but also through signs and wonders.”⁶ One of the most repeated phrases in the book is “that you may know . . .”—God is making himself known in this story. And there are two key themes we’ll see as God reveals himself in these pages: *salvation* and *glory*.

The book pivots on the great act of salvation for which it is named, when God delivers his people from slavery in Egypt through signs and wonders and great acts of judgment, and *brings them out* (the word *exodus* means “the road out”). It’s through this saving event that God makes himself known in a new and special way (cf. 6:2-8). The first third of the book leads up to it, and the rest of the book builds on it, showing us the purpose and results of God’s salvation—how he saved his people that he might rule them and reside with them for the sake of his glorious reputation.

And it’s his glorious reputation that forms the second major theme of the book. While salvation is the climax or crescendo, glory is the refrain—a theme the book comes back to again and again. From getting glory over Pharaoh and Egypt by judging them and saving Israel (14:4, 17-18); to manifesting his glory in the burning bush and on Mt. Sinai and in the tabernacle (3; 19; 40); to revealing his glory to Moses on the mountain (33-34)—God displays his unique worthiness, his unparalleled perfection, and his sovereign power to Israel, Egypt, and the surrounding nations. His glory is expressed in his presence, recognized in his law, and experienced in his salvation.

And so this is not just a book about how Israel begins, but how God saves for the sake of his glory.

But in order to really understand what God is doing in this book, and more importantly what he is saying to us through it, we can’t really start with the book of Exodus. At least the book of Exodus doesn’t want us to. We need some context to make sense of all that we’re about to encounter here. And according to the opening verses, that context is supplied by the previous book—the book of Genesis.

The Context of Exodus: Creation and Covenant

Exodus begins where Genesis leaves off. It starts with a short rehearsal of the last major section of Genesis—the story of Jacob and his family traveling to Egypt where God preserved them from a famine in the land.

⁵ On the historicity and possible dates of the exodus, see Ryken, 17-20; John Walton, “Exodus, Date of” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, T.D. Alexander and D. W. Baker, eds. (Downers Grove, IVP: 2003), 258-272; K.A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 241-312.

⁶ T. D. Alexander, *From Paradise to Promised Land*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 157.

Now of course Exodus doesn't go into the details of how Jacob and his sons got there—how Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery out of jealousy; how he was taken to Egypt and sold to the captain of the guard named Potiphar; how he was falsely accused and landed in prison; yet how God was with Joseph every step of the way; how God brought him success and eventually exalted him to second in command over Egypt, alongside Pharaoh; how God gave Joseph wisdom to store up grain for a coming famine, and through this to preserve not only Egypt, but his own family. At the end of Genesis, Jacob and his family all move to Egypt where they are taken care of. God took what Joseph's brothers intended for evil and used it for good—the saving of many lives (Gen. 50:20).

Exodus doesn't tell us all of that; you have to read Genesis 37-50 to get those details. Instead it starts with a summary of who came to Egypt with Jacob (1:1-4). And it lists his twelve sons not according to their birth order, but according to their mothers (cf. Gen. 35:22b-26; 46:8-27). First, the children of Leah: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah; Issachar and Zebulun. Then the children of Rachel: Benjamin (leaving out Joseph, since he was already in Egypt, v. 5). Then the children of Bilhah, Rachel's servant: Dan and Naphtali. Then the children of Zilpah, Leah's servant: Gad and Asher. "All the descendants of Jacob were seventy persons; Joseph was already in Egypt" (1:5).

But even as the prologue tells us to look backwards, it also points us ahead. The story moves on. Verse 6: "Then Joseph died, and all his brothers and all that generation. But [and here's the most important verse in the prologue] the people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them" (1:6-7).

Now if you've been reading Genesis and you turn the page into Exodus, there are a few words in that verse that ought to stand out to you. Words like *fruitful*, and *multiply*, and *increased greatly*, and the land was *filled* with them. These are the key words of both God's plan for creation and promise in covenant that drive the story of Genesis.

And this is what I want us to think about this morning as we begin our journey through Exodus. This is the context for understanding God's salvation and glory—creation and covenant. What God accomplishes in the book of Exodus is directly related to what God planned for his creation in Genesis 1-2, and what he promises to restore through a covenant first with Noah in ch. 9, and ultimately with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Genesis 12 and following.

God's Plan in Creation (Gen. 1:26-28)

So come with me all the way back to Genesis ch. 1. Genesis 1:26-28:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be *fruitful* and *multiply* and *fill* the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

So God made humanity in his own image. Unlike any other part of creation, humans were made not “according to their kind” (as with the rest of the creatures, cf. Gen. 1:11-12, 21, 24-25), but in the very image of God, which in the context here likely means a few of things:

First, it means *relationship*. In Genesis 5:3 Adam has a son *in his likeness, after his image*. It’s language of relationship—father-child relationship. So God made humans to be his children, to have relationship with him.

Second, being made in God’s image means *reflection*. Just like a child looks like their parent, so we were made to look like God. Our job as humans is to show the world what God is like—how worthy and beautiful he is. Think of humanity as an angled mirror—one of those long stand up mirrors, but tilted upward so that when you look at it you see upward. That’s what people are supposed to be like: when someone looks at us, they should see a reflection of God.

So being in God’s image is relationship and reflection. Third, it’s *representation*—royal representation, to be precise. God, the king of the universe, has taken humanity, made in his image, and as Psalm 8 puts it, *crowned him* with glory and honor, and given him dominion over all creation. That’s the substance of God’s blessing in Genesis 1:28—to be his royal representatives over all the earth, exercising his rule on his behalf. We were made to be servants of God’s kingdom.

And as God’s image-bearers, who are related to him and reflect him and represent him, we are called in v. 28 to be *fruitful* and *multiply* and *fill* the earth. *We are to fill the earth with the glorious image of God, and, as his servants, to bring all of creation under his reign and rule, for the sake of his glory*. This is God’s vision for creation: The glory of God, the joy of his people, the nearness of his presence, the fullness of his blessing, the kindness of his rule.

But of course we barely make it out of the gate before the whole thing turns south. Being tempted by the serpent, Adam and Eve decided they would do a better job running the world than God. So they threw off his rule, not only alienating themselves from God but bringing the whole human race under condemnation. And since then, every person who has ever lived has followed in their rebellious steps (Rom 5:12).

So instead of being servants of God, people became servants of sin, servants of self. We exchanged life for death, God for idols, joy for despair, blessing for curse. It’s as if sin takes a hammer and smashes the mirror; we still bear God’s image, but now it’s all distorted and damaged. And with it, *life* is now distorted and damaged. It’s broken because of our rebellion against God (cf. Gen. 3:17-19; Rom. 8:20-22). Worst of all, we are separated from God. The relationship has been severed. His purpose in creation has been compromised.

And it’s only *now*, because of the sin and rebellion, because of the corruption of God’s purpose in creation, that salvation begins to make sense. And not only make sense, *salvation becomes a necessary and central part of the biblical story*. This is what Exodus scholar Terence Fretheim means when he says, “Redemption is in the service of creation. . . . Because God is a God of life and blessing, God will do redemptive work, should those gifts be endangered. *The objective of*

*God's work in redemption is to free a people to be what they were created to be.*⁷ Put another way, "*God's work in redemption fulfills God's work in creation.*"⁸

So how does God seek to achieve this great plan of salvation—the redemption of his creative purposes? That brings us to God's promise in covenant.

God's Promise in Covenant (9:1; 12:1-3; 17:2-6; 35:11)

As you read through Genesis, one of the things you notice is that when God makes promises to people like Noah and Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, they sound a lot like his original plan for creation. That's because God's work of salvation fulfills God's plan for creation.⁹

Look again at Genesis 1:28, and compare that with some of the promises God gives to his people:

Genesis 9:1 says, "And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, 'Be *fruitful* and *multiply* and *fill* the earth.'"

God says to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3:

"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

Just as God blesses humanity, he blesses Abraham and promises to make him into a great nation, and through him to bless all families of the earth. He reiterates that promise through his covenant with Abraham in ch. 17, where he says to him, "walk before me, and be blameless, ² that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may *multiply* you greatly" (17:2). And again in v. 6, "I will make you exceedingly *fruitful*, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you." Be fruitful and multiply; fill the land.

The same promise that came to Abraham and through him to Isaac, then comes to Jacob in ch. 35:11: "And God said to him, 'I am God Almighty: be *fruitful* and *multiply*. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body.'" What God planned for his creation, he promises to fulfill through a covenant with his people, and that will have an impact on all people, not just Israel. Through Abraham all nations will be blessed.

So what does this have to do with Egypt? According to Exodus 1:7, it's in Egypt where God makes good on his promise to multiply Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and make them into a great nation. In fact, he told them ahead of time he would do this. In Genesis 15 God gives Abraham a

⁷ T. E. Fretheim, "The Reclamation of Creation: Redemption and Law in Exodus," *Interpretation* 45.4 (1991): 359, italics his.

⁸ T. E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 26, italics his.

⁹ For an extensive list of examples of Gen. 1:28 being reasserted or reiterated in the covenant promises of Genesis, see: Noah: 9:1; Abraham: 12:1-3; 17:1-8; 18:17-19; 22:15-18; Isaac: 25:11; 26:2-5, 22-24; Jacob: 27:27-29; 28:1-4, 13-15; 35:9-12; 48:3-4.

vision, wherein he not only promises to provide a son for him, but foretells the future enslavement and exodus of his son's family. He says to Abraham:

Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for yourself, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete. (Gen. 15:13-18)

The exodus doesn't take God by surprise; it's part of the plan. Later he explains to Jacob in Genesis 46 why he has brought him and his family to Egypt, when the land he promised them is back in Canaan. He says to Jacob, "I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, *for there I will make you into a great nation*. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again, and Joseph's hand shall close your eyes" (46:3-4).

It is in Egypt that God will make good on his promise to make Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—"for *there I will make you into a great nation*." And so when we come to Exodus 1:7, we see that this is exactly what God has done. He has kept his promise. "The people of Israel were *fruitful and increased* greatly; they *multiplied* and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was *filled* with them."

Except that the land being filled here is not the land of Canaan. Nor do we see all other nations being blessed through Israel. Which means that the story isn't over. In fact the story is about to take a nosedive when you get to v. 8 and there's a new king in Egypt who did not know Joseph.

But this is the context for understanding God's great work of salvation in Exodus, this foundational, identity-forming event that's about to take place. God's work of salvation is designed to fulfill his plan for creation and promises in covenant.

But when we see that—we see this story firmly anchored in creation and covenant—you realize that Exodus really is more than just the story of ancient Israel. It's the story of God and his plan for the entire world. Which means it isn't just Israel's story, or even just God's story; it's our story as well.

Which is why it shouldn't surprise us that when Jesus comes along, over a thousand years later, the New Testament introduces him to us, and explains his identity and ministry to us, using the language and categories of the exodus. And it's not just an analogy; it's a fulfillment. According to the authors of the New Testament, according to Jesus himself, the exodus story we're about to explore together was meant to be a sign point forward to a later, greater exodus to come—a new exodus accomplished through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

The Fulfillment of Exodus: Jesus Christ

Just a few brief examples. The Gospel of Matthew depicts Jesus as reliving Israel's exodus story. Just as God's son, Israel, sojourned in Egypt and returned to Canaan, so God's Son, Jesus, sojourned in Egypt and returned (Matt. 2:13-15). Just as Israel's deliverer, Moses, was saved from a king's infanticide (Exod. 1:22-2:10), so Jesus, Israel's savior, was saved from the same fate (Matt. 2:16-18). Just as Israel was born through the waters of the Red Sea, so Jesus

inaugurated his ministry through the waters of baptism (3:13-17). Just as Israel was tested for forty years in the wilderness, so Jesus was tested for forty days, and succeeded precisely where Israel failed (4:1-11). Just as Israel received the instruction of God from Mount Sinai, so Jesus ascended a mountain to give instruction to God's people (Matt. 5-7). None of that's coincidence.

In Luke's Gospel, when Jesus describes his coming death in a conversation with Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration, he describes it as his "exodus" (Lk. 9:31). That's the word he uses.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus takes on God's proper name, the LORD (Yahweh—"I AM who I AM"), with his numerous "I am" statements. For instance, in John 8:58-59, "Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, *before Abraham was, I am.*' So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple."¹⁰ As the apostle Paul thinks about the atoning nature of our salvation in Christ, he describes Jesus as the "Passover Lamb" (1 Cor. 5:7; cf. Matt. 26:28; Jn. 1:29; 19:36; 1 Pet 1:19; Rev 5:6-10). In Hebrews, Jesus' resurrection supplies the climactic rest that Israel was looking for in the promised land after having come out of Egypt (Heb. 3:1-4:13). And the list can go on.

Here's the point: *Exodus is not just the story of ancient Israel's salvation; it is the paradigm of God's saving work for all generations and peoples.* It is the pattern that Christ takes up and fulfills in order to accomplish God's plan for creation and fulfill his promises in covenant. What God did foundationally in the exodus he has done climactically in Jesus Christ. It is the same God who saves us, and brings us into the fold of his people, and gives us the same identity and mission as his people—to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (1 Pet. 2:9-10; cf. Exod. 19:4-6). Without this story, it's impossible to appreciate the fullness of who God is and what he has done and what he's doing to bring salvation to his people. This is our story. Our origin story—that shapes our identity, gives us motivation and clarity and the will to strive for glory of God through Christ.

So in the words of Moses, I want to invite you into this book: "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today" (14:13) when he gets his "glory over Pharaoh and all his host" (14:17); when he reveals his glory through his provision, his law, his presence, and his holy name:

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, ⁷ keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation. (34:6-7)

¹⁰ See also Jn. 6:35, 41, 48, 51; 8:12, 24; 10:7, 9, 11, 14, etc.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Opening Questions

1. If you had to choose one word to describe the Old Testament, what would you say?
2. What are some of the reasons people find it hard to spend time in the Old Testament?
3. What are some reasons it is a good idea to study the Old Testament?

Questions for Study and Understanding

4. Look again at the first seven verses of Exodus. Why do you think the book starts this way?
5. What's significant about verse 7?
6. How does v. 7 relate to God's purpose in creation (see Genesis 1:26-28)?
7. How does Exodus 1:7 relate to God's covenant promises (see, e.g., Genesis 9:1; 17:1-8; 35:11)?
8. How would you summarize the main thing the author wants us to understand as we begin this book?

Questions for Reflection and Application

9. What are the big questions you have about Exodus or the Old Testament as we start studying this book?
10. If you had to guess, how do you think studying the book of Exodus will impact your life?
11. What do we learn about God from the introduction to the book, and how might that affect your life today?