

Exodus 1

The book of Exodus has always been a revolutionary book. Indeed it has massively shaped our history.

In the English Civil War of the seventeenth century it was the book of Exodus which shaped the understanding of the Parliamentarians. They were participating in a New Exodus. They were marching to freedom from tyranny and bondage with the God of the Exodus as their leader.

John Owen, a spiritual leader of the Parliamentarians, and for a time Vice Chancellor of Oxford University wrote

‘the great discovery of these days’ is ‘the overthrow of spiritual and civil slavery

Then again the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries it was the book of Exodus that the campaigners against the slave trade turned to. Their leaflets used quotes like “I have heard their cry” and “Let my people go”.

In the plantations of the Caribbean and mainland America, Exodus was the Bible book of the slaves and their churches. Indeed that tradition continues in the black churches of America.

Martin Luther King used Exodus imagery extensively in his sermons as he campaigned for civil rights in the 1950s and 60s. On the night before he was assassinated King once again was using Exodus imagery. He ended his last public speech like this.

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!

And so I'm happy, tonight.

I'm not worried about anything.

I'm not fearing any man!

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!

Some historians have suggested that the book of Exodus simply got co-opted as the voice of an otherwise inevitable movement. I don't think that is supportable. I think history shows that the book of Exodus CREATES great movements.

Take, for instance, the anti-slavery movement. No other culture in history has decided to end slavery. There have been great cultures – Chinese, Islamic – and they have always had some form of slavery. It was only the bible saturated culture of Britain and America – led by bible reading Christians, and empowered by bible quotations – indeed as we have seen Exodus quotations - which motivated us to abandon the slave trade.

So I am excited to be reading Exodus with you this autumn. Who knows what this book might create among us.

But Exodus has not only shaped cultures and movements, it has shaped the spiritual lives of individuals. Augustine, the great fifth century father of the church used to turn to the imagery and language of Exodus often to describe his relationship with God. He adored the God who proclaimed himself as “I am who I am” He loved God's self-description as

The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and merciful God

Martin Luther – father of the Reformation – was the same. And on it goes.

This book reveals God to us in ways which are deeply spiritually nourishing.

All this echoes the importance of Exodus within the Bible itself. The story of God coming down and rescuing his people from slavery, becomes in the rest of the Bible, archetypal for the way he works again and again.

The prophets in the Old Testament looked forward to a New Exodus. An Exodus in which God would come again, in which he would liberate his people from all bondage, especially their bondage to sin, and which he would take them to a new Promised Land which was no less than a new heaven and a new earth.

When Jesus arrives in the gospels he is the fulfilment of that. He understood his own ministry to a ministry of liberation.

Luke 4:18–19 (NIV)

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

His death on the cross was to set us free from sin and judgment – just as the prophets had predicted. The New Testament describes God’s people, God’s church, as Exodus people. People marching to freedom. People heading for the promised land – God’s new creation.

This is our book! We are the people upon whom the fulfilment of the ages has come. We are Exodus people.

But today we meet God’s people in trouble. Exodus 1 describes the people of Israel in slavery under the power of Pharaoh. We await chapter 3 before we see God visiting in power.

This is such an important section for us. Because we live in a time when God is not nearly so powerfully evident in our nation as he has been at other times. And you may well be thinking he is not so powerfully evident in your life personally. Exodus 1 raises some important questions for us – for a time such as this. Where is God? What can his people do?

These are important questions as we consider our vision as a church this morning. What can we do?

Exodus 1 and 2 gives us two answers. God is still there. And he uses resourceful people who fear him.

So here we go this morning – we are going to look at three things this morning. A nation which has forgotten God. A god who has not forgotten his promises. And a people who are used by God.

Firstly then – a nation which has forgotten God.

A nation which has forgotten God

This is Egypt. A previous era has come to an end



Exo 1:6

And a new Pharaoh has come to power.



Exo 1:8

Frankly this is very much akin to our era. I mentioned some history earlier because I am convinced we have forgotten it. Melvin Bragg in his book that I mentioned a few weeks ago decries this. He points out that the Bible has been instrumental in forming our justice system and our democracy, and almost everything good about our culture. But we have forgotten that.

Some time ago I was talking to a former cabinet minister about how our respect for the dignity and rights of minorities – especially religious minorities – had been painfully worked out in our history through patient reflection on the bible. He knew nothing of it. But frighteningly he was making the policies, overturning centuries old traditions of toleration and pluralism – with no knowledge of, and no interest in how those traditions had been formed. We are absolutely living under a Pharaoh to whom Joseph means nothing.

And look how such a Pharaoh treats people of faith.

He is threatened by their tenacious survival.



Exo 1:9

Note that his solution is propaganda.

He addresses his people publicly. He uses clever language



Exo 1:10a

Shrewdness can be good, or it can be devious and manipulative. He is cloaking wickedness in innocuous language.

Note also his appeal to fear



Exo 1:10b

They will join our enemies, they will fight against us.

But there is raw advantage there too. – “they will leave” And we won’t have any slaves.

Fear and greed are powerful drivers, and powerfully used by propagandists.

If you regulate the banks like that you will cause economic meltdown and the bankers will all emigrate to Switzerland. Fear and greed.

This stirring up of the people leads naturally towards oppression.



Exo 1:11

This is the normal environment for God’s people. Rights being eroded. Ill founded fears being promulgated. Christians don’t have the right to expect anything else in their relationship with the world.

This chapter portrays a nation which has forgotten God, but it also portrays a God who has not forgotten his promises.

☞ *A God who has not forgotten his promises*

The multiplication – v7

The creation mandate

The promise to Abraham – Gen 17:6

Not stopped by opposition – v12

Contributes to sense of anxiety

Leads to more systematic opposition

- All my Christian life – not going to get any easier to be a Christian

☞ *A God who uses resourceful people who fear him*

The midwives

Powerless

But shrewd – more shrewd than Pharaoh

Should they have lied? - yes

FEAR GOD – v17

God looks after them – v20

Moses' mother

Clearly has a plan

Places the child where Pharaoh's daughter bathes

Pharaoh's daughter falls for it

Moses?

Good motivation –

But a question over his use of violence

His deviousness – “looking this way and that”

Takes things into his own hands

And the outcome is personal fragility – fled.

- Three big lessons

- God has not forgotten his promises
 - Growing churches up and down the country
- God uses shrewdness and resourcefulness
 - Our vision paper – we hope wise – and we hope in the fear of God
 - The need to create a resilient hub for mission and ministry
 - The need to plant churches to fulfil our vision
- God does not want us to do more than he empowers us to do
 - The warning of Moses
 - The real game changing intervention is going to be God again – the burning bush.

Early in my Christian life I heard the book of Exodus preached – set me on a path to today. When you know the God of the Exodus you are never the same.