

Journey Through Exodus: The Church, Exile, and Covid-19
A three-week study: January 3, 10, and 17 of 2021 Daniel Headrick

Why Exodus, and why *now*?

Exodus tells a story of delivery from bondage to a way of life that was killing the people of Israel. Enslaved by Pharaoh, deprived of dignity and worth, Israel was in danger both of literal extinction and an extinction of its way of life as a people of faith. Enter God, stage left. Yahweh, whose mysterious name is given in the third chapter to a felon on the run named Moses, acts decisively to deliver Israel from bondage.

The paradigmatic event of Exodus is commemorated in the Passover. In Exodus 12, just before the horrible and final plague of the killing of the firstborn is enacted, God instructs the people in a perpetual act of memory and instruction.

You shall observe this rite as a perpetual ordinance for you and your children. When you come to the land that the Lord will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this observance. And when your children ask you, ‘What do you mean by this observance?’ you shall say, ‘It is the passover sacrifice to the Lord, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses.’” And the people bowed down and worshiped. Exodus 12:24-27.

To remember, and to pass on. Perhaps that is the gift Exodus gives us as people of God. To remember how God has acted decisively to save us, and to pass on to the next generation the stories and values that emerged from such salvation.

To remember how God has saved us and how God is saving us today is a vital task for a church surrounded by a culture of amnesia and short attention span. What are our values as a people? What is the common ground that holds us together as a community? What do we want to pass on to our children? Exodus helps us have these conversations, which are vital in today’s era of anxious pandemic.

Before Covid struck, 3,500 churches were closing every year. That’s roughly 10 churches a day. Giving is down 40% for U.S. churches during Covid. We are

asking the survival question, the same we were asking before Covid, only now it is sharper and more defined.

We have not been able to embrace each other or gather together since March of 2020. We have been in literal exile. We are accustomed to hearing many say (and perhaps we have said) that we don't need a church building to worship God. The other day I passed a car with a bumper sticker which said something like "My church is nature."

Exodus tells the story of a God on the move. His tabernacle was designed to be portable because the people were on the move. Wherever God led, there the people went. Now that we cannot gather, where are the spaces we find God's presence?

Exodus helps us have a conversation about a way of life that is no longer working for us. At least for the near future, we will continue to be separated from one another. And so we are invited to have a conversation about what it means to be the people of God in exile, with a God who is on the move, during a terrifying plague, at a time when our stories and values may be uncertain, or forgotten.

In this first session, we look at unlikely leaders of the Exodus. Leaders like Shiphrah and Puah, Jochebed (Moses' mother), Zipporah (Moses' wife), Pharaoh's daughter, and Miriam (Moses' sister). Each of them acted in extraordinary brave ways in furtherance of values for the common good. They are good role models for the church.

Read Exodus 1:8-22 (Shiphrah and Puah); Exodus 2:1-10 (Moses' birth and Pharaoh's daughter); and Exodus 2:15-22 and 4:21-26 (story of Zipporah).

As you read over these texts, ponder these questions:

1. What do you hear God saying to you as you read these texts?
2. Are there any connections between their stories and our life?
3. Who are the unlikely heroes of your life? Have you ever acted boldly to do the "right thing" or seen someone else do so?

If you are interested, I provide some more detailed notes on these stories below.

Notes on Exodus

Exodus means *exit*. We get the name from the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible known as the Septuagint. The Exodus is widely thought to have occurred between the period of 1380-1200 BCE, in other words, approximately *three thousand years ago*. As civilizations rise and fall, the record and material artifacts surrounding those people groups inevitably fade and in many cases, are non-existent.

One material artifact does bear witness to the existence of a people known as “Israel” dating from the 13th century before Christ. It is the so-called Merneptah Stele, but it does little more than verify that something named Israel existed long ago. It records the death of Israel in a series of lines about an Egyptian king’s victories over foreign peoples:

Israel is laid waste, his seed is not.

It is the first source we have outside of the Bible which refers to the people of Israel. The second source from the 9th century says that “Israel has perished forever!” And yet, Israel survived.

The author of Exodus seems disinterested in the kind of particularity that we often demand of historical accounts. All the kings of Egypt in the text receive the same generic title: Pharaoh.

For reasons that are less than obvious, the Hebrew people had become a hated minority in the land of Egypt. A popular historical theory is that the Semitic people group known as the Hyksos had dominated Egypt for a generation. Perhaps the enslavement of the Hebrews was Egyptian ethnic revenge, what we would call “ethnic cleansing.”

The kind of slavery depicted in Exodus was different than the model we are perhaps more familiar with in antebellum America. It was forced labor: enslavement for particular building projects, specifically the supply cities of Pithom and Ramses. By some estimate, it took 24.5 million bricks to construct a pyramid. A slave might make four thousand bricks a day, at least according to the extraordinary quota we have from ancient records.

We are likely familiar with the story that Pharaoh commanded the Israelites to make “bricks without straw” as the story is told in Exodus 5. But, this has it wrong as Nahum Sarna explains:

The new directive did not demand “bricks without straw,” as the English saying goes. Rather, it ordered the brickmakers to collect their own straw; until then it had been supplied by the state. Chopped straw or stubble was a crucial ingredient in the manufacture of bricks. It was added to the mud from the Nile, then shaped in a mold and left to dry in the sun. The straw acted as a binder, and the acid released by the decay of the vegetable matter greatly enhanced the plastic and cohesive properties of the brick, thus preventing shrinking, cracking, and loss of shape.¹

No wonder the Israelites could not finish this task. The Pharaoh was setting them up to fail in hopes that they would perish.

Seeing that “the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread” (Ex. 1:12), Pharaoh resorts to genocide. He commands the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah to kill any Hebrew male babies they encounter during their midwifery. A few notes about this story will aid in your appreciation:

- Shiphrah means “to be beautiful” and Puah means “the girl.”
- They are named while the Pharaoh is nameless. “In the biblical scale of values these lowly champions of morality assume far greater historic importance than do the all-powerful tyrants who ruled Egypt.”²
- The substance of the genocidal command is in verse 16: “When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” The English term “birthstool” conjures up some kind of stone surface for the woman to deliver the baby. However, it is likely a euphemism for testicles. The real meaning of the verse is more likely to be “When you help the Hebrew women to give birth, look at the genitals. If it is a boy, put him to death. If a girl, let her live.”³

¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus* (The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 28.

² Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus* (The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 7.

³ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus* (vol. 2; The New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 77–78.

- We are told that the midwives “feared” God in verse 17. We are not told they feared Pharaoh.
- The midwives are quick witted in verse 19, telling the apparently naïve Pharaoh that the reason they have failed in their task is that the Hebrew women deliver their babies quicker than Egyptian women. The babies had already arrived by the time the midwives had shown up, in this telling.
- Pharaoh orders that the male Hebrew babies be thrown into the Nile, which is an ironic foreshadowing of a time soon to come when the Egyptian “boys” of the Pharaoh’s army will drown in the Red Sea.

The story of Moses’ birth is one of our most beloved and familiar of biblical narratives. Here are additional notes that will aid in your interpretation:

- Moses’ mother is called the “woman” in chapter 2, but we know her name is Jochebed from Exodus 6:20, and we know his father’s name was Amram from the same verse.
- In the New Testament book of Hebrews, we are told that “By faith Moses’ parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king’s edict.” (Hebrews 11:23).
- Upon Moses’ birth, his mother Jochebed sees that he is *tov*, Hebrew for *good*. This is what God says of creation in Genesis 1. Thus, a new creation is born.
- Moses is placed in a *tevah*, Hebrew for *ark*, much like Noah’s ark which represented salvation for humanity. In this ark, there is no way to steer the vessel. Moses is at the mercy of God.
- Moses’ name is from an Egyptian word for “to be born”. But the author of Exodus, in a folklore play on words, interprets his name to derive from the Hebrew word “to draw out from the water”. So the author is telling us that the Pharaoh’s daughter unwittingly named him something that foretells what he will later do, namely, draw the people of God out of the water.

- Moses' sister, presumably Miriam, acts shrewdly in verse 7. She does not disclose that the boy's mother Jochebed is the "Hebrew nurse" who would be suitable. This results in Jochebed being paid wages for raising her own child (v. 9).
- Terence Fretheim gives this wonderful explanation to the role of the women in this passage:
 - Consistent with this creation theme is *the role given to the daughter of Pharaoh*. A non-Israelite (add Moses' teachers in Pharaoh's court, Acts 7:22!) contributes in significant ways to God's activity of life and blessing. In fact, her activity is directly parallel to that of God with Israel (2:23–25; 3:7–8)! She "comes down," "sees" the child, "hears" its cry, takes pity on him, draws him out of the water, and provides for his daily needs. Basic human values such as compassion, justice, and courage (cf. 1:12b!) as well as the active subversion of cruel and inhumane policies are seen to be present among God's creatures quite apart from their relationship to Israel; such are the product of God's activity in creation.
 - Even more, God's use of the gifts of non-Israelites for creative purposes sets the stage for God's redemptive purposes. In the final analysis, there is no difference in the effect of the humanitarian efforts of those who fear God and those who do not. Both Hebrew midwives and Egyptian princess are agents of life and blessing in the created order. God is able to make use of the gifts of both, and the community of faith is equally accepting of their efforts. Moreover, by telling both stories, Israel acknowledges both contributions with thanksgiving. While the redeemed will be *expected* to engage in acts of justice in view of what God has done for them (cf. 22:21–27), many who are not of this community will engage in such activity with more or less comparable results on the basis of other motivations, prompted by God's creative work within them.⁴

After Moses flees his native land because of fear that Pharaoh will kill him in retaliation for a murder of an Egyptian taskmaster, we find him in Midian at a well. This is a familiar scene that calls us back to the matchmaking around wells of

⁴ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 38–39.

Genesis. Moses encounters a “priest of Midian” who we later learn is Jethro, and is given Zipporah as a bride. They have a son named Gershom.

We don’t encounter Zipporah again until chapter 4 in one of the strangest stories of the Bible, the so-called bridegroom of blood account. The Hebrew is confusing, but apparently Zipporah saves Moses from being killed by God. The most common interpretation of these verses in Exodus 4:24-26 is that Moses failed to abide by the law of circumcision for his firstborn son Gershom. By violating the covenant, Moses is under threat of death from God. His wife, the daughter of a pagan Midianite priest, performs the circumcision of Gershom and flings the blood on Moses’ feet.

Some ancient and modern commentators believe that it was Moses’ own failure to become circumcised which occasioned God’s anger. Zipporah acted symbolically in circumcising their son, which is a kind of propitiation for Moses. Whatever the meaning, it is clear that Zipporah acts boldly to avert a sudden disaster.

Suggestions for further reading:

Of course, there is no substitute for a deep and close reading of Exodus. I found that pairing my reading with some excellent commentaries brought alive some of the denser material you find in chapters 25-31 and 25-40 (both of which delve into the construction of the Tabernacle and its environs).

I have had many conversation partners during my study of the book of Exodus. Back in October I took a course on Exodus and preaching taught by the President of Northern Seminary, Dr. Bill Shiell. Bill baptized me years ago when I was a young lawyer, returning to faith at First Baptist Church, Knoxville, Tennessee. His book *Sessions with Exodus: Questions God's Children Ask* is excellent. It is designed for group study, but rewards individual reading.

I relied on several commentaries and books to gain insight on Exodus, the most insightful of which have included works by the Jewish scholar Nahum Sarna. His *Exploring Exodus* book is written for a general audience, while his commentary for the Jewish Publication Society is more academic.

Michael Walzer's book *Exodus and Revolution* traces the theme of Exodus through history and the ways in which different political movements have drawn upon the Exodus. Also, the Egyptologist Jan Assmann (unfortunately named, I know) wrote a fascinating book called *The Invention of Religion: Faith and Covenant in the Book of Exodus* which sets Exodus in its historical context in the Ancient Near East.

Journey Through Exodus: The Church, Exile, and Covid-19
Session 2 January 10, 2021

Last week we looked at three stories of powerful women in the Book of Exodus: (1) the story of the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah; (2) the story of Moses' birth and deliverance in the Nile featuring Pharaoh's daughter, Moses' mother Jochebed, and his sister Miriam; and (3) Moses' wife Zipporah.

In session one I suggested some possible connections between ancient text and contemporary situation. Who are the hidden figures in your life? What does the text say to us about how God is present during times of crisis? I asked the group to begin studying Exodus and to think about what God might be up to during these days of pandemic. I hope to hear from some of you about your thinking.

In this second session, we'll explore two stories: (1) the story of Moses' encounter with God and the burning bush; and (2) the story of the plagues.

If you have time this week, I encourage you to read Exodus chapters 3-12. However, in our brief second session we will focus on these three passages: Exodus 3:1-15, 10:1-7, and 12: 21-27.

As you read these three selections, here are some questions to ponder:

1. What are the objections Moses makes to God in chapters 3 and 4?
2. What does this story reveal about God? What might it reveal about us?
3. Have you found yourself making any of these objections?
4. Reflect back on 2020...what are some things you want to forget, and what are some things you want to remember?
5. What are you learning about God during this pandemic?
6. What are you learning about church?

One of the themes we might explore is our society's inability to lament. I wrote an article about that very theme a while back in an exploration of *Lamentations* if you are interested. <https://christiancitizen.us/lamentations-for-our-time/>

More detailed notes follow for those who are interested.

- Exodus 3

- In a rapid series of first person verbs, God declares that he has *observed, heard, knows, come down, bring them up, seen*, and now he will *send*.
- He addresses the Israelites as “my people” in verses 7 and 10. Thus, even if the Israelites have forgotten, God is reclaiming it.
- In response to Moses’ question *who am I?* God answers literally “I am with you.” It doesn’t matter so much who Moses is; it matters that God is with him.
- Moses asks for God’s name, which in ancient times was thought to be the essence of a person. God’s answer is difficult to translate. The NRSV says in v. 14 *I Am Who I Am*. It could also be translated as *I will be who I will be*.
- The divine name, or Tetragrammaton (four consonants) was thought to be so powerful that it could not be pronounced out loud by the time of the Second Temple, save for once a year on the Day of Atonement by the Chief Priest. Many Jews to this day replace the pronunciation with *Adonai*, which means *Lord*. In many English translations of the Old Testament, a capitalized LORD is an indication that the underlying word is YHWH, sometimes rendered as Yahweh.

- Exodus 5-6

- Interestingly in verse 2, Pharaoh asks the same question as Moses “Who is the Lord...?”
- In verse 22 Moses continues his rather bold practice of addressing God by demanding to know why God has “mistreated this people?” “Why did you ever send me?” He seems to be plagued by self-doubt about his calling from the beginning.
- He complains again in 6:12 about his poor rhetorical skills. So, God adapts by directing his speech to Moses *and* his brother Aaron. Undeterred, Moses gives the same complaint again in 6:30.
- Why all the complaining? Perhaps it was to emphasize that it was God who was doing the work; it was God who was delivering; it was God who was behind all the miracles. Not Moses.

•Exodus 7-12 “The Signs of God”

- The turning of the River Nile into blood is not called a plague. It is a *sign*. And what is the purpose of the sign? Verse 17 tells us that “By this you shall know that I am the Lord.” The sign is a proof of God’s presence.
- We are used to calling the events described in these chapters as the “Ten Plagues” but the text does not use that term. The word plague or a related term is used only three times. The other times the word is “sign.” Remember the way the Gospel of John uses the word “sign” to talk about the ministry of Jesus? Both are markers of God’s presence in the world.
- In Exodus 8, Pharaoh asks Moses to pray to God to remove the frogs. (8:8). This is more than Moses seems able to do in the narrative in terms of his relationship to God.
- Notice the repeated theme of the *hardening* of Pharaoh’s heart. When disaster strikes again and again, do we have a similar reaction?
- In 9:27-28 after the hail disaster, Pharaoh makes a remarkable *confession* of sin and again asks Moses to pray for him.
- He repeats this after the the swarm of locusts in 10:16-18.
- “The motif of the stiffening, or hardening, of Pharaoh’s heart runs through the entire Exodus story; it appears exactly twenty times. Half of the references are to an essential attribute of the man’s character, half are attributed to divine causality.”¹

¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus* (The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 23.

Journey Through Exodus: The Church, Exile, and Covid-19

Session 3 January 17, 2021

In our second of three sessions we discussed Moses' encounter with God in Exodus 3, the story of the plagues, and the directive to pass on to children and grandchildren God's saving acts. We talked about how those seven active verbs in Exodus 3 show that God is active, compassionate, and attentive to his children on Earth. God is big enough to handle our objections and angry prayers, as shown by Moses' vociferous objections in chapters 3-4.

We began a conversation about what we might be learning during this "plague" of Covid. What do we want to pass on to our children?

In this third and final session on Exodus, I'd like for us to focus on two of the dominant themes of Exodus in the remaining chapters: the worship of God and God's presence.

Read Exodus 20:1-2; 25:8-9; 31:1-11; and 40:34-38.

As you read, here are some questions to ponder:

1. Why do you think the Ten Commandments show up in chapter 20? Why did God not give the commandments earlier, say, before the Passover?
2. Why might God be so intent on detailing the way to worship God and how to approach God in worship?
3. What does our worship say about the God we believe in?
4. How does God make his presence known in Exodus? List the ways.
5. What is the significance of God appearing in a cloud? Couldn't God have just handed the Israelites a map and pointed at the Promised Land and said "meet me here?"

More detailed notes follow for those who are interested.

Exodus 20:1-2

- As you read the Ten Commandments, pay attention to the opening words. They begin with what God has done to save Israel. The law does not come until grace has been announced. Compare to the way Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes, followed by the “new law.”
- I am the Lord YOUR God...notice the relationship is becoming possessive and intimate.
- The words are spoken to Israel, but they were overwhelming. Read 20:19 to see how Israel responds. What do they do? They demand that Moses become a mediator. They are afraid that without a mediator they will die.
- “The popular English title “The Ten Commandments” is derived from the traditional, although inaccurate, English rendering of the Hebrew phrase ‘aseret ha-devarim that appears in Exodus 34:28 and in Deuteronomy 4:13 and 10:4.”¹ This Hebrew phrase means “the Ten Words.”
- I will focus in only on the first commandment: “you shall have no other gods before me.”
- In Hebrew, a literal translation would be more like “Other gods shall not be to you.” What might this mean? All those other Elohim (Hebrew word for “gods” and also “God”) are not “to be” because they do not exist. This is the beginning of monotheism.
- The verb for “to be” is used in intimate relationships like entering into a marriage or a covenant.

Exodus 25:8-9

- The sections on the Tabernacle in Exodus are probably the parts of the Bible where people skip over. They are perplexed by the Bible’s tedious attention

¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus* (The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 107–108.

to detail and figure that it describes a long dead form of worship which has no applicability to our way of experiencing God.

- The author of Exodus thought the material important enough to devote a 1/3 of the Book to its explication.
- God shows Moses a “pattern” or “model” of what the sanctuary looks like. Many commentators supposed that there was a heavenly model that the earthly version was based on.
- The word for sanctuary is *mishkan*, which comes from a root word for a transitory encampment. This is not where God *lives*; rather, it is where God’s presence is *in-dwelling*.
- Because the Lord’s holiness was dangerous to the people, there are several intermediary steps between God’s presence and the people.
- Many have observed similarities between the “sanctuary” of the Garden of Eden with its cherubim and flaming sword, and the tabernacle of Exodus.
- What is the point of the tabernacle? We discover that in Exodus 29:45-46:
 - *I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God.*

Exodus 31:1-11

- We meet two craftsmen named Bezaliel and Oholiab who are tasked with constructing the Tabernacle. Interestingly, Exodus devotes a huge chunk of its narrative to the repetitive description of the construction of the Tabernacle. Bezaliel and Oholiab will show up again in chapter 35? Why? In between the narratives of construction can be found the pivotal story of Israel’s apostasy in chapter 32, the so-called golden calf incident. Here, the existence of Israel and the Covenant is threatened with extinction.
- The Covenant is made anew and so too are the instructions for the Tabernacle. The differences are striking, however. In the second account

beginning chapter 35, it is all of Israel which is summoned to construct the Tabernacle. God accepts offerings from those who have “willing” hearts. (Exodus 35: 21).

- Those with “ability” are to make contributions to the worship of God in this space (Exodus 31:3).
- The two craftsmen are from the tribes of Judah and Dan. We are likely given that detail to show that the Tabernacle is constructed by folk who represent all of Israel.

Exodus 40:34-38

- The ending of the Book of Exodus focuses appropriately on its fundamental theme: the presence of God with God’s people.
- God’s presence is localized in a cloud. For other references to this, look at Exodus 13:21; 14:19, 20, 24; 16:10; 19:9, 16; 24:15, 16, 18; 33:9-19; 34:5.
- Genesis ends with Israel *in Egypt*. Exodus ends with the people of God on the move, and God is with them...during “each stage of the journey.”

Daniel's connecting thoughts between Exodus, Covid-19 & NDBC:

1. Like the midwives and other “hidden figures” of Exodus, there are many “hidden figures” in NDBC and in your personal lives. These people may not be as visible, but they are acting for the common good based on deep personal conviction.
2. During a time of plagues we become numb to the accumulation of “bad news.” After the 3rd or 4th plague in a row, much like Pharaoh, we are so numb we may not be able to feel and be passionate about the fifth plague, and so on.
3. Our hearts might get hardened during this journey because of the sheer accumulation of bad news. How do we as a church and a people recover the “good news”?
4. Just like Israel in the Exodus, there is no going back to “the way it was before.” There will be a recovery of tradition as there always is, but our life together has been changed by the pandemic. How do we start living in a way that prepares us for that good tomorrow, rather than the unrecoverable “yesterday”?
5. We can begin by identifying practices that help us move forward on the journey. What are those practices?
 - a. Renewed sense of generosity (missions)
 - b. Focus on portable media (Tabernacle on the move)
 - c. Tell the stories of our octogenarians to pass on examples of faith to our children
 - d. Look for where the Spirit is at work
6. We are in a time of transition at NDBC. During transition times we encounter excitement, confusion, reservation, and denial.
7. It is common for there to be a range of emotions: anxiety, resistance, confusion, but there is also space for great creativity and movement.
8. If we think of God’s presence as “in the cloud” leading us on a journey, we will be less attached to knowing where the destination is.