

The Beginning of All Things – Genesis through Deuteronomy Fall, 2015

The Beginning of All Things – Genesis through Deuteronomy Have you ever wondered what the scriptures teach about the origin of the universe? What about the patriarchs, who were they, and why are they important? What relevance does the account of the exodus of the Hebrews from the land of Egypt have for Christian growth? What can the seemingly tedious ceremonial laws of Leviticus as well as the long list of names in Numbers teach us about godly living? How should a believer read and reflect on the five books of Moses collectively called the Pentateuch (or Torah)? How do these five books “fit in” to the over-arching story of scripture? These questions and more will be explored as we seek to understand this section of God’s Word.

The objective of this class is: to gain an overview of the first five books of the Bible (otherwise known as the Pentateuch), and understand the relation between these foundational books to Christ and Christian living.

Last week witnessed the conclusion of the book of Genesis with Israel and his twelve sons and multiple grandchildren (a total of seventy souls) residing in Egypt, the land of their preservation and eventual enslavement. This week, with the commencement of the book of Exodus we see the continuation of the story. The first few verses fill in the gap informing the reader that, “...*there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph...*” When this new king saw the manner in which the Hebrews were multiplying in the land, he considered them a threat saying, “...*Behold the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land*” (1:9). This statement is interesting on multiple accounts: 1) the children of Israel had multiplied to the point of being a threat to a great and powerful empire like the Egyptians. God’s blessing (the blessing of multiplication) was the cause of Pharaoh’s fear. 2) Pharaoh was afraid that they would join their enemies and, “...*escape from the land*”. 3) They were desired solely for utilitarian purposes, so they must have been enslaved prior to this particular Pharaoh. It is feasible that this Pharaoh did not bring them into slavery, he made their slavery arduous and sought to regulate their numbers. However, the more they were persecuted and afflicted, the more they grew. This week we will explore the enslavement of God’s people in Egypt, the revelation of God as a relational, personable, God, and the extent of God’s restorative plan as he fulfills his oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Point One: The Enslavement of God’s People in Egypt – The Egyptian enslavement should not have been a mystery to the people of God since it was foretold during Abraham’s vision referenced in Genesis 15:13-14. One might wonder, why God chose to use the adversity of Egyptian slavery as the context in which the promise made to Abraham of increasing his descendants after him should be fulfilled. God’s sovereignty reigns supreme over all of His creation. Consequently, there is nothing that happens that is outside of his governance and control. Scripture does not say why Egypt was the chosen context in which the young nation would grow to adolescence, but we do know that God used the harsh conditions to multiply his people. There are three things regarding the enslavement of Israel in Egypt that should be discussed:

- A. The children of Israel remained a distinct people group over a period of at least 350 years, something that the above persecution no doubt aided.
- B. The children of Israel conveyed from generation to generation knowledge of God’s covenant oath made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

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- C. The children of Israel remembered and revered the promise of Joseph that, *“God will visit you, and bring you up out of this land, to the land that he swore to Abraham, Isaac and to Jacob”* (Genesis 50:24).

There are two points that should be made regarding the Book of Exodus as it relates to the book of Genesis and the rest of the Torah. They are as follows:

- 1) There is a dramatic shift in the role of God as a central character from the book of Genesis to the book of Exodus. In all of the Torah/Pentateuch God is the main subject. In the book of Genesis, he is much more of a central character, intervening in human history and in the lives of individuals. He would speak with the Patriarchs face to face. We witnessed an accordion effect throughout the book of Genesis – moving from the universal to the specific and out again. In Exodus we have a steady narrowing of communication through one man - Moses. In the book of Exodus, God is less an intervening character and is more portrayed as the director of the great drama unfolding before us. He still speaks one on one with Moses, but only because Moses is the mediator of a covenant. He still intervenes in human affairs on behalf of his covenant community, but remains cloaked in mystery and shrouded in impenetrable darkness. Gone are the days in which he addresses independent individuals within the community of Israel. He now communicates through a mediator (Moses) and reveals his will prophetically to his people.
- 2) The city-building theme/motif portrayed in the book of Genesis is continued in the book of Exodus, particularly in the context of Israel’s enslavement. Whereas Adam was commanded to replenish the earth and subdue it by exercising his dominion over it (as a vice-regent of God - Genesis 1:28), and the patriarchs looked for a city, *“...whose designer and builder is God”* (Hebrews 11:10), the children of Israel were being forced to build cities for Pharaoh. Therefore, their enslavement was spiritual as well as physical. In their lack of socio-political freedom they were inhibited in their ability to pursue their covenantal purpose.

Point Two: The Revelation of God as a Relational, Personable God – The children of Israel knew God simply as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They knew him as Creator, and as Covenant Maker; however, at the heart of the covenant – as witnessed by the *Akedah* of Genesis chapter 22 – is redemption. Before God reveals himself as the Redeemer of Israel, he reveals his name to Moses. In **Exodus 6:2-5** God tells Moses, *“I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as God Almighty (El Shaddai), but by my name “the Lord”¹ I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners. Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the people of Israel whom the Egyptians hold as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant.”*

What’s in a name? In the ancient near east, there was quite a bit in a name. One’s name said something about the individual. This is why both Abraham as well as Jacob/Israel received new names as part of the covenant God established with them. In the past, God was known as *El Shaddai* or Almighty God. We see reference to this in Genesis 17:1. Almighty God is a name/title consistent with his creative acts. As redeemer, he chooses to reveal himself to Israel as YHWH, a Hebrew word, the exact meaning of which is obscure but derives from the Hebrew root YH meaning “to be”. Historically, the name has been translated as “I AM”. The significance of God revealing himself to Moses and Israel as “I AM” can best

¹ YHWH

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be ascertained when one understands the context of the Israelites' enslavement in Egypt. God had revealed Himself to their forefathers with certain promises involving land, seed, and blessing. These promises remained unfulfilled in the lives of the patriarchs. With the name YHVH, God is stating that I AM God – of redemption. In the passage above, God associates the fulfillment of his Covenantal promises with his impending acts of redemption. These acts become the foundation of Israel's relationship with God and define his relationship with them to the extent that the prophet Hosea many years later would write, "*But I am the Lord your God from the land of Egypt; you know no God but me, and beside me there is no Savior*" (Hosea 13:4). You here have affirmation that God is not known nor knowable apart from his actions. These actions occur in space/time with historical accuracy and consequence. The "I AM" is the God that was, is and always shall be faithful to his covenantal promises.

According to the Dutch Reformed theologian, Hermann Bavinck, "El Shaddai is the God who makes all the powers of nature subject and subservient to the work of grace...As the God of grace, however, he manifests himself especially in the name YHVH".² Also implicit in the divine name (YHVH) is the personal disclosure of God's self through his actions to the extent that God is both personable and relational. He is not solely the transcendent God of creation, the Almighty. He is also immanently present among his people, and assures them...I remember (my covenant)...and I have seen (your sufferings). The name, YHVH, applies to God's covenantal relationship with his people, and has little meaning apart from the covenant. During the time of the Second Temple period (time of Christ), the name YHVH was closely associated with both the temple as well as the kingdom of God. Only the high Priest could utter the divine name, and he could only do so within the precincts of the temple when offering the priestly benediction. The divine name (or Ha-Shem) became closely associated with the kingdom of God to the extent that anyone taking upon himself the yoke of the kingdom of heaven (a phrase commonly used during the Second Temple period to denote willingly binding one's self in obedience to God) was identified as one who "sanctified the name". Although the concept of kingdom exists in its nebulous form within the Torah, the concept of temple is obvious to the casual observer. The temple was, after all, the place where God would *place his name*. From the exodus event forward there are two additional motifs that are added to *city* mentioned above: temple and kingdom. Collectively, all three denote the physical place where God will live among his people and be their God.

Point Three: God's Restorative Plan – The first twelve chapters of the book of Exodus inform us of the great extent to which God went to redeem his people from servitude to Pharaoh. Prior to returning to Egypt, God informs Moses, "*But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that, he will let you go*" (Ex. 3:19-20). Redemption was certain, but it would be costly. Ten times did the hand of God visit the Egyptians, but it was not until the tenth time that redemption was truly complete. The ten plagues along with their scriptural references are mentioned below:

- 1) Water turned to blood (Exodus 7:14-25)
- 2) Frogs (Exodus 8:1-15)
- 3) Lice (Exodus 8:16-19)
- 4) Flies (Exodus 8:20-32)

² Bavinck, Hermann. *Reformed Dogmatics*

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- 5) Disease on Cattle (Exodus 9:1-7)
- 6) Boils (Exodus 9:8-12)
- 7) Hail (Exodus 9:13-25)
- 8) Locusts (Exodus 10:1-20)
- 9) Darkness (Exodus 10:21-29)
- 10) Death of Firstborn (Exodus 12:29-36)

Of the ten plagues mentioned above, the one that would have a continuing impact on the observance and worship of the children of Israel was the death of the firstborn son. Although each plague is mentioned during the observance of Passover, the one plague from which Passover or Pesach itself gets its name is the visitation of the angel of death. The angel “passed over” the families of the Hebrews who obeyed Moses and applied the blood of a sacrificial lamb on the door posts of their house. Here we see again the foreshadowing of Christ’s substitutionary atonement. The Hebrew word for Passover (Pesach) places the emphasis on the sacrificial lamb instead of the act of “passing over”. In either case the death of the firstborn son and the sacrificial substitution play a critical role in the event of redemption. Such a substitution is significant enough that it requires the life of all firstborn men and animals born among the people of God during the exodus generation and for each subsequent generation.

So, what is the significance of the slaying of the firstborn son? According to scripture there are two things in particular that are revelatory: 1) God executes judgement against the gods of the Egyptians through the slaying of the firstborn (and on the Egyptians themselves), and 2) the blood of the paschal lamb is a sign of deliverance/salvation for the people of Israel. In **Exodus 12:12-13** we read, *“For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt, I will execute judgements: I am the Lord. The blood shall be a sign for you, on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you, when I strike the land of Egypt”*. For this reason, God later tells Moses (Exodus 13:1-2) *“Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man, and of beast”*. Here we have an echo of the test administered to Abraham mentioned in Genesis 22. Later we will see that God actually takes the tribe of Levi and sets them apart for holy service in lieu of Israel offering their firstborn sons in sacrifice (**Numbers 8:14-18**). In this echo we see the continued foreshadowing of Christ the final paschal lamb whose death would atone for the sins of his people thereby releasing them, not from the bondage of Egypt, but from the bondage of sin and death.

Questions to Ponder:

- 1) *How does the covenantal faithfulness of God to the children of Israel in the context of pain and suffering (Egyptian slavery) resonate with you and the on-going work of sanctification in your own life?*
- 2) *In what ways is Christ the final Passover lamb, and in what ways is his death/atonement substitutionary?*