

Summary for Session 6: Egypt and Exodus—Part 1

Prep work: Read Exodus 1-17

DVD: Jeff begins by noting that 400 years have passed between the end of Genesis (the Patriarchs) and the beginning of Exodus. The Israelites, who have moved down to Egypt following Joseph and the salvation he offers, have grown more numerous. They have lost their story and have taken Egyptian ideals, and more importantly, Egyptian gods. The Exodus is about God drawing the Israelites out of Egypt, but also about drawing the Egyptian culture out of the Israelites and reminding them that they are God's chosen people.

With the growth of the Israelite population, the Egyptians become fearful of them planning a takeover. To curb this, a decree goes out to have all new-born Israelite males cast into the river Nile. One boy does get placed in the river, but in a basket (or, as Jeff notes, a type of ark?), and Pharaoh's daughter finds him, draws him out, and raises him in the palace. He is named Moses, which means “to draw out,” as in drawn out of the river, but also as an indication that God will use him to draw the Israelites out of the bondage of Egypt. Jeff points out that, like Joseph, Moses will go out into the wilderness ahead of his brethren. In Moses' case, it will be 40 years (symbolic number of preparation); the same number of years the Israelites will wander in the desert. At the end of that time, God appears to Moses in the burning bush. God reveals Himself as the God of the covenant with Moses' forefathers, and also states He has seen the suffering of His people. God tells Moses that he will be the instrument of God's plan to free God's people. While Moses worries about his own inadequacies, God responds by assuring Moses that God will be with him, and that is enough. Moses asks God how to answer the question about who this god is that is leading them, and the name God gives, “I AM WHO I AM”, encompasses all tenses and implies a constant state of being. The giving of God's name also implies that Moses has access to God; in ancient cultures, knowing one's name meant having power over them, indicating that God encourages a relationship between Himself and the Israelites.

Moses is sent to Pharaoh to ask for 3 days freedom so that the Israelites may go out in the desert and worship God. In Pharaoh's refusal, we can see the conflict shift to a stand-off between Pharaoh and God. Pharaoh will not let the Israelites worship and serve God, rather, Pharaoh demands they serve him. Jeff points out that as we define ourselves by what we worship, Pharaoh was also denying the Israelites the chance to know themselves by cutting them off from worshiping their God. Instead, Pharaoh insists they work harder, giving them even less of a chance to know themselves and build community. As an interesting aside, Jeff notes that this is also happening today—with a culture bent on work, we have no time to rest, to worship, to know ourselves, and to pass along our values and beliefs.

At this juncture, an interesting theological point arises. The Bible states that God hardened Pharaoh's heart against Him and also states that Pharaoh hardens his own heart against God—is God denying Pharaoh freedom to choose and instead condemning him to be a villain? Jeff responds by reviewing the Egyptian belief that hearts were weighed at death against a feather representing truth and justice. With each unjust

action of Pharaoh, his heart gets “harder,” or heavier, and the scales fall lower. It is Pharaoh's own doing that determines the “hardness” of his heart.

What follows are the 10 plagues, or what some theologians present as rebuttals against specific Egyptian deities. For instance, the days of darkness disproving the existence of Amon-ra, the Egyptian sun-god. The final plague, the killing of the first-born, strikes Pharaoh's son, himself considered a deity. It is also retribution for the killing of the Israelite first-born. (Israel as a people can also be seen as God's chosen, His “first-born”.) God instructs the Israelites in preparation for a consecration that will enable them to be “passed over” during this 10th plague. The preparations are full of symbolism: bitter herbs reminding them of the bitterness of slavery; roasted flesh as opposed to the Egyptian method of boiling meat; a chosen lamb reminiscent of God's declaration to provide a “lamb” for the sacrifice (Genesis). The Israelites are reconsecrated as God's chosen people in this event, and are led from slavery into freedom—the freedom to choose to follow God. The Exodus as a whole comprises the single greatest event of salvation in the Old Testament. Everything is seen in light of it and as stemming from it. God realizes that these newly freed slaves are like little children. He leads His people into the wilderness, where He will teach them that He can be trusted to provide, sustain, guide, and protect. They are not ready for the conflict involved in retaking the Promised Land; He will keep them in the desert, in, as Jeff puts it, a “royal boot camp” to form their hearts and strengthen their faith. He feeds them manna daily with specific instructions to build trust and faithfulness. After a year, they enter into battle with the Amalekites, and with Moses' hands held steady (a sign of faithfulness), the Israelites win. God will continue to teach and lead them through the wilderness and their own misgivings.