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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

UNIT 11: THE EXODUS

BIBLICAL TEXT:

Read Exodus chapters 7-15 carefully before reading the following background information.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

Although the Bible's description of Israel's exodus from Egypt shows it to have been an event of phenomenal proportions involving multiple miracles, it is nevertheless an event that is very difficult to establish historically and archaeologically. This is because ancient Egyptian historical records and inscriptions were highly propagandist and typically did not discuss military defeats and losses – only victories that showed the pharaohs in a positive light. There is also a comparable lack of archaeological evidence because even very large groups of people moving quickly through a landscape (as the Israelites did) leave virtually no archaeologically discernable “signature.”

It is important to understand this background because sincere and well-meaning Christians often unknowingly perpetuate unauthenticated claims regarding archaeological “proof” of the exodus – such as chariot wheels being found in the Red Sea and similar “evidence.” In reality, there is no hard evidence of the Israelite exodus, and trained archaeologists understand that none can really be expected. That does not mean that evidence could not come to light at some point, or that there is any reason to doubt that the exodus happened. But while archaeology cannot “prove” the exodus occurred, it can help throw light on some aspects of the story, and we will consider three such areas: the exodus plagues, the route of the exodus, and the date of the exodus.

The Ten Plagues:

Many people have attempted to find natural causes for the ten plagues – such as conditions that might follow an extreme flooding of the River Nile which can turn it reddish with particles of soil suspended in the water. In fact, there are Egyptian documents that describe the Nile as “blood” in such circumstances. But although such a scenario could possibly lead to infestations of frogs and various insects – and perhaps indirectly to disease, boils, and other pestilence – it could not account for a number of the plagues such as the hail, locusts, and darkness. Of course, no natural events could cause the death of only the firstborn throughout Egyptian society, and so it makes sense to simply accept that God miraculously brought the plagues about through his own power and direct control of natural phenomena.

It is frequently said that each of the ten plagues was an attack on a particular Egyptian deity because God told Moses: "I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt" (Exodus 12:12 and see also Numbers 33:4), but the situation is not that simple. While some of the plagues utilized creatures associated with various Egyptian gods – such as the frogs which were symbols of the goddess Hekat – they tend to be only minor Egyptian deities, and a number of the plagues do not correspond with any particular Egyptian god or goddess. It is more accurate to say that the plagues brought "judgment" on *all* the gods of Egypt (as Exodus says) because they demonstrated God's power in a way that *all* the Egyptian gods together could not stop. In other words, the "judgment" on Egypt's deities was one of proving them not to be gods at all.

The plagues were actually far more an attack on Egypt's king than on its gods. This is because they made obvious the lack of Pharaoh's power to maintain order in his kingdom – which was an important aspect of Egyptian theology: that the king was himself a god invested with power to maintain *ma'at* or order and stability in the world. In Exodus 5:2 it is recorded that the Pharaoh disdainfully told Moses and Aaron: "Who is the Lord, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go." So it is not coincidental that at the culmination of the exodus at the Red Sea crossing, God said: "I will gain honor over Pharaoh and over all his army, that the Egyptians may know that I am the Lord" – with the expression of gaining honor "over Pharaoh" occurring three times (Exodus 14:4, 17-18).

The Route of the Exodus:

The Bible tells us that when the Israelites fled from Egypt, they were able to miraculously cross on dry ground through a large body of water that then returned and drowned the pursuing Egyptian forces. The Hebrew term often translated "Red Sea" in Exodus is *yam suph*. *Yam* means "sea," but *suph* means "reeds" or "rushes," which is why some versions of the Bible call it "the Sea of Reeds" or "Reed Sea" instead of the Red Sea. There are at least three likely possibilities for the location of this event:

Some scholars believe the Israelites may have taken a northern route and that the sea they crossed was part of Lake Sirbonis, an inlet of the Mediterranean, though there is little to substantiate this possibility.

Other scholars feel that a central route that crossed one of the shallow lakes north of the Red Sea was more likely. This route agrees well with the very limited evidence we have, and with the name "Reed Sea."

Yet other biblical scholars favor the traditional view, that the Israelites took a southern route and crossed the northwest arm of the Red Sea itself – as popularized in films such as "The Ten Commandments." We should remember that "Red Sea" is a modern name, however – the ancient Egyptians actually called this same body of water the "Green Sea."

There are other, less likely, possibilities for the route of the exodus, but the wide range that is obvious in the main three theories shows the uncertainty of the situation. Also, much of the information we do have is susceptible to being understood in different ways. For example, Numbers 33:10 shows that the Israelites passed *yam suph* a second time as they headed south several days after the crossing, and this is sometimes believed to prove that only the Red Sea itself is large enough for that to have occurred. However, the description fits the chain of multiple lakes north of the Red Sea just as well.

Ultimately, we can only be sure that the Bible indicates the Israelites crossed a significant body of water on Egypt's eastern border. Exactly which body of water it was remains uncertain.



A simplified map of the three main proposed routes for the exodus: yellow - northern route, red - central route, blue - southern route, green – common path shared by all routes. Base Image: NASA.

The Date of the Exodus:

The date of the exodus from Egypt is also the subject of ongoing debate. Although there are many theories, two principal dates have been suggested: an earlier one in the fifteenth century – in the reign of Pharaoh Thutmose III (1479 to 1425 BC) or Amenhotep II (1427 to 1401 BC) and a later one in the thirteenth century – in the reign of Rameses II (1279-1213 BC).

The earlier of these two dates has been especially favored by those biblical scholars who have attempted to work out a chronology from the Bible. However, this can be problematic because years are not given for some individuals, some figures seem to be symbolic or only approximations, there are often overlaps that are difficult if not impossible to separate, and the total number of years for a given period often differs between the Hebrew Masoretic text and the Greek Septuagint translation. While some claim that only the Hebrew text is correct in this regard, the apostle Paul used the Septuagint figures in calculating the 430 years between the time of Abraham and the exodus (Galatians 3:17) – showing that the situation is not as clear cut as many would presume. While an earlier date for the exodus does seem to fit with some historical facts, it does not agree with others.

On the other hand, the later date seems to better fit some of the information we have regarding Canaan and especially Egypt. For example, Exodus 1:11 names two of the cities that the Israelite slaves labored to build – Pithom and Rameses. Egyptologists are virtually unanimous in agreeing that this city of “Rameses” was Pi-Rameses, built in the reign of Rameses II (1279–1213 BC), indicating the need for a later rather than an earlier date. Unlike biblical chronology, Egypt’s chronology for the first and second thousand years BC is well established. As a result, had the Bible named the pharaoh with whom Moses and Aaron interacted, the date of the exodus could be known within a few years. The fact that the Bible does not tell us who the pharaoh of the exodus was indicates that the precise date of the exodus is not important – rather it is what happened and what we can learn from the event that should be our focus.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

The exodus story begins with Moses and Aaron requesting from Pharaoh the temporary release of the Israelites in order to celebrate a religious festival in the wilderness. Ancient Egyptian laborers were given freedom from work for religious observances, so the request was a reasonable one. However, Pharaoh's negative response to Moses (see Note 1) led to the plagues by which the Egyptians were afflicted.

In understanding the plagues, it is helpful to realize that they are described in a specific pattern (see Note 2) of three groups – each consisting of three plagues – that are then followed by the final climactic plague:

First group of three plagues – Nile to “blood,” frogs, gnats (Exodus 7:14-8:19)

Second group of three plagues – flies, pestilence, boils (Exodus 8:20-9:12)

Third group of three plagues – hail, locusts, darkness (Exodus 9:13-10:23)

The threefold pattern is made clear in the following manner: The first two plagues in each set of three are given *after a warning* and the third is sent *without any warning*. In each set the first plague is predicted to come “*in the morning*” while the next two plagues have *no specific time* mentioned. In each set God instructs Moses and Aaron to “*wait*” for the first plague, and to “*go to Pharaoh*” for the second plague, but there are *no instructions of location* for the third plague. In other words, each set of three plagues occurs in a fixed pattern with identical circumstances for the first, second, and third plagues, respectively. This subtly intricate pattern is reason enough to reject the claim sometimes made that the plagues account was just a number of stories of natural disasters pulled together to make a single story.

Understanding the pattern of three sets of plagues helps us to see their increase in intensity. The first three are serious annoyances, but relatively mild; the second three bring actual pain to the Egyptians; and the final set brings spectacular plagues affecting both people and the environment.

The final, tenth plague – the death of the Egyptian firstborn – stands alone and the fact that it was not included in a set of three plagues like all the previous afflictions indicates that it was equal to three of the earlier plagues in its severity. This plague was harsh indeed, yet God apparently felt the punishment was deserved in recompense for the killing of the Hebrew children. God also doubtless knew that such a punishment was necessary because the Egyptians would not let his people go until they were actually facing the death of their own people – as the failure of all the lesser plagues clearly demonstrates. It was on the night of the final plague and the deaths of the firstborn that the Israelites were instructed to keep the Passover ceremony – the high point of the exodus event – that will be discussed in detail below.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

The whole exodus story is summarized in a few short verses of Exodus 6, in the words that God told Moses to tell the people of Israel:

“I am the Lord, and *I will bring you out* from under the yoke of the Egyptians. *I will free you* from being slaves to them, and *I will redeem you* with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. *I will take you* as my own people, and *I will be your God*. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. And *I will bring you to the land* I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. *I will give it to you as a possession*. I am the Lord.” (Exodus 6:6-8, emphases added)

In this passage God makes a number of promises beginning with the words “I will ...” In celebrating the Passover, Jewish people drink four small cups of wine – one for each of the first four things God said he would do – though there are seven instances of “I will” – seven promises – in this passage, and each one represents an important aspect of the theology of Exodus: *I will bring you out, I will free you, I will redeem you, I will take you as my own people, I will be your God, I will bring you to the land, I will give it to you.*

Within this important summary of the exodus story, “I will bring you out” and “I will free you” have spiritual dimensions in that the exodus out of Egypt (which the Bible uses as a metaphor for sin – Hebrews 11:24-25; Revelation 11:8; etc.) symbolized the coming out of, and freedom from sin. In the same way, the word “redeem” in the promise “I will redeem you” means to buy back something that one had lost, but it can also mean to deliver someone or something from a bad or evil situation. God’s redemption of the Israelites was manifested in that they were delivered from death in the final plague by the blood of the lamb they sacrificed for the ceremonial Passover meal eaten on the night prior to them leaving Egypt (Exodus 12:1-13). As such, the Passover account is certainly the theological high point of the exodus story from an Old Testament perspective, and it also takes on additional significance for Christians.

The Israelites were told to sacrifice a male lamb without blemish, meaning undefiled and perfect (Exodus 12:5). The connection between this perfect lamb and Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God (John 1:29) is made clear by the apostle Paul: “Christ our Passover Lamb has been sacrificed for us” (1 Corinthians 5:7) and the apostle Peter: “Knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things ... but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Peter 1:18-19).

The lamb had to be taken into the Israelites’ homes on the tenth day of the first month of the Hebrew calendar and sacrificed on the fourteenth day – the days on which the New Testament tells us that Christ entered Jerusalem and was crucified, respectively (John 12:13 and John 13:1 – see Note 3).

The Israelites could eat the lamb only after it was roasted by fire and accompanied by unleavened bread and bitter herbs (Exodus 12:8). The roasting by fire symbolized the burnt offering (Leviticus 1:10-13) that Christ’s sacrifice fulfilled. The unleavened bread symbolized that he was without sin (1 Corinthians 5:6-8). The herbs may picture the hyssop that was used to apply the blood of the Passover lamb to the Israelites’ doorposts (Exodus 12:7, 13) – and it was hyssop that was used to give Jesus the bitter wine or vinegar on the cross (John 19:29).

The sacrificial lamb had to be completely consumed. Any uneaten part was to be totally burned up by fire (Exodus 12:10) so that no part of the lamb would be subject to decay or corruption – just as Christ’s body was not corrupted in death (Acts 13:37).

There are many other symbolic aspects of the Passover event from a Christian perspective (see Note 4), but even the few examples given here show how the first Passover foreshadowed Christ’s sacrifice and served as a lesson in substitutionary redemption. Christians believe, of course, that Jesus changed the symbols of the Passover ceremony to bread and wine at the Last Supper (Luke 22:13-20), but the symbolism of the first Passover still applies to us today, giving us a deeper appreciation of Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf.

Just as the Passover ceremony and Christ’s sacrifice are manifestations of God’s promise, “I will redeem you,” so all the promises of Exodus 6:6-8 have spiritual significance for Christians today.

* Note 1: It is interesting that Moses did not say exactly what God told him to say when he met with Pharaoh (Exodus 3:18; 4:22-23). Moses was even instructed by God to say “please” at this first meeting with Pharaoh (Exodus 5:1). As a result, that meeting did not go well. The second time Moses went before Pharaoh, Moses followed God’s instructions to the word (Exodus 7:10) and that meeting, although not successful in achieving its purpose, clearly went better. Things so often go better when we follow God’s guidance to the word – rather than just generally!

* Note 2: The references to the plagues in Psalms 78 and 105 do not list all ten of the plagues enumerated in Exodus, and they are not given in the same order, but this is because the references in the Psalms are poetic rather than narrative. We see this in the way Psalm 78 mentions the Israelites wandering in the wilderness (vss. 13-33; etc.) before it mentions the plagues in Egypt (vss. 43-51).

* Note 3: The Jewish day begins at sunset; so according to Jewish reckoning, when Jesus ate the Passover meal with His disciples in the evening, it was the beginning of the Passover Day.

* Note 4: The Passover and exodus events are seen throughout the New Testament as symbolizing the death of Christ. For example, when Moses and Elijah appeared to the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration and spoke of Jesus’ approaching death (Luke 9:28–36), Luke used the Greek word “exodus” of his death. And in the book of Revelation, when the Redeemed sing, it is the song of Moses and the Lamb (Revelation 15:3). In fact, the New Testament has over thirty references to the Passover-exodus event, and over twenty of them occur in the narratives recording the end of Christ’s life.

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics:

How important are the exact date and the exact route of the exodus to Christians?

Summarize the pattern that is evident in the grouping of the ten plagues.

Summarize the ways in which the Passover lamb clearly symbolizes the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Looking Below the Surface:

How do the seven promises made by God to Israel in Exodus 6:6-8 apply to the Christian today?

Everyday Applications:

In 1 Corinthians 10:1–11, Paul makes an analogy between the events of the exodus and the process of redemption. In what ways can we profitably apply the lessons from this analogy in our own lives?

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