

“We’re Outa Here”

Exodus 7: 1 – 15: 21

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Our series of *50 Bible Stories Everyone Should Know* brings us, this morning, to the even known as the Exodus – the “going out” of the Hebrews from Egypt where they were enslaved and oppressed.

This going out, you will recall, happened as a result of a series of events – natural disasters and epidemics – that have been called The Ten Plagues by biblical historians: Water turned to blood, frogs, gnats, flies, death of livestock from disease, boils on animals and people, thunder and hail, locusts, darkness, and the death of the firstborn.

This is a topic that we, as people of God, must treat delicately because, on one hand, these were the events that led to the freedom of the Hebrew nation, a cause for celebration. But, on the other hand, they were the cause of much and grievous suffering by the Egyptian people, whom God loved no less than he did the Hebrews.

The Ten Plagues of Egypt are, in fact, a subject which, when sung about, are best suited to the blues.

This past week, as our attention has been drawn to Tennessee, Mississippi, and Louisiana, we have watched a modern day plague – a flood – make its way down the great river.

If the year of the Exodus was a very bad year for the Egyptians, then this has been no less a bad decade for the people of the Mississippi Delta: Katrina, the BP oil spill, and, now, floods.

So, with apologies to Muddy Waters, Fred McDowell, and Robert Johnson, I would like to share with you, this morning, a Delta Blues version of the spiritual we sang last week – “Go Down Moses.”

GO DOWN MOSES – Delta Blues

REFRAIN: Go down Moses, Go down Moses
 Way down in Egypt Land
 Go down Moses, Go down Moses
 Way down in Egypt Land
 Tell Ol’ Pharaoh: Let my people go.

First the Nile River ran a scarlet red
 That killed all the fish, or so it was said.
 Without the fish, the frogs multiplied
 And covered the land, and then they died. (REFRAIN)

The gnats and the flies on the frogs did feast
 And infected and tortured both man and beast.
 Then thunder roared and hail, it fell
 Like a scene out someone’s vision of hell.

Ol’ Pharaoh, he was most annoyed
 When the locust came and the crops was destroyed
 Then darkness fell so black and thick
 You could stir it up with a stirrin’ stick. (REFRAIN)

The final plague, the first to be born
 Set all of Egypt to wail and mourn.
 And so after sufferin’ and weal and woe
 The king relented and let them go.

BRIDGE: He said, Go on, Moses
 Get outa Egypt land
 Hear ol’ Pharaoh
 Get yo’ stuff an’ go. (REFRAIN)

MUSING ON THE STORY

That's really all there is to this story.

Moses and Aaron gather the elders of the Hebrew people and they all go to Pharaoh and say, "Thus saith the Lord: Let my people go."

Pharaoh says, "I don't think so."

Then comes a series of ten plagues designed to get Pharaoh to change his mind. With each plague he does, in fact, change his mind and promises to let the Hebrews go and, then, when the plague lifts, he "hardens his heart" and changes his mind back again.

Each plague is a little worse than the one before until, finally, the angel of death is sent to visit upon Egypt the worst plague of all, the death of all first born – both human and animal.

With that, Pharaoh is broken, and he relents and lets the people go. In fact, as predicted, he pays them to go. He allows them to enter the homes of the Egyptians and take as much gold and silver and other valuables as they can carry.

End of story. Hebrews 1, Egyptians 0.

Next chapter – 40 years in the wilderness.

It is a story that is perfectly suited for telling around the campfire. The numbers are round, even and easy to remember. The plagues follow each other in a logical sequence which we'll get to in a moment. Though the story deals with the fate of thousands, there are just two main characters: an easily identifiable and sympathetic protagonist, Moses, and a foreign, pagan, unsympathetic and cruel antagonist, Pharaoh.

What is more, the Egyptians were meticulous record keepers with a highly developed written language known as hieroglyphics, which they employed liberally in recording the 2500 year history of their vast empire. Historians and archeologists can, using hieroglyphics, tell us the names of the hundreds of kings that ruled Egypt for hundreds of years. They can tell us the weather patterns, the wars that were fought and the battles won and lost, peace treaties that were signed, when and by whom, the weddings within the royal families, epidemics that ran through the population, the dates when droughts and locust swarms threatened the crops and even some of the really great business deals that were made by the leaders of the country.

While Egyptian hieroglyphics are a marvelous gift and a terrific aid in understanding ancient history they also present us with a problem in studying biblical history and that problem is this: Not once in the 2500 year recorded history of Egypt is there even a single mention of anything that is included in the biblical Exodus story.

Try though we will to find it, there is simply no Moses, no Hebrew people, no Ten Plagues, no mass exodus. Nothing.

A contemporary historian sums up the dilemma this way:

According to Exodus 12:37-38, the Israelites numbered "about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children," plus many non-Israelites and livestock. (Numbers 1:46 gives a more precise total of 603,550.) The 600,000, plus wives, children, the elderly, and the "mixed multitude" of non-Israelites would have numbered some 2 million people, at a time when the Egyptian census numbered the population of the entire country at about 3 million.

Marching ten abreast, and without accounting for livestock, they would have formed a line 150 miles long and take approximately three days for all of them to pass one point. (Passing through the Red Sea at its narrowest point would have taken a group of people this size roughly two weeks.)

No hard evidence outside of the Bible exists that Egypt ever suffered such a demographic and economic catastrophe, nor is there evidence that the Sinai desert ever hosted (or could have hosted) these millions of people and their herds, nor of a massive population increase in Canaan, which is estimated to have had a population of only 50,000 to 100,000 at the time.

Furthermore, the logistics and infrastructure needed to feed a group of two million people would have been mind boggling. If they ate only two pounds of food per person per day that would be 2000 tons of food every day – roughly 100 semi-trailers per day just for food. Water would be another problem. If every person averaged two liters a day (in the desert) it would require half a million gallons of water (about one Olympic size swimming pool) every day just to keep them alive. In the desert! And that's not counting the livestock.

Beginning to see some of the problems, here?

Some scholars have interpreted these numbers as a mistranslation - reading the Hebrew word *eleph* as "600 families" rather than 600,000 men, reduces the Hebrew population involved to roughly 20,000 individuals.

A number of 20,000 seems more realistic, given the relative populations of Middle Eastern countries at that time, but, still, wouldn't you think that the exodus of that many people from a country would merit at least a mention on page two?

Then there's the problem of the plagues themselves. In trying to prove that they really happened, scientists have had lots of fun but created new dilemmas of their own.

Just as one example, let me tell you about the work of Doctors John S. Marr and Curtis D. Malloy, both of whom are epidemiologists and medical researchers. (Doctor Marr is former chief epidemiologist for the New York City

Department of Health.) These two set out to see if there was any possible scientific explanation that would prove that the ten plagues of Egypt were actually possible without resorting to supernatural causes.

It didn't really take them long to figure out one very plausible explanation which I will boil down to its essence, here. (If you want to explore further you can go to the Discovery Chanel or to their web site.)

They theorize that at some point between the 13th and 15th century BCE (without a hieroglyphic record there's no real way to tell when all this happened) a perfect storm of natural disasters and epidemics came together in a single year or two to create what we refer to as the Ten Plagues of Egypt.

The hieroglyphic record shows that, around that time, a plague swept the country, possibly the Bubonic Plague or Influenza, that killed about 20 percent of the Egyptian population. Also, after about 100 years of temperate rainy weather a series of droughts hit the Nile delta area where the vast majority of the population lived. Thirdly, about 400 miles away in the Mediterranean islands of Santorini, a volcano called Thera exploded, spewing tons of volcanic ash and dirt into the atmosphere.

Here's what Marr and Malloy think may have happened:

Drought caused the Nile to shrink and its current to slow to nearly a stop making it vulnerable to any one of a dozen toxic algae that can flourish almost overnight in that region. The most likely candidate is called Pfiesteria which causes fish to hemorrhage blood and die, which turned the Nile red and also made it susceptible to a number of other algae which are, themselves, red. (Plague 1)

Pfiesteria does not kill shellfish but the toxin builds up in them and can infect humans who eat them, which we will come back to in a minute.

Without fish to eat the frogs' eggs, the frog population would grow out of control. Also, frogs and toads have the ability to mature from eggs to tadpoles to adults faster than normal during times of ecological stress, which this would have been. Forced out of the contaminated river, they would invade the land, possibly by the millions, where they would die. (Plague 2)

Gnats (Plague 3) and flies (Plague 4) are generic names given to all sorts of flying bugs at that time, the most common is the Midge, a small fly that sometimes invades areas in such massive swarms that livestock have to be kept indoors or they will suffocate from the bugs that invade their noses and mouths. The midge feeds on carrion and gives a painful bite that can infect humans or animals with any number of diseases, including open, infected sores.

Hooved animals become diseased from Midge bites (Plague 5) and both humans and animals receive bites that become infected, open sores or boils (Plague 6).

If all this isn't enough, about 400 miles to the north the volcanic island of Thera exploded with about four times the power of Krakatoa, destroying the city of Akrotiri and creating a tsunami that would become the first disaster in a series that would destroy the entire Minoan civilization on the island of Crete. (It is believed that Akrotiri and Minoa were the bases for Plato's myth of Atlantis.)

The dust and ash cloud and maybe even the burning embers from this explosion would account for the climatic changes that brought about thunder and hail (Plague 7) and darkness (Plague 9). It would also explain climatic changes that allowed for giant swarms of locust (Plague 8) and sandstorms that lasted for days, creating darkness that could be touched (Plague 9).

Darkness, climatic changes, death of fish and frogs (staple food items), the destruction of crops by hail, sandstorms and locust, would all lead to famine and disease. To fight the destruction of their civilization the Egyptians would have turned to their storehouses, first created by Joseph, to feed their people.

But the grains stored in the warehouses would have been contaminated by mold, rat droppings from rats fleeing the polluted river, and various germs and virus contributed by the flies, gnats and locust. Unaware that their food supply was virtually poisoned they would have distributed it to the population and, as was their custom, the first born of each family would have received a double portion. With their immune systems weakened by contaminated food, when Influenza or the Bubonic Plague struck, they had no resistance and succumbed to the disease.

When the people saw the first born dying they would have stopped eating the food in time to save their own lives.

Marr and Malloy suggest that one of two further scenarios is likely:

One: Moses, who had lived the past forty years among a nomadic people and seen much of the outside world, had some knowledge about such events as they or things like them had happened in other places. He used this knowledge of the outside world to spin events to the benefit of the Hebrew people.

This would be like in those old movies when the hero knows of an impending eclipse of the sun and uses it to "prove" to a primitive people that he has the power to turn off and on the sun's light.

Or...

Two: The Egyptians, tired, grieved, and worn down by the series of disasters that befell them over the course of a year or two decided that they needed a fall guy to blame it all on and, when the Pharaoh suggested that the Hebrews and their strange practice of worshiping their single God instead of the Egyptian pantheon were to blame, they jumped on it and threw the Hebrews out of the country.

What we have in the book of Exodus, they say, is the Hebrew spin on the story.

Some have taken this analysis and said that it proves that the whole Exodus story is a "fairytale," a "made up story," and, my favorite, "just a myth." (Anyone who has ever read even a few sentences of the works of Joseph Campbell knows that there is no such thing as "just" a myth. To even suggest such a thing is the very height of ignorance

and foolishness. Myth is a very serious business, indeed. In fact, our cultural mythology – the stories we tell that give our lives meaning – may be one of our most serious undertakings as a people.)

At the other end of the spectrum are the fundamentalists who insist that the story of the Exodus must be accepted, word for word, letter for letter, exactly as it appears in the King James Bible and that all the problems and dilemmas and contradictions and anachronisms are explainable with one simple word: God.

God did it. God can do anything he wants and if he wanted the Exodus to happen exactly as it appears in the King James Bible then he could make it happen that way and that's good enough for me. God said it. I believe it. That settles it.

History is wrong. Science is wrong. Epidemiology is wrong. Logistical analysis is wrong. Everything and everyone else in the whole wide world is wrong unless it accepts, uncritically, a literal reading of the story.

I want to offer one other possibility.

WHY IT'S IMPORTANT

First, we have to go back to the beginning, to when this story was first written down.

Or, more exactly, we have to go back to the future. The events of this story took place, depending upon which chronology we accept, sometime between 1300 and 1600 BCE. They were transmitted by word of mouth around camp fires and by tribal priests and historians, whose job it was to remember and transmit the stories, for about 1000 years until 586 - 550 BCE.

When the Hebrew people were rounded up by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BCE and taken by forced march to live in Babylon they believed that their civilization, their religion, their way of life might be lost so they began to make a concerted effort to preserve their stories by writing them down.

Most of the Torah – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy – were recorded during this time, some 1000 years after the Exodus.

So the question we must ask ourselves is not, "How accurate is their account of the Exodus in all of its details?" There is simply no way of knowing. The witnesses were all gone. The stories had been told for over 1000 years and, no doubt, changed and embellished, polished, and improved with the telling.

When the editor/recorders decided to put them down on paper, they had to make some choices about how the story would be told in writing and what we have is a translation of a translation, a copy of a copy of a copy of the choices they made.

The question we should be asking is not – What really happened?

The question we should be asking, as serious students of the Bible, is – What lesson about God is this story intended to teach us? What about God's relationship with God's people are we to take from it? What about God's nature and being is shown to us in this wonderful story? And what does it tell us about those who lead on God's behalf and those who imperfectly follow God's perfect will?

For this great story which has inspired millions in their quest for freedom, independence and dignity...this story which gave hope to the American slaves in the cotton fields, and gave birth to the liberation theology of the oppressed minorities and the poor of Latin America....this story that has inspired more songs and art than any other in the Hebrew Scriptures...

This story is, finally, a story not about a bunch of people a long time ago, but a story about us, about our children and our grandchildren. It is a story about...

Our search for meaning...

Our longing for God...

Our hope for a bright and promising future... and

Our ongoing struggle for freedom.

AMEN

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. When was the first time you heard this story? Do you remember?
2. Does it weaken the story if we realize that God used natural disasters and events to move the heart of Pharaoh?
3. Why, do you suppose, is Pharaoh's name never mentioned in the story?
4. What people, today, are oppressed and mistreated so that they might find comfort in this story?
5. Some slave holders before the Civil War would not allow this story to be told to their slaves. Why do you suppose that is?
6. Moses confronted corrupt power and empowered those who were powerless. Can you think of any modern day Moses figures? Talk about them.
7. Look up Nelson Mandela on the internet. How is his story like that of Moses?