



# EXODUS: THE PARADIGM OF FREEDOM

Catalog No. 1449

Exodus

First Message

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November 2nd, 2003

John Steinbeck's novel *East of Eden* is based on the Cain and Abel story from Genesis. The book is a compelling work about lives lived in different states of exile, tormented by memories of the distant past. So passionate is Steinbeck about his theme that three quarters of the way through his book, which I read this past summer, he emerges from behind his veil as narrator to make sure his readers don't miss the point. Writing as if he had found the defining mystery of life, he says:

A child may ask, "What is the world's story about?" And a grown man or woman may wonder, "What way will the world go? How does it end, and while we're at it, what's the story about?" I believe there is one story in the world, and only one, that has frightened and inspired us...humans are caught in the net of good and evil...I think this is the only story we have and that it occurs on all levels of feeling and intelligence. Virtue and vice were warp and woof of our first consciousness, and they will be the fabric of our last...There is no other story. A man, after he has brushed off the dust and chips of his life, will have left only the hard, clean questions: was it good or was it evil? Have I done well—or ill?<sup>1</sup>

Steinbeck wrote with artful genius. The reader feels the grim energy of each character. But in the end we have to ask, Is this the only story that gives shape to our lives? Are our souls shut up to the painful memories of our choices? Is that all we are left with? Will we be defined ultimately by the sins of our past?

The good news is that there is another story open to us, one more powerful than that of Cain and Abel. This is the story we all long for: that of the Creator God breaking into our world and rescuing us from our wrong and sinful choices, and from every evil that oppresses and enslaves us. That is the story of the Exodus. It was this story, not the story of Cain and Abel, which gave Israel its identity. The Exodus was the beginning of the fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham. It marks the supernatural birth of the people of God.

The shape of the story is evident in two parallel parts:

<b>A Salvation of Moses</b>	<b>1-2</b>
<b>B Commissioning of Moses</b> (the burning bush)	<b>3-6</b>
<b>A' Salvation of Israel</b>	<b>7-18</b>
<b>B' Commissioning of Israel</b> (Mt. Sinai flaming)	<b>19-40</b>

The first part of the book recounts the story of the salvation of Moses (1-2), and his commissioning at the burning bush (3-6); while the second part follows with the salvation of Israel (7-18) and her commissioning at Mount Sinai.<sup>2</sup>

The Exodus was so significant it shaped Israel's psyche like a hot iron striking an anvil. Over one hundred and twenty times the authors of the Old Testament refer back to it, whether in prayer, liturgy, or prophecy. It became the preeminent saving event in Israel's history. The world could come apart at the seams, but the God of the Exodus could always be relied upon for a saving miracle.

Exodus not only fashioned Israel's memory, it became *the* pattern for her history from the time of the Judges through the monarchy. Numerous allusions to Moses and the Exodus appear in the stories of Gideon, Samuel, and David. When life turned dark, Exodus memories were recast in the brightest hues. During Israel's darkest hour, when Baal worship became the state religion under the tyranny of Ahab and Jezebel, God raised up Elijah to confront the powers of darkness.

The many parallels between Elijah and Moses are no accident. Like Moses, Elijah received supernatural provision of food by God's word (1 Kgs 17:1,6). After a forty-day fast, he encountered the living God at "Horeb, the mountain of God" (1 Kgs 19:8). At the end of his life he crossed the Jordan on dry ground, ascending into the heavens across the river from Jericho (2 Kgs 2:7-14). This was the same location where Moses was shown the land and subsequently died (Deut 34:1). After Elijah came Elisha, whose ministry continued to reawaken the memories of Moses and the Exodus.

The Exodus not only shaped Israel's memory of her past, and forged her history, it also gave her hope for the future. During the nation's exile in Babylon, its metaphors became the paradigm for revival and restoration. The prophets, especially Isaiah (40-66), spoke of a new Exodus to come that would be of an even greater magnitude than the original:

But now, thus says the LORD, your Creator, O Jacob,  
And He who formed you, O Israel,  
"Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name; you are Mine!  
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
And through the rivers, they will not overflow you.  
When you walk through the fire, you will not be  
scorched,  
Nor will the flame burn you.  
For I am the LORD your God,  
The Holy One of Israel, your Savior;  
I have given Egypt as your ransom,  
Cush and Seba in your place." (Isa 43:1-3 NASB)

To appreciate the significance of the work of Christ we must see that Israel was waiting for a new Moses to lead Israel into a new and greater Exodus than that which God had done through Moses in Egypt. Jesus Christ came in fulfillment of those prophecies. As Moses wrote, "The

LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him" (Deut 18:15). Exodus themes are found throughout the gospel of John. The writer describes the incarnation in the Exodus imagery of the tabernacle, saying, "the Word became flesh, and dwelt [lit. "tabernacled"] among us, and we saw His glory" (John 1:14).

John shapes his book around seven "I am" statements, taken from the revelation of God's name to Moses (Exod 3:14), and unabashedly applies that name to Jesus. And, parallel to the ten signs and wonders that brought death to Egypt, John patterns his gospel around seven signs by Jesus that give life. We note a connection especially between the first and last signs. In Exodus, the first sign to Pharaoh was the turning of water into blood; in John, Jesus turns water into wine. In Exodus, the last sign was the death of the first-born; in John, it is the raising of the first-born (Lazarus) from the dead. If these signs don't inspire awe in the human heart, at the end of the book this same Jesus becomes our Passover Lamb. As he is slain, the earth turns dark, reminiscent of the ninth plague in Exodus (which set the backdrop for the final plague, the death of all the first-born in Egypt).

In Mark, the most dramatic re-enactment of the Exodus takes place in chapter 5, the occasion when Jesus sails across the Sea of Galilee into forbidden Gentile territory. There on the lake he confronts a raging storm that threatens to capsize the tiny vessel, and with but a word he calms the sea. On the eastern shore, Jesus confronts a demonized man possessed with a "legion" (a subtle reference to Rome) of demons. With but a word he casts the "legion" into a herd of two thousand pigs, which hurl themselves headlong over the cliffs to be buried in the depths of the sea. Jesus has done to the demons what the Jews had hoped the New Moses would do to the Romans. But instead of the Romans, Jesus has defeated the ultimate enemy, the devil himself, burying the evil one's army in the depths of the sea, just as Moses had done to Pharaoh's chariots.

If we do not grasp the magnitude and shape of Israel's first Exodus, then we will not be able to fully comprehend the magnitude of the work of Christ and the glory of our salvation. Instead of living as freedom fighters, liberating captives around the world, we will merely limp along, plagued and hampered by the enslaving forces of darkness.

I want to begin our studies in Exodus by highlighting six fundamental life-issues that are addressed in this book:

1. Who are we? – *identity*
2. What happened to us? – *reality*
3. What did God do to rescue us? – *value*
4. Where are we going? – *purpose*
5. What is our function in the world? – *fulfillment*
6. Why is the journey so hard? – *humility and dependence*

### **1. Who are we?**

Who are we? There is no more fundamental question in life. Every child longs to know who he or she is. Is our identity based on our achievements? If it is, we can never rest. Is it derived from how others view us? Then we can-

not be free to be ourselves. Yet, nothing stirs the emotions more than hearing the affectionate term "son" or "daughter" on the lips of one's father. The book of Exodus affirms that the children of Israel were sons of the living God. This was when God cried out with swelling pride those words that every new father knows so well, "Israel is My son, My firstborn" (Exod 4:22). Israel's destiny was to be determined as sons of the living God, not as slaves of Pharaoh.

When Christ was baptized in the Jordan, the heavens opened and the Father's voice was heard once again, "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased" (Mark 1:11). And this privileged sonship is the bedrock of our identity. Paul writes in Galatians, "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:26). And again, "Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" (Gal 4:6). The roots of our identity as sons go clear back to the Exodus.

### **2. What happened to us?**

But things were not always this way. Exodus explains that before we were adopted as sons we were lost in slavery. Before the miraculous Exodus, Israel endured centuries of slavery under the tyrannical hand of an Egyptian Pharaoh. Egypt was the most formidable nation on the face of the earth, and Pharaoh was the symbol of its strength.

During that time God seemed absent. He was nowhere to be found. Only the penetrating eye of faith could detect his unseen hand directing the affairs of men through five insignificant women who defied Pharaoh's orders to save the one who would bring deliverance from Egypt. Exodus brings us face to face with the reality of our own slavery in all its grueling severity. It does not ease the pain or soften the blows. Tyranny is presented in its true colors, together with the condition of hopelessness it breeds in those it oppresses. Exodus makes us realists to the depravity of the human heart. This is the book that imbued Israel with profound empathy for the oppressed of any age.

The Exodus imagery of slavery prepares us for Paul's description of our spiritual condition before we met Christ. He writes, "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience" (Eph 2:1-2). Like Israel, before we were adopted as sons we were lost in slavery. We were powerless and without hope.

### **3. What did God do to rescue us?**

But God did not abandon his people. He delivered them, using all the forces of his creation. In an amazing display of power, the Creator God acted on behalf of his people, striking Egypt in a threefold series of plagues, nine in all (which many scholars interpret as a direct attack on the gods of Egypt). It was as if God were creating a people for himself by deconstructing everything in Pharaoh's world and reducing it to primordial chaos. The final blow was the climactic tenth plague, the death of all the first-born in Egypt. As the angel of death wrought his destruction throughout the nation, Israel was slaying an innocent lamb and displaying its blood on the doorposts of her homes. When the angel saw the blood, he "passed over," and those inside were spared.

And still the miracles did not cease. After Israel had been safely evacuated, God separated her from the Egyptian army with a pillar of cloud and fire until she had safely passed through the Sea of Reeds. Moses' shepherd staff commanded the east wind, and the waters stood in a heap until the nation had passed through the sea on dry ground. But when the Egyptian army tried to pursue them, the waters swallowed up Pharaoh's chariots. Any Jew possessing eyes of faith would have understood that the birth of this nation was on the magnitude of a "new creation." The Creator-God "un-created" Egypt in order to "create" Israel. Lest Israel forget its significance, God later put the pointed question to her:

"Indeed, ask now concerning the former days which were before you, since the day that God created man on the earth, and inquire from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything been done like this great thing, or has anything been heard like it? Has any people heard the voice of God speaking from the midst of the fire, as you have heard it, and survived? Or has a god tried to go to take for himself a nation from within another nation by trials, by signs and wonders and by war and by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm and by great terrors, as the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes?" (Deut 4:32-34)

Yet, Isaiah explains that when God re-enacts the second Exodus, her children will be born in even more miraculous terms.

"The children of whom you were bereaved will yet say in your ears,  
'The place is too cramped for me;  
Make room for me that I may live here.'  
Then you will say in your heart,  
'Who has begotten these for me,  
Since I have been bereaved of my children  
And am barren, an exile and a wanderer?  
And who has reared these?  
Behold, I was left alone;  
From where did these come?'"  
Thus says the Lord GOD,  
'Behold, I will lift up My hand to the nations  
And set up My standard to the peoples;  
And they will bring your sons in their bosom,  
And your daughters will be carried on their shoulders.'" (Isa 49:20-22)

Now instead of coming through the sea on dry land, it is as if Israel's children are miraculously resurrected from a watery grave, to be carried home in the loving arms of Gentile nations from around the world. Instead of the nations destroying Israel, they will be birthing and nurturing her! This is a cosmic new creation. In this manner Paul describes each new believer in Christ: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a *new creation*; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Cor 5:17 NIV). This gift of a new creation gives us an infinite value that no one can take away from us.

#### 4. Where are we going?

Because of the Exodus, the Israelites became a people with a direction and a purpose. Liberation did not mean they were free to do as they pleased and go where they wished. No, they were liberated from the hand of Pharaoh so that they could meet with and worship God on a moun-

tain. In one of the most amazing texts of Scripture we read,

Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank. (Exod 24:9-11 NIV)

They saw the living God, "and they ate and drank"! These elders were privileged to sit and dine on the horizon of history, where the mystery of time gives way to eternity. There they glimpsed the eternal banquet that ushers in the new heavens and new earth.

In like manner, after Peter had made his confession that Jesus was the Messiah, the leaders of the new Israel were ushered up to a high mountain, and there Jesus was transfigured before them. For a few moments, while he was speaking with Moses and Elijah, their eyes beheld his glory. Then on the night Jesus was betrayed he prepared his final meal with the disciples in an upper room. He transformed Israel's Passover into the New Covenant meal, dispensing his body and his blood. This new meal, which looks back to his death, is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet to come. This is our ultimate destination. It is a meal that we are invited to enjoy each time we eat the bread and drink of the cup.

#### 5. What is our function in the world?

But fellowship with God was not meant to be an end in and of itself. Israel was liberated by God to be set apart by him as a unique and holy people. She was brought to God at that holy mountain to receive covenant obligations, primarily the Ten Commandments. Then she was given detailed descriptions for building a tabernacle for the holy God to dwell in her midst. Much of the imagery of the tabernacle resembled the Garden of Eden, which suggests God's renewed commitment to create a holy land on the earth. God's presence and these covenant obligations were to make Israel holy as God was holy, to be a light to all the nations and bring them under his rule. God commanded Moses to tell the sons of Israel:

"You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself. Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Exod 19:4-6)

This gave Israel tremendous significance as the special, treasured possession of God to lead the nations to worship him. In appreciation for her freedom she was to love God with her whole heart and mind and soul. But unfortunately, she could not obey and, like Adam before her, was banished from her Garden of Eden into exile. But out of that exile God promised a new Exodus where he would make a New Covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; not written on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts (2 Cor 3:6-7). And now in Christ, as believers we are privileged with this holy status. As Peter writes,

But you *are* a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. (1 Pet 2:9)

Notice there is no “if” clause as there was in the Old Covenant. We “are” a chosen race and royal priesthood, and live with the same function as Israel of old, to lead the nations into his marvelous light. This gift of significance has been secured by the cross and is unmatched by any worldly rewards.

#### 6. Why is there so much difficulty in the journey?

The sixth question that Exodus addresses is this: If this Exodus is so miraculous and life changing, why is the journey so difficult? Why do God’s people end up in a forsaken wilderness? God gave the answer to his people when the journey was over:

“You shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD.” (Deut 8:2-3)

The wilderness is good for us because it teaches us humility, and above all, dependence on God. The wilderness has a way of stripping us of everything that is non-essential. It reduces life to sheer basics, making us trust solely on the word of God to defeat every form of evil.

Even Jesus was not immune to testing in the wilderness. Immediately after his baptism he was driven by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After forty days he became hungry, “And the tempter came and said to Him, ‘If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.’ But He answered and said, ‘It is written, ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God’” (Matt 4:3-4). Jesus would not use his office to feed himself, only others. He would wait on God to feed him. And after the devil left, Matthew says that angels “ministered” (*diakoneo*—in Acts 6:2 the verb is used of serving tables) to him, perhaps suggesting that the angels fed him a heavenly meal.

This then is the paradigm of the Exodus. It is a paradigm that shaped the history of Israel, and the life of Christ, and places its stamp on our lives and on the history of the world. This is the story that gives us our true identity, reality, value, purpose, significance, and humility. As I finished reading Steinbeck’s *East of Eden*, I pondered the man’s creative genius and the power of the Cain and Abel story, but I was thankful that my life was part of another story, the Exodus. Which story are you participating in?

1. John Steinbeck, *East of Eden* (New York: Penguin), 411.
2. For an excellent outline see Waldermar Janzen’s, *Exodus* (Waterloo, Ont.: Herald, 2000), 27.

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