

UNIT TWO: GOD'S REDEMPTIVE WORK WITH ISRAEL

SESSION SEVEN: THE CORE EVENTS

Summary of the Seventh Session of the Course

Deuteronomy 26:1-11

The session began with an explanation of the nature of the biblical book of Deuteronomy. The name means, "Second Law," because the Ten Commandments are presented for a second time in Deuteronomy (the first time being in Exodus 20). Scholars have long realized Deuteronomy is different from the first four books of the Bible. In it, Moses addresses the people of Israel as they stand ready to enter the land promised them by Yahweh. Analysis of the book, however, has shown it to be addressing a later generation of Israelites as though they were about to enter the land. So, the book speaks to two situations at once: what was required of Israel from the beginning of the people's life in the land, and what Yahweh God presently requires of an Israel that has failed to obey Yahweh's commands and to love Yahweh in response to his own love for them.

Deuteronomy 26:1-11 presents a confession of Yahweh's greatness and goodness by the Israelites presenting the first fruits of their harvest at the central sanctuary. They do not speak of Yahweh as a nature god, even though they certainly thank Yahweh for the harvest; instead, they confess Yahweh's mighty acts in history. When they were slaves in Egypt, they cried out to Yahweh, the God of their ancestors, who brought them out of that land of bondage and misery. Then, Yahweh also brought them into this good land which has produced the harvest they now dedicate to their God. This *bringing out* and *bringing in* forms a confessional history of salvation for the Israelites by relating the core events of their deliverance from the living death of slavery and their introduction into a new life of freedom in their own land.

We noticed that the offering, as a celebration of Yahweh's goodness, must include the Levite and the alien (Hebrew word, *ger*). The tribe of Levi received no apportionment of the land because Yahweh was their portion: Levi was the priestly tribe. The alien is the foreigner who lives and works within Israel, just as we have resident aliens living and working among us today. Then, as now, the alien was vulnerable to abuse or neglect. The Israelites, however, had known the experience of being resident aliens in Egypt where they were enslaved and abused; so, they were never to abuse the aliens among them, but were to treat them fairly and are even commanded love the aliens as themselves (Leviticus 19). Those who have no land from which to gain a harvest are to be included in the harvest celebration.

Israel's Faith Was Based in History

One of the people in the class had brought me a newspaper article about a young rabbi who questioned the historicity of the exodus from Egypt because archaeology and extra-biblical historical research have been unable to verify it, at least as the story is told in the Bible. Other rabbis quoted in the article acknowledge the Bible's love of hyperbole, but reaffirmed their belief that the core of the story is historical.

We talked about the way the stories in the first books of the Bible weave different accounts or tellings into one story without trying to hide the combining of the different versions of the same story. The crossing of the Sea of Reeds in Exodus 14 shows evidence of the two versions, one more dramatic than the other.

The idea that archaeology can disprove something historical by *not* finding evidence of it is naive, especially something so historically unimportant to people in power as the exodus of some slaves. There is, certainly, plenty of evidence that the Israelites themselves regarded these events of their deliverance as historical, even if they never pretended to give a literal, objectively historical account of them; in fact, the whole idea of a literal, objectively historical account such as we might prefer would have seemed foreign to them, if they had ever even considered it. They told these stories over and over, continuously relating them to their present situations as the people of Yahweh. These stories were almost living things, constantly adapted to real life. Yahweh is the living God, and Israel is Yahweh's own people living a real life as a people. So, the Israelites never considered these events as things past and done but as realities always present to them. None of this recognition of the nature and use of these stories, however, negates their basis in what we would understand as history. Did they happen exactly as told? No, they are not even told in a single way that would allow that question to make sense. Did they happen at all? Yes, I believe they did.

We still need one more caution, however, as we discuss the historicity of these core events of Israel's life and identity as Yahweh's people. Any history of the doings of God is not history as we know it. Modern scientific historians do not write about acts of God, because God is not subject to historical or scientific scrutiny. These histories in the Bible are told in faith and for faith. An objective historian would have told as exactly as possible *what happened* at the Sea of Reeds (not the Red Sea as we often mistranslate *Yam Suph*), but not *what God did*. What God did is a matter of faith, and it would have been quite possible (as always) for even an eyewitness to fail to see the event as an act of God at all. That some slaves fleeing Egypt were able to get safely across some sort of body of water without being killed by their pursuers is a matter of ancient memory and, I believe, a matter of history. That God made it possible for those slaves to cross that barrier is a matter of faith, and Israel indeed made that confession of faith – and saw it as the people's truest history.

The Core Events

1. Passover and Deliverance from Egypt (exodus – the outgoing)
2. Deliverance from death at the Sea of Reeds
3. Guidance and care in the wilderness
4. The making of the covenant at Sinai between Yahweh and Israel, including Yahweh's giving of the Ten Words (Ten Commandments).
5. The entrance into and conquest of the land of Canaan; its apportionment to the tribes of Israel.

Moses, Pharaoh, and Yahweh

We began with Moses. His birth story would have delighted the Israelites because they repeatedly get the better of the Egyptians, who want to control their population by killing their male babies. The idea is to reduce the generation of potential fighting men who might join with an enemy invading Egypt. Such a fear is real enough for any land that has numerous slaves.

First, the midwives fool the Egyptians by refusing to kill the babies and making the excuse that the Hebrew mothers are so strong they go off and have their own babies without need for midwives. So, the Egyptians (the Pharaoh) decree that all the boy babies should be killed. Moses' mother sets him afloat in a basket on the Nile, and his sister watches where the river will take him (everyone hearing the story, of course, knows Yahweh will take care of the baby). Some young women fish him out of the Nile, and one of them is Pharaoh's own daughter who wants to take him for herself, but, of course, she needs a wet nurse. The girl (his sister) steps up to offer just the needed nurse who is (the hearers or readers know) none other than the baby's own mother, who now gets to raise him.

The second story of Moses shows us his *failure as a liberator and law-giver* when he acts on his own. He kills an Egyptian he sees beating a Hebrew, then buries the body in the sand. The next day, Moses tries to break up a fight between two Hebrews, but one wants to know if he intends to kill them, too, as he killed the Egyptian. Realizing his deed is known, Moses flees to Midian before the Egyptians can arrest him. There he lives as an alien (*ger*). Moses will not be Israel's liberator and law-giver; Yahweh will. Chapter 2 ends with the statement, "God looked upon the Israelites, and God knew (the NRSV translates "knew" as "took notice"). That God knew means God, not only took notice, but cared and even felt – God was moved.

We discussed the story in Exodus 3 of Moses' call by Yahweh (the burning bush story). Now, Moses must return to Egypt and confront the Pharaoh with Yahweh's demand for the release of the slaves. Moses is also told God's name: "I Am Who I Am (to you)" or "I Will Be Who I Will Be (with you)." Then, God gives Israel the third-person form of the name, Yahweh, by which to address him for all time. The impact of the name seems to be that Yahweh will be with Moses and Israel, voluntarily and freely, but no human being can conjure Yahweh or make any claim upon him

by the use of his name. Yahweh's name is his own. This God cannot be possessed in any way but freely commits to the people. In verse 12, Yahweh tells Moses what he most needs to know: "I will be with you." As a concession, Yahweh also sends Aaron with Moses to help him speak (Aaron is Moses' brother and the patriarch of a line of the priests).

Yahweh's confrontations with the Pharaoh of Egypt pit the God of the Hebrew slaves against the supposed son of the gods (Pharaoh). I drew on the board what I call the Egyptian social pyramid, which shows Pharaoh at the peak, then moves downward to the nobles, the merchants, and so on. For effect, I put the draft animals second-to-last and the slaves at the very bottom, because an ox was probably considered more valuable than a human slave. Pharaoh dismisses the demands presented by Moses and Aaron because he is the son of the great gods of Egypt, while Yahweh is just a slave-god in his eyes. "Who is Yahweh, that I should . . . ?" That he should listen or care at all.

In Exodus 4:22,23, we hear Yahweh declare Israel to be his firstborn son. Because Pharaoh has refused to release Yahweh's son, Yahweh will kill Pharaoh's firstborn son.

In Exodus 5:1-9, we saw the ways of a tyrant. Because Moses and Aaron are stirring up the Hebrews with talk of freedom, Pharaoh orders their workload increased: they must gather their own straw but still make just as many bricks. Such a move is typical of a tyrant. *So, you have time to listen to such talk? Then, you have too much time on your hands. I'll make you work harder than ever so you won't have time for Moses and Aaron.* It works. The Hebrews turn against Moses, saying, "You have brought us into bad odor with Pharaoh and his officials, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us." (Exodus 5:21b) [Notice the Hebrew expression for being in disfavor, "in bad odor."] Moses, in turn, complains to God: "Yahweh, why have you mistreated this people? Why did you ever send me? Since I first came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has mistreated the people, and you have done nothing at all to deliver your people." (5:22b,23) Yahweh answers Moses, "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh: Indeed, by a mighty hand he will let them go; by a mighty hand he will drive them out of his land." So, the stage is set for the plagues, culminating in the Passover.

By entering human history as the God who loves and liberates slaves, Yahweh turns everything upside down. Throughout the Bible, we see Yahweh as the God who takes up the cause of the weak and oppressed. Jesus followed suit. So, we learn something about what should be the nature of the church, too. We should not be following the lines of social class and prestige but should be the servant of and home for the poor and needy.

The expected function of religion in a society is to preserve and sanctify that society's social orders, national aspirations, and cherished customs. Yahweh enters history as the God who will have none of that. God comes into the world to change it – to call it back to being the world it should have become. This is redemption, but it is never popular with those in power – those who have a high stake in the system as it is.

Passover and Exodus

“Why is this night different from all other nights,” is the first question asked by the Jewish child during the Passover Seder, the meal shared in remembrance of the first Passover and the exodus from slavery in Egypt. Each year, the story is told, and (as one rabbi put it) each new generation comes to understand itself as Israel delivered by God from slavery. The Passover account in chapter 12 of Exodus tells the ancient story and, also, gives instructions for the ongoing observance of Passover, so that all Israel may always be the Israel delivered by God. Then and now are interwoven in the account.

Deliverance at the Sea of Reeds

The escaping slaves are pinned between the pursuing Egyptian soldiers and the Sea of Reeds. Their situation seems hopeless. They will surely perish. Here Israel remembers an event of salvation beyond all hope for salvation. However it happened exactly and wherever it was located exactly, the deliverance at the sea stands both as a great event of salvation and as a paradigm for God’s faithfulness and mercy for all time.

The Wilderness Wandering

In the wilderness, the Israelites gripe, and Yahweh teaches them to trust. They are painfully slow to learn. They gripe about needing water, then food. When Yahweh provides them with manna for food, they are contented for a while, but then they get tired of manna and want meat. They miss the meat pots (KJV, “flesh pots”) of Egypt. So, Yahweh sends them quails, but is getting annoyed. God tells them they will have so much meat from the quails it will be coming out of their noses. Later, they must learn to trust Yahweh when they are attacked by human enemies.

The wilderness wandering is interrupted by the making of the covenant at Sinai and the giving of the Ten Words (what we call the Ten Commandments).

There are sins and setbacks. The molding and worshiping of a golden calf is a major setback, and Moses must persuade Yahweh to continue to lead Israel. Cowardice at the first chance for entry into the promised land is another.

All the stories are about faith – about learning (or failing) to trust Yahweh their God. The Israelites must learn both to belong to Yahweh and to be free. The two go together because belonging to Yahweh is a matter of grace, not of deserving God’s love, but grace is very hard to learn. We human beings always feel pressured to see belonging and being free as opposed to each other, and often they are. The ancient Israelites and modern Christians must learn the freedom of being loved by Yahweh God, who does not enslave but will not abandon, either.