

Book of Exodus

Week 2 — "I am YHWH"

(Exodus 7–14)



Introduction

The descendants of Jacob are being forced to construct cities to hold Pharaoh's wealth and reflect his glory (1:11). But these slaves don't belong to Pharaoh. Long before he was born, these people were chosen by another ruler and covenanted to be his people (Genesis 17). These people have called the God of Abraham to rescue them (2:23).

God reveals himself to Moses at Sinai, promising to save his people. He sends Moses to Pharaoh with a confronting message: "Let *my* people go!" (5:1). Moses worries no one will take any notice of him, but YHWH declares he will act to break through Pharaoh's hardness so Israel will be released (3:20). Moses' hand may be inadequate, but YHWH's hand is powerful (Ex 4).

Pharaoh responds to YHWH by tightening his grip on "his" slaves (Ex 5). YHWH reassures Moses that he will release his people as promised (Ex 6).

The big question is how earth can be released from the rule of evil. How can good ever overpower evil?

The answer of Exodus is that God acts for his people. The conflict is not the enslaved Israelites versus the might of Egypt; it's the true ruler (YHWH) versus the pretender (Pharaoh). This conflict plays out as a war between kings, but it's the strangest kind of war you ever saw.

Purpose of the plagues (Exodus 7–10)

YHWH performs ten **mighty acts** — miracles, wonders, marvels, extraordinary deeds. To Pharaoh they are plagues — pestilence that threatens life.

Each of these mighty acts demonstrates to the Israelites and to the Egyptians that Pharaoh, despite his claims, is not in control.

#1 *Blood* (7:14-25)

In any conflict or siege, a secure water supply is the most fundamental need. Life in Egypt was based around the Nile, so striking the Nile means life cannot go on as normal. Pharaoh is unable to protect his nation.

After a battle with much bloodshed, you might find the river running with blood. There has been no battle, yet it feels like there has. This has to be most disconcerting for Pharaoh and his forces.

#2 *Frogs* (8:1-15)

Next, Egypt is overrun by frogs. They're an annoyance more than a serious threat. But they show Pharaoh as an impotent ruler.

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If Pharaoh can't even protect Egypt from frogs, can he protect the land at all? Frogs normally stay in or near water, but in this plague they've jumped beyond their boundaries. Pharaoh himself has overstepped his boundaries by claiming to be ruler of the Hebrews.

For the first time, Pharaoh recognizes YHWH at work:

8:8 Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "Pray to the LORD to take the frogs away from me and my people ..."

Moses prays. The frogs die. The land Pharaoh rules stinks (8:14).

#3 Gnats (8:16-19)

The third, sixth, and ninth plague arrive with no warning.

Egypt is invaded by gnats. Pharaoh is powerless to stop even little insects. The priests of Egypt's gods (magicians) could not replicate this plague. They tell Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God" (8:19).

If this is the finger, imagine what the hand of God could do. Pharaoh misses the point.

#4 Flies (8:20-32)

The fourth plague invades Egypt except for the region of Goshen (east of the Nile delta) where the Israelites live. YHWH is making a point, distinguishing between his people and Pharaoh's (8:23).

So Israel's land is fine, while "all the land of Egypt was *ruined* by the swarms of flies (8:24). *Ruined* is the same word used to describe the corruption of the earth through disobedience to earth's true ruler, the ruination that precipitated the Flood (Genesis 6:11, 12, 13, 17). By resisting YHWH, Pharaoh is ruining the very thing he wants to keep.

Pharaoh agrees to let the Israelites placate YHWH with a sacrifice, but only if they stay in the land under Pharaoh's control (8:25). No deal. Pharaoh agrees to release the people, but Moses knows he's lying.

#5 Livestock (9:1-7)

The next plague kills the domestic livestock of the Egyptians: "horses, donkeys, camels, herds, flocks" (9:3). Such a severe economic blow tends to make people dissatisfied with their leader. If Pharaoh can't protect the animals of Egypt, can he protect its people?

#6 Boils (9:8-12)

For the first time, the sixth plague strikes the health of the people.

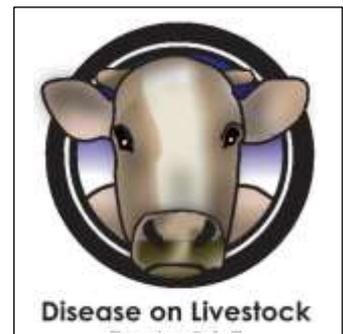
Even Pharaoh's advisors—the magicians who speak for Israel's gods—are struck with boils by a greater power (9:11).



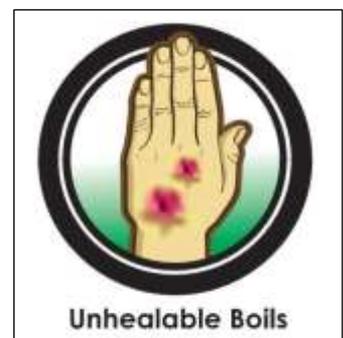
Gnats (Lice)



Flies



Disease on Livestock



Unhealable Boils

#7 Hail (the big one) (9:13-35)

This is the big one: twice as many verses as the previous ones. The narrator sets us up to expect that this seventh plague will do the job:

Exodus 9:13–21 (NIV)

¹³ ‘This is what the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, says: Let my people go, so that they may worship me, ¹⁴ or this time I will send the full force of my plagues against you and against your officials and your people, so you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth.

Hail from the heavens would send Egypt’s proud rulers running for cover, displaying their powerlessness before earth’s true ruler.

But why is it taking so long for God to release his people? Couldn’t he defeat Pharaoh and set his people free more quickly? As William Ford observed, “If Israel is to be freed; freeing them as quickly and painlessly as possible does not appear to be YHWH’s aim.”¹

9 ¹⁵ For by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with a plague that would have wiped you off the earth. ¹⁶ But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.

YHWH is undermining Pharaoh’s power. His officials now must choose between believing YHWH and bringing their workers and indoors, or trusting Pharaoh and leaving their workers and animals outside (9:20-21).

When the hail strikes Egypt (but not Goshen), Pharaoh is humiliated. He admits he was wrong to disobey YHWH:

9:27 (NIV) Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron. “This time I have sinned,” he said to them. “The LORD is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong.

But Pharaoh reneges once the hail stops. Moses knows that human rulers are driven by self-interest:

9:30 But I know that you and your officials still do not fear the LORD God.”

What will it take to break the power of evil and prevent the rulers of this world usurping God’s authority?



¹ William A. Ford, *God, Pharaoh and Moses: Explaining the Lord’s Actions in the Exodus Plagues Narrative* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 3.

#8 Locusts (10:1-20)

Moses is not to blame. That's the reassurance he receives from God. The more resistant Pharaoh is, the more it reveals YHWH's authority. The goal is this: "that you may know that I am the LORD" (10:2).

Locusts are one of the most feared crop-devastators for any farming community. This plague threatens Egypt's food supplies. The servants turn against the king, "Don't you understand Egypt is ruined?" (10:7)

Pharaoh is just beginning to understand YHWH. The name is probably derived from the verb *to be*, so *the Being* (or the *I AM*). Sarcastically Pharaoh says, "*The Being* will need *to be* with you if ever I let you all go" (10:10). Ironically, that's true. The earth will only be released from the tyranny of evil back into God's care if YHWH is *with* his people, fighting on their behalf, insisting evil yields to his unique way of reigning.

When the plague strikes, Pharaoh is so humiliated that it is as if his life is forfeit in God's hands: "remove this death from me" (10:17). And yet he still backflips (10:20).

#9 Darkness (10:21-29)

Without warning (like the third and sixth plagues), darkness descends on Egypt for three days, a palpable darkness (10:21).

Pharaoh can't make the sun rise in the morning, and neither can Ra the sun-god. YHWH's authority is established. If YHWH does not give them light, nothing can grow and life cannot continue.

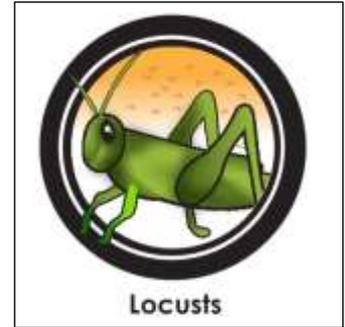
Pharaoh threatens death to Moses if he ever sees him again (10:28). There's no more negotiation.

Death and deliverance (Exodus 11-13)**# 10 Death (11:1-10; 12:29-32)**

Even Pharaoh's servants take Moses seriously now (11:3). He announces that the heir of every family will die (11:5).

Even before they're released, God called them to kill a lamb for YHWH's Passover (12:11). To mark their household as his, they were to paint the lamb's blood on their doorway:

12²³ When the LORD goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down.



The Bible doesn't speak of an *angel of death* (though some translations do, e.g. Hebrews 11:28 NLT).

This is a strategic move in the war between YHWH and Pharaoh. It demonstrates that Pharaoh is unable to protect the families of Egypt. He can't even protect his oldest son, the prince slated to become the next Pharaoh. Pharaoh is just a human, no different to others:

12²⁹ At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh, who sat on the throne, to the firstborn of the prisoner, who was in the dungeon ...

There is no difference between Pharaoh and any other Egyptian, but there is a difference between YHWH's people and Pharaoh's. Completely humiliated as unable to protect his people, Pharaoh releases Israel from his service:

12³¹ Then he summoned Moses and Aaron by night and said, "Up, go out from among my people, both you and the people of Israel; and go, serve the LORD, as you have said. **32** Take your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and be gone, and bless me also!"

Passover (12:1-28; 12:43-13:16)

This release from Pharaoh to be the people of YHWH instead establishes Israel as a nation. The Feast of Passover is therefore the annual celebration of the birth of their nation, just as we have Australia Day (12:43 – 13:16).

In Jesus' time, Jews came to the Jerusalem temple for this special feast. Jesus planned his final confrontation with the Jewish leaders for Passover week. His confrontation against the powers of evil released humanity to be God's people. It's a new exodus — freed from the powers of sin and death, into the God's reign (the kingdom of God).

The Passover Festival recalled the night when the blood of the lamb on their houses overcame the power of death. Pharaoh's army held the Hebrews with the threat of death. Remember 1:15-22? Now death swept through Egypt touching every house. But it *passed over* God's people: they are released from death's power. That's what Jesus did.

Tom Wright describes it this way:

The *entire* Passover context made sense of the *entire* event that Jesus envisaged as he went up to Jerusalem for that final visit. Passover said, "Freedom—now!" and "Kingdom—now!"²

² N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Rethinking the Meaning of Jesus' Crucifixion* (SPCK, 2017), 181.

How many people?

Before we continue, we need to deal with the number of people released in the Exodus. According to 12:37, there were 600,000 adult males. With women and children, that would be over 2 million people.

Many Biblical scholars question if this is the right way to understand the text. Would two midwives be enough for so many people (1:15)? Could that many people cross the Red Sea in one night? Could they survive in the wilderness for a whole generation? If there were already millions of them, why would God not give them the land until they increased in number (Exodus 23:29-30)?

The Hebrew word *eleph* is often translated "thousand," but it can also mean other things such as a "division" of soldiers. Some scholars believe it should be translated "600 divisions" rather than 600,000. If that's right, the number of people released from slavery would be thousands or tens of thousands rather than millions.

While that fits the story better, it makes the maths difficult in the Book of Numbers where the count is given by tribe. It seems best to say that we can't be certain how to translate these numbers.³

The Red Sea (Exodus 14)***The perennial problem of power***

Released from Pharaoh, the descendants of Jacob now serve YHWH. He is visibly present with them, but they can't look directly on God. His personage is wrapped in a pillar of cloud during the day, a pillar that glows like fire at night (13:21).

They are not ready to face the battle for Canaan yet (13:17).

Two things must happen before that:

- a) They must get to know their new sovereign ruler.
That's what the rest of Exodus is about.
- b) They must be organized for battle. (That's Numbers).

He leads them south, towards the Sinai Peninsula where they will meet with God at his mountain, and enter into covenant relationship: YHWH as their sovereign; they as his people.

³ See Douglas K. Stuart, "Excursus: 'How Many Israelites Left Egypt?'" in *Exodus*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B & H, 2006), 297-303; J. W. Wenham, "Large Numbers in the Old Testament," *Tyndale Bulletin* 18:1 (1967), 19-53; G. A. Klingbeil, "Historical Criticism" section 4.2 in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* edited by T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 407-410.

Pharaoh misunderstands. He thinks they're wandering aimlessly. He wants "his" slaves back. He brings his army to force them back under his power.

This is the big problem. How will God bring the earth back under his control? Ever since the world rebelled against God, violence has ruled. Abel was killed because he was worshipping God! Violence so corrupted the world⁴ that God had to start again with Noah⁵ and allow human government to limit violence.⁶ But it led to slavery.⁷ And the nations realized they could use power over others to build kingdoms through war.⁸ God decreed that he would create a nation under his rule to show the nations the blessing they were missing,⁹ but the greedy rulers¹⁰ and warring kings¹¹ threaten Abraham's family.

At the start of Exodus, Jacob's descendants are out of the Promised Land, held in slavery by Pharaoh's forces. The mighty acts of God have bought them liberty, but won't they just fall straight back into slavery to those who have the power in this world? Pharaoh has the military might to crush them again. And if it wasn't Pharaoh, it would be the Philistines or the Syrians or the Assyrians or the Babylonians, or the Romans or whatever force is in power.

How can love and justice ever replace self-serving violence? How can God ever free his enslaved world from evil? It's the question Israel faced throughout the entire Old Testament. It's the question Jesus faced, on behalf of the world.

So it's no great surprise when Israel sees Pharaoh's army coming after them, trapping them between the mountains on one side and the sea on the other (14:10). The release of God's people into his governance isn't accomplished yet.

A way where there was no way (Exodus 14)

Exodus 14:13–14 (NIV)

¹³ Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD...

¹⁴ The LORD will fight for you; you need only to **be still**.

⁴ allenbrowne.blog/2016/05/27/who-is-responsible-for-corrupting-gods-world-genesis-61-6/

⁵ allenbrowne.blog/2016/05/30/is-there-any-justice-genesis-65-22/

⁶ allenbrowne.blog/2016/06/03/human-government-a-concession-genesis-91-6/

⁷ allenbrowne.blog/2016/06/10/noah-is-a-flawed-ruler-genesis-918-29/

⁸ allenbrowne.blog/2016/06/13/the-nations-develop-from-gods-concession-genesis-10/

⁹ allenbrowne.blog/2016/06/27/yhwh-launches-a-nation-of-his-own/

¹⁰ allenbrowne.blog/2016/07/01/what-if-were-unfaithful/

¹¹ allenbrowne.blog/2016/07/06/the-threat-of-war/

That's a favourite verse for those who love the idea that God fights all our battles and sorts all our issues, that all we need to do is be still! It's what Moses said, but it's not what God said. God had told them to go, so why were they standing still?

14¹⁵ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to **move on**."

What God does is to literally make a way where there was no way — through the sea (14:21-23).

Egypt's military might pursues them: *all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen* (14:23). In ancient warfare, chariots were the equivalent of tanks today: a protective, fast moving vehicle, able to run over the enemy.

But the chariots are on uncharted territory. They bog down in the sandy sea floor. The Egyptians fear they're up against more than they expected: "Let's get away from the Israelites! The LORD is fighting for them against Egypt." (14:25).

Moses releases his hand. The water returns. The Egyptian army drowns. The military might of Egypt is no more: it's junk on the sea floor.

God does have a way to release his world from death and from the reign of evil. Nature belongs to him, and is under his control. Might doesn't make right. Love wins.

God's people are released as he promised:

Exodus 14:29–31 (NIV)

²⁹ But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. ³⁰ That day the LORD saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore.

³¹ And when the Israelites saw the mighty hand of the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.

Of course, there is much more to unfold in this story. At this point the nation of Israel is in transition between earthly rule and heavenly rule. In many ways the church of Jesus Christ is still in this phase: already under God, yet threatened by powers that use death. The Exodus story encourages us to look forward to the final release. The resurrection of Jesus guarantees it: he has already overcome the powers of death.

Conclusion

The exodus is God leading his people out of oppression under human rule, re-establishing them under his kingship and governance.

In effect, the Israelites became "a new creation" on earth:

- In Genesis, God established the earth as his land by bringing it out of the sea, placing it under the heavenly lights, blessing it with fruitfulness, and placing humans over creation. But humanity rebelled against his kingship, establishing nations with their own rulers.
- In the exodus, God brought his people out from their oppression, through the Sea, to be the humans who restore his kingship in the world.

That's not the end of the story, but it is the first step towards new creation. Paula Gooder summarizes:

The account of the exodus ... presents the single most re-interpreted event of the Hebrew Bible, defining many subsequent beliefs about the nature of God and the relationship between God and the Israelites. ... The close connection between the account of the exodus and the creation of the world points emphatically to the significance of this stage. Just as God brought the whole world out of the chaos of the deep, so also the people of God have been brought out of the chaos of oppression into a new life.¹²

Memory verse

Exodus 15:13 (NIV)

In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed.
In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling.

¹² Paula Gooder, *The Pentateuch: A Story of Beginnings*, (London: T&T Clark International, 2005), 85.

Take home exercise

Read Exodus 9–16 for next week.

Take some time to consider how foundational the exodus story was. It was the birth of the nation of Israel. Over 3000 years later, Jews still celebrate this moment with the annual Passover celebration.

Irwin W. Reist says this:

Israel's knowledge of God was very much dependent upon the Exodus.

Who was Yahweh? Nearly all of Israel's theological confessions were based on the formula repeated in varying forms: "He is the God who brought us out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."

The knowledge of God was based on an inference from God's deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt, on Israel's confession, and upon the inspired interpretation of that event.

God was first revealed as a powerful and purposeful Lord. Through the Exodus God had revealed Himself as the one whose power was such that only His purpose could prevail in history. God was at work with some purpose of His own in history and He had chosen Israel as His agent to demonstrate that powerful purpose. God was the Lord, King, and judge of history; the Exodus salvation showed an enduring purpose of God that gave hope in desperate times. God delivered Israel because He was initiating His purpose in history through His people.¹³

It's not surprising, then, that Jesus chose Passover as the moment when he would perform a new exodus — not only for Israel, but for the world.

Tom Wright explains:

Jesus must have known the likely result, though he could still have avoided arrest had he chosen. Instead, as the festival approached, he gathered his twelve disciples for a final meal, in all probability some kind of a Passover meal, to which he gave a new and startling symbolic interpretation.

All the Jewish festivals are packed full of meaning, and Passover is the most meaningful of all. The festival involves a dramatic retelling of the Exodus story, reminding everybody of the time when the pagan tyrant was overthrown, when Israel was set free, when God acted powerfully to save his people. Celebrating Passover always carries the hope that he will do so again. Jesus' fresh understanding of Passover, given in interpreted action rather than abstract theory, spoke of that future arriving immediately in the present. God was about to act to bring in the kingdom, but in a way none of Jesus' followers (despite his attempts to tell them) had anticipated. He would fight the messianic battle—by losing it. The real enemy, after all, was not Rome, but the powers of evil that stood behind human arrogance and violence, powers of evil with which Israel's leaders had fatally colluded. It was time for the evil which had dogged Jesus' footsteps throughout his career—the shrieking maniacs, the conspiring Herodians, the carping Pharisees, the plotting chief priests, the betrayer

¹³ Irwin W. Reist, "The Theological Significance of the Exodus" in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 12:4 (1969): 224-225

among his own disciples, the whispering voices within his own soul—to gather into one great tidal wave of evil that would crash with full force over his head.

So he spoke of the Passover bread as his own body that would be given on behalf of his friends, as he went out to take on himself the weight of evil so that they would not have to do so. He spoke of the Passover cup as his own blood. Like the sacrificial blood in the Temple, it would be poured out to establish the covenant—only, this time, the *new* covenant spoken of by the prophet Jeremiah. The time had now come when, at last, God would rescue his people, and the whole world, not from mere political enemies, but from evil itself, from the sin which had enslaved them. His death would do what the Temple, with its sacrificial system, had pointed towards but had never actually accomplished. In meeting the fate which was rushing towards him, he would be the place where heaven and earth met, as he hung suspended between the two. He would be the place where God's future arrived in the present, with the kingdom of God celebrating its triumph over the kingdoms of the world by refusing to join in their spiral of violence. He would love his enemies. He would turn the other cheek. He would go the second mile. He would act out, finally, his own interpretation of the ancient prophecies which spoke, to him, of a suffering Messiah.¹⁴

¹⁴ Tom Wright, *Simply Christian* (London: SPCK, 2006), 93–94.