Exodus 1—18 Resources

# Exodus 3 and 6: The Names of God

The opening chapters of Exodus point to three ways of speaking about God.

## Names such as El Shadday

In Exodus 6:3, God speaks of having appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shadday. Names such as this follow a standard Middle Eastern pattern. They are names compounded with the designation ’*el*, a term for God used by the Canaanites; the Mesopotamian seer Balaam also uses it as a natural term for God (Numbers 23:8 – 24:34). The word points to God as powerful and transcendent, yet concerned for humanity. The particular version of the name used in Exodus 6:3 was God’s self-designation to Abraham (Genesis 17:1; cf. 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3; 49:25). We do not know the origin of the word *shadday* but the translation “Almighty” makes sense in the contexts. (There are related words in Hebrew or related languages that denote “mountain” or “breast” but there is no indication in the Old Testament that the Israelites attached one of these meanings to the name. It was just an old name.) Another example of this kind of name is “God on High [’*el ‘elyon*], maker of heaven and earth,” the name of the God worshipped by the Jerusalem priest-king Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18-22). “God of seeing” [’*el ro*’*i*] is the name given to God by the Egyptian servant girl Hagar (Genesis 16:13). “Lasting God” [’*el ‘olam*] is Abraham’s designation for God (Genesis 21:33); the lasting-ness could be backwards or forwards or both. “Bethel God” [’*el bet-*’*el*] is God’s self-designation to Jacob, reminding Jacob of their meeting at Bethel (Genesis 31:13; Cf. 35:1-3).

## Names such as The God of Abraham

In Exodus 3:6 God speaks to Moses as “the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” In Genesis 31:42 and 53 God was “the God of Abraham, the reverence (or kinsman?) of Isaac, and the Mighty One of Jacob.” This form of designation is Israel’s ancestors’ distinctive way of referring to God. It suggests a particular relationship between God and each of these leaders for the sake of their people. God had made promises to them and led them on their journey. God was not committed to being accessible in a particular place, because they themselves were not located in a place. God was committed to a people who were on the move, and specifically to their leader in this connection. One implication of God’s being on the move with the people is that they could not tie God down. While any attempt to represent God in a fixed way by means of an image was bound to misrepresent God, the same objection holds to building a fixed place of worship (see later 2 Samuel 7).

## The name Yahweh

Both in Exodus 3 and in Exodus 6 God goes on to reveal the name that will be distinctive of Israel, the name Yahweh. In a way the revealing of this name is something of a puzzle, because Genesis portrays the ancestors themselves as worshiping God under the name Yahweh. Perhaps Genesis is operating on the theological conviction that this was the same God as the ancestors’ God. It may then have felt it was appropriate to use the name “anachronistically” (as when some translations give the expression “Holy Spirit” initial capital letters in the Old Testament, implying that the phrase refers to the third person of the Trinity). The God who intended to bring the Israelites out of Egypt was the God who had made promises to Abraham, and for that matter was the God who had created the world. (Genesis 2 – 3 makes that point by using the combined form “Yahweh God.”) What was new was simply the actual name, and some implications it carried. So there would be a case for avoiding the name Yahweh in Genesis, because it was not revealed then, but there would also be a case for using the name in Genesis, in light of the fact that the God who acted and spoke there *was* Yahweh. Fortuitously for the investigation of sources in Genesis, where there are two versions of stories in Genesis, one set of passages jumps one way over that question, the other jumps the other way, and this helped people distinguish the two sets.

Alternatively, perhaps Exodus is speaking of a “renaming of God” more like when Abram is renamed Abraham. A form of the name Yahweh (perhaps *Yah*, which occurs in Exodus 15:2; 17:16) will then have been known earlier, but it is now reworked and reinterpreted.

Whichever of these views is right does not affect the significance that the new or reworked name now has. God gives the name a connection with the verb “to be.” When Moses asks after who God is, first God says “I will be with you,” which is a kind of evasion but also a significant promise. When Moses presses God on the divine identity, God spells out that first promise by saying “I am what I am” or “I am who I am” or more likely “I will be what I will be” or “I will be who I will be.” God then spells out the point again in bidding Moses tell the people, “’I am’ sent me to you” or “’I will be’ sent me to you.” The implication of the enigmatic words is that Yahweh is the God who will always be there, always able to be present and active when the people need God’s presence and activity.

A related implication of the giving of a new name and of the name itself is that different aspects of God’s character emerge or come into clearer focus at different points as the story unfolds. Someone who lives an ongoing life in relationship with other people naturally changes in interaction with their lives and words, and this is true of God. God is not a warrior in Genesis, but becomes one in Exodus. Of course God remains consistent, not fickle (Numbers 23:19). But you discover more about someone the more time you spend with them in different circumstances.

## How Yahweh became “the LORD”

Israelites eventually stopped using Yahweh’s name and replaced it by the designation “the LORD”. This moved on from Hebrew usage to the Septuagint (the Greek version of the Old Testament), the Vulgate (the Latin version), and most modern translations. So whenever the LORD (or GOD) thus appears in all capitals in English Bibles, the text actually has the name Yahweh.

Copyists eventually incorporated in the text itself a reminder to people reading out the Scriptures that they should say LORD (or GOD) not Yahweh. It worked as follows. The Hebrew alphabet comprises only consonants. But in the centuries just before Christ and in the centuries after Christ, when people no longer spoke Hebrew in everyday life, some consonants came to be reused and systems of dots and dashes came to be devised to signify the vowel sounds and thus to help people know how to read the Bible. When they came to the name of God, copyists put the vowels of the word for Lord (*’adonay*) or God (*’elohim*)into the consonants *Yhwh,* to remind people to say *’adonay* or *’elohim* not Yahweh. It is this practice that produces the name Jehovah, which is actually a non-word—it is the consonants of the word *Yahweh* and the vowels of the word *’adonay*. The basis for reckoning that “Yahweh” is the right pronunciation is some comments in early church writers about what Jews had told them regarding the pronunciation.

[You might have expected this non-word to be Yahowah rather than Jehovah. The reason it comes out as Jehovah is as follows.

* The English version of the name comes via the Greek via the Latin. Greek does not have the letter “y” so “y” got changed to “I.” For Greek words that began with I, Latin used “j”. The same applies to other names such as Jeremiah, Joshua, or Jesus, which really begin with a “y” (thus Jesus’ name was actually Yeshua).
* The word for lord (*’adonay*) begins with “a” because it follows the Hebrew letter *aleph*, which is a guttural letter, and gutturals like to be followed by “a”. The form *yehovah* can have the more regular shape because it begins with “y”, which is not a guttural.
* Either “w” or “v” can represent the Hebrew letter called *waw* or *vav*—it is just a different way of pronouncing the same letter. “W” is the traditional western/northern European (Ashkenazi) pronunciation, “v” the usual southern European/Israeli (Sephardi) pronunciation. It would thus be just as logical to say “Yahveh” as “Yahweh”, and I think that is what an Israeli would say, though most Israelis might not want to pronounce the name, for the reasons already indicated.]

While this substitution safeguarded against misusing the name and against giving the impression that Yahweh was simply Israel’s God, it carried with it three disadvantages.

* It is a privilege to be invited to call God by name, part of being invited into a relationship with God. It seems a shame to refuse the invitation and thereby distance ourselves from God. It would be odd to refuse to use the name “Jesus” because we thought it was too personal.
* Like the name Jesus (which means “savior”), the name Yahweh is not just a label. It has a meaning. It indicates that Israel’s God is one who is always with us in whatever ways are needed by changing situations. It is a shame to lose what the name stands for.
* Using the specific word “LORD” instead of that name “Yahweh” is particularly unfortunate. It introduces into Old Testament faith a more marked patriarchal, authoritarian cast that it does not otherwise have. The *name* encourages a personal relationship, but the *title* encourages a distanced, subordinating relationship.

## The nature of revelation

There is a further implication about God’s speaking to Moses in Exodus 3 and 6. It reveals the nature of revelation. It introduces a characteristic pattern that will recur in the Old Testament. Revelation means (1) God declares the intention to do something – in this case, to bring Israel out of Egypt. Then (2) God does it. Then (3) God is in a position to say, “You see, I did it,” and/or Israel is in a position to say, “You see, God did it.” The declaration and the action both show who God is and give the evidence of the reality and the nature of God. The subject of revelation is not abstract truths separate from events, but neither are events revelatory without the declaration about them that comes ahead of them and afterwards. God is someone who is able to declare what will happen because God is the one who makes things happen.

# Exodus 1—18 and How We learn From It: Some Starting Points

We have whether we are interested in tracing historical events or in discovering other ways in which the exodus story has significance for us, the questions and assumptions we bring to the text have a big affect on what we find there. Here are some hermeneutical starting points that have shaped people’s study of Exodus.

## Pietism

A traditional such lens is pietism and its concern with God’s personal relationship with me as an individual. The traditional hermeneutical method whereby I discover insight on that concern is typology. Typology combines three assumptions. (1) There is a consistency about God, so the way God acts with the Israelites would be expected to be informative about the way God relates to us. (2) When God does something for a second time, God is inclined to make it better than the first time. (3) Something literal the first time provides a metaphor for what God does the second time.

The exodus and Passover brought about through Moses thus give us a picture of what Christ will achieve. The exodus story helps us see what it is like to be in spiritual bondage and what it is like when Christ brings us freedom. Passover helps us see how everyone was liable to death but that the sprinkling with the blood of a lamb could exempt them; this shows how Christ’s blood exempts us from the destroying angel. Moses helps us see what Christ will be: for instance, miraculously born, persevering despite his people’s opposition, facing powers of evil.

## British and U.S. History

Typology served to enable settlers in the American colonies to see the significance of the exodus story for themselves in another way. “Englishmen had been taught from childhood… that God’s redemptive efforts centered on England.” But “the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay… believed that, like Israel of old, they had been singled out by God to be an example for the nations (especially for England).” The American Revolution was then the moment when God delivered the colonies from Pharaoh Britain.

On April 14, 1861, Henry Ward Beecher preached a sermon retelling the exodus story and declaring, “Now our turn has come. Right before us lies the Red Sea of war…. And the Word of God to us to-day is, ‘Speak unto this people that they go forward’” (From Cherry, *God’s New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*).

## Liberation Theology

A starting point from the 1970s is people’s experience of oppression in Latin America and the development of liberation theology. The exodus then shows us God’s involvement in leading people from political bondage to political freedom. “The liberation of Israel is a political action. It is the breaking away from a situation of despoliation and misery and the beginning of the construction of a just and fraternal society. It is the suppression of disorder and the creation of a new order” (Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*). The situation of Latin American peoples with their repression, alienated work, humiliation, and enforced birth control policy, parallels and enables us to understand the situation of Israel; and God’s raising up of a liberator there makes us look for it here.

## Black Theology

Liberation theology’s approach was taken up by black theology. African Americans have a similar place in U.S. society to that of Israel in Egypt (Reid, *Experience and Tradition*; the experience of Hispanic people is analogous). Joseph plays a role similar to that of the black middle class, which benefits from the plight of the working poor. Moses tries radicalism without an experience of God and shows that it does not work. Pietism and radicalism need each other, as is suggested by spirituals such as *Go down Moses*. God’s siding with Israel (the equivalent of black people in that situation) shows that God is black. After the exodus it is tempting to want to go back to Egypt; the Israelites have to be prepared to let Pharaoh go. It is vital that the story finds its completion in the arrival in Canaan.

## Feminist Theology

Feminist theology is a liberation theology that starts from women’s experience. Feminist interpretation notices where women are present and active but have been missed and where women have been omitted from the story. The exodus shows the integral role that women played in bringing about the fulfillment of God’s purpose and in celebrating it. Without their work there would be no act of deliverance, but they leave the stage before this act of deliverance is achieved.

## Minjung Theology

Minjung theology started from Asian experience. Minjung is a Chinese word used in Korea for a theology that is the “ordinary people’s theology,” with the assumption that the ordinary people are those who are oppressed, exploited, and marginalized. They are thus in a similar position to Israelites in Egypt. See *Voices from the Margin* (ed. Sugirtharajah), pp. 228-43.

## Postcolonial Interpretation

Postcolonial interpretation turns on their head the various forms of liberation theology. It starts by asking what the exodus meant for the Canaanites, who are a people in a position not unlike that of Native Americans when European settlers arrived: cf. Robert Warrior’s paper in *Voices from the Margin* (ed. Sugirtharajah). For them, the exodus is not an act of liberation but a harbinger of bondage.

## Strengths and Limitations

Different approaches enable us to see some aspects of the text and ways in which it may speak to us, but may make us miss other aspects of the text. The challenge is to see both God’s involvement with individuals and the corporate and political aspect to the text; to see both the corporate and political aspects of the text but also the texts’ consistent stress on acknowledging God and serving God.

# Exodus 4: The Circumcision of Moses

What is going on in the story of Moses’ circumcision? Indeed, readers may be puzzled by the institution of circumcision itself; and the question about Moses needs to be set in the context of the broader issue. Why is circumcision the sign of a covenant with Abraham and his descendants, and what is the implication of the fact that the sign of this covenant by its nature applies only to males?

In Genesis 17 the covenant sealed by circumcision undergirds the promise of offspring, which dominates Genesis 17 as it does not Genesis 12or 15. The covenant sign requires the cutting not of some random part of the body, such as the hair, but of the part of the male body through which God’s promise will be fulfilled. “God is demanding that Abram concede, symbolically, that fertility is not his own to exercise without divine let or hindrance. A physical reduction in the literal superabundance of Abram’s penis is a sign with an intrinsic relationship to what it signifies.... The organ and the power behind it now belong partly to God” (Jack Miles, God: A *Biography*, pp. 53, 90).God issues this demand following on the exercise of the power and the organ on Abram and Sarah’s initiative in Genesis 16.

After the birth of Isaac, the first mention of circumcision comes in the story in Genesis 34*.* In light of the implicit significance of circumcision just noted, it carries some irony. Shechem has demonstrated that his sexuality is not truly circumcised, and it may seem quite appropriate for Jacob’s sons to require his circumcising (and that of the other men in his family) before he can marry their sister. But that is not Jacob’s sons’ concern. For them, circumcision is the means to a wholly other end.

Exodus 4:24-26 is the next occasion when circumcision features. Moses has apparently not been circumcised; certainly his son has not been. Yahweh has commissioned Moses to go back to Egypt and to begin the confronting of Pharaoh about letting Israel leave Egypt. On the way back to Egypt, “Yahweh met him and tried to kill him.” His then wife circumcised her son and touched Moses’ legs (which seems likely to be a euphemism for genitals) with her son’s foreskin and said, “You really are a bloody bridegroom for me.” Then Yahweh let Moses alone.

A man’s sexual instinct is for him a symbol of his manliness, his machismo. Moses is a more macho figure than Abraham is (Exodus 2:11-13,17). Exodus 4:19has referred back to the exercise in machismo that got him into trouble and to the fact that the people who might have brought restraint to this instinct are now dead. So perhaps his vicarious circumcision has this symbolic significance. His attack by Yahweh comes at a moment that resembles Yahweh’s fight with Jacob, at night on a crucial journey. Jacob was literally circumcised but his character was never subjected to Yahweh’s constraint, even after this fight, which Yahweh won only by cheating. As Yahweh had taken on the “old” Jacob, so now Yahweh takes on the “old” Moses, once again in such a way as not to overwhelm him by divine firepower. “Yahweh tried to kill him”: what does that say about Moses’ will-to-live, Moses’ machismo? But the old Moses must die and a Moses under Yahweh’s control must be born. If Moses will not willingly agree, his vicarious circumcision by Zipporah will symbolize it.

A number of further passages refer to metaphorical circumcision, of lips (Exodus 6:12, 30) and mind (Leviticus 26:41; Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; cf. Jeremiah 4:4; 9:25). So a sign which is only applied to males provides a metaphor for the need to be trained and disciplined if one is to speak well and to live well. What might this imply?

We might put alongside it a feature of the New Testament story. Jesus appoints only men as members of the group of twelve whom he gathers around him as the nucleus of a renewed Israel, but there turns out to be method in his omission of women. The twelve male representatives of Israel misunderstand, betray, and abandon Jesus. When he sets about his most decisive act in achieving the renewal of Israel, in Mark’s version of the story only a large crowd of women accompanies him (Mark 15:40-41). It is some of them who are also the first people to discover that the tomb is empty and are commissioned to tell the men that he has been raised to a transformed life and has gone off to Galilee, where they will also see him in due course (Mark 16:1‑7). The events that follow Jesus’ appointment of the twelve men thus explode any suggestion that there is something distinctive about men that provides a positive qualification for their being the exclusive leaders of the renewed Israelite community.

A similar implication emerges from the Old Testament references to physical and metaphorical circumcision. It starts off looking like a sign that establishes that full membership of the Israelite community belongs only to males. But it becomes a sign of a discipline that the Israelite community actually lacks. The fact that it is the males who bear this sign means that it is the males who embody spiritual and mental unfitness to belong to the people of promise.

It is further suggestive that this sign is one that the male bears in his sexual organ. Abraham was supposed to see the fulfillment of God’s promise through his sexual activity, but before that happens his sexual activity is the means whereby he seeks to engineer his own fulfillment of God’s promise. His antitype, David, notoriously fails Yahweh in his sexual activity (2 Samuel 11), being a true descendant of Judah (Genesis 38). David’s own son, Solomon, the great temple-builder, does the same in his own way (1 Kings 11). Proverbs suggests that the distinctively male sin is sexual failure (e.g., 5:16-23). Job begins his claim to having lived a wholly committed life by declaring that he has not “looked on a virgin” (Job 31:1).

Moses is the exception who proves the rule. The Torah exposes no skeletons in his sexual cupboard except that he failed to circumcise his son. But that would suggest he had not taken seriously the significance of the sign of circumcision, its drawing attention to the fact that men in particular lack the moral and spiritual commitment and discipline that make holiness possible, and that their sexuality is a focus of this lack (this may be true of women too, but that is not the subject of these stories). It is a potentially fatal failure on Moses’ part, and God confronts him with it a potentially fatal way.

If God gives men this sign of a covenant commitment despite – even because of – their lack of that commitment and discipline and on the basis of the focus of this lack, there is indeed hope for them and for the world. But they can no more make their receiving this sign a basis for claims to authority which exclude women than they can make this claim on the basis of Jesus’ twelve comprising only men. Neither can women submit to an exclusively male leadership.

Athena Gorospe, in the conclusion to her study of this passage (*Narrative Identity* [Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007], p. 319) comments:

The narrative of Moses’ return to Egypt provides an alternative to the American dream, with its global capitalistic and consumerist underpinnings, that orients many Filipino migrants and their families and shapes their identity…. Moses’ story shows the return of a migrant with a sense of God’s call and a desire to respond to the needs of his people…. This is made possible through an identity-forming death experience and a rite that involves the whole family.

# Exodus 4—14: The Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart, the Closing of Pharaoh’s Mind

The story in Exodus 4 – 14 incorporates substantial narrative theological reflection on the relationship between the sovereignty of the divine King and the sovereignty of the human king. The genius of theological reflection in the form of narrative or story-telling is that it makes it possible to do justice to the complexity of a theological question in a way that may be more difficult for systematic theology. A key term in the discussion is the idea of having a closed mind. Translations traditionally speak of a hard heart, but this can be misleading, because in English the heart is inclined to suggest feelings, whereas in the Bible the heart is more often the aspect of us with which we think things through, formulate attitudes, and make decisions. So it is nearer to the mind in Western thinking.

Exodus uses four different formulations in connection the closing of Pharaoh’s mind:

* Yahweh will close Pharaoh’s mind: Exodus 4:21; 7:3; 14:4
* Pharaoh’s mind was closed: Exodus 7:13, 14, 22; 8:19; 9:7, 35
* Pharaoh closed his mind: Exodus 8:15, 32; 9:34
* Yahweh closed Pharaoh’s mind: Exodus 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:8

The first occurrence of this way of speaking makes clear that God is sovereign in the situation. God is taking initiatives. The expression does not imply that God intends to force Pharaoh to do something he does not wish to do. Pharaoh’s inclination is anyway to hold onto the Israelites. As an act of judgment and a demonstration of power God intends to confirm that inclination. That dynamic is confirmed by the second set of references, which declare that Pharaoh’s mind was closed. God has not yet done anything; these passages are affirming what was the situation, what could be seen by any observer. The third set of passages make explicit that this closed-ness of mind was indeed Pharaoh’s own inclination; there is still no statement of action on God’s part whereby God’s intention is implemented. This comes only in the fourth set of passages.

The different ways of speaking of the closing of Pharaoh’s mind thus affirm (1) the pre-existent sovereignty of God, (2) the observable phenomena whose cause is invisible, (3) the reality of human freedom and responsibility, and (4) the sovereignty of God in practice.

If we are inclined to ask whether God was being fair, then the way Paul takes up this story in Romans 9:14-24 (quoting 9:16; and cf. 11:9) would make it likely that he would simply tell us that we would be wise to shut up. But the story itself provides its own sophisticated account of the way God is not being unfair. It also implies two other presuppositions. One is that Pharaoh has reached the point of no return; he is due for judgment, and closing of his mind is the form it will take. The other is that the issue in Exodus is who is king. Pharaoh thinks he is king, and Yahweh’s action is designed to demonstrate to him and to everyone else that there is another King.

# Exodus 12: The Passover

The Exodus is the event that constitutes Israel anew as Yahweh’s people, and Passover is the festival that annually brings this reality home. The first extraordinary feature of the establishment of the festival is that it is devised when the people are still in Egypt (Exodus 12:1). This contrasts with the way commemorations such as Christmas and Easter were devised decades or centuries after the event. In Exodus 12 the devising of the festival is a statement of promise and faith, a kind of prophecy.

Passover is to mark the beginning of the year (Exodus 12:2), March-April. The Old Testament year and the Jewish year begin in September-October, at the turn of the agricultural year; apparently the Israelites took this instruction to begin the year in March-April metaphorically. The festival is designed to ensure that Israel always “remembers” the exodus event (Exodus 12:14) as the beginning of their story, the event that defines who they are. In Hebrew to “remember” means to keep in mind and think about (you can “remember” the future). Celebrating Passover “makes” them the exodus people again. For the church, the Lord’s Supper is then the equivalent to Passover, a means of “remembering” or “keeping in mind” (“do this in remembrance”).

Passover involves a family meal (Exodus 12:3-4). It is a real meal; it involves more than a mere fragment of bread and a mouthful of wine. It is a family affair, not something that works with individuals. And it gives children a special place (Exodus 12:26). As a “festival” (Exodus 12:14) it involved “pilgrimage” (“pilgrimage” is the meaning of the word “festival”), a journey to the place Yahweh designates (Deuteronomy 16). And it involves drama (Exodus 12:11).

It involves spilt blood. It is thus a reminder of death and a safeguard against death (Exodus 12:7, 12-13). Jesus will declare, “Blessed are you who weep now, because you will laugh” but “alas for you who laugh now, because you will mourn and weep” (Luke 6:21, 25). The Egyptians, the people who were in power and had been doing well, have had their season of laughter and their season of weeping has arrived; the story should frighten Western people. For the Israelites, the reverse is true. For unexplained reasons Yahweh will allow the spilt blood to protect the family from having its blood spilled. This provided the early Christians with a way of thinking through the way Jesus’ death protects people. The Passover ceremony was a sacrament, a sign for the recipients (Exodus 12:13) and also a sign that God sees and is affected by (Exodus 12:13). It does something.

Passover takes an ordinary practice, namely that of desert shepherds (roasting a lamb, seasoning it with wild herbs, eating flat bread, dressing ready for the departure for summer pasturage), sanctifies it (for instance, requiring the sacrifice to be eaten that night rather than being profaned), and gives the practice a new interpretation (for instance, bitter herbs suggest the bitterness of life in Egypt). This makes it like other Jewish and Christian observances that take an observance relating to the annual cycle of nature and seek to transform it by linking it to the story of God’s once-and-for-all deliverance. In Christian faith this was what happened with Christmas and Easter (we are now at the end of the opposite process whereby Christmas and Easter have reverted to being nature festivals). In the Old Testament this process also happened with the Flat Bread Festival, Pentecost, and Sukkot, further agricultural festivals that became commemorations of the exodus.

The Old Testament subsequently makes clear that Passover is not to exclude people who cannot take part at the usual moment or cannot keep the cleanness rules (Numbers 9; 2 Chronicles 30).

# Responses to Questions I Have Been Asked

There is more info in my *Exodus and Leviticus for Everyone* (Louisville: WJK/London: SPCK, 2010).

To what extent are spiritual and physical liberation ultimately tied together?

*\*\**Well they must be totally tied together because we are body and spirit and these are tied together; the resurrection involves both body and spirit. Yet they can be slightly separate. Israel could physically enter God's rest in the land yet still not be enjoying the full nature of that rest (You can take the people out of Egypt but not take Egypt out of the people) - see Hebrews 3—4. I can be spiritually well but physically ill. So Christ came to do the key task in achieving the liberation of the whole people. That meant healing people physically; it also meant dying to put them right with God.

*Much of the narrative in the Torah revolves around specific leaders. God’s interaction with the people is most often through one leader. Does this have implications for God’s interaction with humanity today? In modern times there seems to be such a great emphasis on a priesthood of all believers. Perhaps we have lost appreciation for a chosen prophet? What can we learn about this from the Pentateuch? How important are leaders like Moses?*

\*\*It’s interesting that you comment that we emphasize the priesthood of all believers. What strikes me is our emphasis in our church and secular culture on leaders! I suggest scripture sees leadership as a necessary evil. Our stress on leadership in our culture is hard to fit with scripture. There’s no suggestion that Moses is a model for leaders. He was unique. Our job is to follow his teaching, not be like him.

*Why does God tell Moses and the elders to lie to Pharaoh and say they are only going for three days? It doesn’t seem to fit the character of God to tell his servant to lie to Pharaoh.*

\*\*The tough answer is to note that scripture doesn’t seem to reckon that the oppressed owe truthful speech to their oppressors when the oppressors are not behaving truthfully to them. The midwives told lies, too! The softer answer is that if Pharaoh had said yes, that would be a sign that the oppression was over, and they could come back.

*In 2:23 when the people cried out, God heard their cries and groaning and remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It says he looked upon the Israelites and took notice of them. Had he forgotten about them for all those years? Or did he not take notice because they had not cried out to him until that time?*

\*\*”Remembering” and “forgetting” in the OT imply applying the mind to something or putting it out of mind. So it’s not an accidental forgetting. Scripture doesn’t tell us whether God would have acted earlier if they had cried out earlier, though I guess it invites us to make sure we don’t “have not because we ask not” (James 4:2). Genesis 15:16 gives you (part of) the answer to why God has delayed.

As Christians, in light of social injustices or oppression, what are we to do? All I can gather from the story of the exodus is to cry out, wait on God, and see if and how He wants to involve us. It seems a bit passive, and I feel that as Christians we would lose our credibility if we were passive in the midst of social injustices.

*\*\**One comment is that if that is what scripture says, we would be wise to take notice of it rather than decline to do so because we would lack credibility. It is better to be right than credible. After all, supposing it were the case that if we laid hold on God, that issued in God acting to bring the social justice we can never bring about.... Another is that this story isn’t the only part if scripture that speaks of social involvement. It would then be important for us to make sure that we set the other scriptures that we like more in the context of this one, if we like this one less. Another comment is that we have to keep reminding ourselves that we are Egypt, not Israel.

*How would worshipping God on Mount Horeb after bringing the people out of Egypt be a sign that God sent Moses?*

\*\*Exactly!  Only when Moses has committed himself in faith does he get the sign!  God looks for a response of faith that doesn’t rely on signs.  Then when he has given that response of faith, God honors that!

*Pharaoh does not give Yahweh the time of day. But perhaps he had never heard of Yahweh before? Did God give Pharaoh a fair chance, especially considering the fact that God purportedly hardened his heart in order to make a point. How then can we make Pharaoh take responsibility for his actions? It doesn’t seem fair for God to harden his heart but then bring judgments against him. What’s up with that? If God can act to harden Pharaoh’s heart why doesn’t he act in the opposite direction to open Pharaoh’s heart to the idea of letting his people go? Or why didn’t he just leave him—then he might have relented? And what does this mean for us today?*

\*\*Paul’s answer (Rom 9) is that God is Lord and can do as he wishes. It’s all part of God working out a purpose in the world, a purpose designed for the world’s salvation. Exodus itself moderates the point a bit by noting that God hardens Pharaoh’s heart only after he hardens his own heart. OT and NT assume that people do not need a special revelation in order to know basically who God is and how they ought to behave (cf. Amos 1 – 2; Roman 1 – 3). Pharaoh had ignored what he knew. So the story’s presupposition is that Pharaoh has had every chance and that it is time for a showdown, a moment when God is acting to show who is the real king. In our own world we know that rulers, people in general in our culture, etc, are aware of those basic things (unless they have pushed them right out and God has confirmed that – cf. Romans 1 – 3).

*We read verses telling us that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart and other verses telling us that Pharaoh did this himself. So, to what extent do I control my own heart and to what extent is it directed by God?*

\*\*The beauty of the two forms of expression is that they can reflect how both are true! When I came to faith in Christ, that was both because God opened my eyes, and because I made a commitment. One can’t resolve the relationship between these. Hardening does not mean changing against the will. If I stiffen your resolve, it doesn’t mean I change you against your will. It means I give you arguments for standing firm and encourage you to do so.

*Would a “watered down” exodus (e.g., no plagues), still be significant?*

\*\*I guess it would still be significant, but not as significant. For instance, the plagues story demonstrate Yahweh’s power in nature and give the Egyptians chance to recognize Yahweh.

*What does it mean to give God the firstborn? Was this a payment to God for the things that God did for the people? It seems like the exodus was conditional; since God did this now here is what God expects of the people. I guess this goes against my view of a gracious God who does things without the expectation of something in return.*

\*\*All children – like e.g., all time and all produce – come from God and belong to God. Giving the firstborn or firstfruits or Sabbath is a sign of our recognizing that fact. It’s not a matter of conditions, because God acted first – they didn’t have to do this before God would redeem them. So it’s just like the cross – God does it, then says, give yourself to me in response.

*In I3:2, God commands Moses to consecrate all the firstborn to him. Yet in 13:13 Moses says that all firstborn* ***males*** *will be redeemed. Was the society such a patriarchal one that when Moses heard God’s command, he equated firstborn with firstborn males?* \*\*Actually it’s not clear that 13:2 refers to either sex – the word is masculine and one of my translations has “firstborn male,” so that 13:13 then makes explicit something implicit earlier. But Moses was maybe quite capable of hearing it that way (see Exod 19:10-11 – everyone; contrast Exod 19:14-15 – he assumes men). Of course you don’t have to read it patriarchally. It could imply males are more dispensible, as they are – you don’t need many males to keep the herds and flocks going!

*It seems surprising to me that God would choose to strike so many people dead. This seems to follow the “an eye for an eye” thinking as Pharaoh struck all the male Hebrew babies dead, God is striking all the firstborns dead. Why would God do such a vicious thing? Yes it demonstrates his power, but none of his mercy or love. Liberation comes at the expense of the lives of thousands of people who aren’t directly culpable. How does a God who does not support murder, let alone the murder of innocent children justify this? And furthermore, this mass slaughter is link with a yearly celebration event that has been carried on throughout the centuries and continues to be carried on forever.*

\*\*I could wish God hadn’t acted in this way, but from the beginning to the end scripture seems to reckon that God does punish wrongdoing from time to time, so I assume that when scripture says something I don’t like, I had better let it reshape my thinking. After all, Jesus accepts “an eye for an eye” thinking when he says that people who don’t forgive won’t be forgiven. Sometimes the time for mercy runs out and God acts in judgment. It’s an act of power that demonstrates to the superpower and their leader that God is God and they are not, and an act of punishment for their refusal to acknowledge that fact—so it’s not murder. The notion that one can distinguish between people who are and who aren’t directly culpable doesn’t really work—a nation is bound up in with its leaders, for better and sometimes for worse. It’s striking that the NT refers quite often to Passover and apparently isn’t troubled by this question that troubles us - nor is Paul in Romans 9. Note that the victims are not especially babies: most firstborn are adults. As well as being an act of judgment, it indeed brought about Israel’s freedom as a little people from the superpower that wanted to hold onto them – hence its celebration by them. It’s usually people in power like Westerners who worry about this – and rightly!

*If Christians are being oppressed by another group, is this justification for violent revolution?*

\*\*Not from Exodus, because the Israelites undertake no violent action.

God seems more exacting in regards to his expectation of obedience from his people in Exodus than in Genesis. Does this support the dispensationalist perspective or is there another perspective?

*\*\**God does have more expectations now that he has acted to deliver them. So yes, God has different expectations in different times, which is slightly dispensational, but dispensationalism is much more complicated.

*How do we deal with the lack of any historical evidence for something like the exodus? If Israel’s historical consciousness is (mostly) “false” in one sense – how does that impact our view of what God “did” for them? I can handle the presence of myth and fiction in Scripture and their ability to be and communicate truth, but I feel like it’s one thing if Ruth and Esther are mostly (or completely) fiction – but another if Exodus through Joshua are mostly fictive …*

\*\*Yes, I agree with you – I think we would be in trouble if Exodus through Joshua were mostly fiction. Therefore the fact that God gave it to us means it can’t be. And the lack of historical evidence is just that – not the presence of evidence that works against historicity.

*Why couldn’t God speak to all people? Why does God only speak to Moses – not even Aaron?*

*\*\** Hebrews 12 may suggest that it is because “our God is a consuming fire” - it would be dangerous. God is like electricity or bright sunlight. So Moses is put in this dangerous position on their behalf. He is to be the recipient of God's revelation. It wasn't about his personal relationship with God. Anyone can go to the meeting tent to meet with God.

*How did God as a man of war turn into Jesus and “turn the other cheek?” If we know that the way of violence is a dead end then did God change? If the incarnation moved these themes from the physical realm to the spiritual realm what does that tell me about God?*

*\*\**Actually the question is more the opposite—God has been “turn the other cheek” (so has Joseph) and the striking thing is that he now acts violently. Jesus likewise expects to act violently – e.g., sending people to wail and gnash their teeth in hell. God has always had to hold these two together and move between them, like a parent moving between mercy and discipline. One thing all this tells you about God is that God changes, like a parent – not being inconsistent, but acting in different ways in different circumstances.

*How do we interpret the events of today in light of the exodus? Is God still working for the liberation of people in our world today? For example, was it God’s will that the Iraqi people be liberated from the oppression of Saddam Hussein? Even though this meant the death and destruction of a country and its people? What about the fact that George Bush is a godly man and prays to God and feels that it is his mission form God to liberate the Iraqis? Was God really involved in this? Is God involved politically today as God was in the OT?*

*\*\**In principle I assume God is involved politically as in the OT. But God hasn’t told us what he thinks of the Iraq war. God didn’t send us a prophet like Moses. God leaves us to work things out. So the question is, do you think the Iraq war looks like the kind of war of liberation that God was involved in?

*Did God liberate the people of Israel from Egypt because they were God’s people or because they were under oppression? The answer to this question has a huge impact on how we view liberation in the world today. To say that God liberated the people for both reasons sidesteps such an important question.*

*\*\**Sorry – I think it happens to be the right answer!

*Why does God deliver his people from someone else’s land into someone else’s land? Even in his initial pitch to Moses, God lists the inhabitants of the land he is sending them into. Why is it that God desired to displace other people in order to give the chosen people a place to live? Why bring one people out of oppression only to subdue and oppress another people, or actually several groups of people? It does raise questions about God’s sense of justice and our understanding of it.*

*\*\**God explains that it is because of the wickedness of those peoples (e.g., Gen 15:16 – the reason Israel has to wait so long; Deut 9:1-5 – because of their wickedness not Israel’s deserve) (another passage that indicates that “both” is the answer to the previous question!)

*How do we approach a text such as Exodus? How do you know when your application has been too contextually influenced, or too greatly influenced by the questions you took to the scripture as opposed to what was intended? How can you be careful about this while still allowing theology to be liberatedto have relevancy in our own cultural and situational contexts and not become stale and merely academic?*

\*\*Our application will always be too contextually influenced—at least, that has always been true, for the church in all ages. So be relaxed about it. God will nevertheless take us through. The positive side of this coin is that our context is also what enables us to interpret things well—as liberation theology was able to see some things that were present in scripture because of the distinctive context from which it started. But to safeguard against the limitations of our context, we can set about understanding our context so as to see where our biases lie - e.g., our instinct to apply things to the individual rather than the community and to be preoccupied with our inner experience, our feelings. That process will be helped by looking at the way other cultures and other ages interpret scripture, which helps us see what is odd about our interpretation. It is why the Bible belongs to the church more than the individual—to a body of both sexes, different ages, different classes, different backgrounds, etc. That helps us see things, and see where we mis-see things.  
  
*Would God care if a people were liberated from oppression and other sorts of troubles if he knew they would not serve him?*

\*\*My impression from scripture is that God does not know whether people will serve him, so he acts in hope but usually gets disappointed.

*Do any Latino or African American theologians in using the Exodus narrative to justify some social redress for their oppressed people consider approaching God as Moses did? Do they see that God initiated the whole Exodus and not a man? If it was initiated by a man, it was the corporate man, the Hebrew slaves who began to pray? Is there in their situation a similar cry going up to God? If there is, then one could expect an agent of change (a Moses type) and perhaps even supernatural intervention.*

\*\*I think Stephen Breck Reid’s emphasis on the need to hold together pietism and radicalism would be a good example. When Martin Luther King’s daughter preached at Fuller a few years ago, I was struck by the way she combined these. But I don’t know about “expect.” God isn’t very good at responding to our expectations that if we do the right thing, the right results will follow.

*Many OT events happened only once every several hundred years (e.g., God judging Israel for their sins) or they were the kind of thing that needed to happen only once (e.g., the exodus or the taking of the Promised Land). So how do we learn about everyday life with God from these rare events? How do we learn from people like Moses or Miriam who had a very special relationship with God, but for a very specific purpose and time in history? Has this led us to develop expectations of God that are unrealistic for everyday life? Is it wrong to always be looking for God to do big things in our everyday lives?*

*\*\**The stories are there to shape our understanding of how God created and redeemed us and who God is. Often they aren’t directly about our everyday lives. But knowing how God created and redeemed us and the kind of person God is has significance for that.