

God's Big Story – Part 1 – The Exodus

30 July 2023

BIBLE READINGS

Exodus 3:1-15

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that although the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, 'I will go over and see this strange sight - why the bush does not burn up.'

God called to him from within the bush, 'Moses! Moses!'

Moses said, 'Here I am.'

'Do not come any closer,' God said. 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.' Then he said, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.' At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look.

The Lord said, 'I have seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey - the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. ... So go now. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt.'

But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?'

And God said, 'I will be with you. ...'

Moses said to God, 'Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you," and they ask me, "What is his name?" Then what shall I tell them?'

God said to Moses, 'I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: "I am has sent me to you."'

'This is my name for ever,

the name you shall call me
from generation to generation.'

Matthew 13:44-52

Jesus told them another parable:

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

'Have you understood all these things?' Jesus asked.

'Yes,' they replied.

He said to them, 'Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.'

MESSAGE

As Protestant Christians we give a special place to the Bible in our worship. We claim that God speaks to us through the Bible, so sometimes we call the Bible **God's word**. We have an open Bible on the Communion table each week as a sign that God still speaks through it today. So we read the Bible each week and we want to understand it.

But as others point out, the Bible is a **human** book, or library of books, written over a period of fifteen hundred years by multiple authors living in quite diverse contexts. It was written a long time ago at a time of sketchy scientific knowledge and therefore contains a pre-scientific view of the world. This line of thinking suggests that the Bible should be treated just the same as any other historical document, as an interesting artefact from history, but not as a guide for living today.

One long running issue within Christian faith, though, is how we are to **rightly interpret** the Bible. This task falls to us as the community of faith. [It is of course the various communities of faith down through the centuries that have passed on the central idea that the Bible has a unique role in linking past reflections on God and on

humanity with our present experiences.] And so we continue to read and reflect on the Bible each week despite the many challenges of doing so.

There are many ways to interpret the Bible ... everything from a **literal approach** (where every word is to be read and obeyed as written, which is why Amish women still wear a head covering) to a more **skeptical approach** (where every story is treated with suspicion and is accepted or rejected according to some assumed principle such as we are to love each other).



When I was a relatively new Christian in my 20s, I was greatly helped to understand the whole message and flow of the Bible when someone explained how the Bible tells God’s story as much as it tells a collection of human stories. Over the next few weeks I want to introduce you to this way of reading the Bible as **God’s** story – and to see the main themes that emerge.

I’ll illustrate the approach today using the book of Exodus, then slowly unpack other parts of the Bible over the following few weeks.

The most common way of reading the Bible is to choose a short passage and consider it all by itself. This is the most straight forward way of reading the Bible and is usually our default option.

OLD TESTAMENT CHRONOLOGY & BOOKS								
Time-line (BCE)	2000	1800	1450	1350	1250	1150	1050	
Name of period	Prehistory		Patriarchs		Egypt	EXODUS	Conquest	Judges
Biblical Books	Genesis 1-11		Genesis 12-50		Job (?)	Exodus Leviticus Numbers Deuteronomy	Joshua	Judges Ruth
Key characters (stories of individuals)	Adam & Eve Cain & Abel Noah	Abraham Isaac Jacob Joseph		Moses Pharaoh		Joshua	Ruth Boaz	

It’s the way Sunday School has usually been taught and also how the Lectionary is put together that gives passages to be read each week. So we typically hear a short

passage from one of the Gospels, perhaps a paragraph or two from one of Paul's letters or an OT story about Moses or King David.

Usually, there's a hero in the story – and a moral lesson we can learn. But that moral lesson is sometimes hard to pin down, as in the story of Moses at the burning bush or Jesus' parables about treasure and fishing that we heard this morning.

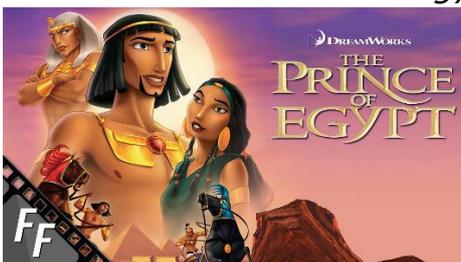
There is another problem too – the selected passages cover only a small part of the whole Bible – so that much of the Bible is simply left out. Someone else has already made the decision as to which parts of the Bible we need to read and what we can safely ignore – which turns out to be most of the OT and much of the NT.

One danger with this simple approach is that we think we can just read the Bible and apply it **directly to our own situation** without considering the historical context of the passage or what type of writing it is.

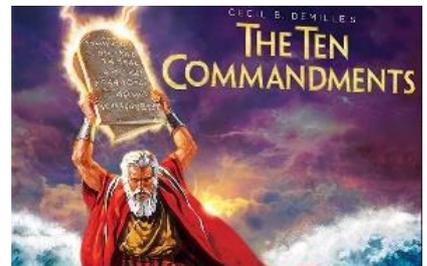
So why, for instance, did Paul write that women should cover their heads – as the Amish women do – and is that still relevant for us today? And which of the laws of Moses should we follow, just the 10 commandments or more than that and how would we decide?



Speaking of Moses, who has watched the movie *The Ten Commandments* starring Charlton Heston or seen the children's movie *Prince of Egypt*?



So most of us know the basic story about the plagues, the Passover, the parting of the sea and the giving of the 10 commandments ...



We are told at the end of the book of Genesis, for instance, that Jacob and his entire clan had moved from Canaan to Egypt to escape a massive famine. The beginning of the book of Exodus explains how that group of people remained living in Egypt and multiplied greatly in number over the centuries until they were seen as a threat by the Egyptian leaders and were enslaved. Moses is born to one of these enslaved and oppressed Hebrew families.

Pharaoh's decree is that all Hebrew baby boys are to be killed, but Moses is carefully put in a cane basket and floated down the river where who should rescue him but

Pharaoh's daughter! So Moses is saved and grows up knowing how Egyptian power and politics is played. It's a unique perspective from which to challenge the ruling power of Egypt later in the story.

However we interpret the passage about Moses at the burning bush, it needs to at least make sense of the historical situation of Moses liberating the people from their slavery under Pharaoh.



Which brings us to our third approach – which I'm suggesting is to explore what a particular passage or story tells us about **God** and about our relationship with God and one another – **God's big story**. My hunch is that most of the stories – and the laws and poems and songs and wisdom writings – that made it into the Bible are there because they have something important to say about God or about our relationships. So while the Bible is definitely a human document, it is at the same time a collection of people's experiences of God.

And so I am suggesting that the Bible works on at least three levels

- at the level of the **individual** and the particular situation they face – such as Moses caring for a flock of sheep and seeing something unusual
- at a larger **historical** level involving the **nation of Israel** or **the church** – so in this case Israel is not yet a nation but rather is an enslaved group of people
- and at a **theological level** communicating something about God's character and will and our human response and responsibility.

And so to the story of Moses and the burning bush and what this reveals about God.

It's a bit of a strange story about a bush that is on fire but not being burned up. When Moses goes to investigate, he has a spiritual encounter with a god who speaks to him. This god commissions Moses to go to Pharaoh, king of Egypt, demanding that Pharaoh release the Israelite slaves.



Moses is then to lead the slaves to a productive land that is currently the home of a number of other peoples. This god promises to be with Moses on this unlikely quest and then reveals that the god speaking with him goes by the mysterious name of 'I am who I am'.

At the first simple level of understanding the Bible, this is a tricky story to interpret because it's well outside our normal range of experience. Moses is curious, confused and cautious all at the same time.

In terms of other similar stories in the Bible, it is a classic **call narrative** where someone is asked by God to take a particular role. So the moral of the story might be that when God calls someone, God also equips them for the task at hand. Alternatively, the moral might be beware of blazing bushes that don't burn up and that talk back!

So we move onto the second level of what's going on in the history of Israel.

Following this incident, the rest of the book of Exodus recounts how Moses does eventually rescue the slaves, lead them out into the desert where they are miraculously provided for with food and water. Moses then receives the Law from God and oversees the construction of the tabernacle or portable temple as the place to worship God. The book ends with God's presence filling the tabernacle as a cloud as the Israelites gather to worship.

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1. Key characters (stories of individuals)	Adam & Eve Cain & Abel Noah	Abraham Jacob	Joseph	Moses Pharaoh	Joshua	Ruth Boaz		
2. Key events (history of Israel)	Creation Fall Flood Babel	Call of Abraham Jacob → Israel Joseph in Egypt		Deliverance from Egypt Giving of the law 40 years in wilderness				

This is the **foundation story** for the nation of Israel. It explains their origin as a people, their deliverance from Egypt by the actions of a mighty god, and the source of the laws that govern their life and their worship. Numerous later writings look back to this Exodus event as the key defining moment in the birth of the nation and its relationship with their God, who is to be known as 'I am', the name revealed to Moses at the burning bush.

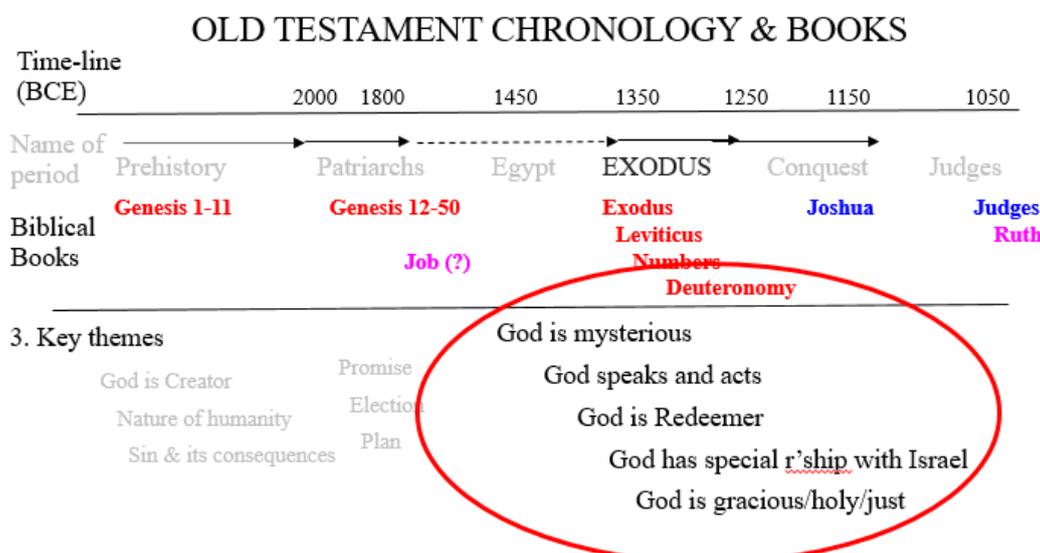
Whether or not we may read the story more as legend than accurate history, the fact is that Jews of all persuasions read this as their foundation story.

For our country of Australia, a comparative story is **Federation**, where the six states joined together to form a new nation called the Commonwealth of Australia with its new Constitution to govern its life. Our Constitution does not function in quite the same way as the Law of Israel, but the need for a referendum later this year to make a small addition to it and the contentious debate around the change shows that this founding document of our nation is taken pretty seriously.



How about the third level of the story of the Exodus? God's big story? What does the exodus story reveal about God and God's relationship with Israel and how the Israelites are to live together?

Just as Exodus provides the foundation story for Israel, so Exodus also provides the **foundation story for God**. How God acts in this story reveals core aspects of the character and will of God.



Given that this book contains what we know as the Ten Commandments, I've noted ten aspects of God that are revealed in this book.

- First, **God is mysterious**. God's name revealed to Moses is 'I am who I am' – or Yahweh in Hebrew – which suggests that God is the source of all being and who just 'is'. God always was and always will be.

I wonder how different it might be if every time we read 'Lord' in our Bibles – the normal English translation of Yahweh – we read 'I am' instead.

And what does it mean for Jesus to say that he is 'I am'?

I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world ... just as God simply is, so Jesus similarly claims to be 'I am' ... the source of being, the source of life.

- Next, Yahweh is a god **who speaks** – unlike the mute idols that the various other nations around Israel worshipped. God **speaks** to Moses from the burning bush just as God had previously spoken with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. If God speaks, how do we hear God speaking to us today? Is it through our prayer, our worship, our reading of the Bible or even when we're out and about and have this strange urge to speak to this person or that person?
- God is **concerned for people** ... God is personal and on the side of the oppressed. God acts with and for the Israelites
- God not only speaks but also **acts**. In Exodus, God performs **powerful** deeds mightier than the Egyptian gods. God redeems the people from slavery and so is known as the **Redeemer**.
- God acts as **Redeemer** for Israel, freeing them from slavery
- God **brings life in the midst of death** ... when the people wander in the desert without food or water to survive, God provides manna to eat and water from the rock. So God gives life in a practical way.
- God has a **special relationship with Israel** ... in the conversation with Moses, God calls the Israelites '**my people**', which is the basis of the unique identity of Israel. As Christians we understand that we too are now included among God's people.
- God is **gracious** ... and rescues the people from slavery and sustains them through their desert wanderings by providing manna and water.
- God is **holy** and therefore not to be approached casually or carelessly. There is a huge emphasis on how the people are to worship and how they may approach God. I wonder if sometimes we are too casual in how we gather for worship. We are thinking of reinstating the practice of holding a time of silence as we prepare for worship.

- Finally, God is **just**, so there are consequences when God's ways are not followed. This theme of justice plays an important part in the life of the Uniting Church. It's why the Uniting Church is supporting the Yes case in the upcoming referendum, why it supports action on asylum seekers and climate change and why it urges restrictions on gambling and gambling advertising. These are all justice issues that stem from the just character of God.

But I need to stop. What I have tried to do is to illustrate for you that there are different ways of approaching and interpreting the Bible, each of which sheds light on the passages we read.

[We may want to object that Exodus is perhaps more legend than accurate history, but that's not how the Jewish people hear and interpret these stories. They represent the foundational story for Israel and for Israel's God, Yahweh, who is to be known as 'I am'.]

We're now going to sing what is a favourite hymn for many, namely **Guide me O thou great Redeemer**.

The imagery of this hymn is nearly **all** taken from **Exodus** – celebrating the God who is Redeemer, the God who is almighty and powerful, the God who feeds us with bread from heaven, the God who makes living water flow from the rock, who leads the people with a cloudy pillar during the day and with fire by night and who encourages songs of praise to be sung.

So perhaps this hymn illustrates how much Israel's understanding of God flows through into our Christian understanding as well.