

A Passover for the Heart

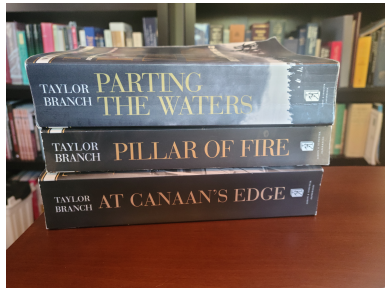
By Dr. Dave Neale

We have spent a couple of months in Genesis tracing the outlines of God's plan to establish a people. We looked at the three "cycles" that Genesis uses to show the path of promise. God promises a *people* and *land* to our forefather Abraham, and his progeny. Genesis covers four generations of the first family of faith.

We come today to story of the ninth plague that led Pharaoh to finally "let my people go!"

The Exodus is the greatest liberation story in all of history. The theme of freedom from bondage inspires all people, everywhere, to strive for release from their oppressors. What a word! Liberation!

Taylor Branch has written the definitive historical account of the American Civil Rights Movement. His three-volume tome documents the exodus of American Black people, from 1954, when Rosa Parks refused to sit in the back of the bus in Montgomery Alabama, to 1968 and the passing of the Civil Rights Act by Lyndon Johnson.



Reading it is a bit of an undertaking (highly recommended), but it has forever changed my consciousness about racial discrimination and the brave men and women who fought to secure equality. Martin Luther King Jr. constantly evoked the Exodus in his speeches. The Branch volumes are entitled *Parting the Waters*, *Pillar of Fire* and *At Canaan's Edge*.

The Exodus continues to inspire liberation movements.

Behind the Text

The dates for Abraham and his several generations are not known for a certainty, but 2000-1800 BCE are most likely.

The name of the Book of Exodus is שמות , *waleh shmot*, "these are the names." The names of those who came down to the land of Egypt with Jacob, Joseph and his brothers, seventy people. Seventy people was about the average size of a tribe.

It is in Exodus 1 that we learn that, after Joseph's death in Egypt, this tiny tribe and grown to become ***prolific*** in number ***...and exceedingly strong***. (Ex 1:7)

The people of Israel languish in bondage for several centuries. While no Egyptian record of this people and their escape from bondage, most scholars say there is little doubt of the historicity of the event and point to a window of 1350-1200 BCE for the rise of Moses.¹

Four hundred years between Joseph and Moses – a long time.

There arose a “new Pharaoh” in Egypt who enslaves the Israelites. ***But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.*** (Ex 1:12)

Back when I was the Executive Director of Campus Manitoba I had worked on a large collaborative project with the public universities and colleges of the province to implement a new transfer credit database – based on BC’s model actually.

A “new Pharaoh” arose following an election in the form of a new Minister of Advanced Education and his rapacious Deputy Minister, who knew Dave Neale not, and promptly canceled my project (and many others) at the eleventh hour. Oh, how I wished the Red Sea had opened up and swallowed them all!

In the Text

Two great themes dominate the book of Exodus. The departure from Egypt into the wilderness (Ex 1-18), and the giving of the Law (19-40, we will talk about the Ten Commandments on October 8).

Towering over both of these themes is the great liberator and law giver, Moses, known to us only as the son of ***a man from the house of Levi*** (Ex 2:1).

Neither he nor his mother’s name are made known to us. His truly and simply a son of the Israelites – a nobody Israelite who become, like his predecessor Joseph, a prince among the Egyptians.²

Then the Lord says to Moses, ***“...I will bring you into the land that I swore to give Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession. I am the Lord.” Moses told this to the Israelites; but they would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery.*** (Ex 6:7-9)

The cruel realities of life can sometimes block out our understanding and recall of God’s promise to keep us and bless us. The people had probably long forgotten the promise to Abraham. People forget. God does not.

We come today to the story of the ninth plague that led Pharaoh to finally “let my people go!”

At the first Passover (Ex 12:1-30) the blood of the sacrificed lamb on the doorways of Israelite homes protects the faithful from the judgment of death. The blood of a sacrifice was the portion of the god, so this is God’s presence, as it were, on the lintels of their homes.

When the Lord sees the blood he does not harm those within the home.”³ The theme is

- a) protection from the “destroyer” (you shall not die)
- b) liberation (you shall flee to freedom this very night).

From the Text

The first Passover was the most important redemptive event in early Israelite history, and the Passover death of Jesus is the most important redemptive event of Christian history.⁴

What meaning, if any, does Passover have for us as modern Christians? Thus, the title of the message that we seek a Passover for the heart!

The New Testament doesn't say anything about the meaning of Passover, except to tell us that it was at *this* festival that Jesus was tried and crucified.

Jesus said, ***"I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God."*** Then he took the cup... (Luke 22:15-17) ⁵

There is a sense in which Passover is to the Judaism as Communion is to Christianity – a holy meal of union with one another and with God.

It fell to Paul 30 years later to draw a theological connection between the fact that Jesus was crucified at Passover and the *meaning* of his death and resurrection.

For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. (1 Cor 5:7) This is a fascinating theological assertion. ⁶

This doesn't refer to an atoning significance of Jesus' death. John the Baptist said, ***Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.***

But if Paul had intended to speak of atonement he would have referenced the Day of Atonement in Judaism. It is an allusion to the two main ideas of the Exodus: protection from death and liberation from slavery.

How so?

First let's deal with the protection from death.

In Passover, the ninth plague *broke* the resolve of Pharaoh. By means of the Passover meal and the placing of blood on the lintels of their homes, the death that was visited on first-born sons was averted for the Israelites.

Hebrews 11:28 ***By faith he [Moses] kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.***⁷

Jesus is our Pascal Lamb in that he broke the bondage to death. We too have a Passover from the hopelessness of death. Because our faith is centered on a resurrected Jesus, who became the ***firstborn from the dead*** (Col 1:18).

It doesn't mean we don't die, or that we don't get sick or experience tragedy even. It means that underlying every human experience, the Christian perspective teaches us there is a floor of hope and life to come! Death has lost its ultimate sway in our lives.

This is, for us, a real Passover for the soul.

Now let's talk about liberation.

In Passover, the ninth plague *broke* the resolve of Pharaoh and led to their *release* from the bondage of slavery – liberation – freedom.

In Egypt it was actual slavery. For the Christian it is slavery, but now slavery to sin and futile ways. We have been liberated from the futility of a hopeless life!

1 Corinthians goes on, ***Our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.*** (1 Cor 5:7-8)

Christ offers us a life in which sincerity and truth are the ultimate goal. I wish we would just pause in all the hype and reflect on how simple and joyous that idea is. Not malice. Not evil. But sincerity and truth.

For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit to again to a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1)

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Benediction

And now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory... before all time and now and forever. Amen (Jude 24-25)

¹ Ex 12:40 says ***The time that the Israelites had lived in Egypt was four hundred thirty years. At the end of four hundred thirty years, on that very day, all the companies of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt.***

² Of Moses it was said ***he was a man of great importance in the land of Egypt, in the sight of Pharaoh's officials and in the sight of the people.*** (Ex 11:3b)

³ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery (DBI)*, p. 55.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 629.

⁵ *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol VI, p. 763. By the time of Jesus, Jews would go up to Jerusalem to partake the Passover. "We can understand how the heightened experience of departing from home and normal social structures and going on pilgrimage amidst throngs of pilgrims would cause people to abandon their usual approach to the world and open themselves to new experiences, in this case the communal experience of the sacred.

⁶ This is also an allusion to Passover: 1 Peter 1:18-19: ***...with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. ...you were ransomed from the futile ways...***

⁷ ***Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, Hebrews goes on to reason, ...lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather healed.*** (Heb 12:1 and 12)