

C. The Theocracy

Toward His declared goal of recovering His creation from the curse, God had called out a man and pledged to him a kingdom. Abraham would become a great nation and that nation would inhabit the land of Canaan. Canaan was to be a kingdom land – not merely the inhabitation of Abraham’s covenant descendents, but the dwelling place of the great King Himself. It was to be the place where God would again dwell in the midst of His people and commune with them; Canaan was to be an expression of the restoration of sacred space.

1. Background of the Exodus

God promised Abraham that He would make him great and that his own personal greatness would extend to his descendents. Genesis chronicles Abraham’s rise to greatness under the covenant and the transference of his distinction to his son and grandson. The *man* Israel assumed his grandfather’s eminence, but it eluded his immediate descendents. Far from perpetuating their father’s greatness, Jacob’s sons went into exile in Egypt and there the covenant family was soon plunged into oppression, degradation, and ignominy. examine

- a. But this circumstance is exactly what God had revealed to Abraham. He would indeed make Abraham’s descendents into a great nation and establish them as a covenant kingdom in the land of Canaan. But this would come about in connection with four hundred years of enslavement outside the promised land. God would fulfill His covenant promises in the context of Egyptian bondage. This phenomenon highlights two principles that are foundational and vitally important to the Old Testament’s gospel revelation:
 - 1) The first is the unilateral nature of the covenant promises and their fulfillment. As nothing in Abraham had provoked God’s promises to him, so the circumstance experienced by his descendents in Egypt left them in no position whatsoever to secure or even influence their own well-being. Their subjugation and oppression at the hand of the mighty Egyptian empire rendered them powerless and without any personal remedy or hope. If the covenant oath to Abraham were to be fulfilled, it would be solely through God’s supernatural power and provision.
 - 2) God had unilaterally pledged to make Israel a great nation, and the fulfillment of that promise was to be equally one-sided. Israel would attain to its covenant greatness in a miraculous way – in the context of cruel slavery. Everything in the Egyptian experience was structured and positioned to destroy the covenant seed, and yet their progress toward fulfillment of the covenant promises continued unhindered. The more the Egyptians oppressed and afflicted them, the more they thrived and triumphed. As they increased in number and flourished they also gained psychological advantage. In the midst of their enslavement Israel’s subjugators became increasingly terrified of them (Exodus 1:8-12).

- b. The Egyptians clearly discerned what was happening with the Hebrews and it filled them with dread. For their part, the sons of Israel were much more aware of their own miraculous preservation and increase, but their hardship led them to forsake their God. The Exodus account reveals little about Israel's religious consciousness and conviction during those centuries, but it does provide a startling portrait when taken together with other Old Testament contexts.

Exodus records that the people groaned and cried out in the agony of their affliction, but it never states that they called out to God (cf. 2:23). Ezekiel provides important perspective for the Exodus content by noting that the children of Israel worshipped the gods of Egypt during their sojourn in that land. Interestingly, God also stated through his prophet that He had chosen Israel and revealed Himself to the people *while they were in Egypt* (20:3-8).

The implication is that they had departed from God during the time of their enslavement – covenantally as well as psychologically. Abraham's offspring had forgotten their God and become indistinguishable from their Egyptian masters in their religious convictions and practice. Thus God's fulfillment of His promise to Abraham required that He renew His relationship with Israel by again taking them as covenant sons ("choosing" them) and then revealing Himself to them as He had done with the patriarchs centuries earlier.

Thus the Ezekiel text pointedly emphasizes the *divine initiative* in Israel's deliverance (20:9-10), and this is reinforced by the book of Exodus. For repeatedly in that narrative God insists that He had taken note of Israel's cries and remembered His covenant with the patriarchs though they, having forsaken Him, were not directing their outcry to Him (cf. 2:23-25, 3:6-10, 16-17, 6:5, etc.).

And so both the *external* and *internal* aspects of Israel's existence in Egypt highlight the sovereign and unilateral nature of the covenant and its fulfillment. On the one hand, the Egyptians sought to psychologically and physically decimate Abraham's descendents; on the other, the people's own unbelief and apostasy jeopardized the covenant.

2. The Significance of the Exodus

Within Old Testament revelation the Egyptian Exodus holds a place of great prominence. The reason is that it was foundational to Israel's national existence and provided a key component of the nation's identity and collective psyche. The Exodus was fundamental to Israel's sense of itself, its relation to God, and its purpose in the world.

And in that Israel itself was ordained by God to play a crucial role in the developing revelation of redemption and its ultimate accomplishment in Jesus Christ, it follows that Israel's deliverance from Egyptian bondage should have *salvation-historical* as well as *historical* significance. In other words, it should be important to the final outcome that Israel and its historical existence portrayed and prepared for as much as to Israel's national life as God's Old Covenant people. This is exactly what the Scripture reveals.

- a. In terms of its historical significance, the Exodus set the stage for God's fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant as it regarded his physical offspring. If the descendants of the patriarchs were to inherit the land of Canaan and possess it as a great nation they would first have to be delivered from Egypt. Thus the Exodus was the foundation for the establishment of the covenant kingdom promised to Abraham (Exodus 2:24-3:17). This, in turn, is the reason the biblical narrative presents Sinai as the focal point of the Exodus (cf. 3:11-12 with 19:1-6), and so also of Israel's national existence as Abraham's covenant seed. For, at Sinai Israel was formally constituted a covenant nation and joined to Yahweh as His "son." The Sinai covenant attested and administered Israel's identity as Abraham's seed.

- b. The Abrahamic Covenant had its first point of reference in the nation of Israel and its inheritance of the land of Canaan. But both Israel's failure under the covenant and the clear testimony of the Scripture indicate that God intended a larger, spiritual purpose for it. *The fulfillment of the covenant promises in relation to national Israel served to further reveal and prepare for the ultimate fulfillment that would come in the true "Israel" Jesus Christ.* This promise/fulfillment relationship means that the historical relevance of the Exodus provides important insight into its salvation-historical significance. And what the Old Testament reveals is that Israel's deliverance from Egypt – toward fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham – was directed toward the recovery of sacred space.

The core consequence of the Fall was estrangement between God and His image-bearer, and this was attested by man's expulsion from God's garden-sanctuary. Given that man was created to be God's son, the remediation of the curse necessarily involves divine-human reconciliation: For God to fulfill His oath in Eden He would have to restore mankind to Himself; He would have to recover sacred space. This is precisely what Canaan represented as the goal of Israel's deliverance and constitution as a nation. The Abrahamic Covenant carried forward God's Edenic oath, and therefore held out the promise of a kingdom land where God and men would dwell together in covenant fellowship.

This truth is made explicit by the *Song of Moses* recorded in Exodus 15. It is a poem that rehearses Israel's redemption from Egypt and thereby acted as a song of celebration and commemoration for the fledgling nation. But more importantly, it served to explain to Israel and her future generations the meaning of the Exodus. The song is partitioned into two main sections: The first celebrates Yahweh's absolute triumph over the powers of Egypt (vv. 1-12), while the second reveals God's goal in delivering His people.

In redeeming Israel, the Lord plundered Egypt's wealth and devastated her power. In this way He showed Himself to be the great God, greater than the gods of Egypt, even the pharaoh himself. But God's intention was other than merely displaying His power. He had delivered Israel, not as *El Shaddai* ("God Almighty") but as *Yahweh*, the covenant God and Father of His elect son in order that He should take His son to Himself (cf. Exodus 3:13-14, 4:21-22, 6:2-8).

The Song of Moses reveals that God's goal in redeeming His son from his enslavement was *covenant fellowship*:

- 1) Yahweh stretched forth His right hand to destroy the oppressors of His people and thereby liberate them (v. 12). But this liberation was an act of *redemption*: God didn't merely free His son; He purchased him from his captivity at the price of Egypt's first-born and the blood of the Passover.
- 2) Moreover, the Lord didn't do so out of necessity or compulsion, but out of *lovingkindness* (v. 13a). This Hebrew noun (*hesed*) takes on crucial significance in relation to the concept of covenant. It speaks of a committed love that expresses itself in covenant (relational) fidelity. In this particular context it is the love of Yahweh, the covenant Father, for His covenant son (cf. Hosea 11:1). Later the concept of *hesed* would be extended to encompass the metaphor of love between a husband and wife; Yahweh would remain the ever-faithful covenant husband while Israel became the adulterous wife (cf. Isaiah 50:1, 54:1-8; Jeremiah 2:1-3; Ezekiel 16:1-63; Hosea 1:1-2:20; cf. also Jeremiah 31:31-32).

While still in Egypt God had chosen Israel as His elect son (ref. again Exodus 4:22 and Ezekiel 20:5-6), so that His act of deliverance in "lovingkindness" only testified to His commitment to that relationship. William Dumbrell notes: "*The point has been made that the word **hesed** is not applicable to the establishment of a relationship, but reflects rather fidelity and loyalty to an existing relationship. The aim of the **hesed** exhibited is to preserve the tenor of the relationship which already exists.*" (Covenant and Creation)

- 3) Yahweh brought His son out of Egypt as an expression of relational commitment, and He did so for the purpose of leading him as a caring shepherd to His pasture, His own "holy habitation" (v. 13b). No enemy would be able to prevent Israel's inheriting the land promised to the patriarchs (vv. 14-16) – not so much because God is truthful, but because He is *faithful*. That is to say, Yahweh would surely lead Israel into Canaan because Israel was His covenant son and He desired that His son should be with Him in His own habitation. God wasn't leading Israel to a *place* as much as to *Himself* (v.17).

Canaan spoke of the recovery of sacred space and, with it, the restoration of the kingdom of God (v. 18). God had created Adam as His image-son to be His vice-regent, ruling over the works of His hands in His name and for His sake. Man was created to exercise his Father's dominion in the context of intimate communion. Thus Israel's possession of the covenant land typified man's return to Eden's intimacy and regal glory. It spoke of man's restoration to God's sanctuary throne. By an act of divine redemption motivated by sovereign love, Yahweh's son would again dwell in the presence of his Creator-Lord in His holy sanctuary.