

## FREEDOM

### Exodus – A Paradigm of Liberation?

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The Book of Exodus is very often used by liberation theologians as a lasting paradigm of freedom from all sorts of oppression. Nevertheless, Exodus is not a story simply telling how God hates oppression and delivers the oppressed. It begs the question whether God would free Pharaoh's slaves if they were not the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, with whom God made a covenant.

*During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel and God knew. (Exod 2:23-25)*

The text shows that Israel is redeemed not simply because of her suffering, but because of her covenantal relationship with God. Only Israel, but no other slaves of Pharaoh, is delivered from Egypt. It does not mean that Exodus is not about liberation. Rather, the point of the Exodus is lost if we reduce it to a story of liberation from slavery without recognising its theological context.

The real purpose of the Exodus can be seen in Moses' speech to Pharaoh, 'Let My people go, that they may serve Me' (Exod 7:16; 8:1). The Exodus is not simply about freedom, but God's calling His people back to their covenantal relationship with Him. Paradoxically, it moves from one form of servitude to another—to a form of servitude that emancipates and liberates. Israel is liberated from the degrading bondage of the brutal Pharaoh for the endless service of the loving God, who remembers His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This idea of liberation involves a change of masters—the slaves of Pharaoh become the slaves of Yahweh. Lev 25:55 makes it clear:

*For it is to me that the people of Israel are servants [or "slaves"]. They are my servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.*

God, and no one else, is the master of the Israelites. For similar reason, land may not be sold in perpetuity because it belongs to God only (Lev 25:23-24). This shows that God is the only master of His people. Compared with the service to Pharaoh, the covenantal service to Yahweh in turn leads to life (Deut 30:19). In summary, the Exodus paradigm should involve the commitment to God.

However, the Exodus paradigm carries with it responsibilities. Should the God-given freedom be abused, we see another divine response—the Exile paradigm—a return to bondage because of the failure to serve Yahweh. Let us remember that if liberation is the only message of the Old Testament, we may encounter disappointment in God when our expected “Exodus” does not happen in times of great affliction.

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