



# Retelling the Exodus

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After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

—Exodus 2:23–25

There is no end to imaginative retellings of the Exodus story. Those began already in the Bible itself, and they continue in popular culture. In the Bible, Ps 105 and Ps 106 (to which we will return) are prime examples of narrative imagination at work. Each psalm offers its own distinct telling of the exodus account, from Israel's positive testimony in Ps 105 to their unhappy and recurrent confession of sin in Ps 106. Harmonizing the two psalms with each other and, in turn, with the book of Exodus should not be our goal. That will merely produce a fourth, extrabiblical account, and, in the end, we would likely be no closer to an "original" narrative. The diversity of narration evidenced by Ps 105 and Ps 106 might, however, free us to read the book of Exodus differently. That book is itself but one telling of the exodus event. Indeed, if there is any remnant of truth to the theories of multiple prior "authors" such as J, E, D, or P, then even the canonical text of Exodus is already a retelling of prior narrations.

This essay is an experiment in reading the book of Exodus through the lens of

*In Exod 2:23–25, a theme paragraph for the entire book of Exodus, God hears, remembers, sees, and knows Israel's plight in Egypt. This hearing, remembering, seeing, and knowing initiate God's saving response. Tracing these four key verbs through the book provides one lens for understanding and imagining the narrative.*

one set of images and metaphors, namely, those of Exod 2:23–24: hearing, remembering, seeing, and knowing. Following these terms through the book of Exodus opens the way for divergent retellings of the exodus event.

As the reader arrives at Exod 2:23–25, the narrative has set up a fundamental problem that must be overcome, namely, Israel's oppression by Pharaoh. No enduring way forward has emerged in the narrative through 2:22. Even the successful subversive acts of the women have reached their end because Moses is out of the land. Israel can do no more than groan and cry out. It has no strength to employ. The one missing actor must come on stage; God must notice and act if Israel is to survive. God's promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in Genesis have been carried forward in the growth of Israel, but, without the active presence of God, that growth has become the catalyst to oppression. Israel's plight has to be addressed. All subsequent action in the first half of the book of Exodus is driven in response to Israel's condition of servitude. All philosophical and theological debates about the propriety of the plagues and about the fairness of hardening Pharaoh's heart must be framed by acknowledging Israel's plight. Their slavery appears to be permanently entrenched.

At precisely that point, the narrative shifts. "Precisely" may not be the best adverb because Exod 2:23 notes that there was a long gap ("many days") between Moses settling in with Reuel and the death of the king of Egypt. The king dies... and Israel groans. They groaned, cried out, and "out of their slavery their cry for help rose up to God." Israel finally verbalizes the suffering. The narrator states it three ways, as if to emphasize their desperateness. Now, at last, God becomes an overt observer. Four verbs describe God's engagement: *hear*, *remember*, *see*, and *know*. Up to this point, three of these four verbs have already made an appearance. Pharaoh *heard* of Moses's murder of an Egyptian, and he also did not *know* Joseph. Moses's mother *saw* the child was good. The daughter of Pharaoh *saw* the basket and the child in it. Moses *saw* the forced labor and the beating of a Hebrew slave. Each acted in response to what they saw. *Remember* is the only verb that has not previously occurred.

That God *remembers* may be the narrator's most striking term, for it could imply that God could have or had forgotten. The oppression that Israel was enduring was—to draw out the inherent metaphor—the experience of the absence or distance of God. Yet, God does specifically *remember* the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, which underscores the links the narrator had forged with Genesis in Exod 1. A decisive counterforce is now set against Egyptian oppression. The plot now moves beyond the short-term success of the actions of the women and the failed rebellious act of Moses. God's *hearing*, *remembering*, *seeing*, and *knowing* sets in motion God's acts on behalf of a people with nothing to wield except their vocal cords, now groaning in pain. Each of the four verbs used to describe God's engagement ripples into broader themes in the book and then into the Psalter's—and our—reimagining of the exodus.

## HEARING

*Hearing* can simply mean to receive a report, but its semantic range also includes to listen to or to obey. Among those who *hear* in Exodus are Reuel/Jethro, Moses, Pharaoh, the peoples, the people of Israel and, most importantly, God. Jethro, for example, has *heard* the report of what God has done for Israel, and Moses listens to (*hears*) his father-in-law's advice (18:19, 24). These instances of *hearing* are straightforward. Israel's reported *hearing* is less so. Whether or not Israel will listen to (*hear*) Moses is discussed repeatedly before Moses goes back to Egypt (3:18; 4:1, 8, 9). In 3:18, God promises that the people will listen to (*hear*) Moses. Moses, however, theorizes that the people will not listen to (*hear*) him (4:1, 8, 9).

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Whether or not they will *believe* Moses is coupled with *hearing* in these instances. *Believing* Moses becomes a significant pre- and post-exodus marker. In 4:31, when the people *heard* from Moses that the Lord has *visited* (“given heed to” [NRSV]) Israel and has *seen* their misery, they *believe* and worship. Earlier God had directed Moses to tell the elders of Israel, “I have given heed to you and to what has been done to you in Egypt” (3:16). In 14:31, when they are outside of Egypt and free, they *see* the work of the Lord against the Egyptians and *believe* in the Lord and his servant Moses. And later at Sinai, the Lord will speak to Moses in the people's *hearing* so that they trust (*believe*) Moses (19:9). *Hearing* and *believing* are linked, but not automatically. In 6:9, the people do not listen to (*hear*) Moses because of their broken spirits and the cruelty of their slavery—which also means that the action set in motion by God's *hearing*, *remembering*, *seeing*, and *knowing* has not been completed. Israel's *hearing*, in the sense of obedience, is inhibited by the incompleteness of God's work. God's *hearing* and Israel's *hearing* are connected.

Pharaoh is another *hearer*. Most references state that he does not *hear* in the sense of not listening to or obeying. First, he responds to Moses' request: “Who is the LORD, that I should heed (*hear*) him and let Israel go? I do not *know* the LORD, and I will not let Israel go” (5:2). Moses' counterassertion is that the Lord is performing wonders so that Pharaoh (and the Egyptians) will *know* the Lord. Pharaoh does not listen (*hear*) after the plagues end, and increasingly the text asserts that God's agenda is to become *known* in addition to bringing Israel out of Egypt. There is a battle between Pharaoh's refusal to *hear* and God's goal to be *known*.

But the key *hearer* is God. Three times the narrative asserts that God *hears* the plight of Israel and each time *hearing* is combined with *remembering*, *seeing*, and *knowing*. In 2:23, Israel has groaned, cried out, and cried for help, and, in 2:24, God *hears*. The term for groaning in 2:24 occurs also in 6:5 where God again *hears* and

*remembers* the covenant. The connections between 2:24–25 and 6:5 are augmented by 3:7 where God asserts, “I have observed [*seen*] the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have *heard* their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed I *know* their suffering.” As with the three terms in 2:23, the term translated “suffering” in 3:7 occurs only here in the book of Exodus. “Misery,” however, occurs in 3:17, where God pledges to bring Israel up from the misery of Egypt, and in 4:31, which states that God has *visited* Israel and *seen* their misery. The term translated “cry” also occurs elsewhere. In 3:9, the cry has come to God. Later, Egypt is the one that cries out. An unprecedented cry comes from Egypt because of the death of the firstborn (11:6; 12:30). Yet one more twist occurs with God’s *hearing*. God’s positive *hearing* in 3:7 can, later in the book, become a hearing that operates against Israel. In the legal section of Exodus, Israel is instructed not to abuse the alien, widow, and orphan lest they cry out, for God will *hear* their cry and *kill* Israel (22:21–24; Heb 22:20–23). A parallel divine *hearing* occurs when a garment used as collateral is kept overnight and the victim cries out to God (22:27; Heb 22:26). Other occurrences of “crying out” create an additional interlinking web of contrasts.<sup>1</sup>

Tracing a single verbal root does not gather together all the “hearing” that occurs in the book of Exodus. Moses hears the directives of God for long stretches in the book (e.g., chaps. 26–31). Israel hears the voice of God announcing the commandments (primarily, 20:1–18) and Moses recounts to Israel what God announced to him. All of this encompasses hearing beyond the mere occurrences of the verb *hear* used as the first of four verbs in 2:24–25, and this describes the shift in God’s unfolding role in the book. Even so, that single verb interconnects with other terms to deepen our picture of God’s engagement, including engagement against Israel when it abuses others in its midst.

## REMEMBERING

Tracing *remember*, the second of the four verbs in 2:24–25, yields additional contrasting perspectives. In 6:5, God *remembers* the covenant as well as *hears* the groaning of Israel, paralleling 2:24. *Remembering*, however, does not preclude newness. In chapter 6, God’s *remembering* contrasts the divine name used previously in the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (6:3) with the new name now announced. Israel is also to engage in *remembering*. They are to *remember* the very day God brought them out of Egypt (13:3). This also provides a link back to chapter 6 where Moses introduces God as the one who brought them out from the burdens of Egypt.<sup>2</sup> It also creates a link forward to other references to being brought out of Egypt, most notably in the preface to the Ten Commandments (20:2). Israel is also charged with *remembering* the Sabbath. The Sabbath, in turn, creates an-

<sup>1</sup>Instances vary from Pharaoh mocking the cry of Israel to Israel crying to God at the Sea, to Moses crying to God when there is no water and when the people are almost ready to stone him. See Exod 5:8, 15; 8:12; 14:10, 15; 15:25; and 17:4.

<sup>2</sup>NRSV translates Exod 6:6 as “freeing” and thus misses the thread of *seeing* within the book.

other set of links throughout the book (primarily in chaps. 16 and 31, but also as early as 5:5 where Pharaoh expresses disbelief that a cessation [sabbath] from work is being requested).

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Most startling, however, is Moses turning *remembering* back at God: “Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever’” (32:13). In 2:23–24, God had *remembered* the covenant upon hearing Israel’s groaning; here, Moses directly demands that God *remember* God’s own deed of swearing an oath. The verb used to urge Israel’s confession of faith from generation to generation becomes the verb of petition directed to God. In parallel fashion, Moses demands in 33:13, “Consider [*see*] too that this nation is your people.” God had *seen* (2:25); now Moses demands that God *see*.

## SEEING

With the last paragraph we have already begun to examine the verb *see*, the third of the four verbs in 2:24–25. *See* occurs in Exodus at least eighty times—too many times to detail here. Instead, we will examine several prominent clusters of occurrences. There are, for example, straightforward uses such as Moses being *shown* (hiphil form of *see*) the plans for the tabernacle (25:9; 26:30; 27:8). More evocative (and perhaps confusing) are the references to *seeing* (24:10) or not *seeing* God (33:20, 23). In 3:2, the angel of the Lord appears (niphal form) to Moses in a flame of fire out of a bush; later, he is told to say to the elders of Israel, “The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me” (3:16; see also 4:1, 5, and 6:3). To *see* (qal form) God is not the same as God appearing (niphal form). There is a delicate balance between a proximity that is appropriate and one that is presumptuous, all of which underscores that God’s *seeing* in 2:25 is an indication of significant engagement.

Pharaoh’s *seeing* is coupled with a hardened heart. Reading across the span of the book of Exodus, the reader encounters here one more construal of the contest between God and Pharaoh as a battle over divinity, not an asymmetrical battle between God and a human. When Pharaoh *sees* that plagues have subsided, he breaks his pledge (8:15; 9:34). In a late exchange with Moses, Pharaoh demands that Moses leave with the threat that “on the day you *see* my face you will die” (10:28). Compare that with God’s refusal to show (hiphal form) Moses God’s face: “You cannot *see* my face: no one can see my face and live” (33:20).

Israel *sees* in diverse and inconsistent ways. At the Sea they glance back and see the approaching Egyptians and panic. In response, Moses tells them to stand still and *see* the deliverance of the Lord. The Egyptians that they *see*, they will never *see* again (14:13)—except of course they do *see* them the next morning, dead on the seashore (14:30). In this, they *see* the act of God against the Egyptians (14:31). The text also states that they “feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses”; the word *believe* loops us back to a significant concern of chapter 4. After the deliverance at the Sea, Israel will need to *see* the glory of the Lord in the provision of manna (16:7). What they have *seen* God do to the Egyptians and through God’s leading them should result in obedience and recognition that they are God’s treasured possession, a priestly kingdom and a holy nation (19:4–6). But when they *see* (and *hear!*) the thunder and lightning that accompanied God’s speaking at Sinai (19:16), they react in a manner reminiscent of their response to the approaching Egyptians at the Sea. Later their reaction to not *seeing* Moses leads to a tragic misinterpretation and subsequent set of actions (see Exod 32). Small wonder then that the narrator reports that God did not lead the people to direct engagement with the Philistines, because, God surmised, if they were to *see* war, they would want to head right back to Egypt (13:17). Yet, in the last verse of the book the Lord is present before the eyes of all the house of Israel in the cloud, fire, and tabernacle (40:38).

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God’s *seeing*, first mentioned in 2:25, is reiterated in two other descriptions of God’s recognition of Israel’s plight. In 3:9, God says to Moses that God has *seen* how the Egyptians oppress them. In 4:31, the people *believe* upon hearing the words and signs given by God to Moses. *Hearing* that God had *seen* their misery, they worship. Later, God’s *seeing* becomes crucial to Israel’s survival: if God does not *see* the blood on the doorpost, the result will be deadly for Israel (12:13, 23). In the golden calf episode, there is a struggle over God’s perception. Where God *sees* a stiff-necked people (32:9), Moses in the next chapter demands that God instead *see* God’s own people (33:13). In addition, the vocabulary of sight is also part of Moses’ conversation with God as he seeks to find favor in the eyes of God (33:13, 16, 17).

## KNOWING

The last of the four verbs in 2:24–25 is *know*. As with the other four, it is sometimes used as a matter of fact. In 2:14, Moses recognizes that his murder of an Egyptian is *known*. Israel does not *know* what the manna is (16:15). Equally

straightforward are the statements that God *knows* Aaron can speak better than Moses (4:14) and God *knows* that Pharaoh will not release the people (3:19). In 2:25, the Hebrew is terse: “God knew.” From the context it is clear that what God now *knows* is the suffering of Israel. In 3:7, the suffering is explicitly mentioned; God *sees, hears, and knows* their misery. Thereafter, knowing spreads to other characters in the narrative. Early on, an interesting contrast is set up between 5:2 and 6:3. In 5:2, Pharaoh asks, “I do not *know* the LORD, and I will not let Israel go.” According to 6:2, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob also did not *know* who the Lord was; God was known to them by the name God Almighty (*El Shaddai*). At the narrative level, Israel comes to *know* the name “Lord” after Pharaoh’s assertion.

Moving forward in the narrative, both the Egyptians and the Israelites come to *know* the Lord. There is overlap in what the Egyptians and Israelites come to *know*: “I am the LORD” is directed to both. Both are told there will be an exodus. However, what follows from the assertion “I am the LORD” is different; God will act to free Israel *from* the burden of the Egyptians and *against* the burdening Egyptians. Regarding Israel, it is stated, “You shall *know* that I am the LORD your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians” (6:7). In contrast, when Egypt is addressed, there is, first of all, no pronominal relationship (there is no “your God” after “I am the LORD”) and second, God is against them. For example, Exod 7:5 states, “The Egyptians shall *know* that I am the LORD, when I stretch out my hand against them.” There is progression in what the Egyptians will come to *know*:

1. there is no one like the Lord (8:10)
2. there is no one like the Lord in all the earth (9:14)
3. all the earth is the Lord’s (9:29).

The Egyptians will *know* the Lord when the Lord gains glory over them (14:4, 8). They will *know* that the Lord is in the land of Goshen (8:22), but against the land of Egypt. Israel will also come to *know* the distinction (11:7).

Israel’s learning, however, is not over when they move out of Egypt. With the provision of manna, Israel will once again come to *know* that the Lord is the one who brought them out of the land of Egypt (16:6) and who is their God (16:12).<sup>3</sup> In legal material, this verb, as with the verb *hear*, should shape Israel’s conduct: “You shall not oppress a resident alien; you *know* the heart of an alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (23:9).

Later, *knowing* becomes contentious as it is intertwined with presence. At the end of the instructions for Aaron’s ordination, God declares to Moses, “I will dwell among the Israelites, and I will be their God. And they shall *know* that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them; I am the LORD their God” (29:45–46). Although the future tense is

<sup>3</sup>Admittedly the verb *know* is not present, but the preface to the Ten Commandment repeats the assertion “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt” (20:2).

used, and thus coming to know God appears to be a continuing process for Israel, a reader could readily conclude that the crescendo has been reached. However, it unravels quickly in the golden calf episode. The people claim not to *know* what has become of Moses (32:1, 23).

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God steps back to decide (*know*) what to do with the people. Moses, however, presses to find out whether or not God *knows* him by name (33:12). If he is so known, he will also *know* to have found favor with God (33:13, 16). Finally, God assures him that God *knows* him by name (33:17). In different and shifting ways, Israel, Moses, Pharaoh, the Egyptians, and God all *know* in the book of Exodus. It is a long narrative journey from a king who did not *know* Joseph to God's knowing Moses (and by extension, Israel) by name.

#### REIMAGINING THE EXODUS IN THE PSALMS

Examining *hearing*, *remembering*, *seeing*, and *knowing*, starting with their combined occurrence in 2:24–25, has provided us with multiple pathways through large sections of the book of Exodus. None of the terms creates an exhaustive narrative, but each one provides a lens through which the larger story can be experienced. They ripple out into interlocking and contrasting themes. Much of the foreshadowing irony encountered in Exod 1:1–2:22 is carried forward by these four verbs. With 2:23–25, there is a dramatic shift in the narrative as God becomes involved. Much of God's subsequent involvement and its ramifications is captured in these four verbs. They are central thematic verbs for the book. In compositional terms, we might even assert that 2:23–25 is the theme paragraph for the entire composition.

These themes emerge later in the Psalms. *Hearing*, *remembering*, *seeing*, and *knowing* appear in Pss 105 and 106 in varying degrees. Psalm 105 makes no reference to either Israel's lament or shortcomings. Of the four verbs, only *remember* plays a significant role. God is characterized as a *remembering* God. God remembers the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob forever, for a thousand generations (105:8–10; the NRSV translates *remember* as "mindful"). There is no sense of an abrupt shift as in the book of Exodus. Thus, providing water in the wilderness becomes an example of constant attending to Israel's needs (105:40–42). Israel is urged, in turn, to continually *remember* the wonderful works of God (105:5). If we were to seek a theme sentence for Ps 105 from the book of Exodus, we would need something like the praise of the Song of the Sea (Exod 15:1–18) rather than the groaning of 2:23–25.



Psalm 106 begins where Ps 105 ends, with “Praise the Lord!” but then it takes a decidedly different turn, focusing on Israel’s lack of appropriate response to God’s deliverance. The psalmist pleads to be *remembered* (106:4) so that the psalmist might *see* goodness for the chosen ones (v. 5). The psalmist confesses that historically the community has not *remembered* (v. 7); they did not obey (*hear*) the voice of the Lord (v. 25). Strikingly, three of the four verbs we traced in the book of Exodus converge near the end of the Psalm: “Nevertheless, he regarded (*see*) their distress when he *heard* their cry. For their sake he *remembered* his covenant” (vv. 44–45). The psalmist places the reader at the pivot of Exod 2:23–25. Only now, this is not just past narration. There is a direct move to the present, coming in the form of a petition: “Save us, O LORD our God, and gather us from among the nations” (106:47). In a sense, Ps 106 calls for a new exodus. It invites reading the book of Exodus from the vantage point of a petitioner.

In the Psalter, as we see, the exodus gives rise both to praise and repentance. The story functions differently in different contexts—as it does elsewhere in so many biblical texts. The exodus, as the central saving event in the Old Testament, is retold and reimagined in generation after generation of Israel, providing us with plenty of warrant for our own imaginative retelling of that story. With Israel—and with God—we are invited to hear, to remember, to see, and to know in new ways. ⊕

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