



## THE BOOK OF EXODUS

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### LESSON 11– STUDY QUESTIONS EXODUS 12:37-49; 13:11-16

#### DAY ONE

1. What thoughts about the Israelites' release from captivity from the commentary and reflection have stayed with you this week?

#### Read Exodus 12:37-39

2a. According to historians, Rameses and Succoth were supply cities. What does verse 37 say about them?

b. Locate these cities on a map. Where are they located in Egypt?

3a. How many men were there in this group (verse 37)?

b. Women were not mentioned because women were not “counted” in biblical times or in biblical writings. Children were mentioned, but not counted. To get a modest estimate of the number of people that were setting out from Egypt, assume that each man had a wife and two children. How many Israelites might there have been in this Exodus?

**THINK: A football stadium, when full to capacity, can hold somewhere around 50,000 people. Picture that number of people in your mind. Now, consider 48 times that number of people traveling together.**

4. According to the beginning of verse 38, we're told that a “mixed crowd” was traveling with the Israelites. Who might these people have been and why might they have been leaving Egypt with this group?

5a. At the end of verse 38, we learn that the Israelites also took their livestock, both their flocks and their herds with them. What animals would this probably have included?

b. Moses would not lead his people out of Egypt until Pharaoh allowed them to take their livestock. List any reasons you can think of that made this such an important condition.

6. In verse 39, unleavened bread is again referenced. “They (the Israelites) baked unleavened cakes of the dough they had brought out of Egypt.” Record the reasons given for this.

7. CONNECTION: This passage contains many amazing facts – the vast number of people who left Egypt together is amazing. That their numbers included many non-Israelites is amazing. That they took with them a huge number of animals is amazing. And, *most* amazing is that Moses and the Israelites had begged Pharaoh to let them go and now, here they are . . . “driven out of Egypt.” Sometimes the answer to prayer comes in a most unexpected way and/or at an unprepared for time. Recall a situation where the answer to prayer came unexpectedly. Record some details here.

Read and record Luke 11:9 (good memory verse). God has good answers for all of your prayers, but when they come, will you be prepared? Let that thought lead you into prayer.

**DAY TWO**  
**Read Exodus 12:40-42**

8. According to verse 40, the Egyptians had held the Israelites captive for 430 YEARS and now they have expelled them! Think back to 430 years ago. What year would that have been? Consider the tremendous number of things that have happened during this time span. To get yourself oriented to what a long time 430 years is, record a few of the major happenings that occurred in the world between then and now.

9a. A **generation** has traditionally been defined as “the average interval of time between the birth of parents and the birth of their offspring.” This places a generation at around 20 years in a

span. Using 20 years as a generation, how many generations have come and gone since the Israelites first migrated to Egypt to escape starvation?

b. Verse 41 refers to “all the companies of the Lord.” The “companies” possibly refer to the descendents of the twelve tribes of Israel that came down to Egypt in the time of Joseph. Skim Genesis 49 and record the names of the heads of these “companies” / families you find in this chapter.

10a. In verse 42, we learn that the night before the Israelites left Egypt was a night of vigil. Look up and record the definition of the word “vigil” that applies in this context?

b. Consider the Easter vigil observed by the Church preceding the celebration of Jesus Resurrection on Easter Sunday. What similarities can you draw between the two vigils?

11. In the Catholic tradition, we continue to celebrate vigils. Record some of the feast days for which we celebrate vigils and why they are kept.

12. CONNECTION: In this passage we learn that the vigil of the Passover was both a beginning and an end. It was the end of the Jews’ slavery in Egypt and the first step of their momentous journey to the Promised Land. God commanded the people to get ready to set out on this life-changing endeavor by observing a night of prayer. He prepared them to meet their new life grounded in prayer.

We often dread the endings in our lives both because we don’t know what the future holds and because we hate to give up what is known and comfortable. TS Eliot once said, “The end is the beginning.” The end of childhood dependence is the beginning of adulthood’s independence. The end of a single life is the beginning of married life. The end of your earthly life is the beginning of your life with God. If we handle life with prayer, we will likely find that the last step of the old often leads into the first step of a new and wonderful adventure. Describe how you have found this to be true in your life.

Read and record 1 Thessalonians 5:16-17. (Good memory verse) Today, apply prayer to both your beginnings and your endings.

### DAY THREE

#### Read Exodus 12:43-46

13. The Lord continues to speak to Moses and Aaron. He gives them an ordinance for the Passover commemoration. According to verses 43-45, who could and could not participate in the Passover meal?

14. Circumcision was the mark appointed by God, to indicate that a man was a Jew, a member of God's people. Circumcision was a **sign** of the covenant God established with the Chosen people. Refer to Genesis 17:9-11. Paraphrase the conditions of this covenant.

b. With the coming of Jesus, the meaning of circumcision was re-interpreted. What does Paul write about circumcision in Romans 2:29?

15. Reread Exodus: 4:24-26. Moses' sons had not been circumcised prior to his journey back to Egypt. Even after his encounter with the burning bush, he had not deemed it necessary to circumcise his boys. What occurred on the way to meet Pharaoh and what significance do you think it had since you now know what happened to those who were not circumcised?

16. According to verse 46, where should the Passover meal be eaten and what restrictions are given concerning this place?

17. At the end of verse 46, the Lord gives Moses and Aaron a command that is a prophetic symbol of Jesus' (the Lamb of God's) death. Read and record John 19:36. What connection can you make between this verse and verse 46?

18. CONNECTION: We can find parallels between the description of the Passover feast in Egypt and the celebration of the Eucharistic meal in our Church today. Participating in the Passover meal was a sign of faith—only circumcised males and their families could participate. It was not to be taken lightly. Do we, as Catholics, take participation in the Eucharistic meal as seriously? Do we recognize and honor the real presence in the sacrament? CCC 1374: In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist “the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity” (both man and God) “of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, *the whole Christ is truly, really and substantially* contained.” (Council of Trent)

How can you receive the Body and Blood of our Pascal Lamb with more awe and reverence? How can you be more present and attentive when you participate in the Eucharistic celebration?

Read and record Luke 22:19. Write a prayer today, thanking Jesus, the Lamb of God, who gave His life for you and whose precious blood saved you.

#### **DAY FOUR**

##### **Read Exodus 12:47-49**

19. The Lord continues to give His commands to Moses and Aaron regarding the Passover celebration. What do you find in verse 47 that expresses the importance of commemorating the Passover?

20a. In the next verse, the Lord mentions another group of people. What word is used to categorize them?

b. Look up this word and record the definition that best defines it as used in this context.

21a. This group of people was not to be unconditionally excluded from the Passover celebration. Under what conditions could they partake of the meal (verse 48)?

b. After he meets these conditions, how does his status change?

22. At the end of verse 48, God re-emphasizes the non-negotiable requirement each man must meet in order to eat the Passover meal. What is it?

23a. God draws a clear distinction between the native and the alien residing in the Promised Land. What does verse 49 tell us about God's law concerning the Passover?

b. The requirement for the alien to be circumcised might evoke different reactions. Some might feel that it is a beautiful expression of inclusion that "an alien," who wants to celebrate the Passover of the Lord and be embraced as a native, can do so if circumcised. Others might question why an alien was required to be circumcised? What's your opinion and why?

**NOTE: To the Israelites, circumcision was a sign that one was part of a covenant relationship with God where the body wears the mark of this covenant. This symbolic act showed that the person recognized God as the author of life and intended to follow His commands. When an alien was circumcised, he was becoming a part of that covenant relationship. Participating in the Passover symbolized all of this. This is how the Catholic Church views participation in the Eucharist. It is a sign of being a part of the covenant family with all of its teachings, particularly concerning the Real presence. It is a sign of unity with the Church.**

24. CONNECTION: In the time of the Exodus, for the Israelites, God's law was the only law. Unlike the Israelites, we live in a world where there are two separate and distinct sets of laws. There are civil laws that govern our secular lives and there are God's laws that are to govern our spiritual lives. Which takes precedence in your life? How do you reconcile any inconsistencies that exist between the two? Give a specific example if you can.

The laws of the Lord are precious. God has given them to us to direct our ways. If we obey the commandments of God, there should be no conflicts between good, moral and just civil laws. Read and record Hebrews 10:16. Let these thoughts lead you into prayer.

#### **DAY FIVE**

##### **Read Exodus 13:11-13**

25. We skipped verses 1-10 of Chapter 13 which repeated the directives given to Moses and Aaron by the Lord pertaining to the celebration of the Passover once they reached the Promised Land. As today's passage opens, Moses is speaking to the Israelites of a promise the Lord made to them long ago. To what promise is he referring and to whom was the promise given? We learned of this promise in previous lessons. If you need to refresh your memory, refer to Genesis 15:18.

26a. How does Moses refer to the Promised Land in verse 11?

b. Who were these people and from whom were they descended? Refer to Genesis 9:18.

27a. In verse 12, Moses gives the people two very specific commands. Record them here.

b. Verse 12 refers to the firstborn of each Israelite family. What do you think it means to "set" this firstborn "apart?"

28a. In verse 13, God makes an exception. Donkeys were considered unclean, so their firstborn were not to be sacrificed. (If they were sacrificed, this would be an unclean offering.) What was to be done instead?

b. If this was not done, what were the people to do with the firstborn donkey?

29a. A new concept is introduced in verse 13—“redemption”. Look up the word “redeem” in a dictionary. Record all the definitions that could apply in this verse.

b. God spared the first-born male in each Israelite family at the Passover. Now, what direction is given by God through Moses in verse 13 regarding these spared firstborn males? Explain what this means to you.

30. Read Genesis 22:12-13. Just as Abraham was ready to slay his son Isaac, the Lord intervened. According to Genesis 22:12, what was God’s message to Abraham?

31. CONNECTION: Abraham “redeemed” his firstborn son with a lamb. The Israelites were to “redeem” their firstborn sons. And God “redeemed” His people with His firstborn Son. Abraham “did not withhold his son, his ONLY son”, from God. And God did not withhold His Son, His ONLY Son from us. GOD DID NOT SPARE HIS OWN SON, JESUS, THE LAMB, WHO REDEEMED THE WORLD. Spend some time reflecting on these words. What are you willing to sacrifice for God? Your money? Your possessions? Your home? Your popularity? Your loved ones? Record your thoughts.

Read and record John 3:16. (Good memory verse) Today, having studied this passage, the phrase “Jesus the Lamb of God” had renewed meaning for us. Begin your prayer in awe of this wonderful God who gave His only Son as a sacrifice for YOU.

**DAY SIX**  
**Read EXODUS 13:14-16**

32a. The Lord has given a very specific set of instructions to the Chosen People for the future. God makes clear His expectations even before they get to the Promised Land. He wants them to get their priorities straight. According to the first half of verse 14, what question will be asked by the children of the Israelites?

b. The father is to give the child a specific answer. The second sentence of verse 14 contains that answer. Record it here.

33a. In the beginning of verse 15, the father's answer to his child continues. He will tell of their ancestor's deliverance from Egypt. Summarize his response.

b. The last sentence of verse 15 refers to "sacrifice" and to "redemption". What will the father say is to be redeemed and what will be sacrificed?

34a. The people of God have been rescued and as a result, their lives will never be the same. What two parts of their bodies are to be marked to symbolize this marvelous truth according to verse 16?

b. That tradition continues to be observed by many practicing Jews. Look up Deuteronomy 11:18-21 and record the phrases that correspond to what is commanded in verse 16 of today's readings.

**NOTE: Words similar to these of the father and son in today's passage continue to be used today in the Jewish Seder meal to commemorate the Passover.**

35a. Verse 16 uses the word "emblem" Look up that word in a dictionary and record the definition that is pertinent to this passage.

b. Think of an emblem that has some kind of meaning in your life. Record it here with some details of why it has meaning for you.

**36. CONNECTION:** This passage ends with a line that tells what the Israelites are never to forget: "...that by the strength of hand, the Lord brought us out of Egypt." Spend some time thinking of ways you could complete the following.

"By strength of hand, the Lord has brought me out of"...

Read and record Psalm 89:13-14. God's own strong hand has been active in your life! Now write a prayer of thanksgiving and praise for all from which God has delivered you by the strength of His hand.





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**LESSON 11– COMMENTARY**  
**By Rev. Paul J. Niemann, D. Min.**  
**EXODUS 12:37-49; 13:11-16**

### **Exodus 12:37-39**

We now begin the first phase of the actual exodus, or departure, from Egypt. The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, that is, from the city, which they built as slaves, toward a place called Succoth, a Hebrew word meaning shelters or booths. Its exact location is unknown.

It is worth recalling that national boundaries were much less clear in ancient times than today. Natural features such as mountain ranges and seacoasts set some limits, but areas that were well-traveled, such as plains or broad river valleys, were continually disputed.<sup>1</sup> Areas with ready access to water were often “shared” by competing ethnic groups. The powerful empire of Egypt extended along the Mediterranean Sea east of the Nile Delta as far as the land of Canaan. Both sides of the Gulf of Suez were also under Egypt’s control; Egyptian copper mines were located in the Sinai Peninsula. If the Israelites lived in the area known as Goshen [Genesis 47:27], the eastern section of the Nile Delta, their departure from Egypt required much more than their stepping across a borderline. They had to flee far from every Egyptian settlement and outpost. There had to be some natural boundary to defend them from the power of Pharaoh. This boundary, as we shall see, is known as the Red Sea, which separates Egypt from the Arabian Peninsula (today’s Saudi Arabia). Exactly where Israel crossed this boundary is not clear. The text calls it *yam suf*, “a sea of reeds,” perhaps meaning the swamps near the Mediterranean Sea.

The story resumes by telling us the number of Israelite refugees: “about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children.” This is an entourage of nearly two million souls. There were others as well: a mixed crowd, meaning enslaved persons of other ethnic backgrounds who took advantage of the final plague to make their escape. Imagine the entire population of a major metropolitan area departing in one night!

Many theories have been proposed to explain this huge number. Some assume that the fertility of the Israelite women explains how seventy [1:5] could grow to 600,000 in 430 years. Others note that the Hebrew word for “thousand” (*elef*) also means “company” in the military sense. Thus, the large number means 600 extended family groups in the Exodus, a far more

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<sup>1</sup> The valley of Jezreel, for example, was guarded by the fortress of Megiddo. So many battles took place in this region that it came to symbolize war itself. The author of the New Testament book of Revelation describes the final battle between good and evil as taking place at “Armageddon,” from *har-Megiddo* (“Hill of Megiddo”).

manageable crowd. The only satisfactory explanation requires us to remember the nature of the Bible. Written in the days of David and Solomon, the Book of Exodus is the story of a nation's birth. How might Israel explain its very existence, as well as the presence of citizens unrelated by blood? The answer is simple: "we were all in Egypt, and the LORD brought us out, into this land." Thus, 600,000 men plus their wives and children is nothing less than the population of the kingdom of Solomon in 1000 B.C.

The next verse reminds us again of the suddenness of Israel's deliverance. Their only available food was the unleavened cakes of the dough that they had brought out of Egypt; the lack of leavening attributed to the fact that they were driven out of Egypt and could not wait.

### **Exodus 12:40-42**

Exodus 12:40 presents us with another problem of biblical arithmetic. Genesis 15:13-16 predicts that Abraham's descendants will be enslaved for 400 years, and then return to the land of Canaan in the fourth generation. Exodus 6:16-20 also recounts for us the four generations: Jacob was the father of Levi, Levi the father of Kohath, Kohath the father of Amram, Amram the father of Moses. This presumes about one hundred years per generation, three to four times the normal span. Four hundred and thirty years is closer to ten generations; indeed, I Chronicles 7:20-27 recounts ten generations between Jacob and Joshua, the assistant and successor of Moses.

The solution here is to presume that the story of the whole migration from Canaan to Egypt and back again did indeed span 400+ years. The biblical text condenses this migration into the story of the arrival of one family and the one-day escape of its numerous descendants; but the historical reality may well be a process of several generations of various clans and families finally coalescing into "the people of Israel." Nonetheless, all share the memory of the LORD's deliverance and all share the identity of one family, one nation. They are all companies of the LORD.

This shared memory and identity is celebrated and reinforced in the observance of Passover, "a night of vigil". That same night is a vigil to be kept for the LORD by all the Israelites throughout their generations. It was in the middle of the night that the LORD performed the deed that set Israel free; it is in the night that Israel will celebrate its covenant in the Passover.

Catholic and Orthodox Christians similarly keep an annual night of vigil, commemorating the event which constitutes us as people of God: the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, proclaimed and celebrated in the Easter Vigil or *Pascha*.<sup>2</sup>

### **Exodus 12:43-46**

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<sup>2</sup> Most Orthodox communities commence their Easter celebration at midnight; the Catholic Easter Vigil must begin after darkness falls on Holy Saturday.

Since the Passover is the celebration of the defining event in Israel's history, we can understand the following verses. The Passover, a celebration of identity, is forbidden to any foreigner. As a feast of freedom, it is also forbidden to any bound or hired servant. Such servants were usually captives taken in war or migrant workers who hired themselves out for food and shelter; these people were not "people of the land" and would readily return to their own country if they could. The only way to be included in the Passover celebration is to be a natural descendant of Israel, or to be joined to the chosen people by accepting the terms of the covenant and undergoing the ritual of circumcision.<sup>3</sup>

The meal is to be celebrated as a religious sacrifice. Its participants are to remain in one house; giving their attention to the meaning of the feast. The *pesach* or Passover lamb is regarded as consecrated food and so is treated with due respect: "you shall not take any of the animal outside the house, and you shall not break any of its bones." The gospel of John (19:36) quotes this verse, identifying Jesus as the ultimate paschal lamb.

#### **Exodus 12:47-49**

These verses underscore the Passover celebration as a symbol of the identity of the people of Israel. It is to be celebrated by the whole congregation, that is, all those who claim to be Israelites. It may also be celebrated by "an alien who resides with you", someone who is a permanent resident in the land of Canaan, provided that he and "all his males are circumcised."

It is not uncommon these days to find Christians who want to celebrate the Passover to the LORD. Such observances are usually held during Holy Week, as a way to dramatize the Last Supper of Jesus and to emphasize the continuity of the Passover meal and the Lord's Supper. These celebrations are useful for Christians who have no experience with ritual meal-sharing and who would otherwise miss the impact of the metaphor of Passover applied to Jesus' death and resurrection [I Corinthians 5:7-8]. However, Passover is first and foremost a Jewish feast, and should always be respected as such. We must be careful not to offend our Jewish neighbors by presuming to celebrate their sacred meal. It is better for Christians to be invited to join a Jewish family or congregation for the feast, so as to strengthen interfaith relations and mutual understanding.

Today's Passover Seder has developed from what is described in Exodus, just as the Christian Eucharist has evolved from the Last Supper of Jesus. Today's Seder meal is not the same as the Last Supper nor is it the original form of the Mass. Each ritual meal has its own meaning and purpose, even though they grow from a common root, and also have much in common with the sacred meals shared by people everywhere.

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<sup>3</sup> This is similar to the Christian practice of restricting participation in the Eucharist to those who have been baptized.

### **Exodus 13:11-13**

Once more the text returns to the theme of the firstborn. We remember that the firstborn male, whether human or animal, signified the renewed vigor of life and the promise of future fertility. Since all life belongs to YHWH, the firstborn sons and male animals were to “be set apart to the LORD”, that is, consecrated by offering them up in sacrifice. Since the donkey is not listed among the “clean animals,” that is, those whose flesh was kosher or fit to eat [Deuteronomy 14:3-20], it was also not a proper sacrificial offering. The owner had either to replace it (redeem it) with a sheep and offer up the sheep in its place, or break its neck so that it could not serve the owner as a beast of burden.

The Israelites deplored the Canaanite practice of sacrificing the firstborn son [Genesis 22:11-14]. Hence Moses teaches explicitly “that every firstborn male among your children you shall redeem”, in a sense, bought back from destruction and restored to his family. This practice continues to this day among the Jews in the ceremony of *pidyon ha-ben*, the redemption of the firstborn son. In this ceremony, which takes place when the son is 31 days old, the parents present the son to the priest,<sup>4</sup> who asks whether they wish to redeem the son or hand him over to the priest. The price of redemption, as stated in Leviticus 27:6, is five silver shekels.<sup>5</sup> The parents give the coins to the priest and the firstborn son is returned to them.

### **Exodus 13:14-16**

Our next section explains the reason for the redemption ceremony. When the child is old enough to understand, and asks about his own redemption or that of another firstborn son in the extended family, he is to be told the story of the Exodus: “By strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery.” Note that “we” are the ones who experience the LORD’s deliverance, “we” were slaves but now are free. Once again we see how significant memory is for the Jewish people. The past is always present; the God who was, still is.

The passage goes on to explain that, in response to Pharaoh’s stubborn refusal, “the LORD killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt.” In other words, the LORD forcibly claimed the all the Egyptian firstborn as a sacrificial offering, because Pharaoh dared to deny the LORD the worship of the Israelites [5:1-3]. In memory of this, the Israelites sacrifice to the LORD every male that first opens the womb, but every firstborn of the sons is redeemed.

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<sup>4</sup> Although the Temple in Jerusalem has not existed since A.D. 70, the hereditary priesthood has survived among the Jewish people. The Hebrew word for priest is *kohen*; families which are traditionally descended from the priesthood frequently carry the name Cohen. The men of these families perform certain priestly roles, including the solemn blessing of the people [Numbers 6:22-27] and the ritual of redemption. These priests are not to be confused with rabbis, who are the teachers of Torah and as such the recognized spiritual leaders of the community.

<sup>5</sup> Since the exact monetary equivalent of the ancient shekel cannot be determined, Jewish custom provides that the redemption is paid in the currency of the locality, for example, in the United States, five silver dollars would be used.

Like a signet ring, a wedding band, a pendant, or a crown, the ritual of redemption will serve as a public and constant reminder “that by strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt.” This passage and Deuteronomy 6:8 and 11:18 have inspired the use of *tefillin* (“prayers”) or phylacteries (from a Greek word meaning to safeguard) among observant Jewish men. *Tefillin* are small boxes made of leather which are fastened to the forehead and the forearm with leather straps. The boxes contain select verses of Scripture and literally serve as a sign on your hand and as an emblem on your forehead. In contrast to their pagan neighbors who wore amulets, sometimes in the figure of their gods, the Israelites honor YHWH by wearing the words of his covenant, but as a reminder to keep the word in their hearts.