

Introduction: God Wants to Be Seen Through His People

Then the Lord said: "I am making a covenant with you. Before all your people I will do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world. The people you live among will see how awesome is the work that I, the Lord, will do for you."

(Exodus 34:10)

God is invisible. That's a problem. It was a problem in ancient Egypt and it's still a problem today. In a world where people tend to worship what they can see and feel and taste and touch, an invisible God is all too easy to ignore.

Take, for example, John Lennon's boast to a reporter in March 1966 that *"We're more popular than Jesus now."* Although many Christians found his tactless comment quite offensive, it was difficult for them to deny the raw facts behind his claim. The Beatles had just held the largest music concert in human history, filling a New York City stadium with 55,000 screaming fans. In the nine days since the release of their new album they had sold 1.2 million copies in America alone. In contrast five weeks later, *Time Magazine* ran a cover story which asked the provocative question *"Is God Dead?"* Quoting from a spoof obituary, it speculated from the shrinking congregations of most Western churches that: *"God, creator of the universe, principal deity of the world's Jews, ultimate reality of Christians and most eminent of all divinities, died late yesterday during major surgery*

13

14

*undertaken to correct a massive diminishing influence."*¹ That's the basic problem: Even a visible human can draw more worship than an invisible God.

Got that? Then you are ready for the books which Moses wrote in the desert.² The Pentateuch (the word is simply Greek for *five-volume story*³) recounts the invisible God's master plan to make himself seen. More glorious than the gods of Egypt; more powerful than the gods of Canaan; more satisfying than the gods of the twenty-first-century Western world – the invisible God would be seen through his People.

Another book in this series covers volume one of the Pentateuch, Genesis, in which the Lord began to make himself visible. Paul reflects on those early chapters in Romans 1: *"What may be known about God is plain to [all people], because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."* Yet because humans sin and close their eyes to this revelation, the Lord executes a plan which makes him impossible to ignore. He chooses Abraham and his family to make the rulers of the nations exclaim that *"God is with you in everything you do"*, and *"Can we find anyone like this man, one in whom is the Spirit of God?"*⁴ The great finale of Genesis sees him moving the seventy members of Abraham's family

¹ *Time Magazine* ran this cover story on 8th April 1966, only five weeks after John Lennon made his boast in an interview with the London *Evening Standard*.

² Although some scholars question whether Moses was the author of the Pentateuch, they make too much of a late editorial insertions and ignore the united testimony of the Pentateuch, Jesus, both Old and New Testaments, and 3,000 years of Judaeo-Christian consensus. See Exodus 17:14; 24:4; 34:27; Deuteronomy 1:5; 31:9; 31:24; Joshua 8:31; 1 Kings 2:3; Mark 7:10; 10:3–5; 12:26; Luke 2:22–23; John 4:46–47; Acts 7:37–38.

³ The Pentateuch was originally one book which was divided into five scrolls for ease of reading.

⁴ Genesis 21:22; 41:38.

to Egypt with a missionary calling to make him visible to the greatest superpower nation of their day.⁵ Sure enough, many Egyptians are saved through Israel's God, and the curtain falls for a 300-year-long interval before the start of volume two.⁶

Exodus 1 therefore comes as a colossal disappointment. The Egyptians are still worshipping their idols as before, and have so oppressed Abraham's family that their faith in Yahweh starts to fail. The distant promises of Israel's patriarchal past are so at odds with the painful realities of the present that the Hebrews are either worshipping their invisible God in private or else giving up on him entirely to serve the bold, brash and visible gods of the Egyptians they were sent to save.⁷ By the time Moses challenges Pharaoh to let God's People go, the Lord has become so invisible that Pharaoh sneers, "*Who is the Lord, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go.*"⁸ The scene is set for the greatest showdown of the Old Testament. The invisible God is about to be seen through his People.

In Exodus 1–18 the Lord displays that he is *God the Saviour*, laughing at the overwhelming odds to free his down-and-out Hebrews from the stranglehold of slavery. In Exodus 19–40 he reveals that he did this because he is *God the Indweller*, who brought them to Mount Sinai in order to camp among them in his Tabernacle home. This leads into the message of Leviticus that he is *God the Holy One* who wants to be seen through his holy People and, when they refuse to live up to this calling in Numbers, into the revelation that he is *God the Faithful One* as he leads and protects them for forty years in the hostile desert.

⁵ The Septuagint adds the children of Ephraim and Manasseh to make *seventy-five* in Genesis 46:27 and Exodus 1:5 (as quoted in Acts 7:14). However, it leaves the total as *seventy* in Deuteronomy 10:22.

⁶ The Hebrews spent 430 years in Egypt (Exodus 12:40). Joseph died after seventy years and Moses was born eighty years before their end (Genesis 41:46; 45:6; 50:26; Exodus 7:7).

⁷ Joshua 24:14; Ezekiel 20:7–8.

⁸ Exodus 5:2.

In Deuteronomy he displays that he is *God the Covenant Keeper*, who remains true to the promises he made to their fathers even when they fail him and provoke him to anger. The Lord wants to be seen through his People, and Moses tells us that nothing can thwart him in his plan.

I have written this book because God still pursues the same strategy with us as he did in the pages of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. In a world where "The Beatles" are still googled more often than "Jesus", God wants to be seen through his People.⁹ In a world which still echoes with the cry of Psalm 42 – "*My foes taunt me, saying to me all day long, 'Where is your God?'*" – God wants to be seen through his People. In a world which largely ignores the true yet invisible God, we must not skim read these books as if they were written for somebody other than ourselves.

I want to bring the pages of the Pentateuch to life for you, so that you can be like the Hebrews who "*saw the great power the Lord displayed...and put their trust in him*".¹⁰ I want to help you reveal the invisible God to those around you, so that they exclaim like the foreigners in the Pentateuch that "*Now I know that the Lord is greater than all other gods*".¹¹

So let's journey through the pages of the Pentateuch together, learning how the Lord wants to use us to capture the attention of the world. The same invisible God who was seen through the Israelites has not changed his strategy today. It is 3,500 years since Moses wrote the Pentateuch, but God still wants to be seen through his People.

⁹ The British *Daily Telegraph* reported this on 21st September 2009 under the headline "*The Beatles 'bigger than Jesus' on Google*".

¹⁰ Exodus 14:31.

¹¹ Jethro, a Midianite worshipper of the Lord, says this in Exodus 18:11. The *'ēreb* – Hebrew for a *mixed-race crowd* – come to a similar conclusion in 12:38 and turn their backs on Egypt to follow Israel's God.

God's Prison Break (1:1–2:10)

But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread.

(Exodus 1:12)

When God wants to be seen through his People, there is simply no obstacle strong enough to stop him. If you were impressed by Michael Schofield's elaborate plans to escape from Fox River State Penitentiary in the TV series *Prison Break*, you will love what happens in Exodus 1 and 2. The Greek word *Exodus* means literally *exit* or *way out*, and these chapters form the prelude to the Old Testament's great escape story.

Make no doubt about it, Egypt in the fifteenth century BC was the world's largest prison. The seventy Hebrews had gone there in obedience to the Lord's promise in Genesis 46 that he would turn them into a mighty nation in Egypt and bring them back to Canaan as conquerors of the land. Almost four centuries later, such promises looked like pipe dreams, and the Devil's agenda to keep the Lord invisible looked more successful than the plotting of a clever prison guard on any television show.

First, the Hebrews lost their privileged status in the nation. Joseph had saved Egypt from disaster under the Twelfth Dynasty of pharaohs, and his family had been rewarded with possession of Goshen, the most fertile fields in the land. Pharaoh appointed Joseph as his royal vizier and mummified his body when he died as if he were one of his own. But shortly after Joseph's death, the Twelfth Dynasty fell and five new dynasties came and went during two turbulent centuries known as the Second

Intermediate Period. Pharaoh Ahmose I of the Eighteenth Dynasty founded the New Kingdom by expelling the Canaanite Hyksos, but this made him naturally suspicious of the Hebrews who remained.¹ Hadn't these foreigners originally come from Canaan? Were they not natural allies to the Hyksos if they reappeared with a new army? So he enslaved them and forced them to build great monuments which shouted to the world that Egypt's new regime was here to stay.² Pharaoh turned their Goshen into his Gulag.

But the plan backfired, spectacularly. Moses tells us in 1:12 that *"the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread."* He uses five separate Hebrew verbs in 1:7 alone to describe the ensuing Hebrew baby boom.³ Alarmed by the Egyptians' open hatred towards them, Jacob's family tried to multiply and soon became a seven-figure nation.⁴ God had promised Abraham this would happen in Egypt in Genesis 15, and he was at work behind the Devil's clumsy scheming. *"The Lord made his people very fruitful; he made them too numerous for their foes, whose hearts he turned to hate his people."*⁵

The Devil tried a second strategy. He incited Pharaoh's heart to order the Hebrew midwives to murder every baby boy

¹ This is why Stephen chooses a Greek word in Acts 7:18 which emphasizes that this ruler was not *another similar (allos)* Pharaoh, but *another different (heteros)* Pharaoh, from a completely new dynasty.

² Don't be confused by the reference to Rameses in 1:11. Some scholars put this together with Galatians 3:17 (where Paul is humouring a Septuagint mistranslation) to argue that the Exodus took place in the thirteenth century BC under Pharaoh Rameses II, but Genesis 15:13, Exodus 12:40 and the chronology of Judges show us that this must be a later editorial update to the place name, like the one in Genesis 14:14. That also means that Exodus 6:16–20 must give only a selective, abridged genealogy.

³ He tells us literally that the Hebrews *were fruitful, teemed, multiplied, grew very numerous* and *filled* the land.

⁴ As a result, although the word *Israelite* is only used twice in Genesis, it is used over 100 times in Exodus.

⁵ Psalm 105:24–25. We will look in more detail in the chapter "Hardened" at how God's sovereignty works.

at birth. Future Hebrew slave-girls were useful to Egypt, but boys were potential insurrectionists and must not be allowed to live. Again this fresh attempt to thwart God's plan backfired, as it galvanized the flagging faith of the dispirited Hebrews to put their hope in him. Spurred on by Pharaoh's threats of murder and the Hebrew midwives' brave defiance, Moses tells us in 1:20 that "the people increased and became even more numerous."

Satan's third strategy was increasingly desperate, provoking Pharaoh to order that every Hebrew baby boy be drowned in the River Nile. This time the Lord's response outshines the very best of Michael Schofield, as he turns Satan's worst into the centrepiece of his plan. "One weak link can break the chain of a mighty dynasty," worries Pharaoh in the animated movie *The Prince of Egypt*.⁶ He had no idea that the Lord was smarter by far and could even use infanticide as a way to smuggle his deliverer into Pharaoh's palace.

Pharaoh's decree forces two Hebrew parents to take their baby boy down to the river and hide him in a basket among the reeds. They pray to the Lord for a miracle, and he reveals himself as God the Saviour when Pharaoh's very own daughter finds the baby and adopts him as her son. By God's power, he had not been overheard crying during his three months in hiding, but now he cries at the right moment to move Pharaoh's daughter to compassion. His sister Miriam is hiding and appears in time for the Lord to use her to make Pharaoh *pay* Moses' mother to look after his enemy!⁷ The Lord runs rings around his would-be opponent Satan. He is smarter by far and will let nothing foil his plan.

Even now, God hasn't finished. He has another trump card left to play. The baby grows up with a dual nationality which is epitomized by his name. *Moses* means *Drawn-Out* in Hebrew, but it also means *Born* in Egyptian and sounds like the names

⁶ *The Prince of Egypt* (Dreamworks Pictures, 1998).

⁷ Miriam is not named in chapter 2, but she reappears in the story by name from Exodus 15:20–21 onwards.

of Pharaohs *Ahmoses* and *Thutmoses*.⁸ Moses is therefore given a royal education in Egypt's wisdom, and gains unparalleled know-how of the inner workings of Pharaoh's court, yet his primary spiritual influence remains his mother so that "when he had grown up, he refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time."⁹

The Devil's three strategies to thwart God's great prison break had failed, because God wants to be seen through his People. All those strategies did was create a larger, more unified, more devout Hebrew nation, which cried out to God for a deliverer and found one forged in the furnace which the Devil had stoked against them.

The story of God's great escape is even cleverer than Michael Schofield's *Prison Break* at its most fanciful. This baby in the basket grew up and went on to write Exodus as his personal account of the Lord as God the Saviour. He smiles at us through these opening verses and assures us that nothing can stop the Lord from succeeding in his plan. He is going to be seen through his People.

⁸ *Ahmoses* means *Born-to-Aah* (the moon-god) and *Thutmoses* means *Born-to-Thoth* (the magic-god). Both names usually lose the final "s" in English. The name of Nineteenth-Dynasty Pharaoh *Rameses* means *Born-to-Ra* (the sun-god).

⁹ Hebrews 11:24–25. This is why Moses flouted Egyptian convention by refusing to marry even at forty. Forbidden from marrying a Hebrew, he refused to marry an Egyptian girl instead. The Lord rewards him with Zipporah in a scene that deliberately echoes Jacob meeting Rachel in Genesis 29:10.