

## 360 | He'Brew | Exodus

Project Zion Podcast

### **Josh Mangelson** 00:17

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

### **Karin Peter** 00:33

Welcome to He'Brew, the Project Zion Podcast series that reduces Old Testament bitterness through explanation, exploration, and through experiencing the text. Our guides through the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures are Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith, and I'm your host Karin Peter. In today's episode titled Moses: Unwilling Liberator, Unappreciated Leader or more, currently, our thinking might be Coward and the Complainers, we're going to look at Exodus and this meeting up with Moses. It's a well known story, even for non-religious folks, because we've all seen the Cecil B. DeMille, Ten Commandments, every Easter and maybe somewhere in the podcast, we can figure out really, Easter; what?! I don't get it. But we all know Moses looks just like Charlton Heston. Tony and Charmaine, let's look at this story and see what we know. And perhaps what we think we know. Let's begin.

### **Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 01:42

Alright. So first, we always try to begin somewhere near the beginning, talk about how are we approaching scripture? And so how we're approaching it is the stories of people trying to share their encounter with God, from their time, with their language, with their concepts, with their worldview. And so we're wanting to take a look and say, What was? What was the author's experience here? What does the author, tell use about their experience? But more importantly, what is the author trying to tell us about their understanding of God? And what were the participants in the story, or in whatever the person wrote, what were they getting? What were they learning about who God was? And so that's what we invite you to, is to explore with us some, today, some passages from Exodus, and see what was the author trying to tell us about this wandering people, and about the God who apparently called them into this wilderness? We're going to use, we're going to look at three parts of Exodus, because it's quite long, and there's just so many complexities that we could get into. So we're only, we're choosing how many complexities we're going to get into. We're going to start with a passage from Exodus 3, which is, for those who are familiar, the burning bush where Moses has an encounter with God in a very unexpected way. And then we'll go into the next chapter in which Moses makes excuses and really doesn't want this task that God is putting before him. And then we'll take a look in chapters 16 and 17 about some of the complaints, like complaining people, you know, they're wandering around, it's like well we haven't got this, we haven't got this please, Moses, take care of this. Okay, so that's maybe a caricaturing of some of the situation. But we want to take off

### **Karin Peter** 03:52

A little bit like some congregational experiences, but go ahead.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 03:57**

Yeah. So anyhow, we'll take a look at that. So we, that's why we put in the subtitle Coward and the Complainers because we kind of thought it sounded like a blues band. But that's kind of how some of these folks are feeling. As we go through the Exodus, we'll hope you'll catch some of their experience and the author's intent.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 04:21**

Okay, so let's start with explaining where we kind of bring to bear on the text current scholarly knowledge and do a little bit of exegesis of the text. And the first thing I want to say here is something about the word Exodus. So Exodus is actually two Greek words, ex hodus in Greek, which means something like the way out, or the exit, which is a nice title for this book. In Hebrew. This book is titled these are the names because the, the old, the more ancient way to title, a couple of words from the start of the book, and so in Hebrew, it's called these are the names But when, when Jewish people in the third century BCE, could no longer, when many of them could no longer read Hebrew and the Hebrew scriptures were being translated into Greek, the Greek translators of these are the names said, Let's find a better Greek term for this. I know Ex Hodus, the way out. And so that's how we, that's how we've got the title Exodus for this book. So let's just, let's just start by how important this book is in the Hebrew Bible. In, in the Hebrew Bible, according to one scholar, Michael Coogan, the Moses story, which starts here in Exodus and ends at the end of Deuteronomy, the, the Moses story, and the Exodus and wilderness story is the longest single narrative devoted to one person of the whole Hebrew Bible. And that gives us a sense for how important, important Moses and this period were in the memory of the ancient Israelites, certainly from the exile on but for some ancient Israelites, even before the exile, the exilic period, which we have noted before, was about 587 to 538 BCE, if you can imagine that, that time on. So this, this is, this is the formative period of the religion of ancient Israel. And so, Coogan goes on to say that, that one of the things about this period is that it's both formative and normative. That is, Israel really became a people out of this event. And this event, then, kind of gave the landmarks for how to interpret their religious understandings from that point on; formative normative. I think that's a really, a really good, a really good description on, on Coogan's part. And you can see the normative and formative part in Judaism to this day where the Passover is, is one of the central celebrations of Judaism. It's, it usually happens roughly about the time of, of Passion Week, Holy Week in, in Christianity. And so to this day, that is the celebration of Judaism that, that, that helps define what it means to be Jewish. So the Book of Exodus is a collection of narratives and stories like we saw in Genesis J, E, and P. The Jahwist, the Elohist, and the Priestly traditions are all woven together here. And actually, in Exodus, there are many clear signs that you've got multiple traditions woven together. For example, in Exodus chapter six, which is, which is a priestly section, there Priestly Christian says that, until this time, God was not known by the name Yahweh. In other words, the Priestly tradition wants to, the name Yahweh to the Exodus tradition. Well, that's news to the Yahwist because the Yahwist has been using that, using the term Yahweh for God since that story about the garden back in Genesis 2 and 3. In other words, there's different memories in ancient Israel about when people started calling this God El by the name Yahweh. So also, if you look at, if you look at the narratives, about the deliverance at the sea of reeds, or Red Sea, and I might say more about that later, if you look at the stories about the deliverance there, at the Sea of Reeds, there's actually two different stories woven together, sometimes carefully, sometimes not so carefully. You could actually separate out two different ways the story was told. And so clearly, again, in the book of Exodus we have, we don't have an

author. We have, we have a committee, a committee weaving, weaving together these various traditions into the Book of Exodus as we read it. Now, we want to spend a little time on Exodus 3, because this chapter, this chapter, I think, deserves to be read over and over again, for lots of reasons. It's, it's embedded, it has embedded in the story of the call of Moses, and the narration of the revelation of God's name to Moses. So let's take a look at that text. And I'll, I'll read us through it. Sorry, this is a longer text than we'd normally like to use. But this text is so important, I'm going to read a good chunk of it. So here we are. Exodus chapter 3 verses 1, I'll actually just read through 14. Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian. He led his flock beyond the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of Yahweh appeared to him and a flame of fire out of a bush. He looked and the bush was blazing yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, I must turn aside and look at this great site and see why the bush is not burned up. When Yahweh saw that he had turned aside to see, God call to him out of the bush, Moses, Moses. And Moses said, Here I am, then Yahweh said, Come, no closer. Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. He said further, I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. Then Yahweh said, I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt, I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land, to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me. I've also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So, come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt. But Moses said to God, who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? God said, I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you, that it is I who sent you; when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain. But Moses said to God, if I come to the Israelites and say to them, the God of your ancestors has sent me to you. And they ask me, What is his name? What shall I say to them? God said to Moses, I am who I am. God said further, Thus, you shall say to the Israelites, I am has sent me to you. And we'll pause the reading of the text there. You know, certainly as I read it, and maybe as you're listening to it, you can tell that there's multiple versions of this experience woven together, sometimes it's Yahweh speaking. Sometimes it's El, God is speaking. And there's a little bit of repetition in a sign of two different two different versions of the story being woven together. So this is, this is an incredible encounter. A bush that is aflame, but not consumed. This is a theophany, we use the term in our most recent podcast, a theophany, a divine manifestation. This sight intrigues Moses, he's drawn in closer, and then the, the bush begins to speak to him. Out of, out of the bush, the voice comes. And that begins this divine human encounter, that sets in, sets in motion, the events that will lead to the Exodus. And of course, we'll pick up later that Moses, Moses is not too happy about this change of his business plan here. So, he was going to be content to be just a herder and be married to Zipporah and be Jethro's father-in-law and just (son-in-law), son-in-law, sorry, yeah, sorry. (Have Jethro as his father-in-law), Have Jethro as his father-in-law and just herd sheep and just be content in the wilderness. And that was not, that was not in God's business plan for, for Moses. So. But I think the thing that I want to focus on for a few minutes here is that, that very enigmatic verse, in which Moses is saying to God, all right, so you're gonna send me. What should I say your name is? Who are you? Who are you? It's a really cool question, because the story is also about who is Moses? And about who are these people that are descended from Abraham and Sarah, right? So there's, there's a whole bunch of identity questions woven into the story, not just the question about who God

is, but that's, that's the primal question here. Who are you? And God responds to Moses with a phrase that's puzzling, a bit puzzling for translators to get out. So, the standard way in the RSV, the NRSV follows the the normal way to translate here. The standard way is to translate that I am who I am. But you see in the in the Hebrew text, what you have here is a verb repeated twice. Yeah. And this verb can be translated as I am, but it can also be translated as I will be. And then it has a sort of like relative pronoun in the middle of it, I am who I am, I am what I am, I will be who I will be, I will be what I will be. But you see, it's, it's even more complicated than that. Because this, this verb can also be translated as cause to be, right? I, I am the one who causes to be, which also fits the narrative really well. Those, those ancient, ancient Greek-speaking Jews, when they translated it, they rendered it as more philosophically, I am the one who is, who simply is. And then Terence Fretheim, in his commentary on Exodus, has made another suggestion. He suggested, I will be who I am. Or you can reverse that I am who I will be. And so, what's going on here in the text is that the, the storytellers have given us a little phrase that's a puzzle that has multiple possible possible meanings. And in some respects, they're trying to say that this name of God is, is like, full of infinite surplus of meaning, right? There's infinite possibilities here. But the idea, I like Fretheim's suggestion of I am the one who will be, or I'm the one who, who I will be going into the future. And actually, that plays off something going on in the text that we read just before it. Moses, Moses' first fearful reaction is, am I going to do this by myself. And in that phrase, a few verses earlier, God says, I will be with you. So same verb, ehyeh, I will be in macca, with you. So I think this, this phrase, and this Divine Name, are really worth a lot of interpretive energy and a lot of meditation to what's going on here. This this God's name, Yahweh, is connected to the verb to be. And when ancient Israelites spoke God's name, Yahweh, the name always reminded them of this, of this tradition, and always reminded them that God was the one who causes things to be that aren't yet. God is the one who can help create a new future out of the present. And God is the one who will be with us, regardless of what's what's going on. Another thing to know here is that, in this culture, to give someone your name, is to make yourself vulnerable to them. And so God, who is, in some respects in this text beyond naming, is also willing to come right down here into the dirt and muck of history, and make God so vulnerable to Moses, to the Israelites, and to the drama that's about to unfold. So, you want to use theological terms here, the name, the name reveals both what we'd say in theology is transcendence and imminence, both the beyond-ness of God, I, I will be who I am, I am who I will be, you can't pin God down to something. And at the same time, the very revelation of a name is God, God saying, I want so much to be with you, and to be connected to you that I'm willing to be vulnerable to you. So this is a God of power, but also vulnerability, that's really important. Now, one other thing about the name here, Yahweh, is not a dude. Let's get it straight. Yahweh is not some kind of male sky god. God, Yahweh is beyond all these categories. I will be is beyond all those kinds of gender categories and, and, you know, historic categories, all of that God is beyond all that. Now, Hebrew Bible, the author's will use male and female and neutral terminology for God. I mean, you're going back to something Charmaine shared in a previous episode of these podcasts, that's convention, They, they sometimes just simply have to use particular pronouns and so on. But the intention of this text is to depict God as not anybody's pet. Right? Not any, not anybody's like, like, just pal. Not, and certainly not, as some kind of male deity, for goodness sakes. Other Near Eastern religions had male and female deities paired all over the place, and cavorting with each other all over the place. Yeah, really, seriously. Israel, ancient Israelite religion avoided that because they, because they saw Yahweh as a god beyond those categories. Im, immersed in our reality, but not to be identified, (or limited) or limited. Yeah, that's a good word, not to be limited by our gender realities, and so on. So, that's really important

to know. And this, this text in the Hebrew Bible really stands as a critique of all the uses of different ideas and concepts and images for God in the rest of the Hebrew Bible. So in other words, this

**Karin Peter** 19:51

I wanted to clarify. So by trying to pin down what God is we limit, then, what the Hebrew Bible is trying to explain about the very nature of God. So that's a, that's a us issue. This whole issue of trying to pin down what God is, is our problem. It didn't come out of the text.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 20:14

Exactly.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 20:14

Right, or trying to make God fit into our worldview or our cosmology or our science, you know, that they're saying, No, no, no, no, we need to blow up this idea that these gods, the Egyptian gods, in this case, because that's where they're, what they've been, they've been influenced by, these, these gods are like us, but more so. You know, they're, they're us and yet they can do all these other things. And, and Hebrew writers are saying, No, God is something completely other, not just us times three. Something else, whether that's looking at gender, whether that's looking at capacity, whether that's looking at understanding; even as far as looking at compassion. I think, you know, that's something that, that is there throughout the Old Testament, but we run up across it in the New Testament, too, of people not being able to comprehend what is this compassion that characterizes? So yeah, they want to, they want to say this is not just one of us, but bigger.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 21:35

That's really important, because all kinds of Christianity, constantly try to pare God down to be some sort of like, like a spitting image of ourselves

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 21:47

Something or something manageable.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 21:48

Yeah, definitely . . . as well. And even the Israelites constantly tried to make Yahweh manageable. And so the Exodus story was intended to say God is not manageable. And even if you can claim to be God's people, God is not your pet dog. Right, right. So. So this transcendent one wants to be in relationship here, and now with human beings. And therefore, the, the authors of the Hebrew Bible, various texts in the Hebrew Bible have to use human images they sometimes depict God as, as a, as a person. They're trying to convey that, that intensely personal sense of, of who this transcendent one is. But this, this text in Exodus is trying the name that is used everywhere in the Hebrew Bible for God Yahweh. This is the one place in the Hebrew Bible where that, that name is, is given an explanation for what it means. And it doesn't mean some, some guy riding on a cloud. So, I think that's really important for us. So, and then finally, here in this text, we have Moses, who is the hero, it's kind of a hero, anti-hero of this whole story, at least depicted as flawed and weak, right, used to pick this, he's hesitant, he needs assistance, he's unsure of himself. And I think a cool thing in all of this is that God doesn't mind.

God, God is willing to work with Moses as Moses is. Right? So let's take a look at this passage now in the next chapter, chapter 4.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 23:20**

And it's really follows beautifully from what we were just reading in 3. Then Moses answered, but suppose they do not listen to me, believe me, or listen to me, but say, The Lord did not appear to you. Moses said to the Lord, Oh, my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you've spoken to your servant, but I'm slow of speech and slow of tongue. Then the Lord said to him, Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I the LORD? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak. But Moses said, Oh, my Lord, please send someone else. And then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses. And God said, What of your brother Aaron, the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently. Even now he's coming out to meet you and when he sees you, his heart will be glad. You shall speak to him and put words in his mouth, and I will be with your mouth (and with) his mouth, teach you what you shall do.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 24:34**

This text reminds me of a single incident when I was growing up with my mother saying, You need to do X. And I'm like, Mom, I don't want to do it. And the conversation went on and on and finally I did it. So

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:47**

Was there a point where like, with God, she just got frustrated?

**Tony Chvala-Smith 24:51**

Yes. Yes. I'm also not truth telling. I say there was a single incident.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:55**

One time when I said, yeah. Good point.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 25:02**

So, this is a really important thing in the, in the Hebrew Bible. You know, I used the word Moses a few minutes ago, that Moses is like the hero of the story. Well, no, actually, it's a bad word. None of these figures, the ancestors, Moses, are depicted as heroic figures. And I think that's really important for us, for readers to recognize that those, those people, those families who were involved in the, in the formation of what becomes Judaism, what becomes Christianity, those, those foundational people are people like us. They're not heroic people. They're people who mess up. They're weak, they're flawed, they make excuses, they make mistakes. And there's, when I hear people say there's not much grace in the Old Testament, like, I don't know what Old Testament you're reading, because God hangs in there with these flawed, weak, sometimes irritating and the miserable people, God keeps hanging in there with them. And so that's grace, that God, God does not expect these people to be heroic in order for God to work with them.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 26:03**

Right. And I think one of the pieces here is, as with many of our other characters, they're not perfect, and the author's very intentional about making sure we see that. And in that, too, then we see something about what is God's nature, as Tony says, persistent. And, you know, you might ask, Well, how patient was God with Moses? You know, it's like, this seems like a fairly short conversation, and God's starting to get ticked and, but even when God is becoming frustrated, because it looks like the people will not have someone, that there won't be a way for the people to come out of slavery, He doesn't just say, Moses, I am done with you, you, you're too high maintenance. We're not, we're not going there. But says, basically, there's a way, here's how we can do it. We'll put this other path before you. Yes, I understand you're afraid. Great. We'll, we'll work with Aaron. And we can still . . . so it's, it's not this outward, just outright rejection of Moses, because he's either inconvenienced or afraid, or whatever the reasons might be for him saying, Ah, get somebody else. But instead, there's this, No, I want you. I, I want you to do this, and I can help you do it. So even when there's this sense that, you know, God's getting his anger is, is God's anger is kindled, it's still, it's not about rejection and judgment. It's about still finding a way.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 27:49**

This, this, this, this Yahweh character is very flexible and maneuverable, with, with human, human weakness, with human frailty, with human failings. This, this Yahweh is a God of grace and mercy. So

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 28:06**

but won't hesitate to call people out on their stuff either. So honest, and actually, that is perhaps a, a helpful way of seeing what the word judging means quite often in the Old Testament. So if you're finding yourself getting tripped up by that, ask yourself if it's being used in this way, and this is a fairly common way, judging about when it's God judging is helping people see themselves as they really are. It is so, those familiar with the David story, the prophet Nathan comes and says, You're not fooling anybody here, except yourself. And God wants you to know, God knows what you did to Bathsheba. And, and so helping David see things as they really are. And so, and that's one way of not projecting our own feelings of, about judgment on to some of these characters or on to God, but to see those places that quite often judgment means God helping people see things as they really are, or them as the person or the people as they really are.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 29:27**

So, that's just kind of some intro to the book of Exodus and this, this particularly, I think, this very paradigmatic story in not only Exodus, but the Hebrew Bible. And I think this week we should say here, remember that this book came together in this form during that Babylonian exile when, when Judeans in exile and centuries after the time of Moses, are stuck in Babylon and are wondering how do we keep our identity, how do we keep our sense of who we are?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 29:59**

There's our timeline again. (Right. There we are.) So this is, this is the exile time. Over here 1290, approximate, approximate, give or take 50 years, 100 years, yeah, (Somewhere in there) is the time of the Exodus around 1290. And so this is, you know, centuries later in the exile that they're starting to write this down. And why is it that the authors are pulling this together right now. And, and it's because

of their situation. in Babylon, they're having to, they're dealing with what's called syncretism, which is the blending of different religions, and kind of adopting things that really aren't compatible. So, they're concerned about all these folks, these Judeans, who are now in Babylon, taking on the beliefs of the Babylonian gods. And so showing that there's a distinction between this Yahweh and the Egyptian gods is going to be really important in this story, showing that this God is more powerful than the Egyptian King, Pharaoh, who sees himself as a god. That's gonna' be really important for these writers as they're pulling these stories together. And so their own, the authors' own situation, is influencing what they're going to say in this story, and what they're going to emphasize.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 31:33

And so these Judeans in exile, it's really, really crucial to remember that the, the God, whom they've covenanted with is a liberating God, a God who does not want to tolerate slavery and exile. And that's where they came from. They came out of that, this God encountered them and freed them from that. And so exile, as long as they're connected to this God, exile can't possibly be the last word because the God whose name means I will be with you, I will cause to be, they've got to remember that God because, because they can't get themselves out of exile, right? They, they have to trust that something else is at work in history that can make that possible for them.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 32:20

That's a good point. Yeah. That's, they're reminding people of their story, and of the nature of this God.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 32:26

So that's explanation. Now we go to exploration, this is a place to throw in questions, wonderings, push backs. And we know that Karin may have one or two of these. So

**Karin Peter** 32:38

I do have a couple. The first one is simply, I'm trying to make sense of what I'm hearing, not just in this story, but what we heard in the Abraham, Sarah, Hagar story and what we heard in the creation story. And so the, the theme I'm, I'm hearing in this is that in, in God's encounters with humankind, that have been carried forward in, in these stories of ancestors, there seems to be this sense of that. Humanness is fulfilled in, in some sense of community in each of these stories. So Adam and Eve, and Abraham can't produce the air on, on his own, so it's Adam, and Sarah and Hagar. Moses can't do this on his own. So it's Adam, and I mean Moses and Aaron. And so there seems to be this sense that God's interaction with us is essentially God's interaction of the sense of community that I hadn't noticed until we started these recordings. So I want to hear your reflections on that.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 33:57

Yeah, sure. The first thing that comes to mind about that is that there would be no Moses had it not been for a couple of Hebrew midwives, back in chapter 1 acting courageously together to, to, to figure out a way to



**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 34:11**

To defy the Pharaoh who said, When, when the Hebrew women have babies, if it's a boy,( kill it,) kill it, and they say, and they refuse to. And instead they say, well, the Hebrew are different. The Hebrew women are different from the Egyptian women. And they've given birth by the time we arrived, so nothing we can do about it. So if they hadn't done what they did, Moses wouldn't have been found in, in the basket on the river as an infant.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 34:42**

And . . . community because it's not just the Hebrew midwives, but it's Pharaoh's daughter, the outsider daughter, and then Moses' sister, they're all working together as a community to (and his mother) and his mother, right.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 34:57**

Who said, we're going to keep this baby, we're going to keep it secret, we're going to figure out a way to do this. (Right.) So, yeah, that's, that's a great observation.

**Karin Peter 35:06**

So, no need for individual heroism when we have the heroism of the community.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 35:11**

(Right.) Right. (Right.) And you know, and maybe that's part of that, what was in that passage where Moses is saying, I don't want to do this is, this is a really sure way of the ego not taking over. Yep. Moses, you really don't speak very well. I mean, God doesn't say, I'm going to fix that. I'm going to take it away. You say you're you're right. You're right. You need somebody. And you know, who of us wouldn't be benefited by hearing that, that we in and of ourselves, are not enough? Yeah, very cool.

**Karin Peter 35:50**

My second is, we haven't hit this yet. But it's coming. And so I want to make sure we get it. And that is in this story of a revealing God, a liberating God, a God of community, we have this horrible incident where all these innocent babies are killed on God's watch to accomplish God's purposes, and the whole Passover experience. And so as we enter into the conversation more about what this says about God, what does that say about God?

**Tony Chvala-Smith 36:31**

Yeah, that you're referring to the plagues. And all connected in there is the plague story, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, and then the destruction of the Egyptian firstborn. Yeah. Difficult, difficult part of the text; really difficult. And even, . . . just difficult too, so. But there, there are a couple, couple of contextual pieces that might help with understanding it. And that is, and here I'm relying on, on Fretheim again, his commentary on Exodus is really good. But just to borrow from Fretheim, this text needs to be read, read as theology before it's about history. And so the whole, the whole scene of the plagues and the hardening of Pharaoh's heart and the destruction of the Egyptian firstborn, it's, it's in the storyline for theological purposes, more than anything else. Now, here's, here's where we can go with that. If you read Exodus closely, this is not a contest between Moses and Pharaoh, really. This is a contest between Yahweh and the gods of the Egyptians. And so, in ancient Egyptian religion, the

Pharaoh was sometimes treated as the embodiment of the Sun God, or the embodiment of a High God. And so what, what ancient hearers of, Israelite hearers of the story would have picked up on immediately is Yahweh hardening Pharaoh's heart is actually Yahweh turning the Egyptian High God into a sort of play thing. Right? This, this is a, this is a Yah, Yahweh, Yahweh is way more, more potent than any Egyptian gods. And so that's, that's part of the plague stories in the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. The other thing is that as we move further into Exodus than we're actually going today, there are, there's later legislation is, in Israel, that's, that's called the Latin term is lex talionis. It's the law of retaliation. That is, you, you, you give back what you have received in terms of, if X has happened to you, you do X back. And so one way ancient hearers would have made sense of the destruction of the Egyptian firstborn is that the Egyptian, the Egyptians already been murdering Israelite babies. And so this was this, was fair exchange. That's how they would have seen it. We don't, I mean, we don't want to try and transplant that into our, our world and our sense of justice. But I think that's how the first hearers of the, hearers and tellers of these stories in ancient Israel would have thought, might possibly in those terms.

**Karin Peter** 39:05

And what we don't we don't, we don't overlay our own justice with that. But here's, here's then my second part of this question for you. How, though, when we read this text, is it influencing our perception of enemy and, and justice? Because we can't overlay ancient ideas of justice on our own, but it does influence us if we're not aware of what we're doing as we read it.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 39:33

Yeah, and, and, you know, I'm not sure if this is, would solve the problem at all, because it, some of this is not solvable. Some of this is, these are images of God that come from the, you know, the ancient world where your people were at war with other people. And it was about survival, and it was, and so it's a violent world. And so you're, as we go into some other parts of the Old Testament, we're going to see what the, the authors think of God as being this, this god that is asking them to wipe out whole populations, you know, men, women, children, animals everything. And so that's one thing we just need to acknowledge is this is a different worldview, a different understanding. And there's, you know, as we, there's some things in Scripture that are time less. And there are some pieces in Scripture that are time bound, bound to their time, bound to their ideas, what they've inherited, and that's part of our job when we're reading scripture is to identify which parts of these stories are timeless, that, that are relevant, useful to, in this relationship with God over time, throughout time. And then there's these other parts where we have to go, Whoa, well, hmmm, that's not helpful. You know, if, if we're sensing that we're, as the people, being called to peace, even sacrificial peace, then we have to let go of some of these human tendencies for revenge or for annihilation of the other, the enemy. And so there's, you know, that's part of it is letting these texts be from when they are with the views that people have of that time. And do that sorting, that's, that's a huge piece of our job as ministers or any kind of theology that we're doing is that sorting. So, you know, there's, there's not a need to defend the writers or their perceptions, but just to acknowledge what they are, and where they're coming from. And, you know, one of the things that we'll keep finding is that, quite often the reactions that the authors have, are just like our reactions to things. And so then it's, it is important to, to come become aware of our own stuff, our own tendencies, because that's when we will connect with one of these authors who wants to annihilate the other and use it in our time as an excuse for that. So it's, it's to be aware of where this is coming from

outside, you know, what's the situation of the author and their understanding of the world? And then what's happening in me (yeah) that's saying, Ooo, I want to see these people as disposable. And I think I like the idea that God doesn't want them around either. You know, so there's, there's the spiritual formation side of that as well.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 43:02

I mean, in any given biblical book, there's the best of times and the worst of times and so, but you know, following up on the spiritual formation side of this how many of us have walked out of an absolutely breathtaking worship experience feeling ourselves extremely close to God and, and loving towards all the people around us in that, in that community? And, and then have driven off and crabbed about a parking place somewhere as somebody stole a parking place? I want to know you can you can go from the sublime to the to the spiteful just in, like, two blocks from church. And so these these texts

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 43:42

Or even before you leave the building. (That's right)

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 43:46

But, you know, I remember, I remember this very well. When I had started my, when I started doctoral studies, one of my, one of my professors was this great, this great German scholar of the new testament, he was a brilliant scholar. He was also a Lutheran clergy. His name was Heinz Gunter. And I remember one time in a graduate seminar, a bunch of us were saying, Professor Gunter, what, what do we do with this particular text? This is a horrible text. And, and I remember him saying this, he said, says, Though, sometimes we have to preach against the Bible. It's like, Well, yeah, sometimes we do. And we need to know exactly what we're doing when we do that. It's going to be most helpful to use other parts of the Bible to preach against the Bible. We need to know what we're doing, but also to recognize that not every text is addressed to us and some we need to be critical of so.

**Karin Peter** 44:43

That's helpful. That'll be helpful going forward for our whole He'Brew series.

44:49

I remember Joshua and what's to come, so I don't know some of this.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 44:53

Yeah, there's difficult stuff to come. Yeah.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 44:55

And that's why I'm glad that in our first of these you asked about whether or not we're going to sugar, sugar coat the Old Testament, and you can't really I mean, if you're going to read it, honestly, you can't. There's some things there that are the darker side of humanity. And sometimes that gets projected onto God. Sometimes that's just their understanding of what gods do, you know. And so, you know, all the neighboring gods wipe out whole towns of people. So that's how we show our god is at least as good as theirs and maybe even better. So. Yeah, it's, it's a tricky one. So keep asking those, those questions.

**Karin Peter** 45:42

And we'll get back to Moses.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 45:46

So is it time now to experience the text?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 45:49

Perhaps it is. Because one of the things we had down to talk about was about the whole plague story. So what, but I (Oh, yeah) some pieces of No, no, there's just gonna say there's some pieces. So we've talked about the beginning, God's call to Moses to go and be one of the people to help liberate the people. He eventually does go and do it. And, and then he vies with Pharaoh to find ways to do that. And then there's the plagues that we were just mentioning in which their severity becomes greater and greater, affecting more and more people. And eventually, the last one is the, the, the firstborn male of every family who doesn't have the mark of the lamb's blood on their doorpost dies, and then, then finally, they're allowed to leave. But even then, the Pharaoh then changes his mind and comes after them with an army, and then there's the miraculous crossing of the Sea of Reeds. And so there's all of that piece of the story in case you know, people have not seen Charlton Heston.

**Karin Peter** 47:09

Take it, check it out.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 47:13

So, anyhow, so that's, that's where it goes. And then and then they're, they're out there in the wilderness. And that's where we're going to pick up the Bible study part from Exodus.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 47:28

So Charmaine was just doing what I should have done, which is give literary context leading into where we're going next.

**Karin Peter** 47:34

It takes more than one person

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 47:35

It does, right. Yeah.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 47:39

So always, as we're beginning the Bible study part, we want, we begin with knowing that many people have a distrust of Scripture, because of the ways in which it's been used against them, to marginalize them, to judge or to suggest that somehow they are beyond God's reach or God's care. And, and we are fully aware of that. So we understand that you may not want to make yourself vulnerable to the text. And we would say that's completely fine. Our approach to the Bible study portion is to humanize the author and the characters. And then we invite you to see if there's anything in their experience with God or in their experience that fits for you, that would be helpful to you in your spiritual journey. And then we let the task, text ask us some questions. And we examine the text to see what it may be revealing to us

about who God is, who humanity is, or what we're called to as people. So, let's dig in. And what we're going to be doing is we're going to learn about the people and about God through the people's complaining. Now, how often do we get to do that, to get to learn about God from people's complaining? So, we're gonna go back here, and we're going to be looking at some, so we're gonna be looking at Exodus 16, and 17, some selected complaints and responses. And actually, I've never done this before. So as I was doing this, in preparation, there was a lot of things that kind of got revealed about this whole dynamic that's happening in this part. And this isn't the only place in Exodus where the people complained. So there's plenty more but we wanted to get just a, a, a sense of it. And then it's to see what is it that is revealed about them and about God. So, I'm just going to read you through. So here's the complaint. The whole congregation of the Israelites complained against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The Israelites said to them, If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt where we sat by the fleshpots, think stew pots here, and ate our fill of bread. For you brought us into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger. And then here's God's response. Then the Lord said to Moses, I'm going to rain bread from heaven for you. And each day the people shall go, go out and gather enough for that day. In that way, I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. And then there's Moses' response. And Moses said to the people, you're complaining is not against us, but against the Lord--there's a little bit of maybe guilt in there somewhere. And yeah, God's response, The Lord spoke to Moses and said, I have heard the complaining of the Israelites. Say to them, At twilight, you shall eat meat and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread, then you shall know that I am the Lord your God. So here's that whole thing about how, what is it God's trying to do with? Why is God meeting their needs, that you shall know that I am the Lord, your God. So, and then on to Exodus 17, the people's complaint, The whole congregation of the Israelites, journeyed by stages as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people quarreled with Moses, and say, give us water to drink. Moses' response, Moses said to them, why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord? And then the people's complaint, But the people thirsted there for water and the people complained against Moses and said, Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst? Moses, now Moses is going to complain. So Moses cried out, Lord, what shall I do with this people, they're almost ready to stone me. God's response, The Lord said to Moses, go on ahead of the people. Take in your hand, the staff with which you struck the Nile and go. I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it so that the people may drink. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and tested the Lord saying, Is the Lord among us or not? I love that last line. Because isn't that, isn't that the question? That if we're honest, we may end up asking off and on throughout our lives, or maybe throughout all life? And there's no, there is no, there's no judgment, in the negative sense here of the people for asking the question. They're asking an honest question. So just want to take a few minutes to again, look at what is the situation that, what's the, the context of these people? Why, why are they reacting the way they're acting? And what can, what can we, where can we have some compassion, but also some understanding. So we could just conclude that these are whiny and trustless people, I mean, but as we look closer, and we consider their situation, we'll also notice what the author is saying about God in this part of the story. So, what is, what is Moses' context? Well, he's left everything, again, because he left Egypt previously, and now he's leaving Midian, his new home. And he's being asked to take on a role that he wasn't thrilled with in the first place. And now he what, what does he do? He's faced with constant complaints from these people. They're demanding. They so seldom show any appreciation. And there's always plenty of

critique. What he's done or given up isn't acknowledged and it's not validated. And somehow, the people think he's supposed to know what God is planning, but he doesn't. And it's like his faith, however, . . . , is, is being relied upon for people to know what is coming, what they should do, how to know or trust or follow this God. So there's a whole lot going on for Moses. So the fact that he gets a little testy about it is not, it's pretty understandable. So, and then there's the people's context. In lots of ways, they are completely vulnerable. They have left all they've known behind--their homes, their neighbors, many of their possessions. And they're at a point where they have no options. They are stuck. They are stuck with Moses and this track that they don't know where it's going, and how it's going to end. Initially, the leaving sounded really cool. And, and yes, now they're free of the Egyptians, but now what? And they're physically hurting, whether it's from hunger or from thirst. They're not sure what to make of this God. Many of the commentators will say that many of the people who are in the story may not have had a long understanding of God, a long history of God. They may be only now learning for the first time who this God is, not sure what to make of God. They're in a situation, and with people that are not of their own choosing. Imagine moving with this whole crowd of people, and all of the vying for the best places to pasture your animals and place your tent and who's, who's the neighbor and how loud are their kids, and you know, all those kinds of things. And you don't have, their fear is amplifying their needs and their neediness. And they're having a hard time knowing what security looks like or what the future can look like, or imagine it. So is it any wonder that all of their fears come out of their mouths as complaints and accusations against poor Moses? So here's the first question for us that the text can, can nudge out of us. And that is your thinking about all of those things that they're struggling with. When have I struggled with one or more of these kinds of vulnerability, not being sure of this God, having no options, moving to being put in a new situation, having fear that we don't know what to do with or being insecure about the future? When have I struggled with one or more of these kinds of vulnerability? And if we had time, as a group, we would take a minute or two and write that down and maybe even share with each other. So that, the question that follows is one of those kind of hard self asking questions. Well, who that I've considered a complainer may actually be dealing with the kinds of uncertainty the people in the story are dealing with? And when we're finding ourselves particularly annoyed by people, this is a good question to ask. So, take just a quick look at what is, the author wants us to see that God is pretty patient. In those two stories of the complaints, God's ire is not raised, just kind of says, Okay, this is how we're going to move forward. This, I've heard they're complaining. And this is our echo back to the very beginning of Exodus where God hears the cries of the people in Egypt who are enslaved, and responds to it. And here again, God says, I hear their, their needs. And so as we think about patience, and whether or not we have it, because sometimes it's in church settings, that we find ourselves impatient with others. And quite often, if we think about it, we may be being impatient with those whose faith is just being formed, or, or reformed, or whose perspective on things is different from ours. And so, this little bit of the story may encourage us to think about, who am I being invited to patience for and, and in my giving room for their faith to be formed, because that's what's happening in the story is God is trying to help them know who God is and that God is reliable, and that God does hear their needs and can respond. And so, it's a, it's a place to use that images of faith growing as being what we're doing when we're, when we're learning patience. So then the last thought here is, if what God wants most, is to be in relationship with us, and that seems to be a pretty important piece in this whole storyline. God isn't there just to help them survive. And God doesn't seem to really want them to blindly, quietly, unquestioningly follow as if God were some kind of a dictator that ruled by fear. God is really quite open to this whole range of feelings, and sees beyond it, and calls them

anyway. So this would have been, for this group of people, a very different idea of a god or any kind of gods, then they would have had from the, their imbibing of the understandings of the Egyptian gods. So this is a God, who cares about us, who wants to be in relationship with us. That's phenomenal. This God doesn't judge them or reject them for their lack of faith, but is trying to teach them how to grow in trust. So in this, in these passages, the goal is for the people, to open their hearts to God, to trust God, to worship God, to rest in God. That's one of the ways of thinking about the Sabbath laws that come much later. The idea of invitation to rest in God, and to look to God for direction. So, in short, part of this is about God wanting to create a situation in which people can love God, and let God love them as they walk on this, at least to us, unknown path before us. So my last two questions here, are, or actually just one. If I were to entertain the idea that what this caring, relational God wants most is to be in relationship with me, how might it change how I look at myself and this day? So, I invite you to take a minute or two after this podcast to think about what if God, what God wants most for you, from you, with you, is to be in a relationship with you; to let you know that you are known and loved and cared for, how might that change how you looked at yourself in this day?

**Karin Peter 1:03:08**

All right, thank you, Charmaine, for that lovely aspect of spiritual formation with the complaining text that we can be spiritually formed even in our cowardice and complaining if we look at Moses and the people. So as we begin to come to the close of this episode, any last points or comments or things we should. . .

**Tony Chvala-Smith 1:03:36**

This is a story about a God who who is a liberator, but who needs us to help God do the liberating. So when I think about, I think about our world, and imagine this God saying, I have, I have heard the cries of my people, and I'm sending you, I think about racism, I think about gender inequality, and heterosexism. I think about the, the, the climate disaster we're in the midst of, and I hear the same God, the same, liberating God saying, I have come down to deliver you and I'm sending you, you, you and you. So God, God acts in history through us. And I think the Book of Exodus gives us the sense that there's all kinds of possibilities before us with this God who will be with us. So we have to simply respond.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:04:39**

Right. And another part of this, though, is that in this storyline, it is people who make this possible, Moses and Aaron, but God shows up along the way. God gives their own comfort animal along the way, but the pillar of light and the pillar of fire that surrounds them that lets them know you're encompassed. And so there, there is help. Yes, we are called to, to address those things we know and see and hear people crying out about. But we can rely on the fact that we have help. And that God's power, God's love can be there with us.

**Karin Peter 1:05:33**

So our next episode then, moving on from this, is going to be taking a look at what to make of the law. Not sure where we're gonna go with that, but I have an idea. We'll go ahead and close out today's episode of Moses and the Exodus story. And we're going to close it with some words from Community of Christ Sings hymnal, which in our hymnal is selection 595, and use verse one. Well, Moses tended

Jethro's sheep in silent reverie, the God of Israel came to him in flaming mystery. Still, as we do our daily work and walk our daily round, draw near to us, oh God most high, and make life holy ground. With those words, we'll end our episode for today. I'm Karin Peter. This has been He'Brew with Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith. Until next time, thanks for listening.

**Josh Mangelson** 1:06:42

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