We are here today to talk about Exodus, and there’s an awful lot that we could talk about. It’s a long book about forty chapters, and there’s all sorts of interesting historical issues we could talk about, but we’re going to focus on the theology of the book of Exodus. I think that’s important because that’s the reason why the book was written in the first place. It’s not written merely to satisfy historical curiosities, things like, who the pharaoh was and other sorts of interesting questions. It was ultimately written for a purpose and that was to teach Israel about who they’re God was and who God is, and also to teach them about who the people are and how they are to respond to God. So we’re going to focus on the theology of Exodus.

There are a couple of things that are going to keep coming back into our discussion of Exodus. One of these theological themes that seems to pop up through a lot of Exodus is how Exodus is connected to Genesis and I think maybe even a better way of putting that is how Creation is connected to Israel’s redemption and deliverance from Egypt. So we’re going to pick out some places where that’s a prominent theme and I think that will help us understand overall just what the book of Exodus is about because that’s what we’re aiming for here, to understand what the book is about.

Another point to make here just at the outset is that the first couple of chapters of Exodus especially, really the first the five or six chapters, but especially the first two chapters are very important for setting up the theology of the book of Exodus. There are themes that are introduced in these first couple of chapters so were going to try to spend a fair amount of attention just on the first couple of chapters and lift things out to try to understand the book of Exodus as a whole.

It is important to understand how Exodus first of all is really connected to the book of Genesis and even just as you you rifle through the book of Genesis you’ll see even there that there is an important Egypt connection with the book of Genesis. The name Egypt or Egyptian occurs, on my count, seventy-nine times in the book of Genesis. Egypt is a pretty important player. Abraham enters Egypt in chapter twelve and departs in chapter thirteen. So we have an Israelite going down into Egypt and
coming back. Hagar is an Egyptian who then is dismissed from Abraham and Sarah’s presence. Isaac himself, like his father before him, goes down to Egypt in chapter twenty-six and of course Joseph goes down into Egypt in chapter thirty-seven and that sets up the whole drama of the book of Exodus that’s how the Israelites were enslaved. So in Genesis itself you already have a lot of hints that Egypt is going to be a very important player in the Pentateuch. That’s one way of looking at it.

From the other side, even when you begin reading in the book of Exodus you see that there are some fairly clear projections back, let’s say, into the book of Genesis. For example, just the very way that the book of Exodus begins. In chapter one verse one, we read, “These were the names of the sons of Israel who went to Egypt with Jacob, each with this family” and then it lists the tribes of Israel. In Hebrew this would come out very clearly but even in translations like the NIV. This is a pretty much an exact citation of what we read in Genesis 46:8 both indicate that Israel is going down into Egypt and it gives a list of the tribes. The point is that Exodus 1:1 through verse five is already setting up how important understanding Genesis is for understanding Exodus as well.

More importantly, I think, is when we look at verses like verse seven of chapter one and then you see Creation language: “but the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous.” This is something that commentators routinely notice is Genesis language. It’s Creation language you can compare this, for example, to what you see in Genesis 1:28. It’s also very important, I think, that we see this same language in Genesis 9:1 with the story of Noah. You see a pattern developing in Genesis and Exodus where there are continual recreations in Genesis and in Exodus. And that really begins us thinking here a little bit about the close connection between God creating and God delivering and a little bit later we’ll have a chance to look at some things in the New Testament as well where that theme is continued, this very close connection between creation and redemption. When God creates he is actually redeeming. When he redeems he’s re-creating, he’s making things new. So you have in Exodus the story of redemption a lot of Creation language a lot of Creation and Genesis imagery comes into play. What Israel is doing here in
verse seven is actually fulfilling the Creation mandate that God gave back in the garden.

That is a very important thing for the theology of Exodus to keep in mind. See, Pharaoh’s problem, what he does that’s so wrong is that he doesn’t like the fact that the Israelites are increasing. His problem, we’ll read this in verse nine, is that there are too many of them. He is setting himself up there in a dangerous place. The real enemies, the real protagonist and antagonist in the book of Exodus, are not really Israel and Pharaoh. In fact, it’s not really Moses versus pharaoh, it’s actually Israel’s God Yahweh versus Pharaoh. What Pharaoh’s doing here in chapter 1 is he is already setting himself up as an opponent to Israel’s true God. How is he doing that? By saying “you’re not going to be fruitful and multiply. I don’t want you to do that.” Now he’s not thinking of Genesis, I’m not suggesting that for a minute, but the way Pharaoh is presented here, he’s being presented as an enemy of God himself. The sin of Pharaoh that he commits is not simply in enslaving the Israelites. Actually, enslaving the Israelites is just one of three things that he tries to do. He doesn’t like the fact that they are increasing so he tries to enslave them. Then we have the incident with the midwives where he tries to kill the male children upon birth. Then that doesn’t work and at the end of the chapter he throws the male children into the Nile. Those were all attempts to lessen their number to make them fewer, and this is a problem. Pharaoh is an anti-creation character in the book of Exodus. He’s an anti-creative force. Why is that important? Well, this anticipates points that we’re going to see later on.

In the book of Exodus, there’s so much in the first couple of chapters that really do set up and anticipate the theology of the book as a whole. Pharaoh, here, is being set up as an anti-creation force, and that’s important for this reason. The forces of creation will be unleashed later on as punishment of Pharaoh. This is what the plagues are. This is what dividing the Red Sea is. In chapter fourteen, the Red Sea is divided and dry land appears. Many commentators have picked up on what sounds like Genesis language, where God separates the water and dry land appears. The forces of Creation will be unleashed against Pharaoh to teach him that Yahweh,
Israel’s God is, in fact, God, and he isn’t. We see that drama already beginning here in chapter one. Pharaoh’s three attempts—the enslavement, the incident with the midwives, and the incident at the Nile—those three attempts do not work. We see that very clearly in verse twelve, which is interesting, the language that is used here: “But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites.” The “increase” language of verse seven is repeated in verse twelve. Pharaoh’s attempts come to naught. He is not able to resist God’s purpose and God’s plan for the Israelites to increase and to multiply. In fact, Pharaoh’s scheme has the exact opposite result of what he intends, which is a picture of what is to come. We’re going to see this again and again, where what Pharaoh intends to happen actually works against him. That has some theological importance as well. So chapter one ends with a sense of gloom. We have the male infants being thrown into the Nile, and readers might be thinking “well how is the story going to end, what is going to happen here?” In fact, will this story end even before it begins? What will happen if all the male children are thrown into the Nile?"

All we know from reading this story, this is a very terse narrative, all we know is that one child is born, one very important child, who escapes Pharaoh’s edict. This is now the beginning of chapter two, he escapes Pharaoh’s edict, and it is through him that God will deliver his people.

I am putting it that way so we intentionally think of something that all Christians of course are familiar with. It is through one very important child, Christ himself, that God will redeem his people. There are many, many connections that we could talk about, some of which we certainly will, between what Moses does, and what Jesus does later on. When we look now at chapter two, the early life of Moses, the first years, and what he does in his adult life, we will see there too that what happens to Moses in chapter two is actually a foreshadowing of what will happen to Israel later on in the book. It’s as if Moses acts out Israel’s drama, before it happens. And when we think here of some things to read perhaps in Paul or elsewhere in the New Testament, it’s not unlike that with Jesus as well. What Jesus did, the drama that he acted out, is a drama that now the church also participates in. I don’t want to get far
afield from Exodus here, but I think as Christians here, we’re going to try to understand how Exodus helps us understand the gospel itself which is ultimately where I think all this Bible study should go. But Christ died and Paul, for example in Romans 6, says we died, Christ was raised, we’re raised from the dead as well. Christ has ascended into heaven, and Paul says, for example in Colossians and he says in Ephesians, that Christians too have ascended into heaven and we are now seated in the heavenly places with Christ. Our head, our leader goes before us and does what the people do then as well. I think we see a similar thing here in the opening chapters of Exodus.

So let’s look at chapter two perhaps a bit more carefully and try to pull out some things that are going to be of theological significance for Exodus. First, we can talk about the birth of Moses. In chapter two, it’s interesting, I think at least, that the parents’ names are not mentioned, but what is mentioned is that he is from the tribe of Levi. His parents’ names are mentioned later on but not until chapter six. There’s a genealogy in chapter six they’re mentioned there but the tribe of Moses is important, the tribe of Levi. Now why might that be? Well, there’s so much of the book of Exodus that concerns priestly kinds of things. And specifically what are we talking about?--the law and the tabernacle. Exodus is forty chapters long. You’re only in Egypt for a few chapters, and you’re taking a trek in the desert for a few more, but by the time we get to chapter nineteen, you’re at Mount Sinai. Several chapters then are devoted to the law that was given on Mount Sinai, but a good half of the book, or nearly half of the book, is devoted to the tabernacle, which we will talk about a little bit later. But the law and the tabernacle, those are areas of priestly responsibility. So even here toward the very beginning of Exodus, we are seeing that fact already anticipated. How? By highlighting Moses and Aaron’s Levite lineage. That’s the important part. His parents’ names are not important at this point, but the tribe that he comes from.

Now there are at least two things in chapter two that help us understand the theology of Exodus itself, and the first we find in verse two of chapter two. She, the Levite woman, became pregnant and gave birth to a son. “When she saw that he was a
fine child,” and that’s an important phrase, “when she saw that he was a fine child, she hid him for three months.” What exactly does that mean, “a fine child”? The Hebrew word there is tov, and that often times means “good.” Other translations, for example, the Greek translation of Exodus has something like beautiful or well-formed, which is also what we read in Hebrews chapter seven, verse twenty, which raises an interesting question. Does Exodus 2:2 mean to say when she saw that the child was good-looking, she hid him for three months? This has been a curiosity for commentators for a very long time. Are we to think that if Moses was ugly, his mother would not have hidden him? That actually makes very little sense. Was he a fine child, ancient Rabbis said for example, this shows that Moses was circumcised at birth, this is what made him special at the very outset, but you see the Rabbis too were struggling with how to understand this.

What I think is that happening, and I’m not alone in this. There are other commentators who think this as well. The phrase there is a phrase you find in Genesis chapter one. And when you see in Genesis where God says "it was good" that exact Hebrew wording is found here in chapter two of Exodus as well. In other words, what we have here is maybe a hint, maybe it's a subtle hint for us, but for Hebrew readers, ancient readers of the Bible, it may not have been as subtle. What we have here perhaps is an illusion to Creation itself, which is to say that with the birth of Moses, there is a new beginning. What we have is Israelites enslaved slaves with the coming of Moses, there is now going to be a new beginning for God's people. Not unlike the birth of Christ, which is a new beginning for all humanity who have faith in Him.

What is, perhaps an even more obvious or clear connection to Genesis is found in verse three: “But when she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him and coated it with tar and pitch.” Now what the NIV has, which is the Bible that I use, has the papyrus basket as the Hebrew word that occurs only in two places in the entire Bible. It occurs here and it occurs in the Flood story. The Hebrew word here, which is teba’, that’s a Hebrew word for “ark” in the Noah Story. There are parallels between the story of Noah and the story of Moses. Both alone, of course, Noah with his family, both alone escaped a watery death in an ark of some sort. Both represent a
new beginning. Both are treated with tar and pitch. It's as if Exodus is sort of banging us over the head with a hammer and saying, "think of Noah when you think of Moses' early years." This also anticipates chapter fourteen when the Israelites pass through the Red Sea. Moses, now, is going through what his people will go through later on. Moses is being delivered from water; God's people later on likewise will be delivered from water.

It's also, another point that is worth making here, is that in verse five, it says that when Pharaoh's daughter went down to the Nile to bathe, and her attendants were walking along the river bank, and she saw the basket among the reeds. There here is a basket sort of abandoned in the reeds and the people later will pass through the Sea of Reeds, which of course is usually translated into English as the Red Sea. But here, also there is just a subtle hint saying “don't just read this as a story of the birth of one person.” This is also already a theological statement to help us to think backwards to the story of Noah and also forward to what's going to happen later on.

Moses grows up and we see this in chapter two verses eleven to twenty-five which really sort of hits us pretty suddenly you don't learn a lot about his early years. It always strikes me every time I watch the movie “The Ten Commandments,” which is a wonderful movie. But it's a four hour movie and at least two hours of if I think takes place right around this period which is described in the book of Exodus which means that most of it is made up because there is not much here to go on. But we see here that Moses was engaged in some activity that likewise foreshadows some things that are to come. What happens here? Well, he goes out and sees an Egypt mistreating an Israelite. And what does he do? He punishes the Egyptian, in that he kills the Egyptian. This is an anticipation of what Moses' role will be later in the book of Exodus, which is to be the instrument of God through which the Egyptians will be punished for their treatment of the Israelites. Now, what we have to be careful about here is that Moses is not presented as a courageous deliverer of Israel. He's a little bit sneaky about it. We read in chapter two that he looked this way and that and that he wasn't sure if he would get away with it. He took it upon himself to punish this Egyptian. Well Moses is not the perfect moral figure in chapter two, but theologically
his behavior here already sets up what we're going to see later on.

This act of killing the Egyptian is what leads Moses himself then to depart Egypt. The next day, I think it says that Moses went out and he saw two Israelites contending with each other and he tries to get involved to settle the dispute and they say, "What are you going to kill us just like you did to the Egyptian the other day?" And Moses is afraid. He's afraid that what he has done has been found out and he departs. And where does he go? He goes to Midian. Why is that important? He has left Egypt, he has gone to Midian, Midian is where the Israelites will later go.

Remember too, perhaps, this Midianite connection is important for Genesis that there were Midianite traders that led Joseph to Egypt in the first place. There were a lot of interesting things that we could explore if we had more time perhaps with this Midianite connection with the Israelites of Egypt. And it even affects the possible location of Mount Sinai because we'll see in chapter three that Moses' Midianite journeys seem to be somewhat close to where Mount Sinai might be. We'll look at that in chapter three in a minute.

He meets, Moses meets his future wife in Midian. He meets his future wife by a well and this is not the first time that has happened in the Bible: Isaac and Jacob both meet their wives by a well, another Genesis connection. He takes up a lengthy residence in Midian which some commentators have suggested is sort of a preview of Israel's forty years in the wilderness wandering. Moses is doing that now already. He's living out there in this foreign land, in this desert land. He also, he gains Jethro's favor, that's his father-in-law, by this is very important, by acting like a shepherd, driving away the enemies of the sheep. And he delivers Jethro's daughters from harm.

This shepherding activity of Moses is very much what he does in shepherding the Israelites into the desert later on. It's also picked up in a Psalm in chapter three of Exodus as well. It's interesting how foreign Moses' early years are. This is more of a side comment, but he was raised really functionally as an Egyptian in Pharaoh's household and then his much of his young adult years, he spends in Midian. This person who will be Israel's deliverer. I always just found that to be very interesting, I’m not sure what to make of it.
Chapter two closes with what I think is very important indication of how we should understand Exodus as a whole, and that’s verses twenty-three and twenty-five, which are key passages of book of Exodus. This goes like this: “During that long period,” the long period where Moses was in Midian, “the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out and their cry for help, because of slavery, went up to God.” Verse twenty-four, “God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned with them.”

The Exodus is response to a promise. God primarily did not deliver the Israelites because he felt sorry for them, although we read he did. The reason why God delivered the Israelites is because He made a promise to the patriarchs and if we can put it this way, God’s honor and his character are at stake. It’s not through what the Israelites themselves did, they were suffering, but it’s not through some merit, let’s say, of the Israelites themselves rather is because of God’s character to demonstrate his faithfulness to his people, his faithfulness to his commitment, and if I could use a good Old Testament word here, to demonstrate his righteousness. What righteousness typically means in the Old Testament is behaving rightly, doing the right, good, and honorable thing. It doesn’t always mean what we read of righteousness in the New Testament specifically in Paul’s letters that’s talking about something else, but here we are demonstrating God’s righteousness. His right activity, his doing the right thing. So this connection with the patriarchs here in verses twenty-three to twenty-five is important, and already now I want to just mention later on with the golden calf episode where God is about to reject Israel for idolatry in the desert. Moses basically argues with God, in chapters thirty-two to thirty-four. He basically argues with God, in just this wonderful exchange between Moses and God, Moses reminds God of his own promises to the patriarchs. God basically says at that point “you know you’re right.” Moses this is all humanly speaking, Moses and God are having a dialogue, but Moses reminds God of his own promises that we read all the way back here in chapter two. This is why God is doing what he is doing and it is his promise to Abraham that guarantees that this is going to happen.
Now a couple of other points here in opening chapters of Exodus, before we start looking at the plagues and Mount Sinai and the tabernacle, these pertain to chapters three and four. This is where Moses meets God and he meets God, we read in chapter three, while shepherding the sheep. And the ancient rabbinic interpreters said this was good practice. Moses was doing in the desert what he was going to be doing later with the Israel’s people. He meets God where? He meets Him at Mount Horeb, which is same as Mount Sinai. Again Moses is in the desert approaching Mount Sinai, which is where he will later lead the people. He is anticipating in his action here what will happen later on.

Now the incident of the burning bush is a tricky one and people spend a lot of time trying to understand what that means. Why did God reveal himself this way? Why of all things a burning bush? And I am afraid there is no definitive answer we can give to this question. It’s a favorite topic of allegorical interpretation. For example, the ancient interpreter Philo, who lived around the time of Christ, he said the burning bush was a symbol of Egypt’s inability to destroy Israel. The fire keeps burning but the tree is not consumed, or the bush is not consumed. That may be. Maybe an easier explanation could be that fire is a fairly common sign of God’s presence in the Old Testament. This is what we call “Theophany language,” the appearance of God which is often time accompanied with fire. I think there is a lot of truth to that. That may very well be right. I think another side of the matter though may highlight another theological aspect of the book of Exodus. The bush is burning but it is not consumed. What does that mean? The natural properties of creation are suspended temporarily by God’s hand. Now where that might be important is that this is what we see throughout Exodus with Israel being delivered from Egypt. We have the suspension of natural properties throughout the plagues. We have certainly the suspension of natural properties in the dividing of the water and the path through the Red Sea for the Israelites this may already be partly anticipating what we are going to see later on in the book of Exodus.

So finally the anticipated deliverance begins. God has an audience with Moses and in verse six of chapter three, the announcement is that God, Yahweh, is the God
of your fathers and the God of the patriarchs. Again a connection with the past. Who
am I? God is saying in chapter three “I am the God of these past people. I am the God
of your ancestors” which is to say, “I am a faithful God. I am the God of the past.”
This is what we saw at the end of chapter two. “I am the God of the past which is what
we will show you that I am going to do what I set out to do here,” even though Moses
doubts it.

Now because our time is limited we obviously can’t go through all of Exodus
somewhat as carefully as we are trying to do here, we can’t go through all forty
chapters. But this far I hope what we have seen are two important elements for
understanding Exodus. These are not the only two elements, but I think these are two
important elements we can highlight. First, is this connection between Creation and
deliverance. That when God delivers, Creation language and Creation imagery is used
to describe that. I think it’s very important not just for Exodus, but as I said before
even for the gospel itself. The Second element we have seen is that the earlier chapters
anticipate later chapters. All that is to say that when we read the book of Exodus for
its theological content we have to have our eyes sort of looking in two different
directions. We have to be looking backwards to what led up to this and also forwards
to where this will lead. And that makes, I think for an interesting and also very
profitable way of understanding the book of Exodus.

Now the next topic that we’re going to cover in more detail is the plagues, but
before we move on to that there’s just one more theological issue that I want to look at
and its important because it comes up all the time and it’s something that I think can
cause somewhat of theological tensions even between Christians talking about it; and
that has to do with the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. And the two passages that are
important for us to look at are 4:21, chapter four verse twenty-one and chapter three
verse nineteen. Maybe we should just begin by just looking at that here. In 3:19 God
is talking to Moses it says, “but I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go
unless a mighty hand compels him.” Meaning Pharaoh will not be convinced to let
you go unless I compel him. So what we read in 3:19 is that at the end of the day it’s
because God compels Pharaoh, it’s by Gods doing, that Pharaoh will finally relent.
Now what creates a theological tension at least, is when we read 4:21, “the Lord said to Moses when you return to Egypt see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders that I have given you the power to do, but I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go.” Now what’s going on here? In chapter 3:19 we read that God’s role is going to be to push Pharaoh into letting the Israelites go. In 4:21 we read, quite frankly, the exact opposite. God’s role now is not to push Pharaoh to let him go, it’s that even when Pharaoh wants to let him go, God is going to intervene and harden Pharaoh’s heart so that he does not let them go.

This creates some interesting discussions I think. We have three options really of how we want to deal with this. We can look at this tension and explain it away, which is to say, they’re not really saying different things they’re saying the same thing. I don’t think that’s helpful. I don’t think they’re saying the same thing and we get that I think just from reading our English Bibles. The second option is just to dismiss this as just hopelessly confusing and it doesn’t make any sense. I think it makes perfect sense. 3:19 says this and 4:21 says that. That makes sense to me, I don’t know how they hang together but I won’t say that it doesn’t make sense.

I think the better option is that we try to learn something from this. Let me put it this way, and I’m trying to be intentionally slightly controversial here as I put it this way, but 3:19 and 4:21 contradict each other. There are contradictions in the book of Exodus. That contradiction is there intentionally, it is for a purpose. It’s not because the writer forgot what he said there and said something else, but this actually creates a wonderful theological tension in the book of Exodus which is an intentional tension. It is this contradiction between 3:19 and 4:21 that drives much of the theology of the book of Exodus. You see, Pharaoh has no chance. Pharaoh is God’s plaything. This is how God will show his might over Egypt, even over the superpower of that world, even over Pharaoh who in Egyptian mythology was equated with the sun god Re. He was the earthly representation of that god. He represented the height of the Egyptian pantheon. This is how God will show his might over Pharaoh. God will not only win but he will manipulate Pharaoh along the way.

This part of Exodus is not designed and this is really what I want to get at here.
This part of the book of Exodus is not designed to satisfy our curiosities about freewill or determination, does God, you know, make you trip up the stairs, does God pick some people to be Christians or not. Exodus doesn’t deal with that. There’s this focus there and there is a war going on between God and between Pharaoh. I don’t think we need to take it much further than that. I think that eases some of the tension because we shouldn’t expect from Exodus to answer all those kinds of questions. The only questions being asked here is who is going to win and the answer is, no question, Yahweh. In fact, watch how he does it. It’s not a match between equals, it’s a match between one very arrogant king and God who will manipulate Pharaoh so much so that at the end there will be no doubt in anyone’s mind as to who brought Israel out of Egypt. There will be no doubt in the Israelites minds, there will no doubt in Egypt’s mind, and as we read elsewhere in Exodus there will be no doubt in the world’s mind as to who is doing this, it is the God of Israel.

Now with the plagues, which we are going to begin looking at here, there is much that we could look at in this narrative of the plagues. What we are going to go though is we are going to look, to go through the plagues one by one more briefly then perhaps we would like, but we are going to highlight where each of these plagues helps us understand the theological message of the book of Exodus and there are several places where we are going to be able to draw out fairly legitimately the connection between Exodus and Creation again, even in the plague narratives. And it’s important to take the plague narratives as a whole. There are ten of them and we have to understand it as an entire theological statement in and of itself. In other words, you know if you’re perhaps preaching through the plagues or you’re leading a Bible study through the plagues, it’s hard to apply the plague of gnats differently than you might apply the plague of flies. That’s not what it’s there for, it’s not meant to be taken in such small chunks but as a whole what are the plagues doing in the story, what is this trying to communicate theologically.