



JESUS WANTS TO SAVE CHRISTIANS

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JESUS WANTS TO SAVE CHRISTIANS INTRODUCTION ■
TO THE INTRODUCTION

This is a book about a book.

The structure follows the narrative of the Bible, which means that there is a progression here, each chapter building on the one before it. If you skip ahead, it's not going to make much sense.

Before we begin, a disclaimer and a shout-out or two.

First, the disclaimer.

In the Scriptures, ultimate truths about the universe are revealed through the stories of particular people living in particular places. As this book explores, the nation of Egypt and the Jewish people feature prominently in the biblical narrative. When we write of Egypt *then*, we are not writing about Egypt *today*. When we mention the Jews *then*, we are not speaking of our Jewish friends and neighbors *today*. We realize that some of these words, such as *Egypt* and *the Jews*, have power to evoke feelings and thoughts and attitudes about the very pain and division in our world that this book addresses. We join you in this tension, believing that the story is ultimately about healing, hope, and reconciliation.

And now, a shout-out. This is a book of theology. The word theology comes from two Greek words: *theo*, which means "God," and *logos*, which means "word."

Theology, a word about God.

Anybody can do theology.¹

This book is our attempt to articulate a specific theology, a particular way to read the Bible, referred to by some as a New Exodus perspective. One New Exodus scholar is a British theologian named Tom Holland, who has done

pioneering work in this approach.² We are grateful to him for his groundbreaking take on the story of Jesus. He has liberated profound truths about what it means to be human, and we celebrate that with him.

One more shout-out, which is actually a massive shout-out. We are part of a church, a community of people learning to live the way of Jesus together. For their love and support and critique and questions and example and insight and hope, we are deeply grateful.

You know who you are.

Grace and peace to you.

And thanks.

Now, on to “Air Puffers and Rubber Gloves.”

JESUS WANTS TO SAVE CHRISTIANS INTRODUCTION ■
AIR PUFFERS AND RUBBER GLOVES



The first family was dysfunctional.

At least, that's the picture painted by the storyteller in the book of Genesis.

The first son, Cain, was angry with the other first son, Abel, because “the LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor.”¹

Cain said to his brother, “Let's go out to the field.” And when they went, Cain killed Abel.

According to the story, Cain “worked the soil” while Abel “kept flocks.” One was a farmer, the other was a shepherd.

A farmer is settled.

A farmer has chosen a piece of land and settled there because he's decided that this land can best support his crops. He has a strong sense of boundaries – this land, the land that he lives on and farms, is his land.

A shepherd is nomadic.

A shepherd goes wherever there is food for his flock. A shepherd wanders from place to place. A shepherd doesn't have a strong sense of boundaries, because he sees all land as a possible spot for him to stop and feed his flock.

It wouldn't take long for the shepherd and his flock to cross onto the property of the farmer. And that would raise the question, Whose land is it, anyway?

This question would have many dimensions – economic, political, religious, social – let alone the personal aspects of ownership and property and progress



and wealth. The story of these two first sons is actually a story about progress, innovation, and the inevitable forward movement of human civilization.²

This Genesis account reflects the transition that was occurring in the time and place in which this story was first told. A seismic shift was occurring as human society transitioned from a pastoral, nomadic orientation to an agricultural one. This was a huge change that did not come without a lot of strife.

And, occasionally, murder.

As a result of the murder, the text says, “Cain went out from the LORD’s presence and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.”³

East of Eden.

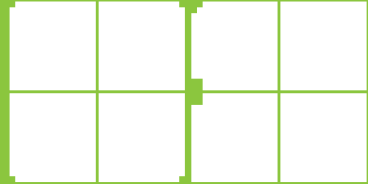
There is a place called Eden, a paradise, a state of being in which everything is in its right place. A realm where the favor and peace of God rest on everything.

And Cain is not there. He’s east of there.

And he’s not only east of Eden, but in chapter 4 of the book of Genesis, the text says that he was “building a city.”⁴

It’s not just that he’s east of where he was created to live, but he’s actually settling there, building a city, putting down roots. The land of his wandering has become the location of his home. And then several chapters later, the Bible says that the whole world had one language and a common speech “as people moved eastward.”⁵

The writer, or writers, of Genesis keeps returning to this eastward metaphor,⁶ insisting that something has gone terribly wrong with humanity, and that from the very beginning humans are moving in the wrong direction.⁷



JESUS WANTS TO SAVE CHRISTIANS CHAPTER ONE ■
THE CRY OF THE OPPRESSED

The first book of the Bible ... Exodus?

Well, yes, and, of course, no.

No, because the first book of the Bible is Genesis. At least when a person picks it up and starts reading from the “in the beginning God created” part.

And yes, because many scholars see Exodus, the second book of the Bible, as the book in which the central story of redemption begins – liberation from Egypt.¹

Egypt, the superpower of its day, was ruled by Pharaoh, who responded to the threat of the growing number of Israelites in his country by forcing them into slavery. They had to work every day without a break, making bricks, building storehouses for Pharaoh.²

Egypt is an empire,

built on the backs of Israelite slave labor,

brick by

brick by

brick.

But right away in the book of Exodus, there is a disruption. Things change. And the change begins with God saying:

“I have indeed seen the misery of my people ...”

“I have heard them crying out ...”

“I have come down to rescue them ...”

“I have seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them . . .”³

A God who sees and hears. A God who hears the cry. The Hebrew word used here for cry is *sa’aq*, and we find it all throughout the Bible. *Sa’aq* is the expression of pain, the ouch, the sound we utter when we are wounded.⁴

But *sa’aq* is also a question, a question that arises out of the pain of the wound. Where is justice? Did anybody see that? Who will come to my rescue? Did anybody hear that? Or am I alone here?

Sa’aq is what Abel’s blood does from the ground after he’s killed by his brother.

The Israelites are oppressed, they’re in misery, they’re suffering – and when they cry out, God hears.

This is a God who always hears the cry.

This is central to who God is: God *always* hears the cry of the oppressed.

The cry inaugurates history. It kicks things in gear. It shakes things up and gets them moving. The cry is the catalyst, the cause, the reason that a new story unfolds.

But God in this story doesn’t just hear the cry. God does something about it. The exodus is how God responds to the cry.

Think about your life. What are the moments that have shaped you the most? If you were to pick just a couple, what would they be? Periods of transformation, times when your eyes were opened, decisions you made that affected the rest of your life.

How many of them came when you reached the end of your rope?

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When everything fell apart?

When you were confronted with your powerlessness?

When you were ready to admit your life was unmanageable?

When there was nothing left to do but cry out?

For many people, it was their cry,

their desperation,

their acknowledgment of their oppression,

that was the beginning of their liberation.

When we're on top, when the system works for us, when we are capable of managing our lives, what is there for God to do?

But the cry – the cry inaugurates redemptive history. These slaves in Egypt cry out and God hears and something new happens. Things aren't how they were. Things change.

These slaves are rescued from the oppression of Egypt.

■ EGYPT

In the Bible, Egypt is a place, a country, a nation where the story begins. But it's much, much more. To understand how central Egypt is to the flow of the biblical story, we have to go back to the introduction to the Bible, to the garden of Eden.