

ZONDERVAN

God Heard Their Cry Discovery Guide
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Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, *Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530*

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CONTENTS

Introduction / 7

Session One

How Big Is Our God? / 15

Session Two

Israel in Bondage: God Heard Their Cry / 57

Session Three

Finger of God: The Plagues / 103

Session Four

Watch with Me: Israel Leaves Egypt / 151

Session Five

The Lord Reigns: The Red Sea / 199

Notes / 243

Bibliography / 245

Website Resources / 247

HOW BIG IS OUR GOD?

God loves a story. In fact, one could describe the Bible as one story made up of many stories. Yet when we read the Bible, we tend to concentrate on the individual stories without considering how each story fits into and contributes to the greater story that God is unfolding. This is particularly true of the story of the exodus of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt. God's protective care for his chosen people thrills us. His demonstrations of power through the plagues and the dividing of the Red Sea amaze us. Yet we seldom consider God's greater story of which the exodus is but an early chapter. So let's begin by discovering where the story of the exodus fits into that greater story.

God's greater story began when he created the universe out of a watery chaos (which he also had created). God's creation culminated in his formation of two humans, Adam and Eve, who were to partner with him in caring for his world. However, they rebelled against the terms of their partnership with God and reintroduced chaos to the harmony of God's creation.

Fortunately, God's story did not end with the return of chaos. Instead, he began a long process of restoring harmony (the Bible calls it *shalom*) to his creation. What is truly amazing is that he chose to accomplish this process in partnership with people — the same created beings who had ruined it in the first place! He commands his created human beings to live lives that bring harmony to his creation and forbids whatever causes brokenness or prevents the restoration he desires. Into this story he invites the Hebrews, the descendants of the patriarchs, to partner

with him so that through them the whole world will know of God's restoration of shalom.

But God's story is not the only story. The other story can be traced to the evil one, the snake, the deceiver who tempted Adam and Eve. He loves chaos and seeks to destroy the shalom of God's creation. The evil one promises harmony and the defeat of the chaos that causes pain, but his definition of harmony actually creates the very brokenness from which he promises deliverance. By the time of the exodus, that story had become the story of all cultures, including the culture of Egypt. That is why the story written in the stones of Egypt is so important. The spectacular temples, architectural details, and carvings in stone found in ancient Egypt are, in effect, the sacred text of that other story.

God's plan required a confrontation between these two stories (or worldviews as some would label them). People need to know the truth about chaos and the shalom, or restoration, that God promises. People need to understand that the way of this world is a lie that only increases the brokenness that permeates life. Perhaps that is why Jacob and his descendants found themselves in Egypt, where they saw and experienced the stark contrast between the two stories. If they were to be God's partners in defeating the lie and restoring shalom to God's creation, they needed to know both stories and commit themselves to living out his story in his way.

So while the fact of the Hebrews' miraculous delivery from slavery in Egypt is a dramatic historical event, it is much more than that. The presence of the Hebrew slaves within the culture of the great empire of ancient Egypt brings into focus the cosmic conflict between the stories of chaos and shalom. As part of his unfolding story of the restoration of shalom to his broken creation, it is no wonder that God used a great and mighty demonstration of his power over chaos to deliver the Hebrew slaves from Egypt.

The experiences of God's people in the exodus are not only the first chapter of God's great story of restoration but are a metaphor, a paradigm, of that restoration as well. God's plan of restoration for his people (or salvation as it is sometimes called) is rooted in the exodus and built on the exodus experiences. The two stories — God's restoration of shalom versus the chaos of the evil one — are present at all

times and in all places, including our own. Thus the most important question for us is the same one both the Hebrews and the Egyptians had to answer: “If you understand the stories, whose story will you believe and live by?”

Opening Thoughts (3 minutes)

The Very Words of God

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning — the first day.

And God said, “Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water.” So God made the expanse and separated the water under the expanse from the water above it. And it was so. God called the expanse “sky.” And there was evening, and there was morning — the second day.

And God said, “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.” And it was so. God called the dry ground “land,” and the gathered waters he called “seas.” And God saw that it was good.

Genesis 1:1 – 10

Think About It

The structures people create and build — museums, bridges, tombs, government buildings, churches, performing arts centers, stadiums — say something about the people who built them and what those people value.

Consider some of the extraordinary structures people of our day build, such as the towering skyscrapers of Dubai, the Sydney Opera House, the “Bird’s Nest” stadium built for the Olympics in Beijing. In

what ways do these structures tell the “story” of our world? What do they reveal about who we are and how we believe the world works?

DVD Notes (35 minutes)

The story of Egypt in stone—pyramids, temples, and architecture

God’s story in the hearts of people—creation, chaos, and shalom

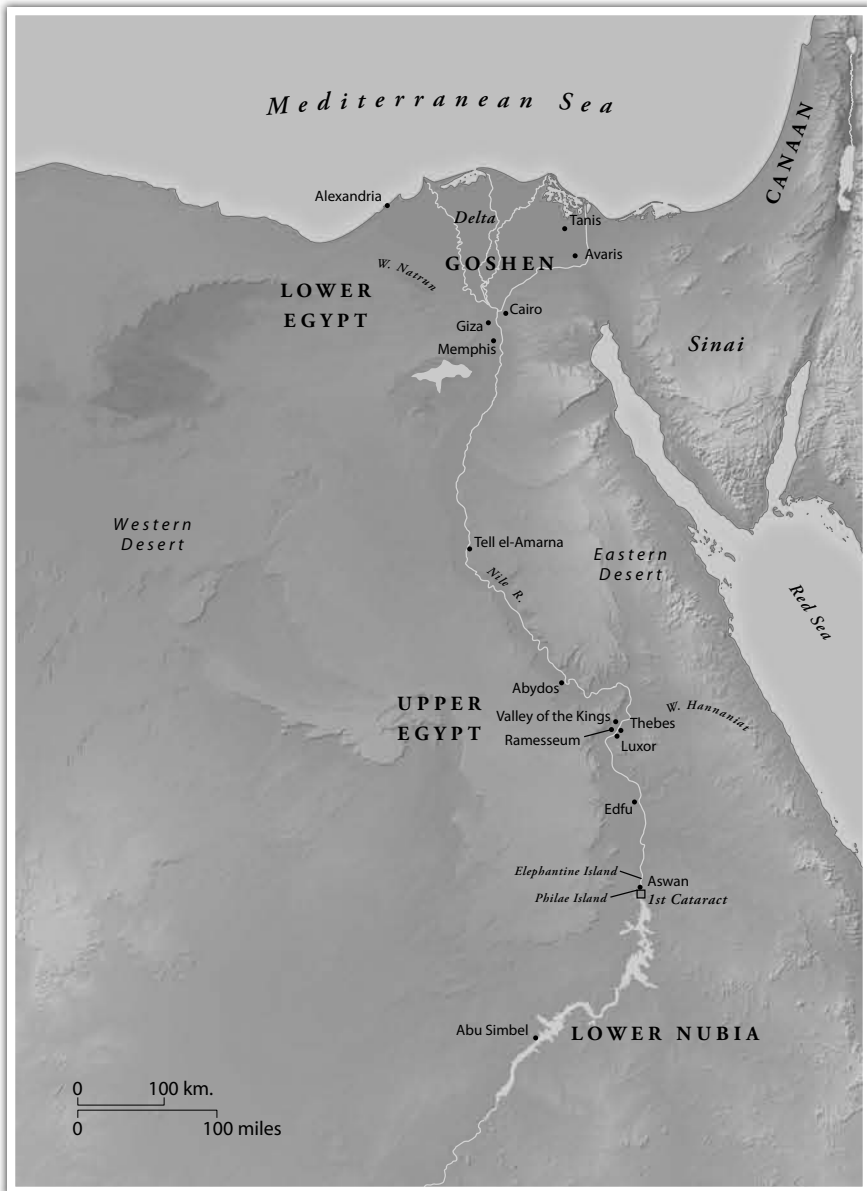
The temple of Amun Re—a theology of chaos and order

The job of Pharaoh: to maintain Ma'at

Each story has a price tag

DVD Discussion (5 minutes)

1. The pyramids, temples, and gigantic stone carvings of ancient Egypt are truly amazing, but to realize that every detail — from the design and shape of the structures to the placement of Pharaoh's name in a cartouche — reveals something of the sacred story of the Egyptian culture is astounding. What did you learn about the Egyptian story that helps you to better understand what was at stake in the intersection of God's story and the Egyptian story in the exodus?



THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN STORY WAS SCULPTED AND ETCHED IN STONE THROUGHOUT THE EGYPTIAN EMPIRE. IT WAS WRITTEN IN THE GREAT STATUES AND TEMPLES OF ABU SIMBEL AT THE SOUTHERN END OF EGYPT, IN THE TEMPLES AND TOMBS OF KARNAK (THEBES), IN THE GREAT PYRAMIDS OF GIZA, IN THE ANCIENT CAPITAL CITY OF AVARIS (RA'AMSES), AND IN SCATTERED MINING SITES IN THE WILDERNESS DESERTS OF THE SINAI PENINSULA.

2. According to the Egyptian story, why was it essential for Pharaoh to be responsible for all of the religious ritual in Egypt?

What would be the consequences in daily life for all Egyptians if he failed?

3. What insights have you gained into the role that the story of a culture plays in shaping who people are and how they live?

What have you realized about the cost of joining a culture's story?

What might you gain by reexamining the importance of God's creation story to your beliefs and daily life?

Small Group Bible Discovery and Discussion (11 minutes)

Ma'at from Chaos — the Egyptian Story

Most of us are familiar with God's story of creation as told in the Bible, but Egypt had a creation story too. We can still read the "sacred text" of Egypt's story in the structure and carvings of its ancient temples. Like God's story, the Egyptian story tells about the establishment of order from chaos followed by the breakdown of that order and the resulting pain and suffering of life. But the Egyptian story has a different solution. It declares that chaos can be defeated by their gods and their ruler, Pharaoh, who was viewed as divine and brought harmony and order — called *ma'at* — to their world.

1. We may not expect to discover similarities between God's creation story and the Egyptian story, but it really should not surprise us when we do. The Egyptians experienced in their lives the same brokenness of sin — failed relationships, famine, violence, immorality — that we experience in ours, and their story certainly reflects a longing for order. What would be the source of their awareness of and longing for God's shalom? (See Psalm 19:1 - 4; 97:6; Acts 14:17; Romans 1:18 - 20.)

2. In a sense, the creation story in Genesis can be viewed as part of a preamble to the exodus story. So we might ask, why did Moses write it in the manner in which he did? Perhaps we can discover at least part of the answer by reading Genesis 1 - 2 and comparing God's creation story to the Egyptian creation story (see Profile of a Culture: Egypt's Creation