The Exodus
by
Richard Elliott Friedman

INTRODUCTION

1. Richard Elliott Friedman concludes his introduction with a question: “Before you set out on this sea of evidence, what does your gut tell you? . . . What does your intuition say: that something happened in Egypt, or that nothing happened?” (p. 4). How would you answer this?

CHAPTER 1:
HISTORY RECAPTURED

1. Professor Friedman writes, “In the last couple of decades an array of scholars, archaeologists, and clergy have seriously questioned whether [the exodus] happened”
(p. 10). Prior to reading this book, were you aware of this controversy?

2. Friedman uses his wife’s example of Cinderella to illustrate his point about the exodus: “It has mice become horses, a pumpkin become a coach, and a poor oppressed girl become a princess because a glass shoe fits only her. The story is fiction. It is not history. But the element of the shoe at least reflects that shoes were a real thing in the culture that produced that story.” How might this analogy be helpful to investigate what parts of the Bible are real things and what may be fiction?

3. “How did this happen? How did we shift from ‘archaeology proves the Bible’ to ‘archaeology disproves the exodus’ in just a few decades? What changed?” (pp. 15–16). Friedman answers these questions on pages 12 to 15. In your own words, how would you describe how it happened?

4. “In 2013, Reform Judaism magazine came out with the heading ‘We Were Not Slaves in Egypt’ on the cover. . . . I, for one, was troubled that this was informing an audience of about a million Reform Jews that the exodus was not real just before they sat down with their children on Passover eve to celebrate the holiday” (pp. 18–19). Why might someone be troubled by this? How would evidence that the exodus really happened impact such a family that is retelling the story every year at the Passover seder table?
5. Friedman distinguishes between scholars who suggest that the exodus did not happen as written in the Bible and scholars who suggest that the exodus did not happen at all (p. 19). What is the difference, if any, between these two views of religion?

CHAPTER 2:
THE MYSTERY OF EGYPT

1. “The principal points that people generally bring up in doubting the exodus are mostly about numbers: We have found no remnant of the two million people in the Sinai region. We have found no widespread material culture of Egypt in early Israel: no Egyptian style pottery or architecture. We have found no records in Egypt of a huge mass of Israelite slaves or of a huge exodus” (p. 27). What do these points prove—or disprove?

2. In this chapter, Friedman makes the case that the exodus was smaller than originally thought—specifically, that it was only the Levites who left Egypt. He asks, “Does it really ruin your day if the exodus was historical but not all of the Israelites were in it?” (p. 83). How would you answer this question? How would a small exodus affect your understanding of this important biblical story? Why do you think it does or doesn’t matter?

3. Friedman brings ten bodies of evidence pointing to a smaller exodus, which he summarizes on pages 64 to 65. Discuss some of these. The first is the fact that only
Levites have Egyptian names. Does your own name or the names of people you know or the names of some celebrities, give clues about family backgrounds?

4. Friedman’s answer to the mystery of how two million people disappear is: “The biblical authors did not make up the exodus. But they had to make up the numbers” (p. 79). How does this answer respond to those who say, “We’ve combed the Sinai and found no evidence of a mass exodus” (p. 17)?

5. Friedman shows that even ancient songs and prose texts that may or may not be fiction can give us clues to the history behind them. In your own experience, can you think of songs or fictional stories that might still shed light on actual events of history?

CHAPTER 3:
THE MYSTERY OF ISRAEL

1. In looking for proof that Israelite and Judean populations existed in the biblical “promised land” when the Levites arrived there from the exodus, Friedman finds much. He writes, “The point of this is how vast the array of the evidence is. This is not a vague hypothesis. . . . This is a civilization: between four hundred and five hundred cities and towns excavated, hundreds of years, thousands of items in writing, millions of people” (p. 103). Did you expect to find this quantity of evidence? Why or why not?
2. Friedman describes the confusion over the Merneptah stele with regard to dating the arrival of Israel in the land (p. 104). How does the smaller Levite exodus (treated at length in chapter 2) present an answer to this confusion?

3. “As I began writing and lecturing about the exodus, people occasionally asked me if I had considered genetic evidence. I had not” (p. 106). Once Friedman started considering genetic evidence, what did he learn? How did genetic discoveries fit with the evidence of a Levite exodus?

4. “A small group joins a much larger group just around the time that they become a nation. They make a revolutionary consensus about having one major God, not two. They make a revolutionary union in which the small group become the priests of the larger group” (p. 113). This is Friedman’s brief summary of the merger between the Levites and the Israelites and Judeans. How does this compare to your understanding of the relationship between these groups before this chapter? How does this impact how you view them? Can you think of other times when people from different nationalities or cultures joined together and formed new ideologies or theologies?

5. “As far as we know, though, these ancient writers invented something new. They did not tell their story in poetry. They told it in prose. . . . Herodotus is called the father of history, but the oldest prose accounts of history in the Bible were written when Herodotus’
great-grandmother was not yet in preschool” (p. 114). Why do you think the Greek works rather than the biblical accounts were viewed as the first attempt to write history?

CHAPTER 4: THE MYSTERY OF MIDIAN

1. “And the difference between a religion with one god and a religion with two is more than just arithmetic. It is all the difference in the world” (p. 121). In your own words, what is the gulf between monotheism and a “duo-theism”? Why does Friedman make such a strong claim here?

2. “The people who left Egypt behind and came to Israel and became its priests worshipped the God Yahweh. But where did they get the belief in this God?” (p. 122). In this chapter, Friedman proposes four possible ways of answering this question. Which of these did you find most/least compelling? Why?

3. Sigmund Freud treated the question of whether Moses was Egyptian. Friedman writes, “Freud questioned the fact that, though everyone seemed to know that the name Moses was Egyptian, no one had raised the natural, logical explanation of this fact: namely, that Moses was Egyptian” (p. 134). What does Friedman make of this proposal?
4. Friedman questions whether someone would invent that Moses’ father-in-law was a Midianite priest. Can you think of any reason why anyone would make that up?

5. “Whether it was the Levites first, as suggested here, or the Israelites or their ancestors in the land first, then that still leaves the question of where this people got their idea of monotheism. Their own story is that Yahweh Himself revealed it to them: to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob, to Joseph, to Moses. That is the Bible’s story, and it is a matter of faith, not to be proven by archaeology and scholarship” (p. 145). How do you personally make sense of the relationship between faith and scholarship? Where do they converge? Where do they diverge? Which one has greater authority?

CHAPTER 5:
THE MYSTERIES OF BABYLON

1. Friedman quotes a group of biblical passages at the bottom of page 150 and the top of page 151. Do you read these as reflecting Israel’s monotheism, henotheism, or polytheism? Why or why not?

2. Friedman reports that many scholars claim that monotheism developed among the Jews during the Babylonian exile, starting in 587 BCE (p. 151)? What does he make of this claim? What evidence does he bring to the table in support of his position?
3. Why does Friedman focus on Psalm 82 in this chapter? What does it reveal about the development of monotheism within Israel? How might this ancient concept of monotheism impact our contemporary one?

4. Friedman offers a new explanation for why God speaks in the plural in three passages in the Bible. Is there some other reasonable explanation that accounts for why God is pictured as speaking this way only in these three places at the beginning of the Bible?

5. “The triumph of monotheism has changed everything, probably even the nature of atheism. Today more people than ever believe in God. And more people than ever don’t” (p. 194). How does learning more about the development of monotheism impact the belief in God today? How does it impact your beliefs?

CHAPTER 6:
THE MYSTERY OF JUDAH

1. “There has been a claim for a while now that turns this famous idea ['Love your neighbor as yourself'] on its head. The claim is that the verse means only to love one’s fellow Jews or Israelites as oneself, that the word for ‘neighbor’ there means only a member of one’s own group. Inclusive? No. It is actually exclusive” (p. 200). How does Friedman respond to this claim in this chapter? What is the implication for today?
2. “One of the things that has impressed me through my years of study of the Hebrew Bible was this repeated concern for aliens” (p. 201). If you are a member of a faith community, have they ever discussed this unique biblical concept and its possible implications for today? If so, what has that discussion been like? If not, why hasn’t it come up?

3. Friedman suggests, “The experience of being aliens, of being oppressed, apparently led Israel’s clergy and teachers, the Levite priests, to say, ‘You must never do that’ ” (p. 203). How do a people’s past experiences inform them in future generations? How do you see this ethic being applied to modern cultural attitudes about morality today?

4. “People sometimes have thought that monotheism promoted exclusivism, prejudice: if there is only one God, and it is our God, then others must be wrong, foolish, in need of correction. But there is another side to this as well: the birth of monotheism was paralleled with the birth of love of neighbors, even alien neighbors” (p. 206). In which of these two ways do you typically see monotheism? Why?

FINAL QUESTIONS

1. How has this book impacted you? How has it impacted your understanding of the exodus? Of our modern understanding of ethics and morals? Of our contempo-
rarity attitude toward immigrants and foreigners? Of monotheism?

2. If a friend saw you reading this book and asked you what it was about, how would you respond?