

Dr. Ted Hildebrandt, Old Testament Literature, Exodus Plagues to Tabernacle

Session 12, 6-min. Video Overview

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Welcome to the explainer. Today, we're basically opening up a historical cold case file. We're going to put on our detective hats and investigate one of the most foundational and honestly puzzling stories in all of history, the Exodus.

So right here in the book of Exodus, we get this verse. Seems pretty straightforward, right? It's God talking to Moses, kind of explaining that a new chapter is starting. The patriarchs, you know, Abraham and the guys, they knew God by one name, but now Moses will know him by another.

No way. Simple enough. Well, it's not quite that simple because, and this is the crazy part, the text itself seems to suggest they did already know the name.

And that creates this fascinating contradiction right at the heart of the whole story. Okay, let's dive into the evidence. So our investigation really kicks off with this contradiction that's been hiding in plain sight.

It's a textual puzzle that has sparked a major scholarly debate for a long, long time. Okay, so look at this. On one hand, Exodus 6.3 says it plain as day.

The patriarchs did not know the name Yahweh, but then you flip back to Genesis, and there's Jacob, one of those very same patriarchs, using that exact name. So what gives? Well, one really powerful solution suggests this isn't about a mistake, but a shift in meaning. It's not about just hearing the word.

It's about truly getting what it stands for. See, to the patriarchs, God was like the promise-maker. But for Moses and the Israelites, he was about to reveal himself as Yahweh, the covenant keeper, the one who doesn't just make promises, but shows up and powerfully fulfills them.

Now, that very contradiction we just talked about, it actually led some 19th-century scholars to cook up a pretty radical theory about how the Bible itself was written. And that brings us to our next big clue. And it's called the JEDP theory.

This was a game changer because it suggested that the text isn't this single seamless work by one person like Moses. Instead, it's more like a masterful patchwork woven together from different authors writing at different times with totally different perspectives. So this theory breaks the text down into these different sources.

You've got the J source, who loved using the name Yahweh, and the E source, who preferred Elohim or God. And as you can see, these sources were supposedly written centuries after

Moses would have lived. So you can see how that would explain the different ways they talk about God's name.

But here's the catch. And it is a big one. This is all a theory.

As the source for our explainer points out, no one has ever found a physical copy of a J, E, D, or P document. Not one. So it's an influential idea for sure, but it's not a proven fact.

Okay, so the text itself has these fascinating puzzles baked right in. But what happens when we try to take this story out of the book and place it in actual history? Well, that's when the case gets even colder. Let's look at the mystery of when the exodus might have actually happened.

The whole debate really boils down to two main theories. You've got folks who argue for an early date around 1445 BC; they point to the Bible's own internal clock and an old Egyptian monument called the Merneptah stele. But then you have supporters of a late date around 1260 BC, and they point to some pretty compelling archaeological clues like the city of Ramses being built, and evidence of cities being burned down in Canaan around that time.

And now for maybe the most mind-boggling puzzle of them all: the sheer scale of the exodus. This isn't just about history; it's a straight-up logistical nightmare. So the Bible says 600,000 men of fighting age left Egypt.

You add in women and children, and you're looking at a grand total of around 2.4 million people. To give you some perspective, that is like the entire population of the city of Houston, Texas, getting up and walking through the desert. I mean, just try to wrap your head around the logistics of that.

We're talking millions of gallons of water every single day in a desert. They'd need like trainloads of manna just to eat. The text even mentions only two midwives for this huge population.

A group this big would be spread out for miles and miles, making the whole journey seem almost impossible. So how do scholars even begin to figure this out? Well, one clue might be hiding in a single Hebrew word, *eleph*. Now it's usually translated as thousand, but it can also mean clan or family unit.

So if the text meant 600 clans instead of 600,000 men, the number becomes way smaller and a lot more manageable. It's a really compelling linguistic clue, but for now, it's still one of the great unsolved questions of the text. Okay, this brings us to our final section, and here we're going to pivot a little.

We've been looking at the historical how and when, but now let's get into the ultimate theological why. Why did the 10 plagues happen? Was it really just about freeing a bunch of slaves? According to the source material, the plagues served three really deep theological purposes. First, they were a direct smackdown on the gods of Egypt.

You know, the plague of darkness against the sun god Ra, that kind of thing. Second, they were a powerful act of revelation. They were designed to show everyone, not just Israel, but the Egyptians too, who Yahweh really was.

And third, they were an act of retaliation, a sort of eye-for-an-eye response to Pharaoh's brutal oppression of Israel, whom the text calls God's firstborn people. So in the end, the Exodus story, with all its historical puzzles and debates, is presented as something much more than just history. It's about the moment a name, Yahweh, was filled with this unforgettable meaning: the God who hears, who acts, and who liberates.

The point wasn't just to know the name, but to finally understand its power. It really makes you wonder what other historical facts might be less about the literal details and more about the powerful meaning they were always meant to convey.