

# The Baggage of the Exodus

What the Hebrews Had  
in Their Suitcases



by

Laurence D. Brown



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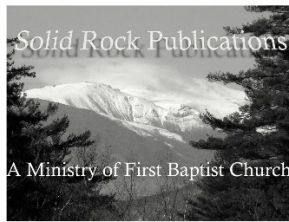
## What the Hebrews Had in Their Suitcases

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In the late 1970s and again in the late 1980s I had the opportunity to travel in the Middle East. While I certainly am not a world-class traveler by any means, I did observe certain things about the customs arrangements of several different nations. In one Arab nation where I traveled, my luggage was actually never examined at all! The airport where I landed seemed chaotic and disorganized in the extreme. By contrast, crossing into Israeli territory at a border checkpoint was a courteous but very thorough process. All my luggage was opened, and every item examined by hand; then the suitcases themselves were checked by hand and by electronic wands, scanning for hidden compartments or weapons. This was one of my first experiences with the reality of the need for security for the tiny Jewish nation, and I appreciated both the efficiency and the courtesy of the Israeli customs officials.

In this little study, we want to study some Bible passages relevant to the exit of the Jewish people from Egypt about 1445 B.C. Imagine for a moment that the roles I just described are reversed, and that you are a customs agent running a checkpoint near the shore of the Red Sea about 3,500 years ago. You look up from your newspaper and bagel to discover...3 to 5 million Jews streaming toward you! Billows of dust rise from the herds of sheep, goats, and oxen; caravans of mules and camels carry bundles and lumpy packs; servants pull or push carts laden with stores and supplies. They begin to line up outside your booth to show you their passports and display their luggage... Well, obviously the picture is purely imaginary!

But what if we could go back to that point in history and actually see what the Jews - God's special people - brought with them on their journey out of Egypt? What could we learn about them? What might it show us about their priorities, their interests, their hearts? More importantly, what could such an investigation teach us? It is our goal in this effort to seek spiritual truths for our own hearts and lives from the baggage of the Exodus.

## **I. The Physical Signs of God's Blessing.**

*Now the sons of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, aside from children. (Exodus 12:37)*

More than 400 years prior to the event recorded in this verse, God had promised Abraham that He would cause his descendants to become a great nation. Joseph, you will recall, was the point man for moving Jacob's family from Canaan to Egypt. At the time of that relocation, the family of Jacob (Israel) numbered seventy persons (Genesis 46:27). Now, the men of able body and military age (probably about twenty to fifty years of age, if later biblical records have any relevance [Numbers 1:3; 4:3]) number 600,000. If we guess that most of these men were married, then that number doubles. If we give each family 2 children, we now have two million, four hundred thousand Jews. Conservative estimates often put the total at four to five million Hebrews leaving Egypt. This huge mass of people, incidentally, would account for the fear the Egyptians felt about the Israelites (Exodus 1:8-12). Four to five million - that's a lot of people! God kept His promise to Abraham, just as He always does!

In addition to the large number of Hebrews, another sign of God's blessing on the nation was the flocks and herds which the people owned. Exodus 12:38 says that along with the people, there were "...flocks and herds, a very large number of livestock." In the ancient middle east, animals represented wealth. Even though the Jews in Egypt were a class of slaves, God blessed them with large numbers of animals. The animals were used for farm work, for transport, for milk, meat, and wool for clothing and tents.

Not only did Israel have a large population, and vast herds of domesticated animals, the people enjoyed God's favor in such a way that their neighbors - the Egyptians - gave them gold and silver jewelry, apparently as going-away gifts. Exodus 11:2,3 say: "Speak now in the hearing of the people



that each man ask from his neighbor and each woman ask from her neighbor for articles of silver and articles of gold. And the Lord gave the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians. Furthermore, the man Moses himself was greatly esteemed in the land of Egypt, both in the sight of Pharaoh's servants and in the sight of the people." Rather than leaving the land of their captivity as paupers, God was sending out the Israelites as rich people! It was God's special hand of blessing that caused the Egyptians to respond favorably to the Israelites' request for parting gifts of gold and silver. Incidentally, the King James Version translation in this place, "borrow," casts an unfortunate light on the request, as though the Israelites were being deceptive and suggesting that the items were to be returned. The best translation, however, is that the Israelites asked for the items, and the Egyptians gave them, without any strings attached or any suggestion of deception. God sent the Israelites with full coffers; later, this wealth would be put to good use in the building of the tabernacle.

All in all, there were three signs of God's great and mighty blessing upon His people: their large and rapid increase in population, in keeping with God's promise to Abraham; their multitudes of flocks and herds; and their wealth of gold and silver, all provided by God.

## **II. The Unleavened Bread Dough.**

*And they baked the dough which they had brought out of Egypt into cakes of unleavened bread. For it had not become leavened, since they were driven out of Egypt and could not delay, nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves. (Exodus 12:39)*

The symbolism of the unleavened bread dough began with God's plan for the Israelites to leave Egypt in a hurry: they didn't have time to let their bread rise. Exodus 12:34 says, "So the people took their dough before it was leavened, with their kneading bowls bound up in the clothes on their shoulders." Such was the haste with which the Jews left Egypt, that there was no time for putting yeast in their bread and waiting for it to rise.

The spiritual significance of this fact is filled out in the New Testament. The Lord Jesus Christ warned His disciples to "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy" (Luke 12:1). Of course, it is in Paul's words to the church at Corinth that we find very clear statements about leavening: "Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (I Corinthians 5:6-8).

The unleavened dough which Israel carried in their kneading bowls out of Egypt is a symbolic reminder that God is holy, and He expects us to be likewise holy (I Peter 1:15,16). We should get rid of any leavening agent - any sin - which threatens to infect our lives!

### III. The Idols of the Nations.

*But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, 'It was not to Me that you offered victims and sacrifices forty years in the wilderness, was it, O house of Israel? You also took along the tabernacle of Moloch and the star of the god Rompha, the images which you made to worship them. I will also remove you beyond Babylon'" (Acts 7:42,43).*

The first two things the nation of Israel carried with them - the physical signs of God's blessing, and the unleavened bread dough - were positive things. But now we turn to the "contraband" items in their luggage. The remarkable verses noted above are from the sermon of Stephen, the first martyr of the Church. He was citing the book of Amos, chapter 5, verses 26 and 27. The charges leveled by God against Israel are that even at the earliest stages of His dealings with them - even while they were being brought out of Egypt, there was a divided loyalty in the hearts of the Hebrews. They were responding to the call of Jehovah to leave the place of bondage and sin, Egypt, and follow the leadership of Moses and Aaron towards the land of promise. But they carried with them the idols, the images, of various gods of Egypt.

It is the constant tendency of the human sin nature to try to replace the worship of the invisible, almighty God with tangible objects. Human finiteness seems to crave material things to worship. As Paul puts it in Romans 1:18 and following, the human heart naturally gravitates toward replacing our responsibility to our Creator with the naturalistic, sinful worship of anything else. "Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures" (Rom. 1:22,23).

You might recall that Egypt actually did worship all these kinds of creatures, often in very strange, combined forms of

animals and humans. Birds, cats, jackals, even insects were manifestations of the gods to the Egyptians, and therefore were objects of worship. But the true and living God of the Bible is not to be compared to the imaginings of man! There is no creature which deserves our worship; there must be no division of loyalty in our hearts. The prophet Isaiah said, "To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him?" (Isaiah 40:18). And, "those who fashion a graven image are all of them futile, and their precious things are of no profit..." (Isaiah 44:9).

The idols which Israel brought with them out of Egypt actually were a continuous snare and blight on them for a nearly a thousand years. The god Moloch mentioned in Acts chapter 7 is noted in Jeremiah 32:35, which was written around 600 B.C. - about nine hundred years after the Exodus. Generations of Israelites struggled with this same problem of idolatry and a divided loyalty.

Jesus taught that no one is able to serve two masters. If we were able to do a baggage check on your heart today, what would we find? On the surface many Christians profess total loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ; but in the secret pockets of the heart, idols, materialism and self-made religion may be hiding. What is in your suitcase?

#### **IV. The Mixed Multitude.**

*Now the sons of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, aside from children. And a mixed multitude also went up with them, along with flocks and herds, a very large number of livestock. (Exodus 12:37,38)*

Relationships are often the most difficult part of life. How often have you heard it said that life would be a piece of cake, if it weren't for people! The mixed multitude that accompanied Israel apparently were peoples of other nations and tribes. Perhaps some of them recognized that the hand of God's blessing was upon the Hebrews, and wanted to be a part of it. We are not told in exact terms who these people were, nor their motivations for going with the Jews up from Egypt. But once again, like the influence of the idols and images, we can track the effect of their presence on God's people.

In Numbers 11:4 we find this mixed group of people creating trouble and fomenting discontent: "And the rabble who were among them had greedy desires; and also the sons of Israel wept again and said, 'Who will give us meat to eat?'" The same problem arose in the time of Nehemiah when the association of the Jews with the Ammonites and Moabites threatened the loss of God's blessing (Nehemiah chapter 13).

We must be aware that God is concerned about our associations and friendships. Paul uses the familiar terminology of the "unequal yoke" in II Corinthians 6:14 to illustrate God's perspective on this sin. Trying to create an organic tie or partnership with an unbeliever is like harnessing a donkey next to an ox, or a teaming a horse next to a camel: it just doesn't work!

God was displeased with Israel when they chose to associate with the pagan nations around them, and He is still displeased today when Christians choose to treat unsaved

individuals as best friends. This is an unequal yoke, and God hates it! In fact, God does not even like it when a mature, obedient Christian associates with a rebellious, hard-hearted Christian as though there were no problem. I Thessalonians 3:6 says, “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep aloof from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us.” This does not prohibit us from loving people in the world and seeking to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with them; nor does it prevent us from challenging Christians to repent and turn back to the Lord. But we must exercise great care in our friendships and affiliations, knowing that they influence us heavily, and understanding that the Lord Jesus Christ is either honored or dishonored by our associations.

## V. The Memories of Egypt.

*“Is this not the word that we spoke to you in Egypt, saying, ‘Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.” (Exodus 14:12) “And the sons of Israel said to them, ‘Would that we had died by the Lord’s hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” (Exodus 16:3)*

This is the last item to tumble out of the opened suitcases of the Israelites. There were some great positive things: the signs of God’s blessings and the unleavened bread dough; but there were negatives too: the idols of the nations, the mixed multitudes, and now, the people’s memories of the land of Egypt.

It is strange to hear them speak with such fondness of the land where they suffered as slaves. The taskmasters of Egypt treated them with such cruelty and harshness; yet now they have fond memories of that land. Indeed, the memory of Egypt haunts the Israelites at every turn. Each time that a new test or trial appears before them, they chant, “Oh, if we could only go back to Egypt!” They have forgotten that it was a place of sin, slavery and oppression!

Strangely, the memories of the supposed pleasures of the world hover over many a Christian in these days, as well. We have forgotten that before Christ broke the chains of our sin and delivered us from ourselves, we were chained to evil. We romanticize the way the world is, pretending it is a place of wonder and joy; in reality, it is a place of emptiness, joylessness and depravity. Stephen spoke of the Jews’ longing for Egypt in this way: “And our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt” (Acts 7:39). How many opportunities the Hebrews missed by looking back! How many tests they

failed because of a longing for the supposed comforts of the land of slavery!

The baggage check on the shores of the Red Sea was an interesting exercise, but the real question is, what is in your suitcase? Have you cleaned the leaven out of your life? Is there some yeast of sin that you know ought to be disposed of? How about the idols of the nations: can you say that the Lord Jesus Christ has your complete and undivided loyalty? Is He alone your Lord and God? Are there mixed relationships that God would find abhorrent? Are you in friendships that dishonor your heavenly Father? Lastly, do you think longingly of the “fun” of the world? Do the old habits of sin and enslavement to self still attract you?

The author of Hebrews spoke about luggage, too. He wrote, “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith...” (Hebrews 12:1,2)

The solution to the baggage problem is to lay aside everything which trips us up or slows us down in the race towards the prize. Standing at the finish line is the object of our love and our joy: the Lord Jesus Christ. With our eyes fastened on Him, let us get rid of our suitcases and with all our devotion, with dependence on His strength, run the great race of the Christian life!