

Let My People Live

A STUDY GUIDE BY AUTHOR KENNETH N. NGWA

This study guide introduces small groups in a church setting to a vision for the full liberation of oppressed people and our environment in Kenneth Ngwa's *Let My People Live: An Africana Reading of Exodus*. The study helps participants think about what full human flourishing looks like in the story of Exodus and in the themes of exodus, and how the church is called to help bring this about.

It is helpful though not necessary for participants to be familiar with the content of each chapter of *Let My People Live* before meeting as a group.

Note: Throughout this study, uppercase Exodus refers to the biblical story and lowercase exodus refers to the motifs and themes that inspire and animate the story.

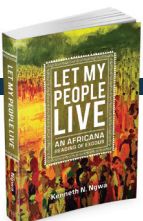
To the Community

This guide is intended to help you accomplish transformative and enriching spiritual and programmatic work, based on your engagement with the Exodus story and the faithful work that it invites us to do. The guiding questions and exercises will help you achieve three things:

- Expand your **knowledge** (epistemology) about Exodus faith and exodus work
- Enrich your **understanding of the methods** of Exodus faith and exodus work
- Create space for you to **assess your commitments** to Exodus faith and exodus work

To the Leaders

Exodus faith and exodus work are best done by, and in, community. Create a **leadership team** to plan and guide each session. Before meeting as a group, leaders can encourage participants to read the opening sections of the guide for each session in order to introduce the purpose of the session and help them prepare for it. During each session, invite active participation

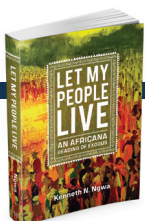


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from members (e.g., invite people to offer opening and closing prayers or songs, or to read Bible passages aloud). Always read the “Purpose of the Session” together at the start of each session and ensure that any additional materials for discussion are available and/or accessible.

For group work, break into smaller groups of 3-4 people for Scripture reading and discussion. The leader can then regather the group for a closing time to share what groups have discussed. Some discussions will be longer than others, so plan accordingly. At the end of each session, remind participants of the session’s goals and make connections to how the session has added to and enriched their knowledge, understanding, and commitments to Exodus faith and exodus work. Then look forward to the next session by drawing the community’s attention to the next “Preparing for the Session” description. Close with a word of prayer for the participants, for the church, for all the world, and especially for those who are studying, understanding, and committing themselves to Exodus work and exodus faith in our time.



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PROLOGUE

When Your Children Ask You

Purpose of the Session

The purpose of this session is to prepare ourselves for, or recommit ourselves to, Exodus faith and exodus work. We shall define what “Exodus faith” is and explore how “exodus work” happens. We shall draw on the Exodus story and on our lived experiences to discuss why Exodus faith and exodus work are important—why they matter—to our own or others’ experiences of survival, liberation, and flourishing.

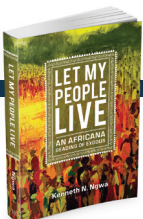
Preparing for the Session

This session is intended to nourish—spiritually, emotionally, culturally, and physically. So come with two things: First, bring a story to share about your experience of the God of exodus and/or a story of your desire to experience and interrogate the God of Exodus in your life or church or community or nation. Second, bring a healthy meal or a snack or a drink to share. Individuals may bring these items, or the church can acquire them on behalf of the community.

Defining Exodus Faith and Exodus Work

Exodus faith answers the question of “What?” What kind of faith inspires a people for exodus work? It is the *spiritual nourishment* found in the God who **transitions and transforms** endangered, marginalized, and oppressed people from a state of survival to liberation to flourishing. Exodus faith is divinely generated faith on the move.

Exodus work answers the question of “How?” It is the *concrete ways* by which the *living conditions* of endangered, marginalized, and oppressed people and communities are **transitioned and transformed** from survival to liberation to flourishing. That is, exodus work is Exodus faith made visible. It has to do with structural changes that permanently improve the quality of life.



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GROUP WORK

Create discussion groups (with 3-4 people in each group)
Read Exodus 1:15-22; 2:15-25; 3:13-22; and 12:21-28

Exodus Faith “Faith that transitions from survival to liberation to flourishing.”

Remember: Focus on the “What?”

First Discussion

In the Bible passages you read,

- **What** did the Hebrews/Israelites need to survive, and what was the source of their faith?
- **What** were they liberated from, and what inspired them to move?
- **What** were their stories of flourishing?
- **What** was God teaching them about their history and their capacities for resilience, imagination, and creativity?

Second Discussion

What does the God of Exodus faith teach us about ourselves—about our past, our present, and our future? What does Exodus faith tell us about the following?

- Governing systems that threaten life vs. Governing systems that enhance life
- Policies that marginalize or alienate vs. Policies that restore and create community
- Ideologies that create privilege for a few vs. Ideologies that create value for the many

Write down your answers as individuals on a separate piece of paper, in two columns. Share those answers in the group and spend some time in conversation.

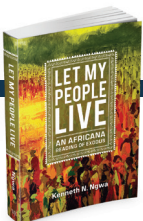
Exodus Work “Work that concretizes Exodus faith.”

Remember: Focus on the “How?”

First Discussion

In the Bible passages you read,

- **How** did the Hebrews/Israelites survive state-sanctioned threats to their lives?
- **How** did they create community in the face of systemic marginalization?



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- **How** did they thrive together against a system that privileged some, or an individual figure, but not everyone else?
- Putting together your answers for the three questions above, **how** did the work of exodus shape the identity and way of being of the Hebrews/Israelites, including how to implement non-violent resistance to injustice, how to understand and create change, and how to listen to God and celebrate their successes?

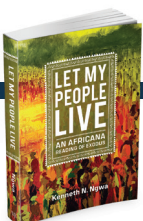
Second Discussion

For this discussion, focus on Exod. 2:23-25 and 3:7-8a. Pay attention to how God works: seeing, hearing, knowing/remembering, and coming to act. How does the God of exodus work show us our true selves—our past, our present, and our future—so that we can:

- **See** systemic forms of death and replace them with *systemic forms of life*
- **Hear** the voices of marginalized communities calling for *inclusive solidarity*
- **Remember** history and ancestors so that we avoid the temptations and incentive structures that favor single heroes (historically known as “BIG MAN”)
- **Re-design** old systems or design new ones to enhance communal flourishing

Conclusion

- Exodus faith and exodus work are about faith that is alive and work that is life-giving.
- Exodus faith and exodus work create kinship bonds across time and across places, and strengthen those bonds to withstand and overcome marginalization and alienation.
- Exodus faith and exodus work connect people to a shared vision based on a communal value system. This work resists the allure of single hero “BIG MAN” stories and leadership styles.



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INTRODUCTION

Hermeneutics after Erasure, Alienation, and Singularity

Purpose of the Session

This session has two related purposes: first, to consider what the church should develop as the core message of its Exodus faith. That is, what should the church believe and teach in the face, or in the wake, of persistent erasure (the loss of life, both human and environmental), of constant alienation (the loss of a sense and a structure of healthy belonging), and the alluring privilege of toxic singularity (incentive and governing structures that favor a select few). Second, the session will then consider how the exodus work of the church can concretize the transition from survival to liberation to flourishing, the three elements that counteract erasure, marginalization, and singularity.

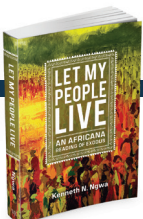
Preparing for the Session

Think about stories and how they work. Stories may differ in detail from one community to another, from one generation to another, and from one geographical location to another. In the same way, the details of the Exodus story change from Egypt to the wilderness and to the mountain area. Alongside liberation stories, there are also liberation motifs—liberation themes around which the stories revolve. For example, political oppression, ecological devastation, racism, xenophobia, colonialism, and so forth. While the story provides details about a people's experiences of oppression and liberation, the motif tells us something about the ideologies or belief systems that make oppression structural, intergenerational, and interregional. One story (for example, anticolonial movements, the Civil Rights Movement) may have many themes/motifs (independence, citizenship rights, immigration laws, economic empowerment, voting rights, etc.). One motif (for example, colonialism, or racism) may produce multiple stories (direct or indirect colonial rule, segregation, redlining, etc.). Africana work around the motif of exodus seeks to “turn the tide” of oppressive history. This does not just mean conjuring what lies on the other side of oppression (“Let My People Go”) but also conjuring the other side as a new beginning (“Let My People Live”). Liberation is not just the other side of oppression; liberation is the beginning of a new thing.

Defining Three Components of Exodus Faith and Exodus Work

The story of Exodus faith takes place in three physical locations: Egypt, the wilderness, and the mountain area. This suggests that the church's Exodus faith also has three components.

Similarly, exodus work also takes place in three locations: Egypt, the wilderness, and the mountain area. To do exodus work in these three locations is to realize that those locations also signify certain ideologies. Egypt is no longer simply a specific geographical location but



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also an ideological house of slavery. The wilderness is no longer simply a barren land where the people temporarily reside on their way to the promised land, but also an ideological place of alienation. This ideological reality is represented with Wilderness (upper case W). The mountain area is no longer a geographical high point but the ideological place of toxic singularity and privilege. That ideology is represented with Mountain (upper case M). The use of the uppercase letter signifies that exodus work is about structural reform, and not about a change in zip code (geographical location).

GROUP WORK

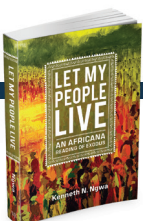
Read Exodus 32

Exodus faith and exodus work deal with three geographical locations that also function as three ideological systems. The story of each location contains three motifs (erasure, marginalization, and singularity). For example, the land of Egypt is a place where life is lost, where people are marginalized, and where Pharaoh is the singular figure of privilege. On the other hand, each ideological motif can manifest itself in the form of a physical location. For example, the motif of singularity (“BIG MAN”) takes the form of a mountaintop. It is on that mountaintop that Moses resists the urge to become the sole ancestor of the exodus people. Similarly, in the New Testament, Jesus’ temptation takes place on the mountain. Exodus faith and exodus work are not just about moving from Egypt to the wilderness and to the mountainside, but also bringing survival, liberation, and flourishing to Egypt, to the Wilderness, and to the Mountain.

Exodus Faith Discussion

In light of your reading of Exodus 32, discuss the following:

- Exodus faith is faith that counters erasure and proclaims the power and vibrancy of life. What does it mean to live in a place where death is prevalent? And what does it mean to live *after* death has happened in the community? What should the church say in order to prevent erasure (death)?
- Exodus faith is faith that proclaims the value of restoration, wherever marginalization has occurred. What does a welcoming community believe about the common bonds between God, its members, and “others”?
- Exodus faith is faith that thrives on multiplicity—that is, on the movement of the Spirit to create a diverse community of faith. Exodus faith proclaims and celebrates the beauty of multiplicity wherever singularity has been exalted as premium. What does it mean to be a church of Pentecost—a place of multiple tongues, talents, and textures?



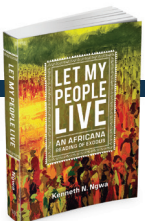
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Exodus Work Discussion

In light of the traumatic nature of events in Exodus 32, discuss the following:

- How does the building of the golden calf and the festival celebration reflect the desire of a people to preserve their exodus work when they are placed at the very bottom of an imperial structure?
- On their way back from the mountaintop, how do Moses and Joshua interpret the sounds they hear from the community?
- When the stone tablets are broken and violence breaks out, how do community leaders react? How should they react? How does God react?
- Can the ideologies of erasure, marginalization, and singularity in this mountainside story be transformed? Can the church tell this Mountain to move, as Jesus said those with faith would be able to do? What would such movement and transformation look like?



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CHAPTER 1

Tears of Redesign: Birthing Exodus and Badass Womanism

Purpose of the Session

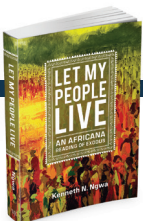
The purpose of this session is to deepen and expand our understanding of how Exodus faith and exodus work can inspire the church to redesign the living conditions of those whose lives are threatened, those who are marginalized, and those who are being subjected to the ideology of toxic singularity.

Preparing for the Session

The church's Exodus faith and exodus work inspire and compel the work of redesign. What is redesign? In the Exodus story, redesign is the commitment to no longer live in Pharaoh's time zones. Redesign is the realization that "let my people go" is the first act of liberation. A second act is needed, to empower the people to actually flourish. That second act means that the church does not end its work with protest against erasure, marginalization, and singularity; the church is called to spiritually and materially transform the living conditions of the liberated community, so that they can thrive. In that new space and reality, Pharaoh is not the reference point; God is. And in that space, the church's faith and work are best described by the phrase: "let my people live." That is the reality and the future that Exodus faith and exodus work produce.

Exodus Faith and Exodus Work as Catalysts for Redesign

In the Exodus story, child bearing is a physical/biological act and a political event too; changing demographics as the population of a marginalized group of people grows constitutes a threat for the ethno-centric ruler. That is why the oppressive Pharaoh is set on controlling the birth stools of the Hebrew women. When that fails, he escalates his actions by commanding that newborn babies be thrown into the Nile. Pharaoh seeks to control the waters of the womb and the Nile. That abusive power produces tears. Those tears—the groans, the laments, the cries of the community—are the voices that God hears and responds to. The tears are the catalyst for divine and human work of redesign. But the women who give birth also produce milk—another form of liquid—that is a source of nourishment that Pharaoh cannot control. That milk of nourishment is integral to the description of the promised land: it is a land flowing with milk and honey. This milk is the sustaining power of Exodus faith.



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GROUP WORK

Read Exodus 1 and 2

Moses was found crying inside the basket in the Nile. These are tears shed in protest against Pharaoh's policy. When he is removed from the basket, he is nursed by his mother after Miriam has secured that opportunity for him. The milk he receives is the generative power inherent in the birthing and nurturing body of the Hebrew people. Through this nurturing milk, the forces (ideologies) of erasure, the forces (ideologies) of marginalization, and the forces (ideologies) of toxic singularity are negated. More importantly, those ideologies are redesigned for community flourishing.

Exodus faith and exodus work come together to forge—to give birth to—a new future. A powerful articulation of this faith and work is in Exodus 1:19. When Pharaoh tries to corrupt the work of the midwives, we are told that, upon interacting with the Hebrew women, the midwives came back to Pharaoh with a message about why his policies had failed: “The midwives said to Pharaoh, ‘Because the Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.’” The reason why redesign is possible is because Exodus faith and exodus work have precedence over the institution of death. Birth of a new future happens before the arrival of Pharaoh's death policy; the future exists outside of Pharaoh's time zone.

The future of liberation is premised on a time and place where Pharaoh's policies of erasure, alienation, and singularity are no longer the driving conditions for life and communal living. Exodus work, therefore, must redesign its understanding of time, of place, of presence.

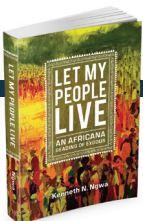
Exodus Faith Discussion

Consider the midwives in the story. Consider how their faith (“fear of God”) is related to their courageous words to Pharaoh

- Are their words simply parodying racial/ethnic stereotypes about oppressed and marginalized persons? Why or why not?
- Are their words possibly based on a truth statement about Exodus faith, namely, that it is vigorous and creates life beyond the control of systems of oppression? Why or why not?

Exodus Work Discussion

- Consider the named and unnamed persons in the story. Where do they live and work and give birth and nurture their children? Under what conditions do they live and work and give birth?



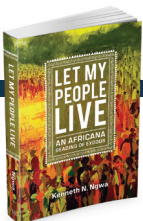
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- Who has privilege in the story? And how is that privilege used in the service of liberation and flourishing of the marginalized and singularized?
- Consider the watery places: the womb, the Nile, the well, the tears, the milk, etc. In what ways have these waters represented experiences of trauma and flourishing? In what ways do these watery places become a part of the story's struggle for survival, liberation, and ultimately, flourishing?

What Is Being Redesigned in the Story?

- The Egyptian princess identified the baby in the basket as Hebrew because she knew of the standing policy requiring that Hebrew children be thrown into the Nile. How does her partnership with Miriam begin the work of redesigning against racist policies, and designing a world/church of inclusion and equity?
- Pharaoh's policy targeted boys for death and allowed girls to live. In the story, which gender poses the greatest challenge to Pharaoh's oppressive policies?
- What does Pharaoh's political action to throw young children into the Nile do to the relation between humans and their environment? And what does the removal of Moses from the Nile tell us about the need for liberation (exodus) work around creating healthy relations between humans and the environment?
- At this stage in the story, God has not made any explicit revelation about survival, liberation, or flourishing. Yet, a spirituality that gives life infuses the story. Identify specific examples of this foundational truth.



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CHAPTER 2

Triple Consciousness and the Exodus Narrative

Purpose of the Session

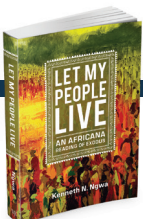
The purpose of this session is to consider how oppression is connected to material structures, locations, and experiences, and how the work of exodus redesign also needs to take concrete, material form. Three spaces (structures) will be considered as examples of sites of oppression. These include the Slave Ship, the Slave Castle, and the Postcolony. Exodus faith and exodus work mean that liberation from such places is also concrete. Liberation is connected to literal places of survival (for instance, Moses inside the basket or the Israelites inside the Passover house) and to the ecological experience of people placed in unhealthy environments. The place of oppression is physical, called a “house of slavery” (Exod. 20:1). After redesign, the oppressive place becomes a land flowing with milk and honey (see Num. 16:13). Finally, the experience of oppression in Egypt is “bitter” (Exod. 1:14), just as the water in the wilderness is “bitter” (Exod. 15:23). When liberation finally occurs, the water is sweet.

Preparing for the Session

The National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) in Washington, DC was designed to look like the Slave Castles in West Africa. From an artistic perspective, it represents the redesign of an artifact of slavery into an artifact of education, liberation, and history. According to its founding director, Lonnie G. Bunch III:

The vision of the museum was built on four pillars: One was to harness the power of memory to help America illuminate all the dark corners of its past. Another was to demonstrate that this was more than a people’s journey—it was a nation’s story. The third was to be a beacon that illuminated all the work of other museums in a manner that was collaborative, and not competitive. And the last—given the numbers of people worldwide who first learn about America through African-American culture—was to reflect upon the global dimensions of the African-American experience.”*

* Lonnie G. Bunch III, “The Definitive Story of How the National Museum of African American History and Culture Came to Be,” *Smithsonian Magazine* (September 2016). Accessed on August 1, 2022. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/definitive-story-national-museum-african-american-history-culture-came-be-180960125/>



GROUP WORK

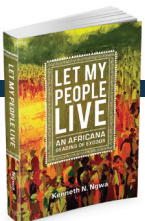
Read Exodus 1:15-22; 4:21-26; 14-15; 32-33

Exodus Faith Discussion

- Consider the Slave Ship as a symbol of racist production and ideology. Think about its function as an instrument of the global circulation of racism. If racist practices even today are literally and symbolically reiterating the capture and circulation of Black persons, what might be needed to interrupt that circular movement and its impact on Africa and the African Diaspora?
- Consider the Slave Castle (for example, Elmina in Ghana) as a material and symbolic structure of colonial rule. The cannons on top of the Castle point both toward the ocean (the African Diaspora) and toward inland Africa. Its three-tier structure includes a (white) governor's residence at the very top, a mid-section that housed a chapel, and the dungeons at the bottom (where enslaved persons were chained). What does this structure suggest about the depth and structure of trauma inflicted on enslaved persons that continues to be inflicted on Africa and the African Diaspora today?
- Consider a Postcolony (for example, Cameroon, Haiti, or Puerto Rico) as a material and symbolic site of ongoing struggle for liberation in a neocolonial world. Discuss the legacies of colonialism and patriarchy. Consider the emergence of “Strong Men” as leaders in many postcolonial states. What might the ongoing struggle for liberation in the postcolony tell us about the tasks of redesigning life-threatening structures and governance into life-enhancing ones?

Exodus Work Discussion

- What examples of physical structures and geographical locations have been transformed from structures and locations of oppression and death to structures and locations of freedom and life? Discussion may touch on prisons, schools, water systems, food deserts, housing, etc.
- What roles should faith communities play in the physical redesign of our political, religious, and ecological structures, so that liberation becomes available and abundant?



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CHAPTER 3

A Postcolonial Africana Reading of Exodus 2

Purpose of the Session

This session invites you to consider your place as part of the church, the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12). Membership is more than a numerical data point; it is about identity and belonging to something greater than oneself. You are invited to think about how you are part of the whole, and to consider how the whole (church) is greater than the sum of its parts. Membership, therefore, is about the deep connective tissue that holds us together. To think about Exodus is to think about membership—its nature, its quality, and its durability.

Preparing for the Session

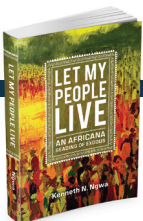
- Think about the importance of names. What does it mean to have a name? What does it mean to be without a name (such as the unnamed characters in the Bible)? What does it mean to be given a name? Who has the power to name? How do names help us navigate the world? Why and when might people consider changing their names?
- What is the name of your church? Of your town? Of your nation? What is (or may be) the historical and/or spiritual significance of that name? Who named your church or town or nation?
- Think about God's names in the Bible. What do those names tell us about who God is and how God has chosen to engage in the world?

GROUP WORK

Read Exodus 1-2

Discussion of Naming as Exodus Faith: Say Their Names

- Consider the names of the children of Israel in Exodus 1. How do these names create identity? How does the communal practice of calling out those names function to enhance membership within the Exodus community?
- Consider the names of the mothers (biological and adopted) and fathers in Exodus 2. What do these names tell us about the spiritual and cultural work of producing survival, liberation, and communal flourishing?



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- Consider the names of the newborn babies (Moses and Gershom). What do their names tell us about the political, cultural, and geographical factors that shaped their identities?

Discussion of Naming as Exodus Work

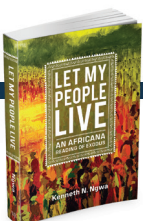
- Naming is the exodus work of remembering and re-remembering. Remembering is the ongoing communal act of recommitting oneself to liberation/Exodus faith. Re-remembering is the ongoing communal work of restoring and revitalizing those who have been discarded or marginalized. How does and how should this work of exodus naming allow us to engage history and connect with the survival, liberation, and flourishing work of the ancestors? How should this work open new paths for spiritual, social, and cultural growth and flourishing?
- Naming is the exodus work of defining the present—that is, of identifying the threats of erasure, the forms of marginalization, and the allures of singularity that continue to hamper our shared life. How does and how should our exodus work enable us to name the current moment in the history of the church and the world?
- Naming is exodus work about conjuring/designing the future. How does and how should our exodus work name the future? How should our exodus work create a future that does not live in the shadow of death, or in a marginalized place, or in isolation?
- Which characters and moments in the biblical story in Exodus 1-2 help us do this work?

Combining Exodus Faith and Exodus Work

God's name in Exodus 3 is "I AM WHO I AM" (Exod. 3:14).

The God of Exodus faith and exodus work is ONE who both remembers the past and shapes the future. Therefore, exodus naming is also about movements (such as social and environmental justice, gender equality, health, etc.) that bring about a freer and more equitable world and church.

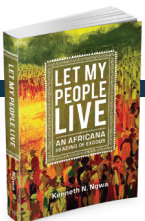
- Name justice movements that have generated and sustained the work of survival and liberation in the life of the church and society. Such movements are connected to God's word, "Let my people go" (Exod. 5:1). In this statement, God is naming a movement.
- Name examples of work that creates and embodies the flourishing of the lives of God's people. Such work is connected to the work of the God-fearing midwives: they let the children live (Exod. 1:18).
- Reflect on the political, cultural, and spiritual names that give identity, meaning, and purpose to individuals and people groups.



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- The rallying social activism cry “#SayHerName” calls on all to recognize the violence suffered by Black women, whose names and stories often go unnamed and unrecognized. Create a list of names of people who have lost their lives unjustly and reflect on the life-enhancing work that develops when the church gathers in remembrance of them.
- Reflect on the “I Can’t Breathe” movement and the work of the church to create a movement of Never Stop Breathing (www.neverstopbreathing.org). This movement was founded after the killing of George Floyd and is focused on challenging social inequity and building equity through mobilizing the values of Community, Advocacy, Research, and Education (“CARE”).



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CHAPTER 4

Afroecology and Exodus

Purpose of the Session

As we have seen, Exodus faith and exodus work are not exclusively about human survival, liberation, and flourishing; they are also about the survival, liberation, and flourishing of non-human creation. In this session and in the next, we will focus on the ecological dimensions of Exodus faith and exodus work. Of particular importance is the need to look at different kinds of “land”: devastated land, wilderness land, and promised land. In other words, the ideology of oppression is as destructive for non-human existence as it is for human existence. Counteracting that oppression, divine and human exodus work for survival, liberation, and flourishing seeks to heal and restore human and non-human creation.

Preparing for the Session

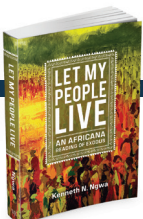
- Explore the work of churches involved in environmental sustainability and related projects. For example, The Green Church (<https://www.greenthechurch.org/>).
- Look at the work of the Green Belt Movement (GBM), “an environmental organization that empowers communities, particularly women, to conserve the environment and improve livelihoods” (<http://www.greenbeltmovement.org/>).
- Explore the work of Black farmers such as the National Black Farmers Association, led by John W. Boyd Jr., who “is a fourth-generation farmer as well as one of America’s most effective defenders of civil rights” (<https://www.blackfarmers.org/about>).

GROUP WORK

Read Exodus 1:14-21; 3; 5:6-18; 7-11 (especially 7:15-18; 8:27; 9:8 and 10:13-15);
and Romans 8:22-23

Discussion of Exodus Faith as Green Faith

- In the biblical story of Exodus, how is human oppression related to environmental oppression?
- What might it mean that the faith of the God-fearing midwives is most evident when they refuse to kill children and pollute the waters?
- What might it mean that Moses’ encounter with God took place among burning bushes, and that his spiritual and political “signs” are also ecological signs?



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- What might it mean to connect liberation faith in Exodus with the salvific work of Jesus, who comes to save creation, which is described as groaning in Romans?
- What kinds of faith practices are destructive to human and non-human flourishing? What kinds of faith practices are life giving for humans and non-humans?

Discussion of Exodus Work as Green Work

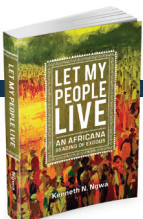
Talk together about how air (breath), water, and wilderness play a role in our understanding of exodus work. Some ideas to spur discussion:

- **Air:** The movement of the Spirit intersects with oxygen from trees (clean air) to liberate people from political choking and environmental choking.
- **Water:** It washes, nourishes, baptizes (initiates), and brings life into existence. But water also holds our traumas and can release those traumas into the world in destructive ways. The work of the church consists of turning the waters of destruction into waters of life. (For more on water, see chapter 5.)
- **Wilderness:** The life found in natural areas is brittle, frail, and fragile, prone to marginalization—not because of some inherent deficiency in its makeup, but because humans extract too many resources from it, abusing and abandoning it. To do the exodus work of liberation is to look for the life of the wilderness and work to reinstate its biodiversity and richness.

Conclusion

Consider how Exodus faith and exodus work intersect around choking lands, polluted waters, and dry lands.

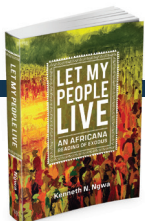
- Oppressive systems are by nature and function choking mechanisms. The choking may happen in the form of violent action (for example, the cases of Eric Garner or George Floyd or Sandra Bland or Tamir Rice) or the choking may be slow (when we live in polluted environments, we gradually develop asthma). Meditate on the relationship between political liberation and environmental liberation.
- Water sustains us biologically and spiritually. When water is polluted (in Flint, Michigan, for example) the quality of health and life itself are endangered for all. Liberation work includes turning bitter waters into sweet waters. That is, liberation is experienced not just by us humans who drink the water, but also by the water itself.
- Life in the wilderness is harsh on the human body. In Exodus, the wilderness experience comes right after the plagues narratives. On a narrative level, this suggests that the wilderness is a natural and logical outcome of an oppressive system, which yields a devastated ecosystem—a depleted land struggling to provide enough food to sustain itself and its human inhabitants. Although transformation may begin with a “manna



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economy” (miraculous survival and provision), liberation must transition into the vision of a land flowing with milk and honey. In other words, Exodus faith and exodus work move away from an economic system that is “day-by-day” to one that is sustainable and enriching for humans and non-humans.



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CHAPTER 5

Miriam: The Water-Woman and Exodus Ecology

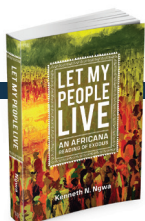
Purpose of the Session

Miriam is a very important character in Exodus faith and exodus work. The purpose of this session is to recognize, appreciate, and reflect on her role as a political strategist, a religious activist, a prophetess and poet, and above all a water-woman: that is, someone who is called upon to work at some of the most important times and in the most challenging circumstances in the story. In the biblical story, Miriam always finds herself next to water, and she works to transition the people from the traumatic encounters with water to life-affirming experiences with water. Her talents are multiple, and this session focuses on how her skills continue to inspire the work of survival, liberation, and flourishing in the face of significant challenges.

Preparing for the Session

Consider the following narrative facts about Miriam:

- In exodus lore, Miriam is remembered as one of three leading trailblazers of liberation work, alongside Moses and Aaron (Mic. 6:4).
- In rabbinic tradition, she is associated with the waters of Marah, while Aaron is associated with the pillar of cloud, and Moses is associated with manna.
- In the Exodus story, she is often positioned around water.
- She uses her talents to advocate for distressed persons (as she does for Moses, who was found crying in the basket, or when she speaks on behalf of the Cushite woman in Numbers 12) and to lead a community in new songs of liberation that require not just the movement of lips but also of bodies (as she does around the Red Sea after a long battle).
- Her name in Hebrew evokes bitter experiences with water (literally meaning “bitter water”). In Egyptian, her name possibly means “beloved,” as in beloved one.
- When Miriam dies (Num. 20:1-5), her physical death intersects with ecological death: the people immediately complain about lack of water and a lack of greenery and produce from the land.
- All these narrative facts show that Miriam is a major figure in exodus interpretation. She is the water-woman, giving life and vitality to the social and ecological body in exodus work.
- Read and discuss the lyrics to the African American spiritual “Wade in the Water.”
- Watch the poem “Water” by Koleka Putuma.



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GROUP WORK

Read Exodus 2:1-10; 15:20-27; Numbers 12

Discussion of Miriam and Exodus Faith

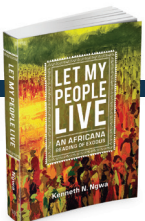
Miriam embodies three forms of faith:

- The faith of a strategist (Exod. 2:6-10). At the prompting of her mother, Miriam is able to do several things in response to the standing decree to throw children in the Nile. What are the things that Miriam does?
- The faith of a poet or conjurer (Exod. 15:20-27). After a long battle, Miriam is able to inspire a new collective song and lead the Israelites to create a healthy and flourishing community. Name and discuss some of the specific things Miriam inspires the community to do in order to bring healing to their bodies and to the earth itself.
- The faith of a marginalized advocate (Num. 12). When Miriam and Aaron raise concerns about Moses's treatment of the Cushite woman, Miriam is singled out, marginalized, and inflicted with a skin disease that threatens her life (Num. 12:12). What does this story tell us about different ways of receiving God's word? For example, (1) through prophetic words that come from God versus receiving the wisdom of generations of life experiences; and (2) revelation to a single person (single "hero") versus communal (shared) revelation and discernment.

Discussion of Miriam and Exodus Work

Just as she embodies three forms of faith, Miriam manifests three forms of work:

- The work of a strategist (Exod. 2:6-10). Miriam's work is that of a "community organizer" who brings together faith, culture, politics, and economics to change a death-dealing situation and policy into life-giving practice and policy. What does her work tell us about the intersectional nature of liberation work?
- The work of a poet or conjurer (Exod. 15:20-27). The fight for liberation leaves an entire community exhausted, wounded, and hurt. The fight also creates a devastated ecosystem. Miriam's work leads to (1) the experience of Yahweh as a healer and (2) to the creation of a place of palm trees and springs where the people settle. What does Miriam's work tell us about the work of communal healing, including establishing new statutes and practices that bring well-being, and (2) the work that leads to new and transformed residential areas?
- The work of an advocate (Num. 12). When Miriam is marginalized, she spends seven days outside the camp. During that time, the community is stuck; the work and movement for liberation comes to a halt. Miriam's seven days outside the camp are



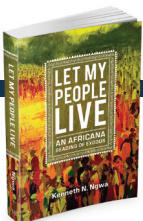
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reminiscent of the seven days of creation. Might her experience tell us something about the work of an advocate—someone who takes on the burdens of another and carries that burden until transformation and restoration has occurred? Does her work outside the camp also tell us something about God’s creative work in Genesis? If so, how? If not, why not?

Conclusion

- Consider the ways in which Miriam (water) holds and shapes political and social identity.
- Consider how Miriam (water) plays a role in rituals (baptism, birth, death, and resurrection).
- Consider how water (Miriam) can also be marginalized and traumatized in a story that perceives rescue as a transition from water to land (seen most clearly in the removal of Moses from the Nile and the transition of Israel from the Red Sea to dry land).



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CHAPTER 6

Facing and Backsiding the Mountain

Purpose of the Session

The purpose of this session is to address the significance of the mountainside in Exodus faith and exodus work. What does it mean to bring the liberated people to the mountainside? Given that the liberated people have been through oppression, what feelings and thoughts might be evoked among them when they are placed at the bottom of a towering mountain? Just like Moses and the Israelites, Jesus and his disciples spend time in the vicinity of the mountain, where he is tempted, where he preaches, and where he is transformed. The mountain is not just the place of encounter with God, but also the place of challenge. This session will focus on the faith and the work of the people around three objects: the Covenant Box, the Tabernacle, and the Tent of Meeting.

Preparing for the Session

Several events take place in the mountain area, including the following:

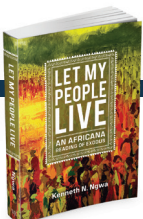
- The people are formally adopted by God (Exod. 19) as a holy community.
- The people receive divine laws and develop statutes to address the complex realities of life (Exod. 20-24).
- The people hold a festival to the Lord (Exod. 32:5) in celebration of their liberation. Therefore, the language of arrival and departure from the mountainside (Exod. 19:1; 33:1) is similar to the language of Israel's arrival and departure from Egypt (Exod. 1:1; 12:38).
- The people also often fear for their lives, and many of them die at the mountain after the golden calf was made (Exod. 19:1-2, 10-12, 16-20; 20:18-19; 32:27-32).

GROUP WORK

Read Exodus 19 and 32-34

Discussion

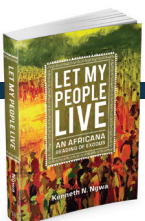
- The Covenant Box holds the second set of stone tablets after the first set was broken (Exod. 33-34). As the people gather around the laws, and especially around the power of steadfast love, what do they learn about:
 - The need to embrace those who are alienated or marginalized?
 - The need to protect those who are endangered?
 - The need to be inclusive (communal) and avoid isolation?



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- The Tabernacle is described as the work of skilled laborers whose hearts were moved by God (Exod. 35:5, 21, 29). As the people build the Tabernacle, what do they learn about:
 - True service that is not premised on oppression but on inspiration?
 - Their capacity to draw on their God-given talents?
- The Tent of Meeting is constructed outside the camp, but activities around the tent are connected to each family's tent (Exod. 33:7-10). As the people relate to the Tent of Meeting, what might they learn about:
 - The spiritual and social value of non-hierarchical relations with God and with one another?
 - God as a member of the community (God as a community resident)?
- Read Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's speech on April 3, 1968 ("I've Been to the Mountaintop"):
 - In what ways does the speech reflect the realities of exodus work around legislation (Covenant Box), around the spirituality of the dignity and compensation of workers (the Tabernacle), and social justice and equity (the Tent of Meeting)?
 - What relationship do you see between the speech and the mountain area stories in Exodus?



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CONCLUSION

Let My People Live

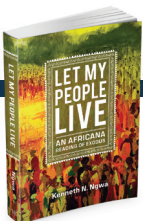
Purpose of the Session

This brief, concluding session emphasizes the central claim that exodus work is not just about moving a people from one place to another, but creating the spiritual and material conditions in which they are able to thrive and flourish. This faith and work has three interrelated parts:

- First, it is faith and work that resists erasure (death), and instead foregrounds wholeness of life.
- Second, it is faith and work that resists marginalization, and instead creates restoration.
- Third, it is faith and work that resists the privileging of singular heroes, and instead works for community values.

Discussion

- Name and reflect on the human and non-human characters responsible for survival, liberation, and flourishing in Egypt. How do these characters inform the quality of the church's faith and work?
- Name and reflect on the human and non-human characters responsible for communal survival, liberation, and flourishing in the wilderness. How do these characters inform the quality of the church's faith and work?
- Name and reflect on human and non-human characters responsible for communal survival, liberation, and flourishing in the mountain area. How do these characters inform the quality of the church's faith and work?



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