

## *Exodus to the Highlands*

A great exodus occurred around the end of the Bronze Age (c. 1200 BCE) in the land of Canaan. Many people faced oppressive economic situations and even slavery by the Egyptian Empire that cared more for enriching itself than caring for its people. During this time, an unprecedented drought occurred, making the already difficult situation worse. People suffered greatly and cried out for help. Some heard a story that there were new villages, out of reach of the Egyptians, in the rocky highlands. They heard that these new villages were far different from the harsh conditions of the Egyptian Empire. The people heard that this place had no kings who hoarded all the wealth and enslaved the people. People believed this story and went in search of these places.

This was the time of the great exodus. Over the course of many years, people from many different places left their homes to find these new communities. They headed to the hills. Many of the exodus peoples became part of these rocky hillside villages in Canaan. As their numbers grew, they built new villages. They made new tools, built new houses, learned new ways to farm, and dug new wells. They each told their story of escape and exodus. They witnessed from a distance as the once-powerful cities collapsed at the hands of seafaring invaders, famines, and other untold destructions. They could not believe their eyes as they saw the oppressive Egyptian civilization collapse. They agreed it was some sort of miracle.

All the while, they forged new lives: built new communities, made uninhabitable terrain habitable, created a new language. On these rocky hilltops of Canaan, the Hebrew people were born. They were a diverse group of people who shared the resources of the land and created a society with far less socioeconomic divides.

These brave and innovative people are the ancestors of the Israelite people who would go on to develop the biblical traditions. Their spirit enlivens liberation movements around the globe. Now, some three thousand years later, we stand in the shadow of their dream. How can we once again make it come alive? What is our own exodus? How do we become an exodus people?

The Highland Settlements exodus-like narration does not focus on violence—either divine or human—but on the injustices of the Egyptian Empire, climate change, and the Highland Settlers' actions of leaving the empire and starting something new. The symbolic telling is poetic and succinct, which enables easy adaptation into liturgical praxis, to be

read as a liturgical prayer or moment of reflection. It could be integrated as a new moment in the weekly worship service, where the origin of the Hebrew tradition is remembered. Just as the Lord's Prayer is recited, the Highland Settlements story could be read as the congregation is invited to listen and reflect. The Highland Settlements story could also become the foundation for children's pageants and plays.

The symbolic storying of the Highland Settlements and these few, quick examples of how churches could incorporate the story into current liturgical practices are only a start. The following chapter details ways that the Highland Settlements research can help to shape theology and praxis within ecclesial and other cultural settings.