

What we have learned about the Pentateuch

We should try to draw together the lessons we have learned so far from our study of the Pentateuch. To recapitulate briefly: we have identified four literary sources in the body of the work, much mingled and edited together: The first two embody vast quantities of very ancient material stretching back into the oral history of the Hebrews:

J **the Jahwist**, a source identified with Jerusalem and Judaea. It is marked by a sturdy humanity, and by *anthropomorphism*, the readiness to identify human qualities in God, whom it calls *Jahweh*. It is earthy, and powerful in narrative terms: a vivid storyteller, responsible for extremely memorable incidents in the Scriptural record.

E **the Elohist**, a source developed in the Northern world of the ten tribes. Because their experience is of a flawed community ruled by usurpers, its presentation of God (whom it calls *Elohim*) is far more exalted and distant. The holiness of God is paralleled by an equal and opposite pessimism about humanity. The lofty presentation of a transcendent God has much in common with that of the *prophetic movement*, since religion in Israel/Samaria was led by prophets rather than by the kings. It develops the notion of *mediatorship*, placing angelic or human figures between earthly affairs and the Most High.

These two sources were edited together, by a hand referred to as *the Jehovist*, probably some time after the fall of the Northern kingdom in 721.

D **the Deuteronomist**, a markedly conservative source calling for a return to the ancient values associated with Moses and the nomadic stage of Israel's history. Influenced by the Law, D is characterised by formulaic repetition, and an austere obedience to the lessons of the past. It is not friendly to the monarchy, regarding it as an unmitigated national disaster. The Book of Deuteronomy itself is voiced as a Last Will and Testament of Moses. It sets out to adapt the Torah as a foundation of life during the Exile, and on the subsequent return to Israel. It relates closely in spirit to prophetic inspiration.

P **The Priestly source** is the most conservative and least attractive hand in the Pentateuch. Although it is capable of a stately and hieratic style (as in the Creation story of Genesis 1) it is also capable of extreme pettiness and an obsessive regard for lists and genealogies, dates and explanation of names. It is concerned to import and exalt the presence of priests (eg Aaron in the Moses tradition) at cardinal points of Jewish history. P is associated with the Exile and beyond, when the kings are dead and the priests have taken on the leadership of the nation.

Please note carefully that these four are *literary sources*, representing long campaigns of writing. They should not therefore be equated or confused with oral traditions, though they certainly embody them. They have their roots in many different loci in time and space, and have been mingled, cut in, set side by side, and sometimes confused in various projects of editing - a process which is studied in *redaction criticism*, because it is always done under a rationale that can be studied and can shed light on the development of Scripture, and therefore on its understanding.

The Study of Exodus

The recent experience of the Easter Vigil will have reminded you that the Exodus is the foundation experience of Judaism. Our rather permissive rubrics allow us to omit many readings from the Easter Vigil: but the reading of the deed of God at the Sea of Reeds is never to be omitted. The mode in which the Jews even today experience the Exodus - the liturgical mode of Passover - is also, and exactly, the mode in which Christians experience the mystery of Christ. This is coherent because the founder of our liturgy was himself formed in the school of the Passover, and (Lk 9:51) deliberately chose the Passover in Jerusalem as the setting in time and place for what Luke calls his own Exodus.

Scripture And Liturgy Require Lateral Thinking

The study of Exodus is therefore of vital interest to anyone who aspires to preside over Christian liturgy; and the exact form of lateral thinking which turns a story into a vital annual liturgy, an historical narrative into a perennial creed, is essential to our study of the faith of Jesus, and therefore of our own faith.

It is also a key to our grasp of the specific way in which Scripture works: because

- as the Passover, a single event from a past age, assimilates, illuminates, in some sense directs the experiences of all subsequent ages, itself remaining valid as the underlying meaning of everything, the index against which all things are judged,
- so the Cross, a single event from a past age, assimilates, illuminates, and in some sense directs the experiences of all subsequent ages, itself remaining valid as the underlying meaning of everything, the index against which all things are judged.

This kind of centrality is something we have learned from Judaism, and the search for a centre of this dominant authority is a direct consequence of our *monotheism*, the worship of One. It bears fruit in many important religious concepts: for instance, the belief that a human being has a religious duty to find personal integrity, oneness of heart, coherence between thoughts words and deeds, etc, is a direct reflection of monotheism, where worship - flowing from an integrated, fully-possessed personality - is offered to a single God.

That this understanding of the centrality of the Exodus is faithful to the mind of Jesus is proved, not only by his choice - or we could say, *recognition* - of the Passover in Jerusalem as the locus of his climactic death, or, as he put it, "The Hour": but specifically by his words at the Last Supper:

This is the cup of my blood, of the new and eternal covenant, for you and for all

In this formula he sets his own death at the heart of an eternal and total covenant - from which no future person will ever be excluded - and commands that all future gatherings of his own ("as often as you break this bread and drink this cup") must be "for a memorial of Me". He is calling for a realignment of all future life on his deed on mount Calvary, of which the bread and cup are the sign. The vital difference can be seen at once: the Passover was life to the Jews, and death to the Egyptians. Easter is life for all on the face of the earth, and for the pardon of all our sins. We are therefore releasing the power of a national epic from its nationalistic cul-de-sac, and voicing it as the central happening of universal history. Passover becomes Easter, the Old Covenant is fulfilled to overflowing by the New.

This is the way to understand Jesus' insistence on the necessity of his death, as something not determined by him, but by his Father; "the Hour" is God's *kairos*¹, and Jesus will observe it with the same religious obedience he has always accorded to the Passover: this also explains the ritual observance of the Passover meal at the Last Supper in the Synoptics, even though historically speaking it is impossible that the Last Supper could have been the *seder*, since this would have involved the breaking of all ritual principles of Passover by the Sanhedrin on the following day. Historically, Jesus is crucified *on the Parasceve* precisely to get the bodies well buried by the time the Passover moon rises. Nevertheless, the solemn setting of the Last Supper reflects the truth that the Mass is a Passover celebration in Christian form "as often as you do this".

The Function of the Exodus in Biblical Tradition

I have referred to a form of "lateral thinking", by which the Exodus themes come to form the underlying basis of every account of religious experience, every encounter with the divine, which the Scripture describes. Because of the complex nature of the Bible, this does not merely apply to events subsequent to the Exodus, which is dated at about 1300 BC, but applies to the very oldest material, which has passed through the processes of oral tradition, later committal to writing, and the redaction process which, as we have seen, is potentially quite radical. Furthermore, I take this to involve every form of literary structure in the Bible. In some sense the same relationship with the Exodus God has to inform each and every one of them. Alertness, for us, will mean an openness to the fact that Leviticus legislating about diet, sexual relations, or the shape of the Tent of Meeting is as much a response to the Exodus as is the telling the story of the war between God and Pharaoh; the resonance of the Exodus is capable of detection in every line of the Psalter; the story of the Creation in Genesis 1, where God's deeds are all acts of dividing (light from darkness, animals, fish, reptiles, birds, insects, male from female) is laterally derived from the judgment between Egyptian and Jew, the death or survival of the firstborn, the physical departure of Israel from Egypt, the parting of the waters which stood in walls to the right and left of them, and finally the perception of the treacherous sea itself, acting as the minister of the saving God (for the Chosen) and the punishing God (for their oppressors): one of the days of creation indeed describes the making dry land rise amidst the waters. Here are three examples, idly drawn together at random:

- Retroactively, the Exodus undoubtedly informs the process whereby the Sumerian fable of Gilgamesh is turned in the Bible's hands to the Exodus epic of Noah's Ark, with its themes of simultaneous cursing and salvation, with water as the medium, the gathering of the species reflecting the assembly of Israel at the Exodus, so that the people leave Egypt with "flocks and herds, and great quantities of livestock". The fact that the end of the ordeal is the sacrifice of Noah, sealing a Covenant with God, symbolised by the rainbow, and the recommissioning of Noah to "increase, multiply, fill the earth, and conquer it" sets the radically laundered story into an Exodus frame.
- We might discuss the details of a story like the Sacrificing of Isaac at the hands of Abraham, in Genesis, to test the theory of alignment on the Exodus. Zionists will forget that the original demand of Moses from Pharaoh was that the people should be freed *to go out into the wilderness to offer sacrifice to its God*. "The People" in the Genesis context is wholly contained in the figure of Isaac, who is the providential, promised "seed of Abraham", through whom he is assured "descendants as many as the grains of sand on the seashore" or "the stars in the heavens". The fear that God has decided to demand the death of this unique child reappears in Exodus, as the first temptation in the wilderness: "Were there no graves in Egypt, that you have brought us out to die in this wilderness?" What we see on the top of the Genesis mountain is the liberation of Isaac, through the word of one called "the angel of the Lord". But this is the same figure who will later pass over the firstborn of Israel and slaughter the

¹ Kairos: consummate moment, definitive encounter or point of intersection, climactic time of revelation

firstborn of Egypt. The Genesis sacrificing of the ram caught by its horns in the thicket in place of the firstborn Isaac is an obvious pre-echo of the Exodus Paschal Lamb, who dies so that the Children of the Promise may live. The Genesis story ends with the statement of Covenant between God and Abraham, as the Exodus is consummated in the Covenant on Sinai, the Mountain of the Lord, between God and Israel. Mount Moriah is thus the paradigm of Mount Sinai, and many Jews believed that the real site of Moriah was in fact the (unrecognised) Temple Mount of Jerusalem. If it were so, the poetic justice of the Passover which Christians celebrate would be finally sealed, since the death of the only-begotten Son of God would be taking place on the site of the testing of Abraham, the father of all who believe.

- The binding of phylacteries on the head and pulse-points of the Jew, containing the words,

Listen Israel: the Lord your God is one, there is no other

is the imposition on the Jews of the truth which Yahweh established by overturning the power of Pharaoh and (by assimilation) the pagan gods he worshipped. The act of reciting these words thrice daily sets the Exodus in Jewish life as its heartbeat. Our own replacement - the thrice-repeated prayer of the Church² - is the Lord's Prayer, once again stressing the oneness of God: our recital of these words is reflected in the Gospel, not only in their being given to us by Jesus, but in their being deliberately echoed in the Last Supper's Priestly Prayer (Jn 17) and in the Garden of Gethsemane. In this way we come to remember the last Passover, the Exodus of Jesus, three times each day.

Canon Charpentier's little book on *Reading the Old Testament* uses the account of the Sea of Reeds to show an example of redaction criticism, allotting the text between the three sources represented in it. You can easily see how the different sources all make a different contribution based on their various concerns. Canon Charpentier goes on to point up the unique significance and "reach" of the Exodus account in the Scripture and in Jewish life.

The way in which other traditions can be assimilated to the Exodus is of great interest to us, and can enlighten us in our preaching task. It is a good exercise to try a random piece of Biblical tradition against the index of the Exodus; you may initially feel that there are parts of the Bible that will not relate to it. Approaching from the other side of the argument, we might ask: what are the basic themes of the Exodus story?

- **God's initiative** The enslaved Israelites are broken in spirit and unfit for survival as a people. God's judgment to intervene is vital, for there is nothing positive in the spirit of the people. The biblical theme of the free grace of God, who chooses without partiality or influence, is consecrated in the Exodus. Every theme in the Bible which sets the will of God in primary position thus reflects the Exodus.
- **The raising up of a mediator** The choice of the people is embodied in the choice of Moses (providential figure from his birth, with secretly relevant details in his biography, like the relationship with Pharaoh's daughter, the Egyptian name, the murder of an Egyptian in righteous anger, his consequent flight from Egypt: he is already in some sense "back from the dead"). The entire history of the prophets finds its seedbed in the ministry of Moses, as do the themes of personal vocation, formation, mediation and ministry. The greatness of his rôle can be glimpsed in the story of his resistance of God, when the angry Yahweh decides to ditch his idolatrous

² Morning Prayer, Eucharist, Evening Prayer: "from the rising of the sun to its setting".

people and make a new beginning with Moses. Moses (Ex 32) reminds God of his covenants, including the Genesis one with Abraham, at which God “relents”.

- **The wilderness** The sacred history of the nomadic pilgrimage to the Promised Land grounds the Jewish religion in its deepest truth, because in the desert Israel depends totally on the providence of God. The manna in the desert feeds them tenuously but securely. The constant insistence on the experience of the Shepherd/nomad as holier and more truthful to God than the experience of the farmer/settler is expressed in various antitheses in the Bible: Abel the Just is a shepherd, Cain a farmer. David is a shepherd, Solomon a court figure. This theme will return as the backcloth to all oracles of judgment on the kings and the cities of Israel: they have lost their spirit of depending on God, they must go back into slavery, and learn anew the nuptial spirit of trust towards God. This return to the wilderness is the register for all experiences of exile and defeat for the future, whether in Babylon or in Belsen.
- **Testing** As they pass through the “signs and wonders” by which God saves them, the people are tested to discover what is in them. This discovery of truth is part of the mystery of salvation: God reveals himself by saving, the Israelites reveal themselves in their response. This intimate binding-together of salvation and revelation will continue to develop throughout the Bible.
- **Remembering** Before the Exodus begins God announces that the people will learn what he is like through the deeds they are about to see. For Deuteronomy the remembrance of the deeds of the past is all-important: *Never forget the deeds of God* is one of the Deuteronomistic formulae which repeat themselves frequently. It is in the remembrance of the Exodus that Israel is to live its life in the future: to forget is to court disaster and death. It is worth looking up the word “forget” in a concordance.
- **Conversion** If God is the author of their liberation, the Israelites are not to be merely passive in response. They are to learn their part in the journey, the conquest of Canaan, and their life in the Promised Land according to the Divine Torah. Their devotion will be carried faithfully into the next generations by the tradition of their faith. The cardinal celebration of this takes place within the family setting, in the *seder* or Passover meal, made up of fidelity to ritual, and of fidelity to word (the Passover telling of the story of Exodus. It is hard to tell whether this domestic setting was so prominent as it is now, for instance, before the Exile; at the Exile there was a vast internalisation of Jewish religion, and with the loss of the Temple, it was seen that the future of the nation would rest on what was transacted in home and heart. We can say, at least, that it is likely that Jesus stood at Joseph’s side on Passover nights and ritually asked to be told the reason for the meal, and for each of its details). The eating of the *seder* brings the grace of Passover from the past into the present, since God is the same and the people are the same. But it is in the keeping of Passover, correct in all its ritual detail, that the people hold hands with the holy nation. Covenant fidelity here takes its specific form. Here is the cradle of Catholic liturgical understanding, in which the Mass and the Last Supper are *one thing*, and the people is renewed in the celebration of the Sacraments.
- **Life and Death** The elements of the Passover are life and death realities. The plagues, growing in intensity, assure the Egyptians that they are risking everything in their stubborn resistance of Yahweh. This stubbornness leads to the death of the firstborn, by which not a household in Egypt is left untouched. The going-out of the People of God is equally a passage through death, the desert expressing the mortal danger in which the pilgrimage has its route. To set out with Moses means danger of

death. For the whole of their journey, death is at the side of the faithful, no further away than the next drink of water, the next gathering of the manna. So in the Christian Pasch the death of Jesus is presented as the essential reality of the Redemption, the matter of salvation. That Christians find themselves called to follow the way of the Cross sets the serious tone of our faith. “Unless you take up your Cross and follow, you cannot be my disciple.”

In literary terms, the Book of Exodus supplies Israel with the national epic: epic is the literary genre of the writing. It is encrusted in other contributions, notably the ritualistic ones which ensure the survival of the feast of Passover and its links with the eventual Sanctuary in Jerusalem³ (I leave you to make a wild guess as to which source might have contributed the latter).

Genres of Exodus

It will be instructive to look at the different literary genres in which the Exodus is expressed in the Bible. Apart from the classic account in **Exodus** itself, **the Book of Numbers** presents a parallel account of the journey through the wilderness, heavily influenced, seemingly, by the Priestly need to validate the practices of post-Exilic Judaism with Mosaic warranty. This re-presentation of Exodus themes is typical of the lateral process by which the different ages of Jewish experience have revisited and reinterpreted the classical foundations of faith. The overall concern of Numbers is to present a credible account of how a sinful and half-hearted people can interpret their story as the scene of God’s dwelling with humanity. The image of a pilgrim people, grouped every night around the Tent of Meeting, is the great image it wants to present. The many detailed accounts of infidelity, and the mode of reconciliation that follows them, give a special tone to the account. The priestly hand is visible in the tribal and family genealogies, and aetiologies (explanation of customs or place-names) which were so dear to the clergy.

The ritual history which goes back into oral tradition can be seen in the ancient and eloquent ceremony of the first-fruits which is embedded in **Deuteronomy 26**. Here are the formulae of the Exodus in Deuteronomistic form: *a nation great, powerful, and numerous: Egyptian oppression, the infliction of harsh slavery: the cry of his people coming up to God: God stooping to hear them, coming to see their misery*, and at last the Exodus, where God brought us out with mighty hand and outstretched arm, with great terror, and with signs and wonders. Finally, the coming to the Promised Land which *flows with milk and honey*. Thus the first-fruits as a fitting offering to the saving God. We should not fail to see that this, a perfectly ordinary harvest thanksgiving, could have been voiced completely locally: eg, The Lord has given you the favour of fruitfulness: you must offer him thanks at the time of the harvest. Instead, the moment of thanksgiving becomes a moment for retelling the Exodus story from beginning to end, because it is the point of reference for all custom and all ceremony.

³ We might here take note of the presence in the Temple of ritual components which reflect the centrality of the Exodus: the great bronze vessel of water, doubtless essential in practical terms, known as the Bronze Sea; the Altar itself, representing the worship Israel left Egypt to accomplish; the Tent of Meeting, symbolically the place where Moses received his directions from God for the guidance of the people’s journey; the container of the manna, miraculously preserved: the tablets of stone from mount Sinai, contained in the Ark of the Covenant, Israel’s most solemn relic. Also present, until the reform of Josiah, was the bronze serpent Nehushtan, once set up by Moses in the desert as a sign of healing. Children had begun to bring it presents, and as the only representation of a living thing in the Temple, it had to go.

Note the classic contradiction, that within the largest building the Jews ever constructed, in the heart of the chief City of the realm, there is a tent, most transient of all dwellings. The heart of Israel, even in the Promised Land, is to remain, at all costs, nomadic. The visions of the prophet Ezekiel about the departure of the glory of God from the Temple expresses the theme of the Temple itself as temporary, potentially de-consecrated: into that prophetic space comes the Son of God, who said: “Destroy this place, and in three days I will raise it up”. This is the rationale behind the Tearing of the Temple Veil as a component of the last Passover.

Deuteronomy is the embodiment of Law for the Promised Land, formulated six centuries after the death of Moses; yet it draws all its inspiration directly from the Exodus. Dt 4:32ff gives a direct link between the Exodus and the spirit of the nation. It is worth reading the tract of Deuteronomy from 4:32 to the end of 8, to see how closely the religious behaviour of Israel is bound to the details of the Exodus.

Judges 2 gives an excellent example of the attitude of the Deuteronomistic history, which sees the infidelities of the Israel of the Promised Land contrasting starkly with the experiences of their past. *A generation grew up which knew neither Yahweh nor the deeds he had done for the sake of Israel*-ie the Exodus. This judgment will recur like a curse for the whole of Samuel 1 & 2, and Kings 1 & 2. Idolatry linked to the religion of Canaan keeps reappearing, polluting the purity of the people of God with syncretism. This kind of judgment points us clearly to the traditions of Prophecy.

At all points the Exodus is re-evoked by **the prophets**, and a very short wander through any one of them will alert you to their holding it the high-point of divine revelation. The mistrust of the city, and the possibility that Israel might see the destroying side of the Exodus coin, is all over the first chapter of Isaiah. The syncretism with Canaanite religion - the worship of Baal and Astarte, the sacred trees, etc, is pilloried alongside the citified ways of the daughters of Jerusalem in Is 3:16ff. The song of the vineyard (Is 5) threatens a return to the wilderness, and the anger of God turned against his own people allows the prophet to identify foreign invaders as the ministers of divine wrath in Is 5:25-30. By comparison, the oracle of deliverance in Is 9 is alight with the joy of Exodus.

But the clearest place to study the prophetic treatment of Exodus is Deutero-Isaiah (Is 40 - 55), written for the exiled Israelites in Babylon. Here the prophet foresees a new Exodus which will restore the ancient trust in the covenant; its oracles are set between ringing announcements of monotheism, and denunciations of the multitudinous gods of Assyria. The poetry of the return to Jerusalem fills these chapters, and sets a new literary pattern, setting the old pilgrim hymns to Jerusalem in a new register as songs of return, restoration, rebuilding. In Is 43:16ff the imagery of the Exodus is formally invoked as an eternally valid poetry, one written in the heart of God even when men have forgotten or forsaken it. The end of the Exile is modelled in the same mould at Is 48:20.