

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EXODUS

Ex 13 - 15

The Old Testament is formed in the community that draws its whole inspiration from the event described in these three chapters. It would be a mistake to think of the Exodus as an incident within a pre-existing national history. The truth is that the Exodus event is the real inauguration of the people called Israel; the previous history of this people is constructed, and the subsequent history is evaluated, in the light of the Exodus.

When, remembering this, you look at the Patriarchal history contained in Genesis (the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob called Israel, and Joseph and his brothers) it is easy to feel the undertow of the Exodus as you go. Even the first 11 chapters of Genesis, which are couched in mythic, pre-historical terms, can be re-read in the light of the story to come (a theme like *salvation by water* can be discerned in the Noah story, which is assimilated to the Bible from middle-eastern myths, and is not an original Scriptural story. The Creation in Genesis 1 is depicted as beginning with *the breath of God stirring the deep*, followed by the *division of waters* (above and below the earth). The parting of the Red Sea, the depiction of God as *enthroned over the flood*, is a seminal and enduring image of divine sovereignty, of a God who reigns over the cosmos. A cursory examination of the readings for the baptismal Paschal Vigil will start all sorts of hares. Theologically, the cosmic lordship which is to be read in the *creation* stories is to be identified with the lordship over history that expresses itself in *salvation*. Thus the Exodus is a set-piece experience of monotheism in action - the Creator and the Redeemer are here seen to be one; and the unicity of God is the primary article of the Jewish faith¹).

Notice that there was a practical, but also symbolic, bronze Sea in the Jerusalem Temple.

You could go in search of the water themes as they return throughout the Bible: *Joshua* crosses the divided Jordan to enter the promised land, as we cross the baptismal water to enter the Kingdom of God. *Jonah* makes abundant use of water themes, with God very clearly in charge of the waves; *Job* is packed with images of God reigning over the deep and its creatures; the *Psalms* mention the sea in this sense frequently, and the *Apocalypse* is seldom unconscious of the waters. *Ezekiel* is particularly eloquent in this area (see the readings of the Baptismal lectionary). Of course, this brings us over into the Christian world where Jesus walks on water - and, in *Matthew*, calls his frightened disciple to do the same: he stills the storm at sea, promises living water to the woman at the well, and in the Temple liturgy for Tabernacles: he sends the man born blind to wash in the pool, and speaks to Nicodemus of being born of water and the Spirit (= *breath*). The Church's theology of Baptism is steeped in the Exodus imagery; *passing through water* evokes death/resurrection, birth, washing, enlightenment; the breathing-forth of the Spirit in John's account of the death of Christ is succeeded with a flow of water, where even the dead body of Christ is seen to be life-giving (cf the Preface of the Sacred Heart).

¹ The Exodus is a good starting-point for a meditation on this important theme. We can glimpse here the roots of the common Christian heresy which sees Jesus Christ as a fire-brigade or even as a subversive, who intervenes in a failed Creation, or teaches his Father to be merciful. It is essential that the will to create and the will to save be seen as *one thing*: Jn 10:30, *The Father and I are One*.

This is therefore a particularly central theme, which transmutes itself into various forms at various points of the Scriptural canon. By following this key theme, we shall be able to build up an awareness of the “net” which is the Bible. Pull a string at one end, and a bell rings at the other. Facility with themes like this one forms the nervous-system of any competent preacher, since the aim of preaching is to break the bread of the Word; we are, if you like, seeing how the cookie crumbles in a very comprehensive way, so that the structure of the whole Scriptural tradition can become familiar to us.