

THE EXODUS

In studying the Pentateuch we have now had direct experience of all the identified sources that go into the scriptural unity which we call The Law.

We have experienced the spiritual depth and human genius of the Yahwist, the other-worldly exaltation and prophetic dimension of the Elohist, the meticulous and stately hieraticism of the Priestly source, and the passionate insistence of the Deuteronomist on the great lessons of the past and their embodiment in a new future. Armed with all of these areas of knowledge, we can come to apprehend the event which is the foundation-experience of the Hebrew religion and its most central fact: the Exodus from Egypt.

A Religion Of The Book? Hebrew religion is emphatically not a book-based reality, any more than is Christianity. If there is one fact to which we ought to bear witness as Catholics, it is this. Protestantism took a momentous step - we would have to say, a step backwards - when Martin Luther was forced to defend his call for reform by the adoption of the slogan *sola Scriptura*, the assertion that only Scripture has the authority which had been formerly claimed by the Church. At a stroke, the Protestant communities found themselves obliged to eliminate from the practice of religion anything for which no specific *scriptural* authority could be advanced; this was an attempt to *cleanse* the Christian religion, but it was also a doctrinaire devaluation of fifteen hundred years of Christian experience, and a relegation of the significance of living Christian experience of this age too. Everything becomes subordinated to the authority of the written word. This sounds as if it's a perfect recipe for veracity, so that all Protestant churches should be exactly uniform copies of the first Church in Jerusalem: and in Switzerland, where they like things to be nice and tidy, there was from the beginning quite a lot of language about building the Swiss Calvinist Church into a New Jerusalem.

But of course, this is very far from reality. The amazing thing is the *variety* of these Churches which have all set out to reproduce the Early Church as described in the New Testament. The reason why they present such a variety is that the Word is alive and active, and that the Word is always becoming *incarnate* - taking flesh in different people, and sweeping up their embarrassing individuality into the divine life. In this way the Protestant churches discover, little by little, what the Catholic Church has never forgotten: we are not a people of the book, but a people whose lives encounter the living God in multitudinous ways and places. The Word itself is diversified and multiplied by the lives it enters and inspires; no two people read the same way, or understand identically, the single Word that is proclaimed to them. It's vital to insist that this *doesn't* mean there is no such thing as the Word of God, or that it is in any way subjectively determined. It simply means that God has indeed delivered his word into the human atmosphere, to be communicative, not like some kind of formulaic exactitude, but like any act of human communication: subject to the limitation of its authors and its receivers. It is part of the risk which characterises the whole project of Creation and Redemption.

If we want to prove this reality, we have only to look at the programme of our founder. If Jesus had wanted to set up a religion of the book, it is obvious that he would have to have been primarily a *writer*. In fact, apart from the incident at the kangaroo court where he is said to have "written in the sand" - proof that he *could* have created Scriptures if he had so intended - Jesus never wrote anything down at all. He left that to those four Evangelists who never met him, and to Paul whose claim to have met him rang so hollow in the ears of his

enemies, to several others who wrote letters to correct, instruct, and encourage the same sort of rainbow variety of Churches that we see in the world at large today, and to an artist in imagination so grotesque that few today would hazard an unaided guess about his apocalyptic meaning.

We are not a religion of the Book.

If you want to see the Scriptural tradition at work in the community for which it was created, it will be a good idea to spend some time studying the celebration of the Passover on the hoof, so to speak; the Exodus tradition bears its fruit primarily in a liturgical tradition that is perennial and venerable, but above all else intimate, homely, and in the best sense *familiar* - based in the context of the *family*. The reality to which it refers is awesome - the dramatic intervention of God himself in human affairs - but the celebration is designed, not for the Temple, but for the home. We may therefore assume that there are elements in its sourcing which relate to the desert tradition, and to the exilic experience: that is, from before the founding of the Sanctuary, and during the time of its Babylonian suspension.¹

We should certainly see the principal event of the Exodus as the miracle at the Sea. The crescendo of happenings in Egypt beforehand are ordered to that moment when God most clearly made Israel his own nation and punished the Egyptians in definitive fashion "with mighty hand and outstretched arm". The plagues preceding it form a frame for the devastating final retribution - the death of the firstborn - a fact commemorated in subsequent generations by the *redemption of the firstborn* in Hebrew ritual. The pursuit of the Israelites into the desert sets the scene for the miracle at the Sea which is the central memory of all subsequent generations of Jews to the present day.

Second in importance in the book of Exodus is the theophany at Sinai; here the fact of the theophany represents that ritual encounter with Yahweh which was a very ancient expression of the motive of Moses' demand to Pharaoh ("let my people go to sacrifice to me, three days' march into the wilderness"- Ex 5:3), and which sets the whole Exodus narrative in the context of worship. God calls the people to himself so that they can be his *worshippers*; and here the question of the Pentateuchal *sources*, of which I have said very little so far in this lecture, comes to the fore. In the book of Exodus the three primary sources of Genesis - J, E, and P, are clearly visible. The usual rules apply: the J and E streams are primarily the vehicle for the ancient elements, the oral traditions. In keeping with what we have studied in Genesis, this material comes to us *already combined* in the form scholars ascribe to *the Jehovist*; and it deserves to be noted that the contribution of the E-source is far less identifiable here than it was in Genesis. So here the work of the Jehovist, dominated quite heavily by passages purely Jahwist, presents us with the consistent narrative drawn from oral tradition, whilst the P source appears quite clearly in later accretions, whose aim is often identifiable as the application of the original desert, nomadic traditions to the post-exilic, priestly - thus *cultic* - context. However, because there is also present a body of legal writing which is certainly not priestly, and which shows no resonance from the J or E sources, we must assume that the Jehovist had already incorporated some legal writing into his work.

One of the consequences of this analysis is that the accumulation of *legal* prescriptions around the theophany at Sinai comes into a new focus. The actual theme which defines Moses as a figure - that he descends from the mountain *in order to bring the Law* - is

¹ The ancient element - that which flows from the nomadic past - can usually be distinguished from the syncretistic pollution from Canaanite sources; but sometimes the latter is artfully inserted, as in the story of the unleavened bread in Ex 19.

therefore to be suspected of late origins. We have already discovered, in Deuteronomy, texts from the cultic festival of the first-fruits which tell the story of the Exodus in recognisable literary kinship with the Exodus texts, but entirely without mention of the theophany at Sinai or the giving of the Law. In its origins, the encounter at Sinai, which forms the consummation of the Exodus, is *the founding of the Covenant* in its most solemn form. This can be thought of primarily in *ritual* rather than legal terms; the simultaneous giving of the Law has obviously been progressively amplified, to the point where it takes over the scene. To think of the God of Israel portentously issuing minute details about the design of the curtain-rings on the interior of the priestly Sanctuary for forty days on top of Sinai becomes more and more peculiar as we think of it: in fact it is clearly somewhat absurd. Here we can see the hands of the priests, but not theirs alone. The giving of the law has become a depository for *every* move that embraces the changed conditions after the Exile; everything which has been expanded out of the heat and violence of history into that timeless ritual which the P-source finds so eternally important. The P-source, for instance, describes the plagues with none of the urgency and liveliness which characterizes J. In J the reactions of Pharaoh are always uncertain. P sees him reacting as God has predicted - he predicts the exact course of events in 3:18-22 - setting subsequent events in a context which has been foreseen and provided-for. It is hard for a modern mind to avoid the implication that God has even predetermined the reaction of the pagan king. The overall effect is of a loss of tension, as the account becomes distanced from humanity.

We can also see that the description of the last plague becomes suddenly much fuller, because the details of the death of the firstborn include the founding of the ritual for the Passover, in which the priestly source is most deeply interested. Equally, in the isolated and identifiable P contributions to the Sinai narrative, there is no indication that Israel was brought there in order to experience an overwhelming theophany, and an encounter with the God of their salvation: the aim is rather that they should receive detailed instructions about the interior of the sanctuary. The telling of the story of the manna loses in priestly hands the vivid description of the risky, dependent life of the desert, and instead becomes a narrative concerned to ratify the institution of the Sabbath, resting on the seventh day, as a divine ordinance, and the preservation of a jar of manna in the Sanctuary. This is of fundamental importance to P and, strange as it may seem to us, is their choice as the climax of the whole Exodus story: because it creates the ordinance by which Israel will henceforward live, whether in the desert, or in the cultivated Promised Land. It is worth noticing that the writing obviously postdates the fall of the monarchy, since the High Priest is already present, wearing the insignia and performing the functions of the Davidic king.

Specific Texts

Chapter One - the Presence of the Sources

P:1-7

J: 8-12

P: 13-14

E: 15-20

P: 20-22

Chapter Three - the Call of Moses 1

The account is largely compounded of J with a very little E material woven in. The narrative pattern shows a certain affinity with later parts of the general tradition: Moses has fled from Egypt, and receives a theophany in the wilderness; Egypt is not yet a place where God can reveal himself in this way. In the same way Israel will flee from Egypt to receive a theophany in the wilderness; so Moses is to some extent trailblazing for the people as a whole. The establishment of a prophetic pattern is interesting, in that the great tradition of prophecy will one day entail the prophets' acting predictively, thus producing in personal signs the eventual experience of the whole people.

Why Midian, which traditionally lies far further east - beyond the Sinai peninsula, and the gulf of Aqabah? The Midianites' appearance in subsequent Jewish history is invariably hostile, as nomadic raiders of the Promised Land. Maybe they - the oldest camel nomads known to archaeology - were actually travelling in the peninsula of Sinai; thus the identity of "the mountain of God" could be equated with the Sinai traditions in the J/E and Horeb in the Deuteronomic traditions. It is an old tradition that Moses was connected with the Midianites by marriage; so some suggestion that his first encounter with God took place in their territory rather than on Egyptian soil may be an old tradition too. However, it is possible that there is an admixture here between two traditions: the one connected with Sinai, and the greater theophany there, and the one which carries the stories of the Exodus.

Of the call of God itself, we can say that J has the theme of God himself bringing his people up out of Egypt, and Moses' rôle will be the simple announcement that this is going to happen (cf again the future work of the prophets, though there it is more often an impending judgment that is announced, rather than the salvific deed of Exodus). The people are then to wait, with Moses, to see what it was that Yahweh would do for them. E has the modified theme that Moses is being commissioned to do the bringing-out, so more of a charismatic agent than a mere envoy. In this E is following out its usual insight that God acts in heavenly realms, and uses a representative agent to be concerned with the earthly realities. J is thus older, as it represents the ancient confession "Yahweh has brought his people out of Egypt" in more exact form. It is J who has God not only hearing the cry of the Israelites, but actually "coming down" to do something on earth (3:8). The lines in 3 18-22 are a detailed description of the future which is unprecedented, borrowing as it does the terminology of the later narrative.

We can see in ch 5, with its imperious command to Pharaoh to let the people go to sacrifice, a possible relic of a far older tradition which has God meet the people in Egypt and send them directly to Pharaoh with the demand for freedom. By the beginning of ch 6 God is predicting that Pharaoh will not only allow the slaves to leave, but will drive them out of his kingdom.

Ch 6:2 - 7:7 is the Priestly version of the call of Moses whose JE form we have seen in ch 3. It is interesting insofar as it takes place in Egypt and not in Midian.

The Night of Passover Ex 11:1 - 13:16

Note the mixed state of the narrative; in 10:28 there comes the definitively final break between Moses and Pharaoh. Yet here in 11:4 there comes a speech which appears to be delivered from God to the Israelites, but which ends up talking about the Lord in the third person, and appears now to be directed to Pharaoh (impossible). This section is JE.

There then follows a large insertion of cultic rubrics (11:9 - 12:20) which can clearly be identified as P. The replacement of the ancient New Year in Autumn with the spring Passover is accompanied by instructions detailing dates - possible only in post-exilic times. This change actually dates from the eighth century, when a Mesopotamian New Year was adopted in Israel. P naturally gives a religious and cultic reason for this.

Consideration of cultic aetiologies brings us to the question of the Passover's historical provenance. It is essentially a *sacrifice*, whose origins lie hidden. Its name is equally uncertain: it seems to be cognate in Hebrew with the verb for limping or jumping, moving at any rate in a strange fashion, but what possible meaning this could have is unsure. Martin Noth suggested that the sacrifice was seasonal, and related to the first movement of flocks, after the birth of their young, to the spring pasturage. This is obviously a dangerous manoeuvre, with the young lambs (= firstborn) particularly at risk. The nocturnal setting indicates a fear of dark powers which could threaten the life of the travellers. This sacrificial feast, which frames the actual *killing of a new lamb* - thus dramatizing in ritual the very fate which is most feared - would explain the significance of the blood on the houses (or more anciently the tents); the spilt blood has the function of turning aside the destructive force, perhaps primitively by implying that the killing has already taken place (= deceiving the angel of death). It is worth noting that the inclusion of the figure of the Destroyer is a late motif; J seems quite happy that the Lord himself should go round smiting the Egyptians. The idea of Yahweh sniffing for blood on doorposts may seem impossibly primitive; but compare the incident described at Ex 4:24.

The aetiology of *the unleavened bread* is far from the Egyptian one. Historically it relates to the first-fruits of barley in the Promised Land, and presumably predates the Israelite adoption of it very considerably. Many of the P rubrics indicate their Palestinian setting, despite the attempt to give them a frame in the Exodus experience.

12:21ff resumes the J narrative, but note the unmistakable interpolation (24-27a) from D. We should notice a similar interjection in 12:14.

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 faith²).

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).

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.

² 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*.