

# EXODUS

We want to study this piece of Scripture in such a way that we expose some of the techniques which are available to Scripture scholars. In order to show that we are doing this, we need to assess the present state of our knowledge, and then to see what the techniques of study have to offer us in modifying, deepening, and enlightening our minds - giving us something to teach to others, and perhaps something to inspire new sensitivity to the Scripture in us and in those who listen to us.

## An Exercise

Let us begin by asking ourselves where our understanding of the Exodus story come from. For myself, I can say that it is formed first of all by the place the story holds in *the Christian Liturgy* - pride of place in the Old Testament part of the Easter Vigil; that means that I have a deep personal response to the reading as a participant in some thirty-two enactments of the restored Paschal Vigil.

My awareness of the meaning of *Passover* through the ages, and my imagining of what Passover meant in first-century Jerusalem, also play an important part.

Then comes a good deal of *theology* that I have learned about the Sacraments, and the imagery of the Paschal Lamb as a type of Jesus, the Passover Meal as the type of the Mass, and the Red Sea as a type of the Christian Sacrament of Baptism all come into play.

Finally, the contribution of *artists and writers*, culminating in the seminal work of Cecil B de Mille, impose an imaginative verisimilitude: all who have watched *The Ten Commandments* have an almost indelible physical interpretation of what exactly the parting of the Red Sea looked like: although we are not unsophisticated viewers of film footage, we do have a vulnerability to photographic images: the camera, we feel, cannot lie.

All of these influences are present almost unconsciously. It is worth noting that none of us comes cold to this piece of study. Now, what have the scholars to say to us?

If you have obediently read his book, Canon Charpentier presents us with the fruit of a piece of **textual criticism** in his three-column parcelling of the Exodus account. When we have read it and thought about it, our return to the original text, for instance in its liturgical setting on Easter Eve, is transformed. We become instantly aware of a sense of fragmentation: what exactly is it that God does, that Moses does, that the people experience? Are we in the presence of a divine intervention, or a piece of human courage sponsored from on high, or a great prophetic intervention by Moses, a servant of God? There is a certain loss of clarity for us as the various components make themselves felt. I would suggest to you that your previous feeling that you have *understood* the text is formed by a kind of compounding of all the above modes of comprehension: they coexist in a manner that is either complex - in those who are conscious of their separate modes - or just messy: where one mode of understanding fails, we change gear into another without noticing.

This variety of understandings of the all-important event, possibly the key event of the Old Testament, is not something theologians have imposed on the Scripture. Rather it is contained there, clearly present in the written text. It happens that this part of the Bible, the Pentateuch, is the most worked-over area, from an authorial point of view, that there is. The rôle of Moses, the understandings of God, the theory of modes of divine action are drawn from various widely-differing sources, all of which have ended up in the same text. The separation out of these different literary materials is the work of *textual criticism*.

Where a particular free-standing piece of writing can be detected, inserted into the recipe from a previous source **form-criticism** will come into play. This recognises that, within the documents that make up the Bible, there is a great variety of identifiable individual elements: these are referred to by the technical term "pericope". Form-criticism pays special attention to the formal characteristics of each pericope, and tries to use the identified form as a kind of vehicle. The first aim is to find the setting in the life of Israel or of the Church which caused this form to be created and used in teaching. The second aim is to go further back, if possible, and identify the setting of the pericope in the life of the original actors - always assuming that there is one to be found. The technical term for a setting-in-life is the German *sitz-im-leben*. Once you have identified a form, it becomes possible to recognise further examples of pericopes obeying the same rules, and this helps greatly in the understanding of the Scripture under study. The forms in the Old Testament are legion. Legends, hymns, laments, prayers, psalms, anecdotes, fables, sagas, soap operas, heroic stories, aetiologies (long or short explanations of names, places, or people), oracles, prophetic denunciations, political propaganda, theological discourse, proverbs, didactic speeches, chronicles: the list is endless, and is capable of enormous detailed, and sophisticated subdivision. Oral traditions can play, as well as written documents. In the New Testament the work of form-criticism reaches into the life of the early Church, and then beyond that to find the *sitz-im-leben* (if there is one) in the life of Jesus. The search is always instructive. Clearly the reason why we have saved for us any particular saying of Jesus must relate to the way in which the early Church understood it. They did not save what they saw no use for, and what they saved they set in a particular context. We may well come to understand these conditions, and correctly read the *sitz-im-leben* of a passage in its early church context: the evangelist will seldom leave us in much doubt about that. What is more difficult is to go back and find the *sitz-im-leben* of the passage in its original setting, in the life of Jesus. This step would form a part of a much-disputed process, called *The Quest For The Historical Jesus*; for most of this century people have disputed whether it is possible for us to get back behind the Gospels and to find the true historical Jesus, before he was framed in the theological formulae of Church doctrine, which includes the theological setting of the four Gospels. Some scholars insist that the historical Jesus is now unobtainable, that we rely on the faith of the church alone. Catholic scholars are more likely to be among those who think this is not true, and that we can recover genuine knowledge of the Jesus of history that is not the creation of subsequent reflection. But this is a different lecture.

The attribution of pericopes to various identifiable literary origins is the work of **source-criticism**. Part of the Exodus material is obviously cultic - all the instructions about the selection and killing and roasting of the lamb, the spilt blood on the doorposts, and so on: what is the source of these injunctions? In a cultural sense they must emanate from a pastoral way of life - because of the involvement of a beast; what was the original impulse that led to the sacrifice of a new lamb? Going back to the most primitive times, we can place the origins amid the tumult of a nomadic existence; nomads do not write things down, but memorize them; so these sources are necessarily oral. There is thus a strong admixture of folk culture in them, which would have been cast into literary form relatively late, after the nomadic way of life had given way to the settled - where a pot of ink can be left on a table and a scroll stored in a cupboard. At the same time, we recognise the lineaments of the ancient rituals surrounding the barley harvest, in the rite associated with the destruction of yeast, the eating of unleavened bread, and so on. This must emanate from a settled environment - since nomads do not grow barley - and it is therefore potentially drawn from a foreign cultural source - folk traditions from settled, Canaanite cultures will naturally have intermingled with nomadic Jewish ones. From time to time we can isolate clear evidence of actual texts: the Deuteronomic directions for the blessing of the first fruits is a very clear example: another is the hymn of the redeemed at the Red Sea - and that enables investigation to proceed in a new direction: who wrote this piece? Can its

original use or setting be discerned? What does its new use and setting say about the editor who chose to set it in this way?

The investigation of these sources can sometimes be conducted from outside, and a comparison with what is known of the alleged event from archaeological and contemporary documentary sources can be carried out, by **historical criticism**. This follows out the idea that all writings are affected, sometimes largely generated, from historical forces. Is there independent historical evidence of the Patriarchs, or are they solely Biblical characters? Some scholars trace the three Patriarchs to different tribes, and suggest that they were only cast into a family structure quite late in the formation of the tradition. Originally founders of tribal sanctuaries, they become related and interlocked by literary creativity, as the historical forces that unite the tribes demand a united past history. Or what do we know independently about the Israelites at the time of the Exodus? Is there evidence, for instance, about the tribal life that was lived by the communities we call by the names of the twelve sons of Israel? Many scholars do not think that all the tribes so delineated were in Egypt, certainly that there was no sense of a Jewish nation there: many support the conjecture that only a few tribes had any experience of life in Egypt, and that the others knew a relatively featureless nomadic life until the time when Hebrews began to infiltrate Canaanite territory. For decades people thought of a structure of tribal life lived under the Judges, where a loose collection (*amphictyony*) of tribes solled and gelled according to need. This is almost certainly oversimplified as an historical picture. The judgments about the Scriptures drawn from archaeological and historical sources outside the Bible can properly be called *historical criticism*.

The work of the editors who brought the themes together into a single literature can be examined by **redaction criticism**. This focuses on what we might at first think of as secondary elements: the links in the chain of narrative: where does the story take place - what is its setting? What precedes it, and what happens next in the story? What is the plan of the whole book overall? Source-criticism leads imperceptibly to redaction-criticism, because one of the next questions to be asked about an identified source is, What was in the mind of the writer who adopted it? What did he do with his materials, and why? The attention here is all on the author. For example, we know that Luke had a copy of Mark and used it as his foundation-stone. Where Luke *differs* from Mark, therefore, we can immediately analyse the change, and make deductions about the intentions it embodies. From this we can attempt to read the mind of Luke, and so arrive at what the Church calls the primary sense of Scripture.

And when all of these have made their contribution, there will be **literary criticism** to be done - close reading of the text, followed by the assessment of the contribution of the text under examination to the book of which it forms part; Fr Brown would go further, and seek to examine the contribution of the text to the whole corpus of the Old or New Testament (**canonical criticism**).

Modern literary criticism has something rather specific to say about Scripture. There is sometimes a temptation to regard form-criticism and redaction-criticism as destructive processes, breaking down something synthetic - the final text of Scripture - into true components which precede and outweigh in significance the Scriptural text itself. **Structuralism** is interested in *the final form of the Scripture* as something which *reveals*, in a mode even ulterior to the conscious plans of the scriptural author. This is actually quite close, as an idea, to certain strata of religious belief about the Scriptures - some more respectable than others. Structuralism in modern literary theory is very French and highly (some think too highly) intellectual. That there is such a thing at all is of interest to us. I leave to one side the next stage of sophistication, the world of deconstructionalism, for the principal reason that, despite my best endeavour, I can't elicit a single iota of sensible meaning from anything that it says.