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The Exodus Motif of Liberation: Its Grace and Controversy

Carol J. Dempsey, O.P.

For centuries the Exodus event has influenced communities of believers around the globe. People have identified with the story of the Israelites' painful oppression caused by corrupt and unjust political regimes, and they have also resonated with the poetry that depicts the Israelites' jubilation on the occasion of the people's liberation. It has been speculated that the pharaoh of the Exodus was Ramses II. But whether it was he or another pharaoh who caused the oppression, his identity has faded into the dusty archives of the past, and yet his spirit remains present today.

The liberation of the Hebrew people from enslavement to the Egyptians is one of the major events of the Old Testament. Its emphasis on liberation from bondage forms the theological backbone not only to the Old Testament but to the New Testament as well. The Exodus (literally "going out") was the catalyst to the formation of Israel as a nation. A tribal group of semi-nomadic people traveled together as a community across the sea, through the wilderness, and into a new land where they eventually evolved into a great kingdom, a strong nation. The detailed narrative of the Exodus event is found in Exodus 1–15, particularly in Exodus 12:37–15:21.

Exodus 1–15: The Story of Israel's Liberation

Within the Pentateuch, Exodus 1:1–12:36 describes the Hebrew people's unbearable situation before their liberation from Egyptian bondage. According to the story, God heard and responded to the people's pain (Exod 2:24; 3:7–12), first by raising up Moses to lead the people out of oppression (Exod 3) and then by hardening Pharaoh's heart (Exod 4:21) so that God could perform, through Moses, a series of "signs" and "wonders" that



would eventually lead to the accomplishment of the mission of liberation. These “signs” and “wonders” took the form of various “plagues.”

The first plague polluted the waters of the Nile, killed all the fish, and left the Egyptians without fresh water and a food source (Exod 7:14-25). The second plague, frogs, filled the land and the Egyptian houses completely. The frogs eventually died in the people’s houses, which caused a great stench (Exod 8:1-15). The third plague was gnats that afflicted both the Egyptians and their animals (Exod 8:16-19). The fourth plague was flies. Once again, all the Egyptians were afflicted while the Hebrew people remained untouched in the land of Goshen (Exod 4:20-32).

The fifth plague was a deadly pestilence that killed all the Egyptian livestock but left the Israelite livestock unscathed (Exod 9:1-7). The sixth plague, boils, festered on both the Egyptians and their livestock but left the Israelites unharmed (Exod 9:8-12). The seventh plague, thunder and hail, struck down the Egyptians, their animals, and all the plants of the field, and shattered every tree in the field. Once again the Israelites remained unaffected by the disaster (Exod 9:13-35). Locusts, the eighth plague, filled the land and destroyed every remaining tree and plant left unharmed by the hail. Yet the Israelites and their livestock remained safe in the land of Goshen while all these events transpired (Exod 10:1-20). The ninth plague, darkness, cast deep gloom over the land and caused utter confusion among the Egyptians (Exod 10:21-29). The final and worst plague, the death of the Egyptian firstborn among the people and their livestock, was the cruelest of all (Exod 11:1-10; 12:29-32). This final plague led Pharaoh to set the people free. The description of this harrowing event is detailed in Exodus 12:29-32:

At midnight the LORD slew every first-born in the land of Egypt, from the first-born of Pharaoh on the throne to the first-born of the prisoner in the dungeon, as well as all the first-born of the animals. Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians; and there was loud wailing throughout Egypt, for there was not a house without its dead. During the night Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, “Leave my people at once, you and the Israelites with you! Go and worship the LORD as you said. Take your flocks, too, and your herds, as you demanded, and be gone; and you will be doing me a favor.”

Perhaps the most significant line in the Exodus story of liberation is heard in Exodus 14:25b. After God supposedly clogs the wheels of the Egyptian chariots so that the Egyptians cannot pursue the Israelites who are fleeing from Egypt on foot, the Egyptians “sounded the retreat before Israel, for” the Egyptians perceived that “the LORD was fighting for them against the

Moses leading the children of Israel through the Red Sea. Fifteenth century illustration from a German Bible.

Egyptians." This image of the warrior God is picked up later in Exodus 15:3, where the Israelites sing:

The LORD is a warrior,
LORD is his name!

The book of Exodus, then, speaks of liberation from oppression. The way the liberation is accomplished, however, is prime material for ongoing critical theological reflection. First, liberation for the Israelites happens in a manner that does harm not only to the perpetrators of injustice but also to the community, as well as to the rest of creation that plays no role in the oppression caused by humans in power who wield their power unjustly. Second, the one causing such devastation is said to be Israel's God, the creator of all, who had once established an everlasting covenant with all creation (cf. Gen 9:8-17). Third, the image of God as warrior in the context of the Exodus event communicates to readers then and now that the divine work of liberation is accomplished through violence, which the text, if read and received uncritically, both sanctions and legitimates.

Thus the story of Israel's liberation as recorded in the book of Exodus creates tension within the communities that continue to hear the text today. Biblical scholars have long recognized that the stories of the plagues reflect the grand imagination of the ancient biblical writers who wrote the stories from a certain perspective, for particular communities, and for particular theological purposes, namely, to assert that Israel's God is sovereign and Lord over history and creation. Much of the Exodus story reflects the culture and religious thinking of its day and that of its authors and later editors. The text should not be taken literally, especially in light of the prophets' vision of a God who will establish new heavens and a new earth through a nonviolent messianic leader whose power will rest in the spoken word (see, e.g., Isa 11:1-9; 42:1-4; cf. Isa 2:1-4, especially v. 4). Subsequent references to the Exodus liberation event are echoed not only throughout the rest of the Pentateuch but also in the Prophets, the Writings, and various New Testament books as well, for example, Luke 9:31; Hebrews 11:22; 2 Peter 1:15.

The Exodus Motif of Liberation in the Prophets

Echoes of the liberation motif, with God as liberator, can be heard throughout the prophetic texts of the Bible. For example, 2 Samuel 22:1-51, David's Song of Thanksgiving, describes David praising God, who saved the king from all his enemies. Both Ezekiel and Second Isaiah allude to a "new exodus" that foreshadows the end of the exile. This "new exodus"—this new "liberation"—features God as a shepherd to the Israelites (Isa 40:11; 52:12; Ezek 34:11-16) who will gather the people together (Ezek 34:24), purify them of their sins (Ezek 34:25), give them a new heart (Ezek 34:26),

put a new divine Spirit within them (Ezek 37:26; Isa 55:3), bring them into the land of their ancestors (Ezek 34:28a), enter into relationship with them (Ezek 34:28b), and bestow on them an abundance of gifts (Ezek 34:29-30; Isa 54:11-17).

Central to the proclamation of the prophets is God's message of justice. Those who suffer unjustly from social, political, or religious oppression will be liberated. Divine justice will be meted out to the perpetrators of injustice within the Israelite community (see, e.g., Isa 1:1-20; 5:8-30) and to those among the nations (see, e.g., Isa 14:14-15:18; cf. Jer 46:1-51:58). As in the Exodus text, however, this divine justice will be executed through violence, with one nation rising up against another as in the case of God stirring up the Medes (Persians) against the corrupt Babylonians (see Isa 13:1-22, especially v. 17). The purpose of the exercise of divine justice is to "chastise" those guilty of injustice. The hope is that they will turn from their ways and either return to God or come to know Israel's God as the sovereign God of salvation. Like the book of Exodus, however, the prophetic books reflect the culture of their day, with liberation being achieved also through violence. The prophetic texts give evidence that this form of liberation does not result in lasting peace. The vision of the peaceable kingdom remains eschatological and involves a different way of exercising justice (see, e.g., Isa 9:1-7; cf. 11:1-9).

The Exodus Motif of Liberation in the Writings

Perhaps nowhere is the hope for liberation heard more poignantly than in the Psalms, where the psalmist cries out:

Look at my affliction and rescue me,
for I have not forgotten your teaching.
Take up my cause and redeem me;
for the sake of your promise give me life.
Salvation is far from sinners
because they do not cherish your laws. (Ps 119:153-155)

For the psalmist, the God who once liberated the Israelites from bondage remains the hope of the community. The people trust that what God did for those suffering oppression in the past, God will do once again for a new generation who look for an end to suffering: "Free me from the net they have set for me, / for you are my refuge" (Ps 31:5).

The Exodus Motif of Liberation in the New Testament

Christians came to understand themselves as "the new people of God" (e.g., 1 Pet 2:9-10; Exod 19:6) and thus heard the Exodus story of liberation in relation to their own lives and to the Christ event. Release from the tyranny of sin became analogous to the freedom gained by the Hebrews

from Egyptian bondage. Within the gospel tradition all the stories that depict Jesus healing people of their infirmities (see, e.g., Luke 7:1-10), forgiving their sins (see, e.g., Mark 2:1-12), and working for their benefit in the midst of rigid political, social, and religious institutions and mindsets (see, e.g., Matt 12:1-8, 9-14) embody the spirit and theology of liberation first heard in Exodus, where God is depicted not only as hearing the people's groans but also as committed to doing something about their pain and suffering.

Perhaps the passage that best captures the Exodus spirit of liberation is Luke 4:16-30, where Luke portrays Jesus in the synagogue, reading from the scroll of Isaiah. He proclaims that the following words are fulfilled in the people's hearing:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord. (Luke 4:18-19)

This passage is a rereading of Isaiah 61:1-2 and omits the phrase "and the day of vengeance of our God" (Isa 61:2b). For Luke and for Jesus, the year acceptable to the Lord is the jubilee year (cf. Lev 25:8-55) when all debts—especially the debt of sin—are canceled. Thus liberation is now given a spiritual nuance. The gospels attest to the fact that Jesus spent his whole life liberating people from the multifaceted expressions of oppression just as God once liberated the Israelites from Egyptian oppression.

Whether or not the Exodus event ever really occurred is a debated question among scholars. The power of the story remains, however, as fresh and alive in people's religious imagination and experience as when the story was first told and recorded. Finally, two questions need to be asked: "Who among us is in need of liberation?" and "How will we exercise justice on behalf of liberation among ourselves, among nations, among all communities of life that make their home on our planet?"

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