

The Exodus is such a significant event in Israel's history, it serves as more than an account of wandering in the desert; it is rather a paradigm, a pattern of how God deals with his people, signifying formation of a relationship

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The events of Exodus show how God by his grace chose the people of Israel and entered into a deeper relationship with them, as part of his broader objective to redeem the whole of his creation from the taint of sin. They echo through the entire Bible. In this essay, drawing partly on Birch et al (1999) Chs 4 and 5, we seek to evaluate the paradigm of God's dealings shown in Exodus, first by examining the events of Exodus from a relationship point of view before looking at some of the preceding patterns in Genesis, the later Old Testament aspects and those which we have come to use as Christians via the New Testament.

The Exodus story is taken in a broad sense to include the whole content of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. One way to characterise it as a complex cycle from bondage, through confrontation to liberation, followed by the entering into relationship in the covenant, cycles of rebellion and punishment, and finally the imminent prospect of possession. Throughout these phases, we can trace the formation of a community where it did not previously exist (horizontal relationships), in a developing (vertical) personal relationship with God. These relationships are cemented by the law given at Sinai and reiterated in Moab.

In the phase of bondage, we see the Israelites crying out from oppression. Their cry is not a prayer, but one of pain. But it reaches God's ear given his concern for the threat to his creation (the infanticide proposed by Pharaoh seeking to prevent humanity being fruitful and multiplying, (Gen 1:28)). We may view this phase as entailing God's seeming absence from relationship, from the slaves' point of view, but God's deep concern (Ex 2:23-25).

God undertakes direct action on behalf of the Israelites, commissioning Moses, sending the plagues to overcome Pharaoh's will and dividing the Red Sea to liberate the fleeing slaves. Throughout this phase, God employs humans (the midwives, Moses) to cooperate in the attainment of his objectives. On a wider plane, God overcomes the evil that threatens his creation by dividing the sea, the Biblical symbol of chaos. The Israelites pass to new life as God redeems them from slavery. This is done by his own will to enter into a saving relation with them and not due to their merit. We can see this phase as entailing God's victory on behalf of his people. Their response is one of praise (Ex 15:1-18), a two-way relationship being established.

Entering into the wilderness, the Israelites realise that freedom from oppression can still entail hardship. God graciously offers his creation power to serve the needs of the Israelites by manna, water and protection from desert tribes. The retelling of the story of the liberation in the institution of the Passover (Ex 12) helps to cement the community and anchor their gratitude to God.

At Sinai, the core of the Exodus, God gives his people the law, which they are to obey out of gratitude for his work of liberation (Lion (1999) p170). This agreement cements the adoptive relationship (cf. Stott (1984) Ch 5). Holiness is crucial to the vertical relation – the community must be one set apart, in which God will be at home. The law is also concerned to develop the horizontal community relations, by ensuring neighbour love and service. The law is designed to ensure that the community flourishes, with a particular regard to those who are poor, weak and oppressed, as God has.

In the development of the relationship, God reveals to Israel a great deal about himself (Birch et al 109-115). He shows that he is faithful to his promises. He is willing to reveal his name. And he shows he is sovereign. He is eventually willing to come down from the mountain to live among the Israelites in the tabernacle, thus becoming vulnerable.

Sadly, the story does not lead on directly to God taking his people up to the Promised Land. There is a cycle of rebellion that pervades the period of wandering. Examples include the golden calf, the rebellion of the Levites, the acceptance of the pessimism of the ten spies and the endless complaints about food and water. “A people can be taken out of Egypt but Egypt may remain in the people” (Birch et al p140). At root are pride and impatience, and unwillingness to trust in God, despite the mighty signs of his presence and care for Israel. A positive way to view this period is a cycle of refinement, with the father teaching his errant son. Israel learns the consequence of sin – as Pharaoh did – and though the consequences are dire for some individuals, the nation is saved. Nevertheless, we see a difference in tone between Exodus and Numbers, where initially God is like a forbearing father while later he is akin to a spurned lover (Nu 14:27). But eventually the new generation is ready to enter the Promised Land, in fulfilment of the covenant promise.

Certain biblical episodes prior to Exodus show both the Israelites at the Exodus and later generations, how God has always been willing to have direct personal relationships with mankind, as well as fulfilling his promises. It is important briefly to relate them to the Exodus, as they are in effect a part of the understanding of the Exodus paradigm.

For example, the law is also concerned with care of God’s creation, first in specific provisions, which in effect give detail to the tasks of Adam to steward the earth, and second in putting right the chaos unleashed at the Fall by Adam and Eve’s disobedience. The lost relation with mankind is to be renewed in the Exodus. We may add that the cycle of rebellion after the liberation and covenant is akin to the Creation and Fall in Genesis. Meanwhile, as in

the covenant with Noah, God is patient and merciful and does not destroy the whole disobedient community as he did with the flood. Finally, God's promise to Abraham is to be fulfilled in the Exodus, as land, descendants and blessing are to be given to the Israelites. The promise was of course made in the context of Abraham's faith and trust in a God he knew personally, an example to Israelites in the desert of how to respond to God's grace.

Looking now at the later Old Testament, we may distinguish first the potent recital of the saving deeds of God at diverse times in Israel's history. Examples are to rally the people under Joshua (Josh24:5-7), to put fear in the hearts of the Philistines (1Sa4:8), as a source of hope to those in distress (Ps77:14-20) and for the prophets to confront unfaithful people with God's faithfulness (Mic6:4). The Exodus story arises often in the context of praise (e.g. Ps 105,135).

Second, the style of the Exodus story speaks directly into the lives of the later generations. The book of Deuteronomy is of particular importance in this regard, being written in a forward looking style addressed directly both to the generation about to enter Canaan but also speaking directly to later readers (De 29:14-15). It urges a people chosen by God to freely choose relationship with him, with prophetic warnings of the consequence if they do not. Love of God and of the "stranger" is solemnly urged upon the reader and for the reader to impress on his children (De 6:2-9). Deuteronomy does not just restate but develops the law, showing God did not intend it as a burden but an aid for his people to live as he intended.

Third, there are the traditions that the Exodus gave rise to, notably the Passover itself but also the other festivals, which ensured that the community would remain closely knit and aware of God's saving actions. The devotion of the Israelite's firstborn (substituted by the Levites), and animal sacrifice itself, as symbols of faith and gratitude for forgiveness, can also be seen in the light of the Exodus.

There are specific events in the later history of Israel that repeat aspects of the paradigm of the Exodus, confirming God's love of Israel and the grace he offers. There is frequent distress, followed by unexpected deliverance and response in community. Judges includes repeated cycles of oppression, redemption by God's action aided by Spirit-filled leaders, praise...and apostasy. Saul shows how relationship with God leads to success, but rejection of God entails loss of relationship and ultimate disaster. David's story shows a further covenant relation directed to David's own family, with the promise of a Messiah. And when David transgresses, God ensures he is punished as a son, but does not withdraw his relationship. Hezekiah's Jerusalem is delivered from the besieging army, and the king from

death, as the Israelites were from the Egyptians. The warnings of a dark future that are specified in the Exodus narrative when the people are disobedient come to pass in the later Kings period, as the prophets warn. And the Exodus story offers hope of redemption in the period of the exile in Babylon (Is43:16-17).

In the New Testament, Jesus in effect comes down from the mountain in the incarnation (Jn1:14), living among us to show how relationship can be with God. He comes to suffer unjustly in the place of the firstborn as a Passover lamb, to achieve our salvation (1Cor5:7). The cycle of crucifixion, resurrection and Pentecost is directly parallel to the cycle of oppression, God's redemption and God's presence in Exodus. Jesus is called as a son from Egypt (Matt2:15); he shows that the law is not static but must change at times, even as it does between Exodus and Deuteronomy. He fulfils the dream of the prophets that the law will be written on people's hearts (Jer31:33). He teaches on the mountain (Matt5-7) and shows his true divinity on another mountain at the transfiguration. He calls us to obedience out of gratitude in the wake of the salvation he provides, while assuring us his yoke is light. Baptism, as instituted by Jesus and his followers, symbolises the deliverance and new life through the Red Sea. He liberates us from sin and consequent death, which threaten the creation as they did from the time of Adam and Eve. Christians are called to be a community of God's people (1Pe2:1)). Intriguingly, it can be argued that Christians still consider they are in the desert, as the promised land is the second coming in Revelation.

One point that one may note is the way that the Israelites sought to avoid the direct presence of God and wanted Moses to be the intermediary. Tenney (1998) suggests that they were thus unwilling to enter relationship in the deepest sense. We as Christians are called to go beyond this. On the other hand, it can be argued that Moses as a mediator was in the line of priests who ultimately included Christ himself, who intercedes on our behalf with the Father.

Concluding, God through the Exodus story still calls Jews and Christians into relation with him, and gives comfort and promise of unexpected redemption when there is disaster. Application to the Shoah and to the 11th September seem to me valid, in the return to Israel and – one may pray – revival in the US today.

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