



The Book of Exodus

Exodus 1-6: The Burning Bush

The Book of Genesis ends with the story of Joseph, which explains how the Israelites, the sons of Jacob, came to be in Egypt. Joseph had been sold into Egypt as a slave, but had risen to be Pharaoh's viceroy, with authority over the whole land of Egypt. His brothers came to seek grain in time of famine but were invited by their powerful brother to bring down their father and settle in Egypt. They prospered and multiplied. Genesis ends with the death, first of Jacob and then of Joseph. The Book of Exodus then begins with a new situation: "a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph" (Exod 1:8).

At this point, the success of the Israelites becomes the cause of their undoing. The new king fears that they have become too numerous and powerful and feels that they will be a threat to Egypt. To contain this threat, he subjects them to forced labor and oppression. This creates the premise for the story of the Exodus. The Israelites become slaves in the land of Egypt.

The Birth of Moses

The motif of the multiplication of the Israelites also provides the occasion for the story of the birth of Moses. The king of Egypt orders the midwives to kill the male children of the Hebrews. The mother of Moses, however, contrives to place her son in a papyrus basket and place him on the waters of the Nile. Here he is found by Pharaoh's daughter, who rescues him, and even employs his mother as a nurse. Consequently, Moses does not experience the hard labor of other Israelites but is raised in Pharaoh's palace. (There is a famous parallel to the story of Moses in the legend of Sargon of Akkad, who lived about a thousand years before Moses. It is quite possible that the older story was known to the biblical authors, and that they claimed for their hero the wonderful adventure of the pagan king).

Moses evidently knew whence he came, and when he saw an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew, he killed him furtively. His action is fraught with implications for biblical ethics and has been much discussed in the context of liberation theology. Is resort to violence justified in face of oppression? His action, however, does not win him any plaudits from those he sought to protect. When he tries to break up a fight between two Hebrews, one of them asks, "Who made you ruler and judge? Will you kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" The upshot is that Moses has to flee from Egypt, and settles in the land of Midian, not in the Sinai peninsula but

east of the Gulf of Aqaba, in Arabia. There he marries the daughter of the priest of Midian, whose name is given variously as Reuel or Jethro.

Moses in Midian

In Midian, Moses has his encounter with God at the burning bush. This happens at “Horeb, the mountain of God.” Horeb is the name for the mountain of revelation in the Elohist and Deuteronomic traditions. It means simply “wilderness.” The bush (Hebrew *sn^eh*) evokes rather Mt. Sinai, as the mountain is called in the Yahwist and Priestly traditions. The traditional site identified with Mount Sinai, is Jebel Musa, in the Sinai peninsula, west of the Gulf of Aqaba, not in Midian. This identification can be traced back to the early Christian era.

It is apparent that two sources (J and E) are woven together in Exodus 3. Twice God says that he has heard the cry of the Israelites (3:7, 9); twice he says he will take them out of Egypt (3:8, 10). In some places (E) it says that Moses is sent to free the people (3:10, 12, 13, 14, 15); in others (J) that Yahweh appeared to Moses to announce that he, Yahweh, would free them (3:8, 16-17). In one strand (E), Moses receives only an auditory revelation; in the other (J), he receives a visual revelation, in the burning bush. These narrative doublets match up with the alternation of designations for the deity: Yahweh (J) and Elohim (E), at least in the first fifteen verses.

The Divine Name Revealed (3:13-22)

The most celebrated part of this passage is the exchange between Moses and God in 3:13-14. When Moses asks for God’s name he is told, “I am who I am” (Hebrew *ehyeh asher ehyeh*). The Greek translators of the Bible rendered this passage as *eimi ho on*, “I am the one who is.” Beginning with Philo of Alexandria, around the time of Christ, countless generations of theologians argued that the God revealed to Moses was identical with absolute Being, in the sense in which that term was understood in Greek philosophy. The Greek translation became the foundation for a theological edifice that assumed that Greek philosophy and biblical revelation could be correlated and were two ways of getting at the same thing. Historically, however, it is impossible to find this meaning in the Hebrew text. Hebrew simply did not have a concept of Being, in the manner of Greek philosophy. This fact does not invalidate the theological correlation of the Bible with Greek philosophy, but neither does it give it any real support. No such correlation is envisioned in the Hebrew text.

The actual meaning of the Hebrew phrase is enigmatic. The proper Hebrew name for the God of Israel, Yahweh, can be understood as a form of the verb “to be”—specifically the causative (Hiphil) third-person singular imperfect. It can be translated “he causes to be.” It has been suggested that this name is a way of referring to a creator God. The Deity is often called “the Lord of hosts” (Yahweh Sabaoth), and it has been suggested that this means “he causes the hosts (of heaven) to be” or “creator of the hosts.” Whether the name was originally understood as a verbal form, however, is uncertain. It often appears in Hebrew names in the form *yahu* or *yaho*, which would not be so easily parsed. In Exodus 3, in any case, the association with the verb “to be” is assumed. The phrase “I am who I am” in effect changes the

verbal form to the first person. The phrase may be taken as a refusal to divulge the divine name, in effect brushing off Moses' question. In favor of this suggestion is the fact that Jewish tradition is reluctant to pronounce the divine name. Rather, it substitutes *Adonai*, "the Lord." But elsewhere in Exodus the name Yahweh is used freely, and it is explicitly revealed in the Priestly passage in Exodus 6. It may be that the passage is only an attempt to put the divine name YHWH, understood as a form of the verb "to be," in the first person.

In any case, Exodus 3 goes on to give a fuller explanation of the identity of the Deity. He is the God of the ancestors, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The key element, however, is what he promises to do in the future: "I will bring you up out of the misery of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites" (3:17), in effect fulfilling the promise to Abraham in Genesis 15. The Deity is motivated by the suffering of Israel: "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt, I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their suffering and I have come down to deliver them" (Exod 3:7-8). YHWH may already have been worshiped in Midian as a god who appeared in fire on the mountain, but henceforth he would be worshiped as the God who delivered the Israelites from Egypt.

Theological Perspectives

The promise that God would deliver Israel from servitude in Egypt is taken as paradigmatic by Liberation Theology, a movement that developed in South America in the second half of the twentieth century (Gustavo Gutierrez is a leading exponent). The Liberation theologians view the Exodus as revelatory of how God deals with all peoples. They speak of an "option for the poor" and say that God is on the side of the oppressed. They insist that the story is about deliverance from economic and social deprivation. Some more conservative critics take issue with this interpretation (e.g., Harvard professor Jon Levenson, who is Jewish, and the late John Howard Yoder, who was a Mennonite Christian). They argue that the question "liberation for what?" is more important than "from what," and insist that Israel is liberated so that it can serve Yahweh. (In Exodus 7:16, Moses reports to Pharaoh the divine command: "Let my people go that they may serve me"). The Israelites are told to request permission from the Egyptians to go three days' journey into the wilderness to sacrifice to their God. Exodus is the prelude to the covenant between God and Israel, which binds the Israelites to obey the laws that will be revealed on Sinai. Levenson cites Lev 25:55, from the Priestly source: "For it is to me that the Israelites are servants; they are my servants whom I freed from the land of Israel."

In fact, there is more than one theological perspective on the Exodus in the Pentateuch. The Yahwist source does not have the emphasis on laws that we find in the other sources, and P (the Priestly source) has a distinctive cultic emphasis. But all accounts of the Exodus start from the liberation from slavery. Without that liberation, the Israelites are not free to worship God, or to live in accordance with their own laws. Without social and economic liberation there is no Exodus. To that degree, at least, the Liberation theologians are correct.

Some scholars also question the analogical use of the Exodus. They argue that Israel was liberated because it was Yahweh's chosen people, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and that it implies no promise of deliverance for anyone else. This objection raises a fundamental question about one's view of Scripture. If Scripture has any relevance to the modern world, and especially to the Gentile world, including Christianity, that relevance depends on analogy. Liberation theologians like Gutierrez counter that God is the creator of all, not just the God of Israel, and that anyone, especially any oppressed people, can identify with the story of Israel. In fact, the story of the Exodus has inspired many movements of liberation. Martin Luther King is a notable example in recent American history. The meaning and relevance of a story cannot be restricted to its original context.

The words of God to Moses in Exodus 3, however, touch on another issue that is fraught with significance for revolutionary movements that seek inspiration in the Exodus. In 3:19 we read: "I know, however, that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand." In the book of Exodus, the Lord himself supplies the mighty hand, by smiting Egypt with plagues. But divine assistance of this sort is not always forthcoming. Hence the dilemma for revolutionaries: should they try to supply the mighty hand themselves by revolutionary violence? The book of Exodus skirts this issue, because divine intervention relieves the Israelites of recourse to violence. Other books of the Bible, notably Joshua, show no compunction about violent action. Biblical attitudes to violence, however, are complex, too complex to be treated here. Exodus, like much of the Bible, suggests that the violence can, and should, be left to God, but as we have seen in the case where Moses killed the Egyptian in chapter 1, human violence is not necessarily excluded.

Exodus 6

Exodus 6 contains a parallel account of the revelation of the divine name, from the Priestly source. Here Moses is told explicitly: "I am Yahweh. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them" (6:2). For the Priestly tradition, as for the Elohist, this God was not known to the patriarchs by his proper name, although the name is used in the Yahwist source throughout Genesis. The passage goes on to link the revelation of the name with the promise of liberation from slavery in Egypt. Again, there is an obvious sociopolitical dimension to this liberation. But it also involves a religious commitment and entails a covenant between Israel and Yahweh: "I will take you as my people, and I will be your God" (6:7). The Israelites will no longer serve the Egyptians but will serve Yahweh instead. Yahweh brings Israel out of Egypt in order to give it "the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (6:8). As a result, "you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians" (6:7). This act of deliverance, rather than the thunder on Mt. Sinai or the study of nature, is the primary revelation of God in the Hebrew Bible.

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