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Exodus: A Paradigm of the Salvation and Liberation of the Oppressed

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The author reflects with deep feeling on the Exodus Event in relation to the condition of the Dalit poor of India—those who are outside the caste system and who are oppressed by the caste communities. He contrasts the message of the Old Testament prophets—Hosea, Amos, Micah, Jeremiah and Isaiah—with the ideological use of the Exodus by the Liberal theologians, especially A. P. Nirmal of Bangalore, to mobilize the poor to resist their oppressors. He concludes that our task is to help all people, including the poor, to discover their latent spiritual resources to overcome their suffering and oppression in dependence on God's Spirit.

Editor

I. EXODUS FROM A LIBERATION THEOLOGY PERSPECTIVE

The growing poverty around the world and violation of human rights by oppressive regimes have challenged Christian theologians in the last few decades as never before. As committed Christians and theologians they try to motivate the Church to get involved in the praxis of liberation. For them, if the Church is to be true to her call and identity, she must be involved in the struggle of the poor and the oppressed for full humanity. Such a stand is legitimized with the axiom: 'God has a preferential option for the poor.' The urgency of the problem and a new understanding of God has forced some theologians to plunge headlong into the revolutionary praxis. Then theology becomes the second act, a reflection of the liberative praxis. This, of course, does not mean a theological justification of ideological positions already taken. But it means a new way of doing theology. Theology, to be **P.162** able to address the ever-changing situation, has to be innovative in three areas: in understanding the Bible; in understanding the context; in finding a new way of relating these two. Liberation theology is innovative in all these three areas and thus the focus is on the hermeneutical and contextual nature of theology. The liberation of theology becomes an imperative. For the liberation theologians the hermeneutical task begins with an ideological suspicion of earlier readings. The hermeneutical circle provides the theologians with the needed interpretation of the Bible to undergird their theologies. Moreover, the analysis of their contexts by marxian tools inevitably led to an eclectic interpretation of the Bible, as in the case of one Indian theologian who announced that marxism had opened his eyes to the questions of justice. Though some of the liberation theologians claim that their reading of the Bible is the only right way to read it, some have tacitly agreed that a neutral reading is never possible and liberation theologians take an advocacy stance. The Bible is read from the perspective of the marginalized and the oppressed. Two concrete examples of such a reading are the Gospel of Mark and the book of Exodus.

For all types of liberation theologies the Exodus has become a paradigm. A 'paradigm' as a historic exemplar determines the further development of theology. In fact a paradigm does not only set the pattern but it also sets the rules for further development. This understanding of Exodus as a paradigm for liberation theology is both a wrong reading of

the Bible and a wrong understanding of theology. If theology is the second act as the liberation theologians claim then a paradigm is never possible. Moreover, the paradigmatic method equates theology with ideology: theology has to motivate and move people into action. Consequently the Church becomes a revolutionary party fighting for the poor and the oppressed. The ambiguities in this method is far greater than what we can see. This can be shown by a reading of Exodus with fresh eyes.

II. EXODUS IN THE THEOLOGY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS

The Exodus is the foundational experience for the people of Israel in the Old Testament, never to be erased from their memory. God takes them out of the cruel bondage of Egypt and leads them into the promised land. But the Old Testament never presents the Exodus as the all-important central fact in the life of Israel. On the contrary it is presented as an aspect of the promise-fulfillment scheme of the history of Israel. Exodus demonstrates that the God who has given a promise is able to fulfil it.

The prophets in the Old Testament use the Exodus tradition widely and with important emphases which are peculiar to their own situations. Their overall position is that God who freed the 'Hebrew' slaves to make them 'sons of Israel' did not do it for their economic and political freedom alone. The promised economic prosperity (promised p. 163 land) was an incentive to achieve something more than that. God's action demanded more in anticipation than the Israelites were ever ready to acknowledge. In referring again and again to the Exodus tradition the prophets place before the people the question: 'Why did God liberate them from the bondage of Egypt?'

The prophet **Hosea** sees the decay in Israel as a result of the loss of love for God. Israel is an unfaithful wife. As the nation grew in prosperity her love for God kept diminishing. The solution given by the prophet is to 'come back to the wilderness'. *I will allure her and bring her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her ... And there she will answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt (2:14-15). I will again make you to dwell in tents ... (12:9).* Exodus was the time when Israel learned to walk holding the hands of God ... *it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms ... (11:1-4).* The whole significance of Exodus for Hosea is its reflection of the youthful relationship between God and his people. It was an experience through which the people were taught to depend on God alone. *You know no God but me, and beside me there is no saviour, (13:4).*

For the prophet **Amos**, Exodus means confirming the people into responsibility. Election—Exodus—Responsibility is an integral scheme. *I brought you up out of the land of Egypt, and led you forty years in the wilderness ... (2:10). O people of Israel, ... the whole family which I brought up out of the land of Egypt: You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities. (3:1-2).* In chapter 3 the prophet continues to argue as to whether God does anything without a purpose or not. The liberation from Egypt and the forty years in the wilderness has a definite purpose. When injustice grows in the country this purpose is defeated. Amos' complaint is that the people have understood their liberation from Egypt in a narrow way, for their own protection and welfare only. He emphasizes that though they are like any other nation (9:7) they have the specific role of a living model of God's saving power and justice.

The prophet **Micah**, in 6:4-5 says that the Exodus is for the people to know the saving acts of God. The reason why God saves people is that they might *walk humbly with their God* (verse 8). For both Micah and Amos, the Exodus is a dramatic manifestation of God's saving power. Through this act of liberating a slave people God wants to establish a sure sign of justice and righteousness.

The prophet **Jeremiah**, like Hosea, reminds the people of their youthful love when they came out of Egypt during their wilderness days (2:2-3). He also calls them to the faith of the wilderness days (6:16). The purpose of the Exodus was that they might become a covenant people. *In the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. But this command I gave them, 'Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk in all the ways I command you,* p. 164 *that it may be well with you'* (7:22-23). Thus, by reminding the people of the Exodus, the prophets want them to reestablish the loving relationship they had with God, to confirm their responsibility and to encourage them to be a living sign of God's justice and righteousness. Exodus is indeed a saving event. The fact that a slave people is brought out of oppression is well attested. But for the prophets it is only a beginning; a mere choosing of a servant. Their real emphasis is on the purpose of Exodus, of liberation, and in assessing whether the people have achieved it or not. Once the nation lost sight of this essential vision God does not hesitate to denounce them. *They shall return to Egypt* (Hos. 8:13-14). The prophets not only condemn the people but also look forward to a remnant who will be a witness to the Lord by keeping its relationship with God. The Exile is seen to be a punishment from God. But more than that it is a necessary purging of a nation. As Hosea had predicated, the nation which was liberated from the bondage of Egypt has been sent back to bondage. But God's purpose and action do not stop there. He will find a remnant to carry on with his work. The promise to Abraham will not be wasted. The remnant nation will come forth in joy from the present bondage. This is the message of **Isaiah**. He is sure that this new Israel will carry on with the Lord's work. He advises the remnant not to think of the first Exodus because God is doing a new thing. *Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a pathway in the mighty waters ... Remember not the former things ... behold I am doing a new thing ... I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert* (43:14-19).

What is the purpose of this liberation? Isaiah responds: *I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness ...* (42:5-9; 49:8-13). Here the prophet does not distinguish the liberative act of God from the responsibility of the liberated people. People are liberated so that they can in turn liberate others.

In the book of Exodus God informs Moses that he has already made a covenant with their fathers and that is one of the important reasons for him to act on their behalf. *I will take you for my people* (Ex. 6:2-9). Moreover Moses informs the Pharaoh that they are going to worship the Lord in the wilderness (Ex. 5:3). Liberation and the identity of a people is determined by how they worship and whom they worship.

III. EXODUS: A DALIT THEOLOGIAN'S PARADIGM

When the people reach the promised land they are commanded to remember how God liberated them. The ancient confession in the book of Deuteronomy (26:5-10) which is used by almost all the theologians looks back at the Exodus with thankfulness. Though Gutierrez or Cone can be referred to here as examples I prefer to refer to A. P. Nirmal, a Dalit theologian of India who has made *the wandering Aramaean* a paradigm on which to build his theology. P. 165 He makes four points out of this passage.

1. Historical Consciousness

A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation great, mighty, and populous (v. 5). He calls

the Dalits to develop a historic consciousness of their suffering. This creates a 'Dalit consciousness'. He claims that this can make the Dalits proud of themselves.

2. Pathos of Suffering

The Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the Lord the God of our Fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression ... (vv. 6-7). He asserts that the Dalits alone know the depth of their suffering. He distinguishes three modes of knowing: sympathetic, empathetic and pathetic. Any one can sympathize with the Dalits for their suffering; few can really empathize with them; only the Dalits know the pathos of suffering. This mode of knowing is essential for the formulation of Dalit theology.

3. Liberation with a Mighty Hand and Much Terror

The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders ... (v. 8). As God liberated the Israelites with a strong arm and with much terror the Dalits are also advised to liberate themselves through violent struggle. They should not think that their suffering is a result of their bad karma or fate.

4. The Promise of a Land Flowing with Milk and Honey

He brought us into this place and gave us this land flowing with milk and honey ... (v. 9). The promise of a land flowing with milk and honey does not mean mere economic prosperity but the establishment of the Dalits' full humanity. It is finding God's image in them.

Nirmal's reading is certainly motivated by his ideological stand. His real concern is not to awaken the Church to identify with the struggle of the Dalits but to formulate a theological basis for the general Dalit movement. He merely chooses a biblical passage to build his ideology on.

An accurate reading of the passage reveals that it is a thanksgiving confession. Von Rad says that this confession is just a matter of fact narration of the history of the people of Israel. All the supernatural events are omitted. The man who comes in the presence of the Lord looks back to his own history with amazement and thanksgiving. The point to note is that every Israelite is exhorted to 'remember' what God has done in his life. He was a nobody, a wandering Aramean. But God has made the wanderer a nation, 'a people'. The real point is that this 'remembrance' should move every Israelite to compassion for others, to bring a concrete symbol of God's justice for righteousness.... *you are a people for his own possession ... to keep all his commandments ... that you shall be a people holy to the Lord your God ... (Deut. 216:16-19).* Though this confession makes them look back at their history with thankfulness, p. 166 their eyes are really set to the future. The past is a celebration but the future holds immense responsibility. The courage and strength to act in the future come from thankfully remembering the past.

Nirmal's reading of this passage along with the suffering of the Dalits is a very limited one. It is certain that the situations of Israel and the Dalits are not similar. While Israel has already seen the mighty acts of God the Dalits have yet to see the acts of God. In fact, they are asked to act on their own. This reading advises the Dalits to look back at their own history with *bitterness* and to act in *anger*. This is a misreading of the passage.

CONCLUSION

From the prophets' and the Deuteronomic understandings of the Exodus we find that it is not the event of Exodus which is important but its purpose. It is not a mere political

liberation leading to economic prosperity but it is an investiture of responsibility. Exodus reveals that God can undertake the running of our lives if we become a light to the nations, a sign of God's justice and righteousness. Thus understanding of the exodus experience is needed not only for the poor and the oppressed but for everyone. God liberates us from all kinds of bondage so that we can take up the responsibility of being God's light to the world.

Exodus leads to the wilderness, to poverty. But this is a poverty everyone has to accept voluntarily. When the people of Israel were about to enter the promised land they were warned by Moses that it was not going to be easy. *The land which you are going over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water by the rain from heaven, a land which the Lord your God cares for* ([Deut. 11:11, 12](#)). The promised land will not produce anything if the Lord does not keep his eyes on it.

when we talk of evangelism to the poor what do we mean? The critical questions are who are the poor and why are they poor. We cannot think of poverty in vague terms or describe it in a fluid manner. Talking from an Indian view-point the Dalits are the real poor. Poverty is not mere lack of economic growth or political power. The basic problem faced by the Dalits is the lack of spiritual resources for them to fight oppression of the caste system. They left Hinduism because it subjugated them. Buddhism has not given them anything. We do not have to hide behind 'social involvement'. Despite the policy of Reservation the Dalits have achieved very little. The real fight is in the area of theology and spirituality.

Our role is not to create needs for the poor but like the prophets to bring out the latent spiritual strength in them to fight their own battles and overcome their suffering and oppression.

Mr. D. Jebaraj administers the *Theological Book Trust*, Bangalore, India. p. 167

Training the Poor for Ministry to the Poor

Agnes Liu

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The Jifu programme in Hong Kong, sponsored by the China Graduate School of Theology, is one of the most innovative and successful attempts to train the poor to minister to the poor in Asia today. The Director of Jifu gives a clear and honest evaluation of the programme, preceded by theological reflection on the hindrances to the effective training of the poor and the goals and methods needed for this ever-increasing task.

Editor

HINDRANCES IN TRAINING THE POOR

The Middle Class Captivity of the Church