

2. THE CREATION OF ISRAEL: THE COSMIC PROPORTIONS OF THE EXODUS EVENT

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Contextualizing the exodus

The Margate Exodus is a modern-day appropriation of the biblical Exodus narrative. The grand old story of liberation has been reworked into a context and culture with which we, particularly as Westerners, are more familiar. This is perhaps testimony to the timelessness of the themes and message of Exodus: the longing for freedom; the cry for justice against tyranny and oppression; the reluctant hero; the restlessness of the human spirit.

I believe the reason for such reinterpretations of the Exodus story (not to mention other popular biblical narratives) is that we find ourselves in a time and culture so far removed from the one that originally produced these narratives. Gone are the days when empires sprawled out across the face of a flat earth. Our world today is a globe, characterized by autonomous nation states exerting their right to sovereignty. It is a world where multinational corporations build economic empires, where humans are connected by an information superhighway, and individuals have an inviolable set of human rights, including the right to determine

their own playlist on their own iPod, or maintain their own network on Facebook. The complexion of our world has changed dramatically from the day of the pharaohs. As a result, our mindset has changed with it, and we feel the need to adapt these classic stories to our own time.

It is for this reason that I wish to ask, are we perhaps missing something as we rework the Exodus narrative for modern audiences? Are there subtleties in the text to which our own culture and context have blinded us? And if we have become blind to them, how would we know about them, and how would we go about recovering them?

I would like to suggest that there are indeed such subtleties in the Exodus narrative which the passing of time has obscured from our vision. And I propose that we recover them. My method for doing so is far from radical: it simply involves entering the mindset of the ancients – that is, reading the narratives from the perspective of those earliest readers of Exodus, and asking what they understood when they heard or read these narratives, what impact the narratives had on them.

There is, I believe, a fairly simple way to do this. The ancient culture we are talking about here is that of Israel and Judah – a society (or societies) that produced a considerable corpus of literature, much of which we now have in our canon of Scripture. If we survey these writings, we shall be able to recover something of the mindset that produced the Exodus narratives, and begin to appreciate the way the earliest readers of those narratives responded to them. In essence, what I am proposing here is to use the larger Hebrew canon as an intertext to uncover something of the outlook of the Israelites and Judeans.¹

However, we can go a little further in recovering this ancient mindset. We must acknowledge that for all their idiosyncrasies

1. I am not proposing here to ask the question of the dating of the Exodus narrative to compare it strictly with the literature of the same period.

Rather, I am seeking to uncover the more fundamental mindset behind the narrative – a mindset common to a fairly extensive period of ancient Near Eastern history.

and distinctives, Israel and Judah were part of a larger region, which we call the ancient Near East. They did not have email or Internet access, but neither did they live isolated from other communities. On the contrary, they had cultural, linguistic, intellectual and historical affinities with neighbouring communities in the Fertile Crescent. As such, delving into the comparative literature of these neighbouring communities will add more depth to our understanding of the Israelite and Judean mindset. To put it metaphorically, holding Exodus up against the colours of the biblical literature and the comparative literature of its near neighbours should allow us to appreciate the shades and hues in Exodus itself.²

Furthermore, we have to come to the book of Exodus with an awareness of its genre. This critical period in the life of Israel has come down to us in the form of a story – a narrative. The astute reader of Exodus will also pick up other genres within the book, such as the legislative material and the extensive description of the tabernacle. However, these are subsumed within a larger narrative framework that conveys the ‘story’ of Exodus. Sensitivity to those literary devices that shape and define this genre will give further resolution to our view of the book. And this, in turn, can help to sharpen our theology as it arises from the book. As such, in the course of our investigation I shall be appealing to the nature of Exodus as an example of ‘story’.³

2. This is the same basic methodology advocated by W. W. Hallo, who did not want ‘to find the key to every biblical phenomenon in some ancient Near Eastern precedent, but rather to silhouette the biblical text against its wider literary and cultural environment’ (1991: 24).

3. A caveat is warranted at this point. In placing Exodus within the broad genre of ‘story’, I am not thereby denying its historicity. A clear distinction must be made between *historiography* and *story*. The former is a dispassionate account of the past, drawing connective links between persons and events, and seeking to answer the questions of ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘when’, ‘where’, ‘how’ and, ultimately, ‘why’. However, a story has a plot: it presents a predicament and a quest to resolve it. It is not a dispassionate and objective retelling of facts, but rather a consciously selective crafting

Now while this task may take up an entire volume in itself, my observations and comments, for the sake of brevity and integration with the other chapters presented here, will limit itself to Exodus 1 – 18. We shall, of course, make the occasional foray into other parts of the book, but only to get our bearings for this initial portion of the story.

The predicament of Exodus

On the surface Exodus is a story of liberation – how the Israelites were freed from slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses. This is, perhaps, the most natural way that we, shaped by our twenty-first-century environment, understand the book. However, if this were the full picture, we should expect the book to end after chapter 15 with the parting of the Reed Sea, the escape of the Israelites, and the destruction of Pharaoh and his army. At that point in the book, Israel’s freedom from slavery has been accomplished. Yet, while it is true that the narrative itself reaches a climactic moment with the Israelites crossing the Reed Sea, as we shall observe, the plot continues on to the great theophany at Sinai, the imparting of the law, and the construction of the tabernacle. There is eminently more to the story than just a tale of liberation.

So what is Exodus about?

As an example of the ‘story’ genre, the book of Exodus presents us with a predicament from which a quest unfolds to resolve it. **What, then, is the predicament of Exodus?** To answer this, we must look for signs of some kind of tension early in the book. However, I shall first survey the ‘stage’ on which the narrative takes place so as to ground us in the context of the story itself.

of scenes in which characters develop and convey a plot that seeks to move the reader to respond in a particular way. The purposes of the two genres may converge in large part, particularly in the questions they seek to answer, but the devices and techniques used are vastly different: *historiography* is essentially analytical, while *story* is more dramatic or theatrical.

The narrative stage: three domains

The narrative begins with the movement of Jacob's clan from the land of Canaan to the land of Egypt. To be sure, Canaan is not specifically named as the place from which Jacob's clan comes, but it is certainly implied. The opening six verses of the book form a bridge with the narrative of Genesis, where we specifically read of Jacob and his family going down to Egypt (cf. Gen. 46:5–8, 26). Readers of Genesis would bring to Exodus a knowledge of God's promises to the patriarchs, especially the promise to give their descendants the land of Canaan. Yet, the fact that Canaan is not overtly mentioned here in the opening of Exodus is part of the artistry of the narrative, for while the narrative moves initially from an implied starting point in Canaan, the liberation of the Israelites creates a movement from Egypt back to Canaan, to fulfil this patriarchal promise. And yet, the Israelites do not arrive in Canaan before the end of the book. As Alter puts it, Canaan is 'the land that remains beyond the horizon of this book' (2004: 302). Indeed, being described hyperbolically in Exodus as a 'land flowing with milk and honey' (Exod. 3:8, 17; 13:5; 33:3), it is a veritable El Dorado for Jacob's descendants, which always seems to be just out of reach.

Egypt also had a similar reputation in antiquity. Its fertility, stability, wealth and culture were viewed with awe by outsiders. Consequently, it was a haven for those seeking relief from hard times or just a better standard of living. This is evidenced by glyptic art from Beni Hasan depicting a caravan of Asiatics entering Egypt in the nineteenth century BC,⁴ as well as the practice letter of a scribe reporting permission granted to *Shasu* (bedouin) tribes from Edom to enter the pasturage of the Nile Delta in the twelfth century BC (Halla and Younger, 3.5: 1997–2002). Thus, to the ancient ear, the descent of Jacob's clan to Egypt would have

4. The wall painting is located in the tomb of a local nomarch's grandson, Khnumhotep II (see Gardiner 1961: 128). The event depicted is dated by the accompanying text to the sixth year of Sesotris II (c. 1880 BC) of the twelfth dynasty. For an excellent colour representation of the wall painting, see Schulz and Seidel 1998: 124 (fig. 35).

sounded very much the way stories of people migrating to Western countries (e.g. USA, UK, France and Australia) sound to us today.

However, within the first chapter of Exodus, Egypt goes from being the land of protection and plenty for Jacob's clan, to the land of tyranny and toil. The popular ancient perception that Egypt was a land of opportunity and stability (a perception we see echoed in Genesis) is turned on its head, and Egypt becomes a land of chaos and disorder.

We have, therefore, two distinct domains in Exodus: once comfortable but now disorderly Egypt, and the unseen but Promised Land of Canaan. Separating the two, however, is a third domain: the desert. And it is in this desert that the majority of the story takes place. It is here that Israel encounters Yahweh, its God, and struggles to come to grips with its newfound freedom. The desert is a place of tension: it is removed from Egypt, the land of disorder, and yet it is a far cry from the Promised Land of Canaan, which flows with milk and honey. It is a transitional domain that on the one hand represents freedom, but on the other represents unfulfilled hopes and promises.

A narrower focus

However, as mentioned previously, Canaan is actually beyond the purview of Exodus. Indeed, Canaan is basically beyond the purview of the whole Pentateuch. Apart from a brief scouting trip and a single aborted attempt at entry (Num. 13–14), the descendants of the patriarchs never actually set foot in Canaan before the end of the Pentateuch. Never do they actually come to possess this Promised Land – that must wait for fulfilment in Joshua. For this reason, we could accurately say that Joshua is a book about the fulfilment of divine promise, but the Pentateuch must have a narrower focus.

This, of course, has significant bearings on how we view the book of Exodus. The book itself begins in Egypt and ends, not in Canaan, but in the desert with the establishment of the tabernacle. If we are permitted to see the establishment of the tabernacle as the final climactic moment of Exodus, we may begin to see something of the predicament that drives the narrative.

The tabernacle represents Yahweh graciously taking up residence among his chosen people. It is a symbol of God's presence and his exclusive relationship with Israel. **If this is the case, then the theme that drives the narrative of Exodus is the forging of a relationship between Yahweh and Israel.** Furthermore, by virtue of who the characters are within the narrative, we understand that this is a relationship between a deity and his servants. It is a cosmic relationship between creator and creature. The first eighteen chapters of Exodus are essentially about the beginnings of this relationship. More specifically, these chapters are about the creation of Israel – the story of how Yahweh begets the nation. **This is pivotal to the portrayal of Yahweh as the Father and Creator of the nation, for although Jacob's clan grows to sizable numbers in Egypt, they do not become a nation until Yahweh creates them as such through the event of the Exodus.**

With this understanding in place, we may begin surveying the contents of Exodus 1 – 18, noting how the narrative itself unfolds through the characters involved, and looking also for those subtleties the ancient mindset would have noticed.

Before liberation: servitude

Yahweh and Egypt: the makings of a cosmic struggle

The opening chapter of Exodus describes the prolific growth of Jacob's clan to the point where they threaten the Egyptians, in whose land they live. The ancient mindset may have found this a striking claim, for Egypt had a formidable reputation as an ancient superpower. Throughout ancient Near Eastern history, Egypt can be seen campaigning in Syria-Palestine (including Canaan, which the Egyptians knew as Retenu), holding sway over its cities, and even warring against other superpowers. For Egypt, then, to have been threatened by Jacob's growing clan must imply spectacular growth. From the material in Genesis we may assume that this staggering growth is the result of God's intentions to bless and multiply Abraham's descendants. This sentiment is confirmed in the way God deals favourably with the two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah. The narrator tells us that the people of Jacob's

clan grew to substantial numbers because God treated the midwives well, giving them families of their own (Exod. 1:20–21), implying that Yahweh was indeed responsible for the people's phenomenal birth rate.

This growth then prompts the Egyptians to subdue the Israelites. Through a series of ever more stringent measures, the Egyptians succeed in making forced labourers of the Israelites – slaves. These measures, however, evidently fly in the face of God's intention to bless Jacob's burgeoning clan. Thus, despite the Egyptians' attempts to curtail their growth, Jacob's clan proliferates even more rapidly under the blessing of Yahweh.

We have, then, in this opening chapter the makings of a cosmic struggle. It is a battle for the control of Jacob's clan, the Israelites. The two main combatants are Egypt (in the person of Pharaoh) and Yahweh. Both lay claim to ownership of the Israelites, but for markedly different purposes. Pharaoh and the Egyptians lay claim to them in order to quash them. It is a claim motivated by fear and hate. The Israelites' slavery and hard living conditions are, therefore, the Egyptians' mark of ownership over them. However, Yahweh lays claim to the Israelites in order to bless them. It is a claim motivated by love and commitment. At this early stage of the narrative, the mark of his ownership is their rapidly increasing numbers. So, with these rival claims of ownership, we have a cosmic showdown in the making between Yahweh and Egypt.

Moses: the embodiment of the struggle

This struggle is perhaps embodied best in the character of Moses. As a fine babe born to an Israelite family (Exod. 2:1–2), he represents Yahweh's blessing and claim to ownership of the Israelites. However, in Egypt's murderous purge of Hebrew boys, he is abandoned to the Nile, a victim of the Egyptians' counterclaim of ownership. Ancient hearers would have been aware that the Nile was both a source of life and of death. In cutting a fertile path through the Sahara Desert, it was the bringer of life, and was worshipped as such by the Egyptians. It was the perennial source of Egypt's fertility and stability. However, it was also the ken of deadly creatures, such as crocodiles, snakes and the occasional

hippopotamus. The western bank of the Nile was also the location of the great necropolises, such as the Valley of the Kings. Many a deceased Pharaoh was ferried across the river to be forever interred in a concealed tomb – a crossing over from life to death. In Exodus 1:22, the baby boys born to the Hebrews are to be murdered in the waters of the Nile. Thus in the Nile River we have the juxtaposition of life and death. We see this juxtaposition clearly as Moses himself in his basket is abandoned to this watery chaos, but eventually plucked out and saved. Yet, while it seems that he has crossed over from death to life, he is eventually brought up by an Egyptian woman. He is named by the Egyptian woman (Exod. 2:10), a sign of her authority over him. In all this, he comes to embody the claim of Egypt to own and domesticate the Israelites. It is a kind of living death.

By knowing of Moses' Israelite origins, readers of Exodus are aware that Moses does not belong in the house of the Egyptian woman, who is the daughter of Pharaoh. Her house may be a haven for him, but it cannot really be his home. Just as Jacob's clan found refuge in Egypt in the midst of a life-threatening situation, so Moses finds refuge in the household of Pharaoh. Yet herein lies the predicament: despite this situation, Yahweh has a rival claim, not just upon Moses, but upon all the Israelites descended from Jacob. He is determined to forge a relationship with Jacob's descendants, which will therefore require the breaking of Egypt's bonds over them.

The Israelites: the contested ground

We have seen how the Israelites are basically the contested ground in this cosmic struggle between Yahweh and Egypt. Throughout the early parts of the Exodus narrative the Israelites are portrayed as essentially helpless. Just like the infant Moses, who is unable to affect his own destiny, so the Israelites are unable to determine their own future. Jacob's clan, despite its immense size, is vulnerable and helpless. It cannot throw off the shackles of slavery, because it is a disparate horde that lacks its own order and cohesion. At this stage it still does not exist as a nation: it has no militia, let alone a standing army; it has no leader; it has no organization; it has no land. The Israelites even fight among themselves, as dem-

onstrated by the dispute between two Hebrew men that Moses seeks to adjudicate (Exod. 2:13–14). As slaves subservient to Pharaoh and the Egyptians, the Israelites are a vacuous entity, vulnerable to the whims of their Egyptian overlords and susceptible to their own in-house wrangling.⁵ As such, it will take intervention from outside to change their plight, for rescue will certainly not come from Egypt, and it cannot come from within their own troubled and disorganized ranks. Thus Moses has to leave Egypt and then be injected back into the fray to embody this rescue from the outside.

Once again, we see how Moses embodies this plight. Moses himself is not a light shining in the darkness. His earliest active contribution to the story as an adult is a murder. Also, his attempt to adjudicate between the two disputing Hebrew men is cynically rejected, demonstrating the infighting that now characterizes the Israelites. And when he is finally called and commissioned by God in Exodus 3, Moses pleads his own inadequacy. He protests his inability to contribute anything of value for enabling the liberation of the Israelites. This is a far cry from the chorus of the theme song in the 1998 animated film *The Prince of Egypt* (see earlier, pp. 19–20), written by Stephen Schwartz, which speaks of the 'miracles you can achieve', and that these occur 'when you believe'. The next line of the chorus emphasizes this: 'you will, you will when you believe'.

However, that is not the song on Moses' lips, and God certainly does not sing it to Moses in order to encourage his reluctant servant. Just like the Israelites, Moses is incapable of doing anything that can in any way change their plight. It will, therefore, take the direct intervention of Yahweh himself to transform Moses, and, through his agency, to transform the boisterous and brow-beaten motley crew that is Jacob's clan into a nation of dignity, unity and, even, holiness.

5. This latter feature will become characteristic of Israel's desert wanderings, particular in the challenges to Moses' leadership.

Liberation: the creation of Israel

We have seen how the predicament that drives the narrative of Exodus is essentially about the lengths to which Yahweh will go in order to forge a relationship with the Israelites. In the first fifteen chapters, the major obstacle to this is Egypt's rival claim to possess and control the Israelites, who are themselves something of a chaotic and vacuous entity. In the remainder of the book, it is the Israelites themselves who threaten to undo the relationship Yahweh is forging with them.

It is in the light of this fundamental tension that we must understand the liberation of the Israelites. There are three things to note here: (1) the liberation of Israel represents a disclosure of who God is; (2) by disclosing something of his person, God defines who Israel is; and (3) by breaking Egypt's bonds over the Israelites, the Exodus event is an act of creation that brings the nation of Israel into being. Let us take each of these in turn.

The disclosure of God

If Yahweh is to forge a relationship with the Israelites, they must know who Yahweh actually is. There can be no genuine relationship without a disclosure of who the parties in relationship are. So when Yahweh calls and commissions Moses at the burning bush to return to Egypt and confront Pharaoh, he first identifies himself as 'the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob' (Exod. 3:6 my tr.). Instantly, therefore, we see that this is a God of relationship. He is not merely defined by attributes, but rather in personal terms by his relationships. The first readers of Exodus would naturally have connected this identification with the promises God had made to those patriarchs back in Genesis. Moses' encounter with God is, therefore, a resumption of those promises in a way that helps to frame the present with reference to the past. Just as this God related to the ancient patriarchs, so he now wills to relate to Moses and the Israelites.

However, Moses' encounter with this God represents a new development. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob have long since died, and the promises God had made to them are still outstanding. Yes, the descendants of the ancient patriarchs have multiplied, as prom-

ised, but they still do not possess a name of renown, or embody a blessing to the nations, let alone possess the land of Canaan. Thus, in this new encounter, our attention is drawn to what remains unfulfilled.

It is fitting, therefore, that when Moses asks God to disclose his name (a very personal and relational request) he receives in the first instance not a name, but a statement about who God is and what he will reveal himself to be: 'I am who I am' (Exod. 3:14 my tr.). The beauty of this statement in the original Hebrew (Hebrew *'ehyeh 'ăšer 'ehyeh*) is the flexibility of the verb form employed. A short consideration of some of the possible nuances of this verb form (the *yiqtol*⁶) will help us to appreciate the subtleties in this statement.

The essence of the Hebrew *yiqtol* verb is to indicate an action or state of which no one particular concrete instance is on view. Rather, the action or state is viewed in general or conceptual terms. For example, the *yiqtol* can indicate an action that occurred habitually in the past, such as that predicated of Samuel's mother, Hannah: 'His mother *used to make* (Hebrew *ta'ăseh*) him a little cloak, and she would bring it up to him from time to time' (1 Sam. 2:19 my tr.). Alternatively, it can indicate an action viewed as generically true at all times, such as in a proverb: 'A man's heart *plans* (Hebrew *yēḥaššēb*) his way, but Yahweh *determines* (Hebrew *yākīn*) his step' (Prov. 16:9 my tr.). Yet another alternative is to indicate an action that has not yet come about at the time of speaking, such as a promise or threat: '*I will ruin* (Hebrew *'ahārīb*) mountains and hills' (Isa. 42:15 my tr.).

When God discloses to Moses an identifying statement about who he is, he employs the verb 'to be, become' (Hebrew *hāyāh*) in a first person singular form of a *yiqtol* verb (Hebrew *'ehyeh*) to produce a statement that may be rendered literally as 'I be who I be' (Hebrew *'ehyeh 'ăšer 'ehyeh*). In the light of my brief (and somewhat simplified) grammatical treatment above, there are three possible ways to interpret this identifying statement:

6. The *yiqtol* has been traditionally known as the *imperfect* verb. Many grammarians are, however, moving towards this more generic descriptive term, *yiqtol*.

1. 'I have always been who I have always been' (past): This would suggest that he has always been the same type of God. In the light of the context in which God identifies himself as the God of the patriarchs, we could go so far as to say that he is a God who embarks on committed relationships.
2. 'I am who I am' (generic present): The implication of this nuance would be that God is self-defining such that he cannot be altered or unduly influenced by another. He is totally independent.⁷
3. 'I will be who I will be' (future): When understood this way, the statement implies that God has a future. In other words, there is more yet to come.

As we consider these three possible ways of interpreting God's self-identifying statement, we must be aware of the exegetical error of totality transfer. This error consists of importing all the possible meanings within the semantic range of a word or phrase into the specific context where that word or phrase is found – that is, overinterpreting it. It is an error because it fails to acknowledge that the meaning of words or phrases is primarily determined by their usage in a given context. Out of all the possible meanings within the semantic range of a word, only one of those meanings is usually indicated in a particular circumstance. In other words, context determines which specific nuance of a word is being implied. This is especially the case in narrative, such as we have here in Exodus 3.⁸

As such, we must ask what the context indicates to us with regard to God's self-identifying statement in Exodus 3:14. There are a number of important observations we may make to inform us.

7. Augustine understood the statement primarily in this way. See *On the Nature of Good* 19; *Sermon* 6.4.

8. Poetry has greater scope to imply more than one nuance of a word, since it works artistically with words to convey meaning. Thus, while we must also beware not to employ totality transfer in poetry, we should not be as quick to avoid it as we are with narrative.

1. Through the use of an equative verb (*bāyāb*), the statement does not indicate an action but rather a *state*. As such, the context implies no specific or circumscribed deed: the idea conveyed is far more nebulous than that.

2. The *yiqtol* conjugation does not inherently indicate tense. Any temporal significance must be inferred from the context. In this case, the context does not provide much help about *when* the state indicated by the verb comes about. The tense, therefore, remains entirely open. This understanding seems to be reflected in the Septuagint, where the Greek translators used a participle (which has no inherent temporal tense) in the attempt to convey the import of the Hebrew.⁹

3. Equative verbs are usually accompanied by a *predicate* that states something about the subject (e.g. I am *a father*). In the case of Exodus 3:14, the predicate is a relative clause that is essentially reflexive. In other words, the predicate ('I am') says nothing more about the subject than what the subject itself conveys ('I am'). Thus the statement does not actually take us beyond the subject itself to another conceptual category by which we may understand it. The statement is, therefore, quite circular, and so we are forced to dwell not on a newly introduced conceptual category to understand who or what the 'I' in the statement is, but rather on the 'I' itself.

4. The statement itself and the state it indicates function as a name that answers Moses' question in Exodus 3:13 about the name of the God of Israel's patriarchs. This is confirmed by God's directive in 3:14b: "This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I am' sent me to you'" (my tr.). This specifically answers Moses' question. Thus we have an equation drawn here between the God of Israel's patriarchs (note the past referent) and the statement of 3:14. This equation, however, is not a word-for-word repetition of his identification as the God of the patriarchs (cf. Exod. 3:6). In some way, therefore, this statement in Exodus 3:14 takes us beyond the identification in 3:6. In line with the nature of the equative

9. The Septuagint translation is *egō eimi ho ōn*, which equates to *I am the being one*.

verb, we understand this to indicate some kind of state of *being* or *becoming*. This pushes us beyond any one temporal interpretation of the statement.¹⁰

5. In the context of the chapter, the subject of the statement is the enigmatic God of the patriarchs who now wishes to liberate the Israelites in order to give them the land of Canaan (cf. Exod. 3:6–10, 12). These are past, present and future ideas that all converge upon the subject, 'I'.

6. The three possible nuances (habitual past, generic present, future) mentioned earlier in the discussion are not three independent verbal forms, but rather three legitimate ways to understand the one verb form (*yiqtol*), which is used within the statement of Exodus 3:14.

As can be seen, there is much more than initially meets the eye in this deceptively simple statement in Exodus 3:14. Our observations drive us to consider more than one possible way of interpreting this statement, because there is evidently no one narrow interpretation that stands out above the others. That is, this self-identifying statement of God in Exodus 3:14 is multivalent.

There is good evidence that the statement was taken in just such a multivalent way in antiquity. First, Isaiah 41:4 has God describe himself with a dual characterization as 'the first and the last', followed immediately by the statement 'I am he' (Hebrew *'ānī hū'*). The Septuagint renders this last statement with the same phrase it uses to translate Exodus 3:14 (Greek *egō eimi*; cf. Deut. 32:39). The Jerusalem Targum paraphrases Exodus 3:14 as 'I am he who is and who will be' (Childs 1974: 83). Perhaps the clearest examples come from the book of Revelation in the NT, where God (Jesus included) is referred to as 'the One who was, who is, and is coming' (Greek *ho ēn kai ho ōn kai ho erchomenos* [Rev. 1:4, 8; 4:8; cf. 11:17; 16:5]). This rendering through the use of participles picks up an earlier point which demonstrated that the statement

10. Augustine commented that the statement *I am who I am* is essentially incomprehensible, and it is for this reason that God also identified himself in more comprehensible terms as the God of the patriarchs. See *Tractate on the Gospel of John* 38.8.

transcends temporal categories. By the same token, however, the way it transcends such temporal categories is also by implying all temporal categories (past, present and future).¹¹ It is, in other words, a bold but simple statement of supreme, factual, dynamic existence that cannot be contained within any one time reference.¹²

We may conclude, therefore, that in this case the syntactical composition, context and circularity of God's self-defining statement in Exodus 3:14 all mean that we are not committing the exegetical error of totality transfer when we attribute more than one nuance to the statement. On the contrary, we would be doing it an injustice if we restricted ourselves to just one narrow nuance in this case.

What then are the implications of all this? On the one hand this simple statement 'I am who I am' says that God is constant and consistent. To pick up the language of James in the NT, in him 'there is no variation or shady bent' (Jas 1:17 my tr.). Thus the God who reveals himself to Moses is no different from the God who revealed himself to the patriarchs and related to them: he is one and the same deity. Yet this God is also self-defining and must be taken on his own terms. Thus, while Moses and the Israelites can relate to God on the basis of the past (the promises to the patriarchs) or the present (his intention to rescue them from Egypt), they cannot change who he is or adapt him to their own desires. Furthermore, this identifying statement invites them to consider who he will prove himself to be in the future.

This ability to point consistently to the past and yet also to the prospective future demonstrates God's intention to be in personal

11. Augustine understood the import of the statement somewhat differently when he argued that God's supreme ontology allowed for no past or future, but only an infinite and unchangeable present. References to the past or the future with respect to God are only permitted due to humanity's limited and time-bound perception. See *Tractate on the Gospel of John* 99.5.

12. Gregory of Nazianzus makes a statement to similar effect in the fourth of his five famous *Theological Orations* (4.18).

relationship with Moses and the Israelites. He is not a motionless God who, in his consistent character, is monolithically static. One cannot really talk about a 'personal relationship' (a dynamic phenomenon) with such a static entity. On the contrary, he is dynamic and active; he is consistent, yet not predictable; he is uncontainable, and yet knowable. In other words, with this God one can have a relationship that grows and progresses, such that one can forge a history together with him. He is a living God with whom Moses and the Israelites can interact dynamically. As Fretheim aptly puts it, '*The name shapes Israel's story, and the story gives greater texture to the name.* At the same time, there are stakes in this for God; God has to live up to the name' (1991: 63–64; emphasis his).

That is why Moses' initial encounter with this God at the burning bush in no way exhausts the revelation of who he is. This God divulges himself in a way that allows for relationship, but never in such a way that exhausts that relationship. This is further demonstrated by the fact that after disclosing this identifying statement of himself, God endorses his name as 'Yahweh' (Exod. 3:15). The name 'Yahweh' (Hebrew *yhwh*)¹³ is itself some kind of variation on the verb 'to be, become' (Hebrew *hāyāh*).¹⁴ In the light of the statement 'I am who I am', it seems to be a hypocoristicon – a shorthand label that, though not the full essence of one's name or being, still makes some suggestion towards the reality it signifies.¹⁵

13. This transliteration of the Hebrew lexeme gives only the Hebrew consonants, since the exact pronunciation of this word is debated. That is, scholars are ultimately unsure as to which vowels belong with these four consonants because they are not entirely sure of the verb form it is trying to reproduce. The English rendering given here (Yahweh) merely follows the convention of scholarly consensus.

14. More specifically, it appears to be a third person masculine singular ('he ...') form of the verb. The other grammatical details of the name are debated.

15. Philo had a similar understanding of the relation between the statement 'I am who I am' and the name Yahweh (rendered into Greek by the word *kyrios*, meaning 'Lord'). He argued that the statement conveys the fact that no appellation could be adequately made of God, since God's nature is

This inability to capture the essence of God's identity and yet still be able to relate dynamically to him stands behind the prohibition of idolatry that we encounter later in Exodus. This God cannot be captured and contained in a static creation, for that is a fundamental misrepresentation of who he is.

The implication of this revelation of God's identity is that he must reveal himself as he sees fit, for only he can truly plumb the depths of his own being and express it accurately. Unlike the gods of other ancient Near Eastern communities, Yahweh cannot be manipulated. He cannot be fashioned by a craftsman's chisel, or exhausted by a philosopher's thought. He must be left to reveal himself and so demonstrate who he is in a dynamic way. Moses and the Israelites are, therefore, in some sense, called to be spectators of his being, beholding his frightening glory. Perhaps the most dramatic demonstration of this fact in the first eighteen chapters of Exodus comes as the Israelites find themselves hemmed helplessly between the Reed Sea and the Egyptian armies bearing down upon them:

Moses said to the people, 'Don't be afraid! Take your positions and watch the salvation Yahweh will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians you see today you will never ever see again. Yahweh will fight for you – you just stand still.' (Exod. 14:13–14 my tr.)

If the Israelites are called to stand and behold God's glory, the Egyptians, too, are given a disclosure of who Yahweh is. When Moses first comes to Pharaoh with Yahweh's confronting ultimatum that challenges Egypt's claim to the Israelites, Pharaoh responds, 'Who is Yahweh that I should obey him by releasing Israel? I do not know Yahweh, and neither will I release Israel' (Exod. 5:2 my tr.). Whether this is agnosticism or flagrant rejection,

simply to be, rather than be described. However, so that humanity might not be without any means of reference to God, the name Yahweh (Greek *kyrios*) was given to Moses. See *On the Change of Names* 1.11; *On Dreams* 1.229–231; *Life of Moses* 1.75. As Childs correctly perceives, Philo's view has a kinship with the tradition of Isaiah 40–55 (1974: 83).

Pharaoh's ignorance does not absolve him from the responsibility of having to obey Yahweh. **The implication of his own words is that knowing Yahweh leads inextricably to obeying him, be it willingly or unwillingly.**

As such, the frightful signs and plagues inflicted on Egypt become a revelation to Egypt of who Yahweh is. It is through these means that Egypt comes to taste the raw power of Yahweh, and thereby acknowledge the legitimacy and truth of his claim over Israel. It is only with the fullness of such judgment that Pharaoh and the Egyptians finally agree to release the Israelites. These ominous signs and plagues are, therefore, how Yahweh deals with his enemies who refuse to acknowledge him and try to counter his own claims.

Tellingly, Israel does not experience these ominous signs in the first fifteen chapters of Exodus. This is not because they are innocent – they themselves in their natural state are not deserving of relationship with God. The fact that they must daub their doorposts with the blood of the Passover sacrifice to stave off judgment (Exod. 12:7, 12–13) demonstrates their inherent unworthiness. They must be spared from judgment themselves and then be made fit for relationship with God. Nonetheless, as Moses and the Israelites behold the frightening revelation of Yahweh's power trained precisely on his enemies, they, too, come to acknowledge Yahweh's sovereignty, power and merciful election. This acknowledgment was to be enshrined in the Passover ritual:

When your children say to you, 'What does this ritual mean to you?', you are to say, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to Yahweh. He passed over the homes of the Israelites in Egypt when he struck Egypt. But he saved our homes.' (Exod. 12:26–27 my tr.)

Thus in the plague narratives we have a further disclosure of who Yahweh is: he is the God of Israel, and none will deny him the close relationship he seeks with them. **And so Yahweh, as it were, fills the stage of the plague narratives. Not one of the Egyptians is mentioned by name.** Pharaoh is merely 'Pharaoh' or 'the king of Egypt' (e.g. Exod. 5:4), his courtiers are mentioned only by their titles (e.g. Exod. 7:11), and the gods of Egypt are

never named (cf. Exod. 12:12). This is a story about Yahweh, who will not allow anyone or anything to stand in the way of his forging a close and committed relationship with his chosen people.

The definition of Israel

The first reference that Yahweh makes to Israel in the book of Exodus comes in 3:7, where he refers to them as 'my people' (Hebrew '*ammi*'). Here we see Yahweh's claim of ownership over the Israelites. **Ancient readers would probably have interpreted this phrase 'my people' as an expression of Yahweh's patronage of Israel.** Most nations of the ancient Near East, especially during the Iron Age (1200–586 BC), had their own national patron deity: the Moabites had Chemosh, the Ammonites had Molech, the Edomites had Qaush, and for the Syrians there was Hadad (better known as Baal). The territory of the nation was viewed as the personal domain of the national god. When one travelled across national borders, one entered the domain of another god and, therefore, one would be expected to pay respect to that god during the time spent in his domain. This is much like the way we use foreign currency whenever we travel today: when we enter another country, we have to use that country's currency. Thus ancient readers of Exodus would have understood this particular term 'my people', and interpreted it in the first instance as Yahweh expressing his patronage of the Israelites.

What is unusual, however, in the Exodus narrative, is that the Israelites do not actually have any territory at this stage. While Canaan has been promised to them, they are at present landless. Thus the foundational category for understanding Yahweh's interaction with Israel cannot be that of a patron deity and the nation who tenants his land. While such understanding is not completely foreign to the situation between Yahweh and Israel, it is by no means foundational. **There is a more fundamental relationship at work here.**

We receive an insight into the more foundational category of this relationship in Exodus 4:21–23. There, Yahweh entrusts Moses with the ultimatum he is to deliver to Pharaoh:

This is what Yahweh says: 'Israel is my firstborn son. So I said to you, "Release my son that he may serve me," but you refused to release him. So see, I am going to slay your firstborn son.' (Exod. 4:21–23 my tr.)

Throughout the ancient Near East, the firstborn son was the heir who stood to inherit all that belonged to his father. Yahweh's ultimatum to Pharaoh defines Israel in those filial categories. Israel is to inherit or partake of what is Yahweh's. This understanding helps to explain the language of inheritance employed to describe Israel's later reception of the land of Canaan. It also implies a relationship of close kinship, which explains Yahweh's call for Israel to be holy just as he himself is holy. There is to be a family resemblance, so to speak.

It also frames the concept of 'worship' or 'service' in filial terms. The exodus is not about Israel trading one slave master (Egypt) for another (Yahweh). That is evidently not liberation, but rather becoming a spoil of war – a mere object to be acquired and manipulated for personal gain. Rather, the exodus is about Israel becoming the son of God. The picture we eventually get of this filial relationship is one where the son lives in acknowledgment and thanks of his father's provision, care and unconditional love. This, in turn, leads to free and willing obedience. To serve Yahweh, therefore, is not to experience servility or exploitation, but rather to receive life, freedom and value through an ongoing and dynamic interaction with a loving God.

A caution is warranted at this point, however. While the exodus liberates Israel to serve Yahweh as a son, it is by no means the final word. On the contrary, it is merely the beginning of an important theological trajectory. The theme of sonship develops through the course of the biblical revelation. From its beginnings here in Exodus as a metaphor for the nation of Israel, the category of sonship is narrowed to a particular individual, as Yahweh personally adopts the heir of David as his own son (2 Sam. 7:14). The theme is then given final and definitive expression in the incarnation of God the Son, who serves and worships the Father perfectly, and reveals the inner relations of God. At that point, the God 'I am' who invited Moses and the Israelites to ponder 'who he will be' reveals himself with plenitude to be Trinity. It is in this theo-

logical framework that we may also understand Paul's important concept that Christians are constituted as sons of God by adoption through the Spirit and in Christ (cf. Rom. 8:14–17, 23; Gal. 4:4–7). This crucial theological trajectory, which runs through the entire course of the biblical revelation, is first expressed in this initial definition of Israel as Yahweh's firstborn son.

The exodus as an act of creation

In the light of our considerations above, we may now turn to see the exodus as an act of creation. In liberating the Israelites from Egypt, Yahweh begets Israel as his own son. He takes the disparate multitude of Jacob's clan and brings them into being as a nation, forming them into a cohesive people with order, shape and purpose.

In ancient Near Eastern cultures, creation was not viewed primarily in terms of substance, but rather in terms of function. That is, creation was an act of differentiation whereby chaos and disorder were tamed through the imposition of order and purpose. This is not to deny the biblical doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*; the Christian doctrine of God cannot be logically consistent with the whole biblical revelation if this proposition is denied. However, this was not the prime concern of the ancients. For the ancient person, the world was more frightening, volatile and mysterious than it is for us today with our advanced technologies, scientific knowledge and stable governments with federal constitutions. The ancient situation bred a mindset far more concerned for immediate stability and order than the more philosophical question of whether the universe came to be out of nothing or not. John Walton phrases the issue well:

As is immediately evident upon even a cursory reading of the texts, very little in these [ancient Near Eastern] cosmologies relates strictly to manufacture of the material cosmos . . . [I]n the ancient world something came into existence when it was separated out as a distinct entity, given a function, and given a name . . . This is in stark contrast to modern ontology, which is much more interested in what might be called the structure or substance of something along with its properties. (2007: 179–180)

In ancient Mesopotamia, the epic *Enuma Elish*¹⁶ depicts the act of creation as a cosmic struggle between Marduk and the chaotic sea-dragon Tiamat.¹⁷ Marduk slays Tiamat (*Enuma Elish* 4.93–104) and out of the pieces of her carcass forms the heavens and the earth (4.135–145). Marduk then takes the blood of Qingu, who is Tiamat's paramour, and forms human beings, giving them the function of working so that the gods may be at ease (6.8, 27–34). Creation is, therefore, conceived in Mesopotamia as a divine conquest over chaos and a subsequent separation into distinct entities with a specific purpose (cf. von Soden 1994: 212–223; Clifford 1994: 90–93).

Similarly, certain Egyptian texts reflect a creation mythology in which the universe begins as a dark watery mass devoid of space or form. Creation is then enacted with the separation of a circumscribed mound and the consequent establishment of life and order.¹⁸ However, the force of chaos and non-being was viewed as still present in such physical realms as the night sky, the ocean or even the desert, for these places smothered human life so that humanity could not function there (Walton 2007: 186).

Readers of Genesis would likewise have been aware of the characterization of the primal chaos as *tōhū wābohū* (Gen. 1:2), a phrase difficult to capture in translation. The closest approximation we have in English is something like 'topsy turvey', but this has an almost comical edge, which the Hebrew phrase *tōhū wābohū* does not carry. Creation is depicted in Genesis 1 as the separation of various domains out of the dark, vacuous and watery ocean

16. For a translation of the epic, see Hallo and Younger 1997–2002: 1:111.

17. It should be noted that though *Enuma Elish* is frequently cited as a creation epic, it is in fact primarily about the rise of Marduk to ascendancy among the gods. The creation of the heavens and the earth is almost an aside to the main plot.

18. The circumscribed mound is usually symbolic of the entire world, and is often identified as a particular god (e.g. Atum). See Clifford 1994: 105–106. For the translation of relevant texts from Egypt, see Hallo and Younger 1997–2002: 1:1, 2, 4, 8, 12. It should also be noted that ancient Egyptians saw creation recurring each day with the rising sun.

chaos. Thus day and night are distinguished from this chaos, and subsequently named and given a function (time). Similarly, sky, sea and land are differentiated, and then appropriately filled with creatures that belong to each of these domains. Out of this watery chaos, therefore, God brings forth order, purpose and stability.

This notion of creation as *distinction* and *imparting of function* would have been part of the mindset the ancients brought to the reading of Exodus. **When this is acknowledged, the exodus event can be seen as essentially a creative act, bringing order and function out of chaos. Furthermore, it highlights the exodus as an act of justice.** The ancient concept of justice (*mišpāt*) was not thought of in purely legal terms, as we largely do today. Rather, justice was setting everything in its proper assigned place so that it may fulfil its assigned function in relational harmony with the rest of creation.¹⁹ In this way, creation and justice go hand in hand: a creative act sets the conditions for justice to prevail. Let us consider briefly how all this is seen in the first section of Exodus.

In the first instance, Yahweh's ultimatum that Pharaoh should release Israel, his firstborn son, so that he may serve him (Exod. 4:22–23) calls for the separation of Israel from Egypt and the bestowal of a function (service) upon Israel. As long as Israel remains subservient to the Egyptians, they are not separated from them, and therefore they cannot fulfil their divinely assigned function of serving Yahweh. This is why Yahweh does not merely reveal himself to Israel and leave them within Egypt, or command them to build a tabernacle in Egypt. That would be an act of injustice, for it would prevent Israel from realizing their own being and function as given to them by God. They must be separated from their oppressors, who unjustly seek to quash their being. In physical terms, this means the removal of Israel from Egypt and their installation in a land of their own where they can fulfil their function of serving God as a son. This is further reinforced during Yahweh's cosmic showdown with Egypt, as three times he

19. This definition of *mišpāt* underlies the semantic range of the word, which includes such notions as 'custom', 'norm' and 'pattern', as well as 'judgment', 'verdict', 'sentence' and 'condemnation'.

proclaims that the plagues he inflicts upon Egypt will make a distinction between Egypt and Israel (Exod. 8:23; 9:4; 11:7).

Perhaps the most definitive picture of the exodus as a creative act comes with Israel at the Reed Sea. Here Israel finds itself caught between the watery chaos of the Reed Sea and the armies of chaos consisting of Pharaoh and the Egyptians. With such disorder and mayhem closing in and threatening to drown and expunge them, Yahweh works his salvation for his people through an act of separation: he parts the chaotic sea so that, just as in Genesis 1, the dry land appears. Through this parting, the sea is tamed and Israel is finally delivered from Egypt.

While the biblical literature produced by Israel and Judah does not portray the polytheistic understanding of creation of its ancient Near Eastern neighbours, it nonetheless communicates its understanding of creation through similar conceptual categories:

By his might he tamed the sea,
by his expertise he ruptured Rahab.
(Job 26:12 my tr.)

God is my king from antiquity,
a worker of salvation in the midst of the earth.
You wrenched the sea in your strength.
You smashed the heads of fanged monsters on the sea.
You battered the heads of Leviathan.
You give him as food to the creatures of the wasteland.
(Ps. 74:12–14 my tr.)

You crushed Rahab like a corpse;
with your arm of strength you dispersed your enemies.
(Ps. 89:11 [English 89:10] my tr.)

On that day,
Yahweh will deal his brutal, large and hardy sword
on Leviathan the fleeing snake,
on Leviathan the thrashing snake,
slaying the fanged monster who is in the sea.
(Isa. 27:1 my tr.)

Wake up! Wake up!
Don the strength of Yahweh's arm!
Wake up as in ancient days, in the generations of old.
Were you not the one who hacked Rahab down,
splitting the fanged monster?
(Isa. 51:9 my tr.)

On two occasions, the OT even identifies Egypt with the fanged monster Rahab:

Egypt's help is vain and empty.
That is why I call her 'Rahab the Failure'.
(Isa. 30:7 my tr.)

I recall Rahab and Babylon among those who have recognized me,
Philistia, Tyre, along with Cush . . .
(Ps. 87:4 my tr.)

In the light of these biblical intertexts, it would be hard to imagine the ancient reader of Exodus not perceiving the parting of the Reed Sea as an act of creation in the midst of a cosmic battle. Indeed, Psalm 106 seems to capture something of this by describing the event as a 'reprimand' of the sea:

He reprimanded the Reed Sea and it dried up.
He had them walk through the watery depths as through a desert.
(Ps. 106:9 my tr.)

Yahweh is here portrayed as taming a hostile entity, the watery depths (Hebrew *tēhomōt*), evoking the fundamental imagery of an act of creation.

Interestingly, the result of this cosmic battle seems to be foreshadowed much earlier in the narrative. One of the signs Yahweh gives Moses at the burning bush for confronting Pharaoh is to throw his staff (a symbol of leadership) on the ground so that it transforms into a snake (Exod. 4:3–5). However, when this occurs before Pharaoh (Exod. 7:8–13), some of the details change slightly. First, it is Aaron's staff that is thrown down before

Pharaoh (Exod. 7:9). More importantly, though, the Hebrew text uses a different word to denote what the staff turns into. At the burning bush, it turns into a 'snake' (Hebrew *nahāš*), but before Pharaoh it turns into a 'fanged monster' (Hebrew *tannīn* [Exod. 7:9–10 my tr.]).²⁰ This change in vocabulary is noteworthy. It is, in the first place, not altogether surprising, for both terms are used as comparable parallels elsewhere (cf. Isa. 27:1, where both words describe the Leviathan). However, the term 'fanged monster' usually denotes the symbol of chaos that thrashes about in the sea and that God vanquishes (cf. Rahab and Leviathan in the verses quoted above). For Moses to be able to pick up such a 'fanged monster' implies the ability to tame chaos. Furthermore, when Pharaoh's magicians are able to replicate the feat (Exod. 7:11), we are told that 'Aaron's staff swallowed up their staffs' (Exod. 7:12). This foreshadows the destruction of the Egyptian army when it is swallowed up by the chaotic Reed Sea tamed by Yahweh (cf. Guillaume 2004: 232–236; Meyers 2005: 81). Thus, if Israel's escape is an act of creation through separation, then the drowning of the Egyptians is an act of uncreation through coalescence. Their existence is undone by the merging of their armies of chaos with the waters of chaos,²¹ just as the staffs of the Egyptian magicians are swallowed up by the staff of Aaron. Theirs is a cosmic defeat at the hands of a God who has power to tame chaos.²²

Thus this act of creation that brings Israel into being occurs in the context of Yahweh vanquishing the forces of chaos. Furthermore, by this creative act Yahweh himself is revealed to the nations

20. This fact is often masked in many English versions.

21. This is reminiscent of the flood, in which the world's population (apart from Noah's family) is deluged as the waters above the earth and the waters below the earth converge to obscure the order of creation.

22. Seeing the exodus event in such cosmic proportions allows us to make better sense of the imagery used to characterize Pharaoh and Egypt in various prophetic oracles (Jer. 46:22–23; Ezek. 29:1–16; 32:1–16). I do not concur with Guillaume (2004: 234–235) that Exodus draws upon Ezekiel's imagery. Rather, both Exodus and Ezekiel appear to draw upon a common ancient tradition that characterized Pharaoh and Egypt in this way.

round about, as is celebrated in the famed Song of the Sea (Exod. 15:1–18).

Beyond liberation: service

As we have seen, the creation of Israel implies their liberation and, therefore, their distinction from Egypt. Yet the narrative does not end there. Beyond the Exodus event itself lies Israel's encounter with Yahweh at Sinai, where they are given the law. It is this law that further defines the function of Israel, giving greater resolution and solidity to the order God was bestowing on them: **they are to be a kingdom of priests who serve God and relate to him in a dynamic way.**

The tabernacle is a physical representation of this relationship. It had defined spaces of specific dimensions within which particular furniture was situated and particular functions took place. It also demonstrated Yahweh's intention of forging a relationship with Israel, as is seen in the final few verses of Exodus, when Yahweh's glory fills the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34–35). These other aspects of Israel's life beyond liberation will be discussed in the following chapters.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I return to my initial consideration and ask what subtleties we have picked up along the way. We first noted that when Exodus is divorced from its ancient Near Eastern mindset and viewed purely through twenty-first-century eyes, it is little more than a story of liberation. Indeed, this is why modern characterizations of the exodus are usually not very interested in what happens after Israel is delivered through the Reed Sea. The imparting of the law does not make for a good liberation story. So what have we gained?

First, by holding Exodus up to its ancient Near Eastern context, we see that it is a story about God's determination to be in relationship with the descendants of Jacob, the Israelites. As such, the

exodus is not just any old liberation story with a curious cast of characters. It is actually a revelation of who God is. It portrays him as a God of relationship, who desires to interact creatively and dynamically with the people he has chosen. Indeed, he desires to be the father of this people. Secondly, we have noted how the exodus event is an act of creation that brings Israel into being as a nation who can serve God as a son serving a father.

When we see this creative aspect of Exodus in the light of the revelation of God, and put it in perspective with the grander scheme of the biblical revelation, we see that Exodus represents a significant step in God's transformative or recreative work. That which was lost through sin at Eden is being partially recovered in Exodus. The relationship between God and humanity that was severed through sin is here being overcome, as Yahweh goes to tremendous lengths to regenerate a relationship with his creatures. Exodus is not simply about what God did for an oppressed people, but rather an account of God's efforts to rescue his creation from the chaos of non-being. In Exodus, we see this is miniature, as it were, in the lead up to a grander and more cosmic achievement through the Son of God, Jesus Christ. This is not a story we can simply adapt for our own entertainment or merely to make a political comment. It is, rather, the revelation of a God who desires to be known by his human creatures as Father.

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