

Anastasia Lott

## Exodus as a soteriological paradigm Journey—struggle—hope—covenant fulfilment

### Introduction

**I**N *Spirit of Survival*, the story of a young Cambodian refugee's journey to a new sense of identity, Gail Sheehy develops the idea of the victorious personality, which she sees, as one same journey of survivors from ancient times to now. She defines it, as a spiral with four "turnings":

First, is the uprooting from "home" (family, security or good health). Next, one is cast off into the wilderness (external and internal), where a confrontation with danger, uncertainty, or evil batters previous beliefs. At the end of one's wanderings there awaits a reconciliation with a new and larger reality, and with one's own renewed self. ("And the end of all our exploring, will be to arrive where we started; and know the place for the first time").<sup>1</sup>

Finally, triumphantly, there is a return to home, but a return with a difference.<sup>2</sup> The story of Sheehy's adopted daughter Mohm, is a modern parable, which newly reinforces the very paradigm we wish to consider here in contemporary situations: as an example in the particular situation of the Bura Irrigation Scheme settlers, along the Tana River in Eastern Kenya.

To say that the Exodus experience is a soteriological or salvific paradigm is to claim it, as foundational factor to our faith and to the salvific and liberating ministry of Jesus Christ. It is a Christian paradigm, one which gives insight into the experiences of Jesus, the early Christian community, and all of us, who continue to seek for and to follow the way to salvation. From the point of view of Gail Sheehy's insight, the same quest, also seems to be a universal paradigm.

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In the Exodus-like experience, many suffering people find a paradigm that both challenges and comforts; one which is gracious and demanding. What Sheehy describes in terms of the individual "victorious personality", the Exodus-event manifests in terms of a communal experience of journey, struggle, covenant, hope, and finally, grace.

It is also, then, a missionary paradigm, a model that gives insight into the journey that a missionary walks, not alone, but together with other struggling people in different places, seeking together for an identity: as the believing people of God. In grace, oppressed people are called to be victorious communities, that suffer from uprooting, and sojourning through a dangerous, frightening and confusing wilderness, that discover and rediscover a new and larger reality (an individual and a communal identity), and come to blissfully dwell at last in God's own home of love, as their own eternal home.

While a full exegesis of the Exodus text is far beyond the scope of this paper,<sup>3</sup> we still hope to give some insights into how the Exodus event, and posterior reflection on it by the Judeo-Christian communities provide a vision of enlightenment to contemporary struggles. It is especially through shared reflection—together in communities—upon these experiences and their paradigm, that we can come to a better understanding.

One of the especially exciting things about reflecting upon the Exodus event is: that it requires us to correlate the elements of grace and human responsibility. As we approach justice issues, and the reality of struggling peoples from the point of view of seeking fidelity, we get led to consider God and the human person together, in a way that allows both to be free and fully participative cooperators.

Jose Severino Croatto has made an interesting assessment of the Exodus theme: by tracing it through, as paradigmatic for the prophets, the life of Jesus, and also in the Pauline message. In *Exodus: a Hermeneutics of Freedom*, he works with alienation and liberation: as opposed forces. Croatto claims that we are created for freedom, that the prophetic role is conscientizing us to freedom; that Christ, in fact, liberates, and that Paul sees sin, death and the Law;<sup>4</sup> as the principal alienations, from which we must be liberated.

Exodus does not signify just a pattern, it is a salvific paradigm. Jesus Christ "does salvation": through the same model—uprooted from life to death, then on to a new self and people—understanding, or attainment of identity through resurrection. People falsely expected a Messiah, who would come in glory, as a Caesar.

However, each believer must go through the agony of giving up an understanding of Christ, as a Caesar, in order to achieve a more authentic understanding of and relationship with Christ, through humility and suffering; and ultimately, in a loving relationship. Jesus Christ's very way of being challenges what has become the basic way of life—challenges culture, challenges the *status quo*, challenges social, political, economic and legal structures and relationships.

This Exodus event provides a rich medium for the reflections of many theologians, operating in contexts of struggle and oppression. In such situations, at best, it is difficult to find the signs of hope, or anything that can support belief in the God, who loves the poor. The Exodus paradigm, not only offers a sign of hope, in the sense of "the promised land", in the midst of struggle; it also gives an insight into theological reflection, through which we come to know and deepen our awareness of God, present with those who struggle. It also particularly reminds us of God's constant presence with us, ever faithfully guiding us in love, by the sign of the pillar of fire, column of cloud, or in the soft, gentle voice.

### **Uprooting and sojourning towards salvation**

Latin Americans engaged in Basic Christian Communities, popular movements, and some types of development work, have often found in the Exodus message guiding inspiration and power to initiate an awakening of consciousness. Croatto names a prophetic conscientization process, and asserts that Jesus also passed through such an experience of coming to new consciousness.<sup>5</sup> The Israelites needed to become corporately aware of their shared condition of slavery and oppression; the possibility of exercising a corporate, non-violent response, in this case, an escape from slavery and exploitation.

The Israelites later became more and more aware of the consequences of their actions and choices. Their conscientization was facilitated by the liberating grace of God, under the leadership of Moses. Moses did not, however, instigate their moaning and groaning. In fact, Moses emerged, as a concrete sign of God's hearing and response to the cries of the people.

In, *Leaving the Old Behind*, Mercy Amba Oduyoye, writing from her African perspective, describes the Exodus in terms of "leaving the old behind".<sup>6</sup> Looking at various aspects of African society, she claims that the burdens came, not only from captivity to foreign countries, but also from the very structuring of traditional society.<sup>7</sup> She sees the Exodus, as an event, that makes sense for Africans, even if turned around, in order to fit:

Laying claim to the Jewish-Christian heritage of the Exodus becomes a matter of faith in the One God, Creator and Liberator. The oppressed in the Exodus story were immigrants; in African history it is the oppressor, who is the immigrant, and in Africa, oppression takes many forms.<sup>8</sup>

For Oduyoye, the journey is, ultimately, about religious conversion. The leaving behind, is a leaving behind of a *status quo*, that presents no possibility of right and holy relationship for the people. Neo-colonistic situations are unacceptable to her: because she recognizes in them the evils of a gripping and chronic disease: self-legitimation.

These situations are the most alienating: because people come to accept what is said of them. They become strangers to their own potential and cannot imagine any other way of organizing society or their personal lives. The norm of operation is that "things, as they are" is the best way. This situation calls for *metanoia*, a hundred and eighty degree reorientation toward the person, as the child of God; and the whole people, as the people of God.<sup>9</sup>

### **Uprooted from our ancestral home**

Land is a fundamental resource for life and worth in Africa. In Kenya, where the percentage of arable land is very low, the scarcity of such

land has created a form of poverty for many, that undermines the family's very sense of identity, as a self supporting community. As a response to the situation, the Kenya government, in collaboration with the World Bank and some other NGOs and governmental institutions, has initiated projects for harnessing part of the Tana River for irrigation. One such project has been developed, which could provide arable land to as many as 5,000 families, to be chosen from among the landless of different ethnic groups throughout the country.

In the Bura Irrigation and Settlement Scheme, the families would be gathered together and resettled into new villages and given the opportunity to work, as tenant farmers: producing cotton and some subsistent crops. For a landless African, the promise of one's own farm in such a resettlement is alluring indeed. But, the cost is emigration from one's ethnic home area.

To have to permanently leave the place of one's ancestral roots, is a painful and initially a confusing experience, to which millions of refugees give more than ample witness in various parts of the globe, particularly in Africa.

Departure from the place of one's roots is sometimes voluntary; but, as in the case of refugees, displacement is by force of circumstances. Although the forces responsible for the displacement of people, especially those of gross injustice, cannot be legitimized, those who survive may become occasions for, and give witness to other dimensions of grace.

The Israelites are not the only people, who found it difficult to choose between a known form of slavery, and an unknown type of promised freedom.

Yet, without uprooting there can be no new planting, no new hope. Even so, our courage is often fragile, our hope wavering. Sometimes we are driven, perhaps unjustly, to the very edge of death; and sometimes, we cannot move, even when we must choose between lying down and starving to death; or daring to die on the move, frightened by fear, but also encouraged by hope.

So the first Exodus-like challenge can be articulated, as an escape, a departure, a conversion. There is both grace and choice in the

first step. There is no hope without graceful accompaniment on the journey—the opposing forces are simply too awesome. Yet, God will not rescue us, in spite of ourselves. We are created: as free children of God; and the very mystery of God's love requires that the Creator respect our human freedom. We must, somehow, assume co-responsibility with God for our liberation. So, we ultimately, either remain enslaved; or take up the risk of marching out into the dangerous and unknown wilderness, which lies between us, as slaves, and new freedom.

### **Struggle or desert experience**

Even when the choice is finally made, or somehow forced by circumstance, we have no guarantee of free and unfurled passage to liberation. The struggle is only now beginning and our faithfulness has yet to meet the rockier roads of temptation to despair. The way to liberation is not an easy one. The desert, physical or spiritual, is that situation or condition, that strips us until we stand in the raw “nakedness” of perceiving who we are, and who we are not.

However, the struggle is then only just began. One of the most common experiences of popular groups and revolutionary organizations is that the struggle is not over after the first victory. Usually, the struggle is only just beginning.

After we have obtained water, electricity, a school for our children, a new charter, a new government, and so forth, whatever our achievements, we discover that there is yet more work to be done. And embarking upon that may be even more difficult, since, most likely, our energy and enthusiasm have been dissipated along the way. We may have accomplished our immediate dream, but things are not yet perfect. We realize how weak our organization is, how much is still lacking. We recognize our many failings, and that we are still sinful. Yet the challenge is to go on, to strive to surmount the new difficulties, to respond courageously and tenaciously to new challenges.

In the process of sojourning, the first challenge is to begin the journey. The way is arduous. If the escape is to become a momentous event, the long and arduous sojourning through the desert wilderness is slow, painful, full of difficulties, including temptations.

It is the endurance of the slowness and suffering in this long struggle that seems to be most difficult for people today, as it was for the Israelites. Accustomed, as we are becoming, to speeds, generated by modern technology, many of us will find the reality of the slow pilgrim-way frustrating. We want to be able to move across the desert, comfortably and at supersonic speed. Perhaps those peoples, who are more familiar with desert life-experience would be better prepared to withstand the long haul, at least in spirit — but, they too would suffer many kinds of casualties along the way.

### **Struggling for our land**

For the Bura resettlers, the decision to take a chance at a new life situation was only the onset of some new problems. Upon arrival, the barren reality of the desert was shattering. Here, in a scorchingly hot region, just south of the equator, people are in desert conditions, trying to create “a promised land” for themselves.

In the earlier days, the mortality rate in the villages was high, as people found themselves unprepared to face and survive the physical and climatic adversities of the region and its lack of services. Malnutrition, malaria and exhaustion took their toll from many of the families. And the debts and risks of tenant-farming continue to exact a high price from those least able to pay. Water problems, pests, and some constraints of project-design, to some extent, continue to frustrate the farmers. The desert is not an easy part of a journey—the “promised land” tends to remain all too far way.

For the Israelites, as for the hopeful Kenyan farmers in the Tana River Bura Resettlement Scheme, the struggle, the revolution, the bus trip, was long enough. The journey into and through the new conditions seems to be interminable. Along the way, some people get lost: they tire, give up, change sides, waver in hope.

Similarly for the Israelites “the desert was a place of danger, of poverty, and of adventure”.<sup>10</sup> In the desert, the Israelites faced the

fundamental issues of survival, lacking food and water. At a time calling for radical dependence upon God, it was, nonetheless easy to doubt and to complain against the divinely appointed leadership. The covenant between God and the Israelites, was, for the latter, an uneasy alliance. "Each struggle of the people on the journey was an obedience to God. It was God, who directed our combat".<sup>11</sup> The journey and the struggle to keep going are intimately bound together. The struggle begins with the first step of the journey. The journey is the unfolding and passage of struggle towards the expected destiny.

### **Establishment of a covenant relationship**

The journey and the struggle through the desert can form a people, with a progressively growing relationship, despite the occurrence of some rivalries and set-backs. The slow process of unification also begins to engender the fruits of a new feeling, a collective or corporate identity. The Israelites came to realize their own identity and common struggle and to appreciate God's fidelity towards them. That relationship was sealed in the Sinaitic Covenant. The elements of that Covenant are the memory of God's work, the Law, and the land.

Such a covenant establishes a special relationship between God and the people. From the people's point of view, it is both a dependence and a partnership. The covenant, especially, challenges us to realize that grace and responsibility are correlated. It is the covenant that finally overcomes the dualism of control. The divine and the human share in one work, sojourning toward the eternal paradise, for which they are both mutually responsible.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that human partners have a lesser understanding, than the divine partner. Nevertheless, humbly and in grace, through Jesus, we are called to be no longer mere servants, who do not understand at all, but friends, who share intimately in the mystery of God's work of salvation (Jn 15:15).

The question remains, as to whether YHWH was the sole actor in the movement for their [Israelites'] liberation. God asks the human, who is created in God's image, to act as His partner. People are to assist in the restoration of their rights. In the past, we

entertained the notion: that God fulfils all of human history under his sovereignty. That is, we were indifferent to the loss of our rights, evading our responsibility, as the partners of God in affirming and upholding them.<sup>12</sup>

The Covenant is the ultimate gift and miracle, connected with both the past—humans created in the image and likeness of God—and the future—God reflected in the image and likeness of humans. The work of God is also partly the work of humans, the work of humans is also partly the work of God. We share a partnership, building up the one home and Kingdom of love. We are not antagonists, but partners.

### **There is much to reconcile**

In the River Tana Bura Project, the challenge to reconciliation is carried out on many levels. The resettling together of many different ethnic groups calls for attempts at overcoming ethnic prejudices and tribalism, and at letting go some of the traditions: in order to form and establish a new community together. Families are required to form collaborative relationships in order to manage their farming-plots more efficiently. Division and discord would hinder potential benefit.

Frustrations and failures of some aspects of the project tend to exacerbate the differences among the people. Even how to worship together can be a frustration, when the language used is not the mother-tongue of all the people here. Above all, people, somehow, need to enter into a covenant with this new land — with all its terrors and difficulties: as a place, where God can become present to them; as a place that can be turned into home. For most people here, faith and dependence on the blessings of the Creator are among the significant factors that promote persistence.

### **Authentic partnership**

The challenge of authentic partnership amongst members of the communities and with God, is perhaps the most difficult aspect of contemporary religious pastoral activity. For while we may talk about partnership, equality and differences based upon ethnicity, cultural

backgrounds, religion, sex, and so forth, tend to disincline people from engaging in smooth interaction with each other. Usually, people tend to be much more geared toward hierarchies, oppressions, exclusions, paternalism and condescension. And with God, we are even less equipped to enter into relationship, as partners, since we are more used to blaming, praising or disregarding God.

The Exodus manifests to us a relationship between history and revelation, an indicator that God chooses to continue to be present in the movement of history, which is at once human and divine. "The central event, through which God is revealed: by intervening in people's history, is the Exodus".<sup>13</sup>

God's commitment to human activity and to salvation history continues. The divine-human covenant reflects that commitment and calls us to mutual interaction and relationship. And in assuming this commitment, we little by little establish a new identity for ourselves; we become reconciled to our deepest vocation.

### **Hope and home**

Arturo Paoli has noted that many "persons are often strangers in their own homes. They don't feel welcome, they don't feel accepted".<sup>14</sup> He sees it, as truly good news for people, when they can feel at home in the world.<sup>15</sup> Having been plunged into the wilderness, we have an opportunity to come to know God, and other people, with a new vulnerability and a new authenticity and integrity. We come to be at home with ourselves, and to become aware of, and to feel at home with God, dwelling in us.

The end of the Exodus-like event is hope. It is not only a challenge to continue to hope, but, finally also a fulfilment of hope. The work that God has already done is a promise to those, who are still labouring to enter the "promised land".

Such an event refers to a future of God in history, then. More precisely, it refers, not only to the God, who is; but to the God who comes, and whose promise is never exhausted by its historical realizations. Ultimately, the basic meaning of the Exodus is bestowed by the revelation of God, who personally "owns" the future.

Revelation is not mainly a doctrine, but a promise, which remains to be verified in its realization in the future of the world. Thus, it unceasingly opens out upon the future of a new creation, a new exodus. God's revelation in history always comports a horizon of the future, in which the divine design will be accomplished in its fullness. Out, beyond events having the value of a sign, a more distant perspective appears, that of the end of the ages ... salvation in its plenitude constitutes the essential kernel of God's word, the thing that awakens hope in the human being.<sup>16</sup>

Revelation brings about hope in many ways, by the shattering of false ideologies. Hope is born in the possibility of creating something new. Hope is kept alive: when people gather together. It is not a denial of sin; but a realization of who we have become; and where we have arrived together. It is an expression of belief in the possibilities of the partnership between God and humans, and of creative mutual redemption—brothers and sisters, friends, God and we, sitting down at the same table: to dream dreams, design our home of love, share communion.

Through the Exodus event, God is revealed in the history of the promise. Deliverance from servitude in Egypt is an event that illuminates the language of the promise: it is an act of fidelity, on the part of God.<sup>17</sup>

### **Will this be our home?**

Most of the adults living in the River Tana Bura Resettlement Scheme continue to think of their home, as the ancestral land, from which they have come, where many of their family members still reside. It will be a long time before many can consider Bura to be their new home—perhaps only future generations will be able to consider it so! One of the problems, named by one Christian community, is the difficulty in forging ahead together: because so many people live in an indecision about: whether to remain in Bura or return to their ancestral home.

Nevertheless, a few people have begun to allow a new rooting to take place in Bura, and to hope that things will be better for their

children and their children's children. Establishing a home here, is confronted by so many problems, especially relationship gaps.

Conversion is akin to having been uprooted, cast into the wilderness, whence we find a way home, a home that is a kind of "promised land", a land of promise and covenant. The promise is forming a relationship with and creative partnership with God. That is a reward of a different kind, to come home to hope, to come home to God's own home of love, which we create together in the transformation of the world, through a world-wide evangelizational process, a world-wide conversion.

## Conclusion

We have tried to show the Exodus experience, as a type of salvific events, as one of the major type of manifestation of God's relation with the whole of creation and in a paradigmatic way—a way that sets rhythms and patterns: that give vision and meaning to significant experiences of our lives, as Christians, desiring to be faithful. The Exodus and similar events present a permanent challenge to our understanding of our relationship with each other, with the oppressed, and with God. Exodus-like events give us unique insights into the nature of grace and of personal and corporate responsibility. In our lives, we are not always faithful to that responsibility. Sometimes our responses are sinful, or frightened efforts to avoid the issues. But, sometimes in our ongoing struggle and journey, we begin to come home together.

God is, God works, God calls us to be, and to work—in creative collaboration, in just and right relationship, not slavery or exploitation. We enter into partnership through conversion and response. The relationship between God and humankind is unique, and challenges us to enter fully into the divine mission and love—design, that is aimed at transforming creation, history and all our relationship into a manifestation of love.

Various Exodus-like events recurrently remind us of these challenges, and urge us to engage in creative, courageous and hopeful responses to God's loving initiative.

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