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DIE SA WERKGEMEENSKAP VIR SENDINGWETENSKAP

Klaus Nürnberger\*

## THE EXODUS – ETHNIC IDENTITY OR REVOLUTIONARY MEMORY?

### The trajectory of the exodus paradigm in biblical history and its political relevance today<sup>1</sup>

#### ABSTRACT

The concept of redemption is central to an understanding of the mission of the church. Liberation theology elevated the exodus motif to its hermeneutical key, while conventional Catholic, Protestant and Evangelical schools concentrate on issues surrounding covenant, law and grace. As part of a project to reconceptualise the soteriological agenda in more holistic and genuinely biblical terms, this essay traces the trajectory of the exodus-conquest paradigm through biblical history. It finds that, in biblical times, the exodus motif did not play an emancipatory role, but rather defined the identity of the Israelites/Jews as the chosen people of God. The covenant-law tradition is historically more fundamental than the exodus-conquest tradition. In the New Testament the exodus motif is not utilised at all, probably because its particularist assumptions clashed with the message of God's unconditional, suffering acceptance of the unacceptable in Christ. This does not imply, however, that the liberative agenda can be dismissed as immaterial for Christians today; it only needs to be derived from another set of assumptions.

#### WHAT IS THE AIM OF THIS ESSAY?

Christians believe that their God has a vision. From God's vision follows God's mission. The church is God's instrument in this mission. So far most Christians agree. But Christians do not agree on what God's mission is. The thrust of God's mission depends on the meaning of redemption. Is God's mission aimed at saving souls for eternity? Or is it meant to transform oppressive social structures? The meaning of redemption again depends on the hermeneutical key to Scriptures. Is the "canon in the Canon" the justification of the sinner by grace accepted in faith, or is it the preferential option for the poor and oppressed?

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This essay is part of a research project which tries to find a biblically based soteriology for our times. The motive for the project as a whole is the apparent irrelevance of the Christian faith as a self-confessed redemptive project for the most urgent needs of humankind today: economic marginalisation, ecological deterioration, population growth, the depletion of resources, the rise of conflict potential, increasingly destructive weapon systems, cultural dissolution, moral decay, religious relativity, and spiritual anomie.

The proposed soteriological theory has the following elements:

- God's ultimate intention is the comprehensive well-being of all people in the context of the comprehensive well-being of their entire social and natural environments.
- God's immediate concern is any deficiency in comprehensive well-being, thus any need arising in any dimension of life.
- Transcendent needs (meaning, acceptability and authority) arise from immanent needs (psychological, physical, social, political, economic and ecological needs) and do not have an independent existence of their own.
- God's redemptive activity is mediated through earthly events and human agency.

A soteriological theory builds on a soteriological hermeneutics. I assume that the soteriological paradigms found in the Bible emerged as responses to human needs. The memory of God's redemptive actions in the past served to reassure believers facing danger and suffering of the mastery and benevolence of their God. As the tradition responded to ever new constellations of need, it was drawn into an evolutionary process. Tracing the trajectory of such a paradigm in biblical history, one discerns an undercurrent of meaning which can be extrapolated into the present. This method maintains the canon as a guideline to the truth without falling into the trap of a-historical and fundamentalist assumptions.

This essay is one of a series of case studies. The others deal with the paradigms of king and empire (Nürnberger 1992), the patriarchal promises (Nürnberger 1993a), covenant and law (Nürnberger 1993b), the conquest of chaos (Nürnberger 1997) and priesthood and sacrifice (Nürnberger 1999). The paradigms of death and resurrection and the Spirit of God are to follow.

The exodus is one of the central soteriological paradigms in the biblical tradition. But its interpretation and utilisation vary widely. For millennia

Judaism has taken it to be the foundational event of their identity as the "people of God". Within the Christian fold, various versions of liberation theology have recently elevated it to the status of a central hermeneutical key. In most other versions of Christianity, notably those clustered around the motifs of atonement (Western main-line churches) and deification (Eastern Orthodox churches), it plays virtually no role. What can we make of this divergence?

## THE EXODUS NARRATIVE IN ITS OVERALL CONTEXT

### The place of the exodus-conquest paradigm within the Old Testament tradition

The exodus has often been isolated from its overall context within the ancient Israelite system of meaning. From the outset it must be made clear, therefore, that in the Old Testament the exodus is part of a greater credal whole which includes, at the very least, also the conquest tradition, if not the patriarchs. To this we have to add the Sinai tradition and the desert narratives. The first three elements are represented in credal formulations such as Dt. 26:5ff, on which Gerhard von Rad based his tradition-historical reconstructions (1962:121ff), though his assumptions have been questioned by more recent scholarship (cf Collins 1995:153, 155, referring to Sanders).

This conglomeration of credal narratives has a very complicated history which we cannot take up here. Suffice it to say that the Sinai complex is widely regarded as an originally independent cluster of traditions (cf Collins 1995:153). In terms of its contents and its historical impact it is a soteriological paradigm of its own, which is distinct from, independent of, and often in competition with, the exodus-conquest tradition. We shall see that it is more fundamental for the Jewish faith than the exodus-conquest paradigm. The immanent need structure to which it responds centres not on political freedom (exodus) and economic sufficiency (land), but on a social contract (covenant and law). The transcendent need to which it responds is that of one's right of existence, acceptability, or justification. In theological terms it formulates the foundational relationship between Yahweh and Israel, while exodus and conquest are concrete manifestations of God's commitment to this relationship.

This insight is important for an assessment of the current standoff between liberation theologies and atonement centred soteriologies in the Christian fold. The conflict can largely be attributed to a difference in the

definition of the centre of religious devotion and theological reasoning. One school focuses the fundamentals of the divine-human relationship (covenant-law), the other on the concrete manifestation of this relationship (exodus-conquest). This again is largely due to a difference in the respective need structure of those who opt for one paradigm or the other. In this essay we focus on the exodus-conquest paradigm.

### The historical origins of the exodus narrative

The historical background to the exodus narrative is not at all easy to come by. Some scholars find substantial historical plausibility behind (never in) the narratives (Gottwald 1993:272f; Loewenstamm 1992:23ff; Donner 1984:84ff), while others, particularly those belonging to the post-modernist emphasis on literary constructions, consider them as purely fictitious (Lemche 1996:19ff, 219f; van Seters, see Vervenne 1996:44; Collins 1995:152). "Es ist in aller Deutlichkeit festzuhalten: ... Nie hat es einen Exodus aus Ägypten gegeben, durch den das Volk der Israeliten der Unterdrückung Pharaohs entkommen ist ..." (Lemche 1996:219f). I believe that the latter view is unnecessarily defeatist. It may be based on the dismissive attitude towards empirical and historical research found in the postmodern schools of thought, thus on a presumption made before reading the text. On the other hand, whatever witness to the historical exodus still exists in the Canon is totally overgrown precisely by such "before-the-text" readings. "Wir stehen beeindruckt vor dem Triumph der Wirkungsgeschichte über die Geschichte" (Donner 1984:93).

It is commonly assumed among those who search for historical roots that the exodus was experienced by a particular group whose descendants later merged into the emerging nation of "Israel". The event is usually assumed to have taken place between 1250 and 1200 BCE, that is during the time of Ramses II who built his resident city towards the end of the century, though there are also attempts to date it earlier (Adler 1995). Unfortunately there is no archaeological material to back up the assumption. The reason for the departure may have been the unwillingness of free nomads to suffer the indignity of forced labour imposed by the Egyptians. That such an illicit escape was dangerous does not need elaboration (Loewenstamm 1992:24; Herrmann 1981:61).

In the canonical text, two traditions of the redemptive intervention of Yahweh seem to vie with each other (cf Nicholson 1973:55ff). The first centres around the passah. It is widely assumed that the passah goes back to a nomadic ritual which served to protect the clan against evil

forces at the onset of its annual migration to the cultivated land (Loewenstamm 1992:206; Schmitt 1982:26). This departure and protection ritual has then been applied to Yahweh's protection of the Israelite slaves at the point of their departure from Egypt.

The other tradition concerning Yahweh's intervention centres on the Reed Sea miracle. A number of historical reconstructions have been attempted which need not occupy us here. Most scholars assume that there must have been some kind of historical core underlying layers upon layers of subsequent interpretation. Some think of a battle in which, contrary to all expectations, the Egyptians were defeated, albeit more by a twist of circumstances than by Israelite military might. The Song of Miriam (Ex. 15:21), believed to be the oldest witness to the miracle by many scholars, definitely speaks of the Egyptian army drowning in the sea. (The "Song of Moses" 15:1-18, which utilises this tradition in 15:1 and 4 to legitimate Zion, belongs to P, as verses 13 and 17 show.) The Yahwist "naturalistic" version may be closer to historical fact than the Priestly "miraculous" version, but the Yahwist in his own way also wants to speak of the miraculous intervention of Yahweh (Gottwald 1993:274ff).

What happened between the exodus and the settlement in Palestine? Some scholars believe that after some desert wanderings they got into contact with a group living around the Kadesh oasis and the Seir mountain range in Southern Palestine, from whom they have picked up the mountain theophany tradition to which the name of Yahweh was attached (Axelson 1987; Donner 1984:101, 114; Herrmann 1981:71ff). Most scholars agree that Yahweh was, originally, a mountain deity (Herrmann 1981:75). Old Testament witnesses also presuppose that Israel got to know the name of Yahweh at a mountain, not during the exodus event. It is likely, therefore, that the Sinai tradition was religiously more fundamental and that the exodus experience was interpreted in terms of Yahweh, the Mountain God, rather than the other way round (Donner 1984:114).

If that is accepted, it is at the Mountain of God, whether Seir or Sinai or Horeb, that Israel was formed as the chosen people of God, not during the exodus. That the exodus became the defining statement of Yahweh in later times, for instance in the prologue to the Decalogue, can easily be explained: it is here that Yahweh's commitment to Israel had manifested itself in a redemptive event; the tradition is a narrative, not a dogma; it centres on Yahweh's gift, not on the demands of a covenant. This became particularly important at a time when the covenant had become

problematic because of Israel's sin in the eyes of the prophetic and Deuteronomistic schools.

This brings us to the settlement in Canaan. All historically-critically oriented scholars agree that the narrative found in the Book of Joshua is not a very reliable historical source. What happened actually? Three kinds of reconstruction dominate the discussion:

- Nomadic tribes migrated into the cultivated land and took it by force.
- Nomadic tribes gradually and peacefully penetrated the cultivated land, which does not exclude the possibility of warlike actions where clashes of interest with the local population occurred.
- A revolutionary movement, which recruited its members from various marginalised and oppressed groups, consolidated itself as a tribal federation and rebelled against the dominant Canaanite city states. It was inspired by the exodus tradition which was brought by the group that came in from the East Bank (Donner 1984:123ff).

This theory, connected with the names of Mendenhall, Dus and Gottwald, shows that the formation of the tribal federation was a more complex phenomenon than had been assumed (for a brief summary see Allen Myers in Gottwald 1983:168). The beauty of the theory lies in its moral implication in terms of the liberationist creed: the formation of Israel in Canaan was not based on conquest and genocide, as later texts want us to believe, but on a process of liberation from oppression. Suddenly the dialectic between the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery during the exodus and the oppression of the Canaanites by the Israelites during the conquest dissolves into a one-directional liberative thrust. Certainly liberation theology must appreciate such a reconstruction.

However, unresolved problems remain. If the Israelite tribes have been a kind of proletariat oppressed by the Canaanite city states, why does one find them in the mountains rather than in the plains? Why have the later texts not preserved and developed a tradition which contained a dramatic second liberation from slavery, rather than trying to rationalise away an embarrassing story of blatant injustice, brutality and collective selfishness? Why do these texts insist on the nomadic past of Israel and the promise of a land which they originally did not possess? While the Marxist paradigm has provided us with the parameters for a more complex understanding of Israel's settlement in Canaan than the texts suggest, it does not seem to have painted an entirely satisfactory picture as yet. (cf Donner 1984:125f).



Another bone of contention is the historicity, status and role of Moses in the whole drama. We have at least one pointer to the fact that he had indeed lived. If the great instrument of Yahweh in the deliverance and establishment of Israel as the people of God was a fictitious figure, why did the composers of this tradition not make him lead Israel into the promised land? That he died just before Israel entered the country seems to point to an ancient historical memory. Another, perhaps less powerful, pointer is his Egyptian name (Donner 1984:108).

Who was he? There is no doubt that in the present story he is the receiver of the theophany in the covenant paradigm (Polak in Vervenne 1996:113ff), and the redeemer in the exodus paradigm. But to say that "he is, under and alongside Yahweh, everything in everything in the Old Testament" (Donner 1984:108; cf Schmitt 1982:15, Noth et al) is certainly an overstatement. In older texts his role is much less prominent than in the Hexateuch (Von Rad 1962:289ff). In the South David is much more prominent than Moses and there are Old Testament traditions which have no connections with Moses at all. The figure of Moses has also been blown up to its present size during exilic and post-exilic times by the priestly tradition, which identified itself with Moses rather than David.

However, it is certainly true that Moses constitutes an overpowering figure in the later Northern exodus-Sinai-Conquest tradition, which is, of course, one of the central clusters of soteriological paradigms found in the Old Testament. Because this is the case, it would have been of great importance to know more about this pivotal leader. To find any historically plausible data about him, however, is an almost hopeless undertaking. Was he an Egyptian? Or a Medianite? (Richer in Vervenne 1996:437). While it is certain that he did not belong to the conquest tradition, was he originally linked to the exodus, or to the Sinai events, or to both? We cannot say more than that all three are possible.

In the attempt to project their own ideas, ideals and interests back into salvation history, later authors have "buried" the historical Moses "under masses of material about him" (Donner 1984:108). And this process of projection continues right into the 20th Century, similar to what happened to the historical Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Donner draws up a grotesque list of modern interpretations: a) A mythical figure, b) a founder of a religion, c) a reformer, d) a founder of a nation, e) a founder of a religious order, f) a theologian, g) a performer of miracles, h) a law giver, i) a prophet, j) a priest, k) a charismatic redeemer, l) the administrator of a federal law, n) a legendary figure based on the memory of his grave on the East Bank. All these theories are problematic because they refer to later developments such as the priesthood, the legal codes, etc. (Donner 1984:110f).

## THE EXODUS-CONQUEST PARADIGM AS A RESPONSE TO NEEDS

### The hypothetical participants in the exodus

Our hypothesis is that a tradition emerges and evolves in response to challenges by ever new constellations of needs. When trying to trace the evolutionary history of the exodus-conquest paradigm we have to take various periods of application into account. Gottwald (following Pixlie) (1993:273ff) speaks of four biblical "horizons" of the narrative. I think there are more than that.

The first is the time of the hypothetical participants in the exodus. The possible needs of that period have been described by Loewenstamm (1992:24) as follows:

The very fact that the Egyptian bondage remained engraved for generations, in precise detail, in Israel's memory, attests both to the shock and dismay of these herdsmen at being charged with the task of construction, a labor so different from their traditional way of life, and to their recollection of the departure from Egypt as an escape from "the house of bondage"....

Herrmann (1981:61) concurs: "... it seems almost certain that free nomads would feel the labour of building in Egypt to be shameful and oppressive and would try to avoid it".

Hard labour in tropical heat, combined with inadequate rations and flogging (Gen 1:11f; 2:11), must be unpleasant at the best of times. However, the transcendent needs of this particular group were much more fundamental than their immanent needs. Freedom is staunchly built into their system of meaning by virtue of two factors:

- they were nomads, for whom a constantly retreating horizon was the limit of their movements, and
- they were the decision makers within a patriarchal clan structure.

Nomads certainly differ in this respect from born slaves, who have internalised their subservient position, from modern workers, who accept pay in exchange for work, or indeed from women who accept their subordinate position in a patriarchal community.

So their sense of identity must have been deeply wounded. Prevented from living up to what they considered to be their authentic selves, their right of existence was being questioned. Enforced obedience robbed

them of their sovereignty and undermined their authority. Slaves tend to become either rebellious or submissive. The texts suggest that they had fallen victim to the lethargy of the oppressed. The prospects of liberation were a challenge to muster their pride and regain their authenticity. But this did not imply a changed system of meaning. They continued to be patriarchs; the liberation of women was beyond their horizon. They were hardly opposed to slavery as such; even centuries later the texts do not betray the slightest indignation about the enslavement of people other than their own.

It is tempting to contrast this reconstructed need structure with that of the elites in the Egyptian Empire. Forced labour was a form of taxation. Obviously any larger economy suffers loss when a substantial number of its work force absconds. Plans cannot be executed; those responsible for their completion are taken to account; other projects have to be postponed or abandoned. Forced labour was also a form of tribute. Political insubordination cannot be tolerated by any self-respecting regime. These are the immanent needs of the Empire. But again the underlying transcendent needs are more important. The pharaohs were considered to be of divine origin and vested with divine authority. Their subjects were at their disposal. Their glory had to be manifested. Their afterlife had to be secured. Insubordination challenged this entire system of meaning, and with it the identity, the right of existence and the authority of the Pharaoh. It could not be tolerated.

It is clear, therefore, that conflict was built into the system. The only question was which system of meaning would prevail – that of the mighty Egyptian Empire, or that of a bunch of herdsmen, who did not like the idea of working in the quarries. There was no way the latter could challenge the former on the battle field, or in any other showdown. In fact, there seemed to be no prospect that relief could ever come to the slaves. Looking at the event in retrospect, the texts are unanimous that it was divine intervention which brought them out of slavery – an intervention by their own God, Yahweh, to take control of his chosen people, and for no other reason. For Loewenstamm (1992:24) "... the Exodus is the moment at which the LORD ceased to be Israel's God in potential alone and became her God in actual fact".

It was a gift of undeserved grace, surely, with no immediate strings attached. Yet the consequences of being Yahweh's chosen people proved to be substantial. In the view of later interpreters, Yahweh, in his turn, did not tolerate insubordination. The way went into the desert, into affliction and temptation, and the punishment even for subdued grumbling

was severe. The Sinai-covenant-law tradition gave form to these obligations. The exodus signifies a change of masters, rather than emancipation. There are no grounds for romanticising the outcome of the exodus in terms of the privileges of living in a modern liberated and liberal society (Levenson 1993:37).<sup>3</sup> The point is, rather, that the system of meaning, the right of existence and the authority of the nomads were restored.

### The settlers in Palestine

With this memory the exodus group may have penetrated the West Bank. If one followed the reconstruction of Mendenhall and Gottwald, it is only now that the revolutionary potential of the exodus paradigm began to unfold. After all, an unarmed miraculous escape from a stable, oppressive system cannot be equated with a violent revolution. Again the immanent need was freedom from oppression. The transcendent need was again the dearth of meaning, right of existence, and authority. The response was the affirmation of the election of the Israelites as people of God. This certainty made the exodus group prone to become leaders of the insurrection against the city states. Note that, although later interpretations again emphasised Yahweh's miraculous intervention, the exodus tradition empowered, rather than obviated, human agency in this case. Certainly military means must now have come into the picture.

One has to concede that the texts themselves know nothing of an armed revolution. One cannot be sure, therefore, that Gottwald's Marxist tools of analysis have not caused him to read too much into the situation.<sup>4</sup> The depiction of the events by later texts bears at least as much historical plausibility. Here the tradition has the function of legitimating the occupation of Canaan. For the authors of these texts it was a clear case of appropriating the land which they believed had been promised to them by their God. This certainty is traced back, not to the exodus, but to the pa-

<sup>3</sup> Levenson refers to the fact that Hagar, after having fled like the Israelites from Egypt, is sent back to her harsh mistress. "It is the most pointed counter-example to the misleading overgeneralization, popularized by liberation theologians, that the biblical God is on the side of the impoverished and the oppressed, exercising, as a matter of consistent principle, a 'preferential option for the poor'" (1993:93). See also Levenson 1996:4ff. One has to mention, however, that liberation theology has discounted that in saying that the Bible is a book written by and for elites and we need to dig out the hidden transcript.

<sup>4</sup> "Once the Marxist analysis is fed into the inquiry, is it not necessary, at the end of the process, to get a class revolt against oppressors?" Legrand in Gottwald (ed) 1983:184. See the debate on Gottwald's "Tribes" there.

triarchs. Seen in this light, the sojourn in Egypt was an episode and the exodus was nothing but the precondition for the fulfilment of the promise.

This interpretation of the sacred narrative is fiercely particularist. That other people had been in Palestine first was tough for the latter. It was Yahweh's own land, assigned to his chosen people, and the natives had no right to be there. Psalm 80:8-11 captures the mood: Yahweh had brought a vine out of Egypt and "cleared the ground" in Canaan to plant it there; so it could take root, fill the land and send out its boughs as far as the river and the sea. The former occupants have the status of weeds. Some texts try to explain the fact that these weeds have, after centuries, not been eradicated, by conceding a temporary utilitarian value to them: the Canaanites are useful in keeping the wild beasts in check until the Israelites are numerous enough to protect themselves (Ex 23:29ff). It is of no use to overplay these (for modern sensitivities ghastly) sentiments. It is the prosperity of Israel that is at issue, not the well-being of humanity at large. Particularist self-interest is one of the most characteristic and enduring facets of Israelite self-understanding.

Of course, we do not claim that the Israelites actually killed off, or drove out, the previous occupiers of the land in bulk when they entered the country, as Exodus 23, Deuteronomy 7, Deuteronomy 20 and parts of the Book of Joshua want to make us believe. Though atrocities may have happened in individual cases, it is probable that the Israelites migrated and interpenetrated the existing population very gradually, and that much more amicable relations existed than suggested by these texts. One needs to remember that the Israelites were entering into what was, at the time, the sphere of a superior culture. It was precisely this lure which seems to have caused the prophetic and Levite reaction against Canaanite influences and the ferocity of outgroup animosity to which these texts bear witness.

There is again no trace of liberation or emancipation as a general principle in any of these texts. Such a principle seems to have been beyond the horizon of those ancient people. The patriarchal order is never questioned. Israelites can enslave other Israelites as much as people from other nations, though Israelite slaves have some privileges (Ex 21:1-11).<sup>5</sup> There is ample evidence that the Israelites imposed forced labour on enemies which they defeated and that such a practice was taken to be demanded by Yahweh (Dt 20:10-20; Josh 16:10; 17:13; Jud 1:33, 35; 2

<sup>5</sup> Collins is rather optimistic in this regard: "While the social order described in the Book of the Covenant is not as egalitarian as some Marxist liberationists, such as Pixlie, would have it, it is light years away from the regime of the Pharaoh in Egypt" (Collins 1995:154).

Sam 20:24; 1 Ki 4:6, 5:14). So the "dangerous memory of the exodus" is nothing but a modern myth.

## The time of the monarchy

This becomes even clearer with the dawn of the monarchy, which seems to have utilised the tradition to underpin its own legitimacy, power and prestige (cf Gottwald 1993:277). Up to that point the exodus-conquest motif seems to have been concentrated in the region of Ephraim. As the central soteriological paradigm of the Northern tribes, the exodus-desert-conquest narrative, linked to the Jacob and Joseph traditions, may have been used at the sanctuary of Gilgal and Bethel before the establishment of the Davidic kingdom and the building of the state sanctuary in Jerusalem. After the breakup of the kingdom, it again formed the sacred story at Bethel and Dan, the two Northern sanctuaries.

With the ascension of David to the throne, the Southern tradition was born, centring on the king, the capital and the state sanctuary. As mentioned in my essay on the royal-imperial paradigm (Nürnberger 1992), this tradition had its roots in Egypt and Mesopotamia and was taken over by the new dynasty from its Jebusite predecessors, together with other religious traditions. But, as a shrewd politician, David also brought the arch of the covenant to Jerusalem. With these two moves he tried to unite the rival systems of meaning prevalent within his kingdom. The Judaeans contributed the Abraham and Isaac traditions. With these developments the various patriarchal traditions, the exodus-conquest tradition, the covenant-law tradition and the Davidic tradition began to form a single pan-Israelite story.

Since Von Rad's influential, but recently problematised thesis (Von Rad 1958), it was believed that the Yahwist belongs to the Davidic-Solomonic era. If that is indeed the case, his work is a powerful witness to the attempt of Solomonic court theologians to help unite the Davidic empire by integrating different traditions into a single story and to give this story a thrust that would legitimate the monarchy (for an assessment see Lemche 1996:213-215).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> If the Yahwist had indeed tried to integrate the various tribal traditions during the Davidic-Solomonic era, his version certainly did not hold after the division of the empire. The exodus-conquest tradition lived on, especially in its original home, the Northern Kingdom, while the Southern Kingdom continued with the David-Zion traditions. There are two possible reasons for this fact: a) It may never have become internalised by the people and institutionalised in the cult of the South as part of the local tradition, and so it was perceived

But whether J belongs to this time or not, it was certainly the politician David who laid the foundations for Jerusalem as the Israelite and Jewish religious centre. And it was the Jebusite priesthood in whose interests it was to establish Jerusalem as the cultic centre of the nation. These rather mundane origins stand in stark contrast to later interpretations. By the time of P, Jerusalem had become the goal of the entire journey of the people of Israel from its patriarchal beginnings, via the exodus and Sinai to the "place that Yahweh had chosen for his name to dwell." Moriah, the location of the sacrifice of Isaac, Sinai, the location of the Mosaic covenant, and Zion, the location of the Jebusite sanctuary, had all collapsed into one. For all intents and purposes the Zion was the holy mountain where Yahweh's presence, his law and his altar were to be found. In terms of our hypothesis, the paradigm had by then responded to the transcendent need for legitimization of the power interests of a new ruling elite.

### The divided monarchy

The reconstruction which dates the merger of the paradigms in Davidic-Solomonic times is faced, however, with the difficulty that the exodus-conquest paradigm does not occur in important post-Solomonic Southern texts such as wisdom literature, the royal Psalms, the Zion Psalms, Proto-Isaiah and Amos. The references to the exodus found in Amos 2:10, 3:1 and 5:25 are taken to be Deuteronomistic insertions (Schmidt 1981:34). Amos 9:7 is directed at the cult in Bethel (Collins 1995:156). What about Isaiah, the most prominent Southern prophet? The motif appears in 11:15-15, but 11:11ff shows that this is an exilic or post-exilic text. Chapter 19:16-25, which is sometimes quoted, does not speak of the exodus at all. So chapter 10:24-26 is the only candidate. If it is not also a later addition, which I suspect, it is certainly singular, and low key. Moreover, when Isaiah spoke against expecting help from Egypt, nothing would have been more natural than to refer to the Egyptians as the enemies of the exodus narrative, as Jeremiah later did in similar circumstances (Jr 2). But he did not.

It is very likely, therefore, that the exodus-conquest paradigm was not generally utilised in the Southern Kingdom before the fall of Samaria. On the contrary, it has been deliberately ignored and disparaged, because it was used by the North to give legitimacy to the Northern Kingdom and its sanctuary, and considered subversive of the claims of Jerusalem to

to be something foreign. b) It was deliberately suppressed during the intense rivalry between the two kingdoms.

pan-Israelite political and religious leadership. The Zadokite priesthood, which was originally Canaanite, must have had particularly strong reasons to play down the Northern Israelite component of the tradition in favour of the Davidic component.

Southern prophets bought into this stance and developed an intense hostility against the Northern monarchy and its sanctuary. The Northerners were accused of apostasy and idolatry by the Southerners. The use of the Canaanite image of a calf in Bethel and Dan to represent "the God who had brought you out of Egypt" (1 Ki 12:25-33; cf Ex 32:4), provided the Southerners with a welcome argument to bring the Northern tradition into disrepute in favour of their own sanctuary and, by implication, the David-Zion tradition.

That the name Yahweh was omitted in these texts is almost certainly the work of the later critics of the Northern cult. Without doubt Yahweh, and no other, was the God who had brought Israel out of Egypt in the eyes of the Northerners - although they had allowed syncretism to take root, and although they were not always faithful to this God, as indeed was the case in the South. Yahweh had actually come to be defined in the North as the God "who led us out of Egypt" from an early date, while in the South Yahweh continued to be attached to the mountain. However, the mountain tradition also lived on in the Northern Sinai-covenant tradition which had, in the mean time, been integrated solidly into the exodus-conquest complex.

Amos was one of the Southern critics of the Northern cult. In a remarkable text Amos emphasised that no privileges can be derived from the exodus (9:7). Other texts in Amos issue an explicit warning not to "go to Bethel" and other sanctuaries, but "seek Yahweh and live", implying that Yahweh could only be found in Jerusalem (5:4ff). In Isaiah the exodus tradition is not even used where the situation would have made it applicable, for instance in the promise of a restitution of Israel from Assyrian oppression in Isaiah 27. As Zechariah 10:11 shows, it could have been applied very easily to the Assyrian experience. Instead a new tradition emerged, that of the "gathering" of the dispersed "on the holy mountain" (verse 13). In other texts another ancient tradition with pagan antecedents was utilised, namely the tradition of the "remnant" (Hasel 1972).

Northerners in turn could fall back on a long pre-monarchic, even pre-Israelite, tradition of its sanctuary at Bethel. Jerusalem could easily be discredited by them as an illegitimate innovation of an illegitimate dynasty at an illegitimate place. Remember that in the eyes of the Benjaminites, at least, David had been a usurper of the throne of Saul, Jerusalem was a



pagan city, and the Zadokite priesthood had a non-Israelite origin. It was not only heretical, it was plainly idolatrous. This entire line of argument is seriously under-represented in the canonical scriptures due to the simple fact that the Northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians in 721 BC, leaving its Southern rival in the unchallenged position of determining the future of the tradition. It is still alive among the remnants of the Samaritans on the West Bank today.

The Northern tradition only began to become accepted in Jerusalem with the arrival of refugees from the North after the fall of Samaria in 721 BCE. After some time the political need to oppose it had subsided. It could even be used to demonstrate that it was the sin of the Northerners which brought the calamity upon them and that the Southern claim to the presence of Yahweh had been vindicated. This brings us to the impact of the Deuteronomistic movement.

### Deuteronomy and the Josianic reform

The patriarchal, exodus and conquest traditions all seemed to suggest a graceful God.<sup>7</sup> But what if loyalty to Yahweh was compromised? During the time of the great Mesopotamian empires, Israel's precarious political situation imposed a religious balancing act onto its rulers. As the Omri dynasty shows, their religious commitments were not very profound in any case. Some elites became wealthy. A wrong sense of security, laxity in public justice, and syncretistic tendencies were the result. The Levites abhorred these aberrations. Beginning with Elijah and Elisha, Northern prophets began to castigate them.

Hosea, a prophet of the North, had linked the paradigm with Yahweh's love for Israel (12:9) and his exclusive claim on Israel (13:4). The desert experience was now interpreted as a period of bridal innocence and purity (cf. Jer. 2, Ez. 20) – in contrast to the later depiction of the desert journey as a series of instances of insubordination. Yahweh's judgment would take the form of a return to Egypt (8:13) and restoration the form of a return from Egypt and Assyria (11:11). All that was before the fall of Samaria. After the event the Deuteronomistic (Levite) version of these sentiments came into their own.

<sup>7</sup> All biblical historiography "refrains throughout from presenting the Egyptian bondage in conformity with the conventional model, in which all suffering inflicted upon Israel is divine penalty for sin ... Whatever significance is attached to the enslavement itself consists solely in the blessings which are to succeed it ..." (Loewenstamm 1992:25).

Deuteronomy is probably the product of Levites, who had always been conservative in their total dedication to Yahwist traditions. That they came from the North is evidenced by the fact that Yahweh is defined as the God who led Israel out of Egypt. The collapse of the Northern kingdom in 721 BC and the dispersal of the Israelites by the Assyrians confirmed their worst apprehensions. Fleeing south, they brought the exodus-covenant-conquest paradigm to Jerusalem.

The relevance of their message after 721 BC seemed to be clear: repent lest the same fate will befall you too! But there is no indication that it found immediate acceptance. For Southerners, the Northerners had been overtaken by the punishment they deserved, and the Southern tradition had been vindicated. Psalm 78 gives expression of these sentiments: the Northern salvific story is acknowledged, but due to Israel's sin, Yahweh rejected Ephraim and its sanctuary (56-60), chose Judah instead, put the Davidic dynasty in place and established his sanctuary on Mount Zion (67-72). It was not until the political situation in the South had changed sufficiently to make the story amenable to the Southern leaders that it came into its own. That was when King Josiah adopted it as the magna carta of his reform.

If we accept the late dating of the Yahwist, it was only now, not during the Davidic-Solomonic era, that the merger of the traditions took place. Somehow the proponents of the Deuteronomistic approach seized the opportunity to bring the document under the attention of the king when the latter gave orders to repair the temple (2 Ki. 22:3ff, 10ff). Whether the reported conversion of Josiah was genuine or not, the situation was right for the document. There was a pan-Israelite political agenda and the stipulations of Deuteronomy, the centralisation of the cult in particular, suited Josiah just fine (Schmitt 1982:74). That the kingship was incorporated into, and thus made subject to, the Mosaic law also served to provide legitimacy to the throne.

For Deuteronomy the exodus-covenant-conquest tradition is, of course, absolutely fundamental. In fact, it was the Deuteronomistic movement which was responsible for its elevation to the status of the foundational creed of the Jewish people. These Levite preachers never tired of emphasising the incredible privilege of Israel being the chosen people of God. This privilege was based on the promise of the land to the patriarchs, the exodus, the journey through the desert, the Sinaitic covenant, and the gift of the promised land. All these elements highlighted one single message: Yahweh's unbelievable choice of this particular nation to be

his covenant partner. These sentiments are beautifully expressed in Psalm 136.

However, this privilege was subject to extremely harsh conditions: exclusive loyalty to Yahweh, and absolute obedience to the Sinaitic law. Disloyalty and transgression had led to the demise of the Northern Kingdom, and the same fate would surely overcome the South if it repeated these inexcusable mistakes. The undeserved and inexplicable divine calling demanded nothing less than total human submission and dedication. This heart-rending message did not fail to make an impression – an impression which is hard to escape even today. But certainly it was something entirely different from the modern principles of liberation and emancipation. On the contrary, following earlier examples (Ex. 23:20ff), the Deuteronomic school developed a highly legalistic and exclusivistic dogma which went to the extreme of demanding genocide (Dt. 7; Dt. 20).

For Deuteronomy, the promise to the fathers, the exodus as a liberative event, and the giving of the land only provided the framework for a covenant which was based on strict reciprocity. And the human part was tied to keeping the covenantal code to the letter. Although the argument was powerfully grounded in the personal reciprocal commitment between Yahweh and Israel, the emphasis clearly shifted to the law as the criterion of such a commitment. The gratuity of the relationship implied an obligation which the covenant people of God could only neglect at their peril: recognition of other gods and transgression of the law would inevitably lead to its eradication from the surface of the earth.<sup>8</sup>

That liberation and human rights were not the issue is also demonstrated clearly by the Josianic reform itself. True, Josiah tried to utilise an opportune moment to throw off the shackles of the traditional oppressors of Israel in Egypt and Mesopotamia and re-establish the Davidic empire. But national sovereignty is not the same as popular liberation with human rights and all. The Northern territories were conquered; all Canaanite and syncretistic cults were liquidated; their holy places, including the sanctuary at Bethel, were destroyed (2 Ki. 23:14f, 19); their priests were executed; Yahwist priests scattered at "high places" in Judah were moved to Jerusalem; local sanctuaries and altars were desecrated and demolished; even the old family feast of the passah was centralised in Jerusalem (2

<sup>8</sup> Collins speaks of Wellhausen's and Von Rad's "Lutheran" preoccupations when these scholars link the law with the covenant. I cannot see the point. Certainly the covenant is based on reciprocal commitment and Israel's commitment is expressed in the form of the law. And by the time of the Deuteronomy, at the latest, the validity of the covenant had been made conditional on Israel's obedience to the law.

Ki. 23:21-23). Certainly there is no resemblance whatsoever to a modern human rights culture.

### Prophecy before and during the exile

When the catastrophes of 598 and 587 BC had struck, the Deuteronomic message seemed to have been vindicated for the second time. So Deuteronomic theology became accepted orthodoxy (Donner 1986:417). It can be found in certain Psalms (81, 106), the entire Deuteronomistic history (Joshua to 2 Kings, and once again modified by Chronicles), as well as in apocalyptic writings (Dan. 9:1-19). In later Judaism it is recited with predictable regularity. As we have seen, however, it is the covenant-law part of this complex which became dominant (Levenson 1993:95). The exodus, as part of the sacred story, came to represent the insignia of the chosen people of God, but it was the unsurpassable privilege of the gift, and the mortal threat of the demand of the covenant, that mattered.

However, old certainties had been shattered by the national catastrophes. A number of alternatives to Deuteronomistic orthodoxy emerged. Some of these utilised the exodus-conquest motif, others not. The historical primacy of the patriarchal promises became important at this stage, probably because this paradigm was based on God's gratuity rather than the legal demands of the covenant. New paradigms, speaking of the "gathering" of the dispersed, or Yahweh's sparing of a "remnant", also seem to have offered more comfort at the time (Mi. 2:12). In exilic prophecy the motif of the return to Jerusalem takes up elements of the royal paradigm, namely the triumphant entry of the emperor into his capital, rather than elements of the exodus-conquest tradition. Deutero-Isaiah is the most prominent example of those who tried to transcend this paradigm.

But before we come to that, we have to deal with prophets belonging to the first period of the exile. Jeremiah, who is close to the Deuteronomic school, uses the exodus tradition profusely, at least in the early days of his prophecy (Jer. 2:5-7; 7:21ff; 11:21ff; 16:14; 32:17ff; etc.). In line with Deuteronomy, he defines Yahweh as the God who brought Israel out of Egypt, and contrasts this God with other deities or idols; he emphasises the covenant and its stipulations; he uses the Hosean image of husband and wife; he mentions the constant apostasy of the fathers in the desert. In Jeremiah 32:17-23 we have the entire story of Israel from creation to conquest as found in the Yahwist.

But Jeremiah also prophesied that a new tradition, based upon the return of the exiles, would supersede the exodus-tradition (16:14; 23:7f; 31:31ff). There would also be a new covenant to supersede the Sinai covenant, based on forgiveness and accessibility of Yahweh to the whole nation, not just the intermediary (31:31-34). Remarkably, Jeremiah again did not link the exodus with his repeated and urgent warnings not to depend on the military power of the Egyptians or to migrate to Egypt (37:7; 42:44) – echoing Isaiah in this regard. He also did not connect his prophecy against Egypt with the exodus (16:14ff). It seems as if the Egypt of the ancient creed and the Egypt of current politics had nothing to do with each other. The exodus had become part of the cultic definition of the relation between Yahweh and Israel. Political significance had vanished from the formula.

If Schmid's thesis, as taken up by Van Seters (1994:458) and others, is right in their post-Deuteronomic, exilic dating of the Yahwist, perhaps this author (or redactor) wanted to restore the balance by offering an alternative to the Deuteronomic version (Schmid; van Seters 1994:465). He tells a story rather than hammering in a dogma; he takes sin out of the narrow confines of the covenant and places it into universal human history; he speaks of Yahweh's willingness to make a new beginning again and again, notably with the patriarchs; he restores the gratuity of Yahweh's relationship with Israel, as manifest in the exodus and the promise of the land; his Moses is a prophet, the mediator of God's word, but also an intercessor and mediator; he emphasises the promise of Yahweh, rather than divine judgment and the condemnation of the transgressor; in line with the pre-exilic prophets, he does not emphasise the cult, but justice and righteousness. Obviously one had to continue with life after the catastrophe, and the Yahwist may have tried to make it bearable by emphasising, once again, Yahweh's redemptive intentions.

Ezekiel 20:1-42 rehashes the Deuteronomic argument, with the exception that Yahweh would now lead Israel back into the desert, let her "pass under his rod" and "bring her back into the bond of the covenant" (20:36-38). The prospects of a new encounter of a purged and united Israel with her holy God on Mount Zion are opened up (20:40-44). Obviously Ezekiel lays the foundations for the priestly restoration.

In Ezekiel 23:2-49 the metaphor of the two sister prostitutes Oholi (Samaria) and Oholibah (Jerusalem), who defile themselves with their pagan lovers, provides us with an interesting redefinition of the exodus paradigm. Now Egypt is the scene not of oppression and liberation, but of idolatry and defilement (23:3, 27), though it is not entirely clear whether

this does not also refer to the diplomatic efforts of late Judaic kings. Ezekiel mentions the pre-exodus oppression of Israel in his prophecy against Egypt (29:6f), but the threat of an exile as punishment for sin is now directed against Egypt. Egypt will be destroyed, its inhabitants led into exile and brought back after 40 years, albeit only to Upper Egypt so that they would not again become a menace to Israel (29:10-16).

The considerable prophecies against Egypt in Ezekiel 30 and 31 do not mention the exodus, nor the exile for that matter. In fact, they are blatant prophetic propaganda for the Babylonian overlords. There is nothing but praise for Nebuchadnezzar and the glory of Babylon, whose side Yahweh has taken (30:10, 25); there is nothing but derision for the Egyptians, their most formidable enemies at the time, and Assyria, their former great enemy, as an example of what will happen to Egypt (31:3-11). "The most ruthless of all foreign nations" is not a reproach, but a praise name for the greatness of the Babylonians. All this is important for our topic because, if there ever had been a spirit of rebellion connected with the exodus, this had completely evaporated by the time of Ezekiel's prophecies. Certainly we have now entered the era of Jewish submissiveness, which began with Jeremiah at the latest, and of the ideological legitimization of the powers that be (cf Bar. 1:10ff, 2:11ff for a late post-exilic example).

Deutero-Isaiah also legitimates the regime of a pagan overlord, but this time it is Cyrus, the Persian conqueror of Babylon (Is. 44:28; 45:1-13). I cannot find any evidence for the general assumption among scholars that Deutero-Isaiah speaks of a new exodus (Schmitt 1982:89; cf Durham 1995). Of the texts cited by Schmitt (40:3-11; 41:17-20; 42:14-17; 43:1-7, 16-21, 48:20f) only one (43:16-17) refers to the exodus at all. Moreover, it does so with the explicit intention of superseding this tradition with the new acts which are to be expected from Yahweh: "Cease to dwell on days gone by and to brood over past history. Here and now I will do a new thing; this moment it will break from the bud. Can you not perceive it?" (43:18f).

That Deutero-Isaiah would speak in the idiom of his religious community is self-evident. An example is Isaiah 52:12. What is surprising, however, is not how much, but how little he actually utilises the exodus-conquest language. Nothing would have been more natural for a constituency steeped so deeply in the exodus-passah tradition than to apply this tradition to a situation which was almost identical with that of the Israelite slaves in Egypt. One would have expected the prophet to utilise this tradition in as powerful and unmistakable terms as we find it in Deuteronomy before him and the Priestly writer after him. Instead, one

gets the impression that Deutero-Isaiah wanted to correct or supersede such a theology.

If that were the case, what could have been the reason? A feasible conjecture is that, during the exile, Deuteronomic orthodoxy had become a painful, hopeless message, a message without consolation: the destruction of Israel, threatened by Deuteronomy for such a long time, had indeed come upon Judah. There was no guarantee at all that Israel's fortune's would be reversed. So Deutero-Isaiah did not appeal to the election, the exodus and the covenant. The tradition Deutero-Isaiah falls back on, and which he develops in a most original and powerful way, is the sovereignty of Yahweh as the cosmic creator who could overcome the forces of chaos and evil and recreate Israel from scratch.

### The post-exilic restoration

With Deutero-Isaiah yet another remarkable development set in, namely the mythologisation of the narrative. Deutero-Isaiah was not afraid of utilising Ancient Near Eastern creation mythology in his witness to the power of the Creator God to make all things new (cf. Lamberty-Zielinsky 1993). According to this mythology the god of life overpowers the god of death; the god of order overpowers the god of chaos. This approach also found its way into a number of psalms (74; 89). But "the historization of the myth is also, simultaneously, the mythologization of history" (Loewenstamm 1992:292; cf. Schmitt 1982:96). Now the overpowering of the primeval ocean, representing chaos and evil, at the beginning of times is mirrored in the overpowering of the Reed Sea at the occasion of the exodus and the overpowering of the waters of the Jordan at the occasion of the conquest (Cf. Wagenaar in Vervenne 1996:461ff).

Three fundamental beginnings! And these beginnings were invoked by the returnees in the hope for a new beginning here and now. The power of a God who had subdued the chaos waters in the mythological past could also overcome the powers of chaos now and lead Israel into a new future (cf. Ps. 114). It seems as if, at a time when human effort fails to attain what ought to be, its validity must at least be expressed in mythological form.

The Priestly School (P) developed this line into a systematic soteriology (cf. Gottwald 1993:277; Schmitt 1982:81ff). While its creation narrative (Gn. 1) represented a fundamental transformation of the Ancient Near East myths of creation (masterly depicted by Levenson 1988), it is still a myth. A myth expresses a truth in the form of a narrative which is pro-

jected to the beginning of times to indicate its validity for all times. The truth which P was interested in was a wholesome cosmic order. God's decree had brought about an ordered universe; God's decree had re-established this order after the great flood; God's decree had split the Reed Sea to stand like walls on both sides for the Israelites to pass into safety; God's decree had established the holy place, the sanctuary, and the holy time, the sabbath. God's decree had laid down the moral and ritual order. It was all one package – and blessed were the people who acknowledged this order and allowed themselves to become part of it.

So again the exodus tradition was built into a system of meaning which legitimated a social system, in this case the theocratic regime of the high priest in Jerusalem, which was a religious satrapy of the Persian empire. Note how in Psalm 105 the elaborate recounting of the story of Israel has become the motivation for keeping the law (105:45). Exodus and conquest can now be applied directly to the moral and ritual implications of the exclusiveness of the relationship of Israel to Yahweh: "You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices" (Lev. 18:3).

Taking up Deuteronomic motives, P centred the (moral and ritual) implications of being the people of God around the idea of holiness: "I am Yahweh who brought you out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy" (Lev. 11:45). Make no mistake: that was the motive of the exodus: "to be your God" (cf. Lev. 22:33)! The character of Israel is to be derived from the character of Yahweh, and the character of Yahweh is defined by the exodus. Therefore the contents of the moral law can occasionally be grounded directly in the exodus: Israelites are to love foreigners "as they love themselves" because they had been aliens in Egypt (Lev. 19:33-34; cf. Dt. 24:17-18); they are to be honest in measuring standards (Lev. 19:35f); they are not supposed to take interest (Lev. 25:35-38) and they are not supposed to enslave fellow Israelites (Lev. 25:39-43).

The stipulations on slavery are particularly important for our theme (cf. also Ex. 21:2-11 and Dt. 15:12-18). If an Israelite had sold himself, because he could not cope with his debts, he was to be treated like a hired servant, to retain the right of redemption by a relative, and to be set free in the year of the Jubilee (Lev. 25:47-55). By virtue of the exodus an Israelite is the possession of Yahweh and cannot be the possession of a slave owner. Obviously this does not apply to people from other nations, nor to temporary residents living within Israel, who can be bought and enslaved for life, even willed to children (Lev. 25:44-46). Apparently this ruling did

not contradict the law on aliens, because the latter were supposed to be free, while slaves were purchased and became the property of their owners.

Once again it is clear that the exodus did not signify a general principle of emancipation, but a change of overlord and owner, albeit from a cruel and unjust, to a merciful and just owner. Being the people of Yahweh indeed restored the proud status of the nomad (or peasant or citizen) with which we began our deliberations above. To belong to Yahweh implied an unsurpassable honour: "I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of Egypt so that you would no longer be slaves to the Egyptians; I broke the bars of your yoke and enabled you to walk with heads held high" (Lev. 26:13). But this is something entirely different from the modern concept of emancipation. And the repetition of the Deuteronomic conditionality in Leviticus 26 shows that this high calling implied a daunting responsibility to live up to the demanding standards of this relationship or face the consequences.

Post-exilic prophets picked up the exodus motif either to repeat the Deuteronomistic accusation (Mi. 6:3f), or to promise a glorious future (Mi. 7:10). In Ha 2:5 the latter motif is applied to the hopeful Zerubbabel. Zec 10:6-11 shows how the motif could be used in a wild combination of metaphors: the gathering (from Egypt and Assyria) and the mythological overpowering of the sea, but now interpreted as the "sea of trouble" and associated with the Nile. The rationale always remains the same: either reproach or reassurance.

In the mean time the exodus tradition had found a prominent place in liturgical texts such as the Passah ritual (Ex. 12:1-35), the decalogue (Ex. 20:2; Dt. 5:6; Ps. 82:9f), the so-called shema (Dt. 6:4-15) and the harvest festival (Dt. 26:1-11). The exodus event lost its historical significance and became a "praise name" for Yahweh.<sup>9</sup> The annual seder celebration must be considered to play a role in Judaism similar in significance to that of Christmas, Good Friday or Easter in Christianity. Through the liturgy the exodus became a permanent and constitutive feature of the self-understanding of Judaism after the exile – and up to the present day. Much reflection was invested in its significance – even in the significance

<sup>9</sup> "Neither the victories of Merneptah, whose stele boasts that Israel has been destroyed forever, nor the vestiges of Egyptian hegemony in Canaan, which persisted until the mid-eleventh century B.C.E., nor any other historical data which might tend to detract from the Exodus, are given any notice at all." (Loewenstamm 1992:233). According to this author (1992:241) quite a number of texts do not mention the Egyptians at all – the parting of the sea alone would be sufficient to achieve eternal renown for Israel's God. See also Schmitt 1982:96ff.

of smaller details of the narrative. However, it is interesting to note that in later Judaism the exodus could also be overshadowed by another motif, the sacrifice of Isaac, in the interpretation of the passah. Indeed, Isaac's sacrifice could become "the new exodus" in these contexts (Levenson 1993:173ff).

## Later Judaism

The prolongation of the salvific narrative is an old phenomenon. Psalm 80, for instance, prolongs the exodus-covenant-conquest complex to the Solomonic era (Hieke in Vervenne 1996:551ff). In later Judaism the classical Israelite salvation history is often recited as a long and flat series of events including the fathers, exodus, covenant, conquest, sin, prophetic threat, exile, the return from exile and some historical elements beyond that. Conversely, any single element of the story can be selected where it fits a particular situation. "Vielmehr steht die Erinnerung an die Ereignisse der Geschichte als ein Sammelbecken zur Verfügung, aus dem verschiedene Elemente zum Lobpreis oder zur Klage oder zur Belehrung eingesetzt werden können, wobei die Intention die Form bestimmt." (Hieke in Vervenne 1996:558).

However, the law and the consequences of its transgression remain central. In 1 Enoch 89-90, for example, the story begins with Joseph and goes via exodus, desert, Sinai, conquest, judges, temple, the two kingdoms, the destruction of Jerusalem, the exile and return, the Hellenistic period, the Maccabean revolt, and on to the establishment of the messianic kingdom. Such narrations aim at a complete rendering of the sacred story, but the law is the pivot. Note, by the way, that this growing narrative knows no principle of canonical closure.

But there are also a number of variations, adaptations and selections from the story. Wisdom literature, for instance, can ignore the historical paradigms altogether, including the exodus-conquest paradigm, and focus, instead, on the cosmic order. Sirach 16:24-17:24 begins with the Priestly creation story (boundaries, orderly behaviour of the celestial bodies, and the teeming variety of living creatures), continues with a general anthropology (combining the Yahwist motif of creation from the earth, the Priestly motif of the image of God and a new rendering of God's "Noahitic" covenant with all humankind), then the allocation of (divine) "rulers" to other nations (cf Ps. 82) in contrast to the immediacy and transparency of Israel to Yahweh as his own possession (which here



plays the role of defining Israel's identity), and ends with the ultimate retribution of wickedness and the opportunity of repentance.

Again it is clear that the motifs of order and covenant are central. Israel's uniqueness is placed into the context of a general cosmology and anthropology. The historical paradigms – patriarchal promises, exodus-conquest, the Davidic monarchy – do not figure at all, nor does the expectation of an eschatological transformation. At best the old tradition is utilised as a quarry of examples for personal excellence. A good example is Sirach 44-50. Again the law is at the centre. In the case of Moses (45:1ff), his signs and his boldness in the presence of the pharaoh are praised, also the theophany and the law are mentioned, but the exodus does not figure. Moreover, Aaron – with his vestments, sacrificial duties, and enemies – takes considerably more limelight than Moses does (45:6ff).

Orthodox post-exilic Judaism is best represented by Jubilees (cf van Ruiten in Vervenne 1996:567ff; Wintermute in Charlesworth 1985:35ff). Originating some time between 160-140 BC, the document pretends to contain revelations to Moses during the 40 days he spent on the mountain. It describes the pre-history of Israel leading up to that point, but the emphasis lies on the prophecies of Israel's apostasy and return. It is "primitive history rewritten from the standpoint of law" (Charles quoted by Wintermute in Charlesworth 1985: 37). There is no interest in eschatology or messianism; the author expects renewed blessings to flow from obedience to the law.

Jubilees is fiercely particularist. Israel is the chosen race, marked by circumcision and destined to share the sabbath and other festivals with God. The Passover (Jub. 49) and the sabbath (Jub. 50) figure prominently. Everything gentile is rejected and condemned. The uncircumcised are "children of destruction" (Job 15:26). It is also vindictive. For each Israelite son thrown into the Nile by the Egyptians (Ex. 1:22), 1000 Egyptians were thrown into the sea at the time of the exodus (Jub. 48:14. cf Wisd. Sol. 18-19). On the other hand, Jubilees engages in intense speculations about the origins of evil. The moral derailments occurring during salvation history are due to Mastema, the devil, and his hordes. Humans are helpless victims. Can the gentiles, we ask, then be blamed?

But there is at least some evidence of a sensitised conscience about Israel's privileges. Clearly the holy narrative is rewritten to provide the needed rationalisations. Early tradition simply took for granted that the Israelites were entitled to drive out the Canaanites. But if Yahweh was a God of justice, this needed an explanation sooner or later. In Deutero-

nomic times religious abominations and atrocities, which would contaminate the purity of Israelite religion, were cited as reasons for the destruction of the Canaanites (cf Ezra 9:11 and especially Wisd. Sol. 12:3ff).

However, in the mean time Israel had also been driven out of the land because of its sin. So Jubilees, written during the time of the Maccabees, had to find other reasons in the tradition: after the tower of Babylon, Canaan, the son of Ham, had been assigned his territory in northwest Africa (Jub. 9:1f), but fell in love with the country assigned to Israel and occupied it illegally. Thus the curse of Noah on Ham fell on Canaan (Jub. 10:27-34). This is ideological legitimisation of ethnic cleansing at its worst!

We note in passing that the special privileges of Judah, and especially of Levi, are also legitimised, this time by utilising the patriarchal tradition: Jacob wanted Abraham to come to Bethel to join him in religious observances there, but Abraham called Jacob to the South; Jacob took these two sons along and they were blessed by Abraham (Job 31:1-32). Similarly the privileged position of Jerusalem is legitimated: when Jacob wanted to build a sanctuary in Bethel, he was told that "this is not the place" (Jub. 32:16f). In contrast, Mount Zion was declared to be "at the midst of the navel of the earth" (Jub. 8:19). One needs to see all this against the political situation of the time to understand its ideological character.

A more general observation concerning this period is that the scope and the emphasis of salvation history tends to move forward in time. We can almost postulate the emergence of a new core story. Not the exodus but the giving of the law now becomes the point of departure, followed by the sin of the fathers, the prophetic threat, the dispersion, and the post-exilic restoration, or the future glory of Israel. Patriarchal promises, exodus and conquest now figure as pre-history, or they are included as a matter of routine (e.g. Bar 1:10-2:10). But they can also be left out completely. Tobit 14:4b-7, for instance, begins with the threat of the prophets, then recounts the sin, exile, return and gathering of Israel, and ends with the salvation of humankind.

Apocalypics shows the same basic tendencies. The genre is the product of intense religious crises, emerging from a kind of oppression that threatens to undo the system of meaning altogether. At times the old salvation history is recited, but it is overshadowed, and almost rendered obsolete, by the concern for cosmic transformation on the one hand, and the fate of the individual sinner beyond death on the other. For a reconstructed cosmos, the royal-imperial paradigm is utilised: the messiah, the city, the temple (e.g. 1 Henoch 45ff). However, the "Son of David" is re-

placed with the pre-existent "Son of Man". Not the political leader, but the morally authentic human being is the mediator of divine presence and blessing in the eschatological future. God's ultimate judgment will determine the fate of righteous and sinful individuals (e.g. 1 Henoch 37ff). Again it is the law which is at the centre of the paradigm. The chosen people of God still figure prominently because they have the law, but the horizon has widened sufficiently to arise interest in the fate of humankind as a whole.

When combined with the transgression-exile motif, the liberative thrust of the exodus-conquest tradition could be turned on its head. Baruch, writing at about 200-150 BC, imagines that the exiles collected money for sacrifices in Jerusalem and asked the priesthood there to pray that the life of Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar might "last as long as the heavens" and the Jews might live under their protection and "give them long service" (1:10ff). Because the Jews had brought their humiliating situation upon themselves by their sin, liberation was not on the cards. The appeal to the "Lord God of Israel, who brought your people out of Egypt with a mighty hand ..." underpins not a cry for freedom, but the request that those who have taken them into exile might be favourably disposed towards them, "so that the whole earth may know that you are the Lord our God, who has named Israel and his posterity as your own" (Bar. 2:11-15).

So what became of the exodus motif under conditions of imperialist oppression? Not a proud and dangerous memory of resistance and revolt, but a groping for the meaning of the special status and right of existence of a humiliated Israel as Yahweh's own people among the nations of the world – and that against the backdrop of the absolute validity of Yahweh's holy law.

## The New Testament

The exodus tradition as such is not utilised as a soteriological paradigm in the New Testament at all. Where authors refer to it, they do so for other reasons. Matthew 2:13-2:23, for instance, is a typical midrash. It quotes Hosea 11:1 and utilises the phrase "my Son" for Jesus, rather than for Israel. There is a slight structural resemblance between the two stories in that the "hero" is taken out of danger in Palestine to safety in Egypt. But it goes no further than that. The theory that Matthew's gospel is an attempt to rewrite the Jesus story in terms of the Moses story is not very convincing. If that were the case, he could certainly have been more explicit about his agenda.

In my view the affinities can be explained much better by assuming that Matthew and his sources quite naturally thought in terms of the Jewish tradition. At a time of intense conflict with Jewish orthodoxy the new religion tried to make the Jesus story acceptable to Jewish readers by filling ancient and sacred concepts with new contents. This new content amounts to a new kind of salvation history. A deliberate utilisation of the exodus-motif as a liberative event is not visible.

Luke is interested in historical sequences. But he utilises the Israelite salvation history only as background to a decisive homiletical point. In Acts 7 the context is the death of Stephen, the first martyr. Luke follows the story up to the building of the temple, only to declare the (destroyed) temple to be theologically obsolete, and to end with a scathing attack on the Jewish hardness of heart, manifest once again in the death of "the righteous one". In Acts 13 he offers a more abbreviated form of the salvation history leading straight into the "Son of David" motif and via the Baptist on to the Jesus story. In both cases the exodus-covenant-conquest paradigm is nothing but part of the historically significant, but now obsolete pre-history of the Christ-event.

Paul uses the paradigm only once, namely in 1 Corinthians 10:1-5. This is a typical midrash which utilises the exodus and desert stories in a revamped "Christian" form to warn the Corinthians against spiritual security. This is reminiscent of the Deuteronomic exhortation. There is no sign of a liberative intent. Jude 1:5 and Hebrews 3:15-4:11 have a similar thrust. In the latter case the conquest is linked with the sabbath. Hebrews also refers to the paradigm but only to show that Christ, the son of God, supersedes Moses, the servant of God (3:1-6). In chapter 8:7ff a quotation from Jeremiah 31:31-34 is used to show that the old covenant is now obsolete. In chapter 11 the entire salvation history of Israel is utilised to exhort the readers to follow the fathers in their different manifestations of faith. This is akin to Sirach 44ff. In Revelation 11:8 Egypt and Sodom are metaphors for the corrupt world (= Rome). Nowhere does the exodus figure as a liberative political event. That is not a particularly impressive harvest for the hermeneutics of liberation theology! The motif is not even used where one would have expected it:

- where the decalogue is quoted (Lk. 18:18ff, the rich ruler and the good Samaritan);
- in narratives where Jesus is reported to have calmed the sea (Mt. 8:23ff and 14:22ff; Mk. 4:35ff and 6:45ff; Jn. 6:16ff);
- in 2 Corinthians 11:26 where Paul relates his perils at sea;

- in similar narratives of dangers at sea in Acts, and
- most importantly, in the story of the procession into Jerusalem and the cleansing of the temple.

If this is the story of a failed liberation, as radical exegetes assume, it would have been the right place to quote the exodus. Paul also does not use the paradigm metaphorically when he discusses Christian freedom (e.g. in Gal. 3). The Book of Revelation utilises traditional motifs such as Sodom, Egypt and Babylon as symbols for the seat of evil, but the hero is the "lamb that was slain", not Moses. Even the "song of Moses" in Revelations 15:3f hardly utilises the original (Ex. 15) and avoids any reference to the exodus.

The passah was dropped very deliberately by the New Testament both as a ritual and a theological motif. The only exception is 1 Corinthians 5:6ff, where the emphasis lies on the yeast as a metaphor for sexual immorality. The fact that the passah is often used for dating an important event in the New Testament, without linking it with the theological content of the passah, indicates that the passah was believed to have been superseded by the Christ-event. In Luke the 12-year old teaches in the temple during a passah festival (Lk. 2:41); in John 2 the cleansing of the temple takes place at the occasion of a passah, as does the feeding of the 5000 (Jn. 6:4), and the washing of the feet (13:1). Although the crucifixion is supposed to have taken place before or during the passah festival in all four gospels, this fact is not utilised theologically. Jesus also did not identify his body and blood with the slaughtered passah-lamb at the last supper, as one could have expected, but with the bread and wine eaten during the meal. The motif of the lamb is taken up in various documents, but usually it refers to the sin offering.

All this cannot be an accident. It would seem that the early church was unable to relate the imagery of the exodus-conquest paradigm to the Christ event in any meaningful way. There is no sign of hostility against it; it is simply ignored. Why that? One could argue that the early Christians had to downplay the political motives of their origin after their leader had been executed by the Romans for insurrection, and again when serious persecutions set in. Many texts indeed witness to a mood of submissiveness during these times, but this cannot be the sole reason.

Much more important is the meaning which the exodus paradigm had acquired in Jewish circles over the centuries. As we have repeatedly shown, the exodus had nothing to do with a general principle of liberation. The exodus was understood as the historical event which gave concrete

manifestation to the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel. It defined Yahweh as the God of Israel and Israel as the people of Yahweh. The rationale was not that some people were liberated from oppression – which certainly was a welcome implication – but that God chose one nation and bound it to himself, while the other nations remained bound to other spiritual masters and forces. "I am Yahweh, your God, who has brought you out of Egypt; you shall have no other gods before my face" (Decalogue).

This simply does not apply to any other nation, community, group or individual in human history. If Christianity had been implanted into this tradition as Paul wants to make us believe in Romans 11:17-24, all Christians would have had to become Jews, albeit as members of a particular Jewish sect. There would have been no essential difference between Christians and Jewish proselytes. But in terms of his own theology, as expressed by his formulations in Galatians 3:26-4:7, Philippians 3, and the Deutero-Pauline letters, such as Ephesians 2, Paul was inconsistent and wrong on this point.

According to Christianity there was a new foundational event: not the exodus and conquest of Israel, but the death and resurrection of Jesus. This event constituted a new authentic humanity: not the descendants of Abraham, but the community of Jews and Gentiles, who were invited to participate in the life of the risen Christ through the power of the Spirit. New rituals identified these believers with authentic humanity: not circumcision and passah, but baptism and holy communion. This new identity did not invalidate, but superseded the previous one. Death and resurrection had to be seen in the context of the transformation of "this age" into the "age to come" as expected by Apocalypics. We have seen that Apocalypics has no use for the exodus paradigm either.

But even in Judaism exodus and conquest were seen to be concrete manifestations of a relationship between Yahweh and Israel which was more adequately expressed in terms of the covenant and the torah. Judaism emphasised righteousness, sin and retribution – whether in this world or the next – and this is the motif to which the early church, whether Jewish or Gentile, could relate most immediately. Only that, in the Christian case, the conditional acceptance of the Deuteronomic covenant was superseded by God's unconditional suffering acceptance of the unacceptable as manifest in the cross of Christ!

## CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

The exodus-conquest paradigm presents us with extraordinary hermeneutical problems. The historical event underlying the tradition is buried beneath a thick layer of subsequent interpretations, extensions, theologisations, ideologisations, even mythologisations. Even in biblical times its tangible history consists of a series of before-the-text readings. Today we have two before-the-text readings of significance, the ancient one of Judaism and the recent one of liberation theology (cf the debate between Collins 1995 and Levenson 1996). The Jewish reading confronts us with the problems of identity and social cohesion, while the liberation-theological reading raises the issues of liberation and resource allocation (land). We shall deal with them one by one.

### The theological problem of identity and social cohesion

Since Deuteronomic times Jewish identity has been defined by a story which is composed of the promises to the Patriarchs, the exodus, the Sinai covenant (including the torah), and the conquest of Canaan. As we have seen above, the exodus was not seen as a case of general human liberation. Rather, it was taken to be Yahweh's sovereign act of extricating the Israelites, as his chosen people, from the oppressive network of international relationships with the intention of binding it solely to his person and subjecting it solely to his own law, the torah. In other words, the exodus defines Yahweh as Israel's God and Israel as Yahweh's people. This also means that the covenant is fundamental; exodus and conquest are nothing but prototypical manifestations of Yahweh's commitment to his side of the covenant.

Collective identity is a human, not only a Jewish problem. It typically emerges in times where an external threat calls for solidarity, where a social formation sets out to achieve an ambitious goal, or where social construction calls for a common system of meaning. Examples of nationalistic self-consciousness abound: the Nama call themselves Khoi-Khoi, meaning people of peoples; the Zulu derive their ethnic name from their word for heaven; the ancient Greeks called non-Greeks barbarians; the history-making impacts of the Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, British, Russian, French, German, Italian and Afrikaner (apartheid) versions are all well known. Neither is the phenomenon restricted to ethnic criteria. In Marxism it is the proletariat which has a historically unique calling, in lib-

eralism it is the entrepreneurs. Similar attitudes can be observed in Christian denominations and many world religions, notably Islam.

Sociologically speaking, identity leads us into the area of in-group-outgroup attitudes. For social cohesion to gel, a group needs a common system of meaning. It consists of a set of assumptions, values, norms, procedures, roles and statuses which functions as a set of conditions for acceptance and belonging. The affirmation of one's right of existence and one's authority to act is subject to one's conformity with this set of conditions. Those who do not fulfil these conditions constitute the outgroup. They can be strangers or outsiders, guests or enemies, but in all cases they do not belong.

And those who do not belong are, in crude or subtle terms, less than human – either wheat or weed! It is interests which guide the relationship of the ingroup to outgroups, from school classes and street gangs to economic agreements and military pacts. If the outsiders constitute a useful resource, such as labour, they can be enslaved or exploited; if they control other resources, which the ingroup needs or desires, they can be conquered and plundered; if they constitute a threat they can be liquidated; if they are too powerful, the ingroup strengthens its defences, attempts isolation or seeks accommodation.

Oppression and exploitation provide the dynamics of much of the last ten thousand years of human history. Genocide and ethnic cleansing, as intended in texts such Exodus 23, Deuteronomy 7 and Deuteronomy 20, have been attempted again and again: the ancient Assyrian destruction of Northern Israel and its neighbours; the Spanish and the American extermination of native Americans; the Dutch hunting down the San in Southern Africa; the Zulu driving the Sotho inland during the mfecane; the Turkish liquidation of the Armenians; the German extermination of the Jews; the Stalinist liquidation of the Russian kulaks; the Hutu extermination of the Tutsi in Rwanda; Serb ethnic cleansing in Bosnia.

In virtually all cases these ingroup attitudes find their legitimation in a religious or ideological system of meaning. Babylon was believed to be the city of the god Marduk; the Pharaoh and the Japanese emperor were believed to be of divine origin; British imperialists believed they were bringing true religion, enlightenment and civilisation to the rest of the world; Hitler believed to have been called by "destiny" to restructure the world under the domination of a master race; Marxists believed they were instruments of the historical dialectic; South African whites believed they were upholding Christian civilisation in Africa.

So the Israelite case is not something special – and it should not be treated as something special by those who have adopted the Old Testament as part of their canonical scriptures. If we allow the religious legitimization of group interests, even genocidal ambitions, to be part of God's own "history of salvation", we have lost the authority to subject other such tendencies to critique. If the religious and ideological legitimization of self-interest at the expense of the interests of others is wrong, it is as wrong in the Bible as it is wrong outside the Bible. The Bible is, and always has been, taken to be canonical precisely for its capacity to reveal the depravity and fallibility of human motivations, as much as for God's initiative of overcoming human depravity.

The infinite guilt, shame and embarrassment of the holocaust have caused many Christian theologians to retrieve the particularist Jewish heritage, link it with Paul's statements in Romans 9-11, and restore it to Christian legitimacy. I believe this to be wrong in principle. Perhaps Christians have reason to shut their mouths – for a long time, or forever – after what "Christians" have done to Jews over the centuries. One can even consider whether the Jews, or at least some of them, rather than the Christians, have played the role symbolised by the crucified Jesus, both in terms of their suffering and in terms of their attitude towards their enemies.<sup>10</sup>

But the most horrendous sins against the truth do not invalidate the truth, nor are the victims of such sins immune against a critique of their own assumptions. Exclusiveness, holy war and genocide are part of "holy" scriptures – common to Jews and Christians – and must be overcome from within that tradition. Exclusiveness contradicts the gospel of unconditional acceptance which Paul and his school (Eph. 2) have espoused with so much power of conviction. Where unconditional acceptance rules, there can be no privileged acceptance. Least of all can arrogance and vindictiveness – Jewish, Christian, or any other – be reconciled with the spirit and the commandment of Jesus to love one's enemies.

Of course, many modern Jewish thinkers are keenly aware of the problem of chosenness (cf Frank 1993), while there are many exclusivist Christian groups – perhaps the majority – who are not. Some Jews deny or play down Jewish exclusivism (Levenson 1996:5), while thousands of Christian sects believe that only they constitute the authentic people of God. But this does not make the principle less valid. Group

<sup>10</sup> This is the impression one gets when reading Maurice Friedman's book *Abraham Joshua Heschel and Elie Wiesel: You are my witnesses*. New York: Farrar-Strauss-Giroux.

identity and group cohesion as such are not wrong; in fact, they are indispensable. Cultural achievements and social interaction are unthinkable without social constructs and the "sacred canopies" located in collective consciousness. There must be common assumptions, values, norms, goals, procedures, statuses and roles. "Rootedness" can also be expressed in ritual (Golding in Frank 1993:229ff). There must be and will be distinctions between ingroup and outgroups. But the boundaries between the two must be permeable, otherwise the gospel of unconditional acceptance is lost.

There are four ways how outsiders can gain access to the acceptance and belonging of an ingroup, only one of which is acceptable from a Christian point of view.

- The first is benign dominance and salutary dependency. According to Gen. 12:1ff it is through Abraham (that is, through Israel, the Davidic king, the post-exilic high priest, the Jewish eschatological Messiah) that all nations would be blessed. Israel was predestined to become the world elite, its own king was to rule the world, from its own capital Jerusalem, with the salutary presence of its God in its own temple on Mount Zion. The pax Iudaica preceded the pax Romana by centuries and the pax Britannica by millennia. It is a powerful model of vertical relationships. The ingroup is dominant, the outgroup dependent. The problem is that human beings are sinners and positions of power tend to be abused. In fact, the hermeneutics of suspicion suggests that the entire model of benign dominance is a legitimization of elite group interests, even though it may have been internalised as salutary by the dependent.
- The second is incorporation. Outsiders are allowed to enter the ingroup on condition that they fulfil the conditions of entry. Acceptance entails conversion, that is, the abrogation of the original assumptions, values, norms, goals, procedures, roles and statuses of the outgroup in favour of those of the ingroup. This way was followed by Jewish proselytisers in the centuries preceding and following the birth of Christ. It was subsequently followed by Christian missionaries, as well as by Islam, liberalism, and Marxism. Here the ingroup simply expands its borders, without changing its identity. The attitudes towards outgroups, whatever they have been, also remain intact in principle.
- The third is the development of a higher loyalty. Sometimes the community cannot be transcended or replaced, but a higher and more inclusive level of group identity can emerge. One sometimes observes



the development of concentric horizons. At higher levels, space is created for various communities to belong to the ingroup, while at lower levels they continue to exclude each other. Exclusiveness at lower levels is not abolished or superseded by inclusiveness at higher levels. This phenomenon is important for nation building, but in the religious sphere it does not always work that way. Monotheism, for instance, logically seems to imply an all-embracing sense of belonging, a sense of a cosmic unity of all people, perhaps even all creatures. But in fact groups legitimate and absolutise their exclusivistic claims by referring to the only true God.

- The New Testament introduced a fourth approach: unconditional suffering acceptance of the unacceptable. In Ephesians 2, for example, cosmic unity is made possible because God substitutes human achievement with divine grace as the basis of acceptance. Unconditional acceptance should not be confused with indifference. The ingroup is as convinced of its truth claim and as committed to its mission as ever. However, the right of all people to make sense of their world and conduct their lives in freedom of conscience is acknowledged. They are accepted and tolerated as they are. But due to differences in what is perceived to be the truth, such acceptance implies suffering of the other. Tolerance is derived from the Latin word *tolere* (bearing a burden). Suffering again produces the urge to overcome the causes of suffering. This means that unconditional acceptance brings about an intense struggle for the truth, as well as an intense desire to overcome evil. I believe that this is the authentically Christian way.

All this has far-reaching repercussions. The biblical faith could never have developed into a world religion on the basis of the exodus-conquest paradigm. It is divine grace which makes Jews and Greeks, men and women, slaves and free part of the body of Christ (Gal. 3:26-28). There is nobody in all of humanity who could not, in principle, identify with this faith. Alas, in practice this is not the case – whether because of the inappropriate behaviour of Christians, the power of other identities, or the unwillingness to face the implications on the side of outsiders. But we cannot pursue this further.

All this deals with the formal side of the problem. The quality of the contents of what is deemed to be acceptable brings us to a second and quite distinct side of the problem. Note that all four ways involve a definition of what ought to be. Self-centred libertinism and post-modernist relativity, for which everything goes, are not on the cards. The question is not

whether there are boundaries to what is acceptable, but what it is that defines these boundaries.

The assumptions, values and norms that mark these boundaries can be determined by idolatries and superstitions; by prejudices and ideological distortions; by obsolete world-views and enslaving social norms; by senseless observances and crippling taboos; by collective selfishness, arrogance and ruthlessness. To our shame we have to admit that this has happened most of the time. But they can also be determined by freedom and responsibility; by equality of dignity and mutual commitment; by justice and compassion for the weak and vulnerable; by respect for nature and accountability to future generations. It is the contents of the criteria of acceptability which brings us to the next level.

### The theological problem of liberation and access to resources

Many scholars believe the exodus to be the single most basic event for the faith of ancient Israel (Schmidt 1990:43; Schmitt 1982:13ff; cf Collins 1995:152). Noth spoke of the "Urbekenntnis Israels" (primeval confession of Israel). Croatto, the liberation theologian, describes the exodus, understood as a metaphor of liberation from oppression, as the "axis" of scripture (Croatto 1987). The canonical evidence hardly bears this out. As we have seen, it does not occur at all in important bodies of Old Testament scripture, especially those emanating from the South. It was only one part of the pre-Deuteronomistic Northern tradition – inextricably linked not only to the patriarchal tradition, but also to the conquest tradition. Whatever the historical nature of the settlement of the Israelite tribes in Palestine, the documents certainly want the conquest to be understood as a deliberate subjugation, even eradication, of the Canaanites – which hardly fits a paradigm of liberation.

When it became the fundamental common heritage of all Israelites in Deuteronomistic times, it did so as one of the four historical anchors of the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel, the patriarchal promises, the exodus, the Sinai covenant and the conquest. As such it defined the identity of Yahweh as Israel's God and the identity of Israel as Yahweh's people; it was not concerned about human liberation as such. The fundamental, thus dominant, part of this fourfold tradition was, without doubt, the covenant-law paradigm with its harsh and not exactly liberating conditionality. The gifts of freedom and land were seen only as the concrete manifestations of the fundamental relationship between Yahweh and

Israel as defined in the covenant and the torah. And within that tradition the emphasis shifted, once again, from the covenant to the law: "... in Judaism, if you want to meet God, you open a book and study. That labor of learning, studying a document of the Torah, is the first place, and the most important place, where you find God" (Neusner 1995:xiv). For Judaism God is defined by the torah.

The exodus was also hardly used as a paradigm of liberation where one would have expected it, notably in the interpretations of Babylonian, Persian and Macedonian imperialism. Here it competed with other powerful paradigms like the messianic and the cosmic re-creation motifs. It is a side issue in apocalypics. The New Testament does not utilise it at all.

The point is that the exodus motif did not go through history as a versatile, powerfully evolving paradigm of social-political liberation with ever new political applications and adaptations. And so the liberation-theological utilisation of the paradigm is a clear case of before-the-text reading. While liberation theology has been supportive of before-the-text reading in principle, this method is not always acknowledged when the exodus is declared to be the canon in the Canon.<sup>11</sup>

Does this mean that the issues of political freedom, social justice and economic sufficiency are irrelevant in terms of the biblical faith? That cannot be true! We have argued above that the ultimate intention of God is comprehensive well-being, and that any deficiency in well-being, thus any need in any dimension of life, is the target of God's immediate concern. The preoccupation with emancipation is a fairly recent phenomenon. But once it has been placed on the agenda, there is no way we can avoid it as a soteriological theme. The question is not whether oppression must be overcome; the question is how this task is to be deduced from the biblical tradition.

One way is to recover the actual content of the tradition which the Jews used as a means to establish their identity. Throughout their history the Jews have foregrounded the transcendent side of their constellation of needs. The need for identity belongs to the category of the need for meaning from which acceptability and authority follow. But, as we have argued right at the beginning, transcendent needs always emerge where immanent needs have become pressing. And the overriding immanent

need of the Jews was, for much of their history, marginalisation, oppression, persecution, and genocide.

True, they used the exodus-conquest narrative to define the identity of Yahweh, their God, and the identity of themselves as the people of this God. But these definitions are linked to the actual content of this narrative. The content of the exodus narrative is, for better or for worse, an act of liberation (Collins 1995:154), while the content of the conquest narrative is, again for better or for worse, an act of acquisition of land as a storehouse of vital resources. That Yahweh, their God, was for them and with them, and not against them, became manifest for the Israelites in nothing other than the promise of political autonomy, social justice and economic prosperity.

However, a more principled approach would be to take the Jewish answer seriously. What mattered for the Jews was Yahweh's commitment to his people, not liberation as such. Yahweh's commitment was evident not only in the exodus, but also in the promises to the patriarchs, the gift of the land, the installation of a king, the return from the exile, the restoration of Jerusalem and – last but not least – the outstanding eschatological fulfilment of all promises. It is from Yahweh's commitment to Israel that the exodus derives its meaning, not from liberation as a political event as such. The God of the biblical witness willed comprehensive well-being for his people. It is for this reason that, among many other things, he also willed liberation.

Our research seems to indicate that fulfilment of the transcendent need (in this case the right of existence) is primary; evidence of the fulfilment of an immanent need serves to substantiate the more basic transcendent assurance. Fulfilment of the transcendent need is primary because, on the one hand, it transcends, and therefore covers, all possible needs, and, on the other hand, it transcends the current non-fulfilment of any of these needs, including political freedom. It is the commitment of God to our well-being which forms the undercurrent of meaning which we have discerned throughout the trajectory. And it is this commitment which we have to extrapolate into our contemporary situation.

Two questions are of critical importance if the underlying current of meaning of the exodus-conquest heritage is to be appropriated by non-Jews. One question is whether the biblical God promises or demands comprehensive well-being (including liberty, justice and prosperity) only for a small, specially chosen minority, or for all human beings. "The real point at issue is whether a theology of the exodus must embrace the particularity of the election of Israel, rather than see the exodus as a meta-

<sup>11</sup> Cf the critique of the hermeneutics of liberation theology by Collins 1995:153 and Gottwald 1993:268ff. Gottwald is, of course, part of the movement he critiques. How else could he speak of "the contemporary recovery of the exodus as a divine-human collaboration in social revolution, already well begun in liberation theology ..."? (1993:279) There is no indication whatsoever in exodus-related texts which would suggest such a lost referent.

phor for the liberation of all peoples" (Collins 1995:154). In the Old Testament certainly it was Israel's liberty and prosperity that mattered, not that of the Egyptians, Canaanites, Moabites, Assyrians, Babylonians, etc. We have dealt with that above.

The other question is whether God's commitment to his people indeed aims at comprehensive well-being, and whether comprehensive well-being indeed includes political liberation and economic prosperity. The sticky point here is that, in the New Testament, political liberation, social justice and economic sufficiency do not even seem to figure in the vocabulary – except perhaps in some Old Testament quotations.

But that does not imply indifference to these immanent needs. Why do I say that? It is often argued that the early Christian communities were too small and insignificant to engage in political activism, but this does not explain their silence on these matters. Their spiritual impact was, after all, subject to the same limitations. One also has to remember that equally insignificant groups were more militant at the time. Jewish Christians did not even take part in the Jewish revolt. The truth seems to be that the Jesus movement had burnt its fingers in political activism – not in the political, but in the spiritual sense of the expression. It had come to the conclusion that this was not the route God wanted it to take. Jesus had been crucified, and God did not intervene; rather, God had raised the crucified Jesus up into glory, from where he would soon return to reconstruct the universe. The way had to go through death to life, through suffering to glory.

Transformation had become, for them, a much more fundamental and comprehensive concept than that of political reform. It is in the context of eschatological deconstruction and reconstruction that the problem of immanent needs was expected to find its solution. This was by no means a coopting out. The fledgling church was under siege by the Jewish mainstream and soon by the Roman state. It was dangerous even to confess Jesus as Lord. The first Christians were ready for persecution, but not for rebellion. In the mean time, they anticipated the "new heaven and the new earth, in which righteousness dwells", by defining leadership as humble service, sharing resources with the needy, treating women and slaves as equals, taking decisions by common consent, allowing all gifts to be developed according to their capacity of building up the community – in other words, anticipating the new age in the form of community practice as far as their sphere of influence reached.

One danger was, of course, that this was again restricted to a circumscribed ingroup, that the fate of outsiders was of no concern to the cosy

family of believers. Christianity has fallen into this trap almost by routine. But this is an aberration of its essential nature. When the second coming of Christ did not materialise as expected, they fell into a worse trap, namely the Hellenistic assumption that Christ came to restore a disembodied soul to spiritual bliss in heaven, and that political freedom, social justice and economic sufficiency were concerns of the "world", which were irrelevant for true believers. This individualisation and spiritualisation was the most selfish and morally indefensible version of them all. Finally, when the church gained access to political power under Constantine, it became part of the social structure and legitimated oppressive rule.

As a result, Christians by and large have not been at the forefront of the struggle for equal dignity, social justice and freedom. One cannot help but suspect that there is a structural deficiency in the Christian dogma in this regard. But if so, it is not located in the foundational assumptions; it is located in the absolutisation of its early (Hellenistic and Roman) contextualisations.

Can we regain the cosmic vision of salvation which the New Testament witnesses intended? There are two prerequisites: universalism and holism.

- In the Old Testament, the claim that Israel's God was the God of the universe indeed served to reassure them that his capacity to protect, redeem and prosper his people was not limited by time, space and cosmic powers. But for them God's universal mastery did not imply his universal benevolence; in fact, the latter seemed to question the special status of Israel wherever conflicts arose. This stance is typical of ingroup-outgroup attitudes and must make way for inclusive horizons.
- In the New Testament the hellenisation of the gospel must be demythologised to regain the comprehensiveness and the earthbound character of its apocalyptic background. Christians, after all, are "looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Pet. 3:13)!

### The biblical critique of current concepts of liberation

In our reflections on the exodus-conquest paradigm we have critiqued both the Old Testament and the New Testament traditions. But these traditions are, in their turn, designed to critique our contemporary perceptions of freedom and prosperity. The modernist mindset is characterised by rampant individualism, utilitarianism and hedonism. For "economic

man", profit, utility and pleasure maximisation is all that counts. There is no accountability, whether to God, the community, the poor, or future generations. It is here that the texts profoundly challenge our modernist civilisation. It is precisely the tendency of ancient Israelite theology to bind the exodus and the conquest into the tight commitment and discipline of the covenant and the community that can overcome our disastrous libertinism. Freedom without responsibility is socially counterproductive and ecologically self-destructive. If we cannot regain our awareness of the greater constellation of forces which determines our lives, and relate to this constellation of forces in responsibility to a personal God as its ultimate source, ultimate criterion and ultimate future, we are doomed.

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