

THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EXODUS

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I. INTRODUCTION: THE DOCTRINE OF REVELATION AND HISTORICAL FACT (i.e., THE EXODUS)

Different periods of church history have found the Church grappling with various theological problems. The early Church struggled to recognize the biblical canon; the fourth century found her defining the person of Christ; in the eighth century she was engaged in the iconoclastic controversy; in the sixteenth century, Christ's body fought over the order of salvation; in the nineteenth century she wrestled with the relation of the scientific method to the Scriptures. The primary task of the Church in the twentieth century has been to formulate a correct view of revelation or religious epistemology.

The older Protestant theologians focused their attention on Holy Scripture as God's revelation. They

...analyzed revelation in terms entirely of God's communicating truths about Himself. . . . The focal centre of their doctrine was the Bible; they viewed the Holy Scripture as revealed truth in writing. . . .¹

However, revelation is also historical and personal, in addition to being propositional.

... God is represented in the Bible as revealing himself in his actions and in his designs. . . . It is in history. . . that God's design is mostly to be perceived, and this is how he chooses to reveal himself. . . ultimately, revelation is in relationship, "confrontation," communion, rather than by the communication of facts.²

If this statement over-estimates and somewhat distorts the place of historical and personal revelation in relation to rational, propositional, and biblical revelation, it rightly declares that God reveals Himself personally through and in history.

II. THE EXODUS AND GOD'S SELF-REVELATION IN HISTORY

A. God as Lord of History

If revelation is propositional, historical and personal, great, decisive

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1. J. I. Packer. "Revelation," *The New Bible Dictionary*. J. D. Douglas, ed. (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), pp. 1090-1091.

2. C. F. D. Moule. "Revelation," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. IV. G. A. Buttrick, ed. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 55.

significance must be given to the great events of the biblical revelation. The Exodus was an event of history, a fact.³ At the beginning of Israel's corporate life was an event—the Exodus.⁴

The Israelite knowledge of God was not founded in the first instance on the numinous awareness... it was based on historic event... No one aspect of nature was more characteristic of Yahweh than another; he was the Lord both of nature and the historic event...⁵

The religion of Israel was the result of a revelation of God in history. Her conception of God was distinctly historical in character. Through Moses and the historical event of the Exodus Israel had experienced God as a God of action who had chosen her in and through historical events.⁶ God reveals Himself uniquely in the historical sphere.⁷

Biblical man conceived of himself as existing in a particular, unique history which possessed significance because God through it was revealed as in process of redeeming all history.⁸

God, then, is Lord of history. History serves His purposes and designs. It reveals God as a God of doing, of action, not as an abstract, conceptual Idea. God is living.

B. The Character of God Revealed in History

Israel's knowledge of God was very much dependent upon the Exodus.

Who was Yahweh? Nearly all of Israel's theological confessions were based on the formula repeated in varying forms: "He is the God who brought us out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage."⁹ The knowledge of God was based on an inference from God's deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt, on Israel's confession, and upon the inspired interpretation of that event.

God was first revealed as a powerful and purposeful Lord. Through the Exodus God had revealed Himself as the one whose power was such that only His purpose could prevail in history.¹⁰ God was at work with some purpose of His own in history and He had chosen Israel as His

3. G. E. Wright, *God Who Acts*. (Chicago: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1959), p. 116.
4. J. Muilenburg, *The Way of Israel*. (London: Routledge and Hegan Paul LTD, 1962), p. 49.
5. G. E. Wright, *The Old Testament Against Its Environment*. (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1950), pp. 22-23.
6. S. Mowinckel, *He That Cometh*. G. Anderson, transl. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1956), p. 151.
7. Wright, *God Who Acts*, p. 55.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Wright, *The Old Testament Against Its Environment*, p. 49.
10. H. H. Guthrie, *God and History in the Old Testament*. (London: SPCK, 1961), p. 32.

agent to demonstrate that powerful purpose.¹¹ God was the Lord, King, and Judge of history; the Exodus salvation showed an enduring purpose of God that gave hope in desperate times. God delivered Israel because He was initiating His purpose in history through His people.¹²

But this power of a sovereign Lord was coupled with a gracious love of God who had been able to use the hard heart of Pharaoh to deliver a weak people.¹³

Israel's greatness lay in what to the nation was a simple fact, that God had chosen her; and God's choice rested in his own mysterious grace. That grace was not and could not be explained; it could only be accepted and inferred in faith and in gratitude.¹⁴

God's love prompted him to act.¹⁵ God did not choose Israel because Israel was more righteous than other nations (Deut. 7:7-8), but because of His love for them.¹⁶

This God of purpose, power and love was also a God of righteousness and justice.

Starting from the fact that it was the oppressor that had been destroyed, he [Moses] proclaimed that Jahweh hated all oppression and therefore demanded of those whom he had chosen as his people that they be scrupulously just in all their relationships.¹⁷

The acts of God are righteous because He is righteous.¹⁸ Because of the righteous acts of God, His people were to be righteous.

This righteousness was ultimate power acting to save or deliver the weak, the oppressed, the poor, the enslaved. It was not primarily justice distributed according to social status, but redemptive action according to need. . . . As God is righteous, so Israel is to be righteous.¹⁹

Yet the attributes of God must not be considered only as a datum apart from His action in history. The object of attention is not His character *per se*, but His action into and through history.²⁰ God is the Lord

11. Wright, *God Who Acts*, p. 50.

12. Muilenburg, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

13. Wright, *God Who Acts*, p. 44.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

15. Muilenburg, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

16. Wright, *The Old Testament Against Its Environment*, p. 50.

17. C. Simpson, *Revelation and Response In The Old Testament*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1947), pp. 36-37.

18. Wright, *The Old Testament Against Its Environment*, p. 22.

19. G. E. Wright, "Exodus, Book of", *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. II. G. A. Buttrick, ed. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 196.

20. Wright, *God Who Acts*, p. 50.

who acts purposefully, powerfully, graciously, and righteously. God is Lord of History.

III. THE EXODUS AND THE ELECTION OF ISRAEL

A. The Election as God's Gracious Act

Israel as the redeemed community of God begins with the mysterious adoption by God of the Hebrews enslaved in Egypt. Israel became God's son (Ex. 4:22) and His nation (Deut. 26:5).²¹ Israel's religious-difference from others is in an act of redemptive choice by God which was demonstrated by the emphasis placed upon the Exodus in Israel's literature.²² The Exodus was the redemption of a corporate people.

Israel's consciousness of being a national people was first awakened at the Exodus. . . . The phenomenon of Israel. . . is not to be explained ethnologically. . . or culturally. . . or mythologically. . . or geographically. . . her beginning belongs to a divine action in history.²³

The prophets appealed to the Exodus to show why Israel was elect; the Exodus showed the gracious favor of God.²⁴

The idea of election is basic to the nation of Israel. When the term "Election" is not used, it is implied as when the prophets speak of the redemption from Egypt.

Even when the thought is of the act of redemption by this sovereign Lord, as in the Exodus from Egypt, it is still emphasized that God has no need of his people. The Exodus. . . is a resolution of God's independent purpose.²⁵

The Song of the crossing of the Sea of Reeds talks of the people whom God has acquired or purchased (Ex. 15:16; Ps. 74:22); it is the buying back of what is one's own, and therefore the reassertion of a former owner-relationship.²⁶ It is unrealistic to declare that Israel's interpretation of the Exodus as God's election of her to Himself as a special people was merely the projection of her own ego upon a fact of history. Rather her interpretation was based upon God's act in history and His inspired, revelatory interpretation given to Israel. How else could she then explain

21. A. Richardson. *The Bible In The Age of Science*. (Phila.: The Westminster Press, 1961), p. 181.

22. H. W. Robinson. *Inspiration and Revelation In The Old Testament* (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1946), p. 149.

23. Muilenburg, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

24. W. Eichrodt. *Theology of the Old Testament*. Vol. I, J. A. Baker, translator (Phila.: The Westminster Press, 1961), p. 52.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 411.

26. G. Von Rad. *Old Testament Theology*. Vol. I, D.M.G. Stalker, transl. (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1962), p. 177.

the Exodus? No explanation of a special spiritual or moral merit is sufficient to explain God's action.²⁷

The redemption and revelation were of such special and awesome character that Israel by faith could conclude no other than that Yahweh had chosen her as His own to fulfill His plan.

B. The Election and Israel's Response

The Exodus is a call to a vocation, a deed provoking a response. It is an event of the past made real in the present by responding to it as a call to service and allegiance under the present impulse of God's Spirit.²⁸ The Exodus offered the power of God to the people for strength to reach the standards to which their behaviour was subjected. The Exodus history "...lays quite unmistakable emphasis on the practical relationship of living founded on those events.²⁹ God's law was His gift to the nation as the basis of their social life. Because He had redeemed them, they were to bring the redemptive message to others.³⁰ The covenant, as the confirmation of God's redemption in the Exodus, was "...a personal and moral fellowship with a divine Lord whose will shaped and regulated afresh the life of His people."³¹

The love of God is to evoke Israel's answering love to Him, and this love expresses itself in the humanitarian legislation, which is not mere legalism, but the joyous response of obedience to the love and compassion of God (Deut. 8:11-20). The relatively merciful treatment of the liberated slave is inspired by the memory of Israel's slavery (Deut. 15:15).³²

God did not choose Israel because she was more righteous than other nations but because of His love for them and the wickedness of the other nations. Israel was delivered from Egypt to fulfil the promises to the patriarchs that in Israel all the nations should be blessed. God's purpose is to use Israel for a universal blessing.³³ The Exodus was to be a source of comfort to the sorrowing (Ps. 77:11-19; Is. 63:11-14) and a chief inspiration to thanksgiving and joy (Ps. 66; 105) so that Israel may fulfil her universal vocation. Israel obeys because of God's work, chiefly at the Exodus.³⁴

IV. THE EXODUS AND THE OLD TESTAMENT WITNESS

The Exodus provided the historical, unifying basis for the Old Testament writers to put together a connected history from creation to the

27. Wright, *God Who Acts*, p. 50.

28. Muilenburg, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

29. Eichrodt, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

30. Wright, *God Who Acts*, p. 52.

31. Eichrodt, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

32. Muilenburg, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

33. Wright, *The Old Testament Against Its Environment*, p. 51.

34. Muilenburg, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

monarchy. Tradition was historically valid and could be used under the inspiration of the Spirit of God.³⁵

A. Creation

In the Near East myth of the chaos-dragon the primeval conflict is between the deified forces of nature, but, in the Old Testament, the Yahweh of the Exodus is also the Creator of the world.³⁶ The meaning of the Exodus for Moses in Genesis was more than that of the redemption of a bound people from an alien empire. It took meaning also for the pre-Mosaic Ages.³⁷

It was an event of cosmic significance. It was an event that had total meaning both for time and eternity.³⁸

Genesis interpretes the Exodus account so that the God of the Exodus who rebuked the sea also was the Creator of the Universe.

The Psalmist did the same. The Exodus confession enlarged when the creation idea entered it. The word "sea" occurs in both the Exodus and the Creation.

"Yahweh" "rebuked" the Red Sea (Ps. 160:9) in the same way as he had done in its time to the Sea of Chaos and, like the latter, it "fled" (Ps. 114:3). The event thus took on primeval dimensions, and was transferred from its historic setting to the beginning of the history; indeed it stood for Israel at the beginning of her whole existence.³⁹

B. The Patriarchs

The deliverance from Egypt is also interpreted by the Genesis account to be the fulfillment of God's promise to the Patriarch's in history. The Patriarchs are necessarily historical figures, and an historically valid tradition which helps to explain God's choice of Israel.

Yahweh calls Abram and makes the election promise to him. That promise is repeated to each of the patriarchs. The Exodus and Conquest then follow as a witness to Yahweh's faithfulness to his promises.⁴⁰

C. The Covenant

The fact that there is more than one theological formula of the Exodus shows it means many things theologically. Israel passed through the time-sequence of the wilderness wanderings to show the meaning of

35. Guthrie, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

36. Muilenburg, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

37. Wright, *God Who Acts*, p. 54.

38. G. A. F. Knight, *A Christian Theology of the Old Testament*. (London: SCM Press LTD, 1959), p. 163.

39. G. Von Rad, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

40. Wright, *The Old Testament Against Its Environment*, p. 50.

the Exodus.⁴¹ The next great historic event was the covenant at Sinai. The basis of biblical theology then is the deliverance from Egypt's bondage and the formation of the amphictyonic or covenant tradition at Mt. Sinai together with the theology revealed in those events.⁴² However, the covenant is secondary.

... however important the covenant, the importance is of formal expression rather than of independent idea. We shall be nearer the truth if we say... with Galling, 'It is in its ultimate basis not itself a redemptive act, but the expression or confirmation of one, the redemptive act being the Exodus...'⁴³

The Exodus and election were confirmed at Sinai in the covenant event.⁴⁴ The Exodus lies behind the Sinaitic decalogue.⁴⁵

The single historical event in which God encountered the nation becomes what the mediator declared it to be, *the point of alignment for their belief in God*; the redemption from Egypt received its definitive interpretation at the covenant—making on Sinai—and thus became *the foundation and the orientation of all the mutual relations* of Yahweh and his people...⁴⁶

The foundation of an everlasting covenant order seems to be the design and fulfillment of the deliverance from Egypt.⁴⁷

D. The Monarchy

Following the Exodus and the Covenant Israel existed as a monarchy. The Exodus is the meaning of the existence of the monarchy, and it is in the Exodus that Israel through the interpretation of Moses became aware of her importance as a people.⁴⁸ In the story of the Exodus, the Old Testament writer understood the meaning of the events that had led to the Davidic empire.

... the primary significance of their existence as a people is to be found in their knowledge of Yahweh... The real significance of the emergence of Israel as a nation in the united monarchy is that the people who possess the clue to the meaning of human history have attained a place in history from which they can act and speak effectively.⁴⁹

E. The Prophets and the Exile

The Exodus was part of a pattern of historical events which showed

41. G. Von Rad, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

42. Wright, *God Who Acts*, p. 59.

43. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

44. Wright, *God Who Acts*, p. 55.

45. Muilenburg, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

46. Eichrodt, *op. cit.*, p. 292. Emphasis his.

47. *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

48. Guthrie, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

49. *Ibid.*

the hidden purpose of God. This controlled the prophetic view of history.⁵⁰ The prophets before and during the Exile appealed to the Exodus "as the motivation for their calls to obedience and faithful allegiance (Hos. 13:4; 12:9)."⁵¹ Israel's disobedience is ingratitude for what God has done at the Exodus (Amos 2:10ff).⁵² In the latter half of the sixth century B.C., Israel is given an either-or choice—either the god of nature or the God of history, of the Exodus and Sinai. The exile is punishment for her disobedience to the God who had ransomed her.

The prophets saw a brighter day coming. The meaning of the Exodus, Exile, and Return is transferred forward to the New Age and Exodus when God's people shall return to Mt. Zion.⁵³ The prophets understand the return from Exile as a typological fulfillment of the Exodus from Egypt.⁵⁴ The prophets advocate a return to the Mosaic Period, but this period is deepened and glorified. It is the consummation of God's deeds and purpose in history. The New Age is one of salvation. As God, delivered from bondage in the Exodus, so he does from the Exile. It is an Age of forgiveness, and free grace. Yahweh enters into a new relation with his people, giving them a new heart, a new will, a new spirit.⁵⁵ As such, the Prophets are looking forward to the coming of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

V. THE EXODUS AND THE NEW TESTAMENT WITNESS

The New Testament faith arises from the Old Testament history. The problem of the New Testament use of the Old Testament is not entirely a system of theology, hermeneutics, or typology, but

...the belief that God has been directing the events of biblical time for his own name's sake and that in Christ the whole of the former period has been brought to completion. . . . The Old and New Covenants were inevitably seen as related through the conception of preparation and promise. . . . and of completion and fulfillment. . . . The events of preparation were the types. . . . of the events of the new age which has dawned in Christ.⁵⁶

The Hexateuch contains an essential series of historical events of God which give unity to the Old and New Testaments. These acts are 1) God, the Creator of the world, called the Fathers of Israel and promised them Canaan, 2) God delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt and guided them through the wilderness, 3) God brought them into the promised land and gave them an inheritance.⁵⁷

50. Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

51. Muilenburg, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

52. *Ibid.*

53. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

54. Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

55. Muilenburg, *op. cit.*, pp. 135-137.

56. Wright, *God Who Acts*, p. 64.

57. Von Rad referred to by Wright, *God Who Acts*, pp. 70-71.

A. The Lord Jesus Christ

The fulfillment of Israel's faith, arising out of history, gave rise to the Christian Church. The promise of Israel's history was preached as fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁵⁸ Christ is the new Exodus which is as important for the New Testament as for the Old Testament. The major words used to describe Christ's work are those used for the Exodus (redeem, deliver, ransom, etc.).⁵⁹ The Suffering Servant of Israel is not a new Moses who will lead the Israelites back in an Exodus from Exile, but is a spiritual leader.⁶⁰ Christ was baptized in the Jordan to anticipate His Exodus at Jerusalem (Lk. 9:36; 12:51).

The New Testament takes up the story of God's saving activity and proclaims the fulfillment of what had been foreshadowed and promised in the acts of God in Israel's history. The great salvation of which the deliverance from Egypt was the historic 'type' or foreshadowing was now achieved in the coming of Israel's messiah, who thru His death and resurrection had accomplished a new Exodus in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31).⁶¹

B. The Kerygma

The *kerygma* is the essential apostolic preaching of Christ. To obtain a biblical theology, one must begin with the *kerygma* and then go back to the Old Testament to see what it proclaimed as God's saving acts, and thus understand what Christ means as the culmination of redemptive history.⁶² The New Testament emphasizes the events from Abraham to David rather than the creation and exile and return. There were five major events: 1) God's choice of the patriarchs, 2) the Exodus, 3) the Conquest, 4) the Davidic Kingship, 5) of whose seed God raised up Christ. Paul gives these in his sermon in Acts 13:16ff. The Israelite recited these events in his confessional theology of the works of God.⁶³

C. The Church and Sacraments

The Exodus is for Israel what the death and resurrection of Christ are for the New Israel and the New Israel uses Exodus terms to portray her deliverance.⁶⁴ Israel passed through the baptism of the Red Sea where her enemies were defeated. (Is. 51:9ff.) She also died. This pictures what baptism symbolizes—deliverance by God through death and resurrection. Man's work is abhorred (Ex. 13-15; I Cor. 10:1ff.).⁶⁵ The theology of the Bible is a baptismal theology and the 'type' of all bap-

58. Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

59. Wright, *God Who Acts*, pp. 63-64.

60. Mowinkel, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

61. Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

62. Wright, *God Who Acts*, p. 112.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

64. Mulenburg, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

65. Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

tism is the Exodus. Baptism is something which proclaims what God does.⁶⁶

When Israel realized what God did in the Exodus, the act of 'confirmation' was made at Sinai in the covenant (Ex. 24:9ff).⁶⁷

If baptism is related typologically to the Exodus, the passover prepares for the Lord's Supper. The Passover was a feast of thanksgiving to Jahweh for deliverance.⁶⁸ It commemorated the Exodus and made it a present living reality.⁶⁹

...at each occurrence of the feast the memory of Jahweh's mighty act of deliverance was revived...enabling the clans which had not been in Egypt to enter into the experience of their brethren...⁷⁰

In much the same way, the final deliverance by Christ is celebrated in the Church's eucharist, the Christian passover, which like the Jewish passover, was the recalling and making present of historical events (I Cor. 11:23-26) and an anticipation of the consummation of history of the kingdom of God (I Cor. 11:26).⁷¹

VI. CONCLUSION

The Exodus then is of primary theological significance. From it the doctrine of revelation springs, the character of God is seen, the election of God's people is discerned, the unity of the Old Testament witness is gathered, and the hermeneutical, typological, and the prophetic witness of the New Testament is fulfilled.

It remains for the individual to become a participator in the Exodus by confessing the God of the Exodus to be his God.

He who belongs to this people belongs to history because he belongs to a solidarity which confesses this God of the Exodus to be Lord and King.⁷²

66. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

68. Simpson, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

69. Muilenburg, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

70. Simpson, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

71. Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

72. Muilenburg, *op. cit.*, p. 50.