

32: Exodus

This lecture will not retell the story of the Exodus, the divinely executed liberation of the Hebrews from their bondage in Egypt. It is assumed that the details of this story are well known. Neither will it take time to tease apart different sources and traditions within the narrative, nor will it explore the issues of miracles and divine intervention. It will, however, concern itself with the theology of the narrative, the crucial intention of the teller or tellers, the writer or writers. In this glorious story, so important for the faith and self-understanding of Christians and post-Messianic Jews. We need to grasp the deep significance of the conviction that here God has acted for the salvation of not only a bedraggled company of Middle Eastern slaves but through them and their Messiah, for the salvation of the whole human race.

The story itself is told with high drama from the ironic troublesome beginning: “But there arose a new king over Egypt who knew not Joseph” (Exodus 1:8) to the victorious conclusion in the Song of Miriam: “Let us sing to the Lord, for He is greatly glorified. Horse and rider He cast into the sea” (Exodus 15:20). The bitter servitude of the Hebrew slaves in their harsh forced labour is broken by God’s decisive act of liberation. For a story so often told at Passover by the time it was written down it should not surprise us that the progress of the narration is skilfully woven around the conviction that what God promised in the Burning Bush (Exodus 3) is accomplished by successive afflictions (the Plagues) and the final inundation of the hapless Egyptians in the Reed Sea. No matter what Pharaoh did or threatened, the end is never in doubt; but of course we read the story now with foreknowledge of the past, as so many generations have read it. Of course, this foreknowledge detracts nothing from the power of story because that power consists not only in the events themselves but in the liberating power of God Himself—a power which is Himself, the Unnamed One. For this reason, we have the crucial significance of the disclosure of God’s enigmatic Name in the incident of what we should call the Unburned Bush. “I am who I am” or “I will be whom I will be” or “I AM the Existing One” (Exodus 3:14) is God’s Name, phonetically, “Yahweh,” the so called Tetragrammaton.

This is why the Egyptians will tremble! In this theophany of God—this divine manifestation of God to a human being—Moses hears what God will do to liberate His people and despite his doubts and questionings it is Moses and Aaron that will be His emissaries to Pharaoh. Clearly, the text here is insisting that there can be no freedom without God’s decisive intervention and the faithfulness of his prophets. What is heard in the divine encounter must be spoken abroad fearlessly. God will do the rest. Essentially, the Exodus story is a celebration of God’s compassionate grace for His

People and His willingness to intervene on their behalf in the raw material of political history. This is not some sort of private mystical moment in a lonely place but rather a public call to the mobilisation of a whole People, as yet ill-formed and fragmentary before God, their Lord and liberating King.

It is a theme which will be picked up again when Christ the Messiah has come to liberate all humankind from death and sin by his death and resurrection. Christ is described in the Orthodox liturgical texts as a new Passover, the “Pascha of the faithful.” This more fundamental and universal Exodus of humanity from the clutches of Hades prompted the Church to see the Incarnate Logos or Word of God as the true “He Who Is” manifested in the Unburned Bush; and this is reflected in the inscription of icons of the Saviour.

When Moses and Aaron return to Egypt with the call to Pharaoh to let the Hebrews go they are rebuffed and this is described in Exodus 6. The following chapters up to and including chapter 11 chronicle the plagues and the competing miracles which serve to heighten the dramatic tension of an obdurate Pharaoh who will not release his slaves confronted with God who will finally act in the tenth plague to crush the spirit of the Egyptians by the death of their firstborn. The plagues and the trauma of these events are both instrumental in weakening Pharaoh’s will to resist and in a sense compensatory justice for the sufferings he had visited upon the Hebrews in their slavery. Let us recall that Pharaoh had tried to eliminate Moses by a vast cull of male infants, (Exodus 1:22) now he himself must face the death of his firstborn son, (Exodus 12:29). Finally, of course, reluctantly, Pharaoh allows the Hebrews to leave.

In preparation for this event God instituted a cultic act by which it would be remembered forever amongst the Jews, the Passover. Not just a hurried meal but a meal with death symbolic and historical significance, this meal was to influence if not strictly determine the shape of the Christian Eucharist upon the new Passover or Pascha of Christ’s death and resurrection. The angel of death passed over the dwellings of the Hebrews marked for protection by the blood on the lintel of their doors. By the hand of God, the Hebrews passed over the Reed Sea, rolled back for their passage, only to see the pursuing Egyptians drowned by the same waters. There then began a long journey of faith and many lapses from faith across the desert to Mount Sinai where God revealed Himself to Moses, giving the People the Law, and finally the entry into the new and promised land—a conquest led by Joshua.

It was at subsequent Passover meals, therefore, that these acts of divine liberation were to be celebrated; the seder meal itself becoming, with circumcision, the essential marks of the covenant commitment and the relationship between God and His People, an experience of freedom for succeeding generations sealed in blood. In the anamnesis or present realisation of

this past event eternally we always hereby recognise a liturgical context, both domestic and communal for the covenantal “hesed” or steadfast loving kindness of Yahweh. Later, in the Davidic era and beyond, the Passover will be reworked to accommodate the unrealised aspect of the Passover promise, the long expected Messiah who will bring to the People an eternal liberation from bondage not only to enemies but also and universally from the corruption of death and sin. The crucified and risen Messiah Himself will then become both the Paschal sacrificial victim and victor not only for the Jews but also for all humankind. Little then did the Hebrews know what was at stake here and how great the promise of God would eventually prove to be for the whole world.

[The commentary that follows is excerpted from *The Orthodox Study Bible* “Christ our Passover” - page 78 [(c) 2008 St. Athanasius Academy of Orthodox Theology, Used by permission. All rights reserved.]:

“Through His saving work, Christ becomes our Passover (*Pascha* in Greek). Through Him we experience liberation from sin, death, and the devil. St. Paul exclaims, ‘Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. Therefore, let us keep the feast’ (I Corinthians 5:7-8). He is the Paschal Lamb (Isaiah 53:7; John 1:29; Revelation 5:6-14) who gave Himself up in sacrifice “once for all” (Hebrews 10:10-14) to reconcile us with God. At every Pascha - ‘Easter’ - the Church sings: ‘Today a sacred Pascha is revealed to us, a new and holy Pascha, a mystical Pascha, a Pascha worthy of veneration, a Pascha which is Christ the Redeemer.’

In many typological details, the Passover of the Jews clearly points towards Christ as our Passover:

1 The Passover lamb, whose blood was smeared by the Hebrews on their doorposts in the sign of the Cross, was a male without blemish; Jesus was a male without blemish who died on the Cross.

2 The blood of the Passover lamb saved the first-born of the Hebrews from death; the blood of Christ saves all those believing in Him from eternal death (Romans 5:8-10; I Peter 1:17-19).

3 The Passover lamb had none of its bones broken (Ex 12:10, 46); Jesus also had no bones broken as He was sacrificed (John 19:31-36).

4 The Hebrews escaped from the burden of slavery in Egypt by passing through the Red Sea; Christians pass ‘from Egypt, from the burden of sin,’ being ‘set free and saved’ through the waters of Holy Baptism (St. Gregory of Nyssa). For in the waters of Baptism, we are ‘baptized into His death,’ ‘crucified with Him,’ and raised up ‘in the likeness of His resurrection’ to ‘walk in newness of life’ (Romans 6:3-11).

St. John Chrysostom marvels at the power of Christ's blood: 'If the type of it had such great power ... in the midst of Egypt, when smeared on the doorposts, much more the reality. ... if death so shuddered at the shadow, tell me how would it not have dreaded the very reality? This blood is the salvation of our souls; by it the soul is washed, and made beautiful and . . . more gleaming than gold" (Revelation 7:13-14).'" [end excerpt]

Interestingly, the Exodus account concludes again with liturgy, the Song of Moses and the Song of Miriam. Both undoubtedly originate in the events themselves, but they have found their way into liturgical celebrations for over 3,300 years. In the Orthodox Church, the whole section of Scripture from the crossing of the Red Sea to the Song of Miriam (Exodus 12 to 15) is read at the Liturgy of Great and Holy Saturday. The Exodus becomes a type of the resurrection which heralds God's victory over sin, suffering, evil and death.

Appendix “A”: A Template for the Orthodox Interpretation of Biblical Texts

Lecture 32: Exodus 15:1-21

In accordance with the proposal of Fr. Theodore G. Stylianopoulos that Orthodox biblical interpretation ought to be approached on three levels, the following template is offered for preachers, teachers, bible study leaders, catechists and students of the Scriptures generally:¹

Level	Process	In Tradition / Fathers (Theoria)	Applicable Now (Praxis)
Exegetical	Historical / Contextual <i>(using the full range of critical tools)</i>	<p>The word “Exodus” meaning “exit” or “departure” is derived from the Greek word <i>exodos</i> and was the name assigned to this book of the Bible by the translators of the Septuagint. The date of the departure of the Hebrews from Egypt is disputed by scholars as being either in the 13th or 15th century B.C.</p> <p>The historical awareness in Exodus 15:2 that God “has become [present] to me for [my] deliverance” is central to the meaning of this passage. As Benedict Englezakis has reflected, “To understand how ‘He who is always present comes’ is a problem inherent in every discussion of the Biblical word.” (<i>New and Old in God’s Revelation</i>, SVSP, 1982, p. 1).</p>	<p>The Song of Moses is viewed as the first great song in Scripture. The action of singing to God because He is our “helper and defender” appears also with the same words in Isaiah 12.2 and in Psalm 117.14, suggesting that the practice of praising the Lord for His glory was well established among the Israelites before being taken up in many forms by many different Christian traditions.</p>
	Allegorical / Typological <i>(as derived from Tradition)</i>	<p>Both St. Basil the Great and St. Ambrose of Milan view the “right hand of God” in verses 6 and 12 as the Son of God. St. Clement of Alexandria proposes in <i>Stromateis</i> 5.8 that “the horse and his rider” who are “cast into the sea” are “the brutal affection, lust, with the rider mounted who [permits] pleasures to reign.” This interpretation is not as far-fetched as might initially appear, because, as St. Clement points out, Plato, writing in <i>On the Soul</i> “says that the charioteer and the horse that ran off [represent] the irrational part [of man], which [includes] both anger and concupiscence.</p>	<p>In <i>Homily 90</i>, St. Jerome challenges us: “We who have bread from heaven, why do we go in search of earthly foods? We who have left Pharaoh, let us call upon the help of the Lord so that the Egyptian king may be drowned in the baptism of those who believe. . . . Let us not murmur against the Lord lest we be struck down by Him.”</p>

¹ In “*The New Testament, An Orthodox Perspective, Volume 1: Scripture, Tradition, Hermeneutics*,” (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1997, Ch. 7), Fr. Theodore sets out three levels serving a sound Orthodox hermeneutical process. These are: **1. Exegetical** - using all critical, contextual, textual and literary methods to determine “the level of understanding of the biblical text in its historical context of literary form and conceptuality ...” (p. 190). **2. Interpretative** – evaluating means derived from the exegetical stage as applicable contextually to the reader’s contemporary issues and concerns (p. 197). **3. Transformative** – experiencing life changing practical applications of insights derived from the previous two stages. In ALL of these three levels, the Orthodox context must be the Church as the locus of divine revelation and inspiration. Here the Holy Spirit leads us into all truth as manifested in the biblical text, the teachings of the Fathers and the liturgical context. In Ch. 4, p. 115f, Fr. Theodore explains the historical and spiritual exegetical approaches which, following the Fathers, must be applied throughout. Classically, these have concerned the Antiochian emphasis on the “literal” or historical approach and the Alexandrian emphasis on the allegorical and typological interpretations that reveal the interconnectedness of all Scripture in Tradition at deeper levels of understanding.

Interpretative	Spiritual / Ethical	The celebration by Moses of the crossing of the Reed Sea is only the beginning of the departure from Egypt. However, as St. Gregory of Nyssa has reflected in <i>De Pauperibus Amandis Orationes duo</i> , “It is not one thing to seek and another to find, for the gain from seeking is the seeking itself.” For Moses and Aaron and the Hebrews seeking to leave Egypt, the remarkable crossing of the Reed Sea and the destruction of the pursuing Egyptians and their chariots was a formative act in the nation of Israel finding itself. Even the Egyptian charioteers recognised that they must “flee from Israel; for the Lord fights [for them against us]” Exodus 14:25	In Sermon 223E.2, St. Augustine insists that the phrase “horse and rider He has cast into the sea” indicates that “all our past sins, you see, which have been pressing in on us, as it were, from behind, He has drowned and obliterated in baptism. . . Let us not turn back to Egypt in our hearts, but with Him as our protector and guide let us wind up way through the other trials and temptations of the desert toward the kingdom.”
	Personal / Social	For two thousand years, the Israelite exodus from Egypt to Palestine has been the focus of the contemporary Jewish festival of Passover, where an important theme is both the deliverance from slavery and “the emergence of the Jewish people as a separate nation” (Dan Cohn-Sherbok, <i>Judaism: History, Belief and Practice</i> (Routledge, 2003, p. 508)	As St. Augustine preached in Sermon 363.4, the songs of Moses and Miriam are “what we too now should sing.” The Christian interpretation of this festival centres on freedom from sin through Jesus Christ.
Transformative	The Call to Holiness	St. Gregory of Nyssa saw Miriam as a type of the Mother of God, while St. Ambrose of Milan viewed her as a type of the Church. Thus the holiness of Mary leads to both the Incarnation of Christ and the formation of the Church. The Songs of Moses and of Miriam both begin with a firm assertion that the Lord “is highly exalted” (v. 1, 21). The Song of Moses closes with the affirmation that the journey of the Hebrew slaves will end only when they have been planted in “a holy precinct”—a dwelling place prepared by the Lord (v. 17) where “The Lord will rule “forever and ever and beyond” (v. 18\). This awareness of the holiness of God is contrasted with the arrogance of the Egyptians. The prophet Isaiah extends this possibility of human arrogance to “every person” with the contrast still to the vision that “the Lord alone will be exalted” (Isaiah 2.1, 2.17).	In Prologue 4 of his <i>Commentary on the Songs of Songs</i> , Origen rightly insists that “nobody can attain to that perfect and mystical song [as sung by Moses] . . . unless they first enter ‘into the midst of the sea on the dry ground’ and, ‘the water becomes a wall for them on the right and a wall on the left,’ (Exodus 14: 2), thereby making their escape ‘from the hands of the Egyptians.’” This challenge to believe in God as “our helper and defender” and act on that belief in the face of evil continues to confront each of us as that challenge confronted Moses and his followers.
	The Call to Witness	The willingness of those who followed Moses out of Egypt to witness to the Lord began with their marking of the lintels and doorposts of their homes with the blood of the lambs slain to celebrate Passover (Exodus 12:22). While this act indicated their obedience to the command of Moses, it was also an indication to the Egyptians of which homes should be destroyed if Moses did not lead the Hebrews out of Egypt that very night.	Christians see the witnessing of the Hebrews through the marking of their homes with the blood of the lamb as an indication of the courage and willingness of a Christian calling to witness to the reality that the Lord is to be glorified and exalted (v.2).

Exodus 15:1-21

New King James Version (NKJV - Masoretic)

The Song of Moses

15 Then Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to the LORD, and spoke, saying:

“I will sing to the LORD,
For He has triumphed gloriously!

The horse and its rider
He has thrown into the sea!

² The LORD *is* my strength and song,
And He has become my salvation;
He *is* my God, and I will praise Him;
My father’s God, and I will exalt Him.

³ The LORD *is* a man of war;
The LORD *is* His name.

⁴ Pharaoh’s chariots and his army He has cast into
the sea;

His chosen captains also are drowned in the Red
Sea.

⁵ The depths have covered them;
They sank to the bottom like a stone.

⁶ “Your right hand, O LORD, has become glorious
in power;
Your right hand, O LORD, has dashed the enemy in
pieces.

⁷ And in the greatness of Your excellence
You have overthrown those who rose against You;
You sent forth Your wrath;
It consumed them like stubble.

⁸ And with the blast of Your nostrils
The waters were gathered together;
The floods stood upright like a heap;
The depths congealed in the heart of the sea.

⁹ The enemy said, ‘I will pursue,
I will overtake,
I will divide the spoil;
My desire shall be satisfied on them.

I will draw my sword,
My hand shall destroy them.’

¹⁰ You blew with Your wind,
The sea covered them;
They sank like lead in the mighty waters.

¹¹ “Who *is* like You, O LORD, among the gods?
Who *is* like You, glorious in holiness,

Septuagint

15:1 Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song to God, and spoke, saying, Let us sing to the Lord, for he is very greatly glorified: horse and rider he has thrown into the sea. 2 He was to me a helper and protector for salvation: this is my God and I will glorify him; my father’s God, and I will exalt him. 3 The Lord bringing wars to nought, the Lord is his name. 4 He has cast the chariots of Pharaoh and his host into the sea, the chosen mounted captains: they were swallowed up in the Red Sea. 5 He covered them with the sea: they sank to the depth like a stone. 6 Thy right hand, O God, has been glorified in strength; thy right hand, O God, has broken the enemies. 7 And in the abundance of thy glory thou hast broken the adversaries to pieces: thou sendest forth thy wrath, it devoured them as stubble. 8 And by the breath of thine anger the water parted asunder; the waters were congealed as a wall, the waves were congealed in the midst of the sea. 9 The enemy said, I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoils; I will satisfy my soul, I will destroy with my sword, my hand shall have dominion. 10 Thou sendest forth thy wind, the sea covered them; they sank like lead in the mighty water. 11 Who is like to thee among the gods, O Lord? who is like to thee? glorified in holiness, marvellous in glories, doing wonders. 12 Thou stretchedst forth thy right hand, the earth swallowed them up. 13 Thou hast guided in thy righteousness this thy people whom thou hast redeemed, by thy strength thou hast called them into thy holy resting-place. 14 The nations heard and were angry, pangs have seized on the dwellers among the

Fearful in praises, doing wonders?

¹² You stretched out Your right hand;
The earth swallowed them.

¹³ You in Your mercy have led forth
The people whom You have redeemed;
You have guided *them* in Your strength
To Your holy habitation.

¹⁴ “The people will hear *and* be afraid;
Sorrow will take hold of the inhabitants of
Philistia.

¹⁵ Then the chiefs of Edom will be dismayed;
The mighty men of Moab,
Trembling will take hold of them;
All the inhabitants of Canaan will melt away.

¹⁶ Fear and dread will fall on them;
By the greatness of Your arm
They will be *as* still as a stone,
Till Your people pass over, O LORD,
Till the people pass over
Whom You have purchased.

¹⁷ You will bring them in and plant them
In the mountain of Your inheritance,
In the place, O LORD, *which* You have made
For Your own dwelling,
The sanctuary, O Lord, *which* Your hands have
established.

¹⁸ “The LORD shall reign forever and ever.”

¹⁹ For the horses of Pharaoh went with his chariots
and his horsemen into the sea, and the LORD
brought back the waters of the sea upon them. But
the children of Israel went on dry *land* in the midst
of the sea.

The Song of Miriam

²⁰ Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron,
took the timbrel in her hand; and all the women
went out after her with timbrels and with dances.

²¹ And Miriam answered them:

“Sing to the LORD,
For He has triumphed gloriously!
The horse and its rider
He has thrown into the sea!”

Philistines. ¹⁵ Then the princes of Edom,
and the chiefs of the Moabites hasted;
trembling took hold upon them, all the
inhabitants of Canaan melted away. ¹⁶ Let
trembling and fear fall upon them; by the
greatness of thine arm, let them become as
stone; till thy people pass over, O Lord, till
this thy people pass over, whom thou hast
purchased. ¹⁷ Bring them in and plant
them in the mountain of their inheritance,
in thy prepared habitation, which thou, O
Lord, hast prepared; the sanctuary, O Lord,
which thine hands have made ready. ¹⁸
The Lord reigns for ever and ever and ever.
¹⁹ For the horse of Pharaoh went in with
the chariots and horsemen into the sea,
and the Lord brought upon them the water
of the sea, but the children of Israel walked
through dry land in the midst of the sea.

²⁰ And Miriam the prophetess, the sister
of Aaron, having taken a timbrel in her
hand—then there went forth all the
women after her with timbrels and dances.
²¹ And Miriam led them, saying, Let us
sing to the Lord, for he has been very
greatly glorified: the horse and rider has he
cast into the sea.