

## A NOTE ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE EXODUS

The significance of the Exodus event can hardly be overestimated. It is at the heart of Israel's faith experience, of Israel's identity as nation and as People of God. The Exodus event has been and continues to be celebrated through the centuries by Jews and Christians alike. Its themes are familiar to Christians who celebrate the Paschal Mystery in Holy Week. It has inspired many liberation movements worldwide, and continues to inspire faith in God who intervenes in history, rescues his people, provides for their needs and reveals himself to them in the person of Moses. The introduction to the Decalogue expresses it: "I, the Lord, am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery" (Ex 20:2).

We discover the Exodus story primarily in the Book of Exodus, but the story runs like a thread throughout the entire Bible. In summary it can be said that the Exodus event is represented in three stages:

### **(i) Liberation from slavery in Egypt (Ex 1-15).**

Moses – an Israelite child rescued from drowning by a kind princess - grows up in Pharaoh's court in Egypt and rises to a place of greatness. He pleads with Pharaoh for the liberation of his fellow-Israelites. This yields no result. Moses then prays to God. His prayer for liberation is answered when a series (10 in all) of plagues are visited on Egypt. Then Pharaoh surrenders and pleads with Moses to leave the country, taking the captive Israelites with him into the wilderness. That journey out of Egypt involves a dangerous crossing of the Reed Sea, pursued by Pharaoh's army. Moses and the Israelites escape miraculously when the sea closes over Pharaoh's army (Ex 12: 1-20). This Crossing is linked in the Bible with the Feast of Passover (celebration of an ancient ritual commemorating the passing of God's angel over the houses marked with the blood of sacrifice).

### **(ii) The Desert wanderings (Ex 15- 18).**

Led by Moses, the nomadic people wander through the desert of Sinai, threatened by enemies of many kinds. They suffer from hunger. God provides manna. They suffer from thirst. Moses strikes the rock at God's command and water gushes forth. They murmur against Moses and against God (17: 1-7) as time goes by without sight of the Promised Land. Moses continues to trust God and to encourage the people.

### **(iii) Theophany on Mount Sinai and the Giving of the Covenant (Ex 19-24).**

The giving of the Covenant was *the* experience by which Israel became God's People. While covenants or agreements (e.g., suzerainty treaties) were part of social life in ancient Israel, the Covenant with Yahweh on Mount Sinai is different. Here Yahweh is the superior, the one who reveals his face to Moses as leader of a people, and commands obedience from Moses and the people. There is the encounter with God and the expression of God's will in the giving of the Decalogue (Ten Commandments). Moses acts as mediator of the Covenant. He is the link between God and the People of Israel.

### **The Renewal of the Covenant (Ex 32-34).**

Israel is influenced by pagan neighbours and forgets the Covenant with God. People begin to worship idols, including the Golden Calf. Moses intercedes for the people.

God forgives their sin, and the Covenant is renewed (Ex 32-34). This pattern will be repeated again and again in Israel's history. People are unfaithful, but God is faithful.

While scholars differ about historical details of the Exodus, there is no doubt about the significance of the Exodus as the foundation of Israel's identity as a people. Chosen, liberated and guided by God, Israel finds the roots of its civic and religious identity in the Exodus and Covenant. In that story, Moses plays a key role as liberator, as intercessor, as mediator and as recipient of the Covenant on behalf of Israel. Of the Exodus narrative, John J. Collins writes:

*"It is more important than any other biblical story for establishing Israelite and Jewish identity. It is repeatedly invoked as a point of reference in the Prophets, later in the Writings, and in the New Testament. It has served as a paradigm of liberation for numerous movements in Western history...It can fairly be regarded as one of the most influential, and greatest stories in world literature"<sup>1</sup>.*

### **Exodus story is relevant today.**

Most importantly, the Exodus narrative continues to inspire and to nourish faith. Its theological riches are inexhaustible. The God who raised up Moses as leader and liberator, who guided a people's wanderings, who revealed his plan and his care for Israel, who personally revealed his face to Moses on Mount Sinai – this God is faithful still, intimately linked with human history and with the personal story of each one of us. The Exodus story can never lose its relevance.

Read Mark Smith, *Exodus* (Collegeville Bible Commentary – New Series), pp. 5-7, 13.

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<sup>1</sup> John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 2004. p. 119