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Passover (Exodus 12: 1-14)

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Last week, we began our Exodus journey with Moses encountering the Lord, Yahweh, on the slopes of Mount Horeb. Here, so the story goes, the divine voice issued from the burning bush, sending Moses back to Egypt to lead the Hebrew people out of slavery. This week, we find ourselves on the brink of the Exodus itself as the Lord instructs Moses concerning the terrible culmination of the campaign to secure Israel's release. It's a moment which raises hard questions about the justice of God and the ethics of liberation, about founding myths and the nature of biblical revelation. How have things come to this?

As per the Lord's command, Moses has returned to Egypt with his brother Aaron. He wasn't keen to go, unsure of his capacity to convince the Israelites that the Lord has sent him: 'But, look, they will not believe me nor will they heed my voice, for they will say, "The Lord did not appear to you"'. (4: 1) He's even less sure that anything he says will impress Egypt's king: "'O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant" ... "O my Lord, please send someone else"' (4: 10, 13).

And in fact, the beginning of the campaign doesn't go so well. Pharaoh is angry at even the suggestion the Israelites be released to go worship their God in the wilderness. As so often happens, the hint that an oppressed people is getting restless provokes an even more oppressive crackdown. Just as, in our day, Syria's President Assad became more tyrannical after the pro-democracy demonstrations of the Arab Spring, so the king of Egypt began to make impossible demands of the Hebrews, with ever more severe

punishments for non-compliance. It's clear that asking nicely for their freedom hasn't worked.

So Yahweh promises the disheartened Moses that he will act: 'I Myself have heard the groaning of the Israelites whom the Egyptians enslave ... Therefore say to the Israelites: "I am the Lord. I will take you out from under the burdens of Egypt and I will rescue you from their bondage and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great retributions. And I will take you to Me as a people and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God Who takes you out from under the burdens of Egypt"' (6: 5-7). And with this speech, we begin to get a sense that more than freedom is at stake here. Yahweh, it seems, is concerned not only to liberate an oppressed people but to create a worshipping people. Yahweh wants them to know 'him' as their liberator, the One because of whose powerful arm they are redeemed.

And this introduces a troubling dimension to the story. Because not only, does Pharaoh have to be persuaded to let Israel go. It has to be obvious that Yahweh is at work. And this requires some pretty obvious signs and wonders. What's more, it seems to require that Pharaoh keep on not letting the people go, so that the signs and wonders can get increasingly more wondrous. How is Pharaoh's obduracy to be guaranteed? Yahweh lets Moses in on the secret: 'I on My part shall harden Pharaoh's heart, that I may multiply My signs and My portents in the land of Egypt' (7:3).

So, the campaign begins. First comes a sign that's relatively innocuous and locally contained; Aaron's staff is turned into a serpent. Pharaoh's competitive instincts are, however, provoked. He instructs his own sorcerers to turn their staffs into serpents, and even though Aaron's serpent eats theirs, the king fails to take the hint. His 'heart toughened, and he did not heed them, just as the Lord had spoken' (7:13). Then the signs begin in earnest – the so-called ten plagues – frogs, gnats, flies, terrible darkness, water turned to blood and so on. The last of these plagues brings the death at midnight

of every firstborn, both human and animal, in the land of Egypt and at last Pharaoh's will breaks. Yahweh instructs Moses that this night is to be remembered by Israel throughout the generations as the night when their Lord brought them out of Egypt. It is celebrated as the Passover, because the Lord 'passed over' their households and spared their firstborn.

How are we to receive this text, this story of bloody liberation by the hand of God? What are we to make of the God it purportedly reveals and the nature of God's action in the world? Well – with some trepidation – let me try to offer a way of beginning to engage these questions.

It's key to the story that the people chosen by God to bear God's name are slaves. We know it's key since, once they've been brought out of Egypt, they will be told to remember this fact about themselves in perpetuity. It reminds them that they're utterly dependent on God for their identity and freedom. Their redemption is entirely God's initiative, nothing to do with their desert or effort – hence the emphasis on God's action to bring them out, with 'outstretched arm' and by means they could never have managed for themselves.

And there are two important consequences of this. For one thing, it affects how the people of Israel are to see themselves in relation to other peoples, because it means there's nothing *intrinsic* to them that is superior to others, nothing they *possess* that authorizes their sense of being chosen by God. For another thing, it affects how Israel is to treat those most vulnerable *within* their nation. The Law God gives them after they've been freed states: 'You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there' (Deut. 24: 14-18). In both these aspects, then, the fact that its life and freedom is so definitively remembered as an act of God fundamentally affects the character of Israel's national life.

But what are we to make of the way God is said to act, the means that God chooses to accomplish this redemption? What kind of a God is this? Here – I think – is where the text is more ambiguous than it appears at first reading.

The theological problem here is that by the time Israel is released from Egypt, it's beginning to seem as if the Egyptians are themselves being oppressed and unjustly treated by the Lord. We're told that included among the dead, for example, are the 'firstborn of the slavegirl who is behind the millstone' (11:5), and the 'firstborn of the prisoner in the dungeon' (12:29). The story presents us with the suffering of those without any influence over the course of events, and ensures we hear of their distress, how 'there was a loud cry in Egypt'. It's because of this that we get a queasy feeling in our tummies when we say 'this is the word of the Lord'.

But, of course, we only know about this 'collateral damage' because of the text itself. The remarkable thing is that the suffering of Egypt is *not* pushed out of the narrative, not erased. In fact, it's positively highlighted and left to sit there, raising questions about the justice of God. The ambiguity in this is so clear that it's explicitly worked into some celebrations of the Jewish Passover. As the ten plagues God sent upon Egypt are recited, ten drops of wine are poured out of the Passover cup, to symbolize 'the lessening of our joy in memory of these hardships upon the Egyptian people'. And how extraordinary it is that, in a story told by the 'victors', the text unsettles itself in this way.

Rene Girard has argued that it's an effect of the Judaeo-Christian revelation in human culture, that we cannot believe God is just with winners, or that God is on the side of the oppressor. I think we can see this revelation at work here. There is an aspect to the story of Israel's liberation from bondage in Egypt that looks like an old-fashioned 'God with us' (and not with you) kind of story – a tale of unproblematic triumph, a self-legitimizing myth of origin: the bad Egyptians and their useless gods justifiably smited by 'our' powerful Lord to underwrite a national identity for we 'good' Israelites. The God

of this story is conveniently a projection of Israel, and Israel's interests. But something else is present too – an unsettling from within of this kind of nationalistic myth, an ambiguity that will not be erased, and will not leave our consciences tidy.

And Girard points out that precisely in this unsettling, we glimpse the influence, the Spirit of a God who is no mere tribal deity, but authentically the God of freedom and justice, who is not just 'our' God, but the God of all; not just a God of the strong and free, but the Saviour of the weak and enslaved – whoever they may be. And this is the same Saviour who, centuries later, will profoundly rework the symbolism of this Passover story, by giving himself to be the lamb slain so that all people might pass from slavery to freedom, from death to life.