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Through the Waters (Exodus 13 and 14)

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According to Robert Alter, from whose wonderful translation we've just read, the narrative journey of the Book of Exodus 'is organized around three thematically defined spaces'.¹ There's Egypt which is the place of bondage; there's the wilderness or desert, a liminal space where the people of Israel will gradually realize their freedom and what it asks of them; and then there's 'the promised destination', a land flowing with milk and honey towards which they're headed and yet which 'remains beyond the horizon of this book'.²

With tonight's reading, we join the people of Israel on the brink of their crossing over between the first and second spaces – between Egypt and the wilderness. It's a vulnerable point in the story. As commentator William Propp has said, they are 'neither in Egypt nor in the desert, neither enslaved nor free'.³ They're at that tricky moment in any major life transition when it still looks possible to go back, and you begin to wonder why on earth you set out in the first place.

It probably doesn't help that the journey wasn't Israel's idea. It's true they've been oppressed and brutalised in Egypt, and have cried out to God. Yahweh has heard their distress and dispatched Moses to call them out of slavery. Naturally, the Egyptians haven't been keen to let the Israelites go, but they've been persuaded to release them by the relentless pressure of Yahweh's campaign of plagues, which culminated, as we saw last week, with the night of Passover and the death of every firstborn of the

¹ Robert Alter (trans. and commentary), *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2004), p.302.

² Alter, *The Five Books*, p.302.

³ William H.C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1998), p.484.

Egyptians. And this brings us to tonight's passage, where we meet the Israelites freshly ejected from the lives they've known till now and facing an unknown future.

Yahweh has issued particular instructions about the way they must take. Instead of leading them by the 'short and obvious coastal route to get out of Egypt northward', they've been led south and are now encamped by the Sea of Reeds. This seems reasonable enough: the northward route would have been bristling with Egyptian garrisons and Yahweh correctly divines that it won't take much for the Israelites to lose their nerve, 'Lest' (as he says) 'the people regret when they see battle and go back to Egypt' (13: 17). Pharaoh, however, thinks they're lost: 'They are confounded in the land, the wilderness has closed round them' (14:3), he gloats. He's regretting his decision to let them go, and since the Israelites seem trapped up against the sea, Pharaoh is confident that his troops will easily surround and recapture them.⁴ His mistake. As Alter suggests, not only has Yahweh been avoiding the northern route; he's been setting up an ambush.⁵ He's been enticing the Egyptians to pursue their former slaves, so as definitively to defeat them and eliminate all danger of the people being dragged back. By this means also, Yahweh says, he will once more demonstrate his 'glory' so that 'the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord' (14: 4).

But this story is not just about defeating Egypt, again. And that's because the liberation of Israel is not just a matter of confounding their pursuers. It requires also the cutting of ties from Israel's side – and tonight we get a glimpse of how long a process this is going to be. For, from the perspective of their current insecurity, the people start to imagine that bondage in Egypt wasn't so bad after all. In fact, terrified at the sight of the advancing chariots, the people unleash on Moses: 'Was it for lack of graves in Egypt that you took us to die in the wilderness? What is this you have done to us to bring us out of Egypt? Isn't this the thing we spoke to you in Egypt, saying, 'Leave us alone, that we may serve Egypt, for it is better for us to serve Egypt than for us to die in the

⁴ Alter, *The Five Books*, p.390.

⁵ Alter, *The Five Books*, p.390.

wilderness?’ (14: 11-13). What’s striking in this speech is the number of mentions of Egypt – as if Israel remains tied to it, fascinated by it. Like I said before, at the point of no return in any major life transition, the hold of the familiar and the desire for security (no matter the cost) can be overwhelming. This suggests that the sea in this story functions not only as the downfall of the Egyptian riders and their chariots, but as part of a necessary passage for Israel.

Egypt, as Alter notes, ‘is associated with water’. Almost everything there is linked with the Nile, its central waterway.⁶ It’s this fertile, watered place that Israel is being asked to leave behind, to enter into a parched and dry place, with nothing but faith in God to sustain them. Paradoxically, they must leave the well-watered land of Egypt by way of water, by way of the sea, which evokes the waters of chaos over which the Spirit of God hovered at the beginning of creation. Yahweh draws them deliberately into this chaos, which threatens death as the waters tower over them on either side, and by means of their passage through it, he symbolically undoes their old identity as slaves and gives them a new identity as a free people. Yahweh brings them through the water to birth as the people of Israel.⁷

So what is this story to us? I said last week that Exodus is clearly, at one level, a tale about how the nation of Israel came to be, and it includes the story, as founding myths do, of how Israel’s enemy was overcome by God. But as we also saw last week, there’s something more than this becoming visible in the text. William Propp remarks that, at the point when Pharaoh is chasing after Israel and the people are chastising Moses for not having left them alone, everyone ‘except Moses and Yahweh agree that Israel would be better off in bondage’.⁸ But who ever heard of a founding story in which the people don’t want to be founded or free? It’s hardly inspiring frontier stuff.

And the effect of this – what’s dominant in the story – is Yahweh’s determination that the people should be and be free. We’re left with the impression not of what a

⁶ Alter, *The Five Books*, p.302.

⁷ See Alter, *The Five Books*, p.394.

⁸ Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, p.494.

bunch of heroes Israel is, how deserving they are of nationhood, but rather of how uncompromising is God's commitment to their emancipation. Thomas Merton remarked that: 'God did not *invite* the Children of Israel to leave the slavery of Egypt: He *commanded* them to do so'.⁹ It's in this sense, I think, that this text is revelation – it doesn't so much justify Israel, as it unveils something about the nature of God. A God of freedom. A God who calls God's people to be free.

And maybe it's good to think again about the radical implications of this revelation. What might this mean for how we live? for how we respond to forms of bondage in our lives and in the lives of others? This isn't always an easy question to discern.

Sometimes we live constrained because we must, because no passage to freedom has yet been offered – and maybe even because there is something to be learned in our 'cell'. But sometimes we become enmeshed (as Israel had) with systems and powers that diminish and oppress. Sometimes we're so habituated to them that we're even frightened of the possibility of release, of a different kind of life calling us to a different quality of responsiveness and responsibility. And, it can be hard to discern the difference. What's a necessary, unavoidable bondage – the place, the circumstances I'm in and to which (at least for now) I must be faithful? And what's a bondage I'm commanded to let go, daring to trust in the unfolding of what Walter Brueggemann calls God's 'emancipatory will', daring to believe that God desires our liberty and life?

There's a gospel tradition that sees Jesus as the new Moses, and St Paul said: 'for freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery' (Gal 5:1). As we continue our journey with God this Lent, may each of us learn the freedom to which we are called, and have courage to undergo the passage. May we become dwellers in, bearers of God's freedom in our enslaved and still enslaving world.

⁹ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: A New Directions Book, 2007), p.110.