

## ***Moving on with God: Key motifs in Exodus 13 – 20***

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### **Introduction: scope and method**

I might have entitled these reflections 'the route to Canaan revisited', for my early years were lived in the Baptist and evangelical sub-culture where the language of Canaan was spoken. The use of 'promise boxes', the describing of spiritual life in terms of being on the victory side, coming out from among them and being separate, following God's guidance, feasting on the daily portion (read 'manna'), undergoing a testing experience, not hankering after the fleshpots of Egypt, passing through a wilderness experience, having a mountain top experience, not tarrying too long on this mountain - these idioms contributed to a model of spirituality subliminally and sermonically imprinted on me. I return to these ideas now not to lampoon, but because I would like to re-appropriate the stories this piety was derived from, stories which catch my imagination and offer me symbols of life.

The Afrikaans community of South Africa, meanwhile, was appropriating the book of Exodus anew through cultic re-enactment of the Great Trek on its centenary in 1938. Through the rhetoric of the chosen people, and of the annual commemoration of the victory of Blood River against the Zulus, known as the Day of the Covenant, or more accurately, Day of the Vow, the Exodus-covenant language was being appropriated in their own way to interpret divine vocation.<sup>1</sup> Again, I do not want to turn away from the political implications of covenant, its liberation theology and socio-economic re-readings of Exodus, but this time I would return to the text politically conscientized towards colonial and racial oppression, and aware there may be future variations on this theme.

I can offer here no typology-free re-reading of Exodus 13 - 20, but whether mine classifies as Neo-Canaanite, New Hermeneutic or New Age, I will leave to you to judge. As regards method, I

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<sup>1</sup> This hermeneutical re-reading of the OT and the process of symbolic meaning-making by which Afrikaner political struggles against the domination of the British Empire were interpreted by the key equation *Afrikaner volk=Israel* has been thoroughly documented and discussed by T. Dunbar Moodie, *The Rise of Afrikanerdom, power, Apartheid and Afrikaner civil religion* (Berkeley: Univ. California Press, 1975); D. J. Bosch, 'The Roots and Fruits of Afrikaner Civil Religion', in J. W. Hofmeyr and W. S. Vorster (eds.), *New Faces of Africa* (Pretoria: UNISA, 1984), pp. 14-35; T. L. Thompson, *The Political Mythology of Apartheid* (London: Yale, 1975).

would like to take a number of motifs which seem relevant to spirituality from the Exodus narrative in the block of material in Exodus 13 - 20. I start with the redactor's theological emphasis, then glance at the canonical trajectory, and finally ask how we may appropriate the text and internalize it in a way that touches our spirituality.

### **I: The journey motif**

Exodus tells the story of a cultic journey. 'We must go three days' journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to Yhwh our God' (8:27). The beginning of the journey is marked by a cultic meal eaten with 'loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand' (12:11). In this way, moving out of Egypt and moving on with God to an encounter symbolized by the covenant meal at Sinai associates a relationship with God with two simple human activities, eating and walking. Both the eating and the journeying take on symbolic significance. In the fullness of time, eating the New Covenant meal will reinforce the symbolism of communing in a rite

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which connects Passover and Sinai. The journeying component then has to be transposed to metaphor only because no literal walking to a geographical promised land accompanies the NT inheritance.

#### ***Leaving to receive***

To appreciate the exodus story as symbolic journey, we need to see the exodus typologically. Precedent for this is set by the Pentateuch itself. The exodus is one of several journeys which form a pattern linked by the text itself. Genesis blazes the trail by presenting the story of Abraham as an exodus from Ur to the Promised Land. In particular, the phrasing of Genesis 15:7 resonates with the typological foreshadowing of the nation's exodus to Canaan: 'I am Yhwh who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans'. In a chapter which foresees the Egyptian oppression and records God's promissory oath of land, this connection of two journeys to the inheritance invites us to see moving on with God as a pattern of obedience.<sup>2</sup> In both cases, there is a leaving in order to receive what is promised.

#### ***A trail of corpses***

Another prefigurement of leaving to inherit the promise is the exodus of Jacob's funeral cortege (Gn. 50:4-14 in the light of Ge. 49:29; 48:21) for his body to be laid alongside those of Sarah and Abraham, Isaac and Rebekah, and that of Leah in the plot of ground near Hebron. Finally, the

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<sup>2</sup> Although commentators tend to be more preoccupied with literary-critical or historical-critical matters at this point, the typological connection is made, for instance by J. van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (London: Yale, 1975), pp. 263ff; G. Wenham, 'The Religion of the Patriarchs', in D. J. Wiseman and A. R. Millard (eds.), *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives* (Leicester: IVP, 1980), p. 182 [[http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/epn\\_6\\_wenham.html](http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/epn_6_wenham.html)], and Genesis 1 - 15 (Waco: Word, 1987), p. 331; C. Westermann, *Genesis 12 - 36* (London: SPCK, 1986), p. 224. 'The life of Abraham foreshadows the history of Israel' - G. Wenham, *Genesis 1 - 15*, pp. 335f.

narrative sequel of Exodus is explicitly bound together with the promises of Genesis by the figure of Joseph himself, who binds his sons by oath to carry him up to Canaan for burial when the exodus happens (Gn. 50:25). The exodus-burial oath to Joseph is cited in Exodus 14:19 when it records that Joseph's embalmed bones joined the trek from Egypt to the Red Sea and beyond. Joshua 24:32 completes this series of journeys to the inheritance, the promise embodied, by recording the burial of Joseph's bones in Shechem, the area of his tribal allotment. Joseph's is the last and the longest-delayed journey to the land of promise. Faith in the promise is indeed a Pentateuchal and biblical motif which motivates inward orientation, social involvement and sense of identity.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Down-to-earth spirituality***

In parenthesis, while thinking of patriarchal burials, we may recall the Ancient Near Eastern ideal of filial piety. From Mari and Ugarit we know this involved an ancestor cult, giving proper burial and maintaining offerings and libations. While proper burial and gathering to the fathers is valued in these Pentateuchal stories, there is no mention of a continuing on-site cultic activity. In this way, land promise has displaced ancestor cult, and inheritance of the land is God's gift, dependent on God's oath, rather than being dependent on son's oath to patriarch about burial.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps this contributes to the this-worldly orientation of OT spirituality, and its relative lack of other-worldly hope. Certainly, the down-to-earthness of OT spirituality has much to offer our generation.

Whether walking or carried in procession, the patriarchs enshrine a spirituality of faith in which their core identity is defined by belonging to the chosen people rather than by the culture in which they are born, live or die. It is, of course, this roving pursuit of the promise which impresses the writer to the Hebrews, and leads him to emphasize the transitoriness and disconnection between the Christian's racial/cultural identity and his ultimate belonging which is to the people of God, gathered around a new Zion, in continuity with, yet alternative to, the gathering at Mount Sinai (Heb. 12).

### ***Canonical method***

Numbers extends and nuances the journey motif because of its explicit and implicit typological parallels between the journey stages of Egypt-Sinai, Sinai-Kadesh, Kadesh-Moab, and the clustering of motifs, such as the murmuring motif, within these narrative blocks.<sup>5</sup> Grasping these

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<sup>3</sup> W. C. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), selected 'promise' as centre for OT theology with some success, but also incurred the problems of omission and underplay of alternative valid emphases.

<sup>4</sup> Danel lacks a son to give him proper burial (Aqht, CTA 17) - see the debates about the Marzeah banquet, Rephaim texts and the ancestor cult reflected in M. Pope, 'The Cult of the Dead at Ugarit', in G. D. Young (ed.), *Ugarit in Retrospect* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1981), pp. 159-179; for Mesopotamia, see A. Skaist's discussion of inheritance: 'The Ancestor Cult and Succession in Mesopotamia', in B. Alster (ed.), *Death in Mesopotamia* (Copenhagen: Akademisk, 1980), pp. 123-128.

<sup>5</sup> See G. J. Wenham, *Numbers* (Leicester: IVP, 1981), pp. 15f. and 51f., and Mann, *Divine Presence and Guidance in Israelite Traditions: the typology of exaltation* (London: Johns Hopkins, 1977), ch. 8 'The Departure from Sinai', pp. 164f.

links between journeyings in the Pentateuchal stories confirms a method of appropriation. Typological re-reading is demonstrably canonical, and evident both within the OT canon itself and in the NT's use of the OT.<sup>6</sup> It points a way for our own re-readings, and emphasizing of recurrent motifs.

### ***Journey, road and walk metaphors***

The journey metaphor, the motif of a walk with God along a route chosen by him through unknown terrain and hazards to an ultimate destination, has embedded itself in Christian tradition and consciousness as a core metaphor of life.<sup>7</sup> In the process, this travelling by foot with divine guidance has accumulated associations in a manner characteristic of tensive symbols, and many journey, path, guidance, light, and destination metaphors will owe nothing directly to the patriarchal cycle or the exodus story. For instance, there is a metaphor of walking by faith or walking with God.<sup>8</sup> This has become as fundamental an image of spirituality as the journey or pilgrimage metaphor. Enoch sets a typological precedent: 'Enoch walked with God' (Gn. 5:22, 24) in a life of intimate fellowship, culminating in the ultimate transformation. This seems separate from exodus journey motifs, yet treaty and grant use the 'walk' imagery, as does Deuteronomy in connection with covenant, so that obliquely the 'walking' metaphor of Genesis spiritually links with Israel's covenant spirituality.<sup>9</sup>

It is hard to tell, for instance, if the summary statement of spirituality found in Micah 6 alludes to the exodus journey, despite explicit exodus references in the context. Does the phrase 'and walk

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<sup>6</sup> The typological connection and method is discussed by D. L. Baker, *Two Testaments, One Bible* (Leicester: IVP, 1976), with which compare M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), Part Three, 12C, 'Typologies', especially pp. 350ff. 'The Bible contains, in general, not propositions but stories, and these can only be relevant in the sense of being typical.... What significance would Abraham and Moses have if they were not typical? ... their experiences are directly relevant to the Church', Baker, p. 256 (italics mine).

<sup>7</sup> Books as diverse as Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and M. Scott Peck's *The Road less Travelled: a new psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), exploit the concept of a spiritual pilgrimage or life journey, as do many other spiritual autobiographies.

<sup>8</sup> Because the metaphor of walking a path through life is so simply based in mundane experience, it crosses cultural boundaries and is magnetic in attracting associations. Much of the spirituality of Ps. 119, in which Yhwh's torah is 'lamp to the feet and light to the path', depends on *derek* and walking metaphors. The Hebrew noun *derek*, used literally in Ex. 13:17ff. of the coastal and desert routes, had a dynamic idiomatic life of its own in Israelite spirituality. Proverbs, like Ps. 119, contrasts the wrong way which leads downwards, to darkness, to death, with the path of life, the way of wisdom. The right 'way' is straight, not devious, crooked and causing stumbling - note the frequency of 'way' idioms in Pr. 2 - 4, and its association with moral choices. The NT too speaks in terms of 'walking in the Spirit' (Rom. and Gal.), 'walking in the light' (1 Jn. 7, 'walking as children of light' (Eph.), 'walking by faith' (2 Cor.), etc.

<sup>9</sup> Weinfeld has documented the phrases used to express covenant loyalty which use this metaphor of walking: 'walking with', 'walking before', 'walking after', 'walking in the ways or, 'walking in the laws of'. 'Walking after' is a political metaphor for allegiance is a metaphor for covenant spirituality. See M. Weinfeld, 'The Covenant of Grant in Old Testament and Ancient Near East', *JAOS* 90.2 (1970), pp. 184-203, 185f, and *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), Appendix A, pp. 332ff. Cf. the metaphors with root stir - 'to turn aside', listed on p. 339.

carefully with your God' image the trek with Moses, Aaron and Miriam which is referred to explicitly in verse 4, or not?<sup>10</sup>

Yet some echoes of the exodus walk are direct, such as those which focus on the guidance spoken of by Exodus 14. The frame of chosen route to a destination and the divine accompaniment along it with pillar of cloud and fire, which mark the exodus as more than a departure, are appropriated by prophets addressing exiles. There will be an unhasty exodus 'for Yhwh will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard' (Is. 52:12);<sup>11</sup> 'in paths they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light' (42:16). The hazards of the desert crossing will be overcome by the supply of pools of water and luxuriant vegetation (Is. 41:17f ; 48:21; 49:8f ).

### ***Guidance on the journey***

As part of the journey pattern, the guidance motif is certainly written large into the exodus story and liturgical reflections on it. Both prose and hymnic sections of Exodus emphasized God's guidance, using the Hebrew root *nḥh*:<sup>12</sup>

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God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines ... Yhwh went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way (13:17, 21).

Thou hast lead in thy steadfast love the people whom thou hast redeemed, thou hast guided them by thy strength to thy holy abode (15:13).

The way exodus guidance appears in the poetry of Psalms 77 and 78 illustrates extension of metaphor, for of the four occurrences of *nḥh*, one retains the pillar of cloud, but in three (77:20 and 78:53, 72) this visual symbol is displaced by Shepherd-flock imagery. This process of elaboration by associating images is so natural that it can pass unnoticed. Indeed, poets may associate images consciously and unconsciously, just as we mix metaphors in everyday speech consciously or unconsciously.<sup>13</sup> Other changes when older traditions are re-utilized are perhaps due not so much to the magnetic field of different imagery (Shepherd-flock rather than Cloud-light) as due to a new theological slant being placed on the tradition. Perhaps the retelling of the

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<sup>10</sup> On this passage, see L. C. Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 362ff., who links Micah's phrase with the exhortation to walk carefully in Eph. 5.

<sup>11</sup> T. W. Mann, *op. cit.*, pp. 130f and 253ff. has discussed the 'vanguard motif in connection with God's 'going before' (*hlk l'pny*) Israel in the exodus-wilderness march, as reflected in Ex., Nu., Dt. and Is.

<sup>12</sup> Mann, *op. cit.*, pp. 130f. and 255, notes that the motif and the key word *nḥh* connect what are customarily regarded as separate sources (J, E and Song of the Sea part B).

<sup>13</sup> This leaves ample scope for disagreement about the reality of allusions. Does the spirituality of Ps. 23 really and consciously depend on the exodus? See M. L. Barre and J. S. Kselman, 'New Exodus, Covenant and Restoration in Psalm 23', in C. L. Meyers and M. O'Connor (eds.), *The Word of the Lord shall go forth* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983), pp. 97-127, which starts from D. N. Freedman, 'The Twenty-Third Psalm', in *Pottery, Poetry and Prophecy: studies in early Hebrew poetry* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1980), pp. 275-302.

exodus in Isaiah 63 with the *ruah* *Yhwh* as guiding presence illustrates a theological nuancing (63:11, 14).<sup>14</sup>

What concerns us here is how the journey-presence guidance pattern becomes an extended metaphor and model of spirituality, or perhaps, taking into account Israel's failure to progress, we should say a map of spiritual hazard.

## II: Testing

### *Experience and growth*

Germane to the entire concept of spirituality is growth in the knowledge of God. The wilderness journey is presented as a test of faith, and a learning experience. Today there are signs that point to theological education's coming to terms with the role of experience and so being more appreciative of God's teaching methods and Israel's trial and error pattern of learning, which is displayed for us so clearly in the exodus-wilderness story. The signs of a greater openness are diverse. I would include liberation theology's insistence on starting from context and praxis, and its attempts at re-readings of the exodus narrative; the charismatic renewal movement's emphasis on experience of the Spirit and on worship; a pastoral appreciation for the role of group dynamics in the process of learning and change in varied contexts, from midweek home groups to marriage enrichment to rehabilitation; the work of academic specialists, who subsequent to particular life-experiences in groups, have written books like W. Wink's *The Bible in Human Transformation: toward a new paradigm for Biblical study* (Philadelphia: Fortress, <sup>4</sup>1980), or Conrad L'Heureux, *Life Journey and the Old Testament: an experiential approach to the Bible and Personal Transformation* (New York: Paulist, 1986); the footnotes of W. Brueggemann which model an end to specialist isolationism and an ability to engage the issues of social and personal change in a way which brings overlooked features of the biblical text to life in our contemporary cultures.<sup>15</sup>

### *Deuteronomy 8 as lens*

We may begin our re-reading of Exodus as learning experience from a vantage point of reflection outside the Exodus narrative itself but canonically a close re-reading of the exodus story. Deuteronomy looks back on the whole wilderness period as a training exercise, and we may use the lens of Deuteronomy 8 to view the experience of the exodus journey to Sinai.

And you shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know; that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but that man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD.... Know then in your heart, that as a man disciplines

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<sup>14</sup> 'An odd and unique tradition about the Exodus', according to C. Westermann, *Isaiah 40 - 66* (London: SCM, 1969), p. 389!

<sup>15</sup> Note, for example, his references to the sociological analyses of Peter Berger, and the work on developmental and personal psychology by writers such as Erikson, Tournier, Fowler, Kegan, Kübler-Ross.

his son, the LORD your God disciplines you. So you shall keep the commandments of the LORD your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him (Dt. 8:2-3, 5-6).

In passing, we notice the geographical and metaphorical use of *derek* - the 'way' through the wilderness and the 'ways of Yhwh, the focus on the inner orientation (the heart) needing to match outward compliance, the connection between obedience and life, and the motif of fear of the Lord, all characteristic of Deuteronomy's covenant theology. The Father-son metaphor not only emphasizes the relationship bond,<sup>16</sup> but implies the whole learning process as well. Yet the context balances the discipline and training dimension with the provider aspect of the Father role. God feeds and clothes as well as acting as discipliner.

### ***Father-son relationship***

The sonship of Israel is a key motif in the liberation struggle with Pharaoh, and is enunciated early on: 'Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me"; and if you refuse to let him go, behold I will slay your first-born son (Ex. 4:23). Besides this rootedness in the exodus story, the concept of testing appears with equivalent prominence in the manna episode which Deuteronomy alludes to. God did subject Israel to the ordeals of desert travel, including thirst and hunger, which form a background to the murmuring motif. Yet the 'test' in the text of Exodus itself, as connected with the verb *nsh* - 'to prove' (RSV), is actually linked to God's fatherly provision, seen in 15:25f. in his role as paediatrician, and in 16:4 as bread-giver. It is Israel's obedience to instructions rather than their will to survive which is to be put to proof. This said, Deuteronomy does explicitly link the ordeal element ('he humbled you and let you hunger') and the obedience element ('whether you would keep his commandments or not').

### ***Transforming ordeal***

In a re-reading more recent than Deuteronomy's, Cohn attempts to relate Israel's wilderness experience to the dynamics of change involved in transitional periods such as tribal rites of passage, millenarian movements and religious pilgrimages. In a stimulating article entitled 'Liminality in the Wilderness',<sup>17</sup> Cohn draws on the work of the anthropologist Victor Turner who has studied these social and symbolic experiences in terms of separation, marginality and re-incorporation with the development of community and an identity formation. Whether these

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<sup>16</sup> Near Eastern family terminology, including marriage, adoption and sonship language, moves into the political domain and into Israel's covenant language - see already F. C. Fensham, 'Father and Son as Terminology for Treaty and Covenant', in H. Goedicke (ed.), *Near Eastern Studies in honor of W. E. Albright* (London: Johns Hopkins, 1971), pp. 121-135, and more recently P. Kalluveetil, *Declaration and Covenant* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1982), ch. 4, along with the cited work of Moran, McCarthy and Weinfeld in particular.

<sup>17</sup> R. L. Cohn, *The Shape of Sacred Space* (Chico: Scholars, 1981), ch. 2, pp. 7-23. We are familiar with the Outward Bound concept of training in which individuals discover their limits in unfamiliar terrain, and develop group bonding to overcome the difficulties. The shared ordeal is intended as a positive learning experience. The root *lîn* - 'to complain, grumble', links several episodes of the trek story; see Ex. 15:24; 16:2,7,8,9,12; 17:3. Commentators note the difference in divine response to Israel's distrust before and after Sinai and this discloses the training perspective on the pre-Sinai section of the journey. After Sinai, Yhwh punishes because he has given ample proof of his care in experiential learning contexts.

models end up emphasizing the common bonds of social processes, or more the unique features of Israel's transition experience, I think we must recognize the truth of ordeal and the truth of ambiguity which characterize Israel's betwixt and betweenness in the wilderness.

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### ***Already/not yet***

NT theology has found that Already/Not Yet transition model fruitful for interpreting Pauline spirituality,<sup>18</sup> as expressed, for instance, in the sonship and freedom of the Spirit to cry 'Abba, Father!' and yet also to groan inwardly. Hebrews too has its sonship and trial and pilgrimage motifs, with a distinct note of ambiguity of outcome as regards those who had started out on their spiritual journey. Finally, as regards canonical trajectory and the usefulness of the sonship-Father training model, we need to make the connection explicit between the covenant narrative of Exodus, the sermonic reflection of Deuteronomy, the identical enunciation of Father-son discipline as spiritual principle in Wisdom education (Pr. 3:11f.), and its re-use in Hebrews as an authoritative quotation from OT Scripture. Beyond this we must note the 'Testing of God's Son' which is embodied as typological pattern in the gospel stories of Jesus' ordeal in the wilderness. This completes the loop back to Deuteronomy 8.<sup>19</sup> Prior to exodus testing, and in many ways the epitome of testing in the OT, is the testing of Abraham in Genesis 22 which confirms the patterning linking forefather and exodus generation.

### ***Trial and error learning***

Returning to Exodus, we note that the other echoes of *nasah* are ironical, for they concern Israel inappropriately reversing the roles and attempting to put Yhwh to the test. This role reversal signals their failure to learn, and it left its mark in the resonance of the names Massah and Meribah from Exodus 17:7 in Israel's liturgy (Pss. 81:7; 95:8; 106:32) and NT exhortation alike (Heb. 3, 4).

The desert trek to Sinai is the prime trial and error learning period. After Sinai, the failure to learn is punished in equivalent episodes found in Numbers, and indeed the 40 years' wandering in the wilderness is a punishment, which the journey to Sinai and the southern border of Canaan was not.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, the wilderness period is no 'wilderness period' as the 'language of Canaan'

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<sup>18</sup> Studies from the 1960s such as Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (London: SCM, rev ed. 1962), and *Salvation in History* (London: SCM, 1967), probably influenced several decades of theological students.

<sup>19</sup> The root itself, *nsh* - 'to prove, try, test', appears in Dt. 4:34; 6:16; 8:2, 16; 13:4; 33:8, and in Ex. 15:25; 16:4; 17:2, 7; 20:20 (disputed - see Durham, *op. cit.*, p. 303). For discussion of the trajectory into the gospels, see B. Gerhardsson, *The Testing of God's Son* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1966), and U. W. Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness* (London: SCM, 1963). These were products of the biblical theology era, coming to terms with typology. An updated bibliography is given by W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *Matthew, ICC* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), p. 407. These NT studies also typify the dichotomizing ideology of the scholastic genre whereby text and life are radically divorced.

<sup>20</sup> Comparison of Moses and Gilgamesh as epic heroes is interesting because of the journey motif. Both epic journeys end in failure, Moses to enter the land of promise though he pleads to do so and can see it from afar, Gilgamesh though he reaches Utnapishtim only to discover he does not qualify for eternal life and then watches the plant of youth disappear with the snake and his last hopes. Both must come to terms with divine limitations set and be content with the legacy they leave. Both take on symbolic roles in the afterlife.



would have it, for it is the locus of daily miracle and divine presence. Brueggemann brings this out well in his chapter headed 'You Lacked Nothing'.<sup>21</sup> Reviewing the entire wilderness period, as Deuteronomy 8 does, we see that the Father did not abandon the son who failed the tests, did not withdraw his presence or provision, even during the protracted phase of enforced discipline. This perspective emerging from a view of the wilderness period as testing and failing, trial and error non-learning, is surely a perspective on spiritual experience to be received thankfully as much as tremblingly.

### III: The fear of the LORD

The motif of the 'fear of the LORD' is certainly strategically placed in the exodus narrative, for it links the experiences of the Reed Sea rescue with the Sinai covenant relationship. Both are awesome experiences of the God of the Hebrews, his presence and activity dramatized through visual effects. There is also a conceptual paradox attached to each episode which makes them memorable, and strengthens this connection.

#### *Seeing is believing*

In Exodus 14:10, the Israelites are pictured as lifting up their eyes to see the oncoming Egyptian attack: 'and they were in great fear'. This sparks the anguished cry that slavery would have been preferable to death in the wilderness - an accusation and despair contributing recurrent irony to the story line. Moses then delivers a salvation oracle with the characteristic opening 'Fear not!', and a picking up of the 'seeing' motif: 'see the salvation of the LORD... for the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again' (14:13).<sup>22</sup>

With repetition and alliteration the point is made that God will give proof-of-Presence, responding to the 'seeing is believing' mind-set. The learning experience is summarized in the statement: 'and Israel saw the Egyptians, and the people feared the LORD' (14:30f.). Seeing was believing, for the verse ends: 'and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses'.<sup>23</sup>

This is a conversion experience from one object of fear to another. It is, of course, part of a much larger transference, a shift from one suzerain to another, from one land to another, and as such it proves to be incomplete and as much a process as was the journeying itself. The story line of

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<sup>21</sup> W. Brueggemann, *The Land* (London: SPCK, 1977), ch. 3, pp. 28-44. His approach could be termed neo-typological because he places Gn. 1 chaos alongside wilderness formlessness, patriarchal infertility alongside wilderness barrenness, and finds in manna a typology of divine presence: 'like manna, his wilderness presence is always enough on which to survive, but not too much. Like manna, he can be graciously received but not stored or presumed upon. Like manna, it is given out of fidelity but never fully seen and controlled' (p. 43).

<sup>22</sup> The 'Fear not!' form of salvation oracle spoken in the context of war is well documented from 2nd millennium Mari texts to NeoAssyrian. See J.-G. Heintz, 'Oracles prophetiques et "Guerre Sainte" scion les Archives de Mari et de l'ancien Testament', *Vetus Testamentum Supp.* 17 (1969), pp. 112-138. It is no coincidence that Is. 40 - 55, which appropriates Exodus typologically, is also marked by 'Fear not!' salvation oracles; see E. W. Conrad, 'The "Fear Not" Oracles in Second Isaiah', *Vetus Testamentum* 34 (1984), pp. 129-152.

<sup>23</sup> Both Ex. 14 and Ex. 19 - 20 strongly affirm the leadership role of Moses as a corollary of the 'fear of the LORD', a point which Mann's study on divine exaltation brings into clear focus.

Exodus gels with the spirituality of the Psalter, for the orientation/disorientation/reorientation perspective which emerges from the liturgical collection coheres with the alternation of lament and exultant thanksgiving of Exodus 14 and 15, and the ongoing cycle of despair and complaint induced by thirst, hunger and enemy attack which is altered by God's action in later episodes and way stages.<sup>24</sup>

### ***The paradox of fear***

Here the conversion paradox is that though they are told 'Do not fear!' it is, in fact, essential that they do fear. In this context, the 'fear of the LORD' is charged with emotion. It is as profoundly experiential and emotional as seeing the Egyptians first alive, then dead. In fact, the fear of Yhwh grips the routed Egyptians first. Their flight into the water counterpoints the Israelites' flight in the opposite direction onto dry ground, and spiritually juxtaposes the fear unto death with the fear unto life. The Song of the Sea highlights the two-sides metaphor of military conflict ('Yahweh is a man of war', 15:3) and the fight with Amalek in Exodus 17, with the decree of perpetual hostility, underlines it. This two-sides, conflictual model is fundamental to a NT perception of transference from kingdom of darkness to kingdom of light, and the whole understanding of spiritual warfare, epitomized by the extended metaphor of Ephesians 6. The Song of the Sea also develops the 'fear unto death' motif in 15:14-16 where divinely inspired terror overwhelms Israel's enemies to effect their displacements.<sup>25</sup>

The paradoxical quality of this 'fear of the LORD' is presented again in Exodus 20:20, where in the one breath Moses says: 'Do not fear, for God has come to prove you, and that the fear of him may be before your eyes, that you may not sin'. The people's fear, described in verse 18, is no quiet reverence but as emotional, indeed physiological, as was the Reed Sea experience. In both contexts, the original experience is overwhelming in its sensory effects. In 20:18, the thunderings, lightnings, trumpet sound and smoking of the mountain, described in the story sequence of chapter 19, are summarized as the cause of this strong reaction along with the hearing of God's audible voice, whether the narrator intended his readers to identify it with the thunder, as the

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wording of 19:19 might suggest, or distinguish it as the announcement of the Ten Words in God's direct speech.

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<sup>24</sup> See W. Brueggemann's study, 'Psalms and the Life of Faith: suggested typology of function', *JSOT* 17 (1980), pp. 3-32, with J. Goldingay's response, 'The Dynamic Cycle of Praise and Prayer in the Psalms', *JSOT* 20 (1981), pp. 85-90.

<sup>25</sup> Since G. von Rad's study of the holy war concept, a number of important studies have focused on the technicalities of the divine warrior motif and its Near Eastern background - see P. D. Miller, *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1973), and M. Weinfeld, 'Divine Intervention in War in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East', in H. Tadmor and M. Weinfeld (eds.), *History, Historiography and Interpretation* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984), pp. 121-147. With more focus on the covenant and treaty framework, see D. C. T. Sheriffs, *Empire and the Gods: Mesopotamian Treaty Theology and the Sword in the First Millennium BC* (unpublished DLitt thesis; Univ. Stellenbosch, 1976).

### *The semantics of fear*

The 'fear' is the experience of feeling terrified, and wishing to keep a safe distance between themselves and this holy God. Yet 'the fear of him ... before your eyes', which Moses' words characterize as an enduring orientation, must have a different nuance from terror, just as Israel's mundane experience differed from the Sinai experience even for the wilderness generation itself. On the other hand, because these primal theophanies were so formative for Israel's faith, the semantic field encompassed by the phrase 'the fear of the LORD' can never really detach itself from Reed Sea and Sinai, to drift away into something solely attitudinal rather than emotional, ethical rather than worshipful, propositional principle rather than transforming effect. There are other nuances to the 'fear of the LORD' than feeling terrified, it is true, and in the Wisdom literature there are seminal statements about the 'fear of the LORD' associated with humility, knowledge, wisdom and moral decision, which have the tone of a day-to-day orientation in contrast to the unique events of Reed Sea and Sinai. These contexts have been sensitively explored in Blocher's 1977 Tyndale lecture 'The Fear of the LORD as the "Principle" of Wisdom', and are certainly germane to an OT spirituality which encompasses everyday behaviour as much as extraordinary encounters with God.<sup>26</sup>

We would want to affirm that the 'fear of the LORD' theology of Exodus coheres with the 'fear of the LORD' theology of Deuteronomy and of the Wisdom literature, and of the Psalms. One basis for affirming this lies in the semantic field evidenced by the exodus story itself.<sup>27</sup> The Reed Sea experience is not the first occurrence of the 'fear of the LORD' motif in the exodus narrative. At the beginning of the story and associated with the fulfilment of the promise of multiplication, we find that the midwives are presented as role models of faith in their civil disobedience. Their refusal to implement the genocide policy is motivated by their choice to fear Yhwh rather than fear Pharaoh: 'but the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them' (1:17)... 'and because the midwives feared God he gave them families' (1:21). In a political and ethical context, that is an obedience-blessing theology like Deuteronomy's. The midwives preceded the rest of Israel in their fear of Yhwh displacing their fear of Pharaoh. The close association is made in this civil disobedience exemplar between 'fear of God' and ethical decision, and between trust in God and the contrasting choice of political expediency. Likewise, Exodus 14:31 closely associates 'fear of Yhwh' with trust in God and his appointed leader, Moses.

In Exodus 14, then, emotional fear of Yhwh is extended into the faith, trust, and obedience way of living. Brain physiology offers an interesting analogy to, or possibly basis for, the interconnection between the experience of fear in the bio-chemical reaction via the autonomic

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<sup>26</sup> H. Blocher, *Tyndale Bulletin* 28 (1977), pp. 3-28. He seems to have passed over the exodus passages prior to Ex. 20:20.

<sup>27</sup> The image of a magnetic force field which is empirically demonstrated by the pattern of iron filings on paper seems better suited to expressing the coherence and individual lines of canonical theology than other approaches which disconnect these lines. The concepts of contextuality and polarity are used most helpfully towards this goal by J. Goldingay, *Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987). Studies of the 'fear of the LORD' by M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), Part Three: 'Deuteronomistic Literature and Wisdom Literature', section 3, pp. 274-281, is an earlier attempt to follow a conceptual thread through different genres of OT literature.

nervous system, the conceptual interpretative framework mainly sited in the cerebral cortex, and the sensory impressions reaching the brain. Learning the 'fear of the LORD' involves the whole brain and the whole person, and seeing the phrase the 'fear of the LORD' as signal of a whole association cluster preserves us from more than a semantic fallacy.<sup>28</sup>

### *New covenant fear*

Finally, there is a trajectory of paradox from Exodus to the sayings of Jesus. In a context describing persecution by the authorities, Jesus tells his followers not to fear the authorities but rather to fear God, and not to fear and yet to fear. 'Do not fear those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both body and soul in hell... fear not, therefore, you are of more value than many sparrows' (Mt. 10:28, 31). This extends into the new covenant the spirituality of the 'fear of the LORD' in Exodus, including the political and covenant axis of the Exodus material.<sup>29</sup> The new covenant community is never exhorted to fear or to love the emperor;<sup>30</sup> Peter urges a life of freedom lived in the fear of the Lord (1 Pet. 2:16f.).

## **IV: Covenant nucleus - Exodus 19:4-6**

I have been assuming that 'spirituality' includes a focus on separation from the world, commitment to God, union with God, communing with God, the sense of the presence of God, growth in the knowledge of God, and all the mechanisms, such as community and worship and the testing of trust, which facilitate this transformation. I cannot stop to argue these points but would refer to Paul's use of the exodus traditions in describing the transformation of the believer 'beholding the glory of the Lord', and 'being changed into his likeness' (2 Cor. 3:18).

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

These words of God, embracing time past and time future, holding out promise and asking for commitment, spoken between leaving Egypt and arriving in Canaan, are nuclear, radiating an exodus spirituality.

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<sup>28</sup> While we find it helpful to compartmentalize our categories, sorting emotions from ethical values from theological concepts, studies of the brain show that the cerebral cortex is involved in processing and interpreting pain stimuli. If the autonomic nervous system which regulates the fight/flight response functioned entirely separately from the cerebral cortex there would be a physiological basis for separating the semantic field of 'fear of the LORD'. On the physiology, see for instance 'Emotions: the Highs and Lows of the Brain', ch. 4 in F. E. Bloom, A. Lazerson and L. Hofstadter, *Brain, Mind and Behaviour* (New York: W. H. Freeman, 1985), ch. 4, pp. 143-175.

<sup>29</sup> Of course, there are exodus-like stories in the gospels such as the stilling of the storm, the transfiguration and the appearance in the upper room where theophany, fear and trust are linked together. These stories encapsulate experiential learning essential for theological understanding of who Jesus is.

<sup>30</sup> See D. Bosch, 'The Church and the Liberation of Peoples?', *Missionalia* 5.2 (1977), pp. 8-39, 23.

### ***Theology versus OT studies***

Sadly, traditional OT studies seem untuned to the wavelengths of vibrant spirituality emanating from this text. What is a jewel of OT theology has functioned more as a prism which demarcates the wavebands of traditional OT studies. The wavebands of source-critical analysis, of form-critical taxonomy, of historical-critical assessment, of collection of Near Eastern idiomatic parallels, of concept developmental hypotheses, and of canonical trajectories are well represented by lines on the pages of the commentaries, monographs and journal articles. Little more is said in these places about the ability of the text to scintillate and transform the reader, and few attempts are made at re-readings which are generated by turning the text with sensitive fingertips and catching glimpses of multihued light off its many facets.

Perhaps exegetes are modest and would conceal their moonlighting as weekend preachers, but we can be glad that the trends of hermeneutics which allow us to speak of levels of meaning, re-readings, and contextualization now make spirituality a respectable concern to bring to the study of this textual gem.

I would like to examine facets of this jewel: the concept of Yhwh as destination and centre, paradox, the use of imagery and symbolization, and the centrality of covenant in connection with identity and vocation.

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### ***'I brought you to myself - journey to the centre***

The whole exodus story is about leaving and arriving and what happens in between. The narrative discourse of Exodus 19:1-2 orientates the reader for time and place by rehearsing the departure point of Egypt, the elapse of time reckoned by the cycle of the moon which is at once calendrical and cultic, and goes on to refer to stages of the journey, mentioning encampment at Rephidim and approach to Sinai.

In this narrative setting, the utterance of God expresses the most profound theological interpretation of this departure and journeying. There is the physical trek and there is the geographical arrival to be sure. The account minimizes neither, the divine utterance discloses the meaning of both. The physical journey is the outward visible form of a profound spiritual movement which God wishes to bring about. Spirituality for Israelites leaving Egypt meant to travel trustingly towards this encounter at Sinai.

Encounter with God at Sinai was indeed the announced goal of the exodus. 'When you have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain' (Ex. 3:12).<sup>31</sup> This goal is built into the call of Moses in two ways. Firstly, it was what Moses himself experienced at

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<sup>31</sup> In the conclusion of his extended discussion of Ex. 3:12, Childs affirms the typological prefiguring of Israel's experience in that of Moses: 'a typological relation between the burning bush on the holy mountain and the devouring fire at Sinai was recognized. The sign to Moses was seen as a prefigurement of Israel's experience' (Childs, p. 60). Compare, more recently, J. I. Durham, *Exodus* (Waco: Word, 1987), p. 30: 'the experience of Moses in Ex. 3:1-12 is an exact foreshadowing of the experience of Israel, first in Egypt, then in the deprivation in the wilderness, and finally at Sinai. In each of these narratives, the Presence-response pattern is fundamental.'

the burning bush. This awesome, life-transforming encounter was to be the experience of the whole community. They were all destined to stand on holy ground, confronted by supernatural fire and sound, as awed as their barefooted leader had been himself, and they were all destined to hear the God of their fathers address them in audible Hebrew.

Secondly, worship at Sinai was to constitute the publicly and prophetically proclaimed purpose of God announced to Pharaoh: 'Yhwh, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, we pray you, let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to Yhwh our God' (Ex. 3:18). The narrative picks up this motif of cultic encounter in 7:16, 20, 27 and 10:9, 25 as the tension mounts. The destination is always in view, and especially because one obstacle after another threatens to abort this journey before it has begun. Meanwhile, the reader is alerted to the impossibility of serving Pharaoh and serving Yhwh. The two become irreconcilable. The claims of one suzerain deity must be displaced by the claim of the real God and King. The Song of the Sea celebrates the overthrow of the one and the kingdom of the other.

But the narrative tension of whether Israel would reach their mountain destination once the Reed Sea has closed behind them on Egypt is kept alive by further threats to their physical and spiritual survival posed by thirst, hunger and enemy onslaught, and more than this, there are threats to Israel's vocation arising within the camp. The mutterings of Pharaoh against this destiny are replaced by the murmurings of Israel against Moses between chapters 16 and 19.

The destination is a spatial and a symbolic reality. It is certainly presented as a real mountain in a specific place on a particular day, but geographical discussion will not elucidate the narrative. The mountain is the site where heaven and earth meet. It functions as a colossal outdoor temple because it becomes sacred space, holy ground, and because it dramatizes and participates in the symbolism of cosmic transcendence.<sup>32</sup> 'Moses went up to God' (19:3a) - a deceptively simple statement matched by 'Yhwh called him out of the mountain' (v. 3b). The physical mountain, the energetic ascent, the physiological effort, and the divine invitation all serve to emphasize the person-to-person encounter. The mountain, together with its special effects - the smoke, fire, quaking, thunder and trumpet sound - dramatizes the encounter. Once the words 'and brought you to myself have been uttered, the mountain and special effects enhance rather than obscure what happens.

In terms of spirituality, the story and geographical setting have immense value. Bushes and mountains: very mundane, unremarkable. Then the scandal of particularity, this particular bush and this particular mountain on this particular day. Go there on another day and there is nothing to see. For all its delight in the dramatic and visual, the narrative has alerted us to this difference between symbolic setting and personal encounter. The mountain is not the destination of the Exodus. The journey is to God himself. There will come the day at that sacred place when God announces that 'you have stayed long enough at this mountain; turn and take your journey and go to the hill country of the Amorites...' (Dt. 1:6; cf. 2:2). The exact location of the mountain has indeed been forgotten.

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<sup>32</sup> See R. J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1972).

### ***Imagery, symbolization and re-readings***

At this point it is helpful to recall that all re-readings are typological, and hence rely on symbol, metaphor and spiritualization of the original text. There is perhaps some value, though a limited one, in making a pilgrimage back to the site of Jebel Musa. But we could not count on an experience like Elijah's, who made this journey and was met at Horeb in a person-to-person encounter. We cannot enter into the meaning of the narrative by revisiting the original setting, either literally, or, metaphorically, in historical-critical studies. We must enter into its meaning by a different route. This begins with visual imagination as we enter the story. It continues with interaction with the symbolism. We must interiorize the mountain, the smoke, the lightning, the thunder, the quaking until we hear the living voice of God speaking again and we sense that he has brought us to himself. We cannot walk to him now.

The poets who composed a liberation theology for the exiles left us prototypes of imaginative re-readings of the exodus story. They had first entered imaginatively into the exodus narrative and seen the overthrow of Pharaoh, the escape through the waters, the journey through the desert, the pillar of cloud and fire.<sup>33</sup> These motifs from the original physical journey which captured imagination, now stir the exiles to a new consciousness of God's purpose. There is a shift from exodus narrative to lyrical poetry, from record to eschatological vision. The past journey has become a symbol, both sign and promise, of a new journey.

The destination is new as well. Interestingly, there is no mention to be found in the fifteen chapters of Isaiah 40 - 55, replete with exodus allusions, of any Sinai event, possibly because the prophet wished to emphasize unconditional grace and promise. Zion is the new mountain. But there is an exact parallel to the original exodus story in that Zion is no more the destination of the journey from exile than was Sinai from Egypt. In each, the physical journey involved expresses the reality of the inner orientation towards God himself and participation in his kingdom.

In Isaiah 40 - 55, the return journey is fundamentally a return to Yhwh. To return is to repent (*šûb* lends itself to this

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double journey metaphor), and if the text calls for a literal departure from Babylon (48:20; 52:11), and it does, then equally it calls for a radical departure in terms of behaviour and attitude ('let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to Yhwh', 55:7). This same destination, a return to Yhwh, to covenant relationship, is expressed in the commission of the servant to 'bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him' (49:5).

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<sup>33</sup> See the studies of exodus motif by B. W. Anderson, 'Exodus Typology in Second Isaiah', in B. W. Anderson and W. Harrelson (eds.), *Israel's Prophetic Heritage* (New York: Harper, 1962), pp. 177-195; 'Exodus and Covenant in Second Isaiah and Prophetic Tradition', in F. M. Cross and W. Lemke (eds.), *Magnolia Dei* [Festschrift G. E. Wright] (New York: Doubleday, 1976), pp. 339-360; J. Blenkinsopp, 'Scope and Depth of Exodus Tradition in Deutero-Isaiah 40:55', *The Dynamism of Biblical Tradition=Concilium* 20 (1967), pp. 41-50; D. A. Patrick, 'Epiphanic Imagery in Second Isaiah's Portrayal of a New Exodus', *Hebrew Annual Review* 8 (1984), pp. 125-141.

We might say that the exodus story is Sinai-centred and the prophecy Zion-centred, but we can affirm that both are explicitly Yhwh- and covenant - centred. This has implications relevant to the 'centre' debate in OT theology.

### ***Paradox and symbol of presence***

Next we need to stop to examine another paradox in the exodus story, indeed paradox built into the very phrase 'I brought you to myself'. The phrase begins and ends with God. The One who is encountered at the destination has initiated and shared the journey all along.

This is no general truth about the omnipresence of God, such as a heading in a work of systematic theology, but rather a point which the text makes in its own style. There are theophanies prior to Sinai. For instance, in 16:10 there is a public theophany: 'they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of Yhwh appeared in the cloud'. This theophany is explained beforehand as a confirmation of God's grace in the exodus in the face of complaints against him: 'at evening you shall know that it was Yhwh who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and in the morning you shall see the glory of Yhwh' (v. 7). As theophany answers Job's rage, and is confirmed in material blessings, so here theophany answers Israelite complaint and heralds the blessing of quail and manna. Israel receives what she does not deserve.

We should link the theophanies of chapters 19 and 16 with the visual effects of chapter 14:<sup>34</sup> 'So it was, when daylight came, that Yhwh looked down towards the Egyptian force from a pillar of fire and cloud, and he threw the Egyptian force into complete disarray' (14:24). Durham affirms that much of the exodus narrative concerns 'proof of Presence': 'The book of Exodus may be seen as a series of interlocking concentric circles spreading outwards from the narratives of the coming of Yahweh.'<sup>35</sup>

Gutierrez has linked these features of the narrative with the paradox of encounter and presence as expressed by Augustine: 'You would not seek me if you had not already found me'. He points to God's instructions about the announcement to Pharaoh (Ex. 3:18) in which encounter with Yhwh is motive for an exit to worship. The Hebrews must leave to draw near to their God who has drawn near (*nigrah 'aleynû*). 'The search for union with the Lord governs the entire process of liberation and constitutes the very heart of this spiritual experience of an entire people.'<sup>36</sup> This 'union with the Lord' resulting from 'I brought you to myself' is not, Gutierrez is at pains to point out, a mystical and individualistic interior experience in this setting.

Brother Lawrence's reflections, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, remind us of this Presence dimension of spirituality. The exodus narrative and the gospels and Acts with their stories of a

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<sup>34</sup> Note the comment on the pillar of cloud by S. Reid: 'The cultic symbols of the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire (Ex. 13:21-22) ought not to be overlooked. Many a scholar has neglected the way these symbols refer to the religious dimension of this very political act' - comment on p. 163, 'The Book of Exodus: a laboratory for hermeneutics', in M. L. Branson and C. R. Padilla, *Conflict and Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), pp. 155-164.

<sup>35</sup> See J. I. Durham, *Exodus* (Waco: Word, 1987), p. 194, and *ibid.*, pp. xxi ff.

<sup>36</sup> G. Gutierrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: the spiritual journey of a people* (London: SCM, 1987), p. 77.



birth, a transfiguration, a resurrection meal, a disappearance, and a rush of wings or wind or tongues of fire remind us that the interface between human consciousness and God himself is extremely complex, varied and subtle. A biblical spirituality should keep us open to experiencing differing modes and confirmations of the presence of God. Its paradoxical quality signals its mystery. The exodus narrative encourages us to experiences of Presence because it discloses that the initiative and impulse come from God himself, even when he seems to need the cry of lament or complaint to provoke him into appearing on the scene.<sup>37</sup>

### ***Paradox of perspective***

The second paradox is embedded in the phrase 'I carried you on eagles' wings'. This is a paradox of perspective because the reader hears this divine perspective enunciated on arrival, still dusty from the trek through the wilderness with the footsore Israelites. The reader has identified with the first desert experience of tired and thirsty walkers arriving at a pool of bitter water. The narrator introduces the hazards of the desert with this story: 'They went into the wilderness of Shur; they went three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter' (15:22f.). Likewise in chapter 17, they trek on only to outspan at Rephidim where 'there was no water for the people to drink' (17:1).

The human experience is one of hardship and threat to survival, all too keenly felt; the divine experience is one of carrying Israel all the way. Here we touch a paradox that remains a key to biblical spirituality from conversion onwards. On the one hand it is all of grace, all of God; on the other, it is response, endurance and 'he who perseveres to the end will be saved' (Mk. 13:13). However tempting it is for reasons of logic, or systematization, to resolve this paradox of human effort and enabling grace, an exodus spirituality reminds us to leave it a paradox. Likewise with the covenant relationship of exodus. Its full reality cannot be measured by collapsing the wave function into law, obligation, stipulation, obedience; nor alternatively can it be collapsed into gift, blessing, promise, guarantee.<sup>38</sup> Both would constitute quantum leaps away from the narrator's presentation.

### ***Metaphor and image: eagle's wings and royal treasure***

One might say that OT imagery refreshes the parts that propositional theology cannot reach.

Embedded in the divine utterance of Exodus 19:4ff, are several metaphors. Their presence reminds us that the language of the OT is picture language. Just as story invites us to imaginative participation, so metaphor opens doors of perception. The popularity of Psalm 23 is no coincidence - it switches on our sensory imagination with its pictures of Shepherd, sheep, green

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<sup>37</sup> There is no obligation to resolve the paradox that the exodus is planned in advance by Yhwh, as Ge. 15 teaches, and comes 'from above', yet is motivated from below by Israel's cries for help which 'came up to God' (see the summary statement of 2:23-25). It is the genius of story to narrate from different perspectives and allow the dramatic characters to articulate these.

<sup>38</sup> This seems to be the problem with W. C. Kaiser's *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978). He has extracted one of the covenant formulary, namely promise, as a centre for theology. For the background to the quantum metaphor, see *New Scientist*, 27 May 1989, p. 39, and the lucid discussion of the two-slit quantum phenomenon in J. Barrow, *The World within the World* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), pp. 131ff.

pastures, still water, protective staff and club, dark ravine, *etc.* Isaiah 40 is likewise full of visual imagery to portray the majesty of God. So too, visual imagery is the life of apocalyptic. In Israel, to approach God in worship, entering the tabernacle precincts or the temple, was to step into a world of visual symbolism.

In Exodus 19:4b, God invites Israelites to visualize a pair of outspread wings. We know from the remark of Proverbs 30:18 that the sight of an eagle in flight captured the imagination of

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the Israelite poet, filling him with a sense of wonder and awe. Starting from the natural world, the familiar sight, the image of an eagle here opens eyes on spiritual reality. The poet of Deuteronomy (32:11) and the dramatist of creation in Genesis 1:2b played on this image of soaring flight.<sup>39</sup>

We know that wings and deities were associated from the 3rd millennium onwards in Near Eastern iconography, whether the Sumerian Thunderbird <sup>d</sup>Imdugud,<sup>40</sup> or the vulture emblem flying above the Pharaoh's battle chariot, or a feathery <sup>d</sup>Aššur hovering over Assyrian kings at war. The eagle symbolism of Exodus 19 fits most aptly into this scenario of intervention in battle seen in Egyptian and Assyrian iconography, and with the opening phrase 'you have seen what I did to the Egyptians', it is possible that the superior ability of Yhwh to protect and triumph, proved in plague and at the Reed Sea, is implicit in the eagle's wings metaphor, though the image could be a naturalistic one rather than iconographically polemic.

The second metaphor is *s<sup>e</sup>gullah*, the 'treasured possession', and we know that it was already in metaphorical use in the 2nd millennium, used to describe a king as the 'possession' of a god, or a vassal-king as the 'possession' of his suzerain.<sup>41</sup> It is improbable that Near Eastern texts will parallel a whole community of liberated slaves being addressed in such honoured terms by the Creator-god. That *s<sup>e</sup>gullah* here nuances positive value, rather than claim and demand only, is

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<sup>39</sup> It appealed to Canaanite poets too: 'Anat soars (but malevolently) over Aqht prior to releasing Ytpn to strike him dead: 'over him vultures soar (*nsrm trhph*), a flock of swift fliers coasts. Among the vultures soars 'Anat' - *ANET* 152 Aqht B, iv:31-33 = CTA 17. See N. Wyatt, 'The Stela of the Seated God from Ugarit', *UF* 15 (1983), pp. 271-277, for discussion of cross-cultural influence from Egyptian and Mesopotamian winged solar discs, together with the conveniently collected portrayals in R. Mayer-Opicinius, 'Die geflügelte Sonne: Himmels- and Regendarstellungen im Alten Vorderasien', *UF* 16 (1984), pp. 189-236.

<sup>40</sup> On <sup>d</sup>Imdugud the Thunderbird deity, see Th. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness* (London: Yale, 1976), pp. 128f, and *The Harps that once...* (London: Yale, 1987), 'Lugalbanda and the Thunderbird', pp. 320-344. The bronze from the 'al Ubaid temple gate now in the British Museum (A. Parrot, *Sumer*, No. 187, p. 158), and the diorite plaque of priest Dudu associate lions and eagles (S. N. Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer*, plates 38, 39) to convey the majestic qualities of the storm deity, and the Roman eagle and the contemporary American eagle show how widespread is the appeal of the king of birds as political symbol. The 3rd millennium poem 'The Exaltation of Inanna' by Sargon's daughter Enheduanna portrays <sup>d</sup>Inanna's attack with storm and bird-form (W. W. Hallo and J. J. A. van Dijk, *The Exaltation of Inanna* (London: Yale, 1968), pp. 16ff., stanzas (iii) & (iv): 'Devastatrix of the land, you are lent wings by the storm ... in the van of battle everything is struck down by you. O my lady [propelled] on your own wings you peck away [at the land]'.  
<sup>41</sup> See M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), p. 328 No. 9 for references with p. 226 and footnote 2.

evident from the associated phrases connoting selection and the status of 'priesthood' and holiness.<sup>42</sup> Creation theology and covenant theology are held in dynamic tension: 'all the earth is mine' runs in parallel with 'you shall be mine'.

### ***Vocation and nationhood***

Exodus 19:4 opens with a flashback: 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians'. The concluding promise - 'kingdom of priests and holy nation' - extends the distinction Hebrews/Egyptians to Israel/all peoples, in the same way as 'all the earth' is a geographical extension from the land of Egypt. The effect is to heighten the value God places on the covenant bond. Racial and national identity is certainly a category of perception here, as in the entire story - witness the phrase 'God of the Hebrews', yet covenant with God and covenant brotherhood exert such a radical ideological critique of Egypt and Canaan that 'holy people' cannot possibly be equated with a nationhood as such. The theology does demythologize and delegitimize Pharaonic Egypt, but cannot be read to legitimize Israel ethnically or nationally *toute simple*. The separation from Egyptians and other *goy* unto God and into covenant relationship is associated with priestly functioning (*mamleket koh<sup>a</sup>nim*), which certainly denotes access to God's presence, but probably also implies that the nation (*goy qadosh*) has, as it were, a priestly ministry towards other peoples. The nation of Israel as a whole occupies the role of the priesthood in a typological model priests:people / Israel:nations.<sup>43</sup>

Weinfeld points out that the remnant community after national judgment is addressed in its renewed constitution as the 'priests of Yahweh' in Isaiah 61:6, and we may follow the trajectory from Exodus 19 to Isaiah 61 and on into the NT where this renewed community is identified with Jesus (Lk. 4) and his disciples (1 Pet. 2:9). When people groups, such as British colonialists or Afrikaner Calvinists or Mass Democratic liberationists, identify themselves with Israel and read their historical destiny in terms drawn from the exodus story, they are simply misconstruing both the offer of covenant relationship expressed in nuclear form in Exodus 19:4-6 and its new covenant re-readings.<sup>44</sup> Entering covenant was a matter of individual wholeheartedness as well as

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<sup>42</sup> Accusation and demand are the semantic setting of the Ugaritic letter RS 18.38 from the Hittite suzerain: 'Now you belong to the Sun, your master; a servant indeed, his possession are you ('b[d]m.sg<sup>lth</sup>.at.). Now, as for you, the Sun your master, you have not recognized at all. To me, the Sun, your master, for one year, two years why do you not come?' (lines 11-16) - text and translation by D. Pardee, 'A further Note on PRU V, No. 60', *UF* 13 (1981), pp. 151-156. Cf. Durham's comment: 'expanded ... to suggest the "crown jewel" of a large collection, the masterwork, the one-of-a-kind piece', *op. cit.*, p. 262.

<sup>43</sup> Such symbolizing lies behind the typology of sacrificial, clean and unclean animals corresponding to the categories priest, Israelite, Gentile. Durham summarizes exegetical work to date on these three phrases 'special treasure', 'kingdom of priests', 'holy nation' which he sees, surely correctly, as associated ideas rather than synonyms. 'Israel as "kingdom of priests" is Israel committed to the extension throughout the world of the ministry of Yahweh's Presence', p. 263.

<sup>44</sup> Whether Dt. 14:2 and Ex. 19:4 carry an intro-Israelite polemic against priestly class pretensions (so Weinfeld, *op. cit.*, p. 227 note 2) is another matter. The NT certainly does, but marks an even more radical break in its conception of the overlap between people-group and covenant community. There is a tendency, implicit more than explicit, in the Kairos Document to associate the oppressed Black community, referred to as 'the people', with Israel: 'God will bring about change through the oppressed as he did through the oppressed Hebrew slaves in Egypt' and 'more than ever before the people of the townships can identify fully with these descriptions of suffering, oppression and tyranny', *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, <sup>2</sup>1986), pp. 12 & 20.

of public oath and rite. It was both interior and confessional. As Brueggemann asserts, covenanting 'transposes all identity questions into vocational questions'.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, national identity and covenant community never were equated - witness the excision of Israelites from cultic communion from Korah onwards.

This said, Exodus 19:4-6 is a political statement, and to come in worship to Yhwh at Sinai was a political act, just as much as the singing of The Song of the Sea was, and the dancing of Miriam. An exodus spirituality is not individualistic, other-worldly pietistic, apolitical and socio-economically naive. Pharaoh perceived the journey into the wilderness to sacrifice to Yhwh as a political act. He was right, and his response ensured that Israel's worship and Israel's covenant with Yhwh were socio-political events. The political background to so much of biblical covenant language, including the whole core metaphor of kingdom and of vassal loyalty, is a sure sign of ideological critique and the displacement of alternative socio-political systems by covenant brotherhood, or in our text's terms, by holy nationhood, priestly kingdomhood under Yhwh.<sup>46</sup> As corollary of covenant's confrontation with the economic and sociopolitical domain, an exodus spirituality is concerned with freedom and dignity, communal righteousness and justice, without which there is no 'holy nation'.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

We started from the patterning of the narratives, and found that motifs such as promise, departure, journey, guidance, presence, testing, fear of the Lord, theophany, covenant commitment and cultic worship characterized Israel's spiritual experience. They typify Israel's faith not because other generations had identical experiences to the Exodus generation, which is plainly not so, but because they were paradigmatic for later generations in interpreting their own experience and expectations of God.<sup>48</sup> It is this paradigmatic quality and the typological readings within the canon which we wish to draw on formatively for our spirituality. Paradigm, symbol, typological re-reading we may utilize, but if we wish to pay close attention to the story, and see our life as in some way mirroring Israel's experience of God, then we shall work with

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<sup>45</sup> W. Brueggemann, 'Covenanting as Human Vocation', *Interpretation* XXXIII.2 (1979), pp. 115-129, 125.

<sup>46</sup> J. S. Croatto, in 'The Socio-historical and Hermeneutical Relevance of the Exodus' in B. van Israel and A. Weiler (eds.), *The Exodus: a lasting paradigm* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark)=*Concilium* 189 (1987), pp. 125-133, not commenting on the Ancient Near Eastern treaty background, but on the language of Ex., remarks: 'So deep does OT language of liberation run that the NT, despite its spiritualizing overtones ... has kept the liberation vocabulary stemming from the Exodus theme. Its application of it to interior, juridical or existential realities (sin, the law, death) is a deepening but not a replacement of the socio-political reference of the OT' (p. 127).

<sup>47</sup> We note the words of the *Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church: a theological commentary on the Political Crisis in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, <sup>2</sup>1986).

<sup>48</sup> The dating of the Song of the Sea is, of course, disputed, but my point stands because the poem's composition or amplification at any date illustrates the resonance effect, and a liturgical re-use of Ex. 15, as postulated by many scholars, only underlines the point, though it is one form only of its life; another, for example, manifests itself in the composition of Rev. 15.

these motifs and their imagery without recourse to allegorizations of the tree at Marah, the seventy palms of Elim, or the manna.<sup>49</sup>

### ***Stages of faith for individual and community***

By examining the dynamic of human experience as link factor between us and ancient Israel, we open our eyes to personal, social and political dimensions of the exodus story. Brueggemann has offered a critique of the stages of human development as discussed by James Fowler in his books *Stages of Faith* and *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*. No understanding of biblical spirituality as a learning experience and growth process can operate without an understanding of personhood and the mechanisms of maturing, and although Brueggemann's catchphrases such as 'critique of ideology', 'embrace of pain' and 'social imagination' can seem a little

[p.57]

too complimentary to the Israelites in the wilderness, and sound conceptually abstruse compared with the story line, his pinpointing of growth by 'wrenching transitions' and changes that are wrought through discontinuity, displacement and disjunction' do justice to how difficult Israel found it to move on with God and 'embrace covenantal modes of life'.<sup>50</sup> To look for biblical concepts of learning, change and the processing of experience within the text of Exodus seems right, indeed Pauline, and discloses some of the dynamics of biblical spirituality.

On the social and political side of human experience and biblical faith, the contributors to the Concilium volume, *Exodus - a lasting paradigm*, have presented stimulating re-readings of sections of the exodus narrative which connect our world with that one by the bridge of human consciousness, conscientization or social and ideological context, while those writing from within a Latin American liberation theology and the liberation struggle in South Africa challenge us repeatedly to respond to the communal and ideological dimensions of faith, and incorporate these into our spirituality.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> In my judgment, B. P. Robinson represents a return to an unacceptable allegorization in his proffered re-reading in Rabbinic and Church Father manner - 'Symbolism in Exod. 15:22-27 (March and Elim)', *Revue Biblique* 94.3 (1987), pp. 376-388.

<sup>50</sup> W. Brueggemann, 'The Exodus Narrative as Israel's Articulation of Faith Development', in *Hope within History* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1987), pp. 7-26. His engagement is primarily with J. W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), and *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), who built on the psychology of Erik Erikson.

<sup>51</sup> Note the evaluation of S. Reid: 'From the beginning of the introduction of liberation theology, Third World theology has been rooted in the spirituality of the community of faith', in 'The Book of Exodus: a laboratory for hermeneutics', in M. L. Branson and C. R. Padilla (eds.), *Conflict and Context: hermeneutics in the Americas* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), p. 163. Compare the criticism from the *Kairos Document* that: 'spirituality has tended to be an otherworldly affair that has very little, if anything at all, to do with the affairs of this world.... Moreover, spirituality has also been understood to be purely private and individualistic' (*op. cit.*, p. 16).

### ***The imprinting process***

Exactly why and how the exodus narrative has so deeply imprinted itself on subsequent generations and their hopes is a little more difficult to answer, granted the thoroughly supernatural, miraculous and interventionist quality of God's participation. Isaiah 40 - 55 resonates with exodus imagery, but the exiles who made the return journey from Babylon to Palestine saw no pillar of cloud and fire, drank no water from rock, and woke to no manna or quails. On return they were under the Persian empire, not free of its permission to renew worship. As Nehemiah's prayer so poignantly expresses it: 'Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that thou gavest to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves' (Ne. 9:36).<sup>52</sup> The disparity between the paradigmatic exodus and the exilic exodus should have created a shattering dissonance, leading to a rejection of this symbolization process. Yet it did not, much to R. P. Carroll's perplexity.<sup>53</sup> The exodus imagery was not that easily dislodged.

After reviewing re-uses of the exodus traditions within the OT, Fishbane remarks: 'The simultaneous capacity of the exodus paradigm to elicit memory and expectation, recollection and anticipation discloses once again its deep embeddedness as a fundamental structure of the biblical historical imagination',<sup>54</sup> but he makes no attempt at describing how that imagination worked. One explanation must be that stories act on human imagination to ingrain their images. The original stories have all the 'what-happens-next' appeal of good stories and are full of strong visual components which produce vivid images in the mind. The images linger on after the reader knows what happens next; each time the story is heard again the image is reinforced. So a poet contemplating a long journey from Babylon to Palestine can see it in his mind's eye as led by God through a landscape with pools of water and oases of trees. This process is not simply the operation of propositional theology - belief that God guides and provides - but the ability to visualize the route. Added to that is the dramatizing or symbolizing process whereby the exilic long walk symbolically recapitulates the original exodus salvation. The poet 'sees' it visually and symbolically, and so sees himself as participant who relates to God as the Israelites experienced God in the wilderness.

### ***The imagination and spiritual resonance***

Using a different metaphor, we could put it this way. Spiritual perception involves vibrating to the resonance set up by the original notes. The tune once learned is resident in memory, and conscious or unconscious stimuli trigger the melody with the effect that the tune plays again in the mind. The *Song of the Sea* was a song sung in a unique historical situation, but once sung it has a life of its own, and is replayed in quite different situations but retaining the resonance of worship. The Song of the Sea, the description of passover, and the covenant formulary of Exodus 19:4-6, are all likely to have been brought to life in Israel's worship and their phrases and imagery imprinted on heart and mind in group experience.

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<sup>52</sup> Note the way this text is appropriated by Kairos theologians with the comment: 'for the people of South Africa this situation is all too familiar' (*op. cit.*, p. 19).

<sup>53</sup> R. P. Carroll, 'Second Isaiah and the Failure of Prophecy', *Studia Theologica* 32 (1978), pp. 119-131.

<sup>54</sup> M. Fishbane, *Text and Texture: close readings of selected biblical texts* (New York: Schocken, 1979), ch. 10, pp. 121-140, 'The "Exodus" Motif/The Paradigm of Historical Renewal', p. 140.

Entering the exodus story and tapping into its spirituality may not, for us, be by the route of liturgy and communal worship but might involve using the imagination in a way that allows the spirit to resonate in response to the stories. This could make use of imaginative exercises using creative writing, or sketching, or visualization techniques of various kinds. Meditation starting from a striking image, such as 'eagles' wings', with its powerful visual and emotional qualities, and flowing into associated clusters of images along a canonical trajectory, is a responsive technique open to us and may emulate the creative imagination of biblical poets prior to composing their poetry.

These stories and their motifs have captured the imagination of generations seeking to interpret their situation, their faith and their longing to move on with God. I would hope that our academic training in OT might enhance and not hinder our ability to respond to the God of the exodus with imagination, heart and spirit in our generation.

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Prepared for the Web in April 2006 by Robert I Bradshaw.

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