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## THE EXODUS MOTIF IN THE PSALMS

The accounts of the Exodus experience are closely related to praise in that the images associated with liberation from Egypt form a paradigm for expressing Israel's myriad experiences of salvation. The Exodus experience is a foundational experience for Israel. Regardless of how many Israelites actually were part of this extraordinary escape, it became paradigmatic for ensuing generations. The Exodus is the liberating image against which contemporary issues were judged and assessed.

The accounts of the Exodus in the second book of the Torah, along with their successive interpretations and adaptations, are quite stylized. In fact, even Abraham leaving the land of Haran to go to an unspecified land is filled with images of the Exodus: a leaving and an entering. There are really two over-arching paradigms of liberation present in the OT. In the first, the given situation is that of slavery. God intervenes with extraordinary acts to bring liberation for an oppressed people. The liberation however does not take place in a vacuum. Liberation heads towards an election by God for the liberated people to be his special people.

slavery	"	liberation	"	election	
Egypt		Exodus		Sinai	Ex. 19:5

This paradigm is by far the most common in the O.T., but there is another that emerges on occasion which begins with election. In fact, one of the motives for God's intervention in Egypt is that Israel had already been chosen through the Ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. After the election, the Israelites experience slavery which induces the Lord to hear the voice of their cry and liberate the people.

election	"	slavery	"	liberation	
Ancestors		Egypt		Exodus	Hos 11:1

The most simple and most general expression of Exodus is contained in the words 'to go out' and 'to come in'. In terms of spatial concepts, liberation is experienced as a leaving and an entering. Abraham left Haran and entered a land promised to his descendants. Moses led the people out of Egypt to bring them into the promised land. The people in exile in Babylon left the city to enter once again the land of their heritage. This pattern can be termed the over-arching paradigm, leaving and entering. It is this general pattern that introduces the Exodus event in the book of Genesis as a promise to Abraham (Gen 15). The paradigm has the extraordinary capacity to allow successive generations to understand their own predicament through the lens of the Exodus paradigm. Not only is this transference explicit within the Hebrew Scriptures but also in the New Testament. The Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus is read in the Gospel in light of the Exodus from Egypt. Christ liberates all human beings from the darkness and oppression of sin. Similarly, groups who consider themselves oppressed within a society appeal to the provocative images of the Exodus to galvanize support and attention to their plight. The lyrics to the American Spiritual, "Tell ol' Pharaoh, let my people go" do not simply refer to the events of the Exodus but relate to the plight of Afro-Americans in the United States. Even some interpreters of contemporary Israel look to the newly found State as embodying the reestablishment of the Promised Land into the hands of the inheritors of the covenant. In the Exodus, we are dealing with a very pliable image that conjures up deeply imbedded values of liberation and belonging and fears of oppression and homelessness. So it should not be surprising at all that the prayer life of Israel makes liberal use of Exodus imagery in order to define and nuance their relationship to God, to others and to the world.

The most extensive treatment of the Exodus as a paradigm envisages three general stages of the actual event. There is the liberation from oppression in Egypt, which of course opens the account. However before the entering into the promised land occurs there is a temporal dimension, the wandering in the wilderness at

which time the people learn something of the ways of their liberator. Finally there is the entering into the promised land which completes the cycle.

Exodus " Wilderness " Promised Land Josh 24

It is curious to note that in the professions of faith that recount the founding experience of Israel, not once is the covenant at Sinai explicitly mentioned in conjunction with the Exodus (however, Exod 6:6-8 contains in the heart of the passage at least the central tenet of the Sinai covenant, "I will take you as my people and I will be your God"). This has led G. von Rad to conclude that originally the two accounts were separate, perhaps experienced by two different peoples that only at a far later time became joined together in the narrative. Others claim that the context for the proclamation of the Exodus event took place precisely within cultic remembrance and re-instatement of the covenant, so that the covenant would not be mentioned with the Exodus. Whatever the case may be the final text does join Exodus and the covenant of Sinai together. But the confessions of faith that hone in exclusively on the Exodus should tell us that the two events are of a different order.

There are several words that characterize the respective stages of the paradigm of liberation that must be noted in order to see their continual re-emergence in the confessions of the psalms.

<b>Exodus</b>	<b>Wilderness</b>	<b>Promised Land</b>
to leave	to wander	to enter
to bring out	to pass through	to possess
slavery	to guide	to care for
oppression	to learn	to dwell securely
hard labour	to lead	heritage

### 1) Paradigmatic References to the Exodus in the Psalms

In the psalms, the image of bringing out or leaving immediately would conjure up for the Israelite the tone and quality of the paradigmatic image of the Exodus. The Psalter makes extensive use of the Exodus motif or paradigm.

- 18:20 - He brought me forth to a spacious land.
- 25:15 - He brought me out from the net.
- 25:17 - Bring me out from my distress.
- 31:5 - Bring me out from the net which has held me.
- 43:3 - O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling.
- 60:9 - Who will bring me *into* the strong city? who will lead me into Edom?
- 68:8 - Lord when will you go out in front of your people?
- 68:22 - The Lord said, "I will bring them back from Bashan, I will bring them back from the depths of the sea
- 71:20 - You who have made me see many troubles and calamities will revive me again; from the depths of the earth you will bring me up again.
- 78:54 - And he brought them to the border of his sanctuary, *even to* this mountain, *which* his right hand had purchased.
- 80:8 - You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.
- 105:37 - He brought out his people covered with gold and silver.
- 107:14 - He brought them out from darkness and gloom.

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- 107:25 - He brought them out from tribulation.  
 136:11 - He brought them out from that land.  
 142:7 - Bring me out of prison, so that I may give thanks to your name. The righteous will surround me, for you will deal bountifully with me.  
 143:11 - For your name's sake, O LORD, preserve my life. In your righteousness bring me out of trouble.

The paradigm of course can be transformed for theological purposes. For instance in order to critique abuses and breaking of the covenant, prophets transformed the paradigm into an anti-Exodus story in order to highlight the undoing of liberation that is the result of unfaithfulness. They predicted that the Lord would bring them back into Egypt and back into slavery. In this way the undoing of salvation history was announced (Dt. 28:68, Hos 8:13, 11:5). The Psalter contains at least one such transformation in Psalm 44.

You have rejected us and abased us, and have not gone out with our armies.  
 You made us turn back from the foe, and our enemies have gotten spoil.  
 You have made us sheep for slaughter, and have scattered us among the nations.  
 You have sold your people for a trifle, demanding no high price for them (Ps 44:9-11).

Liberation in the OT is not a vacuous freedom. The motive in the Exodus story for the Israelites to leave Egypt is to celebrate a feast in honour of the Lord. The image of feasting and celebrating in the presence of God summarizes the relationship God wants and desires for this treasured people. However before entering into this feast there is an intermediate time, a time of learning, of purification, a time of trusting. A great deal of time is spent in the wandering and journeying in the desert or wilderness. Certainly the covenant of Sinai could be construed as the festive celebration that initiated the move out of Egypt. The account of the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire is meant to show how the people are to trust in the providence and care of God (Num 9:9-15). The fact that the people doubted during the wanderings and tested God as at the waters of Meribah (Ex 17:1-8, 13:17-18, 16:9-19) points to the central motif of the wanderings in the wilderness as the time for learning the ways of the Lord and learning to trust in God. This motif also is taken up in the psalms (77:20-21, 78:52, 107:4,33-37).

Without arriving into the Promised Land, the entire Exodus event would have been a cruel tragedy. The land promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and reaffirmed in the call of Moses, is the sign of God's relationship with the Israelites. It is the ratifying sign of their covenant (Num 14:15-16, Dt 9:27-28). The basic word used to convey the possession of the land within the paradigm is to enter, or to go in, the opposite of leaving or exiting. But other verbs are immediately associated with entering: to enter to possess, to dwell in the land that the lord gives, to subdue the land.

Josh 5 highlights a certain nuance in the manner of entering into the land. It is not only the people who enter, but it is the Lord himself who enters leading the people as they go (As commander of the army of the Lord, I have now come. And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped, Jos 5:14). The Lord is the one who has arrived, and the land of course belongs to God, Ex 19:5, Lev 25:23. The land is described in idyllic terms, as a garden, as a land of super-abundance, Dt 8:7-10, 11:10-18.

Not only is the motif of the Exodus in its various components taken up in the psalms sporadically as a theological backdrop for a source of many images, but it is taken up for a specific reason and function within the dynamic of the psalms. Israel had a boundless quest for the meaning of her history. In the deliverance from Egypt, Israel saw the guarantee in all the future of YHWH's desire and will to save. In times of crisis Israel could recall the Exodus event to enlist or mobilize her faith and trust to call upon God.

## 2) References to the Exodus within the structure of Laments:

Recalling Exodus history in the context of lament had the immediate purpose of influencing history.

Laments: 22:4-5, 44:1-8, 80:8-14, 83:9-11.

Ps 22:4-5

In you our ancestors trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them.  
To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not put to shame.

Ps 44:1-8

We have heard with our ears, O God, our ancestors have told us, what deeds you performed in their days, in the days of old: 2 you with your own hand drove out the nations, but them you planted; you afflicted the peoples, but them you set free; 3 for not by their own sword did they win the land, nor did their own arm give them victory; but your right hand, and your arm, and the light of your countenance, for you delighted in them. 4 You are my King and my God; you command victories for Jacob. 5 Through you we push down our foes; through your name we tread down our assailants. 6 For not in my bow do I trust, nor can my sword save me. 7 But you have saved us from our foes, and have put to confusion those who hate us. 8 In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to your name forever. Selah

Ps 80:8-14

8 You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.  
9 You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land.  
10 The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches;  
11 it sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River.  
12 Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?  
13 The boar from the forest ravages it, and all that move in the field feed on it.  
14 Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine,  
15 the stock that your right hand planted.

Ps 83:9-11

9 Do to them as you did to Midian, as to Sisera and Jabin at the Wadi Kishon,  
10 who were destroyed at En-dor, who became dung for the ground.  
11 Make their nobles like Oreb and Zeeb, all their princes like Zebah and Zalmunna,  
12 who said, "Let us take the pastures of God for our own possession."  
13 O my God, make them like whirling dust, like chaff before the wind.  
14 As fire consumes the forest, as the flame sets the mountains ablaze,  
15 so pursue them with your tempest and terrify them with your hurricane.  
16 Fill their faces with shame, so that they may seek your name, O LORD.

We can see in this recalling of Exodus motifs a double purpose in the context of the lament.

- a) It was a sign of faith and trust on the part of the psalmist.
- b) It was a motive for enlisting the continuing blessing of God and his will to save.

A contrast in the prayer is drawn between what God has done in the past and what God is obviously not doing in the present crisis. At once there is a contrast and a reliving of the original Exodus experience. The contrast is drawn between God's past saving action in history and the apparent present abandonment. But in the very recalling of past salvation stands the refrain, "They cried to you and you delivered them". Just as the ancestors cried out to the Lord, so too the contemporary Israelites who found themselves in difficulty cried out in their laments to be delivered from new forms of oppression. Past history is a basis for trust and faith as well as a motive for God's present intervention. No where do we see more clearly the direct relevance for recalling history in the present for the future than in the laments.

Another place within the dynamic of prayer in the Psalter where Exodus imagery finds a natural home is in the psalms of descriptive praise.

Hymns, Descriptive Praise: 33:16-17, 47:2-4, 66:5-7, 95:6-11, 135:8, 136:10-13.

Ps 33:16-17

16 A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.

17 The war horse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save.

Ps 47:2-4

2 For the LORD, the Most High, is awesome, a great king over all the earth.

3 He subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet.

Ps 66:5-7

5 Come and see what God has done: he is awesome in his deeds among mortals.

6 He turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot. There we rejoiced in him,

7 who rules by his might forever, whose eyes keep watch on the nations-- let the rebellious not exalt themselves. Selah

Ps 95:6-11

6 O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!

7 For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today you would listen to his voice!

8 Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,

9 when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.

10 For forty years I loathed that generation and said, "They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they do not regard my ways."

11 Therefore in my anger I swore, "They shall not enter my rest.

Ps 135:8

8 He it was who struck down the firstborn of Egypt, both human beings and animals;

9 he sent signs and wonders into your midst, O Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants.

10 He struck down many nations and killed mighty kings--

11 Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan, and all the kingdoms of Canaan--

12 and gave their land as a heritage, a heritage to his people Israel.

Ps 136:10-22

10 who struck Egypt through their firstborn, for his steadfast love endures forever;

11 and brought Israel out from among them, for his steadfast love endures forever;

12 with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, for his steadfast love endures forever;

13 who divided the Red Sea in two, for his steadfast love endures forever;

14 and made Israel pass through the midst of it, for his steadfast love endures forever;

15 but overthrew Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea, for his steadfast love endures forever;

16 who led his people through the wilderness, for his steadfast love endures forever;

17 who struck down great kings, for his steadfast love endures forever;

18 and killed famous kings, for his steadfast love endures forever;

19 Sihon, king of the Amorites, for his steadfast love endures forever;

20 and Og, king of Bashan, for his steadfast love endures forever;

21 and gave their land as a heritage, for his steadfast love endures forever;

22 a heritage to his servant Israel, for his steadfast love endures forever.

The theme expounded in the first part of descriptive praise is the glory and majesty of God. God's majesty is the subject matter. God has created the universe and God continues to be Lord of the universe in all its historical development. Precisely in this feature within the hymn the foundational experience of the Exodus receives its place. The praise of the Lord of history has less to do with representing past historical facts than to represent and praise the one who is active as the Lord of history. This praise is directed towards the future. It is this type of praise that has allowed Israel to interpret continuously its history in terms of the foundational experience and expression of the Exodus.

This feature of the descriptive psalms of praise in which YHWH as Lord of History was meditated upon was considered important enough to become the prime theme of certain psalms. Almost all the historical psalms recap the story of the Exodus with a view to contemplating YHWH as the Lord of history. Ps 107 is interesting for its digression from the typical presentation of the Exodus. Four types of people are focused upon in this historical psalm. In each case images from the Exodus are used to narrate the salvation they experienced. Other psalms are 78, 105, 135, 136. A new feature in these presentations of the Exodus account is an awareness of Israel's response to the salvation of God. Israel was unfaithful and rebelled against the God who saved them. This reality of Israel's disobedience was rarely present in the original confessions of the Exodus, or in the summary accounts. But in the narrative of the Exodus and in Deuteronomy, the rebellion of the people was firmly rooted.

The influence of the prophets no doubt left its mark on the development of these meditations on the Lord of history. The prophets, particularly Jeremiah, were constantly reminding the people and the leaders of God's faithfulness and their own disobedience in order to call for conversion. These historical psalms that ponder the response of Israel to the Lord's saving actions draw a significant contrast between God's faithfulness and Israel's disobedience. Just as in the laments, the recalling of history was meant to be open to the present and to the future, so too in these historical psalms the contrast between God's faithfulness and Israel's disobedience is an invitation to open the future to conversion.

Recalling for Israel then could never be a mere pondering of the past that had no immediate effect on the present. The past was retold in order to glorify and extol the Lord. It was retold in order to mobilize trust and faith during times of crisis. And finally history was meditated upon in the historical psalms in order to deepen the level of conversion. These psalms functioned as a call to turn towards God with all one's heart, and mind and strength (the language of Deuteronomy). When Israel is confronted with God's bountiful love and their own lack of faithfulness, they are, as it were, almost provoked into choosing the Lord who has exercised such love toward them.