



Exodus Redivivus

Maybe it's because the texts were in German. Maybe that's why the moralisms of a Sunday School curriculum we were reading recently in my Theological German class made me so nervous. The exercise was designed to determine the levels of ability of the students in the class, so I started with these German Sunday School Bible stories—not quite the equivalent of “Run, Dick, run!” but certainly not Kant or Heidegger either. Could they handle this?

My problem turned out to be whether I could handle not the language but the content. Each of the Bible stories (the call of Abraham, the call of Moses) turned into a moral lesson urging the children to listen, to trust, and to obey. Somehow, inculcating such unquestioning obedience (with the use of a repeated refrain to that end) made me uneasy—again, perhaps the more so because it was all in German. Somehow, “God wants you to obey!” sounds foreboding in a Teutonic tone. (For the record, the ethnic background I am questioning here is my own, not someone else's.)

The moralisms themselves were bad enough, turning stories of promise, danger, and adventure into examples of proper behavior, but their very predictability also got under my skin: God calls, we obey, things turn out. Really? My Bible is often messier than that, and my life surely is.

In this issue of our journal, we think about exodus—both the event and the book. Interestingly, my two favorite “exodus” Bible passages aren't in Exodus at all. One is in the Psalter, the other is in Second Isaiah. They are favorites, I think, precisely because they offer more surprise than predictability. And they provide no moral lessons at all.

In Ps 77:19, we may be taken aback to read, “Your way was through the sea, your path through the mighty waters; yet your footprints were unseen.” The reference to the exodus is obvious, confirmed by the final line of the psalm: “You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.” But why, as God led God's people through the sea, were God's footprints unseen? That was hardly the case when Charleton Heston played God. (Oh, wrong—in the movie he played Moses; it was in politics that he played God.) But it's not only Cecil B. DeMille who makes the presence of God unmistakable. So do almost all portrayals of the exodus in popular piety, including the well-known “Footprints” poem by Mary Stevenson. There, too, footprints are missing on the beach during the poet's walk with God, but they turn out to be not God's, but those of the poet: “The times when you have

seen only one set of footprints,” says God, referring to the most trying period of the poet’s life, “is when I carried you.”¹ The piety behind that poem has served many well, but it is quite different from that of Ps 77. Why?

Psalm 77, too, talks of one of the poet’s “most trying periods,” a time literally too terrible for words (“I am so troubled that I cannot speak”; v. 4). The crisis is so deep, in fact, that the psalmist is left to face the impossible possibility that God might not be God anymore: “Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favorable? Has his steadfast love ceased forever? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion?” (vv. 7–9). Since the God of the Bible *is* the God who is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exod 34:6), the absence of those qualities would be more than just a momentary lapse, it would be the end of God—at least of the biblical God. Just that is what the poet fears: “It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed” (Ps 77:10).

At this point, the psalmist who has no words is given words. Now, the poem moves beyond “*my* soul,” which “refuses to be comforted” (v. 2), to a confession of “*our* God” who “works wonders” (vv. 13–14). The words are the words of the community’s worship, the remembrance of God’s “mighty deeds” that constituted God’s people. Somehow, the pray-er has been drawn into that world of praise, and new life is born. To sing of God’s exodus deliverance at the Sea will require a whole percussion symphony as backup and all of Hollywood’s special effects for color: “The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind; your lightnings lit up the world; the earth trembled and shook” (v. 18). Still, precisely in the midst of that spectacular divine sound and light show, the poet makes this most profound confession: “Your footprints were unseen.” We can see Moses and Aaron, we can hear the thunder and lightning, we can feel the force of the waters and the tremors of the earth, but we cannot see God. Is it because Israel knows they cannot look upon the face of God and live? Or is it because they know that, finally, God can be seen only by faith? Or are these the same thing?

Sometimes we think that if we had only lived in the time of the Bible, when things were clear, then we could more easily believe. Alas, however, there never was a time when things were clear. Still, the positive corollary to that is this: our time is no less God-visited than the times of the Bible. We see God only by faith—so did they. No magic, no footprints in the sand, no halos around the saintly, no writing in the sky. We walk by faith. Thus, my pleasure in Ps 77: it describes God as I know God, not as the God of heavenly visions or predictable formulas.

My other favorite exodus text is Isa 43:16–21—the prophet’s description of not the old exodus but the new one. “I am about to do a new thing,” says God (v. 19)—a verse that terrifies those who think that, since the faith “was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 1:3), nothing can, should, or will ever change—espe-

¹Online at <http://www.footprints-in-the-sand.com/index.php?page=Poem/Poem.php> (accessed February 19, 2013).

cially perhaps the forms and sounds of the liturgy or the color of the carpet in the chancel. What is new for Second Isaiah is nothing less than the exodus experience itself. God describes himself grandly as the one “who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters” (Isa 43:16), only then to say, “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old” (v. 18; clearly, in this context, referring to the exodus). Why not remember this most important event of Israel’s past? Because “I am about to do a new thing.” And what will that look like? Well, says God, remember the exodus? “I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert” (v. 19). The play with images and words is delightful. The old exodus was a dry way in the sea; the new exodus will be a wet way in the desert. Just as God rescued Israel of old, which had a problem of too much water (the Sea), so now God will rescue the Israel of the exile, which has a problem of too little water (the desert between Babylon and Jerusalem).

As is often the case, the prophet, speaking for God, even includes an environmental impact statement for this new engineering project: “The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert” (v. 20). To be sure, the story is told from a human perspective, but, by the way, the rest of God’s creatures will join in praise, because they too will be delivered in God’s grand saving scheme. No salvation *from* the earth here, but salvation *with* the earth. Israel (and we) can praise with the jackals because of the exuberant abundance of God’s gifts.

Once more, however, though *Israel’s* footprints might be seen on their desert trek homeward—accompanied perhaps by an ostrich or two—God’s will not be. God is doing a new thing, and it will be seen by the eyes of faith. Cyrus thought he was Israel’s savior, allowing the exiles to return—and, indeed, he was—but the prophet knows that this is all the work of God. And now, so does Israel, and so do we—not because of sight, but because we have been given a word to clarify that which otherwise we could not see.

Second Isaiah has even more surprise in store than just this inside-out exodus. The mode of deliverance will also change. Describing the old exodus, God had gone on to describe himself as the one who “brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior” (clearly the Egyptian forces), who “lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick” (v. 17). The rabbis already had trouble with the notion that Israel’s deliverance required the death of Pharaoh’s army. According to the Talmud, “When the Egyptian armies were drowning in the sea, the Heavenly Hosts broke out in songs of jubilation. God silenced them and said, ‘My creatures are perishing, and you sing praises?’”² But can it be otherwise? Can even God bring the faithful home without removing all obstacles, including the human ones? Second Isaiah hints that such might be possible. Describing the work of God’s servant just a chapter earlier, God says, “A bruised reed he will not break,

²This wording appears in *A Passover Haggadah: The New Union Haggadah*, ed. Herbert Bronstein for the Central Conference of American Rabbis, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Penguin, 1982) 48.

and a dimly burning wick he will not quench....He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth” (Isa 42:3–4). The play between Isa 42 and 43 has to be deliberate: in the old exodus, the Egyptians “are extinguished, quenched like a wick,” but now we learn this of God’s servant: “a dimly burning wick he will not quench.” A new thing, indeed! How this will all work out is more than Second Isaiah knows, but the prophet does recognize that God’s purpose to bring justice and Torah to the nations is somehow wrapped up in the suffering of God’s servant, which will take things in a very different direction than requiring the suffering of the wicked. Something startlingly new is afoot here. And will God be seen at last in the suffering of a latter-day Judean carpenter? Jesus will plant his footprints all across Palestine in his itinerant ministry, but only the eyes of faith will see in them the footprints of God.

The exodus, then, is no “once upon a time” event, but a God-event that will bring new life as it is updated in the worship of the poet of Ps 77 and as it is made new in the words of Second Isaiah. Nothing at all predictable here, because genuine “news” never is. And in this instance, the news is surely good.

F.J.G.