

A Black African Perspective: An African Reading of Exodus

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To read the Exodus in Africa means to enter into solidarity with individuals and groups who are refused the dignity of being human, to denounce the abuses of established systems, and to intervene to protect the weak, as Moses did.

This chapter is taken from the author's book, *African Cry* (Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1986).

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What is the message of the Book of Exodus today for so many millions of Africans in their religious, cultural, political and socioeconomic situations? What can men and women in black Africa who seek deliverance from political and economic oppression look for in a reading of Exodus? This is a towering question facing us. I shall examine it here.

It is not difficult to see the import of this question. Our faith in the God of revelation cannot be lived and understood abstractly, in some atemporal fashion. It can only be lived through the warp and woof of the events that make up history. Faith will grapple with the tensions and conflicts of global society. It runs into the crucial questions and urgent aspirations of all women and men. The praxis of the Christians struggling in situations of injustice must be reckoned with in any effort to understand the living faith. We must reflect on this activity, bring it into confrontation with the gospel, and make explicit the theological intent it expresses.

Ultimately, the sense of revelation will need to be understood in history through the situations and experiences by which the word of God makes itself heard. After all, theology is nothing but a reflection fashioned of the stuff of living experience. One extracts the current

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Jean-Marc Ela

meaning of God's word from a point of departure in the historical understanding that human beings have of themselves and the world. Theology is a labor of deciphering the sense of revelation in the historical context in which we become aware of ourselves and our situation in the world. We must respect this hermeneutic function of theology, remembering that the enterprise it supposes is that of the Bible itself. The Bible in the life of God's people never was anything but a reflection on, a resumption of, the basic meaning of the biblical message and the promise of salvation at the heart of the happenings and the history being lived out by the people of God.

We are called today to understand ourselves in the light of a living revelation, to understand the profound sense of the situations and events that we experience, to read the word of God in the world. History, then, including the history of the life of the church, must be the locus par excellence of theological research and reflection. And so we must renounce any discourse on the exodus that we might generate *in absoluto* without taking into consideration our own concrete, vital context. In other words, from a point of departure in the center of vital interest and in view of the historical experiences and questioning that mark the life of our peoples, we must overcome the temporal distance between us and the exodus and lay hold of the meaning that God seeks to impart to us by means of this key event in salvation history.

And so the questions arise: In the colonial or neocolonial situation that has marked Christianity in Africa, is Exodus not a book terribly absent to us? And is the reason for this absence not that the message it delivers calls into question not only a certain theology but also an ecclesiastical praxis, a worship, and a spirituality?

The God of missionary preaching was a God so distant, so foreign to the history of the colonized peoples. Exploited and oppressed, they find it difficult to identify this God with the God of Exodus, who becomes aware of the situation of oppression and servitude in which the people find themselves. The primary role of the Bible, and of the Old Testament in a special way, in African religious movements is to express the reaction and revolt of African Christians within the institutional churches in which the despised, humiliated human being lives a relationship to God under the rubric of absence.

The God of the Old Testament, the God of the Promise, continually shows human beings a future of hope, which enables them to criticize the existing situation. God summons up from within the hoping consciousness of the human being a nonconformity with reality. In

Voices from the Margin

short, God carries human beings forward, toward a future characterized by a new reality. But in the official churches, God's divinity has been posited in a changelessness, an immutability, an impassibility such that the history of human beings is effectively abandoned to its own devices, deprived of the capacity to appear as the locus of manifestation of God's action. If the God of preaching, when all is said and done, is simply the God of the theodicies, that is, of Greek metaphysics, then God is nothing but a supreme, eternal idea, having no connection with anything that happens on earth, where human beings live their lives. Devoid of any openness to the world, God cannot become involved in the human drama, for God cannot compromise the divine purity in any historical becoming.

My point is this: The God proclaimed to the African human being in the precise context of the colonial situation is a God who is a stranger to the times, indifferent to political, social, economic, and cultural occurrences, having no prospect of involvement such as would necessarily be implied in the Promise. At most, the God of the Christian churches in the times of colonization commanded adaptation and submission to the existing order of things. At the First Vatican Council, did not a group of missionary bishops beseech Pope Pius IX to release the black race from the curse of Ham? A like request is not only perfectly logical in a theology of established disorder; it implies a praxis that accepts a ready-made world, accepts the status imposed on the colonized peoples and justified by a popular theology that interprets the condition of the black race as a punishment from God.

It is scarcely surprising, then, that the missionaries did not seek to spell out the biblical notion of the salvation they claimed to be bringing to the African. In the mind of most African converts, being saved meant going to heaven. Missionaries failed to point out that in the Bible the notion of salvation is shot through with that of liberation, and that salvation (or liberation) is expressed at once as present and future. Salvation is indeed the object of hope, but it has a present dimension as well. To be saved means to be delivered now, to be liberated already, from the forces of alienation that enslave persons.

By contrast, the church, by its silence or by hiding behind an apolitical disguise, reinforces and legitimates dependency. It fails to enunciate the sociohistorical dimensions of salvation and hope. In thrall to a religious anthropology that sees the human being only as a soul to be saved, the church has consolidated a state of misery by teaching the colonized peoples contempt for earthly values. A prayer

Jean-Marc Ela

frequently recited in Christian assemblies, in village and town, went as follows: 'I ask thee not for earthly riches and happiness. I ask thee but for one thing: Give me thy grace and I shall learn to condemn the joys of this world.' The notion of religion as the opium of the people, one might conclude, is not devoid of foundation here.

In the colonial situation that has marked imported Christianity, mission has undergone a systematic distortion. Globally the Christian message has been cut off from its political extensions, which give it its human, concrete meaning. Where world and society are concerned, missionaries have not generally sought to raise up rousers and doers, leaders of men and women, liberators, but have trained passive Christians, persons to be treated as minors. It would have been difficult for missionaries emerging from the colonial seminary to teach anything calculated to impugn the situation of colonial dependence. In the missions the privatization of Christianity reached its zenith. The colonized peoples never had a complete view of Christianity. Bereft of a historical, critical sensitivity that would relate the salvation message to the particular context of colonial domination, the church kept Africans in line with taboos and sanctions instead of launching them into the historical adventure of liberation – where, precisely, the living God is revealed.

If the exodus has any meaning for us, it will be first and foremost in its capacity to illuminate the living relationship between revelation and history. The central event through which God is revealed by intervening in people's history is the exodus. God utters the divine being definitively in the action by which God snatches the people from the servitude of Egypt, and leads them, with mighty hand and outstretched arm, to the very land of Canaan, the land of the promise Abraham has received: 'When Israel was a child I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son' (Hos. 11.1). Deuteronomy capsulizes Israel's religion thus: 'We were once slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with his strong hand' (Deut. 6.21).

Israel's liturgy is shot through from beginning to end with the memory of the exodus. The core, as we know, is the Feast of Passover – no longer a feast of returning spring, such as neighboring peoples celebrated – but a commemoration of the flight from Egypt (see Exod. 12.12–14). The Jewish religion is steeped in the memory of the Passover. The whole psalter seems driven by Miriam's refrain after the passage through the sea (Exod. 15.21–2). There is no psalm without an echo of *In exitu Israel de Egypto* . . . (see Pss. 105, 66, 78). Indeed, for

Voices from the Margin

Israel the entire Bible is simply a rereading of the exodus, when the people of the covenant became aware of the crucial moment when God genuinely created them as a people.

Thus the exodus theme is a commonplace in prophetic preaching. Hosea speaks of leading Israel back to the desert to 'speak to her heart' (see Hos. 2.16-17). Ezekiel transforms his memory of the espousal of the exodus to a promise of a wedding (Ezek. 16). The Song of Songs, so rich with reminiscences of the exodus, is a foretaste of the end of the ages, when Jesus of Nazareth will assume the divine name of the exodus to manifest that in him all revelation is accomplished (John 8.28). The Christ appears in some way as the burning bush, out of which the name of God is communicated to human beings (see John 17.26). This appearance of Christ, wherein the story of the burning bush receives its fuller sense, sheds light on the meaning of the exodus. In the logic of revelation, the word of God develops by a projection into a future that had been awaited throughout the past. In the first great deeds of God, a messianic hope will discern the proclamation of the crowning action to consummate God's revelation in history.

Thus the state of things toward which history is moving is something that mythic time or cosmic cycles could never produce: the full and real accomplishment of divine promises is only partially realized at a given moment in history. In this perspective, the exodus, in which God, in a first moment, has created a people by the first covenant, will be a presage and presentiment of a future event that will be a second exodus. Thanks to the prophets, Israel comes to realize that the liberation from Egypt does not exhaust God's promise. Second Isaiah proclaims to the exiles a liberation that will be as a new exodus (Isa. 43.16-21; 52.4-6; 41.17-20). Cyrus restores freedom to God's people, but this liberation does not yet fulfill expectations. All of these partial realizations, far from quenching hope, only sharpen it. In other words, the capital event, in which God - in a conflict where God triumphs over the forces of slavery and death, symbolized by Egypt and its Pharaoh - bestows on Israel existence as a free people (Ezek. 16.3-9), is not the fulfillment of the promise, but a partial accomplishment and reiteration of the promise.

Such an event refers to a future of God in history, then. More precisely, it refers not to the God who is, but to the God who comes, and whose promise is never exhausted by its historical realizations. Ultimately the basic meaning of the exodus is bestowed by the revelation of a God who personally 'owns' the future. Revelation is not

Jean-Marc Ela

mainly a doctrine, but a promise, which remains to be verified in its realization in the future of the world. Thus it unceasingly opens out upon the future of a new creation, a new exodus. God's revelation in history always comports a horizon of the future, in which the divine design will be accomplished in its fullness. Out beyond events having the value of a sign, a more distant perspective appears, that of the end of the ages. Israel thus appears ever the people to whom God addresses the divine word, to be sure; but Israel is also created by this word, which endlessly bears this people toward a future – inasmuch as the promise of salvation in its plenitude constitutes the essential kernel of God's word, the thing that awakens hope in the human being.

We must seek the meaning of the God of the exodus in light of the fact that the fulfillment of the promises is the locus of intelligibility of revelation as a whole. When we interpret the divine name of the exodus in a dynamic perspective, we understand that, in giving the divine name, God is not content with showing that the divinity is not a being turned inward upon itself. God is actually turned toward human beings, the subject of personal relationships, to the precise extent that it is God's intervention in history that will say that God is God. But God does not designate the divinity as 'I am' in order to say that the divine being abides and subsists in the midst of events (Isa. 40.6–8); rather, God's word is immutable and was, is, and will be *revealed* in history. Through the exodus event, God is revealed in the history of the promise. Deliverance from servitude in Egypt is an event that illuminates the language of the promise: it is an act of fidelity on the part of God. In a word: In the exodus, God is revealed under the formality of promise.

God's revelation is still bound up with history, through the happenings in which Israel's faith deciphers the intervention of the hand of God, through events that are the vessels of the future by reason of God's promises with which they are intertwined. Just so, we see, the divine name of the exodus not only unveils the mystery of God's personhood, but is at the same time a name to be used on a journey, a name revealing God in the direction of the future, a name of promise to show forth, in the darkness of an unknown future, what it is that can be relied upon. It is in an event to be awaited, and not only in reference to an earlier event already known, that God is made known. As Moltmann says so well:

Voices from the Margin

The God of the exodus [is] a God of promise and of leaving the present to face the future, a God whose freedom is the source of new things that are to come. . . . His name is a wayfaring name, a promise that discloses a new future, a name whose truth is experienced in history inasmuch as his promise discloses its future possibilities.¹

The God who reveals the divine name shows thereby that God is not a force of nature whose epiphany signifies the eternal processes of life and death. God is a God concerned to orient the human being not toward the perpetual recommencement of the cosmic cycle, but toward a future constituting the goal of all of the human being's history. When all is said and done, the God who reveals the divine name is the God of hope in the future of an irreversible movement and a radical novelty. The exodus is the event par excellence reread by the people of God and commemorated by them in precise function of its revelation to them of who God is. In referring the human being to a future of God, the divine name of the exodus becomes a call of hope.

In a perspective in which the history of human beings is of value for God, who gets involved in that history and fulfills the divine promise there, we cannot posit the happiness of human beings, justice and freedom, reconciliation and peace, in a beyond having no connection with the realities and situations of the present world.

It is impossible to speak of hope without recalling that social and temporal reality is the locus of God's interventions and revelation alike. There God proposes to human beings a collective project of communion and oneness. Hence not only are liberation movements, mobilizing the collective aspirations, the locus where we are to read the history of the promise, but we must know, too, that God's revelation, in ongoing fashion, calls for the transformation of the world. Charged with a message of hope, God's revelation protests the present in order to actualize the future. God's revelation gives birth to a people who are witnesses to the promise. Their corresponding task is to do something new in history. Ultimately, revelation stirs up a community in exodus, whose mission is not only to live in expectation of the fulfillment of the promise, but also to promote the historical transformation of the world and of life.

Of necessity, the revelation of the God of the exodus enables us to renounce the temptation to short-circuit time and history. It enables us to rediscover the importance of the future and the depth of the present moment. It constrains us to assume historicity and thus to rethink the divine message in the space where the economy of solidarity character-

Jean-Marc Ela

izing God's designs on men and women and their world is being realized. In obedience to God's promise, we are to discern and prepare the roadways to the future. A grasp of the mystery proper to the God of the exodus arouses us to react against a flight to the future that would disregard the historical now. The God of the promise invites us to make history the locus of the progressive fulfillment of the promises.

Thus God's revelation not only has the purpose of illuminating and interpreting the existing reality of the world and of human beings; it also introduces a contradiction into present reality and thus initiates a dynamism whose thrust is toward the definitive fulfillment of the promise. In the perspective of divine revelation, the world itself is on a journey. It is impossible to speak of the promise, of its radical openness to the future, and at the same time to consider the world a self-enclosed system, a perfect order, or a ready-made reality. The fact is that history's end is not yet here. History is the tension between promise and fulfillment. Accordingly, knowledge of God is always provisional – and impossible without a transformation of the world. In other words, if the world is not yet a theophany, if reality is still open to the future, our true situation is still ahead of us. Thus we are at once on the way toward the God who comes and on the way toward a world as it ought to be, in conformity with the final fulfillment of the promise. Revelation in its plenitude coincides with the end of the process of transformation of the world. In short, the expectation of another world calls for another kind of world.

For millions of Africans, the signs of a world in quest of freedom and justice are too evident not to attract the attention of churches that boast the Judaeo-Christian revelation or claim that the message of the exodus occupies a central place. How many illiterate people are paralyzed today by their ancestral (and modern) fears in societies in which the accumulation of new knowledge operates according to the model of an elitist culture? Ignorance is not limited here to an inability to read and write. It extends to the functioning of political institutions, to the mechanisms of economics, to the laws of society. In the face of the manifold harassments and blind bullying of which they are the victims, the illiterate African rural masses are ignorant of the very law designed to protect them. Their very fear of defending themselves, even when they know they are in the right, itself constitutes a stumbling block, one from which many human groups need to be liberated.

In any breach with situations of servitude, a first step will be to promote a mentality of active solidarity. Of course no such mentality

Voices from the Margin

can exist without an inventory of the factors or mechanisms of oppression. No change is possible without an awareness of injustices such as will render them intolerable in the mind of the people. Ultimately, in raising up leaders for a determinate community who will perform the function of prophets in that community, the group will receive a 'word' from which it can draw the strength to forge ahead. There must be individuals to take up the questions and traumas of a group and awaken the group to injustices from within and injustices from without. Certain individuals must decide to speak, in the conviction that many in the group are aware of their suffering.

In any community, village or city neighborhood, the prime interest in reading the Book of Exodus is to rescue the majority of African Christians from ignorance of the history of liberation. After all, this text is about nothing else. Moses is not sent to Egypt to preach a spiritual conversion, but to lead Israel 'out of the house of slavery.' In this escape God is revealed as the unique, matchless God. In today's world changes do result from liberation movements, and Africans must not be kept from knowing that, in our age, living communities are struggling for respect for their rights.

A knowledge of the history of today's liberation movements will spur on communities held down by fatalism and resignation. It will be crucial to remember that through this history God's spirit is at work, toiling internally for the transformation of the world, in view of the fact that injustice and domination, with contempt for men and women and the violence all these things engender, constitute a key aspect of the sin of the world.

Accordingly, a reading of the Book of Exodus in Africa today demands that the Christian churches attempt to solve the problem of the interrelationship between the proclamation and education of faith and projects that will permit local communities to move from servitude to freedom. More radically, in a cultural context marked by the theme of withdrawal or estrangement from God as recorded in most African mythic traditions, how will it be possible to create any space for a desire of the living God apart from liberation experiences? What can supply a starting point for the proclamation of the word of God to human beings in a cultural universe in which, as for the Kirdi of North Cameroon, God has been killed, abandoning men and women to misery, suffering, and death? In the African churches where, all too frequently, a moralizing instruction has influenced generations of Christians, a reading of Exodus can help recall that God utters the divine being in

Jean-Marc Ela

history. It is precisely the place of Exodus in the Bible that obliges us to question ourselves concerning our forms of celebration of salvation in connection with all of the enterprises of human promotion. In other words, how may God's benevolent interventions in human history be recalled from within an experience of life, of joy and freedom, of sharing and communion – all concretely signified in the life of local communities? Must faith and salvation, and the church itself, be imprisoned in purely religious matters? Salvation comes from God, to be sure; but must one experience it outside the concrete history of a people? Or should we rather receive it in the context in which people live, taking account of their creative effort to construct a future that will be different from their past, a past so cruelly marked by slavery and domination? In Africa, where these situations form an integral part of the collective memory, one cannot shut Christianity up within the limits of a religion of the beyond.

If the church's mission is before all else a supernatural one, it can scarcely proclaim the One who fulfills the revelation of the cloud-wrapped God of the exodus without including, in its perceptions and its awareness, the concrete life of human beings, institutions and structures, social categories and ideologies – because these can all promote or paralyze the ascent of the daughters and sons of God. In this view, should the churches not confront today's Pharaohs and demand that they allow the people of God speech, decision, and freedom? Will it be enough to continue to run schools and hospitals, dispensaries and orphanages, all manner of charitable activities, or rather will it be in order to prioritize the assumption of the new aspirations of all of the disinherited by bringing the problems of women and men crushed by injustice into religious education, religious formation, and prayer?

In short: By entering into solidarity with the individuals and groups who are refused the dignity of being human, are the churches not called upon, on the one hand, to rediscover the function of Moses and the prophets as the spokespersons of the oppressed and collectively denounce the most crying abuses of the established systems, and, on the other hand, to intervene at all levels of the social system to protect the weak and the little from the arbitrary will of the great? The churches of black Africa ought to distinguish themselves in this role by the quality of their reflection and ought to be able to count on a laity committed to the process of transformation and change of society.

Beyond the shadow of a doubt, a reading of the exodus is a must in

Voices from the Margin

the Christian communities of Africa today. As the oppressed of all times have turned to this primordial event, thence to draw hope, we shall never come to any self-understanding without ourselves taking up that same history and discovering there that God intervenes in the human adventure of servitude and death to free the human being. The exodus event is the grid permitting the deciphering of human history and the discovery of its deeper sense – that of an intervention of God revealing the divine power and love.²

NOTES

1 J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (New York and Evanston, Harper & Row, 1967), p. 30.

2 As his public life opens (see Luke 4.16–21), Jesus quotes a text of Isaiah (ch. 61), the latter being what is called an 'actualisation de l'Exode' – a recovery of the exodus event for the present. Jesus was steeped in the tradition of the exodus and the prophets. This tradition permeates the Old Testament from beginning to end. For the witnesses of revelation, the exodus was the prototype both of God's action and of the action God expected of the people.

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