Universality and History: Foundations of Core

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The Exodus Epic: Universalization of History through Ritual Repetition

William Franke

Read as religious myth, Genesis represents fundamental conditions of human existence in the form of narrative about the individuals Adam and Eve, who stand for the whole human race. Such interpretation of the "truth" of Genesis in no way precludes belief in Adam and Eve as having been particular, real, individual people–the first–but it maintains that, at any rate, the story also reaches far beyond them as single individuals in order to represent something about the universal condition of humankind. This is how St. Paul reads it: for Paul, "all have sinned" in Adam (Romans 5.12). Such an interpretation enables us to read Genesis as being not only about what happened in a remote past but also about us and our present relationships. We find ourselves exposed in this text as determined by certain factors that insinuate themselves as inescapable conditions of our being human, signally freedom and its infirmity, as represented archetypally in Adam and Eve.

The book of Exodus, on the other hand, can best be assimilated to another literary genre, that of epic history. An epic is the story of the origin of a people. It focuses on some founding event in which a people constitutes itself as a nation. This event is memorialized in the nation's traditions and gives the nation its sense of having a definite identity. The founding event of the nation, its heroic origin, also

furnishes it with an image of its national destiny. The purpose for which a certain people was formed and came into being as a distinct nation illuminates its national history at any point along the way towards fulfillment of that destiny.[1]

In actual fact, a variety of traditions are likely to condense around any event that comes to be chosen as the unifying symbol for the origin of the nation. The Trojan War, as recounted by the Homeric epics, emerged in this way as the founding event of Greek civilization. In Homer's epics, the Greek world's ideals of human excellence and heroism received a compelling imaginative representation that became normative for Greeks generally. Similarly, in Virgil's Aeneid, the Roman people's sense of a unique historical mission and even of cosmic purpose was concentrated into the image of Aeneas as conqueror and founder and so cast into perduring monumental form. Chivalric poems such as Beowulf and the Chanson de Roland had comparable functions in defining a specific civilization for medieval England and France, as did the Niebelungen in Germanic territories and the Icelandic sagas in Scandinavia.

All these epics embody idealized interpretations of historical events expressing the ethos of a people. They tell what a particular people has been enabled to become through the actions of its heroes, as well as revealing something of what the people will be called upon to realize in the challenges facing it in subsequent epochs of its history. It is important to distinguish the language of myth from the language of epic so that the very different claims to truth appropriate to these diverse genres can be respected and appreciated. Myth does not provide scientific or historical truth, but rather sounds deep, timeless, ultimately unanswerable questions like, where did the universe come from? What is humanity's purpose in being here? Why is there suffering and death? Epic history, by contrast, as in Exodus, speaks to and illuminates not the general conditions of human existence but the specific historical identity of a people. What sets them apart from all other peoples of the earth? How did they come to band together in the first place? What should they aspire collectively to achieve? While great epics very often enfold mythological cosmogonies and cosmologies too, their specificity as epic demands to be understood in terms of the general category of history and of the specifics of a certain people's history.

What, then, is history? Of all that happens, those events become historical that leave a trace in the memory of a certain group of people because of their having a significance for this people as a whole. "History" always consists in events being understood in accordance

with some significance. But the true significance of events is recognized always only retrospectively: only in the sequel does the full meaning and purport of an event become manifest. Viewed from an historical distance, certain events take on value as symbols for all the rest. The founding event of the Jewish nation in this manner became the Exodus. This is to propose that from among many memories the Exodus emerged, symbolically, as representing them all.[2] Crossing the Jordan, conquering the Canaanites, miscellaneous military victories against neighboring peoples, deliverance from invasions, and resistance in the face of foreign empires–these and other such scenarios became confirmations of God's special favor and tutelage of Israel as revealed originally and most powerfully in the Exodus. The Jews, both as individuals and in groups, experienced their God as a liberator and savior in manifold ways. But the central symbol of all these concrete experiences of the event of liberation was, and remained, the Exodus. The Jews generally could identify with this story as describing what was essential in their experience of being freed by the God of their faith from those who oppressed them.[3]

The Hebrew people constantly returned to and meditated upon the Exodus as their founding event in order to reaffirm their identity in the present, as well as for the future. The national self-image forged by the Exodus was therefore reinterpreted in correspondence with each new situation and its present exigencies in every successive epoch of Hebrew history. Religious truth, specifically the experience of being saved by God, cannot be only an historical fact pertaining to the past; it must be lived in the present. The narrative of the Exodus sets this event of salvation up as a norm for the present, deriving laws from it, and, moreover, celebrates it in ritual and liturgical forms, thereby preserving it as an active inspiration and living ideal. All the reflections upon the Exodus event, including its ritual repetition and celebration, in subsequent times are, to this extent, actually a continuation of the event.

Exodus is an especially perspicuous example of a text that exposes its own use of history for purposes of a people's self-affirmation through ritual rememoration. The injunction to such liturgical repetition is written into the narrative of the event itself: "And this day shall be unto you for a memorial; and ye shall keep it a feast to the Lord throughout your generations; ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance for ever" (12.14).[4] The text is constantly concerned with actualizing the event it recounts in the present in which it is being recounted and even in the future, addressing itself not only to the

original witness or hearer in the desert but to future generations, "your sons' sons." It is expressly attentive not just to the event per se but to the process of memorializing it through which history is lived and continually relived. "And it shall be when thy son asketh thee in time to come, saying, what is this? That thou shalt say unto him, by strength of hand the Lord brought us out from Egypt, from the house of bondage" (12.14). Hence the reiterated injunctions to remember interpolated directly into the midst of the event as narrated: "And Moses said unto the people, Remember this day, in which ye came out from Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (13.3). The Book of Exodus in this way makes explicit how history is told for the purpose of embodying a significance of vital importance for the present and future times in which it is going to be recited and reactualized.

The description of the "original" event in Exodus is, in fact, at many points transparent to the innumerable subsequent events of reactualization in the form of cultic commemoration. The theophany on Mount Sinai, as described in Exodus 19-24, in which the Ten Commandments, followed by the Covenant Code, are given reads for the most part as a description of the ceremony of renewal of the covenant as commemorated periodically by the Hebrews throughout subsequent ages. Such a ceremony at Schechem, for example, is recorded in Deuteronomy 27 and Joshua 24. These acts of ritual repetition in cultic celebrations have been superimposed upon and, in some instances, written right into the original events themselves as they are represented in the book of Exodus. Clouds of incense and trumpet blasts appear as constitutive parts of the meteorological phenomena of cloud and thunder surrounding the sanctuary of the mountain on which the holy event takes place in Exodus (19.10-19). The narrative thus conflates the original theophany with its liturgical reenactments.[5]

At the heart of the book, the sequence known as the Song of Moses displays this structure of ritualized use of history in the process of memorialization that creates and maintains a national identity. There is constant alternation between verses pertaining to the specific past event–from the opening verse declaring how the Lord has triumphed gloriously by throwing horse and rider into the sea–and more general celebrations of the power and goodness of the Lord.[6] The latter sections open the lesson of the past into an unlimited field of possibilities for all times. For instance, the second verse reads:

> The Lord is my strength and my song,
> and he is become my salvation:

> he is my God, and I will prepare him a habitation;
> my father's God, and I will exalt him.

Nothing in these lines has anything to do specifically with Moses, Pharaoh, or the crossing of the Red Sea. But these verses express something essential about the God revealed in Exodus for all subsequent generations. The sequel of the Song of Moses makes reference to the itinerary of the Israelites among the peoples of Edom, Moab, Canaan, and even to their passing into the promised land and to the building there of a temple. All of this took place long after the event of escape by passing through the sea, the event that the Song ostensibly commemorates. In this way the projection of the Red Sea crossing upon Israel's future seen in this event's light is already anticipated in the victory Song itself.[7]

The *incipit* of the Song of Moses, in Exodus 15.1–"I will sing to the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously: the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea"–clearly is to be counted as among the oldest compositions in the whole Bible. It seems very likely that the whole sequence of verses comprising the song contains in poetic form the germ of the narrative that becomes the full-blown story of the Exodus.[8] There is a hint that the opening verses may very well be older than the rest of the song, since they also appear repeated verbatim as "Miriam's Song" later in the chapter (15.21). This suggests that they existed independently of and antecedently to the narrative and were already known by another name when they came to be integrated into the song and narrative recounting the crossing of the Red Sea in chapters 14 and 15. They may even have been composed by an eyewitness to the event, only later to become the originating cell of Moses' Song and thereby perhaps of the whole Exodus epic.[9]

What I am proposing is that Exodus as a whole be read not as if it were, in some crude form, a documentary history of a unique event in the past but rather as a witness to the Hebrew people's faith across the ages. As such, it represents not objective but personal and relational knowing. A people's sense of being in relation to God in all the vicissitudes of its history, its conviction of being cared for and guided, is expressed in the form of epic narrative growing up around its most significant and obsessive memory traces. These crystallizations of memory then engender further expressions in narrative and in lyrical traditions.[10]

It is patent how the narrative of the Exodus reflects historical conditions pertaining to the time of the book's writing–which means a

number of disparate epochs reflecting, for example, nomadic and agricultural economies–as much as those contemporary with the event of the Exodus itself. In defining the essential norms for national life, the exigencies of later periods are every bit as relevant as the conditions proper to the time in which the story is set. By its heterogeneous and composite nature, Exodus exposes the way in which its own task is not just to record facts but to interpret a sense of national identity as founded upon the relationship with a God who is active as liberator in history and also presently. This is something that must be experienced ever anew in every new present.

There are other ways that the text of Exodus eminently exemplifies and highlights how epic-historical narrative does not merely recount an event in the past but rather reveals memory in the process of preserving the event in its founding importance, giving new meaning to its features as based on present realities. Critical-historical analysis reveals that many of the age-old, traditional feasts of the Hebrew calendar year were given new significance by being attached to the Exodus event. Certain of these feasts were quite generally part of the culture of the Near East in which the Hebrews lived. In particular, nomadic peoples of the ancient Near East like the Hebrews practiced sacrifice of a lamb, spraying blood on lintels or tents to ward off evil spirits. This receives specific meaning in the Exodus narrative as a sign that the Angel of the Lord should "pass over" those houses when smiting the first-born in the land of the Egyptians. Again, farmers in the spring, as part of a fertility rite, would celebrate the feast of unleavened bread, discarding old yeast before taking in a new harvest. Exodus' prescriptions for unleavened bread read very cogently as a re-interpretation of such ritual practices in coordination no longer with the nature cycle but with an historical event. In the context of Exodus, the readiness to escape in a hurry from Pharaoh's pursuit is adduced as the original motivation for this practice that is then ritually repeated. A verse like "And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough which they brought forth out of Egypt, for it was not leavened; because they were thrust out of Egypt, and could not tarry, neither had they prepared for themselves any victual" (12.39; see also 12.26; 13.14) has all the appearances of an after-the-fact etiological gloss on an established ritual practice.[11]

Passages interpreting the reasons for ritual practices as connected with the Exodus event strongly suggest that the exigency of memorializing and keeping alive its religious meaning in the present reacted upon the account of the "original" event. The Decalogue itself shows unmistakable signs of having been subject to interpretation in

successive ages. Formally the commandments can be broken down into concise prescriptions plus explanatory glosses. For example, the last of the commandments dealing with duties to God enjoins simply, "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy" (20.8). But part of the following explanation–"For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it" (20.11)–evidently depends on the later Priestly account of Creation in Genesis 1.

The Exodus event in a certain sense precedes the Creation (as well as the Patriarchy) in Israel's discovery and invention of her history. The liberation from Egypt, placed by scholars in the thirteenth century B.C., would have been the necessary precondition for the formation of a people and a history of Israel in the first place. As the founding event of this holy nation, the Exodus itself would be necessary first to constitute Israel as a people with a distinctive consciousness of itself, specifically with an identity pinned on its special relation to God.[12] The image of God as Creator in Genesis in many ways appears to be a development of the image of God as Liberator in Exodus. The imagery of "dividing" gives the two a common imaginative and structural basis: it is plausible that the dividing of the Red Sea served as prototype for the divisions by which the God of Genesis creates. Considered anthropologically, philosophical reflection about origins comes only after communal life and a cultural matrix have been established and have evolved to a considerable level of sophistication. Only at this stage do speculative questions come into their own. The origins of the cosmos probed in Genesis would, in this order of things, have been treated somewhat later than the origins of the people and nation.

With reference to the climactic event of the crossing of the Red Sea, critical analysis of Exodus has enabled scholars to distinguish two accounts, one in which Jahweh fights side by side with the Israelites, and another in which he acts only by his word.[13] The first is attributed to the oldest strand of the narrative traditions woven together in Exodus, the J-document in which God is called "Jahweh," dating from the tenth century in Jerusalem under the united monarchy. The second belongs to the P-document elaborated by priestly writers in exile in Babylon during the sixth century B. C. This is the source of the priestly theology that left such a clear stamp on Genesis 1, in which God creates by his word. In the J version the Lord fights for Israel, and the wind blows back the waters (14.21). In the P version, the waters divide under Moses' arm stretched out at God's command in a priestly

gesture. The saying-doing sequence (14.4, 8), the saving act as "dividing" (14.21, 16; 11.11), separating, and making holy are exactly homologous to the creative act in the priestly version of the Creation in Genesis 1.

We can never know what actually happened–and not only because of its being in a remote past, but also because of the nature of religious experience itself as witness rather than objective fact. Yet we can read the significance that was attributed to the Exodus event in later epochs. Whether we take the J version or the P version, it is the soul of a people–as constituted by their historical memory–that finds expression in this event. Either set of "facts" serves to illustrate the fundamental event, which is a passage not just through the Red Sea but from fear to faith. The real miracle is the inner transformation–at least from the perspective of the later reenactments, in which the miracle is never over but occurs ever anew. This becomes the model for New Testament miracles (and already in Paul for the sacrament of baptism), where indeed its logic becomes more explicit and deliberate. For example, the return of sight to the eyes of the two blind men in Matthew 9.27-31 is presented as a confirmation and a sign of the primary miracle that has occurred within their souls ("'According to your faith be it unto you.' And their eyes were opened"): their spiritual blindness has been healed in the instant in which they believe in Jesus, the light of life.

The whole Pentateuch consists in reinterpretation of traditions–legal, covenantal, ritual and cultic–in narrative terms and with reference to the all-embracing frame of a national salvation history. The laws of Leviticus, continuous with the Covenant Code in Exodus 25-31 and 35-40 and with Numbers 1-10, are given not only for a nomadic people in constant migration, such as the Hebrews after fleeing from Egypt and wandering in the desert, but are clearly adapted to later periods in Israel's civilization; they deal with the fruit of the harvest and with slaves and much else reflecting much later phases of society. Still, all this variety of legislation is shaped by the guiding concept of Israel as a holy people, separate unto the Lord, such as it was constituted by the Exodus. The account in the Book of Numbers of the forty years sojourn in the wilderness of Sinai reflects the life and crises of the monarchy, the exile in Babylon, and even later periods all within the narrative framework of the aftermath of the Exodus.

Deuteronomy, which means "second law," following upon that given by Moses in the Exodus, does not only reiterate the Decalogue and Covenant Code but also thoroughly reinterprets these and other traditions in an effort to recover the original spirit of a special vocation

for the Israeli nation. Deuteronomy preaches the laws. It is cast as Moses' farewell address. Moses is presented no longer as high priest but as prophet, reflecting a shift in the spiritual leadership of Israel and a need to go deeper than ritual repetition and achieve a revolutionary renewal of the inspired word, a direct experience of God's acts in the proclamations of prophecy. Deuteronomy also advocates reform of worship by means of the centralization of the cult. On the whole, it represents a return to Mosaic traditions with a zeal to revive their original theological meaning and thus to reform Israel, while at the same time adapting these traditions to the very new situations and exigencies of an evolving, historical people.

The book of Exodus in this way remains open to a dimension of continuing experience of "exodus" in myriad forms and at various levels. The process of liturgical reenactment and reactualization has actually extended the founding event far beyond its original matrix and even beyond the boundaries of Hebrew culture. Indeed the Christian religion and specifically the Christ event, particularly as celebrated in the Easter liturgy, are founded on the commemoration of the Exodus. Christ, the paschal sacrifice, the sacrifice that saves, is conceived as the Passover lamb instituted in the Exodus. In the Christian reinterpretation, this sacrifice is linked no longer with escape from bondage in Egypt but with liberation from the slavery of sin.[14]

Granted that epic history concerns the founding event of a people with a distinct identity and historical destiny, we can return to the question of what history is in the particularly revealing form in which it is found realized in the Book of Exodus. For this book, especially when analyzed into its layering of tradition, shows with exemplary clarity how history consists in the interpretation of the past through, and in order to understand, the present, and with a view to the future. No history is simply a neutral account of what happened long ago. Every history is written in an historical context of its own that determines inescapably what can be considered to be important, or be understood at all, in the past. History concerns contingent happenings, such as a journey from Egypt to Israel, rather than necessary and universal structures of existence, like human freedom and dependence, such as are apt rather to be represented symbolically by myth. But like myth, and indeed like every form of literature, or even of human knowledge, history treats of what is not only an object but also involves a human subject. In fact, we use the word history in two senses. History in the sense of what happens is the object of history in the sense of the reconstruction and recounting of what has happened. But

in reality the two interpenetrate and are inseparable from each other. For history is nothing if not a dialogue between events and their recounting. History fundamentally consists not in the bald facts of what happened but in the living significance of events, what they mean in the present to those who remember or, more exactly, memorialize them. And this is reflected and typically thrown into relief by humanities texts. Hence the importance of our remembering how to read texts like the Bible as core texts in humanities curricula.

Notes

[1] For further, penetrating discussion of epic as a genre see Northrop Frye's Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).

[2] Cf. Etienne Charpentier, Pour Lire L'ancien Testament (Paris: Cerf, 1983), 32.

[3] Indeed the very name "Hebrew" seems originally to have designated not so much an ethnicity as a social class, the lowest. To this extent, it is conceivable that the very existence of a Hebrew people may be more a result of the Exodus than an independent and antecedent fact. See Gerhard von Rad, Theologie des Alten Testaments (Munich: Kaiser, 1965-66), "Die Herausführung aus Ägypten," p. 189ff.

[4] Bible quotations are from the Authorized King James Version of 1611.

[5] James Plastras, C.M., The God of Exodus: The Theology of the Exodus Narratives (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1966) writes: "The Sinai narrative tells the story of Israel going to meet her God, but it is not just the story of the first generation of Israelites. It is the story of Israel in every generation. It was the story of the current generation who, even as they listened to the narrative, felt themselves standing at the foot of Sinai ready to listen to the voice of God in the liturgical celebration: 'Oh, that *today* you would hear his voice' (Ps 95[94]: 7)" (p. 21).

[6] The first group comprises verses 1, 4-5, 8-10, 12-17; the second verses 2-3, 6-7, 11, 18. Cf. Charpentier, Pour Lire L'ancien Testament, p. 30.

[7] Robert Alter, in The Art of Biblical Narrative (New York: Basic Books, 1981), speaks here of a "telescoping" of history.

[8] This commonplace in Exodus scholarship is treated by Plastras, The God of Exodus, 166.

[9] Martin Buber, Moses: The Revelation and the Covenant (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 74, quoted by Plastras, The God of Exodus, 166.

[10] Walter Benjamin's writings concerning memory, for example. Berliner Chronik in Angelus Novus (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1966), show the continuation of this specifically Jewish sensibility to memory down to recent times.

[11] A number of such adaptations of festival traditions are pointed out by the notes to the Oxford Annotated Bible (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962).

[12] Von Rad, Theologie des Alten Testaments, "die Anfänge," p. 17ff. and "Die Herausführung aus Ägypten," develops this perspective most originally.

[13] In addition to Charpentier, Pour Lire L'ancien Testament, p. 33, see Jean Louis Ska, Le passage de la mer: Étude de la construction, du style et de la symbolique d'Ex 14, 1-31 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1986).

[14] In medieval exegesis the Exodus becomes a paradigm text for illustrating the four-fold senses of Scripture. Beyond the literal sense of the narrative, which recounted the actual historical event of Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt, the Exodus was understood allegorically in three senses: it was the type or prefiguration of Christ's freeing of the human race from the power of Satan, according to its typological sense; in its moral sense, the Exodus represented the escape of the individual human being from sin; and according to its anagogical sense it signified the delivery of the soul out of time into eternity. See Dante, Convivio , I, i, in Opere minori, vol. I, pt. 2 (Milan: Ricciardi, 1979).