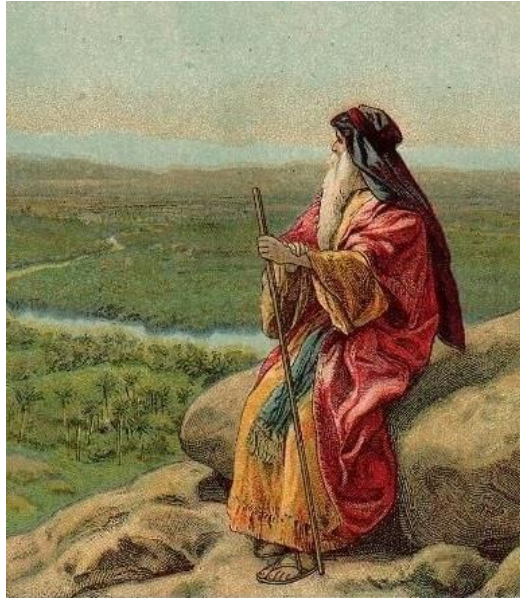


EXODUS, EXILE, AND SACRIFICE



Deuteronomy 34:1 "Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the LORD showed (Moses) the whole land. . . The LORD said to him, 'This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your descendants'; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.'"

William James in his classic work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, concluded that all religious traditions can be reduced to two fundamental claims. First, there is a claim that something is wrong in our lives as we typically live them. All religions, he noted, make some such assertion about the human predicament. And then secondly, all religions speak of a resolution to our plight.

Marcus Borg, the popular writer on the historical Jesus, concluded his fascinating book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, with a description of what he concludes are the main themes of the Jewish Scriptures. Borg suggests that there are three primary themes or emphases found in the Old Testament, each a slightly different way to express and explore the basic human predicament and its resolution as understood by the Jewish tradition.

First there is the theme of Exodus, which our first reading today marks the end of that adventure in the Old Testament, with the death of Moses. Perhaps the Exodus is the most fundamental theme of the three in the Jewish mind. Here is the familiar tale of the Jews in bondage to Pharaoh in Egypt, the story of their miraculous escape from slavery, the long and arduous journey in the Wilderness and lastly their safe arrival at the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. This historical remembrance influenced all subsequent Jewish thought about God and about the human condition. It is the touchstone of the Jewish faith.

The Exodus is a story that echoes in the common human predicament of all of our lives, when we recognize ourselves as people who are trapped somehow, who seek miraculous liberation from our enslavement, who are weary of the aimless wanderings in the wilderness of our lives, longing

instead to at last find that Promised Land, that place we have not known, but for which we as humans endlessly yearn.

The second major theme of the Jewish Scriptures, according to Borg, is the familiar story of the Exile. This is the well-known tale of the Babylonian defeat of Israel, the first destruction of Jerusalem, the carting off into captivity of the Jewish aristocracy, exiled in a distant land, where they were forced to sing the songs of Zion in a foreign country, all the while simply longing to go back home, waiting for their eventual release in order to return and rebuild their lives and their cities and the temple in Jerusalem.

This Old Testament theme also echoes in all of our lives at times. It is the story of our painful separation from that which is familiar and dear to us, reflected in pining of immigrants for the old country and the old ways, or those longing for a forgotten childhood or a lost youthful innocence; it is found in that familiar human ache for a simpler day and time, and in our current longing in the midst of this pandemic for a return to normalcy. For we all are in some sense exiles in this world, not where we are supposed to be, powerless to alter our situation, often living on the margins, frequently feeling oppressed and victimized, fearful and afraid in these strange times and places. We all feel uneasy in our lives at times, aching to

be set free and to return to Eden. All of us have longed to simply be released from our captivity, from all that binds us here, to be free, so that we can go back home again.

The third major theme of the Jewish Scriptures is what Borg calls the Priestly story. This story is not one of exodus or exile, but of sin, guilt, sacrifice, and forgiveness. Central to this theme are notions of impurity, defilement, and uncleanness. This is the story of the Ten Commandments and the Deuteronomic regulations, of our need for law and ritual, for sacrifice and purification in the eyes of God. It is a story that also echoes in our common human feelings of failure --- failure to be all that we can be, failure to do what we know we ought to do. It resonates in our moments of shame and fear, in an innate sense of sin and guilt in our lives, and a desire to be made pure and holy.

The New Testament writers speak of the meanings of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection with imagery drawn from all three of these Jewish themes. The theme of Exodus, for instance, is clearly seen in Matthew's portrayal of Jesus as the new Moses with the new law, the new commandment, set within the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is said to come to "set the captives free."

The theme of Exile is found, for example, in the story of the Prodigal Son who went into a "far country" and who

like us simply longs to return home again. Indeed much of Jesus' teaching stresses the religious life as a journey, a journey from here to some other place, most clearly to the Kingdom of Heaven. The earliest name for the Christian movement was "the Way" (Acts 9.2). And the meaning of the word *disciple* is not "a student of a teacher," but rather to be "a follower after somebody." An 'apostle' is someone who is sent. So we as Christians are called upon to take up our cross and follow Jesus in the way, the truth, and the life.

The Priestly story is less applicable than the others to the life of Jesus, who ate and drank with sinners and tax collectors, the unclean of his day, who talked to the Samaritan woman at the well, or who healed the Syro-Phoenician woman's daughter, or the Roman soldier's slave, who forgave the women caught in adultery, or allowed the harlot to wash his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair.

But the Priestly story is clearly found in the writings of Paul, the Pharisee, and also in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Interestingly, that though the Gospel writers tend to favor the themes of Exodus and Exile, the writers of the Epistles and the early Patristic Fathers tend to prefer the Priestly Story. And after the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century, Christianity soon became the official religion of Europe. And the themes of Exodus or

Exile do not lend themselves well to a state religion or to a Christian nation, and thus the themes of Exodus and Exile virtually disappeared from Christian religious imagery thereafter in the West. Consequently the Priestly story has been the dominant theme of Christianity for the last thousand years in the West, whereas Eastern Orthodox traditions have been focused more on our lives as spiritual transformation and our becoming one with God, themes more like the Exodus and Exile stories.

Although all three themes were important to the New Testament writers, it is the Priestly Story that has often commanded our contemporary understanding of Jesus and the Christian life in the West. It is the Priestly story which has produced the familiar image of Jesus as the Lamb of God whose death is a sacrifice for our sins, thereby making our forgiveness by God possible. The Priestly story of sin, guilt, sacrifice, and forgiveness has become the primary theme shaping our modern sense of who we are as individuals, and our image of Jesus, and of what God requires, and the nature of Christian life.

As with each of the themes though, there are limitations with the Priestly Story. For instance, the Priestly Story tends toward a rather static understanding of the Christian life, making it into a repeated cycle of sin, guilt, and forgiveness; creating a more passive

understanding of the Christian life, not one of gradual spiritual transformation but one of eventual finding a place in heaven. The Priestly Story tends to convey an understanding of Christianity as primarily a religion concerned with the afterlife, with God seen essentially as lawgiver and the final judge, and the fear of death and hell being a great motivator in our Christian life. But most importantly the Priestly Story is very hard for many contemporary people to understand or to believe. The notion that God's only Son came to earth to offer his life as a sacrifice for the sins of the world, and that God could not forgive us without that having happened, that we are saved simply by believing this story, is incredible to many people. Taken metaphorically, this story can be and is very powerful. But taken literally, it is a profound obstacle to many in accepting the Christian way of life. The focus on sin and salvation, simply makes little sense to lots of people, and I think we all need to be honest about that.

Yet when the Priestly Story is understood as only one of several accepted ways of depicting the Christian life, rather than the only one or primary way, the problems with it largely disappear. We must not, therefore, limit ourselves to one biblical theme in our understanding of who Jesus is in our lives and what we are called upon to do or

whom we are called to be, and or where we are on our journey home.

Sometimes the predominant feeling of our religious lives may indeed be one of sin or shame, to which the Priestly story answers. At other times, however, our predominant religious feeling may be one of unfortunate enslavement and a longing for a better place somewhere, for a better life. At other times, we may feel like we are aimlessly wandering in the wilderness of the modern world. And at other times we may feel far from home and captive in a foreign land. In many and different ways we all feel keenly our separation from God at times, and our language and our images of Jesus struggle to evoke and resolve our religious predicament. So let us not limit ourselves in those efforts to find God in our lives, lest we lose our way back to him. AMEN.