

## BIBLICAL PAGES

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### LECTIO on Exodus – God's names

#### Lectio n° 2 These are the names Ex 1:1-13

*1 These are the names of the Israelites who went with Jacob to Egypt, each of them went with his family:*

*2 Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah, 3 Issachar, Zebulun and Benjamin, 4 Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher.*

*5 In all, the descendants of Jacob numbered seventy persons. Joseph was in Egypt already.*

*6 Then Joseph died, and his brothers, and all that generation.*

*7 But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they became so numerous and powerful that eventually the whole land was full of them.*

#### Lectio

The Hebrew name of the Book of Exodus is 'semot', that is, 'the Names'. Like any other book of the Torah it is called by its very first word.

It deals with names, not with figures,

with a personal history,

with the history of a people:

it is not about statistics.

To call somebody by name is an action that establishes a relation between two people, that helps them to dialogue.

The beginning of the Book of Exodus reveals that the subject of the book is 'people', as well as God's personal relation with them, their liberation from slavery, and redemption for each and everyone of them.

Chapter 1 shifts the focus from the history of the patriarchs to the history of the People of Israel.

In the first line, the phrase 'Israel's sons' ('bene yisra'el') still refers to Jacob's sons; while from line 7 onwards it refers to the Israelites who, by now, are the object of God's history of salvation.

By this kind of beginning, the book informs us that it is a sequel to whatever God started in the patriarchal history: in fact, it is its climax. It relates about the Jews becoming a people.

Another name given to the Book of Exodus is 'Sefer Ha-sheni', 'Book n° 2'. The rabbis teach that the uniqueness of this book consists in being the second book, the book which comes after the first one, "because it contains the fulfilment of Creation, that is, the exodus from Egypt and God's gift of the Torah to His people" (Netziv).

However, not only will this book tell us about the exodus from Egypt, but also about the history of God with the 'bene yisra'el', a history which goes from the liberation from slavery to the gift of the Torah; and then, finally, to God's presence in their midst by His Shekinah.

While we pronounce the names – reminding us of the personal relation between God and the ‘bene yisra’el’, a one to one relation – we see that relation shift to the whole people:

God acted in history in favour of Jacob’s sons;

God is acting in history in favour of the children of Israel, His People.

The Book of Exodus mentions the dead by name, “it makes memory of them once again when it relates about their death, in order to show how dear they were to God, given that they were compared to the stars that the Lord makes go out and come in, counting them one by one and calling each of them by its name, as it is written: ‘He who makes the heavenly ranks go out, counting them one by one’.” (Rashi)

Thus the history of a people is intertwined with the history of men and women,  
the great is mirrored in the small,  
the collective in the individual.

The history of the peoples, of one people, finds its origin in the history of the patriarchs and of their sons, called by name. When we call them by name we shall be reminded of the different kinds of love they originate from: the list of the names of Jacob’s sons does not enumerate them in chronological order, but rather according to their respective mothers.

The first six sons (Reuben, Simeon, Levi and Judah, Issachar and Zebulun, 1:2) are Leah’s, that is, sons of Jacob’s first wife.

Then comes Benjamin, second son of Rachel’s, Jacob’s favourite wife.

Then come the names of the sons of Rachel’s maidservant, Dan and Naphtali.

Then again the names of the two sons of Leah’s maidservant, Gad and Asher.

They are arranged in order of preference:

first wife;

second wife, the beloved one;

then comes the sons of the maidservant of the latter,

and at last the sons of the maidservant of the former.

Joseph, Rachel’s first-born, is mentioned at the end because he did not go to Egypt with the others: after becoming a prominent officer, it was him who invited Jacob and his sons to come into Egypt.

From the individual to a people,  
from a people to mankind.

*“In all, the descendants of Jacob numbered seventy persons”* (1:5, cf also Gn 46:27).

Seventy is a perfect number. According to Israel’s tradition, 70 refers to the whole universe; and the phrase “70 peoples” refers to all the peoples of the world.

Therefore, this figure is a hint to the fact that Jacob’s sons in Egypt represent the whole of mankind.

*“Then Joseph died, and his brothers, and all that generation.”* (1:6)

Their death marks the end of an era, and a new era is about to begin.

They are dead in spite of the fact that the children of Israel “became so numerous and powerful that eventually the whole land was full of them” (1:7).

Of course “the whole land” is Egypt; they had become a powerful group in Egypt. However, the term ‘ha’ares’ refers to the land of Israel.

Therefore, “the whole ‘ha’ares’ was full of them” is equal to saying that all the peoples are about to ascend to Israel.

“It will happen in the final days  
that the mountain of the Lord’s house  
will rise higher than the mountains  
and tower above the heights.  
Then all the nations will stream to it,  
many peoples will come to it and say,

‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,  
to the House of the God of Jacob  
that He may teach us His ways  
so that we may walk in His paths’.” (Is 2:2-3)

The generation of the sons of Jacob is dead,  
but here is the promise that in the final days all mankind will move to the Land of Israel.  
The exodus of a people turns into a prophecy of what will happen to all the peoples.  
The vision of a promise, of a dream stands next to the description of a nightmare.

#### THE SIGNS OF POWER AND THE SIGNS OF LIFE (EX 1:8-14)

*8 Then there came to power in Egypt a new king who had never heard of Joseph.  
9 ‘Look,’ he said to his people, ‘the Israelites are now more numerous and stronger than we are. 10  
We must take precautions to stop them from increasing any further, or if war should break out, they  
might join the ranks of our enemies. They might take arms against us and then escape from the  
country.’  
11 Accordingly they put taskmasters over the Israelites to wear them down by forced labour. In this  
way they built the store-cities of Pithom and Rameses for Pharaoh.  
12 But the harder their lives were made, the more they increased and spread, until people came to  
fear the Israelites.  
13 So the Egyptians gave them no mercy in the demands they made, 14 making their lives miserable  
with hard labour: with digging clay, making bricks, doing various kinds of field-work – all sorts of  
labour that they imposed on them without mercy.*

The history of Israel begins in exile, amidst sorrow and slavery.  
From the very beginning we are introduced into this setting full of sorrow.  
And from the very beginning the text relates also the birth of the one who will become God’s  
instrument of liberation. In this setting dominated by evil we can already see the signs of the  
remedy to evil:  
the liberator is born from an enslaved people;  
the time of his birth coincides with Pharaoh’s decree imposing that every new-born Jewish boy  
should be killed.  
But it is in the very heart of oppression, where oppression rages fiercely,  
that a path to freedom is opened;  
when words of oppression and violence resound,  
God acts to free and save them.

The Book of Exodus originates from slavery, just as the Book of Genesis originated from chaos:  
in the latter, the Creator’s word called all things to existence, freeing them from the night, the ‘tohu  
wabohu’, the formless void, the abyss, the waters.  
Here the word of God the Liberator calls to existence His people, freeing it from the oppression of  
slavery and death, which result from power and the fear of losing it.  
‘Chaos’ is then the name of Pharaoh’s power, who does not regard the ‘bene yisra’el’ as the beloved  
children, as he does not know them (cf 1:8: “a new king who had never heard of Joseph”). On the  
contrary, he regards them as a nightmare, a source of fear and instability, to which he responds by  
enslaving them, with violence, injustice, fear, oppression in all its forms, persecution and death.  
The text provides a very useful information when it highlights the very root of every form of  
oppression, of every tyrannical regime: living in fear and terror.  
Whoever lives in terror tends to oppress other people.

The Risen Christ's words, 'Do not be afraid!', will resound only at the end of the history of salvation, when fear is driven out by His love.

"In love there is no room for fear,  
but perfect love drives out fear." (1 Jn 4:18)

The biblical text shows that God's action is opposed to the exercise of power; and, in particular, to the greatest power of the ancient world.

God's action goes hand in hand with the signs of life, chosen by men and women. Thanks to their gestures, God gives birth to a people:

two women choose life (the two midwives Shiphrah and Puah, cf Ex 1:15-21);  
"there was a man descended from Levi who had taken a woman of Levi as his wife" (Ex 2:1);  
a mother conceives and gives birth to a son (Ex 2:2);  
Pharaoh's daughter takes pity of a foreign baby (Ex 2:6).

The most beautiful and simple gestures of true humanity are the basis of the path to liberation. In fact, they are the place where God pronounces His word of salvation.

In the beginning... let there be humanity. And there is humanity.

### **Directions for prayer**

1) I suggest that you meditate / pray focussing your gaze on small things, on the individual person, on the single moment, so that you may see in them the mirrored image of greater things. Let us make memory of minor events, or meetings or words that did seem unimportant at the time but which did open up new horizons and paths; and let us give thanks to God for everything.

"I write from Nazareth,  
in fact, from the very heart of Nazareth,  
not far from that mysterious crater where God took flesh and from which everything started.

"Lost in contemplation in front of the grotto where Mary uttered her 'Yes',  
I try to dig down deeply with my eyes into the 'thickness' of time,  
hoping that I could be able to see that very layer of rock  
where the One who was from the beginning put down His feet.

"However, I cannot pass through the strata of twenty centuries  
to lay bare the stratum which He trod.  
The archaeologists managed to do that. I don't.  
It is a nearly nonsensical adventure, putting my faith to the test.

"Because it is difficult to believe that those rocky places could have been  
the dwelling-place of the One who is riding the cherubim and soars on the wings of the  
wind,  
and makes of the clouds His chariot,  
and spreads the expanse of the heavens like a tent,  
and builds His house on the waters.

"I let myself be seduced by some resounding psalms.

"Thus I realize that the problem is not to overcome two thousand years

and reach the ‘point zero’ of history,  
when the Son of God’s Incarnation took place.

“All in all, even though it is naïve trying to find  
Jesus’ footsteps on the rocks,  
or trying to unearth the pebbles on which His feet stood,  
it is already spiritually satisfying – and unbelievable –  
that one can contemplate the mountains of Galilee and say:  
the skyline which I see is the same that Jesus saw.

“In His sleepless nights He saw the same constellations which I can see tonight.

“And like me, He could also smell the same strong perfume of periwinkle which I was  
persecuted by all day long. And like me, He could contemplate the stamens of the  
passionflower, with lots of portents, while I am filled with remorse.

“On the contrary, the real problem is to cover the distance between ‘point zero’ and the  
“beginning” in which “the Verb was”, as St John says.

“Where is that “beginning”?  
Where are the eternal hills He came from?  
In which sidereal abyss of light does His eternal being sink?  
From which mysterious water beds do the springs of water which reach the earth come?  
Why on this desolate shore?  
To which mysterious loving plan did He intend to obey when,  
crossing the ages of ages, He, the uncreated One whom the heavens cannot contain,  
came to dwell in this calcareous inward curve which lays in front of me?  
And how come did the universal plan of salvation,  
written on God’s scrolls from eternity,  
find its thread right here, in these shepherd’s huts?

“Peguy used to talk about “the ‘fleshiness’ of grace”!  
Perhaps I should find in this phrase the one and only answer  
capable of placating the tumult of my frantic questions.

“The ‘fleshiness’ of grace!  
Salvation is reaching us only through the interstices of wombs.  
Trinitarian hints, which make us jump for joy, through human smiles  
and the intonation of words  
and the softness of caresses.  
The Heavenly circles of love, which touch our earthly bodies,  
only through the sparkles in human eyes,  
the fragrances of sweat,  
the thrill we feel on the skin,  
the tears streaming down somebody’s face.

“These are the eternal paths in full bloom which turn into earthly passageways, so that they  
can meet man,  
winding next to our wells,  
and branching off in our valleys,  
and going up our hills,  
and passing beside our houses,

which are similar to Mary's shabby little house, in which God's breath,  
before turning into a death-rattle,  
became the breath of a baby boy,  
smelling of motherly milk and basil.

“If you want to be ‘universal’, speak about your village”.  
Who said so perhaps was thinking about Nazareth, the village of Jesus,  
who incredibly concentrated in Himself poverty,  
who uttered God's universal words in His own dialect,  
and who expressed the Wisdom of the Verb through the sayings of His village.

“Dear catechists, I stop here so that I am not ‘shipwrecked’.  
However, like Gabriel, I can give you a message of joy too.  
And therefore I say:  
“Do not be afraid!”  
If the One who is “from the beginning” did not disdain those pebbles,  
he will not disdain our poor hearts of stone either.  
If you offer them to Him, He will make His dwelling in our midst...

“And the adventure of redemption will go on, through your assent too.”

(Fr Tonino Bello)

2) I suggest also that you make a research about the phrase “Do not be afraid”. It occurs 68 times in the Scriptures.

Do consider who is the one who pronounces it, in which circumstances, and with which purpose.  
Do consider how fear creeps in, in our own decisions, either of great or of little importance. And also in our own discernment about events and people. So, let us ask the Lord that we may ‘celebrate the Passover’, passing from fear to love for everything.

In order to help you, I give you here the references. It would be good for you to choose a group of books, for instance wisdom books, or the five books of the Torah, or the prophetic books, or the quotes from the New Testament.

Gn 15:1, 21:17; 26:24; 35:17; 46:3;  
Dt 10:12; 31:13;  
Jos 1:9; 8:1;  
Jg 4:18; 6:10, 23;  
Rt 3:11;  
1 S 4:20; 23:17;  
2 S 9:7;  
1 K 17:13;  
2 K 1:15; 6:16; 19:6;  
1 Ch 22:13; 28:20;  
Ps 49:17; 91:5;  
Pr 3:25;  
Is 7:4; 10:24; 37:6; 40:9; 41:10, 13f; 43:1, 5; 44:2; 54:4, 14;  
Jr 1:8; 30:10; 46:27f;  
Lam 3:57;  
Dn 10:12, 19;  
Jl 2:21;  
Zp 3:15f;  
Jdt 10:16; 11:1;

Si 7:35; 22:22; 23:18; 40:7; 41:3;  
2 M 7:29; 8:16; 15:8

Mt 1:20;  
Mk 5:36;  
Lk 1:13, 30; 5:10; 8:50; 12:32;  
Jn 12:15;  
Ac 18:9; 27:24;  
Rv 1:17.

Starting from these texts and others containing the same invitation, do compose your own prayer, for yourselves, the situations, the people and the communities that have been entrusted to you.