

BIBLICAL PAGES

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LECTIO on Exodus – God’s names

Lectio n° 3

And she saw that he was beautiful

Ex 2:1-9

1 There was a man descended from Levi who had taken a woman of Levi as his wife. 2 She conceived and gave birth to a son and, seeing what a fine child he was, she kept him hidden for three months. 3 When she could hide him no longer, she got a papyrus basket for him; coating it with bitumen and pitch, she put the child inside and laid it among the reeds at the River’s edge. 4 His sister took up position some distance away to see what would happen to him.

5 Now Pharaoh’s daughter went down to bathe in the river, while her maids walked along the riverside. Among the reeds she noticed the basket, and she sent her maid to fetch it. 6 She opened it and saw the child: the baby was crying. Feeling sorry for it, she said, ‘This is one of the little Hebrews.’

7 The child’s sister then said to Pharaoh’s daughter, ‘Shall I go and find you a nurse among the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?’ 8 ‘Yes,’ said Pharaoh’s daughter, and the girl went and called the child’s own mother. 9 Pharaoh’s daughter said to her: ‘Take this child away and nurse it for me. I shall pay you myself for doing so.’ So the woman took the child away and nursed it.

10 When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter who treated him like a son; she named him Moses ‘because,’ she said, ‘I drew him out of the water.’

LECTIO

In the commentary to the first lines of the Book of Genesis the Jewish tradition writes:

Rabbi Shimon states that the word ‘light’ occurs five times in the text in order to represent the five books of the Torah, which is compared to light.

*From that we can learn that there are five kinds of light:
through the first kind of light the world was made (Genesis);
the second kind is the light of redemption (Exodus);
the third one is reserved for those who repent (Leviticus);
the fourth one is the Holy Temple (Numbers);
the fifth one is the Torah with its teachings (Deuteronomy).*

*The line, “God said, ‘Let there be light’”
teaches that God created the world through light,
and after these words He started to fashion it.*

Going back to the Book of Exodus, the book of the ‘light of redemption’, we wonder what God did for His people in that situation of oppression and sorrow.

So far, He was mentioned only once, when the book dealt with the Hebrew midwives who were “God-fearing women” (Ex 1:17): “since the midwives feared God, He gave them families of their own”.

Of course God who is always at work (Jn 5:17), the Father who does not let a hair of our head to be lost (cf Lk 21:18), still remembers His people, and sees, hears and acts consequently.

There was a man descended from Levi who had taken a woman of Levi as his wife. (Ex 2:1)

The first sign of God's action is something ordinary. There is no extraordinary divine intervention, neither miracle nor magic. Israel is saved through the first wedding of Exodus: a man takes a woman as his wife.

Later on, in Exodus 6:20, we will learn that the man's name is Amram, and that his wife's name is Jochebed. After getting married they had children. However, neither their first daughter nor their first son are mentioned, at first. Straight away we learn only about the third one.

We discover that Moses had a sister in Exodus 2:4. Later on, in Exodus 4:14, we will come to learn that Moses had a brother too, 7 years his senior, and that his name was Aaron.

When the baby boy was delivered, his mother uttered the most common words that a mother can say, that is, that he was beautiful:

wattēre' 'ōtō kī tōb hū'
and she saw him and he was beautiful (Ex 2:2)

However, the Rabbinical tradition teaches that if Exodus highlights a detail, there must be something special in it.

In the first lines of Genesis we can find a similar expression: in the beginning God created light, and

wayyar^e ' 'ēlōhīm 'et hā'ōr kī tōb
and God saw the light and said that it was beautiful. (Gn 1:4)

The Jewish tradition states that this child was not only beautiful, but also that he was extraordinary beautiful because in him there was a glitter of the primordial light, of the light of creation.

The primordial light of Genesis 1:3 is not the light coming from stars – which will be created on the fourth day – but the light of glory, a reflex of God's very beauty:

*The light created on the first day is not the same light that we can see today.
On that day the Lord created a powerful and brilliant light, so radiant that – in comparison – the light of our sun seems to be darkness. Later on the Lord hid this Heavenly light, and on the fourth day He provided the earth with the light of the sun and of the moon.
Why did God hide the original light?
He said: The wicked men of the future, the generations of the Flood and of diaspora, will not deserve to enjoy the bright light created on the first day. Therefore, He reserved it for the just of the world to come. In Paradise, Adam could enjoy this light. Thanks to it, he could see from one end of the world to the other. This special light was of a spiritual kind: it radiated from the glory of the Shekinah, which the upright would enjoy in the future. They will be rewarded with the light of the Shekinah for studying the Torah, which is compared to light itself.
(Midrash Haggdol, Genesis 1:4)*

This light has been hidden because this is the time of a wicked generation. It will be given back to the world at the Advent of the Messiah.

Rabbi Jehuda bar Shimon said: "The first light is similar to a king who sees a beautiful city and says: 'This is for my son'. In the same way the Holy One, that He may be blessed for ever, when He saw that light, He took it and sowed it for the upright to come, as it is written: 'A light is sown for the upright' (Ps 97:11). And David said: 'Sovereign of the world,

enlighten us by that light, as it is written: God is the Lord, He gives us light!’ (Ps 118:27). The Holy One, that He may be blessed for ever, answered him: ‘It is not for the present time’. David replied in His presence: ‘My Lord, for when then? When will it come back?’ It will come at the end of time, and Zion will be rebuilt, in an instant. And they will say: ‘Arise, shine out, for your light has come’. (Is 60:1) And which light is the assembly of Israel waiting for? It is the light of the Messiah, as it is written, ‘God saw that the light was good’. This means that the Holy One, that He may be blessed for ever, foresaw the Messiah and His works before the world was made, and hid the light under His throne of glory, for the time of His Messiah and His generation. This is the light that has been prepared before the Holy One, that He may be blessed for ever, for the resurrection of the dead.”
(Pesiqta Rabbati)

The light of the first day was hidden under God’s throne, waiting for the upright one on which it was destined to shine.

The same thing happens to that newborn baby. His mother saw that he was beautiful, and did not kill him, but hid him in a similar way to God who hid the primordial light.

The light will shine on that man only afterwards: when on Sinai he will meet God and his face will become radiant.

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands, as he was coming down the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face was radiant because he had been talking to Him. And when Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin on his face was so radiant that they were afraid to go near him. (Ex 34:29-30)

Once Moses had finished speaking to them, he put a veil over his face. Whenever Moses went into the Lord’s presence to speak with Him, he took the veil off until he came out. And when he came out, he would tell the Israelites what orders he had been given, and the Israelites would see Moses’ face radiant. Then Moses would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak to Him next time. (Ex 34:33-35)

And later on, that light will appear once again in the Gospel, when Christ is transfigured in His glory. It is then right to say that, for Him, light has been sown.

*When she could hide him no longer,
she got a papyrus basket for him;
coating it with bitumen and pitch,
she put the child inside
and laid it among the reeds at the River’s edge. (Ex 2:3)*

This newborn baby has not been christened yet and has been kept hidden for some time, till he cannot be kept hidden any longer.

Jochebed hides this baby in a basket and lays it among the reeds at the River’s edge.

Here we find some peculiarities too.

The papyrus basket, coated with bitumen and pitch, which was used to expose Moses on the waters of the River Nile, is referred to as ‘tebah’, a Hebrew term which occurs in the Scriptures just 28 times: twice here in Ex 2:3, 5; and 26 times in Genesis, referring to the Ark built by Noah.

Moses will accompany and guide his people in the exodus from slavery to the promised land.

Noah let a little remnant of mankind ‘cross’ the waters of the flood and enter a new covenant, a land given back by God for man to start rebuilding.

The story of the Flood takes the hue of the Passover: the sea is crossed in order to leave behind what is subject to corruption and humiliates man.

The story of Exodus is the story of the Passover, from slavery and humiliation to freedom, from diaspora to the upbuilding of a people.

Noah's 'tebah'.

Moses' 'tebah'.

Both the former and the latter float in the water; in both of them there is salvation.

Mankind's salvation lies in Noah's Ark,

the salvation of the 'bene yisra'el', of the 70 representing the whole of mankind, lies in Moses, in his 'tebah'.

GOD WITH US

Now Pharaoh's daughter went down to bathe in the river, while her maids walked along the riverside. Among the reeds she noticed the basket, and she sent her maid to fetch it. She opened it and saw the child: the baby was crying. Feeling sorry for it, she said, 'This is one of the little Hebrews.' (Ex 2:5-6)

There is a peculiarity in this text too. And the Rabbinical tradition does not fail to take note.

What does Pharaoh's daughter really see?

The Hebrew text goes:

wattiftah wattir'ēhū 'et hayyeled
She opened it and she saw him the child (Ex 2:6)

The Rabbis¹ wonder why we do not find "She opened it and saw the child", but rather "She opened it and she saw him, the child".

In the Hebrew text we find the word 'et', which can be rendered in two different ways:

it may introduce the object ("she saw him, the child");

or it may mean 'with, together with' ("she saw him with the child").

Who did she see?

To the Hebrew mind, "he" and "him" can refer only to God.

Pharaoh's daughter opened the basket where the baby had been laid and saw God Himself together with the baby who was crying.

This implies that God is always there where His people is, amidst sadness, anguish, sorrow.

God is where His people suffers.

He stays with them, suffers with them.

*Every time the Israelites are chained,
then the Shekinah is chained with them.
Exodus Rabbah*

In the Rabbinical tradition, that is, in the oral Torah, Shekinah is the name of the Glory of God, who grows smaller in order to live among men; the name of the Presence of God who erects her tent among men; the name of the Presence of God who dwells in the Tent of the Meeting in the desert, and in the Temple, once they have reached the promised land.

¹ cf Sotà, 12b. Rabbi Chaninà suggests that Pharaoh's daughter saw the Divine Presence (Shekinah) together with the baby. The Gemarà says that the text should have used 'wattere', rather than 'wattir'ehu'. Rashi writes: "What did she see? The baby. This is the literal sense of the words 'she saw him'. A Midrashic reading (that regards the Hebrew term 'et' not as an object, 'him', but as a preposition and renders it as 'with') upholds the idea that she saw the Shekinah, that is the immanent Divinity that was with him" (Rashi, Commentary to Exodus, 2, 6).

The divine plan was fulfilled through the event of the Incarnation: ‘*Verbum abbreviatum*’; God’s love came down to the earth, growing smaller to the utmost level of humiliation.

*The Verb became flesh,
He lived among us,
and we saw His glory,
the glory that He has from the father
as only Son of the Father,
full of grace and truth. (Jn 1:14)*

*But He emptied Himself,
taking the form of a slave,
becoming as human beings are;
and being in every way like a human being,
he was humbler yet,
even to accepting death,
death on a cross. (Ph 2:7-8)*

Let us also contemplate the beginning of Jesus’ public life, His royal enthronement which was fulfilled in the waters of the River Jordan, in that muddy pool that is the Jordan, while a crowd of poor and wretched people, of ‘little’ people, of ‘lost’ people was begging for forgiveness. Jesus came and He became ‘sin’; He took on Himself the sin of the world; He immersed Himself in the Jordan and became one with sinners. Their own humiliation became His; He shouldered that burden that man does experience because of sin. He became the River Jordan Himself, the river of living water letting us enter the Kingdom, the Promised Land; He became Himself the place of the definitive baptism; the place of forgiveness, where we can experience the humiliation and shame other people are burdened with on account of their sins.

The ancient etymology of the word ‘Jordan’ points to the action of ‘going down’; and the early Christians interpreted it as the new name of Christ.

What river will ‘their going down’ be... but our Saviour? His current, flowing in the descending stream, makes glad the city of God, not the visible Jerusalem but the blameless Church of God, built on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Christ Jesus our Lord being the chief corner-stone. In the River Jordan, accordingly, we have to understand the Verb of God who became flesh and dwelt among us, Jesus who gives us as our inheritance the humanity which He assumed, for that is the head corner-stone...

*He receives the Spirit abiding on Him in order to be able to baptize those who come to Him in that abiding Spirit. But John baptizes beyond Jordan, in the regions verging on the outside of Judaea, in Bethabara, being the forerunner of Him who came to call not the righteous but sinners, and who taught that the whole have no need of a physician, but they that are sick. For it is for forgiveness of sins that this washing is given.
(Origen, ‘Commentary on the Gospel of John’, VI, 25)*

This is truly the sign of God’s greatness:

God is so great that He can queue up with those who are lost, exiled, enslaved;
He is so great that He can identify with the little ones,
and He can enter even a basket where a baby boy is crying.

SAVIOUR BECAUSE HE WAS SAVED

The child's sister then said to Pharaoh's daughter, 'Shall I go and find you a nurse among the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?' 'Yes,' said Pharaoh's daughter, and the girl went and called the child's own mother. Pharaoh's daughter said to her: 'Take this child away and nurse it for me. I shall pay you myself for doing so.' So the woman took the child away and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter who treated him like a son; she named him Moses 'because,' she said, 'I drew him out of the water.' (Ex 2:7-10)

So far the baby boy had no name.

The name was given to him by Pharaoh's daughter, when the baby boy was finally introduced to Pharaoh's house.

wattiqrâ' š'ê mō mōšēh wattô'mer kî min hammayim m'šîṭihû
and she named him Moses, saying: 'I drew him out of the waters'

In the Hebrew text we find a pun on the verb 'masah', 'to draw out',² and the Hebrew name 'Moseh', which is an active participle of 'masah', and which can therefore be translated as Saviour, while his name should have been 'Masu', that is, 'Saved'.

How come was he given the name 'Moseh', as if he were the one who saves?

He was saved but his name tells that he is a saviour.

However, he was not firstly a saviour, a strong man, a man ready to face all kinds of danger, but a man who had been saved, and exactly because he had been saved he could become a brother, a friend, a leader full of hope, to those who were his brothers.

This is the prophetic feature of the character of Moses: he was the one who had experienced radical poverty, the powerlessness of being unable to save himself, and he proclaimed that life is the radical experience of being saved by Another.

We will find the same experience of radical poverty and of radical entrusting oneself to the Lord in Jesus' life. In St Luke's Gospel, the great journey of Jesus to Jerusalem begins in Chapter 9. He journeyed towards His sentence, towards His passion, death and resurrection.

Jesus went up to Jerusalem to die, "for it would not be right for a prophet to die outside Jerusalem" (Lk 13:33).

And this is the word that tells us how precious we are to God's eyes:

"For this is how God loved the world: He gave His only Son" (Jn 3:16).

This is the word that must be proclaimed, that must be given to everybody.

Let us examine what St Luke tells us about Jesus' journey to Jerusalem: "He resolutely turned His face towards Jerusalem" (Lk 9:51). It was a journey to His Passover.

In Chapter 11, Jesus taught His disciples to pray. "His word carried authority" (Lk 4:32). This does not mean that He taught in a different way, but that what He said was authoritative because he was telling them about His own experience. His teaching did not come from learning and education; in fact, He shared His own experience of listening to the Father, His own experience of entrusting Himself to the Father, His knowledge of the Father, His love for the Father, the Father's love for Him.

When He teaches us the Lord's Prayer, He is not teaching us first and foremost what we have to ask God, but He is communicating to us His own experience, and what He asks the Father while He is approaching death on our behalf.

² Rashi, 'Commentary on Exodus', 2, 10, writes: "In the Aramaic Targum this word is translated as 'I drew him out'. The term occurs in the Talmud (Berachot 81): 'As someone who draws a hair out of milk'."

And He is certain that the Father is listening to Him: “Father, I thank You for hearing my prayer. I myself knew that You hear me always” (Jn 11:41-42).

What we ask our Father is fulfilled, is carried out for us, is given to us exactly because it was fulfilled for Him who died and rose again for us:

- hallowed be Your name: Jn 17:6, 11-12, 26;
- Your Kingdom come: Jn 18:33-37; 19:3, 14-15, 19;
- Your will be done: Lk 22:42ff;
- give us this day our daily bread: Jn 6;
- and forgive us our trespasses: Lk 22:34;
- and lead us not into temptation: Lk 22:35-39.

Jesus entered Jerusalem as the One who had experienced the gift of being able to enter, receiving from the Father His life-giving gift, in the same Spirit:

*Rejoice heart and soul, daughter of Zion!
Shout for joy, daughter of Jerusalem!
Look, your king is approaching,
he is vindicated and victorious,
humble and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zc 9:9)*

According to St Luke’s Gospel, Jesus on the cross was tempted only once: when the Jewish leaders, the soldiers and one of the two thieves asked Him to save Himself (cf Lk 23:35ff). He did not do that, He did not come down of the Cross. He did not want to save Himself. In fact, He wanted to tell us that it was the Father who could save Him from death: and God can save us too, together with Him who is “the first-born among many brethren” (Rm 8:29).

Jesus was really saved, not from death but rather through death: only by accepting to be saved by God, that is, by refusing to save Himself, Jesus became that powerful Saviour that Zechariah sang in his Benedictus (cf Lk 1:69).

Going on examining Chapter 11 of St Luke’s Gospel, we can see how Jesus went on communicating to His apostles His own experience of prayer, which in fact was the very experience of a beggar:

*Ask, and it will be given to you;
search and you will find;
knock, and the door will be opened to you. (Lk 11:9)*

To ask, to search, to knock: these are the typical actions of a beggar.

Jesus begged that He could do the Father’s will, He begged for the coming of His Kingdom. He begged for that Love who so loved the world that He gave up His only Son (cf Heb 5:7). He taught His apostles to beg with the certainty that they would receive what they were asking, that they would find what they were searching, that they would have the door opened after knocking.

*For everyone who asks receives;
everyone who searches find;
everyone who knocks will have the door opened. (Lk 11:10)*

Jesus invited His disciples to do the same, to have a share in His own experience of the Father; and He invited them to ask for the Spirit, that is, for that same Love who prompted Him to give away His life in Jerusalem:

*...how much more will the Heavenly Father
give the Holy Spirit
to those who ask Him! (Lk 11:13)*

Directions for prayer

Being the text very rich, I suggest that you focus on just one aspect of the Lectio, that is, the one that strikes you most after a first reading; and that you follow that very path.

The Lectio is divided into three parts. Accordingly, in your prayer you can tread one of the following paths:

A) AND SHE SAW THAT HE WAS BEAUTIFUL

Thanks to the Jewish tradition and the words of the Old Testament about primordial light, we can better grasp the meaning of some evangelical texts, where light becomes the sign of the end of the dominion of sin, the sign of the end of a life belonging to the evil generation, and the sign of the advent of the Messiah. Let us listen to them, so that we may grasp the ancient word that they are telling us about Jesus Christ.

The words of the Old Testament shed light on the New: to find the OT passages that are about Christ and then re-read the Gospel is an experience similar to the experience of the disciples from Emmaus, as well as to the very experience that the disciples gathered in the Upper Room could have thanks to the Risen Jesus:

*The Verb was the real light
that gives light to everyone;
He was coming into the world. (Jn 1:9)*

Hearing that John had been arrested He withdrew to Galilee, and leaving Nazara He went and settled in Capernaum, beside the lake, on the borders of Zabulon and Naphtali. This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah:

*“Land of Zabulon! Land of Naphtali!
Way of the sea beyond Jordan.
Galilee of the nations!
The people that lived in darkness
have seen a great light;
on those who lived in a country of shadow dark as death
a light has dawned.”*

From them onwards Jesus began His proclamation with the message, ‘Repent, for the Kingdom of God is close at hand’. (Mt 4:12-17)

*Now, Master, you are letting Your servant go in peace
as You promised;
for my eyes have seen the salvation
which You have made ready in the sight of the nations;
a light of revelation for the Gentiles*

and glory for Your people Israel. (Lk 2:29-32)

*And the judgement is this:
though the Light has come into the world
people have preferred
darkness to light
because their deeds were evil.
And indeed, everybody who does wrong
hates the light and avoids it,
to prevent his actions
from being shown up;
but whoever does the truth
comes out into the light,
so that what he is doing
may plainly appear as done in God. (Jn 3:19-21)*

*I am the Light of the world;
anyone who follows me
will not be walking in the dark,
but will have the light of life. (Jn 8:12)*

*I have come into the world as Light,
to prevent anyone who believes in me
from staying in the dark any more. (Jn 12:46)*

*It is God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness',
that has shone into our hearts
to enlighten them with the knowledge of God's glory,
the glory on the face of Christ. (2 Co 4:6)*

*But you are a chosen race, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation,
a people to be a personal possession to sing the praises of God
who called you out of the darkness into His wonderful light. (1 P 2:9)*

B) GOD WITH US

I suggest that you reflect on numbers 71-75 of 'Evangelii Gaudium', going down into the city or into the Jordan.

71. The new Jerusalem, the holy city (cf Rv 21:2-4), is the goal towards which all of humanity is moving. It is curious that God's revelation tells us that the fullness of humanity and of history is realized in a city. We need to look at our cities with a contemplative gaze, a gaze of faith which sees God dwelling in their homes, in their streets and squares. God's presence accompanies the sincere efforts of individuals and groups to find encouragement and meaning in their lives. He dwells among them, fostering solidarity, fraternity, and the desire for goodness, truth and justice. This presence must not be contrived but found, uncovered. God does not hide himself from those who seek him with a sincere heart, even though they do so tentatively, in a vague and haphazard manner. (EG, 71)

C) SAVIOUR BECAUSE HE WAS SAVED

Here I suggest that you reflect on your own person, going back to the very roots of your mission and service, that is, to your personal experience of the Lord.

- To re-read our vocation as the place where we have experienced God's mercy, His bending down on our lives.
- From making memory to thanksgiving, because "it is not I who live any longer, but Christ who lives in me".
- To refocus our service and our work according to the gift that we have received, getting rid of the logic of 'giving' and adopting that of 'sharing'.