

BIBLICAL PAGES

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LECTIO on Exodus

Lectio n° 4

He went out to see his kinsmen

Ex 2,10-22

LECTIO

There are two additional 'exoduses' which are earlier than the actual Exodus of the children of Israel:

Moses' exodus to his kinsmen;

God's exodus to His People.

The life of the People of Israel and its freedom originate from the actions of a man who chooses to be their kinsman, as well as from God who listens to the cry of the slaves and bends down to be with His People and to lead it to freedom.

Let us consider first the first exodus, that is, Moses going out of the house of Pharaoh.

IN THE ENEMY'S HOUSE

10 When the child grew up, she [Jochebed] 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 2:10)

The Biblical text presents us Moses as a man who is born in a land where his kinsmen are slaves, and his birth follows a death sentence.

His life is entrusted to a river where numberless Hebrew boys have already been drowned. The Nile becomes the river from which the one who will save his people later on is now being saved.

And the river will be also the place of the first confrontation between Pharaoh, whose heart is hardened, and the leader of a people, a leader armed only with his staff and the word of God.

He could not grow up in his own family, in fact he does not know them,

but he receives his name from a foreigner

and becomes great in the house of his very enemies.

His own people do not recognise him

and he has to flee from Egypt.

In Egypt he is the Hebrew who defends his kinsmen from the Egyptian,

in Midian he is an Egyptian man, *'iš mišrî,*

who defends the Midianite women from gratuitous violence.

He resides in the land of Midian, the land of Israel's enemies,¹
and in that land he will always be a foreigner:

¹ They are the most ancient camel-drivers that we know. In the Book of Judges they are the much dreaded enemies of Israel, after they settled in Palestine: cf Jdg 6:1ff.

this destiny of his will also be inscribed in his son's name: *gērsōm*.

In fact, he belongs to no one;

he does not even belong to that land he will be barred to enter.

He belongs only to that 'Voice' who makes him His own,
and who asks him to lead His people out of the land of slavery,
and to a land of freedom.

Pharaoh's house, the origin of so many evil decrees causing sorrows, becomes the saving place where the future saviour of the enslaved people is brought up:

Moses is saved by his enemy;

he is given a name by his enemy;

he is brought up in his enemy's house.

The rabbinical exegetes discussed this controversial matter in details. Let us quote Abraham Ibn Ezra's commentary (Shemot 2, 4), which is revealing:

God's thoughts are deep. Who can know His secret? His plan is clear to Him alone. Perhaps God made Moses live in the royal palace so that his spirit could get used to leading a life of luxury, not an ordinary life, and not the humiliating life of a slave in a family of slaves.

Can't you see that he killed the Egyptian just to oppose an act of gratuitous violence?

And again, he saved the Midianite daughters from the shepherds because they were resorting to gratuitous violence in order to water their own flock, while Reuel's daughter should be entitled to draw water from that well.

And again, if he had been brought up among his kinsmen, they would have known him from his childhood and, consequently, they would not have feared him, given that they would have been his peers.

Of course God's Providence interweaves His history of salvation with mankind's history.

The text from Exodus teaches us to spot the signs of life and freedom in the very places where life and freedom seem to be negated: the good news is that evil and death, as well as history's darkness, have no power to overcome or oppose God's plan and His salvific will.

Consequently, the path to freedom starts where we are enslaved;

life blossoms where death is decreed;

a brother is recognised as a brother especially where he is a foreigner and an enemy.

Freedom, life, fraternity are not possible only when slavery is over, or death as well as the sense of alienation has been overcome;

but signs of salvation being brought about can be found

in the very heart of slavery,

in the very heart of death,

in the very heart of hostility.

Salvation is not conditioned by what would like to prevent it from happening.

No condition is 'unfavourable' to salvation, no time is the 'wrong moment'. It is bound solely to God's will, that is, His love for mankind.

And His will, His love is being fulfilled.

And it is fulfilled in spite of the inconsistencies and 'black holes' of history.

'This is what the Kingdom of God is like.

A man scatters seed on the land.

*22 Night and day, while he sleeps, when he is awake,
the seed is sprouting and growing;*

how, he does not know.

28 Of its own accord the land produces

first the shoot,

then the ear,

then the full grain in the ear.

29 And when the crop is ready, at once he starts to reap

because the harvest has come.'

(Mk 4:26-29)

KINSMAN

11 It happened one day, when Moses was grown up,

that he went out to see his kinsmen.

While he was watching their forced labour

he also saw an Egyptian striking a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen.

12 Looking this way and that and seeing no one in sight,

he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.

(Ex 2:11-12)

The text of Exodus highlights twice that Moses “was grown up”, *wayyigdal*: the first time the verb occurs in line 10, the second time here in line 11.

In his commentary, Rashi quotes Rabbi Jehuda son of ‘Ilai who said: “*The first time it refers to stature, the second time to nobility. Pharaoh appointed him ‘head of the household’.*”

The same interpretation can be found also in the Acts of the Apostles:

So Moses was taught all the wisdom of the Egyptians

and became a man with power both in his speech and in his actions.

(Ac 7:22)

Then, to grow up means increasing one’s own power, responsibility, dignity and, at the same time, it means getting ready for a future choice.

Moses’ story unfolds with its series of plots and contradictions, paradoxes and situations that would undermine any kind of humanity, any possibility to mature healthily as a man.

However, it is not so.

Moses grew up: his increase in humanity coincides with an increasing identification with his enslaved kinsmen, with an increased sensitivity to their condition, to their cry.

He grows up,

he goes out towards his kinsmen,

he becomes aware of their hard labour.

The protagonists of this story remain nameless: we find the Egyptian, the Hebrew; and even Moses is not identified by name:

he went out,

he simply joined his kinsmen,

he became one of the nameless.

Moses’ behaviour can neither be explained only with curiosity, nor with a protest against injustice, nor with the wish to help the persecuted and the weak, but with a deep identification with his kinsmen.

In other words, in this story Moses is not only a paradigm of justice, but he is also the one who makes himself one of the kinsmen.

The Exodus starts here,
it starts when a man chooses to become their kinsman.

The Midrash Rabbah on Exodus writes:

God said: You left aside your own occupations and went out to see Israel's sufferings, treating them as your kinsmen.

Therefore, I shall leave aside the creatures of Heaven and earth in order to speak with you. This is the meaning of the text, 'God saw him going across to look' (Ex 3:4). God saw that Moses had left aside his own occupations to see their sufferings. That is why He called him from the burning bush.

The text goes on saying that Moses *sees* twice:

he *sees* their hard labour,
he *sees* an Egyptian striking a Hebrew.

The second time he sees something objective; but the first time he sees more in depths.

Rashi comments:

He had prepared his eyes and his heart to feel sorry for them.

This first kind of seeing is not just a pure perception, the recording of an objective fact. The Hebrew phrase is *wayyar^e b^e siblōtām²*: he saw *in* their hard labour, he saw *in* their sufferings.

Suffering is not the direct object of his seeing (otherwise we would have found *'et s^e bālōt*, that is, an object); but he *wayyar^e b^e*, that is, he saw *in*, he saw *within* their sufferings.

Rashi explains that the text is not referring to the pure perception that comes from the sense of sight, but rather to *understanding*, to *going deeply* into something, which includes opening one's eyes as well as one's heart, opening up one's heart to what one has just seen.

Rashi writes that *'he turned to them with his eyes and with his heart, in order to suffer with them'*. And the Midrash Rabbah on Exodus writes:

*Those who saw their sufferings, then cried and said:
We are sorry for you... We wish we could die for you!*

Moses *sees* into the sufferings of his people and recognises it:

he is neither in front of slaves reclaiming their freedom,
nor in front of foreigners who are fighting for their rights and for justice,
but in front of his kinsmen. He sees them and recognises them as his own,
and he sees himself as part of them.

He is a kinsman, he goes out towards *his kinsmen*.

The first kind of 'exodus' occurs in Moses and it is the exit towards the promised kinsman, the true 'land' which is given to him and to which he belongs.

He goes out towards *his kinsmen*, *wayyešē' 'el 'eḥāyw*,
he is looking for *his kinsmen*

and this is why he shares their sufferings when he sees their hard labour.

He reacts to unjust violence by killing the Egyptian, exactly because he is a kinsman. Of course, the Book of Exodus is not legitimizing violence, while manifesting or defending one's own adherence to another, or to God: it would be a complete nonsense. Violence will be purified during the exodus in the desert and the Torah will define its boundaries, while pointing to the way of justice through the observance of God's commandments.³

² In the first six chapters of Exodus *s^e bālōt* occurs six times (Ex 1:1; 2:11; 5:4-5; 6:6-7). The Italian CEI Bible (2008) translates this term as 'forced labour'.

³ Rabbinical thought tried to place Moses' reaction in the context of utter injustice. Rashi writes: 'He saw an Egyptian hitting one of the Hebrews': he was hitting him and oppressing him. The Hebrew was the husband of Shelomit, the

It happened one day ('In those days'), *bayyāmîm hāhēm*, the phrase line 11 begins with, does not mean therefore

in the days when Moses grew up in Pharaoh's house,
 in the days when he was weaned,
 in the days when he was called Moses,
 in the days when he was the son of Pharaoh's daughter,
 but in those very days when he went out towards his kinsmen,
 towards those in whom he recognized himself as a kinsman, thus discovering his identity.

Those days are the days when Moses' heart is beating together with his kinsmen's: this is not due to upbringing but to the fact that he has decided to identify himself with those who are despised and suffering.

In those days: the days when he became a kinsman of the slaves.

23 At the age of forty he decided to visit his kinsmen, the Israelites. 24 When he saw one of them being ill-treated he went to his defence and rescued the man by killing the Egyptian. (Ac 7:23-24)

JUDGE

13 On the following day he came back, and there were two Hebrews, fighting. He said to the man who was in the wrong, 'What do you mean by hitting your fellow?' 14 'And who appointed you', the man retorted, 'to be prince over us and judge? Do you intend to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?' Moses was frightened. 'Clearly that business has come to light,' he thought. 15 When Pharaoh heard of the matter, he tried to put Moses to death. (Ex 2:13-15)

The rabbis highlight that here the Torah does not say 'he saw', and also that the word 'kinsman' is replaced by 'fellow'. Moses is no more the kinsman, and he does not address the two as kinsmen, but rather as *fellows*: *your fellow*, *rē'eḳā*.

He goes out and addresses the one who is in the wrong: *and he said to the evil one*, *wayyô'mer lārāšā*.

Moses goes out exactly as the day before, but he does not act according to the same feelings of the day before, even though Moses' spontaneous role as a master of moral behaviour comes from his responsibility as kinsman.

The day before, Moses was looking for the kinsman. On the second day, and the text does not explain why and how, he found out who was in the wrong, he discriminated between the one who was innocent and the one who was guilty, and he did not automatically leap to the defence of the former.

The evil one.

Moses goes out and he intervenes where fraternity is in jeopardy. He goes out and highlights what spoils fraternity: this is wrong.

Here we find the basic structure of the whole Book of Exodus, as well as of Moses' actions: confrontation with Pharaoh's power, with Egypt, and the whole process of liberation of his people,

daughter of Divri. The Egyptian torturer had set his eyes on her. During the night, he made the husband get up and leave his dwelling. Then he entered the house of the Hebrew and had intercourse with his wife, who believed it was her husband. When the man returned home, he realized what had happened. When the Egyptian understood that he knew, he hit him and tortured him all day long. (Rashi, Commentary on the Book of Exodus)

and the legislative initiative which will make of a series of divided and scattered tribes, one people.

We must 'become kinsmen' and live and act so that fraternity may be the basis of all relations, of all nations and peoples, of any meeting of peoples... We must realize and denunciate what prevents people from meeting, from becoming a community.

And wherever there is a man who is spending his life to build up a family, a community, a Church, there the exodus of a whole people towards freedom may begin.

As in the rest of the Book of Exodus, here Moses has to face opposition from his own people, who accuse him and complain against him: the Hebrew man, the evil one, accuses Moses of being a judge, not a kinsman, and making him flee.

The puzzling sentence, *that business has come to light*, 'ākēn nōda' haddābār, has given rise to more than one Midrashic interpretations. In brief, I would say that that sentence implies not just the fact that Moses killed the Egyptian, but also the fact that Moses decided to join his kinsmen, in his mind and heart.

Pharaoh is aware of that.

That makes of Moses a rebel and not just a criminal who, belonging to Pharaoh's house, would not be punished too harshly for his actions.

In fact, the text is highlighting Moses' two faces:

Moses the kinsman,

and Moses law-giver and judge.

In both cases, he has to go out of Pharaoh's house.

He goes out a first time towards his kinsmen,

he goes out a second time in order to build up fraternity among them.

FAR AWAY FROM PHARAOH

But Moses fled far away from Pharaoh. He went into Midianite territory and stopped / sat down beside a well.

(Ex 2:15)

The fact that Moses flees to Midianite territory is not relevant; on the contrary, it is relevant that *he flees far away from Pharaoh's face*, wayyibraḥ mōšēh mipp^e nē far 'ōh.

Rabbi Netziv (1816-1893) points out that the phrase 'Moses fled far away from Pharaoh' is not necessary to the economy of the line. In fact, the line would be clearer without it: 'Moses fled to Midianite territory'.

However, nothing in the Torah is fortuitous or pointless: of course the writer did not want to highlight the geographical move, but rather Moses' definitive rupture with the Egyptian royal house.

Moses flees far away from Pharaoh: this shows his utter rupture with Egypt, the breaking of that bond.

The rupture with evil is necessary. He has to detach himself completely and settle in another land. This is a necessary step.

First he has to flee from Pharaoh.

Then he can settle in the land of Midian.

Taken as a whole, this process is called 'conversion'.

The word 'he stopped' means that he dwelt there, as we read in Genesis: And Jacob dwelt... (Gn 37:1). He stopped means that he sat down. He learnt from Jacob, who met his future wife after sitting down beside a well. (Rashi, Commentary on the Book of Exodus, 2, 15)

He sat down, *wayyēšēb*, in Midianite territory.
He sat down, *wayyēšēb*, beside a well.

In a few lines, the same verb, *yāšab*, occurs twice, with two different meanings: when referring to a country, it means 'to dwell'; when referring to the well, it means 'to sit down'.

Rabbinical commentators highlight that there is an inconsistency in the text: Moses first dwells in the land, then sits down beside the well. The reverse would be more logical. He has just fled from Egypt and has done nothing that could entitle him to settle in Midian. He has not saved the Midianite women yet.

However, here sitting down beside the well and dwelling in the land of Midian are one and the same thing.

The well is outside of the city walls: Moses is a homeless foreigner, he does not have a place to settle in, and thus he dwells and stays in that land.

Moses fled when he heard this and he went to dwell in the land of Midian, where he fathered two sons. (Ac 7:29)

SAVIOUR

16 Now there was a priest of Midian with seven daughters. They used to come to draw water and fill the troughs to water their father's flock. 17 Some shepherds came and drove them away, but Moses sprang to their help and watered their flock. 18 When they returned to their father Reuel, he said to them, 'Why are you back so early today?' 19 'An Egyptian protected us from the shepherds,' they said, 'and he even drew water for us and watered the flock.' 20 'And where is he?' he asked his daughters. 'Why did you leave the man there? Ask him to eat with us.' 21 Moses agreed to stay on there with the man, who gave him his daughter Zipporah in marriage. 22 She gave birth to a son, whom he named Gershom 'because', he said, 'I am an alien in a foreign land.'
(Ex 2:16-22)

When he first goes out of Pharaoh's house, Moses' action is conducive to fraternity.

When he goes out for the second time, his action is conducive to justice.

In this last episode, Moses' action is conducive to salvation: he springs to their help and saves them, *wayyāqām mōšēh wayyōšī 'ān*.

Here Moses does not spring to help his kinsmen,
he does not warn the evil one,
he does not punish the shepherds,
he does not warn them:
he simply *saves* the Midianite women.

The verb 'to save', *yāša*, has the same root of the name Jesus. It means, 'to come to one's rescue, to deliver', from a prison to freedom.

In the end, to be saved, to experience Jesus, means
to pass from death to life,
from enmity to fraternity,
from sin to grace,

from hate to love,
from darkness to light.

Moses agreed to stay on there with the man, lāšebeṭ 'eṭ hā'īš. This is the third meaning of the verb *yāšab*, to dwell, to sit down. Here it gives the idea of joining a family, moving towards a family, joining a clan, sealed by his wedding with *šippōrāh*.

However, literally, he accepted to dwell *with the man, at his place*, where humanity is made of fraternal and spousal relations, of fatherly and filial relations, made of work and simplicity, made of mutual belonging, sharing, welcoming.

Thus Moses' process of maturation is completed:

he chooses to be a kinsman,
he struggles for fraternity,
he flees from Pharaoh's face,
he saves the weak one begging for help,
he agrees to dwell *with the man*.

That is how we can grow up, and become mature men and women:
in those days, when Moses grew up...

And the Word of God, reaching him from the burning bush, finds him ready, as a soil ready to welcome the seed and to make it produce a rich crop.

Rabbi Berekjah said: Moses was loved more than Noah. After being called 'upright man', Noah was called 'farmer'. After being called 'Egyptian man' (es 2:19), Moses was called 'man of God' (Dt 33:1). (Bereshit Rabbah, XXXVI, 3)

DIRECTIONS FOR PRAYER

1) Moses as a type of Christ

In Moses we can contemplate a prophetic type of the true Saviour of the world: the One who, going out of the bosom of the Father, came and dwelt among us.

The Light that darkness could not overpower,
that the world did not recognise
and that His own did not accept.
In spite of all that He became flesh
out of love, that love
with which God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son:

*4 What has come into being in Him was life,
life that was the light of men;
5 and light shines in darkness,
and darkness could not overpower it. ...
9 The Word was the real light
that gives light to everyone;
he was coming into the world.
10 He was in the world
that had come into being through Him,*

*and the world did not recognise Him.
11 He came to His own
and His own people did not accept Him.
12 But to those who did accept Him
He gave power to become children of God,
to those who believed in His name
13 who were born not from human stock
or human desire
or human will
but from God Himself.
14 The Word 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 1:4-5, 9-14)*

It could be helpful to re-read the Gospel and to look for the passages where, by His gestures, Jesus shows that He has come from the bosom of the Father to be God-with-us; and also to look for the passages relating to His sharing our destiny so that we can tread the same paths that He trod.

In St John's Gospel the verb 'evxe, rcomai', 'to go out', occurs very often, especially during Jesus' Passover week (13 times).

His going out of the bosom of the Father manifests itself as crucified Love, who loves those who are His to the end.⁴
He goes out as the Man crowned with thorns⁵
towards Calvary.⁶
And He goes out as Love given away even after death as blood and water.⁷

2) Moses as a type of the Christian man

Let us go through Moses' path to human maturity once again, and through its five basic steps:

he chooses to be a kinsman,
he struggles for fraternity,
he flees from Pharaoh's face,
he saves the weak begging for help,
he accepts to dwell *with the man*.

In this path we do find our own human identity, the soil in which any vocation and mission must be grounded. It is relevant also to our formative criteria: we should pass from criteria relying on the historical conditions, memberships, family situations to guarantee the blossoming of a

⁴ Jn 13:1-5: Before the festival of the Passover, Jesus, knowing that His hour had come to pass from this world to the Father, having loved those who were His in the world, loved them to the end. They were at supper, and the devil had already put it into the mind of Judas Iscariot son of Simon, to betray Him. Jesus knew that the Father had put everything into His hands, and that He had come from God (evxe, rcomai) and was returning to God, and He got up from table, removed His outer garments and, taking a towel, wrapped it round His waist; He then poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel He was wearing.

⁵ Jn 19:5: Jesus then came out (evxe, rcomai) wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe. Pilate said, 'Here is the man.'

⁶ Jn 19:17: And carrying His own cross He went out (evxe, rcomai) to the Place of the Skull or, as it is called in Hebrew, Golgotha.

⁷ Jn 19:34: One of the soldiers pierced His side with a lance; and immediately there came out (evxe, rcomai) blood and water.

vocation, to accompanying people in their choices leading to a full human and vocational identity, the identity of a kinsman.

POPE FRANCIS' WORD

This is just one of the many texts by which Pope Francis denounces poverty and violence:

From Pope Francis' speech at the 'Ceremony for the Signing of the Faith Leaders' Universal Declaration against Slavery' (December 2, 2014):

“The physical, economic, sexual and psychological exploitation of men and women, boys and girls, currently holds tens of millions in inhumane and humiliating bondage. Every human being – man, woman, boy and girl – is the image of God; God, who is love and freedom, gives himself through interpersonal relations; therefore every human being is a free person, destined to live for the good of others in equality and brotherhood. (...)

Despite the great efforts of many, modern slavery continues to be an atrocious scourge that is present throughout the world on a broad scale, even as tourism. (...)

I ask the Lord to grant us today the grace to convert ourselves in the proximity of every person, without exception, offering active and constant help to those we encounter on our path – whether it be an elderly person who has been abandoned by everyone, a worker unjustly enslaved or unappreciated, a refugee caught in the snares of the underworld, a young man or woman who walks the streets of the world, as a victim of the sex trade, a man or a woman driven to prostitution by the deception of people who have no fear of God, a boy or a girl mutilated for their organs – and who call to our conscience, echoing the voice of the Lord: ‘I say to you whatever you do to the least of my brothers, you do to me’.”

PRAYER

Spirit of God,

make us understand that the poor are the ‘passages’ through which You pour into any human reality and recreate it.

Preserve then Your spouse from the sacrilege of being led into thinking that the option for the poor is just the height of fashion, while in fact it is the passageway through which God’s power can come into the world and start His work of salvation.

Holy Spirit, gift of the dying Christ,

make the Church demonstrate that she is really Your heir.

Make her stay under all crosses. Under the crosses of the individual men and women and under the crosses of the peoples.

May all her words and even silence be inspired by You, so that she may be able to give meaning to the sorrows of men and women.

And each and every poor man or woman may understand that his or her tears are not useless and repeat with the psalm: ‘Collect my tears in Your wineskin, O Lord’.

Make her the untiring protagonist of depositions from the cross, so that the bodies of the suffering freed from nails may find peace on her motherly lap. In those moments, do place on her lips songs of hope.

And give her the gift of never feeling ashamed of the cross, but of regarding it as the main yard of her ship, a ship that You move forward by swelling her sails, full of hope.

Fr Tonino Bello