



## Blood bridegroom

Ex 4,18-26

*18 Moses went back to his father-in-law Jethro and said to him, 'Give me leave to return to my kinsmen in Egypt and see if they are still alive. And Jethro said to Moses, 'Go in peace'.*

*19 The Lord said to Moses in Midian, 'Go, return to Egypt, for all those who wanted to kill you are dead.' 20 So Moses took his wife and his son and, putting them on a donkey, started back for Egypt; and Moses took the staff of God in his hand.*

*21 The Lord said to Moses, 'Think of the wonders I have given you power to perform, once you are back in Egypt! You are to perform them before Pharaoh, but I myself shall make him obstinate, and he will not let the people go. 22 You will then say to Pharaoh, "This is what the Lord says: Israel is my first-born son. 23 I told you: Let my son go and worship me; but since you refuse to let him go, well then! I shall put your first-born son to death."'*

### ISRAEL, MY FIRSTBORN SON

Moses leaves to go back to Egypt and to face Pharaoh, on behalf of the God of the oppressed, of the God of history, of the God who delivers His people, intervening in their favour and delivering them from oppression.

Here God calls Israel 'His firstborn son'.

Redeemer, Father, Bridegroom in the prophets: God is increasingly linked to man, to His people, up to the great event of the Incarnation.

It is interesting to note that Exodus 4:20 is quoted by St Matthew when speaking about Jesus, the new and definitive Moses:

*'Go, return to Egypt, for all those who wanted to kill you are dead.'*

*'Get up, take the child and his mother with you and go back to the land of Israel, for those who wanted to kill the child are dead.'* (Mt 2:20)

God's fatherhood is not revealed by the New Testament only – as it is commonly believed – but it is already present also in the Old Testament. The novelty of the New Testament is that we are children of God in Christ. However, here Israel is described as a son: this is the first occurrence of the revelation of the father-son relationship between God and man, which will occur many more times in the Scriptures, especially in the prophets:

*And yet, Lord, you are our Father;  
we the clay and You the Potter,  
all of us are the work of Your hands.  
(Is 64:7)*

*For the Lord says this:  
Look, I am going to send peace  
flowing over her like a river,  
and like a stream in spate  
the glory of the nations.  
You will be suckled, carried on her hip  
and fondled in her lap.  
As a mother comforts a child, so I shall comfort you;  
You will be comforted in Jerusalem.  
At the sight your heart will rejoice,  
and your limbs regain vigour like the grass.  
(Is 66:12-14)*

*And I was thinking:  
How am I to rank you as my children?  
I shall give you a country of delights,  
the fairest heritage of all the nations!  
I thought: You will call me Father  
and will never cease to follow me...  
Come back, disloyal sons,  
I want to cure your disloyalty.  
(Jr 3:19, 22)*

*When Israel was a child I loved him,  
and I called my son out of Egypt.  
(Hos 11:1)*

*The son honours his father, the slave stands in awe of his master.  
But if I am indeed father, where is the honour due to me?  
And if I am indeed master, where is the awe due to me?  
says the Lord Sabaoth.  
(Mt 1:6)*

This formula will occur also when David is promised an heir: his descendant will be God's firstborn son, that is, the King Messiah. This is a very beautiful text:

*And when your days are over  
and you have gone to join your ancestors,*

*I shall appoint your heir – who will be one of your sons –  
to succeed you, and I shall make his sovereignty secure.  
He will build a temple for me  
and I shall make his throne secure for ever.  
I shall be his father and he will be my son,  
and I shall not withdraw my favour from him,  
as I withdrew it from your predecessor.  
I shall set him over my temple and kingdom for ever  
and his throne will be for ever secure.  
(1 Ch 17:11-14)*

By speaking of ‘firstborn son’ instead of an ‘only son’, Israel’s election does not exclude other peoples’ salvation. Salvation is inclusive.

Election is not a privilege, but an ‘open door’, a gift given so that God may be accessible to all nations. In fact, what happens during the Exodus proclaims God’s salvation to all people and all times.

## GOD’S WRESTLING

*24 On the journey, when he had halted for the night,  
the Lord encountered him and tried to kill him.  
23 Then Zipporah, taking up a flint,  
cut off her son’s foreskin and with it touched his feet and said,  
‘You are my blood-bridegroom’”  
26 So He let him go.  
She said, ‘Blood-bridegroom’ then, with reference to the circumcision.*

This is a very strange event, very difficult to interpret.

God *encounters*, wayyifg<sup>e</sup>šēhû, Moses: the term evokes feelings of intimacy and friendship, together with hostility:

He encounters Moses as Jacob encounters Esau,<sup>1</sup>  
as Aaron encounters his brother Moses immediately afterwards,<sup>2</sup>  
as mercy and loyalty embrace.<sup>3</sup>  
It is also similar to the aggression of the bear robbed of her cubs,<sup>4</sup>  
to the cunning coming up against darkness.<sup>5</sup>

However, it is a decisive and intense encounter, an encounter deciding between life and death.

<sup>1</sup> cf Gn 32:18; 33:8.

<sup>2</sup> cf Ex 4:27.

<sup>3</sup> cf Ps 85:10.

<sup>4</sup> cf Hos 13:8; Pr 17:12.

<sup>5</sup> cf Jb 5:14.

Moses has not been circumcised yet. Neither has been his son.

He has just been elected, but if he is not circumcised, together with his male son, he will not be able to belong to the people of God: life or death depend on that sign.

Moses' wife, *šippōrâh*, realizes what must be done and does it: she circumcises her son and then touches Moses' feet,<sup>6</sup> that is, she does the same to Moses, she circumcises him.

In the Bible, the link between election and proof is recurrent and common: before investiture, the elect must undergo a trial, pass through an 'ordeal'.

A similar event occurs to Jacob in Gn 32:

*That same night he got up and, taking his two wives, his two slave-girls and his eleven children, crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had taken them across the stream, he sent all his possessions over too. And Jacob was left alone.*

*The someone wrestled with him until daybreak, who, seeing that he could not master him, struck him on the hip socket, and Jacob's hip was dislocated as he wrestled with him. He said, 'Let me go, for day is breaking.' Jacob replied, 'I will not let you go unless you bless me.' The other said, 'What is your name?' 'Jacob', he replied. He said, 'No longer are you to be called Jacob, but Israel since you have shown your strength against God and men and have prevailed.' Then Jacob asked, 'Please tell me your name.' He replied, 'Why do you ask my name?' With that, he blessed him there.*

*Jacob named the place Peniel, 'Because I have seen God face to face,' he said, 'and have survived.' The sun rose as he passed Peniel, limping from his hip.*  
(Gn 32:23-32)

At night, while he is going to the place where God is leading him to, someone appears before him and wrestles with him, in a mutual recognition, while looking for each other's names. There and then Jacob gets his new name: he is called Isra'El, the one who wrestled with God and prevailed.

*The struggle is really terrible, when God in person fights; in that struggle He opposes us as an enemy, as if He wanted to take our life... What happened during that gloomy moment? Probably, that mysterious being uttered the following words: 'Jacob, you must die. You are not the one who received the promise!' (...) That was the most terrible moment in the fight, when faith had to struggle more than Jacob's limbs. Jacob went on repeating: 'No, no! It is God who ordained that I should leave in order to go back to my home, it is God who called me! I do not want to believe you, I do not want to agree with you! And even if God killed me, I would survive! Let Him kill me then!'*  
(Luther)

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<sup>6</sup> The term 'feet' is a euphemism for 'genitals'.

What makes Jacob overcome, is the divine in him, that is, what in him belongs to God, what in him comes from God. This is the struggle to live with this awareness. And he ends up being the spiritual father of a whole people.

Jesus too, after St John's baptism and the theophanic encounter, has to face a trial. When the voice says to Jesus:

*You are my Son, the Beloved,*

thus bestowing His proper title upon Him, then the Gospel relates that:

*And at once the Spirit drove Him into the desert and He remained there for forty days, and was put to the test by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and the angels looked after Him.*  
(Mk 1:12-13)

St Mark immediately informs us of what is the meaning of being called 'Son' and receiving the Holy Spirit. The first fruit, the first sign, the first experience that Jesus has of being the Son, and of receiving the Spirit, is being driven into the desert. The term that the evangelist makes use of is a verb that is sometimes referred to devils: Jesus is driven into the desert; the Holy Spirit is the 'propeller'.

In order to be a son one has first of all to undergo temptation, to fight, to wrestle...

*My child, if you aspire to serve the Lord,  
prepare yourself for an ordeal.  
Be sincere of heart, be steadfast,  
and do not be alarmed when disaster comes.  
Cling to Him and do not leave Him,  
so that you may be honoured at the end of your days.  
Whatever happens to you, accept it,  
and in the uncertainties of your humble state, be patient,  
since gold is tested in the fire,  
and the chosen in the furnace of humiliation.  
Trust Him and He will uphold you,  
follow a straight path and hope in Him.*  
(Si 2:1-6)

The fact that one is a son, that he has been called, that he has received the Holy Spirit, does not make him exempt from trials. On the contrary, especially because he is a son, he has to struggle, to fight.

*During His life on earth, He offered up prayer and entreaty,*

*with loud cries and with tears, to the One who had the power to save Him from death, and, winning a hearing by His reverence, He learnt obedience, Son though He was, through His sufferings;  
when He had been perfected, He became for all who obey Him the source of eternal salvation  
and was acclaimed by God with the title of High Priest of the Order of Melchizedek.  
(Heb 5:7-10)*

Jesus goes into the desert in order to understand what being a son means. He goes in search of and finds His 'sonship'. The desert, exactly as it happened to Israel, is the place where one can experience the one and only God, and also His fatherhood.

That happens to Moses too: after being chosen, he is assailed by God. He has to wrestle with God in order to learn that God is God, to receive his being from Him, to be for his own people the blood-bridegroom.

## **CIRCUMCISION**

Circumcision will be the signal and seal on the body of both the Covenant and Israel's election as a people. It is shown in advance in this passage. It is also shown in advance in the passage dealing with the covenant between God and Abraham. This latter text explains what circumcision means in relation to the covenant.

*When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to him and said,  
'I am El Shaddai.*

*Live in my presence, be perfect,  
and I shall grant a covenant between myself and you,  
and make you very numerous.'*

*And Abram bowed to the ground. God spoke to him as follows,*

*'For my part, this is my covenant with you:*

*you will become the father of many nations.*

*And you are no longer to be called Abram;*

*your name is to be Abraham,*

*for I am making you father of many nations.*

*I shall make you exceedingly fertile. I shall make you into nations, and your issue will be kings. And I shall maintain my covenant between myself and you, and your descendants after you, generation after generation, as a covenant in perpetuity, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. And to you and to your descendants after you, I shall give the country where you are now immigrants, the entire land of Canaan, to own in perpetuity. And I shall be their God.'*

*God further said to Abraham, 'You for your part must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you, generation after generation. This is my covenant which you must keep between myself and you, and your descendants after you: every one of*



*your males must be circumcised. You must circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that will be the sign of the covenant between myself and you.*  
(Gn 17:1-11)

The Lord who appears to Abraham demanding that he is circumcised is 'ēl šadday. In order to understand the sign of the covenant, let us examine the meaning of this name of God's.

From rabbinical texts we learn that in the Scriptures this name invariably expresses the idea of the self-sufficient power of God.

*'ēl šadday, that is, the One who has sufficient power  
to give all men whatever they might need  
and to freely give His mercy.*  
(Rashi)

He is the One in whose Divinity there is enough for each and every creature.<sup>7</sup>  
*He is the One in whose hands there is sufficient power to give.*<sup>8</sup>

The term šadday, Almighty, is made up of še and day, which suffices.

*Abraham, be content with the fact that you and I are in the world...  
Be content with the fact that I am your God,  
be content with the fact that I am your Sovereign,  
I am your Almighty God.  
It is I who said to my world: That's enough.  
To heaven and earth: That's enough.  
Because, if I didn't say That's enough,  
they would have kept on expanding...  
I am the One whom the world and all it contains cannot contain;  
they are not enough to contain my divinity.*  
(Genesis Rabbah)

This Name allows man to be a man, it gives man the freedom to be a man, to live according to his own limitations: this is the reason why the removal of a part of an organ is the symbol of man's covenant ('circumcision') with God.

*Circumcise your heart then:*<sup>9</sup> this command implies that we must acknowledge that we are finite creatures, who receive everything from their Creator. We must make room in our littleness so that we can receive and welcome the 'all' coming from God. And we must acknowledge that it is His.

In this relationship, St Clare of Assisi sees the Mother of God:

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<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Saadiah Gaon.

<sup>8</sup> Rashi.

<sup>9</sup> Dt 10:16.

*“Draw close to His very sweet Mother,  
who in the small cloister of her sacred lap contained  
and in her virginal womb carried  
the One whom the heavens cannot contain.”  
(St Clare of Assisi, 2LettSAg 18: FF 2890)*

## CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, we can say that this event shows – in a somewhat bizarre way – how Moses had to really receive his being from God in order to be ‘Moses’, to fulfil God’s mission, in a relationship where there is no doubt about who is the Lord and who is the servant, who is the Father and who is the son, who is God and who is man, who is the Creator and who is His creature.

Let us say some few words on *šippōrâh*, one of Jethro’s seven daughters, who were saved at the well by Moses, who had just come into the land of Midian. The text says very little about Zipporah. However, she plays such a decisive role when Moses’ life is at stake.

This woman – like many other women in the Bible – is able to discern what it is right to do and what she can do herself; and, in fact, she does it, immediately and with self-confidence.

She is a stranger but she is able to acknowledge that her husband is indissolubly linked with God, and with his people: the covenant with God transcends family ties, even the closest ones.

She just say these words: *You are my blood-bridegroom.*

Moses is her bridegroom according to that blood, according to the covenant. He is hers only because she acknowledges his close tie with God: only a wife can gain such a knowledge of her husband’s soul.

And, giving him back to God and to His mission, she goes back to Jethro with her son.

And Moses and Aaron continue their journey to Egypt on their own.

*The Lord said to Aaron, ‘Go into the desert to meet Moses’.*

*So he went and met him at the mountain of God and kissed him.*

*Moses then told Aaron all that the Lord had said when sending him and all the signs He had ordered him to perform.*

*Moses and Aaron then went and gathered all the elders of the Israelites together, and Aaron repeated everything that the Lord had said to Moses, and in the sight of the people performed the signs.*

*The people were convinced,*

*and they rejoiced that the Lord had visited the Israelites*

*and seen their misery,*

*and they bowed to the ground in worship.*

*Ex 4:27-31*



## DIRECTIONS FOR PRAYER

*1) This Lectio makes us ponder over the trials and struggles we have to face on our vocational path. We sometimes have no idea of how to 'name' what is happening to us... It seems as if God became an enemy, as if He were disowning that vocation that He gave us Himself.*

*It is probably necessary to go back to those ambiguous and obscure trials of ours in order to discern, with God's grace, where they have led us to, whether they have led us to a greater maturity, and the mark they have left in our faith.*

*And we must also bless the Lord for all those who stood by us and acknowledged God's action when we were unable to.*

*2) I'd like to invite you to find out in the gospels about the character of the servant, of the servants. You should find out what is requested on their part and what is given to them; what makes of them the "good and trustworthy servants" or, conversely, the "wicked and lazy servants"; which prayers the servants make and which prayers are made for the servants.*

*3) A third path to be tread on is the psalms', especially Psalm 119 (118), the Psalm of the Law, where many expressions are prayers whose object is the servant, or the servants. It is right to ask the Lord what can make of us 'servants' who acknowledge Him as their Lord.*