

וַרְאֵה אֶת-הַדָּם

THE LORD SEES THE BLOOD: EX 12,21-32

In Chapters 12 and 13 of the Book of Exodus we can highlight five liturgical norms as far as Passover is concerned, five ritual elements in a row:

the lamb, (Ex 12:3-11)

the unleavened bread, (Ex 12:15-20)

the blood on the lintels and on the door-posts, (Ex 12:7, 21-23)

the Passover as a memorial, (Ex 12:14, 24-27)

the redemption of the first-born, (Ex 13:1-16)

with their focus on the tenth plague. (Ex 12:29-32)

The paschal sacrifice is the central element of the meal of redemption: a whole lamb roasted, eaten hurriedly with unleavened bread and with bitter herbs, which hint at the oppression the children of Israel are leaving behind them.

In addition to that, there is an act which seems to be weird or even a little bit grotesque: the lintel and the door-posts must be marked with the blood of the lamb, so that the salvation of those who are inside the houses may be guaranteed, waiting for the night of terror to be over.

Let us consider then the gestures of that night, the sign of the lamb and the signs of blood.

THE BLOOD

Some of the blood must then be taken and put on both door-posts and the lintel of the houses where it is eaten...

(Ex 12:7)

Moses summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, 'Go and choose a lamb or kid for your families, and kill the Passover victim.

Then take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and with the blood from the basin touch the lintel and both door-posts; then let none of you venture out of the house till morning.

Then, when the Lord goes through Egypt to strike it, and sees the blood on the lintel and on both door-posts, He will pass over the door and not allow the Destroyer to enter your homes and strike.

(Ex 12:21-23)

This is the first time in the Scriptures that such a ritual is ordered and performed. It is an absolute novelty. In the previous Lectio we have seen that the Israelites' houses were turned into altars, the place of God's presence amidst His people.

But now, helped by rabbinical thought, we pose some further questions. God can see everything and knows everything; He does not definitely need the sign of blood on the Jews' lintels and door-posts to recognize their houses and pass over. However, He must see it.

Then, why that blood? Why that command?

And again: did the blood mark the internal or external side of the doors?

The answers of rabbinical thought are mainly based on what the text says: the blood will be a sign *for you*.

In fact, the phrase 'for you' occurs 11 times in Chapter 12:

For you is the first of the months, the time of free people, (Ex 12:2)

for you is the lamb, (Ex 12:5)

for you it must be kept, (Ex 12:6)

for you its blood will be a sign, (Ex 12:13)

for you this day will be a memorial, (Ex 12:14)

for you are the sacred assemblies during the feast of the Unleavened Bread, (Ex 12:16)

for you is the land that the Lord is giving you. (Ex 12:25)

All this night is *for you* and the children will ask:

What is [ie, means] this ritual *for you*? (Ex 12:26)

It is surprising how all that can be *for you*.

All that belongs to God and comes from God is *for you*.

Starting from this 'for you', rabbinical thought provides a series of interpretations for the blood on the lintels.

A first interpretation states that it is a clear polemical sign against idolatry.

Each man must take a lamb from his flock. (Ex 12:3)

It is written: Shame on all who serve images. (Ps 97:7)

When the Holy One, that He may be blessed, told Moses to kill the Passover lamb, Moses answered: Lord of the universe! How can I do that? Are you aware that the lamb is one of the gods of Egypt? It is said: If the Egyptians see us offering sacrifices which outrage them, won't they stone us? (Ex 8:22) God replied: For your life, Israel will not leave from here before they have slaughtered the Egyptian gods before their very eyes, so that I may teach them that their gods are non-existent. And this is what He did; for during that very night He struck the Egyptian first-born sons; and during that very night the Israelites slew and ate their paschal lamb. The Egyptians saw their first-born sons dead and their gods slaughtered, and they could do nothing at all, as the line says: It was the day following the

Passover when the Israelites confidently set out, under the eyes of all Egypt. The Egyptians were burying those of their own people whom the Lord had struck down, all the first-born; the Lord had carried out His judgement on their gods. (*Nb 33:3-4*)

(*Exodus Rabbah, XVI, 3*)

According to that midrash, what Moses had at first regarded as a dangerous provocation (Ex 8:22), is here commanded by God as a final and decisive proof that He alone is the Lord and Master of man's destiny, and that there are no other gods who may oppose His will.

According to that explanation, the blood was applied to the external side of the doors, so that the Egyptians could see it.

A different interpretation, which is typically Jewish, explains that the blood on the lintels is the act through which – together with circumcision – the Jews deserved redemption. To believe in redemption is not enough, if acts of faith are lacking, and the acts of faith are the *mišwōt*, that is, observance of the commandments.

Seeing that the Jews lacked *mišwōt*, God gave them those two precepts, thanks to which they were redeemed:

Why does God protect them through the blood? Because thus He can remember the blood of Abraham's circumcision, to their advantage.

Israel was redeemed from Egypt thanks to two kinds of blood, the Passover blood and circumcision blood, as it is said:

I saw you kicking on the ground in your blood as I was passing, and I said to you as you lay in your blood: Live! (Ezk 16:6)

And you will put blood on the lintel: thanks to Abraham's merits.

And on the door-posts: thanks to the merits of Isaac and Jacob.

It was thanks to their merits that He saw the blood and did not let the Destroyer enter your house to strike.

(*Exodus Rabbah, XVII, 3*)

In the quote from Ezekiel, the term 'blood' is in the plural. It could be rendered with: I saw you *in your bloods* as I was passing (בְּדַמַּיִךְ *b^edāmayik*), live *in your bloods* (בְּדַמַּיִךְ *b^edāmayik*).

Then Jewish commentaries explain that the plural must be referred to the blood of sacrifice and to the blood of circumcision.¹ The Jews could go out of Egypt thanks to those two merits.

The blood of circumcision and the blood of the lamb are the two signs bearing witness to the unity of those who share the same destiny and the same belonging to

¹ Chapter 12:43ff prescribes that all the alien taking part in the Passover meal must be circumcised. Circumcision is an indispensable feature for one to take part in the paschal supper during that night: no one who is uncircumcised will be allowed to eat (cf Ex 12:48).

God and to His people. They show the identity of the people, acknowledging God's lordship and sticking to His teaching.

The blood on the external side of the doors is what God required from the sons of Israel so that their diversity could come to the fore, as a witness before the Egyptians of their belonging to the People of God, of their readiness to go out of Egypt as a people, and of their trust in God during their future journey.

A third and last interpretation states that the paschal lamb is a protest against idolatry, not against the Egyptians' idolatry, but the Israelites'. After living in Egypt for so many generations, the Israelites had adopted the Egyptians' erroneous beliefs: they felt attracted and conditioned by the easy and attractive cults of the Egyptian Pantheon, in the same way as at the time of the exile the Jews would be attracted by the solemn and precious cults of Babylon, so much so that most of them did not feel like going back to Jerusalem.

Compared to the easiness of the Egyptian religion, the prospective of one God who is offering the gift – and the burden – of liberty is disturbing and gives rise to fears. God's intervention did not demolish only their oppressors' system of political and religious power, but also the system of beliefs that the Israelites by now were subscribing to.

In the Old Testament we do find two passages that bear witness to the difficulty of getting rid of Egypt's idols and the Egyptian beliefs:

On the day when I chose Israel, when I pledged my word to the House of Jacob, I made myself known in Egypt; I pledged my word to them and said: I am the Lord your God. That day I pledged them my word that I would bring them out of Egypt to a country which I had reconnoitred for them, a country flowing with milk and honey, and the loveliest of them all. And I said to them: Each of you must reject the horrors which attract you; do not pollute yourselves with the foul idols of Egypt; I am the Lord your God.

But they rebelled against me and would not listen to me. Not one of them rejected the horrors which attracted them; they did not give up the foul idols of Egypt.

(Ezk 20:5-8)

So now, fear the Lord and serve Him truly and sincerely; banish the gods whom your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems a bad thing to you, today you must make up your minds whom do you mean to serve, whether the gods whom your ancestors served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose country you are now living. As regards my family and me, we shall serve the Lord.

(Jos 24:14-15)

According to rabbinical thought, God bids His people to choose: to sacrifice the Egyptian lamb-god that they were used to worship, thus cutting their bond with idolatry and to prove – above all to themselves – that they were ready for redemption.

To put blood on the doors is consequently a symbol of their faith, not something to provoke the Egyptians. This sign then was put not on the exterior of the doors so that it could be visible to the Egyptians, but rather on the interior, as a message that they should make their own, an exclusive sign for the children of Israel.

This series of different interpretations teach us that liberty – so hoped and wished for – needs concrete acts: we must choose, renounce something, give up something; we must remember who we are and what we want to become; we must be aware of what we leave behind and of what we are willing to do in order to go into what lies in front of us with courage, trust and determination.

IN A HURRY

In last month's Lectio we discussed the origin of the meaning of the term Pesah. There is a third passage rabbinical thought derives the meaning of that word from:

I hear my love / See how he comes / leaping on the mountains, / bounding over the hills. / My love is like a gazelle, / like a young stag. / See where he stands / behind our wall. / He looks in at the window, / he peers through the opening.
(Sg 2:8-9)

Here the verb פָּסַח, *pāsaḥ* is not present; in fact, the idea is the same: God is described as bounding over the hills to proclaim the day of redemption, the day of liberation.

God leaps, bounds over the hills, over the mountains, to reach His people and to lead it out of Egypt. It is He who hurries, and He hurries to meet Israel. He is in a hurry to save His people. Hurry therefore does not definitely refer to the departure, as it would be if they were fleeing from the Egyptians or were afraid that the Egyptians could change their mind. Exactly in the same way as it would happen at the end of the Babylonian exile, in the night of the exodus the Israelites left with God in front of them, carrying a lamp as if He were a servant, the midrash says, and also behind them. They did not flee as if they were thieves or brigands, but they left in all quiet because God was protecting them.

What does the Scripture mean when it says: *You must eat it hurriedly?* (...) Abba Hanin, on behalf of Rabbi Elizier, says: This refers to the hurry of the *Šēkînâh*. And despite there are no proofs of that, there is a passage which says: *I hear my love / See how he comes / leaping on the mountains, /*

bounding over the hills. / My love is like a gazelle, / like a young stag. / See where he stands / behind our wall. (Sg 2:8-9) One could conclude that, in the future, the liberation also will occur quickly. However, it is said: For you are not to hurry away, you are not to leave like fugitives. No, the Lord marches at your head and the God of Israel is your rearguard. (Is 52:12) [Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, Pisha, Chapter VII (Es 12:11-14)]

If they were in a hurry, why would God command them to perform the ritual of the lamb, requiring a lot of time, in fact a whole night. Why was it necessary for Him to see the blood of the lamb?

And when I see the blood.

Rabbi Ishmael used to say: Is it not all revealed in front of Him, as it is said: *It is He who uncovers depths and mysteries?* (Dn 2:22) And again: *Even darkness to You is not dark,* (Ps 139:12) and so on. What is the meaning then of the words *And when I see the blood?* It is this: As a reward for your observance of this precept, I will reveal myself and will protect you, as it is said: *And I shall pass over...* To pass over means simply to protect, as it is said: *Like hovering birds, so will the Lord Sabaoth protect Jerusalem; by protecting it, He will save it; by supporting it, He will deliver it.* (Is 31:5)

And when I see the blood.

I see the blood of the sacrifice of Isaac.²

As it is said: *Abraham called this place 'The Lord sees'.* (Gn 22:14)

In the same way, in another passage: *As He was about to destroy Jerusalem, the Lord looked down and felt sorry about the calamity. And He said to the destroying angel, 'Enough now! Hold your hand!'* (1 Ch 21:15) What did He see? He saw the blood of the sacrifice of Isaac, as it is said: *God Himself will see [provide] the lamb.* (Gn 22:8)

I shall pass over.

Rabbi Josiah says: do not read *ufasahti* (I shall protect you), but rather *ufasa'ti* (I shall pass over). God did not strike the houses of His children in Egypt, as it is said: *I hear my love / See how he comes / leaping on the mountains, / bounding over the hills. / My love is like a gazelle, / like a young stag. / See where he stands / behind our wall. / He looks in at the window, / he peers through the opening. (Sg 2:8-9) [Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, Pisha, Chapter VII (Es 12:11-14)]*

What God sees on the door-posts is the blood of the lamb that was sacrificed instead of Isaac. He sees and remembers, He remembers that Isaac was ready to die for his progeny to live.³

² Isaac's readiness to offer his blood as a sacrifice, given that in fact not even a drop of Isaac's blood was actually offered in sacrifice. Genesis Rabbah says: God Himself will see the blood of the sacrifice, (Gn 22:5) must be interpreted like this: God will see that Isaac was ready to be the lamb for the sacrifice.

And He sees the lamb which will be sacrificed in Isaac's place: when Abraham and Isaac were going up the mountain, God saw the blood of the paschal lamb, which would be spilled much later on, during the night of Israel's exodus from Egypt.

Thanks to that event, the paschal lamb is the sign of God's hurrying to save His people: He runs, leaps over the mountains and hills to reach His people, like the Beloved of the Song of Songs.

This is of fundamental importance to understand the meaning of the sacrifices of the ancient Israel: the effectiveness of the daily sacrifices is linked to the memory of Isaac's acceptance, while he was climbing the mount perfectly in union with his father Abraham.

AN ETERNAL SACRIFICE

This day must be commemorated by you, and you must keep it as a feast in the Lord's honour. You must keep it as a feast-day for all generations...
(Ex 12:14)

This pondering leads us to understand and acknowledge, more and more deeply, the sacrifice of the true Lamb in whom the whole work of salvation is fulfilled, from Adam the first man up to the last man living on earth, the salvation announced in the Old Testament as well as in the New, the full and definitive salvation, the Lamb of God who takes on Himself the sin of the world, the Lamb sacrificed from the foundation of the world, the true Isaac, one with His Father.

*For this is the Paschal solemnity, in which the true Lamb was slain,
by whose blood the doors of the faithful are consecrated.
This is the night in which Thou formerly broughtest forth our forefathers, the children
of Israel,
out of Egypt,*

³ In the Jewish reading of Gn 22, a twofold interpretation of Abraham's reply to his son is highlighted.

Isaac spoke to his father Abraham. 'Father?' he said.

'Yes, my son,' he replied.

*'Look,' he said, 'here are the fire and the wood,
but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?'*

Abraham replied,

'My son, God Himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering.'

אֱלֹהִים יִרְאֶה-לּוֹ הַשֶּׁה לְעֹלָה בְּנִי, 'ēlōhîm yir'êh haśśêh l' 'olâh)

And the two of them went on together. (Gn 22:7-8)

The sentence *'ēlōhîm yir'êh haśśêh l' 'olâh* can be legitimately translated in two possible ways:

God will see [provide] the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.

Or,

God will see [provide] the lamb for the burnt offering: my son.

This answer implies two possible outcomes, which Isaac understands. He is willing to keep on going on with his father: *And the two of them went together, one to bind and the other to be bound, one to slaughter and the other to be slaughtered.* (Bereshit Rabba, LVI, 4)

leading them dry-foot through the Red Sea.

*This then is the night which dissipated the darkness of sin
by the light of the pillar.*

*This is the night which now delivers all over the world those that believe in Christ
from the vices of the world and darkness of sin,
restores them to grace, and clothes them with sanctity.*

*This is the night in which Christ broke the chains of death,
and ascended conqueror from hell.*

(Paschal Praeconium, 'Exsultet')

*It is He the true Lamb who took away the sins of the world,
it is He who, by dying, destroyed death,
and by rising, gave us back life.*

(Easter Preface)

To the paschal victim let us raise today the sacrifice of praise.

The Lamb redeemed His flock,

the Innocent One reconciled us sinners with the Father.

(Sequence)

By offering His body on the cross,

He fulfilled the ancient sacrifices,

and by giving Himself as a gift for our redemption

He became altar, victim and priest.

(Easter Preface, V)

In the Gospel of St John as well as in the Revelation, the figure of the Lamb can be identified with Christ.

The Lamb whose body is true food and whose blood is true drink, (Jn 6:55)

a blood which does not cleanse the door-posts any longer

but which, if one drinks it, will become an inner cleansing: (Jn 6:53-55)

to wash one's garments in the blood of the Lamb

is the definitive sign of one's belonging to Him. (Rv 7:14)

The Lamb who takes away the sin of the world, (Jn 1:29, 36)

who dies while the paschal lambs are presented in the Temple, (Jn 19:14, 31, 42)

whose thirst is quenched through a hyssop stick, (Jn 19:29)

the Lamb whose bones will not be broken. (Jn 19:31-37)

He is the Lamb who was sacrificed since the foundation of the world, (Rv 13:8), that is, in an eternal act which has no end, which belongs to eternity and which therefore precedes man's sin. It is an eternal act generated by love and not by sin, as Duns Scotus' theology teaches.

He is sacrificed because He is Love.

*A blameless and spotless Lamb, Christ, was marked out before the world was made, and was revealed at the final point of time for your sake.
(1 Pt 1:19-20)*

The memorial of that Passover, the Eucharist, is not simply the repetition or re-enactment of a historical event, or a ‘representation’ as the theology used to say in the past. It is the visible manifestation of an eternal act, a gap opened on something that never ceased to exist: God’s love for us.

The visible liturgy is but the symbolical as well as real refraction of the invisible reality of high above, on the level of man’s corporeity in which he finds himself immersed during his earthly life, in the same way as music – Marcel de Corte said – is but the approximate expression of an essential silence.⁴

In this sense, then, this day can be a memorial.

‘Memorial’, זִכָּרוֹן, *zikkārôn*, is different from ‘memory’: it is not simply the memory of an important event, already finished and ritually represented, but it is the visibility and the actualization – here and now – of the event of the original and originating love of Easter, an event founding each and every past, each and every present and each and every future.

That love which during that night freed a people and which in Jesus’ Passover redeemed man, that love which can be found at the origin of everything.

On the day of the Passover, any Jewish man or woman, whenever and wherever he or she may live, must say:
today *I* go out of Egypt.

Rabbi Gamaliel, the teacher of the Apostle Paul, used to say: *In each generation each one must consider himself as if he had just gone out of Egypt.*

Past, present and future. The day without setting, the ‘kairos’.
God is that love which exists from eternity, which still exists and which will ever exist.

He is the One who was, who is and who is coming.

He is the God who intervenes, who intervened and who will intervene.

*We announce Your death, Lord... past,
we proclaim Your resurrection... present,
waiting for Your return... future.*

⁴ Rusconi, C., ‘Le nozze dell’agnello’, Pazzini Editore, Villa Verucchio, 2008, p. 218.

THE DEATH OF THE FIRST-BORN SONS

And at midnight the Lord struck down all the first-born in Egypt from the first-born of Pharaoh, heir to his throne, to the first-born of the prisoner in the dungeon, and the first-born of all the livestock. Pharaoh and all his officials and all the Egyptians got up in the night, and there was great wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without its dead.

It was still dark when Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, 'Up, leave my subjects, you and the Israelites! Go and worship the Lord as you have asked! And take your flocks and herds as you have asked, and go! And bless me, too!'

(Ex 12:29-32)

The Lord struck down all the first-born in Egypt: thus the Lord carried out the promise announced at Chapter 4 of Exodus, where Moses and Aaron first learnt about Pharaoh:

You will then say to Pharaoh: "This is what the Lord says: Israel is my first-born son. 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!"

(Ex 4:22-23)

This passage is different from Ex 9:27, the story of the seventh plague after which Pharaoh acknowledges his sin. This is not a judicial text: the Lord does not present Himself as a judge, but as the injured party: He takes offence at each offence against His first-born son Israel and He demands justice. Justice will be done after acts of patience and persuasion aimed at making Pharaoh's hardened heart melt.

This is the promise that we find in the story of Moses' vocation. The promise is carried out after nine negotiations, after nine plagues.

In Chapter 11 the plague is still announced; at Chapter 12:29 the promise is carried out.

In between there are nine chapters, nine plagues given to Pharaoh so that he could let the people go free.

In the Book of Exodus, the history of the Israelites begins with a cruel order by Pharaoh, an order that is repeated twice in the text, in a very few lines:

'When you attend Hebrew women in childbirth,' he said, 'look at the two stones. If it is a boy, kill him; if a girl, let her live.'

(Ex 1:16)

'Throw every new-born boy into the river, but let all the girls live.'

(Ex 1:22)

Sons thrown into the deep waters of the River,
in order to dash any hope of life,
any hope of future,
any hope of memory,
any possibility of becoming a better and stronger people.
And here we find Pharaoh deprived of his son, a people deprived of sons: it looks as if by working deeds of death, one destroys his own destiny,
one leads himself, his own history, his own future,
into that same death that he has chosen with the aim to preserve his life.

We can feel the same taste – the effects of the sword – in David’s story too. After Uriah’s killing, we can find the same judgement in Nathan’s words:

Why did you show contempt for the Lord, by doing what displeases Him? You put Uriah the Hittite to the sword, you took his wife to be your wife, causing his death by the sword of the Ammonites. For this, your household will never be free of the sword, since you showed contempt for me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite, to make her your wife.
(2 S 12:9-10)

With the death of the first-born, Egypt plunges into death,
in the same way as the Jewish children were plunged into the river.
Death is the direct consequence of Pharaoh’s choices and actions,
and of the hardening of his heart,
which did not manage to change while God was still patient.

The same dynamic of the hardened heart which leads to the death of the First-Born Son, that is, of Jesus, can be found in the Gospels too:

Then He looked angrily round at them, grieved to find them so obstinate, and said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand’. He stretched it out and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and began at once to plot with the Herodians against Him, discussing how to destroy Him.
(Mk 3:5-6)

The cry of the Egyptians now corresponds to the cry of the first-born Israel:

The Israelites, groaning in their slavery, cried out for help and from the depths of their slavery their cry came up to God. God heard their groaning; God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.
(Ex 2:23-24)

Moses then said, ‘The Lord says this, “At midnight I shall pass through Egypt, and all the first-born in Egypt will die, from the first-born of Pharaoh, heir to his throne,

to the first-born of the slave-girl at the mill, and all the first-born of the livestock. And throughout Egypt there will be great wailing, such as never was before, nor will be again.

(Ex 11:4-6)

Pharaoh and all his officials and all the Egyptians got up in the night, and there was great wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without its dead.

(Ex 12:30)

The text does not say how the Lord made the first-born die: to strike down, נָגַף, *nāḡaf*, is in fact an indeterminate term:

*Then, when the Lord goes through Egypt to strike it,
and sees the blood on the lintel and on both door-posts,
He will pass over the door
and not allow the Destroyer to enter your homes and strike.
(Ex 12:23)*

The term ‘Destroyer’, ‘exterminator’, הַמַּשְׁחִית, *hammašhîṭ*, occurs very few times in the Old Testament.

We can find it in 2 S 24:16 and 1 Ch 21:15, where *hammašhîṭ* refers to a pestilence spreading in Jerusalem because of David’s sin. David’s intercession stopped the hand of the angel right in the place where the Temple would be built.

The word ‘destroyer’, ‘exterminator’, הַמַּשְׁחִית, *hammašhîṭ*, can be found also in 1 S 13:17, where the Italian Bishops’ Conference (CEI) translates it with ‘raiding company’. Hence, somebody inferred that there could have been guerrilla warfare, violence and death. It may be true, if we see what is currently happening in the Middle East and how easy it may be to react to violence with further violence.

However, in the attempt to find reasons for this text which scandalizes us for its violence, and puts at risk the idea of a good and merciful God, we risk hiding what the text says. The text is not about a terrorist or guerrilla attack... Even though an attack could have taken place, that is not the point. The text reveals God’s deeds: He is the one and only actor in this event, even if He makes use of the *hammašhîṭ*. And, coming from God, it has the same meaning, the same aim of the other plagues.

The plagues, as we have already seen, are signs revealing the presence and action of the Lord. They are part of God’s pedagogy and not punishments: Israel learns from them that the Lord is for them a Saviour. (Ex 8:19; 9:4; 11:7)

This last sign appears as the last act of God’s pedagogy too. Pharaoh himself interprets it thus. In addition to his decision to let the people go, Pharaoh’s reaction is very peculiar:

It was still dark when Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said,

*'Up, leave my subjects, you and the Israelites!
Go and worship the Lord as you have asked!
And take your flocks and herds as you have asked, and go!
And bless me, too!'.
(Ex 12:31-32)*

And bless me, too!

In this terrible event, Pharaoh recognizes God's deeds⁵ – God spared Israel from the plague which hit his people instead – and recognizes Israel as blessed by God: he acknowledges Israel's role as intercessor, because Israel has been redeemed and can pray for others.

*In the midst of Egypt, which is yeast, there is unleavened bread,
which is Israel, a pure people showing God in His truth
and who therefore can become a blessing for others,
for Egypt too.
(Daniel Attinger)*

Israel goes out of Egypt, but Egypt is not deserted by God: through Israel, they ask to be blessed by Him. This is the true aim of divine election: to be a mediator for others of the same salvation, of the same knowledge of God, of God's blessing, of the same love with which He enwrapped that bush which is Israel.

*Rabbi Hunia used to say, on behalf of Resh Lakish: Israel's community said before the Holy One, that He may be blessed: "Sovereign of the universe, You afflicted the Egyptians through their first-born sons; You made them experience bitterness in their souls; but for me, He is lying between my breasts. (Sg 1:13) How? An Egyptian said to an Israelite, "Hide this first-born of mine among your children"; and the Israelite took him and hid him, but the angel came and struck him down all the same; but for me, he is lying between my breasts, (Sg 1:13), that is, he is enwrapped by my love.
(Midrash on the Song of Songs, 1, 60)*

⁵ The confrontation with Pharaoh was started by this question: "Who is the Lord, for me to obey what He says and let Israel go?" (Ex 5:2) And in the midst of the plagues, the promise which is at their core is announced over and over again, so that both the Egyptians and the Israelites may recognize that God is the Lord: *You will know that I am the Lord by this... (Ex 7:17) ...so that you will know that I am the Lord, here in this country. (Ex 8:18) ...so that you would know that I am the Lord. (Ex 10:2)*

DIRECTIONS FOR PRAYER

I advise you to go back and ponder on the power of ritual in relation to our own following the Lord. We need to rediscover the ritual signs through which God's eternal choice of His people and their adhesion to their God may be recounted. This is very important: the ritual has a language different from the languages of proclamation and of fraternal life. It is a symbolic language, efficacious, who relates through symbols what words are unable to say and the story cannot express by itself.

Ritual helps us understand and rediscover all the time the meaning of salvation, interpret history in the light of faith, recognize a higher measure in our lives.

In addition to that, I would suggest that you may stay in contemplation of the Lamb, of this eternal sacrifice which originates from God's eternal love for us. A sacrifice which is not due to sin, in the first instance, but to Love's necessity of loving, and to us being definitively elected by Him as His people. He is the God for us: there are no other conditions, apart from that love.

It would be wise to go through the gospels looking for signs of God's choice of man, incessantly proposed, proclaimed and affirmed by the life of the Son, who is the true Lamb, the true First-Born Son, whose death gave us life.

Of course you must go back to the passages quoted in this Lectio and make them your own: even this Lectio, after a while, must be left aside.