



MARAH: THE JOURNEY TO FREEDOM

Ex 15,22-26

Moses led Israel away from the Sea of Reeds, and they entered the desert of Shur. Then they travelled through the desert for three days without finding water.

When they reached Marah, they could not drink the Marah water because it was bitter; this is why the place was called Marah.

The people complained to Moses saying, 'What are we to drink?'

Moses appealed to the Lord for help, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood. When Moses threw it into the water, the water became sweet.

There He laid down a statute and law for them and there He put them to the test. Then He said, 'If you listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God and do what He regards as right, if you pay attention to His commandments and keep all His laws, I shall never inflict on you any of the diseases that I inflicted on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord your Healer.'

So they came to Elim where there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees; and there they pitched camp beside the water.

(Ex 15:22-26)

This event was immediately subsequent to the crossing of the Red Sea.

The Israelites had just fled from Pharaoh, after experiencing a night of terror, dismay and depression. They cried out to the Lord from a place with no way out, as if they had been imposed the death sentence, cursing the days of hope and 'day-dreaming':

'Was it for lack of graves in Egypt, that you had to lead us out to die in the desert? What was the point of bringing us out of Egypt?'

Did we not tell you as much in Egypt? Leave us alone, we said, we would rather work for the Egyptians! We prefer to work for the Egyptians than to die in the desert!'

(Ex 14:11-12)

But during that night the Israelites could witness the wonders of the Lord, something which was impossible but happened all the same, and which happened for them: they crossed the sea on dry ground while their enemies sunk like lead in deep waters together with their fears.

When Israel saw the mighty deed that the Lord had performed against the Egyptians, the people revered the Lord and put their faith in the Lord and in Moses, His servant.

(Ex 14:31)

Then they sang the Song of the Sea, the song of victory, God's victory. They sang and celebrated and danced.

Now, one day later, the lights have been put out, the musical instruments have been put back to their places, the songs have died out on the lips of the people, Miriam and the group of women are no longer dancing. Everybody has gone back to his everyday chores. They have to think of a way to survive. They have to start journeying in the desert, and this journey will probably be long and tiring and they will have to cross *a vast and dreadful desert, a land of fiery snakes, scorpions, thirst* (Dt 8:15).

Confronted with all that, they put up resistance.

RELUCTANT DEPARTURE

Moses led Israel away from the Sea of Reeds... (Ex 15:22)

Moses had to drag them away from there, against their wish. Why? Because when the Israelites left Egypt, Pharaoh gave chase to them with a strong army, with carriages and horses adorned and decorated with jewels and precious stones. When they went into the sea and God made them sink into the water and drown, their jewels went into the sea too and were subsequently brought to the shore. The Israelites used to go to the sea shore in order to collect the jewels. They did not want to leave them. When Moses realized what was happening, he forced them to leave.

(Midrash Tanchuma)

Through the image of the jewels that had to be collected, which is not a historical event, the Midrash intends to highlight a peculiar meaning of the events and of the text. It reflects upon the unusual sentence that the Scriptures made use of in order to describe Israel's departure from the Red Sea. In fact, this sentence hinted at a certain reluctance on the people's part and also at a coercive measure on Moses' part:

Moses led Israel away (וַיַּסֵּעַ wayyassa') from the Sea of Reeds...

Ex 15,22

Here the tense of the verb is the *Hiph'il*, which is used to highlight what caused an action to happen: Moses made them leave. We have already seen the verb נָסַע, *nāsa'*, 'to leave', as referred to the Israelites:

The Israelites left Rameses for Succoth, about six hundred thousand on the march – men, that is, not counting their families. (Ex 12:37)

They set out from Succoth and encamped at Etham, on the edge of the desert. (Ex 13:20)

They left, they set out... Moses led Israel away: this sequence is revealing; it tells us that something has changed. In the first two instances, the verb is active. In the third instance it is passive.

According to the Midrash, the Israelites' reluctance to leave the sea was apparently due to their attachment to Egypt's wealth, that they could still collect and exploit. A future in a land where milk and honey flowed, a future based upon the gift of the Torah and on the relationship with the God who had freed them, looked dull to them; the mind of the people just cared about the present.

It was as if the people would like to gather and consume all the riches and pleasures that they could, as a result of the Red Sea events.

Thus the rabbinical thinking teaches us that the Israelites were regarding their regained freedom as a series of pleasures and gratifications to enjoy, as something they could fully possess as an acquired right.

On the contrary, the road to freedom is difficult and demanding. It will lead them on austere and dangerous paths, where one can lose one's way and die. These are the paths of divine Providence, paths on which the people will have to learn that God alone is enough, paths devoid of any vegetation but also of lies.

Moses led Israel away from the Sea of Reeds... (Ex 15:22)

It is written: He brought out His people like sheep, guiding them like a flock in the desert. (Ps 78:52)

In the same way as a flock moves without any stock of either straw or hay but feeds on what they can find on their path every day, so Israel carried no food supply with them in the desert.

(Midrash Rabbah Exodus)

DISHONEST MEMORY

Israel looked back on its days in Egypt with nostalgia: they remembered that they enjoyed some comfort and peace in Egypt. From their grumbling we learn that the children of Israel painted a misleading rosy picture of their previous life in Egypt, forgetting about brick-making, the decree enforcing that any son should be thrown into the river, slavery. In fact, Egypt was a land of oppression and sufferings and there they led a wretched existence.

'Why did we not die at the Lord's hand in Egypt, where we used to sit round the flesh pots and could eat to our heart's content! As it is, you have led us into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death!' (Ex 16:3)

'Who will give us meat to eat?' they said. 'Think of the fish we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic! But now we are withering away; there is nothing wherever we look except this manna!' (Nb 11:4-6)

It seems as if they had not been ill-treated in any way.

Every time that the Israelites are fatigued while walking in the desert, every time there is a shortage of food or water, every time the journey is difficult, they grumble and repeat the same slogan.

'Why did you bring us out of Egypt,' they said, 'only to make us, our children and our livestock die of thirst?' (Ex 17:3)

'Was it for lack of graves in Egypt, that you had to lead us out to die in the desert? What was the point of bringing us out of Egypt?'

'Did we not tell you as much in Egypt? Leave us alone, we said, we would rather work for the Egyptians! We prefer to work for the Egyptians than to die in the desert!' (Ex 14:11-12)

'Would to God we had died in Egypt, or even that we had died in this desert! Why has the Lord brought us to this country, for us to perish by the sword and our wives and children to be seized as booty? Should we not do better to go back to Egypt?' (Nb 14:2-3)

'Why did you bring us out of Egypt to die in the desert? For there is neither food nor water here; we are sick of this meagre diet.' (Nb 21:5)

The longing for welfare, for a comfortable life with no unforeseen difficulties, the lure of Egypt's material riches, even though they were not possessed by the Israelites but just 'surrounded' them, made Egypt turn into something else in the Israelites' memory from what it really was.

The children of Israel seemed to be incapable of seeing beyond the jewels scattered on the sea shore; that is, they were incapable of seeing beyond their immediate necessities, and thus they weakened the power of hope and of dreaming, without which everything that was necessary to fulfil them became unbearable.

SLAVE MENTALITY

The reason of all that is that the Israelites were used to living under the yoke of slavery. And slaves are different from free men in many ways.

Slaves were given food portions in proportion to the amount of work they were supposed to do. The necessary food was guaranteed by the Egyptians. What did the Israelites remember? That they were interested in eating properly every day and that the necessary food was provided.

They did not take into consideration any longer the fact that food portions were slave portions.

Thus, when they were hungry with no way of getting any food, they felt lost. A simple need which went unsatisfied turned into a crisis: slaves knew they had no other possibilities to survive than those they were given day by day, moment by moment.

The slaves' mind was limited by that narrow view of life of immediate material gratification. Slaves were living day by day, without planning for the future: their tasks, their powers, their attention were focussed on the goal of surviving in the present.

Slaves were working at their master's project but without knowing it and without being interested in it. They just cared about their food portion which they received as a reward for the work done. They did not care about the project, they just cared for the food portions which allowed them to survive.

The generation leaving Egypt has a slave mentality.

And God is aware of that:

When Pharaoh had let the people go, God did not let them take the road to the Philistines' territory, although that was the shortest, 'in case', God thought, 'the prospect of fighting makes the people change their minds and turn back to Egypt.'

*Instead, God led the people a roundabout way through the desert of the Sea of Reed. The Israelites left Egypt fully armed.
(Ex 13:17-18)*

The people still regarded Egypt as a safe and protective place. They needed certainties, order, and a reassuring predictability.

Egypt was a place where decisions regarding them had been taken by other people, where there was an established order which they accepted.

Out there, in the external world, there were no certainties and no safety: no one to take decisions for them, no one to guarantee food.

The Israelites were slaves also in another sense.

The rabbis wondered: why didn't the Israelites fight against the Egyptians when they were attacked at the Red Sea? After all, they were 600,000 men fully equipped for war, a powerful force, weren't they?

*The Egyptians were the Israelites' masters. The Exodus generation was used to being tied to the yoke of Egyptian oppression from their very youth. Their spirits were low. How could they confront and fight against their masters? After all, they were untrained in the art of war.
(Ibn Ezra)*

It is difficult to fight against one's masters, against those who have always been such, against those from whom one has learnt his own role, from whom one has learnt when it is right to speak and when it is right to keep silent, from whom one has learnt that he must not ask questions.

The result of all that, of the slave mentality, is a certain instability and a great sense of insecurity in the people. They are fickle because they do not know their identity. This is why they are in high spirits after the miracle of the Red Sea and, immediately afterwards, wishing to go back to Egypt, if they were allowed to.

It is a new crisis. Once again the people is frightened; once again there seems to be no hope; all the theological truths, all the projects and the Word of God have vanished without a trace.

Three days in the desert were enough to do that.

MARAH SPRINGS

Moses led Israel away from the Sea of Reeds, and they entered the desert of Shur. Then they travelled through the desert for three days without finding water.

When they reached Marah, they could not drink the Marah water because it was bitter; this is why the place was called Marah. The people complained to Moses saying, 'What are we to drink?' Moses appealed to the Lord for help, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood. When Moses throw it into the water, the water became sweet.

(Ex 15:22-25)

This is the first time that the people grumbled. Their grumbling could be justifiable: they had been crossing the desert for three days and by now they were short of drinkable water. They could not remain silent.

It is interesting to point out that here neither Moses nor God were angered: God granted their requests and saw to their lack of water.

But that is not all:

There He laid down a statute and law for them and there He put them to the test. Then He said, 'If you listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God and do what He regards as right, if you pay attention to His commandments and keep all His laws, I shall never inflict on you any of the diseases that I inflicted on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord your Healer.'

Ex 15,25-26

After providing them with water, God gave them a statute and law and made a promise, which could be fulfilled only if they would listen to God and they would obey His commandments.

There He established statutes and decrees and put them to the test: there at Marah, through a test – God made them be thirsty and subsequently 'healed' the bitter waters for them – He started proving to them that if they paid attention to the statutes and decrees that He had laid down for them, He would provide for them the necessities of life.

Rashbam

God leads them on a path where no water was available; He guides them to the bitter waters of Marah, and then He heals them, making them sweet and drinkable. Thus He teaches the people of Israel that its life, its strength, its destiny are closely linked to their adhesion to the Word of God. The Word will care for them, will make them grow, will show them a way, will give them sandals to walk, will be the food giving them strength, will be the water quenching their thirst.

The people should not bother about what to eat, what to drink, what to put on, but rather about adhering to God's will, to his Word, to His Torah.

And He will care about all the rest.

The Lord can provide for them the necessities of life and at the same time, by giving them the Torah, shows them a new lifestyle, how to be free and what freedom entails in terms of personal responsibility.

“Open to me, my sister, my beloved, my dove, my perfect one.” (Sg 5:2)
Sister, tied to God through the blood of circumcision as well as through the blood on the lintels of the doors.
Beloved, because she sang at the Red Sea.
Dove, because at Marah God gave her those commandments which made her unique for Him, which distinguished her from all the other nations, as a dove is distinguished from other birds.
Midrash Rabba on the Song of Songs

WATER AND TORAH

The Israelites felt thirst after walking for three days in the desert: they walked for three days in the desert and found no water.

What should have happened on the third day in the desert?

So now please allow us to make a three-days' journey into the desert and sacrifice to the Lord our God. (Ex 3:18)

Give us leave to make a three-days' journey into the desert and sacrifice to the Lord our God, or He will strike us with a plague or with the sword. (Ex 5:3)

Let my people go and worship in the desert. (Ex 7:16)

Pharaoh summoned Moses and said, 'Go and worship the Lord, but your flocks and herds are to stay here. Your wives and children can go with you too.' Moses said, 'But now you must give us sacrifices and burnt offerings to offer to the Lord our God. And our livestock will go with us too; not a hoof will be left behind; for we may need animals from these to worship the Lord our God; for until we get there we ourselves cannot tell how we are to worship the Lord.'

Ex 10,24-26

At the end of the three-days' journey, after worshipping God on the mountain, Israel would be proclaimed to be free:

'I shall be with you,' God said, 'and this is the sign by which you will know that I was the One who sent you. After you have led the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.' (Ex 3:12)

Here, exactly as on Mt Sinai, to worship God is equal to welcoming His commandments, His Word. A famous rabbinical saying states that the words of the Torah can be compared to water: at the end of those three days the people was looking for water, that is, the Torah.¹ And to find the Word means to become aware that we are free, to live for her, to be hungry and thirsty for God's will instead of for the food which perishes.

Let us not forget that God revealed Himself as the true Lord because He freed Israel, not because He made them pass from a kind of slavery to another. The Lord is Lord because He guarantees freedom for His people and not only that, but also all that is needed – in terms of both words and facts – to make that freedom survive, grow, become mature.

To find water to survive and keep on walking in the desert means to find the Torah.

The image of the piece of wood which makes the waters become sweet reminds us of the passage dealing with the Torah / wisdom:

Blessed are those who have discovered wisdom, / those who have acquired understanding! / Gaining her is more rewarding than silver, / her yield is more valuable than gold. / She is beyond the price of pearls, / nothing you could covet is her equal. / In her right hand is length of days; / in her left hand, riches and honour. / Her ways are filled with delight, / her paths all lead to contentment. / She is a tree of life for those who hold her fast, / those who cling to her live happy lives. (Pr 3:13-18)

Another kind of wealth was then given to those who were happy picking up somebody else's 'leftovers', somebody else's residual wealth, distorted memories, lives which could never blossom in all freedom. They were given the richness of the Word that makes man free, that gives him back his dignity of free man, his image of another Kingship, his being made little less than the angels, his being lord over the works made by God's hands, as Psalm 8 says.

Moses appealed to the Lord for help, and the Lord showed him (יִירָהוּ wayyôrēhû) a piece of wood.

When Moses threw it into the water, the water became sweet.
(Ex 15:25)

¹ This is the reason why nowadays the Torah is read three times a week (on Mondays, Thursdays and Sabbaths), so that the people should not go for three consecutive days without Torah (Tanchuma 19).

The Hebrew text has the verb יָרָה *yārah*, ‘to teach’; it does not say “God showed”, but “God taught”, making use of a term which has the same root of the word *Tôrâh*, ‘teaching’.

Origen commented that the wood which made the water sweet is like the ‘wisdom of the cross’ contained in the bitterness of the letter.

The Lord, after breaking the ties with Egypt, leads the children of Israel through the desert, building up a relationship with them, teaching them that the *Tôrâh*, is the spring of life. That will get rid of their dependence on Pharaoh and will make of love their ethos: love for and trust in God on man’s part, as a response to God’s love for and trust in man. This new relationship is based on love. Love is its starting point as well as its point of arrival; love means to discover each and every day as a gift; love is thirst; love is satiety.

God introduces His people to understand that His Word is food and water.

‘Whoever drinks this water will be thirsty again; but no one who drinks the water that I shall give will ever be thirsty again: the water that I shall give will become a spring of water within, welling up for eternal life.’ ‘Sir,’ said the woman, ‘give me some of that water, so that I may never be thirsty or come here again to draw water.’ (Jn 4:13-15)

The woman said to Him, ‘I know that Messiah – that is, Christ – is coming; and when He comes He will explain everything.’ Jesus said, ‘That is who I am, I who speak to you.’ (Jn 4:25-26)

TO LIVE AS CHILDREN

The passage from slavery to freedom is brought about by love. There are two kinds of love interacting with each other: the servant’s love and the Lord’s love.

Freedom is brought about when a slave, even though he has been given back his liberty, stays with his master, out of love.

When you buy a Hebrew slave, his service will last for six years. In the seventh year he will leave a free man without paying compensation. If he came single, he will depart single; if he came married, his wife will depart with him. If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children will belong to her master, and he will depart alone. But if the slave says, “I love my master and my wife and children; I do not wish to be freed,” then his master will bring him before God and then, leading him to the door or the doorpost, his master will pierce his ear with an awl, and the slave will be permanently his.

(Ex 21:2-6)

There are no comments to be added to this beautiful passage. Slavery generates love, a choice to belong, a life wholly and thoroughly devoted to the word of the One whom we have chosen to love.

Love is brought about by the Master's love,
He reveals to us the mystery of His will,
and by the gift of word and life, He makes us His friends.

I shall no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know the master's business;

I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I have learnt from my Father. (Jn 15:15)

No one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends. (Jn 15:13)

Here too there are no comments to be added.

Jesus is giving us life. That is what one has to do for his friends.

Jesus is giving us His Word and that makes us His friends.

If giving life and saying the Word makes us His friends,
then, to Him, saying the Word means to give life...
and we have to place our own lives into His very life, the real one.

DIRECTIONS FOR PRAYER AND MEDITATION

I think that this Lectio offers many points to be pondered. You can ponder on the paths to freedom that the Word is always showing us; and on our own resistances to them. You can become aware of the new paths which are being opened for us, both as individuals and as a community and, at the same time, become aware of what in our own selves opposes renewal and conversion. This would be very wise.

A very interesting Biblical path could lead you to go through the parable of the prodigal son once again, in order to highlight the slave mentality which is present in both the elder son and the younger one; as well as to highlight the offer of forgiveness as a new way of being sons, as a new way of sharing the Father's heritage.

'Father, let me have the share of the estate that will come to me'. So the father divided the property between them. (Lk 15:12)

'How many of my father's hired men have all the food they want and more, and here I am dying of hunger! I will leave this place and go to my father and say: Father, I have sinned against Heaven and against you; I no longer deserve to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired men.' (Lk 15:17-19)

'All these years I have slaved for you and never once disobeyed any orders of yours, yet you never offered me so much as a kid for me to celebrate with my friends.'

But, for this son of yours, when he comes back after swallowing up your property – he and his loose women – you kill the calf we had been fattening.’ The father said, ‘My son, you are with me always and All I have is yours. But it was only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found.’ (Lk 15:29-32)

And again:

If you make my word your home you will indeed be my disciples; you will come to know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’ They answered, ‘We are descended from Abraham and we have never been the slaves of anyone; what do you mean, “You will be set free?”’ Jesus replied: ‘In all truth I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave. Now a slave has no permanent standing in the household, but a son belongs to it for ever. So if the Son sets you free, you will indeed be free.’ (Jn 8:31-36)

Excursus

אֶת-מִטָּה הָאֱלֹהִים
God's staff

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.’ (Ex 4:21)

Which wonders is God referring to? You should answer: He is referring to the snake, to the leprosy, and to the blood. God does not discuss His orders. Should Moses show the wonders to Israel only? On the contrary, he performed them in front of Pharaoh, didn't he?

The meaning of all the wonders I placed into your hand is on the staff, and you can find the ten plagues inscribed on it, by reading the abbreviations ‘détzach, ‘adàsh, beakhàv’ (דצ"ך-עד"ש באה"ב). God said to him, ‘These are the plagues which I placed into your hands; perform these wonders in front of Pharaoh through this staff’.
(Midrash Rabba, Exodus V, 6)

Moses' staff appears for the first time in Exodus 4:1. It is a shepherd's staff, transformed by God into an instrument that will make Moses credible. If it is thrown to the ground, it will turn into a snake; and then, caught by the tail, it will turn into a staff again.

This is the first of the wonders, together with the diseased hand, that confirms Moses' words in front of his people and in front of Pharaoh; and that is a proof that his authority and power are given by God.

It is the staff that Moses keeps in his hand: God orders him to perform the signs with it (Ex 4:17). This power requires obedience and trust.

In line 20, the staff is no longer a shepherd's staff but ‘the staff of God in his hand’. And with it, Moses will perform the wonders that will submit Pharaoh's will; with it Moses will fight God's adversary:

In line 7:12 the staff swallows up the Egyptian sorcerers' serpents.

In 7:17 Moses is ordered to raise his staff and turn the water into blood.

In 8:1 Aaron is ordered to stretch out his hand over the waters with Moses' staff and bring the frogs up over the land of Egypt.

In 8:12 Aaron is ordered to stretch out Moses' staff and strike the dust of the earth and turn it into mosquitoes.

In 9:23 Moses stretches out his staff towards heaven and the Lord thunders and rains down hail on Egypt.

In 10:13 Moses stretches his staff over Egypt and over the country, and the Lord sends an east wind which brings the locusts.

And then, finally, in Ex 14:16,

*Your part is to raise your staff
and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it,
so that the Israelites can walk through the sea on dry ground.*

According to the rabbinical tradition, Moses' staff was created at the origin of the world, on the eve of the first Sabbath of creation, together with ten other things.² It was handed down generation after generation, from Adam to the patriarchs and so on, and to Moses. The initials of the ten plagues were inscribed on it: these were the signs that Moses was about to perform with the staff.

Rabbi Levi said: the staff was created in between day and night and was handed to the first man in the garden of Eden. And Adam handed it to Enoch and Enoch gave it to Noah, and Noah gave it to Shem, and Shem gave it to Abraham, and Abraham gave it to Isaac, and Isaac gave it to Jacob, and Jacob brought it to Egypt and handed it to his son Joseph. When Joseph died, all his house was plundered and all his goods were placed in Pharaoh's palace. Jethro was one of Egypt's sorcerers. He saw the staff and the initials (literally, 'the signs') inscribed on it. He longed for it and finally took it, taking it to his place and planting it in the middle of his garden. No man, by now, could have touched it.

*When Moses arrived at Jethro's, he entered the garden and realized that there was a staff in it and read the initials inscribed on it.³ He stretched out his hand and took it. Jethro saw him and exclaimed: In the future, this man will free Israel from Egypt. This is the reason why he gave him his daughter Zipporah in marriage, as it is said: "Moses agreed to stay on there with the man..." (Ex 2:21)
(Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer, 40)*

According to the rabbinical tradition, Moses' staff, destined to bring about the exodus, was made of the hardest sapphire, of the same material of the tablets of the Law with the Decalogue, created on the eve of the first Sabbath of the world too.

Then this staff foreshadows God's gift to His people from the top of the mountain, that is, the gift of the Torah, of the Word that will guide them along the course of history.

It is relevant that the last time we hear about Moses' staff is in Ex 17:9-11:

Moses said to Joshua, 'Pick some men and tomorrow morning go out and engage Amalek. I, for my part, shall take my stand on the hilltop with the staff of God in my hand. Joshua did as Moses had told him and went out to

² cf Mishna, Avot 5, 6 and par.

³ While Jethro 'saw' them, Moses 'read' them: Moses saw them and understood their meaning, while Jethro saw them but could not understand them. According to the Zohar Va'era 28a, the tetragram was inscribed on it: "Moses' staff was holier than Aaron's, because the holy name of God had been inscribed on it from above in the garden".

engage Amalek, while Moses, Aaron and Hur went up to the top of the hill. As long as Moses kept his arms raised, Israel had the advantage; when he let his arms fall, the advantage went to Amalek.

Moses holds God's staff in his hand, as a sign of the power of prayer, of the cry to God that once again is capable of revealing God's glory and victory over Israel's enemies.

After this episode, neither the staff will be mentioned again, nor the powerful signs and wonders performed with it by Moses. The Scripture will just say: "The Lord spoke to Moses, saying..."

The power makes room for the word, exactly like at the beginning of the world, when the hurricane wind sweeping over the abyss and darkness became Word.

The wind is an image of power, of God's power, of His mysterious presence outside of chaos, but present next to it and ready to intervene.

'And God said...'

*The wind should be part of chaos, a powerful wind moving the waters of the abyss, therefore increasing chaos. However, the verb of the metaphor of evolution, the verb *rāḥaf*, which means 'to tremble' and which is used in relation to the divine wind, becomes a restrained force, which trembles in order to be restrained, as it happens when one is making an effort which makes the arm tremble. God's power is restrained.*

God calls a halt to it, God restrains His power and turns it into something else:

'And God said...'

*In order for God to say something, the wind must be sedate, 'domesticated'. It is as if God were playing with His wind by uttering sounds that in Hebrew are *y'hî 'ôr*. 'Let there be light'. This phrase is made up of vowels and aspired consonants.*

It is the beginning of language: He colours the wind going out of His mouth by pronouncing vowels, and ending this breath with aspirations. This image evokes evolution: a stormy wind, perturbing the abyss; then gradually placating itself and becoming an articulated word, a word which is light and which illuminates everything. God is a God who restrains His power and transforms it into an efficacious word, into a creative word.

(A. Wenin)

It is consoling to see that the instruments grow in conjunction with those who are growing, that the Word grows in conjunction with those who welcome it and let themselves be moulded by it. The Word grows, in a way, depending on how much we are able to listen to it.

The staff becomes the authoritative Word it used to be a symbol of.

We can lean on it, we can win the world through it, we can become free thanks to it.

In this respect, the early Church used a very significant gesture. During the Eucharist presided by the bishop, at the moment of the Gospel reading (which was proclaimed by the deacon), the bishop would let his pastoral staff fall to the ground, to signify that the one and only support, the one and only strength, the one and only authoritative and efficacious guidance is and must be the Word of God, from which any other kind of authority originates.

The Fathers of the Church – and Origen in particular – identified Moses' staff with the wood of the Cross, on which the Word was said and fulfilled, up to the last breath.

As far as I can understand, I think that Moses who goes to Egypt carrying the staff with which he will later perform the ten plagues to 'flagellate' Egypt, I think that this Moses is God's law, given to this world to correct it through the ten plagues, that is, through the ten commandments contained in the Decalogue. Then the staff through which all these signs are performed, that is, through which Egypt is won and Pharaoh overcome, is Christ's cross, through which we can triumph over this world and over the prince of this world, with his dominions and powers.

As regards the staff thrown to the ground and turned into a serpent swallowing up the Egyptian sorcerers' serpents, the evangelical word shows that the serpent refers to wisdom or prudence, when it says: 'Be prudent like serpents'. And in another passage it is said that the serpent was the most subtle of all the beasts that lived in the garden of paradise. Therefore Christ's cross, "the preaching of which looked like foolishness", the cross contained in Moses, that is in the law (as the Lord said, 'On me, in fact, he wrote'), this cross of which Moses spoke, once thrown to the ground, that is, after being believed and professed by people, was transformed into wisdom, and into such a great wisdom that it could swallow up all the Egyptian wisdom, that is, all the wisdom of this world.

Please note how God turned the wisdom of this world into foolishness, after revealing that the crucified Christ is "the power of God and the wisdom of God": by now all the world has been conquered by the One who said: I will overcome the sages through their very shrewdness.

(Origen, Homilies on Exodus, 4, 6)