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BRG400 – Introduction to Biblical Studies**Assignment #2****Book of Exodus**

Of the Old Testament books, Exodus, which forms the heart of the Torah, is particularly dramatic in its amazing range of activity – with supernatural plagues, wilderness wanderings, a fiery mountain, and a golden calf.¹ God is involved in events in a manner not often found in the Old Testament.² Theologian, John F. Craghan, states "the book of Exodus is Israel's identity papers, the record of human interaction and divine grace, of human success and failure, and of divine assistance and forgiveness".³

This paper discusses the origins of the book of Exodus, its purpose, the contents, and the overarching theme of human action and divine grace – and will thereby affirm Craghan's evaluative comment regarding the book of Exodus.

Origins

To locate the Exodus event historically is difficult. Walter Brueggemann, respected Old Testament scholar, notes that "it is not possible to deny or affirm whatever may have been 'historically' the case, though we must allow that some turn of events gave rise to the particular articulation of the miracle that we have in the biblical narrative."⁴ Additionally, the textual material is unusually complex and varied in nature,⁵ including narrative, liturgy, and law.

Traditionally, authorship for the book of Exodus has been attributed to Moses. Several statements in the book indicate that Moses wrote certain sections of the book (see 17:14; 24:4; 34:27).⁶ The New Testament also claims Mosaic authorship for various passages in Exodus (see Mk 7:10; 12:26; Lk 2:22-23).⁷ In response to the question of Mosaic authorship, it is suggested that “the claim for Moses did not entail the notion of ‘authorship’ in any modern sense, for the tradition is interested in authority and not in authorship”.⁸

As far as a date for the book of Exodus, “it is a widespread assumption that the Torah reached roughly its final form by the time of the exile or soon thereafter (587-537 B.C.E.)”⁹, nearly a millennium after the events described.¹⁰ The text of Exodus, then, represents the culmination of recitations and reflections over many generations.¹¹

In the context of tracing the development of the book of Exodus, Brueggemann writes that “a move from reportage to paradigmatic rereading is compelling when we note that every telling or retelling of ‘tyranny and deliverance’ is bound to be pertinent in any particular time and place”.¹² He supports his claim on the basis of limited historical evidence and “the power of the narrative for the liturgical imagination of Israel”.¹³ Furthermore, he notes that the paradigmatic re-use of the narrative is evident in other places of Scripture. For example, in Joshua 4:21-24 (crossing of the Jordan); 1 Sam 4:1-7:1 (ark narrative; see especially 4:8, 6:6, and Exodus 10:1-2) and Isaiah 40-55 (return home of Jews from Babylon; see especially 52:11-12 and 55:12). In sum, “when understood as ‘paradigmatic,’ the narrative is seen to make a claim of intense particularity, but a particularity that invites and permits a re-reading in a variety of circumstances and contexts”.¹⁴

Purpose

Craghan’s observation that “the book of Exodus is Israel’s identity papers”¹⁵ summarizes the book’s central purpose. The Exodus, with the subsequent establishment of the covenant at Sinai, distinguishes Israel as Yahweh’s distinctive people.¹⁶ “It [the book of Exodus] is the biblical document par excellence for exposing Israel’s roots”.¹⁷ As a corollary, Exodus also identifies who Yahweh is. “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Ex 20:2). Yahweh had dramatically entered real time and real people and was totally involved.¹⁸ The powerful Pharaoh had tauntingly asked, “Who is Yahweh?” (Ex 5:2); the book of Exodus provides the answer.

Since the book of Exodus identifies both Israel and Yahweh, one can concur with Fretheim’s when he writes that “the book of Exodus is not historical narrative . . . Its primary concern is with issues that are theological and kerygmatic”.¹⁹ He identifies six leading theological issues that give the book its purpose: a creation theology, knowledge of Yahweh, images for God, true liberation theology, worship and Yahweh’s presence, as well as law and covenant.²⁰

Contents

Exodus as a book falls naturally into three sections: divine redemption – God’s plan for deliverance (1-18); divine morality – God’s guidance for morality (19-24); and divine worship – God’s order for worship (25-40).²¹ The content of Exodus, then, consists of God’s calling his servant Moses to liberate his people from Egyptian bondage, to inaugurate his earthly kingdom by bringing them into a special national covenant with him, and to erect

within Israel God’s royal tent (tabernacle).²² “By means of the tabernacle, the omnipotent, unchanging and transcendent God of the universe came to “dwell” or “tabernacle” with his people, thereby revealing his gracious nearness as well. God is not only mighty in Israel’s behalf; he is also present in her midst”.²³

As Craghan notes, Exodus shows the intertwining of the human and the divine – the book is a record of human interaction, divine assistance, special grace, human success, and failure with forgiveness.²⁴

Human Interaction and Divine Assistance

While Exodus reveals God’s sovereignty, “a more unobtrusive, behind-the-scenes activity is evident” and which shows hidden, divine assistance.²⁵ In the opening chapter of Exodus, God appears nearly absent (except verses 17, 20-21). In fact, “the Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites” (Ex 1:13). Circumstances look grim for Israel. However, God has been present and has birthed a nation! Scripture records that “the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them” (Ex 1:7). This echoes the ancient promise made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that their seed would be exceedingly numerous. (See, for example, Genesis 15:5; 22:17.)²⁶ In Exodus 5:2, Pharaoh asks, “Who is Yahweh?” Yahweh, who is behind the scene in Exodus 5, dramatically answers that question in the rest of the book. Meanwhile, Moses is rebuffed by both Pharaoh and the Israelites, and Israelite life worsens under their taskmasters and supervisors. Later, as Israel comes into the wilderness of Sin (Ex 16:1) they are hungry, despairing, and looking westward back to Egypt (see verse 3). As Aaron addresses the

Israelites, “they look toward the wilderness [eastward], and the glory of the LORD appears in the cloud” (Ex 16:10). The people had looked away from the west, away from Egypt, and eastward toward the harsh and terrible wilderness. When they look toward the place of death, they see “the glory of the LORD”! In other words, as they look into the hard times of life, *that* is where they see God – when peering toward the place of death, they see glory!²⁷

In relation to liberation from oppression and poverty, the exodus is seen to be a sign of hope that these are not the last word, for God is at work on behalf of a different future.²⁸ However, a vital element must not be overlooked: It is only God who is to do the fighting, as stated in Exodus 14:14 – “The LORD will fight for you”. Three directives were given to the Israelites: (1) “Do not be afraid”; (2) “Stand firm”; and (3) “Keep still” (Ex 14:13-14). No explicit, active political activity is involved on the part of Israel – but rather, only a trust in divine activity. In sum, “it is God’s activity that can serve as a paradigm. The exodus is a powerful symbol that the present situation does not define what is possible for God. With God, change and newness are lively possibilities”.²⁹

Special Grace

Remarkably, Exodus shows that the “God of Israel is a suffering sovereign”,³⁰ revealing divine grace. This calls for a redefinition of the common understanding of sovereignty, one in which God is understood in terms other than absolute rule or control.³¹ While Pharaoh is the “unmoved mover” (Aristotle), Yahweh displays “a divine sovereignty qualified by divine suffering, by a divine move of compassion, that enters deeply into the sufferings of the people”.³² For example, while still in forced labour under cruel slave-

masters, “the Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. . . . God heard their groaning, . . . and God took notice of them” (Ex 2:23-24). Reassuringly, in Exodus 3:7 Yahweh states, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings.”

After Israel had left Egypt, Pharaoh’s mighty army soon pursued them. “As Pharaoh drew near . . . in great fear the Israelites cried out to the LORD” (Ex 14:10). Trapped by the sea in front of them, the Israelites felt doomed. God’s divine grace is dramatically evident in what ensues – “the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore” (Ex 14:30). In Exodus 15 is a victory ode that hymns the spectacular grace and unrivalled power of God over Pharaoh when God delivered the Israelites.³³ (The focus of the song is on Yahweh himself with the divine name appearing ten times.³⁴)

In Exodus, then, God is revealed as “not only one who is; God is also one who in some sense becomes”.³⁵ God does not simply remain unchanged by all that happens.³⁶

Human Success and Failure with Forgiveness

Any definition of divine sovereignty must take into account the fact that God does not act alone in the events.³⁷ He therefore works in and through human success, as well as human failure which involves forgiveness. For example, in the opening chapters of Exodus, “God works in and through five lowly women to carry out the divine purpose. . . . but choosing such human vehicles means that God works in unobtrusive, unlikely, and vulnerable ways”.³⁸

Both Israel and Moses testify to human weakness. Beginning with Moses' first encounter with Pharaoh (Ex 5:19-21) down to the war with Midian not long before Moses' death (Nu 31:14-16), Israel failed to trust God in their circumstances, violated the commandments, and rejected God's leadership in rebelling against Moses.³⁹ (See also 1 Cor 10:5-10 for a list of Israel's shortcomings.) Later even Moses disqualified himself from entering the Promised Land because of his disobedience to God (Nu 20:1-13). Nevertheless, God did not reject Moses.

Perhaps one of the most ignominious points in the Exodus narrative is when "all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mould, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'" (Ex 32:3-4) Moses earnestly intercedes for the Israelites on two occasions (Ex 32:11-14; 30-34). The outcome is that "the LORD changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people" (Ex 32:14).

Despite the frailties of Moses and the failures of the people, "most reassuring of all is the fact that God remembers".⁴⁰ Exodus 2:24 states "God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob". After some four hundred to six hundred years later, Yahweh affirms, "I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex 3:8; see also Ex 3:15-17; 6:2-8; 19:3-8.) What God had promised about half a millennium earlier to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, he remembered and began to bring to fulfilment as Israel left Egypt for the Land of Promise.⁴¹

Conclusion

In concluding, the book of Exodus is a synthesis originating from several sources that were refined over many generations and then compiled into a final form around the time of the Babylonian exile. The primary purpose of the book is to identify both Yahweh and his people. Three overall sections form the content: redemption, morality, and worship. Craghan's assessment of Exodus stands valid – indeed it is an account of “human interaction and divine grace, of human success and failure, and of divine assistance and forgiveness”.⁴²

Endnotes

¹ Terrence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 1. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. in his chapter entitled “Exodus” in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1990), edited by Frank E. Gaebelin, notes that in the Pentateuch as a whole, there are six major themes: (1) God's blessing on all nature and humanity; (2) God's promise to the patriarchs; (3) God's deliverance in the exodus from Egypt; (4) God's revelation of himself in covenant, law, and tabernacling presence at Sinai; (5) the wandering in the wilderness; and (6) preparation for entrance into Canaan. Three of these six major themes (3, 4, 5) are given extensive treatment in the second book of the Pentateuch, and thus Exodus forms the heart of the Torah.

² Ibid.

³ John F. Craghan, “Exodus”, in *Collegeville Bible Commentary: Based on the New American Bible With Revised New Testament*, Dianne Bergant and ed. Robert J. Karris (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Order of St. Benedict, Inc., 1989), 79.

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 54.

⁵ Ibid., 19.

⁶ *The NIV Study Bible: New International Version*, ed. Kenneth Barker (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1985), 106.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Brueggemann, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 18.

⁹ Ibid., 21.

¹⁰ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 9.

¹¹ This process is alluded to in Exodus 12:24-27. I am indebted to the following website for this insight: <http://www.stjohnadulterd.org/exodus.htm>, accessed January 4, 2008.

¹² Brueggemann, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 54.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Craghan, “Exodus”, 79.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 7.

²⁰ Ibid., 12-22.

²¹ Frank E. Gaebelein, ed., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1990), 297-299, 302.

²² *The NIV Study Bible*, 108.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Craghan, “Exodus”, 79.

²⁵ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 16.

²⁶ Gaebelein, *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 302.

²⁷ I am indebted for this insight into Exodus 16:10 to Rev. Scott Hoezee, Director of Center for Excellence in Preaching (CEP) at Calvin Theological Seminary in the U.S. The following site was accessed on January 4, 2008: <http://www.calvincrc.org/sermons/2003/exodus16.html>

²⁸ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 18.

²⁹ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 19.

³⁰ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 18.

³¹ Ibid., 16.

³² Ibid., 16-17.

³³ Gaebelein, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 292.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 15.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 17.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ J. D. Douglas, ed., *The New Bible Dictionary* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1962), 848.

⁴⁰ Gaebelein, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 293.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Craghan, "Exodus", 79.

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