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## Exodus as a Paradigm in Liberation Theology

THE RE-READING of Exodus runs through the history of the Latin American church. In the middle of the sixteenth century, shortly after the conquest, the holy bishop of Popayan, Juan del Valle, said that the primitive inhabitants of the region were 'treated worse than the slaves in Egypt'.<sup>1</sup> The valiant revolutionary, the Inca Tupac Amaru, in the decree by which he summoned hundreds of thousands of indigenous people to rise against Spain in Peru on 14 November 1780, wrote:

The Catholic zeal of a son of the Church, as a professed Christian in most holy baptism ... hoping that many others will shake off the yoke of this Pharaoh, the magistrates, I have set forth to speak for and defend the whole kingdom ... The purposes of my sound intention are [to win] for my nation complete freedom from all forms of oppression.<sup>2</sup>

When we reach our own century we find the expression 'land flowing with milk and honey' at the end of the Sandinista anthem in Nicaragua. Or we have Fidel Castro's reference, in his defence, *History Will Forgive Me*, to

the 100,000 small farmers who live [in 1956] and die working a land that is not theirs, contemplating it sadly as Moses did the promised land ...<sup>3</sup>

That is why, as part of this tradition of the Latin American people, liberation theology from its very beginning understood the paradigm of the Exodus as its fundamental schema. So strong is this sense that it is even criticised for this continual return to a re-reading of Exodus.

## 1. THE RELEVANCE OF THE EXODUS PARADIGM FOR THE THIRD WORLD TODAY

The Exodus appears as a central point in *African liberation theology*,<sup>4</sup> and we should not forget that the setting for the Exodus story was actual North Africa. The same can be said of *Asian liberation theology*,<sup>5</sup> where, perhaps even to a greater extent than in Latin America, the oppression of the poor is a blatant fact, beyond concealing. In *Latin America*, from the beginning, we have always come back to Exodus. I recall that as early as 1967 I used to begin my courses at IPLA (CELAM's Instituto Pastoral Latinoamericano in Quito) with exegesis of Exodus;<sup>6</sup> there one could find, spelt out, the main categories of liberation theology. In the same way, at different times, liberation theologians have always had to refer to the basic texts of Exodus.<sup>7</sup>

According to Rubem Alves in 1970,

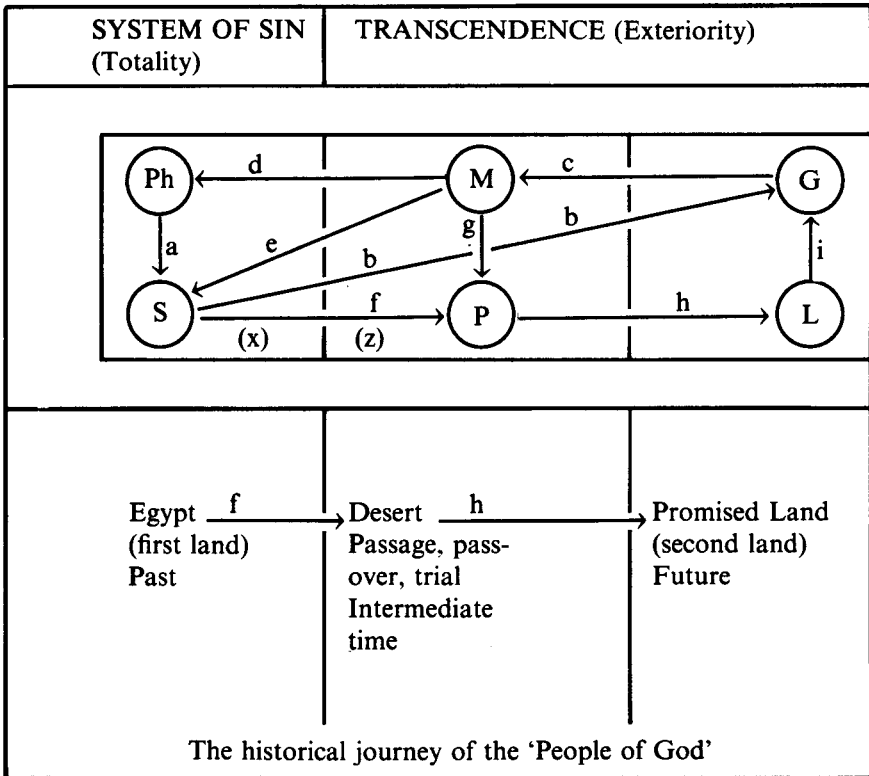
The Exodus was the experience which created the consciousness of the people of Israel. The people formed in the structuring centre which determined its way of organising time and space. Note that I am not saying simply that the Exodus is part of the contents of the consciousness of the people of Israel. If that were the case, the Exodus would be one item of information among others. More than an item of information, it is *its structuring centre*, in that it determines the integrating logic, the principle of organisation and interpretation of historical experience. That is why the Exodus does not persist as a secondary experience... It has come to be *the paradigm* for the interpretation of *all space and all time*.<sup>8</sup>

Sixteen years ago the great Brazilian Protestant theologian pointed explicitly (even in his use of the term 'paradigm') to the topic which concerns us. We shall examine it in stages.

By 'paradigm' we mean the generative matrix or 'schema' (in something like the Kantian sense), the *structure* which, from fundamental *categories*, originates a fixed number of *relations* which become generative, not only of a theology, but also of the everyday hermeneutic of the Christian people's faith.

There are essentially six of these categories: (1) Egypt and the Pharaonic class (Ph), the dominators, the sinners (Exod. 1:8); (2) the slaves (S), the exploited, the just (Exod. 1:11); (3) the prophet, Moses (M) (Exod 2:1ff.); (4) God (G), who listens and converts (Exod. 3:1ff.); (5) the passage (P) through the desert, the passover, the trials, the ambiguity—such a contemporary theme—of the priest Aaron (Exod. 12:37ff.); (6) the promised land (L) (Exod. 3:8).

*Simplified diagram of the Exodus 'paradigm'*



There are eight *relations* which, arising from the *categories*, make up the *structure* of the paradigm: (a) domination or sin (Exod. 1:1-22); (b) the cry of the people (Exod. 3:7); (c) conversion, the call of the word to the prophet (Exod. 2:11-4:17); (d) challenge to the dominator, the sinner (Exod. 4:18-6:1); (e) challenge to the people of God (Exod. 6:2-27); (f) departure, liberation (Exod. 7:8ff.); (g) critical prophetic action, even against the priest Aaron (prophet-priest dialectic, continuing throughout the passage through the desert); (h) entry, the building of the new system (Josh. 3:16ff.); (i) salvation, the kingdom, the community of life, which may be another Egypt (1 Sam. 8:10-18) and so splits: the historical promised land (always liable to be surpassed) and the kingdom of God (the absolute, only fully realised after history).

However, as Alves indicates, there are three space-time areas which organise the discourse, praxis: (1) Egypt as the past, the 'first land', (2) the desert as the 'intermediate time' and space of passage; (3) the promised land as the utopian term, the future, the 'second land'.

The totality of the discourse, of historical praxis, of the paradigm, has a *subject*, 'the children of Israel',<sup>9</sup> the people of the oppressed liberating themselves from the slavery of exploitation, of sin, in an alliance with their God:

I will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again (Gen. 46:4).

The paradigm can be seen, theologically, in the re-reading which the Bible performs of itself:

By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin ... By faith he left Egypt ... By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood ... By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as if on dry land ... By faith the walls of Jericho fell down (Heb. 11:24-30).

For us Latin Americans, certainly, the text of Exodus makes a powerful call on our attention. The reason is clear:

The liberation of Israel is a political action. It is the breaking away from a situation of despoliation and misery and the beginning of the construction of a just and fraternal society. It is the suppression of disorder and the creation of a new order. The initial chapters of Exodus describe the oppression in which the Jewish people lived in Egypt, in that 'land of slavery' (13:3; 20:2; Deut. 5:6): repression (1:10-11), alienated work (5:6-14), humiliations (1:13-14), enforced birth control policy (1:15-22). Yahweh then awakens the vocation of a liberator: Moses.<sup>10</sup>

Let us now see how, historically and in practice, liberation theology has moved in and across the Exodus paradigm.

## 2. DIACHRONIC UNFOLDING OF THE PARADIGM

It should not be thought that everything was present from the beginning, or that everything has already taken place. There has been a *history* (a

'diachrony' of the 'synchronous' moments of the paradigm) which still has to be written. What follows are introductory notes for that history.

In my view, the liberation theologians, as a 'school of prophets'—not as individuals of genius, since they are a community phenomenon in Latin America—have *gradually been 'taking consciousness' of the categories and relations indicated*. They have been semantically deepening their content and, as a result, starting from the 'consciousness of the Christian people' of Latin America themselves, the theology has been growing alongside, starting from and following the historical praxis of that people. Everything could not be expressed in the sixties because the Christian people had not lived through fundamental historical spiritual experiences. History determined the explicit gaining of consciousness of the moments of the Exodus paradigm in liberation theology. No theologians from one Latin American country alone could perform this task; it was the communal achievement of the 'school of prophets' stimulating each other, and based on the experience of the Christian people of various countries. Underplaying some theologians in liberation theology, or exaggerating the importance of some countries, impoverishes an ecclesial and continental phenomenon which is already a 'historical fact' which in a short time has gone round the small world of theology, and indeed of the Church.

On at least five levels there has been a *diachronic maturation* in the gaining of theological consciousness of the structures of the paradigm. First, there has been a move from 'personal' (abstract individual) and 'subjective' experience of *poverty (as a virtue) to poverty as a requirement for the whole Church*. The 'Church of the poor', it is now seen, must be a poor church (the pope, the Vatican, bishops, priests, activists, with a spirit of poverty, without any triumphalism, giving away unnecessary wealth, land, etc.). Secondly, there has been a move from this 'subjective' poverty, as a virtue or 'spiritual infancy', to the objective fact of 'the poor', *other people*. It is no longer Moses poor in the desert, but Moses discovering the poor man being ill-treated by the official (Exod. 2:11–12). Thirdly, there has been a move from the poor discovered in the spiritual experience of the Gospel to the definition of these poor (thanks to the hermeneutical mediation of the social sciences) as a 'class'—first in specific countries—and subsequently as a 'people' in other Latin American countries. The move has been from 'subjectivity' (poverty-virtue) to 'objectivity' (poor-class-people).

Fourthly, there has been a movement from these poor, the class, the people, as object of an 'option-for' (I, subject, opt-for another), to the affirmation of these poor, this class, this people, as the '*subject of the Church and history* (a move from the people as 'object' to the people as 'subject'). Only at this point do we have the emergence of the 'Church of the poor', not the 'poor' Church

of the Vatican II period with the emphasis on the poverty of bishops, priests, etc., but the Church which has as its 'privileged subject' the historical Christian people, made up of the real poor, flesh, bone, blood and oppression, whom the hierarchical structures (pope, Vatican, bishops) have to serve and keep as a point of reference. (A necessary stage here was the 'popular Church', though this has now been superseded.)

And, finally, the fifth aspect is that the diachrony is perhaps more in accord with Exodus. In other words, the Christian people are re-reading scripture in terms of their *actual historical situation*. Oppression, dictatorships, exploitation without hope, form a *Latin American Egypt* (S): today in Chile, but in 1976 in Brazil, Argentina, Nicaragua, etc. Pre-revolutionary situations are the Egyptian 'plagues' (today Guatemala, for example—point *x* on arrow *f*, the beginning of liberation). Revolutionary situations in the strict sense as in El Salvador are the going out into the desert (point *z* on arrow *f*). The wandering in the desert, the violent persecution by Pharaoh's armies, could be compared with the 'contras' in Nicaragua (this was the interpretation of the basic ecclesial communities in Esteli), Aaron's treason (then the priest, now the bishop?), the prophet's rage (Miguel D'Escoto?), etc. Finally there is the building of a new order (before the First Cuban National Ecclesial Encounter, ENEC, in February 1986 we seemed to catch sight already of a new order, which, however, is never the final kingdom). We shall look at these elements in turn in summary form, more as suggestions than a finished analysis.

### 3. THE FIRST SEMANTIC SHIFT: FROM THE 'INDIVIDUAL' TO THE 'POOR' CHURCH

In what was still the prehistory of liberation theology, in the 1950s, many people went through the spiritual experience of a *radical demand for poverty*. Examples are Charles de Foucauld, a Franciscan renewal in various areas of the Church, the presence of French worker priests in the refugee camps during the second world war. I myself was with Paul Gauthier in Nazareth between 1959 and 1961.<sup>11</sup> Our rule of life there was the text: 'The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to evangelise the poor' (See Isa. 61:1; Luke 4:18). Working in the Arab *Sikkun* of Nazareth (as a carpenter) or as fishermen on Tiberias (in the Ginnosar Kibbutz), we discovered the poor Jesus and Jesus the poor worker. At the beginning of the Second Vatican Council Mgr Hakim, the bishop of Nazareth, Mgr Hammer of Tournai and others, including Helder Camara, launched through the Nazareth team the idea of the 'Church of the poor', which Pope John XXIII took up personally. It was a personal, individual requirement of poverty, accepted by people from the pope and cardinals down to bishops, priests, religious and lay activists. The archbishop of Medellin left

his episcopal palace and went to live in a poor district. Mgr Manuel Larrain distributed his diocese's land for the sake of poverty, bishops began to sell their gold pectoral crosses and replaced them with crosses without precious metal. It was a shift from personal poverty, from the 'spiritual childhood' of Teresa of Lisieux, which made such a great impact on us in our adolescence, to community and ecclesial poverty on the part of the universal institution. The goal was a non-triumphalist Church, humble, a servant, poor. This took place in many parts of Latin America from 1952 to 1965, and it later had repercussions in the first works of liberation theology.

#### 4. SECOND SHIFT: FROM 'POVERTY' TO 'THE POOR'

'Subjective' poverty (on the part of the Christian or of the church) was still something of a preparatory stage (*M* in the schema or paradigm). It was the 'Put off your shoes from your feet' (Exod. 3:5), a demand and conversion, an anticipatory spiritual experience, and as such the origin of the liberation theology which was to come. But now the prophet (*M*) in the desert, converted, can begin a discourse. At the beginning the theme was 'faith and politics', the possibility of political commitment, on the part of university students (YCS) and worker activists (YCW). The Cuban revolution (in 1959, the same time as John XXIII launched the idea of a council) had encouraged many young people to go beyond a subjectivist spirituality; it was the time for action—remember Camilo Torres: faith and charity combined with effectiveness. The 'objectivity' of the demand for commitment led to the use of the social sciences, of even Marxist analysis if necessary (remember the Brazilian Acao Popular of the early sixties).

I believe that it was only when a revolutionary political idea was able to combine synthetically with the spiritual experience of subjective poverty that something fundamental took place. The idea was 'the poor'.<sup>12</sup> I recall Assmann's very sensible criticism of the ambiguity of the category 'poor'. By that time it had not been assimilated by liberation theology outside Argentina. The El Escorial meeting (1972) broached the idea explicitly: it was the first time that so many liberation theologians had come together. There the *idea of 'the poor' exploded as a category and a reality.*

It was now possible to talk, not of a 'poor' Church (a subjective and hierarchical approach), but of an 'option for the poor' (an objective approach). Note, however, that if the Church, the prophet (*M*), opts for the slave (*S* and arrow *e* on the diagram), that means that it is not yet poor by birth. It is a moment of maturation, but in no sense the end of the process or of the objective conversion of the Church.

## 5. THIRD SHIFT: FROM 'THE POOR' TO 'CLASS' AND 'PEOPLE'

*Who are 'the poor'?* The abstract poor or real people? Very soon, following El Escorial, where the idea was raised, the answer was given: *the poor are also a social 'class'*. But they can also be *'the people'*. The term 'poor', even in Marxist thought, cannot be identified with a social 'class', but has been used ambiguously to take advantage of its social and Gospel relevance. A Chilean and Peruvian strand, at the height of the Popular Unity government, placed more stress on class analysis. The southern cone, Argentine, line (with the experience of the return of Peronism) tended towards the category 'people'. 'Classism' had a partial aspect, as did 'populism'. What is certain is that both currents merged in their best aspects, around 1973. 'I have heard the cry of my people' (see the Exodus expression), the document of the bishops of the Brazilian North-East, marks, approximately, the beginning of the spiritual experience of a 'popular Church'. The Argentine element combined with the 'class' line but, at the same time, the category 'poor', previously absent, now became central.

In reality there was a twofold maturation (of *S*). On the one hand, as we have noted, the 'poor' Church (subjective) opted for 'the poor' (objective), but 'the poor'—thanks to the mediation of the social sciences and the political commitments of Christians—were now seen as a 'class', and even more, 'the people'. The idea of 'the poor' had been filled out, made historical, identifiable. It was now real, Latin American: *'the Latin American Christian people'*.

In addition, the Church, from being subjectively poor, now discovered itself as 'the people of God', as the (objectively) popular Church. This is no longer an option (options are made by the prophet of the prophetic Church, *M*), but an affirmation of itself: the people has become the subject (the *S* of the diagram is now the subject, 'the children of Israel'). In other words, the poor, the class, the people, for whom the objective option is made, *now became subjects*. This is a subjectivisation of the process, but not now focused on virtue, the individual virtue of poverty, as in the 1950s, but the subjectivisation of the poor themselves, who now have the 'consciousness' of being the people of God, the most hidden part of the Church, the necessary reference for evangelisation. The poor, who were evangelised (the 'basic ecclesial communities', etc.) *now become the evangelisers*.<sup>13</sup>

This last step, after the Nicaraguan revolution (1979), brings a realisation that it is no longer necessary to speak of a popular Church, and there is a return to John XXIII's description 'the Church of the poor'. Now, however, 'of the poor' does not mean just that the Church is poor, but—and this is fundamental—that the real, historical poor are the privileged 'subject' of the



Church itself. The implication is that the slaves (*S*) are 'subjects' of a possible process of liberation (arrow *f*).

The 'praxis of liberation' then also started to change direction, from the liberating praxis of prophets and heroes to the praxis of the people themselves in their liberation. It would be easy to demonstrate this 'semantic shift' in all the liberation theologians. Liberation theology, as a humble expression of this praxis, can also fulfil a critical prophetic function which enables this praxis to be reproduced (arrow *g*).

*Translated by Francis McDonagh*

#### Notes

1. See E. Dussel *El episcopado latinoamericano y la liberación de los pobres* (CRT, Mexico 1979).

2. Quoted in B. Lewis *La rebelión de Tupac Amaru*, (SELA Buenos Aires 1967) pp. 452–53. See E. Dussel, 'Introducción general' *Historia General de la Iglesia en América Latina* (Sígueme, Salamanca 1983) pp. 268–80.

3. Fidel Castro *La revolución cubana 1953–62* (Era, Mexico 1976) p. 39.

4. See Jean-Marc Ela 'Une Lecture africaine de l'Exode' in *Le Cri de l'homme africain* (L'Harmattan, Paris 1980) pp. 40–51.

5. Tissa Balasuriya *Planetary Theology* (Orbis Books, New York 1984) p. 184; Cyris Hee Suk Moon *Minjung Theology* (Orbis Books, New York 1986) p. 120. Also Emerito Nacpiti 'A Gospel for the New Filipino' in *Asian Voices in Theology* (Orbis Books, New York 1976) p. 129.

6. See E. Dussel *History and Theology of Liberation* (Orbis Books, New York 1976) pp. 155ff.

7. See Hugo Assman *Teología desde la praxis de la liberación* (Sígueme, Salamanca 1973) pp. 54–55: 'Opresión en Egipto, Exodo'; Samuel Silva Gotay *El pensamiento cristiano revolucionario en América Latina* (Sígueme, Salamanca 1981) pp. 141–47: 'La liberación del éxodo centro estructurante de la fe'; H. Bojorge 'Exodo y liberación' *Vispera* 19–20 (1970) 33ff; Andres Lanson *Liberar a los oprimidos* (Kaitas, Buenos Aires 1967); Pedro Negre 'Biblia y liberación' in *Cristianismo y sociedad* 24–25 (1970) pp. 49ff; see the reference to the Exodus in the meeting on liberation theology (at the beginning on development) in November 1969 in Mexico: *Inf. Cath. Internat.* 351 (1970) pp. 12ff; Jorge Pixley *Exodo. Una lectura evangélica y popular* (CUPSA, Mexico 1983); 'El Nuevo Testamento y el socialismo' *El apostol* 3/1 (1973) 14ff; R. Sartor 'Exodo-liberación: tema de actualidad para una reflexión teológica' *Revista Bíblica* 139/32 (1971) 73–77; Luis Rivera 'La liberación en el éxodo' *Revista Bíblica* 139/32 (1971) pp. 13–26. The list could be endless, since reference to the Exodus in liberation theology is continual. Even the second Instruction of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith ('Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation', 22 Mar 1986) deals with it in its para. 44: 'The exodus and Yahweh's liberating acts'. Nor can

we forget Porfirio Miranda *Marx and the Bible* (Orbis Books, New York 1974; SCM, London 1977 pp. 78–88ff; ‘The God of the Exodus’); Elsa Tamez *La Biblia de los oprimidos* (DEI, San Jose 1979); Segundo Galilea ‘La liberación como encuentro de la política y la contemplación’ *Espiritualidad y Liberación* (DEI, San Jose 1982) pp. 45ff; Ignacio Ellacuría *Freedom Made Flesh* (Orbis Books, New York 1976) p. 16; for the position of Ernesto Cardenal, see Phillip Berryman *The Religious Roots of Rebellion* (Orbis Books, New York 1984) pp. 20, 23, etc.; S. Croato ‘Liberación y libertad. Reflexiones hermenéuticas en torno al Antiguo Testamento’ *Revista Bíblica* 32 (1971) 3–7; *Liberación y libertad* (Mundo Nuevo, Buenos Aires 1973).

8. In ‘Pueblo de Dios y la liberación del hombre’ *Fichas ISAL* 3/26 (1979) p. 9.

9. See J. Pixley *Exodo*, p. 19.

10. Gustavo Gutierrez *A Theology of Liberation* (Orbis Books, New York 1973 and SCM Press, London 1974) pp. 155–56. See also the texts on pp. 155–60 and 287ff.

11. See Methol Ferre ‘La Iglesia latinoamericana de Rio a Puebla (1955–79)’ *Historia de la Iglesia* ed. Fliche-Martin (EDICEP, Valencia 1981) suppl. vol. 1 pp. 697–725; Gustavo Gutierrez ‘Teología de la Liberación y ciencias sociales’, duplicated text. See Paul Gauthier *Les Pauvres, Jésus et l’Eglise* (Ed. Universitaires, Paris 1963) pp. 101ff: ‘De Nazaret vers Rome’. I remember the little community of Paul, Andrés and myself—which I left in 1961 to start my theological studies in France. The community’s rule of life contains the following statement at the beginning: ‘Its aim is to live the Gospel in the light of that text from Luke 4 in which Jesus, quoting Isaiah 61, reveals his messianic anointing and his mission to evangelise *the poor*’ (Gauthier p. 113).

12. This was made possible by the convergence of the Nazareth experience (1959–61) and a reading of E. Levinas (1969): the ‘poor’ (Isa. 61:1; Luke 4:18), the Latin American poor, the poor as real people and as a theological category (see E. Dussel *Para una ética de la liberación latinoamericana* (1970) (Buenos Aires 1973) I, Chap. 3).

13. See Jon Sobrino *Resurrección de la verdadera Iglesia. Los pobres, lugar teológico de la ecclesiología* (Santander 1981).