

# EXODUS EXPERIENCE

## Language and Truth

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### 1. Introduction

The Exodus experience is at the heart of the Hebrew Bible and further it is one of the greatest biblical paradigms. In the ancient world there was no distinction between the cultic aspects of the worship of the gods and the social activities of the state. It is the Greco-Roman world that made such a distinction.<sup>1</sup> In Hebrew religion there was never a separation between the secular history and the religious history of salvation. Liberation has always been experienced in Israel as a historical reality which nevertheless is primarily and profoundly religious in character.<sup>2</sup> In the Indian religions, too, we do not find such a separation. Today this distinction is evident in most of the contemporary societies where each recognizes the role of the other, even though the temptation to dictate terms for the other is quite evident.

Religious experience that results from intense awareness stands at the core of religions giving them all needed vitality.<sup>3</sup> Such fundamental religious experiences help to bind together people in a common bond. The experience surrounding Exodus was determinant in the formation of Israelite religion. The Exodus of the biblical narratives is not just an impartial and impersonal account; rather, it is a spring board of creative and transformative interpretation.

Through history and the process of interpretation, the Exodus experience has generated a reservoir of meaning found articulated in the cultic celebrations, faith, life, and theology of the Israelites. This remains

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<sup>1</sup>W. C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991, 23; see J. P. Schanz, *Introduction to the Sacraments*, New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1983, 2.

<sup>2</sup>P. Lapide, "Exodus in the Jewish Tradition" in *Exodus: A Lasting Paradigm*, ed., B. Van Iersel and A. Weiler, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1987, 48

<sup>3</sup>L. King, *Introduction to Religion*, New York-Evanston: Harper and Row, 1968, 28.

dynamic, giving rise to new experiences and expressions. In the process, the Exodus experience is always a living memory and an announcement of hope for the future.<sup>4</sup> This implies that even today the Exodus experience is full of meaning.

The Exodus language of the Bible is a witness to the accumulation of meaning this experience has gathered through centuries of lived experiences, expressions, and interpretations. Truth finds its expression in language which is determined by the historical context. Hence the language reveals the truth only against the context in which it finds its expression. Any attempt to uproot language and hence truth from its historical context is *eisegesis* rather than *exegesis*. Meaning has to follow from the expressed language and hence adequate attention is to be given to the religious nature of the biblical language to draw its genuine meaning.

In the Greek world, truth is the logical truth, philosophical truth, and historical truth, which can be condensed in a phrase or a scientific enunciation. In the biblical world, truth is the correspondence with the promise. Religious truth is the fidelity of God to his promises. It is accepted in faith, with the expectation that God will realize the promises in the future. Hence, Jesus is the truth (John 14:6) because God has kept all the promises in him who was not 'yes and no', but the 'yes', Amen (2 Corinthians 1:19-20).

In the Exodus we find the promises of progeny and the land given to the patriarchs being fulfilled. The truth behind the exodus experience cannot be understood without its religious character. An attempt to read the Exodus experience without its religious character is a misinterpretation of the intention of the biblical authors which no serious interpreter can subscribe to.

## **2. The Exodus: The Story and the Experience**

The story of Exodus as summarized in the little Credo of Deuteronomy 26:5-9 is as follows: a group of people went to Egypt seeking their fortune; they were ordinary people with nothing to take pride in comparison with the power, wealth, and fame of the Egyptians, Mesopotamians or any recognizable kingdom of that time. In the course of time they grew in number. The Egyptians became suspicious of their growth and began to oppress them. Under the inspired leadership of Moses, and guided and strengthened by divine power, they escaped from Egypt and journeyed

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<sup>4</sup>J. S. Croatto, *Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981, 14.

through the desert making a covenant with Yahweh, their God from the time of the Exodus and finally settling down in Canaan. The experience related to the departure from Egypt, the journey through the desert, the Covenant at Sinai, and the settlement in Canaan became a most valued patrimony for these people. This story we understand as the Exodus experience.

The Exodus story is the master story of the Hebrew Bible. A story becomes the master story if it is the pivotal point that holds the rest together. Since in the Hebrew Bible, the Exodus experience serves this purpose it can rightly be called the master story. According to M. Goldberg such master stories answer questions of identity, responsibility and destiny of one’s existence by information and formation.<sup>5</sup>

The Exodus story is not just the master story of the Old Testament, rather, in it one can find the thread that connects the whole of salvation history and the whole Bible in a unified whole. We find the echo of the most ancient song of the Bible, the Exodus song, sung by Miriam and the other women at the Sea of Reeds, “Sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously” (Exodus 15:21) in the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, allowing us a glimpse into the ultimate Promised Land. We see the great crowds throng the shores of the crystal sea with the harps of God in their hands singing the victory song of Moses (Exodus 15:1-18), the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb: “Great and wonderful are thy deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are thy ways, O King of the ages! Who shall not fear and glorify thy name, O Lord? For thou alone art holy” (Revelation 15:3-4). This tells us of the impact of the Exodus Story not only in the Old Testament, but in the entire Bible.

The Exodus is the most fascinating and captivating experience in the Bible. It has all the necessary ingredients of a great epic: a search for greener pastures and fortunes, pyramids, pharaohs and slaves, torture and killings, rich and poor, mercy and cruelty, challenges and failures, risks and escapes, plagues and calamities, election and rebellion, mighty rivers and endless deserts, frightening mountains and perilous valleys, heroic and treacherous deeds, divine manifestations and miracles, dreams and frustrations, near-death experiences and escapes, feasts and famine, great love stories and many other larger-than-life adventures. Furthermore, the Exodus has inspired revolutions and insurrections, the production of numerous films, writings of historical value and those of fiction, and the

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<sup>5</sup>M. Goldberg, *Jews and Christians Getting Our Stories Straight*, Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1991, 1.

creation of numerous works of art. In other words, the Exodus has been a powerhouse for human inspiration and imagination. Who can forget such an all-absorbing experience? So it is not a wonder that the Exodus has such a constitutive role in Hebrew religion.

The Exodus experience has a great transformative effect in the lives of the Hebrew People. There are multiple reasons for its importance in the Hebrew religion.<sup>6</sup> First, it was an identity-giving experience. The experience surrounding Exodus shaped Israel as a people with an intimate relationship to Yahweh as their God and they as His chosen people. It is in this Exodus that they find God's promise fulfilled and they journey forward with hope. Before this event, neither were they a people nor did they have an identity. The memory of this experience became the anchor in their life.

Second, the Exodus is the greatest salvific experience in the Hebrew Bible. The experience of being saved helped them to see their own history as salvation history. The haggadic service is eloquent testimony of the religious experience of the Jewish community in striving for continual participation in the redemption of the past with an intense longing for deliverance in the future: "Now we are here, but next year may we be in the land of Israel! Now we are slaves, but next year may we be free men!"<sup>7</sup> In the light of the New Testament, this longing for deliverance and redemption assumes further implication: "God's redemption is not simply a political liberation from an Egyptian tyrant, but involves the struggle with sin and evil and the transformation of life."<sup>8</sup> In the Exodus we see a radical change and a new beginning, effected solely through the mighty saving acts of Yahweh.

Third, in the Exodus, Israel experienced the divine interest in her history and particularly in the critical moments of her life. "God is not abstract, static, and impartial; the God revealed in Exodus liberates, enlivens, redeems, calls, negotiates, forgives, challenges, and journeys."<sup>9</sup> Thus the Exodus experience served as a beacon of the hope of Israel. Yahweh becomes not merely the 'Holy Other,' but the 'one who sides with His people.' Israel understood Yahweh as a God who acted in their history on their behalf.

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<sup>6</sup>G. Edayadiyil, *Israel in the Light of Exodus Event*, Bangalore: ATC, 2009, 7-8.

<sup>7</sup>C. Roth, *The Haggadah*, London/JRS/NY: The Soncino Press Ltd., 1975, 9.

<sup>8</sup>B. S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, OTL; London: SCM, 1974, 213.

<sup>9</sup>S. J. Binz, *The God of Freedom and Life*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993, 8.

Fourth, the Exodus is a revelatory experience. It is the fundamental and archetypal religious experience through which the people come to know Yahweh and to know themselves as a people. It was a passage from slavery to freedom, from darkness to light, and from death to life. This is found expressed in historical, creational, symbolic, and mythological languages in the Exodus story.

God reveals himself in and through history. The Bible presents the Exodus as the first and pivotal God experience of the biblical people who became a nation in Egypt (Exodus 1:7) in accordance with the promise given to the patriarchs (Genesis 12:2). The Exodus experience they transmitted from generation to generation as the epic story of their birth pangs. “This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual ordinance” (Exodus 12:14). Exodus is the story of Israel’s historic origin and it is second to none. For the people of Israel, all the further revelations of God in their history were perceived primarily in the light of this fundamental experience, and it became the most important paradigm in their history and religion.

The Exodus experience set the people of Israel on a forward movement: a movement of people in history;<sup>10</sup> a movement in faith, worship, and theology; and a movement in creative interpretation. In short the Exodus experience set in motion a historical, theological, religious, and hermeneutic movement. The Exodus memory gave courage and hope to the people as they faced oppression in their history. Their first experience of liberation was a call to go beyond Egypt and the rule of Pharaoh to know Yahweh and their self-identity as a people. The Exodus was not a static event, but a continuously energizing force in their history.<sup>11</sup>

We may ask: How were the Hebrew people able to keep their identity as a people even after they were in exile for about two thousand

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<sup>10</sup>The Bible has a special vision of time, spelled out in the Genesis accounts of creation. Here time is not dependent upon the creation of the heavenly bodies of sun and moon; but they themselves exist under the sovereignty of a God who assigns to them their special work and function, J. Muilenburg, “The Biblical View of Time,” *Harvard Theological Review* 54 (1961), 231. ‘History’ unfolds itself within the coordinates of ‘time and space.’ The notion of ‘time and space’ is related to the created universe as such, while the notion of ‘history’ means human history. Hence the notions of ‘history’ and ‘time and space’ are conceived as different, namely, the notion of ‘time and space’ coming prior to ‘history.’ In short, it is in time and space that history evolves, until history enters into God’s time.

<sup>11</sup>Edayadiyil, *Israel in the Light of Exodus Event*, 3.

years? What is the source of such an unflinching hope? How could this people keep the fire of their community-feeling intact down through the centuries? How did they cope with the adversities of life through all those years? There is only one answer: the living memory of the Exodus experience.

The Exodus story served as the greatest motivator and community builder in the journey of the Hebrew people. “You shall tell your child on that day, ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt’” (Exodus 13:8). The Exodus was at the heart of the OT people as a vivid and living experience. “And when your children ask you, ‘What do you mean by this observance?’ you shall say, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses.’ And the people bowed down and worshiped” (Exodus 12:26-27). It is in the context of liturgical celebrations, in catechetical contexts, and in family gatherings that this experience was shared, memorized, and transmitted from generation to generation by word of mouth.

### **3. The Exodus: A Perennial Human Experience**

In the life of individuals and communities we find continuous exiles and exoduses. Hence people of all generations can gather inspiration and enrichment from the Exodus experience. It can give courage and hope to people as they face contradictions and oppressions. The call, *shallah ‘et ‘ammî*, “Let my people go!” has a great motivating and inspiring power. It is the call to go beyond the tempting land of Egypt and the oppressive rule of Pharaoh to know Yahweh and their self-identity as a people. The Exodus was not a static event, but a dynamic one which constantly challenged them to a new level of understanding and commitment in the face of new challenges.

The Exodus carries with it all the essential characteristics of human experience. The experiences of captivity, abandonment, persecution, fear of death, the cry and struggle for freedom are all part and parcel of human existence, whether it is physical, psychological, moral or spiritual; hence, the Exodus experience captivates the attention and is a beacon of hope for every individual and community. The past historical experience enlivens the present experience with the hope of God as liberator.

The Exodus experience obliged Israel to be merciful to others with a sense of social justice. The Pentateuch and Prophetic books were univocal in criticizing the Israelites’ for their deviant ways and the oppression of the

poor. Yahweh asked them to be a people of justice. The primary reason for such a demand was that they themselves had been slaves (Exodus 22:21). What they became was due to God’s blessing, and now they as a people had to be a blessing for all the marginalized – the poor, the orphan, the widows, the outcasts and the foreigners (Leviticus 19:9-10). The Exodus experience was a learning lesson for the Hebrew people. Faith is needed to learn from such experiences.

#### **4. The Exodus: the Archetypal Experience of the Bible**

In every religion there are archetypal experiences stemming from its origin. These exert far-reaching influence on the religion. Such experiences are often shrouded in mystery. The Exodus experience is an archetypal image in the story of the Bible. Since it comes from a remote historical past, the Exodus carries with it many complexities. This is partly due to its Semitic background in which what was handed from generation to generation through oral tradition was mythical-historical in nature. Furthermore, the Exodus was a religious experience. Faith, cult, theology, and successive interpretations played a central role in shaping the biblical picture of the event. This multifaceted nature of the Exodus does not destroy its historicity, but the history surrounding it is presented from a specific theological point of view.

There is a surplus-of-meaning in life and in all human praxis that is especially concentrated in the archetypal experience that sustains a group’s way of being.<sup>12</sup> The community sifts and adds to the received experience. This is evident in the later biblical tradition that sees Exodus experience as an archetypal experience. For Deuteronomy, the archetype of Sabbath is the Exodus experience (Deuteronomy 5:15). In Isaiah 51:9-10, the old exodus is seen described in terms of the creation myth and in turn becomes the archetype of a new Exodus, the return from the Babylonian exile.<sup>13</sup> Many of Israel’s journeys, both the prior ones and the subsequent ones to the Exodus as retold through the powerful and definitional lens of the Exodus memory. For example, Abraham’s departure to Ur (Genesis 15:7) sounds like an anticipation of Exodus. The crossing of the Jordan (Joshua 4:22-23) reminds us of crossing the Reed Sea. In the crisis with the Philistines, the narrative (1 Samuel 4:1-7:1) has

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<sup>12</sup>Croatto, *Exodus*, 3.

<sup>13</sup>F. M. Cross, “The Song of the Sea and Canaanite Myth,” in *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1973, 144.

Exodus overtones. Even the Philistines are mindful of the God of the Exodus (1 Samuel 4:7-8). Amos appeals to the Exodus memory (Amos 9:7).<sup>14</sup> This archetypal character helps the Exodus to become the foundational experience for Israel.

### **5. The Exodus the Foundational Experience of the Hebrew Bible**

Most of the world religions have as their founder some specific person, i.e., Christ is the founder of Christianity, Mohammed of Islam, Buddha of Buddhism, Mahavirajain of Jainism, Confucius of Confucianism, Guru Govind of Sikhism, etc. From that perspective, Moses is the founder of the Israelite religion, but he is more a catalyst than a founder – at least that was the mind of the biblical authors. What is unique to the Israelite religion is that it is based not on one person, but on an experience, the Exodus.

Even though there are different opinions about the centre of the Hebrew Bible, the Exodus can be seen as the foundational God-experience for the Hebrew people.<sup>15</sup> Of the various epoch-making events of Jewish faith, Fackenheim considers the Exodus Event as the root experience.<sup>16</sup> Through interpretation the Exodus experience has become the foundational faith of the people of Israel, its primal experience, and its primal election.<sup>17</sup>

The Hebrew people came to know Yahweh through the experience of Exodus. Israel formed itself as an independent entity after the groups came together to form a political and religious entity after the 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE. It was a time of great polarization in the biblical world, especially in the land of Canaan. Of the various groups that appeared at this time of history, only the people of Israel survived as a separate nation and the Exodus experience remained as its foundation. In Israel, the Exodus experience served (even more than political unity) as the unique bond that knitted the groups together as a people. In Israel's history the Exodus is so crucial that earlier happenings and subsequent experiences are seen in its light. In the history of biblical Israel, the people knew Yahweh as the saving God, a God of freedom and life and knew themselves as the people of Yahweh from the time of Exodus. This experience is crucial in the Hebrew Bible.

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<sup>14</sup>Brueggemann, *Theology of the OT*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997, 177.

<sup>15</sup>Edayadiyil, *Exodus Event: its Historical Kernel*, Bangalore: ATC, 2007, 7.

<sup>16</sup>E. L. Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History*, New York: University Press, 1970, 8-14.

<sup>17</sup>H. D. Preuss, *OT Theology*, vol. 1, ET, L. G. Perdue, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995, 1:98.

## 6. The Exodus Experience is Fundamental in the Life of Israel

The Exodus is at the heart of the Hebrew Scriptures which the great prophets and wise men of Israel retold and developed for later times. The Exodus with its historical, theological, and interpretative dynamics supplies the core of the faith, theology, and liturgical life of the Hebrew religion and the reason for Israel’s existence as a nation.

The Exodus is the key that opens the faith of Israel. Unless we begin from this central experience, neither Israel’s faith nor the formation of its religious traditions and sacred books are understandable. The more Israel becomes engaged in forming itself as a people, the more it focuses on that decisive and foundational experience, which, therefore, is represented in creational language. Croatto is of the opinion that it was only after Israel had crystallized its consciousness of national being and its spirituality around the climatic and fundamental experience of Exodus that it formed the theological elaboration found in the first chapters of Genesis. The entire Exodus experience made a deep impression on Israel as a very profound experience.<sup>18</sup>

For the people of Israel the Exodus came first, and then came Yahweh worship. The story of the Golden Calf in Exodus 32:4 and the account of Jeroboam’s calves in 1 Kings 12:28 suggest the pre-eminence of the Exodus experience. Loewenstamm finds in the cry, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt,” the assumption that the deliverance from Egypt was indeed a divine act and that, by performing it, the deity who did so had become Israel’s God. Yahweh is identified as the God of Exodus.<sup>19</sup>

In all of the Hebrew Bible, the Exodus is an event to which all other biblical books are in some way connected. In Israelite tradition, the Exodus was the constitutive of their history. In Israel, religion served as the unique bond that knitted the separate groups together as a people and Exodus remained as its foundation.

The Jewish people understand their vocation and destiny in the light of the revealing experience of Exodus which made them a people and became their undying memory. This is evident in the cultic life of the Israel. Just as the Christians remember and relive the sacrifice of Jesus Christ in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, so the Jews, even today, recall and make contemporary the Exodus as they celebrate the Passover.

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<sup>18</sup>Croatto, *Exodus*, 12-13, 31.

<sup>19</sup>S. E. Loewenstamm, *The Evolution of Exodus Traditions*, ET, B. J. Schwartz, Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1992, 53.

All the pilgrimage feasts are in some way associated with the Exodus experience: the Passover with the Egyptian Exodus, the Feast of Weeks with the giving of the Covenant at Sinai and the Feast of Tents with forty years of desert wandering. Yes, the Exodus is at the heart of Israel's liturgical life.

Israel's history, worship, theology, nation building, and way of life are anchored in the Exodus event. It is in the light of the Exodus that Israel has lived and written her history. The traditions of the ancestors, the future hope of deliverance and guidance are all anchored in this primordial experience of Yahweh as deliverer. Yahweh is not only the creator, but also the Lord of history and the One who controls all events.

The first community experience of Yahweh was the deliverance from Egypt (Exodus 1:1-15:21) and this has henceforth served as the basic reference point for Israel in her national and religious life and in all her history. With its historical roots, though vague, the Exodus experience stands as the fundamental and foundational event of the people of Israel. The promise made to the patriarchs flows to it and the future hope of the people flows from it. Thus, the Exodus is fulfilment and hope at the same time.

## 7. Language of the Exodus

The Exodus employs historical, creational, symbolic, and mythological languages to express its religious character. This is evident in the story of Moses, the plague narratives, and especially in the Sea drama which stands at the heart of the Exodus experience. The Exodus narrates the story of the movement of people in history and thus, it employs historical language.<sup>20</sup> Apart from this fundamental historical language, it employs creational, symbolic and mythological languages.<sup>21</sup>

The creation language is evident from the way Exodus narratives employ the images from the first creation. The day of deliverance in

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<sup>20</sup>The research of G. Edayadiyil, *The Exodus Event: its Historical Kernel* is done from such a perspective.

<sup>21</sup>R. J. Clifford, "The Exodus in the Christian Bible: The Case of 'Figural' Reading," *Theological Studies* 63 (2002) 348-9; see G. VoRad, *OT Theology*, Vol 1, ET, D. M. G. Stalker, New York: Harper & Row, 1962, 178. "The language of our account has a symbolic and mythical structure. The *event* is not mythological, for it has nothing to do with the primordial history of the gods (the 'intention' of which, on the other hand, does not cease to be 'truthful'). Rather, the event has to do with the historical experience of slavery and salvation that the Hebrews had known in Egypt," Croatto, *Exodus*, 25.

Exodus (Exodus 12:2; 14) was regarded as the first day of creation, and the deliverance out of the darkness of chaos was the first act of creation.<sup>22</sup> Both in creation and in Exodus, God worked the impossible: defeating the chaos He brought new life.<sup>23</sup> The waters of creation and the parting of the sea are closely connected,<sup>24</sup> representing the Exodus as a rebirth and the creation of the people of Israel. Creation and the Exodus were behind the commandment to observe the Sabbath (Exodus 20:11; cf. Genesis 2:1-3; Exodus 31:17; Deuteronomy 5:15). We see in Psalms the creation language and the Exodus language of redemption linked together (Psalms 136:1-15; 135:6-9; 77; 74).

The birth of Israel, in the Exodus, took place at the beginning of the year. In Jewish tradition the creation of the world was similarly attributed to the beginning of the year. The Exodus, like the creation of the world, marked the beginning of something that was utterly new.<sup>25</sup> Exodus was seen “as *an original event*, and one that was decisive for the creation of Israel as a free people; what is original acquires a *foundational character* and takes on a unique prestige. This is why the Exodus story is sometimes told in ‘creational’ language (Isaiah 51:9-10; Psalms 74:12-15) and the Targumic tradition connects Exodus-creation with the first two sacred nights of creation.”<sup>26</sup>

For the author of Exodus, Egypt is considered as an embodiment of the forces of chaos, threatening to undo God’s creation. In this context, Pharaoh’s oppressive measures against Israel were viewed as fundamentally anti-life and anti-creational. The Exodus was ultimately for

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<sup>22</sup>D. Bergant, “An Anthropological Approach to Biblical Interpretation: The Passover Supper in Ex 12: 1-20 as a Case Study,” *Semeia* 67 (1994), 57.

<sup>23</sup>B. S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 237; J. B. Segal, *The Hebrew Passover from the Earliest Times to A.D. 70*, London: OUP, 1963, 188.

<sup>24</sup>“The identification of the Red Sea with the deep suggests that even in the biblical period there was some connection between the waters of creation (see, e.g., תהו in Genesis 1:2) and the parting of the sea: as God gathered the waters together and dry land appeared in Genesis 1:9; God separated the waters of the Red Sea to reveal the dry land so that the Israelites could walk through,” P. Enns, *Exodus Retold*, Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1997, 70-1.

<sup>25</sup>Y. Zakovitch, “*And You Shall Tell Your Son...*”: *The Concept of the Exodus in the Bible*, Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1991, 101.

<sup>26</sup>J. S. Croatto, “The Socio-historical and Hermeneutical Relevance of the Exodus,” in *Exodus: A Lasting Paradigm*, ed., B. Van Iersel and A. Weiler, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1987, 128; See for creational language, G. Edayadiyil, *Israel in the Light of Exodus Event*, 161-163.

the sake of the entire creation; not just for Israel. The universal character of the event was made clear by the re-creative imagery underlined in the event.<sup>27</sup> The destruction of the anti-creational forces on all levels, including that of the cosmic, was not a re-creation of the original creation. It was not calling for a cyclic image of creation, but a spiral one with the intent to create the nation of Israel. The song of the Sea marked the beginning of the creation (birth) of a people.<sup>28</sup>

Patriarchal stories and promises were a prelude to the saving experience of Exodus. It was in the context of the Exodus that patriarchal narratives achieved their relevance. What the people experienced in the Exodus was projected back to Genesis. The eloquent pages of Genesis could not have been written without a prior deep experience and reflection on the Exodus. Genesis is an 'interpretation' of Exodus, expressed in the language of the origins of the ontological 'project' of human beings.<sup>29</sup>

The parting of the Sea of Reeds is similar both in nature and language to the presentation of the creation in the Canaanite epic of the sea's rebellion. Echoes of God's primeval war with the sea are numerous in the Bible.<sup>30</sup> The Exodus language evokes the ancient Near Eastern combat myths of the gods' conflict with the dragon and the sea.<sup>31</sup> There are other biblical texts that interpret the Exodus in cosmic language (Psalms 74:12-14; Isaiah 51:9-11). But Yahweh is in absolute control over the powers of the cosmos and thus the religious language of Exodus finds a unique character. There are texts that identify the monster of chaos with Pharaoh/Egypt (Ezekiel 29:3-5; 32:2-8; Psalms 87:4; Isaiah 30:7; Jeremiah 46:7-8). Halpern finds the mythological elements as highlighting the event and Yahweh's power show a fitting finale for the drama of the Exodus Event.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>T. E. Fretheim, "The Plagues as Ecological signs of Historical Disaster," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 1991, 357, 385, 392-3.

<sup>28</sup>B. W. Anderson, *Creation in the OT*, Philadelphia, PA: FP, 1984, 5; T. E. Fretheim, "The Reclamation of Creation," *Int* 45 (1991), 357-9.

<sup>29</sup>J. S. Croatto, *Exodus*, 31.

<sup>30</sup>Y. Zakovitch, *The Concept of the Exodus in the Bible*, 101.

<sup>31</sup>See, W. H. C. Propp, *Exodus*, vol. 1, New York: Doubleday, 1999, 34, 555-60.

<sup>32</sup>"One characterizes the historical by allusion to the mythic. The historical experience is real, programmatic, the overt referent. Myth furnishes a metaphorical language with which to describe it; the event casts no light on the myth, but the myth provides insight into the event," B. Halpern, "Halpern: YHWH the Revolutionary," in *Jews, Christians and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures*, ed., A. O. Bellis and J. S. Kaminsky, SBL SymS; Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2000, 202.

## 8. Truth of the Exodus

If truth is what “it is,” then the biblical narrative of Exodus is an accumulation of interpretations. If truth is what is “perceived,” then the biblical narrative of Exodus stems from the biblical faith of the people who saw Yahweh as the Lord of the universe and of human destiny. For contemporary man the truth of Exodus means its historicity.

The search for the historical kernel of Exodus will reveal the realization of the biblical people that in some miraculous way, Yahweh had brought them out of Egypt, the land of oppression and in that process made them a people. The presence of the groups resembling the proto-Israelites in the land of Egypt and Canaan, the persecution of the Hebrews in Egypt, the possibility of the Exodus in relation to the historical, sociological, and archaeological studies against the background of the biblical tradition, reinforce that there was present in Egypt, as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, a group who were later to be known as the Israelites. These people, although not of the magnitude that the Bible describes in its Exodus narratives, would later possess the land of Canaan.<sup>33</sup>

Often our reading of the Exodus becomes problematic because the biblical language presents a fusion of faith, history, myth, memory, theology, and interpretation, all in the one story of the heroic birth of the nation of Israel.<sup>34</sup> Such writing is not a problem with the ancient writers, but it is with us who interpret this language with our modern mind-set looking at historicity as veracity. The problem is not theirs but ours, who fail to understand them and their literary style and milieu. The search for truth behind the Exodus experience is a necessary one as there is a temptation to write it off as fictional and mythical in character.

## 9. Historical Writings of the Past

W. W. Hallo and J. Van Seters took the Dutch historian J. Hutzinga’s definition of history: “History is the intellectual form in which a civilization renders account to itself of its past” to interpret the Greek historiography. According to Van Seters, Historical Writing is a genre in which a civilization or nation tried to render an account of its collective past.<sup>35</sup> Early Greek historiographers, like the other people of the biblical

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<sup>33</sup>Edayadiyil, *Exodus Event: its Historical Kernel*, 112.

<sup>34</sup>Edayadiyil, *Exodus Event: its Historical Kernel*, 129.

<sup>35</sup>S. L. McKenzie, “Historiography, Old Testament,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3, Freedman, David Noel, ed., New York: Doubleday, 1992, 418-19;

world, developed the genre of *historía* in terms of rational, critical research and as an evaluative science, in contrast to the more imaginative literary and poetic traditions of epic and mythology. The criterion for this discipline of historiography was historicity: the truth of the events recounted.<sup>36</sup>

J. Van Seters identified some features of history writing, which illumine the history writings of the biblical people, in the works of Herodotus, the father of history. There are two features in Herodotus's work that make the intellectual content of it: a) Research and b) Record of traditions. The term history comes from the Greek word, "historia" meaning, "investigations" or "researches." Herodotus was engaged in personal research/investigation. He gathered first-hand information of subjects that he wrote. He further recorded the traditions that he received with his own introductions and conclusions. Some Greek historians used genealogies to frame narratives or composed speeches and invented stories and sources to fill gaps in the narratives.<sup>37</sup>

Further, Van Seters observes that the primary purpose of history writings in ancient Greece was not to relate past events "as they really happened," but rather was to "render an account" of the past that explained the present, i.e., to interpret the meaning of the past for the present, showing how the "causes" of the past brought about the "effects" of the present. This cause-effect explanation was not scientific in nature, but moral and religious in character. Thus Greek historians used myth or legend as causes of the past leading to the present. These were the only sources available for the distant past, which had not produced written records. Even historians who did not believe the myths were compelled to use them because they had no other sources. These historians often "rationalized" the myths they incorporated by offering a more "scientific" interpretation of them.<sup>38</sup>

## 10. History Writing in Israel

Biblical historiographers resemble the techniques of the ancient Greek historians to render an account of their national past. They, too, used genealogies to frame narratives, composed speeches, and invented stories

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T. L. Thompson, "Israelite Historiography," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3, Freedman, David Noel, ed., New York: Doubleday, 1992, 208.

<sup>36</sup>Thompson, "Israelite Historiography," 206.

<sup>37</sup>McKenzie, "Historiography, Old Testament," 419.

<sup>38</sup>McKenzie, "Historiography, Old Testament," 419.

and sources to fill gaps in the narratives. In the light of the history writings of the Greek, Van Seters identified some principles that help to understand similar writings in ancient Israel. They are the following: 1. History writing was a specific form of tradition in its own right rather than the accidental accumulation of traditional material; 2. History writing was not for reporting the past accurately, but for identifying the reasons of the past (moral) that give rise to the present; and 3. History writing was national or corporate in nature. Biblical authors collected stories and traditions, which they fashioned into literary products with national interest. Biblical historiography as an intellectual tradition of morally and religiously critical commentary of Israel’s past, is reflected in the biblical text. These traditions focus on themes such as promise, covenant, divine providence, monarchy, temple, etc.<sup>39</sup>

### **11. The Exodus Experience and the National Interest**

In Israelite historiographical writing, national interest is very pertinent. This form of writing is etiology, a story that explains the cause or origin of a given phenomenon – a cultural practice or social custom, a biological circumstance, even a geological formation. These etiologies can be imaginative, at times even fictional. Hence etiology presents some explanations of the present conditions and circumstances based on past causes. The Bible’s historical literature is etiological in nature as it seeks to “render an account” of the past – to provide an explanation for circumstances or conditions in the historian’s day. Whether the past events or causes that he describes actually took place or not was not the only concern of an ancient historian. This does not mean everything is fictional; most of them are based on actual events of the past. Accordingly, the ancient historical writings were free to incorporate non-historical narratives. Hence the attempt to read Israelite history of the Bible from the modern perspective as strictly a record of actual events is to misinterpret its genre and is a distortion of the intension of the biblical author.<sup>40</sup>

In the experience surrounding the Exodus, the nation of Israel found its historic origin. In this sense, if we look at the Exodus experience, it is in line with the ancient Mesopotamian, Greek, Egyptian and Hittites historical writings. In the same vein as the above argument, for ancient Israelite historians, Yahweh was the ultimate explanation for the nation’s origin and its present status. As for the ancient Greek historians, so for the

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<sup>39</sup>McKenzie, “Historiography, Old Testament,” 419-420.

<sup>40</sup>McKenzie, “Historiography, Old Testament,” 420.

Bible, history was written for an ideological purpose. History writing was theology.<sup>41</sup> The biblical accounts place Yahweh as the One who demands exclusive allegiance because of Israel's experience of Yahweh in Exodus. Only in the Bible do we find such an extensive, exclusive, and accompanying importance given to God, in relation to all the events of the people. In the Bible, the principal recipient of Yahweh's mercy is people, even though it is associated with the royal house.<sup>42</sup>

## 12. The Referent of Exodus

The referent of historical and fictional writings helps us to distinguish them in the proper way. Both fictional and historical narratives speak from the historical context of the narrator in terms of what has happened, whether real or imagined. So they speak of a past. What distinguishes historiography from other narrative genre is neither its content nor mode of speech, and certainly not such tangential issues as its plausibility and verisimilitude, but rather its referent as perceived by the author. The referent of historiography lies within a world of the past understood as true and real, and as probable in terms of evidence. The referent of fictional literature, on the other hand, lies within a conceptual realm, understood as valid and possible, in terms of the author's own making. Hence the distinction between the two lies within the intentionality of the author and in his assumptions regarding the reality of the past of which they write. When the authors' intension is clear and explicit, there is no difficulty in distinguishing historical from fictional literature.<sup>43</sup> Even though the biblical literature is complex in nature, the religious character of the narratives makes it rather easy to understand the intension of the author. For the biblical authors the referent of the Exodus experience lies within a world of the past understood as true, real, and miraculous. It is mysterious because it is a divine act and not of human origin.

The Exodus serves as one of the most prominent themes and core experiences of the Hebrew Bible. We have plenty of Exodus-related materials in the Bible, but the question is: How historical and truthful are the biblical sources? We have no evidence in history for a people called "Israel," as existing prior to the 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE. And none of the extra-biblical sources directly substantiate the biblical story of the Exodus. A

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<sup>41</sup>McKenzie, "Historiography, Old Testament," 420.

<sup>42</sup>George Braulik, "Introduction to the Deuteronomistic History," *International Bible Commentary*, Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1992, 517-524.

<sup>43</sup>Thompson, "Israelite Historiography," 207.

student of Exodus, even when accepting that the Exodus narrative of the Bible is not a chronology of events, would ask the question: Does the Exodus have a historical core?

### 13. Probabilities of the Exodus

There is no archaeological evidence for an Exodus of the nature that the Bible narrates in any period within the second millennium BCE. But even if such an event did take place, the impact of these immigrants on the material culture of the Israelite settlements in the hill country in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE would have been minimal.<sup>44</sup> Regarding the reality of Exodus, there is a key debate between the minimalist and maximalist views.<sup>45</sup> Once we take into account the religious character of the narratives it will not give any room for doubt regarding the truth of Exodus.

The slavery and persecution in Egypt, as described in the first chapter of the book of Exodus, and that some of the proto-Israelites groups were slaves in Egypt are undeniable facts. They were considered as lower class people and as an oppressed group. In this connection they have some resemblance to the wider social class known from the documents of biblical land, such as *Habiru/’Apiru/SA.GAZ*. Some of these people who were also slaves in Egypt may have joined the Israelites in their departure from Egypt.

Although we are not certain about the nature of the group that was in the Canaan of the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, it is clear beyond doubt that the Merneptah Stele refers to the Israelite presence in Canaan. Many scholars believe that an earlier *’Apiru* settlement involving some part of the tribes was later incorporated into the Israelite confederacy.

The various settlement traditions could not disprove the presence of the proto-Israelites in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century. But in the settlement traditions we find no impact of an Exodus of the magnitude described in the biblical narratives. At the same time, we have no extra-biblical documents which would make the event impossible; rather, we do have some extra-biblical references that point towards the possibility of an Exodus. Except for some sporadic instances of violence, we have no evidence for a traditional biblical conquest model. The lack of data for a conquest does not in any way disprove the Egyptian sojourn and the Exodus. In other words, the nature of settlement does not prove or disprove the possibility of an

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<sup>44</sup>J. Weinstein, “Archaeological Reality,” in *Exodus: The Egyptian Evidence*, ed., E. S. Frerichs and L. H. Lesko, Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997, 97-8.

<sup>45</sup>J. K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, Oxford: University Press, 1997, 3-6.

Exodus. An Exodus, which is reread in the light of archaeological, historical and textual evidence, can fit in with various theories of settlement.

Finally, between the stages of the Israelites' presence in Egypt and Canaan, we are left with only an Exodus. The Exodus experience of the Moses' Group was not a significant event of that time, except for the small group, perhaps a few hundred, who experienced it. For Egypt, the escape of this group of people had no lasting significance. Even had there been a more lasting impact, we would not expect a losing side to record such an unfavourable incident. The historical event itself might not have made a great difference in the life of the people who later joined the Moses' Group except in their realization that in some miraculous way, God had brought the Moses' Group out of Egypt.

It has been shown that there was great movement of people across Canaan at the time of Exodus, and among these who came were the Israelites of the Hebrew Bible. The political chaos of Canaan would have helped the emergence of the Hebrew people. The study of the biblical narratives and the extra-biblical documents has shown that there was sufficient room for an Exodus (surely not of the magnitude in which the Bible describes it) which the future generations of Israelites would recall as an escape from oppression to freedom effected through the mighty hand of Yahweh.

#### **14. Conclusion**

The Exodus is seen everywhere in the Bible as the fundamental and foundational religious experience of the people of Israel. It is the archetypal saving experience for the people of Israel. Like any other ancient people the biblical authors too employed religious language to narrate the experience of the Exodus.

Regarding the Exodus experience, there is no reason to deny its truth, as there was no other reason for the emergence of such a story in later Israel. The Exodus employs historical, symbolic, creational and mythological language. The historical core of this event is undeniable. The failure in establishing the concrete scientific historical truth of the Exodus experience does not disprove its possibility. Often more than the actual historical experience itself, it is the way it is perceived and recorded that is important for later generations. Much depends on the vision, theology, and experience of the authors who interpreted and reinterpreted the experience.

The emergence of the Israelites at the end of the Late Bronze Age and their possible presence in Egypt make plausible the truth of the Exodus, while acknowledging that the Exodus narratives of the Bible are somewhat exaggerated. The lack of archaeological evidence for an Exodus is not sufficient to rule it out. One thing is certain: the Exodus was not an important event for the people of that time, except for a group of people who experienced it as a great miracle – a fact beyond their ability and their understanding.

The biblical narratives are not chronological records. Further, these narratives have undergone successive editing, writing, and rewriting, each revision being influenced by successive ages. The Bible’s own witness of the Exodus is so impressive that it leaves little room for doubt. Israel remembered this experience for all time as the constitutive event that had called her into being as a people. It stood at the centre of her faith from the beginning, as is witnessed by her most ancient poems (Exodus 15:1-18) and confession-like pieces (Deuteronomy 6:20-25; 26:5-10; Joshua 24:2-13), as well as by other texts – down to the end of the biblical period and beyond. A belief so ancient and so entrenched will admit of no explanation, save that Israel actually escaped from Egypt to the accompaniment of events so stupendous that they were imprinted forever in her memory.

The present understanding of the nature of religious language invites us to have a cautious view regarding the one-sided historical research of the biblical accounts. Israel’s response to the Exodus, the great work of God, is fear and wonder expressed in a religious language. We understand that the Exodus as a probable historical experience and that the biblical view of it is a fusion of history, theology, myth, and memory.