

Exodus: A Saving Event? (One more time. Might it be the last?)

Colleagues,

Two of my seminary classmates (class of '55) and dearest friends, plus a younger co-confessor named after the first Evangelist, keep beating the drum that Exodus IS INDEED the “central saving event” of the OT. And that I should recant my contrary point of view. They make impressive cases, but I’m not convinced.

1. Basically my contrary point of view comes from New Testament texts. That may already be a fork in the road where my friendly critics and I take different paths. All 4 of us agree that there must be congruence between God’s saving work in both OT and NT. All 4 of us are committed to the High Priest of the “better” covenant (as the writer to the Hebrews puts it), the covenant of his sacrifice that REALLY is the ultimate “saving event,” opening the (otherwise closed) curtain to God’s mercy, God’s forgiveness of sinners.
2. How to read the OT, seems to me, has been a clash-point for Christians ever since the git-go. The synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke) all present Jesus in constant conflict with his associates on the REAL meaning of the Word of God in the Hebrew Bible. Other major NT writers are involved in the same debate—and not just at the edges, but right in the center: John’s entire Gospel starting with the prolog statement [1:17] has Jesus arguing with his critics [even Pilate!] about what the Word of God really says. Ditto for Paul (especially in Romans &

Galatians and elsewhere as well) and super-ditto for the Writer to the Hebrews.

3. On another “front,” a colleague from Texas has a manuscript that strives to help Christian preachers make better use of the O.T. lectionary texts used in Christian worship. He proposes to present what these texts “meant in their original context” without the accretions and misreadings (sic!) that these texts have undergone as they are used by NT authors. From what he’s sent me, though he’s a Lutheran pastor, I think he’s on the wrong track. How do you arbitrate NT “misreadings” of OT texts? Proclaiming the “real meaning” of OT texts is how Jesus got into trouble with Jewish scholars of his own days (aka scribes = scripture experts) who already knew what those texts meant. Who was “misreading?” The Texas colleague wants to help Christian preachers use these texts in Sunday worship, a noble goal. But avoiding NT “misreadings,” I fear, he’ll most likely wind up with preaching helps for today’s rabbis, but not for Christian preachers. But that’s another ball of wax, a dreadfully important one. My reason for saying that is that most of the sermons I’ve heard in recent years on OT texts—even from Lutheran bishops—are Jewish homilies. They don’t need Jesus. And a sermon on an OT text that doesn’t need Jesus to get its hearers to the sermon’s goal can hardly qualify as Christian proclamation. If that’s the “real meaning” of OT texts, don’t tell Jesus. But I digress. Back to Egypt and the Exodus. Here are some NT-grounded reasons for NOT being excited about Israel’s exodus as a “saving event” at all, let alone the central one:
4. Nowhere does Jesus in any of the 4 gospels even say anything at all about Exodus as saving event. Right now, I can’t remember if he ever mentions it beyond that one reference in Luke where he’s speaking of his own exodus

soon to take place in Jerusalem. Since the evangelists present him constantly in debate about the saving God of the OT, such silence on exodus is passing strange. Conclusion, for Jesus Exodus is ho-hum. Israel's specialness lies somewhere else.

5. Not ho-hum is Abraham when it comes to the location of "saving event" in the OT—especially in John's Gospel, and, of course, everywhere in Paul. Also sometimes David, as in "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me" is an emblem for OT saving.
6. If you look for an OT text that proclaims salvation to God's ancient people, it is in the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. Is it an accident that Is. 53 gets cited 33 times in the NT?
7. Those are some of the TEXTUAL reasons for being suspicious, seems to me, about calling Exodus "saving," if you're talking about the salvation that Christians hang their hearts on. Then there are THEOLOGICAL reasons. It is my hunch that these theological reasons were primary in leading first generation Christians, and the Jesus they present to us in the NT, to bypass Exodus.
8. Exodus then and now (together with the Torah of Sinai) is indeed the central saving event of the OT for Jewish believers, as I understand it. When they—at the time of Jesus and ever since—conclude from that conviction that they must bypass Jesus, the first generation Christians (initially all Jewish) drew a theological conclusion: "The saving we've received in Jesus is different from the saving we used to trust before Jesus bumped into us." [Example: see Paul's own "new hermeneutic" for reading the OT (Gal.4) after his Damascus encounter with the Risen One.] "As we remember Jesus, in his own preaching on OT texts he himself linked HIS saving to God's OT saving with Abraham and David and the promise of its fulfillment in

the Suffering Servant.”

9. Check out the NT uses of covenant. Over and over again it's God's covenant with Abraham. When you ask for covenant-content it's "promise,...forgiveness of sins,...take away their sins." The one reference I found to "rescue from Egypt" as a covenant is in Hebrews and there the author says it was "faulty." It's fundamental defect was that it didn't get you to the "mercy-seat" of God. That means it didn't "fix" the sin-problem. Does that sound "saving?"
10. Any covenant that doesn't fix the sin-problem, but did remedy other dilemmas, might be called a saving event of sorts. But where is there any parallel, any segue, to Good Friday and Easter Sunday? If there were to be a parallel, seems to me, the Jesus story would have to unfold with the Roman occupation forces drowning in the Dead Sea, Masada never happened, and Judea after Jesus the land of the free. But Jesus, the Moses-figure, got crucified by the "Egyptians" with some complicity on the part of his own countrymen. Sure he was raised, but the citizens of Judea, Samaria and Galilee remained just as un-liberated as they were the day before Easter. This saving event did not take place in a face-off with the Roman imperium. No showdown with Pharaoh.
11. Back there Pharaoh's son died for Israel to be saved. But it didn't "cost" God anything. At Jerusalem God's son died in the salvation event. It cost God plenty. Where's the congruence? Though it happened in the territory of the Roman empire, the "saving event" unfolded in the "heavenly" imperium, where sinners (not in bondage to their Roman oppressors, but to sin itself) stand face to face with God. But that's not up in the sky somewhere. It's down on the ground where sinners do their sinning. And God does his critiquing. And God's son does his dying.

After Easter THAT bondage was broken, even as the Roman legions stayed in charge. That bondage was trumped by freedom. Freedom, as Elert says, in the place where folks least expect it, namely, our linkage with God.

12. The letter to the Hebrews is a gold mine on this one. It's all about "saving events"—supposed ones and THE genuine one. It's central claim is that saving events have to undo sin, else the sinner's plight remains un-fixed and there's no salvation worth talking about.
13. Does any OT text make that claim for what happened when God brought them out of Egypt? Fact is, Jeremiah's word about the need for a NEW covenant says "no" on this very point. A new one is needed that will indeed be centered on this word of the LORD "I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more." Neither Exodus (nor Sinai) claimed to do this. Nor could they, even if the claim had been made. It takes THE Lamb of God, not lambish blood on door posts, to take away the sins of the world. Isaiah 53 is in synch with John the Baptist's finger-pointing: "THIS one is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."
14. Some of my debate partners have urged that I distinguish between Exodus and Sinai. Lutherans that they are, they will grant that Sinai is not really good news since the fundamental reciprocal clause of the contract says "you get what you've got coming to you." That can't be rhymed with the "grace of our Lord Jesus Christ." But Exodus, they tell me, IS good news, saving good news, parallel in some way to what God is doing in Christ. I ask for the "tertium," the point of comparison, where the two touch, where we can see the saving common denominator twixt the two. I can't find it.
15. Concerning the textual issue of linking Exodus and Sinai: The Sinai report (Exodus 20:1ff) itself links Exodus and

the two tablets. "I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other godsetc." Where does any OT text even mention any valid distinction between the two? Where does any NT text? They are uniformly of a piece throughout the Bible, and neither of them "good enough" to be good news for sinners.

16. Seems to me that Christian interpreters are "stuck" with the decision: To accept or reject Paul's post-Damascus OT hermeneutic in Galatians 4. Granted he didn't have this OT hermeneutic when he "read Moses" before his Christ-encounter. But the Christ-encounter, as he says elsewhere, did remove the veil to read Moses—Exodus and Sinai—aright. How to read Moses "aright" is still the hot potato—not only with our Jewish contemporaries, but also with our fellow Christians. And my experience is that way too many Christians—especially those who get into the pulpit—read Moses "awrong."
17. I am on no vendetta AGAINST Exodus as saving event. My one-string banjo is strumming FOR reading the OT using the lenses that come along with the Jesus event of the NT. Viewed through those lenses, Exodus and Jesus are as different as law (with the wide compass given that term throughout the NT canon) and gospel (with its concrete Christic content). We have ample help for getting these lenses from the NT writers who wrestled this same problem to the ground in their day. I have some hunches why those lenses are is largely unused, yes unknown, in Christian circles today. But that is another topic.
18. I'll be brash enough to claim Philip Melanchthon's adage as the one I'm hustling here. In Seminex days we called this Melanchthon's "double-dipstick." In the Augsburg Confession and its Apology (1530-31) blessed Philip constantly uses a "double-dipstick" when measuring the

Biblical exegesis of texts proposed by his critics, texts that allegedly “prove” faith-alone to be false doctrine. The exegesis proposed by the critics, he shows, fails the “double-dipstick” test. It regularly “wastes the merits and benefits of Christ [one side of the dipstick], and (thereby) fails to give sinners the comfort God wants them to have [the dipstick’s other side].” Rightful exegesis would do the opposite “USE the merits and benefits of Christ for what God intended, namely, GIVE sinners the comfort they so sorely need.” It’s all about the work of Christ and Good News for sinners, two sides of the same dipstick. In a nutshell (Lutheran code language) it’s about “faith alone.” Since faith is always faith-in-Christ’s-promise, if the promise is absent, faith can’t happen.

19. When my buddies can show that the Exodus from Egypt passes the double-dipstick test, I’ll switch and not fight. For then it is indeed a saving event worthy of the label. Maybe even central.
20. How about this? Taking a cue from Claus Westermann, that “saving” and “blessing” are both good things from God in the Hebrew Scriptures, but “are two alteranate modes of divine activity,” let’s ask: which one was the Exodus event?

SAVING happens when sinners get made right [Hebrew: “zadik”] with God—and its “event” character is a word, a promissory word—often of forgiveness—spoken by God and then heard AND trusted by the hearer. That’s not really the sort of event you could film as Cecil B.DeMille did with the Exodus. Such saving events are only accessible if you were “listening in,” maybe eaves-dropping, and thus heard it yourself.

BLESSINGS are hands-on, tangible, “photograph-able” gifts needed for life and well-being, even for survival. It’s opposite is

“curse . . .[which] results in death, illness, childlessness, and such disasters as drought, famine, and war.”

Conclusion: Isaiah 53 is about a SAVING event. Exodus is a BLESSING event—maybe even the “central blessing event” in the OT. The first has a direct link to Jesus; the other doesn’t. Q.E.D.

Pax et Gaudium!

Ed