The Exodus: a Saving Event? Not Really [Part 2]

Colleagues,

ThTh 210 of three weeks ago questioned whether Israel's Exodus from Egypt was a "saving event" at all. A number of you gave feedback. There was quite a spectrum. From kudos to critique.

1. Kudos: "Once again . . . as the former Talking Heads's David Byrne is quoted as saying: 'Stop making sense.' I.e., Thanks for being a spokesperson for orthodoxy, in the best sense of the term. Our prayers are with you as you continue to re-word God's Word. Thanks for your being there." A couple more in the same vein, though not all that hyperbolic.
2. Another of you used the highfalutin word "deconstructing Exodus" for what I was doing, and you weren't complaining. If indeed I was deconstructing Exodus, I was not doing so very cleanly (or consciously) in the technical meaning that the term has in recent literary criticism. De-construct does not mean to destroy—and then it gets very highfalutin when done by the pros. To this minimal extent I was deconstructing in ThTh 210. I was taking apart a primary OT text and see if "what's always been said about it" is really so. De-constructing the structure of the Exodus text and its corollary the Sinai covenant, laying out the themes and parts (like a child taking apart an alarm clock) to see what's really there, and then asking what's "saving" here? Who got saved? Saved from what?
3. A few asked nitty-gritty pastoral Bible Class questions—"Thanks for the ThTh 210. I read you loud and clear. However may I ask you to say a bit more about the

promise to Abraham, thereby helping me to understand more clearly what God's mercy is as the Psalmists use that term as contrasted (if there is a contrast, although I've never thought there was any) with our applying it to God's forgiveness of sins via the death and resurrection of Christ? In your last two sentences you say that 'Such central saving does exist. It's elsewhere.' My question is – Where?"

"Do an essay sometime on the themes of the OT – why read it, how to read it, how did things look to the original folks. For example, how was Moses saved so that he could end up on the [Transfiguration] Mount with Jesus? Might be helpful for some of us Crossways [sic] teachers and students. Serious lay Bible folks ask here – Might the Exodus (no Sinai experience yet) be the "faith alone in the promise" for Moses? In other words what was the cross–ing experience for the OT folk 'before Paul' or 'before Jesus' for that matter?"

Some thoughts:

The Psalms.

Seems to me salvation in the Psalms is via God's mercy. The seven penitential Psalms (Luther's favorites, next to Psalm 118, his super-favorite) all make that clear as day. If I remember aright they are 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143. What do they say? "Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered." Or again "Have mercy on me, O God according to thy steadfast love [Hebrew: 'chesed' with no pre-requisites, no post-requisites], according to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions." And more. Then again the Psalm text Luther cited for his "Aha!" about salvation in the OT, Psalm 31:1 – "In THY righteousness, O LORD, deliver me." How did these praying people even hear about God's mercy

to blot out transgessions? I don't know. One thing seems perfectly clear, however: they sure didn't get it from Sinai, and if they somehow deduced it from their escape from Egypt, they must have had texts in addition to the ones we have today. The best guess, of course (and I am not jumping to Jesus or Paul), is that God's mercy promise starting with Abraham kept getting whispered among the Israelites. ***How anybody got "saved" in the OT.*** *That was at the center of the debate Jesus had with Rabbinic Judaism of his day, wasn't it? So it seems to me. That is surely how all four Gospels report it. It wasn't Paul who first came up with the idea (even though his letters doubtless were written earlier than the the Gospels were) that there were two alternate ways to read the OT texts, either legalistically or law/promise-ly. Jesus is constantly arguing with his critics about this question, as they debate the meaning of the Hebrew scriptures. One focal summary of that in the synoptic Gospels is his critical barb back to his own critics: "Go and learn what this means (and he then quotes Hosea 6:6 with God speaking): I desire mercy, not sacrifice." (Mt.9:13) Granted that could also be interpreted legalistically, as though God will reward (save) those who practice mercy, rather than those who practice sacrifice. And therefore right practice is the key. But that can't be what Jesus means. In the context of the entire story of the Gospels it has to mean : "I God desire to be merciful to you [for your salvation]; sacrifices won't do it." Else Jesus could not have followed that with these very next words, "For I have come to call not the righteous, but sinners." Folks praying those seven penitential psalms surely trusted the same thing.*

How about Moses?

People who trusted God's [promise of] mercy were "saved," or in the actual words of the OT, were "righteous" before God. People who didn't weren't. Concerning the technical term "saved," see what comes below. How about Moses? Who knows what Moses REALLY trusted? I think God can answer that question, but for the rest of us it's an unanswerable question. We've got no data accessible to us. So why try to answer it? "Might the Exodus (no Sinai experience yet) be the 'faith alone in the promise' for Moses?" I suppose it might be, but there is no textual evidence I know of to verify that assertion. And given the "de-constructed" differences that appear when you put God's promise to Abraham alongside God's conversation with Moses thata led to the Exodus rescue, seems to me it's apples and oranges. If there is promise there, where is it articulated? Promises have to be clear to be trusted. A fuzzy promise is no promise at all. Even Moses showing up with Jesus on the Transfiguration Mount doesn't answer the question of how Moses was rendered righteous. And as I'll try to show in a moment below, even less does that give us a clue about how/whether Moses was "saved."

4. But then there were others of you, not totally happy, some very unhappy, with the conclusions of ThTh 210.Example: "I can't help asking, what other kind of salvific event can one appeal to in the OT or expect to uncover in the OT, save this strange event of getting a bunch of Isrealite slaves out of slavery?" Answer: no "event" at all of such historical dimensions as the Exodus, but a promissory word. I suppose you could call that a "speech-event." All OT salvation, the sort that will work for the folks praying the Penitential Psalms, is God's (sola-chesed)

covenant. The specs of that covenant are found in God's contractual conversations with David, Noah, Abraham, promising God's "chesed," God's TLC to sinners. That is clearly different from Sinai and Shechem covenants where God's TLC is available only for commandment-keepers.

Same respondent tweaked me for "foist[ing] onto the OT a criterion that gets clearly and fully articulated only post-Jesus." Some thoughts about that. Is Paul in Gal. 4 guilty of "foisting a criterion onto the OT?" Or Jesus according to John in chap. 5 & 6 and throughout that Gospel? What was the original, the supposedly native, criterion before NT foisting got started? What kind of criterion had rabbinic Judaism "foisted" onto the OT that prompted Jesus to tell them they needed to "Go and learn what this means"? Or was theirs not a foist? What's the foist of today's academic OT consensus? When de-constructed, what gets revealed? My hunch is that much of contemporary OT scholarship, also that coming from Christian writers, is rabbinic. But I'm out of the loop.

Finally on "being saved."

Seminex colleague and NT whiz Edgar Krentz succeeded in getting me to be more textually "clean" when talking about salvation. He showed me that the verb "to save" in NT texts was regularly used in the future tense. So it is an eschatological term focused on the future. "Shall be saved" is the common NT way to speak, not "already are saved." We believe that we WILL be saved. Saved = surviving the Final Judgment, the Day of Yahweh. That's how Peter preached it on Pentecost with his text from Joel. When Joel says: Whoever calls upon the name of the LORD shall be saved," Peter says, The Lordly Name that will actually deliver such "shall be saved" status is the name of Jesus.

For Israel too salvation was always still up ahead. Until the

final day comes, God only knows who “will be saved.” Christians trust that they are in that company, not by unassailable proofs that they believed “right” or did “right,” But solely by virtue of the promise of God, the promise we’ve heard in the Crucified and Risen Messiah addressed to us. For us folks too it’s still up ahead. “Saved” is like “survived.” Nobody at present “is survived.” Christians trust that they WILL survive their own mortality, the onslaught of the Evil One, even God’s own critique of their faltering faith and slap-dash ethics. All of the above—because of God’s Promise.

Wherever there was any confidence among OT folks that Yahweh was indeed pledging to “save” them, have them wind up alive in his presence and not dead in some valley of dry bones, it had to be “faith in the Promise.” Promise is by definition a “future-tense noun.” Sinai’s legislation, also the Exodus rescue from Egypt—neither of these is “by definition” futuristic, thus not capable of being “saving.” What gives one hope for one’s own “saved” future? That is THE “saving event” question, methinks.

Finale.

Back in Seminex days, James Kennedy’s Evangelism Explosion [EE] was wildfire stuff for some at the seminary. In the model living room dialogue presented in EE, the evangelist—after friendly chit-chat—moved to the first big question: “If you were to die tonight and appear at the gate of heaven, and God asks: “Why should I let you in?’ What would you say?” I posed that question with each first-year seminary class I taught. The best answer I ever got was from a Japanese exchange student, Ikuo Nishida: “You said you would.” If God’s promise won’t save, what else will?

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder