

# The Exodus, a Saving Event? Not Really

Colleagues,

I've been having e-conversation with a dear colleague about Exodus as a saving event. He calls it (and he's hardly alone in this) "the central saving event of the Old Testament." I don't think so and here's a recent letter I composed to tell him that. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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*Dear —My scepticism about the Exodus being a "saving event," let alone the "central saving event" in the OT, is initially a theological scepticism, then an exegetical one. And, of course, I'm following the Bertram axiom: Biblical hermeneutics is at no point separate from Biblical soteriology.*

*Theologically, who/what got saved from whom/what?*

*I'll use the standard Crossings matrix for pericope-study to illustrate my scepticism about anything significant enough to be called "theological" salvation in the Exodus. The matrix, as you probably know, uses the tree-metaphor Jesus sometimes used: fruit, trunk, roots. Problem diagnosis goes down from top to bottom—stage 1 fruit (me and my relationship to people and world), stage 2 trunk (me and my relationships to self), stage 3 roots (me and my relationship to God). There's no genuine healing, no "saving," that does not save at the roots. Comes then in the Crossings matrix the Gospel's healing at the roots*

(stage 4) and subsequent healing for the trunk (stage 5) and finally the fruits (stage 6).

The Israelites might say they were saved at the level of a tree's fruits, stage 1, their de facto yucky life under Egyptian oppression. [Totally parallel in my mind to the Palestinians under current Israeli occupation.] But as far as I can see reading the texts, that's as far as the rescue got. In Lutheran lingo—it was totally confined to God's left-hand operations in their daily civil life. God's care and preservation, but not God's redemptive salvation.

Any salvation at the Stage two level? Any change of heart, any evidence of trusting Yahweh's (Abrahamic) promise, or just trusting Yahweh period? Nope. Evidence? Their quick turn to the calf, and their constant unfaith throughout the wilderness. No salvation there.

How about Stage three? God's de facto outreach in mercy to sinners. Not so if the Sinai covenant signals the terms of the contract God was cutting with them in the exodus-process. Its axiom is theological law—you get what you've got coming to you—straight and strict reciprocity between the deity and the clients, a perfect Hittite suzerainty treaty. Any "saving" Good News in the contract is only for non-sinners ["those who love me and keep my commandments"]. Those who don't, to wit, the whole of the exodus masses, who don't even keep commandment #1 as they demonstrate with the calf, fall under the corollary reciprocity rubric of getting their "iniquities visited to the 3rd and 4th generation of those who reject [=NRSV's softer word for "hate" in the KJV & RSV] me."

To pick up a phrase from a much later Israelite, in Exodus/Sinai God continues to "count trespasses." The [Stage 3] roots of the contract are not changed. Faith (ala Abraham's

contract), *faith-in-God's-promise*, is not in the specs of this contract. It calls for performance: "love me and keep my commandments." No forgiveness of sinners there. No "God reconciling the Israelites unto himself by making Someone [perhaps the Suffering Servant?] to be sin for them, so that they might receive the righteousness of God via THAT ONE."

If folks don't get the "righteousness of God" in the contract, God's saving at Stage 3, where is the saving? Who/what got saved from whom/what?

Apropos of "saving event," Israel still needs saving after Exodus/Sinai. Even more crisply, they need saving FROM the reality of Exodus/Sinai. Which is what Gospel is, already with Abraham. It is the "saving event of trusting God's promise" that saves from the UNSalvation arising from Exodus/Sinai. Using Lutheran lingo, Exodus was a left-hand rescue operation. A great gift from God. No question about that. But it was a gift that obligated the rescued, the same sort of gift that we all receive via God's left-hand work in creation. Granted theirs was a freebee "off the charts," but nevertheless not qualitatively different from God's generic gifts of "rain and sunshine on the evil and the good." There is no evidence that anybody's heart, anybody's "God-relationship" [step 2 to step 5 in the Crossings matrix], got changed. Understandably so, since no "new deal" is offered by God at the root. God's right-hand regime of forgiveness for sinners, Israelite sinners, is not in the contract.

What about the blood of the Passover Lamb smeared on the doorway? Saving event? Yes, that does rescue those so marked from the Destroyer, but what else changes? There is no forgiveness of sinners linked to the action, no change of heart, no Abraham-style promise associated with it at all. The terms of the contract remain the same: legal performance. In

*this case a cultic legal requirement that grants immunity, but, note well, only temporary immunity to God's destroying angel. Even so, it's law-and-performance all the way. No Gospel-and-faith here at all. If you want to call it saving, then you are compelled to say, aren't you: obedience to the law saves. Such obedience is then formally articulated in the legislation at Sinai: obedience saves, "love me and keep my commandments." But that's hardly Good News, and surely no "saving event" for sinners.*

*Seems to me that the Letter to the Hebrews, the most "Jewish" book in the N.T., is a vademecum for helping us to see Exodus/Sinai as no saving event at all. "The covenant I made . . . to lead them out of the land of Egypt" is called "faulty." [8:7] How saving is a "faulty" saving event? Smearred blood culticly presented "cannot perfect the conscience of the worshipper." [9:9] What sort of theological rescue is one that leaves consciences unhealed? There is more of the same throughout Hebrews. When it comes to "saving events" in the Israelite story, Hebrews ties it all to God's promise to Abraham and his association with Melchizedek the mystery man. That's where Hebrews then hooks OUR great high priest, not to Exodus/Sinai at all.*

*So back for a moment to Exodus/Sinai. Look at the very stuff of the entire scenario: the cultic requirements for rescue, the destruction of the Egyptians, the rewards-punishments contract at Sinai, their recourse to the calf, Israel's terror before God at the mountain. Aren't these finally the nemeses that sinners need to be saved FROM? Cultic requirements, God's destroying angel, debit-credit relations with God, our own propensity to idolatry, terror when facing God the critic? Isn't this what Jesus claims to save sinners FROM? I think so. And he does so with the different Divine Regime he offers and then enacts all the way to cross and resurrection. He*

*“fulfills” Exodus/Sinai, because they are finally bad news for sinners, “in his body on the tree.” He fulfills them by getting rid of them.*

*You’ve heard this tune before. Isn’t it finally the radical difference between law and gospel? The difference between God “counting trespasses” and then recompensing, or God sweet-swapping them to Someone Else so that we might REALLY encounter a “saving event?”*

*Summa: Exodus saved the Israelites from Pharaoh, their taskmaster. It did not save them from God, their critic. The “central saving” that Israel needed—and we too—it was not. But such central saving does exist. It’s elsewhere.*