

RUNNING head: SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES IN OUR CHURCH

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AN EXERCISE OF LITERACY – READING A CULTURAL ACT OF SCRIPTURALIZING

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While Genesis explains the origins of the world and of humanity, Exodus is the theological foundation of the Bible. Exodus explains the origins of Torah—the law of the Jewish people and the tradition surrounding that law. Torah is not merely a list of laws, but, rather, the notion of law as a way of life. Indeed, the law exists as a way of life for Moses and his people. Although portions of Exodus are devoted to legal matters, the declaration of law in Exodus always comes in the form of a story, relayed by discussions between God and Moses, and between Moses and the people.

These laws and tradition are filled with symbols of God's promise to the Israelites. In Genesis, God uses symbols such as the rainbow and gives people new names, like Abraham, as signs of

his covenant. Such personalized signs are useful when communicating a promise to a single person or family. In Exodus, however, God attempts to communicate his promise to an entire nation of people. Social laws about how the Israelites should treat their slaves and annual festivals such as Passover are signs that a community of people can easily recognize and share. In this sense, obedience to God's laws is less a means of achieving a level of goodness than it is a way for the people to denote their commitment to God's covenant.

The Hebrew word for "Exodus" originally means "names," and Exodus is often called the Book of Names. The book discusses the different names God takes and the various ways God manifests himself to the Israelites. When God tells Moses that his name is "I AM" (3:14), God defines himself as a verb rather than a noun. This cryptic statement suggests that God is a being who is not subject to the limits of people's expectations or definitions. Most often, however, God reveals himself to the people through theophany: extraordinary natural phenomena that signal God's arrival or presence. Theophanic events in Exodus include the pillars of cloud and fire, the thunder at Mount Sinai, and the miraculous daily supply of manna. Such spectacles demonstrate God's attempts to prove his existence to a nation of doubting people from whom he has been decidedly absent for more than four hundred years. The unwillingness of the people to accept God's existence is never more apparent than when the Israelites worship a golden calf in the shadow of the thunderous Mount Sinai. As a result, God's final manifestation of himself is the tabernacle—specifically, the Ark of the Covenant, a golden vessel in which God's presence, or spirit, will reside. Like the law, the Ark is an effective symbol of God, for it is an object that the

people not only build as a community according to God's specifications but also as a religious vessel that can be picked up and carried wherever Israel goes.

Moses is the first true hero we encounter in the Hebrew Bible. He manifests all the traits of a traditional hero. He overcomes timidity and inner strife. He challenges Pharaoh, leading Israel to great feats. And he wields his own weapon, the miraculous staff. These elements give Moses traditional heroic status, but Moses also presents us with a new type of hero—the religious priest. All of Moses's political and military dealings serve the one end of delivering the Israelites to God, physically moving them from Egypt to Mount Sinai and interceding to God for them when they disobey. As God declares early on, Moses is God's representative to the people, and Moses makes God's relationship with Israel a personal one. Instead of a series of incendiary explosions, Moses presents God's instructions to the people through conversation and conveys God's desire to destroy the Israelites by breaking the stone tablets in front of them. Most importantly, Moses's dialogue with God enables the author to portray God in softer, human terms—as someone who listens, grieves, and is actually capable of changing his mind. All four gospels begins with an appearance of John the Baptist in the wilderness. The authors are using scripturalization by speaking to their readers. This is another movement of God to deliver his people from the slavery in Egypt. In the book of Exodus, God raised up Moses to deliver his people from the land of Egypt; God brought ten plagues through Moses to convince Pharaoh to set his people free. The last plague was the one that convince Pharaoh to let his people go. The first born of everything in Egypt died and in preparation for this on slaughter, God instructed Moses to have every family of the Israelites sacrifice a lamb and spread its blood on the lintels and door post of their homes. This way, when the angel of death came to bring destruction he would see the blood on the doors

of the Israelites and “pass over” then to go to the bones of the Egyptians. After this death event, Pharaoh pleaded with the children of Israel to leave. They fled to the Red Sea where they made their final escape through the parted waters.

It is the story of the movement of God in the book of Exodus to deliver the children of Israel from slavery in Egypt. One would need to look back in the gospel stories to explain the movement of God and the good news of Jesus Christ in the gospels of the New Testament. The story in Exodus is a story of liberation; the book of Exodus one will see the power of God operating to bring about liberation and freedom for people that cannot help themselves. “So much for the phrase, God help those who help themselves.” We see in the story the power of God operating on the behalf of the Israelites, with water coming out of a rock, quails filling up the camps in the evening. The clouds shaded them and guided them by day which was the glory of the Lord and the pillar of fire kept them warm at night. And gave them light at night as well all of this is the power of God in the story of Exodus. The scriptural zing of the story of Exodus can be seen in the new testament gospels. Jesus is raised up by God, he makes an announcement which he calls good from God. He puts this good news in a package that is called the kingdom of God.

Additionally, the Book of Exodus begins more than four hundred years after Joseph, his brothers, and the Pharaoh he once served have all died. The new leadership in Egypt—feeling threatened by Jacob’s descendants, who have increased greatly in size—embarks on a campaign to subdue the Israelites, forcing them into slavery and eventually decreeing that all Hebrew boys must be killed at birth in the Nile River. The Hebrew women resist the decree, and one woman opts to

save her newborn son by setting him afloat on the river in a papyrus basket. Fortunately, Pharaoh's daughter discovers the abandoned child and raises him after he has been nursed, naming him Moses.

Moses is aware of his Hebrew roots, and, one day, he kills an Egyptian who is beating an Israelite worker. Moses flees in fear to Midian, a town near Sinai, where he meets a priest named Jethro and marries the man's daughter, beginning a new life as a shepherd. God, however, is concerned for the suffering of the Israelites, and he appears to Moses in the form of a burning bush. God speaks to Moses, informing him of his plan to return the Israelites to Canaan—to "a land flowing with milk and honey" (3:8)—and to send Moses back to Egypt to accomplish this task. Moses is timid and resists, citing his lack of eloquence and abilities, and refuses to go. God is angered but encourages Moses, presenting him with a staff for performing miracles and instructing Moses to take his brother, Aaron, with him as an aid. When Moses asks God what his name is, God replies, "I AM WHO I AM" (3:14).

Moses and Aaron return to Egypt, where Moses organizes the Israelites and confronts the Pharaoh, demanding the release of the Hebrew people. Moses performs a miracle, turning his staff into a snake, but Pharaoh is unimpressed and only increases the workload for the Israelites. God responds by inflicting a series of ten plagues on Egypt. God turns the Nile River into blood, causes frogs to cover Egypt, turns all of the dust in Egypt to gnats, and causes swarms of flies to come into the houses of Pharaoh and his officials. God then strikes Egypt's livestock with a disease, creates festering boils on humans and animals, and sends thunder, hail, and fire that destroy crops, livestock, and people. God sends swarms of locusts, and covers Egypt with "a

darkness that can be felt”(10:21). Before each plague, Moses demands the Israelites’ release, and after each plague, God purposefully “hardens” Pharaoh so that he refuses the request (4:21, 7:22). The tenth and final plague kills all the firstborn males in Egypt. Before the plague, Moses instructs the Hebrew people to cover their door posts in the blood of a sacrificed lamb as a sign for God to protect their homes from his killings. Pharaoh relents and releases the more than 600,000 Israelites who, in turn, plunder the Egyptians’ wealth. Upon leaving, Moses enjoins the Israelites to commemorate this day forever by dedicating their firstborn children to God and by celebrating the festival of Passover, named for God’s protection from the final plague (12:14–43).

Guided by a pillar of cloud during the day and by fire during the night, Moses and the Israelites head west toward the sea. Pharaoh chases them. The Israelites complain that Moses has taken them to die in the wilderness, and Moses, at God’s bidding, parts the sea for the people to cross. Pharaoh follows and Moses closes the waters back again, drowning the Egyptian army.

Witnessing the miracle, the people decide to trust Moses, and they sing a song extolling God as a great but loving warrior. Their optimism is brief, and the people soon begin to worry about the shortage of food and water. God responds by sending the people food from heaven, providing a daily supply of quail and a sweet bread-like substance called manna. The people are required only to obey God’s commandments to enjoy this food. Soon thereafter, the Israelites confront the warring Amalekite people, and God gives the Israelites the power to defeat them. During battle, whenever Moses raises his arms, the Israelites are able to rout their opponents.

Three months after the flight from Egypt, Moses and the Israelites arrive at Mount Sinai, where God appears before them, descending on the mountain in a cloud of thunder and lightning. Moses climbs the mountain, and God gives Moses two stone tablets with ten commandments inscribed on them regarding general, ethical behavior as well as an extended series of laws regarding worship, sacrifices, social justice, and personal property. God explains to Moses that if the people will obey these regulations, he will keep his covenant with Israel and will go with them to retrieve from the Canaanites the land promised to Abraham. Moses descends from the mountain and relates God's commandments to the people. The people agree to obey, and Moses sprinkles the people with blood as a sign of the covenant. Moses ascends to the mountain again where God gives him more instructions, this time specifying in great detail how to build a portable temple called an ark in which God's presence will dwell among the Israelites. God also emphasizes the importance of observing the Sabbath day of holy rest.

Moses comes down from the mountain after forty days, only to find that Aaron and the Israelites have now erected an idol—a golden calf that they are worshipping in revelry, in direct defiance of the ten commandments. Moses breaks the stone tablets on which God has inscribed the new laws, and God plans to destroy the people. Moses intercedes on the Israelites' behalf, begging God to relent and to remember his covenant. Pleased with Moses, God is appeased and continues to meet with Moses face to face, “as one speaks to a friend,” in a special tent set aside for worship (33:11). God reaffirms his covenant with Moses, and, fashioning new stone tablets to record his decrees, God declares himself to be a compassionate, loving, and patient God. At Moses's

direction, the Israelites renew their commitment to the covenant by erecting a tabernacle to God according to the exact specifications God has outlined

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