

## **OUT OF EGYPT - A BIBLICAL MEDITATION \***

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### **Abstract**

The main topic of the annual national conference of the S A Council of Churches in 1987 was: Confessing Christ in the Southern African Context. In view of this, the writer decided to address especially the problem of people who are made refugees in their own country, or sent into exile. It is done by way of a spiritual reflection, simultaneously on the Biblical text of Matthew 2:15, and the stated problem in the South African context. Following an historical approach through the Old Testament, it is finally argued that Matthew, through this verse, witnesses to a new liberation brought about by Jesus, breaking through a recurring cycle of repression, liberation and renewed oppression.

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**Text: 'Out of Egypt I have called my son' (Matt 2:15).**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The main topic of 1987 SACC National Conference invites us to consider refugees and exiles in South Africa as a challenge to confessing Christ in the South African context. We therefore have chosen a text from the Gospel of Matthew, which is of special relevance to the general topic of this National Conference. It is a passage from the story of the flight of Jesus to Egypt (Matt 2:13-15). It reads as follows: 'Out of Egypt I have called my son' (Matt 2:15). It will be my concern to show how the writer of the Gospel of Matthew through this story addresses us as Christians to strive for a future in which people are no longer made refugees in their own country or sent into exile.

### **11. THE SYMBOLIC NATURE OF THE NAME 'EGYPT'**

If you read the passage in Matthew 2 on the liberation from Egypt, you will realise that the flight of the child Jesus has to be attributed not merely to the persecution of children by Herod. Jesus had to go to Egypt in order that a prophecy might be fulfilled. We find this prophecy in the 11 th chapter of the book of the prophet Hosea where the statement 'out of Egypt I have called my son', refers to the people of God as a whole. In the gospel of Matthew the flight of Jesus to Egypt is therefore of relevance to the liberation of the people of God from Egypt.

The question arises: how is it related to the bondage of God's people in Egypt? We furthermore note that the emphasis of Matthew in the story of the flight to Egypt is not so much on his coming to Egypt, as on his being called out of Egypt. Jesus had to come to Egypt in order to be called out of Egypt.

In the Old Testament the term 'Egypt' is not merely a geographical term. Egypt is the land of bondage where the rulers feel to be independent from God and assume divine authority for themselves, and where the people of God are made slaves. What has happened in Egypt can happen also in other countries, even in the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 17:16).

Several Old Testament scholars have come to the conclusion, on the basis of their research, that only a small section of the people who later constituted the people of Israel, came from Egypt. A considerable section of the people were displaced and dislocated people who had lived in Canaan for a long time.

The dislocation of such people is explained in the following way: the fertile valleys of Canaan were dominated by city states whose citizens depended on the cultivation of the fields in the neighbourhood of the fortified places in which they lived. Canaan, however, was invaded by seafaring people such as the Philistines who gained a foothold in the coastal belt along the Mediterranean sea, and then penetrated into the interior of the country.

In order to protect themselves against the invading newcomers, the city states had to make provision for their defence by modern weapons and a permanent contingent of warriors. This need resulted in the concentration of political power in the hands of the kings of these states, and in the emergence of a class of officials and army officers who depended for their livelihood not on the cultivation of fields, but on taxes collected from the people. Gradually this class accumulated power and wealth. The burden on the smaller landowners became heavier and heavier. If they wanted to evade complete servitude and dependance on the powerful people, they had to withdraw into the infertile mountainous regions of Canaan or into the desert.

The theory has been advanced that these groups of people who had been dislocated from fertile regions of Canaan joined those groups who filtered into the country from Egypt and from the desert, and who had an encounter with Jahwe. It has been suggested that the

word 'Hebrew' originally is a term with a connotation of contempt and disrespect pertaining to outlaws and outcasts. Jahwe thus is seen as the God of the outcasts. The wars resulting in the occupation of Canaan by the tribes of Israel are largely wars of repossession of displaced people.

In this connection it may be appropriate to make some remarks on the interpretation of Israel's history in the Old Testament. Many generations have contributed towards this interpretation of history. Experiences which sections of people in Israel had in their time were woven into their account of the past. Thus the description of details of the oppression, which a section of the people had experienced in the past, was very much enriched by the experiences of people in later times by their own kings in the Promised Land, when they suffered under heavy taxation and under the enforced labour which was exacted from them for the building of fortifications and royal palaces, and even for the temple.

### **111. THE CRUCIAL ISSUE IN ISRAEL'S HISTORY**

**Will Jahwe's people as the people of liberated slaves, retain its liberation?**

The account of the liberation of Israel in the book of Exodus shows that Israel in Egypt did not know Jahwe. However, though Israel did not know Jahwe, Jahwe knew his people. He saw the oppression of his people and heard their groaning under their bondage. In Exodus 3 it is pointed out that Jahwe has 'come down to deliver Israel from bondage' (Exodus 3:8). After the exodus from Egypt, Israel was a people of liberated slaves, and Jahwe was the God of a people of liberated slaves. The decisive issue in Israel's history was whether Israel would retain the liberation it had received from Jahwe, or whether it would cast it away. This also is the concern of the Ten Commandments. It is significant that the introduction to the Ten Commandments reminds Israel of the God from whom it has

received its liberation. 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery' (Deuteronomy 5).

The German Old Testament scholar Frank Crusemann has given his booklet on the Ten Commandments the title: 'Preservation of freedom'. Whether or not Israel preserved or cast away its freedom depended on its relationship

to Jahwe  
to fellow human beings  
to Jahwe's Creation.

Crusemann writes: 'The commandments can be understood appropriately only from the perspective of the liberating God of the Exodus, as guidelines to life. Salvation has been given, it can however be cast away.'

#### IV. ISRAEL'S DILEMMA IN OCCUPYING THE PROMISED LAND

In distinction from other people in Canaan, Israel did not have a king. In times of emergency it relied on Jahwe selecting and indicating a leader who would take the initiative in fighting an enemy, and who would return to his normal occupation when the emergency situation had passed. However, soon doubts arose whether this type of leadership would be adequate for fighting the powerful city kingdoms which were in control of the fertile valleys and regions of the Promised Land. Would Israel not also require a standing army and centralized political power in the form of a king and officials in order to be able to act quickly and efficiently against its enemies whenever need arose? These considerations led influential persons and groups in Israel to demand that the office of a king be introduced. However, these ideas were also encountering a lot of opposition. Israel faced a dilemma: in order to be able to fight against the well organized and well equipped hostile city states - some believed - the people required a king. However, what would happen after the hos-

tile city states in Canaan had been defeated? Would the king of Israel then not use his power, his army and his officials against his own people and exploit and oppress them? Would the people of Israel not experience the same oppression from its kings which the forefathers had already endured from a foreign ruler, when they were treated as slaves in Egypt?

The latter considerations were brought forward by the opponents of those people who demanded that a king should be placed in authority in Israel. According to the Old Testament the most articulate representative of these opponents was Samuel. He warned the people against their return to Egypt. The passage in 1 Samuel 8, to which we refer in our selection of Bible texts, outlines Samuel's reservations against the instalment of a king in Israel. 1 Samuel 8 describes what would happen if Israel installed a king in terms of Israel's Egyptian experience. Ultimately Samuel had to give in and concede that a king be installed. He himself was instrumental in this process. It was assumed that the king of Israel would differ from kings in the surrounding states, by accepting that he had no ultimate and unlimited authority over Israel, and that he was responsible to Jahwe, the God of the people of liberated slaves who had a special concern for the protection of the weak and the powerless people.

## **V. THE RE-APPEARANCE OF EGYPT IN THE PROMISED LAND**

The further account of Israel's history in the Old Testament shows how Samuel's fears became true. David defended the southern tribes of Israel against the Philistines with the help of mercenaries he had gathered around him. He conquered Jerusalem with the help of the same mercenaries, and established himself at this centrally located place on land, which did not belong to any of the tribes of Israel. This power base allowed him to establish and exercise his authority as king, largely independently from the consent of the people (2 Samuel 5). At the same time David skilfully exploited the period of

exhaustion in the rivalry between the world powers in East and West and South, that is, Assyria, Babylonia and Egypt - to secure for his relatively small kingdom a degree of independence, which enabled him to play a role in international politics. This policy was continued by his son Solomon. Under their successors this was no longer possible, because of internal divisions between the southern and northern tribes of Israel, and because of shifts in the balance of power arising from a new struggle for hegemony between the world empires.

The Biblical account of the reign of David does not conceal the danger which a sudden rise to power and participation in power politics implies. The story of David laying hold on Bathseba, the wife of one of his warriors who was in the war, and causing him to be killed in battle, (2 Samuel 11) is an indication that even David, who otherwise was regarded as a king acknowledging his responsibility towards God, was accessible to the temptation of abusing his power.

The tendency to wield absolute power according to the pattern of the kings in the surrounding city states, and to abuse such power, became more manifest during the rule of Solomon. He entered alliances with the kings of neighbouring states, and strengthened these alliances by marriages with princesses from these kingdoms. For the erection of his fortifications, palaces and of the temple, he imposed heavy burdens in the form of enforced labour and contributions from their crops, particularly on the northern tribes. Towards the southern tribes, in which his and his father's authority had its roots, he was far more lenient.

When Solomon died, a delegation was sent to his son Rehoboam by the northern tribes to negotiate with him about alleviating the yoke imposed by his father on the northern tribes. Rehoboam consulted first with his senior advisors, thereafter with the younger ones. The latter insisted that he should not give in. The outcome was Rehoboam's reply to the northern delegates which we find in 1 Kings 12:11: 'My father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions'.

Rehobeam's reply to the delegation from the north ultimately resulted in the division of Israel. The ten northern tribes seceded and constituted the northern state Israel. What they had experienced in their being linked up with the southern tribes in one kingdom, had been a repetition of the Egyptian experience, a re-appearance of Egypt in the Promised Land. In fact, the description of what a section of the people of Israel had originally experienced in Egypt was now in its details deeply influenced by the bondage they had endured under King Solomon.

If we continue to trace the history of the people of the liberated slaves in the northern state of Israel, we are surprised that the pattern of further developments is very similar to that against which they had rebelled in seceding from the southern tribes. Omri, the king of the northern state, followed the example of David in conquering a piece of land as his private property and establishing a new royal residence at which he could wield power independently from the control of the tribes. He founded the city of Samaria as his new capital.

Following the example of king Solomon, his son and successor Ahab married the princess Isebel from the kingdom of Tyrus, who instigated him to wield absolute power without hesitating to deny fundamental rights to his subjects. Ahab has become known through the Old Testament account of his illegal acquisition of Naboth's vineyard and putting up false witnesses against Naboth so as to get him executed. There is good reason to assume that this story does not merely pertain to an individual incident, but reflects the experience of the lesser landlords in Israel who were exploited and oppressed by powerful people favoured by the king. These were people who succeeded in accumulating land and wealth. They were in a position even to make use of legal procedures and institutions for promoting their own interests.

Summarising our considerations of developments in the northern state, we now arrive at the following conclusion: in spite of the rebellion against the southern state, in which they had experienced the re-appearance of Egypt in the Promised Land, their liberation



did not prove successful in a long term perspective. Very soon they had to realise that Egypt had again appeared in the northern state. The kings and their associates who had acquired power made use of priests and religious festivities to be assured that God was on their side.

Against this background we refer to the ministry of the prophets Elijah and Elisha. From the outset they associated with the poor and exploited people in Israel. Elijah took his residence in the home of the widow of Zareptah, Elisha in the home of the widow of Shunam. In both cases we get an insight into the economic exploitation and the oppression to which the people at the bottom ranks of society were exposed. Elijah and Elisha gave them the assurance that Jahwe is aware of their plight. At the same time their sharing of the experiences of the poor and the oppressed people in Israel was the basis from which they took up the struggle against the Baal cult in Israel.

Jon Veerkamp has published an interpretation of the chapters in the book of Kings focussing on the ministry of the prophets Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 1:17, 2:11). He has given the book the title "The annihilation of Baal". Veerkamp convincingly argues that the struggle of Elijah and Elisha against the Baal cult was not a struggle against worshipping a God or deities apart from Jahwe. They struggled against an attempt in Israel to convert Jahwe, the God of the liberated slaves, into the God of the slave masters. This cult was an attempt to legitimize absolute power and justify the oppression of the powerless people, by people who had accumulated power.

Against the background of the ministry of Elijah and Elisha, we understand the longing prevailing in Israel for a king who would not 'return to Egypt' in the sense that he practiced the same oppression against Jahwe's people as they had experienced in Egypt under the yoke of Pharaoh. Israel had made the experience again and again that Egypt followed them into the Promised Land.

In Deuteronomy 17 the new type of king and of political power pious groups in Israel were waiting for, is described as a brother amongst

brethern. He is chosen by God. This king would no longer rely on authority that is merely based on modern weapons. He would not 'multiply horses', the animals of warfare, nor would he greatly multiply for himself silver and gold. He would observe Jahwe's 'statutes', so 'that his heart may not be lifted above his brethern'.

We know how this hope of Israel was disappointed. Political power was abused. Prophets accused the leaders of the people of the abuse of power resulting in the oppression of the poor, the widows and the orphans - these groups of people are mentioned as representatives of the oppressed classes - as a denial of the faith in Jahwe who had liberated his people from Egypt. Jahwe rejected the worship services of people accumulating wealth and power at the expense of the poor and powerless. The prophets announced the impending judgement of God. During the exile an awareness grew of the responsibility of the whole people of God for the oppression that had been practiced in their midst. There was the longing for a saviour whom God would send as a slave to carry the sins of his people and to achieve a breakthrough to a new future.

## VI. THE NEW LIBERATION

We have chosen for our Biblical Meditation the text Matthew 2:15: 'Out of Egypt I have called my soon'. I suggest that we have to interpret this statement of Matthew pertaining to Jesus in the context of the repeated and recurring experience of Israel, that Egypt had following them into the Promised Land. Each attempt to get rid of the shackles of Egypt ultimately failed. The liberation of a people of slaves which Jahwe had brought about through Moses had been foiled through the very same people. Jahwe had to start this liberation anew.

In sending Jesus to Egypt, the land of bondage, Jahwe no longer - as in the story of Moses - saw the oppression of his people and heard the crying of the people from afar. He himself became a slave on our behalf and groaned under the burden of our captivity to the forces of

death and destruction. In Jesus Jahwe made himself vulnerable for us who were his enemies. God accepted us as his bretherm and in raising Jesus from the dead, broke open the shackles of our captivity to the forces of death and destruction.

It is significant that the story of the ministry of Jesus, told in the Gospel, in many respects reflects in style, language and motifs incidents described in the chapters of the books of Kings pertaining to the ministry of Elijah and Elisha. Jesus starts his ministry among the poor and discarded people. He feeds the hungry, assures the discarded people that they are accepted by Jahwe unconditionally, and that he is present in their midst, and shows a concern for the every day needs of the people. He has power over death. This ministry is considered as a threat by people claiming to have absolute control and power and results in the condemnation and death of Jesus. However, Jahwe recognises and affirms his ministry through raising Jesus from the dead and entrusting the continuation of his ministry to his disciples.

In this connection I would like to draw attention to a particular dimension of the ministry of our Lord which is already foreshadowed in the ministry of Elisha. I am referring to the Bible passage 2 Kings 6:8-23. Here we are informed about a war which the king of Syria was planning against the king of Israel who had his residence in Samaria. However, every time the king of Syria sent his soldiers on an expedition against the neighbouring state in the south, he noticed that his movements had already been foreseen and that his efforts to attack the king of Israel by surprise, had been foiled. The Syrian king cherished the suspicion that there must be a spy and traitor among the people close to him who passed on information to his enemies. However, he was told by one of his servants, that it is the prophet Elisha who foresaw the devices and schemes of the Syrian king and enabled the southern kingdom to take precautionary action.

The Syrian king then decided to send his warriors against Elisha. They surrounded the place where Elisha stayed. Elisha's servant was terrified and exclaimed: '.. what shall we do?' Elisha then

prayed to Jahwe and asked that the eyes of his servant may be opened. The eyes of Elisha's servant then suddenly were opened so that he could recognise the multitude of forces beyond the warriors of the king of Syria which were protecting Elisha on behalf of Jahwe.

After this incident the warriors of the king of Syria were slain with blindness at the request of Elisha. The prophet then led them into the centre of the city of Samaria. Here they were completely in the hands of the enemy, the king of Samaria, whom they intended to attack. After their eyes had been reopened at the request of the prophet, they became aware of the situation in which they found themselves. However, Elisha now also had to open the eyes of the king of Samaria, who thought that this was a God given opportunity to slay his enemies. The prophet told him that it was Jahwe who gave the enemy into his hands, and that he had no authority to deal with the enemy as he thought fit. On behalf of Jahwe Elisha now instructed the king of Samaria to prepare a festive meal for his enemies who had been placed into his hands, and to allow them to go home. The outcome of this encounter was the return of the Syrian king to his home country, and the end of the hostilities between Syria and Israel.

In interpreting the demand of Elisha to the king of Samaria to prepare a festive meal for his enemy, we have to be aware that the latter at this moment found himself in a position in which his enemy was completely at his mercy. The demand of love of the enemy may have to be implemented very differently in an different context, in which the person or the persons on whom this demand is made, find themselves in a situation of extreme oppression. In general I suggest that the concern of love of the enemy, because of Jahwe's love of discarded people, as espoused by Elisha, is taken by our Lord Jesus Christ in his ministry and finds its completion in his death and resurrection. The way in which it is expressed varies considerably, depending on the context.

Exactly the concern of love of the enemy because of Jahwe's love of discarded people is taken up by our Lord Jesus Christ in his ministry and finds its completion in his death and resurrection.

In reviewing the history of Jahwe's people according to the Old Testament, we come to the conclusion that the recurring experience of Egypt following the people of God in the Promised Land after each liberation possibly reflects a common feature of human history. Again and again it has become true that an oppressor achieves a hidden victory in the oppressed so that oppression continues after the oppressor himself has been defeated and deprived of his power. The oppressor has succeeded to impress his or her stamp on the oppressed. After their liberation the new people in power practice the same methods of hatred against their opponents which they formerly experienced from their oppressors. They rely on the cultivation of enemy images. People who do not fit into their pattern of thinking, are persecuted. In this way the liberation they have achieved, is lost and replaced by new oppression.

In announcing Jahwe's message 'out of Egypt I have called my son' Matthew points out that a new liberation has been brought about by Jesus. A breakthrough has been achieved through the recurring cycle of repression, liberation and renewed oppression.