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Exodus and Memory

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The biblical story of the Exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt is the narrative account of an 'event' in whose 'aftermath' we are still living, because it refers to an act of revelation on which the three 'Abrahamic' religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, are founded. It has always provoked questions about what really happened. The ancient Egyptian evidence was searched again and again for any traces that could confirm the biblical record; any new excavation, especially that of the tomb of Tutankhamen, was hailed with great expectations of a final proof; theories have been formed about the causes of the ten plagues: collision with a meteorite? Climate catastrophe as a consequence of the eruption of the volcano Thera? What could have caused the parting of the sea? A storm? The archaeology of Palestine has focused on the discovery of traces of the conquest that followed the emigration, levels of destruction and a dramatic change of material culture. Jericho in particular has been investigated, but only to reveal that the site was deserted in biblical times and the destruction by far antedates the events told in the Book of Joshua.

In this chapter, I am asking about the Exodus, not in history but in memory. I am bracketing the question of what really happened and asking about who remembers, when and why, following a Latin hexameter teaching how to deal with historical sources:

Quis, quid, ubi, quibus auxiliis, cur, quomodo, quando?
Who?, what?, where?, by what means?, why?,
how? and when?¹

If we ask these questions, we must carefully distinguish between three different forms in which the tradition about an Exodus from Egypt may have lived on in the memory not only of biblical Israel, but also in the

memory of Jews, Christians and Muslims, and not only in religious but also in secular memory: Exodus as a 'myth', a book and a symbol.

A *book* 'lives', so to speak, in its readings, commentaries, quotations and other forms of intertextual references. A *myth* 'lives' in its variants, in its retellings, transformations and adaptations. In this respect, the Book of Exodus is just one, however canonical, of these variants. It is *one* form of remembering the Exodus that made it first into a book and then into a part of the canon. A *symbol* lives in the multiplicity of its applications. When Immanuel Kant defined Enlightenment as man's emergence – in German *Ausgang*, 'exit' – from his self-incurred immaturity (*aus seiner selbstverschuldeten Unmündigkeit*), he was probably thinking of the Exodus (Kant [1784] 1991: 54). As a symbol, Exodus stands for a liberating pulling out.

Exodus as a myth

It is not clear which came first, the myth or the book. But the most natural order of things seems to be that the myth came first. Taking Exodus as a myth does not mean that we are dealing here with pure fiction without any historical core. Myths may very well be based on historical experiences. The decisive property of a myth is that it is a well-known and widely shared foundational story, irrespective of its historical or fictional base. Golgotha is a myth, but few people doubt that a historical person by the name of Jeshua ha-Nozri was in actual fact executed by crucifixion. The same may apply to the Exodus from Egypt of a tribe by the name of bene-Yisrael. But this is exactly the kind of question that I would like to put in brackets.

The first allusion to the myth occurs in the Book of the prophet Hosea. If we ask our mnemohistorical questions (Who? When? Why?) the answers are obvious. As to who, Hosea was an early and passionate mono-Yahwist, as I would like to call him. He is certainly not a monotheist, because his core concept is loyalty, fidelity, faithfulness, and his core metaphor for this loyalty is matrimony with respect to adultery. What is the point of faithfulness if there are no other gods? What is the reproach for adultery if there are no other men to betray the bridegroom or husband with? Hosea's concept of loyalty presupposes a world full of other gods with whom Israel is all too prone to commit adultery. As to why, God the bridegroom and husband, Israel the bride and adulterous wife – these are the images by means of which Hosea tries to express the singular relationship that binds Israel to her god Yahweh. Another image is the sonship of Israel, and it is in this context that the Exodus myth

is alluded to: 'When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son' (Hosea 11: 1).² Both images, by the way, come from the Egyptian and Babylonian imagery of sacred kingship. In Egypt, the Pharaoh is held to be the son of God, and in Babylonia, the king is wedded to the divine world by a *hieros gamos* ('holy marriage'). What we may retain from this first allusion to the Exodus myth is the very strong connection with the idea of a close and intimate relationship between God and Israel. Hosea wants to remind Israel of this singular relationship. When? This is the decisive question: in a time of utmost danger and affliction at the hands of the Assyrians, who conquered Israel in 722 BCE. Hosea lived under the last kings of the Northern Kingdom and witnessed their desperate struggle between the two superpowers Assyria and Egypt.

Another prophet who refers to the Exodus myth is Haggai. There we read at the beginning of chapter 2:

On the twenty-first day of the seventh month, the word of the Lord came through the prophet Haggai: Speak to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, to Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest, and to the remnant of the people. Ask them, 'Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing? But now be strong, Zerubbabel,' declares the Lord. 'Be strong, Joshua son of Jozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land,' declares the Lord, 'and work. For I am with you,' declares the Lord Almighty. 'This is what I covenanted with you when you came out of Egypt. And my Spirit remains among you. Do not fear.'

(Hag. 2: 1–5)

With this passage, we are in another time and another situation. Haggai dates his vision to the year 520 BC, 17 October, thus more than 200 years after Hosea. The catastrophe that Hosea saw coming has meanwhile happened, in fact twice, first to the Northern and then to the Southern Kingdom. Hosea reminded the people of the Exodus in order to warn them not to defect from the quasi-matrimonial relationship with their God; Haggai, by contrast, recalls the Exodus to encourage them to believe in the alliance with God and his promise. Hosea is a prophet of disaster, Haggai a prophet of hope and comfort.

This seems to be all, which is very little in fact. Egypt is mentioned quite frequently by various prophets and in other biblical texts, but never with regard to the Exodus, only as a contemporaneous power

alongside Assyria and Babylonia.³ This points to the rather surprising fact that the Exodus myth is not as 'alive' in the biblical tradition outside the Pentateuch as one would have thought.

Exodus as a book

With the *book* Exodus, however, we meet with a different situation. We cannot ask 'who tells the story?', because the book is the work of many writers and redactors.⁴ Also, the question 'when' is not easily answered, because this process must have stretched over several centuries, beginning probably at the end of the seventh century and ending in the fifth or fourth century. Decisive and easily answered, however, is the question 'why?' In the Book of *Shemot* or Exodus, the narrative of the exodus of a group called *bene Israel* out of Egypt is part of an overarching concept. This concept is the covenant (in Hebrew, *b'rit*) that God formed (in Hebrew, 'cut' (*karat*)) with his chosen people.⁵ The core of the text forms the revelation or 'gift' of the Law (*torah*) to the people by the mediation of Moses on Mount Sinai. This law, as codified in the Book of the Covenant (*sefaer ha-brit*) (Exod. 20: 24–3), forms the core of the book and is the central idea on behalf of which the story is told.

Brit is a political concept, meaning a treaty of alliance formed either between sovereign states on a basis of equality or between a suzerain and a vassal state. This concept has a historical dimension that differentiates it, for example, from a law code. Treaties between peers, especially in the Hittite tradition, typically start with a recapitulation of a common history on which to build the future alliance. In the case of the Sinai *brit*, however, this part, the telling of the history, plays a much more important role and has yet another motivation. God presents himself, in forming the covenant, as 'the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery' (Exod. 20: 2). He forms this alliance, not as the creator with mankind, but as the liberator with the group of the liberated. The covenant is, therefore, a highly specific, historically circumstantiated phenomenon. Both parties, God and the people, are defined through the Exodus. Most of these prescriptions and prohibitions that follow from the covenant and are listed in the book do not make any sense without the story of liberation that explains and determines them. A political alliance between a god and a people is an absolutely new, unheard of and unprecedented concept. As such, it requires a specific amount of historical motivation and explanation. This is the reason why the story is told. We are dealing here not just with 'a' story, but with 'the' story, the foundation of the covenant that

is the foundation of the people of Israel and of the Jewish and Christian religions.

The revolutionary concept of the covenant between the people and God implies a triple process of theologization: the theologization of the *political* concept of alliance, the transformation of a *secular* law code into *ius divinum* – the Torah – and of *human* history into sacred history. Therefore, the Book of Exodus has three aspects and functions: of a law code, of a treaty and of sacred historiography.

In the Book of Exodus, the compact myth is unfolded in a sequence of core scenes: (1) the suffering of the children of Israel in Egypt, the house of serfdom; (2) the birth, upbringing, flight and vocation of Moses as saviour; (3) the negotiations of Moses and Aaron with Pharaoh and the ten plagues by means of which God forces Pharaoh to yield; (4) the Exodus proper, from the night of Passover to the miracle at the Sea of Rushes; (5) the revelation of the Law at Mount Sinai with the crisis of the Golden Calf; and (6) instructions for the tabernacle. We are dealing here with a careful composition, with a beginning, a middle and an end. The tabernacle is a perfect ending for the story, which could have ended here. This motif concludes the emergence of a new religion by describing its institution. It fulfils the promise of God to dwell among his people. This is far more decisive than what follows. In Leviticus and Numbers, the story continues with (7): the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, more legislation and more crises (the severest being the episode of the spies leading to God's verdict to ban the present generation from entering the Promised Land (Num. 13–14), and the scene at Shittim, the last station before entering the Promised Land, where the Israelites accept an invitation by the Moabites to join in a feast of their god Baal of Peor, and 24,000 are slain by a plague in consequence of the transgression (Num. 25). Deuteronomy is a summarizing recapitulation on the eve of crossing the Jordan. The last scene, (8) the conquest, is told in the Book of Joshua, which is separated from the Torah proper and relegated to the second order, the prophets. The Torah ends with the death of Moses. This is highly significant. The story that begins with the suffering of the children of Israel at the hands of the Egyptians ends, not with the conquest of Canaan, but with the death of Moses, turning the story into a biography of Moses. Narrative structure is determined by the correspondence of beginning and end in terms of lack and the liquidation of lack. The lack is clearly represented by the suffering of Israel in Egypt. It is liquidated by the lifework of Moses, who has turned a mass of slaves into the people of God and has instituted a covenant in the form of a law, a cult and a temple. The Israelites have

achieved this status even before entering the Promised Land, and it is, therefore, independent of their dwelling there. The point of the narrative is not conquest – from destitution to possession – but liberation: from serfdom to freedom. The Bible is careful in drawing the distinction between saviour and conqueror and to assign the conqueror to the second rank. The lasting achievement of Moses is the covenant that God has formed with him as representative of the people. This goal has been achieved on Mount Sinai, in the no-man’s-land between Egypt and Palestine, especially with the construction of the tabernacle that ensures God’s presence among his people, notably a portable sanctuary, and it has only to be *remembered* in the Promised Land in order to enjoy the freedom that the liberation from Egyptian serfdom has bestowed on the people. To be and to remain free means to stay within the covenant and its stipulations; to abandon the covenant means to fall into the hands of other slaveholders and, symbolically, to return to Egypt.

Perhaps the most remarkable and strange section of the Exodus narrative is (3), the ten plagues. In the economy of the narrative, the scene fulfils two functions: it recompenses the Israelites for their suffering by punishing their tormentors, the Egyptians, and it makes clear beyond any doubt that the Israelites have not been expelled but delivered from Egypt. Nevertheless, one major plague would have fulfilled this function. Why ten of them? Their sequence, too, does not show a clear climactic logic.

1. Turning the water of the Nile into blood
2. Frogs
3. Lice
4. Insects
5. Pestilence striking livestock
6. Boils hitting man and beast
7. Hail smiting man, beast and plants
8. Locusts
9. Darkness

The tenth plague, the killing of the firstborn, is set apart by a totally different form of narration; I shall come back to that. The multiplication of the motif of the plague by the factor ten has a clear mnemonic function. Like the Ten Commandments, it is based on the human hands with their ten fingers. However, the plagues are not grouped into two pentads (such as the Ten Commandments in Jewish counting) but in three triads plus the tenth plague that stands apart. They are grouped in

triads by the formula 'in the morning' and other markers. The plagues are something that we have to remember, like the Ten Commandments.

Psalms 78 and 105, however, reduce the number to seven. Also, the seven plagues in the Apocalypse of John are a clear resonance of the Egyptian plagues. Psalm 78 explicitly enumerates the plagues as objects of remembrance:

They did not remember his power – the day he redeemed them from the oppressor, the day he displayed his signs in Egypt, his wonders in the region of Zoan. He turned their river into blood; they could not drink from their streams. He sent swarms of flies that devoured them, and frogs that devastated them. He gave their crops to the grasshopper, their produce to the locust. He destroyed their vines with hail and their sycamore-figs with sleet. He gave over their cattle to the hail, their livestock to bolts of lightning. He unleashed against them his hot anger, his wrath, indignation and hostility – a band of destroying angels. He prepared a path for his anger; he did not spare them from death but gave them over to the plague. He struck down all the firstborn of Egypt, the first fruits of manhood in the tents of Ham.

(Ps 78: 42–51)

The plagues are *signs* to be remembered. This may explain their number. It is not one punishing and liberating event; it is a message to be forever retained and taken to heart.

Exodus as an act and as the foundation of memory

The theme of memory is central in the Book of Exodus. As a historical narrative, it is in itself an act of memory. It remembers an event of the past that, according to biblical chronology, took place in the fifteenth century BC, thus in the Late Bronze Age. As we have seen with the early prophets Amos and Hosea, this memory was still alive in the late eighth century BC, in the time of Homer, who also looked back to the late Bronze Age in telling the story of the Trojan War. The eighth and seventh centuries were generally a time of looking back across the break that the end of the Bronze Age and the first centuries of the Iron Age had brought about in the Mediterranean and Near Eastern world. In Egypt, we are dealing with a period of a very pronounced archaism. Texts were copied and architectural, sculptural and pictorial models were carefully followed that date back to the second and third millennia BC.

The Neo-Assyrian empire even turned into a digging society, trying by means of systematic excavations to reach traces of the Sargonid Empire, the twenty-third century BC, which was held to be a Golden Age and a model of cultural and political perfection (see Jonker 1995; Maul 2001). This was a time of general reorientation, when the past began to matter in various conspicuous forms as a 'normative past' that must by all means be remembered and followed as a source of political, legal, religious and artistic models and norms. For Israel, the Exodus fulfilled precisely this function of a normative past – to a degree of normativity, however, that has no parallel in Egypt, Mesopotamia or Greece. For Israel did not only look back, like its neighbours; it also looked forward. The story of Exodus is a story of promise. The element of promise distinguishes the covenant from other treaties and law-codes. Normally, a law is coupled with a sanction. The commandments and prohibitions of the covenant, however, are additionally associated with a promise. Keeping the covenant will be rewarded by the possession of, and blissful life in, the Promised Land, meaning reproduction, fertility, victory over enemies, peace and prosperity. The treaty at Mount Sinai looks back to the Exodus from Egypt and forward to an unlimited future in the Promised Land – on condition of staying faithful to the covenant and its 613 statutes, commandments and prohibitions. All depends on this one condition: that the covenant will not be neglected or even broken.

In order to secure the keeping of the covenant, a mnemotechnique has to be devised. This corresponds to traditional usage. Treaties have to be laid down in writing on durable material, for example, on a silver tablet to be deposited in the temple, but also – and this is decisive – to be read aloud at regular intervals before the two parties. The Assyrian king Esarhaddon devised yet another ritual of commemoration. He summoned his subjects and vassals to the capital in order to swear an oath of loyalty to his designated successor Assurbanipal. Foreseeing, however, that the change of frame when the subjects and vassals had returned to their various homes would cause forgetting, Esarhaddon devised a mnemonic ritual:

Water from a sarsaru jar, she (i.e. Ishtar) gave them to drink,
A goblet she half filled with water from the sarsaru jar and
gave it them saying:

You speak in your heart: Ishtar, a narrow one (i.e. watchful – or
locally restricted?) is she.

But then you will go away to your towns and your districts,
You will eat bread and forget these oaths.

But as soon as you drink from this water,
 You will remind yourself and you will keep this swearing-in
 which I have enacted on behalf of king Esarhaddon.

(Quoted and translated after Otto 1999: 82)

The mnemotechnique that Moses devised in order to constantly remind the people of the covenant, its various obligations and the story that frames and explains it, is laid out not in the Book of Exodus, but in Deuteronomy, the testament of Moses. Deuteronomy prescribes how to remember, but Exodus narrates what to remember. This mnemotechnique exceeds by far anything comparable in the ancient world. Like Esarhaddon, Moses foresees that the people will forget their obligations once they are living in the Promised Land, eat bread and are satisfied:

When the Lord your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers [...] to give you – a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant – then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

(Deut. 6: 10–12)

Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

(Deut. 8: 11–14)

Moses' mnemotechnique contains no fewer than seven different mnemonic devices. First, learning the text of the covenant by heart. Second, teaching and explaining it to the children, constantly discussing it, at home and abroad, by day and by night.⁶ Third, creating visible markers, to be worn on the body: 'Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads' (Deut. 6: 8). Fourth, fixing the text to the doorposts (*mezuzot*): 'Write them on the door-frames of your houses and on your gates' (Deut. 6: 9). Fifth, promulgation by public inscription: the

canonized 'words' (*debarim*) of the Law shall be written on chalked stelae to be set up immediately on entering the Promised Land.

When you have crossed the Jordan into the land the Lord your God is giving you, set up some large stones and coat them with plaster. Write on them all the words of this law when you have crossed over to enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, promised you.

(Deut. 27: 2–3)

Sixth, celebrating the three commemorative feasts, Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot, all of which provide a frame for the collective commemoration of the sojourn in Egypt, the Exodus and the Torah. Concerning Passover, it is said: 'so that all the days of your life you may remember the time of your departure from Egypt' (Deut. 16: 3); concerning Shavuot: 'Remember that you were slaves in Egypt, and follow carefully these decrees' (Deut. 16: 12); and Sukkot commemorates the nomadic life in the desert; moreover, it is stipulated that every seventh year the whole text of the Torah shall be read aloud to the people during *sukkôt*:

Then Moses commanded them: At the end of every seven years, in the year for cancelling debts, during the Festival of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place he will choose, you shall read this law before them in their hearing. Assemble the people – men, women and children, and the foreigners residing in your towns – so that they can listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this law.

(Deut. 31: 10–12)

The seventh device concerns oral poetry. Moses teaches the Israelites a song dealing with the event of the Exodus, which they are requested to learn by heart and to hand down orally to future generations:

And he said to them, Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law. They are not just idle words for you – they are your life. By them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.

(Deut. 32: 46–7)

The eighth device is closure and canonization: nothing must be added to or subtracted from the commandments (Deut. 4: 2, 13: 1).

The Book of Exodus – as well as the myth behind it – is, therefore, not only a *feat* of memory – remembering an event, however decisive, of the distant past – but also and above all the *foundation* of a memory, that is, part and object of a mnemotechnique that frames and supports the covenant. The Exodus is ‘the’ decisive memory never to fall into oblivion, and the Book of Exodus is the codification of that memory. ‘Remember the Exodus’ means ‘remember the covenant’ and vice versa. To remember the Exodus and the covenant means always to remember the promise, to look into the future. ‘Remember’, we read in Psalm 105:

Remember the wonders he has done,
his miracles, and the judgments he pronounced,
you his servants, the descendants of Abraham,
his chosen ones, the children of Jacob.
He is the Lord our God;
his judgments are in all the earth.
He remembers his covenant for ever,
the promise he made, for a thousand generations,
the covenant he made with Abraham,
the oath he swore to Isaac.
He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree,
to Israel as an everlasting covenant:
‘To you I will give the land of Canaan
as the portion you will inherit.’

(Ps 105: 5–11)

As stated above, the Mosaic mnemotechnique is laid out not in Exodus but in Deuteronomy. Yet the Book of Exodus also contains instructions for a ritual of commemoration. This is contained in Chapter 12, following the report of the tenth plague, the killing of the firstborn in Egypt.

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household. [...] Take care of them until the fourteenth day of the month, when all the members of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight.

Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the door-frames of the houses where they eat the lambs. That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with bitter herbs, and bread made without yeast. Do not eat the meat raw or boiled in water, but roast it over a fire – with the head, legs and internal organs. Do not leave any of it till morning; if some is left till morning, you must burn it. This is how you are to eat it: with your cloak tucked into your belt, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. Eat it in haste; it is the Lord's Passover. [...] This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord – a lasting ordinance. For seven days you are to eat bread made without yeast. On the first day remove the yeast from your houses, for whoever eats anything with yeast in it from the first day until the seventh must be cut off from Israel. On the first day hold a sacred assembly, and another one on the seventh day. Do no work at all on these days, except to prepare food for everyone to eat; that is all you may do. Celebrate the Festival of Unleavened Bread, because it was on this very day that I brought your divisions out of Egypt. Celebrate this day as a lasting ordinance for the generations to come.

(Exod. 12: 1–17)

In the same way as the Sarsaru ritual is a ritual of drinking water, which reminds the drinkers of the oath they have sworn, Passover is a ritual of eating unleavened bread that reminds the eater of their hasty departure from Egypt when they had no time to add yeast to their dough. For the same commemorative reason, the ritual has to be performed in the family and not in the synagogue, because the Israelites spent this night in their homes when the killing angel of the Lord haunted the houses of the Egyptians. In later (i.e. medieval) times, in the diaspora, this ritual prescription was fleshed out in great detail in the form of the Seder liturgy.⁷

In the Jewish tradition, the memory of the Exodus lives on in two forms: first, as part of synagogal recitation, where the entire Torah is read in weekly portions (*parashot*) in the course of the year, and, second, in the form of an annual celebration taking place not in the synagogue but at home, with the *pater familias* (and not the Rabbi) acting as master of ceremonies. Moses is scarcely mentioned in the Seder liturgy. This makes the biggest difference between the Book of Exodus, in which Moses is the protagonist, and the myth of Exodus, which is re-enacted in the Seder ceremony.

Liturgical memory: The Seder Haggadah

The Jewish Seder, the first night of Pesach, is the festive and liturgical realization of the commandment 'Thou shalt teach your son and your son's son', that is, that we have been slaves in Egypt and that the Lord redeemed us from bondage with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. It is a teach-in to remember the connection between history and covenant, law and liberation. The story must be told and the questions be asked in the 'we' and 'us' key. Why do we perform these rites and obey these laws? Because we have been slaves in Egypt. In the same way as this 'we' includes every Jew in addition to those who once emigrated from Egypt 3,500 years ago, the concepts of 'Egypt' and 'Pharaoh' extend to every form of oppression and violence wherever and whenever they occur. A Jew is someone who was liberated from Egypt and who is free insofar as he/she commits him/herself to the covenant and its prescriptions. In liturgical memory, history is turned into myth, into a set of archetypal patterns with regard to which the present is made transparent so that they shine through and render the present readable. In the *New York Times* one could read some years ago:

For thousands of years, Jews have affirmed that by participating in the Passover Seder, we not only remember the Exodus, but actually relive it, bringing its transformative power into our own lives.⁸

This is an excellent definition of liturgical memory. 'In every generation', the Pesach Haggadah prescribes, 'a man should look upon himself as if he came forth from Egypt' (*Die Pessach Haggadah*, 36). The Seder teaches identity through identification. It is about the transformation of history into memory, to make a certain past 'our' past and to let everyone participate in or even identify with this past as 'his/her' past. One could even go so far as to speak of a transformation of semantic memory, something we have learned, into episodic memory, something we have lived, albeit in the form of a ritual play, of an 'as if'.

The function of the Seder is to provide a frame for remembering the Exodus, not only by liturgical recitation of the written texts of the Haggadah, but also and above all by improvised 'conversational remembering' (Middleton 1997). Frames, as Erving Goffman (1974) has shown, organize our everyday life. Thus, they relieve us from reflection and enable spontaneous action. With the Seder, we move on to the level of non-everyday behaviour. This shift from an everyday frame to a festive and an exceptional one is explicitly marked and foregrounded in the

Haggadah, the script for the feast. The arrangements have to be so exceptional that they strike the minds of the uninitiated, and the youngest child has to ask the question that will trigger the chain of explanations and commemorations: 'Why is this night so different from all other nights?' (*Die Pessach Haggadah*, 14). This question addresses precisely the point of framing; it is the question of somebody who lacks the cue: 'What is going on here?' The Seder starts with a festive enactment of a frame-shift.

Difference is a keyword in the Seder ceremony. God is praised for having made a difference: between this night and all other nights, 'between the sacred and the profane, between light and darkness, between Shabbat and the other 6 days of the weeks, and between Jews and Gentiles' (*Die Pessach Haggadah*, 12) – and between serfdom (*avodah*) and freedom (*kherût*), which is the basic theme of the story to be remembered.⁹ All these differences are to be made understandable and palpable through the one difference which is sensually staged and brought to the forefront by the striking exceptionality and unfamiliarity of the arrangements and actions, of 'what is going on'. The children, the uninitiated, are provoked to ask, and the answers given serve the function of an initiation, of conveying and acquiring a new identity. This connection between question, answer and identity is made clear by the 'midrash of the four sons'. At several places in the Torah, there occurs the prescription of what to answer, when your son asks you about the meaning of the Law or one particular law. These passages are collected in this midrash and attributed to four types of sons: the wise one, the wicked one, the simpleton and the one who does not know how to ask.

The wise one – what does he say? 'What are the testimonies, and the statutes and the laws that the Lord our God commanded you?' (Deut. 6: 20). So you tell him about the laws of Pesach, that one may not eat anything whatsoever after the Pesach sacrifice.

The wicked one – what does he say? 'What is this service to you?' (Exod. 12: 26). 'To you', and not to him. And since he excluded himself from the people at large, he denies the foundation of our faith. So you blunt his teeth and tell him, 'It is because of this that the Lord acted for me when I came forth out of Egypt' (Ex. 13: 8). 'For me', and not for him; had he been there, he would not have been redeemed.

The simple son – what does he say? ‘What is this?’ (Exod. 13: 14). ‘Tell him, “with a strong hand God took us out from Egypt, from the house of slavery”’ (ibid.).

As for the one who does not know how to ask, you must begin for him, as it is written ‘and thou shalt tell thy son in that day, saying: It is because of this that the Lord acted for me when I came forth out of Egypt’ (Exod. 13: 8).

(*Die Pessach Haggadah*, 18)

The midrash of the four sons is a mini-drama about memory, history and identity. The identity question is expressed by the play with the personal pronouns: I and me, us and our, you and he. The entire ceremony is about telling the story. This is history as it is remembered and told, not as it might have happened. The Seder provides a frame for telling and explaining the story. The important questions to ask are pretty much the same as those codified in the Latin scholastic hexameter quoted above:

Quis, quid, ubi, quibus auxiliis, cur, quómodo, cuándo?
Who?, what?, where?, by what means?, why?, how?
and when?

Who tells the story? The father and the adult participants, who play the role of the emigrants from Egypt. To whom? To the children, who have to learn to identify with the group of the liberated slaves and to say ‘we’ and ‘us’ with respect to the ancient story. Why? Because it is this story that tells us who we are. When? On the occasion of the annual return of the time when this event is believed to have happened, the spring-time of the offering of the first fruits. By which means, in which form? In the form of a ‘symposium’ (the Haggadah prescribes or recommends eating and drinking in ‘reclining posture’, i.e. in Greek and Roman style (*Die Pessach Haggadah*, 12)) and in a combination of liturgical and conversational remembering.

Even the recital of the ten plagues forms part of the Seder liturgy, spilling some drops of wine with every mention of a plague:

blood (*dam*)
frogs (*tzefarde’*)
lice (*khinim*)

wild beasts ('arov)
 pestilence (*däbär*)
 boils (*sh'chîz*)
 hail (*barad*)
 locusts (*arbäh*)
 darkness (*choscheq*)
 killing the firstborn (*makhat b'khorot*)

(*Die Pessach Haggadah*, 27)

Trauma and triumph go together in liturgical memory. The triumph culminates in the crossing of the Red Sea where the persecuting Egyptians are drowned. This is the decisive act of liberation. The keyword is *b^e-yad khasaqah* 'with strong arm'; again and again this formula recurs in the liturgy, and its theological meaning is to represent the liberation as God's – and not Moses' – work, as a sign of God's power (see Hoffmeier 1997).

Liturgical memory – in the same way as cultural memory – provides society with a connective structure working in both the social and temporal dimensions. In the social dimension, it works as a social cement binding human beings to fellow human beings and creates a common space of experience, expectation and action, which provides trust, confidence and orientation. In the temporal dimension, cultural connectivity works as a principle of continuity linking past, present and future, in that it creates meaning, memory and expectation by integrating the images and stories of the past into an ever-proceeding present. This aspect is the basis of myths and historical narratives such as the Exodus from Egypt. Both aspects, the normative/social and the narrative/temporal, the aspect of instruction and the aspect of narration, consolidate belonging or identity, and enable an individual to say 'we'.

In the Seder feast, however, the past is not only remembered but also performed. The celebration does not scrupulously follow a fixed model, a ritual prescription, but it re-presents or 'presentifies', in the sense of making present, by a form of actual reliving. The recitation of the Haggadah is complemented by all kinds of improvised contributions about 'our' sufferings in Egypt and the delights of liberation. The themes of promise and future are also very prominent in the Seder liturgy, which closes with the proclamation *le shanah-habah be-Yerushalayyim* 'next year in Jerusalem!' (*Die Pessach Haggadah*, 52) – the expression of hope founded on memory. Only he who remembers is able to look with confidence into the future.

Exodus and utopia

This is the utopian aspect of Exodus, the book, the myth and the symbol. Like so many utopian texts, Exodus starts with a departure, with leaving home, setting out for an unknown goal in order to finally, and in most cases unexpectedly, arrive at an island where ideal conditions prevail. In Bacon's *Nova Atlantis*, which is typical of the genre in this respect, the newcomers have to undergo a moral transformation in order to be accepted into the new community and its ideal constitution and institutions. If we apply this pattern to the Exodus, the parallels, but also the differences, become obvious. The departure is not for the absolutely unknown; there is a clearly indicated goal, first Mount Sinai and then Canaan. Nevertheless, there is a departure, there is an ideal constitution – to be received at Mount Sinai – and there is the land of milk and honey, a clear model of Cockaigne, the Schlaraffenland. The Book of Exodus, to be sure, is not meant as a utopia such as, for example, Plato's *Nomoi*. The constitution as spelled out in the *sefaer ha-berit* is to be real, and not ideal, is to be lived and not just aspired to. The Promised Land is not some fictional island of bliss but a very real geographic unit. Still, there is a utopian element in the book and the myth of Exodus that is responsible for its extraordinary radiance and its being so much alive inside and outside Judaism.

The puritans in the early seventeenth century, the time when Francis Bacon wrote *Nova Atlantis*, crossed the Atlantic Ocean and set out for America as a New Promised Land, identifying with the children of Israel going out of Egypt. This was an act of memory as much as it was a revolutionary step forward into something new, a new society, a new constitution, a new attempt at becoming the people of God and performing the covenant as laid down in the Bible. The same may be said of the Puritan revolution, the civil wars and Oliver Cromwell's protectorate from 1642 to 1659.

Exodus – as a myth, a book and a symbol – refers to that revolutionary turn in the history of a large part of mankind we are used to describing as the turn from polytheism to monotheism. The Exodus from Egypt is the narrative articulation of this act of emancipation, disembedding and distantiation of a much larger scope. It is the move from what I have proposed to call 'cosmotheism' (Assmann 1993), in which the divine is conceived of and worshipped as immanent in nature, leading ultimately to the idea that nature or cosmos is God, the visible manifestation of a hidden deity, to a religion that draws a categorical distinction between God and the world, defining god as transcendent in the sense

of strict extra-mundaneity. The Exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt stands for the emancipation of humanity from its embeddedness in the world, its political, natural and cultural powers, and for the emancipation of the divine from mundane immanence. Cosmotheism seems to me to be a far more adequate term than polytheism. Most 'pagan' religions may be characterized as 'cosmogonic monotheism': they recognize *one* God as the origin of the world, including heaven and earth, gods and men, and emphasize the oneness of god and the unity of the world. In antiquity, this basic religious conviction led to the idea of a supreme being that is both 'hypercosmic' and 'cosmic', transcendent and immanent, transcendent in its oneness and immanent in its differentiated multiplicity. The world that turned monotheistic with the Christianization of the Roman Empire had already come to emphasize the unity of god. The turn of Exodus was not from polytheism but from cosmotheism to monotheism.

Seen in this light, we realize that this Exodus has never fully been completed. There have always been relapses, counter-movements in the direction not of polytheism but of cosmotheism. The most powerful of these cosmotheistic trends is Neoplatonism in its various branches, such as Hermeticism, and all kinds of mystic and esoteric traditions, including the Kabbalah. The persisting presence of cosmotheism in Western tradition made it necessary to renew the power and pathos of Exodus in several waves of iconoclasm, emancipation and even emigration, starting with the Reformation, especially in its extreme form of Calvinism and Puritanism, and the Enlightenment, especially in its pronounced anti-clericalism (*écrasez l'infâme!*). It was this undefeatable, at times latent, at times manifest, continuity of cosmotheism that kept the idea, the myth, the book and the symbol of Exodus alive.

Notes

1. The hexameter appears first in Cicero's *De Inventione* in the context of rhetoric and the art of invention: Cicero, *De inv.* 1, 34–1, 43.
2. All citations from the Bible follow the New International Version (UK), <http://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-International-Version-UK-NIVUK-Bible> (20 October 2013).
3. The same applies to Moses, whose name occurs almost 600 times in the Book of Joshua and the Pentateuch, 37 times in the Deuteronomic history and then only rarely in the rest of the Bible. The Exodus occurs in a handful of Psalms (Ps 78, 105, 106, 135, 136), but all the numerous places where Egypt is mentioned refer to it as a contemporaneous power, but not as the land of the Exodus.

4. The book of Exodus is in its basic form probably a work of the priestly school (P^c). Integrated into this book are earlier sources such as the 'Book of the Covenant' (*sefer ha-b'rit*). This book was then in later times amplified by additions.
5. Cf. Hag. 2:4: *ha-ddavar asher karatti ittekhem*, literally 'the words that I cut with you'. In Hebrew, a covenant is 'cut' between the two parties (as, by the way, in ancient Greek, where the word *spondas temmein* is used for 'forming a contract').
6. Cf. 6:7: 'and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up'.
7. I am using the Hebrew-German edition *Die Pessach Haggada* (1998). Translations are mine.
8. Ad of the journal *Tikkun* in *New York Times* of 22 March 2002.
9. Pesach is called *z'man kherûtenu*, 'the feast of our freedom' (*Die Pessach Haggadah*, 11). *Kherût*, 'freedom', however, is not a biblical term. The Bible uses the word *avodah*, 'service', both for the Egyptian serfdom and for the service of God. It opposes the liberating service of God and the oppressive service of the Pharaoh.

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