

Exodus: God Takes Sides (Changing Sides)

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We have been brought up to believe in a God who is the God of *all* people—rich, poor, white, black, Asian, African, North American, South American. We are perturbed when we read that the belt buckles of German soldiers in World War I had the words *Gott mit uns* (God with us) inscribed on them, as though God were supporting the Germans rather than the French, Belgians, English, and Americans. We ought to be equally perturbed when our own political leaders equate the cause of America with the cause of God, pitting us against a "godless" foe, the very "focus of evil."

The notion of God exercising indiscriminate love toward all is a healthy protection against racists, who do not believe God really loves dark-skinned peoples, or against North Americans who instinctively feel (even when they deny it) that God is more concerned about them than about the unemployed workers who flock to Mexico City every day.

And yet there is something false and unbiblical about this view of God's relationship to the world's peoples, as we can see if we pit *other* groups against each other and ask whether God is equally their God. Is God as much the God of the torturers as the God of the tortured? Is God equally the God of the military dictator and the God of those who are murdered by the dictator? Does God have the same disposition toward the victim of a plant closedown in Akron, Ohio, as toward members of the Board of Directors who shut down the plant with no concern for what will happen to the workers?

Our conventional God is aloof from such things; any other God would be a partisan God—worse yet, a "political" God—taking sides with some of God's children and against others. And that is hard for us to swallow.

But it is not hard for the biblical writers to swallow. Indeed, they affirm such a God strongly. We will look at one passage, the story of the exodus, that describes a very partisan God who takes sides with a vengeance. If it were only an isolated passage, we could dispose of it, but it has set its stamp on the whole Bible and has become a paradigm passage for third world Christians living in situations of oppression and injustice similar to the Egyptian situation. To fail to take it seriously is to fail to take the Bible seriously.

THE BIBLICAL TEXT: EXODUS 1:8–14; 2:23–25; 3:7–10

⁸Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. ⁹And he said to his people, "Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us.

¹⁰Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war befall us, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land."

¹¹Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens; and they built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses. ¹²But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. ¹³So they made the people of Israel serve with rigor, ¹⁴and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field; in all their work they made them serve with rigor.

^{2:23}In the course of those many days the king of Egypt died. And the people of Israel groaned under their bondage, and cried out for help, and their cry under bondage came up to God. ²⁴And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. ²⁵And God saw the people of Israel, and God knew their condition.

^{3:7}Then the LORD said, "I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, ⁸and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey....

⁹And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. ¹⁰Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt."

The above passages are snippets of a story that extends over fifteen chapters of Exodus (if one wants to be concise) and over the whole of the Bible (if one wants to be precise). Even in these few verses, however, the main outlines of the story are clear:

1. A class struggle is going on.
2. God is aware of the struggle.
3. God takes sides in the struggle.
4. God calls people to join in the struggle.

We start with the people. And what is happening to the people? The first passage above makes clear that *a class struggle is going on*.

It would be easy for us to digest that claim if only the word "class" were omitted; who could disagree that a "struggle" is going on? But the term "class struggle" has been used deliberately; in the modern world, Christians need to do more than bristle when they hear the words "class struggle." For although Karl Marx may have invented the term, he didn't invent the reality; he merely noticed it and called it to the attention of others. If there is any situation to which it applies, surely the situation described in our text qualifies: it is a story of masters and slaves, kings and chattel, oppressors and oppressed, owners and workers. There are two *classes* of people involved, and they are locked in *struggle*. To reject the term is to reject the story.

It's a pretty uneven struggle. The Israelites are slaves, the king and his crowd are slaveowners. One side holds all the trump cards and aces. If that sounds like a stacked deck, nobody should be surprised, for when one class can make the lives of the other class "bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick and in all kinds of work" (Ex. 1:14), the deck *is* stacked.

Here, then, is a classic oppressor/oppressed situation, complete with intimidation, humiliation, forced labor, powerlessness, and genocide. When the slaves ask for a three-day weekend to go off and worship God, the king's response is typical of how oppressors everywhere respond: he not only doesn't grant requests but makes things even worse than before—*that* will teach them. So Pharaoh tells the taskmasters that not only must the slaves continue to make as many bricks per day as they did before,

but from now on, rather than having straw provided for them, they must provide it themselves. After all, if they have time to go off and worship some god, they obviously aren't being worked hard enough.

What happens in such situations is that the oppressed "internalize their oppression"; that is to say, they accept their lowly status as appropriate or inevitable and, believing themselves powerless to produce change, lose hope. All this happens to the Israelites. They become so shattered that when Moses offers an agenda for protest, "they [do] not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel bondage" (Ex. 6:9).

After the first passage cited above comes a story about midwives, to whom we shall return. There is also a story about a young man named Moses, to whom we shall likewise return: the child of a slave, he grows up, kills an Egyptian taskmaster, and flees to Midian until it is time for him to enter stage left.

In the second passage, the story moves from the sociological account of a struggle in which one side holds all the cards to the theological assertion that *God is aware of the struggle*—the same God who had previously entered into a "covenant" or special agreement with the folks who presently hold none of the cards.

Things have gotten so bad that the Israelites cry out to God. They need help, and they need it badly, and they need it right away. And the good news is that God is not exclusively wrapped up in contemplation of divine attributes but is aware of the Israelites' plight; God realizes that certain covenantal agreements already referred to make it necessary for something to happen.

It is through Moses' encounter with God in the wilderness that we learn, in the third passage that something *is* going to happen. Not only is God "aware," which might be consoling without necessarily changing things, but Moses is told that *God takes sides in the struggle*, which introduces fantastic new possibilities for whichever side is favored with divine assistance. And, as is the consistent pattern throughout the Bible, God does not side with the powerful, the friends of Pharaoh who think they hold history in the palms of their hands, but with the slaves, who up to this moment have had nothing in the palms of their hands but calluses.

God's promise is double-edged: not only liberation *from* Egypt but liberation *for* the Promised Land. "I know their sufferings," God informs Moses, "and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land" (Ex. 3:7–8). God promises *political* liberation (the only kind that would count) from the economic and social bondage Israel had endured. Despite what some of God's later emissaries may have reported, God believes that religion and politics mix.

There is more to come. All of the above could be a recipe for passivity, an invitation to wait for God to move into high gear and take over—which is not the way God operates. For the God who has just said "I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians" follows up by saying to Moses, "Come, I will send *you* to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people" (Ex. 3:10, italics added). *God calls people to join in the struggle*. Moses will be God's emissary to Pharaoh, the one through whom, along with the other Israelites, God's determination to liberate them will actually be accomplished. The people, trusting in the power of the Lord, are to be *the vehicles of their own liberation*. God will not do it without their help. They must act on their own behalf.

God, while intervening on behalf of the weak, is quite prepared to use the weak. Moses, to offer a brilliant example, is as weak as they come; he ducks and weaves in every possible way to avoid the body blow of an assignment, piling up excuses ranging from the fact that he doesn't know God's name to the fact that he stutters and would therefore be a singularly ineffective negotiator with Pharaoh. No matter, God can use even such unpromising material—a consoling thought for the rest of us.

A beautiful example of God's enlisting the people in their own struggle occurs earlier in the account (Ex. 1: 15–22), demonstrating that the real heroes of the liberation are actually heroines—a fact our male-dominated scriptures usually cover up. Fearful of a population increase among the Israelites, Pharaoh instructs the Hebrew midwives to kill the sons of any Hebrew women at whose births they are assisting. The midwives ignore the king's instructions. Sometime later, having seen no notable diminution in the number of Hebrew males on the streets of the royal city, Pharaoh summons the midwives and demands an accounting. The midwives, who are canny, beat him at his own game. They tell him that Hebrew women are more vigorous and in better shape than Egyptian women and always seem to have delivered their own babies, without help, by the time the midwives get there.

While this may be a blow to the midwives' incomes, it is a great boon to the Israelite birthrate, and as a result "the people multiplied and grew very strong" (Ex. 1:20), which was one of God's ways of preparing them to share in the liberation struggle. But God couldn't have done it without the midwives.

We have seen enough to secure the main lines of the exodus story: in a situation of oppression ... God takes sides ... with the oppressed ... to free them from oppression ... by empower-ing them to share in the liberation struggle. The rest is footnotes.

OTHER BIBLICAL PASSAGES

This time we are going to cheat a little. Instead of pointing to a variety of passages as elaborations of the exodus story, we will suggest that this story is so pivotal that the rest of the Bible is commentary on it. When Latin American Christians are accused of putting too much stress on the exodus narrative, Gustavo Gutierrez rightly responds that the exodus narrative is only a vivid example of the biblical narrative as a whole, a narrative that has as its central theme "liberation for the oppressed."

Throughout the rest of this book, therefore, readers are urged to see how the various passages corroborate themes of the story we are now examining. An excellent third world resource for this task is Croatto, *Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom*, which elaborates not only the exodus story itself but also its influence on the Genesis creation stories, the message of the prophets, the mission of Jesus, and the writings of Paul.

ITEMS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

The text confronts us with three questions: (1) How do third world Christians hear this passage? (2) How do we hear it? and (3) How can we deal with the differences?

1. How do third world Christians hear this passage? Their bottom line is that since God is a living God, the story is not only a historical account of God's liberating activity back then but also an ongoing account of God's liberating activity today.

Third world Christians do not need Karl Marx to realize that *a class struggle is going on*. Knowing that they are oppressed is not something gleaned from books; it is gnawing hunger in the gut, family members taken off at 2 A.M. to face torture and death, children growing up so malnourished that permanent brain damage results, and the realization that 80 percent of their people live in unredeemed poverty while the rest live in unimagined opulence.

It is not hard for them to figure out who the oppressors are. They are the little handful on top who have the wealth and power—meaning guns, tanks, and torture chambers—to stay on top and keep the rest on the bottom.

As they reflect on this situation, third world Christians go a step further. They see that the modern pharaohs couldn't continue in power without help from outside, and they see much of that help coming from the United States of America—help that enabled the Somoza family to maintain dictatorial control of Nicaragua for forty years, that has kept Pinochet in dictatorial control of Chile for ten years, that has continuously legitimized Marcos' dictatorial control of the Philippines and that has supported innumerable dictatorial juntas in El Salvador and Guatemala. They see the United States consistently supporting dictators all over the world—wherever it is in its own political and economic self-interest to do so—regardless of what that means for the victims of dictatorial rule.

But there is good news. They are not alone. *God is aware of the struggle they face*. They, too, groan under their bondage and cry out for help (Ex. 2:23). And they, too, believe that God sees them and knows their condition (Ex. 2:25). When the Brazilian bishops issue a pastoral letter about injustice in their land, they use as their title God's declaration "I have heard the cry of my people." The Spanish word for "cry" is *el grito*, which means "scream" and conveys more clearly the immensity of their plight.

There is even better news: God is not only a listening God but a responding God who acts. The source of hope for third world Christians is that *God takes sides in the struggle* and that God takes *their* side. If that sounds like a relic of the *Gott mit uns* mentality, put it another way: God always sides with the oppressed, and it is among the oppressed that most third world Christians happen to be. A God siding with the tyrants would be a God of malevolence; a God siding with no one would appear to be a God of indifference but would also be a God of malevolence, giving support to the tyrants by not opposing them; only a God siding with the oppressed would be a God of justice, a God worthy of the name.

The best news of all is that Christians can participate in throwing off oppression, for *God calls them to join in the struggle*. They need not remain helpless and powerless. God empowers them to do something about their situation. They know from centuries of experience that the oppressors will not voluntarily relinquish power. They know that if another nation "helps" them defeat the oppressor, that nation will become their new oppressor. So they see that they must achieve their own liberation, and that this is what God wants for them. Nourished by such faith, they struggle to challenge the oppressors, organizing resistance movements and working in every way possible to ensure that their children will have enough to eat and can go to bed without fear.

2. How do we hear the exodus story? If such a response to the exodus story is, even close to target, it puts the rest of us in quite a bind. But if we are to be honest with the biblical materials, we cannot ignore such a reading. Let us go through the sequence again and see what it says to us.

We are likely to resist the notion that *a class struggle is going on*; for at least three reasons: (1) because we have been programmed to believe that anything that "sounds Marxist" is wrong; (2) because we

doubt that in our complex world the distinctions between oppressors and oppressed can be so neatly drawn; and (3) because if the distinctions hold, we end up among the oppressors, and we don't think that's fair. Who among us gets up in the morning asking, "Let's see, who can I oppress today?"

So let us hear how third world Christians press the case. Put yourself, they might say, in the shoes of a Chilean woman living in Santiago in 1973. The Allende government, democratically elected, is politically "leftist." But there is milk for the woman's children, and the economy, while precarious, is not as skewed in favor of the rich as before. She has hope for the future, believing that Chile can be governed for the benefit of all and not just the rich.

And then, in early September, the army appears in the streets, bombs the government buildings, assassinates the president, and institutes martial law under General Pinochet. His military dictatorship entrenches itself in power. Inflation rises at a staggering rate. Her husband, along with thousands of others, is seized, interrogated, and tortured and is never seen again. In January she is informed that she can claim his body in the city morgue; it seems he fell and injured himself while exercising in the jail yard. She herself is picked up for questioning and is detained in prison for six weeks, during which time she is unable to make contact with her children, the oldest of whom also "disappears," which is a polite way of saying that the government has murdered him for alleged support of the previous regime.

After her release, the Chilean woman discovers that American business groups had developed elaborate plans to "destabilize" the Chilean economy under Allende so that there would be a pretext for the U.S.-supported military takeover by Pinochet; that the American President and Secretary of State had supported plans for the overthrow (the Secretary of State having said, "Why should we let Chile go communist just because the Chileans don't know any better?"); that many of the Chilean torturers had been trained in American police academies in Panama and Washington; and that it had been a fixed item of State Department policy that Chile should be prevented from consolidating a "socialist" government.

Given these circumstances, our third world friends would ask us, is it any wonder that the Chilean woman counts not only the Chilean junta but the American government among the "oppressors" of her people? Is there not truly a class struggle going on today, just as there was in Egypt? And which side, they would continue to press, are you on?

The notion of class struggle is so difficult for us that the second notion, that *God is aware of the struggle*, may be easier to take hold of initially. We can affirm that God is aware of what is going on in God's world, and while we may not think God sees it the way the Chilean woman sees it, the fact that God *does see* is a given.

We might not even have difficulty with the notion that *God takes sides in the struggle* – until we have to determine *which* side God takes. Our own preference, of course, would be to have God take sides with Pharaoh (read Pinochet) in such a way as to enlighten Pharaoh, bring about a change in Pharaoh's heart, inspire Pharaoh to create better working conditions for the slaves, persuade Pharaoh to give them a three-day weekend (maybe even once a month), and have Pharaoh see to it that the overseers stop treating the slaves so brutally. That would delight us, not least because *it would not upset the existing structures of society at all*; it would just "humanize" them a bit.

But unfortunately, the biblical writers didn't consult us. All they say about Pharaoh's heart is that God "hardened" it rather than enlightening it, which will have to remain a theological problem for another

occasion, since the important thing at the moment is to notice that *God does not enlighten the powerful but empowers the powerless.*

That is very good news to the powerless.

And it is very bad news to the powerful—which is the part of the story we've got to confront, for it is pretty clear that where we fit in the exodus story is among the functionaries in Pharaoh's court rather than among the workers in the slave labor camps. We don't make the big political decisions, but we acquiesce in them; we don't torture people, but our tax money supports the training of torturers; we don't force dictators on the Chileans, but we are complicit in our government's decision to do so. We end up, almost by default, among the oppressors. And if God takes sides with the oppressed, God must also be taking sides against the oppressors. Against us. Bad news.

There's a further affirmation: *God calls people to join in the struggle.* Stated that way, the claim seems reasonable; no one has a right to sit on his or her hands and wait for God to do the work. But in Exodus the claim is that *God empowers the oppressed to work for their liberation,* and that mean overthrowing the oppressors. Servants in Pharaoh's court are not going to fare too well in the light of such an agenda.

3. So, to come to our final question, *how can we deal with the differences between these readings of the story?*

If we are going to try, it means starting with an acknowledgment that the third world version of the story is closer to the biblical version than is our own. And if that is so, we are on the wrong side of the struggle. *Is it possible to change sides?* That question will be central for the rest of this book. Here we can only begin an answer.

Dom Helder Câmara, the archbishop of Retife, Brazil—which is perhaps the poorest area in the whole of South America—once said to a group of visiting North Americans, "If you are appalled by what you see here, please don't try to start a revolution for us—a revolution from which you can flee when real bullets start flying. If you really want to help us, go back to your own country and work to change the policies of your government that exploit our country and keep our people so poor."

We cannot be other than who we are—North Americans who are part of a vast complex of military and economic and political power. But we have an advantage: political and social structures are available to us through which we can work to move that power in less exploitive directions. Both Reinhold Niebuhr and Pope Paul VI (otherwise unlikely theological companions) gave a pointer for that endeavor: If you want peace, they said, work for justice. In the light of the exodus story that means, first of all, refusing any longer to be compliant members of Pharaoh's court and instead using our positions within the court to challenge Pharaoh's policies. That is a tall order.

But sometimes, probably most times, Pharaoh won't budge. And at such times it is no longer enough to try to reform Pharaoh. One has to break with Pharaoh. Instead of changing Pharaoh, one has to change sides. That is the tallest order of all, but fortunately, it is also very biblical, and we will examine many examples of doing it in the following pages. As an initial pointer, consider the experiences of the Latin American bishops.

For centuries, the Catholic Church in Latin America was on the side of Pharaoh. It told the poor to be patient and accept present earthly misery in exchange for anticipated heavenly treasure. It told the poor not to rock the boat, not to challenge structures, not to organize, not to form unions. The rich loved it.

And then something began to happen to the bishops. Some of them overheard Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth talking about "good news to the poor" and began to realize that he really meant it. Others became more aware of the poor in their midst than they had been before. And so gradually, but with increasing conviction, they began to be advocates for the poor and to challenge political and economic structures that kept the poor powerless.

The rich decided this was dirty pool. "You're taking sides," they accused the bishops. "Religion and politics don't mix." To which the bishops could only respond, "You've got it all wrong. For centuries we took *your* side, and you never complained about that particular mix of religion and politics. No, it's not the case that we have started 'taking sides.' We are merely changing sides."

POSTSCRIPT: AN IMMEDIATE WARNING AND AN ULTIMATE HOPE

In the rest of the exodus story, the Israelites not only make it out of Egypt but even (after a discouraging forty-year delay in the desert) make it into the Promised Land. Once there, they give the displaced inhabitants a rough time. The *nouveaux riches* pile up more wealth for themselves, and the widows and orphans—the most defenseless and powerless members of society—become favorite targets for easy exploitation. As one contemporary report describes the scene, "[The rich] have devoured human lives; they have taken treasure and precious things; they have made many widows in the midst of [the land]." The oppressed, once they have gained power, become oppressors.

The story has a dreary familiarity to all who have studied social transformation. The names and numbers of the players changed, but the nature of the game does not; broad-based social movements, born of idealism and selfless commitment, harden into tightly knit oligarchies nurtured by cynicism and self-aggrandizement. The last state is no better, and is often worse, than the first.

This reality becomes a justification for those who want to stick with the status quo. "Why seek change?" they argue. "The new regime will be just as bad as the old one."

The appeal of the argument, of course, is limited to those already on top. They want to stay on top and reap the benefits of their privileged position; if they are clever and calculating enough, they will toss just enough crumbs to the poor to prevent social upheaval. They use words like "stability" and "law and order" to justify putting down any attempts at change. Pharaoh's court was full of such persons. It still is.

Those at the bottom see the specious nature of such arguments. And when things get bad enough to mount significant movements for change, they have at least two fallback arguments: (1) nothing could be worse than the way things are now, so *any* change would be a change for the better; and anyhow, (2) *this* time it's going to be different, because we are not going to make the mistake of becoming carbon copies of the tyrants we replace.

As far as the first argument goes, nobody who is eating well has the privilege of telling starving people that things aren't as bad as they think; the rest of us have a moral obligation to take them at their word.

As far as the second argument goes, the Bible has at least two important things to say. First, it tells us that because God is just, there is a moral dimension to history, so that those who act oppressively—both present tyrants and those who overthrow them and become tyrants themselves—will be brought down and destroyed in the long run.

The answer to that argument is that long-run answers, while consoling, don't help much in the short run. As John Maynard Keynes observed, "In the long run we'll all be dead." So there is a second biblical answer: The best way to keep the oppressed from becoming oppressors is by ongoing protest *from within* the liberation movements. The description in the first paragraph of this postscript, of Israel's oppressive conduct in the Promised Land, is not an outsider's attempt to score points against Jews but is part of the biblical book of Ezekiel (22:25).

The story of Amos is a vivid illustration of the same point. Amos, the farm boy from Tekoa, comes down to the big city of Bethel. He is appalled by the graft, corruption, and exploitation. So he goes to Hyde Park Corner, mounts his soapbox, and does a very clever thing. First of all, he endears himself to his hearers by ticking off the sins of all of Israel's enemies—Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab, and Judah. The crowd loves him. What prophetic fervor! What perception about the sins of our enemies! What insight about their abuses of power! How splendidly reassuring to hear that God is going to destroy them all!

But their satisfaction is short-lived. Amos punctures his hearers' complacency by turning his sharp words against the folk in Bethel itself: Unless the Israelites repent, they too will be destroyed. Why? Because "they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes—they ... trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and turn aside the way of the afflicted" {Amos 2:6–7)—which is a handy summary of exactly what Pharaoh did to those same Israelites in Egypt, save that this time the sandal is on the other foot.

Amos did not win the Boy Orator of the Year Award from the Bethel Chamber of Commerce, despite the fact that he surely spoke with a clear, well-modulated voice. But his devastating indictment is not preserved within the writings of the Jews' enemies; it is preserved within the sacred writings of the Jews themselves.

Amos is one of dozens of voices—all recorded within the Jewish Scriptures—who *from within the life of Israel* keep exhorting Israel not to forsake its commitment to justice, and who keep calling attention to every miscarriage of justice. Commitment to Yahweh, the God of justice, always carries the potential for correcting injustice and saves the biblical demand for radical change from the accusation of the cynics that the oppressed inevitably become oppressors.