

COMMENTARY - EXODUS - Fretheim

Terence E. Fretheim. Interpretation, A Bible Commentary on Exodus. (Louisville: John Knox Pres. 1991),

Introduction: Life as an Adolescent

The wilderness wanderings, or at least their length and breadth, were a surprise to Israel. Instead of a land of milk and honey, they get a desert. The promise falls short. Deliverance at the sea leads into the godforsaken wilderness. ... Salvation from one kind of death leads into the teeth of another. ...¹

The wilderness seems permanent. Forty years is a long time in the old sandbox. Even that grand mountaintop experience at Sinai looks like a one-time thing: it is out of the wilderness only to be led right back in. The wilderness is beginning to look a lot like home. What does it mean for God to create a people out of those who are no people, the grandest of all creative acts, only to leave the rest of their world in chaos? The experience of order leads immediately into disorder, freedom becomes anarchy. Into the jaws of the wilderness, where demons howl and messiahs are tempted, where familiar resources are taken away ... Lifelessness seems to be the only order on which once can depend. The journey from the Red Sea to the promised land is littered with freshly dug graves, and not a single birth is recorded.²

Wilderness is life beyond redemption but short of consummation; but the former seems ineffective and the latter only a mirage. The promise has been spoken, but who can live by words alone? The hope has been proclaimed, but the horizon keeps disappearing in the sandstorms. And so trust in God often turns to recalcitrance and resentment. Faith erodes with the dunes. Commandments collapse into the disorder that shapes daily life. And judgment is invited in to share one's tattered tent.³

Yet even in the wilderness God is responsive to the needs of the complaining people. God provides what the context cannot. The protests are answered, the cries are heard, quite undeservedly. Deliverance comes, but not in being removed from wilderness. A table is spread in the very presence of the enemy (cf. Ps. 23:5). There is a gift of food where the resources are only ephemeral. There is a gift of water where only rocks abound. There is gift of healing here the pain never ends. The movement from death to life occurs *within* the very experience of godforsakenness. Death is transformed into life from *within* a death-filled context. A sanctuary is provided, but in the wilderness.⁴

Although the people are often ungrateful and disloyal, the divine blessing and graciousness pervade the narrative. Israel's time in the wilderness is finally shaped by God's incredible patience and mercy and the divine will to stay with Israel in this time of their adolescence as children of God. Coping with "teenagers" is no easy task, even if the parent is God (cf. Hos. 6:4). No divine flick of the wrist is capable of straightening them out without compromising their freedom. If God wants a mature child, the possibility of defiance must be risked. Parent and child even do a certain amount of "testing" of each other. God will not compromise in holding Israel to

¹ Terence E. Fretheim. Interpretation, A Bible Commentary on Exodus. (Louisville: John Knox Pres. 1991), 171.

² Terence E. Fretheim. Interpretation, A Bible Commentary on Exodus. (Louisville: John Knox Pres. 1991), 171.

³ Terence E. Fretheim. Interpretation, A Bible Commentary on Exodus. (Louisville: John Knox Pres. 1991), 172.

⁴ Terence E. Fretheim. Interpretation, A Bible Commentary on Exodus. (Louisville: John Knox Pres. 1991), 172.

high standards - for the sake of the creation. And so God works through their feelings of abandonment and helplessness, their words of complaint and acts of rebelliousness, and their need for reassurance, protection, a new self-identity, and non-oppressive life structures. God sticks by them through it all. God has made promises to this people, and God is a promise-keeper. The process of maturation takes longer than a single generation.⁵

One observes a high level of *divine responsiveness*, both to Moses' prayer and to the people's need. God is immediately engaged in the situation, though not in independence of Moses' prayer, and provides a means *for Moses* to resolve the difficulty from the world of nature.... God assumes that Moses knows what to do with piece of wood and that the wood has certain properties that enable it to sweeten water (the bark and the leaves of some trees have such capacities). God is here working in and through human knowledge and in the "healing" properties of certain elements of the natural order. God's providence is shown in leading Moses to *help that is already available in the world of creation*.⁶

God does not do such work in independence from human questing, knowledge, imagination, and ingenuity. God's "healing" is not an unmediated divine activity. God makes use of what is available in the world to accomplish that which is right and good. Persons of faith should be more willing and open to speak of God's involvement in and through the use of human and natural capabilities.⁷

Israel is freed from Pharaoh for service to God. God's word to Israel is not casual advice, concerning which a take it or leave it attitude may be adopted. The giving of any word by God is assumed to be in the people's best interests.... That word will always be on behalf of life and well-being. Hence obedience is in service of God's creational purposes. Obedience to [God's ordinance] is a way of exhibiting trust in the God who speaks the word.⁸

⁵ Terence E. Fretheim. Interpretation, A Bible Commentary on Exodus. (Louisville: John Knox Pres. 1991), 172-173,

⁶ Terence E. Fretheim. Interpretation, A Bible Commentary on Exodus. (Louisville: John Knox Pres. 1991), 177.

⁷ Terence E. Fretheim. Interpretation, A Bible Commentary on Exodus. (Louisville: John Knox Pres. 1991), 178.

⁸ Terence E. Fretheim. Interpretation, A Bible Commentary on Exodus. (Louisville: John Knox Pres. 1991), 178.