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# A Sacramental Journey: A Christian-Theological Reading of Exodus

John Mark Hicks

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Exodus is a paradigmatic text for both Israel and the Church. This is evident from the recurrence of its language and themes throughout the literature of both the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures.<sup>1</sup> The story narrated in Exodus creates, identifies and guides Israel as Yahweh's elect people. The confluence of themes that constitutes this identity provides a basic lens through which Israel knows itself and through which the church identifies with Israel. These theological themes—including, among others, creation, redemption and divine presence—shape the life and liturgy of Israel and subsequently the Church.<sup>2</sup>

This essay highlights several sacramental themes that appear in Exodus in the light of Christian theology and practice. These themes underscore the presence of a divine grace mediated by elements of creation (water, food, cloud) through which Israel (and typologically the Church) participated in a new reality.<sup>3</sup> Israel's sacramental experience encounters a gracious God and anticipates—even typifies—the Church's own experience of that same God. Early Christians read the Exodus narrative as their own. That narrative was rehearsed in both sacramental word and ritual as the themes of Exodus found, according to Christians, their climactic and eschatological fulfillment in Christ. Early Christians saw their own baptism, eating/drinking at a table and liturgical assemblies in Israel's own experience of redemption and liberation.

This sacramental theme appears at key moments in the structure of the book of Exodus. Peter Enns identifies three basic movements within the narrative of the book.<sup>4</sup> Theologically, the first movement is from slavery to liberation (Exod 1.1—15.21), the second is from wilderness to Sinai (Exod 15.22—24.18) and the third is a divine movement from Sinai to tabernacle (Exod 25—40). Each of these movements has a sacramental climax. Israel is baptized in the sea and cloud, eats with God on Sinai and Yahweh comes to dwell with Israel in the tabernacle.

## **Baptized in the Sea and Cloud**

As the story opens in Exodus, Israel is found enslaved in Egypt. Israel is lamenting. The people “groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help” (Exod 2.23). Though God appears absent, God hears Israel's “groaning” and remembers the covenant with Abraham (Exod 2.24). Responding, God appears to Moses and sends him to Egypt. God undermines Egyptian confidence in their own deities by reversing

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1. See David Fleer and Dave Bland, *Reclaiming the Imagination: The Exodus as Paradigmatic Narrative for Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2009).

2. Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 1–4, 12–22.

3. See a fuller development of “sacramental theology” in John Mark Hicks, “Stone-Campbell Sacramental Theology,” *Restoration Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2008): 35–48.

4. Peter Enns, *Exodus* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 33.

creation and deconstructing the power of Egyptian gods through the ten plagues. God is present in the chaos that afflicts Egypt for the sake of liberating Israel.

Though Pharaoh released Israel in the face of a divine “uncreation,” he soon pursues Israel to destroy her. Fear rages through Israel, but Moses assures her. At the edge of the sea God moves between the Egyptian army and Israel. The “cloud was there with the darkness” (Exod 14.19); that is, God was present in the night to protect Israel from the Egyptian army. Yahweh was “in the pillar of fire and the cloud” (Exod 14.24). The cloud and the pillar of fire are created elements that function sacramentally. Liturgically, Israel recognized this point and celebrated it (Pss 78.14; 99.7; 105.38–39).

The “waters” figure prominently in the narrative at this point. The “waters” echo the creation account. The “waters” were part of the primordial chaos (Gen 1.2). God “separated the waters” to make space for the earth (Gen 1.6–7). God “gathered the waters” into a single place so that dry land—called the “earth”—might emerge (Gen 1.9–10). The “waters” are the presence of chaos within the creation. The “waters” also echo the Flood narrative. The “flood of waters” was released upon the earth to destroy it (Gen 6.17; 7.6–7, 10, 24). When the “waters receded from the earth,” a new creation emerged (Gen 8.1–3) along with the divine promise that the “waters” would never again “destroy all flesh” (Gen 9.15). The “flood of waters” expresses divine judgment and it cleanses the earth.

Israel, at the edge of the sea, faced the “waters.” These “waters” represented chaos and judgment. Israel faced the chaotic darkness of destruction from the Egyptian gods at the hands of the Egyptian army. In this moment, Yahweh directs Israel “to go forward” (Exod 14.15). They are called to trust Yahweh and experience the salvation of the Lord.

What follows is one of the most memorable—if not the most significant—moment in the history of Israel. Yahweh confronts the chaos, just as God did in the very act of creation itself. A wind (*ruach*) blew over the sea and “the waters were divided” so that “dry land” appeared (Exod 14.21; cf. Gen 1.2). The “waters” were like a “wall” on “their right hand and on their left” (Exod 14.22). They loomed over Israel like a threatening judgment or impending chaos. Israel, trusting in Yahweh, “walked on dry ground through the sea” (Exod 14.29). On that day, Yahweh “saved Israel” (Exod 14.30). Israel “saw the great power of the Lord” and “believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses” (Exod 14.30–31).

Israel passed through the “waters” and received an identity. They escaped the chaos of the “waters” and the malevolent arm of the Egyptian army. Yahweh redeemed them with a creative act—God divided the “waters,” just as in the beginning. God created a new reality for Israel, a new identity.

Early Christians remembered the Exodus in the light of their own baptism. Israel was “baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,” according to Paul (1 Cor 10.2). They gained a new identity when they passed through the waters. In the same way, believers receive a new identity when they “walk through the waters.” They pass through the waters into a new life and a new identity. God creates a new reality—a new creation—through baptism, just as God created a new reality for Israel on the other side of the sea. Israel and the Church share sacramental meaning—God has acted through the waters to save each from chaos and judgment.

### **Eating in the Presence of God**

After their “baptism,” God led Israel “into the wilderness” (Exod 15.22). Though Israel complained about their thirst and hunger in the desert, Yahweh nevertheless provided water and manna (Exod 15.22—18.27). God transformed the desert into new life for newborn Israel. Where there were only rocks and shrubs, God gave the water of life and the bread of heaven. Theologically, it is the promise of new creation—of new life—in the midst of barrenness. This itself has sacramental meaning as Paul recognized when he described the water and food in the wilderness as “spiritual” (1 Cor 10.2–4).

Exodus 15.22—24.18 moves from the Red Sea through the wilderness to “the mountain of God” at Sinai (Exod 24.13). Exodus 15 celebrates this in the conclusion of its victory song: “You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession, the place, O Lord, that you made your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, that your hands have established” (Exod 15.17). Sinai is where the “glory” of Yahweh “dwelt” (Exod

24.16). The wilderness led Israel to a vision of the glory of God as they “encamped before the mountain” (Exod 19.4). Though God is present with Israel in the wilderness—the cloud and pillar of fire lead them—the wilderness leads them to the mountain, the place where God dwells. It is God’s “sanctuary” (Exod 15.17).

Exodus 19–24 narrates the story of God’s covenanting with Israel. Yahweh invited Israel into a covenant relationship and they accepted (Exod 19.3–8). Then God showed up—Sinai was covered with a “thick cloud”: God had come to dwell on the mountain in order to “meet” Israel (Exod 19.9, 16–17). But the people were warned that they must not presume upon God’s invitation and “break through to the Lord” as God, due to divine holiness, would “break out against them” (Exod 19.21–22). The people must learn the way of the covenant, commit to it and approach God through divine grace rather than rushing presumptuously into God’s presence. Consequently, the covenant is summarized in the Decalogue (Exod 20.1–17) and then elaborated in the “book of the covenant” (Exod 21–23). Only then, within the Exodus narrative, is the covenant ratified through bloody sacrifices and a meal (Exod 24).<sup>5</sup>

Mirroring Exodus 19 as a second verbal ratification of the covenant, in Exodus 24.1–11, Israel covenants with God through burnt offerings and fellowship offerings (Exod 24.5). At the heart of this passage are an altar and a table. The altar (sacrifices) is the ground upon which Moses and the elders are invited into the presence of God to eat and drink at a table. Having sprinkled the “blood of the covenant” on the people, the representatives of Israel go up onto the mountain to meet God. On the mountain, the leaders of Israel eat and drink in the presence of God. Astoundingly, Exodus 24.11 succinctly but profoundly reports: “they saw God, and they ate and drank.”

The significance of this statement is immense. The God of Israel is a holy God who cannot be approached by sinful human beings (Exod 33.20). But God established communion with Israel through covenantal sacrifice, through an altar. Twice the text states that they “saw God.” They experience divine holiness without being consumed by it. But more than that, they also experienced communion with God through a covenantal meal. They shared fellowship with God at a table. God became the God of Israel through covenant, and this covenant was celebrated through a meal. The altar led to a table. At the table they ate and drank in the presence of God. It was a sacramental moment.

This is a revolutionary moment in the history of Israel. This eating and drinking with God in God’s sanctuary (the holy mountain) became the fundamental truth of Israel’s sacrificial meals. When Israel ate and drank—as in fellowship meals (peace offerings and thank offerings)—they did so “before the Lord” (Deut 27.7). It was as if they were eating and drinking in the Holy Place itself, which is “before the Lord” (Exod 28.35). That Israel “saw” God is the foundational theology for the sacramental notion of standing, eating or rejoicing “before the Lord” (cf. see “before the Lord” in Exod 27.21; 28.12, 29, 35, 38; 29.11, 23–26, 42; 30.8, 16; 34.34; 40.23, 25). Sacrificial meals were sacramental meals “before the Lord.”

The Eucharist in the Church recalls this event. At the Last Supper Jesus describes the wine of the Passover as the “blood of the covenant” (Matthew 26.27). This is a clear allusion to Exodus 24.8. The blood is the enactment of the covenant. The blood is sprinkled at the altar. The cross is the Christian altar, but the Lord’s Supper is the Christian table. Just as the altar of Exodus 24 is followed by a table in the presence of the Lord, so the cross of Christ is followed by the table of the Lord. While the cross brings forgiveness, reconciliation and relationship, so the Lord’s Supper is the experience of communion in God’s presence.

When Israel ate in the presence of the Lord, that moment anticipated—even typified—how the Church eats in the presence of Christ at the table. The Eucharist is the table of the Lord who eats with the disciples gathered around that table (Matt 26.30). The table is a sacramental moment where the grace of God is experienced through eating and drinking.

### **Yahweh Dwells with Israel**

In Exodus 25–40 the narrative stalls. There is no movement of people from Egypt to the wilderness or through the wilderness to Sinai. Rather, the people are gathered at Sinai while the text details the plans for (Exod 25–

5. The following is dependent upon John Mark Hicks, *Come to the Table* (Orange, CA: New Leaf, 2001), 30–34.

31) and the building of (Exod 35–40) the tabernacle. The golden calf drama (Exod 32–34) occupies the center of the tabernacle story. The preparation and building of the tabernacle anticipate the coming of God to dwell with Israel. The drama of the Golden Calf results in the renewed promise of God to dwell with Israel (Exod 33.12–17). The Exodus narrative climaxes when God descends to “dwell” among the chosen people (Exod 40.35). Rather than the people, God moves this time. Yahweh moves from Sinai to the tabernacle.

The divine movement from Sinai to tabernacle, as Fretheim notes, is a movement from “occasional appearances of God” on Sinai to “the *ongoing* presence of God” in the tabernacle.<sup>6</sup> This closes the distance between God and Israel. No longer is God “over there” or even “up there” but rather God is “here”—God is present among them. Israel now comes “before the Lord” because God is present among them sacramentally in the tabernacle.

One entry into the significance of this point is to note the use of the verb *dwell* in the tabernacle story. The Hebrew term for *dwell* (*shekan* from which the word *shekinah* is formed) is used five times in this narrative. The first use is Exodus 24.16 which states that the “glory of the Lord dwelt on Mt. Sinai.” But by the end of the narrative “the cloud” will “settle” (literally, *dwell*) on the “tent of meeting” as the “glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle” (Exod 40.35). The tabernacle becomes God’s sanctuary where God dwells “in their midst” (Exod 25.8). This movement from Sinai to tabernacle is the realization of the covenantal promise: “I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God” (Exod 29.45). Indeed, this is the significance of the Exodus itself. God redeemed Israel from Egypt for the express purpose of dwelling among them (Exod 29.46).

The covenantal promise—“I will be your God and you will be my people, and I will dwell among you”—finds fulfillment, according to Paul, in the Church where the Church becomes the temple (tabernacle) of God through the indwelling of the Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 3.16; 2 Cor 6.16). This indwelling anticipates—more, it is a proleptic experience of—the eschatological dwelling of God in the new heaven and new earth (cf. Rev 21.1–3). Consequently, through the indwelling of the Spirit we enjoy the sanctifying and communing presence of God who transforms us by that presence. Our bodies are the divine sanctuary on earth and the church community is the sanctuary of God upon the earth. In this sense, we *already* experience what has *not yet* arrived (the eschaton).

Without diminishing the previous point, there is yet another dimension to the proleptic presence of God. Hebrews 10.19–25 assures that we enter the “Holy of Holies” of the heavenly tabernacle when we assemble to draw near to God and encourage each other. Assembly is a moment when the indwelling Spirit lifts us up into the heavenly sanctuary to commune with God. The Spirit who has descended into our hearts is the means by which we ascend into the heavenly tabernacle. In this moment we participate in the worship of the whole cosmos and the angelic hosts as we meet God in the heavenly throne room itself (cf. Heb 12:18–24). Just as Israel met God at the earthly tabernacle in their great assemblies, so the Church meets God in the heavenly tabernacle through their liturgical assemblies. The assembly of the Church, then, participates in the eschatological reality of the heavenly sanctuary: the assembly becomes the sanctuary of God on earth.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

The story of the Exodus is, among other things, a sacramental journey. Israel experienced the gracious redemption of God as they passed through the waters, the presence of God at the table and the dwelling of God in the tabernacle. As Israel passed through the Red Sea, they were “baptized” into a new community. As they encamped around Sinai to “eat and drink” in the presence of God, they experienced the hospitality of God at the table. As they completed the tabernacle in which God came to dwell, they assembled “before the Lord” in a unique, new way. Each of these moments lived in the memory, liturgical and sacramental life of Israel. They remembered their new baptismal identity, they enjoyed fellowship with God through sacrificial meals and they liturgically encountered God at the divine dwelling place.

6. Fretheim, *Exodus*, 264.

7. See John Mark Hicks, Johnny Melton and Bobby Valentine, *A Gathered People: Revisioning the Assembly as Transforming Encounter* (Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers, 2007), 145-148.

The Church, as a descendent of Israel, relives Israel's own sacramental moments through the Church's sacraments. The Church, grafted into the people of Israel, celebrates the redemptive meaning of the Exodus in our own baptism, eats its own meal at the table in God's presence and comes "before the Lord" in the assembling of the saints. The story of salvation history is one. God has acted and continues to act through the gracious gift of the sacraments. As Christians, we remember our baptismal identity, eat with God at the table and encounter God through sacramental assembly. In this we continue to live in the wake and power of the Exodus narrative. Israel's sacramental journey is our own.

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