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## **The O.T. Exodus: A Cultic Approach: The God of Exodus**

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The author indicates first the theological meaning of a certain passage, and applies it then to some contemporary problem, and he shows himself a master in this procedure.

Though we notice, of course, here and there the accent of our Protestant Brother, I must say that as a catholic I can fully agree with all that is positively said, and I have no hesitation in recommending the book fervently also to the catholic reader. A very modern and inspiring book on our mission as christians in the world.

J. BOVENMARS, MSC

## THE O.T. EXODUS: A CULTIC APPROACH

THE GOD OF EXODUS, by James Plastaras, C.M. Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1966. ix, 342 pp.

Israel was a people with a unique religion which has perdured in so many essentials for three millennia and which is still at the basis of the modern Judaeo-Christian world view. But Israel is wholly incomprehensible without the historical and religious events that brought her into existence: the remarkable escape from oppression in Egypt by the unknown God Yahweh, and the covenant made at Sinai with Yahweh that formed the group of slaves into a people. For over a thousand years the same people relived that initial experience with this merciful and saving God in liturgical celebrations. Israel's continuance as a people depended directly on the original exodus events as they were reenacted and reexperienced in cultic rites.

It is surprising, therefore, that no work has appeared in English dealing in a popular way with these important historical and liturgical events narrated in the biblical Book of Exodus. This theological study on the God of Exodus and His people of Israel fills a real need in the Old Testament field. Teachers of theology and the general reader as well can indeed be grateful to Fr. Plastaras for a lucidly written and thoroughly modern approach to a fundamental OT book. The author has succeeded admirably in presenting the results of the latest scholarship in a semi-popular work; his frequently bibliographical references will help those interested in more detailed treatment of the questions raised.

This is not a complete commentary on the Books of Exodus and Numbers, but it does treat the high points in the narratives of Israel's passage from Egypt to the Promised Land, and develops the

main theological themes of these chapters, linking them up frequently with the New Testament.

For a correct understanding of the Exodus narratives, the author tries to show the setting out of which these arose. They did not originate in a historian's research cubicle; rather they came from the liturgy as celebrated in the sanctuary on feast days. The ancient saving events were narrated, for example, at a feast renewing the covenant. The description of those events were colored by the liturgical action itself, and so "reflects the picture of how Israel relived the Sinai event in later generations rather than the original Sinai event itself." In Exodus 19, the thunder of God's voice in His appearance on the mountain becomes trumpet blasts; a three-day purification ritual is prescribed; Moses leads the people in procession. Such details come from later liturgical rites. Similarly, the description of the Passover sacrifice and meal on the eve of Israel's flight from Egypt (Ex 12-13) includes different rites that were practiced in celebrations generations later.

To read the Book of Exodus as simple history, then, would be to misunderstand the type of literature it is and to distort the purpose or the author. Rather these chapters should be approached in much the same way as we approach the texts in the Christian liturgy of Good Friday. Material from both OT and NT, along with ritual from Jewish and Christian backgrounds are fused in order to give the worshippers the *meaning* of the events they are reliving and to elicit from them a response of faith, repentance, gratitude, love of God, etc. We do not read the Good Friday text just to see "what happened"; neither should we approach the Exodus story with mere historical curiosity.

The cultic approach to Exodus and other OT books is not new, but Fr. Plastaras has been able to identify more concretely the type of liturgical rite that influenced the formation of the first fifteen chapters. Using unpublished material (from the classes of Fr. William Moran, S.J. of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome), he has shown how the narrative was built up along the lines of a lamentation liturgy that lay behind many psalms and some prophetic oracles. The following comparison of the structure of Psalm 12 (11) and Exodus 1-15 will show the parallels.

Lamentation	Ps 12 (11), 2-3	Ex 2, 23-25
Petition	4-5	(not expressed, but perhaps implicit in the suffering)

Oracle of the Lord	6	3, 6 and 6, 2-3
Thanksgiving	7	15, 1-21

The author has also presented a clear view of the now familiar suzerainty (or vassal) treaty of the Ancient East that seems to have served as model for the expression of the covenantal relationship between Israel and Yahweh. A great king often made treaties or covenants with lesser rulers and even peoples who pledged to serve him as vassals. The main features of the treaty document and ceremony are also found in OT covenant material, and most of it in the Sinai episode in Exodus 19-24: (1) introduction of the Great King; (2) historical prologue narrating the king's past benefactions to the vassal; (3) the covenant stipulations; (4) formula of curses and blessings for breaking or fulfilling the covenant; (5) a list of witness; (6) writing of conditions on tablets that are preserved in a sanctuary and periodically read out publicly. Thus Israel conceived of her God Yahweh in terms of the loftiest of human positions, the Supreme King with power over the people of Israel, in fact over all rulers and nations of the world, who gave Israel a covenant, demanding unswerving loyalty but promising eternal love and protection.

The last few chapters deal with theological questions that have parallels and contacts with the New Testament: God's presence in Israel, particularly as connected with the ark of the covenant and the cloud overshadowing the tent; the trying years in the desert when God was testing Israel and revealing His providential concern for them; the brazen serpent and Moses praying with extended arms. The final thirty pages present a masterful summary, outlining the main aspects of the new exodus accomplished by Jesus Christ as it is expressed in the writings of each of the NT authors.

This theological study on the God of Exodus should be of immense value in helping to understand one of the most important books of the Bible. It also leads to an appreciation of how the Christian people as the new Israel relives the escape from slavery and their birth as a new people in the liturgical life of the Church, especially in the eucharistic banquet in which the Lord gives men the new covenant in his own blood. Despite the scholarly background, this book could profitably serve as the backbone of a retreat. In fact, Fr. Plastaras has shown vividly that meticulous scholarship need not be confined to the ivory tower or the museum; it can contribute much to a practical, religious understanding of the OT and to Christian living.