

‘THE TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE’

The Path from Egypt to Eden

By MARK COLERIDGE

DIE ARBEIT MACHT FREI’: this was the inscription over the entrance to the death-camp of Auschwitz: ‘Work will set you free’. The world of the death-camp and the world of the Bible are very different. Inscribed over ‘the gateway’ to the Bible there stand the words: ‘The truth will set you free’. The demonic irony is gone, and in its place there sounds a grand promise to which the whole of the Bible attests, though not without an irony of its own since the promise is worked out paradoxically. As we enter the scriptural world, we ask two questions: What is this truth? What is the liberation it works?

The seed of the entire Bible is the Exodus. From the vantage-point of Sinai, Scripture looks back to the first moment of creation and forward to the consummation of all things. It is the act of liberating slaves in what had seemed impossible circumstances that names God. This is important, the naming, since the Bible is nothing other than a naming of God. In Genesis 1:1 we read: ‘In the beginning, God (*elohīm*) created the heavens and the earth’. We are told what God does, but we are not told which God this is. God is designated by the mysterious *elohīm* which, to make matters more complex, is plural. This is very strange given the Bible’s passionate and enduring defence of the oneness of God. As the story unfolds, it appears that the biblical God is addicted to anonymity. In Exodus 3:13 Moses very reasonably asks the name of the mysterious God of the burning bush who has given him such an extraordinary commission. In v 14 he receives a still more mysterious answer: ‘Say this to the people of Israel, “I AM has sent me to you”’. We take this at times to be the revelation of the divine name: the unpronounceable tetragrammaton YHWH. But this is not so. It is rather a refusal by God to reveal his name. God will not be coaxed from anonymity, and the question is: Why? The God of the biblical story proves constantly to be a God who names himself *in action*. Therefore, if you wish to know who this God is, then do not ask his name: look at what he does. This is a God who names himself in action.

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In that sense, the biblical story which recounts God's action in time is nothing other than a naming of God; and in the liberation of slaves we see the seminal action of the God whose first name is Exodus.

That name is sealed in the Law given on Sinai, the Law which traced a paradoxical path of liberation. The rabbis compute that there are 613 commands of the Law. Yet they would concede that there are really only the ten, which compress the hundreds into a few; and they would concede still further that there is only one, with 612 applications, elaborations or extrapolations. This is the First Commandment, which in the Bible is very carefully formulated. When we first meet it in Exodus 20:2-3 this is what we find:

I am the Lord your God
who brought you out of the land of Egypt,
out of the house of bondage.
You shall have no strange gods.

This is one of those points at which the Bible, for all its complexity, comes to a point of unnerving simplicity, since in these few words we have *in nuce* the whole of the Bible. To see how this is so, it might help to identify and explore the three key elements of this, the first and only commandment.

'I am the Lord your God'

Here God speaks as an 'I'. This sense of a personal God is not shared by all the religious traditions of the world, but it is essential to the Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions. The truth which the Bible proclaims is at its heart *personal*. But is also *interpersonal*, since God chooses to relate to the human being as 'you'. Nothing is said by the Bible of why exactly God should choose to do so extraordinary a thing. We perhaps take it for granted that God should relate to us; but the disproportionate relationship warns against a too easy assumption. Why should the God whom the creation cannot begin to contain, the God whom we struggle to think of or imagine, why should this God choose to relate at all to creatures on one tiny planet? The Bible provides no answer to the question, but simply announces the fact. It is clear that the relationship is not between equals, since God remains Lord (YHWH) and the human being dependent. Once the relationship between God and the human being is posited, the question becomes: What is the *effect* of this relationship? And the answer comes in the second element of the First Commandment: 'Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage'.

In choosing to relate to the human being, God shows himself determined to set slaves free, since he did not create the human being for slavery. In this sense, God is determined to restore the creation, to lead the human being back to Eden where the creation is as God intends.

At this point, we turn back to the first pages of Genesis and the beginnings of the biblical story. There we find an original and counter-cultural understanding of the relationship between God and the human being. In the surrounding cultures of the ancient Near East, the common understanding was that the god had created the human being as a slave, to do the necessary work on earth so that the gods could dwell in the uninterrupted ease appropriate to divinity. This made sense in societies whose economies depended wholly on a slave-class. The social order was projected on to the heavenly realm.

The Bible plays with this common understanding, but only in order to subvert it. In Genesis 2:8, we read: 'The Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed'. At this point, everything is as the surrounding cultures would have expected. This is still truer in v 15 where we read: 'The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it'. Here the human being is, it would seem, the slave of God. But the shift comes in v 19: 'So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name'. What is extraordinary about this is that the human being appears no longer as slave of God, but as co-creator and especially so at the point of language.

In the act of creation, God had ordered the chaos by means of a word: 'The breath of God was moving over the face of the waters; and God said, "Light!" and there was light'. The first sound we hear in the Bible is the sound of God breathing in the darkness. Then, we are told, the divine breath hits the divine vocal chords and God speaks a single word: 'Light!' This is a word powerful enough to turn darkness to light and begin the work of creation. Language is what does it. Therefore, in asking the human being to name the creatures, God invites the human being to share in the task of ordering the chaos through language. This is not a task for slaves, but a task for sons and daughters, a task for those created in God's 'image and likeness' (Gen 1:26). Therefore, in his determination to set slaves free, God shows himself faithful to the act of creation by which the human being is not slave but son and daughter. To be set free from Egypt is to begin the journey back to Eden.

Against the background of Genesis 1–2, the biblical story proper begins in chapter 3. All stories are generated by conflict, and in Genesis 3 we have the beginning of the conflict which generates the biblical story, the clash between divine and human freedom. That God is utterly free is unquestioned; the extraordinary thing is that God creates the human being free. Here again we find no trace of slavery. It is once these two freedoms clash that the biblical story really begins to move.

Into the mouth of the mysterious serpent is placed the catechesis of evil. It presents a vision of the relationship between God and the human being which is diametrically opposed to the vision found in chapters 1–2. In Genesis 3:3 the woman reports God's warning of death should the divine prohibition not be respected: 'God said, "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree . . . neither shall you touch it, lest you die"''. To this there comes the reply which states the first element of the catechesis of evil: 'You will not die'. In other words, God is a liar. God's word, which chapters 1–2 have shown as powerfully creative, is deceptive and therefore destructive. Then follows the second element of the catechesis of evil: 'God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil'. Here God is an oppressor, determined to keep the human being in a position of unrealized potential. This again is totally at odds with the vision of God presented in chapters 1–2.

The human being therefore has a choice, and the choice is clearly made to follow the path traced by the catechesis of evil. This is a path which seems to be about ultimate liberation: the human being no longer merely a co-creator but the human being as God. The story makes it clear immediately just how illusory this liberation is. In grasping at what had seemed an ultimate liberation, the human being finds only a slavery which is the opposite of what God intends. The catechesis of evil had claimed that the human being was either God or nothing. Chapters 1–2 had claimed that the human being was neither God nor nothing, but a creature possessed of a unique and magnificent dignity as co-creator made in the image and likeness of God. In seeking to be God, the human beings refuse to take their proper place in the scheme of things and discover themselves in an alien place with an alien status as slave. This is life outside the Garden, the fruit of grasping at an illusory freedom. Outside the Garden, the search becomes a search for an authentic freedom which will lead the human being back to Eden, back to a unique and magnificent dignity, back to a proper place in the scheme of things, neither God nor nothing.

It is this true freedom which God offers in the Exodus. But, with the giving of the Law on Sinai immediately after the Exodus, the freedom God offers seems strange, tied as it is to a Law. For Israel, the question was this: Our forebears came forth from Egypt, but what of us in our time and place? How shall we come forth from our Egypt? In other words: What could ensure that Exodus was not just 'once upon a time', but was always and everywhere possible? It was clear that Egypt was not just 'once upon a time', clear that Pharaoh wore many different guises and worked many different oppressions. If that were so, then Exodus too must transcend time and place, if God were to be faithful to his promise. The answer to which Israel comes through a long and painful journey through time is: the Law. This means that at the heart of the Bible there lies the mystery of a liberating obedience, with the biblical voice insisting: Obey this Law and you will come forth from your Egypt, whatever it may be.

In that sense, the Law is the liberating truth which nothing can remove. Other things might come and go as they did in the dust of history: the land, the monarchy, the temple, the priesthood, the prophetic movements. But the Law remained forever. Even in exile, Israel still had the Law; even if the scrolls were burned, Israel still had the Law written on their hearts, that is, memorized by heart. As long as the Law was there, then there was no Egypt from which Israel could not come forth. The path back to Eden remained open. There was hope.

'You shall have no strange gods'

The problem with the other gods – and their name is legion – is that they all ended up looking like Pharaoh. They were and still are the gods who say either that slaves never come forth from Egypt or that slaves might briefly set foot on the path to freedom only to return irrevocably to Egypt. The other gods are the lords of hopelessness; and this is why God insists that they be rejected. It is not that he is feeling somehow threatened or insecure. True, he is a jealous God, but a God who is jealous not for himself but for the human being. If he demands that the human being turn away from the other gods and their seductive catechesis, it is because God is keen that the human being stay on the path of true freedom which leads back to the Garden.

To this point, we have seen something of the way in which the Old Testament understands both freedom and truth. But other voices sound once we turn to the pages of the New Testament; and prime among them is the voice of Paul. It is clear from the Letters that Paul was raised a Pharisee and that he enthusiastically followed the path of

Pharisaism. This was the path of strict adherence to the Law, not out of some obsessive legalism but in search of the liberation that was God's promise. Yet something of the frustration that must have dogged Paul's search sounds in the Letter to the Romans, culminating in the cry of 7:24: 'Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?' The answer comes in the very next verse: 'Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!' In Jesus, Paul claimed to have found a fullness of freedom to which the Law could point but which the Law could never deliver. To seek from the Law this fullness of freedom, he would later claim, was to condemn oneself to a desperate frustration. After his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul would insist that the fullness of God's liberation – liberation even from what he calls 'the sting of death' (1 Cor 15:56) – comes only through the encounter with the risen Christ.

In his own encounter on the road to Damascus, he comes to two great insights which will shape everything he says, does and writes in his apostolic ministry. First: he comes to see the truth of the primitive proclamation of Christian faith that Jesus is Lord. This has not only the general sense that Jesus is in command when, where and how he wills, but also the more precise sense that it is through the risen Christ that the liberating lordship of God, proclaimed in the First Commandment, is now mediated in its fullness. If this is so, then the most important thing of all is to encounter the risen Christ and live in communion with him. This leads us to the second of the two insights to which Paul comes on the road to Damascus. It appears in the words placed on the lips of Jesus in the Acts of the Apostles. In all three accounts, Jesus says: 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' What is strange about these words is that Saul has been persecuting not Jesus himself but the followers of Jesus. The words of Jesus make clear the radical identification of Jesus with his followers, the kind of identification which will lead Paul later to formulate the extraordinary image of the Church as the Body of Christ.

The two great insights which Paul receives on the road to Damascus may therefore be expressed as follows:

JESUS IS LORD

THE CHURCH IS JESUS

If the encounter with the risen Christ is all-important, then so too is the question, Where might we encounter him? The answer that Paul never ceases to give is, 'In the Church'. This is perhaps a disconcerting

answer, since many people want Jesus but not the Church. Yet, for Paul, you cannot have the real Jesus unless you have the real Church. To have Jesus without the Church is to run the risk of finding a Jesus who is a private concoction devised for our own comfort or consolation and so to take the path of an illusory freedom. The Church, for all that it may at times be disconcerting, even distressing, is the sole guarantee that the Jesus to whom we come is the real Jesus in whom there is found the real freedom of God in its fullness. This is why Paul will spend his whole life founding and nurturing local communities in which the experience of encounter with the risen Christ will be opened to all.

It is sometimes thought that, once he had come to faith in Christ, Paul abandoned the Law. This is not so. Paul never abandons either the Law or his Jewish identity. If he had been asked at his execution whether he was Jewish or Christian, Paul (if he had understood the question at all) would undoubtedly have replied, 'Both'. Paul's coming to Christ was not an abandonment but a fulfilment of his Jewish identity. While he never abandoned the Law, he was certainly forced to resituate it, as we see him doing clearly in Galatians. There he speaks of the Law as strictly preparatory for the coming of Jesus, as pointing to a fullness of freedom which comes only in the encounter with the risen Christ. To ask the Law to provide that fullness of freedom is to ask it to do something which God never intended. To make the Law absolute in this sense is to turn it into what he calls 'an agent of sin', so that something divine in its origin becomes demonic in its force. That is when Paul lashes out against the Law: only when it is made absolute and accorded a place within the plan of God which belongs only to the risen Christ. But if the Law is seen as preparatory rather than absolute, then he insists that it holds its creative force.

To describe the way in which the Law is preparatory, Paul in Galatians uses the image of the *paidagōgos*. The *paidagōgos* was a carefully chosen slave of an aristocratic household whose task it was to prepare the son and heir to assume his adult responsibilities. He supervised all aspects of the boy's education. But the time came eventually when the job was done, when the boy reached his majority. At that point, the *paidagōgos* retired to the shadows, all the preparations now finished. For Paul, the Law was the *paidagōgos* given by God to Israel to prepare for a maturity which would come with faith in the risen Christ. The Law was to prepare for faith, though Paul is quick to concede that this was not apparent until Christ was revealed. But in the light of the encounter with the risen Christ, everything looks different, even the Law.

To explain the inexhaustible mystery of Christ, Paul turns back to the first pages of Genesis. At the heart of Christology there lies the typology of the two Adams, with Jesus understood as the new Adam: 'As in Adam all die, so all in Christ shall be made alive' (1 Cor 15:22). A vision such as this finds voice in the famous hymn from the Letter to the Philippians (2:6–11):

Though he was in the form of God,
he did not count equality with God
a thing to be grasped,
but emptied himself
taking the form of a slave
and became as human beings are;
and being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient unto death,
even death on a cross.
Therefore God raised him up
and gave him the name
which is above all other names,
that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bow
in heaven, on earth, under the earth,
and every tongue confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord
to the glory of God the Father.

As Adam was created in the divine image and likeness, so Jesus was 'in the form of God'. Yet unlike Adam he did not grasp at Godhead; he resisted the urgings of the catechesis of evil. He did not sin. Yet he freely chose to enter into the condition of the sinful human being, to go to the very bedrock of human destitution which comes as a result of 'grasping', the great emblems of which are slavery and death. Where this happens to the sinful, grasping human being as a result of sin, Jesus freely chose to take upon himself a disfigurement which he had in no way merited. He did this in obedience to a divine plan, a plan which would have him go to the depths of human destitution so that God might transform the destitution and lead the human being back to the Garden. Jesus appeared in the form of the sinful human being. He appeared as a slave, choosing the powerlessness of the one who has no will of his own. But he went more deeply still into human destitution: he who was son became not only a slave, but also a corpse. At that point, he chose to enter into an utter powerlessness; and in accepting

the most ignominious death known to the ancient world he went to the bedrock of the destitution and disfigurement caused by sin. And it was there that he was met by a God whom he could not see as he entered the darkness. He was met by a God who moved as power in the utter powerlessness of the Crucified. He was met by a God who was power enough to lead Jesus (and with him humanity) back to the Garden; a God who gave him his true name; a God who restored to him the lordship proper to the human being (Gen 1:28); a God who restored him to the glory which was always the Creator's intention, the glory which in no way contends with the glory of God (as the catechesis of evil had claimed; *either* God's glory *or* your glory) but a glory which redounds to the glory of God the Father.

The hymn is a magnificent proclamation of what Paul will put more enigmatically in 2 Corinthians 5:21: 'For our sake, God made the sinless one into sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God'. The question here is what Paul means by 'righteousness'. To be made righteous is to be restored to that right relationship which is the essence of the life of Eden. Life outside the Garden is a life of wrong relationship – between God and the human being, between human beings, between human beings and the creation. Life in the Garden is the life of right relationship, with the human being finding her or his right place within the scheme of things in a way that Eve and Adam did not. Jesus, 'the sinless one' because he did not grasp at Godhead, was made into sin, that is, took upon himself the disfigurement of sin, so that we might all become 'the righteousness of God', might all find our way back to the Garden, back to the right relationship found fully in God alone.

This right relationship is the *shalōm* which Jesus proclaims when he comes through the darkness of death into the life of the resurrection: 'On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors were closed where the disciples were, because they were afraid of the Jews. Jesus came and stood among and said to them, "Peace [*shalōm*] be with you"'. This is also the freedom from the fear that typifies life outside the Garden. Jesus is the first to return to the Garden, and in that sense he is the fully human being, the human being as God intended in the creation, 'the sinless one'. Paul is quick to point out that Jesus is not the only one to rise from the dead: he is 'the first fruits' (1 Cor 15:20, 23), 'the first-born among many brothers and sisters' (Rom 8:29). Where he has gone, others will follow, with the dogma of the Assumption declaring that Mary, herself sinless, is the first to follow her son.

Christ is the one in whom we see the freedom which is God's will for the creation. He is also the one in whom we see the truth which sets us

free. That truth is God's faithfulness to his creative plan, his absolute determination that his plan will prevail. It is this truth which is liberating; but the liberation works in the life of the human being only in so far as the human being puts her or his trust in God's plan against all the odds. Divine truth becomes divine freedom through the gateway of human faith. The human being returns to the Garden through the gateway of faith. This is why Paul, with his understanding of Jesus as the first to return to the Garden, has Jesus also as the prime believer, in this sense the prime heir of Abraham, 'our father in faith'. It may sound odd to have Jesus a believer; yet that is how Paul sees it. Christ was the first to leap into the abyss of self-emptying, as we saw in the hymn; and it is this leap which is the essence of faith. Christ leaps because he believes that he will be met by the Father in the depths, and that the Father will raise him up, turning the darkness into light as in the beginning. Christ had to believe that God would be faithful to his creative plan, that the divine determination to bring the human being back to the Garden would prevail. It is the powerlessness of this faith which allows the power of God to work again as it did in the moment of creation and as it did in the moment of the Exodus. 'Die Arbeit macht frei' . . . yes, as long as the work is God's. 'The truth will set you free': God's fierce love will bring you from Egypt to Eden . . . through the mysterious gate of Christ's self-emptying into which you are drawn by faith's leap into the abyss:

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling

We shall not cease from exploration
 And the end of all our exploring
 Will be to arrive where we started
 And know the place for the first time.
 Through the unknown, remembered gate
 When the last of earth left to discover
 Is that which was the beginning.

(T. S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*)