

# **The Exodus as Epic**

*David Gooding*

A Myrtlefield House Transcript



**MYRTLEFIELD**  
HOUSE

[www.myrtlefieldhouse.com](http://www.myrtlefieldhouse.com)

## Contents

1	<a href="#">An Epic of Literature</a>	3
2	<a href="#">Where the Exodus Epic Began and Where it will End</a>	16

David Gooding has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

© The Myrtlefield Trust, 2017

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *King James Version* or Dr Gooding's own translation or paraphrases.

This text has been edited from a transcript of two lectures given by David Gooding at the Queen's University of Belfast (N. Ireland) in December 2004. It is made available for you to read or print out for personal or church use. However, you may not publish it either in print or electronic form.

Published by The Myrtlefield Trust  
180 Mountsandel Road  
Coleraine, N. Ireland  
BT52 1TB

w: [www.myrtlefieldhouse.com](http://www.myrtlefieldhouse.com)  
e: [info@myrtlefieldhouse.com](mailto:info@myrtlefieldhouse.com)

Myrtlefield catalogue no: exo.008/bh

## An Epic of Literature

Apologies, ladies and gentlemen, for my truancy; it is just twenty years since I was here before. My first pleasant duty is to thank Dr Devlin for her generosity in forgoing the pleasure of addressing you this morning and handing that pleasure over to me. I thank her too for setting me such a stimulating and thought-provoking study, *Exodus as Epic*.

I confess to you that I had not hitherto thought very much in that line of interpretation of the story of the exodus, and it's always a very refreshing and rewarding thing to be made to look at a well-known topic from a different angle completely.

The topic of Exodus as an epic is stimulating. It will be a little bit difficult for me because, while I shall try to stick to my brief as treating Exodus as literature, and therefore talk about Exodus as epic, other voices will constantly be clamouring to be heard — voices of history and ideology, voices of sociology, politics and of religion. I shall do my best, but if you see me wandering, if not from the truth then from the subject, just draw me back to talk of Exodus as an epic.

I have another little difficulty. It will not be enough for me to recite the details of the story of Exodus as an epic. You will, I presume, expect me to give some guidance as to what the epic means. What makes it an epic and not just, so to speak, an ordinary historical or thriller novel?

The *Cambridge Encyclopaedia of English Literature* tells us that the first qualifications of being an epic must be that it is a substantial body of work. On that ground at least, Exodus certainly qualifies. In fact, while the story of the exodus is given in the book of Exodus, the roots of the epic lie in the previous book, the book of Genesis. And the story is not finished when Israel gets out of Egypt. Like many an epic, it is not merely the escape story to begin with; it is the long journey that follows until the nation reaches its glorious destiny, the promised land.

That being so, the epic of the exodus goes through the book of Exodus, and the book of Numbers has it in great detail. It goes on through Deuteronomy and Joshua, and some people will say it doesn't end even there but goes on into Judges and eventually becomes an epic repeatable through centuries.

You say, 'Well, why then think of it as an epic?' I suppose the obvious answer is the important proportional bigness of the events that happened, beginning with the slavery in Egypt under the powerful pharaohs. And not only the cruel slavery to which they were subjected, but the insidious genocide. To anybody who is interested in the question of genocide, it is an early example of that kind of situation repeated down the centuries; an attempt to emasculate a whole nation.

And then, of course, there is the nation of Israel with its recent memory of the gas chambers and their escape therefrom. All of us who are interested in those sad events will find the story of Exodus vibrating in our hearts and understand that it lies at the centre of their consciousness as a nation.

Along that line we may note the way that people of all sorts of attitudes, beliefs and convictions have responded down the centuries to the story of the exodus.

On the one hand, we have God saying, 'Let my people go.' And at the other extreme there is Marxism, with its straight struggle, to begin with, smashing the power of the capitalists, as they put it; and then, with their vision of a glorious promised land, their social utopia. All these people were encouraged to sacrifice, struggle and, if need be, die in the conviction that ahead lay the promised land of an economic utopia. Marx himself, of course, was a Jew.

Or, when we think of the exodus and the long march towards the promised land, we may think of the Chinese and their *Long March* (1934–35). It originally was, I believe, a method of escape and protecting themselves from the forces of the establishment; but it is now honoured as a vivid memory of the long march that began in the conquest of China to Marxism.

#### *Interpreting an epic*

As I have already said, the story of the exodus seems to our Jewish friends not just an interesting story from the ancient world but a story that encapsulates their great struggles, and therefore we read it, and they read it, as a thing still going on. Here we enter the whole question of interpreting an epic. How would you interpret it? More of that later.

As we all know, there is a Christian interpretation of the epic because, when Jesus Christ celebrated the Last Supper with his apostles, he indicated to them that he saw his coming death in some sense as a fulfilment of Israel's Passover.

So yes, I can justify looking at the story of the exodus as an epic of literature. For my preparation, to bring myself as up to date as possible, I consulted two books, among others. First of all the one by Professor Kenneth Kitchen,<sup>1</sup> which he entitled *The Reliability of the Old Testament*. I consulted that to discover what is the present state of affairs among the archaeologists and historians because, in coming to an epic story, we naturally ask how much of it is actual history and how much thereafter is the accumulation of many ages of retelling and retelling and retelling a story.

For instance, with Homer's *Iliad* there were long periods when people thought that the *Iliad* was simply a made-up story, so to speak, but with no real history behind it. And then Sweden went and dug up Troy, which did surprise everybody—there was a real Troy. That didn't mean that everything in Homer's *Iliad* was factual reporting of the battles around Troy. Of course not, but there was a certain basis in history.

Take an example of the implications of the history side of things. If you read in Homer about the heroes coming by ship, and somebody was able to show that at the time of Troy there weren't such things as ships, then this would be evidence that the stories were full of anachronisms. None the worse for that, of course, as a story.

---

<sup>1</sup> Emeritus professor of Egyptology in the University of Liverpool.

We may ask the same thing about the exodus story: how much is history? In the last fifty or so years, the discoveries at Ebla and at Mari,<sup>2</sup> where they have been accumulating evidence of inscriptions, place the exodus story firmly in the history of that part of the world.

Of course, if you are of the agnostic and atheistic persuasion, you will not accept the story when it says that God delivered the Israelites out of Egypt. The issue, however, is clear in the question of history and geography, and so forth. Were the Israelites actually, in the literal meaning, under particular pharaohs, or is that also a bit of mythology? The massive amount of archaeological finds, discoveries and interpretations are well encapsulated in that volume by Kitchen.

#### *A quest story*

Again, in an effort to bring myself up to date—which is a job when you are my age—I got myself this big book (at great price) by the English journalist Christopher Booker, called *The Seven Basic Plots*. I wouldn't know if in these parts this will be regarded as literary heresy or not, but as an innocent I read it to see what he has to say about this particular epic story. He discovered and points out that it is a *quest story*, and there's much in common with many other such quest stories both in ancient and modern literature.

The quest story begins generally with some horrific situation, maybe, like Israel in bondage and under rigorous slavery. The promise is made, or the idea got hold of, that there is a great future ahead, and if only they could escape from their particular situation they would eventually reach this desired goal. Meanwhile, of course, there are many hindrances on the road and many things to discourage the quest. Eventually, when they nearly reach the quest, they find there are again unexpected obstacles in the way. Only when they have passed the real test do they come at the treasure or whatever it is they are seeking. And if that is true, then of course the exodus story immediately qualifies as literature relating to an epic as a quest story.

*Abraham the nomad.* It goes back earlier than Exodus, to the time when their ancestor was a nomad, a pastoralist, constantly on the move because he didn't own the land. He was just a pastoralist there, a *transhumant* as they call them. He was promised that one day this land would be his and his descendants would form a great nation, and that nation would be a tremendous benefit to all the other nations. That's where the story begins.

*Joseph the unifier.* It hadn't got very far, according to the story, when one of his descendants, a man called Joseph, a young man at the time, had dreams of the wonderful future ahead. But his brothers envied him, were jealous of him, and sold him into Egypt.

Another question of the writers is, if ever the goal of a united nation coming out of this ancestor is eventually achieved, it surely has to overcome this serious difficulty of the jealousies that would lead to internal disintegration of the tribes? And the wonderful story of Joseph, with all its psychological depth and insight of relationships, comes to its climax when Joseph is able to unite his brothers and therefore keep together the extended family that one day will develop into a nation.

Hurdle number one: the whole idea was nearly scotched at its beginning.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ancient Semitic cities in Syria.

*Moses the deliverer.* Then follow the years in Egypt that deteriorated until Israel were in slavery. Here comes Moses to deliver them, and it is a contest of epic proportions, as the story gives it: a contest between Pharaoh, as the sovereign of the leading world power at the time, and not Moses— that is scurrilous to Moses—but the God of Moses and of Israel. If you read the classical epics, you'll find other such things; only there the term *God* is normally in the plural to fit their theology with *gods* of the nations.

#### *An escape story*

Eventually Pharaoh is defeated and Israel are free. They want to escape, and they go with tremendous joy and fulfilment. They're free, they've got their staffs in their hands, 'their loins girded and their shoes on their feet,' and they're munching the Passover lamb. They get out a few miles into the desert . . . Ah! That is typical of escape stories. Just when you think they've escaped, they haven't, and they meet what appears to be an insurmountable obstacle.

Not only an obstacle but a trap. Here's Pharaoh coming up behind with his horses, and there's the Red Sea in front of them. That all adds to the temperature and excitement, doesn't it? How on earth will they get through this one? The story is that there came a great wind and the tide separated and left a strip of land for them to go through. And the question will be, would they dare to take it or would they succumb to the army behind them?

That is a common theme, as I say, when you come to quest stories and escape stories. When they get out into the desert all sorts of things happen. We shall see that next week maybe.

But just to point them out now in summary:

*The epic struggle of belief in the future.* They come to Sinai and make their covenant with the unseen—they saw no form of God, but they heard his words, says the story. Insisting on the visual rather than the auditory, they lost faith in Moses, and lost their vision completely. They talked about this all being nonsense—this whole business of going to a promised land—and proceeded to suggest that they all went back to Egypt.

Temptations along the way. They recovered from that and went on. Then out came the girls from Moab country, and they were colourful to say the least—not quite so puritan as Moses and company. They were very bedecked with colours and things. And here were the Israelite young men, tired and weary and in a desert, and all this, that and the other, and it almost proved too much to give in to the soft option, so to speak—don't be offended, ladies!—instead of carrying on in the rigorous discipline of marching through this wilderness.

*Fear of entering the land.* And then they arrived, right on the borders of the land. They were nearly there, and would have got in, except 'there were giants in the land'. They didn't deny it was a beautiful land and their spies who reconnoitred the country for them came back with wonderful stories of great things. 'It is a good land,' they said, 'but it is impossible. It's unreasonable, the opposition is too big—there are giants in the way.'

The majority rebelled against Moses, talked about making themselves a captain and abandoning the whole scheme because the difficulties were too great to be conquered. So the nation was condemned just to go back to being nomads once more and to go around the wilderness in circles, getting nowhere very fast.

*The final test of getting in.* It involved the river Jordan in flood and the fortified city of Jericho. I don't need to tell all about the battles that ensued, except to warn you that, whereas many interpreters will say that that's where the epic ends and they all lived happily ever after, the actual text of the epic is more realistic.

*Their conquest of Canaan was only partial at best.* There followed years of fighting. That is the period of the heroes that corresponds in literature to the Irish epic *The Táin*, and its great hero Cú Chulainn. If you want a counterpart to that in the Old Testament then it's the book of Judges, not the Exodus story, that gives you that marvellous epic.

And while we're on Cú Chulainn and *The Táin*, it's a very interesting thing for me to observe that, in those long gone days, the method of fighting known as *single combat* was still practised here in Ireland. Single combat means that, when two armies were fighting, they would agree to stop fighting and each side would put forth a hero, and the two single heroes would fight each other.

You find that three times over in Homer's *Iliad* where the Greeks are fighting the Trojans, and one side puts forth a hero to fight. So both armies had to sit down under a truce and the second army looks around to try and find a hero who would dare to go out and face the first hero. It was a very carefully ordered sacred truce and if you shot the hero from the other side while the truce was on, that was a very serious offence.

There was a pattern to it. Each of the heroes would eventually come out a little bit of his camp and stop and hurl abuses at the other—one at a time, of course, the second one would try to outdo the first. And then, when they'd done with the abusing, they would go forth again and fight each other, and in that context the choice of weapon was an exceedingly important thing.

We notice that particular feature in the story of Cú Chulainn. When Ferdiad comes at length to fight with him, they gentlemanly ask each other, 'What weapons shall we use today?' and they decide like honourable gentlemen. So they fight until the evening and then they comfort each other and hope each of them has a good hotel to stay in! Then they come back the next day and again decide what weapons they will choose. It was only when Cú Chulainn was in danger of being slain by Ferdiad that he cheated a little bit, as far as I can understand, and got his secret weapon and hurled it at Ferdiad.

The similar story in the Old Testament is the story of David and Goliath. It is an incident of when the two armies were fighting and each side put forth a hero. Both armies had to sit down, and when the Philistine hero was sent out the Israelites were panic-stricken. They couldn't think of who they could send out to be their hero when David volunteered.

As they did in the manner of heroes, they went out of the camp a little bit and then stood still within shouting distance. With the strongest and most colourful language Goliath abused David and David in turn abused Goliath. After that, of course, they meet. But also in that story is the question of what weapons did they use, and it becomes a central feature of the story.

But now I've wandered too far and I must come back to my topic.

### *Comparing Exodus with other Epic Stories*

We have been talking about the exodus as an epic and I've hinted at what I shall develop next week: the epic begins before the story of the book of Exodus and Egypt. The exodus ends there and leads on to the journey, but as an epic it goes on and on to the end of the journey and on through history.

My task in this particular talk this morning is to take the story of the exodus and to compare it and then contrast it with other ancient epics that we know, and to see what they have in common and where their differences lie.

*Homer's Iliad.* It is an obvious thing that, very often, an epic was a recital of past formative events in a nation's history. So we take Homer's *Iliad*. It used to be the majority view at any rate that these were songs sung by the bards when the peasant heroes were having their feasts. They were there for entertainment, and they sang of the heroic feats of their ancestors.

And then subsequently, some genius, Homer, or somebody else, or a collaboration of people, took those ancient songs and developed them into a masterpiece of literature. But for centuries they had been taken by the Greeks as the memory of formative events of the great heroic struggles that lay at the foundation of their remote history.

*Virgil's Aeneid.* In that sense *The Aeneid* is the same thing; but this time written by Virgil for the propaganda purposes of the emperor Augustus. Therefore, it is what we call *secondary epic* as distinct from *primary epic*, like Homer's stories of the hero, originally arising out of their context of a heroic community. It's a record of their feats in times past and then preserved in the sophisticated poetry of Homer.

Whereas Virgil's *Aeneid* is an epic of a different kind. It doesn't really arise out of past history. This is a literary device that looks back to the past and, from its legends, weaves together a mythical tale of the origin of the Roman nation, coming right up to the time when the foundations of Rome had been laid—that is, the foundations of that society. From the realms of prophecy, it has already foreseen who the great people in Roman history will be, down to Augustus himself.

*The Jewish Passover.* So, those epics are to do with a nation's past, in the same way as the Jewish Passover is the memory and the recital of what was a formative event in the nation's history, and has been recited ever since.

It is an epic—a mini-epic, because it occurs every year at a Passover ceremony, which is a family thing. A boy in the family is instructed that at one stage in the proceedings he must ask his father, 'What does this all mean?' and the father will proceed to retell the story of the exodus.

As I say, many of these epics, the ancient ones, talk about the fighting of their heroes. I have already talked about it in *The Iliad*; you will find the same in *The Aeneid*, and then, of course, in *The Táin*. The interesting thing is that, in the story of *the exodus itself*, strictly so called—the escape from Pharaoh and the early days of the journey—there's scarcely any fighting whatsoever. That is a very striking difference in the story as told at the time of the exodus. The fighting came later, at the end of the journey. These heroic battles are told in the epic literature of the book of Judges and thereafter in the Old Testament.



*The journey motif*

As Christopher Booker stresses in his analysis, he will have it that the story is a *quest* story. And, of course, the story of the exodus is precisely that, because Moses at the burning bush is told that God has come down to deliver his people out of Egypt and to bring them to a land flowing with milk and honey, as was promised to their ancestors Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. So the *journey motif* is part of the story.

Now, of course, that is true of other ancient epics. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*<sup>3</sup>, for instance, Homer's *Odyssey*, and then *The Aeneid*—these all have their long journeys.

The Gilgamesh epic had two journeys. There is the first great journey of the hero of Gilgamesh himself, the king of Uruk. His capital city was provided with fortifications and walls made of wood, which were the admiration of everybody because in that area wood was very scarce. To get the wood, you had to go from Uruk up to the northern countries where the forests abounded.

But if you did that in those days you were going to the bounds of the known world. Beyond that point anything could happen. In the forests there might be hobgoblins and giants with one eye, and what have you, that one is not accustomed to meet on the normal omnibus! And therefore it was fantastic.

You wouldn't know, if you came too far across the sea (the Mediterranean), you might fall off the edge. And, of course, what happened to the sun, when it went down in the west and came up in the east? What on earth was it doing? Did it get into a boat and sail up and come down the other side, or what was it doing? Therefore, literal geographical journeys, because they were in distant parts, fed the mind with all sorts of fantasies and fantastic geography. Understandably enough. There were days, ladies and gentlemen, when the British Isles were thought to be perilously near the edge of the world.

If you read Booker's interpretation of that journey in the Gilgamesh epic, Booker bases his interpretation of these things on what I call *Jungian psychology*. And when the hero, or whoever wrote the story of Gilgamesh, reports the fantastic reactions and wonders and fears and marvels that he saw in this forest, really what the literature is doing is helping us to see the psychological reactions of ancient people and what made up the different sides of their personalities—whether it was the manly side or the female side of the character, or the ego as distinct from the basic self.

So, on this first journey, people like Booker will interpret even the fantastic geography and experiences as evidencing a kind of Jungian psychology on the part of the ancients, though they were unaware of it; and the spirituality has very much in common with the Hindu and Buddhist forms of spirituality.

There is no fantastic geography in the story of the exodus. You may say, 'But doesn't it claim there was a miracle at the Red Sea?' Yes, a kind of miracle, but the Red Sea is the Red Sea; it isn't some fantastic ocean. Egypt was a real place. The journey was through a real desert in the Middle East, with the sundry tribes, known in history and archaeology, who lived there. The promised land that they were going to was not some faraway paradise; it

---

<sup>3</sup> Gilgamesh is the semi-mythic King of Uruk, best known from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (written c. 2150–1400 BC), the great Sumerian/Babylonian poetic work, which pre-dates Homer's writing by 1500 years and, therefore, stands as the oldest piece of epic western literature ([ancient.eu/Gilgamesh](http://ancient.eu/Gilgamesh)).

wasn't even heaven. It was a literal land full of giants and things, and other cities, some of them advanced in their technology and chariots of iron.

The second Gilgamesh journey is highly interesting because of the king's awareness, particularly through the death of his bosom friend Enkidu, that one day he must die. Faced with the inevitability of death, the great king of Uruk went in search of the secret of immortality and we have the description of the great journey that he undertook. He had heard that one of his ancestors, Utnapishtim, had managed to survive death and come to the world of immortality, and he went to see him. After many hideous experiences, Gilgamesh eventually found him and Utnapishtim gave him the secret of immortality—he had to gather a certain plant from the deep waters. So he got it, and on his journey back, being tired, he sat down by a well and slept. As he slept, a serpent came out of the well and stole the old plant, and that was the end of Gilgamesh's hopes of immortality. So he went home and just got on with running the city.

That story is not just interesting because of its universal appeal, but there are times in life that it dawns on us, very personally, the inevitability of death and the whole question of whether there is such a thing as immortality, and therefore the search for it. So the Gilgamesh epic resonates even with us because this is one of life's major and fundamental interests and struggles.

In *The Odyssey* there is also a long journey. After the battle of Troy, Odysseus is sent home. It is a long, long trip, but the journey that he takes also has fantastic geography and oceanography in it. Lands of gods like Circe and Calypso, and one-eyed monsters and such things. In the course of coming home, however, he's shown the secret of going down to the Underworld, where he's given directions of how to find his way home. So eventually he leaves that world somehow and, in the ship provided by the Phaeacia, he comes back home to his dear and darling wife.

Similarly, in *The Aeneid*, after the Sack of Troy, Aeneas is now by divine command going to seek a new world to establish a new order. But on the way he's given the secret of the underworld and manages to go down, where he sees a vision of the future rulers of Rome that will yet be born. So Virgil is taking the *journey motif*, and has Aeneas going back to the underworld, but now he interprets it in the sense of reincarnation. Perhaps he had learned it from Pythagoras the Greek, or else from the Hindus. Because he thinks in terms of reincarnation down in the underworld, he can see the souls of the future rulers, the great heroes of Rome, lining up to be born once more, to form the great Roman Empire.

If we take that element in epic and then we look at Israel's epic of the exodus, there is no fantastic geography, there is no visit to the underworld. It's plain, straightforward geography. Perhaps to some that will limit the excitement of the epic, because it lacks that element of the marvellous, but that's where our comparisons bring us.

### *The goal of the journey*

But then let's look at this other thing that so many of these stories have in common. What is the goal of the journey, according to those ancient epics? And then, according to Israel, as they escape from Egypt and make their journey to their great goal, what is their goal?

*Odysseus' goal—home.* That's a deeply moving story, isn't it, or I'm told it is! On his way home, Odysseus ended up with Circe, a lady of some kind of charm who had a way of turning gentlemen into pigs. And though he dallied with her for a while, the force of his dear true wife at home served to break the affection there. Ah, but then he came across a pretty soul, and she offered him her hand and, with it, so to speak, divination, if you please—to be married to a goddess is something. Well, he stayed there quite a long while, but in the end he thought of his dear wife at home. Had he known the story of 'the suitors' and the pressure she was under for years, and how faithful she had been to him, all the more readily would he have wanted to come home. The emphasis is on home and getting home, and the value of a faithful spouse in marriage and all that.

*Gilgamesh's goal—immortality.* He coveted immortality and when he was about to drink it was dashed from his lips, and he had to die like the rest of us.

*Aeneas' goal— a new beginning.* The goal in the Aeneid is for neither of these personal things, but the founding of a new race and empire. This was significant for Aeneas because he had been a Trojan and one of their heroes. He had fought manfully and bravely to maintain Troy and all that Troy stood for in its position and its values and its history. The Greeks had won and Troy was in flames, and rather than stay behind and try and do anything more, his dear wife Creusa, who was already dead, gave him leave to depart. His gods encouraged him that there was no point in trying to defend Troy any more, or rebuild it; he must fight out further afield and start a new race with a new beginning but with a glorious future ahead. It is, of course, political in its struggle.

*What was Israel's goal?* To appreciate it fully, you will have to start at the real beginning of the story (as we shall next week). Abraham, the ancestor of the race, was a pastoralist; that is, he kept sheep. He was a nomad or, as they called it at the time, *transhumant*. In those days, against his background, there were the very big cities of Babylon, Babel, Erech, and so forth. God tells us in the book of Genesis that there were already those early famous cities when Abraham came from Ur of the Chaldees with his father Terah.

Now, in those old days you had two major forms of life. There were the city dwellers; but around those cities there could also be nomads, who kept fairly near to the city but moved around. They lived in tents, but were free to wander and did wander over the whole countryside. So, on the south of Babylonia where Ur was, you find Terah, Abraham's father, and Abraham himself living up in northern Mesopotamia, and eventually coming down into Canaan. They were nomads, always shifting, not possessing the land that they grazed with their flocks.

Two forms of life then, city dwellers and nomads; two sociologically very distinct ways of living. There were some Philistine cities at the time with city dwellers, but Abraham was a nomad in that land with all its changes and impermanency.

*God's promise to Abraham.* Firstly, that this very land in which he was a nomad would one day become the permanent possession of him and his descendants. Secondly, that he should have descendants so numerous that they would form a great nation. Kings would come of him, and his nation would be a great benefit to other nations.

It's needless for me to say that not only is this literal geography, but the implications are with us still and the matter of inevitably great debate and complex politics. Nonetheless, it is

an epic story, and like all epic stories, when you think of the journey, there are endless obstacles in the way. So next week we shall consider all the obstacles that arose on the journey and threatened to stultify the hope and bring it to disaster—those will be the tensions in the story.

Aeneas's destiny was to leave Carthage and establish a new race. When Aeneas left Troy and took to his ship, so the story goes, they got shipwrecked and blown on to the coast of Carthage. Carthage was a well-founded city, ruled by a queen by the name of Dido. She had been recently widowed, but was now far enough distant from that to see her opportunity—but that's another story! Aeneas was comforted and fed in a palace, if you please, in that gorgeous city.

The Romans who read Virgil's *Aeneid* centuries later would know what Carthage stood for—it had been a thorn in the side of the Romans for centuries. So much so that a famous old senator, when he would arise to speak in the senate, whatever it was he spoke about, whatever bill was before parliament, so to speak, he would end his speech with, *Delenda est Carthago*, 'Carthage must be destroyed.'

Carthage aimed at one stage to be the great power that threatened to overcome Rome, and nearly did put an end to it. But they were a very different nation from the Romans. The Roman aristocracy were farmers and generals in the army, they didn't care much for commerce. They thought it was below their dignity, like the lords and ladies in the England of the sixteen, seventeen and eighteen hundreds, and some of them still! Having its origins in Tyre and Sidon, Carthage was an empire built on trade, according to Aeneid's story.

Carthage that they had built in North Africa was beautiful, and you can understand how Aeneas felt like staying in this beautiful, civilised city, and might have settled down forever, when his patron deity whispered in his ear that it was not for Aeneas to do this kind of thing and settle down in comfort. He must take to the sea again and go to the distant land, for his destiny was to found a new race and a new order in Italy. So he left the beautiful city and got on with his destiny.

You will find no such stories in the Exodus epic. Joseph was the mediator who got Israel into Egypt in the first place, and fed and sheltered them there while they grew from a clan to a great nation. According to the story, Joseph rose to supreme power, second in command under Pharaoh, minister of agriculture and fisheries in the land of Egypt. By his skilful administration of the exchequer he was very near to the prime minister, namely Pharaoh. Anyway, having risen to that great eminence in Egypt, you would think that Joseph would have been content to have his tomb in the equivalent of Westminster Abbey in Egypt.

But no, because, before he died, he straitly charged the Israelites: 'You're going to leave Egypt and go to the land that you've been promised—our God-given destiny. When you go, please take my bones with you.'

It's the same kind of situation, isn't it? On the journey, there were marvellous attractions to settle down and forget the appointed destiny and be prepared to leave the comfort and advancement of the civilised city to strike out across the desert in the hope and expectation of a new order and a new destiny.

And the same story is that of Moses. While his people were being persecuted and the male children thrown into the Nile, Moses' parents put him in a basket and hid him among the reeds on the banks of the Nile. Pharaoh's daughter discovered him and took him into the palace where he grew up, educated in all the wisdom, philosophy, government and arts of Egypt. He might have lived there in tremendous comfort and affluence and in a position of great authority as a prince of the palace, even though his national brothers were groaning in the brick kilns.

What should he do? Doubtless, he was told the story of the nation's promised destiny by his mother in the days when she worked with him, as she did for some four or five years. Moses eventually decided that he would leave Egypt and throw in his lot with this gallery of slaves who were his national brothers and endure with them the rigours of the journey to their promised land.

#### *Common elements in these epic stories*

I'm not taking the story to retell Sunday school lessons that you have learned, but simply to point out the comparison of the exodus story as an epic with these common elements in some of the other ancient epics that we know. The features that are in common then are, of course, the contrasts between them.

I mentioned the *sense of destiny*, and among the ancient epics The Aeneid is perhaps the clearest. Aeneas senses a God-given destiny to find a new order.

Israel, against a background of the great cities and cultures of the ancient Middle East, senses a God-given destiny to found a new nation and a new order.

Then let's notice the *fighting*; not during the journey but at the end of the journey. Booker makes a great point of this in his analysis. It is common to many quest stories that, just when you think you're going to arrive at the goal and take the prize in your hand, there come upon you bitter, sharp battles and fighting. So it was with The Aeneid and The Odyssey, of course. In the story as given by Homer, The Odyssey is only halfway through when Odysseus gets home, so the next half must be important in the poet's eyes because of the proportion he gives to it.

And then the story of the *homecoming* and the state of affairs that he finds when he arrives home. The suitors had been harassing his wife for years, and she is almost now on the point of giving up. She says that when she completes the cloth on her loom, then she will consent to be the wife of one of the suitors. They must have been stupid to have been in pursuit of her anyway! But it was nearly the time when she had to give in. Meanwhile, the suitors were chopping up the estate and Odysseus arrives. How will he find it when he comes? That is a little realistic touch.

At one stage in my career, I worked in the Department of Palaeography and Diplomatic in Durham. It was a side department of the Department of History, and we had charge of all the cathedral's movements and records going down to the time of William the Conqueror. We had many kinds of documents, and I was taught the purpose of what are called *indentures*. If you made an agreement with somebody, you wrote it out on this side and that side of the same bit of paper. Then you cut the paper in two with a zigzag pattern, and one party got one

piece and the other took the other piece. When they came to address the grievance, you could check if the other person was an imposter by whether or not the two pieces matched.

When the knights were on their great wars and perhaps didn't come back for ten years, they would have changed, of course. How would the wives know that it was the dear husband who'd come back or some imposter?

You've got that same kind of suspense in *The Odyssey*, through Odysseus coming home. He shows his prowess by various schemes: shooting the arrow through the axe and stringing a bow. He is known to be himself by the scar on his leg, but he has to fight the suitors in a desperate, bloody battle. The fighting is therefore just when he thought he was home.

Also with *The Aeneid*. When Aeneas reaches Italy his journey is over. But it's there that the real fighting begins, and scholars with better taste than mine say that the second part of *The Aeneid* goes rather flat; it's too much of a copy of Homer, or something. It was all, sort of, not very convincing. But there you are! He had to fight the tribes in Italy, and then he aspired to marry a certain Lavinia. Alas, there was a big prince called Turnus around the place, and he had hopes for this Lavinia as well, apparently. That led to a great battle between Aeneas and Turnus. Who should be the hero, so to speak, to dominate the land from now on? Once again, then, the fighting was at the end of the journey.

And, of course, *the exodus as epic* is no different. There was very little fighting at the exodus itself. In fact, the text will tell you that when they arrived at the Red Sea, they were told by God, 'You won't need to fight. Stand still and God will fight for you.' There were some battles across the wilderness later on, but the real battle came, according to the text, at the end of the journey.

*What is the point of it?*

In *The Odyssey*—the battle, the slaying of the suitors—the question was, 'Who is the true husband, lord and king?' At his homecoming, the fight to establish his identity.

In *The Aeneid*—it's the fight with the local tribes and with Turnus to decide who is to be the dominant and governing race.

What is the point of the Israelites fighting at the end of the journey? Well, not just possession of the land, for under Joshua only a part of the land was conquered and there were many more battles to be fought. It was to determine what kind of a society it would be—built on what basic lines, and according to what moralities?

*Summary*

So, just to sum up what I've been trying to do as I wandered through this lecture. (Forgive me, but that is the truth of old age.) I've been comparing, what you might like to call them from the literary point of view, epics—the exodus as an epic with other epics in the ancient world, and noticing features in which the exodus is very similar to the basic framework of several of those. On the other hand, we have noticed the differences between them.

Next week we shall start then to look at the story itself: the story of the promise, the original goal, and all the different obstacles and struggles and fighting that occurred on the journey, at the end of the journey, and what the goal has turned out to be.

Thank you very much.

Dr. Devlin: Thank you very much, David. Now, I think you'd all agree with me that David's delivery was epic! Thank you very much for sharing so much knowledge. It's a wonderful thing to see a connection between the gift of knowledge and delivery that you have, and being able to bring them together. Now, 'let my people go'!

Dr. Gooding: There are no giants outside that door!

## Where the Exodus Epic Began and Where it will End

Good morning to you. I shall recap briefly what we were attempting to do last week. Our topic is *Exodus as Epic*, so we began by comparing the Exodus story with a number of ancient epics, and came to the conclusion that they had so much in common that it was quite right to regard the Exodus story as *epic*.

Then we proceeded to notice that the Exodus story might rightly be classified as a *quest* story. Some tremendous experience to start with, some secret divulged, or some promise made, and so people start out to achieve that promise. It involves a long journey with much progress but constantly repeated obstacles in the way, and, generally, with those quest stories, it is at the end that the most fighting comes. Judged by that, then, the Exodus story was quite plainly a quest story.

But then we noticed that, unlike many of the epics in the ancient world, in the Exodus story there is *no fantastic geography*. That is to say, while in Homer's *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid* and the *Gilgamesh Epic* the hero goes down into the underworld or such other questionable subterranean places, in the Exodus story there is no fantastic geography of that sort. Indeed, the overwhelming and constantly increasing evidence is that this epic—or the world in which this epic is placed—is the known world of the second millennium BC.

We shall be observing this morning that this epic of Exodus has its roots in the earlier book of Genesis with the promises made to Abraham. Abraham was a nomad and a pastoralist, one of many such pastoralists and transhumants who inhabited the world in the early second millennium BC.

### *The background is the literal world of Egypt*

Then the major story in Exodus is placed in Egypt. That is a literal country, and now, looking at the background of that country, the things that are spoken of in Exodus have their obvious equivalents in the real world of that country. The Israelites made bricks under Pharaoh for the building of their great storehouses. Records show that, at a certain time in Egyptian history, they used other ethnic groups that came to Egypt, or were conquered, and submitted them also to hard slavish work for the making of bricks.

The system in Exodus was that these Hebrews had Egyptian officers over them, but between those officers and the Israelites there were Israelite foremen. That, too, we know from the records, is true to the actual state of affairs in Egypt. There is a question at one stage in the Exodus story of the tallying of the bricks being increased because the pharaoh feels that they are liable to try and escape, so he makes their work very heavy. Well, we have similar



records over different groups, of tallies of bricks, the Egyptian officers, the ethnic foremen, and so forth.

In the story, Moses asked permission from the pharaoh that Israel should be given permission to leave and celebrate a religious festival. There are records of other groups, from time to time, similarly asking permission to go off for a day or two to celebrate religious festivals.

What I'm simply arguing at this moment is that the background of this epic is the real world of Egypt. Whether you personally believe all the records of the stories in Exodus is another thing; I'm simply arguing that this is the literal background.

When we come to that dramatic episode of the plagues in Egypt, as we shall do this morning, you should notice first of all that there were nine plagues, not ten. The tenth was not a plague; it was said to be a direct interposition as government by God. But the nine plagues were concerned with disturbances in the normal ecological systems of Egypt on which Egypt's prosperity depended.

Since the interesting article by Greta Hort<sup>4</sup> some years ago, we can see that the plagues had to do with these eco systems, and you can trace the mechanisms by which those plagues came about. There are records of other times when similar disturbances were experienced in the eco systems of Egypt. That is not to deny the miraculous element in that; it simply raises the question of who eventually controls the eco system. More of that anon.

We shall not get time this morning to consider the record that, after the Israelites came out of Egypt, they built a tabernacle. In previous centuries that has often been regarded as a fanciful, imaginative construction, after the fairy story kind. But recent archaeological discoveries, not least of all Tutankhamun's tomb, have shown that that tabernacle, and indeed the record of its construction, correspond to what we know of Egyptian building of such portable shrines in the second millennium BC.

### *Historic covenants*

And finally at this level, we shall this morning be considering one very important episode in the journey, namely the covenant that Israel made with their God at Sinai. The interesting thing about that covenant is on the theological side, but we're not here to discuss that. On the theological side, the concept of a covenant made with God is a very interesting thing compared with the surrounding Mediterranean nations.

But, historically, it is the form of this covenant that interests us because the discoveries at places like Mari<sup>5</sup> and so on have yielded thousands of clay tablets, many of which are not yet published. And in them we perceive hosts of documents of covenants ranging over one or two millennia. Therefore, we can judge the time at which these covenants were formed; but roughly speaking, because the form of these covenants changed as the centuries went by.

The form of covenant represented in the story of Sinai had its parallel in the Hittite covenants. They were not religious covenants, of course; they were political measures by

---

<sup>4</sup> 'The Plagues of Egypt', *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 69 (1957), 84–103 and 70 (1958), 48–59.

<sup>5</sup> Modern Tell Hariri. Mari's discovery in 1933 provided an important insight into the geopolitical map of ancient Mesopotamia and Syria, due to the discovery of more than 25,000 tablets that contained important information about the administration of state during the second millennium BC.

which an overlord king would put upon the vassal kings in his empire the terms upon which they were to be governed, and these terms had, from time to time, to be read in front of the assembled nation.

So, suppose the emperor was Suppiluliuma<sup>6</sup> and he formed a covenant with his vassal kings and their subjects, the covenant would run in such form as follows:

First, the great emperor would announce who he was: 'I am Suppiluliuma'.

Then he would rehearse all the benefits that he had conferred upon his vassal subjects, like conquering them and slitting their throats and generally subduing them.

Then he would issue a whole lot of dos, 'Thou shall do this,' and a whole lot of don'ts, 'Thou shall not do that.' For those who didn't do what they were supposed to do, he would pronounce curses written into the covenant.

And then he would call on the gods to witness that the people had made this covenant with him and he with them.

And, finally, he would ask for permission to be made for the storing of the covenant and for it to be taken out from time to time and read by the vassal king in the presence of the people.

It doesn't take much Old Testament knowledge to see that the form of the covenant here in the narrative at Sinai follows that. It begins by saying, 'I am the Lord thy God—that's who I am.' And what he's done—'I have brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.' And then the dos, 'Thou shall,' and the do nots, 'Thou shall not' (see Exod 20:1–17).

If you put the covenant in the on-going history throughout the next books, and particularly Deuteronomy, you will come across the blessings pronounced on those who keep it and the curses on those who break it. Then, provision for the storing of the covenant documents. That, in part, was what the ark was for in the tabernacle. And then the responsibility of the leader to get it out and rehearse it in the ears of the people. That is what the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy is about. It is the leader of the people taking the covenant documents and not only reading them, but expounding them and reminding the people of the blessings and the curses. The witnesses are then called. With the Israeli covenant, not the witness of the *gods*, of course, but the appeal to the one *God* to control the people's behaviour and to judge whether they had kept the covenant terms.

All that by way of introduction this morning, just to emphasise that the historical background to this *epic* (and we've agreed it's an epic) and this *quest* story is a background that we know very well nowadays, and increasingly through the archaeological and inscriptional evidence, and it is an epic played out in the real world.

At the end of last week's session Dr Devlin asked a very perceptive question: 'Is it possible now for there to be a modern epic?' I would suggest that our interest in the Exodus epic is in part because it is an example—you might say almost a *prototype*. It certainly shares themes with what is the greatest of all epics: the history of human beings on this planet. To most people it is obvious that humanity is on some kind of a journey and not just standing still. We mustn't suppose we are more intelligent than the ancients, but we know a lot more.

---

<sup>6</sup> Hittite king ca. 1344–1322 BC.

The last century has witnessed enormous progress in the realms of science, technology and medicine, for which surely we are grateful.

But ever and again there arises the question about the future of the human race. When we think of the Exodus epic as a journey to the promised land, we think of political systems that have taken hold of this model and used it in political circumstances. Marxism, as we pointed out last week, is an eminent example of it—denying all the supernatural realm, of course, but talking in terms of the laws of history that would inevitably bring in a glorious economic paradise. Various forms of historicism thought they had discerned principles in history that would inevitably work out.

Or you have the other political themes inspired by the exodus, such as the emancipation of slavery and the struggles leading to it.

#### *The future of the human race*

But then there's a bigger question, as we consider human life on this planet and what it's future may be. The scientists are not quite agreed, are they? They tell us in their charming way that our universe is going to come to an end, at least our planet is. They come to us with the thought that it might be a million years, ten million years, billions of years before it happens, but one day it will go 'phut'.

That raises a fundamental problem: what is our goal, what is our hope for the future? Has the human race a rosy future ahead, or will the forces of nature eventually conspire against it and the whole thing be blotted out and come to a meaningless end? That is the epic of the appearance, progress, hope and future of the race as a whole.

#### *Where the Exodus story really begins*

But no more of that for the moment, I must come down to my proper business. I am not here to discuss philosophy or religion but the book of Exodus. It is a quest story, and it is common to regard this epic as having its roots in the story of the burning bush, where God appeared to Moses and encouraged him to lead his people out of Egypt to freedom (ch. 3).

That makes a very good starting point for that particular phase, but if we would be true to the Exodus epic as a quest story we must start earlier on. It goes back to the figure that the Hebrews claimed as the patriarch of their race, Abraham, a pastoralist nomad. As shown in the record in Genesis, it is told against the background of the great cities of early Mesopotamia and that part of the world, Babylonia, Erech, Moab and such places. The greatest of all was Babel, which eventually became Babylon.

At that time it was quite common to have the latest in sophisticated city life, and yet around it to have pastoralists. So much so that these pastoralists would be named after those cities. Unlike the city dwellers, the pastoralists would move on, hundreds of miles if need be, to get their pasture. This is the background. At the time people were free to move around in the ancient east, and it's not such a wide band of time as you might think. Anyway, that's beside the point!

#### *The promise to Abraham and Sarah*

The story of the beginning of what prompted this quest, and eventually the long journey, is the promise to Abraham and his wife. There were four parts to the promise:

1. They would have a large number of descendants and form a great nation.
2. They would have a land for their own permanent possession, so that they would cease to be nomads.
3. Kings would come of them.
4. It should be for the benefit of many nations at large — this was of great importance.

There begins the promise, and we shall take it from there this morning and look at some of the obstacles that confronted the achievement of that promise.

So let's take the first part of the promise: Abraham's descendants would develop into a large and powerful nation.

*The first obstacle* in the way is told in the famous Joseph story at the end of the book of Genesis. When God came down to Moses at the burning bush, he didn't just tell him that he'd come to set his people free. He said, 'I've come down to deliver them, according to the promise I made with your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.' Many chapters are spent on the story of Joseph, with a dramatic turn of events.

Another patriarch was Jacob, otherwise known as *Israel* because he would give his name to the nation. Jacob had four wives and twelve sons, and the object was to meld those sons into an extended family; for them to become a tribe; then to become a nation. It was at this time only an extended family, but something happened that threatened to disrupt them completely and prevent them from ever becoming a nation. It was a family dispute, and if you say, 'Surely that kind of thing is not a subject for epics?', let me remind you of Homer's famous *Iliad*.

The *Iliad* is full from end to end with epic battles: all those mighty heroes around Troy. But the thing that gives the *Iliad* its cohesion as a piece of literature, as Aristotle long since observed, is where it starts and where it ends. It starts with a row between Achilles, the brightest of the Greek heroes, and Agamemnon, the commander in chief of the allied forces. Achilles had laid eyes on a very charming woman, taken captive by the Greeks, and proposed to take her for himself when Agamemnon stepped in as commander and took the woman himself. Achilles was so incensed that he sulked and retreated to his tent and wouldn't take part in the fighting any more, even when he saw the Greeks being mauled by the Trojans.

There's a dramatic point when the Greeks sent an embassy to Achilles to try to get him to overcome his quarrel and his resentment, but he would not. The drama of the whole book comes to its climax when Achilles is persuaded to come back and get over his resentment, and start fighting for his fellow Greeks once more. Homer obviously decided that, from a literary point of view, this was an important element in the epic.

### *The story of Joseph*

#### *Part 1*

I don't have the time to retell the story of Joseph. It would take too long, and my clumsy attempts to do so would spoil the psychology of the story. If you want to read something on

it, I recommend the book by Meir Sternberg,<sup>7</sup> *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*. Towards the end of that volume it has a very acute analysis of the twists and turns of the Joseph story. But it points out with that ambiguity that gets our interest going, how that among Israel's twelve sons there was this son of a favourite wife, Rachel, named Joseph. His father doted on him and gave him a coat of many colours, and his brothers were incensed at this favouritism.

Then this horrible teenager brought his father a bad report about the behaviour of the brothers. That was telling tales out of school and they hated him all the more. Worse still, this stupid teenager had his dreams, and he unashamedly told them to his brothers. They were all in the field, cutting the corn and putting it in sheaves—or *stooks*, as the Irish say. All the other eleven stooks bowed down to one stook. His brothers weren't slow at catching the implication, and they were exceedingly annoyed at this teenager putting on his airs and graces.

To make things worse, he had another dream. He dreamed about the sun and the moon and the stars, and not only did the other stars bow down to his star but the sun and the moon bowed down too, if you please. Old Israel himself wasn't slow to see what that implied, and rebuked his favourite and possibly spoilt son. 'Shall he rule among us? Preposterous!' (see Genesis 37:10).

The storyteller knows what he's doing—perhaps you sense it in your bones? This impossible teenager is going to be the very saviour of his brothers. His dreams are going to come true in a spectacular fashion. To stop his dreams from ever coming true, his brothers plot to murder him, then they eventually sell him (good solid *tragedy*, this is). But these were the very means of preserving those brothers in time of famine and for accommodating them in Egypt so that they could grow from an extended family into a tribe and then eventually into a nation.

I suggest this is part of the epic bit: one of those twists in the narrative that keeps you in suspense.

## Part 2

Again, I mustn't try to relay the psychology of what then followed when the brothers came to Egypt seeking food. They met Joseph, of course. He knew who they were but they didn't recognise him.

At first he said they were spies. To prove their story, they must leave their brother Simeon in prison, and the next time they came to Egypt they must bring their youngest brother. He was a son of the same wife as Joseph came from, of course.

So they went off and, unbeknown to them, Joseph had had their money, which they'd paid for the corn, put into their sacks. When they got home to Jacob and showed him these sacks of corn, it was marvellous. Then they opened the sacks and there was the money.

At this point in the story you're meant to concentrate on old Israel. Seeing the money, he simply said, 'You have brought this disaster upon me.' 'Me have ye bereaved of my children: Joseph is not, and Simeon is not, and ye will take Benjamin away: all these things are against me' (42:36).

---

<sup>7</sup> Born 1944. Professor of Poetics and Comparative Literature at Tel Aviv University.

It raises the question about what happened originally when they'd come home and told him about Joseph. They'd taken his coat of beautiful colours, killed a goat, stained the coat with its blood, brought it to Israel and said, 'This looks to us a bit like . . . could it be, Joseph's coat, perhaps? It looks like some wild beast has devoured him.' We're not told what old Israel thought. Did he ever believe their lie?

Then they come home the second time and they've lost another brother down in Egypt. Did he really believe them, or had they sold him too? Anyway, when they wanted corn again, they had to take young Benjamin. At first, Israel wasn't having that, but famine forced him and Benjamin was taken.

So now they are in front of Joseph again. He sets them down to dine and gives Benjamin another portion, which would incite their jealousy—if ever they had any jealousy!

Someone may be saying, 'Why didn't Joseph immediately reveal himself to them? That cruel old cad, taking advantage of them and putting them through this harrowing experience.'

But that is to miss the point. He let them go again and surreptitiously put his golden cup in Benjamin's sack. When they were eventually arrested, they said, 'None of us has taken the cup. If any one of us has, he should be put to death and we should be your bondservants for ever.' And they all returned to Egypt.

And now comes a bit of a problem. Joseph insists, 'No, you needn't stay. You agreed that the one who has the cup should be executed, so you can all go home.' At the climax, Judah steps forward—Judah was the one who sold Joseph. He pleads with this man, 'Look here, my father had one son, and "he's not"; now this is the other favourite son. I guaranteed to my father to bring him back, or my life should go for his life. I can't go back without this lad, Benjamin. If I go back without him, it will kill my father. I can't do it; let me die in the place of this lad.'

*Now you get what Joseph was at.* How should all this inter-family resentment and jealousy be scotched and the tribe come to be a nation that is homogenous and not self-destructive?

### *The principles involved*

1. Joseph's own willingness, though he suffered innocently, not to take retaliation.
2. Judah's willingness to suffer substitutionally in the place of his brothers.

These are great principles of national coherence. Since these issues are still with us, not only at the level of family but at the level of the nation, they are part, in my opinion, of the ongoing epic experience of the human race.

Then we come to Egypt. In history it is noticeable that there are two parts to Egypt. In the one, Egypt is exceedingly good. Under Joseph it proved a refuge for Israel. They were saved from famine, given space to exercise their trade and develop into a nation. Egypt educated Moses in its arts and crafts: there was evidence of it in all his subsequent behaviour. Israel owe Egypt a tremendous lot and it is not my purpose to denigrate Egypt.

It's what Egypt became later. The pharaohs enslaved the Israelites, and they didn't do it just to Israel; the record shows they did it to other ethnic groups as well. It was such grievous slavery that the Hebrews forgot their promised destiny, so that, when Moses came to deliver

them, they scarcely believed him. At first, when it looked impossible to free them, they cursed Moses and Aaron for even daring to go to Pharaoh and suggest that they should be let go, because now Pharaoh made their conditions five times harder with the extra tally of bricks.

*Now we've come across another obstacle* in the way of the fulfilment of the promise. It was getting Israel to believe in the reality of a destiny outside Egypt for themselves where they could be free of slavery. It becomes a very difficult thing and proceeded to be a problem even on the journey.

So we come to the third big thing: Pharaoh's defiance of Moses, and of Moses' God, of course. He wouldn't let the people go, and there follow the nine plagues on Egypt and the final judgment of the firstborn.

At the one level I agree, as Greta Hort showed some years ago, that you can explain all these plagues as disturbances in the eco systems of the Nile and the surrounding countryside. Similar, if lesser, things can be recorded in the course of the history of the Nile, but I cannot now stop to paint all those details in.

I'm not trying to deny the *miraculous* element in that story. Moses is claiming that these things came about by God, his God; but it was the *timing* of them that was the miraculous element—he could prophesy when they would happen. I am concentrating for the moment on the sheer *physical* side, just like the subsequent crossing of the Red Sea. The text tells us the mechanics: there came about a wind that separated the waters, and then they came together again.

There is a record in more modern times of a good man in that part of the world who was driving his cows across, and the winds had done a similar thing. When he was trying to get back the waters came quicker than he expected and his machine was bogged down.

Anyway, this is a question of the ecosystems of Egypt on which all their glory, their commerce, their food supplies, and eventually their art, was based.

We're told that the magicians in Egypt were able to do similarly, and control things. Moses turned the water into blood; they could do the same and they did so. That's very interesting.

We shouldn't be too hard on these *magicians*, as they're called. That isn't a good name for them; they were a mixture of magic and science. But then, in the history of mankind, science has often been intertwined with magic, has it not? It's not many centuries ago that leading scientists were still hoping to turn base metal into gold. It's now dismissed as a kind of a magic—it can't be done. Ancient Babylonian astronomy, to which the Greeks owed much, and we to the Greeks for their observations, was all mixed up with astrology.

The text is calling our attention to the fact that these *proto-scientists*, as we could call them, they too could disturb the ecosystems. Don't we know it, ladies and gentlemen? That is still one of the problems that faces mankind on this planet. We, of all generations, have become alarmingly aware of the effects of polluting the atmosphere, or the rivers, or the oceans, and are taking great steps to stop it and clean it up. We need to, don't we?

The point is not, can we as humans affect the ecosystems? Of course we can. It is, can we with our science try to improve them? Of course we can—and we have a duty to do so. At the heart of all that problem is a leading question. What, or who, ultimately controls the

ecosystems? What future have we? Are we in a universe where the ecosystems are blindfolded and we have no ultimate control over them? They exist, therefore, as a threat that might one day obliterate us, our planet and civilisation, and all our hopes. That, too, I suggest, is a part of the great epic that reading these ancient stories begins to remind us of.

### *Israel at Mount Sinai*

Let's hurry on and come to one of the *next big obstacles*: Israel's decision at Mount Sinai. This is famous, of course, and orthodox Jewry still looks back to this time, but I shan't say anything further here.

As Moses pointed out to them when he recited the event, recorded in the subsequent book of Deuteronomy, the issue was that at Mount Sinai they saw no *form* of God. Here is Israel striking its note among the nations. They saw no form of God, nor should anyone try to represent God by any form. What they heard was his voice with the ten *words*. It is a very interesting situation, therefore, with Israel making a covenant with the unseen, relying solely on hearing.

Having made this covenant, Moses went up the mountain again to get details and plans for the subsequent tabernacle. The story is that, down below, *Israel lost faith in the unseen*, the invisible, and determined to have a visible god to go before them. Hence the golden calf. 'Let us make us gods to go before us.' *You must have something visible to aim at*, so to speak.

By rejecting faith in the unseen and in the word, and having got this visible affair, they became disorientated in the desert and lost their sense of direction. It wasn't that they lost their sense of which way they should take to get into their promised land—that was a mere matter of geography—but the promise for the future, and faith in the unseen and in the word of God. Rejecting that, they lost their sense of direction and suggested that perhaps they should go back to Egypt after all.

Whether you trust sight and the visual, or ultimately trust the word, is an interesting question. It reminded me of what Jacques Ellul<sup>8</sup> said twenty or thirty years ago, when he talked about the humiliation of the word and what he regarded as the danger if society comes to put more faith in the *visual* rather than in the *auditory*.

That trait has always been with mankind, of course, and it's still with us, isn't it? Ask the teachers of English about the logical analysis of English, as distinct from the visual—a split second change of visuals in our televisions, as distinct from sustained reading of the text and listening to words.

I must go on, I'm not here to preach—but sometimes temptations overcome one, if you see what I mean! You must pardon me, and if you can't you have the cure in your own hands—speak to Edith and I shall never be asked again!

*The first obstacle when they came to the land.* If you read Christopher Booker he will point out that, in these quest stories, the major fighting comes towards the end, not at the beginning. That is true of the exodus story. There wasn't any fighting to get them out of Egypt, there were one or two skirmishes with the Amalekites and things in the desert. The big fighting was when they came to the land of promise.

---

<sup>8</sup> French philosopher, 1912–94.



They came to a place called Kadesh-Barnea and sent in spies to reconnoitre the land. The spies came back and they all agreed that it was a marvellous land, flowing with milk and honey and such graces you never saw, but the majority thought that the whole scheme of entering and taking this promised land was utterly impracticable. There were not only cities fenced up to heaven, and the Israelites were by now pastoralists; but there were giants in the land, the Anakim, as the Hebrew has it.

Now this little item of there being Anakim reaffirms that this ancient story is true. It would appear that in Moab the Ammonites had an enormous great sarcophagus that held the remains of a certain king called Og, which they showed to visitors from the time of Moses.

Anyway, there were giants and the spies said that the idea of going in and attacking and subduing them was impracticable, so they refused to go in. At this time not only had they lost their sense of direction, but they rebelled against Moses and told him to go back to Egypt and abandon the whole quest as being impracticable nonsense.

Now if I were to argue that this is one little feature, but it is a big feature when you come to consider the epic of mankind, then I would ask how it is that such freaks of humanity got to such colossal power. Psychopaths like Hitler and Stalin and Ceauçescu and Chairman Mao and Pol Pot and Enver Hoxha, all of them, to some extent, disturbed human beings with a highly psychopathic element to them. What mayhem they've caused. And if they have appeared so recently in history, is there any hope of eliminating that strand, or will they always be there to thwart any hope of a paradise ahead?

Are there not now more pressing questions with which we are surrounded, that Moses never dreamed of? And that is the possibility now of manufacturing various types of human—of cloning. For, however much the governments forbid it, isn't somebody going to do it?

I was shown photographs recently of how certain scientists have taken human genes and put them into the embryos of mice, and then traced the mice and their development to see how much of the human elements had come into the mice embryos.

Shall we be able to control it? For if we're going to talk about a future hope and paradise that we wish to build, what decisions shall we make about these kinds of things that now people will be able to control what kinds of human being shall be allowed to be born?

It is not a simple problem either, is it? As C. S. Lewis pointed out in *The Abolition of Man*, man's conquest of nature is not really what it sounds. It means a conquest of nature, not by all mankind but by comparatively few men and women. That will then give the power over the human race and the rest of us to a very few, controlling who and what kinds of things might be born and experimenting with different kinds of human.

Anyway, I've said enough, and far too much maybe. But that's the way it appeals to me, as I read this ancient epic and the nation going towards its hope for paradise. It raises questions that are still with us.

### *Entering the promised land*

When it comes to the entry into the promised land, it is commonly talked of as though Joshua gave the people rest, and that he certainly did. They entered their promised land, but that is not the end of the story; it is not the end of the epic.

People like Christopher Booker want to put the end there. After the final three tests that Joshua had to go through, and indeed there were grievous tests, they reached the promised land and lived happily ever after. But this is history and that's not quite true. Moses had told them that, though they entered the promised land, their hold on it would be conditional. If they didn't behave as they should they would get turned out of it.

The danger was that, having been nomads and living amongst themselves for this last forty years or so, at last they were going in and they would have to eliminate the kings and take some cities. But they didn't destroy all the cities, and they weren't able to turn out the inhabitants either, so they had to live cheek by jowl with a very, very different society. Moses had pointed out to them before they went in that there would now be bigger temptations than there had been before, when they were in the desert. They would be surrounded by cultures that practised the worship of fertility gods, cultic prostitution, the sacrifice of infants to so many gods, and their temptation would be, in the end, to compromise with that kind of ethics and morality.

They had a lot to fight, and if you want to get stories of epic heroes, like the Greeks of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, where you would turn is not so much to Exodus as to the book of Judges, when the people were in the land. That has its own great heroes, one is a superhero. Judges details all their military tactics, how they went about it and the triumph of these great heroes. It is to that period of Israelite history that you get the counterpart of *The Iliad* and, as we saw last week, *The Táin*.

The thing came to its first fulfilment, so to speak, during the life of King David, with his capture of Jerusalem city and his building of the temple there. With that, you come in one sense to a full circle. Abraham had left the ancient cities, Babylon, Erech and so forth, on his life as a pastoralist, with the promise of a permanent land one day. It comes to its fulfilment with David, who brought about a bigger possession of the land than any before him. He was able to build Jerusalem as the capital city that united the whole of the tribes into one nation.

And let's not stop and be tempted now to contrast Jerusalem with Babylon. You will yourselves know what leading themes there have been throughout history, at least in Biblical times. But eventually, of course, the records tell us that Israel were turfed out. They will tell you this themselves; it's not anti-Semitism. They will tell you that the God who took them in, eventually allowed their enemies to take them out. It was followed by the Babylonian captivity.

### *The epic continues*

Is that the end of the story? In a few seconds, let me tell you the rest of the epic so far. The continuation of the epic you will find, for instance, in the poetry of the Hebrew prophet, *Isaiah*, as he prophesied that Israel would one day be restored from Babylon and come back to Jerusalem. You will find, if you read his poetry closely, a lot of it is based on the imagery of Israel's journey as they were getting out of Egypt and seeking their promised land. I haven't the time to quote the passages, but they are there in plenty in the second part of *Isaiah* the prophet.

In one place he appealed to God, 'You who smote Rahab, brought your people out through the Red Sea, will you not bring them in again?' (see Isa 51:9-11). And on the way

across *their* desert—it's a kinder desert now, of course—you will provide water from the rock and food to sustain them (see 48:21). It is Isaiah, in his poetry, using the background story of Israel coming out of Egypt and the journey to their promised land in the hope of future restoration.

And in that context, it is interesting to see what Isaiah's take is on Israel's being a benefit to other nations. Just listen to this, 'There will come a time,' said Isaiah, 'when the Lord will say, "Blessed be Egypt, *my* people," that is God's people, "and Assyria the work of *my* hands," that is God's hands, "and Israel *my* inheritance"' (see 19:25). Israel, Egypt and Assyria (Iraq and beyond) all recognised as equal partners before God. That was Isaiah's expressed hope, it's a vision of the future; but even Isaiah goes beyond the literal and the historical, doesn't he, into realms that I must not now follow here.

### *The biggest epic in history*

We cannot, of course, omit completely Christ's own interpretation of Passover and its epic, for at the Last Supper, as he instituted the memorial feast, he indicated that he himself was the fulfilment of the Passover. That is, he would be the means of humanity's liberation.

And so the early Christians spoke about being 'redeemed by the blood of Christ, as of a lamb' (see 1 Pet 1:19). That is Passover language. And they talked freely of their hope of 'an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fades not away' (v. 4).

This is an ancient epic, and yet it is full of life still. Because, if Jesus Christ is right, what he's saying is the biggest epic in all the long history of humanity and humanity's future.

But there is an alternative ending, if you think of this as the epic of humanity. To quote C. S. Lewis again, in his essay, *The Funeral of a Great Myth*, he talks of man appearing multi-million years ago as the accidental formation of life of some sort in this otherwise sterile environment. Against all odds it proceeds in the various forms of life by an accidental, unplanned development. Then man appears, naked, hopelessly weak against all the great forces of nature. But man grows up and he begins to control—marvellous triumph, and struggles to do so with tremendous success down the centuries. At the end, the forces of nature in the last few years, being non-personal and mindless, overwhelm this creature. His intelligence and his family and mankind die, shouting defiance like a good Greek hero in a tragedy by Sophocles. But in the end he cannot save himself.

That is a very bleak, tragic ending.

You have been extremely patient, and all that it remains for me to do is wish you a very happy Christmas.

Dr. Devlin: Thank you very much, David. That has given us a lot to think about.

## About the Author

**DAVID W. GOODING** is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. His international teaching ministry is marked by fresh and careful expositions of both testaments. He has published scholarly studies on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John 13–17, Acts, Hebrews and the New Testament's use of the Old Testament.