# ‘Who is this coming up from the wilderness?’

Karen Eliasen

God’s power over life and death is manifested in the paschal mystery that we prepare during Lent to celebrate, and it was the Lord of life and death whom Israel came to know intimately in the wilderness, says Karen Eliasen. The exodus story revealed to Israel then, as it does to us now on our Lenten journey, that ‘being in the wilderness is being on an exquisitely sharp edge between life and death.’

Song of Songs may not seem an obvious biblical book to dip into for Lent - but the question above, which is as good as any Lenten question can get, is asked not once but twice in its pages (3:6 and 8:5).[1] It is a striking question in that context, because the kind of geography that dominates the text is not wilderness but rather a fertile, pastoral landscape. It is not an exaggeration to describe the Song of Songs as awash with both the sensuousness and the sensuality of food and drink in abundance, awash with images of that which sustains and nourishes life. All of that makes for an obvious contrast to how wilderness is depicted in the Bible as a place of starvation and thirst – a place of death: ‘You have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger’, Israel complains to Moses (Ex 16:3). That this question of who is ‘coming up from the wilderness’ should nag so in the midst of pastoral abundance makes me want to reconsider from a somewhat different angle that traditional Lenten concern not just with wilderness but with the relationship between what brings life and what brings death.

From ‘Crossing of the Red Sea’ by Cosimo Rosselli

My immediate sense of the fittingness of doing so comes from noting how Judaism directly links the Song of Songs with the exodus story on two fronts, in rabbinic literature and liturgical use. The rabbinic association is an early one, both metaphorical and intertextual, between the Song of Songs and the Holy of Holies; and the liturgical link is through the reading of the whole of the Song of Songs on the first Sabbath of the Jewish Passover celebration. Song of Songs does not appear in the Christian paschal liturgy at all (or in any Sunday liturgy, in fact) but only makes brief appearances in relation to Marian, virginal or wedding celebrations. That the Song of Songs should be so deeply implicated in the Jewish paschal mystery may come as a surprise to Christian readers, so I think it is worth having a closer look at why the Song of Songs is tied so explicitly to the Passover story.

Back in the second century, Judaism debated as hotly as did the early Christian Church whether or not the Song of Songs, with all its eroticism, belonged in the biblical canon at all. But Rabbi Akiva (c.50-c.135), a major contributor to the *Mishnah*,[2] was in no doubt about what was at stake: ‘All of eternity in its entirety is not as worthy as the day on which Song of Songs was given to Israel, for all the Writings are holy, but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.’ Such recognition of the centrality of Song of Songs to the Hebrew Bible carries over in the midrashim[3] that the biblical text gave rise to, so that in the *Song of Songs Rabbah* [4] we get a fascinating record of diverse rabbinic voices through the centuries freely exploring

the original biblical texts. As the rabbis bandy about the wilderness question posed in Song of Songs 3:6, their voices explore some answers present in scripture already: 'The ascent [of Israel] was from the wilderness, the descent is from the wilderness,' offers one rabbi. 'The death is from the wilderness,' adds another, quoting in support of this from Numbers 14:35: 'In this wilderness they shall be consumed and there they shall die'. But a third rabbi takes a different angle altogether: 'The Torah came from the wilderness, the tabernacle came from the wilderness, the Sanhedrin came from the wilderness, the priesthood came from the wilderness, the Levitical caste came from the wilderness, the monarchy came from the wilderness.' It is a long and true list, which is then niftily summed up by a fourth rabbi: 'So all the good gifts that the Holy One, blessed be He, gave to Israel are from the wilderness.'

The first rabbi spoke of 'ascent', which in Jewish spirituality refers to a movement towards a deeper intimacy with God – like the kind of intimacy between two people that the Song of Songs so lyrically expresses, and the kind of intimacy experienced in the wilderness at Sinai between Yahweh and Israel. What happens at Mount Sinai in the wilderness is as up-close-and-personal as Yahweh and Israel get, and it is an experience that the Jewish imagination understands as a time of betrothal or consummation, a time reflecting mutual desire. At the foot of Mount Sinai, Israel enters willingly into this relationship covenant: 'and all the people answered with one voice, and said, "All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do."' (Exodus 24:3), a willingness reiterated a few verses later: '"All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient."' Just think of what the modern 'I do' stirs up and begin to understand the desires informing Israel's commitment! But we, like the rabbis, know how the story proceeds otherwise, not 'ascent' into obedient doing but 'descent' into fear and disobedience, and finally into death. Death in the wilderness, not new life in a promised land flowing with milk and honey, is what awaits the generation freed from Egypt; as the tragic tale unfolds in the Book of Numbers, we learn that only Joshua and Caleb survive the wilderness experience from beginning to end. In Hebrew the Book of Numbers is called by the first Hebrew word of the text, *bmidbar,* meaning 'in the wilderness'; being in the wilderness, then, is being on an exquisitely sharp edge between life and death.

Jewish biblical scholar Ilana Pardes captures this paradox of the Sinai experience very well: 'A careless glance at the divine realm, let alone touch, means death. Sacred intimacy is at the same time the heart of horror and the greatest desire of all'.[5] In other words: we fear death and we desire life. What is clear in the rabbis' explorations is their awareness of what comes out of the wilderness as double-edged. On the one hand from the wilderness comes 'everything good that God has given Israel' – basically, the life-giving Torah; and on the other hand, what comes out of the wilderness as well is death. We tend to forget this about the exodus experience in its totality when we blithely define Passover as a spring festival celebrating the first grain harvest and the escape of the Israelites from Egypt. This definition acknowledges the 'greatest desire' aspect of the wilderness experience but gives short shrift to the 'heart of horror'. It is true that the Book of Numbers, which recounts this death of a generation, does so in an underhanded sort of way, downplaying the tragedy of it to the extent that the reader is left with a vague but untrue impression that the people who left Egypt are the same people who stand poised to enter Canaan. Appreciating what the Israelites are witness to in that first move towards freedom from Egypt, before they get anywhere near Mount Sinai, can remind us of what possibly lies at the 'heart of horror' we are so tempted to ignore. More to the point, it can make us stop and ponder what possibly informs Israel's descent into disobedience, turning what should have been a straightforward traipse towards a promised land into a 40-year wilderness nightmare. The infamous spy story, yes, is the immediate cause; but there is more to it than that.

The so-called Passover event itself, the crossing of the Red Sea, is described in Exodus 14. The Sea has parted, the Israelites have crossed over and now watch the pursuing Egyptians approach: 'As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord' (Ex 14:10). The Lord of course does live up to what is begged of him, and as the episode closes we learn that, 'Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.' (Exodus 14:31). There is reference here to two kinds of fear, both covered in the

biblical text by the Hebrew root יָרֵא (*yireh*). Classically, Strong's Hebrew definition[6] differentiates between fearing in an ordinary sense of feeling terror and fearing in a 'moral' (Strong's word) sense of feeling awe as in, 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom' (Proverbs 9:10). What kind of fear is really at work here in the Passover event? In beholding the Egyptian corpses strewn on the seashore are the Israelites feeling terror or awe? It is when they see the dead Egyptians that the Israelites see the great power of Yahweh, and in the Hebrew the verb 'see' is repeated to connect corpses and power. The unimaginable horror of this sight is hinted at in the biblical text itself which suggests that the Israelites did not immediately break into victory song. Instead the Hebrew makes use of the little word 'then' as if to indicate a lapse of time: 'Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD' (Exodus 15:1). This is the 'fear' that informs the Israelites' belief in Yahweh, a fear in which Yahweh's great power is associated above all with death - with the 'heart of horror'. It is with this association deeply embedded in their experience that the Israelites now proceed into the wilderness towards Mount Sinai – and onwards towards the Canaan and the story of the fearful spies.

For that's the trouble with calling upon God to save us: it is liable to quicken into action his death-wielding warrior aspect, and in few other places in the Bible is this expressed more straightforwardly than in Psalm 68, an ancient poem depicting a warrior God setting out from Sinai to march across the wilderness (v 7) to deal mightily with enemies. Who, then, is this coming up from the wilderness? Consider this suggestive response from Psalm 68: 'With mighty chariotry, twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands, the Lord came from Sinai into the holy place' (v 17) – all in answer to the prayer voiced at the beginning of the psalm to 'let the wicked perish before God' (v 2). But the psalm also points out something else about this saviour God: 'Our God is a God of salvation, and to God, the Lord, belongs escape from death' (v 20). He wields death, but he also makes possible escape from death – or put positively, he gives life. If there is one great overriding attribute of the God who reveals himself in the exodus experience, be it at the Red Sea or at Mount Sinai, it is of a God with this power over life and death; we do not have that power – but we do have a choice, between ascent and descent. This is the very reminder that Moses' final great sermon rings out: 'I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him' (Deuteronomy 30:19-20). Here is not a lecture about life and death, but a stirring reminder to the Israelites of their own immediate wilderness experience, their own in-the-very-marrow-of-their-bones experience, of what it is like to be caught between the greatest desire of all and the heart of horror.

It brings us full circle back to the Song of Songs, which, when all else is said and done, expresses the one truth that Israel at Sinai was asked to commit to and to trust, the truth we are all asked to commit to and to trust,: 'Love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave' (Song of Songs 8:6). So this Lent, read the Song of Songs and let it sink in deeply that He who is coming up from the wilderness as we approach Jesus's paschal mystery is Lord of life and death.

*Karen Eliasen works in spirituality at St Beuno's Jesuit Spirituality Centre, North Wales.*

---

[1] All biblical translations are from the NRSV.

[2] The first written version of the Jewish oral traditions known as the 'oral Torah'.

[3] Midrash is a form of ancient rabbinic literature that is often presented in the form of imaginative story-telling; it can take any biblical word or verse and imaginatively embroider on it to answer a question or explain something in the text, reading the Bible not so much allegorically as intertextually.

[4] Jacob Neusner, *A Theological Commentary to the Midrash Volume 3: Song of Songs Rabbah* (University Press of America, 2001).

[5] Ilana Pardes, *The Biography of Ancient Israel: National Narratives in the Bible* (University of California Press, 2000).

[6] Biblical scholar Jacob Strong was responsible for the compilation of *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* or *Strong's Concordance,* an index of every word in the King James Bible, first published in 1890.