

St. Paul Center for Theology and Prayer: Finding Our Way  
Reclaiming Egypt As Sacred Ground

In Deuteronomy 26, in the description of offering to God the first fruits of the cultivation of the land, we get a version of a formula which is repeated and carried across book after book of stories:

A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

The land of Egypt is a symbol for the people of Israel of slavery, of a past which they have been delivered from. Egypt may be the land of cucumbers and melons and garlic and lamb, as described by the people complaining to Moses in the wilderness, but it is not the promised land of milk and honey.

The Wilderness, that in between place where Moses and the people live and wander for forty years, lost between slavery and freedom, is also Egypt. But it is not called Egypt.

The Burning Bush, the land God's own Self calls "Holy," commanding Moses to remove his sandals, is also Egypt, but we do not call it by that name.

The desert fathers are not called the 'Egyptian fathers.' Their desert is also Egypt, but we do not call it by that name. They do not wax eloquent about the land. The famous gospel for Lent 1, in which Jesus is tempted by Satan in the wilderness, forms the project of desert monasticism: to be led by the Spirit to the wilderness, to fast, and to test oneself against the legions of demons waiting to trap you in error. In this way, the desert, the wilderness, is always a place of test, of trial.

Egypt, the land of Egypt, is not revered by the people of Israel, nor the Christians who come from their lineage. Egypt symbolizes oppression, the place from which we were delivered by God. We tell that God's saving action is to take us from Egypt forever, even when IN Egypt! Egypt/ wilderness/ land is something which tests us, tries us, confuses us.

Now let's read words from the Perfect Discourses of Asclepius:

*"Do you not know...that Egypt is an image of heaven or, to be more precise, that everything governed and moved in heaven came down to Egypt and was transferred there? If truth were told, our land is the temple of the whole world."*

This is a different Egypt from the one we have imagined.

What is this text?

- 4<sup>th</sup> century philosophical hermetica from Egypt
- Loosely concurrent to Evagrius and Origen
- Not Christianity
- Resource for Marsilio Ficino- renaissance Italian magician-priest, as part of theory of unbroken harmony between things in this world and celestial things
- Powerful spiritual caution against refusing to see God in the Land of Egypt

In this text, the speaker predicts a time when the gods will leave the land, “return from earth to heaven” because of our neglect to see divine presence in land. When the link between the land and heaven is broken, it is written, the gods are silent and we are left disconnected and tired. “In their weariness, the people of that time will find the world nothing to wonder at or to worship... They will not cherish this entire world,

*-- and listen here to how this text speaks of the world--*

a work of god beyond compare, a glorious construction, a bounty composed of images in multiform variety, a mechanism for god’s will ungrudgingly supporting his work, making a unity of everything that can be honored, praised and finally loved by those who see it, a multiform accumulation taken as a single thing...

*--what a wonderful world—but when we’ve lost the wonder--*

NO one will look up to heaven... Soul and all teachings about soul will be considered not only laughable but even illusory.... Such will be the old age of this world: irreverence, disorder, disregard for everything good.”

*“Do you not know, (Asclepius,) that Egypt is an image of heaven or, to be more precise, that everything governed and moved in heaven came down to Egypt and was transferred there? If truth were told, our land is the temple of the whole world.”*

I wonder about what kind of dwelling we might make to be able to live in harmony with wilderness, what kind of temple most befits this God? Christianity has long posited a gap between Creator and Creation, but Egypt knew no such gap. If we count Egypt only as our former prison, do we not miss exactly how God dwells with us? If wilderness is a backdrop for our mortal trials and not an image of heaven, will we not become weary, finding in the world nothing to wonder at or to worship? Will we not lose the soul, which began and runs to eternity, as laughable? If we cannot find wonder and worship of our land, will we not also lose the heavens?