AN EXEGESIS OF THE ISRAELITE WILDERNESS JOURNEY AS A PARADIGM OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION FOR THE GHANA CHURCH TODAY

Emmanuel Kwasi Amoafo[1]

Introduction

This paper presents, in two parts, an exegesis of the Israelites' *physical* wilderness journey as a paradigm of their inner *spiritual* journey to become the people of God. The perspective of this paper is that this narrative offers normative lessons for the Ghana church today in its own journey from the syncretism and animistic worldview and practices of its background of African Traditional Religion to becoming the set-apart people of God in Ghana.

Exegesis of the Wilderness Journey

Exegesis of Exodus-Deuteronomy

The narrative of the Israelite exodus from Egypt and their subsequent wilderness journey span the Old Testament Pentateuch books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. An exegetical review of these four Pentateuch books gives a broad picture of the Israelites' exodus out of Egypt and their ensuing forty-year wilderness journey.

The book of Exodus narrates the story of Israel's deliverance from bondage in Egypt and her constitution to become the people of God. It recounts the story of God's covenant with the children of Israel at Sinai and God's instructions for them to construct the tabernacle in the wilderness as the place of God's presence among them.[2] The narrative divides naturally into three main parts. The first part is from chapters 1 to 14. This first part tells the story of the Israelites' bondage in Egypt and it culminates with God redeeming Israel "with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment" (Exodus 6:6). The second part is from chapters 16 to 18. This is the account of the beginnings of Israel's wilderness journey as they make their way to Mount Sinai. Here, God guides his redeemed people by a pillar of fire and cloud and miraculously provides sustenance for them with manna, quail and water. This is the beginning of God's training of the Israelites to relate to him in faith and obedience. The third and final part of book is from chapters 19 to 40. This portion of the story records Israel at Mount Sinai entering into the Sinai Covenant with God. The Covenant stipulations included the Law and the Levitical priesthood and instructions for building the tabernacle as the place of God's presence among the Israelites.[3] Goheen has summarized these three parts of the book as being first, God's redemption of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage

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[1] Emmanuel Kwasi Amoafa is an ordained minister and a doctoral Student at Pan-African Theological Seminary in Lome, Togo.

[2] Gordon D. Fee, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided T*our (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2002), 34.

[3] Tremper Longma*n, An Introduction to the Old Testam*ent, 2nd ed (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2006), 63.

(Exodus 1—18), second, God binding them to himself in covenant (Exodus 19—24), and third, God coming to dwell in their midst (Exodus 25-40).[4]

The book of Leviticus picks up from where the book of Exodus leaves off and presents God's instructions to Moses during the two months between the completion of the construction of the tabernacle (Exodus 40:17) and Israel's departure from Mount Sinai.[5] The book can be divided into two broad parts. The first part, from chapters 1 to 16, contains God's provision for the atonement of sin through blood sacrifices. The second part of the book, from chapters 17 to 27, presents God's requirements for the daily out-working of purity and holy living in the lives of his covenant people. A recurring command in this second part of the book is, "Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy" (E.g. Leviticus 19:2; 20:7, 26).[6]

The book of Numbers covers a large portion of the forty years that Israel spent in the wilderness. The book has three major divisions. The first division is from chapter 1 to 13. Here, Israel is at Sinai, preparing to depart for the land of promise. This is followed by the journey from Sinai to Kadesh. The second part is from chapter 13 to 22. Here, Israel is at Kadesh, delayed as a result of a major rebellion (chapter 13:1—20:13). This is followed by the journey from Kadesh to the plains of Moab. The third and final part of the book is from chapter 22 to 36. Here, Israel, camped on the plains of Moab, anticipates the conquest of Canaan.

The book of Numbers narrates the murmuring and rebellion of the Israelites during the wilderness journey and their subsequent judgment by God. Although God had redeemed them from bondage in Egypt and had entered into the Sinai covenant with them, they failed to respond to God with faith, gratitude and obedience. Their predominant response to God was one of unbelief, ingratitude and repeated acts of rebellion.[7] This came to a head in chapter 14 with the refusal of the Israelites to undertake the conquest of Canaan. Although the covenant at Sinai had established their identity as the people of God the majority of them forfeited entry into the Promised Land. They were condemned to live and die in the wilderness. God removed the entire generation that failed to trust Him, except for Joshua and Caleb, and molded the new generation into a unified nation, prepared to conquer the land He had promised them.[8]

The book of Deuteronomy is the fifth and final book of the Pentateuch. It records the final days of Moses' leadership of the Israelites' towards the end of their 40-year wilderness odyssey into the Promised Land. Camped in the plains of Moab on the east side of the Jordan River two months before they would cross into Canaan the Israelites were addressed by Moses. Moses' address to the Israelites is recorded in three major sermons (Deut. 1:6-4:40; 5:1-26:19; 27:1-31:13). In these sermons Moses reviewed the history of the Israelites up to that time. He repeated and expanded upon the laws that God had given to them in the Sinai Covenant (Exodus

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[4]Michael Goheen W, *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Sto*ry. (Baker Academic, 2011), 34.

[5]Fe*e, How to Read the Bible Book by B*ook, 43.

[6]Leon James Woo*d, A Survey of Israel's Hist*ory (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1986), 162–166.

[7]Fe*e, How to Read the Bible Book by B*ook, 49–51.

[8]Walter C. Kaise*r, The Promise-Plan of God: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testame*nts (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2008), 87.

19-24) and he reminded them of God's promised blessing for obedience to the law and His promised curses for disobedience to the law.[9] Deryck Sheriffs describes Deuteronomy as looking back "on the whole wilderness journey as a training exercise."[10]

Journeying to Become the People of God

Christopher Wright considers the Israelite bondage in Egypt as having political, social, economic and spiritual dimensions.[11] He sees God's redemption of the Israelites as being a decisive act on the part of God that began the process of shaping the Israelites to become his people. He notes that, "God's momentous act of redemption did not merely rescue Israel from political, economic and social oppression…the exodus effected real change in the people's real historical situation and…called them into a new and real relationship with the living God."[12] God's call of Israel into a new and real relationship with him, Wright maintains, shows the spiritual dimension of the wilderness journey. He notes that, "The spiritual dimension of the exodus, then, is that God makes it clear that his purpose in the whole process is that it should lead to the *knowledge, service* and *worship* of the living God."[13]

The implication of this is that the Israelites could not worship the living God and the gods of Egypt at the same time. This lesson was brought forcefully home to the Israelites by the Golden Calf incident recorded in Exodus 32. Thinking that Moses, their leader, who had been gone for forty days into the presence of God on Mt. Sinai had perished up there (Exod. 32:1), the Israelites, influenced by long-practiced traditions of Egyptian bull worship, carved a golden calf and began to worship this as their god who would lead them back to the certainties of Egypt. It is evident from this incident that only newly separated from the idolatry, paganism, syncretism and animism of Egypt, the Israelites had not yet come to a full appreciation of the God they now served. Less than six weeks after they had entered into covenant with Yahweh and bound themselves to obey the Law, they had broken the covenant.

Charles Kraft defines syncretism as the mixing of biblical worldview assumptions with non-biblical worldview assumptions that are basically incompatible with one another.[14] Steyne defines animism as the belief that the physical material world is integrally linked to the supernatural world that controls everything in life.[15] The animist believes that human life can be

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[9]Fee, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*, 55–56.

[10]Deryck Sheriffs, "Moving on with God: Key Motifs in Exodus 13–20," 2010, 51, http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/exodus_sheriffs.pdf. (Accessed May 22, 2014).

[11]Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2006), 271.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid.

[14] Charles Kraft in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, 4th ed., eds. Ralph D. Winter et al. (Pasadena, Calif: William Carey Library, 2009), 405.

[15]Philip M. Steyne, *Gods of Power: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Animists* (Columbia, S.C: Impact International Foundation, 1999), 34–39.

controlled by the attainment of supernatural knowledge and supernatural power to manipulate the supernatural realm of spirit beings to meet human material objectives. This manipulation of the supernatural involves the active use of divination, witchcraft, sorcery, necromancy, astrology, prophecies, ancestors, omens, charms and spells.[16] Adds Kent Mundhenk, "The practical definition of animism is simply trying to get the spirits to do what one wants them to do."[17]

This is precisely what the Israelites were seeking to do. Still functioning with the worldview of Egypt, they sought to manipulate their fate through idolatry and animism. Their physical wilderness journey was therefore in reality an inner spiritual movement from syncretism and animism to spiritual formation and discipleship to become the set-apart people of God. Re-iterating this view, P.J. Johnson sees the wilderness journey as offering timeless truths about "how to journey with God" in faith and obedience.[18] Stephen Smalley concurs with the recognition of the wilderness journey as a picture of "walking in the ways of the Lord"[19] and he goes on to observe further that, "The historical event of the Exodus, in other words, comes to be used figuratively as a paradigm of the spiritual life."[20] Sheriffs adds his voice to the idea of seeing the wilderness journey as a spiritual metaphor. He notes that "moving out of Egypt and moving on with God" highlights "the journey metaphor, the motif of a walk with God along a route chosen by him through unknown terrain and hazards to an ultimate destination."[21] Sheriffs further notes that, "The journey was to God himself . . . The whole exodus story is about leaving and arriving and what happens in between. The physical journey is the outward visible form of a profound spiritual movement."[22]

Goheen argues that the Israelites' inner spiritual journey from Egyptian syncretism and animism to become the set-apart people of God was deemed necessary by God for three reasons.[23] First, Goheen explains, it was to give Israel a new and unique identity as the people of God."[24] Second, it was so that Israel would be the means by which God accomplishes his missional goal to redeem and to renew creation and the nations.[25] Third, it was so that Israel

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[16]Ibid.

[17]Kent Mundhenk, "Common Threads of Animism," *Melanesian Journal of Theol*ogy 22, no. 1 (2006): 7, www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/mjt/22-1_06.pdf. (Accessed May 22, 2014).

[18]P.J. Johnson, "The Murmuring Tradition: A Paradigm for Every Age," *The Indian Journal of Theol*ogy, 24, http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ijt/38-1_016.pdf. (Accessed May 22, 2014).

[19]Stephen Smalley, "The Imitation of Christ in the New Testament," 14, accessed May 22, 2014, http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ifes/3-1_smalley.pdf. (Accessed April 30, 2014).

[20]Ibid.

[21]Deryck Sheriffs, "Moving on with God: Key Motifs in Exodus 13–20," 51.

[22]Ibid., 54.

[23]Gohee*n, A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Sto*ry, 34–43.

[24]Ibid., 37.

[25]Ibid., 38.

would become "a display people, a contrast people in the midst of the nations, a showcase to the world of how being in covenant with Yahweh changes a people."[26]

Application to the Ghana Church

Profile of Ghanaian Christianity Today

Christianity first arrived in Ghana in the fifteenth century. It came with the Roman Catholic Mission although the Catholic Mission's early efforts to introduce Christianity to then Gold Coast failed.[27] By the mid-1800's, however, through the enterprising missionary activities of Protestant missionaries, Christianity had been firmly established in the country. These Protestant missionaries came from the Basel Mission (1845), the Bremen Mission (1847), and the Wesleyan Methodist Mission (1840).[28] Jones Amanor notes that a recent survey conducted by Operation World and published in 1993 shows that 64% of Ghanaians were Christians.[29] Amanor adds, however, that, "The extent to which the population was truly Christianized has, however, come under some scrutiny since the discovery, by the Ghana Evangelism Committee, that nominalism is the greatest problem of Christianity in Ghana today."[30] This is a view shared by other concerned observers. Paul Gifford, in his recent seminal study of the state of the church in Ghana, concluded that the majority of the large Pentecostal and charismatic congregations and their leaders in the country were far more focused on material success, health, wealth and deliverance from witchcraft than on Christian spiritual formation and discipleship.[31]

Different reasons have been proposed by Ghanaian scholars to explain this phenomenon. Kingsley Larbi notes Pentecostals form the bulk of the Christian population of 62% because Ghanaian Pentecostalism has found a fertile ground in the all-pervasive primal religious traditions of the people of Ghana.[32] Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu blames "the precariousness of life

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[26]Ibid., 39.

[27]Opoku Onyinah, "Deliverance as a Way of Confronting Witchcraft in Modern Africa: Ghana as a Case History," Cyberjournal For Pentecostal-Charismatic Research, 2001, 1, http://www.pctii.org/cyberj/cyberj10/onyinah.html. (Accessed April 30, 2014).

[28]Ibid, 3.

[29]Jones Darkwa Amanor, "Pentecostalism in Ghana: An African Reformation*," Cyberjournal For Pentecostal-Charismatic Resea*rch 13, no. 1 (2008): 4, www.pctii.org/cyberj/cyberj13/amanor.html.

[30]Ibid, 5. (Accessed April 30, 2014).

[31]Paul Giffor*d, Ghana's New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalizing African Econ*omy (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 2004), 60–62.

[32]Rev. Dr. Emmanuel Kingsley Larbi, "The Nature Of Continuity And Discontinuity Of Ghanaian Pentecostal Concept Of Salvation In African Cosmology*," Cyberjournal For Pentecostal-Charismatic Resea*rch 10, No. 1 (2001): 10, Http://Www.Pctii.Org/Cyberj/Cyberj10/Larbi.Html.

in a world of poverty and unstable government."[33] Opoku Onyinah sees this trend as being clear manifestations of syncretism and animism. He observes that, "The main agenda of . . . Ghanaian Pentecostals is deliverance, which is based on the fear of spirit forces, especially witchcraft."[34]

Becoming the People of God in Ghana

As already noted above Goheen has emphasized that the Israelites were required to see themselves as having been separated from their life of idolatry and animism in Egypt to become the set-apart people of God, a people who rendered full allegiance to God alone.[35]

This applies to the church in Ghana today. It is only as the Ghana church sees itself as having been released "from an idolatrous way of life to live as a contrast community"[36] that she can be assured of God's abiding presence and his continued providence as was the case with the Israelites during their wilderness journey.

God's presence was constantly felt and seen by the Israelites in the form of the pillar of cloud to guide them by day and the pillar of fire to guide and to give them light at night (Exodus 14:24). McKinney notes that, "God used his presence to lead his people out of slavery into the Promised Land . . . The pillar of cloud/fire was a constant encouragement that God was near and leading."[37] The Israelites' assurance of God's constant presence also assured them of his continual providence. McKinney observes that God's miraculous provision of water, manna and meat in the wilderness revealed that his presence with the Israelites was not only a physical reality but also a spiritual one.[38]

No matter how difficult it may be, the church in Ghana today, in the power of the Holy Spirit, will need to make the hard decision and take the decisive steps required to relinquish its syncretism and animistic disposition to become a true set-apart people in that nation. Referring to how "difficult Israel found it to move on with God and 'embrace covenantal modes of life'" Sheriffs reminds us that our own movement from syncretism and animism in our Christian expressions will of necessity involve "growth by wrenching transitions and changes that are wrought through discontinuity, displacement and disjunction."[39]

Nixon calls attention to the dangers inherent in resisting this necessary but difficult movement from syncretism and animism to spiritual formation and discipleship. Referring to the

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[33]J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, "Contemporary Pentecostal Christianity: Interpretations from an African Context*," International Bulletin of Missionary Resea*rch Vol. 38, No. 2 (2013): 5. (Accessed April 30, 2014).

[34]Opoku Onyinah, "Deliverance as a Way of Confronting Witchcraft in Modern Africa: Ghana as a Case History," 6.

[35]Gohee*n, A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Sto*ry., 34.

[36]Ibid.

[37]Philip L. McKinney, "Leading By Being Led*," Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leaders*hip 5, No. 1 (2013): 147. (Accessed May 22, 2014).

[38]Ibid, 149.

[39]Deryck Sheriffs, "Moving on with God: Key Motifs in Exodus 13–20.," 57.

Israelites' wilderness journey Nixon draws from the book of Hebrews and sees the writer, in Hebrews 3:7 to 4:13, convincingly explaining that, "God brought all the people out of Egypt but none (except Joshua and Caleb) entered the Promised Land. They were faithless and they were destroyed."[40] Nixon's conclusion is that Christians today too must come out of any forms of religion that bears the marks of syncretism and empty formalism "and go forth with Christ."[41] To do this and to become the set-apart people of God in Ghana today there are major implications for the Ghana church from the lessons highlighted above that need to be practically worked out in the life of the church.

First, because of its present highly syncretistic context, the Ghana church must pray for a major shift of its focus from the material to the spiritual through a Spirit-led revival. This is both necessary and urgent if *Ghanaian Christians* are going to become first and foremost *Christian Ghanaians*. Second, the church, through its non-formal church-based Bible study programs, must promote Spirit-led discipleship and spiritual formation aimed at transforming the worldview of Ghanaian Christians. Third, the Church's theological institutions must focus on training Ghanaian church leaders in sound evangelical biblical exegesis and hermeneutics and in how to engage with the Word of God in daily Ghanaian life. As already noted above, Gifford has described the current defining theology of most of the new Ghana Charismatic-Pentecostal churches as being the prosperity doctrine of material success, health, wealth and deliverance from evil spirits.

This is how the Ghana church, like the journeying people of Israel in the wilderness, can be assured of God's constant spiritual presence and provision. This is also how the Ghana church will first, begin to demonstrate Spirit-led living that shows Christ's power over all the powers of darkness and second, actively prepare for the return of Christ through a vigorous and determined involvement in the mission of God in the Ghanaian context.

Conclusion

This paper has presented, in two parts, an exegesis of the Israelite wilderness journey. In the first part of the paper the exegesis has offered the Israelites' physical journey as a paradigm of the Israelites' inner spiritual journey to become the people of God. In the second part of the paper an attempt has been made to see the wilderness narrative as offering normative lessons for the Ghana church today in its own journey from its ATR-conditioned syncretism and animistic worldview and practices to becoming the set-apart people of God in Ghana. The second part has also offered implications for change for the Ghana church derived from this paper and their proposed out-workings for the church in Ghana.

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[40]R.E. Nixon, "The Exodus in the New Testament," 26, http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/exodus_nixon.pdf. (Accessed May 22, 2014).

[41]Ibid., 27.

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