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THEME:
TRINITY, COMMUNITY, AND POWER:
MAPPING TRAJECTORIES IN WESLEYAN THEOLOGY

TOPIC:
DOCTRINE OF GOD IN EXODUS 6:2-9:
CHALLENGE OF A HERMENEUTICAL TASK IN A
RELIGIOUSLY PLURALISTIC COMMUNITY

GROUP:
BIBLICAL STUDIES WORKING GROUP

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The emerging trend of Coalition Governments in India is one attempt of coming together of the State, regional, minority parties to put up a "United Front" to form the Government at the centre. The self-claimed national parties are either outside the government or in the opposition despite having majority (though not sufficient to make government) among the minorities. The coalition is barely held together with fragile cords generating apprehension, doubt, fear, and political uncertainty. The absence of a "common - minimum - programme" does not help the situation. How this new form of government can be strengthened? How can a concept be evolved which will hold this structure together?

The theme of the 10th OXFORD INSTITUTE, "Trinity, Community, and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology" comes to encounter an Indian - Methodist at a time when India after having completed fifty years of its independence has recently ventured into a necessity of an arrangement of coalition government at the centre. The concept of God has usually been linked with the structuring of the community, exercising of power within the community and outside the community. Hindu caste system is said to have originated from the concept of Aadi-Purusha (the primordial male) from whose head "Brahmin" caste (priests and teachers, obviously the most powerful group) was originated; from its shoulders and arms Kshatriya caste (Warriors); from its belly and loin Vaishya caste (merchants, farmers, skilled workers); and finally from its legs and toes Shudra caste (menial job workers - sweepers, janitors, etc.).¹ The matriarchal communities have justified their social structure and power sharing by having a concept of God who is mother, queen, spirit, maddona, and the patriarchal communities have preferred to have a concept of God who is male, father, king, etc). Several ANE communities have had socio-political system of paying tributes (the Suzerian Treaty) and corresponding to it was the religious concept of "Covenant" between God and people.² It is a matter of debate as to which side (socio-political) governs which (religious) or both mutually evolve with each other. None the less the fact remains that a correspondence between the doctrine of God and the question of power inside the community as well as outside is impossible to deny.
In a religiously pluralistic community like India where the issues of salvation and revelation have been treated in a variety of ways, the search for a relevant form of evangelism remains a challenge. One of the areas of this search can be the hermeneutical considerations for evolving a doctrine of God which has its implications for the questions of community and power.

A study of Exodus 6:2-9 (a case-study) will be attempted to discuss the hermeneutical considerations in formulating a doctrine of God which may provide a frame to the pluralities and a common ground to work towards liberation. A new tool of evangelism, a hermeneutical technique, is a search here. Can Exodus 6:2-9 provide a possible, tentative hermeneutical paradigm to evolve a doctrine of God which may empower the community to hope and work towards the liberation of the whole humanity?

I. AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF EXODUS 6:2-9

A. Structure:

(i) Boundary:

Exodus 6:2-9 seems to be one sub-unit of a larger narrative as the narration of 5:22 comes to end at 6:1 as another sub-unit, and from 6:2 to 9 reads like next complete sub-unit of the larger narrative. The narrative link of Vs. 2 "And God spoke to Moses ---" finds its completion in Vs. 9 "Moses spoke thus to the people ---." Both of these Vrs. have a phrase 'ani YHWH (I YHWH) which serves as an 'inclusio' marking the boundaries of this text.

(ii) Divisions:

There are three possible ways to note the divisions of this text into two parts with a transitional phrase separating them.

The use of the verbal tenses in the speech of God makes an indication of its division. In vrs. 2-5 seven verbs are used in the past tense (perfect or Waw Cons. Imperfect 1st person, common, Singular) narrating what God has done in the past. Vs. 6a seems a transition or a link from the past (2-5) into the future which is going to follow.
In vrs. 6b-8, there are eight verbs in the future tense (Waw Cons. Perfect, I.C. Sg.) declaring what God will do in the present to the future.

There is a second possibility of noting the structural division of this text by studying the pronouns and nouns. The speech of God is addressed to "them (Pronoun 3C. pl.) in vrs. 2-5 and to a third person (Moses, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and children of Israel). In the vrs. 6-8 the narrative reports that God is addressing to "You" (2nd person, plural). This marked shift from "I - Them" to "I - You" points towards a division within the text. The first part vrs. 2-5 records God's work in the past with the people at large (usually four groups - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the Exodus group). Then there is a transition and link (6a). The second part vrs. 6b-8 has proclamations of God's present continuous acts in the future which God intends to do with one particularly addressed group "You".

The third possibility to decipher the demarcation is to locate the positioning of the phrase 'ani YHWH. It is placed at three places, one at the beginning (vs.2), one at the end (vs.8) and one at the exact point of transition (vs.6a) marking not only the outer boundaries but the inner boundaries as well, dividing the text in two parts. Thus within these three markers, like three pillars of a wall, the text is divided in two parts.

B. Part One: Exod. 6:2-5:
   (i) Vs.2:

"He spoke" - 'alidbar (Pi'el W.C.I. 3 m.s. rt. dbr). This root is related with the creative utterances of God (Gen.1), a spoken word which eventually happens, liberating chaos into a cosmos. "God" - 'elohim (Plural, Masculine Noun). Plural noun yet understood as one. It is understood as a generic term, universally applicable. "He said" Wi'momer (Qal, W.C.I. 3 ms rt. 'amar).

The use of two different words for the same meaning emphasizes the importance of the WORD as a revelation which is uttered, written and happened.
"I YHWH" - 'ani YHWH. It can be translated as attributively (myself, me YHWH) and also as predicatively (I am/was YHWH). In any case this phrase represents no limitation of time (past or future), therefore eternally valid. YHWH was understood as a proper name of a God (exclusive) but YHWH is also a part of "I". Here in the text the emphasis seems to be more on "I" (pronoun and verbs) rather than YHWH.

(ii) Vs.3:
"And I was seen" - Wa 'ere (Niph. W.C.I. I.C. sg. rt r'ah). And I appeared in El Shaddai. "And I was known" - No d'athi (Niph. Perf. I.C. sg. rt. Yada'). And I made known (not) my name YHWH. The rt. word - "to know" means personal, intimate, experiential knowledge which comes by a relationship.

These two verbs in passive form reflect the limitations of the exclusive revelations as God was seen, known or not known by them. Only a part of God was seen, known by a group which became their claim of revelation. The plurality of revelation is dependent on the human experiences in different places and times, it is how God was experienced.

(iii) Vs. 4-5:
"I caused to raise" - Haqimoti (Hiph. Perf. I.C. Sg. rt. Qum). I made my covenant. Usually a covenant is cut (Karat berit), the raising refers to a sign of establishing a relationship like a flag or an alter which is raised or made.

"--- to give --- land of Canaan ---" - "--- sojourning --- they sojourned ---" - (rt. Gar).

These three phrases reflect the process of salvation. The sojourning is a vulnerable situation to slavery, therefore from this situation liberation is sought. Acquiring a land ensures the liberative condition. This leads to a convenantal relationship with God. "--- groaning --- enslaving" -
The persistent, acute, and continued situation of suffering is conveyed by these expressions. The result of sojourning and landlessness leads to the trapped, cornered and unyielding situation of groaning and enslaving.

"And" I remembered my covenant. - Wa 'ezakar beriti. It is not raising or cutting another covenant, it is a continuation of an already existing, eternal covenant which 'ani has with all the sojourners, landless, bonded, groaning and enslaved people of the world.

C. Transition:

Vs. 6a -

"Therefore" - Laken

"say" - 'amar (Qal, Imperative 2msg rt 'amr).

"Therefore" summarizes the previously described acts of God and prepares the narrative for a transition. Imperative "say", along with "therefore" usually occur in a prophetic speech followed by consequences in the future (what has happened, therefore, what will happen).

D. Part Two : Exodus 6:6b-9

(i) Vs. 6b:

"And I will cause to go out" - Wa huts'ati (Hiph. W.C. Perf. I.C. Sg. rt. vats'a).

I will bring out. It denotes causing of an outward movement from a cornered, trapped unyielding situation, and it signifies one aspect of salvation. It can be further explained in various other ways such as - making room, allowing space to move, possibility of extension and growth.

The root meaning has various shades - to deliver, to defend, to rescue, to recover, to preserve, to snatch away. It is another dimension of salvation where a tiny bird is delivered from the clutches of a wild beast.

"And I will redeem" - *Wa ga'alti* (Qal W.C. Perf. I.C. Sg. rt. ga'al).

The root word comes from the legal realm. According to a primitive law of kinship, a relative may come forward "to redeem" (ga'al) another relative by buying back a relative's property, by marrying a relative's widow. It may also mean to ransom, to purchase, to avenge. The act of ga'al is associated with the legal phrases like - "with an out stretched arm (vs.8 also) and "with mighty acts of judgement". This is the third dimension of salvation used in a sequence.

(ii) *Vs.7*


It is a kind of taking, adopting into one's family or household to be a member. The act of salvation is continued till the people are restored, salvaged into a safer confines, a relationship with God.


It is an event being accomplished and actualized. Here it refers to the act of salvation being culminated in a relationship between God and the people.

These two sentences explain the covenant relationship - I will take you to me for (as) my people, and I will become to you for (as) God.

"And you will know" - *Wa Yad'etem* (Qal W.C. Perf. 2 M.Pl. rt. Yad'a).
This knowledge comes from a relationship, it is an intimate, personal, subjective, experiential knowing. It is a result of the salvation experience whereby the God (totally other, holy, transcendent, majestic) becomes known as my God. The people may have inherited a God by birth but now the people have experienced (born again) the God who liberates.

"I YHWH your God" -

In vrs 2 and 3 "I" was appearing and making know Godself in different titles - 'elhim, El Shaddai, and YHWH. Here the people would come to know that 'elohim, El-Shaddai, YHWH and "I" are one and the only God. The text seems to have achieved its purpose by bringing people to a realization of the God from plurality to Oneness.

(iii) **Vs.8:**

"And I will cause to come in" - Waheb'ati (Hiph. W.C. Perf. I.C. Sg. rt. Bo'a).

And I will bring in. The people will be liberated by 'causing to go out' (vs. 6- Wa huts'ati) from the land of slavery and also by 'causing to come in' (Vs 8 - Waheb'ati) into a land of their own possession (Morashah). Vs. 8 seems to be the summarized version of the whole sub-unit (6:2-9), it has both past and future references in one.

(iv) **Vs.9:**

"And Moses spoke" - Waidbar Moshe (Pi'el W.C. Impf. 3 m sg. rt Dabar).

The same root verb has appeared in Vs 2 for God, here it is unusually attributed to Moses.

"They did not listen" - Wlo'a Sham'u. Because of their shortness of spirit and for the cruel bondage the people could not listen. The people's response to any doctrine authenticates its utility and relevance.
II. HERMENEUTICAL STUDY OF EXOD. 6:2-9:

The exegetical study brings out the inherent hermeneutical considerations in the text. The process of hermeneutics, the issue considered and the doctrine evolved could be some of the areas to be considered in the hermeneutical study of the text, while exegesis deals with what is written and how it is written, the hermeneutical study attempts to go beyond or behind the text and ask, why it is written, what is written, the way it is written.

A. Process of Hermeneutics:

There are at least four steps which can be pointed out in writing of this text.

(1) Need:

This text is recorded as a second call narrative of Moses by the priestly source in the Babylonian exile. The exiles seem to have had a decision to make between the two choices which were prevalent there. Firstly, there was a notion to accept the exile, settle down, buy land, make relationships and alieness. It would mean to accept the socio-religious and political system of slavery, to accept a religion and a God who justifies the oppression of the exiles, sojourners, landless and strangers. It would mean to somehow cut away from the community of the sufferers and cross over to the other side. The letter of Jeremiah to exiles (Jer.29) is one such example of the hermeneutical efforts at work towards this end. On the other hand there was an opinion to resent the exilic situation and hope to go back to their own land. It meant to reaffirm the socio-political system which is based on a coalition of the tribes, a religion and God who delivers the sojourners, landless, trapped people. It meant to describe the present situation as "Sinful" condition from which liberation was sought. The text, obviously, seems to be a hermeneutical effort to motivate people for the second choice, to look at the exilic situation as oppression, to join a community of sufferers, and to look forward for the salvation of the whole community. It was needed to empower the powerless community of sufferers by hermeneutical deliberations.
(ii) Recalling Past for the Future:

The study of the structure of the text points towards a hermeneutical process where the past is expounded for the present and the future. The past, historical or traditional, recorded or oral, experienced or imagined deliverances by individuals or ancestors of the tribes were being recalled to evolve a hope for salvation. What has happened with "them" (vrs. 2-5 Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the Exodus group) was now going to happen to "You" (vrs. 6b-9 the exiles in Babylon). The power of God to liberate "You" as God liberated "them" was highlighted.

(iii) Polling and Harmonizing

The memory of the salvation experience was a religious resource for the families, how God was revealed in and through the liberative act experienced by the great grand parents of the various tribes. For them it was their treasured revelation (Scripture, Tradition).

In this text, a hermeneutical process is at work where the different groups poll in their religious resources into a common pool at the risk of endangering the claim of exclusive revelation. The groups began to dig their religious resources to identify, bring out and share the liberative experiences from a condition of landlessness and sojourning. The liberative experience provided the hermeneutical key to search, evaluate, select, bring out, pool in and harmonize the various revelations. The other aspects of the revelations like title, locality, worship pattern, order of priesthood, rites and rituals, etc. were completely underplayed or conveniently avoided. Once again the umbrella metaphor of 'exodus-event' was recalled and applied to provide a paradigm for the salvation. The plurality of revelation was not taken as a curse but rather plurality was used as an asset, a harmonized whole, making powerless pluralities into a powerful commonality.

(iv) People's Response:

The hermeneutical process seems to have taken into account the people's response to the doctrinal articulation to meet the need of the hour. The instant experience of salvation, obviously, is shown to have an
upper hand over the promise of salvation in the future. The theological treaties need to encounter the people's response for its reformulation, authentication and finally affirmation. It is a dynamic process where an idea encounters a reality and both get engaged into an ongoing process of mutual benefits and refinements.

B. Issue Considered: God Community and Power:

The hermeneutical process operative in the writing of this text seems to have a strong pre-supposition that the doctrine of God and the process of evolving such doctrine has inherent links with the community and power. As it has already been mentioned that the concept of God, community and power are intricately linked with each other, it is evident in this text as well.

(a) Doctrine of God:

(i) One and Many:

The first thing which is harmonized is the issue of one and many. One of the dominant and decisive element in a given revelation is the name of the deity which makes the group of followers a distinct, privillaged, exclusive, and chosen ones. How can several such different groups be brought together in a community unless the plurality of deities are brought together. In vs. 2-3 exclusively revealed names of the deities are shown to have a continuity and commonness in 'ani "I". It seems to be a deliberate attempt to show that, all along it was one and the same 'ani I who was revealed to different people at different times, in different places. If it was known as El Shaddai by the tribes of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in Canaan at one time, simultaneously it was revealed to the slave groups in Egypt as YHWH, and now who is being known to the exiles in Babylon as elohim. The plurality of revelations was subordinated to the commonality of salvation in each of them. The common heritage of faith, in a God, no matter what name God had, who brings salvation to the landless, sojourners and oppressed provided the power of relationship with each other. The scattered, varied groups were provided with a kinship of a liberative faith which empowers them to hope and work for a liberation.
(ii) Structuring within God-Head:

The inter-relationship within the God head provided a paradigm for the structuring of this community and the sharing of the power by various groups within it. The power of God-ness is shown in the text as being shared by various exclusive titles. The God-head reflects a sharing of power by multiple titles of God in a relational, continual, cordial manner. It provided the basic formula for structuring the community and for the distribution of power among the varied factions within the community.

(b) Community:

A community thus formed had, a common heritage of faith in a God who liberated the slaves and sojourners in the past, a common dilemma of slavery at present; and a common hope for a salvation in the future. It became a community of groups who had their exclusive revelations yet they hoped for an inclusive salvation.

The community structured itself in a relational bond as its gods were united in a harmonious relationship. The community was empowered by making its differences into a blessing of richness by binding their histories into a common heritage of salvation. Once the titles of deity were settled the salvation experiences of varied groups were compiled together to evolve a new, common and powerful history. This history was a new revelation, a new doctrine of God.

(c) Power:

This relational doctrine of God (similar to Trinity) too generated power like any other doctrine of God. Though it is often quoted that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, but this power was of a different kind.

Firstly, it was a power to resist the other hermeneutical efforts which authenticated slavery and oppression, fate and hopelessness as divine ordained (judgement punishment) share of one part of humanity. Secondly, it was a power of relationship which bound varied groups of
people together as an equal participants in suffering, in contributing resources to overcome it, and in sharing the salvation. Thirdly, this doctrine of God provided a power of faith in a God who liberated the trapped, enslaved, landless, sojourners, and who did this irrespective of any race or religion. And finally it provided a power to work for the liberation of other struggling communities.

Conclusion:

The religious pluralism is not just a matter of plurality in faith and worship it has socio-economic and political dimensions as well, marking and governing the groups. The interactions among the groups in a community is the matter of prime concern, how do these groups relate with each other. The introductions surface in several ways, such as the identity-crisis leading to self-assertion in the communal riots, the fear of majority causing huddling together of minority groups in temporary, cosmetic superficial allieness and counter-allieness, which are made and broken at random.

"Trinity, Community, and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology" is a timely and apt catalyst to initiate a search for a concept of God which has liberative implications in terms of power for making a community. The study of Exodus 6:2-9 has exhibited one such hermeneutical attempt of making a doctrine of God. One possible way of dealing with the plurality has been discussed in the study of Exodus 6:2-9. This study may be used as a challenge to initiate a hermeneutical task to evolve a doctrine of God. This search may be a new tool of evangelism, spreading the good news of salvation by providing a reason, purpose for the plurality to hold together and work together in the form of a coalition government.
END-NOTES


4 Text is taken from - Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia Translation - Revised Standard Version of HOLY BIBLE.


6 Ibid., pp. 58-59.


9 Ibid., pp. 223-227.


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