

Journeying with Moses towards true solidarity:

shifting social and narrative locations of the oppressed and their liberators in Exodus 2-3

by Bob Ekblad

I. Introduction

I often read the story of Moses' awakening and call with incarcerated Latino immigrants who attend my weekly bilingual Spanish-English Bible studies in Skagit County Jail in Washington State . People in our reading circle immediately identify with characters in the narrative of Exodus 2:11-3:12 and appear to feel excluded from other roles in the story. Participants' first-glance assumptions about each biblical character's social location and their own place in the world leads to a prejudiced reading of the story. These biased interpretations of Biblical stories are often alienating, reinforcing people's feelings of powerlessness or exclusion. I am convinced that oppressive interpretations can be subverted by careful reading of the narrative itself. This best happens when guided by facilitation that directly questions assumptions and invites unexpected identifications.

The story in Exodus 2:11ff opens with Moses, adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter, now grown up, going out to his people. Privileged Moses' going out from Pharaoh's household to see the people's forced labor and the Egyptian beating a Hebrew at first glance does not resemble anyone except maybe me-- the white, middle-class, educated professional's presence there in the jail "to help" the inmates. Their first impressions are of my eyes meeting each of theirs as guards usher them into the jail's multipurpose room, where we sit together for an hour or two in a circle.

The oppressed Israelites resemble the people I read Scripture with: Mexican, Chicano, White or Native American male inmates between 18 and 45 years old. The most visible equivalents to Israelite forced labor and beatings at the hands of Egyptians include the jail or prison sentences, court-ordered fines and probation, addictions to drugs or alcohol, or minimum wage jobs harvesting crops or processing fish or poultry. The task master invites identifications with everyone from me as representative of task master religion to judges, jail guards, probation officers, girl friends, or Department of Social and Health Service (DSHS) social workers who require child-support payments. Other non-human forces like cocaine, anger, and jealousy are occasionally brought up as equivalents of taskmasters. Pharaoh represents the domination system or the status quo.

The story's first impressions of abused Israelites fighting with each other and distrusting their prospective liberator elicit contemporary versions of the same. Would-be liberator Moses' impulsive killing of the abusive taskmaster, denounced presumably by the very slaves whom he sought to defend, leads to his having to flee to a foreign country-- a failed, paternalistic savior who is now completely absent from the scene. The Israelite slaves and their Latino immigrant equivalents remain passive objects of Pharaoh's, and now our, perpetual domination system. God is absent from the scene in the story and too often in people's lives, failing to intervene to keep things from messing up.

A first read might leave these characters and their readers' social roles intact where it not for the story's surprising turns. As the narrative unfolds and people take note of the text's rich detail, discussion deepens. New identifications become possible that are increasingly challenging to both inmates and myself as Moses journeys deeper into marginality. Can a trained reader from the domination system move from being identified and rejected as an Egyptian task master or paternalistic Moses to a new place of effective agent of call, empowerment and liberation? How can inmates and immigrants move from identifying themselves with subjected Israelite slaves to hearing the call of Moses to advocate for their people before the powers? The journey towards empowering solidarity requires great care on my part as the trained reader who seeks to facilitate this reading process without getting in the way.

II. Egyptian task master or privileged Moses reads Scripture with the Israelite slaves?

My own social location among Latino immigrant inmates more closely parallels Egyptian task master status than privileged Moses stature before the Israelite slaves. My race, gender, language, nationality, and education mark me as a representative of the dominant mainstream American culture to my mostly undocumented, brown-skinned, Spanish-speaking, immigrant jail Bible study participants. My racial profile looks similar to the characteristics of most employers that hire people for minimum-wage stoop labor field work or other physically demanding, low paid jobs. Apart from the uniform, I resemble the jail guards, police agents, prosecutors and judges that arrest, detain, judge and sentence the people. Guards usher me into and out of the jail's multipurpose room, making me appear like an officially-authorized benefit afforded to inmates by the powers. Yet since I am not one of the people who has power over them (like an attorney, judge or prosecutor) I am viewed as someone neutral or even positively. Yet since I am Caucasian, a pastor, and known to them as the director of Tierra Nueva, I am viewed as clearly having more power than they do.

My status as pastor and expounder of the Bible also associates me with religious task masters of the dominant theology. As pastor I am automatically associated with God's social location, which in the minds of most inmates is far removed from theirs in the privileged, luxury utopia of heaven. God is viewed by most as hyper-sovereign—a distant judge whose powerful will has predetermined everything. While many confess that their troubles are of their own making, they simultaneously insist that God has their lives all mapped out in advance. They tend to consciously or unconsciously attribute all the negative things that happen to them as God's will. Since their theology assumes that God is just and good, people logically figure they must be bad and deserving of all the calamities that have befallen them. In Skagit County Jail, inmates often tell me “God has me in jail, I was going down a bad road.” Others say that they are there because of their own mistakes. They see God as both unwilling and maybe even unable to help them out. They expect no redemption, unless bail can be posted by a fellow drug dealer or a sympathetic family member.

People's perception of me as religious task master unconsciously comes into play the moment people begin attending my Bible studies. Some of the people come to the gathering with an attitude of indifference, with no visible expectation of hearing any good news. They come for a combination of reasons from socializing with friends from other pods to escaping the boredom of correctional facility's repetitive, predictable, military-like structure. Many people I work with both inside and outside of jail have given up on Christianity after finding that “accepting Christ as their Savior” with the Evangelicals or attending Mass for a while on a regular basis did not solve all their problems as the pastor promised. Addictions to drugs and alcohol and failures to change in other areas often beat people back into submission to the powers. The voice of the Satan, accuser and tempter, too often sounds louder and more powerful than that of the Paraklete -- advocate and comforter.

Other people's attendance may at first be motivated by duty before a probation officer-like God who they consciously or unconsciously think might look at their “religious” efforts favorably, rewarding them with a lighter sentence or by bringing them back into favor with an estranged spouse. This view of God is visible in people's tendency to interpret every Biblical text as calling them to behave in an obedient, morally righteous way. Inmates often reveal their assumptions about what pleases God when they apologize after a swear word slips naturally from their mouth in an uncensored moment or berate themselves as hypocrites who seek God only when they are in trouble but avoid anything religious once on the street. New inmates who do not yet know me are guarded with their language and self-disclosures. Others are looking for my affirmation regarding their efforts to approach God

through Bible reading, pious talk and even fasting. I believe that underlying the most negative motivations people are thirsty for an authentic encounter. In most people there remains a buried hope that something real may yet happen between them and God. The trained reader of Scripture who facilitates Bible studies in settings such as this must be clear about their role and means in engaging people in liberating, transformational reading of Scripture.

My role involves deliberately subverting as many of the barriers to hope and empowerment as possible while at the same time inviting life-giving interpretation that replaces the old, paralyzing theology. I seek to help people directly identify and confront the dominant negative theology even before it appears in their interpretations. Identifying and countering evidence that appears to reinforce the dominant theology in the Biblical stories is critical if the Bible is to be salvaged as medium of an empowering word. Salvaging apparently irrelevant or oppressive Biblical stories must include helping people come to see themselves in the stories in ways that maximize the possibility of them hearing a liberating word addressed to them. Salvaging the story includes broadening the possibilities of Bible study participants' actual identification with appropriate characters in the story. This broadening of identifications is occasioned in part by means of careful examination of both the Biblical characters narrative social location and participants own actual social location. As this happens a shift in social locations up or down the hierarchical power ladder in the text and group can transpire that makes room for people to take on new roles. Privileged, pretentious, Moses-like would-be liberators can become humble wandering fugitives awaiting new calls. Oppressed slaves and their contemporary equivalents can move towards new roles as Moses-like liberators of their people. So how can I as facilitator negotiate the barriers afforded me by my own privileged social location?

III. Shifting the facilitator's perceived social location

My own awareness that my social location associates me with the Egyptian task masters has led me to seek to distance myself from task masters in a number of ways. Firstly I try to help people identify contemporary manifestations of both social and religious task masters. Before launching into our study of Exodus 2:11-3:10 I first briefly present Genesis background that shows Jacob and his sons in Canaan being pushed to migrate to Egypt due to a famine. I then continue with a brief review of Exodus 1—a separate Bible study that I have often done the previous weekly gathering before this study. I describe how God's people were hammered by a powerful Pharaoh, who sought to crush them through forced

labor, physical abuse and death penalties. The Pharaoh's fear-based repression against the multiplying Israelite immigrant community provides fertile ground for Latino immigrants' contemporary comparisons. The Egyptian leaderships oppression of Israelites through hard labor looks a lot like US government lack of enforcement of labor laws set up to protect workers from abuse. The harsh targeting of male children for extermination invites comparisons ranging from racial profiling of immigrant men by law enforcement, and mass incarceration for minor drug-dealing offenses to deportations and permanent bar to reentry to undocumented immigrant men—most of whom are fathers to US citizen children residing in the United States. I emphasize that the redactor shows how God's promise of life cannot be stopped, but even increases with every deathblow. My facilitation style invites people to make associations that gradually lead them to see me as on their side. This establishes a gap between my identity as trained Bible reader the Egyptian Pharaoh, Egyptian people and task masters.

Continuing in my efforts to show the Exodus writer [and myself] as on the side of the oppressed, I remind people how the Israelites resisted, refusing to comply with Pharaoh's laws. Moses was a slave baby who was saved because his family hid him, finally placing him in a basket and sending him down the river. There Pharaoh's daughter found him and had compassion on him. After unknowingly hiring Moses' very mother as Moses nanny, Pharaoh's daughter adopted Moses, raising him with all the royal privileges. He was an Israelite, but he may have been sheltered from the people's reality.

To help people shift in their perceptions regarding God's social location I point out that God is not siding with oppressor Pharaoh. Rather, the story shows God visibly standing with the weakest most vulnerable ones in the story—the baby boys targeted for extermination. God blesses those who resist the forces of death through refusing to carry out Pharaoh's order and lying to him when confronted: the Hebrew midwives. Exodus depicts God as sovereign—but in a completely unexpected way. God's sovereignty is exercised not through the males identified by Pharaoh to be the greatest threat—but through mothers, a young girl and even a foreign princess. Their resistance takes the forms of covert disobedience, lying & hiding and non-compliant adoption of the victim. The legal system cannot stop the fulfillment of God's covenant.

Yet everyone there in the jail is all too aware that the forces of death crush human lives. The principalities and powers wreak havoc on humans and on creation. In spite of God's movement in the world, people suffer: “The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried

out.” This cry did not fall on the deaf ears of an impersonal deity who wills the oppression as some kind of punishment. The text tells us:

Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them (2:23b-25).

People in my Bible studies are taken by surprise when they realize how God works in this story. Could this really be the way God works in our world today? Interest is sparked. The men are open to reading on. I recognize that it is not enough for them to know that according to the Bible God sees people's suffering. While this is encouraging, if God is in fact good and acts, people want to know how God actually responds to oppression. My visible agreement with and excitement about God's strategy partially confounds people's assumptions about my theology as one apparently associated with a sovereign punishing and/or Pharaoh and his task-masters. Yet the narrative offers no clear character equivalents to myself as facilitator other than Pharaoh's daughter. None of these first mediators of liberation in Exodus 1-2:10 are male, nor are they required to gain trust. Most importantly, the Israelites remain slaves.

Moses once again enters the scene at this point in the story, and the Bible study is about to begin. I invite people to pay close attention to the story we're about to read of Moses. I invite them to look for tips about what this might mean for us. God is about to call a human being to a special task. The way God calls and the qualifications of the savior figure tell us a lot about God—and open up possibilities for us as well.

I remind the men that we know from the story that Moses had been given a special break. He'd escaped death thanks to his mother, sister and Pharaoh's daughter. He was adopted into Pharaoh's household, benefited from special opportunities, escaping the grueling slavery of his people.

IV. Seeing the misery through changing social locations: me and Moses

The brief telling of my own story at this point invites a comparison with emerging Moses instead of with the oppressive task masters that can be helpful as part of the process but potentially harmfully if left there. I tell people how I too am from immigrant ancestors—though the comparisons are of limited value. My parents were both born in the United States. My grandfather on the father's side migrated from Sweden at the beginning of the 20th

century, while on my mother's side my descendants trace back to some of the first English settlers in the 18th century. Unlike Moses, a child of slaves once immigrants, I grew up as a privileged member of the dominant US ethnicity, and benefited from many opportunities, including an undergraduate and graduate education. I now am an ordained Presbyterian pastor, jail chaplain and director of an ecumenical ministry to immigrants called Tierra Nueva (New Earth).

When leading this Bible study I often share my story of “going out to see” the people that began over 24 years ago with a life-changing trips to Europe , Israel , Mexico and Central America . This process has continued, including six years of work teaching sustainable farming and leading Bible studies among poor Honduran peasants during the 1980s. “Going out” now includes regular visits to farm workers in migrant labor camps and other immigrant workers in ghetto-like apartment complexes, and in weekly Spanish Bible studies in Skagit County Jail. I use great care to not express my going out in ministry in heroic or victorious ways. If anything I err on the side of confessing my weakness and ignorance in knowing how to effectively help people find healing and liberation from the most insidious forms of oppression (addictions to heroin, meth amphetamines) and my need for God's direct help in my work with people. In addition, my going out to see the inmates is brought about through the agency of uniformed Jail guards who usher me through the thick steel doors into the jail's multipurpose room. The guards releasing of the red-uniformed inmates who want to attend my study from their individual cells and pods and corralling of the red-uniformed inmates through two steel doors to take their places in the circle of blue plastic chairs reminds us all who actually is in the power position.

The men with whom I read more closely resemble Israelite slaves in Egypt than I embody Moses. Many are originally peasants from impoverished rural villages in Mexico . Pushed away by landlessness, drought, unemployment, government neglect and global market forces, they, like Jacob's family were drawn to the bounty El Norte (the USA)-- modern-day Egypt . Once in the United States they find work as farm laborers or minimum-wage workers. Their willingness to work hard for low wages has made them invaluable to farmers, meat packing plants and countless other employers. Most of the people I read with have entered the United States illegally, and live on the margins of American society. Many do not have valid driver's licenses or even identification and make use of counterfeit residency and social security cards. Most have partners and children to support, sometimes in Mexico and in the USA . This is a near impossible feat when making minimum wage. Some are tempted and succumb to small and larger-scale drug dealing for extra cash. Theirs is a life of constant

insecurity. If ever arrested for anything they can be assured they will be deported by the Department of Homeland Security back to Mexico immediately after doing their jail time.

Trusting God does not come naturally. Rather, people learn to lean on their own survival strategies, the “weapons of the weak.” I continually struggle to determine how I, a trained reader of Scripture and professional religious worker can best function as an agent of call or liberation. I propose reading the story of Moses' origins and first encounter with the oppressed in Exodus 2-3 with this question in mind. How and who does God call as agents of liberation? How do would be liberators gain trust?

Moses' journey towards solidarity appears to begin when he goes out and sees the oppression of his people. When I lead a Bible study with inmates, I often launch the actual study with this question. The following dialogue is actually a composite of several Bible studies but is reflective of the way I lead this study and ways inmates often answer.

“The first thing we know about the adult Moses is a description of his awakening to the pain and struggle of the people. Let's see what happened to Moses,” I suggest, inviting someone to read in Spanish and then English Exodus 2:

One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk.

“What did Moses see when he went out?” I ask the group.

“He saw the hard work they were doing,” says Chris, a Chicano man in his early thirties fresh from ten years in a Texas prison.

“He was an Egyptian beating one of his people,” says Vicente, an undocumented Mexican immigrant man in his mid twenties.

”This has happened to me too in many ways,” I continue. “I came from a middle class family where I had lots of privileges. I was sheltered from the struggles of immigrants, poor people, people in prison. If I or someone like me or Moses came into your lives, your families, or your villages in Mexico , what would they see?” I ask.

“A lot of poverty,” says Vicente. “In Mexico one makes in one day what one makes in an hour here.”

“Discrimination,” says Chris. “Last week in court there were five of us Mexicans and 12, maybe even 14 gabachos (White people). Every one of the white guys were released. All of us Mexicans are still here.”

“Lots of struggles.” Someone else adds. “In my home growing up there was lots of fighting between my old man and old lady. Lot 's of drinking too.

“Drugs, addictions.” says Jessie .

“So what sorts of ways do we react to injustices or hardships in our lives?” I ask the men.

“We use violence. We take out our frustration on someone,” says someone.

“Some of us use drugs to blow it all away, to escape the pain,” says someone else.

“Let's see how Moses responds,” I suggest, inviting someone to read the next verse. A volunteer reads:

He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.

“Whoa, I thought Moses was a righteous dude,” says Chris. “But he killed a man. He broke the commandments.”

We talk about how Moses' going out and seeing change his life forever. Direct exposure to poverty, injustice, or oppression—of whatever sort, can lead us to react with violence. Moses' seeing clearly impacts him—as encounters with oppression always do. The next day he returns, trying his hand at conflict resolution between two Hebrew slaves.

“How did the Hebrew slaves react to Moses when he tried to break up their fight? Did he prove himself in their eyes by taking a courageous stand against the bad guys?” I ask.

“They didn't respect him,” insists a Julio, a confident Chicano man in his late 20s. “They saw him as a violent man, acting the same as the Egyptians.”

“I thought that being a bad-ass dude, defending yourself when you're dissed, doing a drive-by on a rival gang got you respect. Isn't that true?” I ask half teasingly.

“Well it does in a way, but not real respect that lasts,” someone responds.

“What about being a tough, strict parent. Isn't that a good thing? How many of you were harshly punished by your parents when you were children?” I ask. Over half the group raises their hands immediately.

“So did it make you respect your parents more or less?” I continue.

“Way less, punishment didn't work,” someone blurts out.

“It just made me more angry,” says another man.

“And how about the police or the court system. Do the harsh sentences to enforce the laws make you respect them more?”

Heads are all nodding no.

“Yeah, like George Bush beating up on the Iraqis. He just used his power. That didn't gain him no respect,” adds Roberto, a thin Chicano guy who hadn't said anything until now.

“So what would he have had to do to win their respect?” I ask, trying to get the men to place themselves in the Hebrew slaves' shoes.

“He'd have to show respect, and be more humble,” says Julio.

We talk together about how seeing can lead us to reflect and act in many different ways. I point out that Moses' mother saw that Moses was a beautiful baby boy, and she hid him. When Pharaoh's daughter saw baby Moses crying, she had compassion on him, adopting him as her own even though she knew he was a condemned Hebrew baby (Ex 2:6).

We wonder together how people thought Pharaoh finds out that Moses is the killer. Did the Hebrew slaves need to denounce him in order to avoid being blamed for the crime? Did the slaves feel more secure with the known system the taskmaster represented than they did with unknown Moses? What would it take for the Hebrew slaves to trust Moses as their liberator? The text is silent regarding all these questions, leaving the reader surmising that Moses' heroic act likely was inadequate to earn him the allegiance of the Hebrew slaves, who had to act in their own security interests.

One thing is certain, Moses' murder of the task master forces him to become a fugitive. Rejected by his people, his crime exposed, Moses' is now on the other side of the law. His law breaking in solidarity with the oppressed has made him an enemy of the Egyptian State. His adopted father Pharaoh now pursues him in order to kill him—showing that dominators cannot be trusted. A warrant issued by Pharaoh himself, Moses flees for his life. (reactive—like many offenders).

Now he's in exile, wanted for murder, a failed liberator/reactionary—unappreciated by his people, a sojourner in a foreign land, shepherding for a living. At the same time Moses' crime, exile and location in the desert significantly broaden the possibilities for others to identify with this character.

When people in Mexico commit a crime and are being hunted by the police, where do they go?" I ask the group.

"Al Norte" (to North-- U.S.A.), they responded. I have met many men who came to the Skagit Valley precisely to escape troubles at home.

Many end up in jail or prison for new crimes committed in N. America. Others work in the fields, picking strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, cucumbers, or working in meat packing plants. Some sell drugs.

"So where was Moses when God met him?" I ask the guys in my study. "Was he in Mass or in some church? What was he doing? Was he praying, studying the Bible, looking for God?"

The men look surprised and slightly uncomfortable with the obvious answer. They're not used to looking at narrative gaps—at what the text doesn't say. Might there be good news there too?

"Moses was in the desert. He was working, shepherding his sheep," they observe.

"But he must have done something good, he must have been a holy person, he must have known God, otherwise God would not have met him," I insist, inviting them to look closer at the text. "What do we know about Moses?"

Occasionally people have stated here that Moses was chosen because he grew up in Pharaoh's court and had the knowledge and social class background to be a liberator. This assumption

is visible in ancient Jewish and Christian exegesis too, which seeks to make sense of God's choice of Moses for such a key leadership role and to respond to the contradiction and even offense of Moses' claims about himself in Exodus 4:10 “but I am heavy of speech and heavy of tongue.” [1]

Arithmetic, geometry, the lore of meter, rhythm, and harmony, and the whole subject of music...were imparted to him by learned Egyptians. These further instructed him the philosophy conveyed in symbols... He had Greeks to teach him the rest of the regular school course, and the inhabitants of the neighboring countries for Assyrian literature and the Chaldean science of the heavenly bodies.” (Philo, Life of Moses 1:23).

Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son, and Moses was educated in all the wisdom of Egypt, and he was powerful in his words and actions.” Acts 7:21-22

While these readings make room for people like me and other trained readers [2] to find their place in the popular liberation struggles, the absence of any signs of Moses having benefited by his life as Pharaoh's daughter makes room for people on the margins to identify with Moses.

The guys look in their Bibles--- someone dares to answer: “He was a murderer. It wasn't even an accident. He looked this way and that. He hid the body in the sand.”

Moses indeed becomes an immigrant and a fugitive, working a minimum-wage job in the wilderness. His life did not yet have a place in God's project of liberation and life. Moses needed to do more than just “go out to see” oppression. Another kind of seeing was necessary for Moses to discover his new vocation. But this second “ seeing ” was not his own doing.

I point out to the men that the place of God's encounter supports this. The desert is the place where the rejected were cast (Hagar, Ishmael). It is also a place of revelation, of being set apart or to find your identity as God's people—and not just as Pharaoh's slaves). [3] Moses drives his flock “behind” the wilderness—a place of utter desolation? It's in this no-man's land that he comes to the mountain of God .

It is here that the Angel of YHWH appears/is seen to him. He sees a flame in a bush, a curious sight. The flame is approachable—it does not burn up the bush. He's drawn to contemplate. God calls him by name: Moses, Moses!

“So what does this mean for us?” I ask the guys in my jail Bible study?

“It's like God shows up where we work, man. He comes to the field, he comes to the factory. He appears right there,” someone says. Another guy adds: “The desert is right here. This jail is the wilderness where we've been led. God appears to us here, when we've come to the end of our rope.”

When Moses is told he's in God's presence, a holy place, he hides his face in fear. “Why do you think he was afraid?” I asked the inmates.

“He felt dirty. He felt ashamed to be in God's presence. Like he wasn't good enough,” said one guy.

“He knew he was guilty of murder. He thought God would punish him, or take him in to Pharaoh,” says someone else.

“So what does God do? Does he slap on the handcuffs and take him away? What does God say? Let's read the next verse,” I suggest.

I have seen the misery of my people who are in Egypt ; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey (3:7-8).

The inmates can hardly believe it when they hear these words. It's like they're waiting for the hammer to fall, the bad news to be announced. But it just gets better and better. When I ask them what the people did in order for God to come down and save them, they smile with delight at the absence of religious-looking behaviors.

“They did nothing! They were in misery, they groaned, they cry out,” someone says.

It surprises people that God says nothing to Moses about his murderous act—and someone else even observed that it was this same Moses who later was given the tablets of stone where God wrote with his very finger: ‘thou shalt not kill.’ God shows surprising solidarity with Moses' first seeing. God too sees the oppression, and God has come down to do something about it. I ask the men at this point if God's knowledge of the people's condition differs from Moses.

We look together at a detail that speaks clearly to any would-be liberator. Moses does go out and sees the burdens and an Egyptian beating one of his people. In the Hebrew text YHWH speaks in the first person using the emphatic doubling of the verb to see that echoes Moses seeing. God's seeing of the misery of his people is followed by two other verbs that suggest a deeper solidarity not yet experienced by Moses. YHWH continues:

I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings.

YHWH's words to Moses are suggestive to any would-be liberator that a deeper solidarity is required that implies a descent into the condition of the oppressed. Hearing people's cries related to their taskmasters and knowing their suffering imply a shift in social location.

In addition, God's response differs markedly from Moses' murderous act. YHWH speaks in the first person about coming down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey. This coming down, delivering and bring the people out implies a commitment to a liberation process on behalf of the entire people rather than a violent removal of a single perpetrator on behalf of one victim. The reader is left wondering at this point how God will accomplish such an ambitious project. A volunteer reads the next verse that clearly states God's surprising choice for the task.

The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh, to bring my people, the Israelites out of Egypt (3:10).

God calls Moses and sends him back. This time armed with a staff and the word of YHWH. God uses Moses, the failed liberator, the reluctant savior. In response to Moses repeated protests: "Who am I that I should go?" God says: "I will be with you." God assures Moses of his very presence along the way.

Moses is no hero figure, and his task is not easy. He presents excuse after excuse to not go. "What if they don't believe that you appeared to me (4:1)?" "But I don't know how to speak," (4:10) and finally "O my Lord, please send someone else" (4:13). Moses' reluctance makes room for our excuses and fleeing. God's persistence and final victory over Moses shows us God's unwavering commitment to liberation—in spite of our resistance.

God is recruiting, calling people to lead others out of slavery and misery and into the promised land of freedom and abundance: a land flowing with milk and honey. God recruits unexpected people, common people. So how is this good news? Roger, a fellow American white male sums up by saying:

“Moses, he's so unsure of himself. He's so human. This makes me realize, hey I'm not alone. There's another really important guy in Israel's history who didn't feel cut out for this. Look, God used him. God can use me too.”

Israel, a Mexican man serving two years in prison sums it up this way:

“This makes me very emotional, because Moses was a sinful person. So God can use people like us. Yes, God is calling us. This jail is a desert, there is nothing that we can do. But God gives us a mission. Even though Moses is a sinner, God continues to call him, even though he was very rebellious.”

Jose too says it in his own way: “God works through humble people, people who are rejected, people with vices, and he uses us to announce his kingdom and the good news to the world.”

Towards the end of the Bible study I invite the men to read 1 Corinthians 1:26-29:

“Consider your own call, brothers and sisters:” Paul writes to the Corinthians. “Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God (1:26-29).

People are nearly always visibly delighted by God's surprising choice of the nobodies as God's mediators. To conclude this study I often ask people to try and summarize how their image of God has shifted or more specifically who they now perceive God to be according to our reading of this story.

V. God's shifting social location and human liberation.

Together with inmates we talk about a new image of God that counters the dominant theology. God's encounter with Moses shows YHWH as close and present in contrast to the distant, impersonal God of the dominant theology whose will is synonymous with the status

quo. The God who meets Moses appears (literally is seen to) regardless of whether he was a murderer who was not even looking for God. God embraces Moses' past and identifies with his reaction to injustice. God reveals God's Self as one who sees, hears and fully knows human suffering. This radically contrasts with images of God as unapproachable, exclusive, angry, and punishing. In addition, this story suggests to careful readers:

God may very well use people from the domination system such as Pharaoh's daughter as agents of liberation. These people may well be required to act as change agents at great personal risk. Moses name as in the words of Pharaoh's daughter "I have taken him out of the water" betray her very act of civil disobedience as Egyptians were required to throw Israelite baby boys into the water.

God desires to bring people out of every kind misery and oppression into a place of abundance.

God delivers the oppressed through enlisting the most unlikely mediators, fully identifying with people like Moses, with people like us—being willing to be associated with weakness, reluctance, failure. "I will be with you."

In fact, because God so fully identifies with mediators—the people often know God primarily through those mediators.

According to the Exodus story God empowers us to do God's very work, enlisting us for the work of liberation. God calls us to bring people from every nation, ethnic group, city, village and family out of bondage and into a place of wholeness—the land flowing with milk and honey. God is doing this work, and is continually recruiting—and recruiting recruiters to usher in the Kingdom.

In conclusion, as I read this story with inmates I experience with them a massive shifting of social locations that include the biblical characters (most notably Moses and God), myself as facilitator and them. Moses' social location has been on the way down from 2:11. By the end of the story Moses has descended from privilege insider to criminal fugitive immigrant outsider shepherd who invites increasingly inclusive contemporary equivalents from among the marginalized. Meanwhile my own role as sympathetic guide has revealed both my solidarity with the shifting Biblical characters and most importantly the marginalized inmate readers. By the time we get to the burning bush we have come to surprising place of common ground. At the very moment when our identification with Moses and each other

becomes the easiest, God's social location shifts, making God absolutely approachable in the intriguing flames on a bush—a curiosity that brings Moses close. There before the burning bush for an instant we all stand as curious spectator equals before a yet to be revealed God with us. God's calling Moses by his name, Moses' fearful hiding of his face and God's gracious response reveal a God who loves and fully embraces Moses in his moment of greatest distance from his people and God there on the other side of the desert. Finally, God's calling of Moses, Moses' insecurity, refusal and ongoing reluctance bring Moses and our humble circle of readers in the heart of the jail closer and closer as we face our common insecurities, fears and unbelief. God's belief in Moses in spite of his transparent weakness invites my own corresponding pastoral faith in my inmate brothers as I find myself finally agreeing with God in his call to us: Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you will bring forth my people out of oppression.

[1] James Kugel makes an interesting observation regarding this text that I quote at length that shows why ancient rabbinic exegesis (quoted below) tended to disassociate Moses from the uneducated—depriving semi-literate or undereducated people of an otherwise natural rapprochement with inarticulate Moses. “Eloquence in the ancient world was thought to be largely the result of schooling—and it was one of the most important things a person could possess. Was Moses thus saying that his education had been incomplete, and that this all-important trait was somehow lacking in him? This would have constituted a serious flaw in the eyes of ancient readers... And in any case, the idea that Moses had not received a thorough education was certainly contradicted by the eloquent words he spoke throughout the Bible—and in particular by the book of Deuteronomy, which is, almost from the beginning to end, one long, highly eloquent speech uttered by Moses just before his death. For all such reasons, then, ancient interpreters were quick to supply what the book of Exodus had James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible As It Was at the Start of the Common Era*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 509.

[2] In Jewish exegesis there is even room for viewing Moses more as an organic intellectual, whose training was homegrown. [The angel tells Moses] “Afterwards, when you had grown up, you were brought to the daughter of Pharaoh and you became her son. But Amram, your [Israelite] father, taught you writing. And after you completed three weeks [of years, that is, twenty-one years], he brought you into the royal court.” Jubilees 47:9, quoted from James L. Kugel's *Traditions of the Bible*, p. 510.

[3] Sometimes I invite inmates to read together the places in Genesis and Exodus that support this (Gen 16:7; 21:14, 17, 20, 21; 37:22; Ex 4:27; 5:1, 3; 7:16; 8:27, 28; 13:18, 20; 14:3, 11, 12; 15:22, 22, 22; 16:1, 2, 3, 10, 14; 17:1; 18:5, 10; 19:1-2).