

4-1-2013

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Recommended Citation

Hamilton, Mark W. (2013) "Resources for the Study of Exodus," *Leaven*: Vol. 21: Iss. 2, Article 13.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol21/iss2/13>

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Resources for the Study of Exodus

Mark W. Hamilton

Like many people my age, I first came to the story of the exodus through the great filmmaker Cecil B. DeMille, whose four-hour masterpiece, *The Ten Commandments*, graced television screens one Sunday night a year just before Easter. Who can forget the barely submerged eroticism of Anne Baxter, to say nothing of the insolence of Edward G. Robinson's Dathan or the Proustian pitifulness of Yul Brenner's Ramesses? Set against the backdrop of the Cold War's struggle against tyranny and drawing on a longer tradition of biblical interpretation of the exodus story going back to the ancient books of Enoch and Jubilees and the Bible itself, DeMille spoke for a generation that took the Bible for granted.

That reality no longer exists, at least not in the same way. The 1990s story of sibling rivalry and political freedom, *The Prince of Egypt*, did not capture the cultural imagination in the way DeMille's work did—nor could it have, even though in many respects it is a better film. (And even more biblical, with its final song being a direct quotation from the Hebrew of Exodus 15.) Times have changed, and the interpretation of the book of Exodus and the story behind it has changed with them. The politics of the mid-twentieth century, in which anti-Communism and Zionism were the preferred options of enlightened Westerners, have given way to a new, more cynical and inward-looking politics suspicious of metanarratives and sensitive to the costs of liberation movements in bloodshed and displacement of peoples. Today's radical chic cannot see Israel's liberation without considering the fate of the Canaanites. So we live in chastened times.

Exodus in History

To recover Exodus for our time, we must recognize that, as with any biblical book, understanding this masterpiece requires examination of its historical, literary and theological aspects. To begin, historical problems include both the truth about events in the second millennium BCE that apparently lie behind the biblical stories and the afterlife of the text among its many interpreters. Against a range of historians who have felt the exodus to be largely fictional, James K. Hoffmeier has argued in *Israel in Egypt: the Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) and *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) that many elements of the stories have a plausible historical core. In the former work, he traces evidence for Semites in Egypt during the second millennium, situates some aspects of the Joseph story in Egyptian political practices and finds Egyptian elements in the first few chapters of Exodus. A welcome antidote to the almost incredible arbitrariness of some so-called minimalist approaches to biblical history (e.g., the work of Thomas Thompson and Niels Peter Lemche), Hoffmeier's books force a reconsideration of Israel's stories.

His second volume extends the discussion into the rest of the Pentateuch, in which he rightly avoids the extreme literalist views of the biblical texts (noting, for example, that the 600,000 warriors allegedly found in Moses' army cannot be the correct translation of the Hebrew word *'eleph*), but still finds historical kernels in notions of the Mountain of God and the desert tent sanctuary. Much of this work has earlier precedents in the research of Frank Moore Cross and some of his students and colleagues (i.e., the so-called Albright

School), but Hoffmeier has carefully considered counterarguments. Hence, his work represents the state of the discussion by and large.

From a very different direction comes Hector Avalos's provocative book *Slavery, Abolitionism, and the Ethics of Biblical Scholarship* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2011). Though his study traces portrayals of slavery throughout the Christian canon and (selectively, perhaps tendentiously) in the history of Christian theology, he offers a long discussion of Exodus and argues that it is not the liberating text often assumed. Or rather, given the Bible's long history of use in the defense of slavery, he insists on its uselessness for forming moral arguments. He arrives at this drastic viewpoint, so consonant with the approaches of the so-called New Atheists, by denying the legitimacy of reinterpolation or refiguration of the biblical text. While such an extreme hermeneutical position might seem unwarranted, at least Avalos's work forces anyone taking a sentimental approach to theology to tread carefully.

Exodus as Literature

The historical issues thus intertwine with literary ones, which are more crucial to the understanding of Exodus as a book. Understanding its creative deployment of genealogy, conflict story, war song, laws, theophany reports and cultic blueprints (to name only the most important literary forms) requires a sense of the whole work as well as its constituent parts. Several recent major commentaries aid this understanding. For example, Thomas B. Dozeman (*Exodus* [Eerdmans Critical Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009]) situates his work in the scholarship now emerging after the disintegration of the Documentary Hypothesis. He distinguishes between P and Non-P accounts, dating both to the exilic or post-exilic periods (though with many examples of earlier material embedded within them), and concludes that their precise dating is not essential to their interpretation. Rather, he argues, a careful study of the P material "will reveal a dynamic inner-biblical relationship with the Non-P History in Exodus, in which divergent interpretations of origin stories are related without being harmonized" (42). The 763 pages (plus indexes and bibliography) of the commentary explore that relationship in detail, along the way offering many useful insights into the text.

Even more massive is the commentary of William H. C. Propp (*Exodus* [2 vols.; Anchor Bible 2; New York: Doubleday, 1999, 2006]), which—in addition to the expected attention to text critical and historical critical issues—tries to understand many of the motifs of Exodus in light of folklore studies, especially the work of the eponymous V. I. Propp in his pioneering work *The Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968). Many of the biblical stories seem to fit patterns of hero-story found in oral traditions around the world. This commentary offers several items that are particularly instructive, notably extensive references to traditional Jewish (rabbinic) sources and occasional excursions clearly and refreshingly labeled as "Speculation."

Most extensive of all is the four-volume work of Cornelis Houtman (*Exodus* [Historical Commentary on the Old Testament; Kampen, Netherlands: Kok, 1993–2002]). Like other volumes in the HCOT series, Houtman attempts to address most text-critical, grammatical and historical issues of the biblical text. Preachers and teachers will benefit most fully from the long discussions for each pericope labeled "Essentials and Perspectives." These sections offer detailed yet engaging discussions of the theological and literary dimensions of a text. The author then proceeds to a verse-by-verse "Scholarly Exposition" of a given unit in which he works out the major critical issues. Although the former section depends on the latter, each works independently to serve the purposes of a given reader.

For those who do not wish to traverse the wide expanses of these three books, a learned companion for Exodus appears in Carol Meyers' *Exodus* (New Cambridge Bible Commentary; Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Meyers states her task as understanding the book's story line, sociocultural context, literary and rhetorical strategies and themes and values (innovative and otherwise), as well as the interpretive and moral issues it raises (18). She achieves even this ambitious set of goals in about three hundred pages, an extraordinary feat that makes hers the best available (in English, at least) short commentary on Exodus.

Any study of the literary issues involved in Exodus should consider John T. Willis' work on the history of the interpretation of Exodus 4:24–26, the odd text in which YHWH attempts to slay Moses while on the road

to Egypt (*Yahweh and Moses in Conflict: The Role of Exodus 4:24–26 in the Book of Exodus* [Bern: Peter Lang, 2010]). Willis spends most of the volume on a thorough description of the pericope's history of interpretation and reception but offers the beginnings of a new proposal that situates the encounter on the road to Egypt in the context of a pattern of stories about conflicts involving Moses, some with God and others with Israel. The volume provides the raw material for a scaled-up proposal that would help illuminate not only this enigmatic text, but also a key dimension of the Moses stories in the Pentateuch.

Theological and Pastoral Implications

If the struggle between Moses and YHWH reveals the theological complexity—and otherness—of Exodus, then informed readers of the book must ask what it wishes to say about the God who elected Israel. Surely Dozeman and others are right to recognize that multiple perspectives are in play in Exodus and that the final redactor has both privileged the P point of view and left non-P ideas fully exposed so that the inevitable tensions created can be theologically generative. This tensive generativity of a text that offers, for example, both a fixed holy site at Horeb and a movable one in a Tent (both ideas from P, but also other strands) is very high. Hence the extraordinary theological afterlife of the text of Exodus as the synagogue and church received it.

Though not strictly theological, David P. Wright's book *Inventing God's Law: How the Covenant Code of the Bible Used and Revised the Laws of Hammurabi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) offers an important example of how the biblical texts engaged long-standing traditions—in this case, legal—and added new insights to them. Particularly for conservative Protestants whose view of biblical law is often profoundly ill-informed and wrong-headed, Wright's learned comparison of the Covenant Code's (Exodus 21–23) provisions with those in other ancient law codes—notably Hammurabi's—illustrates the intellectual and spiritual work that lies behind biblical law.

Similarly, Joshua Berman's discussion of the Bible's recasting of ancient Near Eastern political thought (*Created Equal: How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008]) should be required reading for anyone seeking to apply the Bible to modern life. His chapter on Exodus (135–66) focuses on the long-known parallel between the stories of Moses and Sargon of Agade being drawn out of the water. For Berman, the Sargon story (known in a Neo-Assyrian text, but telling a tale about a ruler from the third millennium) reeks of authoritarianism: its first-person narration is typical of royal pseudo-autobiography designed to “construct an authoritarian personality” (147). By contrast, Exodus employs a third-person narrative, in which humans act with freedom while God lurks in the background. The reader approaches the text as if it were an “objective” reality, not a device for cowing him or her into submission to a dominant power. This difference, according to Berman, reveals one of many examples of the Bible's striking emphasis on a covenantal pattern of life that is far more egalitarian than anything in its environment.

For preachers, a valuable book is *Reclaiming the Imagination: The Exodus as Paradigmatic Narrative for Preaching* (ed. David Fleer and Dave Bland; St. Louis: Chalice, 2009). The essays and sermons in the book closely interact with each other to create a model of the possibilities for imaginative preaching grounded in the biblical text. By providing a forum for dialogue between scholars and preachers (and some who are both), the editors signal the importance of preaching as a mode of biblical interpretation and the centrality of the Bible, insofar as it reveals the working of the God of Jesus Christ, to the language of the church.

Finally, to return to the theology of Exodus proper, one should consider Donald Gowan's *Theology in Exodus: Biblical Theology in the Form of a Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994). More accessible to a general audience and more focused on the overall theological profile of Exodus, Gowan's volume provides ample material for reflection for preachers and Bible class teachers. The same could be said of the commentary on Exodus by Terence Fretheim in the Interpretation series (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991). Fretheim shares with numerous contemporary scholars a preference for “story” as a way of conceiving of the biblical narrative (as opposed to “history”), pointing to the key theological ideas of the book (creation, knowledge of God, images for God, liberation, worship and divine presence as well as law, covenant and identity) as pieces of a paradigm for any community worshipping the God of Israel.

Conclusions

Since the volume of literature about the book of Exodus and the history of its reception in commentary, sermon, song and visual media defies cataloguing, much less description, I have sought here to recommend a small library of books that would help readers begin the work of serious critical engagement with one of the most important works ever written. The influence of the exodus story and the book reporting it would be difficult to overestimate because some of the most fundamental assumptions about human nature—not least the very idea of a common human nature—originated there. For preachers and teachers of the work, engagement with Exodus can become an avenue to engagement with God so that, with Moses, we stand before the burning bush hearing our own life claimed for a liberating mission. Anything that helps us move to our own Horeb—and good scholarship does this—deserves our attention.

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