

# INTRODUCTION

The Exodus from Egypt remains our starting point.

—*Sigmund Freud*<sup>1</sup>

In the beginning was belief: belief in *one* God.

—*Heinrich August Winkler*<sup>2</sup>

The big bang of modernization occurred with the [ . . . ]  
exodus from the world of polytheistic cultures.

—*Aleida Assmann*<sup>3</sup>

THE BOOK OF EXODUS contains what may well be considered the most grandiose and influential story ever told. Its theme is a watershed in the history of the human race, comparable only to such momentous milestones on the road to modernity as the invention of writing and the emergence of states: the shift from polytheism to monotheism. This was an evolutionary caesura of the first importance, at least for the Judeo-Christian-Islamic world. Even if it would take the Christianization and Islamization of the ancient world to reveal the full extent of its revolutionary impact, the story told in the Book of Exodus represents its founding myth. Exodus is thus not just the founding myth of Israel but that of monotheism as such, a key constituent of the modern world. The historian Gottfried Schramm, for one, sees in the departure from Egypt the first of “five crossroads in world history.”<sup>4</sup>

To write the reception history of the Book of Exodus is therefore an impossible undertaking: its influence has been immeasurably vast, its impact all but ubiquitous. I propose instead to consider the source of that unique impact and lay bare the mythic core from which it draws its appeal. Myths lend themselves to countless retellings and revisions. They have the power to reveal new dimensions of life, to reorient human existence or even set it on a new footing, shedding light on situations and experiences that they invest with meaning. Myths are nar-

rative elements that, configured and reconfigured in various ways, allow societies, groups, and individuals to create an identity for themselves—that is, to know who they are and where they belong—and to navigate complex predicaments and existential crises. With the help of the Osiris myth, for example, the Egyptians worked through the problem of death in their culture, while Sigmund Freud understood and treated his patients' neuroses in light of the Oedipus myth.

The Book of Exodus is devoted to the two most important questions on which human minds have dwelled since time immemorial: the question of the role played by the divine in our lives and the question of who “we” are. Both questions take on a specific form in the light of the Exodus myth and they are inextricably intertwined, since who “we” are is determined largely by what God has in mind for “us.” The Egyptians appear never to have asked themselves such questions. They considered themselves not as “Egyptians” but simply as human beings, having emerged from God together with every other living thing (including deities) at the origin of the cosmos. God, for his part, has no special plan or destiny in mind for us; his sole purpose is to keep the universe on track, a task in which we humans can support him by performing religious rites. History did not appear to the Egyptians as a project structured around promises and their fulfillment, but rather as an ongoing process that had to be kept in harmony with primordial mythic patterns through cultural practice and so preserved from change. The Exodus myth, by contrast, relates how God freed the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage, singling them out from all the other peoples in order that they might jointly realize the project of a just society. A greater difference can hardly be imagined. Whereas the Egyptian myth tells a story about how the universe was created, the biblical myth of Exodus recounts how something wholly new came to be established within a world that had been created long ago. As presented in the myth, this groundbreaking new order arose in two ways: through revolution and revelation. In order to free the children of Israel, God first had to break the power of their oppressors; and in order to make them his chosen people and covenant partners in a new religion, he first had to reveal himself to them and proclaim his will.

A clear distinction needs to be made between the Exodus story and the Book of Exodus. The Exodus story goes far beyond what is dealt

with in the Book of Exodus, for without the motif of the Promised Land that story cannot yield its full meaning. The escape from Egypt can be narrated only retrospectively, from the place foreseen at the time of departure as the ultimate destination. This is a story told by those who have arrived, not by those still wandering in the wilderness; by those who have been confirmed in their possession of the new, not by those who have only been emancipated from the old. The motifs of departure and Promised Land thus already belong together in the original myth before being subjected to literary development in the second to fifth books of Moses, as well as in the Book of Joshua. In the Torah, which prefaces this “Ur-Pentateuch” with the Book of Genesis and leaves out the Book of Joshua with the advent in the Promised Land, the Exodus story was confined to the biography of Moses, whose death marks its endpoint. The Exodus story centers on the three primal motifs of departure, covenant, and Promised Land. Those are the mythic kernels from which the account of Israel’s departure from Egypt draws its transformative power across all its countless retellings. The Book of Exodus, by contrast, is restricted to the motifs of departure and covenant. It ends not with the Israelites’ entry into the Promised Land but with God’s entry into a form of symbiosis with his chosen people.

Accordingly, the Book of Exodus is split into three parts. The first part, chapters 1–15, tells the story of *liberation* from Egyptian captivity. The second, chapters 16–24, concerns the *binding* of the Israelites to the new covenant offered them by God. Interestingly, their oppression in Egypt and the religion that liberates them from it are both given the same Hebrew word here: *‘ăbōdâ* or “service.” Human service signifies oppression, divine service denotes freedom. Revelation is the overall theme that shapes both parts, however. The third part, which follows in chapters 25–40, stands in for the Promised Land, understood as the goal that inspired the children of Israel to set out from Egypt.<sup>5</sup> This concluding part of the book is also the longest, although it has enjoyed nothing like the historical influence of the other two. It describes how the Temple (or Tabernacle), priesthood, and cult were set up. In other words, it concerns the institutionalization of the covenant in the form of a new religion. It is now widely accepted that this third part was added by the Priestly Source, which collated the Books of Genesis and

Exodus into a comprehensive historical narrative toward the end of the sixth century BCE.

The Exodus story is also referred to outside the Book of Exodus in surprisingly few biblical texts. Apart from passing allusions in some of the prophets, there are a handful of psalms indicating that tales of God's saving deeds had a fixed place in the liturgy of the postexilic cult of the Second Temple. Here, two points become quite clear: these tales are commemorative acts, intended to preserve past events from oblivion by handing them down to future generations; and, in addition to the three core mythic motifs of departure, covenant, and Promised Land mentioned above, we find here a fourth: the sins of the fathers, which the chosen people had to expiate by wandering in the wilderness for forty years after making the covenant at Sinai until their descendants finally reached the Promised Land. The histories of salvation and damnation go hand in hand, the former brought to mind amid the pangs of the latter. The great liturgy recited in the interconnected Psalms 105–7 begins by recapitulating the tale of the forefathers and Joseph, invoking God's promise "to give the land of Canaan" to Abraham and his seed (105:7–24), before recalling the exodus and the plagues of Egypt. Psalm 106 continues with the parting of the Red Sea and the various pitfalls into which the ill-tempered Israelites stumbled during their years in the wilderness, culminating in the gravest sin of all: the adoption of Canaanite customs in the Promised Land, upon which God drove them out and scattered them among the peoples. Psalm 107 is then the hymn of thanksgiving offered by those whom God brought back from "out of the lands, from the east, and from the west, from the north, and from the south" (107:3).

The Exodus story thus singles out the chosen people in three ways. It distinguishes them from Egypt as the epitome of the old system, which they are enjoined to abandon definitively and unconditionally; from their Canaanite neighbors in the Promised Land, who represent a false, blasphemous religion; and from the "fathers," who remind the Israelites of their own sinful past. It is this final motif, with its dual injunction to both repudiate the "sins of the fathers" and assume collective responsibility for them, that has come to seem uniquely significant in Germany today.

Although the Exodus myth had been told considerably earlier—as allusions in Hosea, Amos, and Micah, dating from the eighth century BCE, make abundantly clear—the era of its literary elaboration and cultic institutionalization only dawned in the sixth century BCE, the period of Babylonian captivity. In particular, its great moment came with the return from exile, when “Israel” had to be reinvented as an ethnic and religious identity and established on the basis of a political, social, and religious constitution. With the help of the Exodus story, those faced with this task succeeded in creating a memory that defined them as a group, anchoring them in the depths of time while also committing them to a common future. What they were doing was more than just history-writing; they were declaring their allegiance to an identity, fashioning a collectively binding self-definition in the medium of narrative and memory. In the two forms of storytelling and lawgiving, the narrative and the normative, the Book of Exodus codifies the *one* all-transforming, truly epochal revelation in which God emerged from his inscrutable concealment—for the Jews, once and for all; for Christians and Muslims, for the first time—to manifest his will to his people, so establishing a completely new relationship to the world, to time, and to the divine.

The revelation on Sinai provides the model for all later revelations, the foundation for a new form of religion that rests on the twin pillars of revelation and covenant and can therefore be termed a “religion of revelation,” in sharp contrast to the “natural” religions that have flourished since time immemorial without reference to any such foundational event. Michael Walzer has read the Exodus tradition in its political dimension as the matrix of all revolutions;<sup>6</sup> analogously, I would like to interpret it in this book as the matrix of all revelations.

“Exodus” is not just the name given to a book in the Bible, however. It is also a symbol that can stand for any radical departure, any decampment for something entirely new and different. When Augustine, in his commentary to Psalm 64, remarks, *incipit exire qui incipit amare* (“the one who begins to love begins to leave”), he has in mind leaving behind the *civitas terrena*, the realm of worldly affairs and preoccupations, to enter the *civitas Dei*, the kingdom of God. This is not a physical movement from one place to another but rather an internal, spiritual exo-

dus: *exeuntium pedes sunt cordis affectus* (“the feet of those leaving are the affections of the heart”). Accordingly, “Egypt” refers to the mundane world where the pious dwell as strangers and suffer persecution for their faith, as recalled in the aria of a Bach cantata, sung on the second Sunday of Advent to words by Salomon Franck (BWV 70), that looks forward to Christ’s second coming: “When will the day come when we leave the Egypt of this world?” When Kant famously declares enlightenment to be “man’s exit from his self-incurred immaturity,” he is likewise drawing on the symbolism of Exodus.<sup>7</sup>

When talking about a turning point in the history of the entire human race, the idea of an “Axial Age” immediately springs to mind. The philosopher Karl Jaspers used this idea to encapsulate reflections that go back to the late-eighteenth-century Iranologist Anquetil-Duperron, the discoverer of the Zend-Avesta.<sup>8</sup> Anquetil-Duperron, recognizing that a number of movements like Zoroastrianism had arisen at roughly the same time in different parts of the ancient world, from China to Greece, spoke of a “great revolution of the human race.”<sup>9</sup> From the outset, the biblical shift to monotheism was also placed in this context. Indeed this shift, extending from the appearance of the early prophets in the eighth century (Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, Micah) to the completion of the Torah some four to five centuries later, falls neatly within the time frame of 500 BCE  $\pm$  300 years identified by Jaspers as the Axial Age. In brief, the Axial Age is marked by the discovery of transcendence. Around this time, a series of charismatic figures—Confucius, Laozi, Mencius, Buddha, Zoroaster, Isaiah and the other prophets, Parmenides, Xenophanes, Anaximander, and others—subjected traditional institutions and concepts to a radical critique on the basis of newly discovered absolute truths, which they had arrived at either through revelation or through methodical reflection.<sup>10</sup> The shift described in the Exodus story would thus present only one of many symptoms of a contemporary global development that saw humankind as a whole making a giant leap forward, as Jaspers asserts.

I take Jaspers’s Axial Age theory to be one of the great scientific myths of the twentieth century, comparable to Freud’s theory of the Oedipus complex. Like Freud’s doctrine, it has the virtue of uncovering overarching patterns that had previously gone unnoticed; but it can also—and this is the other side of the coin—go too far in its tendency

to lump together disparate phenomena under a catch-all category, overlooking important differences in the process.<sup>11</sup> The concept of the Axial Age refers to cultures and worldviews that distinguish between immanence (the this-worldly realm, home to the conditional and contingent) and transcendence (the other-worldly realm, home to the unconditional and absolute). On that basis, they tend to take a critical stance toward the world as it actually exists. Yet this is a question less of an “age” than of the presence of certain media conditions for recording intellectual breakthroughs and making them accessible to later generations. These include writing, of course, but also processes of canonization and commentary that endeavor to stabilize textual meaning. Once secured in this way, ideas can be disseminated in space as well as in time. It seems clear to me that, during the Persian period, Zoroastrianism and the pre-Socratic philosophers influenced the universalistic monotheism that was being developed in Jerusalem in the wake of the great prophets of exile, Deutero-Isaiah and Ezekiel. Yet the Exodus story, with its “monotheism of loyalty,” must be regarded as a phenomenon *sui generis*. As such, it needs to be appreciated in its specificity and not prematurely filed under the all-encompassing rubric of a global “Axial Age.” What is incontestable, at any rate, is that this story laid the foundations for a decisive shift that is entirely typical of the Axial Age. That shift is fully accomplished when the meaning of the divine covenant is expanded to cover the “kingdom of God” and the exodus from Egypt becomes the cipher for the soul’s exodus from “this world,” the *civitas terrena*, into the City of God.