
INTRODUCTION

The book of Exodus is the second book of the Hebrew Bible, but it may rank first in lasting cultural importance. It is in Exodus that the classic biblical themes of oppression and redemption, of human enslavement and divine salvation, are most dramatically and famously expressed. Many of the Bible's most famous characters and episodes are found here: Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, the burning bush, the ten plagues, the Passover, the crossing of the sea, the revelation and law-giving on Mount Sinai, the Ten Commandments, the golden calf. The story of suffering, escape, and journey through the wilderness toward the promised land was the defining narrative for ancient Israel and has maintained a central position in Western culture ever since. This book will trace that story through some of its most prominent and fascinating permutations, showing how Exodus has been adopted and adapted in numerous and often unexpected ways across space and time.

Before we begin, one important clarification is necessary. A distinction must be made between the biblical book of Exodus—the text that comes between Genesis and Leviticus and constitutes one-fifth of the canonical Pentateuch or Torah—and the Exodus story. The biblical book is but one,

relatively late, stage in the development of the Exodus story. As the first chapter below will argue, what we call the book of Exodus is a somewhat artificial delineation of material within the Pentateuch, one that comprises much, but not all, of the material that we commonly associate with the overarching narrative of the Exodus. Moreover, the biblical book, while containing the central core of the Exodus story, is among the most variegated in the Bible. It also includes poems, law codes, architectural plans, and rituals. Each of these has had its own interpretive trajectory—especially the extensive description of the tabernacle, which occupies nearly a quarter of the biblical text of Exodus and provides the foundation for, among other things, the traditional Jewish definition of what constitutes forbidden work on the Sabbath. Similarly, many of the individual episodes and characters within the story could be the subjects of their own biographies. This book cannot contain such multitudes. And, as interesting as they are, these various elements are all overshadowed in the history of interpretation by the grand narrative in which they are set.

That grand narrative—the movement from Egypt to Canaan, from oppression to freedom—extends beyond the borders of the biblical book to which it lent its name. Its themes appear outside of the book of Exodus, indeed outside of the Pentateuch altogether, and often in forms that predate the composition of the pentateuchal text. Just as the traditional nativity story performed and displayed every Christmas season is not derived from a single New Testament gospel but is a distillation, combination, and expansion of an underlying narrative, so too references to the Exodus story do not tend to reflect the exact contours of the

biblical book of Exodus. For millennia, the Exodus has been understood as an event, a tradition, a cultural memory, and a metaphor. The biblical book is itself but one literary version of the Exodus. Though it may be authoritative for some, it is neither the first nor the last word.

It is not the book of Exodus but the Exodus story that has captured the imagination of audiences and interpreters from the biblical period to the present. It is the Exodus story that this volume will be primarily concerned with—though never forgetting that it is the manifestation of the story in the biblical book that is most famous and most influential. In the following pages, we will consider the ways in which individuals and groups, in the thousands of years since the story coalesced into the form we now know, have appropriated this story to be their story, have cast themselves or others into the biblical roles, and have used the themes of this story for their various ends.

Another prefatory note about the structure of this book: In a traditional biography, we would progress in straightforward chronological order through the development of the main character from birth (or just before) to the present. Although there will be a general chronological movement to this biography, the life Exodus has led is not so easily told in a straight line. The Exodus story has been employed for a variety of purposes, across a wide range of conceptual categories: ritual, theological, ethnological, political, and more. While some are obviously earlier or later than others—the Passover Seder is separated by nearly two thousand years from liberation theology, for instance—for the most part these categories developed contemporaneously, if not simultaneously, and moved

along parallel trajectories rather than standing as points on a single interpretive line. Exodus is like a person who made a mark in multiple walks of life—political, for example, plus literary, musical, religious, and scientific—and so a purely chronological approach to a biography would be fractured and difficult to follow.

Instead, this biography will treat the life of Exodus thematically (although within broad chronological parameters). After an initial chapter describing, as any good biography should, the origin story of the subject, we will turn to the variety of uses to which the Exodus story was already being put in the biblical period, in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament (chapter 2). From there we will turn to the Exodus as ritual: the Passover in Judaism and the Eucharist in Christianity (chapter 3); to the centrality of Exodus, and particularly the Sinai event, for Jewish and Christian concepts of the law and the relationship between the two faiths (chapter 4); to the ways that the story has been taken up by communities looking to create or consolidate their identities by identifying themselves with the Israel of Exodus (chapter 5); to the prominence of the Exodus account in the civil rights movements of America (chapter 6); and finally to the development of liberation theology, a movement with social and political aims that grounds itself in the traditional story of Exodus (chapter 7).

What this book ultimately aims to demonstrate is not only the centrality of the Exodus story in so much of Western culture but its remarkable flexibility and malleability. This story of oppression and liberation, of law and covenant, of disobedience both civil and religious, has left its mark in ways both well known and largely unrecognized. With

more than two thousand years' worth of material to cover, not every aspect of Exodus's life can be discussed or even mentioned. Nevertheless, it should be apparent that few books, few stories, have had the kind of wide and lasting impact that we see in the book and story of Exodus.