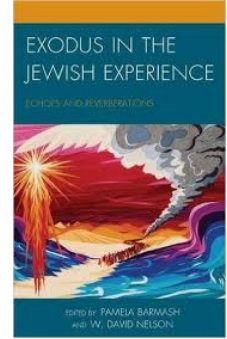


Exodus in the Jewish Experience: Echoes and Reverberations, edited by Pamela Barmash and W. David Nelson

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The biblical account of the Exodus in Jewish experience has transcended its one-time historical event, Barmash claims in the introduction (xi), and the claim is demonstrated by contributors chapter-by-chapter thereafter. This volume advances the notion that the Exodus enables Jews “to lay claim to the future” by means of engaging past narratives, in particular the Exodus story (ix). The chapters demonstrate this claim by examining, successively: the enduring transmission of the Exodus story; the continuity-shattering trauma that produces dissonance in early rabbinic texts; the liturgical iteration of the narrative as paradigmatic of hope in dark times; the Exodus story’s stimulation of social conscience regarding the plight of the poor and disadvantaged; the juxtaposition of mortality and celebration in medieval Judaism; the production of illuminated iconography in order to establish stand-alone haggadot; the transformation of myth to memory in German Jewish translations of the Exodus story, as a means to perpetually personalize historical recollection; and the transposition of desert themes to depict contemporary (re-)placement.

In chapter 1 (“Out of the Mists of History: The Exaltation of the Exodus in the Bible”), Pamela Barmash argues that the Passover tradition, said to obligate Jews to reenact the story of the Exodus in a manner meaningful to present generations, effectively transforms history into metaphor by transcending time and space: those who are present at the Passover meal were once, long ago also in Egypt. The Exodus “template” (6) “was inserted in a matrix of memory and became the matrix of memory for other events” (7). In this manner, the Exodus story becomes a universal tale for not only those who relate or are related to the original players in the narrative by ancestry, but also for all who would seek freedom from enslavement, whether physical, psychological, emotional, cultural, or spiritual—creating a “usable past by re-experiencing rather than remembering from afar” (6). Collective consciousness in combination with creative imagination gave Jews a means to evoke the excitement of escape from enslavement *en route* to a land of promise

while in actuality being forced to live anywhere but in said Promised Land centuries later.

Chapter 2 is entitled “Discontinuity and Dissonance: Torah, Textuality, and Early Rabbinic Hermeneutics of Exodus.” W. David Nelson discusses how the order of the Passover Seder contained within the Passover Haggadah finds authentication in the last tractate of the Mishnah, Pesachim (23).

In chapter 3, “The Past as Paradigm: Enactments of the Exodus Motif in Jewish Liturgy,” Richard S. Sarason argues that the Exodus narrative has remained vibrant and relevant across cultures, contexts, and generations due to its paradigmatic nature that ensures both “durability and malleability” (81) as a “model for resistance” (78), lending itself to a myriad of cultural and social issues. Many have produced a particular Passover Seder to address inequities felt from their own perspective. The *Women’s Seder*, paralleled with *The Freedom Seder*, “resonates deeply with the lived experiences of the participants and [is] reinterpreted to articulate and ritualize their perceptions of themselves and the world in which they live” (74). Past redemption within the biblical narrative transforms, with slight modification, into future hope of redemption when set alongside contemporary examples of oppression and protest. The *Humanist Haggadah* calls for inclusive language wherein “the destiny of the Jewish people cannot be separated from the destiny of all humanity ... since no one can survive alone.... Brotherhood is born of shared need and shared danger.... We can no longer be fully Jewish unless we recognize that we are also fully human” (79).

A paradox relating to halakhah is explained in the introduction and unpacked in chapter 4, “The Impact of the Exodus on Halakhah (Jewish Law),” dedicated to the impact of the Exodus on Jewish law. Barmash, in the introduction, contends that “Jews have placed Jewish law into an Exodus framework in order to comprehend and come to terms with Jewish law” (xiii). Reuven Hammer, in chapter 4, argues that the plight of the poor, sensitivity to the stranger in the land, decency in dealing with a residual reality of slavery, among several topics dealing with human societal sensibilities, lead to legislation which elevates love and generosity vis-à-vis the poor, the needy, and the stranger based on gratitude for redemption and freedom from Egyptian servitude (139). “Moreover, the Exodus was used only as the narrative structure for rabbinic law, not as a generative principle yielding specific statutes” (Barmash, xiii).

Kalman P. Bland examines “Passover and Thanatos in Medieval Jewish Consciousness,” in chapter 5. Bland argues that, during the medieval pe-

riod, personalization generalized and transformed the Passover story into a universal and trans-historical experience (159). While much can be gained by viewing Passover through various contemporary lenses such as what Abarbanel accomplished by imploring the metaphor of the seasons, the original historical and temporal trajectories cannot be ignored. Judaism customarily approaches themes in “polyphonic” manner (148), for example through hermeneutical lenses of Peshat, Remez, Derash, and Sod. No matter how derived the discussion becomes, none of these lenses precludes adherence to the terms of the original context. Mortality’s immanence and death’s deliverance are each inescapable themes in the Exodus as they are in the seasonal stages of life, whether considering the story from an Egyptian or Israelite perspective. Judaism’s internalization of the details, as noted in mystical accounts found in the Zohar, opened the narrative to a deeper exploration of spirituality whereby the metaphor of a cosmic struggle with death obtains, leaving aside emblematic symbolization of stated literary occurrences (153). Maimonides’s admonition “to rejoice and be of cheerful heart” flies in the face of the increasingly morose focus on mortality during the medieval period (154). Death experiences contained in the Exodus story were able, in a highly personalized and psychological manner, to shape contemporary response to trauma experienced in the context of Christian crusades, no less a “preoccupation with death” (159).

Prominence of the Exodus in Jewish art cannot be overstated, especially where images were added to the haggadot. Vivian B. Mann addresses this topic in chapter 6, “Observations on the Biblical Miniatures in Spanish Haggadot.” In thirteenth-century Spain, illuminated manuscripts decorated traditional biblical texts with scenes that became familiar narratives for the literate and illiterate alike. The Seder (Jewish prayer book), along with other medieval ritual publications, show-pieced Torah depictions ranging from Creation to the death of Moses with a disproportionate representation of scenes from the Exodus. As would be expected, the Passover Haggadah was also embellished with such miniature scenes. That Christian and Jewish interests resided in the production and sale of these illuminated texts may be somewhat problematized by the fact that Hebrew manuscript paintings abruptly ceased inexplicably some time prior to the pogroms of 1391 in the Jewish quarter of Barcelona and elsewhere throughout Spain (184).

Abigail E. Gillman, in chapter 7 (“From Myth to Memory: A Study of German Jewish Translations of Exodus 12–13:16”) asks, “Can a nation go from slavery to freedom *without* translation?” (191). Her question is ex-

plored with a view to setting aside the standard discussion of whether the Exodus is fact or fiction (192), in exchange for establishing a new paradigmatic lens to read the cypher by which the Exodus is communicated. Viewing the blood on the doorposts as code permits a distinction between doorpost and threshold. “In some respects, the door *does* mark the dividing line between slavery and freedom” (195). The Destroyer was able to pass over the blood-stained doors but not through them. Further translation of various elements of the Exodus narrative invites additional transformations of thematic escapes from slavery to freedom throughout subsequent generations, thus allowing “a transit point for ‘ours’ to meet ‘theirs’” (207).

In Chapter 8 (“The Desert Comes to Zion: A Narrative Ends its Wandering”), Arieh Saposnik examines the Zionist perspective that living in Diaspora can be equated to the concept of exile; the Exodus culminates only in settlement in the land of Israel (214). This principle lies at the root of Zionist thought as expressed through art and literature. Theodor Herzl, Ahad Ha’am, Boris Schatz, and David Ben Gurion interchange metaphors of the Exodus in their Zionist visionary expressions. The ambivalence of being able to successfully establish a redemptive conclusion has not been without substantial opposition. In “Ben-Gurion’s recasting of the Exodus, however, process—out of placeness—is all but expunged in his vision for Israel, where *endziel*—a longed-for being in place—is the one remaining truth” (240). From the perspective of Zionists living in Israel today, ‘redemption is at hand’ (216).

I required this book as a text for a one-term graduate course for students majoring in psychoanalysis and spiritual counselling that I team-taught with a Christian theologian and philosopher; my role was to provide Jewish perspectives and be a resource for the non-Jewish student. Throughout the term, students were required to read the text and provide critical assessment of its contents. As well, at the end of each class they wrote a brief reflection on their thoughts relating to the topics covered in the text as we explored them in detail each week. At the end of the term, we participated in a mock-Seder.

What stood out for many students was the familiarity they had with the Exodus as paradigmatic for their own life experiences. More than once they expressed identification with Jewish appropriation of translation of the Exodus and in no small measure indicated that experiences described in the text for Jews were not uncommon in their own lives.

Notwithstanding the few qualifications and criticisms embedded throughout this review, Barmash and Nelson have offered a collective work of analysis

that fills a significant gap in a number of topics related to the Exodus while effectively expressing itself in a style that informed readers can access and benefit from today whether in the university classroom, in one's home, or at one's office.

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