

Exodus and Emancipation

Preface

To readers and students of the Bible, the biblical narrative is an open book with multiple timeless messages. Through its narratives, laws, poetry, rhetoric, and prophetic visions, it touches on almost every aspect of morality and the human saga. One such drama in the Five Books of Moses, or Pentateuch, is the story of the Israelite nation's exodus from Egyptian bondage and its forty-year sojourn in the wilderness of Sinai.

This book is an integrated collection of essays that capture my reflections on the biblical description of the Exodus. It presents a new perspective on the saga of the Children of Israel by comparing and contrasting it with the African-American slave experience in the United States and the subsequent emancipation and fight for dignity and equality. The comparison is designed to enrich the reader's understanding of both experiences

I recognize that the comparison is between the proverbial apples and oranges, or better yet, a comparison of bricks of straw and mud compared with cash crops of cotton and sugar cane. The Hebrew Bible is sacred literature that was canonized over two thousand years ago. Associated with this text are long-standing oral traditions as well as hundreds of commentaries. All draw and build upon a common textual base to explore religious, moral, and philosophical issues. In contrast, the African-American experience is not centered on one narrative. It is self-reported, summarized, and analyzed in a vast array of literature written over the past two centuries. These include slave narratives, published letters, eyewitness accounts, recorded interviews of former slaves, and numerous historical, sociological, economic and political analyses of this era in American history. Despite these obvious differences in breadth and perspective, I have found that a study of African-American slavery and oppression yields important insights regarding the biblical narrative. In addition, this analysis highlights the events of the Reconstruction era that precluded African Americans from bringing closure to this part of their history.

I treat the Hebrew text as a self-contained unified entity and therefore do not explore issues associated with the historical accuracy of the Bible or authorship. The analysis of the text is supplemented by references to the Midrash, a collection of Jewish oral traditions recorded over 1500 years ago. The

principal goal of the Midrash is to highlight religious, moral, or philosophical issues even though a superficial reading seems to suggest that the midrashic literature is filling in missing historical details. Lastly, I draw on primarily Jewish biblical commentaries, both traditional and modern, that explore the subtleties of narrative and language in the Hebrew text.

Although I attempt a comprehensive analysis of the biblical text with regard to the Exodus experience, the exploration of African-American experiences is far more selective for a number of reasons. First and foremost is that there was no single common experience. The nature of slavery in the continental United States varied with time, region (the North, the Border States, the Atlantic Coast, the deep South), and slaveholder's demographic status (city dweller, small farmer, or plantation owner). In highlighting this history, my primary interest is the relevance to the biblical narrative. In so doing I present not a complete picture but rather a collage of the African-American experience of slavery and its aftermath. This collage offers a unique perspective on the biblical story told in the book of Exodus. In addition, special attention is given to the symbol of hope and national identity the Children of Israel of old offered African Americans of the nineteenth century. This development is analyzed and chronicled by Glaude in Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America.¹

Introduction

The Israelite nation was born in political slavery in Egypt. The national identity of the Israelites was forged in over two hundred years spent in the Egyptian crucible, elevated by the events of the year before and after the Exodus and refined in the forty years of sojourn in the Sinai Wilderness. The biblical narrative presents a relatively terse description of these events in which key words and phrases may be overlooked when read through a modern-day prism. Today's Western readers generally lack the perspective of having endured massive political oppression. Such a viewpoint may be gained, however, by studying the biblical narrative in light of the more recent and better-documented history of African-American slavery in the United States.²

Perception succeeds optimally by way of contrast and analogy. The human eye sees best when the object stands in sharp relief from its background. Our brains interpret what we see by comparing and contrasting the visualization with information stored in our memory. Similarly, the African-American slave experience provides a rich source of both personal narratives and historical analysis that can enhance our perception of Israelite bondage and redemption. Both peoples experienced oppression that stretched over centuries with the slave population at the time of emancipation in the 1860's roughly double that of the Israelites at the Exodus.³ However, the two groups' respective ups and downs in status occurred in reverse order. The Children of Israel started out in Egypt as welcomed guests, became estranged from the political establishment and masses and ended up as slaves. Upon leaving slavery they received instant citizenship in an emerging nation. By contrast, Africans arrived in the New World as slaves leaving behind citizenship in various nations. Upon emancipation, their status changed to strangers in the land of their birth even though official citizenship was given them a few years later. It took a hundred years to achieve de jure full citizenship and decades more to approach de facto equality.

This power of contrast and analogy continues to enrich my reading of the biblical text. The abundant details of the arrival of Africans in America and slavery's pernicious and pervasive attack on the family unit highlight, by contrast, the significance of the simple phrase that concludes the opening verse in the Book of Exodus, "They came as man and household." These words sharply differ from the individual African experience of arriving with no family unit.

The principle of analogy sharpens my understanding of the biblical description of Moses' stopping the brutal whipping of an Israelite slave. In his autobiography, Frederick Douglass depicts awakening at dawn to the shrieks of his aunt. "The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush;"⁴ Douglass called the whipping of slaves "the blood stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery." The pictures of black slaves with scarred backs that look like the mangled branches of a small bush (Illustration 1) and the narratives describing their scarred psyches add color and dimension to the understanding of the story that introduces us to Moses, the human face of the Exodus.⁵ Try to imagine how many



Illustration 1: Photograph of scars from whippings

Hebrew children awoke to the sight of their fathers being beaten and how many brothers had to stand helpless watching their brothers submit to the power of the taskmaster. Yet the biblical narrative is succinct: "He saw an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man, of his brethren." What was Moses thinking? We don't know. What was Moses feeling? The phrase "of his brethren" might tersely hint at his emotional state. Not surprisingly, Moses became a powerful and compassionate symbol of hope for the American slave, as articulated in the famous Negro spiritual "Go Down Moses." And Harriet Tubman naturally earned the sobriquet "Moses" for leading more than three hundred slaves to freedom.⁶

The biblical narrative has also helped me gain insight into the history of black slavery and its aftermath in the United States. Whatever the setting, slavery takes a terrible toll on the slave community's self-esteem and value system. The God of the Exodus unveiled on history's stage His omnipotence; He powerfully directed the Hebrew's conversion from slave to free man, from slave family to a family sharing the paschal lamb,⁷ and from a nation of individual slaves to a nation of priests, a holy nation. Many of God's deeds and commandments were designed to speed this conversion and rebuild the Hebrew slave's self-esteem. His actions to end the enslavement of one people by another established a precedent for believers to follow under the principle of *imitatio Deo*, imitation of God. Unfortunately, the American public and its government did not learn from the comprehensive approach of the God of the Exodus. The story of black emancipation in the United States lacked closure; many problems created by hundreds of

years of slavery were never addressed. As a result, African Americans continue to struggle with an inequality whose roots are in slavery but which continues to linger more than a hundred years in various forms in both the South and North.

The analogy of the histories of the Biblical Israelites and Blacks is not new. African Americans spokesmen began to publicly identify with the Israelite history towards the end of the eighteenth century. This concept became a powerful uniting image in the decades leading up to the Civil War. Abolitionists extended the comparison of Jews and blacks beyond the Biblical narrative. A number of the leading abolitionists used the history of anti-Semitism to illustrate how unfounded bias led to centuries of oppression. William E. Channing made the equation simply. "For ages Jews were thought to have forfeited the rights of men, as much as the African race at the South, and were insulted, spoiled and slain."⁸ Frederick Douglass compared the two. "For, with the single exception of the Jews, under the whole heavens, there is not to be found a people pursued with a more relentless prejudice and persecution, than are the Free Colored people of the United States." In 1845 James Russell Lowell in the Prejudice of Color wrote "Jews, who by a series of enormous tyrannies were reduced to the condition of the most abject degradation among nations to whom they had given a religious system, and who borrowed from them their choicest examples of eloquence and pathos and sublime genius. Here was and is a people remarkable above almost all others for the possession of the highest and clearest intellect, and yet absolutely dwarfed and contracted in mind and by being sternly debarred from any but the very lowest exercise of mental capacity." He noted that Jews could escape their fate by adopting the prevailing religion, an option not available to blacks who could not escape the color of their skin.⁹ Prejudice was alive and well even after emancipation when George William Curtis said that "the bitter prejudice against the colored race, which is as inhuman and unmanly as the old hatred and contempt of Christendom for the Jews."¹⁰

The contrast embodied in the title Exodus and Emancipation is the subject of this collection. This volume opens with a comparison of the two journeys into slavery and the nature of the respective slave experiences. This book goes on to explore the exodus from Egypt and the start of the transformation from slave to free man. It treats the splitting of the Sea of Reeds, the composition of the Song by the Sea and events leading up to the revelation at Mount Sinai as closing this phase of the exodus. This period is

compared to the black and white experiences during the Civil War both before and after the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation and up through 1868 and the early days of Reconstruction.

Throughout, I am extremely circumspect in trying to make direct linkages between past and present. Thousands of years have passed since the Exodus; its impact on modern Jewry is primarily through biblical narrative, commandments, and shared literary and historical roots. Over a hundred years of legal and de facto discrimination and oppression bridge and color the gap between the end of black slavery and the close of the twentieth century. It is therefore likely that the roots of the problems that have confronted and plagued the African-American community in the latter part of the twentieth century lay as much in the last hundred years' struggle for political and social equality as in the slave history of previous centuries.

Endnotes

¹ Eddie S. Glaude Jr., Exodus! Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 2000).

² For now I use the term "African American" because it is the preferred choice at the start of the twenty first century. Later, as I discuss experiences of slavery and use source material, I often use terms such as colored people, black or Negro. All are consistent with the way slaves and freemen referred to themselves. During the nineteenth century, the preferred term was "colored people" or "people of color" as evidenced by the organization NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). In fact, in the early nineteenth century the vast majority of blacks would have been offended by the term "African American," as it was linked to the proposal to send free American blacks back to Africa.

³ The census at the time of the Exodus produced a count of approximately 600,000 Israelite males between the ages of twenty and sixty. Including Israelite women and children, the total number approached two million. The 1860 census in the United States reported that the African-American population included almost four million slaves and another half million who were free. They accounted for 14.7% of the total population of the U.S.

⁴ Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself, edited with an Introduction by David W. Blight (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1993), 42.

⁵ Illustration 1 is a photograph of a former Mississippi slave named Gordon and was taken by Assistant Surgeon T.W. Mercer of the Forty-Seventh Massachusetts Infantry which was reproduced in Joseph T. Glatthaar, Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers (NY: The Free Press, 1990), after p. 242. (MOLLUS-Massachusetts Collection, U.S. Army Military History Institute)

⁶ Henrietta Buckmaster, Let My People Go: the Story of the Underground Railroad and the Growth of the Abolition Movement (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), 214-215.

⁷ The paschal lamb is the name of the sacrifice brought by the Children of Israel on Passover eve.

⁸ David A. J. Richards, Conscience and the Constitution: History, Theory, and Law of the Reconstruction Amendments (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 63.

⁹ William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease, ed., The Antislavery Argument (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 278 and 313.

¹⁰ Richards, Conscience and the Constitution, 63.