



The Exodus in American History and Culture

By Scott M. Langston

Reading the Bible in light of its original or ancient context is a useful way of understanding a biblical text. It can help illumine the history and culture from which the Bible sprang, as well as what its authors were trying to communicate. This, however, is only part of the story because those who have read the Bible throughout the centuries have usually read it in light of their own historical, social, and cultural backgrounds. People use these backgrounds, or contexts, as tools to aid them in understanding and applying the Bible.

This study of the Bible's use, influence, and impact is called **reception history**. It is a wonderful way of exploring the Bible's influence not only in religion, but also in politics, the arts, culture, society, and many other areas. What's more, it provides an excellent opportunity to learn something about a particular individual's or community's own values and culture. Additionally, when a particular passage is studied over time, its changing meanings and uses become apparent.

The book of Exodus has been exceedingly influential in American history and culture. It tells the story of the Israelites suffering as Egyptian slaves, their deliverance (known as the exodus), and their early days in the journey to the Promised Land of Canaan. It has memorable characters—Moses, Aaron, Miriam, Zipporah (Moses' wife), and the Egyptian Pharaoh and his daughter, to name a few—as well as shocking and compelling events, such as the organized killing of Hebrew baby boys, the burning bush, the sending of plagues against the Egyptians, the first Passover (the Jewish commemoration of the exodus), the crossing of the Red Sea, the giving of the Ten Commandments and other laws, the worship of the golden calf, and instructions for constructing the tabernacle. It has also produced many phrases that have worked their way into American speech, including, "Let my people go," "making bricks without straw," and "Thou shalt not . . ." American politicians, visual artists, writers, musicians, filmmakers, ministers, and ordinary individuals have found it a treasure trove.

Americans have used the exodus story for a variety of causes, but three in particular—the American Revolution (1776-83), the Civil War (1861-65), and the modern Civil Rights Movement (1940s-1970s)—illustrate common ways they have interacted with it. A couple of months after American colonists declared their independence from Great Britain, a committee composed of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams proposed a design for a national seal. It portrayed the Egyptian pharaoh leading his troops through a divided Red Sea in pursuit of the fleeing Israelites. Surrounding this scene were the words, "Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God."

Although the Continental Congress ultimately did not embrace their suggestion, it illustrates a common use of the exodus: to validate and rally groups that are confronting a stronger foe. Success against the much stronger British Empire could not be achieved without widespread support from Americans—many of whom were inclined to remain loyal to Great Britain or to be neutral—as well as military, financial, and political aid from other nations. Jefferson, Franklin, and Adams used the exodus to frame the rebellion as an act of obedience to God, thus reassuring others of its pure motives and ultimate success.

Yet while rebellious Americans were using the exodus against the British, others were using it against another tyrant—American slave owners. American slaves before, during, and after the Revolution used the exodus in much the same way as did white Americans who fought against the British. Whether it was spirituals such as “Go down, Moses” or “Oh Mary, Don’t You Weep,” or sermons¹ such as one given in 1775 by a slave named David in which he assured his audience that God would deliver the slaves just as he had delivered the Israelites from Egyptian slavery, African Americans encouraged themselves and opposed their more powerful masters by looking to the exodus.

In the decades following the Revolution, slavery, as well as states’ rights, continued to be among the most controversial issues stirring the country. They finally exploded into the Civil War, and once again Americans—white, black, North, and South—invoked the exodus. Its use by African Americans and white northerners is well known, but white southerners also used it to encourage and support seceding from the United States. While slaves sang their spirituals in opposition to southern slavery, southerners heralded the South in songs such as “The Happy Land of Canaan” and poems like Henry Timrod’s, “Ethnogenesis,” expressing confidence that God would raise up a Moses to deliver them from northern tyranny. Other southerners, like the Presbyterian minister Benjamin Morgan Palmer, asserted that “the heart of our modern Pharaoh is hardened,” referring to Abraham Lincoln’s efforts to prevent southern states from leaving the Union. Northerners countered with songs like “Our Lincoln’s Act Immortal,” casting Lincoln as a modern Moses.

After the Civil War, Americans continued using the exodus. It, for instance, appeared prominently during the modern Civil Rights movement, especially in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s speeches. In 1954 he compared the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision to desegregate public schools to the Red Sea’s parting. Expressing sentiments similar to those found on the proposed national seal, King said, “Evil in the form of injustice and exploitation cannot survive.” Less well known, however, is Malcolm X’s 1971 declaration that white America was a “modern American House of Bondage” destined to experience the same fate as the Egyptians. He identified the Nation of Islam’s leader, the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, with Moses, something many white Americans found unthinkable.

¹ The reference to this event comes from Sylvia Frey’s book, “Water From the Rock: Black Resistance in a Revolutionary Age” (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 62-63.

These uses demonstrate how the exodus has inspired, given hope, and encouraged opposition by various American groups. Yet they also point out how Americans have differed when identifying contemporary Israelites and Egyptians. They have associated the Israelites with Americans in general, and southerners and African Americans, in particular, while portraying the British, slave owners, northerners, southerners, and white Americans as Egyptians. Often these identities co-existed, as during the mid-nineteenth century when slaves struggled against southerners who were also struggling with northerners; the North and South were portrayed as both Egypt and the Promised Land.

When teaching about Exodus' reception history, uses like these encourage consideration of how and why certain groups interpret the exodus the way that they do. Most students will readily recognize how the South or Great Britain might be viewed as pharaoh or as Egypt, but contemplating Abraham Lincoln or the North or the United States as oppressors can generate interesting discussions about biblical texts and the communities that use them. It can also bring to light oppressive tendencies not readily apparent or overlooked in revered figures and reveal how a group can act simultaneously as oppressed and oppressor. White Americans revolted against the British pharaoh, yet acted as pharaoh to their slaves. Southerners felt oppressed by the North and wanted to establish their Canaan by separating from the Egypt of the United States, yet they enslaved African Americans and created an Egypt for them.

This tendency of Americans to act as oppressed and oppressor is not new or unique, but is rooted in their colonial heritage. Most Americans have some notion that Europeans came here seeking religious freedom. This, in part, is true, and some who came for religious reasons characterized their journey as leaving the Egypt of Europe for the Canaan of the New World. Yet establishing a New World Canaan also created a New World Egypt. One sixteenth-century Spanish Franciscan characterized the conquistador, Hernando Cortés, as a modern-day Moses sent by God to conquer and deliver “innumerable heathens” (Native Americans) from evil and idolatry. It's hard to imagine that his victims would have thought of Cortés' actions as liberating. One contemporary Native American scholar has even asserted that an exodus usually leads to a conquest.

Americans, however, have not exclusively used the exodus in struggles against others. They have often turned to it to bring about healing and unity. Dawn Karima Pettigrew, a Creek/Cherokee writer, uses the exodus in her short story, “Manna and Quail,” to express a Creek/Cherokee girl's journey toward reconciliation with herself and her family. The girl, whose name is Manna, lives among the Diné (Navajo) in Gallup, New Mexico, having come there to escape her past. In a series of events portrayed as the burning bush, pillar of cloud, and pillar of fire, Manna eventually starts the journey to Canaan—her home and family in Cherokee, North Carolina. The exodus thus represents a journey toward personal and family healing. In a similar vein, the 2005 CD, *Let My People Go! A Jewish & African American Celebration of Freedom*, combines songs and readings from the Passover Seder and the Civil Rights Movement. Here, the exodus provides a common bond for American Jews and African Americans.

There are several benefits in using American history and culture to teach about the exodus. Students can learn how and why different groups responded to significant movements in American history. They can identify and trace various traditions of use, seeing how certain factors shaped these understandings, and then explain modern uses in terms of their historical development. They can also contemplate how the form in which the exodus is expressed (for example, song, short story, polemic) affects its meaning. Through these kinds of activities students will begin to see the Bible not merely as an ancient text, but as an influential force in American history and culture.

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Glossary

Reception history, the study of the use, influence, and impact of the Bible. It focuses on the many ways individuals and communities throughout the centuries have understood and used biblical words, passages, events, characters, and books.

For Further Reading

Scott M. Langston, *Exodus Through the Centuries* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries) (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

John F. A. Sawyer, *A Concise Dictionary of the Bible and its Reception* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

Dawn Karima Pettigrew, "Manna and Quail" in *Writing the Cross Culture: Native Fiction on the White Man's Religion*, ed. James Treat (Golden, CO: Fulcrum, 2006).

Library of Congress American Memory Website, <http://memory.loc.gov>. Many of the examples mentioned in this essay can be found on this website.