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# THE EXODUS NARRATIVE:

# POLITICAL REVOLUTION OR PARTICULAR REVELATION?

**Lisa Sari Dushkin**

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Ordination

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Referee, Professor Alan Cooper

## DIGEST

The Israelite liberation from Egypt represents a landmark and a crucial turning point in Biblical history. The Israelites were redeemed and a covenant, which formally recognized the chosenness of Israel, was established. The liberation story tells of a God who acts in history, freeing the Israelite slaves. According to Jewish tradition, however, liberation from Egypt can not be evaluated independently from the covenant. The Israelites were freed in order to receive the covenant at Mt. Sinai. Therefore, the Exodus story includes both liberation and covenant. Exodus chapters 1-24 are thus considered to be a cohesive, inseparable narrative.

Yet, the exodus is not a uniquely Jewish text. There are Christian theologians who understand the exodus story not in terms of the significance of the covenantal agreement described in Exodus chapters 19-24, but rather place great emphasis on the redemption story described in the first seventeen chapters of Exodus. For these biblical interpreters, the redemption narrative is a paradigmatic freedom text independent of the covenant and God's promise at Sinai.

The respective hermeneutics of the liberation story lead not only to different conclusions about the nature of God, the covenant, and the purpose of the liberation, but also have differing implications for contemporary praxis.

The intention of this thesis is to examine Jewish and Christian interpretations of the Israelite liberation (Exodus 1-17) from Egypt and to explore how these interpretations are manifest in contemporary praxis. In Latin American countries, for example, Catholic liberation theologians have interpreted the exodus event as the paradigmatic freedom text. From the exodus story, they see that God is on the side of the poor and oppressed.

Liberation theology is a prime example of contemporary theology in action. Jews may also develop a Jewish theology of liberation, recognizing both the uniqueness and the universal aspects of the liberation story. A Jewish liberation theology is a theology of action and sacred deed.

***I have heard the moaning of the Children of Israel whom Egypt oppresses and I have remembered My covenant.***
Exodus 6:5

*To the memory of my teacher and friend*

*Peter R. Knauss*

To guide a pupil into the promised land, he must have been there himself....What we need more than anything else is not textbooks but textpeople. It is the personality of the teacher which is the text that the pupils read; the text that they will never forget.—A.J. Heschel

I am blessed to be part of a caring and supportive family. I am grateful to my parents, brother, grandparents and great-grandparents(z"l). Their love and care has formed and guided my heart and soul.

I am indebted to my teacher Dr. Alan Cooper. He advised this project with scholarship, patience, and encouragement.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

## HERMENEUTICS OF LIBERATION AND COVENANT

The Israelite liberation from Egypt represents a landmark and a crucial turning point in Biblical history. The Israelites were redeemed and a covenant, which formally recognized the chosenness of Israel, was established. The liberation story tells of a God who acts in history, freeing the Israelite slaves. According to Jewish tradition, liberation from Egypt can not be evaluated independently from the covenant.[1] For the Israelites were freed in order to receive the covenant at Mt. Sinai. Therefore, the Exodus story includes both liberation and covenant. Exodus chapters 1-24 are thus considered a cohesive, inseparable narrative.

Yet, the exodus is not a uniquely Jewish text. There are Christian theologians who understand the exodus story not in terms of the significance of the covenantal agreement described in Exodus chapters 19-24, but rather place great emphasis on the redemption story described in the first seventeen chapters of Exodus. For these biblical interpreters, the redemption narrative is a paradigmatic freedom text independent of the covenant at Sinai.

[1] Rabbinic commentators note that the primary importance of the exodus event is that it allowed the Israelites to receive the covenant. See below, chapter two.

The respective hermeneutics of the liberation story lead not only to different conclusions about the nature of God, the covenant, and the purpose of the liberation, but also have differing implications for contemporary praxis.

In this thesis I intend to examine Jewish and Christian interpretations of the Israelite liberation (Exodus 1-17) from Egypt and to explore how these interpretations are manifest in contemporary praxis.

To begin this investigation of the liberation story, theories of biblical redaction and criticism need to be addressed and analyzed. For the context and environment in which the text is read directly effects its perceived meaning and interpretation. The written word can bear interpretation long after its creation, and in contexts unimagined by its creator. In his book, Interpreting the Pentateuch, Sean McEvenue writes, "Once a text is published its umbilical cord to the historical author is cut. The text itself is preserved and reproduced at will, and in a sense, it becomes timeless. The text then means whatever the reader understands, regardless of any original sources or intentions, or contexts." [2]

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[2] Sean McEvenue, Interpreting the Pentateuch (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1990), p. 17-18.

Indeed, while there have been many attempts to discover the original meaning and intention of the biblical authors or editors, conclusive evidence is elusive. However, scholars have developed various critical methodologies in the hope of gaining insight into authorial or editorial intention and the original meaning of the text.

The Bible may be read in many different ways: as a literary work, an historical document, a philosophical or theological treatise, for example. Some of those readings may be congruent with the original intended meaning and some may be far removed. McEvenue suggests that the ancient text must be studied with a discriminating eye, using "historical-critical methodology, as that it is the only means we have of getting beyond our own ideas to really read the intent of a text from another era."[3]

A single mode of critical investigation is inadequate for achieving insight into the historical and contemporary relevancy of the Bible in general and the exodus narrative in particular. In order to gain a critical understanding of the exodus story, I will apply several

[3] Ibid., p. 152-153.

different critical methods, including historical criticism, redaction criticism, and literary criticism.

As part of this project, I will undertake a critical examination of Exodus chapters 1-17 focusing on an analysis of the connection, if any, between the liberation event and the receiving of the covenant at Mount Sinai in chapters 19-24. Does the Sinai experience provide the rationale for the Israelite liberation from slavery? On the other hand, is the covenant at Sinai a secondary addition to the liberation narrative? What historical and literary evidence exists for reading the exodus story as a unified narrative, with a beginning, middle, and end? Alternatively, must we see the final form of the Book of Exodus as the product of a complex series of redactions, incorporating originally separate stories of enslavement, liberation and covenant-making. Answers to these and other questions give the reader a better understanding of the text, and perhaps increased knowledge about ancient Israel. A firm grasp of the issues also allows the reader to interpret the text based on a more accurate particular understanding of the author's or editor's intentions.

Exodus and Sinai

Of all critical questions, the issue of the literary-historical connection between the liberation and Sinai events is of crucial importance. Linking the Sinai pericope and the liberation from Exodus, for example, has direct theological implications. Some view the liberation/Sinai experiences as a single, continuous account, maintaining that the Israelites were freed from Egypt in order that they might receive the covenant from God at Mt. Sinai. If, however, one chooses to view the Sinai and the exodus events as independent events, the liberation from Egypt must take on a different meaning with wholly different theological implications. Without the covenant, the liberation is an isolated act of divine redemption.

Gerhard Von Rad, a mid-20th century theologian, concludes that the Sinai and Liberation stories originally were separate and distinct. He interprets the Israelite liberation from Egypt as God's response to an oppressed people requiring freedom from bondage. God freed the Israelites not because of *who* they were, but because they were people enslaved and in trouble.[4] A redemptive God heard

[4] G. Von Rad, "The Form-Critical Problem of the Hexateuch", *The Problem of the Hexateuch and other Essays*, E.T. Translated by Trueman Dicken quoted by E. W. Nicholson in Exodus and Sinai in History and Tradition (Virginia: John Knox Press, 1973), p. 20ff.

their cries. According to this interpretation, the exodus event is little more than the characteristic action of a powerful God who frees the oppressed. The liberation, therefore, stands as a paradigmatic act carried out by God for the purpose of redeeming the enslaved.

This act of divine intervention is independent of subsequent actions taken by God. The liberation, in this view, did not occur so that the Israelites could meet God at the Mountain. Rather, after the exodus event, a free people met their liberator. The Sinai event, the attaining of the Laws and the official formation of the Israelite community, is a distinct and separate event in Jewish history.

The exodus and Sinai stories reflect different historical circumstances, and also describe different aspects of the same God. According to Von Rad, "The exodus tradition bears witness to the redemptive purpose of God revealed to Israel in its travels form Egypt to Canaan. It is a 'redemptive history'. The Sinai tradition testifies to the divine justice, revealed to the nation and made binding upon it: it is apodictic law." [5]

While the liberation is a redemptive act of God, the Sinai pericope features a divine revelation that is the basis for a covenantal

[5] Ibid., p. 6.

relationship between God and God's people. According to Von Rad, it "affords no place to the redemptive acts of God in the Exodus and wanderings.... In each case we are dealing with material of quite a different kind."[6]

While some scholars emphasize the importance of the redemptive act in the exodus story, others consider the Sinai covenant to be at the heart of the narrative. In the Sinai pericope, God is not the Universal Liberator, but a partner with whom a sacred agreement with a particular people is fashioned for all times. The formulation and sealing of the relationship between God and the Israelites which occurred at Sinai is, according to many, the formative event of the Israelite people. It is the covenant, not the exodus that becomes the foundation of the ancient Israelite experience. Von Rad notes the centrality of the Sinai covenant for Israelite religion and observes that one would expect the Sinai pericope to be omnipresent in the biblical text.

Contrary to this expectation, Von Rad ascertains that in the early creedal "confession of faith" of Deuteronomy 26:5b-9, reference

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[6] Ibid., p. 5.

to the Sinai pericope is noticeably absent. This passage, according to Von Rad, is a formulaic description of the development of the Israelite community and its relationship to a redeeming God:

> My father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. We cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. The Lord freed us from Egypt by a might hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. [7]

The fact that there is no mention of or reference to the formal covenant at Sinai is tremendously significant. [8]

Why, if Israel is professing its history and relationship with God, is the moment at Sinai not revisited? The creed mentions only the liberation and appears disconnected from other aspects of the ancient Israelite experience. This disconnection prompts Von Rad and others to question the centrality of the covenant in both Israelite history and biblical theology.

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[7] The Tanakh (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985), p. 314.
[8] Nicholson, p. 2.

Ernest Nicholsòn disagrees with Von Rad's emphasis on the absence of reference to Sinai in Deuteronomy 26:5b-9. This absence, according to Nicholson, is not due to the historical distinctiveness of the Exodus and Sinai events. Rather, the deuteronomic authors regard the traditions and events "behind them [as] interrelated and historically connected."[9] The Israelites understand that they cried to a God who rescued *them*. God chose to hear and to redeem the Israelites. Although the Sinai moment might have been missing in the retelling of historical Israelite experience in this particular deuteronomic passage, the covenant is integral to Israelite history. The absence of explicit reference to Sinai in the creedal statement of Deuteronomy is not as significant as Von Rad alleges.

Nicholson suggests that the Exodus event was followed by the land settlement "which was added to the idea of the Patriarchs and wandering in the wilderness. Sinai became the last major theme to be added."[10] Martin Noth agrees and says that historically, the liberation moment was what captured the excitement and memory of

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[9] Ibid., p. 23.
[10] Ibid., p. 17.

the Israelites. The Sinai tradition was added to the narrative later, when time had allowed the excitement and magnitude of the crossing of the Red Sea to settle in the memories of the people. Noth states that the deliverance from Egypt had a "more lively and immediate memory than the divine appearance on Sinai, which was only transmitted within the framework of a regular religious observance."[11]

Similarly, while A. Weiser agrees that the covenant is an event that is of supreme significance in Israelite history, the lack of reference in the creedal passage is due to the particular nature of the historical event. Sinai was not merely an event; it was the foundation of the relationship between Yahweh and the chosen people. The passage thus is not merely an historical account of the Israelites; it is an acknowledgment of a God who redeemed the chosen people.

Like Von Rad and Noth, Julius Wellhausen believes that the Sinai pericope and covenant material came from a relatively late stage of biblical redaction. Citing the narratives that occur both immediately before and after the arrival at Sinai (Exodus 16 with Num. 11, and Exodus 17 with Num. 20), Wellhausen finds that the

[11] Ibid., p. 19.

Israelite journey "to Sinai and the giving of the law there, beginning at Exodus 19 and continuing to Numbers 10, was only secondarily imposed upon this earlier and historical tradition...."[12] It was only after the rise of the Israelite State that the Sinai event was placed into the account. According to Wellhausen, the great prophets placed emphasis on morality and social justice in their messages to the people. The Sinai pericope, however, represents a codification of law that is both subsequent to the prophetic teachings, and less vital in religious significance. God's covenant with the Israelite people was now accompanied by a panoply of laws that they were required to obey. These laws were understood to be the covenantal relationship with God.

Although Von Rad, Wellhausen, and other biblical scholars might have different scholarly approaches to the biblical text, the conclusion that the Sinai and liberation events did not occur in the same historical framework of the text is a common denominator. For they agree that the exodus and Sinai events are historically independent, and separate streams of tradition.

[12] Quoted in E.W. Nicholson, God and His people (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 4.

Rejecting Von Rad's emphasis on Deuteronomy 25:5b-9, A. Weiser believes that the Exodus and Sinai events belonged together as part of one and the same cultic festival in ancient Israel, going back to Mosaic times. Similarly, G. E. Mendenhall believes that the traditions of the deliverance from Egypt and of the events on Sinai were connected at a very early date under the influence of an old covenant-form going back to the pre-Mosaic period.[13] Mendenhall notes that the covenant brought different groups of people together into a single unit, a unit with a common history.

Noth also sees that the Israelites were not one community until the moment they stood together at Sinai. According to his amphictyony theory, those who were liberated from Egypt where not one nation or one people, but rather were members of different tribes. It was only after the liberation—when reflection on shared experience could take place—that the liberated peoples formed a united community. At Sinai, the various tribal units formed a single community that shared a common history. Although unrelated to one another during slavery, they were united by their common past. People who struggle together form close ties and relationships with

[13] Ibid., p. 45.

one another. Servitude unites people even if they are not blood relations. Therefore, after the liberation from slavery, the various tribes grew together in loyalty to God. They began to merge as one at the mountain and became, according to Noth, an 'am—a people only after the settlement.

The Exodus at its most fundamental level is about the redemption of oppressed peoples. The oppressed cried out and God heard their call. Once freed, they met God again at the Mountain, formed a covenant with God, and became a free people bound to be partners with God.

The sacred redemptive acts do not end with Exodus event or the revelatory event at Mt. Sinai. Rather the redemption and revelation culminate with the fulfillment of the divine promise of settlement in the Promised Land.

Covenant

Israel had a special relationship with God. God made a promise to Abraham and the following generations that the people Israel would be given the land of Canaan (Ex. 6:4) and unlike all other nations, Israel alone had an agreement with God: a covenant. God would rescue and redeem the Israelites slaves and they would

become God's people, and He, their God (6:7). The event at which the covenantal agreement took place reflects the idea of the Chosenness of Israel as God's people (see 19:4-6). In this view, the covenant between God and Israel is a demonstration of loyalty. God chose Israel and had to redeem them in order to fulfill His promise. God redeemed the Israelites because of who they were, not because of the oppression they experienced under Pharaoh in Egypt.

According to Mendenhall and Gary A. Herion, a "covenant is an agreement enacted between two parties in which one or both make promises under oath perform or refrain from certain actions stipulated in advance....It is a major metaphor used to describe the relation between God and Israel (the People of God)."[14] We read in the biblical text that God called the people of Israel, who were gathered at the base of Mt. Sinai. The people heard God's demands of them, they agreed saying, "we will do and we will hear", and a covenant—a berit was established. A relationship between God and the Israelites was formed and sealed, for all eternity.

[14] G.E. Mendenhall and Gary A. Herion, "Covenant," Anchor Bible Dictionary, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992) p. 1179.

As in the debate about the historical connection between the exodus and Sinai events, several schools of thought exist concerning when and how the biblical covenant was created. One school understands the covenant to have been created at the time of Moses, in other words, at the beginning of the history of the ancient Israelites. As such, it was an adaptation of the Late Bronze Age suzerainty treaty forms. Others disagree, noting that the covenant appears similar in characteristics to the Iron Age oath treaties. A third group questions the influence of the treaty forms on the Sinai covenant. The dating of the covenant becomes important when we examine its relationship to the liberation event.

A covenant consists of a formal agreement between two unequal partners. Each participant comes to the covenant with different requests and desires of the other. The format of the contract is either literary or oral, and the sacred agreement is ratified with some type of ritual signifying the binding nature of the covenant.

Whether or not one views the covenant as a direct replica of the ancient Near Eastern vassal treaty, the Mosaic covenant and the Hittite vassal treaties do share similar characteristics. Those who see the Sinai covenant as an example of a Late Bronze Age treaty argue

that there are various Late Bronze Age elements in the Sinai Covenant. The Hittite treaty form was contemporary with the origins of the Israelite history (c.1400-1200 B.C.E.).

The characteristic Late Bronze Age treaty begin with an identification of the Covenant Giver. Then we find a historical prologue where the King details his past beneficent deeds so that the vassal is obliged to be obedient. The treaty thus allows for a formal relationship between King and vassal. The King bestows acts of beneficence upon his people and in return, the people who are grateful for the king's deeds are obligated to respond with loyalty. There are stipulations involved between king and vassal. It was common to use if...then clauses, making known rewards, punishments, and expectations. The document might include provisions for placement of written copies, as well as instructions for public reading. The public reading of a treaty took place so that that the vassal and the entire community heard and were aware of what the agreement. Upon hearing the agreement, they were bound to it. There was also a list of witnesses to the treaty. These third parties were deities or defied elements of the natural world. All gods relevant to both parties were called upon as witnesses. These supernatural

witnesses helped to ensure that the vassal would not forget or neglect his duties to the king. Invoking the name of a deity gave the king an additional advantage over the vassal. The deity was a witness to the blessings and curses, rewards and punishments bestowed on the people.

Each treaty had blessings and curses, which served to inform the public of the consequences for not following the stipulations of the covenant. The treaty was then upheld with a ratification ceremony, which was often associated with the sacrifice of an animal. The final aspect of the treaty involved a list of curses. As a sacred document, the treaty was stored in the Temple, a public domain.

Noticing structural similarities between the treaty and the covenant, some scholars note that the ancient Near Eastern treaty influenced the covenant. Like the Hittite treaty, the covenant at Sinai begins with the identification of the covenant giver– God. We read, "I am the Lord Your God who led you out of Egypt". The historical prologue in the covenant has been fused together in the two forms of the Decalogue which is preserved in both Exodus 20: 1-15 and Deuteronomy 6: 1-26, respectively. Although the entire structure of the Sinai covenant represented continuity with age-old patterns of

thought, the covenantal reference to a specific deity and mention of the historical event are a unique aspect to Israel.

Yet, despite the similarities of the prologue and introduction, some scholars argue that other, more significant, elements of the Late Bronze Age treaty formula are missing from the Covenant at Sinai. For this reason, Ernest Nicholson and D.J. McCarthy reject the notion that the Sinai covenant was modeled after Hittite treaties.

Nicholson and McCarthy do not see the covenant stemming from the Late Bronze Age treaty for several reasons. Firstly, they believe Exodus 19 has a different style and character from that of the historical prologue written in the ancient Near East treaties. Secondly, the promises and threats in Exodus 23:20-33 are not strictly related to the preceding laws, as in the Hittite treaty, but rather are concerned with obedience to the angel who is to lead the people into Promised Land.[15] In addition, chapter 23 in Exodus is most likely a secondary addition to the pericope. Lastly, the method of ratification of the covenant as stated in Exodus 24:1-11 is foreign to the treaties. In Exodus 24:9-11 the covenant is ratified with a meal,

[15] Chapter 23:20-23 is most likely a secondary addition to the pericope, linking it to 19:2-4.

while in the Hittite treaties, the ratification usually took the form of an animal sacrifice without any mention of partaking in a meal.

Nicholson asks: even if Israel were familiar with the suzerain-vassal relationship, would it seem to be an apt analogy for their relationship with God? For example, vassals did not love those to whom they were subservient. Furthermore, the participants or partners in the treaty were typically those whom the King had overpowered. The vassals in the treaties certainly did not receive or benefit from being segullah (chosen).[16] Nicholson believes that any similarity between the Sinai pericope of the Decalogue and Hittite treaty texts is merely superficial.

In their discussion of the Mosaic covenant, Mendenhall and Herion state that the inquiries of Nicholson, McCarthy and others are faulty when they attempt to dissociate the Mosaic covenant from the Hittite treaty. For one can not "[attempt] to draw a historical conclusion from an observation about mere literary forms." [17]

Those who see close similarity between the covenant and the ancient near eastern treaties note that there are "substantive links

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[16] Nicholson, God and His People, p. 78.
[17] Mendenhall and Herion, p. 1184.

between the ideological matrix of those Late Bronze treaties and the range of biblical concepts associated with the Sinai covenant relationship."[18]

The similarities include the ratification ceremony of the Hittite treaty as exemplified in Exodus 19:8, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do!" and again in Exodus 24:3, "Moses went and repeated to the people all the commands of the Lord and all the rules; and all the people answered with one voice, saying, 'All the things that the Lord has commanded we will do!'" Following the exodus narrative, in Joshua 24, we find a narrative description of a covenant enactment. Again, the people accept the covenantal agreement saying, "We too will serve the Lord, for He is our God" (Joshua: 24:18).[19]

Despite his rejection of the notion that the covenant is modeled after the Late Bronze Age treaty, McCarthy does note a basic similarity between the treaty and the Israelite covenant. For in both cases, there are provisions imposed under oath with a deity as witness. Also, in each treaty/covenant curses represent the fate of the transgressor. McCarthy found evidence of a gradual

[18] Ibid. p. 1186.
[19] The Tanakh, p. 375.

development from an older notion of the covenant, "centering on ritual (Exodus 24:1-11), "to one in which a covenant made by verbal affirmation and pledge comes to the fore and which in turn was followed by a covenant understood and made after the manner of the suzerainty treaties."[20] McCarthy continues and cites various treaty-like ideas that may be found in Deuteronomy 4:44-26:19.

Mendenhall, on the other hand, believes that the Hittite treaty form is found within the Israelite covenant. He cites Exodus 19:1-24:1, particularly the Decalogue in Exodus 20, a prime example. Yet, McCarthy notes, the "text in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5—lacks curses and blessings formulae which were a constant feature of the treaties."[21]

Many of those who see the biblical covenant as having nothing more than coincidental similarities with the near eastern treaty, agree, nevertheless, that the "context of the Sinai covenant was that of an extremely traumatic period in the history of the then civilized world, namely the transition from the Late Bronze age to the Early Iron Age (1250-1150 bc.)"[22]

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[20] Nicholson, God and His People, p. 60.
[21] Ibid., p. 68.
[22] Mendenhall and Herion, p. 1186.

If the Sinai covenant and the Late Bronze Age Hittite treaty are not from a common model, might the Sinai covenant be related to Iron Age Loyalty Oaths? Like the Mosaic covenant, the Iron Age Loyalty Oaths have a historical prologue and blessings or expressions of gratitude for the provided benefits. Loyalty oaths were made to the King, or the superior military power with curses and punishments put forth as consequences for not fulfilling the stated agreement. Additionally, these oaths contained a preamble, a note about whom loyalty was owed to, invocation of deities, and listing of acts of commission and omission that bring about curses.

The covenant, no matter what oath or treaty came before it, represents a fundamental aspect of Israelite religion. As Nicholson states, "the development of Israelite religion from the earliest stages of its history in Canaan was unavoidably and necessarily shaped in significant respects by the religious thought-world and institutions of its environment."[23] Yet, the covenant is still relevant in the lives of Jews today. We can look beyond the source of the document and recognize its deep theological implications.

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[23] Nicholson, God and His People, p. 196.

Ernest Nicholson suggests that the covenant was developed to meet specific theological needs which arose at a relatively late time in Israel.[24] The covenant allowed the Israelites to rid themselves of any attachment to an old order. After meeting God at the Mountain, they entered a new Land and were able to form a new community with a new rules and government and identity. The covenant at Sinai allowed the Israelites to establish themselves as a People, a nation with allegiance to One God. Israelite self-definition was sealed with the covenant. They belonged to one God and in turn would only obey, follow, and worship one God. The covenant is not merely a historic event. It is a meeting with God and a formulation of a formal arrangement with the Holy One. The people accept God and in turn receive rewards (and punishments) from God.[25] Aware that God chose them, the Israelites became "people of a transcendent God."[26]

The Covenant formally established the monotheism of the Israelites in an era of polytheism. The course of religious history and

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[24] Ibid., p. 57.
[25] Nicholson, Exodus and Sinai in History and Tradition, p. 34.
[26] Mendenhall and Herion, p. 1187.

thought was thus shaped by the covenantal agreement between a God and His people.

However, historians such as Martin Noth see the covenant not as a theological idea but as an institution "with a definable function in ancient Israelite society and religion."[27] The covenant, like the ancient Near Eastern Hittite treaty, allowed for the establishment of a new theology that also created a new cultural and political system. The covenant establishes the relationship between God and creation, yet it also provides boundaries and guidelines for the contract partner with God. Rules and regulations as well as rewards and punishments are stated in order that the society function and live according to the stipulations, promises, blessings and curses of the holy covenant.

The origins and date of the Sinai covenant become important guides to understanding the exodus story. For if the covenant was a secondary addition to the story, written at a different time and place, then the focal point becomes the freeing of the oppressed, not the covenant. The dating of the Sinai covenant has an affect on whether or not the exodus and Sinai events were connected in history. Particular interpretation of the exodus and its relationship to the

[27] Nicholson, God and His People, p. 33.

covenant is thus related to one's own understanding of the dating of the covenant.

The covenant, whether historically bound to the liberation from Egypt or not, is about the relationship between God and the people. There are those who say that the liberation event occurred so that the Israelites might reach the mountain and establish a covenant with God. Conversely, some say that say God released the slaves from Pharaoh because God hears the cries of the oppressed, without regard for the covenant relationship.

As biblical investigation, like all critical inquiry, is subject to personal bias and error, one's opinion regarding the historic connection of the exodus and Sinai event relates to one's own theological understanding of the exodus narrative.

## RABBINIC COMMENTARY ON THE EXODUS NARRATIVE

At its core, the book of Exodus is a text that describes a developing relationship between God and the Children of Israel. It is the book of Moses in which the reader witnesses the birth of a nation and the creation of a society dedicated to serving God in return for the divine gifts of grace and protection.

Creation of the community of Israel begins in Exodus with God's call to Moses and the sacred promise of deliverance and guidance. God calls the slaves "My people", and when the Israelite slaves are redeemed, the reader is witness to the official formation of the Community of Israel. The People become a community dedicated to serving God and the berit, the covenant, is established.

Through the extensive exodus narrative, God's presence is both explicitly and implicitly made known. Whether through the agency of his prophet Moses or performing miraculous wonders on his own, God, beginning with the second chapter of Exodus, is always "with and in the midst of His people Israel." [28]

Exodus details the Children of Israel's gradual acceptance of an all-powerful, omnipotent, benevolent, and caring God. Beginning with

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[28] John I. Durham, World Book Commentary (Waco: Word Books, 1987), p. 3.

an enslaved and oppressed people forced to accept the yoke of Pharaoh and ending with a free people dedicated to service of God, the book of Exodus, particularly chapters 1-19, is "a literary construct fusing saga and history."[29]

The narrative describes the transformation of thousands of slaves into free human beings serving One God. It is a history and account of a particular people's relationship to the Divine. The book of Exodus is the "foundational biblical declaration that whatever else [God] may be, God is first of all a God at hand, a God with his people, a God who rescues, protects, guides, provides for, forgives, and disciplines the people who call him *their* God and who call themselves *his* people." [30] The Exodus is *the* event that unites Israel. Martin Buber notes that it "was the Exodus and not at Egypt that the people come into existence."[31]

The book of Exodus may be divided into three sections. The first section, consisting of chapters 1:1-18:27, concerns the liberation from slavery in Egypt. The covenant is then formally established in chapters 19:1-24:18. Finally, the tabernacle is created in chapters

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[29] Michael Fishbane, "The Prologue to the Exodus Cycle," in Modern Critical Interpretaions, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), p. 60.
[30] Ibid., p. xxiii.
[31] Martin Buber, "Holy Event (Exodus 19-27)" in Bloom, p. 46.

25:1-40:38. For the purposes of this paper, only the first seventeen chapters of Exodus are examined. These particular chapters contain the liberation story that is the primary focus of this research project.

While the primary purpose of this chapter is to understand the liberation and its significance in Jewish thought, one cannot study the impact of the exodus event upon Jewish thought and practice without acknowledging that the covenant in chapters 19-24 is, according to Jewish tradition, directly related to the liberation event.

The book of Exodus begins, "And these are the names". We know that a genealogical history of the Children of Israel concludes the first book of the Bible and begins the second book. Jacob's family, stricken by famine, is reunited with Joseph. The family settles into Egyptian life, in the fulfillment of the prophecy to Abraham in Genesis 15.

The first seventeen chapters in Exodus describe the processes of enslavement and liberation. As this paper seeks to understand the liberation story in both Jewish and Christian terms, the exodus from Egypt is of utmost concern. The chapters on liberation contain several important themes and ideas which help one to understand the relevance and meaning of the liberation story. The ideas inherent in

the text under investigation may be discussed under the rubrics of slavery, liberation, and covenant.

Slavery

Chapters one and two of Exodus introduce the narrative that is to become both the "saga and history" of Israel. In this first section of Exodus, the Children of Israel are enslaved by Pharaoh. We read of an Israel that is nothing more than a collective, passive mass of slaves. Under their taskmasters, the Jews work and build at Pharaoh's command. The collective is not emphasized in chapter two, where we meet individual Israelites who are not victims[32], but are believers and survivors, trying to save the life of a Jewish young child.

As the Jews began to multiply in Egypt, a nervous and disgruntled Pharaoh placed harsh and strict demands on a people who were oppressed only because they were Jewish.[33] Pharaoh sensed that the Jews were a threat to his power, and slave labor was just the beginning of Pharaoh's plan. Ramban notes that it was not

[32] Moshe Greenberg, Understanding Exodus (New York: Behrman House, 1969), p. 58.
[33] Ibn Ezra on 1:11

slave labor that Pharaoh desired, but total extermination of the Israelites.[34]

Sforno, in his commentary on chapter 1:10 ["And get them up out of the Land"], notes that the "original intention of the Egyptians was not to enslave the Hebrews, but rather to make conditions unbearable so that they would leave voluntarily."[35] Whether the Israelites left Egypt by choice or by force, they were oppressed, enslaved, and considered by both governmental leaders and society in general to be outsiders.

Although the Jews had lived in Egypt for over 100 years, a new Pharaoh came into power and was fearful of an ever-increasing population of Israelites. We read in 5:5, "Behold the people are now many." Sforno notes that Pharaoh lamented that the intelligent ones were few, while the 'people of the land,' a euphemism for the ignorant ones, were many; and they would unfortunately listen to Moses, thereby causing idleness and unrest. Like other oppressors, Pharaoh feared his servants. The more they grew in numbers, the harsher their punishments.

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[34] Ramban in The Stone Edition: The Chumash, Vol. 2 ed. Rabbi Nisson Scherman (New York: Mesorah, 1995), p..3.
[35] Raphael Pelcovitz, ed., Sforno (New York: Mesorah, 1987), p. 251.

With the entrance of Moses onto the scene in chapter two, the presence of God is formally acknowledged. God speaks to Moses through an unconsumed Burning Bush and informs his Chosen One that "I have seen the oppression." God is aware of the people's suffering. The oppression is so great that the oppressor is worthy of Divine punishment. In Zechariah, we come to a similar understanding of the nature of oppression, "And I am very displeased with the nations that are at ease, for I was but a little displeased and they helped me for evil" (Zech. 1:15).

Indeed, God heard the voice of the oppressed. "God heard their moaning" (Exodus 2:24). It is important to take note that the Israelites did not cry or appeal directly to God, but rather, their distress *reached* God, and God heard their cry. God heard the suffering of the oppressed. God did not redeem the slaves because of their cries, repentance, or prayers, but rather, God reacts to their oppression and redeems the suffering. Hence, "And I have also seen the oppression" (3:5). God hears the cry of the oppressed not because the people were groaning, but because people were in pain and their cries reached the just and merciful heavens.

The cry of the Israelites was a cry of unbearable pain and suffering. It was not a cry of remorse, or penitence for sins. Nonetheless, writes Sforno, God listened and "reached a decision to begin the process of liberation and salvation." [36] The Lord is a God who not only hears the pain, but also is a God who frees the people because the pain was unbearable to hear. The Rabbis describe God here not only as all-powerful and mighty, but compassionate as well. God's response was one of mercy.[37]

God's awareness of the Pharaoh's oppression of the Israelites is noted in 3:9, with the words, "And now, behold! The outcry of the Children of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them" (3:9). Ramban notes that God's harkening of the suffering is first observed in 3:7, "I have indeed seen the affliction of My people that is in Egypt and I have heard its outcry because of its taskmasters, for I have known of its sufferings." Why do we read that God hears the suffering of the oppressed in both verses? Ramban interprets the repetition as a means of emphasizing that the complaints of the people had reached

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[36] Ibid., p. 258.
[37] Scherman, p.10.

the Heavenly Throne. The cries were heard and redemption could no longer be delayed.

At this point in the chapter, God is concerned with the oppressed people in need of liberation, and unconcerned with Pharaoh, the oppressor. When Pharaoh refused to let the Children of Israel free, God had no other choice but to pursue the matter by means of punishment and retribution. As demands upon Pharaoh became stronger, his cruelty and harshness to the Israelites increased. Despite the plagues placed upon Pharaoh and the Egyptians, it is not the punishment of the wicked, that God seeks, but freedom of the oppressed.

Even the plagues were not designed with the sole purpose of becoming a punishment to the oppressors. The plagues were brought down upon Egypt in order to let the oppressor repent and turn from his evil ways. Sforno comments, "God did not want Pharaoh to succumb to the pressure of the plagues, but to repent of his own volition." [38]

Indeed, when God talks to Moses, God reassures him that the Israelites cannot be judged as the human beings that they became in

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[38] Pelcovitz p 290

Egypt. For they are oppressed people who live in an environment which is deleterious to their spiritual and emotional being. What is important, God reminds Moses, is that the people are willing to "listen, to learn and to serve if only granted the opportunity."[39] It is impossible for the oppressed to be in a sane mind-set. God will take care and trust them only when they are free to follow God's ways.

With a slightly different interpretation of 3:9, one rabbinic commentary notes that God had wanted the Israelites in Egypt to become completely powerless. In this way, "when they were reconstituted, they would have nothing but what God had given them and the spiritual heritage of the patriarchs."[40]

Still other commentators, Kli Yakar and Sfat Emet, ask how the Israelites could get rid of all the Egyptian influences that they had assimilated for so many years. How could the Israelites ever free themselves of their spiritual and emotional bondage? God answered the concern, for as soon as the people left Egypt they would be able to forget their past in bondage. The Children of Israel would wander through the desert, and a new generation would enter the Promised

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[39] Ibid., p. 262.
[40] Scherman, p. 63.

Land. When the life of slavery was forgotten, the People would receive and accept the Torah on Mt. Sinai.[41]

The people of Israel would eventually come to recognize the power of God. Even the plagues were in part designed to show the Israelites God's power and might. Abravanel notes that the first three plagues "come to prove God's existence. The next three asserted a second principle—the providence of God. The last three plagues came to substantiate the third principle, which is that God can change the nature of things at will."[42] Although the plagues and their aftermath are sent from God, "their unfolding is always according to the motives of human actors through whom God's will is done without their realizing it!"[43] Thus, Pharaoh merely had to act with his own free will, and he was following God's plan! Likewise, the children of Israel simply needed to leave Egypt in order for the covenantal process to continue.

Pharaoh's denial and disbelief only fueled the relentless demonstration of God's power and might. God not only wanted the oppressed freed, but wanted everyone to know that God is a

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[41] Ibid., p. 13.
[42] Nachama Leibowitz New Studies in Shemot , Vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Haomanim Press, 1981), p. 172.
[43] Greenberg, p. 182.

Liberating God, "The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord when I stretch My hand over Egypt" (7:5; 7:17; 8:6; 8:18; 9:14,16; 9:29). The plagues were not only to show the Israelites the power of their merciful God (10:1-2), nor were they only to punish Pharaoh. They were also designed to instill fear and acknowledgement of God's presence in all those who refused to believe in God (7:3-5).

However, time after time, plague after plague, the oppressors refused to believe. Despite the hardship, terror, and pain that fell upon the Egyptians, the plagues were unable to convince Pharaoh of the power and wonder of God. Pharaoh would still not heed God's demand, for his "heart hardened and he refused to let the Children of Israel go" (9:35). Pharaoh refuses to recognize the power of God and he thus becomes representative of the archetypal non-believer. The reader is cautioned: what happens to Pharaoh could happen to all who refuse to acknowledge God.

The Oppressor was not about to give up his kingdom and domination over the Israelites. The plagues must occur over and over again and even then, Pharaoh would not easily succumb to Moses' request. Indeed, Pharaoh never really agrees to the "final departure of Israel from his land, even after his claim on the people

has been bargained away".[44] Yet, after the tenth plague, as Pharaoh recognizes the gravity of the situation, he still does not admit defeat. Rather, he says, "go worship the Lord as you said, and say a blessing for me too" (12:31,32). It is as if the people are supposed to worship God, and then come back to Pharaoh with words that the blessing has been offered on his behalf! God had another plan, that the slaves were to be unconditionally released.

An all-powerful God could presumably free the slaves at will. If God so desired, the Israelites need not have been slaves at all. Yet, although some commentaries recognize the enslavement of the Israelites as punishment for their sins of assimilation (Ha'amek Davar), Nechama Leibowitz notes that exile and slavery of the Israelites in Egypt is a reminder to the contemporary reader Jewish reader that he/she must follow the ordinances of God, specifically the Ten Commandments. References in the Hebrew Bible to Israelite slavery in Egypt implore the Jews not to forget the pain and suffering of their ancestors. For they should not wrong or oppress another for "you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Ex. 22:20, 23:9; Deut. 16:11). Likewise, the Jews are commanded to observe laws that

[44] Ibid., p.162.

protect slaves (Deut. 5:14-15; 15:14-15 etc.) to prevent other Israelites from falling into slavery.

Although Pharaoh was the first to recognize Israelites slaves as an 'am, Pharaoh had not recognized the Israelites as human beings. For him the slaves presented a threat to national security and safety. Israelites and the generations after them not only gained a special relationship with God in the aftermath of slavery, but Jews for all eternity have unique ordinances and commandments protecting the oppressed and needy.

Liberation

The theme of liberation is made explicit in nearly each of the first seventeen chapters of Exodus. Classic rabbinic commentaries understand the Great Israelite Redemption as an act of benevolence and justice bestowed upon a particular people. In the context of the exodus, a just God not only redeems the oppressed, but most importantly, frees the Hebrews so that they might gain a new freedom—freedom to follow and obey the laws of the Holy One.

Israel's redemption, however, did not come at all at once. Liberation occurred in phases, as we read in 6:6-8;

> I will *free* you from the labors of the Egyptians and *deliver* you from their bondage. I will *redeem* you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements. And I will *take* you to be my people, and I will be your God... I will *bring* you into the land which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob....

Sforno understands these verses to represent five phases of God's redemption of the Israelites. Basic, literal freedom is the first phase. In order to serve God, the people can not be enslaved to anyone or anything. They must be free from hard labor in order that they might have strength and insight to serve God. The next phase of liberation, deliverance, comes upon the People as they cross the Red Sea. God directly intervenes and the people are delivered into new, free territory. Redemption into safety comes next. When the Egyptian Army drowns in the sea, the people are truly safe and free. No longer must the slaves run in fear. Redemption is evident when freedom from bondage takes place. Now, once deliverance and redemption occur, God, through Moses and Aaron, leads the Children of Israel to the Holy Mountain. At Mt. Sinai, the people are given Torah and so a formal relationship with the Divine has begun. The

climax of the relationship occurs when God brings the Nation of Israel into the Promised Land.[45]

Benno Jacob comments that the sequence of verbs Exodus 6:6-8 mark a transition from Justice to Compassion which then leads to feelings of closeness between the redeemer and the redeemed. The process culminates in a relationship of love between God and the People. Divine redemption thus includes justice and compassion for the oppressed, but ultimately it means love of and from God.

God's love is given to the Israelites in the form of a berit, a covenant. Although God had promised the covenant to the Patriarchs, the promise was fulfilled after the liberation from Egypt. Psalms 106:44-45 reminds the reader that it is justice that God wants, "He looked upon their distress, when He heard their cry, and He remembered them for this covenant."

The liberation story is synonymous with freedom. The exodus allowed the "Jewish people [to be] eternally free; from that time on, any servitude or oppression would be a temporary phenomenon that could not change the pure essence of the nation" (Maharal). At the

[45] Sforno on verses 6:6-8.

foundation of the Israel-God relationship is the initial promise of the covenant. The covenant is the basis for the Israelite community.

The injunction to commemorate and remember the liberation from bondage is the basis for the annual celebration of Passover. Passover, the Festival of Freedom, is to celebrated on the fifteenth day of the first month of Nisan (Exodus12:2). Nisan now becomes the first month of the Hebrew calendar. Thus, the Jewish calendar begins not with the celebration of the new year (Rosh Hashanah, which occurs in the seventh month of Tishri), but rather the Jewish year begins with the month of the year (Rashi).

The People of Israel are engaged in a relationship with God, and it is only after the Israelites accept the word of God at Mount Sinai that they are established as a free nation. For in the month of Nisan, "your existence as a people of (free choice) began."(Sforno) Freedom from oppression thus is the beginning of a new era in Israelite history. Israelite slavery is temporary and it is the redemption that "will inspire the generations throughout history" (Bachya, Exodus 12:40). For the "profound implications of this event through which the Almighty acquired us as His people...were engraved on the historic memory of the Jewish people through

countless symbols and precepts applying to every facet of our existence...."[46]

God chose to liberate a particular people, the Israelites. The Jewish people had, according to Sforno and others, special and unique protection and providence. Yet, the special status carries with it responsibilities, "If you will listen to the voice of Adonai, your God...for I am Adonai who heals you" (15:26). God did not free Israel from oppression so that they would be without accountability or responsibility. Rather, God freed the Israelites in order that they "become free to accept another burden—that of the kingdom of Heaven—of Torah and Mitzvot".[47] God preformed great miracles so that the Israelites might recognize the greatness of their God.

As soon as Moses approaches the unconsumed bush, God enters the scene and the Israelite Liberation saga and history begins. Moses looks at the bush, and asks, "Why will the bush not be burned?" (3:2) Through the fire, God calls out to Moses and Moses replies, "Here I am!", the same response Abraham gave God at Mt.

[46] Leibowitz p.182
[47] Ibid., p. 71.

Moriah. With a call and a response, the relationship between God and Moses begins.

Fire, in biblical usage, is a symbol of the divine. It is recognized as a divine element (Gen. 15:17); it represents fury (Esth. 1:12), love (Song of Songs 8:6), and it is a metaphor for the passionate nature of the Israelite God (Ex. 34:14, Jer. 4:4, 79:5, Zech. 3:8).[48] When the Voice speaks to Moses, it identifies itself as God, the God of Moses' father, and then as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. At the very onset of the relationship between God and Moses, the covenantal promise is recalled.

God's future plans to redeem God's Chosen People are foreshadowed when we read of Moses' complaints to God at the burning bush. Moses argues with God and asks, "What have Israel done to deserve this!" God replies, "when you have brought the people out of Egypt you shall serve God on this Mountain" (3:12). Rashi interprets *on this Mountain* as foreshadowing the Torah the Israelites will receive on that very Mountain. Therefore, despite his protests and insecurity, Moses must carry out God's plan of redemption.

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[48] Greenberg, p. 71.

It is only God who knows that the Israelites will appear before the Divine, in the very place where God and Moses meet. For while Moses complains and God reassures, "God has hinted at something beyond mere liberation of Israel as His ultimate aim".[49] Moses is told that because God will be with him, he should not fear. According to Rambam, to dispel Moses' fear God assured him that that the nation would experience revelation on that very mountain upon which he stood.

Moses, chosen by God, is similar to other prophets in that he is certainly not flawless. Moses is a representative of God and like many true prophets, offers up protests and even oppositional remarks to The One who has called. Moses expresses doubts and God provides the answers and reassurances. God is aware of the task that needs to be done, and He chooses a character with an Israelite heritage who has not been tainted or harmed by Egyptian bondage. Moses, who will become a great prophet of the People, is by nature a fighter for justice. He need not be commanded to work for or pursue justice; it is what he does. Moses sets out from the

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[49] Ibid., p. 78.

palace and defends an Israelite against an Egyptian, intervenes in a quarrel between two of his kinsman and aids Midianite girls in need of water. These three occurrences are examples of Moses' passion for justice and demonstrate his strength of character. Growing up in the royal household, Moses was afraid of no one and was in a position to learn about government and leadership—"matters that would embolden him and enlarge his spirit" (Abravanel). The fact that he fought for what was right and just leads the reader to believe that he, a champion of the oppressed, was indeed the right one chosen to help liberate the Israelite slaves in Egypt.

God informs Moses of the task at hand and commands him to "Go to Pharaoh and speak to him, 'so said God, the God of the Hebrews; Send out My people that they may serve me" (9:1). Shortly thereafter, Moses and Aaron approach Pharaoh saying, "Thus said the Lord..." They did not give Pharaoh a choice, but rather demands that the slaves be unconditionally released so that they might "celebrate a festival in the wilderness." God is both commanding and demanding. Liberation will not happen without God's action. God's human spokesmen, Moses and Aaron, follow God's request; they

pursue Pharaoh and a frustrating pattern of request, refusal, request ensues.

Freedom, deliverance, and redemption are not ends in and of themselves. They are rather, means to an end—a formalization and sacred seal of the relationship between God and the Israelites. Liberation is merely the first step of God's plan for the Israelites. God's involvement in the liberation process is recognized from the outset. God affirms the covenant made with the patriarchs and calls out, "I am YHWH" (6:2,6,7,8) and there is to be no mistaking who is sending Moses to the people.

God not only responded with justice and mercy to the cries of oppressed, but a second cause of the liberation from Egypt is that God remembers the promise of the covenant He established with the Israelite fathers (6:4). Indeed, an oath sworn must be carried out. The redemption of the Israelites had to take place in order that God fulfill the covenantal promise made with the Patriarchs.

Covenant

"Then you shall know that I am the Lord your God" (Ex. 7:5). The Liberation story, as interpreted by the vast majority of rabbinic

commentaries, has at its core, God's love for the people of Israel. Yes, God is just and merciful and hears the cries of the oppressed, but that is only one reason for the redemption from slavery. The primary focus of the liberation story is thus the fulfillment of the covenantal promise. According to rabbinic tradition, the cries of the oppressed remind God not merely of the injustice done to the innocent but "their outcry went up to God. God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God saw the Children of Israel and God knew" (2:23-24).

Through Moses, the prophet, God was known to the people in Egypt. In Ezekiél we read,

> On the day I choose Israel and raised my hand to the seed of the house of Jacob, and made Myself known unto them in the land of Egypt, when I lifted up My hand unto them saying: I am the Lord your God: [who brought the Israelites] from out of the land of Egypt into a land that I had sought out for them, flowing with milk and honey (20:6-7).

God liberated the people because they had somewhere else to go—they had been promised a land and new home. Liberation, the covenant, and the giving of the land flowing with milk and honey (Exodus 6:6ff) were all part of the one divine promise God made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

God remembered the promise and lifted the Israelites out of their misery into a new blessed freedom. Of course the Israelites complain about their new freedom and are unwilling to accept a gift directly after their Egypt experience. Therefore, they wander for forty years and only when ready, when mentally and physically released from the yoke of slavery and their oppressed lives in Egypt do they gain "spiritual transformation from cultural and religious enslavement to the acceptance of the True God."[50] God did not bring them to the Mountain until they were ready to experience the new freedom. Only then do the Israelites enter into a berit with God.

It is important to note that the covenantal theme of the Exodus is found at the very start of liberation. The covenant is merged with the theme of liberation from the outset. Israel is honored above all others, for "Israel [is] My firstborn" (4:22). Israel serves God out of love, not as a slave motivated out of fear of punishment or reward (Sforno).

When freedom is placed upon the Israelites, fear, along with a collective slave mentality, disappears. The oppressed are by nature and good cause, fearful of others. Ibn Ezra asks, why were 600,000

[50] Leibowitz, p.195.

slaves scared of far fewer Egyptians? The Israelites had a slave mentality (see also 14:11-12) and were not able to believe that God would be with them day and night (13:21). Nonetheless, God is sure that the people "shall know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians" (6:7). For all eternity, God shall be the deliver of the Israelites (see Hosea 13:4). Israel's relationship to God goes "beyond the meaning of the laws. It is a connection to their redeemer."[51]

Conclusion

The redemption served "as a spur for a religious duty; that imposed on every Jew to redeem his fellow-being from the slavery he had been reduced to for lack of means. This duty too is motivated in the Torah by the Almighty's rescuing His people from Egypt."[52] God liberated a particular people for a particular purpose.

God is in every aspect of Exodus chapters 1-17. Before the covenant, the rabbis believed that God liberated the people not only because they groaned to God, but because God made a promise and

[51] Greenberg, p.10.
[52] Leibowitz, p. 8.

in order for the promise to be fulfilled, the people had to be free. There are covenantal undertones as well as explicit references throughout the story of liberation.

For classic rabbinic as well as some contemporary commentaries on the book of Exodus, the liberation story can not be separated from the covenant. God has a plan and the liberation is but one part of a greater whole. Liberation is simply the means towards attaining the covenant. The first time Moses and God meet at the burning bush we are given a glimpse at what it is to come, for in a few short months, the people will join Moses and God at that very mountain. According to Moshe Greenberg, Exodus Chapters 1-19 are all about relating the preparations for the "covenant joining God and Israel."[53] The liberation is merely the means to the end. Pharaoh is not viewed as the Great Oppressor of a nation, but as the one who refuses to believe in the One God.

The liberation, allowing the Israelites to establish the covenant and enter into the Promised Land, is a main theme throughout the Tanach (see Deut. 6:20-25). The history of the Jewish people begins with the liberation of the Israelite slaves in Egypt. The liberation is

[53] Greenberg, p.3.

not a single act in history, but an event that represents "triumph over the profane nature of man." [54]

The importance of the event rests upon keeping alive its memory and meaning within Jewish history. The memory of the miracles can not be forgotten through out the generations. For each generation must say, "It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt" (Exodus 13:8). In celebrating the exodus from Egypt, Jews are recognizing the creation of Jewish Peoplehood. Without the exodus, Jews could not have established the covenant, yet without the covenant, there would be no Jewish People. "Israel became God's people, and He their God because He freed them from Egypt (Ex. 6:7; Hos. 12:10, 13:4, Psalm 114:1f)."[55]

The Torah ends with the death of Moses (the one who brought the Israelites out of Egypt and established a covenant) and not with the conquest of the land. This "signifies the absolute character of the covenantal obligation in contrast to the conditional character of the

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[54] Leibowitz, p. 229.
[55] Greenberg, p.14.

possession of the land."[56] It is the covenant that connects the liberation story and the Promised Land. God chose to redeem the Israelites and sent them to a new land "flowing with milk and honey".

Michael Fishbane in his essay, "The Prologue to the Exodus Cycle", writes that Exodus chapters 1-19 tell the story of slavery and liberation

> through the prism of religious memory and imagination. The biblical focus is, accordingly, on divine power and will, on human hope and intransigence, on Moses and the Israelites, on Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Factual details become secondary to a dramatization of the inner conviction that with the exodus-event the God of the patriarchs has fulfilled His ancient promises.[57]

Within the first third of the Book of Exodus the people Israel are redeemed from physical bondage, and they are on their way to spiritual redemption as well. Liberation and covenant are intertwined and can not exist with out the other.

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[56] Ibid., p. 14.
[57] Fishbane, p. 61.

## CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION OF THE EXODUS NARRATIVE

The Exodus event is not merely a critical episode in the history and life of the Jewish people; it is also a story of liberation that transcends the particular Israelite history. This universal story of freedom from oppression lends itself to countless interpretations and retellings from readers and believers all over the world. In fact, the universality of the story is even discerned from within the text itself. Using a rabbinic play on numbers, Michael Goldberg points out that the exodus story "is a story about mankind—in the beginning we read that Jacob's offspring numbered seventy. The number seventy, according to a biblical conception...is also the number of peoples that make up the world."[58] As the rabbis note, there is nothing in the sacred text that is written by coincidence or without meaning, and while the use of numerology is a far-fetched means of textual interpretation, it is interesting to note the way a commentator uses it to signify the universality of the deliverance saga.

The liberation event is the paradigmatic freedom text of the Bible. Yet even so, the concept of liberation takes on different

[58] Michael Goldberg, Jews and Christians: Getting Our Stories Straight (Nashville: Abington Press, 1985), p. 26.

meanings when applied to various historical, religious and cultural circumstances.

In the previous chapter, various rabbinic interpretations of the liberation event were explored within the context of traditional Jewish thought. In this chapter, I intend to examine the importance of the exodus story for Christianity. The exodus event is of crucial consequence in the history of Christianity. Following the exodus story as it is played out in the New Testament offers insight into the historical and theological underpinnings of Christianity. It foreshadows the coming of Jesus and also the ultimate redemption of humanity. New Testament theology sees the liberation from Egypt as the beginning of a greater religious history.

It is particularly interesting to examine the exodus event as it is understood by non-western readers. In Latin American countries, for example, the liberation event has served as a message of hope and encouragement to those who live under oppressive social, political and economic conditions.

The exodus story is a primary source for both Jewish and Christian biblical theologies. This cornerstone event which "[describes] God's activity in human history...freedom and life is the

very heart of Jewish and Christian faith. The Exodus was the crucial event."[59] The event is unique in that a universal God has redeemed the oppressed. Although it was the people of Israel who were freed, God heard the cries of the poor and

> The saving presence of God, the God of freedom and life, was reestablished for every generation, Israelite remains always the people of the Exodus. This foundational revelation underlies every other aspect of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. The whole complex of affirmations about God found in the law, the prophets, the psalms, and the Gospels is rooted in the Exodus event. God is not abstract, static and impartial; the God revealed in Exodus liberates, enlivens, redeems, calls, negotiates, forgives, challenges and journeys. God is revealed in the real, human events in history.[60]

The Exodus event of the Hebrew Bible takes on a different tone and meaning when read in the context of the New Testament. A Christian theologian, James Plastaras, urges the Christian community to recognize the exodus event as a "recent reality" in Christian life. The exodus is the beginning of Christian redemption and it must be recognized as such. For the exodus is not merely a story of another people with a different past. It is a story that is integral to the history of Christianity. The story shows an oppressed people—a people who

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[59] Stephen J. Binz, The God of Freedom and Life: A Commentary on the Book of Exodus (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1993), p.7.
[60] Ibid., p. 8.

are not even aware of the extent of their oppression—who call out to a God who saves them.[61]

New Testament theology understands that while Israelites were freed from slavery and chosen to receive the covenant at Sinai, as the course of history continues, the covenant is broken because the Israelites forsake the divine laws and sanctions. The Israelite prophets sent warnings and urged the people to return to God. Yet, according to Christian interpretation, their call was ignored and thus the covenant between God and the Israelites was broken. The covenant at Mount Sinai, initiated by the Exodus event, was supplanted by a new act of liberation that came to fruition in Jesus Christ. Jesus would enter into a new covenant and would usher in the new exodus—the salvation of all humanity.

## Jesus Christ and the New Exodus

> Christian interpretation of Second Isaiah identifies Jesus Christ as the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. Just as the Israelites suffered in Egypt, so too, will Jesus suffer oppression and degradation throughout his life on earth. Yet, as redemption occurred for the

[61] James Plastaras The God of the Exodus: The Theology of the Exodus Narratives (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1996), p. 25.

Israelites, the suffering servant would not only be redeemed but would deliver the people from bondage. This act of deliverance would establish a new, second exodus and a new covenantal relationship between God and the people. Jesus creates a new way of living, of finding sustenance and strength in the world. "...The Old Testament witness to God's concern to satisfy the physical hunger of his people offers an essential foundation on which the New Testament's testimony to Jesus Christ as the 'bread of life' must be built."[62] The suffering servant satisfies both physical and spiritual hunger. The miracles of Jesus are "enactments of the exodus...the very name Jesus, from the verb YŠ', concerns the capacity of Jesus to 'save' his subjects from the powers of destruction."[63]

While the liberation event and the covenant are core events in Israelite history, there are moments in history when the Israelites seemed to forget their sacred oath to the Divine. They did not heed the words of the prophets, and just as the prophets predicted, a new exodus and new covenant would establish the Kingdom of God on earth for all eternity. God would redeem the people and the "new

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[62]Brevard S. Childs, The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), p. 304.
[63]Walter Brueggemann, Theology of the Old Testament (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), p. 179.

exodus would be more glorious than the first (Isaiah 43:18-19, 20; 52:11-12)." [64]

In the New Testament, the first exodus is not the catalyst or even the turning point for future redemption; it does, however, serve as a foreshadowing of a greater exodus and a new covenant yet to come. For Moses was summoned to help free the people from physical slavery and political oppression, freedom from their suffering until the advent of Jesus Christ. Although the "suffering servant of Second Isaiah focuses largely on spiritual deliverance, more important was the dominant motif of suffering in the prophets which made [the] tradition more suitable for the New Testament's appropriation."[65]

References to the exodus story in the Gospels often recognize the similarities between Moses and Jesus. Jesus is the prophet who fulfills the legacy of Moses. Jesus becomes the new lawgiver and teacher of the New Torah. The gospel of Luke understands that the Prophet of whom Moses had said, "The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet from your brethren as he raised me up. You shall listen to

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[64]Plastaras, p. 7.
[65]Childs, p. 84.

him in whatever he tells you", (Deut. 18:15, quoted in Acts 3:22; 7:37) is in reference to Jesus.[66] It is thus interpreted that Moses predicts the arrival of the prophet Jesus, who will be greater than the other prophets, including himself.

The similarity between Jesus and Moses is developed further in the gospel of Matthew. The birth stories of Jesus and Moses are similar: just as the infant Moses is rescued from the death imposed on all first born Israelite sons (Exodus 1:22), so too, Jesus is saved from King Herod's order to kill all male children in Bethlehem (Mt. 2:16). Jesus and Moses were miraculously saved from imminent death. The parallelism between Jesus and Moses is also demonstrated when God tells Moses to return and speak to the people because "all the men who were seeking your life are dead" (Exodus 4:19). Likewise, an angel of the Lord tells Joseph that it is safe to return to Israel with the child "for those who sought the child's life are dead" (Mt. 2:20). The resemblance of Jesus to Moses provides yet another component to the fundamental belief that Jesus fulfills a Mosaic role.

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[66]Plastaras, p. 323.

Further advancing the theory of association between the new exodus and the old exodus, the Sermon on the Mount is perceived as the new Sinai event. For Jesus comes not to abolish the law and the prophets...but to fulfill them (Mt. 5:17). Jesus is the last leader and teacher of the people. It is he who escorts the people into a new and lasting covenant, thus fulfilling the promise of deliverance and eternal covenant (Mt. 2:15). The gospel of John also discerns that Jesus' is the continuation of divinely inspired leadership, "for the law was given through Moses: grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1:17).

According to New Testament authors, Jesus Christ "carried out all the prophecies for the unfulfilled hopes of Israel's long history."[67] Jesus takes over where Moses left off, leading humanity in a second exodus, one in which eternal salvation and renewed life replaces the antiquated Mosaic covenant at Sinai. Despite the fact that Christianity has its roots in the divine promise at Sinai, the first exodus was inadequate to achieve the goal. The Israelites did not uphold the covenant and a new and better covenant was initiated.[68]

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[67]Plastaras. p. 313.
[68]Childs, p. 233.

Jesus was the initiator of the new covenant. Christian theology understands Jesus as the One who fulfills the promise of a new freedom, a new exodus, to the people. With the new exodus and covenant, the purpose and significance of the Israelite liberation takes on a radically different meaning.

References to Exodus in the New Testament

The letters of Paul recognize that the events of the exodus are a divine sign signaling that the final redemption of humanity would come from the son of God, Jesus Christ. In 1 Corinthians, 10:1-5, 11 we read,

> I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all ate the same supernatural food and all drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless with most of them God was not pleased. For they were overthrown in the wilderness.... Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come.

Although the Israelites were once chosen by God, they did not remain in favor with the Divine. For throughout Israelite history, God, through prophets, called upon Israel to return and repent to the Lord. The Israelites suffered divine punishment, and most of all they

refused to accept the greatest of God's gifts, the new covenant. The new covenant as predicted in Jeremiah 31:31-34, is built around a personal and inward relationship with God. The old covenant was based on laws and divine sanctions; the new covenant would be one of love and spiritual redemption.

While the Hebrew Scripture focuses on the freeing of the Israelites from socioeconomic and political bondage, the New Testament "permits a spritualizing of Exodus language. So that the liberation of the gospel is more readily understood as liberation from sin, in contrast with concrete socioeconomic-political bondage."[69]

The savior, the covenant, and the renewal of the spirit are said to have been predicted in the Old Testament. "Early Christians found in the Old Testament foreshadowings of the new covenant. The crossing of the Red Sea (like the flood in the narrative of Noah) was seen as a foreshadowing of the Christian sacrament of baptism: 'I want you to know, brothers that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea' (1 Cor. 10:1-2)."[70]

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[69] Brueggemann, p.180.
[70] James L. Kugel, The Bible As It Was (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 346.

In his commentary on the above verse taken from 1 Corinthians 10:1-2, Origen notes that Paul interprets the Israelite parting of the Red Sea to be a baptism, while the cloud represents the Holy Spirit.[71] Once the people were redeemed, they had to cross the waters into freedom. The water is therefore necessary to achieve freedom. Yet, the baptism is not enough to guarantee salvation.[72] Ultimate freedom is not achieved through the leadership of Moses and the crossing of the Red Sea, rather only through Jesus Christ is there "freedom from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses" (Acts 13:39).

The call of Moses and the exodus event are referred to in Acts 7:30ff, "in order to demonstrate how God's early messengers were rejected by Israel, whose disobedience culminated in the death of Christ."[73] The exodus thus symbolizes the potential, yet not actualized liberation. The redemption of the Israelites was not the final divine saving act in history. Acts 7 notes that the deliverance

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[71] Origen, Homilies on Ex. 5:1 quoted in Kugel, p. 346.
[72] Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 1388.
[73] Childs, p. 82.

was not complete, for the reference to the exodus is in the context of the cry of the prophets and the deaf ears of the Israelites. The Israelites ignored the warning signs and admonitions of the prophets. Commenting on Acts 7:42-43, The New Oxford Annotated Bible notes that Amos 5:25-27 is "quoted to suggest that the Hebrews had always been idolaters."

The New Testament interpretation of the freedom story differs not only in that Jesus fulfilled the legacy of Moses. In addition, the definition of freedom is radically changed. For freedom is not the acceptance of God's laws, but rather the freedom to reject the old covenant of divine laws.

For Jews, the liberation from bondage is remembered each year during the festival of freedom, the holiday of Passover. Every Jew is to recall the exodus as if they were "slaves in Egypt" and God had liberated them. The Christian reading of the liberation story understands the liberation in a wholly different way. For what had become for Israel "an unequivocal and straightforward memorial to the deliverance from Egypt became for the Christian church a mysterious and paradoxical sign within God's redemptive history of

both the new and the old, of life and of death, of the future and the past."[74]

The essence of freedom is, for Jews, liberation from slavery and the freedom to accept God's laws. For the Christian reader of Scripture, the liberation is a foreshadowing of the coming of Jesus, the hope of the future. "The whole purpose of the Passover celebration was to recall in thankfulness the saving works of the first exodus, and to stir up hope in an even greater deliverance yet to come."[75] Indeed, at the end of the Passover seder, Elijah the Prophet is called upon with pleas to usher in the redemption of humanity bring about the coming of the messianic age.

There are those who describe the liberation event in Exodus as a primary example of a God who chooses to take the side of the oppressed and acts on their behalf. During the past two decades, Catholic theologians, primarily from Latin American countries, have used the exodus event not only as a story of hope and future redemption, but also to acknowledge their worth and value as human beings. Divine action on behalf of the oppressed is necessary proof

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[74] Ibid., p. 212.
[75] Plastaras, p.333.

that God is on their side, and is manifest in political action. The term "liberation theology" was coined to express this particular emphasis on God, the universal liberator, as exemplified in the book of Exodus. "The liberationist reading of the book [of Exodus] is a radical departure from consensus reading in the centrist tradition."[76]

The concluding section of this chapter explores the significance of the liberation event in the lives of contemporary Christians living in third-world countries. The exodus event is seen differently in these societies then in the developed countries of the west. Latin American lay and religious leadership interpret the exodus event as the scriptural catalyst for improving the social, political and economic conditions of the poor. The exodus is seen as primarily a political story with contemporary political and social implications.

## References to Exodus in Liberation Theology

In Latin American countries, the exodus is understood not as liberation from sin and constraints of the old covenant. Rather, for the liberation theologian, the exodus represents divine liberation from socioeconomic and political oppression.

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[76] Brueggemann, p.108.

For the liberationist, Exodus depicts a God who chooses to be on the side of the poor and oppressed, rather than on the side of the oppressor. Not only does God hear the cries of the oppressed; God also acts in history on their behalf. From the liberation story, the poor and oppressed in Latin America thus gain hope and encouragement to continue their own struggle for personal and communal liberation.

The God of the exodus is accessible. God acts in the lives of the people and God in turn may act in their own lives. This is a God of the people. The story is read with the idea that "Israel's liberation is...liberation from the oppressive political and economic structures that have been destroying the Israelites. Inescapable conclusion: God has a concern with the quality of political and economic structures."[77] Economic, political and social oppression go against the will of God and are evils that must be destroyed at all costs. Evil is "systematic—it has an uncanny way of becoming embodied in the structures of society in ways that almost give it an independent existence of its own."[78] Jesus, the divine liberator, spent much of his life working to rid society of oppression.

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[77] Robert McAfee Brown Theology in a New Key (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), p. 89.
[78] Ibid., p. 68.

The exodus story sets a precedent for the work performed by Jesus on behalf of the poor and downtrodden. It is the basis for the work that Jesus does on behalf of the poor. As stated earlier, Jesus is the successor to Moses. The covenant is reestablished through Jesus and the promise of eternal deliverance is manifested through the new covenant and the new exodus.

The focus of the Exodus event for the liberationist is on the final act of God--freedom from Egypt. Despite the fact that the Mosaic covenant is not of primary concern for the Christian in Latin America, an acknowledgment of the covenant is made by the founding father of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutierrez. He recognizes that God redeemed the Israelites "in order to make them a holy nation."[79] The Exodus and Covenant are seen as "different aspects of the same movement."[80] Both the exodus and the covenant with God are divine acts in history and lead to a recognition of God working in the lives of the oppressed. The people read the text from the perspective of their own communal experience—that of impoverishment and hardship. They see themselves in the exodus story as they read about a God

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[79] Gustavo Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation, trans. Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1973), p. 89.
[80] Ibid., p. 89.

who has taken on the political task of redeeming the oppressed.

This story is one of hope, but it is also, for the liberation theologian, a cry for action. As God acts in history on behalf of the oppressed, so too must the oppressed (and, indeed, all Christians) follow in the footsteps of The Liberator and act to end poverty and oppression. The redemption is not just sacred history; it is to be actualized in contemporary society as well.

Liberation Theology has at least three objectives: 1) poor people want freedom from oppression. Christian faith is concerned with the needs of the poor; 2) poor people have a conscious responsibility for their own destiny. God empowers the people to work for justice; 3) a personal and spiritual transformation may occur through studying and acting on the teachings of Jesus.[81] For Jesus, like the God of exodus, takes on the struggles of the poor.

> The spirit of the Lord is upon me; therefore, he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and release prisoners, to announce a year of favor from the Lord (Luke 4:18-19).

Jesus' mission was to take care of the poor. Liberation is thus

[81] Brown, p. 73.

manifested in Jesus' works and deeds. To be of Christian faith is not only to recognize Jesus' work in carrying out a new exodus, but to follow his lead and example. Liberation theology is a particular understanding of Christian faith that centers on the teachings of Jesus—his life and message. All Christians, rich and poor alike, must emulate, to the best of their ability, the teachings of Jesus Christ. The poor are not exempt from acting on their own behalf. On the contrary, the poor study the texts of the exodus and the gospels that may bolster and "affirm their dignity and self-worth and their right to struggle together for a more decent life."[82]

Those who live in a church-based community, a Latin American community that is motivated through Christian faith to work for better living conditions and a just society, study the Book of Exodus and the teachings of Jesus in order to gain a new vision of life's potentials and to see themselves as worthy of divine redemption. The sense of community, mutual support, and faith help lead towards political actions focused on bringing about justice and peace. The Latin American church views the oppressed human being as a beloved creature of God who is made in God's image. The human is given

[82] Phillip Berryman, Liberation Theology (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), p. 4-5.

intelligence and free will and has a God-given right to live in a free and just society. The church has a sacred obligation to oppose social, political and economic injustice wherever it may rest. According to this theology, the church must act in solidarity with those living, working, and praying in church-based communities.

A primary task of the liberation theologian is to monitor the church and its actions with and for the oppressed.

> Latin America is a Christian continent. Some 80% of the population are Roman Catholic, and most of the rest belong to mainstream of pentecostalist protestant groups. This means that...the church is the church of the people. And when one reflects that in Latin America the majority of the people are poor, it becomes clear that we are dealing with a church of the poor.[83]

There is no room for neutrality in liberation theology. A Christian must take sides and work towards the coming of God's kingdom. The church is called upon take an active role in bringing oppression and poverty to an end. The redemptive political action of the exodus event may, with the help of God, be realized again today. For "[s]alvation can come only from a new historical action of Yahweh

[83] Duncan B. Forrester, Theology and Politics (New York: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1988), p. 74.

which will renew in unknown ways the earlier interventions in favor of the people."[84] Salvation is not simply a gift from Jesus, it may be attained through actions in the spirit of Christ. Jesus has fulfilled the promise of the exodus and by following his teachings and actions, people can effectuate salvation.

Social and political praxis are direct outcomes of liberation theology. The deliverance from Egypt and the teachings and actions of Jesus call upon one to take action and work in the light of scriptural teachings. The political framework within which many liberationists operate is the Marxist model of class struggle for economic and political rights. Of all political and social theories, "Marxism provides a compelling analysis of exploitation and oppression of social division and injustice...."[85] Marxism, for most liberation theologians, provides a means of analyzing the social, economic and political climate in which they live. They are embroiled in a class struggle for equality. Equality and freedom come about when sin is abolished.

According to the liberationist, sin is a breach of "friendship with God and with other persons, and therefore, an interior, personal

[84] Gutierrez, p. 93.
[85] Forrester, p. 77.

fracture....Sin demands a radical liberation, which in turn necessarily implies a political liberation."[86] Jesus Christ is the ultimate liberator from sin and injustice.

## Conclusion

Liberationist Jose Miguez Bonino writes that all theology needs a reference point. In Latin America, the theological reference point is "the struggle for liberation, a struggle that has a predominately social and political dimension."[87] The exodus is a political story. The liberationists have interpreted the redemptive event of the Hebrew Bible based on their own social, political and economic conditions. The liberation theologian offers a new way of understanding the Exodus story. Still, there are those who cannot view the exodus as a political event or as a call for political action. Indeed, the linkage of theology and social and political praxis is hardly a universal ideal.

Although the respective Christian and Jewish readings of the exodus text differ significantly, the exodus from Egypt plays a central

[86] Gutierrez. p. 103.
[87] Jose Miguez Bonino, Toward a Christian Political Ethic (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p.43.

religious history for both faiths. The liberation story is of crucial importance in the religious ideology of both Judaism and Christianity.

## LIBERATION THEOLOGY

As we have seen, Christian and Jewish readings of the exodus event differ in both content and approach. While both Christian and Jewish thinkers cite the liberation story as foundational, they reach different conclusions from their radically different lines of interpretation. The Israelite liberation story is one of hope. Hope for a liberation theologian is manifested in the coming of Jesus and messianic redemption. The hope of the exodus event for the Jews is deliverance into the promised land.

In this chapter, I will examine two contemporary Jewish responses to liberation theology. Most Jewish theologians and commentators see the exodus event as inseparable from the covenant story. Liberation and covenant are two parts to the same story. Indeed, Jewish theologians have understood the exodus event to have a dual purpose: it is a story of political liberation offering hope to all oppressed communities, and it is also a particular story about the particular freedom which is applicable only to the Jewish community. Thus, for Jews the issue is not whether liberation from Egypt can stand apart from the rest of the Exodus text, but the

degree to which the liberation might be emphasized in Jewish history and contemporary praxis.

Michael Walzer, a political scientist at Princeton University and Jon Levenson, a Professor at the Harvard Divinity School, present two alternative view of the exodus and its significance for today.

Jon Levenson

Jon Levenson does not interpret the exodus event as the paradigmatic freedom text. For him, the story is about the freedom of a particular people for a particular purpose. God redeemed the Israelites in order that they might receive the covenant at Sinai. Any reading of the Old Testament in the light of the subsequent New Testament message is bound to yield inadequate interpretation of Israelite history. "When Christians read the Old Testament with reference to the New, they are doing something that is impossible with the Hebrew Bible."[88]

> Reading the Old Testament is not the same as reading the Hebrew Scripture. The very term "Old Testament" implies that there is a necessary sequel to the Israelite story, and that the promises of the Old Testament [covenant] are manifested in the New Testament [covenant]. A new covenant in the Christian sense is, of course, antithetical to Jewish belief and

[88]Brueggemann, p. 94.

practice.[89] Each particular text must therefore be read within its own particular context and historical frame of reference. This point of reference, in turn, determines the way the text is understood. Thus, for Levenson, any reading of the Hebrew Scripture that is not within a Jewish context is a misappropriation.

Levenson has strong feelings against the notion that the exodus story depicts a deliverance that is 'finalized' in the coming of Jesus Christ. For the liberationist reading of the exodus text is a "radical departure from consensus reading in the centrist tradition."[90] Liberation theologians are thus guilty of a serious misinterpretation of the liberation story. The Christian interpreter of the exodus event sees the redemption not as essentially Israelite, but as a foreshadowing of the coming of Jesus and messianic redemption. To place Jesus within the context of Hebrew Scripture story is a grievous error, according to Levenson.

Levenson will not accept an interpretation of the Hebrew Scripture as "Old Testament." Like the notion that the coming of Jesus is foreshadowed in the exodus story, any reading of the liberation text that views oppression and social revolution as primary

[89] The term "new covenant" originates in Jeremiah 31:23-40
[90] Brueggemann, p. 100.

themes in the text has overlooked the true significance of the story. The liberation was made possible only so that the Israelites were free to accept God's laws. For that reason, it is not possible to apply the story to a non-Jewish cultural, social or religious situation. The text conveys a specific meaning that it may be found by an examination of its authorship, social context, and literary content.

In commenting on liberation theology and its [mis]use of the exodus story, Levenson notes that the term "liberation" does not represent a problem for interpretation in itself. For the liberation of the Israelites is indeed a key component in the exodus event. Yet, redemption is only momentous in that it allowed the Israelites to receive and accept the covenant with God. To focus only on the liberation is to misunderstand the event. Liberation therefore is not a sufficient description of the exodus event. [91]

The liberation is an act of divine benevolence toward Israel. It is not representative of YHWH's general opposition to slavery or oppression. God freed the oppressed in order to accomplish a particular Divine objective. The exodus event may not be

[91] Jon D. Levenson, The Hebrew Bible, The Old Testament, and Historical Criticism (Louisville: Westminster, 1993), p. 138.

characterized as God's cry, "let my people go"; rather we must view the exodus as the divine call, "Let my people go so that they may serve me."[92] In the act of redemption, the Israelites are free to become servants of God. The exodus and liberation become the catalyst for receiving the covenant.

Levenson believes that the liberation theologian places too much emphasis on the exodus as freedom from oppression and preferential treatment of the poor. The exodus event is not about the end of socioeconomic and political oppression. For

> [t]he early chapters of the book of exodus do not speak of a social revolution or a class struggle; close inspection shows that they do not even speak of the overthrow of Pharaoh. Thus the Exodus does not change the social structure of Egypt one whit. Instead, the subject of these chapters is the miraculous escape to their native promised land of foreigners who had been impressed into state slavery.[93]

The exodus is the event leading up to the theophany at Sinai. The covenant at the Mountain leads to the right of entrance into the promised land. Liberation, covenant and entrance into the Land of Canaan comprise the entire exodus event. To separate out any of the parts, focusing on one event to the exclusion of the other, is to

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[92] Ibid., p. 144
[93] Ibid., p. 137

misread and misinterpret the meaning of the Book of Exodus.

In addition to opposing the compartmentalization of the exodus story, Levenson also rejects the overdefinition of the exodus as God's sanction against injustice and political oppression. Indeed, God does not condone injustice, but the contemporary definition and implication of justice differ from those of biblical times. The "identification of justice with equality is essentially a modern phenomenon and, in the hands of many modern exegetes, an impetus for gross anachronism."[94]

Furthermore, issues of equality and freedom are not integral to the exodus story. Nor are they made reference to in the text. In fact, quite the opposite is emphasized in Israelite history. The rebuilding of the Temple and the "restoration of the royal and priestly dynasties...presupposes—and endorses—the eternity of inequality."[95] To offer a contemporary interpretation of the exodus story without knowledge or understanding of biblical terminology and concepts is, again, a serious misreading of the text.

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[94] Ibid., p. 133.
[95] Ibid., p.133.

Justice and equality often justify notions of individual freedom and self-determination. Yet, in the exodus story, liberation is not equivalent to self-determination, as is implied in liberation theology. In the exodus event, liberation is contrary to self-determination. Emancipation form Egypt leads to acknowledgment of, and servitude to, God. God redeemed the Israelites not because of "the perceived needs of the members of the human community, but from the mysterious intentions and promises of their redeemer, into whose service they enter. Once again, service and redemption are inseparable, and liberation and a certain kind of subjugation are...synonymous."[96] It is unacceptable to take the story out of its original context and separate it from the receiving of the covenant.

Justice and equality are not emphases in the text. Moreover, slavery, oppression, and poverty in the Hebrew Bible were not "inherently exploitive or victimizing."[97] The idea that Israel was redeemed because the people were oppressed, poor, and enslaved is not the reality of the text, according to Levenson. Concern for the poor and divine redemption of the Israelite slaves, are not causally

[96] Ibid. p. 150.
[97] Ibid., p. 136.

related.

Although God heard the cries of the oppressed, God also remembered the covenant made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is the divine promise that led to redemption, not the fact that God heard the suffering of the people. Levenson critiques the liberationist who discerns divine redemption in the Hebrew Bible as an example of God as the Universal Liberator, a God who take the side of the oppressed. Liberation theologians have got it wrong; the exodus is not about a God who is on the side of the poor:

> the cold fact [is] that the biblical criteria for inclusion among those who benefit from the exodus are not poverty, oppression, suffering, or anything of the kind. The criterion is singular—descent from a common ancestor, Jacob/Israel son of Isaac son of Abraham. Throughout the Hebrew Bible Israel is portrayed as a natural family...not a voluntary association... or a socioeconomic class or political movement.[98]

Liberation theology uses a Christian-Marxist view of state sanctioned oppression and poverty for an analysis of the liberation event of Exodus. Needless to say, Levenson can not accept such methodology, for it is certainly not based on economic, political or social concepts in the Hebrew Bible.

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[98] Ibid., p. 152.

The Israelites were not a revolutionary society. Indeed, in their desert wanderings, they begged Moses to return to Egypt where they were sure of their societal position and felt a sense of security, albeit an oppressive one. The people were hardly willing to listen to their leader Moses when the demand for freedom was made to Pharaoh. In addition to their reluctance to take up the struggle for mass exodus and freedom, the Israelites were not an organized, cohesive community. In the beginning of the exodus story, they had little respect for the leadership of Aaron and Moses. The people were not revolutionaries, they merely wanted to escape from bondage.

Furthermore, as Levenson notes, the liberationist ideal of "early Israel as 'a classless society, a society of primitive communism,' is a...case of historical projection."[99] Citing Exodus 20:22-23:33, Levenson notes that the covenant assumes property rights, and differentiates between male and female obligations. The Israelites were not and did not become a classless or communist society.

The message of the exodus story is not merely one of liberation from oppression; it is the acceptance of God by the whole house of

[99] Ibid., p. 132.

Israel. God parted the sea and the Israelites were redeemed in order to receive and obey the laws of God so that they might enter into the promised land. The Israelite acceptance of divine laws is rooted in a unique relationship with the Divine. The theme of freedom in Exodus is such that freedom is celebrated by service to God.[100]

Although the primary message of the exodus story concerns covenant and service to God, the idea of liberation and divine desire for freedom from oppression can not be overlooked in the text. God indeed heard the cries of the poor. God hears the poor and enslaved independently of the covenant. "In short," writes Levenson, "an adequate theology must reckon both with the chosenness of Israel and with what the liberation theologians tend to call the preferential option for the poor."[101] Levenson admits that God might have heard the cry, and indeed God is a just God, but the exodus from Egypt did not occur because God suffers with the people or because God is on the side of the poor. The Israelites left Egypt because that is part of the divine plan. The Israelites were redeemed in order to receive

[100] Ibid., p. 132-142.
[101] Ibid., p. 151.

their own gift of freedom—the freedom to accept and obey God's commandments.

Michael Walzer

Michael Walzer, in his book, Exodus and Revolution, attempts to show that the exodus story is the first instance in history of political revolution. Unlike Levenson, Walzer seeks to interpret the exodus event as a political story with contemporary social, economic and political ramifications. Walzer is not a theologian and is not particularly interested in interpretive methodology or issues of biblical criticism.

While not a theologian, Walzer does acknowledge the theological implications and significance of God in the Book of Exodus. The exodus event is entirely due to the will of God, yet Israelite redemption is also dependent on Moses and the Israelites themselves. It is important to see "where divine intervention is decisive and where it is not. The Israelites are not, after all, magically transported to the promised land."[102]

[102] Michael Walzer, Exodus and Revolution (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1985), p. 10.

Walzer writes that the exodus story is the beginning and center "of Jewish religious thought [which plays] a part in each of the reiterated attempts at Jewish politics, from the Maccabean revolt to the Zionist movement."[103] Exodus is not only the paradigmatic freedom text, it is the first manual of sorts for engaging in revolutionary politics.

The collective liberation of the slaves from the oppression of state power is crucial for understanding exodus politics. The Israelites were enslaved *en masse* by the government: "Pharaoh did not enslave them for the sake of profit...but...they were oppressed, that is, ruled with cruelty, ruled tyrannically."[104] It follows that the Israelites were freed as a people and not individually. The liberation was about the people's victory over the state. Pharaoh's army drowned in the sea and the revolutionaries won freedom from state tyranny.

The Israelites in Egypt had a political leader in Moses. Moses, through God, leads the people out of slavery into the wilderness

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[103] Ibid., p. 6.
[104] Ibid., p. 30.

where they eventually organize themselves into a political society. As in the contemporary formation of political communities or regimes, the establishment of a cohesive civic and bureaucratic community was not without opposition. Walzer notes that the Golden Calf event is the first instance of counterrevolution. "The mobilization of the Levites and the killing of the idol worshippers constitute, from the standpoint of politics, an absolutely crucial moment in the transition from house of bondage to promised land."[105] A subgroup of the Israelites took action against the common purpose of the mission. Freedom for the Israelites was delayed until the counterrevolutionaries were subdued.

For Walzer, solidarity with and freedom for the oppressed are central to exodus politics; the exodus is a story of the oppressed receiving the freedom to act as moral agents. For "the covenant...requires not only that we take a stand against oppression but that we do so in 'authentic solidarity' with the oppressed."[106] As the acceptance of the covenant requires direct political action, it also

[105] Ibid., p. 55-59.
[106] Ibid., p. 96.

requires adherence to divine law. In fact, freedom for the Israelites is the privilege and independence to follow God's laws.

The exodus story for Walzer is fundamentally a political one. He understands that the Israelites needed to establish a 'government' while wandering in the desert, thus creating social order and ensuring entrance into the promised land. Democracy, not human kingship, would rule the people, and (according to the covenant) the ultimate ruler would be God.

Like Levenson, Walzer does not separate the liberation event from the covenant. Yet for Walzer, liberation and covenant are bound not because of the chosenness of the Israelites, but because the covenant is that which is responsible for the people taking action. Divine laws require action and commitment. The revolution does not stop with the exodus out of Egypt. It continues to play a major role in Israelite history. Passivity and neutrality have no place in a covenantal agreement. The covenant "is therefore a reason for political action. In Jewish thought the crucial responsibility that individuals take upon themselves is to live in accordance with divine law."[107]

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[107] Ibid., p. 90.

After wandering in the desert, the former slaves emerged as free men and women able to accept divine laws and enter into covenant with God. Only free human beings are able enter into the covenant, thereby establishing a new social and political order. A political society was formed after the acceptance of the covenant. The

> covenant is an explicit incitement to action....But when the people engage themselves again—it doesn't matter whether they are repeating an event in their own history or in someone else's history—they make themselves into free men and women. Having committed themselves of course, they are in an important sense unfree, bound to obey the law. Since they have bound themselves, however, they are freely bound.[108]

The covenant is part of the divine promise. Formed in the transitional space between Egypt and the promised land, the covenant shaped a relationship of reciprocity and inaugurated a new era. The Israelites were ready to enter the promised land only after they became an organized civic and social community. The exodus story is about liberation "not as a movement from our fallen state to the messianic kingdom but from the slavery, exploitation, and

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[108] Ibid., p. 96.

alienation of Egypt to a land where the people can live with human dignity."[109]

From slavery to freedom to the promised land, the liberation story is one of hope: release from bondage, formation of a covenant people and establishment of a politically and socially just community. Walzer's interpretation of the exodus story does not end with the attainment of the covenant. It is the promised land that provides the impetus for undertaking the responsibilities of the covenant. The promised land represents the hope that all oppressed need to reach a state of freedom. It is hope that encourages and leads the people into freedom's land.

Walzer does not criticize liberation theology with regard to the interpretation of the exodus story, but instead offers a political theory of Jewish liberation. Jewish liberation does not end with the exodus out of Egypt. For the covenant cannot be severed from liberation. In addition, while God is involved in much of the process, the people are not exempt from working towards their own emancipation. The promised land is tied to both covenant and liberation. Where the liberationist sees Jesus as offering hope of eternal and complete

[109] Ibid., p. 149.

freedom, Walzer sees the promised land as the representative of final redemption and hope for the coming of the messianic age of justice and freedom. Exodus is only one third of Jewish liberation theology. The book of Exodus

> taught, or what it has commonly been taken to teach about the meaning and possibility of politics and about its proper form:
> --First, that wherever you live, it is probably Egypt;
> –Second, that there is a better place, a world more attractive, a promised land;
> --and third, that the 'way to the land is through the wilderness.'[110] There is no way to get from here to there except by joining together and marching.[111]

Conclusion

Both Walzer and Levenson agree with the liberation theologian's understanding of the exodus story as a narrative about the freedom and hope of an oppressed people. Levenson's basic criticism of liberation theology is, that it radically alters the meaning of the text. He is opposed to the notion of "Christian supersessionism, whereby others besides the Israelites become the subject of the liberation narrative."[112] Yet, Levenson fails to see that for the

[110] W.D. Davies, The Territorial Dimension of Judaism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 60.
[111] Walzer, p. 149.
[112] Brueggemann, p. 100.

Christian reader, the Old Testament is Truth, and not the Hebrew Bible. The liberationists are merely interpreting the text according to their own religious and moral faith claims. Liberation theology, which began in Latin America, does not claim to represent the views of anyone but its particular constituency.

As I suggested in chapter one of this paper, interpretation is left to the individual once the original intent of the author is no longer retrievable with any certainty. New Testament theologians are not interpreting the exodus event as it appears in Hebrew Scripture. They interpret the exodus story as a component of Old Testament history, a precursor to the greater New Testament tradition.

While Levenson's reading has much merit, I do not accept his attempt to limit the interpretation of the sacred text to a single context. Although Levenson agrees that the liberation text is a paradigmatic freedom text, he insists that any interpretation of the exodus story must acknowledge the "primary Jewishness of this narrative...."[113] That insistence, in my view, is unjustified.

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[113] Ibid., p. 100.

Walzer's interpretation of the exodus takes into account the fundamental linkage of liberation and covenant. The exodus gives Walzer a recipe for political action. The political revolutionaries left Egypt and immediately entered into a covenantal relationship. An unnatural state of pure freedom cannot be attained or maintained for long periods of time and so a covenant must be created. Walzer's claim that the Israelites were political revolutionaries is not convincing. Indeed, they were oppressed, they longed for freedom, but they also longed to get back to slavery once they experienced the insecurity and distress of freedom. The Israelites did not know what was in store for them at the time of their release.

The entire exodus event—oppression, freedom, covenant, promised land—is indeed a paradigm for successful political action and revolution. The people experienced evil and cried out for change, change happened and filled the people with hope. The people were willing to carry on the struggle through the desert wilderness because the goal of reaching the promised land seemed attainable. Any political cause must have hope and a goal in order to be sustained. While Walzer does not directly comment on or critique liberation theology, he would agree that the exodus is a mandate for

contemporary praxis. The status quo of inequality and injustice is unacceptable.

Specific approaches to the narrative aside, neither Levenson nor Walzer separates the covenant (or the promised land) from the exodus event. The covenant is an integral part of the liberation event; they are dependent upon one another. Thus, although chapters 1-17 comprise a main component of the story, the entire narrative from Exodus to Joshua are required for the full impact; the liberation is only one third of the story. As the traditional Jewish commentators suggest, the liberation occurred for a higher purpose: the covenant and divine selection of the people Israel.

Although the exodus text is a particular story about a particular people, it is not an exclusively Jewish text. The sacred text belongs to all who read it and treasure it. Liberation theology offers one specific understanding of the exodus story. The exodus is relevant to the lives of the impoverished in Latin America; they read and study the text along with the teachings of Jesus and they are given strength and hope and a renewed faith.

If the exodus can provide hope and meaning to the lives of people in third world countries, and if it encourages the people to take

political action that will bring about justice, then those living in the West, and Jews in particular, can share ownership in the narrative. Jews in America can read and study the exodus text not only as the paradigmatic text in which they remember the "God you led you out of Egypt" but also the "God who hears the cries of the oppressed."

A Jewish Liberation Theology

A Jewish liberation theology is a valuable component of contemporary Jewish thought and practice. The exodus principles of freedom, covenant and hope in the coming of the messianic age must be brought into the forefront of Jewish praxis today. A Jewish liberation theology will differ significantly from the Latin American version, for Jews are commanded to pay attention to their particular history. Taking care of the poor, widow, and orphan, however, are not optional and we cannot be oblivious to the plight of those who are oppressed.

Dan Cohn-Sherbok, in his book, On Earth as it is in Heaven: Jews, Christians, and Liberation Theology, states that there are indeed numerous similarities between Judaism and Liberation Theology. He urges Jews to participate in the goals and actions of

Liberation Theology. Cohn-Sherbok stresses the similarities between Jesus' mission and Jewish theology when he writes,

> Like the prophets of the Old Testament, Jesus is seen as the conscience of Israel. Just as the ancient prophets criticized the people of Israel for their iniquity so did Jesus attack the scribes and Pharisees for their lack of righteousness. Given this understanding, It is possible for Jews to gain an appreciation of Jesus' mission.[114]

What is needed is not a merging of the two, but a Jewish liberation theology. There is no reason the two theologies cannot coexist, since they share a common concern for the principles of emancipation and the uplifting of the poor.

Jews, like the liberationist, must recognize the emancipation of the Israelite slaves as the divine call for justice against oppression and oppressors. While the liberation story is inexorably joined to the covenant in Jewish thought, it may be understood in its own right as well. Liberation means one thing when conjoined to covenant, and something else when it is taken on its own. And the two meanings should be viewed as complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

A Jewish liberation theology emphasizes the universal concept of freedom from oppression and hope for the coming of the messianic

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[114] Dan Cohn-Sherbok, On Earth as it is in Heaven (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987), p. 113.

age. As the Jews were freed, and as we are told God heard the cries of the poor, the exodus story must become the paradigmatic basis for engaging in Tikkun Olam—the mending and repairing of the world.

A Jewish Liberation theology acts in the social, political and economic sectors of society in order to bring about universal justice and the end of oppression. The Jewish liberationist works for the freedom and release of all oppressed, impoverished people. Like the Latin American theologian who calls for the Catholic Church to put aside its neutrality and take a stand for the preferential treatment of the poor, Jews too, must side with the poor and downtrodden. It is not an option. Advancing the cause of justice and peace is a sacred deed and commandment.

Jews are commanded to remember the exodus story in order that they might not treat others as Pharaoh treated them. A Jewish liberation theology must note the chosenness of the Israelites, but may not overlook the fact that God also heard the cries of all who are oppressed.

For Jews, the story contains the particular idea of selection and the universal notion of a just and inclusive society. The Chofetz Chaim, in a commentary on Exodus, notes that "[t]he Exodus

teaches such important lessons that that itself is enough reason for it to have occurred. But its main purpose was so that [the Jews] should receive the Torah."[115]

Jews, therefore, must take unique ownership of their historical enslavement and liberation. But it is not enough merely to remember; Jews also must actively pursue justice and mercy. The exodus must be understood not only as an event specific to Jewish identity, but also as a story of divine redemption from political and social oppression. The political dimension of the story has not yet been fully appreciated by the Jewish community.

A Jewish liberation theology is a desirable product of the present-day reading of the exodus story. Unlike Latin American liberation theology, a Jewish liberation theology retains the Sinai covenant and devotion to the Land of Israel as a basis for praxis along with the liberation itself. For the covenant not only requires the Jew to remember slavery; it also commands one to be a responsible and active member of the community, striving to work for an end of oppression and injustice.

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[115] Chofetz Chaim, Let My People Go, trans. Raphael Blumberg (Jerusalem: Bais Yechiel, 1993), p. 36.

A key component of a Jewish liberation theology is a broader definition of freedom. Freedom entails not only the opportunity to follow God's laws, but also freedom of expression and freedom from economic, political and social oppression.

Taking the lead of the liberationist, a Jewish liberation theology may call upon all Jews of faith to give special priority to the commandments of taking care of the poor and pursing justice and mercy. Jews must work to end oppression not only because it is a mitzvah, a commandment, but because it is integral to the covenant. Once we were slaves and now we are free, and the price of our freedom is that we must work for the coming of God's kingdom, the coming of universal peace and justice.

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