

from the editor

The book of the Book of Exodus

I was brought up in an irreligious family, but somehow in high school I was moved to read the Pentateuch. Although I skipped much of Leviticus, as well as untold *begats*, mostly I was captivated. Reading the King James Version is like listening to the low-brass passage in a great Romantic symphony: earthshaking and sublime, and you feel the music vibrating under your breastbone. And there's the sheer storytelling force of the five books—especially the flight from Egypt. Exodus is a disjointed work, repetitive yet inconsistent. But it's filled with anguish and triumph. Pharaoh's inflexible fury, the lamb's blood on the doorposts, the frantic mass escape at night with no time to let the bread rise: I believed it all, or most of it.

But I've now read *The Book of Exodus: A Biography* (Princeton University Press, 2019), by Joel S. Baden '99, Professor of Hebrew Bible at Yale Divinity School. And I've been educated. Apparently, there weren't many Israelites in Egypt. "Groups of people cannot avoid leaving some trace of themselves behind," writes Baden. "And yet, when it comes to the Israelites of the Exodus, either in Egypt or in the wilderness, we have nothing. Not a single material trace of Israel's presence has been discovered." (His grandmother was saddened when he explained this once at a family Seder.)

Still, he says, evidence exists that the Egyptians enslaved some Semitic individuals and possibly small groups of Semites. And some of them got away. Over time, "a relatively steady trickle" of escaping Semites may have made their way through Sinai and to the hill country in the northeast. The Exodus story, with all its contradictions and conundrums (40 years to get from Egypt to the Promised Land!), may be an amalgam of the memories and exaggerations and beliefs of "a growing community . . . defining itself against its Canaanite origins: the nascent Israelites."

And all that is only Baden's first chapter. His book is a "biography" because it describes many of the countless groups who have turned to the Exodus story for their own needs. Some of the more moving examples of people seeking new beginnings, new places, or better lives are in his chapter on civil rights. In 1794, Richard Allen, a freed slave, wrote to white abolitionists, "You have wrought a deliverance for many from more than Egyptian bondage." In 1862, a black abolitionist named John Rock compared Jefferson Davis to Pharaoh and Abraham Lincoln to Moses. (Baden also notes that "for the slave-owning South . . . , it was not the black population that represented Israel; they claimed that mantle for themselves.") Martin Luther King and Malcolm X called on Exodus with very different aims: King's to advise that the black community have the patience of the Israelites in the wilderness, and Malcolm's to demand that black people be given "freedom in a land of their own."

It's a short book, and I wish Baden had been able to examine whether religions and peoples beyond Jews and Christians had encountered the story, and how they'd remodeled it for themselves. But he touches on Exodus's roles in many places and theologies, including Mormonism, the writers of the New Testament, liberation theology, and those Puritans whose Exodus meant sailing across the Atlantic to found colonies like New Haven. Exodus has been, he says, central to the Jewish and Christian traditions for 3,000 years: "We would not be who we are—whoever are—without it."


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