

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-88367-2 - Methods for Exodus
Edited by Thomas B. Dozeman
Excerpt
[More information](#)

Introduction

THOMAS B. DOZEMAN

THE GOALS OF THE BOOK

Methods for Exodus is intended to be a textbook for students on biblical methodology. We have two aims in writing this book. Our first goal is to introduce six distinct methodologies that aid in the interpretation of the book of Exodus. The six methodologies are literary and rhetorical, genre, source and redaction, liberation, feminist, and postcolonial criticisms. These methodologies are not exhaustive, but they illustrate the range of contemporary critical interpretations of the book of Exodus. The introduction of the distinct methodologies is similar to many other books on methodology that are available to students. Yet we hope to contribute to the growing literature on the subject by focusing in particular on the role of the six methodologies in the interpretation of the book of Exodus. To this end, each of the following six chapters of the volume will illustrate how a particular methodology has contributed to the interpretation of the book of Exodus. The authors will clarify the hermeneutical presuppositions of the methodology under study and the impact of the method on the interpretation of the book of Exodus as a whole. We have also selected Exodus 1–2 and 19–20 to illustrate in more detail the application of each methodology to specific texts.

Our second aim is to demonstrate the ways in which the different methods relate to each other. This goal is more innovative, since there has been a growing tendency in contemporary biblical interpretation to isolate methodologies from each other in an effort to focus on one particular way of reading over another. The volume will clarify significant differences between the six methodologies. But it will also illustrate ways

in which a critical reading of the book of Exodus is enriched through the use of multiple methodologies. Thus the authors will often note where methods conflict, qualify, or complement each other. Our aim is to equip readers with a range of distinct methodological tools for interpreting the book of Exodus, while also providing guidelines, where possible, on the points of contact between the divergent methodologies, indicating where they may work in consort or supplement each other.

The book of Exodus has been and continues to be a significant resource for the development of biblical methodologies in the Modern and Post-Modern periods. In the Modern period, the account of the Israelites' liberation from slavery in Egypt gave rise to a range of important historical-critical methodologies, which continue to inform the interpretation of the book, including the exploration of the genre of the ancient literature, the identification of the authors, and the investigation of the social setting out of which the narratives and laws were written. The questions of authorship, genre, and social setting are primary aims of interpretation in the methods of source, redaction, and genre criticisms. At the close of the Modern period interpreters began to supplement the questions of authorship, genre, and social setting with a more concentrated investigation of the literary character of the book of Exodus in its own right, paying particular attention to the organization and the stylistic features of the narratives and laws within the book. The new interest in the literary character of the book of Exodus fueled the development of literary and rhetorical criticism toward the end of the twentieth century, with the result that the study of plot, character, and rhetorical features of narrative and law became a firmly fixed methodology in the interpretation of the book of Exodus.

Literary and rhetorical criticism also provided transition from the Modern to the Post-Modern period. The interest in the literary study of the text, rather than authorship or composition, paved the way for a further change in the focus of interpretation, in which the social and political context of the reader become the resource for critical study. Thus, in the Post-Modern period, interpreters have moved beyond the concentration on the author or the text in order to turn a critical gaze on the role of the reader in fashioning the meaning of the book of Exodus. The result is that the Exodus has become a springboard for a series of methodologies,

where the emphasis is on the dynamic role of the interpreter, whose identity, experience, and social location are recognized as formative for the creation of meaning. This shift in emphasis is important in liberation, feminist, and postcolonial criticisms, which explore the ideology of gender, race, class, and empire in the interpretation of the Exodus.

The history of interpretation in the Modern and Post-Modern periods illustrates a significant change concerning where interpreters search for meaning in the book of Exodus. The result is an array of different methodologies now available to all interpreters of the book of Exodus. In the early twentieth century, meaning was located in the authors of the literature, giving rise to the “historical-critical” methodologies of source, redaction, and genre criticisms. By the end of the century, interpreters came to recognize their own creative role in the construction of meaning, which fueled the more “ideologically” oriented methodologies of liberation, feminist, and postcolonial criticisms. The emergence of the different methodologies reflects significant social and intellectual reflection in the twentieth century over the nature of authority and where it should be located in the interpretation of religious texts. Does the authority of the book of Exodus reside in the past with the authors and their social setting? in the book itself detached from its historical context? or in the present reader who infuses the literature with his or her own lived experience which, in some cases, may have been excluded from past interpretations? The rapid pace of social change at the end of the twentieth century has resulted in a growing dichotomy between the so-called historical-critical and ideological methodologies as interpreters debated the nature and location of religious authority in the interpretation of the book of Exodus. We hope that the following chapters will clarify the important differences between the six methodologies and enable readers to become competent practitioners of each hermeneutical approach for reading the text.

We also hope to assist readers in bridging the dichotomy between historical-critical and ideological methodologies that has developed over the past decades. A careful reading of the following chapters will illustrate how interdependent the different methodologies are even though they represent a variety of hermeneutical approaches to interpretation. A comparison of the chapters will illustrate, for example, that the literary

criteria which allow for the identification of distinct authors in source criticism, such as repetition and key works, are the same features that literary critics use to discern the unified structure and plot of texts; that the study of Hebrew stylistics incorporates the unique literary features which arise from the identification of a composite text in source criticism; and that the literary approach of rhetorical criticism even emerged as an extension of redaction criticism, thus intertwining the history of composition and the literary study of the present text. A similar interdependence between methods is evident in genre and postcolonial criticisms, where the quest to describe the genre of ancient historiography includes the topics of empire, colonizer, and colonized that are central to a postcolonial reading of the Exodus. Any number of other examples might also be listed such as the importance of the historical reconstruction of the social world of ancient Israel for liberation criticism, or the crucial role of the recovery of the role of women in the ancient world in feminist criticism. We will see further that the recognition of the reader's active role in creating meaning so central to feminist, liberation, and postcolonial criticisms has also transformed the study of genre criticism from a quest to describe preexisting categories, such as myth, history, or legend, to the recognition that humans create generic categories as we interpret literature. The following chapters will provide many more examples of the interdependence between the distinct methodologies, with the work in one chapter often cross-referenced to that of another. The few examples already listed underscore the importance of overcoming the growing dichotomy between the so-called historical-critical and ideological approaches to the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. It is our hope that this volume will provide a clear understanding of the distinct methodological tools for interpreting the book of Exodus, while also encouraging readers to look for points of contact and even interdependence among the divergent methodologies.

THE BOOK OF EXODUS

The following summary is intended to provide a brief overview of the structure and thematic development of the book of Exodus as background for the more detailed studies in the following chapters. The book of Exodus is an episode in the larger story of the Pentateuch.

The background to the events in the book is the divine promise of lineage and land to the ancestors in the book of Genesis (e.g., Gen 12:1–4, 13:14–17). The book of Exodus opens by recalling the divine promise to the ancestors, when it states that the family of Jacob had grown into a great nation, fulfilling one aspect of the divine promise (Exod 1:7). But Israel's vast population in the land of Egypt, not Canaan, threatens Pharaoh, prompting oppression and even genocide. The result is a paradoxical situation at the outset of the book of Exodus. The partial fulfillment of the divine promise creates suffering, not blessing, for Israel.

The suffering of Israel in Egypt and the unfulfilled divine promise of land provide the background for probing two central themes about YHWH, the God of Israel: the character of divine power and the nature of divine presence in this world. Although the two themes are interwoven throughout the entire book, each takes prominence at different stages in the story, allowing for a loose division in the outline of the book of Exodus. The division is indicated by geography. The theme of divine power is explored, for the most part, in the setting of the land of Egypt (Exod 1:1–15:21). The theme of divine presence is developed in the setting of the wilderness, as Israel journeys with God from Egypt to the promised land of Canaan (Exod 15:22–40:38).

Exodus 1:1–15:21 narrates the conflict between YHWH and Pharaoh over the fate of Israel. It is an epic battle between kings and gods. The weapons of war are the forces of nature. YHWH summons reptiles, insects, and meteorological elements, including hail and darkness, in an initial assault on Pharaoh (Exod 7–10). When these elements fail to persuade Pharaoh to release Israel from Egyptian slavery, the personification of death itself, described as “the destroyer,” descends upon the land of Egypt in the darkness of midnight, slaying all Egyptian firstborn children and animals (Exod 11–12). Even the plague of death does not dissuade Pharaoh from continuing the conflict. During the night he musters his army one last time and pursues the fleeing Israelites to the Red Sea (Exod 13), where YHWH destroys him at dawn, this time using the sea itself as a weapon (Exod 14). The hymns in Exodus 15 look back over the battlefield and confirm the power of God, praising YHWH as a warrior God, who possesses power over Pharaoh and over all the forces of nature.

Exodus 15:22–40:38 describes the ways in which YHWH is able to be present with Israel in this world as they journey toward the promised

land. This story is also told on an epic scale. The forces of nature change their role from providing YHWH with weapons of war, to signaling the presence of God with Israel. God purifies polluted water for Israel (Exod 15:22–27). The miracles of water from the rock (Exod 17:1–7) and manna (Exod 16) save Israel from starvation. Advice by Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, about worship and government (Exod 18) provides transition from the initial wilderness journey to the revelation of the law and the sanctuary on Mount Sinai. Exodus 19–24 describes YHWH's descent on Mount Sinai to reveal covenantal law to the Israelites. Natural forces like thunder, lightning, darkness, and fire signal the nearness of God to Israel and the danger of divine holiness. The need for cultic safeguards results in the revelation of the blueprints for the tabernacle (Exod 25–31). Construction of the tabernacle holds promise for a divine descent from the mountain into the midst of the Israelite camp. But the process is halted, when Israel worships the golden calf (Exod 32). As a result, the story must begin anew, if it is to continue at all. God forgives Israel (Exod 34:1–10), issues new laws for covenant renewal (Exod 34:11–29), and commissions the building of the tabernacle (Exod 35–40). The book of Exodus ends with YHWH finally descending from Mount Sinai and entering the completed tabernacle on New Year's Day (Exod 40:1–2, 7), filling the sanctuary with fire and smoke (Exod 40:34–38).

Moses is the central human character in the book. His story provides a counterpart to the divine epic of war and revelation. The book of Exodus traces his development from being Israel's savior in their escape from Egypt to becoming Israel's mediator during the revelation of law on Mount Sinai. Exodus 2–5 introduce Moses, noting his lack of identity (he is both an Egyptian and an Israelite), his good intentions (he wishes to help his people Israel), and his violent nature (he kills an Egyptian). Moses' early life experience with the Midianites in the wilderness foreshadows Israel's experience in the second half of the book of Exodus. YHWH appears to him at the mountain of God (Exod 3–4) and Moses returns to Egypt to mediate for YHWH in confronting Pharaoh (Exod 5–12). In the process Moses emerges as the liberator of Israel, leading them in their march from Egypt (Exod 13) and even through the Red Sea itself (Exod 14). The mediatorial role of Moses is developed during the revelation of the law (Exod 19–24) and in the construction of the

tabernacle (Exod 25–40). Through repeated trips to the summit of the mountain Moses models the offices of priest, prophetic teacher, and scribe as he purifies Israel, teaches the people the covenant, and records divine law.

Exodus 1–2 and 19–20 represent literature from the two halves of the book of Exodus. Exodus 1–2 introduce the theme of divine power to liberate. The chapters constitute a single scene of several related episodes, including the setting of the Israelite people in Egypt (1:1–7), the fear of Pharaoh and the enslavement of the Israelites (1:8–14), the command for genocide, the resistance of the midwives, and the secret birth and adoption of Moses (1:15–2:10), Moses' initial failed attempt at liberation and consequent flight to Midian (2:11–22), and the slave status of the Israelites in Egypt (2:23–25). Exodus 19–20 explore the theme of the divine presence with Israel in the wilderness. These chapters recount the appearance of Yahweh on Mount Sinai and the revelation of the Decalogue, which progresses from the divine proposal of covenant (19:1–8), the descent and appearance of YHWH on Mount Sinai (19:9–19), and the revelation of the law (19:20–20:20). The two texts provide a rich resource for illustrating the distinctive methodologies in the interpretation of the book of Exodus.

THE OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

The previous summary of the historical development of the different methodologies indicates a near exclusive interest in authorship and historical context at the outset of the twentieth century, which supported source, redaction, and genre criticisms. Literary and rhetorical criticism emerged in the later part of the twentieth century to evaluate more carefully the design of the present form of text, providing transition to the methodologies of liberation, feminist, and postcolonial criticisms, all of which evaluate the role of the reader in a more self-critical fashion. The organization of the volume departs from the historical development of the methodologies, beginning instead with a description of literary and rhetorical criticism. The focus on the present form of the text in literary and rhetorical criticism will provide a helpful introduction to the book of Exodus. The chapters on genre criticism and source and redaction

criticism will describe the literary background, the history of composition, and the different genres of the literature in the book. The chapters on liberation, feminist, and postcolonial criticisms will explore the formative role of contemporary social and political experience as critical tools for interpreting the book of Exodus. The following is a brief synopsis of the chapters in the volume.

Dennis Olson describes the methodology of literary and rhetorical criticism. He states that the goal of the method is to interpret the final form of the biblical text. Olson characterizes the methodology as a “text-centered” literary approach to biblical interpretation that focuses on the structure, poetics, and rhetorical devices that organize narratives and laws. The focus on the literary design of the biblical text was originally intended to complement source and redaction criticism, where interpreters concentrated on the history of composition without paying sufficient attention to the final literary product. But the text-centered literary study of biblical narratives and laws quickly branched out into three broad categories: the constructive literary approach of new criticism that describes the artistic coherence of biblical texts; the oppositional reading of deconstruction that seeks to demonstrate the instability of meaning in biblical texts; and the more dialogically oriented forms of reading such as that of Mikhail Bakhtin that locate the meaning of biblical texts within the context of interpretive communities. The scope of literary and rhetorical criticism underscores how this methodology interacts both with historical-critical theories of composition and with the more reader oriented forms of interpretation.

Kenton L. Sparks reviews the historical development of genre criticism from its origin in form criticism. He notes that the emergence of form criticism in the late nineteenth century sought to describe oral myths and legends that stood behind the book of Exodus and reflected the earliest stage of Israelite social history. Form criticism assumed that the categories of myth, legend, and history had an independent existence, which required interpreters to discover the essence of each category, as for example in the question, what is history? Once the question was answered and the genre was defined, the interpreter could place the correct texts in the proper categories by answering the question, is the book of Exodus history? The problem with form criticism, according to Sparks, was that the application of the method resulted in circular debates over the correct

definition of history and what literature conformed to the category. Form criticism has given way to genre criticism at the close of the twentieth century. Genre criticism represents a rejection of the assumption that categories preexist, or that there is “the” correct definition of myth, legend, or historiography. Genre criticism recognizes instead that humans create generic categories in the process of interpreting literature; it thus incorporates the dynamic role of the reader in the identification of genres. The result is that a text can fit many different generic categories at the same time, because readers create categories as they classify texts which share a common trait or traits. Sparks describes how the classification of literature arises from a comparison of texts within the Hebrew Bible, the broader ancient Near Eastern literary tradition, or even from anthropological evidence from humanity at large. He employs this dynamic method to evaluate the genre of the non-P and P literature in the book of Exodus, the stories of Moses in Exodus 1–2, as well as the character and function of law in Exodus 19–20.

Suzanne Boorer describes source and redaction criticism. She states that the aim of the method is to discern the history of the literary composition of the book of Exodus. Although source and redaction criticism are combined in our study, Boorer clarifies that they represent distinct methodologies. Source criticism unravels the biblical text to identify its earlier written components and, if possible, to discern the date and the historical context of the composition. Redaction criticism moves in the other direction; it puts the text back together describing the literary process by which the sources were combined to form the present text. Boorer traces the development of source and redaction criticism from the nineteenth century to the present, noting both the points of continuity and change in the emerging theories of the Pentateuch’s composition and its literary relationship to the Former Prophets. She highlights the many rhetorical features that aid interpreters in recognizing a composite text of distinct authors. Many of these literary features are also important to literary and rhetorical criticism, even though the goals of source and redaction criticism are very different. Boorer’s application of source and redaction criticism clarifies that Exodus 1–2 and 19–20 are not single-authored compositions, but a collection of writing from multiple authors, with competing interpretations of the meaning of the Exodus and the revelation of law at Mount Sinai.

Jorge Pixley introduces liberation criticism and applies the methodology to the book of Exodus. Pixley states that liberation criticism begins with the hermeneutical insight that biblical interpretation is always influenced by the experience and social location of the reader. More specifically, liberation criticism is grounded in the experience of oppression. Pixley traces the development of liberation criticism from the use of scripture by the economically marginalized and poor in Latin America, where the story of the Exodus plays a central hermeneutical role. This starting point is so important to an understanding of liberation criticism that Pixley is forced to confess the artificial character of introducing liberation criticism in an academically oriented book as this one, which is detached from the remote villages or compact slums of the inner city that has given rise to the method. Pixley clarifies the foundational role of the Exodus for liberation criticism. He describes the presuppositions and emerging methodology of liberation criticism, including the role of memory, the correspondence of relations between the past story of the Exodus and the present circumstances of interpreters – especially the poor and marginalized, the interpretation of the Exodus as the incomplete project of God, in which the story models the freeing of people from oppression, and the active role of praxis in the interpretation of Exodus 1–2 and 19–20.

Naomi Steinberg writes that feminist biblical criticism is a form of scholarly inquiry rooted in the awareness that sexism characterizes both the biblical text and the institutions that claim it and interpret it – both past and present. She traces four developments in contemporary feminist criticism that highlight the importance of women's experiences for biblical interpretation, including the first wave of white North American feminism; race-, social class-, and ethnicity-based feminism; gender-based feminism; and theological feminism. The overview underscores the rich variety in contemporary feminist biblical criticism that has arisen from the diverse social locations and political contexts of the feminist interpreters. Steinberg illustrates this diversity through a range of feminist readings of the book of Exodus, including the recovery of the lost experience of women in ancient Israel, the nature of motherhood in the ancient world, feminist interpretations of the women in Exodus 1–2, and the role of impurity during the theophany in Exodus 19. Her interpretation