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EXODUS

This commentary views Exodus as a cultural document, preserving the collective memories of the Israelites and relating them to the major institutions and beliefs that emerged by the end of the period of the Hebrew Bible. It is intended to help the reader follow the story line of Exodus, understand its sociocultural context, appreciate its literary features, recognize its major themes and values, and note its interpretive and moral problems. It explains important concepts and terms as expressed in the Hebrew original so that both people who know Hebrew and those who do not will be able to follow the discussion.

Carol Meyers is the Mary Grace Wilson Professor in the Department of Religion at Duke University. Meyers has authored, co-authored, or edited such books as *Haggai and Zechariah 1–8* and *Zechariah 9–14*, *The Excavations of the Ancient Synagogue at Gush Halav*, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*, and *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of the Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament*.

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*T*o Baruch A. Levine and Nahum M. Sarna

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Preface



Of all the books in the Hebrew Bible, Exodus perhaps has had the greatest impact beyond the ancient community in which it took shape. The account of escape from oppression has become a great narrative of hope for peoples all over the world. The tale of courageous prophetic activity often has served as a model for struggling community leaders. The values embodied in the legal traditions are reflected in the law codes of many countries. The attention to the physical setting as well as the moral issues involved in the service of God reverberates in houses of worship everywhere. The establishment of a final form of Exodus as part of Hebrew scripture was both the end product of a long process of tradition formation and, at the same time, part of the beginning of the book's profound and enduring role in Christianity and Islam as well as Judaism.

Although it is not the first book in the Bible, Exodus arguably is the most important. It presents the defining features of Israel's identity, as it took shape by the late biblical period. First and foremost are memories of a past marked by persecution and hard-won, if not miraculous, escape. As it is recounted in Exodus, this past is inextricably linked with a theophany on a national level at Sinai, the initiation of a binding covenant with the god whose name is revealed to Moses, and the establishment of community life and guidelines for sustaining it. In addition, Exodus connects central characteristics of ancient Israel's spiritual and religious life as well as its defining cultural practices, as they are known from texts that were formed centuries after Israel first emerges in the land of Canaan, with the story of freedom. The forty chapters of this biblical book give vivid reality and texture to the paradigm of divine communication through prophets, the existence of a national shrine with priestly officials and sacrificial offerings, the celebration of festivals such as the weekly Sabbath and the annual Passover, and the practice of ancient customs such as circumcision and the redemption of the firstborn. And perhaps most significant, ideas about the nature of the divine in relation to humanity are given specificity through the role of one god, Yahweh, in the unfolding drama of what is reported in Exodus.

The dramatic flow of the narrative, however, belies the diversity of its literary genres as well as the complexity of the text and the problem of its relation to the emergence of the people of Israel in the eastern Mediterranean thousands of years ago. The appealing universality of many of its themes masks the moral ambiguities of an account that celebrates the freedom of one people amidst the suffering of others. And its canonical authority tends to privilege social constructs that were pioneering in the Iron Age but are less compelling in the twenty-first century. Moreover, so well known are the outlines of this master narrative of escape to freedom and establishment of community that the various shadings and nuances of the dramatic picture are overlooked. And many of the ideas about God and God's manifestation in the world so often are accepted as unique that their origins in or relation to the wider culture of the ancient Near East go unnoticed.

Exodus demands close attention. Too few people outside the academy are aware of how scholars and students of the Bible since antiquity have puzzled over the form and function of its contents while at the same time drawing inspiration from its story. In each generation, new insights have become available from developments in the wider intellectual world of its interpreters. This commentary thus attempts to examine afresh the historical, social, literary, and religious dimensions of Exodus in light of the tools and insights available at the beginning of the twenty-first century. While remaining mindful of the long tradition of scholarly and theological exegesis, it takes into account the contributions of approaches that have developed in recent decades, in which scholars have become more attuned to the particular social settings of the shapers, as well as of the subjects, of the text and have learned much about how to understand the literary artistry of the Bible. Although they are not explicitly labeled as such, various methodologies have been incorporated into this commentary. I have sought to combine sociocultural perspectives with attention to the design of the completed text as well as to the cumulative wisdom of centuries of biblical scholarship in the hope that a multiplicity of resources allows for a balanced and comprehensible reading of the text.

Many people have played a role in bringing this project to completion. I am grateful to the editors of the *New Cambridge Bible Commentary* series for inviting me to participate in this enterprise and, especially, to the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament editor, Professor Bill T. Arnold, for his many helpful editorial comments. I am greatly appreciative of the guidance of Andrew Beck of Cambridge University Press at every step of the way and of the expertise of Michie Shaw of TechBooks in seeing this book through production. I am deeply thankful for the cheerful and competent assistance of graduate students Ingrid Moen and Erin Kuhns at Duke University. I am indebted to the many Duke undergraduates whose interests and questions over the years have contributed to my endeavors to understand Exodus. And I am incredibly fortunate to have had the abiding

patience and understanding of my husband Eric, especially when my absorption with Exodus affected our weekends and holidays.

In my first semester of graduate school, I found myself enrolled in a course called “Priestly Documents of the Pentateuch”; the instructor was Professor Baruch A. Levine. Not long afterward, I was in a class, taught by Professor Nahum M. Sarna, in which considerable attention was given to the exodus narrative. As a result of these two experiences early in my doctoral program, I wrote a dissertation focusing on aspects of the tabernacle texts of Exodus. I then moved away from such research interests, drawn to other aspects of biblical studies by my extensive responsibilities in field archaeology as well as my growing awareness of gender issues in ancient societies. It has thus been a special pleasure, in immersing myself in this Exodus project, to return to some of my earliest academic pursuits while drawing upon the fruits of subsequent ones. It is with profound gratitude to them for introducing me to the richness and complexity of the second book of the Bible that I dedicate this commentary to my Exodus mentors, Professors Levine and Sarna. The directions I have taken in this book represent my own navigation of a path they showed to me decades ago.

A Word about Citations



All volumes in the *New Cambridge Bible Commentary* (NCBC) include footnotes, with full bibliographical citations included in the note when a source text is first mentioned. Subsequent citations include the author's initial or initials, full last name, abbreviated title for the work, and date of publication. Most readers prefer this citation system to endnotes that require searching through pages at the back of the book.

The Suggested Reading lists, also included in all NCBC volumes after the Introduction, are not a part of this citation apparatus. Annotated and organized by publication type, the self-contained Suggested Reading list is intended to introduce and briefly review some of the most well-known and helpful literature on the biblical text under discussion.

Abbreviations



| | |
|-------|---|
| AASOR | Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research |
| AB | Anchor Bible |
| ABD | <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> (6 vols.), ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992) |
| ABRL | Anchor Bible Research Library |
| AnBib | Analecta Biblica |
| ANEP | <i>The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament</i> , ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954) |
| ANET | <i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> , ed. James B. Pritchard (2nd edition; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955) |
| ASOR | American Schools of Oriental Research |
| AUSS | <i>Andrews University Seminary Studies</i> |
| BA | <i>Biblical Archaeologist/Archeologist</i> |
| BAR | <i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i> |
| BASOR | <i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i> |
| Bib | <i>Biblica</i> |
| BR | <i>Bible Review</i> |
| BZAW | Beihefte zur ZAW |
| CBC | Cambridge Bible Commentary |
| CBQ | <i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i> |
| COS | <i>The Context of Scripture</i> (3 vols), ed. William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, Jr. (Leiden: Brill, 1997–2002) |
| CR:BS | <i>Currents in Research: Biblical Studies</i> |
| DOTP | <i>Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch</i> , ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003) |
| EA | El Amarna (tablets) |

| | |
|----------------|--|
| <i>EDB</i> | <i>Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible</i> , ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000) |
| <i>EJ</i> | <i>Encyclopaedia Judaica</i> (16 vols; Jerusalem: Keter, 1972) |
| <i>HBD</i> | <i>Harper's Bible Dictionary</i> , ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996) |
| <i>HCOT</i> | Historical Commentary to the Old Testament |
| <i>HSM</i> | Harvard Semitic Monographs |
| <i>HUCA</i> | <i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i> |
| <i>IBC</i> | Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching |
| <i>IDB</i> | <i>Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> (4 vols. and supplement), ed. George A. Buttrick and Keith Crim (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1962 and 1976) |
| <i>IEJ</i> | <i>Israel Exploration Journal</i> |
| <i>Int</i> | <i>Interpretation</i> |
| <i>JANES</i> | <i>Journal of the Ancient Near East Society</i> |
| <i>JAOS</i> | <i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i> |
| <i>JBL</i> | <i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i> |
| <i>JEA</i> | <i>Journal of Egyptian Archaeology</i> |
| <i>JJS</i> | <i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i> |
| <i>JLA</i> | <i>Jewish Law Annual</i> |
| <i>JQR</i> | <i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i> |
| <i>JLR</i> | <i>Journal of Law and Religion</i> |
| <i>JNES</i> | <i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i> |
| <i>JPS</i> | Jewish Publication Society |
| <i>JRS</i> | <i>Journal of Religion & Society</i> |
| <i>JSJ</i> | <i>Journal for the Study of Judaism</i> |
| <i>JSOT</i> | <i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i> |
| <i>JSOTS</i> | Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement |
| <i>KJV</i> | King James Version |
| <i>LXX</i> | Septuagint |
| <i>NAB</i> | New American Bible |
| <i>NCB</i> | New Century Bible |
| <i>NEA</i> | <i>Near Eastern Archaeology</i> |
| <i>NIB</i> | <i>New Interpreter's Bible</i> (12 vols.), ed. Leander Keck et al. (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1994–2002) |
| <i>NIDOTTE</i> | <i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> (5 vols.), ed. Willem A. Van Gemeren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1997) |
| <i>NIV</i> | New International Version |
| <i>NJPS</i> | New Jewish Publication Society version (<i>Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures</i> ; Philadelphia: JPS, 1985) |

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|---------------|---|
| OCB | <i>Oxford Companion to the Bible</i> , ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) |
| OEANE | <i>Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East</i> (5 vols.), ed. Eric M. Meyers et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) |
| OTG | Old Testament Guides |
| OTL | Old Testament Library |
| OTS | <i>Oudtestamentische Studiën</i> |
| RS | field numbers of tablets excavated at Ras Shamra |
| RSV | Revised Standard Version |
| RSR | <i>Religious Studies Review</i> |
| SBL | Society of Biblical Literature |
| SBLDS | Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series |
| SBLMS | Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series |
| TAD | <i>Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt</i> (4 vols.), ed. Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press, 1986–99) |
| TDOT | <i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> (14 + vols.), ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (trans. J. T. Willis, G. W. Bromley, David E. Green, Douglas W. Stott; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974–) |
| TOTC | Tyndale Old Testament Commentary |
| <i>TynBul</i> | <i>Tyndale Bulletin</i> |
| UBS | United Bible Societies |
| VT | <i>Vetus Testamentum</i> |
| VTs | Vetus Testamentum Supplement |
| WBC | Word Bible Commentary |
| WIS | <i>Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament</i> , ed. Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross S. Kraemer (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001) |
| ZAW | <i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i> |