

Freedom Journeys

The Tale of Exodus and Wilderness across Millennia

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For People of All Faiths, All Backgrounds

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44

Exodus in the Life and Death of Jesus

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*Be aware, sisters and brothers, that our ancestors 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 CORINTHIANS 10:1-2

The Exodus story resonates just below the surface of the entire Second Testament. The apostle Paul (cited above) understood the journey “through the Cloud and the Sea” to be archetypal for all believers. We can hear Exodus echoes particularly in the synoptic Gospel narratives of the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, from beginning to end. For example, Matthew’s story of Jesus’s birth (Matt. 2:13-18) is closely patterned after the Moses tale in Exodus 1:15-2:10. And as Jesus hung on an imperial cross, the sky darkened—just as it did over Pharaoh’s Egypt (Exod. 10:21-29).

Here we look at Exodus allusions in the Gospel of Mark, which, as the earliest of the Second Testament narratives of Jesus’s life, represents a “core sample” of early Christian faith. We focus on Mark’s “Passion” narrative of Jesus’s execution at the hands of the Romans as a nationalist dissident and then briefly on a theological understanding of the cross as “Passover midrash.”

Nonviolence: Suffering Becomes Freedom

The Passion begins at the midpoint of Mark's story, where Jesus's disciples were unable (or unwilling) to embrace him as a leader who would face death on a Roman cross rather than bring military victory over the empire (Mark 8:27-31). This crisis occurred at the commencement of a long journey from northern Galilee to Jerusalem, during which Jesus instructed his followers in a "catechism" of nonviolence (Mark 8:34-11:1).

This was no ordinary pilgrimage to the Holy City, however. It represented a sort of archetypal *reversal* of the great Exodus. Rather than lead his followers *out* of imperial bondage, Jesus deliberately headed *into* a confrontation with the political authorities—a journey into the "heart of darkness" of empire in Roman-occupied Judea. *Both* movements—to distance oneself from and to engage the powers—are necessary in the long history of struggles for justice.

And it is instructive that here, as in the Moses story where the Israelite slaves complained that Moses was bringing more oppression upon them, Jesus's followers were skeptical of this liberation march, full of dismissiveness (Mark 8:32) and fear (Mark 9:32, 10:32).

This long march culminated in the "Palm Sunday" demonstration at the gates of the city. Jesus, flanked by peasant supporters, entered the Holy City as a prophet intent on challenging the foundations of state power. Mark's so-called "Triumphal Entry" narrative (Mark 11:1-10) portrays carefully choreographed political street theater designed to repudiate the delusion of messianic triumphalism.

On one hand, the symbolism of the parade invoked several biblical precedents that seem to affirm messianic triumph. The colt recalls Jacob's prophetic blessing that a victorious Judah would celebrate with a donkey's colt and also recalls the return of the Ark to Israel (1 Sam. 6:7-12). The laying of cloaks alludes to Jehu's acclamation (2 Kings 9:13), and the chant echoes the royal processional hymn of Psalm 118:25-26. The parade's starting point "near the Mount of Olives" (Mark 11:1) brings to mind the apocalyptic battle between Israel and her enemies, prophetically imagined by Zechariah (14:1-5).

On the other hand, Jesus's symbolism also meant to *parody* messianic movements in more recent history. The parade mimics the military procession of Simon Maccabee, the guerilla general who liberated the Land of Israel from Hellenistic rule two centuries before (1 Macc. 13:51), and more immediately the pomp and circumstance of Roman procura-

torial liturgies. But Mark's odd account of "commandeering" the colt, which takes up half the episode (Mark 11:2-6), reorganizes the symbolism around a different, expressly *anti-military* Zecharian image:

Shout aloud, daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding upon ... a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war horse from Jerusalem ... and shall command peace to the nations."

ZECARIAH 9:9-10

In this sense Jesus's parade reiterates the spirit of Moses's Exodus march: both liberation movements were unarmed, yet utterly subversive to empire!

Mark next narrates a sequence of conflict stories in the capital city (Mark 11-12). Jesus's "nonviolent siege" began at the Temple, which Jesus intended (unlike his nationalist Zealot contemporaries) not to *defend*, but to *disrupt* in the spirit of Jeremiah (11:15-19; see Jer. 7:3-15). He then locked horns in serial fashion with each stratum of Judean social and political power: chief priests (Mark 11:27-33), landowners (12:1-12, invoking Isaiah 5), Pharisees (Mark 12:13-17), Sadducees (12:18-27), scribes (12:28-40), wealthy patrons of the Temple (12:41-44), and eventually the Sanhedrin (14:53-65).

This sequence can be seen as an (obviously polemical) re-narration of Moses's repeated confrontations with Pharaoh—but now it is the *Judean* authorities who were exposed as oppressors of the poor. This critique is summarized in Jesus's famous lament concerning the destitute widow in Mark 12:43-44.

It must always be acknowledged that the fierce intra-Jewish debates portrayed in the Gospels were twisted by later Christian interpreters (especially after the church made its fateful alliance with Constantine in the fourth century) into a deadly rationale for anti-Semitism. This murderous hermeneutic legacy continues to require renunciation and resistance.

Pilate: Provincial Pharaoh/Caesar

The Second Testament evangelists, however, understood the true architecture of first-century Roman oppression, which is why in Mark's

account, Jesus's final showdown happened facing Caesar's representative, the highest rung on the ladder of power (short of Rome itself) (Mark 15:1-15).

Like Pharaoh, Pilate is portrayed as duplicitous and politically calculating. Mark gives us a caricature of procuratorial pragmatism at work: Pilate managed to send a prominent dissident to the gallows, while dividing the nationalist crowd against itself. After Jesus refused to cooperate with his interrogation, Pilate defused the possibility of a popular uprising by granting a special "holiday" amnesty (Mark 15:6), a shrewd public relations ploy aimed at playing the unruly mob's patriotism off against itself. But as in the Exodus story (1-14) of plagues followed by Pharaoh's frightened kowtowing to God followed by his hardening of his heart, followed by more plagues and more reversals, this narrative is heavy with satire.

There are two elements of Mark's narrative that are, historically speaking, utterly implausible: the absurd scenario of a Roman procurator "consulting" a Jewish crowd (Mark 15:9, 15:12, 15:14), and the inconceivable spectacle of Jews calling for the crucifixion of one of their own (Mark 15:13-14).

Both, however, would be consistent with a literary *parody* of the notorious Roman gladiator tradition. These bloodthirsty games began with an elaborate procession into the amphitheater, then pitted criminals, prisoners of war, or dissidents against gladiators or animals. If the victim survived, the sponsor of the games would "consult" the crowd, which would indicate (thumbs up or thumbs down) whether the combatant should be finished off.

Exodus in the Key of Satire

In this light, Pilate's behavior becomes intelligible, as does Jesus's subsequent "death march" to Golgotha—in Aramaic, the "place of the skull" (Mark 15:21-22). This is bitter Markan political satire: populist Judean sentiment, caught between the conflicting revolutionary claims of the urban guerilla Barabbas and the nonviolent rural prophet Jesus, was co-opted by the imperial overlord and manipulated into the pagan ritual of a gladiatorial trade-off.

Rome prevailed, Judea remained under the boot, and the Nazarene became an imperial statistic.

The fact that all these events took place during the Passover festival provides the most dramatic analogue between Mark's Passion narrative and the Exodus account. These holy days always occasioned political turmoil in colonial Palestine, since it was a time when an oppressed populace reflected on their foundational story of liberation. In Mark's story, the "Last Supper" depicts a Pesach Seder truly "on the run," just as the Hebrew Bible describes the original hasty Exodus (Exod. 12:11): Jesus and his community were hunted fugitives (Mark 14:1), meeting clandestinely in the attic of a "safe house," at which they arrived through an underground network replete with "passwords" (Mark 14:12-16).

From the outset this memorial meal was fraught with anxiety, as Jesus announced he was aware that his community had been infiltrated; he underlined the breach of trust by alluding to the lament of Psalm 41:9 (Mark 14:18). The disciples reacted with self-doubt and recrimination—echoing the internal conflicts that plagued the Exodus community.

Nevertheless, Jesus affirmed his extraordinary solidarity with his betrayal-bound companions: his Pesach homily boldly related the elements of the meal not only to the Exodus story, but also to *himself* (Mark 14:2-24). *He* was the "paschal lamb" (Exod. 12) who renewed the "blood of the covenant" in his death (Exod. 24:8). In place of a Temple offering, he offered his "body as sacrifice," understood as the inevitable cost of his nonviolent practice of resistance to all oppression, Judean and Roman.

Jesus concluded his Pesach reflection by announcing that the feast had become a fast—until justice should prevail (Mark 14:25).

Sharing Bread and Justice

Significantly in the narratology and theology of Mark, the ritual described here—"taking, blessing, breaking, and giving bread"—is identical to Jesus's earlier wilderness feedings of the poor (Mark 14:22 = 6:41). That famous "loaves and fishes" episode was, in turn, a midrashic reenactment of both Elisha's provisioning during a time of famine (2 Kings 4:42-44) and the Exodus tale of manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16). The Eucharistic liturgy celebrated by Christians, therefore, *should* be about remembering the *life* of Jesus, not only his

death, as a practice of "Jubilee justice"—something our churches practice poorly.

That death is the ultimate Exodus moment in the Gospel story. As Jesus languished on the executioner's cross, the last two plagues are re-narrated. "Darkness came over the whole land," Mark tells us, invoking YHWH's judgment against empire and its solar gods (Mark 15:33; see Exod. 10:21–23). But here the old story receives its final twist in Mark: it was the firstborn of the Hebrew peasant girl Miriam, rather than those of the Egyptians (Exod. 11:4–6), who died for the cause of liberation.

From the Gospels' perspective, Jesus's death signaled a seismic shift (in Matthew's version we even get an earthquake [Matt. 27:51–52]) from Passover's symbolism of divine retribution against an intransigent enemy to the suggestion of divine solidarity with the sacrificial offering of the nonviolent warrior's life (see, e.g., 2 Cor. 5:16ff.).

Redemption, Reimagined

Taking Mark's lead, later Second Testament traditions identified Jesus as the Passover "lamb without blemish" (1 Pet. 1:19) who was slaughtered by empire but vindicated by God (Rev. 5:12) and whose blood now provided forgiveness of sins to all (Heb. 9:11–10:18). This brings us in conclusion to a controversial issue: the ways in which Jesus's death was (and is) interpreted by churches as *cosmically* consequential.

The Second Testament offers multiple metaphors for how Jesus's death might be understood as "redemptive." Those drawn from the Hebrew Bible include Levitical purity language, the semantics of Jubilee debt release, covenant symbols, and Jesus as the embodiment of Second Isaiah's "lamb led to the slaughter" (Isa. 53:7).

For the last millennium, however, Christian "aronelement" theology has been dominated by problematic medieval metaphors (e.g., Jesus died "in our stead," resulting in a divine exonerated of otherwise sinful human beings). These views are currently undergoing much-needed critique and revision in Christian theology, and this conversation can be helped by recovering the centrality of the Gospel's portrayal of Jesus's death as a "new Passover" drama.

There are at least four advantages in this approach for Christians:

First, to see the Cross as a kind of Passover midrash preserves the Hebrew tradition of *remembrance* as fundamental to faith identity.

Second, it places what Marvin Wilson (in *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith*) calls God's "liberating involvement in the human predicament" at the center of both liturgy and practice, thus authorizing our ongoing participation in struggles for justice.

Third, it affirms the Exodus conviction that the God of the Bible is *always* identified with the poor, a solidarity Christians see embodied in the Jesus who lived and died on their behalf.

Fourth, part of the Exodus tradition is the prophetic anticipation of future redemption (e.g., Isa. 65:17–18; Mic. 4:1–5), when all remaining pharaohs will be brought low and *shalom* will again flourish here on earth. This resonates with Christian convictions about the resurrection of Jesus and eschatological hope of the world redeemed.

To read the Jesus story, around which the entire Second Testament revolves, is to "re-member" the Exodus, recontextualized in a different imperial epoch. To read these traditions *faithfully* is to recontextualize them in our *own* world, which again groans under the shadow of empire.¹ It is our hope that churches and synagogues might support one another in embracing this task; after all, "our ancestors *all* passed through the Sea."