

## CRITICAL ISSUES IN EXODUS

*Perpetua Mteto*

### **Introduction**

Israelites who have moved from Canaan to Egypt due to famine, multiply in great numbers. This poses a threat to Pharaoh who suppresses them into slavery. They cry out and God hears their cry. God reveals Himself to Moses as a burning bush and sends Moses to lead the Israelites out of the land of Egypt, back to Canaan the land promised to their forefather Abraham.

In this essay I am going to look into the critical issues in the book of Exodus. This will include looking at its dating, historicity, authorship, sources, the targeted audience, Israel's state of religion, theological themes, women in Exodus and end with a conclusion.

### **Historicity and Dating**

There is on-going debate about the authenticity of the Exodus story. It has been largely viewed by the majority of people as historically true because of the fact that it is a biblical story. Scholars have a different opinion as John Collins says there is overwhelming consensus among scholars that the Exodus is a mythical story, as it does not describe accurately the historical events.<sup>1</sup> Anderson notices how the Passover is similar to the nomadic celebration traditionally practiced by shepherds even before Moses, where they would sacrifice a young animal, smear the blood on the entrance of the tents, to secure fertility of their flocks and drive away evil spirits. According to Anderson the Passover idea would then be something that did not originate with the Exodus, making the Exodus a compilation of different traditional stories which cannot be historically placed.<sup>2</sup> This is the reason why most scholars view it as a folk story as stated by Collins.

Nancy Bowen in her contribution on the book of Exodus in the Discipleship's study bible says some scholars argue that the Exodus took place approximately 1400s BCE but others put the date as late as the 1200s BCE. In this case the dating of the Exodus is in question according to the comment by Bowen. Bowen further states that the Pharaoh

mentioned in 1:8 is not identified, therefore dating cannot be accurate without fixing a known period to a Pharaoh. Bernhard Anderson puts the date in line with some Historians who believe that the Exodus began around the 18th dynasty when Ahmose 1 expelled the Hyksos from Egypt after their conquest. The Hyksos constituted Semites, Hittites and Hurrians. They were foreign rulers of Egypt and when Ahmose 1 took over some of the ruling class was driven out.<sup>3</sup> Anderson further explains that some Semites remained in Egypt together with the Hebrews who were also of a Semitic origin. The Hebrews only fell victim to the revival of Egypt during the 15th to the 13th century BCE, when Pharaohs needed cheap labor.<sup>4</sup> This historical narrative may be confirmation that a people called Israelites existed and were enslaved by Egypt at a known period although no Pharaoh is affixed to give the exact time as noticed by Bowen.

### **Authorship and Sources**

Traditionally the book of Exodus is attributed to Moses and thought to have been written around 1400 BCE. The view of Biblical scholars now is that Moses did not write or could not have written Exodus. David Hinson says that there are some discrepancies in the book of Exodus which some scholars use to support their argument that Moses did not write the Exodus. He notices that Moses took his wife and children to Egypt in Exodus 4:20 which is contrary to 18:2-3 where he is said to have left his wife and children at his father in law in Midian. This contradiction puts in doubt the authorship of the book by Moses who would not give different accounts about the movement of his family.<sup>5</sup>

Since the authorship of Moses is in question, Anderson says many scholars conclude that the story of the Exodus comes from two different sources, the Yahwist (J) and the Elohim (E). Anderson goes on to say that some Scholars evidence concludes that the narrative represents a blending of sources as written in Exodus 3:1 where the word God (Elohim) is used interchangeably with Lord (YHWH) indicating the combination of the (J) and (E) sources. One Author would not use two names interchangeably. Lawrence Boadt confirms that the older J and E traditions know of covenants made with Abraham (Gen 15) renewed with Isaac (Gen 26), renewed yet again with Jacob (Gen 28) and finally sealed with Moses

and the one on Mount Sinai (Ex 3 and 24). The authors could have put together information from these different sources making it a case that Moses could not have been the sole author, if at all he was involved.<sup>6</sup>

### **Audience**

It seems the book of Exodus is targeted at Israel throughout their whole life as we find the events in Exodus repeated over and over again even in the New Testament. Stephen the first Christian martyr recounts the Exodus to his fellow Jews stressing the point that they should not be swayed to follow other gods but Yahweh who has come in Christ (Acts 7:1-60). The Old Testament has the laws and precepts of God in Exodus expanded in Leviticus, Numbers and repeated in Deuteronomy where the authors stress the need to keep the laws of Yahweh; the blessings if the laws are kept and the curses where there is disobedience (Deut.27-28).

Anderson notes how the Exodus story remained relevant to the young generation of Deuteronomy when he cites a passage that deals with God's religious instructions. He refers to the passage as it reads; "When your son asks about the meaning and motive of obeying the commandments, the answer is to be given in recitation" of events that took place; past present and future. No Israelite was ever to forget the events of the Exodus.

Bowen connects the Exodus and its laws to the present-day situation. The salvation that humanity seeks today, is a response to God's gracious acts in the Exodus. She says this law has always followed gospel. This is true as scripture is one of the three pillars of the Church together with tradition and Magisterium. This therefore widens the target audience of the book of Exodus; the past, present and future.

### **Israel's State of religion during the Exodus**

The Bible tells us that Israelites dwelled in Egypt for four hundred and thirty years (Ex.12:40). This is a long period that would mean the possibility of the last generations not knowing the God of their forefather Abraham. Moses confirms this notion in Exodus 3:13-14. Here are a people who are being introduced to a new religion of Yahweh. In Egypt where they are coming from, they are subjected to the worship of Osiris

(Horus) of the Isis cult. During their desert journey, they encounter the Tammuz cult that has a lot in common with the Baal religion which is firm on idolatry. Israel is fighting against these strong forces to try and live up to the newly introduced religion of Yahweh. Boadt says Israel found themselves easily compromised to the local cultures and religions and began to serve Baal alongside Yahweh.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, their state of religion is falling short of the expectations of Yahweh.

Israelites show their weakness as early as the first major camp at Mount Sinai where they demand a molded idol god of a golden calf from Aaron (Exodus 32). This proves that the idea of Yahweh and the new religion would take time to sink in them.

### **Theological Themes**

The story in Chapters 3:1 – 4:17, tends to tell us who God is, what he does and his character. God reveals and identifies himself to Moses in a burning bush and converses direct with him. He reveals his divine name as “I AM” (3:13-14). The theophany is a theme in that God can reveal Himself to mankind. Revelation has always stood as a firm confirmation of God’s presents within the lives of humans. This is why, according to Gabriel Moran, God chose a group of people in whom He would reveal Himself in the word.<sup>8</sup>

The next theme is salvation. Boadt views the book of Exodus as a story that narrates the glorification of God who saves. He says although modern readers seem to think that these biblical stories are harsh, primitive, violent and warlike, in the world of the weak who have little protection and fewer rights, the God who fights and defend them is a God worth worshipping. God delivered Israel from slavery and brought them to Mount Sinai where He brought them into a covenant with Himself and lived amongst them in the tabernacle. Here God displays His saving power. The history of salvation continues from the time when God set Abraham apart for this purpose (Gen.12) up to this day where humanity is saved through Christ. Bowen connects the physical bondage of Israelites to the spiritual bondage humanity suffers today because of sin where humanity is seeking salvation through Christ.<sup>9</sup>

All humanity that suffers oppression looks forward to being liberated

one day. The liberation of the Israelites in the Exodus has inspired many freedom movements the world over. According to a comment in *The African Bible*, the Exodus is a book for Africans as they have undergone several forms of oppression due to colonialism. It says Exodus remains a key liberation theme for those that are still oppressed by modern pharaohs. It gives them the will to fight on relying on God who they view as the liberator, in their search for self-identity.<sup>10</sup>

Bowen sees the laws in Exodus as designed to structure covenant life. The laws are derived from family or clan ethos that control forms of broad behavior to develop a guideline based on community experience. Mary Fairchild in her article on God's Justice, also says the Exodus transformed the Jewish people and their religious ethical system, which Christianity and Islam have adopted at their core, making half the world profoundly shaped by the after effects of the Exodus.<sup>11</sup>

### **Women in Exodus**

In Exodus women play prominent roles. Shiphrah and Puah who are the Hebrew midwives disobey Pharaoh who instructs them to kill the male born babies of the Hebrews. Their action saves Moses who later becomes the leader of their salvation and freedom (Ex.1:15-21). Although Moses was her child Jechobed plays an important role as she places Moses in Ark of bulrushes adrift the Nile River. In some sense she is being used by God who has his plan for the chosen people (Ex.2:1-4). Miriam plays the shepherd of Moses until he is picked up by Pharaoh's daughter who becomes Moses savior and adopts him. Miriam is also included in the hierarchy that leads the Israelites out of Egypt from slavery and sings a song to the Lord (Ex. 15:20-21). Zipporah Moses's wife, daughter of Midianite priest Jethro, saves Moses from the anger of God by cutting her son's foreskin as a ritual to please God (Ex.4:24-26). The above mentioned women have played significant roles in the Exodus story in terms of Moses's life, but they are omitted from critical legal issues as only men are chosen to help Moses in leading the people. Women assist in the building and furnishing of the Tabernacle but only men are allowed into the Tent of meeting (Ex. 35:21-26). This shows a patriarchal bias of the Biblical communities. Women are treated as property and Exodus

20:17 supports this view.

### **Conclusion**

While the Exodus story may have its controversies, it has helped in shaping humanity as the events of the Exodus remain relevant today. Our ethics as humans are centered on the Ten Commandments which have become the backbone of all things that relate to God. The Christian world today is shaped by them. The Exodus is the most influential historical event of all time as the recorded events recur in the life of humans. From this exploration, there is show that humanity is still journeying to salvation, looking at all the troubles in the world. Like the Israelites who are looking up to God to save them, humanity is also looking up to God to save them both physically and spiritually today. Exodus remains relevant yesterday, today and tomorrow.

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- <sup>1</sup> Collins, John J. *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age*. New York: Eerdmans Publishing, 2005. 46
  - <sup>2</sup> Anderson, Bernhard W. *The Living World of the Old Testament* 3rd Edition. London: The Longman Group Ltd, 1978. 62-3
  - <sup>3</sup> Birch, Bruce C; Blount, Brian K; Long, Thomas G; O'Day, Gail R; Towner, Sibley W. *The Discipleship Study Bible*. London: John Knox Press, 2008.
  - <sup>4</sup> Anderson, Bernhard W. *The Living World of the Old Testament* 3rd Edition. 39-41
  - <sup>5</sup> Hinson, David F. *The books of the Old Testament Revised Edition*. London: SPCK Holy Trinity Church, 1992. 42
  - <sup>6</sup> Anderson, Bernhard W. *The Living World of the Old Testament* 3rd Edition. 173, 140
  - <sup>7</sup> Boadt Lawrence. *Reading the Old Testament*. New York: Paulist Press, 1984. 199
  - <sup>8</sup> Moran, Gabriel. *Theology of Revelation*. Norwich: Fletcher & Son Ltd, 1967. 42
  - <sup>9</sup> Boadt Lawrence. *Reading the Old Testament*. 73, 165
  - <sup>10</sup> Colacrai, Angelo; Victor Zinkuratire. *The New African Bible*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2011.
  - <sup>11</sup> Fairchild, Mary. *God's Justice*. <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-exodus-effect/> Accessed 09/16/2019.