

“AND YOU SHALL TELL YOUR SON...”: THE CONCEPT OF EXODUS IN THE BIBLE by Yair Zakovitch. 1991. Jerusalem: The Magnes Press. 144 pp.

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Yair Zakovitch is a professor emeritus of Bible at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem who has written extensively on inner-biblical and post-biblical Jewish interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. In this book, he attempts to trace the concept of the exodus throughout the Hebrew Bible in order to demonstrate the impact of this idea on biblical historiography.¹ Using an excellent literary sensibility, Zakovitch illustrates the “variety of expressions and conceptions of the Exodus throughout the Bible” (10).

Zakovitch employs an ideological and literary methodology in order to trace the concept of the exodus in the Hebrew Bible. He summarizes his methodology in the introduction to the book: “Historical issues find no place in such a study as this one. We need not consider whether the Exodus actually took place, who left Egypt, or in what numbers. It is a different history altogether that engages us: the history of ideas” (11–12). He expands upon this explanation in more specific terms in the first chapter when he provides a brief discussion of inner-biblical interpretation. Drawing upon the work of Michael Fishbane (1985), he lays out his model of inner-biblical interpretation which is reminiscent of the rabbinical model: “Inner-biblical interpretation is the light one biblical text sheds on another. The interpreting verse is used either to solve a difficulty in the interpreted text, or to adapt the interpreted text to the interpreter’s own ideas. The interpreting text may be found far from the interpreted one, close to it, or even incorporated into it” (15). Zakovitch limits his examples in each chapter to covert inner-biblical interpretations or “those occurrences of inner-biblical interpretation perceptible only to the reader sensitive to the hints and allusion left by redactors, compilers and interpolators who have incorporated a literary unit into a wider context, or have woven in something of their own in order to present the unit in a new

1. Zakovitch does a commendable job illustrating how the idea of the Israelite exodus from Egypt extends beyond the book of Exodus. In this review, I will use the term “exodus” with a lower-case “e” in order to refer to the idea of the Israelite exodus from the land of Egypt. I will use the term “Exodus” with a capital “E” to refer to the book of Exodus.

light” (15–16). This method is employed in each chapter to trace an exodus motif throughout the entire Hebrew Bible.

Zakovitch divides his book into three chapters, and each chapter is an independent study into how the concept of the exodus has affected the composition of biblical literature. In the first chapter, Zakovitch attempts to answer the question, “Why were the Israelites enslaved in Egypt?” according to the Hebrew Bible (12). He proposes an implicit answer to this question: the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt as punishment for the sins of the patriarchs. One example he provides is Abraham’s sins of leaving Canaan for Egypt and abandoning his wife in order to save his own life. He discusses the thematic parallels between Genesis 12 and the history of Israel in Egypt in order to illustrate how Abraham’s undignified behavior warranted punishment. One problem with these thematic parallels is they are subjective, and it is difficult to discern whether a scribe intentionally composed a narrative to mirror another narrative or a reader/listener of the text would have made these thematic connections. A better signifier of the concept of the exodus impacting the composition of other narratives is linguistic scribal markers.

In the second chapter, Zakovitch analyzes how the Exodus is used as a literary model in the Hebrew Bible. He focuses on two major topics: 1) the covert allusions to the Exodus narrative and 2) Moses as an exemplar figure or biblical characters modeled after Moses. In the first part of the chapter, he reviews events which were modeled after the exodus. These events include, the story of Abraham and Sarah in Egypt, Jacob’s journey to Haran, Jacob’s enslavement to Laban and his departure from there with great wealth, Deborah and Barak’s victory over the Canaanites, the northward journey and settlement of the tribe of Dan, the journey of the Ark of God in the land of the Philistines, and resemblances between the book of Esther and the Joseph cycle. In the second part of the chapter, he discusses how the figures of Joshua, Gideon, Elijah, Elisha, David, and Jeroboam are formed in the image of Moses.

In the third chapter, Zakovitch suggests why the Exodus is such a pervasive concept in the Hebrew Bible. He proposes the exodus is a “separatist vision” and fuel for the “monotheistic revolution” (12). By this he means that because the ancestors of the Israelites were actually Canaanites, it was important to reinforce and intensify the exodus tradition in order to instill a strong sense of separate identity.

Zakovitch does not employ the framework or terminology of collective memory studies in this book, he mentions collective memory only once (46),

but the premises, methods, and aims of this work seem to dovetail nicely with recent studies that have applied collective memory studies to the book of Exodus and the concept of the exodus. A major proponent of this approach is Jan Assmann, a prominent Egyptologist, who has written extensively on the interactions between collective memory studies and ancient Near Eastern religions. He developed the concept of cultural memory and its application to ancient religious texts in works such as *Religion and Cultural Memory* (2006) and *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization* (2011). In *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (1997), Assmann describes his concept of “mnemohistory”: “Unlike history proper, mnemohistory is concerned not with the past as such, but only with the past as it is remembered. It surveys the story-lines of tradition, the webs of intertextuality, the diachronic continuities and discontinuities of reading the past. Mnemohistory is not the opposite of history, but rather is one of its branches or sub disciplines, such as intellectual history, social history, the history of mentalities, or the history of ideas” (68). This approach prioritizes questions concerning how events were remembered over questions concerning what really happened. In *The Invention of Religion: Faith and Covenant in the Book of Exodus* (2018), he brings his decades worth of research on cultural memory to bear on the book of Exodus in order to illuminate how the book of Exodus is the story of an unprecedented invention of a radically new conception of religion which becomes the basis for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. What is particularly unique about this new religion is the covenant between God and the Israelites which results in a monotheism of loyalty. Another application of collective memory studies to the concept of the exodus in the Hebrew Bible is Ron Hendel’s article “The Exodus in Biblical Memory” (2001). This is not a comprehensive overview of the literature, but it provides a window into an approach similar to the one advocated by Yair Zakovitch.

The value of Zakovitch’s work in regards to learning Hebrew is two-fold. First, Zakovitch highlights scholarship written by Israeli scholars in Modern Hebrew concerning the notions of the exodus in the Hebrew Bible. Many American and European scholars are unfamiliar with this corpus of scholarship because of their inability to read Modern Hebrew. These scholars rely upon scholarship composed in Modern Hebrew being translated into English or Israeli scholars, like Zakovitch, publishing a book or article in English. This has resulted in the formation of a chasm between Israeli scholars and American-European scholars. I would be remiss to pass on this

opportunity to encourage my American and European colleagues working in the area of Hebrew Bible to learn Modern Hebrew. Learning Modern Hebrew allows scholars to interact with secondary scholarship written in Modern Hebrew, and it also allows scholars to reinforce their understanding of Biblical Hebrew and the development of the Hebrew language.

Zakovitch also incorporates rabbinical literature into his discussion of the Hebrew Bible. Many scholars of the Hebrew Bible, especially non-Jewish scholars, do not incorporate this large corpus of material into their scholarship. This corpus of literature is not only important for understanding early Jewish interpretations of the Hebrew Bible, but it is also important for understanding the development of the Hebrew language. Reading rabbinical literature allows scholars of the Hebrew Bible to discern how the grammar, syntax, and lexicon of Hebrew changed during the post-biblical period. Furthermore, learning Mishnaic Hebrew helps Hebrew Bible scholars sharpen their understanding of the diachronic developments of Hebrew within the Hebrew Bible because Late Biblical Hebrew begins to include features that will be common in Mishnaic Hebrew.

While this book was published 30 years ago, it still provides many excellent exegetical and hermeneutical observations concerning the development of the exodus tradition in the Hebrew Bible and post-biblical literature. For anyone who wants to observe a model of inner-biblical interpretation put into practice, this book is a good starting point.