

## BOOK REVIEWS

### THE NOTION OF THE EXODUS

by JACOB LICHT

יאיר הופמן, יציאת מצרים באומנות המקרא. תל-אביב, תשמ"ג.

Yair Hoffman, *The Doctrine of the Exodus in the Bible*. Tel Aviv: Tel-Aviv University Press, 1983.

The effect of pivotal events in history may be observed on two levels: that of social reality and that of ideas. The American Revolution, for example, led to very significant changes in power politics, economics, etc., but it has also influenced people's thought and attitudes, engendering various democratic ideals and ideologies. The events related by the Old Testament of course had their impact on the social realities of their times – an impact which has been mostly, if not entirely, spent a long time ago; but the notions and ideas concerning these events, as developed in the Old Testament, are still with us, alive and occasionally kicking. Prof. Hoffman has therefore wisely chosen his subject for a monograph: the *notion* of the Exodus from Egypt, as mentioned and elaborated in numerous Bible texts. He attempts to determine its relative importance on the various levels of the Hebrew Bible, as well as its relevance to the social situations in various different periods of the history of ancient Israel. Hoffman has evidently felt some difficulty in finding an adequate name for his subject, or its parts and aspects; he tries "doctrine," "idea," "ideology," and "myth," and is not quite happy with any term. I think that the English word "notion" serves the context admirably, precisely because it does not imply too much: this book is about the bare notion of the Exodus as being an important event, not about the depths of theological thought it might generate.

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To my way of thinking, the Exodus may be more relevantly treated as a *theologoumenon*, i.e., as a precise theological concept. The Lord has led His people out of Egypt, making a responsible nation out of a sorry bunch of slaves, establishing Israel as His people and Himself as their God by a decisive, concrete act on the level of social and political history. This means that Israel sees itself as existing by virtue of a divine act in history – a somewhat peculiar attitude to human existence. All this should be a rather fruitful line of inquiry. Although Hoffman does not pursue this aspect of his subject in depth (or engage in abstract elaboration thereof), he is aware of it and mentions it occasionally. The question which concerns him is rather: when, and under what socio-political circumstances, did the notion of the Exodus gain its prominence? This is certainly a legitimate and important question (although I have reservations about it, to be discussed below). To answer it, the author examines the numerous texts mentioning the Exodus, and several others which do not, although they might be expected to do so (such as Exodus 15). He dates each text as accurately and responsibly as possible, determines and describes its attitude towards the Exodus, and tries to relate it to the situation or circumstances of the time.

Before giving the results of this inquiry, I must point out that all this is standard procedure. Most of Old Testament scholarship is essentially the attempt to construct a sort of history of ideas in Ancient Israel, showing the various stages of development of its thought, the fruitful tension between the Northern and Southern kingdoms, interpreting texts in their historical context, etc., etc. This is why the job undertaken in the present volume should have been done long ago, and already redone several times. As far as I know, it has not; nor does Hoffman mention a forerunner (and his bibliography is rather thorough). The reason for this curious omission is not difficult to find: most OT scholars of the classical school have been Christians, interested primarily in the themes relevant to their faith. Thus, while the Exodus may be examined for some minor but technically exquisite point (e.g., the distribution of verbs used in the context), it is never studied in its own right as a notion being, after all, a Jewish (i.e., ancient Hebrew) one.

Hoffman's reconstruction of the history of the Exodus theme runs – in barest outlines – as follows. The earliest datable texts in the Old Testament (e.g., the Song of Deborah [Judges 5]), do not mention the Exodus even where one would expect it, or do so without much emphasis. There must have been a well-established Exodus tradition, but the notion did not seem particularly important. When the North seceded from the South at the time of Jeroboam, it became rather convenient for the Ephraimites and their allies to stress the importance of the Exodus. Judah had its ideology of a divinely instituted line of kings, so the people of the North, who did not have a comparable institution, relied on the divine election of *all* of Israel as manifested in the Exodus to counter the claims of a Davidic monarchic ideology. At the time of Samaria's fall, the Exodus theme was among those spiritual values of the North to be adopted by the South; it became a prominent part of the message of Deuteronomy, and penetrated into some layers of

the Priestly Code. The Exodus was rather important during the Exile, as it obviously strengthened the hopes of return. With the establishment of the Second Temple and the settling down of the community around it to a rather humdrum existence, the high excitement of the hopes for a renewed Exodus gave way to disappointment; later on, men's hearts and minds were more attracted by apocalyptic speculations and other more recent ideas. This is why, while the Exodus from Egypt was duly remembered and celebrated (mostly at Passover) as an idea with deep roots in the Jewish consciousness, it was not further developed or given independent prominence in the writings of the Second Temple period.

When thus reviewed in outline form, Hoffman's thesis sounds rather arbitrary, poorly based on textual evidence, and beyond the reasonable limits of scholarly thought. Actually, it has none of these faults. Hoffman builds his argument very carefully, keeping as closely as possible to the scholarly consensus on every detail, avoiding oversimplification, and taking into due account all possible objections; in brief, generally speaking he has done a very professional job. Unfortunately, I am afraid that he has no great chance of persuading his fellow professionals, as he does not share their preconceptions and prejudices. He has thoroughly accepted the general tendency of OT studies, its methods and axioms, and even its basic positions on many points; he nevertheless reaches his own conclusions. His book is also very matter-of-fact in approach, devoid of slogans, and useless as a basis for any ideology. In short, one must be genuinely interested in the subject itself in order to read it. It is a fine book, with a poor future.

Personally, I remain unconvinced, albeit for different reasons. I am somewhat bothered by the very neatness of the job: details which do not fit the thesis are duly noted, properly discussed and explained away. The author should know that in real life, and in literature, things are never quite as neat as that, but since we cannot get at the raw reality of gradually ripening ideas in constantly changing situations, he prefers to keep his argument neat at that level which he can reach. This is an attitude which I can accept, although it bothers me. What I cannot accept is the author's basic belief that sound and solid work on details can somehow substitute for the lack of plain evidence. Very few Old Testament texts can be reliably dated and interpreted as clearly reflecting the political situation of their times; for others, it can be done approximately, making educated guesses, and suggesting the best available solution. The result may serve as a substitute for real information, on one level. It cannot, to my mind, sustain a chain of reasoning in which every link is a best-available-solution depending on another best-available-solution. To suggest a line of development for an idea is a risky enough undertaking even where there is plenty of plain and cumulative evidence available (e.g., the rise of early Protestantism). It is simply too speculative, to my mind, for any aspect of OT studies. This field must be treated synchronically, because a diachronic treatment cannot be properly undertaken without a firm base of objectively given dating. But who in Old Testament research shares my view? Given the commonly accepted methodological assumptions, the book in question deserves the closest attention of all those interested in the subject.

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