

Walzer, Michael. 1985. "Exodus and Revolution". New York: Basic Books [Harper Collins].

Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution* (1985) explores the relationship of the Exodus narrative to the self-understanding of a wide range of revolutionary movements. Arguing that many such groups are directly inspired to action by the example of Exodus, Walzer views it as a foundational, enabling narrative expanding the scope of narrative possibility, a "story that makes it possible to tell other stories" (7). He begins with the observation that the Exodus story is directional, and unlike the etiological myths prevalent in many cultures, does not take a circular form – "the world is not all Egypt" (21), and "the end is nothing like the beginning" (11).¹ It is thus "the original form of progressive history", where progress is understood either as physical liberation or as moral improvement. Egypt is not just abandoned but condemned as a source of both corruption and oppression, and is reinterpreted as something to be transcended rather than participated in.

Walzer interprets the situation of the Hebrew people in Egypt given in the Exodus text as a state of political tyranny (30), and argues that by creating a status category which could not be transcended, the Pharaonic regime closed off the possibility of individual escape from the enslaved condition and motivated a search for group-level solutions.² These group-level solutions necessarily involved political upheaval. In this way, the idea of escape from bondage merges into defeat of the tyrant – "the people as a whole are enslaved, then the people as a whole are delivered" (32) – and salvation is necessarily political. Moral progress can be measured by distinction from the behavior of the oppressing culture (40). There is some risk that the people "will internalize their own crushed identity," and it was precisely this problem of internalized slavishness, Walzer argues, that leads such movements to "wander in the wilderness". This is compounded by "the complex attitude that the oppressed take toward the culture of their oppressors," (36) and by differentiation of attitudes within the group.

Impatient with delay, a vanguard party often attempts to drag the remainder of the revolutionary movement to the promised land by means of a purge (59). Walzer cites the murder of 3,000 dissenters by Moses and the Levites (Exodus 32) as an inspirational example to a nascent vanguard party. This group, "whose members anticipate, at least in their own minds, the 'free people' of the future," become the bureaucrats and administrators of the new order, risking a return to Egypt with a new cast of characters (61). Worse, they apparently interpret all resistance as evidence of the insufficiently revolutionary character of their comrades (64). However, "the counterrevolution has deep roots" and ultimately some period of wandering in the wilderness is common while a settlement is negotiated (70). Ultimately, the process culminates in a social contract analogous to the formation of the new covenant, though the details are obscure (121).

This revolutionary process of oppression, journey and liberation is, Walzer argues, a quintessentially Western way of understanding the past (133). The notions of collective

¹ Compare, for example, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* or *The Odyssey*.

² The career of Moses is of course a rebuttal to this idea of fixed status, but an exceptional one.

dissatisfaction with the status quo, rejection of tyranny, journey through the wilderness to a promised land, and a new covenant or social contract, are all deeply rooted in the Exodus narrative. Walzer takes great pains to distinguish his essentially progressive, gradualist interpretation of Exodus from an apparently equally plausible messianic interpretation, where the ends of some vanguard party are so important as to provide justification for any ends required to carry them out (139).³ To this end, Walzer delves into the minutiae of textual justifications for occupation of late 19th century Palestine, arguing that revolutionary movements can misread the Exodus narrative by allowing faith in a savior to outweigh the hard collective action of wandering in the wilderness. He points to scholarship characterizing radicalism as “a secularized form of messianic zeal” as evidence for this relationship (144).

Discussion

The Exodus myth is clearly central to the self-narrative of liberation movements around the world. The Pharaoh’s status as a byword for tyranny and the inherently political nature of mass salvation are obvious manifestations of this importance. However, the extent to which its directionality is uniquely Western is open to dispute. Walzer also ignores the ramifications of a morality defined in opposition to the oppressors rather than according to some independent standard. The notion of the covenant as a social contract is problematic because the covenant was not a contract between members of a society but a somewhat one-sided agreement between that society and a deity. Throughout the text, Walzer often supports ambitious claims with implausible and anachronistic appeals⁴, and rarely pauses to consider alternative points of view.⁵

In a review shortly after publication, Edward Said criticized *Exodus and Revolution* for its omission of any discussion of the crucial role Exodus has played in the destruction of native peoples who stood in the way of a chosen people’s journey to the promised land (Said 1986). Calling his review “A Canaanite Reading,” Said points out that peoples outside the revolutionary group are “excluded from the world of moral concern” (93) by the Exodus narrative, and he makes a persuasive textual argument that the millenarians have a better claim to the narrative than Walzer’s gradualists. We can conclude that the Exodus narrative seems susceptible to a wide variety of revolutionary interpretations. However, all of them appear to reinforce distinctions between groups and to promote dehumanization of the other. While Walzer is correct that many revolutionary movements have been decisively

³ He is of two minds about this, however. “Exodus history, as I have said repeatedly, is the source of messianic politics” (146). But “compared with political messianism, Exodus makes for a cautious and moderate politics” (147).

⁴ For example, Walzer strains to justify a Midrashic claim that the Egyptians were particularly interested in exempting the Hebrews’ female infants from a general massacre (Exodus 1:15) by citing a source critical of Egyptian sexual morality 2,000 years later (34). Similarly, he argues that memory of the Exodus narrative led the descendants of these Hebrews two millennia later to be uniquely kind to their slaves (28). One more example: he takes seriously a folkloric account of political dissent during the exodus recorded by a chronicler in Abassid Baghdad (48), at a distance of more than 3,000 years.

⁵ This is all the more surprising because Walzer has criticized Michel Foucault (in my view rightly) for the same omissions, calling Foucault’s work “ineffective in what we might think of as scholarly law enforcement—the presentation of evidence, detailed argument, the consideration of alternative views” (Dissent 1983).

influenced by the Exodus narrative, its influence may conduce to revolutionary excesses as much as to ameliorative change.

Appendix: The Great Seal of the United States

Benjamin Franklin's original proposal for the Great Seal of the United States involved a very evocative painting of Exodus 14:23. Note the motto: "Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God."



References

Said, Edward. 1986. "Michael Walzer's 'Exodus and Revolution': A Canaanite Reading". *Grand Street*, Vol. 5, No. 2 pp.86-106.

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