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Module 8

## **Book Review – *Exodus and Revolution***

It is rare to find a book that examines both the Biblical text itself, while at the same time taking into consideration the context into which it has been read. Michael Walzer has endeavored to accomplish this feat in his book *Exodus and Revolution*. According to Wikipedia: “Michael Walzer is one of America's leading political philosophers. Currently, he is a professor at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey and editor of *Dissent*, a left-wing quarterly of politics and culture.”

Though it was written in 1985, the text of *Exodus and Revolution* still challenges its readers some twenty years later to take a hard look at how mankind has interpreted the Exodus story throughout the centuries. In the preface, Walzer fully acknowledges that venturing to interpret the Bible sociologically was at the time a fairly novel idea. He prefixes his attempt by saying that while he accepts the title of theologian, he makes no pretenses of being an anthropologist. Still, by examining the way Exodus has been read and used – or perhaps *misread* and *misused* – by others, he hopes to uncover layers of understanding that might have otherwise remained hidden in obscurity or overlooked due to snap judgments.

I got the impression that he lays this initial groundwork, in attempts to counter-balance the arguments of would-be naysayers, lest he be painted as one who embarks on a fool's errand. Perhaps it is due to the amount of time that has passed between his writing and my reading, but I did not at all find his introductory hypothesis to be

unsettling. No doubt a fair amount of his caution was due to an unspoken, inner question: “What will the other learned scholars and authors think?” Thankfully, I consider myself to be fairly average in my reading level and understanding of scripture, and as such have no complaints against his unorthodox approach to Biblical interpretation.

I agree with his overarching thesis, that in order to ascertain how to best relate the timeless account of God’s mighty acts on behalf of his people, it is helpful to learn how the story has been heard in the past. It behooves the storyteller to understand how people might construe words such as: liberation, redemption, revolution, deliverance, salvation. This is especially true when one considers the implications therein around some of the more the ugly parts of human history. Due to our sinful and selfish nature, we have subjected each other to slavery, debauchery, military conquest, and political back-biting. Walzer invites those who have ears to hear – to listen to the echoes of the Exodus story, cast against the unpolished walls of human history. While the underlying truth is oft refracted by individual agenda, these manifestations are still traceable back to the themes of the original story. Concepts which have been made palatable to me as a passive receptor were once much more raw, and in fact persist even today.

Walzer begins at perhaps what is the most obvious point, easing the reader into an analogous mentality. He firstly discusses slavery in colonial and early America, and how this gave rise to the civil rights movement of the 1960s. It was a powerful sermon in Montgomery, Alabama which first opened the eyes of a young Michael Walzer to the use of Exodus in modern-day struggles for justice and equality. He recounts the moment of epiphany he had as he watched this passionate preacher retell the Exodus events. He then goes on to document in rapid succession several other themes he has become cognizant of

throughout the years, from Leninist teachings, Latin American liberation theology, even the French Revolution. Anywhere there has been conflict between factions, Exodus has invariably been a reference point.

The book itself weighs in around a slender 150 pages, but because of its challenging nature is engaging in a way that leaves you pondering the ramifications. It is divided into four main themes:

1. The House of Bondage: Slaves in Egypt
2. The Murmurings: Slaves in the Wilderness
3. The Covenant: A Free People
4. The Promised Land

At each juncture, the Israelites are studied, along with the various individuals and people groups who have identified themselves with God's chosen people. I find it supremely ironic that the greater Exodus narrative has been both a staple of hope for those who are oppressed, as well as justification used by the oppressor. While God certainly delivered his people from the clutches of the Pharaoh, the institution of slavery itself is permitted and condoned upon Israel arriving in Canaan. There have been those who attempted to read between the lines, so to speak, eisegeting their way to the role of master by convincing themselves that they were doing the Lord's work by suppressing a populace unlike themselves. The Crusades of the middle ages were also fueled by the notion of divine right. In this vein, Walzer deftly brings to mind the fact that Moses attributes the order in Exodus 32:27-28 to God:

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“Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Put your sword on your side, each of you! Go throughout the camp, and each of you kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbor.’ The sons of Levi did as Moses commanded and about three thousand of the people fell on that day.” (NRSV)

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That is not to say that Moses was deceptive in his attribution, nor unjust in his wielding of judgment (after all, God wanted to wipe out *all* of Israel). Still, there have been plenty of people who have taken this as license to act on behalf of God, rather than waiting for God to act on their behalf. For instance, Walzer mentioned Lincoln Stephens’ book *Moses in Red*, which attempted to justify Leninist politics via the lense of Exodus. True enough, Lenin’s ideal of a utopian society shared some parallels to theocracy that Israel was meant to be. However, without God in the picture it eventually gave rise to human oppression under the Soviet Union, creating an imbalance in resource distribution – the very thing that the social revolution had sought to equalize. Communism might have looked good on paper, but was doomed to failure because it was built on the cornerstone tenet that people are inherently good, which we are not.

Walzer also delves into the psychology of oppression, that of the tendency to assimilate held in conflict with the desire to retain a cultural identity. The Hebrews held captive in Egypt sat near fleshpots, yet are described as having only eaten bread in Exodus 16:3. Household slaves to royalty caught the whiff of luxury but knew themselves to be slaves. While they were a leg up from the suffering of their brethren in the brickyards, they were not free. Walzer covers the point of view that the Hebrews under Pharaoh were not unlike the Jews held captive by the Nazis, in that a pervasive Stockholm syndrome existed throughout the society. When Moses goes missing in Exodus 32, the newly allegiant Israel is not so committed anymore. They return to what

they know best, the idol worship and decadence which they had been witness to for so many years, yet unable to partake in due to their status as slaves. It is no wonder then, that in their collective insecurity at the absence of their leader, they self-medicate by imitating what they associated with strength – the lifestyle of the Egyptians. Like an abused child who becomes a bully, Israel models behavior engrained in their psyche.

It is this slave mentality that causes them to murmur against Moses as they wander in the wilderness. They plead with him to all them to return to Egypt, so much so that God deems it necessary the 40 years of wandering, a length of time sufficient enough to allow for those who had actually been in Egypt to die off, so that those who would enter the promised land would have only wilderness as their reference point. Essentially, this would make it impossible to yearn for the land and customs of the oppressor, looking only to the future – a land of milk and honey.

Yet, this is not what Israel initially encountered. Instead, they find an entrenched people group so intimidating the scouts describe themselves as mere grasshoppers in comparison. I found it interesting what Walzer points out: Milk and honey are not available in the physical sense until Israel becomes who they were meant to be in the spiritual sense. If not for the murmuring, the time in the wilderness would have been significantly reduced, and if not for the debacle at the golden calf, the need for tiers of priests would not have arose. The entire nation was supposed to be a priesthood, but instead the Levites rise to the challenge of pursuing holiness. This gives rise to all of the additional Pharisaical laws around the Ten Commandments. Upper echelons of power are created due to sinfulness – firstly by the greater populace, and then by the white-washed leaders whom inherit the responsibility of governance; the haves and the have-nots.

In this regard, Walzer points out – oppression is cyclical. The more that Israel wanted to be like other nations, the more they laid the groundwork for a downward spiral. What began with murmuring in the wilderness turns to idol worship in the shadow of Mt. Sinai. This eventually leads to the demand for a king in 1 Samuel chapter 8. God grants the wishes of the people, allowing them to become what they have asked for – just like any other nation, with the same political problems of corruption and oppression. In this way, by wanting a monarchy instead of a theocracy, Israel plunges itself deeper into depravity to the point that a messiah really is the only road to redemption. Yet, when Jesus comes it is not to overthrow any socio-political regime, but rather to fulfill the initial intent of the promise – to allow the chosen people to follow God unhindered by sin, that they may be a blessing to more nations than just themselves. There is more at stake, the horizon so much bigger, extending well beyond the introspective desire to be seen as just another nation.

Walzer drives home the point that Promised Land then, is not simply a location on a map, but a journey of the heart. If we are placated and think we have arrived, that is a surefire sign that there is much more landscape to be traversed. To share in the inheritance of Israel is to draw unto the God whom he has made the promises. He says it best on page 121: “For it is Paradise, not the promised land, Eden, not Canaan, that lies just on the other side of the next-to-Last-Days.” This brings to mind Galatians 3:28. If there is no longer Jew nor Greek, then geography is not quite as important as originally thought. That is not to say that the Holy Land is diminished, simply that the embodiment of God’s people is more about holiness than latitude and longitude.

Overall, this book is a delight to read. Its brevity only serves to enhance its poignancy. While not necessarily conventional, it was a welcome challenge to some of my

presuppositions. When researching the author, I was actually pleased to learn that he is still alive and well, continuing to write and influence the minds of upcoming generations of students. What was once no doubt perceived as an effort from the fringes now seems to have gained legitimacy, garnering praise of Walzer as a leading “political philosopher.” What started as a book review assignment has inspired me to learn more about Walzer’s body of work, particularly in the area of social justice. In a sentence, I recommend the book *Exodus and Revolution* as an essential read for OT studies.

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### ***Works Cited***

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