

Exodus Study Questions

Hum 110, Reed College

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Assignment:

Look up one concept or term that interests you in a bible dictionary. The *Harper's Bible Dictionary* is in the Reference Room and has the call number BS440 H237 1985. Please be prepared to share the information you have found in class.

Exodus as Scripture

In Exodus 13-14 a historical event (the exodus) is linked with a shepherd's rite (the Passover) and an agricultural rite (the feast of unleavened bread). What do you make of the implications of this linkage?

In Exodus 19 God makes a covenant with his people. How does this covenant compare to earlier covenants?

Exodus as Literature

Exodus 1-15. Both Exodus 1-15 and the Greek myth of Dionysus tell the story of how a strange and little known god authenticates his claim to godhood by unleashing his divine power against a proud and stubborn unbeliever. Look at the Hum 110Tech web page on Dionysus (<http://homer.reed.edu/Bacchants.html>) and compare the themes, characters, and structures of these two tales. You should pay particular attention to the characterization of the God and his role in the community (see the passages on Dionysus at the end of the webpage). How are the messages of each text similar? How do they differ? What do the differences tell us about Hebrew culture and theology as compared to Greek culture and theology?

Exodus 15:22-34. How does the giving of the law and the content of the law contribute to the ongoing plot of the Bible? Pay special attention to the content of each of the legal codes (20:2-17, 20:22-23:19, 25-31, 34:14-26) and the seams between the codes and the narrative. Describe the content and style of the four codes. Does it surprise you that God alters the content of the ten commandments? Does it surprise you that he is so concerned with seemingly non religious matters? How does this fit with his character as you have come to know it up to this point in the story? What is the meaning of the law in terms of the larger content of Genesis 1-Exodus 34? Why are the legal codes introduced at this point in the narrative (e.g. rather than when Moses and Aaron first report to the assembled Israelites God's instructions to Moses to lead them out of Egypt)?

Exodus 35:1-38:20 describes the role of art in Judaism. Compare this discussion of art along with the second commandment to the role of art in Greek and Roman culture as discussed by authors we have read so far this semester.

Exodus overall. How is this book a continuation of the tale of beginnings and God's disappointments begun in Genesis?

Exodus as History

Compare Genesis 4:26, Exodus 3:13-15, and Exodus 6-23. What do you think actually happened at the Sea of Reeds?

Exodus is a key text for both Anglo American and African American history. The Puritans told of their migration to America in terms of the journey out of Egypt; similarly African American spirituals and literature often figure American slavery in terms of the Israelites enslavement in Egypt. How does Exodus relate to what you know of Puritan and African American history? What is the power and ramifications of using Exodus (and other biblical texts) to understand American history and social relations? How do African American and Puritan visions of American history through Exodus differ? Do you see contemporary American culture using biblical texts in similar ways?

Biblical Style: Reading the Torah for Pleasure

Much of the playfulness of the Hebrew Bible can be lost if you aren't in tune with the details of the style. The following are some characteristics of biblical narrative that I hope will enable you to read more carefully and pleurably.

1. *Wordplay*. Most names of people and places in the bible are puns or plays on words. For example "Adam" (groundling/earthling) is made from "Adamah" (the ground/earth); the city of Babel is named because it is the place god confounded (babal) the language of all earth. These would be "haha" moments for readers of Hebrew; they can also be joyous moments for you with a little bit of work. The footnotes in our text often point out these witty puns, but you can also look up words in a concordance or biblical dictionary.

2. *Understatement and selective overstatement*. Biblical narrative is very economical. Understatement can often introduce tension or poignancy. For example, when Isaac asks why they haven't brought a lamb to sacrifice, Abraham answers "God will provide the lamb." We should feel a stab of pain at this point, but also optimism at the ambiguousness of the understatement: how relieved we are when God does provide a lamb and it *isn't* Isaac! The irony is doubled.

3. *Non sequitur, anticipatory information, and resumptive repetition*. Frequently information appears that seems to have no correlation to the surrounding narrative. These should be read as signals that something is being revealed or set up. For example, the seemingly irrelevant list of Nabor's descendants (Genesis 20:20-24) lead to the suspenseful realization that Isaac's mate is a descendant of Nabor. Resumptive repetition occurs when summarizing information follows a detailed account (e.g. Exodus 15:21).

4. *Redundancy and repetition*. Repetition is a way of giving stories structure and by highlighting parallels between circumstances and generations. This device can be a useful guide to helping you understand the overall narrative structure of a book of the Bible. If a passage feels familiar (e.g. passing a wife off as a sister), but you don't remember its antecedent, you can look up the type in a concordance.

5. *Ambiguity*. Often motives and details are concealed in the Bible. For example, in Exodus 33:19-23 the answer to Moses question is concealed in the mysteries of Israel's ancient lore. These are moments when the reader is drawn into the text since his/her interpretation is required. When something is ambiguous, you should seek out the opportunity to insert your thinking into the philosophical ideas expressed.

6. *Type-scenes and typology*. A type-scene is a convention for telling a story, a fixed mode or sequence of action by which an event unfolds. Examples include the wife-sister episodes, the divine's appearance at an unknown sacred place, and the call of a prophet. As you read the second or third of these scenes, you may want to ask how it is being varied and what significance you make of the variations. Typology is the tendency of characters and scenes to mirror one another. These parallels are crucial for Christian readings of the "Old Testament." There are also parallels within the Torah, though. For example the escape of Noah in an ark (*tevah*) anticipates the escape of the infant Moses in a cradle (*tevah*). (Even if you didn't know the Hebrew the parallel would be striking.) Noting and making sense of these parallels can add to the pleasure of your reading.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Holtz, Barry, ed. *Back to the Sources*. NY: Summit Books, 1984

Robertson, David. *The Bible as Literature: A Workbook*. Self-published, 1988.