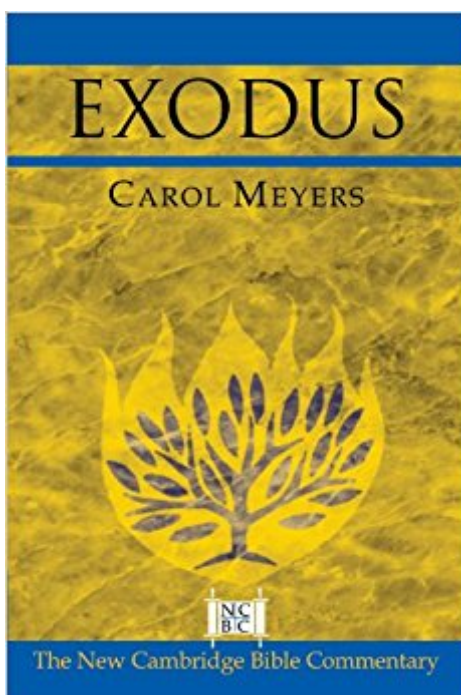


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Exodus (New Cambridge Bible Commentary)



Synopsis

This commentary views Exodus as a cultural document, preserving the collective memories of the Israelites and relating them to the major institutions and beliefs that emerged by the end of the time of the Hebrew Bible. It is intended to help the reader follow the story line of Exodus, understand its socio-cultural context, appreciate its literary features, recognize its major themes and values, and also note its interpretive and moral problems. Carol Meyers explains important concepts and terms as expressed in the Hebrew original so that those who know Hebrew as well as those who don't will be able to follow the text.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"this is a gem of a commentary on a key biblica book. It belongs on the shelf of all who want to understand Exodus better." - Ronald Hendel, University of California, Berkeley, California

Underlying the deceptively simple story line, the second book of the Bible is a complex and rich literary production that presents some of the most fundamental concepts and institutions of Jewish and Christian tradition. This commentary makes the details of the text and the vitality of its story accessible to all readers. It explains the difficult passages and interpretive problems and it recaptures for modern audiences its life setting in biblical antiquity

I will start with the starkest reading of the event possible. There is no archaeological evidence for 40 year trek in the desert; there is no archeological evidence for anything like the event described in the Bible. In other words, the greatest event that never happened. No Moses, no enslaved Jews in Egypt, no 40 year trek in the desert, no Mt Sinai or Mt Horeb event--two names to describe the same place or different places immediately casts suspicion on the whole thing. No burning bush. No God from on High to hand Moses the tablets containing the Ten Commandments. And yet the Book of Exodus--is quite possibly the most important book in all the Bible, the most important book for humanity, the most important book for that sense of existential identity. In other words--in order not to be a murderer--thou shalt not kill. And with those Ten Words--Decalogue--the Jews had raised their Book from a history of God and Israel to a transcendent valuation given to one's existence. An individual commitment to being a decent human. No other literature had done anything or does anything even remotely similar. And this passage alone makes the whole story worthy of belief. This conflict between validation of the story in reality, archeological evidence--and the message the story contains reflects a giant dilemma in religious training. We want our children to embody ideals the Decalogue represents--no one wants their child to be a drug addled psychotic killer. And so we bring our children to worship, to Bible study to prevent the worst case scenario in child rearing. While we can acknowledge the irrelevance of the actual existence of someone named Job in favor of the metaphorical import of the Jobian story, we find ourselves in a profound and disquieting dilemma. Can we accept the crucifixion of Christ as 'just another story'? And if we do that, then the entire eschatological scaffolding of Christianity is destroyed in one fell swoop. After all, Christianity posits a powerful message that Christ was indeed the Son of God and that he died for our sins and that only the belief in a human and divine Christ makes the Christian eschatological scaffolding work. So the Book of Exodus becomes an act of 'faith'. I believe because I must believe. And that belief represents and gives salvation to the immortal soul. A person makes existential choices based on that Decalogue for their own spiritual well being as well as for the well being of society. Carol Meyers is well aware of this spiritual dilemma. She gives a pericope by pericope reading and along the way, she explains the various ins and outs of ancient Hebrew Society. She looks at repetition of patterns, of stories, of motifs and explains their significance. So Carol Meyer's commentary is well worth the read. If I had a quibble, it might be with her reliance--and the reliance of the New Cambridge Bible Commentary--on the New Revised Standard Version--that version should be regarded as garbage; after all, if they can't translate -- as soul in Psalm 69...

I used Meyers work alongside Victor P. Hamilton's own Exodus commentary in working through the book of Exodus; the latter is far superior, particularly for exegesis. Meyers book has some value, but I could not recommend it over other works. The publisher advertises that "It explains important concepts and terms as expressed in the Hebrew original," but Meyers largely does that by ignoring looking at how the Hebrew words are translated and used in other contexts in the Hebrew Bible. This book is a not a verse-by-verse commentary, but mostly an overview of how a few aspects of Exodus fit into Israel's national identity. She assumes the documentary hypothesis (most good commentaries these days have good critiques of the weaknesses of this approach) which leads to her to assign meaning to certain texts that the authors most certainly would not have. The book is devoid of any biblical theology--seeing how the work fits in the total arc of scripture--and does not connect much with other passages in the Hebrew Bible that rely on Exodus; Exodus is mostly left on an island by itself, and even its Genesis roots and parallels are largely ignored. That makes her assertions about Israeli identity questionable, in my opinion. The strength of the book are the "closer look" sections on topics like circumcision, the Sabbath, comparison of the Decalogue to the Laws of Hammurabi, and more. Meyers draws from modern anthropology and archaeology to make her points. Meyers also draws more attention to the role of female heroins in Exodus than other male authors, this is worth noting. The Torah truly elevates the status of women, and Exodus is no exception. An example (pgs. 51, 69): "Jochebed is a theophoric personal name with a shortened form of Yahweh (see Exod 6:20), making her arguably the first person in the Hebrew Bible to bear such a name and signifying the origin of Yahweh as the name of god with her son...A name is related to identity; and the name of Israel's god indicates an open and fluid identity, not linked to any specific cosmological, natural, or functional phenomena, as was the case for other deities in the biblical world...Jochebed's name is also significant - using a shortened form of yhwh, it means 'Yahweh is glory.'" In some cases, she may stretch a bit to find feminine characteristics of God in the text. D.A. Carson might find some "exegetical fallacies." One example (p. 123): "the use of the epithet "merciful" for God as the source of divine compassion is probably related to such maternal images. The adjective "compassionate" (or "merciful") and the noun "compassion" (or "mercy"), as well as the verb "to be compassionate, merciful," all are related to the Hebrew word for "womb" (rehem); and they all are used in relation to God more often than to humans in the Bible." Nonetheless, there is some good commentary on law and legal customs among the Jews and other Near Eastern peoples that I found helpful. I give it two stars out of five. It gets a bit thin at the end as Meyers appears to get bored with the text.

Carol Meyers provides a fine, mid-level commentary on the study of Exodus. Much of its strength lies in its 26 supplementary sections on, among other things, "Bondage, Servitude, and Slavery," "Midwives and Wet-Nurses," "Marriage in Ancient Israel," "The Ark," and "Heavenly Record Books." Her section on "Gendered Images of God" alone yields insight on the basis of God's compassion and mercy, both linguistically and metaphorically, seldom touched on in other commentaries (Meyers' pp. 122-3, on Exodus 34:6). The passage-by-passage commentary format yields insight too, often on patterns in the language not apparent in English translation (for example, the symmetry of the four-fold cries of the Israelites in Exodus 2:23 and the four-fold response of God in 2:24). For verse-by-verse reading of the text itself, one may well turn to Sarna's JPS and Durham's WBC commentaries. Similarly, one may turn to IVP's Dictionary of the Pentateuch and the Anchor Bible Dictionary for further, introductory coverage of topics such as the Decalogue (or Ten Commandments).

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