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The Exodus Narrative: Coloniality and Decoloniality in Creative Tension

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11 The Exodus Narrative: Coloniality and Decoloniality in Creative Tension

Abstract

The Exodus narrative is one of the most used, referenced, and popularised books and stories from the Old Testament, especially in oppressed and exploited communities. This is the story of God's divine intervention in the sordid life experience of the Hebrews who had migrated and lived in Egypt for a long period of time, enjoying a period of relative comfort, which is then followed by a period of severe oppression and exploitation, a period of enslavement. In the midst of this enslavement, God powerfully intervenes and forces their release from captivity and leads them to their promised land, Canaan, where they were going to live in comfort and plenty. Using a decolonial approach, this chapter seeks to interrogate the colonial tendencies in the text and story, in the readings and interpretations in order to rid this text and narrative of the colonial tentacles that have made a story of liberation one of oppression, as well. This chapter assumes that the "the character of Pharaoh", "doctrine of election", "the promised land", and "the character of Moses" have some aspects of coloniality embedded in them, making the text of liberation a colonising and colonial text. It also assumes that "God's intervention for the exploited", "the Hebrew midwives", and "the Princess of Egypt" provide a strong basis for arguing for the decolonising potential and decoloniality of the text and narrative.

Keywords: *Exodus, Narrative, Decoloniality, Coloniality, Epistemicide*

1. Introduction

One of the defining narratives in the emergence and development of the Hebrew, Israelite and Jewish identity has been the exodus narrative. This narrative grew until it was fixed in writing and is now preserved as the Book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament. The exodus is recalled and celebrated throughout the Old Testament, as well as in the

New Testament. The narrative and the book have for centuries or millennia survived with a creative tension between liberation and domination, allowing it to be a resource for readers who are exploited, as well as those who are exploiting. This chapter seeks to approach this creative tension through the lenses of coloniality and decoloniality. There are aspects of the exodus narrative that readily lend themselves to colonial intentions while others lend themselves to decolonial intentions. Ideas around election and the promised land appear to be central to the colonial ideology that can be perceived in the narrative, while those around the liberation of an exploited group of people and the divine option for the oppressed, are central to the decolonial tenets that can be read out of the narrative. While I will refer to the narrative more, adequate attention will be paid to the book in which the narrative has been kept stable for centuries.

The Hebrew title of the Book of Exodus is *Sefer Shemot* (“Book of Names”) and it is derived from the opening words, “*ve’elleh shemôth*”, which mean, “And these [are] the names.” Sometimes the book is simply referred to as “*shemôth*” or “names” (Fluegel, 1910, p. 5). This title appears to make sense only as a conjunction between Genesis and Exodus because the closing sentence in Genesis becomes the opening sentence in Exodus. When considering the contents of this book, this Hebrew title does not appear to do justice to the overall contents because Exodus is not obsessed with names but rather with the lived experiences of Hebrews in Egypt, their liberation through divine intervention and their journey into the wilderness and beyond. The English title “Exodus” is an anglicized version of a Greek word that means “exit” or “departure.” The Greek word for “Exodus” is found in Ex. 19:1: “In the third month after the sons of Israel had *gone out* of the land of Egypt, on that very day they came into the wilderness of Sinai.” So, our English title “Exodus” came to us from the Greek LXX¹ via

¹ “**Septuagint**, the earliest extant Greek translation of the Old Testament from the original Hebrew. The Septuagint was presumably made for the Jewish community in Egypt when Greek was the common language throughout the region. [...] The name Septuagint (from the Latin *septuaginta*, ‘70’) was derived later from the legend that there were 72 translators, 6 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel, who worked independently to translate the whole and ultimately produced identical versions.” (Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia 2024).

the Vulgate² (Fluegel, 1910, p. 5). In a way, the Greek version of the Old Testament captured the essence of the contents of this book in its choice of name for the book, choosing to spotlight the “Exodus” and not the connecting line between Genesis and Exodus.

“The book of Exodus is the second book of the Hebrew Bible, but it may rank first in lasting cultural importance. It is in Exodus that the classic biblical themes of oppression and redemption, of human enslavement and divine salvation, are most dramatically and famously expressed.” (Baden, 2019, p. xi).

Indeed, if the life of the Hebrews, Israelites and Jews is one punctuated by contestation, exploitation, freedom, liberation, domination, and salvation, then the Exodus stands tall in providing a theological basis for approaching these lived experiences. While in contemporary Christian communities one is readily aware of the contestation that exists between two forces – one for good and another for evil, in the images of God and Satan, the Exodus was among the earliest Hebrew literatures to come up with this duality of opposing forces.

“The first chapters of this book produce before our eyes two leading characters, Moses and Pharaoh. They represent the two great forces of human society, the two phases of our human nature. Two powers are ever in contention in our social world, in eternal antagonism, yet ever working in harmony for the preservation of the race and for its unfolding, its stability on one hand, and its gradual, cautious advance, on the other hand. These two forces are the principles of Conservatism and of Progress.” (Fluegel, 1910, p. 5).

While appreciating the views of Fluegel above, I would characterize the figures of Pharaoh and Moses as representing coloniality and decoloniality, while also being aware of the adaptability of the forces of coloniality and their capacity to infect, influence and control forces of decoloniality. This section will briefly discuss the dichotomy of book and story when it comes to Exodus, showing how these two forms have often reinforced

² “**Vulgate**, (from the Latin *editio vulgata*, ‘common version’), Latin Bible used by the Roman Catholic Church, primarily translated by St. Jerome. In 382 Pope Damasus commissioned Jerome, the leading biblical scholar of his day, to produce an acceptable Latin version of the Bible from the various translations then being used.” (Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia, 2023).

each other. This will be followed by an analysis of the colonial aspects that are associated with the Exodus, showing how these elements have shaped especially the use of the Exodus in colonial and post-colonial contexts. A section focusing on decolonization, decoloniality and a decolonial approach leads us to question the import of the story at its point of origin, which is the aspiration for freedom and liberation. A re-imagination of the Exodus from a decolonial approach occupies the penultimate section followed by the conclusion.

2. The Book/Story of Exodus

The Exodus shares its development to several stages, beginning with the experience of redemption and liberation from Egyptian bondage by some Hebrews,³ which grew into a tradition of liberation and freedom passed on orally from one generation to another. These communal memories of the cataclysmic divine intervention continued to grow and centuries later, it was believed to have happened and when writing became possible, the stories were written down, eventually being preserved as the Book of Exodus. While Christian communities, that were not Jewish, only got access to the Exodus through the mediation of the book, they also began a tradition of re-telling the story so that there has also been a Christian Exodus narrative that owes its origins to the book. Old Testament scholars from the critical era have tended to agree broadly that three Pentateuchal sources – that is the Jahwist (J), the Elohist (E) and the Priestly Source (P) – were all used in compiling the canonical book of Exodus. The idea of sources behind the making of the Pentateuch and in this case, the Exodus, is informed by the inconsistencies that are observed in the text and by the realization that oral traditions through which the story was preserved for

³ It is not clear if Hebrew was an ethnic or social identity, while traditionally it was assumed that Hebrew was an ethnic identity for the descendants of Abraham. However, the rise of social scientific approaches, especially in the works of Norman K. Gottwald, Hebrew was taken as a social identity, making reference to a social class and not an ethnic group. It referred to people joined by their social status and not by their ethnicity (Gottwald, 1979; Gottwald, 2002).

centuries are never consistent across different communities. According to Douane Garret,

“Since the development of the documentary hypothesis, scholars have expended much effort attempting to show what sources lay behind Exodus. They are concerned to show whether a given text is from J, or E, or P (or even D), or whether it is from a source outside of the standard four documents. In a study that combines source criticism with tradition criticism, George Coats attempts to untangle what he believes are the threads of the traditions about Moses in Midian narratives. William Propp subjects every passage in Exodus to a documentary hypothesis-driven source analysis, and he generally sticks with the traditional J, E, and P. Unlike many contemporary scholars, he believes it is possible to distinguish Exodus E from Exodus J. Thomas Dozeman, on the other hand, rejects the existence of E altogether (at least for Exodus), and in his source analysis he focuses primarily on P and the ‘Non-P History’. The latter is a kind of amalgamation of more recent interpretations of J and of the Deuteronomist; it is said to have been completed in the postexilic era. He essentially divides all of Exodus between these two sources, the ‘P History’ and the ‘Non-P History.’ [...] Much of this discussion is of doubtful value, either in terms of gaining better tools for interpreting the text or in terms of finding criteria for dividing it into its supposed sources.” (Garret, 2014, pp. 15–17).

Without outrightly dismissing the value of source criticism in Pentateuchal studies, a lot has already been said about its efficacy and even with more than a century of investments in it, it remains a contested terrain. This chapter will not seek to immerse itself into the specificities of the documentary hypotheses, save to agree with scholars that see materials associated with the sources J, E and P as intricately interwoven in the book of Exodus to the point where it can become difficult, maybe even impossible, to successfully disentangle the strands into independent units. While indeed there are fundamental theological, stylistic, and linguistic differences, there are also areas where common expressions are shared since they shared some kind of common community bank of oral traditions. While the book or text is the one in which questions of sources are critical, the story or narrative rarely considers the idea of sources other than the believed experiences of ancestral figureheads. To this extent, it is critical that

“a distinction must be made between the biblical book of Exodus – the text that comes between Genesis and Leviticus and constitutes one-fifth of the canonical Pentateuch or Torah – and the Exodus story.” (Baden, 2019, p. xi).

There is no contestation among scholars that most, if not all, Old Testament books are relatively later than the stories they re-present in written format, the same is true of the book of Exodus. The book was possibly a late development in the life of the ancient story of the Exodus. In some sense, the books artificially cobble together chunks of materials circulating at various points in various contexts, sometimes combining previously unrelated materials and not always following a chronological order and in other cases leaving out materials that would have been part of a shared narrative. This is the history that led Itumeleng Mosala to call biblical texts both in their canonical versions but also in the process that led to their creation as sites of struggle (Mosala 1989). In analysing the book of Exodus, Joel Baden makes some interesting observations when writing:

“Moreover, the biblical book, while containing the central core of the Exodus story, is among the most variegated in the Bible. It also includes poems, law codes, architectural plans, and rituals. Each of these has had its own interpretive trajectory – especially the extensive description of the tabernacle, which occupies nearly a quarter of the biblical text of Exodus and provides the foundation for, among other things, the traditional Jewish definition of what constitutes forbidden work on the Sabbath. Similarly, many of the individual episodes and characters within the story could be the subjects of their own biographies. [...] And, as interesting as they are, these various elements are all overshadowed in the history of interpretation by the grand narrative in which they are set.” (Baden, 2019, pp. xi–xii; see also Coover-Cox, 2010).

While the story of the Exodus gave rise to the book of Exodus, it must also be acknowledged that the book of Exodus gave rise to another story of the Exodus and in fact our access to the story of the Exodus is mediated by the book of Exodus. According to Dempster,

“The story of the Exodus is the central salvation event in the Old Testament. The account of the liberation of a band of Hebrew slaves from horrific oppression in Egypt is the event that shaped virtually everything in the biblical imagination. One scholar remarks that ‘[t]here are over 120

explicit Old Testament references to the Exodus in law, narrative, prophecy and psalm, and it is difficult to exaggerate its importance.' Another writes, 'This act of God, the leading of Israel out of Egypt – from Israel's point of view, the march out of Egypt, the Exodus, is the determinative event in Israel's history for all time to come.' In many ways it provided the ground floor of that imagination for the majority of ancient Israelites, for thinking not only about faith but history, the future, nationhood, law, and ethics." (Dempster, 2008, p. 4).

The single event, whether it happened historically or not, whether it happened with the multitudes suggested in the book of Exodus or not, (the story) captured ancient Hebrew and Israelite imagination and shaped their interpretation of their lived experiences. And yet, in the quotation above, the story appears to be known for its liberation motif, its redemptive goal, which are decolonial tenets. The central motif of the Exodus story appears to be the deliverance of the Israelites from captivity in Egypt. As Wolf says, "Exodus is a book of salvation and deliverance, relating how the Israelites gain their freedom from Egypt under the mighty hand of God" (Wolf, 1991, p. 149). While the liberation-salvation motif was considered for a long time as the central concern of the Exodus, the book of Exodus does provide an alternative motif, a goal of the Exodus, which is the conquest of a land and the subjugation of people that were occupying that land. In this dimension of the story and book, the exodus was not simply about liberation it was also about capturing, dominating and exploitation. Accompanied by the twin doctrines and theologies of election and promised land, the enslaved Hebrews did not see liberation as an end but a means to an end, that of possession, ownership and exploitation. This understanding is expressed in the book of Exodus and beyond. For example, in Ex. 1:8,

"and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites." (Ex. 1:8).

This can also be inferred in Deut. 7:6,

"For you [Israel] are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession." (Deut. 7:6).

These are some of the ideas in the Exodus story that easily lend themselves to a colonial ideology and in fact, these aspects of the story were used by Dutch settlers to justify their expropriation of land from indigenous South Africans and the same happened in other instances of conquest of other Indigenous lands by white people.

3. Exodus and Colonial Ideological Framework – The Theology of Election and Promised Land

The language of colonization is not one that is directly extrapolated from the biblical text, not from the book of Exodus nor any other Old Testament book. However, ideas that lend themselves to a colonial reading are replete throughout the Old Testament, which made it possible for the Bible to be used by colonizing forces, especially from Christendom Europe. *Colonial ideology* denotes a system of ideas and beliefs that legitimized the European move to conquer, subdue, dominate, and rule the world. The ideas of “natural selection”, “survival of the fittest”, “white supremacism”, and a “hierarchy of human races⁴” were central in legitimizing colonization. The belief in the “white man’s burden” to civilize, evangelize and industrialize the “heathens” made colonization sound and look like an honourable service to the peoples of the world. We now know it was far from being honourable! The association of white and good in Christian scriptures, liturgies and traditions coupled with encounters with diverse peoples in the age of explorers led to the rise of the racialization of humanity into “white” and “black” and some in-between, resulting in the institutionalization of white supremacism, whiteness and racism (Harris, 2018).

Not only were white supremacism, whiteness and racism aspects of colonial settlers’ self-understanding, the services offered by missionaries were similarly influenced and contributed to the sustenance of the domination

⁴ “**Race**, the idea that the human species is divided into distinct groups on the basis of inherited physical and behavioral differences. Genetic studies in the late 20th century refuted the existence of biogenetically distinct races, and scholars now argue that ‘races’ are cultural interventions reflecting specific attitudes and beliefs that were imposed on different populations in the wake of western European conquests beginning in the 15th century.” (Takezawa, Wade & Smedley, 2024).

of Africans by Europeans (Rodney, 1972). White supremacism and whiteness “reflect the Eurocentricity behind the Christianization of Africans, with angels represented according to European codes equating Whiteness with perfection, beauty, and purity. When positive values are only represented through White characters, it is impossible to develop a positive image of Blackness” (Mokoko Gampiot, 2017). Colonization was, therefore, the total domination of conquered peoples expressed through governance, epistemologies, theologies, economies, social and legal systems. There are ways in which the Egyptian Pharaoh can be re-presented as a colonizing and enslaving force while the Hebrew or Israelite ideas of being the elect and the promised land can similarly be read as colonizing. This section seeks to pursue this line of thinking with an intentional focus on elements of the Hebrew/Israelite exodus story. *Coloniality* refers to the continuity of the colonial form of domination, exploitation, and racialisation by the dominant racial groups in the post-colonial era (Ramantswana, 2016, p. 181). The end of direct political control and domination sometimes clouds the view, making coloniality operate in the spaces as an invisible force that maintains the privileges that flow to the elites. It refers to the continued influence and authority of colonial systems, epistemologies, theologies and more – even in contexts where traditional colonizers are physically absent. Igboin writes, “the history and experience of colonialism and its constant recalibration in postcolonial Africa have adversely affected African indigenous cosmologies, epistemologies, cultures and experiences” (Igboin, 2023).

The Exodus is set against the background of a people who are exploited, enslaved, and dehumanized for no apparent reason other than that “there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph” (Ex. 1:8a). However, from the perspective of the Egyptians, the exploitation was a means to an end. According to Kenneth Ngwa,

“[a]t the outset of Exodus, we encounter interlocution around Pharaoh’s hypothetical but deeply harmful claims about the children of Israel: ‘Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they may increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land’ (Exod. 1:10).” (Ngwa, 2002, p. 14).

The position taken by the supposed new Pharaoh is one of enslaving and colonizing as a pre-emptive strike against perceived and potential enemies. As the Hebrews were excluded from the luxuries of Egypt, how could they be kept at bay while firmly stuck within? A system of total domination could achieve both, excluding them by labelling them as different and inferior while enslaving them, thereby keeping them firmly in the sight of Egyptian taskmasters. This forced labour-cum-enslavement of Hebrews to construct and develop Egypt is the backdrop to the Exodus story and experience and its power. While they cry for freedom and liberation, the Hebrews are thoroughly dominated so that they cannot extricate themselves from their predicament but can only hope for some superior force to liberate them, a hope that allows the plot of the story to introduce the figure of Moses, a force for good to challenge and dismantle that of Pharaoh. While the figure of Moses comes through the story of Exodus as the liberator, this chapter will seek to look at the colonial threads in this figure, threads that this chapter considers late in origin compared to the liberation threads.

Moses is a survivor of genocidal attempts by the Pharaoh, who had instructed the mass extermination of all Hebrew boys (Ex. 1:16), as part of a policy of domination and extermination of the Hebrew identity, by exploiting the people to death and killing boys while retaining girls, the Egyptians were overseeing a total extermination of the Hebrews (Ngwa, 2022). There are two interesting dimensions to the story of Moses for this chapter, first, Moses survives the genocide by being hid under the nose of the Pharaoh as he was adopted by the Egyptian Princess. Second, Moses, the Hebrew boy, becomes an insider in the oppressive system that sought his extermination, raised and equipped to be its functionary with the system being confident that it had fully erased his identity. When Moses intervenes in a normal case of an Egyptian taskmaster executing the systemic exploitation of the Hebrews, the system that raised him realised his identity had not been completely erased, hence, it sought to handle Moses like the Hebrew that he was. This marks the beginning of the Hebrew career of Moses, who escapes into Midian, away from the Egyptian systems' reach. Away from the colonial space of Egypt, Moses encounters God, and the Exodus story as it now flows through the book combines the colonial

and decolonial aspects of the career of Moses. In this section, we limit our analysis to the colonial elements.

The God that Moses encounters is presented as universal, seen in the fact that this God will intervene for the Hebrews in Egypt without regard to the Egyptian gods. This universal God, however, identifies the Hebrews as “my people”, who are separate from “their taskmasters”, this distinction is critical in that it creates the dualism of “us” and “them” (Ex. 3:7) and goes on to identify the goal of God’s intervention as being “to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites” (Ex. 3:8). While the oral story of the Exodus identifies the Israelites as the “Chosen People” or the “Elect People of God”, the words for chosen or elected are totally absent in the book, yet there are indirect references to the special status of the Hebrews. Based on the cited texts above, it is apparent that Moses was not only being groomed to be a liberator, he was rather being groomed to be a colonizer because his mission was to extricate the Hebrews from enslavement in order for them to colonize, dominate and exploit the peoples that were occupying the lands they were going to take over, almost as their reward for being enslaved in Egypt.

The intentional or unintentional weaving of Christendom European colonial project and the Hebrew/Israelite Exodus story created a religious justification for the colonization of the rest of the World by European states, kingdoms and empires (Gunda, 2021), yet the colonial tendencies of the Exodus were forced, suggesting these aspects were themselves late in development when compared to the decolonial tendencies in the story and book of Exodus.

4. Exodus and Decolonial Ideological Framework – The Option for the Vulnerable

We are aware that as Europe stood shaken by World War II, many colonized nations, states and peoples took advantage to demand the end of colonization and their independence. This is a period widely known as the decolonization period beginning in the 1950s. *Decolonization* refers to the

process of resisting colonization, a process of unlearning the epistemologies of colonialism, a process of undoing the outcomes of colonization and finally, a process of un-being or un-becoming what the colonial ideology had made the colonized into. In its early manifestations, decolonization was thought “to refer to the formal processes of political change” (Horrell, 2023, p. 39), expressed mostly in the visible change of leadership. Political domination was the most visible manifestation of colonization, hence, the early processes of decolonization focused on “governance power”, in politics, society, church, education and industry. I think the strongest power of colonization was the least visible, the “back office” of the colonial project – the systems, epistemologies, theologies, social norms and values. Decolonization involves challenging the particular systems – legal, political, economic, and ecclesial modes of knowing, social norms and values that have been superimposed through colonization. It is a process to remember, reclaim and reimagine, it is about recreating community by affirming and re-affirming the marginalized and suppressed voices.

Decoloniality is understood and defined in relation to coloniality and decolonization, by which it refers to the commitment to perpetual resistance to manifestations of coloniality in society and a commitment to continually decolonize. Decoloniality concerns itself with resisting not simply Eurocentric perspectives but rather colonial ideologies of superiority, privileges, domination, and exploitation (Idamarhare, 2014, p. 53). The beneficiaries of coloniality are not always fixed hence the focus on ideology, systems, and epistemologies. In the area of biblical studies “epistemic decolonisation” is critical (Horrell, 2023, p. 39), because for long biblical studies have been thought of as the exclusive domain in which white European males were the experts, thereby perpetuating colonial biblical “epistemicide” (Santos, 2016, p. 149). The history of the Bible in Africa Studies (BiAS) series dating back to 2009 was an intentional quest to challenge this form of coloniality in biblical studies by creating an alternative platform for marginalized biblical scholars. The intentionality of destabilizing the existing platforms with their coloniality is expressed through the acronym, which can be read as “bias”, exercising the right to execute the option for the marginalized. In his work with African PhD students and scholars,

such as Musa Dube, Ezra Chitando, Kudzai Biri, Susan Kilonzo, Mark Aidoo, Gerald West, Masiwa Ragies Gunda, Francis Machingura, Rose Gabaitsa, Lovemore Togarasei, Obvious Vengeyi and many others, Joachim Kügler took an intentional and deliberate commitment to create an alternative platform from within the citadels of white biblical studies supremacism. Challenging the traditions and assumptions that doubted biblical studies and contributions of African scholars. Through his stewardship, BiAS is now in its 15th year and boasts over 40 volumes!

While we observed the almost artificial and forced nature of the colonial aspects of the Exodus story and book, the decolonial elements read as more natural to the story and the context of the Hebrews that it is most probable that in its earliest stages of development, the Exodus story was a decolonial and liberation story, which was later embellished with the colonial elements once the situation of the Hebrews/Israelites had changed. According to Fluegel,

“Send forth My people that they shall serve Me in the wilderness” [Ex. 5:1], is the motto of the Hebrew's mission, the formula of his Investiture. Let them go forth and civilize the world. Let them scatter and spread over the earth and teach the pure God belief, the Ten Words, the one human race, sympathy and justice to fellowmen. This Israel taught and acted upon, he alone was sincere, others were politic.” (Fluegel, 1910, p. 33).

In fact, this motto occurs seven times in the book of Exodus, Ex. 5:1; 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; and 10:4. In each of these instances, the promised land is not mentioned as being part of the reason why the enslaved Hebrews must be released by the Egyptians. The reason for their release is invariably stated as to allow them to “celebrate or observe a festival of the Lord”, “worship the Lord”, and “to serve the Lord” and this is meant to happen in the wilderness. The Exodus was meant to free and liberate the enslaved without necessarily replicating the Egyptian systems of bondage. In folk songs, this core of the Exodus has been turned into hymns and choruses that cast the Exodus as a decolonial and decolonization intervention, one whose aim was to challenge the colonizing systems of Egypt, dismantling them by disengaging and resisting them by no longer serving them. “An entry into the discourse of resistance is located ‘within the context of historical struggles and conflicts’ of ancient and contemporary communities”

(Wittenberg, 1996, p. 231). The Exodus story is about resistance to oppressive Egyptian systems from which the Hebrews seek to extricate themselves and to disable the system that thrived on the back of exploitation and enslavement. The Exodus was about denying this system its critical but unacknowledged resource, the enslaved people. While this core gives us the first side of the Exodus, a second critical element of the Exodus seeks to answer the question, “and then what?” Is decolonization only interested in dismantling the colonial systems? The answer to this question can be deciphered from Ex. 19:3-6,

“Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, ‘Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, *you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.* These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.’” (Ex 19:3–6).

When looked at from these two elements, the Exodus was not meant to create a new generation of enslavers and colonizers, but rather it was meant to create a new kind of kingdom, one in which responsibility, accountability, justice and righteousness were not to be expected of some but not others, as was the case in Egypt, the symbol of the colonizing kingdoms and systems, the Israelites will be *priestly* and *holy*, Israel was being “consecrated to ethical, mental and spiritual interests” (Fluegel, 1910, p. 32). Being consecrated to a higher moral responsibility comes with a higher responsibility to raise the consciousness of the people to resist colonizing tendencies and principles irrespective of their sponsors, as priests, the Israelites are to spread the principles of justice and righteousness and to raise awareness on the divine option for the vulnerable, only a socially, politically and economically conscious populace can effectively resist coloniality (Gunda, 2009). When read in the light of the texts about the distribution of land among the 12 tribes of Israel, it gets even more interesting because when priesthood is assigned to one tribe, the tribe of Levi does not receive any tribal land (Josh. 13:33) because as priests, they were meant to serve all the other tribes. In the Exodus, the Hebrews/Israelites are meant to be the priests for all the people, making the conquest

of the land something that was likely added to the aspirations of Israel but one that had not always been part of the Exodus story. What remains uncontested in the story is how it revolves around the lived experiences of the enslaved beginning with their experience of being human, living in peace and experiencing normal challenges as a community, including famine. The story continues with the experience of being marginalized, enslaved and erased from history such that the story of Exodus “begins as communal work of interrogating and transforming structures and systems that produce erasure, alienation, and singularity” (Ngwa, 2022, p. 18). Even though coloured by the racist white supremacism logic of 20th century Europe, there are connotations of interest for this chapter in the work of Fluegel;

“‘Let My people go, that they may serve Me in the wilderness’, in this wild struggle for existence; that by their cultivating man’s ethical and spiritual elements, they became the pioneers of a higher civilization than that handed down by Phoenicia, Babylonia or Egypt. This means our text. Juda had the task of clearing the wild forests of barbarism, of removing the rubbish of paganism, of popular ignorance and superstitions, of implanting the seeds of truth, reason, fraternity and justice unto all, of teaching the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of men, inculcating human dignity and spirituality.” (Fluegel, 1910, p. 33).

Simply stated, Israel or the Hebrews were being led into a form of existence and of community in which justice and dignity of all people were the core values and they were being tasked with sharing these values with the rest of the world. We understand that at the height of European colonialism, “justice unto all” might have carried the connotations and meaning of “justice unto all white Europeans”. To realize this new form of being and belonging, the Israelites are to observe various ethical demands but two of which stand out. In Ex. 22:21–24, the Israelites are commanded,

“You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans.” (Ex. 22:21–24).

The three groups identified in these verses, the stranger, widow and orphan, are among the most vulnerable groups, showing that the Lord had

not taken the option for the Hebrews/Israelites but rather in the Exodus, the Lord was executing the option for the vulnerable, marginalized and oppressed people. It is instructive that this text uses categories that are not ethnicity-bound, but rather categories that are universal and not limited to any specific ethnic or cultural group. This is an option that also remains critical for the success of decolonization and decoloniality, both are commitments to stand with the vulnerable, marginalized and oppressed and to remove the systems that continue to create and sustain vulnerabilities and marginalizations. The alternative community that is being championed by the Exodus is one that creates a oneness that is not colonizing and one that does not seek to erase but to co-exist, priests were not meant to live apart, they were to be integrated and included into all communities without losing their identity.

“[W]hat risk does a partially displaced (diaspora-home) community and its earthy environments face if identity formation is modelled after the allure of imperial ideology that wrestles communal multiplicity into singularity, evident in Pharaoh’s anxieties about the epistemological and demographic multiplicity that made up the exodus community (Exod. 1:7, 9; cf. 12:38)? How does community resist the costly allure of privileged singularized existence? The story of Exodus is not only multilocal, but also polyphonic and perennially communal. No single heroes are allowed and none ultimately survive the robust multiplicity that the story produces. Instead of colonial, patriarchal, and imperial singularity, the story produces an ethos of communal oneness – oneness with the divine, with others, and with the earth itself.” (Ngwa, 2022, p. 15).

In seeking the extermination of the Hebrews by working them to death while killing young boys, Pharaoh sought to create a forced oneness in which other identities were systematically eliminated. One of the decolonial interventions is actually a response to the extreme strategy of the Pharaoh.

“The midwives refuse to become agents of death. But more importantly, they move the story beyond the confines of Pharaoh’s deadly time zone, saying of the Hebrew women: “they give birth before the midwives arrive” (Exod. 1:19). The midwives decenter Pharaoh’s necropolitics because the Hebrew women engender multiplying biopolitics.” (Ngwa, 2022, p. 16).

The Exodus story becomes a contest between the politics of death being championed by Pharaoh and the politics of life, with the Hebrew midwives taking centre-stage. Not only are the Hebrew midwives resisting and undermining Pharaoh's decree, the Hebrew women are participating in the resistance by nursing children out of Egyptian gaze. The role of women in creating a mass of critically and socially conscious Hebrew community is often underestimated. It takes three women to place Moses in the public space, Moses' mother, Moses' sister – Miriam – and the Pharaoh's daughter – the princess, the soft underbelly of the empire facilitates radicalization and resistance to be brought into the inner core of the empire (Ngwa, 2022, pp. 16–17).

5. Re-membering/Re-imagining the Exodus

We grew up on a diet of the Exodus story, it was a story, it was songs, it was a metaphor, it was history. The story found expression in many contexts and never lost its potency across generations. What gave this story its potency was its adaptability that allowed readers not only to identify with some of the central characters in the story but it allowed readers to read themselves into the story, identifying their own oppressors with the oppressors in the story. It is not surprising that liberation wars in Africa were imagined as some type of exodus-liberation model, with leaders cast in the light of Moses (Gunda, 2010). Approached from this perspective, it follows that “the reason why Exodus is ultimately not about moving a people from one location to another, but about the ability of such movement to bring liberation to Egypt, the Wilderness, and the Mountain, and therefore to the generations that inhabit those narrative spaces and places” (Ngwa, 2022, p. 16). The place names such as Egypt, Red Sea or the Wilderness are cast as symbolic and representational, representing enslaving, oppressive and exploitative systems and institutions. They snare their victims to the point of eliminating the possibility of potential alternative sources of power that the victims are resigned to their fate. The migrants, enslaved and exploited cannot imagine any other way of living that even during the process of being liberated they are still hungover their oppression, and still considers it as the only way of living hence the journey toward liberation is punctuated by requests to return to Egypt (Ex. 15:23–24;

16:2–3; 17:1–3; Num. 14:1–4). In these texts, the Hebrews constantly regurgitate the colonial logic that there is nothing better than the death-dealing Egyptian oppressive system because at least it allows its victim a reasonable way of dying. Coloniality is at play as the Exodus staggers toward sustaining a transformational experience of an alternative way of being, of community and of life.

Interestingly, while it was possible for God to directly, and without human mediation, intervene in the experiences of the Hebrews in Egypt, God chose to accompany human actors in executing the divine plan to free the Hebrews. This is critically important in the context of decoloniality, the belief that God's plan is for all human beings, notwithstanding the multiple diversities that exist among them, ought to live in communities built on the values of justice (fairness), equality (equity), inclusion and belonging – this plan still requires active characters from within and without the community of the oppressed to create a decolonial or alternative reality, the Moses-Princess combo for liberation. The collaboration or partnership between Moses and the Princess is one that is of critical significance because by the single decision to adopt Moses and place him inside the palace, the princess had initiated an alternative centre of power within the existing centre of power. The existing centre of power assumed it could snare and entice an erasure of identity and sense of belonging in the small boy. Imbibing the strategies of the centre of power and deploying its resources – material and social capital, the boy grows up to be a formidable force. The resistance to the oppressive system was not only playing out on the birth stools, it was now playing out in the palace itself and this collaborative approach was central in dismantling the enslaving and colonizing system represented by Pharaoh. This is the most likely response to Marc Ela's question, "What is the message of the Book of Exodus today for millions of Africans in their religious, cultural, political and socio-economic situations?" (Ela, 1991). It is about freedom and liberation, it is about dismantling oppressive systems and structures, it is about the coming together of victims and well-meaning beneficiaries of the enslaving and colonizing powers for an alternative way of being. It is about challenging the centre of power from within and from without.

The oldest Exodus tradition or story anticipates the liberation and freedom of the oppressed and elicits from its hearers and readers, a sense of belonging and of being in “solidarity with individuals and groups who are refused the dignity of being human, to denounce the abuses of established systems and to intervene to protect the weak” (Mtshiselwa, 2021, p. 504). A decolonial approach to the Exodus can create and foster lines of solidarity between allies that can sponsor resistance within and without the centre of power. This approach can re-equip the Exodus story to raise the consciousness of victims and survivors of the racist, imperial, colonizing and oppressive systems (Ngwa, 2022, p. 14). A decolonial approach to Exodus cannot be an event but a process that will remain alert to the potential of these oppressive systems to adapt to changed circumstances, especially their capacity to camouflage themselves behind faces of supposed victims, something that allowed the transformation of Moses (Joshua) from liberator to colonizer and oppressor, when considering the secondary development of the Exodus to becoming the story of colonialism. This is particularly key when reading the Exodus in post-colonial contexts because the Exodus remains a living story and book that many still consider instructive for their daily struggles (Masenya, 2005, p. 1).

6. Conclusion

In its development in ancient Israel, the Exodus narrative and book underwent some fundamental revisions, beginning as an anti-oppression and pro-liberation story to becoming a manifesto for colonization and oppression, colonizing toward ancient Canaanites and neighbouring peoples. The rise of Christianity as the empire religion during the Roman empire, provided a new impetus to the coloniality elements of the story of Exodus, and this particularly became apparent during the rise of colonial and imperial Europe – a period during which the Exodus became a legitimating force for the colonial projects of European states and kingdoms. The case of Apartheid South Africa illustrates this point extremely well, the Afrikaners understood themselves as divinely ordained to possess the land of South Africa even if it meant driving indigenous peoples out of their ancestral lands. A decolonial approach to the Exodus story and book opens opportunities to question not just the ethnicities of the oppressors

but rather the principles of oppression to guard against the capacity of the oppressive systems to re-brand themselves and lend themselves to newer and subtle forms of coloniality. Decolonization must seek to sponsor, promote, or establish alternative centres of power, alternative principles by which communities relate, as well as equipping for the skills to unmask masked coloniality. The combination of the Princess and Moses provides a critical template between resisters from within working and enabling resisters from without.

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