

“Out of the Iron Furnace” Exodus, Death, and the Reception History of Freedom

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The event described by the Hebrew Bible as constituting the foundational moment of the formation of Israel has, presumably ever since stories of the Exodus from Egypt were first narrated, fired the imagination of listeners and readers. The version of the story that has come down to us through the ages—that is, the one preserved in the Hebrew Bible—has served as the basis for countless religious and political expectations and has inspired both peaceful and violent collective attempts to change the course of history.¹

In recent years, in biblical scholarship and beyond, we have heard a lot about “resistance literature” in the Hellenistic period and, indeed, about “theologies of resistance”, with a book by Anatheia Portier-Young entitled *Apocalypse against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* attracting significant attention.² The “theologies of resistance” identified by Portier-Young and others are found in the classic apocalyptic texts that express the hope for the eschatological establishment of the direct rule of God, concomitantly with the liberation of the people of Israel, such as the book of Daniel.

But we also find, in Jewish Hellenistic literature, examples of—so to speak—a *permutation* of that kind of apocalyptic hope, and that permutation is the hope for *individual* liberation, an expression of the individual’s quest for freedom and the individual’s desire for the liberation of what one may call the “inner self”.³ Such expectations are found in some of the less obvious places in Jewish Hellenistic literature, and to one of them I would like to turn in this essay. The *individualisation and internalisation of the exodus* finds a particularly salient expression in the Wisdom of Solomon, a wisdom treatise probably written by an Alexandrian Jewish author in the first century BCE. As we shall see, the use of

¹ Cf. Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985) and Jan Assmann, *Exodus: Die Revolution der Alten Welt* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2015).

² Anatheia E. Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids, Mich. et al.: Eerdmans, 2011).

³ Cf. Jan Assmann and Guy G. Stroumsa, ed., *Transformations of the Inner Self in Ancient Religions*, Leiden et al.: Brill, 1999); see also Albert I. Baumgarten, Jan Assmann and Guy G. Stroumsa, ed., *Self, Soul and Body in Religious Experience* (Leiden et al.: Brill, 1998).

the exodus motif in the Wisdom of Solomon is a characteristic example of *Nachleben* in the precise sense of Aby Warburg's term:⁴ the survival, through transformation, of a motif in radically changed cultural circumstances; its adaptability and persistence through time and across cultures.

Egypt and the Exodus: key passages in the Book of Wisdom

The Exodus motif is used to great effect in Wisd. 10:15–11:16, and that use is continued in chapters 16:1–19:21. The Exodus motif thus receives much attention in the book of Wisdom, and that includes copious references to Egypt, the Egyptians, and the religion of Egypt. In 10:15–16, Sophia is said to have established herself in the soul of Moses, the servant of the Lord, thus having enabled him to confront Pharaoh and to liberate the Israelites from a "people of oppressors" (v. 15–16):

¹⁵ A holy people and blameless race

wisdom delivered from a nation of oppressors.

¹⁶ She entered the soul of a servant of the Lord,

and withstood dread kings with wonders and signs. (RSV)

Wisdom is thus credited with the actions that are ascribed directly to the God of Israel in the original account in the book of Exodus. The book of Wisdom engages with the Exodus motif across six chapters out of nineteen altogether. Neither the Exodus itself nor Egypt, the Pharaoh or Moses are ever being referred to by name. Indeed, *not a single biblical figure* is ever mentioned by name. We shall need to keep this in mind. Nevertheless, for a Jewish reader, of course, the references to biblical figures were easy to understand.

Let us now turn to a few central concerns of the chapters which the Wisdom of Solomon devotes to its renarration of the Exodus story. Pieter Willem van der Horst writes:

In a series of seven antitheses, the author compares the Egyptians and the Israelites. For instance, the Egyptians were being slain by locusts and flies, while the Israelites survived a serpent attack through the agency of the bronze serpent; the Egyptians were unable to eat because of the hideousness of the beasts sent

⁴ On the concept of *Nachleben*, see Georges Didi-Huberman, *Das Nachleben der Bilder: Kunstgeschichte und Phantomzeit nach Aby Warburg*, trans. Michael Bischoff (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010).

against them, while Israel, after briefly suffering want, enjoyed exotic quail food; on the same night that the Egyptian firstborn were destroyed, Israel was summoned to God and glorified.

So far, so good. But something surprising happens in the book's last chapter:

[...] the Egyptians are accused of *misoxenia*, “hatred of foreigners” or “hostility toward strangers” (19.13), exactly the same accusation that was leveled against the Jews by Alexandrian Jew-haters from the very beginning. This cannot be sheer coincidence. “In styling the conduct of the Egyptians as *misoxenia*, the author is reversing the very charge made against the Jews by pagan contemporaries.” And the reversal of the charge is here made in the context of the exodus story.⁵

Van der Horst concludes that “[a]pparently, this story in its anti-Jewish form was still in the air in the time of this author, as writers such as Chaeremon and Apion prove”.⁶ Accusing the unnamed “people of oppressors” of *misoxenia* serves the purpose both of exonerating the Jews—who had been subject to the abuse of non-Jews—and of making a general point about the *misoxenia* they and others encountered in their lives. This probably is a direct reflection of the Alexandrian Jewish experience in the first century BCE. While there was a large Jewish community in Alexandria, relations with the non-Jewish majority population were at times tense.⁷

Wisd. 11:9–14 thus seems to be not just a renarration of Exodus events, but a reflexion of the actual experience of co-existence with Gentiles in Alexandria (with a focus on the Gentiles) and of the hope for justice:

For when they were tried, though they were being disciplined in mercy,
they learned how the ungodly were tormented when judged in wrath.

¹⁰ For thou didst test them as a father does in warning,
but thou didst examine the ungodly as a stern king does in condemnation.

¹¹ Whether absent or present, they were equally distressed,

¹² for a twofold grief possessed them,
and a groaning at the memory of what had occurred.

⁵ Pieter Willem van der Horst, “From Liberation to Expulsion: The Exodus in the Earliest Jewish-Pagan Polemics”, in *Israel's Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective: Text, Archaeology, Culture and Geoscience*, ed. Thomas Evan Levy, Thomas Schneider and William H. C. Propp (Cham: Springer, 2015), 387–96, here: 395.

⁶ Van der Horst, “From Liberation to Expulsion”, 395.

⁷ Peter M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, vol. I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 805–6.

¹³ For when they heard that through their own punishments
the righteous had received benefit, they perceived it was the Lord’s doing.

¹⁴ For though they had mockingly rejected him who long before had been cast
out and exposed,
at the end of the events they marveled at him,
for their thirst was not like that of the righteous. (RSV)

We must remember that these texts were, as far as I can see, supposed to be read by Jews and non-Jews alike: their Jewish readers knew which biblical groups and figures they referred to, and non-Jewish readers could read the texts as stories that make points about the power and significance of God as well as Sophia and her righteous adherents, without restricting their significance as exemplars to members of the people of Israel.

Sophia is described, by the book’s author, as God’s living instrument that brings about the individualisation and internalisation of Israel’s Exodus from Egypt: the original Exodus is seen as the unique event of *communal* liberation which serves as the background to the experience of *personal and individual* liberation, of a transition *from life through death to a new life* under the guidance of Sophia.

The Greek term commonly used, at the time when the Book of Wisdom was written, to designate the liberation from Egypt—i.e., ἐξοδος—is only used twice in the whole book, in 3:2 and 7:6, and it signifies the *way out of physical life*, of the earthly existence.⁸ The result of that ἐξοδος is painted in glorious colours early on in the book, in chapter 3:

¹ Δικαίων δὲ ψυχαὶ ἐν χειρὶ θεοῦ,
καὶ οὐ μὴ ἄνηται αὐτῶν βάσανος.
² ἔδοξαν ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖς ἀφρόνων τεθνάναι,
καὶ ἐλογίσθη κάκωσις ἡ ἐξοδος αὐτῶν
³ καὶ ἡ ἀφ’ ἡμῶν πορεία σύντριμμα,
οἱ δὲ εἰσιν ἐν εἰρήνῃ.

Wisd. 3:1–3: But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God,
and no torment will ever touch them.

² In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died,
and their exodus was thought to be an affliction,

⁸ See Friedrich Vinzenz Reiterer, “Beobachtungen zum äußeren und inneren Exodus im Buch der Weisheit”, in: Judith Gärtner and Barbara Schmitz, ed., *Die Rezeption des Exodusthemas in deuterokanonischer und frühjüdischer Literatur* (Berlin and Boston: de Gruyter, 2016), 187–208, here: 198–200.

³ and their going from us to be their destruction;
but they are at peace. (RSV, modified)

And in chapter 7:5–6:

⁵ οὐδεὶς γὰρ βασιλέων ἑτέραν ἔσχεν γενέσεως ἀρχήν,
⁶ μία δὲ πάντων εἴσοδος εἰς τὸν βίον ἔξοδός τε ἴση.

⁵ For no king has had a different beginning of existence;

⁶ there is for all mankind one entrance into life, and a common departure.

(RSV)

This exodus, then, was an exodus very different from the one described in the book of that name. Nevertheless, as we have seen, the biblical account of the exodus was hugely important to the author of the book of Wisdom. In a new type of wisdom discourse, he used it to provide the historical background to the Hellenistic Jewish experience of individual liberation through the practice of Wisdom in his own day: an experience that left room for individualising concepts of liberation only, not for social and political liberation.⁹ Why, then, did the author of Wisdom use the exodus narrative at all, and why did he use it in such a sustained manner, across several chapters of a fairly slim book devoted to a topic that seems far removed from the concerns of the book of Exodus? The answer is given by an observation made by Anatheia Portier-Young in her aforementioned book. She writes:

A key discursive strategy of resistance shared by Daniel, the Apocalypse of Weeks, and the Book of Dreams is the historical review, cast in the form of prophetic prediction, that at the same time interprets past and present, asserts the transience and finitude of temporal powers, affirms God’s governance of time and the outworking of God’s plan in history, and gives hope for a transformed future.¹⁰

While the Book of Wisdom does not “cast” its transformed exodus narrative in “the form of prophetic prediction”, that narrative shares all the other aspects of the “discursive strategy of resistance” with Daniel and the other books mentioned by Portier-Young. As she indicates, the discursive strategy which she identifies in Daniel and elsewhere finds its parallels in “opposition literature” produced under Roman domination, as identified by Joseph Ward Swain in a passage by Aemilius Sura, found in the works of Velleius Paterculus early in the

⁹ On the social and political situation of the Jews in Alexandria, cf. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 54–8.

¹⁰ Portier-Young, *Apocalypse*, 27.

first century CE.¹¹ Swain—who, of course, gives much attention to the book of Daniel, which is his starting-point—ultimately traces such resistance literature back not to Daniel but to “the pagans”¹² in Seleucid Asia Minor and dates it to the period between 189 and 171 BCE. Based on this observation and a number of related insights, Portier-Young concludes “that the apocalyptic review of history may have had its roots in Ancient Near Eastern traditions of resistance to Macedonian/Seleucid rule and was fundamental to the way in which these early Jewish apocalypses functioned as resistance literature”.¹³ In a similar vein, Samuel K. Eddy identifies “parallels between Persian and Jewish theologies of resistance”,¹⁴ stating that they “developed a rigidly henotheistic belief and an eschatology which saw human and divine affairs moving inexorably towards the predetermined divine and universal victory”.¹⁵

While the Book of Wisdom is not a typical exponent of “resistance literature”—or, in the words of Swain: “opposition literature”—, it nevertheless shares some key characteristics with such literature.

Conclusion

The *Nachleben* of the Exodus motif in the Wisdom of Solomon is a remarkable one. A powerful narrative of collective liberation was transformed into an exemplar of the formation of individuals in the service of Wisdom and thus, ultimately, of God. Crucial in that process was the enhanced significance of the figure of Wisdom in Hellenistic Judaism. As we saw, the term ἐξοδος was not used to designate the liberation from Egypt, but another liberation: the liberation from the body, from earthly existence. And that way out, that ἐξοδος, is indeed seen as the individual’s liberation: the liberation of his or her soul from the body that used to imprison it. The difference between the ἐξοδος from the “iron furnace”, Egypt, and the ἐξοδος from the body could scarcely be greater, but both are conceptualised as *the gateway to a better existence*.

¹¹ Joseph Ward Swain, “The Theory of the Four Monarchies: Opposition History under the Roman Empire”, *Classical Philology* 35 (1940): 1–21.

¹² Swain, “The Theory of the Four Monarchies”, 21.

¹³ Portier-Young, *Apocalypse*, 29.

¹⁴ Portier-Young, *Apocalypse*, 30.

¹⁵ Samuel K. Eddy, *The King is Dead: Studies in the Near Eastern Resistance to Hellenism, 334–31 B.C.* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), 42.

The reasons for this unlikely *Nachleben* of the exodus motif are not that hard to identify. Between the writing of the original exodus story in its classic form in the Pentateuch and the writing of the book of Wisdom, roughly half a millennium had elapsed, and the social and cultural circumstances had, of course, undergone a dramatic transformation. The situation in which the Jews of Alexandria, one of whom was the author of the book of Wisdom,¹⁶ found themselves in the first century BCE was not conducive to the development of apocalyptic literature along the usual lines, i.e. driven by a desire for a universal, cathartic transformation of the cosmos and the beginning of the immediate and eternal reign of God.¹⁷ Rather, in the Wisdom of Solomon we have a dialogue between wisdom traditions and apocalyptic thought in which the *wisdom element in apocalypticism* comes much more to the fore than its eschatological component. But the eschatological component is not absent. In the book of Wisdom, the exodus is an eschatological event in the sense that every individual will experience it as the crowning moment of his or her own eschatological progress, that is, their progress from their earthly existence through death and on to the communion of their souls with the deity. One might call this a quietistic transformation of apocalyptic beliefs. In any case, what we have here is one of the roots of Jewish mysticism, as described by Peter Schäfer.¹⁸

Be it quietistic or not, Wisdom's transformation of the exodus motif fulfils a desire which Michael Walzer identified in his *Exodus and Revolution*. "The Exodus", Walzer writes, "may or may not be what many of its commentators thought it to be, the first revolution. But the Book of Exodus (together with the Book of Numbers) is certainly the first description of revolutionary politics."¹⁹ But revolutionary politics is not everything. As Walzer rightly puts it:

Why be content with the difficult and perhaps interminable struggle for holiness and justice when there is another promised land where liberation is final, fulfillment complete? History itself is a burden from which we long to escape,

¹⁶ See Luca Mazinghi, *Weisheit* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2018), 30–4.

¹⁷ On the book of Wisdom and key characteristics of apocalypticism, cf. Maurice Gilbert, "Sagesse 3,7–9; 5,15–23 et l'apocalyptique", in: Maurice Gilbert, *La Sagesse de Salomon/The Wisdom of Solomon: Recueil d'études/Selected Essays* (Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2011), 89–107 and Mazinghi, *Weisheit*, 237.

¹⁸ Peter Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty: Feminine Images of God from the Bible to the Early Kabbalah* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002), 33–8.

¹⁹ Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, 134.

and messianism guarantees that escape: a deliverance not only from Egypt but from Sinai and Canaan, too.²⁰

But, one might add, messianism is not the ultimate answer to the desire for the escape from history either: that escape is fulfilled by the escape from the body. It is the body that involves us in history, that defines and to a great degree determines us as physical, social, and political beings.²¹ It now becomes clearer why the author of the book of Wisdom applies the term ἐξοδος only to death, *indeed only to the death of the just*. This is “where liberation is final, fulfillment complete”. It is the state which realises, eschatologically and in an other-worldly way, the inner-worldly promise of liberation held up by the original Exodus narrative.

The personalisation and internalisation of liberation through the ultimate ἐξοδος that is physical death could be conceptualised, by the Alexandrian Jews among whom the author of Wisdom grew up, as the final escape from the oppression exercised by the real and the metaphorical Egypt which they experienced. At the same time, non-Jewish readers of *Sapientia* could learn from the book how to escape what they experienced as *their* metaphorical Egypt: the lack of philosophical and ethical orientation in the “globalised” world of Eastern Mediterranean Hellenism and the absence of an eschatological hope for their lives.

The way this process of liberation was conceptualised was very different from that found in the classic examples of Jewish-Hellenistic resistance literature mentioned earlier in this paper. Matthew Edwards says in his study *Pneuma and Realized Eschatology in the Book of Wisdom*:

[...] language formerly taken to be eschatological, that is referring to a final judgement of God, is in Wisdom used to describe the ongoing mechanisms of creation. Wisdom does not look for a future age but rather expects the work of creation to continue, bringing the wicked to their knees and the judgement seat of the righteous. In this sense, eschatological hope is found to be realized in the operation of the cosmos and the ongoing judging role of the righteous.²²

²⁰ Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, 135–6.

²¹ On the significance of the body, cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945).

²² Matthew Edwards, *Pneuma and Realized Eschatology in the Book of Wisdom* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 199–200.

Edwards is right with regard to the fact that the eschatological expectations expressed in the book of Wisdom and in the apocalyptic literature of the time differ considerably. But he does not see where the key difference between the two is to be found. He overlooks the crucial importance of the educational process undergone by the individual, a process which will result in his or eschatological liberation. The book of Wisdom shares at least one centrally important view with the examples of resistance literature discussed by Portier-Young, and that is “an eschatology which saw human and divine affairs moving inexorably towards the predetermined divine and universal victory”.²³ It is precisely *this* view of eschatology that drives the book of Wisdom: the progress towards the ultimate goal of liberation is inexorable. The book’s hope is not for a realized eschatology in Edwards’ sense but for an individualised *eschaton* for which the individual sets out in his or her own earthly life with the assistance of Wisdom, an *eschaton* in which they will arrive after having undergone the exodus that is their physical death. That transition is the fulfilment of their personalised and internalised eschatological hope. The entry of death into the world (Wisd. 2:24: *eiserchesthai*) is contrasted with the *exodos* of the Just from the world. The latter *exodos* is seen as something entirely positive: it ensures the reunification of the soul, conceived of as *pneuma*, with the *pneuma* of divine Wisdom—and thus with God himself.²⁴

²³ Eddy, *The King is Dead*, 42.

²⁴ Philo later developed the same concept in a different manner. As Joel S. Allen, “The Despoliation of Egypt: Origen and Augustine – From Stolen Treasures to Saved Texts”, in *Israel’s Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective*, ed. Levy, Schneider and Propp, 347–356, here: 348, n. 1, rightly states with regard to the treatment of Gen 15:14 (τὸ δὲ ἔθνος ᾧ ἐὰν δουλεύσωσιν κρινῶ ἐγὼ μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα ἐξελεύσονται ὧδε μετὰ ἀποσκευῆς πολλῆς) in Philo’s *Quis rerum divinarum heres sit*, “[t]he ὧδε (or “here”) refers to the promised land which for Philo represents the soul’s true destination in God. Rene Bloch (in “Leaving Home: Jewish-Hellenistic Authors on the Exodus”) has pointed out that in Philo’s *Life of Moses*, the destination point for the exodus is always left uncertain. Bloch suggests that Philo wants us to view Moses as a cosmopolitan citizen of the world and thus he sought to de-emphasize his status as founder of the land of the Jews. I add that Philo’s de-emphasis on the destination point also helps the biblical story to function as allegory. The real destination of Moses and his people who have escaped Egyptian bodily passions is the ultimate ‘here’ of heaven; the soul’s true home.”