

LIVES OF GREAT RELIGIOUS BOOKS

- The Book of *Exodus*, Joel S. Baden
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- The *Bhagavad Gita*, Richard H. Davis
- John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bruce Gordon
- The *Book of Mormon*, Paul C. Gutjahr
- The Book of *Genesis*, Ronald Hendel
- The *Book of Common Prayer*, Alan Jacobs
- The Book of *Job*, Mark Larrimore
- The *Koran* in English, Bruce B. Lawrence
- The *Lotus Sūtra*, Donald S. Lopez, Jr.
- The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Donald S. Lopez, Jr.
- C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*, George M. Marsden
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Martin E. Marty
- Thomas Aquinas's *Summa theologiae*, Bernard McGinn
- The I Ching*, Richard J. Smith
- The *Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, David Gordon White
- Augustine's *Confessions*, Garry Wills
- The *Talmud*, Barry Scott Wimpfheimer

FORTHCOMING

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- The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila*, Carlos Eire
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- Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Joseph Luzzi
- The Greatest Translations of All Time, Jack Miles
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- The Passover *Haggadah*, Vanessa Ochs
- The *Song of Songs*, Ilana Pardes
- The *Daode Jing*, James Robson
- Rumi's *Masnavi*, Omid Safi

The Book of *Exodus*

A BIOGRAPHY

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Of course, on this side of the pond at least, the most famous Puritans were not those who remained in England to fight alongside Cromwell but those who left for the promised land of New England. Already imbued with the Exodus theme from the context of the English Reformation, the appeal of the story was almost irresistible for those who were literally crossing a body of water to found a new civilization. William Bradford, who journeyed on the *Mayflower* and became governor of Plymouth Colony in 1621, likened the Pilgrims to "Moses and the Israelites when they went out of Egypt."²⁹ (Cotton Mather, the great Puritan preacher, referred to Bradford as a Moses figure.) John Winthrop, who would become the governor of Massachusetts, wrote in 1629, on the eve of his departure for New England, that his journey from the corrupted English culture was akin to how God "carried the Israelites into the wilderness and made them forget the fleshpots of Egypt."³⁰

In order for the New England-bound Puritans to understand themselves as participating in a contemporary Exodus story, they had to draw two related analogies. Jonathan Boyarin writes, "There was first the ethnic-moral analogy, in which the Israelites were to Egyptians and to Canaanites as Puritans were to Papists and to Indians. There was also the geographical analogy, in which Egypt was to England as America was to Canaan."³¹ These analogies operated at two distinct poles: the Puritans had to define both England and America, their point of departure and their destination, in biblical terms. The former was relatively well established, as we have already seen. Especially after the accession of James I and his suppression of Puritanism, it was possible to claim that England had come to be ruled by a new Pharaoh. It is the latter that required some conceptual work, and that had lasting and unfortunate consequences.

The Hebrew Bible is not particularly clear about the status of the Canaanites who dwelt in the land before Israel arrived from Egypt. In some places, such as the famous stories of Joshua, they are to be battled and destroyed. In others, however, the Bible suggests that God would have cleared the land of its prior inhabitants before the Israelites arrived. "I will send forth my terror before you, and I will throw into a panic all the people among whom you come, and I will make all your enemies turn tail before you. I will send a plague ahead of you, and it shall drive out before you the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites" (Exod 23:27-28), declares God to Moses. The Puritans seemed generally averse to the notion of taking up arms against the Native Americans themselves. The leading minister of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Cotton, wrote, "No nation is to drive out

another without special commission from heaven, such as the Israelites had."³² But they were all too happy to see God's hand at work in the diseases that devastated the Native American population, foremost among them smallpox. King James himself, in his charter for the colony, "The Great Patent of New-England," declared that "we have been further given certainly to know, that within these late years, there hath, by God's visitation, reigned a wonderful plague . . . in a manner to the utter destruction, devastation, and depopulation of that whole territory."³³ A pamphlet written in 1643 recognized God's favor toward the settlement "in sweeping away great multitudes of the natives by the smallpox a little before we went thither, that He might make room for us there."³⁴

Here, perhaps more than anywhere else, we encounter the ethical complications of the Exodus story. Redemption and divine blessing are all well and good for Israel, whether the Israel of the Bible or the new Israel of the Puritan community; but they are mitigated by the resulting destruction of the Canaanites, ancient or contemporary. The Puritans seemed to recognize this, at least insofar as they put the fate of the Native Americans in God's hands rather than their own. In doing so, however, they effectively eliminated the Native American population from the narrative of the promised land, reserving it entirely for themselves.³⁵ The repercussions would be felt for centuries to come.