

CHAPTER 1

How Liberating Is the Exodus and for Whom?

Deconstructing Exodus Motifs in Scripture, Literature, and Life

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Watching Charlton Heston playing Moses in Cecil B. DeMille's movie epic *The Ten Commandments* along with stories in Sunday School record my earliest recognitions of Exodus. Many have yoked the concept of "exodus" with the liberation of the enslaved, the disenfranchised, those deemed other. Being educated toward the end of segregation and the beginnings of court-ordered integration in southern United States of America, our teachers, churches, and families believed we could do well and we did. Education was our exodus from the stereotypes blasted in the media. I knew about racism, though our parents shielded us from a lot of blatant oppression. Reading slave narratives triggered a rude awakening about the depths of racial hatred. During my master's studies at seminary and my doctoral work, I began to see and hear the concept of exodus other than liberation. My lived experiences have made me more adamant about justice and liberation issues. Womanist thought provides a powerful rubric that allows me to embrace all my rich experiences, framing my own contexts.

Contexts situate us in the particularity of our reality. The received Exodus text speaks of Hebraic liberation; those God said would be in bondage in conversation with Abraham years earlier. God then tells Moses to tell Pharaoh to "Let my people go." What about the Egyptians' plight who were Pharaoh's subjects? What was the justification for the premeditated, sacrificial murder of the Egyptian first born, not limited to Pharaoh's son? Who

is the God of the Exodus, and is this God the same God who created the Egyptians? Why did this God never tell Moses or Aaron to preach to the Egyptians, setting them free from their own systems of divinity? Why did this God insist on hardening the heart of Pharaoh, causing tremendous pain and suffering, so that this same God could get the glory of redeemer?

These questions emerge when I wrestle with Exodus 1–15, particularly given the high regard for Exodus by Jews and African Americans. Sermons, song, and film have chronicled this liberation sensibility. Several experiences of African Americans incarnate an Exodus experience, from the great migrations to the North and West during the 1930s–50s to the 1960s civil rights movement. Many historians and sociologists, however, argue that the latter did not really change lives of African diasporan or white poor. While you no longer have to enter from the back door, can eat at the lunch counters, and book a room in a hotel, you have to have an education and finances to access these venues. White flight from inner cities to suburbia and shifting tax revenues away from inner cities helped to keep poor school systems poor, and further enhanced wealthy school systems. Such flight by middle class persons of all racial-ethnic groups helped to re-segregate society and heighten classism. That the American interstate highway system most frequently went through Black and Brown communities caused a rift in many historic communities. Thus, the village could no longer raise the child, because the village disappeared. So, who gets liberated when an Exodus occurs?

My essay problematizes the notion of liberation amidst theodicy, visibility, and poverty in Exodus 1–15. Following the mapping out of my interdisciplinary methodology and context, I then: (1) give an overview and examine themes and concepts of liberation in this pericope; (2) place scriptural exodus motifs in dialogue with exodus themes and outcomes in two novels, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*; (3) explore the notion of theodicy, poverty, and visibility, in Exodus 1–15 and the novels; and (4) analyze the impact of context on how one hears and engages exodus motifs as living biotexts, as liberation of actual persons.

Mapping a Contextual Terrain

Womanist theory is a tool to name, expose, question, and help transform the oppression of women, particularly those affected by race and class domination

face daily. Womanists champion theory and praxis, embracing the struggle for freedom for all people. Freedom is a gift and a right bequeathed by a personal God. Taking the use of language seriously, we engage the politics of language, where words and expressions can inspire or subjugate. This strategy is vital to analysis of biblical texts. A *Womanist* reading of biblical texts requires a seven-fold interdisciplinary hermeneutics.¹

(1) Tempered cynicism sometimes equated with reasonable suspicion invites one to question with a sensitivity that knows the joy of the impossible, the hope of embedded faith, together with the scholarship that helps one appreciate the complexities of such work. (2) Creativity affords a context where customary interpretations and traditions do not hinder exploring oral or canonical texts in new ways. (3) Courage provides the cushion for moments when analysis leads to more of the same or to mystery; with the audacity to ask questions and engage comparative analysis of unique and seemingly antithetical texts and themes. (4) Commitment to the hearing and just, appropriate living of these texts undergird the process of relevant discovery. (5) Candor provides the impetus to reveal oppression within texts and the communities that have incorporated such tenets to produce an oppressive, though mainline faith. (6) Curiosity presses one to keep searching the sacred to push the envelope toward inclusivity, mercy, justice, and love. And, (7) the comedic reminds us not to take ourselves so seriously that we fail to grow, and to respect other ways of seeing, though we may disagree.

Womanist biblical scholars wrestle with the scriptures as they deal with the absurdity of oppression: calling for cessation of hostilities, new kinds of interpretation, accountability, and change. Womanist theology is the study of God-talk, which intentionally names and exposes issues of sexism, classism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism—all systemic and individual phenomena and actions that oppress and affect women of the African diaspora; that analyzes related human individual and social behavior in concert with the Divine; is relational. Womanist biblical theology merges such study of theology, with my seven-fold interdisciplinary hermeneutics cited above, to exegete and investigate biblical texts toward human empowerment and transformation,

1. This hermeneutic was first used in my article, "Hot Buttered Soulful Tunes and Cold Icy Passionate Truths: Hermeneutics of Biblical Interpolation in R&B (Rhythm and Blues)," in *African Americans and the Bible*, Vincent L. Wimbush, ed. (London: Continuum, 2000), 782–803.

cognizant of the ways people have used scripture to persecute, demean, and control others. Such biblical theological work never worships the text, understands its paradoxes and challenges when speaking about liberation, and often has more questions than answers.

Thus, reading texts can be an engaged, creative, involved, sometimes daunting, and thrilling opportunity to experience the worlds of others and the realm of God, via the received canon. I have always questioned reality and not been afraid to take an unpopular stance. Challenges from systemic oppression, accepted curriculum, practices, and processes have fueled numerous questions. Affirmed and appreciated throughout childhood, my reality has invoked creative expression and liberative participation. My personal exodus through performance, teaching, research, and publications remain framed by a commitment to justice, my lens for reading Exodus 1–15:21.

Windows into Emancipation or Tyranny: Themes and Concepts around Liberation

The book of Exodus reflects a testament of faith, not an eyewitness account of God's self-disclosure and liberative efforts for Israel around 1250 BCE. Binz posits that this salvific God of freedom and life rescues Israel and people today, out of desperation, directing us to new awareness, comprehension, and goals (Binz 1993: 3–8).

At first glance and within many traditions, the Exodus saga (1:1—15:21) celebrates emancipation, liberation, and salvation history deliverance of Israel. Framed as patriarchal, genealogical narrative when the new pharaoh had no knowledge of Joseph's legacy, Israel poses a threat that must be controlled and liquidated. Empirical intimidation fails to effect Hebrew genocide, and in the language of Cheryl Townsend Gilkes "if it wasn't for the women," Moses would not have made it. Midwives Shiphrah and Puah, mother Jochebed, Pharaoh's daughter, and his sister Miriam aid Moses' survival. As an adult, Moses kills an Egyptian and flees to Midian, where he helps Reuel/Jethro's daughters, and subsequently marries Jethro's daughter Zipporah, who also saves his life. The old pharaoh dies, Israel suffers, God hears their groaning, and remembers the patriarchal covenant. God commands Moses to be deliverer, reveals that the new pharaoh will resist liberating Israel, unless compelled by mighty force, and states that divine power will save the day.

God gets angry when Moses is reluctant, and provides Aaron as Moses' mouthpiece. Bizarrely, Exodus 4 finds Zipporah saving Moses' life, apparently from divine homicide, by circumcising their son. In their first meeting, pharaoh asks: who this God is; why he should pay attention to this God. Further, he will not release Israel, subsequently placing more burdens on the children of Israel. When Moses questions God, about why God allows more evil done to Israel, God replies, "watch what I do to pharaoh." Divine ego again emerges as a central theme. When Moses reminds the people about God's promise to deliver them, their pathology of brokenness and enslavement foils their listening. Following a genealogical interlude, several chapters rehearse the cat and mouse struggles between YHWH and Pharaoh with Moses as intermediary, posing "The Lord God of the Hebrews, sent me to you saying, 'Let my people go.'" The ten plagues serve as contested site of power and control. Amidst this ecological nightmare, YHWH promises to protect Israel and punish Egypt, though a few times God listens to Moses and ceases the onslaught of destruction, after Pharaoh requested respite from the attacks and agrees to let the people go. Often, when Pharaoh acquiesces, YHWH hardens Pharaoh's heart again. Following the announcement of the final plague of the death of the first-born, Moses and Israel celebrate Passover. At midnight, YHWH kills all first-born in Egypt and Pharaoh tells them to be gone, and to bless him also. Following the consecration of the first-born of Israel, God leads them out through a wilderness toward the sea of reeds, guiding them with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God again hardens Pharaoh's heart. Pharaoh and his armies pursue Israel, only to be drowned in the Sea, as "Israel saw the great work which the Lord did against the Egyptians and the people feared the Lord; and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses" (Exod. 14:31). The saga ends with two songs of praise, of Moses and of Miriam signaling YHWH's praise of Israel's deliverance.

One reading of the God of Exodus is that God both wants to liberate the Hebrews and bring an awareness of God to Egypt. The hardening of Pharaoh's heart, by Pharaoh *and* by God, is juxtaposed over against YHWH's determination to liberate Israel. The plagues God orchestrates occur to liberate Israel: salvific history. Freedom in Exodus involves liberty from oppression and freedom to live on land God promised them. The quest for freedom involves confrontations between a confident, dramatic Moses and a resolute,

obstinate Pharaoh. Randall Bailey (1994: 12–17) cautions a liberationist reading of Exodus 7–11, given the difference between the muted liberationist polemic of P and the liberationist/oppressionist motifs of J and E. P suggests that Pharaoh is actually collateral or a puppet of YHWH; Pharaoh is not the problem. The lapse of Israel's faith is one critical issue. The reshaping of P also signals the superiority of YHWH to all other deities, and teases the Egyptians regarding the Egyptians and their institutions. Thus, P's prime directive is recognizing and honoring YHWH's preeminence. Liberation is a side issue. Tables turn, with irony and divine action throughout the text, notably regarding women's roles and power, who customarily have no agency, or voice as they are someone else's property.

Women, who are normally powerless in this culture, ultimately, salvage Moses' life, and help stymie Pharaoh's power. Pharaoh's enslavement of the Hebrews, words of warning to the midwives, and an edict to drown Hebrew boy infants prove unsuccessful; the latter two commands thwarted by women. Shiphrah and Puah birth Hebrew babies; Pharaoh's daughter rescues Moses from the river, and his own mother, Jochebed, gets to nurse him. Their efforts save his life, while Moses himself murders another to help his people, with no apparent ultimate consequences to himself. He helps three different victims: an Egyptian beating a slave; a Hebrew mistreating a neighbor, and stops nomadic men from obstructing women getting water (Binz 1993: 1418).

Brueggemann approaches the book of Exodus as "literary, pastoral, liturgical, and theological response to an acute crisis. Texts that ostensibly concern thirteenth-century matters in fact are heard in a sixth-to fourth-century crisis.... [Read as] an exilic document... requires a rereading of the main themes of the book" (Brueggemann 1994: 680). Thus, liberation pertains to freedom grounded in faith amidst a Babylonian or Persian pharaoh. Second, law involves a counter-ethic in a government bent on total control. Covenant invites membership options to obliging the empire. Last, presence combines vigor, courage, and God's nearness in a domain that wants to remove life of such resources. As a liturgical text, Brueggemann posits that the thrust of the book is covenantal liberation with imaginative possibilities, a source of inspiration for other non-oppressive cosmological options, where abused, violated, oppressed people become agents of their own stories with the capacity to be accountable for their own future. At the same time, as descendants of Jacob

cried out, God heard them, and did not emerge in Exodus until chapter 3, where God hears, remembers, sees, and knows. God chooses Israel as God's people (Binz 1993: 18, 21).

Military historian Richard Gabriel presses us to examine foundational elements of the Exodus experience, of the need for liberation, if the Hebrews were not actually enslaved. Gabriel posits that Israelites in Egypt were *habiru*, not brigands, freebooters, or slaves, with complex confederation-type social organization. The Israelites had a highly professional military unit who frequently functioned as mercenaries. Not only do the Israelites setting in Goshen parallel usual *habiru* employment elsewhere, they were probably in Egypt shortly before ordering Akhenaton's reign and his violent campaign to impose monotheism in Egypt. Given that Akhenaton used special non-Egyptian military units to enforce his religious monotheism program, Gabriel notes that we cannot discount use of Israelite *habiru* in Akhenaton's program. If *habiru* has this status, how could and why was a respected, valued military ally reduced to unpaid, enslaved labor? Gabriel notes that this shift may have occurred since a new king arrives on the scene who does not know Joseph. Several notions of the received text do not make sense around this shift. That Israelites are armed and are slaves, and that the Egyptians turn over provisions to the Israelites do not make sense. Several metaphors signal Israelite military prowess before they leave Egypt. That the Israelites could be *habiru*—bandits, wanderers, outcasts, possibly large complex groups who were pastoralists, agriculturalists, stock breeders, merchants, soldiers, construction workers, fishermen, with largely independent military units, with important positions in Egypt's military at the behest of Pharaoh (Gabriel 2003: 59–73), begs the question of how much slavery was going on, and who and what needed to be liberated. While this essay cannot fully explore the ramifications of this concept, it does support the need to understand the complexities of, and be cautious in viewing Exodus (1–15) as a liberation text. Novels reflect another kind of exodus/liberation motif.

Israel in Oklahoma, Alabama, and Egypt: Exodus Motifs in Dialogue

Grapes of Wrath, *Jubilee*, and the received Exodus story share many common themes. Each story involves a journey from some place to another and transitions, notably of persons seeking to better the lives of their families and themselves. Sometimes there is an explicit divine presence; other times, persons or rituals signify the role of faith and God.

Contextually, while hundreds of thousands migrated thousands of miles during the Great Depression, less than sixteen thousand people actually migrated from the area of Oklahoma where John Steinbeck located the story, *Grapes of Wrath* (Steinbeck 1939). The massive migration occurred during the 1940s due to the California economic boom following World War II. Those migrating from Oklahoma primarily came from cities not from farms. Of the actual immigrants of the Oklahoma Exodus in the 1930s, most prospered while a few, roughly 5 percent of the population did not. Though Steinbeck made bankers the culprit, the actual problem was New Deal agricultural policies that netted a decline of 24 percent of the tenant farmers in the southwest (Windschuttle 2002: 24, 26, 29).

Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* chronicles the Joad family's story of hardship experienced by migrant workers during the Great Depression, juxtaposing poverty, class, and collective action over against individualism and corporate, banking elitism. Banks become the culprit for forcing poor farmers into misery, starvation, and death. The drama unfolds with ecological realities of the Oklahoma Dust Bowl creating devastation, ruined crops, and foreclosures. Tom Joad returns home from prison, having served four years for manslaughter. Joad meets Jim Casy, his former preacher, who gave up ministry because he believes people themselves are holy. Paralleling Joad's return is the arrival of bank officials, evicting tenant farmers. Tom and Casy reach the deserted Joad homestead. Muley Graves, a local holdout who may be insane, relays the story of the evictions and the location of Tom's family.

Tom Joad goes to his Uncle John and finds the rest of his family: his mother, a strong moral voice of the family, his brother Noah, his pregnant sister Rose of Sharon, her husband, Connie Rivers, a dreamer; and Al, Tom's younger brother. Bereft and homeless, the Joads plan to go to California because flyers announce work opportunities in the fields. After setting out with their possessions and themselves strapped to the truck, with their friend

Casy, the Joads learn the announcements are fraudulent. Early on, the family dog and Grandpa Joad die. The Wilson family supports the Joads and they travel together to California, creating an extended family system. As the Wilson family's car breaks, and Casy and Tom want leave together, Ma Joad refuses for the family to split apart. The family learns that work has dried up. They reach California and continue to meet trouble: police harass them; Ma Joad remains stalwart and shields the death of Grandma. Their days in California span from life in a government camp with amenities minus police harassment and Uncle John's alcoholism, to Connie leaving, abandoning pregnant Rose of Sharon, and Casy taking the blame for Tom's brush with police. They move to another camp when they cannot find work and arrive at a ranch where they get higher than normal wages, because they are breaking a strike. Tom learns Casy is leading labor organizing, and they must work together against aristocrats. In an altercation with strikebreakers, one murders Casy; Tom struggles with Casy's killer, kills him, and barely escapes the police. Tom wants to leave to protect his family, but they all leave the ranch for Tom's safety. They relocate but one of the children tells his secret. Tom decides to leave to fight for the reasons Casy died, and determines to return someday to the family. With heavy rains come flooding. The family cannot leave because Rose of Sharon is about to give birth. Other families escape, but the Joads end up atop their car. Rose of Sharon's baby is born dead, and Uncle John places it in a box and sends it down the creek. Finally, the family gets to higher ground and finds shelter in a barn, where a starving man is dying. Rose of Sharon nurses the dying man back to health.

Framed by transition and the exodus from Oklahoma to California, the Joad family deals with poverty, despair, and insecurity. They are migrant farmers whose survival and safety were rooted in the family that can no longer sustain itself as a conjugal unit. While some exhibit selfishness, the Joads and other migrants reflect altruism, embracing other nonbiological family members to their own family. This type of communalism mirrors Steinbeck's uses of socialism and unionism, for the extension of community implies such needs for the disenfranchised (Hinton n.d.: 101).

Tom's character parallels that of Moses, leader of his people, taking them from one land to another. Like Moses, Tom has killed a man, which results in jail time, though Moses never went to prison. Like Moses, regarding the second murder Tom commits in retaliation for police killing his friend, Tom

knows that his own people will betray him if he stays (de Schweinitz 1969: 111–13). At times Ma Joad is also a Moses and an Aaron. She remains faithful, stalwart, and keeps the family together. She is not fearful, and refuses to break when all around her seems to be disintegrating. The wandering of the Joads from Oklahoma to California resembles the seemingly aimless wandering of the Israelites. In both instances, the expectations and the end of the journey are not in harmony, including a great deal of loss along the way. The framing of the journeys are different. The Israelites travel as part of divine liberation. The Joads travel in hopes of better economic possibilities. Both journeys concern familial wellbeing and capacity to survive and thrive. Steinbeck's classic occurs in the wake of the 1930s Great Depression in the Midwest and West. Also set in the United States, Margaret Walker's saga, *Jubilee*, (Walker 1966), takes place from the antebellum through Reconstruction eras.

Contextually, Margaret Walker wrestled with her great grandmother's story for decades, passed to her through her grandmother's story telling. Mesmerized by her great grandmother's life, she began thinking about the story as a child, began writing as a nineteen-year-old senior in college, and completed it as her dissertation. Gloria Gayles notes that Walker uses fact and weaves it into fiction, reflecting black historical truth, portraying a tapestry of black family life in the United States (Gayles in Walker 1975: 3). Walker honed a folk novel, as she worked on various degrees, helped raise her family, and was a professor. She did extensive research, from slave narratives and Georgia slave codes to Reconstruction. She visited Dawson, Georgia to see tools and gingerbread house of Randall Ware, her great grandfather: a free person from birth, educated, and wealthy. Her work holds the weight of history written from the perspectives of white southerners, white northerners, and African Americans, and engages a fluidity of poetry. She reimagined her great grandmother's life, with historical incidents. Walker focused on class and race, reflecting sociopolitical and economic structures that create caste, color, and class, issues as essential as race, where the white family symbolized the confederate South (Walker 1972: 3–25).

Jubilee, the novel, opens when Sis. [Sister] Hetta, African American slave, mother of her master's children, dies. John Dutton is the master of the plantation. Hetta's youngest daughter, Vyry, who could pass for white, is the protagonist. Vyry works in the big house as the personal servant of Ms.

Lillian. Dutton's daughter, Lillian, and her own half-sister, Vyry, share the same father, and they look alike. Brutalized by Big Missy, Dutton's wife, Vyry quickly learns obedience and working skills from a slave, Aunt Sally, who becomes Vyry's surrogate mother. Walker constructs her character, Brother Ezekiel to epitomize the slave preacher who preaches deliverance, out of a commitment to have enslaved Hebrews mirror the souls of black folk in the United States. Traumatized by deaths, executions, and brandings of many slaves close to her, Vyry becomes household cook when Aunt Sally is sold. Vyry meets a free black man, Randall Ware, who pledges to buy her freedom if she marries him. They meet clandestinely and she has three kids by Ware; two of them live. Master John refuses to let Vyry marry Ware. Ware and Vyry continue secretly to see each other until Ware has to leave Georgia. Before his departure, Ware tries to get a white man to purchase Vyry for him, but this fails. Ware tries to get Vyry to run away with him, but Grimes, the plantation's overseer, captures and beats Vyry. During the Civil War, Lillian's husband, her father Dutton, and her brother all die in battle. Her mother Big Missy dies, leaving Lillian alone. Many enslaved blacks run away. After they learn of the Emancipation Proclamation, the remaining house slave's leave; only Vyry, her children, and Lillian remain.

That night, someone almost attacks Vyry, but a man named Innis Brown, a former black member of the Union army, rescues her. During the night, someone attacks Lillian; she loses her mind, and reverts to her childhood. After Lillian's relatives come to care for her, Vyry marries Brown, they move to Alabama, and start their own farm. At every instance, something or someone obstructs the Brown's dreams. Their house and farm flood. A landlord cheats them when sharecropping, and they move again to work for the Jacobson family. Not feeling safe there, they move again after the Ku Klux Klan [KKK] attacks a neighbor. The Klan burns down the house they build in Troy, and Vyry is afraid to rebuild again. After she helps a white woman deliver her baby, Vyry's neighbors come to help her family because they need a *colored granny* to be midwife for the town. Randall Ware returns, and wants Vyry to choose between him and Innis Brown, as she is the wife of both men. She chooses Brown and asks Ware to stay around and be in the children's lives.

As Walker tells a realistic, humanistic story, she reflects her awareness of some enslaved who desired and prayed that Moses would deliver them from an oppressive Pharaoh of the Southern master. The exodus theme continues

during the reconstruction era as Vyry realizes that people often meander a bit in the wilderness before arriving at the Promised Land (Walker 1972: 25).

Violence and socio-economic injustices shape attempts at finding and maintaining a home in *Jubilee*. Class, gender, and race oppression and discrimination shape the efforts of attaining safe space of protection, belonging, and comfort as home for numerous African Americans. The female protagonist must deal with violence, evils of poverty, sexism, and racism, all of which compromises Vyry's physical and emotional wellbeing and thwart her efforts to make home liberatory for all family members. Fierce disruption occurs for the home when difficulty occurs at creating a home or when violence hinders resistance to outside forces that had been emerging. During slavery, the only safe space for the enslaved was evening when they could close their doors and enter another world of good. After slavery, purchasing land, setting up housing, and finding decent employment was difficult (Davis 2005: 25–39).

Freedom from enslavement, and freedom to experience gifts and rights of citizenship, notably to have a home, evaporated in *Jubilee* because the Brown's land is susceptible to flooding and they live near people who would prefer slavery be reinstated. When they find a place high on a hill for a home, a place of stability, peace, and sense of ownership, a space of freedom, the ever-lurking presence of the KKK, and their own marginal presence shows the fragility of their lives. When the KKK torches and burns down their new home, in affect what the plagues accomplish against the Egyptians, the destruction depicts the affects of violent disruption born of hostility and prejudice, present during slavery and reconstruction (Davis 2005: 31–32). Along with freedom and acceptance, *Jubilee* includes themes about coming of age and a quest for righteousness, for justice by enslaved free blacks, and supportive whites. Moses' story is also a coming of age story and a quest for justice. Tom Joad came of age in a jail cell.

Freedom in *Grapes of Wrath* concerns freedom from poverty and homelessness, thus their search for work, which will provide a home. The Joads become delusional because of the deaths along the way, the abuse of power, and how migrant workers are treated. These events unfold after they were put off farms their families had worked for generations. Freedom in *Jubilee* concerns freedom from slavery; that is, how generations of a family deal with legalized disenfranchisement, chattel, being enslaved, objectified bodies; and how they cope amid legalized emancipation. Freedom in Exodus

begins when God tells Abram of the impending slavery of his people (Gen. 13), and that God will rescue or deliver them. Their adopted home through the efforts of Joseph become their prison when a pharaoh who did not know Joseph took the helm.

Scholars and believers use Exodus to find hope, strength, and inspiration to resist and overcome. Exodus inspires some to confront and overthrow tyranny, others used it to generate and preserve tyranny; to justify oppression and domination. Themes of oppression and liberation are both evident, emerging from the nature and use of power in Exodus. Careful considerations of these topics are critical to keep Exodus from becoming a narrative of conquest. Post-biblical use of Exodus reflects complications of using this motif to move toward new community, liberation, and justice. For example, the exodus motif persuaded slave rebellion activity in 1822 Denmark Vesey's rebellion, and simultaneously this motif pushed some to oppose emancipation. Following the Nat Turner revolt, Roderick Dew penned words against slave liberation, warning against the power of rebellions appealing to exodus motif (Langston 2006: 4–8, 144).

Many Womanist scholars question using the Exodus motif as normative for validating God's liberative acts, for all global, oppressed peoples. Delores Williams notes that the lives of non-Hebrews smell of non-liberation. Neither Hebrew Bible nor the New Testament texts condemn or prohibit slavery. Rather, many passages sanction slavery, particularly of non-Hebrews. Intriguingly, males possess important owner restrictions regarding their slave status, whereas female slaves remain property. Williams warns us of the necessity of telling the entire Exodus story, which includes reparations from the Egyptians, God's acts of violence against the Egyptians, genocide against the Canaanites and the theft of the Canaanite land. Williams sees a Black appropriation of the texts borne of American slavery, and argues that Black scholars must not deny Black history prior to slavery. The wilderness experience is more inclusive and indicates leadership roles of Black mothers and women, which gets too little attention from feminists and Black liberation theologians (Williams 1993: 147–52, 160–61).

Theodicy, Poverty, Visibility: The Pursuit of Power and Agency

Exodus: Liberation or Divine Egotism

Scripture and contemporary voices reappropriate the exodus story, and find it archetypal of human liberation, as a salvific message of hope. Most modern readers, Christian and Jewish scholars, undergirded by their religious faith, view Exodus 1–15 as liberatory via triumphalist lens mirrored in scriptural reflections on the Exodus. That is, the exodus is a model of divine desire for all oppressed peoples. Does the text itself support this summation? Eslinger posits that Exodus 1–14 does not support triumphalist readings of Exodus 15 and that we often fail to see the differences because we do not recognize the particular narrator's voice in the text. The narrator's voice carries much of the story, and implicitly allows one to assume the narrator supports the protagonists – YHWH and Moses. The text attests that God's words affirm triumphalist interpretations, as God identifies God's self to Moses and the enslaved Israelites. God teaches Moses his responsibilities, and God speaks, sometimes gloats about taking down Egypt. Moses makes up the A-men corner. Eslinger reminds us of irony surrounding the exodus: that God foretells Abram about the coming bondage of Israel in Egypt (Gen. 15:13); that God's covenant with Abram, including progeny results in huge numbers of persons that trigger their enslavement; that God lets them suffer in captivity over an extended time period. God seems to need a second groaning of Israel to bring them some relief; and the narrator reminds us incessantly that God hardens Pharaoh's heart. Such narrative laced with irony paints a manipulative, ego-maniacal picture of God. Not only does God not want to let Israel go too soon, justifying the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, God insists on getting all glory, manipulating Pharaoh's stubbornness and making the latter a scapegoat. God confesses the import of getting all the glory and takes responsibility for hardening Pharaoh's heart as much as eight times in Exodus: (toward Israel, 6:7, 10:2; regarding Pharaoh, 7:17; 8:18; 9:14; toward Egyptians 7:5, 14:4, 18; and toward Moses 8:6; 9:29) (Eslinger 1991: 43–50).

One can read much of what occurs in the Hebrew Bible through the lens of God's covenant agreement with Abram, Genesis 12:1-3, where God will give Abram a son, make his name great, thus have a relationship with Abram's people in perpetuity, and will give him and his descendants land.

The land promised to Israel, occupied by foreign peoples, is occupied land; divine edict and intention will destroy those foreign peoples. God adamantly asserts that, as part of divine covenantal assurance, freedom and the Promised Land is a certainty. God, as subject and arbiter, will free, deliver, redeem, take, will be, will bring, and will give land and liberation to Israel (Meyers 2005: 54, 68–69). The Joads have to leave the land they had farmed, but never really belonged to them. Vyry and her family search for land and home, and finally settle when the surrounding white town members realize that Vyry has something they need, so they *allow* Vyry and her family to live in their community. Thus, land is not mere property, land has spiritual and divine, biblical capital: tells us about God and God's promises. Framed by years of interpretation and rereading of other biblical texts, particularly Genesis, the God of Exodus engages in teleological ethics: ends justify these particular means. What does such an interpretation say about theodicy?

Theodicy

Theodicy (*theos*, “God”; *dike*, “justice”), asks in Rabbi Kushner's words, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” There are two classic arguments. The Augustinian free will argument claims that bad things happen because people, use their God-given free will to make bad choices. The Irenaeus soul-making argument posits that people are made in God's image and through trials and difficult events people come into being in God's likeness. These two theories are philosophically interesting, but provide little assurance when trying to make sense out of the madness and mayhem of evil (Kirk-Duggan 1997: 40–41). Recent arguments may be interesting or complex theoretically, but fail horribly when dealing with the pain of evil and suffering. Initially in the Exodus text, the Egyptians led by Pharaoh are persecuting the children of Israel. These children groan for a long time and finally God hears them, and sends them deliverance in the guise of Moses. This same “I am, who I am becoming God” then uses oppression at a more intense level to get rid of the Egyptians. When answering Kushner's question, the text would answer “bad things happen to the children of Israel, because their numbers became too large and threatening, and the new Pharaoh who did not know Joseph has to control them through enslavement.” At the end of the pericope, the Egyptians' firstborn are slaughtered and the remaining soldiers drown by divine edict, divine action. Why does God kill

the Egyptians who have nothing to do with Pharaoh's will? One approach is to examine the wrath of God.

Several scholars help us deconstruct the intricacies and challenges of Exodus, and serve as conversation partners for my Womanist biblical theology. In the Hebrew Bible, God's wrath and anger is intense. Wrath, not one of God's perfections, is "a function of God's holiness against sin" (Carson 1999: 388). Carson states the first fifty Psalms and Romans 1 reflect that God hates the sin and the sinner. That God simultaneously directs wrath and love against a community or an individual is not inherently impossible (Carson 1999: 388–89). Exodus 4:21ff implies YHWH's covenantal wrath is rational, in sync with divine holiness and righteousness. YHWH instructs Moses regarding how to perform before Pharaoh and threatens to kill Pharaoh's firstborn son, because Pharaoh did not let Israel, YHWH's firstborn, go. Following this dialogue, YHWH tries to kill Moses, until Zipporah intervenes, a cross between an ancient belief in demonic attack and a foregrounding of what would happen to Pharaoh. The text seems to assume God's wrath occurs because Pharaoh violated God's laws and holiness, and so has Moses by his reticence (Exod. 4:1-17). God exercises mercy and offers patience toward human conversion. If people do not listen, judgment occurs. For Erlandson, divine wrath, framed by divine love is appropriate amid human sin. Thus, divine righteous without divine wrath equals sentimentality (Erlandson 1972: 111–12). From a Womanist perspective, one brings tempered cynicism to be suspicious of Divine favoritism toward Israel and against Egypt, when this God created Egypt but did not self-reveal to them. For Egypt, Pharaoh is their God. Thus they are being faithful to their socio-historical, religious system. Erlandson's view for the need of divine righteousness and divine wrath to avoid sentimentality fails to justify the punishment of innocent Egyptians. A more apparent logic is the editorial work of the Deuteronomists to depict YHWH as unique, all-powerful authority, who can destroy others if they fail to align in worship and belief to this deity. The destruction of innocent Egyptians then pertains to obedience to YHWH, and is not about the destruction itself. This seems to be a case of either you are for us or against us; if you are against us, for the Deuteronomist, do not believe in our God, then you must die.

Midrash also weighs into the plight of the Egyptians in Exodus. The sages who formulated Midrash were committed to amplifying scripture, morale building, and teaching moralistic behavior. The Midrash on Exodus

examined Hebrew enslavement from a circumscribed perspective. According to Glatt, the aggadists' concluded that Egyptian persecution was genocidal, for they wanted to remove all Hebrew people. To halt Hebrew procreation, Egyptians kept men apart from their wives, forced women to do brutal work, and coerced men to do women's work, psychologically breaking them all down. Further, the aggadists justify God hardening Pharaoh's heart because Pharaoh did not heed the previous five warnings, so God decided to punish him (Glatt 1996: 87, 95–97); corporal punishment run amuck.

Fretheim argues that violence and wrath are not divine attributes, rather a response to human sin, sins of violence. God uses violence for two reasons: salvation and judgment. Out of God's loving purposes, God decides to engage in violence so that evil will not triumph; God uses violence as a means to deliver people from violence, from the consequences of their own sin, and from those of others (Fretheim 2004: 22–28). Speaking courageously against Fretheim, which represents a normative Western reading, Womanist biblical analysis compares antebellum U.S. history with Exodus with chagrin. Pharaoh and innocent Egyptians are punished. No Euro-Americans experience wholesale punishment for Black enslavement. Nor is there punishment in the text, then, for Africans who placed other Africans into slave trade. The closest U.S. referent to the drowning at the Reed Sea are Civil War battles. Does that make General U.S. Grant Moses and General Robert E. Lee Pharaoh? With this awareness, how do we sing the Spiritual, "Go down Moses. . . . Let my people go!" While some changes have occurred legally and culturally, sexism and racism continue, in more subtle veins. The question of class and violence is more ambiguous. Violence against Pharaoh could be viewed and a challenge to elitism. Yet, the text fails to inform us as to the socio-cultural and economic status of most Egyptians, beyond Pharaoh, other than their ruthless imposition over the Israelites (Exod. 1:10-14). YHWH dictates the demise of the Egyptians as a response to not letting Israel go, but fails to sanction Moses for killing an Egyptian, though Pharaoh does seek to kill Moses for his crime (Exodus 2:11-16). Divinely provoked or initiated violence is not consistent, rather a matter of choice that favors Israel and sanctions Egypt. With the current economic downturn, poverty is even more problematic. If our culture were not so offended by poverty, then coal miners would have healthier, safer work conditions. The U.S. mentality seems to be in fear and denial of poverty.

Returning to the Exodus text, is there a personality clash going on between YHWH and Pharaoh, the latter, who in his cosmology is god? John Durham contends that Moses first approaches Pharaoh with authoritative, almost arrogant, deliberate confidence, which probably seemed incongruous to Pharaoh, who has no awareness of any such God, is not interested in this God, and probably saw this as a waste of time. The plagues unfold and YHWH's hardening of Pharaoh's heart unfolds as a sequence of mighty-acts. With the slaughter of the firstborn, there is much unprecedented, unrepeatable anguish. With defeat in the air, Pharaoh asks Moses and Aaron for YHWH's blessing. Pharaoh at YHWH's interjection, however, again pursues the people of Israel after having given them permission to leave. The final hymn celebrates YHWH as deliverer (Durham 1987: 64, 69, 97, 109, 191–93). A Womanist reading would challenge the necessity of such horrific bloodshed. From a perspective of candor, how can we interpret such blatant injustice against innocent Egyptians as righteousness? Robert Allen Warrior reminds us that the incongruity of the Exodus story shows YHWH the deliverer become YHWH the conqueror, who orders merciless extermination, decimation, and scapegoating of the indigenous people. Such cruelty, prejudice, and violation of innocent peoples need to be examined critically as we think of global and local relationships (Warrior 1991: 287–295). Creatively, we cannot let tradition and faith allow us to read these texts uncritically, and go with the adage that “God is on our side,” at any cost.

Brueggemann contends that with the plagues there is a reversal of fortune; the formally victimizer becomes victim, an eschatological qualifier of power relations. YHWH's atrocious passion for murdering the firstborn signals divine willingness to use any means necessary to protect vulnerable Israel. Problematically, military descriptors or metaphors describe God. For those who sense God is on their side, the violence is a non-issue. Conflict and struggle for biblical power and authority infuse the Exodus text and force us to deal with divine violence. Contextually, there is order over chaos and God's sacred power has a public dimension. God is victorious over enemies of covenantal human well-being, while poetic and liberatory for Israel (pp. 772, 773, 781–82, 803). However, such power and artistry is not helpful for the dead Egyptians, whose heart God did not harden, and whose minds were not given choices. For Womanists, is this justice? With the voice of commitment, to the hearing, loving, and just interpretation of these texts, Brueggemann's

is not an issue to write off quickly or dismiss. Nor is it ultimately healthy for Israel that divinely perpetrated violence is the answer for justice. We must consider conflict, resolution, mediation, and negotiation. At the least for those deemed other to our way of thinking or belief, we must share our belief system with them and provide them options of choice.

When reading the Exodus account regarding the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, Carol Meyers reminds us that this is not a historiographic record, but a narrative arrangement. Pharaoh's "hardened" heart means he has great resolve that he will not release the enslaved. Pharaoh's intentions and acts ultimately emerge as divinely produced activity. She posits that the ultimate goal is not the liberation of Israel from Egypt, but that Pharaoh recognizes Israel's god's divine sovereignty (Meyers 2005: 70–71). Meyers names a critical issue of divine sovereignty at any costs: a theodicy by divine choice, which begs the question for Womanists from a perspective of curious indignation. We must press the question and wonder why. If God is good and suffering occurs because of God, then are the resulting destruction, pain, and suffering of the Egyptians obliterated because of the divinely initiated teleological results for the good of the chosen? No one's pain is obliterated. God created the Egyptians and the Israelites. A reading that privileges a particular "chosen" group cannot justify mass destruction of innocent people. Some would argue that one must support the chosen or the home team and destroy those who do harm, such as Hitler and the Third Reich. Unfortunately war has ceased to be armed face-to-face combat, and as immortalized in Picasso's *Guernica*. Standard warfare protocol now includes flying armed planes over areas inhabited by civilians. The particular fight for democracy, or the will of the most powerful force, views the dead as collateral damage. That God and humanity have the power to destroy does not justify the destruction of innocence. When a horrifically evil regime, like a Hitler or Pol Pot rules and has massive troops under their leadership, when negotiation fails and they have been approached, then and only then should one inflict violence teleologically. In Exodus, neither YHWH nor Moses approached anyone other than Pharaoh. Other Egyptians did not stand a chance.

Many scholars have rationalized divine use of evil for the good of Israel as redemptive suffering, as a tool of divine deliverance, exacted on the backs and bodies of the Egyptians for the liberation of the chosen of Israel. Problematically, the same God who created the children of Israel created the children of

Egypt. While Pharaoh exacted evil against Israel, even when he worked to halt his oppression, YHWH re-hardened his heart. Here, for Womanists, the comedic and the ironic press: how can divine use of evil be redemptive, when Pharaoh becomes YHWH's robot? Deliverance of those whose ancestors have been in covenant relationship with a deity over against another group who is never taught, evangelized, or recruited to be in relationship seems to create a skewed theodicy and does not honor justice. How much of the results lie within God's purview, and how much in the redactors' hands? In Exodus, theodicy pertains to divine choice to do violence, human choice (Pharaoh) to disregard YHWH, and the related oppression of Egyptians. From the perspective of the Egyptians, the plagues could be construed as natural evil.

Theodicy in *Grapes of Wrath* and in *Jubilee* is a mixed bag of so-called natural evil and evil resulting from human choice. The drought and Dust Bowl of 1930 falls under natural disasters called acts of God. With the drought, failure of crops, and thus foreclosures of farmland, migrants of many ilks moved to California. On their journey, they meet persons that do evil, that cause harm. The Joad family also meets people of good will, who are willing to give a family a hand. Vvry and her family in *Jubilee* deal with a theodicy created by those who think it just to enslave and oppress others. Vvry and her family understand that God loves them, and that many people interested in enslavement as a business, do so by habit and choice. From a Womanist perspective, reading exodus as theodicy for the Joads and Vvry's family, as choice via natural, systemic, and personal oppression exists. Not only is justice often mute, one of its greatest progenitors is the space of poverty.

Poverty

Poverty and related suffering is blatantly present in both novels. Socioeconomic poverty is intense and class-based in *Grapes of Wrath*, and involves class and race in *Jubilee*. Some scholars define poverty as to lack basic indispensable items—including food, clothing, safety, potable water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information and shelter—needed for appropriate living. Others contend that poverty relates to income (the amount of money a person makes) and consumption (monetary value of the goods that an individual actually consumes).²

2. http://library.thinkquest.org/05aug/00282/over_whatism.htm.

In the novels and Exodus, people suffer from the ills of poverty, shaped by institutionalized, systemic oppression. The enslaved of Exodus and *Jubilee* have little or no agency regarding their plight; the poor of *Grapes of Wrath* are trapped in a system, with limited education, at the effect of the weather, of a drought. For the most part, impoverishment does not hinder their practice of faith or belief in a deity. There are moments, when poverty exacerbates life's challenges, so either people hold to their faith much stronger, as Ma Joad and Vyry. Or they buckle under the pressure and cannot hear words of proclamation because they think all people are holy, like Casy, or their pain speaks too loudly, as in Exodus. The ancient Near Eastern world of Israel employed three types of commodified labor: forced labor could be state-organized (Israel in Egypt); work companies comprised of foreigners, destitute immigrants, or local residents; or household-based servanthood, usually involving voluntary indentured slavery resulting from being spoils of war, paying off a debt (Meyers 2005: 35–36). By virtue of the fact that they limit or empower access, poverty, classism, and elitism help shape one's visibility.

Visibility

Visibility pertains to one's ability to be seen, to have agency, to have the capacity to be noticed by, or catch the attention of other people. While YHWH and Moses are the protagonists and major actors in Exodus, the text accords heightened visibility to women who not only save Moses at his birth and early infancy, but as an adult, his wife rescues him from a God who attacks him, but ultimately does not kill him. Zipporah's heroic response is quick, and ritualistic in nature (Meyers 2005: 63–64). The midwives visibility increases, crossing layers of gender and class. Pharaoh ordered Shiprah and Puah, two midwives, to engage in selective infanticide by allowing girl babies to live and by killing all male infants. However, their resistance and obedience to God finds their names recorded for posterity, and the planned genocide by Pharaoh silenced. As marginalized persons, these women exert much power, if for only a few moments/chapters.

As women helping other women and offering supportive holistic care through the intimate practices of midwifery, midwives used prayers, religious rituals, and their technical skills, as wise women helping bring new life into the world. While midwives were present at most deliveries, wet-nurses, were unusual. How striking that Jochebed gave birth to Moses and ended up

being his wet-nurse at the behest of the unnamed Pharaoh's daughter, after Jochebed had placed Moses in a basket on the river to protect him from death at the hands of Pharaoh himself. Ironically, the river Pharaoh prescribed for killing Israelite male infants provides safety for Moses. The midwives disturb national political intrigue and planned genocide that produces visibility, subversion, and comedy at its best (Meyers 2005: 36, 40–43).

In *Grapes of Wrath*, Tom Joad is the protagonist. However, Steinbeck fashions Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon in ways that sharpen their visibility in the narrative. Ma Joad's quiet strength and moral fiber helps keep the family together repeatedly. Rose of Sharon comes of age, learns to be independent, and gives of herself to aid a dying man at the end of the novel. Mirroring a reversal, Uncle John places Rose of Sharon's dead baby in a box on the river: the river saves Moses; the river receives the Joad's dead. In *Jubilee*, Vvry, the protagonist has tremendous visibility, as it is her story. As those who seek to love and protect Vvry, Randall Ware and Innis Brown are visible at significant turning points in Vvry's life, particularly regarding experiencing freedom, safety, and having a home. Thus a Womanist view of visibility involves exemplary inner strength, resistance, clear values and sense of place that manifests as agency, self-actualization, and an assertive move despite systemic authority. Internal power manifests externally where one makes a difference, has value, and becomes a force one must reckon with. Visibility is not only central in character analysis but it also affects geographic context.

Contextual Lens: A Hermeneutical Gaze on Using Exodus Motifs as Living Biotexts

In his discussion on Exodus, liberation theology, and theological argument, Loader broaches the question of whether text or context weighs in as locus of authority. In reviewing the work of liberationists from Gutierrez to Croatto, Boesak, and Bishop Tutu, he finds scholars claiming the relevance of Exodus to liberation and sanctioning this claim because of biblical authority. Embracing Itumeleng Mosala's notion that such a theoretical move is problematic and a theoretical tragedy, Loader argues that we need to get away from the impasse of starting from an existential context and from biblical text as word of God. Outlining the problems of biblical redundancy, self-contradictions, and selective biblical use, Loader suggests that the way

out is to set up biblical authority as functional, following the work of James Barr. Loader shows that one cannot use scripture both as the foundation of the argument *and* as part of the evidence of the argument. Yet, his move to yoking the Hebrew exodus and the New Testament cross as symbols does not solve the problem of just who gets liberated, even if one is mindful of the purpose of the argument. Loader's creative use of allegory, metaphor, and analogy does not offer liberation theology a successful way out for dealing with biblical authority (Loader 1987: 3–18).

Eddie Glaude Jr. posits that African Americans use the term Exodus as religious, political, and socio-religious metaphor to make sense of middle passage, enslavement, and struggles for emancipation in the nineteenth century through liturgical drama of praying, preaching, and singing, disintegrating the space between enslaved peoples in ancient Egypt and colonial United States. Exodus embodies a vision quest of freedom, a movement, or progression from bondage, as the journey transforms the community, framed by enslavement, freedom, law, and revolution. Using Exodus language of Egypt, covenant, wilderness, and Promised Land was the political language of African American public life to unveil the suffering, violence, death, and hope that signified much African American reality. Used politically, Exodus language affords a critique that presses society to live up to its founding principles and ideals, embracing a God of justice and order, whose deliverance promises and grace meant the nation should also do justice in law and deed. Puritans also embraced the Exodus motif, imaged as their migration from the Old country to a New Canaan. Glaude notes that some do not embrace the Exodus motif: for Michael Walzer, Exodus invokes political messianism, which craves apocalypticism, seeks to force the eschaton, and views victory unconditionally. Henry Highland Garnet challenges Glaude's and Walzer's notion of Exodus politics and argues Exodus induces enslaved and free Blacks toward passive gradualism (Glaude 2000: 3–5, 46, 111). When a community requires a savior, a Moses to get them justice, too often the charisma of the savior figure allows that person the room to misuse her/his power, and can move the oppressed to a sense of entitlement, or a sense where like Garnet, they do not need to participate in their own liberation. Either scenario is ultimately pathological and rarely affords permanent change.

Jannie Malan warns of dangers when positing that God is on a particular side, or identifying as God's chosen people in conjunction with the

Exodus motif. She supported the idea of a needed complement, because Exodus failed to invoke an all-embracing or durable liberty. Socioeconomically and religiously, the majority of Israel followed their own desires despite their oppression of others. Malan supports an Exodus from Jerusalem, as a complement to the Exodus out of Egypt. She then aspires to expose and transform Israel's nationalistic exclusivism, socioeconomic aloofness, and its religious formalism and apocalypticism. Malan follows by yoking both testaments, aware that establishing fulfillment in Christ could lead to other hermeneutical shifts. She concludes that the answer to this quagmire of systemic oppression is an exodus from Ego, a way to augment challenging the power of the Exodus motif (Malan 1987: 5–13).

Noting who we are affects what we read, Laurel Dykstra gives a reading of Exodus privileged by corporate capitalism, while committed to liberative justice today. This quest for justice invites challenges to embracing Exodus. Dykstra finds several scholars, including Margaret Guider, Delores S. Williams, and Robert Allen Warrior, who reject the Exodus-liberation motif as available universally. Based on her study of liberation theology, the story of Rahab, a prostitute in the book of Joshua, and her own work with marginalized women, Guider, a Franciscan sister, rejects Exodus as paradigmatic, because Exodus avoids the reality of exploited women and champions conquest. Dykstra's second critique of Exodus involves the work of Womanist theologian Williams (mentioned earlier). Williams posits a survival/quality of life tradition that understands God does not liberate all oppressed, as she notes the irony and contrast: Hagar, an Egyptian in Genesis is enslaved like Israel; yet, God liberates Israel but sends Hagar back to enslavement. And last, Warrior, an Osage Nation member, (also cited earlier) identifies with the Canaanites in Exodus, for the Canaanites and indigenous peoples already occupied the land later stolen from them. The "chosen" oppressors murdered their people and almost destroyed their religion and culture, creating a twofold problem: the historical problem is that the conquest wiped out the history of the indigenes; the narrative problem is that God orders Israel to obliterate ruthlessly those indigenous persons of the promised land. In digesting these challenges, Dykstra reminds us that we all have multiple identities in a pluralistic global reality; thus one can be privileged in one aspect, and oppressed in another. Multiple readings do not have to be negated. We do not need to fall prey to what she terms postmodern paralysis, where we fail to

challenge familiar, old, heterosexist patriarchal readings of texts, since there is no normative reading of the text, and one is then accused of creating some illegitimate new universalism or false authority. Cautioning against a misreading of Exodus, she posits that many of us are both Egypt and Israel, and we are responsible for the liberation and freedom of the oppressed (Dykstra 2002: xi–xvi, 38–65).³

In sum, from a Womanist perspective, Exodus is not liberatory for everyone within the text, or for those who may read it. Tempered cynicism requires suspicion about the divine scapegoating of Pharaoh and the marginalization and manipulation of the Egyptians in response to the hope and deliverance of Israel. Such analysis shows the complexities of deconstructing the liberation process, where some view YHWH's actions warranted, and others view them problematic. Creativity allows a context where normative interpretations of the Exodus tradition, in concert with readings of *Jubilee* and *Grapes of Wrath*, afford different insights into notions of liberation, land, and the variety of experiences one can have in an exodus, as one goes from one place/situation/reality to another. Courage provides flexibility when the analysis of liberation themes and disturbing factors like the hardening of pharaoh's heart leads to the same results for some, insight on the divine ego for others, and then mystery as to where the redactor ends, and Israel's historical experience begins.

Some may perceive having the audacity to question the liberator/deliver God as heretical, yet analysis of unique and perhaps antithetical texts, such as *Grapes of Wrath* and *Jubilee*, produced similar themes. Commitment to the hearing and just, appropriate living of these texts allows a discovery of new terminology, and a different sensibility by Pharaoh. There are times when he acknowledges YHWH's power, though no one directly evangelizes him; he does not experience a conversion theophany, an appearance of Yahweh designed to convert Pharaoh. Candor presses the revelation of the oppression of Egyptians and the absence of references to women beyond the first two chapters within the texts. Further, communities have incorporated Exodus for hope and for tyranny, often producing a simplistic reception of the texts amid mainline faith that fails to examine the entire story. Curiosity presses

3. Laurel A. Dykstra, *Set Them Free: The Other Side of Exodus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), xi–xvi, 38–65.

my renewed searching of the realm of the sacred to push toward inclusivity, mercy, justice, and love. This process leaves me with still more unanswerable questions in response to a complicated, ancient reality. For now, more questions are a good. The comedic lens reminds me to enjoy the discovery without taking the texts or myself too seriously, accepting there are other ways of seeing these texts: ways that feel compromising; ways that have sustained the faith and the scholarship of many for millennia. Another reading, from a different context, asking different questions may one day satisfy the troubling way the reduction of these texts have produced incomplete witness, and thus made us complicit in harm done to oppressed peoples somewhere, in the name of God.