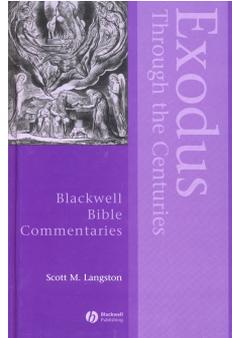


## ○ REVIEW OF SCOTT M. LANGSTON, *EXODUS THROUGH THE CENTURIES*

(BLACKWELL BIBLE COMMENTARIES THROUGH THE CENTURIES. OXFORD: BLACKWELL, 2006)

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This Blackwell series is:

devoted primarily to the reception history of the Bible... on the premise that how people have interpreted, and been influenced by, a sacred text like the Bible is often as interesting and historically important as what it originally meant (p. xi).

Although many of the people Langston cites across the centuries who comment on and appropriate the book regarded it as one connected work, probably written by Moses himself, he is fully aware of the complexity and difficulty of the book of Exodus. It is the product of different people, times and places. On the other hand, this contemporary historical critical view is presented as the latest in a long series of views of what Exodus is and what it can mean. Langston does not automatically see older readings and interpretations as less or as questionable because they are pre-critical or pre-modern. Indeed any wide-ranging review of past readings will reveal the contingency of interpretation and its dependence on the reader, context (religious, social, political) and all the reasons and counter-reasons for the interpretation.

The commentary divides into sections according to the book's own contents and arrangement and the sections cover uneven amounts of the text. For example the first two sections discuss Exodus 1-2 and 3-4 while the final two discuss Exodus 19-31 and 32-40. The comments themselves are arranged more-or-less in the chronological order of the sources beginning with material from the Hebrew Bible – for example, references to the plagues in Psalms 78 and 105 – then from works from throughout the history of Judaism, Christianity and occasionally Islam and ending within a few years of the commentary's publication. Given the contemporary religious

and political context (see below for the importance of context), I would expect more on Muslim receptions and interpretations of Exodus.

References drawn from the past century or more may occur in secular settings and not just in traditional religious contexts. William Blake's poetry and art are a good example of the transition from religious to secular, political uses. As Langston moves into 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century sources he also expands his range beyond the West and the biblical Near East to include material from, among others, South America, Korea, Uganda and South Africa. Both Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu are cited.

There is a thorough bibliography for any who wish to read further or research any of the topics or sources that Langston treats. He also attaches a Biographies and Glossary appendix that briefly identifies the major people and works that he discusses. This is quite helpful but does have some noticeable omissions, for example, the Hellenistic dramatist Ezekiel and his *Exagoge* even though it is referred to at least six times.

Although the majority of Langston's material is drawn from written sources such as commentaries, sermons and moral, religious tracts, he does pay considerable attention to the treatment of scenes and characters from Exodus in art, music and film. Artistic works extend from early times such as the frescoes of the Dura-Europos synagogue to contemporary works by artists such as He Qi, Marc Chagall and Maja Lisa Engelhardt. Films include De Mille's *The Ten Commandments* and the animated feature *The Prince of Egypt*. Langston discusses the heated debates in the United States about the prominent placement of copies of the Decalogue in public buildings and sites. He presents his material with a variety of detail. Most sources are summarised in a sentence or two but others are discussed at much greater length. William Blake (pp. 53–55, *passim*), John Calvin (pp. 86–87, *passim*) and Nicolas Poussin (pp. 179–81 and 245–46) are examples.

Throughout his work Langston is concerned with revealing the great diversity of ways Exodus has been experienced and used by its many readers and hearers across the ages. Hellenistic Jewish writers such as Ezekiel the dramatist and Philo were presenting Jewish traditions and practices in a positive fashion to their Hellenistic readership both Jewish and non-Jewish. In the early and medieval periods Jewish and Christian interpretations were often in a polemics vis-à-vis each other but certainly not always. Both Jews and Christians could attend to Exodus to clarify their own identity both religiously and socially and to explain and justify their practices and concerns for themselves and others without attacking or criticising anyone else. In accord with the diversity of ways, Jews and Christians, or any other significant group, do not demonstrate only one interpretive method or set of results even in a select period of time.

Allegorical reading dominated early and medieval Christian readings and commentaries, drawing much inspiration from thinkers such as Origen and Augustine, but it never effectively suppressed the congeries of approaches gathered under the heading of literal reading. Judaism witnesses an analogous tension between allegorical or midrashic readings and attention to the plain sense, the *peshat*. Literal, plain reading asserts itself more strongly from the 12<sup>th</sup> century on, partly due to the recovery of Aristotelian philosophy, and it expresses itself in a variety of modes. There is no one way of literal interpretation.

Langston provides a solid source book for the study of the variety of the reception and interpretation of the book of Exodus. He has his own take on the material but others could approach

it from different vantage points. For example, one could view the history in terms of the tension and balance between allegorical-symbolic and literal readings, one mode never finally displacing the other. Or theories of the reading and the interpretation of both Exodus and the many works presenting and reacting to it. It is not only the book of Exodus that is complex and difficult.

Langston gives only passing notice to most of the problematics of interpreting the works that are interpreting Exodus. This is not a criticism since the focus and physical size of his book prevent his delving into this rich area. However, he does pay consistent attention to the role of context already noted above in Jewish and Christian appropriations of Exodus to explain themselves, both polemically and not, to themselves and to others. In much Christian allegory the context of a need to explain and expand Christian theology and practice trumps the text of Exodus. If someone reading allegory, such as that of an Origen or a Richard of St Victor, does not share that context, then the reading will appear far-fetched with little or no connection to Exodus itself. This does not mean only modern readers since contemporaries of the allegorists reacted in the same fashion.

Langston emphasises that the diversity has a grim aspect since the same stories or topics from Exodus can be cited for contrasting and contradictory reasons. Early Jewish and Christian polemics provide many examples. This is a powerful lesson in interpretation. A text, even an authoritative, sacred text such as the Bible, does not have one meaning that all agree on. Context, what purpose someone cites the Bible for and for whom, is extremely important. Feminists such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton cite Exodus to oppose the oppression and containment of women just as strongly as their opponents cite it to show women their proper place in society.

At key points in his book Langston exemplifies the contrast with quotations from 19<sup>th</sup> century slaves, abolitionists and slaveholders. Sermons by Benjamin Morgan Palmer, a New Orleans Presbyterian minister, are a choice source for Langston for the latter. Slaves and abolitionists appealed to Exodus stories and imagery to condemn slavery and to proclaim liberation; slaveholders such as Palmer (p. 16) cited the same material to defend slavery and to depict Lincoln and the Union as a new Pharaoh and Egypt. Indeed many slaveholders were descendants of people fleeing oppressive governments in Europe. Langston is alert to the historical reality that the oppressed, once liberated, can become oppressors. Exod 21:1-11 presumes that the liberated Israelites are now slave owners. Langston also offers 20<sup>th</sup> century examples from Zimbabwe and Zambia of the change from liberated to oppressor (pp. 70–71).

Finally, Langston's book, and the entire Blackwell series, offers a compact and focused entrance into sources for the interpretation and reception of the Bible, here the book of Exodus, sources that for all but a few are too many and in too many places to ever be read and appreciated. Langston's presentation is impressive in itself and many readers will stay within its borders, but Langston does offer many solid pointers for further reading for those so inclined.