

THE PERTINENCE OF EXODUS

Philosophical Questions on the
Contemporary Symbolism
of the Biblical Story

Edited by

Sandro Gorgone

University of Messina, Italy

and

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Series in Philosophy of Religion



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Preface

Caterina Resta

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As director of the European Center for Studies on Myth and Symbol, I am delighted to introduce this collection of papers presented at the international conference “The Pertinence of Exodus,” which was supported and promoted by the Center, the University of Messina and the University of Innsbruck. Sandro Gorgone and Laurin Mackowitz, who are the two promoters of this interesting event and its proceedings, proposed to reflect on the category of “exodus” and its enormous history of effect, departing from the well-known episode, which is narrated in the Book of *Exodus* of the Old Testament. The speakers of this conference discussed the actuality of Exodus from various perspectives and approaches. The exodus indicates, indeed, a fundamental *movement* of our existence; maybe it represents its constitutive shape.

What does the exodus mean to us nowadays? What can this movement in direction to the “outside,” which marked from the beginning the history of the Jewish people and the life of their patriarch Abraham, indicate? Abraham, who was called to leave his land, his home and all that was his “own“, is the man of the exodus in a very paradigmatic way. He refuses the logic of belonging and identity and the idolatrous faith of the religion of his Fathers and he begins his path with a separation from himself: he released the bonds with the native land, with homeness, with his origin, with blood and soil. Abraham refuses the myth of autochthony in order to become *other* – a foreigner. He chooses a path of non-identification and expropriation, which leads him to a land, which cannot be appropriated; it is a *promised* land, which can never be in his *possession*. Beyond the history of Israel, Abraham's example typifies the humanity of man. It was he who demonstrates that dwelling the world and sharing it with others is only possible by breaking the bonds of blood and soil, by renouncing every root in a land and “making exodus” from the closure of un-passable boundaries.

The exit from Egypt, which is narrated in the Book of *Exodus*, repeats and develops Abraham's gesture in a different way. It describes a movement of exodus, a “coming outside,” a delivering from a condition of oppression in order to find a better life and a Promised Land, where living freely is possible. This hope, then and now, pushes migrants to face the hard trial of the desert.

They are not yet a people, but in a certain sense they constitute a prefiguration of a people, beyond all usual models. They have no space, where they can reside, but only a desert to cross. During the long time of their wandering, which is scarred by sufferance and desperation, a single warning accompanies them: "You shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt" (Ex 22:20). We have to remember our constitutive condition of foreigners, above all when we become residents.

It is my view that the history of the *Exodus* continues to unsettle us partly because of this caveat, which runs through the Old and New Testaments. Its impact derives not only from the memory of a decisive episode in the history of the people of Israel who can date the beginning of their history from this exodus; I believe that something more important and *universal* is at stake. The warning requires us to remember that we were foreigners, because this condition does not only concern the past, but designates the very condition of human being, and it does not only concern migrants who flee Egypt nor migrants of all times. We are all foreign and we have to live in our cities as foreigners. We must never forget that *foreignness* does not *define* us, but impedes every self-appropriation, every closed-identity, because it refers to the radical exposition to the Other. Hence, the consciousness of being foreign always means being *hospitable*, opened to the other, who inhabits us. The Law of foreignness is not only a *removing* act of the Self, but also a *constituting* act of a *sui generis* people, who are the people of migrants - assuming we can still use the term "people." Remembering not that we *were*, but that we *are* foreigners involves radically overturning the basis of the traditional *nomos* of the *polis*, which is the law of belonging and boundary, the logic of exclusion, according to which the foreigner, as the other, is the enemy to be repulsed and annihilated.

The figure of the migrant, therefore, affords the possibility of thinking a more inclusive future humankind and a new concept of citizenship; one without limits, boundaries, bonds or preconditions. This alternative citizenship should remind us of our condition as human beings in exodus, as foreigners, who are residents in the same land, which host us. At a time when we raise walls, barriers, and news fences everywhere, when the epochal clash seems to be between foreigners and residents, questioning the category of "exodus," starting from its biblical origin, but also beyond it, can be an obligatory step in order to face the challenges of our time.

Introduction

Laurin Mackowitz

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The story of the desertion and emancipation of the Israelites from their slavery and oppression in Egypt appears to be one of the most enduring narratives of a collective political transformation. Starting from its first biblical account in the book of Exodus, the story has frequently been retold, commented upon, compared to innumerable contexts, and interpreted from many angles and for the most contradicting motives. Famously, already Moses Maimonides and Baruch de Spinoza questioned whether the story has to be considered a historical account and in what ways the miraculous tale of the Scripture needs to be reduced to its rational core. For generations of theologians, Egyptologists, archeologists, historians, philosophers, and artists, the story provided rich material to write meticulous elaborations of its various aspects and venturesome speculations about its descriptive and normative qualities. Presently, also secular scholars such as Paolo Virno, Chantal Mouffe, Oliver Marchart, Isabell Lorey, Roberto Nigro, and Gerald Raunig refer to the Exodus to conceptualize emancipatory perspectives under conditions that are referred to as late capitalist, post-democratic or post-liberal. Purged of their miraculous embellishments, the motives of the oppressed people, the cruelty of their oppressors, the promise of liberation, the ambiguities of leaders, and the hardships of change remain crucial reference points and inspirations for political thought in the 21st century. This detachment of the ethical-political symbolism of the story from its religious-theological background and its ancient historical circumstances suggests that the story is universal, and in the sense of a trans-historical master-narrative, a connector of singular experiences and thus applicable to a wide range of emancipatory struggles.

Considering that the ancient call to rid oneself of injustice and to face the rigors of liberation has not lost its appeal, it seems that also the fundamental conditions of oppression, liberation, and justice persist. Accordingly, religious motives continue to influence contemporary understandings of emancipation as well as the formation of individual and collective identities. Any attempt to secularize the biblical story has to consider that the Exodus concurrently appears as Scripture, myth, narrative, figuration, and metaphor. All of these dimensions are mutually related as they symbolically express ontological questions, objectify social experiences, and structure worldviews. Even in its

secular form, the story remains loaded with metaphysical connotations such as the radical Other, the Promised Land, or the wonderful. It describes the pragmatics of liberation as an economical, religious, psychological, legal, and political process. Yet, it also symbolizes a fundamental new beginning for those who abandon their destined past and liberate themselves from a contingent predetermination intending to overcome insurmountable obstacles and constraints. Moreover, it instills the hope that the thereby created utopian community will possibly inspire a new humanity that has the ability to overcome the vices and weaknesses of an all too human condition.

In the form of a paradigmatic narrative, the Exodus has a clear beginning, climax, and end. It is not aimed at utopian and final salvation, but at a processual inner-worldly liberation that is mostly determined by its beginning, the departure from slavery, and less by its end, the arrival in the Promised Land. As figuration and metaphor, it simultaneously appears as a schematics for various – in some cases distant or even contradicting – ideas such as evolution and revolution, messianism and nomadism, processes of personal maturing, the transformation of a collective, self-chosen exile, the fate of displaced persons in foreign lands, and also a self-determined emigration that does not end in a particular place but aims at changing the consciousness of the people, their lifestyle and their coexistence. Right because of this quality of translatability, it also describes some of the most virulent problems of our time: global migration, religious fundamentalism, and political nationalism.

As a transformative narrative, the Exodus indicates the psychoanalytic trauma of the child leaving the womb. Sociologically, it points at individual and collective experiences of emigration and exile. In a political context, it invents a model for the liberation from oppressive regimes and the constitution of a new law. It may also signify the religious conversion of belief, or in an existential denotation, the personal choice that defines the internal orientation of one's life. In this meaning, Exodus has a risky and combative character linking individuals to their unconscious, to the uncertainty of their reality, and the possibility of a cathartic event in the sense of the incalculable arrival of the Other, e.g., the stranger or the promised state of equality. This hope does not expect a messianic salvation but a human solution, aware that durable change takes time, sacrifice, and luck. The motive of the desert represents the tedious abandonment of an identity imposed long ago, allowing for the conception of new solutions. However, these paths become visible only while walking, experimenting with new modes of organizing a community, and growing on the experiences and responsibilities that go with it. In that way, the political strategy of Exodus refers to a process of change drawing to the radical Other, which is already manifest in lifestyles and

relationships. Rather than evasive desertion or escapism, this eccentricity calls for an active relearning of what it means to be human in anticipation of a possible better future.

When Sandro Gorgone and I met in Messina in June 2016, we agreed that for all these reasons, it is pertinent to discuss the ethical and political relevance of the Exodus narrative for the present. This motivation led to the organization of the International Conference “L’attualità dell’Esodo – The Pertinence of Exodus” at the European Center for Studies on Myth and Symbol in Messina. Gathering young as well as distinguished scholars from Germany, Austria, and Italy, the conference aimed to discuss the Exodus’ continuing influence on occidental philosophical, and political traditions and its functionality of motivating processes of emancipation and manufacturing collective identities. The discussions of the symposium maintained theological, historical, political and philosophical arguments exploring whether similarities between the Exodus and current processes and conditions of global migration are helpful for their mutual understanding. We discussed the motive of foreignness from the perspective of stateless persons and as perennial guests on the land, and we dissected what it means to envision the Promised Land as coming or as continuity. Further arguments concerned the question, whether the political strategy of the Exodus – desertion, education, and reconstitution – has the potential to evoke a politically active and self-determined subject. Admittedly, the myth also exposes a human tendency towards voluntary servitude, possibly even a longing for authority that paradoxically correlates with discomfort or hostility towards authority and the law.

After two years of further research, we are able to publish some of the articles presented at the symposium. Where necessary, we have translated quotes and contributions. The book comprises three sections: The first one, entitled *Guests on the land*, collects questions concerned with the relation between the stranger and the land. The second one, *A wandering identity*, deals with nomadism and eccentricity. The third one, *The symbolic and the unconscious*, explores the mythology, psychoanalysis, and aesthetics of the Exodus.

In the first article, “The promised and the foreign land: the other Exodus,” Sandro Gorgone examines the motive of the Promised Land, a motive that constitutes the premises and the end of the Exodus. It expresses the foreignness of the Jewish people to geographical or ethnic identities as well as its distance from God; a distance for which the people become free and responsible subjects but also strangers who will always remain foreign to the land they live on. Andreas Oberprantacher describes in his article “Exodus from camps: prelude to a cosmopolity to come” how processes of exit, emigration, and exodus are marked by zones and periods of waiting. Those

who leave a place, a community or a law appear to be condemned to endure a limbo, a camp or a zone of attendance. He argues that contestations of the borders of these zones and protests against their administration are more than an attempted reentry into a community of rights but a challenge to the state violence, intrinsic for structural exclusion. Aldo Bisceglia's article "Exodus or nomos: the temptation of the exiled to appropriate the earth" contrasts John Locke's and Carl Schmitt's arguments of legitimate territorial occupation with the idea that the relationship between the people and the land ought to be always provisional: While the earth belongs to God, all humans – sedentary and nomadic – remain strangers, guests and sojourners, whose appropriation of land is always temporary. Michele Zanardi's article "The Exodus way to democracy" deals with the concepts of sovereignty and democracy presented in the Exodus. Zanardi argues that the political theology of the Exodus challenges the fundamental biopolitical divide between them and us by projecting the idea of a permanent opportunity to remove the fracture between the power and the people.

In her article "The Exodus through the word" Maria Felicia Schepis inquires along the lines of theological interpretations in what ways a contemporary reading of the Exodus may preserve its essential movement of opening law and identity to contingency and transcendence. Contrasting the motoric to the sensual and the sedentary to the nomadic, she emphasizes the importance of abandoning self-referential attitudes in favor of events that indicate the incomplete and unusual. Rita Fulco discusses in her article "Emmanuel Levinas: A Philosophy of Exodus" an Exodus ontology that transcends totality towards infinity and escapes the metaphysical enchainment of a closure of being. Referring to Levinas' ethics of experience and responsibility for the Other, she argues that this orientation to the exterior guides the Jewish wandering to the unknown. A wandering that evades any return to the Same, while remaining ready to face the unpredictability of death and liberation. Valentina Surace discusses in her contribution "Exodus: an alien identity, a community of aliens" the alterity of the Jewish people as the choice to be strangers to others. She argues that this alien and broken identity is present in the foreignness of the people in Egypt, the strangeness of Moses, and the extraneity of their God. This gift and this choice command a split with self-identity, respect even for the radical Other, and unconditional hospitality. Referring to the motive of retraction and exile, Angela Cimato's article "The Jews and the nomadic truth" describes the Jewish experience of detachment from the present and projection towards the future. Wandering, persecution, and liberation are linked by the ideas of a precarious and unreachable homeland, the abandonment of any attempt to assimilate or appropriate identity, the temporality of possession or property, and the dwelling in the word.

In “Exodus as a sacred myth of the foundation of a nomadic civilization” Giulio Maria Chiodi argues that the Exodus represents the foundational myth of nomadic civilizations. Elaborating on the differences between nomadic and sedentary ideas of the sacred, he outlines essential characteristics of a nomadic religion: the invisibility of God, the inspiration by leaders, the indication of a distant destination, and the necessity of a pact between the people. Maria Gracia Recupero’s article “The road between power and knowledge in Oedipus” compares the Exodus with Sophocles’ tragedy Oedipus in regard to the challenge of circular narrative schemes and the opening to a destined movement that proceeds through singular events and arrives only at incompleteness. Both stories symbolize the departure from a time and a place, the solution of obstacles, and the remainder of a mystery that evades being simultaneously mastered by knowledge and by power. Fabio Palumbo examines in his article “From taboo to Exodus: the emancipative trait in Freud and Lacan” the patriarchal role of Moses in the light of Sigmund Freud’s hypotheses of the collective murder of the primordial father and Jacques Lacan’s notion of the Name-of-the-Father. He argues that experiences of exogamy, exodus, nomadism, and even migration are defined by the unconscious double desire to deterritorialize and reterritorialize. My own contribution “The terror and beauty of Moses image: a political aesthetics of Exodus” draws attention to the ambiguous charisma of Moses, which does not only encourage emancipatory endeavors but warns of revolutionary vigor and demagogic hubris. Drawing on Michelangelo, Spinoza, Freud, and Schoenberg, I delineate a skeptical perspective on the Exodus that recognizes Moses’ glorious and demonic sides.

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Notes on Contributors

Aldo Bisceglia holds a Master in Philosophical Sciences at the University of Milan, where, under the guidance of Professor C. Di Martino, he graduated with a thesis on the structures of factual life in Heidegger, with a special focus on the German philosopher's course entitled *Phenomenology of Religious Life (Freiburg 1920-1921)*. He is currently working on his PhD in contemporary philosophy at the University of Messina jointly with the Institut Catholique de Toulouse. His dissertation is dedicated to the theme *Dare la parola. Il linguaggio come promessa (Giving the word: the language as promise)*.

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and Manlio Sgalambro. Her research has been published in books and in numerous articles and essays in collective books and in international scientific reviews. She has also presented her work in many seminars and conferences, both in Italy and abroad.

Sandro Gorgone is Researcher and Professor of Philosophy at the University of Messina. He qualified as Ordinary Professor in Theoretical Philosophy. He teaches at several Universities in Europe (Freiburg, Heidelberg, Tübingen, Innsbruck). His research areas are German and French Philosophy of the 20th century with a particular attention to the thoughts of Martin Heidegger, Ernst Jünger, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy. His main research itineraries encompass technology and the modern subject; ontology and temporality, power and the metaphysics of work; humanism and technology, the hermeneutics of religious experience and the critic of the Hellenisation of Christianity, modernity and secularization, the phenomenology of the atmosphere, geophilosophy and the philosophy of landscape. His research has been published in numerous articles and essays in collective books and in international scientific reviews. His last book is *Strahlungen und Annäherungen. Die stereoskopische Phänomenologie Ernst Jüngers* (2016).

Laurin Mackowitz holds a PhD in philosophy from the University of Innsbruck. His dissertation *Die Säkularisierung des Exodus. Zur Narration Politischer Emanzipation bei Sigmund Freud, Thomas Mann, Michael Walzer und Paolo Virno* (2019) examines secular interpretations of the biblical Exodus as a narrative for emancipation. He was research assistant to the Wirth Institute of Austrian and Central European Studies at the University of Alberta. His published work concerns the philosophy of history, religion and nationalism, secularization and modernity, and the manufacture of collective identities. Currently, he is engaged in a research project at the Department of Philosophy at the University of Innsbruck, researching philosophical discourses on migration and refuge by investigating how figures of speech create and stabilize preconceptions of membership.

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Fabio Domenico Palumbo holds a PhD in Aesthetics from the University of Messina, and is currently an honorary fellow at the Department of Ancient and Modern Civilizations at the same University. His field of research includes aesthetics (visual culture), postmodernism, and psychoanalysis, mainly focusing on Gilles Deleuze, Slavoj Žižek and Jacques Lacan. He is also interested in the philosophical implications and interpretations of Japanese and East Asian pop culture. Among his publications are *Economia del desiderio* (2015), *L'estetica del mondo fluttuante: il "giapponismo" di Deleuze* (2016), and *Alice allo specchio* (2018). He is in the editorial board and/or collaborates with a number of academic journals ("K.," "Mechané," "Mutual Images," "Fata Morgana Web") and websites ("Suddiario") all across Europe.

Maria Grazia Recupero is Assistant Professor in Political Philosophy and a scholar of the symbolic in politics and Girard's mimetic theory. Her main research areas concern Greekness and Christianity, with particular attention to the relationships between power, religion and violence. Among her publications are *Martirio: Elementi antropologici, politici e filosofico-simbolici*, *Potere e patire: Una lettura kierkegaardiana*, *Homo homini frater: Esitazione e salvezza attraverso il paradigma vittimario di René Girard*.

Caterina Resta is Full Professor in Theoretical Philosophy (University of Messina, Italy). She analyzes contemporary continental philosophy, in particular regarding the following topics: the deconstruction of the subject (identity/otherness), the notion of the human, the question of technology and nihilism, geo-philosophy. Some of her books are: *Il luogo e le vie: Geografie del pensiero in Martin Heidegger* (1996), *L'evento dell'altro: Etica e politica in Jacques Derrida* (2003), *L'Estraneo. Ostilità e ospitalità nel pensiero del Novecento* (2008), *Geofilosofia del Mediterraneo* (2012), *Nichilismo, Tecnica, Mondializzazione: Saggi su Schmitt, Jünger, Heidegger e Derrida* (2013), *La passione dell'impossibile: Saggi su Jacques Derrida* (2016).

Maria Felicia Schepis is Associate Professor of Political Philosophy at the Department of Political and Legal Sciences of the University of Messina. She researches the politics of the space and focuses on her studies above all on the symbolic-political meanings of the border, on the question of the other, and on dialogical thought, with particular attention to Jewish philosophy. Since years she deals with political symbolism, intertwining the traditional political language with that of art, literature and cinema. Among her publications are the volumes: *Confini di sabbia: Un'ermeneutica simbolica dell'esodo* (2005); *Colui che ride: Per una ricreazione dello spazio politico* (2011), and various essays on Hannah Arendt, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, and Vladimir Jankélévitch.

Valentina Surace has a PhD in Methods of Philosophy and is an honorary fellow in the field of Theoretical Philosophy at the Department of Ancient and Modern Civilizations at the University of Messina. She studied German 20th-century thought, particularly Martin Heidegger and Walter Benjamin, to whom she dedicated the book *L'inquietudine dell'esistenza: Le radici luterane dell'ontologia della vita di Martin Heidegger* (2014) and several essays, including *Lutero qui genuit Heidegger: deconstruction of subjectivity* (2018) and *Messianismo e politica: il Frammento teologico-politico di Walter Benjamin* (2017). She also studied French philosophy, especially Jacques Derrida, to whom she dedicated *Messianismi e cosmopolitica: Derrida oltre Kant* (2017). In a geophilosophical perspective she dealt with the themes of the city and the landscape: *Del diritto alla città ovvero del luogo dell'abitare dell'uomo* (2015) and *Eden o l'archetipo dell'abitare* (2017).

Michele Zanardi studied semiotics, theology and philosophy in Bologna, Milan and Trento. He obtained the licentiate degree in Fundamental Theology from the Theological Faculty of Northern Italy, writing a thesis about the concept of "gesture" in Marcel Jousse. He researched the relationship between ethics, politics, and ecclesiology in Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He translated and edited some works of Erich Przywara into Italian. He lectures at the Theological Faculty of Emilia-Romagna and he published some articles for the review *RTE*. His main interests concern theology and language, political theology and the deepening of the concept of nativity.

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