HOW IT HAPPENED AND WHY IT MATTERS

The

EXODUS

RICHARD ELLIOTT F R I E D M A N

Author of WHO WROTE THE BIBLE?



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INTRODUCTION

History's a thing not easily captured And once deceased not easily exhumed.

—R. E. Friedman's misquotation of Dan Fogelberg

Three questions: Is the exodus from Egypt a story—or history? How did monotheism, the idea of there being only one God, come about? What person or events gave us the idea that we should love others as ourselves? Three mysteries. Or one.

It is 1956, I am ten years old, and I am standing in line to see the opening of the movie *The Ten Commandments*. My passion with the exodus must have kicked in even before that day because I already knew the story by the time I saw the film, and that passion has not ended. As for the film, it was a wonder to the ten-year-old. I was short and had big eyes and was overwhelmed like everyone else looking up at the scene of the Red Sea splitting. About forty years later (a biblical number), when I had become a biblical scholar, I was a consultant on another movie about the exodus, *The Prince of Egypt*. Jeffrey Katzenberg at Dreamworks graciously allowed me to bring my daughter to one of the sessions at the studio. She was about the age that I had been when I had seen *The Ten Commandments*, so I met the story again through a child's eyes.

There has been a surge of interest in the exodus lately: live movies, animated movies, books, cover stories in magazines, archaeological surveys and excavations, conferences, lectures, sermons, debates, documentaries, online videos. And the quantity of interest means a quantity of different

treatments at a quantity of different levels. You can find everything from nutty "theories" to serious, respectable scholarship. People blow small items out of proportion. People focus on items of evidence without taking into account other evidence that challenges or outweighs those points. People deny that it happened. People insist that it happened. People say that it happened but not the way the Bible tells it.

The exodus is the story of the birth of a nation—and the birth of some cornerstone ideas. Practically everything that follows it in the Bible flows from it: the greatest concentration of miracles in the Bible, the first statement of the Ten Commandments ("I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt"), the introduction of Moses as well as Aaron and Miriam, the early great prophets, and the first priests. William Propp, possibly the preeminent scholar of the biblical book of Exodus, says it simply in his two-volume commentary: "The story of Israel's flight from Egypt is the most important in the Hebrew Bible." Scholars have written thousands of articles and books about it. Biblical scholars, Egyptologists, linguists, historians, literary archaeologists. scholars, anthropologists: people from practically every background have been drawn to it. Millions of people tell it and retell it and celebrate it and teach it to their children. And we do not even know if it really *happened*.

This is truly frustrating. Until very recently we had the same situation with the Bible's King David. David is, after all, the only figure in the Hebrew Bible who compares to Moses, both in the sheer amount of the texts about him and in the degree of development of his life and character. Some said that there was no such person, no such kingdom, no royal house of David. But then we found two references to kings of the House of David in ancient texts,² and also our work in the City of David Project archaeological excavations of Jerusalem—in which my students and I joined the virtuoso archaeologist Yigal Shiloh—along with subsequent excavations, uncovered monumental architecture from David's period.³ So now there have been a host of books about David, so many that one can hardly choose which to read.⁴ Archaeology and skilled historical detective work have accomplished a great deal toward solving the David problem. But the exodus problem has remained.

The Bible's story of the exodus was always on the menu in my introductory courses on the Hebrew Bible, and I wrote in detail about that story in my *Commentary on the Torah:* the meaning, the artistry, the character of Moses, the connection with other parts of the Bible. But I had little to say as a scholar about the exodus itself, the real exodus, the historical event, whatever that was, behind the Bible's story. I knew that many of my colleagues in Bible studies and most of my colleagues in archaeology doubt, or even deny, that it happened. That never felt right to me.

The event figures centrally in the very earliest texts of prose, poetry, and law in the Bible. And those texts seem to refer to something with which their audiences are already familiar. And beyond this, a scholar, like a detective, has to rely to some extent on his or her instincts. My great teacher, Frank Moore Cross, the Hancock Professor of Hebrew at Harvard, was a model for his students of an intuitive scholar. Sometimes while he was still working on a problem he could make the leap to a solution. As he went on to test the solution, in some cases his intuition proved to be right. In some cases it turned out to be wrong. In some cases he left it to his students to work out the evidence that would prove it right or wrong. But we learned to respect and admire his intuitive scholarship, and we learned how much or how little each of us was able to trust our own intuition as we worked on our own challenges.

My intuition was always that there was something historical behind the exodus story. Probably this intuition came partly from that kid in line back in 1956, who renewed his attraction to the exodus through his own kid's eyes decades later. And it came partly from a sense that there was something in all the different bodies of facts that would eventually come together. That kid still thinks that something really happened in Egypt around thirty-three hundred years ago. Together with some superb fellow detectives, scholars from many countries, in different fields, it took forty years of studies (still a biblical number) to work it out sufficiently to formulate it in writing. Studies of literature and history, archaeology, art, architecture, genetics, linguistics, cultural anthropology, and, not to leave out the obvious, religion—all of these separate kinds of evidence came together in just the last few years for us all to see.

Let me ask you a question. Before you set out on this sea of evidence, what is your intuition? If you are a person of faith, this is not a question about what your faith tells you. If you are a person of facts and reason, this is not a question about what your intellect tells you. This is not a question about opinion. This is a question about what your gut tells you. What does your intuition say: that something happened in Egypt, or that nothing happened? And if your answer was "Why should I care?" then the objective of this book has to be to show you what probably happened and also to show you why it matters.

This book is a work of detective nonfiction. But I am going to give away where it is headed. I believe we can get at what probably took place in Egypt over three millennia ago. That would be a lot. But we have much more. We have evidence that without the historical anchor of the exodus, we would not have had the rise of the idea of monotheism. And without the experience of that returning group from Egypt, we might not have had the ethic of caring for the stranger. Monotheism and loving others as ourselves —two radical developments, *major* developments, in human consciousness became embodied in the heart of Western religion.

Whether one is a monotheist, a polytheist, an atheist, an agnostic, or an observer from another planet, one can recognize the significance of monotheism as a stage in the human adventure here on earth. And whether one is an ethicist, a politician, a minister, a rabbi, or just any decent human being, one can estimate the value of humans' arrival at the idea of loving others as ourselves. Without the exodus we might have arrived at these ideas much later, or in a much different form, or not at all. Those are the stakes here: a story, history, and immense consequences.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RICHARD ELLIOTT FRIEDMAN is one of the premier Bible scholars in the country. He is the Ann and Jay Davis Professor of Jewish Studies at the University of Georgia and the Katzin Professor of Jewish Civilization Emeritus of the University of California, San Diego. He earned his doctorate at Harvard and was a Visiting Fellow at Oxford and Cambridge, a Senior Fellow of the American Schools of Oriental Research in Jerusalem, and a Visiting Professor at the University of Haifa. He is the author of Commentary on the Torah, The Disappearance of God, The Hidden Book in the Bible, The Bible with Sources Revealed, The Bible Now, The Exile and Biblical Narrative, and the bestselling Who Wrote the Bible?

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