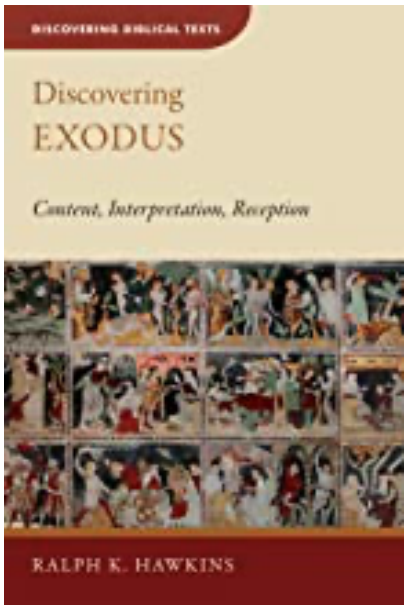
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Ralph K. Hawkins

Discovering Exodus: Content, Interpretation, Reception

Discovering Biblical Texts 7

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The intention (or pretension?) of the series Discovering Biblical Texts is to provide comprehensive, up-to-date, and student-friendly introductions to the biblical books and to pay attention, alongside obvious interests, to their historical reception. These goals help to evaluate the present volume on Exodus, which indeed gives a fair impression of the contents of the second book of the Pentateuch at undergraduate student level and might be useful for educated lay people as well. It gives not only the author's view of the various issues that he discusses but also other stances and relevant debates.

The first, an introductory chapter, deals with the structure of Exodus and gives a survey of its contents. The second chapter initiates the student into Julius Wellhausen's analysis of the four sources that had been integrated into the Pentateuch, the initial approval of this theory, and the subsequent uneasiness with it. With reference to other scholars, Hawkins observes that the traditional consensus built on this "Documentary Hypothesis" has faded away or has even been given up. Without dismissing all aspects of source criticism, he presents the paradigm shift from this method to literary criticism of the final form of the text as an attractive alternative and relates it to Brevard Childs's "canonical interpretation." Hawkins concludes that Exodus can be called "Mosaic" in the sense that it contains traditions about Moses, but he also allows for the possibility of Moses's own authorship of some materials.

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The third chapter discusses "the realia of Exodus," that is, the question of its historical reliability. Against the opinion that most of the events described in it arose from brilliant feats of imagination and thus are fiction, Hawkins points to ancient witnesses of similar contemporaneous events to which historians give the benefit of the doubt despite the lack of corroborating data. He presents ten historical arguments based on ancient sources that might substantiate the reality of the exodus during Egypt's nineteenth dynasty (1292–1189 BCE), but he admits that the number of 480 years in 1 Kgs 6:1 should then be read symbolically. Further, he holds that the "six hundred thousand men on foot" who left Egypt according to most translations, which he considers impossible, should be interpreted as six hundred units or squads (*'eleph*). In his view, the Israelite consciousness of the exodus is a significant argument for its evidence, too.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine Moses's early life, call, and leadership, the revelation of God's name, Passover, and the beginning of the Israelite nation. Again Hawkins attempts to sustain the historical reliability of these traditions. About the pharaoh's daughter who found the Hebrew boy in a basket, he writes that "the narrator reports that the princess gave him the Hebrew name 'Moses' (*mōsheh*)," apparently since Exod 2:10 ascribes to her a Hebrew explanation of this name (*meshîtihû*, "I drew him"). Hawkins admits that actually this interpretation is not correct, but he does not accept this as evidence against the historicity of this story. He informs readers about the widespread opinion that the name is Egyptian in origin, yet he upholds that the princess may certainly have understood Hebrew, although Hawkins also considers that a later editor may have translated her Egyptian words into Hebrew. Such arguments in favor of the historicity of Exodus recur again and again. Against the view that the story of Moses's life contains legendary features, Hawkins quotes contemporaneous sources in order to underscore the historical likelihood of the various accounts. He even accepts the tradition given in Acts 7:23 that Moses was forty years old when he went back to the Israelites, although Exodus does not mention this detail.

Chapters 6, 7, and 8 discuss God's miracles, his law, and his presence in the tabernacle. Hawkins assesses the theological meaning of these topics and confronts them with historical criticism, in other words, "the modern mind." The ninth chapter starts with Israel's rebellion against God in the golden calf episode. The testimony that, thanks to Moses's intercession, God remains faithful and merciful toward Israel, as expressed in Exod 34:6–7, is called "the gospel of Israel." Ample attention is paid to the reception of this text—which enumerates God's attributes—in the Old Testament itself, in early and medieval Judaism, and in the Christian liturgy. Chapter 10 highlights some "secondary characters" in Exodus: the Hebrew midwives, Aaron, Miriam (for whom Num 12 is taken into account as well), Jethro, and Joshua.

Chapter 11 is introduced as Hawkins's first chapter about reception history; it studies the echoes of Exodus in the other Old Testament books. Hawkins holds that the exodus events themselves come back in every part of the Old Testament canon, but this is debatable as far as canonical wisdom literature is concerned. Furthermore, his view of the reception of the book of Exodus in

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the rest of the Old Testament presupposes the chronological priority of this work, which cannot be taken for granted; yet this issue is not addressed in this book. The twelfth chapter presents the echoes of Exodus in the New Testament, where the research of reception history stands on firmer ground, since the New Testament obviously postdates Exodus and is replete with references and allusions to it. Surprisingly, the beginning of the thirteenth and final chapter skips more than a millennium of reception history and jumps immediately to echoes of Exodus in Western culture, considered from the late fifteenth century to the present time. Hawkins discusses art by Michelangelo and Rosso Fiorentino and gives some examples from the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, for example, by Marc Chagall. Hawkins's three pages on architecture, however, explore the relationship between the tabernacle, the first temple, the synagogues, and ancient churches, so that at least a little attention is paid to reception in late antiquity. Next, cinema and music are briefly examined. To conclude, the relationship between Exodus and the American Puritan and political traditions is expounded extensively, with passing references to Martin Luther and John Calvin. The book concludes with a bibliography (thirty-three pages!) of works in English and elaborate indices.

Hawkins demonstrates that he is well-informed about the research on Exodus, so that uninitiated students can learn much from him. The volume is written in a sympathetic, courteous style that quietly addresses the different readings of Exodus and does not polemically denounce views with which the author does not agree. Yet, as almost always, this work leaves room for criticism as well.

First, it is true and understandable that literary criticism has been hailed as an appropriate approach to biblical writings and as an alternative to source criticism, for the latter approach hardly brings to life the ancient texts but rather dissects them. In this book, however, the method of literary criticism is closely related to the wish to conceive the biblical traditions as historically reliable, whereas in fact, according to this method, the final text is the object of interpretation irrespective of its historical basis. Most often, scholars do not and cannot know which elements go back to historical events and which do not. One needs not suppose that almost all of Exodus arose from pious imagination, but to my sense, the presupposition that the many dialogues in Exodus describe real conversations seems simplistic and fairly naïve. However, one may still suppose that Hawkins's approach widens the horizon of students who only know a strictly literal, historical (not to say fundamentalistic) reading of Scripture, since he also seriously introduces other opinions and is engaged in a courteous debate with their protagonists.

Second, the subtitle of the volume promises that attention will be paid to the reception of Exodus. As a matter of fact, it would be a tremendous enterprise to analyze the reception history of this book through the centuries (see Scott Langston's volume in Blackwell Bible Commentaries, included in the bibliography), but, as we saw above, one might criticize the extremely selective focus of this history in the present book. Except for brief references to ancient church buildings and ancient prayers in the Apostolic Constitutions, the reception in early Christianity is passed over in

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silence. Hawkins might have referred to the uneasiness that educated Hellenistic Christians felt when reading that the Lord is a jealous God (ζηλωτής, Exod 20:5 LXX). This contradicted the Platonic notion that there is no jealousy (φθόνος) in the good God (*Tim*. 29E). Some of these Christians—often called gnostics—concluded from the description of the Lord as a jealous God that he is malign and far inferior to the transcendent high God, the Father of the Savior. The early church fathers were also embarrassed by this characterization of the Lord, but they rejected the gnostic (and Marcionite) solution. From the first five centuries, Origen's allegorical *Homilies on Exodus* have been preserved, and commentaries by Cyril of Alexandria and Theodoret of Cyrus, but Hawkins wholly neglects such works. Neither does he mention, for example, Charlemagne's introduction of the Ten Commandments in his Frankish empire, which was a novelty at that time, and the strong emphasis on these commandments in Calvinist worship services. Even if one does not intend to write a full survey of the reception history of Exodus, it might have been illustrative to highlight some more striking examples from less-known centuries, for the instruction of the uninformed student.

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