I. The Exodus Traditions

In this chapter the word “tradition” will be used as a shorthand for its wider meaning of the entire compendium of narratives, references and descriptions that together form a comprehensive and intricate picture of an event, rather than its usual meaning in current biblical studies of the stages before these narratives took on their final form.\(^1\)

The Exodus is undoubtedly the most described and cited event in the Bible. In addition to its extensive description in the Pentateuch, where it also serves as the narrative framework for all the laws and commandments, it is mentioned on approximately one hundred and twenty other occasions, within various references across all types of biblical literature, including historiography, the prophetic literature and the Psalms. On a purely quantitative level, therefore, clearly the Exodus was seen by the authors as the most significant event in Israel’s history. In the introductory scene where Moses is given his divine mission, God proclaims:

... and I will take you for my people, and I will be your God... (Exodus 6:7).

A proclamation which in many ways is completed in Deuteronomy 27:9:

Keep silence and hear, O Israel; this day you have become the people of the Lord your God.

Such declarations, and others like it, may be seen as the essence of the Exodus-related ideology, namely, that it is a profoundly formative event, both historically and religiously.

\(^1\) See also: Y. Hoffman, *The Doctrine of the Exodus in the Bible*, p. 18, who prefers the term “myth.” See note 4 below.
Nevertheless, there is a divergence of attitudes on this point. While in the northern sources and documents the Exodus is indeed perceived of as a truly historic event par excellence, this isn’t the case in the Judean sources. This issue has been widely and extensively discussed by others, including Loewenstamm, and, on this specific topic, by Hoffman. I shall therefore limit myself in this section to citing the highlights in brief, with the addition of a few comments and clarifications where necessary.

As Hoffmann points out, there is not enough evidence about the Exodus tradition in the pre-monarchical period for a full, methodological examination of attitudes at that time. We must focus, therefore, on the evidence in documents from the period of the monarchy onwards. The fact that the importance of the Exodus was viewed differently in various parts of Israel is reflected in the variations of attitude toward it in different parts of the Bible. The Chronicler, for example, downplays it, but particularly significant is the fact that Isaiah hardly ever mentions it. In Isaiah chapters 1–33 the Exodus is explicitly mentioned only once:

The Lord will dry up the tongue of the Egyptian sea. He will wave his hand over the River With his scorching wind, and smite them into seven channels (נחלים = dry riverbeds) that men may cross dry-shod. And there will be a highway from Assyria for the remnant which is left of his people, as there was for Israel when they came up from the land of Egypt (Isaiah 11:15–16).

Elsewhere (19:16–25) he only hints at the wider Exodus tradition. However, most commentaries agree that neither of these passages were in the

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2 See: G. von Rad, Old Testament Theology, Vol. II, London 1965 p. 47: “We have every ground for assuming that the David-Zion tradition was fostered in Jerusalem and Judah, while the patriarchal-Exodus tradition lived on in the northern kingdom.” See also below for Hoffman’s attitude.

3 S.E. Loewenstamm, The Tradition of the Exodus in its Development, Jerusalem 1965 [Hebrew], who mainly deals with the ways of crystallization of the various traditions to what he considers as one consistent narrative.

4 Y. Hoffman, The Doctrine of the Exodus in the Bible, Tel Aviv 1983 [Hebrew]. See pp. 13–14 for a scrutiny of studies of this subject mainly from theological aspects or the historical-diachronic aspect (Galling, who mainly dealt with the affinity between the Exodus tradition and the tradition of the Patriarchs). Also: about Von Rad, Noth and others, who concentrated on the relations between the Sinai and the Exodus traditions.