Exodus in the New Testament

Patterns of Revelation and Redemption

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The exodus story was the single most important story in Israel’s sacred national narrative. For influence on Judaism and early Christianity in late antiquity among the books of Moses the book of Exodus was eclipsed only by the book of Deuteronomy, the most often quoted book of Moses.

The book of Exodus narrates the story of the birth of Moses, his providential protection and care, his life in the court of Pharaoh, his flight into the wilderness, his encounter with God at the burning bush, his confrontation with Pharaoh, the ten plagues that humiliated Pharaoh, his magicians and their gods, the remarkable exodus itself, including the crossing of the sea and the destruction of Pharaoh’s army, the wilderness wonders, including the provision of manna, the receiving of the law at Mount Sinai, and the construction of the tabernacle.

Running throughout the book of Exodus is the theme of God’s absolute sovereignty. He is no mere god among many, he is the only God, the God of the whole earth and his people, Israel, are to worship him and him alone. He is also a gracious covenant God, whose desire is to shepherd Israel, to guide them to a permanent home, to give them a law that promotes justice and promotes the religious and spiritual maturity of Israel.

It is not surprising that Jesus and the major authors of New Testament literature draw so heavily upon the book of Exodus. For Jesus the covenant is foundational to understanding his mission. For Paul it is the many lessons, not least the defeat of mighty Pharaoh and the exaltation of Israel. For the fourth evangelist it is the giving of the law a second time and then filling the tabernacle with God’s glory, an adumbration of the incarnation of the Logos in the person of Jesus.

1 Exodus in Jesus

1.1 “By the finger of God”

Embedded in Mark and Q is tradition in which Jesus is accused of being empowered by Satan (Mark 3:20–30; Matt 12:22–32 = Luke 11:11–23 + 12:10). In Mark the accusation is found on the lips of “scribes who came down from Jerusalem,” who say of Jesus, “He is possessed by Beelzebul [Βεελζεβοὺλ ἐχει], and by the
prince of demons he casts out demons” (Mark 3:22). We should assume parallelism here, that is, the “prince of demons” is Beelzebul. This is made clear in Matthew, where it is the Pharisees who accuse Jesus, saying, “It is only by Beelzebul [έν τῷ Βεελζεβοὺλ], the prince of demons, that this man casts out demons” (Matt 12:24). Matthew has either simplified Mark’s language, or he has used the parallel in Q. In any case it is clear that Beelzebul and the prince of demons are indeed one and the same. The evangelist Luke does not identify those who accuse Jesus, saying only that “some of them said, ‘He casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons’” (Luke 11:15). Luke’s language is similar to Matthew’s, so it is possible the form of the accusation in Matthew and Luke derives from Q and not from Mark.

The epithet “Beelzebul” comes from the Canaanite Baal Zebul, בּוּבְזלַעַב, probably meaning “Lord of the princes,” but in 2 Kings it appears as בּוּבְזלַעַב, a deliberate mispronunciation, probably meaning “Lord of the Flies” (see 2 Kgs 1:2, 3, 6, 16 “Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron”). The Greek translator understood the Hebrew this way, translating Βααλ μυῖαν, “Baal of flies.” Accordingly, the Synoptic Βεελζεβούλ, transliterating Jesus’ Aramaic words, בּוּבְזלַעַב, reflects the original pronunciation.¹

There are more than a dozen occurrences of Beelzebul in the first-century pseudepigraphon Testament of Solomon, a work that is more of a handbook on demonology and exorcism than a testament. In this imaginative account Israel’s famous king overpowers the demons, including Beezebul. In 3:6 Solomon demands the demon’s identity, and it replies, ἐγώ εἰμι Βεελζεβοὺλ τῶν δαιμονίων ὁ ἔξαρχος (“I am Beelzeboul, the ruler of the demons”). The parallel with the language used in the accusation against Jesus is apparent.

To be sure, our version of the Testament of Solomon has been edited by Christians, but in its original form it was Jewish (beginning of the first century?) and reflected the kind of lore we hear about in Josephus’ account of Eleazar the exorcist who in the name of Solomon and with the help of incantations said to have been composed by Solomon was able to cast out demons—on one

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¹ Maurice Casey (An Aramaic Approach to Q: Sources for the Gospels of Matthew and Luke [SNTSMS 122; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002], 156) believes the Aramaic-speaking Jesus would have said בּוּבְזלַעַב. Casey thinks that Βεελζεβούλ was not originally in Q but, influenced by Mark, the evangelists Matthew and Luke added it.