Nothing in the Bible so readily invites the term "liberation" as the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt. The essential question, however, is, in what sense ought the exodus to be seen as an instance of liberation, or, to pose the same question in other words, what is the character of the liberation typified by the exodus and how is this type of liberation to be distinguished from other phenomena to which the same term is presently applied? For liberation theologians from Latin America, it has proven tempting to perceive the exodus from Egypt in the light of their own historical situation and political loyalties. This is not a temptation that many of them have resisted. It was through the exodus, according to J. Severino Croatto, that "Israel grasped a liberating sense of God and an essential value in its own vocation, namely freedom." Now the challenge is to extend that freedom to the entire world: "We are enjoined to prolong the exodus event because it was not an event solely for the Hebrews but rather the manifestation of a liberative plan of God for all peoples... an unfinished historical project." Surveying the literature of liberation theology as it stood in 1978, Robert McAfee Brown concludes that for the liberationists, the greatness of the exodus story is that it describes a "God who takes sides, intervening to free the poor and oppressed." And from whom does he free them? Who are the Pharaohs of our time? "The rich and powerful from other nations," Brown informs us, "who keep national oligarchies in power, thereby becoming complicit in the ongoing exploitation of the poor." Brown's survey shows that this conception of the exodus as a socio-political revolution by and for the poor and oppressed has long been typical of liberation theology. It is in the more recent commentary by George (or Jorge) Pixley, a Baptist minister and biblical scholar born in Chicago but raised in Nicaragua, however, that the liberationist con-
ception of the exodus receives its most thorough explication. Though Pixley is not to be numbered among the best known and most influential of liberationists, he has accomplished something that the others, to my knowledge, have not. First, he has written a book-length commentary in support of the commonplaces about the exodus that one finds scattered throughout the works of other liberation theologians. Second, and more important, this commentary does not rest content with homiletical flourishes but continually engages critical scholarship on the Book of Exodus. To assess whether the book bears out its liberationist interpretation, we can therefore do no better than to concentrate on Pixley's commentary.

Pixley sees the exodus story as having undergone a four-stage evolution. The first stage corresponds to historical fact: "a heterogeneous group of peasants in Egypt, accompanied by a nucleus of immigrants from regions to the east" escaped from Egypt under the leadership of "the Levite Moses"; it was this heterogeneous underclass who were the original Levites, and the Levites, so understood, who actually came out of the house of bondage. In the second stage, these Levites joined an alliance of rebellious Canaanite peasants known as Israel, and the exodus "was then read as the experience of a struggle against exploitation at the hands of an illegitimate royal apparatus." In Pixley's third stage, when Israel had become a monarchy, the exodus was again recast, this time as "a national liberation struggle—no longer a class struggle [but] a struggle between two peoples: Israel and Egypt." Finally, in the Second Temple period, long after the monarchy had fallen, the exodus was converted into the foundation story for the depoliticized Jewish community—now solely religious in character—whose religious obligations then came to be seen as deriving from YHWH's rescue of his people in the exodus.3

As Pixley reconstructs the history of the exodus story, the overall movement is thus one from political religion to a-political religion, the latter being conceived, however, as simply a cover for the maintenance of the political status quo and thus not really a-political at all. For Pixley, texts that speak of God's unique initiative or credit an action exclusively to him are in the nature of "ideology, in the pejorative sense of camouflage and mystification." Their ideological function is to render the populace helpless, impotent, and dependent upon the "dominant class, monarchical or priestly."