1. Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*

Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, New York: Basic Books, 1985

Dr. Michael Walzer (1935–) is Professor Emeritus at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey and Co-Editor Emeritus of *Dissent*.

Since late medieval or early modern times, there has existed in the West a characteristic way of thinking about political change, a pattern that we commonly impose upon events, a story that we repeat to one another. The story has roughly this form: oppression, liberation, social contract, political struggle, new society (danger of restoration). We call the whole process ***revolutionary***, though the events don't make a circle unless oppression is brought back at the end; intentionally, at least, they have a strong forward movement. This isn't a story told everywhere; it isn't a universal pattern; it belongs to the West, more particularly to Jews and Christians in the West, and its source, its original version, is the Exodus of Israel from Egypt. My purpose in this book has been to retell the story in its original version, to give a reading of the Exodus that captures its political meaning—and then to reflect upon the general character and internal tensions of Exodus politics. This is not, of course, the only way of reading the biblical account. It is an interpretation, and like all interpretations, it highlights some features of the account and neglects or suppresses others. But I am not reading Exodus in an idiosyncratic way. I am following a well-marked trail, moving backward from citation and commentary to primary text, from enactments to acts or, at least, to stories of acts. The Exodus may or may not be what many of its commentators thought it to be, the first revolution. But the Book of Exodus (together with the Book of Numbers) is certainly the first description of revolutionary politics.

The Exodus, or the later reading of the Exodus, fixes the pattern. And because of the centrality of the Bible in Western thought and the endless repetition of the story, the pattern has been etched deeply into our political culture. It isn't only the case that events fall, almost naturally, into an Exodus shape; we work actively to give them that shape. We complain about oppression; we hope (against all the odds of human history) for deliverance; we join in covenants and constitutions; we aim at a new and better social order. Though in attenuated form, Exodus thinking seems to have survived

the secularization of political theory. Thus, when utopian socialists, most of them resolutely hostile to religion, argued about the problems of the "transitional period," they still cast their arguments in familiar terms: the forty years in the wilderness, write the Manuels in their chapter on Robert Owen, were "a deep ... cultured memory and the death of the old generation [was] an archetypal solution." (It was even a solution for "scientific" socialists like Marx or, in this century, Lincoln Steffens.) This sort of thing is never merely a matter of rhetorical convenience. Cultural patterns shape perception and analysis too. They would not endure for long, of course, if they did not accommodate a range of perceptions and analyses, if it were not possible to carry on arguments inside the structures they provide. I don't mean to defend an essentialist view of revolution or of radical politics generally. Within the frame of the Exodus story one can plausibly emphasize the mighty arm of God or the slow march of the people, the land of milk and honey or the holy nation, the purging of counterrevolutionaries or the schooling of the new generation. One can describe Egyptian bondage in terms of corruption or tyranny or exploitation. One can defend the authority of the Levites or of the tribal elders or of the rulers of tens and fifties. I would only suggest that these alternatives are themselves paradigmatic; they are ***our*** alternatives. In other cultures, men and women read other books, tell different stories, confront different choices.

But we in the West also have a second way of talking about political change, a second pattern, the intellectual offspring, as it were, of the Exodus, though unlike it in crucial respects. The second pattern is, in Jacob Talmon's phrase, "political messianism." Messianism is the great temptation of Western politics. Its source and spur is the apparent endlessness of the Exodus march. The long drawn-out tale of human progress is shadowed by error and catastrophe wrote the young Ramsay MacDonald in a book called *The Socialist Movement*, "by wearisome journeys in the wilderness, by Canaans which, when yet lands beyond the Jordan, were overflowing with milk and honey, but which, when conquered, were almost barren. ..." MacDonald professed himself bound to continue the march, but one might well decide to give it up (as he eventually did)—or, alternatively, to opt for a far more radical hope. Why be content with the difficult and perhaps interminable struggle for holiness and justice when there is another promised land where liberation is final, fulfillment complete? History itself is a burden from which we long to escape, and messianism guarantees that escape: a deliverance not only from Egypt but from Sinai and Canaan, too. It may seem odd to expect such a deliverance from politics—even from revolutionary politics and apocalyptic

wars. Theological or philosophical arguments in defense of that expectation are always complex, invoking divine purpose or history's providential course along with this or that political program, just as the Book of Exodus does. What is important here, however, is that the messianic program is very different from the one adopted by Moses in the wilderness and at Sinai. (12–13)

COMMENTARY BY WILLIAM GALSTON

No American scholar has done more than Michael Walzer to bring the classic texts of Judaism into the mainstream of contemporary thought. Walzer first signaled the importance that Jewish political thought would attain in his career with his book *Exodus and Revolution*, which explores the impact of the Exodus story on liberation movements throughout Western history. This story and its later reading, he argues, "fixes the pattern" for subsequent accounts of revolutionary events. Because of the centrality of the Bible for the Western tradition, this pattern "has been deeply etched into our political culture" (134), and it remains operative today, as its centrality to the narrative of the US civil rights movement attests.

For this reason, *Exodus and Revolution* moves back and forth between the biblical text and its appropriation by centuries of revolutionary leaders, each illuminating the other. Walzer is alert to the risks of "presentism" this strategy presents, but he believes—plausibly—that the historical resonance it generates more than compensates for any lack of interpretive fidelity.

The template of the Exodus story, Walzer contends, comprises four themes, arrayed sequentially: the experience of oppression; liberation, understood as both breaking the bonds of oppression and the difficulties that attend this first encounter with negative freedom; covenant or, more generally, the constitution of authority and mutual responsibility that transforms a mass of individuals into a people; and finally, the hope for a better life, the Promised Land or utopian vision that gives direction to the people's movement through time.

Walzer links his reading of the biblical text to contemporary themes. For example, he interprets the Israelites' incessant grumbling and episodic rebellions against Moses's leadership as evidence of the ambiguous effects of oppression on the character of the oppressed. Yes, the experience of coerced subordination can purify the soul and make us more sensitive to the sufferings of others. But it can also induce a slavish preference for security over liberty. As Walzer observes, the tribal leaders Dathan and Abiram accuse Moses of leading the Israelites away from, not toward, a land flowing with milk and honey

(Num. 16:13). We may not have been free, they imply, but at least we were not enduring the world's most boring diet and experiencing the constant threat of dying in the wilderness. This retreat from novelty and risk, which the poet John Milton called "backsliding," is a perennial challenge to all movements seeking to upend an unjust status quo.

In another striking move, Walzer connects the Sinai covenant to the psychology of freedom. Liberation produces what philosophers term negative freedom—the absence of impediments to the exercise of will and choice. When negative freedom is attained by throwing off oppressive bonds, it creates a sense of exhilaration. But this intense sentiment cannot last because, Walzer asserts, the condition of negative liberty is in practice "unendurable" (75). (Here he echoes the postwar theme of the "escape from freedom" through which many intellectuals sought to comprehend Europe's embrace of totalitarianism.) Individuals—and even more, peoples—cannot live with endless possibility and pure fluidity. They need solidity and form. The only question is whether a people's form comes from outside through coercion or whether from within through consent. The Hebrew Bible, says Walzer, offers a hitherto unknown pathway to forming a people: "Covenant is the political invention of the Book of Exodus" (74).

Walzer anticipated that his foray into Biblical interpretation would raise some scholarly hackles. He described his new book as a movement back and forth between the Torah and the literature of radical politics—between a field where he was an "amateur" and his home base of professional experience, between the enthusiasm of the novice and the caution of the experts. And he acknowledged that if he had erred, it was in the direction of enthusiasm (ix).

If this cheerful admission was designed to ward off criticism from the field into which he had trespassed, it did not work. Zeev Falk's review in the *Journal of Religion* was tersely dismissive. Jacob Neusner's review in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* was more expansive but no less critical. We must begin by understanding classic stories in their original context, he insisted, which permits us to understand "their points of stress, nuances, generative tensions." When we read them out of context, which Neusner taxed Walzer with doing, we hear "only those messages that we did not need the story to convey to us—only what we knew before." Reviews by sociologists, political theorists, and law professors were less critical but far from thoroughly positive.

In contrast to these scholarly critiques, *New York Times* reviewers raved, and *Exodus and Revolution* was selected as one of the "Books of the *Times*," where it was characterized as a "rewarding" book—"elegantly written, subtly argued, full

of stimulating suggestions." In *Sunday Book Review*, Robert McAfee Brown, a professor of Christian theology, praised the book as a "brilliant tapestry" that wove together strands of the biblical story, commentaries, and accounts of revolutionary activists who drew on this tradition.

These assessments gave *Exodus and Revolution* currency within a wide community of lay readers. They also set the stage for a passionate public debate between Walzer and Edward Said, the noted literary theorist and Palestinian activist. In the course of a "Canaanite Reading" of the book, Said accuses Walzer of minimizing key aspects of the narrative—in particular, the injunction to extirpate the previous inhabitants of the Promised Land. Said links these omissions to the obvious parallels in contemporary politics, and he claims that Walzer's refusal to distance himself from the consequences of Israel's military victories suffuses his work with an "unattractive moral triumphalism." It is Walzer's unswerving loyalty to his people, the foundation of the "connected criticism" he so often praises, that leads, Said says, to a tragic impasse: "you cannot both 'belong' *and* concern yourself with the Canaanites who do not belong." The exchange Said's critique triggered made *Exodus and Revolution* a *cause celebre*.

This controversy only elevated Walzer's stature within the American Jewish community, most of which identified with his brand of liberal, social democratic Zionism. Bernard Avishai's shrewd review took this link a step farther. Scholars such as Walzer, he argued, could help solve the identity crisis of American Jews who do not identify with either Orthodoxy or the secular world of Jewish immigrants, by making Judaism's classic literature part of these Jews' ethical imagination.

To be sure, Avishai continues, there are difficulties with Walzer's this-worldly interpretation of Exodus. He asks whether it is possible to understand how the story unfolds without seeing the "longing for God" as its driving force. This question leads to another: when the Jewish community is commanded to be holy, is this merely a matter of justice and solidarity among human beings? Doesn't holiness require purity as well as righteousness? If so, is holiness fully compatible with the "secular social contract" that provides the fulcrum for Walzer's account? If not—if revolutions made in the image of Exodus have an ecstatic as well as rational dimension, is there not reason to worry about the charismatic leaders who so often lead these revolutions?

Avishai's review highlighted the contestable secular thrust of Walzer's analysis. This did nothing to weaken its appeal to the majority of American Jews, who were encouraged to learn that their leanings were compatible with a

respected scholar's reading of the tradition. And—to state the obvious—it did not hurt that Walzer took as his text the Jewish story that Jews not raised in the tradition know if they know anything at all. Most of the Jews who reject ritual and the calendar of Jewish holidays somehow find themselves at a Seder every year. In this context, *Exodus and Revolution* has taken its place as an accessible reworking of this most familiar of stories for two generations of American Jews.

Throughout his career, Walzer has been a man of the left—specifically, the social democratic left. The tension between democratic and non-democratic radicalism is the most explicitly contemporary issue he brings to (and finds in) the Exodus story. Following Maimonides, he insists that human beings change only gradually and that efforts to accelerate this process lead inevitably to coercion or worse. As Maimonides explains in the *Guide for the Perplexed*, "It is not in the nature of man that having been brought up in slavish service, ... he should all of a sudden wash off from his hands the dirt [of slavery]." This is why God caused the Jewish people to wander in the desert for so long—to allow them to become more courageous and to buy time until a new generation arose that was not accustomed to the humiliation of servitude. And it is why Moses patiently tries to shape an often ungrateful and rebellious Jewish people through rhetoric, persuasion, and law.

Acknowledging "shameless anachronism," Walzer describes this as the "social democratic version" of the Exodus narrative (54). But as he admits, the story has its "Leninist" moments as well (65). Moses's brutal response to the sin of the Golden Calf mobilizes the Levites as the revolution's "vanguard" and generates the first documented "purge" in the history of revolutionary movements (59). For Machiavelli, Walzer observes, this was a pivotally instructive moment.

Unlike some squeamish interpreters, Walzer does not shy away from this episode. Nor does he surrender to it. "Was it the purging or the teaching," he asks, "that made the decisive difference?" Although, as he says, the text can be read either way, he insists on what he regards as its plain meaning: the people's resistance to God's law cannot be defeated by force alone:

> God and the Levites could easily kill all the people who yearn for the flesh-pots (or idols) of Egypt. But then the Levites would arrive in the promised land virtually alone, and that would not be a fulfillment of the promise. The promise is for the people, and the people can only move in gradual stages from bondage to freedom. (69)

In rare circumstances, brutality may be an unavoidable necessity, but it cannot be the principal strategy of a successful revolutionary movement. The Cultural

Revolution did not "reeducate" China's intellectuals; the Khmer Rouge's killing fields did not "purify" the Cambodian people; and the waves of purges Lenin's heir launched did not create the New Soviet Man. In the end, there is no substitute for the slow processes of education and persuasion rooted in the experience of the people themselves.

When Walzer moves from means to ends, the same distinction is in play. On the one side we find what he calls "Exodus politics"—the movement not from our fallen state to the kingdom of God on earth, but rather from slavery and oppression to a real-world politics where human beings can live with a measure of security, liberty, and above all dignity. Exodus politics rejects the idea of a final solution of anything. Politics is always in need of radical reform; the work of reform is endless.

Walzer grounds Exodus politics, so understood, in classic texts of the tradition, such as Maimonides's depiction of the messianic age in the "Laws of Kings." Human nature is not transformed, and neither is the nature of politics. As Walzer summarizes Maimonides, "The messiah ... will be a human and historical figure, exactly as Moses and David were, and the world into which he comes will 'continue in its accustomed course.'" The lion and the lamb will not lie down together; at best, Israel will dwell securely among the nations (123).

By contrast, utopian messianism—which Walzer dubs "the great temptation of Western politics"—yearns for total transformation of human nature and political relations, typically through an apocalyptic event that sweeps away our corrupt and compromised world and ushers in a world of justice without conflict.

As an interpreter, Walzer frankly acknowledges that Exodus can be read as the source of messianic politics as well as the alternative to it. As a social critic, he makes his preference clear: the best reading of Exodus focuses on its "tough realism" (121), and Exodus politics is best understood as "cautious and moderate." In this world, anyway, the most we can hope for is dignity, not redemption (149). And however much we may be tempted to see God's presence in current events, we must resist this impulse, because it makes the everyday politics of compromise and gradual change impossible to sustain. If we are too quick to identify God's will with our own, we end up with the politics of Pinchas.