

Exodus Redux: Jewish Identity and the Shaping of History

Description

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“Under the pretext of recording fables and current reports about the Jews, he [Manetho] took the liberty of introducing some incredible tales, wishing to represent us as...condemned to banishment from Egypt.”

Flavius Josephus, Against Apion

I’ve been intrigued by the story of the Israelite Exodus from Egypt for more than a decade. More than any of its close rivals, including the tale of Haman in the Book of Esther, the Exodus looms large as an early and extremely influential psychological landmark in the lachrymose and highly dubious pseudo-history of the Jewish people. Most obviously, the putative liberation from Egypt is commemorated by Judaism every year, in the form of the Pesach, or Passover festival. Indeed, this festival is one of the most important features of the Jewish religious calendar. Historian Paul Johnson remarks that Exodus “became an overwhelming memory” and “gradually replaced the creation itself as the central, determining event in Jewish history.”^[1]

Exodus has a power that exists independently from the trappings of religious myth, acting through the centuries as a defining narrative of victimhood, group vindication, and self-validation. Jews living under the Tsar produced endless Yiddish plays and satires containing barely concealed allusions to the Tsar as the latest incarnation of Pharaoh.^[2] Exodus is a foundation upon which Jewish identity, as well as Jewish religiosity, is built, and for this reason it has greatly preoccupied even the most atheistic of Jews, Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud among them. Moses, as a subconscious archetype, squats in the shadows of the Jewish psyche.

The early reception of Exodus by non-Jews also plays an important role in the Jewish worldview, in the sense that the “virus” of “anti-Semitism” is said to have originated in response to it. In this regard, there is an almost universal consensus among Jewish intellectuals that the earliest origins of “anti-Semitism”

can be traced to the writings of an Egyptian priest allegedly offended by the account of the Israelite escape from Pharaoh. The theory relates specifically to a history of Egypt, the *Aegyptiaca*, written by an Egyptian priest named Manetho around the third century BC. Although the *Aegyptiaca* is lost to us, we are able to piece together much of its contents based on subsequent rebuttals by later Jewish writers such as Flavius Josephus, and also references to the text by several Greek and Greek-Egyptian intellectuals.

In summary, Manetho reported that centuries earlier a foreign population had entered Egypt's eastern border via "infiltration of the Delta." This foreign population subsequently rose in power within Egypt, becoming a burden and a pestilence to the natives. At some point, the foreign population developed a serious disease of the skin, and the Egyptians were finally motivated to expel the invaders, who later relocated to Jerusalem.

Manetho's narrative certainly provoked some of the earliest examples of Jewish apologia. His account filtered through the ages and was taken up by the Hellenized Egyptian Apion the Alexandrian (30–20 BC – c. AD 45–48), in turn provoking a polemical text by Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (AD 37 – c. AD 100) titled simply *Against Apion*. In this text, Josephus remarked dismissively that "Under the pretext of recording fables and current reports about the Jews, he [Manetho] took the liberty of introducing some incredible tales, wishing to represent us as...condemned to banishment from Egypt." It is interesting that Josephus was most concerned with rejecting the accusation that the Jews had a skin affliction, and was quite prepared to accept that Egyptian hostility was based on "the original grievance of the domination of our [Jewish] ancestors over their country."

Today, historians are almost unanimous that Manetho was a malicious originator of anti-Jewish libels. Paul Johnson's philo-Semitic *A History of the Jews* is a good example in this respect, though his treatment of ancient Jewish history is full of contradictions. For example, Johnson acknowledges that proto-Jewish populations were highly problematic for Egyptian authorities. Referencing the Amarna letters (dated to 1389–1358 BC), Johnson concedes that ancient Egyptian accounts referred to a Hebrew called Labaya or Lion Man who "caused great difficulties for the Egyptian authorities and their allies...[H]e was hard to control, a nuisance. He eventually met a violent death in the reign of Pharaoh Akhenaten."^[3]

Johnson further adds that only part of the Hebrew nation ever lived in Egypt, "a fifth column within the land" that played a crucial part in the broader geo-political strategies of the group.^[4] Even setting aside the supernatural elements inherent in the Exodus tale, Johnson also appears to concede the unlikelihood of a Jewish-instigated departure since it would represent "a successful revolt and escape of a slave-people, the only one recorded in antiquity."^[5] Despite these acknowledgements, Johnson describes Manetho's account of the expulsion of proto-Jewish infiltrators out of Egypt and into Jerusalem as a "fundamental matrix of anti-Semitism, the Ur-libel."^[6]

Jewish academic activist Robert Wistrich, now deceased, described Manetho as "malevolent" and "one of the first anti-Semitic polemicists of Antiquity."^[7] Kenneth Roseman argues that Manetho "disseminated virulently anti-Semitic propaganda."^[8] Ernest Abel called the Egyptian priest "the father of anti-Semitic literature."^[9] A special 1985 edition of *Jewish Social Studies* labelled Manetho "the first literary exponent of the anti-Jewish trend in Graeco-Roman Egypt and as the man who was instrumental in creating, or at least in popularizing, some of the oft-recurring anti-Semitic motifs."^[10]

In order to explain why Manetho may have constructed his "Ur-libel," Wistrich referred to a wider

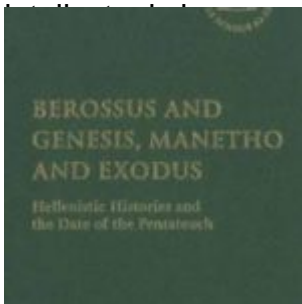
atmosphere in Alexandria in which Jews were in “socio-political competition with the Hellenized Egyptians.”^[11] In the midst of this competition, Jews had come to be seen as exclusivist, unpatriotic, possessing dual loyalties, and possessing a “position of privilege, wealth, and power.”^[12]

These accusations were given their most enduring articulation by leading intellectuals of the day, including Apion, Lysimachus, and Chaeroman, who acted as one of Nero’s instructors.^[13] Antipathy towards Jews was so rife that even after the conquest of Judea, both Titus and Vespasian would refuse to adopt the honorary title “Judaicus.”

Manetho was thus, by modern academic consensus, merely the first to register the first grumblings of a jealous, intolerant non-Jewish civilization.

While non-Jewish grievances during this period are viewed by academic gatekeepers with great scepticism and alarm, Jewish self-aggrandizement from the same era is accepted without contest. Just as Manetho is said to have borrowed from Exodus for his *Aegyptiaca*, so every Hellenistic writer was alleged to have merely grafted ideas from an intellectually superior Judaism. On the contrary, in my own summation, Jews didn’t interact with Greek culture in Alexandria in any manner other than the co-option of its achievements.

This is of course the timeless phenomenon of Jewish cultural chauvinism, built on the re-writing of history. Academic activist Simon Schama writes that, in Alexandria, many Jewish writers and philosophers argued that Judaism “was the ancient root and Hellenism the young tree. Zeus was just a paganized version of the Almighty YHWH, and Moses was the ultimate moral legislator from whom all ethical law-giving had originally sprung. The Jewish Aristobulus of Paneas, writing in the mid-second century BC, wanted his readers to believe that Plato had painstakingly studied the Torah and that Pythagoras owed his theorem to ancient Jewish learning.”^[14] This is the ancient root of the familiar drive to perpetuate the idea of “Jewish genius,” a theme now well-documented here at TOO (e.g., my “[Pariah to Messiah: The Engineered Apotheosis of Baruch Spinoza](#)” for a discussion of how Jewish intellectuals have written the history of the Enlightenment to be the result of Jewish influence).



Although the narratives coterminous with the Exodus fable remain bloated and

inert within the academic corpus, I wish to draw the attention of readers to a quite remarkable book published in 2006. Largely ignored by the gatekeepers of academia, [Russell Gmirkin’s *Berossus and Genesis, Manetho and Exodus: Hellenistic Histories and the Date of the Pentateuch*](#) represents nothing less than a multi-front assault on both the Jewish interpretation of Manetho and the account of Exodus itself. Gmirkin’s study offers compelling evidence that Manetho did not react to Exodus, but rather that Exodus was written by Jewish intellectuals in Alexandria in reaction to Manetho, whose account was both older and more accurate. Or, as the author puts it, rather than Manetho attacking the Jews, “the borrowing and polemics took place in the opposite direction; the Pentateuch polemicized against the Egyptian expulsion stories in Manetho.”^[15] The implication of Gmirkin’s thesis is that, by writing Exodus, a text given later cultural protection and greater credence and authority by the spread

of Christianity, Jews essentially captured history, re-writing it in a manner that salved Jewish pride.

Although what we understand as the Jewish group evolutionary strategy, and the cultural codes underpinning it, was certainly extant prior to the third century BC, Gmirkin argues that the “Hebrew Pentateuch was composed in its entirety about 273 BC by 72 Jewish scholars at Alexandria.”^[16] Combining archaeological discoveries with meticulous textual analysis, Gmirkin demonstrates a heavy literary dependence of Genesis on Berossus’s *Babyloniaca* (278 BC) and Exodus on Manetho’s *Aegyptiaca* (ca. 285–280 BC), as well as a general reliance of Exodus on literary sources available at Alexandria’s Great Library. Contrary to allegations that Manetho engaged in polemics against the Jews as a response to Exodus, Gmirkin points out that his narrative does not mention the Jews by name, referring instead to a tribe of mixed ethnic origin known as the Hyksos (Egyptian for ‘rulers of foreign countries’). Furthermore, Manetho’s account “displays no awareness of the biblical account,” and “can be demonstrated to have drawn exclusively on native Egyptian sources.”^[17]

Substantial elements of Exodus appear to have been plagiarized or corrupted from the *Aegyptiaca*. Gmirkin writes that:

The Exodus story, meanwhile, shows considerable knowledge of Manetho’s accounts regarding Hyksos and expelled Egyptians, showing systematic agreement with Manetho in all details favorable or neutral to the Jews but containing polemics against precisely those points in Manetho that reflected unfavorably on the Jews.^[18]

Gmirkin highlights crucial facts which bring one to wonder just how the “Manetho as anti-Semite” myth came to dominate for so long, even taking into consideration that the march of Christianity protected Exodus from criticism for centuries. Most striking is the fact that “Manetho predated the Septuagint, the first Greek translation of Jewish writings. This chronological consideration alone excludes possible influence of the Jewish Exodus story on Manetho’s account of the Hyksos.”^[19] Explicit knowledge of Jews in Manetho is “really quite limited.”^[20] The real linkage between the Jews of Alexandria and Manetho’s account appears to have been a number of now obscure “Jewish traditions equating the Hyksos with the Jews.”^[21]

Expressed more simply, Jews were offended indirectly by Manetho because he presented a negative portrayal of the Hyksos, whom Jews had, by the third century BC, come to regard in some respects as quasi-ancestral.

While Manetho’s account “had nothing to do with the Jews and was not dependent on the Pentateuchal tradition,” it did indeed advance a negative account of the Hyksos in Egypt.^[22] Utilizing ancient king lists, the life of the last Pharaoh Nectanebo II and the older *Aegyptiaca* of Hecataeus of Abdera, Manetho described the Hyksos as “invaders of obscure race” who had brought misfortune and plagues in their wake following their infiltration of the Delta. ^[23] Modern archaeology has been able to **determine** that the Hyksos were a hybrid people combining West Semitic (Canaanite), Indo-Aryan, and West Asiatic lineages. Regardless of whether the Jews of Alexandria had significant genetic links to the Hyksos, we do know that the latter were expelled from Egypt twice and later settled “in Jerusalem and geographical Judea.”^[24] Perhaps even more important is the fact that for over two thousand years Jews have taken Manetho’s account to be a direct insult, evidence, if nothing else, of their own belief in some form of connection to the Hyksos.

In relation to Manetho, the composers of Exodus employed “a systematic, consistent, predictable pattern in the points of similarity and violent contradiction.”^[25] Both accounts feature Jews/Hyksos as foreigners in Egypt who are in some fashion compelled to leave by authorities or circumstances. Both accounts locate the action at the eastern border of Egypt. Both reference the demographic growth and swelling influence of foreigners in Egypt, as well as the contemporaneous presence of plagues. Gmirkin explains these similarities by pointing out that “the authors of the Jewish Exodus story chose their battles carefully, accepting the basic framework of Manetho’s account, accepting whatever details were deemed harmless, but rising to the defense of the Jews on every point of honor.”^[26] Generally speaking, “the Pentateuch accepted as much of Manetho’s account as possible, due to the authority and reputation of Manetho.”^[27] Where the Jewish writers of the biblical account needed to flesh out their version with references to Egyptian history, they appear to have repeated errors already present in Manetho, specifically in relation to the latter’s misreading of sections of the ancient king lists and chronicles.^[28]

Although successive generations of Jewish intellectuals have taken issue with “anti-Semitic” ancient Egyptian claims that the foreigners suffered some form of skin affliction, and were in part exiled because of it, Exodus and other books in the Pentateuch display obvious attempts to parry such inferences. In Exodus (4:6–7) Moses is able to turn his hand leprous and heal it at will as a magical sign to Pharaoh. In Numbers (12:10) there is the strange story of Miriam’s brief leprosy, imposed by the Hebrew god as a punishment for rebellion. Both Leviticus and Numbers contain many prominent laws dealing with leprosy. Most damning of all is perhaps Deuteronomy (28:60), in which the Hebrew god warns the Jews that if they ever apostatized he would “bring on them again the diseases of Egypt.” There is thus clear evidence that the composers of Exodus and the Pentateuch adopted or at least acknowledged earlier accounts of the Hyksos in Egypt in which that foreign tribe had suffered some form of skin affliction or disease during the sojourn.

One might ask what relevance such ancient history has to the present. By way of answer I refer to the remarks made at the outset of this essay. Exodus remains a pivotal text in the Jewish mental landscape, shaping ideas about identity, victimhood, and validation. Its early reception has also come to represent, in the Jewish mind, the origins of “anti-Semitism” and the plagiarism of a putative Jewish genius. Because of the influence of Christianity in retaining and reinforcing the Pentateuch, and even extending it somewhat into the Western psyche, the story of the Exodus has been undeservedly preserved under a kind of cultural permafrost. We have for the most part lost touch with the fact that it was at one point in time merely one tribal repudiation of an overwhelming consensus. Historian Gohei Hata has argued that by the time of Josephus at least seven major Greek or Greek-Egyptian writers and intellectuals had published accounts asserting that Jews had some distant connection to Egypt, that they had been banished, that they had suffered from an affliction of the skin, and that Moses himself was an unstable Egyptian apostate.^[29]

While our people may recall none of these chroniclers, they are extremely familiar with the tales of oppressed Jews fed to them by their churches, and by a Hollywood that continues to produce both [adult](#) and [children's](#) movies concerning a “heroic” Moses stripped of the murderous, psychopathic qualities that drench the pages of the Pentateuch. Imagine if they were instead confronted with the fact that the tale of Moses familiar to them is even more distant to reality than they could imagine, concealing a much more sinister history in Egypt, and revealing instead the psychotic and fevered imaginings of a cabal of Alexandrian rabbis.

Even if Moses never existed other than as a kind of Golem squatting in the psychological recesses of the intellectuals who conceived him, he still retains a kind of “reality.” And in this regard we might consider the comments of Christian Bale, the Welsh actor chosen to play Moses in the 2014 film *Exodus: Gods and Kings*. Asked about the character he had been asked to play, and his own research into the figure, Bale [replied](#) that Moses “was ‘likely schizophrenic’ and was one of the most ‘barbaric’ individuals he’d ever read about in his life.” He cited biblical passages that were not included as events in the film: The chapter in Numbers where Moses orders the slaughter of all Midianite prisoners of war, save the virgin girls; and the section of Exodus in which Moses punishes the Israelites for worshipping the golden calf by forcing them to drink a scalding liquid made of the ground-up idol before ordering the slaughter of 3,000 Hebrews for the transgression. Bale closed his remarks by adding that “if Moses were alive today, he would likely be tried for war crimes.”

Asked to choose between Exodus and Manetho we might cast our minds back over the more than two millennia of history since both entered the Western canon. Has the exodus or the expulsion featured more prominently in the history of the Jews? Historiography has not been kind to the Egyptian priest, but history finds him vindicated.