



# *Exodus and Liberation: an exchange*

John Coffey and Mark Noll

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*This scholarly exchange between Christian historians is in three parts. (1) John Coffey introduces his book, Exodus and Liberation: Deliverance Politics from John Calvin to Martin Luther King Jr (Oxford University Press, 2014). (2) Mark Noll's review (first delivered at a 'Christianity and History Forum' in Cambridge, UK, June 2014) raises some key issues arising from its discussion of the rhetoric of deliverance grounded in biblical texts, used in particular historical struggles: the impact of a belief or otherwise in the historicity of the biblical narrative; the plasticity of such providential interpretations of history; and the problems that can arise from providentialism, such as fanaticism, self-righteousness and the demonisation of enemies. (3) John Coffey responds to each of these concerns, concluding with the suggestion that historical awareness can deepen and correct our own readings of Scripture.*

EXODUS • LIBERATION THEOLOGY • PROVIDENCE • SCRIPTURE • HISTORICITY  
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## John Coffey: introduction

Generations of readers have been captivated by the story of the children of Israel's deliverance from Egyptian bondage. In Christian preaching, liturgy and hymnology, Exodus has been read as spiritual typology – Israel pointed forward to the Church, Pharaoh's Egypt to enslavement by Satan, Moses to the Messiah, the Red Sea to salvation, the wilderness wanderings to earthly pilgrimage, the Promised Land to heavenly rest. For preachers and songwriters in the Methodist Holiness tradition, the Red Sea represented conversion; the wilderness the struggle with carnality; crossing the Jordan was equated to 'the second blessing' or 'entire sanctification'; and the conquest of Canaan depicted 'the victorious life'.<sup>1</sup>

Yet there has been an almost equally venerable tradition of reading Exodus politically. It originated with Eusebius of Caesarea in the fourth century, who hailed the Emperor Constantine as a new Moses, deliverer of the persecuted Church. It took on new intensity with the Protestant Reformation. My own interest in the history of Protestant 'deliverance politics' originated in the early 1990s, when as a graduate student at Cambridge I read a short book by the distinguished Jewish political theorist Michael Walzer. Walzer had begun his career working on the Puritan Revolution, and in *Exodus and Revolution* (1985) he used historical examples to underscore the seminal role of the Exodus narrative within Western political culture. Around a decade ago, as I conducted my own research on England's mid-seventeenth-century revolution and the Anglo-American abolitionist movement, I was constantly reminded of Walzer's book. References to Exodus were abundant, and when Barack Obama ran for the US Presidency, his speeches showed that Exodus rhetoric continued to resonate, at least in the biblically literate culture of the United States. And so I embarked on a study of how Exodus (and the Jubilee call to 'proclaim liberty') had been deployed from the Reformation to the Civil Rights Movement, from John Calvin to Martin Luther King Jr.

My book begins with Luther and Calvin, not because Exodus politics was a uniquely Protestant phenomenon, but because the Reformation was defined as emancipation from 'popish bondage'. European Calvinists, in particular, identified with the oppressed children of Israel in Egypt and they celebrated national reformations in Britain and the Netherlands as a new exodus. The title page of the Geneva Bible (1560) pictured the Israelites pinned against the Red Sea by the chariots and horsemen of Pharaoh, the moment before their

deliverance. Deliverance became a keyword in Anglophone political rhetoric, a term that fused providence and liberation.

Over the coming centuries, this Protestant reading of Exodus would go through some surprising twists. The Reformers had sought deliverance from the papacy, but radical Puritans condemned intolerant Protestant clergy as 'Egyptian taskmasters'. Rhetoric that had once been trained on ecclesiastical oppression was turned against 'political slavery', as revolutionaries in 1641, 1688 and 1776 co-opted biblical narrative. For Oliver Cromwell, Israel's journey from Egypt through the wilderness towards Canaan was 'the only parallel' to the course of English revolution. For John Milton, tolerationist and republican, England's Exodus led to 'civil and religious liberty', a phrase coined in Cromwellian England. The most startling development occurred during the American Revolution, when Patriots unleashed the language of slavery and deliverance against 'the British Pharaoh', George III. The contradiction between their libertarian rhetoric and American slaveholding galvanised the nascent anti-slavery movement on both sides of the Atlantic. Black Protestants now seized upon Exodus and the language of deliverance. 'For the first time in history,' writes one historian, 'slaves had a *book* on their side.'<sup>2</sup>

African Americans inhabited the story like no other people before them. When they fled from slavery and segregation and migrated to the North, they consciously re-enacted the Exodus. In slave revolts and in the American Civil War they called on God for deliverance from Egyptian taskmasters. In the spiritual 'Go down, Moses', they reimagined the United States (or at least the Southern states) as 'Egyptland', throwing into question the biblical construction of the nation as an 'American Zion'. They sang of a deliverer who would tell old Pharaoh, 'Let my people go'. They celebrated the abolition of the slave trade, West Indian emancipation and Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation by recalling the song of Moses and Miriam at the Red Sea.

For African Americans (as for ancient Israelites), deliverance from Egypt was followed by wilderness wanderings, and one theme of my book is the disillusionment that has often followed exultant moments of liberation, whether in the 1640s, 1830s or 1860s. Yet the main conclusion is a paradoxical one – that the Exodus narrative has been malleable and potent at the same time. On the one hand, the biblical text can seem like a nose of wax, or a helpless prisoner in the hands of its readers. All sorts of figures have been identified as Mosaic deliverers: Constantine, Savonarola, Cromwell, Charles II, George Washington, Harriet Tubman, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King

Jr. The Pharaohs have been an equally motley crew, ranging from Mary Tudor to George III. The story has been put to use by Catholics and Protestants, Parliamentarians and Royalists, Hanoverians and Jacobites, revolutionaries and abolitionists, blacks and whites, Republicans and Democrats. Yet the very fact that so many readers have tried to get their hands on Exodus testifies to the power of the text, its capacity to capture imaginations. Narrative, in particular, provides a frame through which readers see and interpret the world, and, as sacred narrative, Exodus has enjoyed special authority. It has echoed in the Houses of Parliament and the Houses of Congress, in Westminster Abbey and along the Underground Railroad. It has been used by Mormon prophets and Maori prophets, by American presidents and African slaves.

Above all, Exodus has carried a big idea – the idea of deliverance. British and American Protestants came to believe that God acted providentially within history to liberate peoples from ecclesiastical, political and physical slavery. The fact that concepts of redemption and deliverance were deeply embedded in biblical texts was of great significance. Without Exodus and Jubilee, the liberationist rhetoric of revolutionaries and abolitionists would have lacked the powerful sanction of Holy Scripture. Given the right conjunction of circumstances, resonant biblical phrases – Let my people go! Proclaim liberty throughout the land! Break every yoke! Deliverance to the captives! – could be invoked to create a new sense of what was humanly possible and divinely mandated. Without these texts, English-speaking Protestants would have thought differently about slavery and liberation.

## **Mark Noll: Exodus, liberation and the discernment of providence**

John Coffey's *Exodus and Liberation* represents an entirely successful effort to document the salience of deliverance texts in British and American history from the sixteenth century to the present. In this day of ever more concentrated research on ever more narrowly defined subjects, Coffey's book should encourage other historians to tackle questions of large significance over long stretches of time. For those who also believe in the biblical narratives on which the book concentrates, there is much more.

Coffey's Introduction sets out the main argument concisely – that a rhetoric of 'deliverance' grounded in several key biblical texts has been an under-appreciated major theme of political mobilisation in Britain from the sixteenth

century through the Second World War, and in America from the colonial period to the present. In his reading, moreover, the Exodus theme has been both unusually *powerful* and unusually *malleable* in Anglo-American political history. The body of the work provides a rich survey of the manifold uses made of a coherent body of biblical 'deliverance' texts: pre-eminently, the story from the early chapters of the book of Exodus about the children of Israel's deliverance from bondage in Pharaoh's Egypt; but also the provision in Hebrew law announced in Leviticus 25 for a year of Jubilee ('proclaim liberty throughout the land'); the prophetic declarations of Isaiah 58 ('let the oppressed go free ... break every yoke') and Isaiah 61 ('proclaim liberty to the captives'); along with the inaugural proclamation from Jesus in Luke 4 that the Spirit of the Lord had come upon him to proclaim liberty to the captive and set at liberty the oppressed. The book's conclusions succinctly summarise the main findings of its survey: from the early history of Protestantism emerged 'the Reformation fusion of Providence and Liberation in the concept of Deliverance'; 'readers did not merely cite Exodus, they inhabited it'; and 'deliverance' has been a stronger, more pervasive theme in Anglo-American political history even than 'liberty'. Adding persuasively are well-selected images of medals, paintings and drawings that used scenes from Exodus to advance political or social causes.

Especially concerning how believers today might best interpret the ways that past fellow believers applied the Bible to historical events, *Exodus and Liberation* opens up several questions of great importance. A first concerns the historicity of biblical narratives, a second the plasticity of providential interpretations of history, and a third the very providentialism that underlay the political use of deliverance texts.

First is a question of how important it is to think of the Exodus story as having actually happened, the Leviticus legislation about Jubilee to have actually guided ancient Hebrew practice, and the Nazareth discourse from Luke 4 to have been actually spoken by Jesus. This question arose for me from the book's accurate statement that 'Although the black intelligentsia [at the time of Martin Luther King Jr] was increasingly secular, intellectuals recognized the prominence of Exodus in African American folk religion' (p. 190). Because of that recognition, the intelligentsia's use of biblical deliverance motifs remained extremely powerful with black audiences, and also relatively powerful with American white audiences. Given the power of these motifs among black church audiences, it is relevant that African Americans have remained the most resolutely pre-critical of all American Christian groups in their attitudes towards Scripture. ('My Lord delivered Daniel, then why not deliver me?')

Coffey's research convincingly documents the extraordinary power of biblical deliverance motifs in the political wilderness long endured by African Americans. But it also stands to reason that American blacks would only find unusual support in their struggles for civil liberty in biblical stories that they held to recount actual, rather than mythic, occurrences. Even if an increasingly secular black leadership doubted the actual occurrence of such events as described in Scripture, they relied on audiences that were convinced that the biblical events really took place.

At this point I might speculate that the difference between a language of 'deliverance' and a language of 'liberation' is a difference between viewing biblical events as actual and viewing them as mythic. 'Deliverance', with the implication of an actual outside Actor carrying out a task on behalf of the delivered, would seem to accord more obviously with a view of biblical events actually having taken place. 'Liberation', by contrast, might accord more obviously with an opinion that both the creation of biblical texts and the securing of liberation depended upon the humans who imagined biblical stories and who then exercised their own agency. A question of specific interest for a theologically conservative audience is whether the motive-power of deliverance anti-types also requires a realistic view of the biblical types.

My second question, about the plasticity of providence, responds to the many places in the book where Coffey shows how easy it was for liberated Israelites to become persecuting Egyptians. 'As usual,' he writes after describing Jacobite accounts of George II as 'the Hanoverian Pharaoh', 'Exodus was open to *various* applications, holding a special appeal for outsiders and dissidents' (p. 66, emphasis added). In this case, British monarchs whom their Protestant subjects viewed as deliverers appeared as oppressors to those still loyal to the ousted Stuart line of James II. The question is one Coffey addresses in the book's conclusion about whether any motif or trope that has been put to such wide and sometimes contradictory uses can be seen as more than the narrative self-fashioning so beloved of postmodernist critics. Coffey's conclusion on this issue seems right, that 'the malleability of Exodus says as much about its strength as its weaknesses. The story was contested so fiercely because readers needed it on their side' (p. 218). But if the 'need' of readers determined the use of the Exodus motif, was it any longer a motif coming from divine revelation, or only a literary trope exploited by communities who felt that they required divine aid? My own response would be that divine revelation, however used or abused by humans, will always be more essentially foundational for life, culture, society and civilisation than any ideology springing solely from human minds.

A third and more serious question comes from the book's repeated documentation that the force of biblical deliverance politics sprang from an underlying belief in the reality of divine providence. The seriousness of the question arises from my observation, as a believer, that historical instances of strong confidence in providence have often been marked by a host of blatantly sub-Christian attitudes and actions. The question can be put like this: is it possible to believe in providence and in the contemporary relevance of scriptural narratives for current events without falling prey to evils, as well documented in the book, like fanaticism, the demonisation of opponents, and self-righteous blindness about one's own faults? Strong reliance on deliverance tropes seems also to heighten temporal aspirations for the political betterment of my tribe, race or class so strongly as to undercut the Christian message of eternal salvation open to all. This particular failing seems to have beset Puritan revolutionaries in the 1640s as much as the less directly theological revolutions of 1688 and 1776.

If I have identified a genuine problem, it probably arises from the fact that when we talk about providence we are usually thinking about two separate, yet consistently linked, propositions: the belief that God controls the world, and the assumption that humans can ascertain accurately how and why God has acted to control a particular set of worldly events. When the second proposition prevails – that is, when humans are most confident about their ability to discern providence – then we also seem to be the most defensive, self-protecting, self-righteous, unrepentant and over-confident about our own exalted place in the universe. By contrast, an understanding of divine providence that remains keyed to God's character, instead of the human ability to discern divine activity, realises that only God is entirely righteous and that at some level God's will must remain unfathomable to human apprehension or at best be discerned only by incomplete analogy.

Pursuing the difference between providence focused on God's character versus providence focused on the human capacity to explain God's action provides a clue for why I found Part II of the book less theologically troubling than Part I. In Part I we read about the development of Protestant deliverance politics in the struggles that embroiled Western Christendom from the Reformation through the American Revolution. Part II, by contrast, recounts the use of deliverance texts in the campaigns against the slave trade and slavery, and then in the American Civil Rights Movement. The struggles of Part I mostly concerned contests over who should exercise dominant power over a particular nation – during the early English Reformation, in the Puritan tumults



of the mid-seventeenth century, in the deposition of James II in 1688, and then in the warfare leading to American independence. As it happens, my own opinion of much Puritan theology is quite high; I also lean towards the conclusion that the Glorious Revolution worked out decently; and in the wake of 1776 I am pleased as an American not to be singing 'God save the Queen'. Still, ideological over-reach characterised each of these political crises because participants so clearly identified their own causes with God's deliverance of ancient Israel. Calm theological judgement might even conclude that biblically derived just-war criteria for the initiation of violence had not been fully met for civil war in the 1640s, regime change in 1688, or revolution in 1776. In fact, however, the appropriation of deliverance texts contributed directly to the violence that took place. In addition, the providentialism that these episodes solidified in Anglo-American religious cultures must bear some of the responsibility for the mixed moral record of first British imperialism and then American international exceptionalism. Thus, confidence about the ability to know God's providential will led to actions that sometimes transgressed the manifest will of God.

By contrast, it is harder to find serious moral difficulties in the application of deliverance texts to the long struggle against the slave trade, slavery itself and the United States' culture of racial discrimination. Whatever the details of exegesis and application, the image of Egypt seems much more compelling as a way of describing deeply rooted racial prejudice than to describe, as an example, the American patriots' fear that they would be 'enslaved' when Parliament unilaterally reduced taxes on tea.

The difference between the sections of the book might be construed as a result of providence in Part I featuring a larger role for the human ability to discern God's actions, and in Part II more a focus on the character of God. If God disclosed his own power most dramatically through powerlessness – if, that is, the Cross is the central act of divine disclosure – then abuses of Exodus motifs would be less likely, the less directly they were applied to contests over who controlled power. To be sure, struggles against the slave trade, slavery and racial discrimination did involve the breaking of bonds. But the breaking of bonds is not the same as warfare over the establishment of a new centre of power. Perhaps that is why the providential foundation for the application of biblical deliverance texts did more good and less harm in the history described in Part II than did the providentialism featured in Part I.



Yet if that difference between Part I and Part II can be sustained, we are left with the conundrum that the positive use of Exodus for the events described in Part II (abolition and civil rights) descended organically from the questionable use of the history unfolded in Part I (warfare and regime change). John Coffey's book seems to me splendid in every respect as it treats the appropriation of biblical texts, but I am left with questions about the varied outcomes that resulted depending on the interpretations of providence held by those who appropriated the biblical record.

## John Coffey: response to Mark Noll

It is an honour to respond to comments from Mark Noll. As well as being a role model for many of us who work on church history, Mark has devoted a career to critical thinking about the use of the Bible in American political history, from *The Bible in America*, edited with Nathan Hatch (1982), to his major new book, *In the Beginning was the Word: The Bible in American Public Life, 1492–1783* (2015). Moreover, unusually among historians, Mark gives theological consideration to the results of historical enquiry, and he engages the normative questions that historians often sidestep. In *Exodus and Liberation*, the normative questions are always bubbling under the surface, but to cite an old historian's dictum, I wrote it as a recording angel rather than a hanging judge. I did not adjudicate between my subjects or pass judgement on their hermeneutical moves and providential claims, though my sympathies no doubt come through at various points. Elsewhere, I have reflected directly on the strengths and pitfalls of liberation theology, but Noll raises a number of specific issues that demand further consideration even if they are not amenable to easy answers.<sup>3</sup>

First, he presses me on the *problem of historicity*. The Protestants I write about were generally 'pre-critical' in their view of Scripture, and had implicit faith in the factuality of biblical narrative. Ancient Egypt really was providentially visited by Ten Plagues, the children of Israel really walked between walls of water at the Red Sea, and those walls of water literally collapsed on Pharaoh's chariots drowning an entire army. Noll wonders if the biblical narrative loses much of its power when believers come to see it as myth rather than history. I suspect there is a good deal of truth in this and in Noll's observation that the slippage from 'deliverance' language to 'liberation' language reflects a diminishing faith in a divine liberator and an increasing stress on human agents

helping themselves. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, revolutionaries and abolitionists spoke far more about 'deliverance' than 'liberation'. 'Deliverance' carried providentialist overtones and testified to the belief that the God of the Bible was 'the God of the oppressed'. The 'deliverances' of 1558, 1588, 1641, 1688, 1776, 1807, 1834 and 1863 were all celebrated in emphatically providentialist terms, as divine acts. When the black Methodist, Absalom Jones, preached on Exodus in 1808, he had no doubt that the Exodus from Egypt and the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade were analogous historical events, in which God 'came down to deliver the oppressed'.<sup>4</sup>

The rise of biblical criticism undermined confidence in the historicity and supernaturalism of biblical narrative. Exodus was cut down to size, and as a result liberal Protestants have had a less vivid providentialist imagination than their traditional Protestant forebears. As Noll notes, it is striking that the Exodus story has continued to loom largest for those least troubled by modern critical scholarship, especially for African Americans.

That said, there is evidence that the Exodus story can inspire and motivate even when its readers are not convinced literalists. It is not altogether clear how Martin Luther King Jr, or liberation theologians like James Cone and Gustavo Gutiérrez, construed the historicity of biblical narrative, but they were hardly pre-critical. Nor are scholar-activists like Walter Brueggemann. This is not to say that the debate over historicity is beside the point. King did speak as if the narrative had a historical core, as if God did indeed deliver the oppressed Hebrews from ancient Egypt. Indeed, as Christopher Ansberry argues, 'It is not entirely sufficient to claim that the Exodus narrative paints an ahistorical yet theologically accurate portrait of Yahweh's character and Israel's identity.' The narrative itself is not merely concerned to depict the divine character; it also testifies that God has acted within history to deliver Israel. Ansberry's own proposal seeks to move beyond the dichotomies of 'fact' and 'fiction', 'history' and 'myth', suggesting that the Exodus account should be seen as 'a conflation of history and memory' with the cultural memory of the Exodus being 'formed around an actual, historical experience and disseminated through subsequent generations' as 'the subject of continuous remembrance, reconfiguration and representation'.<sup>5</sup>

The second problem Noll identifies is the *problem of plasticity*. The book repeatedly shows that Exodus was twisted to fit a host of rival agendas. Its reception history can look like a case study in 'narrative self-fashioning'. So was it simply a useful literary trope adopted at will to clothe and legitimise

incompatible causes? Readers of the book will make up their own minds from the evidence presented, but I think it shows that the Exodus story carried a potentially explosive theological claim that proved hard to defuse. As the great historian of slavery, David Brion Davis, has noted, Exodus 'has conveyed the astounding message that in the past God actually heard the cries of the oppressed and was willing to free slaves from their masters.'<sup>6</sup> Those who co-opted the Exodus narrative to bolster their own power frequently found that this core message was turned against them. The Puritan Parliamentarians of the 1640s soon faced charges of acting like Egyptian taskmasters towards religious minorities. The American Revolutionaries of the 1770s were soon assailed by critics who condemned unrepentant slaveholders for complaining of political slavery. 'Why is it', asked Dr Johnson, 'that the loudest yelps for liberty come from the drivers of negroes?' Thus while the Exodus story has been commandeered for a host of rival agendas, it has been difficult to control. It has forced its Christian readers to reckon with a vision of God who sides with a downtrodden and marginalised people against the empires of the ancient world. Exodus has often been invoked by the powerful (Constantine, Cromwell, Lincoln), but in such cases the powerful have had to present themselves, and even to act, as defenders of the weak. To use Exodus was to make oneself vulnerable to critique from those on the underside of history (and their defenders). As Noll notes, the Exodus story never looks as compelling as when it is wielded by the weak against the strong, as in the case of African Americans.

The third problem Noll notes is the *problem of providentialism*. Historically, he observes, 'instances of strong confidence in providence have often been marked by a host of blatantly sub-Christian attitudes and actions'. So is it possible to believe in providence without falling prey to 'fanaticism, the demonization of opponents, and self-righteous blindness about one's own faults'? Doesn't historical providentialism feed tribalism? Noll begins to answer the question himself by distinguishing between two kinds of belief about providence: the metaphysical belief that divine providence is active in the world, and the epistemological claim that humans can ascertain correctly how and why God has acted. Noll suggests that the problem of tribalism arises from the latter rather than the former – what is dangerous is our confidence in our own ability to fathom providence. It is one thing to say that an unfathomable providence was somehow at work even in the events of 9/11, another to claim (as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson did in its wake) that God was punishing America because of 'the pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and the lesbians'.<sup>7</sup> Believers need to remember the words of Isaiah: 'For

my thoughts are not your thoughts, and my ways are not your ways, saith the Lord' (Isaiah 55:8). In *America's God* (2002), Noll commends Abraham Lincoln for offering the most profound theological reflection on the American Civil War, precisely because Lincoln eschewed a tribalist reading of providence.<sup>8</sup>

If Noll is sceptical about the providentialism of the Puritan and American revolutionaries, he has more sympathy for the providentialism of African Americans. Part I of the book (which covers 'Reformations, Revolutions and Political Slavery') shows competing factions using Exodus in their struggle to establish a new centre of power. Part II ('Abolitionists, African Americans, and Political Slavery') examines how Exodus was wielded in the long campaign against the Atlantic slave trade and the enslavement of people of black descent. Yet as Noll recognises, the activists in Part II were indebted to a tradition of Protestant deliverance politics established by reformers and revolutionaries. Furthermore, although the abolitionist campaign was largely pacific, it was aided by slave rebellions, John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, and the American Civil War, a conflict more deadly than the English Civil War or the American War of Independence. Violence is not left behind when we leave Part I, and we have to face the fact that it played a critical role in securing the advance of liberty and equality through the defeat of absolutist monarchy, religious uniformity, racial slavery and fascist dictatorship. Whether we like it or not, we live in democracies whose stability and freedoms are the product of war and revolt as well as peaceful protest and high ideals. The long British campaign against slavery is a reminder that there can be a non-violent route to liberation, but even that was accelerated by the armed uprisings of Christian slaves in Demerara (1823) and Jamaica (1830), and public sympathy for the missionaries blamed for stirring discontent. Indeed, a reading of the Hebrew Scriptures suggests that in a world where the powerful oppress the weak, the violent overthrow of oppressors can be part of God's providential purpose.<sup>9</sup>

However, Noll maintains that we need to read the Old Testament through a crucicentric hermeneutic. Our reading of Exodus should build on the conviction that 'God disclosed his own power most dramatically through powerlessness', that 'the cross is the central act of divine disclosure'. Noll has developed this line of argument in *Adding Cross to Crown: The Political Significance of Christ's Passion* (1996) and he has been a voice of restraint and irenicism in an American evangelical culture often given to bellicose rhetoric and belligerent solutions. Reading the Old Testament through the Cross is a way of guarding against its manipulation by the powerful.

Yet we should avoid spiritualising Hebrew Scripture to the point where we deny its political challenge. As the Vatican acknowledged in its response to liberation theology, Exodus 'has a meaning which is both religious and political', for the God of the Exodus 'rescues the people from hard economic, political and cultural slavery'.<sup>10</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez had good grounds for declaring that 'the Exodus is paradigmatic', and he had the support of Absalom Jones for whom the abolition of the slave trade was 'striking proof' that the God of Exodus 'is the same yesterday, today and forever'.

These responses only gesture towards a proper answer to Noll's searching questions, but I want to end by stressing the value of historical awareness. 'Reading the Bible with the dead' is a salutary experience.<sup>11</sup> It reminds us of how easily we can domesticate Scripture, and induces us to be less presumptuous in claiming to know the mind of God and monopolise divine favour. At the same time, it highlights the profound ways in which Scripture has fired the Christian imagination and the extraordinary impact that this has had on human cultures. It is hard not to be moved by how powerfully the Exodus narrative has spoken to the enslaved, assuring them that God has seen their affliction and heard their cry.

## Notes

1. See, for example, the commentaries on Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy and Joshua in A. B. Simpson, *Christ in the Bible*, vols. I–III, New York: Alliance Press, 1903.
2. John Saillant, 'Book of Exodus', in Peter Hinks and John McKivigan (eds), *Encyclopedia of Antislavery and Abolition*, 2 vols, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2007, p. 105.
3. John Coffey, "'To release the oppressed": Reclaiming a Biblical Theology of Liberation', *Cambridge Papers* 18 (2009): <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/to-release-the-oppressed-reclaiming-a-biblical-theology-of-liberation-by-john-coffey/>
4. See Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, New York: Basic Books, 1985, pp. 145–146.
5. See Christopher B. Ansberry, 'The Exodus: Fact, Fiction or Both?', in Christopher Hays and Christopher Ansberry (eds), *Evangelical Faith and the Challenge of Historical Criticism*, London: SPCK, 2013, ch. 3. Compare the minimalist account in Carol Redmount, 'Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt', in Michael Coogan (ed.), *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, and the maximalist case of J. K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
6. David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Emancipation*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014, p. 88.

7. See Andrew R. Murphy, *Prodigal Nation: Moral Decline and Divine Punishment from New England to 9/11*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
8. Mark Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 426–437.
9. See Herbert Butterfield's reflections on divine judgement in history: Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History*, London: Bell, 1949, ch. 3. On the providentialism of abolitionists, see John Coffey, "'Tremble Britannia': Fear, Providence, and the Abolition of the Slave Trade, 1758–1807," *English Historical Review* 127 (2012), pp. 844–881.
10. For the Vatican documents of 1984 and 1986, see Alfred Hennelly SJ (ed.), *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989, pp. 393–414, 461–497.
11. See John Thompson, *Reading the Bible with the Dead: What You Can Learn from the History of Exegesis that You Can't Learn from Exegesis Alone*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007.