

International Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament

Helmut Utzschneider
Wolfgang Oswald

EXODUS 1-15



Kohlhammer

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International Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament (IECOT)

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Cover:

Top: Panel from a four-part relief on the “Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III” (859–824 BCE) depicting the Israelite king Jehu (845–817 BCE; 2 Kings 9f) paying obeisance to the Assyrian “King of Kings.” The vassal has thrown himself to the ground in front of his overlord. Royal servants are standing behind the Assyrian king whereas Assyrian officers are standing behind Jehu. The remaining picture panels portray thirteen Israelite tribute bearers carrying heavy and precious gifts.

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Bottom left: One of ten reliefs on the bronze doors that constitute the eastern portal (the so-called “Gates of Paradise”) of the Baptistery of St. John of Florence, created

1424–1452 by Lorenzo Ghiberti (c. 1378–1455). Detail from the picture “Adam and Eve”; in the center is the creation of Eve: “And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man.” (Gen 2:22)

Photograph by George Reader

Bottom right: Detail of the Menorah in front of the Knesset in Jerusalem, created by Benno Elkan (1877–1960): Ezra reads the Law of Moses to the assembled nation (Neh 8). The bronze Menorah was created in London in 1956 and in the same year was given by the British as a gift to the State of Israel. A total of 29 reliefs portray scenes from the Hebrew bible and the history of the Jewish people.

Translated from German by Philip Sumpter

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This commentary interprets the first part of the book of Exodus, through 15:21. It features two approaches. On the one hand, the commentary interprets the final form of the traditional Hebrew text 'synchronically' by means of form criticism and modern literary methods. On the other hand, it 'diachronically' reconstructs the predecessors of the final form, from its origins in an exodus composition that opposes political domination to the text's final form as a dramatic narrative about the transfer of sovereignty from the Pharaoh to the God of Israel. Concluding syntheses examine the relationship between these two interpretive approaches while adding reflections on traditional and contemporary concerns.

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Editors' Forward

The International Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament (IECOT) offers a multi-perspectival interpretation of the books of the Old Testament to a broad, international audience of scholars, laypeople and pastors. Biblical commentaries too often reflect the fragmented character of contemporary biblical scholarship, where different geographical or methodological sub-groups of scholars pursue specific methodologies and/or theories with little engagement of alternative approaches. This series, published in English and German editions, brings together editors and authors from North America, Europe, and Israel with multiple exegetical perspectives.

From the outset the goal has been to publish a series that was “international, ecumenical and contemporary.” The international character is reflected in the composition of an editorial board with members from six countries and commentators representing a yet broader diversity of scholarly contexts.

The ecumenical dimension is reflected in at least two ways. First, both the editorial board and the list of authors includes scholars with a variety of religious perspectives, both Christian and Jewish. Second, the commentary series not only includes volumes on books in the Jewish Tanach/Protestant Old Testament, but also other books recognized as canonical parts of the Old Testament by diverse Christian confessions (thus including the Deuterocanonical Old Testament books).

When it comes to “contemporary,” one central distinguishing feature of this series is its attempt to bring together two broad families of perspectives in analysis of biblical books, perspectives often described as “synchronic” and “diachronic” and all too often understood as

incompatible with each other. Historically, diachronic studies arose in Europe, while some of the better known early synchronic studies originated in North America and Israel. Nevertheless, historical studies have continued to be pursued around the world, and focused synchronic work has been done in an ever greater variety of settings. Building on these developments, we aim in this series to bring synchronic and diachronic methods into closer alignment, allowing these approaches to work in a complementary and mutually-informative rather than antagonistic manner.

Since these terms are used in varying ways within biblical studies, it makes sense to specify how they are understood in this series. Within IECOT we understand “synchronic” to embrace a variety of types of study of a biblical text *in one given stage of its development*, particularly its final stage(s) of development in existing manuscripts. “Synchronic” studies embrace non-historical narratological, reader-response and other approaches along with historically-informed exegesis of a particular stage of a biblical text. In contrast, we understand “diachronic” to embrace the full variety of modes of study of a biblical text *over time*.

This diachronic analysis may include use of manuscript evidence (where available) to identify documented pre-stages of a biblical text, judicious use of clues within the biblical text to reconstruct its formation over time, and also an examination of the ways in which a biblical text may be in dialogue with earlier biblical (and non-biblical) motifs, traditions, themes, etc. In other words, diachronic study focuses on what might be termed a “depth dimension” of a given text – how a text (and its parts) has journeyed over time up to its present form, making the text part of a broader history of traditions, motifs and/or prior compositions. Synchronic analysis focuses on a particular moment (or moments) of that journey, with a particular focus on the final, canonized form (or forms) of the text.

Together they represent, in our view, complementary ways of building a textual interpretation.

Of course, each biblical book is different, and each author or team of authors has different ideas of how to incorporate these perspectives into the commentary. The authors will present their ideas in the introduction to each volume. In addition, each author or team of authors will highlight specific contemporary methodological and hermeneutical perspectives – e.g. gender-critical, liberation-theological, reception-historical, social-historical – appropriate to their own strengths and to the biblical book being interpreted. The result, we hope and expect, will be a series of volumes that display a range of ways that various methodologies and discourses can be integrated into the interpretation of the diverse books of the Old Testament.

Fall 2012

The Editors

Authors' Preface

The undersigned have been constantly aware of the honor of being permitted to write one of the first two “pilot volumes” of the series *Internationaler Exegetischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament*/*International Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament*. Over the years of our collaborative work we have become increasingly aware of the challenges that such a project brings with it. The Editors' Forward informs the reader about the goals and principles of this undertaking. Our own specific interpretation of these goals and principles as they relate to the interpretation of the book of Exodus can be found in the introduction to this volume. Above all it remains for us to express our gratitude here for all the support that we have received while working on this project.

It would have been impossible to complete this commentary in the brief period of six years if we had not received such generous material support from the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*. Between 2009 and 2012, the DFG financed Wolfgang Oswald's work by providing him with a temporary position at the University of Tübingen. This support also enabled Helmut Utzschneider to take a semester's leave. This semester was then extended by a further free semester, taken in advance, to an entire year of research due to the kind cooperation of the Lutheran Church in Bavaria. In the meantime, Jutta Krispenz filled his position at the Augustana-Hochschule.

In addition to this, the material assistance provided by the DFG helped support the “Colloquium on the Theory of Exegesis” that was held in the Old Testament department of the Augustana-Hochschule during the years 2008–2012. This colloquium was exclusively dedicated to texts and themes from the exodus narrative. We were able to invite

many colleagues who are also involved in interpreting the book of Exodus to this “exodus academy.” We would like to express our particular gratitude for the contributions of Rainer Albertz, Christoph Berner, Erhard Blum, Georg Fischer, Shimon Gesundheit, Thomas Krüger, Dominik Markl, and Frank Polak.

We have also received much encouragement and inspiration from the editors of IECOT. In particular, we will remember with great fondness two intensive weeks in Jerusalem, 2011, where we were able to discuss large swathes of our manuscript with Shimon Gesundheit, the volume editor. The discussions took place in the Faculty Club of the Hebrew University and the library of the Church of the Redeemer during a block seminar that was part of the “Studium in Israel” program.

In the final stages of our work we received generous support from various quarters. Our colleague Stefan Seiler carefully reviewed the translation – we naturally bear responsibility for any mistakes that remain. No less our thanks go to Philip Sumpter for the sensitive translation and especially to David Carr, the American IECOT chief editor, and to Ulrike Guthrie (IECOT work site in New York) for the careful redaction, copy-editing and proofreading of the English edition. Our student colleagues from the Augustana-Hochschule Michael Rummel and Bernhard Schröder, along with the reliable Mrs Andrea Siebert, helped us with general corrections. Last but not least, Walter Dietrich, the chief editor, and his colleagues in Bern, Sara Kipfer and Heidi Stucki, accepted the manuscript. Jürgen Schneider and Florian Specker of Kohlhammer Publishing House were our constant and understanding contact persons. To all these people, we express our warmest gratitude.

Neuendettelsau/Tubingen in the summer of 2014
Wolfgang Oswald and Helmut Utzschneider

Introduction: The Exodus Narrative in Synchronic and Diachronic Perspective

The IECOT commentary series has set itself the goal of combining, to the greatest possible degree, diachronic and synchronic perspectives in its exegesis of the Old Testament. The starting point and reference point for both perspectives is the traditional text that has been transmitted in the *Biblia Hebraica*. We have decided to call chapters 1-15 the subject matter of this commentary, the “biblical exodus narrative.” In this commentary, separate authors have treated the two interpretive perspectives – Helmut Utzschneider the synchronic perspective and Wolfgang Oswald the diachronic.

In this commentary, the two different interpretive perspectives will initially be treated separately in the subsections “synchrony” and “diachrony,” both part of the section called “text analysis.” Their common basis will be the translation, which is provided with notes. In the section entitled “synthesis,” moments of convergence and divergence between the two perspectives will be related to each other. The “dialogue” between the two interpretive perspectives aims to deepen theological understanding and clarify the degree to which the respective hermeneutical presuppositions bring about different interpretations.

The following introductions each have their own research goals and scope of analysis. The introduction from a synchronic perspective offers a broad view of the exodus narrative (Exod 1:1-15:21), in accordance with the scope of this commentary. The introduction from a diachronic perspective, on the other hand, treats the entire book of Exodus. This is because the stages that underlie the final form of the text consist of compositions that are not limited to the first part of the book of Exodus. In some cases, the

decisive evidence for the presence of a layer of literary extension is found in Exod 16–40; as such, a comprehensive view of the text is required in order to successfully sketch the literary history of the book.

A. The Biblical Exodus Narrative – A Synchronic Analysis

1. “Synchronic Interpretation” as Literary-Aesthetic Interpretation

The term “synchronic” is firmly anchored yet only vaguely defined in biblical scholarship. Though we cannot repeat the debate here,¹ it is nevertheless necessary to give a brief account of the way this commentary understands the term.

Synchronic Interpretation in Exodus Commentaries

In addition to this, it is helpful to cast a glance next at the significance of synchronic interpretation for more recent commentaries on the book of Exodus.² Synchronic interpretation has now firmly established itself in the discipline; nevertheless, the understanding of this perspective is variously accentuated and often is defined in contrast to a diachronic perspective (cf. section B.1. of this introduction for the diachronically oriented commentaries).

Of these commentaries, the first to be mentioned is *Das Buch Exodus* by the Jewish scholar and Rabbi Benno Jacob. This comprehensive book was written in German between 1934 and 1944. Because its author had to flee Nazi Germany it has only been accessible in a restored German edition since 1997. The commentator orients himself towards the extant Hebrew text, which he analyzes in light of an intimate knowledge of the classical Jewish interpretive literature and with great linguistic precision. Benno Jacob’s primary concern is to work out the “religious thoughts and intentions” of the Torah, “according to which the narrative has been shaped in the way it has and not in some other way.”³ This point of view is combined with a healthy scepticism towards historically analytical biblical scholarship that has its source in Christian Protestantism. In particular, Jacob vehemently rejects the theory of literary sources, which at the time of his writing was almost the only dominant theory.⁴

The four-volume commentary by Cornelis Houtman that appeared between 1993 and 2002 does in fact assume that “material from various sources”⁵ has played a role in the composition of the entire work. At the same time, due to an act of “final editing,”⁶ the entire work is characterized by considerable unity. This is precisely the sense in which it was intended to be a “unity,” and so this is how it should be read. This does not prohibit us from noting, in individual cases, moments of unevenness or tension in the text that may indicate a literary prehistory behind the unified end product.

The Exodus volume by Carol Meyers, which appeared in 2005 as part of the series *New Cambridge Bible Commentaries*, has clearly been influenced by more recent literary studies. In line with these trends, her commentary is interested in the “existing text,”⁷ which does not hinder the author from occasionally drawing attention to traces of the sources of the present text, in particular the “dominant hand of P.”⁸ From a literary perspective, “Exodus [is] essentially a narrative – a connected series of episodes with characters and a plot.”⁹ As a narrative, the entire book of Exodus (not only the exodus narrative in Exod 1–15) has a special function. With reference to Jan Assmann, Meyers claims that it is remembered history and thus represents “a kind of thinking, in which the biblical traditions are understood as phenomena of collective cultural memory.”¹⁰ This “literature of remembrance” preserves elements of historical reality, such as events and conditions in Egypt during the 19th Dynasty, which are analogous to certain events in the exodus narrative.¹¹ She supposes that the figure of Moses preserves the memory of a charismatic figure from the beginnings of Israel in the village culture of the Iron Age. As in her other works, Meyers applies feminist exegesis to the Exodus narrative (cf. in particular her interpretation of the Song of Miriam in Exod 15:20).

As in Meyer’s commentary, Christoph Dohmen’s German language volume *Exodus 19–40*, published in 2004 as part of the series *Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament*, orients itself towards the traditional Hebrew text and has as its starting point the role of the reader, specifically that of the contemporary reader. The meaning of texts is “always as manifold as their readers.”¹² Nevertheless, limitations are placed upon this semantic diversity by the “*intentio operis*” – Dohmen refers here to Umberto Eco. However, nowhere does Dohmen name a method or even criteria for determining the “*intentio operis*.” The interpretive perspective is twofold: it desires to do justice to both the textual perspective and to the perspective of the reader. As such the commentary is the “guarantor and watchman of the text” while simultaneously keeping open the text’s “semantic plenitude and multidimensionality.”¹³ For Dohmen, this is part and parcel of a clear scepticism towards classical, diachronic research. Dohmen is not concerned with discovering the “original meaning” or the authorial intention of the text.

Inquiry into the earlier stages of the text is not ruled out of court, but for him it does not belong to the actual task of a commentary.

Das Buch Exodus, a German commentary by Georg Fischer and Dominik Markl, which appeared in 2009 in the series *Neuer Stuttgarter Kommentar – Altes Testament*, also takes a synchronic approach. The authors undertook to “remain close to the biblical word,”¹⁴ which meant paying attention to its linguistic structure with all its intricacies. The authors strive to provide a comprehensive portrait of the narrative by paying special attention to its inner movement, its figures and motifs, as well as the text’s peculiar literary characteristics. This latter phenomenon can be seen above all in the fact that the individual parts demonstrate a “coherent, often even necessary sequence.”¹⁵ The result is a very unified view of the exodus narrative and the book of Exodus, the “Exodus scroll,”¹⁶ as a totality; this view typically has great scepticism towards all diachronic theories.¹⁷ Fischer und Markl read “Exodus as an intentional unity full of tensions.”¹⁸

The Text as “Literary-Aesthetic Subject”

This commentary agrees with the commentaries discussed above in that it relates its synchronic interpretation to the traditional Hebrew text. It understands this entity to be a “literary-aesthetic subject,”¹⁹ i.e. an independent literary work that *can* be meaningfully read without reference to the intentions of its authors and without knowledge of the history of its development. Synchronic interpretation in this sense is directed towards the literary form, the poetic formation of the traditional Hebrew text, as well as its aesthetic response. Its most defining poetic form is narrative. This form is realized by means of the specific features of ancient Hebrew narrative style (e.g. syntax, textual incipits), as well as more general narrative techniques²⁰ that are also typical of modern narrative texts. At its heart, therefore, synchronic interpretation is a representation of the narrative profile of the exodus narrative. It is the purpose of this introduction to give an initial impression of this profile; this will later be further developed in the exegesis of its larger and smaller sub-units.

Textual Form

Literary-aesthetic interpretation also focuses its attention on the historical textual forms, i.e. genres, motifs, motif-constellations and traditions, that have formed the text and which have each undergone their own specific, individual formation within it.²¹ Synchronic interpretation, therefore, as understood in this commentary, is not a-historical. Literary-aesthetic interpretation is conscious of its indebtedness to the tradition of Old Testament genre and genre-historical criticism.²²

Synchronic and Diachronic Interpretation

This commentary also differentiates itself from the aforementioned commentaries in not wishing to define synchronic interpretation in opposition to diachronic interpretation. The relationship between the two interpretive perspectives, however, is not formed on the basis of a literary hypothesis of a final redactor, i.e. the last editor in a long series of authors and redactors. An interpretation of the traditional end-text as a “literary-aesthetic subject” in no way requires a hypothesis regarding its author.²³

In contrast to this, diachronic interpretation reconstructs the prior stages of the traditional book of Exodus, identifies older compositions and reveals – as far as this is possible – the original intentions of its authors or its compilers. It thus understands these reconstructed compositions to be acts of communication²⁴ and to this end formulates an historical hypothesis about the location of each composition within the history of Israel’s social discourse.

Historical interpretation operates on the temporal level of each of the reconstructed older compositions in their literary and social contexts and is thus, in a strict Saussurean sense, also “synchronic.”²⁵ (In accordance with typical exegetical usage, however, the term “synchronic” will only be applied here to literary-aesthetic interpretation.)

In our interpretations, these different research agendas will reveal both commonalities as well as tensions between the two interpretive perspectives. It is not our concern to harmonize them. Our concern is much more, under the “synthesis” heading, to bring the various approaches into a dialogue and by so doing attempt to secure their respective contributions to our total understanding of the text.

2. The Exodus Narrative in the Old Testament Narrative Traditions (Gen – 2 Kgs)

Chapters 1–15 of the book of Exodus are not an isolated unit; rather they have been integrated into the narrative arcs of the Pentateuch and the “historical books” that reach as far as the second book of Kings. The exodus narrative is not so disconnected from the narrative thread found in Genesis, the narratives of the wilderness wanderings, the Sinai event, or the conquest of Canaan that it could be considered a self-contained entity.

Forward References

Every now and then – even if not too often – the exodus narrative makes explicit reference to figures and material found in the Patriarchal Narratives (Exod 1:1–6; 2:24; 3:6, 15–16; 6:3; 13:19). For their part, the Patriarchal Narratives themselves make reference to the exodus event. Obvious forward references, however, can only be found in Gen 15:13–16 and Gen 50:24–26; their presence in other texts such as Gen 12:10–20 and Gen 46:1–5 is questionable and a matter of dispute. The network of cross-references between Exodus and the Patriarchal Narratives is not particularly dense, which gives the impression that they are editorial in nature and of a late date.

Back References

Back references to the exodus narrative from later traditions are much denser and more widespread; the scope of their presence includes, for example, the legal traditions of the Sinai pericope (Exod 20:2; 22:20; 34:18; Lev 23:43), the narrative in Exod 32, the list of Israel's stations in the wilderness in Num 33, Deuteronomy, the conquest traditions that make reference to the miracle of the sea within the context of the crossing of the Jordan, and the report of the construction of the temple in 1 Kgs 6:1.

However, it is not only – indeed not even primarily – the explicit references that embed the exodus narrative within the narrative continuum of the Old Testament historical traditions. It is far more the “thematic deep structure” of its plot (cf. 4.1) as well as the depiction of its figures that demand, or at least suggest, a narrative prequel or a narrative sequel.

Exodus and Eisodus

A narrative of the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt presupposes a prior “eisodus,” a narrative of how they got into the land; at the very least it raises the question. Regardless of whether one understands the designation of the collective main character as “Israelites” (בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל) to be a mere demonym or an echo of the “*nomen eponymum*” of the patriarch Jacob (as in Exod 1:7), they are identified as non-Egyptians and *as such* this raises the question of how these characters made their way into Egypt. The story of Joseph (Gen 37:39–50) supplies the answer: the Israelites immigrated to Egypt under the leadership of their patriarch Jacob-Israel because of a famine in the land of “Canaan” (41:57; 42:1–2; 45:11).²⁶

The figure of Moses also connects the exodus narrative with the narrative world of the story of the Patriarchs. In some respects he is a “liminal” figure, located on the borderline between the Israelites and the Egyptians, the