# In the Beginning, Exodus:
## The Bible Then and Now

Andrew P. Porter

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For an old friend, and all like her

# Contents

# Acknowledgements

Many people have contributed ideas for this book.

Edward Hobbs's theology appears on nearly every page, and the few citations don't do him justice. The entire argument about exposure, limitation, and need was his long before it was ever mine, and the arguments about Exodus typology in the New Testament likewise. The attentive reader will quickly see that without those two premises, the inquiry here could never have gotten started.

Shaun Sullivan does not appear in the book, but many years ago I read the sociology of the early Peter Berger with him, and inasmuch as Berger's work sits everywhere in the background, Shaun Sullivan stands behind that conceptual inheritance. In a sense, Berger's work in sociology of knowledge provides empirical warrant for H. Richard Niebuhr's commitment to confessionality as a theological method.

What I didn't learn about the "Old" Testament from Edward Hobbs I learned from Donn Morgan. None of Donn, Edward, or Shaun are responsible for anything here, but if credit is to be given, much of it should go to them.

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# Introduction

This is a book about the Bible, about how it was put together long ago, and about how modern scholars figured out *how* it was put together long ago. It is also about how we became perplexed in the modern world, how biblical religion came to seem so preposterous to so many. What students learn about the Bible and the modern world is too complicated to tell from the pulpit. Nevertheless, it can be life-changing. It makes the Bible come alive, it makes the Bible really real.

Some of it may be frightening, but should not be. Some say it doesn't matter (it's just history, and history doesn't matter). Some think it esoteric knowledge, best saved for professionals, not something to tell ordinary people.

This book is for people willing to look at history. This book is for people who wonder whether history might be the solution and not the problem. This book is for people who want to hear some good news about religion and the Bible in the modern world. And this book is for pastors who know more than they can tell on a Sunday morning.

There is a lot that is not here; only a few problems in recent theology appear in these short pages, and then only tentatively. I once listened to my pastor talking to an RCIA meeting, and he promised to answer candidly questions from the catechumens and candidates, but said he did not have answers to all questions. I think that is exactly the right attitude. For the foreseeable future, there will still be unsolved problems in theology. We live *in statu viatoris*, as people on a pilgrimage in history that is not yet completed. We are comfortable

with that in the sciences, where we also remain ignorant of much of the natural world, and we can live with unanswered questions in science. Yet we are not comfortable with unanswered questions in theology. Living on pilgrimage, living with an unknown and risky future, is much older in biblical religion than it is in the sciences. We can do it again.

Many take the question of "science and religion" to be *the* central issue for theology today. I think science is not the central theological problem today. History is.

What is here is a tour through a few events in the history of biblical religion. It begins before the beginnings, and then does the story of Israelite religion. History matters in a historical religion.

After Israelite religion, we shall see the Disasters of the First Century, out of which came the Church and the Synagogue. For all the carnage on the long road from the ancient to the modern world, things were more stable than they might have seemed, but in recent centuries, the world has come apart and "religion" doesn't make sense any more. There begin our current perplexities: we don't know what to do, we have forgotten how the medieval world worked, and we couldn't get back to it even if we could remember it.

So we shift modes at the end, in order to sort things out. There is nothing like a system here, but a few things can be said. When it is over, the world (and biblical religion in it) will appear differently. Hopefully it will then be possible to recognize a world that should have been familiar all along.

The story of Israelite religion is told in tandem with the older explanation of how the Bible came to be written: "JEDP and all that"—the Documentary Hypothesis. That theory says that the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, passed through the hands of four editors, each known by one of the letters of "JEDP." That theory comes from the middle of the nineteenth century, and it has been taught to seminarians and scholars since then. J and E were early sources, with distinctive narrative styles. We come to them below. D

is Deuteronomy, and P is the Priestly editor; they, too, have distinctive styles, and noticeably different interests. It all came together around the time of the Babylonian Exile, from a little before to a little after.

Before the documentary hypothesis was the traditional explanation, more or less supernatural, that God determined the wording, and Moses wrote it down; hence the "five books of Moses." After the documentary hypothesis—well, things are not so clear. The hypothesis still lives, but with much less confidence than it once got. D and P are distinctive enough to survive, but the rest, the "JE" stuff, is miscellaneous. There is no consensus on dating the various parts, nor on how to handle what's not D and not P. What *does* survive from the documentary hypothesis, with great confidence, is that these texts are edited documents, from many sources, many traditions, from a human culture in part historically accessible and in part probably not recoverable. The supernatural explanation is gone for good. That will take us in the end to the question of how ordinary believers relate to the history of biblical religion, a question that marks the end of the present inquiry; it would be too much for this book, and even technical explanations are scarce, though a little can be said here.

The reader will quickly see how dependent I am on secondary sources; I am not a biblical scholar, only a philosophical theologian. So this book can hardly qualify even as a popularization of serious biblical scholarship, though it may help the reader find better introductions than this one. The best way to indicate my debts is simply to say a little about a few of the books that were my guides in the story that follows. Readers who want more excitement would probably do well just to go directly to chapter 1.

The books that follow are presented in a semi-chronological order: that is, from those that tell about aboriginal religion and biblical religion to those that tell about how modern scholars recovered the biblical history. The philosophy and theology to make sense of it come last. Eliade, *Cosmos and History*, and Westphal, *God, Guilt, and Death*, are the most important. Hans Walter Wolff and Walter Brueggemann,

*The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions*, is somewhat technical, but it is the clearest brief exposition of the theological situations from which the Pentateuch emerged during the Israelite monarchy: the period after David and Solomon. John Courtney Murray, *The Problem of God*, argues that our problem is more like the biblical problem of God than it is either the medieval or modern problems of God: we don't have proofs of God, we have anxieties about living in history, and we should not be afraid of our anxieties.

H. Richard Niebuhr's short essay, "Faith in Gods and in God," reprinted in *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, deserves some explanation. It was recommended to me by Edward Hobbs. Things come to a climax on p. 122, when Niebuhr announces that "the causes for which we live all die," and that this condition of life and the world is the product of a God who seems an enemy, but is not. "The strange thing has happened that we have been enabled to say of this reality, of this last power in which we live and move and have our being, 'Though it slay us, yet will we trust it.'" Edward Hobbs put it in more concrete terms by saying that the disappointments of life (exposure, limitation, and need), each bring blessing, much though they may hurt. Briefly, exposure happens when I get caught red-handed, and so offered a chance to change; the limitations of life are the raw material of creativity; and need, other people's need, offers fellowship and an opportunity for community. These three, exposure, limitation, and need, will be a major theme in this book, and what follows is a story of how they play out in the modern world.

They come in degrees of severity, from mere inconvenience, to suffering, to appalling affliction. To embrace life as good in full face of these pains is not easy, nor should I say it is. The pains destroy us in the end. Anyone who wants to get out of biblical religion can easily do so just by saying that the pains of life hurt too much; and if that is not bad enough, he can say that history is bunk, and so a historical religion is absurd. (I think those are the real reasons people reject biblical religion. Complaints about science and religion won't stand

up to inspection, but that's a long story, only a little of which gets told below.)

When I first heard the series exposure, limitation, and need, it became clear immediately that science was no longer the principal challenge for theology, nor even is science a problem. If you can find and accept the good that comes in exposure, limitation, and need, then nothing can harm you, though many things can hurt you. All problems in theology become solvable, even if they are not solvable *now*. And we need no longer worry about "miracles" as violations of natural laws.

In the modern world, history, "critical history," finding out that the past is not what we traditionally thought it was, is a species of exposure. Relativity, cultural relativity, in which we are both enabled and constrained by what our culture gives us, is a species of limitation. And religious pluralism, the presence of people from other cultures and religions, is a species of need, the need for fellowship. History, relativity, and pluralism are the real challenges to theology and biblical faith today; not science.

If trust in meeting God in exposure, limitation, and need is a general form of faith, then trust in meeting God in history, relativity, and pluralism is the form of faith working itself out in history and community in the present. The faith we can have today is foreshadowed in the biblical record, the story of a people moving from aboriginal nature religion into historical religion. It was a long process of change, one not entirely finished even today, and it was a journey with much anxiety. They thrilled in that anxiety.

# Chapter 1

# Bewildered

## 1.1 More Miraculous Than He Knows

Once upon a summer evening, two of my friends were driving north from UCLA to Yosemite. The circumstances are not entirely clear. Some say it was merely the time of the Watts riots, and very hot. Others say that one of these graduate student miscreants had poured just a wee bit too much liquid nitrogen on the Chemistry Department chairman's pride, and their friends told them to get out of town for a few days, for their own good.

In any case, they had gotten about as far as Bakersfield, when, on the radio, lo and behold, an evangelist began to warm up his crowd. He had a live studio audience as well as all the fans out in radio-land. You heard the typical revival meeting radio patter; prayer shawls, put your hands on the radio, let me pray for you, and so on.

It seems he had seven cripples in various stages of terminal illness up on the stage. Most had crutches or wheelchairs or other visible badges of decrepitude. The evangelist interviewed each one in turn. And each said in effect, "I'm looking at you now, but in a few days, I'll be gone." All were diagnosed as terminal, soon to expire; immediately, if the prayer went on too long.

He asked the audience, will it be a miracle if only one of these seven gets up and walks? A tepid but audible "Yes" from the audience. He worked on them some more, about trust in the Lord, and whatnot. "Lord help these people to see their way to support me in this great work." You know the drill.

"Will it be a miracle if even two of them get up and walk?"

(Louder) "Yes!"

More theology, if you can bear to call it that. More encouragement. And by the way, all you folks out there in radio-land, please put your hands on the radio and pray with us. It will never happen if your heart is not in the Lord!

"Will it be a miracle if three of them get up and walk?"

(A little louder) "Yes!"

An interlude about support for this wonderful ministry (i.e., please send money).

"Will it be a miracle if as many as four of them get up and walk?"

(Louder still) "Yes!"

And so on. By the time he got to asking about a miracle if all seven threw away their crutches and walked, the audience was in a frenzy, wild with anticipation.

And then he went through the series again, and one by one, these cripples each got up and walked. "Number one is getting up; . . . Number two is getting up; . . . Number three is getting up; . . ." and so on. The noise grew in a crescendo, the audience roared its delight at each one.

My friends listened in rapt silence all the while, and then one of them turned to the other and deadpanned, "It's seven-factorial more miraculous than he knows: They stood up in numerical order!"

Factorials are the bread and butter of chemistry students; they use them to compute how probable or improbable a chemical reaction is. Seven factorial is $7 \cdot 6 \cdot 5 \cdot 4 \cdot 3 \cdot 2 \cdot 1$, or 5040, the number of different ways in which seven things can be ordered. The probability of them standing up in order *by chance* is one in 5040, not a large number.

Which leaves the possibility of something other than chance.

Entertaining, perhaps. But how on earth did biblical religion get into this sorry state of degeneration? What the culture knows about it is that it is supposed to work miracles, but the miracles are a fraud? (And modern medicine, by the way, does deliver the miracles.) Supposedly biblical religion of the Christian variety, when it appears as the "real thing," is about miracles, Fundamentalism and biblical literalism. There is no other way to read the Bible. And Liberal Theology, when you find it, is just the same thing diluted, like chicken soup without the chicken, and weak broth at that.

That story is a symptom of the strange way in which biblical religion is understood today. And yet some understand quite well. If you google together the five words *truck, boat, helicopter, flood* and *God*, you will find more than 150,000 instances of a joke that runs something like this: There once was a man in a flood in the upper Mississippi valley, whose neighbors came (twice!) in trucks, once in a rowboat, and once in a helicopter to save him. He declined each time, saying God would rescue him; he had faith. The waters rose, and he drowned. In heaven, he asked the Lord why He didn't save him. God said to him, "I sent you two pickup trucks, a boat, and a helicopter; why didn't you get in?"

The two understandings of how God acts are poles apart, yet the first one seems to vex culture today. We can't quite make it to the second. How did we get to this state of affairs? And how much have we forgotten about biblical religion? How much did we never really know about biblical religion?

This book is about those questions.

## 1.2 Remedies

If the purpose of biblical religion is not to get you out of the pains of life, then what *is* its purpose? Do we simply assume that some other way to minimize pain and maximize pleasure is to be substituted in

its stead? Is that what life is all about? Is it so obvious that it goes without saying? All "religions" are strategies, that is, they are ways to get what you want? To say that would assume you actually *can* get what you want (and if you fail, you lose big). It also says that if you *can't* get what you want, then something is deeply wrong with life and the world. Or at least, if you can't want something both worthwhile and accessible, then something is badly wrong.

Life without disappointments we can all imagine—but it doesn't seem to happen. Those who think they can avoid the disappointments should, I suppose, just try to find better remedies than biblical religion. Biblical religion is not likely to offer much help.

If we are left with a world full of pains, then a second question arises. What do you do with a world full of disappointments? Can they bring any good? Or are they barren? Is life to be valued only in the parts that have no disappointments, no pains? Do the hard parts poison the rest of life? Is the good to be sought somewhere other than in this life?

Try another possibility. Suppose that the anecdote about the radio evangelist has it wrong—Christianity is not about getting out of the pains of life. What if Christianity is about finding good in all of life, pains included?

Grant that the pains of life are real. Might it be possible to integrate all of life, pains included, into something good? Might it be possible to make sense of life as a whole so that it is good? Might it be possible to say that life in this world is good? Suppose that it is. That would indeed be good news—but it would come at a fearful price. The pains can destroy you well before your natural life-span, and in any case, we all die in the end.

This is the possibility I would like to explore. I think that many people within the communities of biblical religion today inherit an intuition that really does affirm life as good, in full view of its pains. And many outside of those communities would like such a vision, and think they cannot get it from present-day Christianity or Judaism. The

idea *that* life might be good, taken as a whole, pains included, I have explored in other books, and they would be a good place to begin. The interested reader may consult *By the Waters of Naturalism* and *Unwelcome Good News*. *The Waters of Naturalism* explored only part of the present difficulties of theology, namely, the confusions that lead people to look for God in nature, as just one more natural phenomenon among other natural phenomena. It looked at very little of the history by which we got to where we are now. *Unwelcome Good News* looked only at the bare commitment to embrace all of life as good, with very little background or development of that commitment. The central commitment to affirming life will certainly emerge here also, but it will appear historically, as the tale unfolds.

## 1.3 Stuck in History

We seem to be in a predicament, and the jokes we began with are just hints of how bad things are. We won't understand our problems until we know *how* we got here. It is a *historical* predicament. We need to unravel our history. If that can't be done, or if history promises only trouble, confusion, and no way forward, then our situation is indeed grim. It could be that we are condemned to repeat history if we don't understand it, and maybe even if we do understand it. If that were to happen, some remedies outside of history would be needed.

As it happens, what is known is somewhat encouraging. Biblical scholars turned to history more than two hundred years ago, and they saw how big a role it plays in the story of the Bible. We need to understand history to make sense of the Bible. Big as history was in the estimation of the biblical scholars in the nineteenth century, I don't think people realized quite how big it really is until Mircea Eliade in the twentieth century looked at religions that don't know history, or don't want to have anything to do with history. Then he saw that for the aboriginal religions the world over, history is terror, if it is seen at all. Nature is orderly, human life is part of nature, and your job is to

fit into nature naturally. For a hunter-gatherer society, without writing or iron, this is a pretty good strategy for dealing with life. But if you live in an agricultural society, with iron and writing, things begin to be different. There are new problems, and the old solutions don't work any more. We shall come to the transition in a few pages.

But for now, Eliade's words are enough: "history is terror." History is disorder, history is uncontrollable, history is what the original nature religions can't handle. History is evil. History means in all likelihood that you are living in the boonies, you have no power over the course of history, and when you come to the attention of folks in the big city, it is because they want to rob you, enslave you, or kill you. And what if you are lucky today, not even rich, just lucky enough to get by comfortably? You could lose it all tomorrow.

Nevertheless, a few people do sometimes seek good in human life in history, and they do so in full view of its pains, not just because they happen to be enjoying their fifteen minutes of fame and imperial glory. Look at the pains, in Edward Hobbs's survey of them: You can be embarrassed, caught red-handed, *exposed*. You can be frustrated, unable to get what you want, unable to do what you want. You're up against *limitation*. You may be stuck with neighbors in *need* whose demands on your time, effort, and resources will put a serious crimp in your plans for a picnic.

Suffice it to say that if you come clean before exposure, you will get freedom, freedom from living concealment. Exposure may be very costly, so one asks, is that freedom worth it? If you embrace limitation, you will find creativity. Sounds hard when you are about to be destroyed, but you can, at a minimum, offer a blessing to someone near to you. If you open your heart to your neighbor, you will get fellowship and community. We shall see these three pains again, for they are the key to unravelling the predicament of Christianity in the modern world.

These three pains come in many ways, to individuals, to communities, to entire cultures and traditions. They come to Christianity as a

whole in ways that are not too hard to spot. Exposure threatens in the discovery that things didn't happen exactly as the Bible says they did. In short, it comes any time that history reveals that tradition was wrong. For tradition sought to portray the religion we know as Christianity as unspotted, started by God himself, and the only way to salvation. History shows plenty of spots, it can't find God, and it shows lots of alternatives to every religion, Christianity included. It shows rabbinic Judaism—at a minimum—as co-heir of the tradition passed on from before the time of Jesus. (So Christianity has no monopoly!)

Christian tradition sought to portray itself as not just true, but true "absolutely," without reference to time or place. History shows otherwise, and opens the door to cultural and religious relativity. That doesn't mean nothing means anything, but it does mean that all religions—Christianity included—are products of their own time and circumstances and historical origins. Relativity shows itself in the encounter with other religions and other cultures, an encounter that has become casual and is available on an everyday basis in a world where people fly to another continent one day and back the next. Religious pluralism is a fact of life in the modern world. When an instructor in world religions in a college not far from me stopped, perplexed about what Jains do at one particular passage in their lives, six Jains raised their hands in class with an answer. Even "minor" religions are represented in cosmopolitan cities today. Your neighbors probably don't belong to your religion, perhaps to none at all. "Religion" is a voluntary activity.

History, relativity, and pluralism are respectively kinds of exposure, limitation, and need. In history, we meet the truth about our own tradition. In relativity, we meet cultural limitation on what we can do and also the fact that our culture is the author of its own religion (simply because other cultures disagree). We have no proof for our religion, and we are left holding the bag when others disagree. In pluralism, we meet other cultures and other religions who also are engaged in the business of trying to make sense of the cosmos. We

all do so in face of eventual and certain death. They would like us to validate *their* cosmos, instead of them validating ours. For we are all lonely before death and chaos, we need each other, but we all think we need the other people to validate our own religion.

Let us assume that in history we meet a truth that offers freedom, rather than fatal accusations that make biblical religion unredeemable. Assume that in relativity, we meet an opening to creativity, rather than nihilistic relativism. And assume that in religious pluralism we meet an opportunity for community instead of inescapable strife. These blessings will take time to find and assimilate—generations. History of religions is not known nearly as well as we would like. Relativity is usually something we can't understand very well, somewhat like the water that the fish will be the last to discover. And pluralism means getting to know other cultures and other religions far better than we do now. There is too much work to do—haste would be reckless. But it is possible to get a better idea of how we got to where we are.