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Exodus Politics and Colonial Contestation

Mark G. Brett

It is widely recognised that biblical literature helped to form the national imagination of many settler colonial states as they sought to distance themselves from the older imperial centres of Europe. The insight is not peculiar to postcolonial studies, since it was also advanced by Michael Walzer in his influential work *Exodus and Revolution* (1985), but it was precisely Walzer’s book that generated Edward Said’s classic postcolonial critique, namely, that an emancipatory exodus vision has oppressive implications when viewed through a Canaanite lens. Nevertheless, the exodus imagination also fueled anti-colonial movements among Indigenous peoples, a contrapuntal complexity in the afterlives of the Hebrew Bible to which neither Walzer nor Said paid much attention.

In our Australian context, any suggestions that penal colonies might embody Puritan visions of a ‘New Israel’ were inherently implausible. The New Israel typologies played a more significant role in North America and South Africa than they did in Australia. Nevertheless, the echoes of biblical motifs have resonated through our historic speeches, legal initiatives, public rituals and works of art. As was the case in many other colonial contexts, there is also evidence that Aboriginal resistance to colonial imposition was sometimes shaped by invocations of Israel’s exodus narratives. This paper will begin by focusing on a reception of the exodus motif in nineteenth-century Victoria, briefly comparing another historical example from South-West
Africa from the same period—the ‘exodus’ of the Nama people in their resistance to German colonial rule in Namibia.

While the Australian version of the doctrine of discovery was largely secularised in the domain of legal discourse, resistance to colonialism was often articulated in religious terms. Before turning to examples from the nineteenth century, it is worth noting that religious connotations of resistance were still evident during our civil rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s, and also in the debates around native title in the 1990s. For Pastor Douglas Nicholls, and William Cooper before him, Christian faith provided a divine sovereignty that contested the unjust assertions of colonial sovereignty and provided a foothold for non-violent Aboriginal resistance. Australian activists in the 1960s were inspired by the influential example set by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., who adopted exodus typology in many of his stirring speeches. And when the body of Koiki Eddie Mabo was returned to his island home in 1996, the struggle for legal recognition of customary land in the Torres Strait was configured with Moses typology. ‘Koiki led the people of Murray islands from the bondage of terra nullius’, the islanders reported to a journalist at the time. This was their explanation of a traditional hymn:

Mama namarida Mose mara memegle e naose gair mara omaskir Israil le.
You sent Moses your servant to lead the people of Israel from Egypt.

Eddie Mabo may have been the only Torres Strait Islander to be configured explicitly as Moses, but the exodus typology stretches back more than a century into stories of Aboriginal struggle, as we shall see.
An Exodus to Coranderrk?

Australian historians have identified a number of examples of how biblical themes played a role in the long struggle for Aboriginal land rights. Bain Attwood, for example, has claimed that the exodus theme was adopted in a commemorative celebration at Coranderrk Mission of a walk that was undertaken in 1860 by Wurundjeri and Taungurong people. Located at the junction of the Yarra River and Badger Creek, east of Melbourne, the Mission was established in March of 1863, so the journey undertaken in 1860 was something of a prologue, and susceptible to multiple interpretations. The primary sources interpreting this walk to Coranderrk are slightly more ambiguous than sometimes suggested, and in this context I want to focus on the evidence provided by a particular photograph taken by Charles Walter that has been analyzed by several authors.

Walter took a number of photographs at Coranderrk in 1865-1866, which were consumed locally and internationally, usually framed by the discourse of civilisation. The Coranderrk Mission was also the source of political protests against government authorities, especially in the 1870s and 1880s, so it cannot be said that this civilising project had the effect of stifling dissent. On the contrary, even the Presbyterian manager of the settlement, Rev. John Green, clearly supported these protests. Historical accounts have been biased towards literary records, and visual records are often dismissed as exploitative, but Jane Lydon has highlighted some evidence in one of Walter’s photographs that points to a measure of agency on the part of Aboriginal people in helping to shape the content of these images.

‘The Yarra Tribe Starting for the Acheron’ is clearly staged, since it was taken a few years after the events, but the movement it depicts is unusual in comparison with portraits at the time. Lydon feels confident that the tableau reflects the participation of Aboriginal subjects. The figures are lined up, stepping out
together on their historic journey, each man holding a gun over his shoulder. The first in line is apparently Simon Wonga, the Wurundjeri leader, while Rev. John Green is third in line, bearing a staff instead of a gun. Lydon interprets the tableau as an allusion to the biblical exodus in part because contemporary reports speak of the Aboriginal aspirations for land being articulated typologically as ‘wending their way to Goshen’. Lydon acknowledges that the particular reference to Goshen that she cites comes from a government official, William Thomas, who had first received petitions for land from Taungurung people in 1859, some four years before Coranderrk was established. It remains unclear, then, how the invocation of Goshen might in some sense be traced to Aboriginal self-understandings. But if this biblical allusion lies entirely in the imagination of a colonial administrator, then it reflects a poignant irony.

Jane Lydon embeds the allusion to Goshen into a wider exodus narrative, as does Bain Attwood, implying that Coranderrk might itself be seen as a kind of Promised Land given providentially by God. But in the biblical narrative, Goshen is nowhere near the Promised Land. According to the book of Genesis, this was a parcel of land separately allocated to Joseph’s family in Egypt on the grounds that ‘all shepherds are abhorrent to the Egyptians’ (Genesis 46:34). Instead of concluding that this is almost equivalent to a promised land, we may linger a little longer with the multiple ambiguities at work in this reception of a biblical motif. In an age of biblical literacy, it could hardly go unnoticed that Goshen was a gift of land within the sphere of Egyptian sovereignty, and the separate status of this land was attributed in part to Egyptian prejudice. If, by analogy, this was William Thomas’ view of the Aboriginal predicament, then this could be considered a remarkably self-critical view of English colonial administration.

Lydon’s overall argument also suggests a significant challenge to postcolonial orthodoxy. Edward Said’s influential critique of exodus and conquest typologies certainly resonates in many settler
colonial contexts, but it breaks down as soon as the Bible is embraced by Indigenous peoples, as it often was in Australia and Aotearoa–New Zealand. ‘The figuring of Coranderrk as promised land’, suggests Lydon, ‘is an ironic inversion of this pattern, for the Aboriginal people by no means became the triumphant conquerors who took possession of Canaan’. Instead, Coranderrk Mission was established on Wurundjeri land, and it became a base for resistance to colonial administration. In short, it seems that the emancipatory possibilities of the exodus narrative were appropriated in this particular context in a way that flatly contradicted the presumptions of the doctrine of discovery.

An Exodus to Namibia

A second example in the nineteenth century comes from the Witbooi Nama people in South-West Africa, who employed the exodus trope in mobilising resistance to the German colonial administration that arrived in Namibia in 1884. The Witbooi had already moved from South Africa to Namibia, settling in 1863 in an area that took the biblical name of Gibeon, and it seems that this early settlement had already been understood in the 1860s as part of an ongoing exodus journey. But it is one of the leaders from later decades, Hendrik Witbooi, who was to become an icon of anti-colonial struggle.

In a similar way to the Aboriginal Christianity found at Coranderrk, Hendrik Witbooi was schooled by a German missionary, yet he was able to form an exodus-shaped resistance against German colonial rule. The Nama, however, were at times engaged in violent conflict not just with the German administration, but also with the Herero people of Namibia. Hendrik Witbooi urged his people in the 1880s to trek further north, beyond the territory occupied by the Herero. He settled for a time in the mountain area of Hoornkrantz, resisting German
offers of a *Schutzvertrag* (‘Protection Treaty’) until he was eventually convinced to sign one in 1894. But ten years later he initiated an uprising against the Germans, declaring that God had heard the cry of the Witbooi Nama, and called on them to break the treaty. He died in a battle with German troops in October 1905.

Tilman Dedering has suggested that Hendrik Witbooi can be seen as an Indigenous Christian prophet, whose political leadership laid claim to divine inspiration. However, Dedering has also questioned whether this religious rhetoric could be better understood as a kind of mimicry of colonial discourse, which ultimately served an instinct for survival. Others have suggested that the very notion of mimicry, at least as it has been understood in postcolonial theory, implies that there is no sharp distinction between religious conversion and mimicry, especially when the lived experience of cultural hybridity can combine elements of pre-colonial traditions with appropriations of biblical narrative. In this example from Namibia, an appropriation of the exodus tradition did not lead to collaboration among Indigenous groups, as was the case at Coranderrk around the same time. It seems that a decade-long conflict with the Herero people formed part of the Witbooi Nama’s motivation for moving further north in search of a more peaceful area to settle. In spite of the evidence of intra-Indigenous struggle, Hendrik Witbooi is now remembered as a hero of Namibian national liberation.

### Varieties of Exodus Nationalism

Bearing in mind these two nineteenth-century receptions of biblical narrative, we can now turn to a broader discussion of the connections between exodus motifs and aspirations for political sovereignty. In his recent work, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, Willie James Jennings has traced in painful detail the chapters of Christian colonial history within which the
ideology of whiteness was translated into a ‘New Israel’ typology. On the other hand, Jennings also acknowledges that there are many historic examples where translation of biblical literature has informed an anti-colonial struggle, yet he suggests that this resistance tends to have a similar outcome: ‘If the practice of translation disrupted colonist hegemony, it did so by making room for something else, cultural nationalism’.17 Even in the case of Indigenous Christian resistance to colonialism, Jennings suggests, cultural nationalism carries ‘racial, social, political, and economic signatures’ that resonate with the ideologies of nation states.18 This theological critique correlates, in some respects, with Edward Said’s response to Walzer. In their different ways, both Jennings and Said have insisted that every liberating exodus story is implicitly twinned with national aspirations. This has been a characteristic conclusion in postcolonial biblical studies, which have often been critical of liberation theology from the 1980s for the unqualified embrace of the exodus motif.19

In sharp contrast with postcolonial trends, the Zionist political philosopher Yoram Hazony has recently insisted that the modern permutations of nationalism were born mainly in Protestant stables, notably when the Treaty of Westphalia supported the idea of separate jurisdictions for the various denominations of Christianity. Hazony applauds the way that Westphalian politics undermined Catholic imperialism. More precisely, he celebrates the achievements of Protestantism in the making of seventeenth-century nationalism, while casting doubt on the subsequent developments in liberal social contracts.20 In effect, Hazony affirms precisely the exodus and New Israel typologies of Protestantism that Jennings and Said have decried.

Postcolonial critics have provided some significant critiques of nationalism in its various guises, beyond the well-known critiques of Zionism. Numerous studies have interrogated not just the duplicitous claims of settler sovereignty but also the post-independence native polities that have invented their own practices of exclusion, often manipulating anti-colonial sentiment
in the assertion of their own authority. Postcolonial literature in recent years has tended to present the kind of utopian hope that strives to overcome the limitations of states and borders, and even the limitations of identity itself. The characteristic features of this literature have been illuminated by Bill Ashcroft, for example, in dialogue with Amitav Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Edward Said, Paul Gilroy, Gloria Anzaldúa, among others.21

If I may risk a summary of Ashcroft’s work in this area, he has identified a significant trajectory of postcolonial utopian thought that might be characterised broadly as cosmopolitan, envisaging a borderless conviviality towards friends and enemies alike, proposing a constantly mutable identity that retains no loyalty to a particular country beyond the transitory accident of residence. Ironically, this trajectory of utopian hope conflicts with the Indigenous ethos that affirms connections with traditional country. In Australia, the burning aspirations for treaties with the First Nations point almost inevitably to Indigenous notions of sovereignty. Before considering some contemporary articulations of Indigenous sovereignty any further, I want to take a moment to reexamine the biblical literature itself and to consider the question whether the exodus motif necessarily gives rise to a national imagination.

If we are to look for the earliest chapters in the reception history of the exodus, then we must begin by noticing the differences between quite different streams of tradition within the biblical literature. The exodus is twinned with conquest narratives mainly in the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua, which biblical scholars identify as ‘Deuteronomistic’ tradition. On the other hand, the exodus story functions quite differently in the ‘Priestly’ literature within Genesis, Exodus and Leviticus—an alternative literary movement that most likely took shape after the demise of Israel’s own political sovereignty. In the context of Babylonian and Persian imperial rule over Israel’s traditional territory, the Priestly traditions went as far as to envisage the possibility that citizens and strangers would be subject to the same law (Exodus
12:49 and Leviticus 24:22)—something that is never suggested in Deuteronomistic tradition. This is just one indication that the Priestly and Deuteronomistic literature configure the exodus differently, and only the latter belongs to a recognisably national imaginary.

The national imaginary certainly remembers the exodus as a story of oppression and liberation. Its political logic yields numerous provisions for the protection of strangers, e.g., in Deuteronomy 27:19: ‘Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice’. The social justice of Deuteronomy pays attention to people betrayed by the tides of history, and in this sense, the ideal nation is shaped not just by the ‘Big God’ metanarrative, to borrow Arundhati Roy’s terminology, but also by ‘Small God’ stories of the dispossessed. The marginalised are named ‘strangers, widows and orphans,’ and the wellbeing of Israel depends on how these people are treated. Nevertheless, the strangers must respect the nation’s uniformity of religion, on this view, and they must assimilate to the overarching requirements of Israel’s law. There is no room for a multiplicity of sovereignties.

On the other hand, the appropriation of the exodus within the Priestly imaginary does not presume the uniformity of religion and politics. This tradition begins already in the Priestly creation narrative of Genesis 1, where the national name of the divinity is scrupulously avoided: the name of the Creator is Elohim, not Yhwh. This crucial difference has often been overlooked, but it is connected with the conviction expressed in Exodus 6:3 that the national ancestors were not Yahwists: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob did not even know the national name of the divinity. Instead, according to Genesis 17, Abraham and Sarah give birth to a multiplicity of nations, only one of which led to the national tradition of Yahwism. This ‘inclusive’ version of monotheism, which allows for a multiplicity of divine names for the Creator, does not yield a conquest narrative.
Beyond even the Priestly imagination, Israel’s wisdom traditions contemplated theological experiments that were unconstrained by the particularity of Israel’s law and covenant. In the book of Job, for example, the protagonist plays deconstructively on the Hebrew word ‘torah’ (the traditional term for ‘law’ or ‘instruction’) in order to insist that the earth has its own form of torah: ‘Speak to the earth, and she will instruct you’ (Job 12:8). Creation becomes here a source of revelation, and one could think of various analogies with Indigenous spirituality.25

In the present context, I want to respond briefly to Willie James Jennings’ suggestion that Aboriginal Christianity often leans towards Indigenous nationalism. It seems to me that there are many different kinds of cultural self-assertion. A people group does not need the machinery of a nation state to support its collective identity. Aboriginal communities in Australia embrace this political complexity, living both inside and outside their traditional country, and they are far from being nation states.26 Their advocacy of self-determination is often linked to demands for acknowledgement from the wider population and from the various agencies of government. Precisely in the cases where subaltern polities are under threat from a national ideology, some supporting legal structures would seem essential to their flourishing. Literary and legal imaginations intersect at this point.

Shortly after native title was first discovered in Australia, the Aboriginal lawyer Michael Dodson proposed a model of double citizenship—one belonging to the Commonwealth and one belonging to each Indigenous nation. Dodson did not envisage the secession of new Aboriginal nations (and nor did the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples).27 He drew attention to layers of sovereignty embedded in federal constitutions that devolve a number of sovereign powers to their constituent states, as long as these powers do not substantially conflict with a federal government’s jurisdiction. Just as constituent states maintain certain sovereign powers under federal arrangements, so also Dodson proposed a layered approach to Indigenous sovereignty
and jurisdiction which, in effect, would require the acknowledgement of corporate Indigenous rights within the borders of a single nation state.

This idea of overlapping or shared sovereignties conflicts, of course, with the modern idea of the nation state as an undivided sovereignty, but it is doubtful whether such a monological politics will ever be able to embrace the complex social spaces of settler colonial states like Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand. Two state governments in Australia have begun consultations with Aboriginal people with a view to securing modern treaties over the areas that were first appropriated by separate colonial administrations. This is taking place as the government of New Zealand absorbs the recent finding of the Waitangi Tribunal that Māori did not, in fact, cede sovereignty to the British Crown in 1840. The implications for Christian Māori—those who still consider te Tiriti o Waitangi a sacred kawanata—are equally complex. Sovereignty is a multilayered political notion, and this complexity is foreshadowed already in the competing biblical visions of Israel’s exodus.

Conclusion

The ideal of religious uniformity that is shared between early Protestantism and modern Zionism is founded on a particular conception of nationalism, flowing from the religious assumptions of Deuteronomy. This was not, however, the only way to read the exodus tradition—neither in the Hebrew Bible itself, nor in colonial history. The prophet Amos went startlingly further by insisting that the Philistines had their own exodus, even though they lived in the dangerous proximity of Gaza (Amos 9:7). ‘Every identity therefore is a construction,’ Edward Said once declared, ‘a composite of different histories, migrations, conquests, liberations, and so on. We can deal with these either as
worlds at war, or as experiences to be reconciled’. Clearly, the idea of nationhood needs to be thoroughly re-examined in settler colonial contexts, and an exodus imagination would begin with a focus on the ‘Small God’ traditions of those who have been betrayed by the tides of history. The Priestly theologians might have put that point around the other way around: the Big God of the national imaginary is too small.

Notes


3 Graeme Davison, Narrating the Nation in Australia (London: Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, King’s College, University of London, 2010).


8 See Ian D. Clark and Fred Cahir, ‘John Green, Manager of Coranderrk Aboriginal Station, but also a Ngamadjidj?’, in Colonial Contexts and Postcolonial Theologies: Storyweaving in the Asia-Pacific, ed. by Mark G. Brett and Jione Havea (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 129-44.


12 Cf. also Wiremu Tamihana’s invocation of Deuteronomy 17:15 in his argument for Māori kingship in the 1860s, notably in his ‘Reply to the Declaration Addressed by the Governor to the Natives Assembled at Ngaruawhā’, Great Britain Parliamentary Papers, 1862 [3040], p. 73; Richard S. Hill and Vincent O’Malley, The Māori Quest
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15 Tilman Deder ing, ‘Hendrik Witbooi, the Prophet’, *Kleio* 25 (1993), pp. 54-78.


19 See, e.g., Louis Rivera-Pagán, ‘Reading the Hebrew Bible in Solidarity with the Palestinian People’, *The Ecumenical Review* 68 (2016), pp. 36-61.


22 For a detailed discussion of this point, see Mark G. Brett, *Political Trauma and Healing: Biblical Ethics for a Postcolonial World* (Grand


27 Michael Dodson, ‘Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People and Citizenship’, address delivered at the Complex Notions of Civic Identity Conference, University of New South Wales, 20 August 1993.


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