EXODUS AS MEMORY AND AS HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

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EXODUS CONVERSATIONS:
HOW THE STORY OF THE EXODUS SPEAKS TO JEWS, CHRISTIANS, AND MUSLIMS
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This curriculum includes three questions for conversation with responses by three scholars who are participants in Exodus Conversations, David Arnow, Mary C. Boys, and Muhammad Shafiq, and Chloe Breyer, a guest scholar. To accompany this conversation, we have also included four texts from each of our traditions. The last component of the curriculum presents a comparison and discussion of two images of the of the Great Seal of the United States, both conceived at different times in the American Revolution, and both involving imagery associated with Egypt and the Exodus. *Exodus Conversations* was conceived and coordinated by Ruth Abram and is supported by the Luce Foundation. Our scholars include:

> David Arnow, Ph.D., a scholar of the Passover Haggadah and co-editor of *My People's Passover Haggadah* and author of many articles on the subject.
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> Sister Mary C. Boys, Skinner and McAlpin Professor of Practical Theology at Union Theological Seminary, and author most recently of *Redeeming Our Sacred Story: The Death of Jesus and Relations between Jews and Christians*.
>
> Reverend Chloe Breyer, Executive Director of the Interfaith Center of New York and author most recently of *Challenging the Christian Right From the Heart of the Gospel*.
>
> Imam Muhammad Shafiq, Professor of Islamic and Religious Studies at Nazareth College in Rochester, New York as well as the Executive Director of the Hickey Center for Interfaith Studies and Dialogue at Nazareth College and author of *Interfaith Dialogue: A Guide for Muslims*.

David and Muhammad responded to all three questions while Mary responded to the first and Chloe to the second and third questions.

I. QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATION

- How does the Exodus contribute to your religious community's sense of collective memory and identity?
- What lessons do you draw from the Exodus story about hope?
- What tensions do you experience between the Exodus as both a story about victimization and suffering on the one hand and hope and redemption on the other?

II. OUR SCHOLARS RESPOND

- How does the Exodus contribute to your religious community's sense of collective memory and identity?

A Jewish Voice, David Arnow

To say that Passover is an important Jewish festival is true, but hardly does justice to the salience of the Exodus in Jewish consciousness. It would be more correct to say that the Jewish People trace their very birth as a nation to the Exodus narrative and that the saga constitutes the archetype that binds together two of Judaism's most fundamental themes — exile and redemption. As the Bible recounts, Jacob's family, the children of Israel, go down from Canaan to Egypt in search of food during a famine. Eventually they become enslaved and through it all, emerge as a nation. Here's how the Book of Deuteronomy puts it in a passage that is central to the Passover Haggadah, the liturgy for the night of Passover. "My father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation" (Deuteronomy 26:5). Amidst their suffering the Israelites lose all hope for a better life. But God hears their wordless cry of pain, and remembers the divine promise to free the Israelites from oppression in Egypt and return them to the Promised Land. From slavery to redemption, from exile to Israel — this constitutes what Jews have traditionally believed to be God's design of Jewish history. Just as God eventually redeemed the Israelites from Egypt, God's redeeming hand would intervene once again on behalf of suffering Jewish communities wherever they lived. That hope helped sustain Jews through the dark times of exile and persecution.

The key to preserving that hope lay in following Deuteronomy's injunction to "remember the day of your departure from the land of Egypt all the days of your life" (16:3). And over the millennia, Jews have remembered. Phylacteries, worn during daily morning prayers, contain the thirteenth chapter of the book of Exodus (along with three other passages) which includes a commandment to remember the Exodus with a summary of the story. Along with other references to the Exodus, the morning prayers feature the Song at the Sea (Exodus 15:1-18), the song that Moses and the Israelites sang after safely passing through the Red Sea and witnessing their Egyptian pursuers perish in the waves. The third paragraph of the *Sh'ma* (Numbers 15:37-41), recited every morning and evening, also refers to the Exodus. The sanctification of the Sabbath and of all festivals speaks of these holy times as "a

remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt." And when day is done, and it's time for the Night Prayer, many traditions include this passage:

[And Moses said,] "If you will heed the Lord your God diligently, doing what is upright in His sight, giving ear to His commandments and keeping all His laws, then I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians, for I the Lord am your healer." —Exodus 15:26

As the story of the Exodus permeates the religious life of Jews, it has also inspired Jews to take action on the stage of world politics. In 1946, David Ben-Gurion, who would become Israel's first prime minister when the state was created in 1948, testified before an international commission charged with making recommendations about the future of Palestine. The war and the Holocaust had just come to an end and Jewish hopes lay in statehood. Ben-Gurion rooted those hopes in the ancient story of Passover.

[M]ore than 3,300 years ago the Jews left Egypt. It was more than 3,000 years before the Mayflower, and every Jew in the world knows exactly the date when we left. It was on the 15th of Nisan [the beginning of Passover]. The bread they ate was matzot [unleavened bread]. Up till today all the Jews throughout the world . . . on the 15th of Nisan eat the same matzot, and tell the story of the exile to Egypt; they tell what happened, all the sufferings that happened to the Jews since they went into exile. They begin [the Passover Haggadah] with these two sentences: "This year we are slaves; next year we shall be free. This year we are here; next year we shall be in the Land of Israel." Jews are like that.[1]

A Christian Voice, Mary C. Boys

Was the Last Supper a Seder? Like many questions about events and practices in antiquity, insufficient evidence precludes a definitive answer. The Seder itself has evolved over the centuries; how Jesus and his disciples might have celebrated Passover before the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. would in any case differ from the Seder as specified by the rabbis in later Jewish texts, such as the Mishnah and Talmud. Regardless, the early followers of Jesus drew upon the imagery of Passover in varied ways as they sought to understand his life, death and resurrection. In one of his early letters, Paul speaks of Jesus as "our paschal lamb, Christ, [who] has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:7). The Gospel of John refers to Jesus as the "lamb of God" (1:29, 26) and the writer of the Book of Revelation makes abundant use of the metaphor, referring to Jesus as the lamb some 28 times. New Testament writers saw in the Passover a way of interpreting Jesus' passage from death to life: "The drama of Jesus' passion week is painted on the canvas of Passover, its memories of a past deliverance and its hopes for a future one."[2] All four canonical gospels situate the death of Jesus during the festival of Passover when large numbers of pilgrims would have temporarily enlarged the population of Jerusalem and made Roman officials wary of potential rebellions by their

[1] *The Jewish Case Before the Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry on Palestine: Statement and Memoranda Jerusalem:* (The Jewish Agency for Israel), 1947, p. 65.
[2] Mark Lewis Taylor, "American Torture and the Body of Christ," in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today,*" ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 274.

Jewish subjects. Historically, this chronology is virtually certain, and explains why the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate would have left his splendid Mediterranean palace in Caesarea to come to Jerusalem with his minions to oversee the unruly population. It is he who ordered that Jesus be crucified. But while the gospels include historical material, they are not in the first instance historical reportage. Rather, they are theological remembrances of Jesus and his "Reign of God Movement," written some forty to seventy years after the crucifixion. References and allusions to Passover carried heavy symbolic weight. Thus, the depiction of the Last Supper as a Passover meal in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke should be read more as a "ritualized metaphor" than as a straightforward fact.[3] John also works at this symbolic level when he situates the Last Supper at the more indeterminate "before the festival of Passover" (13:1) and places the death of Jesus, "the lamb of God," at the precise hour when the paschal lamb was sacrificed in the Temple on the Preparation Day for Passover.

Yet, despite these highly symbolic scenes in John, it may be that his chronology fits historical realities better. If the Last Supper was a Passover meal as depicted in the synoptic gospels (that is, in Matthew, Mark and Luke, who share common sources), then the subsequent events of the arrest, trial before the chief priests and elders of the people, trial before Pontius Pilate, flogging and death on the cross would have taken place on the Passover. This is not likely. More important, however, is the way in which the imagery of Passover enabled Jesus' disciples to make meaning of his death and to ritualize this in a meal in remembrance of him. Just as God had heard the groaning of the Israelite slaves in Egypt and remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (and Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel] Exodus 2:24), so God was delivering his people through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Historian Israel J. Yuval suggests that after the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70, two competing interpretations of the Passover developed. The rabbinic interpretation, evident in the Seder, adhered to the original meaning of the redemption from slavery to freedom; it pointed to a second deliverance still to come. The Christians told of a second redemption already at work in the crucifixion and resurrection. Both stories, Yuval observes, offered a liturgical alternative to the ancient sacrificial rite; they both addressed the question of how to celebrate a festival of redemption in an age of foreign domination and oppression. Both began with degradation and ended with praise, with hope for the future.[4] Today, however, these two interpretations of Passover no longer need compete, but rather exist in conversation

[3] The term "ritualized metaphor" is from Jonathan Brumberg-Kraus, "'Not by Bread Alone…': The Ritualization of Food and Table Talk in the Passover Seder and in the Last Supper," *Semeia* 86 (1999): 165. Brumberg-Kraus argues that the Last Supper was "most likely" a Passover seder. Other scholars think it unlikely; see, e.g., Baruch Bokser "Unleavened Bread and Passover, Feasts of," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, ed. David Noel Freedman et al., (New York: Doubleday, 1992): 755-765; and Anthony J. Saldarini, *Jesus and Passover* (Ramsey, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1984).

[4] Israel J. Yuval, "Easter and Passover as Early Christian-Jewish Dialogue," in *Passover and Easter: Origin and History to Modern Times*. Two Liturgical Traditions, vol. 5, eds. Paul F. Bradshaw and Lawrence A. Hoffman (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 98.

with each other and with Islam. For the children of Abraham, the movement from slavery to freedom, from death to life is a pilgrimage in every age and culture.

A Muslim Voice, Muhammad Shafiq

The Qur'an stands for social justice with equal rights and duties for all. The Qur'anic criterion for the rise and fall of nations is not who believe in God and who do not, but it is justice on earth, protection of human rights and peaceful coexistence. Corruption, oppression and violation of basic human rights pave the way for the downfall and destruction of the nations on earth. The story of Exodus represents the Pharaoh and his army as tyrants, oppressors and a cruel ruler who not only enslaved the Israelis but oppressed them and usurped their human rights. There are a number of such stories in the Qur'an that refer to the rise and fall of nations. Unlike the Bible, the Qur'anic stories are spread throughout the scripture, with the story of Joseph as an exception. The purpose of Qur'anic storytelling is to derive meaningful lessons and to warn society against any kind of social injustice. This is true about the story of Exodus, which is the most significant and spread across the entire Qur'an. In each place, the story points to advice to reform, social justice, respect for human rights and peaceful coexistence. At the same time, the Qur'an warns aggressors about dire consequences. Justice and arrogance oppose each other. Arrogance leads to excessive use of power, usurpation of human rights and persecution.

The Exodus story in the Qur'an portrays Pharaoh and his leaders as arrogant (*istakbaru*, 10:75) by claiming mighty power on earth and using it excessively against the Israelites (10:83). When they were told that a boy would be born among the Israelites and would kill the Pharaoh, they went to an extreme to kill all newborn males in Israelite families. The Exodus story in the Qur'an describes the Israelites as Mustad`afun (the weak, the low, in society) who lived in slavery in Egypt and were persecuted and deprived of their human rights. Pharaoh and his chiefs used all their powers to suppress and oppress them. The Israelites were believers. God had mercy upon them to liberate them. God sent Prophet Moses to free them from the Pharaoh's slavery. The Qur'an says that God asked Moses to go to Pharaoh because he had rebelled and transgressed all limits (20:24). God admonished Moses to speak softly and mildly to him (20:44). But Pharaoh would not listen to any advice and continued with his oppressive policies, even threatening to kill Moses. The Israelites went through a lot of hardship for many years. The Qur'an praises them for their patience at this dreadful time and for their peaceful resistance to the Pharaoh. Finally, God rewarded them with freedom and Pharaoh and his army was drowned in the sea. The Qur'an says: " But it was Our will to bestow Our favor upon those [very people] who were deemed [so] utterly low in the land, and to make them forerunners in faith and to make them heirs [to Pharaoh's glory]"(28:5). In another verse the Qur'an says: "whereas unto the people who [in the past] had been deemed utterly low, We gave as their heritage the eastern and western parts of the land that We had blessed. And [thus] thy Sustainer's good promise unto the children of Israel was fulfilled in result of their patience in adversity; whereas We utterly destroyed all that Pharaoh and his people had wrought, and all that they had built" (7:137). But the promise of

God to believers to sustain them in power is on the condition that they establish social justice on earth and stay away from arrogance and corruption. Whosoever violates God's law of social justice on earth, whether believers or non-believers, would not stay in power for long and would be replaced. The Qur'an says: "This, because God would never change the blessings with which He has graced a people unless they change their inner selves: and [know] that God is all-hearing, all-seeing" (8:53). The downfall comes when there is little hope left to reform. The Qur'an says: "For, never would thy Sustainer destroy a community for wrong [beliefs alone] so long as its people behave righteously [towards one another]" (11:117).

The Qur'an invites people to look into the history of nations to see what happened when they opted for arrogance and oppression over justice: "Have they never journeyed about the earth and beheld what happened in the end to those [deniers of the truth] who lived before their time and were [so much] greater than they in power? And [do they not see that the will of] God can never be foiled by anything whatever in the heavens or on earth, since, verily, He is all-knowing, infinite in His power?"(35:44).

- What lessons do you draw from the Exodus story about hope?

A Jewish Voice, David Arnow

I'd like to focus on three lessons the story of the Exodus teaches about hope. The first is that even a deeply entrenched status quo can change for the better. With no way out in sight, the Israelites had been enslaved for centuries. Who could blame them for completely losing hope? Even God remained seemingly absent. But the story was not over. Something new happened. The people cried out for help which set in motion a series of events that ultimately opened the gates of freedom. That cry for help embodies hope, however faint, which refuses to accept even the most dreadful reality as the last word. Instead of immutable darkness, hope sees a tunnel with a light at the end, and a way from here to there, shadowy though it may be. As Shafiq notes, stories like the Exodus also remind us that when we feel most alone, God remains with us. Alas, our sense of God's presence is not always as palpable as we would wish.

The second lesson involves the decisive contribution of human action in transforming hope into reality. Because God plays such an active role in bringing about the Exodus—sending Moses to lead the Israelites to freedom, beating Pharaoh into submission through an ever escalating series of plagues and parting the Red Sea— it is tempting to draw the following moral from the saga: When facing dire straits we should place our hope in God and wait passively for God to save us. A closer look at the story leads to the opposite conclusion, one that stresses the importance of human agency in bringing hope to fruition. In the beginning of the story, the actions of five courageous women set the stage for Moses' eventual rise to leadership. Two midwives defy Pharaoh's orders to kill all Hebrew newborn males and Moses' mother and sister hatch a plan to save the infant who will lead the Israelites from Egypt. They float the baby along the shore of the Nile to the very spot where Pharaoh's daughter bathes. And in flagrant disobedience of her own father's edict, Pharaoh's nameless

daughter rescues Moses and raises him as her son in the king's palace. These women know that their hope for a future in which babies are not murdered to assuage a despot's fear of losing power depends on their willingness to stand against evil. Yes, God may have had great hopes for Moses, but without the willingness of these women to risk saving the infant, those hopes would have been stillborn. We fulfill God's hopes for the world when we act in godly ways.

A close reading of what transpires prior to the parting of the sea reinforces the point.

> As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites caught sight of the Egyptians advancing upon them. Greatly frightened, the Israelites cried out to the Lord. And they said to Moses, "Was it for want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt? Then the Lord said to Moses, "Why do you cry out to Me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. And you, lift up your rod and hold out your arm over the sea and split it, so that the Israelites may march into the sea on dry ground."
>
> —Exodus 14:10-11; 15

Again, God stands ready to help, but only after Moses takes the first step. Moses' staff—given to him by God at the burning bush—embodies the God given gifts we each possess to help redeem the world. The hope is that like Moses, we too, will overcome the hesitation to use those gifts.

The third lesson about hope considers the Exodus in very personal terms. Hassidic teachers remind us that the Hebrew word for Egypt, *Mitzrayim*, shares the same root as the word for 'straits,' or 'narrow places,' *maytzarim*. To one extent or another we are all stuck in our own narrow places and remain fearful of moving beyond situations that are familiar, even if they are very painful. We are all enslaved to an array of destructive perceptions of ourselves and others, to unhealthy habits and desires. There's a Pharaoh within each of us who refuses to let us move forward, to free ourselves from the patterns of behavior that oppress us and those around us. So engrained have these patterns become that we can scarcely imagine giving them up. But there's also a Moses within us who knows that life can be better. We can attribute the blame for our difficulties to others—parents and difficult circumstances are favorites—but we each have a choice about whether we give greater heed to that inner Pharaoh or Moses. The story of the Exodus reminds us that growth is always possible and that if we have sufficient hope to try, we *can* take that first small step out of our personal narrows toward healthy change.

A Christian Voice, Chloe Breyer

At St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Harlem, African American members of the congregation join with Jewish neighbors to celebrate a "Liberation Seder" each year at Passover. Downstairs in the church basement, congregants and guests together retell the story of God's releasing the Israelites from Pharaoh's oppressive grip. Together, they sing the lyrics of African American Spirituals that strike a similar theme. "Wade in the Water" and "Go Down

Moses" are just two of the hymns written by Christian slaves who appropriated the Exodus story as their own account of God's work in their life together.

When Israel was in Egypt's land,
Let my people go;
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Let my people go.
Go down, (go down) Moses, (Moses)
Way down in Egypt's land;
Tell old Pharaoh
To let my people go!
No more shall they in bondage toil,
Let My people go!
Let them come out with Egypt's spoil,
Let My people go!
Oh, let us all from bondage flee,
Let My people go!
And let us all in Christ be free,
Let My people go!

As an American Christian, the Exodus story has come to life through the experience of African American Slaves in the United States [and of many people in the developing world struggling against colonial rule and legacy.] Liberation theologians have identified the story of God leading Moses and the Israelites out of Egypt with the stories of African American men and women making the long journey from slavery to freedom. As an American Christian, the Exodus story—handed to me by way of liberation theology—gives me hope as it shows God's continued involvement not just in my individual life but in the life of my country and community. This is a reason for hope.

What is liberation theology? In the 1950s and 60s, Latin American Catholic theologians like Gustavo Gutierrez and Leonard Boff were writing that God stood in solidarity with the poor and that God wanted freedom and flourishing for God's people in the present, not in the afterlife. At the same time in the United States, James Cone, the author of a *Black Theology of Liberation* based his theology primarily on God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt in the Exodus. He compared the United States to Egypt, predicting that the oppressed people, whom Yahweh was concerned for, would be led to a promised land. The oppressed people of the 20th Century were blacks. They were the poor and unwanted of society.

If God sides with the poor and outcast in our time as God sided with the Israelites to lead them out of bondage in biblical times, then how is this good news for *everyone* and not simply those who are freed? How is it that Tutu's suggestion about Cone's book *Black Theology* "it is good to be reminded that a biblical or divine concern is for liberation, the

setting free of God's children . . . so that they can become more fully human"[5] is good news for the whole world and not simply the poor?

Returning to the example of the interfaith Seder at St. Mary's church, the power of the gathering around the Exodus story was its diversity. African American Christians whose experience is too often ignored by White Christianity, along with Jewish Americans whose experience of anti-Semitism initiated by the church is too often the dominant one. Blacks and Jews pitted against one another in recent New York history shared a meal and a common story together in the undercroft of an off-the-beaten-track church. That we all might be able to share the Exodus story whether or not all our histories include a direct experience of slavery is the essence of what gives me hope for this story.

For Christians, the Exodus story is a reminder to stand in solidarity with those among us who are not free—those who are imprisoned, those who live in circumstances of oppression, and those who are suffering and marginalized. Liberation theology that has at its heart the Exodus story, shows us that God sides with the poor and oppressed and that as people of faith we are called to do the same.

A Muslim Voice, Muhammad Shafiq

I agree with David's observations about hope. Similar conclusions can be derived from the Qur'an's narration of the story. The Qur'an emphasizes that God is Sovereign of the sovereigns and has power over everything. This inspires believers to look towards Him with hope throughout their lives. The belief that He gives power to those He wishes and disgraces those He wishes (3:26) leads the believers to pray constantly to Him for His favor. Similarly, the Qur'an's teaching (50:16) that God is very close to people, even closer to them than their jugular vein *('hablil warid'*) gives believers hope in times of crisis and prevents them from falling into despair. God is always there to help and give them a better life. The Qur'an warns believers: "We have given thee the glad tiding of something that is bound to come true. So be not of those who abandon hope" (15:55).

It is greed and misdeeds that get people into trouble, and bring on difficult times and suffering. God does not want to see people to suffer, but their deeds bring suffering and calamities upon them. The Qur'an makes it clear: "Mischief has appeared on land and sea because of [the deed] that the hands of men have earned, that [Allah] may give them a taste of some of their deeds: in order that they may turn back [from Evil]" (30:41). Another verse states: "Whatever misfortune happens to you, is because on the things your hands have wrought, and for many [of them] He grants forgiveness" (42:30). But God is very forgiving and asks people to stay hopeful for better days. God speaks of His mercy in these words: "O my servants who have transgressed against their souls! Despair not of the Mercy of Allah. For Allah forgives all sins. For He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful" (39:53).

[5] James H. Cone, "Black Theology—A Documentary History, Volume One: 1966-79" in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, Vol. 46, March 1984, p. 61.

A central principle taught by the Qur'an is that rise and fall of nations and communities is connected to whether they practice social justice or oppression. The Pharaohs became oppressive and arrogant. The Qur'an says: "To Pharaoh and his Chiefs: But these behaved insolently: they were an arrogant people" (23:46). In another verse it says: "Truly Pharaoh exalted himself in the land and broke up its people into sections, depressing a small group among them: their sons he slew, but he kept alive their females: for he was indeed a maker of mischief" (28:4). God sends messengers to remind oppressors and wrongdoers to mend their ways. Moses was sent to Pharaoh to remind the Egyptians of their cruelty and to ask them to free the Israelites. The Qur'an says: "Then after them We sent Moses and Aaron to Pharaoh and his chiefs with Our Signs. But they [the Egyptians] were arrogant: they were a people in sin" (10:57). God instructed Moses to speak politely to Pharaoh. "But speak to him mildly; perchance he may take warning or fear [Allah]" (20:44). Pharaoh refused to hear any advice and God punished him and the leaders of his country by drowning them in the sea. Reminding Moses about Pharaoh's punishment, the Qur'an says: "And remember We divided the sea for you and saved you and drowned Pharaoh's people within your very sight" (2:50).

The Exodus reminds us that sometimes innocent believers and pious people suffer as well as those who carry out evil deeds. The innocent suffer to make them stronger, to test their belief or even to place them in a higher place and closer to God. The Qur'an says: "[But] do you think that you could enter paradise without having suffered like those [believers] who passed away before you? Misfortune and hardship befell them, and so shaken were they that the apostle, and the believers with him, would exclaim, "When will God's succor come?" Oh, verily, God's succor is [always] near!" (2:214). The Israelites suffered on account of Pharaoh and God blessed them with freedom and power.

Other narratives in the Qur'an teach a similar lesson. Take the story of Abraham who went through a lot of suffering in his home town of Ur, in modern Iraq. Not unlike stories found in Jewish midrashic sources, the Qur'an recounts how people from Abraham's community tried to burn him alive. The Qur'an says: "They exclaimed: 'Burn him, and [thereby] succor your gods, if you are going to do [anything].' [But] We said: 'O fire! Be thou cool, and [a source of] inner peace for Abraham!'" (21:68, 69). Abraham remained strong, facing all hardships faithfully as he retained hope for God's mercy. God asked him to leave his homeland and promised that he would be blessed with progeny and many followers.

The same is true about Muhammad. He and his followers were persecuted by the people of Mecca. Muhammad did not give up hope and waited for God's guidance. He and his followers were asked to migrate to Medina where God blessed him with many followers and in his lifetime Islam spread throughout the Middle East. The Qur'an reminds Muhammad: "And remember the time when you were few [and] helpless on earth, fearful lest people do away with you— whereupon He sheltered you, and strengthened you with His succor, and provided for you sustenance out of the good things of life, so that you might have cause to be grateful" (8:26).

Muslims are taught to trust God through all of life's circumstances and not to lose hope. Hard times lead to better days. The Qur'an reminds Muslims: "And, behold, with every

hardship comes ease" (94:5). The Exodus and other stories of suffering remind Muslims to bring about better days by asking God's forgiveness for their short comings and committing themselves to the work of social justice.

- What tensions do you experience between the Exodus as both a story about victimization and suffering on the one hand and hope and redemption on the other?

A Jewish Voice, David Arnow

The fact that Exodus weaves together themes of victimization, suffering, hope and redemption—all on an epic scale—endows the story with an inescapable power. For that reason alone, it has not only helped to shape the Holy Scripture of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but has inspired struggles for liberation over the centuries. The saga of the autocrat who oppresses a helpless minority and whose stubbornness brings about his own downfall and the ruin of his country rings true because it has recurred countless times through history. As a story to nurture hope in the hearts of those struggling for freedom against long odds and powerful foes, the Exodus can't be beat. No wonder in July, 1776, when the American Revolutionary War was in its early days and the colonists' chances of victory seemed slight, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and John Adams recommended an image for the Great Seal of the United States depicting the Israelites fleeing Egypt and Pharaoh's army drowning in the Red Sea. A banner of hope for the downtrodden if every there were one!

Beneath this however, the tensions that emerge between the Exodus as a tale of past suffering and of future hope are palpable. For those who have suffered, what is the legacy of that experience? It may incline one to empathy or to retribution. But which will prove dominant? When empathy holds sway, it provides a foundation for building a just society that shuns oppression. When the urge for retribution triumphs, it perpetuates a cycle of violence that likely leads to further oppression—and so the cycle of conflict endures.

I've long been haunted by an observation of Frantz Fanon, the French psychiatrist, about the impact of France's occupation of Algeria on the local population.

> The town belonging to the colonized people . . . is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire. The colonized man is an envious man. And this the settler knows very well; when their glances meet, he ascertains bitterly, always on the defensive, "They want to take our place." It is true, for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler's place. He is in fact ready at a moment's notice to exchange the role of the quarry for that of the hunter. The native is an oppressed person whose permanent dream is to become the persecutor. . . .
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> —Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1961/1968), pp. 39, 53.

The Book of Proverbs seems to share Fanon's view about human nature: "The earth

shudders… when a slave becomes king" (30:21-22). As Shafiq notes, the Qur'an also expressed concern about the human tendency to forget what it felt like when we were helpless once we have achieved a measure of power.

Perhaps this understanding also underlies the repeated biblical exhortations to show empathy to the stranger and the link between this commandment and the Israelites' memory of their enslavement in Egypt. This commandment recurs some three dozen times, making it the most frequently repeated injunction in the Five Books of Moses (the Torah). Here are two of examples.

> And you shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt.
> —Exodus 23:9

> When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I, the Lord, am your God.
> —Leviticus 19:33–34

The Torah implicitly understands that when an individual or a people has suffered, the memory of that experience will likely lead to vengeance unless strenuous efforts are made to inculcate the alternative of empathy. This illuminates the response of Hillel, a sage who lived at the very end of the first century BCE, to a heathen who wanted to learn the whole Torah while standing on one foot. Hillel, said, "What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Now go and learn it" (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a). Hillel does not cite the "Golden Rule" from Leviticus 19:17—"Love your neighbor as yourself." He pointedly focuses on the dark side of human emotion, on that which we have experienced as hateful, and urges us curb the reflex of inflicting that very wound on others.

Although extremely powerful, this is not the only Jewish voice on the question. Those inclined can certainly find sources within Judaism that model retribution. The festival of Purim falls just a month before Passover. Composed between 400 and 300 BCE, the Book of Esther recounts the victory over Haman, an advisor to the Persian king. Haman manipulated the king into sanctioning the extermination of the country's Jewish population. As the Book of Esther recounts, with the fall of Haman, Jews loosed an attack that killed more than seventy-five thousand of their Persian enemies. Alas, this tale's brutal dénouement evokes admiration among certain fringes of Jewish extremism.

The memory of the Israelites' triumph over slavery has inspired hope over the millennia. But questions remain. Will we ultimately use memories of suffering to promote empathy and to build just societies or to satisfy the urge for vengeance and domination? The hope for healing many of conflicts that plague our world lies in the commitment to enlarging the capacity to use memories of suffering as a source of empathy and raising up those voices in our traditions that urge us to do so.

A Christian Voice, Chloe Breyer

One tension in Exodus between victimization and suffering on the one hand and hope and redemption on the other, can be seen in Exodus 15:1-18, Moses victory song. God who has stood with the Israelites as Pharaoh has heaped injustices upon them—taking away even the straw for the bricks they are forced to make—now takes vengeance upon Pharaoh's army "horse and rider he has thrown into the sea." Moses victory song is not just that the Israelites are free from danger, but it appears that their pursuers, the hated army of Pharaoh, has with God's help been overturned and destroyed.

"I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea . . . Pharaoh's chariots and his army he cast into the sea: his picked officers were sunk in the Red Sea. The floods covered them they went down into the depths like a stone. Your right hand, O Lord glorious in power—your right hand O, God shattered the enemy" (Exod.us 15:1,4-7)

This passage brings up the problem of exclusivity. If God is biased towards the "suffering, the marginalized, and those with no one to speak up for them,"[6] then how does God not become a partisan advocate? How do we avoid the problem of exclusivity and "election"? Is a new group "chosen" to be closer to God than others?

Not only does this celebratory song emphasize what could be seen as the partisan nature of God in the Exodus story, but it also shows God's power operating with a vengeful purpose. As David notes, the song Moses and the Israelites sang after crossing the Red Sea has become part of the daily Jewish morning liturgy. The Song of Moses is a canticle also used by Christians for Morning Prayer in the Book of Common Prayer. Detached from the Exodus story it appears to be a song of praise to God like the Magnificat (Mary's song to God after discovering she will be the mother of Jesus) and other Psalms of Praise. In context, however, with the story of the struggle between Pharaoh and Moses and the escape from Egypt, other components of the reading comes through. Moses rejoices as he and the Israelites look back upon the destruction of their enemies—the Egyptians who are the non-elect of the story.

Bishop Desmond Tutu has insight into this tension. Tutu introduced the concept of shalom and the link between liberation and servanthood. Tutu wrote, "When [the oppressed] are so liberated [God] calls them to become his servants, and . . . to restore to his whole creation that shalom . . . which is the kingdom of God."[7] The Exodus then is not a story only of liberation from oppression it is a story of a people becoming free to participate fully in the co-creation of God's Kingdom.

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[6] Tutu commends Gustavo Gutierrez's commentary *On Job* saying, "Gutierrez demonstrates that you could approach the question of God's bias from a different biblical perspective and still arrive at the same destination—that God has an extraordinary penchant to side with the suffering, with the marginalized, with those who have no one else to speak up for them." Marc Ellis and Otto Mauro, editors, *The Future of Liberation Theology*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), p. 25.

[7] Ibid., p. 6.

A Muslim Voice, Muhammad Shafiq

Great nations are always built around a story of suffering. Hardships are not good, but people can emerge stronger from them. Life has its ups and downs, whether it is the life of a nation, a community, or an individual. What matters most is how we react to these changing circumstances and whether during times of trial we try to mend our ways. This great nation of ours, America, in which it is a blessing to live, experienced great sufferings before independence. The Declaration of Independence reminds us of that very clearly: "The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States"[8]. The Declaration then recounts the many miseries that American experienced. In the Bill of Rights, the Founding Fathers promised basic human rights. Of course, fully honoring those promises and extending them to every citizen, becomes the life's work of any true democracy.

Tyrants and oppressors do not live forever, though the Qur'an states that sometimes God gives them a trial during which they can stay in power. "Now if God were to take men [immediately] to task for all the evil that they do [on earth], He would not leave a single living creature upon its face. However, He grants them respite until a term set [by Him]: but when the end of their term approaches, they can neither delay it by a single moment, nor can they hasten it" (Qur'an, 16:61). It is God's way to send messengers to such people to remind them of their cruelty and show them the path of mercy before they are punished. God sent Moses to Pharaoh, but when the king repeatedly refused Moses' call, God's punishment came upon the king and his people.

Stories about the rise and fall nations teach us that the criterion for retaining power and prosperity is not faith, but social justice. Cruelty, oppression and injustice destroy a nation's power and stability. The Qur'an recounts stories of nations such as `Ad and Thamud, among others, that were destroyed one after another when then they became oppressors. "Have, then, the stories of those who preceded them never come within the ken of these [hypocrites and deniers of the truth]—[the stories] of Noah's people, and of [the tribes of]`Ad and Thamud, and of Abraham's people, and of the folk of Midian, and of the cities that were overthrown? To [all of] them their apostles had come with all evidence of the truth. [But they rejected them] and so it was not God who wronged them [by His punishment], but it was they who wronged themselves" (9:70). Elsewhere the Qur'an says: "For, He it is who has made you inherit the earth, and has raised some of you by degrees above others, so that He might try you by means of what He has bestowed upon you. Verily, thy Sustainer is swift in retribution: yet, behold, He is indeed much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace" (6:165). It is God who brings about the downfall of oppressors and the salvation of the oppressed.

[8] For reference to the American Declaration of Independence, see:
http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html or
http://www.ushistory.org/Declaration/document/

But as David notes, there's no guarantee that the oppressed won't become oppressors themselves. Indeed, God offers a warning about this to the people of Thamud, who inherited the earth after the destruction of `Ad: "And remember how He made you inheritors after the people of 'Ad and [He] gave you habitations in the land: you build for yourselves palaces and castles in [open] plains, and carve out homes in the mountains; so bring to remembrance the benefits [you have received] from Allah, and refrain from evil and mischief on the earth" (7:74). But destruction also came to the people of Thamud because they too grew tyrannical and oppressed the weak. More generally, the Qur'an cautions a people to remember its experience of helplessness as a means of instilling gratitude: "And remember the time when you were few [and] helpless on earth, fearful lest people do away with you—whereupon He sheltered you, and strengthened you with His succor, and provided for you sustenance out of the good things of life, so that you might have cause to be grateful" (8:26).

Suffering and oppression are hard to forget. But according to the Qur'an, the achievement of liberation and freedom should give rise to forgiveness and reconciliation, not revenge. The Qur'an tells of Joseph—the story is quite similar to the biblical narrative— whose brothers had almost killed him and threw him into a dark, deep well. The Qur'an says: "Another of them said: 'Do not slay Joseph, but, rather, if you must do something, cast him into the dark depths of this well, [whence] some caravan may pick him up'" (12:10). God saved him and eventually brought him to a position of great power in in Egypt. There was a severe famine and Joseph's brothers went to Egypt in search of food. They found their brother in charge of the treasury and the country's food reserves. When his brothers recognized Joseph at the helm of state, they were frightened that he would take revenge on them. Seeing this, Joseph addressed his brothers with these momentous words: "No reproach shall be uttered today against you. May God forgive you your sins: for He is the most merciful of the merciful!" (Qur'an, 12:92).

The Prophet Muhammad behaved similarly. He and his followers were oppressed and tortured at Mecca and were forced to migrate to Medina. When Muhammad took over Mecca after some eight years of exile, he forgave all the Meccans and said the same words to them that Joseph had used to forgive his brothers.[9]

It's hard to discuss this without thinking about the apartheid regime in South Africa: a white minority oppressed the black majority for many years. When Nelson Mandela came out of prison and the black majority got their political rights, rather than taking revenge Mandela and Bishop Tutu set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It was an alternative to revenge, an effort to heal the country's wounds and to create the potential for uniting blacks and whites.

When people of different ethnicities, religions or tribes live in proximity and one group has inflicted suffering upon the other, it is important not to excessively commemorate the painful events of the past. Doing so may reignite the fires of hatred. The pre-Islamic era of tribal

[9] Muhammad Husayn Haykal, *The Life of Muhammad*, translated into English by Isma`il R. al Faruqi, American Trust Publications, 1976, pp. 395-413.

feuds—which Islam later described as a period of *Jahiliyyah* (ignorance)—was the product of such commemorations which resulted in continuous tribal bloodshed. The same is true of tribal traditions that continue to nurture violence nowadays.

In post-9/11 America we have witnessed growing hate and in some cases violence against Muslims. As David wrote about the Exodus, the question is what role we want memory to play in connection with that terrible attack. Commemorations can be used to fuel Islamophobia or to build bridges of reconciliation. The latter is what we need. As hard as it is to put into practice, moving beyond hatred is a great virtue. Forgiveness is an attribute of God. God loves those who forgive and on the Day of Judgment God will forgive those who have forgiven others. The Qur'an says: "But let them pardon and forbear. [For,] do you not desire that God should forgive you your sins, seeing that God is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace" (24:22).

I agree with what David said about empathy with strangers and not treating them as aliens or violating their human rights. People are like birds traveling from one place to another in search of food and a better life or to escape bad weather, persecution or other harsh conditions. We are all strangers in one or another way in this world. Our forefathers were born in one region and today many of us live in a different part of the world. The same is true about America. Some may have come before others, but America is a nation of immigrants, of strangers. Therefore, it is God's way that we should treat one another as brothers and sisters sharing a common heritage of humanity in Adam and Eve.

III. Texts Related to the Theme of Exodus as Memory and as Hope for the Future

Four Jewish Texts

You shall not abhor an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in his land.
—Deuteronomy 23:8

[At the time when the Egyptians were drowning in the sea] the ministering angels wanted to sing a song of praise to the Holy One. The Holy One said to them, "My handiwork is drowning in the sea and you want to sing a song to Me?
—Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 39b, 6th century

In every generation, people must see themselves as though they personally had left Egypt.
—The Passover Haggadah, the liturgy for the night of Passover

The children of Jacob's wives, Rachel and Leah, degraded the children of Jacob's maidservants, Bilhah and Zilpah. God said, "How can I make them accept the maidservants' children? I will send them down to Egypt and they will *all* be slaves. When I redeem them I will give them the commandments of Passover to observe—to them, and their children, and their children's children. And they will all say *avadim hayinu*, 'we were slaves to Pharaoh,' [words from Deuteronomy 6:21repeated in the Haggadah] and they will discover that they are all equal."
—*Pesikta Chadatta*, a late medieval midrash, in A. Jellinek, Bet HaMidrasch, Jerusalem: Sifre Wahrmann, 1967, vol. 6, p. 38

Four Christian Texts

[68] "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.
[69] He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David
[70] (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),
[71] salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—
[72] to show mercy to our ancestors
and to remember his holy covenant,
[73] the oath he swore to our father Abraham:
[74] to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear
[75] in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

—Luke 1:68-75

… Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. [13] But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. [14] For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, [15] by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace…

—Ephesians 2:12-15

[32] Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. [33] Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. [34] You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. [35] So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. [36] You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.

—Hebrews 10:32-36

Your boasting is not good. You know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough, don't you? Get rid of the old yeast so that you may be a new batch of dough, since you are to be free from yeast. For the Messiah, our Passover, has been sacrificed.

— I Corinthians 5:6-7

Four Muslim Texts

And remember the time when you were few [and] helpless on earth, fearful lest people do away with you—whereupon He sheltered you, and strengthened you with His succor, and provided for you sustenance out of the good things of life, so that you might have cause to be grateful.

—Qur'an 8:26

Yet, [withal,] your Sustainer is the Truly-Forgiving One, limitless in His grace. Were He to take them [at once] to task for whatever [wrong] they commit, He would indeed bring about their speedy punishment [then and there]: but nay, they have a time-limit beyond which they shall find no redemption.

—Qur'an 18:58

[Thus speaks God:] "O you servants of Mine who have transgressed against your own selves! Despair not of God's mercy: behold, God forgives all sins—for, verily, He alone is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace!"

—Qur'an 39:53

But [since] good and evil cannot be equal, you should repel [evil] with something that is better. Behold! Where there was enmity between you and another it [may then become] as though he had [always] been close [to you], a true friend. Yet [to achieve] this is not given to any but those who are wont to be patient in adversity. It is not given to any but those endowed with the greatest good fortune. Hence, if it should happen that a prompting from Satan stirs you up [to blind anger], seek refuge with God. Behold! He alone is all-hearing, all-knowing."

—Qur'an 41:34-36

IV. A TALE OF TWO IMAGES:
THE GREAT SEAL OF THE UNITED STATES

(Right) After declaring independence on July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress charged Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin with recommending a design for the new nation's seal. For the reverse of the Great Seal they agreed on a scene from the Exodus—Moses' arm outstretched over the Red Sea, the Israelites crossing through the parted waters protected by a divine pillar of fire, and Pharaoh's drowning army. They also chose the motto which Jefferson believed was associated with one of the regicides during the English Civil Wars. Their recommendation was tabled.

(Left) As the Revolutionary War drew to a close, in 1782, a new committee endorsed a different image associated with Egypt, the pyramid. The image now appears on the one-dollar bill. According to the artist who designed the seal, the "pyramid signifies strength and duration." Both Latin inscriptions paraphrase verses by the Roman poet Virgil: *Annuit Coeptis,* "He [God] has favored our undertakings;" *Novus Ordo Seclorum,* "A new order of the ages [is born]." The "all-seeing eye" represents the eye of providence.

- What are the principal values that underlie these two images?
- Which do you prefer and why?

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