

A Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation

The Biblical Motif and Its Meaning in Michael Walzer's Account of Exodus Politics

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[T]o the Antiquity it self I think nothing due:
For if we will reverence the Age, the Present is the Oldest.¹

I. Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution* as Interpretation

„[E]very reading is also a construction, a reinvention of the past for the sake of the present“,² as Michael Walzer states in the preface to his seminal book *Exodus and Revolution*. The past, in this case, is the story of the Exodus, that collective memory of the march from the house of bondage to the land of the free, the mother of all grand narratives. The present is made up of the marches of modern political action, from the Puritan Revolution to the Civil Rights Movement and liberation theology, and on to the marches we ought to set off on today. The Exodus provides us, Walzer notes, with an „idea of great presence and power“, „the idea of a deliverance from suffering and oppression: this-worldly redemption, liberation, revolution.“³

Starting out from the twofold observation that „revolution has often been imagined as an enactment of the Exodus“ and „the Exodus has often been imagined as a program for revolution“, Walzer sets himself „to pursue these imaginings“ – „for they illuminate [...] both the ancient books and the characteristically modern forms of political action.“⁴ Decidedly aiming at something else than a „purely historical account“, he goes on to define the task as follows: „I want to retell the story as it figures in political history, to read the

¹ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: Or The Matter, Forme, & Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civill*, ed. C.B. Macpherson, London 1968, p. 727.

² Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, New York 1985, p. X.

³ *Ibid.*, p. IX.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. IX.

text in the light of its interpretations, to discover its meaning in what it has meant.⁵

In the resultant retelling, a decisive role is played by a motif which already features prominently in the original biblical story: the motif of Israel as „a kingdom of priests and a holy nation“ (Exod 19:6).⁶ In fact, this motif strikes me as key to Walzer’s reading of the Exodus, and in making it key, he contributes to its interpretation. Therefore I set myself in this small essay to reconstruct this reading, hoping thereby to illuminate the ancient motif in pursuing its modern imaginings, to discover more of its meaning in what it has meant.

This interest in the motif itself gives away the biblical scholar. As such, I will begin with a concise outline of the biblical account (II), asking the set of questions Walzer himself expressly is not aiming at, concerning the authorial intent behind the motif and the message it was meant to communicate to the original addressees.⁷ As we move on to pursue the motif in Walzer’s account of Exodus politics (III), however, it will soon become obvious that his retelling gives voice to the ancient narrative in a way that allows the latter to argue its own case. Reinventing „a kingdom of priests and a holy nation“, Walzer at the same time enlarges and explores the dimensions of the motif; putting it in a new context, he carves out characteristic traits inherent in the original.

II. The Biblical Motif of „a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation“

Irrespective of its complex history of composition, the Exodus story as it has come down to us is a remarkably coherent narrative pushing forward with irresistible impetus. At the same time, it is clearly structured. Following the actual „going out“ (*exodus*) from Egypt (Exod 1–15) and a first set of episodes in the wilderness (Exod 15–18), we find the people of Israel at the mountain of God. At this mountain called „Sinai“ or „Horeb“, as the book of Deuteronomy has it, the all-important events of the revelation of the divine

⁵ Ibid., p. 6. Cf. Walzer’s recent study *In God’s Shadow*, in which he sets himself a different, more (if not „purely“) historical task, namely „to figure out what the ideas of the biblical writers were in their own time and place“ (*In God’s Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, New Haven, London 2012, p. XI). For a discussion, see Wolfgang Oswald, „Das Alte Testament und die Politikwissenschaft – eine einführende Sondierung“, in: *Theologische Rundschau* 79 (2014), pp. 135–160, pp. 159 f.

⁶ Biblical translations throughout this contribution follow the King James Version so influential on „revolutionary“ readings from Hobbes to Walzer. I have made some modifications where it seemed desirable to do so.

⁷ See Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, p. 7: „In returning to the original text, I make no claims about the substantive intentions of its authors and editors.“

will and the making of a covenant between Yhwh and Israel are set. In its final form, the „Sinai pericope“ comprises the entire material of Exod 19:1–Num 10:10, encompassing two distinct accounts: one from Priestly circles, originating from their initial composition of the Pentateuch, and one belonging to a competing composition of the Pentateuch which drew inspiration from the earlier book of Deuteronomy. The latter composition’s account of the events is preserved in Exod 19–24 and 32–34. It is this account that features our motif of Israel as „a kingdom of priests and a holy nation“. In fact, the motif may well be interpreted as the theological summa of the non-Priestly Sinai pericope.⁸

This pericope illustrates, by way of narrative theology, quintessential alternatives in the relationship between the people of Israel and their god Yhwh. Right at the outset, Yhwh calls to mind what he did for his people when leading them out of Egypt, how he carried them on „eagles’ wings“ and brought them to himself (Exod 19:4). And he did that for a reason: „Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine. And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.“ (vv. 5–6). The people in turn, not even having yet heard the divine will they are to observe, answer spontaneously and with one voice: „All that Yhwh hath spoken we will do.“ Thus the ideal relationship is defined: Israel is the people of Yhwh, Yhwh is the god of Israel; by covenant, Yhwh is king of Israel. Introducing the demand to „obey Yhwh’s voice“, however, the opening also hints at the alternative to this ideal relationship. The subsequent account specifies the general demand by the proclamation first of the Decalogue (Exod 20:2–17) and then the so-called Book of the Covenant (Exod 20:23–23:19). The latter, containing detailed social legislation, is apparently to be understood as expounding the preceding Decalogue.

Having now heard all that is asked of them – the Decalogue from Yhwh himself (Exod 20:1), the Book of the Covenant as mediated by Moses (Exod 20:18 ff.; 24:3a) – the people confirm their initial consent (Exod 24:3b and 24:7). On this basis, the ideal relationship defined earlier is put into effect: A covenant is made between Yhwh and Israel (vv. 4–8), and in the course of covenant-making we observe that Israel has in actual fact become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. This is obvious from the fact that anybody from

⁸ My reading is inspired by the exposition in Erhard Blum, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch*, Berlin, New York 1990, pp. 45–72. See also Wolfgang Oswald, *Israel am Gottesberg: Eine Untersuchung zur Literargeschichte der vorderen Sinaiperikope Ex 19–24 und deren historischem Hintergrund*, Freiburg (Schweiz), Göttingen 1998, and Michael Konkel, *Sünde und Vergebung: Eine Rekonstruktion der Redaktionsgeschichte der hinteren Sinaiperikope (Exodus 32–34) vor dem Hintergrund aktueller Pentateuchmodelle*, Tübingen 2008.

the people is allowed to offer the sacrifices (v. 5), usually an exclusive prerogative of the priestly clergy, and it is corroborated beyond doubt when the sacrificial blood which, according to both the opinion of the Priestly school and general practice, is used in the ordination to the priesthood (cf. Exod 29:20–21; Lev 8:22–23) is applied to the people (Exod 24:8). Far from being a mere metaphor, the motif is to be taken at face value: Israel now *is* a kingdom of priests and a holy nation! The following account of how they „see“ (*sic!*) Yhwh (v. 9–11) only emphasizes what is apparent already: The events at Sinai are meant to illustrate the ideal relationship between God and his people. Indeed, the pristine intimacy of this scene is reminiscent of the intimacy God and man enjoyed in the paradise garden of Eden (Gen 2–3).

Yet just as paradise was lost, so is Israel's perfect state as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. We need not recapitulate the episode of the fall with the Golden Calf (Exod 32) – in the original composition it follows immediately after the paradise-like scene of seeing God! – to sense the shock of this sudden somersault. In light of the preceding events, the people's turning away from their God who „brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage“ (as Yhwh describes himself in his proclamation of the First Commandment in Exod 20:2) is all but inconceivable, the more so as it constitutes the most flagrant imaginable violation of the First Commandment.⁹ Accordingly, the Israelites now offer sacrifices to their hand-crafted god instead (Exod 32:6). We cannot here follow the narrative any further, rehearsing Moses' intercession on behalf of Israel (Exod 32–33), or Yhwh's faithfulness in finally forgiving his people and renewing the covenant (Exod 34).¹⁰ Instead, it suffices to note the result so far as Israel's status as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation is concerned. Having been in effect for all too few, paradise-like days at Sinai, it is lost again – which could hardly be illustrated more tellingly than through the replacement of the universal priesthood by a professional one (Exod 32:29 in context) as the addressees knew it in their own day.

Within the plot of the narrative, the kingdom of priests is lost; looking at the narrative's purpose in terms of pragmatics, however, it does of course continue to exist: as a paradigm of how the relationship between Israel and Yhwh could be and indeed should be. As such, the motif is meant to challenge its addressees. Every new generation of Israelites is to read this story as

⁹ Actually not only the First Commandment but also the Second, as well as the opening stipulation from the Book of the Covenant in Exod 20:23, are broken, thus indicating the extent and severity of Israel's disobedience.

¹⁰ Were we to address these topics, we would need to do so in the light of the historical catastrophes of 720 and 587 BCE, for the overall theme of the composition is that Yhwh has not abandoned his chosen people, despite the realities of exile and destruction which appear to suggest the contrary.

their own story (cf. Deut 6:20–25), and every new generation is asked to live up to its promise, following the example of their forefathers' initial obedience: „All that Yhwh hath said will we do, and be obedient.“ (Exod 24:7). For this is the appropriate response to Yhwh's election and redemption of Israel, and at the same time, keeping these commandments is the way Yhwh has revealed to be „for our good always“ (Deut 6:24).

This is the message of „a kingdom of priests and a holy nation“ in its original biblical context. Before moving on to pursue the motif in Michael Walzer's account of Exodus politics, however, scholarly debate compels us to look at one problem in more detail, for it might be viewed as calling into question the above reading. The problem derives from the grammatical ambiguity of the genitive phrase „a kingdom of priests“ in Hebrew. In principle, the phrase may be interpreted in two ways: either as a subjective genitive or as an objective genitive. In the first case, it would mean a kingdom in which not a king, but a caste of priests rules – in one word: a hierocracy.¹¹ In the second case, it means a kingdom in which everybody is a priest. As should have become clear from my reading, I take the phrase to mean the latter. According to the vision put forward in the motif, Israel is portrayed as a kingdom in which everybody is priest, yet no one is king, for Yhwh himself rules as king.

There is a whole range of, in my view, cogent reasons corroborating this understanding.¹² Of these, I will draw attention only to those most pertinent for our present purpose. As Exod 19 makes clear, Yhwh's dealings with his people point to the special status of Israel as a whole compared with other nations, not to some subdivision within the people; in this vein, the controversial phrase „a kingdom of priests“ in v. 6 parallels the comprehensive term „a holy nation“. Thus the account focusses on the relationship between Israel and her God, on Israel as the chosen people of Yhwh. The tone is set in v. 5b: „ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people“. Accordingly, both the prologue in v. 4 and the condition announced in v. 5a aim at the acceptance of the rule of Yhwh as king, which indeed follows immediately (Exod 19:8 par. 24:3, 7). And, above all, the lofty promise is not only proclaimed but also fulfilled. As we have seen when looking at Exod 24, at

¹¹ Thus the interpretation proposed, *inter alia*, in two prominent contributions by Catholic scholars. Jean Louis Ska, „Exode 19,3b–6 et l'identité de l'Israël post-exilique“, in: Marc Vervenne (ed.), *Studies in the Book of Exodus: Redaction, Reception, Interpretation*, Leuven 1996, pp. 289–317, and, with particular emphasis, Adrian Schenker, „Drei Mosaiksteinchen: ‚Königreich von Priestern‘, ‚und ihre Kinder gingen weg‘, ‚wir tun und wir hören‘ (Ex 19,6; 21,22; 24,7)“, in: Vervenne, *Studies in the Book of Exodus*, pp. 367–380.

¹² See Erhard Blum, „Esra, die Mosetora und die persische Politik“ (2000), in: idem, *Textgestalt und Komposition: Exegetische Beiträge zu Tora und Vordere Propheten*, ed. Wolfgang Oswald, Tübingen 2010, pp. 177–205, pp. 183 f.

Mount Sinai Israel does in actual fact become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

III. The Meaning of the Motif in Michael Walzer's Account of Exodus Politics

Michael Walzer, for his part, sets out to retell the biblical story in light of its presence, to expound the Exodus as „a paradigm of revolutionary politics“.¹³ Following the sequence of the original narrative, the opening chapter „The House of Bondage“ (chap. 1) states the problem: the Israelites are slaves in Egypt. They are slaves, and they grow accustomed to it. They develop a certain kind of slavishness. Delivered from the house of bondage, these slaves find themselves „in the Wilderness“ (chap. 2). Yet they do not go wandering in the wilderness, as the popular idiom has it. Rather, for Walzer „the Exodus is a journey forward – not only in time and space. It is a march toward a goal, a moral progress, a transformation.“¹⁴

Within time and space, this goal is „The Promised Land“ (chap. 4) – which is not to be mistaken, as Walzer makes clear from the outset, for the messianic kingdom.¹⁵ The promise of the promised land is decidedly this-worldly; the milk and honey the land is flowing with *is* milk and honey. It is a „carnal“ promise, if you will.¹⁶ Yet this carnal promise has „an ethical meaning, which derives from the fact that it was delivered to slaves.“¹⁷ Arguing against „a simple opposition between materialism and idealism, carnal and spiritual meanings, spontaneous politics and high theory“, Walzer claims: „There is, if I may say so, an idealism, a spirituality, a high theory of milk and honey.“¹⁸

The basis for this high theory and also the decisive turn in the Exodus as a march of moral progress comes with the covenant at Mount Sinai (chap. 3).¹⁹ It is with this covenant, to which the Israelites commit themselves as „free men“,²⁰ that they „make themselves into a people in the strong sense, capable of sustaining a moral and political history“.²¹ Here is introduced the idea „that obligation and allegiance are rooted, and can only rightly be rooted, in the

¹³ Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, p. 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 123 and *passim*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 103–104.

¹⁹ See also Michael Walzer, Menachem Lorberbaum et al. (eds.), *The Jewish Political Tradition*, Vol. 1: *Authority*, New Haven, London 2000, pp. 5–46.

²⁰ Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, p. 75.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

agreement of individual men and women.²² These men and women are „moral equals“, as Walzer points out, which in turn results in certain „social consequences of covenantal equality“.²³ And it is precisely these social consequences that are at stake when Walzer comes – not by chance in his chapter on the promised land – to the motif of Israel as „a kingdom of priests and a holy nation“.²⁴

What is the meaning of „a kingdom of priests and a holy nation“ in Walzer’s account? The first thing to note here is that one problem which has preoccupied biblical scholars for quite some time is simply passed over, and rightly so. No time is lost in pondering the grammatical possibility of the phrase „a kingdom of priests“ as a subjective genitive, that is, of the notion that this should be a kingdom in which a caste of priests rules. Rather, Walzer presupposes from the outset an understanding of the phrase as an objective genitive, that is, of a kingdom in which everybody is a priest, with God being king.²⁵ „In God’s kingdom, all the Israelites will be priests; the nation as a whole will be holy.“²⁶ Indeed, this understanding is part and parcel of his exposition.

In this exposition, Walzer puts the motif in a new context, linking it in a novel way with the promise of the land. According to Walzer’s reconstruction, the promise of the land turned out to have „qualifying clauses“: „The land would never be all that it could be until its new inhabitants were all that they should be“ – namely a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.²⁷ Thus a „vision“ is put forward „of how Israel ought to live in the promised land“ in order to enjoy its promise.²⁸ Only for a kingdom of priests, only for a holy nation „will the promised land fulfill its promise“.²⁹ More specifically, it is to be expected of a holy nation that its members observe „divine law“, much of which is concerned with „the rejection of Egyptian bondage“.³⁰ Consequently, in such a nation „no one would oppress a stranger, or deny Sabbath rest to

²² Ibid., p. 83.

²³ Ibid., p. 84.

²⁴ On this motif, see also Walzer, *In God’s Shadow*, pp. 126–143, albeit applying a different hermeneutic (see above, n. 5).

²⁵ According to this interpretation, Walzer notes that Protestantism renewed this „promise of universal priesthood and universal prophecy“ (Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, p. 112; see also idem, *In God’s Shadow*, p. 126).

²⁶ Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, p. 109. It is precisely to the point, therefore, when Walzer goes on to describe the institution of a professional priesthood after the incident with the Golden Calf as „a defeat for revolutionary aspiration“ (ibid.).

²⁷ Ibid., p. 101.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 103.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 108.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 108.

his servants, or withhold the wages of a worker."³¹ Looking then at the first part of the phrase, Walzer goes on to state that a kingdom of priests would be „a kingdom without a king“ – „God would be king“.³² Without a leader, he concedes, the people would not have reached the promised land. „Once there, however, the people will come into their own; they will be priests and prophets or sages and scholars (in secular versions of the argument, they will be republican citizens), and princely power will no longer be required.“³³

It should have become obvious by now how heavily this political theme of Walzer – that the government of the promised land is to be a kingdom without a human king³⁴ – is indebted to the biblical account of the enthronement of Yhwh as king over Israel at Sinai. In arguing his point, however, Walzer makes use of the phrase „a kingdom of priests and a holy nation“ in a way which goes beyond a mere reading, and deliberately so. In the remainder of this essay, let me point out three innovations which characterize this reinvention.

Firstly, the motif's function is redesignated, from a promise to a condition. In Exod 19, the condition is, according to the linguistic conventions of Ancient Near Eastern law codes and treaties, given in the preceding protasis in v. 5a: „Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant ...“ Our motif, in contrast, follows only in the subsequent apodosis indicating the promise made contingent upon this condition. Thus v. 6: „... *then* ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.“ Yet according to Walzer's transposition the motif itself assumes the function of a „qualifying clause“.³⁵ This transposition, secondly, is made necessary by linking the motif with the promise of the land. According to the biblical account, Yhwh's promise to turn Israel into a kingdom of priests and a holy nation is not only made, but also fulfilled at Sinai. In marked contrast to this account, Walzer interprets it as „vision“ or political program of how the people ought to live in the promised land.³⁶ Thirdly, and most importantly, while the original biblical account is concerned primarily with the relationship between Israel and her God, Walzer is interested in the right relationship of one Israelite to

³¹ Ibid., p. 108.

³² Ibid., p. 108.

³³ Ibid., p. 125.

³⁴ See further *ibid.*, pp. 126–129.

³⁵ See again *ibid.*, p. 101.

³⁶ In his careful reading of the original text, Walzer observes that though the wording does not provide a geographical reference, it points forward by being phrased in the future tense (*ibid.*, p. 103). Thus, Walzer concedes, it could also refer to the immediate future: „if, *right now*, you obey My voice and keep My covenant, you shall be, *now*, a kingdom of priests.“ (*Ibid.*; see also *ibid.*, p. 110, citing the rabbinic opinion that the promise was actually fulfilled at Sinai). „In fact, however, obedience is a struggle that extends over many years; holiness lies ahead in time as Canaan does in space.“ (*Ibid.*, p. 103).

another flowing from the former relationship; retelling the biblical story in search of its political aspects, the focus is shifted from the dominant theological theme of the covenant between God and his people to reveal its social implications.

Yet, as already suggested by this description, Walzer's retelling by no means takes the biblical text as a mere stepping stone. Rather, he provides it with an interpretation in the truest sense of the word, allowing the ancient account to assert its meaning for the present. In reinventing „a kingdom of priests and a holy nation“ as a political program, Walzer not only enlarges but also explores the motif's dimensions, further illuminating aspects that tend to remain underexposed in analyses which are exegetical in the strict sense.

Admittedly, according to the plot of the Exodus narrative, Israel does become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation already at Sinai. However, this position does not exhaust the purpose of the motif, as it presents a paradigm of how Israel shall live in the eyes of Yhwh. It is meant to challenge its listeners and readers, thus pointing forward in both space and time. In view of this purpose, Walzer's focus on the conditional structure of the covenant highlights an essential but often underestimated aspect of the original concept. Making the covenantal promise contingent upon a condition, the biblical account clearly implies that it is possible to meet that condition. When Christian readings in the wake of Paul's lament over the weakness of the flesh (see Rom 7 and *passim*) suggest that obedience to the will of God is in fact unattainable, in my view they miss the point. In Exodus, the condition is not imposed as a foil for demonstrating an intrinsic inability of obedience on the side of the human partner, but in order to be obeyed. Walzer's decidedly Jewish account, putting all stress on the „possibility of politics“,³⁷ does more justice to this concept of covenant. And the same holds true, finally, for his focus on the social implications of the covenant. For according to the biblical account, the measure and mode of obedience to Yhwh are to be found in three codes of law (the Decalogue, the Book of the Covenant, and the latter's reworking in Deuteronomy), all of which feature a marked emphasis on social legislation. Owing their freedom to Yhwh, the Israelites are called to be stewards of freedom themselves: „Remember that thou wast a slave in the land of Egypt, and that Yhwh thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched out arm: therefore Yhwh thy God commanded thee ...“ (Deut 5:15).

It is but a forceful affirmation of this call which Michael Walzer offers in his reinvention of „a kingdom of priests and a holy nation“. Walzer writes:

Holiness makes for liberty and justice, but it is effective only insofar as it describes a way of life, a religious and political culture. The Israelites will not be a holy nation until they are, all of them, participants in a world of ritual remembering; until they celebrate the

³⁷ Thus in the conclusion, *ibid.*, p. 149.

Passover, rest on the Sabbath, study the law; until they actively ‚break every yoke‘ and learn to live with what Bloch calls the ‚ineradicable subversion‘ of the Exodus story.³⁸

He concludes: „This is God’s kingdom“.³⁹ A Protestant pastor myself, I can hardly help but answer: „Amen.“

³⁸ Ibid., p. 115, citing Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity: The Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom*, trans. J.T. Swann, New York 1972, p. 82.

³⁹ Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, p. 115.