



Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

Looting mob or God's faithful?

By the end of Chapter 12 of the Book of Exodus, the battle between God and Pharaoh for the Israelites' freedom appears to be over. After ten plagues Pharaoh finally relents. 'Go!' he says to Moses. The exodus has begun. The Hebrew people prepare to march out of Egypt after centuries of exile and slavery.

But they do not leave empty-handed. The Torah tells us:

The Israelites had done as Moses told them; they had asked the Egyptians for jewelry of silver and gold, and for clothing, and the Lord had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have whatever they asked. And so they plundered the Egyptians.' (Exodus 12:35-36)

We might imagine this scene as depicting the pent-up energies of an oppressed people looting their oppressors in a parting gesture of revenge. But the difficulty with this presumption is that the text tells us that the Israelites 'ask' the Egyptians for their goods. Some bibles translate the Hebrew *sha'al* as: 'borrow,' though clearly the goods could not be returned. Either way, it is hardly the description of frenzied mob activity.

But the most compelling objection to the suggestion of a 'looting mob' is an earlier passage in the Exodus story (11:2-3) where the Lord actually commands the dispossession of the Egyptians. How are we to make sense of this divine command?

Over time the Jewish tradition has produced a creative array of responses to this text.¹ For instance, a discussion in the Talmud refers to the incident as compensation for centuries of unpaid labor. To the unsympathetic charge that the Jews should return the 'borrowed' goods comes the reply: "Return me the wages of the 600,000 you enslaved in Egypt."²

But let's get back to the heart of our question: why is the dispossession of the Egyptians a *divine* command? Here we follow the lead of two Jewish voices of the modern period, Benno Jacob and Cassuto.³ Both employ the traditional Jewish approach of freely associating diverse parts of the bible. Both base their views on a legal text in Deuteronomy. By treating God's word as a unity they make creative and insightful connections across the great tradition.

Cassuto cites a law which requires a gratuity payment to be made to a Hebrew servant when released from his master's service:

"You shall not send him out empty-handed" (Deut.15:13). Cassuto concludes that the Hebrew slaves *"were entitled to their freedom and, therefore,...the statutory farewell gratuity."* Where the law of land did not respect this entitlement, God ensured its effectiveness by divine decree.

For Benno Jacob, a legal passage which says *"You shall not abhor any of the Egyptians"* (Deut. 23:7) inspires him to conclude that the process of asking the Egyptians for their goods was actually a gesture of conciliation. Instead of departing enemies, both peoples, at the Israelites' initiative, agreed to part as friends, with the Egyptians providing gifts as a concrete sign of goodwill.

Cassuto and Benno Jacob each refer to a divine concern: for justice and for peace respectively. Thus, according this interpretative path, the text speaks not of a private action of revenge or greed but of a divinely-ordained plan that ultimately benefits both peoples. •

1. For a sampling of interpretations see Nehama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (Jerusalem, 1996), 183-192 on which this article is based.

2. Sanhedrin 91a.

3. Benno Jacob: Germany, d.1955; Cassuto: Italy, d.1950.

Scripture quotations: NRSV.