



5 voices

From antiquity to the present, discussions about the despoiling of the Egyptians in the Exodus event (12:35-36) have produced a variety of commentary. Let your own voice mingle with the tradition as you ponder this passage.

1. A discussion in the Talmud refers to this 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"* (Sanhedrin 91a).

2. The Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria takes a similar view (*Life of Moses* I: XXV), though observing that no amount of gold could compensate for the suffering of the Israelites.

3. Josephus, the 1st century Jewish historian, has an interesting view of the impact of 'neighborliness' on the event: *"When*

they went forth the Egyptians wept and suffered remorse for the way they had treated them ill" (*Antiquities, Book II*).

4. Rabbinic voices in the Hebrew commentary *Mekhilta* [300 CE] also emphasize Egyptian cooperation: *"Before they could make the request their offer was forthcoming—this is the view of Rabbi Ishmael"* (Bo, 12.36).

5. A later Jewish voice affirms the role of divine justice: *"At the moment of departure the terrified Egyptians would give them everything they had to be rid of them and to have no regrets. For their part they would only be taking their due."* (*Harekhasim Levike'ah*, 1815 Torah commentary)

Sources: Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot* (NY, 1996); www.earlyjewishwritings.com

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Why reflect on Torah?

While the Church has always included the Hebrew Scriptures as part of its canon, in many cases Christians have not always looked upon this part of the bible with the same interest and reverence with which they approach the Gospels. Further, there have been times when biblical texts have been used in distorted ways hurtful to the Jewish people, the very people through whom God's Word has been transmitted to us. Our chosen passage for this week's reflection—the despoiling of the Egyptians—is one such text which has been misused in history. While we would want to assume that we live in more enlightened times, we may not have stopped to consider this text from the perspective of the Jewish tradition. This *Light of Torah* series offers the opportunity to do so, encouraged by church voices that remind us:

"What ought to emerge now is a new respect for the Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament... Christians can learn a great deal from a Jewish exegesis practised for more than 2000 years."

"The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible"
(Pontifical Biblical Commission, 2001)

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Exodus 10:1—13:16

Bo: 'Go'

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Light of Torah

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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Exodus 10:1–13:16

At last. The Israelites leave Egypt! But not before another four plagues have ravaged the land, the final one bringing Pharaoh to his senses, at least long enough to allow the Israelites to set out into the wilderness. All this and more is the subject of this week's Torah portion. Our focus for discussion, however, is a brief passage which tells us that when the Israelites departed Egypt they did not leave empty-handed but took with them Egyptian possessions. Read it in context: Exodus 12:29-42.

1. Benno Jacob: Germany, d.1955.
2. Cassuto: Italy, d.1950
3. TB Berakhot 9b
Source: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (Jerusalem, 1996).

Tasting Torah

"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, NRSV)

We might imagine this scene as describing 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 earlier, in 11:2-3, we read that the Lord actually commands this activity. Read and discuss 11:2-3. How do you make sense of this divine command?

Touching Torah

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)—hardly the description of frenzied mob activity. Also, the reference to 'neighbor' suggests that Hebrews and Egyptians lived in close proximity and were known to each other. Over the centuries Jewish commentators have approached this text in various ways (*see back page*), and not all get to the heart of our question: why is this a *divine* command? Here we follow the lead of two modern Jewish voices, Benno Jacob¹ and Cassuto². As you consider their explanations, revisit the text and find your own interpreting voice.

Depthing Torah

Benno Jacob and Cassuto each base their views on a legal text in Deuteronomy. 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 Hebrews *"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) leads 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. According to this creative interpretative path our Torah text speaks not of a private action of revenge or greed but of a divinely-ordained plan that ultimately benefits both peoples.

Doing Torah

Once again the sages demonstrate the value of being able to manoeuvre one's way through whole bible, approaching it as a unity. Discuss the creative association employed by Cassuto and Benno Jacob above, as well as your own insights into this text.



From the Talmud

The Talmud recalls the prophecy in Genesis (15:13-14) where God tells Abraham that his people will be 'enslaved for four hundred years' but later 'they shall go out with many possessions'. Says the Talmudic midrash:³ Abraham, from his heavenly abode, is concerned that while the first part of the prophecy (Israel's enslavement) has been fulfilled, the second part (departing with possessions) will not be. So eager are the Israelites for their freedom, they are unlikely to wait around to negotiate compensation. They are like a person in jail who cares for nothing but the day of release.

In this view, God's command to despoil the Egyptians is a response to the memory and concern of Abraham... In a certain sense, the great Patriarch calls God to account!