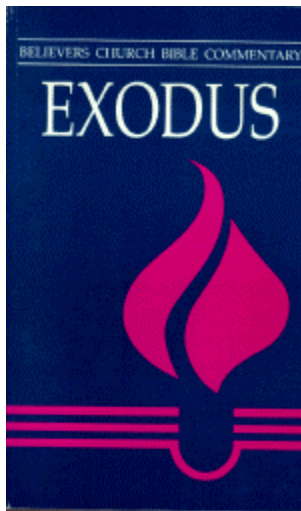


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Janzen, Waldemar

Exodus

Believers Church Bible Commentary

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Janzen's commentary on Exodus is guided methodologically by the following choices: His primary interpretation strategy is to read Exodus in a canonical-literary way. The text of Exodus is considered a meaningful whole that is to be understood in the tradition in which it stands, namely its biblical surroundings. A literary reading provides Janzen with the tools to read the book as a whole. His selection from various literary possibilities focuses on observations by a first implied reader as well as a knowledgeable, repeat reader.

Amongst the general emphases of Janzen's Exodus reading is the assertion that "salvation," and not liberation is the center of Exodus' message. Janzen understands the difference as follows: "Exodus leads from the service of a usurping tyrant to the service of a legitimate and gracious Master; from the groaning of slaves to the celebrating of privileged partners" (p. 26). Instead of narrowing liberation down to political realities, Janzen allows enough scope to include spiritual liberation. Another emphasis is that Janzen repudiates false covenant contrasts. Gospel (good news and salvation) and law do not present distinct entities, but are intricately interwoven.

Janzen interprets Exodus as structurally presenting a mini-exodus leading to Moses' commissioning followed by the exodus, which leads to Israel's commissioning. Both these commissions are given after a safe arrival and welcome by Jethro. Thus Janzen

elevates the otherwise curious appearances of the Midianite priest to pivotal scenes in the story's unfolding. Accordingly, Janzen divides Exodus into two major sections, reflecting the notion of a mini-exodus preceding the real exodus, namely "Anticipation" (Exod 1:1-7:7) and "Realization" (Exod 7:8-40:38). The first part is further divided into "The salvation of Moses" (Exod 1:1-2:25) and "The commissioning of Moses" (Exod 3:1-7:7). This division is mirrored in the second part by "The salvation of Israel" (Exod 7:8-19:27) and "The commissioning of Israel" (Exod 19:1-40:38).

Janzen concurs with other interpreters of Exodus that creation is an important motif. It appears already in Exod 1:7 (the Israelites are fruitful and multiply), it underlies the judgment signs and Israel's liberation from Egypt, and is finally present in the creation of the tabernacle when Israel becomes creative like its master. Exodus is, finally, a narrative that seeks to understand God's presence, which is elusive even when it is revealed (245, 400). The idea recurs that it is God who acts and who brings about change. Human action matters when God allows it to count.

As a commentary to be read by lay people and pastors, Janzen's is successful, although it assumes considerable skill and knowledge in lay readers. It covers most major trends in research admirably and does so in a way that emphasizes the relevance of these quests and discussions for understanding specific parts of the Exodus text. Janzen introduces these discussions in connection to the texts that they immediately illumine (for example, the contradictions between Exodus 14 and 15). He confidently chooses to leave certain questions undecided, rather than tie himself down to narrowing choices, e.g., knowing exactly how big the tabernacle would have been, or accepting variety where one would expect uniformity in the text such as with the narration of the judgment signs or the legal texts. This balanced interpretation is apparent throughout, when Janzen weighs alternatives—at certain points, such as his appropriation of the text for the present, it is too balanced for this reviewer, who thinks that the social-political liberation implications of Exodus warrant very focused attention.

Commentary sections contain a preview, explanatory notes, a consideration of the text in biblical context, and of the text in the life of the church. Some general observations about these commentary sections come to mind: The question arises regarding the usefulness of Janzen's insistence upon a section called "the text in biblical context." Where such a section proves most useful, references to other biblical passages are often incorporated in the explanatory notes. A striking example is the analysis of the Decalogue and the Book of the Covenant. Otherwise, references to biblical contexts seem to distract from the current passage more than add to one's understanding of it. Nevertheless, references to genre do prove useful, for example, "call stories," "theophany," and "law codes."

A further question concerns the integrity of specific texts. Janzen asserts repeatedly that the laws in Exodus must be understood in context. Yet, when he explains them, the operative context is other biblical legal material rather than the narrative of Exodus. One wonders what the singularity of the Exodus laws or law-selection in comparison to others is, but Janzen does not explain. Since he is writing for a faith community he is intent on drawing the implications of Exodus for current readers. This reviewer senses that the effort to find an application for every passage or pointing out the “lesson” (pp. 172, 428) of passages opposes a narrative understanding of Exodus, where individual sections gain their meaning from their place in the narrative. The text, in these cases, becomes a springboard for general theological thinking, such as the meaning of the wilderness stories.

Some of his explanations of Exodus passages deserve special mention. We have already mentioned his interpretation of the Jethro scenes as markers for theophany and commission. Throughout Exodus Moses’ role as intercessor, leader, and mediator is very important. This importance is spelled out dramatically in the Exod 32-34 scenes, when it becomes clear that without Moses’ presence there will also be no divine presence. An intriguing claim is that the Decalogue stands in relationship to the book of the Covenant as *bet 'ab* laws (laws applicable to heads of households for maintaining these units) to laws for the clan (larger social group). It is not clear, however, whether the recapitulation of the law in Exod 34:11-26 supports or detracts from this claim. In his discussion of the laws in larger context (in the Bible and the life of the Church) little is said about Paul’s references to “law.” This seems unfortunate, for equations between Paul’s references to law and these laws lead to misunderstandings. It is all the more surprising, since Janzen stresses the connection between covenant and law, already in the introduction, but also in the discussion of the legal texts. Janzen recognizes the importance of the worship instructions and their repetition, characteristically striking “a balance between giving up on all attempts to understand on one hand, and indulging in lush fantasies on the other” (335). These instructions, and finally, their execution, provide for God’s presence with Israel and involve people in creation and beauty.

Janzen provides a glossary of essay entries on the following themes: beauty, consecration, covenant, Israel in Egypt, Moses, Name (glory, face/presence, hand, arm), narrative technique, pharaoh’s hardening of heart, plagues (signs and wonders), promised land, revelation and mission, route of the exodus, source theory, and Yahweh war. In these essays Janzen clarifies his position, interpretations, and comments in the main text that are otherwise cryptic.

Overall, Janzen’s commentary on Exodus offers lucid and balanced guidance for reading Exodus, a book that is so central to the thought and witness of Christian faith.