

## Charlottesville, Exodus, and the Politics of Nostalgia

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Charlottesville made clear that white nationalists see Donald Trump as their savior. Former KKK leader, David Duke confirmed the linkage: “We are going to fulfill the promises of Donald Trump. That’s what we believed in. That’s why we voted for Donald Trump, because he said he’s going to take our country back.” Reclaiming the country for white Christians has long been the not so subtle subtext of “Make America Great Again.”

Trump’s unwillingness to condemn purveyors of racial hatred, without also condemning protesters against that hatred, made clear that “Make America Great Again” is not only a tribalist cry against the diversity of America today, but also a willful erasure and literal whitewashing of American history.

Despite the swastikas and Neo-Nazi chants, the hatred on display in Charlottesville is not a foreign import. It is home-grown racism and anti-Semitism, fertilized in American soil. Ironically, the Christian appropriation of the central Jewish origin story greatly abetted an American politics of exclusion.

From the time of the Puritans, many Americans have made sense of their experiences in light of the Bible, and they have found no richer text than the grand narrative of the Jewish people’s enslavement in Egypt, their ultimate liberation by God, and deliverance into the promised land of Canaan. The narrative did for Americans what it had done for Jews for millennia: create a sense of peoplehood, establish a connection with a divine being, provide reassurance in troubled times that God sees and will redeem the people’s suffering.

The mythic narrative of Exodus has long anchored American identities. The American Dream is a variant of the Exodus narrative. Americans from the Puritans to enslaved African-Americans, to Bruce Springsteen and Jerry Falwell have peered through Exodus-colored glasses to interpret their lives and their country. Why, then, have they seen such different things? Largely because so many white Christian Americans view their country as Canaan, while Americans of color find themselves not there yet, or even still in Egypt.

The interplay of American religion and American political visions are laid bare when individuals and communities read their lives into Exodus and envision radically different Americas. The tendency to see America as a New Canaan sets the stage for narratives of decline and apostasy and a politics of exclusion and moral surveillance. By contrast, America as Egypt endorses radical political agendas, and America as the Promised Land not yet reached energizes progressive social and political visions. It is the first—America as Canaan—that has long been dominant in America, and whose echo can be heard in the chants of both Make America Great again and “you will not replace us.”

The Puritans identified with the Hebrews newly arrived in the Promised Land. They had left behind a morally bankrupt England, and fled to the promised land of the New World. They were to be a city on a

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hill, on an errand from God, to redeem its “heathen” peoples. If they remained faithful, the God of Israel would dwell among them.

This vision had a dark side, of course. The God of deliverance is also the God of conquest. Governor John Winthrop celebrated the plague that had decimated New England’s native population on the eve of the Puritans’ arrival as clear evidence that God had appointed the country for the New English Israelites. If native peoples did not subject themselves and convert to the ways of the Israelites, forceful removal was warranted. Displacing and killing Native peoples—Canaanites—received sanction from the Puritan interpretation of Exodus. Captivity narratives and conversion narratives alike built on themes of captivity in Egypt and redemption.

America as the New Israel has always been a dangerous reading of Exodus, but it was not the only reading. Enslaved Africans encountering Christianity cast Exodus quite differently. America was not Canaan, but Egypt. White slave-holding Christians were not the chosen people, but the Egyptians. The enslaved Africans in America were the new Israelites anticipating a Moses among them. This interpretation provided a powerful condemnation of the social order, while also instilling faith that God would free his people.

A third, and deeply troubling vantage on the Exodus narrative comes from the experience of America’s native inhabitants. Unlike the Puritans and their descendants, or enslaved Africans and theirs, Native Americans could find little comfort in the myth of Exodus. Who could they be but the Canaanites, destined to lose their land, to be killed or to join the Israelites, at the cost of their culture and their history? Robert Warrior, an Osage professor of American literature, wrote decades ago, “As long as people believe in the Yahweh of deliverance, the world will not be safe from Yahweh the conqueror.”

But America as the New Canaan became the foundation of American exceptionalism from the Puritans on, fueling empires of conquest and benevolence. In times of relative stability and optimism, those who saw themselves as the New Israelites, whether champions of Christianity, American democracy, or both, could show their devotion to God by inviting others to join the ranks of the New Israelites, and sign on to the covenant. If they refused the terms, then violence and displacement were warranted. In the nineteenth century, American exceptionalism energized missions to convert the heathen abroad and displace the heathen Native Americans at home in the name of manifest destiny.

Nevertheless, the myth of the Promised Land has continued to resonate with immigrants. Jewish immigrants especially saw America as their Promised Land, but, not surprisingly, as descendants of the historical Israelites, they would not equate the American nation as the spiritual counterpart of the historical Israel. Rather, Jewish Americans have been at the forefront of advocacy for the rights of the oppressed.

In the modern era, Republican presidents from Ronald Reagan to George W. Bush have drawn from the rhetoric of America’s chosenness to support vastly different political agendas. In his farewell address, Reagan described the America he had shaped as a bustling market on a hill: “a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, windswept, God-blessed.” Even after the attacks of 9/11, George W. Bush’s vision was imbued with a Reaganesque optimism as he articulated the rationale for Operation Enduring Freedom in the language of the Exodus, and America’s special role in achieving God’s desire to liberate those who suffered under tyrants.

America as beacon—of Christianity, democracy, the free market, Western values—has been one consistent tune of the America as New Israel theme. The other, set in a minor key, borrows from the Hebrew prophets who railed against a wayward and decadent people, exhorting them to return to the righteous ways of their Israelite ancestors lest they lose their chosen status.

When instability and calamity arrive, as they inevitably do, Jeremiahs call for reform, rededication, and often fortification of the moral or physical borders. Social and economic woes are seen as God's punishment visited on a sinful people. The apostates must be called to repentance or cast out. Canaanites must be vanquished, and infidels given no quarter.

The Religious Right has been sounding the alarm of a beleaguered American Israel for decades now. This identification with a backsliding Israel of the Old Testament leads to the politics and policies of nostalgia. America will return to prosperity if it can return to how it was when the ancestors arrived in the Promised Land. There are dangers in seeing the Promised Land in the rearview mirror. The question becomes: Who are the sinners who have strayed from our forefathers' pious devotion? Who are the Canaanites who lure us away with false gods, and who are the infidels to be kept from our shores?

Most white evangelicals today will earnestly disavow racism, yet an overwhelming majority voted for Trump in unprecedented numbers because "Make America Great Again" mirrors their sense that America has fallen from its status as the New Israel. Routing the white nationalism unleashed by Trump's presidency will not happen easily, and it will not happen without also disavowing a reading of America's history as having already reached the Promised Land.

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s powerful sermon on the eve of his assassination stands as the most iconic invocation of Exodus in the twentieth century. At the height of the civil rights movement, when violence against black Americans and civil rights activists were the stuff of nightly news, King proclaimed that God had "allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!"

While not committed to the institution of the Church, James Baldwin articulated a similar hope for America: "Great men have done great things here, and will again, and we can make America what America must become." This vision of America as the Promised Land to be strived for has the virtue of remaining clear-eyed about America's failings, while holding out hope for change. It is the image of America most often invoked by Democrats from John F. Kennedy to Barack Obama. In his address commemorating the march in Selma, Obama asked, "What greater expression of faith in the American experiment than this, what greater form of patriotism is there than the belief that America is not yet finished?"

We can be conscious in how we deploy the mythic Exodus narrative. Warrior, the Osage writer, hinted at how one can be inspired by Exodus while learning from its violence:

"But perhaps if they are true to their struggle, people will be able to achieve what Yahweh's chosen people in the past have not; a society of people delivered from oppression who are not so afraid of becoming victims again that they become oppressors themselves."

America's greatest challenge is overcoming the tendency to respond to diversity and hardship with tribalism. Our greatest strength also lies in our diversity. America's unique circumstance is that we are

all of these perspectives on Exodus: We are the enslaved Israelites in Egypt hoping for deliverance, we are the Israelites—refugees seeking our Promised Land, and we are the Canaanites who lost their lives and land. Perhaps, if we can hold all of those perspectives in view, we may yet achieve our country. We may never reach the Promised Land, but we will become a better nation by remaining on the journey.