

Exodus, reparations, and a speech we should remember

By [Edward J. Blum](#)

December 9, 2014

Once again, the epic drama of slavery and freedom is upon us. No, I'm not referring to Ferguson, although others have written extensively on [links](#) there to the nation's history of bondage, legal violence, and avoidance of justice. While others protest, this weekend millions of moviegoers will behold [Exodus: Gods and Kings](#). "Let my people go" will square off against law and order. The fish will die; so will the first born males. The Red Sea will separate, for a time, and then its crashing waters will destroy an army.

Exodus has been with Americans since the nation's birth. During the American Revolution, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin advised the creation of a [national seal](#) to feature an image of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. One century later in the 1870s, southern African Americans who fled the South were called "[Exodusters](#)." In the 1950s, Cecil DeMille's [Ten Commandments](#) featured a brawny Charlton Heston as Moses and a sultry Anne Baxter as Nefertiti. Since 1973, the film has aired every year on Easter Sunday. During the [civil rights crusades](#), Exodus rhetoric animated the prophetic calls of Martin Luther King Jr. and many others.

There is an Exodus speech from United States history that has been forgotten. Long before James Forman stormed churches demanding funds in the 1960s or [Ta-Nehisi Coates](#) recently invoked the Bible for reparations, this man called for more than freedom. He extolled reparations as a corollary to righteousness. The speech did not come from an African American or a poor person or someone on the margins of society. It came from a white American congressman. You've seen the speaker cinematically depicted. In Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln*, he was played brilliantly by Tommy Lee Jones.

Thaddeus Stevens, a congressman from Pennsylvania, was known for taking radical stances for racial justice. In 1867, two years after the Civil War, he stood before his fellow elected officials and [demanded reparations for those formerly held as slaves](#).

If Americans did not, he warned, God would curse them. Slaves “have earned for their masters this very land and much more,” Stevens explained, and for their labor they deserved to own the land and be supported financially. To justify his calls for land and wealth redistribution, Stevens turned to biblical precedent. “Four million Jews were held in bondage in Egypt,” he reminded his audience, and the circumstances of their freedom were similar to those Americans experienced during the recent Civil War, “at the cost, as in our case, of the first born of every household of the oppressor.”

Liberation was not the end; it was the beginning. God did not set them free without “remuneration for their years of labor.” “No!” Stevens barked. “He understood too well what was due to justice. He commanded the men and the women to borrow from their confiding neighbors ‘jewels of silvers and jewels of gold and raiment.’ They obeyed him amply, and spoiled the Egyptians, and went forth full-handed.”

The point of Exodus, in the biblical then and the Reconstruction now, was liberation with reparations. In fact, Stevens went so far as to accuse those who denied economic redistribution of blasphemy. “There was no blasphemmer then to question God’s decree of confiscation. This doctrine then was not ‘satanic.’ He who questions it now will be a blasphemmer, whom God will bring to judgment.” Exodus held clear meaning to Stevens. God would judge any Americans who avoided justice through reparations. “If we refuse to this down-trodden and oppressed race the rights which Heaven decreed them, and the remuneration which they have earned through long years of hopeless oppression, how can we hope to escape still further punishment if God is just and omnipotent? It may come in the shape of plagues or of intestine wars—race against race, the oppressed against the oppressor. But come it will.”

War did come. During Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, some whites brought legal and extralegal violence to bear against African Americans, their white allies, Native Americans, and various peoples throughout the globe. War continued within the nation throughout the twentieth century. The [lynching tree](#) cast its shadow across the entire land. Anti-integration [bombers killed children](#) in the 1960s. Now, vigilantes and police officers discharge their weapons far too often at those who carry none.

Cinematic gore will entertain millions this weekend while real violence destroys real lives. We will never know what the United States could have become during Reconstruction if Stevens had been heeded. We cannot go back in time and take land from traitors and deed it to the black women and men whose labor made it rich.

We may never know in our lifetimes what our nation could become if we do not address our current strife with justice. No peace, however, may only be the tip of the iceberg. The judgments of God have never been reserved only for kings. They may be for us too.

*Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's published in partnership with [the Kripke Center](#) of Creighton University and edited by [Edward J. Blum](#) and [Kate Bowler](#).*