The book of Exodus includes a story about reparations for slavery

White Americans aren’t the Israelites; we’re the Egyptians. Maybe we should follow their lead.

by Matthew Schlimm in the January 12, 2022 issue

(Illustration by Chelsea Charles)

Christian interpreters of the Bible usually see themselves as God’s chosen people. We relate to people like Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Rachel. When reading a book like Exodus, we naturally think of ourselves as the Israelites rather than the Egyptians. Since childhood, most of us have been taught to read the Bible this way. It allows us to feel like we’re on the right side of history. We prefer not to identify with the bad guys.

In an essay called “Why I Stopped Talking about Racial Reconciliation and Started Talking about White Supremacy,” Korean American writer Erna Kim Hackett characterizes such interpretive practices as “Disney princess theology.” In a quote from the essay that went viral in 2020, she points out why it’s so problematic that White Christians see themselves as the princess in every story:

> For the citizens of the most powerful country in the world, who enslaved both Native and Black people, to see itself as Israel and not Egypt when studying Scripture is a perfect example of Disney princess theology. And it means that as people in power, they have no lens for locating themselves rightly in Scripture or society—and it has made them blind and utterly ill-equipped to engage issues of power and injustice.

In actuality, White Americans more closely resemble the Egyptians than the Israelites. Unlike the Egyptians, however, White people have failed to pay reparations for the legacy of slavery.

If you've never heard that the Egyptians paid reparations to the Hebrews for the time that they spent in slavery, it's not entirely your fault. "The Israelites," says Exodus, ". . . 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 what they asked. And so they plundered the Egyptians" (12:35–36). The first sentence sounds like the Egyptians are engaging in a practice remarkably similar to reparations. Coins had not yet been invented, so in lieu of currency, the Egyptians gave the greatest valuables they owned. But what about the plundering? One definition of *plunder* is "to take something wrongfully." Why would God encourage seizing someone else's property wrongfully? Are the Israelites doing something good, receiving what is owed to them for centuries of working without pay? Or are they stealing?

The original Hebrew word, translated in the New Revised Standard Version and elsewhere as *plunder*, appears more than 200 times in the Bible. In a handful of cases, it appears alongside other, similar words in violent contexts (see 2 Chron. 20:25). Exodus 12:35–36, by contrast, talks about the Israelites asking Egyptians for valuables and the Egyptians giving tremendous gifts. That doesn't sound like theft or warfare. It sounds more like a wedding reception or a baby shower. The Egyptians give great gifts to make sure that the Israelites have a good start in their new lives. It sounds even more like the Egyptians realized their treatment of the Israelites was fundamentally wrong, and they tried to make reparations.

This text from Exodus is hardly the only one in the Bible relevant to the discussions of reparations. Duke L. Kwon and Gregory Thompson's *Reparations: A Christian Call for Repentance and Repair* points to reparations as the church's calling and

responsibility. They explain that such reparations need to entail two key elements. The first is *restitution*, giving back what was wrongfully taken. They reference Zacchaeus, who pays back four times what he wrongfully took (Luke 19:1–10). They show how Zacchaeus's actions entail obedience to texts like Exodus 22:1, which says that thieves need to compensate their victims four or five times over.

The second element of reparations is *restoration*, making the wronged person whole again. Here, Kwon and Thompson pay careful attention to the parable of the Good Samaritan, who ensures that the robbed person fully recovers and can move forward with health—even though the Samaritan did not personally cause the robbery and injury (Luke 10:25–37).

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Kwon and Thompson also look at the passage from Exodus 12. It turns out that when the word so oddly translated as "plunder" is conjugated as it is here, it almost always means "deliver," "rescue," or "save," as in Ezekiel 14:14. There Ezekiel talks of saintly people like Noah *saving* themselves from coming famine. If Exodus is using the word the same way as Ezekiel is, then the Israelites are not robbing the Egyptians—they're saving them. Indeed, just a few verses earlier, the Egyptians urged the Israelites to leave because they feared they would all die (12:33). The Egyptians have already faced an onslaught of plagues, and they dread more coming. The best way to understand Exodus 12:36 (and the closely related 3:22) is that the Israelites *rescue* the Egyptians from God's ongoing judgment by asking for and receiving their valuables.

This gift giving does not make things perfectly even, but it does symbolize an end to hostilities. It signifies a new beginning. It demonstrates the Egyptians' readiness to relate to the Israelites in new ways. In an act of significant sacrifice, they surrender their greatest valuables with no strings attached. They demonstrate concretely that they are no longer going to exploit the Israelites. They give the Israelites the means to move forward not in destitution, but in prosperity.

And these reparations benefit not just the oppressed but also the oppressors. In Egyptian thinking, all facets of society were supposed to operate smoothly and in concert with one another. The infanticide, slavery, and plagues of Exodus left no doubt that Egyptian society had failed to reach its own goals. The only way to become a functioning society again was to address past wrongs in hopes of avoiding

divine judgment.

At their heart, reparations have always been about transforming broken societies into flourishing communities. Ta-Nehisi Coates rooted his groundbreaking essay “The Case for Reparations” (*Atlantic*, June 2014) in Deuteronomy 15:12–15, in which God commands that the Israelites set their Hebrew slaves free after six years of service. The text also specifies that the Israelites must outfit the freed slaves with an abundance of gifts, including food and wine for the short term and farm animals that would enable former slaves to generate long-term income. Sheep and goats served as a sort of ancient savings account, giving people assets that could be sold during a drought or other crisis.

These biblical stipulations don’t exactly call for 40 acres and a mule, but they aren’t far removed from such an idea. Indeed, George Fox, the founder of the Quaker movement, appealed directly to this Deuteronomy text in the 1600s when advocating something very similar to reparations. He urged slaveholders to set their slaves free after a period of service, and he added, “When they go, and are made free, l*et them not go away empty-handed*, this I say will be very acceptable to the Lord, whose Servants we are.”

The promise of restitution for slavery recurs elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible as well. In Genesis 15:14, God promises Abraham that after centuries of slavery, his descendants will leave an oppressive land with great wealth. Then, amid Moses’ call, God tells him that the Israelites will go out of Egypt with gold, silver, and clothing, which will be gifts for the next generation (Exod. 3:20–22). Later, just before the original Passover, God tells Moses it’s time to fulfill this earlier promise (11:2–3). Finally, as the Israelites get ready to leave Egypt, they ask the Egyptians for silver, gold, and clothing—and the Egyptians freely give it. Much later in the Bible, Psalm 105:37–38 celebrates that these gifts were given.

These repeated references to the Egyptians giving their greatest valuables amid the Israelites’ emancipation make clear that the writers of scripture don’t want us to miss this essential point: enslavers owe a debt. And, despite many protestations to the contrary, it can be paid by giving valuables that ensure the success of freed slaves and their descendants. In Exodus 3:22 it’s clear that these reparations are for the descendants of slaves, too. The Egyptians’ silver, gold, and clothing will be placed on Israelite children. It’s a time of hope in new beginnings for future generations.

Further, understanding texts in the Torah as calling for reparations for slavery, or something very close to it, is consonant with other biblical teachings. In Genesis, gift giving serves to resolve conflicts, facilitate forgiveness, and move past wrongdoings. When Abram's and Lot's shepherds can't get along, Abram lets Lot have his choice of land (Gen. 13:5–12). When the Philistines and Isaac come close to violence over who possesses which wells, Isaac cedes land he could claim as his own (Gen. 26:12–33). Amid painful strife, Rachel and Leah exchange gifts and privileges to find a way forward (Gen. 30:14–18). When Esau looks ready for revenge, Jacob gives an abundance of gifts to make up for terrible wrongdoings (Gen. 32:3–21, 33:1–17).

It's not that wrongdoers can pay bribes to make artificial peace. Rather, sacrifices of significance introduce alternate logics and ways of being in the world. They function as catalysts of reconciliation. They work sacramentally as outward and visible signs of inward and invisible changes of attitude. They demonstrate when repentance is real. It's hard to overestimate the costs of reparations, but it's also hard to overestimate their potential for healing.

In one of the most famous sermons in American history, preached on January 1, 1808, Absalom Jones begins by describing Israelite slavery in ways that easily connect with American slavery: "They were compelled to work in the open air, in one of the hottest climates in the world: and, probably, without a covering from the burning rays of the sun." After talking about God's intervention in Egypt, he reminds his listeners that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. With those words, he pivots from the past to the present, proclaiming that God is now at work in abolishing the African slave trade:

> Dear land of our ancestors! thou shalt no more be stained with the blood of thy children, shed by British and American hands: the ocean shall no more afford a refuge to their bodies, from impending slavery: nor shall the shores of the British West India islands, and of the United States, any more witness the anguish of families, parted for ever by a publick sale. For this signal interposition of the God of mercies, in behalf of our brethren, it becomes us this day to offer up our united thanks.

The first time I read that sermon to a group of undergraduate students, a Black student expressed discomfort with the idea that it was already time to offer thanks. He knew that while the transatlantic slave trade and even slavery itself may have

ended, he still wasn't in the promised land. Allen Dwight Callahan makes the same point in *The Talking Book*: for African Americans, the period since the Emancipation Proclamation relates best not to times of thriving in a land of milk and honey but rather to times of wandering in the grueling heat of the desert, not yet free to enjoy the blessings of a good land.

A report from the Economic Policy Institute makes clear just how much the United States still resembles a barren wasteland for many African Americans: "With respect to homeownership, unemployment, and incarceration, America has failed to deliver any progress for African Americans over the last five decades." The median household wealth of Black families is about one-tenth that of White families. Only 41 percent of Black Americans are homeowners, compared with 71 percent of White Americans. For every 100,000 Black Americans, 1,730 are incarcerated, compared with 270 of every 100,000 White Americans. It goes on. The persistent inequalities of both economics and opportunity are staggering.

In the Bible, the Israelites do not wake up in the promised land the day after leaving Egypt. For 40 long years, they eked out an existence under oppressive desert heat. What happens to them there is often overlooked—but it is relevant to our American context.

Some of the most disturbing stories in the book of Numbers involve people who try to prevent the Israelites from making it to the promised land. At least five different groups of people do all they can to block the Israelites on their journey (20:14–22, 21:1–3, 21–35, 22:1–24:25). Repeatedly, the Israelites ask in the most polite terms possible just to pass through others' land. They promise not to take so much as a drop of water, a grain of barley, or a single grape—in fact, they say that they'll avoid wells, fields, and vineyards altogether. They just need to make it to Canaan.

But the powers and principalities of that age do all they can to block the Israelites. They refuse passage. They deny water. They attack the Israelites instead. They take them captive. They even try to use religion—a famous holy man named Balaam—to try to curse this group of former slaves.

These people never succeed. They instead bring down God's judgment upon themselves. Instead of creating relationships of respect and kindness with the Israelites, those who obstruct their progress end up losing their safety, homes, and lives because they're working against the God who always wants to set the captives

free. In their fear of the Israelites, they desperately cling to their land and power, and they lose everything.

The White church in America is becoming increasingly aware of how much it resembles these people in Numbers who deny passageway to the promised land. As it does, it faces a question. Will it continue to forbid entry, or will it—like the Egyptians—recognize that recompense is due?

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