

2018

The Divine Collaborative Effort: Agency as a Tool for Examining Power and Relationship in the Exodus Narrative

Harley Burgess
Gardner-Webb University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.gardner-webb.edu/undergrad-honors>

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), [History of Religion Commons](#), [Language Interpretation and Translation Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Burgess, Harley, "The Divine Collaborative Effort: Agency as a Tool for Examining Power and Relationship in the Exodus Narrative" (2018). *Undergraduate Honors Theses*. 22.
<https://digitalcommons.gardner-webb.edu/undergrad-honors/22>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors Program at Digital Commons @ Gardner-Webb University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Gardner-Webb University. For more information, please see [Copyright and Publishing Info](#).

The Divine Collaborative Effort:
Agency as a Tool for Examining Power
and Relationship in the Exodus Narrative

An Honors Thesis
Presented to
The University Honors Program
Gardner-Webb University
6 April 2018

by

Harley Burgess

Accepted by the Honors Faculty

Dr. Paula Qualls; Thesis Advisor

Dr. Tom Jones; Associate Dean; Univ. Honors

Dr. Candice Rome, Honors Committee

Dr. Lorene Pagcaliwagan Honors Committee

Dr. Don Olive, Honors Committee

Dr. Anna Sieges Beal, Honors Committee

Introduction

The character of Moses as seen within the Old Testament is perhaps the most dynamic and powerful character within the biblical text. Continually throughout the Exodus narrative, Moses faces opportunities for growth and development that lead him toward becoming the archetype for leadership. Moses' journey is rife with choice. Though many would place Yahweh at the forefront of the narrative, it is truly Moses whom the audience witnesses generating change, making decisions, and even influencing the decisions of his God.

Moses is not the only character within the Exodus narrative whose choices drive the story. Every character who participates in Moses' journey faces choices and is given a surprising amount of power in determining the outcome of the story. Two midwives are potentially responsible for Moses' survival— ultimately, it was their choice to refrain from killing male newborns upon birth that allowed his mother to save him. Not long after, another woman makes the choice to pluck Moses from the river and care for him, raising him as an Egyptian. Every choice made along the way is one that grooms and prepares Moses both for his eventual encounter with Yahweh and for his essential role in freeing his people from the yoke of slavery.

In the story's climax, Moses is given an amazing amount of power. It is Moses, assisted by Aaron, who confronts Pharaoh. It is Moses who raises his hand or staff to bring the plagues. It is Moses who eventually leads the people through the Red Sea to freedom. While Yahweh is a participant in these events, it is Moses who is the face of them. When their liberation is celebrated, the Hebrews know that it is Moses who has collaborated with Yahweh in this timeless drama of struggle and freedom. Moses' role as the leader of this

people group and mediator between them and the powerful Yahweh continues on throughout the Pentateuch.

The unprecedented and oddly collaborative nature of the relationship between Moses and Yahweh is rarely expanded upon with any sort of depth within biblical scholarship or commentaries on Exodus. Mentioned in passing, the role of Moses in the narrative too often takes a backseat to the splendor of Yahweh or the perplexing nature of Pharaoh's heart. Despite the lack of attention afforded this element of the text, understanding the role and extent of Moses' agency is quintessential to gaining insight into authorial intentionality and, perhaps more concretely, interpretative readings of the text and their subsequent theological implications.

Discussions of agency are not new. Feminist criticism, liberation theology, and similar biblical critical lenses have utilized agency as a foundation for some time. For these schools of thought, power and who it is given to is fundamentally important. However, despite the foundational nature of these conversations, agency rarely ever takes a position in the spotlight. While it may seem to be a connecting puzzle piece, utilized by others in the bigger scheme of their interpretive lenses, agency can be utilized as a lens in itself. Indeed, agency may already be a larger, "umbrella-lens," intellectually preceding schools such as feminism or liberation. Examining the agency afforded to characters within the larger narrative is literary in nature and lends to further analysis regarding the agency of women, minorities, or other groups of concern. Further, examining agency of all characters allows for comparison between them— for example, the agency of Moses could potentially be contrasted with that of Cyrus, an outsider given power both by the biblical author and Yahweh, or the unnamed concubine of Judges, who is afforded no agency at all.

In addition to scholarly applications of such a lens, examining agency opens the door to a wealth of further theological implications. Why is Moses afforded such agency? Does this imply that Yahweh has less power or the same power as human beings do? What does this say of Moses' freewill?

Ultimately, Exodus is the best springboard for establishing agency as a workable, critical lens, through which Old Testament narratives— in the least— can be examined. In order to understand the biblical authors' portrayal of the relationship between God and human beings, agency must be a central consideration of interpretation, if not the central consideration. Examining the agency of characters within Old Testament narratives is vital for understanding the biblical authors' portrayal of the relationship between God and human beings. For the purposes of this brief examination of agency, the Exodus narrative and the character of Moses serve as the subject of the implementation of this critical lens.

This presentation of agency as a central theme of interpretation will begin with an analysis of philosophical and theological theories regarding agency. Through a broad examination of works within the realms of process theology and existentialism, the discussion can attain a more precise definition of what human agency is and how one might identify it. Further, this examination serves to justify the applicability of philosophical theory to the narrative world and biblical text in general. After reviewing and synthesizing the foundational materials, the Exodus narrative will be examined with the resulting concept of agency as the centralizing theme. With the foundational works and theories in mind, the agency of the characters of the Exodus narrative, with special attention paid to the life and role of Moses, can be identified. Finally, the conclusion of this work will provide avenues for further exploration, both within the biblical text and within the field of theology at large.

Scholarly Voices in the Development of the Archetypal Agent

Before any narrative can be examined with human agency in mind, it is important to establish what exactly is meant by “human agency.” What does it mean for a character to have agency, and how does a reader go about recognizing the agency present or absent in a text? To establish this framework, this work appeals to a number of theoretical ideas throughout the fields of theology and philosophy. Though a plethora of scholars have written in regard to human free will, this interpretive framework does not attempt to answer or examine any question as to whether human beings can act freely. What this framework does do is attempt to find those places within the text where characters display, are granted, or are perhaps stripped of their agency. There are a number of assumptions that have influenced this framework, as will be discussed. Primarily, the view of agency depicted here is drawn from an amalgamation of process theology, existentialism, and literary speech acts. Each theory serves to inform the development of vocabulary and thought regarding agency and its relation to both human beings in the waking world and characters within the world of the narrative.

There are a number of assumptions that this framework works alongside: (a) biblical narratives are generally literary in nature; (b) the intentions of the biblical authors cannot be precisely determined, but peculiarities or particularly remarkable elements of the text may point to concepts that the biblical author believed to be true; (c) a reader’s assumptions hold significance for interpreting the text. Collectively, these assumptions inform both the examination of Exodus that will later occur and the following construction of the framework with which the text will be examined. This work assumes that the biblical text was

influenced, in part, by human authors and editors with cultural and personal biases, rather than being devoid of human influence.

This does not mean, however, that this work assumes that the biblical text holds no spiritual or theological authority. Rather, this work holds that the formed quality of the text lends to its importance for theology, spiritual formation, and faith. While the events of biblical narratives could have occurred historically, as some have argued, it is important to recognize that those events, as recorded within biblical narratives, do have literary characteristics. It is these literary characteristics— dialogue, setting, literary devices, word choice— upon which this work places significant importance. It is the way in which the author has crafted the narrative that is particularly important for examining the depiction of agency that now exists within it.

From the perspective of biblical interpretation, it may also be important to note the existent frameworks that inform this one. Feminist and liberation interpretations are certainly fueled by threads of agency within the text. Feminist criticism, for example, generally attempts to read the biblical text from the perspective of a woman. These examinations of minority or disadvantaged viewpoints really center around power and the portrayal of it within the text itself. Literary criticism also obviously influences this framework, as the primary focus is the interpretation of narratives. Finally, reader-response criticism also plays a role in the establishment of this framework. This work assumes that the reader of a narrative participates in the interpretation of that narrative through his or her assumptions and lived experiences. Further, this work will later make claims regarding the theological implications of the portrayal of agency that is examined and how it could potentially influence the life of the reader.

Griffin's Process Theodicy

This overview of human agency must begin with a recognition of its root in process theology. Generally, any solution to the problem of theodicy that considers God's omnipotence to be paramount and non-negotiable diminishes the power of human beings to respond to or combat evil forces.¹ One of the reasons why the problem of theodicy is even a problem at all is the perceived need to reconcile God's absolute power and sovereignty with the horrific events and experiences that human beings endure, often without any conceivable warrant. David Ray Griffin, along with other process theologians, approaches theodicy differently.² The willingness to give up divine omnipotence opens discussions of theodicy to alternative possibilities. It is this willingness to reject absolute omnipotence to which this study of human power largely owes itself.

It may be necessary at this point to briefly, if such a feat can be accomplished, outline the tenets and assertions of process thought. Generally, process theologians, Whitehead and others, assert that God cannot actively intervene in the created world. Rather, God may influence or coax every moment in a particular direction, largely aiming toward the good. This assertion stems from the claim that God did not create *ex nihilo*, or out of nothing. God coaxed the bits of creation that already existed, the deep waters of Genesis, into something more than just bits. From that point, God continually persuaded creation. Sometimes, God's persuasion is not effective; this is how process theologians explain evil. God can try to

¹ "Theodicy," as used here, generally refers to the conflict between the reality of evil, the omnipotence of God, and the benevolence of God. Stephen T. Davis, *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy* (Louisville: Westminster J. Knox Press, 2001).

² David Ray Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 309.

persuade each moment away from cataclysm, and has ample reason to do so as a sympathetic participant in creation, but sometimes fails to effectively do so.³

Though Griffin's precise argument in defense of process theodicy cannot be accurately portrayed within a work of this size, his theories regarding human agency are pertinent to the lens that this work aims to construct. One essential element of Griffin's approach to theodicy is God's sympathetic response to the world. Process theodicy, as any theological stance, is not devoid of weaknesses. One such perceived weakness of Griffin's process perspective is God's guilt in crafting a world that contains potential for evil and devastation, regardless of God's current ability to intervene or God's good intentions in creation. If God created with the knowledge that creation had the potential for evil alongside potential for good, does that make God complicit in the evil that we experience now?

Griffin addresses this issue by asserting that God experiences the world sympathetically. Essentially, God also experiences the devastation of natural disasters, human evil, and seemingly unwarranted tragedy. As Griffin writes:

If God were an impassive absolute, then all the previous talk about the necessity of risk-taking in order to achieve higher values would mean that it is the creatures alone which suffer the consequences of God's decision to take risks. But in process thought, the quality of God's experience depends in part upon that of the creatures. As clarified above, worldly events of pain and sorrow are received into God just as they are. God suffers with our sufferings, as well as enjoying our enjoyments. Since the world always contains a mixture of good and evil, beauty and ugliness, the divine beauty is always a tragic beauty. Accordingly, the risks which God asks the creation to take are also risks for God. Stimulating the world toward greater intensity means the risk that God too will experience more intense suffering.⁴

Now, we approach the true value of process thought to the perspective that this work attempts to construct. As Griffin writes above, God is a participant in creation, *as are the*

³ Griffin, *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy*, 309.

⁴ *Ibid.*

creatures that dwell within it. Process theology leaves ample room for active collaboration between God and the created order. The intelligent beings of creation work alongside God to usher about the good. This is further expanded upon by Griffin, who writes:

Why, then, can we say that God is good in spite of all the evil within the divine creation? Because all individuals within the creation necessarily have power partially to determine themselves and others; because both intensity and harmony are necessary for intrinsic goodness, so seeking to increase intrinsic goodness means seeking to overcome triviality as well as avoiding discord... because God constantly works to overcome the evil in the creation with good, and in human experience does this by simultaneously seeking to increase our enjoyment of life and to *enlist our support in the effort to overcome evil by maximizing good* [emphasis added].⁵

Not only do human beings have the ability to work collaboratively with God to persuade each moment toward goodness, but God *enlists* human beings to do so. God cannot bring about good without the assistance of human beings. This conclusion is only possible when one allows one's theological position to exclude absolute omnipotence and favor human agency. From this perspective, human beings are incredibly powerful and act in conjunction with God to bring about goodness. Moving forward, this argument from Griffin will be essential to assessing the role of Moses' agency within the Exodus narrative as a collaborator, rather than a servant. Further, the influence of process theology will be invaluable to the lens that this work aims to craft in general.

Existentialism and Human Power

Existentialism, grossly simplified, is a way of philosophizing that aims to view humankind as subject rather than an object, at the center of discussion and analysis. Existentialist philosophers form arguments about the nature of humankind, knowledge, and

⁵ Ibid., 310.

metaphysics by examining human beings themselves, rather than nature.⁶ As John MacQuarrie defines, the existentialist thinks of a human being as “not only a thinking subject but an initiator of action and a centre of feeling.”⁷

Various existentialist philosophers have presented differing viewpoints regarding the nature of choice and action. Though these writings all have merit, they will not be the focus of this brief consideration of existentialism.⁸ It is difficult to apply theories about real, observable human beings to characters in a narrative that have been constructed to act and respond to events in a specific way. This problem will be dealt with in greater detail by utilizing Steven Thatcher Mann’s works in the following section. Regardless, existentialism is helpful and relevant, in a general way.

Existentialism begins with humankind, rather than nature. An existentialist theologian, following this rule, may formulate a theological perspective that places the experiences of human beings in a place of importance that proceeds any discussion of God’s observable character. The character of God or nature of God’s creation, from this perspective, is based primarily on humankind.⁹ To some, this may seem like a backwards method of approaching the character of God. With existentialism in mind, human beings can be the starting point for theorizing about theological questions. From the perspective of this work, placing human beings at the forefront of an analysis is essential.

Further, though many existentialist philosophers focus on the individual, the importance of one’s state as an individual within a community of persons is generally

⁶ John MacQuarrie, *Existentialism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), 14.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸ A greater analysis of these theories can be found within MacQuarrie, *Existentialism*, 174-188.

⁹ MacQuarrie, *Existentialism*, 270-274.

recognized.¹⁰ Some outlying existentialists even place this within the forefront of their philosophical endeavors, examining interpersonal relationships to produce answers to vital questions.¹¹ The interplay between the existence of human beings and the relationship between human beings is vital to viewing existentialism from a theological point of view. To discover the character of God, one must look toward the existence of human beings and, perhaps more importantly, the interactions that occur between human beings and God. Utilizing existentialist principles, it is possible to examine human characters, in order that God may be better understood. MacQuarrie summarizes, "... at the present day, when many theories of man are circulating, Christian theology finds a point of entry into the debate by probing the nature of the human existent, his hopes and loves, his finitude and sin, in the conviction that the study of man in depth opens up the dimension of transcendence."¹²

Borrowing from these ideas and conceptions, an appropriate definition for the human "agent" can be identified. A human agent is an existent actor, viewed as a subject rather than a passive object, that can be understood both individually and as a collaborator. When one has "agency," one has the ability to be understood as a subject, rather than an object, can make choices, and may deliberately act.

Mann's Speech-Acts and Literary Theory

¹⁰ Ibid., 16.

¹¹ Further reading on this topic, including references to authors Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel, can be found within MacQuarrie, *Existentialism*, 16.

¹² Ibid., 271.

As previously alluded, examining biblical narratives via theories of human agency as experienced in the real world poses a unique challenge to this type of methodology. Namely, the power, action, and agency described by these theories is discussed in relation to human beings. As human beings, we are aware, at least in some capacity, of our ability to react to experiences and events in a way that feels independent. It is the interplay between what we perceive as freewill and what we may, theologically, wish to assert about God's sovereignty that causes us to theorize about agency at all.¹³ This point of contention gives life to our theories and musings regarding whether or not human beings can act freely at all.

While we may theorize about our relation to God as much as we would like, the structures that order a narrative are not always indicative of the structures that order the real world. Within a narrative, human beings may not have freewill at all, regardless of what we may theorize in the waking world. An author may dictate that his or her characters are governed by a sovereign God, unable to form free thought, or void of any agency whatsoever. While the world of the biblical text is theoretically governed by the same forces that its authors experienced in their own lives, it remains the construction of human authors, biased by their own interpretations of reality's structures and rules. This work does not aim to suggest that the biblical text should be taken literally—the logic that governs the world of the text is not necessarily accurate to the logic that governs the waking world. To assert otherwise would be to expect that the biblical authors knew everything there was to know about sovereignty, freewill, power, and relationship to the divine. This claim would require a very high view of the biblical text, perhaps one of absolute inerrancy and divine authorship.

¹³ A secular viewpoint may find conflict between perceived freewill and biological function—our DNA and biological instincts dictate certain things about our lives, but we perceive that we have the ability to form our own decisions via logic or morality.

Confronted with this problem, how could one possibly approach the biblical text with philosophical theories that attempt to describe the experiences of real human beings? The characters within biblical narratives are not real— even if the events are somewhat biographical or historically accurate, the structure of a narrative relies on authorial flourishes and aspects of storytelling. The agency afforded to characters within a narrative is not true agency. Characters on a page do not have freewill, cannot collaborate with any divine entity, and cannot experience the logic of the real world. They exist as they are written, apart from the logic that we experience as real human beings. The drive of theories regarding agency, namely the contradiction we experience tangibly between freewill and the forces that potentially govern our decisions, is irrelevant to the characters of a written narrative. Any agency that they “experience” is crafted by their authors. The author chooses how to describe and when to implement the agency and power of a character— each character’s independent and powerful action is a choice. The author can choose to strip a character of agency or grant a character enormous power. Therefore, a discussion regarding the agency of characters within the biblical narrative must acknowledge that this agency is constructed by an author, engaged in interpretation and metaphysical analysis.

This conundrum does not necessarily destroy the foundation that this work is seeking to build. Indeed, this problem may strengthen the biblical lens that is being formed. If agency within the narrative is fabricated, it must also be purposeful. Examining the agency of characters within a narrative may give enormous insight into potential authorial intent, purpose, or experience.¹⁴ If a character within the narrative is afforded an unusual amount of

¹⁴ Though this work does not claim any ability to definitively determine authorial intent, it does hope to derive conclusions from the text via a modern reading. From the reader’s

agency in comparison to other characters or the characters of other related narratives, this seems to point toward a purposeful choice by the author. Though we cannot draw definitive conclusions about agency as it exists within the real world, as MacQuarrie, Griffin, and other philosophers do, we can examine agency as it exists within the world of the narrative and how it is applied to the narrative's featured characters. From there, we can determine something about the theological perspective of the text and draw conclusions about how we might order our lives in response. Regardless of reality, biblical narratives have much to say about how we perceive our relationship to God.

Steven Thatcher Mann applies a relevant framework to 2 Samuel. Mann's examination of speech-act theory and 2 Samuel, first establishes, as this work does, a framework that is built upon theories regarding the lived experience. Speech-act theory, simply explained, attempts to examine the complicated relationship between speech and action; the theory posits what it means to speak things into being, such as a judge sentencing a person to death.¹⁵ The judge, through mere words, has essentially killed a person. To examine 2 Samuel in light of speech-acts, Mann must first craft an argument for examining literary speech-acts with tools that were intended to examine speech-acts in the waking world. To do so, Mann explains that literary words hold the same value, if not more value, than those that are spoken by human beings in the real world.¹⁶ Essentially, the speech-acts

perspective, this agency seems purposeful. How that is interpreted by a modern audience may differ from its original interpretation, but we can at least catch some glimpse of choice on the author's part. Even unintentional choices matter to the modern reader.

¹⁵ Steven T. Mann, *Run, David, Run!: An Investigation of the Theological Speech Acts of Davids Departure and Return (2 Samuel 14-20)* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2014), 30-40.

¹⁶ Mann, *Run, David, Run!: An Investigation of the Theological Speech Acts of Davids Departure and Return (2 Samuel 14-20)*, 41-42.

that appear in literature are indicative of the experiences of the person who crafted them.

Mann draws from literary speech-act theorists, writing:

Rejecting the suggestion that the act of writing a story should be understood as a different category of illocutionary act, Searle points out that the utterances within stories can be understood because they still carry the same function that they do in real life, albeit for the world of the narrative and not the real world. For example, a character in a novel who says that it is raining is not committed to the assertion that it is raining outside in the world of the audience. Rather, the assertive must be measured for whether it is raining or not in the world of the story.¹⁷

Mann goes on to argue that literary speech-acts can be understood not only as interactions between a speaker and a listener, but also as interactions between the speaker and hearer, interpreted by a storyteller, and then received by an audience.¹⁸ This is especially important for narratives like Exodus, that are crafted with historical or traditional events in mind. Further, Mann argues that narratives are not only valuable for the speech-acts, that they contain, but are speech-acts in themselves. This is to say that “the telling of a story is an act that is intended to achieve certain results.”¹⁹ An author of narratives interprets the world in a specific way, utilizing his or her personal experience of the real world’s governing functions to establish the governing functions of the narrative world itself. From this point, the characters within the narrative react to these governing forces. Eventually, an audience will also read this depiction of the world and interpret it in relation to his or her own lived experiences. If the author is successful, the audience will be moved to react in some way. Like real speech-acts, works of literature speak events into existence, or at least they attempt to do so.

¹⁷ Ibid., 43.

¹⁸ Ibid., 44.

¹⁹ Ibid., 46.

The eventual conclusions of Mann regarding 2 Samuel are inconsequential to the present discussion, though excellently deduced. Really, what can be drawn from Mann's work is that a narrative serves as both a reflection of the real world and an interpretation of it. What Mann has applied to speech-acts can also be applied to conceptions of human agency. Whereas existentialists draw conclusions based on the human being, narratives also make assumptions about the central nature of human beings. Whereas process theology attempts to address the human experience of what seems to be free will, narratives also draw conclusions about that free will, and present human free will as the author experiences it.

Ultimately, Mann's work, and the literary work that precedes it, allows for an examination of a biblical narrative within the framework of theories that generally make deductions about the real world. One cannot discredit the ability of narratives to portray the waking world, even if they are simply words on a page. This, again, is especially true of the Exodus narrative, a story that holds great historical and traditional significance. Authors make relevant choices regarding the interpretation of their lived experiences in relation to the governing forces of the world. With this in mind, a clear framework of agency-centric biblical criticism can be established.

The Human Agent: A Synthesis of Theories

With all of these things in mind, a definitive framework can finally begin to emerge. With Mann's theories in mind, the way that agency is discussed here can be understood in direct reference to the agency given to characters within a narrative. What can be deduced from Griffin's process theodicy is that human beings experience collaboration with the divine, a commission that they are enlisted to take part in. Human beings hold the ability, and the responsibility, to influence the world and persuade good in every moment. Effectively,

human beings have the potential to prevent evil within the world. Human beings work alongside God to persuade and influence the world around them. Griffin arrives at this conclusion partially because human beings clearly experience the ability to act freely. It is this lived experience that causes Griffin, in part, to advocate for a viewpoint that ensures the agency of human beings. Drawing from this perspective, it can be established that agency denotes action. The character with agency has the ability to influence the world. An agent is a being that takes an active role in the development of the narrative, rather than a passive one. The agent is the collaborator, rather than the tool or servant. When a character actively participates, sews change, and makes decisions that affect the world of the narrative, that character is seen as having agency.

Existentialism adds to this view of the agent as an actor, rather than a passive object. Existentialism places the human being in the forefront of analysis, relying on the human to reveal things about the world and human nature. Theologically, one can discern things about the character of God by viewing the interactions between God and human beings. Truly, existentialism primarily informs the vocabulary and perspective of the framework being constructed. With existentialist sentiments in mind, one can begin to view agency as humanistic.

Ultimately, the human experiences of both the authors who construct the narrative world and the characters that live within it are vital to understanding the governing forces of either world. Further, the relationship to God that both the author has experienced and to whom the characters within the narrative are witnessed responding are vital in discerning the nature of God. More simply put, from human beings, one can learn much about God; therefore, from the human beings that exist within a narrative, one can learn much about the

author's portrayal and experience of God. The claims of biblical authors can be found within the agency of human characters more than anywhere else in the text, precisely because the human being is the most informed and researched figure that the authors construct— they are, after all, human beings themselves. Further, the assumptions that we all hold about the nature of God are brazenly revealed when we confront the agency, or lack of agency, that characters have within the text. Informed by existentialism, the perspective of this viewpoint must be centered on the human characters of the narrative, as they are portrayed by human authors.

Finally, it is Mann's work with speech-acts that defends the validity of working with such theories in relation to literary works, perhaps even suggesting that the claims presented are elevated to new heights by the context of a narrative. As previously noted, a narrative contains within itself a complex network of interactions. It is this complex network that allows one to so closely examine a piece of literature with the intention of potentially discerning authorial choices and interpretive implications. The real world is relatively straightforward in terms of examination. In contrast, the narrative world is steeped in the experiences of its creator and intentional decision-making. A narrative is a speech-act in itself, insofar as its purpose is to cause. For mundane literary works, this may simply mean that the author intended for readers to feel entertained by the work, laugh, or perhaps cry. For something as monumental as a biblical narrative, that purpose could be as ambitious as influencing the reader toward salvific, life-altering change.

Moses as the Epitome of Collaborative Human Agency

A developed methodology, of course, serves no purpose when left unapplied. For this examination in particular, it is best to apply the methodological framework that has been formulated to the Exodus narrative. Moses stands as the epitome of collaborative agency within the Old Testament. The Exodus narrative serves as an incomparably vital story within both Jewish and Christian traditions. Told by Jewish children during Passover, the subject of countless artistic interpretations, and frequently imitated in popular culture, the tale of the Israelites' grand liberation from the shackles of slavery in Egypt is timeless and culturally inescapable.

Though the Exodus narrative has been the subject of countless scholarly and theological examinations, God is often identified as the central focus of the tale. It is Yahweh's sovereignty, power, and mercy that eventually brings the Israelites to freedom.²⁰ With Yahweh's sovereignty a central theme of common interpretation, it is easy to disregard the amazing amount of choices that the narrator describes Moses making and being shaped by. Additionally, the choices that surround and make up the life of Moses are hardly unimportant ones— it is the role of Moses as an agent that drives the liberation of the Israelites. Without the leadership of Moses, it is arguable that the Exodus would not have actually happened.

²⁰ Stefan Kürle has suggested that Moses is not the central character of the Exodus, but that Yahweh is actually the “hero” of the narrative. In his book, *The Appeal of Exodus*, he explores the humanizing characteristics of Moses that are present throughout the narrative. Despite the evidence of Moses' failures, this work posits that the choices Moses makes further reinforce his status as a collaborative agent, rather than relegating him to the position of “mediator.” Stefan Kürle, *The Appeal of Exodus: The Characters God, Moses and Israel in the Rhetoric of the Book of Exodus* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2013), *eBook Collection*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 30, 2017).

Because of the centrality of Yahweh's power and sovereignty in previous interpretive works and the unusual amount of agency afforded to Moses by the narrator, Exodus serves as the perfect example of the power of agency when placed at the forefront of interpretation. With agency as a centralizing theme, the collaborative effort of Yahweh is brought to the forefront, and the human power of Moses is allowed to take center stage. Through this interpretive lens, this work aims to bring to light the themes of human power, collaboration, and relationship within the Exodus narrative.

The following section will examine three key points within the Exodus narrative that exemplify the application of this lens: the initiation of Egyptian infanticide and subsequent birth of Moses (Ex. 1-2), Moses' encounter with Yahweh and call (Ex. 3:7-12), and Moses' interaction with Yahweh before the parting of the sea (Ex. 14:10-16).

The Role of Human Agency in the Birth and Survival of Moses

The circumstances that precede and surround the birth of Moses, the central human hero of the Exodus narrative, are rife with human choices. Not only are these human choices critical to the survival and character of the narrative's primary protagonist, but are made before Yahweh's direct intervention in the plight of the Israelites. The characters that drive the narrative in the first chapter of Exodus do so without any direct intervention or command from Yahweh.²¹ Of even greater import is the gender of these driving characters—Moses' survival and upbringing are assured largely due to the courageous efforts of a band of women.

²¹ James K. Bruckner, *Exodus*, vol. 2, *New International Biblical Commentary*, (Peabody: Henrickson Publishers, 2008), 32.

The narrative explains that the Pharaoh attempted to stall the growth of the Hebrews three times, first through subjugation and later through direct infanticide. Despite his best efforts, his plans were thwarted by the actions of two midwives to the Hebrews, Shiprah and Puah (Ex. 1:15-21). Despite receiving orders to kill the male infants of the Hebrews after birthing them, the two midwives refuse and lie to the Pharaoh to avoid punishment. Afterward, the narrator explains that the midwives were rewarded, though some scholars have hypothesized that v. 21 was added to the text as a gloss.²² In v. 22, Pharaoh's new decree no longer relies on the actions of the midwives, but instructs all persons to dispose of male Hebrew infants.

It is against this backdrop that the infant Moses is born. Of course, the birth of Moses is immediately problematic, as he must be hidden by his mother (Ex. 2:2). After three months, the mother of Moses, later named as Jochebed in Ex. 6 and Num. 26, places him within a basket on what can be assumed to be the Nile River (v. 3). The basket is found by the daughter of Pharaoh, who feels great compassion for the child and decides to adopt him, knowing well that he is one of the Hebrew males that has been sentenced to death (vv. 5-6). Moses' sister, Miriam, who has been watching all of these events take place, suggests that the Pharaoh's daughter employ a Hebrew woman to nurse the child for her (vv. 4, 7). Pharaoh's daughter agrees, and Miriam retrieves Jochebed, who, in an ironic twist of fate, nurses her own child for his adoptive mother, effectively having saved him from the infanticidal decree of the Pharaoh himself (vv. 8-10). Scarcely before Moses' life has even begun in any

²² J. Coert Rylaarsdam, *The Book of Exodus*, vol. 1, *The Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952), 856.

meaningful way, the choices of five female agents have saved him from certain death and foreshadowed his own acts of deliverance from Egyptian oppression.

It is abundantly clear that these five female characters have been purposefully given roles of agency. Feminist scholars like Susanne Scholz have suggested that the placement of female characters at the heart of these preliminary chapters was purposeful in that it may have been humorous to an ancient, androcentric audience—Pharaoh seems like even more of a fool when he is thwarted by a group of lowly women.²³ Despite potential sexism, there are a number of factors that secure the role of these women as agents.

Primarily, these women act regardless of any command or guidance from Yahweh. Though Yahweh appears briefly in Ex. 1:21, as noted previously, it has been suggested that this verse may have been added to the narrative later in an attempt to show that the midwives had been rewarded for their obedience to Yahweh, a sentiment that may have been particularly important to an editor who wished for the narrative to remain consistent with Deuteronomistic principles.²⁴

Even if Yahweh does appear briefly to reward the midwives, the command of Yahweh was not the driving force of the midwives' disobedience of the infanticidal edict. Rather, Ex. 1:17 informs the reader that the midwives disobeyed due to their fear of God. Here, their "fear of God" is probably best interpreted as their steadfast adherence to the way that God was perceived as having ordered the world. As James K. Bruckner explains, to "fear God" likely meant to believe that things were "wrong simply because they were contrary to

²³ Susanne Scholz, "The Complexities of 'His' Liberation Talk: A Literary Feminist Reading of the Book of Exodus," in *A Feminist Companion to the Bible: Exodus to Deuteronomy*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 24.

²⁴ Rylaarsdam, *The Book of Exodus*, 856.

the order of the life God had woven into the fabric of the created world.”²⁵ It was not a direct order or divine revelation that forced these female agents to act, but a strongly held belief system that they felt compelled to reinforce through disobedience. By disobeying of their own accord, as active participants in the larger narrative, they are exemplary, independent agents. They are even recognized by their own names, an honor that is not shared by the Pharaoh or many of the narrative’s other male characters.

These two midwives can also be identified as agents due to their absolutely vital role in the movement of the narrative itself. Without the actions of Shiphrah and Puah, Moses would not have survived childbirth. It is the disobedience of the midwives, and the emphasis they place on feminine Hebrew vitality in explaining this disobedience, that ultimately drives Pharaoh to issue an alternative decree. It is certain that if the midwives did not act as they did, Moses would have been killed upon birth. There would be no reason for the Pharaoh to expand his orders beyond the midwives of the Hebrews, a change that allowed Jochebed to hide and ultimately save her child. Without this act of brave disobedience, taken without any outside urging beyond perhaps their personal sense of justice, Moses, theoretically, would not have been alive to bring the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Without even a call narrative, two women effectively allowed the climax of the Exodus to occur. They play an inseparable and unprecedented role in the narrative, placing them in the highest order of agency. A reading that keeps agency at the forefront of interpretation allows them to be recognized as the foundational and inescapably important characters that they are, as opposed to reducing them to mere stepping-stones for Moses’ rise to leadership.

²⁵ Bruckner, *Exodus*, 23.

The role of Jochebed and Miriam in the survival of Moses is also quintessential to the development of the narrative. While the adoption of Moses by the Pharaoh's daughter can be read as an act of pure divine providence, as it has been, there is evidence within the text that Jochebed's actions were driven by more than hope alone.²⁶ Though no concrete evidence supports the idea that noble women often bathed by the Nile historically, it is textually clear that Miriam was lying in wait for something to happen after her mother placed the basket in the reeds. When Pharaoh's daughter finds the basket, Miriam is quick to suggest that she find a suitable wet-nurse from amongst the Hebrews. When Pharaoh's daughter affirms, Miriam immediately retrieves her own mother, Jochebed. The narrator presents to the audience a wise, careful woman in Jochebed, a character that knows exactly what she is doing. If Pharaoh's daughter usually bathed by the river, it is not outside of the realm of possibility that Jochebed placed the basket there purposefully, so that a noblewoman might find it. The adoption of a Hebrew child by the daughter of the Pharaoh would insure that the child would survive, and survive outside of the binds of slavery. Indeed, it has been suggested that the adoption of Moses by the Pharaoh's daughter may have ended the infanticide altogether.²⁷

The plausible premeditation of Jochebed and Miriam's actions only furthers their roles as active agents within the narrative. Rather than divine providence, it was personal action and choice that led to the survival of Moses. Further, through the saga of his exile from Egypt and rescue of the Midian priest's daughters, Moses displays the characteristics

²⁶ Despite presenting a reading of Exodus that finds divine providence on every page, Roy L. Honeycutt proposes that Jochebed and Miriam planned the rescue of Moses. This seems to contradict the claim that Moses' rescue was a miracle of divine intervention, rather emphasizing the role of human agency in Moses' survival. Roy L. Honeycutt, Jr., *General Articles, Genesis-Exodus*, vol. 1, ed. Clifton J. Allen, *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969).

²⁷ Bruckner, *Exodus*, 28-29.

that the narrator demonstrates his motherly figures as harboring. He is decisive, compassionate, and has a strong sense of justice. He acts without being prompted to do so, and makes decisions based on his inclinations toward right and wrong. Though Moses may be seen as acting harshly or violently within Ex. 2, what is most important is his ability to make decisions of his own accord, following his own sense of righteousness. The portrayal of Jochebed, Miriam, the Pharaoh's daughter, Shiphrah, and Puah are not only indicative of their own roles as independent and active agents, but foreshadow the agency of the narrator's central hero. It is essential to the structure of the narrative that these women be shown as agents, as it displays the role of human choice, decisiveness, and determination that color the entirety of Moses' birth, upbringing, and rise to leadership.

What does this portrayal of human beings in the narrative mean for the narrator's view of God and humanity? Clearly, human characters within the Exodus narrative can and do act of their own accord. They act without any direct push or command from Yahweh. While it may be common to think of the Exodus narrative as a tale of divine providence and the invisible hand of God, it is not explicit within these early chapters that Yahweh is acting at all. In fact, the narrative does not explicitly recognize Yahweh's acknowledgement of the suffering of the Israelites until Ex. 2:23-25. These human agents act without any type of coercion. It can be concluded, simply from these opening chapters, that the human characters can change the circumstances of their lives through the force of their own actions. They can adapt and respond to the problems that face them and work to usher in a better future for themselves. It does become clear, however, that human action alone is not enough to sway the tides of fate. It is the eventual collaboration between Moses and Yahweh that brings about real, concrete change. However, it would be irresponsible to overlook the massive

impact of the decisions that these women make within the establishing chapters of Exodus. Without their lone actions, Moses' rescue would not have taken place.

The Establishment of Moses as a Collaborative Human Agent

Having been birthed, saved, and raised by strong female characters who exhibit human agency through their many crucial choices, Moses is primed by Ex. 3 to become the ultimate collaborative agent of Yahweh. In the later verses of chapter 2, Moses exhibits the same willingness to make tough decisions and fight for justice that the female figures in his life did. After fleeing from Egypt, Moses became aware of his identity and role as both an Egyptian and a Hebrew. By Ex. 3, Moses has been groomed by his experiences and circumstances to become the perfect agent for Yahweh to collaborate with in the liberation of the Israelites.

Through Ex. 1 and 2, the reader is shown the power of human choice. The women in these early verses make decisions that shape the fate of both Egypt and Israel, all without any direct order from Yahweh. However, the narrator does not leave all liberation in the hands of human beings. It is clear through Moses' interaction with his fellow Hebrews in Ex. 2:13-14 that he does not yet hold sufficient authority or courage to lead the people anywhere—the people say as much themselves.²⁸ It is important to note that this idea of Moses' authority being challenged by the people and eventually strengthened by Yahweh is a continual theme throughout the Exodus narrative, and only strengthens the value of the collaborative relationship between the book's two central figures.²⁹

²⁸ Bruckner, *Exodus*, 33.

²⁹ Bruckner, *Exodus*, 33.

In chapter 3, Moses is finally granted the authority that he lacked when confronting the Hebrews the first time. It is in this chapter that Moses receives his call from Yahweh, continually rejects it, and finally accepts his role in the liberation of the Israelites from the bonds of slavery. Though the burning bush theophany has gained great attention from biblical scholars and theologians, what is particularly important for the development of Moses as an agent is Ex. 3:7-12. It is in these verses that Yahweh affirms a collaborative, joint relationship with Moses.

There is a stark contrast between the language that Yahweh uses to describe the situation in vv. 7-9 and v. 10. In juxtaposing the two, the reader finds that the structure of these verses emphasizes the role of Moses, in comparison to the role of Yahweh. Verses 7-9 read:

Then the Lord said, “*I have* observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; *I have* heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, *I know* their sufferings, and *I have* come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; *I have* also seen how the Egyptians oppress them” [*emphasis added*].

Here, Yahweh describes his own role to Moses, affirming the recognition that is described at the end of chapter 2.³⁰ It is clear that Yahweh is the subject of most of the action; Yahweh observes, hears, knows, comes down, and sees. The abundant usage of first person pronouns affirms that Yahweh is acknowledging his own role in the situation. However, v. 10 introduces a new element to Yahweh’s plan: “So come, *I will send you* to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt” [*emphasis added*]. The juxtaposition of this

³⁰ For ease of reading and due to the original text’s usage of male pronouns in reference to Yahweh, this analysis will mirror those masculine pronouns. It should be noted that this work makes no claims in regard to the gender of God theologically or biblically.

affirmation of Moses' active role in the plan to liberate the Israelites and the previous abundant usage of first person pronouns is telling. Though Yahweh is the one acknowledging the suffering of the Israelites, is the hearer of their cries, and is the ultimate deliverer from oppression, it will be Moses who is sent to bring the people out. It would not be sufficient for Yahweh to act alone, nor would it be sufficient for Moses to act without Yahweh. Therefore, these verses make clear that the liberation from Egypt can only be and will only be carried out via a collaboration between Yahweh and Moses.³¹

It is also clear that Yahweh would have the ability to bring about the plagues and rescue the Israelites from Egypt alone. However, doing so would not achieve all of the ends that Yahweh hoped to achieve. The reasons for this will become more clear after considering the implications of Ex. 14, which will be addressed in the following section. For now, it is sufficient to understand that Yahweh purposefully commissions Moses to act within this plan of liberation. The relationship between Yahweh and the Israelites is truly the central concern of the Exodus narrative. Though the book surely acknowledges the awesome power of Yahweh, even in foreign lands, it is much more concerned with the way that Yahweh deals with human beings. From chapter 3, it is clear to see that Yahweh is not a lone sovereign. Rather, the narrator has chosen to portray Yahweh as a considerate collaborator with Moses, respectful of the power of human beings and concerned with approaching them in a way that will be best received. It is important to the narrator that Moses be seen as a human leader, supported by a sovereign and concerned God. The role of human beings in the narrative,

³¹ Bruckner, *Exodus*, 41-42.

when read in this manner, cannot be understated. As Honeycutt writes, “It is by humanity that God redeems humanity.”³²

Viewing Moses as a mere tool or servant within the narrative would be to egregiously misread the text. It is clear that Yahweh harbors a profound respect for Moses, regardless of his later irritation with Moses’ protests (Ex. 4). The revealing of Yahweh’s name to Moses in vv.13-15 represents far more than the passing of a rhetorical tool, with which Moses may convince the people of his authority. To declare one’s name within the biblical author’s context is an enormous display of respect and trust. To give someone else one’s full name is to make oneself vulnerable, capable of being controlled or subjugated.³³ The revelation of Yahweh’s name to Moses reveals something absolutely crucial to interpreting Moses’ role in the Exodus narrative. Through this passing of his name, Yahweh has acknowledged Moses as a person worthy of trust, friendship, and collaboration.³⁴ Along with the fate of the Israelites, Yahweh has trusted Moses with his own name. This demonstration of respect shows that Moses was not simply viewed as a tool to be used by Yahweh, but as a collaborator, granted equal footing with the powerful deity. Their relationship transcends that of a master and servant, fully acknowledging that Moses is a central, active subject within the narrative, rather than a passive object to be utilized by Yahweh.

³² Honeycutt, *General Articles, Genesis-Exodus*, 313.

³³ *Ibid.*, 314.

³⁴ Gerhard von Rad emphasized the importance of the giving of Yahweh’s name to Israel in much greater detail than this work will allow. Essentially, the passing of Yahweh’s name to Moses had enormous cultural implications, especially for a people group that previously had no such access to their deity. The passing of this name implied the trust and nearness of Yahweh at this point in the narrative. As von Rad argues, access to the deity’s name is essential for a people group to form a relationship with that deity, making this passage absolutely vital for the narrative’s conception of the relationship between Israel and Yahweh. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, trans. D.M.G Stalker (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962), 179-184.

The Affirmation of Moses as a Capable Human Agent

As previously mentioned, the role of Moses as a mediator between the Israelites and Yahweh is particularly highlighted at the climax of the Exodus narrative. The harrowing tale of liberation finds its height as the Israelites are on the brink of certain death, along the shore of the sea. As Pharaoh and his soldiers grow nearer, they turn to Moses for advice and, once again, admonish him for making foolish decisions. Again, they question his authority and ability to liberate them, claiming that bondage in Egypt would be far more preferable than death along the shore (Ex. 14:10-12). It is important to note that the Israelites have not been formally introduced to Yahweh yet— their complaints are directed at Moses, as he is the only leader they can communicate with directly.³⁵ Again, Moses' role as the scapegoat for Israel's complaints is a theme that continues throughout the narrative, into the wilderness, established within the context of this harrowing escape.³⁶

It is Moses' reply and, subsequently, Yahweh's admonishment of Moses' advice that is particularly interesting in regard to Moses' role as a collaborative agent. Ex. 14:13-14 reads, "But Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.'" The phrase "keep still" is ambiguous in terms of translation. Though many scholars have argued that Moses only advises the Israelites to stop complaining, the phrase can also be translated as a command to do absolutely nothing.³⁷

³⁵ Bruckner, *Exodus*, 130.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Noel D. Osborn and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on Exodus* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1999), 339.

Regardless of how one translates this ambiguous phrasing in v.14, it is clear that Moses is advising the people to wait for Yahweh to act. Whether this was a command to be quiet and listen for Yahweh's instructions or to wait for Yahweh to act altogether, the translation of this phrase does not alter the interpretation that Moses commanded the Israelites to wait for something to happen.

Yahweh's response to Moses' advice for the people may be troubling to some readers, as it seems to directly contradict what Moses tells the Israelites. Verses 15-16 read, "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground.'" Surely, to any Israelite, having just been told that they should wait for Yahweh to do something, this admonition would seem shocking. To readers, Yahweh's response may be just as troubling. Some interpreters have noticed that there is a "seam" of sorts between verses 14 and 15. The problem really arises in the phrasing that is used— why would Yahweh be admonishing Moses for crying out when he was the one urging the Israelites to be still? Seemingly, Moses had not done anything wrong. For some, this problem is smoothed over in interpreting Yahweh's frustration as being directed toward the Israelites, through Moses.³⁸

Though this interpretation would seem to smooth over the issues with these clashing verses, it egregiously overlooks the grammatical structure of the text itself. In verse 15, a singular second person pronoun is used in Yahweh's admonition, as opposed to a plural "you." It is difficult to justify interpreting this verse as being directed toward a group of

³⁸ Walter Brueggemann et al., *Genesis to Leviticus*, vol. 1, *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 793.

people, rather than to Moses alone.³⁹ Though these interpretations would insinuate that Moses never cried out to Yahweh in a way that would require such a response, a much simpler interpretation would place Moses' advice to the Israelites as the warrant for such a response on the part of Yahweh. Moses instructs the Israelites to keep still, but Yahweh corrects his order by telling Moses to urge them onward.

If interpreted in this way, as they should be, these verses solidify the role of Moses within the narrative. Even Moses thinks of himself as a passive servant within the liberation of the Israelites. This conflict gives the narrator the perfect opportunity to provide the important lesson of this exchange, that Moses has to be the one to part the sea. Relying on Yahweh is not enough. The conclusion that the text leads the reader to is a radical one—waiting on God to act without doing anything is not enough, and is even frowned upon. The Exodus narrator corrects Moses' erroneous conclusion, that one must wait for Yahweh to act or give orders before doing something. Further, the narrative has perfectly equipped Moses for this moment; everything in his history has prepared him to act decisively. When he falters, Yahweh reminds him of his authority, telling him to raise his staff and act.

Though it is Yahweh's ultimate power that does the leg work to part the sea, this event cannot and would not take place without the action of Moses. Bruckner writes:

Yahweh did not choose to act alone to fight for Israel. The Lord could have directly sent the wind to blow the water apart, or to stop it, but did not. God instead allowed Moses' leadership to be maintained and strengthened in the midst of the salvation of the people. Moses was necessary at every stage of their deliverance. The people needed a human leader who was present to lead.⁴⁰

³⁹ Osborn, *A Handbook on Exodus*, 340.

⁴⁰ Bruckner, *Exodus*, 134.

The collaborative relationship between Yahweh and Moses was not just a coincidence, but was orchestrated on the part of Yahweh— and, narratively, by the biblical author— to demonstrate the nature of God to the reader. What is absolutely profound is the conscience effort of the narrative to demonstrate to the reader that, not only does God work best in collaboration with human beings, but that both God and human beings must share agency to act most effectively. The text displays the power of human beings, the power of God, and the miraculous events that can be ushered into being when those two forces work toward the same ends. In Ex. 14, the narrative essentially presents Yahweh as telling Moses, “You have all of the tools at your disposal to do something about your circumstances, and when you take action as my partner, something miraculous is going to happen.” This reading not only places Moses at the forefront of interpretation, as the epitome of human power and agency, but also elevates elements of the portrayed character of God that have previously been hidden by alternative analyses.

Overview

The life of Moses as described within the book of Exodus is consistently influenced by the choices of human agents. From the decisive actions of his mother that prevented his certain death to his own choice to accept Yahweh’s bid for collaboration, the shaping of Moses as the human hero of the Exodus narrative is fully dependent on the agency that both he and his contemporaries exhibit. At every turn, Yahweh is certain to ensure that Moses is aware of his role in the liberation of the Israelites, and that the effort is collaborative.

It is only through the utilization of agency as a central theme of interpretation that these elements of the narrative can be highlighted sufficiently. When sovereignty or historical accuracy are the primary focus of interpretation, the unfathomable importance of

Moses and the humans that surround him are lost. It is through the recognition of agency, informed by the existentialist sentiment that the human being be the foundation of the search for truth, that the reader is introduced to an entirely novel set of divine characteristics. By recognizing the importance of the human agent within the Exodus narrative, the power of human beings gains biblical support. The reader is better able to acknowledge that human agents have a role to play within the grand scheme of the universe. Exodus and Moses stand as the epitome of human relationship with God, and as the best example of human agency within the biblical text.

Agency Beyond Exodus

Agency is not exclusively seen within the pages of the Exodus narrative. The power of human choice and the collaborative nature of God is a theme that runs throughout the biblical text, seen especially within the narratives of the Hebrew Bible. Further, the implications of the presence of this theme throughout the text are not exclusive to biblical interpretation. There are a multitude of theological questions that can be raised regarding the agency that is seen throughout the narratives of the biblical text. Discussions of agency are also vital to examinations of feminine and minority perspectives within the text, as the way minority characters are afforded or stripped of agency reveals a great deal about the importance and role of those groups in question.⁴¹ To demonstrate the further potential

⁴¹ The importance of foundational works in liberation theology and feminist criticism cannot be understated here. Though this work's goal does not lie in presenting a systematic theological perspective, it must be recognized that agency always plays a role in these aforementioned fields. Gustavo Gutiérrez emphasizes the role of humanity and human responsibility in *A Theology of Liberation*, occasionally even highlighting the Exodus narrative. More focused studies of agency, similar to this work, can be utilized alongside landmark works like those of Gutiérrez to deepen examinations of minorities within the text.

benefits of examining agency within the text, this work will now briefly turn to other illuminating examples of agency within Old Testament narratives and the theological challenges revealed by studies of agency.

Outsiders as Agents

Throughout the saga of the Old Testament's narratives, the role of the "other" is often discussed in relation to Israel. The exclusive nature of the relationship between Israel and Yahweh is a vital element of the Hebrew Bible—the many conflicts between Jews and Gentiles that can be seen within Paul's writings and the gospels are a consequence of this exclusionary relationship. When one pays special attention to the agency afforded to characters who are not Israelites within the text, however, the special role of these "outsiders" within the story of Israel comes to light. Though the way in which these characters are written and presented within the text varies wildly, at times unexpectedly positive and otherwise horrifically unjust, recognizing the role of these characters as agents or passive tools is vital for understanding their participation in the story of Israel.

In examining the Exodus narrative, the treatment of outsiders within the text has already been briefly addressed. Though Moses was the primary focus of the previous analysis, the characters that participate within the narrative alongside Moses represent alternative snapshots of what agency looks like within the world of the narrator. As previously mentioned, the daughter of the Pharaoh is instrumental in the liberation of Israel. It was her actions that secured the survival of Moses, the Hebrew child that would eventually become Yahweh's chief collaborator and savior of the Israelites. She makes her own

Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973).

independent choices, outside of the jurisdiction, and even contrary to the decrees, of her father. The Pharaoh's daughter, though unnamed, is afforded an atypical amount of agency, especially as a female character within a harshly patriarchal world. It is a wicked Egyptian that eventually exhibits compassion toward Moses and catapults the Israelites closer to liberation. It is impossible to ignore the curiosity of this choice— in a narrative that focuses on the wickedness of the Egyptians and the subjugation of the Israelites, an Egyptian woman stands as one of its most kind, independent, and instrumental characters. Though this choice may have just been one of humorous irony, one cannot dismiss the fact that an outsider is featured within a narrative that generally favors the exclusive community of Israelites.

When turning to other Old Testament narratives, it is clear that outsiders are often chosen as the subjects of Yahweh's collaborative drive. This can be seen especially clearly in the utilization of Cyrus the Persian as yet another liberator of the Israelites. When the people are once again in need of rescuing, it is not another Israelite that Yahweh turns to to complete this task. Instead, Yahweh chooses a pagan outsider, one who was likely unfamiliar with Yahweh beforehand and gave credit to pagan gods for his victories, to free the Israelites and bring them out of captivity.⁴² The role of an outsider like Cyrus to complete such a task calls into question the exclusivity of the relationship between Israel and Yahweh. The deliberate role of Cyrus within the liberation described in Isaiah is revelatory of the willingness of God to collaborate with all people groups, regardless of ethnicity. Isaiah 45:1 presents Yahweh as venerating Cyrus. The verse reads, "Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes, to open

⁴² John Goldingay, *Isaiah*, vol. 13, *New International Biblical Commentary* (Peabody: Henrickson Publishers, 2001), 263-64.

doors before him— and the gates shall not be closed.” In the effort to find minority perspectives within the biblical text, the importance of the way a chosen text describes outsiders is invaluable. In Isaiah, the reader finds that Cyrus the Persian, the foreign king, is not to be feared, shunned, or otherwise ostracized, but has been given the role of Yahweh’s “anointed” confederate. The way that the text recognizes the ability of a pagan, otherwise excluded from the relationship between human beings and God, to be Yahweh’s collaborator is extraordinary and deserves recognition. The agency of Cyrus the Persian represents minority representation within the text that is unprecedented.

The Non-Agent

Contrary to positive instances of agency within the text, Old Testament narratives often present to their readers troubling depictions of non-agent characters. These characters are stripped of agency, utilized as literary tools or obstacles for the “primary” cast to deal with or use as necessary. All too often, these passive, objectified characters take the form of the submissive female or the demonized foreigner. Depictions like these are troubling, both in the way that they seem to contradict depictions of the underprivileged that have been discussed previously and in the claims they seem to make regarding the order of the world and the character of God. When agency is utilized as the central theme of interpretation, the disconnect between the characters who are presented as agents and characters who are stripped of their agency becomes startlingly clear.

Again, the Exodus narrative already contains an example of a character that has been stripped of agency and appears to be a mere literary obstacle. The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart within the saga of the Israelites’ liberation has troubled many religious thinkers and biblical scholars alike. Due to the enormous wealth of scholarship that has discussed this

issue, it will not be treated at length here. It is sufficient to present the Pharaoh of Exodus as a character that is presented as the opposite of Moses. Where Moses is the ultimate agent, shaped by human choice and allowed to make decisions that impact the grander scheme of the narrative, the Pharaoh is not developed in any meaningful way. The Pharaoh is placed within the narrative as an obstacle for the Israelites to overcome. Who he is on a more fundamental level, where he came from, and the choices he has to make are not consequential to the unfolding of the narrative. He is a passive object, rather than an active participant.

Though women, as noted in relation to the Exodus narrative, are sometimes presented within the Old Testament as possessing extraordinary agency, female characters are all too often stripped of agency and utilized as passive devices for their male counterparts to interact with. This is exemplified in Judges 19-21, a text in which an unnamed female concubine is offered to a group of vagrants as an alternative to her male partner. The narrative functions as a cautionary tale, warning its readers against treating foreigners badly. As the narrative closes, the Levite master of the concubine cuts her body, beaten and raped by the attackers that he and his host offered her to, into pieces and distributes the pieces to prove a point about lawlessness and debauchery. As Phyllis Trible unflinchingly describes her as follows: “Of all the characters in scripture, she is the least... She is property, object, tool, and literary device... In the end, she is no more than the oxen that Saul will later cut.”⁴³ The unnamed concubine of Judges represents a startling contrast to the powerful agency of Moses. She never speaks in the story; as such, she is never given a chance to offer herself for martyrdom,

⁴³ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (London: SCM Press, 2002), 80.

sacrifice, or illustration. She is not a collaborative agent that participates in the narrative willfully. Rather, she is utilized as a tool to demonstrate the vile tendencies of a people group without her consent, literally only placed within the story as a metaphor.

The depiction of the unnamed concubine of Judges 19-21 and her lack of any semblance of agency is troubling for a multitude of reasons. A responsible reader of the biblical text cannot ignore the presence of this narrative within sacred scripture. How can one be expected to deal with a text that presents thrilling and subversive views of women, such as the portrayal of Moses' mother and sister in Exodus, while simultaneously presenting women as passive objects for men to utilize to prove obscure political assertions? What should the reader be expected to discern about God or the divine from such a horrific story? How should the reader be expected to order his or her view of women based on these depictions? Studies that give themes of agency greater consideration have the ability to bring these tensions to the forefront of interpretation. Solutions to this tension within the biblical text are not easily found; though this work does not attempt to present a solution to the problems revealed, the importance of acknowledging these issues cannot be overstated. Utilizing the framework presented will surely allow readers and scholars to discover these problems where they have gone previously disregarded.

Theological Applications of Agency

Studies of agency raise a multitude of theological questions in relation to the biblical text and the metaphysical claims its authors seem to make. Even if the biblical authors' intentional claims cannot be discovered, the text confronts readers with a number of scenarios, characters, and moral problems that must be addressed. Biblical narratives influence the metaphysical perspectives of their readers, along with the divine attributes that

those readers have determined the text to be reflective of. As such, examining the way that biblical characters are portrayed allows for a greater investigation of the claims that the text seems to be suggesting or that can be derived from it. As addressed at length within the methodological portions of this work, narratives are shaped by the presuppositions and interpretive stances of both their authors and their audiences.

Any discussion of human agency will surely raise questions regarding freewill and the sovereignty of God. As presented within the biblical text, it would appear as if God works collaboratively with human beings. The reason for this, however, remains unclear. Is God incapable of performing such tasks as liberating the Israelites or saving the life of the Hebrew infants? Why would God need to employ human beings for these tasks? Further, if God is capable of performing these tasks alone, why would God collaborate with human beings that seem to continually fail or underperform? Would it not be preferable to carry out these tasks alone, with assured success?

It is the position of this work that discussions of agency may serve to provide a biblical basis for viewpoints that have previously suffered from a lack of biblical support. Process thought, presented by Griffin as a solution to issues of freewill and theodicy, is especially supported by these findings. The unprecedented amount of agency that can be seen within the character of Moses supports theories that value the power of human beings over the absolute omnipotence of God. If God is presented as employing the assistance of human beings in performing miraculous tasks within the biblical text, theories like process theology that give preference to divine-human mutuality gain greater scriptural support.

Outside of the realm of academic theology, findings such as these may also be vital for the Christian community. Any viewpoint that claims that the body of Christ must wait in

quiet acceptance of social circumstances for God to be revealed are proven erroneous by the texts that have been examined within this work. The presence of human agency within the text, especially within a narrative as vital and foundational as Exodus, runs contrary to any claim that Christians do not have the capability and responsibility to respond to social and moral crises. Indeed, it is the presentation of divine-human relationship and collaboration within these texts that reinforces the role of the Christian in taking active steps toward social justice, equality, and activism. It is not enough to stand idly by; this is the antithesis of Yahweh's correction that is presented in Ex. 14. It is only by human participation in God's efforts that the fabric of society is changed. A Christian needs only to look to the importance of humanity within the Exodus narrative to draw this conclusion. Thus, it is vital for the Christian community to recognize the role of human agents within the biblical text.

Conclusion

The agency of Moses is treated within Birch et. al.'s introductory text *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* within a small section consisting of three pages of material that leave much to be desired.⁴⁴ It is the aim of this work to present the study of agency within Old Testament narratives as deserving of more than three pages. The importance of the human agent within the biblical text cannot be overstated, especially when it is so exemplified within one of the most widely known, universally celebrated texts in human history. A theme as reoccurring and vital as agency deserves a wealth of scholarly examination comparable to studies of sovereignty, freewill, and historical origin.

⁴⁴ Bruce C. Birch et al., *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 120-122.

Agency is a slippery subject, defined differently within varying fields. However, agency within this context is best explained through its relationship to a number of philosophical and theological ideas, namely those of process thought, existentialism, and studies in literature. A character with agency can be identified as a character that participates actively and independently within the narrative, a person that drives the story and pushes events toward a conclusion. An agent has the power to influence both the fabric of society and the events of the narrative itself. Contrary to a character that possesses agency, a character devoid of agency is depicted as a passive object, unable to influence his or her circumstances, and relegated to the position of literary device or obstacle. In examining the human characters presented by the narrative, the examiner may reveal aspects of what the text presents in terms of claims regarding divine attributes, the relationship of human beings to the divine, and the metaphysical. As claimed by Mann, narratives present unique perspectives, shaped by the interpretations of authors and the cultures that those authors belonged to.

This viewpoint of agency is epitomized within the character of Moses, a hero that is presented as powerful, capable of changing the circumstances of his people, and fully prepared to collaborate with the divine. Similarly, characters like Jochebed, Miriam, the Pharaoh's daughter, Shephrah and Puah, and Cyrus the Persian can be identified as characters that are archetypical of the collaborative agent. Further, characters like the unnamed concubine of Judges can be viewed as a stark contrast to those listed above, stripped of agency and utilized as passive tools.

It is the examination of agency within the text that highlights the issues discussed and raises new questions of sovereignty, human power, and patriarchal influences. Agency has

been proven to be a sufficient lens, through which textual themes and patterns can be viewed, analyzed, and emphasized. Utilizing agency as a central concern of biblical interpretation allows the interpreter to better examine issues related to human characters, the divine-human relationship, and the divine attributes that may be derived from the text. In conjunction with the Exodus narrative, the utilization of agency emphasizes the role of Moses as the central hero of the text, driven by and shaped by human agents, quintessential to the liberation of the Israelites. It is this interpretation that must be considered by scholarly communities and the church body as exemplary of the ability of human beings to influence change and alter the circumstances that bind them. The liberation of the Israelites would have never occurred without the decisive and influential actions of the human agents presented within the Exodus narrative. Similarly, communities that hold the biblical text as authoritative cannot expect social change to occur without attempting to imitate the archetype of human agency.

Bibliography

- Birch, Bruce C., Walter Brueggemann, Terence E. Fretheim, and David L. Peterson. *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999.
- Bruckner, James K. *Exodus*. Vol. 2. *New International Biblical Commentary*. Peabody: Henrickson Publishers, 2008.
- Brueggemann, Walter, Walter C. Kaiser, Leander E. Keck, and Terence E. Fretheim. *Genesis to Leviticus*. Vol. 1. *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994.
- Coogan, Michael David, Marc Zvi Brettler, Carol A. Newsom, and PHEME PERKINS. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Davis, Stephen T. *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*. Louisville: Westminster J. Knox Press, 2001.
- Goldingay, John. *Isaiah*. Vol. 13. *New International Biblical Commentary*. Peabody: Henrickson Publishers, 2001.
- Griffin, David Ray. *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004.
- Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973.
- Honeycutt, Roy L., Jr. *General Articles, Genesis-Exodus*. Vol. 1. Ed. Clifton J. Allen. *The Broadman Bible Commentary*. Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969.
- Kimelman, Reuven. "Prophecy as Arguing with God and the Ideal of Justice." *Interpretation* 68, no. 1 (January 2014): 17-27. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost. Accessed November 30, 2017.
- Kürle, Stefan. *The Appeal of Exodus: The Characters God, Moses and Israel in the Rhetoric of the Book of Exodus*. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2013. *eBook Collection*, EBSCOhost. Accessed November 30, 2017.
- MacQuarrie, John. *Existentialism*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977.
- Mann, Steven T. *Run, David, Run!: An Investigation of the Theological Speech Acts of Davids Departure and Return (2 Samuel 14-20)*. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2014.

Osborn, Noel D. and Howard A. Hatton. *A Handbook on Exodus*. New York: United Bible Societies, 1999.

Rad, Gerhard von. *Old Testament Theology*. Vol. 1. Translated by D.M.G Stalker. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962.

Riswold, Caryn Donna. "Coram Deo: Human Life in the Vision of God." *Dissertation Abstracts International*. Section A: Humanities & Social Sciences 61, no. 04 (October 2000): 1482. *Gender Studies Database*, EBSCOhost. Accessed November 30, 2017.

Rylaarsdam, J. Coert. *The Book of Exodus*. Vol. 1. *The Interpreter's Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1952.

Sholz, Susanne. "The Complexities of 'His' Liberation Talk: A Literary Feminist Reading of the Book of Exodus." In *A Feminist Companion to the Bible: Exodus to Deuteronomy*. Ed. Athalya Brenner. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000.

Trible, Phyllis. *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. London: SCM Press, 2002.