

Research project

The Saved Saviour: Exo 1-2 in Patristic and Rabbinic Interpretation

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The project will deal with patristic and rabbinic interpretations of Exo 1-2, the narrative of the birth, youth, and twofold salvation of Moses (Exo 2:1-22), and the events immediately bringing forth this situation (Exo 1). The book of Exodus is the foundation narrative of both Jews and Christians. Thus its interpretation was important for the discussion over Jewish and Christian identity in the first centuries of the Common Era. Exo 1-2 are the opening chapters of the whole Exodus story and therefore important for the introduction of Moses, who is the book's central character as the saviour of God's people.

Biblical interpretation was made a strong marker of Christian and Jewish self-definition, alongside other factors, such as religious practice, circumcision etc. This discourse over the Bible led to dialogue on the one hand and sometimes acrid polemics on the other hand. Traces thereof can be found in patristic and rabbinic biblical interpretation.

The project will focus on three main texts, which are the most elaborate rabbinic and patristic interpretations of Exodus 1-2: the Midrash Tanhuma, tractate Sota 11a-13a, the Mekhilta, Origen's first two homilies on the Book of Exodus and Ephrem the Syrian's Exodus commentary.

First, the texts will be analysed according to their specific interpretations of Exo 1-2. This examination will be guided by the following topics, which are important for the biblical text as well as for its interpretations: empowerment and disempowerment, structures of power and gender, defining identity and otherness, metaphorical interpretation and its implications, space and time as structuring elements. The second step is the exploration of the texts' social, cultural, and religious contexts. After that, a careful comparative evaluation shall be attempted. As a last step, hypothetical considerations on possible dependencies can be made.

The primary aim of the project is to evaluate the different texts in their respective contexts and then compare them. The specific interpretations will be related to the respective hermeneutical as well as the authors' socio-cultural and theological background. The focus will be on the different interpretations of certain topics of the biblical text.

The project will contribute to a more complete image of early Jewish and Christian Bible interpretation as well as Christian-Jewish relations in the first centuries, which were the foundation for later positive and negative developments of this relationship.