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## Picturing Political Deliverance: Three Paintings of the Exodus by John Martin, Francis Danby, and David Roberts

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Abstract:

During the 1820s the artists John Martin, Francis Danby, and David Roberts each painted large-scale dramatic works representing the biblical narrative of the Israelite exodus from Egypt. The religious subject matter of these paintings has caused many to assume them to be politically conservative by nature; however, this article suggests that these works aligned more precisely with reformist political discourses, and that both the subject matter and the methods of representation generated meanings that substantiated progressive political policies during the "age of reform" in Britain. \_

## Picturing Political Deliverance: Three Paintings of the Exodus by John Martin, Francis Danby, and David Roberts by Chris Coltrin

After signing the United States Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress approved a much less famous resolution that appointed Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams, to design the Great Seal of the United States of America. Following six weeks of independent work, the three men appeared before the Congress to present their respective designs. Somewhat surprisingly, two of the three came back with similar designs. Both Franklin and Jefferson proposed that the Great Seal depict a scene from the narrative of the Israelite exodus from Egypt.<sup>[1]</sup> Franklin's design depicted Moses "lifting up his Wand, and dividing the Red Sea, and Pharaoh, in his chariot, overwhelmed with the Waters," with the inscription "Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God" surrounding the image (fig. 1). Jefferson similarly proposed that the seal depict the Israelites "led by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night."<sup>[2]</sup> These ideas were eventually discarded for the now-familiar eagle, but it is significant that each man envisioned the Israelite exodus as the one narrative that could symbolically encapsulate and articulate their new nation.



Fig. 1, Benjamin Franklin, Proposed design for the Great Seal of the United States, 1856. Drawing by Benson J. Lossing for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. General Collections of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. [\[larger image\]](#)

Almost fifty years later, three artists in Britain coincided in painting the exodus on large-scale canvases. They were not politicians, yet their works were no less political than the designs of Jefferson and Franklin. In 1824, three years after the success of John Martin's (1789–1854) epic *Belshazzar's Feast*, a painting that became a public phenomenon and which caused Sir Thomas Lawrence to refer to Martin as "the most popular painter of the day," he exhibited his depiction of *The Seventh Plague of Egypt* (fig. 2) to great acclaim.<sup>[3]</sup> Martin's popularity and commercial success inspired a number of other artists to follow in his footsteps and attempt to make their reputations with similar subjects and styles of painting. Francis Danby (1793–1861) exhibited his *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt* (fig. 3) in 1825, and David Roberts (1796–1854) presented *The Departure of the Israelites out of the Land of Egypt* (fig. 4) in 1829. Both artists painted in what was widely recognized as "the style of Martin,"<sup>[4]</sup> and they generally garnered the types positive

public sentiments Martin's works had. Yet while these artists painted in a similar style and chose the same biblical story for their subjects, each of the three artists painted different moments from the story and emphasized different ideas in their works.



Fig. 2, John Martin, *The Seventh Plague of Egypt*, 1824. Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.  
[\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 3, Francis Danby, *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, 1825. Oil on canvas. Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston, U.K. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 4, David Roberts, *The Departure of the Israelites out of the Land of Egypt*, 1829. Oil on canvas. Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, U.K. [\[larger image\]](#)

The fact that the narrative of the exodus was painted on such substantial canvases within a five-year period suggests that it possessed special significance in the 1820s. To account for this, it is useful to consider the various public discourses in which the exodus narrative appeared. The story of the exodus was commonly preached from the pulpit in large and small churches, often with an emphasis on the commonalities between the Israelites and the British people, a connection that will be explored later. Yet the story also began to be used in a more secular and politicized manner in the early nineteenth century.

One place the exodus story frequently appeared was in reformist political publications. The narrative lent itself to political interpretations because in the early 1800s it was viewed fundamentally as a historical account of political liberation, despite its source in a religious text. As one writer stated in 1830, "the veracity of Moses is . . . generally acknowledged to be unimpeachable, even by those who do not regard the Pentateuch as written by divine inspiration," due to the inclusion of the Israelite exodus in other secular histories.<sup>[5]</sup> Thus, while from a twenty-first century perspective the miraculous nature of the story might place it firmly in the realm of myth, in the early nineteenth century the exodus was considered an incontestable historical event that resonated in religious and political arenas. The exodus was a paradigmatic shift in the history of the Israelites that resulted in both the liberation of a captive people and the birth of a fundamentally new type of society.

The early nineteenth century was an age of apocalyptic fervor, and these three paintings were invariably bound to the idea of apocalypse. The onset of the French Revolution caused many to envision themselves as actors in the end-of-the-world drama described by St. John in the Book of Revelation, and that belief continued to pervade during the 1820s.<sup>[6]</sup> One might assume that in an age of apocalyptic expectation, representations of mass destruction would be emblematic of a bleak religious outlook allied with conservative political ideologies. However, the history of the period complicates those assumptions. Martin's and his follower's paintings were dynamic entities that could have been appropriated for a range of political purposes. As one reviewer noted in 1833, "In painting one picture [Martin] paints a thousand."<sup>[7]</sup> The exodus narrative touched on some of the most pressing political issues of the 1820s—slavery, the oppression of the poor, and the obsession with unrestrained economic expansion. Most importantly, this new Israelite society carried rhetorical weight for reformers because it contained a political structure believed to be designed by God himself. I believe that these works specifically engaged in promoting reformist political ideas by suggesting that protection from future apocalyptic destruction hinged on a collective type of salvation produced by properly conceived social and political institutions, rather than on individual repentance or righteousness.

### **The Three Exodus Paintings**

John Martin first exhibited his painting of *The Seventh Plague of Egypt* to an "expectant and crowding public" at the inaugural exhibition of the Society for British Artists in 1823.<sup>[8]</sup> The painting was described as "one of the very best performances of this artist" who "is without rival" when painting this type of subject.<sup>[9]</sup> Another reviewer called it a "singular work" that was "executed with a power of pencil no less conspicuous than original."<sup>[10]</sup> The painting was also exhibited in London the following year at a special exhibition of contemporary British artists that included works by Turner, Thomas Lawrence, Benjamin Haydon, and David Wilkie. In contrast to the Royal Academy exhibitions which commonly had over 1000 works on display,

or the Society for British Artists exhibition which had roughly 750, this exhibition was limited to 141 works of only the most eminent living artists.[11] *The Seventh Plague of Egypt* was also disseminated widely throughout British society in print form. A slightly altered version of the scene was included in Martin's large-scale steel mezzotint illustrated *Bible* issued in the 1830s. The print was also sold as a single-sheet mezzotint, some of which sold for as little as one guinea apiece.[12] The image was also reproduced as a wood engraving in a number of cheaply produced annuals, in addition to the cheaply produced Westall and Martin illustrated Bible. [13] The favorable public and critical response to the painting in two prominent exhibitions, and its widespread distribution in reproductive prints, points to the need to explore its resonance with broader issues in British society of the 1820s and 1830s.

In Martin's painting, Moses stands in the left foreground on a raised architectural landing with outstretched arms clutching a rod, as described in the Book of Exodus.[14] At his side, his companion Aaron crouches in apparent fear and reverence at the miraculous scene before him. Directly above Moses and Aaron, streaks of dark rain and cloud descend like black daggers from the sky being thrust into the back of Egypt. In the center of the canvas the scene opens both to Egypt below and the sky above. On the ground, the storm-tossed, wrecked ships in the harbor evince the turmoil caused by the hailstorm. In contrast to this turmoil, bright white light shines down from above, piercing through the swirling vortex of darkness. The heavenly light illuminates monumental Egyptian architectural forms, including immense pyramids in the distance and a series of lengthy colonnades. The right side of the canvas is dominated by a characteristic feature of Martin's paintings—painted architecture—which here frames the cowering figure of Pharaoh and the myriads of Egyptians. By contrasting the minute figures spread across the architecture and the enormous Egyptian columns, colonnades, porticoes, and layers of terraces, a sense of urban magnificence is created. As one reviewer noted, *The Seventh Plague of Egypt* combined "the most dreadful phenomena of nature, with gorgeous piles of architecture, ranges of temples, palaces, towers, which the devastating elements seem about to overwhelm in universal ruin. The whole scene is impressed with an appearance of awe and horror." [15] Beyond their sheer entertainment value, however, these elements take on alternative implications when considered in the historical context of the early nineteenth century.

### **The Positive Plague: A Warning to the Nation**

Despite the repeated moments of tragedy and destruction in the exodus narrative, for most nineteenth-century spectators the story was about freedom, liberation, and triumph. In an 1824 *Methodist Magazine* article an author, after recounting the violence of the plagues of Egypt, immediately followed with comments on how those plagues evince God's "remarkable mercy" and "special kindness." [16] A poem from the *Evangelical Magazine* of 1830 entitled "The Tenth Plague," contained this same juxtaposition. The early portion of the poem details the heartrending impact of the plagues sent by God:

Then o'er her young babe did the mother's tears run,  
As she prest to her bosom her first born son;  
For its smiles they were fled and bereft of its breath,  
It convulsively writhed in the tortures of death.



It is hard to conceive of a scene more tragic than a child "convulsively writh[ing] in the tortures of death" in its mother's arms. Yet following this emotional stanza, wherein God has smitten the first born child of every Egyptian, a different sentiment and tone pervades:

But Hark! On the wind rolls the voice of a song,  
Now louder and louder it echoes along,  
Still higher and higher the swelling notes rise,  
Tis the paeon of multitudes piercing the skies...  
.....  
The men of that host are the children of Shem;  
*The fall of Egyptia is freedom to them;*  
No more shall the taskmaster torture his slave,  
Nor the Hebrew be laid in the bondsman's vile grave.<sup>[17]</sup>

Despite the theme of violence in the story of the exodus, the poem emphasized how that violence punished the wicked and facilitated the liberation of God's chosen people—for "the Fall of Egyptia is freedom to them." For both the ancient Israelite and nineteenth-century Christian, the violence perpetrated by God on the Egyptians through the plagues, along with their ultimate demise in the Red Sea, were considered signs of God's mercy, rather than evidence of his vengeance.

Martin visually alluded to the merciful and liberating aspects of the story by painting a bright circle of light at the center of the composition which acts as a foil to the storm and abates its consequences, even amidst the destruction on the periphery of the canvas. At least one contemporary reviewer of a reproduction of Martin's painting noted how this feature represented the mercy of God, rather than his wrath.<sup>[18]</sup> A critic from *The Monthly Review* wrote:

The Israelite [Moses] looks, indeed, like a minister of heaven, rolling back the deluge and the tempest, which threatened the magnificent city before him with destruction, had not the obstinate king released the tribes from their bondage. The sun-light breaking through the overwhelming clouds, and flashing on the turbid waters; the pyramid in the distance dimly catching the return of the day; the mountains, and the more elevated buildings near them, already rejoicing in its gladness, and the crowds of human beings pouring forth the voice of gratitude for their unexpected deliverance, combine to fill up every part of this noble design with topics of the highest interest, and to impress it with a character of sublimity.<sup>[19]</sup>

This critic noted two significant aspects of Martin's treatment of the subject that reveal an entirely new set of meanings associated with it. First, the critic viewed the destruction besetting Egypt as a result of the King's "obstinate" refusal to free the Israelites. Human agency caused the plague, not God. Second, this reviewer described Moses as "rolling back" the plague, rather than calling it down. From the perspective of this critic, Moses stood as the deliverer from destruction. This interpretation is supported also when examining an early sketch of the scene done by Martin in which the Moses figure stands directly beneath the falling hail. In the final version, Martin shifted Moses slightly to the right, and instead of calling down the hail, Moses seems to be communing with the light piercing through the clouds. And if, in fact, Moses could be seen as pushing back the storms and as a conduit for sparing the Egyptians,

then he would assume his traditional role as the political representative of God on earth whose primary function is to deliver, rather than destroy.

### **Moses as a Political Reformer**

A significant feature of Martin's painting is the elevation of the figure of Moses over that of Pharaoh. Martin's Moses commands much more visual attention than Pharaoh, who is painted on a much smaller scale and hidden amidst a sea of other figures in the right foreground of the canvas. In contrast, Moses is flanked only by the crouching figure of Aaron, whose bright white robes draw the viewer's eye to the dramatic figure of the prophet. The architecture also elevates and frames Moses. Martin created an architectural gap between the massive plinths upon which the Egyptians stand on the right side of the canvas and the platform on which Moses stands, causing the single figure of Moses to act as a counterbalance to the masses of Egyptians. The directional flow of light and dark in the sky above also assists in focusing the viewer on Moses: the black shards of rain and hail angle down toward Moses, while the light creates a diagonal form which culminates in his figure.

This emphasis on the figure of Moses was crucial because of the political overtones that accompanied his representation during this period. Moses was described in the 1820s more often as a political leader than a prophet. In both religious and political publications, Moses was frequently referred to as "the Jewish legislator, historian and prophet," "the first legislator of the Jews," "the great legislator," or "The Hebrew lawgiver."<sup>[20]</sup> In Reverend Michael Russell's book on the history of the Jewish people (1827), the first chapter gives an overview of the civil and political constitutions of the ancient Hebrews; religion is not even mentioned until the second chapter.<sup>[21]</sup> In *The Examiner's* visual description of Martin's painting, the author described the two foreground figures as "the supernaturally gifted Hebrew leaders," rather than Moses and Aaron, thereby sublimating their prophetic role to their political one.<sup>[22]</sup> The fundamentally political nature of Moses is crucial to an understanding of the resonances Martin's painting had in the early nineteenth century.

Moses also began to be associated with a distinct type of politics during the nineteenth century. In the two decades after Martin's painting was exhibited, Moses and the exodus narrative appeared in the writings of Karl Marx and early British socialists such as Moses Hess.<sup>[23]</sup> An echo of these radical political connections was still made in the early the twentieth century in Lincoln Steffens's defense of Leninist politics, entitled "Moses in Red."<sup>[24]</sup> Political philosopher Michael Walzer notes that not only does the exodus story "loom large in the literature of revolution," but that "exodus has often been imagined as a program for revolution" with Moses positioned as the political leader.<sup>[25]</sup> While Moses was not canonized by Hess and Marx as a progressive political figure until the middle of the nineteenth century, the early formulation of Moses's political connotations and their relationship to social reforms began to germinate during the early decades of the century.

Moses's biography made him a powerful political symbol. Because the narrative describes him as being raised within the institutions of Egyptian power, and then opposed to the very system that offered him personal comfort, convenience, and power, he seemed a figure of the ideal reformer. He was also willing to use violence to deliver his people from oppression. In the extremely popular two-penny journal *The Political Register*, the influential radical writer William Cobbett lauded this specific quality. Cobbett wrote that "Moses resisted oppression in

the only way that resistance was within his power. He knew that his countrymen had no chance in any court; he knew that petitions against oppressions were all in vain," and thus "he resolved to begin the only sort of resistance that was left him."<sup>[26]</sup> In 1816 when this was published, the readership of Cobbett's journal was estimated at 200,000 people, making it more widely read than any other newspaper or periodical.<sup>[27]</sup> Though Cobbett was not overtly religious, he employed the language of religion, and particularly the example of Moses, to explicate and justify his political positions. As Cobbett noted, when other peaceful political options were cut off, Moses led a violent revolution at the behest of God. By placing such a politically charged figure at the center of his painting, Martin engaged the radical political discourses into which Moses was rhetorically woven.

### **Francis Danby and David Roberts: "In the Style of Martin"**

John Martin's fame and financial successes in the early 1820s prompted a range of reactions from other artists in Britain. Some were disgusted at his lack of academic training. Others, perhaps jealous at his popular success, condemned his work as virtual theater, rather than fine art. Still others "plunged [their] plowshare into the same soil" as Martin in the hope that it would facilitate their artistic rise.<sup>[28]</sup> The two artists best known in the 1820s for painting in "the style of Martin" were Francis Danby and David Roberts. Though both artists later in their careers concentrated on landscape painting, eliminating overt references to narratives, they produced Martin-esque biblical canvases during the height of Martin's popularity. Critics often attacked them for imitating Martin, yet Danby and Roberts garnered the type of popular praise and attention that Martin enjoyed. One reviewer called Danby's *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt* "one of the most extraordinary pictures ever painted," while another critic described Roberts's *Departure of the Israelites* as "impossible not to be struck with."<sup>[29]</sup> Both paintings elicited popular acclaim and professional advancement for their makers. Within two years of their exhibiting these paintings, each was offered a prestigious role in the British art world, Danby in 1826 as a Royal Academy Associate, and Roberts as the President of the Society of British Artists in 1831.<sup>[30]</sup>

In addition, Danby's and Roberts's paintings entered the collective imagination of the British populace through broadly distributed prints. Martin had become successful by selling mezzotints of his works during the 1820s, and Danby and Roberts followed suit by producing reproductions of their works as well.<sup>[31]</sup> On an even more popular level, Danby's and Roberts's paintings were both featured as wood-engraved frontispieces in *The Saturday Magazine*, a cheap Christian alternative to the popular *Penny Magazine*, in the early 1830s. *The Saturday Magazine* rarely featured history paintings on its cover, generally opting for generic views of cathedrals or foreign landscapes, yet in 1832 they made an exception for an engraving after Roberts's *The Departure of the Israelites out of the Land of Egypt* (fig. 5).<sup>[32]</sup> The next year, the magazine featured Danby's work, citing the popularity of the Roberts piece as the reason for commissioning a wood engraving after Danby (fig. 6).<sup>[33]</sup> Roberts's painting was also turned into a large-scale diorama that was displayed in London, New York and Boston.<sup>[34]</sup> Following the exhibition in New York, the *American Monthly Magazine* called Roberts's diorama "the most magnificent painting that has ever been exhibited in the United States."<sup>[35]</sup> In all three cases, these paintings of the exodus were not only viewed by thousands of spectators at major art exhibitions, but were purchased by wealthy collectors as steel plate engravings, viewed by tens of thousands who saw the illustrated covers of penny magazines, and gazed at as massive public spectacles.





Fig. 5, After David Roberts, *The Departure of the Israelites out of Egypt*, 1832. Woodcut. *The Saturday Magazine*, July 28, 1832. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 6, Francis Danby, *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, 1833. Woodcut. *The Saturday Magazine*, January 5, 1833. [\[larger image\]](#)

### David Roberts's *The Departure of the Israelites out of the Land of Egypt* in Context

In 1824 a relatively unknown stage painter named David Roberts exhibited his first attempt at fine art, a modest landscape painting, in the same exhibition as Martin's *Seventh Plague of Egypt*. Though his early successes were limited, which required his continued employment as a stage painter, Roberts made a splash in 1829 with his first large-scale history painting, *The Departure of the Israelites out of the Land of Egypt*.<sup>[36]</sup> The story of the exodus had previously proven to be fertile ground for Martin and Danby, and Roberts decided to paint a more subdued, yet intensely dramatic scene. Rather than focusing on a moment of miraculous intervention, Roberts depicted the Israelites in a crowded procession funneling out of the great city they had helped construct. As if perched atop the city walls of Egypt, the viewer of Roberts's painting looks down with a bird's eye view over the city onto a broad boulevard flooded by the newly freed Israelites. On each side of the boulevard, multi-colored columns create lengthy terraces that in turn support thousands of Egyptian onlookers. Egyptian statuary, monumental pillars, grand entrances, vast porticoes, and great pyramids cover the left-hand side of the array. The sky above seems to be bisected by the morning sun as it illuminates the scene in the distance and casts much of the foreground in shadow. Apart from the sky and the elevated walkway in

the foreground, every inch of the canvas is packed full of architecture and figures, creating a sort of visual claustrophobia. Martin's paintings were characterized by towering architectural forms and thousands of tiny figures; Roberts took that formula to new extremes in *The Departure of the Israelites out of the Land of Egypt*.

Almost every review of Roberts's painting emphasized two of its features: the unique way it represented masses of Israelites, and the dramatic impact of the architecture. Whereas the drama in Martin's paintings was often conveyed through convulsions in nature, Roberts's composition is more subdued and creates drama through scale, figures, depth, and monumental architecture. In what follows below, I want to suggest that Roberts's painting represented the Israelites in the guise of a modern nation, while the scale of the architecture alluded to their former role as slaves. By representing Israel as a modern nation, Roberts's work emphasizes the parallels between the chosen nation of Israel and the possible chosen status of modern Britain, and by alluding to issues of slavery and freedom, Roberts's work recalls a salient contemporary political issue that was significantly influenced by Christian theology and morality.

### Israel as a Nation

One unique aspect of Roberts's work is his virtual elimination of the major actors in the story in favor of the crowds that line a grand boulevard. Both Pharaoh and Moses are difficult to locate on the canvas, even though each appears in the foreground of the painting. Neither is given the type of space and focus they had in Martin's *Seventh Plague of Egypt*. In Roberts's painting, Pharaoh's small seated figure is arrayed in glorious robes and golden decorations that cause him to merge with his lavish surroundings, rendering him almost camouflaged in the scene. Moses's figure is only slightly more visible in the right middle ground of the painting, as it is turned away from the viewer and covered entirely in shadow. Reduced to a small silhouette with upraised arms, Moses holds a rod to indicate his identity. Viewing either figure requires the spectator to inspect the painting up close and with a high degree of precision, whereas the crowd of Israelites leaving Egypt *en masse* would have been visible to all onlookers. The perspective, the lighting, and the architectural elements all lead the viewer's eye down onto the broad boulevard flooded with Israelites. This emphasis on the Israelites as the key subject in the painting, and their conception as a single mass, significantly alters the possible political associations of the painting.

Roberts's painting suggests visually that the Israelites are leaving Egypt as a unified nation. Some of the more striking details in the painting are the flags, banners, and ensigns carried by the Israelites on their way out of the city. Rather than appearing as a disheveled conglomeration of downtrodden peoples, as one might expect a recently oppressed people to appear, Roberts presents them with the accoutrements of modern nationhood. This sense of unity is also emphasized by the perceived movement in unison across the canvas. A number of critics noted this visual phenomenon in their exhibition reviews. The *Literary Gazette* wrote that the painting contains a "multitude of human beings actuated by one great impulse."<sup>[37]</sup> The *Belle Assemblée* claimed it to be "impossible" that "the effect of immense masses of people could be given upon canvas with greater accuracy," adding that "those masses appear almost to possess the attribute of motion."<sup>[38]</sup> The *New Monthly Magazine* described how the sensation is great from a distance, but as the canvas is approached "a spectator finds that what appears to be a multitude of human beings is merely a number of dabs of color, without shape or form, he

becomes astonished, as a very trifling distance converts them into an animated crowd."<sup>[39]</sup> The crowd of Israelites is described by these various reviewers as "animated," in "motion," and "actuated by one great impulse"—all alluding to the way the Israelites seemed to come to life as a unified body in motion. This sense of unified movement by the Israelites, combined with the flags as markers of modern nationalism, results in the representation of Israel as a nation.

The significance of this pictorial device lies in the rhetorical connections made between ancient Israel and Britain in the early nineteenth century. Numerous commentators connected Britain, in both literal and metaphorical terms, to the ancient nation of Israel.<sup>[40]</sup> Israel was described as an elect society of God that gained heavenly protection amidst calamity, rather than suffering the effects of those calamities. Many people believed that the destiny of modern Britain connected to the children of Israel. Israel was the key example of an exception to the destruction sent by God. Many Britons believed that while calamities would accompany the impending apocalypse, it was possible for Britain to assume the role of the Israelites and be delivered, rather than destroyed.<sup>[41]</sup>

### **Britain as Israel**

Both religious and secular leaders cited various sources to assert the confluence of these two societies, and thus posit the possibility for Britain's deliverance amid catastrophe. Some viewed Britain's role in the Protestant reformation as an example of her chosen status as a modern day Israel. In 1810 Claudius Buchanan preached that "at the present era Great Britain stands conspicuous in the eyes of the world ... and has become, by Divine Providence, the constituted Guardian, in a manner, of the religion and liberties of men." He taught that "Great Britain's survival was as directly providential as God's protection of Israel."<sup>[42]</sup> Many pointed to Britain's immunity from the ravages of the Napoleonic wars as evidence that they had been "delivered" from tyranny in the manner of the Israelites. In the 1820s Reverend George Croly, who was a close friend of John Martin's and would later write the text for Roberts's illustrated books on the Holy Land, also cited Britain's protection during the French Revolution from external invasion as evidence of its chosen status. While preaching about Britain's future in the midst of the apocalypse, Croly said:

The fate of our own country in this visitation may well exercise that deepest interest of piety and human nature. She may well be severely tried; it is scarcely conceivable that in so vast and extent of suffering she should remain untouched. But she has been hitherto sustained in a manner little short of a miracle. In the fearful trial which has so lately passed upon Europe, England was of all nations placed in the most direct road of peril. In the revolutionary race we had the natural means, and hereditary powers, the right, to have flung even France behind; a more democratic constitution, a more democratic spirit than any other monarchical people . . . yet from this unrivaled peril England was saved and more than saved; raised to be successively the refuge, the champion, and the leader of the civilized world.<sup>[43]</sup>

Croly's statement placed Britain under the divine protection of God, but not necessarily through super-human means. Rather than the opening of a Red Sea, Croly cited the "more democratic" form of government as the God-given gift which enabled England to be saved. It is crucial to recognize that although the miraculous emancipation of the Israelites from Egypt was constantly proposed as a type for modern Britain, the otherworldly aspects of their

deliverance were often translated into more concrete and prescient political terms when positing Britain's possible deliverance.

David Bogue made another telling statement in his widely popular tract *On Universal Peace*, which was based on an 1813 sermon and republished many times throughout the 1820s and 1830s. Bogue employed reason to assert the logic of Britain's future deliverance and its connection to ancient Israel:

Is it at all unreasonable to suppose that a nation living under the influence of the spirit of the Gospel . . . would experience the peculiar protection of the great governor of the world? How remarkable in this respect was his care over Israel of old, when they faithfully kept his covenant and his testimonies! . . . is it irrational to conceive, that *if* any one country were to be regulated in all its domestic measures, and in all its foreign relations, by the spirit of the Gospel, it would be the peculiar charge of God, and enjoy the smiles of his approbation, and the guardianship of his providence—in a degree hitherto unknown since the commencement of the Christian era, because such Christian conduct in a government has been unknown? Individuals will have rewards and punishments dispensed to them in a future state—but fair, nations as such, will have no existence. Is it improper then to argue, that virtuous and pious nations will consequently have their reward in the present world?[44]

Based on the prototype of ancient Israel, Bogue concluded that only a country "regulated in its domestic measures, and in all its foreign relations, by the spirit of the gospel" could obtain the protection of "the great governor of the world." He further stated that it would be "Christian conduct in government" that would facilitate the British nation's deliverance. This emphasis on government reform as the mechanism by which Britain could mirror ancient Israel is a key component in understanding the impact of monumental paintings of the exodus. And it was not an idea confined to conservative political circles. After government troops killed innocent protestors in Birmingham at what came to be known as the "Peterloo Massacre," the radical publication *The Medusa* reported that the day of retributive justice could be forestalled if the English government did "works meet for repentance." [45] Each of these writers—Croly, Bogue, and the *Medusa* correspondent—cited government as the key component in the formula that might either gain the favor of God or lose it. It is also important to note the conditional nature of these statements. For instance, Bogue carefully inserted the word "if" right before describing what a country might do to obtain God's divine protection. In this theoretical program Britain is not guaranteed its place as the elect of God; rather it could become such through "Christian conduct in government."

But what did "Christian conduct in government" mean in the 1820s, when Roberts, Danby, and Martin were exhibiting their paintings of the deliverance of the Israelites? If Britain only became the modern day incarnation of the ancient Israelites through effectively implementing Christian-based government reforms, what precisely were those reforms? The most significant and successful implementation of Christian principles into government policy in the early nineteenth century came in response to another social ill alluded to in Roberts's painting—slavery.

### Stone Testaments to Slavery

Reviewers of Roberts's painting were particularly struck by the dramatic architecture of Egypt in *The Departure of the Israelites*, as noted earlier. In the painting, the architecture itself becomes a crucial actor in the painting. Critics described it as "remarkable for its distinctness, force, and truth," and "replete with grandeur."<sup>[46]</sup> Another reviewer described the architecture as producing "an overpowering effect" upon viewers.<sup>[47]</sup> In *The Saturday Magazine*, the author marveled over "the admiration we have felt in musing upon this wondrous scene, letting the eye swim, as it were, over sculptured temple and tower."<sup>[48]</sup> For most nineteenth-century viewers the repeated columns and colonnades stacked one upon another were a prime attraction in the painting. Yet when they are described merely as attractions, there is a danger of minimizing the significance of the ideas suggested by these painted forms. The juxtaposition of such massive buildings with the crowds of departing Israelites alluded to the slave labor that had built such grandiose architecture. A review of the painting in the *Morning Journal* described the paintings as representing "the tens of thousands of the chosen people depart[ing] from the house of bondage, arrayed in the borrowed jewels of their masters, who gaze on them with fear and anxiety from the rich palaces of their masters."<sup>[49]</sup> As this reviewer noted, the narrative of the painting is fundamentally about the freeing of an enslaved people. The slavery of the Israelites is also emphasized by the visualized extremes of class difference—the "rich palaces" of the masters in counterbalance with the "borrowed jewels" the Israelites wear. Roberts's work compels the viewer to think about the issue of slavery through juxtaposing the Israelites with the immense buildings they labored to build.

While the foreground is dominated by extensive colonnades, Roberts included the pyramids of Egypt prominently on the horizon. At this time, the pyramids were largely considered as markers of slavery, or "monuments of the miseries of their erection," as much as they were wonders of the world.<sup>[50]</sup> One author described the pyramids as nothing more than "huge piles of brick or stone, with square bases and triangular sides, reared by slaves for tyrants to moulder in."<sup>[51]</sup> Voltaire published what was probably the most widely-read opinion on the subject in his *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764), where he wrote, "These very pyramids are monuments of their slavery, for the whole nation must have been made to work on them, otherwise such unwieldy masses could never have been finished."<sup>[52]</sup> C. F. Volney's *On the Ruins of Empires* (1793) offered a personal account of witnessing dramatic Egyptian architecture:

Elevated as we are with so exalted a proof of the power of man, when we consider the purpose for which these amazing works were intended, we cannot but view them with regret. We lament, that to construct a useless sepulcher, a whole nation should have been rendered miserable for twenty years: we shudder at the numberless acts of injustice and oppression the tiresome labors must have cost, in conveying, preparing, and piling up such an immense mass of stones and we are inflamed with indignation at the tyranny of the despots who enforced these barbarous works, a sentiment indeed which too frequently recurs on viewing the different monuments of Egypt. Those labyrinths, temples, and pyramids, by their huge and heavy structure attest much less to the genius of a nation, opulent and friendly to the arts, than the servitude of a people who were slaves to the caprices of their monarchs.<sup>[53]</sup>

The pyramids of Egypt, and for that matter all of the Egyptian architecture, including "its labyrinths" and "temples," alluded to the substantial number of slaves required to build such large structures. Rather than viewing these monuments with admiration, these authors focused



on the utter uselessness of such buildings; their descriptions revealed the pyramids to be little more than monstrous stone witnesses to the whims of foolish monarchs and the existence of slave labor in Egypt. Most people believed that it was in fact the Israelite slaves who constructed the pyramids.<sup>[54]</sup> The representation of the pyramids and the other large Egyptian architectural forms would have especially connoted the idea of Israelite slavery in nineteenth-century Britain.

Slavery was the political cause that prompted many Christians to see their religion through a new political lens. The debate over slavery set a precedent for other Christian-inspired political movements. In contrast to those who believed Christianity to be a fundamentally private matter, the legislative intervention into the economics of slavery set a precedent whereby Christian morality could justifiably be turned into law. In 1817 John Ovington wrote against "any kind of policy that would fetter the conscience" on the basis of Christian morality, and described the fight to end slavery as the proverbial "tip of the iceberg." He wrote, "the Slave Trade, that odious traffic in the flesh and blood of human beings, was abolished by a steady union of talents, wealth, and influence. Precisely in the same way should we assail all the remains of barbarism, which are yet to be found in our laws and institutions."<sup>[55]</sup> The debate over slavery near the turn of the nineteenth century had fundamentally altered the relationship between Christianity and politics in Britain: rather than religion acting as a bulwark against changes to a traditional social structure, religion began to inspire progressive political movements. By the 1820s the rhetoric of abolition was defined in even broader terms by early Christian Socialists.

The term "wage-slave" was coined during these decades as a way of extending Christian abolitionist rhetoric to the fight against forms of domestic oppression. In the years after Waterloo, radical journals such as *The People* asserted that "[the working classes in Britain] are enslaved—legally . . . forestalled by our good parliament."<sup>[56]</sup> In the same year Thomas Evans, the Spencean radical, wrote in his popular *Christian Policy* that the policies of land enclosure<sup>[57]</sup> and high taxation have reduced the majority of Britons "to a pauper, a slave. A Slave! Aye, more a slave than the poor African in the plantation; the Africans master is bound to feed him, though he be unemployed, but the lawmaking landlords after robbing the poor of their all, wish to bind themselves to nothing."<sup>[58]</sup> The legislative achievements of the abolitionist movement set a precedent for Christian socialist reformers who continued to attack the injustices of the system throughout the century. Thus, when Roberts exhibited his painting in 1829, the picturing of abolition in a biblical context could have resonated with the causes of freeing African slaves in the new world and alleviating domestic wage slavery as well.

### **The Government of God under Moses**

Because Roberts's painting dealt with the idea of slavery within the exodus narrative, it is necessary to explore the specific ways in which Christian socialists also blended their calls for ending wage-slavery with the Mosaic account from the Bible. Christian socialist reforms took many legislative shapes, each of which could have been alluded to generically through the representation of freeing the Israelites from bondage, since the bondage of British factory workers took the form of physical and economic oppression. Christian reformers had successfully lobbied for restraints on child labor in 1819—including age and hour limitations in factories.<sup>[59]</sup> They also argued for a more progressive structure of taxation, and the institution of usury laws, minimum wage laws, and other legislative checks against the exploitation of the

working classes.[60] In essence, Christian reformers were attempting to create an earthly government that mirrored their conception of a heavenly government. Politically laden phrases such as "the moral Governor" and "the great Governor" were commonly employed in reference to God's role in the administration of the universe.[61] The challenge was how to translate the theoretical governance of the universe into the realities of early nineteenth-century British politics. The radical journal *The Republican*, which often contained anti-religious rhetoric, printed a long article in 1825 entitled "Sacred Politics" that aimed to examine the Bible and ascertain the type of government it favored. After examining both the Old and New Testaments, the author came to the conclusion that,

The sacred writings give the fullest and most satisfactory account of the moral government of God, which is a government of justice and benevolence; they hold it up to our view, and propose it to our imitation; so that the scriptures are most decidedly in favour of that government which is most like God's . . . the New testament inclines strongly in favor of that government, whatever may be its name and form, in which the poor are taken from the background of forgetfulness and contempt, and brought forward to be held up to view as important and respectable; where virtues, not riches, place the laurel on the brow. And that government which casts contempt upon the poor, and neglects the virtuous, has the greatest reason to dread being tried by the touchstone of revelation.[62]

This passage is interesting for two key reasons. First, the rhetoric of the apocalypse was specifically employed, even in an anti-religious journal like *The Republican*. The final phrase, condemning a government that "casts contempt upon the poor" as having "the greatest reason to dread being tried by the touchstone of revelation," directly referenced an impending apocalyptic judgment that was believed to befall the wicked. Second, the passage is striking for its vague generalities when describing the government of God; the author used generic phrases such as "whatever may be its name and form" rather than naming a specific republican or democratic system. I chose this passage because in some ways it encapsulated the challenge of how to outline the government of God. So many different systems of government were recorded in the Bible that it would be difficult to draw firm conclusions as to which type of earthly government God prefers. Christian reformers were left with a series of basic principles centered on the protection of the poor, but with very few concrete policies or detailed government models.

The only section in the Bible that defied this vagueness was the system of government instituted by Moses for the Israelites. Reformers recognized and proclaimed that on this sole occasion in the Bible God himself directed the institution of a government system, thereby providing a precise pattern to follow. The writer for *The Republican* concluded that despite the many things relating to civil government in the Bible, "the chief part [in the Bible on civil government] is contained . . . in the dispensation of the religion which God gave to the Jews," because in it God "not only laid some restraints upon the civil administration, but absolutely appointed of what kind the government should be." [63] The author further noted that "the Mosaic constitution" was difficult to identify by any single name, but it was in any case not an aristocracy or a monarchy determined by birth or wealth. He asserted: "We may call it a Federal Republic . . . We are constrained to acknowledge the democratic nature of the constitution which God framed for the Jews . . . the strain of the Old Testament runs in favor of democracy." [64] Because of this categorization of the Mosaic system of government as a

democratic Federal Republic, the depiction of Moses and the Israelites was by nature politicized. Yet the final painting I will discuss, Francis Danby's *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, further encouraged a political reading through the inclusion of a number of salient details that allowed the painting to allude to the government of God as revealed by Moses.

### **Francis Danby's *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt* in Context**

John Martin's painting elevated the figure of Moses as the political leader of the Israelites; David Roberts work pictured Israel in the guise of a modern nation; and Francis Danby brought the exodus narrative to a conclusion by representing the climactic moment of the Red Sea crossing. From the moment Danby exhibited his work critics noted its similarity to the work of Martin. Yet despite the subject and stylistic similarities, Danby did not merely copy Martin. Danby's artistic skills were of a different sort than Martin's or Roberts's. Danby was more adept at painting the human figure, and his work features a number of detailed foreground figures that evince a series of emotions and perform a number of actions. Aside from these figures, Danby integrated a number of details into the scene that depart from the biblical text and only make sense within the larger framework of Israelite history. The combined effect of these artistic mechanisms was the production of a single narrative moment that also referred to the future Israelite government under the leadership of Moses.

Francis Danby emigrated from Ireland in 1813 with a small group of artists, all intent on becoming successful painters in London. He spent much of his first decade in England in Bristol trying to make ends meet, but things changed dramatically in 1823 after one of his paintings was admitted into the Royal Academy exhibition and later purchased by its President, Sir Thomas Lawrence. On the heels of this success, Danby attempted to create a much more dramatic painting that would capture the attention of all London. When he exhibited *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt* in 1825, it was heavily praised and sold for the substantial sum of 500 guineas. One reviewer called it "the grand attraction at Somerset House" that year.<sup>[65]</sup> Danby was elected the following year as an Associate of the Royal Academy.<sup>[66]</sup> A large mezzotint of the painting was made in 1829, when one reviewer referred to it as "universally known and appreciated."<sup>[67]</sup>

Danby chose the dramatic moment when Moses commanded the Sea to close on Pharaoh's armies. The composition positions the viewer on a raised bluff along with the Israelites who look back at the spectacle of the waters crashing in upon the Egyptians. Most of the Israelites gaze out toward the Red Sea and have their backs turned on the viewer. The painting integrates the spectator into the scene by placing him or her alongside the Israelites, and by so doing causes the viewer to identify with them. Danby divided the canvas nearly in half with a dark rocky precipice that stretches upward and outward above the banks of the Red Sea. The small and relatively inconspicuous figure of Moses is positioned on a smaller outcropping in the middle ground, and his figure would be virtually invisible were it not for the contrast between the dark shadows produced by the rocky peak behind him and his white robes. Waters rush on the left hand side of this bisecting precipice, caving in toward the Israelites and the viewer. Remnants of Pharaoh's grand army can be detected in the gushing white waters. Danby represents the "countless multitudes of Israel" at the base of the white water and overflowing into the foreground.<sup>[68]</sup> These masses then pour over to the right and gather around the pillar of fire hovering in the air over the Ark of the Covenant. In the foreground, Danby painted a number of highly detailed figures, many of whom are overcome with

emotion, and a number of others who appear engaged in various activities. Some are carrying and piling up goods, others are praising God, and some are cowering in fear. Miriam, the sister of Moses, sits prominently on a bright red carpet located in the right foreground of the canvas. In the far distance, the great pyramids of Egypt are silhouetted against an ominously red sunset. Like works by Martin, the public popularity of Danby's painting can be attributed to its scale, its minute figures, the familiarity of the biblical narrative, and the sheer drama of the subject.

### **The Equitable Economics of Moses and British Reformist Politics**

At the heart of the Mosaic system of government was a radical mechanism for ensuring a more economically equitable society. Because of the Israelites' tendency to focus on earthly comforts and possessions, the Mosaic system of government contained a series of checks against property accumulation, along with incentives designed to discourage pernicious social practices that preyed on the poor. Many reformers pointed to this system as the prototype Christian government that should be mirrored by modern Christian nations like Britain, largely because it was believed to have been established by God himself. Samuel Taylor Coleridge summed up the key elements of the Israelite system of government as follows:

The Jewish government was founded on an original Contract. The Constitution was presented to the whole nation by Moses, and each individual solemnly assented to it. By this Constitution the Jews became a Federal Republic . . . The country contained 15 millions of acres, which were equally divided among the people, 25 acres to each man . . . To preserve this equal division it became necessary to prevent alienation—to this end interest for money was forbidden and an act of grace for the abolition of all debts passed every sixth year . . . but as abuses might gradually creep in, and as all constitutions require to be frequently brought back to their first principles, on every 50th year a solemn Jubilee was appointed, in which all lands were restored, and the estate of every family discharged from all encumbrances returned to the family again . . . Property is power and equal property equal power. A poor man is necessarily more or less a slave. Poverty is the death of public freedom—it virtually enslaves individuals, and generates those vices, which makes necessary a dangerous concentration of power in the executive branch. If we except the Spartan, the Jewish has been the only republic that can consistently boast of liberty and equality.[69]

Coleridge's statement is telling for a number of reasons. First, he employed the language of Republican politics. He spoke of the Jewish "Constitution," described their system as a "Federal Republic," and cited it as the historical emblem of "liberty and equality." The mere use of this type of language in the 1790's would have positioned the system of Moses as fundamentally radical since it so closely mirrored the calls of the French revolutionaries. Second, he outlined the specific policies that made the Mosaic system successful, including equal distribution of land, democratic consent, a prohibition against charging interest on loans, and periodic abolition of debt. It is not difficult to conceive of how these ideas might appeal to large sectors of the British public, many of whom had recently lost access to common lands due to "enclosure" and were now struggling under the various debts incurred in the process of migration to urban areas. Virtually every level of abuse allowed in the British social economy was prohibited in the Mosaic Republic.

The economic system of Moses was an especially powerful prototype for reformers for three crucial reasons. First, it offered a supposed historical precedent of a successful legislative structure that achieved many of the goals reformers aimed to accomplish. Second, it was an example that carried the authoritative weight of the Bible. Third, for believing Christians, it was a system considered to be designed by the hand of God. For these reasons, reformers cited the Mosaic government consistently in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Charles Hall, one of the most influential reformers and earliest Socialist thinkers[70] cited the Mosaic system for these very reasons—positing it as the antidote to the evils allowed under the British system. Hall believed that a progressive tax should be instituted, primogeniture should be done away with, and a punitive tax on luxury goods should be introduced, and for each of these proposals he cited the Mosaic system as evidence of its feasibility, wisdom, and practicality.

Nevertheless, despite the prevalence of these ideas within political circles, Danby did not paint a series of social policies—he painted the deliverance of Israel out of Egypt and the closing of the Red Sea on the Egyptians. Connecting the social and economic policies of the Mosaic system of government with this specific biblical moment might seem unlikely. However, when the details of Danby's painting are considered carefully, the work contains a series of visual markers that signify both the political authority of Moses and the conditions that prompted the institution of the precise social policies reformers were citing at the time.

### The Anachronistic Ark

The first of these markers is perhaps the oddest detail in Danby's painting—the Ark of the Covenant (fig. 7). Its oddity stems from the simple fact that the Ark of the Covenant did not exist yet at this point in the biblical narrative. One reviewer noted the anachronism: "The Ark of the Covenant appears in the distant van of the multitudinous line of the Israelites. This is an anachronism, for the Ark was not yet made." [71] The Ark was not constructed until much later in the narrative, following Moses's receipt of the Ten Commandments. [72] Danby's inclusion of the Ark does not reveal an indifference to anachronism, rather, it reveals his utilization of anachronism as a storytelling mechanism.



Fig. 7, Francis Danby, *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, 1825 (detail). Engraving. Yale Center for British Art. Photograph by Chris Coltrin. [\[larger image\]](#)



The inclusion of the Ark of the Covenant was significant because the Ark represented, as theologian John Owen put it, "the most eminent pledge of the especial presence of God among the people."<sup>[73]</sup> But the Ark was more than a spiritual marker, it was also a political one. It held "the law," or the stone tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments. Moses was the "Hebrew Legislator" and the Ark symbolized the divine origin of his political authority, as stemming from "the Great Governor" of the universe. The Ark was also used as a political symbol by early nineteenth-century writers. Writing in 1816, one British author asserted, "the constitution is our Ark of the Covenant."<sup>[74]</sup> By drawing parallels between the modern constitution and the Israelite Ark, writings like these re-inscribed the fundamentally political nature of the Ark of the Covenant. By anachronistically including the Ark in a scene of the Red Sea closing, Danby's painting breaks free from the constraints of the single moment depicted, while simultaneously alluding to the political authority on which the Israelite nation was based.

The Ark of the Covenant is further highlighted in this painting, as it resides beneath the glowing pillar of light. Because of the visual complexity of a scene such as this, certain details functioned as markers for guiding viewers to crucial details; one of these markers was the pillar of light that contrasts with the dark background on the right-hand side of the canvas. Reviewers of the painting marveled at the way in which Danby painted this pillar of light that hovers above and points to the Ark. The critic for the *London Magazine and Review* was captivated with the effect created by the pillar:

In colour, it is of a livid and ominous bluish green; a pervading hue of death and dismay; it seems the element where life dies and death lives, which only Dante or Milton could imagine, and only Danby has painted. It appears to emanate from that wondrous light where locally resides the author or agent of the miracle. In painting this pillar of fire, the artist appears to have dipped his pencil,—not in pigments, but in the essence of light itself. Instead of a column of fire, it takes the more extraordinary form of a lengthened parabolic spindle of light . . . the ominous light which we have endeavored to describe, gleams on the countless multitudes of Israel, which seems to consist of "numbers without number."<sup>[75]</sup>

The pillar of fire interested this critic as a symbolic form and also guided his eye to the minute "multitudes of Israel" on the right-hand side of the canvas and the object they gather around. As another critic pointed out, "The effect produced by the pillar of fire, in illuminating the ark, is wonderfully illusive."<sup>[76]</sup> The Ark is a tiny component in a large painting; nevertheless it gains visual prominence because the pillar of light compels viewers to seek out what lies beneath its glow.

### **The Flesh-Pots of Egypt**

The Ark of the Covenant signified Moses's political authority and alluded to the future of the Israelites under his leadership, but it did not, by itself, speak to any specific aspect of the Mosaic government. However, other elements of Danby's painting pointed more specifically to the social reforms that concerned nineteenth-century reformers. Many parts of the Mosaic government were aimed at countering the Israelite tendency to forget God's mercy and instead long for the comforts they experienced in Egypt. One of the most oft-quoted passages from Exodus was, "And the whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness: And the children of Israel said unto them, Would to God

we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full." [77] The term "flesh-pots" was often used in the 1820s in reference to the enticements, comforts, and luxuries of the world. [78] In 1817, one author who was attempting to stamp out revolutionary sentiment made connections between the British and the "Rebellious Israelites" by asserting, "But you, Briton, my countrymen, are invited to rebel and cry out for the flesh-pots which your fathers had not,—for the comforts they never enjoyed." [79] The author equated the Israelite desire for the "flesh-pots" of Egypt with the desire among nineteenth-century Britons who were discontent with simply having their needs met, but rather wanted more of everything. This phrase is significant because in Danby's painting the foreground contains the enticing flesh-pots of Egypt.

One of the most unexpected and eye-catching portions of the canvas is the bottom left corner, where a large mound of luxury objects lies. The pile has been created by an individual who continues to carry objects even during the closing of the Red Sea beneath (fig. 8). Due to his labors, a mound of shining armor, jeweled cups, golden helmets, and numerous other luxury objects sits on the precipice above the Red Sea. One reviewer concluded, based on the fact that the Israelites were newly freed slaves and would not have possessed such objects themselves, that these were "the riches of which Egypt ha[d] been despoiled, consisting of splendid armor, magnificent vases, and other costly matters." [80] This is one of the oddest episodes in the painting, because the figure's actions seem counter-intuitive; rather than turning and acknowledging the convulsing waters, which are painted with such drama that they almost seem to have an audible effect on the viewer, this figure stares down at a large golden vase on a fine red carpet.



Fig. 8, Francis Danby, *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, 1825 (detail). Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Harris Museum & Art Gallery, Preston, England. Photograph by Chris Coltrin. [\[larger image\]](#)

This motif of distraction by luxury goods during the moment of miraculous deliverance is then repeated across the canvas. The bottom right corner contains another mound of objects, along with a group of oblivious individuals who unload a camel laden with goods. In addition, Danby placed in the middle ground of the painting a series of figures pushing a cumbersome golden chariot loaded with goods up the hill. I would argue that through these various episodes Danby evokes the "flesh-pots" of Egypt. Though not part of the biblical account of the closing of the Red Sea, Danby represents the Israelites as clinging to the fine things of Egypt even as they leave them behind. Thus, the still lifes in the foreground, and the figures engrossed in them, point to a broader moral in the story of the exodus regarding the greed

and selfishness among the Israelites, even when confronted with the evidence of God's power and presence.

Danby also represents a variety of emotional responses among the foreground figures. Instead of unified rejoicing at their deliverance, some figures bury their heads in their hands, so consumed with grief that they are unaware of God's intervention on their behalf. Danby paints the Israelites as torn between fundamental impulses: gratitude and greed, faith and doubt, selflessness and selfishness. Even when witnessing the miraculous hand of God before their eyes, those impulses persist. This point is crucial in reference to contemporary British politics in the nineteenth century. Those arguing for government reformation based their arguments on the notion that because mankind was inherently inclined toward oppressing one another, government intervention was required in order to stabilize and harmonize society.<sup>[81]</sup> The laissez-faire approach preferred by conservatives was based on the notion that self-correction and the ability of religion to provide that self-correction freed government from any responsibility toward that end. Yet Moses was a religious leader who felt compelled to institute social and economic policies to counter mankind's inherent tendencies, rather than place his faith in the power of religion alone to produce social harmony. Thus, by depicting the very selfish and greedy tendencies of man when confronted with his miraculous deliverance, Danby's painting makes an implicit case for the government policies Moses instituted, and reformers cited as templates, for modern Britain.

During the 1820s the rhetorical employment of the Mosaic government as a precedent for parliamentary reform was continued in publications like *The Imperial Magazine*, which featured an article "On the Legislation of Moses" in 1823. The article stated that under the Mosaic system, "the restraining laws on usury, and against every kind of oppression, convincingly teach the humanity of the legislator; and certainly afford a profitable warning to every state, against the growing and overpowering evils of national pauperism."<sup>[82]</sup> As the debate regarding the reformation of the "poor-laws" became even more heated in the early 1830s,<sup>[83]</sup> the working-class journal *The Co-operator* again cited the Mosaic system of government as a pattern to be followed, stating that "the avarice and rapacity of the rich of those days [meaning the days of the Israelites under Moses], and the natural tendency to accumulate, were guarded against by a law which prevented the perpetual alienation of small properties." But under the system of Moses, "Neither force nor cunning could despoil a man of his little inheritance."<sup>[84]</sup> Perhaps the Spencean Allen Davenport put it most succinctly in 1836—"the only question to be decided is which is right, the Bible, or the landlord's title-deeds."<sup>[85]</sup>

### Conclusion

Martin, Danby, and Roberts cohered in choosing to paint the narrative of the exodus, though they each emphasized different elements of it. Martin, in his *The Seventh Plague of Egypt*, revealed the power of God behind the plague, and highlighted the role of Moses as the instrument whose agency facilitated the will of god on earth. Roberts's painting of *The Departure of the Israelites* distanced itself from such miraculous moments of the narrative, opting instead for visualizing the nation of Israel exiting Egypt. By representing the Israelites with the trappings of modern nationhood, including banners and ensigns, Roberts's work engaged the contemporary discourse that aligned modern Britain with the elect nation of Israel. Also, his painting alluded to the slavery of the Israelites by juxtaposing them with the immense architectural structures they built. Danby's painting of *The Delivery of Israel out of*

*Egypt* concluded the exodus narrative by representing the Red Sea closing on the Egyptians. He emphasized the Israelites' failure to recognize the intervention of God on their behalf by painting some figures as longing instead for the comforts of Egypt. Through these prominent motifs, along with an anachronistic inclusion of the politically-charged Ark of the Covenant, Danby's painting transcended the single moment depicted and alluded to the future travails of Israel in the wilderness.

Each of these works invoked ideas that were politically potent in the early nineteenth century. Martin elevated Moses, a figure constantly characterized in the early nineteenth century as a political lawgiver and legislator enacting the government of God. Roberts's painting engaged the heated debate on slavery and abolition—an issue that was especially pertinent to a religious painting given the influence of Christianity on the abolitionist movement. Danby's anachronism and conceptions of Israelite character alluded to the legislative policies instituted under Moses as a check on the selfish social behavior depicted in his painting. This message was especially salient in the early nineteenth century, when land reformers and early Christian socialists cited Mosaic government policies as their inspiration and evidence of their divine sanction.

Christian reformers in the nineteenth century sought to understand and define the government of God as contained in the Bible. God was frequently described in political terms as the monarch of all creation. Yet the Bible does not reveal which government system God favors for mankind in the absence of a perfect monarch. For centuries, kings in Europe had cited the monarchy of God as a precedent for their rule on earth. However, by the early 1800s reformers had begun to use religious discourse as a means of combating absolute monarchy. Reformers pointed to the Mosaic society of the Israelites as the only place in the Bible where God had instituted a legislative program. Under Moses, monarchy was supplanted by a "Federal Republic" that had a series of laws assuring economic equality. The contrast between the Egyptians and the Israelites in all three of these paintings emphasized this point. God destroyed the oppressive monarchical system of Egypt. Out of its ashes he created a new system among the Israelites that inverted everything upon which Egypt's destruction had been premised. The juxtaposition of Egypt and Israel in these three paintings made them fundamentally political works. In the context of early nineteenth-century politics, where the abolition of slavery, alleviation of wage-slavery, and land-redistribution were core components of the reformist platform, these works visualized the synchronization between the Bible and modern reformist politics.

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## Notes

- [1] For a summary of the history of the seal see James Parton, *The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* (London: Trubner and Co., 1864), 2:131.
- [2] *Ibid.*, 368.
- [3] Leopold Martin, "Reminiscences of John Martin," *Newcastle Observer*, March 30, 1889.
- [4] "The British Institution," *London Magazine*, September, 1825, 68; "The Passage of the Red Sea, Engraved by Phillips," *Athenaeum and Literary Chronicle*, March 11, 1829, 152; "Engravings," *Examiner*, March 29, 1829, 200.
- [5] "Art IV: The Veracity of the Five Books of Moses," *Eclectic Review*, April 1830, 334.
- [6] See Morton D. Paley, *Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1999); Christopher Burdon, *Apocalypse in England: Revelation Unraveling, 1700-1834* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); Stephen Goldsmith, *Unbuilding Jerusalem: Apocalypse and Romantic Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); W. H. Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists: The Uses of Biblical Prophecy in England from the 1790s to the 1840s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).
- [7] "On the Genius of John Martin," *Arnold's Magazine of the Fine Arts*, December 1833, 101.
- [8] "Fine Arts," *Examiner*, April 25, 1824, 262.
- [9] "Society of British Artists," *Literary Magnet of the Belles Lettres, Science, and the Fine Arts*, January 1824, 307.
- [10] "Fine Arts," *New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, May 1824, 201.
- [11] For an overview of the number of works on display at the Royal Academy, see Richard Redgrave and Samuel Redgrave, *A Century of Painters of the English School; with Critical Notices of Their Works, and an Account of the Progress of Art in England* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1866), 2:574. For information on the Society for British Artists exhibition numbers, see "Society of British Artists," 307. For information on the 1825 exhibition of contemporary British artists, see "Monthly View of New Publications, Music, the English and Foreign Drama, the Fine Arts, Literary and Scientific Intelligence," *Belle Assemblée; or Court and Fashionable Magazine*, June 1825, 261.
- [12] For details on the editions see Michael J. Campbell and York City Art Gallery, *John Martin: Visionary Printmaker* (England: Campbell Fine Art in Association with York City Art Gallery, 1992), 39–40; William Feaver, *The Art of John Martin* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 84.
- [13] John Hobart Caunter, Richard Westall, and John K. L. Martin, *Illustrations of the Bible by Westall and Martin, with Descriptions by the Rev. Hobart Caunter* (London: Edward Churton, 1835); Frederick Shoberl, *Forget-Me-Not, a Christmas and New Year's Present for 1828*, (London: R. Ackerman, 1828), 203.
- [14] Exod. chap. 9.
- [15] "Gallery of British Artists, Suffolk Street," *Literary Chronicle*, April 17, 1824, 253.
- [16] "Divinity: The Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist," *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine*, October 1824: 660.
- [17] "The Tenth Plague," *Evangelical Magazine*, July 1830, 301–2, italics added.
- [18] As mentioned before, *The Seventh Plague* was re-produced as an engraving in a number of annuals, one of those being the Schobler, *Forget-Me-Not* of 1828. This quote is taken from a review of the print contained in this publication.
- [19] "Book Review," *Monthly Review*, November 1827, 40.
- [20] Mrs. Sherwood, *Bible History, or Scripture Its Own Interpreter Illustrated from the Birth, to the Death of Moses* (London: Knight and Lacey, 1823), 33; "The Bible," *Co-operator*, June 1, 1830, 3; "Art XVII: The Principal Events in the Life of Moses," *British Critic*, January 1816, 109; "On Miracles," *Republican*, November 24, 1826: 612, 616.
- [21] Michael Russell, *A Connection of Sacred and Profane History* (London: C. & J. Rivington, 1827).
- [22] "Exhibition of the Society of British Artists," *Examiner*, May 2, 1824, 276.
- [23] Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 6.
- [24] Lincoln Steffens, *Moses in Red: The Revolt of Israel as a Typical Revolution* (Philadelphia: Dorrance, 1926).
- [25] Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, 1.



- [26] William Cobbett, "To the Journeymen and Labourers of England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland," *Cobbett's Political Register*, November 2, 1816, 556.
- [27] See James P. Huzel, *The Popularization of Malthus in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 109; Jon P. Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790–1832* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 101.
- [28] "Fine Arts: Suffolk Street Gallery," *Literary Gazette*, March 28, 1829, 212; "The Genius of John Martin," *Arnold's Magazine of the Fine Arts*, December 1833, 97–104.
- [29] "Monthly View of New Publications," (1825), 261; "Monthly View of New Publications, Music, the English and Foreign Drama, the Fine Arts, Literary and Scientific Intelligence," *Belle Assemblée; or Court and Fashionable Magazine*, May 1829, 223.
- [30] Clara Clement, *Artists of the Nineteenth Century and their Works: A Handbook Containing Two Thousand and Fifty Biographical Sketches* (Houghton: Osgood, 1879), 181; James Ballantine, *The Life of David Roberts* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1866), 36.
- [31] "New Engravings," *Monthly Magazine, or, British Register*, May 1829, 550–51.
- [32] *Saturday Magazine*, July 28, 1832, 5.
- [33] *Saturday Magazine*, January 5, 1833, 33.
- [34] Kevin J. Avery, "Dioramas in New York, 1826–1849," *Panorama; the Newsletter of the International Panorama and Diorama Society*, no. 3 (Spring 1990): 6–7.
- [35] "The Fine Arts, Literature, Science, the Drama, &C.," *American Monthly Magazine* January 1, 1835, 285.
- [36] Due to the centrality of the biblical narrative in understanding these works, I have chosen to structure my analysis of the three paintings of exodus around the chronology of the narrative moments they represent, rather than considering them in the temporal order in which they were created. So although Roberts's painting was painted last of the three, I will consider Roberts's painting prior to Danby's, as it represents a moment that takes place in-between those narrative moments painted by Martin and Danby.
- [37] "New Publications," *Literary Gazette*, May 26, 1832, 330.
- [38] "Monthly View of New Publications," (1829) 223.
- [39] "Fine Arts," *New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, May 1829, 206.
- [40] For example, see Robert Mudie, *Babylon the Great: A Dissection and Demonstration of Men and Things in the British Capital* (London: privately printed, 1825), 13; E. M. Butler, ed., *A Regency Visitor, the English Tour of Prince Puckler-Muskau Described in His Letters 1826–28* (London: Collins, 1957), 189.
- [41] John Wilson, *Lectures on Ancient Israel, and the Israelitish Origin of the Modern Nations of Europe* (London: James Nisbet and Co., 1840); Richard Brothers, *A Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times* (London: Edward Gray, 1794); Claudius Buchanan, *Three Sermons on the Jubilee, Preached at Welbeck Chapel, London* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1810), 42; Christopher Wordsworth, *The Expostulation of Moses against the Murmurings of Israel a Warning to England: A Sermon* (London: F. C. & J. Rivington, 1817), 17–18; George Croly, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (London: C. & J. Rivington, 1827), 439–40.
- [42] Buchanan, *Three Sermons on the Jubilee*, 42.
- [43] George Croly, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (London: C. & J. Rivington, 1827), 439–40.
- [44] David D. D. Bogue, *On Universal Peace; Being Extracts from a Discourse Delivered in October 1813*, Society for the Promotion of Permanent and Universal Peace. Tract. No. 6 (London: Bensley and Son, 1819), 13.
- [45] Julianus Probus, "A View of the Future State of the Country and Arrival of the Day of Reckoning," *Medusa*, April 24, 1819, 76.
- [46] "Monthly View of New Publications," (1829), 223; "Fine Arts: Suffolk Street Gallery," 212.
- [47] "Exhibition of the Society of British Artists," *Athenaeum and Literary Chronicle*, April 8, 1829, 222.
- [48] "The Departure of the Israelites out of Egypt," *Saturday Magazine*, July 28, 1832, 34.
- [49] Cited in William Cosmo Monkhouse, *Masterpieces of English Art, with Sketches of Some of the Most Celebrated of the Deceased Painters of English School from the Time of Hogarth to the Present Day: Illustrated with Twenty-Six Photographs* (London, Bell and Daldy, 1869), 148.
- [50] "Book Review," *Metropolitan Magazine*, June 1842, 41.
- [51] "Antiquity," *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*, August 8, 1835, 221.

- [52] M. De Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary* (New York: George H. Evans, 1830), 7.
- [53] Constantin François de Count Volney, *The Ruins; or, A Survey of the Revolutions of Empires: With Notes Historical, Geographical and Explanatory* (London: T. Davison, 1819), 283.
- [54] William Carpenter, "The Biblical Companion; or, an Introduction to the Reading and Study of the Holy Scriptures ... Compiled from the Best Authors ... and Adapted for Popular Use" (London: Thomas Tegg and Son, 1836), 454.
- [55] John Ovington, *The Labouring Man's Advocate: An Appeal to the Justice and Humanity of the British Public Respecting the Wages of Labour* (Clapham Common: J. Ovington, 1817), xxvi–xxvii.
- [56] *People*, July 5, 1817, 348.
- [57] "Enclosure" is the term for a legislative process by which common land, which traditionally had been used by the lower classes for farming and animal grazing, became privatized. During the last three decades of the eighteenth century thousands of acres of common land were "enclosed" and many poor farmers who had relied on access to those lands for their subsistence were forced to seek alternative forms of employment. This process peaked in 1801 with the passage of the "Inclosure Consolidation Act."
- [58] Thomas Evans, *Christian Policy the Salvation of the Empire. Being a Clear ... Examination into the Causes that Have Produced the Impending, Unavoidable National Bankruptcy* (London: privately printed, 1816), 17.
- [59] R. A. Soloway, *Prelates and People: Ecclesiastical Social Thought in England, 1783–1852* (London: R. Routledge & K. Paul, 1969), 12.
- [60] John Ovington, *The Sin and Danger of Oppressing the Poor: Selected from the Scriptures for the Benefit of All Classes of Society* (London: Pewtress, Low, and Pewtress, 1819), 58, 74; Charles Hall, *The Effects of Civilization on the People in European States* (London: privately printed, 1805); William Benbow, *Grand National Holiday, and Congress of the Productive Classes* (London: privately printed, 1832).
- [61] Charles Peers, "The Siege of Jerusalem: A Poem," *The British Review, and London Critical Journal*, November 1823, 165; "Idolatry: A Poem in Four Parts," *Eclectic Review*, May 1827, 440.
- [62] "Sacred Politics," *Republican*, February 4, 1825, 148.
- [63] *Ibid.*, 133–37.
- [64] *Ibid.*
- [65] "Monthly View of the New Publications, Music, the English and Foreign Drama, the Fine Arts, Literary and Scientific Intelligence," *Belle Assemblée; or Court and Fashionable Magazine*, May 1829, 288.
- [66] For details on Danby's life, see Francis Greenacre, *Francis Danby, 1793–1861*, exh. cat. (London: Tate Gallery, 1988).
- [67] "Fine Arts Exhibitions," *Monthly Magazine, or British Register*, May 1829, 550.
- [68] "Monthly View of the New Publications," (1825), 288.
- [69] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lewis Patton, and Peter Mann, eds., *Lectures, 1795, on Politics and Religion* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1971), 124–26.
- [70] See Charles Ryle Fay, *Life and Labour in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), 168; Mark Blaug, *Ricardian Economics: A Historical Study*, Yale Studies in Economics 8 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), 148.
- [71] "Fine Arts," *Examiner*, May 15, 1825, 305.
- [72] Exod. 25:10–22.
- [73] John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews: With the Preliminary Exercitations*, rev. and abr. Edward Williams, 2nd ed. (London: James Black, 1815), 218.
- [74] "Art XI," *Quarterly Review*, October 1816, 253.
- [75] "The Fine Arts," *London Magazine and Review*, June 1825, 256.
- [76] "Monthly View of New Publications," (1825) 26 1.
- [77] Exod. 16:2–3
- [78] For example, see "Mediocrity," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, June 1821, 287; Joseph Hall, *Contemplations on the Historical Passages of the Old and New Testaments* (London: William Baynes and Son, 1825), 99.
- [79] "To the People of England," *The Good Old Times! A New light for the People of England*, June 28, 1817, 176.

[80] "The Fine Arts," *Examiner*, May 15, 1825, 305.

[81] See Noel W. Thompson, *The People's Science: The Popular Political Economy of Exploitation and Crisis 1816-34* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); and David McNally, *Against the Market: Political Economy, Market Socialism and the Marxist Critique* (London: Verso, 1993), 107–20.

[82] T. Yates, "On the Legislation of Moses," *Imperial Magazine*, May 1823, 403.

[83] The English Poor Laws were measures designed to alleviate poverty and provide for basic subsistence to the poor. In 1834, Parliament passed the "Poor Law Amendment Act" which made obtaining relief much more difficult, and was universally reviled by poor Britons.

[84] "The Bible," *Co-operator*, June 1, 1830, 3.

[85] Allen Davenport, *The Life, Writings and Principles of Thomas Spence, Author of the Spencean System, or Agrarian Equality ... With a Portrait of the Author* (London: Wakelin, 1836), 11.

## Illustrations



Fig. 1, Benjamin Franklin, Proposed design for the Great Seal of the United States, 1856. Drawing by Benson J. Lossing for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. General Collections of the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, John Martin, *The Seventh Plague of Egypt*, 1824. Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. [\[return to text\]](#)





Fig. 3, Francis Danby, *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, 1825. Oil on canvas. Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston, U.K. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, David Roberts, *The Departure of the Israelites out of the Land of Egypt*, 1829. Oil on canvas. Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, U.K. [\[return to text\]](#)





Fig. 5, After David Roberts, *The Departure of the Israelites out of Egypt*, 1832. Woodcut. *The Saturday Magazine*, July 28, 1832. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 6, Francis Danby, *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, 1833. Woodcut. *The Saturday Magazine*, January 5, 1833. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 7, Francis Danby, *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, 1825 (detail). Engraving. Yale Center for British Art. Photograph by Chris Coltrin. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 8, Francis Danby, *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, 1825 (detail). Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Harris Museum & Art Gallery, Preston, England. Photograph by Chris Coltrin. [\[return to text\]](#)