



**Matthew Silver.** *Our Exodus: Leon Uris and the Americanization of Israel's Founding Story.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010. 266 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8143-3443-0.



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## Exploring the Influence of Uris's *Exodus*

Few novels have ever wielded the sociopolitical influence of Leon Uris's *Exodus*, about the founding of Israel. Published in 1958, the book became an international bestseller and was translated into over fifty languages. But *Exodus*'s success extended far beyond the literary marketplace. The novel also played a crucial role into transforming the majority of American Jews (who until then largely had maintained a cool, uneasy relationship with the Jewish state) into ardent Zionists. *Exodus* also helped enlist support for Israel among American political leaders and the American public at large—an alliance that has continued, despite periodic tensions, to this day. Without question, Uris deliberately intended *Exodus* to serve as a vehicle for winning support for the Jewish state, especially in America. Shortly after the book appeared, the author told a *New York Post* interviewer, "I set out to tell a story of Israel. I am definitely biased. I am definitely pro-Jewish."<sup>[1]</sup> As a result, *Exodus* is one book that can be justly labeled (without fear of sounding like Vanessa Redgrave) "Zionist propaganda." The novel's achievement as ultra-successful propaganda was

even recognized at the time by Israel's then prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, who remarked, "As a literary work, it isn't much. But as a piece of propaganda, it's the greatest thing ever written about Israel" (p. 100).

Yet, despite this influence, *Exodus* has received relatively little critical attention. In his obituary for Uris (who died in 2003 at age seventy-nine) published in *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Stephen Whitfield maintains that Uris "was not the sort of writer who stirred the admiration of literary critics; and Jewish scholarship has paid very little attention to his work.... The implication of literary scholar Arnold Band's assertion ... that *Exodus* is certainly a major document in modern Jewish history has rarely been pursued."<sup>[2]</sup> Given this critical silence, M. M. Silver's *Our Exodus: Leon Uris and the Americanization of Israel's Founding Story* has the potential to fill an important scholarly niche. However, *Our Exodus*, while intermittently interesting, is a deeply flawed book. An Israeli academic who has spent time as a visiting scholar at several American universities, Silver seems aware of *Exodus*'s many faults, in particular its one-sided depic-

tion of Israel's founding, a view which has come to seem increasingly inadequate. Yet, perhaps because of his innate fondness for *Exodus*, which may stem from gratitude for the role the novel played in winning support for his homeland, Silver consistently follows his lengthy indictments of *Exodus* with tortured, confusing, and utterly unpersuasive defenses of the book and its author—passages at times further obfuscated by academic jargon.

The problem begins in the book's introduction. Here, Silver admits that *Exodus* is not a historically accurate retelling of the 1948 war between Israel and a coalition of Arab forces, which erupted immediately after the state's founding. Yet he insists, inexplicably, that *Exodus*'s lack of historical veracity is not important to an assessment of the novel, referring to "ultimately unproductive binary polarities between the 'real' facts of 1948 and 'mythic' perceptions of Israel's founding" (p. 3). The introduction further insists that "since *Exodus* was never exactly about Israel, it did not matter that Uris was not exactly right about the facts of its establishment" (p. 10). Silver concludes that "framing analysis of its history upon mechanical opposition between 'truths' and 'myths' about the Jewish state and its founding is beside the point" (p. 11).

No doubt the millions of readers who consumed *Exodus* upon its publication recognized that it was a work of fiction. Nonetheless, surely the vast majority of those readers assumed that *Exodus* was basically a historically accurate account of the "facts" of Israel's founding, not a mere recitation of "myths" generated by Uris's pro-Zionist agenda. How could *Exodus* have helped inspire America to support the Jewish state if its version of Israeli history was seen as purely mythic?

The same illogic arises when Silver turns to *Exodus*'s depiction of the historical event from which the novel derives its title—namely, the attempt of a ship named Exodus, filled with Jewish Holocaust survivors, to elude the British blockade and dock in Palestine. The very captain of the actual Exodus, Yehiel Aranowicz, disputed Uris's retelling of this event, telling *Time Magazine* that the book was "neither history nor literature.... The types ... described in it never existed in Israel" (p. 167). Silver acknowledges that in numerous instances Uris's version of the Exodus's voyage departs from reality: e.g., he leaves out the many American Jews aboard ship; he portrays the refugees as exclusively children and adolescents, whereas in actuality they were mostly adults; he omits that the refugees, denied admission to Palestine, were repatriated by the British in Germany and other

European countries. In all these cases, Uris altered history to suit his didactic purposes. Nonetheless, Silver declares, "What everyone understands about *Exodus* from the novel ... is *really true*.... Very little in the book's ... depictions of the DP ship episode accords with the actual facts of the case (indeed, in the most basic sense it is reasonable to conclude that Uris's *Exodus* is not about Exodus). Nonetheless, the book has a reality principle" (pp. 68, 70-71). But it is highly unlikely that most of *Exodus*'s readers were aware that the novel's version of the ship's voyage was based on "a reality principle," whatever that means, as opposed to actual reality.

It is worth noting that nowhere in the way the novel was advertised was there any indication that the book was only "loosely based" on real events. In the preface to the 1969 edition, Uris alludes to the trip he took in Israel with members of the IDF to research the book, saying that the nation's "story was a revelation to me as I discovered it in the farms and cities of Israel."<sup>3</sup> And that same edition concludes with a brief afterword by the unnamed editor which reads, "You've just finished a most remarkable book ... of eye-opening historical significance."<sup>4</sup> Both of these declarations strongly suggest that the novel is rooted in historical truth.

Our *Exodus*'s implausible defense of Uris's novel becomes especially egregious when Silver turns to *Exodus*'s patent anti-Arab biases. Silver admits that the novel completely ignores what he aptly terms the "Other Exodus"—namely, the 1948 war's creation of approximately 1,150,000 Palestinian refugees. To obscure this tragedy, Uris demonizes the Arabs. He stresses, for example, that the mufti of Jerusalem at the time, Haj Amin al-Husseini, had had ties with Hitler during World War II. Uris exploits this fact by portraying the Arabs who opposed Israel in 1948 as surrogate Nazis. Moreover, *Exodus* claims that all the Palestinians who fled their homes during the war did so under orders from their leaders, not because they were evicted by the Israeli Defense Forces—a claim which has been persuasively challenged by Israeli "New Historians" such as Benny Morris and Tom Segev, who document that in some instances the Palestinians were ordered to leave home by their leaders, but in others they were kicked out by the IDF. Rather than evicting the Palestinians, the novel purports, the Israeli military and civilian leadership welcomed them to stay in a state which would treat them to the benefits of modernity—an offer the Palestinians obstinately refused. On the contrary, Silver calls "such refusal ... the logic of nationalism itself" (p. 178).

The Arabs were particularly in need of Israel's high-tech advantages because, says *Exodus*, the life they led was invariably backward and filthy. This degraded view of Arab culture is exemplified in the scene in which the novel's hero, the Sabra freedom fighter Ari Ben Canaan, and his sometime lover, the American nurse Kitty Fremont, visit a Bedouin encampment. There they encounter "the dregs of humanity," particularly the Bedouin women, who are described as "encased in black robes, and layers of dirt. [Kitty] was not able to smell the goats but she was able to smell the women." The Bedouins offer the Israeli-American couple a meal of "greasy lamb leg," "unwashed fruit," and "thick, sickeningly sweet coffee in cups so filthy they were crusted." Ari counsels Kitty: "Be a good girl and eat whatever [the Bedouin host] offers you. You can throw it up later" (quoted, p. 178).

Admittedly, there are a few "good" Arab characters in *Exodus*, but they are exclusively the handful who ally themselves with the Israelis, and they are inevitably punished for their "reason" by their Arab brethren. An example is the conciliatory Kammal, who cedes part of his land so that the Zionists can build the Gan Dafna asylum for the Exodus ship refugees. Silver notes, "His murder by the mufti's terrorists symbolizes the end of hopes for beneficial Palestinian development alongside, or within, the Jewish state" (p. 180).

Yet once again, after convincingly demonstrating *Exodus*'s anti-Arab racism, Silver inexplicably exonerates the novel from all such criticism: "It is easy to upbraid Uris for writing without an anthropological sense that Arab resistance to Zionist rhetoric about raising stan-

dards of living stemmed from a desire to preserve a way of life. But had he written in such a vein, *Exodus* would never have become such a mass-culture commodity; so, in effect, such criticism is pointless" (p. 181). However, contrary to Silver's assertion, it does not absolve *Exodus* of all charges of anti-Arab prejudice to argue that had Uris not demonized Arabs in this fashion, his book would not have been commercially successful. Why has Silver devoted pages to revealing the book's anti-Arab bias if he believes that all such allegations are "pointless"?

*Our Exodus* ends with a discussion of how *Exodus*, after being circulated in samizdat in the former USSR, inspired a Jewish revival among Soviet Jews, inciting them to oppose the communist regime and petition for the right to emigrate to Israel. However, this section, while interesting in itself, fails to bring the book to any real conclusion. Silver's book is both confused and confusing and this conclusion to it was an unsatisfactory way to wrap things up.

#### Notes

[1]. Uris cited in Phillip Roth's essay, "Some New Jewish Stereotypes," in *Reading Myself and Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 138.

[2]. Stephen Whitfield, "Necrology: Leon Uris (1924-2003)," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 94, no. 4 (Autumn 2004): 666-671.

[3]. Leon Uris, *Exodus* (New York: Bantam Books, 1958, reprinted 1969), preface.

[4]. *Ibid*, afterword, 599.

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