Abstract

Resistance against oppression and exploitation is motivated by physical revulsion, by theoretical objection, and to a large extent by myths about a feasible liberation. The exodus of the Israelites from Egypt is one of the oldest reports of a people successfully overcoming slavery and genocide. Regardless of whether the liberation actually happened as it is told in the Pentateuch, the narrative of these mythical events has encouraged generations to resist repression and to seek a more just life. Since the Age of Enlightenment, this myth has been secularized in order to make its charisma visible to people of all faiths and unbeliefs. This work examines in what way over the past hundred years this myth has been used to understand the human condition and to promote humanistic values. It shows the significance the Exodus maintains, in particular as a hermeneutical model for psychoanalysis, as a material for art, as a strategy for politics and as a narrative for philosophy. Sigmund Freud investigates the story of Exodus to expose the causes for the development of religion and ethics and to understand why people oppose the rational civilizing of their inclination to violence, jealousy, and self-abandonment. Thomas Mann recounts the myth in a disenchanting and ironic manner to warn against alleged saviors and to counteract the Germans' submissiveness to the barbaric perversion of socialist ideals. Michael Walzer explores the use and abuse of Exodus by historical revolutionary movements to show how Exodus should be read to restrain from a messianic reenactment of radical politics and to outline a realistic emancipatory perspective. Paolo Virno uses fragments of the myth to explain how the social uprisal of the 1960s and 1970s could be colonized by capitalism, and to identify political abilities in the age of late capitalism. These secular interpretations make it evident that the Exodus still inspires activism for a more just and free society and that it should be remembered not only as a narrative but also as a warning and an example.