Spoils from Egypt

Lawrence E. Frizzell, Seton Hall University
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Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell
Jewish-Christian Studies Graduate Program
Department of Religion
Seton Hall University
South Orange, NJ
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This motif draws upon Exodus 3:21-22; 11:2-3; 12:35-37; see Genesis 15:14. In the early Church this was a paradigm to justify Christian appropriation of wisdom from the pagan world. Gnostics used these Exodus passages to argue that the Jewish Scriptures portray an inferior God. Irenaeus (130-200) responded that Egyptians owed gratitude to Joseph and that their gifts to the Israelites constituted compensation for slave labor (Against the Heresies IV.30.3; see Clement of Alexandria, Miscellanies I:157.2).

Origen (185-254) acknowledged that pagan teachings could be dangerous to Christian faith yet wisdom should not be spurned. “Test everything; hold fast to what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21 in Homily on Exodus 11:6). The spoils would be used for the tabernacle and ark of the covenant, yet some became the golden calf (Philocalia XIII). The only way to avoid compromise and heresy is to study the Scriptures in a spirit of prayer, mindful of the relation between Scripture and divine worship.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) discussed this motif in 83 Diverse Questions (53), On Christian Instruction (II.11.60) and the Confessions (7:9); this image is found in discussions of Christian theologians to modern times. In England some social reformers of recent centuries have used the spoils motif as a description of Jewish greed. This anti-Jewish judgment is alien to the Christian tradition.

Bibliography


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