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Spoils from Egypt

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SPOILS FROM EGYPT

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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.

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