In his book *Exodus and Revolution*, Michael Walzer places political philosophy in dialectic relationship with biblical studies. More specifically, Walzer attempts to “move back and forth between the biblical narrative…and the tracts and treatises, the slogans and songs, of radical politics” (ix). He does not attempt an interpretation of Exodus that is “authoritative” in any sense; rather, he seeks “to discover its meaning in what it has meant” (7). In other words, Walzer interprets Exodus through the lens of the history of interpretation. This essay will explore Walzer’s treatment of the Exodus text, paying particular attention to his development of the themes of “Exodus politics” and “messianic politics.” Then, it will offer a critique, drawing on themes from Edward Said’s article “Michael Walzer’s ‘Exodus and Revolution’: A Canaanite Reading.” This essay will conclude by drawing some implications from both Walzer and Said for the church and the world today.

Walzer begins his book by asserting the centrality of the Exodus story in the history of the politics of revolution: “Wherever people know the Bible, and experience oppression, the Exodus has sustained the spirits and, sometimes, inspired their resistance” (4). This includes Communists, Puritans, Leninists, Latin American liberation theologians, German peasants, Calvinists, Huguenots, American Revolutionaries, Boer Nationalists, and those within the American Civil Rights movement. In his introduction
Walzer makes two key points that will be important throughout this book. First, because it has an end (the Promised Land), the Exodus story inspires interpretation and application like no cyclical revolutionary tale can. In other words, “the appeal…lies in its linearity, in the idea of a promised end” (14). Where there is no promise, there is no hope, and thus no revolution. Second, while “Exodus is an account of deliverance or liberation expressed in religious terms…it is also a secular, that is, a this-worldly account. Most important it is a realistic account” (9). Walzer contrasts this aspect of the Exodus story with “messianism,” which has its roots in Exodus thinking but seeks redemption at the super-historical, cosmic level. By contrast, Walzer introduces the concept of “Exodus politics,” in which Moses “is only a man” (17) and redemption is “secular and historical” (17).

For Walzer, Israel’s escape from Egypt implies a judgment against Egypt’s oppression and corruption. Although the oppression is never called “unjust” in the text, its “active and personal” (23) nature make it so. The Israelites were “guest workers,” (26) forced to serve “with rigor” (be-farech), a term that could refer to “service without the limits of time or purpose” (27) or “the sense of physical cruelty” (28). This oppression was intentionally exploitative and cruel: in short, a tyranny. Egypt’s corruption, of which the “flesh-pots” are a metaphor, lies in its vast, unequal wealth and its culture (35). Walzer is careful not to overstate the judgment. The rejection of Egypt was very complex, for it acknowledges both the allure of luxury and the threat of a return to Egypt. Additionally, the judgment was not against affluence, per se. There is affluence in the Promised Land as well, only it is “more widely shared” (40).
As Said rightly notes, Walzer’s treatment of the wilderness “murmurings” is his “freshest and most perceptive” (Said, 88). It is also crucial to his argument for the gradual nature of “Exodus politics.” It is in the wilderness that the Israelites come to terms with their internalized “slave mentality” (46) and wrestle with what it means to be free. The tension lies in the claims that freedom places on the individual: freedom means responsibility. This tension comes to a head in the story of the Golden Calf, which is, for Walzer, a story of a free people choosing to return to slavery. Throughout his description of the wilderness and the Golden Calf, Walzer stresses the “inevitability of gradualness,” (54) the “argument for gradualism” and the “gradual pedagogy of successes and failures” (58). There is a difficulty in maintaining this position in light of “the mobilization of the Levites and the killing of the idol worshippers… the first revolutionary purge” (59). This is a creation of a vanguard—the enemies of gradualism—and it has been used by various groups of people to advocate political violence. Notwithstanding, Walzer suggests a “social democratic reading” (67). For Walzer, “the text can be read either way, that is why it has been read so long and so often” (67). He is not trying to present an authoritative interpretation; he is reading the text through its history of interpretation (albeit, as Said rightly observes, a limited view of that history).

The answer to those who would espouse “messianic politics” is the Covenant. The Sinai Covenant invites participation by each member of the community, not simply a vanguard. The Covenant is a central aspect of the revolutionary pattern. A slave is not free to commit himself to anybody but his master. With the Covenant, the people of Israel are asserting their freedom by freely committing to God. Once committed, they are “freely bound” (97) to the cause; their freedom comes with responsibility. When they are
unfaithful, the Prophets call them back. This could be seen as the “faithful [enforcing] the Covenant against the people, in the name of the people themselves” (95) or it can be seen as “a more democratic kind of politics: public commitment, instruction, prophetic complaint, and public recommitment” (95). The vanguard is indeed inspired and zealous, but they have to wait for the people to catch up, to give their consent.

With the entrance into the Promised Land, the Israelites experience a problem; namely, “the land was rosier in the promising than in the getting” (101). The Israelites have discovered that they will never have a land of milk and honey where there is “enough for everyone” (107) until they become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Material plenty is predicated upon the “elimination of misery and exploitation” (107). The disillusionment of a promise deferred becomes the roots of a new “messianism” in which the “promise becomes utopian” (118). Messianic thought develops in a parallel line with Exodus politics, but is very much different. “Not only is the messianic promise unconditional…. The picture of the ‘new heaven and the new earth’ is worked out, instead, in opposition to this world, this life” (120).

In his conclusion, Walzer contrasts “Exodus Politics” with “political messianism” (135), which is incited by the seemingly endless gradualism of the march through the wilderness and the disillusionment with the realism of the Promised Land. Political “messianism” is characterized by “an extraordinary sensitivity to and something like a longing for apocalyptic events” (138) and a “readiness to ‘force the End’… to act politically for ultimate purposes” (139). “Compared with political messianism, Exodus makes for cautious and moderate politics” (147).
Edward Said’s poignant article offers several critiques of *Exodus and Revolution*. For Said, Walzer’s problem lies less in what he says, than in what he omits: evidence for his claims, description of the pre-bondage state of the Israelites, the uncompromisingly fierce nature of YHWH throughout Numbers and Deuteronomy, the importance of other stories of revolution, and the bloody history of the interpretation of Exodus “from the Indian-killing Puritans…to South African Boers claiming large swatches of territory held by Blacks” (Said, 92). In Said’s view, Walzer has tamed the Exodus story, while neglecting to judge as wrong the most disturbing inference he draws from it: that “the Canaanites are explicitly excluded from the world of moral concern” (Said, 192). Said draws out the political irony that he sees as a reflection of this reading of Exodus: “the emergence of a new and eccentric colonial situation [modern Israel] at exactly the same time that classical colonialism was being defeated everywhere else” (Said, 98). For Said, this is a dangerous result of “the defense of spheres and peoplehood based on exclusion and displacement of others who are deemed to be lesser” (106).

Michael Walzer is primarily a political philosopher, not a biblical exegete. In one sense that is a criticism, but in another it is an allowance. I will examine each in turn. Throughout his book, Walzer makes bold claims with little evidence (particularly about the centrality of Exodus for revolutionary politics; pp 24-25, 134). He delves into deep detail for texts that support a “social democratic reading” while practically skipping over certain troubling parts of the story (e.g. the killing of the Hebrew first-born sons). As a biblical exegete, Walzer is weak, constantly deferring to the interpretations of others over and above evidence that is in the text itself and reading into (isogesis) the text his own presuppositions. Which leads to the allowance. Walzer himself is not claiming authority
as a biblical exegete. He is trying to “discover it’s meaning in what it has meant” (7). This means that isogesis is inevitable. He is offering “a reading of the Exodus that captures its political meaning” (133). In this endeavor he is quite a bit more successful; his reading is a plausible one.

The importance of the issues raised by Walzer and Said go far beyond, yet certainly include, the matters of Zionism and post-colonialism. Said is rightly incensed by Walzer’s refusal to condemn a view of the Exodus that explicitly excludes anybody from the world of moral concern. All people are of moral concern, whether the Exodus portrays them that way or not. Additionally, people today are slowly beginning to believe that moral concern extends beyond people, to nature and ecology in ways humans have taken for granted for hundreds of years. Ironically, this may be a point of overlap for Said and Walzer. The religious landscape in America over the past century has been dominated by views of other-worldly, apocalyptic eschatology, and by political and religious messianism based on a duality between “material” and “spiritual” reality that has extolled the latter at the expense of the former. Walzer’s “Exodus politics” provide “a narrative frame within which it [is] possible to think about oppression and liberation in this-worldly terms. It…suggests…that there might be a great day that [isn’t] the Last Day” (130). Viewed in a more comprehensive way, in which no one or no thing is “excluded from the moral sphere”, Walzer’s “Exodus politics” could have a grounding effect on present-day messianism—from the Jewish Zionist variety to the Christian dispensationalist variety.