

Masculinity and Mission: The Transformation of American Attitudes towards Jews during the “Long 1950s”

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< Abstract >

The “long 1950s” – roughly 1948 through 1963 – witnessed a significant transformation of Christian attitudes towards Jews in the United States. Among the reasons for the change, perhaps the most surprising was an unprecedented association of Jews with vigorous masculinity at a time of national confusion and anxiety about the meaning and durability of male gender roles. All Americans felt the pull of these tensions, not least among them Protestant Christians who, despite the emergence of new male role models in their own midst, accepted tutelage from other traditions as well. Particularly powerful symbols of the new Jewish masculinity were a triad who can be thought of as the “three Bens”: on the movie screens, Judah Ben-Hur in the 1959 blockbuster film *Ben-Hur*, from library shelves Ari Ben Canaan, the hero of Leon Uris’s bestselling 1958 novel *Exodus* as well as the 1960 film made from it; and on the evening news, David Ben-Gurion, whose career as the most important figure in Israeli society and politics coincided exactly with the span of the “long 1950s.” The “three Bens” differed from other male role models in the era by their effective linkage of hyper-masculinity with a sense of focused purpose. The union of masculinity and mission would help shape American ideals and ideologies in the 1960s and beyond.

[**Keywords**] Anti-Semitism, Philosemitism, 1950s, masculinity, Ben-Hur, Leon Uris, David Ben-Gurion

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I. Introduction

A half-century ago the class of 1965 in a high school in Virginia Beach, Virginia included no African Americans nor Asian Americans and, at various points, exactly one (half) Hispanic, one Mormon, and, to my knowledge, one Jew. The absence of blacks a decade after the implementation decree for the *Brown v. Board of Education* II decision mandating desegregation “with all deliberate speed” resulted from calculation by the racist school superintendent for whom the high school was named, but the dearth of other types of diversity was an accident of history – Virginia Beach was a Navy town, and the US Navy did not draw many volunteers from certain sectors in society, notably American Jews. Yet despite the relative absence of many real-life Jews, I was part of a small group of philosemitic students who learned to dance the *hora*, an Israeli folk dance, from a teacher once employed at a Jewish summer camp, and who passed around a soon-tattered paperback copy of *Exodus*, Leon Urris’s 1958 novel about the founding of Israel a year after we were born. To become a member of our coterie there was only one prerequisite: you had to have shed a tear on page 598 of *Exodus* (Uris 1959), when the rugged, implacable Ari Ben Canaan finally weeps after learning that young Karen Clement cannot join the surviving characters for Passover *seder* because she has been murdered by Palestinian guerillas. “God! God! Why don’t they let us alone! *Why don’t they let us live!*”

Only in retrospect can I appreciate the historical importance of the enthusiasm for Jews and things Jewish displayed by a small group of Protestant adolescents only four

decades after a revived Ku Klux Klan erupted across the United States in opposition to Catholic and Jewish immigrants. A major study of anti-Semitism in America fixes its high point in the late 1930s and early 1940s, between five and ten years before we were born, when over half the population, according to one poll, had “negative impressions of Jews, most finding them greedy, dishonest, and aggressive” (Dinnerstein 1994, 105-149, quotation on 127). Even during the first couple of years after victory over an anti-Semitic regime in Germany, fundamentalist leaders in the United States tended to argue that hatred of Jews would persist until they converted to Christianity, while many liberals agreed with the editors of *Christian Century* in both rejecting overt anti-Semitism and regretting what they viewed as the displays of Jewish arrogance and insularity that helped feed it (Wuthnow 1988, 76-77). As recently as 1949, when we would have been starting to talk in sentences, two Jewish war veterans who had moved their families into a jointly purchased home in a non-Jewish section of Chicago were met by angry neighbors throwing rocks and jibing, “The only trouble with Hitler is that he didn’t finish the job.” Yet the riot is as interesting for the reaction to it as for its echoes of the past: Chicago newspapers first downplayed it in the hope that it might not become a precedent, then vigorously editorialized against it to insure that it would not (Ellwood 2000, 207-208, quotation 207).

Over the “long 1950s,” by which I mean the elements of continuity in American political and cultural evolution from about 1947 until 1963 or so,¹⁾ The term “long

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1950s” has been entering historians’ lexicon over the past couple of decades. For example, M. Keith Booker (2001, 3 and passim) a sea change in American attitudes transformed the position of Jews in the national culture (Dinnerstein 1994, 150-174). As Matthew Hedstrom (2013,143) has argued, after World War II “the tectonic plates of American religious and political life that the previously dominant conception of the United States as a Christian nation – meaning, in practice, a Protestant nation – that tolerated the presence of religious minorities gave way to a new, more fully pluralistic society of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews....” I now realize that our reaction to Exodus as impressionable teenagers can be viewed as a symbol of that metamorphosis.

II. Three Factors Transforming Attitudes toward Jews

As Leonard Dinnerstein has noted (1994, 250), “Given what apparently had been an escalation of bigotry during the war, the transformation in public rhetoric and behavior afterwards was so swift that candid observers were at a loss to explain the changes.” The rapidity and extent of the decline of American anti-Semitism are still perplexing, but at least three factors seem to have been at work – the postwar emphasis on continuity that nourished the contemporary paeans to Judeo-Christian civilization; feelings of empathy for the suffering of Jews in the Holocaust; and newly found respect for Jews as role models in precisely the areas of American culture that seemed most at risk in the long 1950s.

In the postwar years pluralism became a

mantra for American intellectuals, for some as a celebration of diversity within continuity, but at least for many as a quest for continuity across the historical divisions in the national culture – the many rooms devoted to ethnic, racial, religious, and other particularistic identities within “The House I Live In” that Frank Sinatra sang about in 1945 in a short film aimed at anti-Semitism (LeRoy 1945; Hollinger [1975] 1985; see also Hollinger [1995] 2000, Hollinger 1996, and various essays in Hollinger 2006). The pluralism championed by academic and political elites might have foundered on the contemporary religious revival that up to around 1958 saw church membership and attendance mushroom, except that polls indicated the extent to which most Americans, especially in the new suburbs engirdling the nation’s cities, felt that belief in any religious concept should be considered a supreme good in and of itself above any specific belief as articulated in church doctrines and upheld by religious institutions (Herberg [1955, 1959] 1983, 46-98; Whitfield 1996, 77-100; Hudnut-Beumler 1994, 29-84). As a result, even though the Protestant establishment, now buttressed by the polished evangelicalism of Billy Graham, remained for many the public face of American religion throughout this period (Marsden 2014, 97-125; Finstuen 2009; Stevems 2010, 42-83; Douthat 2012, 32-37; Wacker 2014), the nation’s religious leaders preferred to talk about the continuities permeating, in the era’s catchphrase, the “Judeo-Christian tradition.” As Jews and Catholics were awarded equal conceptual status with Protestantism, “a new tri-faith image of America” became fixed as “America’s standard operating procedure” (Schultz 2011, quotations on 7, cf. 43-67; Hedstrom 2013, 142-171) The exigencies of the Cold War

added to its urgency, with President Dwight Eisenhower taking seriously his role as high-priest of what he called the “Judeo-Christian concept” that differentiated the theistic West from the atheistic Communist bloc (Inboden 2008, 257-309).²⁾The quotation derives from Eisenhower’s 1952 comment that has become the ur-text of discussions of America’s civil religion: “In other words, our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don’t care what it is. With us of course it is the Judeo-Christian faith, but it must be a religion that all men are created equal.”

It became customary for films with religious themes, notably the Biblical epics that poured out of Hollywood in the 1950s, to hire experts from each of the tri-faith communions to vet productions on behalf of their fellow believers, while even laments about the superficiality of the era’s religiosity were often cast in an ecumenical light. Probably the most famous attack on the shallow “civil religion” of the era, for example, was the argument that a simplistic “faith in faith” allowed “the operative faith of the American people” to become “the American Way of Life” in *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (1955) by Will Herberg, a Jew influenced by the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr (Herberg [1955, 1959] 1983, 89, 75; Hudnut-Beumler 1994, 109-130; Schultz 2011, 85-89).

Awarded pride of historical place in the “Judeo-Christian” world, American Jews quickly became beneficiaries of the pluralistic

ethos. Partly this occurred through judicious marketing of Judaism as Christianity’s elder brother, with particular emphasis on the fact that Jesus and most of his original followers were Jewish (Tatum 1999, 100-106; Prothero 2003, 229-266). This focus on the Jewish roots of early Christianity extended even to Paul, who, probably more than any of the other early church leaders, had been considered by Protestants the figure most responsible for recasting Christianity as a new universal religion rather than a sect within Judaism (Pelikan [1985] 1999, 17-20). In the Technicolor extravaganza *Quo Vadis* (LeRoy 1951), however, Paul is referred to as “Rabbi,” and is played by a half-Jewish actor with strongly, apparently augmented Semitic features in a colorful Jewish robe that is in sharp contrast to the white togas and stolas worn by the Roman family that he is instructing in the faith. Even without subliminal nudging, though, average Americans began showing a new level of openness to Jews, particularly in their middlebrow reading tastes. As early as 1946 the *New York Times* bestseller list was topped by Rabbi Joshua L. Liebman’s *Peace of Mind*, a merging of church and synagogue, religion and psychiatry, in the interest of achieving “the good life” on earth that foreshadowed the Reverend Norman Vincent Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking* of 1952 (Liebman [1946] 1994, quotation on 15; Hedstrom 2013, 188-194; Schultz 2011, 93; Marsden 2014, 97). By 1955 Herman Wouk could turn from a broad American canvas in *The Caine Mutiny* (1951) to Marjorie Morningstar, which Gordon Hutner (2009, 303) has identified as “very likely the first novel about American Jews that American Gentiles read avidly.” By 1958, American readers would anoint with bestseller status *Only in America*, a volume of humorous

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anecdotes drawing on Jewish immigrant life in New York City and Charlotte, North Carolina, by Harry Golden, who mingled pride in his ethnic heritage with a commitment to the values of “Judaean-Christian civilization” (Goldberg 1958, 317). By the end of the decade Wouk and Golden had been joined by a constellation of more gifted authors led by Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth who won both highbrow respect and middlebrow sales for fiction that increasingly focused on Jewish life in America.

Several of their novels such as Bellow's *The Victim* (1947) and Malamud's *The Assistant* (1957) took as their subject the victimization of Jews, with suffering often offered as the most universal of their traits – as Malamud put it, “All men are Jews, though few of them know it” (Shahwam 2013, quotation on 96).³⁾ When they could be helped to know it, when non-Jewish Americans could be forced to put themselves in the place of Jews, undeserved victimization was probably the most potent antidote to anti-Semitism. Laura Hobson's novel *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947) won a large audience with just that strategy, as a WASP journalist, played by Gregory Peck in the movie made from it the same year, learns firsthand the sting of prejudice when he poses as a Jew for two months (Hutner 2009, 252-256). A stagehand on the movie set got the point, however perversely, when he vowed that “he would never again be rude to a Jew ‘because he might turn out to be a Gentile’” (Dinnerstein 1994, 153). The most significant example of

undeserved victimization, though, would become the Holocaust, the enormity of which only gradually entered public consciousness over the “long 1950s” (Novick 1999, 63-123; Fermaglich 2006, 17-23). Millions of people around the world would seize as its most enduring symbol a book published in English translation in 1952 on what would have been the author's twenty-third birthday if she had still been alive – but Anne Frank had died at the age of fifteen in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. The diary that she was revising when the family's hiding place in Amsterdam had been betrayed in August 1944 would become a bestseller and the basis of a 1955 Broadway play that won the Pulitzer Prize and the New York Drama Critics Award and a 1959 film directed by George Stevens, who required his cast to watch film that he had shot at the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp (Prose 2009, 232). Stevens' footage had previously been screened at the Nuremberg trials, but the average American would not have had an opportunity to view the sickening scenes and begin to absorb the ghastliness of the Nazi “final solution” of the Jewish problem until other films shot by US personnel at the death camps were used in the movie *Judgment of Nuremberg* (1961).

Yet even as scenes of bulldozed corpses and emaciated survivors seared the public consciousness, many Jews had mixed feelings about the evolving image of them as history's greatest victims. As early as the late 1940s, when a memorial to the victims of the (as yet unnamed) Holocaust was proposed for New York City, the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Congress, and the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith joined to scuttle the idea, mostly, it seems, out of

3) Similarly, the reviewer of *The Victim* in *Commentary* argued that in his second novel Bellow had found in Jewishness “a quality that informs all of modern life... the quality of modernity itself” (Menand 2015, 73).

concern that it would make Jews appear mere defenseless pawns incapable of agency on their own behalf (Ellwood 2000, 216-217). A strong case could be made that the eventual construction of memorials to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust – a movement that in the United States began with the opening of the Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust in 1961 and that crested in 1990s with the dedications of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, in 1993, the New England Holocaust Memorial in Boston in 1995, and the Museum of Jewish Heritage at Battery Park in New York City in 1997 – only became possible after Jews had demonstrated a forceful alternative image with the creation, defense, and expansion of the state of Israel. The image problem would have been especially burdensome for Jews, who except for occasional gangsters or revolutionaries were known to themselves as well as outsiders primarily as scholars and merchants. Leon Uris, the creator of *Ari Ben Canaan*, spoke for many who preferred a “harder” image to replace the “soft” Jew of the past when he wrote in the preface to the original paperback edition of *Exodus* that it celebrated “fighting people, people who do not apologize either for being born Jews or the right to live in human dignity” (Nadel 2010, 94). No mere feminized tools of others’ hatred, Jews could now be viewed as the strongly masculine agents of their own destiny.

It would have been surprising if during the long 1950s American Jews did not feel compelled to create a counter-myth to the Holocaust built around strong individuals, hyper-masculine when men, independent, resourceful, and often highly sexual when women, for the imagery, especially of male role models, resonated with Gentiles as well.

A keynote resounding throughout the period was the widespread concern for reclaiming and restoring masculine values, sometimes in an overtly sexual context, especially after the first Kinsey Report suggested in 1948 that heterosexuality and homosexuality were less fixed attributes than points on a continuum of sexual activity, more often in a cultural sense as American males struggled to redefine masculinity in terms of a managerial service economy and a society constructed around the previously feminized world of consumption (Reumann 2005, 17-85; Gilbert 2005; Cuordileone 2005; May 1999; Cohen 2004). Adding to the gender crisis of the long 1950s were the abrupt changes in masculine roles after the “greatest generation” demobilized at the conclusion of World War II and had to adjust to civilian life, and the anxiety that all Americans, but perhaps especially men, felt at not being in control of the future in an age of potential nuclear warfare. The decade’s prototypical genre on movie and television screens therefore became the western, which across a greater variety of plotlines and metaphors than many now remember usually revolved around two master themes, the meanings of America and of masculinity (Slotkin [1992] 1998, 347-533). The protagonists of the novels that furnished the characters and story lines of Howard Hawks’ *Red River* (1948), George Stevens’ *Shane* (1953), and John Huston’s *The Unforgiven* (1960) had inherited their fathers’ “force and authority,” were determined to make a stand, “now, here on this river Papa found”; they had become men “tight twisted and burned to the color of Texas” recognizable as “male creature[s], loaded with threat in every movement,” with “eyes endlessly searching..., checking off every item in view, missing nothing” who had returned from the war

schooled “in the cruel, merciless business of keeping alive when those who look for your death are on every side” (Chase [1948] 2014, 17, 28; Schaefer 1949, 2; LeMay [1957] 2009, 31, 43).

The renewed emphasis on strong male models also affected religion, especially Protestant Christianity. In 1951 Catherine Marshall, in her preface to *A Man Called Peter*, a memoir of her late husband, the chaplain of the United States Senate, that would become a surprise bestseller and a Hollywood film, told of a dream in which she had visited him in Heaven and he had advised her, “Tell it all, if it will prove to people that a man can love *the Lord and not be a sissy...*” (Marshall [1951] 2002, 11, emphasis in text). Billy Graham, who trained like an athlete before his evangelical crusades and claimed he could run a six-minute mile in his fifties, cultivated his image as a male role model for the era and worked especially hard to convert men, to prevent the church from becoming an overly feminized force in the world (Wacker 2014, 81-90; Gilbert 2005, 106-134).

It is important to note that the men singled out for praise as role models employed their masculinity for higher goals. Even men who were not evangelists had missions, whether saving Texas or preserving a homestead. Men without missions became mere gunslingers. Yet even more than masculinity in the abstract, it was masculinity with a mission that seemed threatened during the long 1950s – and ironically the danger seemed to derive from the very sense of continuity that underlay tri-faith America when recast as bland Eisenhower-era political and ideological consensus. Even when mission was invoked,

as it was in the religious-flavored rhetoric of Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, it often could not be acted upon in the context of a global contest between nuclear powers (Whitfield 1996, 53-76; Brinkley 2001; Inboden 2008, 226-309).

It is here that the convergence of Jewish-American and mainstream American ideals and attitudes in the long 1950s seems to have played a crucial part in the rapid diminution of anti-Semitism in the United States. Tri-faith continuity, it could be argued, simply recast traditional antiseptic notions of toleration, while the image of victimization could elicit feelings of mingled sorrow and pity that made many Americans, both Jews and Gentiles, uncomfortable. By themselves and in combination they proved important sources of anti-anti-Semitism. Yet they could not explain the philosemitism of teenagers in a suburban development in Virginia Beach – for philosemitism is rare enough in world history to require special explication (Sutcliffe and Karp 2011). To appreciate how the convergence reached Frank W. Cox High School, it is helpful to look at the effect of the “three Bens” on American culture as the 1950s yielded to the 1960s (*ben*, Hebrew for “son of,” itself is a clue to the importance of masculine images at the time). The first is Judah Ben-Hur, whose name derives from a misunderstanding of Jewish naming practices on the part of Lew Wallace, the author of the original 1880 novel *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*; we are informed that Judah’s late father was named Ithamar, but Wallace and subsequent filmmakers considered both Judah and Ithamar as members of the House of Hur, which is spoken of in the same way that contemporaries would have alluded to the House of Rothschild (Wallace [1880] 1998, 97). Wallace’s novel had

already had a major Hollywood incarnation as a silent film in 1925, but in 1959 *Ben-Hur* was once more in the headlines as an epic movie that would be nominated for twelve Academy Awards and win a then unprecedented eleven.⁴⁾ The analysis of *Ben-Hur* presented here will be developed in more detail in a forthcoming paper, "The Son of Hur and the Son of God in Two Eras: *Ben-Hur*, Religion, and Masculinity in America, 1880 and 1959," scheduled for the Korea Society for Religion and Literature conference to be held July 9-10, 2015 at Sogang University in Seoul, Korea.

The second is Ari Ben Canaan, the hero of Leon Uris's novel *Exodus*. The third is David Ben-Gurion, the real-life key figure in the creation of Israel in 1948, the nation's first prime minister, and its head of state again from the mid-1950s until 1963.

III. The Role of the "Three Bens"

Despite its many accolades at the time, the 1959 version of *Ben-Hur* has not aged well except for religious viewers who still respond to annual televised presentations around Easter. Although some critics continue to find it effective, especially when compared to the other Biblical epics of the era (Solomon 2001, 205-213; Cyrino 2005, 59-88; Eldridge 2006, 212; Theodorakopoulos 2010, 30-50; Sinyard 2013, 181-193), David Thomson (2012, 138)

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probably speaks for many contemporary viewers in his complaint that "it's harder to watch now than the version from 1925. We don't want to hear what these earnest biblical folk are saying." Nevertheless, the film still draws attention, not least because its director was William Wyler (Sinyard 2013, 181-193; Miller 2013, 358-365), a much decorated filmmaker with an eventual four Academy Awards for Best Director, including the one for *Ben-Hur*, whose other works ranged from *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) to *Funny Girl* (1968), from *The Westerner* (1940) to *Roman Holiday* (1953). Born to Jewish parents in Alsace, Wyler would probably, if MGM had secured rights to the play, have been helming *The Diary of Anne Frank*, which appeared the same year as *Ben-Hur*, rather than George Stevens at 20th Century Fox (Prose 2009, 227). Instead, as one of Wyler's daughters has remembered her father quipping, "It took a Jew to make a really good movie about Christ" (Herman 1997, 400). Yet, setting aside the still debated question as to whether his *Ben-Hur* is "a really good movie," even ignoring the subtitle *A Tale of the Christ* inherited from the novel, we should recognize the film as sharing all three themes depicted here as principal contributors to the erosion of anti-Semitism after 1945.

It was, to start with, one of the most potent representations of Judeo-Christian continuity created in the long 1950s. As Jason Stevens (2010, 14) has noted, one of the key differences between Wyler's film and the original novel or the 1925 silent film is that in 1959, "*Ben-hur* (sic) touches the mezuzah as well as the cross." The note of continuity is sounded, literally, in the opening minutes of *Ben-Hur*, when the birth of Christ in the Bethlehem manger stall is celebrated by one of the shepherds blowing

a *shofar*, the ram's horn used to introduce high holy days in Judaism (cf. Theodorakopoulos 2010, 34). Throughout the ensuing three and a half hours (Wyler [1959] 2011), the status of Judah Ben-Hur (Charlton Heston) as an observant Jew is emphasized. We see him, for example, donning a kippah or yarmulke before asking God's blessing at a meal with his mother and sister. But Stevens is right: it is the *mezuzah*, the inscription of verses from the Torah placed on the doorpost at the entrance of Jewish homes, that becomes the recurring sign of the Jewishness of characters. We first notice a mezuzah early in the film in the combined home and shop of the carpenter Joseph in Nazareth when a customer pays his respects to it before asking the whereabouts of Joseph's son Jesus. All the other shots involving a mezuzah, however, concern Judah Ben-Hur taking time to touch it and kiss his fingers as he races into his house to meet a guest, weeping while leaning against it on his return home from Rome, and finally honoring it when he returns home after the crucifixion of Jesus – Judah Ben-Hur may be on his way to eventually becoming a Christian, but he remains a Jew.

The movie also inevitably deals with the issue of the historical victimization of Jews. As the *New York Times* critic noted at the time, Jewish-Roman relations in Wyler's *Ben-Hur* bore unmistakable echoes of the recent Jewish-Nazi conflict (Wyke 1997, 22-23); more recent critics have noted how Romans in the film, unlike their predecessors in the 1925 version, comport themselves like a self-conscious master race, disparaging both Jews and Arabs (cf. Winkler 2001, 65-72, especially 71-72; Miller 2013, 362-363). The movie's plot involves a series of scenes depicting wrongs to Jews: Judah's sentence to slavery pulling

the oars of a Roman warship; the crucifixion (instead of the novel's torture) of his own slave and business advisor Simonides; and the imprisonment of his mother and sister that results in their contracting leprosy. The fact that none of the fictional Jewish victims die – even Simonides receives a respite when the Sabbath intervenes – is a result of happenstance or, as in the case of the two women, a final miracle of Jesus, who is the only significant Jewish character to suffer death at Roman hands in the movie.⁵⁾ It probably did not hurt Jewish reactions to the film that it ends with Christ's crucifixion, not his purported resurrection, though interestingly this was not a revision for 1950s audiences – possible events on the third day afterwards are also not mentioned in the original novel.

With all Jewish suffering redeemed by the end of the movie, the images that probably persist in the memory of most viewers are not of Judah's bloody feet and parched lips as he is marched through the desert in chains or of his family cowering in the shadows to avoid giving him their disease, but of his angry eyes as his taut muscles push the oars, and of the determined set of his jaw as he maneuvers his team of white Arabian horses in the chariot race. Although the plot as inherited from Wallace requires a transformation within Judah Ben-Hur at the end of the film, the cinematic change seems "indirect and vague" (Miller 2013, 364), a "near-conversion" (Theodorakopoulos 2010, 33), for while Judah's hatred has dissipated, he remains in other respects during the film's final moments

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the same vigorous, virile specimen of masculinity who could win the chariot race a week or so earlier. The key transformation for many viewers is not the movie's end but the moment on a raft shared with Arius, the Roman admiral of the fleet, when "Judah demonstrates the new reversal of authority as he stretches to his full muscular height, almost naked, on the raft where he holds the Roman commander in chains," when we can share "the will and perseverance in Judah's nude humanity" (Cyrino 2005, 87). The heroic masculinity of Ben-Hur asserting his freedom in fact represented one of the reasons Wyler had agreed to make the movie, for as he told an interviewer in 1976, and repeated on two later occasions, "Here was a situation where the Jews were fighting for their freedom and their country against the Romans, and two thousand years later they are still fighting for these same things, only now it is against the Arabs. I don't know if people who are not Jewish see this dimension of the story, but it impressed me" (Miller 2010, 75, cf. 81, 115).

Wyler's decision in 1957 to direct *Ben-Hur* thus coincided with Leon Uris's creation of Ari Ben Canaan – indeed Uris, in the throes of writing *Exodus*, worked for Wyler for two months that year polishing the script of *The Big Country* before the director fired him (Nadel 2010, 106). Leon Uris was the son of a Russian Jew who had briefly lived in Palestine before immigrating to America and shortening his name from Yerushalmi, "Man of Jerusalem" (the name of the creator of Ari Ben Canaan, or "Lion, Son of Canaan," could therefore be rendered "Lion, Man of Jerusalem," a verbal parallel that surely did not escape the author's attention). In 1942 the son left high school in his senior year to volunteer for the Marines. In 1956, while he was in Israel researching

his most famous novel, the highest praise he could give the country in a letter to his father was to call it "a nation of young Marines" (Nadel 2010, 98). Leon Uris's experiences at Guadalcanal and Tarawa would lead to his first novel *Battle Cry* (1953), which would become the year's highest-grossing paperback and the last Uris novel to secure a favorable consensus of reviews, with a national poll of rating it higher than most other novels published that year, including Saul Bellow's *Adventures of Augie March* (Nadel 2010, 64). The young author then moved to Hollywood to work on the film of his novel and stayed to work on other scripts, of which the only one to reach the screen with his name attached was a western, *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral* (1957). He was working on it when his agent shopped around a list of script ideas including a story set in Israel to Dore Schary at MGM, who had independently decided to make a movie about the founding of the state. Since the agent's partner was the brother of the director Otto Preminger, the deal that would be signed in January 1956 was obvious: the studio would fund a trip to Israel for research purposes, Uris would write a novel and eventually a script based on it, and Preminger would film it for MGM (Nadel 2010, 95).

Uris set to work on *Exodus* after rummaging through some three hundred English-language books (without bar mitzvah training as a boy, he did not read Hebrew) and spending seven and a half months in Israel interviewing participants and learning the terrain on a first visit that would coincide with the Suez crisis (Nadel 2010, 95, 97-104). The novel appeared in September 1958 to an initially lukewarm reception, but in early 1959, apparently through word of mouth of excited readers, sales began to skyrocket. It would stay at the top of the

bestseller charts for five months starting in May, become a belated Book-of-the-Month choice a year after its publication, and generate a then unprecedented advance paperback order of 1,500,000 copies, which was the size of the total anticipated print run. Bantam quickly doubled production for a paperback edition that has never been out of print since October 1959 (Nadel 2010, 108-109; Silver 2010). The copy purchased for this paper was part of the 96th printing.

The novel asserted a strong Jewish identity that rejected the stereotypes of the past and helped create a new one for the future rooted in the issues and anxieties of the long 1950s. When Uris left Israel in late November 1956 he had vowed in a press release “to write a book worthy of our people” (Nadel 2010, 104), by which he meant a book that eschewed the confessional introspection that he believed afflicted too many Jewish-American authors. As he explained in a newspaper interview after the novel’s hardback publication, “I was just sick of apologizing – or feeling that it was necessary to apologize.... We Jews are not what we have been portrayed to be. In truth, we have been fighters” (Nadel 2010, 109). As an American Jew tells another character in the novel explaining why he is helping the Palmach (the elite underground military arm of the Jewish immigrants in Palestine) smuggle refugees past the British blockade, “Every time the Palmach blows up a British depot or knocks the hell out of some Arabs he’s winning respect for me. He’s making a liar out of everyone who tells me Jews are yellow. These guys over here are fighting my battle for respect...” (Uris 1959, 95). As a result, *Exodus* played “a vital role in the recovery of Jewish self-confidence after the devastation of the Holocaust” (Silver 2010).

But Uris was less interested in reshaping Jewish self-consciousness than in making other Americans aware of what he believed to be the essential Jewish character. As he had told his father in 1956, “I am writing a book for Americans... Gentiles... not for Jews” (Nadel 2010, 98). This goal shaped the novel’s epic scope, which attempted to encompass the entire history of Zionism from the 1880s into the early 1950s by mixing real and fictional characters and events described for newcomers in vigorous, exclamatory, occasionally incendiary prose. And it dictated the narrative choice of telling much of the story through (or, in the case of the history, telling it to) Kitty Fremont, an American Christian woman with vaguely anti-Semitic views who becomes attracted to Ari Ben Canaan, and through him to the struggle of the Israeli Jews, against her inclinations and expectations. The romance between Ari and Kitty antagonized some orthodox Jews and strong Zionists opposed to inter-religious liaisons (Nadel 2010, 94 notes that the entire relationship was dropped from one typewritten *samizdat* translation into Russian), but Uris knew what he was doing, as a coy exchange between Ari and his superior in the Palmach suggests. When the Palmach commander asks whether Kitty is a “friend,” meaning a committed ideological ally willing to work for the Zionist cause, Ari replies “No, she isn’t a friend. Not even a fellow traveler,” which elicits the response, “A shame. We could use a good American Christian” (Uris 1959, 318).

Uris was taking a gamble, as good American Christian readers could have been repulsed by some of the men in *Exodus*, including Ari. He is described in terms that readers of westerns would have recognized – he is “a big man, well over six feet and well

built” with “absolute concentration and seemingly superhuman stamina” as well as “a calm ease, a sureness about him” that showed in the “set hardness” in his “penetrating” “ice-blue eyes” (Uris 1959, 21, 42, 35, 13, 54, 177). But he acts ruthlessly, particularly in the long first section of the novel, in ways that even Tom Dunson and Ethan Edwards, the characters played by John Wayne in *Red River* (1948) and *The Searchers* (1956), might have dodged. To embarrass the British government, which has been sharply limiting the flow of Jewish refugees from the concentration camps into its Palestine mandate to ease Arab fears, Ari smuggles three hundred children onto a ship in Cyprus, but then arranges for the British army to learn of their presence before the renamed *Exodus* can sail. As they surround the ship, he takes control of the stand-off by first threatening to blow the ship up with all aboard, then instigating a hunger strike by the orphans of war, and finally announcing that he will allow ten children a day to commit suicide until the British allow his people to go. The British, by then under global scrutiny, finally capitulate. But then Kitty and we learn Ari’s history and understand the pain driving him, the girl friend serving with him in the Palmach killed and raped “over a hundred times” (Uris 1959, 281), the impossibility of rescuing more than a relative handful of European Jews as he serves as a young agent of the Jews in Palestine, what he (and Uris) view as the hysteria of the Arab masses, what he (and Uris) see as the callous perfidy of the British. We also find that others, even other Jews, are more militant and ruthless than he is. Ari is the son of one of the moderate leaders of the Jewish community in Palestine, but his uncle is the leader of the “Maccabees,” a group of terrorists who in the novel are

credited with some of the real-life actions of the Irgun, including blowing up the King David Hotel in Jerusalem. In terms of Israeli history, Ari is the son of David Ben-Gurion but also the nephew of Menachem Begin.

Although Uris, most of whose contacts in Israel had been moderate in 1947 and 1948 (or wanted to appear that way to an American audience), seems in the novel to regret the violence initiated by the Irgun, he places it in the same context as Ari’s cold-blooded calculation. He, and most readers at the time, certainly our little group in Virginia Beach, seemed willing to forgive much for their selfless dedication to a mission. In this regard, it is helpful here to consider the “third Ben,” the one we could read about in *Time* and watch on the *Huntley-Brinkley Report* or the *CBS News with Walter Cronkite*. The Zionist leader David Ben-Gurion had helped negotiate and proclaimed Israeli independence, then had served as the country’s first prime minister, returned to the office in time to engineer the alliance with Britain and France in the Suez crisis, and finally retired in 1963, shortly after we had read *Exodus*. Ben-Gurion certainly had something of Ben Canaan in him; he was, he acknowledged, “a calculating machine.” By his reckoning, “Power is not power if no one knows that it exists, if we lack the talent, the knowledge, the will, and the ability; to use it wisely and for a cause, and not out of rage or hatred” (Aronson [1999] 2011, 40). We knew that in 1956 he had launched a pre-emptive war against Egypt, and we would not have been surprised to learn that his solicitation of American Jews and Gentiles rested on a calculation that in the context of global politics after World War II they were more likely to advance Zionist interests than the British (Gal [1985] 1991). But Ben-Gurion’s exercise of

power seemed goal-oriented – “for a cause,” as he said. In this he seemed to meet the goals of masculinity with a mission better than his contemporary Dwight Eisenhower, four years his junior in age, who had embodied consensus rather than passionate purposefulness. In all senses of the Yiddish word that we learned at the time, David Ben-Gurion, like Ari Ben Canaan, was a *Mensch* – a man of integrity and purpose. Dwight Eisenhower, and too many of the adults we knew while growing up, were not.

IV. Diverging Paths

The subterranean currents feeding our philosemitism probably made us receptive to the muscular idealism of the John F. Kennedy administration. Yet they could also have turned us into ardent supporters of Barry Goldwater in 1964. The dissatisfactions of suburban life could nudge Americans towards missions on either the right or the left (Klatch 1999; McGirr 2002).

Philosemitism has also pointed in multiple directions from the start. One early sign of this was the popularity of Ernest Gold’s music for the soundtrack of the movie that Otto Preminger made from Uris’s novel, although without a Uris script after the writer and filmmaker parted ways (Nadel 2010, 117-118). Some of us considered the film *Exodus Lite*, with most of Ari’s ruthlessness cut and the acid portrayals of British and Arab opponents attenuated, but the music had the passion and focus that the movie as a whole may have lacked (Preminger 1960). Among the viewers who could not forget the film’s soaring main theme was the singer Pat Boone, who wrote the English-language words to what would

become known as the “Exodus Song”: “This land is mine, God gave this land to me....” As Boone played with words to fit the melody, he started writing them down on the first piece of paper he found – ironically, but appropriately, a Christmas card (Davis 2002, 174-175). It was appropriate, because Boone was already famous as the clean-cut born-again alternative to Elvis Presley. As he later recalled (YouTube 2015), “I had read not only Leon Uris’s book *Exodus* but also Moses’s book by the same name in the Bible.” In the years to come he would often visit Israel, often as the leader of religious tours that showed the fascination with Israel that has become as common among American evangelicals since the 1970s as anti-Semitism had been in the past (Ariel 2011). A strong Christian Zionist working with organizations such as Christians and Jews United for Israel, Boone has in recent years been involved in projects such as “The Holy Land Dream,” which sells tiny plots of land in Israel to born-again American Christians while he croons “The Exodus Song” in the background of the accompanying video (YouTube 2012).

Boone’s brand of philosemitism, it could be argued, differs little from a traditional identification of come-outer Protestants with ancient Jews, except in its explicit yoking of American patriotism, adherence to Western values, and strong support of Israel. But that exception in some respects makes all the difference, and reflects the transformation in American attitudes towards Jews in the “Long 1950s.” The urgency of gender politics in the push for “family values” allegedly threatened by gay rights activists and militant feminists would have made many evangelicals feel more comfortable with Jews of the hyper-masculine Ari Ben Canaan/Bibi Netanyahu mold than with

many religious liberals. In Kevin Schultz's formulation (2011, 11), tri-faith America had split once again, only now "the primary religious divisions were no longer between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews but between liberals of all three faiths and conservatives of all three faiths."

Yet philosemitism has also remained a force on the left, although much diminished from its heyday in the 1960s. Watching *Ben-Hur* and reading *Exodus* might for some Americans have facilitated a narrow defensiveness of gender and religious identities, but for others identification with Jews helped open them to a more cosmopolitan embrace of diversity. We need only recall an Ari Ben Canaan moment in Birmingham, Alabama, in the spring of 1963, when the civil rights demonstrations led by Martin Luther King threatened to peter out in disarray when few adults seemed willing to join King in jail. James Bevel, one of the younger activists, suggested using children instead to march and go to prison. King and most of the other leaders demurred at first, both because they knew how bad conditions were in jail and because they did not want to foist criminal records on the innocent young. However, King finally allowed Bevel, and the children, to have their way. Over a thousand came the first day, and almost a thousand went to jail. The next day another thousand came, only to be met with fire hoses and police dogs. Replacing them were a growing number of parents and other adults. The possible sacrifice of young lives to claim a higher moral ground had the same effect on the Kennedy administration as Ari's fictional ploy on the *Exodus* had on the Labour government in Britain. Was it pure coincidence that Bevel wore a yarmulke as well as his black preacher's suit to show his love of the Jewish prophetic

tradition (Branch 1998, 54, 75-78)? Had he perhaps been one of the hundreds of thousands to have read a battered copy of the Bantam paperback of *Exodus*?

Perhaps, in a variety of ways he could not have anticipated, and a few of which he would have deplored, Bernard Malamud was right: after the long 1950s, all Americans became Jews, whether they knew it or not. Some of us knew it.

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