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Zarathustra Geht Nach Jerusalem

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Zarathustra Geht Nach Jerusalem

An inquiry into the elements of the Nietzschean Uberman in Leon Uris’ Exodus.

If history has a single quality which dominates all others, it is irony. Great states are felled by internal decay, a dynasty will fall for want of a nail, and conquered peoples swallow their captors. But perhaps the greatest of all ironies is the emergence of a philosophy, once distorted and misrepresented as a rationale for genocide, as a justification for the former victim’s actions in the modern world. It is not without reason, therefore, that Arnold Toynbee accuses Israel of replacing Buchenwald and Dachau with the Gaza Strip, for the logical and ethical implications are much the same. Nor is it unprophetic that Nietzsche once wrote to a friend of having all anti-Semites shot, because that is a possibility in the modern Middle East.

Leon Uris, who rose to prominence in popular fiction with Battle Cry, has given full vent to his ardent pro-Jewish sentiments in his recent work, Exodus.

Perhaps the most striking feature of this piece of quasi-historical fiction, outside of its remarkable length, is the resemblance of its heros and their rationale to the ideal of the Nietzschean Overman.* In the interest of brevity, it will be possible to examine only a few of these elements. Yet, they remain in much greater depth than is conceivable to the common mind; perhaps in greater depth than Uris consciously desired.

* NOTE: Overman is the literal translation of the term Uberman, which became Shaw’s “Superman,” and the Nazi “Master Race.”
The Nietzschean Overman is a superior form of existence, the logical consequence of human evolution. His superiority, rather than physiological, is manifest in his state of mind, which is reached by self examination. He is man divested of the inhibitions of Western institutions in the Christian Era in thought and morality, i.e., slave morality. He is beyond the bounds of the laws which bind mere man, answerable only to himself. His only crime is to make a mistake, because mistakes are human, and make him answerable to the laws of men. He is beyond the concepts of Good and Evil, and his actions are never fettered by them. His only sin is pity, because pity is a quality of man, a weakness which must be overcome. Above all, he is an individual, loyal only to his own kind, and dedicated to knowing himself and his world through experience; his justification for existence is existence. He is in no way answerable to the society of man.

If these are the elements of the Overman, and the list is by no means exhaustive, how do they appear in Exodus? For the greatest part, they appear in the character of the heroes portrayed, and in the totally personal justification, or total lack of social justification for their actions.

To begin with, these people are a select or elite group. Not only are they God’s chosen people, but the forces of two thousand years’ persecution have eliminated the weak and timid. Finally, the persecution of the Nazi’s hammered the crude iron into tempered steel. The weak have perished, and only the strong survive. They consist mainly of two elements, the young and resourceful, who by luck and their wits managed to escape the gas chambers, and the brilliant, dedicated survivors of the Zionist movement. Like Zarathustra descending from his mountain fastness, they step forward from isolation in the wilderness of Nazi Europe to establish themselves and their new-found Weltanschauung in the community of man.

They have a single goal: to reestablish the homeland of their fathers in the name of their own kind. It does not matter that this land is already populated by their semitic brothers, whose claims go back over two thousand years longer, than the original Hebrew occupation. These Johnny-come-latelys are on the soil of the Jewish homeland—foreigners and intruders—and deserve no more consideration than the Jew’s warrior ancestors gave the first recorded inhabitants of the land, the Philistines. Moreover, the Jews have justification in their
superior utilization of the soil. They can make Zion bloom, and so can take it; quite like the coming Overman’s confiscation of the earth from the herd of the mottled cows.

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Perhaps the strongest indication of the prevalence of the Overman philosophy is the constant contempt of the Jews for the laws, customs, morality, and ethics of Western man. The British Mandate in Palestine was the legal creation of a duly constituted authority, the League of Nations, and its existence was confirmed by the United Nations; the Jews were an illegal revolutionary government without any legal sanction. It was Britain’s assigned duty to administer protection and guidance to these lands and their peoples. However, from the Jewish point of view, the British were outsiders to be banished from the land. In the name of their own existence, they felt no guilt or hesitation to smuggle, run guns, import illegal aliens, and kill or maim the innocent British soldiers who were tools of international policy. Like Zarathustra, pity, the human weakness, is their greatest sin.

Above and beyond these essentially mild political actions, however, lies another, more serious commitment, the endorsement of terrorism. Terrorism is the calculated use of force, sabotage, and murder by secret agents to gain political ends by the immobilization of opposing forces through fear. It is beyond the sanction of Western legal tradition, but the laws of man do not concern the Overman.

While Exodus is filled with verbal condemnations of terrorism, the actions of the heroes speak louder than their words. Moreover, most of the verbal condemnations of terrorism are in terms of political expediency, rather than in respect for human rights and ethical politics, which are meaningless slave morality for the Overman. Finally, this endorsement of terrorism assumes its greatest Nietzschean overtones when the terrorist leader dies in an escape attempt, vindicated. Uris, like Zarathustra with the fallen tight rope walker, seems to be telling man that living dangerously is man’s greatest experience.

Besides these violations of civilized action, there is also the callous disregard for the consequences of their actions on others in the world political arena. These people could have acquired virgin land in many parts of the British Empire, without the political consequences caused by their intrusion into the Arab world; but they would not. Even though their pres-
ence was detestable to the Arab world, they came. And, because of their creation as a nation, the Western commitment to the protection of small nations resulted in a violent clash with Arab nationalism and Arab sensitivities. This clash drove the Arabs, along with their oil, the Suez, and the great land link of Europe, Africa, and Asia, toward the Soviet bloc. It almost goes without saying that the world balance of power and present threats to Western survival would not be as strongly against the West as they are, if Israel had not been created. It should also be pointed out that any astute, objective political observer could have foreseen the consequences of the creation of Israel, because even Uris points out the British comprehension of the Jewish problem in terms of Arab nationalism. Since the Overman is totally unconcerned with the consequences of his actions on mere man, however, it is easy to understand the lack of regard of the Jews for the result of their schemes on Western survival.

This is a part of the picture that Exodus presents, the Overman in his raw, elemental form. He is beyond good and evil, he is beyond the laws, customs, morality, and ethics which regulate and maintain the civilized community of Western Man.

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Thou shall not kill, thou shall not steal, fell in the struggle. The Law and the Prophets are the heart of Judaism as a religion, and the Law is dead. In its place are Nietzschean ideals and intense nationalism, the keystones of the Nazi creed. Jewish, a term used for centuries to designate a religious group, until the Nazi's designated it a race for political purposes, has suddenly become a term for race instead of religion in the minds of its members. Again we can see the transportation of a philosophy from a master to a rebel servant.

Thus, in Exodus, we see a suppressed people reemerge transformed—to the shape of their former masters. Historical irony, in its sharpest form, at least as Uris pictures it.