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## 'God Gave This Land to Them'



By Marty Kaplan

Pat Boone wrote the words to *Exodus*.

If you're below a certain age, Pat Boone is some random dude you need Google to ID, and *Exodus* is the new Ridley Scott 3D film with Christian Bale as Moses and a wicked cool CGI Red Sea.

To Boomers, Pat Boone was the un-Elvis in white bucks, Charlton Heston owns Moses, and the real Moses movie is *The Ten Commandments*. *Exodus* was Otto Preminger's Zionist epic based on the 1958 Leon Uris novel, and its score won Ernest Gold an Academy Award. It had a big theme — buum BUUM, BUUM BUUM — but no words, because Preminger and Gold couldn't agree on them.

A year after the picture came out, Pat Boone put the score on the record player, and when those first four notes sounded, he heard words. This land. Is mine. He grabbed the nearest thing to write on, a Christmas card, and got the rest of the lyric down. "The Exodus Song" became a hit Andy Williams single. I still have the sheet music; it cost 60 cents. I learned to play it *espressivo e doloroso* on the piano, singing the words as heroically as an 11-year-old could. The song became, as he put it, "the second Jewish national anthem," and recently Boone donated the Christmas card to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum.

Last week, when I saw a billboard for Ridley Scott's *Exodus*, that song effortlessly materialized. Some strong synapses are hanging on to that lyric, from the covenant:

*This land is mine,*

*God gave this land to me,*

*This brave and ancient land to me.*

...to the defiant finish:

*To make this land our home,*

*If I must fight,*

*I'll fight to make this land our own.*

*Until I die — this land is mine!*

Today, some people embrace the literal meaning of “The Exodus Song.” There are plenty of places in scripture where God gives land to the Jews, and if Holy Writ says so, that’s as clean as a deed of title can be. But there’s more to the real estate story than that. Nina Paley’s 2012 animation of Andy Williams’ pipes shows a succession of conquering Canaanites, Egyptians, Assyrians, Jews, Babylonians, Macedonians, Seleucids, Romans, Caliphs, Crusaders, Mamluks, Ottomans, Palestinians and others who also said this land is theirs, and also in the name of God, gods, divine rulers, divine prophets and holy texts.

Eleven years old is the same age as the British actor Isaac Andrew, whom Ridley Scott has stunt-cast as God in his *Exodus*. When I learned “The Exodus Song,” when I sang, “God gave this land to me,” I knew whom “God” and “me” referred to, and I knew that “gave” meant “gave.” This was still several years before I got an inkling of the carnage cultivated over the millennia by one righteous God or another; before I understood that there was such a thing as the history of colonialism and imperialism, which is about political and economic domination; before I learned how often indigenous peoples have discovered that they’ve been discovered, and their land is not their ancestors’ or theirs or their children’s anymore.

This was also before the events depicted by Uris and screenwriter Dalton Trumbo, like every other narrative of Zionism I grew up on, was contested by a generation and more of Israeli historians, journalists, military leaders, political figures and artists. This openness to historical reality doesn’t diminish the idealism and right to self-determination of that nation’s founders, doesn’t mitigate the horror of the Holocaust that impelled its establishment, doesn’t accept the tragic spiral of terror and counterterror visited on its inhabitants. But it does make it harder to hold fast to origin stories in which right always battles wrong and never battles right.

“God gave this land to them” is a sentiment I don’t think I’ve ever encountered in history, let alone in song. Historical revisionism doesn’t displace one god with another. It replaces divine narratives with secular ones that are less flattering and less thrilling. It’s uncomfortable to think about Thanksgiving’s origin in gratitude to a Christian God for enabling the massacre of Native Americans who worshiped heathen spirits and inconveniently preceded the colonists. It’s dispiriting that America’s conquest of its continent, and beyond, was widely believed to fulfill the manifest destiny allotted to white people by Providence. It may be a heretical thought, but the founding of modern Israel had more to do with mortal men and women than with the coming of Moshiach or the second coming of Christ.

Earlier this year, Pat Boone predicted that President Obama’s birth certificate will be revealed as a forgery. In a new poll, 49 percent of Americans say that recent natural disasters are signs we’re living in the End Times. People believe stories, whether they’re true or not. They have undeniable explanatory appeal. “The

Exodus Song” tells one helluva powerful origin story. That’s why the 11-year-old in me wants to keep singing it. But a fable is not a fix.

*This is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me at [martyk@jewishjournal.com](mailto:martyk@jewishjournal.com).*

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