



Foundation

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THE LONE AND LEVEL SANDS

Reader's Guide

Overview

In their graphic novel *The Lone and Level Sands*, writer A. David Lewis and artist Marvin Perry Mann (aka mpMann) retell a classic story from an unconventional vantage. The Pharaoh of the Book of Exodus is usually seen as one of the great villains of either history, literature, or both depending on how one chooses to read it. In Lewis and Mann's hands, the biblical character both emerges as a complex and conflicted figure and is the focal point of their tale. *The Lone and Level Sands* tells the story of a man trying to rule wisely, love his family well, and deal justly in the face of a divine wrath.

First published in 2005 as a black-and-white book by Caption Box, the book was selected by Archaia Studios Press for re-publication as a hardcover, full-color edition. In this revised endeavor, Lewis and Mann were joined by artist Jennifer Rodgers, whose conceptually and emotionally nuanced colors added further richness and depth to the storytelling.

While multiple awards and critical acclaim followed the book's re-publication in 2006, *The Lone and Level Sands* also received various criticism for being either too religious or too secular. Likewise, is it fictional or is it historical? Apologetic or condemning? Blurring the lines with every page, *The Lone and Level Sands* aims to encourage discussion and thought, holding no one viewpoint above the rest.

As Tom McLean of *Variety* writes, "Those who are intimately familiar with the Bible and those who aren't will both find something to like in this book... There's no sense of being preached to..."



Supplementary Reading: Sample Reviews

The following excerpts are just a few of the critical reviews received by *The Lone and Level Sands* since its initial publication. They are represented here so as to provide a variety of alternate viewpoints, discussion topics, and articulations of the book's details. Hopefully, readers can use them either to find a reviewer's voice with whom they most relate or simply to become familiar with the world of graphic novel journalism.

Jim Witt — ComicBook Galaxy

In **The Lone and Level Sands**, writer A. David Lewis has taken on an ambitious task — a re-examination of the Jewish exodus from Egypt. It's a tale familiar to some from the Biblical story in the book of Exodus, to others from the Qur'an, and to yet others, from a somewhat less venerable source, Cecil B. DeMille's **The Ten Commandments**. **The Lone and Level Sands** examines the Exodus from the point of view of the Egyptian leader, Pharaoh Ramses, attempting to fill in the gaps in the Biblical account to explore the story from the view of the vanquished. It's a bold attempt, and a serious effort, taking the source documents seriously while not being limited to them in terms of characterization and personal motivations, which largely go unexplored in the Biblical text. As a theologian who loves graphic novels of all kinds, and for many different reasons, I was particularly taken with Lewis's work, and that of the artists, mpMann and Jennifer Rodgers. This is narrative material, sacred history, if you will, that has helped to shape the belief of millions of people in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. For many, as God said to Moses from the burning bush, this is "holy ground."

Not only that, the tale of the Exodus is also one that has caused untold grief among interpreters of the Old Testament. There is

an unrelieved tension in the Biblical account between the sovereignty of the Almighty and human responsibility, that has caused innumerable disagreements from adherents of various branches of Christianity and Judaism. In the Exodus story, this issue comes to play particularly in the interaction between the God of the Jews, his spokesman Moses, and the Pharaoh of Egypt. At various points, the Scriptural account speaks of the Lord "hardening Pharaoh's heart," while on other occasions the text speaks of the Pharaoh hardening his *own* heart. The question that arises from the complicated interplay between Moses and the Pharaoh is this: how does one reconcile the overarching power and control of God with the fact of human responsibility? How does one bring together human freedom, and divine omnipotence? How does one reckon with the Pharaoh's own ability to make decisions in this story? Is the Pharaoh merely a pawn in the hands of a vengeful God, or does he bear the responsibility for his own actions?

These questions have occupied the greatest minds in world civilization since time immemorial, and are likely never to be answered to anyone's satisfaction. So the real question here is not, "How did the authors of this work *solve* this conundrum?", but "Did the authors of this work *adequately and honestly* strive with the issue?" And the answer to the real question is a resounding "Yes." Lewis has done what I feel is a remarkable job of bringing together the elements of human responsibility and divine sovereignty, in a unique, insightful way. While I believe Lewis does an excellent job with this depiction, that's not to say that I agree with it entirely. The fact is, I don't. And when it comes right down to it, as a comic reader and reviewer, that fact isn't very important. But... and this is a very important "*But*", Lewis shows a depth of insight into the source material that is remarkable, and that is what I admire. He grapples with the issues, he works honestly with the historical record, and the final form of **The Lone and Level Sands** makes this very clear.

In his foreword, Ben Towle exhibits a fundamental, but unfortunately common misrepresentation of Torah (the five books of Moses that form the basis of Jewish belief). This reading dates back as far as Marcion, a prominent figure in the early Christian church who despised Jews and wanted to rid Christian Scripture of all of what he considered to be Jewish remnants that, he believed, adulterated the Christian message. It is a view that veers dangerously in the direction of anti-Semitic thinking, however unwittingly. When he writes, "Like much of the Old Testament, Exodus is a tale rife with brutal violence, searing conflict, and an often wrathful Deity whose modus operandi is more, 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,' than 'Turn the other cheek,'" he says nothing new, but places the God of Hebrew scriptures at a somehow lower, more brutal, and less evolved level than the God of the New Testament. He continues on, "The Ramses of **Sands** is not a straw man slave master, but a conflicted monarch who's inherited a conflict not of his making, and who's become an unwitting cog ground down in a divine clockwork."

Joe Sutliff Sanders — *Voice of Youth Advocates* (VOYA), Aug 2006

Here is the heartbreaking story of how the Hebrews won their release from Egyptian slavery, the costs that both sides endured, and why the last Egyptian standing made sure that history would remember his name. Told in clear, large panels with economic dialogue, it will be accessible to teens interested in an unflinching examination of a desperate chapter in history and religion. It is not a story without flaws: the book's experiments in perspective (which is inconsistent), line (which is inclined to caricature), and word bubbles (which are sometimes, confusingly, located as captions), for example, have highly mixed results. That said, it is an extremely intelligent book, brutal in its portrayal of both a society that used slavery and a society that tortured its captors with a series of gruesome and devastating curses. Even the most frustrating part of the book, Pharaoh's sudden changes of heart, are well-conceived as the

disastrous decisions of a man manipulated by the gods and wracked with devotion to his wife, son, and friends.

Dave Ferraro — *Comics-and-More*

[...] God is the bad guy here, manipulating people on both sides to make his prophecies come true, laying waste to this proud civilization. Like the creators of the series wanted, it throws out the traditional good vs. evil motif and explores the fact that there is no absolute good or evil, but motives for actions, whether they're selfish and oppressive, or ambitious and self-righteous. Ramses isn't a two-dimensional tyrannical ruler here like in **Exodus**. He loses everything in the end, no matter how you look at it. In his pitiful state, can he really be called the villain of this tale? And on the flip side, can Moses be called evil because he desired the freedom of his people, trusting in a god who brought about such devastation for their oppressors?

Brian Cronin — *Comics Should be This Good*

In "With God On Our Side," Bob Dylan wrote, "In a many dark hour/I've been thinkin' about this/That Jesus Christ/Was betrayed by a kiss/But I can't think for you/You'll have to decide/Whether Judas Iscariot/Had God on his side." That, essentially, is the main dramatic tension in the story of Pharaoh Ramses II. Part of God's plan was for Jesus to be sacrificed, so therefore, for the plan to succeed, Judas had to play his part. So, therefore, wasn't he, in fact, doing God's will? That, however, conflicts with the idea of free will. It is this tension that is present throughout *The Lone and the Level Sands*. How much control does Ramses have over his own destiny?

To Lewis' great credit, he never flinches from the fact that he does not give us real answers, and rather, the fact that, for the story to truly work, he CAN not give us definitive answers.

J.W. DeBolt Jr. — *Comic Critique.Com*

The plagues are symbols that the author uses to make this story deeper than it appears: Water symbolizes God’s word. Blood validates God’s authority. The Apiru bondage in Egypt symbolizes Egypt’s (and mankind’s) bondage to sin; the Apiru exodus represents the return of humanity to God in Heaven. Thus in that view Pharaoh can do nothing, because mankind will always be sinful while true believers will always have a path to Heaven.

Moses himself emphasizes the symbolism, saying, “When is a frog not a frog?” Frogs represent false prophets and doctrines. Coming from the river and the source of life, they might also represent Egypt turning inward and consuming itself without the fresh nourishment of God’s word. It starves on false Gospel.

The gnats encroached on the clean living the Egyptians tried to maintain. They may have come from the rotting frog bodies, making them a bonus plague. The locusts also symbolize false prophets and man losing his humanity. Ramses refers to “Moses and his swarm,” perhaps trying to depict *them* as the false prophets. The demonstrations continue until Pharaoh’s Chief Priest Bekenkhonsu reports that his own priests start calling Yahweh the Universal Lord [...]

Bezalel Stern — *JBooks.Com*

At first, one comes into the story believing that it will just be a cheap retreat: a comic book

modeled on a film modeled on an ancient text. But *The Lone and Level Sands* soon surprises us. The Exodus narrative is given a new, surprisingly modern perspective, which nonetheless feels somehow in parity with the biblical text itself.

The book manages to do this through a potentially precarious but ultimately successful narrative twist: the story is told solely through the eyes of Pharaoh. But this alone does not account for the ingenuity—and, ultimately, the unique modernity of the book. What does is this Pharaoh’s attitude toward action. The Egyptian ruler realizes that the God of the Israelites is out to avenge His people, and he submits willingly, if with despair, becoming, in a sense, a Sartre 32 centuries before the rise of existentialism. When asked, after the Israelites had left Egypt, why he wants them back, when they had caused so much trouble, so much pain, Pharaoh responds, “We do not. But we have no other choice. No other path. It is what we are supposed to do.”

This is an interesting, if somewhat illogical, explanation for the stubbornness of the Pharaoh of the biblical text. Question is: Why does Pharaoh not give in to the demands of Moses, even when being smitten with plague after plague? Why doesn’t he just let the Israelites go?

[...] The result is a portrait of a vengeful, somewhat sadistic God, reminiscent of the blood-loving deities of the *Iliad*. By the end of the book, somewhat ironically, it is Pharaoh who takes up the position more often in literature reserved for the Jew: “Why do this?” Pharaoh screams at God, “What sick pleasure comes from our suffering?”



Basic Questions

1. How should *The Lone and Level Sands* be classified? As historical fiction, as a biblical comic book, as a graphic novel retelling, or by some other name? What seems to be the difference between each of these classifications?
2. In a graphic novel, words and pictures can be used together to create an effect greater and more subtle than words or pictures alone. Can you find an example of this in *The Lone and Level Sands*?
3. In *The Lone and Level Sands*, the authors show the plagues as real. Do you believe they were? Could they have a scientific explanation?
4. What do you believe are the main themes to *The Lone and Level Sands*? Can you locate moments in the story where the art seems to convey a certain theme best? Is there a moment where the dialogue conveys one best?
5. With which character did you most relate? Why? Would you have done anything differently from what he or she did?
6. Why might these events be found only in the Bible and not in any of the Egyptian historical records?
7. In the Bible, Moses describes himself as a poor speaker. His brother Aaron speaks for him. How does this relationship play out in *The Lone and Level Sands*? Do you feel it is best that Aaron speaks for Moses? And, how does this compare to Ramses' relationship with his advisor and childhood friend Ta?
8. There's a familiar quote: "History is written by the winners." How would the Exodus story have been different if the Egyptians had written it?
9. What does Ramses' dream mean?
10. Based on their depictions in *The Lone and Level Sands*, create a list of all the main characters. For each person, name at least one good quality and one bad quality. Do any of the characters share the same qualities? Do you find any qualities that are good for one person but bad for another? Which characters, based on your list, seem the most alike?



Suggested Reading

Farewell, Georgia by Ben Towle*

The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative by
Frank Kermode

The Literary Guide to the Bible by Robert Alter and Frank
Kermode (eds.)

Megillat Esther by J. T. Waldman*

Mortal Coils by A. David Lewis et al*

The New Revised Standard Version Bible with Apocrypha,
“Exodus” by NRSV Bible Translation Committee
and Bruce M. Metzger

The Red Tent by Anita Diamant

Rex Mundi Volume 1: The Guardian Of The Temple by
Arvid Nelson, Eric Johnson, Jeremy Cox, and
Juan Ferreyra*

The Riddle of the Exodus by James D. Long

Samson: Judge Of Israel by Jerry A. Novick, Mario Ruiz*

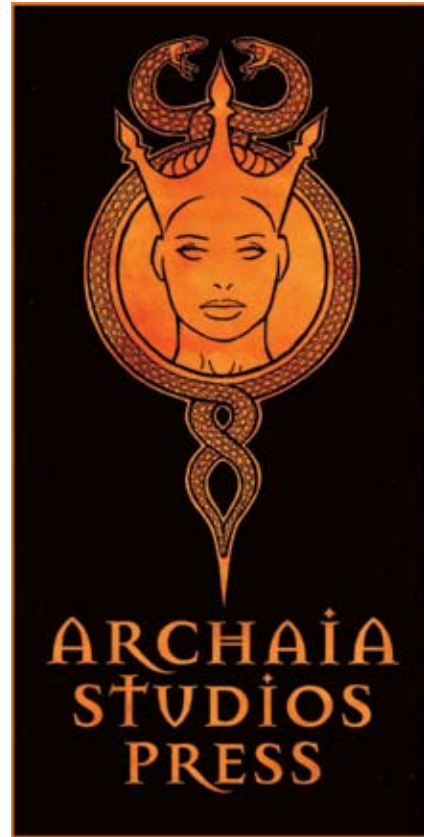
* graphic novel or trade paperback comic book

About the Creators

Emerging from the field of comic book academia, **A. David Lewis** has presented scholarly papers on the comic book medium at conferences across the country and published articles in *The International Journal of Comic Art*, for which he is now an Editorial Board member. He has edited and written for a number of small press comic companies including Red Eye Press with *Valentine*, Sky Dog Comics with *Even More Fund Comics*, and Silent Devil Productions with *Dracula vs King Arthur*. In 2002, Lewis debuted his own title, the dark suspense anthology *Mortal Coils*, which went on to be named a winner in the 2003 *Cinescape* Literary Genre Competition. Following stints as an instructor at both Georgetown University and Northeastern University as well as a conference lecturer, Lewis joined Boston University in 2006 to pursue his PhD in Religion & Literature. Lewis was nominated for a Harvey Award for Best New Talent in 2006.

Marvin Perry Mann began his comics career in 1989 inking *The Trouble With Girls* for Malibu Graphics, going on to illustrate *Ape City* and the hilarious *Girls* spin-off *Lizard Lady*. Returning to comics in 2002, he utilized 3dsmax animation and modeling software to create a 240 page silent comic strip and two related flipbook animations for Mark Stephen Meadows' book *Pause and Effect: The Art of Interactive Narrative*. He has appeared in several anthology comics and the webcomics *Arcana Jayne: Hair of the Dog* with Lisa Renee Jonte (Girllamatic.com) and *Lifelike* with Dara Naraghi (Komikwerks.com).

Colorist **Jennifer Rodgers** is an illustrator with a Bachelor's Degree in Illustration from Moore College of Art & Design. Winner of the Norman Cohn Award for Excellence in Applied Illustration in 2003, she has done coloring work for Sky Dog Comics, trading card illustrations for the *Wars Trading Card Game* from Decipher, and illustrations and design work for role-playing games from Anvilwerks, Blue Devil Games, and Hero Games. She was nominated for a Harvey Award for Best Colorist for her work on *The Lone and Level Sands*.



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ABOUT ARCHAIA STUDIOS PRESS

Mark Smylie founded Archaia Studios Press (ASP) in 2002 as the home for his epic fantasy comic book, *Artesia*, winner of ForeWord Magazine's Best Graphic Novel of 2003, and its sequels—*Artesia Afield* and *Artesia Afire*. *Artesia: Adventures in The Known World*, a new RPG based on Mark's creation, expanded ASP into the world of gaming. In 2005, Mark expanded ASP to publish a line of creator-owned titles, including *Robotika* (by Alex Sheikman), *Mouse Guard* (by David Petersen) and *The Lone and Level Sands* (by A. David Lewis and Marvin Perry Mann). Other titles include *The Killer* (by Matz and Luc Jacamon), *OKKO: The Cycle Of Water* (by Hub) and *The Secret History* (by Jean-Pierre Pécau and Igor Kordey, Leo Pilipovic, and Goran Sudzuka). More information can be found at <http://www.aspcomics.com>.