“Study to Show Thyself Approved”

An Analysis of Oral Roberts’ Personal Copy of the Commentary on Exodus by Umberto Cassuto

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Abstract

Having happened upon what was previously Oral Roberts’ personal copy of the commentary on Exodus by Umberto Cassuto, I observed his active interaction with the volume by way of notes and underlines. I determined to analyze his interaction with it. This essay shares the results of the analysis of that book. It begins with a brief overview of his personal life during the time in which he possessed the commentary. Then, it makes observations about his interaction, showing specific examples. Finally, it will look more intently at a sermon in which his use of the commentary is made explicit.

Introduction

On a biennial basis, I teach a class on the book of Exodus. The culmination of this class is an analytical paper on a selected passage from the book. In preparing the students for that process, I often take them to the library to acquaint them with some of the most valuable resources. This usually involves pointing out the many exemplary commentaries that have been written over the centuries on this momentous book of the Bible.

On one such occasion, I opened for them the distinguished volume written by the late Umberto Cassuto, Professor of Bible at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The volume—a translation of the original Hebrew in which he wrote it—is a staple in close investigation of the book of Exodus. As I flipped open the cover to show the students, I was surprised by the signature of a familiar figure: Oral Roberts. This particular volume was at one time a part of his personal library. As I flipped further, I was surprised to see detailed notes, underlining, and other markings throughout the book. As someone who has been significantly shaped by the life and ministry of Oral Roberts, I sensed that I was peering through the window to see Oral himself, at work in his study. I decided to sit with this volume in order to see what might emerge from it.
In this article, I wish to share some of the results of that process. I will begin by considering the timeframe in which Oral Roberts possessed the volume so as to situate his engagement with the text within his own life’s context. I will then synthesize observations made about his interaction with the commentary, looking at examples along the way. Finally, I will consider in depth a sermon in which his use of this commentary is made explicit, thereby exploring some of the ways in which he moved from study to sermon.

A Tumultuous Decade

When did Oral Roberts possess and use this commentary? Being able to situate the volume chronologically might help us to plumb its significance for him. As I moved further into my investigation, I observed two key pieces of data in this regard. First, below Roberts’ signature inside the cover, he included a date: “1–78.” This, then, is the terminus a quo—January 1978.

Also on the cover is a stamped sticker with the following: Presented to Oral Roberts University Library/Theology Library by President Roberts, April 6, 1990. That provides the terminus ad quem.
I want to consider what took place during this timeframe in the life of Oral Roberts. I want to proceed with caution, though. On the one hand, such an effort to situate the commentary within his life might help to offer further insight into the ways in which he was engaging the volume. On the other hand, the attempt could falsely lead to unsubstantiated conclusions about particular comments that he writes in the commentary and their possible connection to real-life events. I offer the summary of this time period in his life with the intent of staying closer to the former while avoiding the latter.

The beginning of this time period is enshrouded with heavy burdens. A consideration of this time period must begin with an event that took place nearly one year before Roberts received the book. On February 11, 1977, Roberts endured what no parent should: his eldest child, Rebecca Roberts Nash, 37, was tragically killed with five other people as their plane crashed in a storm over Kansas.1

With that loss not even one year in behind him, another significant event happened in the life of Roberts, one that would cause ripples for years to come. On January 24, 1978—which also happened to be his sixtieth birthday—ground was broken for the City of Faith. Cathy Carothers of *Communiqué*—a publication for Oral Roberts University (ORU) alumni, at the time—captured Roberts’ statements at the event:

> “Today is dreary and overcast,” said President Roberts, as he celebrated his 60th birthday by breaking ground, “and that’s the condition that millions of people are in. They have depressed minds, sick bodies, spirits that are down, and they’re

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looking for the sun to break through the clouds. And the Bible says, “The Son of Righteousness will rise with healing in His wings.”²

The years following this event would be marked by active efforts to see the project through to completion.

Famously, it was during this period that Roberts indicated that he had experienced a vision of Jesus. In the September 1980 issue of Abundant Life, he included a letter to donors that described the event.³ In a section entitled, “I’VE SEEN JESUS,” he says:

He came to me five times in a period of an hour and a half as I stood up close in front of the CITY OF FAITH structure, beginning at 7:00 p.m., May 25. The CITY OF FAITH is over 600 feet tall. I saw Jesus appear, and He looked like He stood at least 900 feet tall. I saw Him bend down and put His hands UNDER the unfinished CITY OF FAITH structure and lift it and say, “See how easy it is for Me to lift it?” (emphasis original)

His depiction of his experience would be the source of ridicule for decades to come. Certainly in the years immediately following, many were skeptical that his vision was an elaborate ruse to get the money needed to fund the building project.

The City of Faith was dedicated on November 1, 1981. In some ways, the event represented the hard-won victory of the dream Roberts had for this facility. Sue Smith, with The Oklahoman, reported that approximately 12,000 people filled the Mabee Center. Included among that number were “television evangelists Rex Humbard and Pat Robertson, Tulsa Mayor Jim Inhofe, Gov. George Nigh, Congressman Jim Jones, former football player and television performer Rosie Grier, country-western singer Barbara Mandrell [who sang the National Anthem] and a delegation from the government of Kenya.”⁴ The event brought national attention. At the ceremony, Congressman Jones read a letter of congratulations from an unnamed sender. At the conclusion of the letter, he announced the sender’s name: President Ronald Reagan.⁵

What followed in subsequent years, however, casts a shadow back over the dedication festivity. Though not immediately related to the City of Faith project, tragedy again struck the Roberts family as their eldest son, Ronald, died by suicide in 1982. One knows that such a loss for anyone would be devastating. But in Oral Roberts’ case, it was compounded. First, as was mentioned above, he lost his daughter

in 1977. Thus, the entire process from groundbreaking to dedication was bookended by the tragic loss of two of his children. Second, the public scrutinized Ronald’s death—its nature, his life leading up to it, and the reality that he was Oral Roberts’ son. For example, Bob Bonebrake, reporting during the aftermath in *The Oklahoman*, said, “Growing up, Ronald Roberts watched as thousands of the sick and desperate came searching for help. . . . It might have surprised many of those searchers to know the younger Roberts was also searching for something, something he apparently never found.” Implied in this reporting is that Oral Roberts was able to help many, yet he could not help his own son.

Insufficient funding for the City of Faith likewise complicated the celebration of the dedication of the complex. Entire issues of *Abundant Life* would be dedicated to pleading with donors to send in support in order to fund the remainder of the project. The cover of the special issue from February 1982 includes a picture of Roberts preaching over a yellow background. At the top, in large, red letters, it says, “EMERGENCY.” Down the side, it says, “HELP KEEP THIS MINISTRY ALIVE.” The issue indicates that at the time of the opening of the City of Faith, the interior of the buildings still remained about 80% incomplete. Roberts expresses the direness of the situation, from his perspective:

> This is a very, very special sermon. I hurt as I write it. I am facing the worst crisis I’ve faced in my 35 years in this ministry of God’s Word. THE DEVIL IS TRYING TO DESTROY THIS ENTIRE MINISTRY. And, partner, I need you to keep it alive. Unless we get a continuous miracle—a breakthrough from heaven for your life and mine—this ministry is gone. The City of Faith, where thousands are being healed through the merging of medicine and prayer, will be closed. The 4,200 young people at Oral Roberts University will have to go home. Our television and radio outreach . . . will end. If this ministry dies, your letters to me will not be answered. There’ll be no more ABUNDANT LIFE. . . . The Prayer Tower will close. Millions of hurting people will not be helped. We’re in that kind of financial crisis, and I’m here to tell you about it.

Readers can sense the desperation that Roberts felt at that moment.

This desperate situation culminated with another notorious moment, as Roberts claimed that if he did not raise necessary funding, then his life would end. In the January–February 1987 issue of *Abundant Life*, he opened with the following: “As I

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have shared with you since last March, God gave me a mandate at that time to turn the ORU medical school into a total missionary outreach to the nations. He gave me one year to do it. And he said if I didn’t do it, my work would be done and He would call me home.”⁠¹⁰ As the end of March drew near, Roberts planned to enter and remain in the Prayer Tower, fasting and praying, until the remaining money had been raised. Spokeswoman Jan Dargatz, quoted in the Los Angeles Times, said, “When Oral does this, it’s almost like a marathon, but he has trained for it. He prays every day.”⁠¹¹ The event drew heavy criticism from those inside and outside the church.

Two years later, in September 1989, eleven years after ground was broken for the City of Faith, Roberts announced that it would be closing. Whereas the issues of Abundant Life during those eleven years were replete with updates about the City of Faith, those issues that arrived in the months leading up to the announcement were notably silent on the building complex. Focus shifted to other ministry efforts and the university. The publication, which by this time had moved to every other month rather than monthly, did not even produce what would have been a September–October issue in 1989. The last headline related to the City of Faith came in the January–February 1989 issue: “A Neurosurgeon Joins the Staff of Spirit-filled Physicians at the City of Faith.”⁠¹²

After the events of the previous decade, Roberts unsurprisingly came under further scrutiny as he announced the closing of the City of Faith. Robby Trammell and Jim Killackey, in an article in The Oklahoman entitled, “Roberts Urged Not to Build City of Faith Hospital in ’78,” said:

Tulsa State and local authorities tried to tell evangelist Oral Roberts in 1978 that his proposed City of Faith hospital was not feasible, that it would be a monumental mistake. But nothing seemed capable of stopping the high-rolling national television minister’s ambitious plans. . . . A more humbled Roberts announced Wednesday that the financially plagued hospital where God’s miracle healing power would be combined with the wonders of modern medicine would close by Jan. 1, affecting 600 employees.⁠¹³

Writing in the Washington Post, Arnold Hamilton quoted a medical student who was attending the medical school at the time that the closing was announced:

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Medical student Pat Rice, 30, . . . said he was not surprised by the decision . . . “I’ve been here two and a half years and kind of watched things fall apart,” Rice said. “I’ve watched doctors leave in droves. I’ve watched classmates leave in droves. . . . I frankly don’t have a lot of confidence in the leadership here from what I’ve seen and experienced. You get told one thing and other things happen.”

The general time period during which Roberts possessed the commentary that is the subject of this article, then, was marked by some of the most extreme experiences of his career and personal life. Personally, he experienced severe tragedies. Professionally, he pursued perhaps his most ambitious plan to date. Though he would see some success along the way with the City of Faith, on the whole, the plan did not end as he had hoped it would. By fall 1989, the project had come to an end. Within a few months of the closing, Roberts would donate the commentary to the university.

Oral Roberts Reads Umberto Cassuto

I now want to look at Roberts’ engagement with the commentary. As noted above, the volume is filled with personal notes and interaction with the text. Roberts regularly marks the text itself and writes notes in the margins. In this section, I will examine the specific ways in which Roberts interacts with the commentary. In particular, I will focus on the three main ways he interacts with it: he repeats points made in the commentary; he summarizes points, often doing so through his own theological framework; and he reflects on pastoral implications of the points. I will suggest that these three methods of engagement, when taken together, indicate Roberts’ posture as an active learner. I will focus on his interaction with Exodus 1–2.

He is especially keen on numbers in these chapters. He underlines and rewrites a comment about the number 70: “70/indicates perfection of a family blessed with offspring.” He draws attention to the commentary’s discussion of “Seven expressions of increase”; he calls them “7 phases of increase,” and he lists them out in order.

15 As the notes in the commentary are handwritten, they can be difficult to determine clearly at points. When the text is in doubt, I will not attempt to conjecture. Emphasis added by capitals and underlining are original.
16 All citations will be from Umberto Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Exodus, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: The Magness Press, 1976).
17 Cassuto, Exodus, 8.
18 Cassuto, Exodus, 9.
highlighted the commentary’s observation of uses of *seven* in Exodus: “7 is found often in Exodus.” An example that stood out to him was the word *child*: “child — occurs 7 times.”

He also seems drawn to discussions of *multiply/increase*. He wrote out a phrase from the commentary, “multiplied exceedingly,” and added a parenthetical gloss: “an overflowing measure.” He focused on the aforementioned “7 phases of increase,” writing out the details provided by the commentary. In reflecting on the commentary’s note about the affliction imposed on the Israelites in Exodus 1, he adds, “Satanic in origin—to stop them from growing.” He writes out the note from the commentary that “the more the latter [the Israelites] continued to multiply,” and adds: “very important.” He writes out from the commentary, “and the people multiplied and grew very mighty despite efforts of enemies.”

He paid special attention to the commentary’s discussion of the birth of Moses, speaking of the “miracle” of this event and the “seeds” that had been planted through faithfulness. He is first drawn to the example of the midwives. Summarizing a point made in the commentary, Roberts says, “Midwives of Pharaoh feared King of the Universe, not King of Egypt.” Being regularly drawn to steps and patterns, he paid special attention to the midwives: “Midwives helped Hebrews and were blessed for it—and the people multiplied and grew very mighty despite efforts of enemies.”

Roberts is likewise drawn to the demonstration of the faith of Moses’ mother. He shares the note from the commentary that Moses’ mother had placed Moses’ sister in a position to watch what would happen with the baby once he was placed in the river. He comments: “She expected a miracle! ([. . .] of what she did—her seed planted).” He lists eight steps in the miracle of Moses, which involved Pharaoh’s daughter, Moses’ mother, Moses’ sister, and Moses’ own crying. All converged to enable the rescue. The results would be blessing beyond what would have previously been possible, as Moses’

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The miracle, for Roberts, would continue into Moses’ adulthood. He asks of the text, “How did Moses know that Hebrews were his brethren?” He follows with his hypothesis: “Jochebed.” Though neither the text of Exodus nor the commentary are explicit, Roberts sees in every one of the mother’s actions intentionality that flowed out of her trust in and relationship with God.

He observes the commentary’s description of what motivates the adult Moses. He states from the commentary, “He LOOKED on their burdens just as his mother and Pharaoh’s daughter took pity on him, so he felt compassion on his brethren—their burden.” Roberts reflected also on the role of the cries in the people in motivating the Lord’s response. He underlined the text of the commentary that said, “And God remembered.” He elaborated: “Listen: Are you groaning inside for deliverance?/Are you crying to God/Are you asking him to help you.” He rewrote the following as a summary of the commentary’s point: “1. God heard 2. God remembered 3. God saw 4. God remembered . . . stage by stage God’s response to the groaning of the Ch. of Isr. and finally He decides to intervene on their behalf.”

One can sense, based on what he has selected to write out from the commentary, his theological concerns. His concern with multiply/increase occurred throughout his ministry. The language of miracles and planting seeds also stood center stage for much of his life. These dimensions of his own theological reflection came together concretely in his hope to see the funding for the City of Faith to come to fruition. One does not have to probe too deeply to consider that during these years of his life, Roberts found in the story of Moses—the faith demonstrated in the women surrounding him, the miraculous nature of his early life, God’s use of him to deliver the people, the blessing that follows seemingly insurmountable trials—a template for his own longed-for success with the vision he saw for the City of Faith. This connection will be demonstrated explicitly in what follows.

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28 Cassuto, Exodus, 20.
29 Cassuto, Exodus, 22.
30 Cassuto, Exodus, 22.
31 Cassuto, Exodus, 28.
32 Cassuto, Exodus, 29.
During the research for this project, I sought a tangible demonstration of Roberts’ use of this commentary in his writings. I searched especially through the issues of *Abundant Life*, since this was one of Roberts’ main forms of regular, public communication during the time at which he possessed the commentary. In most issues, he opened with a sermon. As one might imagine, the sermons were often directed toward encouraging readers of the hope that God would bring the vision of the City of Faith to pass. To my joy, I eventually discovered an issue from 1985 that included a sermon on Exodus 3. In this section, I will explore the connections between that sermon and Roberts’ engagement with the commentary. In particular, I will seek to accomplish two goals: (1) I will show how the sermon is more generally based on notes from the commentary, and (2) I will demonstrate specific moments at which Roberts explicitly uses the commentary.

On the cover of the November–December 1985 issue of *Abundant Life* are a Christmas tree background and two family photos—one of Richard and Lindsay Roberts and their child and the other of Oral and Evelyn Roberts. The caption reads, “From Our Hearts to Yours . . . Merry Christmas!” The opening page states: “Nearly 2,000 years ago this Christmas, Jesus Christ—the LIGHT of the world—was born into the world. Throughout the centuries, those who have followed him have carried that LIGHT to countless generations. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ this holiday season, remember that through our personal relationship with Him . . . ,” followed by, “We Are a Lighted People”—which is the title of his sermon on Exodus 3.34

His sermon opens by setting the stage for discussing Moses as an example of someone being used by God. Summarizing Exodus 2, he says, “As a man, Moses was rejected by his people and forced to live a life of exile.”35 This note does not appear in the commentary; it appears to be Roberts’ own interpretation. Following this summary comment, he expresses the main thesis: “From that encounter with God, Moses became a LIGHTED person. Through his obedience to God, he carried that LIGHT to countless generations to follow . . . so that you and I today, as followers of Jesus Christ, can also be a LIGHTED people.”36 The emphasis on *lighted* comes from the commentary, as will be demonstrated below. Following this introduction, he shares the text of Exodus 3:1–15.37

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After sharing the Scripture, he aims to draw a parallel between readers and Moses, the elders of Israel, and what God had called them to do.38 The basis of this parallel he expresses as follows: “Because you and I, as Christians, are also a called people, a chosen people, a people who are sent out into this world with a mission of bringing those who are still in bondage today out of darkness into His marvelous LIGHT.”39

He then returns to the opening chapters of Exodus and the factors leading up to the birth of Moses. He mentions the rise of a new Pharaoh who did not know Joseph and who “saw a fruitfulness among the Israelites that he was determined to stop.”40 This statement appears to be based on a combination of two notes that Roberts had written in the commentary. First, he underlines the commentary and states from it, “They ‘multiplied exceedingly’ (in overflowing measure).”41 Second, as stated above, Roberts notes regarding the commentary’s mention of Pharaoh’s affliction of the people of Israel that it was “Satanic in origin—to stop them multiplying.”42

He then reflects in his sermon further on the intentions of Pharaoh and the experience of the people of Israel. He states, “[Pharaoh] determined to lay heavy burdens upon the Israelites and to increase their burdens until he had reduced them to slave status in Egypt.”43 This sentence appears to derive from the commentary’s discussion of the Hebrew word for serve as well as the name Hebrew itself. The commentary notes that the word for serve and the word for rigor occur seven times in total in Exodus 1:14 in order to drive home the servitude of the people.44 Regarding the name Hebrew, the commentary says, “In the Bible the children of Israel . . . are called Hebrews particularly when the writer has in mind their relationship to the foreign environment in which they find themselves . . . , and more especially when they are in the position of slaves. . . .”45 Roberts wrote out notes on both of these points. He wrote on the first point, “toil that breaks/that crushes.”46 On the second, he wrote, “1. Called chil (sic) of Israel when not slaves 2. Called Hebrews when in position of slaves.”47

41 Cassuto, Exodus, 9.
42 Cassuto, Exodus, 10.
44 Cassuto, Exodus, 11–12.
45 Cassuto, Exodus, 13.
46 Cassuto, Exodus, 11.
47 Cassuto, Exodus, 13.
The next sentence in Roberts’ sermon says, “Soon they felt the hammerlike blows of the king’s burdens laid upon them.” In the commentary, he has written the note, “Their work was like hammer blows.” This comment of his seems to be the basis of his statement in the sermon. This is interesting, though, in light of what the commentary actually says: “The words [related to the Hebrew word for serve] follow one another in these verses like hammer blows. . . .” The author of the commentary is not talking about the nature of the work, but rather the use of words related to serve. Perhaps Roberts found in that metaphor useful language for reflecting on the experience of servitude; possibly he misunderstood what the author was communicating. In either case, his note in the commentary seems to be the basis for his statement in the sermon.

In the following paragraph in the sermon, Roberts seems to blend two moments in the Exodus narrative and their corresponding discussion in the commentary. First, he looks at Exodus 2 when he says, “When [the people of Israel were burdened by Pharaoh], the children of Israel cried, the Bible says. They cried brokenheartedly to the Lord for deliverance.” The statement that “the children of Israel cried,” including emphasis, appears to derive from the following in the commentary: “[T]he children of Israel cry out from their place of bondage.” The statement, “They cried brokenheartedly,” seems to come from the following: “‘From their bondage’ . . . the children of Israel were groaning brokenheartedly and crying unto God. . . .”

Second, he states from Exodus 1, “Yet they grew in their oppression. The more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied their numbers.” This statement seems to come from the following, which Roberts has underlined and labeled as “very important” in the commentary: “The more they sought to persecute the Israelites and to weaken them, the more the latter continued to multiply in increasing measure, as Scripture narrates: But . . . the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied . . . and the more they spread abroad.”

Later in his sermon, Roberts considers the act of Moses’ mother constructing the basket and putting it in the river. He says, “I find it very interesting that the Word says that she ‘placed’ it upon the river. Because to me that one word indicates that God operates by a divine plan. He knows precisely what He’s doing in this world . . . and in

49 Cassuto, Exodus, 12.
50 Cassuto, Exodus, 12.
51 Cassuto, Exodus, 29.
52 Cassuto, Exodus, 29.
54 Cassuto, Exodus, 11.
our lives."\(^{55}\) In the commentary, the author highlights the use of the word place. He says, “The repetition of the word placed appears to imply that the mother put the ark down very gently, with the same tender care with which she had put the child in the ark.”\(^{56}\) Alongside this point, Roberts notes, “placed the bassinet carefully in the water.”\(^{56}\)

This seems to be the basis of Roberts’ statement in the sermon here. Roberts saw in the commentator’s words not only the care and intentionality of Moses’ mother, but through her acts, the care and intentionality of God.

Next, Roberts considers in his sermon the coincidence of Pharaoh’s daughter coming to the exact spot where Moses’ mother had placed him. He says, “And while the princess was bathing, the baby cried. Now there’s something very important here. When you read the Bible, you must remember that there’s nothing accidental in it. It says, ‘. . . the baby cried.’ He could have kept from crying until the princess had left, but he cried and she heard it.”\(^{57}\) In considering the scene involving Pharaoh’s daughter, the commentary says, “The thing that immediately attracted her attention was his weeping. He is crying, therefore he is not dead, but is suffering and arouses compassion.”\(^{58}\) Roberts notes in the commentary, “Baby cried at precise moment to


\(^{56}\) Cassuto, Exodus, 18.


\(^{58}\) Cassuto, Exodus, 19.
gain her attention . . . his crying got to her—was suffering, aroused her compassion.”

He next considers in his sermon what resulted from the encounter: Moses’ mother “not only got to nurse and raise her own baby—who would have been killed had she not listened to God—but she was paid to do it!” In the commentary, Roberts had written out the following: “Paid to raise her own child, who had been condemned to death. No more anxious for his life.”

After ending his consideration of Exodus 1–2, he connects what he has observed to his readers’ experiences. He asks, “Do you think that that was just an accident? Do you think your life today is just an accident? No. . . . Somebody planted a seed, somebody went to battle.” As was noted above, the language of “planting a seed” is found in Roberts’ notes in the commentary at just this point.

Roberts then moves into the main focus of the sermon, Exodus 3. He begins, “A bush on fire was not an uncommon sight on the mountain where Moses had gone with his sheep. But this one was different, and Moses could not turn his eyes away. For this bush burned, but it was not consumed by the fire. Its flame came up out of itself and made it flame and shine to give a man a vision of God.”

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59 Cassuto, Exodus, 19.
61 Cassuto, Exodus, 20.
appears to come from a note in the commentary: “Although the bush . . . is commonly found in steppe country, and it is no unusual phenomenon for a bush dried by the summer’s heat to catch fire, yet the bush that Moses saw was not consumed in the flame. . . .”

Further, the commentary says, “On this mountain Moses was vouchsafed a vision of God,” a note which Roberts has underlined. In reflecting on the discourse between the Lord and Moses, Roberts states in his sermon, “It’s interesting to me that the first thing God wanted Moses to do was to tell the people his testimony.”

In a note written in the commentary, Roberts says, “Moses’ personal testimony: God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has appeared to ME/the God of your father—has appeared to ME.”

Next, he comes in his sermon to what is perhaps the most intriguing connection between the sermon and the commentary. He says:

I have more than fifty commentaries on the Old Testament written by Jewish rabbis. In one commentary I was reading recently, the author brought out a point that is very meaningful to us today. He said that THE LIGHT THAT WAS IN THE BUSH LIGHTED MOSES! That was part of Moses’ testimony. In coming down to the elders of Israel, Moses said, in effect, “I am LIGHTED. I’ve been LIGHTED BY GOD and I’m bringing that LIGHT to you. You are now LIGHTED. And as LIGHTED PEOPLE we will now go to Pharaoh and say, ‘Let God’s people go.’” As I read that commentary, I bawled like a baby.

The commentary under discussion says the following:

Another point: Moses and the elders were to tell Pharaoh that God lighted . . . upon them (to be exact: upon one of them on behalf of all of them), that means, that He revealed Himself to them by chance; whereas in the narrative above (v. 2) the verb appeared . . . occurs; so, too, when Moses speaks to the elders (v. 16) he uses the term has appeared . . . Also in this distinction between “appeared” and “lighted” there is discernible the intention to adapt the language to the Gentiles’ way of thinking. For in the Canaanite tongue the verb [lighted] signified a theophany. . . . Consequently, the Bible also uses this verb in accounts of theophanies to non-Israelites. . . . The words and now introduce, as usual, the conclusion: since our God has lighted upon us, we request your permission to go forth. . . .

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64 Cassuto, Exodus, 31.
65 Cassuto, Exodus, 31.
67 Cassuto, Exodus, 41.
69 Cassuto, Exodus, 42–43.
Readers can see the obvious connection here. The commentary to which Roberts refers is the commentary under discussion. The commentary’s explication of lighted is the basis of Roberts’ sermon. Roberts finds in the language a combination of experiential encounter with God followed logically by testimony to it. Further, we can thus safely say that Roberts interacted with this commentary toward the end of 1985.

Afterward, Roberts considers implications for readers. He says: “Recently a member of the American Medical Association was here on campus. And he let me know that prayer is no longer an issue in hospitals across this country. It all can be traced right here to this little spot of ground in Tulsa, Oklahoma, that’s been LIGHTED with the LIGHT OF GOD . . . where the bush is still burning.” Roberts ends by stating, “Just one little bush—this university or that City of Faith, your church or your Christian school—is burning with the flame that comes up out of its own flame, out of God who has engulfed us, and WE ARE LIGHTED.”

He seeks to utilize Moses’ experience to motivate his readers to acknowledge their similar experience and their vocation to extend that light into the world.

Roberts’ sermon on Exodus 3 provided a unique opportunity to see how his thoughts could move from the latent state during his interaction with the Cassuto commentary to the actualized form found in that sermon. Often, he demonstrates his reliance on the expertise of the commentator. He even allows himself to be vulnerable in sharing how a section of the commentary moved him emotionally as he read it. Overall, he implicitly reveals his posture as an active learner. But he does not merely repeat what he has read there; he also engages it and interacts with it, plumbing its depths for pastoral implications.
Conclusion

In this essay, I have sought to reflect on Oral Roberts’ use of the commentary on Exodus written by Umberto Cassuto. The impetus for this was my happenstance discovery of what was previously his personal copy of this commentary, filled with notes and interaction. I began by sketching important events from the time period during which he possessed this volume. I then made some broad-brush comments about the types of interaction found within the volume. Finally, I moved to a more substantial comparison and analysis of the commentary itself, his interaction within the commentary, and his sermon on Exodus 3.

As someone who has been deeply influenced by the life and ministry of Oral Roberts as well as someone who studies the Old Testament, I have benefited tremendously from this exercise. One does not often have the opportunity to access such a personal, intimate item from someone who lived such a public life. I have attempted to walk lightly into the journey. The result has been a deeper appreciation for the intentionality with which Oral Roberts studied Scripture. Throughout, he positions himself as someone who is willing and eager to learn from others. Especially crucial in that regard was witnessing the journey of his note in the commentary on God “lighting” on Moses to its presence in his sermon. It is apparent that this portion of the commentary truly moved him—academically and spiritually. My hope is that this essay can contribute, in some small way, to a deeper appreciation for Oral Roberts, a man whose life and testimony have influenced many.

In retrospect, we might consider the City of Faith a failed project. That story of Roberts’ ministry did not end as he had expected. But from another vantage point, we might admire the vision Roberts had. At a time when many other pastors might have pushed for the separation of medicine and faith, Roberts insisted that medicine was a good gift from God for the healing of those who hurt. Likewise, his willingness to take up and read the commentary by Cassuto testifies to his belief that such resources can be gifts from God, and that we honor God and grow in our faith as whole people—spirit, body, and mind.

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ORU's College of Theology & Ministry is excited to invite qualified applicants to be a part of the next Cohort. Renowned for its "globally positioned" orientation, this degree explores the contextual theologies of global Christianity and the phenomenal growth and emerging scholarship within the global Spirit-empowered movement. It aims to equip scholars and practitioners to engage, impact, and expand the Spirit-empowered ethos and faithfully serve the Kingdom of God.

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