

## EXODUS NOTES

### Introduction

Biblical religion revolves around two themes, Creation and the Exodus. The former asserts God's individual sovereignty over nature, the latter asserts God's control over history. These essential themes are inexplicably linked, inform one another, and are complementary. A Creator who withdraws from His creation and leaves His creatures entirely to their own devices is a functionless deity, an inactive being, remote and aloof from the world of men and women. The human race is bereft of ultimate destiny.

The God of the Bible is vitally concerned with the welfare of His creatures, intensely involved in their fate and fortune. He imposes His laws on the human race, and He judges the world in righteousness. History, therefore, is the arena of divine activity. It is no wonder that the exodus is one of the pivotal events in the Bible, and that the experiences connected with it – the slavery of the Israelites, their liberation from Egypt, the covenant between God and His people at Sinai, and their journey in the wilderness towards the promised Land – all constitute the dominant motif of the Scriptures in one form or another.

Apart from the actual narrative itself, the Exodus theme is referred to about 120 times in the OT alone. It was never seen just as a historical event of the past, but became a permanent symbol in the Israelite consciousness. For example, about 500 years later the prophet Amos could say: "I brought you up from the land of Egypt and led you through the wilderness forty years to possess the land of the Amorite" (Amos 2:10, 3:1) The Exodus event so captured the imagination of Israel that it not only served to illuminate Israel's most basic identity, but also functioned as a prism for interpreting all of Israel's subsequent history (Isa. 43:1-21; 51:9-11). Liturgy has shaped literature (Exod. 12:1-28).

In the critical passage of Deut. 6:20-25, the father's reply to his son highlights: (i) the wonderful liberation from Egypt, the preliminary to the fulfillment of the promise of land made to the patriarchs; and (ii) the subsequent giving of the laws, whose observance is a meritorious reverencing of their giver. These two aspects are implicitly related: what God did for Israel authorized Him to lay down the law for them. Israel's response was one of awe and gratitude. God's authority to command and Israel's obligation to obey both spring from historical experience rather than from abstract reflection on the inner worth of the laws. "It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt" (Exod. 13:8). To that end, the recurrent festivals of Israel were dedicated to celebrate these redemptive events – the spring festivals of Passover and unleavened bread, and the autumn festival (Lev. 23:43) celebrate the exodus. Furthermore, other rites, such as the offering and redemption of the first fruits and firstborn, were turned into memorial to the exodus.

The constitution of Israel, the Torah, ends without telling the story of the conquest of Canaan. This signifies the absolute character of the covenantal obligation in contrast to the conditioned character of the possession of the land. The covenant became binding on

Israel before they took possession of the land. The Torah ends with Moses' death because by that juncture it has related all that it needed to provide the rationale for Israel's way of life. Hence, when the kingdom of Judah fell, the Judean exiles were able to conceive of the covenant's validity even when they were no longer in their land.

Exodus can then be divided as follows: (i) the historical preparation for the covenant: how God redeemed Israel from slavery, and thus showed His faithfulness, His care, and His wonderful might; (ii) the covenant made: how God established His covenant with Israel, and gave them a rule to make them His kingdom of priests, a holy nation; and (iii) the sovereign's residence: how God ordained a sanctuary for Himself amidst His consecrated people, so that he might dwell among them to care for them and guide them.

It is possible to epitomize the entire story of exodus in the movement of the fiery manifestation of the divine presence. At first, fire burned momentarily in a bush on the sacred mountain as God announced His plan to redeem Israel; later it appeared for months in the sight of all Israel as God descended on the mountain to conclude His covenant with the redeemed; finally, it rested permanently on the tent-sanctuary, as God's presence settled there. The book thus recounts the stages in the descent of the divine presence to take up its abode for the first time among one of the peoples of the earth.

The Exodus theme is used for theological and didactic purposes in seven ways:

1. It affirms, as in Genesis, that God's sovereignty over nature is absolute (thus, the plagues).
2. Human beings cannot successfully defy God's will or effectively thwart His purposes.
3. History has meaning and purpose, and is not just a progression of haphazard incidents.
4. God is the redeemer from injustice and oppression.
5. The Exodus is a paradigm of future redemption.
6. The religious calendar of Israel and its rituals and practices are all reinterpreted in terms of the Exodus.
7. History is a source of ethical teachings and as a motive for social ethics. (Exod. 22:20, 23:9, Lev. 19:33-34, Deut, 5:13-15, 10:17-19, 15:12-15, 23:8, 24:17-18, 24:20-22,)

The **title** in English is derived from the LXX (the fuller title is "The Exodus [departure] of the Children of Israel from Egypt"). The most widely used Hebrew name is Sefer Sh'mot ("The Book: Names"), taken from the opening Hebrew words of the book, "These are the names of the sons of Israel".

New Testament Links with Exodus – The understanding of the gospel has been decisively shaped by this saving experience of the Exodus. The NT writers used Exodus as a vehicle for interpreting and proclaiming God's act in Jesus, and the ecclesia as the people of God.

1. Jesus, like Israel, is "called out of Egypt" (Matt. 2:15), and tested in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11).
2. Jesus not only celebrates the Passover (Mark 14:12-25); Matt. 26:28) but, in a radical theological extension, is himself identified as the "Passover lamb" (1 Cor. 5:7; 11:25),

and the “supernatural rock” who followed Israel in the wilderness (1 Cor. 10:4). Jesus assumes the role of a new Moses as he teaches his disciples from the mountain (Matt. 5-7).

3. Most remarkably, Israel’s God “tabernacles” in Jesus’ very person (John 1:14).

4. The Exodus texts, as well as being applied to Jesus, provide a continuity between Israel and the ecclesia as the people of God (1 Cor. 10:6-11; 9:8-12; 2 Cor. 8:14-15).

The God of the Exodus is our God, whose saving activity we too have experienced. We are one with those Israelites who stood on the shore of the Red Sea and proclaimed the victory of their God. Their songs have become our songs. Israel in exile finds itself in straits similar to its forebears in two major respects: (i) captive to outside forces; and (ii) suffering under just judgment because of its disloyalty to God. Israel stands in need of both deliverance and forgiveness.

The Book of Exodus insists that one cannot speak of liberation as a freeing from all restraints; it is not a declaration of independence. Exodus moves from one kind of slavery to another, from bondage to Pharaoh to service to Yahweh. One cannot bypass Sinai on the way to the promised land. Hence, any who would use Exodus as a paradigm for liberation should then move to the question. Whom will we now serve? Exodus would claim that true freedom is found only in the service of Yahweh.

[Liberation theology – Fretheim, “Exodus”: pp.18-20]

A common structural aspect of the book is that certain narrative aspects are made to prefigure later ones. Each story reflects aspects of another, which binds them together more closely.

The actions of Pharaoh’s daughter on behalf of Moses prefigure later divine activities on behalf of Israel (Exod. 2:1).

The various activities of Moses in Exod. 2:11-22 foreshadow later actions by both God and Israel.

The deadly encounter of Moses with God in Exod. 4:24-26 anticipates the Passover.

Each of the plagues prefigures disastrous aspects of the Passover and sea crossing.

Each of the events in the wilderness has aspects that foreshadow Sinai realities.

Key transitional sections also serve to interlock the major portions of the book (Exod. 1:1-7; Exod. 2:23-25; Exod.6:28-7:7; Exod.11:1-10; Exod.15:19-26; Exod. 19:1-8; Exod. 24:12-18).

The Book of Exodus is incomprehensible except as a sequel to the book of Genesis. The narratives in Genesis focus upon individuals and the fortunes of a single family; they center upon the divine promises of people-hood and national territory that are vouchsafed to them. In the Book of Exodus, the process of fulfilling those promises is set in motion. God first reveals Himself to Moses as the God of the Patriarchs, and the phrase “the Israelite people” appears for the first time (Exod. 1:9, 3:6, 15, 16). The opening verses of Exodus list the original 70 pioneers who migrated to Egypt, with the passage clearly derived from Gen. 46:8-27. At the burning bush, we have a clear echo of Joseph’s dying

words: “God will surely take notice of you and bring you up from this land to the land which He promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Exod. 3:16, 13:19).

The Book of Exodus has essentially two parts: Chapters 1-18, the emancipation from Egyptian bondage (1:1-15:21) and the pilgrimage to Sinai (15:22-18:27); and Chapters 19-40, Israel’s sojourn at Sinai where the covenant was made and laws given (covenant at Sinai and prescriptions of the law (Chapters 19-24), and command to erect the tabernacle and its implementation (Chapters 25-40).

Historical background – The one and only clue to the place in Egyptian history of the exodus narrative is the mention of Pithom and Raamses in 1:11. No Egyptian king is named though two reigns are mentioned in the story; no event of history recorded in Egyptian sources appears. But the city Raamses is almost certainly the delta residence of the Ramesides of the 19<sup>th</sup> dynasty, founded by Ramses II (1304-1237 BC), and named after him. His long reign suits the representation of Moses as being born and growing to manhood under a single reign. Egyptian records are silent about Israelite slaves, but the story’s assumption of their nearness to the capital (which makes Moses movement between them and the court easy) agrees with the New Kingdom evidence that parties of Asiatic shepherds were occasionally permitted entry to the eastern delta for pasture. That such immigrants dwelling in the vicinity of the capital should have been subjected to corvee by Ramses II in the course of his extensive building operations is natural.

Pharaoh (two Egyptian words “per-aa”, literally “the great house”), who was absolute master of the population. The basis of his power was his complete control of the machinery of government – the civil service, the police, and the army. Even the priests of Egypt were his agents and representatives, and it was he who normally appointed and removed them. As to the common man, while it is wrong to suppose him utterly without rights, the lot of the forced labor recruited from foreign and captured populations was harsh. The people were completely subservient to their rulers – not a single uprising against a native king is attested in two and a half millennia of history. Egypt was indeed a “house of slaves”.

The most likely date of the exodus would seem to be the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC, although the precise identification of the Pharaohs by name in the Exodus account makes timing very difficult and imprecise. All the Egyptian kings are so termed, at least from the advent of the new Egyptian kingdom in the 16<sup>th</sup> century BC. The Hyksos peoples, Asiatics who seized power and ruled Egypt for about 150 years, maintained a royal residence in the NE delta of the River Nile during 1780-1570BC. The Hyksos occupation was a shameful humiliation for the Egyptians that had a profound effect upon the national psychology. By 1720BC, the Hyksos (the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Dynasties of Egypt) were fully in control of the eastern delta of the Nile, expanding later into southern Egypt. The rise of Joseph to power and the migration of the Hebrews fits in well with what is known of the era of the Hyksos rule. The final crushing defeat of the Hyksos was achieved by Amose (1552-1527BC) who founded the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty of Pharaohs, and inaugurated the New Kingdom, the period of the Egyptian Empire, in the course of which the country reached the height of its power and magnificence. [see Sarna JPS p. 5)

The most reasonable explanation for the change in Israel's fortunes towards slavery lies in the policies adopted by the pharaohs of the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (ca. 1306-1200BC), and especially Ramses II (ca. 1290-1224BC), who shifted Egypt's administrative and strategic center of gravity to the eastern Delta of the Nile, where he undertook vast building projects that required a huge labor force.

Exodus 12:40-41 mentions that the Israelites stayed in Egypt for 430 years. Genesis 15:13 had predetermined a period of 400 years for the slavery and oppression, but this is coordinated with no more than four "generations" in Gen. 15:16, although the word "generations" is rather elastic in the Hebrew ("dor") meaning a "cycle of time, a life time" – a generation is therefore not really incompatible with 400 years. According to 1 Kings 6:1, Solomon built the temple at Jerusalem in the 4<sup>th</sup> year of his reign, which is said to have coincided with the 480<sup>th</sup> year after the Exodus; however, this may not be meant as an exact marker. Since Solomon came to the throne in 960BC, this notice in 1 Kings 6 would date the departure from Egypt in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century BC. But this was a period of strong Egyptian kings holding sway over Syria and Palestine when a conquest of Canaan by the Israelites would seem unlikely. The books of Joshua and Judges make no reference to Egypt as a factor in the wars of conquest.

Perhaps "schematized chronology" is involved (bottom page 8 – Sarna for examples). Notice too that the sum of the years from the 4<sup>th</sup> year of Solomon when he built the temple to the last year of the king in Jerusalem is, according to Biblical sources, exactly 430. If the 50 years of exile are added, the resultant 480 years brings us to the Cyrus declaration of 538BC, which allowed the Jews to return to Zion and to rebuild the Temple. In other words, by having Solomon's temple building occur in the 480<sup>th</sup> year after the Exodus, the Bible may be making that event the central point in the Biblical history of Israel.

Some further factors appear relevant:

1. Joseph, as prime minister, and the Israelites subsequently, lived in Goshen, the eastern part of the Nile Delta, with the royal administration presumably nearby (Gen. 45:10). Gen. 47:11 equates the area of Israelite settlement with "the region of Raamses". This indicated the period of the Hyksos invaders, who maintained their royal residence in this region (1780-1570BC).
2. The birth narrative of Moses makes it clear that Israel lived close to the River Nile. Furthermore, the Israelites were "conscripted" to build the cities of "Pithom and Raamses", and from the latter site the Israelites commenced their march of liberation out of Egypt. During the 200 odd years that elapsed between the collapse of the Hyksos rule over Egypt and the 19<sup>th</sup> dynasty (1306-1200 BC), the eastern delta had been neglected. The oppression, or at least the final and most severe stage of it, seems to have taken place during the reign of Rameses II.

3. Rameses II (1290-1224BC) was followed by the ten-year rule of Memeptah, and then 20 years of anarchy ensued. Rameses III (1194-1164BC), when securing the throne, needed to look after the attacks from the west and, after his death, Egyptian rule in Canaan came to an end. This period provided an ideal setting for the Israelite conquest of the promise land.

4. Archaeological findings also suggest that Canaan was in an advanced state of decay in the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century BC, coming to an abrupt end around that time. It was riven by political fragmentation and chronic disunity, debilitated by economic instability. With their military strength greatly weakened by the successive forays of Egyptian kings, the fortified city-states that made up the country were in a parlous condition.

Despite the defeat of the Hyksos, the Semitic population was not driven out of the eastern delta (the Hyksos never seem to have dominated upper Egypt, where a native family retained control and spear-headed resistance to the Hyksos). As a result, the danger of foreign invasion, especially from Asia via the eastern delta, haunted Egyptian rulers thereafter. The new pharaoh of Exodus Chapter 1 quite understandably was anxious about the rapid growth of the Israelite presence in the strategic Delta region. Against this background, the opening chapter of Exodus becomes comprehensible.

Unlike Genesis, Exodus has to do, not with the family of Jacob, but with a people, the people of Israel. This change in identity is established in the opening verses of Exodus, and in God's first speech ("my people", Exod. 3:7). Israel's status as God's elect people is in place from the beginning. They are the people of the covenant made with Abraham; the promises to Abraham are also their promises (Exod. 2:24).

## **I. GROWTH AND BONDAGE IN EGYPT Exodus 1-2**

In summary, God's historical promises are fulfilled among the people of God in Egypt. But this resolution is threatened by chaotic forces embodied in an oppressive Pharaonic regime. Initially, God works behind the scenes against this threatening situation in and through the wisdom and courage of two lowly women. Their disobedience preserves a future for Israel and enables the emergence of a leader in the person of Moses. His early life experiences both embody Israel and anticipate the divine action. A new intensification of divine activity (Exod. 2:23-25) gives promise for a changed future

The wide-ranging scope of these two chapters is breathtaking. They move back and forth from the familial to the national, from the personal to the cosmic, from courageous women to arrogant kings, from endangered babies to a concerned God.

Chapter 1 covers the events of four generations, and Chapter 2 of two-thirds of Moses' life. The time span is therefore diminishing. The principle interest is focused on Chapter 3 to which the introductory chapters lead. The rest of the book of Exodus covers a period of little more than one year. An interesting issue is why there are no further references to the decree against the infants after Moses' birth account, and in 5:6-23, for example.

## **Exodus 1:1-7 The land was filled with them**

Though the family of Egypt numbered only 70 souls when it came down to Egypt, it later increased prodigiously. The book of Exodus opens by indicating the base ingratitude on the part of a Pharaoh and the Egyptian people, which precipitates a radical reversal of fortune for the tribes of Israel. As predicted in the pivotal passage, Israel were “strangers in a land not theirs” (Gen. 15:13). Their slavery and suffering are discussed only briefly, compressed into a few verses, with the emphasis on the process of liberation. Initially, there is no explicit mention of God directing events. But God’s covenant to Abraham in Gen. 15:13 is clearly the backdrop to this evolving situation, an unfolding of the divine purpose. A key to this section, which announces the theme of Israel’s prosperity in Egypt, is the repetition of the phrase “the sons of Israel [Israelites]” at the beginning and the end of the section.

The opening of the book of Exodus is a verbal link back to Genesis, interlocking the two narratives. The book does not pick up where Genesis left off, as the true sequel to Gen. 50:26 sets in only at 1:6. In verse 1, the phrase stresses continuity with Gen. 46:8-27, recapitulating briefly and utilizing the framework there, which names those who went down to Egypt, totaling 70 in all (1:5; Deut. 10:22); the LXX has 75 persons; compare Acts 7:14; Luke 10:1. The order of the names is based on Gen. 35:23-26, with the two wives mentioned first in order of seniority, followed by those of the two handmaids in reverse order to form a chiasm. This order, by focusing on Gen. 35:23-26, draws appropriate attention to the divine blessing to Jacob (Gen. 35:11): “Be fruitful and increase; a nation, yea an assembly of nations, shall descend from you”. The Exodus text is therefore affirming that the promise is being fulfilled, at least in an incipient way (Gen. 12:1; 17: 2; 28:14; 46:3). We are moving from a particular family to an entire people, from Jacob/Israel to Israel, from a patriarch to a national entity. The latter use of the phrase occurs only twice in Genesis (Gen. 32:32; 36:31); in Exodus, it will occur 125 times, a major shift in vocabulary language. This shift to an entire people is accentuated in Exod. 1:6-7; not only has Joseph died (so Gen. 50:26), but the entire Genesis generation. The immigrant community had completely died out by the time the oppression had begun.

Exod. 1:7 multiplies language regarding the growth of this people, going beyond the language of Gen. 47:27b. Expressions of Israel’s fertility in 1:7 exceed those in God’s blessings to primeval man (Gen. 1:28; 9). Outside of 1:7 and Gen. 9:1 (the command to Noah and his family to replenish the desolate earth), the verb “saras” is used only of the swarming of subhuman creatures. Five verbs are used to stress an extraordinary increase in numbers (one verb is used for the plague of frogs, 8:3). This language connects with the promise of fruitfulness to Israel’s ancestors (cf. Gen. 17:2-6; 48:4), the fulfillment of which is anticipated in Gen. 47:27. Still further language of growth is used as the chapter progresses (Exod. 1:9, 10, 12, 20), highlighting the fulfillment of promises made to this family. (Note Deut. 10:22; 26:5; Psa. 105:24).

Fruitfulness and multiplication invite links with Gen. 1:28; 9; 1 and 7 - Noah. Yet there is no specific language of fulfillment and no reference to God until Exod. 1:17. God is very much present, but unseen (Gen. 50). The long period of time covered in these verses is

thus recognized, when God has been seemingly absent, but when God's work of blessing has been substantial, and in a foreign land, Egypt (Gen. 45:17-20).

If God has begun to fulfill promises, and in such an extraordinary way, is there not hope that other promises will be fulfilled, not least the gift of land? An expanding people needs land. The vocabulary of 1:7 reflects the promise of blessing to Adam (Gen 1:28; 9:1) as well as the promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:1).

### **Exodus 1:8-14      Whom will Israel serve?**

Alarmed over the increase of the Israelites, a new Pharaoh, who recognized no obligation to Joseph, organized the Israelites into work gangs and set them to work in his building projects. He hoped thereby to check their increase, yet they went on multiplying to the horror of the Egyptians. The Egyptians heaped labor upon the Israelites, field-work as well as construction, driving them ruthlessly and embittering their lives.

Into the midst of God's extraordinary creative activity enters a major effort to subvert what God has done. A sign of blessing for Israel is a sign of disaster for Pharaoh, an issue of national security for Egypt, with the new Pharaoh becoming suspicious of foreign intervention (Exod. 1: 9-10). This is a threat to undo God's creation and ongoing purpose. It is a threat to Israel in losing its identity. God's promises of oppression were on target (Gen. 15:13). The culprit this time is not a serpent or a Cain who kills his brother, but "a new king over Egypt". He is not even given a name, nor is his successor. The sole description of Pharaoh is that he "does not know" Joseph, the one through whom God has preserved the people alive (Gen. 45:5-7; 50:20). "Know", a key word occurring over 20 times in the first 14 chapters, has a rich meaning, going beyond mental to include emotional activities. This contrasts with the God who "knows" his people and their situation (Gen. 2:25; 3:7; cf. 33:17). Not-knowing leads to oppression; knowing leads to salvation (Jer. 22:16). Who knows and who does not (yet) know will be a recurrent theme in Exodus (cf. 5:2; 6:7; 7:5). Israel's deteriorating fortunes are reflected in Joseph's private internment in Egypt compared with Jacob's public funeral in Machpelah, attended by many Egyptian officials. In 1:8, "arose" indicates the inauguration of a new era.

Pharaoh's speech is ironic in being the first to recognize the children of Israel as a "people" (1:9), highlighting by an outsider the fulfillment of God's promises; to underscore the new usage, the associated verbs and adjectives in 1:9-12 are in the singular. Literally, the beginning of Pharaoh's speech in 1:9 reads, not "too many and too mighty", but "much larger and more numerous than us" (as in Psa. 105:24; Deut. 4:38; 7:1; 9:1, 14; Num. 14:12). The phrase "escape ("alah") from the land" is exactly the wording used in Exod. 13:18, which also uses battle language. This verb is also used for God's saving action in Exod. 3:8, 17 ("bring up"; Gen. 46:4). In 1:10, to "deal shrewdly", in order to control the growth of the Israelite population, Pharaoh now unwittingly challenges the will of God. There is a paradox in Pharaoh's position as, while concerned about Israel's numbers, he wants to keep them in his power and to help them to construct his huge building projects – perhaps the energy dissipated in the latter will kill them off and so abate their increase. Exit from Egypt appears always to have been regarded as a



difficulty—understandably so in view of the strong guard set by Egyptians to control movement on their eastern frontier. Similarly, how difficult it is to escape from sin!

In 1:11, the Israelites are not pressed into private domestic slavery but are conscripted for compulsory unpaid labor on public works projects for indefinite periods under brutal and degrading conditions; “to oppress” and “to be a slave” reflect the prediction of Gen.15:13: they shall be enslaved and oppressed. The men so conscripted received no reward for their labors; they enjoyed no civil rights, and their lot was generally much worse than that of a household slave. Organized in large work gangs, they became an anonymous mass, depersonalized, losing all individuality in the eyes of their oppressors. They were requisitioned for the maintenance of the irrigation ditches, dikes, and canals, having to clean out the mud deposited by the inundation of the Nile. They were also put to work in the fields to be subject to the unending drudgery demanded by the manifold and arduous tasks of agriculture. The nefarious scheme of the Pharaoh to reduce the male Israelite population through state-imposed enslavement, and the subjection to degrading, exhausting, and backbreaking toil, did not yield the expected results, But the more Israel is oppressed, the more it grows; the tyrant’s efforts have been inexplicably foiled, fueling the disquiet (1:12).

The precise locations of Pithom and Raamses are unknown, but the latter was doubtless the famous Delta residence of Raamses II. As often for Israel, it must pass in and through adversity on the way to the fulfillment of promises. The language of affliction and burden is a recurrent motif in the exodus tradition in the OT (Deut. 26:5; 1 Sam. 12:8; Exod. 22:21-24). The recalling of oppression is to lead to an identification with those who suffer, and also to center the people on what God has done for them in their suffering.

Exod. 1:13-14 uses repetitive language to emphasize the dire experience of oppression. The Israelite labor gangs are now exploited for exhausting toil in construction work and agriculture on the prodigious building activity. The word “perek” (“rigor”) occurs twice, stressing the harshness and cruelty of the Egyptian treatment (forbidden among Israelites in Lev. 25:43, 46, 53). Words related to the Hebrew root “abad” (“serve- slave”) are used five times, twice qualified by “ruthlessly” (compare the five verbs in 1: 7). This root provides one of the leading motifs in the book of Exodus (it is used 97 times). It will also be used for the service and worship of God. In addition to construction, the Israelites are put to “all kinds of field labor” (agriculture, irrigation, Deut. 11:10). In 1:14, the expression “embittered their lives” is unique.

Several Egyptian texts shed light on the burdens endured by the agricultural worker, on his wretched condition, and on his low status in Egyptian society. One contemporary source describes the burdens of the brick maker and the builder: “He is dirtier than vines or pigs from treading under his mud. His clothes are stiff with clay, his leather belt is going to ruin. Entering into the wind, he is miserable...His side aches, since he must be outside in a treacherous wind... His arms are destroyed with technical work... What he eats is the bread of his fingers, and he washes himself only once a season. He is simply wretched through and through....”

Calvin appropriately describes the king's action as a classic example of using an alleged threat as an occasion for one's own wickedness.

Whom then will Israel serve, a key question in the book of Exodus? Exod. 1:13-14 makes it very clear that Israel is serving Pharaoh. To be in his service, however, means harshness and bondage, the lack of freedom to be what one is called to be. That is not God's purpose for the creation. God will see this slavery (Exod. 2:25, 3:7) and move to deliver Israel, so that the Israelites become God's servants. Only in service to God can service without bondage be found. With God, service is freedom. Yet Israel is not freed to do what it pleases; Israel moves from one kind of servitude to another. The exodus does not constitute a declaration of independence, but a declaration of dependence upon God (cf. Exod. 14:31). This is ratified in a covenant at Sinai (Exod. 24:7).

### **Exodus 1:15-22 Daughters save sons**

Pharaoh now ordered the midwives who served the Hebrew women so to manage things that all male infants should die at birth. But the midwives, being God-fearing, disobeyed, and when Pharaoh called them to account, displayed a shrewdness in their answer to the king that matched his own. Having failed to secure the cooperation of the midwives, Pharaoh then called upon all his people to lend a hand in the destruction of the male infants.

Responding to the failure of his schemes, the pharaoh resorts to unrestrained cruelty. In addition to the harsh burdens imposed on the adult males, he now issues a decree of crushing barbarity; infanticide, in order to reduce the Israelite population. The obligation to commit this infanticide was thrust upon the midwives, who ironically outwit the king of all Egypt. Also ironic is the fact that the king of all Egypt stoops to converse with two lowly women to move his intentions forward. The women are named, and the pharaoh unnamed. (Shiprah=to be beautiful, and Puah=a fragrant blossom, coming to connote a girl). These lowly champions of morality assume a far greater historic importance than do the all-powerful tyrants who rule Egypt. Pharaoh can get the entire Egyptian community to bend to his will but fails to get two [daughters of Israel] to so respond. While the entire Egyptian community is finally unsuccessful, the two women are successful. The Egyptian's fear of the Israelites leads to their failure; the women's fear of God leads to their success. Were the midwives Israelite or Egyptian women, as the text in 1:15 can read either "Hebrew midwives" or "midwives of Hebrew women"? It might seem strange for the king to have expected the Israelites to kill the males of their own people. And yet the names are Semitic. Josephus and others believe that they were Egyptian midwives, but there is a mixed tradition.

Here we have history's first recorded case of civil disobedience in defense of a moral cause, motivated by the "fear of God". Faced with a conflict between the laws of God and those of the pharaoh, the midwives followed the dictates of conscience. Their defiance of tyranny constitutes history's first recorded act of civil disobedience in defense of a moral imperative. They were actuated by "fear of God", a phrase frequently associated with moral and ethical behavior. "Fear of God" connotes a conception of God

as One who makes moral demands on humankind; it functions as the ultimate restraint on evil and the supreme stimulus of good. It is strange that there were only two midwives to service such a large population. Perhaps the two were the overseers of the practitioners, directly responsible for the many women under them – or perhaps the two names were those of guilds of midwives named after the original founder of the order. Pharaoh does not perceive that his policy will rebound upon his head; Egyptian sons, including his own, will be killed as an eventual outcome of his policies. Saving daughters backfires, as women are key instruments for “saving” the nation, here as in the next chapter. Saving sons from the angel of death anticipates the pass-over.

Effective service is exercised by the lesser known members of society; such persons are not powerless. In carrying out their rather mundane responsibilities, they are shown to have had a profound effect on the future of their people (Jer. 9:23, 1 Cor. 1:26-29). God is able to use persons of faith from even lowly stations in life to carry out the divine purpose. The fear of God brings blessings for the midwives’ families. Pharaoh promotes an even more murderous plan to achieve his goal. His plan is to eliminate Israel altogether. Drowning looks forward to the next chapter where the river provides the very setting for the rescue of the baby Moses, and portends the later and final destruction of Pharaoh. He mobilizes “all his people”, the entire apparatus of the state, to annihilate the people of Israel. There is another irony that the chosen instrument – water – (not mentioned subsequently, was it implemented or rescinded?) will in the end become the agency of Egypt’s punishment. [Expand on judgment and salvation by water.]

In 1:15, the origin of Hebrews is a puzzle, first used of Abram in Gen, 14:13. At least three explanations have been suggested: (i) it is connected with Eber, grandson of Moses; (ii) it is derived from Hebrew (“ever” = “beyond”), that is, the one who came from beyond the River Euphrates; and (iii) it indicates Abraham’s religious non-conformism – “all the world was on one side (“ever”), and he on the other side”. Greenberg argues that “’ibri” is used when (but not whenever) other nationals speak of Israelites (or their ancestors) or when (but not whenever) the author treats of Israelites (or their ancestors) in relation to other nationals. The fact that Yhwh is called “God of the Hebrews” (5:3) is, he considers, decisive. It is evidently an archaic term that served in pre-Davidic times to designate Israel as one ethnic group vis-à-vis others.

In 1:20, the narrative closes on the same note with which it began in 1:7; the pharaoh’s diabolical measures have not changed the situation because God has willed otherwise. The condemnation of male infants seems either self-defeating or inadequate. If Pharaoh wanted to exploit Israel’s manpower, the decree was self-defeating; if he wanted simply to reduce the Israelite population, he should have condemned the females, or at least included the females. The inconsistency of Pharaoh’s attitude toward the Israelites is displayed in the paradox contained in his opening statement (1:10). Pharaoh is foiled twice: (i) despite the hardships, the Israelites continue to increase; and (ii) his secret scheme to do away with the male infants is thwarted by the midwives failing to cooperate. Pharaoh then elicits the cooperation of the whole people in the genocide.

Note, overall, in Chapter 1, 70 persons come from Egypt. (1:5), seven references to “multiplied greatly” (1:7), seven “rigors” (1:14), seven references to midwives (1:15-21); and three sets of seven verses: Note the sequence in prosperity: (i) Israel’s prosperity in Egypt: (1:1-7); (ii) continued prosperity in the face of deliberate opposition (1:8-14); and (iii) prosperity as divine favor in spite of Pharaoh’s covert attempts at controlling the population (1:15-21). In Exodus Chapter 1, God is fulfilling the first part of His promises constituting Israel as a people, but beyond it in terms of the exuberant growth of the peoples in primeval times to fill an empty earth. – the proliferation theme therefore links Exodus with Genesis. The provision of land as the second part of the promise is yet to come. In Chapter 1, the visible motives of events are the alarm of the Egyptians, Pharaoh’s cunning, the midwives’ piety, and the desperation that drives the Egyptians at large to genocide. All this will, of course, work an effect the very opposite of that intended by Egypt. Thus does the Bible narrative often love to show how, all unknowing, men collaborate with God in the execution of His purposes.

### **Exodus 2:1-10 Daughters save Moses – Survival of Moses despite Pharaoh’s threat**

A baby born to Levite parents during the time of Pharaoh’s decree was put into a box by his mother shortly after his birth, and committed to his fate in the Nile’s cane-brake. He was discovered there by Pharaoh’s daughter, recovered for his mother by a ruse of his sister, and eventually returned as a boy to Pharaoh’s daughter. She named him Moses and adopted him as a son.

There is a wonderful change of outlook and focus between this, and the preceding, section, and an ominous backdrop. The narrative narrows from all the “sons” of Israel (1:7-14) to all male “sons” (1:15-22) to one special “son” (2:1-10) who shall save the “firstborn son” (4:22-23); casting “sons” into the Nile parallels the one “son” Moses being drawn from the Nile. (2:10). As Israel is under the threat of extinction, so is Moses. Pharaoh’s chosen instrument of destruction (the Nile) is the means for saving Moses. As in 1:15-22, the daughters are allowed to live, and it is they who now proceed to thwart Pharaoh’s plans. A member of Pharaoh’s own family undermines Pharaoh’s policies, saving the very person who would lead Israel out of Egypt and destroy the dynasty. Exod. 2:7 indicates that Egyptian royalty heeds a Hebrew girl’s advice. The mother gets paid to do what she most wants to do, and from Pharaoh’s own budget (anticipating 3:22). What the princess has done for Moses, Moses will do for all the people of Israel. God’s plans for the future of the children of Israel rest squarely on the shoulders of one of its helpless sons, a baby in a fragile basket (Isa. 53:1). There is hope amid a situation where God is seemingly absent. What appears to be a hopeless time is actually filled with positive possibilities. But it takes faith, “the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1).

The child’s mother (unnamed, but Jochebed, Num. 26:59) “saw that he was good” (God’s word for the creation in Genesis), suggesting that the birth of Moses was the dawn of a new creative era (as with Noah). In 6:20, we are told that Jochebed was the paternal aunt of Amram to whom she was married (prohibited in the legislation of Lev. 18:12 and 20:19), bearing Moses and Aaron. Thus, the parentage of Moses continues the inbreeding characteristic of Abraham (Sarah was his half-sister, Gen. 20:12), Isaac (Rebekah was the

daughter of his cousin, Gen. 22:22-23), and Jacob (who married the two daughters of his second cousin). In Moses' case, it is particularly close, giving Moses descent from the sacerdotal tribe on both sides. The time of 430 years of the Egyptian sojourn (12:40) is difficult here, with the few generations between the descent into Egypt by Levi and the exodus under his great grandson; Amram is Levi's grandson, while Jochebed was Levi's daughter (6:20; Num. 26:59). This means that Amram's father was born early, and Jochebed late, in Levi's life.

The Hebrew word for "basket" is uniquely the same as that for Noah's ark. Moses is parallel to Noah (cf. 32:12-17 with Gen. 6:8), both adrift in a watery chaos, but they are divinely chosen ones. Both underscore the vulnerability of its occupant and its being under divine protection. There is neither steerage nor steersman, wholly dependent on God's benevolent protection for safety. God unobtrusively works unseen in and through human beings to preserve Moses alive (cf. Gen. 45:5-7). The towering personality, Moses, preeminent in the entire cast of OT Biblical characters, appears upon the scene of history unaccompanied by any supernatural phenomenon. There is no prior birth announcement for him who is to be the redeemer of Israel, architect of its religion, consummate political leader, lawgiver, and archetypal prophet. In 1:3, the rare word "reeds" is artfully allusive, prefiguring Israel's deliverance from the Egyptians at the Sea of Reeds (Hebrew "Yam suf"). The Hebrew word "suf" is borrowed from Egyptian and means a thicket. Placing the basket in the reeds prevented its being carried downstream. Exod.1:6 is the only Biblical instance of a baby crying.

Note the favorable role of women in this chapter. The princess' activity is directly parallel to that of God with Israel (2:23-25; 3:7-8). She "comes down", "sees" the child, "hears" its cry, takes pity on him, draws him out of the water, and provides for his daily needs. All five women so far noted are actively engaged on the side of life against a brutal ruler. As a result, they not only contribute to the prospering of the children of Israel but enable this particular child, destined to become Israel's leader, to emerge with the best possible preparation for his task (does a similar unknowing hand work in our own lives?). What the women do for Moses, God will do for all Israel. As the activity of the princess parallels that of God, so Moses' experience parallels that of Israel. The story of Moses is a paradigm for Israel's experience of redemption. Just as Moses was safely borne through water and reeds, rescued from the brutality of the Egyptians, and provided with daily sustenance, so also was Israel. Moses' parents may be unnamed here to make more prominent his connection with Levi, especially in view of his being raised in an Egyptian household and his Egyptian name.

Moses' stay with his mother imbued him with an awareness of his Israelite origin. His stay at the Egyptian court enabled him to grow up free of the crippling physical and spiritual effects of slavery.

The interpretation of Moses' name in 2:10 is a notion suggested by assonance, a loose association of sound, rather than historical understanding or etymology. The narrator puts a Hebrew origin for the name into the mouth of the Egyptian princess; unbeknown to her, it foreshadows the boy's destiny. The name Moses, from an Egyptian word meaning "a

child is begotten” (the basic verbal stem “msy” means “to be born” and the noun “ms” means “child, son”), is given by the narrator in the princess’ mouth as “the one drawn out”, a passive participle. Actually, it is an active participle “he who draws out”, indicating divine providence at work. “Then they remembered the ancient days, Him, who pulled His people out [mosheh] [of the water]: Where is He who brought them up from the Sea?” (Isa. 63:11).

In terms of the **New Testament link**, there is a close relationship in the infancy narrative in Exodus 2:1-10 to Matthew 2 (see also Acts 7:20; Heb.11:23). Both have to do with the birth of a young male child, whose life is threatened by the ruling monarch, at first secretly, but later in open hostility. The child is rescued in the nick of time, but the other children are slaughtered in a vain effort to remove the threat of the one child. In Matthew’s account, the quotation from Hos. 11:1 “Out of Egypt have I called my son” draws a typological parallel between Israel’s deliverance from Egypt and Jesus’ ascent from the same land. Again, the order to return to the land of Israel in Exod. 2:20 is a clear reference to Moses’ instructions in Exod. 4:19.

The story of Moses functions as a paradigm or typology for Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth, with a fundamental continuity in the way in which God works in the lives of both Moses and Jesus – the preservation of life and the preparations of leaders. Also seen is a continuity in human activity, from the senseless murder of children to the faithfulness of human beings.

In both Exod. 1 and 2 and Matt. 2, God’s plan for His people has a fragile beginning. In both, the child serves as the not-yet-revealed instrument of God’s intervention, and in both cases the thread on which everything hangs is exceedingly thin. God seems to be taking such an enormous risk to let everything ride on two helpless midwives, a frail ark as protection from the sea, and a last-minute flight to Egypt. In contrast, the power of the world seems so impressive and invulnerable. Because God’s salvation appears as a threat, the world can unleash its power against this frail beginning. Pharaoh senses a threat and devises his plan long before the Hebrews are in the least prepared to resist. The wise men appear so naïve and powerless before the scheming intrigues of the king. And in both cases, when the secret plans fail, the ungloved fist is ready in an instant to strike.

Both accounts witness to the wonderfully unexpected rescue from a humanly impossible situation. The Exodus writer records the rescue by Pharaoh’s daughter and marvels at the mystery of God’s work. In Matthew, the wise men rejoice at the star and worship the child with gifts, before warning them of the terrible danger from the king. Furthermore, both accounts testify to the suffering of the people which accompanies the redemption. Rachel weeps for her children who have been destroyed (Jer. 31:15). The salvation promised by God is not greeted by a waiting world, but opposed with the hysterical fanaticism which borders on madness. The deliverance from Egypt had not brought true freedom, but Israel still awaited her true redemption. The Messiah, Jesus, identifies himself with the history of his people, descending into Egypt, and coming out as the true son. In Matthew’s account Christ calls forth his most bitter opposition, not from Gentiles, but from within his own people (Herod).

## **Exodus 2:11-22      Moses as embodiment of the future – flight of Moses after killing the Egyptian, and his marriage**

One day after Moses grew to manhood he went out to observe his kinsmen's toil. Coming upon an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew to death, Moses stepped in and killed the man—assuming he was not witnessed. Undaunted by the first day's contretemps, Moses made a second excursion to his brothers. This time he found two of them fighting, and when he intervened again he was taunted with his killing. Word of Moses' act soon reached Pharaoh, and Moses was forced to flee for his life. He escaped to Midian, where, as a result of rescuing some shepherd-girls from bullying shepherds, he found a home with the local priest, their father.

Here there are three incidents in Moses' early life which display his moral passion and his inability to tolerate injustice, bringing him into contact with three different groups; the Egyptians, his own people, and the semi-nomadic Midianites; and showing him identifying with his own people and making a definitive break from the pharaoh and Egypt. The three incidents: (i) Moses' intolerance of oppression and his whole-hearted identification with the plight of his people: (ii) two Israelites quarreling, showing Moses' care for the underdog; and (iii) Moses, with local shepherds, pushing aside a group of girls at the well, the abuse of the weak by the strong. Moses could hold his own with the bravest, and was afraid of no one. Nor could he brook the sight of evil, either in Egypt or in Midian where he was a stranger and a fugitive. All this indicates that Moses was by nature righteous, just, and large-hearted, and worth of his calling. "Even from the days of youth it is known whether his deeds will be pure and right" (Prov. 20:11).

Much time has passed (cf. Acts 7:23, Moses is 40 years of age). Moses intervenes with the Egyptian beating a Hebrew, witnessed Hebrew fighting Hebrew, and spontaneously assists the weak and defenseless foreign shepherd girls. Note: Moses embodies Israel in his own life experience. Moses (i) enters into conflict with the Egyptians; (ii) becomes the subject of a murderous edict of Pharaoh; (iii) has to "flee" (see 14:5) from Egypt to the wilderness, where he encounters God at Sinai; and (iv) testifies to having been (become) a sojourner in a foreign land. In a number of ways, Moses both relives the fate of the people and anticipates their near future. Moses status as an Egyptian (cf. 2:19) means that he must move away from Egypt to be able truly to know the Israelite's sojourning experience. Life in the wilderness (Midian) allows him to see more clearly who he is; so shall it be for Israel.

Moses' killing of the Egyptian was a deliberate act - note Moses' caution - of rescue from imminent death. The situation displays Moses' sense of justice. In 2:11-12, it is implied that the Egyptian was giving the Hebrew a murderous beating. In verse 12, "and seeing no one" brings to mind Isa. 59:16 where God is said to act on His own because no one else was about when the time to redeem Israel came. This Isaiah passage is probably an interpretation of the phrase in 2:12, justifying Moses on the ground that he acted only when he saw that "there was no one else" who would perform the rescue. In the second incident, the taunter's comment "as you did to the Egyptian" betrays his knowledge of Moses' kinship with Moses, which emboldened him to show such insolence which would

never have happened if he had been respected as the son of an Egyptian princess. The Hebrews here would seem to be identified as Dathan and Abiram in Num. 16:13b.

Note: Moses' actions anticipate/foreshadow God's actions. (i) in 2:11 Moses "sees" Israel's oppression, language used of God in 2:25, 3:7, 9; 4:31; 5:19, leading to initiatives being taken. Moses' reference to "his brethren" emphasizes that the years spent in the Egyptian court did not alienate him from his people and origins; (ii) the Egyptian beats (*nakah*) a Hebrew – Moses responds in kind, shown by the use of the same word. Beating or striking may or may not be fatal (cf. 21:12-21). This word is also used of God's actions towards the Egyptians (12:12, 13, 29), hence anticipating God's activity. The repetition of the verb, especially in Exodus, anticipates the idea of an "eye for eye, tooth for tooth". The question the next day was appropriate: "Who made you a ruler and a judge over us?" The answer? No one – yet; (iii) Moses saves, or delivers, the daughters of Jethro, the priest of Midian, and provides water for them. He who was saved by women now saves them. When the shepherds drive the women away as Pharaoh will drive Israel away (6:1, 10:11, 11:1, 12:39), Moses helps and delivers them. This language is used for God's salvation (14:13, 30; 15:2) and deliverance (3:8; 6:6; 12:27) of Israel, especially in the Midianite setting of 18:4, 8-10. The deliverance involves the drawing of water, pointing forward to the provision of water for Israel in the wilderness (17:1-6); and (iv) Moses confronts a wrong (2:13). Just as Moses confronts the Hebrew who wrongs another, so God through Moses will confront Pharaoh.

Note: Moses' actions anticipate issues facing a leader in Israel.

Moses later resolves intra-Israelite disputes (18:16). Disputes about Moses' leadership surface later (5:21; 14:11-12), and refusal to listen to Moses (6:9-11), and accusations of Moses trying to kill them (16:2-3; 17:3-4). Midianites are more accepting of Moses than his own people, continuing the actions of Pharaoh's daughter (but hostile to Israel in the period of the judges). NOTE: These actions of Moses, while anticipatory, are also inadequate. A personal sense of justice, whether slave being beaten to death (2:11), a neighbor wronged (2:13), or woman deprived (2:17), is not adequate for the mission God has in mind. Moses cannot accomplish the salvation of Israel on his own; God will have to become directly involved. Moses' sympathies for those less fortunate and his active response on their behalf anticipate God's will as expressed both in saving action (14:13, 30; 15:1-2) and in written statute (22:21-27).

In 2:18, Reuel means "friend of God". In Num 10:29, we read: "Hobab son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law", where it is uncertain which of the two is designated. In Num. 18:10ff, we read that he was quick to confess Israel's God. From Judges 4:11, it would appear that Hobab is the father-in-law, but in other texts this latter epithet is given to Jethro who also bears the title of "priest of Midian" (of the Kenite tribe). Rabbinic exegesis reconciles the discrepancies by assuming that Reuel was the grandfather of the girls and that the other names all refer to the same person, who bore several names. It is to be noted that the title "priest of Midian" is attached only to Jethro. This raises the possibility that the Hebrew "Jethro" is not a proper name but an honorific meaning "His Excellency". In 2:22, the interpretation of the name Gershom, Moses' son, "I have been a



sojourner in a strange land” indicates that Moses felt himself to be an Egyptian. Without the long exile in Midian, he would not have experienced even a semblance of the alien feelings that were his people’s lot in Egypt. The full paragraph to 2:10 ends in name giving (Moses), as does also 2:22 Gershom). The whole section 2:1-22 begins and ends with a birth (Moses and Gershom), contrasting with the deadly edict of Pharaoh against all the sons born to the Israelites. In 2:25, the time for God’s action has arrived.

### **Exodus 2:23-25    When kings die - A transitional postscript - God hears sighs**

During the many years that Moses stayed with Jethro, the Pharaoh under whom he had grown up and who had sought his life, died. The Israelites in the meanwhile continued to labor without respite. They cried out because of their labor, and their cry reached God. Mindful of His covenant, God took note of the people’s distress and considered what He must do.

Meanwhile, back in Egypt..... God breaks His silence, and directly intervenes in Israel’s history, with a fivefold reference to God in three verses. The death of the king who sought Moses’ life was a precondition of Moses’ return to Egypt, referred to again in 4:19. God does not expect His messengers to risk death unnecessarily (1 Sam. 16:1-3, God supplies Samuel with a ruse when going to appoint David). Another precondition was God’s decision to take note of the people’s plight. The new pharaoh does not offer the usual amnesty, but intensifies the persecution. Four times Israel’s cry, and twice their “bondage”, are mentioned in this short paragraph. They now engage in public outcry, and name their oppression for the slavery that it is. The people are now seeking for salvation. A “fullness `of time” has come for God to act. Four terms give voice to Israel’s suffering: “groaning”, “cried out”, “cry for help”, “moaning”, and four verbs express God’s response: “heard”, “remembered”, “looked upon”, “took notice”. A prayer to God that says: “Remember me” is asking for more than recollection. It embraces concern and involvement and is active not passive, so that it eventuates in action. Looking upon leads to remembering, and remembering leads to action.

In 2:23, the Israelites are not said to have cried out to God (let alone Yhwh), but to have cried out, and their cry reached God (contrast Deut. 26:7). The language of the Sodom story (Gen. 18:20-21; cf. 19:13) is almost identical, and there is no question there of calling to Yhwh. Regardless of whom they invoked, God heard their outcry as the judge of the world. “Man and beast you save, O Lord” (Psa. 36:7). From 8:25, it emerges that before Moses’ confrontation with Pharaoh, the king had never allowed the people to sacrifice to their God in Egypt, and from 8:26, even if he had, they could not have done so without offending the Egyptians. With the absence of God in the early sections of the Exodus account, as if God “had hid His face”, it is as though religion was paralyzed through the years of bondage. In Ezek. 20:7-8 and Josh. 24:14, Israel is expressly charged with idolatry in Egypt, addicted to its idols. They were rescued for the sake of the covenant (Ezek. 20:9) and of their fathers.

In 2:24, when God is said to have remembered His covenant with the patriarchs, the reference is to its second part, the promise of a land for their descendants. The first part,

the promise to make them numerous, had already been fulfilled. But the reasons for the enslavement are never explicitly given. God finally acted by dint of His covenant promise and abiding compassion. At the end of Chapter 2, the question is: “What will God do now?” The purging of Israel’s sins appears to be a factor in Deut. 4:20 and Jer. 11:4.

The section 2:11-25 receives **two extended interpretations in the New Testament** (Acts 7:23-29, 35 and Heb.11:24-28). The Acts passage focuses on Moses, like Jesus’, rejection by his kinsfolk. The Hebrew account focuses instead on Moses’ faith during suffering.

In Stephen’s speech, recorded in Acts 7, after outlining the birth and up-bringing of Moses in Egypt (vv. 17-22), continues in vv. 23-29 with the account of Moses’ slaying the Egyptian and his flight to Midian. Elaborating on the Exodus record, Stephen adds that Moses “supposed that his brethren understood that God was giving them deliverance by his hand, but they did not understand”. By adding a motivation to Moses’ actions, not supplied in the Exodus account, Stephen thereby extends and applies the historical background to subsequent disobedient Israel. Moses is also identified in Acts 7:26 as a one attempting to reconcile his brethren: “Men, you are brothers”. But Israel, ancient and modern, thrusts the redeemer aside. Stephen then goes on to describe Moses as an “exile” (7:29), emphasizing the rejection by his own people. Stephen then continues by referring to the incident at the burning bush, where the sanctity of God and the continuity in His promises to His people are stressed.

In Hebrews 11:23-29, where Moses’ life is used as an illustration of faith, the active choice of faith by Moses is stressed, “refusing to be called the son of Pharaoh, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God”. Moses’ faith meant that, in the wider perspective of his situation, he did not fear the king. Furthermore, he had a voluntary participation in the sufferings of his people. The very important statement that Moses “suffered abuse for Christ” indicates an actual participation by Moses in Christ’s shame, in the same way as the saints who follow Christ later also share (Heb. 10:33; 13:13). In the letter to the Hebrews, therefore, Old Testament history is to be read as a witness to God’s promise to a wandering people, yet to be fulfilled (Heb. 11:39). In summary, the Hebrews account emphasizes Moses’ sufferings as pre-figuring those of Christ, while Stephen’s speech in Acts 7 focuses on the rejection of Moses as foreshadowing Christ’s own rejection.

## **II. MOSES AND GOD: CALL AND DIALOGUE      Exodus 3:1-7:7**

This section comprises an extended call narrative and commissioning of Moses (3:1-4:17), a report on Moses’ return to Egypt (4:18-31), report of an initial confrontation with Pharaoh which fails, intensifying the bondage of the people (5:1-6:1), and a restatement of the call (6:2-7:7). The appointment of a leader to rally the demoralized people and represent them before the Egyptian authorities is the first stage in the process of liberation.

Moses' four objections: (i) his unworthiness for the task (3:11-12); (ii) he does not have a mandate from the people and enough information about God, especially not even knowing the name of the God for whom he is now asked to speak (3:13); (iii) people will not listen to Moses or believe him (4:1); and (iv) he is incompetent, and wants somebody else sent (4:10-13). God responds: (i) He will be with Moses (3:12); (ii) God provides His Name (3:14-22); (iii) God will provide signs so that they will believe (4:2-9), and (iv) God will be with Moses' [and Aaron's] mouth. The recognition of holiness does not lead to Moses' passivity in the presence of God. The divine holiness is of such a character that it invites rather than repels human response, inviting Moses into genuine conversation. God does not demand a self-effacing Moses, but draws him out and works with him. God adapts His plan [Aaron] but His end-purpose is clear [analogy of the divine chess player.]

The dialogue at the bush can be summarized as follows:

1. God declares His purpose to rescue Israel through Moses (3:6-10)
2. Moses' first difficulty: his inadequacy for the task (3:11)
3. God's response: "I will be with you", prediction of the future worship of the people at the mountain of God (3:12)
4. Moses' second difficulty: his ignorance of God's Name (3:13)
5. God's response: revelation of the Name, speeches to be made to Israel's elders and Pharaoh, prediction of happy ending (3:14-12)
6. Moses' third difficulty: the people's incredulity (4:1)
7. God's response: three signs (4:2-9)
8. Moses' fourth difficulty: his lack of eloquence ((4:10)
9. God's response: "I will be with your mouth" (4:11-12)
10. Moses' despairing plea to be replaced (4:13)
11. God's anger and concession of a spokesman to Moses (4:14-17)

While the idea that man is under divine care and guidance is shared by all ancient Near Eastern religions, the regard in which the God of the Bible holds man is without parallel. God even changes His mind in response to human arguments. The significance of God's readiness to adjust Himself to His human partners can be properly gauged only when it is kept in mind that from the time of Moses, at any rate, the presence of God strikes terror into those who are aware of it. After Abraham, Moses is the next man with whom God repeatedly initiates such dialogues.

The first condition of such dialogue is God's willingness to adjust Himself to the capacities of man, to take into consideration and make concessions to human frailty. Such divine forbearance is evident throughout our story. A prevailing theme is Moses' inexperience and timidity. He hides his face in fright when he learns what the apparition is; he recoils from the serpent; and he will not speak in public. God is correspondingly considerate: He leads Moses gradually with a care not to overwhelm him, from the familiar and quite common scrub fire, to the strange unburnableness of the bush, to the awesome heart of the theophany. Thus assured of God's benevolence, Moses is not frightened into silence, but can carry on a reasoned dialogue with Him (contrast God's purpose in the later terrifying public theophany, 20:20; Deut. 4:36). God allows Moses to

talk out all his doubts, and provides him with one assurance after another. He forewarns him of the initially discouraging course of events. And even when he is at last provoked to anger, He makes a concession to Moses' weakness so that the ultimate shape of Moses' mission is not quite what God had intended but owes something to Moses' choice.

Even more striking is the assumption of God's forbearance that underlies Moses' strong language in 5:22ff. But the fullest expression will come when God abandons His plans to destroy Israel in the face of Moses' intercession (32:14; Num. 14:20). Moses' intercession provided the model for prophets in subsequent ages. In time, it became the duty of the prophet to expostulate with God on behalf of Israel until pardon was obtained (1 Sam. 12:23; Ezek. 22:30ff – cf. Ps. 106:23). It is noteworthy how Moses' diffidence vanishes later. At first afraid to look at the divine apparition, he will later ask boldly: "I pray thee, show me Thy glory" (33:18), and be singled out of all the prophets for "beholding the likeness of the Lord" (Num. 12:7). He, who was at a loss to deal with an incredulous people until armed with a few petty signs, will later face a popular uprising and spontaneously call upon God to create an unheard of prodigy to crush it (Num. 30??). He who is not "a man of words" will, at the end of his life, make some of the finest orations in the whole of Scripture (Deut).

The key to the messenger's office is to be one who is sent (3:10, 12, 13, 14, 15), henceforth recurring in the calls of saviors and prophets through the ages. The words, acts, and signs of these "men" of God were not their own, did not redound to their glory or establish their power, but stemmed from and refined the power of God who sent them (Psa. 136:4). The exodus story contains a density of wonders greater than anywhere else in the Bible (apart from the gospels). This reflects the genuine Egyptian background for these traditions – ancient Egypt having been notoriously ridden with magic. Great miracles were performed at the Exodus so that Israel might know that that is impossible in nature is possible with God. Since Egypt was full of magicians, God chose to work His demonstrations there, so that it would be perfectly plain to all that the miracles were not accomplished through magic.

### **Exodus 3:1-6 Curiosity and call – theophany at the burning bush**

Moses, ending the flocks of Jethro, drove them on one occasion far abroad in search of pastures, till he happened upon the mountain of God (3:1-10). There a strange apparition - a bush that burned without being burnt - arrested his attention. Approaching it, he began to hear the voice of his ancestral God telling him of His decision to rescue Israel from Egypt and bring them to the promised land. And Moses was to be His agent in this undertaking.

As a humble shepherd of his father-in-law's flock Moses has reached the station most opposed to what he was and what he will be. How important persons rose unexpectedly from lowly beginnings, thus showing the working of Providence in human affairs, is a favorite Biblical theme – consider Amos 7:15 and David, Ps. 78-70-72. "He chose David His servant and took him from the sheepfolds". Jesus is the supreme example of

this Biblical theme. In 34:3, we read that the mountain of the Lord was grazing land – “neither shall the flocks and the herds graze at the foot of the mountain”.

The burning bush story is the most elaborate account in the Bible of the commissioning by God of a messenger. In length, it is exceeded only by the account of Ezekiel’s call (Ezek. 1:1-3:15), but the bulk of that is taken up with a description of the divine vehicle. Elements of Moses’ call are found elsewhere: Gideon was told “I will be with you” and encouraged by signs; young Samuel was called by a repetition of his name and only gradually realized what was happening; Jeremiah pleaded that he did not know how to speak; Ezekiel’s attention was arrested by a marvelous daytime vision in which fire played a prominent part. Moses’ commissioning alone contains all of these and more. It is thus the fullest statement we have of the conditions of God’s call and His relation to His messenger. Moreover, such statements as in Num. 12:7 and Deut. 18:18 and 34:10 show that Moses was considered the ideal and archetype of God’s messengers. The story of his call bears a corresponding significance.

God chooses a mountain in the wilderness named Horeb (“wasteland”) – possibly the name of a wider region, with Mount Sinai as a specific peak - as the place of revelation (“the mountain of God”), far removed from the sights and sounds of the religious community. There is no temple nearby where he might expect a divine appearance, no sign that it is a holy place. Unlike the owner of the sheep, Moses is not a priest or a prophet. Compare God’s appearance to shepherds in the wilderness with an announcement of peace and goodwill. Curiosity leads to call. It is only as Moses allows himself to be drawn into the sphere of the unusual sight that communication takes place. Moses sees the bush as burning but not consumed, but it is in fact not a burning bush but a flame of fire from the midst of a bush that was not consuming it. In Acts 7:30, we read: “Now when forty years had passed, an angel appeared to him [Moses] in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, in a flame of fire in the bush”. Fire, because of its nonmaterial, formless, mysterious, and luminous characteristics, is frequently used in descriptions of the external manifestation of the Divine Presence (“a flaming torch” Gen. 15:17; “pillar of fire” Exod. 13:21-22; the Lord came down to Sinai “in fire”, and “the presence of the Lord appeared in the sight of the Israelites as a consuming fire on the top of the mountain” Exod. 19:18:24:17; and the opening visions of the celestial chariot Ezek. 1). Sight is important here (words for seeing occur 10 times in 3:1-9).

Seeing adds something to hearing. This anticipates God’s appearance to Moses “in fire” at Sinai (19:18), where God spoke “out of the midst of the fire” (Deut. 4:11-12). Indeed, the rare word for the bush (s`eneh) – only here and in Deut. 33:16 (note) - is a verbal link to Sinai. God also leads the people in the wilderness “in” a pillar of fire (13:21). Moses knew that seeing God may mean death, indicating his familiarity with the religious heritage of his ancestors. The sanctity of the space appears for the first time in Exodus, and it is a one-time phenomenon, the duration of which is limited to the period of the revelatory experience itself. Later, far from deferential, Moses enters into animated dialogue with God. Moses did not initially fully realize the import of the apparition, for only after God’s self-introduction (3:6) did he cover his face – and his eyes, now still drinking in the marvelous sight. “Moses, Moses” indicates the urgency of the call.

Philo was the first to interpret the bush as Israel, suffering under the persecution of Egypt, but never consumed – although the Bible leaves the interpretation open. In 3:2, two levels of interpretation can be suggested for “not consumed”. The self-sustaining fire requiring no substance for its existence or perpetuation is a clear representation of the Divine Presence. The bush that remains intact in the face of the flames may be symbolic of the people of Israel surviving Egyptian oppression. In 3:4, Moses responds: “Here I am”, the spontaneous, unhesitating response to a call. The lowly bush is also a symbol of the pathetic state of Israel in Egyptian bondage while the fire represents the forces of persecution. Just as the bush remains unconsumed, so Israel will not be crushed by its tormentors.

The emphasis throughout is on the divine initiative, with God confronting Moses and calling him to a task, with endowments already shone as suited for it. There is no holiness inherent in the place as such, but the divine presence and purpose make it holy. Note the first usage of YHWH in Exodus in 3:2, 4, and 7. “I am the God of your father, of Abraham, of Isaac, and Jacob” (2:24), the covenant God who will fulfill His promises. Here is the continuity of God’s purpose with a people, a heritage with Israel, not just an individual. The function of the introductory, self-identifying formula is everywhere to emphasize effectively the unimpeachable authority behind the ensuing declaration. The scene at the burning bush establishes an unbroken historic continuity between the present experience of Moses and the revelation received by each of his forefathers, the patriarchs, beginning with Abraham. The God who revealed Himself to each of them (God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob), and who made then promises of redemption for their posterity, is the same God who now addresses Moses. He is about to fulfill those promises, and is soon to choose Moses as the one through whose agency this will be achieved. The reference to “God of your father” introduces the idea of family worship, the earliest and most intimate experience Moses would have had of the ancestral God.

The Shoes – even though the Lord was drawing near to Moses, Moses could not casually approach him. The removal of sandals was a sign of humility and reverence in the presence of the Holy One, excluding the dust and dirt of the world. Shoes are worn to keep the feet from dirt and harm; as such, they are an insult to sacred ground. In 3:6, Moses “hid his face”, the initial encounter with God being a terrifying experience, a reaction shared by other Biblical characters. The overwhelming, awesome intensity of the experience of the encounter with the Divine Presence typically, in the Bible, evokes trauma and dread. For example, Jacob’s struggle with the angel; God to Moses in the wilderness: “man may not see Me and live”; and the appearance to Manoah “We shall surely die, because we have seen a divine being”. Always the unique, transcendent holiness of the Divine Presence is an experience felt to be almost beyond the human capacity to endure. Later in the course of his career, by dint of his intimacy with God, Moses is so emboldened as to request a glimpse of the Divine Presence.

The **New Testament cites this section of the Exodus record** in Matt. 22:32, and in the parallel accounts (Mark 12:26; Luke 20:37), with Jesus using Exod. 3:6 as a proof text for the resurrection of the dead. “I am not the God of the dead, but of the living”. Further, Acts 7:30-34, in Stephen’s speech, refers in some detail to the call of Moses, with “an

angel appearing to him in the wilderness of mount Sinai in a flame of fire in a bush”. Stephen uses this great historical event as a backdrop in demonstrating how God’s early messengers were rejected by Israel. Again, as a further New Testament link, Rev. 1:8 could be taken as alluding to the divine Name (see 3:14 below): “I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty”. God’s activity encompasses the past, the present, and the future. It is not an unknown God who encounters Moses, but the covenant God who has long since spoken to the patriarchs. Even the Name YHWH points to the future orientation of God’s relationship with His people. Who He is and what He does will emerge in the history which yet lies ahead, as His redemptive purpose unfolds.

### **Exodus 3:7-12      The sending of Moses – the divine call**

Moses reacts to God’s proposal by protesting his inadequacy for the task. God reassures him of support and offers him a sign of His commission: Israel’s worship at this mountain after Moses has led them out of Egypt (3:11-12).

God’s address to Moses in 3:7-10 has two main themes: (i) God has taken sympathetic notice of Israel’s misery; and (ii) He is about to save them through Moses and give them a good land of their own. Pharaoh’s declaration of hostility is countered by God’s declaration of care. Divine compassion is responding to human misery in an act of grace. According to the message from the bush, no requirement of God is to be answered by the redemption, only the need of man. The redemption is not a return for anything Israel has done for God heretofore. [Using “elohim” in the narration of 3:9-15 serves to represent vividly Moses’ ignorance of the Name, Yhwh.]

Between 3:4 and 4:17, Moses’ responded to the 13 times in which God spoke to him from initial deference (3:4, 6), to immediate obedience (4:3-7), to questioning or demurrals (3:11, 13; 4:1, 10, 13). “Those who are brought close to God retain their integrity even in moments of closest contact. They are not merely passive recipients, but active, even opposing respondents. There is true address and response, genuine give and take. The human partner has a say in shaping the direction and outcome of events” Greenberg, page 94. [Chess analogy – both the good {Moses} and the bad {Pharaoh}]. God works through Moses. Thus, “they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses” (14:31).

Note Exod. 3:7-8 (God redeems) and 3:9-10 (Moses is God’s agent), in a broadly similar message. God will not leave Israel in a halfway house, redeemed but left in a chaotic wilderness. Deliverance for God is not only *from* something; it is *to* something. In 3:7, “outcry” is one of the most powerful words in the language. Pervaded by moral outrage and soul-stirring passion, it denotes the anguished cry of the oppressed, the agonized plea of the helpless victim. God sees (verses 7, 9), and Moses is sent (verse 10) – the parallel.

While Exod. 2:24-25 is the narrator’s report concerning what God is doing, the passage in Exod. 3:7-10 records the direct speech of God, the first word of God in Exodus (with a six-fold use of the first person singular by God in this section). God sees their affliction,

hears their cry, and knows their suffering (repeats verbs of 2:24-25). The goal is not reform, to make life more bearable in Egypt, but removal from the situation. God's activity becomes a paradigm for Israel; its life is to be lived in imitation of God (22:21-27).

In 3:8, "milk and honey" reflects a highly nutritious diet. Here we have the first reference to the singular fertility of the promised land. The very diverse "region of the Canaanites" was to be miraculously integrated for the first time as the land of Israel. In 3:10, Moses, the pivotal point of the theophany, is told to "come", the human instrument by which the redemption of Israel is to be effectuated. In 3:8, "good and spacious land" is a unique combination, evoking amplitude and freedom of movement after the slavery of Egypt. A land flowing with milk and honey guarantees that the land will not be inferior to Egypt, which was considered as such (Num. 16:13).

Moses' **first objection**, stated in 3:11-12, is that he is unworthy for the task, speaking as though he were on his own. At the beginning of a lengthy dialogue with God until 4:17, Moses responds to God's invitation: Who am I to bring Israel out of Egypt? Moses' "Here I am" (3:4) has become "Who am I?" Initial readiness turns into reluctance and a sense of personal unworthiness once the task has been outlined. Moses' innate humility (Num. 12:3) must have been intensified by his understandable fear for his life and by the recollection of his previous experience with the two quarreling Hebrews. The verb used ('ehyeh) anticipates the giving of the divine name, and is an assurance of protection: "I will be with you". What is the sign, as "this" is ambiguous? Is it the burning bush showing the divine appointment? Is it Moses' unique ability to negotiate freely and safely with the all-powerful pharaoh that will authenticate his calling? Or is it a future event, namely Israel's worship of God in Sinai, that will provide Moses with this assurance (3:11)? If the latter, it cannot be made absolutely clear in advance that God is the one who stands behind the call to action. It will become clear to Moses that God has sent him only when all this has been accomplished and Moses stands with all Israel (the "you" is plural) and serves God at the very place where they are now standing. (see 1 Sam. 2:34; Isa. 37:30 for other signs to be realized only in the future; Childs page 57).

In 3:12, God reassures Moses in two ways: (i) he will not be alone, for God will be with him; and (ii) the proof - that the God who spoke out of the bush has really made him his agent - will be the worship of Him by all Israel after the Exodus at the selfsame spot. This is linked with 3:18 which speaks of Moses' request to Pharaoh to let Israel sacrifice to its God in the wilderness. The burning bush is a sign that it is God who sent Moses, and it is the guarantee that when Moses has rescued the people from Egypt, he will worship God on the same mountain. Something beyond liberation, therefore, is God's ultimate aim. Note that Moses, unlike Gideon, did not ask for a sign here. In 3:12, "ye shall worship" alludes to the objective of the exodus, frequently stated to Pharaoh, as the means by which the people can worship God. Since the Hebraic stem means both "to be in servitude" and "to worship", the phrase insinuates the idea that worship of God is incompatible with servitude to Pharaoh.



Assuming that he accepts God's commission, Moses now protests that he will not know what to answer if requested by the people to name his sender. God puts an answer into his mouth, to which He then appends two speeches to be made, respectively, to the elders and to Pharaoh. Pharaoh's stubbornness, the unheard of punishments that will be inflicted upon him, and the final exodus of the people, laden with the goods of Egypt, are then foretold.

In his **second objection** (3:13), Moses professes inadequate information about God, especially not knowing the name of God. Moses' "Who am I?" becomes a "Who are you?" Human questioning leads to further divine revelation. Moses' question is natural: Will the people listen to him? God's double command (3:15-16) that the new identification be repeated to the people shows its importance. In 3:14, the repeated verb "to be" is in the first person singular, plus the relative particle; YHWH is a third person masculine singular, "ehyeh" is the corresponding first person singular. It is a name and not a title or an epithet. Possible translations are "I am who I am"; "I will be what (who) I will be"; "I will cause to be what I will cause to be"; "I will be who I am/I am who I will be". In essence, I will be God for you. The force is not simply that God is or that God is present, but that God will be faithfully God for them.

In the course of the Second Temple period, the Tetragrammaton came to be regarded as charged with metaphysical potency and therefore ceased to be pronounced. It was replaced in speech by "adonai". "Lord" was rendered into Greek as "kurios". Often the vowels of "adonai" would later accompany Yhwh in written texts, giving rise to the mistaken form, Jehovah. The original pronunciation was eventually lost.

The use of the same verbal form in 3:12; 4:12, 15 (cf. 6:7; 29:45) suggests that God will be God with and for the people at all times and places. God will be faithful. Israel need not be concerned about divine arbitrariness or capriciousness. Israel's experience with God in its history will confirm the meaning of the name. A relationship without a name inevitably means some distance; naming the name is necessary for closeness. Yet because name is not person, there remains a mystery about the one who is named. In verses 14-17, the three different introductions suggest a special emphasis on each separate statement, with each statement fuller than the last. The first simply gives the name to Moses; the second picks up the people's question more fully and ties the name to Moses' commission; the third takes the question one step further and ties the name to the God of their fathers. NOTE: Both the word spoken to Moses and the sight he has seen are important (cf. Gen. 48:3; 1 Kings 11: 9-10). Words and appearance combined carry power.

The name Yhwh is not meant to be a mere identifying label, which was not the main function of names in the ancient Near East. Rather, the name is intended to connote character and purpose, the totality of the intricate, interwoven, manifold forces that make up the whole personality of the bearer of the name. God's reply to Moses means that the Tetragrammaton expresses the quality of Being. However, it is not Being as opposed to

nonbeing, not Being as an abstract, philosophical notion, but Being in the sense of the reality of God's active, dynamic Presence. Whether it means "I am that I am", or "I am who I am", or "I will be what I will be" – and it can mean any of these – God's pronouncement of His own Name indicates that the Divine Personality can be known only to the extent that God chooses to reveal His Self, and it can be truly characterized only in terms of itself, and not by analogy with something else. This is the articulated counterpart of the spectacle of fire at the burning Bush, fire that is self-generating and self-sustaining. Furthermore, since in the ancient world there existed the notion that name-giving communicates superiority and power over the recipient of the name, it is self-evident that God's name must proceed from Himself, and cannot be conferred by man. This explains why God uses the first person – "Ehyeh" – instead of the regular third-person form of this verbal name – Yhwh. Finally, in 3:15 God reaffirms the identification of Yhwh with the God of the patriarchs, and declares "This shall be My Name forever, This my appellation for all eternity". The character of God as just explained to Moses is absolute and unchanging. This immutability provides inflexible reliability that the promise of redemption will be realized.

God's response to Moses' query cannot be the disclosure of a hitherto unknown name, for that would be unintelligible to the people and would not resolve Moses' dilemma. Remember Gen. 4:26 where, at the birth of a son to Seth, "at that time, men began to call upon the name of the Lord (Yhwh)". However, taken together with the statement in 6:3, the implication is that the name Yhwh only came into prominence as the characteristic personal name of the God of Israel – or its meaning understood - in the time of Moses. This accords with the facts that the various divine names found in Genesis are no longer used, except occasionally in poetic texts; that of all the personal names listed hitherto, none is constructed of the prefixed or suffixed Yah", with the first such name compounded of a divine element derived from Yhwh fittingly being Jochebed, Moses' mother. Thereafter, such names predominate in the Israelite thesaurus of names. Hence, Yhwh came to the fore as the dominant personal name of the God of Israel beginning with the new era of Israelite monotheism inaugurated by the advent of Moses. The idea could be that both the Name and the meaning were unknown to Moses in view of his estrangement in the Egyptian court from the people. The meaning, if not the Name itself, could have been unknown to the Israelites, especially living in an apostate environment.

"My presence will be as something undefined, something which, as my nature is more and more unfolded by the lessons of history and the teachings of the prophets, will prove to be more than any formula can express". Hence, elaborating in a similar construction, 33:19 reads: "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and show compassion to whom I will show compassion". Yhwh expresses God's essence, of which all the other names were only partial evocations.

God assures Moses that the people will listen to him. But, while true of 4:30-31, it is not true of 6:9. The people both listen (4:31), and do not listen (6:9, 12). The initial message to Pharaoh in 3:18 is quite modest, and maybe a ploy to escape from Egypt. "Let us go three days journey into the wilderness that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God." Moses considers this possibility that Pharaoh might be persuaded, hence his reaction in 6:12, 30.

However, this minimal request, without revealing the real intentions to escape, indicates the weakness of Israel's natural situation. Exod. 3:21-22 looks forward to the end of the contest with Pharaoh, with the Israelites gaining favor in the eyes of the Egyptians and collecting many valuables from them. The poor and the rich will change positions (Deut. 15:13-15; 1 Sam. 2:7-8). This fulfils Gen. 15:14: "I will execute judgment on the nation they shall serve, and in the end they shall go free with great wealth". These spoils could be seen as well-deserved compensation to the Israelites for their long years of unpaid forced labor – they could also reflect the law of Deut. 15:13-15 that requires the master to provision his slave liberally at the time of emancipation: "When you set him free, do not let him go empty-handed". This is also mentioned in 11:2 and 12:35-36 and in Psa. 105:37: "He led them out with silver and gold". What happened was the result of God's causing the Egyptians to be favorably disposed towards Israel (3:21; 11:2-3;12:35-36).

### **Exodus 4:1-9    Moses and magic**

Moses now raises the objection that the people may refuse to believe his claim. Accordingly, he is given three signs to prove that divine power has been put at his disposal.

Moses presents his **third objection** (4:1): the possibility of being rejected and not believed by the Israelite masses. Moses' flat rejection of God's statement in 3:18a is remarkable. God had mentioned only the elders, not the people, in 3:18. This time Moses' argument is not refuted, but he is instructed how to dissipate popular skepticism should it materialize. Deut. 13:2-6 discusses the role of the sign in legitimizing a prophet in Israel. Here the signs possess a distinctly Egyptian coloration, not surprising as magic was a pervasive ingredient of everyday life in Egypt. The signs validate Moses' claim to be the divinely chosen instrument for the redemption of Israel. They also function to establish the superiority of Moses over the Egyptian magicians and, by extension, to affirm the superior might of Israel's God over those whom the Egyptians worshipped as gods. Moses is not a magician. He possess no superhuman powers and no esoteric knowledge; he is unable to initiate or perform anything except by precise instructions from God; he pronounces no spells, observes no rituals, and employs no occult techniques, and often he does not know in advance the consequences of the actions he is told to perform. In Egypt, the magician manipulates the divine; in Israel, it is the one God who manipulates man and nature.

Even though God has said the people will listen to him (3:18), Moses does not think so. The trustworthiness of the leader is a central issue for any community, especially when such a one claims to speak for God. It is striking that Moses questions a word about the future which God has just spoken (3:18). As it turns out, the people both listen (4:31), and do not listen (6: 9, 12). God does not chide Moses in any way for his response, but recognizes the difficulty that he is facing and gives him additional resources. God takes into account the perspective of the human party, an openness to consider seriously what the human partner has to say. God acknowledges the uncertainty of the people's response by repeatedly using conditional language. *If* they do not believe the first sign, they *may*

believe the second. *If* they do not believe these two signs or listen to Moses' voice, then a third sign will be given.

The **first sign** (4:2-5) to authenticate Moses' legitimacy – a rod, to a snake, and back to a rod – causes a “recoiling” by Moses, indicating his astonishment that God, not he, is in command of the situation. The rod in ancient Egypt was a symbol of royal authority and power, while the snake represented the patron cobra-goddess of Lower Egypt. Worn over the forehead on the headdress of the pharaohs, it was emblematic of divinely protected sovereignty, and a menacing symbol of death to the enemies of the crown. Moses shows his faith by taking the snake by the tail, a normally fool-hardy action.

The **second sign** (4:6-7) - Apart from the startling phenomenon of the sudden appearance and disappearance of the encrustation or severe dermatitis (“the hand was encrusted with snowy scales”, usually translated “leprosy”), this particular sign has an ominous aspect to it in that it is seen in the Bible as a divine punishment for human misbehavior. The affliction could therefore be a warning sign to Moses that he is approaching the moment of God's impatience at his continued evasion of the call to leadership. At the same time, it would serve as an omen to the people of the serious consequences that would ensue should they reject Moses.

The **third sign** (4:8-9), which later becomes the first of the ten plagues, involved the water of the Nile being turned into blood. The Nile, the life-blood of Egypt, was deified; this sign, therefore, like the first, signifies God's sovereign rule over nature and the subordination of Egypt and its so-called gods to Yhwh.

Does 4:8-9 then contradict 3:18, where God states unequivocally that the people *will* listen? No. God often makes unconditional statements about the future, especially through the prophets, which may need to be recast in view of human behavior. As in 3:11-12, Moses does not ask for signs, but God so interprets the question. There is a certain directness to God's response. It is clear that Egyptian magicians had “secret arts” (7:11, 22; 8:7, 18) whereby they could do at least some of what God does. Relating to magic, God acts in and through realities that relate to the context of which the people are a part (consider the “signs” in John's gospel). The effect of the third sign on the people is left open (4:9), signaling that no number of signs can guarantee a positive response. “If they do not hear Moses...neither will they be convinced” (Luke 16:31); see Mark 8:12. Why does this generation seek a sign? Belief cannot be compelled by evidence or external signs, no matter how unusual. Note the remarkably brief reference to the doing of the signs in 4:30.

Note the close connection between these signs and the plagues. This is seen in specific matters (staff/snakes; leprosy/boils; water/blood), their ominous character, their relationship to the realm of nature, and the fact that both are called signs (*‘ot*). These signs therefore relate beyond the Moses/people relationship to later activity in Egypt. Note the tie between believing and the theme of the plague cycle: “that you may know” (7:17, etc.) The line between signs used to foster belief and signs as a portent of judgment is very narrow indeed. Unbelieving Israel and unbelieving Pharaoh are not very far from

each other. Signs may in fact harden one in unbelief, only to function as portents of the consequences of unbelief.

### **Exodus 4:10-17      Moses and his mouth**

Moses now protests his lack of eloquence – and he is told, sharply now, that God will be with his mouth. Having reached the end of his tether, Moses nakedly pleads that another than he be sent. Angered, God assigns Aaron to be his spokesman and ends the conversation.

Moses' **fourth objection** (4:10-13) is that he is inadequate for the task, especially not being eloquent, in being God's spokesman before the Egyptian court. : "slow of speech and slow of tongue". This is generally interpreted as a speech impediment (6:12, 30) – as the concentration on physical disabilities in 4:11 suggests - but some consider it a lack of eloquence or a loss of fluency in the Egyptian language. God's response has two parts, stressing overall that prophetic eloquence is not a native talent but a divine endowment granted for a special purpose, the message originating with God and not with the prophet: (i) in 4:11, God states that the human mouth, and other senses, including Moses', are a divine creation. These questions do not deny the point of Moses' objection. But God simply accepts that Moses has a speech problem; in fact, God has been involved in this physical development; and (ii) 4:12 speaks of God's providential activity in the life of Moses. God knows Moses' speech abilities well, but God still calls Moses for the task, because God is able to work even with the ineloquent in bringing the word of God to others. God does not correct Moses' speech difficulties, but works in and through real human impediments to further the divine purpose. God chose a slow-tongued man for his minister in order to make a greater display of His power. God chooses what is weak in the world to shame the strong (1 Cor. 1: 26-29).

Every objection has been taken seriously and God has shown that none of them are finally valid. God has been willing to work through all the specific objections, but when that has been done, Moses still refuses to assume the task. In 4:13, Moses, having exhausted his arguments, makes **one last desperate appeal** that the Lord would "make someone else His agent". God then becomes angry, as one would now have expected Moses to agree to the task. It is as if all the objections raised were not genuine issues for Moses; when all is said and done, he simply does not want to do the job; or at least do it alone. Hence, God is angry. Aaron is mentioned here for the first time as "spokesman" or "mouth [literally]", although notably his role diminishes over time. The plan of 4:15-16 is not carried through the narrative. Moses ends up speaking on his own, and Aaron is finally nowhere to be seen in the climactic events of Chapters 13-14, including the conclusion in 14:31. Moses gradually works himself into the role that God originally intended. The choice of Aaron witnesses to the fact that God is not finally stymied by human intransigence. God is able to take what is now available in the human situation and work with that. Aaron becomes Moses' prophet (7:1, see Lev. 10:11 for a comparable function for the Levites). God meets Moses half way. If he is unwilling to speak publicly, Aaron will not be, but the right word will still depend on divine

instruction. It is not Aaron's fluency that will carry the day, but the word of God mediated to him through Moses.

But even if Moses will not speak, he is still called to act, and so God asks him to take his staff to do the signs when he returns to Egypt (4:17). The staff as an extension of the hand (cf. 9:22-23; 10:12-13) is a symbol of Moses' authority and a surrogate for the divine hand (7:5, "staff of God", v.20). The theophany comes to an end with Moses' silence, succumbing to his fate. What will he do with this latest divine word?

### **Exodus 4:18-31 God seeks to kill Moses, who returns to Egypt to arouse the faith of his people – the challenge of leadership: initial failure**

The sections here are: (i) leave-taking and departure (4:18-23); (ii) the night encounter and circumcision (4:24-26); and (iii) the acceptance of Moses' leadership (4:27-31).

In 4:18-20, Moses returned to Midian to secure permission of his father-in-law to return to Egypt. There he was told by God of the death of his persecutors, whereupon he took his family and departed. In 4:21-23, God gave Moses parting instructions: he again foretold Pharaoh's resistance and revealed to him that this resistance would in the end threaten Pharaoh's firstborn. In 4:24-26, at a night's lodging on the way, a member of the family was assailed by God. With quick wit, Zipporah seized a flint and circumcised her son, bringing immediate relief. An epithet had its birth in that event. In 4:27-31, at God's command, Aaron met Moses midway, at the holy mountain; on the way to Egypt, Moses revealed his commission to him. Arrived, the two summoned the Israelite elders, announced the good tidings to them, showing them the signs. The people believed them and worshiped in gratitude.

This section views the transition from Midian to Egypt from various angles. Moses, having returned to Midian, seeks leave from Jethro to see whether his kinsfolk in Egypt are still alive (or, how they are faring); the previous conversation has assumed that there were Israelites to bring out of Egypt. Moses is therefore not disclosing the true reason for returning to Egypt. He modestly veils his true motive in returning to Egypt, pretending that he wishes to see how his kinsmen are faring. God supports this decision (4:19), seemingly reassuring him that those who sought to kill him are now dead. As complementary action, Moses will work the wonders, while God hardens Pharaoh's heart. In 4:21, the signs are to be expanded to Pharaoh. Note the contrast of firstborns – Israel's first born and Pharaoh's [meaning Egypt's] firstborn (4:22-23). In order to free the one, the death of the other will be required. According to 18:2-5, Jethro brought Zipporah and the two sons from Midian to Sinai after Exodus, showing that they were not in Egypt all the while.

In 4:21, God states that He "will stiffen his [the pharaoh's] heart". The motif of the stiffening, or hardening, of the pharaoh's heart appears 20 times in the Exodus story between Chapters 4 and 14, with half of the references to an essential attribute of the man's character, and the other half attributed to divine causality. The heart is seen as the determinant of behavior, with the psychological faculties concentrated there, the

controlling center of human actions, the seat of the inner life. The “hardening of the heart” expresses therefore a state of arrogant moral degeneracy, unresponsive to reason and incapable of compassion. It is the numbing of the soul, a condition of moral atrophy. In the first five plagues, Pharaoh’s obduracy is self-willed, callous, and evil minded. He must bear full responsibility for his iniquitous act freely and knowingly perpetrated. It is only thereafter that it is attributed to divine causality. The king’s intransigence has by then become habitual and irreversible. The idea of God’s hardening Pharaoh’s heart is that he utilizes a man’s natural proclivity toward evil. He accentuates the process in furtherance of His own historical purposes.

The brief narrative in 4:24-26 underscores the paramount importance of the institution of circumcision and the surpassing seriousness of its neglect (Gen. 17:9-14). The nocturnal attack on Moses’ family presaged something similar to Jacob’s encounter with the angel (Gen. 32), from which there would be a deliverance, but this time with bloodshed. No motive for the attack is given. But the incident is indicative, a premonition of the final plague, God’s attack on the firstborn. Who are the cast of this drama? Zipporah is the only unambiguous personage. She takes the active role and this suggests that Moses will not or, for some reason, cannot act. Why? The focus is on the act and its effect rather than on the participant’s identity (hence the absence of names). What is significant is Zipporah’s quick wit: sizing up the peril, “she cut off the foreskin of a son of hers” – which one matters not – and thus saved life. The identity of the person attacked is left open, allowing the focus of the story to remain where the narrator evidently wished it: on the saving power of the blood of circumcision.

The inextricable tie between circumcision and the Passover is plainly set forth in 12: 43-49, and also in Joshua 5 (after crossing the Jordan, a mass circumcision ceremony was performed as a prelude to the first celebration of the passover inside the country). There is a functional correspondence between the blood of circumcision and the visible sign of the blood on the paschal sacrifice. In both instances, evil is averted on account of it (4:26; 12:7, 13, 22-23). Circumcision was a precondition for participation in the paschal sacrifice (12:43-49).

Starkly, “the Lord met him and tried to kill him” (4:24). The way was not safe at all – from Pharaoh perhaps, but not from God. It is not often in the OT that God acts in such ways without some notice of motivation (cf. 2 Sam. 6:6-8). Who does God want to kill, Moses or his first born son? (Gen. 17:14). Moses is not mentioned by name here. Why did God “try - sought” to kill him, a threat and not an attempt to kill (probably a sudden illness)? The antecedents of the pronouns are uncertain, and the “blood-bridegroom” (or blood-circumcised one”) reference is opaque. Zipporah provides the occasion for the divine action. This foreshadows the passover (Greenberg p. 117). The application (naga’, “touch”) of Passover blood to the doorposts saves the Israelite firstborn from the judgment of God (see 12:13, 22-23). Here too, the touching of blood to Moses’/his son’s – the latter is a more exact parallel – feet is an action that protects him from the ominous activity of God. Moses, or his son, thus endures a life-threatening experience which Israel will later have to undergo, in connection with which the effectiveness of blood in preserving life is demonstrated. This may also anticipate the atoning value that blood has

in the sin offering. There is life in the blood (see Lev. 17:11). The throwing of blood upon the people to seal the covenant may also be noted (24:8). If this is a parallel, the sealing of the relationship between God and Moses may be in view here. The mediation of Zipporah is then parallel to the mediation of Moses. In 4:26, “bridegroom of blood” could mean “you are now circumcised and so protected for me by means of blood –the blood of circumcision”.

It is commonly held that “batan damim” refers to Moses - supposedly the victim of the attack - as “a bridegroom” (i.e. a revived and restored husband) through the blood of circumcision. But “batan” never means husband with reference to a wife, only with reference to his in-laws. Hence, an alternative interpretation is that the angel was not intent on slaying Moses but the infant – with the infant the “batan”. Bridegroom of blood would equate, in this view, as circumcised infant.

If, as is usually assumed, the victim of the attack is Moses, then the bond of father and son, which allows the father to be rescued by an action on the son, forms a counterpart to the involvement of “fathers” with “sons” that is the central concern in the immediately preceding verses. Just as God and Pharaoh are involved with their “sons” so is Moses with his. But if the victim of the attack is Moses’ son (Gershom), then it points back to the preceding verse with the threat on Pharaoh’s first born, with release involving the spilling of blood. This provides an unmistakable foreshadowing of the last plague and the simultaneous saving of Israel’s firstborn through the paschal blood-rite. On the eve of Moses’ return to Egypt there is a suggestion of what will happen at his final departure. With a foreign mother and a foreign-born child, the circumcision by the mother caused the whole family to enter into the redemptive event as full-fledged members of the house of Israel.

Israel’s firstborn is understood to be redeemed by the death of the Egyptian firstborn. Moses (as the embodiment of Israel as God’s firstborn) or Moses’ first born son – the parallel again works best with Moses’ son – is placed at risk. The firstborn, including Israel’s, belong to God and are to be consecrated to God. The circumcision of the son becomes the means by which Moses’ firstborn (or Moses as firstborn) is redeemed through blood and consecrated to God. The firstborn sons of Israel must be redeemed through blood, the blood of circumcision. Or, just as Moses was saved by the blood of his firstborn, so Israel would be saved by the blood of the Egyptian firstborn.

Zipporah, by her quick-wittedness and insight, saves Moses, standing in the train of the midwives, Moses’ mother and sister, and the daughter of Pharaoh. Moses owes his life to a series of actions by women, two of them non-Israelites. While the other women saved Moses from Pharaoh, Zipporah saved Moses, or his son, from God. She thus plays the role of mediator between God and Moses, anticipating the very role that Moses will later play on Israel’s behalf. Moses is thus revealed as one who does not himself stand without need of mediation with God. Moses’ continued resistance to the divine call, occasioning God’s wrath (4:14), and his failure concerning circumcision, are signs that do not bode well for the future.



God speaks for the first time to Aaron (4:27), asking that he meet Moses in the wilderness, at the “mountain of God” (where Moses received the word). God adds his request to a decision which God knew Aaron had already made on his own (4:14). Aaron’s motivation to meet Moses was informed by issues of family and friendship; he wanted to see Moses. God’s explicit involvement means that there is a new purpose for this meeting. As is often the case, God picks up on quite ordinary human affairs, not least the joy that people have in one another (4:14), and makes use of them for more specific divine purposes.

In very sparse words, the encounter with the people is recorded, and Moses’ leadership is accepted by the elders and subsequently the people (4:27-31). For the first time, it is clear that Moses has taken up the commission to which he has been called. Aaron speaks all the words (and, perhaps, does the signs – the pronoun is unclear) which God gave to Moses. The people believe AND worship, not because of the signs, but because of the specific promises inherent in God’s involvement. The next reference to worship will be upon deliverance from death on Passover night (12:27). The next time they believe will be on the far banks of the sea (14:31).

### **Exodus 5:1-6:1   Oppression revisited. The first audience with Pharaoh fails**

The new Israelite leadership seizes the initiative with a diplomatic approach. It ends in failure, and the plight of the people becomes an issue in Egyptian public policy. It is now that the struggle for freedom begins in earnest.

In 5:1-5, Moses and Aaron next went to the palace, where they conveyed God’s demand to let Israel go celebrate a festival to Him in the wilderness; this elicited from Pharaoh a flat denial of God’s authority. A more deferential restatement of the request was then made, which Pharaoh, in turn, answered with a more reasoned refusal. In 5:6-21, that very day Pharaoh took measures to crush the people’s restiveness. Diagnosing it as the result of idleness, the king increased their labor by cutting off their supply of straw, obliging them to scavenge for stubble in its stead, at the same time to produce the same number of bricks as before. When the Israelite foremen, who bore the brunt of the taskmasters’ wrath at the people’s inability to meet this demand, complained to the king, he angrily accused them of attending to Moses’ message because of idleness. Coming upon Moses and Aaron as they left the palace, the foremen charged them with worsening their lot and called down on them God’s judgment. In 5:22-23 and 6:1, returning to God with a bitter complaint that he had merely worsened the people’s condition, Moses was assured that God would soon act to obtain for Israel a total release from bondage.

In 5:1-5, Moses and Aaron have their first confrontation with Pharaoh, but not accompanied by the elders as instructed in 3:18. According to the midrash, the elders lost their nerve, and one by one they dropped off on the way to the palace. Responding to the request to celebrate a festival, Pharaoh contemptuously retorts: “Who is the Lord?” comparing starkly with Moses’ humble response: “Lord, who am I?” As a god, Pharaoh viewed himself as superior to Yhwh. “I do not know the Lord” is a failure to acknowledge God’s authority, and reflected Pharaoh’s very basic problem. In 5:3, the

reaction of Moses and Aaron is restrained, doubtless surprised and cowered by Pharaoh's aggressive arrogance. They say: "God [rather than the Lord] of the Hebrews" as the monarch has already denied all knowledge of Him (as also in 5:8). In 5:4, Pharaoh treats the request for time to worship as a ploy to shirk work. In 5:5, Pharaoh appears to be alluding to the economic hardships and loss of productivity if the request for leave be granted. In 5:9, "heavier work" is artfully allusive – "heavier" derives from the same Hebrew stem soon to be used of Pharaoh's "hardening" of the heart, while the noun can mean both "work, labor" and "worship". The former meaning is Pharaoh's response to God's demand that Israel worship Him in the wilderness.

In 5:6-9, Moses and Aaron are silent, and the disastrous audience with the king is abruptly terminated. Pharaoh wastes no time in issuing peremptory orders designed to drive home to the Israelites the futility of entertaining any hope of gaining relief. As shown in 5:14, 20-21, the "foremen" were Israelites overseeing their labor gangs, and the "taskmasters" were Egyptians. In 5:7-8, the new directive did not demand "bricks without straw", but ordered the brick-makers to collect their own chopped straw or stubble, which until then had been supplied by the state.

In 5:10-14, the oppression intensifies. "Thus says Pharaoh" is a collision course with "Thus says the Lord" (4:22; 5:1). Although "them" is ambiguous, it appears that the Israelite foremen took pity on their toiling brethren and as a consequence were beaten. In 5:15-18, the foremen protest that they are being treated unfairly with no straw supplied to them. Pharaoh responds: "Be off to your work", ironic in view of the identical phrase: "Be off now to your worship" in 12:31. Demoralization ensues (5:19-6:1), and Moses is criticized by the people for bringing them into contempt and imperiling their lives. Moses' deep disappointment in 5:22-23 suggests that he had unrealistic expectations of early success. The bitterness of his outburst traces back to his original reluctance to accept the divine commission.

Moses is no stranger to the Egyptian court, but no connection is made to that earlier experience. Israel's sufferings are intensified, and Moses and Aaron come under fire from their own people. The language of serving occurs seven times in 5:19-21, all with Pharaoh as object. Whose claims win out, Yhwh's or Pharaoh's? Pharaoh will finally admit Yhwh's claim in 12:31 (with preliminary admissions in 10:8, 24). Chapter 5 is primarily concerned with this issue. The section is best heard by viewing it from the various aspects of the oppressive system. There is an utter sense of helplessness before the highly organized machinery of the system (Childs p. 106). Pharaoh, Egyptian slave drivers, Israelite foreman, Moses and Aaron all speak – but the Israelite people are silent. Pharaoh has all the astuteness of the experienced oppressor. Their liberators are making things worse – Pharaoh's propaganda is carried by Israel into the wilderness (14:12; 16:3).

Pharaoh's charge that this request comes because the people are lazy is typical of oppressors; "slack" or "idle" is a key word here. This transfers the problem from the oppressor to the oppressed, the latter being said to have a character flaw or faulty work ethic. The key is to keep them so busy that they do not have the time or the energy for

complaints or rebellious thoughts: “lying words”. Matthew Luther King Jr. puts it this way: “The Pharaohs had a favorite and effective strategy to keep their slaves in bondage: keep them fighting among themselves. The divide-and-conquer technique has been a potent weapon in the arsenal of oppression. But when slaves unite, the Red Seas of history open and the Egypts of slavery crumble”. The Israelite foremen take their complaints to Moses and Aaron, which turn into sharp accusations. The leadership of Moses and Aaron is in jeopardy, and Pharaoh has succeeded in dividing the Israelite community. Moses takes the foremen’s accusations to heart and continues in the same vein in a complaint to God, not willing himself to shoulder the blame, which rests he feels with God, perhaps for not anticipating these developments. Moses uses the phrase “evil” to refer to both God and Pharaoh: both of them are responsible for this evil the people are suffering, each in his own way.

The focus of Moses’ complaint is the question Why? Why has he been sent to be God’s emissary, and why has God done this to the people? What Moses does not understand is why this particular effect has to occur; this episode has only delayed the deliverance. God does not chide Moses for his hard questions. God receives them for what they are: complaints at a difficult moment of life. God simply responds and assures Moses by saying that His purpose is firmly on track. Moses was not prepared for a worsening of the Israelite’s situation, and there had been no sign up to this point of God’s power.

In 6:1, God reaffirms His promise to Moses that, with a strong hand, Pharaoh will send and drive out the Israelites from the land. The repeated “yad hazaqa” (strong hand) in 6:1 is exquisitely ambiguous, certainly referring to God’s power but perhaps also to Egypt’s power. He will not only let them go, but will drive them out. The first reference could be to God’s pressure on Egypt, the second to Pharaoh’s on Israel.

A gauntlet has been thrown down, and in the nature of things Pharaoh will eventually have to yield on every point. You said: Who is the Lord? – you are destined to say: “The Lord is in the right” (9:27); you said, “I know not the Lord” – you are destined to say – “I have sinned to the Lord your God” (10:16); he who scoffed at releasing Israel would in the end, as predicted, press them to leave his country. Note the absence of Moses and Aaron in 5:6-23 where the intensification of bondage occurs.

### **Exodus 6:2-7:7 Commission reaffirmed. Call of Moses and appointment of Aaron**

In 6:2-9, God affirms that, having, as El Shaddai made a covenant with the patriarchs to give them Canaan, He has now heard Israel’s cry and recalls His covenant. Moses must announce to the Israelites that, as He is Yhwh, He will liberate them, take them for His people, and bring them to the promised land. Moses delivers the message, but the people are too distracted to listen. In 6:13-30, the story is interrupted by a genealogical list supplying details about Moses and Aaron that have been wanting until now. In 7:1-7, God responds to Moses’ demurrer by appointing Aaron as His spokesman to Pharaoh. Pharaoh will prove obdurate, suiting God’s purpose to multiply His prodigies in Egypt and thus let the Egyptians experience His power.

The iterated “I am Yhwh” (6:2, 6, 7, 8) is more that self-identification. It is also an assurance of divine guidance and protection. The name is a reminder of God’s nature and capacity, His greatness and capability, and His ability to work great wonders as deliverer of His people. This is alluded to, importantly, in Ezek. 20:5-6. In view of the pervasive demoralization, God now amplifies His response to the complaint of 5:23. The divine Name and its significance in relation to the promises made to the patriarchs are now the topic of God’s renewed theophany to Moses. Seven verbs, each in the first person with God as the subject, are employed emphatically to reaffirm the certainty of redemption (6:6-8). The same components appear as in 3:1-12: a divine encounter, commission, objection, and reassurance. Moses is newly presented with a double commission to speak to Israel (6:6-8) and to Pharaoh (6:10-11); this order is reversed when compared with Chapter 3, although the order of execution remains the same (4:30; 5:1). Three structural questions arise from the narrative? Why a reaffirmation of Moses’ call? Why a two-fold commission to Pharaoh and objections? Why the genealogy? The promises in 6:2-8 are in three parts; redemption, adoption, and settlement of the land, with 6:7 the key verse: “You shall know that I am the Lord”. But the Israelites did not listen (6:9). God’s compassion had been spelled out at the burning bush, but now God’s covenants to vindicate His Name will also be shown as crucial to His purpose.

The reaffirmation of the call reflects the objection raised by Moses in 5:22-23, especially the question: “Why did you ever send me?” This reflects a crisis of call, in view of the failed approach to Pharaoh and the divisions among the Israelites. Moses not only needs reassurance, he must be more explicitly committed to the call. There never was an unambiguous acceptance the first time around. As for the people, their negative response reflects a broken spirit (6:9); they are in desperate straits. This is powerful testimony that the ability to hear the word of God can be adversely affected by the conditions in which people live. Until the conditions are bettered, the good news cannot break through into the minds and hearts of the people. Hence, no further attempt is made to speak to the people until the very eve of liberation (12:3). Their future must come from outside themselves. Hopes for a more promising Pharaoh had not eventuated. God is shown to be responsive to these changing circumstances and personal considerations.

Moses’ objections surprisingly come only after the commission to Pharaoh (6:12) and that in view of the negative response of the people, not Pharaoh. “Uncircumcised lips”, a vivid way of describing dysfunctional speech, is the stated problem. Moses has apparently not been pleased with the arrangements with Aaron; Moses alone spoke in 6:9. God had earlier said that Moses would be as God to Aaron in speaking with the *people* (4:16); here Moses is to be God to Pharaoh and Aaron would be his prophet. Moses stands as an authority above Pharaoh; his word to Pharaoh is the word of God, and Aaron is now not simply his mouthpiece but would be his prophet.

As regards 6:2-3, we read: “And God said to Moss, “I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as El Shaddai (probably God Almighty), but by my name the Lord (Yhwh) I did not make myself known to them”. Note the text does not say: “I did not let them know my Name Yhwh”. For El Shaddai, usually God Almighty, see Gen. 17:1-8 and 35:11-12. The most likely interpretation of 6:2-3 is that a new name,

or better, a new import for an old name is revealed in view of these major new developments in God's relationship with Israel at the time of the Exodus. The patriarchs never knew God in His full capacity, evoked by the tetragram. This passage would seem to suggest that El Shaddai was the name of the "God of the fathers" most familiar to the patriarchs. It is the most common of the divine names in the Genesis narrative that are compounded with the initial element El. Outside Genesis, El Shaddai appears only in poetic texts. Biblical personal names constructed of the element Shaddai are extremely rare, supporting the view that this name was used basically for a limited early period. It is by the name Yhwh that the God of these events is to be addressed and revered. If the statement in 6:3 meant that an unknown divine name – Yhwh – is now to be revealed for the first time, the effect of the "I am" formula would be vitiated. The credibility of a promise is undermined, not enhanced, if it is issued by one whose name is unfamiliar. Precisely because the bearer of the name is well known, and its mention evokes such emotions as awe, reverence, honor, and fear, its use as the source and sanction of a law or edict reinforces its authority and encourages compliance. [To state that "I did not make myself known to them by name Yhwh" is to state that the patriarchs did not experience the essential power associated with the name Yhwh. The promises made to them belonged to the distant future, with their partial fulfillment now imminent.] The link between knowing the name of Yhwh and the display of divine might occurs most clearly in Isa. 2:6 and Jer. 16:21.

God's revealing of Himself in a majestic act of self-identification is a key focus of Scripture: "I am Yhwh". To know God's Name is to know His purpose for all mankind. Ezekiel sees all of God's intervention into human history arising from concern for His Name (Ezek. 20:8-9): "But they rebelled against Me and would not listen to Me; they did not every man cast away the detestable things their eyes feasted on, nor did they forsake the idols of Egypt. Then I thought I would pour out my wrath upon them and spend My anger against them in the midst of the land of Egypt. But I acted for the sake of My Name, that it should not be profaned in the sight of the nations among whom they dwelt, in whose sight I made myself known to them in bringing them out of the land of Egypt".

In 6:4-8, it is difficult to imagine how the gospel of the exodus could be stated more effectively. God had established a covenant with the Israelite's ancestors. One aspect of this promise was the gift of the land of Canaan as their home: another was "to be God to you and to our descendants after you". (Gen. 17:1-8). These promises, linked to present deeds, God now remembers (cf. 2:24), that is, moves actively to fulfill them on behalf of an Israel groaning under the weight of great oppression. I am Yhwh bespeaks divine authority, often accompanying acts of self-revelation in which God's commitment to Israel is emphasized. In the face of all obstacles, even Moses' or Israel's faithlessness, God will be faithful. God would bring them out, deliver them, and redeem them (three action verbs). The people would come to know that Yhwh is their God. "I will take you as my people" is best understood with Deut. 4:20, 34 as God's taking Israel out from among the Egyptians (cf. Deut. 30:4; Ezek. 36:24; 37:21). Israel is God's, not Pharaoh's, people.

In 6:10-13, there is a renewed call to action, with Moses not to be deterred from persevering with his mission. Moses employs a reasoned argument to justify resistance to

the divine command. The lack of response on the part of the Israelites (5:21; 6:9) will itself impair the effectiveness of Moses' petition to Pharaoh, and the unfortunate situation will be aggravated by Moses' own oratorical handicap. "Uncircumcised of lips" means "impeded speech". Aaron is introduced here as the spokesman offsetting Moses' impairment, linking with the genealogy that follows.

The message that God conveys in 7:2-5 is largely a composite of previous divine words to Moses (3:18-20; 4:22-23; 6:6-8), but with some new features. There is no talk of a three day journey, but a much wider "let my people go". Very important, the Egyptians will come to know that Yhwh is God, countering Pharaoh's claims. The cosmic scope of these events is crucial to see. The knowledge of God will be revealed in the judgment against Egypt and God's liberation of Israel. In the midst of the plagues it is stated: "So that my Name may be declared throughout all the earth" (see at 9:16, cf. Psa. 96:3). While the focus of the exodus is on the deliverance of Israel, its public character witnesses to God's purpose for the entire world. Negatively, God will not be indifferent to evil. Acts of cruelty and ruthlessness, which bring people to the brink of despair, will not be tolerated. The relentless, seemingly arbitrary prolonging of the plagues must be related to this wider impact, so that the world may know. The concern stretches far beyond this historical moment for Israel. The peoples of the world must hear and know.

Moses ought not be discouraged at Pharaoh's refusals, which are not a sign of God's impotence, but serving a public purpose. Moses has now moved beyond any objections and is prepared to do God's bidding. The ages of Moses and Aaron (7:7) and genealogy show that we have the right people in the right place at the right time. As in 2:23, the "fullness of time" has come.

As regards the genealogy in 6:14-25, it links Moses and Aaron with the twelve sons of Jacob in 1:1-4, but concentrates on Levi. As such, it demonstrates that both Moses and Aaron (especially) have the appropriate priestly lineage to serve as divine emissaries. Aaron's (but not Moses') descendants are named, thereby linking the Aaronic priesthood with the exodus. The genealogy is a literary device that definitively marks off the first stage in the process of liberation – the unavailing human efforts – from the coercive intervention of God that will ensue – the ten plagues. At the same time, it links the time of the Exodus with the patriarchal period. Because a genealogy inherently symbolizes vigor and continuity, its presence here also injects a reassuring note into the otherwise despondent mood. In the genealogy, the Levites are singled out from among the other tribes of Israel; the families of Aaron are distinguished from the other Levitical families; and there is a further differentiation within the families of Aaron themselves. This all points forward to the special status to be granted to the tribe of Levi, the appointment of the family of Aaron to serve as priests, and the investment of Aaron as High Priest, with one specific line of his descendants exclusively designated to succeed him. Aaron is also at this point being integrated into the full story of the exodus and beyond, and hence the genealogy is appropriately inserted here.

On the hardening of Pharaoh's heart (7:3, for example), a middle position seems to be taken between Pharaoh's freedom of will being in tact to the end, and God's

determination of Pharaoh's behavior and His control of events leading up to the exodus. God intensifies Pharaoh's own obduracy by ensuring that His word comes on and on. Pharaoh, in turn, hardens his own heart, and so does God. "To be heavy, strong, and hard" are used together 10 times with God as the subject, and 10 times also for Pharaoh. The heart, the seat of the mind and the will, is no longer as responsive or resilient to outside influence, hence stubborn and obstinate. Pharaoh's heart hardens even when a plague is removed, so entrenched is his mind. Note that the divine hardening did not override Pharaoh's decision-making powers. God's hardening in 10:1 does not predetermine Pharaoh's, or his servant's, response. There is a build-up of hardness or imperviousness over time, with the effect of hardening at the beginning of the plague cycle different from its effect at the end. Psa. 81:11-12 captures the point well: "But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would have none of me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels". God's activity makes Pharaoh's own obduracy of such a character that he is driven to the point of no return. [NOTE]

There is a limited kind of deterministic language that one can use at the end of the narrative. It is not unlike a boat on a fast-moving river, headed for a gorge or a waterfall. Human decisions and other factors can bring human affairs to a point where there is no turning back. In such cases, history's possibilities are inexorably narrowed to a single one. Deterministic language can be used to interpret such moments; but it is not a determinism that was in place from the beginning, as if the trip over the falls were always the shape of the future, but only in the sense that there may come a moment when in fact that plunge is inevitable. And so with the prophets where God's work through them may lead to repentance, but in its absence that very work makes the stubbornness more obdurate. In such situations, the continued divine involvement has the effect of intensifying the sinful behavior of the people, driving it towards its fullest negative consequences as it goes crashing through the gorge.

**In the New Testament**, Paul refers in Rom. 9:14ff. to the theme of Pharaoh's role in the exodus to confirm his argument of God's absolute freedom in carrying out His plan for Israel and the nations.

In 7:1, Moses is to fill the role of God in negotiations with Pharaoh, who claimed divinity for himself. Moses' divinely endowed power and authority will expose the hollowness of that claim. In 7:5, in "the Egyptians shall know", we have the ultimate response to Pharaoh's contemptuous declaration: "I do not know the Lord" (5:2). Moses, at 80 years of age in commencing his career, was at a stage of life taken in Biblical times to be the completion of unusual longevity.

For the punishment to suit a crime of such proportions and achieve its desired end, it must itself be grand and eked out until the country be devastated and its pride brought low. It was necessary to avert premature repentance on Pharaoh's part. Extended small doses were also necessary so as to measure the plagues to what the people could tolerate. That God deliberately managed the affair only heightens its fearsomeness. Self motivation in Pharaoh's heart occurred during the first half of the plague series (7:22; 8:15, 19, 32: 9:7) with divine compulsion on him during the second half (in plagues six,

eight, and nine (9:12; 10:20, 27) – and the summation in 11:10 and 14:8. Pharaoh loses his freedom of choice in the course of the plagues. That freedom is regarded as a privilege whose abuse may be punished by revocation. Only God knows when such a drastic step must be taken, hence no man may despair of repentance; but that on the rod of a transgressor a point of no return may be reached is the plain teaching of this and other passages in Scripture (1 Sam. 2:25; 1 Kings 18:37; Ezek. 20:25). If a man does not repent God closes His heart to repentance in order to punish him for his

### **III. THE PLAGUES Exodus 7:8-11:10**

#### **Introduction and overall perspective**

[See Sarna, with diagram (p. 76), for the pattern of the plagues]. The plagues are aimed at demonstrating to Egypt the impotence of its gods and, by contrast, the incomparability of Yhwh, God of Israel, as the one supreme sovereign God of creation, who uses the phenomena of the natural order for His own purpose. Furthermore, Israel and Egypt must “know” Yhwh (10:2). It is only after the culminating miracle at the sea that “the people feared the Lord; they had faith in the Lord and His servant Moses” (14:31).

In addition to Sarna, it should be noted that the first set or triplet of plagues is prefaced by an echo of God’s second commission to Moses, “You [Pharaoh] shall know that I am the Lord”. This means: “You shall know me as a power”, a fit description of the failure of the magicians in the first triplet. This triplet therefore establishes God as a power beyond and other than the magic of Egypt. Here, the question is who can produce the plague, not who is its victim. The second set or triplet of plagues is keynoted by the clause, “that you may know that I, the Lord, am in the midst of the earth”; the idea of an overseeing providence embodied in this clause conforms with the separation theme of the second triplet. This second triplet shows God’s presence in the land through a discriminating application of punishment. The third set or triplet opens with the purpose clause, “that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth” – an expression repeatedly echoed in the next two plague narratives (but not in the darkness narrative). This third triplet gives scope to His power, more than anything that history has to tell. A new emphasis in this third triplet is the unparalleled nature of these latter plagues in all Egyptian history, and hence the most prodigious (9:18, 24 hail; 10:6, 14 locusts). Each triplet also tends to have refrains of earlier themes. Also, the fixing of a time for the onset of the plague sets in with the first plague of the second triplet (swarms), and appears thereafter in every forewarning speech. The third set is markedly longer and more complex as befits a climax, including much cross-referencing to earlier plagues and speeches.

The plagues probably extended over a one year period. Such a time span can be deduced from the notations of 7:7 and Deut. 34:7 to the effect that Moses was 80 years of age at his first audience with Pharaoh, and was 120 years old when he died after spending 40 years in the wilderness leading the people to Canaan. The theme of the plague narrative is sounded in the preparatory exhortation to Moses and Aaron (7:5). “The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord when I stretch My hand over Egypt.” It is repeated variously throughout the episodes (blood 7:17 ; frogs 8:6; swarms 8:18; hail 9:14, 16, 29). This is



an answer to Pharaoh's retort in 5:2: "who is the Lord that I should obey him and release Israel; I do not know the Lord, nor will I release Israel."

Regarding internal structures, it is commonly thought that the plagues become increasingly more serious and unpleasant, have escalating severity, and are more and more a threat to Egypt's well-being, beginning with annoyances, moving to disease and damage, and finally to darkness and death. Others emphasize the gradual heightening of the harm inflicted by the plagues; God began His discipline with the mildest punishments; only water withheld of their victuals, which was not wholly cut off from them, only made more difficult to obtain; next their persons were mildly harmed. The seventh to the ninth plagues had escalated to a point that they were unparalleled in Egyptian history. Or, there is a certain logic to five groups of two in terms of content (Nile, diseases, damage, darkness/death); or, three groups of three in terms of setting (Pharaoh approached early morning outside – plagues 1, 4, 7; at the palace – plagues 2, 5, 8; and not at all – plagues 3, 6, 9); the climaxing in the death of the firstborn.

Note that Psalms 78:44-51 and 105: 28-36 seem to speak of a seven plague tradition, differing in the number and order of the plagues, and to a certain extent also in their content, when compared with the Exodus account. As regards agency, the introduction attributes the plagues to God (7:3), and the summary to Moses and Aaron (11:10; cf. 4:17). As against creation, the plagues embody a return to the forces of chaos, acting against God's purpose as it was beginning to develop with the growth of the Israelite peoples. The language does not refer to plagues as such (blow or stroke) but to "sign" – 'ot' (4:17; 7:3; 8:23; 10:12) and "portent (wonder)" – 'mopet' (4:21; 7:3, 9; 11:9-10). Sign is not just to open mouths in amazement, but to point towards a disastrous future. They are a judgment in themselves and point toward a future judgment, either Passover or sea crossing or both. Key words are "know" and "earth", as in 9:16 where God's name is to be glorified throughout the earth (as also in Psa. 78:3-4; Isa. 43:21). Also see Rom. 9:17.

The plagues represent the forces of disorder or chaos. Water is no longer water; light and darkness are no longer separated; diseases of people and animals run amok; insects and amphibians swarm out of control. A speck of dust becomes a gnat (8:18), and the hail "shatters every tree of the field" (9:25). The signs come to a climax in the darkness, which in effect returns the creation to the first day of Genesis 1. The stress on the word "all" serves to show the impact on both the human and inanimate aspects of creation. The hail strikes down every plant and shatters every tree. Boils break out on every beast and human being. The locust devastation is such that "not a single green thing remains" (10:15). Except in Goshen, where the opposite applies. Not a single cow dies from the plague, not a single swarm of flies, not a single hailstone falling, and the pitch black darkness stops dead in the air precisely at the border.

Natural, as well as theological, issues are involved. Their sequences do have a certain naturalness – frogs leaving water of blood, flies drawn to piles of dead frogs, and so forth. The elements of the natural order are not what they were created to be and do. It is a picture of creation gone berserk, with the world reverting to a state of chaos. There is

correspondence between deed and consequence. In 4:23, God's judgment of death on Pharaoh and the Egyptians correlates to that experienced by Israel earlier at their hands. Furthermore, (i) the extended oppression of the Israelites and a prolonged oppression of the Egyptians by means of the plagues: (ii) the losses experienced by the Israelites – general well-being, poverty, land, life – and those felt by the Egyptians: (iii) Israel's bondage and its ill effects and the hardening of the Egyptians' hearts, an experience of enslavement: (iv) the indiscriminate death experienced by the Israelite babies at the hands of Pharaoh bent on genocide and the death of the Egyptian firstborn: and (v) the "cry" of the Israelites in bondage (3:7, 9) and the "cry" of the Egyptians (11:6; 12:30).

When the plagues are removed, God overcomes the chaos and returns those elements of the natural order to a closer semblance of their created scope and intensity, or purpose. The restored order portends the provision of water and food in the wilderness. The plagues are not an arbitrarily chosen response to Pharaoh's sins, as if the vehicle could just as well have been foreign armies or an internal revolution. God acts to reestablish the "rightness" of the created order (ironically confessed by Pharaoh in 9:27), and Yhwh is to be feared (9:19-21). The plagues must then be seen in the context of judgment and moral order. The impact of human sins, including greed and exploitation, is indeed felt on the natural order today.

It is worth noting that a similar kind of literary symmetry and schematized arrangement is employed in the Genesis creation account. This creation process is laid out as a systematic progression from chaos to cosmos through a series of six successive units of time culminating in a climactic seventh unit that pertains solely to God. The creative acts are arranged in two corresponding groups, each comprising four productions within three days, while the third day each time witnesses two creations. In the book of Job, the series of misfortunes that beset Job is presented in three groups of two afflictions each, in which the first blow falls on livestock and the second on human beings. The cause of each series is alternately human and divine, and the whole culminates in a climactic, divinely wrought, seventh calamity.

Just as God may use a person's fundamentally evil character to further His own objectives, as in the case of Pharaoh's obstinacy, so may He employ the vagaries of nature to achieve His historical goals. In two passages in the Pentateuch, the plagues are understood to be as much judgments on the Egyptian gods as on the Egyptians themselves. In 12:12, the Lord declared: "I will mete out punishments to all the gods of Egypt, I the Lord". The historical summary of Num. 33:4 states that "the Lord executed judgment on their gods". This motif is again mentioned in Jer. 46:25.

The entire story of the plagues is about a contest between the will of Pharaoh and the will of the God whom only the Israelites recognized. The Pharaoh was a self-proclaimed god, the object of worship by his subjects. The theory of his divinity was sustained by the religious and political institutions of the Egyptian state. Consequently, the plagues, the ignoble defeat, and the ignominious end of the god-king constitute a saga that breathes contempt for Egyptian paganism. In Exodus, this war on polytheism is found in the Bible for the first time, becoming one of its major themes.

Pharaoh's reactions and concessions are the least ordered elements of the plague narrative. His initial reaction in 5:2 was disdainful rejection in harsh and decisive words.

1. Blood unmoved (Pharaoh's response)
2. Frogs begs relief, concedes (insincere) release unconditionally (but deception)
3. Lice unmoved
4. Swarms concedes conditional release (two stages), begs relief
5. Pestilence unmoved
6. Boils unmoved
7. Hail confesses guilt, begs relief, conceded release unconditionally (but large and empty promises) – his ministers fear God
8. Locusts willing to negotiate before plague for conditional release, later confesses guilt, begs relief – his ministers urge him to yield, generating Pharaoh's isolation
9. Darkness resumes negotiations; concedes conditional release (10:24 reverses 10:10); when rejected, refuses further negotiation

When Pharaoh finally faces squarely the full extent of Moses' demand - nothing short of total surrender of any hold on Israel - his indignation knows no bounds.

In the dramatic evolution of Pharaoh's reactions, there is a consistency of principle – the core of his intransigence – namely, the maintenance of his sovereignty. That is the crux of the matter; that is the offence to the Godhead's kingship; that is what cannot coexist with God's authority. Thus the opposition of Pharaoh is the archetypal opposition of human power, of human authority to the claims of God. Under pressure it will show flexibility and accommodation, even reversing itself – first by crying for help, then by confessing guilt and making concessions. But after all its retreats, it clings to its last redoubt, a core of self-assertiveness and independence, to surrender which would mean the end of its claim to ultimate, self-sufficient power. Here it resists, careless of the cost, unto death.

On the other side, Moses refuses to recognize Pharaoh's authority. In each of his six warnings, he repeats unchanged God's demand: "Let my people go serve Me". He is uncowed, inflexible, finally disdainful as he pursues his goal of complete liberty for Israel. As Pharaoh's manner mellows, Moses' grows sharper. Early there is a sporting note in his invitation to Pharaoh to set a time for the removal of the frogs (8:5); clever parrying of Pharaoh's quasi-concession to worship in the land of Egypt (8:22ff), followed by an earnest rebuke (8:25); the next remark on Pharaoh's intransigence is gloomier and dour (9:30). In the final bargaining scenes, Pharaoh's concessions not only fail to move Moses toward meeting him halfway, but actually provoke Moses to his most trenchant and extreme rejections of Pharaoh's game. At each concession, Moses provocatively raises the ante, throwing the king into a paroxysm of rage. With a power resting on a godless foundation there can be no compromise and no dealing. The only acceptable outcome is victory for God and humiliating overthrow for the godless.

In spite of the deterministic framework, events are depicted as flowing from the ambitions and conflicts of normal human beings - that is, of human beings seized with the everyday delusion of self-sufficiency. We are at the heart of the Biblical conception of the drama of history. Events unfold under the providence of God, yet their unfolding is always according to the motives of the human actors through whom God's will is done without them realizing it. See Joseph in Gen. 45:8 and Rehoboam (1 Kings 12:15). God had determined that Pharaoh should act as he did, indeed he saw to it; but Pharaoh conducted himself throughout conformably with his own motives and his own godless view of his status. God made it so, but Pharaoh had only to be himself to do God's will.

### **Exodus 7:8-13      On swallowing rods and Egyptians – signs before Pharaoh**

The brothers are provided with a sign of their divine commission, which Aaron is to perform upon demand. When they appear before Pharaoh, Aaron performs the sign, but its effect is cancelled by the ability of Pharaoh's magicians to do the same, in spite of the ultimate superiority of Aaron's sign.

The signs, performed before the people, must now be performed before Pharaoh. Henceforth, Aaron performs the signs as long as the Egyptian magicians are present [Note]. This enables Moses to negotiate with the Egyptian king as an equal. 2 Tim. 3:8 and several post-Biblical sources identify Pharaoh's magicians as Jannes and Jambres, said to have been the two sons of Balaam. The encounter between Pharaoh and Moses/Aaron in this section is sometimes considered formally to be the first plague. However, its scope and effect are very limited, and more likely a preface to the plagues. It is not to be viewed as the first plague, having to do primarily with demonstrating the brothers' powers and not God's powers. This sign sets the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in place, with the following plagues stemming from Pharaoh's initial refusal. The staff is placed front and center, while Pharaoh ironically requests to see a wonder, a precursor of many more. Pharaoh asks Moses and Aaron to establish their credentials, proven many times subsequently. Wisdom is accentuated, but the Egyptian magicians, replicating the sign, are only capable of making things worse – more snakes, more water of blood, more frogs. However, the unexpected swallowing of the magicians' staffs - an extension of the sign that Moses had performed earlier to prove his own legitimacy before the Israelites as the messenger of God - is a precursor of the fate of the Egyptians at the Red Sea. The only other use of the verb "swallow" ("bala") in Exodus occurs in 15:12, where it refers to the swallowing of the Egyptians in the depths of the earth beneath the sea. This results from God's "stretching out His right hand", a reference to the staff (see 7:5; 14:16).

The word for serpent used here (tannin – large reptile) is much more terrifying than the snake (4:3). Elsewhere, this word (tannin) refers to the chaotic forces that God defeated in the exodus (see at 15:1-21; Psa. 74: 13; Isa. 51:9). Even more, it is used elsewhere as a symbol for the Egyptian Pharaoh (see Ezek. 29:3-5; 32:2); and for Babylon as one who endeavors to swallow Israel (Jer. 51:34). The seemingly innocuous reference to snake swallowing is thus an ominous sign for Pharaoh, being a signal of his fate. In 7:11, the reference to the magicians' spells – suggesting that the wonder belonged to their conventional repertoire of tricks – contrasts strongly with the simplicity of Aaron's act.

## **Exodus 7:14-25 One - Pollution of the Nile. Whose blood in the water?**

Moses was commanded to come to Pharaoh at the Nile's edge in the morning and to demand, in the name of the Hebrew's God, that he let Israel go to worship Him. Otherwise, Pharaoh would come to know the Lord's power through a plague that would turn the Nile to blood, kill its fish, and make its water undrinkable. Aaron was charged to extend his staff over all Egypt's waters, the Nile was struck and it, together with all the rest of the country's water, turned to blood. The magicians duplicated the feat, confirming Pharaoh in his stubbornness. The Egyptians had to dig around the Nile for water, but Pharaoh went into his palace, heedless. And so a week passed.

Here begin the "extraordinary chastisements" foretold in 7:4, occurring in the course of a year. The first two plagues are centered on the Nile. Moses is to go to Pharaoh as he walks by the river (perhaps for washing rituals or for worship of the Nile), a reminder of Pharaoh's daughter (2:5). Moses was found at the end of her walk, only this time Moses will shape the future of Pharaoh's household. Aaron is to stretch out his hand/staff over all the waters of Egypt, even water in barrels, pots, and wells, so there will be "blood throughout all the land of Egypt" (7:19, 21). Aaron's staff was used in the first three plagues. It would seem that surface water only was affected, subsurface was not. With the Nile deified, this plague could serve to discredit Egyptian polytheism. "Egypt is the gift of the Nile" indicated the importance of the river in Egyptian economics and theology. Also, by commencing the series of plagues with the striking of the Nile waters, the text suggests an underlying notion of retribution, measure for measure, for Pharaoh's iniquitous decree that all newborn males be cast into the river.

This plague is unusual in that it reports the actions of God and Aaron in nearly identical words (7:20, 25). The point of the sign is to be found in the repeated phrase, "There was blood throughout all the land of Egypt", bringing to mind the waters of the Red Sea flowing with the blood of the Egyptians. Or of 12:30: "There was not a house where one was not dead". God had smitten "all the firstborn in the land of Egypt" (12:29). Ezek. 32:6 states: "I will drench the land [Egypt] even to the mountains with your flowing blood; and the watercourses will be full of you". Ezekiel will also use the word "fish" to refer to Egyptians, and the death of "all the fish of your streams" (Ezek.29:4-5). This plague, which was not abruptly terminated by Moses as was the case for many of the other plagues, apparently lasted one week (7:25). The only other measured duration of a plague was for the darkness, which is said to have lasted three days (10:23).

The ultimate purpose of the sign is so that "you shall know that I am the Lord". (7:17). God asks that Israel be liberated from oppression to "serve" Yhwh; Pharaoh insists that Israel be enslaved to him. Ezek. 29:3 puts it, Pharaoh said, "The Nile is my own: I made it". God's actions show Pharaoh that the land of Egypt, its water, and its people are neither his creation nor his to do with as he pleases. The magician's success (7:22), however, offsets the ominous effect of the plague.

### **Exodus 8:1-15 Two – Frogs The land stank**

God sent Moses into Pharaoh's palace to warn him that, if he refused to let Israel go worship Him, his whole land would be plagued with frogs. At Moses' command, Aaron extended his staff over all the waters, calling up swarms of frogs that penetrated everywhere, from Pharaoh's palace down. The magicians again duplicated this feat, but Pharaoh, greatly annoyed, asked Moses to pray to the Lord and remove the plague, promising to let the people go. Moses invited Pharaoh to set a date for their removal, and his prayers were answered. The heaped carcasses of dead frogs made his land stink, but when Pharaoh got relief, he reverted to his obduracy.

It is possible that this plague, like the first one, was regarded as a judgment on Egyptian polytheism, for a frog-headed goddess was credited with fashioning man out of clay, associated with fertility and assisting in childbirth. Hence, the plague may have been taken as retribution for the decree ordering the midwives to kill the newborn males at birth. The image of 8:3-4 is extraordinary: frogs in your house, in your bed, in your oven, in your pots and pans, and jumping all over you - not hurt nor kill, but to be unpleasant. The magicians duplicate the effort, so twice the number of frogs. Pharaoh doubles the trouble. Pharaoh is not able to escape the effects of this plague, as doubtless he was with the preceding plague, turning to wine or other drink. For the first time, there are changes in Pharaoh, as his magicians can bring the frogs on, but cannot get rid of them. The process of humbling Pharaoh therefore now begins. Pharaoh asks Moses to entreat Yhwh (cf. Isa. 19:22), acknowledging the existence of Yhwh and using the name for the first time, thereby recognizing that it is Yhwh with whom he has to do. If God removes the frogs, Pharaoh will let the people go. Israel's God will respond according to Pharaoh's own schedule, but the purpose for the accommodation is that Pharaoh may know that there is no God like Yhwh, who is now not only God (7:17), but incomparable – an advance in Pharaoh's understanding. Moses' unauthorized venture allowing Pharaoh to set a time by which the frogs would be removed – tomorrow - indicates that Moses' diffidence is vanishing in the crucible of events. The phrase: "the land stank", reflects a reversal of the natural, intended order of things. But after the frogs die, Pharaoh goes back on his word. "I will plague (smite) all your country with frogs" – this is a strong word not used again until Chapter 12 with its portentous looking forward to the death of the firstborn (12; 23, twice: 12:27).

### **Exodus 8:16-19 Three – Gnats, Vermin, Lice From dust to dust**

God charged Moses to have Aaron strike the dust of the earth with his staff, at which it would turn to lice, plaguing man and beast. Aaron did so, and the lice came. When the magicians tried to duplicate the feat and failed, they confessed to Pharaoh that "it is the finger of God", yet Pharaoh remained unmoved.

Gnats are pests, often carriers of deadly diseases. If they are mosquitoes, even more so (the translation is uncertain), especially in the wake of the preceding plagues. This plague goes beyond discomfort to being a sign of human mortality and abject humiliation. This is the first of three signs where no request is made of Pharaoh and no warning given him,

suggesting that this is a direct response to Pharaoh's failure to live up to his word. The key word here is the repeated reference to "dust" ('apar), the loose topsoil. Human beings have been made from dust, and will so return (Gen. 3:19), referring to the grave (Job 17:16; 21:26; Psa. 22:29; Isa. 26:19). The image therefore suggests the mortality and end of the Egyptians, and humiliation of those who oppose Yhwh. The magicians finally meet their match, with a simple and straight-forward report to Pharaoh, a public testimony that this is the work of God. There is no indication that the dust is returned to normal. Gnats seem now to be a way of life. In 8:18-19, the magicians retire from the scene, their powers entirely exhausted, recognizing a supernatural phenomenon beyond their control, although perhaps not recognizing that Yhwh was the guiding power.

### **Exodus 8:20-32 Four – Flies The land is ruined**

Moses was to meet Pharaoh in the morning at the river and warn him that, if he did not let the people go serve God, his land, starting down from Pharaoh's palace, would be filled on the morrow with swarms of noxious creatures. Goshen alone, where the Israelites lived, would be exempt from the plague – which would show Pharaoh the Lord's presence in the land. As the plague ravaged Egypt, Pharaoh declared himself ready to let the people celebrate their festival in the land. Moses argued for and obtained the right to worship in the desert nearby, expressing the hope that this time Pharaoh was in earnest. Moses then prayed for the removal of the pests, which, when it happened, encouraged Pharaoh to remain stubborn.

The plague cannot be identified with certainty because the Hebrew word "arov" occurs only in the present context. The Septuagint refers to it as the dog fly, a vicious blood-sucking insect, transmitting anthrax and other animal diseases. The flies now join the gnats and swarming flies, but life and limb are still not threatened. Yet, "the land was ruined" (8:24). Everything is affected, including the "ground" (adamah). This word joins others (earth/land; dust; country) to stress the cosmic dimensions of the sign. In this plague and the next, Moses' instrumentality is not mentioned. Importantly, from this point on, Israel, its people, animals, and land (Goshen), are explicitly or implicitly excluded from the signs' effects, indicating an intensification of the struggle, and a divine distinction between Israel (the oppressed) and Egypt. The time of the onset of the plague is fixed. Pharaoh is concerned. It demonstrates in a new way who is in charge of the situation (6:22 – "that you may know that I am the Lord within the earth/land"). This protection of Israel is an anticipation of their later deliverance from the forces of chaos.

The sole reference here to a "sign" within a plague sequence (8:23) indicated the extraordinary nature of the plague, with the flies stopped at the Goshen border, as if by an invisible wall. The idea of distinction, first introduced here, is repeated in 11:7. The distinction in the slaying of the firstborn is precisely the event of which this is the sign. The separation between Israel and Egypt recurs in the pestilence (9:4, 6), hail (9:26), darkness (10:23), and first-born death (11:7), showing that "I, the Lord, am in the midst of the land" (8:22). The use of the word "ruin" (sahat) stresses this, as it would seem too strong for a reference to fly infestation (cf. Psa. 78:45). In Psa. 78:45, the flies are said to have "devoured" them, whereas the frogs "destroyed" them. In Psa. 105:31, the flies and

gnats are conjoined. The flies that ruined the land but not Israel were an ominous sign of the destroyer that would bring ruin to Egypt. Pharaoh gives Israel permission to worship only if they remain in Egypt. The second new feature – apart from the separation of Goshen – is the announcement in advance of the time that the plague would strike.

At Pharaoh's request, Moses entreats the Lord, and warns Pharaoh not to deal falsely again (8:14). Not one fly remains, but Pharaoh reverts to form, and does not let the people go. In 8:23, "division" is a translation of the Hebrew "pedut" which normally means "rescue, redemption". In 8:24, Pharaoh makes a concession for the second time, this time more limited. In 8:25, Pharaoh permits a sacrifice within the land, not in the wilderness. "Since the Lord is evidently in the midst of the land, why must you go out to the desert? Worship Him in Egypt." But Moses insists that the sacrifices be outside Egypt, so as not to offend the Egyptians because of their alien mode of worship. In 8:26, there is a deliberate ambiguity: Hebrew "to'evah" can mean "that which is taboo to the Egyptians" and also "that which is an [Egyptian] abomination" in the sight of Israel, namely, their animal divinities. Pharaoh makes a concession, but asserts his authority (8:28).

### **Exodus 9:1-7 Five – Cattle Pestilence Whose livestock die?**

Moses was charged to go into Pharaoh's palace and warn him that, if he refused to let the people go to worship God, all the livestock in his fields would be struck with a severe pestilence. Israel's livestock was exempted, and a time fixed for the plague's onset. After the blow fell, Pharaoh checked and found that Israel's livestock was indeed unscathed; this only confirmed him in his refusal to let the people go.

Allusion to the importance of sacred animals in Egyptian religion is now followed by a visitation that exposes the inherent absurdity of such a notion. The God of Israel strikes the animals with pestilence, probably the highly infectious anthrax. Once again, the livestock of the Israelites are unaffected, the time of the plague's onset is forecast, and Pharaoh is warned in his palace.

This sign takes a significant step beyond nuisance and discomfort. All the livestock in Egypt die of a "severe plague" (anthrax?), perhaps in part a consequence of the previous plagues. Pharaoh is given a day's notice (8:23). As in the previous plague, God is not said to use Moses and Aaron (though see 11:10). Pharaoh does not speak a word, but only seeks to determine what has happened to Israel's livestock. The sign value of this plague rests largely on the use of the word "deber" which is indeed ominous, used exclusively in divine judgment contexts (Deut. 28:21; Ezek. 5:12), and with an emphasis on "all". For the first time his own possessions are affected. Why should animals suffer when people are the problem? The consequences of Pharaoh's sin, indeed human sin generally, are cosmic in scope and often have severe effects on animals (Hos. 4:1-3). In 9:3, "will fall" (Hebrew "hoyah") is undoubtedly a play on Yhwh. In 9:7, Pharaoh's need to learn whether the prediction made in 9:4 was fulfilled betrays a weakened self-confidence. Pharaoh does not entreat Moses to call off the pestilence because "what was to die died, what was to live remained alive", and so there was nothing for which to pray.



Since in both the following plagues livestock are victims (9:9-10, 19, 22, 25), the pestilence must not have killed “all of the livestock of Egypt”. “All” is probably a hyperbole for “most”. Use of hyperbole also occurs in 9:25, otherwise the magicians would have had no dust with which to operate. Or, as another possibility, the livestock victims could have been limited to those in the open fields (9:3).

### **Exodus 9:8-12 Six – Boils, Inflammation Signs of mortality**

God charged Moses and Aaron to take handfuls of kiln-soot, which Moses was to throw skyward in front of Pharaoh (without warning him of the consequences). The soot would turn to fine dust, spread over the country and cause an inflammation breaking out in boils on man and beast. This was done, the boils broke out – the magicians weren’t even able to appear in court so badly were they afflicted. But God stiffened Pharaoh’s heart so that he still refused to yield.

Without warning, after ashes - probably hot - from the kiln are thrown by Moses into the air, the sores breaking out all over the body affect human beings much more personally and painfully than any of the signs so far. Indeed, for the first time, one of the plagues directly imperils human life, probably anthrax (9:9 – skin ulcerations). This is a vivid reminder of one’s mortality, and should function as such a sign for Pharaoh. The sign is similar to the gnats in that God begins by immediately telling Moses to do the sign. Moses and Aaron are to take handfuls of ashes and Moses is to throw them toward heaven, becoming a fine soot that settles on everything, causing open sores to break out on people and animals. The magicians enter one last time, moved from an active to passive stance, from sign worker to victim, no longer able to stand alongside Moses. There is much irony in the fact that Pharaoh’s magicians were themselves afflicted by the disease to such an extent as to be totally immobilized. The magicians have gone unnoticed since their lice discomfiture; Aaron has also not been mentioned since the lice plague, acting essentially as counterparts. A new level of intensity in the struggle has been reached, with the last mention of Aaron in these events, and with Moses now standing alone. Moreover, this is the first time that God is the subject of Pharaoh’s hardening (see elsewhere).

This sign has been prefigured in 4:6-7, where Moses’ hand becomes leprosy and then is returned to normalcy. The verb used in 9:8-12 “parah: break out” is often linked to leprosy, which is specifically connected with boils (Lev. 13:18-23). This is probably a precursor to the final plague (not identified) in 12:13. The later recollection of “the boils of Egypt” (Deut. 28:27, 60) suggests the importance of this sign of human mortality and susceptibility to disease.

### **Exodus 9:13-35 Seven – Hail and Thunderstorm A sign from heaven**

Moses was to appear before Pharaoh in the morning to warn him that, if he did not release the people, he would be struck this time with all of God’s remaining plagues, to teach him that God is incomparable. God might have destroyed Pharaoh along with the

livestock in the pestilence, but He had kept him alive to display His power and broadcast His fame throughout the world. Should Pharaoh persist in his obstinacy, God would strike Egypt with hail of unprecedented severity – but animals taken indoors would be spared. Pharaoh’s God-fearing courtiers heeded this warning. At a signal from Moses, the hail came with thunder and fire. Exposed humans, beasts and vegetation were struck, except in the land of Goshen. Pharaoh summoned the brothers, confessed his sin and his people’s, and begged them to pray for the cessation of the plague, promising to release them. Moses agreed, not that he believed in Pharaoh’s repentance, but to prove God’s control over the earth. Early ripening plants had already been crushed by the time Moses left to pray, though not late ripening. When the hail ended, Pharaoh reverted to his hardheartedness.

The next two wonders constitute the longest narratives of the series, indicating the new levels of intensity in the struggle with Pharaoh. An extraordinarily long warning is given to Pharaoh at dawn. Much of this length is due to the great detail - reflecting the escalation in terror and ruin setting the stage for the final catastrophe - regarding the natural phenomenon and their effects upon Egypt, its land, its animals, and its people, for the first time having effects on vegetation of all kinds. The entire natural order seems to be caught up in this series in one way or another. The sign begins as did the first and fourth plagues, but now some important sentences unique and central to the cycle are used. God says: “I will send all my plagues [blows] upon your heart” (see 7:23), most likely referring to the remaining plagues. The fourth of the “ye may know” passages follows. The essence of 9:14-16 is to show God’s forbearance: If I had not had the intention of your knowing that there is none like me in all the earth, indeed that my name be declared throughout all the earth, then I should have put forth my hand and cut you off from the earth. “Throughout the whole earth” (9:16) emphasizes that God’s purposes span the world (Rom. 9:17), and is therefore a key issue here [Note].

Comparative language now begins to be used: such a hailstorm has never before been seen in Egypt (9:18). It is the intensity and incomparability – twice stressed (9:18, 24) - of these events that give them their sign value. Indeed, there were Egyptians, but not Pharaoh, who heeded the warning because they “feared the word of Yhwh”. The intensity of the weather is important as a sign because of the common associations of hail and related phenomena in theophanies (Psa. 18: 12-13; 77: 16-20) and divine judgment (Isa. 28:2, 17: 30: 30-31; Ezek. 13: 11-13; 38: 22-23; Hag. 2:17). In 9:23-25, the description is clearly of a long-lasting savage hailstorm marked by repeated thunderclaps and continual flashes of lightening. In 9:14, God states His intention to let out the stops and loose the incomparable force of His blows in unprecedented severity, and Pharaoh would not escape. Previously, the restraint in the use of annihilative force was deliberately intended to display God’s repertoire of visitations. In 9:15-16, justification is given, very importantly, for the succession of plagues – not because of a supposed impotence of God, but that His name and power should be made known (Zeph. 3:6ff).

Moses is to use the staff so that hail may be brought upon the land. The sky is filled with thunder and lightening and hail, devastating vegetables in particular (9: 25). This is a sign of incredible intensity, never before experienced. For the first time, the Egyptians

and their livestock are given the opportunity to take shelter, and some avail themselves of it (9:19). God shows concern for the needless loss of human and animal life. A rabbinic comment on this verse states: “Come and observe the extent of God’s compassion. Even in a moment of anger, He has compassion on the wicked and on their animals.” In response to this disaster, Pharaoh sends for Moses and Aaron, with a remarkable confession following: “I have sinned, Yhwh is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong”. For the first time, he openly admits to being at fault. For the third time, he asks for Moses’ intercession. Also for the third time Pharaoh promises that he will let Israel go. But the confession, which appears to have been unqualified, lacked any depth as Moses knew (9:30). Once the storm had stopped, Pharaoh “sinned yet again”, hardened his heart, and would not follow through on his promise to let the people go.

### **Exodus 10:1-20    Eight – Locusts    Driven into the Red Sea**

God commanded Moses again to go in to Pharaoh notwithstanding his God-sent obduracy, which was intended to give scope to God’s wonderworking - a topic on which Israel would dwell in generations to come and through which they would come to recognize God’s power. The brothers warned Pharaoh that persistent refusal to submit to God would bring a locust plague of unheard-of severity: what vegetation had been spared by the hail would be consumed wholly. And the homes of Egypt, from Pharaoh’s down, would be afflicted with the pest. The two Hebrews having gone, Pharaoh’s courtiers urged him to let the men go worship their God, lest Egypt be utterly ruined. So Pharaoh recalled the brothers and began to negotiate the release. Moses’ unwillingness to bargain enraged Pharaoh and he expelled the brothers. The plague came, darkening the face of the land with swarms of locusts; all vegetation was consumed. Pharaoh quickly summoned the brothers, begged them to forgive him this once and to pray for removal of this death. Moses prayed, the plague was ended, but God hardened Pharaoh’s heart.

The locust swarm has always been one of the worst scourges to afflict humanity. An area of one square kilometer can contain 50 million such insects which in a single night can devour as much as 100,000 tons of vegetation. Their mass multiplication is fostered by heavy rains and unusually moist conditions. The introduction to the onset of the plague is again especially lengthy. It also contains several new features. The king’s courtiers boldly challenge him, and Pharaoh makes concessions in advance of the actual plague

Usually, the reference to the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart occurs at the end of each sign narrative. But here it occurs at the beginning, as part of a divine word preparing Moses for the visit of Pharaoh. God has hardened not only Pharaoh’s heart but that of his servants also, because (i) these signs may be shown to Pharaoh and his servants; (ii) God’s acts may be told to generations of Israelites to come; and (iii) Israel (usually Egypt, but now Israel) may know that “I am Yhwh”. For the first time, the actual word of God to Pharaoh is reported. Ominously, the locusts will destroy not only everything left by the hail, but they will also fill their homes (cf. 8:21). Despite hardening of their hearts, the Egyptian people want Israel to go, but Pharaoh disagrees and is less willing than before (9:28). He will only allow the men to go, with women and children left as hostage, ensuring the return. The divine response is the locust plague.

In 10:7, the threat of the plague of hail had fractured the ranks of Pharaoh's courtiers – “this one” was a disrespectful allusion to Moses (9:20). The predicted invasion of locusts now leads to an open break with the king's policies. At the urging of the courtiers who want the male Israelites to be released for their worship, Pharaoh calls Moses and Aaron back for negotiations, which fail with Pharaoh enraged at Moses' unwillingness to bargain. Pharaoh had asked “Who would go?” suggesting a smaller number of males required for worship, but Moses had in mind the whole of Israel, including livestock, leaving (10:7-11). Pharaoh in 10:10 plainly hints that he knows whither the Hebrews' demand is tending, namely, toward escape. While the plague raged, Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron and confessed his guilt toward their God, and begs that they forgive him and make one last appeal on his behalf to God.

The eleven-fold use of the word kol (“all”) in 10:12-15 stresses the absoluteness of the devastation. Locusts, like hail, are a common symbol of divine judgment (Deut. 28:38, 42; 2 Chron. 7:13; Jer. 51: 27; Amos 4:9; 7:1). And especially in Joel (1:4, 7, 17-20; 2:9-10, 25). As with the frogs, they will cover the face of the whole land (like the waters covering the Egyptians). The language of incomparability appears twice (10:6, 14). The east wind bringing the locusts is portentous of the east wind driving back the sea for the people of Israel. Furthermore, “not a single locust was left” (10:19), which is precisely what happens to the Egyptians in 14:28. Pharaoh reacts again with the language of confession, with a new note in seeking forgiveness, for the fourth time asking that the devastation be removed. The significance of the signs is beginning to dawn on him. A west wind drives the locusts into the sea, the only time God uses the nonhuman order to remove a sign. Not one locust remains.

### **Exodus 10:21-29 Nine – Thick Darkness A return to the first day of creation**

In 10:21-29, also 11:4-8; 1-3, 9-10, Moses was commanded to bring on a dense darkness over the land of Egypt without warning Pharaoh. The darkness was so dense it could be felt, and no one could leave his place for the three days it lasted; for the Israelites, however, there was light. Pharaoh summoned Moses to resume negotiations. He was now ready to concede everything Moses demanded, only excepting the livestock, which must be left as hostages. Moses replied that not only must every last beast of theirs go – for God's requirements in the festival were unknown – but that Pharaoh himself would supply sacrificial beasts for the Lord. Pharaoh's restraint ended and he angrily banished Moses from his presence, warning him against seeking further audiences under the pain of death. Moses seconded this severance of relations, leaving the king with the announcement that at midnight every first-born in Egypt would be struck dead, while Israel would go unscathed. Then, he predicted, the court entourage would come and prostrate themselves before Moses, crying to him to take Israel and get out; and Israel would leave. Having spoken, Moses stalked out in a rage. (God told Moses that there would be one last plague, after which Pharaoh would unconditionally drive Israel out of Egypt. Anticipating that, Moses was to have the people ask the Egyptians for silver and gold vessels. The Egyptian mood toward Israel had been disposed favorably by God. And Moses himself was held in esteem by the Egyptian people).

As with signs 3 and 6, the ninth sign begins without warning with an immediate directive from God. Darkness descends, not ordinary darkness, lasting three days without break. It was sheer blackness (groping and feeling), but the Israelites had light. The winds from the desert had probably enveloped the land in thick sand and dust. Thick darkness is used elsewhere for the devastating effects of God's judgment (Isa. 8:22; Joel 2:2; Zeph. 1:15). This is the most ominous sign of all. Darkness language follows, both with respect to the tenth plague (11:4; 12:12, 29-31, 42) and the sea crossing (14:20-21). It is the darkness of chaos, a pre-creation state of affairs. God is at work in the darkness, and God's new creation will burst forth in the light of day. The blotting out of the light of the sun for three days would have carried a powerful symbolic message for the Egyptians, for the sun was their supreme god, and its worship was pervasive in the official palace ritual. The sun was regarded as the first king of the land from whom all the pharaohs descended. The plague of darkness was therefore a humiliation of the sun god. A plague of three days of darkness would surely have been taken by the Egyptians as the vanquishing of the sun god by Apophis, the monstrous serpent, as the triumph of demonic and chaotic powers, and as a portent of incipient horrors.

Pharaoh says that all the people including children can go, but the animals must remain. Moses says that the animals will be needed to serve Yhwh. Moses also audaciously seeks livestock from Pharaoh for their offerings, enraging Pharaoh (10:25). This account does not end with any hardening of Pharaoh's heart, but anger. If I see you again, Moses, you will be a dead man. Moses replies that Pharaoh will have his wish, but he, Pharaoh, will be the dead man. This change in narrative conclusion suggests that an impasse has been reached. In 10:25, "you yourself" indicates that Pharaoh who contemptuously denied all knowledge of Yhwh will, in the end, provide sacrifices for Him in acknowledgment of His reality and power.

### **Exodus 11:1-10 The end is near - Announcement of the final (tenth) plague**

In 11:9-10, thus it was that events were just as God had predicted (7:3-4); Pharaoh had refused to yield, enabling God to display His great wonders. Moses and Aaron had done their duty and God had made Pharaoh obstinate so that he refused to let the Israelites go.

Pharaoh has closed the door on any further negotiations with Moses. Despite their concentrative force, their timing and intensity, the natural disasters have left the king even more uncompromising than before. Now one final, overwhelming blow is about to descend on the Egyptians, one that is wholly outside the range of nature or of previous human experience. This Moses announces to Pharaoh before he leaves the palace. He probably also explains the significance of the first born – Israel being the firstborn of God.

The stream of negotiations has reached the narrows, and the waters are shortly going to go crashing through the gorge. There is no stopping things now. The word commonly translated "plague" ("nega") in 11:1 is not used elsewhere in Exodus. It is used most commonly in Leviticus 13-14 where it is commonly translated "disease". Pharaoh will

now drive them out, leaving no one behind (see 3: 19; 6:1). Moses reminds the people (see 3:21-22) to ask their neighbors for their silver and gold possessions, having received favor in the eyes of the Egyptians, if not Pharaoh. The gifts would seem genuine, Moses in particular being highly regarded. Pharaoh stands alone, as his own servants will bow before Moses (11:8). There seems often to be a difference between the people and their leaders. With the prospect of the first born dying from the least to the greatest, human beings and cattle, there will be a great cry (“se’aqah”), last heard among the Israelites under Egyptian bondage. Responding, all of Pharaoh’s servants will tell Moses to take his people and leave Egypt. Pharaoh’s silence is deafening, although he is the one who will in fact order the people out, desiring their rapid departure one and all (12:31-32). Moses is angry that everything has come to this, and that sin is so persistent. He is probably angry at Pharaoh’s death threat in 10:28.

Exodus 11:10 serves as a summary statement for all the signs up to this point, bringing together all the principles of these events. Moses and Aaron did all these wonders; God hardened Pharaoh’s heart; Pharaoh did not let Israel go. But now things will change. Pharaoh will let Israel go. God’s implementation of this announcement is not immediately reported, but delayed until 12:29-32. Between the announcement and the act, comes the report of the feast of Passover and unleavened bread. This announcement closes the sign cycle, yet it anticipates the Passover. The actual event of 12:29-32 is outside the flow of the story, and integrates it into a liturgical context.

**Reference to the plagues in the New Testament** is focused on **Rom. 9:17-18** and in the **Book of Revelation (Chapters 8, 9, 15, and 16)**. In Romans 9:17-18, Paul uses the example of Pharaoh’s hardening of heart in the context of his argument concerning the continuity of God’s purpose in electing Israel as His chosen people. Paul illustrates God’s unlimited freedom in terms of both His mercy and His judgment by citing the case of Pharaoh’s hardening of heart. “For the scripture says to Pharaoh, “I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that My Name may be proclaimed in all the earth”. So then He has mercy upon whomever He wills, and He hardens the heart of whomever He wills”.

The references to the plagues in the Book of Revelation occur in the cycles of apocalyptic judgment, essentially in the context of the trumpets in Rev. Chapter 8 and 9 and the bowls of the wrath of God in Chapters 15 and 16. (Note that the trumpets are within the seventh seal). The use of the plague imagery in these apocalyptic visions is largely in the context of impending judgment, and the associated warnings against unfaithfulness, and is doubtless related to the warning in Deut. 28:58-60: “If you are not careful to do all the words of this law which are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awful name, the Lord your God, then the Lord will bring on you and your offspring extraordinary afflictions, afflictions severe and lasting, and sicknesses grievous and lasting. And He will bring upon you again all the diseases of Egypt, which you were afraid of; and they shall cleave to you.”

Both trumpets and bowls present the plagues in the same order: plagues striking (1) the earth, (2) the sea, (3) rivers, (4) the sun, (5) the realm of the wicked with darkness, (6) the

Euphrates (together with influencing the wicked by demons), and (7) the world with the final judgment (with the same imagery of “lightning, sounds, thunders, and earthquake” and “great hail”). Hence, Revelation 16, for example, pictures the seven bowls of judgment in terms of boils, water to blood, death of fish, fierce heat, darkness, foul spirits like frogs, and lightning, thunder, and earthquake. The overwhelming likeness of the trumpets and bowls is clearly a result of both being modeled on the exodus plagues. Every woe in both series, except the sixth trumpet, alludes to an exodus plague. Furthermore, in each series, seven angels execute the seven plagues. Of particular importance, the repetition of the phrase “they did not repent and give Him glory” (Rev. 16:9, 11) reflects the exodus pattern.

The parallelism of the trumpet and bowl series can be set out as follows:

**Trumpet 1 (Rev. 8:7):** Hail, fire, and blood fall on the *earth*, one third of which is burned up (corresponding to Exod. 9:22ff. – **plague 7, hail and thunderstorm**).

**Bowl 1 (Rev. 16:2):** A bowl is poured on the *earth*. Malignant sores come on those who have the mark of the beast and who worship his image (corresponding to Exod. 9:8ff. – **plague 6, boils, inflammation**).

**Trumpet 2 (Rev. 8:8-11):** A blazing mountain falls into the *sea*. One third of the *sea* becomes *blood*, a third of *sea creatures* die, and a third of all ships are destroyed.

**Bowl 2 (Rev. 16:3):** A bowl is poured on the *seas*, which become *blood*, and *every living thing in them dies* (both trumpet and bowl corresponding to Exod. 7:17ff. – **plague 1, pollution of the Nile**).

**Trumpet 3 (Rev. 8:8-11):** A blazing star (Wormwood) falls on a third of *rivers and fountains*; their waters are poisoned and many die.

**Bowl 3 (Rev. 16:4-7):** A bowl is poured on *rivers and fountains*, and they become blood (both trumpet and bowl corresponding to Exod. 7:17ff. – **plague 1, pollution of the Nile**).

**Trumpet 4 (Rev. 8:12):** A third of *sun, moon, and stars* are struck. Darkness results for a third of a night and day (corresponding to Exod. 10:21ff. – **plague 9, thick darkness**).

**Bowl 4 (Rev. 16:8-9):** A bowl is poured on the *sun*, which scorches people with fire (corresponding to Exod. 9:22ff. – **plague 7, hail and thunderstorm**).

**Trumpet 5 (Rev. 9:1-11):** The shaft of the pit is opened. Sun and air are *darkened* with smoke from which *locusts* emerge to *torment* people without the seal of God (corresponding to Exod. 10:4ff. – **plague 8, locusts**).

**Bowl 5 (Rev. 16:10-11):** A bowl is poured on the throne of the beast. His kingdom is *darkened* and people are in *anguish* (corresponding to Exod. 10:21ff. – **plague 9, thick darkness**).

**Trumpet 6 (Rev. 9:13-21):** Four angels bound at *the Euphrates* are released. With their cavalry of two hundred million, which kills a third of humanity (no correspondence to a plague).

**Bowl 6 (Rev. 12-16):** A bowl is poured on *the Euphrates*, which dries up for kings from the east. Demonic *frogs* deceive the kings of the world to assemble for battle at Armageddon (corresponding to Exod. 8:2ff. – **plague 2, frogs**).

**Trumpet 7 (Rev. 11:15-19):** *Loud voices in heaven* announce the coming of the kingdom of God and of Christ. *Lightning, thunder, earthquake, and hail* occur.

**Bowl 7 (Rev. 16: 17-21):** A bowl is poured into the air, and *a loud voice from God's throne* announces "It is done". *Lightning, thunder, and an unprecedented earthquake* occur, and terrible *hail* falls, (both trumpet and bowl corresponding to Exod. 9:22ff. - **plague 7, hail and thunderstorm**, and to the **Sinai theophany** (Exod. 19:16-19).

Other imagery should be noted which resembles the Exodus account – for example, the drying up of the Euphrates conjures up images of the opening up of the Reed Sea as Israel crossed on dry land. Furthermore, the word "plague" is used specifically in Rev. 9 (v.20), Rev. 15 (vv.1 and 8) and in Rev. 16 (vv. 9, 21), while the song of Moses (Exod. 15:1-18) is quoted in Rev. 15:3-4. The construction of these apocalyptic images around the plague accounts of Exodus is therefore unmistakable, speaking of impending judgment, with the related warnings for the unfaithful.

Overall, the plague accounts, which in the Book of Exodus witnessed to the great battle between God and Pharaoh over the rule of His people, has become in the Book of Revelation the great cosmic battle between God and evil. No longer is the battle a glorious memory in Israel's past history, but it still lies in the future with its impending threat. The struggle with evil has taken on a new dimension of anguish and terror. The people of God do not stand carefully protected in Goshen, but are called upon to participate in the battle unto death. All the terrors of Gog and Magog, of the dragon from the deep, of the beasts from Daniel's visions, are combined in a terrifying picture of the forces of evil. The people of God are not measured in terms of their nationality, but of their faith. God's judgments are "true and just" and directed against all the sin and corruption of Babylon. God then brings into His Kingdom, and He is worshipped by, His saints (Rev. 4:8) because He alone is worthy to receive "glory and honor and power". There is a new earth, and God dwells with His people for ever (Rev. 21:1 ff.).



#### IV. FROM PASSOVER TO PRAISE Exodus 12:1-15:21

##### Introduction: Story and Ritual

The great event of 12:29-32 is surrounded by details of Passover ritual (12:1-27a) and songs of praise (15:1-21). In and through the passover liturgy and ritual, every generation of Israelites was the recipient of God's exodus-shaped redemption. In every era, Israel confessed: God delivered us.

12:1-27a	Passover and unleavened bread	(I. Liturgy encloses story)
12:27b-28	Transition	
12:29-39	Story -----	
12:40-42	Transition	
12:43-49	Passover	(I. Liturgy encloses story)
12:50-51	Summary	
13:1-16	First born and unleavened bread	(II.Liturgy encloses story)
13:17-14:29	Story -----	
14:30-31	Summary	
15:1-18	Song of Moses	(II. Liturgy encloses story)
15:19	Transition	
15:20-21	Song of Miriam	

Liturgy encloses the whole sequence. The historical event is at one and the same time a liturgical event. The effect of the liturgical interpretation or presentation is to place these events outside the normal flow of the story.

##### **Exodus 12:1-28 Passover, past and present. The feasts of Passover and unleavened bread (matsot).**

In 12:2, Israel is told that the month of liberation, the springtime of nature and now the springtime of Israel as a free people, is henceforth to be the start of the year. The new calendar of Israel is to be luni-solar – that is, it is to be regulated by the positions of both the moon and the sun. The month begins with the new moon, but the first month of the year is to fall in the spring. The new year now begins, not in nature's renewal nor in mythology, but is an historic event, the liberation of a people from national oppression. Such a revolutionary phenomenon is without analogy in the ancient world.

Four liturgical calendars are listed in the Torah, and each commences with the Passover (23:14-17; 34:18-23; Lev. 23; Deut. 16:1-17). In the pre-exilic period, the months of the Israelite year have predominantly no names, but are generally designated by ordinal numbers. After the exile, Babylonian names were often used (Esther 2:26; 3:7, 13). There are some non-liturgical calendars that have an autumnal new year, indicated say by the "Early and later rain" (Deut. 11:14; Jer. 5:24), determined by the agricultural year that takes its bearings from the fall.

This section consists of a word of God to Moses regarding the ritual – Passover and unleavened bread combined – to be followed by the deathly event to come (vv. 1-20) and a speech of Moses to the elders regarding Passover only (vv. 21-27), the latter essentially being an abbreviation of vv 1-20. Blood is important as a symbol of life, the vitality of the living and the life of creation (Lev. 17:11, 14; cf. Deut. 12:23). Note that liturgy precedes the event itself. The reenactment is as much a saving event as the original enactment (Deut. 6:20-25). It is entering into the reality of the event in such a way as to be reconstituted as the people of God thereby. The Jewish liturgy for passover (Passover Haggadah) stresses that worshipers in every celebration are actual participants in God’s saving deed: God brought US out of Egypt. The passover also serves as important background for the NT presentation of the death of Jesus and the understanding of the Lord’s supper. For the first time since 4:31, the people bowed their heads and worshiped. Pharaoh had ordered the shedding of the blood of all their newly born males in order to curb the Israelite population; God’s punishment of the Egyptians therefore began with a plague of blood, and blood became emblematic of the deliverance of their victims.

In 12:2, the entire religious calendar of Israel is henceforth changed to number the months of the year from the month of the Exodus, reflecting the completely new order of life that is to be dominated by the consciousness of God’s active presence in history. In 12:11, compare Isa. 52:12: “For you will not depart in haste, nor will you leave in flight”. The rationale for choosing the tenth day for the animal to be set aside and kept in readiness is unknown; compare 40 years later the tenth day of the month chosen by Joshua to cross over into the promised land (Josh. 4:19), Yom Kippur (Lev. 23:27), and the opening of the jubilee year (Lev. 25:9-10). On the 14<sup>th</sup> day, the unblemished lamb or kid was to be slaughtered at twilight, and some of the blood was to be daubed on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses. The flesh was to be roasted over the fire, and eaten together with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. No other mode of preparation was allowed. Preferably, it should all be consumed at the festal meal, but should there be any leftovers, they had to be burned the next morning. The sacrificial meal, the “passover offering to the Lord”, is the prelude to the Exodus – the last supper [Note].

Three traditions about the meaning of the stem p-s-h (“passover”) have survived. The oldest, and apparently the most reliable, is “to have compassion”, another is “to protect”, a third is “to skip over” (the last is has the widest currency, but is the least likely). It was through the influence of the Latin Vulgate version that “Passover” became the predominant rendering, even though it seems to the least likely of the three possibilities. In 12:13, an assurance is given that no harm will befall Israel, needed because fulfillment of the forgoing instructions is fraught with peril, and the ensuing period of inaction engenders anxiety. In 12:22, on Passover night one stays within the house for protection. The security of the Israelites lay in maintaining family solidarity within the portals of their hallowed homes. In 12:25, apart from the celebration on the first anniversary of the exodus, as described in Num. 9:1-5, no further mention of the actual observance of passover appears in the account of the wilderness wanderings until after the crossing of the River Jordan, as recorded in Josh. 5:1-12.

The feasts of the Passover and of unleavened bread (from the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the month) were separate celebrations and festivals as indicated by 34:25, Lev. 23:5-6, and Ezra 6:19-22. This is why 13:6-8 mentions only the seven days of eating unleavened bread, and says nothing of the Passover. Passover (no portion for the priest) was a ritual consistent with the life of a pastoral nomad, while unleavened bread (some portion for the priest) was the ritual of an agricultural people. Following the Exodus and the conquest of Canaan, the people of Israel changed from being pastoral nomads to being farmers. The revised Israelite calendar reflects the mixing of the old with the new reality, and is therefore uni-solar.

The link of unleavened bread with the exodus is given in 12:34, 39 and Deut. 16:3 “for you departed from the land of Egypt hurriedly”, and there was no time for the dough to rise. The leavening process of fermentation, being related to decomposition and putrefaction, symbolized moral corruption (Matt.16:6; Mk. 8:15; Luke 12:1; 1 Cor. 5:6ff; Gal 5:9). Bitter herbs, mentioned in 12:6 and Num. 9:11, are doubtless related to suffering, with Lam. 3:15 providing the only other reference to bitter herbs: “He has filled me with bitterness, sated me with wormwood”. Compare the sufferings of the Israelites in 1:14.

### **Exodus 12:29-36 Ten - A tragic night, a joyful day. Israel's departure from Egypt**

This is a story of both death and new life. The darkness of the night matched the darkness of the deed. No house nor barnyard escaped, with the victims mainly children whose lives were snuffed out because of what adults had done (including Pharaoh's genocidal decision to kill all Hebrew baby boys not long before – 1: 16, 22). Consider the prediction of this event in 4:23, a punishment measure for measure befitting the crime. The text does not back off from identifying the subject of this judgment: God smote all the firstborn in Egypt. Perhaps it was a pestilence epidemic that killed quickly (Psa. 78:49).

Why not just any person from every Egyptian family? It is because of the widely known understanding regarding the firstborn. This is a public statement as to God's claim over Egypt, God's authority over the Egyptian people rather than Pharaoh's. The firstborn was dedicated to Yhwh rather than to Egypt's gods (see 12:12). The firstborn of the mother's womb was considered rightfully to belong to God in gratitude for His bounteous gifts to humankind. All three firsts – of the soil, of domestic animals, and of the womb – enjoyed a certain status of sanctity and preciousness. This situation is directly responsive to the type of claim that Pharaoh was making on the Israelite children. See Moses' address in 4:22ff. which presaged the final plague and supplied in advance a justification for it. The death of the first born is viewed as a kind of measure for measure, as making the punishment fit the crime. Pharaoh sought to destroy God's people. The first born of Egypt, in whose name Pharaoh speaks and acts, will suffer the fate that had been planned for Israel, God's firstborn.

While still dark, Pharaoh summons Moses and Aaron, ordering them to take all people and animals and leave Egypt, and serve the Lord as Moses had demanded. The scenario

sketched out in 4:23 has become a reality. “Bless me also” (12:32) says Pharaoh, a seeming benediction with unknown tone and intent, a pathetic imploring cry. In haste the Israelites take their unleavened bread (see 12:14-20) and flee the country. In obedience to Moses, they had already asked for and received the fine possessions of the Egyptians, whose heart as one had been softened towards Israel by God (see 3:21-22; 11:2-3). They leave Egypt “dressed out”, not as slaves, but as persons who have been raised to a new level of life by their God. Their raiment and jewelry are those of persons no longer bound but free. “You are a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God” (Isa. 62:3).

In 12:30-32, Pharaoh himself has to rise during the night, thereby compounding his humiliation at having to surrender unconditionally to Moses’ demands. By summoning Moses and Aaron, he must retract the arrogant threat made at their last meeting (10:28). For him to seek their blessing is thus the ultimate humbling of the despot. In 12:31, Pharaoh uses the term “the Israelites” for the first time, thereby granting recognition at last to Israel as a national entity. The story of the oppression, which opened with this term (1:1), now closes with it.

The New Testament transition to the Passover in Christ is made explicit in 1 Cor. 5:7: “Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us, therefore, celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth”. In Luke 22:15, Jesus says: “I have earnestly desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer”. Having taken the bread symbolizing the “manna from heaven”, he takes the cup, saying: “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood”. Jesus is thus both the shepherd and the lamb, “that takes away the sins of the world”. In an extended reference to this theme, Jesus is recorded in John 6:53-56 as saying: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him.” The Passover, with all its historical and ritualistic connotations from times past, is truly fulfilled in him.

### **Exodus 12:37-51 Freedom and faith**

“A mixed multitude” (12:38) suggests that many non-Israelites had been integrated into the community of faith, and other communities, probably mainly forced laborers, no doubt taking advantage of the opportunity to choose freedom. Freedom for Israel means freedom for others (see 22:21; 23:9). God’s redemption is not for the chosen few; it is for the sake of the whole world. But there are distinctions to be made between Israelites and non-Israelites regarding Passover observance (12:43-49). This is a feast only for the “congregation” of Israel. Circumcision is the distinctive factor because that is a sign of membership which confesses the God of Passover. This is a festival for persons who have faith in God. These others are invited to join that community by being circumcised, as sign that they have made the confession of this “congregation” their own.

Moreover, the people of God are accompanied by “great numbers” of animals; both animals and people are liberated. Freedom has an effect on more than human beings, a theme found widely elsewhere in Scripture (20:10; Deut. 5: 14; Psa. 36:6; Rom. 8:22). Israel’s God is one who is about redeeming the whole creation. “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb....and a little child shall lead them” (Isa. 11:6). They travel quickly (no tarrying and dallying) and light (unburdened by provisions that would weigh them down – Luke 10:4). Much that is near and dear to the life of bondage is to be left behind, if freedom is not to become another form of slavery.

The number of 600,000 men on foot, plus women and children, would perhaps amount to 2 million or so. Part of the problem is the period of Israel’s sojourn in Egypt, said here to be 430 years, compared with the four generations in 6:14-25. Perhaps thousands means clans or a small military unit, the number of fighting men levied from each tribe. Perhaps a large number is specified to emphasize their growth. But note that this figure is an approximate representation of the population of the time of David and Solomon, thereby becoming a way of confessing that all Israel from this later time was brought out of Egypt by their God: (2 Sam. 24:9). Supporting this latter view, the building of Solomon’s temple was considered the end of an era that began with the exodus (15:17 – 1 Kings 6:1), with special note of the time between exodus and temple – 480 years and the link in the dedicatory prayer to the exodus (1 Kings 8:9, 16, 21, 51, 53). Furthermore, each post-exodus generation is to confess that their God brought THEM out of the land of Egypt (12:26-27; 13:8-10, 14-15), an ever-contemporary appropriation of those events. NOTE

In these transition verses 12:40-42, “the night of watching by the Lord” is to be “a night of vigil” by the Israelites in all subsequent generations. Israel’s keeping remembers God’s keeping. What God has done for the Israelites is to be paralleled by Israel’s careful watching/observance of the passover. In the summary verses 12:50-51, Israel’s faithful observance of the Passover and God’s deliverance from Egypt link God’s actions with Israel’s faithfulness. Exodus and passover must be tied together if the experience of redemption is to continue to be a living reality for Israel. In 12:40, the period of 430 years does not accord exactly with the 400 years of Egyptian oppression predicted in Gen. 15:13. In 12:15, 34, 39, reference is made to the departure of the Israelites in haste from Egypt before the dough they had prepared had time to rise. Leaven is the agent known as sour dough which is added to accelerate the rising of the dough. In 12:44, 49, circumcision even for the stranger, is a prerequisite for taking the passover meal (12:19, Num.9:14).

### **Exodus 13:1-16 Body and memory – the consecration of the firstborn (vv.1-2, 11-16) – house of bondage (v. 3) - commemorative rituals**

This section continues the process of historicizing existing institutions by reinterpreting them in terms of the exodus experiences. The revitalized ancient rituals, now charged with new historical meaning, serve to perpetuate the memory of those events by making the living realities for succeeding generations. In 13:4, this is the time of spring, the season of nature’s rebirth, leading into the installation of the first born.

Emphasis is placed on what God has done on Israel's behalf. Again and again, the events are rehearsed and explained (13:3, 8, 9, 14, 15, 16). There is also a repeated look to the future and the time in a new land, a place of both gift and responsibility (13: 5, 11). The divine commitment to Israel's future is recalled (13: 5, 11). The basic rhythm of the text is not that of memory and hope (the outcome is viewed as certain), but of memory and liturgical responsibility. The liturgical responses correspond to specific aspects of those events. (i) the consecration and redemption of the firstborn correlate with the death/life of the firstborn on Passover night. Because of the divine redemption of Israel's firstborn, they belong to God: (ii) the eating of unleavened bread specifically replicates the haste with which Israel left Egypt (12: 34, 39); and (iii) the various liturgical details of Passover are also replications of the events of that original night. With God the giver of life, the life of the firstborn was consecrated to God in gratitude.

Firstborn language is used in the collective sense for Israel's relationship with God in 4:23, referring to the entire people as God's firstborn (both male and female). When Israel reaches Canaan (13:11), the inclusiveness remains (13:11) – the death and life of Passover night make no distinction between male and female firstborn – but the practice of redemption pertains only to sons (13:13-16). In 13:15-16, we are reminded of the death of the Egyptian firstborn, indicating at what cost Israel's firstborn was redeemed. The firstborn belong to God not only because of Israelite children were saved but also because Egyptian children were killed.

These responses are not merely recollections of the past. As with Passover (see 12:1-28), the concrete and replicating nature of each of the rituals indicates that they are vehicles in and through which God effects salvation for each new generation. The concern is not that God be properly thanked, but that the redemptive experience should be a living reality for each Israelite in every age. Note the inter-weaving of past and present reference and the use of the pronouns (eg. 12:27; 13:3-4, 8, 14), implying a cross-generational experience of salvation. What happens in the liturgy should receive appropriate interpretation. Hence, specific instructions are given for children, with (12:26; 13:14) and without (13:8) their request. Note too that the body is here pressed into the service of memory (marks, piece of cloth, and so on). In 13:9, reference is to the "tefillin" or "phylacteries".

Unleavened bread is to be celebrated "because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt" (13:8; 12:17), which focuses on the firstborn there (and hence the material in 13:1-16, concerning the feast of the unleavened bread, is placed between sections regarding the firstborn).

The first born belongs to God solely by reason of an act of divine will decreed at the time of the exodus and not on account of any inherent sanctity. The consecration of the first born may be a polemic against pagan notions of the first born being endowed with intrinsic holiness. After 13:2 with its immediate consecration of the firstborn, 13:11-16 deals with the treatment of the firstborn following settlement in the promised land. The animal firstling is to retain its status and so belong to God, but the priestly status of the human first born is to be revoked and their functions taken over by the tribe of Levi

(Num. 3:12;8:16,18). Hence, first born sons are to be desacralized by “redemption”, which explains why this section does not immediately follow 13:2.

### **Exodus 13:17-22 Providence and planning – Israel’s deliverance**

This section consists basically of the narrator’s report regarding the initial stages of the people’s departure from Egypt. The focus is on God’s “leading” (13: 17, 21) of the people. God was concerned that Israel not take the most traveled route from Egypt to Canaan, lessening the chances for encountering hostile forces along the way, and also testing their faithfulness and resolve. God uses, not only Moses, but a pillar of cloud by day and a luminous pillar of fire by night (13:21-22). This is probably the same pillar, showing up differently during night and day (see 14:24), and providing tangible and visible divine assurance. This pillar is constantly with Israel throughout the wilderness wanderings (see 14:19-20, 24; Num. 14:14), anticipating God’s revelation in the tabernacle (see 40:34-38). Cloud and fire are associated with the divine presence elsewhere in the OT (1 Kings 8:11; Psa. 18: 8, 1-12; Psa 29; Isa. 6: 4-6). Note that Moses took Joseph’s coffin along on the exodus journey. Bringing Joseph’s bones out of Egypt brings closure to the Egyptian stage of Israel’s life and symbolizes that what had begun with Joseph had now been realized in a marvelous way (Josh. 24:32; Acts 7:16).

In 13:17, the word carries the double juridicial sense of divorce and of emancipation of a slave. The word “shillah” is also the key term in each of the divine promises of redemption give to Moses (3:20; 6:1; 11:1); its presence here intimates their fulfillment. By not taking “the way of the land of the Philistines” (13:17-18), the Israelites thereby avoided exposure to inevitable warfare and having to contend with the strongly entrenched Egyptian forces on what would have been hopelessly unequal terms.

In 13:18, the Sea of Reeds, not the Red Sea, is referred to, the latter being too saline to allow the growth of reeds. Also, from Goshen to the Red Sea is about 130 miles, too great a distance to cover even in a week in those days. Probably the initial march was to the far north-east of Egypt, to one of the lagoons near the shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Note, however, that Yam Suf does on occasions refer to the Red Sea as we know it (23:31; Num. 21:4; 1 Kings 9:26; Jer. 49:21). Apparently, the designation “Sea of Reeds” was applied comprehensively to the entire network of lakes that skirted the wilderness in the NE Delta region, as well as to the long, narrow strip of water that extends SE from Suez to the horn of Africa. Raamses was apparently the rallying point for the departure from Egypt, followed by Succoth, and Etham, from where they were to pull back and encamp “between Migdol and the sea”.

In 13:19, while the other Israelites were busy plundering the Egyptians, Moses was preoccupied with disinterring Joseph and keeping faith with him. In 13:21-22, God’s active, dynamic presence – His Being who transcends the limits of time and space, and thus surpasses human imagining – is symbolized, however inadequately, by the mysterious, intangible, incorporeal elements of fire and cloud – a luminescent mist visible both by day and night.

## **Exodus 14:1-31 Overview – the miraculous sea crossing**

The liberated Israelites, having reached the edge of the wilderness, were suddenly ordered to change course. This new direction, fraught with danger, was actually a stratagem to mislead the Egyptians and lure them to their doom. It was the culminating defeat of Pharaoh. At the moment of supreme crisis, Moses rallied the people and encouraged them with calming and reassuring words (14:13-14). Thereafter, Egypt does not again appear in Israelite history until the time of King Solomon. The miracle of the parting of the sea became the paradigm for the future redemption of Israel from exile. Remarkably, the overwhelming majority of the texts that celebrate the crossing of the sea relate solely to God's sovereign control over nature and history and do not mention the drowning of the Egyptians.

Liberation from Egypt can be confessed only after freedom for Pharaoh is a reality. It is only at the sea that the forces of chaos are decisively overcome and the world is reestablished on firm moorings. Cross and resurrection are kept together. This is a cosmic victory, with the crossing of the sea not simply an event of local significance. "Yam Suf" (13:18; 15: 4, 22), traditionally translates as Red Sea, meaning literally "sea of reeds" or, better, "sea of the end". The "sea of reeds" could be one of the smaller bodies of water in the delta region, but could also be the Red Sea proper (1 Kings 9:26; Jer. 49:21; cf. Exod. 23:31). Consider the liturgical use in Psa. 106: 7, 9, 22; 136:13, 15; Neh. 9:9. The Egyptians are portrayed as moving from frenzied activity to the profound stillness of death on the seashore. The Israelites move from fear and doubt to stillness to faith and worship.

In 14:4, "that I may gain glory", the idea is that the destruction of the wicked is a reaffirmation of the fundamental Biblical principle that the world is governed by a divinely ordained moral order that must ultimately prevail. God is therefore glorified.

### **Exodus 14:1-18 Divine and human preparation**

The entrapment possibilities are not accomplished with military maneuvers alone, but with a hardening of Pharaoh's heart so that the planned pursuit will be intensified. Without mention of Israel's liberation, the focus is on God and the Egyptian's relationship to God. The objective is to bring the Egyptians, indeed the entire world, to the point of knowing that Israel's God is the Lord of all the earth. (cf. 14:25). The word for gaining honor belongs to the same root as one of the hardening verbs (kabad). Pharaoh's hardening of heart leads to God's honoring. Pharaoh's defeat will bring public honor to God (hence Chapter 15). Ironically, the Egyptian praise becomes a theme for Israel's praise. Initially, the praise comes from the Egyptians themselves: "The Lord fights for them" (14:25).

As for Pharaoh, he and his army engage in frenzied preparations and fervent pursuit of the escaping Israelites. Every chariot (14 references in Chapters 14-15) and every horse/horseman (12 times), indeed the entire Egyptian army, are thrown into the fray. Before God proceeds with the hardening of Pharaoh's heart (14:8), Pharaoh is pictured as



having already changed his mind (heart). He realizes that the issue is as stated in 1:13-14: Will Israel serve Pharaoh or someone else? God's hardening is not in a vacuum. It is not contrary to Pharaoh's (or the Egyptian's, 14:17) own general will. God intensifies a well-ingrained proclivity – "strengthened him in his resolve" [NOTE]. Pharaoh takes up the headlong pursuit (note the repetition of 14:8-9). The language of the Egyptian pursuit is echoed in the song of victory at the sea (see 15:9); their goal has now become destruction rather than simple capture.

The Israelites stand between these two powers planning and struggling for preeminence in fear of their lives, knowing more about Pharaoh's intent than God's. They cry to the Lord, as when in bondage, channeling their cry through Moses, which takes the form of a complaint. They accuse Moses of ulterior motives, bringing them into the wilderness to die. For the first time there is reference to complaints made earlier to Moses, preferring bondage in Egypt (cf. 5:21; 6:9). This is the first of many such "murmurings", often voiced in the wilderness. The desire to stay in Egypt, and now the urgent pleas to return there, are typical for a people who have gone through an extensive period of oppression. Moses speaks an oracle of salvation to a hurting people (see Psa.12:5), making clear the divine plan in all this. Israel does not have the resources for its own deliverance; it must depend upon God alone.

"Do not be afraid". God is present and at work on their behalf – a word of assurance. "Stand firm" They are not to flee nor fight, but stand ready to observe the salvation that God will work for them. Their perspective will be shaped by what God does, not by what the Egyptians do. "Keep still". This is not a call to passivity, "not move a muscle", but a call to silence – no lament or battle cry will add to what God is doing on their behalf. Moses will be the agent for the saving work of God (14: 16, 21; Isa. 63:12). Given the pervasive effect of oppression, salvation will affect not only who they are as human beings, but the entire world. Salvation is at once individual, corporate, and universal. "The Lord will fight for you" –God is warrior and leader in battle (se 14:25; 15:3). Perhaps surprisingly, Moses is scolded for conveying the people's cry to God. This is not a time for Moses to bring such concerns before God. Moses must lead, not complain.

In 14:10, "cried to the Lord", shows that the self-assurance mentioned in 14:8 is dissipated quickly. In the Hebrew language, this is the same phrase as in 2:23, with a dialectic variant; thus, the entire narrative of Israel's oppression and liberation is framed by a record of Israel's heartfelt cry to God for help in dire distress. In 14:11, the rebuke to Moses is a piece of bitter irony, for Egypt, with its death-obsessed religion, was the classic land of tombs. The rebellion at the Red Sea is mentioned in Psa. 106:7. When so close to redemption, they still rebel. In 14:16, Moses is not instructed to strike the sea. The rod instead is the signal for the strong wind to blow back the waters. In Isa. 63:12, it is God who splits the sea.

### **Exodus 14:19-31 Through sea to dry land**

In 14:19, the luminous cloud, the symbol of God's indwelling presence (13:21), now serves as a protective screen separating the two camps, when the Egyptians caught up

with the Israelites. In 13:20, the night was “lit up” (LXX), probably generating the traditional interpretation that the side of the cloud facing the Egyptians remained dark, while the other side illuminated the night for the Israelites. The cloud of incense (Lev. 16:2-3; 1 Kings 8:10-11; Isa.6:4) could have functioned as the prototype for the wilderness symbol of the Divine Presence.

Pharaoh and his army are in hot pursuit; the people are anxiously waiting on events; Moses stands at the ready; God has decided what to do. The events at the sea begin with a divine initiative; the messenger of God IN the cloud pillar takes up a position between the people of Israel and the Egyptians. God thereby works in and through the natural entities of cloud and darkness. God then acts through a human agent, Moses stretching out his hand/staff over the sea, and a natural entity, a strong east wind blowing all night long – not a divine snap of the finger. The agencies – divine, human, and nonhuman – work in harmony with one another. The effect is an act of creation, dry land appearing in the midst of chaos, just as in Gen. 1: 9-10 (cf. 8:13) at the separation of the waters. “Let us make” (Gen. 1:26) recalls the divine dialogue, but Moses here is God’s instrument. The people walk in faith through the sea on dry land - they are not passive. For Egypt, the same scene and their walk lead to judgment not redemption. The character of the human response shapes the nature of their participation. The Egyptians, set on the subversion of the just order of God’s world and the termination of life and blessing, place them in diametric opposition to what God has newly brought into being.

As the morning breaks for Israel, the night falls on the Egyptians. They realize that a power is at work among the Israelites that can turn back their efforts. They voice a public confession regarding Israel’s God: Yhwh fights for them. They now know that Yhwh is the God of all the earth (see 14: 4, 18), unwittingly supplying imagery for Israel in its hymns of praise. Egypt drowns in the chaos of its own making. God is the visitor. Israel is free. The Israelites respond in a number of ways (cf. 4:31; 12:27); they revere Yhwh, they believe in Yhwh; they believe in Yhwh’s servant Moses; and they sing a song of praise to God for the life and blessing that had become theirs. They also engage in rituals - passover, unleavened bread, redemption of the firstborn - and retell the story of what God has done. Moses is exalted in their praises as God’s instrument, indicating the extraordinary importance of the leader in the relationship between God and people.

In 14:24, “the morning watch” is between the hours of 2-6am. In Israel, the night was divided into three watches, the others covering the hours of 6-10pm and 10pm-2am. In 14:25, “with difficulty” – the related verb is often used of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart – a subtle word play intimating causal connections. In 14:30-31, the preceding narrative is rounded out and, at the same time, acted as a preface for the following “Song at the Sea” (Psa.106:9-12). In 14:31, “His servant Moses” is so designated over 30 times in the Hebrew Bible, although he is never the object of a cult personality. His faults are not obscured, and he is even punished for transgressing in anger the divine command. Yet he is Israel’s leader par excellence. Of Moses, God says, “He is trusted throughout My household” and it is to him that God speaks “mouth to mouth” (Num. 12:7-8). The verdict of the Torah on his life is: “Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses – whom the Lord singled out, face to face” (Deut. 34:10).

## **Exodus 15:1-21 Two songs of victory**

The Song at the Sea, “shirah” (15:1-19) is dominated by its God-centered theme – God alone, not Moses or the cloud for example, attracts the poet’s interest. The English title, Song of Miriam (15:20-21), is somewhat misleading since the text states that Miriam, the prophetess and Aaron’s sister, recites only the first line of the “shirah”. This reflects the custom (Judg. 11:34 and 1 Sam. 18:6) of women going forth with music and dance to hail the returning victorious hero, although in the present instance, it is God and not man who is the victor.

To God alone, doxologies are sung, some of the oldest poetry in the Hebrew Bible. Without such a response by the people, the great deeds of God would have been without a voice in the world. God’s goal to have the divine name declared to all the earth (9:16; see Josh. 4:24) would have been set back. The two songs (Moses and the people, vv. 1-18; Miriam v.21) have historical and cosmic dimensions, and are preceded by nearly identical references to the saving act of God on behalf of Israel (14: 28-29; 15: 19). The songs seem to move from the sea crossing (v. 1-12) to anticipations of the land settlement and the establishment of God’s abode in Canaan. The song of thanksgiving functions as adoration and as witness, as an honoring of God and as a witness about God (9:16) before all the world (see Psa. 119: 171-172). The purpose of the exodus was “so that my name may be declared throughout all the earth” (Lev. 26:45; Psa. 106: 8; Isa. 63:12; Ezek. 20:9, 22; Neh. 9:10).

The peoples of the world quickly hear of God’s power, and tremble (15:14-15). The word goes out like wildfire, a veritable pillar of fire and smoke. The song insists that the creator God is the decisive factor in the event, and hence only when one hears the interpretation does one know what in fact one has experienced. A simple report of a group of slaves escaping from Egypt would have put the fear of God in few, if any. But if that escape is interpreted in terms of the worldwide purposes of a creator God who is about the business of setting a chaotic, oppressive world straight, then all perpetrators of injustice might well melt away (15:13-16). Apart from 15:4, with its only specific reference to Egypt, the language has been widened to cover God’s work everywhere and not Egypt alone: man of war, power, strength, right hand, arm, greatness, majesty, holiness, fury, terrible, glorious deeds, wonders, guidance, redemption, and steadfast love. God’s sovereignty and love, His mighty deeds and redemption of Israel, are celebrated and emphasized in the song, not revengeful or rejoicing about the destruction of the Egyptians (Josh. 4:22-28; Isa. 51:9-10; 63:11-13). The entire emphasis falls on God’s care for His people, His absolute sovereignty over nature, and His control over history.

Many OT texts identify the chaos monster with Pharaoh/Egypt. Ezek. 29:3-5; 32:2-8; Psa. 87:4 (cf. 89:10); Isa. 30:7 (cf. 27:1); Jer. 46:7-8. But note especially Isa. 51:9-10 and Psa. 74: 13-14 which speak of the sea crossing as a conquest of chaos. In the exodus account, not a single instrument of human warfare is mentioned. The sword that Pharaoh draws (15:9) is not opposed by another sword; the chariot that he rides (15:4) is not met by another chariot; the army that he leads (15:4) clashes with no human fighting force.

The divine instruments are entirely from the natural order; wind, sea, floods, waters, deep, earth. To use Martin Luther King: “Egypt symbolized evil in the form of humiliating oppression, ungodly exploitation, and crushing domination”. Against such an enemy, traditional weapons will not do. (cf. Isa. 59:17; Eph. 6:10-20).

Structure and content of the Song at the Sea:

15: 1-10 celebrate God’s great triumph over the Egyptian foe

15:11-13 tell of the incomparability of God

15:14-16 describe the impact of these extraordinary events upon the surrounding peoples

15:17-18 are forward-looking and anticipate future developments, culminating in the building of a temple. (Deut. 12:9-11; 1 Kings 8:56).

God was the warrior, with sovereign control over nature and history, and no spears are needed, despite the reference to Israel as an army. The decisive factor in war is ultimately not human prowess or the force of arms, but the free exercise of God’s will. As David retorted to Goliath: “This whole assembly shall know that the Lord can give victory without sword or spear, for the battle is the Lord’s...(1 Sam. 17:47)”. Also, Zech.4:6: “Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit, said the Lord of Hosts”. In 15:18, the Song ends with the proclamation of the eternal kingship of God, suggesting the contrast between the ephemeral and illusory nature of Pharaoh’s self-proclaimed royal divinity and the permanent reality of God’s sovereignty.

In the Song of the Sea, the faith of the redeemed people is portrayed. It is fully clear that Israel was not saved because of her faith. Rather, Israel failed to believe right up to the moment before her deliverance. The faith of Israel did not provide the grounds of her salvation in any sense. Yet a faithful response was called forth. Israel broke out in praise to God. But Israel did not remember. “They did not keep in mind His power on the day when He redeemed them from the foe”. Already within the Old Testament the inability of Israel to maintain itself as the new Israel was clearly recognized by the prophets. God must provide a new covenant, not like the one made with the fathers when He brought them from Egypt. Because there can be no full redemption from bondage until one is freed from sin and death, the people of God await with eager expectancy the final redemption from the world of evil. The exodus then becomes only a hint of what will come in full power at the end. The exodus from the bondage of Egypt serves as a foretaste of the final joys of life in the presence of God. Yet the exodus also serves as a warning. The ecclesia lives in the memory of the redemption from the past bondage of Egypt, and looks for the promised inheritance. It now lives still in the desert somewhere between the Red sea and the Jordan. “Therefore let no one think that he stands lest he fall, but God is faithful and will also provide for us the *way of escape*”.

**In the New Testament, there are several references to the redemption from Egypt.** According to Acts 13:16ff. Paul speaks of “our fathers” who were led out of Egypt. Again, in Luke 1:6, Zachariah’s praise to God for his deliverance consists of a collection of Old Testament passages which include Psalms 18 and 106 with their references to the exodus experience. Very importantly, the New Testament places the redemption out of

Egypt into the new context of the salvation in Christ. Matthew 2:15 cites from Hosea 11:1: “Out of Egypt have I called My son”. Jesus not only participates in the history of the nation but, as the true redeemer of Israel, he ushers in the messianic age which the original exodus from Egypt only foreshadowed. The emphasis is on the final exodus to come when the Lord returns in his glory.

Paul’s speech in Acts 13 begins with reference to the exodus from Egypt, but then concludes that Israel did not really achieve freedom. Only in Christ is there “freedom from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:39). Likewise in 1 Cor. 10:1ff., which is the most extended reference to the exodus from Egypt, the great redemption provided by God is emphasized: “Our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea”. But the main point of Paul’s argument in that passage was the failure of all of Israel to partake in the divine acts of mercy: “With most of them God was not pleased”. Israel’s failure to achieve salvation was given as a warning to Christians to take heed lest they also perish. In a similar way, Hebrews Chapter 8 finds a warrant in Jer. 31:31ff. for emphasizing the inadequacy of the first exodus in achieving the intended goal. Because the first covenant proved obsolete, a new and better covenant was initiated.

Finally, there is a reference in Rev. 15:3 to the saints singing the song of Moses and the song of the Lamb. The passage interrupts the announcement and execution of God’s last judgment upon the earth. The writer sees the saints, in anticipation of the victory, praising God for His acts of righteous judgment. There are certain parallel features between Exodus 15 and the hymn which follows. The crystal sea parallels the red Sea, the elders with harps the victorious Israelites, the conquered beast the defeated Egyptian army. The hymn is made up of phrases from the Old Testament., frequently found in the Psalms. However, the striking similarity between the content of the hymn as praise to the just judgments of God parallels Moses’ song in Deut. 32 far more closely than Exodus 15. A foretaste of this final redemption in Christ is indicated in Isa. 51:9ff. where the writer joins the redemption from Egypt to the creation of the world.

## **V. THE WILDERNESS WANDERINGS Exodus 15:22-18:27**

### **Introduction: Life as an adolescent - crises in the wilderness**

Freed from the Egyptian threat, the people begin the long trek through the wilderness toward the promised land. The rest of the Book of Exodus relates some major events of the first year of these wanderings, the central one, of course, being the experience at Sinai. But on the way to the mountain, four crises occur: (i) a lack of drinking water (15:22); (ii) a shortage of food (16:1-36); (iii) a further lack of water (17:1-7); and (iv) a sudden, unprovoked aggression by a wild desert tribe (17:8-16). These misfortunes reflect the harsh realities of life in the wilderness. The first three are imposed by the cruelties of nature; the last, by the cruelty of man. In each instance, Israel’s need is very real, and the popular discontent is quite understandable. These experiences illustrate both the precarious nature of Israel’s survival and God’s providential care of His people. Although in no case is divine anger displayed, the first three narratives nevertheless leave

the unmistakable impression of being a negative judgment on Israel's behavior, an implicit critique of the people's ingratitude to God and their lack of faith in spite of their very recent experience of His wondrous protection and deliverance. And, moreover, where one might expect popular resentment to diminish in the wake of the divine response to each successive deprivation, in fact just the opposite occurs. It appears that "faith in the Lord and His servant Moses", to which 14:31 witnesses, began to weaken under the strains of life in the wilderness. The full itinerary of the journey is set out in great detail in Numbers 33.

The wilderness wanderings, or at least their length and breadth, were a surprise to Israel. Instead of a land of milk and honey, they get a desert. Dancers and singers are stopped dead in their tracks. Bondage with security and resources seem preferable to freedom and living from one oasis to another. Forty years is a long time in the old sandbox. The experience of order leads immediately into disorder, familiar resources are taken away, and freedom becomes anarchy. The journey to the promised land is littered with freshly dug graves, and not a single birth is recorded.

Yet even in the wilderness God is responsive to the needs of these complaining people. The protests are answered, the cries are heard, quiet unreservedly. A tale is provided in the midst of their enemies (cf. Psa. 23:5); food and water are provided. Death is transformed into life from within a death-filled context. True life must always be shaped by the wilderness. "These forty years the Lord your God has been with you; you have lacked nothing" (Deut. 2:7). Although the people are often ungrateful and disloyal, the divine blessing and graciousness pervade the narrative. Dealing with Israel in its adolescence or "teenager" stage is no easy task. God works through their feelings of abandonment and helplessness, their words of complaint and acts of rebellion, and their need for reassurance, protection, a new self-identity, and non-oppressive life structures. God keeps His promises.

Unlike the plague stories, the natural order springs into new life. Consider the contrasts between the wilderness and the plagues: (i) the result of the first plague was that "they could not drink the water" (7:24) but now, when that applied, the bitter water is made sweet and potable (15:22-27). This presages a later victory: "For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool and the thirsty ground springs water" (Isa. 35:6-7; 41:17-18; 43:19-23; 48:21; 49:10); (ii) whereas in the seventh plague God "rained" hail upon Egypt, which destroyed the food sources (9:18, 23), here God "rains" bread from the heavens (16:4). Rain and food become indistinguishable (see Deut. 11:11-17). In the eighth plague, locust "came up" and "covered" the land (10:14-15), destroying plants and trees. In 16:13, quail "came up" and "covered" the camp, providing food. In the parallel story (Num. 11:31), the wind brings quail rather than locusts; (iii) here the "staff with which Moses struck the Nile" (17:5) brings water for the people to drink rather than making all the water in the Nile unfit to drink; and (iv) here the "staff of God" is used against the Amalekites, whose destructive ways towards Israel were compared to that of the Egyptians (cf. Deut. 25:18). The natural order provides for life and blessing rather than deprivation. But what happens to Israel

will depend on their moral obedience to God (Deut. 28:27 where the “diseases of Egypt” will come upon disobedience).

### **Exodus 15:22-27    Obedience and healing – the bitter waters at Marah**

The transition from 15:21 is very sharp, from singing to no water to drink. Songs of praise quickly turn to the complaining heard earlier (14: 10-12). God responds quickly to Moses’ prayer and the people’s need by showing Moses a piece of wood. God purifies the water, contrasting with the first plague.

### **Ground rules for the journey**

Exodus 15:25b-26 shares the ground rules or general guidelines for the journey. “By this we may be sure that we know Him, if we keep His commandments” (1 John 2: 3-4). This passage shows that the giving of the law at Sinai is not something new in Israel’s relationship with God. Some commandments have already come out of real life situations. God as healer both has reference to the healing of the water and to the immediately prior word about diseases – not necessarily the plagues (15:26).”For I am the Lord your healer”. If you obey my laws, you will be less likely to suffer illness. If the God who is healer becomes judge, that healing power will not be as available. God will heal, but He will also honor the moral order. God “who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases” (Psa. 103:3).

### **Exodus 16:1-36    Food and faith**

This section has three components: (i) the shortage of food – manna and quail (16:1-20); (ii) the law of the Sabbath (16:21-30); and (iii) an appendix on the manna (16:31-36). Note, after detailing God’s marvels for His people, the description of their grumbling follows (Psa. 78:17-25). Yet, despite the people’s ingratitude and lack of faith, God still shows the concern for the hungry and, in His compassion, provides for their needs.

Exactly one month after leaving Egypt, the euphoria attendant on the miraculous escape at the Sea of Reeds had given way to the harsh realities of life in the wilderness as the people trekked from one oasis to another. Food was now in short supply, and public dissatisfaction soon surfaced and broke into a clamorous outcry against the leadership of Moses and Aaron. In response, the people were promised provisions of “bread from heaven” in the morning and “flesh” in the evening.

Elim is a welcome oasis in the wilderness, but the time to leave comes and, 45 days beyond Egypt, it is back into the wilderness. A food crisis leads to a faith crisis, a lack of discernment of God’s presence in the ordinary leads to a denial of God’s activity in the extraordinary. The complaints begin once again in earnest; this time it is food (probably providing the background for Ezek. 20:10-13, including the violation of the Sabbath laws in the wilderness). A choice of places to die, abundance with oppression – an idealized and selective memory – is preferred to starvation with freedom (another popular idealizing of the past occurs in Num. 11:5 “we remember the fish that we used to eat free

in Egypt, the cucumber, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic”). Complaining turns to accusation: Moses and Aaron intend to kill them. God responds without anger: “I will rain bread on you”. Food abounds even in the wilderness (see Isa. 49:9-10; 51:3), and contrasts with the raining of hail. Exod. 16: 6-10 is the response of Moses/Aaron to the people’s complaint of 16:3, to which God replies in 16:12.

The various references to the manna yield the description that it fell during the night, was flaky, was fine as frost, resembled coriander seed, was white in appearance, but also had the color of bdellium, and tasted like wafers of honey, and like rich cream. It could be collected, ground between mill-stones or pounded in a mortar, boiled in a pot, and made into cakes. Any part of it not eaten the day it was collected became infested with maggots and stank. Numbers 11:7-9 gives a detailed description of the manna, and how it was prepared.

The issue is the relationship between food and faith. The people have reverted to their pre-exodus stance of expressing doubt that Moses and Aaron have their best interests at heart. The purpose of giving the food is that they might know: (i) that Yhwh is their God; and (ii) it is God who is the subject of the event. God has heard their murmurings (repeated 4 times) and will provide food, even though the complaints are actually against God (3 times). Even more, the glory of God will appear to them, so that they can “see” that this provision of food is a gift from God Himself. How common it is among the people of God that a crisis, whether of daily need or physical suffering, occasions a crisis of faith. Material and spiritual well-being are more closely linked than we often care to admit (see 6:9). It is by discerning the presence of God in connection with daily needs that we can return once again to the confession of our faith – not just focus on the extraordinary acts of God. God’s dramatic acts of creation are of one piece with daily blessings. And now God’s gifts come to people in and through that which is quite physical, natural, and ordinary. Jesus is the “true bread from heaven” (John 6:32) – also in 1 Cor. 10:1-3. “What is it?” (Exod. 16:15 Heb. “man hu”, a popular etymology for manna.) But with these gifts come responsibilities.

The prior word about testing (see 15:25; 20:18-21) is put into play: only one day’s supply at a time, except on the day before the Sabbath. In Deut. 8:2-3, 16, the divine motivation is more fully stated: that they might learn humility and remember that human beings do not live by bread alone but also by the word of God. “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matt. 6:11). The expressions of the will of God for Israel are threefold: (i) the people are to be mindful of a time of rest, a recurrent theme in Exodus (see at 20:8-11 and 31:12-17; cf. 23:12; 34:21; 35:2-3); (ii) a time for rest, but not at the expense of daily needs, a double portion is to be gathered on the day before Sabbath (16:5). The Sabbath, not an oppressive system, is a profound sign that the people’s days of bondage are past (hence, slaves are too to observe the Sabbath); and (iii) the gathering of provisions for only one day at a time (16:4, 19-20). There is to be no hoarding of the gifts of God’s creation, no building of larger and larger barns (Luke 12:18; cf. 1 Tim. 6: 6-10), no anxieties about what they are to eat on the morrow (Luke 12:22-30). Israel’s failure to adhere to these responsibilities earns the wrath of both God (16:28) and Moses (16:20).



God then commands Moses to have about two quarts of manna kept for posterity, so that the people would be reminded how God had fed them in the wilderness. The idealized and unwarranted memories of Pharaoh's food (16:3) are to be replaced with the genuine memories of the bread from God (16: 32-34).

In 16:10, the expression "in a cloud" refers to the luminous cloud that symbolizes God's active, dynamic, indwelling presence in Israel during the wilderness period (1 Thess. 4:17). In 16:31-36, an appendix dealing with the manna contains a note on the purported origin of the name manna, a description of the substance's appearance and taste, and instruction to preserve a sample, a historical retrospect, and a metrological note. Josh. 5:11-12 reports that "on the morrow after the passover, on that very day, they ate of the produce of the country, unleavened bread and parched grain. And the manna ceased on the morrow, when they ate of the produce of the land; the people of Israel had manna no more, but ate of the fruit of the land of Canaan that year". Hence, this reference expands 16:35, which probably refers to Gilgal, the first encampment of Israel west of the Jordan.

**The New Testament** regards the gift of manna from both a negative and a positive perspective. On the one hand, the manna was incapable of supplying the Israelites with genuine life. On the other hand, the manna was a gift of saving grace which was then identified in some way with Christ. The account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness according to Matthew and Luke makes explicit reference to the manna story by its citing of Deut. 8:3: "Man shall not live by bread alone...." There is an obvious analogy drawn between Israel and Jesus. As Israel wandered hungry for forty years in the wilderness and was tested by God, so Jesus the Messiah hungers for forty days and nights in the wilderness and is also put to the test. Jesus rejects the temptation to misuse his Messianic power. He acknowledges the true nature of the gift of food and cites Deut. 8 as a testimony to his faith that God can sustain by His Word even without food. Thus Jesus discerns the reality to which the miracle points.

Again, there is an implicit reference to manna in the accounts of the feeding of the five thousand (Mark 6; Matt. 14; Luke 9), although these accounts have been influenced by the literary form of 2 Kings 4:42. The people are still wandering hungry in the wilderness. The deliverance through Moses is not complete, but only a foreshadowing of what Jesus does as the new Moses, signaling the coming Messianic age. The emphasis is on the passive role of the people; the action is on the side of God. The miracle consists in feeding the people with ordinary bread and fish, but which were miraculously multiplied.

Then again, Paul makes use of the manna tradition. In 1 Cor. 10: 1-13 he finds the analogy between Israel and the ecclesia in the great redemptive events of the old covenant. The Israelites were "baptized into Moses...ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink". The parallel between the situation lies in the lesson that God's saving grace, which both experienced, can be forfeited and lost. The ecclesia has not reached the promised land, and must not succumb to temptation. Again in 2 Cor. 8:15 Paul makes an exhortational reference to the manna, and finds in the divine gift a warrant for the ecclesia's responsibility to share its wealth with the needy.

Finally, the most extensive and profound use of the Old Testament manna tradition appears in John 6:31-58. In a major spiritual development in God's purpose, the traditional role of the law is transferred to the bread from heaven (John 6:33), with the heavenly bread being identified with Jesus. Those who have not accepted Jesus have failed therefore to heed God's voice given in the Old Testament (John 5:37 ff.; 6:41ff.). Again, Jesus as the heavenly bread performs the function of Old Testament wisdom and sustains with food and drink those who "come to him".

### **Exodus 17:1-7      On testing God – Massah and Meribah**

For the third time, the people grumble against Moses. Their rhetoric grows stronger and more threatening; they even question God's providence. Biblical authors used the theme in various ways: (i) frequently, the episode serves as a motif of Israel: "trying" and "provoking" God. Numbers 14:22-23 makes a general statement of the many such occasions during the wilderness wanderings. Deut. 6:16 and 9:22 specifically cite the grumbling at Massah as the prime example of such discontent. This theme is echoed and emphasized in Psa. 95:8; (ii) The Massah ["trial"] - Meribah ["quarrel"] theme (both words used in 17: 2 and 7) also served as the paradigm of God's active presence in sustaining Israel during its dire need. Deut. 8:15 and particularly Psa. 78:15-16, 20 relate to it in this way; (iii) here the situation is reversed; it is God who is seen as trying Israel, with the trials and tribulations intended to test their faith. Hence, Deut. 8:2, 16 states: "that He might test you by hardships to learn what was in your hearts: whether you would keep His commandments or not" and "in order to test you by hardship only to benefit you in the end". This interpretation is taken up in Psa. 81:8: "I tested you at the waters of Meribah".

Once again, the people are on the move. Rephidim was the last station on the journey from the Sea of Reeds to Sinai (19:2: Num. 33:14-15). The water here was not unpotable (bitter) as at Marah (15:23), but was severely depleted presumably either through drought or the restraints of the Amalekites. This brief but composite story highlights the character of the divine leading, the continuing human complaint, and the unsurpassable graciousness of God. The people continue to move from promise to fulfillment. The wilderness might seem like a godforsaken place, but it is not. The people are being led by God Himself (see at 13:17-22). God's leading does not always move directly towards oases. Here they are led to a place where, once again, there is no water to drink (see the parallel in Num. 20: 2ff). The people complain to Moses again; this time they have no water to drink at all. Moses notes that they are putting God to the test. Why did you bring us out of Egypt, they say to Moses? For the third time in four complaints (14:11; 16:3), they wonder whether Moses intends to kill them, stressing the children and the cattle this time. From 17:7, the double name given the place, Massah/Meribah, marks divine testing as the basic memory associated with this story. These memories haunt later Israel. The names became a type for testing God: "You shall not put Yhwh your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah" (cf. Deut. 6:16; Psa. 78:18, 41, 56; 81:7; 95:9). From Num. 14:22, the people had tested God 10 times, severely testing the divine patience. In addition, it is at this place that "it went ill with Moses on their account". (see Psa. 106:32; Num 20:2-13; Deut. 32:51).

What does it mean to test God? It is appropriate for God to test Israel (16:4), but not for Israel to test God. The asking of the question: “Is the Lord among us or not?” in itself is not a testing of God. Testing has to do with “putting God to the proof”. That is, seeking a way in which God can be coerced to act or show Himself, to try to force God’s hand in order to determine concretely whether God is really present. If God is really present, then God must show us in a concrete way by making water materialize. It is an attempt to turn faith into sight (cf. Matt. 4:5-7). No need for care, insurance, and so on, because God will care for me, holding God a hostage. Moses leaves off disputing with the people, and turns to God, who responds, not with advice about how to deal with Moses’ unruly people, but provides directions on how to find water. Moses is to strike the rock at Horeb, from which water will come forth. Contrasting with Moses’ striking the Nile which led to water being unfit to drink, so here his striking the rock leads to water fit to drink. (Isa. 35:6-7; 41:17-18; Ezek. 36:24-26; 47:7-12; cf. 1 Cor. 10:4). With Sinai water and law are linked. The law is given in the midst of chaos and disorder. Obedience in the midst of the wilderness brings order into chaos. The gift of the water of life comes from the same source as the gift of the law, a source of life [death?] for the community of faith.

In 17:2 “quarreled” is the key word with quasi-judicial overtones, much stronger than “grumble” in the previous two complaining incidents. It conjures up a picture of an angry and hostile confrontation in which the people, professing to be an aggrieved party, levy charges against God and Moses. In 17:3-4, the situation has deteriorated seriously, with the language of the mob intemperate, the ugly mood is explosive, and a riot may break at any moment. In 17:5, whereas striking with the rod had deprived the Egyptians of drinking water (7:17-24), the same action now serves to satisfy Israel’s need for water.

### **Exodus 17:8-16    There’s power in those hands – the battle with Amalek**

This incident, also occurring at Rephidim, is expanded in Deut. 25:17-19, which reports that the Amalekites, long-time implacable foes of Israel, made a surprise rear attack on the famished and exhausted Israelites not long after the escape from Egypt. They ruthlessly cut down the stragglers – the elderly, the weak, and the infirm. Israel was forced to fight its first defensive war for survival. Importantly, they were undeterred by the “fear of God” (Deut. 25:17-19, cf. 1:17). The people of Israel had come out of Egypt “equipped for battle” (13:18). This brief, unified story reports their first and only use of that equipment in the book of Exodus. The somewhat passive, complaining stance of the people to this point is no longer in evidence. The battle is with the Amalekites, a desert region nomadic people, often hostile to Israel (see Judg. 6:3-4; 1 Sam. 27:8). Moses takes the leadership role in the defense. This is a revisiting of the conflict with Pharaoh. Exod. 17:5 refers to the prior use of the staff at the Nile, which was also used at the Red Sea (14:16, 21, 26-27). Joshua is mentioned for the first time (17:9). Unlike earlier, the outstretched staff/hand is not immediately fully effective, probably because the object of its use is a human endeavor rather than a natural occurrence.

The outstretched hands could be seen as a prayer gesture, but no relationship to prayer is evident here. More likely, the emphasis suggests that Moses, probably holding an ensign

signifying the presence and support of God (17:16), was visible to the foe on the hilltop; to see the hand/staff of Moses was to see the hand of God. It is not like an “electrical shock system”, but a symbol to Israel and the enemy of God at work in their midst, with perseverance in faith needed. This incident provoked strong memories for later Israel. The Amalekites attacked “when you were faint and weary, and cut off at your rear all who lagged behind you” (Deut. 25:17-19). At a point of supreme vulnerability for the people of God, when their future was hanging in the balance, Amalek had sought to exterminate them, becoming an embodiment of evil, and Pharaoh revisited. Moses built an altar and named it: “The Lord is my banner” or “rallying signal” (see especially Isa. 49:22). Moses’ hand upon the banner refers to the staff as a realistic symbol of the hand of God.

In 17:14, with “inscribe”, there is the first reference to writing in the Bible. The need for remembrance and memory is also emphasized in this verse.

### **Exodus 18:1-12 Faith and family – Jethro’s visit and the organization of the judiciary**

Exodus 18 witnesses to the two central aspects of what it means to be the people of God: faith and law. The chapter would appear not to be in chronological sequence, with the episode occurring after the revelation at Sinai and towards the end of the sojourn there. Verses 1-12 describe the visit of Jethro to the camp of Israel, focusing on the declaration and confession of what God has done for Israel. Verses 13-27 center on community structures - proposal for organizing the judicial system - that give shape to the life of faith. In 18:1-12, Moses’ family is integrated into Israel’s new identity as the exodus community of faith (13 references to Jethro being Moses’ father-in-law, and only one reference to him being a priest). (i) Jethro hears what God has done for Israel (18:1); (ii) having heard the news, Jethro with Moses’ family visits the newly delivered community (18:5); (iii) they then go (18:7) into the tent (sanctuary), a precursor of 18:12; (iv) Moses declares the good news to Jethro concerning all that God has done, with no reference to his own role; (v) Jethro rejoices, using basically Moses’ language, and hence a faithful transmission; (vi) Jethro gives public thanks for the deliverance, echoing other passages (1 Kings 8: 56-61; Psa. 135; 1 Chron. 29:10-13); (vii) Jethro then, in public, confesses that Yhwh is God of gods and Lord of lords, and now “knows that God is incomparable”; and (viii) Jethro presents an offering to God and in the tent worships with the leaders of Israel. Jethro is the subject of all the activity except for Moses’ crucial witness in 18:8.

### **Exodus 18:13-27 Redemption and good order**

Key features are the extraordinary situation where an important Israelite institution such as the judiciary is ascribed to the initiative and advice of a Midianite priest, and the secular nature of the judicial agency – from the civil and not the ecclesiastical sphere (the elders are not mentioned).

A people freed from oppressive structures will need to develop societal structures of their own. Jethro observes that Moses is trying to do everything all by himself (see Judg. 4:4-

5; 2 Sam. 15:1-6), and that he is not very good at delegating. Moses is not only wearing himself out, the people's patience with him is wearing thin as well. "It is not good", with its echo of Genesis 1, suggests that justice should be manifest in every aspect of the social order. With Jethro's suggested delegation of duties, Moses' energies are to be devoted largely elsewhere. Moses is to present the community before God, bringing their concerns to the divine presence and discerning the divine will for their daily life. Moreover, he would be the teacher of God's ways. But not just any persons of faith will do, but people of integrity and incorruptibility, as was indeed quickly put into effect (see Deut. 1:9-18). As is so often the case, the one who presents the suggestion for improvement moves on to other things. Jethro returns to his home, never to be heard from again.

The arrival at Sinai (19:1) inaugurates the culminating stage in the process of forging Israel's national identity and spiritual destiny. The shared experiences of bondage and liberation are to be supplemented and given ultimate meaning by a great communal encounter with God. Henceforth, Israel is to be a people inextricably bound to God by a covenantal relationship.

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