PARALLEL GUIDE 13

Moses and the Pharaoh

Summary: Israel understood her very existence as God's people in light of her deliverance from Egyptian bondage in the Exodus/Sinai event. This chapter considers the account from the birth and call of Moses as Israel's supreme religious leader through the series of plagues that finally forces the pharaoh to free them.

Learning Objectives

• Read Exodus 1-13:16

• Describe the effect of the Passover ritual on Israel

• Name three figures besides Moses for whom there are stories of miraculous births

• Identify on a map the two possible locations for Mt. Sinai

• State the theological significance of the name Yahweh

• State the significance of God's "hardening Pharaoh's heart"

• Describe how St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas interpreted the divine name

Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Describe the effect of the ritual of the Passover on Israelites in later generations.

2. State the significance of the contest between Yahweh and Pharaoh.

3. The deliverance from bondage is an old symbol. What recent movements have some of the same characteristics as the Exodus/Sinai event?

4. Some scholars call the Exodus/Sinai event the foundation story of the Jewish people. What other foundation stories do you find significant in your life?

Preparing for Your Seminar

In Hebrew thought, rehearsing or retelling the story did more than simply remind the people of what happened long ago. The retelling had the effect of bringing the past up into the present and making it truly alive. This may be an opportunity to visit the story as an EfM group and mark out significant events that make your group unique. Think about these events and bring them to your group for discussion.

Additional Sources

Brevard Childs, The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary (Westminster Press, 1094) is one of the best commentaries on Exodus; it is intelligent, interesting and highly readable. Another excellent one, though a bit sparer is, Martin Noth's Exodus: A Commentary (Westminster Press, 1962). Both books are part of The Old Testament Library series.

Gerhard von Rad's Moses(Association Press, 1959).

Chapter 13
MOSES AND THE PHARAOH

For this chapter you need to have your copy of the Oxford Annotated Bible at hand. We cover fairly large blocks of biblical material. First read through the biblical passages indicated at the beginning of each chapter. Read the passages as if they were short stories, paying attention to the story line. Do not spend great time or energy on the problems of the text. We attempt to deal with any difficulties as they arise.

In this chapter we consider the account of the escape of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt up to the point in the story at which the institution of the Passover is described. In Chapter Fourteen, we continue the account up to the Israelites' arrival at Mt. Sinai. We read a portion of the Bible which is as important for an understanding of the Old Testament as any other. There is a sense in which the story of the Exodus—of God's act of deliverance of his people—explains the creation, physical and spiritual, of the people of Israel. Israel understood her very existence as a people under God in the light of the exodus event.

Read Exodus 1-13:16

The first fifteen chapters of the Book of Exodus have long been recognized by scholars as a single unit. The story may have been rehearsed as part of a ritual held every year or perhaps every seventh year. In Hebrew thought, rehearsing or retelling the story did more than remind the people of what had happened long ago. The retelling had the effect of bringing the past up into the present and making it truly alive. The Israelites were quite serious, almost literal, when they said that in the celebration of Passover—the annual celebration of the escape from Egypt—the young children who heard the story were made present with their ancient ancestors as they left Egypt and were delivered safely through the sea. We might say that hearers of the story went back "in imagination" to the events of that far away time, but this is much too weak an expression. For the Israelite the story was not about how they in that generation left their slavery, were pursued by the Egyptians, and were delivered by God from certain defeat at the waters of the sea, but about how we experienced all these things. Imagination this may well be, but it is a use of the imagination which makes permanently real the experience of being present at the event which made Israel into the people of God.

After your study of Genesis, you are aware that calling these chapters a unit does not necessarily mean that they were written at the same time by the same person. They, and all the rest of Exodus, are woven together from the same sources—J, E, and P—that we found in Genesis. Occasionally, when it seems to be important for understanding the text, we point out which source provided a particular passage. The rest of the time we count on your familiarity with this characteristic of the Old Testament that permits you to take in your stride the inconsistencies and contradictions that sometimes occur.

Exodus is more than textually similar to Genesis. The history of the Exodus, no less than the legends of the patriarchs and the myths of creation and sin, is theological

in purpose. Whether or not the events of the Exodus happened as they are described is less important than the way they came to be experienced and understood. Israel heard the story not only as one of its deliverance from physical slavery in Egypt, but also as the story of its redemption. Human beings had universally followed "the evil imaginations of the heart" and been scattered in confusion over the face of the earth. Now God was calling Israel into a life under YHWH as the beginning of God's work of redeeming all the nations of the world. Israel would often forget or ignore this calling, but when she did, prophets would arise to remind the people of the covenant that YHWH had made with them when delivering them from Egypt. This

was the ideal time for Israel—the time it would remember again and again, not only as a source of correction in time of infidelity, but also as a source of strength in time of trouble.

To say this raises questions about the relation of the exodus event—or better the Exodus/Sinai event—to the covenant with Abraham. You may recall that we discussed that event in similar terms. It is possible that there were at one time two traditions, one of which saw Abraham's call as the "moment of deliverance" for Israel and the other which traced the beginnings of the actual nation to Moses. The stories of the patriarchs are presented in such a way as to suggest this possibility. Or, it may be that the events surrounding Moses really do give us the beginnings of the life of Israel as a recognizable community under the covenant, and that earlier patriarchal memories became interpreted as foretastes of the covenant-life that Israel later experienced. There is no way to decide for certain between these two possibilities, though the reconstruction of the events that we suggested in the last chapter would cause us to tend in the direction of the latter: that is, that there were during the patriarchal period some kinships among the various tribes that eventually became Israel, but that no real unity under the covenant with YHWH came about until the tribes who had been in Egypt entered the land under Joshua. At any rate, as the text of the Hebrew Bible now stands, Abraham is shown as the ideal "type" or model of Israel's faith and covenant with God, but the actual covenanting event is described as occurring under Moses. We try to show that this picture is correct and that the figure of Moses deserves the prominence which the present text accords him.

According to Genesis 46:26-27, the number of people "of the house of Jacob" who came into Egypt was seventy. This number, which is confirmed here in v. 5, represents Jacob, sixty-seven male offspring, and Joseph and the two sons born to him in Egypt. (The number seventy-five, found here in the Septuagint and again in Acts 7:14, apparently adds to the accounting the son and grandson of Manasseh and the two sons and grandson of Ephraim, all of whom were born in Egypt.) This number is hardly to be taken literally, but it may well be that only a small handful of an original "Jacob" clan did come into Egypt. Verse 7 tells us that this people, whatever their original number, increased greatly—there are in fact in this one verse five statements to that effect: the people of Israel are said to be "fruitful," they "increased greatly," they "multiplied," they "grew exceedingly strong," and "the land was filled with them." Later we read of a fantastically large army of people who leave Egypt with Moses. In 12:37, the number is set at "about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children." In Numbers 2:32, the count is more exactly six hundred

and three thousand, five hundred and fifty. These numbers cannot be taken literally either. In Hebrew, numbers are expressed by means of letters of the alphabet. If you take the consonants in the phrase "the sons of Israel" and give them their numerical equivalents, you get six hundred and three thousand, five hundred and fifty. It may well be that the precise number given in the Book of Numbers was arrived at in this way and that the approximate number given in Exod. 12:37 is a rounding off of that. The meaning seems to be that all "the sons of Israel"—that is, whatever the historical truth of the matter, all twelve tribes—were in Egypt.

While we cannot know precisely how many Israelites came into the land of Egypt with Jacob or left with Moses, we do know that these people presented a problem to Pharaoh. They seem to have overflowed the land of Goshen originally ceded to them and were presenting a threat to the structure of power in Egypt. As we pointed out earlier, the new pharaoh "who did not know Joseph" (Exod. 1:8) was possibly Rameses II, who is credited with building the store-cities of Pithom and Raamses. (Rameses—variant spelling is Raamses.) Whoever the "Pharaoh of the oppression" was, it was his policy to lay heavy burdens on the Hebrews to keep them under control. It was established Egyptian policy to allow nomadic tribes to graze their flocks in this area, on the eastern fringe of the fertile area of the Nile delta at the edge of the marsh. The story's account of the amazing growth of the numbers of Hebrews is probably exaggerated. It is hard to see how the new pharaoh's policy could be seen as dealing "shrewdly" with them (v. 10). Still, for the Old Testament writer, Pharaoh's attempt to check the people's growth by requiring the midwives to kill the newborn Hebrew boy babies serves as a means of asserting the favor of God to the Hebrews. To this point

there has been no mention of God—the "history" has been secular. But now we discover that the midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, fear God (1:17) and therefore spare the babies, and so "God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong" (v. 20). With the failure of this means of controlling their growth, the pharaoh orders that all the boy babies be cast into the river. The Hebrew text of this verse shows a ruler who is "out of control." He commands all male babies in the kingdom be thrown into the water. The English adds "born to the Hebrews." While that makes sense, and is undoubtedly what Pharoah intended, the Hebrew as it stands makes a point about "all-powerful" rulers.

Some have seen this early part of Exodus as a drama played with and through women. It is the fertility of the Hebrew women that causes Pharaoh concern. His plans to "deal shrewdly" with the people are thwarted by the two midwives in one general instance and by Jochebed and Miriam, Moses' mother and sister, in a second, more particular one. Moses is saved at his birth by these latter two women and by the daughter of Pharaoh himself. Later, before he sets out on his mission (4:24-26), he will be saved by his wife, Zipporah. The Midrash (story) to the effect that Israel is redeemed because of its righteous women is in no small part true. Finally, this account of oppression serves not only to describe oppression by forced labor—which no doubt was real—but also to set the stage for the story of the birth of Moses. This greatest of all Israelite heroes could not have been born without

some special show of God's favor upon him. The story of his birth provides this. As Gerhard von Rad points out, while the story is properly categorized as legend, we must remember that all stories about Moses are also, and even primarily, stories about God.

Not a single one of all these stories, in which Moses is the central figure, was really written about Moses. Great as was the veneration of the writers for this man to whom God had been pleased to reveal Himself, in all these stories it is not Moses himself, Moses the man, but God who is the central figure. God's words and God's deeds, these are the things that the writers intend to set forth. (*Moses*, pp. 8-9)

Exodus 2:1-10

The well-known story of Moses being set adrift in a reed basket among the bulrushes of the Nile has counterparts in other ancient literatures. According to an Assyrian legend, the great king of Assyria (or Akkad), Sargon I, was found floating in a basket in the water, saved by the gods and brought up by them to be the ruler of Assyria. In fact, Sargon was an illegitimate child who usurped the throne, and this story was likely spread about in order to justify his breaking the former dynastic line of rulers. Queen Hatshepsut, one of the few women to rule as absolute monarch in Egypt, acquired about her a legend that she was chosen as queen and nursed by the gods—probably to explain to the people why a woman was their ruler and to validate her claim to power. Similarly there was a legend that the Persian king Cyrus was, on the command of the then-reigning king, left as an infant to die by exposure, but was rescued by divine aid and lived to overthrow his would-be murderer. Some of these stories may have been known by those who told the story of Moses' birth. But it cannot rightly be said that these storytellers falsified an otherwise straightforward birth account. In ancient thought it was assumed that the greatness of a life must be prefaced by some unusual features surrounding the birth. We see the same attitude at work in the accounts of the births of John the Baptist and of Jesus in the New Testament. Admittedly, it is possible in all these cases that an essentially accurate tradition concerning these births was preserved; that is not the point. Even in the absence of such "historically true" traditions, great men and women would be accorded comparably great or miraculous circumstances surrounding their births as portents of their future greatness.

The Moses story is not completely consistent. A man and a woman from the tribe of Levi—later to become a tribe of priests—have a son. Presumably he is the firstborn, although according to 7:7, Aaron is three years his elder. In v. 4, there is an older sister who watches over the baby and persuades the pharaoh's daughter to

employ the baby's own mother as a wet nurse. Neither the parents nor the sister is named here, although later tradition says that the sister's name was Miriam (Num. 26:59). According to 6:20, Moses' father was Amram and his wife was Jochebed, Amram's father's sister.

The writer derives the name "Moses" from a Hebrew word (mashah) which means "to draw out." Actually it is an Egyptian name appearing as the last part of the names of some of the pharaohs. It signifies "born of," the root verb being "to beget a child."

Perhaps there was originally an Egyptian prefix to the name, given by Pharaoh's daughter. If so, this has been lost in the Jewish tradition. The fact that the name is Egyptian lends support to the story's claim that Moses was raised as an Egyptian.

Moses in Midian

We are told nothing of Moses' childhood, although later tradition was to elaborate upon it richly. Verses 11-15 tell of an adult Moses killing an Egyptian for mistreating a Hebrew. Moses recognizes the Hebrew as "one of his kinsfolk" (v. 11). We are not told whether he discovered his Hebrew parentage from his sister or his mother and kept it secret, or whether it was known among the royal court circles. As with many stories which are told as background to the major acts of heroes, we are probably not supposed to be concerned with such details. The point of this story is to account for Moses' fall from favor in the court.

Exodus 2:11-22 The Flight

Note the realism in v. 12—"he looked this way and that"; only when the coast is clear does Moses kill the Egyptian and hide him. And not until the next day when two Hebrews reveal that they know of the murder does Moses realize that his attempts at concealment have failed. He has to flee the country, for the pharaoh seeks to kill him.

Moses goes to Midian. Look at a map and you will find Kadesh-barnea and somewhat to the west of it a site marked Mt. Sinai with a question mark after it. This is likely the area referred to as "the land of Midian," and the site marked there as Mt. Sinai is one of two such sites. If you look elsewhere on a map, you may find another site for Mt. Sinai with a question mark. This is the traditional site of the holy mountain where Moses met God at the burning bush and where later he was to receive the Law. Two sites are marked because there is a dispute as to the actual location of Mt. Sinai. We discuss the issues surrounding the debate in the next chapter.top In the land of Midian, that is, near Kadesh-barnea, Moses stops by a well and meets the daughters of "the priest of Midian." The name ascribed to this priest is Reuel in v. 18, but elsewhere in Exodus he is called Jethro. Moses is given his daughter Zipporah as a wife and has a son, Gershom, by her. The word *ger* in Hebrew means "sojourner." In Israelite law great care is taken to protect the rights of "sojourners," the "stranger within thy gates" of the Ten Commandments; the Law also makes constant reference to the fact that Israel has for so long "sojourned" in Egypt.

In Exod. 2:23-24, the death of the king of Egypt is noted and then P makes a statement, so characteristic of this writer, summing up the meaning of the older JE narratives: "The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them." The final sentence is anticipatory—and reassuring. Even if the people have largely forgotten him, God remains true to his promises. He is present at all times.

Exodus 3:1-4:17 The Call of Moses (J and E)

The story of the call of Moses to set free the people of Israel is told twice, once here by the JE writer and again in Exod. 6:2-7:7 by the P writer. For J and E the call comes to Moses while he is in Midian, while for P Moses is in Egypt at the time of his call.

In Exod. 3:1-10, we can see by tracing the use of the divine name that the J and E sources are intertwined. Moses, while tending the flocks of his father-in-law, sees a bush which is burning but is not consumed. Many speculations have been made about what this bush was. Naturalistic explanations may be found, but it would miss the point of the narrative to pursue them. The point is that Moses experiences the burning bush as part of a divine call. The phenomenon marks the place as "holy ground"; it may well have been a Midianite holy place. When God calls Moses, he answers with the by now familiar reply of the person of faith: "Here am I" (v. 4). God identifies himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We should not forget, from our vantage point of long familiarity with the Judeo/Christian tradition, that in the ancient world contact with the gods was relatively commonplace; it was therefore necessary for the god to identify himself. Simply because the ground was "holy" did not mean that it was holy to YHWH; it could have been holy to any of a number of the gods. This is the God of the patriarchs. God has remembered the covenant with the people and now intends to deliver them out of their bondage and bring them to the land promised to their ancestors long ago. Furthermore, God proposes to perform this act of deliverance through the person of Moses.

In Exod. 3:11-4:17, Moses raises four objections to his call. The first is in vv. 11-12: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh . . .?" God's response is rather perplexing. God promises to be with Moses and says that there will be a sign that this is so. But what is the sign? As the text now reads (v. 12), it seems to be that in the future, after Moses has brought the people out of Egypt, they worship God upon this mountain. But how could this future event be a sign that would authenticate God's presence with Moses when he appears before Pharaoh? There is no definitive answer to this. Some scholars—including Martin Noth whose commentary on Exodus is recommended for further reading—assume that the actual sign has dropped out of the text. But Brevard Childs in his commentary The Book of Exodus attempts to explain the text as it stands. After analyzing various forms of "call narratives," Childs suggests that the sign to authenticate Moses' call means an extraordinary event occurring at the time of the call. He then argues that the sign is the burning bush itself. Yet, he goes on, the bush is also in a way a sign of a future event, namely the coming of the people to worship at the mountain. The burning bush is a sign of the devouring fire of Sinai to which the people are to come. "The point of the verse is as follows: this burning bush is a sign that it is I who send you, and it is your guarantee that when you have rescued the people from Egypt, you will worship God on this same mountain" (Childs, p. 60).

The second objection Moses raises is that the people will want to know which god sent him. The passage Exod. 3:13-15 is one of the most disputed in the Old Testament. Moses asks for the name of the god, for simply to say that the god of the patriarchs had sent him would not be sufficient. Turn to 6:2-3. This is the P version of the call

of Moses. Here God gives the name YHWH, noting the previously used name El Shaddai, "God Almighty," by the patriarchs. As we saw in Genesis, God was in fact called by many names. If the patriarchal stories reflect a period in which the tribes which were to become Israel were kindred "Hebrews," it would be important that YHWH, the God of the covenant under which they united, is equated with the gods on whom these tribes had called earlier.

For the J writer, of course, the name YHWH had been used since the time of Enosh, the grandson of Adam (see Gen. 4:26). For both E and P the name YHWH is given only at the call of Moses. Exodus 3:13-15, or at

least part of it, is the E version, and 6:2ff. is that of P.[top]

The disputes center mainly about two issues: first, what is the meaning of the phrase in v. 14, which is translated "I am who I am," but can also be translated "I am who I am," or "I will be what I will be," or even "I am he who causes to be"; and second, how is the grammatical confusion to be resolved? Let us look at the second question first. If you look at v. 14 and 15 closely, you will note three replies in very close succession: "God said to Moses . . ."; "He said further . . ."; and "God also said to Moses . . . ." One reply would surely have been enough. Packing three into so short a space suggests to some scholars that various traditions have been combined. Perhaps originally the J story had Moses ask for God's name (v. 13) and the immediate reply (v. 15, omitting "also") was, "God said to Moses, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, I am has sent me to you."' For J, since this was the name of God during the patriarchal period, such a reply would suffice. But E, who needs to account for a shift in names from those which were used during the period of the patriarchs to the name YHWH, associates the new divine name and the mysterious phrase which occurs in v. 14.

What of the meaning of the phrase itself? It seems clear that the verb used is "to be" *(hayah)*. The form used can be either present or future. It can also be a "causative" form, that is, a form in which whatever action the verb expresses is caused to come about by the subject, thus the different possible translations given above. Commentators in recent times have tended to regard the phrase as either a refusal to supply a name—so that it could be paraphrased, "Do not ask my name, for I am who I am!"—or as the giving of a name which remains indefinite. The name is not translated in the English translation prepared by the Jewish Publication Society (1962)—it is rendered by a simple transliteration of the Hebrew "Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh"—and in his commentary on that translation W. Gunther Plaut notes that

. . . though Moses is given the new name to take back to Israel, not one single instance is reported in the Torah where he is shown to have actually used it. From this we can conclude that the revelation was never meant for the people at all. . . .

Rather Moses asks for himself—for his own benefit—and the answer he receives is also for him. (A parallel is in the story of Jacob's wrestling with the "man," Gen. 32:24-29.)

God understands what Moses wants, and the very vagueness of His answer is purposeful. . . . Moses wants to know the nature of God by inquiring about the inner meaning of his name, but God will not be fully known and therefore evades a clear answer. His response is intentionally vague, for it is a response to Moses only, and not a name suitable for communication. 'You ask to know My name,' God says, 'and I will tell you: I am what I am, I will be what I will be. And when you tell your people of this experience tell them it is the same YHWH they know about.' (The Torah: A Modern Commentary, pp. 405-406)

One may argue that God does give the name "YHWH," so that v. 14 cannot be a simple evasion. Rather—according to this argument—the reply is an emphatic assertion that God is, and furthermore that God is not fixed or set in his "being," but has freedom to "be what he will be" and to "cause what he will cause." So far as the concern to withhold from humankind the power to manipulate God through God's name, the effect is the same. Nothing is revealed about God except that God is and that God is beyond human control.

Some Christian commentators, such as St. Augustine in the fifth century and St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth, have interpreted the assertion "that he is" in the more static sense of Greek philosophy. The phrase was then customarily translated "He who is" and interpreted as "Being Itself." Some modern theologians, notably Paul Tillich, have spoken of God as Being Itself, or "the ground of being." The Septuagint Greek translation lends itself to this interpretation, and there are some weighty theological reasons, given the philosophical alternatives that have been developed in the Christian era, for speaking of God in this way. It seems clear, however, that this text in its original Hebrew form cannot be used as a justification for such

thinking. The Hebrew does not give us any clue about the nature of God; it speaks of his relationship of presence to and yet freedom from his creation. Who God is will become manifest in history.

In Exod. 3:16-22, which intrudes into the objections Moses raises to his calling, the whole program for the rest of the first fifteen chapters of Exodus is spelled out: Moses is to go to the elders of Israel with the announcement of YHWH's intent to deliver them; he is to appeal to Pharaoh for permission to go a three-days' journey to offer a sacrifice to YHWH and he is to be refused by the pharaoh—whereupon YHWH will "smite" Egypt with plagues until the people are released; finally, the people will leave with many treasures, "despoiling" the Egyptians. We should probably recognize this as a later insertion into the earlier narrative, since it is mere summary and since chapter 4 takes up Moses' dialogue with God as though there had been no interruption.

We can pass over without great comment the objections Moses raises in Exod. 4:1-17. The miraculous signs with the rod that turns into a serpent and the turning of Moses' hand from clear to leprous and back to clear again are, according to this passage, to convince the Hebrews that Moses has been sent from God. Yet in 4:30-31, it is Aaron who does these signs, and in 7:10-12, Aaron who performs the miracle with the rod to convince the pharaoh. The reference to water from the Nile turning into

blood sounds like the plagues which were later visited on Egypt and may not be part of the original version of Moses' objection. The fact that Moses is not eloquent (4:10-16) draws God's impatient reminder that God personally gives people their abilities and is sufficient to provide them with anything they need; here he announces he will send Aaron the Levite to speak for Moses. Note that Aaron is to speak the words that Moses gives him, as Moses is to speak the words that God provides.

Of the many explanations advanced to explain Moses' slowness of speech, the following is probably the most enchanting.

Moses used to play before Pharaoh and once took the king's crown off his head and placed it on his own. Pharaoh's advisers deemed this a bad omen and counseled to have the child killed, but Jethro advised a test: give the child a choice between a gold vessel and live coals. If he chooses the former he is clever and dangerous, but if the latter, he is slow-witted and poses no threat to Pharaoh. The test was carried out and Moses (guided by an angel) took a hot coal and put it into his mouth burning his tongue. Thus was his life saved and thus also did Moses become slow of speech and tongue. (Plaut, p. 392)

Exodus 4:18-31 Moses Returns to Egypt

Throughout this section the splicing together of different sources is quite apparent. In vv. 18-20, we have two different accounts of Moses' decision to return to Egypt. In v. 18, Moses makes the decision himself and asks permission from his father-in-law to leave, presumably alone. In v. 19, it is YHWH who commands Moses to go with his wife and sons. The first version is usually assigned to E and the second to J. The passage in vv. 21-23 is another of many summary statements of God's program, such as in 3:18-22. Here we find first mention of God's intention to "harden" Pharaoh's "heart." The intention is announced nine other times in the course of the story of the plagues, so it is obviously an important element in that story. It is also a confusing element. If God is responsible for Pharaoh's attitude toward the people of Israel, in what sense can Pharaoh be said to be guilty in his actions toward them? If he is not guilty, how can he be punished? These questions raise the issue of free will and that is not the "issue" at the center of the story of Moses' contest with Pharaoh. The story is less one of a contest between warriors or leaders of the Israelites and of the Egyptians, but between gods, the God of Israel and the incarnation of the gods of Egypt. The focus of the story then is on the matter of divine freedom. While it may be true that men and women are free, they are free only within limits. God is also free, and that freedom prevails over ours. The God of the Exodus is a God who intends the

redemption of his people. In 4:21, God assures Moses of his intent, even in the face of every obstacle, including the hard heart of Egypt's pharaoh. God has taken that difficulty into account; moreover, God intends that it will not interfere with his will, and, in fact, it will be turned to God's glory.

The "hardening" motif is difficult to interpret because the Hebrew uses three separate verbs, all of which are rendered in standard English versions as "harden." In addition, sometimes it is God doing the "hardening," sometimes Pharaoh himself, and sometimes no agent is given: "his heart was hardened."

Then comes the mystifying little story in Exod. 4:24-26 which we looked at briefly in Chapter Ten. Moses is on the way to Egypt when YHWH "seeks" to kill him. This story probably has something to do with the institution of the rite of circumcision. It may be connected with marriage. It is certainly from very ancient times: flint rather than metal is used for the circumcision. Like the story of Jacob's wrestling with the "man," this account may well have been connected originally with some night demon instead of with YHWH. Beyond this, there is very little that we can make of the story. For one thing it is a mass of syntactical confusion so that we cannot be absolutely certain who is attacked, whether it is Moses or a son, and, if the latter, which one; who attacks, God or a messenger; or to whose feet (or genitals) the foreskin is touched, Moses' or one of the sons. Whatever value the account may have had as an etiological story explaining the expression "bridegroom of blood" is now lost.

Aaron is instructed by God to go and meet Moses. He does so at "the mountain of God," which in this account appears to be between Midian and Egypt. Finally, Moses and Aaron announce God's deliverance to the elders of Israel as they have been commanded to do. Aaron acts as Moses' spokesman. The role of Aaron here and throughout this part of the story may seem extraneous. Nothing of any substantial meaning is lost if all the references to him are omitted. Eventually the story tells us that the priesthood of Israel stems from Aaron. We can therefore guess that the hand of the Priestly writer is at work here, pushing for the earliest possible establishment of Aaron's role.

The Contest Between Moses and Pharaoh This section (5:1-11:10) contains details about the sequence of events in which YHWH demonstrates power to redeem the people. Although they are held in Egypt where, presumably, the gods of Egypt would be supreme. In this section Pharaoh is not simply the monarch of Egypt —he is the incarnation of its gods. Thus the contest is between Moses and Pharaoh only on one level; on a deeper level it is between YHWH and the gods of Egypt.

Exodus 5:1-6:1 The First Meeting

At first (4:31), the people of Israel accept God's promise delivered by Moses. The first request is made to let the people go a three-days' journey to offer a sacrifice to YHWH. When Pharaoh's response is to increase their burden of work—by making them acquire their own straw for brick-making—the people turn on Moses and blame him for their plight (5:20-21). This is to be characteristic of the people throughout the story. They are with Moses when things go well, but they grumble when things go badly.

In 5:22-6:1, Moses pleads with YHWH. He complains about his selection by God to accomplish God's work. This is a recurring motif. Moses experiences the frustrations of many leaders called upon to shepherd a people with no vision of their own. This is surely an intentionally honest portrayal by the writers who intend to show that it was not by their own spirit or will that the Hebrews were brought out of Egypt, but by YHWH alone. Indeed the Hebrews do not yet have any sense of being a people.

Exodus 6:2-7:13

The P account of the call of Moses is given in 6:2-8. It is apparent that this is a second story of the call, rather

than a reminder to Moses that he has been called.

This account of the call occurs in the context of Moses' plea to YHWH on behalf of the suffering of the Israelites. In 6:1, God has promised to act in such a way that Pharaoh himself will drive the people out of Egypt. Now, identifying himself with El Shaddai (cf. Gen. 17:1), YHWH commissions Moses to speak on his behalf to "the people of Israel." The message Moses is to carry contains one of the simplest and yet most inclusive statements of the covenant relationship between YHWH and Israel: "I will take you as my people, and I will be your God . . ." (6:7). It is a message the people cannot yet hear, "because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery." In v. 10, God once again commands Moses to go to Pharaoh, but Moses objects that since the Israelites will not listen to him, how should he expect Pharaoh to? The expression "uncircumcised lips" (v. 12) is used in the King James and NRSV. It may mean lips that are sealed. It may also be another reference to Moses' difficulty of speech; the Jewish Publications Society translates the phrase as "impeded speech" and the NRSV says, ". . . poor speaker that I am."

Verses 14-25 are a Priestly genealogy. The intrusion is obvious and disruptive, but the splicing picks up in v. 26 by returning to the scene at the point of the interruption: "It was this same Aaron and Moses to whom the LORD said . . ."; then in v. 30 the objection raised in v. 12 is stated again. It is as if a narrator on a television serial drama had recapitulated the plot just before the interruption for a commercial announcement!

In 7:3, we have the announcement that God will harden Pharaoh's heart so that he will not heed Moses' plea. We would be more likely to say that because Pharaoh's heart was hard, he could not perceive God acting through Moses and the people of Israel. But from the standpoint of the biblical writers, to say that God hardens Pharaoh's heart is to say also that the deliverance of Israel from Egypt was due to the power of YHWH and not to the good graces of the gods of Egypt (Exod. 7:5). The purpose is to magnify and glorify YHWH as the God who rules all.

Exodus 7:14-11:10

The contest between Moses and Pharaoh is long and complicated. At the beginning it seems simply a duel between the power of YHWH to work wonders and that of the human magicians of Egypt to duplicate them. Then the story moves into the narration describing the series of plagues with which YHWH besets Egypt. As you read through this account, you will note certain discrepancies. For instance, sometimes Moses and Aaron go to Pharaoh and tell him what is going to happen, and sometimes they do not. Sometimes Moses speaks, and sometimes Aaron. Sometimes it seems to go unnoticed that the plagues will affect the Israelites as well as the Egyptians, and sometimes the point is made that the area in which the Israelites live is exempt. At one point (Exod. 9:6ff.) all the cattle of the Egyptians die, and then in v. 9 the next plague causes boils on man and beast. Some of these apparent inconsistencies are evidence of multiple sources. Others stem from the fact that the word translated "cattle" is a more general term covering various grazing animals. The point remains clear: YHWH shows power over the power of the gods of Egypt.

The Plagues

Many attempts have been made to "explain" these plagues. Recurrent natural disasters known to occur in Egypt have been referenced. We do not attempt to do this,

for to do so is beside the point of the stories. Within the narrative itself there are details that suggest purely natural phenomena at work (10:19), while others suggest a supernatural explanation. The J writer customarily sees God acting through natural events, while by the time of the P writer the stories had become filled with

supernatural elements. The point is that these things happened. It was YHWH who caused them for his own purposes.

Two other introductory notes before we examine briefly the plagues themselves. The first has to do with their order, the second with the part they played in the tradition of Israel's worship. There have been numbers of attempts to group the plagues, as five groups of two, for example, the first pair (blood and frogs) having to do with the Nile; the fourth (hail and locusts) with crops; darkness and death, the fifth pair, also seem to have some relationship with one another; but the relationships between the other pairs, lice and insects and pestilence and boils, are more tenuous. They have been seen as two groups of four and two "groups" of one, the groups representing mere nuisances, more serious attacks, and two final steps to the liberation of the people. A division popular in Jewish tradition has seen the plagues in three groups of three, plus one. "In the beginning of each of the cycles Moses meets Pharaoh in the open; in each second plague Moses addresses himself to Pharaoh with a warning; and each third plague proceeds without warning" (Plaut, p. 430). In fact, the plagues show no particular progression. All we can say for certain is that the entire story is directed toward the accounts of the Passover night.

The plagues are recounted in two of the psalms, Ps. 78 and 105. Neither contains all the plagues described in Exodus—note also that the arrangements of the plagues differ—and both conclude with the death of the firstborn of Egypt, the "Passover": that is the true beginning of the Exodus from the land. Both psalms have been linked to the covenant festival, the celebration of the renewal of God's covenant with the people, Israel. In the Qumran liturgy community, the psalm's recall of the saving deed of God was read by the priests; this narration was followed by a Levitical recitation of Israel's sins, whereupon the congregation confessed its own sins and affirmed faith in God's righteousness and inconceivable grace and mercy.

It is outside our scope to discuss each of the plagues individually, but we can notice important features in the plague stories. The first plague, the blood pollution of the Nile, finds Pharaoh strangely uninvolved. He turns away from the problem and goes into his house "and he did not take even this to heart" (7:23). The second plague (of frogs) affects him personally—they shall come up into his "palace, and into [his] bedchamber and [his] bed" (8:3)—and he is thereafter personally engaged in the contest.

The first three plagues continue the contest with Egypt's magicians. The contest has begun with Aaron's demonstration of YHWH's power: he casts his rod and it becomes a serpent (7:10). Pharaoh's magicians are able to do the same with their rods, but the superior wonder-working power of YHWH is shown in the fact that Aaron's rod devours theirs. So also the magicians are able to turn water into blood and "with their spells" to bring frogs upon the land (8:7). The account does not wonder at their ability. That their magic, too, can produce wonders, even wonders

like in effect to those produced by the power of YHWH, is accepted. Their power does have definite limits, and this is not true of God's power. With all their spells, they cannot produce lice (8:18), and when last we see them—or don't see them for they cannot appear (9:11)—they are as much affected by boils as any of the other people of Egypt.

Pharaoh is thus early warned that in the God of Israel he is dealing with a power beyond the magic of Egypt. Still he continues to be stubborn. One pattern that emerges in a number of the stories has Pharaoh calling Moses to halt the plague—he will let the people go. Moses accedes to his request, but then Pharaoh goes back on his promise. We are not surprised, because we know the promise is forced: it is not meant seriously, nor does Moses take it seriously. He accedes because the ending of a plague is just as much a sign of God's great power as the beginning of it. There can be no doubt that God is in control throughout.

All is done to God's glory. Thus the plagues continue through insects, pestilence, and hail, though God might

have “cut [the Egyptians] off from the earth” (9:15). He chooses to spare them only to show his power “to make my name resound through all the earth” (9:16). This idea is repeated at both the beginning and end of this entire section. God has actually hardened Pharaoh’s heart so that God’s own signs and wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt (7:3;11:9).

It is also true that the eventual aim is to bring the Hebrews out to worship him (9:1, cf. 10:3). Freedom for Israel is not understood as a good in itself, but because it provides opportunity for the worship of YHWH. The narrative suggests in several places (e.g., 8:25-27) that the Israelites have not been able to sacrifice to their God in Egypt. Now, to God’s honor, they must be allowed to do so.

The last of the plagues—before the striking of the firstborn—is the plague of darkness. This may indeed be seen as a prelude to that final disaster. The darkness is that of the original chaos. How it comes on is left to our imaginations, but its effect is well described. It is thick, “a darkness that can be felt” (10:21). It is absolutely debilitating: the people cannot see each other, they cannot even get up from their places. One of the Rabbis has suggested that this is the worst of all darknesses, when people cannot move to help their neighbors in distress.

At this point (10:28), Pharaoh breaks off negotiations. This is serious. The plagues can no longer continue as they have; something new must be happening. We turn to that final calamity that also provides a setting for the institution of the Passover, in the next chapter.

End of chapter

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Can also be translatedback

There is some kind of editorial mistake in our text here.

>

Ancestorsback

Note how many African Americans talk about their ancestors.

>

Midwives[back]

And think of Herod, and the slaughter of the innocents.

>

Not about Mosesback

I don't understand this.

>

Meeting at the well[back]

Amy-Jill Levine (primarily a New Testament scholar in spite of being Jewish) points out that many Old Testament heroes met their wives at a well, where they helped them draw water. She suggests that any first-century Jewish reader of this passage would have seen it as a hilarious parody of such stories.

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The NAMEback

I've sometimes wondered if YHWH simply means "none of your business."

>

Hardening Pharaoh's heartback

This is mysterious. We could discuss.

>

Bridegroom of blood[back]

Not much of a bridegroom. Or the title of a horror movie. No but seriously, this passage is probably so

corrupt that we can't expect to make anything out of it.

>

Who delivered Israel?back

Interesting

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Being Itselfback

I had abstract nouns so thoroughly beaten out of my head in college philosophy that I have trouble even beginning to understand what this is supposed to mean. "Everything?" "The reason that everything exists?" We could discuss.

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