

EXODUS
INTRODUCTION

Introduction

We have divided the Book of Exodus into Four Parts:

- Part One (1:1 – 15:21) tells the story of Israel in slavery in Egypt, the birth and mission of Moses, the confrontation between Moses and the Pharaoh, and Israel's escape across the Red Sea.
- Part Two (15:22 – 18:27) tells the story of their journey through the wilderness
- Part Three (19:1 – 24:18) recounts the revelation given to Moses on Mount Sinai
- Part Four (25:1 – 40:28) gives the directions for the erection and furnishing of the tabernacle (25:1 – 31:18), tells the story of the breaking of the covenant and its renewal (32:1 – 34:35), and concludes with the building of the tabernacle (35:1 – 40:38).

The cultic material, which makes up half the book, is from the Priestly School. The rest consists mostly of stories that are traditional, and that have been shaped by the various schools, including the Priestly School and the Deuteronomic School, and reveal a rich and hard-won consensus, the result of much dialogue, discussion and debate on how best to communicate the essence of the covenant revealed by YHWH to Moses. Nowhere do we find more beautifully expressed the essence of what it is to be YHWH's 'treasured possession', a priestly kingdom and a holy nation' (Exodus 19:5-6).

LIBERATION FROM OPPRESSION

EXODUS 1,1 - 15,21

¹These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each with his household:

²Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah,

³Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin,

⁴Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher.

⁵The total number of people born to Jacob was seventy. Joseph was already in Egypt.

⁶Then Joseph died, and all his brothers, and that whole generation.

⁷But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.

Verses one to four summarise the account already given in Genesis 46:8-25. The number ‘seventy’ (1:5) comes from there (46:27). Verse six recalls Joseph’s death, mentioned in the final verse of Genesis, and adds the statement that all his brothers also died, ‘that whole generation’.

Verse seven marks a new situation. Jacob’s family (1:1) has become ‘the Israelites’. A family has become a nation. ‘The land was filled with them’ (1:7) – not the land of promise, but the land of Egypt. We are meant to recall God’s blessing of humankind at the beginning:

God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.”

– Genesis 1:28

We recall also God’s blessing when humankind had a new beginning after the purification of the flood:

God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.”

– Genesis 9:1

We remember God’s promise to Abraham when he called him to journey to the Promised Land:

YHWH said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

– Genesis 12:1

Is God blessing Egypt through Israel? But what about God’s promise to Jacob?

I am God, the God of your father; do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make of you a great nation there. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again”

– Genesis 46:3-4

Jacob was taken back (Genesis 50:7-13), but what about the Israelites? When will Joseph’s final words be realised?

I am about to die; but God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob ... When God comes to you, you shall carry up my bones from here.

– Genesis 50:24-25

When will God come?

The Pharaoh who knew Joseph recognised him as ‘one in whom is the spirit of God’(Genesis 41:38), and put him in charge of administering Egypt. In this way the Pharaoh opened Egypt to receive the blessing offered by YHWH. He welcomed Jacob and his family, offering them ‘the best of the land of Egypt’(Genesis 45:18). Jacob blessed him (Genesis 47:10). Egypt was a recipient of YHWH’s promise to Abraham: ‘In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed’(Genesis 12:3).

Now ‘a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph’(1:8). He is afraid because ‘the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we’ (1:9) and is immediately portrayed as stubbornly opposed to God’s promise: ‘they might escape from the land’(1:10). He is also portrayed as a tyrant. He decides on a policy of oppression, forcing the Israelite people into slavery. ‘Pithom’ means the ‘House of Atum’(the sun-god). ‘Rameses’ (see Genesis 47:11) was the royal delta residence of Rameses II (1279-1213BC). His policy fails, for the Israelites continue to multiply and spread (1:12). A power greater than the king of Egypt is at work.

Oppression increases and the king secretly determines to wipe out male babies. This is a folk tale. They thought that life came from the male. We are being prepared for the birth of a special male child. This stubborn and tyrannical king, the repository of wisdom (1:10), is also a comic figure, naive enough to be outwitted by the midwives. ‘Shiphrah’ means ‘beauty’; ‘Puah’ may mean ‘radiant’ or perhaps simply ‘girl’. The women outwit him because they ‘fear God’: they obey God’s will, not the will of Pharaoh. In this dramatic folk tale, the first character on stage is the dark ‘demon’. There is no point in trying to identify him with an historical Pharaoh.

⁸Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.

⁹He said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we.

¹⁰Come, let us deal *wisely* with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” ¹¹Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labour. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. ¹²But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. ¹³The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, ¹⁴and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labour. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

¹⁵The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, ¹⁶“When you act as midwives to the Hebrew women, and see them on the birthstool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she shall live.” ¹⁷But the midwives feared God; they did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but they let the boys live. ¹⁸So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and allowed the boys to live?” ¹⁹The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.”

²⁰So God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and became very strong. ²¹And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families. ²²Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, "Every boy that is born to the Hebrews you shall throw into the Nile, but you shall let every girl live."

²¹Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman.

²The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months.

³When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. ⁴His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

⁵The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. ⁶When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him, "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. ⁷Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?"

⁸Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. ⁹Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. ¹⁰When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

Pharaoh's second attempt also fails, and God gives the midwives a share in the blessing. The oppressor commands 'all his people' to kill every male child of the Hebrews. When 'the earth was filled with violence' (Genesis 6:11), God brought on the flood to 'blot out from the earth the human beings that I have created' (Gen. 6:7). This time, God sends a saviour: a new birth to counter the violence of the new king. We are introduced to the second character of the dramatic story.

The word translated 'basket' (ḥēbâ) is also used for Noah's 'ark', and only in these two situations. This 'basket' is the new ark of salvation, floating among the 'reeds' (sûp). In human terms, God's response appears weak. Again it is a woman whose compassion (2:6) thwarts the will of the pharaoh, and the irony is that the woman is his daughter. At the heart of the empire all is not evil.

As is customary in the folk tales of the Bible, a name is explained by a similar sounding word, māšâ ('draw out', 2:10). In fact 'Moses' is the second part of an Egyptian name, such as Thutmose or Rameses, meaning 'son of ...'. Presumably an Egyptian god's name has been removed from the beginning of his name.

In the New Testament, Matthew models his portrait of Herod on Pharaoh. Herod, too, tries to eliminate the Saviour by killing all the male children (Matthew 2:16). Once again 'Rachel [the mother of the Israelites] is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more' (Jeremiah 31:15; see Matthew 2:18). The Samaritan Version and Rabbinic midrashim speak of cosmological wonders at the birth of Moses. Matthew draws on these, too, in his story of the star guiding the wise men.

We are left to imagine the life of privilege led by Moses since his adoption by Pharaoh's daughter. Here we see him coming face to face with his enslaved people, and with courage taking their side against their oppressors.

However, we have heard nothing from God. We are watching Moses acting from his own sympathy and sense of justice, but without a mission from God. His first instinctive reaction is a violent one, and one that he is forced to hide. It does not work. A Hebrew ('ibri; from 'abiru: a stateless person?) asks the pertinent question: 'Who made you a ruler and judge over us?(2:14). The answer is clearly 'No one'. Moses has no authority. His privileged upbringing does not give it to him, and his choice to side with his people means that he has to flee from Pharaoh.

Acts 7:23-29,35 sees the rejection of Moses as part of a tradition which culminated in the rejection of Jesus. The Letter to the Hebrews 11:24-27 uses this story to portray Moses as a man of faith.

Moses is a fugitive in Midian (see Genesis 25:2,4). Again his sense of justice is shown when, though an unprotected foreigner, he defends the rights of the daughters of the priest of Midian, Reuel ('kinsman [rēa'] of God [el]'), against the shepherds. In Genesis 36 the name 'Reuel' is connected with clans of Edom. Only here and in Numbers 10:29 is Reuel given as the name of Moses' father-in-law.

He is welcomed into Reuel's household, marries one of the daughters, Zipporah ('bird'), and has a son whom he names Gershom ('a wanderer [gēr] there [šām]'), stressing the fact that Moses (like the patriarchs, Genesis 26:3; 35:27) is dwelling in a foreign land.

¹¹One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labour. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk. ¹²He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.

¹³When he went out the next day, he saw two Hebrews fighting; and he said to the one who was in the wrong, "Why do you strike your fellow Hebrew?" ¹⁴He answered, "Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Then Moses was afraid and thought, "Surely the thing is known." ¹⁵When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses.

But Moses fled from Pharaoh. He settled in the land of Midian, and sat down by a well.

¹⁶The priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. ¹⁷But some shepherds came and drove them away. Moses got up and came to their defense and watered their flock. ¹⁸When they returned to their father Reuel, he said, "How is it that you have come back so soon today?" ¹⁹They said, "An Egyptian helped us against the shepherds; he even drew water for us and watered the flock." ²⁰He said to his daughters, "Where is he? Why did you leave the man? Invite him to break bread."

²¹Moses agreed to stay with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zipporah in marriage.

²²She bore a son, and he named him Gershom; for he said, "I have been an alien residing in a foreign land."

God remembers his covenant

²³After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites sighed under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God.

²⁴God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

²⁵God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

Finally, the unseen power whose will determines everything that happens in our story is introduced. It is God, introduced as One who hears and responds to those who ‘sigh’ ‘cry out’, ‘cry for help’ ‘groan’ (four different verbs in two verses). The psalmist proclaims:

He did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him.

– Psalm 22:24

This poor soul cried, and was heard by YHWH, and was saved from every trouble.

– Psalm 34:6

YHWH hears the needy, and does not despise his own that are in bonds.

– Psalm 69:33

YHWH lifts up the downtrodden.

– Psalm 147:6

The instrument of God’s compassion, as we are about to see, is Moses. Moses has the background that fits him for the task, and the personal courage to stand up for justice that the task will require. But on their own these cannot help the oppressed. Their situation requires the action of God ‘remembering’. It was when ‘God remembered Noah’ (Genesis 8:1) that the flood receded, and God promised to ‘remember’ his commitment to Noah (Genesis 9:15-16). Redemption came when God ‘remembered’ Abraham (Genesis 19:29), and when he ‘remembered’ Rachel (Genesis 30:22). Now we are told that ‘God remembered his covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15:18; 17), Isaac (Genesis 17:21), and Jacob (see Genesis 50:24-25)’. God is about to ‘come to’ his people (Genesis 50:24-25).

Matthew echoes this scene, too, in his portrayal of Jesus as the new Moses. Just as the death of the oppressor king is the occasion for God’s redeeming action in Egypt, so it is the death of Herod (Matthew 2:19) that brings the Saviour back from Egypt to redeem his people.

The stage is set for the confrontation between violence and compassion, between Pharaoh of Egypt and YHWH, the God of Israel. For, though one king has died, it is the oppressive system that is the problem, and we will soon see that nothing has changed.

God ‘took David from the sheepfolds ... to be the shepherd of his people’ (Psalm 78:70-71). So it is here with Moses.

In Exodus 2:28 Moses’ father-in-law was called ‘Reuel’. Here, however, and in 4:18 and again in chapter 18, he is called ‘Jethro’. The authors of Exodus are drawing on two traditions. Likewise with the ‘mountain of God’, called ‘Horeb’ here (3:1), in Exodus 33:6, and regularly in Deuteronomy, but for the rest of the Torah called ‘Sinai’. Sirach combines the traditions:

You [Elijah] heard rebuke at Sinai
and judgments of vengeance at Horeb.

– Sirach 48:7 (see 1Kings 19:8)

The expression ‘the angel of YHWH’ is first employed in Genesis 16:7-11 when Hagar is encountered at a spring by a stranger through whom YHWH gives her a message. It is YHWH who encounters Hagar, but through a messenger. The next time Hagar is banished, it is ‘the angel of God from heaven’ who speaks to her (Genesis 21:17). It is ‘the angel of YHWH’ who calls to Abraham ‘from heaven’ instructing him not to kill Isaac (Genesis 22:11-15). When Abraham sends his servant to Haran to find a wife for Isaac, he promises him that YHWH will ‘send his angel before you’ (Genesis 24:7, 40). Jacob tells his wives of a dream in which ‘the angel of God’ spoke to him (Genesis 31:11), and, as he blesses Joseph’s sons, he identifies ‘the angel who has redeemed me from all harm’ with ‘the God before whom my ancestors Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day’ (Genesis 48:15-16). ‘The angel of YHWH’ is a way of speaking of YHWH while preserving YHWH’s transcendence. In our human experience, God’s communication is always mediated.

In this scene the medium experienced by Moses is a fire blazing in, but not consuming, a bush (sⁿê - some speculate that ‘Sinai’ may come from this word). To find what is ‘of YHWH’ here we must attend to the message. Moses is on ‘holy ground’ (‘*dāmâ qodeš*’, 3:5; compare Jacob at Bethel, Genesis 28:16-17). The God who breaks into his life is the God of his people (for ‘God of my father’, see Genesis 31:5,42; 32:9), the God of the patriarchs (Genesis 50:24), the God who hears the cry of his people in Egypt and ‘remembers his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob’ (Exodus 2:24). Moses removes his sandals, acknowledging that he is the slave of this awesome God.

¹Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

²There the angel of YHWH appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. ³Then Moses said, “I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.”

⁴When YHWH saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.”

⁵Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”

⁶He said further, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”

And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

**⁷Then YHWH said,
“I have observed
the misery of my
people who are in
Egypt; I have heard
their cry on account
of their taskmas-
ters.**

**Indeed, I know
their sufferings,
⁸and I have come
down to deliver
them from the
Egyptians, and to
bring them up out
of that land to a
good and broad
land, a land flow-
ing with milk and
honey,
to the country of
the Canaanites,
the Hittites, the
Amorites, the Per-
izzites, the Hivites,
and the Jebusites.**

For the first time we hear YHWH speak of the ‘Israelites’ (3:9) as ‘my people’ (3:7). Verses seven and nine repeat what we have already heard in 2:23-24: God has heard his people’s cry and has ‘come down to deliver them’ (3:8). The word ‘deliver’ (nāzal) is found in Jacob’s prayer when he cried out to YHWH: ‘Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau’ (Genesis 32:11). Here it is applied to the whole of the enslaved people. Genesis ends with Joseph’s words: ‘God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob’ (50:24). The moment of redemption is at hand.

For the first time we hear the Promised Land described as ‘a land flowing with milk and honey’ (3:8; food of the gods; not bee’s honey, but sweet syrup from grapes or dates) – an expression that will recur throughout the Torah. The nations listed in verse eight recall YHWH’s promise to Abraham in Genesis 15:19-21.

Following Egyptian practice the indigenous inhabitants are referred to as ‘Canaanites’. ‘Amorite’ means ‘westerner’, and was a term in general use in the ancient Near East for the people to the west of Mesopotamia. With the complete breakdown of law and order in the late Bronze Age (thirteenth century BC), the Amorites seem to have migrated south and taken control of various parts of Canaan and Transjordan. The other ethnic groups seem to have migrated into Canaan at about the same time. In his Deuteronomy 1-11 (Anchor Bible, 1991, 363) Weinfeld writes:

The Hittites constituted an empire in Anatolia [central Turkey] and Syria in the fifteenth and fourteenth century B.C.E. After the collapse of the Hittite Empire at the end of the thirteenth century, when the ‘sea peoples’ attacked the Anatolian and Syrian coast, there came down to Palestine hosts of refugees and immigrants consisting of various ethnic groups including Hittites, Jebusites, Hivites and Girgashites, who settled in the densely populated areas in the hill country. They seized power in the few existing cities in the mountains such as Shechem, Gibeon, and Hebron.

The three main ethnic groups are reflected in Ezekiel:

Thus says the Lord YHWH to Jerusalem: Your origin and your birth were in the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite, and your mother a Hittite.

– Ezekiel 16:3

The Jebusites controlled Jerusalem till David captured the city and made it the capital of the United Kingdom (see 2 Samuel 5:6-10).

Moses' immediate response is to be expected. He was unable to sort out a problem between two Hebrews and had to flee for his life from Pharaoh (2:13-15). How can he possibly do what God is asking of him? God's reply goes to the heart of all mission. It is not about who *you* are. It is about who *I* am, and 'I will be with you' (3:12). The mission will succeed because it is God's mission. Moses (like Abraham) will have to walk in faith. It will only be when he returns to this sacred mountain that he will see that God is, indeed, with him.

There are times in Genesis where God appears and gives his name. In Genesis 17:1 it is 'God Almighty' ('ēl šaddāy). In Genesis 26:24 it is 'The God of your father Abraham'. In Genesis 28:13 it is 'YHWH'. Throughout Genesis, God has been identified as YHWH. However, according to the Priestly School the first one to have the name YHWH revealed to him was Moses.

The Hebrew translated as 'I AM' in verse fourteen, is 'ehyeh, already found in verse twelve in the expression 'ehyeh 'immāk ('I will be with you'; see also Genesis 26:3; 31:3). One could also translate verse fourteen: "I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE". The Greek Version has 'I Am the One Who Is' (*egō eimi ho ōn*). Exodus is not offering an abstract metaphysical title. It is linking the title YHWH with the verb 'to be' as a way of addressing God because of what God is *doing*.

Perhaps the future 'will be' captures the meaning best. When Moses arrives, announcing God's redemption, the people will want to know his credentials. Their God cannot be 'named' in the sense of defined, but Moses is told that they can call him YHWH, as a reminder to watch, and keep watching, for what God is doing in their midst. It is an assurance that God 'will be' with them. They will come to know YHWH by journeying in trust and experiencing his presence and action in their midst. This is the assurance that Moses is to give them. It is these same actions of God among them that will confirm that God has chosen Moses to speak and act for him as his intermediary.

9The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them.

10So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

11But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

12He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

13But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"

14God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

15God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'YHWH, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you':

This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.

¹⁶Go and assemble the elders of Israel, and say to them, ‘YHWH, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, has appeared to me, saying: I have given heed to you and to what has been done to you in Egypt.

¹⁷I declare that I will bring you up out of the misery of Egypt, to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.’

¹⁸They will listen to your voice; and you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, ‘YHWH, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; let us now go a three days’ journey into the wilderness, so that we may sacrifice to YHWH our God.’

¹⁹I know, however, that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty *arm*. ²⁰So I will stretch out my *arm* and strike Egypt with all my wonders that I will perform in it; after that he will let you go.

²¹I will bring this people into such favour with the Egyptians that, when you go, you will not go empty-handed; ²²each woman shall ask her neighbour and any woman living in the neighbour’s house for jewelry of silver and of gold, and clothing, and you shall put them on your sons and on your daughters; and so you shall plunder the Egyptians.”

In this passage the authors of Exodus highlight the mediatory role that Moses is to have in God’s liberation of the Israelites. It also highlights the fact that Moses is not to mediate on his own, but with ‘the elders of Israel’ (3:26). Moses is to persuade them first, and then to go with them to Pharaoh. This is our first introduction to ‘the elders of Israel’, the older men (*zāqēn*) who play a leading role in the running of the community.

This passage summarises what is to come in the following scenes.

Moses (with Aaron) will assemble the elders and will repeat to them what God has said to him (see 4:29-30).

Moses (with Aaron, but not the elders – we will look into this later) will speak to Pharaoh as instructed in verse eighteen (see 5:1,3). The point of identifying YHWH as ‘the God of the Hebrews’(3:18) is that he cannot be worshipped in Egypt, and so the people must be allowed to ‘journey into the wilderness’(3:18).

Pharaoh will not listen (3:19; see 5:4). YHWH speaks of his mighty ‘arm’(3:19). The Hebrew *yād* includes the forearm and the hand. The reference to power in battle (6:1) points to ‘arm’ as a better rendering than ‘hand’.

Chapters seven to eleven show ‘the wonders that I will perform in Egypt’(3:20), and 12:35-36 fulfils the promise given here in verses twenty-one and twenty-two. They will ‘plunder the Egyptians’. YHWH is waging a liberating war against the dark power of Egypt, and the Israelites will take the spoils of war.

This is Moses' third objection (see 3:11 and 3:13). What if the people refuse to believe him? We watch with delight as God endows Moses with 'divine powers'. He instructs Moses to throw his staff on the ground, where it turns into a snake (nāḥāš). This is the third time a snake has played a significant role in the story. The first was in the garden where it successfully tempted Eve, and, through her, Adam (see Genesis 3:2ff). There will be attempts made to thwart God's will, but God demonstrates to Moses that if he confronts the 'snake' it will lose its power. The second time we heard the word nāḥāš it is translated 'divination' (Genesis 30:27; 44:5,15). Snake charming was common. What Moses is able to do here is much more exciting.

The second piece of magic is rather more difficult to interpret. The translation 'leprous' is not correct. There is no evidence of leprosy (Hansen's disease) in the Ancient Near East prior to the period of Greek colonisation. The condition hinted at here is described in greater detail in Leviticus 13, which describes a scaly skin disease with symptoms of various skin conditions that rendered people 'impure' in a cultic sense and prevented them from mixing with the community while the symptoms were present. The point here is to show that God has power to inflict disease and to cure (see Deuteronomy 32:29), and that this power will be exercised through Moses.

The third 'sign' (4:9) points towards the first of the 'plagues' that will strike Egypt (see 7:15-25).

We are dealing here with a dramatic folk tale. Those listening to it would get the same kind of excitement that today's readers have when reading *The Lord of the Rings*. Moses (Gandalf) is being prepared for his decisive encounter with the Evil Empire.

¹Then Moses answered, "But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me, but say, 'YHWH did not appear to you.'"

²YHWH said to him, "What is that in your hand?" He said, "A staff."

³And he said, "Throw it on the ground." So he threw the staff on the ground, and it became a snake; and Moses drew back from it. ⁴Then YHWH said to Moses, "Reach out your hand, and seize it by the tail"—so he reached out his hand and grasped it, and it became a staff in his hand— ⁵"so that they may believe that YHWH, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you."

⁶Again, YHWH said to him, "Put your hand inside your cloak." He put his hand into his cloak; and when he took it out, his hand was leprous, as white as snow. ⁷Then God said, "Put your hand back into your cloak"—so he put his hand back into his cloak, and when he took it out, it was restored like the rest of his body— ⁸"If they will not believe you or heed the first sign, they may believe the second sign.

⁹If they will not believe even these two signs or heed you, you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground; and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground."

10But Moses said to YHWH, "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue."

11Then YHWH said to him, "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, YHWH? 12Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak."

13But he said, "O my Lord, please send someone else." 14Then the anger of YHWH was kindled against Moses and he said, "What of your brother Aaron, the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently; even now he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you his heart will be glad. 15You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do. 16He indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him. 17Take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs."

18Moses went back to his father-in-law Jethro and said to him, "Please let me go back to my kindred in Egypt and see whether they are still living." And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace."

19YHWH said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt; for all those who were seeking your life are dead." 20So Moses took his wife and his sons, put them on a donkey and went back to the land of Egypt; and Moses carried the staff of God in his hand.

Moses' fourth and final objection enables the authors to make a key statement concerning prophecy. God needs the willing cooperation of the prophet, but the power of the words spoken does not depend on the natural gifts of the prophet. It is God who inspires the words, and it is God who is the source of their power. We are reminded of Jesus' promise:

I will give you words and a wisdom
that none of your opponents will be
able to withstand or contradict.

– Luke 21:15

Using the special form of 'lord' that is kept for God ('^adonāy), Moses pleads with YHWH to send someone else. God is angry but will not be deflected from his determination to redeem the people, and so he tells Moses that he can take his brother, Aaron, with him. This is the first mention of Moses' brother, introduced into the story here to prepare the reader for the mediatory role of the priesthood in Israel's cult. Aaron is to speak only the words given him by Moses, and God will inspire and guide them both. Aaron will speak on Moses' behalf, but will serve Moses as he would serve God. Moses is reminded by God to take his staff with him 'with which you shall perform the signs'(4:17, see 4:1-9).

Jethro allows Moses to return to Egypt 'in peace'(4:18), and the scene ends with YHWH telling Moses that he can go back to Egypt now, 'for those who were seeking your life are dead'(4:19). We already know that this includes Pharaoh (2:23). Matthew includes this line in his portrayal of Herod as Pharaoh and Jesus as Moses. Jesus' father is told to take the child back 'to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead'(Matthew 2:20).

Armed with divine power, Moses returns to Egypt.

‘I will harden (hāzaq) his heart’ (4:21). Usually this Hebrew word is used positively in the sense of making a person courageous. However, in Ezekiel 2:4 and 3:7, when used with ‘heart’, it means ‘stubborn’, as in this text. It emerges in the narrative that Pharaoh stubbornly refuses to ‘let the people go’. Since the assumption is that God controls everything, it must be God’s will that Pharaoh’s heart be hardened.

The result of this hardening is that YHWH’s ‘firstborn son’ (4:22), Israel, will live, while Egypt’s ‘firstborn son’ (4:23) will die. Egypt saw itself as the firstborn of the gods, but Pharaoh cannot prevail against the power of YHWH and YHWH’s choice of Israel.

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and
out of Egypt I called my son.

– Hosea 11:1

I have become a father to Israel,
and Ephraim is my firstborn.

– Jeremiah 31:9

Verse 24 introduces a story of an encounter with death that Moses undergoes on his way back to Egypt. On the same assumption that we noted above, namely that God controls everything that happens, it is assumed that it is YHWH who is threatening Moses’ life. The story gives as the reason that Moses is not circumcised (see Genesis 17:10-27). Zipporah circumcises the son, symbolically smears the blood on Moses’ penis (‘feet’), and so saves Moses’ life. He is now set apart ritually for his mission. Verse 25 describes elements of the rite, including words that the authors responsible for the comment in verse 26 seem to have as much trouble understanding as do we.

Verses 29-31 give Aaron a more important role than the elders (see 3:16). Do we have here an indication of the rivalry of the elders and the priests in post-exilic Judah, with the present text coming from the priests?

The first part of Moses’ mission is successfully accomplished: ‘the people believed’ (4:31).

²¹And YHWH said to Moses,
“When you go back to Egypt, see
that you perform before Pharaoh
all the wonders that I have put in
your power; but I will harden his
heart, so that he will not let the
people go.

²²Then you shall say to Pharaoh,
“Thus says YHWH: Israel is my
firstborn son. ²³I said to you,
“Let my son go that he may wor-
ship me.” But you refused to
let him go; now I will kill your
firstborn son.”

²⁴On the way, at a place where
they spent the night, YHWH met
him and tried to kill him. ²⁵But
Zipporah took a flint and cut off
her son’s foreskin, and touched
Moses’ ‘feet’ with it, and said,
“Truly you are a bridegroom of
blood to me!” ²⁶So he let him
alone. It was then she said, “A
bridegroom of blood by circumci-
sion.”

²⁷YHWH said to Aaron, “Go into
the wilderness to meet Moses.”
So he went; and he met him at the
mountain of God and kissed him.

²⁸Moses told Aaron all the words
of YHWH with which he had sent
him, and all the signs with which
he had charged him. ²⁹Then Mo-
ses and Aaron went and assem-
bled all the elders of the Israel-
ites. ³⁰Aaron spoke all the words
that YHWH had spoken to Moses,
and performed the signs in the
sight of the people. ³¹The people
believed; and when they heard
that YHWH had given heed to the
Israelites and that he had seen
their misery, they bowed down
and worshiped.

Oppression increases

¹Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, "Thus says YHWH, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness.'" ²But Pharaoh said, "Who is YHWH, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know YHWH, and I will not let Israel go."

³Then they said, "The God of the Hebrews has revealed himself to us; let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness to sacrifice to YHWH our God, or he will fall upon us with pestilence or sword."

⁴But the king of Egypt said to them, "Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their work? Get to your labours!" ⁵Pharaoh continued, "Now they are more numerous than the people of the land and yet you want them to stop working!"

⁶That same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people, as well as their *foremen*, ⁷"You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as before; let them go and gather straw for themselves.

⁸But you shall require of them the same quantity of bricks as they have made previously; do not diminish it, for they are lazy; that is why they cry, 'Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God.' ⁹Let heavier work be laid on them; then they will labour at it and pay no attention to deceptive words."

¹⁰So the taskmasters and the *foremen* of the people went out and said to the people, "Thus says Pharaoh, 'I will not give you straw. ¹¹Go and get straw yourselves, wherever you can find it; but your work will not be lessened in the least.'" ¹²So the people scattered throughout the land of Egypt, to gather stubble for straw.

God's initial instructions to Moses were:

You and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and say to him, 'YHWH, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; let us now go a three days' journey into the wilderness, so that we may sacrifice to YHWH our God.'

– Exodus 3:18

Here we have 'celebrate a festival' (ḥāg). Like the Arabic equivalent (ḥājj) this includes the idea of a pilgrimage. Note that it is Aaron who accompanies Moses, not the elders (see comment on 4:29-31). YHWH told Moses:

I know, however, that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty arm.

– Exodus 3:19

'Thus says YHWH' (5:1) is an expression frequently found in the prophets when they are confronting their own king – as is the use of the first person in giving the prophetic message. 'Let my people go' recurs seven times in the following chapters.

Pharaoh's refusal begins here, and we are also introduced to the theme: 'I do not know YHWH' (5:2). Pharaoh echoes the statement of his predecessor:

The Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we.

– Exodus 1:9 (see 5:5)

Typical of a highly organised oppressive regime, the response to complaints is to increase oppression. If they have more work they will have less time to complain. The taskmasters are clearly Egyptian. The foremen are Israelite (see 5:14), used to supervise their own people.

The narrative brings out the utter helplessness of the oppressed, in a description of oppressive behaviour that goes on repeating itself throughout history.

The foremen are telling Pharaoh that he is hurting his own people. They are the ones losing out.

Unable to make any headway with the oppressor, the Hebrew foremen turn on Moses. His talk of liberation has only worsened their plight.

Moses pleads with YHWH, whose response picks up the rest of his first announcement to Moses:

I will stretch out my arm and strike Egypt with all my wonders that I will perform in it; after that he will let you go.

– Exodus 3:20

We will see where real power lies. It is not with the ‘all-powerful’ oppressor. It is with YHWH who takes the side of the oppressed. Perhaps ‘mighty arm’ refers to Pharaoh’s power as well as God’s. Without realising it, Pharaoh’s way of exercising his power is aiding YHWH’s design.

¹³The taskmasters were urgent, saying, “Complete your work, the same daily assignment as when you were given straw.”

¹⁴And the *foremen* of the Israelites, whom Pharaoh’s taskmasters had set over them, were beaten, and were asked, “Why did you not finish the required quantity of bricks yesterday and today, as you did before?”

¹⁵Then the Israelite *foremen* came to Pharaoh and cried, “Why do you treat your servants like this? ¹⁶No straw is given to your servants, yet they say to us, ‘Make bricks!’ Look how your servants are beaten! You are unjust to your own people.”

¹⁷He said, “You are lazy, lazy; that is why you say, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to YHWH.’”

¹⁸Go now, and work; for no straw shall be given you, but you shall still deliver the same number of bricks.” ¹⁹The Israelite *foremen* saw that they were in trouble when they were told, “You shall not lessen your daily number of bricks.”

²⁰As they left Pharaoh, they came upon Moses and Aaron who were waiting to meet them. ²¹They said to them, “YHWH look upon you and judge! You have brought us into bad odour with Pharaoh and his officials, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us.”

²²Then Moses turned again to YHWH and said, “O YHWH, why have you mistreated this people? Why did you ever send me?”

²³Since I first came to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has mistreated this people, and you have done nothing at all to deliver your people.”

^{6:1}Then YHWH said to Moses, “Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh: Indeed, by a mighty *arm* he will let them go; by a mighty *arm* he will drive them out of his land.”

I will be your God

²God also spoke to Moses and said to him: "I am YHWH.

³I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name 'YHWH' I did not make myself known to them. ⁴I also established my *promise* to them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they resided as aliens.

⁵I have also heard the groaning of the Israelites whom the Egyptians are holding as slaves, and I have remembered my *promise*.

⁶Say therefore to the Israelites, 'I am YHWH, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.

⁷I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am YHWH your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians.

⁸I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession. I am YHWH."

⁹Moses told this to the Israelites; but they would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery.

A key feature of the Priestly School is that they do not use the name YHWH prior to God's self-revelation to Moses (Exodus 3:15). They call God 'God Almighty' ('ēl šaddāy) in the patriarchal narrative (see Genesis 17:1; 28:3; 35:11; 43:14; 48:3). When the post-exilic authors of Genesis use the name YHWH they are identifying the God of the patriarchs as the God their contemporaries know as YHWH. The priest writers makes this identification clearly here in verse three.

YHWH identifies himself in a solemn proclamation, repeated three times: 'I am YHWH' (6:1,6-8; see also 6:29). The 'name' (6:3) functions as an acoustic icon. Using it brings a person into communion with the One who promised a land to the patriarchs (Abraham: Genesis 12:1,7; 13:5; 15:7,18; 17:8; Isaac: Genesis 26:3; Jacob: Genesis 28:13; 35:12; 48:4). This promise (b'rit) is about to be realised (6:8). We recall Joseph's final words:

God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

– Genesis 50:24

YHWH renews his promise to demonstrate his power and deliver his people from slavery (6:7; see 3:20), a promise reinforced in the light of Pharaoh's stubborn resistance.

And now, for the first time, the solemn commitment made with the patriarchs is made with the people: 'I will take you as my people, and I will be your God' (6:7). This is not strictly a 'covenant', as no corresponding commitment is asked of them in this passage. The focus is on God. We recall the words of the prophet of the exile:

Thus says YHWH, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: 'Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.'

– Isaiah 43:1

The people's spirit is so broken that even this magnificent statement of YHWH fails to make an impression. Ezekiel recalls this scene, highlighting God's revealing of his name and adding: 'but they would not listen' (Ezekiel 20:5-9).

When God first commissioned Moses at Horeb to ‘go to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt’ (3:10), Moses kept throwing up objections. His fourth and last objection was his lack of eloquence (4:10). God told him to take Aaron with him:

He indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him.

– Exodus 4:16

At first everything went well: ‘the people believed ... they bowed down and worshipped’ (4:31). However, Pharaoh refused to let the Israelites go and increased the oppression.

In a solemn way, God renewed his commitment, but this time ‘the Israelites would not listen to Moses’ (6:9). YHWH renews his commission, but Moses, once again, states his lack of ability to carry it out, reinforced by his experience of being criticised and rejected by his own people: ‘How then shall Pharaoh listen to me, with uncircumcised lips?’ (6:12). The focus this time is on his lack of purity.

Once again YHWH speaks of Aaron. Before, he was to speak for Moses to the people (4:16). Now he is to speak for Moses to Pharaoh.

This is the second time that God has spoken about hardening Pharaoh’s heart (7:3). In 4:21 the verb used was *ḥāzaq* (see commentary). Here it is *qāšâ*. The adjective has appeared twice in relation to the ‘hard’ nature of their slavery (see 1:14; 6:9).

As the confrontation between YHWH (acting in and through Moses and Aaron) and Pharaoh is about to be played out, YHWH repeats to Moses his commitment to liberating his people through ‘great acts of judgment’ (7:4).

‘The Egyptians shall know that I am YHWH’ (7:5, see 5:2).

¹⁰Then YHWH spoke to Moses,
¹¹“Go and tell Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the Israelites go out of his land.” ¹²But Moses spoke to YHWH, “The Israelites have not listened to me; how then shall Pharaoh listen to me, *with uncircumcised lips?*”

[Insert 6:13-30 - see following page]

^{7:1}YHWH said to Moses, “See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. ²You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his land.

³But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and I will multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt. ⁴When Pharaoh does not listen to you, I will lay my hand upon Egypt and bring my people the Israelites, company by company, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment.

⁵The Egyptians shall know that I am YHWH, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out from among them.”

⁶Moses and Aaron did so; they did just as YHWH commanded them.

⁷Moses was eighty years old and Aaron eighty-three when they spoke to Pharaoh.

Moses, Aaron, and the levitical priestly office

¹³Thus YHWH spoke to Moses and Aaron, and gave them orders regarding the Israelites and Pharaoh king of Egypt, charging them to free the Israelites from the land of Egypt.

This verse puts the narrative on hold in order to present the following genealogy which speaks briefly of Jacob's first two sons, and then focuses on Levi, from whom *Aaron* and *Moses* and the levitical priestly families are descended. The priest writers are tracing the priestly office back to Levi, through Aaron. The mention of women in a genealogy is rare. Their names are given here to reinforce the purity of the line from which Aaron came.

¹⁴The following are the heads of their ancestral houses: the sons of Reuben, the firstborn of Israel: Hanoch, Pallu, Hezron, and Carmi; these are the families of Reuben. ¹⁵The sons of Simeon: Jemuel, Jamin, Ohad, Jachin, Zohar, and Shaul, the son of a Canaanite woman; these are the families of Simeon.

¹⁶The following are the names of the sons of Levi according to their genealogies: Gershon, Kohath, and Merari, and the length of Levi's life was one hundred thirty-seven years. ¹⁷The sons of Gershon: Libni and Shimei, by their families. ¹⁸The sons of Kohath: Amram, Izhar, Hebron, and Uzziel, and the length of Kohath's life was one hundred thirty-three years. ¹⁹The sons of Merari: Mahli and Mushi. These are the families of the Levites according to their genealogies.

²⁰Amram married Jochebed his father's sister and she bore him *Aaron* and *Moses*, and the length of Amram's life was one hundred thirty-seven years. ²¹The sons of Izhar: Korah, Nepheg, and Zichri. ²²The sons of Uzziel: Mishael, Elzaphan, and Sithri. ²³*Aaron* married Elisheba, daughter of Aminadab and sister of Nahshon, and she bore him Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. ²⁴The sons of Korah: Assir, Elkanah, and Abiasaph; these are the families of the Korahites. ²⁵*Aaron's* son Eleazar married one of the daughters of Putiel, and she bore him Phinehas. These are the heads of the ancestral houses of the Levites by their families.

²⁶It was this same Aaron and Moses to whom YHWH said, "Bring the Israelites out of the land of Egypt, company by company."

²⁷It was they who spoke to Pharaoh king of Egypt to bring the Israelites out of Egypt, the same Moses and Aaron.

²⁸On the day when YHWH spoke to Moses in the land of Egypt, ²⁹he said to him, "I am YHWH; tell Pharaoh king of Egypt all that I am speaking to you." ³⁰But Moses said in YHWH's presence, "Since I am a poor speaker, why would Pharaoh listen to me?"

In verses 26-27 the editors are linking the inserted genealogy back into the narrative. 'Company by company' translates 'al ṣebā'ōt, an image taken from the battlefield (see Genesis 21:22,32; 26:26). It is also used of God's creation (Genesis 2:1), and may refer here to God's heavenly hosts that are on the side of Israel against Egypt.

Verses 28-30 recapitulate 6:2-13 in order to lead on to 7:1-7 (see previous page).

Here the post-exilic authors of Exodus are drawing on ancient folklore and other fragments of written material. Somewhere along the line emerged this entertaining folk tale that begins here and goes to the end of chapter eleven. It is drama to demonstrate God's power over evil.

The first round in the conflict between Moses-Aaron and Pharaoh takes us back to YHWH's response to Moses' concern that he would not be believed. YHWH showed him that he could turn his staff into a snake (nāḥāš), and then take hold of it again, when it would turn back into a staff (see 4:2-4, and the commentary there). YHWH told him: 'Take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs' (4:17) – which Moses did (4:20).

Here he (or rather Aaron at his command – the priests are keen to feature Aaron as prominently as possible) puts the staff to use. It turns into a snake (tannîn). The use of a different word for 'snake' may indicate a different source. On the other hand, the authors may want to evoke the image of 'sea monsters' (the meaning of tannîn in Genesis 1:21; Isaiah 27:1 and Psalm 74:13).

However, Pharaoh is not concerned. He has a range of 'wise men', 'sorcerers' and 'magicians of Egypt' and is confident that they can match anything that Moses can come up with. His opening words 'Perform a wonder' (7:9) is the equivalent of 'Try your tricks. I couldn't care less'. As the narrative progresses we will see that he will get more than he bargains on.

Even though 'Aaron's staff' (snake) swallows up the snakes of the Egyptian magicians, Pharaoh is not impressed. His 'heart was hardened' (ḥāzaq, as in 4:21); that is to say, 'he would not listen', 'as YHWH had said' (see 4:21).

YHWH chose this 'sign'. It was obviously not meant to succeed. We have already been given the key reason. God intends to perform 'great acts of judgment' in Egypt, so that 'the Egyptians shall know that I am YHWH' (7:4-5). There is a lot more excitement still to come, but it has a serious message: it is about who is truly God.

In Jewish tradition Pharaoh's magicians are named Jamnes and Jambres (see 2 Timothy 3:8).

⁸YHWH said to Moses and Aaron, ⁹"When Pharaoh says to you, 'Perform a wonder,' then you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and throw it down before Pharaoh, and it will become a snake.'"

¹⁰So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did as YHWH had commanded; Aaron threw down his staff before Pharaoh and his officials, and it became a snake.

¹¹Then Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers; and they also, the magicians of Egypt, did the same by their secret arts. ¹²Each one threw down his staff, and they became snakes; but Aaron's staff swallowed up theirs.

¹³Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as YHWH had said.

The first plague

¹⁴Then YHWH said to Moses, “Pharaoh’s heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go.

¹⁵Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is going out to the water; stand by at the river bank to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that was turned into a snake. ¹⁶Say to him,

‘YHWH, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, “Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness.” But until now you have not listened.’ ¹⁷Thus says YHWH, “By this you shall know that I am YHWH.” See, with the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water that is in the Nile, and it shall be turned to blood. ¹⁸The fish in the river shall die, the river itself shall stink, and the Egyptians shall be unable to drink water from the Nile.”

¹⁹YHWH said to Moses, “Say to Aaron, “Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt—over its rivers, its canals, and its ponds, and all its pools of water—so that they may become blood; and there shall be blood throughout the whole land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone.”

²⁰Moses and Aaron did just as YHWH commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and of his officials he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the river, and all the water in the river was turned into blood, ²¹and the fish in the river died. The river stank so that the Egyptians could not drink its water, and there was blood throughout the whole land of Egypt.

²²But the magicians of Egypt did the same by their secret arts; so Pharaoh’s heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them; as YHWH had said. ²³Pharaoh turned and went into his house, and he did not take even this to heart. ²⁴And all the Egyptians had to dig along the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink the water of the river.

²⁵Seven days passed after YHWH had struck the Nile.

A third word is used here for ‘hardened’ (kābēd, ‘inflexible’; see 7:3).

Moses is portrayed here as a prophet. As God’s ambassador, he speaks God’s words in the first person: ‘Let *my* people go’, that they may worship ‘*me*’; ‘I am YHWH’; ‘I will strike the water’. The introductory phrase ‘Thus says YHWH’ (7:17; see 5:1) is typical of the prophetic oracles (1Kings 14:7; 21:19).

When Moses and Pharaoh meet ‘at the river bank’ (7:15), are we to recall the baby Moses floating there (2:5)?

The imagery here comes from a recurring natural phenomenon. When the Nile does not flood, decaying algae mix with the red soil and redden the Nile. There may also be ironic mythical overtones here. YHWH, ‘the God of the Hebrews’ (7:16) is defeating Hapi, the god of the Nile (hence the ‘blood’). If so no one in Egypt picks up the irony. This plague was foretold in God’s initial encounter with Moses (see 4:9). The scene described is, indeed, revolting.

Once again Moses is to tell Aaron to carry out the action; once again ‘the magicians of Egypt do the same by their secret arts’ (7:22; see 7:11); and once again Pharaoh’s heart remains hardened (ḥāzaq). The plague lasts seven (symbolic) days.

This plague is celebrated in Psalm 105:29 and Psalm 78:44.

The pattern here has many parallels with the first plague. Moses is God's ambassador, God's prophet: he begins with the traditional formula 'Thus says YHWH' (8:1), and he uses the first person in his message. Once again it is Aaron that performs the ritual, and once again the magicians duplicate the 'magic' 'by their secret arts' (8:7; see 7:11,22).

Pharaoh shows the first signs of weakening. He even asks Moses and Aaron to 'pray to YHWH to take away the frogs' (8:8). It is important for the reader-listener to enter into the creepy, slimy, revolting scene, and 'enjoy' the misery of the Pharaoh. This is how it was read in Judah!

Once again the aim of the whole exercise is made clear. It is 'so that you may know that there is no one like YHWH our God' (8:10).

However, once the plague is stopped by YHWH, Pharaoh 'hardened his heart, and would not listen to them just as YHWH had said' (8:15; see 4:21; 7:13 and 7:22).

This action of YHWH is celebrated in Psalm 105:30 and Psalm 78:45. Revelation draws on the imagery of this plague in its symbolic depicting of God's judgment (see Revelation 16:13); just as it drew on the imagery of the previous plague (see Revelation 16:3-4).

¹Then YHWH said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh and say to him, "Thus says YHWH: Let my people go, so that they may worship me. ²If you refuse to let them go, I will plague your whole country with frogs. ³The river shall swarm with frogs; they shall come up into your palace, into your bedchamber and your bed, and into the houses of your officials and of your people, and into your ovens and your kneading bowls. ⁴The frogs shall come up on you and on your people and on all your officials."

⁵And YHWH said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Stretch out your hand with your staff over the rivers, the canals, and the pools, and make frogs come up on the land of Egypt.'" ⁶So Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt; and the frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt. ⁷But the magicians did the same by their secret arts, and brought frogs up on the land of Egypt.

⁸Then Pharaoh called Moses and Aaron, and said, "Pray to YHWH to take away the frogs from me and my people, and I will let the people go to sacrifice to YHWH." ⁹Moses said to Pharaoh, "Okay, you win. Tell me when I am to pray for you and for your officials and for your people, that the frogs may be removed from you and your houses and be left only in the Nile."

¹⁰And he said, "Tomorrow." Moses said, "As you say! So that you may know that there is no one like YHWH our God, ¹¹the frogs shall leave you and your houses and your officials and your people; they shall be left only in the Nile."

¹²Then Moses and Aaron went out from Pharaoh; and Moses cried out to YHWH concerning the frogs that he had brought upon Pharaoh.

¹³And YHWH did as Moses requested: the frogs died in the houses, the courtyards, and the fields. ¹⁴And they gathered them together in heaps, and the land stank.

¹⁵But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart, and would not listen to them, just as YHWH had said.

The third plague

¹⁶Then YHWH said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth, so that it may become gnats throughout the whole land of Egypt.'"

¹⁷And they did so; Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff and struck the dust of the earth, and gnats came on humans and animals alike; all the dust of the earth turned into gnats throughout the whole land of Egypt.

¹⁸The magicians tried to produce gnats by their secret arts, but they could not. There were gnats on both humans and animals.

¹⁹And the magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God!" But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, just as YHWH had said.

This story leaves out YHWH's first instruction to Moses about what he is to say to Pharaoh, and moves straight to what he is to tell Aaron to do. Moses and Aaron instantly obey (8:17; compare 7:10; 7:20). Once again, it is Aaron who performs the ritual.

For the first time, the Egyptian magicians are unable to reproduce the 'magic', and they inform Pharaoh that 'this is the finger of God' (8:19). The power they are facing goes beyond their magical arts. There must be a god involved.

However, Pharaoh is still unmoved and the conclusion (8:19) is the same as for the prior two plagues (see 7:22; 8:15). This plague (gnats? lice?) is celebrated in Psalm 105:31.

Let us pause here to examine Paul's brilliant use of the theme of God hardening Pharaoh's heart in his treatment of God's mercy in Romans 9. Were he focusing on the human dimension he would have spoken of human freedom and of Pharaoh's rejection of grace. However, Paul does not want to deflect attention from God, and so he insists that God, in his mercy, uses even the effects of Pharaoh's refusal as a means of revealing God's mercy. This could lead to an objection. If Pharaoh's stubborn resistance in refusing to listen to God is part of God's providence in revealing his mercy, why should we accuse Pharaoh of sin? Why should we accuse anyone of sin? It would seem that we are just puppets in God's plan for the world, fulfilling the role assigned to us and quite unable to resist God's will: 'Why does God still find fault? For who can resist God's will?' (Romans 9:19)

Paul takes up this problem and reasserts that everything willed by God is with a view to his ultimate purpose, which is to show mercy. Even when – as is the case with Pharaoh – we stubbornly resist God's will, God uses this very hardness of heart to bring about his merciful purpose. Such stubborn resistance calls down God's wrath, but God's mercy patiently holds back even the punishment which sin deserves, in order to effect God's transcendent purpose, which is to show mercy.

In terms of the Exodus story, God's mercy is to redeem Israel. It is also that 'the Egyptians shall know that I am YHWH' (Exodus 7:5).

There are a number of variations in the way this fourth plague (disease carrying worms) is presented when compared to the first three.

No instructions are given to Aaron because his role as mediator is not mentioned.

Also, for the first time, the plague strikes Egypt, but leaves Goshen untouched.

This time Pharaoh is directly affected and appears to give in: 'Go, sacrifice to your God' (8:25).

However some shrewd negotiation goes on till Pharaoh lets Moses take the people into the wilderness as long as he does not go far away (8:28).

Once again Pharaoh asks for prayers (see 8:8).

However, as we have come to expect, as soon as YHWH stops the plague in response to Moses' prayers, Pharaoh reneges on his permission: 'Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and would not let the people go' (8:32).

This plague is celebrated in Psalm 105:31, and Psalm 78:45.

We are meant to be asking 'What's next?'

²⁰Then YHWH said to Moses, "Rise early in the morning and present yourself before Pharaoh, as he goes out to the water, and say to him, 'Thus says YHWH: Let my people go, so that they may worship me. ²¹For if you will not let my people go, I will send swarms of flies on you, your officials, and your people, and into your houses; and the houses of the Egyptians shall be filled with swarms of flies; so also the land where they live. ²²But on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, where my people live, so that no swarms of flies shall be there, that you may know that I YHWH am in this land. ²³Thus I will make a distinction between my people and your people. This sign shall appear tomorrow.'"

²⁴YHWH did so, and great swarms of flies came into the house of Pharaoh and into his officials' houses; in all of Egypt the land was ruined because of the flies.

²⁵Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron, and said, "Go, sacrifice to your God within the land." ²⁶But Moses said, "It would not be right to do so; for the sacrifices that we offer to YHWH our God are offensive to the Egyptians. If we offer in the sight of the Egyptians sacrifices that are offensive to them, will they not stone us? ²⁷We must go a three days' journey into the wilderness and sacrifice to YHWH our God as he commands us." ²⁸So Pharaoh said, "I will let you go to sacrifice to YHWH your God in the wilderness, provided you do not go very far away. Pray for me." ²⁹Then Moses said, "As soon as I leave you, I will pray to YHWH that the swarms of flies may depart tomorrow from Pharaoh, from his officials, and from his people; only do not let Pharaoh again deal falsely by not letting the people go to sacrifice to YHWH."

³⁰So Moses went out from Pharaoh and prayed to YHWH. ³¹And YHWH did as Moses asked: he removed the swarms of flies from Pharaoh, from his officials, and from his people; not one remained. ³²But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and would not let the people go.

The Fifth and Sixth Plagues

¹Then YHWH said to Moses, “Go to Pharaoh, and say to him, ‘Thus says YHWH, the God of the Hebrews: Let my people go, so that they may worship me. ²For if you refuse to let them go and still hold them, ³the hand of YHWH will strike with a deadly pestilence your livestock in the field: the horses, the donkeys, the camels, the herds, and the flocks.

⁴But YHWH will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt, so that nothing shall die of all that belongs to the Israelites.”

⁵YHWH set a time, saying, “Tomorrow YHWH will do this thing in the land.”

⁶And on the next day YHWH did so; all the livestock of the Egyptians died, but of the livestock of the Israelites not one died.

⁷Pharaoh inquired and found that not one of the livestock of the Israelites was dead. But the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he would not let the people go.

⁸Then YHWH said to Moses and Aaron, “Take handfuls of soot from the kiln, and let Moses throw it in the air in the sight of Pharaoh.

⁹It shall become fine dust all over the land of Egypt, and shall cause festering boils on humans and animals throughout the whole land of Egypt.”

¹⁰So they took soot from the kiln, and stood before Pharaoh, and Moses threw it in the air, and it caused festering boils on humans and animals.

¹¹The magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boils afflicted the magicians as well as all the Egyptians.

¹²But YHWH hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he would not listen to them, just as YHWH had spoken to Moses.

As in the earlier plagues, Moses is God’s ambassador and prophet – see ‘Thus says YHWH’ and the use of the first person in the words Moses is to address to Pharaoh.

As in the previous plague, Aaron’s mediation is not mentioned. As in the third plague, the dialogue with Pharaoh is presumed by the storyteller who goes straight to YHWH’s inflicting the plague. As in the previous plague Egypt is affected, but not the Israelites.

Another level of meaning is perhaps being suggested, for the Calf of Ur-Mer (incarnation of Ra) was worshipped at Heliopolis, the Bull Bakis was worshipped at Thebes and the Bull Apis at Memphis. YHWH is more powerful than the gods of Egypt. Pharaoh is unmoved. This plague is not mentioned in Psalm 105 or Psalm 78.

Interestingly, in this sixth plague, though Moses and Aaron are both mentioned (9:8), it is Moses, not Aaron, who performs the rite (9:10). In the first two plagues, Pharaoh’s magicians were able to duplicate YHWH’s action ‘by their secret arts’(7:22; 8:7). Then they found that it was beyond them (8:18). In the last two plagues they fail to get a mention, and here they are back on stage being affected by the plague (9:11). I’m afraid we are meant to enjoy the comedy in watching this. The conclusion picks up the refrain of 7:22; 8:15 and 8:19.

This plague is not mentioned in Psalm 105 or Psalm 78. The imagery is used in Revelation 16:2,11 for God’s judgment.

Once again Moses is God's ambassador and prophet. Note the formula: 'Thus says YHWH'(9:13), and use of the first person in the words Moses is to speak. Aaron does not feature in this plague.

The storyteller uses this longer speech to remind us of the purpose of the plagues: 'so that you may know that there is no one like me [YHWH] in all the earth'(9:14; compare 8:10); 'to show you my power, and to make my name resound through all the world'(9:16). To know YHWH is to be open to welcome YHWH's offer of life, blessing and faithful love.

The delay in achieving total victory over Egypt is not an indication of YHWH's lack of power. It is to give Pharaoh an opportunity to repent, and to 'stop exalting yourself against my people'(9:17). In the drama of the folk tale, it is also to entertain and reinforce YHWH's care for his people.

This time God not only gives a warning, he also offers the Egyptians the opportunity to defend themselves and their stock against the destructive power of the hail.

Those who 'fear the word of YHWH'(9:20) – that is to say, those who respect and obey YHWH – take advantage of the warning. The others take no notice. Not everyone in Egypt is as stubborn as Pharaoh!

¹³Then YHWH said to Moses, "Rise up early in the morning and present yourself before Pharaoh, and say to him, 'Thus says YHWH, the God of the Hebrews: Let my people go, so that they may worship me. ¹⁴For this time I will send all my plagues upon you yourself, and upon your officials, and upon your people, so that you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth.

¹⁵For by now I could have stretched out my *arm* and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. ¹⁶But this is why I have let you live: to show you my power, and to make my name resound through all the *world*. ¹⁷You are still exalting yourself against my people, and will not let them go.

¹⁸Tomorrow at this time I will cause the heaviest hail to fall that has ever fallen in Egypt from the day it was founded until now.

¹⁹Send, therefore, and have your livestock and everything that you have in the open field brought to a secure place; every human or animal that is in the open field and is not brought under shelter will die when the hail comes down upon them.'"

²⁰Those officials of Pharaoh who feared the word of YHWH hurried their slaves and livestock off to a secure place. ²¹Those who did not regard the word of YHWH left their slaves and livestock in the open field.

The Seventh Plague

²²YHWH said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand toward heaven so that hail may fall on the whole land of Egypt, on humans and animals and all the plants of the field in the land of Egypt."

²³Then Moses stretched out his staff toward heaven, and YHWH sent thunder and hail, and fire came down on the earth. And YHWH rained hail on the land of Egypt; ²⁴there was hail with fire flashing continually in the midst of it, such heavy hail as had never fallen in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation. ²⁵The hail struck down everything that was in the open field throughout all the land of Egypt, both human and animal; the hail also struck down all the plants of the field, and shattered every tree in the field. ²⁶Only in the land of Goshen, where the Israelites were, there was no hail.

²⁷Then Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron, and said to them, "This time I have sinned; YHWH is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong. ²⁸Pray to YHWH! Enough of God's thunder and hail! I will let you go; you need stay no longer." ²⁹Moses said to him, "As soon as I have gone out of the city, I will stretch out my hands to YHWH; the thunder will cease, and there will be no more hail, so that you may know that the earth is YHWH'S. ³⁰But as for you and your officials, I know that you do not yet fear YHWH God."

³¹(Now the flax and the barley were ruined, for the barley was in the ear and the flax was in bud.

³²But the wheat and the spelt were not ruined, for they are late in coming up.)

³³So Moses left Pharaoh, went out of the city, and stretched out his hands to YHWH; then the thunder and the hail ceased, and the rain no longer poured down on the earth. ³⁴But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned once more and hardened his heart, he and his officials.

³⁵So the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he would not let the Israelites go, just as YHWH had spoken through Moses.

Once again, 'the land of Goshen, where the Israelites were' is spared (compare 8:22; 9:4).

It would appear that at last Pharaoh repents (9:27). When the previous Pharaoh increased his oppression of the Israelites, the foremen accused him of sinning against his own people (see 5:16). Apart from that verse twenty-seven is the first mention of 'sin' (ḥāṭā) in Exodus.

Moses agrees to pray for the ending of the plague, but is too shrewd to accept Pharaoh's repentance as genuine: 'I know that you do not yet know YHWH God' (9:30).

Moses is right. Pharaoh goes back on his word, and the scene ends with the customary refrain (see 7:22; 8:15; 8:19; 9:12). Verses 31-32 are added to leave something alive for the next plague.

This plague is celebrated in Psalm 105:32-33 and Psalm 78:47-48. Revelation 16:21 uses it as a symbol of God's judgment.

Since in fact Pharaoh does not repent, the divine purpose as presented in this tale is, in the final analysis, to demonstrate YHWH's power over Egypt so that *Israel* will 'know that I am YHWH' and will ensure that the memory of what YHWH is doing in Egypt will never be lost (10:2).

Moses and Aaron are not told what to say to Pharaoh. This is assumed when they begin their message with 'Thus says YHWH', and speak God's words in the first person.

This time they threaten a plague of locusts.

By now Pharaoh stands alone, a pathetic figure in his refusal to bow to God's will. His officials advise him to give in.

Moses speaks from a position of power, but Pharaoh knows there is more to this than the desire to celebrate a pilgrimage-festival (ḥag; see 5:1).

Pharaoh insists that Moses go, but only with the men. This is his final offer and Moses and Aaron are 'driven from his presence' (10:11).

¹Then YHWH said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his officials, in order that I may show these signs of mine among them, ²and that you may tell your children and grandchildren how I have made fools of the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them—so that you may know that I am YHWH."

³So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh, and said to him, "Thus says YHWH, the God of the Hebrews, 'How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me? Let my people go, so that they may worship me. ⁴For if you refuse to let my people go, tomorrow I will bring locusts into your country. ⁵They shall cover the surface of the land, so that no one will be able to see the land. They shall devour the last remnant left you after the hail, and they shall devour every tree of yours that grows in the field. ⁶They shall fill your houses, and the houses of all your officials and of all the Egyptians—something that neither your parents nor your grandparents have seen, from the day they came on earth to this day.'" Then he turned and went out from Pharaoh.

⁷Pharaoh's officials said to him, "How long shall this fellow be a snare to us? Let the people go, so that they may worship YHWH their God; do you not yet understand that Egypt is ruined?"

⁸So Moses and Aaron were brought back to Pharaoh, and he said to them, "Go, worship YHWH your God! But which ones are to go?"

⁹Moses said, "We will go with our young and our old; we will go with our sons and daughters and with our flocks and herds, because we have YHWH'S festival to celebrate."

¹⁰He said to them, "YHWH indeed will be with you, if ever I let your little ones go with you! Plainly, you have some evil purpose in mind.

¹¹No, never! Your men may go and worship YHWH, for that is what you are asking." And they were driven out from Pharaoh's presence.

The Eighth Plague

¹²Then YHWH said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the land of Egypt, so that the locusts may come upon it and eat every plant in the land, all that the hail has left.”

¹³So Moses stretched out his staff over the land of Egypt, and YHWH brought an east wind upon the land all that day and all that night; when morning came, the east wind had brought the locusts. ¹⁴The locusts came upon all the land of Egypt and settled on the whole country of Egypt, such a dense swarm of locusts as had never been before, nor ever shall be again. ¹⁵They covered the surface of the whole land, so that the land was black; and they ate all the plants in the land and all the fruit of the trees that the hail had left; nothing green was left, no tree, no plant in the field, in all the land of Egypt.

¹⁶Pharaoh hurriedly summoned Moses and Aaron and said, “I have sinned against YHWH your God, and against you. ¹⁷Do forgive my sin just this once, and pray to YHWH your God that at the least he remove this deadly thing from me.”

¹⁸So he went out from Pharaoh and prayed to YHWH.

¹⁹YHWH changed the wind into a very strong west wind, which lifted the locusts and drove them into the Red Sea; not a single locust was left in all the country of Egypt.

²⁰But YHWH hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he would not let the Israelites go.

Moses is YHWH’s instrument in bringing on this plague.

Pharaoh is forced to eat humble pie. Having thrown Moses and Aaron out, he has to recall them, admit his sin, and beg for pardon. He asks them to pray ‘just this once’ (10:17) that God will end the plague. YHWH changes the direction of the wind and drives the locusts into the Red Sea (yam sūp̄). The last time we met the word sūp̄ was when Moses as a baby was placed in a basket ‘among the reeds (sūp̄) on the bank of the river’ (2:3; see also 2:5). There are a number of literary links between what happens to the locusts here and what happens later to the Egyptian army in the same area (see 14:21ff). Elsewhere in the Bible armies are likened to an invasion of locusts (see Joel).

As noted in the Introduction (page 14), one tradition may imagine the crossing in the marshy wetlands between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean – the ‘Reed’ Sea? The priests, however, have the crossing in the Red Sea.

Again Pharaoh goes back on his word.

This plague is celebrated in Psalm 105:34-35 and Psalm 78:46. Revelation 9:3-11 draws on the imagery of locusts when speaking of God’s judgment.

The storyteller dispenses with the warning and goes straight to the plague (as in 8:16-19 and 9:8-12).

In the first plague, YHWH defeated Hapi, the god of the Nile. Here in the ninth plague he defeats the sun-god, Amen-Ra. This is the personal god of Pharaoh. The eclipse of the sun signifies the end of Pharaoh, the son of Ra (Rameses).

An angry exchange between Moses and Pharaoh (Aaron plays no part in this plague) is followed by a complete breakdown of negotiations.

‘Sacrifices’ (10:25; *z^abāhîm*), refers to meat sacrifices that are only partly burned and then consumed in a communion meal. ‘Burnt offerings’ (‘*ōlôt*) refers to meat sacrifices where the whole animal is consumed in fire, and the smoke rises to heaven. The priests have a special interest in the distinction.

Pharaoh threatens to kill Moses if he ever sees him again, and Moses is just as strong: ‘I will never see your face again’ (10:29).

In its celebration of the signs given by God in Egypt, Psalm 105 puts this plague at the head (Psalm 105:28). It is not listed in Psalm 78, but is used as an image of God’s judgment in Revelation 16:10 (see also 8:12).

21Then YHWH said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand toward heaven so that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness that can be felt.”

22So Moses stretched out his hand toward heaven, and there was dense darkness in all the land of Egypt for three days. **23**People could not see one another, and for three days they could not move from where they were; but all the Israelites had light where they lived.

24Then Pharaoh summoned Moses, and said, “Go, worship YHWH. Only your flocks and your herds shall remain behind. Even your children may go with you.”

25But Moses said, “You must also let us have sacrifices and burnt offerings to sacrifice to YHWH our God.

26Our livestock also must go with us; not a hoof shall be left behind, for we must choose some of them for the worship of YHWH our God, and we will not know what to use to worship YHWH until we arrive there.”

27But YHWH hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he was unwilling to let them go.

28Then Pharaoh said to him, “Get away from me! Take care that you do not see my face again, for on the day you see my face you shall die.”

29Moses said, “Just as you say! I will never see your face again.”

The first nine plagues

A reflection on the plagues

The imagery used in the first nine plagues is taken from experience: the reddening of the Nile, plagues of frogs, gnats (lice), flies (vermin), pestilence, boils, hail, locusts, and the eclipse of the sun. Some of these experiences (hail is an example) fit the Palestine scene better than the Egyptian, but those who created the tales and those who enjoyed them had no trouble imagining the horror of these plagues. In a culture which saw God as controlling the world, the storyteller could present all such happenings as willed by God. Since God was known to be just, the listener-reader would be looking for the sin that was being punished, and for why God was punishing the sin in this way.

In the case of the plagues of Egypt, the sin was the violent oppression of the Israelites. Pharaoh, therefore, is presented as being responsible for the plagues. He is portrayed as a tyrant, and at the same time, he and his 'magicians' are comic figures. In spite of growing evidence of his powerlessness, he keeps exalting himself against YHWH's people (9:17), and refusing to humble himself before YHWH (10:3). His stubborn refusal to let Israel go brings on the disasters, which would not have happened had he listened to God's word spoken to him through Moses.

Pharaoh's stubborn refusal to repent is expressed in terms of his heart being hardened. Three images are employed for this: *ḥāzaq* (to be/make adamant); *kābad* (to be/make inflexible) and *qāšâ* (to be/make determined). This is looked at on two levels. On the human level, Pharaoh is responsible and this is expressed throughout. However, on another level, since whatever happens is understood (in that culture) as willed by God, it must be God who makes Pharaoh's heart hard. Why?

The scenes of the dramatic folk tale offer as God's reason for this God's determination to reveal his power, his power to redeem. YHWH is demonstrating his power so that Egypt, indeed, the whole world (9:16), will know that YHWH is God. Throughout the various scenes we hear that YHWH wants Egypt to 'know' him (5:2; 7:5,17; 8:19,22; 9:29). This is consistent with the constant theme of Genesis, that through Abraham (through Israel) 'all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Genesis 12:3). This is the key point made by Paul in his treatment of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in Romans 9 (see page 58). Paul sees everything God does as being directed to the showing of mercy.

However, Pharaoh refuses to know YHWH, and so the plagues demonstrate YHWH's victory over Egypt. No earthly power, not even the power of the greatest empire in the world, can thwart God's determination to hear the cry of the oppressed. This is good news for the Israelites, and those listening to these stories are meant to thank and praise God for what God has done for them, and enjoy the humiliation of the evil Pharaoh.

In a special way, Israel must never forget what God has done and continued to do in order to free them from slavery (10:2).

The stories we have heard encourage us to name the sins that cause so much suffering in our world. They also encourage us to look for the 'hand of God', that is to say, the grace and power of God calling us, through the plagues that affect us, to repentance and to freedom.

Before he leaves, Moses has some final words for Pharaoh. This time YHWH tells Moses that there will be no turning back: ‘when Pharaoh lets you go, he will drive you away’(11:1).

This has been a battle between Egypt and YHWH. YHWH’s people are to enjoy the spoils of victory. This is something YHWH promised Moses on their first encounter at Horeb:

I will bring this people into such favour with the Egyptians that, when you go, you will not go empty-handed; each woman shall ask her neighbour and any woman living in the neighbour’s house for jewelry of silver and of gold, and clothing, and you shall put them on your sons and on your daughters; and so you shall plunder the Egyptians.

– Exodus 3:21-22

Moses relays YHWH’s words to Pharaoh. We were prepared for this at the burning bush of Horeb:

You shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says YHWH: Israel is my first-born son. I said to you, “Let my son go that he may worship me.” But you refused to let him go; now I will kill your firstborn son.’

– Exodus 4:22-23

We have heard the Israelites cry (3:7,9). Now it is the turn of the Egyptians (11:6). This final plague is celebrated in Psalm 105:36 and Psalm 78:51.

For the last time the reason for the plagues is given: ‘in order that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt’(11:9; see 8:10; 9:14; 9:16; 10:1-2).

Pharaoh ignores the warning, and the scene is set for the final showdown.

¹YHWH said to Moses, “I will bring one more plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; afterwards he will let you go from here; indeed, when he lets you go, he will drive you away. ²Tell the people that every man is to ask his neighbour and every woman is to ask her neighbour for objects of silver and gold.” ³YHWH gave the people favour in the sight of the Egyptians. Moreover, Moses himself was a man of great importance in the land of Egypt, in the sight of Pharaoh’s officials and in the sight of the people.

⁴Moses said, “Thus says YHWH: About midnight I will go out through Egypt. ⁵Every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the female slave who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the livestock. ⁶Then there will be a loud cry throughout the whole land of Egypt, such as has never been or will ever be again.

⁷But not a dog shall growl at any of the Israelites—not at people, not at animals—so that you may know that YHWH makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel.

⁸Then all these officials of yours shall come down to me, and bow low to me, saying, ‘Leave us, you and all the people who follow you.’ After that I will leave.” And in hot anger he left Pharaoh.

⁹YHWH said to Moses, “Pharaoh will not listen to you, in order that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt.” ¹⁰Moses and Aaron performed all these wonders before Pharaoh; but YHWH hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he did not let the people of Israel go out of his land.

Three Rites connected with the Exodus

Exodus 12:1 - 13:16

To this point the authors of Exodus have presenting in narrative form the basic beliefs of Israel in the nature of their God and in the ways in which this God, YHWH, has related to them throughout their history. YHWH is a God who hears the cry of the oppressed. YHWH is a God whose power to redeem cannot be thwarted even by the most oppressive of regimes. YHWH is a God who promised their ancestors that they would be a great nation and inhabit a land that God would give them. The post-exilic authors of Exodus were reshaping earlier traditions to encourage their contemporaries to continue to live the faith of their fathers in YHWH. Now, just as we approach the climax of God's redemptive action in liberating the Israelites from oppression, there is a dramatic interruption, and the presentation of quite different material. The interruption is placed here, because they want to link three ancient rites of the people to the story of the Exodus so that it will never be forgotten. There is every reason to think that the link was made well before it was expressed in writing by the Deuteronomic or the Priestly School.

Pasch

The first rite is the pasch (pesaḥ, from the verb 'to spare). Its origins seem to go back to an ancient pastoral rite, celebrated in autumn when the flocks were moving from their summer pasture to the edges of the wilderness for winter, and again in spring, when they were returning. Israel gave this ancient rite a new meaning by linking it to the 'new spring', their beginnings as a people, celebrated in 'the first month of the year' (12:2; see 13:4). In post-exilic Judah this feast was a public one, celebrated in connection with the temple. In the passage we are about to read, it is presented in a simpler form, fitting for the context, as a family celebration on the occasion of the Exodus.

Unleavened Bread

The second rite is the pilgrimage feast (ḥag, from ḥāgag, to 'dance for joy') of Unleavened Bread (maṣṣôt). Its origins seem to go back to an ancient agricultural spring festival celebrating the beginning of the barley harvest. It is not surprising that in time this would have been combined with the spring Pasch so that Pasch became the first night of the seven day harvest celebration. The festival of Unleavened Bread thus reinforced the truths about God expressed in the Exodus story.

Redemption of the Firstborn

The third rite that is linked with the Exodus is the rite of the sacrifice or redemption of the firstborn. As with the Pasch and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, we are dealing here with a custom that pre-dates Israel and originally had no connection with the Exodus. In the case of animals the best animal from the previous season was sacrificed to God in the hope that God would be pleased and would grant an abundant harvest in the current season. In the case of humans, there may be a connection with the prohibition of child sacrifice. In any case these ancient customs are linked here with the last plague, and so with the Exodus. Each time the first male child was redeemed, the family remembered and celebrated that Israel is YHWH's firstborn (Exodus 4:22), his chosen people.

There are indications that the ancient Israelites celebrated the beginning of the year in autumn (perhaps in line with the resurrection of the storm god, Baal, in Canaan) By the seventh century BC they were celebrating it in the spring (see Jeremiah 36:22, 2Kings 25:8, Ezekiel 40:1).

As it stands, the text is basically a cult-text developed in the sphere of cult-worship. It is insistent on involving everyone in Israel, ‘the whole congregation’ (12:3). As presented here, it is a family rite. Only if a lamb is clearly too much for a family can they combine with another family. The commemorative meal is to be celebrated between sunset and dark on the fourteenth day, the night of the full moon – the first full moon after the spring equinox.

Details of the rite are spelt out. Verses 7, 11-13 link it to the Exodus. The name of the rite (pesaḥ) is linked to the similar sounding verb ‘to spare’ (pāsaḥ). They wear sandals, carry a staff and eat hurriedly, preparing for a hasty departure; the blood visible on the door will protect them from the plague. There is evidence of such a practice among the Bedouin and pre-Islamic Arabs, to protect the house-tent against evil spirits.

The solemn ‘I am YHWH’ takes us back to 6:2-6. We are left in no doubt. God’s climactic victory over ‘the gods of Egypt’ is about to happen. YHWH Himself will ‘strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt’ (12:12; see 4:22-23; 11:5).

¹YHWH said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: ²This month shall mark for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you.

³Tell the whole congregation of Israel that on the tenth of this month they are to take a lamb for each family, a lamb for each household.

⁴If a household is too small for a whole lamb, it shall join its closest neighbour in obtaining one; the lamb shall be divided in proportion to the number of people who eat of it. ⁵Your lamb shall be without blemish, a year-old male; you may take it from the sheep or from the goats. ⁶You shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembled congregation of Israel shall slaughter it at twilight.

⁷They shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat it.

⁸They shall eat the lamb that same night; they shall eat it roasted over the fire with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. ⁹Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but roasted over the fire, with its head, legs, and inner organs. ¹⁰You shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn.

¹¹This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it hurriedly.

It is the pasch of YHWH. ¹²For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both human beings and animals; on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am YHWH. ¹³The blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you live: when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.

Unleavened Bread

¹⁴This day shall be a day of remembrance for you. You shall celebrate it as a festival to YHWH; throughout your generations you shall observe it as a perpetual *statute*.

¹⁵Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread; on the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses, for whoever eats leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day shall be cut off from Israel. ¹⁶On the first day you shall have a *summoning to the sanctuary*, and on the seventh day a *summoning to the sanctuary*; no work shall be done on those days; only what everyone must eat, that alone may be prepared by you. ¹⁷You shall observe the festival of unleavened bread, for on this very day I brought your companies out of the land of Egypt: you shall observe this day throughout your generations as a perpetual *statute*.

¹⁸In the first month, from the evening of the fourteenth day until the evening of the twenty-first day, you shall eat unleavened bread.

¹⁹For seven days no leaven shall be found in your houses; for whoever eats what is leavened shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether an alien or a native of the land.

²⁰You shall eat nothing leavened; in all your settlements you shall eat unleavened bread.

The Pasch took on an extra importance in the exile. When other rites had to cease with the loss of the temple, this rite could continue, and it became a strongly identifying one for the exiles, separating them from the Babylonians in whose land they were forced to live.

Now the authors of Exodus follow tradition in linking another festival to the Exodus and to the pasch: the pilgrimage festival of Unleavened Bread (see page 68).

These verses continue under the rubric: ‘YHWH said’(12:1). Believing that they belonged in a unique way to YHWH, who was guiding them in everything they did, the people of Israel looked to YHWH as the source of their religious observances and cultic institutions.

The text gives meticulous rubrics for the carrying out of this rite as well. The important aspect of this celebration is not the eating of unleavened bread, but the prohibition of having any leaven in the house (12:19-20). This purging accents the fact that the community is experiencing a new start, a further reminder of the new beginning that God created when he brought them out of Egypt.

The punishment of being ‘cut off from the congregation of Israel’(12:15, 19) is executed only by God. God will terminate the offender’s line, and when he dies he will not join his ancestors. There was no immediate way of verifying this threat, but it was a powerful deterrent.

Once again the role of the ‘elders’ (12:21) is highlighted (see Genesis 50:7; Exodus 3:16, 18; 4:29). Pesah is the name of the feast and also of the animal that is sacrificed (12:21).

In verses 22-23 Moses elaborates on those elements of YHWH’s instructions (12:1-20) that bear on the last plague (see 12:7, 12-13).

In verses 24-25, to YHWH’s instruction of 12:14 Moses adds a reference to ‘the land that YHWH will give you as he has promised’ (see 6:8).

Another rubric of the rite is added in verses 26-27. The accent is on telling the story to one’s children.

The tenth and final plague strikes, the essential plague announced by YHWH when he first commissioned Moses to be his instrument in liberating Israel (see 4:22-23). This is the ‘one more plague’ we have been expecting (see 11:1-8; 12:12,23). It is the victory of the firstborn of YHWH over the firstborn of Egypt, the final demonstration of where choice, authority and power lie.

Our story began with the cry of the oppressed (2:23-24). Now it is the turn of the oppressor (12:30).

21Then Moses called all the elders of Israel and said to them,

“Go, select lambs for your families, and slaughter the *paschal* lamb.

22Take a bunch of hyssop, dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood in the basin. None of you shall go outside the door of your house until morning.

23For YHWH will pass through to strike down the Egyptians; when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, YHWH will pass over that door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you down.

24You shall observe this rite as a perpetual ordinance for you and your children.

25When you come to the land that YHWH will give you, as he has promised, you shall keep this observance.

26And when your children ask you, ‘What do you mean by this observance?’ ²⁷you shall say, ‘It is the *paschal* sacrifice to YHWH, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses.’” And the people bowed down and worshiped.

28The Israelites went and did just as YHWH had commanded Moses and Aaron.

29At midnight YHWH struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the prisoner who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock.

30Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his officials and all the Egyptians; and there was a loud cry in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead.

³¹Then he summoned Moses and Aaron in the night, and said, "Rise up, go away from my people, both you and the Israelites! Go, worship YHWH, as you said.

³²Take your flocks and your herds, as you said, and be gone. And bring a blessing on me too!" ³³The Egyptians urged the people to hasten their departure from the land, for they said, "We shall all be dead."

³⁴So the people took their dough before it was leavened, with their kneading bowls wrapped up in their cloaks on their shoulders.

³⁵The Israelites had done as Moses told them; they had asked the Egyptians for jewelry of silver and gold, and for clothing, ³⁶and YHWH had given the people favour in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. And so they plundered the Egyptians.

³⁷The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children.

³⁸A mixed crowd also went up with them, and livestock in great numbers, both flocks and herds.

³⁹They baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had brought out of Egypt; it was not leavened, because they were driven out of Egypt and could not wait, nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves.

⁴⁰The time that the Israelites had lived in Egypt was four hundred thirty years.

⁴¹At the end of four hundred thirty years, on that very day, all the companies of YHWH went out from the land of Egypt.

⁴²That was for YHWH a night of vigil, to bring them out of the land of Egypt. That same night is a vigil to be kept *in honour of YHWH* by all the Israelites throughout their generations.

It is as YHWH had said: 'Indeed, when he lets you go he will drive you away'(11:1). In asking for a blessing (12:32), Pharaoh is acknowledging his complete dependence of the God of Israel.

Verse 34 prepares us for verse 39. Verses 35-36 mark the fulfilment of 3:21-22 and 11:2-3. The Israelites take the spoils of victory.

There is no point in attempting to reconstruct the itinerary of the Israelites. Names are chosen because they are familiar, not because they record an accurate historical memory. For Rameses see Genesis 47:11 and Exodus 1:11).

'Six hundred thousand men' is an impossibly huge number, though from the point of view of the narrative we have frequently been told of the immense growth of Israel in Egypt (see 1:9). See the comment in the Introduction (page 13). Rather than attempting to rationalise the number, it seems best to allow the huge number to impress, without expecting historical accuracy.

Does the 'mixed crowd'(12:38) contain vestiges of the memory that those who escaped from Egypt were, indeed, 'ḥabiru', stateless slaves of mixed race?

The priests did not have accurate statistics for the figure of 430 years (Genesis 15:13 has 400), See the comment in the Introduction (page 13). We cannot use the figure to create an accurate time line.

For 'all the companies of YHWH' see 7:4.

The Israelites developed regulations concerning who could and who could not take part in the Pasch ritual. Foreigners are excluded, except for those who are actually residing in the land. These can take part provided they are first circumcised. Here these practices are traced back to Moses and Aaron and given divine authority.

The rubric 'you shall not break any of its bones' (12:46) is a ritual demonstration of the truth expressed in Psalm 34:19-20.

Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but YHWH rescues them from them all. He keeps all their bones; not one of them will be broken.

The people experience suffering, but their 'bones' will not be broken. Just as bones survive death, so the nation will continue on.

John draws attention to this as he depicts Jesus on the cross:

These things occurred so that scripture might be fulfilled: None of his bones shall be broken.'

– John 19:36

Just as the Exodus was a beginning of a new life for a people whose freedom had been taken from them, so Jesus' death will issue in a resurrection.

13:2 introduces the third rite that is linked with the Exodus (see page 68). A detailed explanation follows in 13:11-16. Here the ancient rite (see Genesis 4:3-4) is given divine authority.

⁴³YHWH said to Moses and Aaron: **This is the *statute* for the passover: no foreigner shall eat of it,**

⁴⁴**but any slave who has been purchased may eat of it after he has been circumcised; ⁴⁵no bound or hired servant may eat of it.**

⁴⁶**It shall be eaten in one house; you shall not take any of the animal outside the house, and you shall not break any of its bones.**

⁴⁷**The whole congregation of Israel shall celebrate it.**

⁴⁸**If an alien who resides with you wants to celebrate the passover to YHWH, all his males shall be circumcised; then he may draw near to celebrate it; he shall be regarded as a native of the land. But no**

uncircumcised person shall eat of it; ⁴⁹there shall be one law for the native and for the alien who resides among you.

⁵⁰**All the Israelites did just as YHWH had commanded Moses and Aaron.**

⁵¹**That very day YHWH brought the Israelites out of the land of Egypt, company by company.**

^{13:1}YHWH said to Moses:

²**Consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb among the Israelites, of human beings and animals, is mine.**

³Moses said to the people, “Remember this day on which you came out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, because YHWH brought you out from there by strength of hand; no leavened bread shall be eaten. ⁴Today, in the month of Abib, you are going out. ⁵When YHWH brings you into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which he swore to your ancestors to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, you shall keep this observance in this month. ⁶Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a festival to YHWH. ⁷Unleavened bread shall be eaten for seven days; no leavened bread shall be seen in your possession, and no leaven shall be seen among you in all your territory. ⁸You shall tell your child on that day, ‘It is because of what YHWH did for me when I came out of Egypt.’ ⁹It shall serve for you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead, so that the teaching of YHWH may be on your lips; for with a strong hand YHWH brought you out of Egypt. ¹⁰You shall keep this *statute* at its proper time from year to year.

¹¹“When YHWH has brought you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your ancestors, and has given it to you, ¹²you shall set apart to YHWH all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your livestock that are males shall be YHWH’S. ¹³But every firstborn donkey you shall redeem with a sheep; if you do not redeem it, you must break its neck. Every firstborn male among your children you shall *ransom*. ¹⁴When in the future your child asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall answer, ‘By strength of hand YHWH brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. ¹⁵When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, YHWH killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from human firstborn to the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to YHWH every male that first opens the womb, but every firstborn of my sons I *ransom*.’ ¹⁶It shall serve as a sign on your hand and as an emblem on your forehead that by strength of hand YHWH brought us out of Egypt.”

Scholars draw attention to the similarities in language, style and content between these verses and the Book of Deuteronomy. Verses 3-10 enlarge on the instructions given in 12:14-20, focusing again on what ‘you shall tell your child’(13:8; see 12:26). They are leaving in the season of the ‘new grain’(hā’ābîb, 13:4). The use of phylacteries (tephillin) ritualises the admonition of verse nine.

Verses 11-16 parallel 5-9, giving details concerning the consecration of the firstborn to YHWH (see 13:1-2). Here again, part of the rite is a dialogue with the children (13:14; see 12:26; 13:8).

The firstborn male among animals is offered in sacrifice to God. The firstborn donkey and the firstborn child is ‘ransomed’(pādâ): an offering is made as a substitute. The donkey is ‘unclean’, unfit for sacrifice. Child sacrifice, though part of ancient Semitic religion (2Kings 3:27), and not unknown in Israel (2Kings 16:3; Jeremiah 7:23) is forbidden (Leviticus 18:21). Genesis 22 may be related to this issue.

The Christian Pasch

It is not surprising that the Jews who became disciples of Jesus saw him as revealing the full meaning of the Pasch. The fact that he was crucified at the time of the Pasch gave the immediate impetus to this connection. The Synoptic Gospels portray his last meal with his disciples as a Pasch meal. Mark writes:

On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the *Paschal* Lamb, Jesus' disciples said to him, 'Where do you want us to go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?'

– Mark 14:12

Luke introduces the meal with Jesus saying to his disciples:

I have eagerly desired to eat this *Pasch* with you before I suffer.

– Luke 22:15

The first Pasch took place after sunset on the night before the Israelites were redeemed from slavery in Egypt and started out on their journey to freedom. It was a celebration of God's liberating action, of their brotherhood as a people, of their faith in God, their hope in his promise and their commitment to his cause. It was to be celebrated as a memorial. So it is with the last supper. This sacrificial rite took place after sunset in the night before the culminating action of God's redeeming action in history, to be sealed by the blood of the new 'Paschal Lamb' (1Corinthians 5:7). It too was a celebration of this redemptive action of God, of the brotherhood of Jesus' disciples, of their faith, hope and love. It signified the fulfilment of God's promise of a new covenant, and was to be kept as a memorial (1Corinthians 11:25).

The Christian Pasch celebrates the love that Jesus gave, especially in his self-giving on the cross. In his Gospel John highlights the connection between Jesus' death and the Pasch. He presents the last supper as being held 'before the feast of *Pasch*' (John 13:1). The Pasch in John's portrayal takes place after sunset on the Friday, thus linking Jesus' death with the killing of the paschal Lamb in preparation for the feast. As noted earlier, he speaks of Jesus in terms taken from the Pasch rite:

When the soldiers came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out ... These things occurred so that the scripture might be fulfilled, "None of his bones shall be broken."

– John 19:33-36 (quoting Exodus 12:46)

John also presents three other important moments of Jesus' ministry in the context of the Pasch: the clearing of the temple (John 2:13,23), the miracle of the loaves and the subsequent discourse (John 6:4) and the triumphal entry into Jerusalem for the last segment of his ministry (John 11:55). Throughout the New Testament, Jesus' gift of himself to God and to the world, culminating in his self-giving on the cross, is seen as inaugurating a new Exodus, the exodus from all forms of slavery that prevent us from 'living to the full' (John 10:10) in full communion with God. Jesus, 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29), saw himself as 'giving his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:35; see Ephesians 1:7; 1Timothy 2:6; 1Peter 1:19; Revelation 5:6-14).

YHWH leads his people through the wilderness

¹⁷When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, “If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt.”

¹⁸So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt prepared for battle. ¹⁹And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites, saying, “God will surely take notice of you, and then you must carry my bones with you from here.”

²⁰They set out from Succoth, and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. ²¹YHWH went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. ²²Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

^{14:1}Then YHWH said to Moses:

²Tell the Israelites to turn back and camp in front of Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, in front of Baal-zephon; you shall camp opposite it, by the sea. ³Pharaoh will say of the Israelites, “They are wandering aimlessly in the land; the wilderness has closed in on them.”

⁴I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them, so that I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army; and the Egyptians shall know that I am YHWH. And they did so.

We already know that God intends them to go to Horeb (3:12). In speaking of the coast road as going ‘by way of the land of the Philistines’(13:17), the authors are identifying the way in terms familiar to their contemporaries. It was well known that this way, called by the Egyptians ‘the way of Horus’, was heavily defended by Egyptian forts. On the ‘Red Sea’ see 10:19. When the Israelites are described as being ‘prepared for battle’(13:18), we are again being reminded that there is going to be a final show down between YHWH and Pharaoh. The phrase recalls the reference to ‘companies’ earlier (see 6:26; 7:4; 12:17, 41, 51).

We are reminded of the oath taken at the end of Genesis (50:25) to take Joseph’s bones with them, so that he could be buried in the Promised Land.

As noted in relation to 12:39, there is no point in attempting to work out an itinerary from the names given here. The authors are telling a story and using place names with which they were familiar. The essence of this passage is that it is YHWH who is leading them (13:18, 21-22). We might recall the words of Hosea (applied by Matthew to Jesus in Matthew 2:15):

When Israel was a child, I loved him,
and out of Egypt I called my son.

– Hosea 11:1

An Israelite could not read verses 21-22 without thinking of the altar in the temple, and the sacrifices lit from the fire, with clouds of smoke ascending to heaven.

YHWH is setting a trap for Pharaoh, so that everyone who hears of this victory will know that glory is to go to YHWH (not Pharaoh), and so that ‘the Egyptians shall know that I am YHWH’(14:4; see 7:5, 8:22, 9:29).

Pharaoh falls for the bait and rides out in pursuit with ‘all the chariots of Egypt’(14:7)

Overtaken by the Egyptian army, the people call out in fear to YHWH. Their words to Moses recall their reaction back in Egypt when his talk of liberation led to an increase in their oppression (5:21). Facing the might of the Egyptian army, slavery seems a better option than what appears to be certain death.

The key to the passage is in Moses’ response. They are not to be afraid, for they will be saved, not because of anything that they can do, but because of what YHWH will ‘accomplish for you today’(14:13). ‘YHWH will fight for you. You have only to be still’(14:14) - a message picked up in Psalm 46:10.

Be still and know that I am God.

⁵When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the minds of Pharaoh and his officials were changed toward the people, and they said, “What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?”

⁶So he had his chariot made ready, and took his army with him; ⁷he took six hundred picked chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them.

⁸YHWH hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt and he pursued the Israelites, who were going out boldly. ⁹The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh’s horses and chariots, his chariot drivers and his army; they overtook them camped by the sea, by Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baalzephon.

¹⁰As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to YHWH. ¹¹They said to Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? ¹²Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, ‘Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”

¹³But Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the *salvation* that YHWH will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. ¹⁴YHWH will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.”

¹⁵Then YHWH said to Moses, “Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. ¹⁶But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your *arm* over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground.

¹⁷Then I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and so I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers. ¹⁸And the Egyptians shall know that I am YHWH, when I have gained glory for myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his chariot drivers.”

¹⁹The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them.

²⁰It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

²¹Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. YHWH drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided.

The ‘you’ in verse sixteen is emphatic. Moses has been commissioned to lead, let him lead. The staff (13:16) featured in the scene where YHWH first commissioned Moses to be his instrument in redeeming Israel (Exodus 4). It featured in the preparatory encounter with Pharaoh and his magicians (Exodus 7), and in five of the ten plagues, With the staff Moses’ arm is an extension of the ‘mighty arm’ of YHWH (3:19; 6:1; Isaiah 63:12).

On the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, see the commentary on pages 58 and 66. Verses 17-18 repeat 14:4.

On ‘the angel of God’ as a way of speaking of God while preserving God’s transcendence, see the commentary on 3:2 (page 43). The prophet of the exile speaks of YHWH leading them on their return from exile:

YHWH will go before you, and the
God of Israel will be your rear guard.

– Isaiah 52:12

The cloud ‘lit up the night’ (14:21) because of the mysterious fire of the divine presence that shone in it. The Egyptians were unable to see through it and so could not see the Israelites.

When Moses stretched out his arm as instructed by YHWH (14:6), a strong east wind from YHWH drove the sea back, leaving a dry path through the sea.

In this magnificent climactic victory, the evil, oppressive empire is utterly defeated by YHWH, the God who listens to the cry of the oppressed and rescues them 'with mighty arm'. YHWH still uses Moses (15:26-27), but it is YHWH who throws the Egyptian army into panic (15:25), who clogs their chariot wheels so that they cannot turn back (15:25), who casts the Egyptians into the sea as it crashes back over the path that YHWH had previously caused to appear in the middle of the sea (15:28). Pharaoh who drowned the children of Israel (1:22) is himself drowned.

YHWH is acting with the same power with which he conquered chaos in his act of creation. So it is that we read in the Isaiah scroll:

Awake, awake, put on strength,
O arm of YHWH!
Awake, as in days of old,
the generations of long ago!
Was it not you who cut Rahab in
pieces, who pierced the dragon?
Was it not you who dried up the sea,
the waters of the great deep;
who made the depths of the sea a way
for the redeemed to cross over?

– Isaiah 51:9-10

Recalling this scene, Paul writes:

These things happened to them to
serve as an example ... So if you think
you are standing, watch out that you
do not fall ... God is faithful, and he
will not let you be tested beyond your
strength, but with the testing he will
also provide the way out.

– 1 Corinthians 10:11-13

At last the people 'fear YHWH'; that is to say, they are ready to listen and obey (see Genesis 22:12; 42:18; Exodus 1:17; 9:30). They believed in YHWH (see 4:31), and they believed in his servant Moses (see 4:1-9; also 14:13).

²²The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

²³The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers.

²⁴At the morning watch YHWH in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic.

²⁵He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for YHWH is fighting for them against Egypt."

²⁶Then YHWH said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers."

²⁷So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, YHWH tossed the Egyptians into the sea.

²⁸The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. ²⁹But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

³⁰Thus YHWH saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.

³¹Israel saw the great work that YHWH did against the Egyptians. So the people feared YHWH and believed in YHWH and in his servant Moses.

A Song of Praise of YHWH

The whole of Israel is invited to join in this song (šîr) of praise to YHWH for the power he showed in his victory at the Red Sea. They ‘believed’ (14:31). They burst into song.

¹Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to YHWH:

**“I will sing to YHWH, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.**

**²YH is my strength and my might,
and he has become my salvation;**

The word ‘salvation’ (yešû‘â) occurs only once in Genesis, in the prayer that is inserted into the tribal slogans (Genesis 49:18), and only one other time in Exodus, when Moses says to the people: ‘Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the salvation which YHWH will accomplish for you today’ (Exodus 14:13). Compare Isaiah and the psalm:

Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for YH YHWH is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.

– Isaiah 12:2

YH is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.

– Psalm 118:14

**this is my God, and I will praise him,
my father’s God, and I will exalt him.**

The expression ‘my father’s God’ recalls 3:6. That the God of the Exodus is the God of the patriarchs has been a constant theme in Exodus (see 2:24; 3:6,15,16; 4:5; 6:3).

**³YHWH is a warrior;
YHWH is his name.**

Compare the following:

YHWH the God of hosts, YHWH is his name!

– Hosea 12:5

They lean on the God of Israel; YHWH of hosts is his name.

– Isaiah 48:2 (see Jeremiah 10:16; Amos 4:13)

**⁴Pharaoh’s chariots and his army he cast into the sea;
his picked officers were sunk in the Red Sea.**

**⁵The floods covered them;
they went down into the depths like a stone.**

**⁶Your right arm, O YHWH, glorious in power—
your right arm, O YHWH, shattered the enemy.**

**⁷In the greatness of your majesty you overthrew your adversaries;
you sent out your fury, it consumed them like stubble.**

**⁸At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up,
the floods stood up in a heap;
the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea.**

**⁹The enemy said, ‘I will pursue, I will overtake,
I will divide the spoil, my gullet shall have its fill of them.
I will draw my sword, my arm shall destroy them.’**

**¹⁰You blew with your wind, the sea covered them;
they sank like lead in the mighty waters.**

¹¹“Who is like you, O YHWH, among the gods?

There is hardly any mention of ‘gods’ in Genesis. There is the story of Rachel stealing her father’s ‘household gods’(Genesis 13:19ff), and there is the story of Jacob telling his household to put away their ‘foreign gods’ (Genesis 35:2). The only mention of gods so far in Exodus is when YHWH said he would execute judgment ‘on all the gods of Egypt’(Exodus 12:12).

Who is like you, majestic in holiness,

This is the only time we find ‘holiness’(qodeš) in Exodus. It evokes images of the temple, the mountain, and heaven itself.

awesome in splendour, doing wonders?

You are the God who works wonders;
you have displayed your might among the peoples.

– Psalm 77:14-15

With your strong arm you redeemed your people,

**¹²You stretched out your right *arm*,
the earth swallowed them.**

The bloodthirsty Egyptians leaped into the attack, ready to ‘fill their gullets’ with the slain Israelites (15:9). Here they are swallowed up by the earth and sucked into Sheol.

¹³“In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed;

This is the first time ‘steadfast love’(ḥesed) has been used in Exodus. It is one the defining characteristics of God in Genesis (see 24:27; 32:10; 39:21). ‘Redeem’(gā’al) is found only once in Genesis (48:16), and in Exodus only here and in 6:6 (see Psalm 77:15; Isaiah 52:9). Psalm 78 echoes this song:

God led out his people like sheep, and guided them in the wilderness like a flock.
He led them in safety, so that they were not afraid;
but the sea overwhelmed their enemies.

– Psalm 78:52-53

you guided them by your strength to your holy abode.

The ‘holy abode’ would have evoked different images depending on who was singing and where they sang. If they sang a hymn of praise on Mount Sinai, that would have been YHWH’s holy abode. If they sang it before the period of the monarchy in the shrine at Shiloh, that would be the holy abode. In Jerusalem it would have been the temple.

The song placed here on the lips of ‘Moses and the Israelites’(15:1) goes beyond the Exodus, for ‘salvation’ is not complete till they are at home in the Promised Land.

- ¹⁴The peoples heard, they trembled;
pangs seized the inhabitants of Philistia.**
- ¹⁵Then the chiefs of Edom were dismayed;
trembling seized the leaders of Moab;
all the inhabitants of Canaan melted away.**
- ¹⁶Terror and dread fell upon them;
by the might of your arm, they became still as a stone
until your people, O YHWH, passed *through*,
until the people whom you acquired passed *through*.**

‘Pass through’ (‘ābar) was used of YHWH inflicting the final plague (Exodus 12:12, 23). YHWH ‘acquired’ (qānâ) the people, capturing his firstborn back in his victory over Egypt where they had been enslaved. qānâ is also used of God as the one who brought heaven and earth into being (see Genesis 14:19). Israel belongs to God. God brought them into being as his people in the wilderness.

- ¹⁷You brought them in and planted them
on the mountain of your own possession,**

In Judah ‘the mountain’ would have been understood as the temple mount. ‘Possession’ (nāh^alâ, ‘inheritance’) occurs only here in Exodus (see Genesis 31:4; 48:6). The image of ‘planting’ is developed in Psalm 80:

You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.
You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land.
The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches;
it sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River.

– Psalm 80: 8-11

**the place, O YHWH, that you made your abode,
the sanctuary, O YHWH, that your hands have established.**

On the ‘abode’ and the ‘sanctuary’ see verse 13

- ¹⁸YHWH will reign forever and ever.”**

**¹⁹When the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and his chariot drivers went
into the sea, YHWH brought back the waters of the sea upon them; but the
Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground.**

**²⁰Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand;
and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing.**

²¹And Miriam sang to them:

**“Sing to YHWH, for he has triumphed gloriously;
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.”**

If ‘Miriam’ is an Egyptian name it means ‘beloved’. If it is Semitic it may mean ‘gift’. Moses’ sister (unnamed) helped organise his care as a baby (see 2:4). Miriam is introduced here as ‘Aaron’s sister’. This may be because he is her senior brother. It was customary for the women to sing a victory song for the heroes of a battle.

The Christian Exodus

Paul begins his sermon in the synagogue at Antioch by referring to the Exodus:

The God of this people Israel chose our ancestors ... with uplifted arms he led them out of Egypt.

– Acts 13:17

He concludes:

Through Jesus release from sins is being proclaimed to you, in regard to everything from which you could not be justified under the law of Moses. In him every believer is justified.

– Acts 13:38-39

What God did through Moses at the Red Sea, he completed through Jesus, liberating the whole world from every form of slavery that prevents us from enjoying full communion with God.

As the first creation is described in terms of the victory of God over the chaos of the primeval waters, and as the formation of Israel into God's chosen nation begins with God's victory over Egypt at the Red Sea, so the new creation begins with the emergence of the new Adam, Christ, from the waters of the Jordan.

Just as Jesus came up from the water ... a voice from heaven said: 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

– Matthew 3:16-17

Paul uses the Crossing of the Red Sea as a symbol of Baptism:

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.

– 1Corinthians 10:1-2

He sees the disciples of Jesus, both Jews and non-Jews, as the true inheritors of the redemption that is signified in the crossing of the Red Sea. Baptised into Christ, the new Moses, Christians are drawn into the mystery of God's protective presence, and escape from slavery to sin.

The Apocalypse was written to encourage Christians facing persecution. The third and final sign revealed at the sounding of the seventh trumpet is concerned with 'God's judgment'(14:7). The hymn of praise that rises up from the redeemed celebrates the eternal redemption effected by Christ.

They sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb:
'Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty!
Just and true are your ways, King of the nations!
Lord, who will not fear and glorify your name? For you alone are holy.
All nations will come and worship before you,
for your judgments have been revealed.'

– Revelation 15:3-4