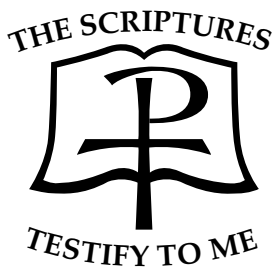


CONCORDIA COMMENTARY

A Theological Exposition of Sacred Scripture

EXODUS 1-18

Kenneth A. Cherney, Jr.



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Author's Preface

בשם האל הגדול והנורא. אתחיל לכתוב חידשים בפרוש התורה.
באימה ביראה ברתה בזיע במורא.
מתפלל ומתודה בלב נדכה ונפש שבורה. שואל סליחה מבקש מחילה וכפרה.

In the name of the great and awesome God.

I will undertake to write new things about the interpretation of the Torah.

With terror, with fear, with shaking, with sweat, with awe.

Praying and confessing, with a crushed heart and broken spirit.

Asking forgiveness, seeking absolution and atonement.

Ramban (AD 1194–1270)¹

Possibly the only thing more arrogant than undertaking to write an Exodus commentary is to declare one “finished.” There is no “finishing”—first, because for me, this work represents one step on a journey that has come a long way but is still just getting started; second, because no commentary on the living Word, which is never done speaking, can ever claim anything like finality. At some point, though, a book of some kind had to leave my hands so it could be put into yours. Please accept it as partial and provisional and with my thanks.

I wish I could say that my love affair with Exodus began in church or Sunday school. Truthfully, it began when, as a boy, I watched Cecil B. DeMille’s immortal film *The Ten Commandments* with my family, something we did almost every year. For a long time afterward, there would be a staff in my hand on my walks through the vacant lot behind our house—not the Sinai but the best I could do. Our Labrador Retriever made a passable substitute for flocks and herds. Sometimes I would raise the staff and my other hand and look skyward, expecting—what? I don’t know, but the narrative had burned itself into me, and like so many others, I longed to inhabit the world it created. This project has been an opportunity to dwell in the Exodus world for a while, and I am deeply grateful.

Thanks are due to many people: Rev. Dr. Christopher Mitchell, for his wise counsel, patience, and undyingly cheerful encouragement; Rev. Dr. Adam Hensley, for his perceptive reading and helpful suggestions; Mrs. Julene Dumit, for her scrupulously careful edits; my colleagues at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, who took up the slack during my sabbatical year when much of the spadework for this commentary had to happen. Thanks to those who read portions of the work and gave me useful input, including Prof. Joel D. Fredrich, Prof. Thomas P. Nass, Prof. Earle D. Treptow, Dr. Christo H. J. van der Merwe, and Prof. Paul O. Wendland. Rabbi Dr. David E. S. Stein deserves special

¹ “Ramban” = Rabbi Moses ben Nahman.

mention for helping me navigate the reception of Exodus within Judaism, including the great medieval commentators, and for his useful suggestions on general matters. The flaws that remain in this commentary are my own fault and no reflection on these helpful friends.

Thanks to my wife, to whom this volume is dedicated, and to my sons and their families for their patience, encouragement, and support. Above all, thanks to Israel's God, who, incarnate in Jesus Christ and victorious over all that oppresses and enslaves, is even now leading us through the desert to the home we have been promised.

We always hold the staves in our hands,
and rest on the rod that came forth from the root of Jesse;
we are always being set free from Egypt,
we are always going in search of the wilderness of human life,
we are always setting out on the journey toward God.
Eusebius of Caesarea, "On the Celebration of Easter," 7²

² Trans. Andrew Eastbourne (*The Collected Works of Eusebius of Caesarea* [Delphi Classics, place of publication not specified, 2019], lix).

The Call of Moses, Part 1: Moses Meets God

Translation

3 ¹Now Moses used to tend the sheep of Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian. He led the sheep beyond the open country, and he came to God’s mountain, that is, to Horeb. ²Yahweh’s Messenger appeared to him—a fiery flame from inside a senna bush. [Moses] saw it, and he noticed that the senna bush was burning with the fire—but without the senna bush being consumed. ³So Moses thought, “I’m going over there to see this great sight. Why isn’t the senna bush burning?”

⁴Yahweh saw that he had gone over to see, and God called to him from within the senna bush. “Moses! Moses!” he said.

Moses said, “I’m right here.”

⁵He said, “Don’t come any closer. Take your sandals off your feet, because the place you are standing on is holy ground.”

⁶And he said, “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 because he was afraid to look at God.

Textual Notes

3:1 **הָיָה רֹעֶה אֶת־**—The use of **הָיָה** with a participle that functions as a verb (here with a direct object, **אֶת־**) indicates habitual action (cf. Jer 26:18).¹

יִתְרוֹ—Known as “Reuel” (2:18) until now. On the switch in names, see the commentary.

אֶתֶר הַמִּדְבָּר—Meaning “the side opposite the position of the speaker, or opposite the direction the **מִדְבָּר** is normally considered to ‘face.’”² The translation “west of” is also possible.³ The conventional translation of **מִדְבָּר** as “wilderness” is misleading. United States law defines “wilderness” as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man” (Wilderness Act, Section 2[c]). In popular usage, the word connotes an inhospitable place, often of great natural beauty, where humans seldom go and do not remain. Levine is probably correct that the salient feature of a **מִדְבָּר** is that it was used for grazing rather than tillage (cf. Jer 2:2). Moses has therefore taken the sheep beyond the lands they normally graze and into the mountains.⁴ This com-

¹ BHRG, § 20.3.3.2.a.

² SDBH.

³ IBHS, § 11.2.1a.

⁴ Levine, “The Land of Milk and Honey,” 45–46.

mentary will use the translation “desert” when the waterlessness of the place is in view (e.g., 17:1).

אֶל־הָרֹאשׁ־הַהוּא הָאֵלֹהִים חֹרֶבָה—Two equivalent expressions in apposition; the place is called simply “the mountain of God” also in Ex 4:27; 18:5; 24:13 (cf. Num 10:33; 1 Ki 19:8). The designation here is proleptic. Local people may have associated this mountain with God’s presence before the events of Exodus 3, but if so, Moses does not seem to know this.⁵ The names “Sinai” and “Horeb” refer to the same place and are used interchangeably (compare Ex 3:1, 12 and Ex 19:1–3; Ex 19:20–20:17 and Deut 5:2–21; Acts 7:30). “Sinai” is more frequent in Exodus (thirteen times; first in 16:1) than “Horeb” (only 3:1; 17:6; 33:6).

3:2 מִלְאָךְ יְהוָה—On his identity, see the commentary.

בְּלִבְת־אֵשׁ—The form לִבְת is unique, leading Ibn Ezra to translate the phrase as “in the heart of the fire,” as if לִבְת were from לֵב. The normal construct form of לִהְבֶּה, “flame,” would be לִהְבֶּת (1 Sam 17:7; Ezek 21:3 [ET 20:47]). לִבְת may be an alternate construct form of the same word (the Samaritan Pentateuch reads לִהְבֶּת, which could be equivalent to לִהְבֶּת) or a construct form of a synonymous noun לִבְה, which would occur only here.

As a gloss for the preposition בְּ, “in” is the usual starting point. The trouble is that the English “in” suggests a “trajector” (in this case, the Messenger) contained inside a “landmark” (in this case, the bush). It has been argued that “containment” is not really the prototypical sense of the preposition generally,⁶ and in any case, it does not seem to be the point here. Alternatively, the בְּ could be instrumental (cf. Ex 9:35),⁷ which would mean that the flame was the means Yahweh’s Messenger used to make himself visible to Moses. GKC, § 119 i, is more likely correct, however, in proposing this as a case of the so-called *bet essentialiae*, in which the “trajector” and the “landmark” (the flame) are one and the same (*BHRG*, § 39.6.f). Hence the translation above.

מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּנֵּי—Literally, “from the midst of the bush.” The phrase could be appositional to (literally) “in a flame of fire,” and the point would then be that the bush is the source from which the fire emanates. The accents, however, end a *tiphcha* unit with אֵשׁ (“fire”), yielding syntax that could be paraphrased this way: “Yahweh’s messenger appeared to him, [literally,] in a flame of fire; [he appeared to him] from the midst of the bush.” In that case, the emphasis shifts slightly to the bush as the source of the Messenger’s self-revelation. Note that Yahweh calls to Moses “from the midst of the bush” (מִתּוֹךְ הַסִּנֵּי) in 3:4, where the fire is not mentioned.

What exactly a סִנֵּי is is much debated (cf. BDB: “blackberry bush”). Some interpreters infer that the bush was thorny and therefore symbolic (even numerologically) of the oppression of the Israelites in Egypt (*Exod. Rab.* 2.5).⁸ Nothing in the text requires thorns, however. A bush in the *senna* family is a reasonable candidate (cf.

⁵ Sarna, *Exodus*, 14.

⁶ *BHRG*, § 39.6.

⁷ *BHRG*, § 39.6.3.a.

⁸ Cf. Utzschneider and Oswald, *Exodus 1–15*, 113–14.

DCH, s.v. סִנַּי), but the primary reason for the translation “senna” above is to approximate the pun on “Sinai” (סִינַי), which would have been obvious to a native speaker of Biblical Hebrew. סִנַּי here (used five times in three verses) is the narrator’s sly way of introducing the name “Sinai,” which works because “Horeb” (3:1) and “Sinai” are the same place. See Acts 7:30 and the fourth textual note on 3:1. The definite article is used on הסִנַּי, but not because the bush has been referred to before (it hasn’t) or as a generic article that places the bush within a certain class. Grammatical definiteness “focuses attention on the referent’s *identity*,”⁹ implying an answer to the question “which one?” The answer here is “the *seneh* you would expect on a mountain called *Sinai*, of course!”

אֶפְסָרִי—A passive Qal participle (not to be confused with a Qal passive participle).¹⁰ The Masoretes point the form as if its *binyan* were Pual (i.e., as a Pual participle that is missing its *mem* prefix). That the form must be a participle is clear from its negation with אֵינֶנִּי.

3:3 וַיֹּאמֶר בְּנִשָּׁה—“He thought,” not “he said,” since there is no addressee present. The full expression for “he thought” is וַיֹּאמֶר בְּלִבּוֹ (e.g., Gen 17:17).

וְאָסַרְהָנָא וְאָרְאָה—Literally, “let me turn aside and I can see.” סָוֵר often implies a departure or change of direction (e.g., Deut 2:27), so we may infer that whatever Moses’ original route was, he changed it to accommodate a visit to the bush. The first cohortative וְאָסַרְהָנָא expresses nothing stronger than personal intention, perhaps after brief deliberation. The following *wəyiqtol* (a cohortative with *waw*) is telic: “so I can see” (Joüon, § 116 b [3]). Unlike Isaiah’s (Is 6:1–13) or Ezekiel’s (Ezek 1:1–2:2), Moses’ experience is not a theophany that overwhelms his senses. Instead, Yahweh’s Messenger appears as an odd-looking phenomenon nearby that lures Moses in. Only after Yahweh observes Moses’ approach does God reveal himself. On the switch between “Yahweh’s Messenger” (3:2), “Yahweh” (3:4a), and “God” (3:4b, 6), see the commentary.

לֹא־יָבֵעֵר הַסִּנַּי—Many translations (e.g., ESV, KJV, NASB, NIV, NRSVUE) render this as an indirect question in apposition to “this great sight” (אֵת־הַמִּרְאָה הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה), i.e., “[I must see] this great sight, *namely*, why the bush does not burn.” מִדּוּעַ normally introduces a direct question, and translating it accordingly (CSB, GW, NABRE, NET) not only observes the *athnach* on הַסִּנַּי but also vividly conveys Moses’ puzzlement.

Note that Moses’ report of what he is seeing (לֹא־יָבֵעֵר) differs slightly from the narrator’s report of what Moses saw in 3:2, where we were told that actually the bush *was* burning (בִּעֵר). It is possible that Moses is simply using a shorthand expression, but there may also be a hint here that Moses does not fully realize what he is seeing. This, together with the gentle way that Yahweh initiates the encounter, suggests that Moses is still inexperienced in dealing with the presence of God.

3:4 וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים אֵלָיו—“And God called to him.” The momentous divine revelations in Ex 19:3; 24:16; Lev 1:1 also begin with very similar expressions.¹¹

⁹ *BHRG*, § 24.4.4.2.

¹⁰ *IBHS*, § 22.6c, including example 7.

¹¹ Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 46–47.

It is hard to see much difference in force between the divine names **יְהוָה** (3:4a) and **אֱלֹהִים** (3:4b, 6) when they are used in such close proximity (but see the commentary). This kind of change in divine names was decisive for the Documentary Hypothesis, which proposes five switches from “J” to “E” or back again in 3:4–9.¹²

בַּשָּׂה בַּשָּׂה—Repeated so that Moses will stop in his tracks, exactly like the repetition “Abraham! Abraham!” in Gen 22:11.

3:5 שֶׁל־נִעְלִיךָ יַעַל רַגְלֶיךָ—The LXX, the Vulgate, some manuscripts of the Samaritan Pentateuch, and some medieval Hebrew manuscripts have only one sandal; the Samaritan Pentateuch, a fragment from the Cairo Genizah, and some other Hebrew manuscripts have only one foot. These readings may be harmonizations in the direction of Josh 5:15, where in most other respects the wording is identical; Ex 3:4 and Josh 5:15 are the only two occurrences of the imperative **שָׁל** (from **נָשַׁל**, “to detach”). Note: a plot of ground near Jericho and a plot on Horeb can both be “holy.”

הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹמֵד עָלָיו אֶדְמוֹת־קֹדֶשׁ הוּא—Literally, “the place on which you are standing—holy ground it (is).” The pronoun **הוּא** is resumptive after the relative clause (*BHRG*, § 36.1.5.2.a).

3:6 וַיֹּאמֶר—The speaker has not changed since 3:5 began. “And he said” is repeated from 3:5 because, meanwhile, God had paused to let Moses take his sandals off.¹³

אֱלֹהֵי אָבִיךָ—“The God of your father [singular],” not “your fathers” (some LXX manuscripts and Justinus).¹⁴

כִּי יִרָא מִהֵבִיט אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים—Literally, “for he was afraid from looking at God.” Because **מִן** can denote separation, in Hebrew, one can be afraid “from” something (e.g., Gen 46:3; Ex 34:30; Lev 19:14). The semantic difference between **נִבֵּט** (Hiphil) and **רָאָה** is not large (Num 23:21; cf. *SDBH*), but the former usually denotes a more intentional kind of “seeing”; hence the translation “look at.” In Num 12:8, God will describe Moses as routinely (**יִבִּיט**, *yiqtol* [imperfect]) doing exactly this, namely, “looking at” (**נִבֵּט**, Hiphil) God’s visible self-representation.

Commentary

Structure

Ex 3:1–4:18 contains a “call/commissioning narrative,” which invites comparisons with other texts in the same category (Judg 6:11–22; Is 6:1–13; Jer 1:4–19; Ezek 1:4–3:15; Jonah 1–2; cf. Lk 5:1–11). These tend to consist of (1) an encounter with God (Ex 3:1–4a); (2) an introductory word from God (3:4b–6); (3) a command from God to go and do something for him (3:7–10); (4) an objection from the person called, explaining why he cannot carry out the commission; (5) God’s reassurance that yes, he can; and (6) some sign that

¹² Friedman, *The Exodus*, 223.

¹³ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 44.

¹⁴ Acts 7:32 should not be considered an additional witness to the written text of Exodus at this point (*pace BHS*).

authenticates the call and guarantees God’s support.¹⁵ Moses’ call stands out because of the number and strength of Moses’ objections, each of which Yahweh answers (Ex 3:11–4:17). The lengthy conversation is not only a demonstration of Yahweh’s remarkable patience; it is also meant to establish beyond all doubt that Moses did not choose his role or mission for himself. In it, as in Exodus 1–14 as a whole, the fact that Moses is God’s special called servant is stated, challenged, and proven—here by Moses himself, later by the Israelite nation.¹⁶

Attempts to subdivide the unit are various. This one attempts to catch the rhythm of the narrative:

- Moses meets God (3:1–6)
- God commissions Moses (3:7–10)
- Moses objects, God responds: first duologue (3:11–12)
- Moses objects, God responds: second duologue (3:13–22)
- Moses objects, God responds: third duologue (4:1–9)
- Moses objects, God responds: fourth duologue (4:10–12)
- Moses objects, God responds: fifth duologue (4:13–17)¹⁷
- Conclusion: Moses goes (4:18)

The first of these subunits (3:1–6) is artfully constructed. The chart below is from Utzschneider and Oswald, who observe movement back and forth between the “divine plane” and the “human plane” until both finally come together:¹⁸

	<i>Divine Plane</i>	<i>Human Plane</i>
3:1	Although Moses doesn’t realize it, he is standing on the mountain of God.	Leading Jethro’s sheep, Moses wanders beyond the usual grazing land.
3:2–3	Yahweh’s Messenger appears in a bush.	Moses sees the bush burning and decides to have a look.
3:4	Yahweh sees that Moses wants to approach and calls his name.	Moses responds, “Here I am.”
	<i>Divine and Human Together</i>	
3:5	God warns Moses not to come any closer.	
3:6	God introduces himself as the God of Moses’ father and of the patriarchs.	

¹⁵ Habel, “The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives,” 298.

¹⁶ Surls, *Making Sense of the Divine Name in Exodus*, 46.

¹⁷ Surls similarly counts five “duologues” in 3:11–4:17, with “and he said” (וַיֹּאמֶר) as the divider (*Making Sense of the Divine Name in Exodus*, 43).

¹⁸ Utzschneider and Oswald, *Exodus 1–15*, 109.

Shepherding Jethro's Flock (3:1)

“Jethro” is the name of Moses’ father-in-law when the scene begins here and again when he visits the Israelite camp in 18:1–12 (he is called “Jether” in 4:18). In 2:18, apparently the same person was called “Reuel.” To complicate things further, Num 10:29 tells us of a conversation between Moses and “Hobab the son of Reuel the Midianite, the father-in-law of Moses.” That sentence can be parsed as meaning either that Hobab was Moses’ father-in-law (so Rashi) or that Reuel was, which would make Hobab Moses’ brother-in-law. Then, in Judg 1:16, Moses’ father-in-law is called “the Kenite” (unless קֵנִי is not a gentilic, but yet another personal name, Keni). In Judg 4:11, once again, Moses’ father-in-law is (apparently) called “Hobab.”

The question “Who exactly was the priest of Midian, the father-in-law of Moses [Ex 3:1]?” has frustrated interpreters from ancient times. Proposed solutions tend to fall into one of these categories:

1. The same man had seven names (*Exod. Rab.* 27.8; cf. Rashi on Ex 18:1–2)—Reuel, Jether, Jethro, Hobab, Heber, Keni, and Putiel—each with its own significance.
2. Moses’ father-in-law had two names, Hobab and Jethro (Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, *Sifre Numbers* 78). Hobab/Jethro was the son of Reuel, who was therefore Ziporah’s grandfather, not her father (Ex 2:18; Targum Pseudo-Jonathan). Albright proposed (based admittedly on no textual evidence) that “Reuel” was actually a clan name and that “Jethro, son of” had somehow been dropped from the text before “Reuel” in 3:1.¹⁹
3. Moses’ father-in-law had two names, Reuel and Jethro.²⁰ Reuel/Jethro had a son named Hobab, who is therefore Moses’ brother-in-law, not his father-in-law (Ibn Ezra on Num 10:28 and following). This is why, when Moses speaks to Hobab in Numbers 10, he makes him sound young, vigorous, and perhaps open to changing his people and relocating (Num 10:30–31).²¹ This solution requires either positing a looser meaning than “father-in-law” for יָתֵרוֹ (e.g., “a male in-law”) or perhaps repositing to בְּנוֹתָיו, “the son-in-law of . . .,” in Num 10:29 and Judg 4:11 (*BHS* critical apparatus).²²
4. (In combination with 1, 2, or 3.) “Jethro” (most likely) or “Reuel” or “Hobab”—or all three—is a title, not a proper name. “Jethro” means “His Excellency.” “Reuel” means “companion of El.” “Hobab” means “he loves,” which Rashi takes to mean that he loves the Torah.²³

Attributing the different names to different written sources does not solve the problem, since this question remains: Why was the text allowed to stand

¹⁹ Albright, “Jethro, Hobab, and Reuel in Early Hebrew Tradition,” 6–7. Albright believed that Hobab was Moses’ son-in-law, not his brother-in-law.

²⁰ For source critics, “Reuel” is the name used in “J” and “Jethro” in “E.” Neo-Documentarian Joel Baden takes Num 10:29 to mean that Reuel is Hobab’s father and Moses’ father-in-law, with the result that the passage agrees with “J” (*The Composition of the Pentateuch*, 79).

²¹ Albright, “Jethro, Hobab, and Reuel,” 6.

²² The repositing makes Hobab Moses’ “son-in-law” (בְּנוֹתָיו) rather than his “father-in-law” (יָתֵרוֹ).

²³ In Num 10:29, Rashi takes “father-in-law of Moses” with “Hobab,” not with “Reuel the Midianite.”

in a form in which the same individual is called by two different names within the space of only nine verses (2:18; 3:1)? Solutions should be proposed tentatively (and humbly!), but in the view of this commentary, the best way to account for all the data is to combine 3 with (part of) 4. Reuel is the personal name of the priest of Midian, which is why he is introduced this way initially (2:18). Jethro (“His Excellency”) is a title (3:1), and “Jether” (4:18) is not a scribal error but simply a shortened form (“Excellency”). Hobab (Num 10:29) is in fact Zipporah’s brother and Moses’ brother-in-law, as Ibn Ezra proposed.

More important for purposes of the narrative is the mention of Reuel/Jethro as the owner of some sheep (2:16–19; 3:1). Moses’ career path, like David’s (1 Sam 16:11), will take him from literal shepherding to shepherding God’s people (Num 27:17; Ps 77:21 [ET ET 77:20]; compare Ps 78:70–72). The mention here of his father-in-law underscores Moses’ present humble circumstances. The former Egyptian aristocrat is reduced to tending sheep in the desert—and the sheep are not even his!

Moses leads the sheep to “the mountain of God” (3:1), known in the Torah as both “Horeb” and “Sinai.” As noted above, both names appear in these verses, though “Sinai” in veiled form; that “Horeb” and “Sinai” are the same place is clear from the play on the words “senna” (bush) and “Sinai” (see the third textual note on 3:2). For the Documentary Hypothesis, “Horeb” is the name for the mountain in “E” and “D” (“J” and “P” call it “Sinai”), and the use of the name in 3:1 is said to indicate the beginning of “E’s” version of the story of Moses.²⁴ Actually, the choice of the name “Horeb” (“wasteland”) here is purposeful. Levenson notes that the precise location is notoriously hard to pin down, but wherever it is, it is outside the reach of Egyptian civilization, and it apparently isn’t in Midian, either. Israel’s God chooses to reveal himself in a desolate no-man’s-land to disavow any connections with human culture or achievement and to teach us that he is “like his worshippers: mobile, rootless, and unpredictable.”²⁵ This means that, while Horeb/Sinai is certainly a real place, knowing its precise whereabouts (Does **אַחֲרֵי** mean “‘west of’ or ‘behind’ the open country”? Which “open country”? Within grazing distance of Midian? And where is “Midian” exactly?) would take us no closer to the narrator’s point.

Yahweh’s Messenger in a Bush (3:2–5)

An encounter between Moses and the Divine would seem to require a cast of only two characters, but the matter is more complicated than that. As noted above, the narrator reveals that it is “Yahweh’s Messenger” who appears to Moses as a blazing fire within a senna bush (3:2–3), although Moses believes that he is merely seeing a bush that looks like it is burning but is not. Moses approaches the bush, but it is not “Yahweh’s Messenger” who sees him coming; it is “Yahweh” (3:4). Moses is abruptly told to stop by a voice identified

²⁴ Baden, *The Composition of the Pentateuch*, 120–21.

²⁵ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 22.

by the narrator as “God” (3:4–5). Finally, God tells Moses, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (3:6). This question seems natural: With whom exactly is Moses dealing in Exodus 3?

Sarna’s solution is that Moses sees the Messenger, but he speaks with God. The Messenger does not participate in the dialogue; he is mentioned in 3:2 only to avoid the “gross anthropomorphism” of having God located in a bush.²⁶ The trouble, however, with distinguishing Moses’ experience with “Yahweh’s Messenger” from his experience with the “God” named “Yahweh” is that this event is described interchangeably as an appearance of either one (3:2, 16; 4:1, 5), and these verses use exactly the same verb for “appeared” (נִרְאָה in the Niphal).

According to von Rad, Ex 3:2–6 belongs to a class of passages in which distinguishing Yahweh’s Messenger from Yahweh (or God’s Messenger from God) is not possible (Gen 16:7–14; 21:17; 22:11–18; 31:11–13; Judg 2:1–3).²⁷ “Agency metonymy” is Stein’s term for the likely reason for this. It was common knowledge in the ANE that monarchs and other important personages, as a rule, do not engage their subjects directly. They use agents, and the agent’s words and actions are treated as the monarch’s own.²⁸ Stein’s premise is demonstrated by texts like 2 Sam 11:5. Applying it here in Ex 3:2 yields a thought similar to Luther’s: “It is an angel in this bush that proclaims God’s Word to Moses and speaks as God. . . . Therefore, it is rightly said, ‘God spoke with Moses’ [Ex 6:2], even though it is not always mentioned that He has spoken through the angels.” As an analogy, Luther uses Mt 19:5, where Jesus quotes a remark from the narrator in Gen 2:24 and attributes it to the Creator himself.²⁹

But the difficulty with seeing Yahweh’s “agent” as Moses’ interlocutor throughout 3:1–4:18 (in such a way that he is not also Yahweh himself) is that the “agent,” speaking in the first person, participates freely in the dialogue—answering Moses’ objections on the fly and finally growing angry with him (4:14)—with apparently no need to consult with Yahweh, who sent him. That divine emissaries can do this may also have been part of the shared cultural knowledge of the ANE, but a simpler explanation seems preferable.

That explanation is suggested by von Rad’s study cited above. Yahweh’s Messenger is the “angel” mentioned most often in the OT, and his character is the most developed: he is “an express instrument of the particular relationship of grace which Yahweh has with Israel” and “the personification of Yahweh’s assistance to Israel.”³⁰ For von Rad, the notion of a spiritual being not quite the same as Yahweh but friendly to Israel is a relic of Israel’s primitive religious

²⁶ Sarna, *Exodus*, 14.

²⁷ Gerhard von Rad, “מַלְאָכִים in the OT” (in “ἄγγελος,” *TDNT* 1:77).

²⁸ Stein, “Angels by Another Name.”

²⁹ AE 62:65.

³⁰ Von Rad, “מַלְאָכִים in the OT” (in “ἄγγελος,” *TDNT* 1:77).

past, and in later, more rigidly monotheistic texts, this notion becomes theologized into an “instrument” or “personification” of Yahweh himself.

For this commentary, the notion is not evidence of any evolutionary development within Israel’s religion, but of the nature of God as he truly is: a plurality of persons in one divine essence. As God’s revelation progresses, we learn further that the “personification” and “express instrument” of Yahweh’s grace is God’s eternal Son, who in time becomes incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth (Jn 1:17). Early Christians saw Christ as the one whom believers experienced in the OT’s many theophanies (e.g., Genesis 18; 28; 32; Exodus 33; Judges 6; Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 1), and therefore the one whom Moses worshiped in the burning bush. In fact, many church fathers took the identification as a given, and some insisted on it as a criterion of orthodoxy.³¹

A further observation of von Rad’s is helpful. When there is an “apparently haphazard alternation” between “Yahweh” and “Yahweh’s Messenger,” this is not random but intentional. The “Messenger” tends to be mentioned when Yahweh first enters man’s “field of vision.”³² After the mention of the Messenger in 3:2, it is “Yahweh” (3:4a) who observes Moses’ approach—God as he knows himself to be, but by a name that he has not yet used with Moses; i.e., a name still on the “divine plane.”³³ It is then “God” who calls out audibly (3:4b) and at whom Moses does not want to look (3:6). On the reason for the use of “Yahweh” in 3:7, see the commentary there.

Why exactly should God reveal himself to Moses as a bush in flames? As Adelman observes, a bush, unlike a stone, is not a permanent feature of the landscape. It will eventually dry up and die, and there is no question of it becoming a perpetual channel for God’s presence or a pilgrimage or worship site.³⁴ Fire, as “simultaneously substantive and amorphous,”³⁵ is a perfect image for the God who simultaneously occupies his creation and transcends it. In Scripture, God’s presence often manifests itself as fire, but this is usually a “consuming fire” to be dreaded (אֵשׁ אֹכֶלֶת/אֹכֶלֶת, Ex 24:17; Deut 4:24; Is 33:14; cf. Heb 12:29). Here the fire is amazing for the fact that it does *not* consume (3:2), which is the reason it amazes Moses without terrifying him.

The menorah that stood outside the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle (Ex 25:31–36) may be reminiscent of *both* the tree of life (Gen 2:9) and the burning bush. The menorah is described as a tree—complete with branches (קַנִּים), almond-like cups (כְּפֻזִּים), and blossoms (פְּרָחִים)—festooned with lamps



³¹ In time, this interpretive tradition came to an end, especially in the Western church. Bucur sees Augustine and his anti-subordinationist context as primarily responsible for this (“Christological Exegesis of Theophanies and the Making of Early Christian Thought,” especially 118–20).

³² Von Rad, “מַלְאָךְ in the OT” (in “ἄγγελος,” *TDNT* 1:77).

³³ Utzschneider and Oswald, *Exodus 1–15*, 109. Cf. also Cassuto, *Exodus*, 32.

³⁴ Adelman, “The Burning Bush: Why Must Moses Remove His Shoes?”

³⁵ Sweeney, “Moses’s Encounter with G-d,” 96.

holding open flames that did not burn it up.³⁶ In a sermon on Ex 3:1–6 preached on Easter Monday 1526, Luther mentions the belief of some church fathers that the bush of Exodus 3 is in fact the Virgin Mary and the fact that it is not consumed represents her perpetual virginity; he cites the “Office of Our Blessed Lady” sung at Lauds: *Rubum, quem viderat Moses* (“O Bush Whom Moses Saw”).³⁷ For him it was far better to see the burning bush as an illustration of Christ,³⁸ although he stops short of the “christophanic exegesis” mentioned above.

Chemnitz traces back to this burning bush the many analogies commonly used to teach the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in the one person of Christ (lighted wood, a branding iron, a glowing coal, a heated sword). Chemnitz’s use of Exodus 3 stops short of the claim “this is what it means.”³⁹ And yet an inseparable union of fire (emblematic of the divine) with a humble bush—but without the bush being destroyed—remains one of the most evocative pictures of the hypostatic union.

One wonders how often Moses recalled how he first met God, whose appearance in fire would later terrify the entire Israelite nation (Ex 19:16–19), gently reposed in a tender plant—and on this very same mountain. For us, the sight is a foreshadowing of God’s ultimate self-revelation in Christ (Jn 1:18; 1 Jn 4:12), in whom God, who is referred to as “a consuming fire,” takes on the flesh of a teenage girl from Bethlehem.

God Speaks (3:5–6)

The double call “Moses! Moses!” recalls Gen 22:11 and Gen 46:2: “It is both a summons and a warning, for contact with the deity bodes danger.”⁴⁰ God’s initial word to Moses is a warning that he is standing on holy ground. There is no animistic notion here that certain places are natural conductors of spiritual energy. The holiness of the place results from the presence of Yahweh, not the other way around.

The ground’s holiness means that Moses must go barefoot, and explanations for this have proliferated. There is a strong Jewish tradition that the priests

³⁶ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 20–21. Taylor believes that a menorah is “representative of a living almond tree that had been chopped and trimmed in a particular way, so that blossoms completely covered its branches” (“The Asherah, the Menorah, and the Sacred Tree,” 51).

³⁷ StL 3:746. Luther maintains the perpetual virginity of Mary, but as an interpretation of the bush in Exodus 3, he finds this “too weak” and believes “the Holy Spirit wants to represent something higher.”

³⁸ In the “Allegorical or Spiritual Interpretation of Chapter 3” of November 20, 1524, Luther derides the Mariological interpretation and uses the burning bush solely as a picture of Christ (AE 62:76–80).

³⁹ Cf. Chemnitz, *The Two Natures in Christ*, 90, 291.

⁴⁰ Adelman, “The Burning Bush: Why Must Moses Remove His Shoes?”

served in the temple barefoot⁴¹ and that worshipers entering the Temple Mount were barefoot too.⁴² If this is accurate, removing one's sandals may have been an attempt to symbolically recreate Yahweh's initial appearance to Moses,⁴³ but it still does not explain why *Moses* had to take his sandals off.

That bare feet can be symbolic of mourning (2 Sam 15:30; Micah 1:8) or deprivation and shame (Is 20:2; Lk 15:22) is probably irrelevant. Some infer a common ANE gesture of respect,⁴⁴ but how bare feet would show respect is generally left unspecified. Others suggest that to touch holy ground with the skin of a dead animal (i.e., sandal leather) would defile it.⁴⁵ Greenberg's theory is that the purpose of sandals is to protect feet from harm (they don't do much to protect them from dirt) and that it would therefore be an affront to God to suggest that protection is needed in his presence.⁴⁶

Palmer's explanation seems a bit forced: both in the ANE and in the Bible, removing a shoe is associated with relinquishing a claim to something (cf. Deut 25:9; Ruth 4:8–10). Moses' barefootedness, like Joshua's before Jericho (Josh 5:15) or the priests' in the tabernacle,⁴⁷ would therefore be an acknowledgment that Yahweh's servants have no claim to the ground on which they stand.⁴⁸

Krause has shown that not just in the Bible but also throughout the ANE, it is simply assumed that one enters any dwelling with his shoes off, and sacred space falls into the same category.⁴⁹ A Talmudic conversation suggests a related and, I believe, helpful explanation. According to *b. Ber.* 62b (cf. *Sifre Deuteronomy* 258), it is forbidden to enter the Temple Mount carrying a staff, wearing shoes, or with one's money belt on because to do this is to treat the Temple Mount as a shortcut on the way to somewhere else. "Take off your shoes" is an emphatic command: "Not another step! Ground on which I am present is not anybody's 'shortcut.' This is your destination, and you have arrived."

God identifies himself as "the God of your father [singular]," and Moses is the only non-patriarch to whom God does this. In *Exod. Rab.* 3.1, Rabbi Joshua ben Nehemiah takes this to mean that Moses is still new at receiving divine

⁴¹ Ex 30:19 and 40:31 *may* imply that Moses and Aaron were barefoot in the tabernacle court. The Torah describes the priests' vestments in elaborate detail (Exodus 28 and 39) but says nothing at all about shoes—one reason for the tradition that they wore none (Palmer, "Unshod on Holy Ground: Ancient Israel's 'Disinherited' Priesthood," 1). Cf., e.g., y. *Šeqal.* 5:1, 8b; y. *Pesah.* 7:11, 35b.

⁴² *Sifre Deuteronomy* 258.

⁴³ Palmer, "Unshod on Holy Ground," 1.

⁴⁴ Sarna, *Exodus*, 15.

⁴⁵ Utzschneider and Oswald, *Exodus 1–15*, 111.

⁴⁶ Greenberg rejects the idea that bare feet are a return to a natural state that is more pleasing to God (*Understanding Exodus*, 60n7).

⁴⁷ But see footnote 41.

⁴⁸ Palmer, "Unshod on Holy Ground," 12–14.

⁴⁹ Krause, "Barefoot before God: Shoes and Sacred Space in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East."

revelation, and so in order not to frighten him, God chose to speak to Moses in a voice that sounded like his literal, human father, namely, Amram (Ex 6:20). It is better to see the expression as connecting Moses to the account of Jacob in Genesis 31–32, which has other elements—e.g., an enigmatic divine encounter; an oppressor unwilling to grant freedom to Yahweh’s people; an oppressor who is stealthily plundered—that foreshadow the exodus narrative to come.⁵⁰ The phrase used here most closely resembles Gen 46:3 (cf. also Ex 15:2; 18:4 and David’s words to Solomon in 1 Chr 28:9), and the form of address strongly suggests the intimate, personal relationship between God and Moses that will develop in the narrative to follow.⁵¹ The phrase “God of your father” says as much about who Moses is as about who God is. An identity for Moses is beginning to take shape.

⁵⁰ An, “A Canonical Reconsideration of the Song at the Sea,” 27–28.

⁵¹ Sarna, *Exodus*, 268.

Exodus 7:8–10:29

The Plague Narrative

Introduction to the Plague Narrative (Ex 7:8–10:29)

7:8–13	The Plague Narrative, Part 1: Staffs into Snakes
7:14–24	The Plague Narrative, Part 2: Water into Blood
7:25–8:11	The Plague Narrative, Part 3: Frogs (ET 7:25–8:15)
8:12–28	The Plague Narrative, Part 4: Fleas and Assorted Pests (ET 8:16–32)
9:1–12	The Plague Narrative, Part 5: The Livestock Disease and the Skin Eruption
9:13–35	The Plague Narrative, Part 6: Thunder and Hail
10:1–29	The Plague Narrative, Part 7: Locusts and Darkness
<i>Excursus</i>	<i>The “Hardening” of Pharaoh’s “Heart”</i>

Introduction to the Plague Narrative

(Ex 7:8–10:29)

The Plague Narrative: Structure

The structure of the Plague Narrative is regular and purposeful, a fact which critical scholars acknowledge but generally attribute to reworkings by one or more redactors.¹ There are various positions, however, on what the prevailing structure is or where the “Plague Narrative” unit begins and ends. These questions are interlocking, and the answers depend on the organizing principle on which an interpreter chooses to focus. In my view, three main organizing principles are at work simultaneously. A focus on the form of the account of each “plague” (starting with the initial authenticating sign but not including the final plague, the death of the firstborn) yields five pairs of corresponding accounts that are arranged concentrically:²

- A Staffs into snakes (7:8–13; the first sign/plague)
- B Water into blood (7:14–24; the second sign/plague)
- C Frogs (7:25–8:11 [ET 7:25–8:15]; the third sign/plague)
- D Fleas (8:12–15 [ET 8:16–19]; the fourth sign/plague)
- E Assorted pests (8:16–28 [ET 8:20–32]; the fifth sign/plague)
- E' Livestock disease (9:1–7; the sixth sign/plague)
- D' Skin eruption (9:8–12; the seventh sign/plague)
- C' Thunder and hail (9:13–35; the eighth sign/plague)
- B' Locusts (10:1–20; the ninth sign/plague)
- A' Darkness (10:21–27; the tenth sign/plague)³

A focus on the pattern of variation of certain features in the accounts yields a 3 + 3 + 3 + 1 arrangement, if one does not count the staffs turning into snakes (7:8–13) but does count the death of the firstborn (11:1–12:42) as the tenth plague:

The first set of three plagues

- Blood: the first plague (7:14–24)
- Frogs: the second plague (7:25–8:11 [ET 7:25–8:15])
- Fleas: the third plague (8:12–15 [ET 8:16–19])

The second set of three plagues

- Assorted pests: the fourth plague (8:16–28 [ET 8:20–32])
- Livestock disease: the fifth plague (9:1–7)
- Skin eruption: the sixth plague (9:8–12)

¹ Grossman, “The Structural Paradigm of the Ten Plagues Narrative,” 589.

² Adapted from Coats, *Exodus 1–18*, 60–68.

³ In Coats’ schema, 10:28–29 is not part of the plague of darkness but the conclusion of the plague-narrative cycle (*Exodus 1–18*, 66).

The third set of three plagues

Thunder and hail: the seventh plague (9:13–35)

Locusts: the eighth plague (10:1–20)

Darkness: the ninth plague (10:21–29)

One final plague

The death of the firstborn: the tenth plague (11:1–12:42)

Finally, again excluding the turning of staffs into snakes and including the death of the firstborn, important shifts take place at the seventh plague (thunder and hail, 9:13–35) such that the first seven accounts belong together, as do the last three:

The first seven plagues: blood (7:14–24), frogs (7:25–8:11 [ET 7:25–8:15]), fleas (8:12–15 [ET 8:16–19]), pests (8:16–28 [ET 8:20–32]), livestock disease (9:1–7), skin eruption (9:8–12), thunder and hail (9:13–35)

The last three plagues: locusts (10:1–20), darkness (10:21–29), the death of the firstborn (10:1–12:42)⁴

There is no more reason that we should have to choose between these structural models than that a piece of plaid fabric cannot be a pattern of squares, a pattern of colors, and a pattern of spaced stripes all at the same time.

Coats observes that the first and the last in his chiastic schema, the sign of the staff that becomes a snake (7:8–13, A) and the plague of darkness (10:21–27, A'), have not only the same structure but also the same length. There are similar correspondences between the water becoming blood (7:14–24, B) and the locusts (10:1–20, B'), between the frogs (7:25–8:11 [ET 7:25–8:15], C) and the thunder and hail (9:13–35, C'), between the fleas (8:12–15, D) and the skin eruption (9:8–12, D'), and between the assorted pests (8:16–28 [ET 8:20–32], E) and the death of the cattle (9:1–7, E'), although these five pairs vary with respect to the ways in which their members match one another.⁵ The A-B-C-D-E-E'-D'-C'-B'-A' schema justifies both, including the staff that becomes a snake (7:8–13, although it is not a “plague” per se; cf. Ibn Ezra on 7:16) and excluding the very different account of the Passover and the death of the firstborn (11:1–12:36).⁶ As a result, the total remains the number “ten” (cf. *Jubilees* 48:7)⁷—which apart

⁴ Grossman, “The Structural Paradigm of the Ten Plagues Narrative,” citing Noegel, “The Significance of the Seventh Plague.”

⁵ Coats, *Exodus 1–18*, 66–68. The structural correspondence between the plagues of blood and locusts is the least tidy. The reason is that the plague of locusts receives extra development as the first plague in the final group of three.

⁶ For Coats, 12:37–42 is not part of the plague narrative but a “summary of the exodus tradition” (*Exodus 1–18*, 89–92).

⁷ The issue is similar with the “Ten Commandments.” “Ten” is the intended number (e.g., Deut 4:13), but there is more than one way to arrive at it (Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 317; Harstad, *Deuteronomy*, 189–91).

from its general significance is also held to correspond to the ten instances of Israel's disobedience in the desert (Num 14:22).⁸

The view that the ten plagues consist of three cycles of three, followed by the unique account of the Passover and the death of the firstborn, goes back at least to the medieval commentator Rashbam (commenting on Ex 7:26 [ET 8:1]), and it remains the most common approach today.⁹ Rashbam noted that in each cycle of three, two plagues that are preceded by warnings are followed by one that is not. In plagues 1, 4, and 7 (blood, pests, thunder and hail), Moses is told to go to Pharaoh "in the morning" (7:15; 8:16 [ET 8:20]; 9:13) and deliver a warning. In plagues 2, 5, and 8 (frogs, livestock disease, locusts), he is told to go to Pharaoh and warn him at an unspecified time (7:26 [ET 8:1]; 9:1; 10:1). In plagues 3, 6, and 9 (fleas, skin eruption, darkness), Pharaoh receives no warning at all.¹⁰ The final plague—the death of the firstborn—includes a warning once again (11:4–8), which is then followed by instructions for the Israelites on how they should prepare (12:1–28). Childs observes: "In my judgment, the major themes are not brought into any sharper focus by recognizing this [3 + 3 + 3] pattern."¹¹ In the view of this commentary, that applies equally to the pattern A-B-C-D-E-E'-D'-C'-B'-A'.

Structure is most useful when it *does* bring "major themes" into "sharper focus,"¹² and in this respect, Grossman's refinement of a proposal by Noegel is the most productive approach.¹³ The seventh plague—the plague of thunder and hail—has several features that give it an importance beyond its simply being the first member of the third triad in the 3 + 3 + 3 + 1 schema. It is the longest by far of any account except for the Passover and the death of the firstborn (chapters 11–12); it has the longest uninterrupted speech by God in the entire Plague Narrative (9:13–19); its introduction almost makes it sound like it will be the last plague of all (9:14–16);¹⁴ and it includes the first time that we are told that

⁸ Assmann, *The Invention of Religion*, 89. Assmann claims that the final redactor of the narrative duplicated the third plague (lice, which repeat as the pests of plague 4) and the sixth plague (boils, which repeat as the livestock disease of plague 5) to arrive at the number ten (146).

⁹ Cf., e.g., Cassuto, *Exodus*, 92; Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 151–53; Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 321; Sarna, *Exodus*, 38. Both Greenberg and Propp attempt to explain how the text arrived at a form in which several organizing schemes overlap.

¹⁰ Childs, *Exodus*, 150; cf. Cassuto, *Exodus*, 93.

¹¹ Childs, *Exodus*, 150.

¹² On various attempts by historic Jewish commentators to find meaning in the structure of the ten plagues, see Benjamin and Mangel, "The Ten Plagues and Statistical Science as a Way of Knowing," 20–21.

¹³ Grossman, "The Structural Paradigm of the Ten Plagues Narrative," citing Noegel, "The Significance of the Seventh Plague."

¹⁴ Grossman, "The Structural Paradigm of the Ten Plagues Narrative," 593. For source critics, this is because 9:13–35 is the final plague in "J," which had only seven (Van Seters, "The Plagues of Egypt," 31).

Pharaoh repented (9:27, although of course he later changes his mind).¹⁵ In John's Apocalypse, a severe hailstorm is tied to the seventh and final trumpet (Rev 11:19) and the seventh and final bowl of God's wrath (Rev 16:21), which mirrors the position and importance of the plague of hail in Exodus.¹⁶

For these and other reasons, Grossman is correct: the most telling structural division in the Plague Narrative is that between the first group of seven, starting with the blood and finishing with the thunder and hail, and the final group of three, beginning with the locusts and concluding with the death of the first-born. The primary purpose of the first seven plagues is to bring the Egyptians to acknowledge that Yahweh is God (7:17; 8:6, 15, 18 [ET 8:10, 19, 22]; 9:14, 16, 29), and this explains why the Israelites are either unmentioned or said to be unaffected by the plagues in this group.¹⁷ Pharaoh's statement in 9:27 shows that Yahweh's work at educating the Egyptians has in some sense reached its goal. Accordingly, in the accounts of the last three plagues, beginning with the locusts (10:1–20), there is a shift to an emphasis on the implications of the plagues for the Israelites' future relationship with Yahweh.¹⁸

This arrangement overlaps with an important theme of the Plague Narrative, namely, the "hardening" of Pharaoh's "heart," which will be discussed in detail elsewhere (see the excursus "The 'Hardening' of Pharaoh's 'Heart'" following the commentary on 10:1–29). Most important for present purposes is that in the first seven plagues—with one exception—Pharaoh's "heart" is simply said to "be hard" (e.g., 7:22),¹⁹ or it is said that Pharaoh did the hardening himself (8:28 [ET 8:32]). Yahweh actively hardens Pharaoh's heart in the last three plague accounts (e.g., 10:20). The references to hardening in plagues 1–7 mention several times Yahweh's prediction that Pharaoh would refuse to listen to Moses and release the people (7:13, 22; 8:11 [ET 8:15]; 9:12, 35), but in the last three plague accounts, the words "as Yahweh had spoken" cease to appear. These shifts support Grossman's conclusion that in the first seven plagues, the impact of the plagues on the Egyptians (above all, Pharaoh) is in view. Plague 7 (thunder and hail) includes an attack on Pharaoh's "heart" (9:14; see also 9:34–35), after which the interest in Pharaoh's inner life diminishes. The final three plagues do not reckon with any possibility that Pharaoh will permanently change his mind and disaster will be averted.²⁰

¹⁵ Noegel, "The Significance of the Seventh Plague," 533–35.

¹⁶ Noegel, "The Significance of the Seventh Plague," 539n49.

¹⁷ Grossman, "The Structural Paradigm of the Ten Plagues Narrative," 597–98.

¹⁸ The view that each of five pairs of adjacent plagues targets a specific Egyptian god or religious belief will be discussed in the commentary on 12:12. The view that Yahweh smiting the Nile was equivalent to his smiting a god is as old as *Exod. Rab.* 9.9 (cf. also Rashi). See James K. Hoffmeier, "Egypt, Plagues In," *ABD* 2:376–77.

¹⁹ The one exception—Yahweh hardening Pharaoh's heart after the plague of skin eruption (9:12)—will be dealt with in the excursus "The 'Hardening' of Pharaoh's 'Heart'" following the commentary on 10:1–29.

²⁰ Grossman, "The Structural Paradigm of the Plague Narratives," 605.

Yahweh Delivers

Translation

12 ²⁹It happened at midnight that Yahweh struck down every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne down to the firstborn of the captive in the prison, as well as the firstborn of every domestic animal.

³⁰Pharaoh got up in the night—he, all his servants, and all Egypt—and there was a great outcry in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead in it.

³¹So he summoned Moses and Aaron in the night and said, “Get up and go away from my people, you and the Israelites! Go serve Yahweh, as you have been saying!

³²Take your flocks and your herds too—as you said—and go! And bless me too!”

³³The Egyptians, in a hurry to send them away from the land, urged the people [to go], because they thought, “We’re all going to die!”

³⁴The people picked up their dough before it had been leavened. Their kneading troughs were tied up in their cloaks on their shoulders. ³⁵The Israelites had done as Moses had said and asked for articles of silver, articles of gold, and cloaks from the Egyptians. ³⁶Yahweh had given the Egyptians a high regard for the people so that they gave them [these things], and they looted the Egyptians.

³⁷The Israelites traveled from Ramses toward Succoth—about six hundred thousand men on foot, apart from women and children. ³⁸A large mixed company went up with them, as well as flocks and herds—a massive amount of livestock.

³⁹They baked their dough that they had brought from Egypt into disks of flatbread, because it had not risen. For the Egyptians had driven them out, and they could not delay. They had not even prepared provisions for themselves.

⁴⁰The Israelites’ time of residence—during which they dwelled in Egypt—was four hundred and thirty years. ⁴¹It happened at the end of four hundred and thirty years—yes, it came about on the exact day—that all Yahweh’s brigades went forth from the land of Egypt. ⁴²It was Yahweh’s night of observance for bringing them out from the land of Egypt. It—this night—is Yahweh’s, an observance for all Israelites throughout their generations.

Textual Notes

12:29 יְהוָה הִכָּה—The subject “Yahweh” is specified because the subject of the last verb (עָשָׂה) had been “the children of Israel” (12:28).

הַיֹּשֵׁב עַל-כִּסְאוֹ—Literally, “the one sitting on his throne.” “Who sat on his throne” is preferred in the translation because the reference is probably to Pharaoh’s status, not to what he was literally doing at the time. It is ambiguous whether “Pharaoh” (פַּרְעֹה) is the one “sitting on his throne” or whether it is “the firstborn of Pharaoh” (בְּכֹר פַּרְעֹה) who “was to sit on his throne.” Because its opposite is “the captive who is [not “who is to be”] in the dungeon,” the first option is more likely. See the identical expression in the first textual note on 11:5, where “Pharaoh who sits on his throne” is paired with

“the maid behind the millstones.” There, as here, the point is status: “Egyptian society from top to bottom.”

הַשִּׁבְיָה—In the parallel text in 11:5, it was “the maid behind the millstones.” Perhaps influenced by **הַשִּׁבְיָה** in 11:5, the LXX translates **הַשִּׁבְיָה** here with the feminine *αἰχμολωτίς*, “female captive.”¹ There is a certain heightening (or lowering) effect in 12:29. A captive in a dungeon is lower in status than a maidservant.

12:30 הָיָא—The nonrepresentation of **הָיָא** in the LXX (cf. also the Vulgate) probably does not indicate a different *Vorlage*.

אֲשֶׁר אֵין שָׁם מָוֶת—Literally, “which there was not there a dead person.” As a participle, the force of **מָוֶת** is adjectival, “a dead person,” not “someone (in the process of) dying.” (Contrast the fourth textual note on 12:33.)

12:31 וַיִּקְרָא—The LXX, the Syriac, the Vulgate, and some medieval Hebrew manuscripts include “Pharaoh” as the subject of the verb. In the case of the versions, this is probably a translator decision. On whether this contradicts Moses’ declaration in 10:29 that he would not see Pharaoh’s face again, see the commentary.

קוּמוּ וְצֵאוּ—The conjunctive accent on **קוּמוּ**, together with the conjunctive *daghesh hazaq*² in **צֵאוּ**, links the commands closely together and suggest agitation on Pharaoh’s part. “Get up and get out of here!”

כִּדְבַרְכֶּם—It may appear that Pharaoh is acceding only to the demand Moses and Aaron have been explicitly making (“as you are saying”), namely, to take a three-day journey out into the open country to worship Yahweh (5:3; 8:23 [ET 8:27]; cf. 3:18). The near repetition of **כִּדְבַרְכֶּם** in the next verse (**כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתֶּם**, 12:32) makes it much more likely that Pharaoh is dismissing Israel from service to Egypt—a decision he will soon regret (14:5).

12:32 נִסְעוּ בְּצֹאֲנֵיכֶם וּבְהֶמְתֶּם—In 10:9, Moses and Aaron had presented a demand to depart with their “flocks” (**צֹאן**) and “herds” (**בְּהֶמָה**). Pharaoh refused with those terms in 10:24; now he accedes.

וַיִּבְרַכְתֶּם אֹתִי—Pharaoh’s request harks back to his request in 8:24 (ET 8:28) that Moses and Aaron “pray for me” (**הִעֲתִירוּ בְעֵדִי**; cf. 8:4 [ET 8:8]; 9:28; 10:17). To “bless” (when one person “blesses” another, as also in 39:43) is to invoke God on someone’s behalf to obtain a special benefit, which can be health, wealth, fecundity, progeny, power, and so on (*SDBH*, s.v. **בָּרַךְ**). On what Pharaoh appears to have in mind, see the commentary.

12:33 וַתִּחַזַּק מִצְרַיִם עַל-הָעָם—Literally, “and Egypt was strong/prevailed upon the people.” The English “urge” by etymology is “to press hard or compel,” making “urge” an appropriate translation. The use of **חִזַּק** here is very likely a pun. We are told that Pharaoh’s heart “was strong” (**חִזַּק**, 7:13, 22; 8:15 [ET 8:19]; 9:15); then that Pharaoh “strengthened” his own heart (9:2); then that Yahweh “strengthened” Pharaoh’s heart (9:12; 10:20, 27; 11:10)—just as from the beginning Yahweh had promised Moses that

¹ Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 411.

² This commentary prefers the meta-language term *daghesh hazaq* over the term *daghesh forte* (Latin).

he would do (4:21). Now it is Egypt that is acting with “strength”—not to force Israel to stay, but to get them to hurry up and leave.

לְמַהֵר לְשַׁלְּחָם—Literally, “to hurry to send them away.” The Hebrew does not make it clear exactly who is “hurrying,” the Israelites or the Egyptians. It is best to regard **לְמַהֵר** as the equivalent of an adverb: “to send them *quickly* on their way.”

וַיֹּאמְרוּ בְּלִבָּם—The meaning “they thought” seems more likely than that this was said aloud to the departing Israelites. The full expression would be **וַיֹּאמְרוּ בְּלִבָּם**, “and they said in their heart”—i.e., to themselves.

כִּלְנֵנוּ מָתִים—“We’re all going to die!” Compare KJV: “we be all dead men.” Participles can be used for action in the very near future which, from the point of view of the speaker, is sure to take place (Gen 20:3; *BHRG*, § 20.3.3.3)—that is, unless something intervenes. Cf. GNT: “we will all be dead if you don’t leave” and NIV: “for otherwise ... we will all die!”

12:34 טֶרֶם יִהְיֶינָּה—“Before it had fermented and risen” seems to imply that the dough *would* have risen if it had had more time. Compare the verb **יִהְיֶינָּה** here with the cognate nouns **הַמֵּיץ** in 12:15 and **מִדְּמֵצֶת** in 12:19–20. On the hasty-flight etiology for the Festival of Flatbread, see the commentary.

מִשְׁאַרְתָּם—Both here and similarly in 7:28 (ET 8:3), the LXX translates with “their dough batches” (τὰ φερούμενα αὐτῶν), perhaps because the translator read a *sin* rather than a *shin* and related the noun here to **שָׁאֵר**, “leaven,” in 12:15, 19 (cf. BDB). The parallel between **מִשְׁאַרְתָּם** and **טֶבֶא**, “basket,” in Deut 28:5, 17 suggests that a **מִשְׁאַרְתָּה** is a vessel in which dough was prepared.

12:35 עָשׂוּ—“Had done,” not “did.” If the looting had taken place after the people hoisted their kneading troughs on their shoulders (**וַיִּשָּׂא**, 12:34), we would have expected a *wayyiqtol* (imperfect with *waw* consecutive), **וַיַּעֲשׂוּ**. It is also hard to imagine this exchange happening as the Israelites were hurriedly packing up and the bereaved Egyptians were urging them on.³

12:36 וַיִּתֵּן יְהוָה נֶלֶתֶן אֶת־תֵּן הָעַם בְּעֵינֵי מִצְרַיִם—Literally, “and Yahweh put the favor of the people into the Egyptians’ eyes.” For the same reason cited in the previous textual note, **נֶלֶתֶן** is translated with an English past perfect: “had given.” See the first textual notes on 3:21 and 11:3, where virtually the same expression occurs.

וַיִּשְׁאַלְהֶם—Since the same root is used in the Qal in 12:35, with the Israelites as subject, it seems natural to seek a different meaning for the Hiphil used here with the Egyptians as subject and the Israelites as object. BDB and *HALOT* propose that the Hiphil means to allow someone to make a successful request, i.e., to grant it.⁴ The LXX translates with “and they lent to them” (καὶ ἔχρησαν αὐτοῖς), which introduces an ethical difficulty not present in the MT, namely, by implying an expectation that the items will be returned. A story in the Talmud (*b. Sanh.* 92a), apparently operating with the same understanding, has the Egyptians demanding before Alexander the Great the return of the silver and gold taken by the Israelites. In the story, the brilliant Jewish

³ Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 412.

⁴ Cf. Joüon, § 54 d.

lawyer Geviha ben Pesisa argues that the value of the Egyptian silver and gold should be measured against the value of four hundred and thirty years of unpaid labor by six hundred thousand Israelite laborers. The Egyptians quickly backed down.

הַיִּנְצָלוֹ—The root נצל is far more common in the Hiphil. The Piel occurs only in Ex 3:22, here, and in Ezek 14:14 with human beings as patient; in 2 Chr 20:25, the patient must be understood as the goods themselves.

12:37 מִרַעְמֶסֶס סֶכֶתָה—Jacob and his family were settled in “Ramses” initially (Gen 47:11). See the fourth textual note on 1:11, in which Israel builds storage cities for Pharaoh at Ramses and at “Pithom.” Scholars generally link “Succoth” to the Egyptian name *Tjeku*, which is strongly connected with Tell el-Maskhuta in the northeastern part of the country.⁵ The identification of *Tjeku* with Pithom has been proposed, but it remains in dispute.⁶ So far, the Israelites are on a logical route out of the country.⁷

כְּשֵׁש־מֵאוֹת אֶלֶף רִגְלֵי חֲנֻכָּרִים—According to the accents, the syntax is this: “about six hundred thousand on foot, males.” A nearly identical phrase appears in Num 11:21. For חֲנֻכָּרִים, see the first textual note on 10:11. On the huge number, see the commentary.

לְבַד מִנְּטָי:—“Apart from noncombatants.” If the nation consists of נְבָרִים and טָף, then the latter term includes everyone other than able-bodied adult males—i.e., women and the elderly as well as “little ones” (BDB; cf. Num 32:16–17). See the second textual notes on 10:10 and 10:24.

12:38 עָרַב רָב—Probably connected with the root ערב, “to mix,” from which the noun “woof” (as opposed to “warp”) also derives. In Num 11:4, for אֶסְפָּרָה (from אָסַף), “collection,”⁸ Targum Onqelos renders with the Aramaic reduplicated noun עִירְבָרְבִין, “mixture.” This leads Cassuto to see עָרַב רָב in Ex 12:38 as a Hebrew reduplicated noun analogous to the form אֶסְפָּרָה or (possibly) פִּקְחָקוֹה (“opening,” from the root פָּקַח, Is 61:1). More importantly, it leads Cassuto⁹ to follow many other interpreters¹⁰ in seeing both Num 11:4 and Ex 12:38 as referring to the same group of non-Israelites, a move that seems to lessen Israel’s culpability for the rebellion in Numbers 11. While the עָרַב רָב may include some of the same persons as the אֶסְפָּרָה (“rabble”) of Numbers 11, there is nothing at all pejorative about the mention of these people here.¹¹ On the significance of their joining Israel, see the commentary.

מִקְנֵה כֶּבֶד מְאֹד:—Literally, “very heavy livestock.” The punning possibilities of the root כבד, “to be strong, heavy,” have been maximally exploited in the narrative: Moses’ lips and tongue are “heavy” (4:10), some of the plagues are “heavy” (8:20 [ET 8:24];

⁵ Jo Ann H. Seely, “Succoth (Place),” *ABD* 6:217.

⁶ Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 120.

⁷ Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 181.

⁸ The connotations may be negative, so that “rabble” or “riffraff” would be workable translations (*SDBH*, s.v. אֶסְפָּרָה).

⁹ Cassuto, *Exodus*, 147–48.

¹⁰ These other interpreters include *Sifre Numbers* (a halakhic midrash) 86, Ibn Ezra, Rashi, and several modern interpreters. See the list in Sherwood, “The Mixed Multitude in Exodus 12:38: Glorification, Creation, and Yhwh’s Plunder of Israel and the Nations,” 140–41.

¹¹ Sherwood, “The Mixed Multitude in Exodus 12:38,” 141.

9:3, 18; 10:14), and Pharaoh's heart is "heavy" (e.g., 7:14; 8:11, 28 [ET 8:15, 32]). It may be that the use of כָּבֵד here is an intentional echo of these other occurrences, like the use of חָזַק in 12:33 (see the first textual note on 12:33).

12:39 עָנֹת מִצּוֹת ... וַיֹּאפּוּ אֶת־הַבֶּצֶק—A double accusative construction: to bake *x* (הַבֶּצֶק) into *y* (עָנֹת מִצּוֹת) (GKC, § 117 ii). On the etiology for the Flatbread Festival, see the commentary.

כִּי־נִרְשׁוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם—The MT reads "for they were driven out of Egypt." The Pual of נִרְשָׁא occurs only here and in Job 30:5. In 2QExod^a,¹² the Samaritan Pentateuch (כִּי גִרְשׁוּם מִצְרַיִם), apparently the *Vorlage* of the LXX (ἐξέβαλον γὰρ αὐτούς), and the Syriac, the מ prefixed to מִמִּצְרַיִם attaches instead to the end of נִרְשׁוּ and becomes a pronominal suffix: "Egypt drove them out," which would be נִרְשׁוּם. Evidence for the latter reading is strong, and the MT's reading מִמִּצְרַיִם could have resulted from the occurrence of the same word earlier in the verse.¹³ The translation (cautiously!) opts for the variant reading. If the thought is similar to 12:33, the "driving out" by the Egyptian people was not hostile, but they were certainly eager to see the Israelites go.

12:40 וּמוֹשָׁב בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר יָשְׁבוּ בְּמִצְרַיִם—Literally, "the residence of the sons of Israel, [during] which they resided in Egypt." The Samaritan Pentateuch (וּמִבְּתָם) and several LXX manuscripts (including Codex Alexandrinus) add "the residence of the sons of Israel and their fathers" (καὶ οἱ πατέρες αὐτῶν). The Samaritan Pentateuch also adds "in the land of Canaan and in the land of Egypt" (בְּאֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן), and most LXX manuscripts similarly add "in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan" (καὶ ἐν γῇ Χαναναί). The expansions probably arose to deal with certain chronological difficulties, on which, see the commentary.

12:41 בַּעֲצָם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה—Literally, "on the bone of this day." See the second textual note on 12:17. Israel entered and left Egypt on exactly the same date, which became the first day of Flatbread (*pace* Houtman, who argues that "on the exact day" refers only to the fact that this is Nisan 15, not to the length of Israel's stay¹⁴). On the problem of the terminus a quo for the four hundred and thirty years, see the commentary.

צְבָאוֹת יְהוָה—The noun צְבָא means "a relatively large group of people, often with centralized leadership; assembled for a common purpose, such as warfare or a journey—division, company" (SDBH). How militaristic the word's connotations are probably varies by context. The LXX's translation here, "the Lord's force" (ἡ δύναμις κυρίου), evokes a military frame, and appropriately so. Israel is marching out in ranks with Yahweh as their commander (cf. Num 9:15–23). See also the third textual note on 6:26.

12:42 לַיְלָה שְׁמֵרִים—The Samaritan Pentateuch has the usual form לַיְלָה and joins it to 12:41, reading "all of Yahweh's brigades left the land of Egypt at night." לַיְלָה is a construct of the by-form לַיְלָה (e.g., Is 15:1 [see BHS]; 30:29). The noun שְׁמֵרִים, literally, "observances," occurs only here (twice). While KJV understands the plural as intensive

¹² On 2QExod^a as a textual witness, see Longacre, "A Contextualized Approach to the Hebrew Dead Sea Scrolls Containing Exodus," 102–3.

¹³ Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 365.

¹⁴ Houtman, *Exodus*, 2:204.

(“a night to be much observed”), nouns denoting actions are often in the plural (cf., e.g., שְׁלָחִים, “sending away, dismissal”; כִּפּוּרִים “atonement”), possibly because they are thought of as an aggregate of many smaller actions (Joüon, § 136 i). On the question of who (or what) is “watching” whom (or what), see the commentary.

וְהָיָה הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה לַיהוָה—Literally, “it, this night, is to/for Yahweh.” In a verbless clause, the word order subject + predicate is unmarked, and the accents suggest the Masoretes also understood the syntax as “this night is Yahweh’s.” The difficulty is וְהָיָה, which seems superfluous. Translations that don’t ignore it altogether often render it as “same” (i.e., “this/that same night”; cf., e.g., CSB, ESV, NJPS, NRSVUE). Like Propp’s rendering,¹⁵ this commentary’s translation takes the construction as appositional: “it—namely, this night—is Yahweh’s.” Compare KJV’s “this is that night of the LORD.”

Commentary

Structure

Ex 12:29–42 is a section of narrative sandwiched between *Pesah* instructions in 12:1–28 and 12:43–49. The structure of this “exit narrative” is as follows:

A At midnight: Yahweh strikes Egypt’s firstborn; Pharaoh admits defeat (12:29–32)

B *Matzot* etiology (12:33–34)

C Israel carries off great plunder (12:35–36)

C’ Yahweh carries off great plunder (12:37–38)

B’ *Matzot* etiology (12:39)¹⁶

A’ That very night: the *Pesah* etiology (12:40–41); Yahweh is victorious (12:42)

This chiastic structure is an example of the kind of geometric “arabesque” that is frequent in the Torah and which can frustrate attempts to read an individual unit as a sequential narrative—but a sequential narrative is not the text’s intention.¹⁷ Sherwood, who perceptively notes this chiastic arrangement, also observes the unit’s richly intertextual character (with 12:29 reporting the fulfillment of 11:9–10; 12:30–32 reporting the fulfillment of 4:22–23 and 11:4–8; and 12:32–36 reporting the fulfillment of 3:21–22 and 11:1–3) and its strategic location within Exodus 1–15 as a whole.¹⁸

For Documentarians, 12:29–39 belongs to “J,” with 12:37 as an insertion by a redactor who wanted to organize the account of the Israelites’ travels.¹⁹ “P” is

¹⁵ Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 357.

¹⁶ On the “chiastic hinge” in 12:34–39, see Sherwood, “The Mixed Multitude in Exodus 12:38,” 146.

¹⁷ On the “arabesque” (a repetitive geometric pattern in Islamic visual art) as an analogy for the structure of texts within the Torah, see Berman, “The Biblical Criticism of Ibn Hazm the Andalusian,” 388–89.

¹⁸ Sherwood, “The Mixed Multitude in Exodus 12:38,” 141, 144.

¹⁹ Friedman, *Bible with Sources Revealed*, 140n.

then said to take over in 12:40.²⁰ It is difficult, however, to see how 12:40–42 could have been understood apart from the “exit narrative” that precedes it.²¹

Yahweh Strikes Egypt’s Firstborn; Pharaoh Admits Defeat (12:29–32)

The account of the death of the Egyptian firstborn and the Israelites’ departure from Egypt has strong verbal links to several previous texts. Ex 12:29 is nearly identical to Yahweh’s threat in 11:5, with the difference that in 11:5, the emblematic victim at the bottom of the socioeconomic scale was “the firstborn of the maid behind the millstones” (בְּכוֹר הַשֹּׁפְחוֹת אֲשֶׁר אַחֲרַיִתָּהּ), whereas here it is “the firstborn of the captive in the prison” (בְּכוֹר הַשִּׁבְי אֲשֶׁר בְּבֵית הַבּוֹר).²² The emphasis on “the firstborn” harks back to when Moses left Mount Horeb and Yahweh told him to declare to Pharaoh that Israel was Yahweh’s firstborn; it would cost Pharaoh his own firstborn if he refused to let Israel go (4:22–23).

Here the threat is carried out and the results are horrific. The words “there was not a house [in Egypt] without someone dead” (12:30) are probably more Plague Narrative hyperbole, since it is mathematically improbable that in such a vast nation there was literally not one household where not one member was a firstborn child.²³ Even so, the scale of the devastation raises an inevitable question about Yahweh’s justice. Pharaoh is more than deserving of punishment from Yahweh, but it is his son, not he, who dies. It would be easy to understand if we were told that those Egyptian oppressors who persecuted the Israelites received their comeuppance, but it is simple birth order, not people’s participation in the oppression, that determines whether they live or die. It is perhaps least clear of all why Yahweh should require the death of the firstborn child of a maidservant grinding grain or of a captive in a dungeon—to say nothing of the firstborn offspring of a domestic animal.

That the question bothered traditional Jewish interpreters is clear from the *Midrash Rabbah*. Here the Egyptians who die are those who despised Israel, while any righteous Egyptians are spared. The captive in the dungeon whose firstborn dies is one who refuses to be set free if a condition is that the Israelites get their freedom too. Apparently, for the sages, if the captive were an anti-Semite, the death of his firstborn offspring was less problematic (*Exod. Rab.* 18.10).

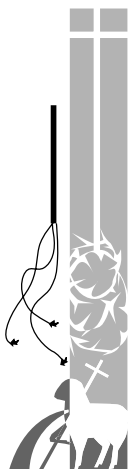
²⁰ Noth, *Exodus*, 98–101. For Friedman, the exit narrative is “E” (*Bible with Sources Revealed*, 139–40).

²¹ See further discussion in “Authorship” in the introduction.

²² As noted in the second textual note on 11:5, Ibn Ezra’s view is that these are two references to the same group: servants who in sweatshop fashion did their grinding during the day and were kept in confinement at night. At night, they would set their millstones at the mouth of the “pit,” which is why they are said to be “behind” the stones.

²³ In order to take these words literally, Rashi proposes either (1) that in cases where there was no firstborn, the head of the household died in his place (arguing from Ps 89:28 [ET 89:27]) or (2) that Egyptian women were so promiscuous that every household had several “first-born” (to their fathers, but not necessarily to their mothers) in it.

The text makes no attempt to justify Yahweh’s action, and interpreters who do have overstepped their assignment. The emphasis of the text is twofold. First, the point is precisely that it is *not* necessary to be directly and personally responsible for the oppression of Israel to suffer in this tragedy. The captive in the dungeon, the maid behind the millstones (11:5), and certainly Egypt’s domestic animals are not guilty, and yet they too are bereaved. The point is the broad swath of the destruction brought on by Pharaoh’s muleheadedness, which unleashes divine wrath of a kind that no human being can withstand or even comprehend. God’s judgment falls, not only on Egypt’s false gods (including Pharaoh), but also on all who belong to them. “To fall into the hands of the living God is beyond terrible” (Heb 10:31).



Second, as said in the commentary on 4:23, just as the text does not suggest that Egypt’s firstborn deserved killing, it does not suggest that Israel’s firstborn deserved sparing. Every firstborn belongs to Yahweh (Ex 13:2, 11–16; 22:28–29 [ET 22:29–30]; Num 18:15), and in this final plague, God claims *both* the Egyptian and the Israelite firstborn for his own, although in very different ways.²⁴ Later, the Levites will be declared Yahweh’s property in lieu of the firstborn sons of Israel whom Yahweh spared as the price of Israel’s redemption (Num 3:9–13). For exactly this reason Jesus Christ—the price of the world’s redemption—will be emphatically declared to be the “firstborn” by the NT (Lk 2:7; Rom 8:29; Col 1:15; Heb 1:6). Just as Israel’s ransom price was not paid to Pharaoh, so also our ransom was not paid to Satan. And both the price of Israel’s redemption and the price of our redemption were paid by the Lord with what was already his (Mt 20:28; Jn 6:51; Rom 3:24–25; Titus 2:14; 1 Pet 1:18–19).

Pharaoh’s summoning Moses and Aaron in 12:31 appears to contradict Moses’ declaration in 10:29 that Moses would not see Pharaoh’s face again. In that verse, “to see the face” of Pharaoh most likely had the meaning of “to be granted a formal audience with the head of state as a petitioner,” which is certainly not what is happening here. See Propp’s treatment of the issue,²⁵ and this commentary on 10:29.

Pharaoh sends Moses and Aaron away with a request that they “bless” him too (12:32). However Pharaoh understands the worship that will take place out in the open country, he thinks it will entail an opportunity for Moses and Aaron to invoke Yahweh on their behalf, and he wants himself, too (כִּי), included in those who are blessed. Safety and healing for his family may be uppermost in his mind. Durham regards the “blessing” Pharaoh intends as the lifting of a curse on Egypt,²⁶ but there is no explicit “cursing” vocabulary in the text. “The factor that makes a blessing a blessing is the relationship between God and the person blessed. God blesses because of his favorable attitude toward a person or

²⁴ Cf. Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 457.

²⁵ Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 341–42.

²⁶ Durham, *Exodus*, 167.

group of people.”²⁷ It is almost touching that Pharaoh thinks that Moses would be willing and able to effect a “favorable attitude” toward him on God’s part.

The *Matzot* Etiology (12:33–34, 39)

As noted above (see “Structure”), the point of Israel’s carrying off great plunder (12:35–36) is bracketed by two descriptions of what the Israelites did with their dough that was being readied for baking. This is an obvious etiology for the Festival of Flatbread. Although the Torah is silent about this, it may be that such a festival was not a complete *novum* for Israel, but one that had pre-exodus roots in an annual commemoration of the beginnings of the barley harvest (see “Structure” in the commentary on 12:1–28). Henceforth, however, Flatbread would commemorate the night that Israel was hurried out of Egypt and had no time to let their bread rise for the next day’s baking. The clear implication of 12:34 is that the Israelites had dough starter with them that they had not yet used. In 12:15, 19, however, they were told that preparation for the festival requires removing every speck of starter dough from their homes. Along with the seven-day period for the celebration, this shows that the envisioned setting for the institution of Flatbread in 12:15–20 is a time after Israel is installed in the land; the instructions could not have been followed on the initial night of Israel’s deliverance. The removal of old starter from Israelite homes will be both emblematic of a new beginning and an expression of trust in Yahweh to provide. Trust in Yahweh is a major theme in the narrative of Israel’s desert wanderings, and it is set up here by the observation that Israel “had not made provisions for themselves” (12:39). Will the people rely on God to feed them or not?

Plunder for Israel (12:35–36); Plunder for Yahweh (12:37–38)

According to the usual translation of 12:37, the Israelites who leave Egypt number “about six hundred thousand men on foot, apart from women and children.” This would imply a total Israelite population of at least two million, although it is important to note that the text never gives this figure. A treatment of the difficulties caused by the number “six hundred thousand” properly belongs to a commentary on the book of Numbers (Numbers 1 and 26 in particular; see also Num 11:21). For now, we should note Hamilton’s observation that this number is “stratospherically high,”²⁸ and it is not always clear how to reconcile it with other Scripture or with simple logistical considerations.²⁹

For one thing, two million persons encamped at a single, small oasis (Ex 15:27)³⁰ or assembled at the entrance of the tent of meeting (Lev 8:3;

²⁷ Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK “To Bless” in the Old Testament*, 165.

²⁸ Hamilton, *Exodus*, 194.

²⁹ For a thorough treatment of these, see Davies, “A Mathematical Conundrum: The Problem of the Large Numbers in Numbers i and xxvi.”

³⁰ Cultivated date palms are planted at a density of about sixty per acre (Jagdsh, *Agri Farming: Dates Farming Project Report, Cost, Profit Guide*). A camp of two million persons could occupy 2,400 acres easily.

Num 16:16–19) is not easy to picture, assuming that is what the text asks of us. For another, Yahweh's instructions for the conquest imply that the Israelites are not an especially numerous people—smaller, in fact, than each Canaanite nation whom they will be displacing (Deut 7:1; 7–8; 11:23)—but if Deuteronomy means this literally, then the Levant in the Late Bronze Age had a population more than one-third larger than the nation of Israel today. For another, if a loose crowd occupies about ten square feet per person, and the space needed for pack animals and baggage is added (to say nothing of a very large number of livestock), then a group of two million persons could easily occupy two square miles or 1,280 acres when on the move, much more than that in camp. As Friedman points out, if two million Israelites walked through the desert fifty abreast (one possible meaning of *הַחֲנֻכִּים* in 13:18), leaving one yard between each row, the resulting train would have been at least twenty-two miles long,³¹ or about one-sixth the width of the entire Sinai Peninsula.

For these and other reasons, several interpreters point out that the Hebrew *אַלְף*, “a thousand,” can also mean “clan”—the next smaller unit of social organization to a “tribe”—and when so used, it does not necessarily represent an exact or even consistent number of persons (Josh 22:14; Judg 6:15; 1 Sam 10:19; Micah 5:1 [ET 5:2]).³² It may be significant that Ex 12:37 gives the number of *הַנְּבָרִים* *הַרְגְּלִי*, literally, “on foot—the men,” a term which seems to have military connotations.³³ The effect of the proposal to take *אַלְף* as a military unit of inconsistent or even indeterminate size would be to shrink the Israelite population to a figure less “stratospherically high.”

Some objections to the number “six hundred thousand” are more cogent and fairer than others, but a population of more than two million certainly raises questions. To translate *אַלְף* here as “clan,” “troop,” or “infantry unit,” however, creates problems of its own. The round number “about six hundred thousand” (cf. also Num 11:21) seems to underlie the more specific figures of “603,550” in Ex 38:26; “630,550” in Num 1:46–47; 2:32; and “601,730” in Num 26:51, figures that are then broken down into tribes (e.g., Num 1:20–23: 46,500 Reubenites and 59,300 Simeonites). In the case of these more specific numbers, if the correct translation of, e.g., Ex 38:26, is “six hundred three infantry units plus 550 (men),” then why the mention of the “550” in addition to the number of “infantry units”?³⁴ If the extra “550” persons are not enough to make up another “infantry unit,” then how do we know that the translation of *אַלְף* as “infantry units” rather than “thousand(s)” has shrunk the total appreciably?

³¹ Friedman, *Exodus*, 27.

³² See, e.g., Mendenhall, “The Census Lists of Numbers 1 and 26,” 60–61.

³³ *הַנְּבָרִים* can be akin to “foot soldiers” or “infantry” (e.g., Judg 20:2; 2 Sam 10:6; 1 Ki 20:29).

³⁴ Cassuto's suggestion—that 600,000 is based on the sexagesimal system and is merely a conventional way of indicating a huge number (*Exodus*, 147)—has the same problem. It does not explain the more specific numbers given later.

Two points are worth emphasizing. One is that to call in a miracle (or several) to solve these inner-biblical and logistical problems is not the mark of a high regard for the text, when nowhere does it suggest that God somehow worked this all out miraculously. I believe that the Hebrew text we have will not support the translation “six hundred military units” instead of “six hundred thousand” and that interpreters who argue for it³⁵ are mistaken. Some (like Stuart) make this move, however, not because of any inherent bias against the miraculous, but because they take the text of the Torah seriously. Their position should not be conflated with that of critical scholarship, which simply dismisses the “stratospherically high” number as fanciful.³⁶

Second—and more important—submission to the text and its claims means that the important consideration is not how the high number is possible, but what it intends to communicate. The text notes the huge number of Israelites here for two reasons. For one, it underlines the fact that God did indeed keep his promise to the patriarchs to multiply their descendants “like the stars of the sky and like the sand on the seashore” (Gen 22:17) and that Pharaoh’s attempts to diminish their population (Ex 1:8–22) were unsuccessful. Second, it prepares us for the “desert wandering” narrative by noting how many people for whom God will have to provide on the way to the promised land. Sustaining these people in unsown open country for forty-plus years will indeed require miracles, which the text *does* explicitly assert (e.g., Exodus 16).

The point about Israel’s leaving Egypt loaded down with plunder is not an aside or incidental (see “Structure”). As Sherwood has shown,³⁷ it is placed at a strategic location in the text, and the narrative in Exodus (3:20–21; 11:2–3)—in fact, the entire Torah (Gen 15:14)—has been gesturing toward this for some time. Why is it so important that Yahweh led Israel out of Egypt loaded down with plunder?

Fretheim is no doubt correct that this represents a radical reversal in Israel’s fortunes: mud-splattered, straw-picking slaves no more, they depart Egypt decked out in finery.³⁸ At long last their oppressors are despoiled, and Israel receives its compensation for centuries of unpaid labor (cf. *b. Sanh.* 92a, cited in the first textual note on 12:36). This detail contributes to the impression of the book of Exodus as subversive, anti-imperial literature and the exodus as the work of a God who characteristically “impoverishes and enriches, abases and exalts” (1 Sam 2:7; cf. Lk 1:52–53).

But the message accomplishes more. It is not only Israel who carries off great plunder in this section; it is also Yahweh. This is the reason for the mention of the “large mixed company” (עַם רַב מִזְרָבִּים, 12:38) that joins Israel in the exodus. Many commentators identify this group with the “rabble” (רֵעָרָבָא, Num 11:4)

³⁵ For an example, see the extensive discussion in Stuart, *Exodus*, 297–306.

³⁶ E.g., Noth, *Exodus*, 99.

³⁷ Sherwood, “The Mixed Multitude in Exodus 12:38.”

³⁸ Fretheim, *Exodus*, 142.

that will cause such trouble in Numbers 11, and the latter text is probably behind the characterization of the **רַב־עָרֹב** here as “riffraff,”³⁹ a “motley mob,”⁴⁰ or a “motley crew.”⁴¹ The assumption, however, that mixed parentage makes this a group of lesser persons and potential troublemakers is already disturbing. Stuart’s “a huge ethnically diverse group”⁴² is more accurate. Nothing negative is said or implied here about the **רַב־עָרֹב**, and it is not until the medieval period that the identification of them with the “rabble” of Numbers 11 becomes common—an identification which allows some commentators to assign to this group the blame, not only for Numbers 11, but also for the incident of the golden calf (Exodus 32).⁴³

Exodus 12 gives us no reason to regard the mixed company’s joining the Israelites with foreboding. On the contrary, as Sherwood has shown, the note is triumphant. For Yahweh’s decisive defeat of Egypt’s gods, including Pharaoh,⁴⁴ the prize he carries off is a new people comprised of both Israel and the “large mixed company” of 12:38. The latter are representatives of the nations who through Israel will be blessed (Gen 12:3), who come to hold Israel in high regard, and to whom Israel will be given a mission (Ex 19:6; Deut 28:2, 9–10; Is 42:6; 60:3; cf. Mt 28:19–20; Rev 5:9–10). The incorporation of “the nations” into the people of God therefore takes a momentous step forward at this moment.⁴⁵

A Night to Remember! (12:40–42)

According to 12:40–41, Israel left Egypt on a day exactly four hundred and thirty years after—what? The variant readings in 12:40 (see the textual note) seem to have arisen as solutions to a perceived problem with counting “four hundred and thirty years” from the day Jacob’s family first arrived in Egypt. According to Gen 15:13, God promised Abram that his descendants would live in a foreign country for four hundred years, a round number which is in essential agreement with Ex 12:40. The “problem” stems mainly from two factors: (1) Gen 46:7, 11, if these verses are taken to mean that all Jacob’s sons and grandsons were born in Canaan and then traveled to Egypt with him and (2) the genealogy in Ex 6:13–25. In the genealogy, Levi’s son Kohath is said to live 133 years and his son Amram, 137 years; Amram’s son, Moses, is then said to be eighty years old at the time of the exodus (Ex 7:7). If no generations in this genealogy are omitted, this would mean the sojourn lasted 350 years at

³⁹ Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*, 321n38.

⁴⁰ Cassuto, *Exodus*, 147.

⁴¹ Hamilton, *Exodus*, 192.

⁴² Stuart, *Exodus*, 303. Cf. ESV: “those of foreign descent” in Neh 13:3.

⁴³ Magid, *From Metaphysics to Midrash: Myth, History, and the Interpretation of Scripture in Lurianic Kabbala*, 82–83.

⁴⁴ The final blow of which will not be struck until Exodus 13–14.

⁴⁵ Sherwood, “The Mixed Multitude in Exodus 12:38,” 15–16.

the very most (the lifespan of Kohath plus the lifespan of Amram plus the first eighty years of the life of Moses). The number 350 is already considerably less than 430, and the discrepancy grows even wider when we factor in the unlikelihood of Kohath arriving in Egypt as a one-year-old and when we realize that basing a 350-year sojourn on Exodus 6 requires that Kohath and Amram each fathered their sons during their last year of life.

The rabbis' solution is that the sojourn in Egypt lasted only 210 years. Rashi (commenting on Ex 12:40) uses Gen 46:11, the genealogy in Exodus 6, and Moses' first eighty years to try to show that a sojourn of 430 years is impossible. Rashi's position—which is the traditional Jewish view (cf. Gal 3:17⁴⁶)—is that “430” in Ex 12:40 is the number of years between God's covenant with Abram in Gen 15:13 and the exodus.

The rabbis understand Genesis 15 as a prediction of four hundred years of “exile, persecution, and servitude,” but not necessarily all of these at the same time. They take the “400 years” of Gen 15:13 as beginning with the birth of Isaac. When Jacob came to Egypt, he was 130 years old, so that 190 years of the 400 were already completed; 210 years remained. As Gadeloff points out, the rabbis are adapting their interpretation of Genesis 15 and Exodus 12 to conform to Genesis 46, which they take literally as a statement that all of Jacob's grandsons were born in Canaan and migrated with him to Egypt.

Gadeloff's solution—which is favored by this commentary—is to do the reverse: to take the “400 years” of Genesis 15 and the “430 years” of Exodus 12 at face value and to adjust our understanding of Genesis 46 toward these texts. This would mean that the point of Genesis 46 is not really “an accounting of who was born where.”⁴⁷ If the genealogy of Exodus 6 skips generations—as discussed in the commentary—then there is no reason why the sojourn in Egypt could not have lasted 430 years, a position that does full justice to the wording of Ex 12:40–41.

The night Israel left Egypt is described twice in 12:42 as, literally, “a night of watchings/observances” (לַיְלָה שְׁמֹרִים ... הַלַּיְלָה ... שְׁמֹרִים) for both Yahweh and for all generations of Israelites. Interpreters differ on exactly what this means. The Talmud understands this as a night of continual “guardings” against threatening demons (*b. Pesah.* 109b) or a night that was constantly “anticipated” since the time the world was made (*b. Roš Haš.* 11b). Especially in the first occurrence in 12:42, but possibly in both occurrences,⁴⁸ it is not immediately obvious who is doing the “watching”—Yahweh (ESV, NIV, NRSVUE) or the

⁴⁶ Cf. Das, *Galatians*, 353.

⁴⁷ Gadeloff, “How Long Was the Sojourn in Egypt: 210 or 430 Years?” 186. He acknowledges that this may require adjusting our understanding of “the persons who *came* to Egypt” in both Gen 46:26 and Gen 46:27. The Hebrew has a participle (הַיֹּדְעִים, Gen 46:26), which could mean that “the list of people ... was still in the making when descending to Egypt.”

⁴⁸ For Utzschneider and Oswald, Yahweh does the “watching over” in both 12:42a and 12:42b, the point being that Yahweh guards all generations of Israelites just as he guarded the exodus generation (*Exodus 1–15*, 249).

Israelites (CSB, KJV, NASB). Since Yahweh is the subject of “to bring them out” (לְהוֹצִיאֵם), the logic seems to be this: “Yahweh kept a special observance on this night; therefore, all Israelite generations should do the same.” This was a night on which Yahweh shielded his people from harm and delivered them from bondage (12:42a); therefore, all Israelites of all time should imitate his vigilance on this night and spend it commemorating their deliverance (12:42b).

For observant Jews who use the rabbinic Seder,⁴⁹ *Pesah* celebrates not just Israel’s redemption from slavery but also her salvation from the idolatry of Egypt through the giving of the Law at Sinai.⁵⁰ In fact, the night of *Pesah* is a night to remember other acts of deliverance as well, and the *Pesah* observance is an occasion to talk about how God saves his people from oppressions and idolatries of many kinds. But the “observances” (12:42) decreed for Israel on this night are understood as looking forward, not just back. This can be seen, for example, in the custom of opening the door before the fourth cup of wine of the *Pesah* meal to show that guests are watching for the coming of Elijah and, with him, the messianic age. In the Talmud, Rabbi Yehoshua argues from 12:42 that Israel’s final redemption will take place on *Pesah* (*b. Roš Haš. 11b*).

While it is doubtful that the root (שָׁמַר) of the term for “watchings, observances” (שִׁמְרִים) has the meaning “to stay awake,” the term in this verse has long been taken that way.⁵¹ The ancient Christian custom of the Easter Vigil appears to have its roots in this “night of observances.” The Easter Vigil is, historically, a night spent “in fasting and meditation on the mighty acts of God in salvation history, culminating in the announcement of Jesus’ resurrection and the celebration of baptism.”⁵² The custom waned after the Reformation but was revived among Roman Catholics in the 1950s, and a reintroduction of the Easter Vigil in Anglican and Lutheran churches followed.⁵³ It is a fitting way to commemorate our deliverance from sin, death, and the devil by “Christ our Passover” (1 Cor 5:7) and to encourage us in continued watchfulness until the day of our final redemption. Like Israel’s, our vigil looks ahead as well as back—to the consummation of Christ’s redemption in our arrival at the new, heavenly sanctuary, where we will worship him forever.⁵⁴



⁴⁹ See the excursus “*Pesah* through the Ages” following the commentary on 12:1–28.

⁵⁰ “Not only for the bodily redemption we give thanks to God but also for the spiritual-moral redemption. From the Egyptian ‘darkness’ of idolatry the Lord led us to the Sinai, where we have received the ‘great light,’ that is God’s law” (*The Haggada with an English Translation and Explanatory Notes*, 29).

⁵¹ Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 416.

⁵² Senn, “The Lord’s Supper, Not the Passover Seder,” 368.

⁵³ Maschke, *Gathered Guests: A Guide to Worship in the Lutheran Church*, 272. Two Lutheran hymnals published in 2006 include rites for the Easter Vigil: *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America [pp. 266–70]) and the *Lutheran Service Book of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod* (*LSB Altar Book*, 529–51).

⁵⁴ Shin, *The “Exodus” in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31)*, 163–66.