

TYNDALE OLD TESTAMENT
COMMENTARIES

TOTC

EXODUS



PAUL R.
WILLIAMSON



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COMMENTARY

PART 1: RESCUE FROM EGYPT (1:1 – 13:16)

The first part of the book of Exodus (1:1 – 13:16) focuses on Israel's oppression in Egypt (1:1 – 2:25),¹ Moses' encounter with Yahweh and his divine commission (3:1 – 4:31), the protracted conflict between Yahweh and Pharaoh (5:1 – 11:10), and, finally, the death of Egypt's firstborn and Israel's hasty departure (12:1 – 13:16). The total period covered (cf. 1:1; 12:40) is 430 years, although most of the material covers an eighty-year period: from Moses' birth to Israel's exodus (cf. 2:2; 7:7).

1 Siebert-Hommes (1992) argues for a sevenfold symmetrical structure of 1:1 – 2:25 which centres on the birth of Moses.

1. OPPRESSION AND THE PROMISE OF DELIVERANCE (EXOD. 1:1 – 4:31)

A. Enslavement, genocide and the rescue of Moses (1:1 – 2:10)

Context

Exodus must be read against the backdrop of the book of Genesis and the outworking of the promises made to Israel's ancestors. Accordingly, the book is much more than a story of deliverance or divine action on behalf of an oppressed people. Rather, it recounts a very significant stage in the fulfilment of the promises God made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – promises through which God's goal for creation would eventually be realized. It is with the initial outworking of this divine plan that the book of Exodus is primarily concerned. Its narrative thus commences with a brief recap of material recorded in the final chapters of Genesis – the migration of Jacob and his extended family to Egypt. The proliferation of Jacob's descendants and a change in Egypt's leadership since the demise of the original migrants precipitates a crisis for the present generation, for whom the prospect of deliverance anticipated by Joseph (Gen. 50:24–25) has

not yet materialized. The opening chapter highlights the perilous situation they now face, while also subtly underlining how God's promises to Abraham are coming to fruition.

Comment

i. Oppression (1:1–14)

1–4. Picking up the story of Israel's period in Egypt from the book of Genesis, Exodus begins its account with a literary flashback. This opens with the exact words of Genesis 46:8, where a more comprehensive list of Jacob's extended family immediately follows (Gen. 46:9–25) using the following maternal sequence: Leah (vv. 8–15); Zilpah, Leah's maidservant (vv. 16–18); Rachel (vv. 19–22); Bilhah, Rachel's maidservant (vv. 23–25). Here in Exodus 1, however, a chiasmic arrangement (Leah, Rachel, Bilhah, Zilpah) is adopted (Hamilton 2011), similar to that reflected in Genesis 35:23–26, where the context is the demise of the previous generation and God's command for Jacob's family to 'be fruitful and increase in number' (Gen. 35:11) in order that his covenant promises might be fulfilled. It is on the fulfilment of this command and the non-fulfilment of the related promises that these opening two chapters are primarily focused.

5. While *seventy* may be a round number (cf. Gen. 46:27) rather than a purely symbolic figure, some symbolism could nevertheless be intended. If, for example, there is a deliberate allusion to Genesis 10 (the seventy that constitute the 'table of nations'), Israel may well be presented here as a microcosm of humanity (Wenham 1994: 442). The LXX (followed by Acts 7:14) has 'seventy-five', but this is almost certainly a later attempt to incorporate the immediate descendants of Ephraim and Manasseh. Despite these textual differences, the inner consistency of both the MT and LXX highlights the continuity between the end of Genesis and the start of Exodus.

6–7. Despite the (peaceful) demise of the generation who migrated to Egypt, God's plans have clearly been coming to fruition: the prolific growth of Jacob's family in Egypt bears eloquent testimony to this fact (1:7; cf. Gen. 13:16; 15:5; 17:2, 6; 22:17). Thus, the book opens on a very positive note: Israel is experiencing God's blessing. The mandate God had given humans at creation (Gen. 1:28) and had reiterated to Noah (Gen.

9:1, 7) and subsequently to Jacob (Gen. 35:11) has clearly been fulfilled.¹ Jacob's offspring had been extremely fruitful and had multiplied greatly, and now the land (*'eres*) was filled with them. Therefore, God's creative and redemptive purposes are in some sense being realized here through Abraham's descendants.

8–10. Ironically, however, this divine blessing that Israel was experiencing evoked a crisis. These verses introduce a complication into the unfolding plot: Israel's phenomenal population explosion was seen as a threat to national security by the new pharaoh. The precise identity of this *new king*, like that of the other pharaohs referred to in the Pentateuch, remains unclear,² rendering any precise correlation with Egyptian history problematic and open to debate. The *new king* almost certainly alludes to the end of an entire dynasty, not just the death of his immediate predecessor, but the precise identity of the dynasty in question is impossible to determine for sure. While some have tried to link the Israelite migration and subsequent expulsion with the Hyksos period – during which a large Semitic population resided and even exercised power in Egypt – such a connection is tenuous at best. Others date the beginning of Israel's oppression centuries later, identifying this new king as Seti I, founder of Egypt's Nineteenth Dynasty, but this is also uncertain (see Introduction 4b, "The date of the exodus"). Since the narrator was obviously driven by other concerns and did not consider such information essential, the identity of this pharaoh/dynasty should not distract readers from the more important focus of the narrative.

The fact that this king 'did not know Joseph' (v. 8, AT) seems to imply more than just personal ignorance (cf. the later pharaoh's confessed ignorance of Yahweh, 5:2). Rather, this new king/regime had no obligations to protect the favoured status formerly

1 An obligation to be fruitful and multiply is also reflected as promises elsewhere in the patriarchal narrative (cf. Gen. 17:2, 6; 17:20; 26:4, 24; 28:3; 48:4).

2 The first pharaoh actually named in the OT is Shishak (1 Kgs 11:40), a contemporary of Solomon.

conferred on the Hebrews: Joseph's actions and kinsfolk *meant nothing* to this new dynasty.

Israel's alarming population growth served only to stir up paranoid fears. Whether Pharaoh was suggesting that they were simply expanding too rapidly, or were already threatening to outnumber the indigenous population, the net effect was the same: sooner or later the Israelites would be beyond Egyptian control. The grammatical echoes ('Come, let us . . .') and conceptual parallels (obstructing divine objectives) between Pharaoh and Babel's tower-builders (Gen. 11:3–4) suggest to the attentive reader that Pharaoh's plans will be similarly frustrated. Ironically, Pharaoh's main concern was that Israel might 'go up from the land' (AT) – the very thing that Yahweh promised to do for them through the agency of Moses (cf. 3:10) and subsequently achieved (13:18). This renders less likely the suggestion that Pharaoh's immediate fears related not to the Israelites' actual departure, but to the possibility that they might unite with Egypt's enemies and, having formed some sort of fifth column, 'take possession of the land' (Stuart 2006: 66). But whatever the perceived threat, it was apparently groundless: other than Pharaoh's delusional fears, there is nothing to suggest that the Israelites were intent on either overthrowing the Egyptians or leaving the country anytime soon.

In an attempt to curb the perceived threat Pharaoh introduced a number of radical measures. While Pharaoh thought he was being shrewd (cf. v. 10), in fact he was acting foolishly – attempting to thwart the fulfilment of God's set plan and purpose. Thus, the stage is set for the ensuing struggle between Egypt's pharaoh and Israel's God.

II. Corvée labour – in which sectors of the community were conscripted for large public works (cf. 1 Chr. 22:2; 2 Chr. 2:17–18) – was the first of several attempts at population control. The *slave masters* or project managers were evidently Egyptian (cf. 5:14), but, as the latter text shows, some responsibilities were delegated to Israelite supervisors (cf. the use of *Kapos* in Nazi concentration camps). Pharaoh's initial policy was a fairly straightforward one of containment. It was evidently his intention to break the Israelites' spirits and so keep these immigrants firmly under Egyptian control. The precise location of *Pithom* and *Rameses* has generated considerable debate (cf. Hoffmeier 1997: 116–122; Kitchen 2003:

254–259; Collins 2008).³ Both were apparently in the Delta region, in the vicinity of Goshen where the Israelites lived (cf. Gen. 45:10). Even more controversial is the significance of the second named city. While many link this to Ramesses II, a pharaoh renowned for his building enterprises in the region, others argue that the name is used anachronistically (cf. Gen. 47:11), similar to saying that the Romans built York – a much later name for the city they founded as Eboracum. Despite its initial promise, therefore, this text does not indisputably settle the question of the date of the exodus (see Introduction 4b, ‘The date of the exodus’). As English translations suggest, both cities were storage facilities (not fortifications),⁴ presumably for commodities collected as royal taxes – here and elsewhere in the Old Testament such cities are associated with royal activity (Hamilton 2011).

12–14. However strange it must have seemed for the Israelite victims of such oppression, this brutal treatment by the Egyptians was actually part of God’s plan. After all, this was an aspect of his promise to Abraham (cf. Gen. 15:13). To the Israelites in Egypt, it may have seemed that God had simply forsaken or abandoned them, and that God’s promises had failed. But even in these dire circumstances God was at work, bringing his plans to fruition and fulfilling the promises he had made to Israel’s ancestors. Not surprisingly, therefore, this hard-labour policy failed miserably (v. 12a). Almost comically, Pharaoh’s brutal oppression seemed merely to exacerbate the problem of population control. Moreover, now the Egyptians really did have something to worry about (v. 12b): here in their midst was an expanding community which they had deliberately alienated and aggrieved. Whatever threat these Hebrews had posed to national security beforehand, it must have seemed much greater now that Egypt had subjected them to such injustice – hence Egypt’s new-found *dread* of the Israelites,⁵ and

3 The debate is closely linked to the chronology controversy; see Introduction 4b, ‘The date of the exodus’.

4 The LXX mistakenly translates *miskēnôt* as ‘fortified’.

5 While the verb *qûš* can mean ‘loathe’ (when followed by the preposition *bē*), followed by *mippēnē* it means ‘dread’ (cf. Num. 22:3; Isa. 7:16).

their determination to carry on, and even intensify (Exum 1983: 69 n. 9), this new domestic policy despite its initial failure (vv. 13–14). With the fivefold use of *worked/labour* (Heb. *‘abad*), a key motif is introduced. Now reduced to harsh servitude in Egypt, the Israelites would subsequently be called to serve/worship (Heb. *‘abad*) Yahweh at Sinai. Thus, this exploitative and degrading activity imposed by Pharaoh stands in sharp contrast not only to work as God intended (cf. Gen. 2:15), but also to the service Yahweh would demand. God’s creative and redemptive purposes are therefore both under direct assault, as Egyptian animosity towards Abraham’s descendants intensifies.

ii. Genocide (1:15–22)

Despite popular (Egyptian!) support, Pharaoh’s initial policy clearly failed to deliver. Given the reality of the situation depicted here, this is unsurprising. It was God’s decreed will that his people should be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth. Moreover, God had promised that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through Abraham’s seed. Thus, no pharaoh, however shrewd, could thwart God’s sovereign plan. However, he could resist it; and resist it he did. Pharaoh now implemented an even more radical policy – one all too familiar today and somewhat euphemistically labelled ‘ethnic cleansing’. This was the first of many attempts at a ‘final solution’ to a perceived threat posed by Abraham’s descendants.

15–16. Pharaoh surreptitiously enlisted the help of two *Hebrew midwives* to implement a rather crude form of ‘birth control’.⁶ Whatever is intended by the *delivery stool*,⁷ the king’s diabolical intentions are crystal clear: males (perceived to be the main

6 Some witnesses (e.g. LXX; Vulgate; Josephus) suggest that they were Egyptians (i.e. midwives to the Hebrews), but the Hebrew grammar clearly presents them as Hebrews.

7 Lit. ‘two stones’. While some interpret this euphemistically for testicles, or in terms of a form of prenatal examination (Morschauer 2003), the majority understand this as some form of birthing equipment. For more on the latter, see McGeogh 2006.

threat; cf. 1:10) were to be subjected to some form of involuntary euthanasia. How only two midwives could achieve this when apparently serving so many⁸ is not immediately obvious. Possibly Shiphrah and Puah served in a regional or supervisory capacity (cf. 1:19b), although this is somewhat speculative and apparently of little concern to the author – unless his intention was to illustrate further the stressful conditions the Israelites faced (Hamilton 2011). That these two ladies are named is unusual, especially since neither name is particularly significant,⁹ nor do we ever hear of them or their families again. However, there is probably a deliberate contrast between these two characters and the nameless pharaohs in this book; unlike those who despised Abraham’s offspring and brought God’s curse upon themselves and their families (cf. Gen. 12:3), these women are not only blessed themselves (cf. vv. 20–21) but are remembered by posterity.

17. These women courageously refused to participate in Pharaoh’s devious plans, because they *feared God* (more so than the king of Egypt; cf. Acts 4:19). Here another recurring theme in Exodus is introduced (cf. 9:30; 14:31; 18:21; 20:20): fearing God and behaving appropriately are inextricably linked (cf. Gen. 20:11). The midwives’ response appears to be instinctive – possibly reflecting a common standard of morality (cf. Gen. 20:9) that Pharaoh was blatantly ignoring.

18–19. Faced with an irate Pharaoh, the midwives make their excuses, exploiting Pharaoh’s preconceived ideas in the process (Weems 1992). Perhaps there is more truth to their explanation than is often acknowledged. After all, if these Israelites were

8 Some eighty years later, Exod. 12:37 suggests a total population of some 2 to 3 million people. While the accuracy of such a huge figure has been questioned (e.g. Humphreys 1998, 2000; cf. Rendsburg 2001), for an attempt to explain how such rapid growth between Jacob’s migration and Israel’s exodus is feasible, see Cohen 1999.

9 Meaning something like ‘fair’ and ‘girl’ respectively, neither name has any obvious connection to the plot; hence a symbolic connotation seems rather unlikely.

swarming like flies (1:7; cf. Gen. 1:21; 8:17),¹⁰ and there were only two midwives to deal with the entire population, many of the Israelite women could well have given birth before a midwife arrived on the scene. However, the text does not deny that they have been holding out on Pharaoh (it is highly unlikely that they were late for all such births); nor does it suggest that these women were blessed because they answered the king's accusation deceitfully. Rather, it is explicitly because they *feared God* that he *gave them families of their own* (v. 21). Here God was working out his purposes through God-fearing, but certainly not sinless, individuals.

20–21. Though certainly not motivated by self-interest or the like, the midwives' actions were divinely rewarded, an example of God honouring those who honour him (1 Sam. 2:30). Thus, because they refused to implement Pharaoh's murderous instructions, God dealt favourably with these women (v. 20). The irony should not be missed. God blessed these Hebrew women with the very thing that Pharaoh was seeking to deny them: the establishment of their own families (Paul 1992). Rather than Pharaoh thwarting the plan of God, here God is already thwarting the plans of Pharaoh.

22. Despite these setbacks, and his uncritical acceptance of the midwives' explanation, Israel's nemesis was not prepared to concede defeat quite so easily. Rather, he now devised an even more ruthless strategy for dealing with the perceived problem. However, this time, no subtlety or duplicity is involved. The second phase in his infanticide policy amounted to state-sanctioned mass murder: all male Hebrew babies were to be exposed to the Nile;¹¹ whether the intended meaning here is 'thrown into' (cf. Gen. 37:20–24) or simply 'abandoned beside' (cf. Gen. 21:15; Ezek. 16:5),

¹⁰ Hamilton (2011) tentatively suggests an ethnic slur (cf. 'breeding like rabbits') is expressed in Exod. 1:19b. However, attractive as this may be, his alternative pointing of the consonantal text is purely conjectural.

¹¹ While the ethnicity of the victims is not specified in the Hebrew text, English versions are undoubtedly correct in linking the infanticide to newborn *Hebrew* boys.

the result is surely the same. As previously, only female infants would be allowed to live, possibly with a view to subsequent intermarriage with Egyptians (cf. Gen. 12:12).¹² The designated means of disposal was probably a matter of mere convenience rather than having any religious significance. The chapter thus ends on a rather ominous note and begs the question: how will Abraham's descendants possibly survive, and what will become of God's promises?

iii. The rescue of Moses (2:1–10)

It is into these perilous circumstances of state-sponsored infanticide (1:22) that Moses, the human channel of Israel's future deliverance, is born. Against all the odds, Egypt's later antagonist not only survives Pharaoh's homicidal decree, but finds shelter and protection in the most unlikely of places – within the confines of the royal household. Once again, Pharaoh's murderous machinations are foiled and, interestingly, once more women are involved. First it was those fertile Hebrew women; then it was those duplicitous midwives; and now it is the child's mother, the child's sister and, ironically, even Pharaoh's daughter!¹³ Given Pharaoh's preoccupation with the opposite gender, it is surely ironic that his policy should repeatedly be subverted by women.

There are several parallels between this account of Moses' deliverance in Exodus and several 'exposed infant' legends of the Ancient Near East (see Currid 2013: 75–87), perhaps simply reflecting a common ancient custom (Longman 2009: 54–56). However, the legend of the Akkadian king Sargon I is particularly close, suggesting to some a literary dependence (Smith

12 So Hamilton 2011, who further suggests this rationale may lie behind the later pharaoh's insistence that women (and children) remain in Egypt (Exod. 10:10–11).

13 Interestingly, none of the three women in 2:1–10 are named, which may focus attention on their 'typified roles' in this narrative (Reinhartz 1998: 106).

2010).¹⁴ However, if drawing on the Akkadian legend, the biblical narrator (certainly not Moses) is apparently employing such polemically: rather than demonstrating Moses' royal origins (as in the Sargon legend), Exodus is exposing Moses' humble (Hebrew) origins.

For others, a more significant parallel is an Egyptian legend, the Myth of Horus, core elements of which predate the New Kingdom period, the biblical setting for the events recounted in Exodus. As Currid helpfully illustrates (see tabular comparison, 2013: 81–82), Moses' birth account in Exodus closely echoes the tale of Horus's birth, even sharing specific Egyptian vocabulary. However, this makes the differences all the more striking (not only the non-mythical setting of the biblical account, but its ironical twist in the plot: Moses, not Pharaoh, is the Horus-like victim of oppression, and Pharaoh is the Seth-like persecutor rather than the embodiment of Horus). Thus Currid (2013: 86) plausibly infers that the biblical author polemically 'takes the famous pagan myth and turns it on its head in order to ridicule Egypt and . . . the Egyptian Pharaoh'.

At any rate, here in Exodus 2 the narrative fosters further confidence in God's sovereignty and providence: it is Pharaoh's plans, not those of God, that are frustrated. Behind all this apparent happenstance God was evidently at work. However, somewhat typically the biblical narrator makes no explicit mention of this. Indeed, other than the cameo appearance in 1:20–21, there is no mention of God until Moses' potential as Israel's deliverer has apparently been circumvented by an act of folly that led to his own mini exodus and self-imposed exile in Midian.¹⁵

14 Sargon the Great reigned about 2334–2279 BC, but the legend was written long after his reign, perhaps as royal propaganda during the reign of his late eighth-century namesake (Sargon II), but possibly earlier. A mythic parallel with Cyrus has also been suggested (Zlotnick-Sivan 2004), but this is heavily dependent on a Persian dating for the biblical tradition.

15 In a number of ways Moses foreshadows the subsequent experience of the Israelites.

1–2. The new development in the plot begins with the birth of a son to a *Levite* couple. The significance of such parentage is not yet disclosed, but this will become apparent as the larger Pentateuchal narrative unfolds. This unnamed couple is traditionally understood to be Amram and Jochebed (Exod. 6:20; cf. Num. 26:59), although these may have been the ancestors, rather than the biological parents, of Aaron and Moses (cf. comments on 6:20).¹⁶ Under normal circumstances, there would be nothing unusual about the birth depicted here. However, in view of Pharaoh’s edict (1:22), this birth notice introduces significant tension: we wait with bated breath to see what’s going to happen next – will this Hebrew boy fall victim to Pharaoh’s murderous decree? Well, not if his mother can help it (v. 2b). According to the text, she was prompted to act as she did because ‘she saw that he was good’ (AT) – which the LXX translates as ‘beautiful’, giving the impression that she was motivated primarily by the child’s appearance: he was a fine-looking (or healthy) baby.¹⁷ Not surprisingly, a more theological rationale than this has been sought, some suggesting a possible allusion to the Genesis creation narrative, in which God repeatedly pronounces his creation ‘good’. Thus understood, the birth of Moses constitutes the beginning of a new creation – the birth of a deliverer for God’s people. However, the inclusion of the predicate here (i.e. ‘*he* was good’; cf. the absence of such in the refrain of Gen. 1) makes this allusion less likely. Rather, a much closer parallel is found in Genesis 6:2 (Hamilton 2011), where the Hebrew adjective almost certainly conveys the idea of physical beauty or attraction. However, rather than suggesting that Moses was a ‘special’ or ‘favoured’ child, the idiom may simply convey the

16 The fact that Jochebed was Amram’s aunt bears testimony to the historicity of the narrative, as any such marriage was subsequently prohibited by the Mosaic law (cf. Lev. 18:12–14).

17 However, the semantic range of this adjective (*asteios*) was wider than just physical attractiveness, so perhaps some other quality is (also) being alluded to (cf. O’Brien 2010: 429). Acts 7:20 suggests he was ‘beautiful *to God*’ (AT).

idea that ‘she liked him’ or ‘she wanted to keep him’ (Stuart 2006). Thus understood, the text is not necessarily implying that this child was somehow exceptional or unusual; rather, the attempt to hide him was prompted simply by parental love.¹⁸ In any case, by this action both the life of this child and the future of the nation were providentially preserved.

3. The preparation of a *papyrus basket* (lit. ‘ark’, but not the word employed subsequently in Exodus for *the ark* [i.e. chest] of the covenant) suggests that God’s saving purposes are at stake here. This is the only occurrence of this Hebrew term (*tēbā*) other than in the flood story, where a much larger ark is similarly waterproofed before sheltering its occupants from the deluge that followed. Like the flood survivors, the baby is safely located in this saving flotation device. Ironically, this is then deposited at the very river of execution (1:22), the reeds of which may ominously foreshadow the later fate of the Egyptians in the *yam sūf* (traditionally, the ‘Red Sea’; cf. 15:4).¹⁹

4. The fact that his sister (presumably Miriam; cf. 15:20; Num. 26:59) monitored the situation to see what would transpire may suggest that subsequent events were not entirely unexpected. Moreover, given the duty of care exercised thus far, it seems quite likely that the location where the ark was left was carefully selected. Thus understood, the baby’s mother may well have been entrusting her child not simply to God, but also to Pharaoh’s daughter (Hamilton 2011).

5–6. Since the river was infested with crocodiles, it could not have been very long before Pharaoh’s daughter arrived on the scene. In any case, the baby was quickly discovered – an ominous development were it not for the fact that Pharaoh’s daughter was clearly unlike her father; whereas he had heartlessly decreed that such babies be drowned (or at least abandoned to their fate), his daughter’s compassion dictated otherwise – and so this child was spared.

18 The action is ascribed to both parents in Heb. 11:23.

19 See brief discussion of the route taken in Introduction 4c, ‘The route of the exodus’.

7–10. In an extraordinary turn of events, Pharaoh’s daughter allows the baby’s older sister to arrange a foster home and pays his mother to be a wet nurse for her own child.²⁰ Rather than depicting this Egyptian princess as hopelessly naïve or foolish (cf. Yee 2009), this is surely further testimony to her compassion for those her father so despised. Anyhow, Pharaoh ends up supporting one of the very infants he had condemned. Indeed, not just one of them, but the one who, under God, would bring about the very thing he was most opposed to: the departure of the Israelites from Egypt (cf. 1:10).

Once weaned, the child is formally adopted as Pharaoh’s daughter’s son, presumably with all the privileges that entailed. As the narrator informs us with some sort of play on the boy’s name,²¹ this ‘drawn-out’ child is none other than Moses, the human instrument God raised up to deliver his people from captivity; the one whose personal deliverance from the reeds (*sîf*) of the Nile foreshadowed an even greater deliverance ahead, when Israel would be delivered from the *yam sîf* (cf. ch. 14).²²

Meaning

By tracing the radical changes that have taken place in Israel’s circumstances in Egypt since the original migration of Jacob and his family, the author has subtly highlighted the extent to which God’s promises have thus far been fulfilled, suggesting that

20 Yee (2009) offers some interesting insights on the role of a wet nurse in antiquity, although most of her information reflects a much later period than the narrative setting of Exodus.

21 Both the provenance and meaning of Moses’ name are debated. Most understand it to be Egyptian (cf. Ah-mose, Thut-mose, the Egyptian deity’s name having been deleted in the case of Moses); Kitchen (2003: 296–297), however, suggests an original *Māšû* (‘one drawn out’), later changed to *Mōšeh* (‘one drawing out’). Following Sternberg (1998: 335), Hamilton (2011) suggests a double etymology, with an allusion to the similar-sounding Egyptian word for ‘son’ (*mesu*).

22 However, see discussion of the meaning and identity of the *yam sîf* in the Introduction 4c, ‘The route of the exodus’.

everything is working out according to God's plan. This is further underlined by the sinister developments that unfold subsequently, since such oppression was precisely what God had foretold back in Genesis 15:13. Therefore, while Israel's situation may seem rather stark by the end of chapter 1, the thread of fulfilment running through it implies otherwise: despite appearances, Israel's future is nevertheless secure; God's covenant promises are sure. This is further highlighted at the start of chapter 2, where God's sovereignty and providence are further underlined: once again, it is Pharaoh's plans that are frustrated, ironically by those whose lives his murderous decree has spared. Moreover, the one who in time would become Egypt's arch-nemesis is brought up within its royal place. Behind all this apparent happenstance God was very evidently at work.

B. Moses' exodus to Midian (2:11–22)

Context

This next episode could arguably begin with the heading 'Forty years later', since that is the time-lapse according to Acts 7:23; there Stephen claims that this new twist in the tale took place when Moses was about forty years old. Between 2:10 and 2:11, therefore, the narrator has skipped over the early chapters of Moses' life. It is now four decades since Moses escaped the jaws of death in a watery grave and was adopted by the Egyptian royal family. According to Jewish tradition, in the meantime Moses has received an education with Egypt's finest. Again, Stephen claims that 'Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was powerful in word and action' (Acts 7:22, AT). Philo and Josephus concur, adding that he surpassed all his peers, and started to carve out a major political career. Such extra-biblical accounts may reflect some degree of embellishment and pious fiction, but whatever the facts, these formative years are clearly of no importance to the writer of Exodus, who skips over them without comment. The storyline resumes when the boy has become a man, and the man is about to make some career-changing decisions.

Comment

11. This next episode begins with an inspection of the royal building site. However, it was not the construction that interested Moses, but the Hebrew labourers. Significantly, the verb used here for Moses' 'going out' is later used to describe Israel's departure from Egypt (cf. 12:41). Moses is thus embarking here on his own mini exodus, leaving the palace and exposing his personal sympathies. To all appearances, he was undoubtedly an Egyptian (cf. 2:19), but like his adoptive mother he was clearly moved by the plight of *his own people*. Whether or not he was aware of his true identity at this stage is not spelt out (although cf. Acts 7:25), but by his actions Moses was taking the first tentative steps in his monumental 'refusal to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin' (Heb. 11:24–25, AT).

12. It was apparently concern for *his own people*, rather than just compassion for other human beings, that propelled Moses into action when he witnessed the brutal treatment of one of his fellow Hebrews. His action in killing the Egyptian supervisor has been variously explained. Since the causative Hebrew verb (Hiphil *nākā*, 'to strike') does not necessarily imply a fatal blow, this was arguably a rash, impulsive act rather than intentional homicide. Understood thus, Moses intended merely to intervene in this situation and give the Egyptian a little of his own medicine. However, in the heat of the moment, Moses overdid it, inadvertently killing him. Alternatively, Moses' action can be seen as more calculated and deliberate, possibly prompted by the fact that there was no-one else to avenge the victim of this assault.²³ Thus understood, Moses was acting in a judicial rather than a homicidal manner, foreshadowing the subsequent action of Yahweh himself (3:20; 12:12–13). However, while the latter may certainly be true,

23 With others, Hamilton (2011) infers from analogous language used in Isaiah (59:16; 63:5) that Moses *looking this way and that* (2:12) does not necessarily express a concern to avoid detection. However, given the circumstances here in Exodus, this seems somewhat contrived – who else might Moses have expected to intervene in this particular situation?

Moses' actions both immediately before and after the killing suggest that the killing was somewhat impulsive. Indeed, given the apparent absence of any other witnesses,²⁴ the Hebrew assault victim probably survived (cf. 2:14), making Moses' reaction clearly disproportionate. However, whether Moses actually intended to kill the Egyptian or simply beat him up is more difficult to ascertain, especially since no weapon is mentioned in either assault. In any case, this deed severed all ties with Pharaoh; by striking someone whose actions were officially sanctioned, Moses was clearly aligning himself with Pharaoh's enemies. But while fear of reprisal may explain Moses' actions to some extent, the narrative implies that Moses did exactly as he intended. It is doubtful, therefore, that Moses thought he had used excessive force. Rather, as Stephen explains, seeing one of his brothers being mistreated, Moses 'went to his defence and avenged him by killing the Egyptian. Moses thought that his own people would realise that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not' (Acts 7:24–25).

13–14. Such lack of comprehension quickly manifested itself. When Moses again intervened in a fracas – on this occasion *two Hebrews* were brawling (cf. 21:22) – he experienced rejection and rebuke.²⁵ Rather than being accepted as Israel's deliverer, Moses' authority is challenged: *Who made you ruler and judge over us?* The irony should not be lost on the attentive reader; this is precisely the role to which Yahweh subsequently called Moses. Yet there is nothing in the preceding verses to suggest that Moses was acting on divine impulse or commission. Moreover, even if he was aware that God had preserved his life for such a purpose (cf. Acts 7:25), he seems here to have jumped the gun and acted on his own initiative. Not surprisingly, therefore, his misguided attempt to rescue the Israelites by his own hand ends in abysmal failure. Clearly Moses had yet to learn that if these people were going to

24 Unless the idea is that there were no other *Egyptians* in the vicinity to witness the event.

25 On top of verbal rejection, according to Acts 7:27 Moses was also physically manhandled.

be delivered, it would not be through human strength – not even that of a prince of Egypt; rather, deliverance would come only through Yahweh’s mighty hand and Yahweh’s outstretched arm (cf. 3:19).

The immediate problem for Moses, however, was not his rejection by the Hebrews, but his alienation from the Egyptians. News of his previous subversive behaviour had leaked, despite his diligent efforts to bury the evidence. Either the Hebrew victim of the previous day’s assault had told others (Hamilton 2011), or else – assuming that Moses’ precautionary glance (2:12) related to potential *Egyptian* witnesses – some of the Israelite workforce had in fact seen what Moses had done and spread the word. While admittedly conjectural, it is also possible that the present scenario (2:13–14) took place within earshot of Egyptian taskmasters; this would certainly explain Moses’ new-found fear and anxiety. But however the news spread, it was clearly evident to Moses that he was now in a rather precarious situation.

15. It quickly transpires that Moses had every reason to be afraid. Given what we know of this pharaoh so far, his hostile reaction comes as no great surprise. Indeed, if he were already aware of Moses’ origins, perhaps this simply gave him the excuse he’d long been waiting for. Whatever the reason, Pharaoh’s reaction was swift and his intent clear: he sought *to kill Moses*. Once again, however, his plans to kill this particular Israelite were foiled, this time by the swift response of Moses himself. Realizing his situation in Egypt was fraught with danger, Moses made good his escape. The New Testament suggests that he was motivated by faith rather than by fear (cf. Heb. 11:27), although this may arguably be alluding to subsequent events at the time of the exodus. Understood in this manner, Hebrews 11:28–29 is expanding on 11:27, rather than reflecting a chronological sequence of events. Alternatively, the more positive take in Hebrews is simply due to the LXX, which avoids any embarrassment by describing Moses’ flight in terms of a tactical withdrawal (Barclay 1992).²⁶ Located in

26 Rather than *pheugein* (flee), the more obvious equivalent of Heb. *bārah*, the LXX here employs *anechōrēsen* (depart/withdraw).

the north-western part of the Arabian Peninsula, *Midian* was dry, uncultivated land, very different from that of the irrigated Nile Delta. It is unclear whether Midian was his intended destination or was simply where he happened to end up. If the former, it may have been because the Midianites, a nomadic people, were distant relatives (cf. Gen. 25:2–4). However, arguably Moses' movements reflect another example of divine providence. Indeed, given the parallels between the following incident and the earlier experience of Jacob,²⁷ it seems that God was continuing to direct and overrule in what otherwise might seem a rather ordinary affair. The following incident should therefore not be dismissed as either trivial or insignificant.

16–19. Once again (the third time within a few verses), Moses actively expresses a concern for the oppressed – a concern which, as we'll soon discover, is shared by God himself. This time the dispute is over watering rights. We are not told why the shepherds behaved as they did – perhaps it was simply a matter of male dominance rather than any entrenched animosity – but it's implicit from the subsequent dialogue between Reuel and his daughters that this was a frequent, if not daily, occurrence. However, on this occasion the shepherds meet more than they bargained for; an Egyptian stranger comes to the girls' aid and ensures that their flock gets watered.

Like most of the characters in the plot, Moses' future father-in-law is not initially introduced by name (v. 16), although this is disclosed in 2:18 as *Reuel* ('friend of God' or 'God is a friend'). Unless either Jethro or Reuel is a clan name (cf. comment on 3:1), it seems that Moses' father-in-law had more than one name.²⁸ Anyhow, here attention is drawn to his occupation; he was a *priest of Midian*.²⁹ From this, and his later interactions with Moses and the Israelites in chapter 18, some have inferred that Moses'

27 Following Alter (1981: 47–62; esp. 56–58), many identify this as a biblical 'type-scene of betrothal'.

28 Other biblical examples include Uzziah/Azariah and Saul/Paul.

29 For the possible significance of this, and Jethro's contribution to the OT concept of an 'outsider', see Leveen 2010.

father-in-law exercised a significant influence on Israel's subsequent faith. However, according to Exodus 18 (cf. esp. vv. 10–12), it was the Midianite's faith that was impacted by Moses and his testimony of what the LORD had accomplished for Israel.

Moses' mistaken identification as an Egyptian (v. 19) is presumably explained by his appearance and language. Such assimilation to Egyptian culture is not surprising for a Hebrew brought up in the royal palace but was not atypical for any Semite involved in the upper echelons of Egyptian bureaucracy (cf. Gen. 42:8).

20–22. Having been rejected by his own people and having exchanged his life in the palace for life in the desert, Moses – a foreigner – is now embraced by these foreigners. His acceptance by Reuel and his family was evidently sealed by marriage to Zipporah. Unlike the similar accounts in Genesis, there is no mention of either special virtues (cf. Gen. 24) or a romantic interest (Gen. 29) to explain why, of Reuel's seven daughters, Zipporah was singled out. Indeed, the impression given is that the selection was made entirely by Reuel; both Moses and Zipporah play a rather passive role. In any case, the narrator seems much more interested in the name Moses gave to their son, reflecting Moses' sociopolitical status as *a foreigner in a foreign land*.

While the rationale given by Moses could possibly refer to his previous status in Egypt (i.e. 'I have *been* a foreigner in a foreign land'), it seems more likely here to describe his present status (i.e. 'I have *become* a foreigner in a foreign land'). Since this is the only time during this episode that Moses actually speaks, it's obviously not an insignificant detail. Indeed, the previous section ends on a similar note, which only heightens its importance. Possibly the ambiguity in Moses' explanation of Gershom's name is intentional; Moses may have both scenarios in mind. Whether back in Egypt or here in Midian, he is a stranger, a resident alien; his true homeland is elsewhere – in the land that Yahweh had promised to Abraham. As Hebrews 11 puts it, 'Moses considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward' (i.e. the better country – the Promised Land). However, it appears with the passing of time that Moses seems to lose sight of this fact; certainly, the next

time we encounter him he has settled entirely into the life of a nomad, with no great aspirations and apparently little concern for anything other than his father-in-law's sheep. In this respect Moses' flight and temporary exile from Egypt differ markedly from the story of Sinuhe, an early second-millennium historical fiction with a somewhat similar plot to this passage in Exodus (see Currid 2013: 89–95). Unlike Moses, however, Sinuhe truly is a son of Egypt, longing to return there. Indeed, when he finally does so, he and his pharaonic nemesis are completely reconciled. From this comparison Currid again discerns a polemical twist, by which the biblical author 'taunts Egypt and her nationalistic fervor: Moses doesn't crave Egypt or her kingly deity; he longs only to serve Yahweh' (2013: 95). However, while the former is clearly so, there is no evidence at this point for the latter.

Meaning

This is not just a nice story about macho Moses rescuing some pretty damsels in distress. Together with the previous episode, this incident foreshadows the even greater deliverance that lies ahead. Just as these antagonistic shepherds *drove away* Reuel's daughters, so the Egyptians would *drive away* the Israelites. Just as Moses *delivered* these girls and watered their sheep, so later Yahweh through Moses would *deliver* his people and quench their thirst. The rescue that Moses accomplishes here foreshadows the even greater deliverance to come, as is further highlighted by the way Reuel's daughters describe what happened: 'An Egyptian *rescued* us from the hand of the shepherds' (AT); later the almost identical clause describes how 'Yahweh *rescued* [the Israelites] from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of Pharaoh' (14:30, AT). What we have here is the exodus in microcosm. And as such, this incident alludes to the fact that despite Moses' clumsy efforts, God's plans are still on track. Nothing that has happened has upset the divine apple cart. Rather, God is still at work behind the scenes, bringing his sovereign plans to pass and putting into effect his unchanging purpose. It might look as if Moses had thoroughly messed things up; but he hadn't. God's plans are still intact. Indeed, all this is an essential part of Moses' training, his preparation for ministry. Moses had to learn that deliverance for Israel would not be the

result of mere human strength; flexing his muscles might be enough to rescue a few sheep, but this would not be enough to rescue God's flock. This was something only God could do. And yet, as this incident with the shepherds reminds us, God could use even an imperfect vessel such as Moses to accomplish this task. The Israelites might have rejected Moses, but God had not rejected him; rather, God was moulding and shaping him, preparing him to accomplish his purposes in his way and at his time.

C. God hears Israel's cry for help (2:23–25)

Context

This transitional paragraph switches the focus back to the situation in Egypt and signals the most significant change in Israel's circumstances thus far. An undisclosed period of time is passed over in relative silence, although according to the New Testament it was another period of some forty years (cf. Acts 7:30). During this time there had been some significant changes: for one thing, the pharaoh who instigated the oppression of the Israelites had died. Despite this, however, their circumstances remained the same. However, this would not be the case for much longer, for their cry for help had been heard by God. Thus, for the reader at least, hope is now revived.

Comment

23. While Moses was making a new home for himself in Midian, the oppression in Egypt continued unabated – even after the death of the reigning pharaoh. Whatever forlorn hope of relief the latter might possibly have engendered, the harsh reality of the situation soon became evident: no radical changes to Egyptian domestic policy were imminent. Rather, the status quo would continue for the foreseeable future. For the first time, however, the reaction of the Israelites to their enslavement is mentioned: not surprisingly, they groan and cry out. While their cries for help here are not explicitly directed towards God (or indeed anyone) specifically (although cf. Num. 20:16; Deut. 26:7), they reach him nonetheless. This contrasts markedly with Pharaoh, who deliberately remains deaf to Israel's subsequent cries (cf. 5:8–9).

24–25. At last, a note of relief is breathed into the narrative: ‘God heard . . . God remembered . . . God looked . . . and God was concerned’ (lit. ‘knew’; אַר). After his relative and somewhat disturbing absence in these two chapters,³⁰ God finally takes centre stage, from this point on becoming the central character in the plot. At long last, God acknowledges the Israelites’ plight and remembers his covenant with their ancestors; he is thus about to act. Such is the significance of God ‘remembering’; the idea is not that he has somehow forgotten to act previously, but rather that – because of a prior commitment he has made – he is now about to act. Thus, God is not primarily motivated by a concern for social justice – though it would be misleading to suggest that such is not part of the equation – but by covenant obligation and responsibility. ‘Even if life in Goshen had been serene and idyllic, God still would have delivered them’ (Hamilton 2011: 42). And so hope is again renewed; finally deliverance for Israel is somewhere in sight.

Meaning

Moses had apparently put his past and the Israelites’ plight behind him during his prolonged stay in Midian. This, however, was premature for, unlike Moses, God had not forgotten them. As this final paragraph informs us, the situation for Israel was about to change. While, humanly speaking, deliverance may seem as far away as ever, God has finally entered the unfolding drama, and with covenant fulfilment on top of his agenda, more positive developments can now be expected.

D. Theophany and proof-signs (3:1 – 4:17)

Context

According to Stephen (Acts 7:30), this next incident took place when Moses was around eighty, after living in Midian some forty years. Apparently, since settling into his new life as a nomad,

³⁰ Other than the passing mention in 1:20–21, this is the first explicit mention of God in the story so far.

little has changed for Moses. Despite the passing of time, he still appears to be dependent on his father-in-law for his livelihood. But this does not seem to bother him; Moses seems quite content with his new lifestyle, however alien it once was. Moreover, it would appear that he has absolutely no plans for returning to Egypt; seemingly that period in his life has finally been put behind him. At least, so he thought – his situation is about to change dramatically. The narrator has already given notice of this at the end of chapter 2. ‘During those many days’ (2:23, AT) a significant development had taken place. Despite a change in leadership, not much had happened politically and socially; the situation of the Israelites remained much as it was. However, there had been a theological watershed. The desperate groans of God’s people had reached heaven itself; God had heard; God had remembered his covenant; and finally, the time has come for God to act. And so, here in chapter 3, God begins to put the next stage of his plan into action. The event anticipated back in Genesis 15:14 is fast approaching: Israel’s deliverance is now at hand. Consequently, the day has dawned for Moses to step into his divinely appointed role.

Comment

i. Theophany at the mountain of God (3:1–22)

1. As suggested above, the fact that after forty years Moses is still tending *the flock of . . . his father-in-law* may imply a lack of independence. The unexpected name-switch to *Jethro* (cf. 2:18) is not elucidated in the text and has given rise to various theories.³¹ For some, this anomaly reflects the use of different underlying sources in the compilation of the narrative. However, this fails

³¹ To complicate things further, 4:18 refers to him as ‘Jether’, he is arguably called ‘Hobab’ in Num. 10:29 and Judg. 4:11, and in some texts he is identified as a Kenite (cf. Judg. 1:16; 4:11) rather than a Midianite. However, each of these is fairly easy to explain: ‘Jether’ is simply a variant of ‘Jethro’, ‘Hobab’ probably refers to Jethro’s son (cf. *NIDOTTE* 2: 327), Moses’ brother-in-law, and Midian refers to a coalition of peoples that included the Kenites.

to do justice to the integrity of the compiler/editor, who was obviously aware of such ‘inconsistencies’ in the text. Still others conclude that the diversity reflects a use of the clan name in some texts, rather than the personal name of Moses’ father-in-law. However, the simplest explanation (i.e. that he had more than one name) is probably the best.

There is nothing to suggest that the route that Moses took on this occasion was unusual,³² nor does the description of Horeb as *the mountain of God* suggest some kind of pilgrimage. Rather, the latter description derives from the fact that God manifests his presence there – first to Moses (here in ch. 3), and subsequently to Israel (chs. 19–40). There is no suggestion that God actually dwelt on this mountain (see 15:13). As with Jethro, it appears that the mountain was known by more than one name (cf. 19:18–23) – unless one name denotes something different from the other (a single peak as opposed to a mountain range). The precise location of this mountain is unknown. Its traditional site (Mt Musa) is in the central, southern region of the Sinai Peninsula, but nearby (Mt Serbal) or more northerly (Mt Sin Bishar) sites are also feasible, as the precise route taken by Israel is uncertain (see Introduction 4c, ‘The route of the exodus’).

2–3. What probably started as a fairly ordinary day became something else when Moses came across a bush-fire – one that, despite being relatively contained, was extremely unusual.³³ It was not the fire itself, but rather the fact that the bush was not consumed by the flames, that drew Moses’ attention to this *strange sight*. Scholarly attempts to explain this phenomenon naturalistically, however ingenious, strangely miss the point: this sight was so unusual that it caught the attention of a seasoned nomad and

32 ‘Desert’ and ‘wilderness’ conjure up misleading associations of arid wasteland, whereas here *midbār* denotes uncultivated, remote grazing land; cf. Exod. 34:3 (Hamilton 2011: 45).

33 Even the term used for ‘bush’ (*šēnē*) is unusual; its only other occurrence is in Deut. 33:16. It has clear similarities with ‘Sinai’ (Heb. *sināy*), and thus subtly anticipates the subsequent theophany that would take place there (Exod. 19).

drew him closer to investigate. Unlike Moses, of course, readers are alerted to what is actually happening from the outset: these were no ordinary flames; rather, this supernatural fire was a theophany, a means through which God was manifesting his presence to Moses. Here *the angel of the LORD* (see Additional note below on the revelation and meaning of the divine name) seems to be synonymous with the actual flames of fire; hence the GNT's '*as a flame . . .*' (emphasis added) better captures the sense. Thus understood, here the angel of the LORD is simply a vehicle for divine communication. Elsewhere in the Old Testament, however, this figure apparently assumes a human form (e.g. Judg. 6:11–22; 13:2–22; cf. Gen. 18:1–2), leading some to explain the motif as a Christophany (a pre-incarnate manifestation of Christ). However, this is problematic, both exegetically and theologically: whatever form the manifestation takes, this angel is closely identified with God (and so speaks with divine authority), while at the same time being carefully distinguished from God (i.e. he remains a 'divine messenger' and is not to be confused with the LORD himself; cf. 23:20).

4–6. Having captured Moses' attention, the LORD now begins to communicate with him verbally. It seems unlikely that the switch halfway through verse 4 was designed to identify the speaker as the aforementioned angel (so Hamilton 2011), as 'the angel' rather than 'God' would have made this more obvious. While possibly stylistic, it may also highlight the perilous nature of the situation: Moses was standing in the presence of God (cf. vv. 5–6).³⁴ The double vocative (*Moses! Moses!*) is not unusual in such divine communications (cf. Gen. 22:11; 1 Sam. 3:10); like other such examples (cf. 2 Sam. 18:33; 2 Kgs 2:12; Ps 22:1 [MT 2]), the sense is emphatic. Having responded in a conventional manner,³⁵ Moses now discovers what readers already know: this is an encounter with none other than God. As such, steps must be taken to ensure Moses' safety. As was later true for Israel (cf. ch. 19), Moses must maintain a safe distance and take appropriate

34 Interestingly, apart from v. 7, *God* is used consistently of the divine speaker up until the revelation of the divine name.

35 Cf. Gen. 22:1, 11; 27:1; 31:11; 37:13; 46:2; 1 Sam. 3:4, 5, 6, 8, 16; Isa. 6:8.

action before a holy God. The removal of his sandals may be just a reverential act (cf. Muslim practice entering a mosque), but was possibly designed to avoid ‘contaminating’ holy space (i.e. ground that had been set apart by God’s manifest presence) with anything that might be defiling or unclean.³⁶ The somewhat unusual singular noun at the end of the phrase *I am the God of your father* (v. 6; but cf. 15:2) may well have a collective nuance (cf. 3:13, 15–16) or be echoing the ancestral promise of Genesis 46:3. In any case, whether God introduces himself as the deity of Moses’ *father* or ‘fathers’ (as attested in *sp*, some Greek witnesses and Acts 7:32), the explicit mention of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob makes it abundantly clear that Moses was standing in the presence of Israel’s ancestral deity – something that Moses obviously realized was fraught with danger (cf. Gen. 32:30; Exod. 33:20), prompting him to hide his face before God (cf. the similar action of the seraphs in Isa. 6:2).

7–8. Whatever his apprehensions, Moses had nothing to fear; God meant him no harm. All he wanted was to share some information and make Moses aware of his plans to rescue Israel. And so, beginning with what we, the readers, already know (v. 7; cf. 2:24–25), God makes his intentions clear, fleshing out what it meant for God to have *remembered* his covenant (2:24). Not surprisingly, God’s plan involves rescuing Abraham’s descendants from Egyptian oppression (v. 8a; cf. Gen. 15:14)³⁷ and bringing them safely back to Canaan (v. 8b; cf. Gen. 15:16), thus fulfilling the covenant promises of Genesis 15. The description *flowing with milk and honey* is undoubtedly figurative speech involving hyperbole; significantly, the twelve spies brought back grapes, pomegranates and figs to illustrate the land’s fertility (Num. 13:23, 27). Thus understood, it is not entirely beside the point whether *milk* (*ḥalab*)

36 As Hamilton (2011) observes, the absence of any mention of footwear in Exod. 28 and 39 (chapters dealing with priestly clothing) may indicate that priestly service in the tabernacle was conducted barefoot.

37 As mentioned above, the verb (Hiphil *nāṣal*) used here of God’s act of deliverance is the same verb used by Jethro’s daughters to describe their ‘rescue’ by Moses. It is also used several times of God’s deliverance of Israel in Exod. 18.

should be understood as ‘fat’ (*ḥeleb*) or the *honey* (*dēbās*) as sweet syrup produced from fruit (e.g. grapes, date and figs);³⁸ the main idea is that this land is extremely fertile, a pastoralist’s dream. As elsewhere, the extent of Israel’s territorial inheritance is delineated by a representative list of its indigenous inhabitants. While the numbers in such lists vary considerably,³⁹ this probably reflects different levels of exactitude (i.e. some lists differentiate between the various people groups more precisely than others) and possibly in some cases a desire to represent the Canaanites symbolically.

9–10. As the repetition (cf. v. 7) indicates, Israel’s plight has prompted God to act; it now becomes clear how this also involves Moses: he has been selected to confront Pharaoh and play a significant role in this divine deliverance. As so often in Scripture, God does not act alone, but uses human instruments to bring his plans to fruition.

11. Not surprisingly, Moses found this divine commission quite incredible. After all, there were several issues that God seemed to have overlooked: (1) his refugee status – technically, he was still a fugitive from justice; (2) his track record – his previous attempt to rescue his fellow Israelites had ended in rejection and failure; (3) and his advanced age – at eighty years old, surely he wasn’t the ideal candidate for this formidable task. But whatever thoughts may have been on Moses’ mind, the question he asks (*Who am I . . . ?*) makes it abundantly clear that his focus was solely on himself.

12. As God’s response underlines, Moses was ignoring the most important detail: this time, he would not be acting alone; rather, God would be with him. God’s assurance here (*I will be with you*) is later given to Joshua, Moses’ successor (cf. Deut. 31:23; Josh. 1:5; 3:7), and the concept also appears elsewhere in the Old Testament, usually in relation to those God has raised up for a particular task (Jer. 1:8, 19; 15:20; cf. Isa. 43:2; Jer. 20:11; 30:11; 46:28). The verbal form used in the assurance here in Exodus 3:12 (*’ehyē*) may deliberately foreshadow the revelation of the divine name

38 Explicit OT references to bee honey are uncommon (e.g. Judg. 14:8–9; cf. also 1 Sam. 14:26–27).

39 Cf. Gen. 13:7; 15:19–21; Num. 13:29; Deut. 7:1.

that immediately follows (cf. vv. 14–15), which arguably reflects a closely related verb (Heb. *hāvâ*, ‘to become’ [Aramaic, ‘to be’]; cf. Heb. *hāyâ*, ‘to be’). If so, this verse may throw some light on the meaning and significance of the latter revelation (see discussion below). Not only is Moses assured of God’s divine presence, however; he is also assured that the entire assembly (the *you* of the final clause in the verse is plural) will worship God at this very place. The latter seems somewhat strange as a *sign* designed to bolster Moses’ confidence, prompting some commentators to suggest that this *sign* must actually refer to something else (e.g. the burning bush). However, it is probably best thought of as a ‘fulfilment sign’ which both encouraged faith in the present and provided retrospective reassurance in the future (Stuart 2006). Its anticipatory nature readily explains why it failed, on this occasion, to eradicate Moses’ present anxieties and fears. As Cole (1973: 68) comments, ‘Self-distrust is good, but only if it leads to trust in God. Otherwise, it ends as spiritual paralysis, inability and unwillingness to undertake any course of action.’ Thus, instead of pressing forward in faith, Moses responded with objection number 2.

13. Moses’ first objection focused on his inadequacy; this next one focuses on his ignorance: rather than asking, ‘Who am I?’ he now asks, ‘Who are you?’ He frames the question, however, with a hypothetical, yet realistic, scenario: *Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ Then what shall I tell them?* This seems to be a perfectly legitimate question, especially if Moses himself was ignorant of the divine name. Understood in this way, Moses was concerned with how he could possibly convince the Israelites that *their* God had spoken to *him*, especially if he was unaware of their deity’s name. However, while this explanation seems more plausible than the argument that – until now – the divine name had not been disclosed to anyone,⁴⁰ it is still somewhat inadequate. Mere

40 Apart from having to assume an anachronistic usage of the name in Genesis, this idea fails to explain how Moses could prove his prophetic credentials by presenting himself to the Israelites in the name of a deity that was hitherto unknown to anyone.

acquaintance with the name of the Hebrew deity would not necessarily prove that Moses had personally encountered this God at Sinai, still less that God had given Moses this particular task; less incredible explanations for Moses' familiarity with God's name would probably have seemed more obvious.⁴¹

However, if the divine name was already familiar to both Moses and his fellow Israelites, then what are we to make of the hypothetical question that Moses anticipates here and his implied ignorance of the correct answer? The key to the most likely solution is found in the interrogative pronoun which Moses uses. Rather than the idiomatic 'Who is your name?' Moses asks, 'What is your name?'⁴² Waltke thus concludes that, 'Within the context of the narrative, Moses is really anticipating this question from the Israelites: "Given all the suffering we have been through, what does I AM mean anyway?"'⁴³ Along similar lines, Blackburn (2012: 37) argues that Moses is anticipating misgivings on Israel's part over the success of the proposed mission. Accordingly, Moses is enquiring here about the *character* as opposed to merely the *appellation* of Israel's God (cf. Neh. 9:10).

14–15. Not surprisingly, therefore, rather than simply answering, 'My name is Yahweh' (as would presumably have sufficed if a mere epithet was the focus of Moses' enquiry), God unpacks the meaning and significance of this name, responding: 'I will be who I will be', or as most English versions render this notoriously enigmatic phrase, *I am who I am* (see Additional note

41 Such knowledge would hardly have seemed extraordinary for an educated person such as Moses, especially given the interest he had already shown in these Hebrew slaves.

42 As Waltke (2007: 365) points out, 'In biblical Hebrew *mī* . . . is the animate, interrogative pronoun that focuses on the person. Thus, *mī šemekā* (lit., "Who is your name?") is used to ask for someone's name (Judg. 13:17). The inanimate pronoun *mab* is used when the focus is on the circumstance rather than the person. Thus, *mab šemekā* (lit., "What is your name?") seeks the meaning of the name (Gen. 32:28).'

43 Waltke 2007: 365. Waltke uses 'I AM' rather than 'the LORD' to translate the divine name YHWH.

on the revelation and meaning of the divine name).⁴⁴ Thus God does not simply supply Moses with the divine name here; rather, he discloses something of his character that is bound up in the name. The revelation, therefore, concerns something about the name's significance of which both Moses and his fellow Israelites were presently unaware, and which Moses is to communicate to the Israelites.

Interestingly, a similar use of an 'I am who I am' statement is reflected in an Egyptian mythical text, the Book of the Heavenly Cow,⁴⁵ which Currid (2013: 97) takes to be an example of polemical theology by the ancient Egyptians in response to a major tenet of Hebrew theology. Scholars have highlighted various parallels between this text and Exodus, the most astounding being the *idem per idem* use of the verb 'to be' (the cognate Egyptian root is *yw*) found in Re's edict to destroy rebellious humankind: 'I am that I am [*ywy ymy*]. I will not . . .' This is arguably the earliest attested extra-biblical use of the divine epithet,⁴⁶ preceding other such non-Israelite examples (e.g. the Moabite Stone) by several centuries. But it employs the key phrase with reference to the god Re, of whom Pharaoh was considered the human embodiment, sovereign over all creation. Given how the significance of Yahweh's name is gradually disclosed in the conflict between Moses and Pharaoh in Exodus, it is perhaps unsurprising that the

44 Yahweh (he is/he will be?) is probably the third-person form of the verb *hwb* (Heb. 'to become'; Aramaic, 'to be/become'). A very similar verb (even more so in Hebrew, where the middle consonants are more alike), *hyb* (also meaning 'to be'), is used in the sentence, 'I am/will be who I am/will be', subsequently abbreviated to 'I am/will be'. See further, Athas 2008: 41–47.

45 As Currid explains (2013: 99), the name derives from the way Amon-Re's creation of the cosmos is depicted 'as a cow being uplifted by the god Shu, the deity of air and light, with the help of eight other deities'.

46 Some suggest an even earlier reference in a list from the reign of Amenhotep III (fourteenth century BC), in which 'the land of Shosu-Yhw' designates a geographical location, and may not refer to the God of Israel at all (especially if a late date for the exodus is correct).

Egyptians might appropriate it as a means of denying Yahweh's claims and asserting the supremacy of Re and Pharaoh, akin to how Moses had appropriated the pharaonic phrase 'Thus says the pharaoh' and applied it to Yahweh.⁴⁷

Additional note: the revelation and meaning of the divine name

The commentary above has argued that (1) the divine name is not revealed here for the first time; and (2) that some theological information, pertinent to Moses and Israel's circumstances, is being disclosed. Neither of these conclusions is universally accepted. Indeed, the sheer volume of secondary literature pertaining to Exodus 3:13–15 attests to how exegetically challenging and controversial this material in Exodus actually is. In terms of the first issue, many scholars have argued that this text does indeed suggest that the name of God (YHWH) is here revealed for the first time.⁴⁸ The difficulty with this, however, is not only its prior usage in Exodus (cf. 3:2, 4, 7), but also the numerous times that it has been

47 While one could argue that 'I am that I am' was simply another phrase the Hebrews polemically appropriated from Egypt, this would depend on Exodus 3 being the first use of the epithet by them. For the problems with this, see Additional note on the revelation and meaning of the divine name.

48 The divine name is sometimes referred to in scholarly literature as the 'Tetragram' or 'Tetragrammaton' (i.e. 'four letters'). Uncertainties with respect to its correct pronunciation have led to a reluctance on the part of many to supply any vowels at all (YHWH). The traditional pronunciation (Jehovah) is certainly incorrect, deriving from the scribal combination of the consonants of YHWH and the vowels of *Adonai* (the word traditionally substituted to avoid misusing God's name). Many scholars (and some modern translations) suggest 'Yahweh', although this too is not without problems (e.g. technically speaking, this would probably mean 'He causes to be', hardly appropriate as a revelation for Israelites currently under Egyptian oppression). Modern Jewish practice is simply to refer to 'the name' (Heb. *hāšēm*; cf. Lev. 24:11).

used in Genesis. To account for the latter, mainstream scholarship has often resorted to source criticism, concluding that usage in Genesis reflects an underlying source ('J') that differs from that reflected in Exodus 3 and Exodus 6:3 ('P').⁴⁹ This, however, builds on the unlikely premise that there was no consensus in ancient Israel over such a fundamental issue. Alternatively, some (e.g. Wenham 1980; Moberly 1992; Bartholomew 2021) argue that the use of the divine name prior to Exodus 3 is deliberately anachronistic, designed to identify Yahweh as the God of the primeval and patriarchal narratives. However, while it is true that the divine name is mostly employed by the narrator (rather than the characters) in Genesis, this is not always the case (cf. Gen. 4:1; 9:26; 14:22; 15:2; 16:2, 5, 11; 18:14; 19:13; 22:14; 24:3, 7, 12, 27, 31, 35, 40, 42, 44, 48, 50, 51, 56; 26:22, 28–29; 27:20, 27; 28:16, 21; 29:32–33, 35; 30:24, 27, 30; 31:49; 32:9; 49:18; cf. also Gen. 4:26; 12:8; 21:33; 26:25).⁵⁰ Others thus conclude that while God's name was known before Exodus 3, its theological significance was not appreciated or understood.

The latter, however, has also generated considerable controversy. The explanatory phrase ('I am/will be who I am/will be') has been understood as stressing God's existence, sovereignty, creative power or presence; indeed, it has even been seen as deliberately evasive (cf. Gen. 32:29; Judg. 13:18), amounting to a curt refusal to answer Moses' question. However, this seems inappropriate in the present context, where the credibility of Moses as a divinely sent ambassador is at stake. It is much more likely that 'I will be who I will be' is drawing attention to the fuller revelation of Yahweh that Moses and Israel are about to experience in his

49 Previously, scholars distinguished a third putative source ('E'), allegedly underlying Exod. 3:13–15.

50 Admittedly, on the lips of some characters (e.g. the entourage from Gerar in 26:28–29), the mention of Yahweh may well be rhetorical; moreover, to 'call on the name of the LORD' may simply be an idiom for offering acceptable worship. This does not significantly detract from the numerous texts suggesting patriarchal familiarity with the divine name.

mighty acts of deliverance (Seitz 1998). Thus understood, the revelation given to Moses, to be passed on to Israel, amounted to an exposition of the divine name in terms of who he is, as would be demonstrated in what they were about to see him do.

16–17. Something of the divine character that is bound up in the divine name is further unpacked as Moses' commission is reiterated and amplified (vv. 16–22). Through what Moses is about to disclose, the Israelites will learn more about Yahweh, who has *appeared* (v. 16) as such to Moses (cf. 4:1; 6:3). They will discover that he is not only one who speaks, but one who saves.

Moses' mission will begin with a declaration of Yahweh's concern and intent (cf. vv. 7–8) to Israel's *elders*. The fact that there were such in the Israelite community suggests some degree of social autonomy and organization. Elders were recognized leaders in many ancient societies (cf. Gen. 50:7; Num. 22:7), often due to their position as heads of their tribes, clans or households.⁵¹

18–19. In view of God's assurance here of a positive response, Moses' subsequent objection (4:1) seems inexcusable – although even Yahweh seems prepared to concede that some initial reluctance may have to be overcome (cf. 4:8). But however the Israelites might respond, there is no mistaking the fact that Moses will come up against an immovable obstacle: Pharaoh will obstinately refuse to let the people go. The specific request – for a three-day journey into the desert – may seem strange or even disingenuous in view of the ultimate objective and destination (cf. vv. 8, 17). Most likely, however, this was simply a conventional expression for a short journey (i.e. a figure of speech readily understood within Ancient Near Eastern culture which no-one would have taken literally; cf. Firth 2021: 71–75).⁵² Alternatively, it may have

51 For a detailed discussion of elders in the OT, see Reviv 1989.

52 For more on this, with some comparable expressions in modern English, see Stuart 2006: 124–125. It is nevertheless interesting that the only temporal reference highlighted in the itinerary of Num. 33 is the 'three days' it took for the people to reach Marah (Num. 33:8) – possibly throwing some light on Israel's impatience with Moses at that point in the journey.

been a bartering technique, making a fairly small request to determine how much (or otherwise) Pharaoh was prepared to concede. Whatever the case, Pharaoh would not be compelled by mere human persuasion (v. 19). While most English translations assume that the ‘strong hand’ (AT) is Yahweh’s, Stuart (2006) argues that it is better to translate the last part of verse 19 as ‘not even by a strong hand’, which refers here to mere human strength in contrast to the kind of power that Yahweh will exercise against him (v. 20).

20. Yahweh would therefore have to exercise his powers of persuasion; this time it would be Yahweh’s hand that would *strike* the Egyptians (cf. 2:12), and by performing *wonders* (i.e. the subsequent plagues) he would secure Israel’s deliverance. The final outcome of this enterprise was absolutely certain: however much he might resist, Pharaoh would eventually capitulate and let Israel go.

21–22. As well as receiving ‘exit visas’, these emancipated slaves (cf. Deut. 15:12–18) would not leave *empty-handed*. Rather, in fulfilment of the promise of Genesis 15:14, they would ‘come out with great possessions’. Other than the fact that Yahweh would make the Egyptians *favourably disposed* towards the Israelites, the motivation for such ‘generosity’ is not really explained either here or in 11:2–3. However, it is clear from 12:33 that their motivation was not entirely altruistic: fear for their lives contributed significantly to the desire to see the back of these troublesome Israelites, and thus facilitate their speedy departure in whatever way possible. By this means Israel would *plunder the Egyptians*. Most likely this alludes to booty taken by the victors in battle. However, it may also suggest that, as well as being emancipated, these Israelite slaves will receive some measure of compensation for their hard service (cf. 1:13).

ii. Proof-signs for Moses (4:1–17)

Despite the assurances already offered, Moses remains unconvinced. He continues to focus on how the Israelites *might* respond to his extraordinary claims. However, while the situation envisaged by him here is clearly hypothetical, subsequent events (4:29–31) suggest that Moses’ misgivings were not entirely unfounded: the

performance of the signs (4:30) seems to imply that Moses was indeed challenged to validate his testimony after all.

1. The issue now is one of incredulity: how will anyone believe such extraordinary claims?⁵³ Nevertheless, while Moses' objection may seem quite reasonable, the fact that he is verbally denying what Yahweh has already said (cf. 3:18) should not be missed. It seems that Moses is simply unable to move beyond the first perceived obstacle (i.e. convincing his fellow Israelites); there is no suggestion (contra Hamilton 2011) that he thought persuading Pharaoh might be any easier.

2–5. Amazingly, this bold contradiction of Yahweh's previous reassurance does not evoke an immediate rebuke or divine anger (cf. v. 14). Rather, Yahweh continues to exercise great patience with his reluctant servant, offering him some proof-signs to shore up his faith and disclose how any necessary persuasion will be done. The idea that the first of these sign-acts – involving Moses' staff – was some kind of conjuring trick that Moses had learnt in Egypt is clearly belied by his personal reaction: an inanimate object had temporarily changed into a slithering snake, prompting a hasty retreat. Clearly it was God, not Moses, who was responsible for this amazing metamorphosis. This transformation demonstrated Yahweh's sovereignty over a creature revered in Egypt and even used, along with a staff, to symbolize Pharaoh's authority.⁵⁴ Along with the following two signs (vv. 6–9), it was also a subtle reminder that Yahweh has ultimate authority over all creation. Here, however, it primarily served to authenticate Moses' claim that Yahweh, the God of Israel's ancestors, had indeed appeared to him (v. 5; cf. v. 1).

6–9. The same was true in the case of the two subsequent signs, both of which again involved a miraculous transformation:

53 The Hebrew preposition may suggest the focus is more on the credibility of Moses' claims than his personal trustworthiness (Novick 2009, cited in Hamilton 2011: 69), though the difference is surely rather semantic.

54 For more on the latter, see comment on the use of Moses' and Aaron's rod in their initial confrontation with Pharaoh (Exod. 7:8–13).

normal skin changing to abnormal skin,⁵⁵ and back again; and water changing into blood.⁵⁶ Only the first of these additional signs was apparently ‘pre-viewed’ at this stage by Moses. Indeed, it is unclear whether the third sign was even necessary to eradicate any Israelite scepticism (4:30). In any case, its description here seems to distinguish it clearly from the implementation of the ‘plague of blood’ recounted in Exodus 7:14–24. While Moses’ subsequent performance of at least two of these three signs convinced his fellow Israelites (cf. 4:30), the first and the third (albeit on a much larger scale) were insufficient to persuade Pharaoh.

10–12. Ironically, the same was also true in the case of Moses. Despite these extraordinary ‘sign-acts’ – which underline that it is not Moses, but Yahweh, who will do the persuading – Moses remains sceptical about his ability to carry out the task that Yahweh is giving him.

Moses’ fourth objection (v. 10) involves a switch in focus from Yahweh and the Israelites to himself and his perceived inadequacies – more precisely, his inability to communicate clearly or effectively. It is hard to know how we should interpret this fourth objection. After all, according to Stephen, Moses ‘was powerful in *speech* and action’ (Acts 7:22; emphasis added), which might seem to undermine any suggestion that ‘heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue’ (אָר) alludes to some form of speech impediment (cf. 6:12, 30) or language barrier (cf. Ezek. 3:5–6). The latter, however, seems most unlikely since Moses would have spoken Egyptian for some forty years before his exile in Midian, and he is never portrayed as requiring an ‘interpreter’ (cf. Gen. 42:23). Possibly

55 The description of the transformed skin clearly suggests some form of severe skin disease (e.g. psoriasis), but arguably not the medical condition we know today as leprosy (i.e. Hansen’s disease).

56 Here, unlike in Exod. 7:14–24, it is difficult to see how *blood* can possibly be construed as contaminated or discoloured water (i.e. water that simply looks like blood). If understood in terms of an unusual chemical reaction between the water and the sand on the ground, it is hard to see how this would conceivably prove persuasive, as it could quite easily be replicated by others.

Moses is simply referring here to his general communication skills (or lack thereof), claiming that he had never been very articulate (a man of words), but generally found himself ‘tongue-tied’ in the presence of others. For Moses, that such was true even in the present context may have been a case in point, although the irony of Moses boldly arguing with God cannot be lost on the reader. Nevertheless, it is clearly Yahweh who does most of the talking here, and his response to Moses’ objection suggests that Moses’ claim was not unwarranted. Moreover, a close reading of the ensuing narrative in Exodus and beyond lends significant support to the suggestion that Moses did indeed have some sort of speech issue such as an acute stammer, necessitating communicative assistance from others (Millard 2016; see p. 100 n. 10 below). But whatever the precise problem – and significantly Yahweh does not deny that such existed – Moses is still making the same fundamental mistake; once again, he’s focusing in the wrong direction: looking at himself and his own inadequacy, rather than at Yahweh and his sufficiency.

Not surprisingly, therefore, Yahweh responds (vv. 11–12) by redirecting Moses’ focus, answering a series of rhetorical questions with, *Is it not I, the LORD?* By this means Yahweh again encourages Moses to get his eyes off himself and onto the one who gives people their faculties, and on whom the success of this mission ultimately depends. What actually matters is not Moses’ abilities or lack thereof, but the fact that – as stated back in 3:12 – Yahweh would accompany him. Moses could therefore boldly go and carry out this task, knowing that Yahweh would both *help* [him] *speak* and . . . *teach* [him] *what to say*.

With all his objections duly answered, we might expect that Moses would finally submit to the divine commission and carry out the task assigned to him. However, it now becomes clear that all these objections sprang from the fact that Moses simply did not want to do so.

13. This time, rather than raising another objection, Moses curtly refuses to go. He introduces this negative response respectfully (‘Please, my Lord’, אַתָּה), and phrases it as diplomatically as possible: *Please send someone else* is literally, ‘Send by the hand you will send’ (i.e. ‘Send whomever you please, so long as it’s not me’).

Even so, this does little to soften what amounts to unbelief and disobedience. Whether or not Moses really thought there might be a more suitable candidate is beside the point; he was clearly not prepared to carry out this assignment.

14–16. Not surprisingly, this evoked God’s anger. Though God is *slow to anger* (34:6), disobedience inevitably arouses God’s wrath – as the Israelites themselves would later discover. It was thus at this stage of the divine encounter that Moses was clearly in the greatest danger; but unlike some other cases in the Old Testament where God’s anger is directed against individuals (cf. 2 Sam. 6:7), Moses does not lose his life. Rather, despite his divine anger,⁵⁷ God continues to deal with Moses graciously and patiently, again addressing his insecurities by providing a practical solution to the lack of communication skills raised previously. Yahweh had apparently anticipated Moses’ need for assistance in effective communication; hence his brother Aaron, a skilled orator, was already on his way to meet Moses. His description here as *the Levite* (cf. 2:1) probably anticipates the later significance of both Aaron and his tribe in Israel’s worship (cf. 28:1; 32:29), but in the immediate context his role was merely to serve as Moses’ assistant. It is subsequently made clear that Aaron had been similarly called by Yahweh to embark on this journey (cf. 4:27); thus the circumstances and timing of their brotherly reunion were divinely orchestrated. Aaron would function as Moses’ mouthpiece or, as God later puts it (cf. 7:1), as Moses’ *prophet*; Moses would be *God* to him (i.e. he would communicate Yahweh’s thoughts and will) in the same way that he would subsequently represent Yahweh before Pharaoh. Together Moses and Aaron would communicate Yahweh’s message. But, as the final instruction (see v. 17) implies, the work of persuasion would be done by Yahweh himself. It wasn’t really Moses *or* Aaron who would do the convincing. That was God’s responsibility. All Moses had to do was to carry out Yahweh’s instructions, and trust Yahweh to do the rest.

57 As Stuart (2006: 137) suggests, a better translation might be: ‘Although God’s anger raged against Moses, he said . . .’

17. Moses' *staff* has now become the symbol of his divine authority. While it was used only in connection with the first of the aforementioned signs (vv. 1–9), the use of the plural here (*the signs*) implies that it will be used more extensively in subsequent events. During these later events it appears that Aaron kept possession of the staff (cf. 7:8, 10, 12, 19; 8:5, 16; cf. 7:17; 9:23; 10:13; 14:16); thus understood, there is no discrepancy between Yahweh's instructions here and the implementation of these signs in the narrative that follows. Whether associated with Moses or Aaron, it is this one staff that is in view throughout.

Meaning

The opening two chapters have raised readers' expectations that God is about to intervene on behalf of Abraham's descendants and that Moses will have a significant role to play in this. Unfortunately, however, Moses is not particularly interested in the job; he has no great desire to return to Egypt; and he certainly has no wish to incur the wrath of another pharaoh. Whatever the frustrations of his dead-end job in the desert, at least there he was safe; he had apparently been able to put his past troubles behind him – and he clearly wished to remain doing so.

However, this was no longer possible; whether Moses liked it or not, he was God's chosen instrument, the one through whom God would deliver his people. Moreover, the time had come for God's promise of Genesis 15:14 to be fulfilled. However, as this encounter repeatedly stresses, this anticipated deliverance would not be achieved by human strength, but rather by divine might; Moses (and Aaron) were merely the human instruments through whom Yahweh would make himself known, whether to Israel, Egypt or other nations.

E. Moses' return to Egypt and the Israelites' response (4:18–31)

Context

Having exhausted his protests, it seems that Moses has finally been persuaded to carry out the divine assignment. His final argument will resurface again later – after the initial efforts to

persuade Pharaoh have failed (cf. 6:12, 30) – but for now Moses appears ready to comply with Yahweh’s instructions. And so, as we approach the conclusion of this chapter, it seems that the matter has finally been resolved and Moses has fully submitted to Yahweh’s command. Apparently, however, there remains a significant problem which must be addressed before Moses begins his mission.

Comment

i. Departure from Midian (4:18–20)

18. While requesting such ‘leave of absence’ in such circumstances would have been a matter of Ancient Near Eastern etiquette,⁵⁸ this report of Moses doing so clearly indicates his assent to Yahweh’s instructions. Admittedly, Moses may seem somewhat coy about the goal of his mission – in view of what Yahweh has said already (cf. 3:7–10, 16–22), what are we to make of the rationale Moses offers Jethro here? Does this reflect some degree of lingering doubt in Moses’ mind? Or is he simply side-stepping what would inevitably have been an awkward conversation? ‘I need to take some time off. God appeared to me in the desert and told me to pick a fight with the most powerful man in the world.’ However, it seems preferable to interpret this verse in the light of Moses’ previous attempt to rescue Israel (cf. 2:11);⁵⁹ thus understood, Moses now intends to complete the task he had initiated some forty years earlier; this time, however, he would do so in God’s time and in God’s way.

19. Translating the first verb of verse 19 as a pluperfect (*Now the LORD had said to Moses in Midian*), as the context seems to suggest, is certainly possible. In this case, verse 19 would constitute a short parenthesis or flashback. Alternatively, since the rationale given by Yahweh here is new, it is possible to interpret the verse as a further nudge by Yahweh to ensure that Moses did not procrastinate. In any case, rather than suggesting that it is now ‘safe’ for Moses to return

58 Seeking such permission to leave is best understood in terms of parting on amicable terms, rather than acrimoniously.

59 Significantly, both these verses refer to Moses going to see his brothers.

because the previous Egyptian leaders have died, verse 19b may well be indicating that the process of deliverance has begun with the death of Moses' adversaries. Thus understood, this is a further indication that the fulfilment of God's purposes is now back on track; God's time has arrived, so Moses can return to Egypt and fulfil his destiny – the task of leading God's people out of Egypt.

20. And so off Moses goes, back to Egypt, with his family in tow and that all-important staff of God in his hand (cf. v. 17). Mention of *sons* is surprising, since only one son has been mentioned previously (cf. 2:22) and only one son is spoken of in the enigmatic incident that follows (cf. 4:24–26). Nevertheless, it is subsequently disclosed that Moses and Zipporah had two sons (cf. 18:2–4), whom Moses sent (with Zipporah) back to Jethro at some stage between his 'near-death experience' (4:24–26) and the family reunion recounted in chapter 18. Whether this separation took place after the incident related in the next few verses (4:24–26) or at some later stage (either to keep them out of harm's way, or, more probably, to herald the arrival of the Israelites at Sinai) is impossible to determine.⁶⁰ Whatever the circumstances, there is little in the text to support any suggestion of an acrimonious separation (cf. 18:2–4).

ii. *Israel, Yahweh's firstborn son (4:21–23)*

21. While possibly hinted at earlier (cf. 3:19), it is now clearly indicated that Egyptian compliance was not the short-term objective. The *wonders* that Yahweh had given Moses the power to initiate refer to the extraordinary phenomena that culminated in the death of Egypt's firstborn (cf. 3:20; 7:8 – 11:10). Although there is clearly some overlap with the *signs* that Moses performed before the Israelites (4:1–9, 30), it seems that the latter were designed to stimulate faith, whereas the *wonders* (i.e. the plagues) primarily functioned as acts of judgment designed to induce repentance. However, any such repentance on the part of Pharaoh would not last, because Yahweh would *harden his heart* – the first mention of a recurring theme throughout the narrative in chapters 7–14 (see Additional note on

60 This is one of several 'blanks' in the narrative of Exodus which the narrator has not filled in.

the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart). Therefore, despite these portents that Egypt would experience, Pharaoh would persist in his refusal to comply with Yahweh’s demands, thus bringing dire consequences not only on his own family, but on all of Egypt.

22–23. Consequently, the time would inevitably come for Moses to announce the ultimate judgment that Yahweh would bring on those who refused to release his *firstborn son*: the life of their firstborn would be forfeit. These two verses clearly rehearse the speech that Yahweh (through Moses) will declare to Pharaoh *at the climax* of the ensuing conflict (cf. ch. 11), just prior to the final blow in the series.

Additional note: the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart

As noted above (see comment on 4:21), one of the recurring themes in Exodus 4 – 14 is the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, for which three different Hebrew verbs are employed, with different subjects and in a variety of ways (prediction, action or disposition; see Table 2).

Table 2: Verbs used to describe Pharaoh’s heart

Nuance of the verb used	Prediction	Action	Disposition
<i>The LORD makes Pharaoh’s heart:</i>			
firm/strong (<i>ḥāzāq</i>)	4:21; 14:4	9:12; 10:20, 27; 11:10; 14:8 (cf. 14:17)	
heavy (<i>kābēd</i>)		10:1	
difficult (<i>qāšā</i>)	7:3		
<i>Pharaoh makes his heart:</i>			
firm/strong (<i>ḥāzāq</i>)		13:15 (heart implied)	
heavy (<i>kābēd</i>)		8:15, 32; 9:34	
<i>Pharaoh’s heart is/becomes:</i>			
firm/strong (<i>ḥāzāq</i>)			7:13, 22; 8:19; 9:35
heavy (<i>kābēd</i>)			7:14; 9:7

While on some occasions Yahweh is said to be responsible for the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, at other times Pharaoh is said to harden his own heart, or his heart is simply described as being or becoming hard. Back in 3:19 it appeared that Pharaoh himself was wholly responsible for his anticipated intransigence, but Yahweh would apply some persuasion by means of the wonders he would perform in Egypt. In 4:21, however, Yahweh seems to be responsible for Pharaoh's intransigence, and these wonders either fail to persuade or are the very means by which Yahweh hardens Pharaoh's heart.

Various solutions to this crux have been proposed, concisely summarized by Ford (2006: 5–10). For source critics, the 'discrepancy' is largely due to different explanations reflected in the underlying sources. Others attempt to resolve the tension by foregrounding the role of either Pharaoh or Yahweh. Thus, some maintain that Pharaoh is always responsible, so statements attributing the hardening to Yahweh have either a permissive nuance (Yahweh *allowed* rather than *caused* the hardening), or reflect the mindset of authors who attributed everything to God without denying human agency. Conversely, others argue that Yahweh is always responsible for the hardening, with Pharaoh never really acting independently of Yahweh's influence, but rather in terms of the mysterious interplay between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Still others maintain that some kind of progression can be traced in the narrative – either in terms of Pharaoh's psyche, the reader's understanding or Yahweh's response. Thus understood, responsibility shifts from Pharaoh to Yahweh at some stage in the sequence of events, either because Pharaoh has gradually 'lost control', or to emphasize that Yahweh is now judging Pharaoh for his persistent intransigence. Either way, there is a progressive self-hardening which culminates in, or is ultimately explicable by, a divine hardening.

Arguably, however, the conundrum can be resolved by paying close attention to the actual circumstances of such hardening in the narrative. Certainly, in the case of the plagues, it is only after relief from such that Pharaoh is said to harden his heart. Thus, God's *gracious* action in granting respite seems to have had the

negative effect of prompting *Pharaoh* to stiffen his resolve. Even in the Sea incident, Yahweh created the circumstances (Israel's apparent confusion; cf. 14:1–4) which led to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart and Egypt's final humiliating defeat. Accordingly, rather than controlling Pharaoh as some kind of puppet, or yielding his sovereignty to human whim and happenstance, Yahweh simply utilized the changing circumstances (including Pharaoh's intransigence) to execute his plans and purposes. Thus understood, the problem of Pharaoh's hardened heart is best explained in terms of a disposition that became Pharaoh's undoing when Yahweh's actions stiffened his resolve (from 9:12) not to let Israel go. And so an inflexible, insensitive and unresponsive king became even more resistant to Yahweh's will, while at the same time ensuring that God's purpose for Pharaoh (9:16) would indeed be realized. Rather than hardening Pharaoh's heart directly, Yahweh did so indirectly (by his acts of mercy and grace) and is thus in no way implicated in the sin for which Pharaoh is solely responsible.

But whatever the explanation of this interpretative crux, we must not lose sight of the overarching point: it is Yahweh, not Pharaoh, who is ultimately in control – as indicated by the recurring phrase *as the LORD had said* (7:13; 8:15, 19; 9:12, 35). God's sovereign control of these affairs does not absolve Pharaoh of blame because, like all sinners, Pharaoh remains fully accountable for his stubborn refusal to obey God (Rom. 9:16–18).

iii. Bridegroom of blood (4:24–26)

24–26. At this stage the narrative flow is unexpectedly interrupted by one of the most enigmatic passages in all of Scripture – this bizarre incident concerning Zipporah and the rite of circumcision. Like 3:13–15, the paragraph continues to attract considerable scholarly attention with little consensus over its meaning. There are several exegetical difficulties: the ambiguous use of Hebrew pronouns makes the object of key clauses unclear (i.e. both the object of Yahweh's hostility and the owner of the 'feet' Zipporah touched); the only indisputable fact is that Zipporah somehow knows to circumcise her (unnamed) son to avert the implementation of Yahweh's death threat. The context

suggests that Moses is the target of the latter,⁶¹ and that it is his ‘feet’ (perhaps a euphemism for genitals) that Zipporah touches with the foreskin of their son (Gershom?). This action appears to have a vicarious effect, compensating in some way for Moses’ implied ‘offence’ – his failure to apply the covenant sign of circumcision to his son (cf. Gen. 17:1–14). This may have been due to some reluctance or opposition to this cultic rite on the part of Zipporah (v. 25b), although this is dependent on how her enigmatic ‘bloody bridegroom’ declaration should be understood.⁶² While this is often interpreted as a derogatory statement expressing Zipporah’s revulsion over the rite of circumcision, the precise meaning of these words (and who Zipporah is describing) is another one of the many exegetical challenges these verses present. Some (e.g. Fretheim 1991a; Hamilton 2011) are therefore reluctant to portray Zipporah as the villain of the story, seeing her rather as the heroine who saves Moses from God’s wrath. However, whether directed towards God or Moses, it is difficult not to detect some sort of negative vibe in what she says.

Apart from these knotty exegetical issues, there is also the problem of its literary and theological significance; what purpose does this enigmatic account serve? Having finally persuaded Moses to return to Egypt, why should Yahweh now seek to kill him? It is clear that this incident emphasizes the importance of circumcision for being counted among Israel, God’s firstborn son. However, it may also highlight the significance of this rite (and/or the obedient faith it expressed), not just for Israel as a whole, but for each family within Israel. Ignoring God’s command meant exposing oneself to divine hostility; such wilful neglect would have dire consequences in relation to the divine judgment that had just been anticipated for the Egyptians (v. 23).

61 The most immediate antecedent is Pharaoh’s firstborn, but clearly this cannot be Yahweh’s target in 4:24. Prior to 4:21–23, Moses is the main subject, and his ‘absence’ in 4:24–26 would be anomalous (the father would normally have been responsible for circumcising his son; cf. Gen. 17:23; 21:4).

62 For the various possibilities, see Propp 1993.

iv. Rendezvous with Aaron (4:27–28)

27–28. After Moses' extraordinary brush with death, the main narrative resumes with what appears to be a flashback: God's command for Aaron to go and meet Moses (cf. v. 14), followed by a brief account of their subsequent reunion at the mountain of God (cf. 3:1). Presumably this was their first meeting in decades, although it is possible that the narrator has deliberately gapped any previous encounters. The use of the verb *command* here (in connection with *signs*) may deliberately allude to the basic struggle, by contrasting Yahweh's demands with those of Pharaoh (cf. 1:22; 5:6).

v. Israel's response to Aaron and Moses (4:29–31)

29–31. As Yahweh had directed, Moses and Aaron cooperate in announcing the good news to Israel's elders. Possibly the Israelites did require some convincing, hence the performance of the aforementioned signs; while it is Aaron who now carries out Yahweh's instructions, including the performance of these signs, he clearly acts with Moses' authority and as his intermediary. Interestingly, however, the Israelites' response is explicitly related not to what they *saw*, but to what they *heard*, which may suggest that they were a lot less sceptical than Moses had anticipated. In any case, the good news that Moses brought them was received in an attitude of acceptance and grateful adoration.

Meaning

After his initial reticence, Moses has finally been persuaded to carry out his divinely appointed task. Compliance, however, does not mean that it will all be plain sailing. Rather, Moses must carry out Yahweh's instructions knowing that Pharaoh will refuse to comply. Still, this human intransigence was not something that Yahweh had somehow overlooked or failed to take into account. Rather, even this was something through which God could and would work out his purposes. Nevertheless, it was also something for which Pharaoh (and Egypt) would be divinely judged – a divine judgment that would encompass others also, including Moses, should they fail to implement Yahweh's instructions. True to his word, Yahweh not only supplies Moses with the assistant he

needs, but also empowers both to convince the Israelites that their circumstances are about to change. However, this was only the first hurdle, overcome only temporarily; as the following chapter plainly demonstrates, Moses and Aaron are still a very long way from ‘mission accomplished’.

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