

FROM THE POWER OF PHARAOH TO THE POWER OF GOD: THE JOURNEY OF ISRAEL FROM EGYPT TO SINAI

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*An interesting and intriguing biblical narrative that deals about power is the story of Israel's liberation from Egyptian slavery in the book of Exodus. Ex 3:8 expresses the intention of God to rescue the Israelites from "the power of the Egyptians". In contrast to the power of the Egyptians is the power of God mentioned in Ex 9:16 "to show you my power and to make my name resound throughout the earth." The Hebrew word used in Ex 3:8 and translated into English as "power" is *yād* יָד whereas in Ex 9:16 it is *kōaḥ* כֹּחַ. The contrast between the power of the Egyptians and the power of YHWH is articulated in Ex 14:30-31 "Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the power (*yād*) of Egypt. When Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the seashore and saw the great power (*hayyād haggedolāh*) that the Lord has shown against Egypt, the people feared the Lord. They believed in the Lord and in Moses his servant."*

This essay will explore the concept of power in the story of Israel's liberation from Egypt and the desert journey in the Book of Exodus. The plague narrative has been interpreted as presenting a contest of power between God and Pharaoh. Using narrative analysis, this paper will show the plot development of the story that climaxes in the story of the crossing of the sea. The Israelites might have been freed from the hand of Pharaoh yet the story of their desert wandering shows that Egypt still had a hold in them. The crossing of the sea might signify the physical liberation from Egypt and the power of Pharaoh but the Israelites remained under the sway of Egyptian cultural power. The desert journey was a stage in the process of the formation of the people as a community under God's power. It can be asked whether the narrative shows simply a change of power—from Pharaoh to God, and therefore not a true liberation for the Israelites or being under God's power is what liberation is all about. In what sense then can being under God's power mean true liberation for the Israelites? What does this mean for our contemporary times?

Introduction

The Book of Exodus opens with the mention of the descendants of Jacob who migrated with him to Egypt and continued to stay in the land even after the death of Joseph and his brothers (Ex 1:1-6). A considerable time passed until the reign of the new king who “knew nothing of Joseph” (1:8).¹ As the memory of Joseph’s role in Egypt belonged now to the distant past, the new king might not have really known his significance. This lack of historical knowledge would explain his attitude towards the growing population of the Israelites (1:9-10). On the other hand, the king could have known about Joseph but probably chose to dismiss it for he considered the Israelites’ presence in the land as a threat. The word used in Ex 1:9 to describe the Israelites is עֲצוּם (‘*atsūm*) which means “mighty, numerous.” The connection of number with power is evident in the NAB translation of the king’s words: “Look how numerous (רַב *rab*) and powerful (עֲצוּם *‘atsūm*) the Israelite people are growing, more than ourselves” (1:9). Apparently, the new king saw the increasing number of Israelites as a threat to Egyptian power. The king of Egypt thus sought to solve this problem by shrewd means (1:10).²

In the Hebrew text of Ex 1:1-22, only the words עֲצוּם *atsom* (“be mighty, numerous” 1:7.20b) and עֲצוּם *‘atsūm* (“mighty, numerous” 1:9) are related to the idea of power. This idea of power is connected with the “many,” that is, with greatness in number. This is similar to what we often hear: “there is strength in number.” The opening narrative of Exodus does not deal directly with power. What is highlighted is the motif of increase or growth in number (1:7.9-10.12.20b). The idea is expressed in different Hebrew words: פָּרָה *pārāh*, “bear fruit, be fruitful” (1:7), שָׂרַצ *shārats*, “swarm, teem” (1:7), עֲצוּם *atsom*, “be mighty, numerous” (1:7.20b), עֲצוּם *‘atsūm* “mighty, numerous” (1:9), רָבָה *rābbāh* “to become great, many” (1:7.10.12.20b), רַב *rab* “many” (1:9),

¹ The length of the Israelites’ sojourn in Egypt is 430 years according to Ex 12:40 cf. Gen 15: 13 (400 years).

² The verb used here is נִתְחַכְּמָה *nithokmah*, imperfect of the verb חָכַם *hakam*, “to be wise”. Ex 1:9-10 suggests a contrast between power in numbers and power through cleverness. The king’s words convey that the latter can overcome the former.

פָּרַצַּת *parats*, “to break through” (1:12). The increasing number of the Israelites did not in itself constitute power. The new king of Egypt was alarmed because of the potential danger posed by the numerous Israelites in time of war. He was concerned that they would join with the enemies to fight against them. Ironically, although they were becoming numerous, the Israelites had seemingly no idea that they could wield power. They did not or could not resist the oppression and the forced labor imposed upon them by the Egyptians. It was this changed situation of the Israelites in Egypt under the new king that sets the stage for the unfolding of the story of Israelites’ liberation from Egypt.

The opening narrative in Ex 1:1-22 contains interesting details that invite us to analyze it as a story about power. Our exploration of the concept and workings of power in this narrative will guide our analysis of the story of the Israelites’ liberation from Egypt as a contest between Pharaoh and YHWH and as a movement from being under the power of Pharaoh to being under YHWH’s power.

“Power” in Ex 1:1-22

Our analysis of power in Ex 1:1-22 starts with the basic definition of “power” as the “ability or capacity to produce effects.” This definition helps us to identify elements in the narrative that convey or relate to power. Further specification, clarification or elaboration of the concept of power will come from the consideration of the elements of the narrative (characters, setting, plot). The characters in the narrative are the Israelites (1:7), the new king of Egypt (1:8; Pharaoh 1:11), the Egyptians (1:12b, cf. 1:9.22), taskmasters (1:11), Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah (1:15-21), God (1:17.20-21).

The Israelites are described in 1:7 as “fruitful and prolific” (וַיִּבְרְאוּ וַיִּצְרְפוּ *pārū vayyishrētsū*), becoming “numerous and strong” (יִרְבּוּ וַיַּצִּיחֵם *yirēbbū vayya tsēmū bimē od mē od*), filling the land (תִּמְלֵא אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם *timlēa hā ārets othām*).

The verb פָּרָה *pārāh*, “bear fruit, be fruitful” (1:7) is used in the sense of having many offspring and relates to generative power.

The king of Egypt (מֶלֶךְ *melek* 1:8.15.18) or Pharaoh (פַּרְעֹה *phar’oh* 1:11.19.22) occupies the highest position of power in Egypt. As king, he has and wields political power.

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The people of Egypt are called “his people” (1:9.22 עַמּוֹ *ammō*, “his subjects” in NAB). He identifies himself with the Egyptians (“we ourselves” 1:9) in contradistinction to the Israelites. He makes decision, initiates action and gives command (1:10.15-16.22). He decides who may live and who may die: “if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, she may live” (1:16, cf. 1:22).

The taskmasters (1:11 יִרְשָׁמִים *sārē missīm*) carry out the decision of the king to oppress the Israelites with hard labor and deal with the Israelites with severity, reducing them to cruel slavery (1:13-14). Their power is given to them by the king.

Like the taskmasters, the Hebrew midwives are told by the king what to do. Shiphrah and Puah are given by the king power over the life and death of a newborn baby (1:16). Unlike the taskmasters, the midwives do not carry out the king’s command because they fear God (1:17). Rather than exercise power over life and death, they choose to act in accordance with their belief in God. The power they manifest is that of resistance and the power of their fear of God (יִירָא אֱלֹהִים *yir ath ʔlohīm*).

The story of the midwives brings in the idea and reality of God (אֱלֹהִים *ʔlohīm* 1:17.20.21). It is God whom the midwives fear (1:17). The fear of God causes the midwives to act against the king’s order. For acting out of fear of God rather than out of fear of Pharaoh, the midwives experience God’s blessings. God shows goodness to them and builds up families for them (1:20-21). What God does for the midwives leads us to understand that God is truly the source and the power behind the growth of the Israelite population (1:20). Moreover, the midwives’ refusal to exercise power over life and death indicates that this power belongs not to themselves or the king but only to God. It is God who has power over life and death.

The contest between God and the king of Egypt, which becomes pronounced in the story of the plagues and the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt through Moses (5:1-15:21), actually begins in Ex 1:1-22. The structure of this narrative is as follows:

- Ex 1:1-7 Introduction and Setting
- 1:8-14 The Oppression of the Israelites with Hard Labor
- 1:8 The Rise to Power of a New King
- 1:9-10 The King’s Decision Concerning the Israelites

- 1:11-14 The Oppression of the Israelites
- 1:11 The Oppression of the Israelites by the Taskmasters
- 1:12a The Increase of the Israelites
- 1:12b Dread of the Israelites by the Egyptians
- 1:13-14 Slavery of the Israelites by the Egyptians
- 1:15-22 The King's Order to Kill the Newborn Hebrew Males
- 1:15-21 The King's Oder to the Hebrew Midwives
- 1:15-16 The King's Order to the Midwives
- 1:17 The Midwives' Fear of God
- 1:18-19 The Questioning of the Midwives by the King
- 1:20 Outcome of Midwives' Action
- 1:20a God's Goodness to the Midwives
- 1:20b The Increase of the People of Israel
- 1:21 The Families of the Midwives
- 1:22 The King's Order to His People

Ex 1:1-22 is an open-ended narrative because it ends with an order that awaits execution (1:22). The order of the king is to throw the newborn Hebrew males into the river. The continuation of this story is in the birth of Moses and his adoption by the daughter of Pharaoh (Ex 2:1-10). It is sufficient, however, to deal with Ex 1:1-22 to bring out the idea of power in this opening narrative of Exodus. The content of Ex 2:1-10 may be summarized and seen as part of the plot development of the preceding narrative.

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The key to the plot development of Ex 1:1-22 is the motif of increase (1:7.21).³ It is the increase of the Israelite population.

³ Plot, according to Hilary Dannenberg, is “one of the most elusive terms in narrative theory”; see H.P. Danneberg, ‘Plot,’ in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, eds. D. Herman, M. Jahn, M.L. Ryan (London: Routledge, 2008), 435, quoted in J.M. Morgan, “Emplotment, Plot and Explotment: Refining Plot Analysis of Biblical Narratives from the Reader’s Perspective,” *Biblical Interpretation* 21/1 (2013) 64-98, 66. Other scholars using narrative analysis have given similar comments. In his study of the plot of the Fourth Gospel, F. Segovia begins with a definition of plot as “the structure of its actions, as these are ordered and rendered toward achieving particular emotional and artistic effects”; see M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999), 224. Segovia then proposes to understand plot in terms of three intersecting axes: particular-abstract axis, synchronic-diachronic axis, content-emotion axis. From the particular to abstract axis, plot is understood as outline of main events, overall pattern or property of the mind; at the synchronic end of the axis plot is defined as structural whole in which causal completion gives the sense of unity while at the diachronic end, plot is said to be the process of causal completion with the focus of attention on the dynamic and sequential element of the narrative; on the content end, plot is defined as the arrangement and connection of events according to the orderly sequence of presentation in the narrative while on the emotion end plot is the organization of the events for maximum emotional effects; on the content end, plot refers to how the reader learns of the story while on the emotion end, plot has to do with how the reader is affected by the story. F. Segovia, “The Journey(s) of the Word of God: A Reading of the Plot of the Fourth Gospel,” *Semeia* 53. *The Fourth Gospel from a Literary Perspective* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 23-54, esp. 23-26. Using Chatman’s distinction of ‘plot of resolution’ (time, evolution, order of events are essential and development is an unraveling) and ‘plot of revelation’ (events have illustrative function and readers gain new insights into the characters and the situation described), J. L. Ska sees a combination of these two plots in Exodus 1-15 in which the focus is more on the revelation of God to the Egyptians (Ex 14:25) and to the Israelites (14:30-31; 15:1-17) more than on the liberation of Israel. “*Our Fathers Have Told Us.*” *Introduction to Analysis of Hebrew Narratives* (Subsidia biblica 13; Rome, 2000), 18. In Ska’s comment on Exodus 1-15 seems oblivious of the reader which is crucial in Chatman’s definition of the ‘plot of revelation.’ Ska also mentions R.S. Crane’s classification of plot into three categories (change of knowledge, change of values and change of situation) but allows for a combination of different types of plot in a narrative. Our study of the theme of power in Ex 1-19 is based on the understanding of plot as unraveling of events (diachronic – content axes) intertwined with the revelation of God and the response of Israel. J.M. Morgan’s definition of plot takes into account the experience of the reader: “the reader’s progressive cognitive and affective encounter with the gradual release of information concerning the narrative’s central question within the storyworld which raises questions and expectations and the consequent desire to know and experience their development toward some degree of closure.” “Emplotment,” 80.

The first strategy is oppression with hard labor; the second is to let the Hebrew midwives kill the newborn baby boy; the third is to throw the newborn baby boy into the river.

The plot development in Ex 1:1-22 clarifies the interplay of power. The background of the story found in the beginning (Ex 1:1-6) explains the presence of the descendants of Jacob in Egypt. The mention of Joseph (Ex 1:5b-6) recalls Joseph's rise to power in Egypt (Gen 41:37ff) and how because of his closeness to Pharaoh, he was able to settle his father and his brothers in the best part of the land of Egypt and provide for all of them (Gen 47:11-12). The Israelites continued to stay in Egypt even after the death of Joseph (Ex 1:6-7) and many years thereafter. Furthermore, they were increasing in number and becoming strong. That "the land was filled with them" could mean that their presence was now being felt. And indeed, the new king who did not know Joseph, described the Israelites to be more numerous and more powerful than the Egyptians. The new king perceived the Israelites to be potential enemies rather than allies and influenced his people with his view of the Israelites. The plural form of the verb (יָסִימוּ *yasīmū*) in Ex 1:11 indicates that the king did not act alone but was able to convince the people that something must be done about the situation. Thus, they undertook a preventive strategy by setting taskmasters over the Israelites to oppress them. The new king did not consider the Israelites as belonging to his people and made them realize it by oppressing them. He made a distinction between them, the Egyptians, and the Israelites, the "other." The story would have been different if Pharaoh considered the Israelites as allies rather than potential enemies.

From the first strategy to the next, the plot is characterized by strategy, failure and irony. The first strategy was to engage them in hard labor in building the cities of Pithom and Raamses for Pharaoh. It is not clear at this point of the story whether the Israelite laborers felt oppressed or honored for being part of a building project for Pharaoh. The strategy failed for it produced the opposite of the intended result. "The more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread" (1:12). As a result, the Egyptians oppressed them more "reducing them to cruel slavery" (1:13). A cycle of oppression, increase, and further oppression comes about. The episode ends with the situation of oppression, hard labor and bitter life for the Israelites (1:14); however, in the light of 1:12, the king's strategy fails to stamp out the increase of the Israelites. This leads to the king's second strategy.

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The king then commissioned the midwives to kill the baby boys as soon as they are born. The second strategy ended in failure because the midwives did not obey the king for they feared God. As a result, the “people multiplied and grew very numerous” (1:20b) and God built up families for the midwives (1:20-21). The plot develops from order to non-execution to outcome.

The third strategy of the king is to order his people to throw the newborn baby boys into the river (1:22). There is no narration of the actual execution of the king’s order. However, it is implied in Ex 2:1-3. Moses’ mother hid him and later put him in a basket which she placed on the bank of the Nile. The final irony is that this Hebrew baby would be adopted by Pharaoh’s daughter and through him the people of Israel would be delivered from slavery in Egypt.

The analysis of plot and interaction of characters in Ex 1:1-22 reveals different types of power. There is the power of Pharaoh over his subjects, the reproductive power of the Israelites, the power of fear that leads Pharaoh to curb the growing number of the people of Israel, the power of the fear of God that leads the midwives to disobey Pharaoh’s order, the power of YHWH that obstructs Pharaoh’s plans and actions. The basic definition of power applies to reproductive power and fear that influences people’s decisions and actions but this definition has to be qualified in order to apply to the power of Pharaoh. Pharaoh’s power is not simply the ability or the capacity to produce effects. The effects must be the ones intended.⁴ Furthermore, the exercise of this power includes the element of force and coercion. The plot of the story, however, shows the limits of Pharaoh’s power for he does not succeed to bring about the outcome he intends.

The Israelites between Two Powers

The story in Ex 1:1-22 is really about the people of Israel yet the focus is on Pharaoh. The dominance of Pharaoh is conveyed by the narrative itself. The narrative does not give the Israelites’ reaction to the forced labor and oppression. They appear to be compliant and endure their bitter life. The first note of resistance is seen in the action or non-action of the Hebrew midwives (Ex

⁴For Bertrand Russell, power is the “production of intended effects.” See B. Russell, 1938, 25 cited in Steven Lukes, 76.

1:17) who disobey the king's command because they fear God. The success of the midwives' resistance lasts only for a while for the third strategy of the king is more violent and gruesome. He commands all his people to kill the newborn male babies by throwing them into the river. It looks as though Pharaoh has now succeeded. The next scene shows the rescue of a baby boy by Pharaoh's daughter who names him Moses (Ex 2:1-10). The story is filled with irony. The one who rescues Moses is the daughter of the king who has ordered the killing of the newborn males. Moses' sister has the courage to approach Pharaoh's daughter to offer their own mother to be his nurse. Moses is nursed by his own mother until he grows up. Moses who was saved by Pharaoh's daughter will be the one to stand up against Pharaoh to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. But, this does not happen immediately.

It will take a long time before Moses is called by God to rescue the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt. The grown-up Moses first gets into trouble. In trying to defend a Hebrew kinsman, he kills an Egyptian and hides him in the sand to keep the matter secret. Later, when he tries to go between two Hebrews fighting each other, he realizes that the matter has been known. Fear grips him and he decides to flee from Pharaoh who is now trying to kill him. Moses reaches Midian and receives hospitality from the priest of Midian whose daughters Moses saves from the shepherds. He gets married to Zipporah and begets a son. Moses appears to have forgotten all about Egypt and his Hebrew kinsfolk.

The death of the king (Ex 3:23a) signals a new beginning. The Israelites' reaction to their bondage is mentioned for the first time in Ex 3:23b: "The Israelites groaned under their bondage and cried out, and from their bondage their cry for help went up to God." It is not said that the Israelites cried to God for help; rather, their cry for help went up to God. God's response is described in Ex 3:24-25: "God heard their moaning and God was mindful of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God saw the Israelites, and God knew..."

Setting and Preparation for the Contest of Powers

In Ex 1:5-22, Pharaoh's power is challenged by the power of God in subtle ways. As the narrative progresses in Ex 3-15, the limits of Pharaoh's power becomes more evident as God's power becomes more and more manifest.

God reveals to Moses his intention to deliver the Israelites from the power of the Egyptians (Ex 3:8). God says, "I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians" (NAB). The Hebrew word translated as "power" in this verse is *yād* יָד which literally means "hand" and metaphorically power, might, strength. Ex 3:9-10 repeats the thought of Ex 3:7-8.

3:7a I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt
3:7b and have heard their cry against their taskmasters
3:9b I have seen how the Egyptians are oppressing them
3:9a indeed the outcry of the Israelites has reached me

Ex 3:8 "I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and lead them up from that land into a good and spacious land" is clarified in Ex 3:9 "I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites out of Egypt." "I have come down to rescue" expresses God's decision on behalf of his people Israel. By sending Moses to Pharaoh God acts out his saving plan. God acts through Moses. For Moses to bring the people out of Egypt is for God to lead them from that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey. The power of the Egyptians is Pharaoh; Moses represents the power of God.

Moses feels powerless to face Pharaoh or to speak to the Israelites (3:11.13). God promises to be with him (3:12) and reveals to him his name YHWH יהוה upon his pleading (3:13-14). God instructs him what to tell the elders of the Israelites (3:16ff) Ex 3:16b-17 recalls 3:7-10. "I have observed you and what is being done to you in Egypt; so I have decided to lead you up out of your affliction in Egypt into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Girgashites, the Hivites and the Jebusites." God tells Moses to go to the king of Egypt with the elders of the Israelites and bring His message. God reveals to him that it will not be easy because the "king of Egypt will not allow you to go *unless compelled by a mighty hand* אֶלֶּי דִּיבְ אֱלֹהִים (*vēlo*

bēyād ḥāzāqāh)” (3:19 NRSV).⁵ God proceeds to tell Moses, “I will stretch out my hand (יָשֹׁטֵה יָדִי וְשָׁחַלְתִּי אֶת-יָדָי *vēshālachtī eth-yādī*) and strike Egypt with all the wondrous deeds I will do in its midst. After that he will let you go” (3:20). The wondrous deeds of YHWH will demonstrate His “mighty hand,” his power that will force Pharaoh to let the Israelites go. YHWH’s hand (3:19-20) stands in contrast to the hand of the Egyptians (3:8), Pharaoh’s power (3:10).⁶

In Ex 4:1-9, God responds to Moses’ continuing objection by showing him the signs he can perform with his hand. God commands him to throw his staff on the ground and it becomes a snake. Then God tells him to stretch out his hand (שָׁלַח יָדְךָ *shēlah yādēkā*) and take hold of its tail; “and Moses stretched out his hand (יָשֹׁטֵה יָדִי *yādō vayyishlah*) and it became a staff in his hand” (4:4). “Hand” is used 8 times in this unit and all refer to Moses’ hand (4:2.4[2x].6[3x].7[2x]). “Stretching out the hand,” a phrase that refers to God’s action in 3:20 is now used for Moses. Moses stretches out his hand (4:4) to perform what God asks him to do. God does wonders through the hand of Moses. Moses’ hand will show the power of God. Moses’ role is made more evident in God’s response to his objection (4:10-17). God allows him to be accompanied by Aaron who will speak to the people for him. God makes it clear though that Aaron will be Moses’ spokesman, and Moses will be “as God to him” (4:17).

⁵ The NAB translation of Ex 3:19 “unless his hand is forced” conveys that the hand is that of the king of Egypt. This translation gives a clear contrast between the hand of the king of Egypt (3:19) and the hand of YHWH (3:20). However, the Hebrew phrase is וְלֹא בְיָדֵי מֶלֶךְ מִצְרָיִם *vēlo bēyād ḥāzāqāh*, literally, “and not by a mighty hand.” “Hand” is used figuratively but it does not seem to refer to the king’s hand. Followed by a reference to YHWH’s hand in 3:20, it is preferable to read the hand in 3:19 as referring to God’s mighty hand as most English translations convey. See James K. Hoffmeier, “The Arm of God versus the Arm of Pharaoh in the Exodus Narratives,” *Biblica* 67/3 (1986) 378-387, for a study of the use of these words in the Pentateuch. Also J.J.M. Roberts, “The Hand of Yahweh,” *Vetus Testamentum* 21/2 (April 1971) 244-251; Thomas B. Dozeman, *God at War. Power in the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Karen Martens, “‘With a Strong Hand and An Outstretched Arm’. The Meaning of the Expression *byd hzqh wbzrw’ ntwyh*,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 15/1 (2001) 123-141.

⁶ Hoffmeier suggested that an Egyptian influence underlying the biblical use of the words *yād ḥāzāqāh* and *zērōa nētūiāh*. The expressions are similar to Egyptian description of the Pharaohs viewed as warrior kings whose “power to conquer, subdue, hunt, etc. are linked to their mighty arms.” “The Arm of God,” 386.

God's final instruction to Moses is "Take this staff in your hand; with it you are to perform the signs." In Ex 4:21-23 God reminds Moses that he has put wonders into his power ("hand" *yād* יָד) but Pharaoh will not let the people go until the death of their firstborn. Ex 4:23 anticipates the last plague on the Egyptians that will cause Pharaoh to let the people go (Ex 11:4-8; 12:29-36).⁷

Moses and Aaron gather the elders of the Israelites as God has commanded (4:29, cf. 3:16) and tell them everything God has said to Moses. The people respond favorably. They "believed and when they heard that the Lord had observed the Israelites and had seen their affliction, they knelt and bowed down" (4:31). This verse gives the first reference to the people's belief. Their act of bowing down indicates their acceptance of YHWH's power.

As God has instructed him (Ex 4:18), Moses together with Aaron goes to Pharaoh and gives him the message from the Lord, the God of Israel: "Let my people go, that they may hold a feast for me in the wilderness" (Ex 5:1). Pharaoh's answer is an assertion of his power: "Who is the Lord, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and I will not let Israel go" (5:2). Moses and Aaron explain further their purpose (5:3). They identify the Lord as the God of the Hebrews, add the length of time and the purpose of their request for permission (three day's journey in the wilderness to offer sacrifice to the Lord), and the reason for the sacrifice, that is, to avert being stricken by God with plague or the sword. Here in this episode is the first time Pharaoh hears about the God of the Hebrews and that this God makes claims on the Israelites. Pharaoh is not the only authority over the Israelites for God now lays claim on the Israelites. For the first time he meets two men speaking on behalf of the Israelites. But, Pharaoh is unmoved. He suspects a hidden agenda. He judges their words to be deceitful (5:9). They only want the people to rest from their work.

The reference to the increasing number of Hebrews harks back to Ex 1:9. Pharaoh's action after this meeting recalls Ex 1:11ff. Pharaoh orders the taskmasters to increase the work of the Hebrews. He justifies the additional burden on these people by calling them lazy. His purpose is to keep them preoccupied with work so that they will not listen to words like those of Moses and

⁷ The threat in 4:23 spans "all the plagues and speaks immediately of the final one." B. Childs, *The Book of Exodus. A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Louisville: The Westminster Press, 1976), 102.

Aaron (5:6-9). The Israelites are made to gather their own straw for brickmaking yet they are required to produce the same quota of bricks. The taskmasters announce to the people Pharaoh's order. The taskmasters introduce Pharaoh's order with a messenger formula "Thus says Pharaoh" (5:10). This is comparable to "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel" in Moses' introduction to the message from YHWH (5:1). The taskmasters are to Pharaoh as Moses is to YHWH.

The people accept the new situation, follow Pharaoh's order, look for stubble themselves for making bricks and try to produce as much as before. The Israelite foremen are beaten because the people are not able to provide as much bricks as required (5:10-14). The Israelite foremen then go to Pharaoh and ask why this is being done to them. They identify themselves and the people as Pharaoh's servants (5:15-16). When they tell Pharaoh that it is his fault, he answers by telling them that they are lazy and confirms his order that no straw will be supplied to them but they must supply their quota of bricks (5:17-18, cf. 5:8). After this unsuccessful meeting with Pharaoh, they confront Moses and Aaron and accuse them of making the Israelites offensive to Pharaoh and his servants to the extent that they can kill the Israelites.

Moses has recourse to God asking Him: "Why have you treated this people badly?" (5:22). His question to God resembles the question of the Israelite foremen to Pharaoh: "Why do you treat your servants in this manner?" (5:15).⁸ The tone of Moses' question to God seems stronger than that of the Israelite foremen to Pharaoh. Moses is aware that his appearance to Pharaoh on behalf of the Israelites is the reason for Pharaoh's harsh treatment of them.⁹ Moses asks why he is sent and complains to God for doing nothing to rescue his people. To this God responds, "Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh. For by a strong hand, he will let them go; by a strong hand, he will drive them from his land" (6:1). The expression "by a strong hand" *בְּיָד הַקּוֹדֵשׁ* *bēyād ḥāzāqāh*, which appears twice in this verse, recalls Ex 3:19. The "strong hand" *יָד הַקּוֹדֵשׁ* *yād ḥāzāqāh* here refers to YHWH's. God

⁸ The questions in 5:15 and 5:22 are parallel: *הַיְדָבְבָה עַל הַבַּחַשׁ הַשְּׂעֵת הַמֶּלֶךְ* (5:15) *הַיְדָבְבָה עַל הַיָּד הַקּוֹדֵשׁ הַמֶּלֶךְ* (5:22). The verbs used are different (*הִשָּׁעַת* and *עָעַר*). The question addressed to Pharaoh seems milder than the question Moses raises to God.

⁹ Here in 5:23 the verb used for Pharaoh's action towards the people the same as the verb used for God in 5:22.

will act in such a way that Pharaoh will let the Israelites go, driving them from his land. Thus, Pharaoh will act, even without realizing it, by the strong hand of God, under God's power and according to God's will.

The Challenge to Pharaoh's Power (Ex 6-15)

The story of how God brings the Israelites out of Egypt through Moses in Ex 6-15 provides a contrast to how God challenged and thwarted Pharaoh's power in subtle ways in Ex 1:8-21. In Ex 1:8-21 the increasing number of Israelites despite their forced labor and oppression and the Hebrew midwives' disobedience foil Pharaoh's plans. Without Pharaoh and the Israelites knowing it, God is the one who enabled the Israelites' increase and the fear of God was the reason why the Hebrew midwives did not carry out Pharaoh's commands. In Ex 6-15 God's power becomes more and more visible as Pharaoh refuses to let the Israelites go. The power of YHWH is revealed in the ten plagues (Ex 7:14-11:10; 12:29-30) and in the salvation of the Israelites at the crossing of the Red Sea (Ex 14). The song at the sea (Ex 15) celebrates the victory of YHWH over Israel's enemies.

Prelude to the Plagues

After Moses' first appearance to Pharaoh has led to further oppression of the Israelites, Moses questions God about his mission: "Why did you send me?" (5:22). Then God tells him his plan (6:1) and reassures him by revealing more of Himself to him and making him aware of his privilege of receiving the revelation of His name: "I am the Lord. As God the Almighty I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but by my name, Lord, I did not make myself known to them" (6:2-3, cf. 3:14-15). God also tells Moses about his covenant with Israel's ancestors and his promise to give them the land of Canaan. It is His remembrance of this covenant that prompts him to act for the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt. Thus, God sends Moses again to the people to tell them that He will deliver them from their slavery (6:6). The proclamation of God's deliverance uses the expression "by my outstretched arm" (הַיָּטָוּן עֲזָרְזָבָה *bizērōa nētūyāh*) and "mighty acts of judgment" (מִלְדֻּתְּ מִיִּטְפָּשֶׁבַּ *bishfatīm gedolīm*). The phrase

“outstretched arm” (זְרֹעַ הַיָּד הַנְּתֻיָּאָה *zērōa nētūyāh*) implies that God’s power will be evident. The pairing of “outstretched arm” and “strong hand” (יָד הַקִּיָּץ *yād ḥāzāqāh*) appears also in Dt 4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 11:2; Ps 136:12; Eze 20:33.¹⁰

God’s message to the people through Moses includes three promises:¹¹ a) *deliverance* - “I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and will deliver you from their slavery. I will redeem you by my outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment” (6:6); b) *making them God’s people* - “I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God; and you will know that I, the Lord, am your God who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians (6:7); c) *gift of land* - “I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I will give it to you as your own possession” (6:8). This time the people would not listen to Moses (6:9). Their reaction here is in sharp contrast to their previous response of belief and acceptance in 4:31.

God then tells Moses to go to Pharaoh but Moses protests (Ex 6:10-13; 6:28-7:5).¹² Moses doubts that Pharaoh will listen to him (6:30). God answers by clarifying his role and that of Aaron: “I have made you a god to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother will be your prophet” (7:1, cf. 4:17). Moses, in fact, is right. God knows that Pharaoh will not listen to him (7:4). But Pharaoh’s obduracy will only serve the astonishing display of God’s power. Hardness of heart results in the multiplication of signs as judgment.¹³ The final outcome is the revelation of God’s power to the Egyptians: “All Egyptians will know that I am the Lord” (7:5). This is parallel to the revelation to the Israelites: “you will know that I, the Lord, am your God who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians” (6:7). The “outstretched arm” and “mighty acts of judgment” by which the Lord will redeem Israel from slavery in Egypt (cf. 6:6) are presented in 7:3-5 as God’s laying “his hand

¹⁰ The expressions could have been used intentionally by the biblical writers to show YHWH’s superiority over all gods. In the clash of YHWH and Pharaoh, YHWH is the victor. The “outstretched arm” becomes a metaphor for YHWH’s salvation. Hoffmeier, “The Arm of God,” 387.

¹¹ Cf. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 115.

¹² Ex 6:10-13 is repeated in 6:29-7:5. The repetition is occasioned by the insertion of the genealogy in 6:14-27. The narrative thread from 6:13 is resumed in 6:29.

¹³ Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 174.

on Egypt” (7:4), stretching out his “hand against Egypt” (7:5). Judgment and liberation are manifestations of God’s power.

The scene that serves as introduction to the cycle of plagues involves the sign of the staff turned into a serpent (7:8-13).¹⁴ Moses and Aaron are there at God’s command. Aaron throws his staff down and it turns into a serpent (7:10). Pharaoh for his part summons the wise men and the sorcerers, the magicians, and they do the same thing (7:11-12a). However, Aaron’s staff swallows their staffs (7:12b). The sign does not produce the intended effect. Pharaoh does not listen (7:13). The cycle of plagues then begins.

A Contest of Powers

The story of the plagues presents the struggle between Pharaoh and YHWH. Because of Pharaoh’s refusal to let the people of Israel go, YHWH brings about the plagues. The nine plagues are narrated in 7:14-10:29. The story climaxes in the tenth plague (12:29-30) which was preceded by a warning (11:1-10). The consequence of this plague is that Pharaoh lets the people go (12:31-32) and the Egyptians urge them to leave (12:33-36).

The nine plagues may be divided into three sets of three. The first set consists of blood (7:14-24), frogs (7:25-8:11) and gnats (8:12-15); the second set, flies (8:16-28), pestilence (9:1-7) and boils (9:8-12); and the third set, hail (9:13-35), locusts (10:1-20), darkness (10:21-29). The first of each series (first, fourth and seventh plagues) are comparable in structure and style; so also the second of each series (second, fifth and eighth plagues) and the third of each series (third, sixth, and ninth).¹⁵

¹⁴ The sign of the staff turning into a serpent is given by God to Moses in 4:2-5.

¹⁵ In his study, Dozemann does not include darkness in the plagues but includes the snakes as part of the priestly editing of the plague cycle. He identified three levels of tradition in the plague cycle. A pre-exilic plague cycle that contains six plagues (blood, frogs, flies, cattle, hail, locusts) underwent minimal deuteronomic editing (blood, flies, hail, locusts), aimed at connecting the plague-exodus cycle with the wilderness tradition. Then a more thorough priestly editing gave the cycle a new introduction and added three more plagues (snakes, gnat, boils). For details see “God at War,” 28-29, fn 5 as well as pertinent chapters.

The narrative is characterized by a pattern of God's command to Moses, the execution of the command, the occurrence of the plague, effects of the plague, reaction of Pharaoh and his allies. The first and second of each series contain a warning to Pharaoh. "Let my people go to serve me" is the constant message. The second of each series has a typical formulation: "Let my people go to serve me. If your refuse to let them go..." (7:27; 9:2; 10:4). Another refrain is "Stretch out your hand" which is God's command to Moses and Aaron to effect the plague. In the first three plagues the command is given to Aaron through Moses. Thus the blood, frogs and gnats are brought about through Aaron's hand. For hail, locusts and darkness, Moses is commanded by God to stretch out his hand. The command "Stretch out your hand" is not found in the plague of boils. For this sixth plague, both Moses and Aaron are commanded by God to "take a handful of soot" but it is Moses who scatters it toward the sky (9:8.10). In the case of hail, Moses stretches out his hand and God sends forth peals of thunder and hail (9:23). The flies and pestilence occur by God's direct action (8:20; 9:6); similarly, the tenth plague, the death of the firstborn of the Egyptian is effected by YHWH (12:29).

The motif of Pharaoh's obduracy runs through the whole story. It provides the reason for the delay of the fulfillment of Moses' mission and justifies the increasing display of God's power. Signs and wonders are done because of the consistent refusal of Pharaoh to let the Hebrew people go. The irony in the story is that Pharaoh's persistent opposition to the will of God actually leads to its magnificent fulfillment. The theme of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart serves to highlight this (4:21; 7:3; 11:9-10). It affirms that no human action or event is beyond God's control. God can turn even human opposition to his will into an instrument of its realization.

In the course of the plagues, Pharaoh gradually loses his allies and increasingly gives in to Moses' demand that the people be allowed to go to worship in the wilderness. The changing stance of Pharaoh's magicians and servants anticipates the final result of the struggle between YHWH and Pharaoh. Before the series of plagues, when Aaron's staff is turned into a serpent, Pharaoh's magicians do the same (7:10-11). However, their staffs are swallowed by Aaron's staff (7:12). When Aaron strikes the water with staff and turns it into blood, the Egyptian magicians do the same (7:20.22). Frogs come and cover the land of Egypt when Aaron stretches out his hand over the waters of Egypt (8:2).

The magicians also make the frogs overrun Egypt by their magic arts (8:3). What happens here is ironic. In competing with God's messenger and showing they can do the same things, the magicians themselves actually aggravate the plague.

With this plague of frogs all over Egypt, Pharaoh begins to negotiate with Moses and Aaron. Pharaoh acknowledges the power of God: "Pray to the Lord to remove the frogs from me and my people, and I will let the people go to sacrifice to the Lord" (8:4). This is a development from his first reply to Moses and Aaron in 5:2. Moses agrees to intercede with God and God ends the plague of frogs. But Pharaoh becomes obstinate after seeing that the plague has ended.

The dust of the earth turns to gnats through Aaron's hand. When the magicians could not bring forth gnats though they try, they tell Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God" (8:15). The intended effect of the plagues begins to be realized. But Pharaoh's heart is hardened and he would not listen. So, God brings forth swarms of flies and the land of Egypt is devastated on account of the swarms of flies (8:20). God begins to make a distinction between the Egyptians and the Israelites for the land of Goshen where the Israelites live is not affected by the swarms of flies (8:18). Pharaoh then calls Moses and Aaron and tells them, "Go sacrifice to your God in the land" (8:21). Moses insists on doing as the Lord has commanded: "We must go a three day's journey in the wilderness and sacrifice to the Lord" (8:22). Pharaoh concedes but with a condition, "I will let you go to sacrifice to the Lord, your God, in the wilderness, provided that you do not go too far away" (8:24). Moses agrees to pray to the Lord that the swarms of flies may depart from Pharaoh, his servants and his people but warns Pharaoh not to act let the people go.

The fifth plague is described as directly coming from God's hand: "the hand of the Lord will strike your livestock in the field – your horses, donkeys, camels, herds and flocks – with a very severe pestilence" (9:3). As a result, the livestock of the Egyptians die. Pharaoh learns that not one animal belonging to the Israelites died but he remains obstinate (9:6-7).

Then through the hand of Moses and Aaron, God causes boils on human beings and beasts. This time the magicians themselves are afflicted with boils and could not stand in the presence of Moses (9:11). It is the Lord now who hardens the heart of Pharaoh (9:12). It is clear at this point that Pharaoh's power is no match to God's power but Pharaoh does not know it. Before the seventh

plague, God warns Pharaoh through Moses. God reveals that the pestilence could have caused Egypt's total annihilation had God wanted it: "By now I should have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with such pestilence that you would have vanished from the earth" (9:15). It is God who lets them survive: "to show you my power and to make my name resound throughout the earth" (9:16). The divine speech clarifies that the plagues are a demonstration of the power of God so that all may know there is none like the Lord anywhere on earth (9:14). The challenge is directed to Pharaoh: "Will you continue to exalt yourself over my people?" (9:17). But even as God intends to bring fierce hail, God gives Pharaoh and his people time to save their lives, their livestock and whatever they have in the open fields. At this point, there occurs a division among Pharaoh's servants, between those who fear the word of the Lord and those who do not pay attention to the word of the Lord (9:21).

When Moses stretches out his hand toward the sky as God commands, the Lord sends forth peals of thunder and hail. The hail strikes down everything in the fields, human beings, beasts and vegetation, throughout the land of Egypt but in the land of Goshen, where the Israelites are, there are no hail (9:25-26). The plague causes Pharaoh to acknowledge before Moses and Aaron that he has sinned. He now proclaims, "The Lord is the just one, and I and my people are the ones at fault" (9:27). He then gives permission for the Israelites to go (9:28). Moses agrees to intercede to the Lord to stop the plague but tells Pharaoh that he knows Pharaoh and his servants do not yet fear the Lord God (9:29-30). After the plague has gone through Moses' intercession (9:33), Pharaoh once more sins; he and his servants become obstinate and would not let the Israelites go (9:34).

Before the eighth plague God reveals to Moses that it is not just Pharaoh but also his servants are obstinate. This obstinacy is caused by God Himself so that He may perform the signs among them for the Israelites to know that He is the Lord (10:1-2). The demonstration of God's power through signs and wonders is for the Israelites as well as for the Egyptians (cf. 6:8; 7:5; 9:16). When Moses has delivered the warning to Pharaoh, the servants urge Pharaoh to let the people go to serve the Lord, their God (10:7). They can see that Egypt is being destroyed. Pharaoh then calls Moses and Aaron and gives them permission to go (10:8). But he finds another reason for not letting them go when Moses tells him all of them will go, with their young and old, sons and daughters,

flocks and herds (10:9). Pharaoh suspects Moses of planning evil and allows only the men to go and serve the Lord (10:11).

Through the hand of Moses, God sends locusts to come upon the land of Egypt and eat up all the land's vegetation (10:12-15). Pharaoh is again repentant before Moses and Aaron: "I have sinned against the Lord, your God, and against you" (10:16). He asks for forgiveness and for God to "take this death" from him (10:17). In response to Moses' prayer, God puts an end to the plague but the Lord hardens Pharaoh's heart so that he would not let the people go (10:20). The ninth plague, darkness, is inflicted on Egypt without any warning (10:21). Pharaoh now concedes and allows Moses to go but without their flocks and herds. Moses insists that these should go with them. So, Pharaoh once more refuses to let them go. Pharaoh threatens Moses: "See to it that you do not see my face again! For the day you do see my face you will die!" (10:28). Moses replies, "You are right! I will never see your face again." There is irony in this dialogue. It is implied in the following scene that Moses still goes to Pharaoh to warn him of the tenth plague (11:1-8). Both Pharaoh's and Moses' words do not come true here. Moses goes to Pharaoh again to warn him of the last plague (11:4-7).¹⁶ By this time, Moses has gained honor before Pharaoh's servants and the people in the land of Egypt (11:3).

After the tenth plague, the death of the Egyptian firstborn, Moses finally gets Pharaoh's approval: "Leave my people at once, you and the Israelites with you! Go and worship the Lord as you said. Take your flocks, too and your herds, as you demanded, and be gone; and you will be doing me a favor" (12:31-32). Here is the fulfillment of what God has said to Moses, that Pharaoh will drive the Israelites from his land (6:1). Not only Pharaoh but his Egyptian subjects urge the Israelites to depart (12:33). What Moses has predicted has come to pass: "All these servants of yours will then come down to me and bow down before me saying: Leave, you and all our followers" (11:8).

¹⁶ Scholars have noted the difficulty in the text. Moses' speech begins in Ex 11:4 but it is not clear to whom he is speaking. The ending of the passage makes clear that he is speaking to Pharaoh (11:8). A solution is to view 11:4-8 as originally following 10:29 but was displaced with the insertion of the instruction for the despoiling of the Egyptians. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 161.

The drama of the story is heightened by the repeated pattern of Pharaoh's refusal, concession and refusal. Within this pattern is shown the gradual and progressive weakening of Pharaoh's resistance to Israel's departure. From an adamant refusal in 5:2 ("I do not know the Lord, and I will not let Israel go"), Pharaoh slowly loses the upper hand. He negotiates for the removal of the second, the fourth, the seventh to the ninth plagues (frogs, flies, hail, locusts, darkness). He begins to say, "I will let the people go to sacrifice to the Lord" (8:4) but then retracts. Later, he tells them to sacrifice in the land (8:21); afterwards, he allows them to sacrifice in the wilderness provided they do not go too far away (8:24). Then, he tells them to go and serve the Lord but gives a condition that only the men will go (10:8.11). To have the ninth plague removed, he tells them to go and serve the Lord but they must leave their flocks and herds (10:24). Finally, after the death of the firstborn, he drives the people out of Egypt, letting them take their flocks and their herds (12:31-32). Pharaoh's defeat is unmistakable. Yet, he makes a final display of power to prevent the Israelites from leaving Egypt. He musters his forces, "six hundred select chariots and all the chariots of Egypt, with officers on all of them" to pursue the Israelites (14:7).

The Lord's Victory at the Sea

Ex 14, the narrative of the Egyptians' pursuit of the Israelites until the Red Sea, illustrates the fulfillment of God's word in 10:1-2: "I have made him and his servants obstinate in order that I may perform these signs of mine among them and that you may recount to your son and grandson how I made a fool of the Egyptians and what signs I did among them, so that you may know that I am the Lord." The obstinacy of Pharaoh and his servants (14:4-9) is reflected in their words, "What in the world have we done! We have released Israel from our service!" (14:5). Pharaoh then pursues the Israelites to bring them back to servitude. This pursuit leads to doom and death for him and his army. Pharaoh and the Egyptians are lured to their death by Pharaoh's own obstinacy (14:23.27-28).

Ex 14:30-31 summarizes the conclusion of the contest of powers. The Lord saved Israel on that day from the power of Egypt (מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם *miyyad mitsrāim*). Israel saw the great power (דְּיָהָתָא *et-hayyad haggēdolāh*) of the Lord. Israel is liberated from

the “hand” of Egypt, the power of oppression and slavery. The “great hand” of the Lord is the power of deliverance and salvation. The routing of the Egyptians serves as a sign for Israel of God’s liberating power. Because of this, the Israelites fear the Lord and believe in Him and Moses, his servant (14:31).

The image of God in Ex 14 is a warrior God who fights against evil, injustice and oppression on behalf of his oppressed people. This image is conveyed not only by the narrative itself but also by the words of Moses and the Egyptians. Moses encourages the people by saying, “Do not fear! Stand your ground and see the victory the Lord will win for you today...The Lord will fight for you; you have only to keep still” (14:14). When the Egyptian army pursuing the Israelites by the sea was thrown into a panic, they said, “Let us flee from Israel, because the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt” (Ex 14:25). The song of Moses that follows this narrative celebrates the victory of the Lord at the sea (Ex 15). It clearly proclaims: “the Lord is a warrior, Lord is his name” (15:3).

The contest of powers ends with the victory of the Lord God. The Lord’s victory is the triumph of the power for liberation and freedom over the power of oppression and servitude. The Lord’s victory is the revelation of the limits of Pharaoh’s power. Not only that Pharaoh’s power can be challenged and foiled by another or greater power, it is a power that leads to his own destruction and that of his associates. The Exodus narrative (1-15) presents a contrast of the power for good and the power for evil; the power that brings life, freedom and liberation and the power that causes oppression, suffering and death. The Lord’s victory is the revelation of God’s power. Pharaoh’s power is no match to God’s power. The signs and wonders are meant for Pharaoh to realize that there is a power far beyond his own. Before God’s power, Pharaoh’s power is puny and weak, no matter how great and strong it may seem to him and to his subjects. God does not have to struggle with Pharaoh. It is Moses who stands up to Pharaoh. But who is Moses to stand up to Pharaoh? A Hebrew fugitive with a murderous past confronts Pharaoh not by his own power but by the power of God. God is the power of the powerless who seek not the power to rule but the power to be free to live in peace and security.

The Lord’s victory at the Red Sea is the fulfillment of God’s promise of deliverance (6:6). Two other promises are yet to be fulfilled – to make the Israelites God’s people and to give them the land for their possession (6:7-8). The shaping of the Israelites

into God's people is a process that happens in their wilderness wandering up to their sojourn on Mt. Sinai (Ex 16-24). On Mt. Sinai, God reveals his will to the people, gives them the Law and establishes his covenant with them (Ex 19:1-24:11).

The Israelites' Departure from Egypt

From Ex 6:10 to 11:9, the Israelites are spoken about but they do not speak. They remain as passive characters, always referred to, but not heard. Ex 6:9 gives the last description of the Israelites' reaction before the story of the nine plagues. They are spoken to by Moses but they do not listen to him because of their dejection and hard slavery.

God shares with Moses his concern for the Israelites. He sends Moses so that the Israelites may be delivered from Egypt (7:2.4-5.16). Moses acts on behalf of God for the people; he confronts Pharaoh for the sake of the Israelites. The Israelites remain in the background even as Moses negotiates with Pharaoh for their departure from Egypt. The whole story of the plagues focuses more on the reaction of Pharaoh and his servants. Beginning with the fourth plague, the Israelites are distinguished from the Egyptians. The land of Goshen, where the Israelites are, is not affected by the swarms of flies (8:18). The pestilence does not strike the livestock of the Israelites (9:4.6). The land of Goshen is spared from the hail (9:26). The Israelites are not spoken to until Ex 12.

In Ex 12:1ff God gives instructions to Moses and Aaron about the Passover ritual. God commands them to announce this to the whole community of Israel (12:3). Moses then gathers all the elders of Israel and gives them instructions (12:21-27). Moses instructs them to apply some of the blood of the Passover victims to the lintel and the two doorposts. The blood on the lintel and the two doorposts will be a sign for the Lord to pass over the house so that only the Egyptian household will be touched by the destroyer (12:23.27). The people's response is to kneel and bow down (12:27b, cf. 4:31). They do exactly as the Lord has commanded (12:28).

After the Lord has stricken the houses of the Egyptian with the death of their firstborn (12:29-31), the Egyptians urge the Israelites to leave their land (12:33). Starting Ex 12:34, the Israelites emerge from the background. They take their unleavened

dough “in their kneading bowls wrapped in their cloaks on their shoulders” (12:34). They do as Moses has commanded. They ask the Egyptians for articles of silver and gold and for clothing (12:35). The Lord makes the Egyptians well-disposed to the Israelites that they let them have whatever they ask for (14:36, cf. 11:3). The Israelites, thus, despoil the Egyptians as God has said (12:36).¹⁷

The deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt is commemorated in the Passover (12:43-49). “On that day the Lord brought the Israelites out of the land of Egypt company by company” (12:51). It is also associated with the consecration of the firstborn (13:1-2) and the feast of the unleavened bread (13:3.6-7). Moses enjoins the people to remember this day on which they came out of Egypt, out of a house of slavery and declares “it was with a strong hand that the Lord brought you out from there” (13:3). The affirmation “with a strong hand the Lord brought you/us out of Egypt” is repeated in 13:9.14.16.

The story of Israel’s departure from Egypt is dramatically portrayed with God leading them (13:17 נָהַם *nāhām*). God is concerned that the Israelites might change their minds and return to Egypt, so God leads them by another way. This motif of the Israelites desiring to return to Egypt every time they experience difficulties runs through the story of their desert wandering (Ex 16-19). The story of Israel’s deliverance now proceeds with the focus on the Israelites being led by God (13:18) and Moses acting still as the mediator for God and the people. The reference to Joseph in Ex 13:19, to his bones being taken up by Moses and brought to the land, and to his words, indicates a closure in the story of Israel in Egypt. But Joseph’s words before he died, “God will surely take care of you” (13:19, cf. Gen 50:25), is here remembered and provides a perspective for understanding God’s ways with Israel at the sea and in the desert. Thus, the Lord shows His care by preceding them, “in the daytime by means of a column of cloud to show them the way, and at night by means of a column of fire to give them light” (13:21). It is further said that “neither the column

¹⁷ Ex 12:34-36 recall God’s words in Ex 3:21-22; 11:2-3. The verses deal with the theme of the despoiling of the Egyptians. For Dozeman, *God at War*, 47, the “despoiling motif reinterprets the death of the Egyptian firstborn as an instance of holy war.” See also fn. 46 on pp. 75-76 where Dozeman gives other scholars’ interpretations on 3:22; 11:2; 12:35.

of cloud by day nor the column of fire by night ever left its place in front of the people.”

From Ex 14:1 onwards, Moses remains in God’s constant communication. His role is no longer to speak to Pharaoh but to the Israelites God’s word and command. Through Moses, God directs the people’s journey through the sea and through the wilderness.

A Challenge to God’s Power

After all the plagues in Egypt, Pharaoh’s power is no longer as formidable as it seemed. Pharaoh cannot stand up to God’s power. The challenge to God’s power now does not come from Pharaoh but from the very people God has saved, the Israelites. What God shows to Israel is the power of a caring God.

The Israelites set out from Rameses to Succoth (12:37) and from there to Etham (13:20). Then God directs them to turn about and encamp before Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea (14:1.9). Upon seeing the pursuing Egyptians catching up with them, the Israelites become greatly frightened. They cry to the Lord (14:10) and complain to Moses: “Were there no burial places in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Did we not tell you this in Egypt, when we said, ‘Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians’? Far better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness” (14:11-12).

No sooner have the Israelites gone out of Egypt do they now wish to return. “To serve the Egyptians” contrasts with “to serve the Lord,” the very purpose Moses presented to Pharaoh for their going out of Egypt (7:26; 8:16). The people prefer life in servitude than death in the wilderness. The people’s question conveys that they lack or have no awareness of God leading them in this journey. All the signs and wonders God has performed seem not enough for the Israelites to believe. The battle is no longer against Pharaoh though the threat of Pharaoh’s army still looms. The battle is for the heart of Israel. Moses calms the people’s fear, “Do not fear! Stand your ground and see the victory the Lord will win for you today.”

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He assures them, “These Egyptians who you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you have only to be still” (14:14).¹⁸

The Lord instructs Moses what to do. It is rather strange that God’s instructions are preceded by an apparent reproach: “Why are you crying out to me?” (14:15). The people are told to set out while Moses is to lift his staff, stretch out his hand over the sea and split it in two (14:16). The Israelites are protected by the angel of God and the column of cloud that come between the Israelites and the Egyptians. Moses stretches out his hand over the sea and the Lord drives back the sea with a strong east wind all night long and turns the sea into dry ground. The waters are split and the Israelites enter into the midst of the sea on dry land (14:19-22). The Lord throws the Egyptian army into a panic, clogs their chariot wheels and they retreat. Then as God commands, Moses stretches out his hand over the sea so that the water flows back. As the sea returns to its normal flow, the Egyptians flee head on toward it. The Israelites see the Egyptians lying dead on the seashore (14:26-29). Thus, the Israelites are saved by the Lord. They now fear and believe in the Lord (14:30-31). They acknowledge the Lord’s power, praise and proclaim his saving deed (15:1-18.21).

The story of Israel’s desert wandering will be punctuated by the people’s remembrance of Egypt and their desire to return especially when they experience difficulties. This has been previewed in Ex 14:11-12 in their complaint to Moses when they feared for their lives seeing the Egyptians pursuing them. The remark “Far better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness” conveys the idea of recapitulating to the Egyptians. They seem to be ready to surrender to the Egyptian army, willing to go back to Egypt as slaves, ready to exchange freedom for their life.

When they reach the wilderness of Shur and come to Marah after travelling three days without finding water, they find water in Marah. But they cannot drink it for it is too bitter. They begin to grumble against Moses, saying “What are we to drink?” (15:22-24). Moses cries out to the Lord and the Lord tells him what to do. Moses throws into the water a piece of wood pointed out to him by the Lord and the water becomes fresh (15:25). God promises

¹⁸ Ex 14:13-14 sounds as a war oracle. Dozeman views the confrontation at the sea to be anchored in Israel’s holy war tradition and considers Moses’ words in 14:13-14 as war oracle. *The God at War*, 21- 22.

not to afflict the people with any of the diseases with which He afflicted the Egyptians provided they listen to his voice, do what is right and keep his commandments (15:26). God proclaims himself as their healer. Yet, despite this experience of God providing for their need, the people grumble whenever their need is not satisfied.

The people grumble again when they reach the wilderness of Sin. They grumble against Moses saying, "If only we had died at the Lord's hand in the land of Egypt, as we sat by our kettles of meat and ate our fill of bread! But you have led us into the wilderness to make this whole assembly die of famine!" (16:3). The Lord reveals to Moses that he will provide bread for the people and that his instruction on the gathering of their daily portion is a test to see whether they will follow or not (16:4-5). Moses assures the Israelites of God's provision and tells them that their grumbling is not against him but against God (16:8). God seems to overlook the people's forgetfulness of his mighty deeds shown at their deliverance from Egypt, for the Lord hears the people's grumbling and provides what they ask (16:12-15). The Lord gives them bread from heaven. He sustains them with meat and bread (16:12), quail in the evening and manna in the morning (16:13-15).

The people quarrel with Moses again when they are encamped at Rephidim. They ask Moses to give them water to drink. They fear for their life. They say, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt? To have us die of thirst with our children and our livestock?" (17:3). Moses cries out to the Lord: "What shall I do with this people? A little more and they will stone me!" (17:4). God responds by instructing him to go on ahead with the elders of Israel and to use his staff to strike the rock while God is standing in front of him on the rock in Horeb. Once Moses strikes the rock water flows from it. Thus God has provided water for the people to drink (17:5-6).

Each time the Israelites are in need God provides for them. But they easily forget what God has done for them. They continue to yearn for Egypt and to question, "Is the Lord in our midst or not?" (Ex 17:7).

The motif of grumbling תִּלְוִנָּה *təlūnnā* is a major theme in the wilderness wanderings both before Sinai in the book of Exodus and after Sinai in the book of Numbers. The people's grumbling is expressed in stereotyped formula:

Ex 16:3 "If only we had died at the Lord's hand in the land of Egypt, as we sat by our kettles of meat and ate our fill of bread! But you have led us into the wilderness to make this whole assembly die of famine!"

Ex 17:3 "Why then did you bring us up out of Egypt? To have us die of thirst with our children and our livestock?"

Num 11:4-6 "If only we had meat for food! We remember the fish we used to eat without cost in Egypt and the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic. But now we are famished; we have nothing to look forward to but this manna."

Num 11:18 "If only we had meat for food! Oh, how well off we were in Egypt."

Num 11:20 "Why did we ever leave Egypt?"

Num 14:2-3 "If only we had died in the land of Egypt"; "If only we would die here in the wilderness! Why is the Lord bringing us into this land only to have us fall by the sword?"

Our wives and little ones will be taken as spoil. Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?

Num 20:3-5 "Would that we had perished when our kindred perished before the Lord! Why have you brought the Lord's assembly into this wilderness for us and our livestock to die here? Why have you brought us up out of Egypt, only to bring us to this wretched place? It is not a place for grain nor figs nor vines nor pomegranates! And there is no water to drink."

Num 21:5 "Why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in the wilderness, where there is no food or water? We are disgusted with this wretched food!"

The people keep on remembering Egypt, regretting what they have left behind. They do not remember what God has done to bring them out of Egypt. They keep on testing the Lord (Ex 17:2).

It is to be remembered that the people's grumbling in Ex 16-17 happens in their desert wandering before reaching Sinai whereas the desert journey that serves the context for the people's grumbling in Numbers 11-21 is after the covenant at Sinai. The motif of grumbling serves to create a tension in the story and relates to the question whether God will succeed in bringing them to the place He intended for them. When God called Moses to

bring the people out of Egypt, God told him that He intended to rescue the Israelites from the power of the Egyptians and lead them up to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey (Ex 3:8). The end point of God's deliverance is the land of Canaan (Ex 6:4).

To Moses' first objection God responded by assuring him of His presence and giving him a sign: "When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will serve God at this mountain" (Ex 3:12). This is the sign that God had sent him. As the fulfillment of God's whole act of deliverance is Israel's possession of the land, the fulfillment of the sign for Moses is reaching and serving the Lord at Mt. Sinai. The reliability of Moses hangs on the success of the desert journey. But it is not only Moses' reliability that is at stake but God's too. This is the point of Moses' lament and plea to God in Num 11:10-15: "Why do you treat your servant so badly? Why are you so displeased with me that you burden me with all this people? Was it I who conceived all this people? Or was it I who gave them birth, that you tell me to carry them at my breast, like a nurse carrying an infant, to the land you have promised under oath to their fathers? Where can I get meat to give to all this people? For they are crying to me, 'Give us meat for our food.' I cannot carry all this people by myself, for they are too heavy for me. If this is the way you will deal with me, then please do me the favor of killing me at once, so that I need no longer face my distress." These words are filled with emotion. Moses is grieved because the people are crying at the entrance of their tents to the extent that the Lord becomes angry. Moses feels the burden of leading the people who continue to complain of their lot.

On another occasion, Moses prays to God, "The Egyptians will hear of this, for by your power you brought out this people from among them. They will tell the inhabitants of this land, who have heard that you, Lord are in the midst of this people; you, Lord, who directly revealed yourself! Your cloud stands over them, and you go before them by day in a column of cloud and by night in a column of fire. If now you slay this people at once, the nations who have heard such reports of you will say, 'The Lord was not able to bring this people into the land he swore to give them; that is why he slaughtered them in the wilderness'" (Num 14:13-16). God's honor is at stake if the people do not reach the land God promised to them.

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Throughout the desert journey the people's grumbling and desire to return to Egypt provide the counterpoint to God's continuing acts of deliverance. God's power is challenged by the people's lack of faith expressed in grumbling and questioning of God's motive in bringing them out of Egypt.

The meeting of Moses and his father-in-law, Jethro, just before reaching Sinai, is an occasion for recalling the whole experience of Moses and the Israelites. Moses tells Jethro "all that the Lord had done to Pharaoh and the Egyptians for the sake of Israel, and of all the hardships that had beset them on their journey, and how the Lord had rescued them" (Ex 18:8). Jethro's response is to rejoice "over all the goodness that the Lord had shown Israel in rescuing them from the power of the Egyptians" (18:9). Jethro recognizes the goodness of God. He proclaims, "Blessed be the Lord who has rescued you from the power of the Egyptians and of Pharaoh. Now I know that the Lord is greater than all the gods; for he rescued the people from the power of the Egyptians when they treated them arrogantly" (18:11).

The people have left Egypt. They are no longer under Pharaoh. They have ceased to be slaves. Yet they are still within the grip of Egypt. God who knows the heart of Pharaoh knows also the heart of His people. The people's departure from Egypt is only one aspect of their deliverance. The movement out of Egypt requires that the Israelites move away from what it represents for them in the past in order to move forward and towards the future God has in store for them. Their deliverance is a process that requires giving up the past that shaped their attitude and way of life and allowing their present situation to create a new vision of themselves. The people's grumbling, negative though it may sound, is in fact a sign of power. They come to know that with their God, they can grumble and be heard. The Lord hears and listens to the grumbling (16:9.12) of a people still struggling to deal with their new-found freedom. Between Egypt and Sinai, God shows his power by allowing the people to grumble, listening to them, providing for their needs and sustaining them on their journey through the wilderness. God is shaping them to be a people peculiarly his own (Ex 19:4-6). God's power is indeed challenged by the people's grumbling and lack of faith. But this challenge has only proved the great power of God's goodness and love. Ex 15:13 says this beautifully: "In your love you led the people you redeemed; in your strength you guided them to your holy dwelling." The strength of God is equated now with love. In Ps 136 which celebrates God's saving deeds, the

expression “with mighty hand and outstretched arm” (הַיָּד הַגְּדוֹלָה וְהַיָּד הַמְּשֻׁלְמָת) *bēyād ḥāzāqāh uvēzērōa nētūyāh*) is followed by the refrain, “for his mercy endures forever” (136:12). The power of God is interpreted as an expression of God’s loving kindness (חֶסֶד *hesed*).

Conclusion

The narrative of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt in the book of Exodus is an interesting narrative for the study of power and the interplay of power. The opening narrative shows Pharaoh at the center stage. Pharaoh represents the ruling power in an organized society. His power is backed up by the system that acknowledges the status and value of kingship.¹⁹ Pharaoh sees the increasing number of Israelites as a potential challenge to his power. Powerful though he is, he acts out of fear. He oppresses the Israelites, who though already numerous, do not resist Pharaoh but submit to Pharaoh’s demands. Why they do so is a question that the narrative stirs up in the readers. Have they been so socialized in Egyptian society that they offer no resistance at all to Pharaoh even if they experience his demands to be contrary to their interests?

Pharaoh’s first and second strategies are foiled. Subjecting the Israelites to hard labor does not produce the intended effect of reducing their number. The continuing increase of the Israelites poses a challenge to Pharaoh’s power. His second strategy is foiled by the resistance of the Hebrew midwives who count little before Pharaoh yet like Pharaoh can decide on the life or death of the newborn baby if they so wished it. Pharaoh does not recognize the power that obstructs his plan. His third strategy seems to

¹⁹ Robert Gnuse, “The Assault upon Kings and Tyrants in the Moses Tradition,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 39/4 (2009) 190-203, enumerates the functions of kings in the ancient world to illustrate that “kings in the ancient world were important to the social, religious, economic, political and intellectual fabric of society”, 191. He cites Dale Launderville’s analysis of ideology and the social world of kingship in Amorite Babylon, Homeric Greece and Ancient Israel that demonstrates “that the institution of kingship was a cultural, social, economic, political and religious symbol by which societies were unified”, 192. Cf. Dale Launderville, *Piety and Politics: The Dynamics of Royal Authority in Homeric Greece, Biblical Israel, and Old Babylonian Mesopotamia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

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succeed but a child is rescued by his own daughter, the child who would grow up to be the man through whom God will deliver the Israelites. As it happened, when Moses is called by God and is sent back to Pharaoh, Moses faces another Pharaoh, not the Pharaoh who sought his life. Moses goes to Pharaoh to bring the message of God's deliverance for the people of Israel. But who is Moses to confront Pharaoh? He has no social legitimation from the people, no mechanism, no resources, no military might. His power rests on God.

The contrast between Pharaoh and Moses conveys the challenge of charismatic power (Moses) to institutional power (Pharaoh). Moses acts on the divine commission and a contest of powers ensues. At the outset it looks like the contest is between Pharaoh and God but the plague cycle reveals that Pharaoh has no power before and against God. The narrative shows the levels of confrontation - Aaron versus Pharaoh's magicians and Moses versus Pharaoh. God is not in the equation for God's power transcends that of Pharaoh's. God, the power behind Moses, is the God of all the earth. As God demonstrates his power, Pharaoh somehow recognizes it but remains in hardness of heart until it leads to his own destruction. Moses' power becomes a foil to Pharaoh's power. Moses carries out the will of God for the liberation of the people of Israel; Pharaoh acts on his own counsel and for his and his own people's interests.

God's power leads the Israelites out of Egypt through the wilderness to Sinai where they are constituted as a people. In the process of desert wandering, the people keep grumbling every time they experience difficulty and fear for their life. But their grumbling is a sign of gaining power, expressing their need, experiencing being listened to. God responds to grumbling with goodness and generosity. God brings them to Sinai.

A refrain in God's message to Pharaoh through Moses is "Let my people go to serve me" (7:16.26; 8:16; 9:1; 9:13). The stated purpose for bringing the Israelites out of Egypt is to serve the Lord. It would seem that the Israelites would continue to be slaves but under a different master. The story of the wilderness wandering shows that God did not set the Israelites free only to become his own slaves. God set them free to become his people. The Israelites are constituted to be God's people at Sinai. They are given a choice: "If you obey me completely and keep my covenant, you will be my treasured possession among all peoples,

though all the earth is mine” (19:5). God’s power revealed in the wilderness wanderings is the power of His loving kindness.²⁰

It is interesting how this ancient narrative evokes issues that have been dealt with and are still being discussed in analyses of power relations and domination. Among these issues are the consent of the actors to their own domination and the role of socialization.²¹ Education is a process of raising consciousness so that people are able to recognize their situation and articulate their ways of perceiving reality in dialogue with one another. Advancement in science and communications technology paves the way for dissemination of information and various interpretative frameworks, yet it is still open to question whether this leads to greater freedom of people to make wholesome decisions for themselves or constraining them to accept values imposed by dominant cultures. Reading the narrative of Exodus leads us to critical reflection of our own understanding of power relations and our perception of God’s liberating deeds.

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²⁰ Dozeman suggests that wilderness is the symbol for God’s relational power, power based on influence and persuasion rather than control and dominance. *God at War*, 68-69.

²¹ See the discussion of Gramsci, Lukes, Bourdieu and Foucault in Mark Haugaard, “Power and Social Criticism: Reflections on Power, Domination and Legitimacy,” *Critical Horizons* 11/1 (2010): 53-74.