# Issues in Parashat Va-era

## Exodus

### William W. Hallo

The work we know today as the Book of Exodus must have laid some claims to being a chronicle of historical events, of history “as it really happened.” The events recorded in Exodus were close in time to the time of the artist who gave us the finished book. Moreover these events bear a much more crucial relation to the history of his own time, whatever precise date is assigned to that.

A united Israel is hardly conceivable without the shared memory of the Exodus (or an exodus) preceding the conquest of Canaan. And the Exodus in turn presupposes the prior sojourn in Egypt and subsequent wanderings in Sinai.

Genesis moved in the realm of the what may have been. In Exodus, we move to the realm of the what must have been: the necessary organization of group traditions into a meaningful sequence of events that can account for the group’s present awareness of its collective destiny.

Reading the text in its “canonical” shape—that is as a single, finished work of literature—one tends to detect three such components: biography, history and legislation. They predominate respectively in what may be called the prologue of the book (chapters.1-6. the subject of this article), its body or narrative core (chapters 7-17), and its denouement or conclusion (chapters 21-40). All of them converge in its climactic centerpiece, the revelation at Sinai (chapters 18-20). They may serve as a thread in distinguishing the kinds of ancient Near Eastern literature—inevitably very diverse—respectively relevant for their elucidation.

To turn from Genesis to Exodus is, then, to pass from legend to history. The gap is considerable, but the transition is facilitated by recourse in both books to biography: the biographies of the Patriarchs, the twelve sons of Jacob, and particularly Joseph at the end of Genesis, the biographies of Moses and his kin at the beginning of Exodus. The entire story of the Egyptian oppression, from the midwives who frustrated the Pharaoh’s intent to the enforced labor of the Israelites, is told in terms of its relationship to Miriam, Aaron and Moses.

The historicity of these three figures was an article of faith long before the close of the biblical period (and an adulatory “Life of Moses” was written by Philo Judaeus of Alexandria shortly thereafter). References to. them in pre-exilic prophecy, in the Deuteronomic history, and in the Psalms show how deeply embedded was the belief in their crucial role in transforming the twelve tribes into one people.

But precisely because of their part in the emergence of Israel’s nationhood, later memory tended to invest them with legendary accretions which have the cumulative effect of discrediting their historicity in modern critical judgment. Thus it is important to identify the purely literary elements in their biographies, especially any so-called topos, a motif or theme cast in a recurrent literary form.

#### The biography of Moses

One such topos is the tale of Moses’ birth. On the surface it resembles a familiar folkloristic motif: the exposure of the infant son by royal decree and his rescue and ultimate arrival at or return to the palace, although the motifs of exposure in a reed basket and rescue by a person attached to the palace appear nowhere outside the “Birth Legend.”

Many secondary motifs are likewise shared by the tale of Moses with particular versions of the theme as developed in other cultures. Among the most is the “Birth Legend of Sargon of Akkad” preserved in an Assyrian text cast in the form of a fictionalized autobiography. But there is no indication that this legend about Sargon goes further back than the late 8th century B.C.E.

Scores of comparable legends have been identified in other literatures, but none includes all the elements of the Moses birth legend, which evidently evolved in response to the felt need to explain both his name and his origins, or better: to explain them away, for there were surely more convincing etymologies available both in Egyptian and in Hebrew.

Another topos crucial to the figure of Moses is his speech difficulty.

It is remarked at least two and possibly three different times.. The “heavy” speech idiom is rooted in Near Eastern literature. In one of the earliest Sumerian epics, for example, a central role is played by the messenger whose “mouth was too heavy” to repeat a message verbatim, leading by necessity to the invention of (letter-)writing.

The marriage of Moses again involves familiar literary topoi, combined in unique or novel ways. The initial encounter with Zipporah at the well, the insistent hospitality on the part of her family, and even her father’s name here (Reuel; 2.15-22) are reminiscent of the wooing of Rebekah and to some extent of the first meeting of Jacob and Rachel.

#### The emergence of Israel

When Moses assumes the divinely assigned leadership role, the focus of the narrative shifts from the development of an individual to the birth of a nation or, in literary terms, from biography to history. Correspondingly, the significant literary unit grows from the isolated topos to the complex of motifs which together constitute an entire type of narrative within a given larger genre, and fruitful comparison must move from what may be called “topology” to typology.

The narrative portions of Exodus recur in no other Near Eastern historiography. True, the general phenomenon of large-scale ethnic movements characterizes the late 13th century B.C.E. throughout the Eastern Mediterranean, and there are heroic echoes of these migrations in the epics of various peoples. And Egyptian literature attests, for the same period, to the concern for workmen and for straw to maintain the daily quota of brick production and to the tight control exercised by Egypt over her eastern frontier, regulating the entry by tribes coming westward across the Sinai desert in the face of drought in Palestine (Edom), or sending military search parties eastward into Sinai in pursuit of individual runaway slaves.

On a royal Egyptian stele, there is even a mention of Israel among the victims of Pharaoh Merneptah, toward the end of the 13th century in what is certainly the earliest extra­biblical reference to Israel, and the only instance known from an Egyptian text; in turn, the name of Merneptah is thought to survive in the toponym “the spring of Mei-neftoach” (“the waters of Neftoach”; Joshua 15.9; 18.15).

But the specific events recorded by Exodus for Israel’s history are not validated by independent testimony from any extra-biblical source. And no comparable events are claimed (or conceded) for any other people’s history—unless it be by the Bible itself [for example, Amos 9.7: “To Me, O Israelites, you are just like the Ethiopians —declares the Lord. True, I brought Israel up from the land of Egypt, but also the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir”].

No other people preserved a record of its own enslavement, or of “despoiling” its oppressors by stealth, or of its grudging farewell to the “fleshpots of Egypt,” or finally of its collective entry into a social compact. *The very uniqueness of these narratives in the literary sense argues in favor of their authenticity; at least they are not imitations of foreign models*.

A word about the oppression. In Exodus itself, it is dealt with in an extremely cursory manner. The “storage cities” of Pithom and Rameses are mentioned as the ostensible objects of the Israelites’ forced labor; they provide a precious clue—possibly the sole clue—to the historical context of the oppression, since the cities with which they can best be identified were built in the Eastern Delta under the first kings of the 19th (First Ramesside) Dynasty in the 13th century B.C.E. But the further details of the oppression, including Pharaoh’s attempts to slay the male offspring and the increasing exactions of the foremen, are told in the context of Moses’ biography and add little to the historical picture. It is in the legislative context, both inside and outside Exodus, that the oppression is most emphasized. The second iteration of the Decalogue in Deuteronomy 5.15 insists that Israel “remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt,” and “for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” is a refrain in all the other law codes.

The Bible elevates the theme of oppression to a typological level, justifying thereby the legal protection to be accorded to the stranger living in Israel’s midst or to the slave be he originally Israelite or stranger. Characteristically, the biblical legislation adds the stranger to the widow and orphan, the two categories of unprotected classes traditionally the object of (royal) solicitude in the ancient Near East. Thus the memory of the oppression remains a living stimulus for a distinctive Israelite modification of an ancient Near Eastern concept of social justice.

If Exodus deals summarily with the oppression, it dwells elaborately on the negotiations to bring about the release. Moses and Aaron, assuming their first historical role, confront Pharaoh seven times and scourge Egypt with what were originally seven plagues (see Psalms 78 and 105); they became ten plagues when two discrete sources were combined into the final artful redaction, the form familiar from the liturgy of the Passover Haggadah.

Whatever their precise number, nature or order, however, the plagues are less a historical than a literary phenomenon. They are probably indebted to catalogues of calamities known from native Egyptian compositions, notably the “Admonitions of Ipuwer.” These are usually assigned to the First Intermediate Period (ca. 2100 B.C.E.), less often to the Second Intermediate Period (ca. 1600 B.C.E.), but in any event draw a classic picture of a chain of ecological disasters overtaking the usually stable Egyptian society: the sand dunes advance over the arable land, the peasant abandons his plot in despair, the birth rate declines and the death rate increases, corpses are abandoned to the Nile, yet its waters, thus polluted, are drunk for want of better; law and order break down. Such traditional evocations of Egyptian collapse can hardly be dissociated entirely from the stylized narrative of the ten plagues.

The Exodus narrative climaxes in the slaying of the first-born, and is not demonstrably indebted to any extra-biblical model. On the contrary, it served as the model for subsequent deliverances down to our own day. In line with repeated injunctions to instruct the next generation, it was made a prominent part of every narrative of the national experience, whether in biblical prose or in poetry. The memory of it was so effectively impressed on all posterity that it colored every subsequent crisis in the national experience. Every oppression was somehow regarded as another “Egypt,” every liberation as a triumph over Pharaoh.

## The strange mentions of three women

### Anna Urowitz-Freudenstein

#### “Amram took to wife his father’s sister Yocheved.”

While Moses’ mother is mentioned several times in the Torah, her proper name, Yocheved, is stated only twice, here and in Numbers 26.59. Here, she is simply described in the Hebrew as her husband Am­ram’s *dodah*, an imprecise term indicating a familial relationship. Numbers 26.59, however, makes clear that Yocheved was the daughter of Jacob’s son Levi (and that she was born to Levi in Egypt). That information has been taken into account in the translation of the present verse: Yocheved (daughter of Levi) was the aunt of her husband, Amram, a grandson of Levi.

The Rabbis were uncomfortable with this marriage, since it appeared to contradict the prohibition in Leviticus 18.12 against an aunt-nephew sexual/marital relationship. One response to this dilemma was simply to point out that the relationship was pre-Sinaitic and therefore was not restricted to the law as stipulated in Leviticus. Another rabbinic approach rested on further investigation into the meaning of the word *dodah*. According to BT San­hedrin 58b, Yocheved was only a “half-aunt.” She and Amram’s father were said to have shared the same father (Levi), but they were born of different (un­named) mothers. Therefore, the marriage of Amram and Yocheved was not prohibited as it was between a man and his half-aunt.

#### “Aaron took to wife Elisheva, daughter of Ammina­dav.”

The Torah mentions Elisheva only once and defines her by her familial relationships. While it is standard for a biblical woman to be identified by her father’s name, and even by her husband’s or children’s names, the mention of all of them in the same verse is unusual. The description of Elisheva is even more unusual in that she is also identified as the sister of Nachshon.

Vayikra Rabbah 20.2 elaborates on these relationships by pointing to one day in Elisheva’s life, which was also an important day in the lives of all the male relatives mentioned in this verse. According to narratives found later in the Torah, it occurred exactly one year after the Exodus took place; on that day, the Tabernacle was dedicated in the wilderness, and Elisheva experienced a number of joyous events—but then a disaster transformed her happiness into mourn­ing. The joyous incidents were that her brother-in­-law (Moses) took on a mantle of leadership that is compared to royalty; her brother (Nachshon) was made chief of the tribe of Judah; her husband (Aaron) was made high priest; her grandson (Pinchas) was anointed as a military leader; and two of her sons (Nadav and Avihu) were made assistants to the high priest. The circumstance for grief concerned the sudden death og these two sons, presumably at God’s hand.

Even though Elisheva bat Amminadav is men­tioned only once in the Torah, a rabbinic opinion in BT Sotah equates her with Puah, one of the two midwives who saved the Israelite baby boys contrary to Pharaoh’s decree. These two mid­wives, Shifrah and Puah, are identified by some rabbinic commentators as the mother-daughter team of Yocheved and Miriam, and by other rabbinic commentators as a mother-daughter-in-law team, namely, Yocheved and Elisheva. Such conflation of several bib­lical personalities into one person is typical of rabbinic interpretation.

#### “Aaron’s son Eleazar took to wife one of Putiel’s daughters.”

This verse is part of a longer priestly lineage recorded in Exodus 6. It is unusual, although not unique, in that it mentions a wife. The way that this woman is designated is also unusual, in that she is described as one of the daughters (plural) of Putiel, rather than simply a daughter (singular) of Putiel. The Rabbis derived from this plurality that both sides of her family may be seen as influences on her son, Pinchas (who plays a major, heroic role in events recorded in Numbers 25). They learned about her an­cestors by analyzing the name of her father Putiel, since he is not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible, and nothing else is known about him. By examining the Hebrew root of his name [which is actually Egyptian in origin], they deduced that he (and therefore his daughter) is descended from Jethro (Moses’ father-in-law) on one side of his family, and from Joseph on the other side (BT Sotah 43a).

## The Weighing of the Heart

### Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, ז״ל

Even before the first plague has struck Egypt, God tells Moses: *”I will harden Pharaoh’s heart* and multiply My miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt.”

The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart is referred to no less than 30 times in the course of the story of the Exodus. Sometimes it is Pharaoh who is said to harden his heart. At other times, God is said to have done so. The Torah uses three different verbs in this context:  to strengthen,  to harden, and  to make heavy.

Throughout the ages, the commentators have been concerned with one problem. If God hardened Pharaoh’s heart, how could he have been to blame for not letting the Israelites go? He had no choice in the matter. It was God’s doing, not his. That he and his people should be punished seems to flout the fundamental principle of justice, that we are guilty only for what we have freely chosen to do.

However, the commentators noted that for the first five plagues, Pharaoh is said to harden his own heart. The obstinacy, the refusal, the intransigence are his. Only with the sixth plague is God said to have done so. This led to several explanations.

Rashi says that the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart in the last five plagues was a *punishment* *for the first five*, when it was Pharaoh’s own obstinacy that led him to refuse to let the people go.

Maimonides interprets God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart as meaning that “*repentance was withheld from him*, and the liberty to turn from his wickedness was not accorded to him.”

Albo and Sforno offer the opposite interpretation. God hardened Pharaoh’s heart precisely *to restore his free will*. After the succession of plagues that had devastated the land, Pharaoh was under overwhelming pressure to let the Israelites go. Had he done so, it would not have been out of free choice, but rather under *force majeure*. God therefore *strengthened* Pharaoh’s heart so that even after the first five plagues he was genuinely free to say Yes or No.

It may be that all three are right and are simply responding to the different verbs. “Hardening” supports Rashi’s reading. Pharaoh was hard on the Israelites, so God was hard on him. ”Making heavy” supports Maimonides. Pharaoh lacked the energy, the strength, to repent. ”To strengthen” supports Albo and Sforno. The text allows for all three possibilities.

However, part of the truth may lie in a completely different direction, The Egyptians—Pharaohs especially—were preoccupied by death. Their funerary practices were astonishingly elaborate and were meant to prepare the person for life after death. The tombs of the Pharaohs were among their most lavish creations. Tutankhamun’s, discovered in 1922, is a dazzling example. One of the greatest literary works of ancient Egypt was *The Book of the Dead*.

The Torah notes the attention the Egyptians gave to death. At the end of B’reishit, we read of how the Egyptians accompanied Joseph and his family in the funeral procession to bury Jacob. The Canaanites witnessed this and said, “The Egyptians are holding a solemn ceremony of mourning.” They named the place, *Avel Mitzrayim*. They called it “the place of Egyptian mourning,” not Israelite mourning, despite the fact that it was for Jacob, a non-Egyptian, who was being mourned. Then we read of how Joseph himself was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt. In the Torah, only Joseph, and Jacob at Joseph’s request, are embalmed. So we have already been forewarned about the significance of death to the Egyptian mind.

However, there is one specific aspect of Egyptian belief that opens up an entirely new perspective on the references to Pharaoh’s heart. According to Egyptian myth, the deceased underwent a trial to establish their worthiness or otherwise to enjoy life after death in Aaru, the Field of Reeds, where souls live on in pleasure for eternity. They believed that the soul resides in the heart, and the trial consisted of the ceremony of *The Weighing of the Heart*. Other organs were removed after death, but the heart was left because it was needed for the trial.

On one side of the scales was a feather. On the other, was placed the heart. If the heart was as light as the feather, the dead could continue to Aaru, but if it was heavier, it was devoured by the goddess Ammit (a combination of lion, hippopotamus and crocodile), and its owner was condemned to live in Duat, the underworld. An illustration, on papyrus, in *The Book of the Dead* shows the ceremony, undertaken in the Hall of Two Truths, overseen by Anubis, the Egyptian God of the dead.

It follows that the root *k-v-d*, “to make heavy,” would have had a highly specific meaning for the Egyptians of that time. It would imply that Pharaoh’s heart had become heavier than a feather. He would fail the heart-weighing ceremony and therefore be denied what was most important to him—the prospect of joining the gods in the afterlife.

No one would have been in any doubt as to why this was so. The feather represented *Ma’at*, the central Egyptian value that included the concepts of truth, balance, order, harmony, justice, morality, and law. Not only was this fundamental to Egyptian culture. It was the task of the Pharaoh to ensure that it prevailed. This had been an Egyptian principle since a thousand years before the Exodus, found in Pyramid texts dating from the third millennium B.C.E. *Ma’at* meant cosmic order. Its absence invited chaos. A Pharaoh whose heart had become heavier than the *Ma’at* feather was not only endangering his own afterlife, but threatening the entire people over whom he ruled with turmoil and disarray.

One of the things the deceased were supposed to do as part of the trial was to make a series of negative confessions, 42 in all, declaring themselves innocent of the kind of sin that would exclude them from paradise. These are some of them:

* I have not done injury to men.
* I have not oppressed those beneath me.
* I have not murdered.
* I have not commanded murder.
* I have not caused suffering to men.

If the “heavying” of Pharaoh’s heart is an allusion to the Weighing of the Heart ceremony, it allows us to read the story in a completely new way.

First, it suggests that it is directed to Egyptians as well as Israelites; to humanity as a whole. The Torah tells us three times that the purpose of the signs and wonders was “so that the *Egyptians* may know that I am the Lord.” This is the core of monotheism. It is not that the Israelites have their God, and the Egyptians their pantheon, but rather that there is one sovereign power in the universe.

That is the point of at least three of the plagues: the first, directed against Hapi, the god of the Nile; the second, frogs, directed against Heket, the Egyptian goddess of fertility and childbirth, represented in the form of a frog; and the ninth, the plague of darkness, directed against Ra, the sun god. The message of these plagues would have been clear to the Egyptians: there is a power greater than those they have worshipped until now. The God of Israel is the God of the world and of all humanity.

The religion of Israel is not intended to be the religion of all humanity. Nowhere in the narrative does God imply that He wants the Egyptians to adopt Israelite religious practices. The point is quite different. *Religion is particular. Morality is universal*. If the story of the “heavying” of Pharaoh’s heart does allude to the Book of the Dead, then the story of the Exodus is not simply a partisan account from an Israelite point of view. It is telling us that *certain things are wrong, whoever does them and whoever they are done against.* They are wrong by Egyptian standards, too. That was true of Pharaoh’s decision to kill all male Israelite children. That was an unforgivable sin against *Ma’at*.

Justice is universal. That is the point made plainly by the Torah’s three stories of Moses’ early life. He sees an Egyptian hitting an Israelite and intervenes. He sees Israelites hitting one another and intervenes. He sees non-Israelite shepherds behaving roughly to Jethro’s daughters and intervenes. The first was a case of non-Israelite against Israelite, the second was Israelite against Israelite, the third was non-Israelite against non-Israelite. This is the simplest way of telling us that Moses’ sense of justice was impartial and universal.

Finally, and most deeply, the Torah is hinting at a self-contradiction at the heart of the Egyptian concept of *Ma’at*. The most generous interpretation of Pharaoh’s refusal to let the people go is that he was charged with maintaining order in the Empire. A successful minority like the Israelites could be seen as a threat to such order. If they stayed and thrived, they might take over the country as the Hyksos had done several centuries earlier. If they were allowed to leave, other enslaved groups might be tempted to do likewise. Emigration is a bad sign when the place people are trying to leave is a superpower. That is why, for many years, the Soviet Union forbade Jews to leave the country.

Pharaoh, in his repeated refusal to let the people go, doubtless justified his decision in each case on the grounds that he was securing *Ma’at*, order. Meanwhile however, with each plague the country was reduced to ever greater chaos. That is because oppressing people, which is what Pharaoh was doing, was a fundamental offense against *Ma’at*.

On this reading, the whole issue of Pharaoh hardening his heart was not so much psychological as political. In his position as semi-divine head of state of an empire that practiced forced labor on a massive scale, Pharaoh could not let the Israelites go free without creating the risk that other groups would also challenge the Corvée, the unpaid, conscripted semi-slave labor that was part of Egyptian society and was only abolished in 1882.

For the first five plagues, Pharaoh could tell himself that he was enduring minor inconvenience to protect a major principle. But as the plagues became more serious, reducing Egypt to chaos, Pharaoh’s room for maneuver grew ever less. Having five times said “No” to the Israelites, he could not now back down without making himself look ridiculous, forfeiting his authority and damaging his standing. *Pharaoh was a prisoner of his own system*, held captive by his own decisions.

Seeking to protect order, he created chaos. That is because the order he was seeking to protect was built on a foundation of injustice: the enslavement of the many for the benefit of the few. The more he tried to defend it, the heavier his heart grew.

Justice is universal. The Exodus story of how the supreme Power entered history to liberate the supremely powerless is not just for Jews. It is the world’s greatest metanarrative of hope.

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## The hardening of the heart

### Nahum Sarna

At the scene by the Burning Bush, God shared with Moses His foreknowledge that the pharaoh would reject the call for the release of the Israelite slaves: “I know that the King of Egypt will let you go only because of a greater might.” The clear implication of these words is that the man is possessed of a ruthless and stubborn character, and is devoid of all compassion. He will eventually yield, but reluctantly, and only under compulsion of overwhelming force. However, toward the end of the revelation to Moses, a new and seemingly contradictory note is introduced. God makes the startling declaration that He Himself will harden the heart of the king so that he will not let the people go.

The pharaoh’s obstinate resistance to Moses’ demands actually appears to be attributed to divine causality!

Moreover, the theologically disturbing perplexities produced by such a statement are intensified by a repeated observation of the narrator. In the course of the description of the series of punitive disasters that befall the Egyptians, be tells us unambiguously that God indeed “hardened Pharaoh’s heart.”

Before examining this problem in detail, it is useful to discuss the idiom itself. Generally in the Bible, physical sensations are expressed in terms of the actions of the specific part of the body with which they are believed to be associated. Thus, bowels were thought to be the seat of strong emotions. When Jeremiah cries out in anguish, “My bowels, my bowelsl’“ he is really saying, “O my suffering, my suffering!” And when he speaks of Ephraim as God’s beloved son, and declares, “My bowels are troubled for him,” he means that he is filled with longing for him.

In like manner, the elegist who laments the fall of Jerusalem in the Book of Lamentations can proclaim that his “liver spills on the ground” over the ruin of his people. When the psalmist confesses that his kidneys afflict him, he is suffering the torments of conscience; and when God “probes the kidneys,” He subjects to searching scrutiny the innermost thoughts of a human being.

So it is that the heart only rarely in the Bible refers to the physical organ, as such. Mostly it is as the vital principle, the controlling center of human actions, the seat of the inner life, that “heart” is used. Man’s thoughts, his intellectual activity, the cognitive, conative, and affective aspects of his personality, are all regarded as issuing from the heart. The state of the heart defines, then, the essential character of a person. Its “hard­ening” connotes the willful suppression of the capacity for reflection, for self-examination, for unbiased judgments about good and evil. In short, the “hardening of the heart” becomes synonymous with the numbing of the soul, a condition of moral atrophy.

The motif of the hardening of the pharaoh’s heart occurs precisely 20 times in one form or another within the scope of the Exodus story between Chapters 4 and 14. Intriguingly, the distribution of the motif is exactly equally divided between the pharaoh and God as the direct cause of the hardening. Ten times it is said that the pharaoh hardened his own heart, and ten times the hardening is attributed to God.

Furthermore, it is not until the advent of the sixth plague that divine intervention begins. For the first five plagues the pharaoh’s obduracy is the product of his own volition. This is crucial to the theological issue, for it stamps the king as a callous, evil-minded person who must bear full responsibility for his iniquitous acts freely and know­ingly perpetrated.

The pharaoh’s culpability is established beyond doubt. He is not an innocent, blameless individual whose integrity is com­promised, and finally subverted, by the intervention of Providence. He exhibits an obvious and willing predisposition to cruelty. Accordingly, the king’s continued intransigence from the sixth plague on cannot be said to be involuntary, a point that is carefully made in the narrative by its twice stressing that the pharaoh’s obstinacy after the seventh plague was again self-willed. He was not one to be constrained by moral principles, and he cannot be excused from criminal liability.

In brief, the idea of God’s hardening the pharaoh’s heart is that He utilizes a man’s natural proclivity toward evil; He accentuates the process in furtherance of His own historical purposes.

There is one other point to be made in this connection. The theology and political theory of ancient Egypt stressed the literal divinity of the living pharaoh. His will was law, his word absolute. By reinforcing the pharaoh’s stubbornness, thereby making him a prisoner of his own irrationality, God deprives the “god” of his freedom of action. The pharaoh can no longer control his own will and his so-called divinity is mocked.

## Why Pharaoh’s name is never mentioned

### James K. Hoffmeier

The Joseph story serves to explain the circumstances under which the family of Jacob entered Egypt with its flocks and herds, as aliens settling in the northeast Delta, the land of Goshen. There is no attempt to explain the amount of time that elapsed from Joseph’s death until the open­ing of the book of Exodus, from the “good old days” under Joseph to the oppres­sion that begins in Exodus 1. It is widely recognized that Exodus 1.1-7 serves as a bridge connecting the story of Joseph to that of Moses and the exodus.

For over a century, source critics have viewed the composition of Exodus 1 through 14 as a combination of the earlier J and E sources with insertions and ed­itorial work by the Priestly writers in the fifth century B.C.E. During the 1980s se­rious criticism against this dominant view began to appear, and new literary ap­proaches were advanced. Recent literary readings of the Exodus narratives reveal that the linguistic and literary criteria used in the past to identify different sources can no longer be sustained.

While new literary readings of Exodus 1 to 14 are revealing a literary unity, against the more fragmented picture offered by source critics, other scholars now see folklorist, mythic, and legendary influences that once again cast a pall over the historical dimensions of the text. For instance, one such proponent frequently uses the term “historiography” to describe the Exodus narratives, while he considers the units to be made up of “ahistorical folk tradition[s]” and “popular folklore and folk his­tory of the time, arranged to make a fundamental affirmation about their already existent self-identity as a nation of *gerim* [sojourners], led by God.”

Similarly, another such scholar assumes that the sojourn and exodus story is legendary and concludes that the material is devoid of historical value. This scholar asserts: “It is generally acknowledged by scholars that the traditions about Israel’s sojourn in Egypt and the exodus of the Israelites are legendary and epic in nature. The very notion that a single family could in the course of a few centuries develop into a whole peo­ple, a nation, consisting of hundreds of thousands of individuals, is so fantastic that it deserves no credence from a historical point of view.”

The use of mythological language and images in a Hebrew narrative does not mean that a fictitious event is being described. In the end, those who consider the Exodus stories to be histori­cized myths, folklorist tales, or legends rest on assumptions about the nature of the literature that cannot be proven.

After an undisclosed period of tranquility and tribal fertility, a radical change oc­curred when “there arose a new king over Egypt who did not know Joseph.” Unfortunately, this pharaoh, like those who followed in Exodus, is anonymous. This silence is used as evidence for the mythic or legendary nature of the exodus narratives, while for others it demonstrates that the Hebrew writers were not really interested in history or simply did not know the facts.

The ab­sence of the pharaoh’s name may ultimately be for theological reasons, because the Bible is not trying to answer the question “who is the pharaoh of the exodus” to satisfy the curiosity of modern historians; rather, it was seeking to clarify for Is­rael who was the God of the exodus.

In Exodus 5.1, Moses and his brother Aaron approach Pharaoh with the request, “Let my people go.” To which the obdurate monarch responds, “Who is the Lord that I should hear his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord.” Pharaoh not only rejects Moses’ petition, but denies knowledge of the Lord. This rebuff sets the stage for the subsequent series of plagues in which God demonstrates who He is, both to Pharaoh and to Israel.

*Another factor that might account for the absence of Pharaoh’s name in the exodus narratives is that it was normal in New Kingdom inscriptions not to dis­close the name of Pharaoh’s enemies.* Several examples of this practice will suffice to illustrate this point. Thutmose Ill’s campaign against the rebellious coalition at Megiddo was fomented by the king of Kadesh (on the Orontes) who is named “that wretched enemy of Kadesh” or simply “that wretched enemy” in the Annals of Thutmose III and in the Gebel Barkal stela. Even when reviewing the booty taken from this battle, the scribes do not name the king whose possessions the Egyptians captured.

A stela reports on Amenhotep II’s successful battles against some Nubian tribes. “Seven chieftains” from Tekhsy were slain and their bodies unceremoniously tied upside down on the king’s bark as he returned to Egypt. Subsequently, six of the enemies were displayed on the walls of Thebes, while the seventh was returned south to Napata for the same treatment. Once again, none of the names of the Nubian chieftains are recorded.

In another Amenhotep II stela reference is made to campaigns in Edom, Canaan, and Syria. For­eign kings who are defeated, deposed, or killed are unnamed. Mention is also made of the chieftains of Naharin (the land east of the Euphrates), Khatti (the Hittites), and Babylon. Despite the fact that these were rather prominent kings, their names are not given.

This large stela, known as the “Memphis Stela,” con­tains extensive documentation of cities and regions attacked. However, only the names of two minor chieftains are recorded. What is different with these two is that they surrendered to Amen­hotep, and one of them was taken to Egypt along with his family as prisoners of war. It thus appears that in the 18th Dynasty, as a rule, Pharaoh’s enemies were not usually named unless they were taken captive.

The same practice continues in the Ramesside era. The Karnak reliefs of Seti I show him vigorously battling various enemies. Against the Libyans he is de­picted trampling on a chieftain while about to dispatch another with a javelin. Against the Hittites, the chariot driving Seti fires arrows at the fleeing Hittite king. The 20 lines of text over this relief describe the battle in general terms, but do not mention the name of the depicted Hittite foe.

Rameses II had extensive reports of his battle at Kadesh against a coalition headed by the Hittite king Muwatallis inscribed on several temples. Throughout the “Bulletin” and “Poem,” the expressions “the enemy from Khatti” and “the wretched chief of Khatti” are used throughout. Lesser kings are also dubbed “the chief of {an individual’s homeland).” In the Merneptah (Israel) stela, the primary focus is on the Libyan in­vasion. The chieftain is called “the wretched chief” and “the Libyan enemy” throughout the battle report until the point when he is taken prisoner. Only then is his name disclosed.

What can be concluded from the normal Egyptian scribal practice of omitting the names of Pharaoh’s enemies? Surely historians would not dismiss the his­toricity of Thutmose Ill’s Megiddo campaign because the names of the kings of Kadesh and Megiddo are not recorded. It seems unlikely that Thutmose and his scribes were not aware of their enemies’ names. No one denies that there was a battle at Kadesh between the forces of Rameses II and Muwatallis because the latter’s name does not appear in Egyptian records of the event.

We cannot think the names were omitted because these documents were written by later historians who were ignorant of the details they wrote about because the texts cited above all come from dated documents written during the lifetimes of the kings whose actions are recorded. In the few cases where an enemy’s name is divulged, it seems to have been because that chieftain or king was captured and taken prisoner.

In contrast with the Egyptian scribal practice of omitting the names of Pharaoh’s royal enemies, Assyrian rulers from the second through the first millen­niums are meticulous in reciting the names of their enemies. This difference is especially true in Neo-Assyrian annals during the period (ninth through seventh centuries B.C.E.) when, according to many biblical scholars, the books of Genesis through Joshua were being written. And yet the New Kingdom Egyptian practice of omitting a king’s name is followed in Exodus, rather than the Assyrian tradition of naming monarchs that dominates the first millennium.

The history of the Israelite monarchy in Kings and Chronicles, which spans the first half of the first millennium, faithfully mentions the enemy kings of Israel and Judah’s by name. The Hebrew scribal tradition at work in Kings and Chronicles reflects the con­temporary Neo-Assyrian counterpart, against the New Kingdom Egyptian cus­tom in Genesis and Exodus.

What possible rationale is there for the deliberate omission of the names of Pharaoh’s enemies in New Kingdom texts? Could it be a literary counterpart to the practice of excising the names from inscriptions and defacing the images of one’s enemies? Alan Schulman has called this practice *damnatio memoriae*. Dis­tinguished from the royal practice of usurpation, *damnatio memoriae* required de­facing both the image and name of the individual whose memory and very ex­istence were being magically annihilated. In the case of battle reliefs where, for instance, Seti attacks the Libyan chieftain or the Hittite king, they are shown shot with arrows and about to be killed by Pharaoh’s blow. And the names are not recorded.

A variation on the *damnatio memoriae* practice is the Execration Texts. Begin­ning in the Old Kingdom, names of Egypt’s enemies, real or potential, including nations, tribes, and foreign kings, were written on jars or anthropoid figurines and then smashed so as to magically destroy those enemies. Provisionally, it might be suggested that the practice of ignoring the name of Pharaoh’s enemies in royal in­scriptions was intended to destroy magically Egypt’s enemies in a similar way. An alternative explanation for the practice of omitting the names was as a sign of con­tempt for one’s enemy.

The omission of Pharaoh’s name in the exodus story, I suggest, was deliberate.

For the Hebrew writer, there was good theological reasons for this silence: the reader learns of the name of God and His power as the Exodus story unfolds, whereas his arch-rival, Pharaoh, remains anonymous—a nice piece of irony.

##  ‘And Upon all the Gods of Egypt I Will Execute Judgment’

### Ira Friedman

In Exodus 12:12, God tells Moses and Aaron that He will “execute judgment on all the Egyptian deities.” In order to understand how God carried out this promise, the account of the ten plagues has to be read in light of ancient Egyptian religious beliefs. Some commentators have done that, generally suggesting that each of the plagues was targeted at a different Egyptian deity. But over time the ancient Egyptians had as many as 2,000 deities. If the Egyptians did not associate each plague with the deity suggested by the commentators, they would not have gotten God’s message.

This article discusses passages in the Torah’s narrative of the ten plagues that can readily be associated with Egyptian worship of the god­dess of war, plague, and pestilence, Sekhmet, and suggests that God used this deity as the focal point of His defeat of the Egyptian deities.

Ancient Egyptians prayed to Sekhmet to refrain from attacking them and asked her, instead, to inflict plagues and destruction on their enemies. When God showed that neither Sekhmet nor the rest of the Egyptian pantheon could protect the Egyptians from the plagues or exact revenge on the Israelites, He demonstrated the futility of the Egyptians’ faith in them.

The role of Sekhmet worship in the Exodus narrative begins with the first plague, in which God turned the Nile’s water to blood. At first blush, the reason God attacked the Nile seems obvious: it was the very lifeline of the Egyptians. But why, then, did He not inflict long-term damage on the great river? After all, that would have shattered the Egyptian economy and inflicted a famine from which the Egyptians might never have recovered.

Evidently, that was not God’s plan. If God only wanted to contaminate the Nile to begin degrading the health of the Egyptians, why choose blood over other potential contaminants? And why choose a motif—the bloody Nile—that was reminiscent of the ancient Egyptian myth, the “Destruction of Humanity”? That would have only prompted the Egyptians to attribute the blood to more slaugh­ter by their murderous and bloodthirsty goddess Sekhmet, not to a God whom they had never heard of.

Yet that may be exactly what God intended. There is reason to believe that He wanted the Egyptians to assume that the bloody Nile was caused by the lion-headed Sekhmet. This would lead them to focus their prayers for relief and vengeance on this mighty goddess. Over the course of the next nine plagues, the futility of their prayers should have become in­creasingly clear. The ultimate repudiation of the Egyptian deities came in the tenth plague. There, God prevented “the Destroyer” from attacking the Israelite houses that had the blood of the Paschal lamb smeared on their lintels and doorposts.

The deity the ancient Egyptians called “the Destroyer” was Sekhmet.

A brief review of the religious beliefs in ancient Egypt helps us understand the ancient Egyptians’ mindset as they were confronted by the ten plagues. The ancient Egyptians were in awe of the manifestations of nature. Like all humans, they knew they were at nature’s mercy. The sun gave them a sense of time and constancy but could not ensure peace and tranquility. The Nile sustained them through annual inundations, but “high” and “low” Niles could bring famine and disrupt the social order. Animals could be docile or hostile, but had powers the Egyptians could neither fathom nor control.

Consequently, the Egyptians conceived and worshipped gods through whom they hoped to appease and moderate the forces of nature. Al­though the Egyptians did not worship the Nile itself, they worshipped the gods of the inundation. They prayed to deities who had manifestations of animal power for good or bad—for example, the falcon-headed su­preme sun-god Ra, the motherly, cow-headed Hathor and the raging lion-headed Sekhmet.

At some point in time, their beliefs coalesced into a common creation legend and then into a more or less cohesive belief system. The names and attributes of the creator gods changed over time, but some themes remained fairly constant: Ra was supreme, and the king—called “Pharaoh” since the 18th Dynasty—was himself (or herself) believed by the Egyptians to be a kind of deity.

Sekhmet was one of the most powerful Egyptian deities. The daugh­ter of Ra and the consort of Ptah, one of Egypt’s creator gods, she was directly associated with plagues, which were often called the “messen­gers” or “slaughterers” of Sekhmet. Egypt’s “goddess of war and destruction,” Sekhmet carried out Ra’s decisions to have Egyptians or their foes killed. Sekhmet shared Ptah’s cult center in Memphis, long Egypt’s administrative capital.

Sekhmet was the wrathful alter ego of the goddess Hathor, perhaps Egypt’s most popular deity.15 As daughters of Ra, they were both referred to as the “Eye of Ra.”16 Because Sekhmet inflicted plagues and destruc­tion, she also came to be asked to protect Egypt by turning her wrath on its enemies and curing Egyptians of the effects of plagues and illness.17 When the Egyptians prayed for healing, they often prayed to Sekhmet.

The “Destruction of Humanity” myth may have laid the foundation for Sekhmet to be known as “the Destroyer.” According to this myth, Ra decided to destroy humanity because the Egyptians failed to pay him proper respect. He commanded his daughter, the “Eye of Ra,” to wreak vengeance on the Egyptians. She did his bidding and waded in her vic­tims’ blood.

Ra later changed his mind about destroying humanity. In order to subdue Sekhmet, Ra ordered that a large quantity of a red substance be ground up and mixed into 7,000 jars of beer, turning the beer the color of blood. The beer was then poured onto fields, presum­ably the fields of inundation along the banks of the Nile. Attracted by the “blood,” Sekhmet drank the mixture, became drunk and was subdued.

Another myth, the “Distant Goddess,” depicted the desert as Sekhmet’s natural habitat. This myth related that Sekhmet openly defied Ra’s authority by traveling to the desert and destroying everything she encountered. One or more gods finally persuaded her to return to Ra.

This combination of destructive and protective qualities, and her role as the goddess of plagues and pestilence, made Sekhmet the ideal instrument for God to use to demonstrate His supreme authority, to the exclusion of that of the Egyptian gods.

In Judaism, the ten plagues are the paradigmatic display of the hand of God. The plagues also delivered a message to the significant portion of Israelites in Egypt who were steeped in Egyptian culture and worshipped the Egyp­tian deities to repent and return to the worship of God.

The first plague is clearly reminiscent of the “Destruction of Humanity” myth. As a result, Pharaoh and the Egyp­tians likely prayed to Sekhmet to stop her murderous rampage, and they continued appealing to Sekhmet as the plagues progressed and intensified.

The second and third plagues flowed in a natural sequence from the first, but in each case intensified to cause awe and make them “signs and wonders.”

The frog invasion was a compound dem­onstration of God’s power. Frogs frequently appeared after Nile inunda­tions as a natural phenomenon, one that the Egyptians considered an omen of fertility. Yet, if the Nile had become contaminated naturally, the contaminant would have either caused the frogs to leave the river im­mediately or killed them. Here, seven days passed before the frogs emerged, and the magnitude of the frog swarm was super­natural. Although there is no direct connection between the second plague and Sekhmet in the Torah narrative, the word “negef,” meaning “plague,” appears in connection with that plague and only one other, the tenth plague where Sekhmet is explicitly referred to.

The last plague in this group, an infestation of lice, could have been a natural (albeit magnified) progression from the dead, rotting fish and frogs. It marked an escalation in the plagues in that the magicians were unable to replicate it. This is one of the only two plagues where no direct or veiled association with Sekhmet is apparent in the Torah narrative.

The next three plagues—insect swarms (or wild animals), pestilence, and boils—primarily attacked the Egyptians and their animals. The fourth plague also brought God’s message to the Egyptians to a new level, whereby He began to protect the Israelites from the plagues.

The nature of the fourth plague, “arov,” is debated among the rab­binic sages. Rabbi N’chemya says it was an attack of mosquitoes, gnats, and wasps. Rabbi Y’hudah says that arov refers to a mixture of wild animals (as do many commentators). Since lions were prominent among the wild ani­mals, according to some commentators, this interpretation of arov would call to mind the lioness-headed Sekhmet. In addition, the Torah uses the reflexive verb meaning “will be destroyed” to describe the dam­age inflicted on Egyptian land. This word is derived from the same root as ha-mashchit (“the Destroyer”), the term that appears in the tenth plague and, as noted, was an epithet for Sekhmet.

There is no obvious connection in the Torah nar­rative between Sekhmet and the sixth plague, which may not have been a separate disease but rather symptoms of diseases inflicted by earlier plagues.

The final four plagues— fiery hail, locusts, darkness, and deaths of the first-born—inflicted a series of devastating supernatural disasters designed to lead the Egyptians to believe that their most important gods were abandoning (and possibly attacking) them.

Storms were greatly feared by the Egyptians. The seventh plague, fiery hail, was a particularly invidious plague, one that clearly did not oc­cur naturally. It came from the sky, the mythological domain of Ra, Sekhmet’s father.

The eighth plague, locusts, was a foretaste of the ninth plague, total darkness.

The Torah uses the following phrase to describe how the locust swarm will obscure the earth: “and it will cover the eye of the land.”) We are struck by the unusual term “eye of the land.” If the passage means that the sun was obscured, it could have said so explicitly (as the Torah did in Exodus 8.2, describing the frog plague). The Kabbalists understood the “eye of the land” to be referring to Egyptian mythology, signifying that the Egyptian deities were incapacitated. Now we know something they would not have known: in Egyptian mythology Sekhmet was one of the deities referred to as “the eye of the sun.” The ninth plague, darkness, is interpreted by many sources, Rabbinic and secular, as the negation of the power of Sekhmet’s father, Ra.

This brings us to the tenth plague. Here, God almost explicitly iden­tifies Sekhmet as his target. He refers twice to a “mashchit,” which means “Destroyer,” which clearly refers to Sekhmet.

God used Sekhmet, the powerful, murderous “eye of Ra,” as the proxy for “all the gods of Egypt” in driving home this final demonstration of His supremacy over them and in repudiating their power, if not their very existence.

The knowledge that Sekhmet was the “Destroyer” makes the test of faith em­bodied in 12.23 even more powerful than we previously realized. God’s instruction to smear blood on the lintels and doorposts likely plunged idol­-worshipping Israelites into shock and fear. After all, blood was the very substance that would attract the murderous Sekhmet to them! Neverthe­less they complied, and in doing so they demonstrated their trust in God and proved themselves worthy of redemption from Egypt.

Thus God demonstrated that Sekhmet, and through her the entire Egyptian pantheon, was powerless to protect the Egyptians and to wreak vengeance on the Israelites.

## The Ten Plagues—Another View

### Norman Fredman

The scene is repeated throughout the years, throughout the world. Jews gather for the seder and reach the point where they recite these words: “And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a strong hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great terror, and with signs, and with miracles.”

This verse introduces a theme that occupies several pages midrashic exegesis of the Ten Plagues:

“Another interpretation of this verse: ‘strong hand’ equals two; ‘outstretched arm’ equals two; ‘great terror; equals two; ‘signs’ equal two; and ‘miracles’ equals two. These [five references to two plagues] constitute the ten plagues that the Holy One, Praised be He, brought on the Egyptians in Egypt. And these are: blood, frogs, lice, swarms, pestilence, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and the death of the firstborn. Rabbi Y’hudah described them with a mnemonic: d’tzakh adash b’avhav.”

In this way the Haggadah presents the classical argument between Bible scholars: Should the Ten Plagues be viewed as five pairs of plagues or as three triads of plagues (plus one)?

It is possible to view the Ten Plagues as five pairs:

* Blood and Frogs (Plagues of the Water)
* Lice and Swarms (Plagues of the Land)
* Pestilence and Boils (Plagues of Light)
* Hail and Locusts (Plagues of the Sky)
* Darkness and Death of the Firstborn (Plagues of Darkness)

This analysis sees the Ten Plagues as a fulfillment of the Divine promise: “And against all the gods of Egypt I shall wreak judgments.” The ancient pagans had three main gods: the earth, the sky, and the ocean. High in all pantheons, especially that of Egypt, were the gods of light and darkness.

The Ten Plague chapters echo Genesis 1. That chapter of Creation tells us that it is God himself who names day, night, heaven, seas, and earth. This naming shows his ownership; He created them and He named them, assigning them their duties. These five chief natural powers which man had worshipped in His stead are now punished.

Blood and frogs are both plagues of the water. To the Israelites the Nile had long been bloody; now the Egyptians found it so.

The plague of frogs might have been a reminder of Heket, the frog-headed goddess who attended births. The Egyptians should have taken the hint: The Nile, where they had drowned Israel’s newborn boys, now swarmed with a killing fertility.

Lice and swarms were plagues of the land. To show that “I am the Lord in the midst of the land,” God sends swarms that afflict Egypt, but not Goshen where Israel dwells.

Pestilence and boils are plagues of the light. The ancient belief in a connection between luminaries and diseases is assumed by the Tanach. The sun and moon are potential sources of “the pestilence that stalks in the dark, (and ) the plague that ravages at noon.” It is only because of God’s protecting shadow, says the psalmist, that “the sun shall not smite you by day, nor the moon by night.” The Talmud records the ancient Temple prayer recited on Wednesday, the day the sun was created, in which Israel asked that children not be afflicted with that most feared disease, diphtheria.

The sun, even more than the Nile, was the chief Egyptian god.

The name Pharaoh itself means the Great House (or earthly embodiment) of the Sun. Pharaoh was the sun’s incarnation. Umberto Cassuto, following a midrashic hint, was tempted to translate Pharaoh’s words to the impudent Moses, “Behold, you stand in the presence of Ra (the sun god).” It may be more than a coincidence that the name of this chief god of Egypt is identical in Hebrew with the word for “evil” (ra).

The healing power of the sun is destroyed. The fifth plague destroys the choicest cattle, as the tenth destroys the first born. As the Haggadah notes, only this cattle plague is called ‘‘the hand of the Lord.”

The plague of boils comes after Moses throws furnace soot skyward. Cassuto sees the furnace soot as both the product and symbol of brick-making. Fired bricks were made during the reign of Rameses II. But most bricks were sun-baked. The furnace soot thrown at the sky is more than a reminder of Israelite labor; it is thrown to darken fires, even symbolically the fires of the sun. And it introduces the dreaded epidemic.

The next two plagues come from the sky: hail and locusts.

The final two plagues involve darkness. A well-known Midrash, that obviously senses the parallels between the two plagues, suggests that just as death and darkness characterize the ultimate plague, so death and darkness characterize the penultimate plague. Wicked Israelites, the Midrash writes, died during the plague of darkness which served in part to keep the tragedy from Egyptian knowledge. If the Egyptians had known they would have said, “Just as the plague passed over us, so has it passed over them.” They would not have sensed the Divine hand and would have refused to free their Hebrew slaves.

For the plague of darkness, Moses is commanded, “Stretch out your hand toward heaven that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, darkness that can be felt.” The final plague, the death of the firstborn, is announced for midnight; it takes place at midnight; and the Jews begin to leave the night. The plagues end with a peroration: “It was a Watch-night for the Lord to take them out of the land of Egypt. This is the Night for the Lord watched by all the children of Israel throughout their generations.”

It is also possible to view the Ten Plagues as three triads (plus one).

Just as the five-pair analysis sees the plagues as a destruction of the five chief natural powers which God has created, so does the three-triads analysis reflect the destruction of what was created on the two triads of days of creation. On the first day light was created: on the fourth day, creatures of light. The first plague of each triad takes place in the morning. On the second day sky and seas were created; on the fifth day, creatures of sky and seas. The second plague of each triad comes from the water or sky. On the third day, earth was created; on the sixth day, creatures of earth. The third plague in each triad mentions or implies dust of the earth.

The final triad of plagues is announced with the same introductory formula as the two previous triads (“Send out My people”) but now ends with an expanded educational purpose. Pharaoh is not the main pupil; mankind is.

Thus said the Lord, God of the Hebrews, “Send out My people that they may serve Me. For this time I shall send all My plagues against your heart, your servants, and your people so that you shall know that there is none like Me in all the earth .... For this reason have I made you stand: to show you My power and that My name be declared throughout the earth.”“

The final triad adds on to the first two. As in the first triad, Pharaoh learns “I am the Lord.” As in the second triad, Goshen and Israel are not struck by either hail” or darkness. 59 But this time in addition the punishment comes from the heavens. For the first time the target is the indispensable crop. For the first time it is not Pharaoh but God who hardens Pharaoh’s heart. He is no longer the main pupil. And for the first time the specific word “sin” is used to describe Egyptian deeds. “I have sinned,” Pharaoh confesses both

The five-pairs analysis sees the plagues as a war between God and the nature man has set up to equal and replace Him. The three-­triad analysis sees the plagues as a lesson not so much to Pharaoh, or even the world, but to Israel, “so that you recite in your son and grandson’s ears what I did in Egypt and about the signs I placed therein so that you know that I am the Lord.”

Which analysis is correct? The editor of the Haggadah chose both.

## The Significance of the Seventh Plague

### Scott B. Noegel

Regarding biblical lists that contain ten items, the Rutgers professor of biblical studies, Hebrew language, and ancient Judaism Gary Rendsburg writes: “in the Bible where rosters of ten occur, special prominence is given to the entries listed in the seventh and tenth positions.” Rendsburg’s comment dealt primarily with Genesis 15 and the appearance of the Amorites in seventh position in a list of nations. He also drew attention to the findings of other scholars concerning the use of the positions seven and ten in Genesis 5 (specifically with respect to Enoch and Noah) and Ruth 4,18-22 (with regard to Boaz and David).

While these observations are undoubtedly correct, their foci have been primarily on lists of nations and genealogical rosters. However, the device also occurs in narrative, in particular in the most famous of all series of tens: the plagues of Egypt.

The importance of the tenth plague, the death of Egypt’s first born, long has been understood as the most devastating of the plagues. It is with the tenth plague that the story reaches its climax. Pharaoh finally concedes and releases the people Israel.

On the other hand, the importance of the seventh plague has gone unnoticed. Rather, the seventh plague typically is viewed simply as part of one dramatic build-up incorporating plagues one through nine. It is here where an awareness of the convention noted by Rendsburg comes into play. The seventh plague, like the tenth, was intended to stand out in the narrative, that is, above the other eight.

As observed already by Rashbam and Abarbanel, and more recently by Umberto Cassuto, Moshe Greenberg, and Nahum Sarna, the account of the plagues occurs in a tripartite literary structure. According to Sarna: “The plagues are arranged in the form of three series of calamities comprising three afflictions in each series.” The first of each series begins with a time indication of warning, which happens to be in the morning, and with an instruction formula ‘station yourself’ employing the root nun-tsade-bet.

As Greenberg notes, the beginning of the third series—the seventh plague—contains an important variation on the formula. The first two series (first and fourth plagues) mention Pharaoh going out to the water. The seventh plague, however, omits this mention. The author deviates from the expected order to suspend the reader’s anticipation of the mention of water. It appears, of course, a few lines later in the form of hail.

In addition to cues in the literary structure of the plague account, the importance of the seventh plague may be seen in that it is given the most verses of any plague except for the tenth. Cassuto accounts for this by saying that since the seventh plague is more severe and more decisive than the earlier ones, its account is longer and fuller than that of the preced­ing plagues.

Similarly, the versions of the plagues given in Psalm 68 and Psalm 105 also devote more verses to the plague of hail than to any other. In addition to being given the most space, this scene also contains the longest uninterrupted divine monologue in the plague account: a total of seven (!) verses (Exodus 9.13-19).

Further, it is with the seventh plague that we first are told that Pharaoh repents of his deeds—”I have sinned this time”—and that he promises to let the Israelites go. As other scholars have noted, in other ancient Near Eastern accounts of plagues it is usually the gods who repent and reform after a plague. Here, the god-king Pharaoh, who would have appeared to the Egyptian masses as responsible for the plagues, repents. Thus Pharaoh’s repentance marks a turning point in the story by coming at a time when the reader may be expecting a cessation or completion of events, i.e., in the number seven slot.

In addition to literary markers, there are clues in the language which bespeak the heightened relevance of the seventh plague. Before the arrival of the hail and thunderstorms Moses repeats God’s threat: “For I will at this time send all my plagues upon your heart and upon your servants, and upon your people, that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth.” According to the biblical scholar Prof. Adele Berlin, the word “all” is a quantifier often used “to highlight an important event or theme in the narrative.” As only four plagues remain (including the seventh), the word “all” can serve no other purpose. Cassuto also notes a hyperbolic use of the word “all” in 9.25, where we are told that the hail devastated “everything that was in the field, every herb of the field, and every tree that was in the field.”

Verse 9.15 contains a significant variation on God’s threats. Instead of stating, as is done for all previous plagues, “the Lord will send upon you (i.e., upon the Pharaoh and upon Egypt)” the particular plague, God thunders, “this time I will send all My plagues upon your heart.” After each of the previous plagues, we are told that the Pharaoh “hardened his heart.” That God now aims the plague at Pharaoh’s heart signals the importance and directness of the attack. This connection is cemented further by the nexus between Pharaoh’s “heavy” heart and the hail which was “heavy.” In addition, unlike the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart after other plagues, with the seventh, God hardens not only the heart of Pharaoh, but also the hearts of his servants.

Furthermore, after each of the previous plagues we are told that despite the miraculous efforts of Moses, God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. After six such hardenings on the part of God the reader quite naturally is forced to ask why. It is only here, immediately before the seventh, where an explanation is given: “Nevertheless, I have spared you for this purpose: in order to show you My power, and in order that My Name may resound throughout the world.”

In 9.14 the pericope also contains a significant variation on the repeated admonition, “that you may know that there is none like the Lord our God.” In Greenberg’s words: “... the first triplet establishes God as a power beyond and other than the magic of Egypt, the second shows his presence in the land through a discriminating application of punishment, and the third gives scope to his power, more than anything that history has to tell.”

The plague of hail is visibly important also in 9.23-26. Three points stand out in this section which suggest that the seventh plague held special importance. The first is the frequency with which we hear the word hail. In the entire pericope, the word hail occurs a total of 14 times (twice times seven)! No other plague is mentioned as often. Moreover, the word “hail” resounds later in the account of the next plague, locusts, where it appears three times in connection with the crops available to the insects.

We may take this a step further. Cassuto observes a deliberate and frequent use of the number seven in the plagues account. After the Nile becomes blood, the narrator informs us: “ And seven days were fulfilled….” To Cassuto the number seven “serves to emphasize the principal word in the paragraph, namely the Nile, which occurs 14 times in the course of the paragraph—twice times seven.”

The use of the number seven is extensive. The swarm of flies occurs in its pericope seven times. In the account of the seventh plague, the word “land” (eretz) appears seven times, the seventh of which occurs alongside Goshen. In the same paragraph, “field” (sadeh) appears seven times, and as mentioned above, “hail” (barad) occurs 14 times, twice times seven. As Cassuto also notes, “The tendency towards numerical patterns based on the number seven…is observable throughout…the first cycle, [in which] the names of the plagues occur 21 times—three times seven (blood 5 times, frogs 11, gnats 5)….”

The importance of the seventh plague, therefore, is in keeping with the symbolic use of the number seven within the narrative.

Finally, the Rabbis who were responsible for the annual reading cycle of the Torah also seem to have recognized the importance of the seventh plague, because the reading cycle places a division between the first seven plagues and the remaining three.

The cumulative evidence demonstrates that the plague of hail and thunderstorms, like the death of the first born, was understood as possessing special significance. As with other lists of ten, the importance of the plague was cued by placing it in the seventh position.

This conclusion illustrates that the convention here discussed was not limited to genealogical lists and rosters of nations, but also was incorporated into the structure of the biblical narrative. Such an interpretation demonstrates once more how a holistic approach bears out the unity of the narrative. Regardless of what sources may underlie the account in the book of Exodus, the finished product reflects an essential coherence with the inclusion of a deliberate rhetorical device, namely, the double climax, organized in accordance with the seven/ten literary convention.

## Excerpts from ‘The Admonitions of Ipuwer’

### translated Raymond O. Faulkner

[The sage Ipuwer is presumed to be speaking to the king:]

The door[-keepers] say: ‘Let us go and plunder….’ Indeed, the plunderer [ ... ] everywhere and the servant takes what he finds. Indeed, the Nile overflows, yet none plough for it. Everyone says: ‘We do not know what will happen throughout the land….’

Indeed, poor men have become owners of wealth, and he who could not make sandals for himself is now a possessor of riches….

Indeed, [hearts] are violent, pestilence is throughout the land, blood is everywhere, death is not lacking….

Indeed, many dead are buried in the river; the stream is a sepulchre and the place of embalmment has become stream.

Indeed, noblemen are in distress, while the poor man is full of joy. Every town says: ‘Let us suppress the powerful among us.’

Indeed, men are like ibises. Squalor is throughout the land, and there are none indeed whose clothes are white in these times….

Indeed, the river is blood, yet men drink of it. Men shrink(?) from human beings and thirst after water….

Indeed, gates, columns, and walls (?) are burnt up, while the hall(?) of the Palace stands firm and endures.

Indeed…, towns are destroyed and Upper Egypt has become an empty waste….

Indeed, men are few, and he who places his brother in the ground is everywhere….

Indeed, gold and lapis lazuli, silver and turquoise, carnelian and amethyst…are strung on the necks of maidservants. Good things are throughout the land, (yet) house-wives say: ‘Oh that we had something to eat…!’

Indeed, laughter has perished and is [no longer] made; it is groaning that is throughout the land, mingled with complaints.

Indeed, every dead person is as a well-born man….

Indeed, hair [has fallen out] for everybody, and the man of rank can no longer be distinguished from him who is nobody.

Indeed, [ ... ] because of noise; noise is not [ ... ] in years of noise, and there is no end to noise.

Indeed, great and small (say): ‘I wish I might die.’ Little children say: ‘He should not have caused (me) to live.’

Indeed, the children of princes are dashed against walls, and the children of the neck are laid out on the high ground….

Indeed, everywhere barley has perished and men are stripped of clothes, spice(?), and oil; everyone says: ‘There is none.’ The storehouse is empty and its keeper is stretched on the ground; a happy state of affairs…!

Behold, he who was buried as a falcon (is devoid(?)) of biers, and what the pyramid concealed has become empty.

Behold, it has befallen that the land has been deprived of the kingship by a few lawless men….

Behold, Egypt is fallen to pouring of water, and he who poured water on the ground has carried off the strong man in misery….

Behold, he who had no property is now a possessor of wealth….

Behold, the poor of the land have become rich, and (the erstwhile owner) of property is one who has nothing….

De[stroyed is ... ] their food [is taken(?)] from them [ ... through] fear of his terror….