Parashat Sh'mot

An introduction to the Book of Exodus: Nahum Sarna

The Title

The commonly known Hebrew title for the second book of the Torah is *Sh'mot*, Names, based on its opening words, "And these are the names."

Another ancient Hebrew name was *Sefer Y'tziat Mitzrayim*, "The Book of the Departure from Egypt," expressing its central theme. The Jews of Alexandria, Egypt, in pre-Christian times, rendered this title in Greek as *Exodos Aigyptou*, abbreviated simply as *Exodos*, which is how it appears in the Septuagint, the Jewish translation of the Torah into Greek. This was adopted for use in the Old Latin version of the Bible (pre-fourth century C.E.) in the form of *Exodus* and so passed into the Vulgate and through it into numerous European languages.

Another Greek rendering of the Hebrew title was *Exogoge*, "The Leading Out/The Departure [from Egypt]." The Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 B.C.E. to 50 C.E.) used this name and offered his belief that Moses himself had designated the Hebrew title behind it.

The Hebrew title *Sefer Y'tziat Mitzrayim* was still current in Palestine in the tenth century C.E., for it is cited in a work by the Masoretic scholar Aaron ben Moses ben Asher.

Still a third Hebrew name for the book is mentioned in the Talmud: *Chomesh Sheni*, "The Second Fifth [of the Torah]."

The Torah Readings

Present-day editions divide the Book of Exodus into 40 chapters. This practice is not rooted in Jewish tradition but was borrowed from Christian Bibles. In the late Middle Ages, the Church forced Jews to engage in disputations, which usually focused upon the interpretation of scriptural passages. This necessitated a common, standardized system of reference, and so the Christian chapter and verse numberings were introduced into the Hebrew manuscript bibles by Rabbi Solomon ben Ishmael (ca. 1330).

This innovation displaced an earlier Jewish system based upon the weekly Torah readings. In Palestine and Egypt, the entire Pentateuch was originally completed in triennial, or three-year, cycles. The Book of Exodus was variously divided into 29 or 33 such *sedarim*, as the weekly Sabbath readings were called. Eventually, the Babylonian practice of completing the entire Torah in the course of a single year became universal. In this system, the Book of Exodus is divided into 11 sections, each known as a *parashah* or *sidrah*.

The Contents and Character

Using the criterion of geographic location, one may divide Exodus into three parts. Chapters 1:1 to 15:21, which describe the oppression of Israel as well as the struggle for liberation and its final attainment, obviously have as their setting the land of Egypt. The events recorded in chapters 5:22 to 18:17 take place on the way from the Sea of Reeds to Sinai, although the location of chapter 18 is debatable. For the rest of the book, the scene of the action is Sinai.

Such a simple locational classification, however, obscures the richness and variety of the subject matter. The Book of Exodus is the great seminal text of biblical literature. Its central theme, God's redemption of His people from Egyptian bondage, is mentioned no less than 120 times in the Tanach in a variety of contexts. This event informed and shaped the future development of the culture and religion of Israel. Remarkably, it even profoundly influenced ethical and social consciousness, so that it is frequently invoked in the Torah as the motivation for protecting and promoting the interests and rights of the stranger and the disadvantaged of society.

This pervasive and sustained impact of the Exodus drama is not limited to the period of the Bible itself. It continued throughout history down to the present time and in recent years has been a source of inspiration for the "theologies of liberation" movements. If it has so profoundly affected peoples of widely different cultures, this is hardly because the biblical narrative is a straightforward account of an historical event, which it is not.

Rather, this influence is due to the special orientation and perspective of Exodus. It is a document of faith, not a dispassionate, secular report of the freeing of an oppressed people. The Book of Exodus possesses a character all its own and must be understood on its own terms.

A close examination of the constituent elements of the Book of Exodus determines at once that we do not have a comprehensive, sequential narrative, only an episodic account. Moreover, the time frame in which the varied episodes are placed is extremely limited. The narrative is most sparing of detail relating to the period of the oppression. Neither the duration of the sufferings of the Israelites nor anything about their inner life and community existence is mentioned. Only incidentally do we learn that the period of Egyptian enslavement lasted at least 80 years.

We are told that Moses, who was born after the king's genocidal decree, was 80 years old when he first presented himself before the pharaoh as the leader of the people. Further investigation reveals that the book really covers the events of just two years: the year-long diplomatic activity as well as the coercive measures taken against the Egyptians and a few incidents from the year in the wilderness following the Exodus.

This limitation, together with the paucity of historical data, suggests a high degree of deliberate selectivity. Both the selectivity and the disposition of the featured material stamp the Book of Exodus as falling into the category of historiosophy rather than historiography: Not the preservation and recording of the past for its own sake, but the culling of certain historic events for didactic purposes is the intent.

The entire narrative is God centered. Its focal points are God's mighty deeds on behalf of His people in times of oppression, in the act of liberation, and in the course of the wilderness wanderings. God is the sole actor, the only initiator of events. The various episodes, therefore, project Israelite concepts of God and of His relationship to the world; that is, they embody the fundamental tenets and crucial elements of the religion of Israel and of its world view.

The different aspects of the divine personality, as revealed in Exodus, express a conception of God that is poles apart from any pagan notions. There is but a single Deity, who demands exclusive service and fidelity. Being the Creator of all that exists, He is wholly independent of His creations, and totally beyond the constraints of the world of nature, which is irresistibly under His governance. This is illustrated by the phenomena of the burning bush, the ten plagues, and the dividing of the Sea of Reeds. As a consequence, any attempt to depict or represent God in material or pictorial form is inevitably a falsification and is strictly prohibited. The biblical polemic against idolatry appears here for the first time in the context of the Exodus.

Although the nature of God must be beyond the scope of the human imagination, the texts affirm, as one of their principal teachings, that He is nevertheless deeply involved in human affairs. History, therefore, is not a procession of causeless, undirected, meaningless happenings but is the deliberate, purposeful, unfolding plan of the divine intelligence. God chooses to enter into an eternally valid covenantal relationship with His people, Israel; this legal reality entails immutable and inescapable obligations on their part. The Decalogue and the legislative sections of Exodus thereby constitute divine law. They are not, as is the case with the Near Eastern law collections, the fruit of human wisdom or royal sagacity.

From this flows another credo, first explicated in Exodus, which thereafter animates all of biblical literature: that the welfare of society is conditional upon obedience to God's law. God is deemed to be absolutely moral, and He correspondingly demands moral standards of behavior from human beings. He delivers the faithful from injustice and oppression and ensures the ultimate and inevitable downfall of the wicked.

The religious calendar of Israel became transformed by the Exodus experience. Formerly tied to an expression of the rhythms of the seasons, the sacred times were reinterpreted in terms of that great historical event, They became commemorations of God's benefactions upon Israel in Egypt and in the wilderness, and were emancipated from phenomena of nature.

Finally, two of the most important institutions of biblical Israel find their origins in this book. The account of the organization of the cult around a central place of worship with a hereditary priesthood occupies nearly one-third of the entire book; 13 of its 40 chapters are concerned with this topic. And the prophetic office, of seminal importance for the national history and faith and later also for some of the world's other major

religions, is initiated through the person of Moses. He is the archetypal prophet whose mission epitomizes the distinguishing features of later classical apostolic prophecy.

The Setting in Time

A clear distinction must be made between the special literary mold in which the narrative is cast—with its particular selectivity, emphases, and teachings—and the historical background of the Exodus. This last issue is complicated by the absence from the biblical accounts of certain data essential to establishing chronological parameters. The names of the reigning Egyptian kings are not given; we do not know how long after Joseph's death the reversal in the fortunes of the Israelites occurred; and we have no extra-biblical documentation that directly refers to Israel in Egypt, to the Exodus, or to the conquest of Canaan.

In addition to these matters, there is the problem that certain biblical texts have not yet yielded their secrets. For instance, Genesis 15:13 foretells that Abraham's offspring "shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed for 400 years." This time span is there coordinated with just four generations. Exodus 11:40-41 states that the Israelites resided in Egypt for 430 years. We are not told when this period is thought to have commenced; hence one cannot work backward to the patriarchal era in order to fix the date of Israel's departure from Egypt, not to mention the fact that the dates of the patriarchs are still a matter of scholarly dispute.

The one apparently unambiguous chronological note is in 1 Kings 6:1, according to which 480 years intervened between the building of Solomon's Temple and the Exodus. The king's project can be reliably dated to around 960 B.C.E. This would place the great event at about the middle of the 15th century B.C.E. Unfortunately, this dating cannot be reconciled with many other details of the biblical narrative. Thus Moses, who lived in the Nile Delta, is easily and frequently in touch with the ruling pharaoh, who must also have had his residence in the area. But in the 15th century B.C.E. the Egyptian capital and royal palace were located at Thebes, a distance of more than 400 miles to the south of the Delta.

Moreover, commencing about 1550 B.C.E. and for the next few hundred years, energetic and powerful Egyptian monarchs maintained a tight grip on Canaan. This situation would hardly have been conducive to Israel's departure from Egypt and its conquest of Canaan in this period, especially as Egypt never figures in the biblical account of Joshua's campaigns.

On the other hand, a 13th century B.C.E. dating would seem to be far more satisfactory. It was then that the royal capital was situated in the Nile Delta; it was in this period that archaeological evidence shows the towns of Pithom and Ramses to have been built, and the Tanach ascribes their erection to Israelite slaves. It was then that frenetic construction activity took place in the Nile Delta, which would have required the conscription of large numbers of laborers. The end of the 13th century was a period of Egypt's decline and loss of its Canaanite province. The invasion of the Sea Peoples and the Libyans occurred; there was a power vacuum in the East; and generally it was a period of turmoil and upheaval.

Although a mid-13th-century B.C.E. dating for the Exodus presently appears to accommodate more facts than a dating two centuries earlier, it is not without its own difficulties. True, it is reinforced by the Stele of Merneptah, the inscribed monument set up in western Thebes by the pharaoh of that name (ca. 1224 to 1211 B.C.E.) to celebrate his victory over the invaders of Egypt. This stele mentions "Israel" as a people in Canaan, but apparently not yet settled down within fixed borders.

Nevertheless, the Exodus and conquest in the 13th century cannot be reconciled with the above-cited biblical chronology if it is to be taken literally. Moreover, the archaeological data collected from numerous sites in the area do not always fit in with the biblical reports of the towns in Transjordan that the Israelites encountered on their way to Canaan nor of the places that Joshua conquered and destroyed in the course of his campaigns inside Canaan, if a 13th century B.C.E. time frame be insisted on.

Only future research will be able to solve the problem. In the meantime, it must always be remembered that the biblical narrative is a theological exposition—a document of faith, not a historiographical record.

Parashat Sh'mot (Exodus 1.1-6.1)

These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each coming with his household: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah; Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin; Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. The total number of persons that were of Jacob's issue came to seventy, Joseph being already in Egypt. Joseph died, and all his brothers, and all that generation.

But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them.

A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise, in the event of war, they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground."

NS: The Israelites find themselves undergoing a cataclysmic change. A new regime perceives them to be a potential threat to national security. "A new king" probably means a new dynasty, but the anonymity precludes the possibility of positive identification with a known pharaoh. The most reasonable explanation for the change in fortune lies in the policies adopted by the pharaohs of the 19th Dynasty (ca. 1306-1200 B.C.E.), and especially by Ramses II (ca. 1290-1224 B.C.E.), who shifted Egypt's administrative and strategic center of gravity to the eastern Delta of the Nile, where he undertook vast building projects that required a huge local labor force. In fact, intimations of a deterioration in the Israelite situation are already discernible in the closing chapters of Genesis. Jacob, on his deathbed, feels the need to give his family the reassurance that "God will be with you and bring you back to the land of your fathers." Joseph voices his anxiety for the future even more strongly. He tells his brothers, "God will surely take notice of you and bring you up from this land to the land that He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." The dying statesman knows that his family will not wield the influence necessary to arrange for his burial in his ancestral land as he had been able to do for his father.

NS: This is the first appearance in Exodus of the verb *yod-daled-ayin* ("to know"). It is a key term in the Exodus narratives, occurring over 20 times in the first 14 chapters. The usual rendering, "to know," hardly does justice to the richness of its semantic range. In the biblical conception, knowledge is not essentially or even primarily rooted in the intellect and mental activity. Rather, it is more experiential and is embedded in the emotions, so that it may encompass such qualities as contact, intimacy, concern, relatedness, and mutuality. Conversely, not to know is synonymous with dissociation, indifference, alienation, and estrangement; it culminates in callous disregard for another's humanity.

So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor; and they built garrison cities for Pharaoh: Pithom and Raamses.

But the more they were oppressed, the more they increased and spread out, so that the [Egyptians] came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians ruthlessly imposed upon the Israelites the various labors that they made them perform. Ruthlessly they made life bitter for them with harsh labor at mortar and bricks and with all sorts of tasks in the field.

The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shifrah and the other Puah, saying, "When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live." The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live.

NS: The names of the midwives are recorded but not those of the reigning pharaohs. In the biblical scale of values these lowly champions of morality assume far greater historic importance than do the all-powerful tyrants who ruled Egypt.

So the king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them, "Why have you done this thing, letting the boys live?" The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth." And God dealt well with the

midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly.

And because the midwives feared God, He established households for them. Then Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, "Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live."

RA: The idea is presumably that the people would be eradicated by cutting off all male progeny while the girls could be raised for the sexual exploitation and domestic service of the Egyptians, by whom they would of course be rapidly assimilated. Pharaoh's scheme will again be frustrated, as the future liberator of the Hebrews will be placed (not flung) in the Nile and emerge eventually to cause grief to Egypt. There is also an echo here of Abram's words to Sarai when they come down to Egypt, adumbrating the destiny of their descendants, during a famine: "they will kill me while you they will let live" (Genesis 12:12).

NS: The oppressive acts of the pharaoh have built to a climax. Strangely, his third and most barbarous decree—infanticide—is never again referred to in the Tanach. We are not told to what extent it was implemented or whether it was later rescinded. The primary function served by its narration is to set the stage for the story of the birth and survival of Moses. His arrival gives new direction to the life of the suffering people. The unseen hand of God is at work so that the king's crowning evil actually initiates a series of events that is to culminate in the humiliation of its perpetrator and the liberation of Israel.

Chapter 2

A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she hid him for three months. When she could hide him no longer, she got a wicker basket for him and caulked it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child into it and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. And his sister stationed herself at a distance, to learn what would befall him.

RA: The basket in which the infant is placed is called a tevah, ark, the same word used for Noah's ark. (It may be an Egyptian loanword. Such borrowed terms abound in the story, giving it local color. The most prominent is the word for "Nile," ye'or.) As numerous commentators have observed, the story of Moses begins with a pointed allusion to the Flood story. In Genesis, a universal deluge nearly destroys the whole human race. Here, Pharaoh's decree to drown every Hebrew male infant threatens to destroy the people of Israel. As the ark in Genesis bears on the water the saving remnant of humankind, the child borne on the waters here will save his imperiled people. This narrative recapitulates the Flood story, itself a quasi-epic narrative of global scope, in the transposed key of a folktale: The story of a future ruler who is hidden in a basket floating on a river has parallels in Hittite, Assyrian, and Egyptian literature, and approximate analogues in many other cultures. Water plays a decisive thematic role in Moses's career. He is borne safely on the water, which Pharaoh had imagined would be the very means to destroy all the Hebrew male children. His floating among the reeds (suf) foreshadows the miraculous triumph over the Egyptians that he will lead in the parting of the Sea of Reeds (yam suf). His obtaining water for the thirsting people will figure prominently in the Wilderness stories. The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the Nile, while her maidens walked along the Nile. She spied the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to fetch it. When she opened it, she saw that it was a child, a boy crying. She took pity on it and said, "This must be a Hebrew child."

Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a Hebrew nurse to suckle the child for you?" And Pharaoh's daughter answered, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will pay your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it.

When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, who made him her son. She named him Moses, explaining, "I drew him out of the water."

NS: The Hebrew name is of Egyptian origin. Its basic verbal stem *msy* means "to be born," and the noun *ms* means "a child, son." It is a frequent element in Egyptian personal names. usually but not always with the addition of a divine element, as illustrated by Ahmose, Ptahmose, Ramose, and Thutmose. Two papyri from the time of Rameses II mention officials named Mose. The Narrator puts a Hebrew origin for the name into the mouth of the Egyptian princess; unbeknown to her, it foreshadows the boy's destiny. By means of word play, the Egyptian Mose is connected with Hebrew *mem-shin-hey*, "to draw up/out (of water)." The princess explains the name as though the form is *mashui*, "the one drawn out," a passive participle, whereas it is actually an active participle, "he who draws out," and becomes an oblique reference to the future crossing of the Sea of Reeds.

Some time after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his kinsfolk and witnessed their labors. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen. He turned this way and that and, seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.

When he went out the next day, he found two Hebrews fighting; so he said to the offender, "Why do you strike your fellow?" He retorted, "Who made you chief and ruler over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Moses was frightened, and thought: Then the matter is known! When Pharaoh learned of the matter, he sought to kill Moses; but Moses fled from Pharaoh.

He arrived in the land of Midian, and sat down beside a well. Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters. They came to draw water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flock; but shepherds came and drove them off. Moses rose to their defense, and he watered their flock.

When they returned to their father Reuel, he said, "How is it that you have come back so soon today?"

They answered, "An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds; he even drew water for us and watered the flock."

He said to his daughters, "Where is he then? Why did you leave the man? Ask him in to break bread."

NS: Reuel means "friend of God." It is mentioned once again in Numbers 10:29—"Hobab son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses' father-in-law"—where it is uncertain which of the two is so designated. From Judges 4:11 it would appear that Hobab is the father-in-law, but in other texts this latter epithet is given to Jethro, who also bears the title "priest of Midian." Rabbinic exegesis reconciles the discrepancies by assuming that Reuel was the grandfather of the girls and that the other names all refer to the same person, who bore several names. Many modern scholars prefer to assign the variants to different strands of tradition. However, it is to be noted that the title "priest of Midian" is only attached to Jethro. This raises the possibility that Hebrew *yitro* is not a proper name but an honorific meaning "His Excellency." In Akkadian *atru (watru)* means "preeminent, foremost," and several old Akkadian names begin with that element. In Ugaritic several personal names are prefixed by the element *ytr*.

Moses consented to stay with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Tzipporah as wife. She bore a son whom he named Gershom, for he said, "I have been a stranger in a foreign land."

A long time after that, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God. God heard their moaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

Chapter 3

Now Moses, tending the flock of his father- in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. Moses said, "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?"

When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "Here I am." And He said, "Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground.

"I am," He said, "the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

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

And the Lord continued, "I have marked well the plight of My people in Egypt and have heeded their outcry because of their taskmasters; yes, I am mindful of their sufferings. I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the region of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

"Now the cry of the Israelites has reached Me; moreover, I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt."

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?"

And He said, "I will be with you; that shall be your sign that it was I who sent you. And when you have freed the people from Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain."

Moses said to God, "When I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is His name?' what shall I say to them?"

RA: For 1 will be with you. And this is the sign. Rashi proposes that God "answered the first question first and the second question second." That is, to the question "Who am I?", God responds that He will be with Moses, so Moses will have divine authority invested in him. To the question about bringing out the Israelites from Egypt, God responds that the fire in the bush is the concrete token of the miraculous power Moses will exert as God's agent in rescuing his people. It should be observed, however, that the reference of "this is the sign" is quite ambiguous, and perhaps was intended to be so. It could refer simply to the previous clause: "I will be with you" and that will be the sign you require. It could refer to the very burning bush out of which God speaks, as Rashi infers. Or, it could refer to the following clause: the sign that it is God Who has sent Moses will be realized when Moses succeeds in the extraordinary undertaking of bringing the Hebrews out of Egypt and leads them all the way to the mountain on which he now stands.

And God said to Moses, "*Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*."

RA: *Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh.* God's response perhaps gives Moses more than he bargained for—an ontological divine mystery of the most daunting character. Rivers of ink have since flowed in theological reflection on and philological analysis of this name. "I-Will-Be-Who-I-Will-Be" is the most plausible construction of the Hebrew, though the middle word, asher, could easily mean "what" rather than "who," and the common rendering of "I-Am-That-I-Am" cannot be excluded. ("Will" is used here rather than "shall" because the Hebrew sounds like an affirmation with emphasis, not just a declaration.) Since the tense system of biblical Hebrew by no means corre-sponds to that of modern English, it is also perfectly possible to construe this as "I Am He Who Endures." It is worth registering at least a note of doubt about the form of the divine name. Here God instructs Moses to tell Israel Ehyeh, "I-Will-Be," has sent him. The deity, if the Masoretic vocalization is to be trusted, refers to Himself with a qal ("simple") conjugation. This could conceivably imply that others refer to him in the qal third person as Yihyeh, "He-Will-Be." (The medial yod sound in this conjugated form would have had considerable phonetic interchange with the vav consonant in the Tetragrammaton (the four-letter Name we deliberately mispronounce as "adonai"). This in turn would make the name fit a common pattern for male names in the third-person masculine singular, qal conjugation, imperfective form: Yitzchak (Isaac), "he will laugh"; Yaakov (Jacob), "he will protect," or "he will grab the heel"; Yiftach (Jephthah), "he will open"; and many others. The logic of Yihyeh as the essential divine name would be that whereas particular actions may be attributed to humans through the verbal names chosen for them, to God alone belongs unlimited, unconditional being. This conjecture, inspired by the use here by God of the qal conjugation in naming Himself, is far from certain, but it might introduce at least some margin of doubt about the consensus opinion regarding the divine name.

NS: God's response to Moses' query cannot be the disclosure of a hitherto unknown name, for that would be unintelligible to the people and would not resolve Moses' dilemma. However, taken together with the statement in 6:3, the implication is that the name we pronounce as Adonai only came into prominence as the characteristic personal name of the God of Israel in the time of Moses. This tradition accords with the facts that the various divine names found in Genesis are no longer used from here on, except occasionally in poetic texts; that of all the personal names listed until now, none is constructed of the prefixed yeho-/yo- or the suffixed -yahu/-yah contractions of the Tetragrammaton; that the first name of this type is Yocheved, that of Moses' morher. Ibn Ezra points out that Moses, in his direct speech, invariably uses the name Tetragrammaton, not "Lord" or "God." Without doubt, the revelation of the divine name to Moses registers a new stage in the history of Israelite monotheism.

He continued, "Thus shall you say to the Israelites, '*Ehyeh* sent me to you.'"

And God said further to Moses, "Thus shall you speak to the Israelites: 'The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This shall be My name forever, This My appellation for all eternity.

"Go and assemble the elders of Israel and say to them: 'The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has appeared to me and said, "I have taken note of you and of what is being done to you in Egypt, and I have declared: I will take you out of the misery of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, to a land flowing with milk and honey."' They will listen to you; then you shall go with the elders of Israel to the king of Egypt and you shall say to him, 'The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, manifested Himself to us. Now therefore, let us go a distance of three days into the wilderness to sacrifice to the Lord our God.'

"Yet I know that the king of Egypt will let you go only because of a greater might. So I will stretch out My hand and smite Egypt with various wonders which I will work upon them; after that he shall let you go. And I will dispose the Egyptians favorably toward this people, so that when you go, you will not go away empty-handed. Each woman shall borrow from her neighbor and the lodger in her house objects of silver and gold, and clothing, and you shall put these on your sons and daughters, thus stripping the Egyptians."

Chapter 4

But Moses spoke up and said, "What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me, but say: The Lord did not appear to you?"

The Lord said to him, "What is that in your hand?"

And he replied, "A rod."

He said, "Cast it on the ground."

He cast it on the ground and it became a snake; and Moses recoiled from it.

NS: This creature probably serves a dual purpose here, practical and symbolic. As we learn further on, the trick is later duplicated by the court magicians, which then enables Moses to demonstrate the superiority of Israel's God. The rod in ancient Egypt was a symbol of royal authority and power, while the snake, the uraeus, represented the patron cobra-goddess of Lower Egypt. Worn over the forehead on the headdress of the pharaohs, it was emblematic of divinely protected sovereignty, and it served as a menacing symbol of death dealt to the enemies of the crown.

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Put out your hand and grasp it by the tail"—he put out his hand and seized it, and it became a rod in his hand— "that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, did appear to you."

The Lord said to him further, "Put your hand into your bosom."

He put his hand into his bosom; and when he took it out, his hand was encrusted with snowy scales!

And He said, "Put your hand back into your bosom."

He put his hand back into his bosom; and when he took it out of his bosom, there it was again like the rest of his body.

"And if they do not believe you or pay heed to the first sign, they will believe the second. And if they are not convinced by both these signs and still do not heed you, take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and it—the water that you take from the Nile—will turn to blood on the dry ground."

But Moses said to the Lord, "Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue."

And the Lord said to him, "Who gives man speech? Who makes him dumb or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, and I will be with you as you speak and will instruct you what to say."

But he said, "Please, O Lord, make someone else Your agent."

The Lord became angry with Moses, and He said, "There is your brother Aaron the Levite. He, I know, speaks readily. Even now he is setting out to meet you, and he will be happy to see you. You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth—I will be with you and with him as you speak, and tell both of you what to do— and he shall speak for you to the people. Thus he shall serve as your spokesman, with you playing the role of God to him, and take with you this rod, with which you shall perform the signs."

Moses went back to his father-in-law Jether and said to him, "Let me go back to my brothers in Egypt and see how they are faring." And Jethro said to Moses, "Go in peace."

RA: Moses does not mention that he had fled Egypt for having committed a capital crime, and perhaps one may infer that he never divulged that part of his Egyptian past to his father-in-law. In the very next verse, God will give Moses assurance that he no longer is in danger of execution for the act of manslaughter. The last clause here is a pointed allusion to Joseph's anxious question to his brothers (Genesis 45:3) about whether his father is still alive: the familial bond that induced Joseph to bring his father and brothers down to Egypt will now be manifested in Moses's actions as he sets out to reverse the process, bringing his "brothers" up out of Egypt and back to Canaan. His wondering whether his brothers still live is more than a way of saying that he wants to find out how they are faring because he is aware that they have been the target of a genocidal plan.

The Lord said to Moses in Midian, "Go back to Egypt, for all the men who sought to kill you are dead."

So Moses took his wife and sons, mounted them on an ass, and went back to the land of Egypt; and Moses took the rod of God with him.

And the Lord said to Moses, "When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the marvels that I have put within your power. I, however, will stiffen his heart so that he will not let the people go. Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the Lord: Israel is My first-born son. I have said to you, "Let My son go, that he may worship Me," yet you refuse to let him go. Now I will slay your first-born son.'"

At a night encampment on the way, the Lord encountered him and sought to kill him. So Tzipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched his legs with it, saying, "You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me!" And when He let him alone, she added, "A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision."

NS: The featuring of the circumcision episode following the reference to the first-born provides an artfully wrought literary framework for the entire narrative, one that encompasses the struggle for liberation from Pharaoh's oppression. That struggle begins with Moses' setting out to return to Egypt, and its successful conclusion is signaled by the death of the Egyptian first-born. This latter is followed immediately by the law requiring circumcision as the precondition for participation in the paschal sacrifice, which in turn is followed by the law of the first-born. There is also a functional correspondence between the blood of circumcision and the visible sign of the blood on the paschal sacrifice. Genesis 17:9-14, it should be noted, made circumcision the indispensable precondition for admittance to the community of Israel.

RA: This elliptic story is the most enigmatic episode in all of Exodus. It seems unlikely that we will ever resolve the enigmas it poses, but it nevertheless plays a pivotal role in the larger narrative, and it is worth pondering why such a haunting and bewildering story should have been introduced at this juncture. There is something starkly archaic about the whole episode. The Lord here is not a voice from an incandescent bush announcing that this is holy ground, but an uncanny silent stranger who "encounters" Moses, like the mysterious stranger who confronts Jacob at the Jabbok ford, in the dark of the night (the Hebrew for "place of encampment" is phonetically linked to laylah, "night"). The potently anthropomorphic and mythic character of the episode generates a crabbed style, as though the writer were afraid to spell out its real content, and thus even the referents of pronominal forms are ambiguous. The story is an archaic cousin of the repeated biblical stories of life-threatening trial in the wilderness, and, as modern critics have often noted, it corresponds to the folktale pattern of a perilous rite of passage that the hero must undergo before embarking on his mission proper. The more domesticated God has just assured Moses that he can return to Egypt "for all the men who sought your life are dead." The fierce uncanny God of this episode promptly seeks to kill Moses, just as in the previous verse He had promised to kill Pharaoh's firstborn. The ambiguity of reference has led some commentators to see the son as the object of this lethal intention, though that seems unlikely because the (unspecified) object of the first verb "encountered" is almost certainly Moses. Confusions then multiply in the nocturnal murk of the language. Whose feet are touched with the bloody foreskin? Perhaps Moses's, but it could be the boy's, or even the Lord's. All this may leave us in a dark thicket of bewildering possibilities, yet the story is strikingly apt as a tonal and motivic introduction to the Exodus narrative. The deity that appears here on the threshold of the return to Egypt is dark and dangerous, a potential killer of father or son. Blood in the same double function it will serve in the Plagues narrative is set starkly in the foreground: the blood of violent death, and blood as the apotropaic stuff that wards off death—the bloody foreskin of the son will be matched in the tenth plague by the blood smeared on the lintel to ward off the epidemic of death visiting the firstborn sons. With this troubling mythic encounter, we are ready for the descent into Egypt. The Lord said to Aaron, "Go to meet Moses in the wilderness."

He went and met him at the mountain of God, and he kissed him. Moses told Aaron about all the things that the Lord had committed to him and all the signs about which He had instructed him. Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of the Israelites. Aaron repeated all the words that the Lord had spoken to Moses, and he performed the signs in the sight of the people, and the people were convinced. When they heard that the Lord had taken note of the Israelites and that He had seen their plight, they bowed low in homage.

Chapter 5

Afterward Moses and Aaron went and said to Pharaoh, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Let My people go that they may celebrate a festival for Me in the wilderness."

But Pharaoh said, "Who is the Lord that I should heed Him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, nor will I let Israel go."

They answered, "The God of the Hebrews has manifested Himself to us. Let us go, we pray, a distance of three days into the wilderness to sacrifice to the Lord our God, lest He strike us with pestilence or sword."

But the king of Egypt said to them, "Moses and Aaron, why do you distract the people from their tasks? Get to your labors!"

And Pharaoh continued, "The people of the land are already so numerous, and you would have them cease from their labors!"

That same day Pharaoh charged the taskmasters and foremen of the people, saying, "You shall no longer provide the people with straw for making bricks as heretofore; let them go and gather straw for themselves.

But impose upon them the same quota of bricks as they have been making heretofore; do not reduce it, for they are shirkers; that is why they cry, 'Let us go and sacrifice to our God!' Let heavier work be laid upon the men; let them keep at it and not pay attention to deceitful promises."

So the taskmasters and foremen of the people went out and said to the people, "Thus says Pharaoh: I will not give you any straw. You must go and get the straw yourselves wherever you can find it; but there shall be no decrease whatever in your work."

NS: The new directive did not demand "bricks without straw," as the English saying goes. Rather, it ordered the brickmakers to collect their own straw; until then it had been supplied by the state. Chopped straw or stubble was a crucial ingredient in the manufacture of bricks. It was added to the mud from the Nile, then shaped in a mold and left to dry in the sun. The straw acted as a binder, and the acid released by the decay of the vegetable matter greatly enhanced the plastic and cohesive properties of the brick, thus preventing shrinking, cracking, and loss of shape.

Then the people scattered throughout the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw. And the taskmasters pressed them, saying, "You must complete the same work assignment each day as when you had straw."

And the foremen of the Israelites, whom Pharaoh's taskmasters had set over them, were beaten. "Why," they were asked, "did you not complete the prescribed amount of bricks, either yesterday or today, as you did before?"

Then the foremen of the Israelites came to Pharaoh and cried: "Why do you deal thus with your servants? No straw is issued to your servants, yet they demand of us: Make bricks! Thus your servants are being beaten, when the fault is with your own people."

He replied, "You are shirkers, shirkers! That is why you say, 'Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.' Be off now to your work! No straw shall be issued to you, but you must produce your quota of bricks!" Now the foremen of the Israelites found themselves in trouble because of the order, "You must not reduce your daily quantity of bricks."

As they left Pharaoh's presence, they came upon Moses and Aaron standing in their path, and they said to them, "May the Lord look upon you and punish you for making us loathsome to Pharaoh and his courtiers—putting a sword in their hands to slay us."

Then Moses returned to the Lord and said, "O Lord, why did You bring harm upon this people? Why did You send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has dealt worse with this people; and still You have not delivered Your people."

Chapter 6.1

Then the Lord said to Moses, "You shall soon see what I will do to Pharaoh: he shall let them go because of a greater might; indeed, because of a greater might he shall drive them from his land."