

Introductions to Parashat Va-era

WGP: My Name Adonai

For the second time in the story of Moses, the divine name is revealed. At the burning bush the revelation had been made to Moses for his own sake. Now once more God states an identity, and this time both for the sake of the people and as an accreditation for Moses. For the latter's intimate understanding of the Deity would tend to make him more trustworthy and at the same time more confident that his leadership would be sustained. This appeared necessary for, while in the beginning the Israelites had believed in Moses and his God, they were now dubious about the promised redemption, and Pharaoh was not listening in any case.

The introduction to the revelation begins in a formulaic way, "I am the Eternal." Such a solemn declaration occurs often in other Near Eastern texts as well as in Torah passages. Notably among the latter are the repeated declarations in the Holiness Code (Leviticus, chapter 19), where major ethical injunctions are given emphasis by the formula "I am the Eternal."

But when we come to the revelation that has been introduced so solemnly we are met with an immediate difficulty: we are told that it is Adonai who guarantees the ancient covenant made with the ancestors, although they had not known God by this name. This statement contradicts the frequent occurrence of the name Adonai in Genesis, where the story of the patriarchs is told. According to Genesis, the forefathers had known the Name. Biblical scholars have attempted to solve this contradiction in various ways.

Many hold that chapter 6 belongs to the P-tradition in which the patriarchs knew God only as Elohim or El Shaddai. Now this God self-discloses to Moses as Adonai. (The passages in Genesis where Adonai is used in connection with the patriarchs are assigned to the J-tradition, and this tradition also is responsible for the passages in chapter 3 that refer to Adonai as the name God will forever own.) In chapter 6, the P-school connects Adonai with Moses in order to establish the legitimacy of the priestly hierarchy: Moses will be "God to Pharaoh," while Aaron, emerging with a more important stature than before, will be God's prophet. Finally, the partial genealogy climaxes with Leviticus and goes no farther, thereby underscoring that the important role which that tribe assumed in later history was traceable to ancient origins.

One pre-modern commentator attempted an equally radical explanation. Rabbi Joshua is quoted by Abraham Ibn Ezra as saying that all occurrences of Adonai in Genesis were anachronistic additions made by Moses himself.

While such explanations overcome the apparent contradictions, they do not deal with the text as it now is. For we may assume that these problems were as clear to the

redactor of the Torah as they are to us. We must ask how the redactor perceived the content of the revelation as arising from the story as transmitted to us.

Moses and the people had since patriarchal days known the name Adonai as God's name, but in the centuries since then this knowledge had hardly been more than a customary appellation. At the first revelation, at the bush, Moses is charged with his mission but—despite being provided with access to the divine name Ehyeh—he does not come radically closer to the essence of the God he seeks to know. Now, however, after his first trials and failures, Moses confronts the Deity again, and this time God reveals the Name more fully, which is to say that Moses glimpses the Divine more clearly than before. (This approach was already favored by traditional interpreters like Ibn Ezra who said that the ancestors knew God—and the name—only in a limited way, and that Moses now comes to understand the Divine to have yet another dimension.) What is this new insight Moses acquires?

The patriarchs conceived of the Deity as endowed with qualities that set God aside from all other gods. But this distinctiveness was essentially one of degree, not of essence. For the patriarchs, the existence of other gods presented no problem; their own God, known to them as Adonai or Elohim (or El Shaddai or El Elyon), commanded their total devotion.

Moses, however, begins to see God in a new light: God is faithful, merciful, and compassionate; God remembers the people of Israel and—this is most important—God will redeem them while being shown as superior to all the powers in heaven and on earth. Beside the Eternal—as the second commandment will state specifically—there is none else, and any adoration of other gods will therefore be an idolatrous enterprise, useless for the nations and illegitimate for Israel.

This is the new insight that comes to Moses and which in the course of his career he will deepen, until at the end of his life he will fully develop and teach the fundamentals of monotheism. The people do not grasp the message at first; in fact, it will take them many centuries to assimilate it fully.

Moses then appears here not only as the political leader of his people; he now emerges also as a religious innovator, and as such he will make his indelible impact on humankind. The patriarchs had glimpses of God's essence, but only now, through Moses, does it come into full view. In this sense it may be said that this section, which is given to the accreditation of the leadership of Moses and Aaron, submits, so to speak, God's credentials, as well. They are contained in the divine name, in the four sacred letters that are the seal and pledge of redemption.

NS: Divine Reaffirmation

The verses that ended the last parashah cite evidence of pervasive demoralization among the Israelite slaves. In order to combat this despondent mood, God now

amplifies His response to Moses' complaint found near the end of Chapter 5, where he had lamented the deterioration in Israel's situation that followed his petition to Pharaoh in God's name.

The divine Name and its significance in relation to the promises made to the patriarchs are now the topic of God's renewed theophany to Moses. Seven verbs, each in the first person with God as the subject, are employed emphatically to reaffirm the certainty of redemption. Significantly, the theophany is framed by the authoritative royal formula of self-identification.

The effect of the "I am" formula would be destroyed were this statement "but I did not make Myself known to them by My name Adonai" to mean that a previously unknown divine Name—Adonai—is now to be revealed for the first time. The credibility of a promise is undermined, not enhanced, if it is issued by one whose name is unfamiliar.

Furthermore, the phrase "I am Adonai" appears scores of times in the Bible and is widespread in corresponding form in Northwest Semitic royal inscriptions, such as "I am Mesha," "I am Shalmaneser," "I am Esarhaddon." It cannot, therefore, reflect the introduction of a new name.

On the contrary, precisely because the bearer of the name *is well known*, and its mention evokes such emotions as awe, reverence, honor, and fear, its use as the source and sanction of a law or edict reinforces its authority and encourages compliance.

In the present context the invocation of a hitherto unknown divine name would hardly serve to counteract the widespread demoralization which is, after all, the very function of God's declaration.

In light of these considerations, the meaning of this statement needs to be reexamined.

In the ancient Near Eastern world, names in general, and the name of a god in particular, possessed a dynamic quality and were expressive of character, or attributes, and potency. The names of gods were immediately identified with their nature, status, and function, so that to say "I did not make myself known to them by My name Adonai" is to state that the patriarchs did not experience the essential power associated with the name Adonai. The promises made to them belonged to the distant future. The present reiteration of those promises exclusively in the name of Adonai means that their fulfillment is imminent. This, indeed, is how Rashi, Rashbam, Bekhor Shor, and others construed this statement.

WGP: The Plagues—Natural or Supernatural?

The straightforward meaning of the biblical text appears to be that God brought extraordinary events to pass which were designed to have an impact on Israel's fate. This interfered with the ordinary, familiar processes of nature. Such intervention, which

is usually described as “miracle,” has for many Bible readers become a formidable obstacle to reading the text with full appreciation.

Yet the Torah does not have a term corresponding to “miracle” in the sense that later rabbinic and Christian literature gave it. Rather, the story of the plagues mainly uses two expressions for the extraordinary acts of God: *ot*, (“sign”) and *mofet* (“marvel”). Their use implies divine action—manifestations and omens of divine concern and potential participation (in fact, in Deuteronomy 34, *mofet* is rendered as “portent”). The terms also convey that nature is not an impersonal structure governed by rigid laws, but an arrangement that is flexible and subject to personal forces. In that sense, the terms “natural” and “supernatural” do not fit the biblical outlook, which conceived both divine and demonic powers built into observable reality.

Most moderns would take the opposite view: the stories are unacceptable as fact and must be deemed legendary and unhistorical. A similar position was already taken by Baruch Spinoza: the universe itself is a miracle but its laws are inexorable.

Ancient and medieval scholars were also much concerned with the problems raised by biblical wonders. Already in Deuteronomy 13.2-4 we are warned not to trust the performance of extraordinary signs as evidence of prophetic authenticity. In consequence, there was a tendency in Jewish life to discount or play down such evidences.

In a famous story recorded in the Talmud, God brought about miracles in order to support Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanos in a dispute: uprooting a tree, making a river flow backward, inclining a wall, and even issuing an audible judgment in the matter. But the majority of the Rabbis refused to be swayed and proclaimed that they had been given the Torah (which rules that the majority decides the law, precluding God’s interference) and were not about to surrender their privilege. The legend then concludes by having God express pleasure over this act of human independence even after having suffered a “defeat” in the process.

But while postbiblical miracles could thus be discounted, biblical marvels could not be disposed of in this way. They were accepted as having happened in the manner described in the text. The solution that the Rabbis adopted—and which was later reinforced by Maimonides—was to assume that all so-called miracles recorded in the Bible only appeared as contemporaneous divine interventions. In fact, they had already been built into the process of Creation. The crossing of the Reed Sea, the descent of manna, and so forth were pre-created as it were—and merely happened in a “natural” way when their time came.

Others tried to circumvent the problem by stating that a miracle was or is an event that cannot (yet) be explained. Thomas Aquinas took this view and said that people often call “miracle” what may not really be one, since they do not ever fully know the workings of nature. The rigidity of natural laws itself was altogether questioned by

Augustine, who suggested that nature might be considered as including what God does, a position similar to some rabbinic teachings.

All these approaches to the text proceed from the assumption that the plagues occurred as recorded, and they attempt to explain the extraordinary nature of the events. But these efforts are wide of the mark, for they consider the story literally rather than for what it really is: essentially interpretive and legendary. The release of the Israelites from slavery was unprecedented, and the only explanation possible, repeated a thousand times in folk recital and eventually set down in writing, was to give the credit to God. The release and its attending events were experienced as signs and wonders by the people who saw themselves in a special relationship to the Divine. God's presence transfigured history, and the eventual release from bondage became an aspect of salvation in both the material sense and the spiritual sense. Israel experienced the events in what Heschel called a state of "radical amazement."

Whether there were any natural happenings that in their unusual nature gave rise to these sentiments and instilled anxiety in the hearts of the Egyptians is hard to say. There was possibly or even likely a historical kernel that became, in the biblical tradition, transposed into the moral-religious realm.

Thus it has been claimed that the bloodiness of the Nile was caused by special deposits that the river picked up from the mountains (hence the name "Red Nile" for one branch); that frogs accompanied a large-scale inundation; and that lice or gnats as well as insects recurrently infested the area.

But such natural events would have had to be of extraordinary magnitude to classify as wonders, and, in any case, it is not possible to treat the biblical story as a historical account. It was an attempt to explain the inexplicable and it did so on a religious basis.

Israel's redemption was the ultimate marvel, and it was caused by God. To bring it about, nature itself was harnessed, the drama of the plagues was unfolded, and the ground was laid for an experience that forever after was etched into the hearts of the people and their descendants.

The mysterious power of God brought the redemption about; and God's chosen ones knew this as certainty. The story of the plagues was the legendary framework of the tradition that dealt at its core with oppression and freedom, faith and resistance to faith, opposition to the will of God and God's final, glorious victory.

NS: The Plagues

Pharaoh's intransigence—as foretold—sets off the "extraordinary chastisements" mentioned in verse 4. These take the form of ten disasters that strike Egypt in the course of a year. They are popularly known as the "Ten Plagues," in Hebrew *eser makkot*.

The Hebrew Bible features three accounts of the plagues. The longest and most detailed narrative is the prose version set forth in the ensuing chapters. Psalms 78.43-51 and 105.27-36 present highly condensed poetic paraphrases. The three sources vary in the sequence, number, and content of the plagues. Psalm 78 makes no mention of lice, boils, and darkness, whereas Psalm 105 ignores boils and pestilence.

Due to the uncertain meaning of some of the Hebrew terms in those psalms, it is difficult to determine exactly how many and what kind of plagues the two compositions respectively present. Nor can one establish with certainty whether the differences represent variant traditions or poetic license.

The present narrative is a sophisticated and symmetric literary structure with a pattern of three groups each comprising three plagues. The climactic tenth plague possesses a character all its own. The first two afflictions in each triad are forewarned; the last always strikes suddenly, unannounced.

Furthermore, in the case of the first, fourth, and seventh plagues, Pharaoh is informed in the morning and Moses is told to “station” himself before the king, whereas in the second of each series Moses is told to “come in before Pharaoh,” that is, to confront him in the palace.

Finally, in the first triad of plagues it is always Aaron who is the effective agent; in the third, it is always Moses. The controlling purpose behind this literary architecture is to emphasize the idea that the nine plagues are not random vicissitudes of nature; although they are natural disasters, they are the deliberate and purposeful acts of divine will—their intent being retributive, coercive, and educative.

As God’s judgments on Egypt for the enslavement of the Israelites, they are meant to crush Pharaoh’s resistance to their liberation. They are to demonstrate to Egypt the impotence of its gods—and, by contrast, the incomparability of Adonai, God of Israel, as the one supreme sovereign God of Creation, who uses the phenomena of the natural order for His own purposes.

In addition to this dominant motif of the plagues narrative, a secondary theme is also discernible: Israel as well as the Egyptians must “know” Adonai. This is made explicit in 10.2. The early Exodus narratives are very clear about the lack of the people’s faith in its relationship with God. In this regard, the mysterious silence of the Israelites throughout the course of the plagues may well be significant. True, the people is said to be shielded from the effects of the catastrophes, but only in the course of five of them; nothing is said about this in connection with the others. It is only after the culminating miracle at the sea that “the people feared the Lord; they had faith in the Lord and His servant Moses” (14.31).

PARASHAT VA-ERA, Exodus 6.2-9.35

Chapter 6

God spoke to Moshe and said to him, “I am the Lord. I appeared to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My [four-letter] name [pronounced] Adonai [but in My name Adonai I was not known to them—RA]. I also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners. I have now heard the moaning [the cry—REF] of the Israelites because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage, and I have remembered My covenant.

“Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: ‘I am the Lord. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements [tremendous judgments—REF; great (acts of) judgment—EF; great retributions—RA]. And I will take you to be My people, and I will be your God. And you shall know that I, the Lord, am your God who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians.

“I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, and I will give it to you for a possession, I the Lord.”

RA: I, the Lord, am your God who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians This idea, emphasized again and again in the Torah as well as in later books of the Tanach, is the cornerstone of Israelite faith – that God has proven His divinity and His special attachment to Israel by the dramatic act of liberating it from Egyptian slavery. Some modern scholars, arguing from the silence of Egyptian sources on any Hebrew slave population, not to speak of any mention of an exodus, have raised doubts about whether the Hebrews were ever in Egypt. Yet it is hard to imagine that the nation would have invented a story of national origins involving the humiliation of slavery without some kernel of historical memory.

But when Moshe told this to the Israelites, they would not listen to Moshe, their spirits crushed [out of shortness of breath—RA] by cruel bondage.

The Lord spoke to Moshe, saying, “Go and tell Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the Israelites depart from his land.”

But Moshe appealed to the Lord, saying, “The Israelites would not listen to me; how then should Pharaoh heed me, a man of impeded speech [literally, “uncircumcised lips”; Fox uses “foreskinned lips”]!”

REF uncircumcised of lips. Does this shed light on the meaning of “heavy of tongue and heavy of mouth”? It seems rather to be even harder to interpret. Uncircumcision is used elsewhere in the Torah as a metaphor as well. Leviticus 26.41 and Deuteronomy

10.16 refer to the people's uncircumcised heart. (The prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel use this image also.) There it is a strong image, criticizing the people who understand that their covenant requires circumcision of the skin that covers the penis, but who do not appreciate that they must likewise remove the impediment to their hearts. But the meaning of the image here is less clear. We still do not know what the impediment is. All we can say is that Moses is again pictured as unconfident, feeling inadequate to the task. The repeated emphasis on this point will make the eventual success of the exodus that much more dramatic.

RA: I am uncircumcised of lips It is a mistake to represent this image simply as "impeded of speech" because the metaphor of lack of circumcision suggests not merely incapacity of speech but a kind of ritual lack of fitness for the sacred task (like Isaiah's "impure of lips" in Isaiah 6). The idiom is clearly intended to resonate with the Bridegroom of Blood story, in which Moses is not permitted to launch on his mission until an act of circumcision is performed. Syntactically, this last clause of the verse dangles ambiguously: Moses's thought was already complete in the *a fortiori* relation between the first and second clauses (if the Israelites wouldn't listen to me, how much more so Pharaoh...), and now Moses offers a kind of reinforcing afterthought – and anyway, I am uncircumcised of lips. God offers no explicit response to Moses's reiteration of his sense of unfitness as spokesman, but, as Rashi notes, God's joint address at this point to Moses and Aaron may suggest Aaron's previously indicated role as mouthpiece for Moses.

So the Lord spoke to both Moshe and Aharon in regard to the Israelites and Pharaoh king of Egypt, instructing them to deliver the Israelites from the land of Egypt.

NS The narrative breaks off at this low point in the wretched fortunes of Israel with the insertion of a genealogy. This interruption is not an interpolation but a literary device that definitively marks off the first stage in the process of liberation – the unavailing human efforts – from the coercive intervention of God that will ensue – the ten plagues. At the same time, it links the time of the Exodus with the patriarchal period.

Because a genealogy inherently symbolizes vigor and continuity, its presence here also injects a reassuring note into the otherwise despondent mood.

A detailed analysis of the content of the genealogy discloses careful design and purpose. The line of the Levites is framed by a separate introduction and conclusion; the lifespans of individuals are registered only in the list of Levites; and the descendants of Levites are traced to five generations in contrast to the single generation given for the Reubenites and Simeonites. Still more peculiarities appear in the Levitical listing:

Aaron's name precedes that of Moses; Moses' wife is not mentioned but Aaron's is; only the fathers-in-law of Aaron and his son Eleazar are named; only Aaron's brother-in-law is recorded; only Aaron's descendants and not those of Moses are listed, and to three generations.

To put it all another way, the Levites are here singled out from among the other tribes of Israel; the Aaronides are distinguished from among the other Levitical families; and there is a further differentiation within the Aaronide families themselves. These special features undoubtedly anticipate later developments: the special status to be granted to the tribe of Levites, the appointment of the Aaronides to serve as priests, and the investment of Aaron as High Priest, with one specific line of his descendants exclusively designated to succeed him.

The exaltation of Aaron is enhanced even further by the note about his marriage; his brother-in-law, Nachshon, and also presumably his father-in-law, Aminadav, was a chieftain of the tribe of Judah and an ancestor of King David.

Ramban (Nachmanides) suggests that the genealogy begins with the Reubenites and Simeonites, even though the primary focus is on Levites, in order to emphasize that the last named was not Jacob's first-born and that the Levites were elevated because of their own merit.

The following are the heads of their respective clans. The sons of Reuven, Israel's first-born: Chanoch and Pallu, Chetzron and Carmi; those are the families of Reuven. The sons of Shimon: Y'muel, Yamin, Ohad, Yachin, Zohar, and Shaul the son of a Canaanite woman; those are the families of Shimon.

These are the names of Levi's sons by their lineage: Gershon, Kohat, and M'rari; and the span of Levi's life was 137 years. The sons of Gershon: Livni and Shimei, by their families. The sons of Kohat: Amram, Yitzhar, Chevron, and Uzziel; and the span of Kohat's life was 133 years. The sons of M'rari: Machli and Mushi. These are the families of the Levites by their lineage.

Amram took to wife his father's sister [literally, "his aunt"] Yocheved, and she bore him Aharon and Moshe; and the span of Amram's life was 137 years.

The sons of Yitzhar: Korach, Nefeg, and Zichri. The sons of Uzziel: Mishael, Eltzafan, and Sitri.

Aharon took to wife Elisheva, daughter of Aminadav and sister of Nachshon, and she bore him Nadav and Avihu, Eleazar and Itamar.

The sons of Korach: Assir, Elkanah, and Aviasaf.

Those are the families of the Korachites.

And Aharon's son Eleazar took to wife one of Putiel's daughters, and she bore him Pinchas.

Those are the heads of the fathers' houses of the Levites by their families.

It is the same Aharon and Moshe to whom the Lord said, "Bring forth the Israelites from the land of Egypt, troop by troop [by their masses—REF]." It was they who spoke to Pharaoh king of Egypt to free the Israelites from the Egyptians; these are the same Moshe and Aharon.

And it was in the day that the Lord spoke to Moshe in the land of Egypt. And the Lord said to Moshe, "I am the Lord; speak to Pharaoh king of Egypt all that I will tell you," Moshe appealed to the Lord, saying, "See, I am of impeded speech [literally, "uncircumcised lips"]; how then should Pharaoh heed me!"

RA The recurrent language (in this case, regarding lips) is a clear-cut instance of a compositional technique that biblical scholars call "resumptive repetition": When a narrative is interrupted by a unit of disparate material – like the genealogical list here – the point at which the story resumes is marked by the repetition of phrases or clauses from the point where the story was interrupted. Moses's report of Israelite resistance to his message is not repeated because the focus now is on the impending confrontation between him and Pharaoh. For the same reason, "how will Pharaoh heed me?" is repositioned at the end of Moses's speech because it will be directly followed by God's enjoining Moses and Aaron to execute the first portent intended to compel Pharaoh's attention.

Chapter 7

The Lord replied to Moshe, "See, I place you in the role of God to Pharaoh, with your brother Aharon as your prophet. You shall repeat all that I command you, and your brother Aharon shall speak to Pharaoh to let the Israelites depart from his land. But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, that I may multiply My signs and marvels in the land of Egypt. When Pharaoh does not heed you, I will lay My hand upon Egypt and deliver My ranks, My people the Israelites, from the land of Egypt with extraordinary chastisements [great judgments—REF; great (acts of) judgment—EF; great retributions—RA]. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out My hand over Egypt and bring out the Israelites from their midst."

RA I ... shall harden Pharaoh's heart, that I may multiply My signs and My portents. Whatever the theological difficulties, the general aim of God's allowing, or here causing, Pharaoh to persist in his harshness is made clear: Without Pharaoh's resistance, God would not have the opportunity to deploy His great wonders and so demonstrate His insuperable power in history and the emptiness of the power attributed to the gods of Egypt. It should be noted that three different verbs are used in the story for the action on or in Pharaoh's heart: *hikshah*, "to harden" (the verb here), *chizek*, "to toughen," or in

other contexts, “to strengthen” (the verb used in earlier passages), and *kaved*, literally, “to be heavy,” which in English unfortunately suggests sorrow when linked with the heart, and so has been rendered “harden” in this translation (as in verse 14). The force of all three idioms is to be stubborn, unfeeling, arrogantly inflexible, and there doesn’t seem to be much differentiation of meaning among the terms, though elsewhere *chizek* linked with heart has a positive meaning – “to show firm resolve.”

This Moshe and Aharon did; as the Lord commanded them, so they did. Moshe was 80 years old and Aharon 83 when they made their demand on Pharaoh.

The Lord said to Moshe and Aharon, “When Pharaoh speaks to you and says, ‘Produce your marvel,’ you shall say to Aharon, ‘Take your rod and cast it down before Pharaoh.’ It shall turn into a serpent.”

So Moshe and Aharon came before Pharaoh and did just as the Lord had commanded: Aharon cast down his rod in the presence of Pharaoh and his courtiers, and it turned into a serpent. Then Pharaoh, for his part, summoned the wise men and the sorcerers; and the Egyptian magicians, in turn, did the same with their spells; each cast down his rod, and they turned into serpents. But Aharon’s rod swallowed their rods. Yet Pharaoh’s heart stiffened and he did not heed them, as the Lord had said.

WGP The Egyptian magicians did the same. The text expresses no surprise that the sign which God gave to Moses to demonstrate the divine power could be readily duplicated. It is therefore clear from the outset that the real battle is not between Moses and the magicians, or between one set of signs and their imitations, but between God and Pharaoh. The latter’s will is the battleground, and he will be made to yield, though his resolve to the contrary is hard and persistent. The Torah also pays no attention to the obvious question: Where did the magicians obtain water for their demonstration? The focus is solely on the recalcitrance of Pharaoh.

And the Lord said to Moshe, “Pharaoh is stubborn; he refuses to let the people go. Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is coming out to the water, and station yourself before him at the edge of the Nile, taking with you the rod that turned into a snake. And say to him, ‘The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, sent me to you to say, “Let My people go that they may worship Me in the wilderness.” But you have paid no heed until now. Thus says the Lord, “By this you shall know that I am the Lord.” See, I shall strike the water in the Nile with the rod that is in my hand, and it will be turned into blood; and the fish in the Nile will die. The Nile will stink so that the Egyptians will find it impossible to drink the water of the Nile.’”

And the Lord said to Moshe, “Say to Aharon: Take your rod and hold out your arm over the waters of Egypt—its rivers, its canals, its ponds, all its bodies of water—that

they may turn to blood; there shall be blood throughout the land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and stone.”

Moshe and Aharon did just as the Lord commanded: he lifted up the rod and struck the water in the Nile in the sight of Pharaoh and his courtiers, and all the water in the Nile was turned into blood and the fish in the Nile died. The Nile stank so that the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile; and there was blood throughout the land of Egypt.

But when the Egyptian magicians did the same with their spells, Pharaoh’s heart stiffened and he did not heed them—as the Lord had spoken. Pharaoh turned and went into his palace, paying no regard even to this. And all the Egyptians had to dig round about the Nile for drinking water, because they could not drink the water of the Nile.

When seven days had passed after the Lord struck the Nile, the Lord said to Moshe, “Go to Pharaoh and say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord: Let My people go that they may worship Me. If you refuse to let them go, then I will plague your whole country with frogs. The Nile shall swarm with frogs, and they shall come up and enter your palace, your bedchamber and your bed, the houses of your courtiers and your people, and your ovens and your kneading bowls. The frogs shall come up on you and on your people and on all your courtiers.’”

RA the Nile will swarm with frogs. The verb in the Hebrew is transitive (“will swarm frogs”). Several commentators have noticed that this word choice echoes the “swarming” of the proliferating Hebrews in chapter 1. There, the orgy of propagation seems to have struck the Egyptians as repellently reptilian; here, they are assaulted with a nauseating plague of amphibians. In this, as in other details of the Plagues narrative, the allusions to the Creation story, initially sounded in the first chapter of Exodus, turn into a network of reversals of the original creation.

It would be excessive to insist that every detail of the narrative, or even every plague, confirms this pattern. Nevertheless, the allusions to early Genesis that are detectable trace a possibility that much exercised the imaginations of the biblical writers: If creation emerged at a particular moment in a process with discriminated stages, one could imagine an undoing of this event and this process, apocalypse being the other side of the coin of creation. The benign swarming of life in Genesis turns into a threatening swarm of odious creatures, just as the penultimate plague of darkness, prelude to mass death, is a reversal of the first “let there be light.” Alexander Pope, at the end of his great anti-creation poem, *The Dunciad*, writes thoroughly in the spirit of these reversals when he announces of the new reign of anarchy, “Light dies before thy uncreating word.”

Chapter 8

And the Lord said to Moshe, “Say to Aharon: ‘Hold out your arm with the rod over the rivers, the canals, and the ponds, and bring up the frogs on the land of Egypt.’” Aharon held out his arm over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt. But the magicians did the same with their spells, and brought frogs upon the land of Egypt.

Then Pharaoh summoned Moshe and Aharon and said, “Plead with the Lord to remove the frogs from me and my people, and I will let the people go to sacrifice to the Lord.”

And Moshe said to Pharaoh, “You may have this triumph over me [Be honored over me—REF]: for what time shall I plead in behalf of you and your courtiers and your people, that the frogs be cut off from you and your houses, to remain only in the Nile?”

“For tomorrow,” he replied.

And [Moshe] said, “As you say—that you may know that there is none like the Lord our God. The frogs shall retreat from you and your courtiers and your people; they shall remain only in the Nile.”

Then Moshe and Aharon left Pharaoh’s presence, and Moshe cried out to the Lord in the matter of the frogs which He had inflicted upon Pharaoh. And the Lord did as Moshe asked; the frogs died out in the houses, the courtyards, and the fields. And they piled them up in heaps, till the land stank.

But when Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he became stubborn and would not heed them, as the Lord had spoken. Then the Lord said to Moshe, “Say to Aharon: ‘Hold out your rod and strike the dust of the earth, and it shall turn to lice throughout the land of Egypt.’”

And they did so. Aharon held out his arm with the rod and struck the dust of the earth, and vermin came upon man and beast; all the dust of the earth turned to lice throughout the land of Egypt.

The magicians did the like with their spells to produce lice, but they could not. The vermin remained upon man and beast; and the magicians said to Pharaoh, “This is the finger of God!” But Pharaoh’s heart stiffened and he would not heed them, as the Lord had spoken.

And the Lord said to Moshe, “Early in the morning, present yourself to Pharaoh, as he is coming out to the water, and say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord: Let My people go that they may worship Me. For if you do not let My people go, I will let loose swarms of insects against you and your courtiers and your people and your houses; the houses of the Egyptians, and the very ground they stand on, shall be filled with swarms of insects. But on that day I will set apart the region of Goshen, where My people dwell, so that no swarms of insects shall be there, that you may know that I the Lord am in the midst of

the land. And I will make a distinction between My people and your people. Tomorrow this sign shall come to pass.”

And the Lord did so. Heavy swarms of insects invaded Pharaoh’s palace and the houses of his courtiers; throughout the country of Egypt the land was ruined because of the swarms of insects.

Then Pharaoh summoned Moshe and Aharon and said, “Go and sacrifice to your God within the land.”

But Moshe replied, “It would not be right to do this, for what we sacrifice to the Lord our God is untouchable [is an offensive thing—REF] to the Egyptians. If we sacrifice that which is untouchable to the Egyptians before their very eyes, will they not stone us! So we must go a distance of three days into the wilderness and sacrifice to the Lord our God as He may command us.”

Pharaoh said, “I will let you go to sacrifice to the Lord your God in the wilderness; but do not go very far. Plead, then, for me.”

And Moshe said, “When I leave your presence, I will plead with the Lord that the swarms of insects depart tomorrow from Pharaoh and his courtiers and his people; but let not Pharaoh again act deceitfully, not letting the people go to sacrifice to the Lord.”

So Moshe left Pharaoh’s presence and pleaded with the Lord. And the Lord did as Moshe asked: He removed the swarms of insects from Pharaoh, from his courtiers, and from his people; not one remained. But Pharaoh became stubborn this time also, and would not let the people go.

Chapter 9

The Lord said to Moshe, “Go to Pharaoh and say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews: Let My people go to worship Me. For if you refuse to let them go, and continue to hold them, then the hand of the Lord will strike your livestock in the fields—the horses, the asses, the camels, the cattle, and the sheep—with a very severe pestilence. But the Lord will make a distinction between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of the Egyptians, so that nothing shall die of all that belongs to the Israelites. The Lord has fixed the time: tomorrow the Lord will do this thing in the land.’”

NS camels The presence of this animal here and in the patriarchal narratives is a problem because the camel does not figure in Egyptian texts and art until the Persian period. It is conspicuously absent from the published Mari texts from Mesopotamia, which are replete with information about pastoral nomadic groups and their way of life. Thousands of commercial and administrative texts from the Old Babylonian period (ca. 1950-1530 B.C.E.) maintain complete silence on the existence of this animal.

All available evidence points to the conclusion that the effective domestication of the camel as a widely used beast of burden did not take place before the 12th century B.C.E., which is long after the patriarchal and Exodus periods.

The key word in this last paragraph is “effective,” *for evidence of another kind does exist.* Certain bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian lexical texts from Mesopotamia equate a domesticated animal called “donkey-of-the-sea-land” with a dromedary, thus proving a knowledge of the animal in southern Mesopotamia in Old Babylonian times (ca. 2000-1700 B.C.E.). Moreover, the scribes knew to differentiate between the dromedary and the Bactrian camel, and a Sumerian text from that period mentions the drinking of camel’s milk.

A braided cord made from camel hair (ca. 2000 B.C.E.) has been found in Egypt; a tiny bronze figurine of a camel from before 2,100 B.C.E. turned up at Byblos; a frieze of a procession of typically Egyptian animals, including a camel, decorates a pot (1500-1400 B.C.E.) uncovered in Greece; a steatite seal from Minoan Crete (1800-1400 B.C.E.) features that animal; and a ration list from the North Syrian town of Alalakh from the 18th century B.C.E. in Old Babylonian includes fodder for the camel.

In light of all this, mention of the camel in Exodus and Genesis can be taken at face value. First domesticated in southern Arabia in the third millennium B.C.E., its presence spread very slowly and long remained a rarity. A wealthy man might acquire a few as a prestige symbol. Only much later did it become a beast of burden.

And the Lord did so the next day: all the livestock of the Egyptians died, but of the livestock of the Israelites not a beast died. When Pharaoh inquired, he found that not a head of the livestock of Israel had died; yet Pharaoh remained stubborn, and he would not let the people go.

Then the Lord said to Moshe and Aharon, “Each of you take handfuls of soot from the kiln [furnace—REF], and let Moshe throw it toward the sky in the sight of Pharaoh. It shall become a fine dust all over the land of Egypt, and cause an inflammation breaking out in boils on man and beast throughout the land of Egypt.”

REF The mention of a kiln or furnace (*kiyshan*) is ominous because the only use of the word until now was to describe the smoke of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19.28). Now it comes again as a harbinger of something awful. But the next time it will be mentioned will be in connection with God’s descent onto Mount Sinai (Exodus 19.18). Then it will still be frightening, but it will be transformed from something ominous into something reflecting the closest that God ever comes to a human community in the Bible. And then the word will never occur again in the Bible. The point: humans must overcome their fear in order to come close to the divine.

So they took soot of the kiln and appeared before Pharaoh; Moshe threw it toward the sky, and it caused an inflammation breaking out in boils on man and beast. The magicians were unable to confront Moshe because of the inflammation [burning rash—RA], for the inflammation afflicted the magicians as well as all the other Egyptians. But the Lord stiffened the heart of Pharaoh, and he would not heed them, just as the Lord had told Moshe.

RA burning rash. The Hebrew *shechin* obviously refers to a painful skin disease, but no definitive identification of the malady has been made. The noun is probably related to a root that means “to be hot.” The fact that the plague is inaugurated with soot taken from a kiln may reinforce an association between burning heat and the skin disease in question.

As for the soothsayers, they could not stand before Moses because of the burning rash. Their repeated gesture in the earlier plagues of a weak imitation of Moses vanishes. We might have expected something like “they could not cure the burning rash.” In fact, the soothsayers, themselves painfully smitten by the maddening skin disease, are in no condition to make any effort of the sort but instead flee from Moses’s presence. What was noxious to them in the earlier plagues has now become physically unbearable.

The Lord said to Moshe, “Early in the morning present yourself to Pharaoh and say to him, ‘Thus says the Lord, the God of the Hebrews: Let My people go to worship Me. For this time I will send all My plagues upon your person, and your courtiers, and your people, in order that you may know that there is none like Me in all the world.

“I could have stretched forth My hand and stricken you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been effaced from the earth. Nevertheless I have spared you for this purpose: in order to show you My power, and in order that My fame may resound throughout the world. Yet you continue to thwart My people, and do not let them go!

“This time tomorrow I will rain down a very heavy hail, such as has not been in Egypt from the day it was founded until now. Therefore, order your livestock and everything you have in the open brought under shelter; every man and beast that is found outside, not having been brought indoors, shall perish when the hail comes down upon them!”

Those among Pharaoh’s courtiers who feared the Lord’s word brought their slaves and livestock indoors to safety; but those who paid no regard to the word of the Lord left their slaves and livestock in the open.

WGP The seventh plague, fiery hail, is provided with an elaborate opening, setting the stage for the impressive demonstration of God’s power. For it now becomes ever clearer that the plagues are above all “signs” that an obdurate Pharaoh needs to

experience before at last he accepts the reality of God's superior might. The plagues are demonstrations that God is uniquely powerful. This is not just another god who's protecting a favored people; rather, the Eternal is master of all humankind and all nature. The signs are there for the world to see, and they are for Israel the basis of a new understanding of the Deity whose name Moses had communicated to them after the second revelation.

The Lord said to Moshe, "Hold out your arm toward the sky that hail may fall on all the land of Egypt, upon man and beast and all the grasses of the field in the land of Egypt."

So Moshe held out his rod toward the sky, and the Lord sent thunder and hail, and fire streamed down to the ground, as the Lord rained down hail upon the land of Egypt. The hail was very heavy—fire flashing in the midst of the hail—such as had not fallen on the land of Egypt since it had become a nation. Throughout the land of Egypt the hail struck down all that were in the open, both man and beast; the hail also struck down all the grasses of the field and shattered all the trees of the field. Only in the region of Goshen, where the Israelites were, there was no hail.

Thereupon Pharaoh sent for Moshe and Aharon and said to them, "I stand guilty this time. The Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong. Plead with the Lord that there may be an end of God's thunder and of hail. I will let you go; you need stay no longer."

Moshe said to him, "As I go out of the city, I shall spread out my hands to the Lord; the thunder will cease and the hail will fall no more, so that you may know that the earth is the Lord's. But I know that you and your courtiers do not yet fear the Lord God."

Now the flax and barley were ruined, for the barley was in the ear and the flax was in bud; but the wheat and the emmer were not hurt, for they ripen late.

Leaving Pharaoh, Moshe went outside the city and spread out his hands to the Lord: the thunder and the hail ceased, and no rain came pouring down upon the earth. But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he became stubborn and reverted to his guilty ways, as did his courtiers.

So Pharaoh's heart stiffened and he would not let the Israelites go, just as the Lord had foretold through Moshe.