

20 who sought your life are dead.” And Moses took his wife and his sons and mounted them on the donkey, and he returned to the land of Egypt, and
21 Moses took God’s staff in his hand. And the LORD said to Moses, “When you set out to return to Egypt, see all the portents that I have put in your hand and do them before Pharaoh. But I on my part shall toughen his
22 heart and he will not send the people away. And you shall say to Pharaoh,
23 ‘Thus said the LORD: My son, my firstborn, is Israel. And I said to you, Send off my son that he may worship Me, and you refused to send him off, and, look, I am about to kill your son, your firstborn.’”

24 And it happened on the way at the night camp that the LORD encountered
25 him and sought to put him to death. And Zipporah took a flint and cut off

20. *his sons*. Only one son was previously mentioned, and only one son figures in verses 24–26. Some textual critics, noting an ambiguity in early Hebrew orthography, propose “his son” as the original reading.

21. *But I on My part shall toughen his heart*. This phrase, which with two synonymous variants punctuates the Plagues narrative, has been the source of endless theological debate over whether Pharaoh is exercising free will or whether God is playing him as a puppet and then punishing him for his puppet’s performance. The latter alternative surely states matters too crudely. The heart in biblical idiom is the seat of understanding, feeling, and intention. The verb rendered here as “toughen” (King James Version, “harden”) has the primary meaning of “strengthen,” and the most frequent synonym of this idiom as it occurs later in the story means literally “to make heavy.” God needs Pharaoh’s recalcitrance in order that He may deploy the plagues, one after another, thus humiliating the great imperial power of Egypt—the burden of the triumphalist narrative we have already noted—and demonstrating the impotence of all the gods of Egypt. But Pharaoh is presumably manifesting his own character: callousness, resistance to instruction, and arrogance would all be implied by the toughening of the heart. God is not so much pulling a marionette’s strings as allowing, or perhaps encouraging, the oppressor-king to persist in his habitual harsh willfulness and presumption.

22. *My son, my firstborn is Israel*. Framing the relationship in these terms lays the ground in measure-for-measure justice for the lethal tenth plague predicted at the end of the next verse, since Pharaoh has sought to destroy Israel.

23. *to kill your son, your firstborn*. This dire threat, to be fulfilled in the tenth plague, also inducts us to the narrative episode that follows in the next three verses, in which the LORD seeks to kill Moses, and the blood of the firstborn intercedes.

24. *on the way at the night camp that the LORD . . . sought to put him to death*. 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

her son's foreskin and touched it to his feet, and she said, "Yes, a bridegroom of blood you are to me." And He let him go. Then did she say, "A bridegroom of blood by the circumcising." 26

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"). One may infer that both the deity here and the rite of circumcision carried out by Zipporah belong to an archaic—perhaps even premonotheistic—stratum of Hebrew culture, though both are brought into telling alignment with the story that follows. 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. Traditional Jewish commentators seek to naturalize the story to a more normative monotheism by claiming that Moses has neglected the commandment to circumcise his son (sons?), and that is why the LORD threatens his life. What seems more plausible is that Zipporah's act reflects an older rationale for circumcision among the West Semitic peoples than the covenantal one enunciated in Genesis 17. Here circumcision serves as an apotropaic device, to ward off the hostility of a dangerous deity by offering him a bloody scrap of the son's flesh, a kind of symbolic synecdoche of human sacrifice. The circumciser, moreover, is the mother, and not the father, as enjoined in Genesis. 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 of verse 19 has just assured Moses that he can return to Egypt "for all the men who sought your life are dead." The fierce uncanny YHWH of this episode promptly seeks to kill Moses (the same verb "seek"), just as in the previous verse He had promised to kill Pharaoh's firstborn. (Here, the more judicial verb, *himit*, "to put to death," is used instead of the blunt *harag*, "kill.") 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. The scholarly claim, moreover, that "feet" is a euphemism for the genitals cannot be dismissed. There are again three male candidates in the scene for the obscure epithet "bridegroom of blood," though Moses strikes me as the most probable. William H. C. Propp correctly recognizes that the plural form for blood used here, *damim*, generally means "bloodshed" or "violence" (though in the archaic language of this text it may merely reflect intensification or poetic heightening). He proposes that the deity assaults Moses because he still bears the bloodguilt for the act of involuntary manslaughter he has committed, and it is for this that the circumcision must serve as expiation. 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.

27 And the LORD said to Aaron, "Go to the wilderness to meet Moses." And he went and encountered him on the mountain of God and he kissed him.
 28 And Moses told Aaron all the LORD's words with which He sent him and
 29 all the signs with which He charged him. And Moses, and Aaron with him,
 30 went, and they gathered the elders of the Israelites. And Aaron spoke all the words that the LORD had spoken to Moses, and he did the signs before
 31 the people's eyes. And the people believed and heeded, that the LORD had singled out the Israelites and that He had seen their abuse. And they did obeisance and bowed down.

1 CHAPTER 5 And afterward Moses and Aaron came and said to Pharaoh, "Thus said the LORD, God of Israel: 'Send off My people that
 2 they may celebrate to Me in the wilderness.'" And Pharaoh said, "Who is

27. *And the LORD said to Aaron.* We return to the welcome sphere of a God Who speaks, and directs men to act through speech. After the reunion of the brothers, they will promptly implement God's instructions as Moses imparts the words to Aaron and Aaron then speaks the words to the people.

31. *And the people believed and heeded.* In the event, the two signs of the staff and the hand are sufficient to win their trust ("believe" does not have any doctrinal sense here), and the third sign, of water turned to blood, can be reserved for the first plague.

CHAPTER 5 1. *Thus said the LORD.* This is the so-called messenger formula, the conventional form for introducing the text, oral or written, of a message. The conveyor of the message may be divine, as here and repeatedly in the Prophets, or human, as in verse 10, where the message comes from Pharaoh. The phrase was regularly used at the beginning of letters.

Send off. The Hebrew verb *shileah* has a range of meanings: "to let go or dismiss," "to divorce," "to send guests decorously on their way," "to grant manumission to a slave." There is probably some ironic tension in this narrative between the positive and the negative senses of the verb, and since it is repeatedly played off against God's "sending" out His hand or sending ministers of destruction, this translation represents the reiterated request to Pharaoh as "send off."

The abruptness of Moses and Aaron's address to the king of Egypt is noteworthy. They use none of the deferential forms of speech, none of the third-person bowing and scraping, which are conventional in biblical Hebrew for addressing a monarch. Instead, they immediately announce, "Thus said the LORD," and proceed to the text of the message, which begins with an imperative verb, without the polite particle of entreaty, *na'*. William H. C. Propp observes that in doing this, Moses is not following God's orders: he was to have spoken together with the elders, who appear to be absent; he was to have performed his two portents; he was to have threatened Pharaoh's firstborn in God's name. As to the absence of the elders, Rashi, following the Midrash, suggests that they slipped away in fear one by one as Moses and Aaron approached the palace.

the LORD, that I should heed His voice to send off Israel? I do not know the LORD, nor will I send off Israel.” And they said, “The God of the Hebrews 3 happened upon us. Let us go, pray, a three days’ journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God, lest He hit us with pestilence or sword.” And the king of Egypt said to them, “Why, Moses and Aaron, do 4 you disturb the people from its tasks? Go to your burdens!” And Pharaoh 5 said, “Look, the people of the land are now many, and you would make them cease from their burdens!” And Pharaoh on that day charged the 6 people’s taskmasters and its overseers, saying, “You shall no longer give 7 the people straw to make the bricks as in time past. They themselves will

2. *Who is the LORD, that I should heed His voice.* The very name, YHWH, of this Semitic deity may be news to Pharaoh, and even if he grants that there is such a god, there is no reason that he, as an Egyptian polytheist and as a figure thought to have divine status himself, should recognize the authority of this Hebrew deity. (“I do not know the LORD” has the sense of “I refuse to recognize his divine authority.”) Pharaoh speaks here in quasipoetic parallel clauses, and D. N. Friedman has proposed that this may be coded as an aristocratic style of speech, a token of his regal stature.

3. *Let us go, pray, a three days’ journey into the wilderness.* Speaking in God’s name, they had made the request unconditionally, without stipulation of time limits. Now answering Pharaoh’s indignation in their own voice, they use the cohortative verb form (“let us go”) with the particle of entreaty (“pray”) and mention the three days, which they presumably should have done at the outset.

lest He hit us with pestilence or sword. The proposal of some scholars that “us” be emended to “you” (because of the impending plagues) should be resisted. It was a perfectly understandable religious concept for peoples of the ancient Near East that a national deity might need to be propitiated through sacrifice. By couching their request for a furlough for the slaves in these terms, Moses and Aaron are saying to Pharaoh that the cultic expedition into the wilderness is no mere whim but a necessary means to avert the punishing wrath of the god of the Hebrews. In this fashion, they are pitching their argument to Pharaoh’s self-interest, for dead slaves would be of no use to him.

5. *the people of the land are now many.* This phrase remains a little obscure. Because of the end of the sentence, it has to refer to the Hebrews. The most likely sense is that the Hebrew workforce has become vast (compare all the references to their proliferation in chapter 1), and so the Egyptian economy has come to depend on this multitude of slave laborers and can scarcely afford an interruption of their work.

6. *taskmasters . . . overseers.* As becomes clear in what follows (e.g., verse 14), the taskmasters are Egyptian slave drivers, the overseers are Hebrew foremen. The former term, *noges*, derives from a root that means “to oppress” the latter term, *shoter*, is associated with a root meaning to “record in writing.”

7. *as in time past.* The literal meaning of this common Hebrew idiom is “as yesterday [or] the day before.” At the end of verse 14, these two components of the idiom are broken out from the fixed formula, each being prefaced by the emphatic *gam* (“even,” “also”).

8 go and scabble for straw. And the quota of bricks that they were making in the past you shall impose upon them, you shall not deduct from it, for they are idlers. Therefore do they cry out, saying, 'Let us go sacrifice to our
9 god.' Let the work be heavy on the men and let them do it and not look to
10 lying words!" And the people's taskmasters and its overseers went out and
11 said to the people, saying, "Thus said Pharaoh: 'I give you no straw. As for you, fetch yourselves straw wherever you find it, because not a thing is to
12 be deducted from your work.'" And the people spread out through all the
13 land of Egypt to scabble for stubble for straw. And the taskmasters were urging them, saying, "Finish your tasks at the same daily rate as when there
14 was straw." And the overseers of the Israelites, whom Pharaoh's taskmasters had set over them, were beaten, saying, "Why have you not completed your tally for making bricks as in time past, neither yesterday nor today?"
15 And the Israelite overseers came and cried out to Pharaoh, saying, "Why
16 should you do this to your servants? Straw is not given to your servants, and bricks they tell us, make, and, look, your servants are beaten and the
17 fault is your people's." And he said, "Idlers, you are idlers! Therefore you

scabble for straw. The verb *qosheshu* is linked with its usual cognate-accusative object *qash*, "stubble" (see verse 12). "Straw" (*teven*) and "stubble" (*qash*) appear to be the same substance, with the latter in the condition of not having been picked from the ground. Crushed straw was used to give cohesiveness to the bricks before baking.

8. *for they are idlers.* The contemptuous term invoked here by Egypt's head slave owner, *nirpim*, is derived from a verbal root that means "to relax," "to loosen one's grip," "to let go." It is the very verb that is used in 4:26, when the threatening deity of the Bridegroom of Blood episode "let him go."

12. *And the people spread out through all the land of Egypt to scabble for stubble.* Even in this measure of aggravated oppression, the language of the story picks up the initial imagery of animal-like proliferation, which in turn harks back to the injunction in the Creation story to fill the land/earth.

14. *the overseers of the Israelites . . . were beaten.* The Egyptians have instituted an effective chain of command for forced labor. It would not be feasible to beat all the teeming thousands of Hebrew slaves, so when they fail to produce their daily quota, the Israelite overseers are made personally responsible and are beaten by the Egyptian slave drivers. The overseers then turn in protest to Pharaoh, "crying out" (or "screaming"), which is the predictable reaction to a beating.

16. *Straw is not given . . . bricks they tell us, make, and, look, your servants are beaten.* There is a colloquial immediacy in the language with which the overseers express their outrage to Pharaoh, positioning "straw" and "bricks" at the beginning of the first and second clauses.

the fault is your people's. Presumably, the fault for the failure to fulfill the quota of bricks is the Egyptians' because they are not providing the straw.

say, 'Let us go sacrifice to the LORD.' And now, go work, and no straw will
 be given to you, but the quota of bricks you will give." And the Israelite
 overseers saw themselves coming to harm, saying, "You shall not deduct
 from your bricks, from the same daily rate." And they encountered Moses
 and Aaron poised to meet them as they came out from Pharaoh. And they
 said to them, "Let the LORD look upon you and judge, for you have made
 us repugnant in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of his servants, putting
 a sword in their hand to kill us." And Moses went back to the LORD, and
 said, "My lord, why have you done harm to this people, why have you sent
 me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has done harm

17. *Idlers, you are idlers! Therefore you say, "Let us go sacrifice to the LORD."* In keeping with a common procedure of Hebrew narrative, phrases of previous dialogue are pointedly recycled. Pharaoh sarcastically quotes the phrase from Moses and Aaron's request about sacrificing to the LORD, and in a kind of incremental repetition, he picks up his own term, "idlers," and expands it to "Idlers, you are idlers!" These repetitions nicely convey a sense of inflexibly opposed sides in the conflict.

18. *no straw will be given . . . but the quota of bricks you will give.* By this point, "give" (*natan*) has emerged as a thematic key word of the episode. Pharaoh had announced in his message brought by the taskmasters, "I give you no straw." The Hebrew overseers then complained, "Straw is not given," and Pharaoh, picking up their very words, lashes back at them, "no straw will be given," again stipulating that the slaves have the same obligation as before to "give" their quota of bricks.

19. *saw themselves coming to harm.* This is the understanding of the somewhat cryptic Hebrew *wayir'u . . . 'otam bera'* proposed by Abraham ibn Ezra and many other commentators. Still smarting from their recent whipping, they are acutely aware that they will be the first to suffer for the inability of the Hebrew slaves to maintain their usual quota of bricks.

20. *And they encountered Moses and Aaron poised to meet them.* Moses and Aaron, who previously had acted as bold spokesmen, now wait awkwardly, perhaps nervously, outside the palace while the delegation of overseers brings its petition before Pharaoh. The verb for "encounter," *paga'*, has both a neutral and a violent meaning. It indicates the meeting of persons or substances—including the "meeting" of forged iron with flesh, when it has the sense of "stab" or "hit," as at the end of verse 3, above.

21. *made us repugnant.* The literal meaning of this common Hebrew idiom is "made our odor stink," but the fact that the idiom is twice linked here with "eyes" suggests that the writer is not much thinking of its olfactory force.

putting a sword in their hand to kill us. Moses and Aaron, we should recall, had expressed the fear to Pharaoh that, without due sacrifice, the LORD would hit the people with pestilence or sword.

22. *why have you sent me?* Moses's initial hesitancy to accept the mission imposed on him at Horeb seems to him perfectly confirmed now by the events. God has only made things worse for the Hebrew slaves (Moses, as it were, passes the buck he has received from the accusing overseers), and the whole plan of liberation shows no sign of implementation.

6:1 to this people and You surely have not rescued Your people.” And the LORD said to Moses, “Now will you see what I shall do to Pharaoh, for through a strong hand will he send them off and through a strong hand will he drive them from his land.”

2 CHAPTER 6 And God spoke to Moses and said to him, “I
3 am the LORD. And I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as El
4 Shaddai, but in My name the LORD I was not known to them. And I also

6:1. *And the LORD said.* Although the conventional division puts this verse at the beginning of a new chapter, it actually sums up the preceding speech, whereas 6.2 marks the beginning of a new speech in which God offers a quasihistorical summary of His relationship with Israel and His future intentions toward Israel.

through a strong hand will he send them off and through a strong hand will he drive them from his land. The “strong hand”—that is, violent force—becomes a refrain in the story, here repeated in quasipoetic parallelism. The phrase refers to the violent coercion that God will need to exert on Pharaoh. It is noteworthy that the semantically double-edged “send” (to send away ceremoniously, to release, to banish) is here paired with the unambiguous “drive them from his land.” In the event, God’s strong hand will compel Pharaoh to expel the Hebrews precipitously, so that “let my people go” is reinterpreted as something like “banish my people.” The Exodus, in other words, extorted from a recalcitrant Egyptian monarch by an overpowering God, will prove to be a continuation of hostility, a fearful and angry expulsion of the slaves rather than a conciliatory act of liberation.

CHAPTER 6 2. *I am the LORD.* This formula—“I am X”—has been found in a variety of ancient Near Eastern documents, both royal proclamations and pronouncements attributed to sundry deities. The force of the words is something like “By the authority invested in me as X, I make the following solemn declaration.” The content of this particular declaration is a rehearsal of the binding covenant in which God entered with the patriarchs and an expression of His determination now to fulfill the covenantal promise by freeing the Israelites from slavery and bringing them up to the land of Canaan. In terms of the narrative rhythm of the Exodus story, this grand proclamation by the deity is inserted after the frustration of Moses and Aaron’s initial effort, suspending the action while providing depth of historical background before the unleashing of the first of the plagues.

3. *as El Shaddai, but in My name the LORD I was not known to them.* The designation El Shaddai, which is in fact used a total of five times in the Patriarchal Tales, is an archaic, evidently Canaanite combination of divine names. El was the high god of the Canaanite pantheon, though the Hebrew term is also a common noun meaning “god.” No satisfactory explanation for the meaning or origin of the name Shaddai has been made, but some scholars link it with a term for “mountain,” and others associate it with fertility. The usage of “in My name” is a little odd because there is no equivalent here for “in” (*bē*) in the Hebrew. Willam H. C. Propp has proposed that the ellipsis implies a distinction of meaning, but the grounds for such an inference seem rather tenuous. Were the patriarchs in fact ignorant of the name YHWH? It is true that Genesis has no special episode involving the revelation of

established My covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their sojournings in which they sojourned. And also I Myself have heard the groaning of the Israelites whom the Egyptians enslave, and I do remember My covenant. Therefore say to the Israelites: 'I am the LORD. I will take you out from under the burdens of Egypt and I will rescue you from their bondage and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great retributions. And I will take you to Me as a people and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God Who takes you out from under the burdens of Egypt. And I will bring you to the land that I raised My hand in pledge to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, and I will give it to you as an inheritance. I am the LORD!'" And Moses

the syllables and mystery of this divine name, as we have here in 3:13–16; but there is also no indication that the name was withheld from the patriarchs, and the Primeval History reports that the invocation of this name goes back to the time of Enosh son of Seth (Genesis 4:26). Source critics see this passage as striking evidence for the original autonomy of the Priestly source, which does not share J's assumption that the name YHWH was known to the patriarchs. All the sources drawn together in the Exodus narrative assume that it was only on the threshold of God's intervention in history to liberate Israel that He revealed His unique name to the whole people.

4. *sojournings in which they sojourned*. God's language stresses the character of temporary residence of the nomadic forefathers in the land. Now temporary residence, *megurim*, will be transformed into fixed settlement, *yeshivah*.

6. *I am the LORD*. The repetition of this initiating formula is dictated by its marking the beginning of a declaration within a declaration—the divine proclamation that Moses is to carry to the people. In this instance, "I am the LORD" will be repeated at the end of the proclamation (verse 8) in an envelope structure.

7. *you shall know that I am the LORD your God Who takes you out from under the burdens of Egypt*. This idea is emphasized again and again, in the Torah as well as in later books of the Bible. It is the cornerstone of Israelite faith—that God has proven His divinity and His special attachment to Israel by the dramatic act of liberating the people 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. The story is surely a schematization and simplification of complex historical processes. There is no intimation of the quite likely existence of a sizable segment of the Hebrew people in the high country of eastern Canaan that never was in Egypt. Yet it is also 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. Virgil in the *Aeneid* may invent a tale of Rome rising from the ruins of a defeated Troy, but the defenders of Troy are heroic warriors foiled by trickery, which is scarcely the same as abject slavery.

8. *I raised My hand in pledge*. The Hebrew has only "raised My hand," which by idiomatic usage implies a pledge or vow.

spoke thus to the Israelites, but they did not heed Moses out of shortness of breath and hard bondage.

- 10,11 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Come, speak to Pharaoh king
 12 of Egypt, that he send off the Israelites from his land." And Moses spoke
 before the LORD, saying, "Look, the Israelites did not heed me, and how will
 13 Pharaoh heed me, and I am uncircumcised of lips?" And the LORD spoke
 to Moses and to Aaron and He charged them regarding the Israelites and
 regarding Pharaoh king of Egypt to bring out the Israelites from the land
 of Egypt.
- 14 These are the heads of their fathers' houses: The sons of Reuben, Israel's
 firstborn—Enoch and Pallu, Hezron and Carmi, these are the clans of

9. *out of shortness of breath.* The Hebrew *ruah* can mean "breath," "wind," or "spirit." This translation follows Rashi's understanding of the phrase, a construction that is attractive because of its concreteness: the slaves, groaning under hard bondage—a condition made all the harder by Moses's bungled intervention—can scarcely catch their breath and so are in no mood to listen to Moses. Others render this term as "impatience" or "crushed spirit."

12. *And Moses spoke before the LORD.* The preposition "before," instead of "to," is sometimes used in addressing a superior (it can also mean "in the presence of").

I am uncircumcised of lips. The phrase is an approximate parallel (the documentary critics would say: in P's vocabulary as against J's) of the "heavy-mouthed and heavy-tongued" we encountered in chapter 4. It is a mistake, however, to represent this upward displacement of a genital 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 lips" in his dedication scene, 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.

13. *and the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron.* 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.

14. *These are the heads of their fathers' houses.* Genealogical lists, as one can see repeatedly in Genesis, serve an important compositional role to mark the borders between different narrative segments. The story of Moses's early history and the prelude to the plagues is now completed, and before the unleashing of the first of the ten fearful divine blows against Egypt, the genealogical list constitutes a long narrative caesura. Although this list begins with the sons of Reuben and Simeon, because they are the two firstborn in the order of Jacob's sons, it is not a complete roll call of the tribes but is meant only to take us to the tribe

Reuben. And the sons of Simeon—Jemuel and Jamin and Ohad and Jachin 15
 and Zohar and Saul, son of the Canaanite woman, these are the clans of
 Simeon. And these are the names of the sons of Levi according to their 16
 lineage—Gershon and Kohath and Merari. And the years of the life of
 Levi were a hundred and thirty-seven years. The sons of Gershon—Libni 17
 and Shimei, according to their clans. And the sons of Kohath—Amram 18
 and Izhar and Hebron and Uzziel. And the years of the life of Kohath were
 one hundred and thirty-three years. And the sons of Merari—Mahli and 19
 Mushi. These are the clans of the Levite according to their lineage. And 20
 Amram took him as wife Jochebed his aunt, and she bore him Aaron and
 Moses. And the years of the life of Amram were a hundred and thirty-
 seven years. And the sons of Izhar—Korah and Nepheg and Zichri. And 21,22
 the sons of Uzziel—Mishael and Elzaphan and Sithri. And Aaron took him 23
 Elisheba daughter of Amminadab sister of Nahshon as wife, and she bore
 him Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. The sons of Korah—Assir and 24
 Elkanah and Abiasaph, these are the clans of the Korahite. And Eleazar son 25
 of Aaron had taken him a wife from the daughters of Putiel, and she bore
 him Phinehas. These are the heads of the fathers of the Levites according

of Levi, and then to culminate in the two sons of the tribe of Levi, Moses and Aaron, who are poised to carry out their fateful mission to Pharaoh. Other Levites appear to be singled out because they are to play roles in the subsequent narrative. “Father’s house” (*beyt ’av*) in this list, as elsewhere in biblical Hebrew, refers to the social unit of the extended family presided over by the father.

16. *a hundred and thirty-seven years*. The life spans are schematized (either 133 or 137) and, as in Genesis, rather hyperbolic. Propp notes that the figures mentioned are approximately a third of the total period of four hundred years supposed to be the duration of the sojourn in Egypt.

20. *Amram took him as wife Jochebed his aunt*. Such a marriage was banned as incestuous by the Priestly writers, to whom scholarship attributes this passage. This is not the only instance in which a union prohibited by later legislation is recorded without comment (compare Jacob’s marrying two sisters), and might well reflect an authentic memory of a period when the prohibition was not in force. Only now is the anonymous “Levite daughter” of 2:1 given a name.

she bore him Aaron and Moses. Her sons are listed by order of birth. Three ancient versions add “Miriam their sister,” but the list, like the one in chapter 1, is interested only in sons.

25. *Putiel . . . Phinehas*. These are the two names in the list of Egyptian origin (though Putiel has the Semitic theophoric suffix *-el*). One might infer that taking a wife “from the daughters of Putiel” suggests that Eleazar’s marriage is exogamous—another indication that the Hebrews were not altogether segregated from the Egyptians—and thus the wife might understandably give an Egyptian name to their son. Later, this possible product of intermarriage will show himself to be a fierce zealot on behalf of Israelite purity.

26 to their clans. It was the very Aaron and Moses to whom the LORD said,
 27 “Bring out the Israelites from the land of Egypt in their battalions.” It was
 they who were speaking to Pharaoh king of Egypt to bring out the Israelites
 from Egypt, the very Moses and Aaron.

28 And it happened on the day the LORD spoke to Moses in the land of Egypt,
 29 that the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “I am the LORD. Speak to Pharaoh
 30 king of Egypt all that I speak to you.” And Moses said before the LORD,
 “Look, I am uncircumcised of lips, and how will Pharaoh heed me?”

1 CHAPTER 7 And the LORD said to Moses, “See, I have set
 you as a god to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother will be your prophet.
 2 You it is who will speak all that I charge you and Aaron your brother will
 3 speak to Pharaoh, and he will send off the Israelites from his land. And I
 on My part shall harden Pharaoh’s heart, that I may multiply My signs and
 4 My portents in the land of Egypt. And Pharaoh will not heed you, and I

26–27. *It was the very Aaron and Moses . . . It was they . . . the very Moses and Aaron.* As we move from the end of the list back to the narrative, the writer emphasizes the focus on Moses and Aaron with a triple structure of rhetorical highlighting, putting an indicative pronoun at the head of each clause: *hu’ aharon umosheh, hem hamedabrim, hu’ mosheh we’aharon.*

29. *I am the LORD.* See the comment on verse 2.

30. *Look, I am uncircumcised of lips, and how will Pharaoh heed me?* This sentence repeats verbatim Moses’s demurral in verse 12, reversing the order of the two clauses and omitting the first clause about Israel’s failure to heed Moses. The recurrent language 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 1. *I have set you as a god to Pharaoh.* The reiteration of this bold comparison may have a polemic motivation: Pharaoh imagines himself a god, but I have made you a god to Pharaoh.

3. *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