

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 am the LORD. And I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as El 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 5 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 6 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 7 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 8 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 9

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 mouth-piece 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

shall set My hand against Egypt and I shall bring out My battalions, My people the Israelites, from the land of Egypt with great retributions, that the Egyptians may know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out My hand over Egypt and bring out the Israelites from their midst.” And Moses, and Aaron with him, did as the LORD had charged, thus did they do. And Moses was eighty years old and Aaron was eighty-three years old when they spoke to Pharaoh.

And the LORD said to Moses and to Aaron, saying, “Should Pharaoh speak to you, saying, ‘Give you a portent,’ you shall say to Aaron, ‘Take your staff and fling it down before Pharaoh, let it become a serpent.’” And Moses, and Aaron with him, came to Pharaoh, and they did as the LORD had charged, and Aaron flung down his staff before Pharaoh and before his servants, and it became a serpent. And Pharaoh, too, called for the sages and sorcerers and they, too, the soothsayers of Egypt, did thus with their spells. And each

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: *hiqshah*, “to harden” (the verb here), *hizeq*, “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 *hizeq* linked with heart has a positive meaning—“to show firm resolve.”

4. *I shall bring out My battalions, My people the Israelites.* The opposition expresses a wry and surprising identification. God bears the epithet “LORD of Battalions” (“LORD of Hosts,” “LORD of Armies,” *YHWH tseva’ot*), but here the “battalions” God calls His own turn out to be the people of Israel—in fact, a mass of wretched slaves who will be fleeing from their taskmasters.

9. *let it become a serpent.* The noun used here, *tanin*, is not the ordinary *naḥash*, “snake,” of the Burning Bush story. (When God in verse 15 refers to the staff that turned into a snake [*naḥash*], He may be alluding to the Burning Bush episode.) The *tanin* is usually a larger threatening reptile, as William H. C. Propp correctly observes, and is sometimes used for the Egyptian crocodile, or for a mythological dragon. The Hebrew zoological reference is clearly slippery, allowing a couple of commentators to see a Nilotic cobra in the transformed shepherd’s staff.

11. *and they, too, the soothsayers of Egypt, did thus with their spells.* The Hebrew word for “soothsayers,” *hartumim*, is a direct borrowing from the Egyptian designation for priest-magicians. The term translated as “spells,” *lehatim*, either is related to the root *l-’-t* that means “to conceal” or, if one follows a proposal of Abraham ibn Ezra, is derived from the

13 flung down his staff and they became serpents, and Aaron's staff swallowed their staffs. And Pharaoh's heart toughened, and he did not heed them, just as the LORD had spoken.

14 And the LORD said to Moses, "Pharaoh's heart is hard. He refuses to send
15 off the people. Go to Pharaoh in the morning. Look, he will be going out to the water, and you shall be poised to meet him on the bank of the Nile, and the staff that turned into a snake you shall take in your hand.
16 And you shall say to him, 'The LORD god of the Hebrews sent me to you, saying, Send off my people, that they may worship Me in the wilderness,
17 and look, you have not heeded as yet. Thus said the LORD, By this shall you know that I am the LORD: Look, I am about to strike with the staff in my hand on the water that is in the Nile and it will turn into blood.
18 And the fish that are in the Nile will die and the Nile will stink, and the
19 Egyptians will not be able to drink water from the Nile.'" And the LORD said to Moses, "Say to Aaron: 'Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, over their rivers and over their Nile channels

root *l-h-t*, "to flame out," which he links with the fire-and-flash technique of the illusionist. Ibn Ezra, a rationalist, thus implies that the soothsayers' success in transforming their staffs into serpents was an act of legerdemain. The ancient writer, however, seems to have assumed the efficacy of magic as a kind of technology: the point of the story is that the capacity of this technology was limited, and hence the authentically miraculous serpent into which Aaron's staff has turned swallows up the other serpents.

13. *Pharaoh's heart toughened.* In any case, Pharaoh is not impressed. Moses and Aaron, after all, have done no more than trump his sorcerers at their own game. What is called for in order to shake him is a series of truly cataclysmic miraculous events.

15. *Look, he will be going out to the water.* This narrative presupposes, at least on the information about Egypt available to the Hebrew writers, that Egyptian royalty regularly went down to the Nile to bathe, unless the purpose was, as ibn Ezra proposes, to check the level of the Nile. Pharaoh's encounter with Moses by the riverside looks back to the discovery of Moses by Pharaoh's daughter when she went down to the Nile.

16. *Send off my people, that they may worship Me . . . you have not heeded.* It should be observed that this prose narrative, in a style not evident in most other biblical stories, proceeds through the solemn, emphatic reiteration of refrainlike phrases and entire clauses, both in the language of the narrator and in the dialogue.

17. *water . . . blood.* For Egypt as a nation dependent on irrigation, the Nile with its fresh water is literally a lifeline. Blood in the Bible is imagined in radically ambiguous terms—the source and substance of life, an apotropaic and redemptive agent, the token of violence and death. It is manifestly the third of these meanings that is brought into play here, as the first plague symbolically anticipates the last one and deprives Egypt of life-sustaining water.

19. *Nile channels.* The Hebrew here converts the Egyptian loanword, *ye'or*, "Nile," into a plural. Elsewhere, in occasional poetic usage, this plural form is simply an elegant synonym

and over their ponds and over all the gathering of their waters, that they become blood. And there shall be blood in all the land of Egypt, and in the trees and in the stones.’” And Moses and Aaron did thus as the LORD had charged. And he raised the staff and struck the water that was in the Nile before the eyes of Pharaoh and the eyes of his servants, and all the water that was in the Nile turned to blood. And the fish that were in the Nile died and the Nile stunk, and the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile, and the blood was in all the land of Egypt. And the soothsayers of Egypt did thus with their spells, and Pharaoh’s heart toughened and he did not heed them, just as the LORD had spoken. And Pharaoh turned and came into his house, and this, too, he did not take to heart. And all

for “streams” or “rivers.” In this Egyptian context, it seems more likely that it designates both the Nile itself and the system of irrigation canals built out from the Nile.

in the trees and in the stones. Many construe this as a reference to wooden and stone vessels or receptacles, but the plural form ‘*etsim* suggests trees rather than wood. In any case, trees and stones as objects in nature accord better with the catalogue of bodies of water that precedes than would household utensils. It has also been noted that the Hebrew pairing here, ‘*etsim wa’avanim*, is often used to refer to the material out of which idols are made.

20. *he raised the staff.* This would have to be Aaron.

before the eyes of Pharaoh and the eyes of his servants. The first spectacular cataclysm is devised so that they will be eyewitnesses to the fearful event. In most of these contexts, “servants” (it can also mean “slaves”) refers to Pharaoh’s courtiers.

21. *and the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile.* One of the most frequently employed conventions of biblical narrative is the verbatim repetition of whole clauses, or even sequences of clauses, of narrative material—often, as here, once in dialogue and once in the narrator’s report. But the characteristic handling of this convention is to introduce small but quite revelatory divergences from verbatim replication as the material is repeated (see the comments on the elaborate near verbatim repetitions in Genesis 24 as a textbook illustration of this technique). Here, however, the point of the repetition seems to be that every term of God’s dire prediction (verse 18) is implemented as an accomplished event (verse 21), only the temporal aspects of the verbs shifting, with one minor substitution of a synonym—instead of “will not be able” (*nil’u*), “could not” (*lo’-yakhlu*). The summary clause at the end of the verse here, “and the blood was in all the land of Egypt,” is not part of the prediction in verse 18 but appears to be a digest of the panorama of sites to be struck in God’s instructions for Aaron in verse 19.

22. *the soothsayers of Egypt did thus with their spells.* Ibn Ezra wonders where they got water to turn into blood if Moses and Aaron had already done the trick for the Nile and all the rivers and ponds. His answer is that they performed their magic on water dug up from subterranean sources (verse 24), a conjuror’s act of transmutation that is not to be compared with the miraculous conversion of streams of flowing water into blood. Again, the reality of a technology of magic is not called into question but it is noteworthy that the soothsayers can do no more than effect a pale imitation of the destructive act of the God of the Hebrews; what they are powerless to do is to reverse the process of destruction.

of Egypt dug round the Nile for water to drink, for they could not drink the water of the Nile.

- 25,26 And seven full days passed after the LORD struck the Nile. And the LORD said to Moses, "Come to Pharaoh, and you shall say to him, 'Thus said the
27 LORD: Send off My people that they may worship Me. And if you refuse to
28 send them off, look, I am about to scourge all your region with frogs. And the Nile will swarm with frogs and they will come up and come into your house and into your bedchamber and onto your couch and into your servants' house and upon your people and into your ovens and into your kneading
29 pans. And upon you and upon your people and upon all your slaves the frogs will come up.'"

25. *And seven full days passed.* The literal sense of the Hebrew is "and seven days were filled." Many commentators infer that during this period the waters of the Nile returned to their original state; otherwise, the first plague alone would have been sufficient to make things utterly intolerable for Pharaoh.

26. Although the King James Version begins chapter 8 at this point, the Masoretic Text continues chapter 7 for four more verses, as here.

28. *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 anticreation 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."

into your house . . . your bedchamber . . . your couch . . . your servants' house. The all-powerful Pharaoh should be invulnerable to such violation and should be able to protect his people. Instead, what this fearful catalogue of penetrations conveys is the absolute, helpless exposure of all Egypt, from king to slave, from the intimate place of sleep and procreation to the places where food is prepared, in the face of God's onslaught.

29. *upon you.* The Hebrew preposition would normally mean "into you," which led the Talmud (Sanhedrin 80) to amplify the idea of grotesque penetration by saying that the frogs would croak from inside the guts of the Egyptians.

CHAPTER 8 And the LORD said to Moses, “Say to Aaron: 1
 Stretch out your hand with your staff over the rivers, over the Nile channels
 and over the ponds, and bring up the frogs over the land of Egypt.” And 2
 Aaron stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs came
 up and covered the land of Egypt. And the soothsayers did thus with their 3
 spells and brought up frogs over the land of Egypt. And Pharaoh called to 4
 Moses and to Aaron and said, “Entreat the LORD that He take away the frogs
 from me and from my people, and I shall send off the people, that they may
 sacrifice to the LORD.” And Moses said to Pharaoh, “You may vaunt over 5
 me as for when I should entreat for you and for your servants and for your
 people to cut off the frogs from you and from your houses—only in the Nile

CHAPTER 8 1. *Stretch out your hand with your staff over the rivers.* The explicit repetition of language and gestures from the first plague has the emphatic effect of a formal refrain, with an overlap between the first two plagues in the location of the Nile as source of the catastrophe. The report of the Ten Plagues—other biblical traditions appear to have known a smaller number—exhibits a high degree of literary shaping and symmetry. Umberto Cassuto offers a good early synthesis of the scholarly literature that has been devoted to following these formal patterns, and subsequent discussions by Moshe Greenberg and William H. C. Propp are also noteworthy. The plagues are organized in three triads, followed by the climactic and most devastating tenth plague. Only in the first triad is Aaron with his outstretched staff the executor of the plagues. In each triad, in the first plague of the series Moses encounters Pharaoh going out early in the morning; in the second plague of the series, Moses comes into Pharaoh’s palace; and in the third plague of the series, the disaster is unleashed without warning. Cassuto also observes that the plagues are equally arranged in pairs: two involving the Nile, two plagues of insects, two epidemics affecting beasts and humans respectively, two plagues devastating the crops, and the final darkness paired with the death of the firstborn.

4. *take away the frogs from me.* Unlike the water turned to blood, the frogs actually invade the homes of Pharaoh and his subjects, thus impelling him to his first offer of terms to Moses.

5. *You may vaunt over me as for when.* The Hebrew “vaunt over me” (*hitpa’er ‘alai*) is a little odd. The construction of the consensus of commentators, medieval and modern, which seems plausible, is that Moses is offering Pharaoh the limited “triumph” of choosing the moment when the plague will cease. This choice, of course, in fact demonstrates God’s absolute power and Moses’s perfect efficacy as intercessor. “When” refers not to the time of entreaty but to the time of cessation of the plague, a distinction indicated in the Hebrew, as Rashi nicely observes, by affixing the prefix *le* (“for”) to *matay* (“when”). It is a bit surprising that Pharaoh does not choose to have the plague ended at once. Perhaps he is trying Moses’s powers: Can Moses really stipulate a given moment of cessation in the near future and make it come about?

cut off the frogs. In Moses’s proposal to Pharaoh, he uses a word that suggests abrupt extirpation of the frogs. In the prediction that he goes on to spell out (verse 7), he uses a less violent verb of evacuation or retreat (“turn away”). Finally, the narrator in his report of the

6 will they remain.” And he said, “For tomorrow.” And he said, “As you have
 7 spoken, so that you may know there is none like the LORD our God. And the
 frogs will turn away from you and from your houses and from your servants
 8 and from your people—only in the Nile will they remain.” And Moses, and
 Aaron with him, went out from Pharaoh’s presence, and Moses cried out
 9 to the LORD concerning the frogs that He had put upon Pharaoh. And the
 LORD did according to Moses’s word, and the frogs died, out of the houses
 10 and out of the courtyards and out of the fields, and they piled them up heap
 11 upon heap, and the land stank. And Pharaoh saw that there was relief and
 he hardened his heart and did not heed them, just as the LORD had spoken.

12 And the LORD said to Moses, “Say to Aaron: Stretch out your staff and
 strike the dust of the land and there will be lice in all the land of Egypt.”
 13 And thus they did, and Aaron stretched out his hand with his staff and
 struck the dust of the land, and there were lice in man and in beast, all
 14 the dust of the land became lice in all the land of Egypt. And thus the
 soothsayers of Egypt did with their spells, to take out the lice, but they
 15 were unable, and the lice were in man and in beast. And the soothsayers
 said to Pharaoh, “God’s finger it is!” And Pharaoh’s heart toughened, and
 he did not heed them, just as the LORD had spoken.

event (verse 9) says, with plain descriptive accuracy, “die” because his account includes a discomfiting idea not mentioned by Moses to Pharaoh—the piles of dead frogs throughout the country.

10. *and the land stank*. The stench of the putrefying dead frogs provides another link with the preceding plague, in which the stench was produced by the dead fish from the Nile.

12. *lice*. At least in postbiblical Hebrew, the terms *kinam* (a collective noun) and *kinim* (a plural) mean “lice,” though some have suggested that in this text they might mean “gnats” or “mosquitoes.” The plagues began with a profoundly ominous, symbolically portentous, and life-threatening transformation of water into blood. The next three plagues are afflictions of maddening or disgusting discomfort rather than actual threats to survival. The tone of the Plagues narrative is that of harsh (indeed, gloating) monotheistic satire against the pagan imperial power, and so pains are taken to show the Egyptians squirming before they are exposed to destruction.

14. *And thus the soothsayers of Egypt did . . . to take out the lice*. The syntax directs us to a kind of comic discovery: at first we imagine that still again the soothsayers are engaged in their own pathetic imitation of Moses and Aaron’s destructive act, bringing forth their own lice; then we realize that this time they are attempting to get rid of the plague, but to no avail.

15. *God’s finger it is*. Now that they have tried futilely to get rid of a plague instead of replicating it, they have been forced to recognize that they are contending with a greater power.

And the LORD said to Moses, “Rise early in the morning and station your- 16
 self before Pharaoh—look, he will be going out to the water—and say to
 him, ‘Thus said the LORD: send off My people, that they may worship Me.
 For if you do not send off My people, I am about to send against you and 17
 against you servants and against your people and against your houses
 the horde, and the houses of Egypt will be filled with the horde and the
 soil, too, on which they stand. But I shall set apart on that day the land 18
 of Goshen upon which My people stands so that no horde will be there,
 that you may know that I am the LORD in the midst of the land. And I 19
 shall set a ransom between My people and your people. Tomorrow this
 sign will be.’” And thus the LORD did, and a heavy horde came into the 20

As Rashi neatly paraphrases their perception, “This plague is not through magic but from the Deity.” It is noteworthy that the preceding narrative repeatedly spoke of God’s hand or arm; the soothsayers appear to concede a lesser trace of divine action in mentioning God’s finger.

And Pharaoh’s heart toughened. The repeated formula for Pharaoh’s obduracy takes on added meaning here because he willfully ignores the testimony of his soothsayers. The narrative provides no indication as to whether the plague of lice comes to an end, like the previous two, or whether the Egyptians simply continue to live with the infestation as God proceeds to launch the next blow.

17. *if you do not send off . . . I am about to send.* Although the two verbs are in different conjugations, the pun, with its measure-for-measure emphasis, is quite explicit in the Hebrew.

the horde. The Hebrew term ‘arov occurs only here, and the only plausible derivation is from the verbal root that means “to mix.” Some medieval Hebrew commentators imagined this as a mingling of sundry beasts of prey, but this seems unlikely because, as verse 27 makes clear, the ‘arov has infested the Egyptians rather than torn them limb from limb, and “not one remained” probably suggests minuscule constituents of the horde. A plague of maddeningly noxious insects also makes a much better pair with the preceding plague. The King James Version’s “swarm of flies” is as good a guess as any, though it seems wise to avoid “swarm” in order not to introduce a misleading echo of the verb “swarm” in Exodus 1:7 and 7:28.

18. *But I shall set apart on that day the land of Goshen.* Goshen is the region of northeastern Egypt that, according to the account in Genesis (46:34), was set aside for Hebrew settlement. This is the first clear indication in Exodus that the Hebrews lived in a segregated area in Egypt. That geographical segregation will play a crucial role in the climactic ninth and tenth plagues.

19. *I shall set a ransom.* Most interpreters understand the Hebrew *pedut* to mean something like “separation” or “distinction.” Everywhere else, however, this root means “to ransom,” “to redeem,” “to rescue from danger,” including the three other occurrences in the biblical corpus in this form of a verbal noun. It seems wise to retain the semantic force of “ransom” and assign the indication of separation to the preposition “between” that follows—that is, God will grant ransom or rescue from the horde to the Israelites, and that saving act will set them apart from the afflicted Egyptians.

house of Pharaoh and the house of his servants, and in all the land of
 21 Egypt the land was ravaged in the face of the horde. And Pharaoh called
 to Moses and to Aaron and said, “Go, sacrifice to your god in the land.”
 22 And Moses said, “It is not right to do thus, for the abomination of Egypt
 we shall sacrifice to the LORD our God. If we sacrifice the abomination of
 23 Egypt before their eyes, will they not stone us? A three days’ journey into
 the wilderness we shall go, and we shall sacrifice to the LORD our God as
 24 He has said to us.” And Pharaoh said, “I myself will send you off, that you
 may sacrifice to the LORD your god in the wilderness, only you must not
 25 go far away. Entreat on my behalf.” And Moses said, “Look, I am going out
 from your presence and I shall entreat the LORD, that the horde may turn
 away from Pharaoh and from his servants and from his people tomorrow.
 Only let not Pharaoh continue to mock by not sending the people off to
 26 sacrifice to the LORD.” And Moses went out from Pharaoh’s presence and
 27 entreated the LORD. And the LORD did according to Moses’s word, and

20. *the land was ravaged.* This indication of general devastation suggests that the second of the two plagues of insects is somehow more intense than the first.

22. *for the abomination of Egypt we shall sacrifice.* The most likely meaning is that the Hebrews will sacrifice cattle or other beasts considered taboo by the Egyptians and so infuriate them. There is some evidence that Egypt in the late Bronze Age was in fact quite tolerant about different kinds of sacrifice. The Hebrew writer could well be reflecting the awareness of a later age, when Egyptian attitudes may have shifted. By the time of Herodotus, the Egyptians had developed a reputation for rigid sacrificial restrictions.

24. *I myself will send you off.* The desperate Pharaoh now uses a new turn of urgent speech, prefacing the first-person imperfective verb with an emphatic *’anokhi*, “I myself.”

only you must not go far away. Having yielded to Moses’s argument on the three days’ journey, he still stipulates that the Hebrews should go no farther, for he is unwilling to contemplate the permanent loss of this population of slave workers.

25. *Look, I am going out from your presence.* There is temporal urgency in Moses’s response, as he uses a participial verbal form to indicate that he is already on his way to entreat the LORD. The coy game of asking Pharaoh to stipulate a time of deliverance that marked the previous plague is set aside as Pharaoh’s own sense of desperation grows.

Only let not Pharaoh continue to mock. Moses’s “only” clause is a clearly marked formal rejoinder to Pharaoh’s “only” clause in the previous verse. The verb here, *hatal*, is rendered as “deal deceitfully” by the King James Version and some modern versions, but elsewhere it means “to mock,” “to toy with,” and, from Moses’s point of view, that would be a reasonable representation of Pharaoh’s repeated reflex of seeming to yield and then reasserting his intransigence.

the horde turned away from Pharaoh and from his servants and from his people, not one remained. And Pharaoh hardened his heart this time, too, and he did not send off the people. 28

CHAPTER 9 And the LORD said to Moses, “Come into Pharaoh and you shall speak to him, ‘Thus said the LORD, God of the Hebrews: send off My people, that they may worship Me. But if you refuse to send them off and you still hold on to them, look, the hand of the LORD is about to be against your livestock which is in the field, against the horses, against the donkeys, against the camels, against the cattle, and against the sheep—a very heavy pestilence. And the LORD will set apart the livestock of Israel from the livestock of Egypt, and nothing of the Israelites’ will die.’” And the LORD set a fixed time, saying, “Tomorrow the LORD will do this thing in the land.” And the LORD did this thing on the next day, and all the livestock of Egypt died, but of the livestock of Israel not one died. And Pharaoh sent 7

CHAPTER 9 2. *and you still hold on to them.* As we move to the end of the first half of the Ten Plagues, a note of impatience is introduced into God’s words through Moses to Pharaoh as this clause is added to the formulaically repeated language. Perhaps this new emphasis on Pharaoh’s continuing torment of Israel is the reason that Rashi surprisingly glosses the transparent verb “hold on to,” *maḥaziq*, by citing a bizarre parallel from Deuteronomy 25: “should . . . she reach out her hand and seize [or hold on to] his pudenda.”

3. *the hand of the LORD is about to be against your livestock.* The Hebrew verb here has a spine-tingling effect for which there is no obvious English equivalent. The verb “to be” in Hebrew is not supposed to have a participial, or present, tense. At this ominous and supernatural juncture, however, that verbal stem *h-y-h* yields an anomalous *hoyah*, rendered in this translation as “about to be.” This strange usage involves a kind of fearsome pun on the divine name YHWH that was mysteriously highlighted in the Burning Bush episode. God’s intrinsic and unique capacity for being, we are made to see, is not just a matter of static condition but an awesome power of action—the hand that is “about to be” against all the livestock of Egypt.

camels. As in Genesis, the reference is anachronistic. Although camels were widely introduced to Mesopotamia and the land of Israel by early in the first millennium B.C.E., they were not used in Egypt until several centuries later; and in any case, the actual setting of the Exodus story would be some time in the thirteenth century B.C.E.

4. *the LORD will set apart.* The theme of the setting apart of the Hebrews from the Egyptians, first introduced in the previous plague, is again stressed.