

no uncircumcised man shall eat of it. One law shall there be for the native 49
and for the sojourner who sojourns in your midst.” And all the Israelites 50
did as the LORD had charged Moses and Aaron, thus did they do. And it 51
happened on that very day that the LORD brought the Israelites out of the
land of Egypt in their battalions.

CHAPTER 13 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, “Con- 1,2
secrate unto Me each firstborn, breach of each womb among the Israelites
in man and in beast—it is Mine.”

And Moses said to the people, “Remember this day on which you went 3
out of Egypt, from the house of slaves, for by strength of hand the LORD
brought you out from here, and unleavened stuff shall not be eaten. Today 4
you are going out, in the month of the New Grain. And so when the LORD 5
brings you to the land of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite

between the apotropaic blood of circumcision, the apotropaic blood of the lamb on the
doorposts, and God’s saving Israel from the bloodbath of Egypt to make them His people.

then may he draw near. In ritual contexts, this verb is often an ellipsis for “draw near to
the altar” (to offer sacrifice). The Hebrew for “sacrifice,” *qorban*, is cognate with the verb
“draw near,” *qarav*.

49. *One law.* The Hebrew term here is *torah*, which has the primary meaning of “teaching”
or “instruction.”

CHAPTER 13 2. *Consecrate unto Me each firstborn.* As Nahum Sarna notes, there
are indications elsewhere—e.g., Numbers 3:12—that the firstborn originally served as
priests, until they were replaced by the members of the tribe of Levi, and so consecration
here has a double meaning: the human firstborn are to be dedicated to God’s cult and the
animal firstborn are to be sacrificed to God. These first two verses of the chapter appear
to be a separate unit, editorially inserted because of the connection with the instructions
about the redemption of the firstborn and the sacrifice of firstborn animals in the next unit
(verses 12–13, 15).

breach of each womb. The Hebrew *peter* means “opening” and is related, by metathesis,
to *perets*, “bursting.” It is a vivid idiom for the firstborn.

3. *Remember this day.* The Hebrew verb *zakhar* suggests both the cognitive act of remem-
bering and the ritual act of commemoration. This entire projection into the future in
the promised land of the Passover observance clearly duplicates some of the material in
12:14–28, though it stresses even more centrally the function of memory/commemoration.

unleavened stuff. This rendering of *hamets* is preferable to “unleavened bread” used by
some translations because the term probably includes grain-based foods other than bread,
as later Jewish tradition would extravagantly stipulate in its Passover regulations.

and the Hivvite and the Jebusite which He swore to your fathers to give to you, a land flowing with milk and honey, you shall perform this service
 6 in this month. Seven days shall you eat flatbread and on the seventh day a
 7 festival to the LORD. Flatbread shall be eaten through the seven days and no
 leavened stuff of yours shall be seen and no leavening of yours shall be seen
 8 in all your territory. And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, 'For the
 9 sake of what the LORD did for me when I went out of Egypt.' And it shall
 be a sign for you on your hand and a remembrance between your eyes, so
 that the LORD's teaching will be in your mouth, for with a strong hand the
 10 LORD brought you out of Egypt. And you shall keep this statute at its fixed
 11 time year after year. And so when the LORD brings you to the land of the
 12 Canaanite as He swore to you and to your fathers and gives it to you, you
 shall pass every womb-breach to the LORD and every breach of spawn of
 13 beast that you will have—the males to the LORD. And every donkey's breach
 you shall redeem with a lamb, and should you not redeem it, you shall break

5. *this service*. The reference is to the Passover ritual. As has often been noted, the Hebrew 'avodah, the term for service or worship, is also the word repeatedly used for the labor or slavery in Egypt; so the narrative traces a move from coerced manual service to service of the deity.

6. *on the seventh day a festival to the LORD*. Surprisingly, there is no indication here, as in the previous chapter, of a festival on the *first* day. Either this is an ellipsis, which would be untypical for legal injunctions, or it reflects a variant tradition.

9. *a sign for you on your hand and a remembrance between your eyes*. The concrete reference of these famous words remains in doubt. The original intention could conceivably be metaphorical: the story of the Exodus is to be forever present on the hand (or arm), the idiomatic agent of power and action, and between the eyes, the place of perception and observation. Here the key word for our passage, "remembrance" (*zikaron*), is used for what should be between the eyes. In verse 16 the term used is *totafot*, "circlets" or "frontlets," a word of obscure origin and not entirely certain meaning: many imagine it as a headband, although a headband would be worn above, not between, the eyes, whereas there are Egyptian ornaments, as some scholars have noted, that were worn between the eyes. Subsequent Jewish tradition construed this phrase to enjoin the wearing of small leather boxes containing scriptural passages written on parchment (*tefillin*, conventionally translated as "phylacteries").

the LORD's teaching. Here *torah* has the clear meaning of "teaching" because it is said to be in the mouth (learning in the ancient world would have involved recitation out loud).

12. *pass . . . to the LORD*. The verb, which is the causative form of the verb used for God's crossing or passing through Egypt, means in this context "to transfer possession."

13. *every donkey's breach*. Since the donkey was an impure animal for both dietary and ritual purposes, it could not be sacrificed, and a lamb (or sheep) had to be sacrificed in its stead. As William H. C. Propp observes, a donkey was worth several times the value

its neck, and every human firstborn of your sons you shall redeem. And so 14
 should your son ask you tomorrow, saying, 'What is this?,' you shall say to
 him, 'By strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house
 of slaves. And it happened, when Pharaoh was hard about sending us off, 15
 that the LORD killed every firstborn in the land of Egypt from the firstborn
 of man to the firstborn of beast. Therefore do I sacrifice to the LORD every
 womb-breach of the male and every firstborn of my sons I must redeem.
 And it shall be a sign on your hand and circlets between your eyes, that 16
 through strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt.'"

And it happened when Pharaoh sent the people off that God did not lead 17
 them by way of the land of the Philistines though it was close, for God

of a sheep, so the sheep substitution would almost certainly be embraced rather than the
 alternative of destroying the donkey that is put forth in the next clause.

you shall break its neck. The Hebrew verb *'araf* clearly derives from *'oref*, the nape. It
 could conceivably refer to slaughter with a knife at the back of the neck rather than at the
 front, as is ritually prescribed. In postbiblical Hebrew, the verb means "to behead." In any
 case, the idea is that if a person should refuse to perform the substitute sacrifice for the
 donkey, he should be deprived of its use—which no sane owner of this ubiquitous and
 valuable beast of burden and means of transportation would do.

14. *What is this?* Again and again, these texts emphasize the educational and commemo-
 rative function of the Exodus story and of the Passover ritual embedded in it. The story
 encodes the very matrix and rationale of Israelite national existence, and it becomes a
 sustained exercise in collective remembering. The educational formulas here reiterate the
 verbal motif of "a strong hand" or "strength of hand" that punctuates the Exodus narra-
 tive proper.

15. *every firstborn of my sons I must redeem.* The permanent "redemption" of every firstborn
 son, in remembrance of all the firstborn Hebrew sons rescued from death on that dire night
 in Egypt, is evidently a payment in silver or goods to the priests. The notion that this is
 a substitute for human sacrifice of the firstborn, as Sir James Frazer contended, is at best
 part of the shadowy archaic antecedents of this practice, here firmly anchored in historical
 commemoration.

17. *And it happened when Pharaoh sent the people off.* We now return to the story, with an
 indication of the escape route that will be important as we approach the dramatic event
 at the Sea of Reeds.

by way of the land of the Philistines. This would have been the most direct route to
 Canaan, along what amounted to a coastal highway up through the area that is the present-
 day Gaza Strip. This route was in fact heavily fortified by the Egyptians as the principal
 avenue for their varying imperial enterprises to the north, and so would have immediately
 confronted the fleeing slaves with the prospect of "battle." The Philistines in this period are
 an anachronistic reference, for they arrived from the Aegean region (and thus are known
 as the Sea Peoples) in this coastal strip during the twelfth century B.C.E., perhaps as much
 as a hundred years after the conjectured date of the Exodus in the later thirteenth century.

thought, "Lest the people regret when they see battle and go back to Egypt."
 18 And God turned the people round by way of the wilderness of the Sea
 19 of Reeds, and the Israelites went up armed from the land of Egypt. And
 Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for he had solemnly made the
 sons of Israel swear, saying, "God will surely single you out, and you shall
 20 take up my bones with you from here." And they journeyed from Succoth
 21 and encamped at Etham at the edge of the wilderness. And the LORD was
 going before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them on the way and
 22 by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light to go by day and by night. The
 pillar of cloud would not budge by day nor the pillar of fire by night from
 before the people.

1,2 **CHAPTER 14** And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak
 to the Israelites, that they turn back and encamp before Pi-Hahiroth
 between Migdol and the sea, before Baal-Zephon, opposite it you shall
 3 camp, by the sea. And Pharaoh had said of the Israelites,

18. *the Sea of Reeds*. This is not the Red Sea, as older translations have it, but most likely a marshland in the northeastern part of Egypt. (Marshes might provide some realistic kernel for the tale of a waterway that is at one moment passable and in the next flooded.) But it must be conceded that elsewhere *yam suf* refers to the Red Sea, and some scholars have recently argued that the story means to heighten the miraculous character of the event through the parting of a real sea. Even if the setting is a marsh, the event is reported in strongly supernatural terms.

19. *he had solemnly made the sons of Israel swear*. Here the reference of *beney yisra'el* would have to be Joseph's brothers, the actual sons of Israel/Jacob. But the double sense of the term works nicely by stressing the continuity of obligation between the original sons of Israel who swore to bring Joseph's bones up out of Egypt and these "sons of Israel" who are the Israelites, the Hebrew nation.

21. *And the LORD was going before them*. The participial form of the verb in the Hebrew suggests constant action. This effect is complemented by the verb at the very beginning of (in the Hebrew) the next verse, *lo' yamish*, which has an iterative force, "would not budge." The twin images of a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire going before the people extend the representation of the Israelites as "the LORD's battalions" because in biblical idiom the commander of an army is said to "go out and come in" before it, that is, lead it in battle.

a pillar of cloud . . . a pillar of fire. This spectacular panoramic picture of the Israelite throngs following these miraculous guides through the wilderness nicely counterpoints the plagues that preceded. Several of the plagues involved destruction descending from the sky. Here a great mass of cloud descends from the sky to lead Israel. The penultimate plague plunged Egypt into terrifying darkness, and now a column of divine fire serves as a huge beacon to show Israel the way through the dark of the wilderness.