**5. The tenth plague: Passover (Exodus 11:1–13:16)**

**Announcement of Passover**

**(Exodus 11:1–10)**

It seems clear from this section that Moses has remained in the presence of Pharaoh. It is not until verse 8 of this passage that Moses leaves Pharaoh’s court. If that is the case, then verses 1–3 become problematic. Is there an actual revelation of God to Moses in the presence of Pharaoh and his court? Some translators have skirted the problem by translating the opening of verse 1 with ‘Now the Lord had said to Moses’, a translation indicating a pluperfect tense—as if God had told this to Moses at a previous time (i.e., before his current stand in Pharaoh’s court). The problem is that no such tense is found in Hebrew narrative prose.

The verse literally opens with, ‘And Yahweh spoke to Moses.’ The Hebrew appears to indicate that God spoke to Moses in the midst of his audience with Pharaoh. And why not? Even if it was an audible communication (and we do not know this for certain), it would have served as a sign to, and put fear into, Pharaoh and his servants. There was no need for solitude for divine communication to take place (as on previous occasions) since the plague account was now moving towards a grand climax.

Exodus 11:3 is a parenthesis, a historical insertion by the author into the midst of the audience with Pharaoh. Verse 4 then returns to the conversation between Moses and Pharaoh.

11:1. And Yahweh spoke to Moses, ‘Yet one plague I will bring upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt, and afterwards he will send you out from this place. When he sends you out from this place he will certainly drive you out completely.’

The origination and source of the plagues is announced. They are not mere natural occurrences but Yahweh has ‘brought’ them upon Egypt. This is the first time in the exodus account that this Hebrew term is used. In this form, ‘plague’ is used almost exclusively to refer to a physical blow given by an overlord to a subject and, most often, it is used of the action of the Hebrew God in meting out chastisement. This is a direct claim of sovereignty, that nature is at Yahweh’s beck and call, and it performs his will. It is a striking teaching in the light of Egyptian religion, which teaches that nature is the personification of the gods.

Yahweh declares that he will bring one final plague upon Egypt. It will result in the expulsion of the Hebrews. The idea that Pharaoh will drive them out ‘completely’ probably refers to the Hebrew people in their fulness, altogether. Remember that Pharaoh had previously said he would send the Hebrews out without their children (10:10), or at another time without flocks (10:24), and on an even earlier occasion that they could go provided they went not very far away (8:28). Now we see that the Israelites will leave Egypt in totality. Their departure will be without restriction or limitation.

The unqualified nature of the release is supported by a repetition of the Hebrew verb garas (the first a Piel infinitive absolute, followed by a Piel imperfect): ‘He will certainly drive you out.’

11:2. ‘Speak now in the ears of the people, that they might ask, a man from his neighbour and a woman from her neighbour, for articles of silver and for articles of gold.’

This command refers back to a similar directive in 3:22. It probably alludes to the same event because the people are now nearing the time of departure. The Septuagint and other early manuscripts understand it in this way, as they add ‘and clothing’ in this verse in order to make it the same as the earlier passage (see commentary on 3:22).

Again, this episode is a fulfilment of God’s promise to Abraham in Genesis 15:14. He had declared that his people would come out from Egypt ‘with great possessions’. It is also a material judgement on Egypt for having enslaved the people of God for over four centuries.

11:3. And Yahweh bestowed favour on the people in the eyes of the Egyptians. Also the man Moses was very great in the land of Egypt in the eyes of the servants of Pharaoh and in the eyes of the people.

Just as God controls Pharaoh by hardening his heart, the Lord causes grace or favour to be bestowed on the Hebrews by the Egyptians. The verse literally says, ‘He gave the people grace in the sight of the Egyptians.’ It is a telling fact that the very people who had been hated and despised by the Egyptians (see commentary on 1:12) now come to be respected by them. God is at work, changing the spirit of the Egyptians towards the Hebrews.

The second half of the verse then speaks of Moses’ standing in Egypt: ‘Also the man Moses was very great in the land of Egypt.’ How could it be otherwise? What power he had been given! What wonders were wrought by his staff and his hand!

Consider who it was that believed Moses to be so great. First, it was ‘the servants of Pharaoh’, which probably refers to the Egyptians. And, secondly, ‘the people’ stood in awe of him. This perhaps refers to the Hebrews, as it does earlier in the verse. The only one not mentioned is Pharaoh. His heart remained hard.

11:4. And Moses said, ‘Thus says Yahweh, “In the middle of the night I am going out in the midst of Egypt.” ’

Moses now utters the very words of God, introducing them with the divine formula, ‘Thus says Yahweh …’ He conveys them in the form of Yahweh speaking in the first person. God says, ‘I am going out’ through Egypt. This verb is used commonly in the exodus account in relation to Israel’s departure from Egypt. Because Pharaoh will not let God’s people go out of Egypt, God will go out in Egypt!

Although many translations say this will take place ‘at midnight’, the Hebrew simply signifies ‘in the middle of the night’. Night-time was an especially fearful time for the Egyptians. In the ‘Hymn to the Aton’, the author describes the dread of night because the sun-god has departed to the underworld and is no longer protecting the Egyptians. For the Hebrews, on the other hand, there is no fear, for ‘He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep’ (Ps. 121:4). Yahweh is awake, working, sustaining and protecting his people.

11:5. ‘And every first-born in the land of Egypt will die, from the first-born of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the first-born of the slave girl who is behind the millstone, and every first-born of animals.’

God will bring a final, horrible plague upon Egypt. It will result in many deaths. Who is to die? All the first-born, from Pharaoh’s son, who presumably was prince of Egypt and next in line of succession, to the girl slaving away in the mill. This is a merism, two opposites that are all-inclusive. Pharaoh, of course, had the greatest stature in Egypt, whereas the mill-worker had the least. Cassuto argues that in Egyptian literature the mill-worker is a common symbol for the poorest of the poor. In any case, all Egypt will be greatly affected by the plague of death.

The first-born of animals will also die. Egyptians attributed divine character to animals, and so they will be destroyed to show that Yahweh discharges judgements against the gods of Egypt.

11:6. ‘And there will be a great cry in all the land of Egypt, the like of which has never been, nor will ever be.’

The intensity and severity of the final plague are expressed in a similar fashion to those of other plagues (see 9:24; 10:14). The extent of the plague will result in ‘a great cry’ throughout the land of Egypt. This ‘great cry’ will not be one of weeping or wailing, but rather a loud call for help under distress and duress. Egypt will call upon its gods for aid, but they will remain silent. The same verb, ‘to cry’, was used in relation to the Hebrews as they called on Yahweh for deliverance from Egyptian oppression. Unlike the Egyptian gods, Yahweh answered them.

11:7. ‘But for all the children of Israel not a dog will growl against a man or an animal, in order that you might know that Yahweh makes a distinction between Egypt and between Israel.’

Whereas God will destroy the first-born of both man and beast in Egypt, not even ‘a dog will sharpen its tongue’ against the Hebrews or their animals. That expression signifies angry growling. There will be no such hostility in Goshen.

A debatable point is whether the author is here making a subtle reference to the impotence of Anubis, the god of the dead and embalming. On this interpretation Anubis, who had a canine form, is seen to have no power of life or death over the Hebrews, who were protected by Yahweh.

The reason for such a contrast is stated clearly. It is so that the Egyptians might know (the ending on the verb signifying ‘you’ is in the plural) that Yahweh makes a distinction between Israel and Egypt. The verb means ‘to treat differently/to discriminate’ (see its use in 9:4). This is the wonderful doctrine of election in which God sets apart a people by his own will and desire. Israel, by no means of its own merit or goodness, is the recipient of Yahweh’s favour and grace.

11:8 ‘And all these your servants will come down to me, and they will bow down to me, saying, “Go out, you and all the people who are following you!” And afterwards I will go out.’ Then he went out from the presence of Pharaoh in a rage.

Moses announces that all the servants in the Egyptian court will bow down before him, rather than before Pharaoh. It is Moses (and ultimately Yahweh) who has the upper hand now. In support of this is the fact that Moses does not wait to be dismissed by Pharaoh but he up and leaves of his own accord. And he does so in great anger or, literally, ‘with a hot/scorching nose’.

11:9–10. Then Yahweh said to Moses, ‘Pharaoh will not listen to you, so that my wonders might be multiplied in the land of Egypt.’ And Moses and Aaron did all these wonders before Pharaoh. But Yahweh hardened Pharaoh’s heart, and he did not send the children of Israel out from his land.

Here is a summary statement of the setting in Egypt after the nine plagues have occurred. From the very outset of the plagues God has said that Pharaoh would not listen to Moses. The reason is stated here: so that God’s ‘wonders’, or ‘miracles’, would be multiplied in the land. And such marvellous, terrifying events testify to the reality of Yahweh, and to his sovereignty and majesty.

Thus, the situation (particularly regarding Pharaoh’s heart) has not changed from the beginning of the plagues in chapter 7 right up to the ninth plague. However, starting with the next section, it will be narrated how the entire scene changes dramatically when Yahweh brings the tenth plague on Egypt.

**Application**

This section announces the climax of the plague account. It is a proclamation of death in Egypt. But even with that declaration of impending doom, Pharaoh refuses to yield or repent. One would think that such a pronouncement from a deity who already has acted by destroying Egypt with nine plagues would elicit a positive response from the Egyptian king. It does not happen.

Frankly, we should not be surprised. Even in the ultimate culmination of the plagues in the Apocalypse of John—which, as we have seen, is far harsher and more painful than the plagues in Egypt—people respond in hardness. In the plague account recorded in Revelation 16, it says that men ‘blasphemed the name of God who has the power over these plagues, and they did not repent, so as to give him glory’ (Rev. 16:9). Pharaoh thus epitomizes unbelieving mankind and the seed of the serpent.

Apart from God’s grace (see Exodus 11:3) all men are akin to Pharaoh. They are hardened, unseeing and unrepentant. Paul comments regarding this: ‘For he says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” So then it does not depend on the man who wills or runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.” So then he has mercy on whom he desires, and he hardens whom he desires’ (Rom. 9:15–18).

**Institution of the Passover**

**(Exodus 12:1–28)**

This section of the book relates the detailed instructions relating to the first Passover and the command to observe the Passover event throughout subsequent history. It gives various laws relating to the Passover meal (12:1–11), the placing of blood on the doors of houses (12:7, 21–22) and the manner of celebrating the Feast of Unleavened Bread (12:14–20). Finally, the passage provides the divine rationale and purpose for the Passover event.

12:1–2. And Yahweh spoke to Moses and to Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying, ‘This month shall be the first of the months for you; it is to be the first month of the year for you.’

Laws concerning the Passover were given ‘in Egypt’ (12:1). The designation of the location is for the purpose of not ascribing all Hebrew laws to Mount Sinai (Exod. 20 onwards). In other words, the Israelites were not a lawless society prior to the giving of the codified law at Sinai. It is also interesting to note that the laws given at Sinai rarely deal with the Passover in detail (except Deut. 16)—the reason is clear: the Passover laws were already set down in Egypt.

This announcement does not mean a change in the Hebrew calendar. The text literally reads, ‘This month is for you the first month.’ Thus it is at the time of the Hebrew new year that the Passover occurs. And now the Israelites truly have something to celebrate—a new beginning that is born of redemption from Egypt!

Other texts inform us that the opening month is Abib (see Exod. 13:4; 23:15; 34:18). In the later Jewish calendar from the Babylonian exile it is referred to as Nisan (Neh. 2:1; Esther 3:7). The new year generally corresponds to the months of March and April.

12:3. ‘Speak to all the congregation of Israel, saying, “On the tenth of this month, they shall take for themselves—a man shall take a lamb for his family, a lamb for his household.” ’

This is the first reference in the Bible to ‘the congregation of Israel’. The word ‛dh means ‘a gathering’. The Septuagint, the Vulgate and multiple medieval manuscripts prefer the reading, ‘the sons of Israel’. There is, however, no necessity for such an emendation. We are viewing for the first time the establishment of the Hebrews as a corporate entity.

Each ‘family’ is to secure a lamb. That term is literally ‘house of the fathers’, and it corresponds to an extended family, a sub-unit of a clan. The lamb is to be procured on the tenth day of the first month. That specific day is important: Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) occurs on the tenth day of the seventh month (Lev. 23:27), and the Israelites cross the Jordan River into the promised land on the tenth day of the first month. The number ten often symbolizes completion in the Bible: for example, the Ten Commandments, the ten plagues, etc. Here it may signify the complete redemption of Israel out of Egypt.

12:4. ‘If a household is too small for a lamb, then he and his neighbour, closest to his house, shall take one according to the number of persons. According to what each person will eat, you will divide the lamb.’

Verse 4 opens with a particle introducing an ‘if … then’ clause in Hebrew. If there are not enough members in a family to consume the entire lamb then two neighbouring (‘near’) families may join in the feast. It would also allow two families to share the expenses of the meal.

According to Josephus (Sarna tells us): ‘… a minimum quorum of ten participants was required for this ritual in Second Temple times. The actual slaughtering of the animal was performed in groups of no fewer than thirty.’

Why the entire sacrifice is to be consumed is not stated in the text. Perhaps it is to signify complete and total redemption from the land of Egypt.

12:5. ‘An unblemished male lamb, one year old, shall be for you; from the sheep or from the goats you may take it.’

The characteristics required of the animal to be sacrificed and eaten are now spelled out. First, the beast shall be ‘complete’, ‘perfect’, or ‘unblemished’. The purity of sacrifice is thus demanded. It is also to be a one-year old male, which according to later law at Sinai is a clean animal. Therefore, the animal may be offered as a sacrifice and eaten.

The animals sacrificed may be either sheep or goats. The Hebrew term includes both kinds.

Later prophets use the imagery of a sacrificial lamb for the work of the coming Messiah. Isaiah 53:7 says, ‘He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so he did not open his mouth.’

12:6. ‘Keep watch over them until the fourteenth day of this month, when all the community of the congregation of Israel shall sacrifice them at twilight.’

Each family is to ‘guard’ or ‘keep watch over’ the sacrificial animal for four days—it is to be protected from any defect or unholy intrusion. Then on the fourteenth day of the first month the people are to slaughter the lambs/goats simultaneously. The sacrifice is a united act of worship.

The term ‘community’ is found for the first time referring to the people of God. It literally means ‘assembly’: the people of Israel are congregating for a communal worship service. This act of redemption is solidifying the Hebrews as one covenanted people before Yahweh.

The time of the community sacrifice is unclear. A direct translation of the Hebrew says, ‘between the two sunsets/evenings’. Some scholars have suggested this means ‘twilight’, that is, between sunset and dark.

12:7. ‘Then they shall take from the blood and put it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses in which they are eating.’

Each family is to take blood from the sacrificed animal and put it ‘on the two door-posts and on the lintel’ of the entrance to the house. Every part of the entrance is to have blood smeared on it. The purpose of this act is stated later in verse 13: it is an external sign that those within are those numbered among the people of Yahweh. In other words, it is a pointer to their having been set apart as part of the community of God.

Why use blood as the sign? Throughout the Old Testament, the shedding of blood often signifies entrance into, and being part of, the covenant with God (see, for example, Gen. 15:9–17; 17:9–14). Blood is the essence of life, and thus it symbolizes the extremity of the covenant relationship extending to life and death. The Hebrews bear the sign of God and live; the Egyptians have no sign and many die.

12:8. ‘And they shall eat the flesh on that night, roasted in fire, and unleavened bread with bitter herbs they shall eat with it.’

The Hebrew people were to eat the animal roasted or fully cooked. This was an innovation because in the ancient Near East spring rituals of pagans included eating a raw or half-cooked sacrifice. The Lord was abolishing such bloody festivals of idolatry.

‘Unleavened bread’ (mătsāh) was also to be eaten at the Passover meal. It signifies the Hebrews’ quick departure from Egypt. They did not have time to allow the bread to leaven, but they left with unleavened bread bound up in clothes over their shoulders (see 12:34).

‘Bitter herbs’ were included in the feast. These are symbolic of their bitter lives under slavery in Egypt (see Exod. 1:14). But now they would be freed from that bitterness!

12:9. ‘Do not eat any of it raw or boiled in water, but only roasted in fire, its head, along with its legs, and along with its inner parts.’

Reiteration of the requirement for roasting the animal serves to stress the method of cooking. The text adds that the various parts of the animal are to be roasted at the same time: no parts are to be withheld from the fire. This prescription was kept throughout Israel’s history of the Passover, as confirmed by 2 Chronicles 35:13: ‘So they roasted the Passover [animals] on the fire according to the ordinance, and they boiled the holy things in pots, in kettles, in pans, and carried them speedily to all the lay people.’

12:10. ‘Do not leave any of it until morning, but what remains of it until the morning you will burn with fire.’

Hebrew lō’, the negative, with an imperfect verb, is common in legislative texts of the Old Testament (eight of the Ten Commandments are so structured). It is a prohibition in legal literature. That is what appears at the beginning of the verse: here is a law that Israel must keep.

The sacrifice was to be eaten in totality. However, if that was not possible what remained was to be burned up. The meat of the animal had been set apart for the Passover celebration; it was too sacred to be used at any other time. The Hebrews were not to save any meat for later. In addition, the full consumption of the sacrifice points to its completeness and efficacy. It signifies a full-scale redemption.

12:11. ‘This is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand. And you shall eat it in haste. It is the Passover of Yahweh.’

Each person who consumes the sacrifice must be arrayed in the following way: fully clothed, with a belt around the waist, sandals on the feet and a staff for walking in the hand. This manner of dress implies that the Israelites must be ready to depart Egypt at a moment’s notice during the night-time festivity. While fully dressed, the participants are to eat the meat ‘in haste’. This term in the original Hebrew does not only mean ‘quickly’, but it bears a great sense of alarm/trepidation/danger.

The word for ‘Passover’ is pĕsăh. This is the first time it is used in the Bible. The precise meaning of the word in the original is much disputed. In any event, pĕsăh. is the principal term throughout Scripture that designates the celebration of the redemption of Israel out of Egypt (see Exod. 12:21, 27, 43, 48; 34:25; etc.). There is no evidence or reason to believe that this was an established term or concept appropriated by the Hebrews at this time.

The Passover is not primarily about the deliverance of Israel out of Egypt. Nor is it mainly about the humiliation of Pharaoh and Egypt. Rather its essential purpose is the glorification and exaltation of Yahweh: ‘It is Yahweh’s Passover.’

12:12. ‘And I will pass through the land of Egypt on this night and I will strike every first-born in the land of Egypt, from mankind to animal. And I will bring judgement against all the gods of Egypt. I am Yahweh.’

The theme of the exodus event is here declared. God will demonstrate his superiority over ‘all’ the false gods of Egypt (which has already been demonstrated by the plagues against specific gods). Pharaoh is included. All of these are non-gods. This is a great statement of monotheism.

Antagonism is confirmed by the adversative use of the preposition beth in the verse: ‘And I will bring judgement against all the gods of Egypt.’ The contest of deities is about to reach a climax.

12:13. ‘And the blood will be a sign for you on the houses in which you are. And I will see the blood, and I will pass over you. And no plague will be upon you for destruction when I strike the land of Egypt.’

In the tenth plague, God will again make a distinction between his people and Pharaoh’s people. Those who belong to Yahweh will bear upon their houses the sign of blood, and they will not be struck by the plague. Those who do not mark their homes with blood will suffer the plague.

It should be observed that the blood is merely ‘a sign’. It is a physical symbol that points to a spiritual reality; that is, the people inside the houses covered with blood belong to Yahweh. The blood does not cause the people to be Yahweh’s, but simply acts as a billboard proclaiming the fact.

The verb ‘I will pass over’ is psh. Derived from this verb is the Hebrew name for the Passover, Pesach. Yahweh’s act of passing over the covenant people in this final plague is why the feast is called Pesach, or ‘passing over’.

12:14. ‘This day is a memorial for you, and you will celebrate it as a feast to Yahweh throughout your generations. You are to celebrate it as a lasting ordinance.’

Passover is to have an abiding character, i.e., it is to be celebrated ‘throughout your generations’. Thus it is not only for the Hebrews in Egypt, but for their posterity, so that future generations might understand and remember the great deliverance of Yahweh when he brought the children of Israel out of Egypt.

This verse uses three terms to define the Passover. First, it is ‘a memorial’. That noun derives from the verb that means ‘to remember/remind’. Passover, therefore, is to serve as a reminder to the Hebrew people of their lives of slavery and of the events of their redemption.

Secondly, Passover is ‘a feast’. A ‘feast of gathering’ or a ‘pilgrim-feast’ is what is especially signified by this word. The Hebrews are being called together and appear before Yahweh; it is a communal celebration (see Exod. 23:14–17).

Finally, Passover is ‘a lasting ordinance’. The Hebrew term for ‘ordinance’ means ‘law/rule/statute’. And thus we see a law given to Israel by God that precedes the laws revealed at Sinai. Israel is not lawless before the meeting at the mount. Note, in addition, the continuous, binding nature of the ordinance: bound to ‘law’ is a masculine adjective which means various things, but in the context of our passage probably signifies ‘in perpetuity/in continuous existence’.

The command to keep the Passover is emphasized by the reiteration of this law in Exodus 12:24 and 13:10.

12:15. ‘Seven days you will eat unleavened bread, but on the first day you will remove all leaven from your houses. Because anyone who eats leaven—his life will be cut off from Israel, from the first day to the seventh day.’

Further regulations and details of the Passover celebration are now set out. Three ordinances are set forth in this verse. First, the Hebrews are allowed only to eat bread without yeast during the festival period. Secondly, they are to ‘remove all leaven from [their] houses’—apparently this directive would keep them from accidentally using leaven in their food. And, finally, the feast is to last for seven days (the number seven, of course, often reflects the idea of completion).

The sanction of being ‘cut off’ from Israel is a common penalty in the Torah (see, e.g., Lev. 17:10; 20:3, 5, 6). In a general sense, it means that one is no longer considered part of the covenant community of Israel or receives any of the blessings associated with membership of that community. A person is simply denied fellowship with, and standing in, the people of Israel. It is a very serious consequence, and it underscores the gravity and importance of the Passover ordinances.

12:16. ‘And on the first day will be a holy convocation and on the seventh day there will be a holy convocation for you. No work shall be done on them, except that which is eaten—that alone may be made by you.’

On the first day and on the last day of the feast the Hebrews are to have ‘a holy convocation’, a gathering together of the people of God. The term ‘sacred assembly/holy convocation’ is used seventeen times in the Torah (eleven times in Lev. 23, four times in Num. 28–29, and twice in Exodus). This is its first appearance in the Bible. It is a technical term for a religious gathering on the Sabbath or on other sacred, set-apart days.

The prohibition against any work on these two days is relayed in the strongest possible form in the Hebrew. When the negative is used with ‘all/any’ it expresses absolute negation, absolutely none whatsoever. In this sense, the first and last days of Passover operate in much the same way as the later Sabbath (see Exod. 20:8–11).

12:17. ‘Keep the feast of unleavened bread, because on this very day I brought out your hosts from the land of Egypt. And you shall keep this day throughout your generations as a lasting ordinance.’

The opening phrase of the verse literally says, ‘Keep [or ‘guard’] the mătsōt’, i.e., the unleavened bread. This has received various interpretations. Some, such as the NIV translators, argue that there is an ellipsis here; that is, the term for ‘feast’ has been omitted (probably through a later scribal error). The translators of the Septuagint and the Samaritan Pentateuch believe the word mătsōt’ was somehow copied incorrectly and should really be mĭts‘vāh (Hebrew for ‘commandment’), so that the phrase should read, ‘Keep the commandment,’ referring to the previous Passover commands. Some rabbinical interpretation takes the statement at face value and says it literally means to guard and protect the bread of the Passover so that no impure element (such as leaven) should get into the food.

The description of the way God is bringing the Hebrews out of Egypt, according to ‘hosts’, or divisions, has military overtones (see commentary on 6:26).

The final clause says that the Passover celebration shall be ‘a lasting ordinance for the generations to come’. These precise words occur earlier, in verse 14. That repetition is to underscore the importance and benefit of the Passover to future generations, to the posterity of the Hebrews.

The verb used in this verse, ‘I brought’, is a Hiphil perfect. The perfect tense/aspect in Hebrew signifies completed action. But how can this be if the events of deliverance have not yet occurred? Perhaps it is what Gesenius calls the perfectum confidentiae; that is, it expresses facts which are undoubtedly imminent. Because God is speaking these words they will indeed come to pass!

12:18. ‘On the fourteenth day of the first month, in the evening, you will eat unleavened bread until the twenty-first day of the month, in the evening.’

Holy, set-apart days and weeks begin and end in the evening. Leviticus 23:32 says, ‘From evening until evening you shall keep the Sabbath.’ This custom may perhaps reflect the creation week of Genesis 1 in which the creation days apparently commenced in the evening: ‘… and there was evening and there was morning, day one’ (1:5).

12:19. ‘Seven days no yeast will be found in your houses, because whoever is eating leaven—that person shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, whether he is an alien or a native of the land.’

The yeast laws and their sanctions apply not only to the native citizen of the people of God (‘the congregation of Israel’) but also to the ‘alien’ or ‘sojourner’. The Hebrew word refers to a resident alien, a person to be distinguished from a foreigner. It is someone who has taken up permanent residence in Israel but is not an Israelite by birth or inheritance. In Israel, the alien had a special status and had various rights, such as religious participation.

In this verse, the Passover statutes apply to both the alien and the native. However, a further restriction for alien participation in the feast is given: the ger may not eat the lamb or celebrate the festival unless he is circumcised, as was the native Israelite. He must wear the physical sign of belonging to the people of God or he is not included in the celebration.

For the consequence of disobedience, see the commentary on 12:15.

The Hebrew preposition b‘ (or beth) is attached to both ‘alien’ and ‘native-born’. Its use here is that of specification and it serves to qualify the realm of the verbal action. In other words, it has the sense of ‘with regard to’.

12:20. ‘You shall not eat any yeast. In all your dwellings you shall eat unleavened bread.’

The conclusion to the prohibition of eating leavened food and the directive to eat matsah is emphasized in this verse. Its structure is in the form of an antithetic parallelism with an internal chiastic structure. The verse looks like this (direct translation from original):

a

b

Anything leavened

you shall not eat.

c

b1

a1

In all your houses

you shall eat

mătsōt.

This type of structure in a narrative serves to accentuate, or to bring to a climax, the preceding prose section.

12:21. Then Moses called for all the elders of Israel, and he said to them, ‘Go at once and take for yourselves lambs according to your families and slaughter the Passover lamb.’

Moses now instructs the people to begin preparations for the initial Passover. Additional particulars are added in this section to the general statutes already given by the prophet. In this verse, we are told that the elders of Israel are the ones to prepare and administer the feast/sacrament of Passover. The elder is to care for the families that have been placed under his charge and authority.

‘Go at once’ is an imperative in Hebrew that means ‘Proceed/lead’. It is the elders as the leaders in Israel who are to obey God’s statutes first, and then the community will follow.

12:22. ‘You shall take a bunch of hyssop and you shall dip it in the blood which is in the basin, and you shall touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood which is in the basin. And none of you shall go out of the door of his house until morning.’

Now Moses explains to the elders the method and manner of applying the blood-sign to the Israelites’ homes. The elders are to use hyssop to smear the blood on the dwellings. Hyssop is a plant with many stalks, and its use prevents the blood from coagulating. It is employed in the administration of other rites in the Old Testament, primarily in regard to purification (see Num. 19:18). Hyssop later developed into a symbol of purification, as we read in Psalm 51:7: ‘Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me and I shall be whiter than snow.’

The Hebrew term translated ‘basin’ has two distinct meanings. On the one hand, it can be translated as ‘basin’ or ‘goblet’ (see, for example, 2 Sam. 17:28; 1 Kings 7:50). But the word is more often used as a noun masculine for ‘threshold’ or ‘sill’ (see, for example, Judg. 19:27; Ezek. 43:8; etc.). If the latter translation is correct for verse 22, it implies that the entire structure of the door—lintel, doorposts and threshold—is to be covered with blood. It would then demonstrate a complete covering of the people inside.

12:23. ‘And Yahweh will pass through to strike Egypt, and he will see the blood on the lintel and upon the two doorposts. And he will pass over the door, and he will not allow the destroyer to come to your houses to strike.’

The identity of ‘the destroyer’ is a matter of disagreement among commentators. Some define it in an impersonal way. Sarna, for instance, argues that ‘The plague, although personified, is not an independent demonic being. It can only operate within the limits fixed by God.’ While I would agree that the destroyer is not an ‘independent demonic being’, I would disagree regarding its impersonal nature. Rather, the figure is probably to be identified with an angel of Yahweh. In 1 Chronicles 21:9–17, an angel of the Lord serves as a destroying force against David and Jerusalem because of an uncalled-for census.

12:24. ‘You shall keep this event as an ordinance for you and for your children for ever.’

As in verse 17 (where the verb ‘keep’ occurs twice), the binding nature of the Passover ordinances is emphasized in the present verse. It is also a rite that must be carefully taught to children so that its meaning and significance would pass from generation to generation. The posterity of the Hebrews would be prime beneficiaries of the Passover event. It is thus ‘a lasting ordinance’ (NIV), one that is to be honoured and observed in perpetuity.

12:25. ‘And it will be when you come to the land which Yahweh is giving to you as he said, then you will keep this ceremony.’

The land that God had promised the Hebrews is Canaan, and it was given to Abraham and his seed many centuries before (see Gen. 12:7). The Israelites are to make certain that they keep the Passover ritual in the land flowing with milk and honey. They are not to forget what God has done for them as a people. One of the first acts of the Hebrews after entering the land was in fact the observation of the Passover (Josh. 5:10).

The Hebrew word for ‘ceremony’ is the common term for labour/service. Used earlier of the Hebrews’ slavery under Pharaoh (Exod. 1:14), it here reflects who it is that the Israelites truly serve. And the contrast is clear: the hard and cruel service they rendered to Pharaoh is now replaced by a compassionate, loving service to Yahweh.

12:26–27. ‘And when your children say to you, “What does this ceremony mean to you?”, you will say, “It is the Passover sacrifice to Yahweh, when he passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when he struck Egypt but he delivered our houses.” ’ And the people bowed down and worshipped.

Here at the conclusion of his instructions to the people, Moses reiterates the pedagogic aspect of the Passover ritual. When children see the events of the Passover celebration they will naturally be curious. Parents are to seize the opportunity to share with their children the story of redemption from Egypt, and continually to remind them of the God who acts.

The response of the people was, literally, that ‘They bowed down and prostrated themselves.’ This is a Hebrew idiom reflecting a scene of worship, praise and adoration. It was used earlier in the book of Exodus (see commentary on 4:31).

12:28. And the children of Israel went and did as Yahweh commanded Moses and Aaron, thus they did.

Worship of Yahweh is soon followed by action. Obedience is born out of obeisance. What the Hebrews did was to make preparations for the Passover; that is, they complied with all the instructions and ordinances that Moses had just given to them.

The fact of their submission to the Torah commands is confirmed by the repetition of the verb ‘to do’. The verse literally reads, ‘The sons of Israel did what Yahweh commanded Moses and Aaron, thus they did.’ That same grammatical construction was earlier used of Moses and Aaron when they obeyed God’s directives right down to the very details (see commentary on 7:6).

**Application**

A critical teaching of this foregoing section is the temporal application of the Passover commands. Passover is to be observed by the people of God throughout history, from one generation to the next. This injunction is intensified by its appearance three times in the passage under consideration (vv. 14, 17, 24). The continuous, binding character of the Passover celebration raises a question for the church: how does the church keep this command? Do we celebrate Passover?

The Lord’s Supper in the New Testament is a Passover commemoration (see Matt. 26:17–19). Every Passover meal included two elements: wine and unleavened bread. The wine symbolized the blood of the lamb that was shed for the Israelites to protect them from the avenging angel. The bread signified the bread that the Hebrews carried on their backs when they left Egypt in haste. Jesus reinterprets those two elements and pronounces the Passover event a type of foreshadowing of himself and his ministry. In Matthew 26:26–28, Jesus says that the wine is a figure of the blood of Christ that takes away the sins of his people, and the bread is a figure of his body that is hung on the cross for sinners. In short, what Jesus is proclaiming is that he is the Passover Lamb, who by the shedding of his blood is a substitute for his people, protecting them from the wrath and judgement of God. In other words, as Israel is covered by the blood of the Passover lamb, so the new Israel is covered by the blood of the Messiah (see John 1:29; 1 Peter 1:19; 1 Cor. 5:7).

The fact of the matter is that when Christians celebrate the Lord’s Supper they are keeping the Passover that God commanded his people to honour in perpetuity. The Scots Confession of 1560 puts it this way:

As the fathers under the Law, besides the reality of the sacrifices, had two chief sacraments, that is, circumcision and the Passover, and those who rejected these were not reckoned among God’s people; so do we acknowledge and confess that now in the time of the gospel we have two chief sacraments, which alone were instituted by the Lord Jesus and commanded to be used by all who will be counted members of his body, that is, Baptism and the Supper or Table of the Lord Jesus, also called the Communion of His Body and Blood.

The reason that Christians celebrate the Passover in this way is, first, to remind themselves of the work of Christ in delivering his people from death and darkness. It is, furthermore, a sign that believers are the people of God and the covenant, and that God dwells in their midst. And, finally, it is a sign of the continuity of the people of God from the Old Testament to the New Testament and beyond.

**Death of the first-born**

**(Exodus 12:29–36)**

This section records the historical event of the first Passover. Everything that God has told Israel to prepare for now comes to pass. Included in the account is the death of the first-born, the expulsion of the Hebrews from the land by Pharaoh and the despoiling of the Egyptians.

12:29. And it came to pass at midnight that Yahweh struck all the first-born in the land of Egypt, from the first-born of Pharaoh who was sitting on his throne to the first-born of the prisoner who was in the dungeon, and all the first-born of the animals.

What took place at the first Passover is now described by the biblical author. All the Egyptians without exception are struck by the plague. The all-embracing nature of the disaster is accentuated by the use of two all-inclusive opposites: the plague strikes the family of Pharaoh, who sits in luxury on his throne, and it also hits the families of prisoners, those ‘dwelling in the house of the pit’. It spans all, from the one who enjoys the greatest comfort to the one in the situation of least comfort (cf. 11:5 in which a different image is used to reflect the idea of hardship).

The first-born of Egyptian animals are also destroyed, as Moses had prophesied in 11:5 (see commentary on that verse).

12:30. And Pharaoh arose that night and all his servants and all Egypt. And a great cry was [heard] in Egypt because there was not a house in which there was not one who died.

The extent of the final plague is stressed by this verse. It concludes with a statement of result or consequence: ‘because there was not a house in which there was not one who died’. That clause carries a double negative, a particle that means non-being or non-existence. Thus, the plague is exhaustive in its outcome for the land of Egypt.

The serious nature of the plague is also highlighted by the singling out of Pharaoh in the passage. First, he is humiliated by being forced to rise from his bed in the middle of the night, a procedure that is clearly not one normally associated with royalty. And, more critically, the king’s house is subject to the consequences of the plague. It is a true statement that the final plague is primarily directed against Pharaoh as a god of Egypt and against the Egyptian royal succession. Numbers 33:4 links the Passover with the judgement upon the deities of Egypt.

12:31. And he called for Moses and for Aaron at night, and he said, ‘Rise up, go out from the midst of my people—both you and the children of Israel! Go, serve Yahweh as you have said!’

As a result of the tenth plague, Pharaoh was desperate to rid his land of the Hebrews. The urgency to expedite Israel’s departure is emphasized in this verse. First, Pharaoh employs four imperatives: ‘Rise up, go out … Go, serve!’ The first two imperatives are found elsewhere in Scripture to indicate great haste. In Genesis 19:14, Lot urges his sons-in-law with these imperatives to flee for their lives from Sodom.

The King of Egypt is humbled. He is forced to summon to the palace the very men he had banished from it earlier (see 10:28). He also, for the first time, calls the Hebrews by the name, ‘the children of Israel’, or Israelites. This appears to be an acknowledgement of their status as a people—not yet a nation but in the process of becoming one.

Finally, the answer to the question of whom the Hebrews will serve/worship is given out of Pharaoh’s very own mouth: ‘Go, serve Yahweh!’

12:32. ‘Take your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and go! And also bless me.’

Pharaoh now concedes all the demands of the Hebrew prophets and withdraws all his previous limitations and restrictions. All the children of Israel may leave Egypt, and all their flocks with them. In addition, Pharaoh gives no time-frame for their departure and places no restrictions on how long they may be gone. Apparently, at least for the moment, the King of Egypt has been defeated.

The ultimate humiliation of Pharaoh is seen in his seeking the blessing of the prophets even after his defeat. Childs remarks that Pharaoh ‘even seeks from Moses a blessing which serves to underline Moses’ complete victory’. Was this request honourable? Was it a sign of true remorse? Or was it sarcasm? What we can say with certainty is that there was no real repentance on the part of the king. He gave no recognition of any personal responsibility—he wanted the blessing without the liability, the shame, or the consequences. He simply desired the plagues to be gone. We know this to be the case, because once the immediate shock following the final plague had subsided, the Egyptian king pursued the Hebrews in order to destroy them.

12:33. The Egyptians urged the people to make haste, to send them out from the country, because they said, ‘We shall all die.’

A literal rendering of the opening of this verse reads, ‘And the Egyptians pressed/made strong upon the people.’ Ironically, the verb is the same one that is used of God hardening or making strong Pharaoh’s heart (see 7:13, 22; 8:15). Thus, previously the Egyptian hearts were hardened not to let the Hebrews go (9:34), but now they are equally determined to force them to leave.

The act of strengthening is so that the Hebrews would be sent out—this is the Hebrew verb so frequently used in the exodus account. The opening salvo between the Hebrew prophets and Pharaoh focused on that verb: ‘Thus says Yahweh, God of Israel, “Send out my people …” ’ (5:1). Now the Egyptians are causing the Hebrews to be sent out!

The Egyptians are worried and faltering. They want the Hebrews to depart, literally, ‘because all of us are dying’. The latter is a participial form, and ‘the participle is the form which indicates continued action …’ From the perspective of the Egyptians, if the Hebrews stay in the land Pharaoh’s people will indeed all perish.

12:34. So the people lifted onto their shoulders dough [which] had not yet been leavened, in kneading bowls wrapped in clothes.

Prior to departing from Egypt the Hebrews perform two further acts. The first is stated in this verse. They place dough in ‘kneading bowls’ (this term is used earlier in 8:3), and carry them upon their shoulders wrapped in garments. They had no time to leaven the dough or to cook it in Egypt. Great haste was the order of the day. It is in commemoration of this event that unleavened bread has been part of the Passover celebrations throughout history. Deuteronomy 16:3 says in regard to the instructions for Passover: ‘You shall not eat leavened bread with it; seven days you shall eat with it unleavened bread, the bread of affliction (for you came out of the land of Egypt in haste), in order that you may remember all the days of your life the day when you came out of the land of Egypt.’

A temporal adverb is found in this verse: it has an adversative affect, meaning ‘not yet’. Also, when it is followed by an imperfect verb, as it is in this case, the verb is in the pluperfect tense. The correct reading of the clause is therefore: ‘And the people lifted … dough, [which] had not yet been leavened …’

12:35–36. And the children of Israel did as Moses said, and they asked the Egyptians for articles of silver and articles of gold and clothing. And Yahweh gave favour to the people in the eyes of the Egyptians, so they gave them what they requested. Thus they plundered the Egyptians.

This event is the fulfilment of the commands that God had given to the people in 3:21–22 and 11:2–3 (see the commentary on both those passages).

**Application**

It is important to realize that the Passover event was a historical incident, that it was set and fixed in time and space. It was not merely an idea or a belief that found its reality in future celebrations, but it really did happen. The same can be said for the significance of the Lord’s Supper. That Christian ritual truly represents the historical episode of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul underscores the gravity and weight of the historicity of those events in the following passage: ‘Now if Christ is preached, that he has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain’ (1 Cor. 15:12–14).

The very essence of biblical religion and faith is the fact that what the Bible records actually occurred in history.

**Initial journey: Rameses to Succoth**

**(Exodus 12:37–42)**

This next section relates the very outset of the Hebrews’ escape from the land of Egypt. It provides us with some interesting data regarding geography, chronology and the numbers of people that left Egypt.

12:37. And the children of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children.

The opening leg of the journey begins at ‘Rameses’, which was one of the cities the Hebrews had helped to build (see commentary on 1:11 for information regarding its location). The first stop in their travels was ‘Succoth’. Some researchers suggest that Succoth is to be found at Tell el-Maskhuta. The name Succoth, perhaps derived from Egyptian tkw (Tjeku), has been discovered on numerous monuments at Tell el-Maskhuta. The problem with this identification is the fact that urban occupation did not begin at Tell el-Maskhuta until the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. E. L. Bleiberg has attempted to solve this problem by asserting that Tjeku (Succoth) was originally a region in the Wadi Tumilat area of Egypt and it was later located specifically at Tell el-Maskhuta.

The number of people leaving Egypt was ‘six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children’ (note that there is no mention of the word ‘women’ in the original). The term for ‘men’ distinguishes this group from women, children and non-combatants. For that reason, interpreters often estimate the size of the population of Israel at the exodus to have been between 2,000,000 and 3,000,000 people. In favour of taking these numbers at face value is that they coincide with the data given about the population size in the wilderness from the book of Numbers (see Num. 1:46–47; 2:32; 26:51). In addition, according to Exodus 1, the Israelites were experiencing a great period of growth and increase (see analysis of 1:6–7).

Others argue that the figures are hyperbolic. Some insist that the word for ‘thousand’ (Hebrew ’ĕlĕph) actually means ‘a clan’, and thus six hundred clans left Egypt. ’Ĕlĕph is used that way in Judges 6:15. Others say that ’ĕlĕph is a military unit of men levied for war.

12:38. And also a mixed multitude went up with them, and flocks and herds, a great number of livestock.

The verse begins by saying that ‘A mixed multitude went up with them.’ ‘Mixture’ is a Hebrew word which is used of miscellaneous peoples who attach themselves to a group to which they do not naturally belong (see Jer. 25:20; 50:37; Neh. 13:3). Many English translations render the word as ‘foreigners’. The point is that various kinds of people who were not part of Israel joined themselves with the people of God. Perhaps some of them were Egyptians who came to believe and fear the word of God (see Exod. 9:20–21).

The Hebrews left Egypt with, literally, ‘a very heavy flock’. As has been noted previously, the word for ‘heavy’ (Hebrew kābēd) has defined what God has done to Pharaoh’s heart throughout the account of the exodus. As God made Pharaoh’s heart heavy, or hard, thus he makes Israel heavy in material possessions.

12:39. And they baked the dough which they brought from Egypt into cakes of unleavened bread because there was no yeast when they were driven from Egypt; they were not able to wait and also they did not make provisions for themselves.

On the first leg of the journey, the Hebrews cooked unleavened bread for their sustenance. The reasons for their having to resort to it were twofold: first, ‘They were not able to wait/linger/tarry’ in Egypt long enough for their bread to rise. Secondly, the text reports that ‘also they did not make provisions for themselves’. The Hebrews were unprepared for the spontaneous nature of their departure.

12:40–41. And the length of time that the children of Israel dwelt in Egypt was 430 years. And it was at the end of 430 years, on this very day, that all the hosts of Yahweh came out from the land of Egypt.

Israel’s period of enslavement lasted over four hundred years. This was a fulfilment of God’s prophecy to Abraham in Genesis 15:13, where he says, ‘Know for certain that your seed will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years.’ The discrepancy between the two figures may easily be explained by the Genesis figure simply being a round number, or one that is the minimum figure, that is, at least four hundred years. The number in the present verses would then be the specific figure for the length of the sojourn. The fact that 430 years is the specific figure is confirmed in verse 41 where it says the Hebrews left Egypt, literally, ‘on this selfsame day’.

The opening word of verse 40 is literally ‘dwelling’. It is a derivative of the verb used later in the verse (‘lived’). This is a unique usage of the noun form because it apparently means in the context ‘dwelling-time’, length of stay.

12:42. It is a night of watching by Yahweh to bring them out from the land of Egypt; this night is for Yahweh to be watched by the children of Israel throughout their generations.

The final verse of the section begins by saying that Passover is ‘a night of watching by Yahweh’. Protection of his people is the main idea behind it. It is night-time, and the God of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps (Ps. 121:4). He is the keeper and guardian of Israel.

In contrast, Pharaoh has to be aroused and awakened in the middle of the night to be told of the plague (12:30). The sun-god Ra is in the nether regions, and unable to come to the aid of his people. Where are the gods of Egypt?

**Application**

I once heard a missionary Baptist pastor from the Delta region of Mississippi preach on this text. The title of his sermon was ‘God Works the Night-Shift’! The point of his sermon needs to be driven home to the church today—and that lesson is the constant, ever-working providence of God. He continually maintains and sustains the universe, and he has ceaseless and endless care and compassion for his people. The Westminster Confession of Faith speaks directly to this latter observation: ‘As the providence of God doth, in general, reach to all creatures, so, after a most special manner, it taketh care of his Church, and disposeth all things to the good thereof’ (Chapter 5).

As the people of God, we can take great comfort from this doctrine: God’s care of his church is uninterrupted and incessant. It has no end.

**Reiteration of Passover commands**

**(Exodus 12:43–13:10)**

A third rehearsal of the Passover laws is found in this section, especially in Exodus 13:3–10. There we see the general laws, barring yeast from the festival, giving the directive to teach the meaning of Passover to children and issuing the command to keep this feast in perpetuity. New, more detailed instructions are set out in Exodus 12:43–49, in which those who are allowed to participate in the feast are listed and described.

12:43. And Yahweh said to Moses and to Aaron, ‘This is the ordinance of the Passover: any son of a foreigner shall not eat of it.’

One of the principal teachings of this next section relating to the Passover is to define who may or may not partake of the festival. Regulations begin with a negative injunction: ‘Any son of a foreigner may not eat of it.’ The title ‘son of a foreigner’ signifies a non-Israelite who temporarily dwells with the people of God (see Deut. 23:20). That person does not profess the religion of Yahweh and is not a member of the covenant. Passover participation is restricted to Israelites.

The verb ‘eat’ is followed by the preposition b‛ and the pronominal suffix ‘it’. It is the partitive use of the preposition which implies the ‘idea of an action as extending to something, with at the same time the secondary idea of participation in something’. Thus, part of the restriction is that no foreigner is to participate in any part of the Passover communal event.

12:44–45. ‘Any slave, one who has been bought with silver, after you have circumcised him, then he may eat of it. A temporary resident and a hired worker may not eat of it.’

The statute of verse 43 is now spelt out in further detail in these two verses. The general principle is: ‘Any son of a foreigner may not eat of it’ (i.e., the Passover, 12:43). However, there is one exception to the rule: the slave in Israel who has been circumcised is now part of the covenant people, and he may therefore participate in the Passover. This privilege is in accord with the circumcision commands of Genesis 17:12–13.

Two groups who do not have covenant status are the ‘temporary resident’ and the ‘hired worker’. The first is a person who has a very temporary relationship with Israel, much more so than the ‘alien’ or ‘sojourner’ referred to in 12:19. The second is, strictly speaking, a mercenary worker who has been hired to work in Israel. These groups have no religious commitment to Yahweh, and they are thus denied access to the festival.

12:46. ‘In one house it must be eaten; anything from the flesh shall not be brought out of the house to the outside. And you shall not break any bone of it.’

The prohibition of breaking any of the bones of the Passover sacrifice has received various interpretations. R. de Vaux, for instance, argues that in ‘the Passover sacrifice the bones would not be broken in order that God might restore the victim to life, i.e. ensure the fertility of the flock’. He draws this conclusion on the basis of apparent modern Arab parallels. Sarna comments that the law prevents the Hebrews from breaking bones in order ‘to suck out the marrow’. The meat of the animal should have been completely satisfying. There is not much supporting evidence for either of these explanations.

G. A. Barton suggests that some parallels to this activity are known from ancient Egypt. His argument is not very convincing.

M. Noth has the most balanced understanding of this restriction. The wholeness of the victim symbolizes the communal character of the sacrifice; that is, it emphasizes the cohesion of the family unit at worship.

The end of the verse is quoted in John 19:36 at the crucifixion of Christ. The point is simply that Jesus is the paschal lamb (cf. 1 Cor. 5:7). Leon Morris put it this way: ‘When that sacrifice was instituted the command was given that not one bone was to be broken. If this is the allusion then John is viewing Jesus as the perfect Passover offering.’

12:47. ‘The whole congregation of Israel shall do it.’

In contrast to the foreign groups mentioned in verses 43 and 45, the entire ‘congregation of Israel’, without exception, is to partake of the Passover feast. Apparently that term signifies all who are circumcised (i.e., bearing the sign of the covenant), and their wives and children, assembling together for worship. The Septuagint translates this word as ‘synagogue’, and it has a similar meaning.

12:48. ‘And when a stranger sojourns with you, and he celebrates the Passover to Yahweh, every one of his males must be circumcised; and then he may draw near to celebrate it. And he shall be like a native of the land. And anyone uncircumcised may not eat of it.’

The opening words of the verse involve a word-play in the Hebrew: ‘And when a sojourner sojourns with you …’ A ‘sojourner’ is different from the ‘foreigner’ of verse 43. The former has lived in the land with the people of Israel for some time. He has settled in the land and therefore he has privileges. The sojourner ‘as a resident enjoys the rights of assistance, protection, and religious participation. He has the right of gleaning (Lev. 19:10; 23:22), participation in the tithe (Deut. 14:29), the Sabbath year (Lev. 25:6), and the cities of refuge (Num. 35:15).’ He could not, however, participate in the Passover unless circumcised.

This verse is for the future. It envisages what was stated back in verse 25, that is, the settlement of the Israelites in the land of milk and honey.

The word for ‘circumcised’ is an infinitive absolute in Hebrew. It is being employed here as a legislative, jussive form; in other words, it is volitional, a word of command.

12:49. ‘One law shall be for the native and for the sojourner who sojourns in your midst.’

This sentence literally begins with the words: ‘One Torah shall be for …’ The term ‘Torah’ simply means ‘instruction/teaching/law’. In the grammatical construction of the sentence ‘one Torah’ precedes the verb for the sake of emphasis.

The one law is that circumcision is a requirement for participation in Passover. It applies to the ‘native’ Israelite as well as to the ‘sojourner’. Often in the Pentateuch these two terms are used in opposition to one another for the purpose of inclusiveness (Lev. 16:29; Num. 9:14; 15:29).

‘One Torah’ is a feminine noun qualified by a feminine adjective. However, in this verse it takes a masculine verb. Some would argue that the ‘instances in which the gender or number of the following predicate appears to differ from that of the subject are due partly to manifest errors in the text’. That conclusion is probably incorrect. Rather, this ‘priority of masculine gender is due in part to the intensely androcentric character of the world of the Hebrew Bible’. It is what grammarians sometimes call ‘the prior gender’.

12:50. And all the children of Israel did just as Yahweh commanded Moses and Aaron.

This verse contains verbal reiteration for the purpose of emphasis. It reads, literally, ‘All the children of Israel did as Yahweh commanded Moses and Aaron, thus they did.’ The very construction and vocabulary of the verse constitute an expression idiomatic in the book of Exodus (see 7:10; 12:28 and commentary on 7:6). This characteristic style signifies absolute obedience to the Word of God.

12:51. And it came to pass on this very day that Yahweh brought out the children of Israel from the land of Egypt according to their hosts.

See analysis of verses 40–41.

13:1–2. And Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Consecrate to me every first-born. The first opening of the womb among the children of Israel, whether man or animal, belongs to me.’

A general principle is now stated by direct word of God to Moses. Every first-born male, human or animal, is to be ‘consecrated’ to God. This verb literally means ‘to set apart’. In this verse it is in the Piel imperative form, so it is a command to put something into action.

Perhaps this activity is a polemic against other ancient cultures of the Near East. Preferential status is known to have been accorded to the first-born son in Nuzi, Assyria, Syria, Babylonia and Palestine. Special treatment and privileges were considered inherent in the position of first-born. In other words, the eldest male is born with certain rights, and thus he is set apart from birth. In this verse we see that the rights of the first-born are not intrinsic, but rather something bestowed by the hand of God.

The first two verses of chapter 13 appear to be out of place. Subsequent verses 3–10 revert to a discussion of Passover regulations. It is not until verse 11 that the author gives detail to the laws of the first-born. However, there is a significant connection between Passover and the consecration of the first-born. In Egypt, God had destroyed the first-born of the Egyptians, both man and beast; now he redeems Israel’s first-born and they belong to him!

13:3. Then Moses said to the people, ‘Remember this day on which you came out from Egypt, from the house of slaves, because by a strong hand Yahweh brought you out from this [place]. Yeast shall not be eaten.’

Now begins the third time that Moses gives regulations regarding the Passover. This is an example of repetition for the purpose of emphasis. Passover was the most remarkable day in the history of Israel. It was the birth of a nation no longer under the rod of oppression. Pesach symbolizes for the Hebrews the concepts of freedom, deliverance and redemption.

Moses’ statement begins with the command to ‘remember’. The Hebrew word is an infinitive absolute which is being used as an emphatic imperative. In such constructions, ‘It predominantly expresses divine and/or prophetic commands.’

The land of Egypt is called ‘the house of slaves’. Sarna makes an interesting comment about that nomenclature: ‘It may derive from the Egyptian practice of settling the labour gangs in workmen’s villages in proximity to the site of the project for which they were conscripted. These villages were wholly enclosed by walls. One such has been uncovered at Deir el-Medinah, near Thebes. It served the labourers engaged in the construction of royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings. To the Israelite conscripts, such a village may have appeared to be a gigantic ‘slave house’.

13:4. ‘Today, in the month of Abib, you are leaving.’

The month in which the exodus took place is called ‘Abib’. This is a word used earlier of a barley crop being ‘in the ear’, that is, ripe for harvest (see 9:31). The Palestinian inscription called the Gezer Calendar (from c. 925 B.C.) also employs that term for the month of barley harvest. Historically, barley harvest in Palestine occurs during the month of April.

Verse 4 begins with the word ‘today’. The Samaritan Hebrew Pentateuch would rather place it at the end of verse 3, which would then read, ‘And no yeast shall be eaten today.’ That emendation of the text is unnecessary because ‘today’ has been used elsewhere in the story precisely for the day of departure (12:41; 13:3).

13:5 ‘And it will come to pass when Yahweh brings you to the land of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, which he swore to your fathers to give to you, a land flowing with milk and honey, then you are to celebrate this service in this month.’

This is a basic reiteration of the promise of Exodus 3:8, 17. God is in the process of fulfilling his purposes that he had earlier given to his people. The only substantive difference between the present verse and the earlier ones is that the group called Perizzites is missing on this occasion. It is really not a problem, however, because the list is being used as a formula and it is unnecessary that every group be included each time it is quoted (see commentary on 3:8).

The words in Hebrew for ‘you are to celebrate this service’ are a construction that can be translated literally, ‘and you are to serve the service’. Perhaps this is a word-playon verse 3 which calls Egypt ‘the house of servants/slaves’ (using a variation of the same words as here in verse 5). Again, one of the great issues of the book of Exodus is underscored: the Hebrews are no longer to serve the Egyptians, but now they are to serve Yahweh, and him alone.

13:6. ‘Seven days you are to eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there will be a feast to Yahweh.’

The Septuagint and the Samaritan Hebrew Pentateuch both read, ‘Six days you shall eat.’ Apparently this translation was to keep the number of days in line with Deuteronomy 16:8 which says, ‘Six days you shall eat.’ However, elsewhere in the Torah the text stipulates seven days for not eating mătsāh (see Lev. 23:6). This discrepancy is really not a problem. The difference simply revolves around whether or not the seventh day is to be included in the stricture against eating leavened bread. Obviously it is (see next verse), and at times that is assumed by the Torah while at other times it is not.

The number seven in Hebrew often symbolizes completeness. Here the Passover reaches its climax or crescendo on the seventh day. It is a festival day in which all the people gather for a sacred assembly (see Deut. 16:8 where the term ‘sacred assembly’ is used of the Passover event).

13:7. ‘Eat unleavened bread seven days. And yeast shall not be seen by you, nor any leaven seen by you in all your borders.’

See commentary on 12:15. The only addition to earlier regulations regarding unleavened bread is that previously the command was to keep yeast out of their homes. Here we see a further directive that prevents it from even being allowed within the ‘borders’ of the nation. This term is primarily used in the Old Testament of the outer boundaries of the territory that God gave to Israel in the land of Canaan (e.g., Josh. 12:2; 16:2–8).

13:8. ‘You shall tell your son on that day, saying, “[This is] on account of what Yahweh did for me when I came out from Egypt.” ’

Redemption from Egypt must not only be recounted to children, but must also be explained to them. Here is a simple justification for the celebration of the Passover throughout history: it is to recall what God had done for the Hebrews by rescuing them from Egypt. The catechism need not be more complex than this for children—the answer goes to the very heart of the issue: salvation.

Some grammarians see a textual corruption in the verse because of the use of the telic particle ‘on account of/so that/because’ as a relative pronoun. Although such usage is unusual, it is hardly a sign of a need for textual emendation. The verse makes perfectly good sense as it stands.

13:9. ‘It shall be for you as a sign on your hand and for a reminder between your eyes, so that the law of Yahweh will be in your mouth—because by a strong hand Yahweh brought you out from Egypt.’

According to Talmudic interpretation this is a reference to the precept of wearing phylacteries, that is, leather straps worn on the arms and head of a worshipper which contain copies of Exodus 13:1–10 and various other passages. Phylacteries are fitted on the person during morning prayers. Evidence for this practice derives from the Second Temple period, there being no confirmation of it from Old Testament times.

The command is probably to be understood metaphorically. Passover is thus to be before the eyes and upon the hands of the Hebrew. It has an ever-present status and significance.

13:10 ‘You must keep this ordinance according to its time from year to year.’

The final verse of the section enjoins the Hebrews to celebrate the Passover in perpetuity. It literally says they should keep the feast ‘from days to days’. On the last word is a directional ה in Hebrew, and in this instance ‘The particle can mark forward progression through time.’ (Compare a similar usage in Judges 11:40.)

**Application**

In this section we are introduced for the first time to the concept of the first-born of Israel having been set apart, or consecrated, to God. They belong to him because he spared them in Egypt when he destroyed the first-born of the Egyptians (see discussion below in verses 10–16).

In the New Testament Jesus, Mary’s first-born son, is set apart, or sanctified, according to the commands laid down in Exodus: ‘And when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every first-born male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”), and to offer a sacrifice according to what was said in the Law of the Lord’ (Luke 2:22–24). Luke even quotes Exodus 13:2 in his description. Elsewhere Christ is called ‘the first-born among many brethren’ (Rom. 8:29).

Also in the New Testament, believers are accounted as first-born by virtue of their union with Christ. It is the church of the first-born that is set apart to God (Heb. 12:23). In fact, the name the New Testament writers often give to Christians is ‘saints’ (e.g., Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:1). That word in Greek literally means ‘the set-apart ones’. Thus, Christians are in a special, set-apart relationship with the Creator. We are the first-born of Israel.

**Law of the first-born**

**(Exodus 13:11–16)**

This passage provides an explanation of the command of verse 2 that all the first-born in Israel, whether man or beast, are to be consecrated to Yahweh. In addition, it describes the means by which the first-born are redeemed from Yahweh; that is, how they are ransomed from him. Rationale for this peculiar ritual is also given by the author.

13:11–12. ‘And it shall be when Yahweh brings you to the land of the Canaanites which he swore to you and to your fathers, and he gives it to you, then you shall give over every first-born of the womb to Yahweh and every first offspring of animals which belong to you; the males belong to Yahweh.’

Verse 11 is a reiteration of verse 5. These are laws for the future of the people of Israel as they reside in the land of Canaan.

Verse 12 literally begins with: ‘And you shall pass over every first-born of the womb to Yahweh.’ The verb ‘to pass over’ is employed in surrounding chapters regarding the feast and celebration of Passover (12:13, 23). So here we have a verbal word-play: as Yahweh passed over the Hebrews during the tenth plague, the Hebrews are now to pass over their first-born to him.

The verb ‘to pass over’ is also a commentary on pagan child sacrifice. Pagans of the ancient Near East would take a child and pass him over/through the fire as a form of devotion and sacrifice (Deut. 18:10; 2 Kings 16:3). Yahweh does not require such barbarism. He wants the first-born set apart and devoted to his service. Thus the Israelites are not to pass over their first-born in the fire, but pass them over to the Lord.

This law applies to both humans and animals. The terms for ‘first-born’ and ‘males’ are unusual words in Hebrew that include the offspring of both.

13:13. ‘Redeem every first-born donkey with a lamb; but if you do not redeem [it], then you shall break its neck. Redeem every first-born male among your sons.’

Neither donkeys nor human children will be sacrificed to Yahweh; instead they will be redeemed—that is, bought back for a price. In other words, God is permitting a substitutionary payment in place of the first-born of donkeys and humans. The only animal mentioned as being in need of redemption is the ‘donkey’, or male ass. Perhaps the reason for this is that the donkey was the only unclean domestic animal used by the Hebrews in Egypt. The value of that animal for transportation or for packing is obvious, and so God allowed for its redemption by the substitution of a clean animal, namely, a lamb.

If, however, a man does not want to substitute a lamb for his donkey, then he must kill the donkey by breaking its neck. Since man is depriving God of his due, then man is denied use of the animal. Breaking the donkey’s neck instead of killing it with a knife or by some other means is probably in order to divorce it from any sacrificial act or intent.

The first-born of man is also to be redeemed. No mode of redemption or price to be paid is given here. Later, in Numbers 18:16, the valuation is provided: it is to be five shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary.

A connection is made between this redemptive act and the act of deliverance of the people from Egypt by the use of the verb ‘to redeem’. It is a form used throughout the Bible to refer to God’s saving act in Egypt (see, for example, Deut. 7:8; 13:5).

13:14. ‘And it will come to pass in days to come, when your son asks you, saying, “What is this?” that you shall say to him, “With a strong hand Yahweh brought us out from Egypt, from the house of slaves.” ’

Children will be curious regarding the singular ritual associated with the redemption of the first-born. It must be explained to them (see comment on verse 8). Once again, the importance of the didactic value of the exodus event is underscored.

The beginning of an answer to the question is stated. The law of redemption is tied to the deliverance of the Hebrews out of Egypt by the power of Yahweh. The following two verses will spell out clearly the precise relationship between the two events.

‘In days to come’ is literally ‘tomorrow’. The Hebrew can bear the idea of an indefinite future time period (see, for example, Deut. 6:20).

13:15. ‘And it came to pass when Pharaoh was stubborn about sending us out that Yahweh killed all the first-born in the land of Egypt, from the first-born of man to the first-born of animals. Therefore, I sacrifice to Yahweh every first-born of the womb, the males, but every first-born of my sons I will redeem.’

The answer to the child’s question from verse 14 continues. The principal reason for the redemption of first-born humans and animals is because God had killed the first-born of mankind and animals in Egypt. God had spared the first-born of the Hebrews, so now they belong to him.

The clause, ‘This is why I sacrifice to the Lord’ is actually centred on a participial form which denotes ‘a durative circumstance involving repeated actions’. In other words, because of the events in Egypt, Israel throughout her history is continually to perform the redemption of the first-born.

13:16. ‘And it shall be as a sign upon your hand and as a symbol between your eyes, because by a strong hand Yahweh brought us out from Egypt.’

The devotion and consecration of the first-born constitute a physical sign, or symbol, of God’s redemptive act of rescuing Israel from Egypt. As the celebration of Passover is to serve as a pointer to the exodus (13:9), so too is the rite of redemption of the first-born (see commentary and bibliography relating to 13:9).

A major distinction between verse 9 and the present one is the replacement of the term ‘reminder’ (used in the earlier verse) with the word ‘symbol’. The latter term in Hebrew probably means ‘bands/frontlets’ (see its use also in Deut. 6:8; 11:18). Apparently it is a physical object that is being used figuratively in the sense of perpetual remembrance. Later Jews interpreted it literally, and thus came about the custom of wearing phylacteries.

**Application**

The redemption of the first-born in Israel by the blood of a lamb is a pointer to the fact that the Christian has been saved by the blood of Christ. The latter’s work is also one of a substitutionary payment as he acts as a sacrificial lamb. In 1 Peter 1:18–19, the apostle, speaking to the church, comments: ‘… knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver and gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ’. The author of the epistle to the Hebrews speaks of the Messiah’s work in a similar fashion: ‘and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through his own blood, he [Jesus Christ] entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption’ (Heb. 9:2).

It should further be observed that the act of redeeming the first-born in Israel was a mere shadow of the work of Christ. The result of the tenth plague was a deliverance of Israel that was physical, earthly and temporal. The redemptive work of Christ in his death is much greater: it is also eternal and spiritual. Thus, the Old Testament act of redemption reaches its apex and its fulfilment in the work of the great Redeemer in the New Testament.

**6. Salvation at the sea Exodus 13:17–15:21**

**God as guide**

**(Exodus 13:17–22)**

Here we witness the Israelites fleeing from Egypt. They are not leaving in great fear, however. The style of this paragraph is poetic and elevated. It demonstrates the joy and passion with which the Hebrews left Egypt, the land of death and darkness—and why not? God was guiding them in his appearances as a pillar of fire and a pillar of cloud; it was the Lord who was leading this expedition and there was no room for fear.

13:17. And it came to pass when Pharaoh sent forth the people, that God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, even though it was near, because God said, ‘Lest the people change their minds when they see war, and they return to Egypt.’

The writer returns to a description of the travel itinerary of the Hebrews in their escape from Egypt. He explains, firstly, that God did not lead them to the promised land by the shortest route possible. That most direct route would have been the Via Maris (the Way of the Sea) that extends from the Nile river across the northern Sinai into the coastal plain of Palestine. This was an extensively travelled road in ancient times, and was probably the most commonly used route from Egypt to Asia.

An attempted escape through northern Sinai would have placed the Hebrews in harm’s way because the primary roads in that region were guarded by a series of Egyptian forts. God was well aware of the character of the Israelites, that they would flee at the first sign of danger and war. They would simply prefer to return to Egypt and its oppression rather than face the hazards of battle (consider Num. 14:1–4 where God’s assessment is shown to be correct).

A play on words is evident in two of the major verbs of the verse. The verb for God’s ‘leading’ them is nāhām. The verb used for the Hebrews’ changing their minds is yĭnnāhēm. Although the two verbs derive from different roots, here they look and sound alike. The reason for it is perhaps to underscore the contrast between God’s leading and Israel’s desire to go elsewhere—i.e., back to Egypt.

13:18. So God led the people by the way of the wilderness to the Red Sea, and by divisions the children of Israel went up from the land of Egypt.

God guides the people in a more south-easterly direction by a desert road towards the Red Sea (Hebrew, yăm sûph). The identification of the latter body of water has been much disputed. Since I have dealt with the issue elsewhere at length, I will quote from that study:

Throughout the parallel accounts of the crossing, the water is often referred to as the yăm sûph (Exod. 15:4; Deut. 11:4; Josh. 2:10; 4:23; 24:6; Ps. 106:7, 9, 22; 136:13, 15). Many modern scholars translate yăm sûph as ‘Sea of Reeds/Papyrus’ because the term sûph is used in the Old Testament to refer to the reeds growing along the side of the Nile River (see Exod. 2:3). Furthermore, we are told that sûph may in fact be related to the Egyptian word ṯwf(y), ‘marsh plant’. Since papyrus does not grow along the Red Sea/Gulf of Suez, scholars conclude that the yăm sûph is one of the marshy lakes in the eastern delta region north of the Red Sea.

Recent studies by Bernard Batto have demonstrated, however, that this common view cannot be sustained by the evidence, but in fact yăm sûph does refer to the Red Sea/Gulf of Suez. In the first place, every certain reference to yăm sûph in the Bible refers to the Red Sea or its northern extensions in the Gulfs of Aqaba and Suez (e.g., 1 Kings 9:26; Jer. 49:21). Second, the parallel drawn between Egyptian pЗ-ṯwfy and yăm sûph is not without its problems. Whereas yăm sûph refers to a body of water, that is not true of pЗ-ṯwfy. Egyptian pЗ is a demonstrative pronoun meaning ‘the’. The term ṯwfy, is properly translated ‘papyrus, papyrus thicket’, and sometimes designated a region or district where papyrus grows. Nowhere in Egyptian texts does pЗ-ṯwfy refer to a body of water; it means ‘the land/area of papyrus’.

Batto has also demonstrated that the word sûph in Hebrew is not related to the Egyptian twfy, but derives instead from the Semitic root sôph, which means ‘end’. Therefore the Hebrew place-name yăm sûph, literally meaning ‘the sea of the end’, refers to the waters to the far south, the waters at the end of the land. And that, of course, would be the Red Sea.

Numerous ancient and modern translations (such as the Targums and the Vulgate) say that the Hebrews left Egypt ‘armed’ or ‘equipped for battle’. The meaning of the Hebrew term is uncertain, however. The Septuagint translators render it ‘the fifth generation’. It seems to be a derivative of the number five, and it may possibly refer to an army in five parts/divisions. Thus the word may indicate that the Hebrews were leaving Egypt not necessarily in a military posture, but rather in an orderly, military-like fashion. They were well organized in their departure from Egypt.

13:19. And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because he made the children of Israel truly swear, saying, ‘God will certainly visit you, and you will bring up my bones from this [place] with you.’

Moses performs a curious act. He retrieves and takes the embalmed body of Joseph to go up with the Hebrews to the promised land. This incident is in fulfilment of a promise the Hebrews of earlier generations had made to the patriarch Joseph—in fact, the author of Exodus quotes Genesis 50:25 word for word. It is related later that the body of Joseph was eventually buried in Shechem in Palestine (see Josh. 24:32).

13:20. And they journeyed from Succoth, and they camped at Etham on the edge of the wilderness.

An Egyptian text, called Papyrus Anastasi V, from the thirteenth century B.C., may be helpful in determining the route out of Egypt taken by the Hebrews. The text is in the form of a letter written by a soldier from a place called Tjeku. He tells of his pursuit of two slaves fleeing from Egypt to the wilderness. The soldier mentions three place-names: ‘I reached the enclosure wall of Tjeku on the third month of the third season … to the south … When I reached htm, they told me that the scout had come from the desert [saying that] they had passed the walled place north of Migdol.’ Tjeku has already been identified as Succoth (see 12:37). The slaves headed south from Succoth to htm, which perhaps corresponds to the biblical Etham (it is phonetically possible). They then fled to Migdol, which appears to be on the fringe of the desert. Migdol is mentioned in Exodus 14:2 as a location near which Israel camped. The order of this escape—Succoth-Etham-Migdol—is similar to the account of the Israelites’ departure recorded in Numbers 33:6–7: ‘And they journeyed from Succoth, and camped in Etham, which is on the edge of the wilderness. And they journeyed from Etham, and turned back to Pi-hahiroth, which faces Baalzephon; and they camped before Migdol.’ The Egyptian papyrus raises the possibility that the Israelites fled from Egypt on a common escape route into the wilderness.

In any event, the Hebrews are now at the gate of freedom, arriving at the final town or outpost before escape into the wilderness. Nothing appears to be standing in the way of their deliverance.

13:21. And Yahweh was going before them by day as a pillar of cloud to lead them on the way, and by night as a pillar of fire to give light to them, in order to travel by day and by night.

Moses now presents Yahweh in theophany. In the Old Testament, the appearance of Yahweh arrives in many forms: at times he appears as a man (e.g., Gen. 18:1–33) or in a bush (Exod. 3:1–6). Often he would appear as a glory cloud, called the Shekinah glory by some writers. The glory cloud was a visible symbol of God’s presence among his people.

In the present story we see Yahweh in a double theophany. It is, as Kline remarks, a ‘double-columned cloud-and-fire revelation of the Glory-Spirit at the exodus’. The reason for the two theophanies is clear: it is so that Yahweh would be with his people and lead them ‘by day’ and ‘by night’. The use of the two opposites underscores the all-inclusive nature of God’s presence with Israel.

Both occurrences of the word ‘pillar’ are introduced by a form of the preposition beth. Here it is probably used as a beth essentiae, meaning ‘as’ rather than ‘in’. This grammatical point accentuates the fact that both the cloud and the fire are no more nor less than theophanies.

For the Hebrews these manifestations of God were no small thing. Although they were traversing unknown territory they had no reason to fear. Yahweh ‘was going before them’, guiding, directing and leading them.

13:22. He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night from before the people.

Opening the verse are the words, ‘He did not remove/take away …’ The subject is clearly Yahweh from verse 21. The verb is in the third person masculine singular, a Hiphil causative stem. The point is that Yahweh is the one who appeared as the cloud and fire, and he is the one who controlled and decided the length of time that these manifestations were to appear. Obviously they were constantly before the people because God had not removed them.

**Application**

How often God does not lead his people by what they perceive to be the easiest and shortest way! He knows our hearts, that they would falter in times of danger. Oh, how like the Israelites we are! Thus God will frequently take us by the long road in many things. In that way, he protects us from danger and destruction. His leading also has a didactic purpose, to teach us to rely upon him and his timing. We think we know best: ‘There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death’ (Prov. 14:12).

But, even today, God is always with his people. In the barren wilderness, God travelled with the Hebrews by day and by night as a pillar of fire and a pillar of cloud. He is also with us even in times of distress, turmoil and suffering. Many are the saints who had a clear perception of the presence of the Almighty during such periods of danger.

**Pharaoh as pursuer**

**(Exodus 14:1–12)**

At the close of chapter 13 we see the Israelites quickly fleeing from Egypt. They have reached the very edge of the wilderness and are about to enter it for their final escape from the land of death to go to the land of promise. They are carrying Joseph’s bones with them as a reminder that the promise of the exodus event in Genesis 50 has now been fulfilled. In addition, God is leading them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. The Hebrews have all the evidence they need to believe that God is protecting them and that they will succeed in their escape from Egypt. How soon that assurance is shattered! God is about to place Israel back into the fiery furnace, into the raging crucible!

14:1–2. And Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to the children of Israel that they turn back and camp in front of Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea. You shall camp in front of Baal Zephon, opposite it, near the sea.’

Israel is on the brink of escape into the wilderness. But God orders the people to ‘turn back’. Instead of breaking out of the land of death, God causes the Hebrews to reverse their course. He then commands them to encamp with their backs to the sea, and so it appears that they have no escape route out of Egypt. They are sitting ducks.

Locations of the three sites mentioned are uncertain. Migdol is a term of Semitic origin meaning ‘tower/fortress’. It was borrowed by the Egyptians during the New Kingdom period and used as a place name for various sites. A network of Egyptian outposts lined the eastern border of Egypt during the New Kingdom, and any one of them could have gone by the name of Migdol.

Three major proposals have been proffered regarding the location of Baal-zephon. It has been placed at Tell Daphneh, about ten miles west of el-Qantara; in the vicinity of the Bitter Lakes, about twelve miles south-east of Tell el-Maskhuta; and at the head of the Gulf of Suez on the Red Sea. Its location cannot be identified with any certainty.

A clue to the location of Pi-hahiroth is the meaning of its name. It appears to be a Hebraized form of the original Akkadian Pi-hiriti, which literally means ‘the mouth or opening of the canal’. The eastern delta has a defensive canal from the Mediterranean Sea to at least the area of the Bitter Lakes and this may have extended further south during the period of the New Kingdom. Pi-hahiroth may therefore have been an opening or break in the canal system that allowed entrance into the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula.

14:3. ‘And Pharaoh will say of the children of Israel, “They are wandering in confusion in the land; the wilderness has closed them in.” ’

The position of the Hebrews is so poor strategically that when Pharaoh is told where they are camping he will think their situation to be utterly hopeless. In fact, he will be vocal about the matter: the verse begins, ‘And Pharaoh will say …’ The monarch of Egypt will thus conclude that he has the utmost advantage and he will desire to crush Israel.

The Hebrew verb for ‘wandering in confusion’, or ‘aimlessly’, is used elsewhere in the Old Testament of cattle that roam to and fro not knowing where they are headed (see Joel 1:18).

The first words of Pharaoh begin with a lamed preposition, which literally means, ‘of the children of Israel’. However, it is probably an emphatic use of lamed that can be translated ‘indeed’, so that the sentence reads, ‘Indeed the children of Israel are wandering aimlessly!’ The emphasis demonstrates Pharaoh’s excitement over the prospects he now has of crushing Israel.

14:4. ‘And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart that he will pursue after them. And I will be glorified in Pharaoh and in all his army. And the Egyptians will know that I am Yahweh.’ And they did so.

To add fuel to the fire, God says he will then harden Pharaoh’s heart so that the King of Egypt will chase after the Hebrews. The verb ‘pursue’ in Hebrew is normally used in the Old Testament of a man or a group pursuing others for revenge. And, thus, it sometimes bears the connotation of ‘persecution’.

Why did God place the chosen people in such treacherous and trying circumstances? Certainly Yahweh could have conducted Israel far beyond the reach of Pharaoh and his army, even before the latter had set out from Egypt. Why did he not do that? The answer is not cryptic but crystal clear: God desired to display his power in the salvation of his people so that he would be greatly glorified.

Ironically, the word for God’s glory in this verse is kābēd, which, as we have seen earlier, literally means ‘heavy/weighty’. The same word is employed throughout the Exodus account to describe the state of Pharaoh’s heart (see 7:14). Pharaoh’s heart is ‘heavy’ so that ‘heaviness’ would be given to Yahweh!

In any event, the plight of Israel appears, in human terms, to be grave. The Egyptians have them trapped with their backs to the sea. Escape seems to be out of the question. Pharaoh’s evil object is at the very point of attainment. On a higher level, however, God is controlling this event to his own end and glory. Yes, Israel is placed in the fiery furnace, but man’s extremity is God’s opportunity. The sovereignty of God is the point of this lesson: it is he who puts Israel in a dire situation, and it is he who hardens Pharaoh’s heart. He is directing the scene. We are witnessing a great maestro conducting a grand symphony!

14:5. When it was reported to the King of Egypt that the people had fled, the heart of Pharaoh and his servants turned against the people, and they said, ‘What is this we have done, that we have sent forth Israel from our service?’

The setting of the story now changes, reverting to the scene of the Egyptian palace. Pharaoh is told by his counsellors that the Hebrews are trying to flee Egypt, and that they are curiously entrapped by the sea. The first response of the king (and his courtiers) is, literally, that his ‘heart changed/turned back’ (the verb is a Niphal passive). This is the same verb, in the same form, that was employed in the story of the rod changing to a serpent (7:15). Pharaoh’s heart, which had been softened to allow Israel to leave Egypt, now returns to its hardened state.

The Egyptian leaders realize that they have lost a major source of cheap labour. With all the colossal building programmes in Egypt during the New Kingdom period, this loss was no small thing. The Ramesside pharaohs constructed buildings and monuments in the delta by employing much foreign labour, most of which consisted of slaves. The Egyptian document Papyrus Leiden 348 informs us that a group called the ‘apiru were engaged in ‘hauling stones to the great pylon’ of one of Pi-Rameses’ temples. The ‘apiru are not to be equated with the Hebrews, although the Israelites may have constituted a segment of that social group. In any event, Egypt could not afford to forfeit such a large workforce.

14:6. So he made ready his chariot, and he took his people with him.

A literal translation of the verse is: ‘And he harnessed [or “hitched”] his chariot and his people he took with him.’ The verb ’āsăr (‘to harness’) is a common Old Testament term meaning to prepare a chariot for action (see Gen. 46:29; 2 Kings 9:21). The word for ‘chariot’ is often used collectively in the Bible signifying ‘chariotry’, or ‘force of war chariots’. It is likely that Pharaoh was responding to Israel’s attempted escape by amassing his chariot force to recapture the Hebrews.

‘People’ in Hebrew sometimes refers to a group bearing arms, that is, an army (1 Sam. 11:11; 1 Kings 20:10). This term perhaps relates to groups of foot-soldiers gathered to pursue Israel (see 14:9). Thus Pharaoh answers Israel’s flight by mustering a significant and substantial military force—made up of cavalry and foot troops—in order to hunt down the people of God.

14:7. And he took six hundred chosen chariots, and all the chariots of Egypt, and officers over all of it.

A description of the make-up of the chariot force is now provided. Pharaoh, apparently at the head of one grouping, assembles ‘six hundred chosen chariots’. According to the Old Testament, six hundred was a standard military unit (Judg. 18:11, 16, 17; 1 Sam. 13:15; 14:2).

The king also gathered all the remaining chariots of Egypt, and he placed ‘officers over all of it’. The word for ‘officer’ is related to the term for the number three. Based upon that relationship, some scholars have suggested that the ‘officer’ is ‘best explained as third man [in the chariot]’. Thus in each chariot there would be three men, one of whom served as officer in command of the chariot. This is unlikely, however. The ‘officer’ was probably an adjutant to Pharaoh, one who was ‘of the third rank’. Consequently, officers of the third rank supervised the chariots of Egypt, but they were not in each and every chariot.

The reason why these details of the Egyptian chariots are given is to underscore the hopeless situation of the Israelites. Probably the greatest fighting force in the world was preparing to pursue them. Many of their attackers would come speedily in chariots. The Hebrews were on foot and locked in by the Red Sea. What chance did they have?

14:8. And Yahweh hardened the heart of Pharaoh, the King of Egypt, so that he would pursue after the children of Israel, who were going out boldly.

God further providentially sets the scene by hardening the heart of the Egyptian king so that he would pursue the Hebrews. This action is in fulfilment of the prophecy that Yahweh had spoken in verse 4. For commentary on the use of the word ‘hardened’, see 4:21.

The end of the verse is normally understood to describe the Israelites’ demeanour as they left Egypt as being, literally, ‘with a high hand’. This is a Hebrew idiom that many believe means ‘in defiance’ (see Num. 15:30) or ‘in triumph’ (see Deut. 32:27). It is a metaphor ‘drawn from the depiction of ancient Near-Eastern gods menacingly brandishing a weapon in the upraised right hand’. Thus, many commentators argue that Israel was leaving Egypt in great and complete confidence.

I would suggest, on the other hand, that perhaps the final clause is not speaking of the attitude of the Hebrews at all. Rather, the phrase may be expressing the means by which Israel was departing from Egypt. If the preposition is understood to be a beth of instrumentation, then the clause reads, ‘who were going out by a high/mighty hand’. In other words, the verse is speaking of Yahweh’s power and not Israel’s defiance. In support of this idea is the fact that the idiom ‘high hand’ is used in the Old Testament of God’s power (see Isa. 26:11; Ps. 89:13).

14:9. So the Egyptians pursued after them, and they overtook them camping near the sea—all the horses and chariots of Pharaoh, his cavalry and his army—near Pi Hahiroth in front of Baal Zephon.

The Israelites were encamped by the sea. The Hebrew verb for ‘to camp’ bears the basic meaning of ‘to bend’, or ‘curve’, and when it is applied to settlement areas, it may perhaps reflect the circular configuration of an encampment. Recent studies by Israel Finkelstein have demonstrated that the Hebrews probably camped in an elliptical pattern at the sea and during the wilderness wanderings. Later, the Israelites designed their first settlements in Canaan in an ovate form.

Some scholars have been suspicious of references to horsemanship and chariots in the story, many believing that those arts were late in coming to Egypt. In reality, Egypt is well known for its mastery of equestrian practices as early as the beginning of the Eighteenth Dynasty (c. 1550 B.C.). Any doubt regarding the accuracy of the biblical text on this point is unwarranted.

Pharaoh’s cavalry, chariots and foot troops ‘overtook’ the Hebrews by the sea. This verb does not mean there was any direct physical contact, but it signifies that the Egyptians ‘reached/caught up with’ the Hebrews.

14:10. As Pharaoh drew near, the children of Israel lifted their eyes, and behold the Egyptians were marching after them. And they were very afraid, and the children of Israel cried out to Yahweh.

The Israelites, on foot, encamped by the sea with no means of escape, saw Pharaoh approaching from a distance. The Egyptians were drawing near with evil intent. What was perhaps the most powerful military force of the time was nipping at the heels of God’s people. In front of them lay the sea, and behind them the army of darkness was closing in. From a human perspective, the situation appeared bleak and grim—no human power could save them. What chance did they have? What were they to do?

This entire scene is dominated by Pharaoh—only he is mentioned as drawing near to the Hebrews. Pharaoh is commonly depicted as the central figure of battle scenes in Egyptian representations and designs. The Egyptians believed that in war the ‘acts of the king alone count; he is invincible, nay, unassailable’; ‘[No] man can hope to resist the divine ruler and survive,’ and ‘It is no mere assertion that so many are powerless against the single figure of Pharaoh.’

Israel’s response was swift and spontaneous: ‘They were very afraid.’ And then they reacted properly by ‘[crying] out to Yahweh’. Earlier they had cried out to Elohim (2:23), and some of them had even cried out to Pharaoh because of oppression (5:15). But now they pleaded for Yahweh, the God of their salvation, to intervene.

14:11. And they said to Moses, ‘Were there no graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness? What is this you have done to us, to bring us out of Egypt?’

Note the irony of this verse. The phrase ‘no graves in Egypt’ borders on the humorous because Egypt was the land known for its graves, death and preoccupation with the afterlife.

With their sarcastic remarks the Israelites display panic and urgency. Their opening question begins with a double negative: the two negatives are ’en and b‘lî. Gesenius comments that ‘Two negatives in the same sentence do not neutralize each other but make the negation the more emphatic … This especially applies to the compounds formed by the union of ’en or b‘lî.’

Murmuring becomes a dominant negative theme in the wilderness wanderings (Exod. 15:23–26; 16:2–3; 17:2–3; etc.). Moses, the author of the Torah, sees it as the antithesis of Yahweh’s grace and favour to the people; the alternation of Yahweh’s long-suffering patience with Israel’s complaints and demands is all too obvious.

14:12. ‘Was this not what we told you in Egypt, saying, “Leave us alone so that we might serve the Egyptians”? Because it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than for us to die in the wilderness.’

The Hebrews now recount what they supposedly said to Moses while they were still in Egypt. No record exists in the earlier parts of Exodus that would confirm such a conversation. However, there is little doubt that the people of God were reluctant to leave Egypt: ‘So Moses spoke thus to the sons of Israel, but they did not listen to Moses on account of their despondency and cruel bondage’ (6:9).

Verse 12 constitutes treasonable words. The Israelites desire to deny Yahweh’s deliverance and salvation! And, more to the point, they announce that they would rather serve the Egyptians than Yahweh (see commentary on 8:1).

**Application**

We may well feel disposed to judge Israel at the sea, and not be able to account for her lack of faith in the trial. However, the more we know of our own lack of resolve and our own cowardice, the more we shall see how like the Israelites we are!

We must be aware of the sovereignty of God in all things. We too frequently lose sight of this great truth, and the consequence is that our hearts give way in time of trial. If we could only look upon each of our trials and persecutions as an occasion for God to be more greatly honoured and glorified, it would certainly enable us to endure any crisis. Thus, when we are put in the fiery furnace it is God who wills us there, and we can persevere because of him: ‘Who shall separate from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, “For your sake we are being put to death all day long, we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” But in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us’ (Rom. 8:35–37).

**Separation of the sea**

**(Exodus 14:13–31)**

This next paragraph relates the actual event of the dividing of the Red Sea. It tells of the destruction of the Egyptian army, one that was so significant that Egypt was not again a force to be reckoned with by Israel until after the death of Solomon (the reign of Pharaoh Shishak in Egypt). It also gleefully describes the salvation of the people of God, and how they finally became free of the Egyptian oppression.

The Red Sea crossing is the salient incident in the history of Israel. It left a striking and lasting impression upon the later writers of the Old Testament (see, for example, Ps. 78:13; 106:9–10; Isa. 50:2; 51:10; 63:12). Deliverance at the sea was so important that it came to be viewed as a paradigm for later salvation events in the life of Israel, such as the return from Babylonian captivity (see Zech. 10:10–11).

14:13. And Moses said to the people, ‘Do not be afraid! Take a stand! And watch the salvation of Yahweh which he does for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you will not see them again—not ever.’

Moses’ reply to the people’s complaints is somewhat harsh. He begins with a volitional statement: ‘Do not fear!’ The negative followed by an imperfect verb ‘constitutes the negative imperative’ in Hebrew. True imperatives cannot be preceded by a negative particle. Therefore, what we have here is the strongest possible form of expressing negation in the Hebrew language. It is followed by two imperatives: ‘Stand!’ and ‘See!’ Moses is ignoring, and refusing to sanction, the murmurings of Israel.

The prophet is calling the Israelites to ‘take a stand’. The verb ‘to stand’ is in the Hithpael pattern, indicating its reflexive nature. It is best understood as signifying, ‘taking one’s stand/holding one’s ground/stationing oneself’. Moses is probably telling the people to choose with whom they stand—Yahweh or Pharaoh? How long will they limp between two opinions?

It is enlightening that the Hebrews are called merely to ‘see’ the salvation of Yahweh. They have nothing to contribute. They are spectators. Salvation is by God’s power, by his grace alone.

14:14. ‘Yahweh will wage war for you, and you shall be quiet.’

This short and simple statement goes to the very heart of the Red Sea event. First, it says, ‘Yahweh will wage war for you.’ God is the one who is going forth to battle, and to face Pharaoh of Egypt, with his claims to divine status. As Pharaoh dominates the military might of Egypt (14:8), so Yahweh is the sole character representing Israel’s military prowess. When Moses praises God for his work at the Red Sea in the next chapter, he declares, ‘Yahweh is a man of war!’

In contrast, Moses commands the Israelites, literally, ‘… but you, you shall be quiet.’ This declaration is accentuated by the inclusion of the second person masculine plural independent personal pronoun, ‘you’. Again, the inability of the people to help in their deliverance is underscored. Yahweh will act; Israel will watch and remain silent.

14:15. And Yahweh said to Moses, ‘Why do you cry out to me? Speak to the children of Israel that they should go forward.’

The Syriac Old Testament adds, by way of introduction to the verse, the clause, ‘And Moses cried out to Yahweh.’ Its translators were trying to solve the problem of God’s confronting Moses about crying out, although he apparently had nothing to do with it (see 14:10). The proper solution is to understand that Moses is being addressed by God as the mediator of the covenant, the representative of the people.

This interrogative normally means ‘What?’ But in a few instances, such as the present, it means ‘Why?’ (see, for example, 2 Kings 7:3).

The time for pleading and prayer is over. The time for action has arrived. Moses is to command (‘Speak’ is a Piel imperative) the Hebrews to ‘set out’.

14:16. ‘Lift up your staff and stretch your hand over the sea and divide it. And the children of Israel shall go in the midst of the sea on dry ground.’

In spite of Israel’s unbelief, God orders Moses to stretch out his hand (apparently with the rod of God in it) over the Red Sea in order to divide it. It is essentially the same command God had given in the opening plague (see comment on 7:19). On that earlier occasion, the miracle had worked primarily as a curse upon Egypt. Here, as we shall see throughout the passage, it serves as both blessing and curse.

The term for ‘dry ground’ refers to something which is ‘dry, withered, without moisture, drained’. In Scripture, it is the exact opposite of, or contrast to, to the sea. In the creation account, for instance, the separation of the ‘dry ground’ on the third day (Gen. 1:9) is in antithesis to the waters that are gathered into one place.

Yahweh’s power as the source of this miracle is confirmed by the later prophets, such as Isaiah, who says:

Was it not you who dried up the sea

the waters of the great deep;

who made the depths of the sea a pathway

for the redeemed to cross over?

(Isa. 51:10; cf. 63:12).

14:17. ‘And, behold, I am hardening the heart of the Egyptians that they might go in after them. And I will be glorified in Pharaoh and in all his army, in his chariots and in his cavalry.’

God’s role as the source and engineer of the scene at the Red Sea is emphasized at the outset of this verse. It begins with an independent personal pronoun followed by a demonstrative particle with a first person singular suffix: ‘And I, behold I’. God is the subject and main character of the Red Sea episode!

The verb ‘I am hardening’ is actually a Piel participle being used predicatively. In that form it reflects a continuous exercise of action. The construction signifies an action in process: ‘And I, behold I, am hardening the hearts of the Egyptians.’ The verb is the same word used in verses 4 and 8 (and elsewhere) of God hardening Pharaoh’s heart. Now Yahweh stiffens the resolve of the entire Egyptian army to chase the Hebrews into the sea.

The second half of the verse is dominated by four instances of the preposition beth being used to convey instrumentality. It literally reads, ‘I will be glorified [kābēd] by Pharaoh, by his army, by his chariots and by his cavalry.’ This is a statement of the ultimate purpose and significance of the Red Sea incident.

14:18. ‘And the Egyptians will know that I am Yahweh when I am glorified in Pharaoh, in his chariots, and in his cavalry.’

What ended verse 17 is now repeated in verse 18. The principal aim of the event at the Red Sea is the glorification of Yahweh and the recognition of his sovereignty over all. This has been the theme of the book of Exodus (see 7:5, 17; 8:19, 22; 10:2; 14:4, 18, 25).

14:19–20. Then the angel of God who had been going before the camp of Israel travelled and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud travelling in front of them stood behind them. And it came between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel. And there was the cloud with the darkness and it gave light to the night. And one did not come near the other all night.

Yahweh now acts to protect his people. First, the angel of God, who had been leading the Israelites in their escape, moves between God’s people and the Egyptians. It may be that the angel of God poses in a military stance, as he does in Numbers 22:22–23, 31–32. This is the same figure who appeared in the burning bush in Exodus 3:2. There he spoke and acted as if he was God. (The suggestion has already been made that perhaps this person is a pre-incarnate appearance of the Messiah—see commentary on 3:2).

The second event is that the pillar of cloud also moves to stand between Israel and Egypt. This is the theophany of Yahweh that leads Israel out of Egypt into the wilderness (13:21–22). It is the Shekinah glory by which God often makes his presence known to his people (19:9; 33:9–10).

Verse 20 expresses the work of the cloud that night to bring both blessing and curse. One side of the cloud brought light; the other side gave darkness. The Egyptians were clothed in darkness, as they had been during the ninth plague; Pharaoh, the incarnation of the sun-god Ra, could not bring light to his people. But the Hebrews were bathed in the light of the pillar. Symbolically, one represents the children of darkness, and the other the children of light.

14:21. Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and Yahweh caused the sea to go back all night with a strong east wind. And he turned the sea into dry land. And the waters were divided.

Moses obeyed God’s command of verse 16 and stretched his hand out over the sea. Then, Yahweh, literally, ‘caused the sea to retire/go back’ (Hiphil causative). And the Lord accomplished this feat by using ‘a strong east wind’ (note the beth used here to convey instrumentality, i.e. ‘by’). The miracle is not instantaneous, however; it takes ‘all night’.

The consequence of God’s activity is that ‘He turned the sea into dry land.’ The verb here is śîm, which normally means to ‘set/put/place’. But when it is followed by a lamed preposition, as in this verse, it conveys the concept of making or fashioning (see 4:11).

For an excellent study of the changing of the waters into dry land, see the work of M. Barlian.

The direction of the mighty wind that divides the sea is from the east (cf. 10:13). That means that the wind was coming from the opposite side of the sea from where the Hebrews were standing. Obviously the waters would first open on the eastern shore of the Red Sea. The Hebrews would thus have to wait until the entire sea was divided before they could put one foot into it. In other words, the people of God had to be patient all night, watching the sea separate from the far side.

Many scholars attempt to explain the event in wholly naturalistic and rationalistic terms. Nothing in the text supports that position.

The dividing of the Red Sea may be an ironic, belligerent critique of Egyptian magic and its spells. The Egyptians themselves had an account of a priest separating a large body of water. The Westcar Papyrus tells the story of the bored King Snofru who summons his chief priest Djadjaemonkh to give him advice on how to find some pleasure. The priest suggests that the pharaoh travel on a lake in a boat rowed by many beautiful naked women. His heart is happy until one of the rowers drops her fish-shaped charm into the water. She will accept no substitute, so Snofru calls for Djadjaemonkh to solve the problem with his secret arts. Through his magic sayings Djadjaemonkh places one side of the lake upon the other and finds the fish-shaped charm lying on a potsherd. Having returned it to its owner, Djadjaemonkh utters some more magic sayings that bring the water of the lake back to its original position.

The Egyptian tale is reminiscent of the biblical account of the crossing of the Red Sea. One wonders whether the Hebrew writer may have regarded this event as a polemical parallel. The chief lector priest of Egypt may have divided a lake in search of a valuable charm, but the God of the Hebrews parts the entire Red Sea and causes a nation to pass through on dry ground. Who has the greater power?

14:22. And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, and the waters were a wall for them on their right and on their left.

The Hebrews, literally, ‘entered into the midst of the sea’ and they walked through on ‘dry ground’ (see discussion of verse 16). The latter term is used in the Bible to describe land that is exceedingly dry, with no moisture. It appears in Genesis 1:9 as the ‘dry ground’ which becomes visible at creation (in antithesis to the waters). The earth’s surface is called ‘dry ground’ after the flood of the day of Noah (Gen. 8:7, 14). In all three events, God causes water to be removed so that dry land might appear. This truth underscores the sovereignty and omnipotence of Yahweh!

The divided waters are described as ‘walls’. ‘Wall’ is an architectural term in Hebrew often employed for the fortifications surrounding a city—walls which are high and strong for protection and security.

14:23. And the Egyptians pursued and they went in after them—all the horses of Pharaoh and his chariots, and his cavalry into the midst of the sea.

Some time after Israel entered the Red Sea, the angel of God and the pillar of cloud must have stood aside. The Egyptian army was thus allowed free viewing of what was happening and access to the sea.

Pharaoh’s troops see Israel traversing the sea, and in their hardness and obstinacy they believe they also can go through protected. So they take up the evil pursuit. Note, however, that it is only the mobile forces, the chariots and cavalry, who take up the chase. Certainly they would have thought that they would overtake Israel very quickly.

14:24. And it came to pass in the morning watch that Yahweh looked down upon the Egyptian camp in the fire and in the cloud, and he threw the camp of Egypt into confusion.

The verse opens with the clause, ‘And it came to pass in the morning watch’ (see 1 Sam. 11:11 for the identical expression). The term ‘watch’ signifies a division of time. In the Old Testament, the night is comprised of three watches: 6:00–10:00 p.m., 10:00–2:00 a.m. and 2:00–6:00 a.m. (Ps. 63:6; 119:148; Lam. 2:19; and cf. Judg. 7:19 that speaks of a middle watch). The morning watch is the latest of the three divisions of time, that is, 2:00–6:00 am.

During these early morning hours, Yahweh ‘leant over and looked down’ upon the Egyptian forces. He then acted by, literally, ‘throwing the army of Egypt into confusion by noise’. This latter verb is used in 1 Samuel 7:10 when God thunders with a great thunder against the Philistines, and they become confused. Back in Exodus 14:3, Israel was the one in apparent confusion, but now we see it is Egypt who is truly in a panic.

14:25. He removed the wheels of their chariots so that they drove with difficulty. And the Egyptians said, ‘Let us flee from Israel because Yahweh fights for them against Egypt.’

As the Egyptian chariot force moved through the Red Sea, God ‘removed’ (a Hiphil form) the wheels from their chariots. The Septuagint, Syriac, Samaritan Hebrew Pentateuch and some modern commentators prefer to understand the root of this verb to be ‘to tie/bind’. So, in some manner, God locked up the wheels of the chariots in order that they could not easily move. In reality, however, there is no compelling reason to accept this proposal in place of the direct, straight reading of the Masoretic Text.

The second verb of the passage literally says, ‘He caused them to drive in heaviness.’ The subject of the clause is Yahweh, and he is causing the situation to occur, or effecting it (the verb is a Piel form reflecting ‘the bringing about of a state’).

‘Heaviness’ is a derivative of the noun kābēd, which, as we have seen, is often used in Exodus of what God does to Pharaoh’s heart. Here we see that not only is Pharaoh subject to the hardening activity of Yahweh, but so too are the chariots of Egypt!

14:26. And Yahweh said to Moses, ‘Stretch forth your hand over the sea and return the waters over the Egyptians, over their chariots and over their cavalry.’

As the Egyptian forces are bogged down inside the sea, God orders (with an imperative form) Moses to put forth his hand and cause the waters to close over the army. Here, then, is ‘the final retribution, measure for measure, for the casting of the infant sons of the Israelites into the waters of the Nile (1:22)’.

14:27. And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea and he returned the sea at daybreak to its place. And the Egyptians were fleeing to meet it. And Yahweh shook off the Egyptians in the midst of the sea.

We are told that the destruction of Egypt’s army occurred ‘at daybreak’. As the sun-god Ra rose in the east, the Egyptian forces were destroyed. The sun-god could do nothing for his worshippers; he was impotent to stop the decimation of his people. Who is sovereign? Who is God? Is it Ra, Pharaoh, or Yahweh?

On this day, the triumph of the God of Israel is trumpeted forth throughout creation. The fears of the Hebrews and the boastings of the Egyptians are dashed by the overwhelming power of Yahweh!

The same waters that formed a wall of protection for God’s people served as a tumbling wall of death for the Egyptians. The water thus signifies both blessing and curse. That curse finds its import in the verb that means ‘to shake off’ (in Piel pattern; cf. Ps. 136:15). God shakes off wicked men from the face of the earth (Neh. 5:13; Job 38:12–13).

After the destruction the water returns ‘to its place’. A more literal translation would be, ‘to its steady flow’—that is, to its permanent and previous position.

14:28. And the water returned and it covered the chariots and the cavalry of all the army of Pharaoh which was going after them into the sea. Not one remained from them.

Attached to the phrase ‘the entire army of Pharaoh’ is a lamed preposition. Many understand it to be in apposition, and to mean ‘that is’. Thus an equation is made between ‘the chariots and horsemen’ and ‘the entire army of Egypt’. This is probably not correct. Rather, the particle may be used to indicate possession, so that the phrase means, ‘the chariots and horsemen which belonged to the entire army of Pharaoh’. It is not the whole army of Pharaoh that was destroyed in the Red Sea, but only the chariots and cavalry of Egypt (this fits with commentary on 14:23).

14:29. But the children of Israel went on dry ground in the midst of the sea. And the water was a wall for them on their right and on their left.

This verse is a repeat of verse 22 in order to contrast the fate of the Egyptians and that of the Hebrews.

It is worth noting that the Genesis creation account serves as a paradigm for Israel’s deliverance at the sea. That is to say, ‘The redemptive creation of Israel at the sea is cast in the same narrative style of original creation as the pillar of divine presence brings light into darkness (Exodus 13:21, cf. the first creative day), the waters are divided (Exodus 14:21; cf. the second creative day), and the dry land emerges (Exodus 14:29, cf. the third creative day).’ In other words, the account of the deliverance of Israel out of the oppression of Egypt through the crossing of the Red Sea reflects the narrative of the original creation. The sea crossing is so structured ‘as to be a redemptive re-enactment of creation.’ (For a fully developed presentation of this theme, see my book on ancient Egypt.)

14:30–31. On that day Yahweh saved Israel from the hand of the Egyptians. And Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea. And Israel saw the great hand that Yahweh used against Egypt. And the people feared Yahweh, and they believed in Yahweh and in Moses his servant.

These two verses set out an important contrast. In verse 30, the writer says that Yahweh saved Israel ‘from the hand [sing.] of the Egyptians’. Verse 31 literally says that ‘Israel saw the great hand that Yahweh used’ against the Egyptians. Here is the antithesis! Whose hand is more powerful? Yahweh’s hand is omnipotent, and his alone. The reference to the ‘hand’ of Yahweh is also a fulfilment of his promise back in 6:1, in which he said, ‘Because by a mighty hand he will send them out, and by a mighty hand he will drive them from his land.’

In verse 13 of this chapter Moses had proclaimed that the Hebrews would not see the Egyptians ever again. The Israelites did see them in verse 30, but not as they had the day before. Now they were dead, and simply powerless adversaries.

**Application**

Donald Bridge tells the story of ‘an American congregation which included some negroes accustomed to answering the preacher as he went along. On one occasion they were addressed by someone with “liberal” leanings, tending to dismiss the miracles of the Bible. He referred in his sermon to the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. “Praise de Lord,” shouted a negro. “Takin’ all dem children through de deep waters. What a mighty miracle!” The preacher frowned. “It was not a miracle,” he explained condescendingly. “They were doubtless in marsh-land, the tide was ebbing, and the children of Israel picked their way across in six inches of water.” “Praise de Lord!”, shouted the negro unabashed. “Drownin’ all dem Egyptians in six inches of water. What a mighty miracle!” ’

How like Israel we are! Unbelief is the same in all ages. David, in an evil hour, said, ‘I shall one day perish by the hand of Saul’ (1 Sam. 27:1). Unbelief led Elijah to flee from the evil rantings of Jezebel, that evil queen who was the power behind the throne of Israel. It caused Peter to disown his Lord and flee from the place of trial. How many of us facing suffering or tragedy or persecution have not cowered, having moments of unbelief and doubt?

Yet, truly, there is no difficulty too great for the Lord. In fact, the greater the trouble, the greater the opportunity for God to display his power and grace. Man’s weakness is God’s opportunity. It is Yahweh who does battle for us—if he is for us, who can be against us? Dare we think that the God who divided the Red Sea is powerless to intervene in our lives, that he is unable to care for us? Do we think that he is somehow shackled?

Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:1–6 tells us that the exodus event speaks to the church today. He basically argues that the Hebrews were specially chosen people and they received the great blessing of being delivered by God’s work at the Red Sea. Yet, though they had been set apart by God, they ‘were strewn in the wilderness’ because of their disobedience. And Paul warns the Corinthian church and the church today that we ought to beware of, and take warning from, this incident. John Calvin comments: ‘If God did not spare them, he will not spare us, for our situation is the same as theirs.’

**The Song of the Sea**

**(Exodus 15:1–21)**

The Song of the Sea is the first recorded psalm or hymn of the Hebrew nation. It sings praises to God because of his redemptive work of bringing Israel out of the land of death and darkness into freedom. It is a symphony of adoration!

The Song of the Sea is the first of many psalms or songs that extol God’s majesty at the exodus event. For example, the psalmist proclaims that:

He saved them for the sake of his name,

That he might make his power known.

Thus he rebuked the Red Sea and it dried up; And he led them through the deeps,

As through the wilderness.

So he saved them from the hand of the one who hated them,

And redeemed them from the hand of the enemy. And the waters covered their adversaries;

Not one of them was left.

Then they believed his words;

They sang his praise

(Ps. 106:8–12).

The reader should also see, in particular, Psalms 78 and 136. The fact is that the Red Sea crossing was for the Hebrew the most important physical redemption in the history of the Old Testament.

The strophic structure of the hymn is straightforward. It is divided into three stanzas: verses 1–6, verses 7–11, and verses 12–16. At the end of each stanza appears the vocative, ‘O Yahweh!’ to mark the stanza’s conclusion. In addition, it should be observed that near the end of each of the three strophes appears a related simile: ‘like a stone’ (end of v. 5); ‘like lead’ (end of v. 10); and ‘like stone’ (end of v. 16). These three stanzas are followed by an epilogue (vv. 17–18) and a responsive refrain (vv. 19–21).

The great antiquity of this song has long been recognized. Various grammatical points in the text will confirm that age.

15:1. Then Moses and the sons of Israel sang this song to Yahweh, and they spoke saying:

‘I will sing to Yahweh,

for he is surely exalted;

the horse and its rider,

he has hurled into the sea.’

The opening verses of the stanza set forth the theme of the song: it is a doxology, a hymn of praise and honour to Yahweh. Hymns of the ancient Near East commonly open with such adoration, but usually they are in praise of an earthly king. But here only God is so honoured.

A grammatical construction that begins with ‘then’ and is followed by an imperfect verb (‘sang’) indicates that the singing occurred at ‘approximately the time when’ God destroyed the Egyptian army and they lay strewn on the seashore. In other words, the joyful singing of the Hebrews was spontaneous and an immediate reaction to God’s wondrous work. It is as if the people could not help but break forth into song!

‘I will sing’ is a first person singular verb. But it does not merely refer to Moses; it includes all the men of Israel (‘the sons of Israel’) in covenant oneness, singing forth the praises of God.

When the Hebrew men sing that Yahweh ‘is surely exalted’, they are using the same verb twice. It is an infinitive absolute form followed by a perfective form of the verb. Repetition in this type of construction has an intensifying effect—that is, there is no doubt or question regarding the statement made.

15:2.

‘And Yahweh is my strength and song,

and he is my salvation.

This is my God and I will praise him,

The God of my father and I will exalt him.’

This verse is classic Hebrew poetry because it contains parallelism and a chiasm. The original word order displays its deliberative construction:

a

b

c

My strength

and song [is]

Yahweh

c1

a1

And he has become to me

for salvation.

a

b

This is my God

and I will praise him,

a1

b1

The God of my father

and I will exalt him.

The name given to the Lord is an abbreviated form of Yahweh, literally, ‘yāh’. It only appears in poetry when standing alone. However, often Hebrew names end with -yāh as a suffix: for example, Jeremiah, Hezekiah and Josiah.

The meaning of the word translated ‘my song’ is unclear. Some scholars argue that it means ‘protection/defence’ and, therefore, it is in parallel with ‘my strength’. Others contend that the word does in fact refer to ‘the praise of God in cultic music’. Sarna reasons, unconvincingly, that the word is a double entendre, so that it deliberately means both strength and song.

Attached to the last verb, ‘I will exalt him’, is a nun energicum, a special connecting syllable linking the verb and the pronominal suffix. Older grammars believed this ending provided intentional emphasis to the action of the verb. That conclusion is probably incorrect; it seems that the form simply reflects an early stage of the Hebrew language. It does, however, confirm the great antiquity of the poem.

See the commentary on 3:6 regarding the phrase, ‘God of my father’.

This verse is quoted in Psalm 118:14 and Isaiah 12:2. It may have attained the status of a confessional statement in later Hebrew religion.

15:3.

‘Yahweh is a man of war,

Yahweh is his name.’

Yahweh as a warrior, or ‘a man of war’, becomes a central biblical motif. Regarding Exodus 15, Longman and Reid comment: ‘This poem represents the first explicit statement of the warlike nature of God … this theme of God as a warrior became a recurrent refrain in the Old Testament. The Exodus event itself became an important archetype in the biblical tradition, a means of telling and retelling God’s acts of deliverance. God often dramatically revealed himself to the Israelites as the one who saved them from physical harm. He fought against their enemies.’

The ‘name’ of this warrior is ‘Yahweh’. The basis of this declaration is the recognition by Israel of who it is that fights for them. They have seen his power and his majesty with their own eyes, and they are convinced and convicted—at least for now.

15:4.

‘The chariots of Pharaoh and his army

he has cast into the sea;

and his chosen officers

have drowned in the Red Sea.’

The structure of this verse of poetry is a complete synonymous parallelism:

a

b

c

The chariots of Pharaoh and his army

he has thrown

in the sea.

a

b

c

His chosen officers

have sunk

in the Red Sea.

Parallelism, or repetition of lines (technically known as cola), is principally for the purpose of emphasis in poetry. The fate or end of the Egyptian army is here being accentuated.

For commentary on the identity of the ‘officers’, see 14:7.

15:5.

‘Deeps cover them,

they went down into the depths like a stone.’

‘Deeps’ is the same word as in Genesis 1:2: ‘… and darkness was over the surface of the deep.’ Some scholars have attempted to find a parallel with Mesopotamian creation accounts. In those myths a goddess appears whose name is Tiamat, a term that some say is related to the Hebrew t‛hôm, ‘deep’. Tiamat was a mighty foe of the Mesopotamian creator-god Marduk, and she had to be vanquished before creation could occur. According to this theory, at creation and at the Red Sea, Yahweh is the Creator God who is conquering the chaos deity Tiamat. What lies behind the biblical account is a pagan world-order. In reality, the equation of Mesopotamian Tiamat and Hebrew t‛hom is at best dubious. Unfortunately, it has come to be regarded as fact in much recent literature.

Rare endings appear on the verb ‘covered’ and on the preposition ‘like’. They are old forms that reflect the antiquity of the hymn of the sea.

15:6.

‘Your right hand, O Yahweh, was majestic in power,

your right hand, O Yahweh, shattered the enemy.’

The poetical symmetry of this verse is obvious. It is, however, a complete synthetic parallelism: that is, each line, or colon, contains the same number of components but a new or more detailed idea is added to the second line.

a

b

c

Your right hand

O Yahweh

was glorious in power.

a1

b1

c1

Your right hand

O Yahweh

shattered the enemy.

The second line helps to define the first line and, therefore, God’s destruction of the Egyptian army explains what is meant by his right hand being ‘majestic/glorious in power’.

Hebrew culture places great importance on the right hand. It symbolizes power, pre-eminence and strength. Here it signifies the power of God as an instrument to deliver his people:

O sing to Yahweh a new song,

for he has done wonderful things,

his right hand and his holy arm

have gained the victory for him

(Ps. 98:1).

Connected to the word ‘majestic’ is a remnant of an early case-ending known as a hireq compaginis. This also points to the antiquity of the Song of the Sea.

15:7.

‘In the greatness of your majesty,

you overthrew those who rose up against you.

You sent forth your burning anger,

it consumed them like stubble.’

The second stanza of the hymn begins in much the same way as the first. In fact, the term ‘majesty’ is a noun derivative of the verb ‘to rise up’. The latter verb occurs twice in the first stanza as ‘highly exalted’.

The ‘burning anger’ of God is used exclusively of divine anger and fury in the Old Testament.

The simile, ‘It consumed them like stubble,’ is a prominent figure in the Bible describing the end of the wicked (Isa. 40:24; 41:2; Jer. 13:24; Ps. 83:13). What makes the figure so potent in the present context is the fact that ‘stubble’ was what the Hebrews had to gather to make bricks in Egypt (see 5:12). Now the Egyptian army is consumed like stubble!

15:8.

‘And at the blast of your nostrils,

the waters were piled up;

the floods stood firm like a heap;

the deep waters congealed in the heart of the sea.’

‘Blast’ is actually the common Hebrew word for ‘wind’. It certainly refers to the east wind from 14:21. The great dividing blow is not of natural origin, but comes from the very nostrils of God.

The resulting action is narrated by three lines of synonymous parallelism (following in the word order of the Masoretic Text):

a

b

They piled up

the waters;

a1

c

b1

They stood firm

like a heap

the floods;

a2

b2

d

They congealed

the deep waters

in the heart of the sea.

The first verb appears only here in the Old Testament. It is in the Niphal pattern (i.e. it is passive), and it means ‘to be heaped up’. Its noun derivative describes a heap of grain or of rubbish (Ruth 3:7; Neh. 4:2).

The second verb (also in Niphal) means ‘to take an upright position/to stand firm’. In cognate languages, a related word is used of statues and monuments that do not move. The line is sometimes translated to say the waters ‘stood firm like a wall’, but the noun is better rendered as a ‘heap’ (see Josh. 3:13, 16; Ps. 78:13). In Isaiah 17:11, the term denotes a heap of grain. That translation aligns well with the parallel of the first line.

The third verb conveys the idea of something thickening/condensing/congealing. Job 10:10 describes the curdling of cheese by using this verb. Cross and Freedman contend that the verbal form actually means ‘to churn’, which would be the exact opposite of the traditional translation. Their definition destroys the sense and symmetry of the threefold parallelism and is, therefore, unnecessary.

15:9.

‘The enemy said:

“I will pursue, I will overtake,

I will divide the spoil;

my life will be filled with them;

I will draw out my sword,

my hand will destroy them.” ’

In these boastings of the Egyptians, five verbs appear in relative succession. They are not connected by conjunctions. This is vigorous poetic imagery that Gesenius calls constructio asyndetos. Its purpose is as ‘a rhetorical expedient to produce a hurried and so an impassioned description’. An exalted poetic style is the result of the verse’s construction.

Poetic form is further accentuated by alliteration. The first five words of the verse begin with the Hebrew letter aleph.

The verbs for ‘gorge/fill’ and ‘destroy’ each end with an enclitic mem. This form was common in the early stages of the Hebrew language, but its usage died out over time. Remnants still can be seen in poetry. The meaning of the construction is uncertain, although it may have an emphatic force. In any event, its repeated appearance points to the antiquity of the poem.

15:10.

‘But you blew with your breath,

the sea covered them;

they sank like lead

in the mighty waters.’

A conceptual parallel exists between this verse and verse 5 of the opening stanza. In both cases, the waters of the Red Sea envelop (the same verb in Hebrew, ‘to cover’) the Egyptians, and the army subsequently sinks into the watery depths. Pleonasm and parallelism serve to emphasize the point.

The verb ‘to sink’ is a hapax legomenon. Perhaps it is related to the verb with the same root that means ‘to be or grow dark’. Darkness in the Old Testament can symbolize being near to death (Ps. 102:11; 109:23). Thus, the verb may be translated, ‘They sank into the darkness/abyss.’

‘Breath’ is a word meaning ‘wind’. It is a reference to verse 8 of this chapter, and to the east wind of chapter 14.

The description of the waters is that they are ‘mighty’. That word really means ‘majestic/magnificent’. The waters are reflecting the character of the Creator (Ps. 18:1; and especially Ps. 93:3–4).

15:11.

‘Who is like you among the gods, O Yahweh?

Who is like you?

Majestic in holiness,

awesome in praises,

performing wonders.’

This second stanza concludes in the same manner as the final verse of the opening one: with glowing praise and adoration of Yahweh. The parallel nature of the two verses is confirmed by the fact that the word ‘majestic’ is a focus of both.

Two rhetorical questions are asked in the verse. No answer is expected. The response is obvious: no one is like Yahweh! Truly, who can be compared to Yahweh from among the pagan deities? Can the gods of Egypt, who failed to deliver their worshippers?

Some translators want to render ‘holiness’ as a plural noun, ‘holy ones’. That rendering is in agreement with the Septuagint. However, the Masoretic Text makes perfect sense as it stands and thus is in no need of emendation. ‘Holiness’ in Hebrew culture means ‘to be set apart/distinct/unique’, and indeed Yahweh is majestic in his wholly otherness. He is like nothing else.

15:12.

‘You stretched out your right hand,

the earth swallowed them.’

This final stanza describes the results of the Red Sea crossing. First, what God has done is relayed in terms similar to what Moses had been commanded to do—in 14:16, Yahweh told Moses to stretch out his hand over the sea. That terminology is now being used in relation to God because he is the one who truly had the power to open and close the waters.

The consequence of God’s work is that the earth ‘swallowed’ the Egyptian army. In Exodus 7:12, that same verb is used of Aaron’s staff swallowing the rods of the Egyptian magicians. Ancient Near-Eastern literature often employs the act of swallowing to signify desolation and death. In Egyptian magic, ‘The act can serve a principally hostile function, whereby “devour” signifies “to destroy.” ’

The verb ‘swallowed’ is an imperfective form. According to Driver, the imperfect expresses progressive duration. Gesenius assumes that the use of that form in the present verse ‘represents the Egyptians, in a vivid, poetic description, as being swallowed up one after another’.

The word ‘earth’ sometimes means ‘Sheol’, or ‘the place of the dead’ (Isa. 14:9; 29:4; Jonah 2:6). Other ancient Near-Eastern literature draws the same conclusion.

15:13.

‘You lead by your loving-kindness

the people that you have redeemed;

you guide by your power

to your holy dwelling.’

Another synthetic parallelism arises in this verse. In the order of the Masoretic Text it looks like this:

a

b

c

You lead

by your lovingkindness

the people that you have redeemed.

a1

b1

d

You guide

by your power

to your holy dwelling.

The Hebrew word translated ‘that’ is a demonstrative pronoun being used as a relative pronoun. This form appears exclusively in Hebrew poetry.

The Hebrew word for ‘loving-kindness’ denotes ‘covenant loyalty’, that is, God’s keeping of the covenant promises he made to his people. Indeed, this fidelity to his covenant refers back to the time of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and it continues to the present.

The identity of the ‘holy dwelling/habitation’ is ambiguous. Some commentators believe it may refer to the promised land, on the basis of passages such as Jeremiah 10:25; 23:3 and Psalm 79:7. Others argue it is specifically alluding to the temple mount on Mount Zion (2 Sam. 15:25; Isa. 27:10). Verse 17 of the present chapter lends great support to this position. On the other hand, the reference may simply be to Mount Sinai (see commentary on 3:12).

15:14–15.

‘Peoples have heard, they tremble;

writhing seizes the dwellers of Philistia;

the chiefs of Edom are terrified;

trembling seizes the leaders of Moab;

the dwellers of Canaan melt away.’

A further consequence of the incident at the Red Sea is that pagan peoples will be told what has happened and they will be afraid. Four countries are specifically mentioned, and they are listed in a poetic parallel structure (based upon the Masoretic Text):

Line 1

a

b

c

Writhing

seizes

the dwellers of Philistia;

Line 2

b1

c1

are terrified

the chiefs of Edom.

Line 3

c2

a1

b2

The leaders of Moab

trembling

seizes them.

Line 4

b3

c3

They melt away

the dwellers of Canaan.

The order in which the nations are listed follows the geographical sequence of the route the Hebrews will use to travel to the promised land: Philistia—Edom—Moab—Canaan.

All four nations were to become notorious enemies of Israel. Philistia was located in the coastal plain of Palestine, and the Philistines often fought with Israel during the early centuries of her existence (e.g., Judg. 13–15; 1 Sam. 4–7). The Edomites were descended from Esau, and they populated the area of southern Transjordan. They struggled with Israel in order not to let her pass through their territory (Num. 20). Moab, in central Transjordan, was the home of the descendants of Lot. Balak was one of the kings of Moab during the conquest period, and he strongly resisted Israel (Num. 22). The Canaanites, of course, inhabited the land of promise, and many of them were destroyed by the Hebrew invasion of Palestine.

Attached to the end of the verb ‘tremble’ is a nun paragogicum (or a ‘flying nun’!). The purpose of the ending in poetic text is uncertain. It is true, however, that it is more common in earlier texts than later ones.

The same word is used for the ‘people’ of Philistia and the ‘people’ of Canaan: literally, ‘the dwellers/sitters of’. It may, in fact, refer to those sitting on thrones, or the leaders of those peoples (see Exod. 11:5; 12:29). That rendering would fit better with the four-part parallelism of the verse.

15:16.

‘Terror and dread will fall upon them;

by the strength of your arm,

they will be as still as a stone;

until your people pass by, O Yahweh;

until the people whom you have purchased pass by.’

A few minor grammatical points help to show the emphatic force of this final verse of the third stanza. First, the word ‘terror’ has an early accusative ending (called the accusative of intention) which serves the goal of poetical emphasis. Second, ‘strength’ translates an adjectival construction which usually conveys a superlative force. Gesenius comments that ‘The adjective which is made into a regens is strongly emphatic, and is frequently equivalent to a superlative.’

The translation, ‘They will be still’, has been challenged. Some scholars want to repoint the verb and make it into a Niphal (passive) reading, ‘They will be struck dumb as a stone.’ Dahood suggests it comes from a different word altogether that means ‘to throw/hurl’. And, thus, he sees an echo here of verse 5. However, the reasons advanced for altering the Masoretic Text from its present state are noticeably weak.

The power of Yahweh’s arm should be seen in the light of Egyptian texts that characteristically describe Pharaoh’s might in the same way (see commentary on 3:19–20).

The verb ‘to purchase’ sometimes bears the sense of originating/creating (see Gen. 4:1; 14:19, 22; Deut. 32:6). This meaning supports the idea that the crossing of the Red Sea is a re-creation event. See analysis of 14:29.

15:17.

‘You will bring them in and plant them

on the mountain of your inheritance;

the place that you have made for your dwelling, O Yahweh;

the sanctuary, O Lord, established by your hands.’

This epilogue looks even further into the future when God will establish Israel in the land of promise. The Hebrews will build a sanctuary there to worship Yahweh. The designation of a mountain obviously refers to Mount Zion where the temple will ultimately reside.

It is unnecessary to suppose that this reference to the mountain means that the song must have been written after the Israelites had settled in the land. It may simply indicate intention rather than accomplishment (see 23:20; 32:34).

The parallel designations

a

b

on the mountain of

your inheritance,

a1

b1

the place of

your dwelling,

are well-attested in Ugaritic literature of the fourteenth century B.C. This formula refers in those instances to the sanctuary of the Canaanite god Baal. The use of this expression, however, does not indicate borrowing on the part of the Hebrew writer. It is more likely that it has a polemical thrust. In any event, because of these early attestations, some scholars leave the door open for an early dating of verse 17 and for the entire poem.

15:18.

‘Yahweh will reign for ever and ever.’

The song ends as it began—with the glorification of Yahweh. He is the subject of the hymn. As all begins with him, all ends with him. Yahweh is the eternal King!

15:19. When the horses of Pharaoh and his chariots and his cavalry went into the sea, Yahweh returned the waters of the sea upon them. And the children of Israel went on the dry ground in the midst of the sea.

Although this verse is not part of the song—it is narrative prose—it is the writer’s summing up of the Red Sea crossing. It simply and concisely gives a synopsis of the grand event of Israel’s history.

15:20. Then Miriam, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took the tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing.

The Song of Miriam in the next verse is introduced by this prose passage. This is the first time that Miriam is mentioned by name in the Bible. She is probably the sister anonymously designated in 2:4–9, although that is not completely certain.

Miriam is identified by two titles. She is, firstly, called a ‘prophetess’ (feminine ending). Only four other women in the Old Testament bear that epithet: Deborah (Judg. 4:4), Huldah (2 Kings 22:14), Noadiah (Neh. 6:14) and the unnamed wife of Isaiah (Isa. 8:3). The position and duty of a prophetess are the same as those of a prophet—that is, as one who is authorized to speak for another (see Micah 6:4). Thus Miriam had a favoured status in the nation of Israel. Her prophetic function (along with Aaron’s) was later to lead to great problems (Num. 12:1–2).

Secondly, Miriam is recognized as ‘Aaron’s sister’. This is a biblical example of fratriarchy, in which authority in the family is invested in the eldest brother.

The word translated ‘tambourine’ is actually a framedrum. Whenever that instrument is used in connection with dancing in the Old Testament it appears to reflect a genre known as the ‘Victory Song’.

15:21. And Miriam answered them:

‘Sing to Yahweh,

for he is surely exalted;

the horse and its rider,

he has hurled into the sea.’

A direct translation of the opening clause is: ‘And Miriam answered them …’ The pronominal suffix ‘them’ is a masculine plural, and thus refers to Moses and the men of Israel. Because the song is an answer/response to the men, then the women were singing antiphonally with the men. The content of the song is exactly the same as verse 1 of the chapter, the opening of the first stanza of the Song of Moses. Apparently this passage served as a refrain to the larger hymn.

**Application**

After crossing the waters, the victorious people of Israel stood by the sea and sang a song of deliverance and triumph. This event was a foreshadowing of the victory of God’s redeemed at the end of time. In Revelation 15:1–4, the apostle John has the following vision: ‘I saw in heaven another great and marvellous sign: seven angels with the seven last plagues—last, because with them God’s wrath is completed. And I saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb:

“Great and marvellous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty.

Just and true are your ways,

King of the ages.

Who will not fear you, O Lord,

and bring glory to your name?

For you alone are holy.

All nations will come

and worship before you,

for your righteous acts have been revealed.” ’

Thus John sees a sea, and on the seashore stands a victorious multitude. They are playing harps and singing the Song of Moses. Hendriksen comments, ‘Clearly, this vision is based on the story of the drowning of Pharaoh’s host in the Red Sea.’

So the church in covenant will at the end times sing hymns of adoration before the throne of God. One of those hymns will be the Song of the Sea from Exodus 15. And note that the subject matter is the same in Exodus and in Revelation: the glorification of God. He is worthy of the church’s honour and praise because of who he is, and because of his great redemptive work. Amen and amen.

Parallels between Israel at the sea and the church at the sea are striking. The general theological thrust of the two episodes is similar as well: as Israel moves from a scene of redemption to communion at the sea and on to inheritance of the land of promise, so does the church. The church has been redeemed by the blood of Christ; it communes at the sea in Revelation 15 and, finally, it receives an eternal inheritance that is imperishable and will never fade away (1 Peter 1:4).

**7. Grumblings in the desert Exodus 15:22–17:7**

**The incident at Marah**

**(Exodus 15:22–27)**

We mentioned earlier that the grumbling of the Israelites becomes a dominant negative motif of the wilderness wanderings (see comment on 14:11). Instances of it occur repeatedly throughout the books of Exodus and Numbers (see, e.g., Exod. 14:11; 15:23–26; 16:2–3; 17:2–3; Num. 11:4–6; 14:1–4; 16:11–14; 20:2–5). George Coats remarks: ‘A form-critical study of the relevant texts reveals that the murmuring motif is not designed to express a disgruntled complaint. Quite the contrary, it describes an open rebellion … In the wilderness theme the murmuring motif characterizes a basic tradition about the rebellion of Israel.’ The biblical author sees this rebellion in direct contrast to the grace and favour that Yahweh has bestowed upon the people. This episode is also to be seen by way of antithesis to the preceding scene of joyful singing. And what a contrast it is!

This section is carefully written and crafted. It employs elaborate word-plays that anchor the entire section to the main idea, which is that the Israelites are living by sight and not by faith. The Hebrews are required to depend totally upon God for their sustenance and means.

15:22. Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea, and they went out to the wilderness of Shur. And they went three days in the wilderness, and they did not find water.

The style of the initial phrase of this verse is unusual. It employs a Hiphil verb (causative), meaning, literally, ‘Moses caused Israel to set out.’ It may be that the Hebrews were lax, or slow, in departing from the Red Sea region—perhaps they were merely basking in the glory of victory over the Egyptians. In any event, the prophet is described as having been the catalyst, or prime mover, in Israel’s decampment and setting out.

Israel entered the wilderness of Shur. The term šûr means ‘wall’ in Hebrew. For years scholars have supposed that it denotes a wall of fortresses built by pharaohs to the east of Egypt, the purpose of which was to deny access to Egypt by Asiatics. The wilderness of Shur is mentioned elsewhere in the Torah (see, for instance, Gen. 16:7; 20:1; 25:18). It appears to have been one of the principal caravan routes to Palestine, in particular, through the Negev to the town of Beersheba.

Three days of travel in the wilderness yielded no sources of water.

15:23. And they came to Marah. And they were not able to drink from the waters at Marah because they were bitter. (Therefore its name was called Marah.)

When the people of God finally discover water they cannot drink it because of its unsavoury taste—a possible indicator of poisoning. Thus begins a testing of the Hebrews, and the reader is anxious to see how they will respond.

This is a good example of the writer of Exodus’ penchant for using plays on words. The name of the location, ‘Marah’, is the Hebrew word for ‘bitter’. So the name of the site reflects the noteworthy event now taking place there. No wonder the location of Marah is uncertain.

15:24. So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, ‘What shall we drink?’

The Hebrews react unfaithfully. This is the first time the verb ‘grumble/murmur’ appears in the Old Testament. It is used only in the following chapters of the Hebrew Bible: Exodus 15, 16, 17; Numbers 14, 16, 17; and Joshua 9 (v. 18). In every instance it reflects the rebellious attitude of the Israelites against their leaders and authority structures.

15:25. And he cried out to Yahweh, and Yahweh showed him a tree. And he threw it into the waters, and the waters became sweet. There he set a decree and a law for them, and he tested them there.

In response to Israel’s distress, God causes the water to become sweet. He performs that miracle by first ‘show[ing]’ Moses ‘a tree’. That verbal form is from a root which in the Hiphil pattern means ‘to teach/instruct’. The noun Torah, or law, is a derivative of that verb. Thus God is directing Moses how to change the nature of the water.

Some commentators explain the water’s transfiguration in naturalistic terms. Purportedly wood absorbs salt and, thus, it filters impurities from the water. But in reality there is nothing in the text to support this anti-supernatural understanding of events.

The last part of the verse is a parenthesis or an editorial. We are not told of what the pre-Sinaitic law consisted. However, Yahweh apparently tested Israel by that law through the episode of the bitter water. Israel obviously failed the test. The lesson seems to have been that the Hebrews were totally dependent upon God for their survival. They needed divine guidance and aid, apart from which they would surely perish.

15:26. And he said, ‘If you will certainly listen to the voice of Yahweh your God, and you do the right thing in his eyes, and you listen to his commandments, and you keep all his decrees, then I will not set upon you any of the diseases which I put on Egypt. Because I am Yahweh, the one who heals you.’

Perhaps this verse constitutes the ‘law’ referred to in verse 25. Moses records it in a series of three parallel couplets: first, a complete synonymous, chiastic one; secondly, a complete synonymous one; and, finally, an incomplete synonymous one. The following is a translation according to the order of the elements in the Masoretic Text:

a

b

If you certainly listen

to the voice of Yahweh

A

b1

a1

And the right thing in his eyes

you do,

B

a

b

And you listen

to his commands

A

a1

b1

And you keep

all his statutes,

B

a

b

c

Every disease

I set

on the Egyptians

A

b1

c1

I will not set

on you.

B

The directive to ‘listen carefully’ is actually two forms of the same verb. It is an infinitive absolute followed by an imperfective form. In Hebrew the verbal idea is strengthened and made more forcible by this construction.

Yahweh is called ‘your healer/physician’. This is a common title for the Lord in Scripture (see Isa. 19:22; Hosea 6:1; 11:3). The episode of changing the waters at Marah from bitter to sweet is a physical symbol of this spiritual reality that Yahweh is the healer of his people.

The ‘diseases’ or ‘sicknesses’ that God had sent upon Egypt obviously refer to the plagues of Exodus 7–12 (see the references in Deut. 7:15; 28:27–29).

The healing of the waters at Marah serves as a paradigm for a similar event in 2 Kings 2:19–22. In that incident, Elisha purifies bad water by throwing salt into it. Even some of the vocabulary of the two episodes is alike. For example, God proclaims in the later episode in that ‘I have healed these waters’ (2 Kings 2:21).

15:27. Then they came to Elim, and there were twelve springs of water and seventy date palms. And they camped there near the waters.

Soon the people travelled to Elim, where they found plenty of food and water for their sustenance (in contrast to Marah). The location of Elim is much disputed, although a good case for it is made by Simons: ‘From Marah the Israelites came to Elim (Exod. 15:27; Num. 33:9), whose well-watered and wooded oasis is usually recognized in Wadi Gharandel. Though the stopping-place by the Sea of Reeds, mentioned only in Numbers 33:10, is not further specified, we may think of the plain of El-marhah providing a comfortable camping-ground, where the travellers could prepare for the march inland.’

**Application**

The Israelites move from a period of ecstatic joy (at the Red Sea) to a phase of unbelief, grumbling and murmuring (at Marah). What was it that brought the Hebrews to so great a depression in so little time? They were living by sight, and not by faith. At Marah they ran into a material problem, and they responded unfaithfully. But, again, let us not judge them too harshly, because—oh, how like the Israelites we are!

**Sin in the wilderness of Sin**

**(Exodus 16:1–7)**

We have seen that near the end of chapter 15 God had supplied abundantly for the needs of the Hebrew people. They had grumbled because of bitter water, but God made the water sweet. In the final verse of that chapter we viewed a people who must have been quite content at the site of Elim, where there were twelve springs and seventy date palms. All was well with Israel—or was it? Unfortunately, the writer brings us back to the refrain of the wanderings—the faithlessness of Israel.

16:1. And they journeyed from Elim and all the congregation of the children of Israel came to the Wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they came out from the land of Egypt.

According to Numbers 33:10, after the Hebrews left Elim they then returned to camp by the yăm sûph (Red Sea). In other words, the people had passed through the Red Sea, had encamped at Marah and Elim, and now they set up camp at a more southerly place next to the Red Sea. This southern route was one of the principal roads for Egyptian mining expeditions during the Middle and New Kingdoms (c. the twentieth to twelfth centuries B.C.). We know that Semites participated in these expeditions. The Hebrews who had been in Egypt for four centuries would most certainly have known of this route.

A clash between the escaping Israelites and Egyptian mining expeditions was not inevitable. Egyptian activity at the mines occurred primarily during the months of January to March, while the Hebrews were traversing the territory after April. According to Exodus 13:4, Israel left Egypt during the month of Abib (around March), and according to the present verse they reached the mining area a month and a half later.

16:2. All the congregation of the children of Israel grumbled against Moses and against Aaron in the wilderness.

This complaint is more severe and more widespread than the grumbling of which we read in 15:22–26. First, the outcry of the people is not now merely directed at Moses (as on the earlier occasion), but against his brother as well. Secondly, in 15:24 it was the generic ‘the people’ who lodged a complaint. Here ‘the entire congregation of the children of Israel’ deplore and protest against the present conditions. Finally, whereas the incident in chapter 15 begins with a description of a need followed by murmuring on the part of the people, this passage does the opposite. The author ‘begins with the grumbling and thus casts the complaint immediately in a negative light’. Unbelief and sedition are becoming habitual for the Israelites.

16:3. And the children of Israel said to them, ‘Would that we had died by the hand of Yahweh in the land of Egypt when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full—because you have brought us forth to this wilderness to kill all this assembly with hunger.’

Although the assault is directed at Moses and Aaron, in the final analysis the Hebrews are grumbling against Yahweh. They doubt God’s care for them and thus cast aspersions on his power. These facts result in hostile opposition to his leaders in whom he has invested authority. This is a very serious act of open rebellion. In fact, verse 3 narrates treasonable words: ‘Would that we had died by Yahweh’s hand!’ The very hand that had destroyed the Egyptians (15:6) and that had delivered Israel is now blamed because it did not destroy Israel!

Their complaint is spelled out. The Hebrews crave two things: meat and bread. They argue that Egypt was better than what they have now. There they ate meat and bread ‘to the full’, a term that reflects the idea of satisfaction. Really? How well do they remember Egypt? Is this honestly how Pharaoh treated them? This point goes to the very heart of the exodus story: was Pharaoh’s servitude easier to bear and more comforting than that of Yahweh? (Ironically, the Israelites are now groaning under Yahweh’s service as they did under Pharaoh’s.)

The discourse of the Israelites actually begins with the interrogative ‘Who?’ However, when that particle is followed by an imperfective verb it expresses a wish. Thus it is correctly translated, ‘Would that …’ (cf. Num. 11:29).

16:4. And Yahweh said to Moses, ‘Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you. And the people shall go out and gather a day’s portion in its day—in order that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not.’

When the Hebrews groaned under the slavery of Egypt, Pharaoh took straw from them to make their lives harder. Yahweh responds to the complaining by abundantly providing for them. He promises to ‘rain bread from heaven’. This is another miraculous sign that God is with his people; it is a concession to a people who live by sight.

However, it is not a gift that arrives with no strings attached. God is going to test the Hebrews in order to refine their characters into obedience. Deuteronomy 8:16 declares, ‘In the wilderness he fed you manna which your fathers did not know, that he might humble you and that he might test you, to do good for you in the end.’ It is to teach God’s people to depend upon him.

The test for Israel is stated in general terms at the close of the verse. The question is, will Israel ‘walk in my law’ (literally, ‘go in my Torah’) or not? One of the specific laws is also revealed: the Israelites are to go out to the fields daily and bring in enough bread for daily consumption.

16:5. ‘It shall be on the sixth day that they shall prepare what they bring in, and it shall be twice what they gather daily.’

The second specification of the law is that five days a week the Hebrews are to gather bread for each day, but the sixth and seventh days are to be different. On the sixth day they are to collect a double portion of bread, so that they will have enough for the next day as well. Work on the seventh day is not allowed.

Sabbath laws predate the giving of the Sinaitic legal code. That is not a problem because they reflect the creation account of Genesis 2:1–3. Sabbath is a creation ordinance.

No concept of Sabbath rest has been found in ancient Egypt. That fact underscores the differences between Yahweh and Pharaoh: the God of the Old Testament is compassionate and caring towards his people. Pharaoh was merely a burdensome taskmaster. That is why the recitation of the Sabbath law in the version of the decalogue recorded in Deuteronomy stresses its purpose as commemorating Israel’s deliverance from slavery (Deut. 5:15).

16:6–7. And Moses and Aaron said to all the children of Israel, ‘At evening you will know that Yahweh brought you forth from the land of Egypt; and at morning you will see the glory of Yahweh, because he has heard your grumblings against Yahweh. And what are we, that you grumble against us?’

Two physical signs will be given to Israel so that the people will cease their grumbling and see the foolishness of their ways. The first sign is that the Hebrews will receive food that very evening—probably the meat mentioned in verse 8 (cf. the use of ‘evening’ in both verses). A second sign will occur in the morning: ‘the glory of Yahweh’, the Shekinah glory, will make an appearance before the people. In verses 9–10 the presence of Yahweh manifests itself in the cloud that had been leading the Hebrews through the wilderness. It is also in the morning that bread is miraculously given to the people (16:13).

Moses and Aaron rightfully discern the hearts of the people. The Israelites’ fight is with Yahweh because it is he who is leading them out of Egypt. They are venting their anger at the two prophets unjustifiably, and thus they are hiding their unbelief in, and unfaithfulness to, Yahweh.

**Application**

The Hebrews were worrying about not having any food and wishing that they had died in Egypt. They remembered, perhaps falsely, that in slavery they had food in abundance. Now they had nothing. They were very anxious about their lives. These were people who could have benefited from Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, when he said, ‘For this reason I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing?… Therefore do not be anxious for tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own’ (Matt. 6:25, 34).

Are we not like the Hebrews? We often find ourselves in difficult situations, and we grow anxious and we look back, full of regrets and wishing things had turned out differently. In reality, such attitudes display a keen lack of trust in the sovereignty of God and in the idea that his plan is being worked out in heaven and upon earth. Certainly we should regret our sin and repent of it, but we should also realize that God’s will is coming to pass and it can happen in no other way.

In addition, we need to understand that God will test us as he tested Israel. And such trials may have great benefits for us as Christians, such as increasing our trust and dependence upon God, or bringing us back to the godly way of living and thinking, or they may be for a myriad of other reasons. So let us not rebel when things become difficult, but let us rather go to God in prayer and serve him with all our hearts, souls and minds.

**Yahweh’s provision**

**(Exodus 16:8–20)**

The Lord again responds to Israel’s unfaithfulness by abundantly providing for them. At issue is not a lack of water but an acute desire for food. In this section, God answers the people’s grumbling by appearing to them in the cloud, and then miraculously giving them bread and meat. The scene demonstrates God’s wonderful care for his people, in spite of their wicked ways.

16:8. And Moses said, ‘[It will happen] when Yahweh gives you in the evening meat to eat, and in the morning bread to satisfy you, because Yahweh has heard your grumblings which you are grumbling against him. And what are we? Your grumblings are not against us but against Yahweh.’

Verse 8 is basically a repetition of the previous verse—in both ideas and vocabulary. On that basis, modern scholars have claimed that it is the result of dittography (unintentional repetition of words—e.g., a scribal error), or of textual conflation (a composite reading of a text), or that it is a literary gloss (an expanded commentary or interpretation). Thus, numerous commentators want to eliminate verse 8 from the text.

Repetition, however, for the purpose of emphasis is an essential Hebrew literary device. Reiteration drives home the point of this passage: that is, Israel’s grumblings are hazardous because they are ultimately directed against God Almighty! The prophets, although initially on the receiving end of the complaints, are merely the instruments of God’s work—it is really against him that Israel is rebelling.

The use of the negative at the end of the verse is not denying the fact that criticism has been levelled against Moses and Aaron, but rather it ‘is ironic, achieving criticism by emphasizing that murmuring against God’s messenger is murmuring against God’.

16:9. And Moses said to Aaron, ‘Speak to all the congregation of the children of Israel, ‘Come before Yahweh because he has heard your grumblings.’

Aaron continues to serve as Moses’ spokesman. Originally a role given to Aaron in the dispute against Pharaoh, his public speaking was also sometimes addressed to the Hebrews (see 4:16).

‘Come before Yahweh’ is a formula often found in the Torah, and here it obviously refers to the Israelites approaching the glory cloud. Because the expression is later used in regard to Israel’s drawing near to the sanctuary (Num. 16:17), Childs argues that it signifies the Tent of Meeting in the present verse. His reconstruction is incorrect because the tabernacle was not built until after the law was given at Mount Sinai (25:1–9).

16:10. And it came to pass while Aaron was speaking to all the congregation of the children of Israel that they turned to the wilderness, and behold the glory of Yahweh appeared in the cloud.

The verb ‘turned’ (‘looked’, NIV, NKJV) when followed by the preposition ‘el (to) means ‘to turn and look’. Apparently the Hebrews are acting according to the command that Aaron had conveyed to them in verse 9: they are coming before Yahweh whose theophonic presence is in the cloud leading the people through the wilderness.

‘Cloud’ has a preposition and a definite article attached to it, giving it the meaning ‘in the cloud’. It is thus referring to the very cloud that had been leading them (13:21–22; 14:19–24). For a study of the glory cloud throughout Scripture, see the work of Meredith Kline.

16:11–12. Then Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, ‘I have heard the grumblings of the children of Israel. Speak to them, saying, ‘At twilight you shall eat meat and in the morning you shall be satisfied with bread.’ And you will know that I am Yahweh your God.’

Yahweh declares that he will make the people ‘satisfied’ by supplying meat and bread for them. That is the same word the grumblers had used in verse 3 to describe their circumstances in Egypt. It is only Yahweh and his provisions that will truly satisfy.

Regarding the use of the dual form ‘twilights’, see commentary on 12:6.

The phrase, ‘You will know that I am Yahweh,’ has become idiomatic in the exodus account. It is used of the Egyptians (see 7:5, 17; 8:22; 14:4, 18), and of the Hebrews (see 6:7). One of the major points of the entire text of Exodus is the recognition of Yahweh as God over all.

16:13. And it came to pass in the evening that quail came up and covered the camp and in the morning a layer of dew was around the camp.

Quail (Coturnix coturnix) is for food whenever it is mentioned in the Bible. The habits of quails as we know them today fit the biblical picture. First, the bird flies mostly at night. Secondly, after migration the birds are so exhausted that they can be caught with bare hands. Lastly, during migration they make use of favourable winds: in the description of the provision of quail in Numbers 11:31 it says, ‘Now there went forth a wind from the Lord, and it brought quail from the sea …’

Although large flocks of quail live in the Sinai Peninsula (mainly on the Mediterranean coast), the miracle of the provision of quail in Exodus and Numbers is primarily in the timing and extent of the events. The amount of quail in and around the Hebrew camp was astounding: the birds were ‘beside the camp, about a day’s journey on this side and a day’s journey on the other side, all around the camp, and about two cubits deep on the surface of the ground’ (Num. 11:31). Psalm 78:27 concurs by relating that ‘He rained meat upon them like the dust, even winged fowl like the sand of the seas.’

16:14. And the layer of dew went up, and behold upon the surface of the desert thin flakes like frost on the earth.

In the morning a layer of dew covers the ground. Soon the sun evaporates the dew and another layer of a substance is revealed. The exact nature of the substance is difficult to determine: the text describes it as ‘thin/fine/small’. In addition, it is called ‘flaky’, a participial form from the verb ‘to scale/peel’ which occurs only here in the Masoretic Text. The Septuagint did not even try to translate the latter verb, but simply inserted ‘white coriander seed’ (based upon the description of the substance in Num. 11:7).

Numerous attempts have been made to define scientifically the nature of the food. For example, Bodenheimer remarks: ‘Accordingly we find that manna production is a biological phenomenon of the dry deserts and steppes. The liquid honeydew excretion of a number of cicadas, plant lice, and scale insects speedily solidifies by rapid evaporation. From remote times the resulting sticky and often times granular masses have been collected and called manna.’ Such explanations are not sufficient, and they do not precisely fit the biblical descriptions. It is unwise to remove the miraculous element: manna is ‘bread from God’ (Exod. 16:15), ‘food from heaven’ (Ps. 78:24), and the ‘bread of angels’ (Ps. 78:25).

16:15. When the children of Israel saw [it] they each said to his comrade, ‘What is it?’ For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, ‘It is the bread which Yahweh has given to you to eat.’

When the Hebrews see the flaky substance, they ask ‘mān hû”, literally, ‘What is it?’ The word Mān is unique in Hebrew—the normal way of asking ‘What?’ is măh (used later in the verse in the phrase, ‘what it was’). Mān is an ancient dialectic variant found in Canaanite literature, such as in the texts at Ugarit.

The term ‘manna’ (see 16:31) for the bread is based upon the Hebrew mān, ‘what?’ Thus, the present incident describes a popular etymology—that is, the first use of the word, and where it came from. Other similar etymologies are common in the Old Testament.

16:16. ‘This is the word which Yahweh commands: “Gather for yourselves each man according to what he eats; you shall take an omer for the number of persons in each tent.” ’

Moses now gives more detailed instructions regarding the gathering of the manna. First, the prophet says the Hebrews are to pick up manna, literally, ‘a man according to his eating’. This is precisely the command given at the Passover sacrifice: the lamb was to be divided according to what each man could eat (Exod. 12:4). The point of these two directives is that no one should hoard any food. A natural desire because of hunger would be to take much and store some of it for future use. God is forbidding hoarding: Israel must trust him daily for their sustenance.

An ‘omer’ normally signifies ‘a sheaf’ (Lev. 23:11–15; Deut. 24:19; Ruth 2:7, 15), and it can be used figuratively of food in general (Job 24:10). In this verse, ‘omer’ is a measurement of weight or capacity. It is one-tenth of an ephah; an ephah is one-tenth of a homer; and a homer equals 48.4 gallons. Thus, an omer is approximately half a gallon.

16:17–18. The children of Israel did so, and some gathered much and some little. And when they measured it by the omer, he who gathered much did not have too much, and he who gathered little did not have too little. Every man gathered what he could eat.

At this point, the text indicates that the Hebrews do as they are commanded. And God adequately and precisely meets the needs of the people: no one has too much or too little.

16:19. Then Moses said to them, ‘Let no one leave any of it until morning.’

The Hebrew prophet lays a further stricture on the people. He uses a negative (‘ăl) followed by a jussive, which in the Hebrew language constitutes a negative imperative. They are commanded not to save any of the manna from day to day. The Israelites are to gather it in the morning and use it throughout the day, but that is all. Thus they must constantly have faith that God will provide for them each and every day.

16:20. But they did not listen to Moses. And some of the people left it until morning. And worms grew [in it], and it smelled. And Moses was irate with them.

Some of the people apparently had too great a concern for the next day: what shall we eat tomorrow? So they disobeyed God’s command by keeping some of the manna until the following morning. As a result, there was a plague on the manna. The nature of the plague is not certain, although the word used commonly refers to ‘worms’. The manna thus became contaminated and smelled. This seems to be a deliberate allusion to the first plague on Egypt in which the Nile was contaminated and smelled (the same word is used in both places—see 7:18).

The verb translated ‘grew’ (NIV, ‘it was full of [maggots]) is problematic. Brown, Driver and Briggs understand it as meaning ‘to be wormy’ (p. 942). However, it may simply stem from the common root that means ‘to rise/grow’.

Moses responds to the Hebrews’ disbelief and disobedience with anger. There is no stronger verb in Hebrew to reflect wrath/anger than the one used here. The Hebrews are again living by sight and not by faith; Moses is therefore highly indignant.

**Application**

The reason that God gives manna to the children of Israel is not merely to feed them. A much greater purpose is being served. Moses later comments that ‘He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord … in the wilderness he fed you manna which your fathers did not know, that he might humble you and that he might test you, to do good for you in the end’ (Deut. 8:3, 16).

The primary intent of the provision of manna was to teach God’s people to depend upon God and upon his Word. Man’s survival is dependent upon the Lord, and him alone. The reader should consider Jesus’ response to Satan’s temptation that he should turn stones into bread! (Matt. 4:4).

Manna is also a type and foreshadowing of Jesus. In John 6, the crowd asks for a sign from Jesus so that they might believe, a sign like the manna in the wilderness: ‘They said therefore to him, “What then do you do for a sign, that we may see, and believe you? What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread out of heaven to eat’ ” ’ (vv. 30–31).

In response, Jesus claims that he is the true bread of heaven that has been sent by the Father to quench people’s thirst and hunger: ‘Jesus therefore said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it is not Moses who has given you the bread out of heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread out of heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down out of heaven, and gives life to the world.” They said therefore to him, “Lord, evermore give us this bread.” Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst” ’ (vv. 32–35).

**Sabbath commands**

**(Exodus 16:21–30)**

In verse 5 of the present chapter, Yahweh gave a general command to Moses regarding the gathering of the manna. There he ordered that on the sixth day of the week a double portion of manna should be collected in order to provide for the sixth and seventh days. In the paragraph now under consideration, Moses provides specific regulations relating to that law. These are the first Sabbath laws of the Bible.

16:21. And they gathered it morning by morning each according to what one could eat; but when the sun grew hot, it melted.

This verse serves as a general introduction to the next section. The Hebrews have mended their ways, and now they are obedient to the commands of God regarding the manna.

A repetitive expression for the time of gathering is employed here: literally, ‘in the morning, in the morning’. Reiteration of the preposition and the noun signifies entirety in distribution—in other words, it expresses the idea that the Israelites collected manna each and every morning.

16:22. And it came to pass on the sixth day that they gathered twice as much bread, two omers for one [person]. And all the leaders of the congregation came and they told it to Moses.

Some commentators believe that the double amount of manna on the sixth day was a surprise to Israel when the people went out to the fields. Based on that discovery, they say, Moses then used the opportunity to instruct the Hebrews in the Sabbath principle. But the fact of the matter is, the Sabbath law did not simply come out of the blue. God had already explained it to Moses in verse 5. The existence of the Sabbath is assumed in the present verse; it had existed since the time of creation in Genesis 2:1–3.

16:23. And he said to them, ‘This is what Yahweh says, “Tomorrow is a Sabbath, a holy Sabbath to Yahweh; bake what you will bake and boil what you will boil. Whatever is left over, you shall keep for yourselves until morning.” ’

On the same day as the events of verse 22 (the sixth day), Moses tells the people that the next day is to be observed as a Sabbath day. It is a ‘holy’ day—that is, one that is set apart, unique and special; that, of course, reflects the account of the original creation: ‘Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because in it he rested from all his work which God had created and made’ (Gen. 2:3).

The command concerning cooking reads literally: ‘That which you will bake, bake. And that which you will boil, boil.’ In both phrases, an imperfect verbal form is followed by an imperative of the same root. This is the idem per idem principle which serves to provide the subject with total freedom in carrying out a command.

‘You shall keep [it]’ is the same command that was given to the Israelites in Egypt in regard to saving the Passover lamb until the proper moment of sacrifice (12:6). These things must be done according to God’s timing and laws.

Two basic interpretations have been proposed for the general command of this verse. The first is that all the manna had to be baked or boiled on the sixth day so that the Sabbath would not be profaned by cooking on it; the second view is that the Israelites were to bake and boil only the manna which they needed on the sixth day; uncooked manna would not be contaminated on the Sabbath. In other words, the law had nothing to do with cooking on the Sabbath. On the basis of the idem per idem formula, the latter explanation appears to be the most appropriate.

16:24. So they saved it until the morning as Moses commanded, and it did not smell or have worms in it.

The Hebrews obeyed God’s orders as they were given through Moses. The result is that the manna gathered on the sixth day kept overnight; it did not become contaminated or rancid, in contrast to what happened on the other six nights. If they hoarded manna on those days, it would be spoilt by morning (v. 20).

The general sense of the verb for ‘save’ is ‘to rest’: ‘So they rested it until morning.’ Actually, because of the command it was the Hebrews who were to rest, not the manna.

16:25. And Moses said, ‘Eat it today because today is a Sabbath to Yahweh; today you will not find it in the field.’

Verses 23–25 contain the first instances of the noun Sabbath (Hebrew, sabat) in the Bible. Certainly the concept existed as early as creation, yet the specific name of the day is not revealed to the reader until this time.

The definite noun translated ‘today’ occurs three times. It is for emphasis, to underscore the uniqueness of the Sabbath to the people of Israel.

16:26. ‘Six days you may gather it, but on the seventh day is a Sabbath; it will not be there.’

The formulation, ‘Six days … but on the seventh day’ first appears in the Bible in this verse, but it becomes idiomatic for the Sabbath laws throughout the Torah (see Exod. 20:9–11; 23:12; 31:15, 17; 34:21; 35:2). This literary convention is another indicator that the central ideas and laws of the Sabbath are present in the story of the manna. It is again important to note that these concepts precede the giving of the law at Sinai.

16:27. And it came to pass on the seventh day that some of the people went out to gather, and they did not find [any].

A prepositional phrase serves as the subject of the sentence. ‘From the people’ (preposition min) is a partitive marker referring to a part of the subsequent noun (cf., 2 Sam. 11:17; 2 Kings 9:33). The word ‘some’ is a solid translation. The subject is so general, however, that one cannot determine the extent or number of the people involved in the disobedience.

Ezekiel, a sixth-century prophet of Judah, alludes to this event by saying, ‘So I took them out of the land of Egypt and brought them into the wilderness. And I gave them my statutes and informed them of my ordinances, by which, if a man observes them, he will live. And also I gave them my Sabbaths to be a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the Lord who sanctifies them. But the house of Israel rebelled against me in the wilderness. They did not walk in my statutes, and they rejected my ordinances, by which, if a man observes them, he will live; and my Sabbaths they greatly profaned’ (20:10–13). Implied in the prophet’s account is the idea that the scene was one of widespread violation. Exactly how many people were involved in defiance is a mystery, however.

16:28. Then Yahweh said to Moses, ‘How long will you refuse to keep my commands and my instructions?’

Clearly, the ‘commands’ and ‘instructions’ that God is speaking about are the Sabbath statutes that have just been elaborated. Again, God is testing the obedience of his people. They, however, are failing miserably.

The Lord’s charge against Israel (through the covenant mediator Moses) is similar to his assault upon Pharaoh. In Exodus 10:3 the Lord said to Pharaoh, ‘How long will you refuse?’ The Hebrews are thus acting like the Egyptian king; that is, stubbornly disregarding the Word of God. But God has warned them. If they continue to act in disbelief and rebelliousness, then they will receive the same diseases/plagues that fell on Egypt (see 15:26).

16:29. ‘See that Yahweh has given you the Sabbath; therefore he is giving you bread on the sixth day for two days; everyone shall stay in his place; no one shall go out from his place on the seventh day.’

Yahweh himself is speaking here. He announces that the Sabbath is a divine gift to the people of Israel. Thus it is right to emphasize the joyfulness of the day. It is not something that the Hebrews celebrated in Egypt—Pharaoh was an oppressor and he would give them no time for rest. Unfortunately, many of the Hebrews apparently saw the Sabbath as oppressive, and that is why they disobeyed and went in search of manna. They had got it the wrong way round (see Deut. 5:15). P. D. Miller sums up the meaning of this verse by saying, ‘Here is an explicit statement in a narrative about the Sabbath that it is the gift of the Lord. In a larger way that is clearly the point that the Exodus form of the commandment means to make by reading the Sabbath into creation and identifying the Sabbath as blessed by the Lord and hallowed. That is, the Lord’s blessing of the Sabbath is the providing of the Sabbath as a gift for human existence.’ While I would strongly disagree with his statement that the Sabbath is to be read into creation—rather than being integral to it—yet, his emphasis upon the Sabbath as blessing is quite accurate.

16:30. So the people rested on the seventh day.

The verb ‘rested’ is šābăt, from which derives the noun ‘Sabbath’. Consequently, the opening phrase could actually read, ‘So the people kept the Sabbath’ (cf. Lev. 23:32).

The reader should also note the assonance in the verse: the verb is šābăt and the word for ‘seventh’ is šĕba‘. Thus the section ends on a lovely and highly poetical note.

**Application**

Many in the church today feel that the Sabbath/Lord’s Day is oppressive and burdensome. They act as if the day were one of drudgery and dull legalisms. That general misconception is unfortunate, because the Sabbath is to be a day of celebration and joy. Even Karl Barth, with whom we have little in common, recognizes the jubilant and joyful nature of the day: ‘On this day he is to celebrate, rejoice and be free, to the glory of God. In this celebration, joy and freedom he will be obedient. To withdraw from it under any pretext would be disobedience.’ That, of course, is Jesus’ point when he says, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath’ (Mark 2:27). It is for humanity’s well-being; it is a blessing; and it is to be a delight.

When I first began teaching, a number of my students were convicted of the necessity of keeping the Sabbath. They believed that the day should be set apart for acts of piety, necessity, mercy and rest. Their main concern was the idea of not being able to study on that day. An odd thing happened, however. When they kept the Sabbath their grades actually improved. They worked diligently the other six days of the week and they looked with eager anticipation to the Sabbath—and it became a day of joy to them. God makes a grand promise to his people about the Sabbath:

‘If you keep your feet from breaking the Sabbath

and from doing as you please on my holy day,

if you call the Sabbath a delight

and the Lord’s holy day honourable,

and if you honour it by not going your own way

and not doing as you please or speaking idle words,

then you will find your joy in the Lord,

and I will cause you to ride on the heights of the land

and to feast on the inheritance of your father Jacob.’

**The mouth of the Lord has spoken (Isa. 58:13–14).**

**Commemorating the provision of manna**

**(Exodus 16:31–36)**

The biblical author now inserts some editorial comments regarding the provision of manna throughout the remainder of the wilderness wanderings. He first gives a further description of the nature of the manna. An explanation of the length of time during which manna was eaten then follows. Finally, Moses comments upon the manna as a symbolic reminder of God’s goodness to Israel in the wilderness.

16:31. And the house of Israel called its name manna; it was white like coriander seed and its taste like wafers in honey.

This editorial section opens by recounting and adding to previous material from chapter 16. First, it mentions the naming of the manna which was related earlier in verses 14–16. The main difference is that now the Hebrews are called, literally, ‘the house of Israel’. That title appears in the Bible for the first time here. But it is not out of place: the idea of ‘house’ being used of a group of people is not new to Exodus (see 2:1). In addition, the designation is common in the Torah (Exod. 40:38; Lev. 10:6; 17:3, 8, 10; Num. 20:29). So the Septuagint’s translation ‘the children of Israel’ is misplaced.

Secondly, the verse provides another description of the manna (see verse 14). It agrees with the account of Numbers 11:7–8, but more detail is provided here.

16:32. And Moses said, ‘This is the word which Yahweh commanded, “Take an omerful of it to keep throughout your generations, so that they might see the bread with which I fed you in the wilderness, when I brought you from the land of Egypt.” ’

Yahweh directs the Hebrews to preserve one omer of manna—the amount of a daily ration—for future generations to see. This has a didactic purpose. It is to serve as a vivid reminder, a memorial, of God’s aid to the Israelites in their time of need. As Coats remarks, ‘The manna stands here as a symbol of a positive relationship between God and his people during the wilderness period.’

The form of the verb ‘to eat’ is a Hiphil causative, and thus it takes an active meaning—‘to feed’ someone with something.

At the beginning of the Lord’s command there is no verb; it literally says in the Masoretic Text, ‘the fulness of an omer’. The lack of a verb caused the Septuagint and Targum translators to read the noun ‘fulness’ rather as an imperative verbal form, ‘Fill!’ The latter reading makes the passage clearer in meaning.

16:33. And Moses said to Aaron, ‘Take one jar and put in it an omerful of manna and place it before Yahweh to keep throughout your generations.’

The verse opens with the command (imperative form), literally, ‘Take one jar.’ Indefinite nouns in Hebrew are normally left unmarked, but occasionally indefinite nouns can carry the adjective ‘one’ (for further examples, see Judg. 9:53; 13:2; 1 Sam. 1:1; 7:9, 12).

This is the only occurrence of the Hebrew word translated ‘jar’. The Septuagint translates it as ‘vessel’. It may be related to an Aramaic word which means ‘basket’. In any event, the word signifies some type of receptacle.

Moses’ order does not date from the time when the manna was first given. The wording, ‘place it before Yahweh’, implies that a priesthood exists and that a sanctuary is in operation—a point that is confirmed by the next verse. Such circumstances did not exist until after the law was provided on Mount Sinai.

Repetition of the phrase, ‘to be kept for the generations to come’, from verse 32, is for emphasis. It underscores the purpose of the ritual: it is to teach future generations of Israel how God provided for his people.

16:34. As Yahweh commanded Moses, so Aaron placed it before the Testimony to keep.

Moses now dictates that his brother (later to be the high priest) set the jar of manna before ‘the Testimony’. That term is often used in the Torah of the tabernacle containing the ark of the testimony (see Exod. 38:21; Num. 1:50, 53; 10:11). This reference to it has long been recognized as anachronistic, because neither the tabernacle nor the ark has yet been built. Early commentators regard the verse either as anticipatory or prophetic. In reality, it is Moses simply inserting this material when he wrote the book of Exodus to show that the Israelites did fulfil the commands God gave them at the time of the provision of the manna.

This is the third time the Hebrew infinitive ‘to keep’ appears, and it occurs in three verses in a row. This is for emphasis, in order to accentuate the preservation of the manna as a teaching tool for Israel’s posterity.

16:35. And the children of Israel ate the manna forty years until coming to an inhabited land; they ate the manna until they came to the border of the land of Canaan.

This editorial remark takes the reader even further into the future to the point at which the manna ceased to be provided for Israel. Joshua 5:12 defines that moment: ‘And the manna ceased on the day after they had eaten some of the produce of the land, so that the sons of Israel no longer had manna, but they ate some of the yield of the land of Canaan during that year.’

The period of forty years in the wilderness is historical, but also perhaps symbolical. Often the number ‘forty’ signifies a period of adversity and trial (see Gen. 7:12; 1 Sam. 17:16; Matt. 4:2). The testing of Israel is a central concept of the wilderness wanderings and God’s provision of manna (see 16:4).

16:36. And the omer is one tenth of an ephah.

See commentary on 16:16.

**Application**

This section underscores God’s great and continual provision for the house of Israel. It is not a one-off provision, but ‘a continual feast’, to quote Matthew Henry. Manna rained from heaven for forty years, and that demonstrates, in Henry’s words, ‘how constant the care of providence is’. And the manna never failed, even in the light of the people’s ingratitude. Despite Israel’s great sins of murmuring and rebellion, ‘God’s special bounty’, as Calvin calls it, came daily and yearly. Therefore, a memorial pot of manna was to be set in the tabernacle; it was there to witness to the magnitude, the glorious nature and the graciousness of the miracle.

The church should take great encouragement from this story. As the apostle Paul comments, ‘These things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come’ (1 Cor. 10:11). We must always remember and believe that God is providentially caring for his church, supplying her with great bounty! And, therefore, we need to trust in him at all times and in all circumstances.

**The incident at Massah and Meribah**

**(Exodus 17:1–7)**

Now occurs a most severe test for the people of Israel. The people are travelling in stages through the desert. They arrive at Rephidim and there is no water. How do they respond to the hardship? We are now introduced to the fourth instance of grumbling in the wilderness (the first three are 14:11–12; 15:24; 16:2).

17:1. And the whole congregation of the children of Israel journeyed from the wilderness of Sin, place by place, according to the command of Yahweh. And they camped in Rephidim. And there was no water for the people to drink.

The Hebrews depart from the area in which manna and quail are first given to them, that is, the Wilderness of Sin. They travel, literally, ‘according to their goings out’. That is all one word in Hebrew, and it derives from a verb normally denoting source, origin, or beginning. The vein that yields silver (Job 28:1), the spring that gives rise to water (2 Chron. 32:30; Ps. 107:33–35) and the bud from which the flower develops (Job 38:27) are each called by this Hebrew word. The term also signifies the place of a journey’s commencement. Simply put, it denotes a starting-point, or place of departure.

The directions to and locations of these encampments are given to the Hebrews, literally, ‘by the mouth of Yahweh’. God is the one directing the people through the desert, and he is taking them from one oasis to another.

On the significance of the verb ‘to camp’, see the commentary on 14:9. The siting of the camp at Rephidim is uncertain.

The problem at Rephidim is lack of water. It is a more severe problem than at Marah. At Marah there was water, and God made it sweet. At Rephidim water must appear, apparently, ex nihilo.

17:2. So the people quarrelled with Moses and they said, ‘Give us water to drink and we will drink.’ And Moses said to them, ‘Why are you quarrelling with me? Why are you testing Yahweh?’

The response of the people to their circumstances is more combative than mere grumbling. The word ‘quarrelled’ is a strong word meaning ‘to strive’, or to find fault with a measure of hostility. The intensity is further emphasized by the stark demand of the Hebrews, the imperative: ‘Give us water to drink!’

The prophet answers the rebels in much the same way as he responded to the third case of grumbling (see 16:7). When Israel contended with Moses they were really testing the Lord who had placed Moses in a position of authority. It was ultimately a lack of faith in Yahweh that led the people to act in such a manner.

The second occurrence of the verb ‘to quarrel’ ends with a nun paragogicum. This ‘usually expresses a marked emphasis’ and certainty, although it can also signify that something is by way of contrast. In any event, its appearance in this verse demonstrates Moses’ strong reaction to the accusation made by the Hebrews.

17:3. But the people were thirsty for water there. So the people grumbled against Moses. And they said, ‘Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?’

The language of Israel’s response is angry and hostile. They accuse Moses of bringing them out to the wilderness to die. It is the second time they have charged him with this crime (see 16:3).

The spoken complaint reflects the oneness and self-centredness of the people. It is reported in the first person singular and reads, literally, ‘Why did you bring us up out of Egypt? To kill me, and my children and my livestock?’ Numerous versions, such as the Septuagint, the Syriac and the Vulgate, translate the endings as first-person plurals—and, indeed, every English translation does the same.

17:4. Then Moses cried out to Yahweh, saying, ‘What shall I do for this people? They are almost ready to stone me.’

The opposition of the rebels to Moses’ authority is reaching fever pitch and mounting towards a climax. Moses himself discerns that the people are close to murdering him: he says, literally, ‘Yet a little while and they will stone me.’ The first part of that statement in the Hebrew is a durative phrase that conveys a sense of impending action and urgency (see Hosea 1:4; Jer. 51:33). It is not hyperbole in any sense, but it demonstrates clear and present danger.

The prophet’s response is to pray to the Lord. He petitions the God of the Hebrews for an answer to the problem.

17:5. And Yahweh said to Moses, ‘Cross before the people, and take with you some of the elders of Israel, and your rod with which you struck the Nile. Take it in your hand and go.’

Yahweh’s solution to the prophet’s dilemma is constructed on three imperatives. First, Moses is commanded to ‘pass on by’ the Hebrews. That verb carries the idea of going ahead of the people into the wilderness. Second, the prophet is told to ‘take’ some of the elders of Israel with him. They are to serve as witnesses to the subsequent event. Finally, Moses is instructed to ‘take’ the rod that had been a tool of God’s miraculous power during the plague cycles in Egypt.

Yahweh makes mention of the first plague that came upon Egypt. The probable reason for the comment is to draw a contrast. The very rod that had struck the Nile river to deprive Egypt of water (7:14–25) now becomes a source of benefit to the people of Israel by providing water for them.

17:6. ‘Behold, I will stand before you there upon the rock at Horeb. And you will strike on the rock, and water will come forth from it so that the people may drink.’ And Moses did so before the eyes of the elders of Israel.

God meets Israel’s needs, and he does so miraculously and abundantly. Moses is to go to ‘Horeb’, to the place where God had revealed himself to the prophet at the burning bush. Horeb is an alternative name for Mount Sinai, where the Hebrews will soon receive the law from Yahweh (see commentary on 3:1,12).

Yahweh announces that he ‘will stand’ on the rock at Horeb. Some commentators argue this is mere anthropomorphic language, using human imagery to describe the presence of God. Others see a theophany in which the pillar of cloud descends upon the rock. Either way, God is at Horeb in a special, unique way in order to provide for his people.

A natural explanation of water spewing from rocks, such as that given by Cassuto, is unwarranted. The point of the story is to demonstrate that if need be God will go to great and miraculous lengths to sustain the Hebrews.

17:7. And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah because of the quarrel of the children of Israel and because they tested Yahweh, saying, ‘Is Yahweh among us or not?’

In good Semitic fashion, Moses names the place of the miracle according to the incident that occurred there. These etymologies are based upon assonance. ‘Massah’ means ‘test’, and it is a derivative of the verb ‘to test’ in verse 2. ‘Meribah’ means ‘quarrel’, and it derives from the verb ‘to quarrel’ also in verse 2. The purpose of naming the site in this way was so that the people of Israel should never forget how foolishly and shamefully they had acted here.

The author drives home the point of the etymology by employing a chiastic structure:

**Application**

Many authors have suggested that the events at Massah/Meribah serve as paradigms or pointers to certain New Testament stories. Some of these proposals have been good, while others have been less convincing. For example, the claim that the water ceremony in John 7:37–39 is a re-enactment of the wilderness water miracle seems to be stretching parallels too far. Also, the idea that the Lord’s Prayer is based upon the Massah/Meribah tradition is a bit strained.

On the other hand, when Satan tempts Jesus to throw himself off the temple to see if God would be faithful and truly save him as he promised (Matt. 4:5–7), Jesus answers by quoting Deuteronomy 6:16: ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah.’ Jesus is being tempted to commit the same sin into which Israel fell when they were tested in the wilderness. Jesus, however, does not fail, as Israel failed, but remains true, obedient and faithful to God.

The apostle Paul also provides us with a fuller meaning and understanding of the Massah/Meribah occurrence, when he says, ‘For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was the Messiah’ (1 Cor. 10:1–4). The identification of the Messiah with a rock is not an anomaly in the Old Testament. It is a term that is frequently used of God (see Gen. 49:24; Deut. 32:4, 15, 18, 30–31). And, thus, Paul ‘… connects an episode from the history of Israel with the current conditions in Corinth. Christ was present in the wilderness as he is present with the church today. God’s rejection of those Israelites who tested and tried him is a relevant lesson and reminder for those Corinthians who dabble in idolatry.’ Israel is the church in the Old Testament. And we should learn from our forefathers, and not act the way they did at Massah/Meribah.

Attempts to use Moses at Massah/Meribah as a model for ministry today are not very successful. That is not the point of the story, and many of these studies easily slip into allegorical teaching.

**8. Preparation for Sinai Exodus 17:8–18:27**

**War with Amalek**

**(Exodus 17:8–16)**

This section has a lot in common with the previous incident (17:1–7). Both accounts are based at Rephidim; a great test or period of suffering occurs in both stories; the rod of God plays a significant role in each; Yahweh intervenes to save his people both times; and there are similar-sounding words (i.e. examples of assonance) in the two episodes (cf. 17:2, 7, 15). The major difference is that up to this point the adversity experienced by Israel after leaving Egypt has been of an inanimate nature. Now the people are confronted with human power and military might. This episode describes the first fight against another nation since the Hebrews left Egypt.

17:8. Then the Amalekites came and they fought with Israel at Rephidim.

As if Israel does not already have enough problems at Rephidim (17:1), now they are attacked there by a pagan, warring nation. The Amalekites were a semi-nomadic people who lived in the desert lands to the south of Palestine (e.g., Gen. 14:7). Some analysts believe that they were fighting over control of the Kadesh Oasis, a most important caravan centre. The exact location of the battle is unknown, however. Probably the most that can be said is that the Amalekites attacked Israel because they feared encroachment on their control of oases and caravan routes, in general.

Their method of attack is described in Deuteronomy 25:17–18: ‘Remember what Amalek did to you along the way when you came out from Egypt, how he met you along the way and attacked among you all the stragglers at your rear when you were faint and weary.’

17:9. And Moses said to Joshua, ‘Choose men for us, and go forth to fight against the Amalekites. Tomorrow I will stand upon the top of the hill, and the rod of God will be in my hand.’

Israel does not respond by fleeing—as they did in Egypt—but they make their own necessary defence against the aggressor. In the escape from Egypt, the people merely stood and watched Yahweh stunningly defeat the Egyptians; now they must help to defend themselves.

The man ‘Joshua’ is mentioned for the first time in Scripture, as he is appointed field commander to choose capable warriors to drive back the Amalekites. We later learn that he was the son of Nun (33:11), and the assistant to, and successor of, Moses (24:13; Josh. 1:1–3). It was he who later led Israel in the conquest of Canaan.

Moses was advanced in years, and so he could not lead the military attack. He would do his part, however, by placing himself on top of a hill at the battlefield so as to be seen by Israel. There he would hold the staff of God, as he said, ‘in my hand’—that powerful instrument that had channelled God’s power to bring plagues on Egypt and to produce water from the rock at Rephidim.

In the original a question exists regarding whether the word ‘tomorrow’ should be attached to the activity of Joshua (first clause) or to the work of Moses (second clause). Perhaps it refers to both.

17:10. So Joshua did as Moses said to him—to fight against the Amalekites. And Moses, Aaron and Hur went up to the top of the hill.

As in the case of Joshua in verse 9, so too the figure of Hur is first introduced here. He was later to become an important judicial figure in early Israel (24:14). Perhaps he was from the tribe of Judah and was the grandfather of Bezalel, the leader in the construction of the tabernacle (31:2; 35:30; 38:22). Jewish tradition also claims that he was either the husband or the son of Miriam, the sister of Moses.

17:11. And whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; whenever he lowered his hand, then the Amalekites prevailed.

The battle begins. Whenever Moses holds up ‘his hand’ Israel dominates, but when he rests ‘his hand’ the Amalekites sway the battle. Much ink has been spilled regarding Moses’ part and activity in the conflict. Sarna, for instance, argues it is ‘highly plausible’ that ‘Moses held up a standard bearing some conspicuous symbol that signified the presence of God in the Israelite camp’. Confirmation of this position rests in the name Moses gives to the battle site in verse 15: ‘Yahweh is my banner.’ Others insist we are witnessing an act of prayer—when Moses’ hands are raised for divine intervention, God responds. There is absolutely nothing in the text to support this idea. Still others believe Moses is acting as a cult-magician, employing magical powers much like those of the magicians of Egypt. Coats remarks, ‘By quasi-magical ritual, he determines the proceedings of the battle.’

The answer is quite simple. Moses has God’s rod in his hand—see verse 9 in which ‘hand’ is also singular. The rod is the mediating instrument of God’s power. It is God who is fighting for Israel, and he who is to be glorified. And the reason Israel does not prevail when the rod is lowered is to show the people that God contributes more to their victory than do sword and shield.

17:12. When Moses’ hands [became] heavy, they took a stone and they set it under him and he sat upon it. And Aaron and Hur held his hands up, one on one side and one on the other. And his hands were steady until the setting of the sun.

The problem for the aged prophet was that ‘the hands of Moses’ were ‘heavy’. This is a noun clause in Hebrew (it has no verb) and its purpose is ‘to emphasize very strongly the unconditional relation between the subject and predicate’. If Israel was to be victorious, Moses needed help.

With the aid of Aaron and Hur, Moses, in a sitting position, was able to keep his hands ‘steady’ until the going down of the sun. The basic meaning of the word ‘steady’ is ‘faithful/trustworthy/true’. It is normally used in moral contexts, and this is the only time in Scripture that it relates to a physical activity.

17:13. So Joshua overcame Amalek and his people by the edge of the sword.

Joshua’s defeat of the Amalekites was not one of total destruction or annihilation. The verb ‘overcame’ has the basic sense of ‘to weaken/disable’ (cf. Isa. 14:12). The use of this verb has an ironic twist to it. A possible word-play exists between the verb (hālăš) and the noun used in Deuteronomy 25:18 to describe the Hebrew stragglers/weak ones (hănnĕhĕšālîm) being picked off by the Amalekite army. Thus Joshua made weak and disabled those who preyed upon the weak and disabled!

17:14. Then Yahweh said to Moses, ‘Write this memorial in the book, and put it in the ears of Joshua, that I will surely blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under the sun.’

Because of the hostility of Amalek, Yahweh commands (imperative mood) Moses to record ‘a memorial in the book’. The term reflects a historical record of what God promises. The pledge is to be kept orally and in writing from generation to generation.

The content of the memorial inscription is directly stated: ‘I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek.’ The statement is intensive, because the infinitive absolute of the verb is followed by an imperfective form of the same verb. It literally reads, ‘Blotting out, I will blot out.’ In addition, it should be noted that the word ‘memory’ is related to ‘memorial’ from earlier in the verse. The point is to contrast the eternality of God’s command and justice with the eventual demise of the people of Amalek (see 1 Sam. 15:1–33).

17:15. And Moses built an altar, and he called its name ‘Yahweh is my standard.’

On account of the great deliverance at Rephidim, Moses erects an altar to Yahweh and he names it Yahweh nissi, that is, ‘Yahweh is my standard.’ Similar memorials are known elsewhere in the Old Testament: for instance, Jacob constructs an altar at Shechem, and he calls it ‘El the God of Israel’ (Gen. 33:20). These altars were not for sacrifice, but were erected in commemoration of the event that had taken place at the site.

The Hebrew term often translated ‘banner’ is really a ‘standard’ or signal-pole. In antiquity, a standard was a rallying-point. Often it bore an emblem, symbol, or banner on its top. A standard was normally raised on a hill or other high place to be seen by all (see Num. 21:4–9). It was an object of focus and hope for the people.

Moses’ appearance on top of the hill with the rod of God in his hand acted much like a standard. The rod on the hill served as a symbol of Yahweh’s power. Yahweh was thus seen to be the standard beneath which Israel rallied. The standard as a figure of the divine is known from other places in the Old Testament. In Isaiah 11:10, the Messiah, the ‘root of Jesse’, is one who ‘will stand as a standard for the people’.

17:16. And he said, ‘Because a hand was against the throne of Yahweh, Yahweh will make war against Amalek from generation to generation.’

The difficulty in interpreting this verse has been recognized by commentators for a long time. My concern is not to analyse each and every proposal—Childs has already done that masterfully. I will generally present the problems, and then explain what I think to be the best solutions.

The first part of the verse is fragmentary, and it appears to have a poetical form. It literally says, ‘Because a hand upon kēs yāh …’ The meaning of kēs yāh is much in dispute. The Septuagint translates it as ‘a secret hand’—which is a weak attempt. Some want to see a scribal error, and believe the word kēs should be nēs (standard/banner) in line with verse 15. The Vulgate and other translations view it as a scribal omission of a syllable and assume the word should be kîssē’, meaning ‘throne’. The latter is probably correct.

The yāh is the abbreviated form of Yahweh seen previously in 15:2. See commentary on that verse.

The preposition ‘upon/to’ in the clause is probably being used in an oppositional sense, meaning ‘against’ (see Exod. 20:3). Thus the entire phrase would read, ‘Because a hand was against the throne of Yahweh’. In other words, the Amalekites assaulted the rule and sovereignty of the Hebrew God.

As a result, Yahweh will do battle against Amalek for generations to come. And that provides the setting for what follows in Scripture regarding the relationship of Israel and Amalek (see 1 Sam. 15; 30).

**Application**

The medieval writer Dante wrote a book called The Inferno. In it, the Roman poet Virgil leads Dante through hell and its different compartments. In Canto III, Dante is introduced to the souls of the dead who in life were neither for good or evil but only for themselves—their only banner was ‘me’. They race round and round in a black haze pursuing a wavering banner on a standard. Dante relates the scene: ‘I saw a banner there upon the mist. Circling and circling, it seemed to scorn all pause. So it ran on, and still behind it pressed a never-ending rout of souls in pain … These wretches, never born and never dead, ran naked in swarms of wasps and hornets that goaded them the more they fled, and made their faces stream with bloody gouts [drops] of pus and tears that dribbled to their feet to be swallowed there by loathsome worms and maggots.’ These dead ran after a standard to call their own, a banner to give them identity, meaning and significance. In The Inferno, the dead could never catch the banner.

Christians, like the church of old, are to proclaim, ‘The Lord is my Banner.’ He is the ensign on the standard around which we are to rally, and which is to lead us into battle. It is the emblem of whom we serve!

Onward Christian soldiers,

Marching as to war,

With the cross of Jesus

Going on before:

Christ, the royal Master,

Leads against the foe;

Forward into battle,

See his banners go.

Onward Christian soldiers,

Marching as to war,

With the cross of Jesus

Going on before.

**Jethro and Moses**

**(Exodus 18:1–12)**

This section presents an antithesis, or contrast, to the preceding block of material. In it we see one of the leaders of a neighbouring people not seeking to destroy Israel, as had the Amalekites. Instead here is one who honours the unique and wonderful redemption that God had accomplished for his people.

18:1. And Jethro, the priest of Midian, the father-in-law of Moses, heard all that God had done for Moses and for Israel his people, that Yahweh had brought out Israel from Egypt.

The last mention of Jethro was in 4:18, where he gave Moses leave to return to Egypt. Because it has been so long since Jethro has been referred to in the text, the author details his status, as a reminder to the reader: he was ‘the priest of Midian and the father-in-law of Moses’ (see 3:1). Thus Moses is taking us back to a situation and relationship that preceded all the events which took place in Egypt.

Jethro had heard about Yahweh’s redemption of Israel out of Egypt. He probably received reports in the common manner from caravans travelling through his land into and out of Egypt. In addition, Zipporah and her sons would have brought news to Jethro because they had originally accompanied Moses on his journey to the land of the pharaohs (see 4:20).

18:2–3. And Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, took Zipporah, the wife of Moses, after he had sent her back, and her two sons, of whom the name of one was Gershom, for he said, ‘I was an alien in a foreign land.’

Now we read about an episode about which nothing further is known. Apparently Moses had sent his family back from Egypt to live with Jethro. The cause of the separation is uncertain. It may have been related to the incident concerning the circumcision of his son described in 4:24–26. That was the last time that Moses’ family has been mentioned up to this point. The incident at the inn was a distressing one, and it may be that his family went no farther into Egyptian territory. It has also been frequently proposed that once matters began heating up in Egypt with the plagues, then Moses sent his family away for their protection.

Some Rabbinical writings, such as Mekilta, understand the sending away of Zipporah as a divorce. The verb ‘send back’ in rare instances can mean the judicial separation of a marriage (see Deut. 24:1). Yet Jethro refers to Zipporah as Moses’ ‘wife’ in verse 6. ‘Send back’ seems to carry its basic, common meaning here; in other words, Moses sent her back to her father for safe-keeping.

Moses’ two sons had accompanied Zipporah on her return to Midian. The author, here and in the next verse, provides the names of the children and the meaning of their names. The names are given because they apply to the recent and present circumstances of Moses and Israel. The naming of Gershom is a word-for-word duplication of 2:22, in which Gershom was first named by his father (see commentary on that verse). The name is a word-play. ‘Gershom’ means ‘a sojourner/stranger there’.

The verbal form used in the naming of Gershom is a perfective, and it reads, ‘I was an alien in a foreign land.’ It is likely this is a reference to Egypt, from where Moses had recently fled with Israel.

18:4. And the name of the other was Eliezer, for [he said], ‘The God of my father was my help, and he delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh.’

The name of the second son was ‘Eliezer’, which means ‘God is help.’ His name reflects God’s deliverance of his people from the foreign land of verse 3—that is, Egypt. Moses explains that God is his helper.

The phrase ‘the sword of Pharaoh’ is unique and curious. It may perhaps be a reference to Egyptian literature. In numerous inscriptions from the New Kingdom, the reigning pharaoh is accorded the title ‘lord of the sword’. This is particularly true of Rameses II, who may well have been the pharaoh of the exodus. The sword is a metaphor for military prowess, power and victory. It is from that dazzling force that Yahweh has delivered Israel.

18:5. And Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, and his sons, and his wife came to Moses, to the wilderness, where he was camping at the mountain of God.

Jethro brings Moses’ family to meet him at ‘the mountain of God’. In Exodus 3:1, the ‘mountain of God’ is identified as Horeb, another name for Mount Sinai. It is here that God called Moses at the burning bush. Camping and worshipping ‘at this mountain’ was also the sign and fulfilment of the promise God had given that he would be with Moses (see 3:12).

The miraculous event of bringing water from the rock near Rephidim occurred at Horeb (17:6) and the war with Amalek also took place in the vicinity of the mountain (17:8). Finally, this was to be the site where Israel received the law of Yahweh (19:2ff.).

18:6. And he said to Moses, ‘I, Jethro, your father-in-law, am coming to you with your wife and her two sons with her.’

In the light of verse 5, translators have had difficulty understanding this verse. It begins, literally, ‘And he said to Moses, ‘ “I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you.” ’ How could Jethro be speaking these words to Moses? The Septuagint and Syriac alter the reading of the verse to: ‘And it was said to Moses, “Behold, your father-in-law Jethro, is coming to you.” ’ The two changes made are, first, to read the verb ‘said’ passively rather than actively, and, secondly, to substitute hinneh (‘Behold’) in place of ‘ni (‘I’). These modifications signify that a third party, a messenger, came to Moses announcing the imminent arrival of his family.

The problem is that the Masoretic Text makes perfect sense as it stands, and is in no need of emendation. It is clear from verse 7 that a messenger is employed—but, as any good messenger does, he speaks the exact words of the patriarch who sent the message. The herald thus speaks in the first person. He is a mere instrument, or tool, of the sender.

18:7. So Moses went out to meet his father-in-law, and he bowed down and he kissed him. And they asked each other concerning their welfare. Then they entered the tent.

The meeting between Moses and Jethro takes priority over the return of Moses’ family. That is because Jethro is the one with the highest station, even above that of Moses. The formal courtesies that Moses gives to Jethro underscore the homage due to the elder, the one of greater authority. First, Moses travels to meet his father-in-law on the way, an act of humility and obeisance (see Gen. 33:3). And, secondly, Moses greets Jethro by bowing before him and kissing him, also common acts when meeting a person of higher status (e.g., 2 Sam. 14:33).

Other formal civilities of the ancient Near East then occur. Literally, they ‘asked each of his comrade as to peace/welfare’. This is a Hebrew idiom of greeting, that is, finding out how the other person has been faring in life (see its use in Judg. 18:15; 1 Sam. 10:4; 17:22; 25:5). And, finally, after the formalities, the two men retire to a tent for more serious discussions.

18:8. And Moses recounted to his father-in-law all that Yahweh had done to Pharaoh and to Egypt for Israel’s sake, all the hardship they had found on the way, and how Yahweh had delivered them.

This verse opens the general discussion that the two men had in the tent. It begins with the testimony of Moses. The prophet first tells Jethro about what Yahweh had done in and to Egypt, i.e., the events of the plagues and the Red Sea. Then he describes the various troubles and difficulties Israel had faced in leaving Egypt and travelling through the wilderness—lack of water at Marah, grumbling over food in the Wilderness of Sin, the rebellion over the water shortage at Massah/Meribah, and the battle against the Amalekites. Finally, he declares how Yahweh had delivered Israel from all their trials and tribulations.

Moses gives all the glory to Yahweh. He talks to Jethro about ‘everything Yahweh did’ and ‘how Yahweh saved them’. The prophet takes no honour to himself.

18:9. And Jethro was delighted about all the good which Yahweh had done for Israel when he delivered them from the hand of the Egyptians.

Jethro is greatly moved by the testimony of Moses. And he displays a similar enthusiasm and excitement to his son-in-law; in fact, he uses similar vocabulary to that used in Moses’ recitation in the previous verse.

The opening verb, translated ‘delighted’, is rare (it comes from hdh, see Job 3:6). The Septuagint translates it as if it derives from the verbal root hrd, which means ‘to tremble/shudder’. The Jewish Midrash B. Sanhedrin 94b renders the verb as ‘He felt cuts in his body.’ No matter how one views it, the word reflects a heightened response on the part of Jethro.

18:10. So Jethro said, ‘Blessed is Yahweh, who delivered you from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of Pharaoh, who delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians!’

The next two verses constitute Jethro’s confession. He begins his benediction with, literally, ‘Blessed be Yahweh.’ A blessing beginning this way becomes a recognized formula in Israel’s history. In addition, this is by no means the only blessing upon God and Israel invoked by non-Israelites (see Gen. 26:28–29; Josh. 2:9–11; 1 Kings 5:2). It is also important to note that Jethro does not employ a generic name applying to any deity, but he specifically names ‘Yahweh’ as the blessed one. Here is a Midianite calling on the personal name of the God of the Hebrews!

The Septuagint, apparently sensing an example of dittography, does not include the second half of the verse in its translation. In agreement, the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia notes a lacuna at the end of verse 11, and thus places the second half of verse 10 at the end of verse 11. All this is unnecessary literary gymnastics. What we have here is a poetical confession, in which the second line basically repeats the first line for emphasis (the essence of Hebrew poetry). It is an incomplete synonymous parallelism, looking like this:

a

b

c

Blessed be Yahweh

who delivered you (plural)

from the hand of the Egyptians and from the hand of Pharaoh

b

c

who delivered the people

from under the hand of the Egyptians.

8:11. ‘Now I know that Yahweh is greater than all the gods because they acted arrogantly against Israel.’

‘Now I know’ is an expression commonly used in the Old Testament (e.g. 1 Kings 17:24; 2 Kings 5:15). In the majority of its appearances the formula is used of a person being convinced of a truth by an event. It reflects conviction on the part of the recipient. Whether or not it signifies the conversion of Jethro to follow the Hebrew God is uncertain: that may have happened earlier, in which case he now has greater belief in the Lord or firmer conviction. It does appear, however, that at some point Jethro became a devotee of Yahweh.

The second half of the verse is difficult. It literally reads, ‘because of the way in which they acted arrogantly against them’. Who is meant by ‘they’? Some argue it is a reference to the Egyptians of verse 10. On the other hand, it is more likely that it represents the ‘gods’ of the earlier part of the verse 11. Indeed, the two halves of the verse are tied together by a word that serves to introduce a causal clause (‘because’). Thus, the entire verse signals another mockery of the gods of Egypt—it is they who acted presumptuously and arrogantly against the people of God. This is a confirmation of Exodus 12:12.

18:12. Then Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, took a whole burnt offering and other offerings before God; and Aaron and all the elders of Israel came to eat food with the father-in-law of Moses before God.

Jethro offers sacrifices to God as expressions of joy, thankfulness and devotion. The first sacrifice is the ‘burnt offering’. This type of animal offering had existed since the time of Noah, when the patriarch sacrificed victims immediately after the Flood (Gen. 8:20). It was later used in the temple/tabernacle morning and evening as a symbol of unceasing communion with God (Exod. 29:42). The Hebrew word literally means ‘that which ascends’, implying that the offering goes up heavenward to the great God. The sacrifice ‘makes its meaning plain enough, impressing on the thoughtful worshipper the desire of God for ‘truth in the inward parts’, and for a disciplined devotion. It depicts a general self-dedication which is worked out in careful and painstaking detail.’

The other ‘sacrifices’ refer to an extremely ancient type of sacrifice, of which we first read in the Scriptures in Genesis 31:54 and 46:1. The word reflects a class of sacrifices. However, normally the rite included the eating of the flesh of the victim at a feast held in honour of God. Often it was an offering of thanksgiving.

After the ritual of sacrifice, ‘Aaron and all the elders of Israel’ had a meal with Jethro. It may be that the meal consisted of the remains of the sacrificial animals: the term ‘bread’ used here in the original is often a synecdoche for food in general.

The content of the verse may actually ‘portray the making of a covenant between the Israelites and the Midianite Jethro’. The constituent parts of the scene find parallels with sacrificial events that are part of covenant-making (see Gen. 31:54, in particular). The sacrificial meal shared by Jethro and the Israelite leaders is the strongest point in favour of this interpretation.

**Application**

What a wonderful family conversation we are witnessing! Moses and Jethro are not talking about the weather, sheep-herding, or the latest caravan gossip or news. No, but they are talking about the wondrous works of God. Moses is telling Jethro of the marvellous deeds of Yahweh—it is Moses’ testimony, his sharing of the good news with his father-in-law. How profitable is this type of conversation! Each of us ought to consider the manner in which we deal with our families—what do we talk about around the dinner table? In what do we rejoice when we hear of it? I believe Moses’ evangelistic efforts put many of us to shame.

Jethro’s response to the good news is also astounding. Whereas the Israelites murmured and grumbled throughout their wanderings, here is a Midianite rejoicing over God’s goodness to Israel! The faith of the Gentile is putting to shame the faith of the Hebrew. What Jesus says about the Roman centurion in Matthew 8:10 could be said about Jethro: ‘Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel.’

**Judging the people**

**(Exodus 18:13–27)**

The purpose of this paragraph is to show the foundation of the judicial system in Israel. It is a self-contained narrative regarding Moses’ appointment, at the behest of Jethro, of judges for the people. The story is essentially repeated in Deuteronomy 1:9–18, and that passage should be consulted.

The date of this material is a matter of controversy. Many scholars want to date it after the giving of the law at Sinai and thus see its present position as a retrojection. On the other hand, the passage does bear marks of great antiquity; Sarna comments on the salient point that ‘so important an Israelite institution as the judiciary is ascribed to the initiative and advice of a Midianite priest. This extraordinary fact testifies to the reliability of the tradition and to its antiquity. In light of the hostility that later characterized the relationships between the Midianites and the Israelites, it is hardly likely that anyone would invent such a story.’ The fact that judges should have been appointed prior to the giving of the law at Sinai is not a problem—as we have frequently seen, Israel was not a lawless society prior to Sinai. Therefore, the people were in need of a judicial administration.

18:13. And on the next day, Moses sat to judge the people. And the people stood near Moses from morning until evening.

This verse provides the general setting for the entire passage. First, it gives a chronological connection with the events recorded in the previous verses: ‘And it came to pass on the morrow.’ The timing is important because it indicates that Jethro was still present and the Israelites had not departed from Horeb. At that time Moses ‘sat’ (the same word as in 17:12) to serve as judge over the disputations of the Hebrews.

Moses was acting alone in judicial authority and, therefore, the people ‘stood by/beside’ him (a locational preposition is used). Apparently crowds of people approached him in order to have their cases heard by him. The activity of the prophet is described in terms of two all-inclusive opposites: he judged the people ‘from the morning until the evening’. The figure of speech is used to highlight the great number of cases waiting to be dealt with by Moses.

18:14. When the father-in-law of Moses saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, ‘What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why are you sitting alone, and all the people standing near you from morning until evening?’

After watching the proceedings all day long, Jethro asks Moses two questions. The first one is rhetorical: Jethro knows exactly what Moses has been doing, but now he wants his son-in-law to acknowledge his activity. The second question is an accusation. But what is it that he is accusing Moses of? ‘It is important to note that Jethro does not accuse Moses of misappropriation of power; Moses clearly stands in a legal office. Nor does Jethro introduce Moses to legal responsibility. The text presupposes that Moses carries a legitimate juridical position.’ The problem is that Moses is doing too much ‘alone’. He is carrying too great a burden on his own. He has no assistance.

18:15. And Moses said to his father-in-law, ‘Because the people come to me to enquire of God.’

Moses’ response is straightforward: the Hebrews come to him ‘to enquire of God’. That verb is often used of the act of dispensing oracles. In other words, when a person desires to know the will of a god, or what might happen in the future, he or she would seek answers from a deity. Oracular activity was quite common in the ancient Near East, and it is sometimes referred to in the Bible using the word ‘enquire’ (see Gen. 25:22; 1 Sam. 9:9; 2 Kings 22:18). A commentator might conclude that Moses is thus acting as a seer, or diviner, for the Hebrew people.

The problem with this understanding of the passage is the fact that the context of the people’s enquiry is judicial. They went to receive answers to their legal disputations (18:16). And, so, the word ‘enquire’ has taken on a technical, legal meaning within the context of our story, and it has nothing to do with divination.

18:16. ‘Whenever they have a dispute, they come to me, and I judge between a man and his neighbour. And I make known the decrees of God and his laws.’

The verse opens, literally, ‘when a matter is to them’. The noun is normally translated ‘thing/word/matter’, but here it obviously signifies a dispute, or an affair that needs to be dealt with. The disagreement is then brought to Moses. He responds in two ways. First, he acts as the adjudicator, or the judge who decides what is right. Secondly, he is the law-giver: ‘I make known’ (a Hiphil causative) the precepts of God.

Because of Moses’ position as law-giver, some scholars argue that the events recorded in Exodus 18 must have occurred after the provision of the law at Sinai. This is a non sequitur. The fact of the matter is that many laws preceded the giving of the law at Mount Sinai, such as the Sabbath statutes of Exodus 16 and the Passover commands of Exodus 12.

18:17. And the father-in-law of Moses said to him, ‘The thing you are doing is not good.’

Jethro passes judgement on Moses’ activity. He speaks directly and plainly. His speech opens with the words lō’ tôb, ‘not good’ (cf. Gen. 2:18). This is emphatic: ‘When expressing absolute denial, the Bible always uses lō’ followed by an additional word.’ When lō’ precedes any part of the sentence other than the verb, it means the word or expression thus singled out is being ‘strongly emphasized’. In speaking to Moses, Jethro is not vacillating or wavering in his opinion. To him, what Moses is doing is wrong.

18:18. ‘You are certainly wearing down, both you and this people who are with you, because the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone.’

The reason for Jethro’s judgement that what Moses is doing is ‘not good’ is now stated. And it is given in the strongest and most forceful terms. His point is accentuated by the use of an infinitive absolute followed by an imperfective of the same verb: literally, ‘Fading you will fade.’ The verb means ‘to sink/languish/drop down/wither’. It is used of the drooping of a leaf (Isa. 1:30; Ps. 1:3). In the present context, it refers to exhaustion, wearing down and discouragement.

The two verbs are followed by a double use of an emphatic particle: ‘Indeed you! Indeed this people!’ The negative effects of the present circumstances, will, first of all, have an impact upon the prophet who is an old man and unable to ‘do it alone’. The Hebrew people will also be worn down and frustrated as they wait all day to have their cases heard.

The entire situation is simply ‘too heavy’ for Moses. The word for ‘heavy’ is kābēd, which as we have noted elsewhere, is a key term in the book of Exodus, having been used earlier of Pharaoh’s heart (8:15, 32; 9:34; 10:1), of the plagues (8:24; 9:3, 18, 24; 10:14) and of Moses’ arms (17:12).

18:19. ‘Now hear my voice, and I will advise you. May God be with you! You be for the people a representative before God, and you bring the disputes to God.’

Jethro now wants Moses’ attention (he uses the imperative ‘hear!’) so that he may advise him. But before he gives his advice, Jethro utters a benediction in the form of a jussive clause: ‘May God be with you!’ The content of Jethro’s advice is the need for the establishment of a new order of judicial hierarchy. He begins, in this verse and the next, to define the nature of Moses’ responsibilities in the new order. First, Moses must act as the people’s ‘representative before God’. The Hebrew word is normally used as a preposition meaning ‘in front of’, and rarely as a substantive meaning ‘front’ (only twice in Scripture). In the present context it is figurative, signifying ‘the one in front of God’. He is to serve first and foremost as the covenant mediator between Israel and Yahweh.

Secondly, Moses, as mediator, is to bring various cases before God to receive decisions. Obviously, this duty does not involve every single dispute, but rather ones that are intricate and difficult (see 18:22). The workload and caseload falling on Moses are to be eased.

18:20. ‘And you must teach them the statutes and the laws, and make known to them the way in which they should walk, and the work they should do.’

Jethro’s job description for Moses has a pedagogic aspect: he is to be a teacher/instructor of the Word of God. The word translated ‘teach’ is probably related to a verb that means ‘to enlighten/shine’. However, it also carries a sense of gravity and warning.

The content of Moses’ teaching is to include ‘the decrees and the laws’. This is certainly a reference to verse 16, which defines these laws as originating with the Creator. He is also to ‘make known to them the way they should walk’—that is, ‘live’. Thus, Moses’ didactic task is not merely ‘religious’ instruction, but he is to teach the people how to function in all areas of life. He is to present them with a world- and life-view based upon God’s Word.

18:21. ‘And you shall select men of character from all the people who fear God, men of truth, haters of dishonest gain; and you shall set them as leaders over thousands, leaders over hundreds, leaders over fifties and leaders over tens.’

Jethro tells Moses that he has a further duty. He is to ‘select’ able men from among the people. The verb used means ‘to see/behold’. In this passage it probably signifies that Moses is to look for such men (the verb is also used that way in Genesis 41:33).

Moses’ father-in-law then describes the qualifications of the men that Moses is to search for. First, they are to be ‘men of character’—that is, men of integrity and virtue. The term is frequently applied in military contexts to ‘men of strength’, but here it implies ‘one of sterling character’. Secondly, they are to be ones who ‘fear God’, a term in Hebrew that means a reverence that leads to obedience. Thirdly, the ones chosen are to be ‘men of truth’. And, finally, they ought to hate ‘unjust/dishonest gain’; in other words, they are to be incorruptible.

The judicial hierarchy is to be set up on the plan of a military administration (see 1 Sam. 22:7–8; 2 Sam. 18:1; 2 Chron. 1:2). This structure is not surprising because the entire account of Israel’s wilderness journey is written in terms of a military itinerary (see Num. 33:1–49).

18:22. ‘And they will judge the people at all times. And every great matter will be brought to you, and they shall judge every small matter. And it will be lighter for you, and they will bear it with you.’

Jethro now explains to Moses the function and duty of the men whom he should choose: ‘They will judge the people.’ They will do the same job that Moses has been doing. They are to share with him the status of the office of judge. There is, however, to be one difference between them: the judges are to care for the common, normal, everyday disputes and matters, while cases of major importance (literally, ‘large’ matters) are to be brought to Moses.

The position of judge is not a temporary one. The text says it will be ‘at all times/continually/permanently’ (see the use of that phrase in Ps. 34:1; Lev. 16:2; Prov. 8:30). The position of judge remained in existence throughout the history of the nation of Israel.

The purpose of the shared judicial duty was so that Moses’ burden and load would be less. Jethro expresses this with a Hiphil imperative: ‘Make light!’ The verb used here is the antonym of the verb meaning ‘to be heavy’ used in verse 18. Jethro is urging Moses to act on his advice, and he does so in no uncertain terms.

18:23. ‘If you do this thing, and God commands you, then you will be able to stand and also all this people will go to their place in peace.’

Here is a conditional ‘if … then’ clause. If Moses implements the changes suggested by Jethro, then specific consequences will follow. First, Moses ‘will be able to stand’. This statement seems to have both figurative and literal qualities. It means, on the one hand, that Moses will be able to stand up to the number of cases brought to him. On the other hand, the word ‘stand’ is purposely contrasted with ‘sit’ in verse 13: Moses’ strength is preserved so that he may stand before the people.

Secondly, Jethro says, ‘All the people will go to their place in peace.’ This clause implies that the court system will function properly and efficiently. The people will not be waiting all day for their disputes to be decided. Thus no social disorder or unrest will result from such a judicial system.

There is one caveat attached to the implementation of this administration. It must have divine approval and sanction. Childs expresses the opinion that what Jethro is really saying is that God is commanding that such an institution be established. That is probably incorrect because the conditional clause ‘if …’ still applies to God’s commands in the sentence structure.

18:24. And Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law, and he did all that he said.

The prophet accepted the advice of Jethro as he ‘listened to the voice of his father-in-law’. Back in verse 19 Jethro had said to him, ‘Now listen to my voice,’ and Moses was obedient.

18:25–26. And Moses chose men of character from all Israel. And he made them heads over the people, leaders of thousands, leaders of hundreds, leaders of fifties and leaders of tens. And they judged the people at all times. But they brought the difficult disputes to Moses, and every small dispute they judged themselves.

These two verses are the detailed outworking of the instructions given by Jethro that Moses carried out. They are a repetition of Jethro’s words from verses 21–22, almost verbatim. There are a few slight changes, such as the use of the word ‘difficult/hard’ in place of ‘large’. The alteration is significant, probably indicating that Moses not only took the major, important cases, but he also dealt with any disputes that were particularly vexing and complex.

18:27. Then Moses sent his father-in-law away, and he went to [what belonged to him], to his land.

Here we read of the departure of Jethro. It stands in parallel with his arrival in verse 1 of the chapter.

**Application**

Ligon Duncan has commented that, ‘In the words of wise counsel from Jethro (in Ex. 18) we discover that: to establish justice and righteousness amongst the people “men who fear God” are needed.’ The church in the Old Testament could not run properly or effectively without being led by men of sound judgement, great reverence and personal holiness. The same is true of the church today: only when church leaders, such as pastors, elders and deacons, are righteous and reverent can God’s people expect to flourish.

The Word of God being taught to the church is central and the key to its sanctification. However, it is not enough. Discipline, through judges or elders, must be applied in the church situation—only then will holiness and righteousness prevail in the church.

End of volume 1

John D. Currid, A Study Commentary on Exodus: Exodus 1–18, vol. 1, EP Study Commentary (Darlington, England; Carlisle, PA: Evangelical Press, 2000), 270–390.