2

Exodus

GETTING OUT OF EGYPT—*EXODUS 1–15*

FIRST TO LAST, the book of Exodus focuses on how human beings, and Israel in particular, may come to recognize who God really is and to shape their lives in accordance with that consummate reality. The book as a whole is fairly evenly divided between two literary genres: narrative, some of the Bible's most dramatic, in the first half; and law, both legal prescriptions and detailed instructions for building the wilderness tabernacle, in the second. To many modern readers, this literary structure seems like an editorial mistake. The great story of deliverance from slavery, a master narrative that has fundamentally shaped the self-understanding of both Jews and Christians[1]—at least, the part made vivid in our imaginations by Cecil B. DeMille and DreamWorks—culminates in the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:1–17) and then quickly devolves into picayune prescriptions. The greatest challenge for most readers is to see how the two, the story and the commandments, fit together as a complex statement about how Israel is to live out its vocation as a people wholly claimed by God at Sinai (19:3–6).

Most North Americans, and especially Christians, know only the truncated form of Exodus represented in DreamWorks' *Prince of Egypt*, which climaxes with the Israelites crossing the sea and ends with only a cameo shot of Sinai. In the Bible, however, the account of Moses and the Israelites in Egypt constitutes less than half the story—of which the theophany at Sinai is the centerpiece. The "road out" from Egypt leads to the supremely consequential encounter with God at the mountain, and, to a great extent, the rest of Israel's Scriptures will unfold from that encounter. When I saw the film some years ago and the theater lights came up just as the Israelites were reaching Sinai, I was puzzled to see people picking up their coats; I naturally assumed, having read the book, that we were just pausing for an intermission.

By contrast, the centrality of Sinai is implicit in traditional Jewish readings of Exodus and in Jewish religious practice altogether, which is a lived interpretation

of the Sinai covenant. Accordingly, the earliest known commentary on any biblical book, the *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, is a compilation of second-century rabbinic explorations of Exodus. In the following **midrash**, the rabbis ponder a question that arises from the structure of the book and of **Torah** as a whole—namely, the nature of the connection between narrative and law, exodus and Sinai:

> Why were the Ten Commandments not said at the beginning of the Torah? [The rabbis] give a parable. To what may this be compared? To the following: A king who entered a province said to the people: May I be your king? But the people said to him: Have you done anything good for us that you should rule over us? What did he do then? He built the city wall for them, he brought in the water supply for them, and he fought their battles. Then when he said to them: May I be your king? They said to him: Yes, yes. Likewise, God. He brought the Israelites out of Egypt, divided the sea for them, sent down the manna for them, brought up the well for them, brought the quails for them. He fought for them the battle with Amalek. Then He said to them: I am to be your king. And they said to Him: Yes, yes. (*Mekilta*, Tractate Baḥodesh 5:5–11, on Exod 20:2)[2]

Despite the playfulness of this style of commentary, the rabbis are engaged in serious theological reflection, here on the relationship between narrative and law. If the commandments are (as the rabbis would maintain) the most important part of Torah, then why all this narrative preface—some seventy chapters of Genesis and Exodus? The answer to which the parable points is that no one, including Israel, would be motivated to obey the commandments without a prior account of all the good things "the king" has done. The parable of the king also suggests rightly that Sinai is the place where, for the first time, God asserts sovereignty over Israel. All the preceding narratives, going back as far as the creation story itself, contribute to our understanding that the God revealed at Sinai is the monarch whom Israel can accept and trust.

The overarching theme of Exodus is how the people Israel come to "know"—in the deep sense of recognition and embrace—**YHWH** as their God. That primary theme is amplified by two other themes: first, Israel's formation as a people and then faltering growth as YHWH's "special-treasure out of all the peoples" (19:5), and second, Pharaoh's prolonged refusal to know YHWH.

Birth of a People

The initial formation of the people Israel is the subject of the genealogy with which the book opens (Exod 1:1–4). Readers of any biblical book should pay special attention to how it begins and ends. Most of us are inclined to skip over the

genealogies as filler, good only for reference, as though someone had accidentally slipped a snippet from the telephone directory into the Bible. But that inclination simply shows that we, unlike the writers and ancient hearers of the Bible, do not belong to a kinship-based society. I once heard a Maori citizen of Aotearoa / New Zealand comment that his clan had lived in those islands for twenty-two generations. I asked whether he could name the line of ancestors, and without a moment of hesitation, he rattled off the genealogy, including in some cases both parents in a generation. In a society where family is the core of one's personal identity, genealogies are the most condensed form of history writing or history telling, a handy way to cultivate cultural memory and connect events across generations and centuries.

Preceding this Exodus genealogy are three others, all found in the **Primeval History** (Gen 5:1–32; 10:1–32; 11:10–27); they establish a pattern that helps us interpret this one in Exodus. Each of the Genesis genealogies appears immediately after a rupture in what had seemed to be God's plan for humankind or for all creation and then points to how the history of the world will continue. The first genealogy comes after the murder of Abel. Starting with Adam's third son, Seth, it shows how that lineage and the image of God that Seth now represents (5:1; cf. 5:3) continue through to Noah. The second genealogy appears immediately "after the flood" (10:32) and depicts the human repopulation of the ravaged earth. The third and final genealogy in Genesis commences just a few verses later, following the disaster of Babel, with the peoples of the world scattered into different language groups. It traces the line of Noah's son Shem, ending with Abraham, Abraham's brothers, and his nephew Lot. The genre of genealogy highlights the drama in Abraham's story, for he has no offspring; it thus invites the question, Will this story go on? The answer to that tacit question takes the form of the ancestral tales that constitute the rest of Genesis. Following immediately from those ancestral stories is the genealogy in Exodus, which begins: "And these are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob" (Exod 1:1). The conjunction "and" underscores the close connection with the lineage of God's people traced through Genesis.

Genesis establishes the pattern of a genealogy following upon some kind of rupture; here, the disruption is the descent into Egypt itself, separating Abraham's descendants from the land to which God's promise attaches (Gen 12:7). The famine that sends them to Egypt threatens the very existence of the family, a possibility that may be suggested by the distinctive structure of this genealogy. Whereas the genealogies in Genesis are of the "vertical" type, which names just one ancestor in each generation, this "horizontal" genealogy displays a whole generation at a glance: "every living being that came out of Jacob's thigh—seventy souls" (Exod 1:5). The fact that they can be quickly named and enumerated points

to their vulnerability. This makes all the more remarkable the vast expansion of Israel, from a family to a people, in Egypt:[3]

> The descendants [children] of Israel were *fruitful* and *swarmed* and *multiplied* and grew very, very great, and the land was filled with them. But a new king rose up over Egypt, who did not know Joseph, and he said to his people: "Look, the people of the descendants of Israel are more numerous and greater than we are. Come on, let's act intelligently concerning them, lest they keep *multiplying* . . . and it might happen that they [the women] *declare* war, and they too join forces with our enemies and make war against us and go up from the land." (Exod 1:7–10)

The first three verbs here echo the divine commandment to the first humans (Gen 1:28); even more closely, they echo God's charge to Noah's family after the flood:

> *As for you, be fruitful and multiply;*
> *swarm on the earth and multiply on it. (Gen 9:7)*

The inference is that God's original intention for all humankind is being fulfilled, at the microcosmic level, by the Israelites. However, far from rejoicing at the flourishing of Egypt's essential labor force, Pharaoh is terrified. As suggested by the unusual feminine plural form of the verb "declare" in his fretful statement, healthy Israelite wombs are, in his eyes, the ultimate weapon of mass destruction.[4] That disparity between God's intention and Pharaoh's perception is the great tension that dominates the account of Israel in Egypt: because Pharaoh does not see things as God does, he sets himself against God's plan for the world. As will become evident in the plague battle, that opposition provides occasions for multiple assertions of God's sovereignty over the created order, including Pharaoh's own heart.

The birth of a nation begins in earnest with the birth of one particular Israelite child, and that small story contains further echoes of the creation story:

> A man from the house of Levi went and took a certain daughter of Levi. And she conceived and bore a son. When *she saw how good he was* [or: *that he was good*], she hid him for three months. And when she could not hide him any longer, she took for him an *ark* of bulrushes and coated it with bitumen and with pitch, and she set the boy in it and set [it] in the reeds on the edge of the Nile. (Exod 2:1–3)

"When she saw how good he was"—Moses's mother looks upon her child just as God looked upon the creatures in the first days of the world (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). And in a second verbal echo of the early history of the world, she saves him from a watery death in exactly the same way God saved Noah, with an "ark" (*tevah*), which occurs only in these two stories. The echo might alert us to other ways in which Moses resembles Noah: having been delivered, he will deliver others, and after that deliverance, enter into a covenant with God. Thus, Moses's birth story draws our imaginations across the sweep of history from creation to the crossing of the sea to Sinai.

Divine Self-Revelation

Moses and Pharaoh are the two most vividly drawn human characters in Exodus, and together they illumine the central theme of knowing God. Each of these mighty opponents is subject to YHWH's self-revelation, to which the two respond in drastically different ways. The contrast between them is immediately evident from their first encounters with YHWH.

For Moses, the first moment of revelation happens out "beyond the wilderness" (Exod 3:1), years after he has fled from Pharaoh's palace for killing an Egyptian overseer who was beating a Hebrew slave. Having reinvented himself as a herdsman, he is here with his father-in-law's flock on the far side of nowhere when his attention is arrested by a strange sight. In an unusual move, the narrator shows exactly what Moses thinks, and what God thinks, at the moment of the encounter:

> Moses said, "I'll just turn aside and see this great sight: why does the bush not burn up?" And when YHWH saw that Moses had turned aside to see, God called to him from within the bush and said, "Moses Moses!" And he said, "I am here." (Exod 3:3–4)

Maybe other herders have walked right past the blazing bush without a glance. But as soon as Moses goes out of his way to see what is going on, God calls out urgently, "Moses Moses!" (3:4)—twice in quick succession, with no pause marker in the Hebrew punctuation. The ancient rabbis compared God at this moment to a person carrying a heavy load, about to collapse, who suddenly sees that someone standing nearby has noticed and calls: "Quick, help me out!"[5] God *calling for help* from the burning bush—what a suggestive way to imagine the relationship between these two. God is calling Moses to help carry the load of human suffering, the suffering of the oppressed.

If Moses's willingness to turn aside from business as usual is what moves YHWH to speak, Moses nonetheless is not immediately won over to the mission

of bringing Israel out of Egypt. On the contrary, he offers four objections and a plea to be excused. Not surprisingly, this is enough to anger God (4:14)—who, even so, answers Moses point for point:

> Objection #1: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, that I should bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (Exod 3:11). Answer: "I'll be with you" (3:12).
>
> Objection #2: "And when they ask for your name . . . ?" (3:13). Answer: "Tell them, 'I will be whoever/whatever I will be' " (3:14)—a revelation that is hardly a disclosure.
>
> Objection #3: "They won't believe that YHWH appeared to me" (4:1). Answer: Instruction in signs and wonders for the disbelieving (4:2–9).
>
> Objection #4: "I'm terrible at public speaking" (4:10). Answer: "Who made your mouth?" (4:11).
>
> Plea: "Please, Lord, just send whomever you will . . . [implied: except me]!" (4:13). Answer: "You put the words in [your brother Aaron's] mouth, and I will teach you both" (4:15).

Thus, although annoyed (4:14), **YHWH** makes a concession: Aaron can do the talking. Already from this first exchange between YHWH and Moses, it is evident that a real divine–human partnership is emerging, in which each will yield to the other to some extent.

How different is Pharaoh's first encounter with YHWH—not directly, but via the message that Moses and Aaron deliver:

> "Thus says YHWH God of Israel: 'Let my people go so they may make pilgrimage to me in the wilderness.' " And Pharaoh said, "Who is YHWH that I should abide by his voice to let Israel go? I don't know YHWH, and I'm not going to let Israel go either!" (Exod 5:1–2)

"I don't know YHWH"—Pharaoh's failing in a nutshell. This one statement forecasts his whole encounter with YHWH and highlights the difference between Moses and the king of Egypt. When YHWH shows up in power, blazing in a bush, Moses recognizes something wondrous strange. He yields to that power, albeit reluctantly. Pharaoh, by contrast, is unable to recognize any power apart from his own.

The dramatic plague battle between YHWH and Pharaoh is itself a form of divine revelation, in which both Israel and Pharaoh have the opportunity to recognize God's sovereignty over creation, including their own lives. Recognition,

and not simply destroying opposition, is the crucial theological aim of the plagues. As God tells Pharaoh just before the onset of the seventh plague (hail):

> Any time now I could have stretched out my hand and struck down you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been obliterated from the earth. However, it is for this that I have let you stand, in order to show you my strength and so that my name might be told in all the land [or: the earth]. (Exod 9:15–16)

Notably, YHWH identifies the plagues as "signs" or "displays" (7:3), not punishments, and their purpose as persuasion: "*that Egypt may know that I am YHWH*, when I stretch out my hand over Egypt and bring the Israelites out of their midst" (7:5). That so-called recognition formula occurs eight times in the course of the plague battle (7:5; 8:6 Heb., 8:10 Eng.; 8:18 Heb., 8:22 Eng.; 9:14; 9:29; 10:2; 14:4; 14:18; cf. 11:7).

Taken together, the burning bush story and the plague account indicate that self-revelation is one of God's signature acts, for the benefit of those who have some capacity for recognition. God is *essentially* unpredictable: "I will be whoever I will be"; yet at the same time, God seeks to be known by humans. Moses demurs but finally yields to God's will; the burning bush, that nonaggressive form of revelation, suffices for him to recognize YHWH. But for Pharaoh, the aggressive revelation of God through the plagues serves only to make him more obdurate, as YHWH tells Moses at the outset:

> I myself will harden Pharaoh's heart and multiply my signs and displays in the land of Egypt, but Pharaoh will not listen to you, and I will set my hand upon Egypt and bring out my troops, my people the Israelites, from the land of Egypt, with great acts of judgment. (Exod 7:3–4)

God assumes responsibility for Pharaoh's fatal cardiac sclerosis—which we find troublesome—yet at the same time, the biblical writers hold Pharaoh responsible. As the ruler watches his magicians compete with Moses and Aaron, we read that Pharaoh's heart "became tough" (7:13) and "heavy" (7:14), and a little later, that YHWH "toughened" Pharaoh's heart (9:12). Scholars often assign these statements to different sources, but the complexity remains: Pharaoh did it to himself, and YHWH did it to him. Three angles of vision, from perspectives traditional and modern, may help us reflect on the problem, even if they do not solve it.

We begin with an observation about literary structure. There is a certain pattern of distribution to how the plague narrative identifies the agent who hardens

Pharaoh's heart: in the first five plagues, it is Pharaoh himself; in the next four, it is (ultimately) God. (For the seventh plague, responsibility is assigned to both: first Pharaoh [9:34] and then God [10:1].) This pattern could be read as showing Pharaoh's steady moral deterioration. What begins as his own choice not to know God—his lack of desire, in Gregory's terms, as we shall see further below—gradually becomes a permanent disability. Having forfeited his capacity for moral choice, Pharaoh is unable to lead or protect his people. This seems to be what his own courtiers perceive, after Moses has threatened the eighth plague (locusts):

> Pharaoh's servants said to him: "How long will this guy be a snare to us? Let the people go so they may serve YHWH their god. Do you not yet know that Egypt is done for?" (Exod 10:7)

One of the poignant elements of the book is that the Egyptian people, and even the elite circle around Pharaoh, are not portrayed as evil or personally hostile to the Israelites (see 12:36). Like enslaved Israel, they, too, are victims of Pharaoh's moral blindness.

A second angle of vision comes from another biblical writer, the prophet Ezekiel, who seems to suggest that the hardening of Pharaoh's heart is God's just punishment for Pharaoh's spiritual pride. Pharaoh believes that he himself is a god; Ezekiel quotes him as saying, with childish diction and intent: "The Nile is *mine* and *I* made it for myself" (Ezek 29:3). Because Pharaoh presumes to be more than human, God makes him less than human; Pharaoh loses the proper function of his heart, the organ of moral and spiritual discernment. As Michael Goldberg observes, this is an instance of the principle the rabbis later call "measure for measure."[6] The principle is first clearly articulated in the Bible at the outset of YHWH's battle with Pharaoh:

> YHWH said to Moses, ". . . You shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says YHWH: Israel is my son, my firstborn. And I said to you, "Let my son go so he may serve me," but you have refused to let him go. Look, I am about to kill your son, your firstborn.'" (Exod 4:21–23)

Already here the terrible end of the battle of two supreme forces is anticipated. It is a tragedy—mass death "from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the captive in the prison-pit, and every firstborn domestic animal" (12:29). The narrative does not mute the tragedy; moreover, it shows that Pharaoh himself has a full measure of responsibility in the deaths that strike his household, along with every house and barn and sheepfold in the kingdom. The

tragedy originates with Pharaoh when he hardens his heart and refuses to release YHWH's "child" from bondage. Gradually, he loses control over his own heart, as we see the measure-for-measure principle manifested *internally*. At the end of the battle, with the killing of the firstborn in the tenth plague, we see the principle manifested *externally*.

A third angle of vision comes from the fourth-century Christian theologian Gregory of Nyssa. In his spiritual classic *The Life of Moses*, he illumines the hardening of Pharaoh's heart by using the method that modern critics call "intertextuality." Gregory interprets Pharaoh's experience in light of Paul's denunciation, in the letter to the Romans, of those who practice immorality: "Since they refused to see it was rational to acknowledge God, he abandoned them to shameful passions (Rom. 1.28, 26)." Gregory continues:

> Pharaoh is not hardened by the divine will. . . . Who it is who is delivered up to shameful affections can be clearly learned from the Apostle: It is he who does not like to have God in his knowledge. God delivers up to passion him whom he does not protect because he is not acknowledged by him.[7]

Pharaoh's failing is not simple ignorance but rather lack of desire to know YHWH, as was evident from his first contemptuous dismissal of Moses and Aaron, and the God of whom they spoke: "Who is YHWH that I should pay attention to him?" (Exod 5:2). Fundamental to the tradition of monastic theology to which Gregory belongs is the insight that true spiritual knowledge grows only out of genuine desire for God.

In sum, Pharaoh is responsible for the hardening of his own heart. Yet YHWH is also responsible, through the characteristic action of divine self-revelation. The more clearly God is manifest as the sovereign power in Egypt and in creation itself, the more intently, obsessively, Pharaoh resists, to the destruction of his own people and land. (A partial analogy might be seen in the later stages of the Third Reich, when Hitler concentrated his transportation resources on moving Jews to the extermination camps, leaving the German army badly undersupported.) The biblical story points to a profound irony and an acute danger of the spiritual life. God seeks to be known, showing up in the world in perceptible ways. However, if the divine desire to be known is not met with the human desire to know God, then the result is that the human heart is hardened in opposition to God. That theological understanding informs Dante's telling representation of hell, which gets colder, not hotter, in its depths, rendering those who are trapped there incapable of any movement. Those who are guilty of the ultimate sin, "treachery against the authority and grace which are the divine order of the world," are covered with ice, "like straws in glass" (*come festuca in vetro, Inferno* 34:12).[8]

Notes

1. On Exodus as a master narrative, see Michael Goldberg, *Jews and Christians: Getting Our Stories Straight; The Exodus and the Passion-Resurrection* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001).
2. Jacob Z. Lauterbach, trans., *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1961), 2:229–30.
3. The medieval Jewish commentators noted the effect of naming the number seventy, to emphasize the remarkable growth of the Israelites in the next generation; see Michael Carasik, *The Commentators' Bible: Exodus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005), 3.
4. For this interpretation of the feminine plural verb form, see Jacqueline Lapsley, *Whispering the Word: Hearing Women's Stories in the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 71.
5. Exodus Rabbah 2:6, in *The Book of Legends / Sefer Ha-Aggadah*, ed. Hayim Bialik and Yehoshua Ravnitzky (New York: Schocken Books, 1991), 63.
6. Goldberg, *Jews and Christians*, 83.
7. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist, 1978), 71.
8. John D. Sinclair, trans., *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939), 428.

BECOMING GOD'S PEOPLE—*EXODUS 16–40*

IN EGYPT, THE descendants of Jacob, a.k.a. Israel, grew in *numbers*; the family of Israel became a people. But once they have crossed the Red Sea, Israel must begin to grow in *character* to become a people worthy of entering into covenant—"cutting a deal," to use the Hebrew phrase—with YHWH at Sinai. The rest of the book introduces three crucial elements of their formation: first, a sustainable food economy (Exod 16); second, the gift of the core commandments, the fundaments of the covenant (Exod 19–24); and third, construction of the tabernacle, the wilderness sanctuary (Exod 25–31; 35–40).

The Manna Economy

Probably most readers of this book know where their next meal is coming from. We take for granted that we will have enough (or too much) to eat, and that distinguishes us from most people in the ancient world, as well as most people across the globe today. Because Israelites lived with the reality of a precarious food supply, the Bible shows a keen awareness, starting in the very first chapter (Gen 1:29–30), that an adequate food supply is a gift from God. Accordingly, the first order of business after the crossing of the Red Sea is the establishment of a new food economy, an economy of sufficiency, for Israelites newly released from slavery. As we shall see, the beautifully crafted story of manna in the wilderness sets forth the basic practices of faithful eating and the virtues that sustain them, as well as the enduring value of those practices and virtues for people in more ordinary economic situations.

It is not surprising that hunger is what gives rise to the people's first complaint, directed at Moses and Aaron:

> If only we had died by the hand of YHWH in the land of Egypt, when we sat beside the fleshpot, when we ate bread until we were stuffed! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole congregation by starvation! (Exod 16:3)

The complaint is bitterly ironic; those who have just escaped from Egypt by the "great hand" of YHWH (14:31) now wish they had died by that hand in Egypt. This is not the last time the Israelites will look back to Egypt with misplaced nostalgia (cf. Num 11:5). Unlikely though it is that slaves had the leisure to sit and eat to the point of satiety, their memory is probably accurate in one respect: they were *beside* the fleshpots, tending them for the overseers; slaves ate bread or roasted grain, not meat. However, that insincere death wish opens the way for a new mode of divine revelation, with food as its primary vehicle:

> YHWH spoke to Moses: "I have heard the complaints of the Israelites. Say to them: At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread—*and you shall know that I am YHWH your God*." (Exod 16:11–12; cf. 16:6)

The recognition formula ("and you shall know . . .") commonly appears in situations where YHWH's authority is bitterly contested (e.g., Exod 8:6, 18 Heb., 8:10, 22 Eng.; 1 Kgs 20:13, 28; Ezek 6:7, 10, 13). It punctuated the account of the plague battle, and its recurrence here implies that the Israelites still have as much to learn as Pharaoh did. We can hope that they will be more successful.

Two rules govern the manna economy: limiting the daily collection to "an omer a head" (Exod 16:16)—as much as a person can eat in a day—and refraining from collection on the Sabbath. On that day, everyone is to stay comfortably seated (!) at home (16:29–30). This is the first time Israel is called to observe the Sabbath. The Sabbath commandment is the longest and the most frequently repeated of the great commandments they will receive at Sinai (20:8–11), and here they are challenged to learn it by the inductive method. This is a litmus test, and a crucial one, to determine "if they will walk in [YHWH]'s teaching [*torah*] or not" (16:4).

Both of these rules mark the manna economy as the exact opposite of the Egyptian food industry—first, because Egypt's economy, like other large-scale agrarian economies before the age of fossil fuel, entailed the conscription of labor, the physical energy of the enslaved, whereas the manna economy entails the regular *cessation* of labor, including specifically that of the enslaved (20:10). The second sense in which the manna economy is opposite to Egypt's is that it is an economy of sufficiency, not of excess. There is enough for everyone, not a glut for

the few causing many to be enslaved, as in Egypt, or to starve, as in our global food economy. The fact that manna cannot be stored (except on the Sabbath) creates a complete contrast between the Israelites' tents and Pharaoh's store cities, on which they themselves labored. The royal store cities of Pithom and Rameses (1:11) held the massive grain supplies that poured in from fields all along the Nile. Pharaoh was the titular owner of the whole land of Egypt and thus the ostensible source of food. In the wilderness, Israel must learn the reality that all food comes from God.

Although the rules of the manna economy seem straightforward enough, Israel has trouble following them. They try to save a surplus, and Moses gets angry (16:20); they go out to collect on the Sabbath, and YHWH gets angry (16:27–29). This is the first time God's anger is directed against the people (cf. 4:14), although one might expect more leniency toward newly liberated slaves. However, as Gregory of Nyssa (335–395 CE) saw, this story is not primarily about the particular circumstances of a formerly oppressed group; rather, it is foundational for understanding the kind of spiritual growth that is essential for every community in every generation, if they are to be formed as the people of God: "Whatever marvels the history enumerates in connection with that food are teachings for the virtuous life."[1]

Following Gregory's clue about how to read this "history," we might then say that the first virtue that informs a godly food economy (and probably a godly economy altogether) is restraint in how we meet our most fundamental need. Our culture does not celebrate the virtue of restraint; witness the rampant popularity of "Let It Go," Elsa's song from the Disney film *Frozen*: "It's time to see what I can do / To test the limits and break through / No right, no wrong, no rules for me—I'm free!" Contrast that sentiment with the instruction that the apostle Paul gave to the Roman governor Felix, who had inquired "about faith in Christ Jesus" and then was unnerved by Paul's gospel lesson on "justice and self-restraint and the coming judgment" (Acts 24:24–25). The connection that Paul sees between justice and self-restraint, basic also to the manna economy, is the principle that all get what they currently need, and no more. Abiding by that limit requires trusting that God will provide "*our* daily bread," enough for everyone. Moreover, that practice of self-restraint is essential to there being enough; our trust in God turns out to be part of the dynamic whereby God's promise is fulfilled for the whole covenant community. That is why obedience to these two simple rules is a critical test of Israel's ability to become a covenant community, of their willingness to walk in God's *torah*, or not.

This wilderness economy is of course temporary; the manna fall will end when the Israelites settle in a land where they can plant grain (Exod 16:35). Therefore, we might ask whether the virtue of restraint has enduring value for people in more ordinary circumstances, such as our own. The answer lies in the odd symbol of the clay jar of manna that Moses instructs Aaron the priest to set in the most holy

spot in the sanctuary. The daily "omer-ful" is to stand "before YHWH as a keepsake for your generations" (16:33). Ultra-perishable manna is literally enshrined as a permanent reminder of what it means for Israel to eat within limits, on YHWH's terms. The alert reader might think back to the first story about eating within a divinely set limit—a limit that the first humans violated, with the result that they were expelled from Eden. Putting together these two stories of beginnings—of humanity as a whole and of the people Israel—we might infer that eating modestly and mindfully is one of our chief obligations to the God who created us and keeps us alive.

The Sinai Covenant

By the time biblical readers get to Sinai, the notion of covenant is already familiar. This one follows upon the first covenant, with Noah and "all flesh" (Gen 9:17), and the second, with Abraham (15:18) and his line (17:7). However, there is one great difference. The earlier covenants were assurances from God: of continued life on earth, of blessing and perpetuation of the family line in a promised land. At Sinai, YHWH for the first time gives commandments; something—a lot—is specifically required of the covenant partner. Moreover, at Sinai, much is required of the reader; the combination of narrative and legal prescriptions is much more complex than the brief narrative presentations of covenant in Genesis. Here I highlight four aspects that should figure in a twenty-first-century discussion of covenant as it is represented in the Bible: divine sovereignty, divine dangerousness, affirmation of the goodness of creation, and the problem of slavery.

Divine Sovereignty

Twentieth-century archaeological discoveries of ancient Near Eastern political documents revealed that the accounts of the Sinai covenant in Exodus and Deuteronomy bear a structural resemblance to a type of treaty common in the Eastern Mediterranean world over several centuries, roughly 1500 to 700 BCE, when a powerful king (a "suzerain") would contract a treaty with the ruler of a vassal state. That political pact seems to have served as a partial model for the biblical writers in outlining the relationship of mutual obligation between the divine suzerain YHWH and the "vassal" Israel.

The standard suzerainty treaty has six basic elements, which are identified below, along with similar features in one or both accounts of the Sinai covenant:

- A *preamble*, in which the suzerain names himself: "I am YHWH your God . . ." (Exod 20:2; Deut 5:6).

- A *historical prologue*, naming events that led up to the conclusion of this pact: ". . . your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from a house of slaves" (Exod 20:2; Deut 5:6).
- *Stipulations* of the vassal's obligation *of exclusive loyalty* to the suzerain: "You shall have no other gods in my face" (Exod 20:3; Deut 5:7).
- *Invocation of curses* for violation of the treaty *and blessings* for compliance with it: the curses in Deuteronomy 27 and the blessings in Deuteronomy 28.
- A *list of witnesses* to the treaty: "I call as witnesses concerning you today the skies and the earth" (Deut 30:19).
- A charge for *deposit of the suzerainty pact* in a safe place: YHWH's "pact," or "testimony," is to be placed in a cabinet, or "ark," within the tabernacle that Israel constructs in the wilderness (Exod 25:16–22; 39:35; 40:3; Deut 31:26).[2]

The metaphor of a suzerainty treaty implies that there is real power on both sides, although it is not equally distributed. YHWH's royal status is underscored especially by an unusual term that appears in the opening address at Sinai to the people Israel:

> You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, when I lifted you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. And now, if indeed you listen to my voice and keep my covenant, then you shall be to me a special-treasure [*segullah*] out of all the nations—for the whole earth is mine. (Exod 19:4–5)

The rare word *segullah* denotes valuable property to which an owner has total claim; in the Bible, it is used exclusively to designate royal possessions (Eccl 2:8; 1 Chr 29:3) and, by extension, YHWH's claim to the people Israel (Ps 135:4; Deut 7:6; etc.) or those who serve God faithfully (Mal 3:17).

On the other side, Israel's power is implied in the next verse, which mixes political terms with explicitly religious language:

> And as for you, you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exod 19:6)

Only comparatively few Israelites were literally priests, and so the meaning of the metaphor is not self-evident. What constitutes Israel's "priestly" status, what makes it holy—this is a question that persists through the rest of Exodus, as well as Leviticus and Numbers, that vast sweep of texts from the **Priestly** tradition that are foundational for later biblical writers, including the Prophets and the New Testament writers, and thus are foundational for both Jewish and Christian identity.

Divine Dangerousness

Immediately after these statements of Israel's peculiar status, it becomes evident that the people's close proximity to God is in fact dangerous to them. Sinai itself is not a safe place, as YHWH advises Moses:

> Set a boundary all around the people, saying, "Be careful about going up on the mountain or touching its edge; anyone who touches the mountain shall surely be put to death." (Exod 19:12)
>
> YHWH said to Moses: "Go down and warn the people, lest they break through toward YHWH, to see, and many of them fall. And even the priests, who approach YHWH—let them sanctify themselves, lest YHWH burst out against them." (19:21–22)

The priestly role, for both the leaders and the people as a whole, means living at the edge of the high-voltage zone of YHWH's holiness, a position both privileged and precarious. The tension of their situation is captured concisely in Moses's paradoxical words to the people at the climactic moment, just after YHWH has uttered the first Ten Commandments, the only part of the Sinai instruction that is addressed directly to the people:

> Do not be afraid, because it is for the sake of testing you that God has come and so that fear of him will be upon your faces, so that you do not sin. (Exod 20:17 Heb., 20:20 Eng.)

Being brought near to God is a privilege, but its threatening aspect cannot be entirely set aside, even by Moses. (An early hint of divine dangerousness in Exodus is apparently directed at Moses; see the nearly incomprehensible fragment of a "bridegroom of blood" story in 4:24–26.) At Sinai, YHWH plainly declares, "I am a jealous [*qanna*] God" (20:5). The Hebrew word has an Arabic cognate meaning "reddened";[3] this vivid description might suggest the flush that comes over the (metaphorical) face of the impassioned Deity—here, at the possibility of other gods being "in [his] face" (20:3). These murky hints and specific warnings are enough to indicate that only fools would toy with YHWH. Their full import will become clear following the great sin of the golden calf (Exod 32).

Affirmation of the Goodness and Integrity of Creation

A more positive but equally demanding aspect of covenant is that it serves as an affirmation of the goodness and integrity of creation. Although this is plain

from the text, it has until recently received little attention from modern scholars and general readers. From the standpoint of Sinai, entering into covenant means seeing oneself as part of the community of creation, human and nonhuman, including the fertile earth itself. That notion of participating in a creation-oriented covenant community is first expressed in the commandment to observe the Sabbath, the weekly memorial of creation (Exod 20:11). Some Christians have embraced the importance of Sabbath as a hedge against overwork and burnout, but it should be noted that Exodus enjoins Sabbath observance on theological, not pastoral, grounds. The reason to keep Sabbath is that we should not go more than a few days in a row without stopping to consider what it is to be the creatures of God, living among other creatures in a world that God has made. We are not our own, and we are not in charge.

That perception of our situation is reinforced by the next of the commandments, to honor father and mother "that your days may be long on the fertile-soil [*adamah*] that YHWH your God is giving you" (20:12). We are covenanted to God, not as mere individuals, but as members of a multigenerational community, a community that depends directly on the soil for its thriving, just as every child depends on its parents. And those relationships are reciprocal: parents depend in the long term on their children, just as the soil depends on those who take their lives from it for its own continued thriving.

One particular religious symbol establishes the reciprocal relationship between *adam* and *adamah*, humans and humus (Gen 2:7), as part of Israel's covenant relationship with YHWH. Immediately following the Ten Commandments, and building upon them, the people are instructed to make an altar of earth (*adamah*):

> You shall not make alongside me gods of silver, and gods of gold you shall not make for yourselves; an altar of soil you shall make for me and offer upon it your burnt offerings and your offerings of well-being, and your flocks and your cattle. In every place that I allow people to commemorate my name, I shall come to you and bless you. And if you should make for me an altar of stones, you shall not make them dressed stones. For if you have wielded your "sword" over it, then you have profaned it. (Exod 20:23–25)

This prescription marks Israel as religiously distinct; outside Israel, most altars in ancient Near Eastern temples were made of dressed stone. Moreover, the prominent positioning of this commandment, following the Ten Commandments, implies its importance. As the reference to metal images indicates, the earthen altar reinforces the prohibition on idol worship, the mother of all other

commandments. Ancient farmers, as almost all Israelites were, would likely have sensed instinctively the significance of the earthen altar. It stands as a symbol of what it is to worship God properly as a creature, *adam* responsibly connected to *adamah*. The commandment calls Israelites to a "grounded" life. The prohibition on stones dressed with metal tools ("your sword," 20:25), the advanced technology of the Iron Age, suggests to us that technological innovations, though necessary for human thriving, should not be presumed innocent. Worshiping God rather than idols of our own making entails a thoughtful acceptance of limits on interventions into natural systems.

Implicit in this kind of interpretation is an understanding that biblical law prescribes modes of embodied theology and spirituality. In shaping behavior, it also forms certain attitudes and understandings with respect to God and the world as God's creation. Without such a theological perspective, readers and interpreters can make little or no sense of the (approximately) 120 chapters of "legal material" that constitute the rest of Torah.

The Problem of Slavery

It is jarring to every thoughtful reader to see slavery introduced next—and not, as we would hope, to prohibit it absolutely:

> When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall work six years, and in the seventh year he shall go out free—for nothing. (Exod 21:2)

The lack of a total scriptural prohibition on slavery in either Testament famously contributed to the American Civil War, or at least to the debates that led up to it and prolonged it. The legal prescriptions of the Bible reflect its own social context over centuries, and their perspective is altogether more realistic than idealistic. Slavery was endemic in the ancient Mediterranean world for millennia. That slavery was persistent within Israel itself is evidenced by the fact that every legal code mentions it, with an aim to setting limits on a cultural practice whose dangers are recognized. Here, the implication seems to be that holding other members of the covenant community in bondage is unworthy of Israel's high calling as the "treasure-people" of God.

What is the social context that underlies this matter-of-fact regulation, which assumes that Israelites will be purchasing other Israelites? Many scholars would see the section that begins thus, the so-called Covenant Code (21:1–23:19), as the oldest collection of legal ordinances in the Bible. Since legal codification is often a response to major social change (the Constitution of the United States being one example), this code might come from relatively early in the period of

Israel's monarchy, about the tenth century BCE. The rise of the monarchy and the nation-state gave rise also to debt slavery, the kind of slavery envisioned here. A nation-state requires a tax base, to support its bureaucracy, army, roads, and public buildings, the royal court, and the small circle of elites around the king. The peasant farmers of Israel paid their taxes in the form of crops, and bad crop years were frequent in that semiarid land, where drought is common and sometimes acute. Moreover, they were regularly drafted off their farms for months at a time, into military service and state labor crews. Both of those pressures weighed heavily on small farmers laboring at subsistence level. As a result, formerly free peasants fell into debt and gradually into indentured slavery, often working for new landlords in fields that had once been their own. The landlords were members of the new aristocracy, people to whom the king owed political debts, which were paid off with land.

In the context of Exodus, setting a temporal limit on slavery marks Israel as the antitype of Egypt, where Pharaoh allowed his land to be destroyed rather than letting slaves go free. Release in the seventh year is a kind of Sabbath; like the weekly Sabbath, it is a hedge against the heedless exploitation of human labor. Moreover, the Sabbath commandment itself specifies that those still enslaved, male and female, must be freed from work every seventh day (20:10). The connection between Sabbath observance and the participation of the enslaved is underscored in the next iteration of the commandment, this time with an affective note:

> Six days you shall do your work, and on the seventh day you shall cease, in order that your ox and your ass may rest, and your handmaid's son *may catch his breath* [*veyinnafesh*], and the sojourner. (Exod 23:12)

That final verb is vivid; we feel the exhaustion. It is also rare; the verb appears only three times in Scripture, and two of those occurrences are in iterations of the Sabbath commandment in Exodus. A few chapters later, we read:

> The Israelites shall keep the Sabbath, to make the Sabbath through their generations, an everlasting covenant. Between me and the Israelites it is a sign forever, that for six days YHWH made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he ceased and *caught his breath* [*vayyinnafash*]. (31:16–17)

The combination of these two texts creates a striking theological and social statement. The enslaved person now appears as an image of the breathless Deity, worn out from the exacting work of creating the world. This in turn gives new insight into the second commandment, the prohibition on graven images (20:4). Fabricated images are dangerous to the extent that they blind us to the fact that the true image of God resides only in human form—potentially all humans, male and female (Gen 1:26–27), slave and free. Thus, the prohibition on images discourages Israel from putting God in a shrine box or on a pedestal, and also endorses the innate dignity of every human being. It exposes as a form of idolatry slavery of any kind, the perennial economic practice of extracting cheap (or unpaid) labor from the culturally invisible. If ancient Israel did not manage to rid itself entirely of the shame of slavery, at least the biblical writers never got used to it. Thus, they give their readers, including ourselves, a chance to see and repent.

Constructing the Tabernacle

The third major element of Israel's formation as a people is the construction of the tabernacle, the portable temple for the wilderness years. To most modern eyes, these thirteen chapters of building instructions (Exod 25–31) and their execution (Exod 35–40) are arguably the most boring in the whole Bible, and the least theological. We have to strain to see why they are there at all, especially in a book that contains such compelling narrative passages. Remarkably, the construction account is almost exactly the same length as the story of Israel in Egypt, inviting the question how it could possibly compete for interest or importance. But if we assume that the design of the book is deliberate and artful, beginning as it does with slavery and ending with the tabernacle construction, then we can see that these two accounts correspond to each other as the most extended portrayals of work in the Bible. Israel's enslavement was a labor system contrary to God's intentions for creation, and Pharaoh's determination to maintain it finally led to the destruction or de-creation of the land of Egypt. By contrast, the work of constructing the sanctuary is both godly and humane, and thus fully consonant with God's creational and covenantal intentions.

Viewed in its wider literary context, the tabernacle construction can be seen also as reconciling work, the process whereby Israel is restored to God's favor after the debacle of the golden calf and the terrible punishment that followed (Exod 32–33). In Genesis, we observed the fourfold literary pattern: (1) God's initiating a new relational reality, which (2) humans damage or rupture, followed by (3) divine judgment and human suffering, and then (4) God's beginning again. That same pattern appears in the second half of Exodus, where the new relational reality of the Sinai covenant is disrupted by idolatrous worship of the golden calf. As the following overview shows, the two large sections of the tabernacle account (instructions for building and their subsequent execution) figure significantly within that pattern in the way it unfolds here:

1. *A new relational reality, the Sinai covenant*: the covenant ceremony, including the Covenant Code (Exod 19–24)

- *A call for Israel to respond in authentic worship*: YHWH's instructions for building the tabernacle (Exod 25–31)

2. *The rupture of idolatrous worship*: the making of the golden calf (Exod 32:1–6)
3. *Divine judgment and human suffering*: the ensuing punishment (Exod 32:7–33:6)
4. *Beginning again*: YHWH's renewal of the covenant, after negotiation with Moses (Exod 33:7–34:35)
   - *The response from Israel to the commanded worship*: the building of the tabernacle in accordance with YHWH's instructions (Exod 35–40)

The structure of these chapters shows that the work of building the tabernacle is essential to Israel's formation, and re-formation, as YHWH's "treasure-people." It is healing work, an antidote first to the dehumanizing work of building Pharaoh's store cities (1:11). But also, following the great sin of the golden calf, the execution of the instructions that were given before that rupture is an antidote to Israel's sick internalization of Egyptian idolatry, even in the face of clear demonstrations of YHWH's power. In this double sense, YHWH proves to be Israel's "healer," the divine identity that was revealed immediately after the crossing of the Red Sea (15:26).

Two keynotes in the description of the execution suggest a complete contrast from the experience and disposition of the enslaved. First, this work is Sabbath-oriented, and second, it proceeds from wise and willing hearts. When Moses assembles the Israelites to begin work, his first charge to them is to rest on the seventh day—even on pain of death (35:1–3; cf. 31:12–17)—followed by a call to assemble the materials:

> Take from among yourselves a contribution for YHWH. Everyone whose heart is willing should bring YHWH's contribution: gold and silver and bronze and blue and purple and crimson [dye] and linen and goats' hair. . . . And every wise-hearted person among you should come and make everything that YHWH has commanded. (Exod 35:5–6, 10; cf. 35:21–29).

Wisdom is the attribute that punctuates the whole description of the builders and their contributions. The chief builder, Betzalel from the tribe of Judah, is a man filled with "the spirit of God in wisdom and in discernment and in knowledge and in every kind of craft" (35:31); he (not Solomon!) is the individual in the Bible with whom wisdom is most closely and consistently associated. Here, as everywhere else in the Bible, wisdom is not a purely or even chiefly intellectual quality. It proceeds from the disposition of the heart and the work of the hands.

One detail especially shows the extent to which hearts are moved: the women who serve as attendants at the tent of meeting contribute bronze mirrors, their one luxury, to be melted down and remade into a basin and stand for the sanctuary (38:8). Nonetheless, Moses sets a limit to permissible generosity. Hearing that "the people are bringing more than enough for the work," he sends word through the camp that no man or woman is to bring anything more (36:5–6). Just as with manna, there is such a thing as enough.

Finally, "all the work of the tabernacle of the tent of meeting was completed, and the Israelites had done according to all that YHWH had commanded Moses" (39:32). Such a notice of completion appears just three times in the Hebrew Scriptures. Its first appearance is when "the heavens and the earth and all their host were completed" (Gen 2:1). The echo of the completion notice here marks this as a moment of new creation. (The third occurrence is when the apportionment of the land is completed; see Josh 19:49–51.) Moses blesses the builders, as God blessed the new creatures of the world (Exod 39:43; cf. Gen 1:31; 2:3). The sanctuary is a microcosm, a divinely ordered world emerging out of the "formless void" of Egypt, of wilderness, of Israel's own idolatry. Perhaps that is why the tabernacle account lingers so long on detail, in order to show precisely what kind of work is eligible for a blessing. In faithful imitation of God's own work, this work is Sabbath-oriented, proceeds from a willing heart, and eschews excess. In its respect for both persons and material resources, it is radically unlike both Egyptian slavery and the dominant work practices of our own industrialized culture.

Notes

1. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist, 1978), 88.
2. On the suzerainty treaty as a model or metaphor underlying the biblical representations of the Sinai covenant, see Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion* (New York: HarperCollins, 1985), 26ff.
3. Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*, vol. 1 of *The Schocken Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 369.