# CHAPTER 5

# The Exodus from Egypt

**The exodus is the most celebrated event in the entire Hebrew Bible, though it is not attested in any ancient nonbiblical source. In this chapter we will examine what we can know about the exodus as history; the revelation of YHWH in the exodus story; and the centrality of the liberation from Egypt for Israelite tradition.**

The exodus is the most celebrated event in the entire Hebrew Bible, and the event that is most important for the later identity of Israel and of Judaism. The story is told primarily in the first half of the book, proceeding from slavery in Egypt to the revelation at Mount Sinai in chapter 19.

It is much more difficult to distinguish the J and E sources in Exodus than it was in Genesis. After Exodus 6, all sources use the proper divine name YHWH for God. The giving of the Law on the mountain is ascribed to E. P is prominent in Exodus. It includes the revelation of the divine name in chapter 6, the account of the Passover in chapter 12, the crossing of the sea in chapter 14, the instructions for the tabernacle (chaps. 25–31) and the account of its construction (chaps. 35–40).

## EXODUS AS HISTORY

The exodus is not attested in any ancient nonbiblical source. The Egyptians kept tight control over their eastern border and kept careful records. If a large group of Israelites had departed, we should expect some mention of it. For an Egyptian account of the origin of Israel we have to wait until the Hellenistic era, when a priest named Manetho wrote a history of Egypt in Greek. Manetho claimed that Jerusalem was built "in the land now called Judea" by the Hyksos, after they were expelled from Egypt. (The Hyksos were people of Syrian origin who ruled Egypt for a time and were driven out of Egypt ca. 1530 B.C.E.) Moses, according to this account, was the leader of a rebellion of lepers in Egypt, who got help from these Hyksos. Manetho probably did not invent this story. Another


**The Landscape of the Book of Exodus**

Hellenistic writer, Hecataeus of Abdera, also says that Jerusalem was built by people led by Moses, who had been driven out of Egypt. There was a strong folk memory in Egypt of the Hyksos as the hated foreigners from Asia who had once ruled the country. But the idea that Jerusalem had been built by these people is probably a late guess; it provided Egyptians with an explanation of the origin of the strange people just beyond their borders. It is unlikely that Manetho had any reliable tradition about the origin of Israel.

The biblical account offers few specific details that might be corroborated by external evidence. The pharaoh is never named. Exodus 1 mentions the building of the cities Pithom and Rameses. Rameses (Pi-Ramesse) was built on the site of the old Hyksos capital of Avaris in the time of Ramesses II (1304–1237 B.C.E.). The location of Pithom (Per-Atum) is uncertain. One of the possible sites was also rebuilt at that time. Because of this, most scholars have favored a date around 1250 B.C.E. for the exodus. (The internal biblical evidence gives a date of 1450 B.C.E.). All we can really say, however, is that the biblical account was written at some time after the building of Pi-Ramesse and Per-Atum, and possibly that the author was aware of some tradition associating Semitic laborers with these sites. If the story of the exodus has any historical basis, then the thirteenth century B.C.E. provides the most plausible backdrop.

The existence of Semitic slaves in Egypt in the late second millennium is well attested. Habiru or 'Apiru (Hebrews?) worked on the construction of the capital city of Ramesses II. Papyri show that access to Egypt was tightly controlled in the thirteenth century B.C.E. One papyrus records the passage into Egypt of an entire tribe during a drought. Another reports the pursuit of runaway slaves who had escaped to the desert. It has been suggested that the story of the plagues contains a reminiscence of an epidemic in the mid-fourteenth century that is referred to as "the Asiatic illness" (compare the story of the lepers in Manetho). While parallels such as these suggest that there is a certain amount of Egyptian "local color" in the story, they fall far short of establishing the historicity of the exodus.

Other considerations must be weighed against these elements of local color. The consensus of archaeologists is that the material culture of early Israel, in the central highlands of Palestine, was essentially Canaanite. If there was an exodus from Egypt, then, it must have been on a small scale. Indeed, the claim in Exod 12:37 that about six hundred thousand men, in addition to children, came out of Egypt is hyperbolic in any case. Some scholars now suppose that the biblical account may have "telescoped" several small exoduses, which took place over centuries.

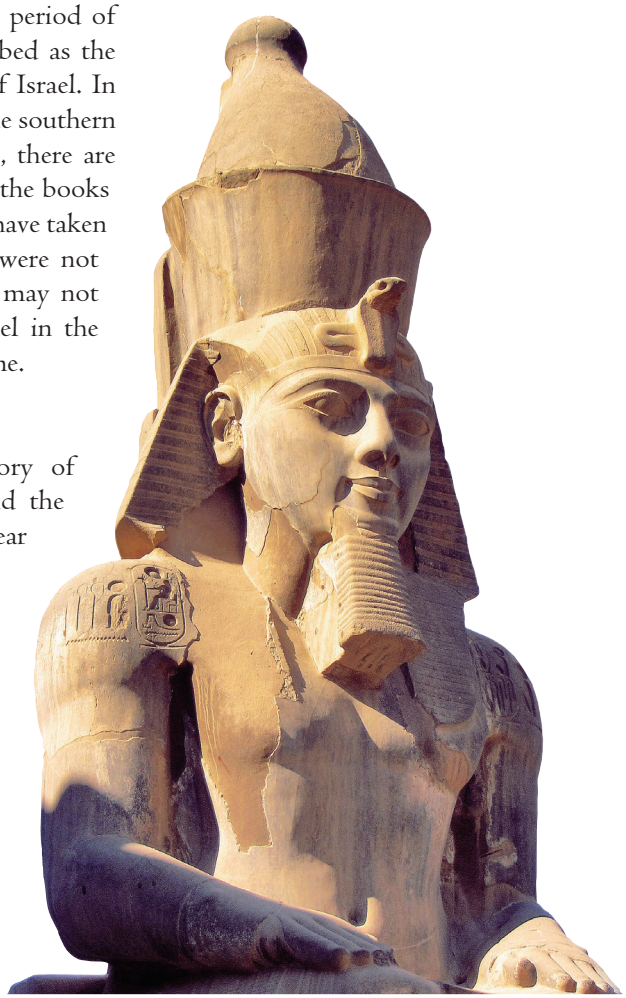
Further, the genre of the stories in Exodus is legendary and folkloristic. The story is replete with miraculous incidents, from the rescue of Moses from the Nile, to the burning bush, to the contest with the magicians of Egypt, to the crossing of the sea. The story of the baby Moses found in the bulrushes is a common folkloric motif. A similar story was told of King Sargon of Akkad (ca. 2300 B.C.E.). The final edition of the book of Exodus is no earlier than the Babylonian exile, some seven hundred years after the events it describes. It is not an exercise in historiography, even by ancient standards, as can be seen readily from the differences in style between the book of Exodus and the books of Kings.

Nonetheless, it seems likely that some historical memories underlie the tradition of the exodus. The name Moses is of Egyptian origin. The word means "child" and it

The traditional site of Mount Sinai: Jebel Musa in the Sinai Peninsula, Egypt.

normally occurs as an element in a longer name, which begins with the name of a god, such as Ptah-mose, Ra-mose, or Thut-mose. It is unlikely that a people would claim that it had experienced the shameful condition of slavery if there were no historical basis for it.

The memory of the exodus seems to have been especially important in the hill country of Ephraim. When Jeroboam I led the revolt of the northern tribes against Rehoboam, son of Solomon, he allegedly set up golden calves in Bethel and Dan, and told the people: "These are your gods who brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (1 Kgs 12:28). There is also a parallel between the career of Jeroboam and the beginning of the book of Exodus. Jeroboam was in charge of the forced labor of the house of Joseph under Solomon (1 Kgs 11:28). He rebelled and had to flee to Egypt, but he came up from Egypt after Solomon's death. Moses also encounters a situation of forced labor, and has to flee when he kills an Egyptian. The motif of forced labor, then, had special resonance in the time of Jeroboam. It is clear from the prophets Amos and Hosea that the exodus was celebrated at Bethel during the period of the monarchy. The exodus has been described as the "charter myth" of the northern kingdom of Israel. In contrast, it does not figure prominently in the southern prophets, such as Isaiah of Jerusalem. Also, there are surprisingly few references to the exodus in the books of Judges and Samuel. Jeroboam would not have taken the exodus as his "charter myth" if there were not already a tradition about it, but the story may not have been as prominent in the life of Israel in the period before the monarchy as it later became.



Statue of Ramesses II (1303–1213 B.C.E.), from Luxor, Egypt.

## The Revelation of YHWH

There are two major themes in the story of the exodus: the revelation of YHWH and the liberation from slavery. These themes appear to have been originally independent of each other. Several old poetic passages speak of YHWH as the divine warrior who marches out from Mount Sinai, or from some other location in the region south of Israel (Deut 33:2; Judg 5:4-5; Ps 68:7-8). These passages do not speak of an exodus from Egypt. Conversely, the events at Sinai are usually passed over in summaries of the early history of Israel (Deut 26:5-9; Josh 24:2-13). In the poetic passages, Sinai appears to be located south of Israel, in the region of Edom or Midian. It

appears that YHWH was associated with a mountain in Midian even before the exodus, and this tradition is also reflected in the story of the burning bush in Exodus 3–4. The oldest poetic passages do not mention the giving of the law in connection with Sinai. In the Elohistic and Deuteronomistic traditions, the mountain where the law is revealed is called Horeb, which means "wilderness"—and may be understood as an unspecified mountain in the wilderness. It appears that the book of Exodus draws on various old traditions, but it is difficult to say with any confidence when these traditions were combined.

## The Burning Bush

There are two revelations on a mountain in Exodus, first in Exodus 3–4 and then in Exodus 19–34. In the first episode, the mountain is called "Horeb, the mountain of God," but the Hebrew word for "bush" (*s'neh*) is wordplay on Sinai. The mountain is located in Midian, which was east of the Gulf of Aqaba. The traditional site identified with Mount Sinai, in contrast, is Jebel Musa, in the Sinai Peninsula, west of the Gulf of Aqaba. The context of the stories in Exodus would seem to require a location close to Egypt, so in the Sinai Peninsula rather than further east, but the association of Sinai with Midian and Edom requires the location east of Aqaba. It may be that the theophanies at Sinai were not originally part of the exodus story.

In Exod 3:13-14, when Moses asks for God's name he is told "I am who I am" (Hebrew *ehyeh asher ehyeh*). The Greek translators of the Bible rendered this passage as *eimi ho ōn*, "I am the one who is." Beginning with Philo of Alexandria, around the time of Christ, countless generations of theologians argued that the God revealed to Moses was identical with absolute Being, as understood in Greek philosophy. The Greek translation became the foundation for a theology that assumed that Greek philosophy and biblical revelation were speaking about the same thing. Historically it is impossible to find this meaning in the Hebrew text. Hebrew simply did not have a concept of Being. The actual meaning of the Hebrew phrase is enigmatic. The Hebrew name for the God of Israel, Yahweh, can be understood as a form of the verb "to be"—specifically the causative (Hiphil) third person singular imperfect: "He causes to be." "The Lord of hosts" (YHWH Sabaoth) may mean "he causes the hosts (of heaven) to be" or "creator of the hosts." Whether the name was originally understood as a verbal form, however, is uncertain. It often appears in Hebrew names in the form *yahu* or *yaho*. In Exodus 3 the association with the verb "to be" is assumed. The phrase "I am who I am" in effect changes the verbal form to the first person. The phrase may be taken as a refusal to divulge the divine name. Jewish tradition is reluctant to pronounce the divine name. Rather, it substitutes *Adonai,* "the Lord," or *HaShem*, "the name." But elsewhere in Exodus the name YHWH is used freely, and it is explicitly revealed in the Priestly passage in Exodus 6. It may be that the passage is only an attempt to put the divine name YHWH, understood as a form of the verb "to be," in the first person.

Exodus 3 goes on to give a fuller explanation of the identity of the Deity. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The key element, however, is what he promises to do in the future: "I will bring you up out of the misery of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites," in effect fulfilling the promise to Abraham in Genesis 15. The Deity is motivated by the

suffering of Israel (Exod 3:7-8). YHWH may already have been worshiped in Midian as a god who appeared in fire on the mountain, but henceforth he would be worshiped as the God who delivered the Israelites from Egypt.

Exodus 6 contains a parallel account of the revelation of the divine name, from the Priestly source. Here Moses is told explicitly: "I am YHWH. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name YHWH I did not make myself known to them" (6:2). For the Priestly tradition, as for the Elohist, this God was not known to the patriarchs as YHWH. The passage goes on to link the revelation of the name with the promise of liberation from slavery in Egypt. There is an obvious sociopolitical dimension to this liberation. But it also involves a religious commitment: "I will take you as my people, and I will be your God" (6:7). The Israelites will no longer serve the Egyptians but will serve YHWH instead.

## THE LIBERATION FROM EGYPT

### The Plagues

The plagues affect not only Pharaoh and the taskmasters but especially the common Egyptians, who also labored under Pharaoh. The most chilling plague is the slaughter of the firstborn. Exodus appreciates the depth of grief to which this gives rise, but in the end there is little sympathy for the Egyptians. Underlying this episode is the claim made in Exod 4:22-23 (J): "Israel is my firstborn son. I said to you, 'Let my son go that he may worship me.' But you refused to let him go; now I will kill your firstborn son." The notion that Israel is the son of God is an important one. In the present context it implies a stark claim of divine election that makes the Egyptians expendable.

The hardening of Pharaoh's heart serves to justify the punishments that follow. Pharaoh is held responsible for his hard heart, even though it was the Lord who hardened it. In much of the Hebrew Bible the Lord is responsible for everything, good and bad, but this in no way lessens human responsibility.

### The Passover

Before the Israelites depart from Egypt, they celebrate the Passover. This celebration is found only in the Priestly source. Just as P grounded the Sabbath in the story of creation, so it grounds the Passover in the story of the exodus. The Passover was probably originally a rite of spring, practiced by shepherds. In early Israel, it was a family festival. It is not included in the pilgrimage feasts in the oldest cultic calendars, in Exodus 23 and 34. It was also distinct from the Festival of Unleavened Bread. The celebration was changed by the reform of King Josiah in 621 B.C.E. into a pilgrimage festival, to be celebrated at the central sanctuary (Jerusalem) and was combined with the Festival of Unleavened Bread. It is also combined with Unleavened Bread in Exodus 12. Whether the Exodus account assumes that it is celebrated at a central shrine is more difficult to determine. The story is set in Egypt, long before there was a temple of YHWH in Jerusalem. It would have been anachronistic to speak of a pilgrimage to a central shrine. What Exodus says is that

the paschal lamb must be sacrificed by "the whole congregation of the assembly of Israel" (Exod 12:6). This formulation seems to imply that it is not just a family festival, although each family takes its own lamb, but is a collective celebration of the assembled people. I shall return to this issue in discussing the relationship between P and D.

## The Crossing of the Sea

The story of the exodus reaches its climax in the crossing of the sea. The sea in question is called the *yam sup*. The conventional translation, "Red Sea," derives from the LXX. The Red Sea is the body of water between Africa and the Arabian peninsula, ranging in width from 100 to 175 miles, which splits at its northern end into two gulfs, the Gulf of Suez (20–30 miles wide) between Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula, and the Gulf of Aqaba (east of the Sinai Peninsula, 10–20 miles wide). The Hebrew expression *yam sup* is used several times in the Bible to refer to the Gulf of Aqaba and may refer to the Gulf of Suez on a few occasions The Hebrew word *sup*, however, does not literally mean "red" but "reed," and some scholars have suggested that the site of the exodus was not a great sea but a reedy marsh or lake. It is difficult to see why the Israelites would go toward the Gulf of Suez, still less the Gulf of Aqaba. For this reason, many people have found the suggestion of "the Sea of Reeds" attractive. The situation is further complicated by the fact that the sea of the exodus seems to be distinguished from the *yam sup* in Num 33:8-10.

Exodus 15:4 says that Pharaoh's officers were sunk in the *yam sup*. Exodus 15:1-18 is a hymn, which is generally believed to contain some of the oldest poetry in the Bible. The basic hymn is found in 15:1-12, 18. Verses 13-17 are a later expansion, and change the focus from the victory over Pharaoh to the triumphal march of Israel into the promised land. The hymn does not actually speak of people crossing through the sea, and it makes no mention of dry land. The central theme is how YHWH, the Lord, cast Pharaoh and his army into the depths of the sea. It is important to remember, however, that this is a hymn, not a ballad, and that its purpose is to praise God, not to describe a historical event. The imagery of sinking in water is used elsewhere in Hebrew poetry as a metaphor for a situation of distress (e.g., Psalm 69). A psalm found in Jonah 3 says: "The waters closed in over me; weeds [Hebrew *sup!*] were wrapped around my head at the roots of the mountains." (Jonah is supposedly in the belly of the whale, but the psalm was not composed for that context.) In these cases, sinking in the depths is not a description of a physical condition, but simply a metaphor for distress. By analogy, to say that Pharaoh and his army sank in the depths is a metaphorical way of saying that they were completely destroyed. We do not actually know whether the hymn was composed to celebrate the exodus. It may have been a celebration of the withdrawal of Egypt from Canaan, or it may have had a specific battle in mind. It is poetic language, and it does not lend itself to the reconstruction of historical events.

The biblical prose writers, however, wanted to describe the overthrow of Pharaoh in more specific terms. The account in Exodus 14 is largely from P, but a J account can be reconstructed, according to which the Lord drove back the sea by an east wind, and caused the Egyptians to panic. At dawn the sea returned to its normal depth and he threw the Egyptians into it. We are left with the impression of a tidal wave, which returned and

engulfed the Egyptians. One can imagine how this account might have been inferred from the poetry of Exodus 15.

The Priestly account adds further embellishment to the story. Moses is told to stretch out his hand over the sea so that the waters are divided (cf. Gen 1:6-10, where God separates the waters, and gathers the waters under the sky in one place, so that dry land appears). The Israelites pass through, but then Moses again stretches out his hand and causes the waters to return on the pursuing Egyptians. This vivid account should not be viewed as an historical memory but as one of a series of imaginative attempts to give concrete expression to the belief that YHWH had rescued his people and overthrown the Egyptians.

The sea imagery continued to exercise a powerful effect on the religious imagination of ancient Israel. Other ancient Near Eastern peoples had stories of combat between a god and the sea, or a sea monster. The Ugaritic myth of Baal and Yamm is the one closest to the context of Israel. In the biblical psalms, too, we often find that YHWH is said to do battle with the sea. In Psalm 114 the sea looked and fled before the Lord. In Psalm 77 the waters were afraid, in view of the thunder and lightning of the Lord, as he led his people. One of the most vivid passages is found in Isa 51:9-11, where the prophet asks: "Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over?" Rahab and the dragon were sea monsters, supposedly defeated and slain by YHWH in the process of creation (although this story is never narrated in the Bible). The exodus was an event of the same type, in effect, the creation myth of Israel. The prophets imagined a new exodus, as a way in which Israel might start over, and renew its relationship with its God. This motif becomes especially important after the Babylonian exile, either in the form of return from exile or of a final, eschatological deliverance.

Exodus 15 declares: "YHWH is a warrior, YHWH is his name!" The idea that gods are warriors was a common one in the ancient Near East. A major reason why the early Israelites worshiped YHWH was that they believed that he was a powerful warrior who could help them defeat their enemies. Implicit in this image of God is a view of life as an arena of constant conflict. Exodus makes no pretense that we should love our enemies. Some people in the modern world may find the violence of such imagery repellent, but its power cannot be denied. In Exodus the warrior God is on the side of the weak, and this imagery has continued to inspire and support liberation movements down to modern times.

## CONCLUSION

In the end, very little can be said about the exodus as history. It is likely that some historical memory underlies the story, but the narrative as we have it is full of legendary details and lacks supporting evidence from archaeology or from nonbiblical sources. The story of the crossing of the sea seems to have arisen from attempts to fill out the allusions

in the hymn preserved in Exodus 15. The references to drowning are poetic, and cannot be pressed for historical information.

Regardless of its historical origin, however, the exodus story became the founding myth of Israel (especially in the northern kingdom) and of later Judaism. It is more important than any other biblical story for establishing Israelite and Jewish identity. It can fairly be regarded as one of the most influential stories in world literature.

## FOR FURTHER READING

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