

## Chapter Twelve

At long last, the tenth and final plague which sets in motion Israel's departure from Egypt, their home for over the past four-hundred years. For all practical purposes, that country and its rulers had treated them well, else they wouldn't have remained so long. The introductory verse of this chapter ('The Lord said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt') is significant because it's the first time words like "in Egypt" have been used. It may seem an obvious statement of fact but intimates that the days of remaining in that country are coming to a close rapidly. Furthermore, this verse is a continuation of the concluding verse of Chapter Eleven.

"This month shall be for you the beginning of months; it shall be the first month of the year for you" [vs. 2]. *R'osh* is the noun for "beginning" and *ri'oshon* the adjective for "first," both being derived from the same verbal root...thus we end up with a *r'osh* which is *re'oshon*. When Moses heard that the Lord was instituting a new form of marking time, i.e., a calendar, he knew something big was in the works; not just death of the first-born but Israel's departure from Egypt.

Once this momentous revelation is made, the Lord bids Moses to address Israel. "Tell all the congregation of Israel that on the tenth day of this month they shall take every man a lamb according to their fathers' houses, a lamb for a household" [vs. 3]. This telling (*davar*) is relatively easy, for all the Israelites had gathered in the compact land of Goshen in Egypt's northwest corner to escape the nine plagues. Even if Moses had told a small group, word would have spread by the end of the day, especially when it comes to a vital matter. *Hedah* is the noun for "congregation," the first time this word is found in the Bible and centers around the giving of testimony or precepts. In other words, *hedah* seems to be a regulatory or governing body and will be used frequently from now on. "Let the assembly of the peoples be gathered about you and over it take your seat on high" [Ps 7.7]. Now that "this month" [vs. 1] has been chosen, the Lord gets more specific, narrowing down to the tenth day. Note that on this particular day the lamb is to be taken "according to" [*L*] their fathers' houses," the preposition used as preface meaning literally "to" in the sense of in the direction of. This source for lambs is vital and not to be confused with lambs from among the Egyptians...one could argue that there are very few left after the series of plagues. Should a household be too small, vs. 4 offers provision, namely, that a person should join his neighbor or more practically, "according to what each can eat you shall make your count for the lamb" [vs 4].

Vs. 5 offers two fundamental traits necessary for the lamb (a goat can be used; this is prior to Christ's distinction as in Mt 25.31-46), *tamym* and *zakar*: "Your lamb shall be without blemish, a male a year old; you shall take it from the sheep or from the goats." The first suggests completeness or wholeness: "Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation" [Gen 6.9]. The second comes from a verbal root (same spelling) meaning "to remember" and was noted in 2.24: "And God remembered his covenant," the idea being that through a male child memory of past generations is carried forward and made present as well as guaranteeing continuation into the future. As for the image of a lamb, it is applied to Christ, one chief reference being 1Pt 1.18-19: "you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers...but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot."

Vs. 6 continues with the selective process of the lamb/goat for what will be known as the Passover sacrifice though as of yet it had not been given this name. "That it shall be kept until the fourteenth day of this month when the whole assemble of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs in the evening." The first part of this reads literally, "and will be to you to a keeping (*mismereh*)," this noun being derived from the verbal root *shamar* (to keep) noted in 10.28: "Take heed to your self." As for the word at hand, another reference (among many) is Num 9.23: "to do the service of for the people of Israel at the tent of meeting." At the end of this special *mismereh* comes the time for slaughter, *shachat* being the verb applicable to sacrificial victims. "And he shall kill the lamb in the place where they kill the sin offering and the burnt offering, in the holy place" [Lev 14.13]. Vs. 3 mentions *hedah* or congregation, but here we have a refinement, *qahal* used with this noun...a *qahal* of *hedeth*...or a gathering which intimates that a group of people had assembled with the intent to enact or discuss an issue affecting their way of life and of regulating it by rules or laws. One reference to *qahal*: "A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall spring from you" [Gen 35.11]. As for the time of this *shachat*, it reads literally "between evenings" (*herev*, singular). That seems to mean the time from

one evening or when the sun has just set through the night, on through the next day and continuing to the time of sunset the next day. It involves twilight, full darkness, full daylight and finally, a second (evening) twilight. Thus the Lord dispenses a liberal time span to effect this *shachat*, a full twenty-four hours. However, the intent is to be aware of the two boundaries of evening twilight or when the sun goes down...twice.

“Then they shall take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat them” [vs. 7]. Most likely some, if not most, Israelites inquired among themselves the reason for this but intimated it was for some sort of divine protection. “Some of the blood” implies that the rest will be used for other purposes though that does not seem to be the case except for a repetition of this injunction in vs. 23. As for applying this blood, it is to be smeared upon the two doorposts and lintel...two vertical sides and one top horizontal side, not the threshold itself. What this blood is supposed to ward off doesn’t become clear until vs. 12 when the Lord himself will pass through Egypt to slay the first-born of men and animals. The three sides of an entrance to a house is a sufficient sign for the Lord to pass-over its residents. Leaving the threshold un-smeared at least invites the Lord to put his head in and see if all is well, but he will go no further. As for the sacrificial lamb/goat, “They shall eat the flesh that night, roasted; with unleavened bread and bitter herbs they shall eat it” [vs. 8]. This method of preparation is spelled out further in vs. 9 saying that the lamb/goat must be roasted, not cooked in any other way. As for the time of eating, that would be several hours past sunset after the victim had been slain, certainly well before midnight. The unleavened bread or *matsah* means bread which has not been allowed several hours to rise, that is, bread made without yeast. Later on in 29.2 *matsah* is mentioned in conjunction with the consecration of priests or when it has become formalized and thus ready to celebrate for future generations. As for the bitter herbs (*merorym*), only two other biblical references are used, Num 9.11 and Lam 3.15, the latter being cited here: “He has filled me with bitterness, he has sated me with wormwood.” As in the first two references (i.e., the one at hand), “herbs” is implied.

“And you shall let none of it remain until the morning; anything that remains until the morning you shall burn” [vs. 10]. So once the lamb/goat has been eaten—and leftovers were bound to remain—the scraps are to be burned. Nothing is said whether this is to be inside the homes protected by the smeared blood or outside. Given the fact that the blood was on the doorways, chances are the remains were cast into a fire within the homes.

Vs. 11 explains the manner in which the victim is to be eaten: “your loins girded, your sandals on your feet and your staff in hand; and you shall eat it in haste.” This must have clued Moses and Aaron more into the nature of this supper, that it was to be the last one in Egypt, followed by a hasty departure. *Maqel* is the word for “staff,” unlike the *mateh* belonging to Moses mentioned frequently above. It also applies to a twig or spear, something more slender, with this being the only use in Exodus. “I see a rod of an almond tree” [Jer 1.11]. Nothing is said about bags being packed for a journey; the people are to eat the meal “in haste” and therefore have no time to pack except grab what they could on the run. *Chiphazon* is the noun for “hasty flight” with two other biblical references (Dt 16.3 and Is 52.12), the former being cited here since it refers to the same event: “For you came out of the land of Egypt in hurried flight.” Vs. 11 continues with the simple yet definitive sentence, “It is the Lord’s Passover” or *Pesach*, from a verbal root also meaning to spare, to halt as noted in vs. 13. So when future generations of Israelites are to hear about commemorating the Passover, they are to recall it was a time of sparing them...and done in haste with a minimum of preparation. That mean they were about to leave behind over four-hundred years of tradition and settlement in Egypt stemming back to Jacob and his sons at the invitation of Joseph and another Pharaoh, one who had been disposed kindly toward them. Where they were to go is unclear, for making a break with an established past all the more painful. Nothing is said about those Egyptians who must have intermarried with some Israelites; they are to be left behind in haste as well.

Now vs. 12 gets down to the actual reason for the Passover: “For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will smite all the first-born in the land of Egypt, both man and beast.” Here *havar* is used, not *pasach* (that’s for vs. 13), the common verb used with the preposition *b-* (in) prefaced to Egypt...“in Egypt.” Not only will the Lord *havar*-in Egypt, but he will “execute judgments” followed by the statement “I am the Lord.” *Sh’phatym* is masculine plural and was first noted in 6.6, that is, with regard to the ten plagues: “I will

redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment.” Now the same *sh’phatym*, already effected through the first nine plagues, will reach fulfilment in this the last and tenth plague.

“The blood shall be a sign for you upon the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you and no plague shall fall upon you to destroy you when I smite the land of Egypt” [vs. 13]. Here blood equals *’oth* (sign), this term first noted in 3.12 with regard to serving God upon Mount Horeb: “this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you.” Vs. 12 has the verb *pasach* which, as noted above, connotes sparing compared with the more general *havar* of vs. 12. Apart from two other instances in Exodus, *pasach* is found four times, one of which is Is 31.5: “He will protect and deliver it (Jerusalem); he will spare and rescue it.” In the verse at hand, *pasach* is used with the preposition *hal-* (on, upon) prefaced to the noun “you,” different from the preposition *b-* (in) prefaced to “Egypt” used with *havar* in vs. 12. Taken literally, this means that the Lord, upon seeing blood smeared upon lintels and doorposts, will *pasach*-upon those houses, bounding up over them from the ground and landing on the other side. Though nothing is said about those Israelites who fail to carry out the divine injunction, chances are they would suffer the same fate as the Egyptians or if not, would be left behind after the impending exodus. As for those Egyptians and Israelites just mentioned without a first-born (male and female), they will be spared; already they had suffered enough and don’t need to be afflicted further.

“This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord” [vs. 14]. First comes “this day” or the day of *Pasach* as one of “memorial” or *zikaron* (the verbal root *zakar* or to remember was noted above) which means it is to be recalled just as any event. However, this is a special event—one to define Israel itself for all posterity—that it alters one’s entire life and society or those who participate in this *zikaron*. That’s why the Passover as *zikaron* is to be kept (*chagag*; last noted in 5.1 which mentions the connotation of dancing) as a *chag* (last noted in 10.9). Dancing is a physical engagement done in public which makes the occasion that much easier to recall. In the case at hand, we have the actual event about to transpire, the elements of which are being laid out now by the Lord. Those who participate in the Passover are to attune their memories in a special way as first witnesses to an event that must be repeated not just the next year but indefinitely into the future. That’s important, to get the details down. Once the first celebration (a year hence) is complete, the details will have been worked out, making it that much easier for the second celebration. This may take some years of refinement, especially to weed out unnecessary or superfluous details, but given the supreme importance of the event at hand, it is recounted quite accurately and with greater ease than one would suppose. Again, that’s due to Passover being the defining event in Israelite history which takes on a different slant once the Torah is revealed. Vs. 14 continues with “throughout your generations you shall observe it as an ordinance forever.” *Choq* is the common noun for “ordinance” and is used in another sense in 5.14: “Why have you not done all your tasks of making bricks today as hitherto?” Also the verb *chagag* is repeated as “shall observe” in conjunction with future generations which is that special way by which yet-to-be-born generations will facilitate their recollection of Passover through a physical act, not just something repeated by words.

“Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread” [vs. 15]. That is today, seven days after the Passover or for six more days which intimates that the Israelites are to be in a state of readiness for a whole week, reminiscent of Jesus’ parable about the ten virgins, five of whom were prepared and five of whom were not. *Chamets* is the word for unleavened bread and is a verb—bread which has been leavened or made sour—and occurs seven other times in the Bible, two of which are in Exodus. In other words, bread has been left to turn sour or not allowed to rise and thus remains flat and relatively tasteless. For an alternate meaning of this verb, see Ps 73.21: “Thus my heart was grieved.” Vs. 15 says that before one makes unleavened bread—and that should be done is short order—“you shall put away leaven out of your houses.” Not that leaven will somehow make its way into the flour but that even its presence tucked away in a kitchen shelf will be enough to disqualify that household from celebrating the Passover. And so, getting rid of leaven is the task of the first day which involves scouring one’s house for any trace of it. Should some leaven be found and used for baking regular bread, “that person shall be cut off from Israel” as vs. 15 continues. *Nephesh* is the noun for person which often refers to the human soul or any living creature as in Gen 1.20: “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures.” As for the verb “shall be cut off,” it is *karath*, the root for covenant as something that has been cut; it also means to destroy as in Lev 7.12 (it uses *nephesh* for ‘person’ as the verse at hand): “that person shall be cut off from

his people.” To be *karath* is the worst form of removal from Israel, especially at this early stage when that people had not yet departed Egypt. To be *karath* in this instance is to suffer the same fate as death of the first born, only instead of being killed, that person will remain alive or stuck behind in Egypt after one’s native people has departed.

“On the first day you shall hold a holy assembly and on the seventh day a holy assembly” [vs. 16]. These two types of assemblies seem different from the Passover proper; then again, they can represent Passover as spread out over an extended period of time mirroring the six days of creation followed by the seventh of God resting from it. “First day” reads more properly “day one” in accord with these seven days of creation where a given day is stated first followed by its enumeration, thereby lending greater significance to each segment of time, more stretched out than the common twenty-four hour cycle. Such a manner of stating time can be taken as a *kairos*. Later perception of a day evolved into the evening before through the evening of the next day, hence embracing two sunsets. *Miqrah* is the noun for “solemn assembly,” derived from the common verb *qara’* (to call) suggesting that all the people will be summoned by word of mouth. This noun appears seven other times in the Bible; Neh 8.8 brings out the sense of *qara’* as reading in common or in public: “and they gave the sense so that the people understood the reading.” Here the preposition *b-* (in) prefaced to *miqrah* suggests that the reading is done “in” the people, that they grasp it fully. As for the verse at hand, *miqrah* is to be read on “day seven” which reflects the day when God rested from his work recounted in Genesis. Though both nouns are used, “day one” and “day seven.” Obviously there is a difference; on the other five days a *miqrah* is not to be held thereby offering a period to reflect upon that belonging to “day one” and how it leads up to “day seven.” “Day one” of Genesis differs from “day seven” (and the other, of course) but such is not the case here. The Passover “day one” is to be the primary event itself followed by five days of reflection and culminating in a second *miqrah* which recaps the previous six days. Interestingly, “no work shall be done on those days” as vs. 16 continues. In other words the *miqrah* precludes labor of any kind. While the five intervening days permit work, the text implies that work is to be limited to what is necessary. Finally, lengthy vs. 16 concludes with “but what everyone must eat, that only may be prepared by you.” Since “day one” of the *miqrah* requires preparation, it seems that food for the other six days must be prepared then as well.

Vs. 17 fleshes out a bit more observance or the *shamar* of the Passover, the feast of unleavened bread (‘feast’ not being mentioned): “for on this very day I brought your hosts out of the land of Egypt.” *Hetsem* is the word for “very” which alternately can read as “itself,” a way to distinguish the day at hand from all others. An alternative for *hetsem* is “bone:” “Now this is bone of my bones” [Gen 2.23] or more apropos to the text at hand, “this very one in front of me.” So with *hetsem* aligned with “day one” or the Passover day itself, it takes precedence over “day seven” which is a culmination of that day and the five which had come after it. Also the Passover took place on the actual day of deliverance when the Lord “brought your hosts out of the land of Egypt,” these hosts being *tsava’* (singular) or the same battle-array formation noted in 6.26: “Bring the people of Israel from the land of Egypt by their hosts.” Again, “day one” is to be kept (second use of *shamar*) “as an ordinance (*chuqah*) forever.” Vs. 18 more or less repeats the time of the Passover which had been stated in vs. 6, refining it “from the fourteenth day...until the twenty-first day,” this verse designating both days by evening.

“For seven days no leaven shall be found in your houses” [vs. 19]. That is to say, no *matsah* (first noted in vs. 8), used for making regular bread, is to be put away, this verse being a repetition of vs. 15. There a person (*nephesh*: soul) will be cut off (*karath*) from Israel whereas here a person will be cut off from the congregation of Israel or *hedah* (cf. vs. 3) which is more specific. Such a *hedah* is more inclusive than the Israelites, for it includes both sojourners and natives of the land. As for the former, *ger* was mentioned first in 2.22 as applicable to Moses residing in Midian and again in 6.4 with reference to the Israelites dwelling in Canaan. Possibly those who fell under this category referred to here are those who migrated with Israel into Egypt from Canaan and became attached to that people throughout their extended stay. Nevertheless, that prolonged period of time did not make them full-fledged members despite their lengthy affiliation; at the same time there were sufficiently allied to Israel in order to share in their impending departure from Egypt. As for “natives of the land,” the word is *‘ezrach*; from the verbal root *zarach* (to rise) and refers to descendants of a given place, hence it’s used with *‘erets* (land). A person who falls under the category of *‘ezrach* seems to be an Israelite and the *‘erets* at hand is more specifically Goshen originally prescribed by the anonymous Pharaoh sympathetic to Joseph four centuries ago. The Book of Leviticus contains the most references to *‘ezrach* in its various

prescriptions, one reference being 16.29: “and shall do no work, either the native or the stranger who sojourns among you.”

After the Lord had presented Moses with an explanation of the Passover and the rules governing it, vs. 20 stresses the importance of having no *matsah* (leaven) within a house. It stands out as integral to the text and as symbolic of haste, of not lingering in Egypt. “You shall eat nothing leavened; in all your dwellings you shall eat unleavened bread.”

Vs. 21 signals the transition from impartation of divine instructions about the Passover to their transmission to the elders of Israel. Usually in such a process some information is lost, forgotten or distorted. Not so with Aaron as Moses’ mouthpiece who formed a perfect copy of what the Lord imparted to Moses: He shall speak for you to the people; and he shall be a mouth for you, and you shall be to him as God” [4.16]. “Select lambs for yourselves according to your families and kill the Passover lamb.” The elders were heads of households, local leaders in the community, who quickly could spread Moses’ words mediated through Aaron. Given the urgency of the situation, these elders were exact copies of Aaron’s ability to speak for Moses. As for the verse at hand, the Hebrew text has “select and take,” the first verb being *mashak* which means to draw out. “Draw me, we will run after you” [Sg 1.4]. The second is the common verb *laqach*. Note the division, families or *mishpachah* (singular) which also refers to tribes as well as kinds of animals. It is first mentioned in Gen 8.19–not with regard to creation but after the departure of animals from Noah’s ark on in the new creation: “—went forth by families out of the ark.” And so we have the first clear identity between a lamb and the Passover though it had been implied (NB: goat was mentioned as an alternative to a lamb in vs. 5. However, it seems to have fallen out of favor).

“Take a bunch of hyssop and dip it in the blood which is in the basin and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood which is in the basin” [vs. 22]. *‘Agudah* is the noun for “bunch” which refers to anything gathered into a bundle and hence tied. Also it can refer to that which is arched or vaulted. Only two other biblical references pertain to the former and one to the latter which is quoted here: “who builds his upper chambers in the heavens and founds his vault upon the earth” [Am 9.6]. As for “hyssop,” the word is *‘ezov* as in Ps 51.7: “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean.” *‘Ezov* provides a fine instrument to apply the blood from the slain Passover lamb because it consists of woody branches with aromatic leaves thus scenting the odorless sacrificial blood. With one (or more) pieces of hyssop the Israelites are to apply this scented blood upon the lintels and doorposts of their homes, the verb being *nagah* which more particularly means to touch as well as to draw near. For the latter, see Ezk 7.12: “the day draws near.” That is to say, the hyssop isn’t used to be a sprinkling device...an aspergillum...but implies more a smearing which is more thorough, not unlike painting. Thus three parts of the entrance are marked. As for keeping doors open or closed, the second half of vs. 22 suggests that latter. While the thresholds are not smeared, this allows the Lord to peep inside the houses without entering. This is to be fulfilled later in the Song of Songs with “Behold, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattices” [2.9]. Vs. 22 concludes with “and none of you shall go out of the door of his house until the morning.” Morning (*boqer*) applies more to sunrise which during this very special night must have been anticipated greatly. All the Israelites were sequestered in their homes which means they hadn’t a clue as to exactly what was transpiring outside. Since the Lord was in the process of slaying the first born (to be described shortly), the Israelites surely were aware of the screams of horror at these deaths or more accurately, the parents’ piercing cries throughout the night.

“For the Lord will pass through to slay the Egyptians” [vs. 23]. Here we have the first of two verbs relevant to the Lord’s transit, *havar* as in vs. 12 (‘For I will pass through the land of Egypt that night’) with the second or *pasach* as follows: “the Lord will pass over the door.” Thus *havar* and *pasach* work hand-in-hand with the former signifying a going-through and the latter, the same going-through but with the intent to spare. *Nagaph* is the verb for “slay” as found in 8.2: “I will plague all your country with frogs.” Thus in the minds of the Israelites *nagaph* is associated with the plague of frogs compared to other afflictions recently experienced, that the Egyptians will be plagued. The image obtained from vs. 23 is that the Lord will see (the common *ra’ah* is used) lamb’s blood smeared at the lintels and doorposts of each house suggesting that he will be walking through the cities, towns and villages of Egypt. Most were situated up and down the Nile River. The same applies to the Egyptians, so the Nile itself became a means for conveying unspeakable grief. And so the

interaction between *havar* and *pasach* may be put as follows: the Lord *havar* Egypt, sees the blood and then spares (*pasach*) that household. If he does not see the blood (both of Israelites and certainly the Egyptians), he will not *pasach* but enter and slay any first born. More precisely, the Lord will not enter but his destroyer: “he will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to slay you.” This destroyer or *mashchyth* (better as the noun destruction) is a kind of angel of death as in 2Sam 24.16: “And when the angel stretched forth his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, the Lord repented of the evil.” Here the verb *shachat* (as in vs. 5 regarding slaying the Passover lamb) is used which forms the root for *mashchyth*. As for this word, one reference among ten is 2Chron 20.23: “they all helped to destroy (to destruction) one another.” And so the image is of the Lord first engaged in *havar* followed by (hopefully) *pasach* or sparing...not alone but accompanied by *mashchyth* who will “slay you” or *nagaph* (i.e., will plague you).

“You shall observe this rite as an ordinance for you and your sons forever” [vs. 24]. *Shamar* is the verb as in vs. 17 regarding the feast of unleavened bread, *davar* being the noun for “rite” or that which is spoken (from the verbal root of the same spelling). This *shamar* is not to be done occasionally but forever. Since the first Passover is about to take place, it is vital for those elders of vs. 21 whom Moses is addressing to get all the facts straight. That’s the value of having Aaron as a mediator though he isn’t mentioned here but presumed to be privy to all the details. And so *shamar* as keeping watch or as attending to begins this very night and extends throughout all eternity.

The first keeping of Passover as a *davar*—not the first or actual one in Egypt but outside its bounds—is provided for in the next verse: “And when you come to the land which the Lord will give you as he has promised, you shall keep this service” [vs. 25]. At first one would think this keeping or *shamar* is one year from this night. Not so, for the Israelites were to wander forty years in the wilderness during which there was no true Passover. That is to say, the Passover is to give way (at least during forty years of wandering in the desert) to the bestowal of the Torah. Such ambiguity increases the weight of that burden of memory upon the elders. The promise hearkens back to Moses’ first encounter with the Lord: “to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land...to the place of the Canaanites (etc.)” or the land prior to Jacob’s migration to Egypt. Though Egypt (more specifically Goshen or the principle settlement area for Israelites) and Canaan are relatively close and contact was maintained throughout the four hundred years, chances are the Israelites had turned their backs on the “good and broad land” simply because Goshen provided such a boon. As for that land which the Lord had promised, the verb is *davar* (for the Lord to speak is as good as for him to promise) but is coupled with another use of *shamar*, to guard or protect.

At this point halfway through Chapter Twelve or the impartation of observance for the soon-to-be actualized Passover, it does well to recall the connective words “and,” “then,” “but” and “now,” all being one letter/word, *w-* prefaced to the beginning word of each sentence. Its importance lies in the fact that virtually every verse of Exodus is connected to show continuous action. *W-* as connective is even more significant for such a pivotal event as the Passover because the details are presented one after another with the intent that those receiving them will not just remember them but will use them to set in motion a new phase of their religion that had been missing up to now. That is to say, the Israelites will be required to recall (*shamar*) the Passover, the first real liturgical action done in common. Prior to this point an occasional recollection of the patriarchs and their deeds in Canaan might have been noted but nothing more. Although the Israelites were faithful, they remained exposed to the Egyptian deities which could wear them down further until all recollection of their past had been lost. This puts the forty year period of wandering in the wilderness in better perspective though neither Moses nor the Israelites had a clue it would last so long. During this time the people were allowed to purify themselves of four hundred years of living in Egypt and of getting instruction as to the Passover prior to entry into Canaan. In other words, to move directly from Egypt into Canaan—an easy march of several days—would have been the equivalent of inserting Egyptian habits and customs directly into their ancestral homeland. That means living in Canaan would make little difference from their previous abode in Egypt.

One key element of *shamar*, of keeping in the sense of recollection, lies in the great value of Israelite children. They form the next generation which will be responsible for the actual transmission of the Passover event into a *davar* or service (thing spoken, cf. vs. 25) which is what the Lord has in mind in vs. 26: “And when your children say to you, ‘What do you mean by this *havodah* (service)?’” Though the Lord is anticipating a future

response (and correctly so), he has in mind that those too young to recall the actual Passover or those who never have witnessed it. Instead, they will be relying upon how the elders in vs. 21 went about the vital task of preserving memory of the past. There was always the chance that while the Israelites were promised by the Lord to inherit the land, that very land could be taken over by native tribes hostile to them. Thus the need for *shamar* of the Passover transcends the place in which the Israelites might find themselves. In the verse at hand, note the use of *havodah*, the same word in 6.9 with negative implications: “but they did not listen to Moses because of their broken spirit and their cruel bondage.” So for future generations the *davar* or promise becomes transformed into a thing to be worked or served, not a “cruel bondage,” one fundamental meaning of the verbal root *havad*.

Vs. 27 spells out this *havodah* or thing-to-be-done: “You shall say, ‘It is the sacrifice of the Lord’s Passover.’” In other words, *havodah* equals *zevach*, that which the Lord wished back in 3.18 on Mount Horeb but with the significant addition of Passover to distinguish it from earlier requests. The numerous requests Moses had made to Pharaoh for *zevach* all were to be done in the wilderness; this one is to take place not there but here in Egypt on the threshold of their departure from that land. The next Passover sacrifice—not until some forty years had passed, to be more exact—would be celebrated once the Israelites had left the wilderness though at this stage they hadn’t a clue about this. “For he passed over (*pasach*) the houses of the people of Israel in Egypt when he slew the Egyptians but spared our houses.” Vs. 27 continues with the addition of *natsal* first noted in 3.8 (‘and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians’). Finally the same verse ends with “And the people bowed their heads and worshiped,” the same response in 4.31 when Aaron had communicated the Lord’s words to Moses about their impending deliverance. This willingness is followed by compliance as vs. 28 recounts: “Then the people of Israel went and did so.”

“At midnight the Lord smote all the first born in the land of Egypt from the first born of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the first born of the captive who was in the dungeon and all the first born of the cattle” [vs. 29]. At last, the long-awaited, long-feared event which many Israelites and most likely Moses and Aaron, though they wouldn’t admit it, thought would never come. Without a doubt, credit is owed them; they followed the injunction to slay the Passover lamb and eat unleavened bread in a mode fit for a journey as they prepared to leave the land they called home for some four centuries. As for the time midnight (literally half-night in Hebrew), chances are that ancients determined it with some exactitude by position of the stars. They did not know, however, that half way through the night was when the Lord would come, so the time from dusk to midnight must have been one of extreme anxiety. As for the Egyptians? They hadn’t a clue except for Pharaoh and those in his court who heard the threat laid against them. Tonight was a night like any other. Yet a clue was present for anyone attentive enough. The Egyptians saw their Israelite neighbors staying up much later than usual. For so many to do this must have struck them as odd but then again, the Egyptians may have written them off as performing just another one of their strange religious rituals. The unexpected and total nature of the Passover is heightened by two extremes: from Pharaoh to those deep in a dungeon. However, among animals cattle alone are mentioned (a major source of food and trade) which implies that other types such as sheep, goats and fowl are exempt. To wipe out all animals after so many plagues would have meant the end of Egypt, an invitation for her neighbors to take advantage of her weakness.

“And Pharaoh rose up in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians” [vs. 30]. This *qum* or rising almost on cue by virtually every inhabitant is dramatic indeed; it took place exactly the same time the Israelites had been awake and now were celebrating the Passover, the one upon which all others would rest. Perhaps the waking was followed by the full realization that the Israelites did not go to sleep because they knew this tragedy was about to take place. They Egyptians must have been filled with bitter regret for not having inquired earlier as to why the Israelites hadn’t gone to bed which only served to increase their pain of loss. So if all first born were slain, that means automatically the second born assumed their place. They must have been especially fearful; if the Lord had inflicted such a blow, what about the future? So later when the Egyptians ran the Israelites out of their country, the second born must have been in the forefront urging them on with loud voices in case their turn was next. They were hard pressed not to kill the Israelites but restrained themselves in case an even greater plague would strike. Vs. 30 heightens the drama already stated with “and there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was not a house where one was not dead.” *Tshaqah* is word for “cry” found in 11.6, a prediction of this event: “And there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt such as there has never been nor ever shall be again.”

“And he summoned Moses and Aaron by night” [vs. 31], *qara’* being the verb which means to call as had been noted several times earlier. No doubt, Pharaoh was mindful of the audience recounted in Chapter Eleven as well as those many times his heart had been hardened. Pharaoh had no problem summoning the two brothers some time between midnight and dawn; most of his servants had just lost their first born and were eager as he to get to the bottom of this. And so these servants quickly made their way through the streets while passing countless homes in desperate mourning. At the same time the homes of Israelites were deserted; they had quietly departed for Goshen in preparation for their departure. The Passover meal had been eaten, the first born of Egyptians had been slain, but now what? As for Moses and Aaron, they knew Pharaoh would summon them during the night, most likely before dawn. They remained in the vicinity of the royal palace, not in Goshen, knowing full well that they would be called there, and when word came, they left for the place with some trepidation. Surely Pharaoh’s servants questioned them en route. “Why?” was obviously on top of their minds...why did the Lord bring such a catastrophe upon our first born? Vs. 31 continues with Pharaoh saying, “Rise up, go forth from among my people, both you and the people of Israel; and go serve the Lord as you have said.” Note the use of *qum* (‘rise up’) a second time in fairly quick succession, the first when Pharaoh and the Egyptians rose at midnight when the Lord slew their first born. Thus *qum* intimates a getting ready at once which in the case of the Israelites, certainly no problem for them. They were ready long before the time of celebrating the Passover meal. The sense of *qum* is intensified by the order to leaven not so much Egypt but “from among my people” or from *betok* my people, that word meaning “in the midst of” as noted in 11.4, an ominous prediction of the final plague: “About midnight I will go forth in the midst of Egypt.” The words which follow—“and go serve the Lord as you have said”—are for real this time, no hardening of Pharaoh’s heart being mentioned for such is the result of all those previous hardenings.

As for the final encounter between Moses, Aaron and Pharaoh, it ends on what appears to be a note of reconciliation (‘and bless me also,’ vs. 32) though soon Pharaoh would betray the Israelites by one final and absolute act of revenge. Such words come more from desperation. It is not recorded whether or not the brothers did bless Pharaoh. Perhaps they did, just out of personal safety and relief that their lengthy and fruitless encounters with him were at last over.

“And the Egyptians were urgent with the people to send them out of the land in haste, for they said, ‘We are all dead men’” [vs. 33]. *Chazaq* is the verb for “were urgent,” a verb often used to describe the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. In the case at hand, the Egyptians were so hardened against the Israelites that instead of slaying them (deep down they’d like to do this but were terrified to carry it out, divine revenge), single-mindedly they rose up to expel them from their midst. Full well they knew that they would lose a population which for four hundred had been an economic boon for Egypt, but better without them than to be inflicted with more plagues. The intensity of *chazaq* is enhanced by the preposition *hal* (upon) prefaced to “the people,” that is, “upon the people.” It is continued by two uses of the preposition *l* (to) prefaced to the two verbs *mahar* and *shalach*... “to be quick” and “to send.” The Egyptians, claiming to be already “dead men,” now work in favor of the Israelites in that they knew that by doing so, they had no reprisals to fear.

When vs. 34 says that the Israelites “took their dough before it was leavened (etc.),” they had no real bread with which to celebrate the Passover meal just several hours ago. Any unleavened bread would have to be consumed in flight for which they had been prepared (‘your loins girded, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand,’ vs. 11). So this bringing along of unleavened bread suggests that the Passover extended its influence well beyond that night when the Lord slew the first born; they would eat it on the shore of the Red Sea just before crossing it.

Vss. 35-6 recount what might be termed a despoiling of the Egyptians...not quite accurate because the Israelites asked (*sha’al*) for jewelry and clothing. No problem with clothing which has immediate, practical use, but jewelry? It was of no advantage in the desert but probably was asked for simply because it was portable and of potential value. Once the Israelites reached Canaan in a few days (supposedly), they could use this jewelry to purchase items and land. Regardless, the Israelites demonstrated that they hadn’t a clue as to their destination except to worship the Lord in the desert and later would melt down this jewelry to fashion a golden calf. Though the drama unfolding before their eyes intimated their departure was final, many harbored

thoughts that it might be temporary. Once having did obeisance to the Lord, they would return to familiar and comfortable Goshen, thereby settling down to a newly chastened Egypt and Pharaoh. In the verses at hand, “the Lord had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians,” that is, *chen* as predicted in 11.3. Such *chen* was given while the Egyptians were in the very act of being despoiled or *natsal* which was noted last in vs. 27 but in a different sense: “but spared our houses.”

“And the people of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot besides women and children” [vs. 37]. Before this journey (*nasah*: to remove, depart), the Israelites had to muster together at pre-arranged places within Goshen on the northwest corner of Egypt, that fertile area which had been bestowed by another Pharaoh to Joseph and his brothers. That wasn’t difficult despite the large amount of people. It doesn’t matter whether the number is an exaggeration; it shows how fruitful and generous the land of Egypt had been for four centuries even in later years of repression. “The more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad” [1.12]. Besides, many householders must have combined to celebrate the Passover. Despite this high concentration of Israelites in Goshen, surely others were scattered throughout Egypt or along the Nile River. Since the Nile area was virtually the only place where people could live, it was easy and quick for them to journey north on boat to Goshen. En route they must have passed countless household still mourning the death of their first born and had a sense of guilt that they were partly responsible.

Thus this mustering must have taken place under the cover of night. Actually this was an extended night, the night of the Passover, because in addition to celebrating the meal, the Israelites had journeyed from Rameses to Succoth after having gathered from all around Egypt. Accompanying the Israelites from Rameses to Succoth was “a mixed multitude” [vs. 38], the two words being *herev* and *rav*. The former comes from the verbal root *harav* meaning to mix as well as to pledge (and several other sub-meanings). Ten other similar biblical references exist, nine of which are in Chapter Thirteen of Leviticus meaning “woof:” “in warp or woof of linen or wool” [vs. 48]. As for *rav*, it’s an adjective modifying *herev*. No specifics are given as to this motley group, but chances are it contained those who migrated from Canaan into Egypt by reason of the famine for which Joseph had provided as well as others from that area who had been sympathetic toward Israel. Even an indefinite number of Egyptians might be included, especially those who still retained memories of gratitude toward Joseph who literally saved their country.

“And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough which they had brought out of Egypt, for it was not leavened because they were thrust out of Egypt” [vs. 39]. The verb for “thrust” is *garash* noted in 11.1, a foretelling of the Passover: “he (Pharaoh) will drive you away completely.” This sudden expulsion prevented the Israelites from tarrying (as vs. 39 continues) or *mahah*, a verb suggestive of denying or refusing (*mehumah* or commotion is a noun derived from it). “Ehud escaped while they tarried” [Judg 3.26]. This double sense of *mahah*, if you will, fits in with the situation at hand because the Israelites both tarried and were in a state of commotion, that is, while still within the bounds of Egypt.

Vs. 40 inserts an important fact, that the people of Israel dwelt in Egypt four hundred and thirty years. Israelite scribes must have kept account of this but as noted above in several places, we have no record of their religious practices or how the people fared. The presumption is that all went reasonably well, a fact often noted but overlooked; they had the option of returning to nearby Canaan, about a week’s journey to the east, but never returned there. In the next verse (41) *behetsem hayom* refers to the day after the night of the Passover meal, “on that very day,” *hetsem* noted in vs. 12 alternately as “itself” and even has the alternate meaning of “bone” which signifies the very heart of the matter at hand. Thus *hetsem* as applicable to the day refers more specifically to that lengthy night of Passover meal, the slaying of the first born and mustering at Succoth, all which coincide with the 430<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Israel coming into Egypt. Such is the significance assigned to that anniversary; the numerical significance is unimportant, for if it was the Israelites were ascribing significance to some type of fate or happenstance as opposed to divine intervention. And so the day at hand which is *hetsem* or out of the ordinary actually refers to the night of the Passover which is the only night in history that is longer than others by reason of the events that transpired within it. Another fact which abolishes the tendency to perceive numerical representation as bound up with fate is a sense of history. That is to say, the attitude of one human being who happened to be Pharaoh and how his stubbornness helped precipitate the departure of Israel from his land. As for the departure of the Israelites, it was not done

haphazardly but in an organized form not unlike an army or as hosts or *tsava'* (singular) last noted in vs. 17.

“It was a night of watching by the Lord to bring them out of the land of Egypt” [vs. 42]. The phrase “night of watching” gives a clear idea of why the Passover celebrated at that time had extended well beyond the normal dusk-to-dawn period. During this night the Lord himself was engaged in a prolonged *shamar* or watching as in vs. 24 (‘You shall observe this rite as an ordinance forever’). And so, *shamar* stands at the very core of Israelite religion, much more so than it might have in the past as a loose recollection of various deeds by the patriarchs in Canaan. This *shamar* will be centered around the Torah or Law, notably Psalm 119, which of all the Psalms has the most occurrences of that verb. Of course, *shamar* isn’t confined there but is found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy with respect to Torah which, it should be noted, was an new institution yet to be born. *Shamar* translates over into observance at this specific time as vs. 42 continues: “so this same night (*hetsem* isn’t used here) is a night of watching kept to the Lord by all the people of Israel throughout their generations.” Emphasis shifts from “watching by the Lord” to “watching kept to the Lord” where the divine *shamar* is assumed by the Israelites. Those original participants realized the significance of *shamar*, for they were responsible for handing it over to the next generation and those two or three afterwards who retained some memory of the original event, if not directly then from next-to-directly. From that point forward when no witnesses were left, this *shamar* would have to be ritualized to some degree for preservation “throughout all their generations.”

The remaining verses (43-51) of Chapter Twelve are a kind of supplement attributed to the so-called priestly tradition where some more details as to observance of the Passover are laid down (‘And the Lord said to Moses’). While reserved for Israelites, allowance is made for some categories such as slaves through the ritual of circumcision or *mulah*. The first reference to this practice in Exodus is 4.26 when Moses’ wife Zipporah said “‘You are a bridegroom of blood’ because of the circumcision” which despite its long extra-Israelite history is perhaps why later before the Lord Moses recalls the experience when he claims to be a “man of uncircumcised lips” [6.12]. As for the verses at hand, they seem to apply more to future celebrations of the Passover, not the original one, where it was too late to carry out circumcision on such a large group of males. The same ordinance refers to non-Israelites (cf. vs. 48), that they require circumcision prior to eating the Pasch. This caution towards non-Israelites is necessary lest the tradition of Passover be distorted or watered-down over time. For example, “in one house shall it be eaten; you shall not carry forth any of the flesh outside the house.” Such an injunction means that the Passover lamb is to be eaten indoors away from the prying eyes of both Egyptians and non-Israelites.

As for the words “you shall not break a bone of it” in the same verse, later it is applied to Christ on the cross just after he had expired (cf. Jn 19.36). This quote is prefaced by “that the scripture might be fulfilled” implying that the original Pasch, important as it might be, has yet to attain consummation. No one at the time realized this though Moses may have had some intimation by reason of his familiarity with the Lord. “All the congregation of Israel shall keep it” [vs. 47] or the entirety signified by *hedah* noted in vs. 19, more inclusive than a *qahal*, for it includes both sojourners and others. Instead of the *shamar* or keeping noted in the last paragraph, the common verb *hasah* is used (to do, accomplish) meaning that the actual rites are to be effected, the whole of which, if you will, consists in the *shamar* of the Passover. This cautionary approach is verified by the non-Israelites being able to “come near and keep it” [vs. 48]. First comes *qarav* (‘and all the congregation drew near and stood before the Lord,’ Lev 10.9) or approaching followed by a *hasah* or doing of the Pasch. And so the process of indoctrination...a type of mystagogia...results in these persons becoming “as a native of the land.” *Ezrach* is the word for “native” as found in vs. 19 which refers to an Egyptian but here one fully incorporated into the Israelite community which is associated with *‘erets* or “land.” Even though the Israelites had not returned to their ancestral homeland of Canaan and made it into their *‘erets*, still being considered an *‘ezrach* of that *‘erets* is as good as realization of that distant deed.

“There shall be one law for the native and for the stranger who sojourns among you” [vs. 49]. Such concludes the “priestly” injunctions beginning in vs. 43. Torah is the law (yet to be given) yet here can apply to circumcision of every male member of Israel, native or otherwise. Chapter Twelve concludes with the observation that the Israelites did as the Lord had commanded and more specifically, “On that very day the Lord brought the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt by their hosts” [vs. 51]. And so we have another use

of *hetsem* (very) used in the same sense as in vs. 41. There as here reference is to “day” as opposed to night which can be expanded to include a larger period of time than the normal twenty-four hour cycle...not unlike one of the seven days of creation. In fact, it is a new day of creation for Israel. They were departing the ‘*erets*’ (‘land of Egypt’) constituted in essence as that ‘*erets* of Israel-as-*hedeth*’ which later will take root in Canaan.

### Chapter Thirteen

This chapter is a kind of interlude between the preliminaries to Israel’s actual departure from Egypt and its accomplishment, dealing with the important matter of the consecration of the first born (human and animal) which took place shortly after the death of the Egyptian first born both of man and beast. *Qadash* is the verb for “consecrate” (fundamentally it means to be pure or clean), the root for the familiar adjective “holy.” Actually this is the first time *qadash* appears in Exodus suggesting that it was unfamiliar to the Israelites. Here it is bound up with the notion of redemption which the Lord spells out later within this chapter. “Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly” [Jl 1.14]. To demonstrate the exclusivity of the first born, the Lord says “is mine” or in Hebrew, “is to (*L*) me.” Part of the reason for the importance attributed to the first born among ancients is the high infant mortality rate. The second born would (presumably) move into the first position should the first born die, and such must have been the case in many instances. Thus with the added promise of divine protection the first born would have a higher chance of surviving the early years of childhood.

“And Moses said to the people, ‘Remember this day in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of bondage, for by strength of hand the Lord brought you out from this place’ [vs. 3]. The injunction “remember” or *zakar* first noted in 2.24 (‘and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Issac and with Jacob’) forms the root for the noun “male” or *zakur*. “Three times in the year shall all your males appear before the Lord God” [23.17]. It should be noted that a distinction exists between *zakur* and *bekor* (first born). The former applies to a male child whereas the latter not necessarily so though often that is the case. So when Moses bids the people to remember, implied is that they beget or give birth to that which they are commemorating; what has come to birth doesn’t pass away but matures over a period of time into adulthood. When *zakar* is applied to “this day,” it means day as described towards the end of Chapter Twelve, day in the Genesis sense of “day one,” etc. And so the “day” at hand is more inclusive than a twenty-four hour cycle.

Two elements are vital to a *zakar* of “this day” in vs. 3 with respect to the preposition *min* (from) prefaced to two words: “house of bondage” and “this place,” the two basically meaning the same. The way the Lord mentions “this place” suggests contempt; in fact, “place” isn’t in the Hebrew but has “from this.” As for “bondage” (*heved*), it is reminiscent way back to 2.23 when the Lord had taken notice of it, *havodah* being the word. In the verse at hand, *heved* is associated with “house” suggestive that the *heved* became a permanent feature of Israel’s life in Egypt, not what they had reckoned for four hundred years ago. Vs. 3 concludes with the familiar injunction, “no leavened bread shall be eaten” because the Israelites are to hasten from both the “house of bondage” and “this place.” It had been noted earlier that perception of the Israelites being maltreated by the current Pharaoh had been part of their lives since their arrival in Egypt or after Joseph and the Pharaoh whom he served had died. Not necessarily so. If this *heved* had lasted four long centuries, the Israelites would have picked up and left early on. Instead, they seem to have found it quite comfortable in Egypt, especially Goshen. It was by the Nile River and close to the Mediterranean Sea for trade as well as entry into what’s now the Middle East and beyond.

“This day you are to go forth, in the month of Abib” [vs. 4]. A short but important verse as the actual date of departing Egypt, the first time this month is given, and occurs four other times in Exodus with one other reference in Deuteronomy. *‘Aviv* means “new barley” and corresponds to our month of April or the springtime when first crops were coming in. Implied here is that the Israelites, having just celebrated the Passover, were still uncertain as to the next step, they being in the midst of a country that had just lost its entire first born. “Are to go forth” suggests this waiting, that it was not necessarily the following day. In other words, the Israelites were awaiting their marching orders (literally). It should be noted that many of the earlier plagues had destroyed so many animals and crops but not so for the Israelites. They, not the Egyptians, were unaffected, which gave them the advantage of determining the exact time to leave. Besides, the Lord must have taken into consideration violent reaction to the death of Egypt’s first born, an outrage against Israel that

was sure to follow.

“And when the Lord brings you into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites and the Jebusites.” Thus begins the first part of vs. 5 which mirrors 3.8 when the Lord first spoke with Moses from the burning bush. Besides, both verses bear a striking resemblance to the promises made to Abraham as in 15.18 when he mentioned these tribes among others: “To your descendants I give this land.” Thus the Israelites are presented with the same promise as Abraham. Chances are the original promise had been kept alive orally in Egypt during the Israelites’ four hundred year sojourn. They must have pondered it deeply and wondered how it applied to them in what seems to have been a fairly stable, peaceful existence until there arose the Pharaoh who put them under forced labor. Those peaceful years lulled the Israelites to sleep as to their eventual future. Actually it is quite amazing that the people had stayed together for so long. Early on in the Book of Exodus the Israelites are presented as a more or less unified group distinct from the Egyptians (and others) among whom they were living which meant they had retained their identity reasonably intact for such a long time. Thus they were in a double-bind: the secure way of life in Egypt and the tradition of their origins going back to Abraham’s promise, of whether or not (or when) they would carry it through. Obviously the Canaanites and others were glad to see the Israelites depart so they could resume their old ways minus an annoying group of people in their midst bent on subduing them.

Vs. 5 begins with “and when” meaning that the departure from Egypt is a given fact but built and expanded upon the original call of Abraham with “you shall keep this service in this month.” The sole purpose for leaving Egypt is to carry out “this service” or *havodah* as in 12.26 (“What do you mean by this service?”) even if the intended place is one “flowing with milk and honey.” Note that the verb “shall keep” is *havad* or to do compared with *hasah*, literally, “to do” the Pasch as in 12.48 and *shamar* in 12.47. In sum, Israel is bidden not so much to take over Canaan (that’s involved, of course) but to be faithful in the *havad* of the *havodah*. This new *havodah* is certainly more attractive than the one imposed by the Egyptians in 1.14: “and made their lives bitter with bitter *havodah*.” Then again, the Israelites may have thought that yes, we have experienced bitter *havodah* to date, but the current Pharaoh can’t remain in power much longer after his first born son had been slain by the Lord. It might be better to wait and see if things will return to normal as they had been for over four hundred years.

“Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a feast to the Lord” [vs. 6]. There seems a contradiction here, eating unleavened or unraised bread for seven days with a feast on the seventh day. However, the seven days at hand differ from the “seventh day” by reason of it being designated as “day seven,” reminiscent of that day when the Lord had rested from his creation. As for the number seven, it is *shevah*, from the verbal root *shavah* meaning to swear an oath. “He swore to your fathers” [vs. 5]. Thus day *shevah* is day *shavah* or day-of-the-oath. Thus day *shavah* is one of a feast or *chag* as in 12.14: “This day (Passover) shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord.” The stricture against unleavened bread—flat bread, if you will—is continued in vs. 7, part of which runs “and no leaven shall be seen with you in all your territory.” *Gevul* is the noun for “territory” as last noted in 10.14 and refers more to borders compared with the country itself though that is implied. Thus no unleavened bread is to be found with Israel’s borders. So when future generations have settled down in Canaan and have made it their own, they will continue to comport themselves at Passover as on the move and in haste. They may have a permanent home but not so as far as God is concerned. The beauty of about this focus upon haste is that it transcends whether Israel has a home or not or whether its home remains or is destroyed. The Passover will be celebrated to the full, hence the beauty of these divine injunctions.

“And it shall be to you as a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the law of the Lord may be in your mouth” [vs. 9]. Here “sign” or *’oth* (first mentioned in 3.11) is equivalent to “it” or “this day” of vs. 3 as well as “day seven” of vs. 6. With regard to the designation of time noted above as based upon the seven days of creation in Genesis (i.e., ‘day one,’ day two,’ etc.), this *’oth* serves to bring home the immediacy of the day’s significance which is why it will be etched, if you will, on one’s hand. The precise nature of this etching isn’t spelled out in the text and can mean a tattoo, bracelet or a physical mark. What is clear, however, is the existence of a direct correlation between the *’oth* and the doing of it, hand being the operative agent. Apparently the *’oth* is never removed from one’s hand. The same applies to one’s eyes in vs. 9 which means

the faculty of vision: “as a memorial between your eyes,” *zikaron* being the word for “memorial:” “This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord” [12.14]. Just as the *’oth* or sign is inscribed or placed on one’s hand, so the *zikaron* is put in between one’s eyes...a third awakened eye, if you will. Thus the faculty of vision is transformed to the faculty of memory which is more at home determining time as in the Genesis fashion of day one, etc. In other words, *zikaron* relative to the Passover is more important than what one sees. Both *’oth* and *zikaron* (sign and memorial) are geared for one purpose which completes vs. 9: “that the law of the Lord may be in your mouth; for with a strong hand the Lord has brought you out of Egypt.” This law or Torah as it later came to be known had not yet been given to Moses though it has been mentioned several times already. Implied is that the special time of “this day” and “day seven” is involved; Torah, once it attains fulness from the hand of Moses, will contain everything necessary for becoming aware of this new mode of time. Torah is to be in one’s mouth as something uttered. Even more fundamental is that Torah is to be at the root of all one’s thoughts which assume oral expression. The concluding words of vs. 9 refer to the Lord’s “strong hand” and is the reason why *’oth* or sign is associated with the hand of a person.

“And you shall therefore keep this ordinance at its appointed time from year to year” [vs. 10]. Though the Israelites in Egypt must have been familiar with the new type of telling time based upon the seven days of Genesis, here it is put into the wholly new context of the Passover. “From year to year” in essence means forever or refers to the passage of conventional time. Insertion of the new type of time (‘day seven,’ for example) into this linear time means that it is transformed from an experience of *chronos* into *kairos* or from mindless passage of time to an event that grabs your attention. Liturgically speaking, the former consists of just seven special days out of the entire year. At the Lord’s request, Moses puts this observance of special time in terms of an “ordinance” or *chukah* as in 12.17 which is to be kept or *shamar*, this verb now being focused upon that one week period as opposed to the rest of the year.

Vs. 11 repeats more or less vs. 5: when the Lord “brings you into the land of the Canaanites” after which he “shall give it to you.” In other words, we have a two-fold action about to unfold: the bringing out of Egypt by the Lord followed by his giving Canaan to the Israelites. The latter is familiar but the second has yet to be revealed. Perhaps the Israelites thought Moses would continue leading them in Canaan, having no idea that they’d be wandering in the desert for forty years. Since he had come through for them time after time, especially dealing with Pharaoh, the mightiest man on earth, surely he will do so again. One clue as to this future giving of Canaan to Israel is that “you shall set apart to the Lord all that first opens the womb” [vs. 12]. As for the verb at hand, the Hebrew text has two words: the verb *havah* (to make, to do) noted several times earlier plus the noun *peter* meaning a fissure or that which cleaves or breaks forth. Five other references are found in Exodus with three elsewhere. One of the others verses is Num 3.12: “I have taken the Levites from among the people of Israel instead of every first born that opens the womb among the people of Israel.” Thus *peter* has the sense of an infant breaking forth from the womb for the very first time. The same sense of uniqueness applies to the Israelites’ cattle only, no other beasts.

A provision for safeguarding the prerogative of the first born is given in vs. 13 where a human *peter* is redeemed by an animal instead of a human (sacrifice), *padah* being the verb, to loose or set free. “And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities” [Ps 130.8]. As for the moral character of a first born, in the case at hand it seems to take second place to the importance of priority at birth. Perhaps much of this has to do with infant mortality as noted earlier including the miracle of a child being born for the first time after which the mystery is diminished. As for the *padah* at hand, the ritual is given but the occasion isn’t spelled out; that will become clearer with time in the desert. Obviously children will inquire as to this *padah*: “What does this mean?...By strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt from the house of bondage” [vs. 14]. As for “time to come” which opens this verse, the word is *machar*, often as “tomorrow” or in reference to some future time which here intimates as long as Israel exists as a people. The asking of this question and the response can be taken as an antidote to ignorance but more than that, remembrance of leaving Egypt in the form of a ritual. Vss. 15-16 spell out this departure, of Pharaoh’s stubborn refusal to let Israel leave Egypt (note that vs. 15 includes cattle, again of all the animals belonging to the Israelites). The same verse speaks of the Lord sacrificing “all the males that first open (*peter*) the womb,” *zavach* being the verb for “sacrifice” as in 3.18: “that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.” *Zavach* applies to the slaughter of animals; in addition to an offering of

males on an altar, it is sharing in something akin to Abraham's offering of his son Isaac which an angel of the Lord prevented at the last minute. Certainly that dramatic story was familiar to the Israelites during their lengthy sojourn in Egypt. Note that *zavach* applies to "all the males that open the womb" whereas "the first born of my sons I redeem." The same category (first born) is dealt with but here in terms to both *zavach* and *padah* (redeem). *Padah* throws into better relief the notion of *zavach* or sacrifice, that the two apply with equal force.

Moses' final words to the people which began in vs. 3 conclude with an echo of vs. 9 (sign and memorial, *'oth* and *zikaron*): "It shall be as a mark on your hand or frontlets between your eyes." Here *'oth* is identified as "mark" instead of sign, the term used several times earlier, especially vs. 9 ('a sign on your hand'). Both uses of *'oth* seem to be the same for hands but instead of *zikaron* (memorial), we have "frontlets" or *totaphoth* which are bands later used by Jews at prayer. Two other references are found, both in Deuteronomy (6.8 and 11.8), and are the same, the former being quoted here: "And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes." Finally vs. 16 concludes the address by Moses with "for by a strong hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt," and that hand was the archetype, if you will, of the human hands with a mark or *'oth*.

Vss. 17-22 or to the end of Chapter Thirteen are not words of Moses but a prelude of sorts before the important act of Israel's deliverance in the next chapter. Though the people were ignorant of this, Moses knew full well in advance but didn't disclose it else he would have a rebellion on his hands as well as vengeance from the Egyptians. "When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near." The direct route would have been from Goshen where the Israelites had been assembled, across the Red Sea, skirting the northern part of Sinai and right into Canaan...not more than a week's march. Besides, that was the most popular trade route between Egypt, Africa, the Middle East and beyond. The Lord was sensitive to the attachment Israel had acquired toward Egypt, especially when confronted with armed response to their entry into Canaan. He was afraid the Israelites would "repent" or *nacham* which means to lament, grieve or take vengeance. "Obey the voice of the Lord your God, and the Lord will repent of the evil which he has pronounced against you" [Jer 26.13]. If that should happen, Israel would face even stiffer servitude, even annihilation, upon their return to Egypt and lose divine favor. Instead of this quick transit the Lord "led the people round by way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea" [vs. 18]. That is, they headed south of the traditional route which must have made them wonder what was going on.

Obviously there was no land bridge to Sinai, so they figured some type of divine intervention had to take place. Perhaps some thought this was a good alternative because it avoided the heavily trafficked route into Canaan and would preclude inviting suspicion. To get in that vicinity, chances are the people took boats up the Nile River. As for this leading by the Lord (*nachah*: 'The Lord has led me in the way to the house of my master's kinsmen,' Gen 24.27), nothing is said explicitly about it though Moses is presumed to play an important role. Therefore he must have a certain sensitivity to the Lord as to this *nachah* so as not to deviate from the path. This is desert region he is passing through; one misstep and everything is lost. Apparently the people went along with this alternate plan, for vs. 18 continues with "And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle." This was noted earlier in different terms: "And on that very day the Lord brought the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt by their hosts." The words "equipped for battle" is one in Hebrew, *chamushym*, an adjective in the plural with just three other references one of them being Jos 1.14: "but all the men of valor among you shall pass over armed before your brethren and shall help them." As for the meaning of *chamushym*, it translates as something like "by five in a rank," *chamesh* being the number five.

"And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him" [vs. 19], words which harken back to the conclusion of Genesis: "Then Joseph took an oath of the sons of Israel saying, 'God will visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here'" [50.25-6]. Memory of this oath seems to have remained very strong through Israel's four centuries in Egypt, forming part of their oral heritage. As for the "visit" by God, the verb is *paqad* noted in 4.31: "that the Lord had visited the people of Israel." Joseph gave no indication of when this *paqad* was to happen, just that it was promised. He was confident that it would happen which is why he ordered his bones to be transported from Egypt. Despite the generosity by Pharaoh and the people, Joseph knew Egypt was not his homeland. Surely he kept under close wraps that order to transport his bones, for in the eyes of the

Egyptians Joseph had become legendary for having become their savior during the seven year famine. Nothing is said as to the location of Joseph's remains in Egypt, most likely in Goshen, where some type of shrine must have been erected. Later when the Holy Family fled King Herod, it is likely they headed for this shrine. Joseph must have prayed here asking guidance from his predecessor by the same name...one dreamer consulting another dreamer.

As for the remaining verses of Chapter Thirteen, they recount the first movements of Israel with the Lord going before them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire at night (vss. 21-2) as echoed in 14.19. *Hamud* is the word for "pillar" which later will play an important role in the construction of the ark. Most likely the Israelites took their recollection of this divine *hamud* for incorporation into the ark's support later in Exodus. After all, *hamud* had a precedence in the number of pillars (*matsevah*; implies a memorial) set up by the patriarchs in Canaan. Since two pillars are presented, one of cloud (day) and one of fire (night), it appears that one pillar existed which changed during the morning and evening twilight hours instead of one pillar replacing the other. That's another reason why the Israelites later were especially sensitive to the Sabbath commencing at first twilight, watching for the evening star as a sign of passage into Sabbath. This *hamud* was stationary as far as its relationship with Israel, for it "did not depart from before the people" [vs. 22]. The verb for "depart" is *mush* which connotes a withdrawing. "Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, did not depart from the tent" [33.11]. How far was this stationary pillar, no one knows for sure, but it must have been distant enough for all to behold. The same applies to its height: probably just high enough to be seen in the fairly level terrain of the desert. The Israelites were accustomed to pillars in the lavish buildings of Egypt, so that would have offered a good analogy for the divine pillar at hand. The pillar by day might have been relatively harmless to look at, but when it changed into one of fire at night, it must have made the Israelites somewhat fearful. Regardless, the Lord himself was in the pillar (cf. vs. 21), concealed there as he would later in the ark and Jerusalem temple.

## Chapter Fourteen

The Lord addresses the people of Israel through Moses in the first four verses.

After so many failed negotiations with Pharaoh by Moses and Aaron to let Israel depart Egypt, at last the time had come for the actual departure but only at a great cost to the country by means of ten grievous plagues. The second half of Chapter Twelve describes the departure from Egypt but only to the vicinity of the Red Sea. Furthermore, all the precepts concerning the Passover had been spelled out, and it had been duly celebrated while the tenth and final plague was ravishing Egypt. The goal now was to muster Israel. "Tell the people of Israel to turn back and encamp in front of Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, in front of Baal-zephon; you shall encamp over against it" [vs. 1]. All three places were on the eastern border of Goshen along the main military route to and from Egypt, aptly so, for Israel was about to depart in battle formation (cf. 13.18). Word must have got out quickly in the surrounding area of such a multitude drawn up as if for battle; it seemed that the Israelites were planning an invasion somewhere soon in the area. As for the turning back, it took place after Israel already was in the process of departing their beloved Goshen. This seems to have occurred along their initial route toward Succoth in the south by the coast of the Red Sea as noted in 12.37. It must have seemed a disappointment with no reason given. Nevertheless, Israel has the single pillar of cloud by day which transformed into one of fire by night (cf. 13.21-2). The people now followed that pillar instead of Moses and Aaron or better, with the two brothers taking a secondary role of leadership for the time being. Besides, this detour was deliberate, giving them time to formulate their next move, of getting used to direct guidance which will come from the Lord outside Egypt and in unfamiliar, wild territory. So when vs. 1 opens with "Then the Lord said to Moses," it means he addressed him from that pillar. Being encamped by the Red Sea made the Israelites uncomfortable...understandably so...for they had their back up against it with the desert on the west, easily accessible by the Egyptians because of the transportation offered by the Nile River.

"For Pharaoh will say of the people of Israel, 'They are entangled in the land; the wilderness has shut them in'" [vs. 3]. A statement with some irony: while Pharaoh says this, similar words were on the minds of the Israelites as well knowing that they were bait for a divine trap. *Buk* is the verb for "entangled" and applies to a turning or rolling and hence a perplexing situation. Two other biblical references exist, J1 1.18 and Est 3.15, the

former being cited here: “The herds of cattle are perplexed because there is no pasture for them.” As for the preposition “of,” *l-* is prefaced to “people” which could read “Pharaoh will say to the people of Israel.” With this in mind, it could be said he wasn’t addressing Israel per se but mocking them in their absence. As for *buk*, awareness of it came to the fore when Israel was told to “turn back” as in vs. 1. They were familiar with the area, of course, and were afraid Moses might have misinterpreted the Lord despite his proved faithfulness. Then again, that pillar was present right there before Israel which gave them hope though they were unable to communicate with it directly. Perhaps even at this critical juncture Moses himself couldn’t do the same. Vs. 3 concludes with “the wilderness has shut them in,” *sagar* meaning to shut up or around. “The Lord had shut up her womb” [1Sam 1.5]. So in top of being entangled (*buk*), Israel was for all practical purposes trapped (*sagar*).

“And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host” [vs. 4]. These word were both encouraging and discouraging. Encouraging in that the Lord will take direct action and discouraging in that the Israelites had heard about this hardening or *chazaq* many times before with regard to the plagues. With Israel both *buk* and *sagar* (entangled and shut in), they had no choice except to take the Lord at his word. Though no accounts of murmuring are recorded as they would be later on in the wilderness, it’s almost certain that many grumbled aloud. Here the Lord introduces something new, however, to give Israel heart, *kavad* or glory. That word was noted several times earlier as in 7.14 with a different meaning: “Pharaoh’s heart is hardened.” The idea behind the verbal root *kavad* (from which ‘glory’ or *kavod* is derived) is heaviness or weightiness. “And it will rebound to their honor on the day that I show my glory, says the Lord God” [Ezk 39.13]. So if previous experiences with Pharaoh’s heart being *kavad* came off successfully, why not put trust in the Lord that he will use it for manifesting his own divine *kavad*? Perhaps when the Israelites heard the word “host,” they were reminded immediately of the Egyptian army, the most powerful one in the world. Actually “host” as *tsava’* was applied to Israel in 12.51 but here *chayl* is used—basically the same meaning—but with more emphasis upon the valor of those who are waging war. “Now Jephthah the Gileadite was a mighty warrior” [Jud 11.1]. Vs. 4 continues with “and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord”...not just Pharaoh but all his subjects, most of whom had just suffered loss of their first born. Then follows the brief sentence in the same verse, “And they did so.” That is to say, Israel followed the Lord’s bidding to encamp by the sea as in vs. 2.

“When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the mind of Pharaoh and his servants was changed toward the people” [vs. 5]. Obviously Pharaoh was unaware that the Israelites had fled, being consumed by grief over loss of his first born; for him it was not just the loss of an infant but the loss of a successor to the throne. *Barach* (‘has fled’) is the verb which connotes a breaking through and therefore escape: “Absalom fled and went to Talmi, the son of Ammihud, king of Geshur” [2Sam 13.37]. If Pharaoh’s advisors had been more attuned to activity among the Israelites, especially their preparation for the Passover, they might have intimated that something big was about to happen. Apparently they weren’t, hence the surprise. After all, six hundred thousand men, not including women and children, were on the march (cf. 12.37), something not easy to miss even when in the process of assembling. In the verse at hand, note use of the singular “mind” (*levav*) relative to both Pharaoh and servants, this term applicable more to the heart. “Be strong, and let your heart take courage, all you who wait for the Lord” [Ps 31.24]! The verb “changed” applies to this verb, *haphak* suggestive of turning or overthrowing. “And all the water that was in the Nile turned to blood” [7.20]. Prior to this *haphak* regarding Israel, it appeared Pharaoh was disposed to their departure, but the conclusion of Chapter Ten seems a bit ambivalent. There during Moses’ last audience Pharaoh shows anger and asks Moses never to come into his presence. Surely Pharaoh’s words “Get away from me” in vs. 28 applies not just to Moses but to all the Israelites. Then again, on a number of earlier occasions Pharaoh had demonstrated willingness to let the people go but changed his mind, those instances being characterized by *haphak* though the verb was not used.

“What is this we have done, that we have let Israel go from serving us?” And so concludes vs. 5 with a manifestation of that *haphak* or change of mind. Such a question must have been raised during the night of Passover while Egypt was suffering the aftershocks of the death of their first born. Despite the overwhelming tragedy, Pharaoh and his servants seemed more concerned about Israel remaining under subjection or forced labor. That intimates their prime interest in resuming construction of those store cities mentioned in 1.11. Even though the ten plagues had inflicted tremendous pain Egypt was in a period of economic prosperity and expansion which depended upon virtual slavery for the Israelites. If Israel were allowed to get away, that would

be equivalent to an eleventh plague, severe indeed. The immediate response by Pharaoh was to muster his army: “he made ready his chariot” [vs. 6] which means he was to take personal command of his army. As for those servants of Pharaoh who raised the question of vs. 5, some, if not all, may have lost their heads because of bad advice. As for the numerous hardenings of Pharaoh’s heart by the Lord, this was the ultimate though it’s inserted here almost casually: “And the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he pursued the people of Israel as they went forth defiantly” [vs. 8]. Perhaps Pharaoh wouldn’t have been bothered by the departure of so many precious laborers, let alone their contributions to culture, but the way they left, “defiantly” or literally as “in a hand raised up” (*rum*).” One could just visualize the Israelites leaving Goshen with all six hundred thousand men raising their hands on high, many perhaps in an obscene gesture as well. In other circumstances the Egyptians might have let them off, but they just suffered the calamity of the death of their first born. As for Pharaoh and his army, they caught up with Israel at Baal-zephon mentioned in vs. 2. Since that was near the chief military road into Canaan and beyond, many soldiers who were stationed there were within easy reach for muster. Most must have shared the same determination of Pharaoh because they too had lost their first born.

“When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them” [vs. 10]. “Lifted up their eyes” suggests that the people were preoccupied with something else (for example, cf. Gen 22.4). Indeed, the Israelites were preoccupied with how to get out this situation with their backs up against the Red Sea. Despite the Lord’s presence in the form of a pillar, that did not alleviate their desperation. Moses had to muster all his leadership skill along with Aaron’s help to keep the people calm. Perhaps it was during one such meeting that the people “lifted up their eyes” and saw the Egyptians approaching. It was only natural for them to be “in great fear,” *me’od* being an adverb here for “great” which intimates excessively (the text reads better, ‘they feared greatly’). So when they cried out to the Lord, their cry didn’t travel far, just to that pillar which must have been one of fire since it was daylight. This pillar may not have been as visible compared with one of fire at night because of the shimmering desert sunlight and added to Israel’s confusion.

After having cried out to the Lord, the people put Moses on the spot with “It is because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness” [vs. 11]? A poignant if not ironic statement with anger simmering just below the surface ready to burst out. Though the two words aren’t connected except by reason of the same verbal root, when reading the Hebrew text you see the verb “drew near” in vs. 10 and “graves” in vs. 11.” That is to say, *qarav* is the root at hand from which the latter is derived, so one may say that the Israelites perceive their graves are ready at hand with the approach of the Egyptian army...and Pharaoh must have had on top of his list capture of Moses. Furthermore, Moses could only listen to the repeated, desperate questions put to him such as the next one, “What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt” [vs. 11]? Surely Moses was in just as desperate mind as his people but could not show it. And so this incident, despite other famous ones to follow, was the most severe test of his leadership. It should be noted that the people did not address the ever-present pillar which remained silent and apparently not offering support.

Obviously Moses had to respond with the pillar overlooking him and the people. While addressing them often he glanced furtively at that pillar for help and inspiration exemplified in the following words: “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord which he will work for you today” [vs. 13]. *Natsav* was noted in 9.20 with a slightly different tone devoid of anxiety: “Rise up early in the morning and wait for Pharaoh as he goes out to the water.” Still, the idea of waiting is common to the verb *natsav*. Getting into the mode of *natsav* is crucial for the people’s survival, for it’s necessary to see that “salvation” or *yeshuhath* about to be wrought celebrated later: “The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation” [15.2]. In the verse at hand, *yeshuhath* is something to be worked or done (*hasah*) as with the Pasch in 12.48. How this will come about is not clear, but the people sensed it was close which must have increased their anxiety even more. Vs. 14 continues with “for the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again.” So the first seeing relative to *yeshuath* or salvation sets the stage for the other two seeings; that is, Israel will see them one more time after which they will disappear. The people weren’t sure as to how this will occur but because their backs were up against the Red Sea, surely they intimated that the Egyptian army would be consumed there. It was quite obvious.

“The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be still” [vs. 14]. In other words, the *yeshuath* at hand consists in the Lord fighting for Israel, *lacham* being the verb which also means to eat. “The Lord your God who goes before you will himself fight for you just as he did for you in Egypt before your eyes” [Dt 1.30]. Just the fact that a fight is all but unavoidable must have cheered the Israelites, but the condition laid out is difficult though simple, “be still” or *charash* which fundamentally means to cut into, inscribe or plow as well as to be deaf. It’s a word suitable for the occasion, for the people must “cut” into themselves...discipline themselves...to achieve quiet both inner and outer. “A man of understanding holds his peace” [Prov 11.12].

Now the Lord steps in that he may continue speaking with Moses: “Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward” [vs. 15]. An expression of some aggravation on the Lord’s part because he wants to get on with the business at hand, to effect his plan of *yeshuath* by fighting the Egyptians. So when the Lord commands Moses to have the people go forward, in effect he is telling them to walk directly into the Red Sea which to them is as disastrous as facing the Egyptian army. If they put up a fight, at least that’s better than certain suicide. In an almost matter-of-fact manner the Lord bids Moses, “Lift up your rod and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it that the people of Israel may go on dry ground through the sea” [vs. 16]. *Mateh* is the word for “rod” used so many times in conjunction with the plagues inflicted upon Egypt. However, it would not turn out this way except for the Egyptian army which is about to suffer its worse defeat ever. Most likely Moses was on a bluff of sorts overlooking the sea when he was about to do this and with the Egyptian army closing in behind him from the west. *Baqah* is the verb for “divide,” more a cleaving or tearing asunder. “By his knowledge the deeps broke forth and the clouds drop down the dew” [Prov 3.20]. Once done, the sea bottom becomes *yabashah* or “dry ground,” not just mud with pools of water here and there. With a similar incident in mind which takes place some forty years later, see Jos 4.22: “Then you shall let your children know, ‘Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.’” To heighten the contrast between this *yabashah* and the water we have the word *betok* (through) meaning right through the center of something, a preposition which goes well with the verb *baqah* (to cleave).

Vs. 8 describes a hardening (*chazaq*) of Pharaoh’s heart, a theme all too familiar from his response to the plagues inflicted by the Lord through Moses. Now we have yet another *chazaq*, the final one, this time pertaining to the Egyptians as a whole or more precisely, those who were pursuing Israel. In both instances it may be presumed that the hearts of all the Egyptians were not hardened, that they had been open to change, but that change vanished with no option for repentance. As for the word “heart” (*lev*), it is singular, “the heart of the Egyptians” much like “mind” (*levav*: another word for heart) in vs. 5. Bound up with this hardening of hearts is the Lord getting glory or *kavad* as in vs. 4. The preposition *b-* (‘in’) is used prefaced to both “Pharaoh,” “chariots” and “horsemen” signifying that this glory will be in all three, a thorough penetration by the Lord with regard to what was about to take place.

“Then the angel of the God who went before the host of Israel moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them” [vs. 19]. This is the first mention of “angel” or *mal’ak* since 3.2: “And the angel of the Lord appeared to him (Moses) in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush.” It seems that this *mal’ak* was not present but came on the scene at a critical junction as angels are wont to do. All along, however, the *mal’ak* was present. We don’t know his name nor the form he had taken but given the 3.2 quote, he was a fire-like creature in appearance. He is distinct from the pillar in which the Lord was present (cf. 13.21), the two exchanging positions. The pillar, now being behind the Israelite encampment or between it and “the host of Egypt” [vs. 20]. Though the Israelites had grown accustomed to this pillar of fire and cloud, it was a novelty for the Egyptians whose response goes unrecorded. If it had posed a threat or scared them, we would have known about it. “And there was the cloud and the darkness; and the night passed without one coming near the other all night” [vs. 20]. Since it was night or approaching nightfall, the “cloud and darkness” (*hanan* and *choshek*) denote a change in the pillar from being one of light at night to one consisting of these two manifestations relative to night or better, concealment. *Choshek* was used last in 10.21, an apt description of the current situation: “that there may be darkness over the land of Egypt, a darkness to be felt.” That means the darkness in the pillar (and presumably the Lord was still there as in 13.21) was darker than the night which must have been an unusual sight. Because the darkness was of the same order as that which could be felt, it acted as a barrier to keep apart the two camps. As for the words “and the night passed,” the Hebrew reads “and it lit up the night”...not by the light which earlier had emanated from the pillar

but from the *choshek*, that's how unique it was. Both Israel and Egypt knew this couldn't last for long, that with dawn something would have to give one way or the other.

"Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea" [vs. 21]. Compare with vs. 15 which says that Moses stretched one hand over the sea and lifted up his rod with the other. The first incident didn't part the Red Sea but was a kind of rehearsal for what was to be the most celebrated in Israel's history. So when the time came to do it for real, Moses was prepared. In vs. 21 he doesn't use his rod, just his hand after which "the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided." The two actions—Moses' extension of his hand and the Lord using the east wind to dry up the water—are effected seamlessly, as though they one and the same gesture. Note that a wind (*ruach*: the same noun for spirit) from the east did this drying up meaning it came from the eastern side of Sinai Peninsula across the Red Sea, its western shore. In other words, the water came rushing toward the Israelites like a tsunami in whose wake the sea turned into *charavah* or dry ground, not the *yabashah* of vs. 16. If the Israelites weren't close by on the shore, this tsunami would have continued right across into the Egyptian army thereby eliminating them. As for *charavah* instead of *yabashah*, it suggests a desolation as can be seen from its verbal root; indeed in a short time this would be the fate for the Egyptian army. Another reference to *charavah* is Job 3:17: "And while all Israel was passing over on dry ground." It is not upon this *charavah* that the people advanced but the *yabashah* or rather the *yabashah* "in the midst of the sea" or *betok* the sea, its very center as in vs. 16.

As for the parted waters, "they were "a wall to them on their right hand and on their left" [vs. 22]. The word for "wall" is *chomah* or that which protects a city. "Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem" [Ps 51:18]. That means the waters on both sides were solid as stone rising straight up from the ground to the surface, a rather disconcerting experience for Israel to pass through. Naturally they feared that what appears solid could come crashing down upon them. Within this corridor came the Egyptians on the heels of Israel. *Radaph* is the verb in vs. 23 for "pursued" as in Ps 83:15: "Pursue them with your tempest and terrify them with your hurricane!" Such *radaph* was done by "all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots and his horsemen [vs. 23] literally "to the midst of the sea." Instead of *betok* as in vs. 22 we have *tok* which is similar which puts the accent a bit more upon the middle of something. So while the Israelites were *betok* the sea, the Egyptians were there too, *tok* the sea coupled with the preposition 'el (to') prefaced to it...as though the Egyptians were more in the middle of the sea which implies that is were they will remain and not come out.

"And in the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and of cloud looked down upon the host of the Egyptians and discomfited the host of the Egyptians" [vs. 24]. Note the time, "morning watch," *ashmorah* being the first word, the time of keeping guard; it is derived from the verbal root *shamar* as in 13:10. Six other biblical references of this noun exist, one of which is Ps 63:6: "When I think of you upon my bed and meditate on you in the watches of the night." As for the traditional watches of night, the one at hand is the last starting in the pre-dawn hours and lasting until there's sufficient light to see. Given this transitional time of twilight, of night passing into day, both the Israelites and the pursuing Egyptian army had entered the Red Sea when it was barely light. In other words, the event took place neither in the full light of day nor total darkness. However, this was no problem for the Israelites because according to vs. 20, the text says literally "and it (the cloud and darkness) lit up the night" and presumably dispelled the ambiguity of morning twilight for the Israelites. If this unique combination of cloud and darkness (i.e., *choshek*) caused light not just in the desert but in the heart of the Red Sea for the Israelites, a major drawback for the Egyptian was that they lacked such illumination. The pillar did not enter the sea but remained perched on some nearby bluff overlooking the parting waters. So when the Egyptians pursued Israel, they had to pass by the pillar of fire and cloud, a disconcerting sight. However, the hardness of their hearts was so great that they practically ignored this marvel which normally would have stopped anyone else.

*Shaqaph* is the verb for "looked down" and also means to overlay as with planks. "(Jehu) painted her eyes, adorned her head and looked out the window" [2Kg 9:30]. Bound up with this downward glance from God is the verb *hamam* (to be discomfited) as in Ps 14: "And he sent out his arrows and scattered them; he flashed forth lightnings and routed them." The manifestation of this *hamam* according to the literal reading of the text is that the wheels of their chariots were removed, most likely in the thick mud as opposed to that *yabashah* or

dry ground on which the Israelites were treading in front of them. It might have been tempting for the Israelites to look back at the Egyptians who suddenly found themselves in distress. However, they would have a fate not unlike the wife of Abraham who turned into a pillar of salt when she glanced back at the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (cf. Gen 19.26). Incidentally, she became not a *hamud* of salt but a *netsyv* of salt (something placed or set) compared with the pillar of fire and cloud, *hamud* being more a column or even a platform. In fact, once on the other side of the Red Sea, the pillar vanishes; the Lord entrusts leadership of his people to Moses, the first time he was really on his own with the Israelites. At least now he was in relatively familiar territory, having fled to Midian years before.

Vs. 25 adds a final touch to the drama at hand with: “and the Egyptians said, ‘Let us flee from before Israel; for the Lord fights for them against the Egyptians.’” That is to say, the Lord engages in *lacham*...a combat...as noted in vs. 14. There the Lord bade Moses “to be still” while this fight is going on and presumably he is doing just that, having taken the lead of Israel in their passage. The text doesn’t specifically say that he was in front but that’s the natural place for a leader to be. Most important was, of course, that Israel get safely on the other side of the Red Sea, a thought that must have tempted Moses dearly which is why he had to remind himself of that command to be still and allow the Lord to complete his task. If not, chances are he would have panicked and rushed to the east bank. Also the further Moses got away from the pillar of fire and cloud on the west bank (after all, he was in a ditch of sorts during morning twilight), the further it receded from visibility. The length of this passage and the time it took are not recorded; it must have taken considerable time, given the large amount of people (cf. 12.37-8). The same applies to the width of the parted waters; it could have been fairly wide to accommodate everyone and get them to safety.

“Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and their horsemen’ [vs. 26]. Given that he had just completed a perilous journey, Moses was more than eager to comply. This stretching-out counters that of vs. 21 when Moses opens the Red Sea. It was a wise decision because “the sea returned to its wonted flow when the morning appeared; and the Egyptians fled into it, and the Lord routed the Egyptians in the midst of the sea” [vs. 27]. Note the time of day, morning, when the sea returned to normal which means it was cleaved the full day before as well as the night that had just passed. The verb *nahar* is used for “routed” which more accurately to shake off and connotes a physical contact of sorts. It is a good choice in the context, not unlike the Lord shaking off something pesky or irritating. “I also shook out my lap and said, ‘So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not perform this promise’” [Neh 5.13].

The second part of vs. 29 sums up this event simply with “not so much as one of them (i.e., the Egyptians) remained.” However, the text doesn’t mention that Pharaoh had entered the sea itself along with his army. While eager to pursue the Israelites, especially Moses and Aaron, for safety his military advisors advised him to stay on the western bank. So there was the ruler of Egypt helplessly watching on as his entire army and cavalry horses disappear from sight when the two walls of water collapsed. Pharaoh must have been relatively close to that pillar of fire and cloud from which the Lord threw his terrifying glance after which it must have looked at him in derision. However, the Lord did not choose to slay Pharaoh. Egypt had suffered enough from the ten plagues. As to this Pharaoh, nothing is heard about him again. He may have fell victim to palace intrigue and was assassinated by reason of having lost over six hundred thousand laborers. Such was the “great work” (*hagedolah* or that which is great, vs. 31) which made the people fear the Lord. Not only that, “they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.” While this is a fitting conclusion to the most momentous event in Israel’s history, quickly the beneficial fear and belief will fade once they leave the Red Sea and enter the wilderness of Shur (cf. 15.22). In fact, the rest of Exodus documents this all too well.

## Chapter Fifteen

“Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the Lord, saying” [vs. 1]. Here’s another example of a chapter, let alone a verse, beginning with the connective *w-* (and, then, but) as used throughout Exodus which reveals the close and immediate succession of events. This continuous, uninterrupted action is especially noteworthy on the heels of Israel’s escape through the Red Sea and the destruction of the Egyptian force sent after them. One gets the impression that without hesitation Moses and the people broke into song which

stands in sharp relief to all the travail they had experienced in Egypt. It should not be forgotten—and this was recalled several times earlier—that for over four hundred years Egypt was a place of refuge and prosperity starting with Joseph and the Pharaoh who had shown him favor. Presumably this favor was extended to other Pharaohs because never have we heard a bad word about Israel having been maltreated. Such is the land they had just exited in favor of a place (i.e., Canaan) they only heard about through their history and visitors from that land in Egypt. Also we don't hear about any Israelites visiting Canaan though surely that must have been the case. Though this connection with Canaan is latent in the background, we can presume some form tradition and history relative to it was essential to bind the Israelites together. Now they were returning to the land promised to Abraham and in many ways were in imitation of him. Though a quick read of Exodus gives the impression that the Israelites were ignorant of Canaan and its inhabitants, in reality the opposite is true given the small geographical area and the importance of Egypt to which people from all over were accustomed to visit. Besides, Egypt contained the greatest architectural wonders of the world.

As for the song Moses and the Israelites are singing (it extends through vs. 18), that means six hundred thousand men were involved, let alone women and children plus “a mixed multitude” (cf. 12.37-8) which joined in. The sound of all those voices singing in unison must have shook the ground and was heard for miles around, even having reached the ears of Pharaoh on the west bank of the Red Sea. “I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea” [vs. 1]. *Syrr* is the form for both verb and noun and intimates a performance done by a chorus. With the exception of one insignificant reference in Gn 31.27, the verse at hand is the first mention of a *syr*, let alone one detailed so precisely. Because such a multitude partook of the miracle together, everyone knew the *syr* and sang it spontaneously. This turned out to be so important that succeeding generations recalled it verbatim. The singers began their *syr* in the first person singular, indicative of a newly discovered unity of purpose and as a nation. “Triumphed gloriously” has the verb *ga'ah*, to lift oneself up, to increase, and is the root for a noun which more often applies to pride and arrogance. Four other references exist, one of which containing this pair in Miriam's song, vs. 21: “Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously.” Actually, *ga'ah* is the fulfillment of *kavad* (glory) noted in 14.17: “and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots and his horsemen.” As for the Lord casting the Egyptian army into the sea (*ramah* is the verb, as to shoot with a bow) which isn't the case presented literally in Chapter Fourteen or when “the water came back upon the Egyptians” [14.26]. Nevertheless, keeping in mind we are dealing with a *syr* or song where such casting does not conflict with the actual report. As for “horse and his rider,” the Hebrew has for the latter “chariot.”

“The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.” Such runs the first part of vs. 2 about the Lord as “strength” and “song” (*hoz* and *zimrath*) with references accordingly: “The Lord is my strength and my shield” [Ps 28.7] and Ps 118.14 along with Is 12, close copies which are not to be cited here, they being the only other biblical references. Once Moses and the people acknowledge this two-fold fact, then and only then can they claim the Lord as their salvation or to put it more accurately, that “he has become my salvation.” *Yeshuhah* is the same as *yeshuath* cited in 14.13 with a slightly different spelling. Such is the noun derived from the verbal root *yashah* and hence the proper name Jesus. With this in mind, for a Christian it would not be far-fetched to read the words of vs. 2 as “and he became my Jesus.”

Vs. 2 continues with “this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him.” At last a corporate acknowledgment that the Lord who had been with Israel since the beginning of their affliction is the God of the people of Israel. *Navah* is the verb for “praise” with one other biblical reference: “Moreover, wine is treacherous; the arrogant man shall not abide” [Hab 2.5: the RSV says in a footnote, “The Hebrew of these two lines is obscure”]. Anyway, the idea behind *navah* seems to that of being comely, adorned; the adjective *na'vah* is derived from it. “I am black but comely” [Sg 1.5]. “My father's God” refines “this is my God” and identifies the Lord as one who related not so much with the immediate fathers but more specifically with the patriarchs. In other words, the people had a growing sense that by their departure from Egypt en route to Canaan, they were accomplishing what Abraham and his children had set out to do. Reference to this is situated between two verbs of jubilation. As for the verb “exalt,” it is *rum* which means to lift up oneself and was found in 14.8: “he pursued the people of Israel as they went forth defiantly.”

“The Lord is a man of war; the Lord is his name” [vs. 3]. A very brief sentence where the Lord is identified as

a man (*ysh*) joined with the noun *milchamah* or war though technically speaking no battle had taken place, just the waters covering the Egyptian army. “The Lord, the mighty in battle” [Ps 24.8]. The second half of this sentence is more like an exclamation, “the Lord is his name.”

“Pharaoh’s chariots and his host he cast into the sea; and his picked officers are sunk in the Red Sea” [vs. 4]. *Chayl* is the word for “host” as in 14.4 which implies more to the valor of a fighting force compared with *tsava’*, the more common term found earlier. Those singing the song must have taken special delight in this verse which specifies their enemy that had just been vanquished. *Shalysh* is the word for “officers” which literally means “third” by reason of soldiers fighting in chariots, one driving and two fighting (It is found in 14.7 but *shalysh* wasn’t noted). “But of the people of Israel Solomon made no slaves; they were the soldiers, they were his officials, his commanders, his captains, his chariot commanders and his horsemen” [1Kg 9.22]. Specific mention of these officers is important for the Israelites, a way of saying that the cream of army’s leadership was wiped out. Unfortunately for the Israelites, their song doesn’t include the death of Pharaoh who, as mentioned above, did not enter the Red Sea and therefore escaped death. Nevertheless, his power was broken...not permanently but long enough for the Israelites to get further away from Egypt and hopefully once established in Canaan, not to face any military threat. As for “Red Sea,” *suph* is used which means a reed...in other words the sea of reeds implies shallow water. Still, the reeds may have been close to the shore compared with deeper waters further out.

“The floods cover them; they went down into the depths like a stone” [vs. 5]. *Tohum* is the word for “floods” which applies to a huge amount of water making a noise as found right at the beginning of Genesis: “darkness was upon the face of the deep.” In the same verse *tohum* rhymes with *tohu* or “without form.” Thus at the destruction of the Egyptian army the Israelites were reminded of the primal waters which lacked form. Adding to the drama is *metsulah* or “depths.” “I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me” [Ps 69.2]. This going down (*yarad*) into the depths “like a stone” means that the Egyptian army sank which is not exactly in accord with the waters coming in over them at Moses’ gesture. These words also testify to the fact that the Reed (*suph*) Sea consisted of deep water further away from the shore. Regardless of the sea’s depth, it identifies the foes of Israel as ending up in the *tohum* and hence *tohu*, that formless waste prior to creation under the image of flood waters.

“Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power, your right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy” [vs. 6]. This is the first mention of the Lord’s “right hand” in Exodus signifying his favor of Israel compared with the left hand, not mentioned. It is “glorious in power” or *adar* which here is a participle of a verb with two other references, vs. 11 and Is 42.21, the latter being cited here: “The Lord was pleased for his righteousness’ sake, to magnify his law and make it glorious.” The fundamental idea lying being *adar* is to make wide or to swell. It is this right hand that “shatters” the Egyptian army, *rahats* meaning to break into pieces with one other biblical reference, Jud 10.8: “and they crushed and oppressed the children of Israel that year.”

“In the greatness of your majesty you overthrew your adversaries; you sent forth your fury, it consumes them like stubble” [vs. 7]. *Ga’on* is the noun for “majesty” and can apply to an ornament or anything glorious as well as pride or arrogance, often with the second two meanings in mind. “For the sin of their mouths, the words of their lips, let them be trapped in their pride” [Ps 59.12]. *Haras* is the verb for “overthrew and suggests a pulling down to destruction. “Wisdom builds her house, but folly with her own hands tears it down” [Prov 14.1]. Such pulling down falls in line with the Egyptians sinking into the Red Sea. As for “adversaries,” the verb *qum* (to rise) is used...almost as though the sinking Egyptians attempted to rise up not just to the surface of the water but to rise up against the Lord. While they were in the process of this rising, the Lord then sends his “fury” or *charon* or burning heat which presumably came from the pillar (of fire). “He let loose on them his fierce anger” [Ps 78.49]. As for “stubble,” see a similar verse from Is 47.14: “Behold, they are like stubble, the fire consumes them.”

“At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up, the floods stood up in a heap; the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea” [vs. 8]. This verse depicts the Lord as blowing forth through his nose with a “blast” or *ruach*, the same word for wind and spirit, which he does from the pillar on the shore opposite to where the Israelites had just come. So when the waters “piled up” or *haram*, they did so from the western shore towards the

eastern one. *Haram* means to be high (also to make naked, to be crafty), the only biblical use of the term with this meaning. If we take the idea of acting in a crafty manner which *haram* suggests, the Lord acted accordingly, waiting for the Egyptians to get right in the center of the Red Sea before springing his trap. *Ned* means “heap” or pile and has five other biblical references, one of which refers to the incident at hand, Ps 78.13: “He divided the sea and let them pass through it and made the waters stand like a heap.” This word implies something temporary as opposed to anything permanent, and all biblical references except one (that referring to a harvest) pertain to water. *Nazal* is a participle and means “floods” which differs from *tohum* in vs. 5 in that it emphasizes the fluidity of water, its flowing-ness. “He made streams come out of the rock and caused waters to flow down like rivers” [Ps 78.16]. In order for a *ned* to exist, it requires some kind of foundation, hence the verb “congealed” or *qapha’* which means to draw together or curdle and has three other biblical references one being Job 10.10: “Did you not pour me out like milk and curdle me like cheese?” To stress this curdling, the text has “in the heart of the sea” or in its very center, “heart” being not unlike *qerev* in 8.22: “that you may know that I am the Lord in the midst of the earth.”

“The enemy said, ‘I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil, my desire shall have its fill of them.’” Such is the first of two sentences within vs. 9 where the Egyptians (the army as a whole or Pharaoh himself) speak in the first person plural, the only occasion in the song where this occurs. If these words actually were spoken, the Israelites overheard them before entering the Red Sea as in 14.9: “and overtook them encamped at the sea,” the same verb *nasag* being used. In essence, they were uttered long before as an intent or when the Lord had inflicted Egypt with plagues. *Shalal* is the noun for “spoil” referring to that which has been stripped off. The sinners in Prov 1.13 said something similar: “We shall find all precious goods, we shall fill our houses with spoil.” Such spoil the Egyptians expected to have their fill, *nephesh* (soul) being used as first person plural. Next in the same verse the Egyptians/Pharaoh continue in the first person singular as “I will draw my sword, my hand shall destroy them.” As for the verb “shall destroy,” it is *yarash* which fundamentally means to possess. The sense here is that the Egyptians are intent upon possessing—rather, repossessing—Israel for that forced labor mentioned in the beginning of Exodus. “I will strike them with the pestilence and disinherit them, and I will make of you a nation greater and mightier than they” [Num 14.12].

“You blew with your wind, the sea covered them; they sank as lead in the mighty waters” [vs. 10]. *Nashaph* is the verb for “blew,” one of two biblical references, the other being Is 40.24: “scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth when he blows upon them and they wither.” From it derives the noun *nesheph* or evening twilight when a cooler wind blows: “And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day” [Gen 3.8]. The “wind” which the Lord blew is *ruach* or spirit as noted in vs. 8 (‘blast’). Here the *nashaph* differs from the *ruach* coming from the Lord’s nostrils, a second phase, if you will, which after the floods thinned in a heap and the deeps congealed the sea came crashing down upon the Egyptians. Finally the army “sank” or *tsalal*, a verb suggestive of tingling. “Whoever hears, his ears shall tingle” [Jer 19.3]. With this in mind, it is easy to hear the sound of weapons, armor and chariots clanging together with the rush of waters which are “mighty” or *adyr*, an adjective sometimes used as a substantive as Jud 5.13: “Then down marched the remnant of the noble.”

Between vs. 11 and vs. 19 the song is directed to the Lord himself after he had praised him. “Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, terrible in glorious deeds, doing wonders” [vs. 11]? The preposition *b-* (in) is prefaced to “gods” (*el*) reading literally “in the gods.” Implied here is the existence of deities other than the Lord God and may reflect the exposure to the Egyptian pantheon over the four centuries Israel had lived among them. During that time they had witnessed plenty of religious ceremonies, perhaps even miracles (recall how Pharaoh’s magicians countered the wonders of Moses and Aaron), so it would not have been unusual for the Israelites to have been affected by them. Now that they had just witnessed an extraordinary event, they exclaimed that the Lord is far superior to any (Egyptian) gods. While that might be true at the moment, the future will be plagued by many conflicts between the Lord and deities native to Canaan and other places, Egypt included. Even before that Moses had to contend with the molten calf fashioned by his trusted brother, Aaron. Compared with the Egyptian gods, the Lord is “majestic” *adar* (participle) as in vs. 6 (‘glorious in power’) relative to “holiness” or *qodesh* (adjective) last noted in 3.5: “the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” Since *qodesh* fundamentally means being set apart, this adjective means that the Lord is set apart from other gods who, by their very nature, lack this unique quality.

“Terrible” is the verb *yare’* (to fear) and applies to “glorious deeds” or *tehilah*, a noun which means praise or a hymn of praise. Literally the words at hand read “fearful in praise.” “He is your praise, and he is your God” [Dt 10.21]. Such *tehilah* can apply to the Israelites, the Egyptians and especially to the gods “among” (*b-*) whom is the Lord. As for “doing wonders (*pele’*), note the present tense, that what the Lord had just effected will continue among the Israelites. “I will remember your wonders of old” [Ps 77.11].

“You stretched out your right hand, the earth swallowed them” [vs. 12]. This stretching of the Lord’s right hand was done through Moses as in 14.26: “Stretch out your hand over the sea” though there the hand, right or left, is not specified. As for the earth having swallowed (*balah*) the Egyptian forces, such is not the case as has been reported; it was the Red Sea that covered them. However, this *balah* may apply to the Egyptians having been pushed underground or under the earth beneath the sea as a demonstration of the Lord’s force. The verb at hand also means to devour as in Num 17.32: “and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up.”

“You have led in your steadfast love your people whom you have redeemed, you have guided them by your strength to your holy abode” [vs. 13]. The leading under consideration applies to a relatively short period of time or when the Israelites assembled in Goshen and passed through the Red Sea; despite being short, it was the most significant event in their history to date. *Chesed* is the word for “steadfast love” which, like *agape*, is difficult to translate adequately. The sentiment of desire and ardor as well as zeal are bound up in this noun. Because this is the first mention of *chesed* in Exodus, it is a kind of revelation unknown to the Israelites, of seeing a quality of the Lord which hitherto had not been manifested but will make itself known again in the future. “But showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments” [Dt 5.10]. With this recent experience of divine *chesed* in mind as associated with leading, it will be continued to be experienced as such, that is, within the context of leading. And this leading will apply to the forty years in the desert about to get underway and assume a new meaning later once Israel is established in Canaan.

Divine *chesed* is applied to the people whom the Lord “has redeemed” or *ga’al*, this verb being noted in 6.6: “and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment.” Concomitant with *ga’al* is the Lord having “guided” the Israelites (the simple verb ‘to go’) with strength or *hoz*, the same *hoz* as in vs. 2 (“The Lord is my strength and my song”). The song at hand suggests knowledge of the place to which the Israelites are headed, namely, “to your holy abode” or *naveh*. It derives from the verbal root meaning to sit down, to rest and sometimes can apply to folds of sheep: “I have taken you (David) from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel” [1Chron 17.7]. Though the *naveh* is not specified, the people knew full well that it lay somewhere outside Egypt, in the desert, as they picked up from Moses’ frequent requests to Pharaoh. “Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord” [5.17]. By now Mount Horeb was known as passed down from Moses, but many were uncertain as to its exact location. Even then Horeb may have been confused in their minds with some unknown, nondescript place in the wilderness.

“The peoples have heard, they tremble; pangs have seized on the inhabitants of Philistia” [vs. 14]. “Peoples” here are not Israelites but those in the general area such as Philistia. Word travels quickly in the desert, especially with over six hundred men plus others out there, difficult not to notice. *Ragaz* is the verb for “tremble” meaning to be disquieted or to shake. “The Lord reigns; let the peoples tremble” [Ps 99.1]! In other words, the song which this mighty throng of Israelites is singing resembles an earthquake resounding throughout the region. Egypt does not have to *ragaz*; it had suffered enough already. As for Philistia, this is the first time it’s mentioned in the Bible though “Philistines” is noted in Genesis.

Vs. 15 continues as a refinement of sorts of the previous verse concerning other nearby peoples: “Now are the chiefs of Edom dismayed; the leaders of Moab, trembling seizes them; all the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away.” As for Edom and Moab, this is the first mention in Exodus though often mentioned in Genesis. Hitherto the Israelites had been sheltered within Egypt from Philistia, Edom and Moab but were now fair game for any military engagement or more accurately, hit-and-run raids. Note the reaction by the leaders of the second two tribes, *bahal* and *rahad*. The first suggests a hastening or a trembling that comes on suddenly and without warning. Both are mentioned in Ps 48.6-7: “As soon as they saw it, they were astounded, they were in panic, they took to flight; trembling took hold of them there, anguish as of a woman in travail.” As for the

inhabitants of Canaan—that land of ambivalent relationships, the one which the Lord had promised to Abraham—they “melted away” or *mug* which means to flow down or dissolve. “All the inhabitants of the land melt away before you” [Jos 2.9].

“Terror and dread fall upon them; because of the greatness of your arm they are still as a stone, until your people, O lord, pass by, until the people pass by whom you have purchased” [vs. 16]. *Eymatah* and *pachad* are the words for “terror” and “dread;” on one occasion (Jer 50.38) the former refers to idols by reason of the terror they caused: “For it is a land of images, and they are mad over idols.” As for *pachad*, it connotes trembling. “If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed” [Gen 31.42]. This two-fold panic falls upon the chiefs of Edom, the leaders of Moab and inhabitants of Canaan mentioned in the previous verse which seems just as dreadful if more so than the ten plagues that had afflicted Egypt. Without a doubt, word of those plagues reached far and wide; now with the crossing of the Red Sea and drowning of the Egyptian army having taken place, no small wonder that peoples in the area were terrified.

Both *eymatah* and *pachad* combine to make Israel’s potential enemies “still as a stone,” *damam* being the verb for “still” which also means being silent and confounded, the latter being the case at hand. For another sense of *damam*, see Ps 37.7: “Be still before the Lord and wait patiently.” Reduction of these people east of Egypt to outright fear not so much of Israel but from the wonders done by the Lord takes place in order that “your people pass by.” That is to say, they will *havar* which is reminiscent of 12.23: “For the Lord will pass through to slay the Egyptians.” Those who *havar* have been “purchased” by the Lord, *qanah* being the verb meaning to acquire. Usually when you make a purchase it’s from a vendor or the like. So from whom did the Lord *qanah* his people? Actually from no one, *qanah* representing that Israel had been divinely acquired. “Remember your congregation which you have gotten of old, which you have redeemed to be the tribe of your heritage” [Ps 74.2]! Such *qanah* can be taken as foreshadowing Christ as in Lk 1.68: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people.” Keeping in mind the *havar* of Lord in 12.23, the of Israel before the chiefs of Edom, leaders of Moab and inhabitants of Canaan is meant to remind them...a warning...not to interfere lest they suffer the same fate as the Egyptians who had lost their first born. One can just imagine all these people gathered upon a bluff or hill while the Israelites passed before them, right into their own lands in order to claim (or reclaim) them à la Abraham. After the Israelites had passed...had made their *havar*...that terror and dread mentioned in the beginning of vs. 16 will be lifted.

“You will bring them in and plant them on your own mountain, the place, O Lord, which you have made for your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established” [vs. 17]. This bringing is a consequence of the Israelites’ *havar*, of passing by, and results in being planted upon the Lord’s personal mountain, if you will, which refers to Horeb or Sinai where Moses had received divine revelation in Chapter Three. That was the destination viewed in terms of Moses’ repeated requests to Pharaoh that the Israelites worship in the desert. Though the people singing this hymn were overcome with joy at their recent deliverance, they had not yet reflected upon whether they would stay permanently “planted” on Horeb, an inhospitable place unsuited for such a large contingent of men, women and children.

Vs. 17 has three words relative to a dwelling: mountain, place and sanctuary. The first and most general one is “your own mountain” which literally reads as “in the mountain of your inheritance.” If taken literally it means that the Lord inherited Horeb from someone else...older than he. Given the situation at hand, the mountain had been the place where the Lord revealed himself to Moses which made it a place to be cherished and handed over to the Israelites. In other words, Horeb-as-inheritance was in store for them. The second term is “the place which you have made for your abode” or *makon* which applies to both a dwelling and a foundation. “From where he sits (*makon*) enthroned he looked forth on all the inhabitants of the earth” [Ps 33.14]. The verb *yashav* as applicable for making an abode means more properly to sit or sit down. “You shall not go into the house of feasting to sit with them and to eat and to drink” [Jer 16.8]. The third and final term is “sanctuary” or *miqdash*, first use of this term in Exodus (the verb *qadash* is found in 13.1, ‘Consecrate to me all the first-born’) and is suggestive of something new in store for the Israelites. It is mentioned one other time with respect to the ark: “And let them make me a sanctuary that I may dwell in their midst.” *Miqdash* will be developed at length in the Book of Leviticus as well as later in Israel’s history. Looking back from that

perspective, it is interesting to see how the Israelites had a seminal notion of a holy place starting on the east bank of the Red Sea and prior to coming to Horeb. With regard to the *miqdash*, two verbs are used: *pahal* which refers to making preparations or arrangements. “How abundant is your goodness which you have laid up for those who fear you and wrought for those who take refuge in you” [Ps 31.19]! The second verb (‘established’) is *kun* which means to set upright, to erect. “He has established his throne for judgment” [Ps 9.7]. *Kun* is used with “hands” whereas *pahal* is not, meaning that the Lord put more care into the *kun* of his *miqdash*.

The song which opened Chapter Fifteen concludes with the enthusiastic exclamation, “The Lord will reign forever and ever.” That means the Lord is king; *malak* is the verb “will reign” from which is derived “king.” Here on the east bank of the Red Sea away from Egypt yet potentially still in its grasp Israel loudly proclaims her king which Pharaoh must have heard on the west bank, indeed, a final insult. He had to face a lonely retreat back to his palace with a double loss, his army and the Israelites who had been subjected to forced labor. Both would not sit well with a population that had lost its first born. From here Pharaoh drops out of history; no surprise because given what he brought upon his countrymen merited death.

Vs. 19 is an introduction of sorts to the song of Miriam and recapitulates the recent event of the Egyptian army having been swallowed up in the Red Sea by saying that the Lord “brought back the waters of the sea upon them” while “the people of Israel walked on dry ground in the midst of the sea.” That is to say, the two events are presented as having taken simultaneously. While the Israelites were advancing through the parted waters, the same waters came crashing down upon the Egyptians right behind them.

“Then Miriam, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand” [vs. 20]. This is the first time we hear of Miriam who is called a “prophetess” or *nevy’ah*, one of six biblical references to this term, the other most important prophetess being Deborah in the Book of Judges. “For I brought you up from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of bondage; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron and Miriam” [Mic 6.4]. Earlier Miriam must have advised her brother Aaron as Moses’ mouthpiece (cf. 4.16), the two siblings being a kind of Simeon and Anna who were present at Jesus’ presentation in the temple (cf. Lk 2.22-38). Miriam, Aaron and their brother Moses must have had many interesting conversations while in Egypt, of how to correctly present the revelation of the Lord to the Israelites. While Aaron was Moses’ mouthpiece, perhaps Miriam had a role in this as well. Thus we have a three-way sharing of how divine revelation was given to Israel. *Toph* is the word for “timbrel,” a circular instrument with brass bells. “Then Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah; and behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances” [Jud 11.34]. As for “dancing,” the word is *mechulah* which derives from a verbal root meaning to turn around and hence implies dancing in a circle. “As soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses’ anger burned hot” [32.19]. In the verse at hand, Miriam started playing on the timbrel and danced after which the women “went out” to join her, not the men.

“And Miriam sang to them: ‘Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea’” [vs. 21]. Miriam is the only woman singing (*shyr*) the song in vss. 1-18, rather, a summary of those verses. It is a brief sentence not unlike a refrain to be repeated by the assembled women summing up the event that just occurred concerning the Lord who “triumphed gloriously” which in Hebrew reads *ga’oh ga’ah*; in other words, the same verbal root used twice. It means to lift oneself up in the sense of being proud and has four other biblical references one of which is Job 40.11: “and look on everyone that is proud and abase him.” As for vs. 21, considered one of the oldest poetic couplets in the Old Testament, it lacks mention of Pharaoh who, as noted earlier, is not recorded as having drowned with his army. As for the verb *ramah* (‘has thrown’), it occurs in vs. 1, “the horse and his rider (or ‘its chariot’) he has thrown into the sea.” It is interesting to note that the Israelites did not erect any monument for the Red Sea miracle as their patriarchs had done in Canaan. While appropriate, it would have been secondary to the song just sung which became more enduring than any monument of stone. The event had seared itself into the collective memory of Israel, not just one or two prophets or holy men, and was destined to have a life of its own.

“Then Moses led Israel onward from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur; they went three days in the wilderness and found no water” [vs. 22]. There was no reason for Israel to linger on the eastern shore of the Red Sea for long but get on with their journey. Hence vs. 22 is rather abrupt in this regard and

reflects favorably on Moses who knew the value of completing their trip to Mount Horeb as quickly as possible. Now they were entering true desert, the wilderness of Shur, the northern part of the Sinai Peninsula, so quickly that it would be difficult to feed six hundred thousand men let alone woman, children and others who chose to go with them. The Israelites left Egypt in such haste that they had no provisions except those taken on the run. Moses himself must have wondered about this area's ability to support such a multitude. After all, he was familiar with the territory after having fled to Midian when he had slain the Egyptian. It can be assumed that this was terra incognita for most Israelites who had led comfortable lives in Egypt or at least until the present Pharaoh afflicted them with forced labor.

A three day journey into the wilderness without finding water clearly shows the vulnerability of this mass of people. "When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; therefore it was named Marah" [vs. 23]. While the exact location of this place is uncertain, it seems to be an oasis but contained water unfit to drink. Here is an obvious play on words, "bitter" (*mar*) being the root of Marah. Since the place was so named, Moses knew the water would be not suited for drinking; after all, he must have tried it out one time when shepherding the flocks of his father-in-law, Jethro. Thus Moses approached Marah with some trepidation but had a sense it would be the first test of Israel's reliance upon the Lord with him being right in the thick of it.

"And the people murmured against Moses saying, 'What shall we drink' [vs. 24]? This is the first of numerous grumbings in the desert and is notable because it happens three days after Israel's miraculous deliverance at the Red Sea. Already the people forgot what had happened and don't seem to show any trust that the Lord will provide for them now. *Lun* is the verb for "murmured" which also means to pass the night or to tarry. The general idea is that *lun* connotes a certain stubbornness, of maintaining one's position...tarrying...for better or for worse. "What is Aaron that you murmur against him" [Num 16.11]?

"And he cried to the Lord; and the Lord showed him a tree, and he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet" [vs. 25]. *Tsahaq* is the verb for "cried" first noted in 2.23: "And the people of Israel groaned under their bondage and cried out for help." There seems to be no delay between Moses' *tsahaq* and the Lord showing him a tree, the common verb "to see" being used. The tree that was there must have been no larger than a shrub, so it was easy for Moses to uproot and cast into the water after which it became sweet or *mataq*. This verb also means to become pleasant and has five other biblical references, one of which is Prov 9.17: "Stolen waters are sweet." The verse doesn't have the Lord commanding Moses to cast the tree into the bitter water, just directing his attention to it, most likely the only one there. If the tree were alive despite the non-potable water, its presence in the water just might make it suitable to drink. As for the murmuring, it seems the Lord wasn't surprised to hear it against him so early on after their passage through the Red Sea, hence the quick response; after all, the Israelites were in a wasteland threatened with immediate death, especially the children.

Vs. 25 continues with a second complete sentence: "There the Lord made for them a statute and an ordinance and there he proved them." In place of "the Lord" the Hebrew text has "he." As for the making at hand, it isn't specified but delivered through Moses who first had to listen to the Lord. At this point there is no need for Aaron who had acted as his brother's mouthpiece when speaking with Pharaoh. In the recent crossing of the Red Sea after the Passover Moses had acquired the gift to speak eloquently to the people. The play on words, "there" and "made" (*sham sam*; the verb more commonly taken as 'to place') indicates the importance of the event which is intended to counter the murmuring of the Israelites which the Lord hoped would register. Note the twofold action, "statute" and "ordinance" or *choq* and *mishpat*. The former is found in 12.4 as "you shall observe it (Passover) as an ordinance forever" and whereas the latter is used here in Exodus for the first time alternately translated as "judgment." "When God arose to establish judgment to save all the oppressed of the earth" [Ps 76.9]. So the people were already familiar with *choq* but not *mishpat*. The reason for both is that the Lord "proved" the Israelites or *nasah*, a fact that Moses knew would occur, hence his bringing the people to Marah. Unfortunately that would not be the first *nasah* as 17.7 reveals: "because they put the Lord to the proof by saying, 'Is the Lord among us or not'" [17.7]? In the verse at hand *nasah* is found with the second use of *sam* ('there') as if to emphasize the importance of what had happened.

The twofold nature of *choq* and *mishpat* are spelled out now in vs. 26 in four parts: “If you will diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord your God and do that which is right in his eyes and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases upon you which I put upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord, your healer.” The first part consists in “diligently hearken” to Lord’s voice which in Hebrew has the common verb “to hear” twice, *shamah shamah*, along with the preposition *l-* (‘to’) prefaced to “voice” or *qol*...i.e., “hear hear to the voice (of the Lord).” The second part is “doing right” with *yashar* as the adjective which connotes straightness. “Let me die the death of the righteous” [Num 23.10]. Such *yashar* is done under the direct gaze of the Lord, “in his eyes.” The third part is “giving heed” or *‘azan*, a verb which means to be sharp, accurate or pointed (the noun ‘ear’ is derived from it). *‘Azan* thus is an intensification of *shamah* (to hear). “Give ear, my people, to my law” [Ps 78.1]. The object of *‘azan* is the Lord’s “commandments” or *mitsvah*, the first occurrence of this word in Exodus. It is similar to *choq* and *mishpat*, “statute” and “ordinance” and suggests prohibition. “And not forget the works of God but keep his commandments” [Ps 78.7]. The fourth and final part deals with the Lord’s statutes, the second use of *choq* in vs. 26. Here *choq* is singled out as being kept or *shamar*. It is applied to the Passover as follows: “And you shall observe the feast of unleavened bread, for on this very day I brought your hosts out of the land of Egypt.”

In sum, the four parts may be outlined as follows:

<i>shamah shamah</i> -> <i>qol</i>	diligently hearken -> the Lord’s voice
<i>yashar</i> -> in the Lord’s eyes	do right -> in the Lord’s eyes
<i>‘azan</i> -> <i>mitsvah</i>	give ear -> commandments
<i>shamar</i> -> <i>choq</i>	keep -> statutes

Should the Israelites engage in this four-fold duty, the Lord will not afflict them with the same diseases he put upon the Egyptians. The word for “diseases” is *machalah*, one of four biblical references, the other Exodus reference being 23.25: “and I will take sickness away from the midst of you.” Obvious reference is to the ten plagues which the Lord terms as *machalah*, not the several different words used for them earlier. Just mention of these afflictions is enough to strike fear into the Israelites because in the Lord’s eyes they would be no different from the ten plagues which the Egyptians had suffered or more specifically, from the hardness of Pharaoh’s heart. The same fear must have struck Moses not to harden his heart because now he was the leader in a fuller sense than in Egypt. After this somewhat ominous note, vs. 26 concludes positively with the Lord himself saying that he is Israel’s “healer” or *rapha’* which runs better as “the Lord who heals.” “Is there no physician there” [Jer 8.22]? So here towards the conclusion of the momentous Chapter Fifteen is another revelation of the Lord’s character, as one who heals and more specifically as one who heals from the afflictions of the ten plagues: blood, frogs, gnats, flies, cattle plague, boils, hail and thunderstorm, locusts, thick darkness and death of the first born both of man and beast. That covers a lot of territory and should be reassurance for the Israelites in their journey as well as a warning to keep the four-fold nature of the statute and ordinance of vs. 25.

“Then they came to Elim where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees; and they encamped there by the water” [vs. 27]. Elim contrasts favorably with the bitter waters of Marah. Moses led the newly chastised people (himself included and in a sense, even more so) in silence to this favorable oasis for an indefinite period of time. Obviously it wasn’t enough to sustain the vast number of Israelites as a permanent dwelling place—and they were aware of the fact—but sufficient to rest and shortly pass on. The words “encamped by the water” serves to highlight that contrast with the bitter waters of Marah. That is to say, the Israelites were so glad to be in Elim that they were “on” (*hal-*) such waters which has an almost literal feel to it.

## Chapter Sixteen

“They set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the people of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin” [vs. 1]. Even though Elim turned out to be a welcome respite in comparison with the bitterness of Marah, the Israelites did remain there. How long is not given, but Moses must have had made the decision to move; at least he could advance at the head of this vast multitude confident that he overcame the first major challenge

after the Red Sea. *Hedah* is the noun for “congregation” which was used first in 12.3 as centered around the institution of the Passover and as noted there, refers to the giving of precepts. Most likely the Israelites were thinking that soon they would attain their final destination, having heard often the “three days’ journey” into the wilderness requested by Moses to Pharaoh. Already it was over-extended, for as vs. 1 continues, they came to the wilderness of Sin “on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had departed from the land of Egypt.” Yet at this early stage the people realized that their *hedah* which consisted of six hundred thousand men, not including women and children, was moving into increasingly inhospitable terrain. Nevertheless, the people were in good spirits though the anxiety level was increasing. The murmuring at Marah was a clear sign of this. On top of their minds was what type of life they would lead once they entered Canaan. Would they have to fight to take over the land or simply move in? Though Abraham offered a model, his small band gradually settling couldn’t compare with so vast a multitude. Also, how would that tie in with their supposed first destination of Horeb? They had heard about both this short journey and promise of a new (though old) land and may have been confused as to which was more important. Since the people had just made the miraculous crossing at the Lord’s direct intervention, surely reaching his dwelling place was the first priority.

“And the whole congregation murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness.” Vs. 2 is an incomplete sentence and spills over into the next verse which is fairly long. Compare with 15.24 when the people—compared with the “whole congregation of the people”—murmured against Moses at Marah. That is to say, the entire *hedah*, not just part of it, is named in vs. 2 as the one doing this *lun* (murmuring). Note that *lun* is used with the preposition *hal* (on, upon) to show the hostility behind it as in 15.24; that is to say, the text literally reads as “upon Moses and upon Aaron.” Though the *lun* here at threshold of the wilderness of Sin doesn’t seem as intense as that of Marah, it does reveal the tense situation among the people and their inability to trust in the Lord. They hadn’t even entered Sin yet the terrifying vast waste made them balk. It does have the advantage of setting the context for the rest of the chapter about how the Lord provide manna and quails. In sum, their progress from Egypt up to this point was painfully slow though on the whole they deserve credit, given the huge amount of people under such hostile conditions.

“Would that we have died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt when we sat by the fleshpots and ate bread to the full” [vs. 3]. While traditionally this wishful longing has been taken as lack of trust in the Lord—essentially true—it’s easy to lose sight that close to a three-quarter million people find themselves in a desert environment; not only that but they were relatively unprepared. In fact, they were told to depart their homes by the Lord himself: “they were thrust out of Egypt and could not tarry, neither had they prepared for themselves any provisions” [12.29]. In other words, this lack of human preparation quickly made itself be felt. As for the verse at hand, the Hebrew has the verb “give” inserted at the beginning which reads something like “who would give that we have died,” a way of expressing frustration and anger. Such longing for death is at the Lord’s hand (*b-* or literally ‘in’) being prefaced to “hand” at least shows that the Israelites would prefer this rather than being slain by Pharaoh. Perhaps the death they had in mind was twofold: when the Lord had slain the first born during the Passover as well as the forced labor to which they had been subjected. This death ironically would have taken place by the “fleshpots” or *syr basar*, *syr* meaning pot as well as thorns or briars, so called from the idea of boiling or bubbling up or the crackling sound made when the briars were being burned. “Sooner than your pots can feel the heat of thorns” [Ps 58.9]. The idea of *syr basar* seems to represent the abundance of food....meat...which the Israelites had despite their afflictions, and *syr* can be taken as thorns, symbolic of these afflictions. In contrast to such abundance under harsh conditions the Israelites complain (again in vs. 4) to Moses that “you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” Here the word *qahal* is used for “assembly,” not *hedah*, as in vs. 3; both are used (respectively) in 12.6: “the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel.” So when the Israelites say they are a *qahal*, they are referring to themselves as a people as a whole.

“Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you’” [vs. 4]. Actually this verse is quite important because it continues through the rest of the chapter. As at Marah with the bitter water, the first instance of the people complaining (*lun*) against Moses, the Lord responds immediately and in a matter-of-fact way, taking into account their vast numbers in a desolate place. He doesn’t give Moses time to inquire about how the Lord will help, just that he will so by providing food. At Marah the Lord did not speak to Moses at first as here where he begins with “behold” or *hineh* which was noted elsewhere above, often used as

a way of getting one's attention before saying what is on your mind. *Hineh* also acts as a sign that an important utterance is about to be imparted, contrasting as it does against virtually every sentence in Exodus (as well as Genesis before it) which begins with the connective *w-* (and, then, but). This is done deliberately in order to show continuous action. For example, the last use of *hineh* is 10.4: "behold, tomorrow I will bring locusts into your country."

Vs. 4 continues with "and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day that I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law or not." Having bread drop down from the sky is the easiest way to give it, almost too good to be true. But the people aren't to hoard the bread; instead, they are to gather a "portion" in accord with the needs for one day, *davar* being the noun as in 2.14: "Surely the thing is known." The verbal root (same spelling) is to speak or to utter and possibly has something to do with a verbal agreement as to the portion at hand. As for the words in this verse, they read literally "the portion of a day in his day." There follows the important *lemahan* or "in order that" with respect to proving the Israelites, *nasah* being the verb as found recently in 15.25: "and there he proved them." That *nasah* offers an opportunity for the Lord to ask the people to follow his commandments and thus avoid diseases he set upon the Egyptians. The *nasah* at hand, however, is to see whether or not the Israelites will walk (*halak*, the simple verb 'to go') in his law or Torah last noted in 13.9: "that the law of the Lord may be in your mouth." Mention of Torah is important at this early stage of Israel's deliverance from Egypt, for it helps prime them for impartation of Torah on Sinai. As for observance of the Torah at hand, surely the 13.9 reference is important, let alone Torah as pertaining to circumcision in 12.49. Despite these two references, it is unclear at this juncture as to what Torah actually means, certainly a general moral code which will shortly reach fulfillment with the Ten Commandments. "Walking" as pertaining to Torah means active observance of it, not just give lip service.

"On the sixth day when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily" [vs. 5]. As noted earlier with respect to the enumeration of the days of creation in Genesis, it is better to read "sixth day" as "day six." Surely the Lord had this in mind in vs. 5. Not only does it endow that day with special meaning but the previous five days as well. As for the five days (not mentioned but presumed such as 'day one,' 'day two,' etc.), there are times when the Israelites are to gather that bread which falls from heaven. The amount, time of day nor extent of such raining down is mentioned here though in vs. 8 the Lord expands on this by giving flesh to eat in the evening and bread in the morning. *Kun* is the verb for "prepare" first noted in 8.26 with a different meaning and connotes the idea of being established and hence is applicable to a custom: "It would be right to do so." So the Israelites prepare the bread gathered in the morning, the exact nature of which is not specified but intimated as having a religious connotation since it is not of this earth. Automatically by such *kun* it doubles and does so on a daily basis. Perhaps Jesus' disciples had this in mind when "they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten" [Jn 6.13]. Incidentally, five thousand is a small number compared with the vast throng of Israelites.

Vs. 6 shifts from the Lord speaking to Moses to Moses and Aaron speaking to "all the people of Israel." It isn't clear if Aaron resumed the role of mouthpiece for his brother, probably not as noted above, but both spoke the exact same words the Lord communicated to Moses (i.e., not Aaron) in vss. 4-5. Those verse are concise, deliberately so, because a quarter million people must get the message delivered quickly and clearly as possible. The verse at hand continues with "At evening you shall know that it was the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt." Evening is singled out as opposed to the morning, for that is the time the Lord will give the Israelites flesh in the form of quails (cf. vs. 13). This will be the time for knowing (*yadah* as intimate knowledge) that the Lord had rescued the people from Egypt. In other words, here is the first of two parts of a divine revelation and care for the people who will have from evening until dawn—the entire night—to reflect upon...*yadah*...the significance of this meat. The time of evening is reminiscent of "the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day" [Gen 3.8]. "Cool" is *ruach* or wind, spirit, that refreshing breeze in the desert after the day's scorching heat. During the night hours the Israelites had a chance to *yadah* upon this story in Genesis of how their first parents hid from God after which he expelled them from the garden. Then they would awake at dawn with a new mind in preparation for the second part of God's plan.

Vs. 7 continues as part of vs. 6: "and in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord because he has heard

your murmurings against the Lord. For what are we that you murmur against us?" As for "morning" (*boqer*), it has no preposition in front of it; also the specific time of morning isn't given but most likely implies dawn, a word deriving from a verbal root meaning to cleave...the cleaving of the eastern horizon by the rising sun. So at this *boqer* the people will see the Lord's glory or *kavod*, first mention of this term in Exodus which implies weightiness or heaviness and is a foretaste of *kavod* on Mount Sinai: "The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days" [24.16]. What form this *kavod* will assume is not given, but it is one that will become visible. Perhaps many of the Israelites recalled their recent experience with the pillar of cloud and fire as they approached the Red Sea, a good a guess as any at this juncture. However, seeing the divine *kavod* is a direct result of their murmuring as to why Moses had brought them into the wilderness of Sin and hence a lack of water as with Marah. Moses closes vs. 7 with a question, "What are we that you murmur against us?" meaning against him and Aaron. To that the Israelites give no response but instead are filled with anticipation as to what will happen shortly. Actually this question fills them with some anxiety. They got their water at Marah without suffering any penalty, but now? As for the murmuring—and this was a major problem for which the Israelites can't be blamed fully but do not realize how damaging it is—Moses repeats more or less the question "For what are we that you murmur against us?" at the conclusion of vs. 8: "What are we?" "Your murmurings are not against us but against the Lord" where the preposition *hal* is used twice meaning "on" or "upon" which intensifies the sense of this grumbling.

Vs. 9 begins with "And Moses said to Aaron." That is to say, Moses did not address the people directly but is falling back upon his brother as mouthpiece (cf. 4.15) though this time it seemed more out of frustration and anger at the people's stubbornness. "Come near before the Lord, for he has heard your murmurings." The encounter at hand is reminiscent of the first man and first woman hiding themselves from the Lord as he walked in the cool of the evening, a fact point out two paragraphs above. Moses had in mind the desire for his people not to hide but to stand right out there and take responsibility for their murmurings. If they did this, the curse upon the human race would be lifted at once, well worth all the trouble of having exchanged Egypt for a desert place. In sum, the wilderness of Sin had the potential of being transformed into a new Garden of Eden. The words "come near" is the verb *qarav* and *liphney* which is comprised of the preposition *l* (to, towards) prefaced to *paneh* (face)...in short, "draw near to the face" of the Lord, the opposite of what happened in Eden. "Draw near to the altar and offer your sin offering and your burnt offering" [Lev 9.7]. Note that Aaron is to address the "whole congregation of the people of Israel," a rather formal way of putting it, with *hedah* for "congregation" as in vs. 2. As noted earlier, *hedah* applies to the giving of laws and precepts, a more formal gathering of people for this purpose.

"And as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the people of Israel, they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud" [vs. 10]. Note that Aaron is the one doing the speaking at the behest of Moses. Since the people had been familiar with this in Egypt, it was nothing new here. "As Aaron spoke" intimates that he was fleshing out what Moses had communicated to him when suddenly the divine *kavod* made its appearance in the wilderness, the same place in which the Israelites found themselves. The verb *panah* (first noted in 2.12, 'He looked this way and that') is used for "looked" which means turning. In other words, the people were engrossed in Aaron's words but turned their attention away from him to the divine *kavod*. Often the hearing is more acute than the capacity for vision; thus the people may have heard a sound which got their attention, one out of the usual. The same applied to Aaron who was too engrossed in addressing the multitude which must have required the people to relay with reasonable accuracy the words he uttered. *Hanan* or "cloud" got the Israelites' attention, the same word found in 14.19: "and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them." However, the latter *hanan* comprises the shape of a pillar in which was present the divine *kavod* or glory introduced for the first time in vs. 7 and promised to be seen in the morning. As for the characteristics of such *kavod*, the text says nothing...whether about it nor the people's reaction.

Now vs. 12 shifts to the Lord speaking to Moses from the cloud presumably while Aaron continues his address to the people and more or less repeats vs. 8 only substituting "twilight" for "evening." The phrase *beyn haharbaym* which reads literally "between the evenings" as in 12.6, time of sacrifice for the Passover lamb. So if taken as such, the time for "eating flesh" is from one twilight through the night into the next day and on to the time just prior to the next twilight. While that is going on, "in the morning you shall be filled with bread" or

midway in between the two evenings. Only upon being satiated will the Israelites “know that I am the Lord your God,” not when they are hungry.

“In the evening quails came up and covered the camp; and in the morning dew lay round about the camp” [vs. 13]. Note that the quails or *salah* “came up” (*halah*) during the twilight when it was difficult to see them fully and when most likely they were searching for a place to settle down for the night. *Halah* might refer to the quails arriving from the south or being blown off course into the center of the Sinai peninsula. *Salah* occurs three other times, twice in Numbers. “They asked, and he brought quails and gave them bread from heaven in abundance” [Ps 105.40]. The Israelites had to gather these quails before light disappeared altogether not just to obtain sustenance but to prevent wild animals from entering the camp in search of food. Once accomplished, on the next morning they found dew around the camp...not on the camp but around (*savyv*) it. Vs. 14 continues with a description of this dew: “there was on the face of the wilderness a flake-like thing, fine as hoarfrost on the ground.” *Daq* is an adjective meaning that which is beaten small, minute and can apply to a dust particle. “Two handfuls of sweet incense beaten small” [Lev 16.12]. It modifies the noun or better, the passive participle *mechuspas* which is derived from the unused verbal root *chasaph* (to strip off, to peel). And so the image presented here is something very thin and delicate held together by the cold of the desert night like *kephor* (hoarfrost) so-called because it covers (*kaphar*) the ground. “He scatters hoarfrost like ashes” [Ps 147.16].

“When the people saw it, they said to one another, ‘What is it’” [vs. 15]? Quails were easy to identify even if they might be unfamiliar to the Israelites after having lived in Egypt over four hundred years. This other material which appeared as hoarfrost in the morning twilight was quite another thing which is why they said *man hu* which translates into a question, “What is it?” Apparently this hoarfrost-like substance was new despite having spent a fairly good number of nights in the wilderness. To their puzzled inquiry Moses responded “It is the bread which the Lord has given you to eat.” So what appeared as frozen wafers turns out to be bread, something which had been revealed beforehand by the Lord to Moses.

Vs. 16 opens with “This is what the Lord has commanded” with *davar* as “thing,” a noun (same spelling as its verbal root) which means something that had been spoken. It, in turn, is ordered by the Lord implying that before this ordering, the *davar* at hand had already existed in his mind and at the appropriate time was imparted to Moses for the Israelites’ benefit. Now this *davar* is about to be translated, if you will, into action or the bread-like substance to be gathered into one omer per person, omer being a measure of dry things or a sheaf, this term applicable to wheat. “Pray, let me glean and gather among the sheaves after the reapers” [Rt 2.7]. As for the word “persons,” it is *gulgoleth* which literally means “skull.” “And fastened his (Saul) head in the temple of Dagon” [1Chron 10.10]. The idea seems to be something not unlike a head count of the vast multitude of people requiring this food.

“And the people of Israel did so; they gathered, some more, some less” [vs. 17]. That is to say, the people gathered an omer apiece in accord with the need of each family. However, in vs. 18 the omer functions as a kind of scale or means of measurement (the verb *madad*, to measure) for the “bread” in the form of hoarfrost. Two verbs show the balance achieved, *hadaph* and *chasar* (to be abundant and to lack). For the former, cf. vs. 23: “and all that is left over lay by to be kept until the morning.” So whether one favored *hadaph* or *chasar*, the proper measure was meted out. How this was done is not mentioned though presumably divine intervention was involved. As for any remainder which applies to those who were greedy, Moses commands “Let no man leave any of it until the morning” [vs. 19]. Such “bread” had appeared in the morning, the time when it was gathered (cf. vs. 8), so the verse at hand seems to apply to the following morning when new “bread” can be gathered. That “bread” which exceeded the proper amount produced worms and became foul (cf. vs. 20). As a result, “Moses was angry with them.” *Qatsaph* is the verb which fundamentally means to break out. “Lest wrath come upon all the people” [Lev 10.6]. This manifestation of anger which breaks forth against the people is followed by what can be taken as an offshoot of it: “but when the sun grew hot, it melted” [vs. 21]. Such melting is consistent with the “bread’s” nature of being like hoarfrost or thin, frozen wafers which had to be consumed rather quickly.

The Israelites had learned how to gather properly the “bread” though nothing is said about an excess or lack of

quails, a source of what seems to be a better source of nutrition. Regulation of this “bread” is more important, perhaps because it was “like wafers made with honey” [vs. 31], quite delicate, and offered a more immediate stimulus in arid conditions. Gathering of it continued until “day six” when “they gathered twice as much bread, two omers apiece” [vs. 22]. It is to the Israelites’ credit that they recalled the Lord’s words to Moses in vs. 6 that “what they bring in will be twice as much as they gather daily.” Such doubling of the portion on day six is deliberate because “Tomorrow is a day of solemn rest, a holy sabbath to the Lord” [vs. 23] when no gathering is permitted. Here is the first mention in the Bible of a sabbath) which derives from the verbal root *shavat* meaning to rest, desist or leave off. “It shall be to you a sabbath of solemn rest, and you shall afflict yourselves (i.e., to make atonement)” [Lev 23.32]. This sabbath is to be holy or *qodesh* (set apart as in 3.5 regarding the ground on which Moses stood) “to the Lord” with the preposition *l-* acting as prefix indicating direct relationship or direction toward-which.

Not only is the sabbath set apart, it is to be characterized by a rest which is solemn and is *shabaton*, an intensified form of sabbath with two other references in Exodus and the rest occurring in Leviticus, one of which is 23.32 just cited. This day free from labor must have struck the Israelites as unusual, especially in a desert setting. It is more than a “free day” but is to form a way of marking time within which is to be inserted celebrations of the recent Passover. Previously to this the Israelites had only oral tradition of their history because of having lived over four hundred years in Egypt where they must have followed the local calendar. Now that tradition of which we have no real information has passed, it is time to adopt a new one, the foundations of which had been laid with the Passover and crossing of the Red Sea. These two which eventually will be perceived as one event will bridge that four hundred year gap, swallowing it with a finality mirrored by the Egyptian army being swallowed up in the sea. And so the introduction of sabbath is conditioned up the people making provision on day six for the following day. All food prepared on day six the people are to “to be kept until the morning...and it did not become foul, and there were no worms in it” [vss. 23-4].

“Six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day which is a sabbath, there will be none” [vs. 26]. Here sabbath is designated as “day seven” and distinct from the other six days. This setting aside of sabbath as free from work is a necessary reminder of days of creation followed by God resting. Perhaps the Israelites had a vague notion of that tradition from their days in Canaan and before that, from Abraham and what he received from his predecessors. After all, the Book of Genesis up until Abraham is a kind of prelude to his mission, even the historical events and people who preceded him. The events of Chapter Sixteen are vital for Moses as well, the traditional author of the Pentateuch which, of course, begins with Genesis. He had to get these details down correctly before he composed it and in preparation for his ascent to Sinai when he received the power to write down all the details, past and future, for that time of forty days and forty nights on the mountain were outside the familiar flow of time as well as outside space.

To drive home the importance of the sabbath, the Lord said to Moses, “How long do you refuse to keep my commandments and my laws” [vs. 28]? The issue is one of *shamar* (to keep) last mentioned in 15.26 with regard to “commandments and statutes” (*mitsvah* and *choq*) which here apply again to *mitsvah* but with the added Torah which had been mentioned in vs. 4. Prior to that a general sense of Torah is communicated in 13.9: “that the law of the Lord may be in your mouth.” So the Lord’s request to keep his commandments, laws and Torah are stripped down, if you will, adapted for living in the harsh conditions of the desert and lacking the complexity after Moses’ stay on Mount Sinai. By that time the people will have gotten accustomed to desert existence and their forty year exile will be drawing to an end.

“Remain every one of you in his place; let no man go out of his place on the seventh day” [vs. 29]. This remaining comes from a kindred verb from which sabbath is derived (*shavat*), *yashav*, and means more properly to sit down, remain and inhabit. Thus *yashav* refers to sitting put without moving and is reflective of the divine *shavat*. Such staying is identified with the home (tent) of a person or family through the noun *maqom* (place) which was noted on several occasions above. The mention of *maqom* twice in one verse shows the importance of observing the sabbath and reflecting back upon the six days when the Israelites had gathered both that “bread” and the quails. *Maqom* as tent was quite confining from sunrise to sunset; it had a twofold advantage, however, of bringing each family together as well as preventing all the families from intermingling indiscriminately and therefore from gossiping. At the end of a full day’s confinement within one’s *maqom*, people would emerge with a different view on life, that they knew they would be free from the compulsion of

continuous work. This made considerable sense to a people which had been enslaved by the Egyptians to build supply cities.

“Now the house of Israel called its name manna; it was like coriander seed, white, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey” [vs. 31: compare with Num 11.7-8, a similar description]. “Manna” (“What is it?”) harkens back to vs. 15 when the people first saw this “flake-like thing” [vs. 14] upon the ground. Interestingly, after six days of gathering it they had no idea as to its substance. As for “coriander seed,” the former term is *gad* with one other reference in Num 11.7 which tasted like “wafers” or *tsaphychyth*, the only use of this word in the Bible, and its taste was sweet as honey. It is well known that Christ has this description of manna in mind when feeding the five thousand: “I am the bread which came down from heaven” [Jn 6.41]. Also, it should be kept in mind that both the Exodus story about manna and Jesus’ feeding a multitude which parallels it have nothing to say about the quails which as noted several paragraphs above, offer more nutrition.

Because such importance was placed upon manna, Moses echoes the Lord by saying “Let an omer of it be kept throughout your generations, that they may see the bread with which I fed you in the wilderness when I brought you out of the land of Egypt” [vs. 32]. As already pointed out, an omer functions as a scale as well as container which holds a bit over three and a half liters. It is to be “kept” or *mismereeth* which is a noun meaning custody, guard or observance and was noted in 12.6 concerning the Passover lamb (or goat): “and you shall keep it until the fourteenth day of this month.” So the keeping—the *shamar* (verbal root) assumes the form of an object or container—is to be looked after with great care as a kind of living relic. The manna enshrined in this omer/*mismereeth* is not subject to becoming foul (cf. vs. 20) but retains its pristine form and freshness. Since nothing has been said about quails, presumably no remnant of them is to be kept. Future generations were able to see the bread because the container (cf. *tsintseneth* next paragraph) was partially transparent (alabaster) and could be viewed without exposure to the air. The Lord is careful to add “When I brought out of the land of Egypt” so that the Israelites will never forget what this bringing-out means. The idea behind this statement is that he will bring them out from similar distress situations should they arise.

Moses bids Aaron to insert into this omer/*mismereeth* containing the manna a jar or *tsintseneth* (vs. 33), the only use of this term in the Bible and seems to refer to any kind of basket. Thus the jar functions as a protective device, important for the Israelites as they continue their journey in the desert. Once done, Aaron is to “place it before the Lord to be kept (*mismereeth*) throughout your generations.” The next verse (34) specifies the place, “before the testimony, to be kept (*mismereeth*).” *Heduth* is the noun for “testimony,” first mention in the Bible and closely related to *hedeth* as in 12.6, “the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel.” Later on Sinai this *heduth* takes on the form of the ark which at this point did not exist. So if the omer as *mismereeth* containing manna within the jar is a *heduth* or testimony, that means the Israelites themselves as *hedeth* or assembly are the prime guardians which can never lose identity with this object. In other words, Israel becomes a ready-made *mismereeth* or guard for the manna which will serve to retain their identity in later generations.

“And the people of Israel ate the manna forty years until they came to a habitable land; they ate the manna until they came to the border of the land of Canaan” [vs. 35]. By any standard, forty years of eating this flake-like food is trying, but after all, the Israelites were in the desert where food was scarce. During that time they had no need of being reminded of manna as with the jar they carried about. That was for future generations. Certainly some people considered destroying it...who would want to be reminded of having eaten manna day after day over an extended period of time? As for the word “habitable,” it is derived from the verb *yashav* noted in vs. 29 and contrasts with the present wandering which essentially was just getting under way though no one knew it except Moses, Aaron and perhaps Miriam. Manna would last in the desert and give way at the “border” or *qatseh* of Canaan. “And the manna ceased on the morrow when they ate of the produce of the land” [Jos 5.12], that is, near Jericho. *Qatseh* signifies an end or extremity, a kind of outpost belonging to a given territory compared with *gevul* as in 13.5: “in all your territory.” For a reference to *qatseh*, see 13.20: on the edge of the wilderness.”

By way of note, vs. 36 concludes with “An omer is the tenth part of an ephah,” an ephah being a unit of measure containing approximately a little over thirty liters.

## Chapter Seventeen

“All the congregation of the people of Israel moved on from the wilderness of Sin by stages according to the commandment of the Lord and camped at Rephidim” [vs. 1]. Certainly when breaking camp at Sin—and the text mentions “wilderness” in conjunction with it to highlight the miracle of food being provided in that barren place—many must have reflected upon what had happened, that it was an important event and would require continued reflection by future generations. Mention of “all the congregation (*hedah*), of the people (literally, sons) and Israel “(three parts, as it were) shows that no one of the approximately quarter million people stayed behind but moved ahead as single unit. They did not advance all at once to Mount Sinai but by “stages,” this being a verb which is the same as “moved on” or *nasah* as in 12.37: “And the people of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth.” Thus the overall *nasah* (the verb implies a removal) went along the western shore of the Sinai Peninsula east into what is now Arabia and then north (by way of note, these ‘stages’ are mentioned in Numbers 33.1-49). And so *nasah* intimates a slowing down of sorts of the journey by Israel, of taking numerous rest stops. This was only natural for such a huge contingent of people in the desert; they used each *nasah* as an opportunity to gather sufficient manna and quails which the Lord said would continue until “they came to the border of the land of Canaan” [16.35]. Whether or not one or more intermediary stages existed between Sin and Rephidim we have no information except that the latter was the next stop...for how long the Israelites had no idea. As for the words “according to the commandment of the Lord,” the text reads literally “on (*hal-*) the mouth of the Lord” which signifies a direct connection between the Lord and the Israelites. With this in mind, each *nasah* the people took was done “on” the mouth of the Lord.

Once at Rephidim “there was no water for the people to drink” [vs. 1], that is to say, this lack of water now has become a familiar experience starting at Marah and continuing to the wilderness of Sin. They must have wondered why the Lord hadn’t provided this most vital of all resources while he gave manna and quails on a daily basis. Moses and Aaron knew, of course, that this was a way of testing the people’s reliance upon the Lord, a very direct one in the desert. By now the image of the Israelites as a somewhat ragged group of emigrants is not entirely true. Among them must have been learned men, even some skilled in Egyptian magical arts as had been the case with Pharaoh’s magicians, and had the ability to divine what they were undergoing. Besides, Egypt was the most advanced country of the day, and some Israelites must have been highly trained in various fields. Some of these individuals must have advised Moses who often is misleadingly portrayed as going it alone apart from Aaron. However, such people were overruled by the desperate situation at hand.

Now comes a familiar refrain: “Therefore the people found fault with Moses and said ‘Give us water to drink’” [vs. 2]. *Ryv* is the verb for “found fault” which more specifically means to contend, to strive as well as to plead a cause. It signifies a more serious rift than previously experienced at Marah or Sin between Israel and Moses, so to engage in *ryv* was as close to open conflict if ever there was one. “The herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac’s herdsmen” [Gen 26.20]. Moses responded that it is not with him that they are engaging in *ryv* but “Why do you put the Lord to the proof?” That is to say, why are you instigating this *nasah* (*-h* or the letter *ayin* compared with the letter *hei* as in *nasah* of vs. 1)? “There (Masah) he proved them” [15.25]. Both here at Rephidim and Masah the people murmured (the familiar *lun*) against Moses, not the Lord, due to a lack of water. In short, the people did not pay attention to Moses’ question. Such murmuring must have been more palpable in the wilderness with countless tents spread out all over, each tent seething with anger. From a vantage place on a ledge one could hear this murmuring begin like a low-grade buzzing sound that grew into a rumble until it engulfed the entire campsite. That’s why vs. 4 has Moses crying out (*tsahaq*), “They are almost ready to stone me.” For another reference to this verb, see 15.25: “And he cried to the Lord,” the instance being at Marah.

“Pass on before the people, taking with you some of the elders of Israel.” Thus begins vs. 5 with a direct response from the Lord who heard the *tsahaq* from Moses. Chances are that when Moses complied to *havar* (pass on), he did so either early in the morning or in the evening when they were out gathering manna or quails, not during the midday heat when they were inside their tents...and murmuring. Note that Moses did not *havar* alone but with “some of the elders” or those skilled or proven men mentioned in the last paragraph,

pretty much for protection. *Havar* also intimates that both moved along rather quickly so as to avoid being accosted or even stoned but slow enough to make their presence known, a way to show who was in charge. Vs. 5 continues with “take in your hand the rod with which you struck the Nile, and go.” *Mateh* is this “rod” last noted in 14.16 (‘and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it’), the same one which was involved, for example, in being changed into serpent before Pharaoh (cf. 7.10). Once Moses took in hand his *mateh* (he must have kept it safely stored away after the Red Sea crossing for such an emergency as this), he went...to where is not stated immediately but hastened his passing-on or *havar* with the elders.

“Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb” [vs. 6]. This is the first mention of Horeb since 3.1, “the west side of the wilderness” where Moses had been keeping watch over the flock of Jethro, priest of Midian. As for Jethro, he is mentioned at the beginning of Chapter Eighteen, so Moses was in familiar territory. Apparently Rephidim, where the people complained about a lack of water for the second time, was close to Horeb. Perhaps some of the older Israelites recalled his self-imposed exile there and therefore felt more confident in his leadership. Was he going to settle the people in this area? Chances were slim because the desert could not support such a multitude. As for the form of this standing (*hamad*) by the Lord on the rock, we have no details. It could be either as a burning bush much earlier at Horeb or as a pillar of cloud and fire at the Red Sea. This rock could have been a boulder or promontory though *tsur* is a fairly general term. Compared to Moses’ earlier encounter at Horeb, he isn’t commanded to remove the sandals from his feet; apparently this place was not “holy ground” [3.5]. In the verse at hand, Moses is bidden to strike (*nakah*) the rock just as he had struck the Nile, turning it into blood (cf. 7.20). That means Moses had to approach the *tsur* on which the Lord was standing and with his staff hit the *tsur* which he did “in the sight of the elders of Israel” (‘sight’ here literally reads as ‘in the eyes of’). These were the same elders (the number isn’t given) mentioned in vs. 5 who would report back to the people to verify the incident). En route to this *tsur* on which the Lord stood—we can presume the elders were unaware of the Lord, just Moses—they must have discussed with him his earlier experiences at Horeb, of how the Lord had appeared in a burning bush and thus set in motion the whole enterprise of leaving Egypt. As far as the elders not seeing the Lord, that was no problem, really. They were more interested in preventing the people from dying of thirst. Once Moses had struck this rock, the Lord vanished from his sight.

“And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah because of the fault-finding of the children of Israel and because they put the Lord to the proof by saying, ‘Is the Lord among us or not’” [vs. 7]? The proper name Massah is the noun for temptation or trial. “When disaster brings sudden death, he mocks at the calamity of the innocent” [Job 9.23]. As for Meribah, it means contention or strife, derived from the verbal root *ryv* as in 17.2: “Therefore the people found fault with Moses.” As for the verbal root *ryv*, it is mentioned in 17.2: “Why do you (i.e., Moses speaking to the Israelites) find fault with me?” And so the two place names are commemorations of a sort with regard to the Israelites contending with the Lord and Moses. The issue for the people was whether or not the Lord was “among” them (*qerev*) which in Hebrew is a noun indicative of closeness, of being in between the people, as it were. “That you may know that I am the Lord in the midst of the earth” [8.22]. Such *qerev* had been manifested from the Passover, through the Red Sea and afterwards. Despite these clear manifestations, thirst in the desert was so overpowering that it blotted out all concerns for things spiritual.

“Then came Amalek and fought with Israel at Rephidim” [vs. 8]. Amalek can be taken as an individual or tribe first recorded in Gen 14.7. While Moses resided with Jethro in Midian after he slew the Egyptian, he must have had some contact with these desert nomads who understandably resented the presence of such a multitude of people encroaching upon their territory with its limited resources. It turned out that Rephidim was a place more trying than lack of water. However, once word got out—how could such a miracle of water springing from a rock be kept quiet?—Amalek quickly drew near to this abundant source of water which had appeared miraculously. Not only did that tribe come but others must have attempted to take advantage of such a boon.

In vs. 9 Moses for the first time addresses Joshua, his eventual successor, someone who had not been mentioned before though he must have played some role when Moses had dealt with Pharaoh. Moses bade Joshua to pick men to fight will Amalek. “Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand.” Obviously Moses had seen Amalek approaching far off which gave him, Joshua and the elders time

to prepare. They had to do this quickly, for since they had left Egypt in such haste, chances are they brought as little as possible, let alone weapons with which to do battle. Joshua had faith in Moses, that is, when he bore that rod (*mateh*) which had just struck the *tsur* to produce water and even more important, the one which Moses used to divide the Red Sea (cf. 14.16). Most likely that the hill (*givhah*) forms part of that *tsur* or rock upon which the Lord had stood. That's why Moses spontaneously said to Joshua that he was going there, not leading men into battle, something Joshua understood from his earlier experience with him. Better to be close to the Lord which would insure victory in battle. How could Moses not succeed? He would be on top of the *tsur* which he had struck with his rod, the same rod which hopefully will smite Amalek. Accompanying Moses was his brother Aaron and Hur, the first mention of this man whose identity isn't clear but apparently one of the elders of Israel. "Behold, Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a cause, let him go to them."

"Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed" [vs. 11]. The issue is one of prevailing, *gavar* fundamentally meaning to be strong or to confirm. "When our transgressions prevail over us, you forgive them" [Ps 65.3]. Nothing is said about the *mateh* or rod, but presumably it was in Moses' hand because one hand is mentioned. Since it was an issue of becoming tired of holding one hand (with the *mateh*), this could not continue for long, so both Aaron and Hur made Moses sit down on a rock (*even*: a stone of any kind) after which they held up both of Moses' hands, that is, one with the *mateh* and the other without. "So his hands were steady until the going down of the sun" [vs. 12]. The adjective "steady" is a noun in Hebrew (*emunah*) which means faithfulness ('amen' is derived from it). "A God of truth and without iniquity" [Dt 32.4]. No time is given as to when this battle with Amalek began, just that it lasted until sunset. That means Moses, along with Aaron and Hur as his support, had his hands (and rod) extended in "faithfulness" for the bulk of the day, especially during the afternoon heat. "And Joshua mowed down Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword" [vs. 13]. Here a distinction is made between Amalek (the leader or king) and his people, not noted earlier. The verb for "mowed down" is *chalash* which means to prostrate, to vanquish and to waste away. Two other references are found in the Bible (Job 14.10 and Is 14.12), the latter being cited here: "How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low!" Obviously the Israelites engaged in battle had attention upon their foe whereas Joshua made an agreement with Moses to occasionally glance up on the rock to see if Moses' hand and rod were extended. Once Joshua saw Aaron and Hur supporting him, he knew victory was assured.

"And the Lord said to Moses, 'Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven' [vs. 14]. This is the first mention of "book" in Exodus, *sepher* meaning that which is inscribed and most likely applies to a scroll of parchment or papyrus which was very common in Egypt made from the reeds of the Reed (*suph*) or Red Sea. Even in their hasty departure from Egypt the Israelites must have grabbed some papyrus, knowing that it would be valuable later on for keeping records, this material not being available in the desert. *Sepher* is noted later with respect to the covenant: "Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people" [24.7]. The victory over Amalek in a book/scroll is the first recorded event; the more significant one of the Passover and crossing of the Red Sea are not put down in a *sepher*. They were too important to be entrusted to papyrus; verbal transmission would ensure their remembrance for future generations. Although such transmission can distort or alter elements of the original, the two major events were etched so firmly and vividly in the minds and spirits of those involved that the details would be preserved accurately. Also song was an important vehicle of transmission, hence Moses' song which comprises the bulk of Chapter Fifteen.

The *sepher* recording victory by Joshua over Amalek at the hand of Moses (literally) is a "memorial" or *zikaron* as in 12.14: "This day (Passover) shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord." In this instance nothing is said about recording the Passover, just that it will be remembered...*zakar*...which as noted there, comes a noun derived from this verbal root (same spelling) meaning a "male" or the agent through whom the memorial of his parents and relatives even further back are continued into the present. Thus a *zikaron* is a living embodiment passed on within a community of people (for another reference, see 13.9 which assumes the form of a sign on one's hand and a memorial between one's eyes). Once the *zikaron* concerning Joshua's military victory has been inscribed, Moses is to recite it in his ears, to *sum* it or to place it. Thus the image is one of Moses taking what has been written down, lifting it from the scroll and physically placing it in the ears of Joshua, a new form of *zikaron*. That which is placed there is a promise by the Lord

that he will *machah* or wipe away the *zakar* of Amalek. “That he would blot out the name of Israel” [2Kg 14.27]. As for *zeker*, it is of the same verbal root as *zakar* as that which is held in memory, a more common form of remembrance among people who lacked physical records. “For in death there is no remembrance of you” [Ps 6.5]. So while the *zikaron* of Joshua’s victory is placed by Moses in his ears (and to be told to future generations), the *zeker* of Amalek will be wiped away. “From under heaven” stresses this *mahah*, that heaven as the Lord’s dwelling place will not see it again.

“And Moses built an altar and called the name of it The Lord is my banner” [vs. 15]. Here is the first mention of “altar” (*mizbeach*; from *zavach*, to slay for sacrificial purposes) in Exodus. While in Egypt, repeatedly Moses had requested permission from Pharaoh to offer sacrifice or *zavach* in the desert, so the concept was not something new. Later the Passover is termed a *zavach* as in 12.27 (‘sacrifice of the Lord’s Passover’). However, nothing is said in both instances of a *mizbeach* or altar on which the sacrifice is to be performed. With this in mind, Moses accessed the collective memory of Israel prior to its four hundred year sojourn in Egypt, all the back to the patriarchs. The form of this *mizbeach* at Rephidim is not given, presumably of stones which were abundant in the desert. Moses names it “The Lord is my banner” or *nes* which means a flag or standard as used in battle, the battle with Amalek. Most likely Moses had in mind this *nes* being his *mateh* or rod, the two being not dissimilar. “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole” [Num 21.8].

Vs. 16 continues with Moses exclaiming “A hand upon the banner of the Lord!” That is to say, a hand on the *nes* of the Lord which can imply a hand on the *mateh* of the Lord, the same hand that Aaron and Hur helped Moses keep steady in faithfulness (*emunah*) while Joshua slew Amalek and his people. While this was an important victory, Moses is aware that it will continue, for in vs. 16 he says “The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.” This seems to contradict the *machah* or wiping away of Amalek’s *zakar*, his memory. While that may be true for the victory at hand, the desert tribe by his name remained, rather was dispersed, throughout such a vast area that it would continue to war against Israel as long as they were in the Sinai Peninsula and areas about it. Such conflict would continue after Israel left this area and became established, for King Saul waged war against Amalek in Chapter Fifteen of First Samuel but spared its king (Agag) and allowed the people to take booty instead of destroying it, a form of sacrifice (cf. 15.21). Perhaps if Saul had seen that *nes* or banner erected by Moses, he would have acted differently. Samuel, who had anointed Saul against the Lord’s wishes, was keenly aware of this *nes*, hence his conflict with Saul. Thus even within Israel the war against Amalek continued (i.e., ‘from generation to generation’) in the person of these two antagonists and the institution of the monarchy, a direct spin-off of Saul’s disobedience.

## Chapter Eighteen

This chapter is significant for Moses on a personal level because it reunites him with the head of the family to which his wife belonged. “Jethro, the priest of Midian, Moses’ father-in-law, heard of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel his people, how the Lord has brought Israel out of Egypt” [vs. 1]. It was only natural for Jethro to keep in touch with his son-in-law, especially the role he had played with the plagues. Of course, such dramatic events as these plus the crossing of the Red Sea and destruction of Pharaoh’s army would have traveled far and wide like wildfire. That’s why it is mentioned separately in the verse at hand. Chances are that Jethro got wind of these events very shortly after they occurred. He must have pondered them in his heart much like the Virgin Mary did centuries later (cf. Lk 2.19) but kept his distance from Egypt. Jethro intuited from Moses’ character that eventually he would make his way to Midian, the place where he took refuge after having slain the Egyptian. Association with that murder, too, may have kept Jethro a safe distance from Egypt.

Moses had married one of Jethro’s daughters which cemented relations between him and his father-in-law, so family members must have made the journey between Egypt and Midian frequently. In other words, the Israelites weren’t wholly isolated in Egypt nor were the Midians in their own land. For a reason not given in vs. 2, Jethro had taken Moses’ wife Zipporah “after he had sent her away.” The same applies to his two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. However, this may have been to protect them from any wrath Pharaoh may wish to stir up against Moses’ family. Pharaoh could have used Zipporah as a propaganda tool telling the Israelites that their leader had married the daughter of some obscure tribal leader/priest in the desert, a non-Israelite, even a

non-Egyptian. In vs. 3 we have an explanation of the names of Moses' two sons. First is mentioned Gershom, "I have been a sojourner in a foreign land" which repeats 2.22. The adjective for "foreign" is *neker* which intimates something unknown or having roots in another country; it is an intensification, if you will, of a *ger* or sojourner. "King Solomon loved many strange women" [1Kg 11.1]. To be a *ger* means that one is in a such a *neker* land but had become familiar with it (Egypt, for example). Secondly we have Eliezer who was not mentioned back in Chapter Two nor elsewhere until now. The derivation of his name? "The God of my father was my help and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh" [vs. 4]. As for Moses' father, the text has no mention of him, but he must have been faithful to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob during Israel's four hundred year sojourn in Egypt. Mention of having been delivered (*natsal*) from Pharaoh's sword suggests that Eliezer had been born more or less the same time as Gershom or shortly after Moses had slain the Egyptian and fled to Midian. The verb *natsal* is found first in 3.8 shortly after Moses had married Gershom: "I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land." In the verse at hand, *natsal* differs from "help" or *hezer* (source of Eliezer's name) which seems to be more general than the former which is more particular. That, however, does not diminish its significance when related to divine intervention: "May he send you help from the sanctuary and give you support from Zion" [Ps 20.2]!

"And Jethro...came with his sons and his wife to Moses in the wilderness where he was encamped at the mountain of God" [vs. 5]. The significance of the place is not to be overlooked, "the mountain of God" or where the Lord had appeared to Moses in a burning bush many years earlier. Although Gershom and Eliezer were young, Zipporah must have had some knowledge of the mountain's significance since she was raised in that area. In other words, it was holy long before Moses came on the scene. Once the party reached Moses, he "went out to meet his father-in-law and did obeisance and kissed him; and they asked each other of their welfare and went into the tent" [vs. 7]. One would expect this to have been a joyous reunion for all involved with Jethro taking the initiative of bringing Moses' family to him. However, nothing further is said of Zipporah nor of the two sons whose importance fades into the background compared with the relationship between Moses and Jethro. Zipporah knew this and complied...not so much because she was a woman and knew her place (that is inferred, of course), but she realized this meeting between two long-lost friends was to be taken in light of the great multitude of people for whom her husband was responsible. The two performed the required ritual of doing obeisance and exchanging kisses. As for "obeisance," the verb is *shachah* which is found in 4.31: "and when they heard that the Lord had visited the people of Israel...they bowed their heads and worshiped." "And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped" [Jos 5.14]. As for the exchange of kisses (*nashaq*), refer to 4.27: "So he (Aaron) went and met him (Moses) at the mountain of God and kissed him." In other words, the same gesture of greeting at the same mountain. Once done, each man asked how the other was doing, the noun *shalom* being used for "welfare" which has a more comprehensive sense than the common translation of peace.

The exchange of words was relatively brief and to the point, taking place outside the tent with Zipporah, Gershom and Eliezer looking on at a respectful distance. After *shalom* had been established, the two men went inside a tent whereupon Moses "told his father-in-law all that the Lord had done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians for Israel's sake" [vs. 8]. The verb *saphar* is used for "told" and fundamentally means to write something down as in a scroll and is found in 9.16: "so that my name may be declared throughout all the earth." In the situation at hand, Moses' *saphar* to Jethro was the giving of an account, of fleshing out what Jethro had heard "of all that God had done for Moses and for Israel" [vs. 1]. Understandably the two accounts differ, for the former came through the report of other persons and was second hand whereas the one (*saphar*) from Moses was a first hand account backed up by Aaron. The two must have compared notes, as it were, to see how they jibed with each other and how they could be used in the future to deal with potentially hostile tribes. Two constants were in both reports: Pharaoh (presumably the plagues and destruction of his army in the Red Sea) and "for the sake of Israel" or *hal 'odoth* which translates something like "on the causes" or "on the circumstances."

Another important factor must have been how Israel would adapt once back in the land of Canaan after a hiatus of over four hundred years. The people certainly had traditions going back to that time which they had kept alive in Egypt, else they would not have survived. Now that they left Egypt which, for the exception of the Pharaoh who had afflicted them, had been a marvelous incubator. Now they wandered in an in-between-place,

that is, in between their known and received past and an unknown future. In addition to this, Moses recounted...*saphar*...the “hardship” that befell Israel after the Red Sea crossing or *tela’ah* which means toil or weariness as from the verbal root *la’ah* (to be wearied, exhausted). Though not explicit, such *tela’ah* refers to Marah, Meribah and the battle with Amalek. As for this word, three other biblical verses exist, one of which is Num 20.14: “You know all the adversity that has befallen us.” Moses could have used another word to describe such travails but chose this one because despite the perils experienced, they were wearisome compared with anticipation of reaching the mountain of God to see what would happen there. Despite such *tela’ah*, the Lord “delivered” Israel or *natsal* noted in vs. 4 in reference to the proper name of one of Moses’ sons, Eliezer: “The God of my father was my help and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh.”

“And Jethro rejoiced for all the good which the Lord had done to Israel” [vs. 9]. *Chadah* is the verb for “rejoiced” which has two other biblical references (Job 3.6 and Ps 21.6), the latter being quoted here: “You made him glad with the joy of his presence.” Jethro continues in the same verse “in that he (the Lord) had delivered them out of the hand of the Egyptians,” the verb *natsal* being used again. Jethro must have taken personal delight in Egypt’s defeat at the Red Sea, for Midian was in Sinai, right under the influence of that country. In vs. 10 Jethro more or less repeats his joying by invoking the Lord with a third reference to *natsal* which shows how impressed he was at the event. Then again, Jethro may not have been so surprised, living as he did under the shadow of the mountain of the Lord and familiar with his ways.

“Now I know that the Lord is greater than all gods because he delivered the people from under the hand of the Egyptians when they dealt arrogantly with them” [vs. 11]. So Jethro knows...*yadah* or knows intimately...that from the events just recounted (*saphar*) by his son-in-law the gods of his neighborhood are insignificant. This was a fact he may have subscribed to not fully due to their continued presence in and around the base of the mountain of the Lord. Prior to this knowledge Jethro seems to have acknowledged both divinities and may have given allegiance to each in some form or another. As for the words “he delivered,” they are transposed from vs. 10 (see footnote ‘d’ of the Oxford RSV), but the Hebrew reads “in the word (*davar*),” etc. And so the twice-mentioned *natsal* or delivery of Israel was effected by (rather in, *b-*) the *davar* uttered by the Lord. The arrogant way Egypt dealt with Israel (literally, ‘on’ or *hal-* them) is described by the verb *zod* which literally means to boil over or to cook. The image evoked is a pot over a fire which boils or rather spills all over the place. “Once when Jacob was boiling pottage, Esau came in from the field” [Gen 25.29]. A fine way indeed to describe the ten plagues and ruin of Pharaoh’s army at the Red Sea when the Lord “boiled over” upon the Egyptians, a unrelenting series of disasters countered only the arrogance of Pharaoh.

“And Jethro...offered a burnt offering and sacrifices to God” [vs. 12]. The Hebrew text has the simply verb *laqach* (to take) with the noun *holah* (‘burnt offering’) as in 10.25 when Moses requested permission from Pharaoh to do the same: “You must also let us have sacrifices and burnt offerings that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God.” Perhaps Moses got the idea of *holah* from Jethro himself during his exile in Midian and brought it back to Egypt. Furthermore, *holah* was part of the tradition going back to Abraham and the other patriarchs whose memory the Israelites had kept alive for four centuries even though no record exists of the Israelites offering sacrifices in Egypt. Though Jethro’s *holah* was not the same as Moses had requested repeatedly from Pharaoh, for the moment it was good enough. Both men did this privately, not before the people, for they could mistake such *holah* for one offered to a local divinity. In addition to *holah*, Jethro offered “sacrifices” or *zevach* which more specifically pertains to bodies of animals; a *holah* may include that but seems to apply more exclusively to that which is burnt.

In the case at hand, *holah* is singular (‘a burnt offering’) and a *zevach* is plural (‘sacrifices’). Once Jethro and Moses finished this private ritual, “Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat bread with Moses’ father-in-law before God” [vs. 12]. The *holah* and *zevach* were followed by admission of Aaron and chosen leaders from among the people in order to fill them in on Jethro’s report and later confirmation from Moses, i.e., his *saphar*. This was important because Israel was in the vicinity of the mountain of the Lord or (presumably) that place of sacrifice to which Moses asked Pharaoh to go, a request familiar to the elders. If it weren’t for Jethro’s presence at this critical juncture, Moses would not have known what to do with so many people in the wilderness. Surely the words of 14.11 echoed in his ears, “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?” As for eating bread, some of it could have consisted of manna

which remained a daily staple of the Israelites' diet. Not only did they eat bread, they did so "before God" which here isn't his direct presence on Sinai ('they beheld God and ate and drank,' 24.11) but in the vicinity of the mountain. Hopefully from that encounter whose nature was of yet completely unknown would resolve the issue of what to do with so many people wandering in the desert.

"On the morrow Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood about Moses from morning until evening" [vs. 13]. Chances are this judging began on a regular basis in the wilderness of Sin when the people became more or less settled compared with their earlier wanderings after having crossed the Red Sea. Thus it appears to belong to a more stable form of existence compared with a nomadic one. The judging (*shaphat*) at hand is tied in with the act of sitting, most likely on a raised ledge in an open area so the people could witness the proceedings. After having taken his seat in the morning or shortly after the people had gathered their daily quota of manna, Moses continued his *shaphat* all day until evening while "the people stood about" him or when it was time to go out and gather quails. The nature of the cases brought before Moses is not stated but must have involved various conflicts from such a multitude of over six hundred thousand men, let alone women and children. Jethro took note of this arduous task from sunrise to sunset under the desert sun. He exclaimed, "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, and all the people stand about you from morning until evening" [vs. 14]? Jethro must have burst in during the course of some litigation with a crowd looking on and since they were waiting in line, agreed whole-heartedly. Surely the people didn't enjoy hanging around the entire day.

Jethro's question evoked a matter-of-fact response from Moses as though he were used to a grueling schedule, "the people come to me to inquire of God" [vs. 15]. The verb here is *darash* which fundamentally means to rub, beat or tread...that is, beat one's way to someone in order to get something. "Formerly in Israel when a man went to inquire of God he said, 'Come, let us go to the seer'" [1Sam 9.9]. This response by Moses is revealing. After all, he had been the leader-mediator for the people starting with Pharaoh and gradually grew into this role. With the passage of time and the press of so many people, Moses lost sight that he was just that, a mediator, not God. While the people *darash* divine justice in their various cases, Moses assumed the role of God without knowing it. This was something he realized that must be shaken off but didn't know how until Jethro came along. Vs. 16 spells out this *darash* in human terms: "when they have a dispute, they come to me and I decided between a man and his neighbor." The word for "dispute" is *davar* as noted in vs. 11 above, a general term where the English "thing" can apply with some accuracy. Because this "thing" has arisen between two parties and can't be settled by them, they bring it to Moses. When the *darash* comes in vis-a-vis God is that Moses putting the *davar* in terms of knowing "the statutes of God and his decisions" [vs. 16]. As for "statutes," the word is *choq* as in 12.14: "you shall observe it (Passover) as an ordinance forever" (also see notes above with regard to 15.26 and other legal terms). As for "decisions," we have Torah as in 12.49: "There shall be one law for the native and for the stranger who sojourns among you." As noted elsewhere, *choq* and Torah should not be taken in terms of life on the "other side of" Sinai when the Lord imparted the Torah to Moses. The ones at hand have been handed down from the patriarchs in Canaan and developed over four hundred years in Egypt, even having been influenced by the Egyptian legal and religious system. The advantage, however, of Moses being the single arbiter for Israel was that he was able to discern between human and divine elements and bring his decision to bear upon the legal case at hand.

In vs. 17 Jethro is blunt with his son-in-law: "What you are doing is not good" or literally "the *davar*" is not good. Those standing around the two men must have taken it the same way but quickly realized the current method of handling disputes was too cumbersome. "You and the people with you will wear yourselves out, for the thing (*davar*) is too heavy for you; you are not able to perform it alone" [vs. 18]. The verb for "wear out" is *naval* which means to become withered or faded as well as to act foolishly...both being an apt description here. "For they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb" [Ps 37.2]. Jethro wisely applies his remarks not just to Moses but to those who come to him for resolving disputes. So if Moses "fades away," the people seeking justice will, an effect that will snowball until it infects the entire population. Jethro offers Moses his advice, again most likely in the presence of quite a few people standing about, but first begins with "I will give you counsel and God be with you" [vs. 19]! The verb here is *yahats*, often used in a legal context. "I will guide you with my eye" [Ps 32.8]. The verse at hand continues with "You shall represent the people before God and bring their cases to God." Instead of the verb "represent," the Hebrew has *mul* or that which is in

front of, over against. Still the authority of Moses is preserved after which he brings the *davar* (cases) of the people to ('el) God. How this is done isn't spelled out but presumably through prayerful intercession which may include sacrificial offerings. Once done, Jethro continues with "and you shall teach them the statutes and the decisions and make them know the way in which they must walk and what they must do" [vs. 20]. Once again the terms *choq* and Torah appear (cf. vs. 16) which Jethro urges Moses to "teach" or *zahar*, a verb which means to make to shine, be brilliant. The idea is that Moses is to make both *choq* and Torah shine forth for all the people, a kind of guiding light for the *derek* or way on which they shall walk. "You shall give them warning from me" [Ezk 3.17]. Use of *derek* here has broader implications for the future, unknown to all involved, because many years lay ahead of wandering in the desert.

"Moreover choose able men from all the people such as fear God, men who are trustworthy and who hate a bribe" [vs. 21]. The verb "choose" is *chazah* which means to look upon and see in the sense of getting experience from the object of one's *chazah*. "The oracle of him who hears the words of God, who sees the vision of the Almighty" [Num 24.4]. And so Jethro counsels Moses to "see" men with three qualities: *yare'* (fear God), *'emeth* (trustworthy) and who hate a *betsah* (bribe). At first you'd think most if not all Israelites feared the Lord after so many dramatic encounters with him. As for *'emeth*, it refers to those who have faith in this *yare'*, that it sustains them. Finally, *betsah* applies to unjust gain which in the context at hand involves trading vital commodities such as water plus manna and quail beyond the prescribed limit (cf. 16.20). "Everyone is given to covetousness" [Jer 6.13]. Despite these qualities, a certain disconnect continues between divine interventions and the vicissitudes of life in the desert, a tension that will continue well after Israel enters Canaan and beyond. As for choosing such men from so vast a multitude of people, it didn't take long for Moses to weed out those who had all three qualities. They stood out by example and were noticed not just by Moses and Aaron (we can include Miriam and Hur, the latter who helped hold up Moses' arms during the fight with Amalek) but by the people as a whole. Once such men had been chosen, Moses is to set them over large-to-small groups of people (cf. vs. 21).

These men noted for the just mentioned threefold qualities are to "judge the people at all times" [vs. 22]...at all times simply because they lived among the people and knew their needs first hand. "If you do this, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure and all this people also will go to their place in peace" [vs. 23]. Note the discreet caution on Jethro's part: "and God so commands you," not I. As for the verb "endure," it is *hamad* or to stand or to take one's stand (noted above). That is to say, Moses will be free from those long days of judging from sunrise to sunset. Each person will approach these newly appointed judges (for lack of a better term). Those over the largest amount of people (thousands) are the most able going to hundreds to fifties and finally to tens. Such criss-crossing of the entire population of Israel ensures *shalom* (peace among the people).

Now that Jethro had made his suggestions, Moses "gave heed" to him and put into practice his suggestions. Vs. 25 implies that without delay Moses sought out "able men" or those with *chayl* or virtue and integrity as well as strength. This word is noted in 14.4 with another meaning yet reveals the strong, even militant type of character Moses was seeking: "I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host." "Host" applies to army and hence a mighty force to be reckoned with. Only when this new system of judges had been installed does Moses "let his father-in-law depart, and he went his way to his own country" [vs. 27]. He didn't want to have Jethro leave beforehand but to stick around for support. During this time Jethro must have consulted the chosen judges and communicated to them his ideas about how to handle the people. As for "his own country" or Midian, that was close by. Jethro knew Moses would revisit the Lord on the holy mountain and thus showed another act of discretion by getting out of the way.

## Chapter Nineteen

"On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone forth out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai" [vs. 1]. This is the second mention of Sinai, the first being 16.1: "the wilderness of Sin which is between Elim and Sinai." The location of Sinai or other places in the Book of Exodus have some value but play little or no role in this document except as an aid to the practice of *lectio divina*. This intent was set forth at the beginning and should be recalled from time to time, especially when

place names can become confusing is the case here.

To pass from one region to another is a gradual process, especially when it comes to desert regions. The distinctions become clear by contours, oases (or lack thereof) and the color of sand. As had been the case since Egypt, the Israelites were moving from one desert region to another with the exception of having battled Amalek and then meeting Jethro. Though the time covered to date is short compared with the bulk of forty years wandering ahead of them, the Israelites deserve credit for demonstrating cohesion thus far; they had been accustomed to dwell in urban areas while in Egypt, so the desert experience is new to them. After this introductory statement indicative of movement from Jethro's native land, vs. 2 says that "Israel encamped in the wilderness and there Israel encamped before the mountain." In other words, two mentions of the verb "encamped" (*chanah*) which means to set oneself down or incline. For earlier instances, see 13.20, 14.2, 15.27 and 17.1; actually the use of *chanah* in the verse at hand is the last mention of this term in Exodus. No name is given to this mountain which may be the same as Horeb in Chapter Three.

"And Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him out of the mountain" [vs. 3]. From the time Moses and Israel had left Jethro there is a sense of urgency that had not been present. His earlier experiences in Midian endowed Moses with great familiarity of the area since at the time he had tended sheep and sheep tend to wander into every conceivable place to find grass. Moses gave no hint as to his intent of ascending the mountain except to people like Aaron, Hur, Miriam and those elders he had chosen as judges. After all, both he and they didn't know how long he would be on the mountain and had to inform the people who intimated something like this would occur as they had gathered from Moses persistently having asked Pharaoh to make sacrifice in the wilderness. Vs. 3 continues with "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the people of Israel." This the first time the Lord or anyone else uses the phrase "house of Jacob" (*beyth Yahaqov*) which acknowledges the coming of this patriarch into Egypt at his son Joseph's request. Given that Jacob or Israel (the two being the same name), the father of the twelve tribes of Israel, had come to Egypt, it is interesting that no mention is made of Joseph who is the impetus behind it all. In vs. 3 the Lord uses two terms of address, *'amar* and *nagad*: the common verb to speak and the other which connotes a showing or making manifest. In sum, no words of greeting nor of introduction but of getting right down to business.

"You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself" [vs. 4]. This seeing of what the Lord had done to the Egyptians, Pharaoh obviously included, takes place high on a mountain which intimates an overall view of recent events. From there Moses could see—not with visible eyes but with eyes of the spirit—the Lord's deeds. While "looking" from that vantage point, Moses could behold the entire encampment of Israelites down below and take some satisfaction in the role he had played thus far. Still, there was the burning issue of what to do with this multitude. "You" in the verse at hand is plural which, of course, refers to Israel as a whole in the person of Moses. As for "eagle" (*nesher*), another reference not unlike this one is Is 40.31: "Mount up with wings as eagles." Moses did not have to worry about the future, for the Lord had brought him and Israel "to himself" upon these eagle wings.

"Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine" [vs. 5]. The verb *shamah* (to hear as to obey) is used twice with the preposition *b-* ('in') prefaced to "voice" rendering it literally (obey) "in my voice." Vs. 5 echoes 4.1: "they will not believe me or listen to my voice" where the same verb *shamah* is used. However, the double use of *shamah* applies to obedience and is the first instance of this divine request. And so accent is placed upon listening to God's voice despite the high visibility of the ten plagues, crossing of the Red Sea, water from the rock, victory over Amalek as well as manna and quails on a daily basis. On the mountain Moses intuited that these direct interventions weren't intended to last indefinitely but suffice in order to win Israel's trust in the desert before settling down in Canaan. From that point on, focus would be upon hearing...not just within that land but later down through the centuries. In the same breath as this double *shamah*, if you will, is a *shamar* (keeping) of God's covenant. "And you shall observe the feast of unleavened bread, for on this very day I brought your hosts out of the land of Egypt" [12.17]. This is the fourth time "covenant" (*beryth*) is mentioned in Exodus and refers to the one made with Abraham all the way back before Israel had come into Egypt. The Israelites were somewhat familiar with the notion of *beryth* and are to be credited with keeping its memory alive for over four hundred years. Now that time gap is closed in preparation for a return to Canaan, the land promised to

Abraham yet never really settled by him nor his descendants. Thus the twofold *shamah* and *shamar* (in that order, not reversed) are integral for future prosperity and reliance upon divine assistance.

If Israel is faithful to the *shamah-shamar* just mentioned, it will be “my own possession among all peoples,” that is to say, Israel will become the Lord’s very *segulah*, a term connoting private property as opposed to that which is held in common. “For the Lord has chosen Jacob for himself, Israel as his own possession” [Ps 135.4]. The privacy of this *segulah* is highlighted by contrasting it with “all peoples” even though the “earth is mine.” In other words, the Lord as possessor of the earth and all peoples has the freedom to single out whom he wishes. To solidify the new *segulah*, the Lord will make Israel “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” [vs. 6]. Note that accent is in the future (‘will make’), not presently in the desert. With the exception of Jethro of Midian, the idea of priest (*kohen*) is unfamiliar to the Israelites except what they had grown accustomed to in Egypt. And Egyptian priests were servants not just to an indefinite multitude of gods and goddesses but to a living person, Pharaoh himself. For the notion of a *kohen*, you have to go all the way back to Melchizedek in Gen 14.28 (‘priest of God Most High’) yet even he was not of Israelites stock. In other words, *kohen* was not part of Israel’s tradition as of this stage in their history. And so the promise is one of being a “kingdom” of priests isn’t spelled out clearly but presumes that each member of Israel will partake in the office of *kohen* in one way or another. Being priests is identified with “kingdom” or *mamlakah*, a term which could be applied to other nations, Egypt, for example. As for “nation,” *goy* is the word which later will be used as all nations other than Israel, a counter-word, if you will to *segulah*. Finally vs. 6 concludes with the injunction that Moses is to speak these words to the people or when he descends from the mountain.

“So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words which the Lord had commanded him” [vs. 7]. This coming is another word for descending from the mountain as well as terminating the encounter with the Lord. During most if not all such encounters there are neither introductory nor concluding words, just getting to the matter at hand. No superfluity of words exist with the Lord when he is doing the talking. The duration of Moses’ stay on the summit isn’t given as it will be later on (forty days and forty nights) but presumably is short, a climb and a descent on the same day. Even the time of the Lord’s communication in vs. 3-6 could be imparted in human terms as within a few seconds but most likely were effected spiritually without the mediation of words. So chances are the people didn’t even know Moses was gone for a few hours, just a few trusted elders. That’s why Moses summons the elders first after which he “set before” them the *davar* or words commanded by the Lord. The verb at hand is the common *sum* (‘recite’) as in 17.14: “Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua.”

With regard to the elders, this *sum* is to be before them which intimates more than verbal communication and even writing them down. As with Joshua, what the Lord had spoken is a physical putting into their ears. Still the notion of freedom is there. The elders do not have to take up these words before them but can refuse to do so. This *sum* was not done in isolation because “all the people answered together and said, ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do’” [vs. 8]. Most likely the people saw the elders...and this could include the newly appointed judges (cf. 18.21) who got up and left to meet Moses. When they saw these leaders making their way to him they knew something important was up. Moses had to make a decision when he saw everyone streaming toward him. Instead of speaking with the elders alone—for they were certainly present right in front as in a circle—the people formed an outer ring listening in. Their response was spontaneous and right from the heart. Once this assembly dissolved, Moses “reported the words of the people to the Lord” [vs. 8]. Nothing is said about him ascending the mountain a second time in two days. This time Moses didn’t have to make the ascent, for the Lord secretly descended the mountain with him and was present among the assembly. Thus this communication began with *davar* from the Lord to the people and concluded with *davar* from the people to the Lord.

“Lo, I am coming to you in a thick cloud that the people may hear when I speak with you and may also believe you forever” [vs. 9]. Such was the conclusion of the exchange of *davar*, of words. Moses hasn’t a clue as to this coming—whether it will be in the camp or upon the mountain—just that it will happen sometime soon. The adjective for “thick” is *hav* where most references are to a cloud which in vs. 9 is a separate term. The notion at hand is thick in the sense of being dark with rain (rain clouds), not that familiar in a desert environment except during brief, violent downpours. “He made darkness his covering around him, his canopy

thick clouds dark with water” [Ps 18.11]. Such an image wasn’t unfamiliar to Moses because not long ago the Lord appeared as a pillar of cloud and fire when Israel was about to cross the Red Sea. However, the thickness or *hav* of the cloud of which the Lord speaks is directed to Moses alone with the people watching and listening from the outside. Within this *hav* darkness—it differs from the *choshek* (often a metaphor for misery) which was felt, cf. 10.21—communication of an order different from earlier occasions is to take place. All earlier communications, with the exception of the burning bush and pillar of fire and cloud, did not have any visible point of reference. At the same time the Lord speaking with Moses will not be among the elders but in full public view: “that the people may hear.” Such hearing (*shamah* as in the context of obeying in vs. 5) will be for the purpose of Israel having faith (*aman*, to believe) in Moses...not just in the context of a thick cloud but “forever.” That means the image of impenetrable thickness with only the sound of the Lord’s voice will make an enduring impression that will be handed down to future generations. Yet this hearing strangely isn’t one done by the ears but by obedience (the double *shamar* above, if you will), so there is not physical sound emanating from the cloud. Vs. 9 concludes with the sentence: “Then Moses told the words of the people to the Lord,” that is, he communicated their response of willing obedience.

“Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow, and let them wash their garments” [vs. 10]. From this point onward we are moving into different territory, the penultimate purpose for which the Lord led Israel from Egypt...the ultimate reason being the reclamation of the land of Canaan. “Go” implies that Moses had been apart from the people and needs to join them. It takes place after the interlude, if you will, of the Lord speaking on the mountaintop and summoning the elders. “Consecrate” is *qadash* which means fundamentally to be clean, purify, and ties in with the washing of garments or *simlah*, usually applicable to large outer garments used by men and women. “Wash and anoint yourself and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor” [Rt 3.3]. Though this *qadash* is not specified in vs. 10, presumably it is a kind of sprinkling with water. To do this, let alone wash garments in a desert environment, points to a lavish use of water, such a precious commodity, especially when it involves a vast multitude of people. “Today and tomorrow” suggests it would be too much to purify all the people in one day.

“And be ready by the third day; for on the third day the Lord will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people” [vs. 11]. The two days used to consecrate the people is followed by the third day or “day three” which begins on the evening of the second day or after the people had gathered their daily portion of quails (not mentioned but certainly assumed). *Kun* is the verb for “be ready” and connotes the idea of being established and hence is applicable to a custom as first noted in 8.26: “It would not be right to do so.” For another use, cf. Ps 108.1: “My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast!” Such *kun* is to be seen in light of the Lord’s descent upon Sinai of which vs. 3 is a prelude. There only a few Israelites such as the elders knew of Moses’ ascent but here it will be in full view of everyone. As to the manner of this divine descent, no one was certain as to what form it will assume except that it will be in a “thick cloud” [vs. 9] perhaps not unlike that pillar of fire and cloud at the Red Sea.

“And you shall set bounds for the people round about saying ‘Take heed that you do not go up into the mountain or touch the border of it; whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death’” [vs. 12]. The setting of such “bounds” (*gaval*) is not determined; this verbal root fundamentally means to twist, wreath as a rope, so the bounds may consist of ropes taken from livestock. Four other biblical references to *gaval* exist (one Exodus example is vs. 23), one of which is Dt 19.14: “You shall not remove your neighbor’s landmark which the men of old have set.” Though the people are commanded not to ascent Sinai, emphasis is more on not touching the mountain, the verb being *nagah* as in 12.22: “touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood which is in the basin.” If a person should touch the mountain (no one seems to have done it), he or she will have a visible mark of contamination immediately recognizable by everyone. This *nagah* applies to the “border” or *qatseh* as in 12.16: “they ate the manna until they came to the border of the land of Canaan.” As noted there, *qatseh* signifies an end or extremity, an outpost belonging to a specific territory compared with *gevul*. The form of the death penalty is by stoning or by being shot as in vs. 13: “no hand shall touch him, but he shall be stoned or shot; whether beast or man, he shall not live.” Again we have emphasis on touching (*nagah*) which is to be avoided. Chances are that if a person did touch someone who made contact with the mountain, he too would face certain death as well as receiving for a time a visible mark of his offense. As for “shot,” the verb is *yarah* from which Torah is derived (noted above). The idea behind this verb is one of

casting, so the form of execution could apply to being shot by arrows. “But God will shoot his arrow at them; they will be wounded suddenly” [Ps 64.7]. The same forms of execution (stoning and shooting) apply to beasts as well, and these refer to the livestock the Israelites had take from Egypt or captured after the battle with Amalek.

“When the trumpet sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mountain” [vs. 13]. *Yovel* is the word for “trumpet” and has come to be associated with the year of jubilee. “The people shouted, and the trumpets were blown” [Jos 6.20]. As for “long blast,” the Hebrew has the verb *mashak* which means to draw out. “And when they make a long blast with the ram’s horn” [Jos 6.5]. In the verse at hand, this blast which is *mashak*...drawn out...is different from shorter ones used for other purposes of summoning the people. Thus it stands out by being prolonged. This is necessary, given the strict injunction not to touch the mountain upon penalty of death. Only when the people heard the protracted blast could they come “up to the mountain,” the preposition being *b-* (‘in’) prefaced to mountain which does not mean ascending it but passing beyond the *gaval* or borders, pretty much at the mountain’s base.

Now that the manner by which the people are to assemble about the mountain has been communicated, Moses can descend after which his first task was “to consecrate the people; and they washed their garments” [vs. 15]. The verb for “consecrate” is *qadash* as noted in vs. 10 which in both instances involves the washing of clothes. One can picture Moses doing this *qadash* on one side of the *gaval* (border) with the multitude on the other side. No small wonder that the Lord laid such a strict penalty; if not, the people would have broken through. Next Moses orders “Be ready by the third day; do not go near a woman” [vs. 15], echoing vs. 11 (i.e., ‘day three’). *Nagash* is used for (do not) “go near” and is not unlike *nagah* in vs. 12 (“Take heed that you do not...touch the border of it’). So the same distance signified by the *gaval* at the mountain is to be kept with regard to sexual relations. Another reference for *nagash* is Gen 27.27: “And he came near and kissed him.” Certainly by day three the men and women regarded each other differently than before which made them aware of their relationship with the Lord.

“On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightings and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast so that all the people who were in the camp trembled” [vs. 16]. Here on day three there takes place the most dramatic divine intervention Israel had encountered, perhaps even more than the parting of the Red Sea. Reason: now Israel confronts God directly compared to the Red Sea when, despite the miracle, he worked through the pillar, not directly. To have thunder and lightning in the desert is rare, given the dry climate. As for the “thick cloud,” it differs substantially from the one which was *hav* in vs. 9 (‘thick’) by reason of its dark color compared with the cloud which is *kaved* or one characterized by its heaviness, if you will (*kaved* meaning fundamentally heavy from which *kavod* or glory is derived). All three manifestations took place high upon the mountain yet were clearly visible because of the desert atmosphere. They happened during the day; if it had been night, the people would have been more terrified. As for the “loud trumpet,” it differs from the *yovel* in vs. 13, that is to say, it is rendered as *qol shophar* or “voice of the trumpet,” *shophar* being a curved horn often associated with a ram. Nothing is said about the person sounding this trumpet which given its curved shape, made a deeper, more penetrating sound compared with the *yovel*. Because the *shophar* was endowed with a *qol* or voice, it was quite terrifying along with the thunder, lightning and thick cloud. No wonder the people “trembled” or *charad*. “The coast lands have seen and are afraid, the ends of the earth tremble” [Is 41.5].

“Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God; and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain” [vs. 17]. Given the terrifying spectacle, Moses had to use some physical force or better, yank the people from their tents where many were cringing. Apparently they were not that close to the mountain and hence the *gaval* or boundary which separate it from everything else. Moses first gathered the elders and deputized them with the task of going through the camp to assemble everyone after which they marched the short distance to Sinai not unlike in battle formation. Once there, “they took their stand at the foot of the mountain” [vs. 17] with *tachat* for “at the foot of” also meaning under...under the long shadow that mountain had cast.

“And Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord descended upon it in fire” [vs. 18]. *Hashan* (smoke)

is a noun with no Hebrew word for “wrapped” but has “all” in its place...“all smoke.” This term is also used for divine anger as in Ps 18.8: “Smoke went up from his nostrils and devouring fire from his mouth.” As with the burning bush and pillar of cloud and fire, a preferred way of God manifesting himself is through fire, and the verse at hand continues this theme. Fire produces smoke (again, exceptionally clear in the desert atmosphere) so it is the most direct result. The *hashan* that results was far thicker than anything before, “like the smoke of kiln” or *kivshan* which produces intense heat, so much that it is used for melting metal. Three other references are found in the Bible, two of which are in Exodus and the other being Gen 19.28: “and lo, the smoke of the land went up like th smoke of a furnace.” Surely those familiar with the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, integral to their heritage, could not help but make the association which made the event that much more fearful. In other words, is the Lord coming to destroy Israel here on his native territory? “And the whole mountain quaked greatly,” the verb being *charad* just like the people did in vs. 16: all the people who were in th camp trembled.” In sum, not just the summit of Sinai trembled but every bit of the mountain.

“And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him in thunder” [vs. 19]. In other words the “voice” (*qol*) of the *shophar* introduced in vs. 16 “speaks” more loudly, the verb being *halak* (to go) with the verb *chazaq* (to grow strong) and the adverb *me’od* (excessively). Thus we get something like “the voice goes louder and becomes stronger excessively.” At first you’d think it was impossible for any human voice to be heard in such a din, but “Moses spoke and God answered him.” Moses’ voice became just as loud as that *shophar* to which God responded in thunder. The Hebrew text lacks “thunder” and has the verb *hanan* (to answer).

“And the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain; and the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up” [vs. 20]. The cloud and trumpet, along with thunder and lightning, formed an escort to proceed the Lord whose actual manner of descent upon Sinai isn’t recorded but must have been the opposite to these dramatic elements. One gets the impression that he descended with the ease and quiet of a bird alighting upon a branch, concealed beneath these overpowering manifestations. The text specifies “top” or *r’osh* of the mountain” which one would assume, a way of precluding any impression that he might have been elsewhere on it or even hovering above the *r’osh*. Once there, the Lord summoned Moses to ascend, the manner of this calling not mentioned which is secondary to his willingness to make the arduous ascent. As soon as Moses arrives at the *ro’sh* of Sinai the Lord bids him to descend in order to “warn” the people or *hud*, this verb meaning to take as a witness, testify or to enjoin. So in the context of Moses just having attained the summit of Sinai and being asked to return, *hud* means that his presence there, however brief, is sufficient “witness” to communicate the seriousness of the divine intervention. “Hear and testify against the house of Jacob’ says the Lord God, the God of hosts” [Am 3.13]. *Hud* has two parts: to prevent the people from breaking out and gazing upon the Lord. *Haras* is the verb for the former and connotes a pulling down to destruction. It is used in 15.7: “In the greatness of your majesty you overthrew your adversaries,” that is, with reference to the Egyptian army drowned in the Red Sea. The common verb *ra’ah* (to see) translates “gazing.” Should the people manage to *haras* and get beyond the terrifying thunder, lightning and so forth, they would see the Lord and perish immediately. Such familiarity is exceptionally rare and reserved for only one person thus far, Moses, and even he did not see the Lord directly. Ever since the burning bush Moses never broke through...*haras*...to the Lord but respected the distance between them.

“And let the priests who come near to the Lord consecrate themselves lest the Lord break out upon them” [vs. 22]. This is the second mention of priests (*kohen*), the first being vs. 6: “and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” As noted there, the idea of priest is relatively new, the last mention in Israel’s tradition being Melchizedek in Gen 14.28 (‘priest of God Most High’) who was a foreigner. Somewhere along the line Moses, Aaron and others had to establish a functioning priest-class to serve the people, the manner of which is not described. But since Moses recently had met his father-in-law Jethro (priest of Midian), perhaps he garnered some ideas from him. During these tenuous days of desert wandering it was as good as any. Besides, the priests formed a kind of elder group not unlike the judges Moses had chosen at Jethro’s request in order to reduce the burden of his duties. The priests in vs. 22 who draw near (*nagash*) follow the pattern outlined in vs. 15 with regard to consecrating (*qadash*) the people. The *qadash* proper to the priests differs from that of the people by reason of them being allowed to draw near to the Lord. If this doesn’t take place, the Lord himself will “break out upon them” [vs. 22]. *Parats* is the verb as found in 1.12 with another though

not dissimilar meaning: “the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad.” And so the *parats* which the Lord threatens Israel is not so much destruction but one not unlike that of Gen 11.8 where the same verb is used in reference to the tower of Babel: “So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.”

To the Lord’s words of caution Moses brought his concern about the people presumably eager to break through the bounds already established. In response to this natural concern the Lord tells Moses “Go down and come up bringing Aaron with you” [vs. 24]. Here is the second command to go down, the first being in vs. 21. And so Chapter Nineteen closes with only two people allowed to ascend Mount Sinai, Moses and his brother Aaron. Moses does communicate to the people what the Lord wishes to pass on to them, and that takes up the first half of Chapter Twenty culminating in the Ten Commandments.