

2ND EDITION

A  
Theological  
Introduction

TO THE

Old  
Testament



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## CHAPTER FOUR

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### BONDAGE, EXODUS, WILDERNESS

*Exod 1–18, Selected Psalms*

It would be hard to overstate the central importance of the Exodus experience for Israel's understanding of itself and of its faith. In many ways the narrative of Exod 1–15 may be considered the birth story of Israel as a people. The book of Exodus opens with Israel suffering oppressively as slaves in Egypt, but in the climactic moment of the story (Exod 14–15), they are delivered by God's hand through the sea to new life. The struggles of wilderness begin (Exod 16–18), but they are on the way to Mt. Sinai where they will become God's covenant people (see chap. 5).

God's victory is seen in Exodus both as a cosmic victory over forces of chaos that threaten God's creation and as a defeat of human oppressive power in history. The liberation of Israel is a central event giving identity to the community of God's people throughout ongoing generations in both Jewish and Christian traditions. Frequent references to the Exodus experience are found throughout the literature of the Old Testament (see further discussion below), and the annual observance of Passover serves as a reclaiming of the Exodus story by each generation of the Jewish community down to the present.

The Exodus experience has also held central significance for the Christian community. Early Christians were baptized with a remembrance of passing through the waters to new life. The Gospels are permeated with Exodus themes and references, and the New Testament in general makes frequent use of the Exodus tradition. Like Israel, Jesus is "called out of Egypt" (Matt 2:15). He teaches



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Israel on the mountain like a second Moses (Matt 5-7), and is himself identified as the "Passover lamb" (1 Cor 5:7; 11:25). Christian liturgy for the Eucharist declares "Christ, our Passover, is sacrificed for us; therefore, let us keep the feast." The victory of God at the sea is identified with the victory of God over the powers of death in resurrection, and Exod 15 is one of the scripture readings in the lectionary for Easter Sunday. In Christian history the Exodus story and its hope for oppressed people have come to special prominence whenever the community found itself in desperate circumstances of poverty and oppression, for instance, in the spirituals of black slaves in the American South or the modern liberation theologies of Latin America.

To read the story of the Exodus experience is for both Christians and Jews to touch the origins of community identity as God's delivered people. "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people" (1 Pet 2:10; see Hos 2:23).

#### Reading the Book of Exodus

Because of the significance of both deliverance from Egypt and covenant at Sinai for Israel's life and the literature of the Old Testament, we will treat these themes in separate chapters. Yet, the two experiences are interrelated thematically and structurally in the book of Exodus. Hence, some perspectives on reading the book of Exodus in its entirety are appropriate at this point.

##### *Context in the Canon*

The book of Exodus does not stand as an independent piece but is intended to be read as a part of the Pentateuch. From a historical perspective, it is not at all clear that the Hebrew slaves of the Exodus story had any direct historical connection to the ancestors of the Genesis stories.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the literary and theological presentation of events in Exodus assume a continuity between Genesis and Exodus that is defined by promise and fulfillment. God's promises in Genesis are moved toward fulfillment in Exodus. These promises are located in two different arenas in Genesis. On the one hand, God gives to humanity a promissory mandate in creation to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Gen 1:28). Now, in Exodus,



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material on the tabernacle is interrupted by a dramatic story of *Israel's apostasy with the golden calf* (32:1–34:35). Israel's idolatrous action results in divine anger and judgment. Only Moses' intervention allows for divine forgiveness and the renewal of the covenant. These episodes of the book of Exodus will be dealt with more fully in chapter 5.

The narrative flow of the book of Exodus seems carefully structured to move the reader through an account of events that radically alter the realities of Israel's life. In the book of Exodus we move from the seeming absence of God in bondage to the liberating power of God in victory over oppression to the full presence of God in Israel's midst; we move from building Pharaoh's cities to building covenant community to building the tabernacle for God's glory; we move from oppression to liberation to community to worship.

### Theological Themes in the Exodus Tradition

#### *Creation as Cosmic Context*

God's redemptive activity in the Exodus experience is set in the framework of God's purposes as Creator of the cosmos. The work of Terence Fretheim has especially emphasized the importance of creation theology for understanding the book of Exodus.<sup>4</sup>

We have already noted above that Exod 1:7 places the prospering of Israel in Egypt as the fulfillment of the creation mandate to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Gen 1:28). The pharaoh's threat to the future of Israel that immediately follows (1:6-14) is thus a threat to the purposes of God the Creator. There are frequent references throughout the Exodus story to Israel's God as the Lord of "all the earth" (9:14; 9:29; 19:5). Even though the focus of God's redemptive activity is the liberation of Israel from Egyptian bondage, this activity is intended to serve God's larger creation purposes. "I will send all my plagues . . . so that you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth . . . to show you my power, and to make my name resound through all the earth" (9:14, 16).

The pharaoh represents not only the historic powers of oppression but the forces of chaos that oppose God's work in creation. The drama enacted in this story is cosmic as well as historic in character. Thus, the plague stories represent God's sovereignty over the non-



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human elements of creation directed against Pharaoh's subversion of God's creation purposes. God's deliverance of Israel is not an end in itself. It restores God's creation by bringing new life out of victory over Pharaoh's actions that oppose the full life God intended in creation. This cosmic dimension of the Exodus drama is especially evident in the Song of the Sea (Exod 15:1-18). God commands the elements of sea, wind, storm, and earth (vv. 8-12) to bring victory over Pharaoh's forces. In the end, all the nations of the earth are witness to God's sovereignty (vv. 14-16), and God's reign is established over all the cosmos (v. 18). God's victory is both liberation (see below) and new creation.

### *Oppression as Historical Context*

Israel's birth story as God's people does not begin in a chronicle of national heroism and triumph or in testimony to cherished hope in divine providence. It is significant that the central redemption story of the Old Testament begins in the context of oppression and suffering marked by the absence of God from the narrative. The description of Pharaoh's use of slave labor for his own building projects (1:11), the fear of the oppressor toward the oppressed, and the genocidal policies that grow out of that fear (1:8-22), serve as a gripping reminder of the underside of human history. We are forced to the recognition that human history includes exploitation so cruel that it extinguishes even the possibility of hope: "they would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery" (6:9). Theological meaning in the Exodus story grows out of this social context in oppression. When human resources seem defeated by the oppressive and self-serving power of empire (Pharaoh), there is yet the power of God as a source of hope and possibility for new life.

Yet, the first signs of hope and life in the story come not from God but from unexpected human agents—through the courage and resourcefulness of five women, the antithesis, in the ancient world, to the pharaoh's power. Even in human terms, the power of an oppressive pharaoh does not define reality. The Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, deceive the pharaoh and thwart his genocidal command to destroy Israel's male children (Exod 1:15-22). The infant Moses is saved by the defiant action of his mother and sister,



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and he is subversively taken in by the pharaoh's own daughter to be raised in the Egyptian court (2:1-10). The actions of these women precede and foreshadow the saving activity of God on behalf of the Hebrews in bondage and preserve the life of God's agent, Moses.<sup>5</sup>

The context of oppression and suffering is also emphasized by the Hebrews' own outcry, which mobilizes the liberating activity of God. "The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God" (Exod 2:23*b*; cf. 3:7, 9; 6:5). The Hebrew verb *za'aq*, "to cry out," implies not only pain but complaint (sometimes even in a legal sense). Israel's outcry is recognition that even slaves are not resigned to things as they are and refuse to accept oppression and suffering as the final reality of their lives. The outcry is a public expression of hurt that directs criticism toward the dismantling of oppressive power and begins to suggest the hope of a new reality. It is important to note that the outcry is not directed to God; it is not public prayer. It is a human cry of pain, yet, God hears. God's direct action enters the story in response to Israel's cry of pain.

#### *The Self-disclosure of God*

Above all else, the Exodus story is a story through which the character of Israel's God is revealed. It is Pharaoh who poses the dramatic question at the heart of this story, "Who is Yahweh?" (Exod 5:2). Repeatedly, the narrative states that a primary motivation for God's self-disclosure and action in the Exodus events is to make Yahweh known—to Israel (Exod 6:3, 7; 10:2), to Pharaoh/Egypt (7:17; 8:10, 22; 9:14, 29; 11:7; 14:4, 18), and eventually to all the peoples of the earth (cf. 15:14-15; 18:8-12). In the Exodus story, features of God's character are revealed for the first time in the biblical story and established as centrally important for much of the rest of the Bible and on through centuries of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Perhaps above all else these chapters are about the identity of God.

Crucial aspects of God's identity (and intentions) are first revealed to Moses in his encounter with God on Mt. Horeb (an alternative name for Mt. Sinai) in 3:1-4:17, and subsequently confirmed and elaborated in the activity of God through the dramatic events of confronting Pharaoh and liberating Israel from slavery. We may use elements of this story to sketch a portrait of the divine character revealed in the Exodus story.



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God's self-disclosure to Moses out of the burning bush begins with a statement of identification with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This expression affirms the *fidelity of God*; the God of Exodus keeps promises, and the events of deliverance are tied in this narrative to the promises given to the ancestors (cf. Gen 12:1-3). The larger story of the Pentateuch shifts from the promises of land, descendants, and blessing to all the families of the earth into a narrative that begins the fulfillment of those promises. Israel will move toward a land of its own (Exod 3:8; 6:4, 8), has already become a numerous people (1:7), and will become God's covenant partner in a mission to all the earth (19:4-6). Even though Israel's ancestors did not fully know this God and called upon God by names other than Yahweh (6:2-3), God remembers the promises made and will keep them (2:24; 6:5). God is faithful and trustworthy.

God continues the disclosure on Mt. Horeb: "I have seen the affliction of my people; I have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians" (Exod 3:7-8a, author's translation). The powerful sequence of verbs in this verse discloses a God at the heart of Israel's salvation story who, in significant ways, is unlike the gods and goddesses of other ancient Near Eastern cultures. In response to the oppressed condition of a group of slaves in Egypt, God takes initiative to open a new future for them. This initiative represents the sovereign exercise of the *freedom of God*. God's deliverance of Israel is an act of freely given grace; it is not compelled or made necessary by special merit on Israel's part or by ritual coercion of divine favor (cf. Deut 7:8). The Exodus story particularly contrasts the freedom of Israel's God to that of the gods of Egypt. In Egypt, Pharaoh himself is considered a god, and the gods are allied with the powerful and the wealthy. In Egypt, and also in later Mesopotamian empires, the gods are identified with the ruling classes. By contrast, the Exodus God of Israel is free from the fates of empires—free to take up the cause of slaves. The later stories of Joshua and Judges suggest an identification of the gods of Canaan with oppressive social power centers as well (see the discussion in chap. 6). To tell the story of Yahweh, who responded and acted in behalf of Hebrew slaves in Egypt, is to testify to a sovereign divine freedom that provides a radical alternative to the state-controlled and manipulated gods of the ancient empires. Walter Brueggemann



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points to the significance of this radically free God for an alternative pattern of community in Israel: "In place of the gods of Egypt, creatures of the imperial consciousness, Moses discloses Yahweh the sovereign one who acts in lordly freedom, is extrapolated from no social reality, and is captive to no social perception but acts from his own person toward his own purposes. The participants in the Exodus found themselves involved in the intentional formation of a *new social community* to match the vision of *God's freedom*."<sup>6</sup> It is divine freedom that Yahweh emphasizes in the midst of covenant-making later in Exodus by proclaiming, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious" (Exod 33:19). God's free choice of Israel becomes freedom *for* Israel rather than freedom *from* Israel. The apostle Paul later cites this same divine declaration of freedom and God's confrontation with Pharaoh to remind the early church that salvation comes as a gift of divine freedom in grace rather than as a result of meritorious works (Rom 9:14-18).

God's disclosure to Moses (Exod 3:7-8a) indicates that God has not only freely taken initiative but has done so in relationship to human suffering and need. God's "seeing" and "hearing" are not generalized expressions of omniscience, but focused divine regard for oppression and suffering. Divine response is attuned to and mobilized by human cries of pain. Perhaps the most remarkable self-disclosure in this verse is in the phrase "I know their sufferings." The Hebrew verb used here (*yada'* "to know") indicates something broader than cognitive knowledge. It indicates a participation in and experiencing of that which is known. Thus, God indicates a divine choice to enter into and experience Israel's suffering. It points to a quality of divine character that we might call the *vulnerability of God*, the willingness of God to be wounded in solidarity with human woundedness. This is a distinct contrast to the gods identified with the power centers in ancient Near Eastern religions. It is the beginning of a biblical witness to the suffering of God in relationship to human suffering that for Christians finds its fullest expression in the death of Jesus (God incarnate) on the cross in full experiencing of human pain and brokenness. In between the moments of Exodus vulnerability and cruciform suffering in the biblical story are many other witnesses to God as vulnerable. Expressions of God's anguish, mourning, compassion, and partici-



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pating presence in human suffering can be found especially in the Psalms and the Prophets.<sup>7</sup> In the book of Exodus we read the contest of power and sovereignty between Yahweh and Pharaoh knowing that divine power is tempered by divine suffering with the oppressed, but Pharaoh's power is self-serving and genocidal. The question is not simply "Who is sovereign?" but "What purposes does that sovereignty serve?"

Such a radical divine identification with human suffering and the plight of the dispossessed at the heart of Israel's birth story makes understandable the constant return throughout the canon to themes of God's special regard for the powerless, the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized. At many points in the remaining chapters of this book we will see the reappearance of testimony to this aspect of the divine character.

It is important to note that God's word to Moses from the burning bush (Exod 3:7-8a) does not treat God's identification with human suffering as an end in itself. God freely chooses to be *active* in human history in behalf of those who suffer: "I have come down to deliver." God acts to make a new future possible for those who saw only a future without hope. To Moses, God declares a divine intention, and much of the narrative that follows is testimony to God's action in fulfillment of that intention. We will consider the climactic drama of God's salvation/deliverance/liberation further below.

God's character is further illuminated in the encounters with Moses by the revealing of the *divine name, Yahweh* (Exod 3:13-18; 6:2-9).<sup>8</sup> Moses objects that he cannot come to Israel and have credibility as one sent by God if he does not know the name of that God (Exod 3:13). Although the name Yahweh is used for God in some of the narratives of Genesis, the understanding of the Exodus tradition is made explicit in 6:2-3, "I am the LORD [Yahweh]. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty [El Shaddai], but by my name 'The LORD' [Yahweh] I did not make myself known to them." In response to Moses' insistence God reveals the divine name, Yahweh, to him (Exod 3:14-15).

The act of revealing the divine name is itself remarkable. In the ancient world, the giving of one's name is an act of intimacy that establishes relationship. It is related to vulnerability as well, for to know God's name is to have access, communication, and relationship by those who name the name. To know the name of God opens



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the possibility of honoring God more deeply in relationship, but for God runs the risk of abuse and dishonoring of the divine name as well. One of the commandments of the Decalogue is devoted to the protection of the divine name from such abuse (Exod 20:7; Deut 5:11). In later Israel the developed reverence for God's name (see the formula in Exod 33:19; 34:6) bespeaks a sense of Israel's belonging to God, and identification of themselves as people who carry God's name (see Num 6:27). Later Jewish reverence for God's name led to the practice of never vocalizing the name Yahweh but using the Hebrew word *'adonai*, which means "lord." This continues as a practice of Jewish piety today.

The content of God's revealing of the divine name to Moses involves a play on words that has been extensively discussed, both linguistically and theologically. The divine name Yahweh is somehow linked to the Hebrew verb "to be" (*hayah*). The traditional translation of God's word to Moses in verse 14 is "I am who I am." This suggests a relationship of God to the state of being itself or a God whose reality is stable at the core of the divine being. Such a view is not in keeping with the more active view of God revealed in the Exodus story. Most scholars prefer a translation of the phrase that suggests a more dynamic relationship to existence—either "I will be what (who) I will be," or "I will cause to be what I will cause to be." The force of these translations is to relate the character of God to the unfolding of existence. In the immediate context of the Exodus story, it is Israel's salvation and birth as a people that is coming to be. God's character is at the heart of what is emerging in human history. At the same time, the statement of God's name in terms of what is, what will be, or what is caused to be reminds us that, in Exodus, God the deliverer is also God the Creator. God is the God in whom both cosmos and history originate, and it is this God who reveals the divine name to Moses and to Israel and establishes intimate relationship.

It must be noted that the English convention of translating the divine name Yahweh as "LORD" is an impediment to fully appreciating the significance of God's name in biblical texts. The practice originates from the post-Old Testament Jewish custom of reading *'adonai* ("Lord") in the place of Yahweh out of respect for the divine name. In the later Hebrew text, alternative vowels were written with



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the consonants for Yahweh as a reminder not to pronounce the holy name. The result was the peculiar hybrid title *Jehovah*. Out of respect for this ancient Jewish practice, most modern English translations continue to translate Yahweh as "LORD" (always printed in caps), but this suggests we are reading a title rather than a proper name and suggests masculine gender, which is not a part of the name Yahweh. In this volume we will most often use the proper name Yahweh unless quoting a particular translation.

Exodus 6:2-9 presents a further reflection on God's name, marked by the repeated refrain "I am the LORD" (Yahweh).<sup>9</sup> Most scholars think this passage comes from the Priestly tradition and especially reflects the importance given to the name of Yahweh during the time of the Babylonian exile. In the contrast between the theme of God's name in Exod 3 and here in Exod 6, we can see the evidence of multiple sources that led to the documentary hypothesis. Each passage reflects a theology of the name of God that speaks to a different generation in Israel. We have already discussed the emphasis on God's name as connected with the emergence of Israel, a theme appropriate to the period of Israelite monarchy when Israel was establishing its identity and place in the world (J and E sources). Exodus 6 relates the name of Yahweh more directly to themes of God's keeping of promises and making of covenant, themes important to an exile generation that has experienced broken covenant but hopes for renewal born of God's fidelity to promises.

In the context of the Exodus story as it now stands, this powerful passage (Exod 6:2-9) strengthens the connection of God's name to the covenant commitments of God—the fulfillment of promises made to the ancestors. The outcome of that fidelity to promises will unfold in the dramatic Exodus events that lie ahead in the story. Those events are anticipated in a series of powerful verbal phrases in verses 5-8: "I have heard the groaning. . . . I have remembered my covenant. . . . I will free you . . . and deliver you. . . . I will redeem you. . . . I will take you as my people. . . . I will bring you into the land. . . . I will give it to you." Four times throughout this recital God says, "I am Yahweh" (vv. 2, 6, 7, 8). The name Yahweh is being filled with this Exodus salvation and liberation content. The phrase "I will take you as my people and I will be your God" is a formula that is associated with the covenant at Sinai and anticipates that unique



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covenant relationship beyond liberation. It is easy to see how Israel in exile drew hope from devotion to Yahweh, whose name carried this hopeful content. It is also easy to understand how this has been true for generations of Jews and Christians, especially in times of distress and hopelessness.

### *God's Salvation as Liberation*

God's salvation in Exodus does not focus on saving Israel from sin but is experienced as liberation of Israel from the oppression of a tyrant. Thus, the Exodus story is a major biblical corrective to a spiritualized notion of God's salvation.

The story does not proceed directly to the climactic moment of liberation (the dramatic passing through the sea), but first engages the reader in an extended drama of *God's confrontation with oppressive power, historical evil, and cosmic chaos*. This drama is a struggle to demonstrate whose power is sovereign in creation and history, that of Yahweh or of Pharaoh. Many scholars have felt that the episodes of confrontation between Yahweh (with Moses as active agent) and Pharaoh (5:1–11:10) have been liturgically shaped, probably through generations of Passover remembrance. Thus, the episodes are formally styled, with repetitive formulas and themes (e.g., "let my people go," "that you may know that I am Yahweh," the hardening of the pharaoh's heart).

It is not accidental that the pharaoh of these stories is not named. The concern of the narrative is less on the original historical moment of confrontation with a particular pharaoh than with Pharaoh as representative of those forces that constantly oppose the sovereignty and purposes of Yahweh. On the one hand, the fearful, oppressive, near genocidal policies of the pharaoh are documented as an evidence of historical evil, using political power in self-serving and demeaning ways that crush hope and break the spirit (cf. 1:8-22; 5:1-22; and esp. 6:9). On the other hand, the pharaoh is seen as a personification of the forces of chaos that oppose the intended order of God's creation and the intended well-being of God's creatures.

Yahweh opposes the oppressive power of the pharaoh in both its historical and its cosmic dimensions. With Moses as agent (see further discussion below), Yahweh begins a dramatic reversal of power that will culminate with the oppressed of Israel having the upper hand and the seemingly invincible pharaoh rendered powerless.



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The realities of power in the world are not what pharaohs and their admirers imagine. What we commonly call the plagues (the text refers to them as "signs and wonders," 7:3) are evidences of disruptions in the cosmic order in response to Pharaoh's sin. These elements of the created order are evidences of the chaos that ensues when God's created order is threatened. Yet, even in their disturbance, these elements of creation stand under Yahweh's sovereignty and are directed to Yahweh's purposes. Fretheim calls the plagues "ecological signs of historical disasters."<sup>10</sup> The outcome of this drama is that all should "know Yahweh," sovereign as Creator and liberator.

The section on the plagues brought against Pharaoh (7:8–11:10) reflects a complex tradition history that has undoubtedly been shaped by liturgical practices. Comparison with Pss 78 and 105 makes clear that a seven-plague tradition was known in Israel. Those concerned with source analysis have all found evidence of at least three interwoven strata in these chapters, although the extent of each is debated. In some plagues God alone plays the decisive role, in some Moses and/or Aaron, and in some God and Moses. In short, these chapters show a complex literary and tradition history that cannot be recovered with certainty.<sup>11</sup> The result is a narrative in its final form that interweaves divine and human agency in opposition to oppressive power. Creation itself is disrupted and the chaos that results is used by God, Moses, and Aaron to oppose the tyrant who disturbed God's purposes for the world by acts of oppression. The plagues show the chaos unleashed by the pharaoh directed against his own hold on power.

There are consequences for those who serve the purposes of evil and chaos in opposition to Yahweh's sovereignty. Liberation of oppressed Israel and restoration of disrupted creation is not achieved without human cost to Pharaoh and to his people, Egypt. The consequences of oppression are not limited to the oppressors alone but extend to those the oppression was intended to benefit. It is a harsh lesson taught by these texts to those who think avoidance of direct oppression of others is enough to allow them to avoid culpability. The cost of oppression is seen especially in two difficult themes: *the hardening of the pharaoh's heart* and *the death of Egypt's firstborn*.

Some readers experience difficulties with God's action in the plague stories because God hardens the pharaoh's heart.<sup>12</sup> Does this



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not make Pharaoh the victim of a fate made inevitable by God's action? A careful reading of the references to Pharaoh's hardness of heart presents a more complex picture. There are three verbs used to indicate the hardening of Pharaoh's heart: "to be heavy," "to be strong," and "to be hard." They indicate varying degrees of obstinacy, single-mindedness, stubbornness, and lack of regard. Ten times God is the subject of these verbs, but ten times Pharaoh (or Pharaoh's heart) is the subject. Significantly, God becomes the subject only in the sixth plague (9:12; God's hardening is anticipated as a future action in 4:21 and 7:3). Prior to the sixth plague it is Pharaoh who hardens his own heart. Pharaoh's obstinence is due to his own predilections and willful resistance to God's desire for Israel's freedom. God becomes the hardener of Pharaoh's heart as an intensification of the pharaoh's own character. Pharaoh's resistance to God's word made known through Moses accumulates through the pharaoh's own obduracy until God enters the process to give the pharaoh up to the irreversible consequences of his own persistent sin. The last reference to Pharaoh's hardening of his own heart occurs in the seventh plague (9:35). God does not originate pharaonic persistence in sinful refusal of God's will, but there comes a point when God seals the fate of the oppressor and makes his fall from power inevitable.

The story of the final plague, the death of Egypt's firstborn (12:29-39), is surrounded by liturgical materials providing for and reflecting the celebration of Passover in Israel (12:1-28, 40-51; 13:1-16). This tragic, final act of the struggle between Yahweh and Pharaoh is understood in Exodus as the ironic, perhaps inevitable, rebounding of Pharaoh's own deadly intent toward Israel to take its toll on Pharaoh's own people. Pharaoh had commanded the death of all firstborn Israelite sons as an ongoing genocidal policy. God refers to all Israel as God's own firstborn and declares the death of Egypt's firstborn as the appropriate penalty for Pharaoh's crime (4:23). Pharaoh has set in motion the violence that finally takes the sons of oppressed and oppressor alike. One need look no further than the great wars of the twentieth century to realize the terrible truth of such an equation. Oppression exacts its cost on victims and beneficiaries alike. God's involvement is not a statement of divine lack of compassion but of divine unwillingness to soften the conse-



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quences of oppression's inevitable demise. To tolerate or benefit from the power of oppression is exposed as a risky course, and even the innocent, such as children, are placed in danger by the reckless disregard for God's purposes on the part of an oppressor. Those who rely on the brutalizing power of Pharaoh, even innocently, are at risk.

In chapters 14 and 15 we come to the stunning climax of this liberation story. God's will for freedom and justice for Israel becomes reality in a dramatic escape from bondage through the midst of a divinely parted sea and through the destruction of the pursuing Egyptian force. God's *salvation is experienced as liberation*.<sup>13</sup> Israel passes through the sea to new life, and the powers that would consign Israel to death are defeated. The story is told in a complex prose narrative (14:1-31), and the event is celebrated in song by Moses and Miriam (15:1-21). Both narrative story and poetic celebration represent the dramatic events at the sea as the culmination of a public struggle to determine the source of true power in the world. It is Yahweh who emerges as victorious. The sovereign God who suffers with the oppressed is more powerful than the brutal, seemingly invincible oppressor.

In this climactic moment, the emphasis is firmly on Yahweh as the source of liberating power, and the key image for Yahweh in these texts is that of divine warrior.<sup>14</sup>

"The LORD is a warrior" (15:3a). It is Yahweh who fights and wins the victory; Israel is summoned to faith and trust in this divine power to new life: "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still" (14:13-14). The weapons available to a divine warrior include the elements of the cosmos: wind, water, darkness, clouds. No human warrior could stand the waters of the sea up in walls to come crashing in on the Egyptian enemy (14:22-29; 15:8-10). The warrior and battle language of these texts has sometimes seemed harsh and offensive to modern ears. Why must the moment of salvation come in terms of such violence? It is true that such military metaphors for God may be (and have been) used to authorize violence in God's name, often for less than noble purposes. Nevertheless, the truth of this text is that God is implacably opposed to the violent powers of oppression



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### *Exodus as Formative and Paradigmatic*

The full significance of the Exodus story cannot be understood in terms of the experience of Israel in the originating events alone. The narrative of Exod 1–15 already reflects a process of appropriation and reappropriation of the Exodus story by succeeding generations of the community of faith. The canonical text does not end this process; it continues beyond the fixing of the canon through the generations of Jewish and Christian communities down to our own. Every generation tells the Exodus story as its own. The story is both formative—calling community into being—and paradigmatic—reflecting and shaping each generation's experience of God's deliverance.

1. *Event, Response, and Meaning.* The Exodus experience does not stand as an isolated moment in Israel's past. God's liberating action immediately demanded response, and out of that response community was formed. Through the generations the community's Exodus witness generates new and accumulating response. Thus, the meaning of Exodus grows beyond its originating moment and demands response from every generation in the ongoing community of faith—from Israel to the present. The narrative itself indicates elements of the response to Exodus deliverance that forms community—both for Israel and the ongoing generations of God's people.

The initial response of liberated Israel is *doxological*. The joy of Israel in their new freedom spontaneously bursts forth in praise. Miriam and Moses lead Israel in singing:

I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;  
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.  
The LORD is my strength and my might,  
and he has become my salvation;  
this is my God, and I will praise him,  
my father's God, and I will exalt him.

(Exod 15:1b-2; cf. also 15:21)

The initial community of liberated Israel is a community of praise. Praise remained central and constitutive of Israel. This can be especially seen in the Psalms where praise is Israel's natural response in celebration of God's acts of grace in their behalf. Such praise at the



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heart of Israel's worship often included the praise of subsequent generations for the Exodus deliverance from bondage.

Praise the LORD!

Praise the name of the LORD;  
give praise, O servants of the LORD. . . .  
He it was who struck down the firstborn of Egypt,  
both human beings and animals;  
he sent signs and wonders  
into your midst, O Egypt,  
against Pharaoh and all his servants.

(Ps 135:1, 8-9; cf. also 136:10-16)

Praise of God defines a central purpose for which God's people were formed, and Exodus themes are at the heart of Israel's praise. Israel is "the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise" (Isa 43:21). If we in the modern church would be God's liberated people in our time, then praise of God must be placed at the heart of the church's life.

Israel's response to Exodus liberation is also *kerygmatic*. Praise becomes proclamation. The Song of the Sea moves from doxology to tell the story of God's deliverance in stirring poetic detail. Community is formed in the act of recital. Israel is formed as community in part because they have a story to tell and a word of God's salvation to proclaim. Exodus is a central originating memory for Israel. Although the story of God's people grows, the central role of Exodus in that story remains clear throughout the generations. Thus, the kerygmatic recital of the Exodus events recurs throughout the Hebrew canon, attesting to the importance of such a story for the faith identity of subsequent generations in Israel. This may be seen in several creed-like recitals preserved in the biblical text. Deuteronomy 26:5-10 includes Exodus in a statement of faith to be used at the offering of firstfruits from the harvest. Joshua 24:5-7 makes Exodus a key element in recital of Israel's salvation story to those inhabitants of the land who are challenged to "choose this day whom you will serve" (Josh 24:15). The Exodus story is part of the identity of Israel known to the Philistines who face Israel in battle (1 Sam 4:8). It is a part of the proclamation of the prophets who call Israel back to obedience in service of the God who has



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saved them: "For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam" (Mic 6:4); "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols" (Hos 11:1-2). In time of exile, Exodus memory and recital becomes a source of prophetic hope for new life:

Thus says the LORD,  
who makes a way in the sea,  
a path in the mighty waters,  
who brings out chariot and horse,  
army and warrior;  
they lie down, they cannot rise,  
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:  
Do not remember the former things,  
or consider the things of old.  
I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
(Isa 43:16-19a)

Of course Israel's recital of Exodus liberation is most centrally focused in the Passover, which is celebrated every year in the spring. Each generation is formed anew in relation to the Exodus story as it is retold and celebrated. Each generation becomes the Exodus generation. The narratives of Exod 12:1-28, 43-49; 13:1-16 already reflect the liturgical practice through generations of Passover celebration. Moreover, such celebrations continue in the Jewish community until the present. In the gospel stories, Jesus' final supper with his disciples is a Passover meal, and Jesus' own death is understood through the metaphor of the sacrificial lamb of Israel's Passover and the tragic but necessary death of the firstborn to enable salvation. Liturgies today often declare, "Christ, our Passover, is sacrificed for us; therefore, let us keep the feast." Recital of the good news of God's deliverance lies at the heart of identity for the community of the people of God in the Jewish and the Christian communities. Passover (and its accompanying Exodus story) reminds each generation of the community of faith that their life originates in God's gift of life when they had no life. "Remember



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that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you" (Deut 15:15).

Finally, Israel's communal response to Exodus is *covenantal*. It is not enough to sing praise and tell the story if there is no structure of community to carry on such doxology and recital. Thus, the story of the book of Exodus must continue on from the shores of the sea to the encampment at Mt. Sinai (Horeb) and the events that form the "mixed multitude" (Exod 12:38; "mixed crowd" in NRSV) of liberated Israel into a covenant people. The identity of God's covenant people presupposes the Exodus experience: "You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation" (Exod 19:4-6). Although this portion of the book of Exodus is the subject of chapter 5, we suggest here that Exodus tells the story of Israel's freedom from the forced labor that built Pharaoh's treasure cities and that Sinai will call Israel to the covenantal labor that is necessary to build the faithful community of God's people. The move from Exodus to Sinai, from salvation to covenant, from freedom to obedience, is a necessary journey for every generation seeking to be God's people.

2. *The Pattern of Exodus Faith*. Even apart from explicit references to Exodus memory, there is a pattern of faith, a paradigm for understanding the experience of God's grace, that grows out of the Exodus experience. There is an Exodus shape to the faith experience of God's people reflected throughout the Old Testament, into the New Testament, and on through the subsequent history of church and synagogue.

This pattern arises out of the climactic moment of deliverance at the sea and consists of three elements:

Situation of Distress ⇒ Unexpected Deliverance ⇒ Response in Community

All persons and communities experience situations of distress, moments, both personal and corporate, when, like Israel at the sea, every generation despairs of finding any way into the future. In these moments we, like Israel, experience grief and anger (the people



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turned on Moses, 14:11-12). We see no possibilities for life, believing that death has the upper hand. We are without hope.

It is the testimony of Exodus faith that into this despairing moment God has made possible unexpected deliverance. In the Exodus story what could be more unexpected than that a path should open through the sea itself, and that Israel would walk to freedom on dry ground? The Exodus pattern suggests that through God there is always a way into the future and a further word of life to be spoken in the face of death. It will often come in "unexpected" ways. Exodus faith does not mean that people of faith always receive the future they wish for, but in God there will be a way forward into new life. The wilderness stories of Exod 16-18 suggest that such new life in faith involves struggle (see further discussion below). The promise of the Exodus paradigm is that death never has the final word; God's grace will make new futures possible, often in surprising and unanticipated ways.

Community forms in response to this movement from distress to deliverance. The Exodus-initiated community celebrates and remembers the stories of God's saving/delivering/liberating grace, and responds to shape its life and practice differently in the world because of its experience of the saving/delivering/liberating God. We will discuss this shaping of community in chapter 5 in relation to the concept of covenant.

This pattern of distress, deliverance, and community is reflected in much of the literature of the Old and New Testaments. In Israel's literature the pattern may be seen most clearly in the Psalms. The psalms of lamentation speak movingly and candidly of distress in many forms, but, as is well known, most laments also move toward praise in anticipation of deliverance (see Ps 77, which includes an explicit reference to the Exodus). Psalms of thanksgiving look back on distress from the perspective of those who have experienced deliverance and new life (see Ps 33). Other types of psalms reflect the community—in its remembrance of the salvation story (Ps 136), in its festival celebrations of faith (Ps 24), in the ethical demands on God's community (Ps 15), and in the leadership expected of the king (Ps 72). For Christians, the pattern of faith reflected in the Exodus story may also be seen in the central salvation story of the New Testament. In the relationship between crucifixion, resurrection,



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and Pentecost we may see a christological reenactment of the Exodus-shaped faith. On the cross, Jesus identifies with the deepest human distress and despair. In resurrection God speaks an unexpected word of new life to those who thought death had spoken a final word. And in Pentecost, a new community is birthed to witness to and live out the implications of this new experience of God's grace. In the early church, baptism is associated both with rising from death to life (resurrection) and with passing through the waters to new life (Exodus). The pattern of faith experience that is reflected in the Exodus story remains a central part of the identity of God's people through the generations down to our own. Brevard Childs concludes his treatment of the deliverance at the sea with this theological reflection on its paradigmatic character:

The church lives in the memory of the redemption from the past bondage of Egypt, and she looks for the promised inheritance. She now lives still in the desert somewhere between the Red Sea and the Jordan. "Therefore let no one think that he stands lest he fall, but God is faithful and will also provide for us the way of escape."<sup>16</sup>

#### *Moses and the Role of Human Agency*

God's initiative and ultimate power accomplish Israel's liberation from Egyptian bondage. But God does not act alone in these events. The important role of human agency in partnership with the redeeming activity of God is acknowledged in Israel's own testimony at the very moment of their liberation: "So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses" (Exod 14:31b).

God's power does not operate independent of human agency in the Exodus events. As we have seen, the resourceful, saving activity of five women preceded even the explicit initiative of God in behalf of Israel's future well-being (Exod 1:15-2:10). Aaron also plays an important role alongside that of Moses: "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. You shall speak all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his land" (Exod 7:1-2). Aaron becomes the ancestor of a major line of priests in Israel (cf. Exod 28:1).

In addition, Miriam is given an important role of leadership in the wilderness period of Israel's journey from Egypt. The prophet



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Micah lists her alongside Moses and Aaron, "I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam" (Mic 6:4b). She is first to lead Israel in praise after the crossing of the sea (Exod 15:20-21) and is central to important wilderness episodes, particularly the account of a rebellion by Miriam and Aaron against Moses' leadership (cf. Num 12:1-15; 20:1; 26:59; Deut 24:9).<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, Moses most centrally represents the partnership between God and human agency in the liberation enterprise. The influence of Moses extends beyond these deliverance events into the experience of Israel in the wilderness and in the covenant formation at Sinai. In the Exodus drama, God announces the divine intention to deliver Israel from bondage and, almost in the same breath, commands Moses to go to the pharaoh to effect this desired outcome: "I have come down to deliver them. . . . So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt" (3:8a, 10).

Moses engages in the difficult face-to-face confrontations and negotiations with Pharaoh over Israel's fate (5-12), faces the abuse and rejection of his own people, who are too beaten down to choose the risk of their own freedom (5:20-23; 14:10-12), and mediates God's power in the decisive moment of victory and freedom (14:15-16). The signs and wonders in this story remind us of the power of Yahweh, sovereign over creation and history. But the courage and faithfulness of Moses remind us of the human and social struggles through which God is at work to effect the divine saving purposes. Moses is the revolutionary agent of God, who defeats oppressive human power and makes hope possible to the hopeless. Moses is the mediator of divine creative power, standing with God in opposition to the forces of chaos and demonstrating God's sovereignty over creation itself.

The motif of Moses, being raised in the household of the very oppressor he would oppose is an element recognized by political theorists as often present in events that lead to liberation. The oppressed are drained of energy and without the power of initiative in oppressive circumstances. A human agent, spared from the deadening effects of oppression and benefiting from the resources of the privileged, identifies with the fate of the oppressed and exploited. Such a person, equipped with resources drawn from the privileged, often becomes a catalytic agent in revolutionary situations. In Exod 2,



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Moses is given a privileged upbringing and yet nourished in his own identity by contact with his mother and sister. As an adult he is forced to choose between these identities and demonstrates a predilection for justice (2:11-22), though one that is not yet channeled and focused for God's purposes. When he is sent by God to confront the pharaoh, Moses stands between two communities he has known, but neither broken in spirit by oppression nor hardened of heart by possession of power. He can represent God's new possibility for Israel.

Attention to Moses' role in this story is the antidote to a reading that would settle for passive human waiting for God's action alone to oppose oppression and injustice. Trust in God's liberating power requires human participation in the processes that call and send persons like Moses to engage the oppressive powers of every generation. The leadership required of those who attend to Moses' role in this story will involve confrontation and struggle in the sociopolitical order, facing the Pharaohs of every age.

Liberative leadership also may require mediation between God's purposes and the people of God. Moses often faced the skepticism and rebellion of his own people (5:20-23; 14:10-12; 16:2-3). He challenged them in the name of the liberating God he served, urged them forward when they would remain in bondage, and mediated God's forgiveness in the face of their stubborn refusals of divine purposes.

God does not liberate without also calling human agents to the task of liberation. God works with and through the gifts and the weaknesses of those agents—in Moses' time and in our own. Passive waiting for God's justice and deliverance does not fit the biblical model of the Exodus story. Neither can political readings of these texts argue for human agency alone or fail to see the centrality of God's initiative and sovereignty. It was Moses (and secondarily Aaron and Miriam), as well as Yahweh, who brought Israel out of Egypt (see Exod 6:13, 26-27; 32:7).

#### *Liberation into the Wilderness*

God delivered Israel not immediately into the promised land but into the wilderness. Following the Song of the Sea (15:1-21), the book of Exodus includes several chapters reflecting initial struggle



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in the wilderness prior to the encampment at Mt. Sinai (Exod 19). Although some later texts look back on the wilderness as a "honeymoon period" in Israel's life (e.g., Hos 2:14-15), this is not the perspective of the wilderness traditions in Exodus (or the somewhat different wilderness traditions of Leviticus, Numbers, or Deuteronomy). Although important shaping of Israel as a community took place in this period, it was a time of trial and struggle.

The wilderness traditions immediately following the deliverance at the sea include crises over adequate water (15:22-27 and 17:1-7) and sufficient food (16:1-36). There is also the story of an attack by an enemy, the Amalekites (17:8-16), and a narrative on Moses' reunion with his father-in-law, the Midianite priest Jethro, who helps him organize the governance of the people Moses now leads (18:1-27).

Although there will be further discussion of important wilderness experiences in the following chapter, we can briefly note several important themes that appear in these initial wilderness encounters.

1. God's salvation does not guarantee life without hardships. The world outside of bondage is also a world with dangers and struggles. Needs are not automatically supplied, and lack of food and water for Israel carries the threat to the people's welfare into the most basic of human needs.

2. In the context of such struggle, even bondage can begin to look attractive. Faced with the wilderness, some would choose the security of bondage over the struggle in freedom. "If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread" (16:3).

3. In the wilderness struggle, the people turn on Moses, Aaron, and God (15:24; 16:3, 9; 17:2-4). This conflict is the beginning of a complex set of traditions concerning the people's complaint and rebellion in the wilderness that continue on through the Pentateuch. The memory of Exodus deliverance is not enough to engender trust in the Lord's providence. Moses increasingly must intervene and mediate between his rebellious people and God (see 16:11-12; 17:4-7).

4. In these chapters God's response is gracious, merciful, and providential. Only later in the wilderness traditions does the people's rebellion evoke God's anger and judgment (e.g., Exod 32).



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In the midst of these wilderness trials the biblical narrative emphasizes God's ability to provide for the people's needs. The resources to sustain life in wilderness struggle come from God and are trustworthy. God's victory over the chaotic power of Pharaoh, who opposed God's creation, is now reflected in God's use of creation to give life in the wilderness.

The manna story in chapter 16 is especially important. Israel returns often to reflect on this story of the people's need and God's providence (Num 11; Deut 8; Josh 5:12; Neh 9:20; Ps 78:24). Every day the people could trust that the manna would be available. Every day the people must gather and eat it. Important economic insights were drawn from the manna story. Manna always miraculously provided just enough for the people's needs: "those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed" (16:18). Resources were keyed to need and excess was not possible. Later covenant provisions for economic life reflect some of the lessons learned from reliance on the manna from God. Even in the New Testament, the apostle Paul appeals to this same story for the principle of providing for one another's needs and avoiding excess when he takes up his collection for Jerusalem (2 Cor 8:13-15).

It is Yahweh who gives the resources that provide life in the deadly dangers of wilderness, but Israel must trust in the reliability of God's provision and avoid the temptation to hoard or control the blessings God provides. The people of God must learn to receive God's gifts; to attempt to grasp these gifts is to lose them (16:20).

5. The odd story of Jethro's advice to Moses in organizing new leadership structures for Israel that relieve the burden on him (18:1-27) serves two purposes. First, it allows for acknowledgment by a non-Israelite of what Yahweh has done in defeating Egypt and bringing Israel to freedom. The nations are indeed beginning to "know" that Yahweh is God. Second, this ordering of Israel's life foreshadows the long and important work of shaping Israel as covenant community. The justice initiated with Exodus deliverance begins to be institutionalized in social structures within the community. The structuring of Israel as a new community in covenant with Yahweh begins in chapter 19 of Exodus and serves as the subject of our next chapter.



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### Notes

1. See the discussion of "History and Faith in the Book of Exodus" in Terence F. Fretheim, *Exodus* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 7-10.
2. For those interested in scholarly judgments on the source-critical history of the text, the commentary by B. S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), is a magisterial commentary that gives detailed attention to previous critical work on the text of Exodus.
3. Some scholars also defend an earlier date for the Exodus events. See the excellent discussion of historical possibilities in the Exodus narrative in Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 125-32.
4. Cf. Fretheim, *Exodus*.
5. See Fretheim, *Exodus*, 36-41; and J. Cheryl Exum, "You Shall Let Every Daughter Live: A Study of Ex 1:8-2:10," *Semeia* 28 (1983): 63-82.
6. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 16-17.
7. See T. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (OBT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); and also B. C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991).
8. For a fuller theological discussion of God's self-disclosure in Exodus, with reference to key previous treatments, see Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," *NIB*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 711-22, 733-37.
9. See W. Zimmerli, *I Am Yahweh* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 1-28.
10. Fretheim, *Exodus*, 107-8; and T. Fretheim, "The Plagues as Ecological Signs of Historical Disaster," *JBL* 110 (1991): 385-96.
11. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (pp. 121-70) gives detailed discussion and response to the critical historical, literary, and liturgical questions raised by the plague narratives. In the end, he insists that the address of these texts is theological, as do Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus," 722-23; and Fretheim, *Exodus*, 105-12.
12. See excurses on the hardening of the pharaoh's heart in Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 170-75; and Fretheim, *Exodus*, 96-103.
13. The work of George V. Pixley, *On Exodus: A Liberation Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1987) emphasizes the importance of the liberation theme throughout the book of Exodus. See also J. Severino Croatto, *Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1981) in this regard.
14. See P. D. Miller, Jr., *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973); and M. C. Lind, *Yahweh Is a Warrior* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1980).
15. See M. Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).
16. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 239.
17. See Rita J. Burns, *Has the Lord Spoken Only Through Moses?* (SBLDS 84; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987); and Phyllis Trible, "Bringing Miriam Out of the Shadows," *BRev* 5 (1989): 14-24, 34.

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