Parashat Bo 5771

Did the Exodus Really Happen...

AND DOES IT MATTER?

מא וַיְהִי, מִקֵּץ שְׁלֹשִׁים שָׁנָה, וְאַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת, שָׁנָה; וַיְהִי, בְּעֶצֶם הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה, יָצְאוּ כָּל-צִבְאוֹת יְהוָה, מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם.

Exodus 12:41 And it came to pass at the end of four hundred and thirty years, even the selfsame day it came to pass, that all the host of the LORD went out from the land of Egypt.

מב לֵיל שִׁמֻּרִים הוּא לַיהוָה, לְהוֹצִיאָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם: הוּא-הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה לַיהוָה, שִׁמֻּרִים לְכָל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְדֹרֹתָם. {פ}

42 It was a night of watching unto the LORD for bringing them out from the land of Egypt; this same night is a night of watching unto the LORD for all the children of Israel throughout their generations. **{P}**

"Some stories are true that never happened." – Elie Wiesel

" Gentlemen, suppose if tomorrow's headline in the NY Times carried the sensational news that the original Two Tablets containing the Ten Commandments have been found, do you think that people would, as a result, flock to the synagogues en masse & became much more pious?"

Abraham Joshua Heschel – to students in a rabbinical school classroom

"If it could be definitively proven that the Exodus did happen do you think there would be some massive deepening of people's Seder experience with people concluding, "Wow, the Exodus really happened we need to take Seder more seriously?"

If it could be definitively proven that the Exodus did *not* happen, do you think there would be some massive disaffection from having a Seder with people concluding, "The Exodus never happened so we don't need to have Seder anymore as it's all a lie?"

The issue is less whether the Exodus "really" happened or the but rather the more challenging issue is whether the people (we) who claim these stories are animating sources of wisdom for us actually live differently - more richly, compassionately, ethically, alertly, and lovingly- because of them...and increasingly -fair or unfair - whether we can demonstrate this is the case. I don't care that much what people believe about the historicity of the Exodus and other Biblical stories. I care about how seriously one takes them, how much wisdom one can reveal in them, and how they actually affect one's way - attitudes and actions - in the world.

Yeshayahu Leibowitz once said that when he was in synagogue and the portion was read about the ass who spoke to Balaam, Leibowitz believed that it was true that the ass really spoke. Outside the synagogue, it was a different story.

The Bible, Archaeology, and the Origins of Israel

Prof. Daniel M. Zucker - 10/24/2006

David Storobin's essay on the origins of the Jewish People ("The Origin of the Jewish People and the Land of Canaan", Global Politician, May 10, 2006) while presenting a very different view of Jewish origins than that of the traditional Biblical text, actually comes close to the current theories afloat in the world of archaeology and critical biblical studies. There are however some important details in the presentation of his theory that are in need of clarification and/or correction; this essay seeks to do just that.

Storobin essentially is correct that there **is no evidence of an Israelite presence in Egypt or the Sinai during the period in question (the Late Bronze Age, c.1550-1200 BCE).** There is however the controversial finding by Frank L. Yurko of the University of Chicago, made in the winter of 1976-1977 and published in 1990 of a Thebes inscription and diagram of battles between Pharaoh Merneptah and Israel. The inscription does indicate the presence of an ethnic group identified by the Egyptians as "Israel" in the territory of the land of Canaan. Like the famous "Merneptah Stele" from Merneptah's mortuary temple in Thebes, discovered in 1896 by Sir Flinders Petrie, and a similar fragmentary inscription from a temple in Karnak, Yurko's discovery attests to the existence of Israel at this early period (c.1220 BCE) but it does nothing to prove an Israelite presence in Egypt proper. So too, Storobin is correct in writing that the walls of Jericho had tumbled down (due to seismic activity) centuries before the theoretical time period of Joshua (c.1200 BCE).

The Late Bronze Period (c.1550-1200 BCE) began with strong Egyptian control of Canaan, but as the centuries wore on that control faded in and out. The el-Amarna period(end of the 18th dynasty, in the mid-14th century BCE) when Amenophes IV took the name Akhenaton and Egyptian imperial concerns were neglected in favor of a theological revolution did much to weaken Egyptian control of its Asiatic territories. The early 19th dynasty under the aggressive early Seti I and II and Ramses I and II did much to reestablish Egyptian control of Canaan. The huge southeast Balkan emigrational upheavals that led to the destruction of the Hittite empire in the mid-13th century BCE however created an almost universal societal distress that marked the end of the Late Bronze period throughout the Levant.

It was at the beginning of the Iron I period (c. 1200 -1000 BCE) that the Egyptian control of the land of Canaan grew weakest, particularly shortly after 1200 BCE when Ramses III had to defend Egypt from the invasions of the Libyans and the Sea Peoples. In the chaotic conditions where imperial control vanished, the Canaanite urban elites began to oppress the pesantry so that many began to flee the larger urban centers of the lowlands and retreat to the safety of the rural hill country, slowly developing a counter culture to that of the wealthy Canaanite aristocracy and the new

Sea People invaders, especially the Philistines.

Although once a popular theory, the suggestions that there is a direct link between the Biblical word for Hebrew (Ivri) and the Egyptian hieroglyphics for the Akkadian HABIRU/APIRU has been demonstrated by Amarna tablet expert Professor Anson F. Rainy of Tel Aviv University, to be incorrect. Rainey, incidentally, uses philological evidence to suggest a minority view of a soft invasion of Arameans as the background for the "Israelite Conquest". The old idea of Hebrews as "caravaneers" or "donkey drivers"-- the latter term suggested by no less a scholar than the famous William Foxwell Albright - likewise has been cast into history's dustbin.

Today, led by such archaeologist-historians as William G. Dever, the prevalent though not universally accepted theory about the "Conquest" of Canaan by Joshua, as recorded in the biblical book of Joshua, is that **the text is a pious fraud**; it never happened. Rather, as Israeli archaeologist Israel Finkelstein, of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University, has demonstrated through his studies of the archaeology of the hill country in Ephraim and Judah during the twelfth and eleventh centuries, it seems that the disaffected Canaanite peasants that fled to the hill country appear to have organized themselves into a counter-culture that evolved over time into the Israelite tribes. Perhaps the truth lies with both camps: the majority of the "tribes" were indigenous disaffected Canaanites, but Aramean stock could have migrated southwest into Canaan as well. We should not be too quick to dismiss the considerable biblical traditions (most likely originally oral) of connections to Haran and northern Aram. The general disunity of the tribes certainly would support the idea that it was a variety of groups that eventually came together to form biblical Israel.

Storobin's suggestion of catastrophic earthquakes and disasters sounds appropriately dramatic, but there is no concrete evidence that the period in question suffered any more seismic activity than usual (keeping in mind that the land of Israel sits on the largest fault line known, stretching from Turkey to north-east Africa). The suggestion that the Israelites wandered around in the Judean desert does not fit well as it seems that Judah altogether had a very sparse population before 900 BCE and miniscule before 1000 BCE. Besides, we should be very careful about taking the Biblical text too literally; it uses the literary conventions of its day (brilliantly) but it is not a video tape of the events of the period. Rather the biblical text is what the Germans term "heilsgeschicte", which means "holy history" or the "history" of the relationship of Israel with God. As a religious text, it uses religious terminology, which is to say, it is not a factual account, but rather a faith based document.

The proto-Israelite tribes were not monotheists; indeed the Bible itself testifies to the fuzzy theology of the Israelites at the time of the Judges (c.1200-1000 BCE). The Israelite tribes probably worshipped a variety of deities that includes the Canaanite gods Baal, El, and Astarte, as well as the southern Hebrew deity YHWH. Over time the cult of YHWH won out against the competition, but as the Elijah narratives record, the outcome was not clear for quite some time. Jeremiah still complains at the end of the 7th century BCE that women are baking raisin cakes and bringing them to the Jerusalem Temple to offer to the Queen of Heaven! Solid monotheism was not present in the First Temple period, although the prophets, especially Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah championed the idea. But the people weren't there yet as the material culture (Kenyon's discovery of dozens of Astarte figurines from the City of David [monarchic Jerusalem]) and a careful reading of the narrative texts clearly indicates.

Archaeologist Israel Finkelstein has suggested that the Hebraic taboo on pork may have been due to an aversion to anything that was popular with the Philistines, who as an Aegean people, brought domesticated pigs to the Levant, which the Canaanite lowlands then accepted into their diet. "If they like it, we will shun it" seems to be the basis for the taboo on pork according to Finkelstein, who noted that pig bones, while common in Canaanite lowland sites, were virtually non-existent in hill country sites. Finkelstein's theory would accord well with the text in Leviticus 18:3 which suggests that Israel's behavior is at least in part governed by a desire to reject both the practices of the Egyptians and the Canaanites. As far as the name "Israel" itself is concerned, we do not know what the name really is meant to signify; the explanation in the biblical text itself (Genesis 32:28) is not a clear etymology.

Now, if the Israelites were not slaves in Egypt, and most Israelites were actually of Canaanite stock, where did ancient Israel get the story about being slaves in Egypt? Is the Bible completely mythical as some deconstructionist biblical scholars like Thomas L. Thompson and the Copenhagen School suggest? What really occurred?

We probably will never know all the details, but critical biblical scholars such as the late Stanley Gevirtz of Hebrew

Union College and Richard Elliot. Friedman of the University of California at San Diego have **suggested that it seems likely that some of the tribes did experience an Egyptian enslavement.** The tribe of Levi is recognized to have a large number of Egyptian names. Names such as Moses, Miriam, Hofni, and Phineas are Middle Egyptian in origin. The tribe of Levi never received a separate tribal allotment, and the tribe of Simeon, with which it is linked in many blessings as well as the Israelite vengeance upon the denizens of Shechem for the rape of Dinah (Genesis 34) likewise did not retain its theoretical allotment, being swallowed up by Judah. Gevirtz, Friedman, and others have suggested that the tribe of Levi probably did experience a period of servitude in Egypt. Gevirtz also suggested that the Joseph narratives record Simeon's imprisonment in Egypt which might echo that tribe's experience as well. The other tribes would have developed in the Ephramite, Galilean, and Gilead highlands in the early stages of the Iron I period. The less than cordial first attempts at (re-?) unification are reflected in the Levite-Simeonite massacre of the people of Shechem in Genesis 34 and the Judges 9 story of Abimelek's failed attempt to forge a kingdom. The Book of Judges reflects accurately the disunity of the Early Iron I period. (1200-1050 BCE)

We do know that King David used the Levites as his agents for the administration of the tribal districts in his united kingdom. We also know that David chose Zadok as his high priest over Abiathar of the Shilonite priesthood. Although Zadok is called an Aaronide, there seems to be some question about this. Gevirtz noted that the city of Jerusalem, or Urusalmu as it is termed in Akkadian and Egyptian texts, had a long history of names of its rulers with the root צ-ד-ק. Going back to the "Melchezedek" text in Genesis 14 which theoretically would describe the 20th century BCE and stretching forward to Zedekiah, the last Davidic king before the fall of the city in 586 BCE we have the following names: Melchezedek, Adonizedek (Joshua 10:1,3), the same name possibly mentioned in the 14th century Amarna tablets, Zadok (II Samuel & I Kings), and Zedekiah (II Kings and Jeremiah). "Zedek" was the name of the Canaanite god of justice, a fact reflected in Psalm 97:2. Some scholars have suggested that Zadok may have been the original Jebusite priest of Jerusalem. If such is the case, the following theory may explain why Israel assumed an Egyptian experience that included slavery and redemption.

David, as the first ruler of a United Kingdom of Israel and Judah not only needed administrators to help him control what had been roughly twelve different tribal entities with very different identities and beliefs, but also had great need for a unifying "myth" [the term myth (mythos) is used here in the original Greek sense of a foundation story rather than a falsehood] to help him unify these diverse groups. In exchange for their serving as his administrative agents, David accepted the history of the Levites as the history of all Israel. By the force of his personality and that of his son Solomon, the unification and its underlying mythos worked. But when Reheboam came to the throne, his lack of tact in dealing with the northern tribal elders resulted in their rejection of the entire unification enterprise, mythic history and all. The Levites had done their job well enough that the basic outlines were still accepted by the people. Also, Levites continued to live in the northern kingdom, particularly in Shiloh, and so they would have had additional opportunities to teach their history to the nation. But the union was finished. When the northern kingdom of Israel succumbed to Assyrian domination and destruction in 721 BCE, the northern Levites fled to the south, bringing their version of Israel's history with them, which eventually was integrated into the "history" of Judah.

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1. One of the major foundations of the denial of the Exodus is, that if 600,000 men (+women and children = 2,000,000 ?) left Egypt they must have had to have left a "footprint" in the Sinai, and there are no artifacts that have been found. Never mind that an argument from silence is no argument, there is a bigger problem with this reasoning.

Notice the contradiction, they deny the Exodus but yet accept the factuality of the biblical numbers of 600,000 men. I have long ago come to the realization that people who are a lot smarter than me do not see the simple things that are before them.

Even, Umberto Cassuto (an Orthodox Jew and great Ugaritic scholar and professor of Bible at Hebrew U., who by the way rejected the Documentary Hypothesis which most of us accept) understood that biblical numbers cannot (at least in the earliest books) be taken literally, and may have some symbolic meaning that eludes us today. He understood genealogical lists were much more important in their time than they are for us today, while today we give greater credence to numbers than they did. So, Cassuto reasons, if there are four generations from Jacob (Levi-Kehat-Amram) to Aaron, the stay in Egypt could not have been 400 years. The numbers (400) have some elusive symbolic meaning, he reasoned, and the stay in Egypt (4 generations) was about 100 years or so. So the number of those who left Egypt would total what 4 generations after the 70 who went down to Egypt with Jacob would grow to. A few hundred to a few thousand, and therefore NO footprint.

2. The deniers claim that there are no external, non biblical evidences of an Exodus. This is also false. The Merneptah Stele which dates from around 1215 BCE mentions "Israel" as a people who are not settled on a land. Merneptah's father Ramses II ruled for around 67 years, and was so powerful that it is unlikely that even a small group could have left Egypt with impunity. Yet his son Merneptah began to rule when he was in his 60's. He must have been regarded as weaker than his father because during his short reign all hell broke loose against Egypt. The Libyans attacked from the west. The Sea Peoples attacked from the north. And the city-states of Canaan and that region to the east rebelled against Egypt. It seems that Ramses II left his son an Egypt that was stronger than those around her realized, at least Merneptah claims that he was able to suppress all those uprisings. If there was a time when a small group of Israelites could flee Egypt then, one possibility is, it could have been during the turmoil of all these serious threats and the resulting confusion.

In addition there are Hittite laws about merchants from Ugarit. The Anastasi Papyri, from the time of Merneptah, show that in times of famine the Egyptians allowed Bedouin tribes and their sheep to enter the Goshen area of Egypt, and gives us the route that runaway Egyptian "slaves" usually took (between Migdol and the Mediterranean Sea.)

3. All this evidence, and others, do not either prove or disprove the biblical accounts. But they can help us suggest whether these events were possible, and at best suggest whether they were probable.

Kings of Controversy **NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC DEC. 2010**

Was the Kingdom of David and Solomon a glorious empire—or just a little cow town? It depends on which archaeologist you ask.

By Robert Draper

The woman sitting on a bench in the Old City of Jerusalem, round-faced and bundled up against the autumn chill, chews on an apple while studying the building that has brought her both fame and aggravation. It doesn't really look like a building—just some low stone walls abutting an ancient terraced retaining wall 60 feet high. But because the woman is an archaeologist, and because this is her discovery, her eyes see what others might not. She sees the building's position, on a northern escarpment of the ancient city overlooking Jerusalem's Kidron Valley, and she imagines an ideal perch from which to survey a kingdom. She imagines the Phoenician carpenters and stonemasons who erected it in the tenth century B.C. She imagines as well the Babylonians who destroyed it four centuries later. Most of all, she imagines the man she believes commissioned and occupied the building. His name was David. This, she has declared to the world, is most likely the building described in the Second Book of Samuel: "King Hiram of Tyre sent...carpenters and masons, and they built a house for David. And David realized that the Lord had established him as king over Israel, and that He had exalted his kingdom for the sake of His people Israel."

The woman's name is Eilat Mazar. Munching and gazing, she is the picture of equanimity—until a tour guide shows up. He's a young Israeli man accompanied by a half dozen tourists who assemble in front of the bench so they can view the building. The moment he opens his mouth, Mazar knows what's coming. The tour guide is a former archaeology student of hers. She's heard how

he brings tourists to this spot and informs them that this is NOT the palace of David and that all the archaeological work at the City of David is a way for right-wing Israelis to expand the country's territorial claims and displace Palestinians.

Mazar jumps up from the bench and marches over to the tour guide. She chews him out in a staccato of Hebrew, while he stares passively at her. The gaping tourists watch her stalk off.

"You really need to be strong," she mutters as she walks. "It's like everyone wants to destroy what you do." And then, more plaintively: "Why? What did we do wrong?"

The archaeologist gets into her car. She looks stricken. "I feel like I'm really getting sick from stress," she says. "I've lost years from my life."

In no other part of the world does archaeology so closely resemble a contact sport. Eilat Mazar is one of the reasons why. Her announcement in 2005 that she believed she had unearthed the palace of King David amounted to a ringing defense of an old-school proposition under assault for more than a quarter century—namely, that the Bible's depiction of the empire established under David and continued by his son Solomon is historically accurate. Mazar's claim has emboldened those Christians and Jews throughout the world who maintain that the Old Testament can and should be taken literally. Her purported discovery carries particular resonance in Israel, where the story of David and Solomon is interwoven with the Jews' historical claims to biblical Zion.

That narrative is familiar to any student of the Bible. A young shepherd named David from the tribe of Judah slays the giant Goliath from the enemy tribe of the Philistines, is elevated to king of Judah following the death of Saul at the close of the 11th century B.C., conquers Jerusalem, unites the people of Judah with the disparate Israelite tribes to the north, and thereupon amasses a royal dynasty that continues with Solomon well into the tenth century B.C. But while the Bible says David and Solomon built the kingdom of Israel into a powerful and prestigious empire stretching from the Mediterranean to the Jordan River, from Damascus to the Negev, there's a slight problem—namely, that despite decades of searching, archaeologists had found no solid evidence that David or Solomon ever built anything.

Then Mazar sounded her trumpet. "She knew what she was doing," says fellow Israeli archaeologist David Ilan of Hebrew Union College. "She waded into the fray purposefully, wanting to make a statement."

Ilan himself doubts that Mazar has found King David's palace. "My gut tells me this is an eighth- or ninth-century building," he says, constructed a hundred years or more after Solomon died in 930 B.C. More broadly, critics question Mazar's motives. They note that her excavation work was underwritten by two organizations—the City of David Foundation and the Shalem Center—dedicated to the assertion of Israel's territorial rights. And they scoff at Mazar's allegiance to the antiquated methods of her archaeological forebears, such as her grandfather, who unapologetically worked with a trowel in one hand and the Bible in the other.

The once common practice of using the Bible as an archaeological guide has been widely contested as an unscientific case of circular reasoning—and with particular relish by Tel Aviv University's contrarian-in-residence Israel Finkelstein, who has made a career out of merrily demolishing such assumptions. He and other proponents of "low chronology" say that the weight of archaeological evidence in and around Israel suggests that the dates posited by biblical scholars are a century off. The "Solomonic" buildings excavated by biblical archaeologists over the past several decades at Hazor, Gezer, and Megiddo were not constructed in David and Solomon's time, he says, and so must have been built by kings of the ninth-century B.C.'s Omride dynasty, well after David and Solomon's reign.

During David's time, as Finkelstein casts it, Jerusalem was little more than a "hill-country village," David himself a raggedy upstart akin to Pancho Villa, and his legion of followers more like "500 people with sticks in their hands shouting and cursing and spitting—not the stuff of great armies of chariots described in the text.

"Of *course* we're not looking at the palace of David!" Finkelstein roars at the very mention of Mazar's discovery. "I mean, come on. I respect her efforts. I like her—very nice lady. But this interpretation is—how to say it?—a bit naive."

Now it is Finkelstein's theory that is under siege. On the heels of Mazar's claim to have discovered King David's palace, two other archaeologists have unveiled remarkable finds. Twenty miles southwest of Jerusalem in the Elah Valley—the very spot where the Bible says the young shepherd David slew Goliath—Hebrew University professor Yosef Garfinkel claims to have unearthed the first corner of a Judaean city dating to the exact time that David reigned. Meanwhile, 30 miles south of the Dead Sea in Jordan, a University of California, San Diego professor named Thomas Levy has spent the past eight years excavating a vast copper-smelting operation at Khirbat en Nahas. Levy dates one of the biggest periods of copper production at the site to the tenth century B.C.—which, according to the biblical narrative, is when David's antagonists the Edomites dwelled in this region. (However, scholars like Finkelstein maintain that Edom did not emerge until two centuries later.) The very existence of a large mining and smelting operation fully two centuries before Finkelstein's camp maintains the Edomites emerged would imply complex economic activity at the exact

time that David and Solomon reigned. "It's *possible* that this belonged to David and Solomon," Levy says of his discovery. "I mean, the scale of metal production here is that of an ancient state or kingdom."

Levy and Garfinkel—both of whom have been awarded grants by the National Geographic Society—support their contentions with a host of scientific data, including pottery remnants and radiocarbon dating of olive and date pits found at the sites. If the evidence from their ongoing excavations holds up, yesteryear's scholars who touted the Bible as a factually accurate account of the David and Solomon story may be vindicated.

As Eilat Mazar says with palpable satisfaction, "This is the end of Finkelstein's school."

A busy highway, Route 38, crosses the ancient road that follows the Elah Valley en route to the Mediterranean Sea. Beneath the hills on either side of the road lie the ruins of Socoh and Azekah. According to the Bible, the Philistines encamped in this valley, between the two towns, just before their fateful encounter with David.

The battlefield of legend is now quiet and abounds with wheat, barley, almond trees, and grapevines, not to mention a few of the indigenous terebinth (*elah* in Hebrew) trees from which the valley derives its name. A small bridge extends from Route 38 over the Brook of Elah. During high season, tourist buses park here so that their passengers can climb down into the valley and retrieve a rock to take back home and impress friends with a stone from the same place as the one that killed Goliath.

"Maybe Goliath never existed," says Garfinkel as he drives across the bridge and up to his site, Khirbet Qeiyafa. "The story is that Goliath came from a giant city, and in the telling of it over the centuries, he became a giant himself. It's a metaphor. Modern scholars want the Bible to be like the *Oxford Encyclopedia.* People didn't write history 3,000 years ago like this. In the evening by the fire, this is where stories like David and Goliath started."

Beneath Garfinkel's bald, scholarly exterior and gentle sense of humor—which reveals a jagged edge when the subject is Israel Finkelstein—lurks a man of unmistakable ambition. He first learned from an Israeli Antiquities Authority ranger about a nine-foot-high megalithic wall looming over the Brook of Elah. He began digging in earnest in 2008.

The wall, Garfinkel discovered, was of the same variety seen in the northern cities of Hazor and Gezer—a casemate of two walls with a chamber in between—and it encircled a fortified city of about six acres. Private houses abutted the city wall, an arrangement not seen in Philistine society. After shoveling out the topsoil, Garfinkel uncovered coins and other artifacts from the time of Alexander the Great. Beneath that Hellenistic layer he found buildings scattered with four olive pits, which carbon-14 analysis dated to around 1000 B.C. He also found an ancient tray for baking pita bread, along with hundreds of bones from cattle, goats, sheep, and fish—but no pig bones. In other words, Judaeans, rather than Philistines, must have lived (or at least dined) here. Because Garfinkel's excavation team also uncovered a very rare find—a clay pottery sherd with writing that appears to be a proto-Canaanite script with verbs characteristic of Hebrew—the conclusion to him seemed obvious: Here was a tenth-century B.C. complex Judaean society of the sort that low chronologists like Finkelstein claimed did not exist.

And what was its name? Garfinkel found his answer upon discovering that the fortified city had not one but two gates—the only such site found thus far in the kingdoms of Judah and Israel. "Two gates" translates into Hebrew as *shaarayim,* a city mentioned three times in the Bible. One of those references (I Samuel 17:52) describes the Philistines fleeing David back to Gath via the "road from Shaaraim."

"You have David and Goliath, and you have our site, and it fits," says Garfinkel simply. "It's typical Judaea, from the animal bones to the city wall. Give us two arguments why this is Philistine. One argument is because Finkelstein doesn't want us to destroy low chronology. OK, so give us a second reason."

Here would be a second reason to be skeptical of Yossi Garfinkel's conclusions: He announced them, swiftly and dramatically, despite the fact that he had only four olive pits on which to base his dating, a single inscription of a highly ambiguous nature, and a mere 5 percent of his site excavated. In other words, says archaeologist David Ilan, "Yossi has an agenda—partly ideological, but also personal. He's a very smart and ambitious guy. Finkelstein's the big gorilla, and the young bucks think he's got a monopoly over biblical archaeology. So they want to dethrone him."

Better still, from the perspective of other interested parties: Once Finkelstein retreats from the throne, King David returns to it.

He has persisted for three millennia—an omnipresence in art, folklore, churches, and census rolls. To Muslims, he is Daoud, the venerated emperor and servant of Allah. To Christians, he is the natural and spiritual ancestor of Jesus, who thereby inherits David's messianic mantle. To the Jews, he is the father of Israel—the shepherd king anointed by God—and they in turn are his descendants and God's Chosen People. That he might be something lesser, or a myth altogether, is to many unthinkable.

"Our claim to being one of the senior nations in the world, to being a real player in civilization's realm of ideas, is that we wrote this book of books, the Bible," says Daniel Polisar, president of the Shalem Center, the Israeli research institute that helped fund Eilat

Mazar's excavation work. "You take David and his kingdom out of the book, and you have a different book. The narrative is no longer a historical work, but a work of fiction. And then the rest of the Bible is just a propagandistic effort to create something that never was. And if you can't find the evidence for it, then it probably didn't happen. That's why the stakes are so high."

The books of the Old Testament outlining the story of David and Solomon consist of scriptures probably written at least 300 years after the fact, by not-so-objective authors. No contemporaneous texts exist to validate their claims. Since the dawn of biblical archaeology, scholars have sought in vain to verify that there really was an Abraham, a Moses, an Exodus, a conquest of Jericho. At the same time, says Amihai Mazar, Eilat's cousin and among Israel's most highly regarded archaeologists, "Almost everyone agrees that the Bible is an ancient text relating to the history of this country during the Iron Age. You can look at it critically, as many scholars do. But you can't ignore the text—you must relate to it."

But, adds Mazar, "you shouldn't seek to prove the text verbatim." And yet multitudes of archaeologists have made that very goal their life's work, beginning with the American scholar and godfather of biblical archaeology William Albright. Among Albright's protégés was the Israeli military titan, politician, and scholar Yigael Yadin. For Yadin and his contemporaries, the Bible was unassailable. As a result, when he uncovered the city gates at the biblical city of Hazor in the late 1950s, Yadin committed what would be a current-day archaeological no-no: Since carbon dating wasn't available, he used the Bible, along with the stratigraphy, to date the pottery found inside the gates. He attributed the gates to the exalted tenth-century B.C. empire of Solomon—because the First Book of Kings said so.

The problem with relying on this particular chapter of the Bible is that it was added long after Solomon died in 930 B.C., when Israel had split into two parts—Judah in the south and Israel in the north. "Gezer was the most southerly city in the northern kingdom of Israel, while Hazor was in the most northern realm, and Megiddo was an economic hub in the center," says Tel Aviv University archaeologist Norma Franklin. "So it would be important to the people writing this story to lay claim to all of this territory. To Yadin, the Bible said so and that was it. Three gates—they all have to be Solomon's."

Today, many scholars (including Franklin and her colleague Finkelstein) doubt that all three gates are Solomonic, while others (Amihai Mazar, for example) think they could be. But all of them reject Yadin's circular reasoning, which in the early 1980s helped spawn a backlash movement of "biblical minimalism," led by scholars at the University of Copenhagen. To the minimalists, David and Solomon were simply fictitious characters. The credibility of that position was undercut in 1993, when an excavation team in the northern Israel site of Tel Dan dug up a black basalt stela inscribed with the phrase "House of David." Solomon's existence, however, remains wholly unverified.

Absent more evidence, we're left with the decidedly drab tenth-century B.C. biblical world that Finkelstein first proposed in a 1996 paper—not a single great kingdom replete with monumental buildings but instead a scruffy landscape of disparate, slowly gelling powers: the Philistines to the south, Moabites to the east, Israelites to the north, Aramaeans farther north, and yes, perhaps, a Judaean insurgency led by a young shepherd in not-so-dazzling Jerusalem. Such an interpretation galls Israelis who regard David's capital as their bedrock. Many of the excavations undertaken in Jerusalem are financially backed by the City of David Foundation, whose director of international development, Doron Spielman, freely admits, "When we raise money for a dig, what inspires us is to uncover the Bible—and that's indelibly linked with sovereignty in Israel."

Unsurprisingly, this agenda does not sit well with the Jerusalem residents who happen to be Palestinian. Many excavations take place in the eastern part of the city, where their families have dwelled for generations but stand to be displaced if such projects morph into Israeli settlement claims. From the Palestinian perspective, the scurrying for archaeological evidence to justify a people's sense of belonging misses the point. As East Jerusalem resident and archaeology professor Hani Nur el-Din says, "When I see Palestinian women making the traditional pottery from the early Bronze Age, when I smell the *taboon* bread baked in the same tradition as the fourth or fifth millennium B.C., this is the cultural DNA. In Palestine there's no written document, no historicity—but still, it's history."

Most Israeli archaeologists would prefer that their work not be used as a political wedge. This, nonetheless, is the way of young nations. As Bar-Ilan University archaeology professor Avraham Faust observes, "The Norwegians relied on Viking sites to create a separate identity from their Swedish and Danish rulers. Zimbabwe is named after an archaeological site. Archaeology is a very convenient tool for creating national identities."

That is one way in which Israel differs from other countries. Its national identity came well before any digging. What's dug up can only confirm that identity... or not.

"This place was hell," says Tom Levy cheerfully as he stands over an open pit filled with ancient coal-black slag. Sprawling around him and his volunteer undergraduates from the University of California, San Diego is a 25-acre copper production site—and adjacent to it, a large fortress complex that includes the ruins of 3,000-year-old guardhouses. Apparently the sentinels lived practically on top of the smelting operations, while overseeing a presumably reluctant labor force. "When you have industrial production of this scale, you have to have a procurement system for food and water," Levy continues. "I can't prove it, but I think that

the only people that are going to be working in this rather miserable environment are either slaves—or undergrads. The point is, simple tribal societies couldn't do something like this."

Levy, an anthropologist, first came to southern Jordan in 1997 to examine metallurgy's role in social evolution. The lowland district of Faynan, where the blue-green glitter of malachite can be seen from a distance, was an obvious place to study. It also happened to be where the American rabbi and archaeologist Nelson Glueck unabashedly proclaimed in 1940 that he had discovered the Edomite mines controlled by King Solomon. Subsequent British excavators believed they had found evidence that Glueck was off by some three centuries and that Edom actually dated to the seventh century B.C. But when Levy started probing the site known as Khirbat en Nahas (Arabic for "ruins of copper"), the samples he sent off to Oxford for radiocarbon dating confirmed that Glueck had been on the right track: This was a tenth-century copper-production site—and, Levy adds pointedly, "the closest copper source to Jerusalem."

The team headed by Levy and his Jordanian colleague Mohammad Najjar has uncovered a four-chambered gate similar to ones found at sites in Israel that might date to the tenth-century B.C. A few miles from the mines, they've excavated a cemetery of more than 3,500 tombs dating to the same period—perhaps filled with the remains of Iron Age mountain nomads known from ancient Egyptian sources as Shasu, who Levy thinks may have been "corralled at certain points in time and forced to work in the mines." Most work in the mines appears to have ceased by the end of the ninth century—and the so-called "disruption layer" uncovered by Levy's students may explain why.

They found in this layer 22 date pits, which they dated to the tenth century B.C., along with Egyptian artifacts such as a lion-headed amulet and a scarab, both from the time of the pharaoh Shoshenq I. That ruler's invasion of the region shortly after Solomon's death is chronicled in the Old Testament and at the Temple of Amun at Karnak. "I definitely believe that Shoshenq disrupted metal production here at the end of the tenth century," says Levy. "The Egyptians in the Third Intermediate Period weren't strong enough to field an occupying force, which is why you don't see Egyptian bread molds and other material culture here. But they could organize some pretty big military campaigns—strong enough to upset these petty kingdoms, to make sure they wouldn't be a threat to them. That's what I think Shoshenq did here."

The "hell" that Levy has unearthed at Khirbat en Nahas could prove to be hell for the Finkelstein school of low chronology. Levy's copper mines may not be as sexy as King David's palace or the perch overlooking the battle of David and Goliath. But Levy's excavation work spans more time and area than those of Eilat Mazar and Yosef Garfinkel, with far more extensive use of radiocarbon analysis to determine the age of his site's stratigraphic layers. "All scholars dealing with Edom in the last two generations claimed that Edom didn't exist as a state before the eighth century B.C.," says Amihai Mazar. "But Levy's radiocarbon dates have their own story, and that story is related to the tenth to ninth century B.C., and no one can claim that they're incorrect."

In fact, that is precisely what Levy's critics are doing. Some deemed his first 46 datings insufficient to justify reordering an entire chronology for Edom. For his second round of C-14 analysis, Levy doubled the number of samples and meticulously selected charcoal from shrubs with verifiable outer growth rings.

Despite the high cost of C-14 analysis—more than $500 for a single olive pit—the technique isn't a silver bullet. "Carbon-14 doesn't help you solve all this controversy," says Eilat Mazar. "You have the plus or minus"—a margin of error of about 40 years. "You have different laboratories bringing different interpretations. You have debates about the whole C-14 issue." Indeed, Finkelstein and Amihai Mazar have been locked in an ongoing tussle over the dating of a single stratum at Tel Rehov, a Bronze and Iron Age city just west of the Jordan River. Mazar contends that the stratum could be Solomonic. Finkelstein says it's from the later Omride dynasty, named for Omri, Ahab's father. The gap between the two eras is about 40 years.

"Many of the radiocarbon dates for this period cover exactly the range that's under debate," Amihai Mazar says, chuckling wearily. "Not before and not after. It's been this way for 15 years."

"You can find evidence in radiocarbon for David being a villager in Norway in the sixth century A.D.!" declares Israel Finkelstein—exaggerating to make a point, as he is prone to doing. "But look, I enjoy reading everything Tom writes about Khirbat en Nahas. It has brought all sorts of ideas to me. I myself would never dig in such a place—too hot! For me, archaeology is about having a good time. You should come to Megiddo—we live in an air-conditioned B&B next to a nice swimming pool."

This is how Finkelstein begins his rebuttals, with amiable preambles that cannot conceal the Mephisto-like gleam in his eyes. For a scholar, the Tel Aviv archaeologist has a highly visceral manner—leaning his tall, bearded frame into a visitor's face, waving his large hands, modulating his baritone with Shakespearean agility.

Yet his charm wears thin for those who have felt the sting of his attacks. "If you want to attract attention, you behave like Finkelstein," says Eilat Mazar. Similarly unamused is Yosef Garfinkel, who says of Finkelstein's recent receipt of a four-million-dollar research grant, "He doesn't even use science—that's the irony. It's like giving Saddam Hussein the Nobel Peace Prize."

Still, Finkelstein's theories strike an intellectually appealing middle ground between biblical literalists and minimalists. "Think of the Bible the way you would a stratified archaeological site," he says. "Some of it was written in the eighth century B.C., some the seventh, and then going all the way to the second B.C. So 600 years of compilation. This doesn't mean that the story doesn't come from antiquity. But the reality presented in the story is a later reality. David, for example, is a historical figure. He did live in the tenth century B.C. I accept the descriptions of David as some sort of leader of an upheaval group, troublemakers who lived on the margins of society. But not the golden city of Jerusalem, not the description of a great empire in the time of Solomon. When the authors of the text describe that, they have in their eyes the reality of their own time, the Assyrian Empire.

"Now, Solomon," he continues with a sigh. "I think I destroyed Solomon, so to speak. Sorry for that! But take Solomon, dissect it. Take the great visit of the Queen of Sheba—an Arabian queen coming to visit, bringing all sorts of exotic commodities to Jerusalem. This is a story which is an impossibility to think about before 732 B.C., before the beginning of Arabian trade under Assyrian domination. Take the story of Solomon as the great, you know, trainer in horses and chariots and big armies and so on. The world behind Solomon is the world of the Assyrian century."

Of Levy's mining fortress, Finkelstein says, "I don't buy that it's from the tenth century B.C. There's no way people lived on this site during production. The fire, the toxic fumes—forget it! Instead, look at the fortress of En Hazeva on our side of the Jordan River, built by the Assyrians on the main road to Edom. I see Tom's building as an eighth-century Assyrian fortress parallel to the other one. And look, at the end of the day, his is a marginal site. It's not a stratified city with many eras, like Megiddo and Tel Rehov. Taking a pile of slag and making it the center of the discussion of biblical history—forget it, no way, I reject this absolutely!"

With greater venom, Finkelstein mocks Garfinkel's discoveries at Khirbet Qeiyafa: "Look, you'll never catch me saying, 'I've found one olive pit at a stratum in Megiddo, and this olive pit—which goes against hundreds of carbon-14 determinations—is going to decide the fate of Western civilization.'" He snickers. The lack of pig bones, suggesting it is a Judaean site? "A gun, but not a smoking gun." The rare inscription found at the site? Probably from Philistine Gath rather than the kingdom of Judah.

The irony is that biblical archaeology's enfant terrible has become the establishment, a Goliath fending off upstart assaults on his chronological order. The proposition that a complex tenth-century B.C. society may have existed on either side of the Jordan River has thrown Finkelstein's vision of the David and Solomon era squarely on the defensive. His many rebuttal papers and his sarcastic tone reflect that defensiveness, and his arguments at times seem a bit desperate. (The notion of living in a fortress next to a copper-smelting site would not seem ludicrous to West Virginia coal miners or residents near Three Mile Island, for example.)

Still, even if Garfinkel can prove that the Judah tribe that begat David dwelled in the fortress of Shaaraim, and Eilat Mazar can document that King David commissioned a palace in Jerusalem, and Tom Levy can successfully demonstrate that King Solomon oversaw copper mines in Edom, this does not a glorious biblical dynasty make. How much digging before the argument is settled?

Many archaeologists question whether the obsessive scramble to prove the biblical narrative is a healthy enterprise. One of them, Tel Aviv University's Raphael Greenberg, flatly states, "It's bad for archaeology. What we're supposed to contribute is a point of view that isn't available from texts or preconceived notions of history—an alternative vision of the past: relations between rich and poor, between men and women. Something richer, in other words, than just validating the Bible."

But does David, with all of his metaphorical power, cease to matter if his deeds and his empire are ultimately viewed as works of fiction? When I point out to Finkelstein that people all over the world are invested in the greatness of David, I am surprised by his response. "Look, when I'm doing research, I *have* to distinguish between the culture of David and the historical David. David is extremely important for my cultural identity. In the same way, I can celebrate the Exodus without seeing it as a purely historic event. David for me is the David reflected in the later king Hezekiah, the David reflected in the later king Josiah, the David of Zacharias in the eschatological prophesies in which Jerusalem is burned but David is alive, the David who is the connection with the beginning of Christianity. In this sense, David is *everything.* If you want me to say it simplistically, I'm proud that this nobody from nowhere became the center of Western tradition.

"So for me," says Finkelstein, David's dethroner, "David is not a plaque on the wall, not even merely a leader of a tenth-century band. No. Much more than that."

Seder Resource—The Four Questions of Social Justice

Introduction

Every year in this season, the Jewish community recalls and relives our master story of the Exodus from Egypt. We return to this tale year after year, each time rediscovering its radical assertions that oppression can and must end, and that humanity and the world can be redeemed. The Exodus story contains the Jewish vision of how a just world might look.

Yet the Exodus narrative is far more than a story, or the basis for a family dinner in the spring. Rather, the Exodus reflects a powerful ambition for a political order, and it can, and has been, an influential force for shaping the world. To read the story of the Exodus in this way is to understand that the Jewish textual tradition is not now, nor was it ever, concerned *exclusively* with ritual observance or devotional prayer. Judaism has a vision of earthly justice that demands liberation from oppression, a covenantal community and an unending aspiration for a tomorrow that is better and more just than today. To engage with Judaism at that level is to engage with its fundamental building blocks.

How to use This Resource

The Four Questions of Social Justice is based on *From Liberation to Freedom*, a Passover resource jointly produced by American Jewish World Service and AVODAH: the Jewish Service Corps. These four important questions, which also serve as the basis for *From Liberation to Freedom*, ask *seder* participants to reflect on themes of Jewish life and social justice that are raised by the Exodus story. The questions are inspired by Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution*, which provides a descriptive analysis of the historical uses of the Exodus as a model for social change. Based on Walzer's analysis these questions ask how the Exodus narrative can serve as a paradigm and a prescriptive tool for inspiring social responsibility and Jewish global citizenship in our time. These questions may be used to generate an evolving conversation that progresses as the *seder* unfolds, or as stand-alone discussion topics.

Each question is presented along with the following components:

- Suggested *Time in the Seder* to introduce the question
- *Texts* to read out loud as a group or for study in *chavruta* (paired learning) or small groups
- *Discussion Questions* to support *seder* participants in thinking critically about the sources

The four questions are:

- Why do free people avoid responsibility?
- Do we achieve justice through reform or revolution?
- What does our covenant with God entail?
- How do we sustain commitment for the long haul?

Question 1: Why do free people avoid responsibility?

Time in Seder: **ורחץ** / *Urchatz* (Handwashing)
At this point in the *seder*, we wash our hands. In the context of social justice, Egypt can represent the desire to escape responsibility for our actions. It is literally washing our hands of responsibility and allowing the powerful oppressor to bear responsibility for our own inaction. When do we choose to take responsibility and when do we hide behind a powerful "Egypt," to avoid it?

Texts

1. Exodus 16:3

The Israelites said (to Moses and Aaron): If only we had died by the hand of Adonai in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole congregation to death.

שמות פרק טז:ג

וַיֹּ֤אמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם֙ בְּנֵ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל מִ֚י יִתֵּ֣ן מוּתֵ֔נוּ בְּיַ֥ד ה' בְּאֶ֖רֶץ מִצְרַ֑יִם בְּשִׁבְתֵּ֨נוּ עַל סִ֤יר הַבָּשָׂר֙ בְּאָכְלֵ֣נוּ לֶ֔חֶם לִשְׂבֹּ֖עַ כִּ֣י הוֹצֵאתֶ֗ם אֹתָ֛נוּ אֶל הַמִּדְבָּ֥ר הַזֶּ֖ה לְהָמִ֥ית אֶת כָּל הַקָּהָ֖ל הַזֶּ֥ה בָּרָעָֽב׃

2. Erich Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, p. 5
Is there not also, perhaps, besides an innate desire for freedom, an instinctive wish for submission? If there is not, how can we account for the attraction which submission to a leader has for so many today? Is submission always to an overt authority, or is there also submission to internalized authorities, such as duty or conscience, to inner compulsions or to anonymous authorities like public opinion? Is there a hidden satisfaction in submitting, and what is its essence?

Discussion Questions

1. What did the Israelites claim to miss about Egypt? What other longings might have been below the surface?
2. Fromm suggests that in addition to desiring to be free, it is human nature to desire someone or something to which we can submit—and therefore avoid taking responsibility for our actions. Share a personal story that illustrates, or refutes, Fromm's idea about submission.
3. When you choose whether or not to pursue justice, do you make this choice out of a sense of freedom or obligation? How does that change your understanding of pursuing justice?

Question 2: Do we achieve justice through reform or revolution?

Time in Seder: יחץ / *Yachatz* (Breaking the *Matzah*)
One tradition suggests that in breaking the middle *matzah*, we acknowledge that the world is broken and is in need of repair. However, while many people recognize the brokenness of the world, there is great disagreement about how to repair it. Will we achieve change and justice through reform or revolution?

Texts

1. Exodus 32:26-28

Moses stood up in the gate of the camp and said, "Whoever is for Adonai, come here!" And all the Levites rallied to him. He said to them, "Thus says Adonai, the God of Israel, 'Each of you put sword on thigh, go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay brother, neighbor and kin.'" The Levites did as Moses had bidden; and some three thousand of the people fell that day.

שמות לב:כו-כח

וַיַּעֲמֹד מֹשֶׁה בְּשַׁעַר הַמַּחֲנֶה וַיֹּאמֶר מִי לַה' אֵלָי
וַיֵּאָסְפוּ אֵלָיו כָּל בְּנֵי לֵוִי: וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם כֹּה אָמַר ה'
אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׂימוּ אִישׁ חַרְבּוֹ עַל יְרֵכוֹ עִבְרוּ
וָשׁוּבוּ מִשַּׁעַר לְשַׁעַר בַּמַּחֲנֶה וְהִרְגוּ אִישׁ אֶת אָחִיו
וְאִישׁ אֶת רֵעֵהוּ וְאִישׁ אֶת קָרֹבוֹ: וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בְּנֵי לֵוִי
כִּדְבַר מֹשֶׁה וַיִּפֹּל מִן הָעָם בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא כִּשְׁלֹשֶׁת
אַלְפֵי אִישׁ:

2. Exodus 18:20

And enjoin upon them the laws and the teachings, and make known to them the way they are to go and the practices they are to follow.

שמות יח:כ

וְהִזְהַרְתָּה אֹתָם אֶת הַחֻקִּים וְאֶת הַתּוֹרֹת וְהוֹדַעְתָּ
לָהֶם אֶת הַדֶּרֶךְ יֵלְכוּ בָהּ וְאֶת הַמַּעֲשֶׂה אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשׂוּן:

3. Rabbi Yosef Yosel Hurwitz, *Madreigat Ha-Adam*, "Darkei ha-Teshuvah"

If someone has a *treif* (non-kosher) kitchen and wants to repent and make it *kosher*, he might say, "How can I repent all at once and break all my dishes? It will cost a great deal of money! I'll do it gradually. I'll break one dish, and replace it with a *kosher* one; later I'll replace a second dish, later a third...until it is completed." Such a person would be considered a fool. For as soon as the [first] *kosher* dish mixes with the rest, it is all *treif*. If he wants to repent he must break all the dishes at once.

Discussion Questions

1. In Texts 1 and 2, Moses guides the Israelites through their transition from slavery to freedom in two different ways. In Text 1, he pursues revolution, rallying troops to kill those who worshipped the Golden Calf. In Text 2, he pursues reform, using his skills as an educator to convince the Israelites to follow God. Which approach do you think was more successful? Was there a benefit to using a combination of these methods?
2. According to Rabbi Hurwitz, one can only truly pursue a new way of life by smashing the old system or by totally separating from it. What can we learn about pursuing social change from Rabbi Hurwitz?
3. Are you more of a reformer or a revolutionary? Share a personal story that reflects this orientation.
4. On Passover, we are mindful of the liberation we have experienced and the one we need to create. Which methods do you think the world most needs today to bring about justice?

Question 3: What does our covenant with God entail?

Time in Seder: **מגיד** / *Magid* (Telling the Story of the Exodus)
Early in the *Magid* section, before we continue with the four children, we take a moment to thank God for giving us the Torah. By accepting the Torah, what obligations do we take upon ourselves?

Texts

1. Exodus 19:3-8

And Moses went up to God. Adonai called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel: 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel." Moses came and summoned the elders of he people and put before them all that Adonai had commanded him. All the people answered as one, saying, "All that Adonai has spoken we will do!" And Moses brought back the people's words to Adonai.

שמות יט:ג-ח

וּמֹשֶׁה עָלָה אֶל הָאֱלֹהִים וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו ה' מִן הָהָר
לֵאמֹר כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבֵית יַעֲקֹב וְתַגֵּיד לִבְנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל: אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְמִצְרָיִם
וָאֶשָּׂא אֶתְכֶם עַל כַּנְפֵי נְשָׁרִים וָאָבִא אֶתְכֶם אֵלָי:
וְעַתָּה אִם שָׁמוֹעַ תִּשְׁמְעוּ בְקֹלִי וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת
בְּרִיתִי וִהְיִיתֶם לִי סְגֻלָּה מִכָּל הָעַמִּים כִּי לִי כָּל
הָאָרֶץ: וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מַמְלֶכֶת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קָדוֹשׁ
אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר תְּדַבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: וַיָּבֹא
מֹשֶׁה וַיִּקְרָא לְזִקְנֵי הָעָם וַיָּשֶׂם לִפְנֵיהֶם אֵת כָּל
הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר צִוָּהוּ ה': וַיַּעֲנוּ כָל הָעָם
יַחְדָּו וַיֹּאמְרוּ כֹּל אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' נַעֲשֶׂה וַיָּשֶׁב
מֹשֶׁה אֶת דִּבְרֵי הָעָם אֶל ה':

2. "Duty to Assist" law from the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms (Part I, Chapter 1:2)
Every human being whose life is in peril has a right to assistance…Every person must come to the aid of anyone whose life is in peril, either personally or calling for aid, by giving him the necessary and immediate physical assistance, unless it involves danger to himself or a third person, or he has another valid reason.

3. Seinfeld: The Finale, Part II
Chiles: It is a travesty of justice that these four people have been incarcerated … You know what these four people were? They were innocent bystanders. Now, you just think about that term. Innocent. Bystanders. Because that's exactly what they were. We know they were bystanders, nobody's disputing that. So how can a bystander be guilty? No such thing.

Discussion Questions

1. In Text 1, the Israelites enter into a covenant with God. What are the parameters of this covenant? Is the Israelites' commitment passive or active?
2. Texts 2 and 3 are two perspectives on the extent to which people are obligated to one another. Where on the spectrum are you? What factors have influenced your thinking on this issue?
3. Whom do you feel obligated to help and how much help do you feel obligated to give?

Question 4: How do we sustain commitment for the long haul?

Time in Seder: **נִרְצָה** / *Nirtzah* (Conclusion of the *Seder*)
We end the *seder* with the words "Next year in Jerusalem," hoping that next year, redemption will come, the world will become just and we will all celebrate Passover together in the Land of Israel. Despite this, we are fairly certain that we will still be sitting around a *seder* table next year in a world still unredeemed. How, then, do we keep striving to create a better world, without becoming discouraged?

Texts

1. Deuteronomy 34:7-8

Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died; his eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated. And the Israelites bewailed Moses in the steppes of Moab for thirty days.

דברים לד:ז-ח

וּמֹשֶׁה בֶּן מֵאָה וְעֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה בְּמֹתוֹ לֹא כָהֲתָה עֵינוֹ וְלֹא נָס לֵחֹה: וַיִּבְכּוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת מֹשֶׁה בְּעַרְבֹת מוֹאָב שְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם וַיִּתְּמוּ יְמֵי בְכִי אֵבֶל מֹשֶׁה:

2. Hosea 4:1-2

Hear the word of Adonai, O people of Israel! For Adonai has a case against the inhabitants of this land, because there is no honesty and no goodness and no obedience to God in the land. [False] swearing, dishonesty, and murder, and theft and adultery are rife; crime follows upon crime!

הושע ד:א-ב

שִׁמְעוּ דְבַר ה' בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי רִיב לַה' עִם יוֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ כִּי אֵין אֱמֶת וְאֵין חֶסֶד וְאֵין דַּעַת אֱלֹהִים בָּאָרֶץ: אָלֹה וְכַחֵשׁ וְרָצֹחַ וְגָנֹב וְנָאֹף פָּרָצוּ וְדָמִים בְּדָמִים נָגָעוּ:

3. Nicholas Kristof, "Save the Darfur Puppy," *The New York Times*, May 10, 2007

Finally, we're beginning to understand what it would take to galvanize President Bush, other leaders and the American public to respond to the genocide in Sudan: a suffering puppy with big eyes and floppy ears.

That's the implication of a series of studies by psychologists trying to understand why people – good, conscientious people – aren't moved by genocide or famines. Time and again, we've seen that the human conscience just isn't pricked by mass suffering, while an individual child (or puppy) in distress causes our hearts to flutter.

4. Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, p. 149

So pharaonic oppression, deliverance, Sinai, and Canaan are still with us, powerful memories shaping our perceptions of the political world. The "door of hope" is still open; things are not what they might be—even when what they might be isn't totally different from what they are. This is a central theme in Western thought, always present though elaborated in many different ways. We still believe, or many of us do, what the Exodus first taught, or what is has commonly been taken to teach, about the meaning and possibility of politics and about its proper form:

—first, that wherever you live, it is probably Egypt;

—second, that there is a better place, a world more attractive, a promised land;

—and third, that "the way to the land is through the wilderness." There is no way to get from here to there except by joining together and marching.

Discussion Questions

1. In Text 1 we read about Moses's death before the Israelites reached the Promised Land; his fate was to die just before they entered. What meaning, if any, do you derive from the death of the greatest leader of the liberation movement just as they are about to reach their goal? Similarly, what, if any, significance do you derive from the fact that the Five Books of the Torah ends without the Israelites reaching the Promised Land?
2. Text 2 shows the Israelites backsliding. They have reached the Promised Land and yet they have not achieved a just society. Does your conception of liberation work include backsliding and readjustment? How do you keep yourself going in such circumstances?
3. In Text 3 Kristof talks about compassion fatigue. How can we overcome compassion fatigue and other obstacles that stand in the way of our ability to sustain the day-to-day work of justice?
4. According to Walzer in Text 4, the only way to liberate the world and ourselves is by joining together and marching. Who are the people with whom you already march? With whom would it be strategic for you to march in order to hasten a socially just world?

Groom at the inn. Miracles. The ten plagues. Symbolism of the Red Sea. The Song of Moses and Miriam.

The story of the Israelites' struggle for freedom is studded with miracles—the ten plagues that strike Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, the Israelites' safe passage through it, and the drowning of the Egyptian army. But how did it really happen?

No sooner had Moses accepted his mission to speak with the Egyptians on behalf of the Israelites than he was almost killed. He and his family started on the long journey back to Egypt when suddenly, God attacked Moses. It was only the quick thinking of his wife Zipporah that saved him:

> On the way, at a place where they spent the night, the LORD met him [Moses] and tried to kill him. But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched his feet with it, and said, "Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!" So He let him alone. It was then she said a "bridegroom of blood" for circumcision.
>
> Exod. 4:24–26

This attack on Moses seems quite inexplicable. After all, God had just commissioned him to go back to Egypt, and now, without explaining why, the text says that "the LORD met him and tried to kill him." Just as mysterious is Zipporah's response: she hurriedly circumcises her son, then touches "his" (apparently, Moses') feet with the bloody foreskin and declares, "Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!" With that, the attack on Moses ceases.

Considering these facts, ancient interpreters sought to proceed logically. If God had tried to kill Moses but then stopped after this bit of emergency surgery, it must be that it was some failure to circumcise the child earlier that was the reason for the divine attack. In other words, Moses must, for some reason or other, have delayed circumcising one or both of his sons in Midian, and although God had selected him for an important mission, even Moses was not spared the divine wrath for his negligence. Perhaps, then, the point of this brief passage was to teach how important circumcision was: no one was exempt from carrying out this divine commandment:

> Great indeed is [the commandment of] circumcision, for not the slightest delay was granted [even] to the righteous Moses in regard to it.
>
> Mishnah, *Nedarim* 3:11

Such an interpretation seemed not only warranted but appropriate; since Hellenistic times, Jews had in various periods been pressured to neglect the rite of circumcision. It was thus encouraging for religious authorities to find a biblical story that taught that even a slight delay in circumcising would meet with the sternest divine disapproval.

But why should Moses, a paragon of virtue and devotion, have delayed? Here interpreters' attention was directed to the fact that Zipporah's father was a pagan, indeed, a "priest of Midian" (Exod. 2:16). Surely, they reasoned, such a person, a worshiper of many gods, would not have gladly accepted the fact that his daughter was marrying someone who believed in the existence of one God alone—and the God of Israel at that! The father-in-law must therefore have insisted that Moses raise his children to worship his *father-in-law's* gods, bow down to *his* idols—or at least that his first grandchild be so raised:

> At the time that Moses had said to Jethro, "Give me Zipporah your daughter as a wife," Jethro said to him, "Accept this one condition that I will tell you and I will give her to you as a wife." He said: "What is it?" Jethro said to him: "The son that is born to you first will be given over to idolatry [and hence will not be circumcised]; those born thereafter can be given to the worship of [your] God." He accepted this condition . . . For that reason did the angel* seek to kill Moses at the inn, whereupon "Zipporah took a flint and cut the foreskin of her son."
>
> *Mekhilta deR. Ishmael, Jethro; Amalek*

According to this interpretation, it must have been all right for Moses to stick to this agreement while he was still under his father-in-law's watchful eye: he had no choice. But the minute that he and Zipporah were on their way out of Midian, there was no longer any reason for Moses to put off performing the circumcision. Yet apparently he had; he was already "on the way, at a place where they spent the night" (this phrase was actually understood by interpreters, in keeping with a later stage of Hebrew, as "on the way, *at the inn*"). Here thus were Moses and Zipporah, after at least one day of traveling, settling down for the night at some inn—and they still had not bothered to circumcise their one uncircumcised son. No wonder that God became impatient and dispatched his angel! Fortunately, the couple immediately understood what was wrong, and before Moses could be harmed, the circumcision was performed and all was set aright.[1]

* Here, in common with other ancient sources, it is not God who "tried to kill" Moses—since, if He had tried, He surely would have succeeded—but an angel.

"That Was When . . ."

For modern scholars, as usual, this same passage seems to have a rather different interpretation.[2] The key to understanding this episode, according to one theory, lies in the little Hebrew word *'az*. Literally, *'az* means "then," but often it should really be rendered as "that was when." What's the difference? "That was when" more clearly implies that the reader or listener has already heard something of the matter being discussed; the narrative comes to specify when exactly it was that this already-known thing took place or got started.[3] So, for example, Gen. 4:26 mentions the birth of Adam's grandson Enosh, adding that "that was when" humanity first began to be called by this name (*'enosh* is indeed a general term for humanity in biblical Hebrew).[4] Similarly, when a hymn like that of Exodus 15 is introduced (or the Song of the Well in Num. 21:17, or of Moses in Deuteronomy 32), the narrative says "that was when" this well-known song was first sung. So here too, the narrative says, "*That was when* [the expression] 'bridegroom of blood' was first used in connection with circumcision."

Why was it important for ancient Israelites to know the original context of the expression "bridegroom of blood"? The Torah is quite insistent that circumcision is to be performed *on infants,* indeed, on the eighth day after an infant's birth. But this was a specifically Israelite practice; anthropologists know that, in many cultures, circumcision is instead a rite of puberty, performed not long before (sometimes only a month or two) the boy is to be married.[5] Apparently, "bloody bridegroom" was a term in circulation at the time this episode was written—perhaps indeed, the Midianites or even some of Israel's own ancestors performed circumcision as a prenuptial rite[6] and referred to the newly circumcised young man as a "bloody bridegroom."

If so, then this little story is out to deny the potential implications of this expression, "bloody bridegroom." What it seeks to say is that one should *not* understand the use of this term to mean that it is proper to circumcise a boy in anticipation of his marriage (that is, at puberty or thereafter). No, the story contends; this term was originally coined to refer not to the circumcisee but to Moses, Zipporah's bridegroom, when she touched him with the bloody foreskin of their newborn son and so saved his life. (She apparently did so as an apotropaic act, to ward off evil—and it worked!) "*That was when* [the expression] 'bridegroom of blood' was first used in connection with circumcision," the story concludes. So this expression does not mean—and never did!—that future bridegrooms should be circumcised at puberty or a few months before the wedding.

Like so many *schematic narratives,* this one is short and utterly self-contained. Modern scholars believe that it may have circulated independently

for some time. But later, they theorize, an editor or compiler of Moses' life story had to decide where to put it, and this was no easy task. Obviously, it had to take place after Moses was married and had become a father, but not long after (since he has to still be able to be referred to as a "bridegroom")—hence, sometime when he was in Midian, presumably just after his first son is born. The story could thus conceivably have been put right after the mention of Gershom's birth in Exod. 2:22. But that would have located it *before* Moses' long conversation with God at the burning bush, and such a location would have been quite awkward: the whole point of the story of the burning bush is that this is the first time that Moses had actually met the God YHWH, whereas the "bridegroom of blood" story has this same God meeting Moses face-to-face and trying to kill him. Therefore, scholars suppose, the editor in question decided to locate this episode just *after* the burning bush episode, adding, on his own initiative, that the incident occurred at some vague location "on the way, at a place where they spent the night." Inadvertently, however, this placement created a problem for later interpreters: why, if God had recently commissioned Moses to return to Egypt, did He now try to kill him just as he was performing that very task? Moreover (since ancient interpreters were not likely to think of circumcision as an apotropaic act but simply as a divine commandment), why should circumcising the child cause God to cease trying to kill Moses and "let him alone"? These considerations, as we have seen, brought ancient interpreters to an entirely different understanding of the story.

Miracles

Not long ago, I saw a book for sale that purported to tell what it called "the real story of the exodus." Written by an eminent British scientist, it provided logical explanations for the various biblical miracles involved, thus demonstrating, apparently, the veracity of the biblical account. I quote from a summary of the book's main points as listed on its back cover:

- *The Burning Bush:* Caused by a volcanic vent that opened up under the bush.
- *Crossing the Red Sea:* The water was pushed back by a very strong wind blowing all night. This is a known physical phenomenon called wind setdown. The details given in the Bible mean we can pinpoint where the Red Sea crossing occurred.
- *Drowning Pharaoh's Army:* When the very strong wind suddenly stopped blowing, the water rushed back in the form of a rapidly returning "bore" wave, sweeping Pharaoh's army into the sea.
- *Mount Sinai:* The real Mount Sinai is in present-day Arabia, not the Sinai Desert as is generally assumed.[7]

I suppose one ought to be sympathetic to such books, but I confess that whenever I start reading one (this was hardly the first),[8] I find that I myself am engulfed by "a rapidly returning 'bore' wave." Why is it that, when the Bible reports on something miraculous—something that, it is at pains to claim, was the result of God's direct intervention into our world, a changing of the natural order—there are always people who try to say, often explicitly in "defense" of the Bible, that what happened really has a perfectly logical explanation? The answer, obviously, is that such people don't believe in miracles. Instead, they hold that this world is a basically orderly place with its own immutable rules of operation, and that if something appears to have happened that contradicts those rules, then the people observing it must have simply failed to discern its real, natural cause, or they must have been the victim of some sort of mass delusion or clever trick or fata morgana. But if that is so, then there is a real problem here: If what the Israelites *perceived* as God's mighty intervention into human affairs was really just an unusual manifestation of the natural order, then is not their (and the Bible's) whole notion of God based on illusion? Isn't some notion of the miraculous necessary to the belief in a God who actually does things—answers prayers, speaks to prophets, and intervenes in human history?[9]

The point I wish ultimately to make, however, is that the realistic and totally unrealistic approaches to biblical miracles seem to have coexisted side by side since the time of the Bible itself.[10] Careful readers of chapters 14 and 15 of Exodus will observe that the Bible evidences two (in fact, as we shall see, perhaps three) different approaches to the splitting of the Red Sea. At first, God instructs Moses simply to "lift up your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, so that the Israelites may enter the sea on dry ground" (Exod. 14:15). This sounds like it is going to be an altogether instantaneous, mind-mauling miracle. But later, after Moses does lift up his hand, the text adds: "The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground" (Exod. 14:21–22). So what was it, a miracle or just a particularly strong, wind-induced low tide? And why, after both these options were, so to speak, on the table, should anyone opt for the utterly miraculous one? Yet—this is such an interesting point!—people did. Long after the book of Exodus was written, the book of Nehemiah summed up these same events without any mention of the strong east wind; it simply asserted, "You split the sea before them and they crossed over in the midst of the sea on dry ground" (Neh. 9:11). Indeed, later on in our same Exodus account, the pendulum seems to swing back to the miraculous side: "The Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, and the water was like a wall for them, to their right and to their left" (Exod. 14:29). In other words, what might appear to be the more primitive, unrealistic approach was never successfully swept aside by the realists: both existed in parallel.

The same is true in postbiblical times. On the one hand, a rational fellow e the Greek-speaking author of the Wisdom of Solomon (late first century E) has this to say about Moses and the miracles of the Exodus:

> A holy people and blameless race
> Wisdom delivered from a nation of oppressors.
> She entered the soul of a servant of the Lord,
> and withstood dread kings with wonders and signs.
> She gave to holy people the reward of their labors;
> she guided them along a marvelous way,
> and became a shelter to them by day,
> and a starry flame through the night.
> She brought them over the Red Sea,
> and led them through deep waters;
> but she drowned their enemies,
> and cast them up from the depth of the sea.
>
> Wisd. 10:15–19

hroughout the Wisdom of Solomon, God does very little; His desires on arth are generally carried out by a female figure called Wisdom (*Sophia*). She ; a purposely ambiguous figure. At times she seems to be what scholars call hypostasis of God, an actual being or entity, a sort of God-in-action-on-arth; at other times the author seems to be using this same word *sophia* as he common noun meaning ordinary human wisdom, of the sort said to be ossessed by mothers and ex-presidents. So when he says above that Wisdom entered the soul of a servant of the Lord," we are not sure if he is talking bout God actually entering the soul of Moses (he is the "servant of the ord" in question), or whether it simply means that Moses suddenly became ise.

One thing is clear, however: this sentence, which alludes to Moses' ncounter with God on Mount Horeb, makes no mention of a miraculously urning bush or an angel speaking from its midst. Obviously, this author does ot like miracles. So the ten plagues here are summed up in a single, throw-away phrase: Moses used "wonders and signs" to wear down Pharaoh's esistance. No detailing of blood, frogs, or killing of the firstborn—appar-ently, these vivid facts are purposely eschewed. As for the miraculous pillars of cloud and fire that guided the Israelites on their journey (Exod. 13:21–22), these turn out to be, in this author's phrasing, Wisdom herself, who "became a shelter to them by day, and a starry flame through the night." Again, this is ambiguous: it might mean that Wisdom-the-hypostasis physically sheltered the Israelites by day, or it might simply be that, protected by wisdom, the Israelites proceeded safely on their journey. But in the "*starry* flame" at the end of this sentence the author appears to have tipped his hand: he seems to

be suggesting that there really was no pillar of fire at all, only the stars at night that enabled these travelers to navigate in the dark.[11]

At roughly the same period of time, other interpreters were pulling in the opposite direction. Here is another Greek-writing commentator on the burning bush:

> Moses prayed to God that the people might be delivered from their sufferings. While he was thus supplicating, fire suddenly appeared *up out of the ground* . . . and it burned, *although there was no firewood nor other wooden substance* in that place. Moses was frightened by what happened and he fled. But a divine voice told him to make war against Egypt and to save the Jews and lead them to their ancient homeland.
>
> Artapanus, cited in Eusebius, *Praeparatio Evangelica* 9.27.21

The same tendency to aggrandize biblical miracles is at times apparent among rabbinic writers as well, who claimed that not one but "ten miracles were performed on Israel's behalf at the Sea"[12] or that, after the ten plagues inside Egypt, the Egyptians were afflicted with fifty more plagues at the Red Sea.[13] Indeed, one ancient tradition held that, at the moment when the sea divided, a fish happened to be swimming precisely along the dividing line: it too was split in half, with its head going with the waters on one side of dry land and its tail with the waters on the other.

The Ten Plagues

Once back in Egypt, Moses went before Pharaoh to demand that he release the Israelites. But Pharaoh refused and even increased the Israelites' labor, withholding straw for the brickmaking. Discouraged, Moses turned to God, who told him to perform the miraculous acts He had showed him on Mount Horeb. Accordingly, Moses and his brother Aaron returned to Pharaoh and Aaron cast his staff on the ground; it turned into a snake. Pharaoh's sorcerers did the same, and their staffs were also transformed into snakes, but Aaron's snake swallowed up the others. Still, Pharaoh was unimpressed and refused to let the people go.

As a consequence, God brought upon the Egyptians the ten plagues, a series of apparently miraculous events designed to cause Israel's oppressors suffering and misfortune. According to the Exodus account, Moses first lifted up his staff and the Nile was turned to blood, killing all the fish in it; then, frogs swarmed all over the land, infesting the Egyptians' houses; next, gnats or mosquitoes attacked the Egyptians, and after these, flies; a plague struck the Egyptians' livestock, and the Egyptians themselves were afflicted with boils on their bodies. A crushing hail then hit Egypt, striking people and

ivestock, trees and crops; following this, a plague of locusts arrived, devas-ating the remaining crops. Then a dense darkness fell on Egypt—but where he Israelites lived there was light. In the last plague, all the firstborn of the Egyptians were killed, from the firstborn of Pharaoh himself to the firstborn of the lowliest servant—but God passed over the houses of the Israelites and did not afflict them. At last Pharaoh relented and begged the Israelites to eave.

Seeking a natural explanation for these events as well, some people in the nti-miracles camp have suggested that Moses did not so much turn the Nile o blood (Exod. 7:17–20) as benefit from the multiplication of certain species of red algae in its waters, which gave the Nile a bloodlike appearance. The ame choking algae then caused the water to be undrinkable and the fish in he Nile to die (Exod. 7:21). As a consequence, the frogs that normally live in he Nile were forced to abandon their habitat and seek shelter on dry land; ome of them entered the houses of Egyptians, where *they* died (Exod. 8:1–6). The corpses of the dead frogs (Exod. 8:14) then brought on an infes-ation of gnats (Exod. 8:16–19) and swarms of flies (Exod. 8:20–24). And so orth.[14] All of this may please the sensibilities of some—but such a reconstruc-ion is, of course, no more verifiable than the biblical account itself.[15]

More interesting to biblicists is the fact that the Bible itself is not particu-arly consistent with regard to the ten plagues. Apart from the Exodus ccount, the plagues are listed in two other places in the Bible, in Ps. 78:43–51 nd 105:27–36. Psalm 78, however, fails to mention the third plague (*kinnim,* sually understood as lice or gnats), the sixth (boils), or the ninth (darkness), whereas Psalm 105 omits boils as well as the fifth plague, the pestilence on ivestock. Moreover, both these psalms present the plagues in an order that is lifferent from the plagues in the book of Exodus. It is difficult to know what o make of this; even postbiblical sources sometimes fail to list all the plagues r put them in the same order as Exodus.[16] Perhaps, scholars say, the differ-nces between the Exodus account and these two psalms indicate that both are lependent on earlier, orally transmitted accounts that were committed to writing only somewhat later on—and somewhat inconsistently.[17]

How Did They Know the Words?

After the Egyptians were struck with the last plague and Pharaoh had given n, the Israelites set out at once to leave Egypt. No sooner had they departed, owever, than Pharaoh had second thoughts. He dispatched his army to vertake the fleeing Israelites. The army caught up with them at the Red Sea,[18] rapping them at the water's edge—but then God miraculously divided the sea nd the Israelites walked across on dry land. When the Egyptians tried to pur-ue them, the waters returned to their former state and the Egyptians

drowned. Safe on the other side, the Israelites sang a great song of praise to God for saving them, the lengthy hymn now found in Exodus 15.

This hymn, sometimes known as the Song of the Sea, is justly famous and found an honored place in early Jewish and Christian liturgies. The most interesting exegetical problem that ancient interpreters found in the song began from what was, relatively speaking, a minor question. The song is introduced by the words "Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song . . ." Moses, of course, was a prophet, so there was hardly any wonder at his breaking spontaneously into song about events that had just then concluded: he was divinely inspired. But how could the other Israelites sing along with him—how did they know the words? One possibility was that they didn't: Moses sang the first line on his own, "I will sing of the LORD, how greatly He has triumphed—horse and rider He has cast into the sea," and then the Israelites simply repeated the last words as a refrain throughout the rest of the song.[19] (Alternately, they might have repeated the concluding words of each verse right after Moses had sung them.)

Another possibility occurred to ancient interpreters, however: not only Moses, but *all* the Israelites were divinely inspired at that moment, and thus all of them were able simultaneously, and in unison,[20] to sing the same song. The song, after all, is more than a hymn of thanksgiving for what had already happened. It also speaks prophetically of events to come, foreseeing the terrified reaction of other peoples as Israel marches through the wilderness, and even Israel's founding a "sanctuary of the LORD" in the land of Canaan after their arrival (verses 13–18). Surely, then, this was not so much an act of singing as a collective prophetic vision of the future (the only one recorded in the Bible).

Further support for this hypothesis came from the second line of the song, "This is my God and I will glorify Him, the God of my father and I will exalt Him" (Exod. 15:2). The word "this" (*zeh*) can be used in various ways in Hebrew; a modern scholar would say that here *zeh* means something like "such" in English—that is, the description in the previous line of a gloriously triumphant deity is altogether true, "such is indeed my God."[21] But *zeh* is also a demonstrative in Hebrew, and ancient interpreters preferred to understand it here in this demonstrative sense: the Israelites, having just been saved from mortal danger, actually caught sight at that moment of God's very being, shimmering right there in front of them. Then they all exclaimed, "*This* is my God." Such a direct vision of God indicated that each and every Israelite was at that moment like a prophet; indeed, it put them ahead of later prophets, who only heard God's words or saw figurative visions of Him:

> Rabbi Eliezer said: [from the word *this* we know] that the lowliest servant-girl at the Red Sea perceived what the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel had not.
>
> *Mekhilta deR. Ishmael, Shirtah* 3

The same verse posed a further difficulty, however. Granted, the Israelites were actually like prophets at that moment and, seeing God, exclaimed, "This is my God and I will glorify Him." But how could they know that this God appearing before them at that moment was the same God who had appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—that is, how could they utter the second half of this verse, ". . . the God of my father and I will exalt Him"? Surely the God they saw carried no sign identifying Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob! Considering the problem, ancient interpreters came up with an ingenious solution: the two halves of this verse were not necessarily sung by the same people. The Israelite fathers could have sung, "This is my God and I will glorify Him"; then, hearing their fathers utter these words, the children might have chimed in, "the God of my father and I will exalt Him":

> They sang hymns, O Lord, to Your holy name, and praised with one accord Your defending hand; because Wisdom opened the mouth of the dumb,[22] and *made the tongues of babes speak clearly.*
>
> Wisd. 10:20–21

> Said R. Yose the Galilean: when Israel came up from the Sea and saw their enemies were now corpses stretched out on the shore, they all praised God. Even the newborn on his mother's knees and the suckling at his mother's breast . . . sang forth and said, "This is my God and I will praise Him [my father's God and I will exalt Him]."
>
> *Tosefta Sotah* 6:4

The Song of the Sea

This same hymn has attracted the attention of modern scholars, but for a different reason. Its style, vocabulary, morphology, and orthography all indicate that it is in a very old form of Hebrew. For example, scholars have established that none of the Semitic languages originally had a definite article corresponding to "the" in English). Like Russian today or classical Latin, ancient Semitic tongues simply did without one for a while; later, however, most developed some way of indicating definiteness, the prefix *ha-* in Hebrew or *al-*in Arabic, the suffixes *-a'* and *-ta'* in Aramaic, and so forth.[23] In most parts of the Bible, the prefix *ha-* is found in abundance; in this song, however, it is not found even once.[24] That—along with a host of apparently ancient morphological and lexical features—would indicate to modern scholars that it has been preserved from a very early stage of the Hebrew language and thus may be one of the oldest parts of the Bible.[25]

Two of W. F. Albright's students, Frank M. Cross and David N. Freedman,

noticed an interesting thing about this hymn: it never mentions the sea being split apart.[26] The closest it comes is in two verses toward the beginning of the song:

> In the greatness of Your majesty You overthrew Your adversaries;
> You unleashed your fury, it consumed them like stubble.
> 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.
>
> Exod. 15:6–7

If you read these verses in the light of the surrounding narrative, they certainly appear to be talking about the same act of splitting the sea that is described in Exodus 14: "the waters piled up," "the floods stood up in a heap." However, Cross and Freedman argued, if you imagine for a minute that the account in Exodus 14 is actually a later text and then try to read this one on its own terms, no mention of the sea being divided or the Israelites walking on dry land will be found. Indeed, the passage just cited would seem instead to be talking about some great storm at sea. Presumably, the Egyptian soldiers, loaded onto boats or barges, had been in hot pursuit of the Israelites—but then suddenly the wind picked up: "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."[27] Particularly revealing is this last phrase, "the heart of the sea," since it usually indicates a spot somewhere out in the midst of deep waters, far offshore.

It is no accident, according to this same way of understanding, that these lines occur where they do. Just before them, the song says, "In the greatness of Your majesty You overthrew Your adversaries; You unleashed Your fury, it consumed them like stubble." The song then goes on to tell *how* that was done: "At the blast of Your nostrils the waters piled up. . . ." Far from being a description of what saved the Israelites and allowed them to cross the sea on dry land, Cross and Freedman observed, these words describe what finished the Egyptians off. As a matter of fact, we are never really told in the song where the Israelites were when the Egyptians were drowned or how they got there. Apparently, however, there was nothing miraculous involved, *or else it would surely be mentioned;* the sole miracle described here is the drowning of the Egyptians. Other elements in the song seemed to the young scholars to point in the same direction. Thus, the Egyptians are described as going "down into the depths like a stone" (Exod. 15:5) and sinking "like lead in the mighty waters" (15:10). But if the Egyptians had been pursuing the Israelites on a dry path in the midst of the waters, then there was nowhere for them to "go down" and "sink" to—they were already walking on the bottom of the seabed.

How did these conflicting accounts come to be created? Cross and Freed-

ıan theorized that the narrative account in Exodus 14 is actually based on a ıisunderstanding of the (much older) hymn in Exodus 15. After all, someone ı the pro-miracles camp would have no difficulty in reading a line like "At he blast of Your nostrils the waters piled up, the floods stood up in a heap" ınd imagining that it was talking about *walls* of water being held in place by he mighty gusts of God's own breath. With the water piled up in that way, he Israelites were free to walk right next to this watery "heap" and stay quite lry. Under such circumstances, it is not hard to imagine what the pursuing Egyptian army would do: seeing the walls of water, they would naturally fol- ow the Israelites into this miraculous patch of dry land and continue their ɔursuit. How could they know that it would all collapse as soon as the last ısraelite was safely on the other side?

Cross elsewhere[28] noted another brief reference to these same events in the ɔook of Joshua, one that has some links to (while apparently being indepen- ıent of) the hymn of Exodus 15:

> When I brought your fathers out of Egypt, you came to the sea; and the Egyptians pursued your fathers with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. When they cried out to the LORD, He put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and made the sea come over them and cover them; and your eyes saw what I did to Egypt. Afterwards you lived in the wilderness a long time.
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> Josh. 24:6–7

Note that here too, there is no mention of the sea splitting, nothing at all miraculous about the Israelites' own crossing of the sea (if they crossed at all!); the whole miracle consists of the fortuitous arrival of darkness, under cover of which the Israelites presumably made their escape, and then the sea's "coming over" the Egyptians and drowning them. This reference may indeed constitute something like the "missing link" between Exodus 15 and 14.

A Clue about Composition

In one sense, as modern scholars see it, the song in Exodus 15 is actually *later* than the surrounding narrative. That is, many scholars believe that, while it was composed long before, the song itself was inserted into our current text only after the prose account had already been written. This is hardly a rare phenomenon in the Bible: for various reasons, scholars have argued that many songs found amidst prose narratives were later insertions—the Song of Deborah in Judges 5, Hannah's hymn in 1 Samuel 2, David's song in 2 Samuel 22, and Jonah's prayer from the belly of the whale are commonly cited examples.[29] So, too, with the Song of the Sea. Indeed, although the text

begins by asserting that "then [*or rather,* that was when] Moses and the Israelites sang," like many inserted songs, this one, scholars say, really does not fit the historical context to which it was assigned. The reason is that (as already noted) after describing the miraculous drowning of the Egyptians, the song goes on to speak of later events:

> In Your love You led the people whom You redeemed; You guided them
> by your strength to Your holy abode.
> When the peoples heard, they were panicked; trembling seized the
> inhabitants of Philistia.
> Then the chiefs of Edom were dismayed; fear shook the leaders of Moab;
> all the inhabitants of Canaan were aghast.
> Terror and dread fell upon them; by the might of Your arm, they became
> still as a stone—
> Till Your people, O LORD, passed through, till the people whom You
> ransomed passed through.
> You brought them in and planted them at the mountain of Your territory,
> the place, O LORD, that You made Your abode,
> The sanctuary, O LORD, that Your hands established.
> The LORD will reign forever and ever.
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> Exod. 15:13–18

All the events in this latter part of the song take place after the Egyptians have drowned. The Philistines and Edomites and Moabites could hardly have known anything about the Israelites at the time they were supposed to be singing this song. It was only long after, when the Israelites were actually crossing through these other peoples' lands on their way to Canaan, that the nations might be said to "tremble" and be "aghast" at the Israelites. Indeed, the song refers to an even later event, God's settling the Israelites "at the mountain of Your territory," that is, at some "sanctuary, O LORD, that Your hands have established." Cross and Freedman thus theorized that this song was originally a hymn connected to a particular temple somewhere in ancient Israel (there were several) and that it had been intended to be sung at the occasion of a festival, perhaps that of Passover (which celebrates the exodus) and/or that of the particular sanctuary's founding.[30] It was thus an altogether independent text to start with. Since, however, to a later way of thinking, the Israelites were obliged to offer *some* words of thanksgiving to God after being saved, the hymn was eventually inserted where it was: *that was when,* the introductory line says, this well-known hymn was first sung, as a way of thanking God.

But if the insertion was done at a relatively late point, that hardly means that this was the first point of contact between the song and the prose narrative. In Cross and Freedman's reconstruction, the very idea that the sea split

n two and formed a wall of water on either side of the dry land may have been suggested by the ambiguous phrasing of "at the blast of Your nostrils the waters piled up, the floods stood up in a heap." If this is correct, then it would seem to indicate that this hymn had provided the raw material out of which the prose narrative was later shaped. People heard the song and misunderstood it: thus were born the walls of water and the dry path through the sea. If so, this would not be the only such case of alleged misprision: as we shall see, scholars have found the same to be true of the Song of Deborah (Judges 5), which provided the basis for the (somewhat different) prose narrative in the chapter that precedes that song.

To modern scholars, the comparison of parallel prose (chapter 14) and poetic (chapter 15) accounts has suggested a more general conclusion about the prose narratives of the Pentateuch and other historical parts of the Bible. They were not (or not all of them) simply written down on the basis of vague, orally transmitted traditions. Instead, some were prose rewritings of an ancient cycle of songs, an anthology that may have been put together in David's time, perhaps even a lengthy poetic epic. This theory is difficult to assess, since it depends on a wholly unverifiable hypothesis, and one that is redolent of ideas about the priority of poetry to prose that are part of the baggage of German Romanticism of the nineteenth century. But it does have in its favor the evidence from ancient Israel's northern neighbor Ugarit, whose clay tablets preserve a large quantity of narrative material written in poetic style (and no historical narratives in prose). What is more, the Bible itself refers to various now-lost historical sources, including the *Book of the Wars of the Lord* (Num. 21:14) and *The Book of Yashar** (2 Sam. 1:18). Perhaps, scholars say, these lost books contained hymns such as that of Exodus 15, hymns that had been assembled from here and there for the purpose of uniting the northern and southern parts of David's kingdom. After that kingdom split in two, the theory goes, this same national songbook served as the raw material for two different prose rewritings of early Israelite history, one in the north and the other in the south—namely, the collections of texts known as J and E.[31]

Piecing It All Together

What, then, do modern historians make of the various matters discussed in the present and the previous chapter? Can they be pieced together into some plausible historical event? About this there is no general agreement. Some scholars still feel the whole story of the exodus is an invention—but, for reasons already discussed (the improbability of anyone making up such a

* Or, according to the variant reading of the Old Greek translation of the Bible, *The Book of Song* (that is, not *y-sh-r,* but *sh-y-r*).

national myth, the presence of authenticating names and other details here and there), many others reject this idea. To them it seems more likely that there is a kernel of historical truth in the exodus account. It may be that the story was originally much more localized and involved far fewer people—perhaps only a small band of escapees from Egyptian servitude. Scholars have long noted that the exodus theme is especially prominent in northern (non-Judahite) texts. For that reason, some have supposed that the whole exodus tradition was originally found only among some of the northern tribes, most likely, the Rachel tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. After David succeeded in uniting the twelve tribes under one flag, this formerly local bit of history would have become part of the common heritage of all tribes.[32]

Certainly such a turn of events would not be unparalleled. After all, Americans of my generation were taught in school about "our Pilgrim fathers" who came over on the *Mayflower* or "our Founding Fathers," the signers of the Declaration of Independence and drafters of the Constitution—whereas the overwhelming majority of Americans could hardly be said to be descended from this idealized ancestor group. Perhaps the American analogy is apposite to the biblical case in an even more exact sense, since even back in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, only a small portion of the population of the thirteen colonies might ever have been described as Pilgrims or Puritans; certainly many of those who settled in the south did so principally for material reasons that had little to do with religion, and this was true of quite a few northerners as well. Yet schoolchildren today are regularly taught that "freedom to worship as they pleased" was a main motivation in the colonies' founding. It is not hard to imagine, scholars say, that a similarly pious theme—God's miraculous intervention to save the Israelites from Egyptian slavery—came to be transferred from the experience of a few to the foundation myth of an entire nation.