

EXODUS 7-15

PRESENCE IN CREATION

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INTRODUCTION

The coming confrontation between the LORD and Pharaoh is a cosmic struggle between the Creator and the earthly powers that oppose the Creator’s life-giving rule. Pharaoh stands as the archetype of such powers, and the reader would do well to keep this in mind throughout the narrative. Yet on another level—both narratively and historically—the Pharaoh is also a real human being, one who was himself created by the very God he resists. This is an important theological insight, even if it reflects a later interpretive layer rather than the earliest historical memory.

In other words, Pharaoh is not merely a symbol of oppression; he is a creature endowed with freedom, formed by God with the capacity to recognize divine authority and to obey. The tension of the story arises precisely here: the one who embodies cosmic opposition is also one who could have chosen fidelity. The narrative thus holds together two truths—the LORD’s sovereignty over creation and the genuine human agency of the king of Egypt. Pharaoh’s resistance is not predetermined fate but the tragic misuse of the freedom given by the Creator.

This dual perspective allows the reader to see Pharaoh both as the archetypal tyrant and as a free moral agent, deepening the theological weight of the confrontation. It is not simply a clash of cosmic forces; it is the drama of a human being rejecting the very God who gave him breath.

THE CONFRONTATION (Exodus 7:8-13, et al)

“Still Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said.”
(Exod 7:13)

This line introduces a genuine theological tension. The same God who created Pharaoh with freedom is also described as hardening his heart. God knows how Pharaoh will respond, which can appear to nullify human freedom. It may sound deterministic or fatalistic, as the authors hold together the delicate interplay between Pharaoh’s agency and the LORD’s sovereign will. Several points help clarify this paradox.

The “heart” in the Old Testament is the seat of human will, emotion, and intellect—the center of personal identity. To speak of a hardened heart is to describe an incapacity to respond to the divine will, whether through discernment, resolve, or emotional perception. The metaphor signals a profound spiritual dysfunction.

Three times the narrative uses the conditional (“If you refuse...”), indicating that Pharaoh faces a genuine choice. Linguistically, this signals openness rather than predetermination. The text assumes that Pharaoh’s response is not fixed in advance but emerges from his own will.

From a narrative perspective, the authors and editors write with full knowledge of the story’s end. Thus the tension is not only between divine will and human freedom but also between Pharaoh’s unfolding decisions and the LORD’s ultimate triumph. The narrative is shaped by theological conviction that the LORD’s sovereignty will prevail, even as Pharaoh’s choices remain real.

The causality of Pharaoh’s hardening is always rooted in his own resistance. Even when the text says the LORD “hardened Pharaoh’s heart,” the underlying cause is Pharaoh’s refusal to acknowledge the LORD’s authority over creation and the LORD’s presence in Egypt. Divine hardening intensifies what Pharaoh has already chosen. This dynamic is central to understanding divine agency in Exodus.

The Hebrew verbs used to describe Pharaoh’s hardening make this even clearer—nuances often lost in translation. Three distinct words appear in the plagues narrative:

- Hazaq — “to grow strong,” “to be firm.” Often associated with courage before battle. In Exodus, it suggests Pharaoh steeling himself for conflict with the LORD.
- Kabad — “to be heavy.” When applied to bodily organs, it indicates dysfunction. Moses’ speech impediment is a “heavy tongue” (Exod 4). Pharaoh’s “heavy heart” is a non-functioning heart unable to perceive the LORD’s work.

- Qashah — “to be stubborn.” Used only twice, before the first plague and after the last, framing the narrative with divine and prophetic assessment of Pharaoh’s character and highlighting the LORD’s ultimate victory.

These verbs show that Pharaoh’s hardening is not a single act but a complex spiritual deterioration.

In the exodus narrative, both human will and divine agency contribute to Pharaoh’s hardness of heart. Confronted with the divine command—“Let my people go”—Pharaoh can obey or refuse. His refusal hardens his heart, which leads to further refusal, which leads to deeper hardening. The pattern is recursive. Pharaoh’s heart was already hardening through his brutal treatment of the slaves long before Moses arrived, and it intensified as he confronted the LORD directly. This dynamic is familiar in the spiritual life: sin, fear, hatred, and injustice harden our hearts, making us less able to perceive or respond to God’s work. Pharaoh’s hardening is the natural, even expected, outcome of resisting the LORD of creation.

When the LORD becomes the causal agent after the sixth plague, the causality is accidental rather than primary. The revelation of the LORD—through plague, mercy, and judgment—intensifies Pharaoh’s hardness only because Pharaoh refuses to accept what God is doing. He still retains freedom, as shown in his confessions in 9:27 and 10:16–17, where he acknowledges his sin.

Finally, the sacred authors are writing a theological account meant to inspire obedience and encourage readers to hear, trust, and respond to the LORD with a malleable heart. From the outset, the plagues narrative assures Israel that deliverance is coming. The LORD’s sovereignty unfolds plague by plague, each one offering Pharaoh an opportunity to submit. His hardened heart brings about Egypt’s destruction and Israel’s liberation, revealing that the LORD alone is God over all creation.

THE PLAGUES IN GENERAL (Exodus 7:14-12:32)

Having addressed the difficult question of the confrontation between Pharaoh and the LORD, attention now turns to the plagues themselves, first in general terms and then individually. From the outset, the reader should remember that the plagues narrative unfolds within a social, political, and religious drama in Egypt—a conflict between worldly authority, embodied in Pharaoh, and the divine authority of the LORD. As seen in Exodus 3 and 6, the LORD’s physical presence first entered earthly space when God appeared to Moses on Horeb in the burning bush, transforming ordinary ground into holy ground. God’s promise on the mountain signaled that holiness would now dwell on earth in a manner unknown among the patriarchs. Yet with

such holiness comes judgment—not as vindictive wrath, but as the natural consequence of holiness confronting human refusal to acknowledge divine presence and authority.

In Exodus, this judgment takes the form of plagues—signs and wonders in the land of Egypt. Notably, the English word “plague” appears only in Exodus 8:2, 9:14, and 11:1 (RSV, NRSV, NIV, NAB). The Hebrew root *negef* in these verses means “to strike.” While “plague” conveys the disaster befalling Egypt, it can obscure the deeper theological meaning: these acts are God’s work on behalf of Israel. In Deuteronomy, the same events are described as “signs and wonders” (Deut 4:34; 6:22; 7:19; 26:8; 34:11)—“signs” as outward manifestations of divine action, “wonders” as awe-inspiring displays of divine power. This Deuteronomic framing helps the reader see that the acts in Exodus are not mere demonstrations but revelations of divine presence and sovereignty.

What is at stake is the question of divine authority and sovereignty—signs that Pharaoh should submit to the LORD as a vassal. The plagues are not expressions of divine wrath or vindication; rather, they are displays of power meant to establish justice and divine order. On one level, this reflects a socio-political and religious drama. Pharaoh insists on retaining autonomy and refuses to acknowledge the LORD’s authority over Egypt. He never denies the LORD’s existence but refuses to admit the LORD’s presence in Egypt or the LORD’s claim over its people. To Pharaoh, the God of Israel is an unknown deity threatening Egypt’s economic and social stability by demanding the release of its slave labor.

On another level, at the heart of Exodus, the plagues must be understood within an Israelite theology of creation. In the ancient world, divine law, justice, and mercy were intimately connected to the order of creation. Ethical and moral failures were believed to produce environmental consequences, as seen in the flood narrative of Genesis. When Pharaoh opposes the LORD and refuses to submit to the natural order of divine sovereignty, the resulting environmental events—anti-creation events—are the natural outcome, pushing Egypt further toward chaos. Canonically, the plagues narrative forms a striking contraposition to Genesis 1, where order and goodness are the central themes. Here, creation unravels as Pharaoh resists the Creator.

Recalling the blessing of God expressed in Israel’s multiplication and fruitfulness, the reader now witnesses Egypt’s collapse from the first plague to the last. The abundance that once drew Jacob and his sons to Egypt becomes desolation, a judgment against Pharaoh’s brutality and hardness of heart. The LORD is revealed as the God of all creation who will no longer tolerate injustice and devastation. Instead, right order is re-established through divine power over creation. In the grand drama of the plagues, what is at stake is not a minor dispute between competing religious systems but the wellbeing of creation itself and the future of humanity.

Israel's liberation is the narrative frame, but within that frame unfolds a larger story of cosmic restoration. The deliverance of Israel is for the sake of all creation.

The Exodus is not merely a liberation story. It is liberation accomplished through public dethronement. Yahweh enters the symbolic and spiritual center of one of the ancient world's greatest empires and begins dismantling its theological infrastructure. Each plague exposes another element of Egypt's sacred worldview as powerless before the God of Israel.

Egyptian religion wove together the natural world, the gods, the priesthood, and Pharaoh's authority. The Nile, the sun, the fertility of the land, the health of the people, and the stability of the kingdom all carried religious significance. Thus, when Yahweh seized control of these domains, he was not merely manipulating nature. He was demonstrating that Egypt's spiritual powers could neither protect their worshipers nor resist his authority. The plagues become theological confrontations, revealing Yahweh's sovereignty over every sphere Egypt believed its gods governed.

The plague narrative repeatedly emphasizes that Egypt's magicians could not reverse what Yahweh had done. At first, they reproduced certain signs, but their actions only increased Egypt's suffering. Later, they failed to reproduce the signs and confessed that they were witnessing "the finger of God." Eventually, they became so afflicted that they could not even stand before Moses. This progression is deliberate, marking the collapse of Egypt's religious authority.

This progression matters because Egypt's religious specialists embodied the institutional authority of its gods. They advised Pharaoh, performed rituals, guarded sacred knowledge, and upheld the appearance of cosmic stability. Yet Yahweh progressively silenced them and brought them to physical collapse. In this way, the Ten Plagues defeated Egypt's gods as well as the human institutions that claimed to represent them. The narrative thus portrays liberation not only as political emancipation but as the overthrow of a theological system that upheld oppression.

It is important to remember that Exodus is a composite work, woven together to form a narrative with didactic purpose and theological intent. The sacred authors, editors, and redactors write prophetically, communicating Israel's history and the theological truth embedded within that history. The plagues are extraordinary events, central to Israel's salvation history, and the narrative is an epic recounting of God's powerful acts of redemption. Yet ultimately, the narrative is preserved and ordered for the faith of the people of God.

THE PLAGUES INDIVIDUALLY (Exodus 7:8-12:32)

The First Sign (Exodus 7:8-13)

This portion of the Exodus narrative, known as the plagues narrative, begins not with a plague but with a different kind of sign. It brings no hardship upon Egypt; instead, it introduces and foreshadows what is to come. In this encounter, Aaron duels Pharaoh's magicians, turning their staffs into serpents—a sign already anticipated in Exodus 4:2–5. Serpents held deep symbolic significance in Egyptian religious lore, functioning as mythical protectors of Pharaoh and emblems of royal power. Yet the magicians' display proves short-lived, unable to withstand the superior power of the LORD. The Hebrew verb *balah*, used to describe Aaron's serpent "swallowing" the magicians' serpents, is the same term used when the sea "swallows up" the Egyptians as they pursue Israel (Exod 14:28). The verb conveys utter destruction, and its use here signals the trajectory of the narrative: the LORD's power will consume the forces that oppose divine sovereignty. This opening sign thus serves as a narrative overture, revealing in miniature the decisive victory that will unfold through the plagues.

Water Turned to Blood (Exodus 7:14-25)

The first plague, found in Exodus 7:14–25, fittingly takes place on the river. Flanked by desert on both sides, the Nile is Egypt's source of life and fertility, and its significance cannot be overstated. For the priestly authors through whom the plagues narrative likely comes, blood represents defilement. Thus the author employs striking hyperbole in describing the blood as penetrating even the trees and stones, signaling total impurity and comprehensive judgment upon the land. Notice that Aaron is the principal divine instrument in this scene, a role he maintains through the third plague.

Exodus 7:17 contains the first of three summary statements that articulate the purpose of the plagues: "By this you shall know that I am the LORD." The other summary statements appear in 8:22 and 9:14 (at the fourth and seventh plagues). The purpose does not change, but as the plagues intensify and Pharaoh's heart grows harder, the theological aim becomes clearer. The first summary statement focuses on Pharaoh's recognition that what follows is the work of the God of Israel—the LORD revealed on Horeb. This theme of recognition is central to the narrative's theological design.

Despite the scale of the plague, the text notes that Egypt's magicians "did the same." What water they actually turned to blood remains a mystery, and the irony is sharp: rather than reversing the plague, they only add more blood, more defilement, and more death to Egypt. Their imitation underscores the futility of Egypt's religious power in the face of divine judgment. After this first plague, "Pharaoh turned and went into his house, and he did not take even this to his heart"—a narrative marker of his growing resistance and spiritual incapacity.

The supernatural message was unmistakable. Egypt believed its gods sustained the Nile, but Yahweh demonstrated that the river obeyed him. The deities associated with its waters could not purify, protect, or restore them. This first confrontation establishes the pattern that will unfold throughout the plagues: Yahweh dismantles Egypt's sacred world one domain at a time, revealing that the gods of Egypt cannot defend their territory, uphold their authority, or preserve their people. In this way, the first plague becomes the opening act in the larger drama through which the Ten Plagues defeat Egypt's gods and expose the emptiness of the theological system that sustained Pharaoh's power.

Frogs (Exodus 8:1-15)

The second plague, the infestation of frogs, appears in Exodus 8:1–15 and maintains a thematic connection to the Nile. There is no narrative or linguistic indication that the frogs emerged because the river had been turned to blood; each plague stands as its own act of divine disruption. The Hebrew term used here—likely referring to a more dangerous amphibian—symbolizes unclean spirits, a potent negative force in both Egyptian and Canaanite religious traditions. Whatever its precise meaning, the LORD demonstrates authority over these creatures. As in the first plague, there is no distinction made between Egyptian and Israelite, underscoring the universal reach of this particular judgment.

The magicians again replicate the sign but do nothing to alleviate the misery; they only succeed in multiplying the frogs and worsening Egypt's plight. In response, Pharaoh acknowledges Moses as the LORD's intermediary and asks him to plead with God on his behalf—a reluctant and begrudging admission of the LORD's authority over creation. Moses agrees, and in a striking reversal of the usual pattern in which people act according to the word of God, the LORD acts according to the word of Moses. God listens to his servant and responds, drawing Moses more deeply into the mystery of divine work—a theme that will recur throughout Exodus.

This plague is commonly associated with Heqet, a goddess depicted with the head of a frog. Heqet was linked to fertility, childbirth, and new life, and frogs themselves symbolized the abundance produced by the Nile. Yet what once represented vitality becomes invasive, suffocating, and repulsive. Heqet cannot control the creatures tied to her sacred identity. She cannot limit their numbers, keep them out of Egypt's homes, or make them disappear. Yahweh brings the frogs, determines their movements, and removes them at the appointed time. The supposed goddess of fertility remains silent while Yahweh exercises complete authority. In this way, the second plague exposes another pillar of Egypt's religious worldview as powerless before the God of Israel.

Gnats (Exodus 8:16-19)

The third plague, the infestation of gnats, is found in Exodus 8:16–19. The image of dust may be more evocative than the gnats themselves, forming an intentional connection to the patriarchs

and recalling the promise to Abraham: “I will make your offspring like dust of the earth” (Gen 13:16). The extravagance of divine blessing—manifest in Exodus 1, where Israel was fruitful and multiplied—meant that the “dust” of Abraham had become so numerous as to trouble Pharaoh. Now, in judgment, gnats rise from the dust of Egypt against the one whose heart was hard.

At this point, the magicians are unable to replicate the sign. Recognizing “the finger of God,” they confess that the action is the work of the LORD, the God of Israel. Their admission only heightens Pharaoh’s obstinacy and deepens his inability to perceive the signs of divine judgment. The contrast between the magicians’ clarity and Pharaoh’s blindness underscores the narrative’s growing theological tension.

Depending on the translation, the insects are identified as gnats, lice, or another biting pest. Some interpreters associate this plague with Geb, the god linked to the earth. Yet the more direct target may have been Egypt’s priestly system and its claims to ritual purity. An uncontrollable infestation would threaten bodily comfort and ceremonial cleanliness alike. The dust itself—basic material of the land—turns against Egypt, becoming an instrument of judgment. In this way, the environment Pharaoh claimed to govern becomes a living testimony against him, revealing that even the ground beneath his feet responds to the LORD’s sovereignty.

Flies (Exodus 8:20-32)

The fourth plague, the swarm of flies, is recounted in Exodus 8:20–32. In Exodus 8:22, the second of the summary statements appears, clarifying that the divine purpose is so that Pharaoh will know that the LORD is “in this land” (literally, “in the midst of them”). The plagues are not only demonstrations that the God of the Israelites is the LORD of all creation; they are also sent so that Pharaoh, Egypt, and Israel might recognize God’s active presence. This theme of divine nearness becomes increasingly central to the narrative; see divine presence.

Although the image resembles the swarming gnats, the flies represent an escalation. Flies symbolize what they always have: the presence of rot and death. The authors seem to suggest that Egypt is not merely defiled or desolate but already dead—or at least dying. For the first time, a demarcation appears between Israel and Egypt. Symbolically, Israel is not dying and therefore will not be covered by flies. More importantly, the narrative now highlights God’s explicit protection of Israel in Goshen. This protection demonstrates to Pharaoh that the LORD is not a distant deity hidden in the heavens but the present sovereign over the land, capable of enacting both judgment and salvation.

With the fourth plague, the narrative shifts from Aaron to Moses as the direct actor. At the plague’s conclusion, Moses enters into a lengthy diplomatic exchange with Pharaoh, who offers the Israelites the right to worship within Egypt. Why this would offend the Egyptians (as Moses

claims) is unclear, though it may reflect a general Egyptian aversion to foreign religious practices. In any event, Pharaoh concedes a three-day journey, and Moses intercedes to remove the flies. Yet Pharaoh deceives once more and hardens his heart further, deepening the pattern of resistance.

Some interpreters associate this plague with Khepri, a deity connected with the rising sun, transformation, and rebirth, commonly represented by a scarab beetle. Although the precise insect remains debated, the theological message is unmistakable: Egypt's sacred order could not prevent Yahweh from commanding the swarms. The domain of life, renewal, and cosmic stability—claimed by Egypt's gods—proves vulnerable before the LORD's authority.

Disease of the Livestock (Exodus 9:1-7)

The fifth plague, pestilence brought upon all the livestock of Egypt, is found in Exodus 9:1–7. This plague marks yet another escalation in suffering and is characteristically described with hyperbole. The reader must gloss over later references to surviving livestock—when Moses warns the Egyptians to shelter their animals from the hail and when the firstborn of the livestock die—because the narrative's aim here is theological rather than statistical. The point is that the loss of livestock strikes at the very core of Egypt's life and welfare. Livestock represented food, labor, transportation, agricultural strength, and accumulated wealth. Their death would have caused severe economic disruption. Yet Pharaoh's heart remained hardened, and he refused to let the people go.

Moreover, animal worship—or more precisely, the worship of gods represented in animal form—was common in Egyptian religious tradition. A strike against the livestock was therefore a strike against Egypt's gods. This judgment confronted deities and religious symbols associated with cattle, including Apis and Hathor. Apis embodied sacred strength, vitality, and royal power, while Hathor was associated with motherhood, nourishment, fertility, and protection. The death of the livestock thus attacked both Egypt's economic foundation and its sacred imagery. The gods who were believed to animate, protect, and bless Egypt's herds proved powerless before the LORD.

Boils (Exodus 9:8-12)

The sixth plague, the outbreak of boils, unfolds in Exodus 9:8–12. This is the first plague to inflict direct physical suffering on the Egyptians, marking a shift from ecological devastation to personal affliction. The boils signify the impurity of the people, just as the blood in the first plague signified the impurity of the land. The act of throwing soot into the air is curious, and its symbolism somewhat opaque, though it likely evokes retribution. In Deuteronomy 4:20, Egypt is called the “iron furnace,” a vivid image of Israel's searing oppression. The soot of the kiln thus becomes a reminder of Israel's suffering, now turned back upon the Egyptians. This judgment may have confronted deities associated with healing and protection, including Sekhmet and the

later-deified Imhotep—Sekhmet linked to disease, war, healing, and divine protection; Imhotep celebrated for wisdom, medicine, and healing.

During this plague, Egypt's religious specialists can no longer stand before Moses. Their bodies publicly display their inability to protect themselves. The healers cannot heal; the ritual experts cannot maintain ceremonial fitness. Egypt's religious establishment is not merely losing an argument—it is collapsing in front of Pharaoh. The magicians, who once replicated signs and later confessed "the finger of God," now disappear from the narrative entirely, undone by the very affliction they could neither prevent nor cure.

Even—or perhaps especially—Pharaoh's own religious practitioners are afflicted, unable to stand before Moses because of their boils. This plague also marks the first instance in which the LORD explicitly hardens Pharaoh's heart. Yet this should not be taken to imply that Pharaoh's freedom has been removed. As the narrative consistently shows, Pharaoh's reluctance and obstinate refusal to accept the LORD remain the ultimate cause of his hardening heart. Divine hardening intensifies what Pharaoh has already chosen; it does not negate his agency.

Thunder and Hail (Exodus 9:13-35)

The seventh plague, the thunder and hail, is recounted in Exodus 9:13–35. Near the beginning of the account, Exodus 9:14 contains the third summary statement: the plagues are sent "so that you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth." The first summary statement revealed that the LORD is God; the second, that the LORD is present in Egypt. Now the purpose is fully clarified: Pharaoh must know that the LORD is incomparable in all creation. The LORD also announces, "I will send all my plagues on you yourself" (literally, "upon your heart"), intensifying the confrontation and making clear that the conflict is between two sovereigns—the lord of Egypt and the LORD of all creation. The emphasis now falls on universal sovereignty: the plagues are visible signs for Egypt and for all the earth, testifying to the authority of the one true God.

The account of the thunder and hail is the longest and most detailed, underscoring that this was no ordinary storm but one "unlike any in Egypt since it became a nation." Its vivid description highlights the LORD's command over the heavens and therefore over the storm-gods Egypt and Canaan revered. In Egypt, Set embodied storm, disorder, and chaos; in Canaan, Baal and Mount Zaphon symbolized cosmic power. Possible theological targets also include Nut, goddess of the sky. Egypt looked to the heavens as a pillar of cosmic stability, yet the sky itself now becomes an instrument in Yahweh's hand. The storm bears the marks of **anti-creation**: instead of nourishing the earth, the heavens assault it. Crops, trees, animals, and unprotected people suffer devastation, and the cosmic order Egypt trusted begins to unravel.

As with the previous plague, the hail affects only Egypt, sparing Goshen where the Israelites dwell. The devastation is so severe that Pharaoh summons Moses and confesses, “This time I have sinned.” The qualifier “this time” reveals Pharaoh’s limited contrition, and Moses rightly discerns his insincerity—a judgment confirmed when Pharaoh returns to his old ways once the thunder, hail, and rain cease. The plague thus exposes both the LORD’s unmatched sovereignty and Pharaoh’s persistent resistance, setting the stage for the final escalations to come.

Locusts (Exodus 10:1-20)

The eighth plague, the locusts, comes in Exodus 10:1–20. As noted in the account of the previous plague (Exod 9:14), the plagues were sent as signs for Egypt and for all the earth, testifying to the presence and authority of the LORD, the God of Creation and of Israel. At the beginning of chapter ten, this purpose expands: the signs are also given for the future, to be remembered by Israel and by the nations for generations to come (Exod 10:1–2). The plagues thus function not only as immediate judgments but as enduring markers of divine sovereignty.

The devastation caused by locusts was well known and deeply feared in the ancient Near East. Here, God takes control of a phenomenon Egypt already understood, but transforms it into something unprecedented. The locusts “cover the surface of the land” so completely that “no one will be able to see the land” (Exod 10:5). The Hebrew idiom literally reads “shut the eye of the land,” an anthropomorphic image suggesting that creation itself is blinded by darkness. This judgment may have confronted Min and other deities associated with fertility, vegetation, and agricultural productivity. Whatever remained after the hail is now consumed beneath the locust swarm, pushing Egypt’s food system toward total collapse.

Locusts were not symbolic inconveniences; they represented hunger, economic disaster, and the destruction of future stability. The gods associated with fertility could not preserve a single field from Yahweh’s command. Egypt’s agricultural theology failed precisely when the nation needed it most. The land that Pharaoh claimed to govern is shown to be fully subject to the LORD’s will.

For a second time, Pharaoh confesses his sin and asks for forgiveness. Yet his repentance remains qualified—“only this once”—revealing its half-hearted nature. Moses nevertheless extends mercy and intercedes on Pharaoh’s behalf, and God honors the prayer. But the narrative makes clear that the LORD’s patience will not last indefinitely. Pharaoh’s repeated refusals deepen the crisis and prepare the way for the final, climactic judgments.

Darkness (Exodus 10:21-29)

The ninth plague, darkness, is found in Exodus 10:21–29. The narrative now shifts from ecological devastation and physical suffering to the spiritual realm. Light and darkness are powerful biblical images, conveying motifs of good and evil, order and chaos, and life and death. As with the previous plagues, this is no ordinary darkness. It is darkness “that can be felt.” The

Hebrew root *māshash* means “to touch” or “to feel,” but in this passive context it evokes groping blindly—precisely the image used in Deuteronomy’s warning to Israel: “You shall grope at noonday, as the blind grope in the darkness” (Deut 28:29).

The darkness is so intense that the Egyptians “did not see one another” and “for three days they could not move from where they were” (Exod 10:23). The language evokes paralysis, isolation, and despair—physical effects that mirror psychological and spiritual collapse. Just as the hail demonstrated the LORD’s authority over Egypt’s storm-gods, this plague confronts the solar theology at the center of Egyptian religion. Ra, the sun-god, stood among Egypt’s most important deities, and Pharaoh’s kingship drew legitimacy from the daily rising of the sun as a sign of cosmic order. When darkness covers Egypt, the message is unmistakable: Ra cannot make the sun appear, and Pharaoh cannot restore the light. Yahweh symbolically shuts down the central power source of Egypt’s worldview.

Underlying this confrontation is a theology of creation. In Genesis, God creates light on the first day and separates it from the darkness. Here, that primordial order is inverted for Egypt but preserved for Israel. “The Israelites had light where they lived”—three days of illumination in contrast to three days of Egyptian darkness. The plague thus becomes a dramatic sign of divine sovereignty: the LORD governs creation’s most fundamental distinction, revealing both judgment and mercy through the separation of light and darkness.

The Death of the Firstborn (Exodus 11:1-10; 12:29-32)

The conclusion to the plagues narrative is preceded by a brief interlude (Exod 11:1–3) that initially seems out of place. The Israelites are instructed to ask their Egyptian neighbors for silver and gold, foreshadowing the later despoiling of Egypt in Exodus 12. Moses is also described as “a man of great importance in the land of Egypt” (Exod 11:3), signaling that Pharaoh now stands isolated while the rest of Egypt honors Moses. The comment marks a striking reversal of roles between the two figures.

In Exodus 11:4–10, the narrative turns to the warning of the death of the firstborn, the final plague. From the outset, the reader notices the insertion of liturgical instruction and law at several points (Exod 12:1–20; 12:43–49; 13:1–16). Though fitted into the historical narrative by later redactors, these sections intentionally create anachronism. The authors and editors connect present worship practices to past events so that the meaning of the Exodus might illuminate future generations, and future generations might interpret the past through their ongoing liturgical life.

The LORD is the sole agent of the final judgment, the only one with power over life and death. Exodus 11:6 announces that “there will be a loud cry throughout the whole land of Egypt,” echoed in 12:30 when the plague occurs. This cry stands as the antithesis to the cry of the

Hebrews that once rose to God's ears. Now Egypt experiences a grief "unlike any that has been or will be." When the divine act is completed (Exod 12:29–32), the reversal is total and judgment executed. The ruler and nation that distorted the natural order of the LORD now experience its consequences. The extent of the judgment may seem severe, but for the ancient authors the collective guilt of Egypt was assumed—just as the prophets later assume the collective guilt of Israel during the exile. In Egypt, "death in every household" is hyperbolic language meant to convey that the land is utterly defiled apart from the purity of Israel.

By this point, Pharaoh's capitulation is not unexpected. However, it is also not without selfish motivation as Pharaoh pleads to be "blessed". The asking of a blessing from the descendants of Abraham is surely a link to the Abrahamic covenant promises in Genesis 12 in which Abraham and his descendants will be a blessing to all the earth. The Pharaoh knows that he has been defeated, but he still seeks mercy.

By this point, Pharaoh's capitulation is unsurprising. Yet it is not without self-interest: he pleads to be "blessed." His request for blessing from the descendants of Abraham recalls the covenant promise of Genesis 12, in which Abraham and his offspring would be a blessing to all nations. Pharaoh knows he has been defeated, but he still seeks mercy. The narrative subtly underscores that even Egypt's king recognizes the power of Israel's God.

The urgent departure from Egypt in Exodus 12:33 concludes the plagues narrative. The LORD's presence and power have been revealed and made known. As the scene unfolds, hundreds of thousands of Hebrew slaves depart together with a "mixed multitude." This vast company includes people from various tribes and ethnicities, all invited into the experience of salvation. Though not Israelites, they are given the opportunity—through circumcision and obedience—to join the worshiping community. The Exodus thus becomes not only Israel's deliverance but an opening for the nations to enter the life of the covenant.

LITURGICAL REMEMBRANCE (Exodus 12:1-28 & 12:33-13:16)

Passover & Unleavened Bread (Exodus 12:1-28)

After the announcement of the last plague but before its execution, the narrative turns aside from history to provide liturgical instructions for the celebration of *Pesach* and Unleavened Bread. In Exodus 12:2, the LORD declares, "This month shall mark for you the beginning of months." The feast signals a new birth—the emergence of God's people as a distinct community, no longer defined by the patriarchal past. The historical narrative of Exodus is the story of a people brought from death to life, redeemed from slavery and led toward the land of

promise. Whether in the land or in exile, Israel would remember salvation, freedom, and deliverance through the Passover meal.

The Hebrew word *zikkaron*, used in Exodus 12:14, is often translated “remembrance” or “memorial,” but its meaning is far richer. *Zikkaron* signifies a recollection that becomes an ever-present reality for each new generation—a remembrance that looks forward as much as it looks back. Each generation celebrates Passover with the same longing and expectation of deliverance that their ancestors had. In Exodus 12:42, later generations “keep vigil” for the LORD with the same anticipation of redemption that Israel experienced in Egypt. Passover thus expresses a profound unity of past, present, and future. In essence, there is no difference between earlier and later celebrations.

The liturgical instructions in Exodus 12:1–20 concern two feasts celebrated concurrently: Passover and Unleavened Bread. Both derive from pre-Israelite springtime rituals marking the new year. In the ancient world, spring symbolized new beginnings—the birth of the firstlings of the flock (*Pesach*) and the first fruits of the harvest (*Matsot*). These seasonal rites became the framework through which Israel interpreted its own redemption.

Passover (Exod 12:1–14) likely originated in rituals of nomadic herdsman. Before moving flocks to summer pasture, herdsman placed the blood of a sacrificed animal on their tents as an apotropaic device to ward off evil. The sacred authors reinterpreted this ancient practice, giving it new meaning and historical grounding. In Exodus, the blood of the lamb loses its magical function; instead, it becomes “a sign” (Exod 12:13) that the Israelites themselves make, reminding them that their protection comes from God. When the text says that God will “see the blood,” it is really about God seeing Israel’s obedience.

The narrative also hints at a vicarious dimension to the offering, later explored by Jewish and Christian interpreters. Terrence Fretheim’s work on the firstborn is especially illuminating. He notes that the firstborn of flocks and the first fruits of the land were offering gifts to the LORD, carrying redemptive significance. Fretheim asks whether the death of Egypt’s firstborn might function as a redemptive sacrifice for Israel—the LORD’s own firstborn. The paschal lambs thus serve as symbols of a vicarious offering: the death of the firstborn of the flock preserves the life of the firstborn son, Israel .

In any event, the ancient shepherds’ ritual meant to pacify malevolent spirits becomes, in Israel’s hands, a symbol of salvation. The paschal sacrifice marks Israel’s transition from death to life as the firstborn of the covenant. The blood on the lintels and doorposts sets them apart, protecting them from judgment and inaugurating their new identity as God’s people.

Matsot or Unleavened Bread (Exod 12:14–20) likely originated in Canaanite springtime harvest rites. During this feast, Canaanites expelled old leaven from their homes—a necessary purge because fermentation naturally produces decay. Over time, this annual practice became a ritual symbol of purification and new beginning.

Its significance changes when joined to the Exodus. Unleavened bread becomes a reminder of Israel's hurried departure from Egypt. It marks the movement from the decay of slavery to the purification of wilderness life. Eating bread without leaven becomes an act of readiness for redemption. At some point in Israel's past, these two ancient rites were fused with the Exodus narrative and transformed into a national memorial. The feasts became liturgical expressions of Israel's springtime of identity—its departure from Egypt and its emergence as a people.

Further Instructions (Exodus 12:33–13:16)

After the results of the last plague, the Israelites are virtually driven out of Egypt (Exod 12:33–39), with Pharaoh's permission wrapped in his self-interested desire for blessing. The departure scene is followed by a historical summary (Exod 12:40–41) marking a new era in Israel's life. The author claims that Israel's time in Egypt was 400 years—a number that does not align neatly with the genealogies but serves a theological purpose. The critical link is the dedication of Solomon's temple, a moment toward which the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15 will later look. For the sacred authors, Israel's salvation history is framed by two defining events: redemption from Egypt and the dedication of the temple—Israel's birth and its coming to maturity in the land. The dating of the Exodus thus becomes a way to summarize the theological significance of Passover:

“That was for the LORD a night of vigil, to bring them out of the land of Egypt. That same night is a vigil to be kept for the LORD by all the Israelites throughout their generations.”
(Exodus 12:42)

Centuries of slavery had dimmed the hope of the covenant, but this one night restored faith that God would keep and fulfill the divine word.

Further liturgical instructions for Passover appear in Exodus 12:43–51. These likely represent later additions, reflecting circumstances of a settled people and specifying times and dates of departure. The comments about slaves and foreigners also assume life in the land. Yet the importance of Passover and Unleavened Bread is so great that the redactors pause again in Exodus 13:1–16 to provide another set of instructions. In chapter 13, the tone becomes more didactic than practical as Moses reflects on God's powerful acts in history and highlights the significance of offering the firstborn to the LORD.

Three specific modes of remembrance emerge in the narrative, later interpreted by the rabbis:

First, in Exodus 13:9, Moses invites the people to adopt the practice of wearing *tefillin* (phylacteries), which would “serve for you as a sign on your hand and a reminder on your forehead.” Though later understood as small boxes containing Scripture, the original meaning was likely metaphorical or expressed through another device. The intent was clear: the story of the Exodus should remain ever-present in one’s thoughts (forehead) and actions (hand).

Second, in Exodus 13:11–16, Moses instructs the Israelites to set apart every firstborn for the LORD. This reflects the final plague, in which Israel’s firstborn were spared through obedience. The idea of “redemption”—that one life may be bought back by offering another—has precedents in Egyptian and Canaanite traditions. The offering of the firstborn became highly ritualized in ancient Judaism, reflected in Luke 2 when Joseph and Mary present Jesus in the temple.

Third, the most common form of remembrance is didactic instruction. Parents are commanded to explain to their children, “It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt” (Exod 13:8). The “I” and “me” arise from the collective identity of Israel’s families. Again, in Exodus 13:14, Moses says, “When in the future your child asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall say, ‘By strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt.’” Later generations who recite these words and practice these rituals are projected back into the original moment, making the past a present re-enactment of God’s salvation. The ritual becomes both remembrance of what God did and recognition of what God continues to do.

In the end, it is vital that these rituals be recalled in ways that reflect the events they commemorate and teach future generations the reason for Israel’s national existence.

ISRAEL ON THE RUN (Exodus 13:17-15:21)

The Pillars of Cloud and Fire (Exodus 13:17-22)

With the Passover instructions complete, the people finally begin to move. The most direct route to Canaan would have taken them along the Mediterranean coast, but the narrator explains that God does not lead them that way: “If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt” (Exod 13:17b). The Philistines, who settled in the region around present-day Gaza in the twelfth century BCE, would eventually dominate the surrounding territory through their five city-states. Though subdued later by David, they remained a formidable presence until the Babylonian exile. Rather than lead Israel immediately into conflict with future enemies, God chooses the safer, though more demanding, way of the wilderness toward the *yam suf*.

The *yam suf* is a body of water—*yam* clearly meaning “sea.” The meaning of *suf*, however, is debated. Traditionally, *yam suf* has been translated “Red Sea,” placing the crossing near the Gulf of Suez. This translation stems from the Septuagint and was carried into the Vulgate. Yet *suf* may be an Egyptian loanword meaning “reed” or “papyrus,” suggesting “Sea of Reeds,” possibly referring to a large lake between the Gulf of Suez and the Mediterranean, perhaps near Bitter Lake. Whatever its precise location, the LORD leads the people toward *yam suf* as part of a deliberate theological and narrative design.¹

The wilderness itself becomes a major motif in Old Testament theology. It is the place of testing, purification, and refinement—a liminal space where Israel enters covenant with the LORD and prepares to dwell in the divine presence. The gospel writers later echo this pattern by placing Jesus in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry, signaling preparation and divine formation. Israel’s journey into the wilderness is thus not a detour but the necessary path of transformation as they prepare to dwell in the divine presence.

As they set out, the people receive a second physical manifestation of God’s presence: a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. These visible signs represent the LORD’s real presence and the impenetrable mystery of divine being—*deus revelatus atque absconditus*, the revealed and hidden God. The cloud and fire foreshadow the great theophany at Sinai, where the LORD will guide, instruct, and shape Israel throughout its wilderness experience. The journey begins not with Israel’s confidence but with God’s presence, leading them step by step toward the fulfillment of the covenant.

Crossing the Sea (Exodus 14:1-31)

While the climactic blow seemed to occur in the Passover event, the final and decisive act of deliverance unfolds at the Sea. Later liturgical traditions recall the last plague with great detail, yet the crossing of the sea—arguably the supreme act of salvation—has no festival of its own, only a secondary association with Passover. Even so, the event is remembered throughout the Old Testament, so centrally that Gerhard von Rad considered it the core of Israel’s earliest confession of faith.² In the crossing, the LORD splits the waters and delivers the people, demonstrating divine authority over the chaos of the deep and linking Israel’s redemption with the cosmic framework of creation itself.³

Preparations for the crossing and the beginning of the wilderness journey begin with navigational instructions. Despite the many place names, none can be located with certainty;

¹ The debate will clearly not be settled here. I have a tendency towards the Sea of Reeds translation and place the event of the crossing north of the Bitter Lake. R disagrees and places the crossing in the Gulf of Suez.

² G van Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, volume 1.

³ M Scarlata, *Abiding Presence*, 102.

Migdol simply means “watchtower” and may refer to a general, non-specific reference point. The purpose of the directions is theological rather than geographical: they lure Pharaoh to the edge of the sea so that his heart may again harden and the LORD’s glory be revealed. The Hebrew word *kabod* (“glory”) shares its root with *kabad*, the term used to describe Pharaoh’s heavy heart earlier in the narrative. The wordplay contrasts the weight of the LORD’s honor—soon to be displayed—and the heaviness of Pharaoh’s heart, which will drag him into the depths.

As the reality of losing their slave labor sets in, Pharaoh and his officials have a change of heart. The mighty acts of God seem forgotten, overshadowed by economic fear, and the Egyptians pursue Israel relentlessly. Meanwhile, the Israelites experience dramatic emotional swings. In Exodus 14:8, they march out “boldly” (“with raised hands”), yet this victory image quickly collapses into fear as they see their pursuers. In Exodus 14:10, they cry out to the LORD—the same LORD who heard their cry in Exodus 2—and then turn on Moses with a bitter complaint:

“Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?” (Exodus 14:11)

This is more than just a complaint; it strikes at the very heart of God’s redemptive purpose and exodus theology. This is a wholesale rejection of God’s salvation as Israel faces its first big test. The theme of Israel’s obstinance will recur throughout the wilderness journey, revealing the tension between human distrust and the steadfast faithfulness of God.

At this critical moment, the prophet Moses speaks a confession of faith,

“Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.” (Exodus 14:13-14)

The emphasis shifts entirely to the LORD as the agent of redemption. The repeated use of the verb “to see” underscores Israel’s role as witnesses to this moment in salvific history. They witness the warrior God fighting on their behalf, and in the face of that they are instructed to “be still” or “keep silent.” Their stillness signifies both helplessness and trust: Moses’s command offers the purest ideal of faith: a recognition of one’s own helplessness and reliance on the LORD God, Creator of heaven and earth.

Exodus 14:19–20 likely preserves an older version of the sea-crossing tradition. Here, the angel of the LORD and the pillar of cloud move from before the Israelites to behind them—the only time in Exodus that the pillar shifts position. This movement symbolizes a final separation from Egypt, placing divine protection between Israel and its former oppressors.

Beginning in Exodus 14:21, the narrative describes the separation of the waters. Moses is the human agent; creation provides the means through a strong east wind; and the LORD orchestrates the event. While natural explanations are conceivable, the text presents the moment as a divine sign and wonder. The imagery evokes Genesis 1, where God divides the waters to create order. The final blow comes in Exodus 14:26–29, when the waters return to their natural flow and the Egyptians are overwhelmed by the weight of the sea. After fourteen chapters of struggle, suffering, and outcry, the Israelite bondage is broken in silence.

The chapter closes by linking Moses directly to the act of salvation and marking Israel's renewed faith:

“Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.” (Exod 14:31)

The people's fear becomes reverence, and their belief becomes loyalty—setting the stage for the wilderness journey and the covenant at Sinai.

The Song at the Sea (Exodus 15:1-21)

Exodus 15 constitutes the Song at the Sea (also called the Song of Moses), offering a poetic summary of the LORD's faithfulness. Drawing on particular moments from the narrative, the song emphasizes the LORD's sovereignty over creation and the divine triumph over Egypt. Moses himself plays no role in the details of the song because its purpose is to proclaim the name and character of the LORD. The Song at the Sea appears to be one of the oldest pieces of Israelite literature, sharing thematic, symbolic, and structural features with Canaanite poetry from the late second millennium BCE.

Although some of the imagery of God as warrior may feel intrusive to modern Christian sensibilities, the metaphor is a poetic way of expressing God's agency in Israel's deliverance, especially at the sea. The LORD alone fights for Israel and executes judgment on their behalf. This portrayal should not be confused with notions of “holy war” in later religious history. The LORD's battles are not comparable to human conflicts driven by pride, greed, or unjust motives. Instead, the LORD acts in judgment to restore justice and order in creation. The warrior imagery communicates divine intervention against oppression and the reestablishment of the right relationship between God, creation, and God's people.

The Song serves as a perfect summary and conclusion to the first part of Exodus. Yet even as it looks back, it also looks forward. The song anticipates the future blessing of God, who will guide Israel past its enemies and plant them on the holy mountain. Israel is now free from Egyptian bondage and on its way to a new life. The wilderness experience is not mentioned; instead, Moses looks ahead to the time when the sanctuary—the “abode” of the LORD—will be

established in the land, where “the LORD will reign forever and ever” (Exod 15:18). The song thus bridges past deliverance and future hope, celebrating the God who saves and the God who will continue to lead Israel toward its promised destiny.