

## “HIS NAME THROUGHOUT THE EARTH”: YHWH’S POLITICAL STRATEGIES IN EXODUS 3-15

### “SEU NOME POR TODA A TERRA”: AS ESTRATÉGIAS POLÍTICAS DE YHWH EM ÊXODO 3-15

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes the characterization of YHWH as a political ruler in Exodus 3-15. His role as king of Israel comes as a novelty in the biblical narrative after the book of Genesis, and in the book of Exodus he presents new divine traits such as jealousy, wrathfulness and holiness. Among his new traits as a ruler comes the concern with his reputation, both in the short and long term, amidst his followers and even his enemies. A close-reading of the Plagues narratives thus shows God’s actions stemming from his political reasoning and strategies, which aim at driving the whole earth — especially Israel, his chosen people — to acknowledge his absolute power and rule.

**Keywords:** Book of Exodus. Plagues. YHWH. God. Narrative criticism.

**Resumo:** Este artigo analisa a caracterização de YHWH como um governante político em Êxodo 3-15. Seu papel como rei de Israel chega como novidade na narrativa bíblica após o livro de Gênesis, e no livro do Êxodo ele apresenta novos traços divinos, tais como ciúme, ira e santidade. Entre seus novos traços como governante está a preocupação com sua reputação, tanto a curto quanto longo prazo, entre seus seguidores e até entre seus inimigos. Uma leitura atenta das narrativas das Pragas, portanto, mostra as ações de Deus partindo de seu raciocínio e suas estratégias políticas, que visam levar toda a terra — especialmente Israel, seu povo escolhido — a reconhecer seu poder e domínio absolutos.

**Palavras-chave:** Livro do Êxodo. Pragas. YHWH. Deus. Crítica da narrativa.

The Exodus account of the liberation of Israel (Ex. 1-15) is a remarkable sequence of prose and poetry that yields an awe-inspiring story for the birth of a nation and its leader, being the foundational myth for Israel’s identity; Moses, Israel’s leader in the Exodus, also figures as a role model for prophesying in the Hebrew Bible. Both Israel and Moses, however, are subject to the rule of YHWH. It is the God of Israel who chooses Moses as the people’s leader and directs his every action towards the Hebrews’ liberation, and even though he intervenes primarily for the sake of his chosen people, his methods show an equally great concern for his reputation:

(...) the Israelites’ departure from Egypt is not a victory for justice so much as a demonstration of God’s power “to pursue fertility for his chosen people and wreck it for their enemy” (104). God at the exodus is the protagonist.<sup>1</sup>

YHWH’s concern with his public image comes as a novel development of his character. While in Genesis YHWH’s major roles were as a parent, creator, patron and a judge,<sup>2</sup> in the book of Exodus he assumes a new role as the political ruler of a newborn nation; he becomes the divine king of Israel, and in addition to his already established roles he behaves as a suzerain

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<sup>1</sup> GUNN, 2016, p. 101.

<sup>2</sup> According to Humphreys (2001).

towards its vassal.<sup>3</sup> But he does not stand as an established leader so much as a ruler in the making. While Moses, his chosen emissary, has to develop his own character in order to become a leader fit for Israel, YHWH needs to “spread the knowledge” of himself in the human world:

The mainspring of God’s actions throughout history is the spread of “knowledge” (...). Only when his creatures threaten or frustrate that desire do other motives, like retribution, come into play; (...)<sup>4</sup>

The liberation of Israel is thus a case in point, for while YHWH intends to become Israel’s divine ruler, he must first manage to be acknowledged as such. The people he wishes to make his own have spent many generations without a word from the God of their fathers, and their current Egyptian master is a ruthless, proud ruler who will not acknowledge any claims of lordship as equal or superior to his. The conflict between YHWH and Pharaoh is, therefore, both theological and political — both intend to impose an universal social order in their own right.

Such innovation in the character of YHWH does not come without its difficulties. Once willing to promote himself as the supreme God and master of the world, YHWH displays new traits, such as jealousy, wrathfulness and holiness;<sup>5</sup> his acts of violence also become increasingly frequent and ruthless, such as observed in the prolonged suffering of both Israelites and Egyptians in the plagues of Ex. 7-12. But it is not so important to analyze YHWH through the moralizing and metaphysical lens of modern theology as it is to understand the political reasoning behind his actions — both inside and outside the world of the story. For while the character YHWH is primarily concerned with his reputation among the characters inside the story, he also seems to care about his reputation among the would-be descendants of such characters, *i.e.* the post-exilic Judaeian audience of the public readings of the Torah. The biblical writers weave the narrative in a way that puts YHWH as a transcendent character, equal to the narrator in knowledge and power,<sup>6</sup> and as a god who seeks an everlasting hegemony, which in turn also influences the readers’ approach to the social order of their time. Comprehending YHWH’s political strategy is paramount to understanding the character of his divine rule, be it in the level of plot or in the level of discourse.

In order to better understand some of YHWH’s political strategies, this essay will explore his role in the liberation of Israel, namely in Ex. 3-15, through a synchronic analysis of the text in its final form — an approach often termed “Narrative Criticism.”<sup>7</sup>

### **The calling of Moses and the failed approaches to the people**

YHWH shows political reasoning in his plans of liberation since the first time he shares them with Moses. This is why Moses has to ask Pharaoh not for the people’s liberation, but for a leave to travel into the desert and offer sacrifices to YHWH (Ex. 3:18-20); such a reasonable and basic request was hardly exceptional for the Egyptian corvée system at the time, and the expected refusal from the Pharaoh would expose the true character of his tyrannical rule.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> LASINE, 2016, p. 467.

<sup>4</sup> STERNBERG, 1987, p. 324.

<sup>5</sup> LASINE, 2016, p. 467.

<sup>6</sup> For a deeper discussion of YHWH as a transcendent character, see STERNBERG, 1987, p. 84-128.

<sup>7</sup> MOORE, 2016, p. 27-43.

<sup>8</sup> SARNA, 1991, p. 16.

Instead of declaring an all-out war against the established order, YHWH chooses to slowly build up his reputation as a better and more reliable sovereign than the Pharaoh, steadily undermining his rival's hegemony and stability until Egypt itself breaks with Israel. Such a plan not only allows YHWH to promote himself without the setbacks of managing a nation, but also aims at giving Israel a headstart as a free people through the consented plundering of the Egyptians (Ex. 3:21-22). In fact, YHWH is even willing to strengthen Pharaoh's heart in order to delay Israel's final liberation (4:21).

But the subjects of YHWH hardly behave as he wants them to, and Moses is no exception. After reassuring every insecurity and excuse raised by his chosen leader (Ex. 3:7-4:12), his anger burning against Moses' last refusal (4:13-17), YHWH concedes. One does not, after all, simply become the emissary of an invisible ruler against the most powerful empire of the time. Moses may trust his God, but he trusts neither Israel nor himself, and thus arises a chain of mediators: Aaron mediates between Israel, Pharaoh and Moses, who in turn mediates between Aaron and YHWH. Interestingly, Moses might be just like his master after all — both have a hard time when trying to address their ultimate subjects directly.

Moses and Aaron gather all the Israelite elders after arriving at Egypt, and the elders not only believe them, but bow in worship to YHWH (4:29-31). Likewise, Pharaoh reacts as expected: upon hearing the request for a three-day journey into the desert, he says

מי יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר אֶשְׁמַע בְּקוֹלוֹ לְשַׁלַּח אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יָדַעְתִּי אֶת־יְהוָה וְגַם אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא אֲשַׁלַּח:

Who is YHWH, that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not YHWH, neither will I let Israel go. (Ex. 5:2)

What is at stake, then, is the recognition of YHWH as the ultimate sovereign. Pharaoh will not acknowledge a foreign god as being above himself, for he lacks knowledge, and YHWH will impinge this knowledge upon Pharaoh, even if it means his complete ruin. Moses and Aaron still try to bargain with the Egyptian king, arguing that YHWH could strike down the Hebrews for their religious negligence (5:3) and therefore hinder their work for Egypt. But Pharaoh's brief characterization leaves little space for sympathy: he responds to Moses' request by cutting the Hebrew's supply of straw and demanding the same amount of bricks nevertheless (5:6-9). In Pharaoh's view, the people's outcry (זעק) is not the result of oppression, but laziness; he is callous to the suffering of others, and is contrasted by the narrative with YHWH, who is prompted to act in favor of the Israelites precisely for their outcry (Ex. 2:23-25).<sup>9</sup>

Less expected in YHWH's plans was the Israelites' reaction to Pharaoh's increased repression. Overwhelmed and frustrated after having their appeals for mercy denied by Pharaoh, the Israelite foremen invoke YHWH as their judge against Moses and Aaron (Ex. 5:19-21). Buying into Pharaoh's interpretation of the events, they conclude YHWH would not want them to literally "become malodorous in the eyes of Pharaoh" and place the guilt on YHWH's envoys. Moses, who mentioned the sword as a punishment for his people's cultic negligence (5:3), is indeed bringing the sword against his fellow Israelites. Deeply affected by the foremen's complaint, Moses questions YHWH (5:22-23), who responds with an amplified, more powerful version of his earlier promises at the burning bush. But Pharaoh's callousness has a point after all: the increasingly cruel bondage imposed upon the Israelites renders their spirits and breaths short (קָצַר רוּחַ), and they do not listen to YHWH's new message of encouragement (Ex. 6:9). Words do not suffice to an oppressed people, and thus YHWH prompts Moses to act against the Egyptian ruler at once (Ex. 6:10, 7:1-6).

<sup>9</sup> The root זעק refers to a cry of sorrow or in search of aid. Cf. Gn. 18:20, Ne 9:9, Is. 15:5, 65:19.

## The cosmic battles

This time there is little to no dialogue with Pharaoh before Moses and Aaron display a signal from YHWH (Ex. 7:8-13). Aaron throws his staff before Pharaoh, and the staff becomes a *tanniyn* (תַּנִּינ); then the mages of Egypt do the same. The recurrent translation of *tanniyn* as ‘serpent’ does little justice to the term, which, associated with the cosmic dragon figure in the Ancient Near East and the story’s setting near the Nile, should be translated as ‘crocodile’.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, through the use of *tanniyn*, the narrative

is evoking this cosmic battle against Sea as an appropriately elevated historical stage upon which God will eventually “judge the gods of Egypt” (Exod. 12:12) and create the nation of Israel.<sup>11</sup>

On the plane of discourse, then, the narrator draws upon ANE cosmic battles imagery to impress the importance of YHWH’s intervention upon the reader. Inside the world of the story, on the other hand, the scene may appear to be of little political consequence for the characters, and the people of Israel are not said to have witnessed it. But the fact that Aaron’s rod acts on its own and swallows the magician’s staffs is already an ominous establishment of YHWH as the superior deity, and anticipates what is to happen should he wage a war against the Egyptian gods — Pharaoh included. Such implications would have hardly passed unnoticed through the Egyptian audience on stage; it is no wonder Pharaoh’s heart begins strengthening itself precisely now (Ex. 7:13), as previously announced by YHWH. This scene, both on the level of story and discourse, amounts to a declaration of cosmic war.

The conflict already escalates in the following verses, for they inaugurate YHWH’s ultimate propaganda effort. The Plagues narrative is a sophisticated literary structure that arranges the plagues in three triads plus the death of the firstborns, with both internal and overarching patterns between them.<sup>12</sup> Its controlling purpose is to

emphasize the idea that the nine plagues are not random vicissitudes of nature; although they are natural disasters, they are the deliberate and purposeful acts of divine will — their intent being retributive, coercive, and educative. As God’s judgments on Egypt for the enslavement of the Israelites, they are meant to crush Pharaoh’s resistance to their liberation. They are to demonstrate to Egypt the impotence of its gods and, by contrast, the incomparability of YHVH, God of Israel, as the one supreme sovereign God of Creation, who uses the phenomena of the natural order for His own purposes. (...) a secondary theme is also discernible: Israel as well as the Egyptians must “know” YHVH.<sup>13</sup>

The Israelite God manipulates both the fabric of nature and narrative in order to dramatize his almightiness to his audiences, be they inside or outside the narrated world. Meir

<sup>10</sup> CASSUTO, 1967, p. 96; KAWASHIMA, 2016, p. 55.

<sup>11</sup> KAWASHIMA, 2016, p. 55.

<sup>12</sup> For a deeper analysis of the patterning in the Plagues narrative, cf. CASSUTO, 1967, p. 92-93; MEYERS, 2005, p. 78-80.

<sup>13</sup> SARNA, 1991, p. 30.

Sternberg calls it the omnipotence effect,<sup>14</sup> a literary device through which YHWH demonstrates his absolute power by controlling both the narrated world and the narrative literary structure together with the narrator. Such effect is even more evident on serialized signs, for “there must be repetition to settle any lingering doubt about the causal link between performative and performance”.<sup>15</sup> Thus, in

symmetrical contexts, like the Plagues, the sense of all-powerfulness that such equivalence gives the reader (faced with two matching pieces of discourse) is even sharper (...) In the hands of the narrator, therefore, God gives advance notice, then performs, then (often) comments on the performance; and then repeats the sequence all over again.<sup>16</sup>

The point of a patterned display of power such as the Plagues is, therefore, entirely theological, and for that very reason it is also entirely political. For the communicative strategy that gives the characters knowledge about the only God consolidates the same God as their political ruler; and the narrative strategy that crystallizes a given comprehension of divinity in the audience is also the political strategy that grants the audience’s subservience to divine will. Thus the whole point of the Plagues narrative is the attainment of hegemony by YHWH, both on the level of narration and discourse. This shall become clearer as the narrative advances towards its end.

The first plague (Ex. 7:14-25) already comes in a retributive fashion, since the river turned into blood is the same where newborn Hebrew males were thrown by order of the earlier Pharaoh (Ex. 1:22). On the level of the plot, such symmetry would not pass unnoticed, be it by the now avenged Israelites or by the increasingly scared Egyptians. There is also a measure of retributive justice on the level of discourse, since the term used to describe the Nile water’s stench (שֶׁמֶט) is the same used by the Israelite foremen regarding their Egyptian master’s stand towards them (Ex. 5:21; 7:18,21); the Egyptians, once disgusted by YHWH’s people, now are to be disgusted by their own source of life. The plague also displays remarkable cosmological implications:

The Egyptians personified and deified the river Nile as the god Hapi, to whom offerings were made at the time of inundation. The flooding itself was regarded as a manifestation of the god Osiris. It is quite possible, then, that the contamination of the river served to discredit Egyptian polytheism.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, bloodlike water in the ANE literature is an “omen, a portent of impending disasters. As the first of the signs-and-wonders sequence, it is a harbinger of calamities do come.”<sup>18</sup> But Pharaoh will not heed, and a minor demonstration by his magicians is enough to satisfy him (Ex. 7:22); YHWH’s power does not seem so different from his, after all. His heart strengthened once again, Pharaoh refuses to know YHWH as was intended by the signal (Ex. 7:17); but again, this stubbornness was also to be expected.

The second plague (Heb.: Ex. 7:26-8:11) also presents a potential retributive measure: the Egyptian frog-headed goddess Heqt was associated with fertility and was thought to assist women during their childbirth. A swarm of frogs which turns fertility from blessing into blight

<sup>14</sup> STERNBERG, 1987, p. 99-128.

<sup>15</sup> STERNBERG, 1987, p. 108.

<sup>16</sup> STERNBERG, 1987, p. 108-109.

<sup>17</sup> SARNA, 1991, p. 30.

<sup>18</sup> MEYERS, 2005, p. 81; also cf. SARNA, 1991, pp. 30-31.

is, then, a direct response to the nation that sought to undermine Israel's fertility through the killing of newborn babies at the hands of the midwives (Ex. 1:15-16).<sup>19</sup> The stench appears once more as the Egyptians are delivered from the frogs: now the water and the land of Egypt stink (Heb.: Ex. 8:10). It is also the first time Pharaoh, albeit only for a moment, acknowledges YHWH (Heb.: Ex. 8:4).

YHWH's political strategy begins yielding results already in the third plague, for the magicians, unable to mimic the multiplication of gnats, transmit their awe to Pharaoh: "This is the finger of God!" Pharaoh, as usual, does not listen (Heb.: Ex. 8:15). The supernatural propaganda is starting to work, disrupting the inner cohesion of the Egyptian court, but only to an extent. The magicians do not attribute the sign to YHWH, but to 'elohim (אֱלֹהִים), which in its generality could mean God or even gods; there may also be a hint of underestimation, since the magicians talk of a finger while YHWH talks of his stretched arm (Ex. 6:6). Thus it is no wonder that the next triad of plagues (Heb.: Ex. 8:16-9:12) aims to set apart Israel from Egypt (Heb.: Ex. 8:18-19, 9:4); once the magicians acknowledge the presence of supernatural powers, it is time to impress upon them the identity and side of such a power. They must know that YHWH is not only above, but amidst the land (Heb.: Ex. 8:18), and that he is not a neutral supernatural force, but an absolute sovereign who has his own people and chooses sides. Pharaoh, however, does not yield, and the narrator hints at a supernatural reason for the king's obstinacy: YHWH is strengthening his heart (9:12), just as he announced previously (4:21, 7:2-4).

The reasons for YHWH's tampering with Pharaoh's heart are straightforwardly put as theological and political propaganda:

כי בפעם הזאת אני שלח את כל־מגפתי אל־לבך ובעבדיך ובעמך בעבור תדע כי אין כמני בכל־  
הארץ:  
כי עתה שלחתי את־ידי נאף אותך ואת־עמך בדבר ותכחד מ־הארץ:  
ואולם בעבור זאת העמדתיך בעבור הָרֵאתֶךָ אֶת־פְּחֵי וּלְמַעַן סַפֵּר שְׁמִי בְּכָל־הָאָרֶץ:

For this time I shall send all my plagues against your heart, and upon your servants, and your people, so that you shall know that there is none like me in all the world. For now I could have sent my hand and stricken you and your people with the pestilence and you would have been obliterated from the earth. However, for this have I let you endure, in order to show you my strength and so that my name may be declared throughout the world. (Ex. 9:14-16)

Pharaoh will not allow Israel, his servant, to serve a different master; neither will he acknowledge the existence of any master who equals him in power and authority. For that he pays, not only by ruining his nation and losing political support — "And Pharaoh's servants said unto him, How long shall this man be a snare unto us? let the men go, that they may serve the YHWH their God: knowest thou not yet that Egypt is destroyed?" (Ex. 10:7) — but also by losing control of his very self:

the hardening motif powerfully expresses Yahweh's manipulative power. From the point where God intervenes, any "struggle" between "masters" is palpably an unequal one. Pharaoh is doomed; he is a puppet before God. The freedom of the master turns out to be no more than that of the slave.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> CASSUTO, 1967, p. 101; SARNA, 1991, p. 31.

<sup>20</sup> GUNN, 1982, p. 81.

YHWH's strategy of self-promotion works so well on the level of the plot that many Egyptians who "fear the word of YHWH" take shelter against the seventh plague when given the chance (Ex. 9:20-21). Even Moses, as YHWH's emissary, becomes "very great in the land of Egypt, in the eyes of the servants of Pharaoh and in the eyes of the people." (Ex. 11:3) But it is also intended to work on the level of discourse:

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה בֹּא אֶל־פַּרְעֹה כִּי־אֲנִי הִקְבַּדְתִּי אֶת־לִבּוֹ  
 וְאֶת־לֵב עֲבָדָיו לְמַעַן שְׂתִי אֶתְמִי אֱלֹהִים בְּקִרְבּוֹ  
 וְיִלְמְעוּ תִּסְפֹּר בְּאָזְנֵי בְנֵהוּ וּבְנֵי־בְנֵהוּ אֵת אֲשֶׁר הִתְעַלְלֹתִי בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֵת־  
 אֶת־אֶתְמִי אֲשֶׁר־שָׁמְתִי בָם וַיִּדְעוּתֶם כִּי־אֲנִי יְהוָה

And YHWH said unto Moses, Go in unto Pharaoh: for I have hardened his heart, and the heart of his servants, that I might shew these my signs before him; and that thou mayest tell in the ears of thy son, and of thy son's son that I made a mockery of Egypt, and my signs which I have done among them; that ye may know that I am YHWH. (Ex. 10:1-2)

## The Passover and the identity of YHWH

Interestingly, the very identity of Israel is also a piece of political propaganda. The Passover ritual is intended to remind Israelites through the generations of YHWH's deliverance through the death of the firstborns:

וְהָיָה כִּי־תָבֹאוּ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יָמַן יְהוָה לָכֶם כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת־הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת  
 וְהָיָה כִּי־יֹאמְרוּ אֲלֵיכֶם בְּנֵיכֶם מָה הָעֲבֹדָה הַזֹּאת לָכֶם  
 וְאָמַרְתֶּם זֶבַח־פֶּסַח הוּא לַיהוָה אֲשֶׁר פָּסַח עַל־בְּתֵי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִצְרַיִם בְּנִגְפוֹ אֶת־מִצְרַיִם  
 וְאֶת־בְּתֵינֵנוּ הִצִּיל וַיִּקַּד הָעָם וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ

And it shall come to pass, when you come to the land which YHWH will give you, according as he has promised, that you shall keep this service. And it shall come to pass, when your children shall say unto you, What do you mean by this service? That you shall say, It is the sacrifice of YHWH's passover, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when he smote the Egyptians, and delivered our houses. And the people bowed the head and worshipped. (Ex. 12:25-27)

Such a remembrance serves not only to establish Israel's identity as a nation of slaves who were redeemed by their god, but also to establish the identity of YHWH as the liberator of his people. He is forging his identity as a ruler along with his servants:

At this point appears a curious hint of insecurity in God himself, paradoxically as it may appear in the context of this massive demonstration of his mastery. After all, what does it profit God if he "provides" but his people fail to identify their provider? It is a vulnerability of all gods! Yahweh needs Israel, just as Israel needs Yahweh. Thus by his signs and wonders Yahweh seeks to secure his identity.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

Such identity will indeed be secured, and YHWH will be remembered mostly for his role in the liberation of Israel. Ironically, however, the act through which YHWH delivers his people renders him just as dangerous to them as he is to Egypt: his act of passing over the houses of the Israelites is entirely dependent on their obedient acts of self-protection, for the vengeful YHWH is a violent force of nature that makes no distinction between the innocent and the guilty parties.

On the other hand, the ritual is theoretically feasible by anyone who fears the word of God, and as such it could give even Egyptians the possibility of joining the innocent party; moreover, the ritual is a remarkable way of not rendering the Hebrews the essential culprits for the massacre of the Egyptian's firstborns, which could brew a general hatred of Egyptians against Israel and thus yield new waves of violence — not between their masters, but between the servants themselves. It is no wonder that the Egyptians end up driving the Israelites out: “We are all dying!”, they say (Ex. 12:33). They would rather lose their nation of servants than serve such a terrible master as YHWH.

### The man of war and the raising of a nation

Once departed from Egypt, YHWH has new challenges to overcome as Israel's ruler. He exalted himself as a master above all others and proved capable of instilling chaos amidst the Egyptian civil society, but does that extend to his military might? What would happen should YHWH lead his newborn nation into war? YHWH seems painfully aware of this gap in his identity before Israel:

וַיְהִי בְשִׁלַח פְּרָעָה אֶת־הָעָם וְלֹא־נָחַם אֱלֹהִים דָּרָךְ אֲרָץ פְּלִשְׁתִּים כִּי קָרוֹב הוּא  
 כִּי אָמַר אֱלֹהִים פְּנֵי־יִצְחָק הָעָם בְּרֵאתָם מִלְחָמָה וְשָׁבוּ מִצְרָיִמָה:  
 וַיִּסַּב אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָעָם דָּרָךְ הַמִּדְבָּר יַם־סוּף וְחַמְשִׁים עָלוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֲרָץ מִצְרָיִם:

And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God led them not through the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, Lest peradventure the people repent when they see war, and they return to Egypt. But God led the people about, through the way of the wilderness of the Red sea: and the children of Israel went up harnessed out of the land of Egypt. (Ex. 13:17-18)

God knows his victory is still too frail to be taken for granted, and that facing the many Egyptian fortresses along the coastal route to Canaan<sup>22</sup> is tantamount to political suicide. He leads Israel through an alternative route in the wilderness, and soon develops a plan in order to close this last gap in his identity:

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:  
 דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְשָׁבוּ וַיִּחַנּוּ לִפְנֵי פִי הַחִירָת בֵּין מִגְדֹּל  
 וּבֵין הַיָּם לִפְנֵי בַעַל צִפּוֹן נִחְחוּ תַחְנוּ עַל־הַיָּם:  
 וְאָמַר פְּרָעָה לְבָנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל נִבְכִים הֵם בְּאֲרָץ סָגֵר עֲלֵיהֶם הַמִּדְבָּר:  
 וְחִזְקוּתִי אֶת־לִב־פְּרָעָה וְרַדְף אֲחֲרֵיהֶם וְאַפְכָדָה בַּפְּרָעָה וּבְכָל־חֵילוֹ

<sup>22</sup> “Since the days of Pharaoh Seti I (ca. 1305-1290 B.C.E), the coastal road to Canaan had been heavily fortified by the Egyptians.” (SARNA, 1991, p. 50)

וַיִּדְעוּ מִצְרַיִם כִּי־אֲנִי יְהוָה וַיַּעֲשׂוּ־כֵן:

And YHWH spake unto Moses, saying: Speak unto the children of Israel, that they turn and encamp before Pihahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, over against Baalzephon: before it shall ye encamp by the sea. For Pharaoh will say of the children of Israel, They are entangled in the land, the wilderness hath shut them in. And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, that he shall follow after them; and I will be honoured upon Pharaoh, and upon all his host; that the Egyptians may know that I am YHWH. And they did so. (Ex. 14:1-4)

The God of Israel will lead his people into an ambush and manipulate the heart of his enemy once more in order to exalt himself on military grounds as well. When the Egyptians arrive at the Israelite encampment, YHWH's fears prove to be well founded: in face of danger, the people even say they would rather serve Egypt than die in the wilderness (Ex. 14:11-12). They are ominously quick to dismiss deliverance from their new master and do not even consider fighting the Egyptians under YHWH's banner, even though they left Egypt "harnessed" for battle (Ex. 13:18). Moses also seems privy to the political dilemma faced by YHWH, since his words of reassurance have clear military connotations (Ex. 14:13-14):

The three rhetorical and challenging questions of his people are answered with three successive and reassuring imperatives: "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and experience [NRSV, see] the deliverance" that God will perform (14:13). The first of these commands is one commonly used in military contexts, to steady the troops before battle (...) The second command may also be a technical military term for assuming battle readiness (as when Goliath takes his stand in 1 Sam 17:16). The third command is especially noteworthy in its use of the term "salvation" (...) used often and prominently in the Hebrew Bible (...) in association with the military victories of various Israelite leaders, in particular those attributed to divine intervention.<sup>23</sup>

According to Moses, then, Israel just has to be silent while YHWH wages the war for them (Ex. 14:14) — a war which, just as in Ex. 7:8-13, is also implied to be a cosmic battle for a new creation:

וַיִּט מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדוֹ עַל־הַיָּם וַיִּוָּלֶךְ יְהוָה אֶת־הַיָּם בְּרוּחַ קָדִים עֲנָה כָּל־הַלְּיָלָה  
וַיִּשָׂם אֶת־הַיָּם לְהַרְבֵּה וַיִּבְקְעוּ הַמַּיִם:  
וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתוֹךְ הַיָּם בַּיַּבֵּשׁ וַהֲמַיִם לָהֶם חֲמָה מִיַּמִּינָם וּמִשְׂמָאלָם:

And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and YHWH caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea upon the dry ground: and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left. (Ex. 14:21-22)

The scene clearly evokes the creation of the world in Genesis; both present God's wind or spirit (רוּחַ) agitating the waters (Gn. 1:2), and in both cases the waters are gathered in order to make the dry ground (יַבֵּשׁ) appear (Gn. 1:9).<sup>24</sup> This is not only an act of deliverance, but it

<sup>23</sup> MEYERS, 2005, pp. 139-140.

<sup>24</sup> CHWARTS, 2017.

comes on the level of discourse as the creation of a new humanity by YHWH. Consequently, the story also draws heavily from the ANE imagery of deities securing sovereignty and creating the world after defeating the primordial, watery forces of chaos.<sup>25</sup>

Such a depiction has enormous implications for the identity of YHWH as a ruler and as a military commander. Egypt itself recognizes that YHWH is waging war for Israel (Ex. 14:25), and Israel finally believes in “YHWH and in Moses, his servant” (Ex. 14:31), something YHWH had intended all along (Ex. 4:1, 5). In the Song of the Sea (Ex. 15) the people themselves draw the parallel between Egypt and the forces of chaos, calling YHWH the “man of war” (Ex. 15:3) and drawing from ANE epic poetry motifs:

The threat of the Egyptians to the Israelites is assimilated into the wider notion of primordial dangers, and the victory of order and the vanquishing of the enemy are epitomized by God's rescue of the Israelites at the sea. The vocabulary of conquest is inevitably military, and the language of the poem is accordingly replete with divine warrior imagery.<sup>26</sup>

The victory of YHWH is both transcendent and particular in the eyes of the Israelites. It renders them a free nation once and for all; they are not to be made in the likeness of Egypt anymore, but of YHWH, which is tantamount to a new creation of the world by their God. Moreover, the episode of the Sea is also universal in its political impact — the Song depicts all the inhabitants of the Promised Land as shaken to the core by news of YHWH's victory (Ex. 15:14-15), a theme that will be resumed later in the narratives of Joshua (Jos. 2:10-11). The name of YHWH is indeed proclaimed throughout the known world.

## Conclusion

The narrative of Ex. 14 ends optimistically, with Israel finally believing in YHWH and Moses, and after three months in the wilderness YHWH will show himself to his people, forging a new covenant and at last establishing himself as the divine king of Israel (Ex. 19-24). But the optimism is short-lived: while still celebrating their new covenant with YHWH, Israel crafts and worships a golden calf, being severely punished and almost wiped out by their God (Ex. 32-34). Interestingly, the people are only spared because Moses appeals to the stain in YHWH's reputation should he wipe Israel out (Ex. 32:12); but the same argument will fail to move God from his purpose on the borders of Canaan (Num. 14:15-16), and the entire generation of Israelites who left Egypt will be doomed to die in the wilderness (Num. 14:28-35).

The narratives of Exodus 3-14 show a God who is deeply dependent upon being acknowledged by his chosen people, and who will go to unimaginable lengths to secure his identity as their ruler. He will give Israel a multitude of wonders and signs, and will even manipulate his enemy's will in order to keep the show going. He moves both sides as pawns in a fixed game, whose sole purpose is to have YHWH's name to be “declared throughout the earth” (Ex. 9:16), and will even ambush his own people in order to achieve his aims (Ex. 14). But “even an Almighty versed in psychology may weary of playing to an unappreciate gallery;”<sup>27</sup> and once established as Israel's ruler YHWH will find that his is a forgetful nation,

<sup>25</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between the Hebrew Bible and the Chaostkampf motif, cf. TSUMURA (2005).

<sup>26</sup> MEYERS, 2005, p. 119.

<sup>27</sup> STERNBERG, 1987, p. 109.

always willing to exchange YHWH's wonders and promises for their previously cruel, but safe and tangible, servitude. The point is to be taken both by the God in the story and the people in the audience: signs and wonders may not be enough, but there's no rescuing someone previously redeemed by YHWH. There's no turning back from the wilderness once the sea is crossed.

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