

## Reading Exodus to Learn and Learning to Read Exodus

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Those who read little, learn little about reading; but the little they learn is applied to all they read. Contemporary devotional reading of Scripture has much in common with the fragmentary approach of the critics a generation ago: here a verse, there a clause, everywhere a tidbit. But, with the possible exception of individual proverbs,<sup>1</sup> biblical texts do not suffer fragmentary reading willingly nor with impunity. Like a love letter, they are meant to be read in their entirety, from beginning to end. Only by reading and rereading will the addressed lover encounter the depth of the sentiments expressed and thus learn to read the letter as it was intended to be heard. That takes time, commitment, and concentration. Unlike a love letter, however, reading of Scripture is a communal activity. We do not come to Scripture *de novo*; we read through the well-informed eyes of our ancestors in the faith. By reading and rereading in their light, we learn to read Scripture, we hope, as it was intended to be heard. In addition to time, commitment, and concentration, this will require the humility to listen to those who have gone before us.

Of course, reading starts with the text itself. But, what is the shape of the text? Where do we begin and end? When we select a novel by P. D. James or a sonnet by Browning, the question seems almost impertinent. But a comparison of commentaries on the Pentateuch published in this century will reveal great disagreement: Pentateuch, Hexateuch, or Tetrateuch? Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and so forth, or J, E, JE, D, or P, or maybe the Sinai pericope (Ex. 19-Num. 10:10)?<sup>2</sup> Similarly the extent of pericopes within Exodus: 1:1-2:25 or 1:1-2:22? 2:23-4:17 or 3:1-4:31? In this article, I will read the text traditionally known as Exodus using six steps that will require time, commitment, and concentration.

1 The social use of proverbs appears to give them an independent existence. Nevertheless, whether social or literary, proverbs function in context. In Scripture they are all embedded in larger textual reality. See Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, *Context and Meaning in Proverbs 25-27*, SBL Dissertations Series 96 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

2The documentary hypothesis is now in disarray, its relationship to the newer literary reading of Scripture is not at all clear. See the work of Terence E. Fretheim. *Exodus. Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox. 1991). 5-7; idem, *The Pentateuch*, *Interpreting Biblical Texts* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

## Defining Six Steps for Reading to Learn

## The Beginning and Ending of the Text

Before reading the entire narrative it is helpful to become familiar with the beginning and ending of the text.<sup>3</sup> Examining these will alert the reader to the narrative problem and its basic themes, usually defined at the beginning, and the manner of their treatment and resolution at the end. Familiarity with the rhetorical device of repetition of key words and phrases will enable the reader to recognize the parameters within which the narrative unfolds. This technique discloses the frame<sup>4</sup> within which the narrative action takes place and the frame that limits the reader's narrative field of reference. For example, after determining that Exodus 1-40 is the object of our analysis, study of the desert narrative will be limited to 15:22-18:27. It will exclude the desert narrative in Numbers, except for purposes of comparison.<sup>5</sup> Within the parameters described by the text's beginning and ending, it will be the reader's task to fix precisely what the text says, and to explain how the text does so. The same mechanism applies to the definition of pericopes within Exodus.

## Reading the Entire Text

Consideration of the beginning and ending naturally leads to the following step: to discern the relationship between the beginning and the ending by reading the entire text, observing throughout the reading how the initial motifs, or narrative problem, develop to a final resolution. While this step assumes that the text between the beginning and ending is capable of development or organization, it does not determine the nature of that organization. Thus, the narrative order of the text is not imposed, nor predetermined, but searched out. Reading the entire text in one sitting is preferable in order to receive the maximum impact of the narrative's continuity and development. If this is not possible, two or three sittings will do.

<sup>3</sup> The importance of understanding the beginning and ending of a literary unit was emphasized by James Muilenburg ("Form Criticism and Beyond," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 [1996]: 12-13): "The first concern of the rhetorical critic. . . is to define the limits or scope of the literary unit, to recognize how it begins and how it ends. . . . A second clue for determining the scope of a pericope is to discern the relation of beginning to end, where the opening words are repeated or paraphrased at the close. . . ." In his study of the Pentateuch (*The Pentateuch*, 43-56), Fretheim discusses the beginning and ending of the Pentateuch.

<sup>4</sup> The consequences of breaking such a frame and the significance of a text are discussed by Erich Auerbach when treating the secularization of the medieval mystery plays, in Erich Auerbach, "Adam and Eve," in *The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 160.

<sup>5</sup> Under the influence of the critical methodologies these two distinct narrative units were often treated harmonistically.

### Key Words and Phrases

Throughout this reading, the reader should note the themes that are developed and the new ones being introduced. These are often indicated by key words or phrases. A keyword, or phrase, is

repeated meaningfully within a text or series of texts. Not every word or root which is repeated within a text or sequence of texts can be considered a key word. In this connection attention should be paid to three aspects: (1) how frequently the word is used in the Bible; (2) how frequently the word is used within the text or series of texts; (3) how near the repeated words are as regards their position in the text. The greater the frequency of the word in the Bible, the more densely should it occur (more often or with greater proximity); and the rarer it is, the less intensively need it occur (less often and at a greater distance).<sup>6</sup>

The clustering of key words in a text and their reappearance or absence in subsequent, or slightly different contexts, contribute to meaning of the text by way of commentary, analysis, anticipation, or dramatic assertion. Sometimes a key word repetition involves paranomasia, a play on words, by means of a small vowel or consonantal change.

Consider the following examples from Genesis.<sup>7</sup> The word there (אֵשֶׁת) plays a crucial role in Genesis 11:1-9. In this brief narrative there refers not only to the place of humanity's gathering but also to the location from which the Lord scatters them. At the same time, name (שֵׁם) occurs twice: Humanity wants to make a name for itself; it receives a name from the Lord-Babel, "confusion." Thus, there where humanity wanted a name, becomes the there from which humanity is expelled and where it receives a name. Significantly, שֵׁם, the word name reappears in Genesis 12:2. The Lord will make Abram's name great, not Abram in the style of Babel. Another significant repetition in the Babel narrative, the phrase, "all the earth" (כָּל־הָאָרֶץ) occurs once at the beginning, twice in the development of the narrative, and twice in the last verse. As with the words there and name, this phrase participates in the divine reversal of human intentions. Both of these keywords and phrases frame the text with vocabulary crucial for the depiction of the text's central action and for defining the outside limits of the text. The mini clusters of the key words and the key phrase at the end of the text underscore its central interest and the reversal. Thus, key words and phrases not only contribute to understanding the significance of the text but also to its structure.

<sup>6</sup> Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989), 212.

<sup>7</sup> From here on, Gen. 11:1-9 will be the illustrative example.

### The Organization of the Text

A single reading of a text is insufficient to determine the narrative order, organization, or structure of the text. Several attentive readings of the text that include examination of the beginning and end of the narrative, its development, and the occurrence and location of key words prepare the reader for the next step: an examination of the text to determine its organization or structure. Staying with our example of Genesis 11:1-9, the following observations are pertinent. An examination of the narrative and speech portions shows that in verses 1-4, the narrative focuses on what the human community proposes to do in order to prevent being scattered about the earth. But in verse 5, the text switches to the divine perspective. When God comes down to examine the situation, his speech of reversal mimics the residents' speech ("Come, let us . . .," vv. 3, 4; "Come, let us . . .," v. 7). Thus, the narrative movement from the expressed desire of "all the earth" to build community and a reputation, to the divine response that ends in the dispersal of the community with an unwanted reputation, suggests that the text is composed of two scenes: verses 1-4 and 5-9. Verse 5 functions as the pivot upon which the reversal turns: "But the Lord came down. . . ." <sup>8</sup>

This brief study of Genesis 11:1-9 also suggests four criteria for discerning the text's constituent parts, either internally or in relationship to its context. First there is a **significant shift in major characters**, from the human to the divine; or place, from the perspective of the earth to that of heaven. The inclusions or frames created by the appearance of **שָׁם** and **כָּל־הָאָרֶץ** at the beginning and ending of the text is an example of how, second, framing repetitions are useful devices for uncovering the structure of a text. Third, **iconographic grouping** around a particular theme, present in Genesis 11:1-9 in the moving toward a place for unity and the scattering from that place provides narrative unity. Hence, the shift to another theme also suggests that the narrative is moving to depict another concern. Finally, the presence of a **culminating, or summarizing scene** at the end of a series of **episodic** scenes, indicates the end of a narrative section. Genesis 11:1-9 itself is the last narrative scene of Geneses 1:1-11:26 (Gen. 11:10-26 is genealogical). The first two criteria for distinguishing scenes are well known and acknowledged in biblical and literary studies; the others merit further consideration. I will briefly discuss these with reference to ancient Near Eastern pictorial narrative.

Irene J. Winter's study of the Standard of Ur shows that the narrative is composed of a series of registers. Reading from the bottom up,

<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed exposition of this text and other factors for determining the structure, see J. P. Fokkhean, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1975), 11-45. For a briefer analysis, see Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Waco: Word, 1987), 234-46.

the horizontal registers progress from battle chariots at the bottom to the gathering of prisoners in the middle to the presentation of the prisoners before a larger central figure, presumably a ruler, at the top. On the other side, the scene proceeds from the amassing of pack animals and goods in the lower register to the procession of food animals and men bearing fish in the middle to the banquet in the upper register that is again dominated by a slightly larger figure in a flounced skirt, probably the ruler. In fact, the dominant, primary position of the ruler at the center of the upper register of the battle side, the culmination of the sequence, is comparable to the position of Eannatum in the upper register of the Stele of Vultures.<sup>9</sup>

According to Winter each register is unique in its depiction by means of the technique of **iconographic grouping**, in which each register is dominated by one central image or icon: amassing for battle, presentation of prisoners, and so forth. The juxtaposition of the individual registers forms a series of episodes whose narrative progression is linear and tends to a particular image that the artist wants to impress upon the audience. This impression the artist places at the end of a series of narrative reliefs, in the *culminating scene*, a register that summarizes the essence of the antecedent account by depicting the central event and its major characters. According to Ann Perkins, the culminating scene depicts "one group of figures, one moment of time, at the climax of a series of events."<sup>10</sup>

Iconographic grouping and the culminating scene as organizational devices are not foreign to biblical literature. For example, Ian Parker Kim argues that the "disappearance of three royal enemies in the first part of the frame story is paralleled by the appearance of three royal enemies in the second part of the frame story."<sup>11</sup> Grouping of particular characters serves to segment a particular unit and helps us to understand some of its thematic significance. Genesis 11:1-9 fits Perkins' definition of a culminating scene. It stands at the end of a series of events (from creation to this narrative moment), there is a basic group of figures (the Lord and the descendants of Adam [בְּנֵי הָאָדָם 11:5]) at one

<sup>9</sup> Irene J. Winter, "After the Battle Is Over: *The Stele of Vultures* and the Beginning of Historical Narrative in the Art of the Ancient Near East," in *Pictorial Narrative in Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, ed. Herbert L. Kessler and Marianna Shreve Simpson (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1985), 19. See also her "Royal Rhetoric and the Development of Historical Narrative in Neo-Assyrian Reliefs," *Studies in Visual Communication* 7 (1981):2-38. These studies develop concepts presented in a 1955 symposium on visual narrative. See articles by Carl H. Kraeling, Ann Perkins, and Hans G. Gilterbock in volume 61 (1957) of the *American Journal of Archaeology*. I developed this material in relationship to Exodus in my, "An Iconography of Order: Kingship in Exodus. A Study of the Structure of Exodus" (Th.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1992). See also Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, *The Place of Narrative: Mural Decoration in Italian Churches, 431-1600* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

<sup>10</sup> Ann Perkins, "Narration in Babylonian Art," *American Journal of Archaeology* 61 (1957): 55.

<sup>11</sup> Ian Parker Kim, "Repetition as a Structuring Device in 1 Kings I-11," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 42 (1988): 42.

moment in time (the expulsion by confusion). The image this scene leaves behind is clear: Adam's descendants cannot thwart the Lord's purposes, they will have to take account of heaven in all their cultural activities.

### The Argument

The first four steps constitute a geographic reconnaissance of the text in which the reader becomes familiar with the landscape of the text; its hills, valleys, straight places, and unexpected features. Moving from this reconnaissance to the text's significance without keeping its major features in mind allows the reader to forget or avoid parts of the textual landscape. For example, discussions of the Babel passage often emphasize the tower but forget both the city and the fact that after the Lord's descent, they stopped building the city, not the tower. (Artistic representations of this narrative often depict an unfinished tower.) By neglecting the city, the reader can also ignore the city-state imperial structure of that time, a not unimportant feature for hearing the text. Similarly, Exodus commentaries often pay only lip service to the tabernacle section, although it occupies ten chapters of the narrative. Such a practice can only result in a superficial grasp of the text's significance.

Thus, after reviewing the beginning and the ending, understanding the development of the narrative with its key words and phrases, and discerning the structure or narrative order, it is important to state the argument<sup>12</sup> of the text. The argument, the subject of the discourse or an outline, not a debate or controversy, consists of a reduced narration of what the text recounts in great detail; at the same time it preserves substantively the most important details. The purpose of this exercise is to fix most exactly and clearly what the surface structure of the narrative states before moving on to the significance of the text. By using the text's own narrative sequence and vocabulary, closeness to the text is best preserved. Stating the argument of the text is the crucial first step toward understanding its purpose or intention. As an example, I suggest the following as the argument of Genesis 11:1-9:

When all the earth was of one speech people gathered at Shinar. There they decided to build a city with a tower to make a name for themselves and to keep from being scattered over the earth. The Lord came down to see the

<sup>12</sup> Calvin prefaces his commentary on Genesis with an argument. See his *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis*, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 57-66. The argument proper is stated on pp. 64-65. For further discussion on *argument* and *scope* see Gerald T. Sheppard, "Between Reformation and Modern Commentary: The Perception of the Scope of Biblical Books," in *A Commentary on Galatians: William Perkins, Pilgrim Classic Commentaries*, ed. Gerald T. Sheppard (New York: Pilgrim, 1989), xlviii-lxxvii. A good contemporary example of the argument, called the story line, of the Pentateuch is found in Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 31-33. Because Genesis 11:1-9 is short, the argument seems inordinately long. This is the result of paying close attention to several key words that are crucial for the text's significance.

city and its tower Adam's descendants were building. Having determined to confound them by confusing their language, the Lord scattered them over the whole earth, so they stopped building the city. He called the city Babel because from there he confused their language and scattered them over all the earth.

Note how I have maintained the text's indefinite subject "they" until they are defined as "Adam's descendants" in the context of the Lord's descent (v. 5). This crucial conjunction of subjects in the middle of the text coincides with the pivot fiat divides the text into two subunits. Naming the Babel builders "Adam's descendants" also links this text with the beginning of human history and the first city builder, Cain, firstborn son of Adam (Gen. 4:17) .

### The Theme

When the argument of the text is clearly formulated, including the essential details of the text, it is possible to define the theme of the text. By removing the details of the argument, the theme appears as the clearest expression of what the author wants to communicate. Thus, the theme of Genesis 11:1-9 is: *The Lord scatters the descendants of Adam over the whole earth by confusing their language at Babel.*

In summary, the steps for an attentive reading<sup>13</sup> of the text are: (1) Examine the beginning and ending of the narrative. (2) Read the entire text to uncover the development of the text. (3) Identify the key words and phrases. (4) Determine the text's organization or structure.<sup>14</sup> (5) State the argument of the text. (6) Formulate the theme of the text. In the rest of this article, I will use these steps to read Exodus.

## Learning to Read Exodus

### The Beginning and Ending

An examination of the beginning and ending of Exodus uncovers several themes indicated by the repetition of key words or phrases. They are blessing, filling the earth, building, slavery, and the mountain. Together they form the frame within which the narrative action takes place. I will briefly examine each one of these elements of the frame.

<sup>13</sup> These ideas for reading a text are based on the work of Fernando Lázaro Carreter and Evaristo Correa Calderon, *Como se comenta un texto literario* (How to Explain a Literary Text [Madrid: Ediciones Catedra, 1980]).

<sup>14</sup> As discussed above, the following would be involved in the definition of structure: (a) major change in characters or shift of location, (b) framing repetitions, (c) iconographic grouping, and, (d) culminating scene.

*From Blessing to Blessing*

After reviewing the arrival of Jacob and his sons, the opening verses of chapter 1 recall Joseph's earlier arrival and his death. But death will not be the last word for these descendants of Abraham, for they live under the marvellous promise of blessing (Gen. 15:5; 22:17). Using the familiar words of the blessing from Genesis 1:28; and 9:1,7, repeated to the patriarchs (Gen. 17:2, 6; 26:4, 23; 35:11), the Exodus narrative counters death in Joseph's generation: "but the Israelites were fruitful (פָּרָה) and multiplied greatly (רָבָה וְשָׂרְצָה) and became exceedingly numerous (עָצַם), so that the land was filled (מָלְא) with them" (1:7). The Lord's promise of blessing to Israel is fulfilled in Egypt more than that, since these words echo the blessing spoken in Genesis 1 and 9, the Lord's benediction upon all the descendants of Adam and Eve (the nations) is also partially fulfilled. That is, even as all the world came to Egypt to be saved from death by famine through the work of Joseph son of Abraham (Gen. 41:56-57), so now in Egypt, what God wanted for the world is coming true through the instrumentality of Abraham (Gen. 12:3). Exodus begins with a word of blessing, and it reminds the reader that what God began to do with Abraham is being fulfilled in Egypt.

Exodus also ends with blessing. After Israel makes the tent of meeting, its furnishings, and the priestly apparel, we read: "The Israelites had done all the work just as the Lord had commanded Moses. Moses inspected the work and saw that they had done it just as the Lord had commanded. So Moses blessed them" (39:42-43). Two things are remarkable about this text: its echo of Genesis 1:31-2:3 and the object of Moses' blessing.

Parallels between Exodus 39-40 and Genesis 1:31-2:3 have long been recognized.<sup>15</sup> Pertinent are the following texts:

Genesis	Exodus
God saw all that he had made (כל אשר עשה) and it (והנה) was very good. (1:31)	Moses inspected the work (כל המלאכה) and saw that they had done it (והנה עשו אותה) just as the Lord had commanded 39:43
Thus the heavens and earth were completed (ויכלו) in all (וכל) their vast array. (2:1)	So was completed all (ותכל כל) the work on the Tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting. (39:32)
God finished the work he had been doing (. . . ויכל אלהים) (מלאכתו אשר עשה) (2:2)	And so Moses finished the work. (ויכל משה את המלאכה) (40:33)

<sup>15</sup> Nehama Leibowitz discusses Abranavel's and Rashi's comments on the parallels. She also states that Martin Buber discovered seven correspondences between the creation and tabernacle accounts. See her *Studies in Shemot: Part Two*, trans. Aryeh Newman (Jerusalem: World Zionist Association, 1983), 479. See also Moshe Weinfeld, "Sabbath, Temple and the Enthronement of the Lord—the Problem of the Sitz im Leben of Gen. 1: 1-2:3," in *Melanges bibliques et orientaux en l'honneur de M. Henri Gazelles*, ed. A. Caquot and M. Delcor (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1981), 501-12.

And God blessed (וַיְבָרֶךְ) the seventh day. (2:3)

So Moses blessed them (אַתֶּם וַיְבָרֶךְ) (39:43)

These parallel texts in Exodus describe Israel and Moses doing what God does in Genesis: the work of creation and blessing. Minimally this suggests that the activities of creating and making the tabernacle are linked--maximally that they are analogical--the tabernacle being a microcosm of the creation. This analogy is reinforced by the reference to Israel's work on the tabernacle (מִשְׁכַּן כָּל־עֲבֹדָתוֹ, 39:32) and its echo in Genesis 2:15, where Adam and Eve are instructed to work (עָבַד) and guard (Gen. 2:15) the garden in God's presence. Gordon J. Wenham has argued that these verbs are only used elsewhere to describe the Levites' duty in working and guarding the tabernacle. He concludes that "if Eden is seen. . . as an ideal sanctuary, then perhaps Adam should be described as an archetypal Levite."<sup>16</sup> If this is a correct reading, it suggests that Israel's work (עֲבֹדָה)<sup>17</sup> on the tabernacle is similar to that of Adam's: priestly activity in the mediate presence of God.

Strikingly, after finishing their "priestly" work, the Israelites bring the appurtenances of the tabernacle to Moses and he blesses them, even as God had blessed Adam and Eve (Gen. 1:28). At the end of Exodus, the descendants of Adam and Eve by way of Abraham receive Moses' blessing. Unlike the rest of Adam's descendants who continue life outside of God's presence, these children of Adam and Abraham are beginning to enjoy the presence of God again and to do the work for which all of Adam's descendants were created.

The blessing of Moses in Exodus 39, then, fulfills a double duty: It recalls God's blessing depicted at the opening of Genesis as well as the blessing to which Exodus 1:7 refers by means of its vocabulary. Thus, the ending of Exodus links Israel to God's universal purposes both by recalling the beginning of the biblical narrative and by the particularist application of the blessing at the beginning of Exodus--an application operative in the Old Testament epoch of the biblical narrative. It is the particularist application of blessing, by reference to Israel's growth and priestly work in the Lord's mediate presence, that forms a frame for the Exodus narrative.

#### *From the Filling of the Land to the Filling of the Earth*

As a result of the Lord's blessing, Abraham's descendants fill the land (אַתֶּם וַיִּמְלְאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ, 1:7; cf. Gen. 1:28: (וַיִּמְלְאוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ) of Egypt. In the opinion of the lord of the land, Israel's swarming multitudes threatens its stability. With

<sup>16</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, "Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story." in *Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies: Division A, the Period of the Bible* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1986), 21.

<sup>17</sup> This noun along with עָבַד and the verb עָבַד; form an important cluster of key words that focus the narrative on Israel's servitude, whether that of Pharaoh or of the Lord. 19

Babel-like language<sup>18</sup> the text describes Pharaoh's cruel attempts to contain Israel, but the harder he works them the more Israel grows (1:12, 20) and, presumably, fills the land. At the end of the narrative, after Moses assembles the tabernacle "the glory of the Lord filled (מָלֵא) the tabernacle" (40:34, 35). This key word repetition of the verb "to fill" forms an inclusio for the book. What, is the relationship between the occurrences of this verb at the beginning and ending of Exodus?

"The land" (הָאָרֶץ) can refer to a specific country such as Canaan (Gen. 12:1), or the whole earth as in Genesis 1:1, 28. Egypt is obviously the primary referent in Exodus 1:7, but its specific blessing vocabulary recalls Genesis 1:28, which focuses on the whole earth. This requires that "the land" in 1:7 perform double duty, a task that supplies a profound ambiguity in 1:7: Israel's filling of the land of Egypt is not only a realization of God's promises to Abraham but also a partial realization of the Lord's purposes for Adam's descendants--to fill the whole earth. Again, the redemptively particular work of the Lord is linked with his originally universal purposes.

Similarly the Lord's "filling" the tabernacle in Exodus 40. Numbers 14:21 states what is apparently a present reality: "as surely as the glory of the Lord fills the whole earth" (וַיִּמְלֵא כְבוֹד־יְהוָה אֶת־כָּל־הָאָרֶץ), as do the words of the cherubim: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa. 6:3). This reality, that the whole earth is full of the glory of the Lord, is only revealed to Israel at this point (cf. Ps. 147:19-20); it is not acknowledged by the rest of Adam's descendants. According to Paul, it is sinfully ignored (Rom. 1:18-20). But in Israel's midst this reality is anticipated by the Lord's filling of the tabernacle, the microcosm of the creation. Thus, Israel's filling of "the land" and the Lord's filling of the tabernacle both anticipate subsequent redemptive acts that will more fully disclose this truth (John 1:14): the Lord fills the earth (Acts 1:8) with his people (Acts 2:4; Eph. 1:23; Col. 2:10).

#### *From Building for Egypt to Construction in the Presence of God*

Pharaoh's fear of Israel's rapid growth generates his decision to force Israel to build the store cities of Pithom and Rameses. The decision to limit Israel's growth by subordinating her strength to the extension of Pharaoh's renown sets him in conflict with the Lord's promise to bless Israel by immense growth. It is not strange, therefore, that the construction materials, "mortar and bricks" (בָּחֶמֶר וּבְלִבְנִים) recall the Babel episode (Gen. 11:3). This paradigmatic episode for human cultural rebellion against God now functions as the hermeneutical background that defines Pharaoh's action as a challenge against the Creator. But his challenge fails; Abraham's descendants swarm all over Egypt (1:7, 12). Nevertheless, Pharaoh insists on yoking (עֲבַד), 1:13, 14)

<sup>18</sup> Note the imperative plus cohortative construction הָבֵה נְתַחֲמָה in 1:10 and the building materials: brick and mortar in 1:14 (cf. Gen. 11:3, 4).

Israel to the interests of his rule; their work (עֲבֹדָה), 1:13, 14) will build Pharaoh's store cities (עָרֵי מִסְכָּנוֹת), 1:11).

At the beginning of Exodus, Israel, vassals of the Lord because they are Abraham's descendants, is Pharaoh's de facto vassal people; they work to build his store cities (עָרֵי מִסְכָּנוֹת). When the Lord acknowledges their cries, he remembers his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (2:23-25) and begins a process that ends in Pharaoh's defeat, Israel's rescue, and a formal covenant ceremony that makes them his special people (19:4-6). At the end of the narrative, they are still building, but now they are constructing the tabernacle (מִשְׁכָּן + עֲבֹדָה, 39:32). Thus, the text links Israel's work on the cities and Lord's dwellingplace by assonance: *miskan/mishkan*. With this wordplay, the text constructs a frame for the narrative: the building of the kingdom of Pharaoh and the building that expresses the reign of God.

#### *From the Land of Slavery to the Land of Service*

In addition to Israel's growth, Pharaoh fears that Israel may "go up from the land" (וַעֲלֶה מִן־הָאָרֶץ, 1:10). Their leaving implies a loss of valuable service and a loss of face for Pharaoh.<sup>19</sup> But, by the end of the narrative, Israel is on the way, although not on their own; their movements depend upon the lifting (עֲלָה) of the glory cloud from the tabernacle (40:36, 37<sup>2</sup>).

Israel is on the way to the Promised Land. Although the words the land do not occur at the end of the narrative, the audience knows the promise that the Lord will take them from Egypt, "to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (וַיִּבֶן הָלֶבֶד וַיִּדְבֹּשׁ, וַיֹּלְהֵעֵלְתוּ מִן־הָאָרֶץ הַהִוא אֶל־אֶרֶץ טוֹבָה וְרַחֲבָה אֶל־אֶרֶץ, 3:8). The verb "to bring up" (עֲלָה) is also used to depict the movement of the glory cloud from the tabernacle (40:36-38). Israel has become a pilgrim community, but does not wander aimlessly in the desert; the glory cloud leads. Thus, the goal is clear: The Lord is directing them toward the land of Abraham's hope (Gen. 12:1), there to serve him alone (עֲבָד, 23:24, 25).

#### *From the Mountain to the Tabernacle*

In the opening scene of Exodus 3, God speaks to Moses from the burning bush in the vicinity of "the mountain of God." In the presence of this theophanic fire (וַיִּשַׁע, 3:3<sup>2</sup>) Moses must remove his shoes. Similarly, when the fire appears on Mt. Sinai,<sup>20</sup> God prohibits Israel from coming close, lest they die

<sup>19</sup> Moshe Greenberg writes that "our story assumes that Pharaoh claimed absolute authority over all in his domain. For the Israelites to win their freedom . . . would not have been so much a loss to Egypt's economy . . . as a blow to that authority." Later, concerning the phrase, "going up from Egypt," he comments that it "is thematic to the whole account of the Egyptian sojourn." See his *Understanding Exodus* (New York: Behrman House, 1969), 22-23.

(19:13). After the covenant has been sealed, Israel sees the glory of God as "a consuming fire" (אֵשׁ אֹכֵלֶת, 24:17) in contrast to "the bush which did not burn" (וְהַסִּנֵּה אֵינֶנּוּ אֹכֵל, 3:2). The fire of the Lord's presence is potentially life threatening for Israel. At the end of the narrative this dangerous presence is in Israel's midst, hovering over the tabernacle (40:38). The theophanic fire is also part of the frame that encloses the Exodus narrative.

### Conclusion

The frame of Exodus enables an integral reading of the narrative by compelling the reader to account for the whole text according to its elements as repeated at the beginning and the ending. Recognizing these elements will guide the reading of the entire text by reminding the reader of the narrative threads interwoven throughout the text and by moving the reader toward the consciously designed ending.<sup>21</sup> Attention to these elements and the way they develop also helps avoid a tendentious or partial interpretation.<sup>22</sup> This frame tells the reader that the narrator takes Israel from slavery to Pharaoh to service in the presence of God. The narrator tells this story by organizing the paragraphs, or subunits, into the narrative before us. So that the audience will properly hear this narrative, essential to its being and survival, it is crucial to discern the limits, organization, and juxtaposition of these subunits.

### The Development of the Narrative

Reading Exodus from beginning to ending helps the reader to become familiar with the landscape of the text so that subsequent detailed study is anchored in and shaped by the contours of the text's particular interests. Such a reconnaissance seeks answers to questions such as: What is happening? Who is involved? What literary devices shape the narrative? Where do significant

<sup>20</sup> The bush (הַסִּנֵּה) anticipates Sinai (סִינַי), as do Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, 69-70, Fretheim, *Exodus*, 55; and Benno Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus*, Trans. with an introduction by Walter Jacob (Hoboken, NJ.: KTAV, 1992), 50.

<sup>21</sup> It is important to recognize that canonical literature is read often, that the reader does not come to the text de novo, but time and again. Unlike mystery novels, it is crucial to read the Bible, and the individual books within it, in the light of the ending. Without the ending, of Exodus or Scripture as a whole, we would be engaged in a "hopeless" reading.

<sup>22</sup> For example, readings of Exodus that focus primarily on the liberation from Egypt such as J. Severino Croatto, *Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom* (New York: Maryknoll, 1981) Jorge V. Pixley, *On Exodus: A Liberationist Perspective* trans. Robert R Barr (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1987); or, a reading that reduces to a minimum the interpretation of the tabernacle narrative such as Rita J. Burns, *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers with Excurses on Feasts/Ritual and Typology* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1983), 180-81. This is typical of many commentaries on Exodus.

changes in texture occur? What are the markers that indicate such changes? Now that some of these questions have been addressed in the opening and closing chapters of Exodus, I turn to a first reading of the text to discern the development of the narrative.

### Reading Exodus from Beginning to End

The opening chapters introduce the protagonists of the narrative: Israel, Pharaoh, Moses, and the Lord. They also define the narrative problem: Pharaoh's oppression of Israel. This oppression occasions the conflict between him and Israel's Lord. The conflict develops when Pharaoh rebuffs God's messengers, denies knowing the Lord (5:2), refuses to let Israel go, and increases her burdens. Through Moses, the Lord announces the plagues that will cause Pharaoh, Egypt (7:5, 17; 8:22; 9:14), and Israel (10:2) to know that the Lord is God alone. These plagues will also proclaim his power to the nations (9:16). But Pharaoh stubbornly refuses. When the tenth plague overwhelms Egypt's firstborns on Passover night, Pharaoh relents and sends Israel away to serve the Lord, but he repents of this and pursues Israel into the waters of the Sea of Reeds. The Lord manipulates the waters of judgment so that Egypt drowns and Israel passes through safely. When the people of God see their enemy dead on the seashore, they believe in the Lord and his servant Moses (14:30-31; cf. 4:1, 4,8-9). Led by Moses and Miriam, Israel sings the Lord's praises (15:1-21).

The narrative problem enunciated in chapters 1-2 has been resolved: The Lord heard Israel's cry (2:23-25; 3:7-8) and answered with convincing signs of his power. Israel is free from servitude to Pharaoh. The development and resolution of the narrative problem occur within a conceptual framework familiar to Israel: the movement from lament to praise.<sup>23</sup> The psalm of praise, then, effectively concludes the narrative.<sup>24</sup>

Because Pharaoh has died, it would seem that the exodus narrative should come to a close with the psalm; the common use of Exodus suggests this. But the journey begun on Passover night (12:37) moves beyond the sea, into the desert (15:22), where Israel wanders for some time (16:1; 17:1; cf. 19:2). This move in to the desert, away from Egypt, is a further development of the promise that God would take Israel to the Promised Land (3:7-11). But, although the direction is clear, the goal will not yet be realized. The new location is crucial: On the way to the land, that is, in the desert, the narrative develops the theme of dependence upon the Lord. In the inhospitable desert, Israel receives water,

<sup>23</sup> On the lament pattern as a basis for understanding Exodus 1-15:21 as a unit see James Plastaras, *The God of Exodus: The Theology of the Exodus Narrative* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1966), 49-57, and C. Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. Keith R. Crim and Richard N. S Owen (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 260.

<sup>24</sup> Other psalms that close a narrative: Gen. 49; 2 Sam. 22, 23:1-7. Psalms that are part of a narrative opening: I Sam. 2:1-10; Luke 1:46-55; 67-79.

manna, and divine protection from the nations represented by Amalek. All this is to break her dependence upon Egypt (cf. 16:3). The narrative memorializes Israel's unwillingness, her murmuring against God, and the embarrassing praise of God and wise administration offered by a Gentile, Jethro, Moses' father-in-law.

Noteworthy at the beginning and ending of this material are the clusters of legal vocabulary (15:25, 26; 18:13, 16, 22-26). They not only anticipate the Lord's Sinai speech and suggest that Israel's life outside of Egypt needs the Lord's particular word but also frame the desert narrative. By framing Israel's desert experience, these clusters require the reader to put on the lenses of torah (15:25; 18:16). Bitter service to Pharaoh is a distant memory; now Israel learns to live with the Lord's sweetener of the bitter waters in the desert torah (15:25; cr. Ps. 19:8-10). Self-determination is not a possibility for Israel.

Although Israel remains in the desert, with Exodus 19:1-2 the narrative begins to focus on a specific location within the desert the<sup>25</sup> mountain (19:2; cf. 3:12). Even though the mountain is mentioned in 18:5, the text indicates anew thematic development by the summarizing disjunctive clauses in 19:1-2, which reach back to Egypt and depict Israel's journeys from Rephidim to Sinai. Exodus 19:3 begins the narrative proper of this subunit, an account of Moses' ascents into and descents from the presence of God during which he receives and transmits to Israel the Lord's words. Israel may not touch the mountain nor ascend into God's immediate presence, on pain of death (19:12-13; cf. 20:18-19). In God's dangerous presence, Israel vows covenant obedience (19:8; 24:3, 7) with a self-maledictory oath (24:8). After this, Moses alone ascends into the glory cloud and stays there for forty days and forty nights (24:18).

The narrative accounts of Moses' ascents and descents<sup>26</sup> in chapters 19 and 24 frame the covenant instruction material (20:1-17; 21:1-23:19) and embed it in a narrative that depicts the presence of a God that Israel has heretofore not experienced. This fiery presence of God provides motivation for Israel's obedience at the mountain of God's self-disclosure and warns against faithlessness. Moses' final ascent brings him into the presence of God that Israel thought "looked like a consuming fire" (24:17).

<sup>25</sup> The article suggests a specific mountain, which in the context of Exodus can only be the mountain where God revealed himself to Moses, the mountain of which he said "you" (pl.) will worship me there (3:12).

<sup>26</sup> Moses' ascents to and descents from Sinai continue up to and including Exodus 34. Some commentators argue that these form segmentation markers: Thomas B. Dozeman, "Spatial Form in Exodus 19:1-8a and in the Larger Sinai Narrative," *Semeia* 46 (1989): 96; Rolf P. Knierim, "The Composition of the Pentateuch," in *Seminar Papers: The Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1985), 400-403, argues that this pattern organizes Exodus 19:3-39:43. He takes 34:29-39:43 as the last unit. However, the Lord's speeches in 25-31 are instructions for the building of the Lord's dwelling, not covenant stipulations or instruction.

The Lord's first speech to Moses at the top of Sinai, however, initiates a wholly new, and unexpected, theme: the building of a sanctuary for the Lord's dwelling in Israel's midst (25:8-9). Mimicking the creation account,<sup>27</sup> there follow six speeches detailing the offerings, the specifications for the sanctuary furnishings and the sanctuary, the design of the priestly appurtenances and the instructions for their consecration, and instructions for Bezalel and Oholiab (25:1-31:11). The seventh speech (31:12-17) reminds Israel to observe the Sabbath as a sign for the generation to come "so that you may know that I am the Lord, who makes you holy" (31:13); they are to celebrate it "for generations to come as a lasting covenant" (31:16).<sup>28</sup> Then, the Lord gives Moses the two tables of the Testimony (31:18).

The distance between God and Israel, already defined in chapters 19 and 24, is redefined in these seven speeches. Where before God brings Israel to himself (19:4) but keeps them at a safe distance (19:12-13), now he wants to dwell in Israel's midst. Even so, the distance is maintained by God's special design of the tabernacle (25:9). Israel's nature requires the distance; God's grace designs an "incarnational" medium by which the distance is minimized and the nearness maximized so that he might meet with his people. With the tabernacle, God is creating space for his people to know and enjoy him forever (29:43-46).

Throughout 25-31, Moses remains in God's presence at the top of Sinai. Abruptly, however, the narrative shifts the reader's attention to the people who are awaiting Moses at the foot of Sinai (32:1). Motivated by the people's impatience, Aaron fashions a calf in whose presence Israel worships God with a mixture of prescribed and alien elements (32:6). Israel's corrupt worship in the Lord's presence brings on his wrath. Were it not for Moses' intercession in God's immediate presence, Israel would have been consumed by God's anger (32:7-14; cf. 3:2-5). Thereafter Moses descends and breaks the tables of the law, thereby symbolizing the broken covenant; three thousand Israelites die at the hands of the Levites (32:15-29). When Moses ascends to plead for pardon (32:30), the Lord first reminds him that the sinners will die for their own rebellion (32:33) and then declares that Moses will not accompany Israel to the Promised Land because their stubbornness ("stiffnecked," קָשָׁה-עַרְוֹתָ, 33:3, 5; 34:9; cf. 32:9) may provoke divine destruction.<sup>29</sup> Moses continues to plead that God be present with his people and that he show him his glory. The Lord grants his requests and speaks a word of mercy (33:12-23). Moses then prepares two new stone tablets upon which he will write the words of the covenant again

27 See Peter J. Kearney, "Creation and liturgy: The P Redaction of Ex 25-40," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 89 (1977): 375-87.

28 See Rolf Rendtorff, "'Covenant' as a Structuring Concept in Genesis and Exodus," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108 (1989): 385-93.

29 The narrative describes Israel with vocabulary reminiscent of Pharaoh's hardness of heart: See the verb (קָשָׁה) in 7:3 and 13:15 and the adjective in 1:14 and 6:9. How does Israel hear this?

(34:1-4, 27-28). Before the covenant renewal takes place, the Lord reveals his compassionate and gracious nature: He is slow to anger but will not let the guilty go unpunished (34:6-7). This compassionate and gracious God renews the covenant and forgives his stubborn people. Moses again descends, this time with the tablets of the renewed covenant. Thereafter, whenever Moses consults with God in his presence, he veils his face to protect Israel from the full glory of God (34:29-35).

In these chapters, Israel experiences God's anger and his mercy. God has delivered Israel a second time, this time from themselves. Now they are not only free from Pharaoh but also forgiven by God. Only so do they begin to fashion the appurtenances of the tabernacle. A thematic change in 35:1-3 takes the reader back to the subject of the Sabbath, treated immediately before the narrative of Israel's corruption of the Lord's presence (31:12-17).

After the golden calf episode, Moses assembles the community and transmits the Lord's instructions for the offerings (cf. 25:1-7) necessary for the construction of the tabernacle. Israel willingly offers more than necessary and, under the leadership of Bezalel and Oholiab, begins the building project (35:1-36:7). Israel obediently manufactures all the necessary items for the tabernacle, ending with the gold plate for Aaron's turban upon which is inscribed: "Holy to the Lord" (36:8-39:31). Then, in a narrative evocative of Genesis 1:31-2:3, 30 Israel completes the work of the tabernacle in perfect obedience and brings all the items to Moses (39:32-41), who blesses them (39:42-43).

Moses assembles and consecrates the tabernacle and the priesthood on new year's day: the first day of the first month, in the second year (40:2, 17; cf. 12:1).<sup>31</sup> After Moses finishes his work (40:33), the glory of the Lord fills the sanctuary: God is in the midst of and leads his forgiven people on their journey (40:34-38).

## Conclusion

After reading through the development of the Exodus narrative from beginning to end, I conclude that Exodus is composed of six major narrative subunits: 1:1-15:21; 15:22-18:27; 19:1-24:18; 25:1-31:18; 32-34; and 35-40.<sup>32</sup> But what

<sup>30</sup> See pp.18-19 above.

<sup>31</sup> On this day the flood waters dried up from the earth and Noah removed the covering from the ark, Genesis 6:13.

<sup>32</sup> I discuss this segmentation more fully in my, "An Iconography of Order: Kingship in Exodus. A Study of the Structure of Exodus., 116-332. For recent studies with a similar segmentation see, Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 687-89; Everett Fox, "On the Book of Exodus and its Structure, in his *The Five Books of Moses: A New Translation with Introductions, Commentary and Notes* (New York: Schocken, 1995), 241-47. A different arrangement is proposed by Mark S. Smith, "The Literary Arrangement of the Priestly Redaction of Exodus: A Preliminary Investigation, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (1996): 25-50.

is the interrelationship among the subunits? In the following part, I will begin to answer this by pointing to the themes of Exodus as indicated by key words and phrases.

### The Key Words of Exodus

In this section, I will focus on clustered key words and phrases that not only emphasize the major themes but also support the definition of the major narrative subsections of Exodus as defined above.

The first important cluster of key words refers to servitude (עֲבָדָה. עָבַד. עֲבָדָה) and occurs approximately ninety-seven times in the Exodus narrative. They are distributed as follows: sixty-seven times in 1:1-15:21, seventeen times in 19-24, two times in 32-34, and eleven times (only עֲבָדָה) in 35-40. Within 1:1-15:21, these words occur thirty-three times in the plagues pericope (7:8-11:10). The heavy concentration of this word complex and its complete absence from 15:22-18:27 suggests that 1:1-15:21 forms a major narrative subunit that answers the question: Whom will Israel serve, Pharaoh or the Lord? The song at the sea declares that the Lord reigns forever (15:18); the construction narrative depicts Israel's performing "work" (עֲבָדָה, 39:32, 42; cf. 1:13, 14) on the Lord's behalf.

Other key words help answer this question and support the argument that 1:1-15:21 forms a subunit. First, the verbs describing the hardening of Pharaoh's heart (קָשָׁה. קָשָׁה. קָשָׁה), whether Pharaoh or the Lord is the subject of these verbs,<sup>33</sup> occur throughout. Second, the verb "to know" (יָדָע) describes the result of God's mighty acts in Egypt: Pharaoh, Egypt, Israel, and the nations will acknowledge the Lord as God. Third, "to believe, to trust" (אָמַן)<sup>34</sup> in the Lord or Moses, a theme introduced at the time of Moses' commissioning, is resolved at the sea when Israel sees her enemy lying dead on the seashore and then believes in the Lord and his servant Moses (14:31).

These key words, along with the movement from lament to praise and the resolution of the conflict depicted in the opening chapters, support the contention that 1:1-15:21 forms a major narrative subunit.

As already observed in the reading of Israel's desert experience, the geographic shift to the desert distinguishes this part from the previous narrative. Several clusters of key words support this contention. The key words test (נִסָּה), 15:25, 16:4; 17:2, 7), bread (לֶחֶם, 16:3, 4, 8, 12, 15, 22, 29, 32), water (מַיִם, 15:22, 23, 25, 27; 17:1, 2, 3, 6), to complain (לָלַח, 15:24, 16:2, 7, 8, 9, 12; 17:3), and to set out (נָסַע, 15:21, 16:1; 17:1) typically occur in 15:22-17:7, which depicts Israel's

<sup>33</sup> Pharaoh hardens his heart ten times (7:13, 14, 22; 8:11, 15, 28; 9:7, 34, 35; 13:15); the Lord also hardens Pharaoh's heart ten times (4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8, 17).

<sup>34</sup> The verb occurs in 4:1, 5, 8, 9, 31; 14:31. Gerhard von Rad ("Beobachtungen an den Moseerzahlungen Exodus 1-14," *Evangelische Theologie* 31 [1971]: 579-88) called attention to the overarching function of this key word.

perceived threat to her life, the Lord's sustenance in the desert, and the probative value of the experience. In 17:8-18:27, the key words are to do battle and *battle* (לָחַם מִלְחָמָה, 17:8, 9, 10, 16)), *hand* (יָד, 17:9, 11, 12, 16; 18:9, 10), to be *heavy, weighty* (כָּבֵד, 17:12; 18:18), *to sit* (יָשָׁב, 17:12; 18:13, 14), *to judge* (שָׁפַט, 17:12; 18:13, 14), *to save, deliver* (נָצַל, 18:4, 8, 9, 10), and the phrase *everything the Lord/Moses had done* (אֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂה יְהוָה, 18:1, 8, 9, 14, 17, 20, 24). With these, the text develops the themes of external and internal threat as represented by Amalek and disputes among the people and how they are resolved.

Most important, however, is the clustering of legal vocabulary at the beginning and end of this unit: to judge and judgment (שָׁפַט מִשְׁפָּט, 15:25; 18:13, 16, 22<sup>2</sup>, 26<sup>2</sup>), *decree* (חֹק, 15:25, 26; 18:16, 20), to command and commandment (צִוָּה מִצְוָה, 15:25; 18:23), to listen to (שָׁמַע לְקוֹל or בְּקוֹל, 15:26; 18:19, 24), and to instruct and torah/law (יָרָה. רוּרָה, 15:25; 18:16). By framing the text with these clusters, the narrator leads the audience to evaluate the narrated events from the perspective of God's law as the giver of life, sustenance, and order. It also defines 15:22-18:27 as the second major narrative subunit. The subsequent shift to a specific location in the desert, Mt Sinai (19:1-2), argues for the beginning of a new unit and therefore supports the claim that 15:22-18:27 is the second major narrative unit.

The shift to Sinai in chapter 19 includes a different vocabulary. Three of the following five chapters deal almost exclusively with legal, not building, instructions, and the other two narrate the offer and sealing of a covenant. This suggests that the central concern in these chapters is covenant stipulations. The clustering of related terminology supports this: the word (in reference to the Lord's words; דְּבַר, 19:6, 7, 8, 9; 20:1; 22:9<sup>2</sup>, 23:7, 8; 24:32, 4, 8, 14); covenant (בְּרִית), 19:5; 23:32; 24:7, 8); judgment (מִשְׁפָּט, 21:1, 9, 31; 23:6; 24:3); and Israel's vow of submission (19:8; 24:3, 7).

Another cluster of words describes the ascents and descents of Moses on *the* mountain, the descent of the Lord on *the* mountain, and the fiery presence of the Lord. They are: *to go up* (עָלָה, 19:3, 13, 18, 20, 24; 24:1, 2, 9, 12, 13, 15, 18); *to descend* (יָרַד, 19:11, 14, 18, 20, 21, 24, 25); *mountain* (הַר, 19:2, 3, 11, 12<sup>2</sup>, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18<sup>2</sup>, 20<sup>3</sup>, 23<sup>2</sup>; 20:18; 24:4, 12, 13, 15<sup>2</sup>, 16, 17, 18<sup>2</sup>), the Lord's instructions that Israel stay at the foot of the mountain (בְּתַחַת יַד הַהָר, 19:17; הָהָר תַּחַת, 24:4), and fire (אֵשׁ, 19:18; 24:17). The use of mountain and the verbs of ascent and descent almost exclusively in chapters 19 and 24 supports the contention that they form a frame for these chapters and argues for the conclusion that 19-24 form the third narrative subunit.

The speeches of building instruction in Exodus 25-31 and compliance with those instructions in 35-40 distinguish these as separate units within the larger narrative. Since both deal with the structure that will facilitate the Lord's presence among his people (25:8), it will be helpful to treat the keywords they have in common at the same time. We will not address the obvious repetition of 28

READING EXODUS TO LEARN AND LEARNING TO READ EXODUS 29  
those words that depict the tabernacle and priestly appurtenances.

Both instruction and construction units begin with instructions concerning the offerings of basic materials for the tabernacle construction: The Lord instructs Moses in 25:1-9, and Moses teaches Israel in 35:3-36:7. The Lord says:

Tell the Israelites **to bring** (לָקַח) me an **offering** (תְּרוּמָה). You are to receive (לָקַח) the **offering** (תְּרוּמָה) for me from each man whose heart prompts him to give. These are the **offerings** (תְּרוּמָה) you are to receive (לָקַח): . . . then have them **make** (עָשָׂה) a **sanctuary** (מִקְדָּשׁ) for me, and I will  **dwell** (שָׁכַן) in their midst. **Make** (עָשָׂה) this **tabernacle** (מִשְׁכָּן) and all its furnishings exactly like the pattern I will show you. (25:1-3a, 8-9)

After the Lord forgives Israel and renews the covenant, Moses instructs Israel:

**Take** (לָקַח) from what you have, an **offering** (תְּרוּמָה) for the Lord.

Everyone who is willing is to bring an **offering** (תְּרוּמָה) of gold, silver. . . . All who are skilled among you are to come and make (עָשָׂה) everything the Lord has commanded: the **tabernacle** (מִשְׁכָּן) with its tent and . . . (35:5, 10-11a).

The key words in bold lettering underscore the central action of these two narrative units: Moses gives Israel the Lord's instructions to take (לָקַח, 25:2<sup>2</sup>, 3; 27:20; 28:5, 9; 29: 15, 31 [plus twelve times]; 30:16, 23, 34; 35:5; 36:3; 40:9) her free-will offerings (תְּרוּמָה, 25:2<sup>2</sup>, 3; 29:27, 28<sup>3</sup>; 30:13, 14, 15; 35:5<sup>2</sup>, 21, 24<sup>2</sup>; 36:3, 6), and from them make (עָשָׂה, 212 times) the Lord's dwelling place (מִשְׁכָּן, fifty-six times; "tent of meeting," אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד, thirty-four times).<sup>35</sup>

Three other key words suggest the purpose of the instruction and construction accounts: *sabbath*, *to meet*, and *to dwell*. Sabbath occurs only a few times (31:13, 14, 15<sup>2</sup>, 16<sup>2</sup>; 35:2, 3). Its narrative location at the end of the instruction and the beginning of the construction account, however, is crucial because it argues for an intimate connection between the Sabbath and the building of the tabernacle. Childs, for example, contends that they are "two sides of the same reality" and that "the witness of the tabernacle and that of the sabbath both testify to God's rule over his creation (31:17)."<sup>36</sup> The narrative location also forms a frame around the apostasy of Israel and the Lord's renewal of the covenant, thereby distinguishing it from the instruction and complinace narratives. If, in reference to the tabernacle accounts, sabbath evokes the Lord's rule, its linkage to the rebellion of Israel argues that Israel violated that rule. Moreover, if sabbath evokes the Lord's rule over creation, then the verbs to meet (יָעַד, 25:22; 29:42, 43; 30:6, 36) and to dwell (שָׁכַן, 25:8; 29:45, 46; 40:35), along with taber-

<sup>35</sup> The word sanctuary (מִקְדָּשׁ) occurs only in 25:8 (cf. 15:17). The two words for the Lord's dwelling place are the occasion of many studies arguing for different historical traditions concerning the tabernacle or tent of meeting. See Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 584-93, for his discussion of Exodus 33:7-11. Note also 39:32, which states "the work on the tabernacle: the Tent of Meeting, was completed." The appositive "the Tent of Meeting" argues that the received text points to the same referent.

<sup>36</sup> Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 541-42.

*nacle* and *tent of meeting*, evoke the place from which the Lord's rule emanates upon the earth, and the people among whom he effects his particular rule.

Finally, although to bless (בָּרַךְ) is technically not a key word in the tabernacle accounts since it occurs there only once (39:43), it is linked with the key word *work*, which occurs in the instruction and compliance narratives (מְלָאכָה, 31:3, 5, 14, 15<sup>2</sup>; 35:2<sup>2</sup>, 21, 24, 29, 31, 33, 35<sup>2</sup>; 36:1, 2, 3, 42, 5, 6, 72, 8; 38:24<sup>2</sup>; 39:43; 40:33). The construction narrative, and thus Exodus, ends with Moses' blessing Israel even as God had blessed the seventh day (Gen. 2:1-3) after God had finished all his work. Remarkably, then, Exodus ends where Genesis begins. Or, to put it another way: The end of Exodus picks up where Adam's and Eve's sin created a disjunction between the presence of God and human history.<sup>37</sup>

The golden calf account, located between the instruction and construction narratives, presents, develops, and resolves the problem of Israel's rebellion in the Lord's presence. Located here, it forms a significant transition from the instruction to the construction account. Those who manufacture the tabernacle parts and its furniture have experienced the justice and mercy of God. Could a rebellious people participate in such a construction?

Keywords remind us of Exodus 19-24 and Moses' ascents and descents (see the uses of בָּוֹא עֲלֵה יְרֵד) on the mountain of God (הָרַ, 32:1, 12, 15, 19; 33:6; 34:22, 32, 4, 29<sup>2</sup>, 32). But where 19-24 focuses on the making and sealing of a covenant, in 32-34 the issue is Aaron's and Israel's making (עָשָׂה, 32:1, 4 [+ fourteen occurrences]) a golden calf (עֲגֹל 32:4, 8, 19, 20, 24, 35). In the light of the significance of the verb to make in the tabernacle accounts, this suggests that Aaron's making of the calf is an antisacred activity.<sup>38</sup> The consequences are disastrous. The Lord distances himself from Israel when he describes them to Moses as "your people" (עַמִּי; plus thirty-two other occurrences of it in 32-34), declares his intention "to exterminate" (כָּלָה, 32:10, 12; 33:3, 5) this "stiff-necked" (קִשְׁיָה עֹרֶף, 32:9; 33:3, 5; 34:9) people and make, (עָשָׂה, 32:10) a great people out of Moses. Moses reminds God that Israel is "your people." The deadly prepositional repartee concludes with a summary statement: "Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people (עָמֹ) the disaster he had threatened" (32: 14). In this connection, the verb to exterminate

<sup>37</sup> The verb to bless in 39:42 is linked to *to sanctify* in the Lord's sabbath speech in 31:13. These texts then recall the seventh day speech of Genesis 2:1-3 in which the Lord blesses and makes holy the seventh day. Remarkably, in Exodus, Israel, and not the Sabbath is the object of the Lord's sanctifying power. Similarly Israel, and not the Sabbath, is the object of Moses' blessing. In Exodus, these verbs appear in the reverse order: to bless and to sanctify (Gen. 2:3) and to sanctify (Ex. 31:13) and to bless (Ex. 39:43). This reversal of crucial words is common with quotations and references to other texts according to Moshe Weinfeld, "The Decalogue: Its Significance, Uniqueness, and Place in Israel's Tradition, in *Religion and Law: Biblical-Judaic and Islamic Perspectives*, ed. Edwin B. Firmage, Bernard G. Weiss, John W. Welch (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 19.

<sup>38</sup> Fretheim, *Exodus*, 280.

(הָלַךְ) assumes importance because of the manner in which its conjugated forms mimic the verb to consume (אָכַל) in 3:3. If Israel is stiff-necked like Pharaoh, they are also in danger of suffering the destruction the Lord brought upon him. If Pharaoh stood in the way of the Lord's glory and was destroyed, how much more when Israel gives the Lord's glory to another? Fire comes close (שָׂרַף, 32:20, 24), and some suffer the Lord's anger. And when the Lord reveals he will not lead Israel to the land, Moses' appeals move the Lord so that his presence (פָּנָיו, thirty times in 32-34) does accompany Israel. The Lord reveals his mercy, renews the covenant, and inscribes his words on the tablets (כָּתַב, 32:15<sup>2</sup>, 16<sup>2</sup>, 19; 34:13, 42, 28, 29) again. The unique constellation of keywords and phrases in the golden calf account strongly argues that it is a narrative subunit.

My brief examination of clusters of key words and phrases supports the segmentation of Exodus into the six major narrative subunits mentioned above: 1:1-15:21; 15:22-18:27; 19:1-24:18; 25:1-31:18; 32-34; and 35-40. But there remains the matter of the interrelationship among these subunits.

#### The Structure of Exodus

Until recently, arguments for a double or triple organization of Exodus were common, and appeared to be based primarily on the geographic movement of the narrative.<sup>39</sup> Closer examination of such analyses, however, would disclose underlying historical-critical assumptions that separated the Egypt and Sinai traditions and that argued that these were only subsequently linked by a redactor. Assumptions about the nature of historical narrative--it must flow unimpeded (Gressman)--and law--the priestly tradition reflects the dry legalism of later Judaism (Wellhausen)--also contributed to the exegetical and hermeneutical separation of the two traditions that not only distinguished history and law but also separated the gospel of salvation from Egypt from the law of God's covenant. Although Fretheim and others have recently challenged this separation of law from narrative, the exegetical use and devotional reading of Exodus still reflects an antipathy toward the legal material and a preference for the narrative and its story of redemption.

The distinction between the genres of law and narrative has also led commentators to define a "Sinai pericope" that moves well into Numbers: Exodus 19:1-Numbers 10:10, which ignores the received segmentation between Exodus-Leviticus and Leviticus-Numbers.<sup>40</sup> It is also true, however, that Israel

<sup>39</sup> Double: 1:1-18:27: The exodus from Egypt; 19:1-40:38: The giving of the law on Sinai. Triple: 1:1-15:21: The events taking place in Egypt; 15:22-18:27: The events taking place in the desert; 19:1- 40:38: The events taking place on Mt. Sinai

<sup>40</sup> S. R Driver, *The Book of Exodus* (Cambridge: University Press, 1929), 168. Georg Beer and Kurt Galling, *Exodus*, Handbuch zum Alten Testament (Tubingen: Mohr, 1939), 84. There remains, however, the problem that these segmentations erase the received boundaries between Exodus and Leviticus and Leviticus and Numbers, thereby removing one book effectively from discussion.

camps at Sinai from Exodus 19:1 through Numbers 10:10, that this material is mostly instructional, and that from Numbers 10:11 the people continue the journey they began in Exodus 12:37. This observation, then, has the benefit of emphasizing Sinai as the central locus of divine self-disclosure. And, by extending this Sinai narrative to include Exodus 15:22-18:27 and Numbers 10:11-20:13, the memory of Israel's desert experiences, one before and the other after the Sinai theophany, the narrative frames this central location. These desert experiences, however, are dissimilar: Before the Sinai theophany, Israel complains without consequences; after Sinai, God judges Israel for their complaints. Theologically, this suggests that the fiery presence of God in Israel's midst as they journey toward the land, not yet a narrative reality in the first desert pericope, creates a new community that ignores the divine presence only at their peril.

This brief discussion argues for two conclusions. First, the nature of the literary organization is not neutral--it has hermeneutical significance and theological consequences. Second, the discussion of the larger Sinai pericope suggests that the commingling of narrative and law is not a problem to be solved historically. To the contrary, the present form of the text argues that we read the divine speeches of instruction as embedded in a larger and continuing narrative without positing a tension between narrative and law. This has the effect of letting the flow of narrative shape the hearing of law.<sup>41</sup> Without narrative, law has no context within which its demands make sense; without law, narrative has no power to define the world it depicts. Narrative and law work together to create a text that uniquely shapes the audience's hearing and response. In order to allow the narrative to maximally shape the audience, it is important to discern its rhetorical strategy on the level of its macrostructural organization.

Exodus 25-40 provides an important clue for defining the interrelationship among the six narrative subunits: Chapters 25-31 and 35-40 are linked as instruction and construction narratives. The insertion of chapters 32-34 between them creates a chiasmic arrangement. Construction of the tabernacle does not take place until the narrative has moved through Israel's rebellion to its forgiveness. If this is such an obvious linkage, why then do so many still read 19-24 with the tabernacle section? One answer is that both 19-24 and 25-40 contain legal material and much of it reflects the style of the priestly tradition (P). But, is this enough to conclude that 19-24 be read with the tabernacle section, or should it be read with the antecedent material?

Several arguments call for the conclusion that chapters 1-24 also exhibit a chiasmic arrangement. Thematically the narrative develops toward Sinai in a

<sup>41</sup> James W. Watts ("Public Readings and Pentateuchal Law," *Vetus Testamentum* 45, no. 4 [1995]: 543) argues that "narrative invites, almost enforces, a strategy of sequential reading, of starting at the beginning and reading the text in order to the end the placement of law within narrative conforms (at least in part) the reading of the law to the conventions of narrative."

movement from disorder to order. At the beginning of the narrative, Israel is under Pharaoh's control until the Creator's power produces massive disorder in Egypt and the waters of judgment swallow Pharaoh and his army. Shortly after moving through the Sea of Reeds into the desert, Israel complains of thirst. The Lord sustains them with gifts of water and manna, and defends them against Amalek. Jethro's wisdom enables Moses to administer the Lord's will: his torah. After they arrive at Sinai, Israel vows allegiance to the Lord; life will now be determined by the stipulations of the covenant. Life with God at Sinai is radically different from that in Egypt. The two places are linked as antipodes: unwilling slavery and disorder versus willing vassalhood and order. Egypt and Sinai are also connected sequentially by itinerary notices (נָסַע, 12:37; 13:20; 15:22; 16:1; 17:1; 19:2) that serve as a transition device: They take Israel from Rameses (12:37; cf. 1:11), the place of Israel's bitter servitude, to Sinai (רָהַר הַיְיָ, 19:2) where they willingly submit to the Lord (19:8; 24:3, 7). Finally, a thematic change separates 19-24 from the following chapters. Although Moses ascends to the Lord's presence to receive the tablets of the law (24:12), God's speeches in 25-31 are dedicated to the tabernacle instructions, not covenant making. This unexpected thematic change creates a major narrative break. For these reasons, I suggest that the Egypt and Sinai narratives form the outer elements of a chiasm: At Sinai the former slaves of Pharaoh willingly become the servants of the Lord. The desert narrative provides a transition that comments on certain aspects involved in the change of masters.

Combining the reading of the entire narrative with the insights gained from the clusters of keywords, I understand the interrelationship of the subunits as of Exodus follows:

- A Royal Conflict From Slaves' Lament to Servants' Praise (1-15:21)
- B The Desert: Learning to live with God (15:22-18:27)
- A<sup>1</sup> The Mountain of God: We will do all we have heard! (19:1-24:18)
- C Tabernacle and Sabbath: Let there be a sanctuary! (25:1-31:18)
- D Corruption in God's Presence: like Pharaoh, like Israel! (32-34)
- C<sup>1</sup> God's Presence in the Tabernacle: And it was so! (35-40)

In this structure the sigla A-A' and C-C' point to the basic narrative movement in each half; B and D indicate the transitions from one aspect of this movement to the other. This structure suggests that even as B and D nuance the antecedent narratives (A and C) so they shape the audience's hearing of the subsequent narrative (A' and C'). That is, the desert and the apostasy narratives nuance the audience's hearing of the covenant making and the construction of the tabernacle.

This double triadic structure of Exodus depicts a consistent move from Egypt into God's presence at Sinai and the consequent design of an instrument for God's dwelling in the midst of his people and his continuing presence on their continuing journey from Egypt to the Promised Land.

### The Argument of Exodus

Having examined the beginning and end of Exodus, followed its development from the initial definition of the narrative problem to its resolution, discerned clusters of key words and phrases, and defined the organization of the text, I will now state the argument, or the subject of the account, in a brief narration of what the text recounts in greater detail.

Fearing Israel's enormous growth, Pharaoh enslaves them to build his cities and devises a plan to murder all newborn males; but Israel continues to grow. After God acknowledges Israel's oppression, he rescues them from stubborn Pharaoh by mighty and terrible acts, announced and mediated by Moses. On Passover night, Pharaoh urges Israel to leave the land, but he recants and pursues Israel into the sea. The Lord moves the waters to defeat Pharaoh but he lets Israel pass through on dry ground. After praising God for his great salvation, Israel enters the desert where they complain to Moses about lack of water and bread. In the desert God supports Israel with water and manna; he also defends them from Amalek's attack. Jethro, the Midianite priest, visits the camp, praises God when he hears about Israel's escape, and helps Moses in the judicial administration of the people. The Lord brings Israel to Sinai where he makes a covenant with them and Israel promises faithful obedience. Afterward God calls Moses to meet him at the top of mount Sinai. (1:1-24:18).

At the top of Sinai, Moses receives instructions for Israel to collect offerings and to make a sanctuary for the Lord to dwell in their midst. While God is speaking to Moses, Israel organizes a corrupt worship of the Lord with a golden calf. This provokes the Lord to destroy Israel, but Moses intervenes on Israel's behalf. Although Israel suffers the Lord's punishment, he forgives his people, promises to lead them to the Promised Land, and renews the covenant. After this, Israel obediently manufactures the various elements of the tabernacle complex and brings them to Moses. He inspects Israel's work and then blesses them. On the first day of the second year, Moses assembles and consecrates the tabernacle and the priesthood. Then the glory of the Lord fills the tabernacle; the fiery cloud guides Israel on their journey (25:1-40:38).

I have written the argument to reflect the narrative structure and to conserve the movement from Egypt to Sinai, and that from instruction to construction. According to the working definition, the argument is descriptive; no interpretation<sup>42</sup> of the text should intrude at this stage, only a keen appreciation of the narrative movement from beginning to end.

<sup>42</sup> It is, of course, true that interpretation begins with the act of reading and discerning structure. I mean at this stage to describe as objectively as possible what the text before the audience says, given the structure for which I am arguing.

### The Theme of Exodus

For preaching purposes, the theme of a narrative or its subunit should have only one subject and a predicate in order to clearly hear who does what in the narrative. This is an extremely difficult, if not impossible, task for a larger narrative. But the statement of the argument already provides us with a good reduced version of the narrative. I begin, then, with a thematic statement, product of keeping the essentials of each major subunit and of removing details. By mighty signs of power, the Lord rescues Abraham's abundant descendants, Israel, from Pharaoh's slavery in Egypt, sustains them in the desert, and brings them to covenant with him at Mt. Sinai. Through Moses, the Lord instructs Israel to make him a dwelling place; but instead, Israel makes a golden calf. After God pardons their rebellion, Israel makes the tabernacle and Moses assembles it. Then the glory of the Lord fills the tabernacle and leads Israel on their journey.

This thematic statement can be further reduced to: *By mighty signs of power the Lord rescues Israel from Pharaoh and brings her to his presence at Sinai in order to dwell in her midst by means of the tabernacle.* Exodus 29:43-46 could be considered the narrative's own thematic statement.

### Conclusion

In this article, I have provided a brief, first reading of Exodus as an exercise in reading a larger biblical narrative. By following these steps the reader can appropriate the narrative flow such that subsequent readings of smaller pericopes can be placed in the light of the whole narrative. This reading has also shown that the commingling of narrative and instructional genres is not an obstacle to understanding the Exodus narrative. But, there remains the question of the coherence of Exodus; what gives the narrative its unity. This I will address in a later article.

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