

Lecture 9: The Exodus.

Reading: Exodus 1-15; Kugel 198-232.

Topics:

- Is the Exodus a historical event? (does it matter? Does it matter to Kugel?)
- What is the message of the Exodus narrative as a whole?
- Why did Moses need to bring ten plagues against the Egyptians – couldn't God have taken care of them all at once?
- Why did God harden the pharaoh's heart?

Exodus 1-15:

- 1 Enslavement of the Israelites; two Israelite midwives;
- 2 Birth of Moses, flight to Midian from Egypt;
- 3-4 Commissioning of Moses at the burning bush;
- 5-11 various confrontations of Moses with Pharaoh and conversations of Moses with God; plagues;
- 12 the institution of Pesah sacrifice; the deaths of the first-born;
- 13-14 flight from Egypt; the miracle at the Red / Reed sea;
- 15 The Song of Moses (and Miriam).

Two poles around which (some)(much) biblical theology revolves: creation vs. Exodus:

- the rationales for the Sabbath in the ten commandments, Exodus 20 (creation) vs. Deuteronomy 5 (Exodus);
- In the wake of the destruction of 587 BCE: Jeremiah sees God's redemptive act in terms of the Exodus, II Isaiah in terms of creation.

Historicity of Exodus narrative (much debated: see Kugel):

- Some elements of local Egyptian color (notably Israelite names, including Moses) in the Exodus narrative;
- *Hapiru* (immigrant workers in Egyptian texts) seems to be related to Hebrew *ivri* ("Hebrew"), which is used in the Bible mostly in Egyptian contexts (Kugel);
 - ♦ The *Hyksos* (invaders who take over Egypt for two centuries or so) are too early to be the "real" Israelites, even if later Egyptian writers conflate them.
- Still, no archaeological smoking gun, and no clear reference to Israelites in Egypt or to the miraculous departure of 600,000 slaves;
- Commonly encountered argument: who would make up such a story;
- Cf. story that Abra(ha)m migrates from Mesopotamia;
- Common view of MBS: *some* tribes / groups / clans that would later go on to join the Israelites told stories of their miraculous departure from Egypt; the story of these few became the story of the many. Most Israelites were actually of Canaanite stock; their ancestors did not participate in an Exodus from Egypt;
- Israelites did not build the pyramids!!!

Themes in the narrative:

God is the God of history, for both Israelites and non-Israelites alike.

Striking that morality / sin / punishment are not the driving force of the plot here:

- All is scripted: Genesis 15:13-14 ¹³And He said to Abram, “Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years; ¹⁴but I will execute judgment on the nation they shall serve, and in the end they shall go free with great wealth.
- Similar statement at burning bush: Exodus 3:19-21;
- God remembers the covenant 2:24 6:5;
- Repeated references to the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart;
- This is not “exile.”

Why then does God need the plagues?

- To show off, to convince the Egyptians and the Israelites 10:1-2 ¹Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go to Pharaoh. For I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his courtiers, in order that I may display these My signs among them, ²and that you may recount in the hearing of your sons and of your sons’ sons how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I displayed My signs among them—in order that you may know that I am the LORD.”
- Pharaoh says “I do not know the Lord” (5:2). Let Pharaoh know! (7:5 14:2 14:18).
 - ♦ Israelite recognition of God implies exclusivity in the Torah’s view; not so recognition by non-Israelites;
 - ♦ There were some Egyptians who feared the word of the Lord (9:20).

The “ten plagues”:

- Nowhere said to be ten;
- Nowhere called plagues (*makkot*); they are signs (*otot*) or wonders (*mofetim*);
- The plague narratives are combined from different sources and form various patterns; see note in JSB on 7:14 p. 117;
- Long history of rationalizations; these attempts do not defend the text as much as they undo it (Kugel).

Exodus 12: history of *Pesah* (Passover) sacrifice:

- Sacrifice of the first born seems to be at the bottom of this;
- Replaced (??) by sacrifice of lamb or goat;
- Family feast, but its apotropaic quality is still evident in the blood manipulations;
- Gets combined with *matzah* (unleavened bread) festival, apparently agrarian, origins and meaning not clear;
- Eating of *matzah* gets historicized (12:39);
- Later in “D” becomes a pilgrimage festival (Deut 16:1-8).

Exodus 15: song of the sea: song of Moses, and song of Miriam (15:21):

- An ancient piece of poetry that may not be in complete agreement with the prose narrative that comes before it (Kugel);
- Cf. Gen 49 and Judges 5.