

Faust 1

Severe Grace:

An Examination of the Benevolence of the God Character in the Ten Plagues Narrative in  
Exodus 7:1-12:32 and in the Book of Jonah

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For Jenn

For your encouragement, your wisdom, your devotion,  
and your unconquerable ability to find joy in all circumstances.  
You are my inspiration.

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**Abstract**

In Exodus 34:6-7, God claims to be “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty.” This claim to coexistent mercy and wrath figures as a central claim regarding the benevolence of the God character in both the Ten Plagues Narrative in Exodus 7:1-12:32 and in the Book of Jonah. This thesis examines the God character’s claim to benevolence in those two passages and claims that, based upon the literary data of those primary texts within the broader context of the Hebrew Bible, the actions and words of the God character are demonstrably benevolent toward the other characters present.

Keywords: Benevolence, Plagues Narrative, Exodus, Jonah, God Character.

## Preface

What follows is a literary examination of two specific texts from the Hebrew Bible with a chosen focus on one specific character – the God character – as he speaks and acts within those texts, which texts will be examined within, not in isolation from, their respective biblical contexts. As such, the tools of literary interpretation, rather than biblical hermeneutics or theological exposition, serve as the primary elements of the employed methodology. The God character will be treated as a character in a story, much like Raskolnikov would be in a study of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Issues peripheral to the benevolence of the God character, such as the actual existence of any divine being, the historicity of the narratives studied, the date and process of composition of the texts, the authorship of the texts, and the scientific validity of the miraculous interventions in the texts will not be explored. Additionally, discussion of the words of God in the text will refer to the actual speech of the God character as distinct from the theological conception of the whole Bible as the Word of God. Finally, presentation of history and time as they relate to the texts will refer primarily to narrative time, that is, time as elapsed according to the flow of the plot of the story of the Old Testament as a whole rather than to actual, historical time.

## Chapter One

### Expulsion: The Beginning of Benevolent Judgment

Shortly after what the book of Genesis calls “the beginning,” God vents his wrath upon the first of his human subjects – a man and a woman who before eating fruit from a forbidden tree had been the unspoiled prize of his creation – by expelling them from the perfect garden he had created for them and by placing an angel with a flaming sword at the garden’s entrance to ensure that they never tread within its bounds again. From this point forward the narrators of the Old Testament texts never lack an awareness of the fundamental enmity between God and man, and though God chooses to identify himself as the God of Israel, a name inextricably tied to its origin in a story about a man who wrestles with God, the permissive and near-blasphemous connotations of such a name for the people of Israel, the recipients of this name, which is God’s self-identity, are certainly tempered by the knowledge that the man who chose to wrestle with God not only lost the wrestling match, but walked with a limp for the remainder of his life. Force, from Genesis 3 forward, is never absent from God’s dealings with mankind.

In addition to this implicit claim to power, God claims to be “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex. 34:6).<sup>1</sup> The repetition of this creedal confession in Numbers 14:18, Nehemiah 9:17, Psalms 86:15, 103:8, and 145:8, Joel 2:13, and Jonah 4:2 evidences clearly the Hebrews’ continual preoccupation with the benevolence of the God they worshipped. Apart from God’s claim, though, how was this belief in his benevolence established? In contrast with

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<sup>1</sup> Scripture quotations will be taken from the English Standard Version except where otherwise noted.

his continual intervention in the affairs of people<sup>2</sup> and his repetitious promises about what he intends to do,<sup>3</sup> explicit descriptions by God of his own character are largely absent from the first two books of the Old Testament. In fact, between Genesis 1 and Exodus 34:6-7 (the passage partially quoted above), only in Exodus 20:5 and 33:19 does God make direct statements about his own character,<sup>4</sup> and the claims made in both those Exodus passages are strikingly similar to the claim God makes about himself in Exodus 34:6-7. In Exodus 20:5, God describes himself as jealous, a God who punishes those who hate him and shows steadfast love to those who love him and keep his commandments. In 33:19, he claims that the decision to be gracious and merciful toward people rests with him alone. And in 34:6-7, he claims to be merciful, gracious, faithful and forgiving, but also affirms that he will not leave the guilty unpunished. In all three of these self-identifying statements God defines himself by coexistent forgiveness and judgment, mercy and wrath, steadfast love and punishment of sin.

God, it seems, wishes to be seen as both just and benevolent. But how does his behavior correspond with this claim? Are readers to trust his self-assessment, or does he,

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<sup>2</sup> For example, he intervenes regularly in the lives of Adam and Eve, “marks” Cain after the murder of Abel, sends the flood during the time of Noah, confounds human language at Babel, and calls Abram to leave his home and travel to a land yet unknown. See also Gen. 12:17, 15:1, 16:7-12, 17:1, 18:1, 19:1-29, 20:3-7, 21:1, 12-13, 17-20; 22:1-19, 26:24, 28:12-15, 32:22-32, 35:1, 9-13; 39:23, Ex. 1:21, 3:2-22 and the entire plagues narrative discussed below.

<sup>3</sup> He announces the coming flood, he promises never to destroy the earth by flood again and uses the rainbow as a sign of that promise, he promises to make Abraham a great nation and repeats that promise to both Isaac and Jacob, he promises to multiply the offspring of Ishmael, and he predicts Isaac’s birth. See also Gen. 17:1-8, 18:16-33, 21:13, 18; 22:17-18, 26:3-5, 28:13-15, 35:12, Ex. 3:7-22 and the discussion of the plagues narrative below.

<sup>4</sup> God’s direct statements about himself in this portion of the Old Testament are scant enough to be listed here. In Genesis 15:1, he calls himself Abraham’s “shield”; in Genesis 17:1, he refers to himself as “El Shaddai,” or “God Almighty”; in Genesis 26:4 he calls himself the God of Abraham; in Genesis 28:13 he calls himself the God of Abraham and Isaac; and in Genesis 35:11 he calls himself “El Shaddai.” His first identification of himself in the book of Exodus comes in Exodus 3:6, when he calls himself “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” In Exodus 3:14 he reveals the divine name YHWH to Moses, and in Exodus 20:2 he says, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” in introduction to the Decalogue. As stated above, none of these statements are direct summary claims about God’s *character*, and as such they must be treated differently than the claims God makes in Exodus 20:5, 33:19, and 34:6-7.



like so many other characters, display self-deception?<sup>5</sup> More to the point, can legitimate interpretive processes lead to the conclusion that this character is benevolent, as he claims to be? Undoubtedly, the God of the Old Testament is a judge – he curses Adam and Eve, marks Cain as a murderer, destroys the world by flood, and rains fire and brimstone upon Sodom. But it remains to be seen whether these acts of confrontation are the disciplinary interventions of a wise shepherd, the capricious, malevolent outbursts of a tyrant, or the unwittingly abusive punishments of a misguided parent. Accordingly, definitions of such terms as *judgment*, *wrath*, *discipline*, *jealousy*, and *punishment* that assume moral culpability from the outset without allowing for potentially beneficial expressions of force must be rejected.

The present project does not attempt to resolve the complex interrelationship of justice and mercy or to examine every instance in which God expresses wrath toward mankind. Instead, the focus will be on the defensibility of the claims that God makes about his own benevolence based upon the evidence of his behavior. More specifically, two scenes from the Old Testament – the Ten Plagues narrative in Exodus 7:1-12:32 and the Book of Jonah – will be examined as primary texts within the broader context of the Hebrew Bible in order to determine whether or not the actions and words of God within those scenes should be interpreted as ultimately benevolent toward the other characters present. In the plagues narrative, these characters will include the Israelites, the Egyptians, and the Canaanites; and in Jonah, the prophet Jonah, and peripherally, the pagan sailors and the Ninevites. In the pages that follow, I will argue that the literary data

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<sup>5</sup> E.g., Hamlet or Dorian Gray, and elsewhere in the Bible, Lot (in the events surrounding the destruction of Sodom and the visit of the angels) and King David (in regard to his adultery with Bathsheba).

of the two texts under primary focus reveal the words and actions of the God character to be ultimately benevolent toward the other characters in those texts.

As benevolence will be the primary object of this study, a working definition will prove necessary. Benevolence includes “disposition to do good, desire to promote the happiness of others, kindness, generosity... affection, goodwill... an expression of goodwill,” and “act[s] of kindness” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). For the present purposes, benevolence will be defined as that characteristic of God by which he continually and invariably does what is best for mankind, for individual persons, and for the whole of existence. This includes, but is not limited to, love, which begins with good will, moving as much as one is able toward what is best for another, even when that movement necessitates sacrifice on one’s own part. This good will must also account for the long-term consequences of any action or lack of action, and to the extent that the ultimate result of any action can be known, must work with as much power as is available toward the greatest possible result. Benevolence does not exclude judgment, but in fact supersedes it to the extent that good will must at times express itself by way of confrontational intervention. Benevolence is neither rape nor neglect, and to call benevolence “just” would thus be redundant – all true benevolence is just. As one expression of justice, then, benevolence must always move within ethically appropriate means, and it acknowledges that goodness is not to be equated with desire, though the pairing of desire and goodness is its ultimate goal. In accordance with his demonstrably benevolent nature, God’s words and actions ultimately bring good and not harm to all who are affected by those words and actions. This is done without compromising the absolute moral imperatives explicitly and implicitly established by the wider biblical text.

In those cases where harm does take place, as in the deaths of Pharaoh's soldiers in the Red Sea, God benevolently provides a way of escape from that harm, and only allows harm out of respect for human free will.

The two primary texts of this study have been selected because of both their similarity to and their divergence from one another. Both passages are clearly judgment narratives – in Exodus, God expresses his wrath toward Egypt, a nation outside covenant relationship with him, and in Jonah, he expresses his wrath toward Jonah, a prophet and citizen of God's covenant nation. In both passages, God intervenes through miraculous events involving nature – in Exodus, he turns water into blood, infests Egypt with frogs, locusts, and gnats, keeps the sun from shining, and the like; in Jonah, he sends and stops a miraculous storm, keeps a man alive in the belly of a great fish for three days, and causes a plant to grow and die in a day. In both passages, God speaks directly only to a chosen prophet, who then communicates God's messages to the other characters. God demands specific obedience early in both passages, and in both passages he never relents or changes his demand. Both passages contain religiously-charged symbols (such as the Nile and the sun in Exodus and the fish and the storm in Jonah), the understanding of which allows for a correct interpretation of the actual messages communicated to the other characters by God's words and actions. Both passages contain a prominent message that YHWH is the God of all the earth and that he welcomes into his community any person who chooses to submit to his requirements.

The divergence between the two passages allows for a test of the present thesis outside of the strict boundaries of language usage, character response, and authorship that would exist in a study of only one primary text. Where Exodus contains primarily literal

language, Jonah is saturated with irony and multiplicities of meaning. In Exodus, most of the gentile recipients of the threat of God's wrath refuse to repent and those who do not repent receive judgment as promised; in Jonah, the gentile recipients of the threat of God's wrath outwardly repent and all are spared judgment. The Exodus narrative presents Israel as a politically oppressed nation under the power of a foreign empire; the Jonah narrative presents Israel (or at least its representative) as a religious oppressor attempting to horde grace and keep it from the citizens of a foreign empire. Finally, the different genres of the two texts elicit differing responses based upon the expectations and norms of those genres.

The Old Testament claims that the God of the Exodus text is also the God of the Jonah text, and accounting for the divergences mentioned above allows for a more thorough, vigorous evaluation of that claim. If the two texts express a sufficiently distinctive view of God's benevolence to justify the belief that they are records of two distinct characters exhibiting a similar characteristic, then the argument for the unity of the God character throughout the Old Testament texts proves to be ill-founded.<sup>6</sup> If, however, both judgment texts express an essentially unified view of God's benevolence, then the assertion that God is the same character in both texts remains valid.

A glance at the first instance in the Bible of what might be called "benevolent judgment" will establish context for the conclusions to be drawn in the following pages, and will present a third scene by which the consistency of the behavior of the God

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<sup>6</sup> The present task does not include a full examination of the doctrines of the Christian faith which discuss the nature and character of the Bible, such as inspiration, unity, canonization, and inerrancy. The question of the unity of the God character in the two texts to be examined is pertinent to this thesis in that, in order to coherently discuss the two narratives in view, a consideration of whether they are two records of the same character or of two different characters will be necessary. The discussion and application of the consequences of the following conclusions in theological discourse regarding the doctrines mentioned above is outside the intention and scope of this project.

character may be examined within a text that is literarily divergent from the primary Exodus and the Jonah texts,<sup>7</sup> namely, the story of God's expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3.<sup>8</sup> Based upon the definition of benevolence given above, the question in view regarding the benevolence or non-benevolence of God's expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3 must center upon whether or not that action ultimately brings good rather than harm to its recipients. In addition, though determining whether this is the *best* that could have been done within the circumstances would be impossible, other available and reasonable choices must be accounted for in order to determine with some degree of certainty whether the action performed can be deemed beneficial in comparison. The argument for benevolence in the case of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden rests upon the presence of sufficient prior warning and the ultimate positive result of the action taken.

Prior to Adam's eating of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, God's direct, practical communication with him, though certainly not lengthy, clearly expresses God's expectations. The first words of God which appear in the narrative are found in Genesis 1:28-30:

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<sup>7</sup> This divergence is at least partially based upon the significance of the time interval (within the narrative) between the Genesis record of the fall of man and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden and both the Exodus and the Jonah texts in view in the above thesis. Within the interval between the Genesis text and the Exodus text lie the beginning of human death, the great flood, the dispersion of languages at Babel, the call of Abraham and beginning of the Jew/Gentile distinction, the widespread establishment of the sacrificial system, to give only a short list. The literary impact of these distinctions for the interpretation of God's character, and specifically his benevolence, is significant, if for no other reason than that there is a great deal more history of God's actions upon which to draw in interpreting and understanding the God character of the Exodus text. Furthermore, the worldview-shaping function of the Genesis text is different from that of the Exodus text, at least to the extent that the Genesis text seeks to grant a grounding historical heritage to all mankind, whereas the Exodus text seeks only to do so for the nation of Israel. The divergence between the Genesis text and the Jonah text is similar, though expanded even further based on the greatly extended narrative time period between the two texts and the difference of genre.

<sup>8</sup> The name "Eve" is used here for the sake of consistency. The woman does not actually receive her name until after the expulsion from the garden has taken place. At this point she is only "the woman."

Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth... Behold I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth and to every bird of the heavens and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.

This speech, which is labeled a blessing, communicates to Adam and Eve God's provision not only for them, but for all living creatures on the earth. The command-promise pattern employed in the speech bequeaths responsibility immediately followed by the wherewithal to fulfill that responsibility. God's second direct speech, given only to the man and thus earlier in time despite its later placement in the narrative, contains the prohibition regarding the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. In this case the command-result pattern contains three elements – a two-part command containing a statement of liberty (“you may surely eat of any tree in the garden”) followed by a prohibition (“but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat”), and a single statement of result regarding the consequences of disobeying the prohibition (“for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die”) (Gen. 2:16-17). In the period prior to Adam and Eve's consumption of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, these two speeches contain the entirety of God's direct recorded communication with mankind.<sup>9</sup> Though the narrative certainly assumes that other communication took

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<sup>9</sup> In Genesis 2:18, God speaks of his plans to provide a helper suitable for the man, and though it appears to have been spoken in Adam's presence, the words are not directed to Adam, and thus do not qualify as

place between God and the two humans (both individually and collectively),<sup>10</sup> the exclusion of all other speeches besides these two effectively elevates the reader's consciousness of God's two-fold identity in the passage – he seeks to provide for the needs of the man, the woman, and all flesh, and he prohibits that which will bring death. Both these senses of identity include a sharing of power by which God bestows upon the man and the woman sovereignty (over the animals and the land) and moral responsibility (over themselves). God regularly uses his actions to establish his character prior to giving any verbal description of that character, a pattern seen first here and reinforced elsewhere in the Old Testament narrative.<sup>11</sup> Before he describes himself as a provider (and even this he does not claim directly in this passage), God establishes abundant provision, and before he communicates a prohibition, he establishes the consequences for disobedience of that provision.

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direct communication to mankind. The matter of Adam's knowledge of this speech is far from crucial to the present argument – whether or not Adam heard God's second speech, his view of God thus far remains essentially the same. To this point, based upon both Adam's experience and his reception of God's words, God is a provider who has given only one restriction. If he heard God's second speech, then this view of God is based on two speeches of provision and one of prohibition (though even the prohibition contains provision), and if he did not, then it is based on one of each.

<sup>10</sup> Explaining how Adam knew that it was his task to name the animals proves difficult in the absence of verbal communication between him and God. Further, the familiar tone of the conversation between Adam and God when Adam and Eve are hiding in the bushes in Genesis 3:9-12 evidences previous conversations between them, though nothing qualifying as conversation between the humans and God is recorded up to this point. The two speeches of God that are recorded, then, must have been intentionally chosen by the author of the Genesis texts for his own rhetorical and theological intentions among which certainly seems to be the elevation of the command/blessing in Genesis 1:29-30 and the prohibition/warning in Genesis 2:16-17.

<sup>11</sup> One primary example of this action-preceding-communication pattern is the complete absence of any direct claim from God regarding his own character in the entire book of Genesis. The claims that he does make about himself are often references to history (e.g., God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), which draw the attention of the recipient of those descriptions to his previous deeds, not to his words. God's first "I am" statement is found in Genesis 15:1, when God tells Abraham, "I am your shield." The first time that God "introduces himself" to any human being is not until Genesis 26:24, when he announces himself to Isaac as the God of his father, Abraham. The fact that God communicates with Adam and Eve, Cain, Noah, and Abraham without the kind of introduction found at the beginning of God's communication with many other characters throughout the Bible (such as Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and, in the New Testament, Saul of Tarsus) implies that those characters prior to Isaac with whom God spoke directly already knew him and did not need to be "introduced." The further fact that God gave no description of his own character to these early recipients of divine communication indicates that his intention was that they assess his character based upon his behavior rather than upon his self-description.

God's choice to forcibly remove Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden in the wake of their sin, then, cannot have taken the two newly-clothed humans much by surprise; if they were surprised at all, it was probably by the fact that the death God had spoken of was eventual rather than immediate,<sup>12</sup> though the text does not indicate that either Adam or Eve expected immediate death upon eating the forbidden fruit, a fact not often considered by those who accuse God of inconsistency based upon a hyper-literal interpretation of his idiomatic statement that they would die "in the day" that they ate the fruit of the forbidden tree. To claim that God's forcible removal of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden was an act of benevolence on the basis of intention alone would be insufficient; however, God's statement of intention in Genesis 3:22 – that he would remove Adam (and Eve with him) "lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever" – gives at least a starting point by which God's actions can be evaluated. Though we cannot know conclusively *why* God does not want Adam and Eve to live forever in the Garden of Eden, we can at least contemplate, within the boundaries and rules of the story, the probable results of God's choosing to leave them there rather than removing them, or, to use the terms above, we can contemplate the probable results of God's neglecting force in favor of autonomy.

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<sup>12</sup> Making an argument for benevolence on this basis can certainly be taken too far. To say that God was gracious for threatening death and only following through with eventual death makes him not only inconsistent in fulfilling his promises, but also puts him in the same category as the abusive husband who decides to use his fists instead of the bat this time. Such a being certainly cannot be called gracious. This argument, however, depends for its force upon the assumption that death is ultimately and categorically punitive, an assumption which fails to account for, at very least, the supernatural view of humanity that is clearly present in even the earliest of the Biblical texts. This issue is further complicated by the lack of clarity in the text regarding whether God's words in Genesis 2:17 ("in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die") are prescriptive or descriptive. If they are prescriptive, then God is telling Adam what God will do – he will kill them. If, on the other hand, they are descriptive, then God is simply alerting them to the kind of thing that will take place when the grounding force of not only their own existence, but of the universe itself (that is, goodness) is attacked by the cancerous presence of sin.



According to the rules of the story, Adam and Eve's access to the Tree of Life (clearly God's primary concern in regard to their exclusion from the Garden) would have caused them to live forever on earth, and despite mankind's constant and indefatigable quest for immortality, the actual result of achieving it in a postlapsarian world would have meant, for Adam and Eve, an existence riddled with painful, difficult labor, sorrowful childbearing, broken, dysfunctional relationships, and fractured communion with God, all with no hope of escape or of any better life beyond the grave.<sup>13</sup> Regardless of any consideration of afterlife (which at this point would be somewhat misplaced in light of the absence of concern with such to this point in the narrative), existence in the world of Cain and Abel's feud (Gen. 4:1-16), Lamech's exploitation of women (Gen. 4:19) and malicious violence (Gen. 4:22-24), and the interpersonal fracture and confusion of all that comes after Babel (Gen. 11:1-9) without hope of so much as annihilation is cruel indeed. "How long, O Lord?," a constant refrain of the later Psalmists, depends for its answer upon God's forcible removal of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, and

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<sup>13</sup> The consideration of prescription and description arises again in regard to the curse of Genesis 3:14-19. The first words of God's speeches to the serpent and to the man are the same: "because you have..." The actions of the party in view are the most direct cause of the results that follow. When speaking to the man, God even repeats this pattern, saying, "cursed is the ground *because of you*." These portions of the curse seem to suggest that God's words are primarily descriptive of the result of sin, and thus observational rather than punitive. In his speeches to both the woman and the serpent, God includes an "I will" statement, which suggests a prescriptive function. To the serpent, God's direct actions will be to put enmity between the serpent and the woman, and between his offspring and her descendant. His direct action upon the woman is multiplication and pain in childbirth. There is, to her, also the mention of a fractured relationship with her husband, which cannot be clearly discerned as either prescriptive or descriptive. In summary, then, the curse includes, for the serpent, first a descriptive and then a prescriptive statement, for the woman, a prescriptive and an indiscernible statement, and for the man, two descriptive statements. Stated slightly differently, the curse on the serpent is partially the consequence of his own action (crawling on his belly and eating dust) and partially the punitive act of God (enmity with the woman and her offspring and a crushed head); the result of sin for the woman is partially an act of God (multiplied, painful bearing of children) and partially of indiscernible source (fractured marital relationship); and the result of sin for the man (difficulty in work and death) is entirely the consequence of his own actions. I am here indebted to Dr. Donald Fowler for his clarification that the Hebrew text of Genesis nowhere says that the man and woman are cursed. Thus, the consequences for them are more accurately described as the results of sin rather than the curse of God, lending credence to the claim that God's statements to them are generally descriptive rather than prescriptive.

that answer is, “not forever.” The benevolence of Genesis 3:23-24 is the benevolent gift of death by which God guarantees respite from an existence that is fractured in its deepest core.

One final consideration that deserves brief comment before a more focused examination of the two primary texts takes place is the methodological concern for the rules of the story as an expression of genre. As can be seen from the above discussion of God’s expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, assessment of the claim to benevolence in God’s actions within each story will rely upon acceptance of the rules of each story as it stands. This acceptance, which is common practice at the most basic levels of literary interpretation, deserves particular attention in light of the diversity of stances regarding the historicity, composition, and religious import of the texts in view. In the present study, God’s ability to perform miraculous works, know the thoughts and emotions of other characters, and predict the future will be accepted similarly to the way in which the main character’s ability to be transformed into a cockroach is accepted in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*. The God character must be allowed to be a *God* character, and the definitions of what the term “God” means are most appropriately taken from the context of the earlier narrative. Accordingly, the God of the Exodus (the first primary text of this study), is the God who spoke the universe into existence, formed Adam from the dust of the ground and Eve from a piece of Adam’s flesh, forcibly removed Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden after their sin, sent a worldwide deluge from which he spared one man’s family, called Abraham to be his prophet, and spoke to Moses from a fire burning within a bush. His claim in Exodus 34:6 that he is a benevolent presence in

the biblical text can only be justified by his actions in the previous scenes, such as the plagues narrative of Exodus 7:1-12:32, to which we now turn.

## Chapter Two

### Confrontational Mercy: How to Speak to the Most Powerful Man in the World

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the ten plagues narrative in Exodus 7:1-12:32 in order to determine whether God's actions and words there are ultimately benevolent toward Egypt, Israel, and Canaan. First, the monotheistic setting of the narrative will reveal the primarily revelational, rather than adversarial, purpose of the plagues. Next, a review of the history of God's relationships with both Israel and Egypt will establish a set of expectations by which the effectiveness of God's attempt to prepare both characters to receive his benevolent offer of exemption from deadly plagues can be assessed. Two distinct structural analyses of the plagues narrative – one focused on God's conversations with Moses and one focused on the rhetorical flow of the passage – both highlight the intentional movement of the narrative toward the final death plague. The second, rhetorically-focused, structure will reveal God's repeated interruption of the flow of the narrative in order to give the recipients of his messages every opportunity to understand those messages and to assure that those who desire to escape the deadly plagues have every opportunity to do so. Examining the plagues themselves, each in turn, will highlight the ways in which God creates opportunities for Egypt and Israel to have correctly understood his messages as the plagues narrative moves forward. From the outset, God prepares both Egypt and Israel, but particularly Egypt, for the destruction of the final plague and particularly for the possibility of exemption from that plague. He accomplishes this by continually drawing attention to Israel and the actions of the Israelites so that by the time the final plague comes, he can be sure that Egypt has reason to be watching Israel in order to know how the final plague can be avoided. Further, he

continually draws attention to the announcements of the plagues, and in the cases of the severest plagues, he communicates means by which even Egyptians can avoid destruction. He gives periods of pause in which Egypt has opportunity to assess and comprehend his messages; and when escape from plague is possible, he grants sufficient time for any Egyptians who choose to do so to fulfill the requirements for escape. Finally, when the final plague does come, in addition to previous biblical precedent, the warnings inherent in the pre-plagues confrontations and the previous nine plagues, the preceding pause of both the plague of darkness and the period between the warning and the arrival of the final death plague, and the public nature of the requirement for escape from the plague, God sends Israel into every corner of Egypt with the message that no more plagues will follow and that the Egyptians may escape this final plague in a reasonable, simple way. Having established God's benevolence toward Israel and Egypt in the plagues narrative, a brief consideration of Canaan's experience of the plagues will show that God's benevolence toward Egypt and Israel in the plagues narrative is not limited to those characters alone but includes other parts of the ancient world.

Consideration of the monotheistic setting of the ten plagues narrative will clarify how and why God reveals himself and allows for a more precise assessment of his claim to benevolence. It is of no small significance that God's primary claim in the text – that he is the God of all the earth – is true. In the beginning, he is alone. Until the introduction of the serpent in Genesis three, God's power to create and rule as he chooses remains completely uncontested, but even in relation to the serpent, his power and authority remain absolute. Throughout Genesis, he is the sole source of supernatural activity, and other gods, such as those Rachel steals from Laban in Genesis 31, appear as little more

than trinkets without even the power to protest being sat upon by a woman while she rides her camel across the desert.<sup>14</sup> At least so far, God does not compete with other gods; in fact, there do not appear to *be* any other gods – at least none that can share the name.<sup>15</sup> Because to this point he has never interacted with any other gods, God’s claim in Exodus 12:12 that the final death plague culminates a judgment “on all the gods of Egypt” stands out in striking contrast to what we have seen from him in the preceding sixty-one chapters of the Bible.<sup>16</sup> Not only is Exodus 12:12 the first mention of God’s interaction with any other deity, it is only the fourth time in the Bible where any other deity appears at all.<sup>17</sup> At least to this point, the Bible presents the cosmos as the uncontested realm of

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<sup>14</sup> That this story is the first verifiable mention in the book of Genesis of any other god or idol besides the creator God of Genesis 1-2 gives some insight into the rhetorical purposes of the author/compiler of the narrative as it exists today. Certainly, no matter what the process of composition actually was, the person or persons who finally arranged the book as it stands would have been well aware of the presence of the worship of idols throughout the period leading up to the events of Genesis 31, yet those idols themselves are conspicuously absent from the story. With the possible exception of Laban’s mention of divination in Genesis 30:27 (and even this is left ambiguous in light of the near-immediate mention of the LORD, as well as a variant reading), no other god or idol is even hinted at until Rachel steals her father’s household gods in Genesis 31:19. The rhetorical power, then, of reserving the mention of any other god besides YHWH until his competitors are not only small enough to be hidden beneath the hindquarters of a traveler, but are actually kept there, trapped between the dusty hair of a camel and the unmentionable parts of a *woman*, all the while with no way to restore their own “divine” dignity, clearly amounts to satire of the first order. This satiric voice is seen to speak particularly loudly when the powerlessness of these gods is compared with the recent actions of YHWH, who has of late busied himself with granting prophetic dreams, bestowing wealth and honor upon his servants, and opening and closing the wombs of Jacob’s wives (of which wives one rests above these gods as she travels), and will soon visit his servant to engage in a wrestling match which proves that no man can best his power. Whether Rachel truthfully claimed that she could not rise to greet her father because “the way of women [was] upon [her]” (vs. 35) or simply claimed it was so in order to avoid discovery, the picture of the *teraphim* being bled upon beneath her as her father searches for them adds a further level of depth to the satiric voice of the narrative.

<sup>15</sup> Albright points out that even if a Mesopotamian source myth is asserted for the creation narrative, Genesis 2:4-7 retains a “completely monotheistic character” (93). This appropriation and revision of previously existing myths (if such is, in fact, to be asserted) evidences an intentional monotheistic message on the part of the author of Genesis. On myth and monotheism see also Assmann. On myth and the Bible, see Oswalt. On myth and history see Lewis.

<sup>16</sup> See also Numbers 33:4, in which we find a repetition of the claim that the plagues, and specifically the death plague, were a judgment upon the gods of the Egyptians.

<sup>17</sup> In addition to Rachel’s theft of Laban’s household gods, Jacob tells his household to “put away the foreign gods that are among you” in Genesis 35:2. That these gods could be “put away” assumes that they are of an entirely different character from YHWH. Also, Genesis 41:45, 50 records Joseph’s marriage to the daughter of Potiphara, a priest of the god On, a passing reference which hardly justifies the assertion of divine competition within the early Hebrew worldview. These three references (Laban’s household gods, the foreign gods in Jacob’s household, and the mention of On) do, however, confirm that the authors of the

one God. Other claimants to deity appear as either scraps of wood and stone no more able to impact fate than a clay pot or a sandal strap (as in the case of Laban's *teraphim* and the "foreign gods" of Jacob's family in Genesis 35) or as impotent objects of superstition who are both unable to reverse, or even slow, the mighty works of YHWH, and are not even spoken of (thus effectively absent, or even in retreat) until they are mentioned by YHWH himself (as in the plagues narrative). According to the entire book of Genesis and the first twelve chapters of Exodus, no deities besides YHWH exist.

The gods-in-competition motif pervasive in the myths of many early cultures does not appear to apply to the early Old Testament.<sup>18</sup> As a result, any interpretation of the "battle" between YHWH and the gods of Egypt in the plagues narrative must account for the ontological absence of any god but YHWH, which means that God's motivation in sending the plagues cannot have been to win a battle of majesty among a heavenly pantheon. God's claim that his plagues judge "all the gods of Egypt" does not appear until Exodus 12:12, after nine of the plagues have already taken place, making the battle motif mentioned above more an afterthought than a primary theme in the narrative.<sup>19</sup> The repetition of the claim that because of the plagues the Egyptians or Pharaoh "will know that I am the LORD" suggests a primarily active (revelational) rather than a reactive (adversarial) purpose for sending the plagues.<sup>20</sup> Despite its secondary place in the narrative, however, this undergirding adversarial element works alongside the primary revelational purpose of the plagues such that the whole reveals YHWH not only as deity,

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biblical texts were aware of other deities, which means that their choice to effectively omit any deity besides YHWH from the biblical texts in view was a conscious one.

<sup>18</sup> On this see Pritchard Part I: Myths, Epics, and Legends and Albright 93-97. In regard to the specific relationship between Yahweh and other deities, see Cross chs. 1-3, Smith chs. 1-4, and especially Walton ch. 1.

<sup>19</sup> In his article "Three Ways to Look at the Ten Plagues," Zevit surveys three primary theories regarding the purpose of the plagues – natural disasters, war on the gods of Egypt, and undoing of creation.

<sup>20</sup> This phrase and variations of it appear in Ex. 7:5, 17; 8:10, 22; 9:14, 29; and 10:2.

but as uniquely so in comparison with his challengers.<sup>21</sup> These intermingling strands of active and reactive revelation simultaneously confront false beliefs and replace those beliefs with truth among the Egyptians, the Israelites, and the Canaanites. The absence of mention of the gods of Egypt throughout the narrative would have been conspicuous in the minds of the original readers of the Exodus text, who would certainly have asked, “Where is Aten?” “Where is Hapi?” “Where is Amon-Re?” The text answers clearly – they are nowhere until YHWH mentions them, and even then they are not worth mentioning by name.

When God tells Moses about the coming plagues (Exodus 7:1-5), he says that his purposes are twofold: to bring Israel out of Egypt and to reveal to the Egyptians that he is YHWH.<sup>22</sup> The former of these purposes further nuances the presentation above of God’s adversarial purpose in sending the plagues. God confronts the gods of Egypt, but he also confronts Egypt, and his stated purpose in confronting Egypt is to free the Hebrews from slavery. In contrast to God’s confrontation of the gods of Egypt, the freedom of the Hebrew slaves is given as a purpose for the plagues before they begin, which places

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<sup>21</sup> Ford takes a similar view of God’s statement in Exodus 12:12 that YHWH will judge the gods of Egypt, citing the difficulty of asserting a one-to-one relationship between specific plagues and specific Egyptian gods. He says that “general humiliation and powerlessness [of the Egyptian pantheon] seems to make good sense and to be about as far as we can go” because “the vast number and overlapping responsibilities of the gods and goddesses of the Egyptian pantheon means that practically *any* plague, sign, or natural occurrence could be understood as related to one (or indeed several) gods” (170). For further discussion of this, see Assmann, Propp, Greenberg, Kitchen *Reliability*, Zevit “Three Ways,” Houtman, Sarna, Noth, and Hoffmeier *Israel*.

<sup>22</sup> In light of this purpose, God’s choice of Moses as his representative bears particular significance. Certainly Moses’ privileged upbringing in Pharaoh’s household and his heritage in the tribe of Levi make him uniquely qualified to serve as God’s representative, but beyond these more obvious purposes, Moses’ similarity to God by way of concern for all people stands out as a possible motivation for God’s choice as well. In the words of Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, “[Moses’] concerns are not parochial. He intervenes when a non-Jew oppresses a Jew, when two Jews fight, and when non-Jews oppress other non-Jews” (29) in reference to the three recorded incidents in Moses’ life (besides his birth narrative) prior to God’s calling him as a prophet – he kills an Egyptian for beating a Hebrew slave (Ex. 2:11-12), he tries to make peace between two Hebrews fighting with one another (Ex. 2:13-14), and he defends the daughters of Jethro against Midianite shepherds (Ex. 2:16-17).



Hebrew freedom above divine competition and pairs liberation with revelation, marking YHWH as a liberator. He will accomplish the purposes given in 7:1-5 by multiplied “signs and wonders,” “great acts of judgment,” and “stretch[ing] out [his] hand against Egypt.” Given the above definition of benevolence, the question remains whether God’s attempt to accomplish these two purposes by these means ultimately brings good and not harm to the recipients of God’s words and actions, in this case the Israelites, the Egyptians, and the Canaanites as described below.<sup>23</sup> Good will cannot simply be equated with good intentions, particularly in light of the definition of God as able to create *ex nihilo* (Gen. 1), to grant prophetic dreams based upon his knowledge of future events (Gen. 41:1-36), and to control the forces of the cosmos (Gen. 7:6-24). In addition, without engaging in the theological and philosophical discussion of the complex interplay of divine sovereignty and human free will, the possibility that God’s first desire may be thwarted based upon his respect for human free will, as in the story of Adam and Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden, must be accounted for. We must hold in tension God’s responsibility to simultaneously bring about positive outcomes while avoiding the kind of tyranny that often results from the pairing of good intentions and unrestricted means. The unqualified claim will not suffice that “God can do anything” and thus should simply have arranged circumstances such that the sorts of difficult questions being raised in the present study would not even need to be asked. To say, for example, that God should have made sure that Adam and Eve never partook of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil while he simultaneously granted them morally significant free will not only

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<sup>23</sup> If Telushkin is correct in asserting that the final plague alone would have been sufficient to accomplish the exodus, then the purpose of the other nine plagues cannot be simply to get Israel out of Egypt (33). In this case, our interpretation of the first nine plagues must focus primarily on God’s desire that the Egyptians know that he is LORD.

confuses or ignores the definitions of many of the terms involved; it also (and more importantly for the present purposes) argues entirely from silence by refusing even to acknowledge the claim to benevolence as it stands.<sup>24</sup> Benevolence consists of moving forcefully toward good; it does not consist of making evil impossible. Accordingly, the present argument will keep in mind that assessment of God's benevolence must rest primarily upon his actions in benevolently providing the *opportunity* of escape from catastrophic revelational plagues. Even when God's foreknowledge is accounted for, a claim to benevolence simply cannot be based upon the *responses* of Egypt, Israel and Canaan to God's benevolent actions. Were our definition of benevolence limited to actual positive outcomes, we would require of God a tyranny that would undercut any claim to benevolence from the outset, regardless of the outcome of those actions. The benevolence of a rapist is no benevolence at all.

A clear sense of the two collective characters "Israel" and "Egypt" within the narrative context will allow for a more fruitful examination of the words and actions of God in that his communication *to* them must be based partially upon his knowledge *of* them. And assessment of the benevolence of that communication depends in part upon their opportunity to receive it. Israel holds as its primary identity its participation in the covenant between YHWH and the patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. The blessing of the covenant established with Abram in Genesis 12 and confirmed to both Isaac and Jacob in Genesis 26 and 28 respectively, promises inheritance of a land they have not inhabited for over four hundred years. The original establishment of the nation in Abram's family began with God "calling out" Abram from among pagans in order to

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<sup>24</sup> The term "morally significant free will" is borrowed from Alvin Plantinga.

make him a blessing to all nations, and this purpose, which was restated in the confirmation of the covenant to both Isaac and Jacob, has certainly lost some of its vigor by way of its connection to the promise of progeny, the greater part of which has now been fulfilled in bitter slavery under the ruthless command of a series of tyrants. Israel's trust in God has understandably taken a beating. God's promise to Abram to be a "shield" and a great reward (Gen. 15:1) seems not to have carried over to Abram's descendants, and the fact that Israel "crie[s] out" in Exodus 2:23, but not specifically to YHWH, evidences their awareness of the fact that YHWH's early promises to the patriarchs seem to have died in Egypt with Joseph. At the same time, the miraculous events of Joseph's life and YHWH's direct involvement with those events (i.e., Joseph's interpretation of the dreams of the cupbearer, the baker, and Pharaoh) establish a precedent for God's ability to supernaturally intervene on behalf of his people within the boundaries of Egypt. Despite this precedent, however, Israel's groanings appear to be an ambiguous supplication to anyone who may be listening, not an appeal to YHWH to remember his covenant with their forefathers.<sup>25</sup> Only after the presentation of the miraculous signs that

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<sup>25</sup> This presentation of Israel's collective consciousness has not yet accounted for the statements in Exodus 1:17, 21 that the Hebrew midwives Shiphrah and Puah "feared God," a fact about them which can certainly be extended to at least some others within the Israelite community. This exception to the presentation of an Israel essentially divorced from its historic connection to YHWH, however, does little to support the idea that Israel as a whole still held fast to its early commitment to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Though the idea of the fear of the LORD certainly speaks in many cases of true religion, its primary reference seems to be to God's moral principles, as evidenced by von Rad's claim that the term is synonymous with obedience (242). This being the case, fear of God may in some cases be interpreted as a somewhat benign application of God's moral principles without a necessary faith commitment. Apart, though, from the broader application of the term "fear of God" elsewhere in the Old Testament, the function of the midwives narrative within the wider Exodus narrative illuminates the intent of the term's usage here as well. The "fear of God" that causes Shiphrah and Puah to show mercy on the Hebrew infants and to lie to Pharaoh about the circumstances surrounding the births of the Hebrew babies stands in stark juxtaposition to Pharaoh's own hardheartedness in the face of the plagues. The rhetorical effect of the brief story of the midwives so early in the book of Exodus is to establish a pattern of obedience-reward by which Pharaoh's later disobedience can be seen as even more grievously foolish. A similar juxtaposition of Jonah and the Ninevites will be seen below. The issue in view here, then, as later with Pharaoh, is not relational piety but simple obedience to the moral commands of God. With the above juxtaposition in mind and in addition to the counterposing blessings upon the midwives and curses upon Pharaoh as a result of their

God gives to Moses does the text show Israel collectively worshipping (Ex. 4:31), and even this devotion crumbles under the “harsh slavery” of Pharaoh and his armies (Ex. 6:9). Israel, it seems, trusts YHWH no more than Egypt does.

Egypt’s relatively minor place in the book of Genesis proves nevertheless intimately related to the study at hand by way of the precedent it provides for God’s actions toward Pharaoh and Egypt in the plagues narrative. The Bible first mentions Egypt in Genesis 12:10, when Abram travels there to escape a famine in Canaan. This narrative recounts Abram’s attempt to avoid Pharaoh’s disfavor by calling Sarai his sister and, intriguingly, speaks of plagues sent upon Pharaoh’s household as a result of his acceptance of Sarai into his harem. This Pharaoh, in contrast to the Pharaoh of the Exodus narrative, repents immediately when YHWH sends plagues, and Abram, like Israel later, leaves Egypt having increased greatly in wealth. Two primary rhetorical functions of this story – to explain Abram’s great wealth and to give Hagar a source narrative – often overshadow a third purpose which becomes clear when this narrative in Genesis is juxtaposed with the text in Exodus in an attempt to situate Egypt in its proper biblical context. This third purpose, which is related to the midwives narrative discussed above (see note 25), is to prefigure God’s later, similar interactions with another Pharaoh. The Pharaoh of Genesis 12 fears God, at least to the extent that, when plagues come upon his household, he responds by searching for a cause and eliminating it; that is, he repents. The Pharaoh of Genesis 12 functions as a foil to the Pharaoh of the plagues narrative, making the Pharaoh of the plagues narrative seem not only foolishly hardheaded, but also, in a strange reversal, to be acting in opposition to the expected and appropriate

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respective obedience and disobedience to God’s moral statutes, it is certainly not by accident that the Hebrew midwives are given specific names and Pharaoh is not.

response of a man in his position. The parallels between these two stories not only highlight the differences between these two Pharaohs, but also reveal the consistency of God’s benevolent actions toward them:

	<b>Abram in Egypt (Gen. 12:10-20)</b>	<b>Israel in Egypt (Gen. 42:1-Ex. 14:31)</b>	<b>Significant Contrasts</b>
Flight to Egypt	“There was a famine in the land...” Gen. 12:10	“...for the famine was in the land of Canaan.” Gen. 42:5	
Pharaoh’s Early Favor Because of a Representative	“For [Sarai’s] sake [Pharaoh] dealt well with Abram.” Gen. 12:16	“Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘...Settle your father and your brothers in the best of the land.’” Gen. 47:5-6	Intervening tension between Joseph and his brothers. <sup>26</sup>
An Israelite Seen and Taken Into Pharaoh’s Household	“[W]hen the princes of Pharaoh saw [Sarai], they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh’s house.” Gen. 12:15	“Now the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river...She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her servant woman, and she took it.” Ex. 2:5	
Mistreatment of Israel by Pharaoh	“And the woman was taken into Pharaoh’s house.” Gen. 12:15	“Therefore [Pharaoh and his people] set taskmasters over [Israel] to afflict them with heavy burdens.” Ex. 1:11	Order of events. Ignorant mistreatment (Gen.) vs. knowing mistreatment (Ex.). <sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Despite this intervening tension, the parallel between Abram’s sojourn in Egypt and Israel’s sojourn in Egypt still holds in light of two primary factors. First, the intervening tension between “Egypt” and “Israel” recorded in Genesis 42-46 actually involved neither Egypt nor Israel. Rather, it was a result of Joseph’s earlier conflict with his brothers and would more be appropriately described as infighting within Israel rather than as conflict with Egypt. Second, the first time Israel (Jacob) himself is actually present in Egypt is in Genesis 47, the passage in view in the chart above. Accordingly, the tension between Joseph and his brothers, and the multiple journeys from Canaan to Israel and back, cannot be taken as appropriate elements of the above parallel examination. The relationship between Egypt and Israel, and particularly between Pharaoh and Israel, contains early favor from Pharaoh in both narratives.

<sup>27</sup> Though the text does not explicitly claim that Pharaoh’s assimilation of Sarai into his harem was a “mistreatment” of Abram, to read such actions any other way seems hardly defensible. Pharaoh’s ignorance of the facts of the situation, however, increases the dramatic effect of the contrast between the two Pharaohs in view. Though both mistreated Abram’s family, only one did so knowingly. The problem of the differing order of events in the two passages stands as a challenge to the reading I have presented; however, to dismiss the other clear parallels on the basis of so small a difference as the reversal of two events in one of the narratives would cause us to miss the rhetorical power of viewing these two stories as a pair. It has never been true that a legitimate argument for literary reference between two stories must include a one-to-one mirroring at every point. Additionally, the presence of such differences points to some sort of basis in

God Confronts Pharaoh	“The LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues.” Gen. 12:17	“I will lay my hand on Egypt... by great acts of judgment.” Ex. 7:4	Length and severity of plagues.
Pharaoh’s Response to God	“So Pharaoh called Abram... ‘here is your wife; take her, and go.’” Gen. 12:18-19	“Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen.” Ex. 7:13, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 12, 35; 10:20, 27; 11:10.	Repentance vs. stubborn refusal.
Exit From Egypt	“And Pharaoh gave orders concerning him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had.” Gen. 12:20	“Then [Pharaoh] summoned Moses and Aaron by night and said, ‘Up, go out from among my people, both you and the people of Israel; and go, serve the LORD, as you have said. Take your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and be gone, and bless me also!’” Ex. 12:31-32	Both sent out, but in Exodus Pharaoh chases after Israel, resulting in a miraculous battle.

This first introduction of Egypt in the biblical narrative (and the parallels inherent between that first text and the record of Israel’s later sojourn into and exodus from Egypt) not only prepares the reader for the Exodus narrative – the central “Egypt text” of the Bible; it also presents Egypt, from the outset, as a people with whom God communicates by way of miraculous and catastrophic events focused toward Pharaoh. Further, God establishes a pattern of remission of plagues in which Pharaoh, should he so choose, may at any time reconcile his wrongdoing (whether known or unknown) and bring about the withdrawal of YHWH’s hand of judgment. Finally, the intertextual parallels between these two passages highlight God’s benevolent provision of *opportunity* for Pharaoh and

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external record, if not historical fact, for the stories. Had they been fabricated with these evident rhetorical purposes in mind, such a clear case of prefiguring as this one would certainly have been made smoother at some point in the process of composition. The presence of such discrepancies, then, evidences a respect for the authoritative nature of the stories in the minds of the authors and compilers of these narratives – a respect which could not be transgressed for the sake of drawing parallels like those explicated above.

Egypt to escape plagues without requiring God to violate Pharaoh's free will in order to produce a positive result. This concern for opportunity appropriately limits the examination of benevolence to God's actions rather than including Pharaoh, Egypt, or Israel's actual responses.

The view of Egypt and especially of Egypt's relation to Israel's God in the biblical record prior to the ten plagues narrative depends primarily upon the story of Abram's sojourn in Egypt in Genesis 12. Other references to Egypt in the book of Genesis include a statement that "the Jordan Valley was well watered everywhere, like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt" (Gen. 13:10), a reference to "the river of Egypt" as a boundary of the Promised Land (Gen. 15:18), a wife for Ishmael taken from Egypt (Gen. 21:21), a geographical description by which the land of the descendants of Ishmael could be situated (Gen. 25:18), a command from God to Isaac not to go down to Egypt in response to a famine as his father had done (Gen. 26:2),<sup>28</sup> and the Egypt-laden Joseph narrative beginning in Genesis 37 which can be seen, for our purposes, as an introductory element of the Exodus story with regard to its function of relocating Jacob's family from Canaan to Egypt. As a clear precursor to the plagues narrative and the primary early identifier of Egypt in the Bible, the story of Abraham's sojourn in Egypt in Genesis 12 sets up an expectation that God is not only willing to communicate with Egypt, and particularly with Pharaoh, but chooses to do so by way of catastrophic events which are revoked immediately upon Pharaoh's reconciling of whatever wrong he committed to bring those catastrophic events about. When the Joseph narrative is added to the Genesis 12 encounter, it is clear that, based upon the Biblical data, Egypt's

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<sup>28</sup> Though Isaac does obey God by refusing to go to Egypt for help, he also repeats his father's mistake by telling Abimelech and the men of the land that Rebekah is his sister.

understanding of YHWH would have been as a God who communicates through miraculous events such as plagues and dreams (even to those who are not in covenant relationship with him) and concerns himself with the welfare of the entire world (not just the family he chose as his unique possession) to the degree that he intervenes miraculously by way of prophetic dreams in order to assure the survival of Egypt and the surrounding areas in the event of severe, widespread famine. God clearly establishes benevolent relationship with Egypt prior to the plagues narrative.

The lack of scholarly consensus regarding the historicity, date of composition, and intended chronological setting of the book of Exodus makes the relationship between any actual Egyptians at any time and the collective Egypt character of the Exodus narrative difficult to describe.<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, estimation of this character must rely more heavily upon the biblical context already examined than upon supposed external reference. Nevertheless, a brief consideration of Egypt's religious beliefs and philosophical commitments will help to highlight the ways in which God directly challenges those beliefs and commitments in the plagues.

As is the case with many early cultures, the Egyptian religious cult was intimately intermingled with the monarchy. Pharaoh was both a religious and a political figure, and even the idea that there was a "religious life" separate from work, family, or politics

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<sup>29</sup> Egypt, just like any other collective "character" is, of course, at no time to be seen as a single, unified, monolithic actor within the narrative. I use this terminology in an attempt to appropriately describe the way in which the narrative itself sees Egypt within the context of my thesis, which has as its primary focus the interaction between God and the other characters (either individual or collective). For the purposes of the present study, the Egypt character will be defined as that group of people within the ten plagues narrative who live within the land of Egypt as residents rather than as sojourners and are under the authority of Pharaoh. Further, Egypt will be defined, both here and in the narrative itself, as in juxtaposition to Israel in the sense that the Egyptians are those who exist on the catastrophic side of the "distinction" that God makes between his people and Pharaoh's people beginning in Exodus 8:22-23. The actions of individuals may at any time be in contradiction to the actions of the collective Egypt character. Thus, just as the phrase "all Israel" does not necessarily connote strict one hundred per cent participation, so "all Egypt" does not require an interpretation that claims that every single individual acts as "all Egypt" acts. In regard to issues of historicity, see, for example, Stuart, Durham, Kitchen "Egyptians," Currid, and Hoffmeier *Israel*.



would have been foreign to Egyptians of nearly any era. As both a political leader and a representative of the divine world, Pharaoh was believed to have special access to the heavenly realm, and at some points even to be a god himself as the incarnation of Amon-Re. This elevated view of Pharaoh would have reconciled easily in the minds of Egyptians with the presentation of the events of Genesis 12, in which Pharaoh's interactions with YHWH directly affect the coming and going of plagues. Egyptian religion was both polytheistic and closely tied to natural events such as the sunrise, rain or drought, and the behavior of animals.<sup>30</sup> The principle of *Ma'at*, a word widely acknowledged to be impossible to accurately translate into English,<sup>31</sup> figures into Egyptian religious and political life as a core philosophical principle, even the undergirding of existence itself. *Ma'at* encompasses justice, truth, order and righteousness. It is the order that was brought out from chaos in the beginning of all things, and it is the ultimate stabilizing force by which the fundamental nature of the universe remains rhythmically permanent. To synthesize this extremely brief examination of the political, religious, and ethical landscape of Egypt, we must be aware of the connections between Pharaoh's religious function, the belief in a fundamental cosmic order by which all things exhibit permanence, and the reflection of the divine in the natural realm of the cosmos, the cycle of seasons and agriculture, and the animal kingdom. These three realms – the religio-political, the natura-religious, and the ethico-

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<sup>30</sup> Animals, in fact, seem to play a uniquely significant role in Egyptian religion in that, though they are used to represent the gods as in other systems, there seems to be a relationship between animal and god that goes beyond representation, as if there were something divine *in the animal itself*. This supra-metaphorical representation is evidenced by the occurrences of tombs filled with hundreds of mummified animals (Frankfort 8-10).

<sup>31</sup> See Frankfort 53-54 and Archer and LaSor 107.

politico-natural – are not only inextricably tied to one another, but are together the sum of Egyptian philosophy and life. All three are fundamentally challenged by the plagues.<sup>32</sup>

Structural analysis of the plagues narrative reveals the ways in which God accomplishes his rhetorical purposes and communicates his benevolence to the other characters in the story.<sup>33</sup> A number of scholars have noted the triadic structure of the plagues, breaking the first nine plagues into three sets of three and making the final death plague a separate and finalizing judgment. Ford, for example, notes the cyclical nature of God's instructions to Moses, in which the first plague of each cycle includes a command to go to Pharaoh in the morning (7:15, 8:20, and 9:13), the second plague of each cycle simply commands Moses to go to Pharaoh (8:1, 9:1, and 10:1), and the third plague of each cycle contains no words of warning at all (8:16, 9:8, and 10:21). A similar structural assessment has been noted even as early as the Talmud (134-5). A complete examination and defense of such a structure would certainly be a distraction from the present purposes, and given the level of attention structural issues in the plagues have received elsewhere,<sup>34</sup> Ford's presentation will be used as a supportive addition to, though by no means a necessary part of, the present argument. By acknowledging a 3:3:3 structure in the plagues, the primary section in which nine of the plagues take place is temporarily "bracketed off" in order to focus more intently upon the "bookends" of the narrative. If Ford's structural model holds, then such temporary bracketing is at the invitation of the intentional structure of the text itself, but even if not, it certainly appears justified in light of the clear distinction between the pre-plagues confrontations between Moses and Aaron

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<sup>32</sup> For a further discussion of the issues mentioned regarding the political, religious, and ethical beliefs and practices of ancient Egypt, see Frankfort, Assmann, LaSor, Archer and LaSor, and of course Pritchard.

<sup>33</sup> This structural analysis is not intended to connote employment of Structuralism as an interpretive theory.

<sup>34</sup> Various views of this structure, other proposals, and assessments of the relevance of such a structure in regard to interpretation can be found in Childs, Propp, Fishbane, Zevit "Three Ways," and Jacob.

and Pharaoh and the plagues themselves as well as the clear distinction in both severity and narrative flow between the first nine plagues and the final death plague. These pre-plagues confrontations, like the plagues generally, evidence a progressive increase in the force of the validation God gives on his own behalf. The difference most salient to the present purposes between the pre-plagues confrontations and the plagues themselves is that the pre-plagues confrontations include non-destructive miraculous intervention by YHWH where the plagues destroy widely. The first of these two confrontations (Ex. 5:1-4) consists of nothing more than a request to be released to worship in the wilderness because “[t]he God of the Hebrews has met with us” (Ex. 5:3). That this request may be disingenuous in light of God’s actual intention to bring the Israelites out of Egypt and into “a good and broad land” (Ex. 3:7-8) has been discussed at significant length elsewhere and will not be pursued here.<sup>35</sup> God’s first request of Pharaoh here does not preclude a further request in the future, nor does it constitute misrepresentation on God’s part. His final intention to take Israel out of the land for good certainly becomes clear by the end of the narrative,<sup>36</sup> and this first comparatively minor request rhetorically highlights Pharaoh’s tyrannical obsession with control of the Hebrews such that not only does he refuse to release them from slavery; he refuses to grant even the temporary respite of a religious festival in response to the miraculous intervention of their God.

In addition to the 3:3:3 narrative structure by which God highlights the importance of the final plague, he punctuates his revelation of himself through the plagues by a series of pauses in which the other characters are given time to consider

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<sup>35</sup> See Ford 34-43 and also Greenberg, Sarna, and Propp.

<sup>36</sup> Pharaoh’s words in 12:31-32 evidence clearly his understanding that Israel was leaving for good. See also the transition to simply “let my people go, that they may serve me” and the complete absence even of mention of the wilderness in the requests to Pharaoh beginning in 8:1.

what has been taking place in the land of Egypt and Pharaoh is given opportunity to end the plagues. Following the first plague the text leaves Pharaoh in his palace, the Egyptians digging on the banks of the Nile for water, and God silent for seven full days. As the only definitive statement of how much time elapses between plagues in the narrative, this pause in 7:25 seems a breath of quiet before the plagues begin piling atop one another, adding to the destruction of Egypt with the repetition of the phrase “Then the Lord said to Moses” before each plague begins (8:1, 16, 20; 9:1, 8, 13; 10:1, 21; 11:1).<sup>37</sup> The repeated usage of this phrase makes the narrative feel like one long, tightly wound string of devastating events, a series of blows each of which falls even before the echo of its predecessor has ceased. The seven-day pause between plagues one and two also parallels the later pause that begins with the plague of darkness and ends with the destruction of the final death plague.<sup>38</sup> God’s messages to Pharaoh take place in a 1:2:7:1:1 rhetorical structure in which appear first a verbal warning followed by a period of pause, then two preliminary warnings with increasingly significant miraculous display (the second pre-plague confrontation and the plague of blood) followed by a respite of seven days in which Pharaoh has sufficient time to consider what has already taken place, what has been prophesied to come, and what his response will be should those prophecies come to fruition. These three preliminary warnings are followed by seven increasingly catastrophic events with little or no respite between them, such that the text records

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<sup>37</sup> 8:23 does specify that “tomorrow” the fourth plague would begin, but as no definitive end to the plague of gnats is given and thus the two may even overlap, this statement of time cannot specify a space between the plagues. Similarly, the ending of the plague of flies “tomorrow” (8:29) does not specify a time period between plagues.

<sup>38</sup> A second purpose for this seven day interval may be to allow the waters of the Nile to be purified by carrying all the blood out to sea. This possibility certainly does not work against the rhetorical and practical observations above, in fact it presents yet another way in which the narrative builds to a climax in that this first plague is allowed to carry out its natural course without being specifically removed by YHWH. The later removal of plagues can thus be seen as a building sense of respite from YHWH.

Moses and Aaron doing little else besides repeatedly coming and going from Pharaoh's palace with announcements of plagues. Following these seven, the plague of darkness ceases all noise and movement throughout Egypt for three days, leaving Pharaoh and the Egyptians nothing to do but think about the devastation they have just experienced and wonder what is still to come.<sup>39</sup> This period of meditation is followed by the announcement of the final plague and then a description of the Passover requirements that functions as another break in the flow of the story prior to the actual event of the death plague. Such structural pacing not only heightens the dramatic effect of the narrative; it also highlights at least four periods of significant pause (after the first warning in chapter 5, after the plague of blood in chapter seven, during the three days of darkness in chapter ten, and between the announcement and the event of the final death plague in chapters 11 and 12) in which Pharaoh receives from God both warning and time that he might have every opportunity to halt the devastation. Both this structure of rhetorical pacing and the 3:3:3 structure of warning and revelation mentioned above serve to highlight the continually building tension as the narrative moves forward, and both focus the reader's attention on the final death plague in that the final plague is not only the sole exception to the 3:3:3 structure of warning; it is also preceded by a supernaturally-enforced period of meditation and preparation reminiscent of the previous calm that preceded seven rapidly unfolding acts of destruction. Four times God communicates and waits for a response from Pharaoh, the Egyptians, and the Israelites. Four times they all respond with silence. God's benevolence here is clear, but he does not force Pharaoh and the Egyptians to heed him.

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<sup>39</sup> This structure also highlights the significance of the seven plagues of the main body as a complete destruction of the land of Egypt. The succeeding silence of the plague of darkness recalls the silence of pre-creation. This reading aligns with Zevit's reversal of creation motif ("Three Ways").

God's communication to Pharaoh is public from the outset.<sup>40</sup> The events following the first pre-plagues confrontation help to accurately situate both Egypt and Israel as characters within the narrative in terms of their potential comprehension of the events. Pharaoh's first response – that the Israelites be forced to make bricks without straw – certainly became public knowledge prior even to the second pre-plagues confrontation in Exodus 7. Pharaoh's reference to the request to be released to worship YHWH in 5:17 is in response to a complaint by the Israelite foremen, and this confrontation between Pharaoh and the Israelite foremen leads to a subsequent confrontation between the Israelite foremen and Moses and Aaron. The number of characters involved by this point is already significant – Moses, Aaron, Pharaoh, and the attendants in Pharaoh's court were certainly all present to hear God's original demand of Pharaoh, and Pharaoh's command that the bricks be made without straw (5:7-9) assumes communication and explanation of that demand to those enforcing the new requirements. Prior to the second pre-plagues confrontation between Moses and Aaron and Pharaoh, it can be assumed based upon even a conservative estimation that nearly all the Israelites and many Egyptians were aware that YHWH had made a request of Pharaoh that the Israelites be allowed to leave the land of Egypt. God's use of Moses and Aaron as his prophetic messengers assures that those who hear of the coming plagues associate them

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<sup>40</sup> Though there are certainly hindrances within this narrative context to fully "public" communication in the modern sense of widespread, and even global, transcultural and translinguistic communication, barriers which include the fractures of tribal culture and widespread illiteracy, one would be hard pressed to find a means of communication more effective for speaking to such a large multicultural group, at least without appealing to supernatural intervention. Supernatural intervention is not, of course, out of bounds in the present discussion; however, to say that God should have supernaturally assured that his messages reached the ears of *every single* Egyptian and Israelite not only ignores the supernatural intervention by which God *does* engage these two cultures as a whole; it also creates a slippery slope by which only God's forceful overstepping of the bounds of free will can suffice as justification for the claim to benevolence. And as we have already seen, such a requirement for tyrannical force undercuts the argument for benevolence before the evidence we do have can even be considered.

with YHWH's intervention rather than simply natural, albeit unusual, phenomena. Had God communicated directly with Pharaoh, through dreams, for example, such association with YHWH would not have been as clearly evident to the general Egyptian public.

In the second pre-plagues confrontation, God uses miraculous display to further draw the attention of both Israel and Egypt to his conversations with Pharaoh. Though the text does not reveal the amount of time that passes between the two confrontations with Pharaoh in Exodus 5 and Exodus 7, the intervening reiteration of Moses' task and the genealogy of Moses and Aaron in chapter six serve, at least in the mind of the reader, to separate the two confrontations in time, giving Pharaoh sufficient opportunity to reconsider his response to God's demand, as well as to extend the introductory material so as to more effectively accomplish the feeling of increasing pace as the plagues pile on top of one another in the upcoming chapters. The miraculous transformation of Aaron's staff into a serpent, which occurs at Pharaoh's request and results in a clear message that YHWH's power significantly exceeds that of Pharaoh's sorcerers, heightens the level of attention that Israel in particular (for fear of greater retribution from Pharaoh) would already have given to this second confrontational meeting between Moses and Aaron and Pharaoh. Egypt's attention would similarly be drawn to this confrontation in light of the Egyptians' awareness of the defiant and even blasphemous requests that were being made of Pharaoh by YHWH's messengers. The miracle, then, would certainly have become widely known very quickly as the ongoing confrontation between YHWH and Pharaoh becomes the central focus of gossip for both Egypt and Israel.

Prior even to the plagues themselves, then, both Egypt and Israel begin fixating upon the events taking place in Pharaoh's court. Pharaoh has been challenged to let Israel

go, and that challenge has been supported by a miraculous temporary metamorphosis duplicable, but not exactly so, by Pharaoh's sorcerers.<sup>41</sup> At this point, no destruction has taken place, but God has effectively drawn the attention of a large number of Egyptians and Israelites to the confrontations between Moses and Aaron and Pharaoh. Assessment of the benevolence of God's actions depends not only upon what he actually says to Pharaoh, but also upon the effectiveness of his communication with both Israel and Egypt through his conversations with Pharaoh. As a result, understanding Israel and Egypt's level of access to God's communication with Pharaoh is crucial.

The first plague publicly verifies YHWH's presence in Egypt and identifies him, in contrast with Pharaoh's magicians, as not only the sender but also the remover of plagues. The announcement of the plague (Exodus 7:14-23) is certainly not a public broadcast, but the fact that the announcement takes place at the bank of the Nile rather than inside Pharaoh's palace makes it public in a way that the previous two confrontations were not. Furthermore, the widespread and highly public nature of the plague itself assures that every person in Egypt feels the effects of the plague. Despite its pervasiveness, however, the first plague is more annoyance than catastrophe, as evidenced by the picture of the Egyptians digging on the banks of the Nile for water. Though the deaths of all the fish of the Nile (7:21) would certainly have significant economic ramifications that would last well beyond the period of the plagues themselves, and the Egyptians, or at least some of them, would have responded to the plague with fear

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<sup>41</sup> The drama of this first scene of YHWH's miraculous power has not often been fully grasped by the English translations of the word "serpent." The word used in this scene connotes a monstrous and frightening sea monster, crocodile, or even dragon (see Gen. 1:21, Ps. 74:13, 148:7, Isa. 27:1, 51:9, Jer. 51:34, Ez. 29:3, 32:2, and Job 7:12) and is distinct from the "snake" that Moses runs from in 4:3 (Durham 91). In light of this much more powerful and frightening image, that Aaron's "staff" gorges itself upon these other monsters turns this into a scene of salvation rather than only of competition. The motif that Pharaoh's sorcerers can duplicate destruction but cannot remove it appears throughout the plagues narrative.



over their future livelihood, the most immediate rhetorical effect of the plague, and thus the most pertinent effect for the discussion of God's benevolence, must be the stinking, dead river that had traditionally served as a central source of life and sustenance for the people of Egypt. Not only does the bloody river recall Pharaoh's thirst for the blood of the Hebrew sons (1:16), but it may also connect to the scenes of destruction and economic collapse in "The Admonitions of Ipu-Wer," in which the Nile turning to blood is given as one image among many that prophetically connote the catastrophic fall of Egypt (Pritchard 441, ii, 10),<sup>42</sup> and it further prefigures the final death plague in which the land of Egypt will be overrun with the blood of its own firstborn sons. In light of the prophecies of Moses and Aaron, the ominous, stinking presence of blood throughout the land makes clear that YHWH's presence resides in Egypt, and the imitation of the plague by Pharaoh's sorcerers appears darkly comical in its repetition of the motif first seen in the confrontation between Aaron's serpent-staff and theirs – these men can only add to the plagues that YHWH sends; they do not even attempt to reverse them, and thus, though they do seem to have legitimate power, they can only make matters worse (cf. Durham 98 and Ford 132). Throughout the narrative, only YHWH removes plagues.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Pritchard suggests that the Admonitions precede the plagues narrative at least in some form, and Zevit dates the Admonitions no later than 2050 BCE, which means that if there is a relationship at all between the two, the Exodus text is appealing to the Egyptians' previous awareness of blood in the Nile as a symbol of economic and political collapse. The factors necessary for this rhetorical reference to be effective, however, such as the Hebrew author of Exodus's knowledge of the Admonitions, that author's knowledge of the Egyptians' knowledge of the Admonitions, and finally his knowledge of his Hebrew audience's knowledge of the Egyptians' knowledge of the Admonitions, cannot possibly be known with any certainty. Thus, any claim to a connection between the Admonitions of Ipu-Wer and the Exodus narrative must be both tentative and cautious. The Admonitions passage in view reads: "Why really, the River is blood. If one drinks of it, one rejects (it) as human and thirsts for water."

<sup>43</sup> The objection that Pharaoh's magicians would have been unable to find any unspoiled water to perform their imitative miracle (see Childs 165-166, Houtman 30, and Propp 325) requires too rigid a reading of 7:19 such that every bit of water anywhere in the land must become blood in order for the words of God to be fulfilled. This hyper-literalistic reading not only misrepresents the genre of the text by requiring it to speak as thoroughly and precisely as, for example, a modern academic publication or research report, it is demonstrably ridiculous in light of the actual consequences of claiming that *every* bit of water in Egypt

The awareness of YHWH's presence in Egypt among both the Egyptians and the Israelites continues to heighten as the plagues narrative moves forward. Three confrontations between Moses and Aaron and Pharaoh have communicated the demands of God in such a way that YHWH's words are at least partially accessible to the general public of both Egyptians and Israelites. This accessibility increases as the plagues increase, as does the power displayed by YHWH and the focus upon the Egyptians, rather than the Israelites, as the recipients of YHWH's disfavor. To this point no severe destruction has taken place, and the only salvation recorded (the salvation from the serpent-monsters in the second pre-plagues confrontation) comes from YHWH. Egypt's assessment of YHWH's character, based upon the available evidence, then, must be that he is a God willing to send plagues and other miraculous events in order to grant legitimacy to his demands. These demands are communicated through prophetic servants imbued with power to legitimize their claims. YHWH chooses to communicate with Pharaoh, though he does not hide his requests from commoners, and to this point, he gives Pharaoh opportunity to avoid destruction by submitting to his demands before God sends destruction.

Where Egypt's primary question in the plagues narrative is, Who is YHWH? Israel's primary question seems to be, Can we trust YHWH to take us out of Egypt? To this point in the narrative Israel has watched from a short distance as their historic God begins to intervene in the affairs of the reigning world power by way of direct, miraculous confrontation of the most powerful man on earth, prior to which they (or at

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must turn to blood, a claim which forces us, if we are to be fully literal, to require that every bit of saliva and every tear be turned to blood. It is the Nile that is turned to blood, and the text's awareness of its own general use of terminology is evidenced by the appearance of Egyptians digging in the banks of the Nile for water, an attempt which would have been useless if the hyper-literalistic reading above is to be accepted.

least their elders) were privileged with a private message and a private miraculous display that confirmed to them that the upcoming events were the means by which God had chosen to free them from slavery and bring them out of Egypt to the bountiful land he promised to their forefathers as an inheritance (Ex. 4:29-31). When Pharaoh responds to God's first demands by making their work even more bitter than it had previously been, their trust in him, who has seemingly been absent for the past four hundred years, wanes. Israel's personal experience of the plagues to this point is somewhat minimal in comparison to Egypt's, and the primary effect thus far of God's actions is an increase in the difficulty of Israel's work. Had God asked them at this point to attempt an escape from Egypt as he does in chapter twelve, many, if not most of them, would likely have been unwilling to leave given that God's claim to be able to triumph over Pharaoh and actually lead them out of Egypt safely remains unsubstantiated. Israel is not yet ready to leave Egypt, because God has not yet proven himself trustworthy to lead them out. Because of this, God's benevolence toward Israel is at this point incomplete. His benevolent expression of force has not yet been sufficient to earn their legitimate trust. Thus, his intervention must continue.

The second, third, and fourth plagues further increase Egypt and Israel's awareness of God's presence and power, thus far without immediate catastrophe or threat to human life.<sup>44</sup> The second plague causes the land to be overrun with frogs, and once again Pharaoh's sorcerers duplicate the miracle, but, comically, they are only able to make things worse by producing *even more* frogs in a land already saturated with them. Pharaoh knows already that if he is going to get rid of the frogs, he must appeal to

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<sup>44</sup> Like the first, these plagues would certainly have had lasting economic and agricultural effects on the land of Egypt, but the present focus on the communication between God and the other characters in the narrative concerns itself more strictly with immediate message than ultimate effect.

YHWH to do so, and when Moses and Aaron appear at his request, he is told that YHWH will end the plague whenever Pharaoh decides it should end. Thus, God ends the plague the next day, and the scene closes with Pharaoh hardening his heart as he watches his people shovel the carcasses of frogs into heaps in the streets.<sup>45</sup> The plague of gnats follows quickly upon the deaths of the frogs, perhaps bringing swarms even while the frogs are being piled, and this time the sorcerers' attempts to duplicate the plague fail. The sorcerers' statement that the plague of gnats is "the finger of God" (8:19) confirms that they attributed at least this plague to divine intervention, and coupled with the lack of any other explanation from any Egyptian other than that YHWH is the source of the plagues anywhere in the narrative leads directly to the conclusion that Egypt understood that the plagues were supernatural rather than natural, and that YHWH was their divine source. Flies follow gnats, and in the fourth plague YHWH for the first time draws an explicit distinction between his people and Pharaoh's people by exempting the land of Goshen from the plague. In addition, the announcement of the fourth plague includes a near-repetition of God's statement to Pharaoh in 7:17 that the purpose of his miraculous intervention is that Pharaoh "may know that I am the LORD" (8:22). In contrast to the first statement, however, God this time makes *exemption* from plague instead of the plague itself the mark of his presence, thus identifying himself with mercy rather than catastrophe.

By this point the Egyptians have reason to be paying close attention to the conversations between Moses and Aaron and Pharaoh. They have dug up the banks of the

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<sup>45</sup> Oddly enough, Pharaoh calls for the end of the plague "tomorrow" rather than immediately, leaving his people to suffer the frogs for another day. Pharaoh's continued unwillingness to do what is required to spare his people from plagues here and throughout the narrative stands out in contrast to God's willingness to remove the plagues, and presents Pharaoh as a significantly less benevolent leader than God.

Nile searching for water, carried frog carcasses out of their homes and been swarmed with gnats and flies, and if there is to be any hope of avoiding future plagues, certainly it will come from those conversations. The most recent confrontation between YHWH's prophets and Pharaoh has once again taken place openly, at the bank of the Nile, and this time not only did YHWH reveal the specifics of the fourth plague, but also the time it would commence and whom it would, and more importantly would not, affect. The exception of Goshen from the plagues turns the attention of Egypt to the Israelites, because it proves conclusively that they are favored by the God who is sending these plagues. From this point forward, anything Israel does is certain to be closely watched by any in Egypt who are paying attention to YHWH's warnings.

Though Israel seems to have been affected by the first three plagues, God's communication with Pharaoh through Moses and Aaron establishes with certainty that Egypt is the target of catastrophe, making Israel's experience of the plagues peripheral. The exemption of Goshen from the plague of flies further clarifies Egypt as God's target, singling Israel out as God's favored possession and effectively beginning the process of the Exodus by revealing to Israel God's ability to bring catastrophe to others while simultaneously bringing salvation to them. Throughout, no one, including Pharaoh, Egypt's most powerful sorcerers, and even the Egyptian gods themselves, appears able to stop or even hinder YHWH in his attempt to reveal that he is "LORD in the midst of the earth" (8:22).

The fifth and sixth plagues continue to emphasize the distinction between Israel and Egypt, further drawing Egypt's attention to Israel. The fifth plague (death of

Egyptian livestock) is the first time that the plague itself is death.<sup>46</sup> The sixth plague (boils) is the first to directly attack human beings. It also reintroduces Pharaoh's sorcerers, who have been absent since plague three, when they called the swarms of gnats "the finger of God" (8:19). Here, as before, they can do nothing to reverse or even hinder YHWH's plagues, in fact their inability to protect even their own bodies from boils highlights comically once again the impotence of any power but YHWH in the narrative. In this sixth plague God is for the first time named as the agent of Pharaoh's hardheartedness. Previously, Pharaoh's hardheartedness has been described by either the direct phrase "Pharaoh hardened his heart" (8:15, 32) or the ambiguous phrase "Pharaoh's heart was/remained hardened" (7:13, 22, 8:19, 9:7).<sup>47</sup> Though the text does

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<sup>46</sup> The first plague, though it resulted in the deaths of the fish in the Nile, was not on the fish themselves. Similarly, the frog deaths by which the second plague ended were peripheral to the plague, not primary.

<sup>47</sup> Because a full discussion of the issue of God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart would require an examination at least the length of the current project, I have chosen not to pursue it fully here; however, the close relationship of this issue to the present thesis requires at least some comment, even though I am primarily concerned with God's communication toward Egypt, Israel, and Canaan. The issues at stake in such a discussion, namely an appropriate working definition of what is meant by hardening of the heart as well as a clarification of the extent to which this hardening binds Pharaoh's will, must be at least reasonably settled before a discussion of the ethics of God doing such a thing can even begin. The idea that God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart results in a complete binding of his will becomes an impossible reading in light of 10:1-11, in which God hardens the hearts of Pharaoh *and* his servants (vs. 1), shortly after which (vs. 7) the servants beg Pharaoh to submit to YHWH's demands. Unless somewhere between verse one and verse seven the text has begun referring to a different set of servants or their hearts have been hardened and then immediately softened (in which case the hardening loses all meaning), then the hardening of the hearts of the servants does not remove their ability to intellectually acknowledge that for Pharaoh to continue on his current course of rebellion against YHWH would be utter foolishness. This reading seems to agree with Telushkin's assessment of the issue:

Strangely enough, had God not hardened Pharaoh's heart, it would have deprived the Egyptian monarch of free will. Of course he would have then allowed the Hebrew slaves to go; not out of choice, but out of terror. [Because God hardened his heart], the Egyptian king no longer feared the kind of physical devastation that would terrify and evoke instant obedience from a normal man. There was nothing, however, to stop Pharaoh from intellectually recognizing the injustices he had inflicted on the Hebrew slaves and letting them go... Only when the firstborn started dying did he finally realize that he was facing a force immeasurably greater than [himself]. And perhaps, being a firstborn himself, he wanted the Hebrews out in order to save his own life. (34)

Even granting the assumption that the hardening of Pharaoh's heart does result in a binding of his will such that he cannot let Israel go, God's provision of means by which deadly plagues can be escaped assures that no human death will necessarily result from such hardening. In this case, the purpose of the hardening would be to assure that all the plagues are able to take place and God's messages in the plagues are able to be fully revealed. Even so, Pharaoh's subsequent choice to muster his armies and pursue the Israelites after they have already left Egypt takes place prior to God's hardening of his heart in chapter 14. In light of this,

not specifically exempt Israel from the sixth plague, the statement in 9:11 that “the boils came upon...all the Egyptians” suggests that the Israelites were spared.

Discussion of the seventh plague is crucial to the present thesis because of its severity and the fact that it is the first instance of human death in the narrative. The announcement of this plague takes place a full day prior to the actual event of the hail, and God gives both the time of the plague and specific instructions for avoiding it. The distinction between the land of the Egyptians and the land of Goshen remains, but unlike in the previous plagues, here God tells the Egyptians not only what to do, but when and how to do it, if they want to avoid catastrophe. To claim that this speech is invalid as an attempt to offer protection to the Egyptians because it was directed only to Pharaoh proves insufficient even according to the text itself. Given the attention to the conversations between Moses and Aaron and Pharaoh already shown to exist among the Egyptians and certainly heightened even further by the recent increase in severity of the plagues, that a number of Pharaoh’s servants leave his court after Moses and Aaron are seen there and immediately begin hurrying their slaves and livestock to safe shelter would undoubtedly have been noised abroad among the Egyptians. Aside from a booming voice in the sky (and perhaps even in that case), it is difficult to imagine a more effective or efficient way for God to tell the Egyptians how to escape the seventh plague

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it seems that, regardless of God’s intervention, Pharaoh’s decision to do everything within his power to keep Israel in his service would have lasted through, and even after, the plagues themselves. The inconsistent descriptions of the hardening (mentioned above), in which sometimes Pharaoh is said to harden his own heart, sometimes God is said to harden his heart, and sometimes his heart is simply hardened, further complicate the issue. What the text does seem to say clearly is that the hardening does not result in a complete binding of Pharaoh’s will such that he is unable to let the people go, Pharaoh himself bears a great deal of responsibility for his choice to rebel against God’s commands, even if God does at times miraculously hinder him from doing so, and the ultimate result of the plagues within the metaphysical worldview of the Bible is positive for both Egypt and Israel to the degree that both Egypt and Israel have received conclusive, miraculously confirmed revelation regarding the identity and character of the one God of the universe by which they may align themselves with ultimate reality.

than what the text says he did. Further, the intervening 24-hour period before the plague confirms that anyone who heard and believed the report of YHWH's words, or even was susceptible enough to peer pressure to pull his livestock, slaves, and family under shelter after seeing the servants of Pharaoh do so was spared the destruction of the plague. God's purpose in sending this seventh plague, which is stated more explicitly than in the previous plagues – that Pharaoh and the Egyptians “may know that there is none like me in all the earth” (9:12) – refers most directly within this context to the knowledge that, in cases of catastrophic judgment upon human beings, YHWH provides specific, sufficient prior information about what the judgment will be, how to avoid it, and when to do so *even to those outside covenant relationship with him*. In fact, God gives this opportunity for escape to those who have collectively brutalized and enslaved his covenant people and who are under the leadership of a man who has continually spurned God's attempts to peaceably remove his people out of Egypt and take them to the land he has promised to them. In the seventh plague, God sets a precedent that, should an Egyptian follow the regulations he gives for avoiding the catastrophic effects of a plague, that Egyptian and anyone sufficiently under his authority to benefit from his obedience will be spared. Here God demonstrates most powerfully to this point in the plagues narrative the coexistent judgment and mercy that he claims for himself in Exodus 34:6-7. He does send the plague, and people die as a result, but no one dies for lack of opportunity to be saved. The mercy by which he offers salvation from the seventh plague could hardly be easier to access; in fact, some were certainly even spared by accident.

Nevertheless, God's offer of exemption from the seventh plague does not, by itself, negate or excuse his responsibility for the fact that because of that plague, and



because of the tenth plague yet to come, people die. Remembering that benevolence does not exclude confrontational justice and judgment, the task of asserting God's benevolence even in deadly plagues must center upon the necessity of such severe intervention in order for God's primary revelational purpose in the plagues to be accomplished. Such necessity can be asserted on the basis of two considerations: God's concern for truth and the responsibility inherent in his chosen incarnational methodology, and his consistency in holding himself to his own given moral requirements. As he reveals his own benevolence to the other characters in the plagues narrative, God simultaneously reveals certain facts about the nature of existence and about a proper perspective of morality. This multi-level revelation is incarnational in that its principles are taught by *presence* and *experience* rather than by exposition. Because of his established incarnational methodology, God's responsibility extends beyond telling the truth about himself to telling the truth about the world and the actions of human beings as well, and though an exact estimation of the destructive metaphysical power of sin would certainly be impossible, God's forceful movement against sin implicitly and incarnationally reveals his vehemence toward it. In light of the plagues' purpose to remove the Hebrews from slavery, God's forcefulness contains within it revelation of the heinousness of human slavery itself. Accordingly, the absence of violent force in the plagues would amount to an absence of animosity toward slavery in the character of God.

Further, were God to shield innocents from the consequences of the decisions of those in power over them (in this case Pharaoh), he would misrepresent the unavoidable, complex power relationships inherent in human society. The actions of human beings, especially leaders, cannot be isolated from their impact on others within their spheres of

influence, and for God to exempt this one situation from such a universal principle by assuring that the consequences of Pharaoh's political and religious decisions remained completely isolated from the lives of the people under his leadership would be both inconsistent and deceitful. That human death was in fact the only means that did finally prove effective in freeing the Hebrews from Pharaoh's clutches, and that even after that death took place and Pharaoh let the Hebrews go, he changed his mind and pursued them to the Red Sea, suggests that such violent force was, in fact, necessary in order to accomplish the purpose of freeing the Hebrews from slavery. And when God exempts Pharaoh, who was presumably a firstborn, from the final plague, he singles Pharaoh out as the primary object of the messages of the plagues and gives him yet another chance to reconcile himself to the revelation he has been given.

God's commitment to truth is further expressed by the earthly finality of death as confirmation of the distinction between redemption and revocation. Actions produce consequences that cannot be undone, and the simultaneous revelation of redemption and irreversibility in the Passover presents atonement as distinct from consequences in a way wholly consistent with the human experience of reality. Forgiveness redeems, but does not rewind, and murder, rape, or slander cannot be undone simply because they have been atoned for. For God to present this complex interrelationship other than as he does would misrepresent both himself and the world he created, thereby producing in those who would receive such revelation an expectation of exemption from consequences that will not and should not be fulfilled.

The discipline inherent in the plagues reflects God's consistency in holding himself to the same standards he expects of human beings and human governments. In

this case, God's application of the principle of *lex taleones* contains exactly the kind of appropriate reflection of punishment and crime that he requires of Israel's governmental leadership in Leviticus 24:17-22. That *lex taleones* finds its basis in the fact that "I am the LORD your God" seems just one more instance of God's consistent pattern of establishing examples prior to making claims about himself, or in this case before making legal applications based upon claims about himself. The achievement of God's revelational purpose, then, depends upon an accurate presentation of sin, power, and consequence, as well as a consistency of governing principles between his own expressions of discipline and those he requires of his people. Without attempting to quantify the value of sin and righteousness, awareness of God's incarnational methodology in the plagues narrative allows for a legitimate comparison between the destruction God brings upon Egypt and the destruction sin brings upon the human soul.

The eighth plague serves something of a summary function in that the destruction brought by the locusts lays waste anything that has been left by any of the other plagues, leaving the land of Egypt completely desolate. An Egyptian who has lived through the first eight plagues has now experienced the stinking death of the Nile, an inundation and subsequent death of frogs, flies and gnats swarming in his home to the point that the ground becomes black and the sun cannot shine through the swarms, livestock dying and rotting in the fields, painful, torturous boils on his skin, deadly, giant hail and ferocious lightning striking the ground and killing both man and beast throughout the land, and a swarm of locusts so thick that the land is completely laid waste and there is no food to be found. As he walks out of his house to survey the land in the calm that comes when the strong west wind finally blows the locusts out to sea, he cannot but think that nothing

remains to be destroyed. The carcasses of frogs, livestock, and even men and women lay rotting in the fields where they have been pelted by hailstones large enough to kill a man with one blow. Smoldering embers remain where lightning has struck the ground and the trees. The eerie silence seems almost palpable in comparison with the reverberating thunder of the locusts that had filled the air only moments ago, and as he surveys the wasteland, a thick, heavy darkness approaches, swallowing up everything in its path and stilling all activity in the land of Egypt for three days.<sup>48</sup>

Thus far God has drawn the attention of the Egyptians to the actions of the Israelites by exempting Israel from plagues four through nine. He has proven conclusively to the Egyptians that, should they choose to follow his instructions regarding how to escape a given plague (as in the cases of those plagues which threaten human life), they will be spared, regardless of their ethnicity or the actions of Pharaoh. The plagues have become increasingly more severe, and the devastation has paused (at least in terms of its immediate effect) with the plague of darkness, during which the Egyptians have no choice but to stay in their homes and ponder the events of the previous days and what they might mean.<sup>49</sup> No power in Egypt seems able to counteract, or even challenge, YHWH's control over the forces of nature, and the details of at least some of the conversations between Moses and Aaron and Pharaoh have become public

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<sup>48</sup> That the land of Goshen was exempted from all of the plagues that would have been catastrophic to the agricultural life of the area (flies, death of livestock, boils, hail, locusts, and darkness) creates an intriguingly gracious provision for Egypt once the plagues have ended. With Israel gone from the land, the flax and barley crop that had been lost in Egypt could be harvested in Goshen, assuring that even those who had ignored their opportunity to escape the plagues by which livestock, servants, and firstborn were decimated and who had chosen not to accompany Israel out of the land would still have access to food. God, it seems, loves his enemies and does good to those who persecute him.

<sup>49</sup> During the three days of darkness, the Egyptians can reasonably have concluded based upon the previous exemption of Goshen and the political and military paralysis caused by the oppressive darkness that the purpose of the plague of darkness was to grant Israel the opportunity to escape Egypt without Pharaoh being able to pursue them, especially in light of the fact that, with the darkness, the immediately destructive force of the plagues seemed to have ceased. When Egypt comes out of the darkness to find Israel still present in Goshen, the expectation of a further plague or plagues certainly followed.

knowledge. God's stated purpose in sending the plagues, "that you may know that I am the LORD in the midst of the earth" (8:22), has become known among the Egyptians, and their knowledge of God centers specifically on his willingness to grant respite from plagues even to those not in covenant relationship with himself.

The final plague, the death of the firstborn, presents the greatest challenge to God's benevolence. Prior to the actual event of the plague, Moses announces in the presence of Pharaoh and his servants what the final plague will be and when it will take place. By now there remains no doubt about whether YHWH has the power to carry out what he has said he will do, nor can anyone reasonably expect him to fail to follow through with what he has promised. The gifts of precious goods that pass from Egypt to Israel during the day of the final plague are not only a means by which the Israelites plunder the Egyptians. By sending the Israelites *en masse* into every home in every corner of Egypt, God not only confirms to Egypt that Israel will finally leave; he also effectively assures that every home in Egypt has the opportunity to be given the message of the final plague that Moses has just proclaimed to Pharaoh. The Israelites know both the plague and the means by which it can be escaped, and by sending them out into Egypt, God gives his people the opportunity to be the bearers of the good news that destruction is not inescapable. Whether they did so or not cannot be known from the evidence of the text; however, that God shares his power with Israel by inviting them to participate in his benevolent warning to Egypt about the final plague opens the door of opportunity for Israel to achieve the dignity of saving human life, even if that human life belongs to their enemies. When they enter the houses of the Egyptians, they come face to face with the firstborns they know will die that very night. That many of them apparently

left in silence shows that God's choice to redeem them from slavery was not based upon any similarity between his heart and theirs. But even if the Israelites told not one Egyptian about the Passover regulations, the stated means by which God said the destroyer would spare the homes of the Israelites was the sight of the blood on the doorposts. The only thing necessary for a home to be saved from destruction was the outward display of obedience to YHWH's requirements. Given the degree to which God has drawn the attention of Egypt to the actions of Israel by this point, coupled with the mass visits to Egyptian homes that day, to say that God desires the Egyptians to know about the possibility of escape from the plague seems reasonable. Had they observed Israel applying blood to the doorposts and chosen to do the same (whether they knew why they were doing it or not), the text gives no reason to believe that they would not have been spared along with the Israelites.<sup>50</sup> God does not tell the Egyptians directly that they may escape the plague, and he does not paint the doorposts of their homes for them, but neither does he hide from them their opportunity to be saved, and his preparation of Egypt to escape this final plague can be traced all the way back to his conversations with Pharaoh before the plagues began. He does send the plague, and innocents die as a result, but none die without the chance to be spared. Such behavior is far from capricious.

God's primarily revelational rather than adversarial purpose in sending the plagues was noted above. His primary desire – that Pharaoh, Egypt and Israel would know him as the LORD – undergirds his actions throughout the narrative. Accordingly, the primary question now must be, What has been revealed to Egypt and to Israel about YHWH?

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<sup>50</sup> Here I find Ford's assertion that the possibility of exemption from the tenth plague is "only open to the Israelites" to be indefensible and without basis in the text (166). The seventh plague has already shown that God's distinction between Israel and Egypt does not depend on total exclusion of Egypt from mercy.

Egypt's experience of the plagues begins with annoyance and moves progressively toward the severity of the final death plague. Throughout this process, YHWH makes clear that no other deity or power in Egypt can conquer him, thus trust in his word is essential for survival. YHWH consistently keeps his promises, both in judgment and in mercy, and on the only two occasions in which a plague involves human death, he gives both significant public warning and an opportunity for Egyptians to escape catastrophe, even in spite of Pharaoh's repeated unwillingness to repent and experience respite from the plagues as certainly would have occurred based on the precedent of Genesis 12. By exempting Goshen from plagues, God draws the eyes of Egypt toward the Israelites so that by the time of the final death plague, the Egyptians would have opportunity to witness the process by which their homes could be spared, even sending the Israelites into their homes with the message that this plague would be the final one, and after it the Israelites would leave Egypt for good. As it was the culmination of a series of increasingly catastrophic events, the severity of the final plague cannot have been a surprise. The plagues as a whole amount to a definitive statement by YHWH that he exists as the only legitimate power in Egypt, and he grants grace to all who are willing to submit to his requirements, regardless of their ethnicity or the actions of their leaders.

In the plagues, Israel experiences a progressive revelation of God's trustworthiness and power to lead them out of slavery. Their battered faith gains strength as God progressively asserts his power over Pharaoh, over the Egyptians sorcerers, over nature, and over the gods of Egypt. For Israel, the revelatory power of the plagues lies in the knowledge that the God of their fathers had now chosen to fight for them. But even in

the midst of the clear schism drawn between Egypt and Israel throughout the narrative, Israel's perspective of Egypt in the narrative and in subsequent Hebrew thought remains intriguingly compassionate. The mention of a "mixed multitude" (12:38) traveling with Israel out of Egypt can only refer to Egyptians who feared the LORD, perhaps some who were saved from the plagues of hail and death as a result of their willingness to heed God's warnings, and perhaps some who were not spared because of their unwillingness to heed God's warnings but chose nevertheless to align themselves with this God who had shown himself to be both powerful over the natural world and accepting of those outside his established covenant people. Additionally, the spilling of drops of wine at the mention of the plagues that remains in the Passover Seder to this day symbolizes the joy of the Exodus tainted by the suffering of the Egyptians, and according to Rabbinic legend, God angrily stopped the singing of the angels in heaven after the crossing of the Red Sea because of his grief over the drowning army (Telushkin 34-35). These clear examples of compassion toward Egypt reveal an underlying belief that God himself, even in the plagues, was concerned not only with the salvation of the Israelites from slavery, but with the spiritual and physical well-being of the Egyptians. This view of God agrees with his revelatory behavior as portrayed in the plagues narrative, and within the monotheistic worldview of the Bible, such behavior is certainly benevolent toward both Egypt and Israel.

In addition to the messages communicated to the Egyptians and Israelites discussed above, a brief consideration of the place of the Canaanites in the plagues narrative will reveal a further example of God's benevolent actions toward even those outside his covenant with Israel. According to Genesis, Canaan's primary experience and



knowledge of YHWH would have come from the influence of Abraham and his family prior to the twelve tribes' sojourn in Egypt beginning in Genesis 46. Though relatively little direct interaction between the followers of YHWH and the Canaanites appears in the Genesis narrative, the episodes that do appear make clear that a significant number of Canaanites would have been aware of the connection between Abraham's family and the God YHWH. Furthermore, the miraculous events associated with YHWH in Genesis – the plagues on Egypt in Genesis 12, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19,<sup>51</sup> and Abimelech's revelatory dream in Genesis 20 – affirm YHWH's power and presence both within and outside of the land occupied by Abraham's family, even among those outside the covenant. Further, the presence of Melchizedek (a priest of YHWH) in Salem among the Jebusites in Genesis 14 confirms that the message of YHWH was preached by some not related to Abraham.<sup>52</sup> According to the Genesis narrative, the Canaanites as a whole were certainly aware of YHWH and of the covenant connection between YHWH and Abraham's family.

Canaan would have immediately recognized the God of the plagues as the ancestral God of the Israelites who had seemingly been dormant for four hundred years and was once again working on the Israelites' behalf. Not only so, but God's actions reveal his power over the gods of Egypt who, in light of Egypt's status as the most powerful nation known to the Canaanites, would have been seen as the most powerful

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<sup>51</sup> Though the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah lies outside the view of this thesis, it is worth noting that this judgment passage fits within the pattern seen in the plagues – when sending judgment, God provides both significant public warning and opportunity for escape prior to sending calamity, even when sending catastrophe upon those outside his covenant people.

<sup>52</sup> It is not my intention here to engage the debate over the actual identity and character of Melchizedek. What the text says conclusively about him is that he was a priest of the Most High God and he was the king of Salem. The book of Hebrews' applications of the story notwithstanding, the point here does not change regardless of Melchizedek's actual identity. What matters is his confirmation of the fact that the teaching of YHWH existed even apart from Abraham's family during the patriarchal period.

gods in the world. Israel's exodus from Egypt and subsequent entrance into Canaan under the power and authority of YHWH, then, would have been seen by the Canaanites as either an opportunity to join with YHWH (as Rahab did) or to fight against him (as the Amalekites and other Canaanite tribes did). The story of Rahab in particular, however, makes clear that it was known among at least some of the Canaanites that YHWH was willing to accept into his retinue those who were not ethnically Hebrew. Those who chose to fight against YHWH and his followers did so foolishly and in direct rebellion against the clear message of the plagues – that YHWH is the God of all the earth.<sup>53</sup>

Within the ten plagues narrative, the claim that YHWH is God of all the earth is true. His desire to reveal himself even to those outside covenant relationship with him must thus be seen as a benevolent desire, for no other god actually exists to fulfill the religious needs of the Israelites, the Egyptians, and the Canaanites. The actions motivated by this benevolent desire in turn prove benevolent themselves in that God chooses to forcibly confront falsehood in no uncertain terms, but does so in such a way that any who desire to align themselves with truth may do so regardless of their political or ethnic affiliations. The idea of Israel as God's chosen people can be seen, even at this early point in the Bible, as inclusive rather than exclusive in the sense that even those who are not descendants of Abraham may at any time join the ranks of Israel if they are willing to submit to the requirements of the covenant. The plagues narrative in Exodus 7:1-12:32

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<sup>53</sup> The story of the Gibeonites in Joshua 9 presents a third possible response to Israel's entry into Canaan – manipulation. In their conversation with Joshua, the Gibeonites confirm exactly what has been claimed above – the Canaanites knew of the plagues and attributed them to the power of YHWH working on behalf of Israel. Israel keeps its oath not to destroy Gibeon (though they certainly had both the power and the justification to do so) despite the deceitful grounds upon which that oath was initiated because they believe that God's curse will rest upon them if they revoke the promise they have made. Though founded in deceit, even this feeble attempt to access God's mercy is respected and awarded.

shows that God's claim in Exodus 34:6-7 that he is a God of benevolence toward, in this case, Egypt, Israel, and Canaan aligns with his actual behavior.

### Chapter Three

#### A Dove in Flight: How to Save the Wicked and the Ignorant.

The argument thus far has consisted of a claim that God's actions in the plagues narrative in Exodus 7:1-12:32 align with his claim about himself in Exodus 34:6-7. My employed methodology has been derived from the text itself in that God's actions in the plagues narrative precede his explicit claim in Exodus 34:6-7, making God's claim to benevolence dependent upon his previous actions (of which the present consideration has been limited primarily to the plagues). That God simultaneously sends plagues and provides the possibility of escape from those plagues is wholly consistent with the coexistent wrath and good will he claims for himself in Exodus 34:6-7. God's benevolence motivates his general good will toward humanity in that his messages through the plagues are available to a general population both within and outside of Egypt. His benevolence also motivates his good will toward specific individuals, as evidenced by the opportunities given to individuals to escape various plagues even while the community in which those individuals live suffers catastrophe. This benevolence extends even to the experiences of a single individual at different points in time, as evidenced by the multiple opportunities given for escape of plagues and reconciliation of beliefs with truth throughout the period of the plagues.<sup>54</sup> And finally, a glance at Canaan has shown a "peripheral benevolence"<sup>55</sup> toward even those outside the purview of the events themselves.

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<sup>54</sup> Pharaoh's magicians, for example, are seen at first rejecting YHWH's expressions of power through Aaron because they can reproduce them, but they attribute his later expressions of power to "the finger of God," which evidences a marked change in their attitude toward YHWH as he progressively reveals himself. (Ex. 7:11, 22; 8:7, and 8:19).

<sup>55</sup> The term "peripheral" here refers to literary centrality and focus rather than importance. The fact that God so clearly acts benevolently toward those who exist in the "margins" of the biblical text (e.g. the Canaanites in the Ten Plagues narrative) means that those individuals and groups are not in any way

Whereas the plagues narrative presents a relatively straightforward and literal record of a series of events in sequence, many passages in later Old Testament books make use of nonliteral and nonlinear devices such as symbol,<sup>56</sup> proverb,<sup>57</sup> parable,<sup>58</sup> and allegory.<sup>59</sup> The prophets in particular utilize such devices to communicate their messages,<sup>60</sup> and the book of Jonah is rife with the ambiguity and complexity of the satiric voice and a series of scenes not nearly so closely related as those in the plagues narrative. These scenes take place in a variety of unrelated settings and are filled with different people and groups of people. God's actions in Jonah show his attention to be focused primarily on Jonah, whereas in the plagues narrative his words and actions reveal significant concern for the broader audiences of the Israelites and Egyptians despite the limiting of his direct verbal communication to Pharaoh through Moses and Aaron. Finally, the vast time between the two narratives embeds Jonah with a history of God's dealings with Israel and the nations, a history that is not accessible to the plagues narrative.

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peripheral in terms of his concern for them. Their reception of benevolence in the narrative, however, can be described as peripheral in the sense that they are not the primary intended recipients of God's actions and are not directly spoken to by him. Similarly, God's primary purposes *in terms of the flow of the narrative* in sending the storm in Jonah chapter one seem to have been to keep Jonah from successfully fleeing to Tarshish and to communicate to Jonah his effective power outside the land of Israel. Nevertheless, God's revelation of himself to the sailors by way of the storm and the words of his (reluctant) prophet Jonah amounts to benevolent action toward them. Their status as peripheral characters is evidenced by the fact that they do not appear outside of chapter one and do little to advance the plot of the story, but by the end of their part in the story they have received the knowledge of YHWH. And within the worldview of the story, the knowledge of YHWH is the best knowledge one can possibly possess.

<sup>56</sup> The tabernacle, the Ark of the Covenant, the altar and the horns of the altar, the temple and many of its furnishings, the priestly clothing, the right hand of God and many of the descriptions of God (as shepherd, as king) are a few Old Testament symbols.

<sup>57</sup> The book of Proverbs is, of course, the primary example, but examples can also be found in Ecclesiastes.

<sup>58</sup> Nathan's confrontation of David in II Samuel 12, for example.

<sup>59</sup> Isaiah 5, Jeremiah 2, Ezekiel 16, and Hosea (remembering that allegory does not necessitate non-historical reference).

<sup>60</sup> Jeremiah buries and digs up a belt (Jer. 13), Ezekiel lies on one side for 390 days and on the other for 40 days and cooks his food over dung (Ezek 4), and Hosea marries a prostitute. All of these prophetic narratives have meanings that extend well beyond the literal.

Though drastically different from the plagues narrative in style, genre, and setting(s), the book of Jonah makes a similar claim about God and it supports that claim in similar ways.<sup>61</sup> In fact, Jonah's reference to Exodus 34:6-7 in Jonah 4:2 holds a central rhetorical place in the story and thus functions as something of a "thesis" for the story.<sup>62</sup> As in Exodus, this thesis appears after God has already intervened on several occasions, and thus the methodology employed in interpreting Jonah will take God's actions as the definitive measure by which the claims about him are to be evaluated. Accordingly, the thesis of this chapter is that, as in the plagues narrative, the words and actions of God in Jonah align with the claims made about him and the claims he implicitly makes about himself in the book, among which the primary claim is that he is "a gracious God and

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<sup>61</sup> Because genre is a matter of such significant and lengthy debate in studies of the book of Jonah and has been discussed at such length elsewhere, I have chosen not to engage the issue directly here. As Jonah was composed prior to and outside of traditional Western genre categories and in light of the fact that a definitive catalogue of Hebrew genre categories does not exist, strict classification into current categories is unlikely to be highly fruitful, though certainly an awareness of modes of composition is indispensable to the discussion of any literature. For the present purposes, genre study is helpful inasmuch as it heightens awareness of the thick irony present throughout the book and alerts interpreters to the expectations inherent in reading it. The prevalence of reversals of biblical tropes (such as the Exodus 34 creed and its application to covenant Israel, the submission of the prophet to the will of God, and the destruction of the evil city) suggests a heavy presence of the satiric voice, though calling Jonah a full-fledged, formal satire (à la Swift) seems to go too far. The best starting point in a discussion of genre would be Hebrew prophecy, as the book appears within the book of the twelve and presents as its protagonist Jonah son of Ammittai, the *nabi* (prophet) of II Kings 14:25. Any deviation from or reversal of the traditional elements of Hebrew prophecy (and there are many in Jonah) must thus be seen as revisions of the idea of prophecy and the prophet. A literary presentation of Jonah, then, must be alert to the incidence of irony, satire, and reversal in light of the ways in which those literary devices fit into the broader genre of Hebrew prophecy and the more specific context of the book of the twelve. For a survey of the discussion regarding the genre of Jonah, see Woodard, Lange, Alexander, Orth, Wendland, Elata-Alster and Salmon, and McKenzie.

<sup>62</sup> Jonah does not actually reference the entirety of the Exodus 34:6-7 creed. His omission of verse 7, the part of the creed which speaks of God's judgment, stands out as particularly ironic in light of Jonah's desire to see God destroy Nineveh and spare him. Jonah is angry with God for what he sees as staying true to one half of his promise and ignoring the other, but in demanding that God destroy the city, Jonah asks God to stay true to the second half of the promise and ignore the first. Jonah's problem, then, is not with God's failure to keep his promises, but rather with the fact that God's supposed inconsistency does not align with Jonah's inconsistency. Were Jonah to have it his way, God would act only according to Exodus 34:6 in his relationship with Jonah, and would act only according to Exodus 34:7 in his relationship with Nineveh. Instead, God stays true to the entirety of his claim by showing both mercy and justice. Though Jonah's ironic claim about God is limited specifically to Exodus 34:6, the claim of the *author* of Jonah seems to include both 6 and 7. As it does not appear in the text of Jonah, discussion of verse 7 will not be included below except where its absence is particularly conspicuous.

merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster” (Jonah 4:2 cf. Exodus 34:6).

Examination of this thesis will take place in two parts. First, literary and rhetorical matters will reveal what exactly are the claims about God’s benevolence in the book. These matters are, first, the strong presence of concern with God’s compassion toward gentiles in the book as highlighted by a series of “firsts” and “lasts”; second, the presentation of Exodus 34:6 as the theological thesis of the book based upon its rhetorical centrality; and third, the structural and rhetorical flow of Jonah’s prayer in chapter two. Explication of the central claims about God’s benevolence in the book will lead to the second main section of the examination, in which God’s words and actions in the book will reveal whether he should or should not be described as a benevolent character whose behavior aligns with the descriptions of him in Jonah 4:2 and Exodus 34:6-7. God’s final speech is highlighted by its great length in comparison to his other speeches in the book. Additionally, the narrative draws attention to that final question by placing it outside of the repetitive structure of the other four. God’s actions will be categorized based upon the grammatical structures used to communicate them to show that the five primary actions of God are all directed toward Jonah and all communicate God’s benevolence toward that prophet. This benevolence benefits both Jonah and the gentiles within his sphere of influence, and like the Canaanites in chapter two, both the sailors and the Ninevites become recipients of God’s benevolence toward Jonah.

Both the first introduction to and the final glimpse of God in the book of Jonah contrast God’s benevolence toward the residents of Nineveh with Jonah’s bigotry toward them. God’s compassion toward the residents of Nineveh not only functions as the

literary occasion for the plot of the book; it also begins to build the case for God's benevolence in the book. The first thing the book says about God is that he has seen the "evil" (*ra'ah*) of the city of Nineveh, and thus he sends Jonah to preach there. The ambiguity of *ra'ah*, however, complicates a clear understanding of God's motivation for sending Jonah to Nineveh without an appeal to the context of the rest of the book.<sup>63</sup> The ESV in 1:2 reads, "their evil has come up before me," but Stuart translates the phrase, "their trouble is of concern to me," noting that the wide variety of meanings of *ra'ah* allows for the possibility that even Jonah was unclear about exactly why God had chosen to send him to Nineveh (*WBC* 444, 448).<sup>64</sup> *Ra'ah* appears repeatedly in the book,

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<sup>63</sup> Regardless of God's motivation, that he sends a prophet to *Nineveh* at all stands out as a consummately benevolent act in light of Assyria's famous brutality as attested to elsewhere in the Old Testament (e.g. Nahum) as well as in external literary and archaeological records. Though an interpretation of God as benevolent does not depend on a recipient of benevolence so famously depraved as the residents of Nineveh, that those residents are the chosen recipients here makes God's gracious pursuit of them stand out as that much more powerful an example of his longsuffering. The effectiveness of the use of Nineveh as a device by which to trap the reader in a similar bigotry as that expressed by Jonah is strengthened by the ambiguity of *ra'ah* in the opening lines of the book. The book's original audience, which would not have had to stretch credulity to see Nineveh as their contemporary Sodom, would certainly have expected God's reaction to the great evil (*ra'ah*) of the city to be a catastrophic judgment rivaling the one recorded in Genesis 19. When God's final words make clear that his motivation in sending Jonah to Nineveh was primarily their calamity rather than their sinfulness, readers who in chapter one drew parallels between Sodom and Nineveh and between Abraham and Jonah find themselves aligned with Jonah under both a withered plant and the scrutinizing question of a benevolent God. On the brutality of Nineveh and Assyria see Pritchard and Bleibtreu.

<sup>64</sup> In this case, the ambiguity of God's command draws attention to Jonah's pre-existing attitude toward Nineveh. Should Jonah interpret God's command as a wrathful response to the sin of the Ninevites, then his choice to run could (at least at this point in the narrative) be construed as unwillingness to be the instrument of doom and the servant of a capricious God, but if Jonah interprets God's command as a response to Nineveh's calamity (as he seems to based upon his later explanation of his actions in 4:2), then he is being presented as a wrathful prophet unwilling to be the instrument of a God he sees as unjustly benevolent. Even accounting for nuances of interpretation beyond the two listed, the ambiguity of *ra'ah* effectively builds literary tension by making a full understanding of God's motivation for sending Jonah to Nineveh impossible, both for the reader and for the prophet. As the plot moves forward and the intentions of both God and Jonah become more clear, we become progressively more aware not only of Jonah's preconceptions of God, but of our own as well. Our own guesses (for at this point they can only be guesses) about why God is sending Jonah to Nineveh reveal to us our own pre-existing thoughts about God, and as the narrative moves forward perhaps place us in the same camp with Jonah over and against a God we, like he, have misunderstood. The foundation for the multilayered satiric and critical functions of the book is thus established even in its first sentence. Hauser notes that in chapter one readers are led "to conclude either that Jonah is fleeing in order to avoid being the agent of the city's destruction or that he is fleeing the



referring variously to Jonah's displeasure (*ra'ah*) toward God for sparing Nineveh (Ackerman 241), the destruction (*ra'ah*) that God had planned for the city, the destructive (*ra'ah*) storm that came upon the ship (Young 315), and the "evil way" (*ra'ah*) for which the Ninevites repent (Chisholm 415). The word even appears in the "thesis" passage discussed above (Jonah 4:2), where God's relenting from disaster (*ra'ah*) is given as one of his primary characteristics (Young 315).<sup>65</sup> This elasticity of usage allows for the weaving of intriguing literary threads (such as Chisholm's observation that by 4:6 Jonah has become the *ra'ah* that he was originally sent to preach against (415)) but hinders any attempt to create one consistent, trustworthy definition. Based upon God's actions toward the Ninevites throughout the book and his description of the residents of Nineveh in 4:11 (that they "do not know their right hand from their left"), that God sent Jonah to Nineveh to warn the Ninevites of impending, unavoidable doom as he had done with Sodom and Gomorrah seems unlikely.<sup>66</sup> But of course in 1:1-2 the reader does not yet have access to

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terror of God's wrath. There is just enough misdirection to nudge the readers toward either of these conclusions... even as late as chap. 3" (21).

<sup>65</sup> That *ra'ah* does not appear in the original Exodus 34 passage highlights its presence here as an intentional literary device by which the author of Jonah continues to explore the various possible nuances of the word as he employs it with various connotations and definitions throughout the book.

<sup>66</sup> Had God's primary goal been for his message to be preached in Nineveh, surely he could have found a simpler means by which to accomplish that goal than chasing his prophet around with a hungry fish until Jonah submits to his assigned task. At very least God has angels at his disposal who are more than capable of delivering such a message without all the trouble of free will and flighty prophets. And Nineveh's quick and overwhelming repentance in response to a sermon of only a few words suggests that the effectiveness of Jonah's ministry there was not dependent upon the particulars of his unique personality; it would seem that almost anyone could have been as effective as he was. Certainly, God desires his message to be preached, and preached by Jonah in particular, but his concern lies also, and perhaps primarily, with Jonah himself. Sasson references here a rabbinic legend connected with Jonah in which a slave runs from his master, and the master responds by saying that he has plenty of slaves to fill the runaway slave's place (89). The rabbis apparently saw as well that God's "chasing" of Jonah cannot have been motivated by *need* – he had plenty of other servants to do the job. Additionally, the verbal and ideational connection between Nineveh's *ra'ah*, which "has come up before" the LORD in Jonah 1:2 and the "outcry" against Sodom and Gomorrah that had "come to" the LORD in Genesis 18:21 and had "become great before the LORD" in Genesis 19:13 recalls Abraham's intercession for Sodom in which he stands before God pleading for mercy. Jonah, in ironic contrast, stands before God and pleads for judgment. In both cases, God shows more mercy than his prophet asks for – in Genesis, God cannot find ten righteous, but he spares all that are willing to leave the city, righteous or not; and in Jonah, God spares the city *even when his prophet*

4:11 and is thus left to his own devices in determining whether God's movement toward Nineveh will result in judgment or in salvation. *Rhetorically*, the motivation for God's response to Nineveh's *ra'ah* in 1:1-2 remains ambiguous; *theologically*, that response can be appropriately described as benevolence motivated by pity based upon the evidence of 4:11. *Practically*, by failing to provide a conclusive statement of his own view of Nineveh until 4:11, God once again sets up his own behavior, rather than his claims, as the definitive test of his benevolence.

Regardless of the word's ambiguity, to split the meanings of *ra'ah* and say that it cannot connote both sin and calamity would be to misunderstand the biblical usage of both of those terms. God's compassion toward Nineveh does not depend on the city being free from sin. He sees their calamity and responds with compassion, even if that calamity results directly from their own wickedness, and he moves forcefully against their wickedness, their ignorance, and their trouble. Though Exodus 3:7 uses *oni* rather than *ra'ah* to refer to the affliction of the Israelites in Egypt (Young 16), the presentation of the plagues narrative above gives a pointed awareness of the similarity between God's call to Moses to rise up and cry out to Pharaoh in response to the affliction of the Israelites and God's call to Jonah to rise up and cry out to Nineveh in response to the calamity of the Ninevites.<sup>67</sup>

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*intercedes in judgment against it.* Band draws a similar connection between Nineveh and Sodom in his argument for an interpretation of the book of Jonah as parody based upon the pervasiveness of intertextual parallels (181).

<sup>67</sup> Discussion of the intertextual parallels between the ten plagues narrative and the book of Jonah in this chapter and throughout the current project does not include a claim to any kind of intentional dependence upon or "marking" (see Jeremy M. Hutton's article on Isaiah 51:9-11) of the plagues narrative on the part of the author of Jonah. The similarities between the two texts allow for a determination of whether or not they reveal the same God character, but to say that the two are parallel in the same sense that, for example, God's command and blessing upon Adam and Eve at creation in Genesis 1:26-31 and God's command and blessing upon Noah and his family at the re-creation after the flood in Genesis 9:1-7 are parallel seems to be an engagement in what Dr. Donald Fowler calls "parallelomania." Though the texts certainly do not

God's final question to Jonah, which ends the book and stands as God's own "last word" about himself, leaves both Jonah and the reader with a final meditation on God's compassion for Nineveh. The question itself is straightforward – God juxtaposes Jonah's driving concern for his own comfort with his similarly driving desire for Nineveh to be destroyed, thus revealing to Jonah his own selfishness, bigotry, and recalcitrance and showing the great distance between Jonah's concerns and God's. The question also clarifies, finally, both God's original motivation for sending Jonah to Nineveh and the meaning of *ra'ah* in 1:2. That God has not left Jonah to stew in his own inappropriate self-pity but has turned Jonah's attention outward in order to align him more closely with God's benevolent pity toward Nineveh extends God's pity as presented in 1:1-2 to now include Jonah in addition to the city of Nineveh as a recipient of benevolent confrontation. As it began, the book ends with God's concern for Nineveh, thus bracketing it with the knowledge that God, unlike his prophet, desires even pagans to know him as the God of all the earth.

A number of other "firsts" and "lasts" reveal the continual preoccupation with God's benevolent attitude toward gentiles and toward Jonah.<sup>68</sup> The first words God speaks in the book (1:2) send his prophet to a group of pagans and his last words (4:10-11) challenge that prophet's prejudice toward those pagans. God's first action (1:4 – sending the storm) forcefully keeps Jonah from failing to fulfill this commission and his

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evidence sufficient similarity to be said to be in significant, intentional "conversation" with one another, awareness of their shared claim to God's benevolence and the task of determining the legitimacy of that claim and particularly of the consistency of that claim across both texts requires a methodology which examines the actions of the God character with a view toward incorporating his actions in both narratives. The comparison, then, between Jonah and Moses does not constitute a claim that Jonah is being presented by the text as a "new Moses" in any significant sense. Rather, it only highlights the consistency of God's calling in the lives of two prophets and particularly the consistency of God's motivation for that calling.

<sup>68</sup> To say that these firsts and lasts are intentionally structured as such by the author of Jonah goes beyond what the evidence suggests. The unity of theme among them, however, becomes just one way to highlight the continual preoccupation with and repetitious appearance of concern for God's benevolence in the book.

last action (4:8) sends a scorching wind from the city of Nineveh to draw Jonah's attention back there and finalize the object lesson by which Jonah's attitude toward Nineveh is finally and incontrovertibly shown to be opposed to God's. The first words spoken directly to God in the book are the words of the prayer of the sailors in 1:14, in which they plead for God to mercifully spare their lives as they (so they think) take Jonah's life by throwing him into the sea. God benevolently accepts their prayer, and he even verifies that he has heard them and that his anger is not directed toward them by ceasing the storm as soon as Jonah is in the water.<sup>69</sup> Jonah's first words to God (2:2) are fittingly the only "first" in the book that do not pair God's benevolence with gentiles. His focus on salvation is also a focus on himself, and his last words in the book (4:9 – that his anger over the plant is appropriate motivation for a death wish) sum up the description of the prophet – he praises God for acting benevolently toward *him*, but when God applies that same benevolence to anyone else, Jonah pouts and wishes to die.<sup>70</sup> With the exception, then, of Jonah's prayer (which, as discussed below in the presentation of the rhetorical flow of the prayer, ultimately points to the possibility of gentile participation in God's *chesed*) and Jonah's final statement of anger, all of these firsts and lasts pair God's benevolence with gentiles.

Among these firsts and lasts, the first (and only) direct claim about God (4:2 – Jonah's reference to Exodus 34:6) stands out as the "thesis" about God in the book. Hauser argues convincingly that this statement plays a central role in its surprising revelation of the answer to the most enigmatic mystery in the book: Why did Jonah run?

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<sup>69</sup> That the pagan sailors are concerned for Jonah's life and respond immediately and reverently to God's intervention stands as ironic comment on Jonah's presence as the "prophet of YHWH" in the book. Of all the characters in the book (including the animals), Jonah seems the least like God.

<sup>70</sup> Here again Jonah's desire to apply Exodus 34:6 to himself and 34:7 to Nineveh is evident.

But even more powerfully than this rhetorical closure, Jonah creates a profoundly confrontational reversal by using this traditional creed, which is presented in Exodus 34 as a primary identifier of God's covenant relationship with *Israel*, to speak of God's benevolence toward *gentiles*. "I knew you were a God of *chesed*," Jonah says. And such knowledge is expected from a prophet of YHWH. But Jonah's conclusion – "and thus I knew that you would spare the city of Nineveh" – makes this reference to Exodus 34:6 so shocking as to be unforgettable, and that he revises the creed by omitting the second half only adds to this shock.<sup>71</sup> The statement is both the logical crux and the theological summary of the entire book, and the scene immediately following Jonah's confession of God's benevolence reveals exactly *how* God expresses that benevolence – he confronts his prophet, asking Jonah to join in his benevolent pity toward Nineveh.<sup>72</sup>

By connecting the claims about God in the book of Jonah back to original institution of the creed in Exodus 34, as well as to the numerous reiterations of that creed throughout the preceding books of the Old Testament,<sup>73</sup> the author of Jonah hints even beyond the book itself to a broader claim present in the Old Testament as a whole. Jonah presents Exodus 34:6 (and by extension verse 7 as well) as God's *central identity*; and his story becomes (among other things) an examination of whether or not the claim of that

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<sup>71</sup> Dr. Donald Fowler has recently pointed out to me that the next time the Exodus 34 creed appears in the book of the twelve is in Nahum 1:3, but there the first half is omitted, apparently because Nineveh's repentance has proven short-lived. Thus, within the book of the twelve, Jonah and Nahum together illustrate the two halves of the creed. Jonah's omission of verse 7 fits well its purpose in Jonah of presenting the prophet as the bigoted antithesis of God's concerns while that omission simultaneously interacts with Nahum to create a broader comment on the nature of God's just benevolence within the book of the twelve. This double function of the Exodus 34 creed is just one element of the artistry of both the book of Jonah and of the broader book of the twelve.

<sup>72</sup> Band notes the intriguing connection between the "re-inscribing" in Exodus 34 of the stone tablets upon which were written the Ten Commandments and Jonah's "re-inscribing" in Jonah 4:2 of the theological creed given by God to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7 (181-182). The immediate context of the Exodus 34 passage reveals a God who benevolently repeats his covenant vows and commands to his people after his prophet Moses shatters the first tablets of the covenant. As in Jonah, God does not there change or soften his requirements, but he benevolently allows a second chance.

<sup>73</sup> See Numbers 14:18, Nehemiah 9:17, Psalm 86:15, 103:8, and 145:8, and Joel 2:13.

passage accurately describes the behavior of God. But this external reference means that the book of Jonah, despite being relatively self-contained, should not be read in isolation from the broader Old Testament. Through synthesis of literary artistry, direct and indirect theological claims, and historical reference, the book of Jonah points toward consideration of the benevolence of God in the Old Testament generally, with the story of Jonah as only one example of the fact that the chasm between man's concerns and God's concerns remains vast. But God continually works to close it.

In addition to the firsts and lasts, and particularly the centrality of Jonah's quotation of Exodus 34:6 as the only direct theological claim in the book, Jonah's psalm in chapter two stands out as literarily unique among the narrative sections of chapters 1, 3, and 4. A change of genre and a clear break in the narrative action of the book direct attention to Jonah's prayer from the belly of the fish as a meditative and interpretive pause during which the reader may consider the actions of both God and Jonah to this point in the story. In this way the prayer recalls the seven-day pause after plague one and also the pause of the plague of darkness in the ten plagues narrative. Despite God's direct and continuous communication with Jonah in chapter one, both in word and deed, Jonah never speaks directly to God until he is actually inside the great fish. The bulk of his prayer employs second person direct address to God, the only exceptions being the first and last lines and the line in verse 8, all three of which are addressed to the audience. Throughout, the prayer focuses on God's salvation, but the primary and most direct theological claims of the poem come from the three addresses to the audience, in which Jonah, rather than addressing God, "turns to teach," as it were.<sup>74</sup> Of the three, the second

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<sup>74</sup> The conception of God in Jonah's prayer as a personal savior who responds to the cries of people matches not only the view of God in the book as a corporate savior to the Ninevites; it also recalls God's

and third stand out as unique from the first in that they are the only two statements in the psalm written in present tense. Excluded from their context in the rest of the psalm, these three addresses read as follows:

“I called out to the LORD, out of my distress, and he answered me” (vs. 2a).  
 “Those who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love (*chesed*)” (vs. 8).  
 “Salvation belongs to the LORD!” (vs. 9b).

In addition to being the center of this threefold address, verse 8 is also a logical turning point in the psalm in that it bridges the past tense section and the future tense section.

Prior to verse 8, the psalm employs past tense – Jonah remembers his descent and salvation from death. Between the addresses to the audience in verse 8 and verse 9b, the psalm speaks of the future – Jonah will sacrifice and will fulfill his vows. This transition from past to future tense matches the surrounding context in that Jonah composes this psalm *inside the great fish* – his salvation from death is his past, and the fulfillment of his vows lies yet in the future. His *present reality* is salvation by way of digestion, and in that reality he contemplates salvation, the uselessness of idols, and the hope of *chesed*.<sup>75</sup> The

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hearing of the cries of the Israelites in Egypt in the Exodus narrative. In these three cases, God responds to distress by sending salvation, whether that salvation takes the form of plagues (in Exodus), the message of a prophet (for Nineveh), or three days inside a giant fish (for Jonah). And God responds the same way to Jews in slavery, pagans from a warrior nation, and a prophet running to escape his call. In the case of the Jews in slavery, the cry was not even specifically directed toward YHWH; in the case of the Ninevites, the recipient of salvation not only threatens to torture and destroy God’s covenant people, but has not even cried out at all (their only “cry” is their *ra’ah* which rises to God); and in the case of Jonah, God responds to a prophet who has turned his back on God’s task for him. None of these recipients of God’s benevolence seems to deserve it, and in all three cases God makes the first move.

<sup>75</sup> The theological teaching of the prayer depends in part upon its immediate context, which places the prayer on Jonah’s lips while he is still inside the fish, and though he seems in 2:4 and 2:9 to be confident that he will at some point get out of the fish, he has been given no promise as such. We can only speculate that, if Jonah guessed at all that he would survive the ordeal, such an assumption was based upon his belief in the tenacity of God’s call and the fact that God had not let him die in the ocean. The salvation in view, then, specifically does *not* refer to salvation from death or from the fish, and certainly does not connote any softening of God’s call to go to Nineveh. Jonah may have in mind God’s keeping him from drowning, but salvation from drowning by way of digestion in the belly of a fish seems less than sufficient to elicit the composition of a psalm of thankfulness. My argument here admittedly assumes that Jonah composed the psalm while actually inside the fish. Regardless of the plausibility of such an event, the author of this text has placed the words of the psalm on Jonah’s lips while he is still inside the fish. Because the present thesis

theological claim of the prayer, and to this point the primary theological claim of the book, is that YHWH is a God of salvation who grants *chesed* to those who are willing to forsake their devotion to idols.

Jonah's statement in 2:8 that "[t]hose who pay regard to vain idols forsake their hope of steadfast love (*chesed*)" comes to bear directly upon the present thesis in light of *chesed*'s close relationship to benevolence. Though *chesed* is used primarily in covenant contexts (cf. Glueck), Sakenfeld has shown that it can also apply to "a more voluntarily given loyalty," such as the devotion of Ruth to Boaz and God's acceptance of the Gentiles here in Jonah (Stuart "Steadfast Love" 613-614). These exceptions to the primarily covenant-oriented uses of the word, however, must be interpreted in light of their *relationship* to covenant concerns rather than their *independence* of those concerns. Jonah's use of *chesed* to speak of God's benevolence toward idol worshippers here in 2:8 and toward the residents of Nineveh in 4:2 does not imply any attempt by God to establish covenant with those gentiles in the same sense that he establishes covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12 and with Moses and the nation of Israel at Sinai.<sup>76</sup> Rather, the uses of *chesed* in 2:8 and 4:2 function as a reversal of expected usage and highlight once again the presentation of God's pity toward gentiles as an appropriate attitude. Jonah's application of the Exodus 34 creed to gentiles is a particularly stark example of such reversal – the idea that a divine name given to Israel at the very ceremony during which God gave to Moses the ten tablets inscribed with his holy words of the covenant could be

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concerns itself more closely with the rhetorical effect of the text as it stands than with concerns of the plausibility of the events recorded in the narrative, I choose to accept this event in the same way that I accepted the supernatural plagues in chapter two above. My concern is with what the author wanted us to think happened, whether that is what actually happened or not. On Jonah's ignorance as to whether he would ever escape the belly of the fish see also Day 40.

<sup>76</sup> Though previous biblical examples of gentiles who join Israel, such as Rahab the prostitute and Uriah the Hittite, make clear that these sailors and Ninevites may also join God's covenant community, should they so desire.



applied to a group of pagans effectively (though offensively) draws a Hebrew audience's attention to God's pity for the gentile nations, much like the destruction of the vine does for Jonah in chapter four. Such a reversal becomes the kind of "peripheral benevolence" mentioned in the discussion of the Canaanites above in that the Hebrew reader, like Jonah, must face the benevolent confrontation of God in regard to the alignment (or lack of alignment) of his own view of gentiles with God's view of them. This reversal additionally contributes to the overall ironic effect of the book and revises expectations of the prophetic genre by placing prophetic words on the lips of the prophet but making *the prophet himself*, rather than his audience, the first object of critique.

Stuart's assumption that Jonah in 2:8 refers primarily to Hebrews disloyal to YHWH seems discordant with the immediate context both before and after the psalm (WBC 478), in which God confronts gentiles and responds to their cries to him with benevolent restraint of judgment. Stuart's reading also seems at odds with the one other use of the word *chesed* in the book, in 4:2 (Jonah's reference to Exodus 34:6), which clearly speaks of gentile recipients of God's *chesed*. The NIV rendering of 2:8 ("Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs") seems to agree with the potential application of Jonah's statement to gentiles, though the ambiguity of the recipient of *chesed* in 2:8 sets up a rhetorical tension similar to that created by the ambiguous use of *ra'ah* in 1:2 (see note 64 above). Though this first use of *chesed* does not unquestionably point to gentiles as potential recipients of *chesed*, the second usage of the word, in 4:2, does. Thus, the reader who assumes (with Stuart) that the hope of *chesed* in 2:8 is a hope only available to Israelites finds himself in 4:2 in a trap of his own

making when Jonah applies not only *chesed*, but a primary creed of the covenant, to the residents of Nineveh.

The consistent preoccupation with God's benevolence toward gentiles in the "firsts" and "lasts" of Jonah, the rhetorical centrality of Jonah's reference to Exodus 34:6, and the rhetorical and literary attention to the claim that *chesed* is available to those who forsake the worship of idols in Jonah's prayer together communicate and highlight essentially the same claim about God—he benevolently pursues those within and outside covenant relationship with him that they may know more accurately the truth about who he is.

God's words and actions must now be examined more closely in order to determine whether this claim about God is true. God speaks directly only five times in the book of Jonah. In 1:1, he commands Jonah to preach to the city of Nineveh. In 3:2, he repeats this command. In 4:4, God asks Jonah if he has any right to be angry about God's compassion toward Nineveh, and in 4:9, he asks Jonah if he has any right to be angry about the vine. Finally, in 4:10-11 he compares Jonah's pity for the plant with his own pity for Nineveh. God directs every word he speaks toward Jonah, and all five of his speeches challenge Jonah to move toward Nineveh, either physically or emotionally. He does not make a single direct claim about himself. The closest he gets is his final question to Jonah in 4:11. Taken together, God's words in the book are as follows:

1. "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me" (1:2).<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> The phrase "call out against it" should not be interpreted as an unyielding, fixed condemnation of the city, though modern readers are justifiably tempted to understand it in this way. That God was sending a prophet to Nineveh at all assumes willingness on his part to accept their repentance, should it come, and as such the command ought to be seen as an act of benevolence. Clearly, based on his words in 4:2-3, Jonah knew that the repentance and acceptance of the city into God's favor was the Lord's intention from the beginning. This is not to say, of course, that Jonah's message was not severe; however, the idea that God had consigned Nineveh to judgment and was simply sending Jonah to inform them of their impending

2. “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you” (3:2).
3. “Do you do well to be angry?” (4:4 – In reference to God’s compassion toward Nineveh).
4. “Do you do well to be angry for the plant?” (4:9).
5. “You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?” (4:10-11).

God’s final question is his only speech with primary content not repeated elsewhere. The length of this final speech exceeds the length of all four other speeches combined, and the repetitive structure statement-statement-question-question-question places emphasis on this last speech by reversing the expected pattern.<sup>78</sup> Clearly, the recorded speeches of God in Jonah are arranged to give God “the last word” about himself, and that last word agrees with the previous assessment of God’s motivation for his actions throughout the entire book – he has pity toward the city of Nineveh.

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doom is both logically indefensible and without basis in the text (see also note 64 above). Stuart describes the situation similarly:

Jonah is told to “speak against” Nineveh, i.e., denounce it. To a prophet such a command could have meant little else than to warn that God was about to enforce his covenant by enacting its sanctions, or curses... Jonah would also recognize – as would the hearers/readers of this story in ancient Israel – that to give advance warning of the imposition of covenant sanctions was to open the door to the possibility of repentance. The term “preach against” by itself probably does not imply that God will *guarantee* the Ninevites a chance to repent, but it leaves open the question. (449-450)

Though “call out against” does not require an interpretation of ultimate condemnation toward Nineveh, the ambiguity of *ra’ah* discussed above and the severe connotation of the word “against” in God’s original call to Jonah together serve to increase the dramatic tension of the narrative as it moves toward Jonah’s confession of God’s benevolence in 4:2. This further ambiguity works in concert with Hauser’s reading of 1:2 mentioned above.

<sup>78</sup> ESV has God’s words in 4:10-11 broken into two sentences, as does Stuart. NIV has four. KJV separates the statement about the plant from God’s question with a colon, thereby preserving the unity of the thought. The above presentation of the form structure of the five speech acts depends upon the unity of this final two-verse question, and though the consensus among translators seems to be that the speech constitutes more than a single sentence, the rhetorical and logical coherence of the words suggests that, regardless of punctuation, these final words of God constitute a single speech. Even if this presentation of the final reversal of the form structure of God’s five speeches proves illegitimate, the attention focused upon God’s final question highlighted both immediately above and in the previous sections sufficiently supports the point that the overall presentation of God in the narrative focuses attention on his compassion toward Nineveh.

God's direct actions in the book of Jonah are the most appropriate evidence for judging his benevolence in that the text itself has highlighted God's actions by the scarcity of his speech. There are seven actions specifically attributed to God in the book: in chapter one, he sends a "great wind on the sea" and provides a "great fish to swallow Jonah"<sup>79</sup>; in chapter two, he commands the fish to vomit Jonah onto dry land; in chapter three, he spares Nineveh from destruction; and in chapter four, he sends a plant to shade Jonah, then a worm to attack the plant, then a "scorching east wind" to wither Jonah's resolve. In addition to these seven, God can be credited with the increase of the intensity and the subsequent calming of the storm as well as the result of the lot-casting, though the text does not specifically state that these things were his direct intervention. The command to the fish to vomit Jonah onto dry land is much less direct than the statements of God's involvement in sending the storm, the fish, the vine, the worm, and the wind in that there he commands action rather than acting himself,<sup>80</sup> and though God's compassion in withholding judgment is stated directly ("God relented" in ESV), it is nevertheless passive action and carries a different type of force than the active sending of the storm, the fish, the plant, the worm, and the wind.

In total, God acts ten times in Jonah. These ten can be separated into four categories of forcefulness as follows: When God directly causes events, he participates in active sending. In the book of Jonah, all of these active sending events involve God's control over nature in some way. When God causes events which are mediated and carried out by the action of another force that cannot disobey him (in this case the fish),

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<sup>79</sup> Though in the Hebrew text this event occurs in 2:1.

<sup>80</sup> ESV translates 2:10 "the LORD spoke to the fish," NIV "the LORD commanded the fish," and KJV "the LORD spake unto the fish," whereas the other actions of God are rendered, in ESV, "the LORD hurled" (1:4) and "the LORD appointed" (1:17, 4:6, 7, 8). NIV uses "sent" in 1:4 and "provided" in 1:17 and 4:6, 7, 8. KJV uses "sent out" and "prepared."

he participates in causative commanding. When God relents from something he had planned to do, he participates in passive withholding. Though strictly speaking this withholding is inaction rather than action, because God's relenting from destruction is grammatically structured as direct action, it comes under the purview of the present examination of God's actions. Finally, when events occur in which God is understood to be the force behind those events based upon either his previous participation in those events (as in the sending and subsequent calming of the storm) or the attribution of such events to his influence elsewhere in the Bible (as in the result of the casting of lots), God's implicit involvement in those events can be justifiably asserted. The distribution of these four types of activity in the book of Jonah is as follows:

<b>Active Sending</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. "<u>The LORD</u> hurled a great wind upon the sea" (1:4).</li> <li>2. "<u>The LORD</u> appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah" (1:17).</li> <li>3. "<u>The LORD</u> God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah" (4:6).</li> <li>4. "<u>God</u> appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered" (4:7).</li> <li>5. "<u>God</u> appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint" (4:8).</li> </ol>
<b>Causative Commanding</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. "<u>The LORD</u> spoke to the fish, and it vomited Jonah out upon the dry land" (2:10).</li> </ol>
<b>Passive Withholding</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, <u>God</u> <u>relented</u> of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it" (3:10).</li> </ol>
<b>Implicit Involvement</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>8. "So they cast lots, and the <u>lot fell on Jonah</u>" (1:7).</li> <li>9. "The men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for <u>the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them</u>" (1:13).</li> <li>10. "...and <u>the sea ceased from its raging</u>" (1:16).<sup>81</sup></li> </ol>

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<sup>81</sup> To assert on the basis of these examples of God's intervention in the life of Jonah by way of natural events that *all* natural events exhibit the influence of God in the same way that they do here is unnecessary and inadvisable. Because God specifically "hurled" the storm at the boat in 1:4, it is fair to attribute its calming to him as well. Similarly, the casting of lots is commonly assumed throughout the Bible to be under the direct influence of God's hand; as such, it would be strange *not* to see the result of a lot casting as the implicit intervention of God, particularly in light of the reader's knowledge that Jonah boards the ship in order to flee the presence of the LORD. Other natural events, such as the rising and setting of the sun, for example, do not connote the intervention of God *in the same way* that the result of the lot casting and the variation of force in the storm do here in Jonah.

As they are the only direct and unmediated actions, and are thus the most forceful, God's five active sending actions can be used to present a concise summary of his primary activity in the book. God's actions are all sending actions, and the things sent are: storm-fish-plant-worm-wind. All five are directed toward Jonah, and all five function as humbling lessons by which God confronts Jonah's attitude toward Nineveh. They all involve nature and are thus both undeniable and outside Jonah's control. The flow of God's attitude toward Jonah is wrath-grace-grace-wrath-wrath – another pattern with an inverted, and thus highlighted, final step.<sup>82</sup> The verbs used to describe God's actions are hurled-appointed-appointed-appointed-appointed (or in NIV, hurled-provided-provided-provided-provided). The obvious repetition of “appointed/provided” creates a juxtaposition of ideas that implies exactly the kind of benevolence God claims for himself in Exodus 34:6-7 and Jonah reluctantly acknowledges in Jonah 4:2.<sup>83</sup> The phrase “God will provide” has become a cliché roughly equivalent to “everything will be ok,” and the biblical usage of similar phrases often carries the same optimistic connotation. Here in Jonah, however, God's “provision” includes a fish to swallow Jonah, a plant to shade him (but only for a day), a worm to kill that plant, and a scorching wind to burn his bigotry out of him. The provision described does not allow Jonah to remain content in his sense of religious and ethnic superiority, but instead confronts his sin and forces him to face his own inappropriate behavior. Such a view of benevolence accords well with Jonah's description of his time in the belly of the fish as “salvation” in Jonah 2 (though

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<sup>82</sup> This inversion of the final step assumes that, had Jonah responded appropriately to God's confrontation in chapter four, God's response to him would have been grace rather than wrath. Not only is this a *possible* response, but is in fact the *expected* outcome of the confrontation based on the pattern that God has set up. Even knowing Jonah's attitude thus far, and even (in his omniscience) knowing the final outcome of the final confrontation, God nevertheless somehow expects Jonah to react appropriately, thus evidencing his unwavering belief in the potential of the prophet despite even the most damning evidence.

<sup>83</sup> And for the present purposes Jonah's begrudging reference to Exodus 34:6 highlights his belief that God's benevolence is an undeniable *given*. Jonah's problem with God is that he is *too* benevolent.

Jonah's personal acceptance of the theology of the psalm remains highly suspect), as well as with the assessment of God's behavior in the plagues narrative discussed in chapter two above.<sup>84</sup>

The above examination makes clear the thorough *intention* in the Jonah narrative to communicate the message that God's actual character aligns with the claim of Exodus 34:6-7. But can such alignment be asserted with any certainty? What is Jonah's actual experience of YHWH? What about the pagan sailors? The Ninevites?

The task of asserting God's benevolence in the Old Testament seems generally to be reconciling Exodus 34:6 (that God is "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness") with God's pervasive expressions of wrath. But after all the fury of wind, fish, vomit, and worm, we discover to our surprise that the only thing that has *actually* been destroyed in the entire book of Jonah is a plant! God's words and actions, with all their force, seem in the end like one long object lesson by which he arranges his final conversation with Jonah and gives Jonah a profound opportunity to see the world through a benevolent God's eyes. By the time Jonah actually converses with God in chapter four, God has pursued Jonah out into the sea, confronting his fear with undeniable proof that, should he choose to do so, he is able to protect Jonah by way of miraculous intervention, even outside the boundaries of Israel.<sup>85</sup> He has saved

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<sup>84</sup> And as in the plagues narrative, God's confrontational intervention in Jonah's life fulfills his previously established incarnational methodology as well as his responsibility to accurately represent reality within his revelation of himself.

<sup>85</sup> God's confrontation and salvation of Jonah by way of a fish recalls the etymological association between Nineveh and the river-goddess Nina as well as the city's cuneiform ideogram, which included a fish (Fritsch 538). The claim that God's use of the fish to directly connect to Nineveh in Jonah's mind depends upon Jonah's knowledge of this connection between Nineveh and fish, which cannot be confidently asserted because to say, for example, that God's message to Jonah through the fish episode was, "If I can save you through the fish, then I can save you through the fish city," seems to go beyond the available evidence (Sasson, for example, calls such connections between Nineveh and fish "fanciful" (71)). Nevertheless, if Nineveh was in any way identified with fish as has been claimed by Harper, Bauer, and

him from drowning and miraculously transported him safely back to land while giving him three days to consider the task assigned to him. And he has proven himself benevolent toward a city full of people that have not sought his benevolence. God certainly interferes with Jonah's autonomy. But he does not force Jonah to be benevolent. He does not rapaciously conform Jonah to his image. And ironically, perhaps even tragically, Jonah never accepts the truth about God's benevolence toward him and toward Nineveh. In confronting Jonah, who is certainly his primary concern in that *all* of his actions and *all* of his words are directed toward Jonah, God's benevolence overflows upon both the sailors and the Ninevites. The sailors receive undeniable proof that YHWH is the God of all the earth, and by the end of their part of Jonah's story they have sufficient opportunity and knowledge to bring them into the community of Israel should they seek such community. And despite Jonah's reluctance in fulfilling his call to preach to them, the Ninevites receive the confrontational word of God and respond to it with repentance. Like the Canaanites in the plagues narrative, even those who are not God's primary concern in the book of Jonah benefit from his benevolent words and actions to such an extent that they receive both divine revelation and the means to act upon that revelation. Jonah himself, the reluctant prophet whose wildly successful ministry shames

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Trumbull, then this connection would at least have been evident to Jonah when he did actually reach Nineveh, making more than slightly consequential God's choice to use a fish rather than, for example, supernaturally transporting Jonah out of the water and back on to the shore. Even prior to Jonah's arrival in Nineveh, and even assuming that he did not know of the connection between fish and the city, God's supernatural interruption of Jonah's flight benevolently and undeniably confirms God's ability not only to control the forces of nature, but also to protect Jonah in dangerous circumstances *outside the land of Israel*. In addition, Jonah's experience inside the great fish gives him *time* to consider the events that have taken place in the previous narrative. The result of God's miraculous intervention in Jonah's journey, for Jonah, echoes the result of God's miraculous intervention in Egypt for the Israelites in the plagues narrative. Whether or not there was a direct connection between Nineveh's gods and the giant fish for Jonah, and whether or not there was a direct connection between Egypt's gods and the plagues for pre-exodus Israel, for both parties God's intervention undeniably revealed not only his ability, but his willingness to make possible the task he had commanded them to fulfill, regardless of their personal *comfort* (physical or otherwise) with the situations that resulted from God's supernatural interventions.



that of any other prophet in the Bible, seems a tragic reversal of Jeremiah, who remained faithful to God's call all his life and never saw a single convert. The benevolent God of the book of Jonah simultaneously confronts his prophet's bigotry by way of a series of unforgettable and undeniable object lessons and reveals to pagan sailors and Ninevites his willingness to redeem them. That God makes not a single direct claim about himself in the entire book of Jonah forces us to look to his words and actions to determine whether Jonah's claim about him in Jonah 4:2 is true. And those words and actions reveal a God whose steadfast love refuses to allow his prophet to give in to fear, all the while pursuing those outside covenant relationship with him that they might know him who is the God of all the earth.

## Chapter Four

Literary Artistry, Objective Interpretation, and the Restrained Force of Severe Grace.

The interpretation thus far has focused primarily on the actions of a single character as a test of the claims made by and about that character's benevolence as described in Exodus 34:6-7. Rhetorical strategies in the texts have revealed both the *artistry* and the *messages* of the texts. These strategies include (in roughly the order they appear in the narratives) prefiguring (the echoing relationship of the plagues narrative to the similar Egypt narrative in Genesis 12), narrative pause and pacing (the narrative breaks after plagues one, eight, and nine, and the meditative pause of Jonah's prayer in the belly of the great fish), interaction between characters (God's direct communication with only Moses and Jonah, the public announcements of coming plagues, and the limited communication between Jonah and God), dramatic tension and mystery (the building tension of increasingly severe plagues, the mystery of Jonah's motivation in running from God, and the "dangling" ending of the book of Jonah), and referential marking and reversal (Jonah's reference to Exodus 34:6 and the numerous reversals of the prophetic genre in Jonah). Synthesis of these various rhetorical strategies points to the centrality of both the actual text of Exodus 34:6-7 and the principle of confrontational intervention as an appropriate expression of benevolence in both narratives. The centrality of God's claim to benevolence, and specifically the narrative placement of that claim subsequent to and thus in submission to many of his actions, as well as the rhetorical elevation of those actions, in turn presents a methodology of taking actions as the definitive evidence of the truth or falsehood of this central claim. In addition, the God character's revelatory choices in both the plagues narrative and the book of Jonah invite

behavior-oriented evaluation of his claims about his own benevolence and of the claims others make about his benevolence. God's behavior shows that he is a benevolent presence in that he does not withhold judgment, but confronts evil, ignorance, and bigotry, all the while offering opportunity for humans to escape from judgment. Such behavior agrees with the claim to benevolence in Exodus 34:6-7. In addition, the interplay between multiple texts, the depth and genuineness of characterization, the rhetorical complexity and variation of modes of revelation, and the consistent presentation of the benevolent actions of the God character through two vastly divergent texts highlight not only the literary *artistry* of these two texts, but their rhetorical and revelatory *effectiveness* as well.

E.D. Hirsch's principles of objective interpretation, and particularly his emphasis on the importance of distinguishing between meaning and significance, provide a set of guidelines for beginning with the claims and emphases of the texts themselves within their respective genres. Certainly, there are appropriate *applications* of texts to be made once basic meaning has been established; however, the first aim of this study has been to *respond* to the emphases and foci of the texts themselves in order to present the God character as the texts present him. I have concerned myself with meaning, trusting that significance naturally follows once meaning is appropriately established. The first goal in both texts has been to identify the respective claims about God's benevolence and test those claims against God's self-identification in Exodus 34:6-7 as both just and gracious. Doing so has been a response to the centrality of the claim of the Exodus 34 creed.

In both the plagues narrative and the book of Jonah, elements of literary artistry work alongside message content to enhance and reinforce the overall effectiveness and

beauty of the narratives. Form, in the cases of these two narratives, reinforces content. In fact, form grants access to content such that a study of the *literary* data of the texts has provided a unique perspective of the specific *theological* claims the narratives make.<sup>86</sup>

The presentation of the biblical texts as literature and of God as a literary character has brought forth an explication of the theological claims in the texts and the justifications given for those claims not easily accessible to exegesis or theological exposition alone.

Robert Alter's work of evaluating the artistry of the biblical texts similarly pairs the principles of literary criticism with contemporary biblical hermeneutics, and in so doing implicitly argues that the beauty of the biblical texts comes from the same elements of literary artistry present in the great works of world literature. Like Hugo's Jean Valjean, Moses spends much of his early life as an exiled criminal, and only achieves virtue after the over-gracious intervention of a benefactor. Jonah seems a dark *Quixote* – he does not fit in the hero's shoes, and we cannot help but laugh at him because he cannot see the ridiculousness of his own warped perspective, though unlike Cervantes' protagonist, Jonah is far from harmless or pitiable.<sup>87</sup> The seemingly endless repetition and continuous increase in force of the waves of destruction brought about by the plagues evoke a similar cosmic sense of helplessness and chaos to Faulkner's depiction of the calamity of the Bundren family in *As I Lay Dying* and the foreboding sense of doom that pervades Thomas Hardy's novels. The immodesty of Swift's *Modest Proposal* produces in his audience a similar revulsion to that certainly experienced by readers in Jonah's Israel when presented with the idea that *Nineveh* had repented and entered into God's favor, and the use of this corporate villain as an example to the one who ought to have

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<sup>86</sup> In chapter one of *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Alter argues convincingly for the value of literary study of the Bible alongside and in addition to traditional exegetical, expository, and theological explication.

<sup>87</sup> And like Quixote, Jonah is an anti-hero, a reversal of the expectations inherent in the genre of his text.

been the hero echoes the voice of Dr. Frankenstein's surprisingly human monster. Moses' unwillingness to accept the task that will ultimately make him a hero recalls Bilbo and Frodo Baggins, and the ultimate triumph of enslaved Israel over Egypt under his leadership is reminiscent of the unlikely success of the fellowship in Tolkien's Middle Earth trilogy or of Dumas' Edmond Dantes. The subversive tension between narrator and protagonist in Jonah reflects a similar lack of literal trustworthiness as that evidenced by the subversive narration strategies of Faulkner, Swift, and Sterne. And the sense of unfinished-ness at the end of Jonah seems akin to the unanswered questions of O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," as well as Hawthorne's "The Wives of the Dead." These universally *human* themes in the ten plagues narrative and in Jonah reveal not only the consistent concern among the Hebrew authors of the biblical texts to deal candidly and vigorously with the most significant questions of the human experience, but also a pervasive concern to incorporate those questions into a profoundly *literary* presentation of their God. What results from such a collision is a work of spectacular artistry.

But to whom can we compare the God character? Moses, Aaron, Jonah, and the Ninevites have echoes in both literature and human experience, but can literature give us categories by which to describe God? Dawkins has claimed that the Hebrew God is the vilest character in all literature, worse even than Grendel, Iago, Count Dracula, Orwell's Big Brother, Huxley's Benefactor, and even Milton's Satan (31). The concern of this project remains with God's benevolence, and as such any parallels must be limited for the present purposes to the kind of benevolence God shows in the ten plagues narrative and the book of Jonah. Additionally, a full response to the kind of claim Dawkins makes

would necessitate a much more thorough examination of God's entire character than the bounds of this project allow. But even within those bounds, the present study has answered several crucial questions about God's claim to benevolence and about his invitation to test that claim and the means by which one can do so. In response to that invitation, a number of conclusions about the interrelationship between his actual behavior and his claim to benevolence can now be asserted.

According to the literary data of Exodus 7:1-12:32, God is a character who chooses to intervene in the lives of human beings. That intervention is motivated by his awareness of the suffering of his covenant people and includes miraculous events of varying and increasingly devastating force. Within those catastrophic events, God provides both sufficient prior warning and opportunity to escape destruction, and provides means by which any human being who hears and believes his warning may escape deadly plagues. The plagues themselves constitute active revelation to Egypt, Israel, and Canaan about God's power and character. God's stated revelational *intention* in the plagues is effectively carried out in actual experience – any in Egypt willing to hear the messages of the plagues have sufficient opportunity to receive, understand, and respond to those messages. Once the plagues (and with them the revelation of God's benevolence) have occurred, God leaves Egypt and Pharaoh alone that they may choose for themselves what they will do with what they now know about him. In sum, God forcibly intervenes in response to the cries of his people in such a way that both Israel and Egypt may know him as benevolent; he assures that any who will listen have opportunity to hear those warnings; and, having revealed himself, he respectfully allows those who have received his revelation to decide for themselves how to respond. Though

definitive statements asserting the benevolence of God's actions in the plagues narrative must remain tentative, certainly those actions evidence a desire for benevolent intervention in the lives of human beings paired with a respect for the free will of those human beings. Such coexistent intervention and respect suggest both good leadership and steadfast love.

Similarly, the literary data of the Jonah narrative reveal a God character who intends to confront the evil and ignorance of a famously depraved city by sending them a prophet. Unlike Moses, Jonah refuses his calling, and as a result God's confrontational actions are directed toward his prophet rather than toward the gentiles in the story. Unlike the plagues, God's miraculous interventions in Jonah cause no catastrophic damage or loss of human life, but as in the plagues narrative, his activity carries a more-than-literal weight in the eyes of its recipients such that God's revelation of himself becomes both practical and religious in nature. Despite Jonah's reluctance to be the instrument of God's pity toward Nineveh, God nevertheless communicates his message to the city, but unlike in the plagues narrative, God's destructive and confrontational interventions do not cease with the conclusion of his revelation to the gentiles in the story. As he did with Egypt, God leaves Nineveh to ponder his self-disclosure given them. But he does not abandon the still-bigoted Jonah; God demonstrates once more the sheer folly of Jonah's concerns. The open-ended conclusion of the book leaves God and Jonah still together, which simultaneously offers hope that Jonah will change his ways and presents God as willing to leave his final question unanswered. Once again, God has chosen to respect human will rather than force the positive outcomes he desires to bring about. We never find out whether Pharaoh softened his heart toward God and toward those he enslaved, and we

never find out whether Jonah softened his heart toward Nineveh, but we do see a God willing to let such stubborn characters walk away from him once he has given them everything they need to change their inappropriate beliefs and behaviors.

The God of both the ten plagues narrative and the book of Jonah is active in the lives of human beings. His activity is defined by attempts to bring human behavior and belief in line with his own behavior and knowledge, which behavior and knowledge are characterized by benevolent justice and pity. Additionally, God's revelation of himself in all cases in these two passages has as its recipient human beings who have not sought him. The argument for God's benevolence as it appears here, then, applies only to those who are either apathetic or knowingly hostile to God's revelation of himself and cannot make any statement at all about the ways in which the God character might respond were a human being to seek him out. Where people stray from alignment with God's benevolent justice and pity, which is his original intention for those who are the *imago dei*, God intervenes, but he does not rape. He continually offers *opportunity* to reflect his image, but he does not overtake *behavior*. Certainly, such a strategy of character development requires great perseverance and causes near-constant frustration with those who, like Pharaoh and Jonah, continually refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of God's benevolent revelation of himself; but the patience required to employ such a strategy is exactly what God claims for himself, and is, appropriately, the one primary facet of God's claim in Exodus 34:6-7 not yet discussed at length. YHWH is "a God merciful and gracious, *slow to anger*, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty" (emphasis added). God's claim, then, is that he is not only



benevolent, but also sufficiently patient to carry out that benevolence wisely. As he himself acknowledges in the plagues narrative and in Jonah, the most appropriate test of God's claim to patience is a thorough examination of his behavior, and that behavior associates him unwaveringly with inclusion rather than exclusion, communication rather than mystery, and grace, even in his severity.

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