

## Creation as Sacred Space in the Exodus Narratives\*

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### I.

In the 1967 English edition of his commentary on Exodus and again in the 1973-75 English edition of his collected papers on *Biblical and Oriental Studies*, Umberto Cassuto observes that the account of the splitting of the Red Sea in Exodus 14-15 serves as a creation text within the larger Exodus narrative in the Pentateuch.<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that the Exodus narrative is a unified text, as Cassuto understood the Pentateuchal narrative to be a unified composition dating to the tenth century B.C.E. But the defeat of Pharaoh's army with the emergence of dry land in the midst of the Red Sea recapitulates the initial creation by the emergence of dry land in the midst of the sea in Genesis 1:1-2:3, which functions as the introductory creation text in

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\*Originally presented at a panel of the Theology of Hebrew Scripture at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting on San Diego, CA in Nov. 2019. The theme of the session was Theological Perspectives on Sacred Space in the Hebrew Bible.

the Pentateuch. Such an observation suggests that the concern with creation functions as an ongoing process in the Pentateuchal narrative insofar as YHWH's creation of the universe is not completed in Genesis 1:1-2:3, but it continues to unfold in subsequent episodes in relation to the role of the emergence of features of the natural world of creation in YHWH's acts on behalf of humanity at large and Israel in particular.

In this vein, readers may recognize that creation also serves as sacred space in the Exodus narratives, insofar as YHWH's revelation to Moses in Exodus 3 presents a narrative in which YHWH employs an element of creation, i.e., the *rubus sanctus*, identified as the burning bush in Exodus 3, as an agent of divine revelation during which YHWH instructs Moses to remove his shoes as he is standing on holy ground.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the Exodus and Wilderness narratives throughout Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy indicate that YHWH's revelation to Israel and humanity employs elements in creation, such as the snakes that emerge from the rods of Moses and Aaron, the first nine plagues of the Exodus narrative, the production of water and manna in the wilderness, Mt. Sinai in the wilderness, and others, as vehicles for the revelation of YHWH's efforts to deliver Israel from Egyptian bondage and guide them to the promised land of Israel. When read in relation to these motifs, readers may recognize that the concluding narratives concerning the construction of the Tabernacle in Exodus 25-40 also recognize the realm of creation as holy insofar as the Tabernacle signifies YHWH's presence in the world of creation for the duration of the Exodus narrative and beyond.

It is therefore the purpose of this paper to suggest that the Exodus and Wilderness narratives as a whole function as a creation narrative within the Pentateuch.

Creation is here not understood as the original act of creation in Genesis 1:1-2:3, but as ongoing acts of creation in which additional elements of the natural world of creation emerge in relation to YHWH's efforts to deliver Israel and enable it to serve as a holy nation in the midst of creation.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, creation serves as sacred space in which Israel is formed as a distinctive holy nation in the midst of humanity in the Exodus and Wilderness narratives. The paper considers the role of the various elements of creation, including the burning bush, Aaron's rod which becomes a snake, the first nine plagues, the production of manna and water in the wilderness, and the construction of the wilderness Tabernacle as signifiers of creation as sacred space in the Exodus narrative.

## *II.*

The narrative concerning YHWH's call of Moses in Exodus 3:1-7:7 is generally read as an expanded form of the prophetic call narrative by scholars in the field.<sup>4</sup> This is all well and good, because Moses begins as a prophet of YHWH in the Pentateuchal narrative, and only later is recognized as a Levitical priest following YHWH's selection of Aaron and the tribe of Levi to serve as YHWH's priests in Israel in Numbers 17-18.<sup>5</sup> Otherwise, interpreters have spent a great deal of effort attempting to locate Mt. Sinai, where Moses' encounter with YHWH allegedly took place.

But there is another dimension of this narrative to consider, viz., its role as a creation narrative. YHWH's self-revelation to Moses takes place in relation to a burning bush that appears to burn, but it is never consumed by the fire. This is a standard motif in texts concerned with YHWH's revelation or theophany, insofar as the imagery

of light and fire, often expressed in the form of lightning (e.g., Exodus 19), Seraphim (Isaiah 6), and gleaming bronze cherubim (Ezekiel 1) often accompany YHWH to indicate the interplay between YHWH's intangible and yet tangible character in such texts. Such imagery has led some to suggest that YHWH has an actual body, but such suggestions overlook the metaphorical character of light and fire as an expression of YHWH's divine presence.<sup>6</sup>

Interpreters have concluded that the burning bush in the passage is based in a very real bush well known in the Sinai wilderness, the *rubus ulmifolius* or *rubus sanctus*.<sup>7</sup> The *rubus sanctus* is more of a bramble that blossoms with bright red flowers in the spring that make the plant appear to be aflame when it is viewed from a distance. Of course, it is not actually aflame, but it serves as an appropriate metaphorical expression of YHWH's presence on Mt. Sinai. It also serves as a means to associate the divine presence of YHWH with natural features of the Sinai wilderness and Egypt, motifs that permeate the Exodus and Wilderness narratives. Insofar as the *rubus sanctus* does not appear elsewhere in the Exodus and Wilderness narrative, it functions either as a natural feature of creation that serves such a purpose. It adds a new dimension to the portrayal of the natural world of creation in the Bible insofar as it identifies sacred space for the divine presence of YHWH in the world analogous to YHWH's later presence in the wilderness Tabernacle and the various Temples of Israel and Judah. Such a function suggests an effort to define creation as sacred in order to allow for the interaction between YHWH and human beings as is evident from the outset of the Pentateuchal narrative beginning in Genesis 1. Although YHWH may be viewed as a transcendent deity by many, YHWH also functions as an immanent deity,

insofar as YHWH is revealed through the natural features of the realm of creation.

A closely related motif in the burning bush narrative is that of Moses's rod—and also Aaron's rod—that will turn into a snake when thrown upon the ground.<sup>8</sup> This element appears when Moses asks YHWH, “what if they do not believe me and they do not listen to me?,” when YHWH instructs Moses to appear before Pharaoh to demand the release of the Israelite people from slavery. YHWH instructs Moses to throw his rod onto the ground. When he does so, it transforms into a snake, a well-known feature of ancient and modern Egyptian culture in which snake charming plays a prominent role. Such a motif is an important element in this narrative because it demonstrates that YHWH—and not Pharaoh or any of the Egyptian gods—is the true creator of the natural world in the Exodus narrative. Although the Egyptians would have viewed the snake and snake charming as a quintessential Egyptian symbol and skill, YHWH's ability to control the snake in the hands of Moses and Aaron functions as means to inform the reader that YHWH is the true source of this characteristic Egyptian symbol and skill. Once again, a characteristic feature of creation is the product of YHWH's creative efforts, and the realm of creation itself becomes sacred space insofar as it reveals YHWH's presence and power to the reader.

By the end of the narrative in Exodus 6:1-7:7, YHWH is finally ready to reveal the divine name to Moses. Whereas YHWH had previously identified the divine self as “I am who I am,” employing an example of the “idem per idem” rhetorical device to conceal the divine identity, YHWH now self-identifies in Exodus 6:1-13, “I am YHWH, and I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make my name known to them.”

When Moses had asked about the divine name earlier in the narrative, YHWH's use of the idem per idem was intended to put Moses on notice that YHWH was not like the Egyptian gods whose names would be used by humans in execration texts and elsewhere to curse or bless others at will. It was only after YHWH had demonstrated to Moses and Aaron that YHWH was a unique and powerful deity, who was not only responsible for the creation of the natural world but also for the establishment and protection of Israel, that YHWH would then reveal the divine name to Moses.

### *III.*

The plague narratives in Exodus 7-13 constitute another major section of the Exodus narratives in which creation plays a major role in facilitating the manifestation of divine action, thereby rendering creation as sacred space.<sup>9</sup> As the following considerations show, each of the first nine plagues represents a known facet of creation in the Egyptian or Canaanite landscape, whereas the tenth plague, the slaying of the first-born, gets to the point of the narrative in explaining why ancient Israel initially employed first-born sons to the mother as a priestly class that assisted the sons of Aaron.

The first plague in which the Nile River is allegedly turned to blood is the first example of a reference to the Egyptian ecosystem in Exodus 7:14-25. Every spring, the head waters of the Nile River in Ethiopia, the Sudan, and ultimately Uganda, are flooded by the melting snows that fill the White Nile by Lake Victoria in Uganda and the reddish-brown mud and silt that flows into them by means of the Blue Nile originating in Ethiopia. When combined in Sudan, the waters overflow their banks all the way down to

the Mediterranean where they spread the fertile mud and silt on the shores of the river to create the basis for agricultural growth in Egypt. Although this is a natural phenomenon, the reddish-brown cast of the spring waters gives the impression of blood. Consequently, the plague is portrayed as YHWH's act of turning the waters of the Nile to blood.

The second plague, frogs in Exodus 8:1-15, is a natural consequence of the spring floodwaters of the Nile. The water will carry a multitude of river life, frogs being predominant among them, although plenty of other river creatures would also be spread over the land. Although such inundation by frogs and other creatures might seem objectionable, it also contributes to the ecosystem by providing further fertilization when the frogs die as the water recedes and their corpses decompose.

Indeed, the decomposition of the bodies of the frogs leads to the third and fourth plagues, viz., gnats and flies, in Exodus 8:16-19 and 8:20-32. Gnats will first emerge with the decomposition of the amphibian bodies, but they will soon enough grow into flies. Gnats and flies are pests that spend much of their time biting either corpses or live bodies to gain sustenance, and this leads to plagues five and six, cattle disease and boils in Exodus 9:1-7 and 9:8-12. As the gnats and flies bite the carcasses of frogs and the like and then bite the living bodies of cattle and humans, they transfer the germs that they have picked up from the rotting corpses that then infect the living bodies of cattle and humans, causing cattle disease and boils or lesions on human bodies.

The hail and thunder that would follow as the seventh plague in Exodus 9:13-25 would not be a part of the Nile's own ecosystem of flooding and fertilizing, but it is nevertheless part of the natural landscape that would

manifest itself in relation to the rainy season in Egypt during December—February, thereby stimulating the flooding of the Nile in the spring.

The eighth plague, locusts in Exodus 10:1-20, appear in Egypt during the late spring or summer after the flood waters have made it possible for their larvae to grow. When they come to birth, they will swarm the land in search of food, just in time to devour the crops that would grow in Egypt following the spring floods.

Finally, the ninth plague, darkness in Exodus 10:21-29 is a natural phenomenon in a Mediterranean climate, such as that of Egypt, Israel, or Southern California.<sup>10</sup> Scirocco winds are formed when high pressure areas form over the deserts located to the east of the territory in question, viz., the Arabian Desert in the case of Egypt and Israel, or the Mohave Desert in the case of Southern California. The weight of the desert high pressure system then forces air to move from east to west, opposite its natural flow from west to east, thereby creating high-powered winds, such as the *sharav* (Hebrew), the *hamsin* (Arabic), or the Santa Anna (American Spanish).<sup>11</sup> A major feature of these winds is that they carry a great deal of dust and dirt in the skies that often blocks out the sun or renders the moon as red, thereby bringing darkness upon the land.

The final plague, the death of the first-born, is a motif that is not connected to the natural world, but instead addresses the early Israelite practice of using first-born sons (to mothers) as a class of priests to assist the sons of Aaron, a practice which the narrative is intended to explain.<sup>12</sup> The practice is illustrated by the example of Samuel, the son of Elkanah, a man of Ephraim, and the first-born son of his wife, Hannah, in 1 Samuel 1-3, who is weaned and raised in the Shiloh sanctuary under the supervision of the High

Priest, Eli, to become a priest himself. In 1 Chronicles 6:12-13, Elkanah and Samuel are identified as Levites.

Altogether, the first nine-plagues take up natural features of creation that are known in the world of ancient Egypt as a means to demonstrate YHWH's divine presence, mastery over the world of creation, and manifestation in human events that thereby renders creation as sacred space in the Exodus narratives. The tenth plague, the death of the first-born, confirms the role of creation as sacred space insofar as it portrays the basis for the creation of this priestly class in the Exodus narratives. Although the role of the first-born sons initially serve as the assistants to the sons of Aaron in the Pentateuchal narratives, YHWH replaces them with the tribe of Levi as narrated in Numbers 3:5-16; 3:40-51; 8:5-22 (see also Exodus 34:19-20).

#### *IV.*

The account of the crossing of the Red Sea—or more properly the Sea of Reeds in the Masoretic Hebrew Text—introduces the account of the Wilderness Wandering that extends from Exodus 14-15 until Joshua 3-4 in the larger Biblical narrative of Genesis—Kings. Indeed, the account of the crossing of the Jordan River in Joshua 3-4 employs the same motif as Exodus 14-15, the emergence of dry land in the midst of the waters that allows the people of Israel to cross the body of water dry shod. As Coats and others observe, this is a creation motif that functions as a literary bracket at the outset and the close of the period of Wilderness Wandering in Exodus 14-15—Joshua 3-4.<sup>13</sup> The use of this motif at the beginning and the end of the Wilderness narratives signifies this period as a time of creation for the people of Israel insofar as their journey from Egypt to the promised land of Israel forms them as a

nation with a set of laws and experience that gives them the basis for their identity as a just and holy nation under YHWH.

Several features of the Wilderness narrative support such an understanding.

First are the early narratives concerning the provision of water in the Wilderness in Exodus 15:22-27 and 17:1-7 and the provision of food in the wilderness in the form of manna and quail in Exodus 16:1-36. The holy dimensions of space in these narratives are evident in two major dimensions. Each location functions as the locus for divine revelation to the people of Israel and to the readers of the narrative. And in the case of the provision of food, the timing of such provision is determined by the weekly Shabbat cycle in the narrative, insofar as the people are instructed to gather food every day, but not on the Shabbat. In such a case, a double portion of food is provided on the sixth day so that the people will have ample food for the Shabbat on the seventh. Such a motif is signaled in Genesis 1:1-2:3 as an inherent feature of creation, thereby ensuring the recognition of the holy character of creation at large in the overall Pentateuchal narrative.

Second is the so-called Sinai pericope in Exodus 19:1—Numbers 10:10, a diachronically recognized narrative that presents the account of the revelation at Sinai and concludes with Israel's departure from Sinai for the land of Israel. The initial account of YHWH's theophany at Sinai sets the tone of sanctity in the narrative insofar as Sinai is not only the holy locus of divine manifestation, but it also serves as model for understanding the theophany or appearances of YHWH at the Israelite Temple in general, most notably the Jerusalem Temple, but also including the Temples at Shiloh, Beth El, Dan, Gilgal, Beer Sheva Arad, and others.<sup>14</sup> The elements of YHWH's theophany, i.e., the

depiction of the divine presence with fire or lightning, cloud or incense smoke, and thunder or the rumbling of the heavy Temple doors as they open signify Sinai as holy space in creation just as they signify each Temple as holy space in the religious lives of Israel and Judah. Furthermore, the sanctity of the divine revelation is enhanced by the holy dimensions of the laws revealed by YHWH to Moses and Israel at Sinai, e.g., the use of the Shabbat principle for defining the terms of service for debt slavery as six years of service and release in the seventh year in Exodus 21:1-11 and Deuteronomy 15:1-18; the planning of fields for six years, but requiring that they lie fallow for every seventh year to provide food for the poor in Exodus 23:10-11; and the provision for observance of the Shabbat in Exodus 20:8-11; 23:12 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15.<sup>15</sup> Other laws of holiness, such as the treatment of blood in Leviticus 16-26 and the various commandments concerning the offerings in the Holiness Code, the Priestly Code, the laws of Numbers, and the laws of Deuteronomy may also be considered together with the laws of justice throughout the narrative that are designed to enable Israel and Judah to become just and holy societies within the world of YHWH's creation.

Finally, readers may note the role of the account of the construction of the Wilderness Tabernacle in Exodus 25-30 and 35-40, which culminates in the account of how the divine presence of YHWH settles into the Tabernacle in Exodus 40. The Tabernacle thereby functions both as a manifestation of divine presence among the people of Israel in the wilderness and in the larger world of creation and as a guide for Israel as it travels through the wilderness on its journey to the promised land of Israel.<sup>16</sup> Of course, the Tabernacle constitutes the pattern for the construction of holy sanctuaries in Israel once the nation is settled in the

land as well as the source for holy instruction from YHWH in the life of the nation, thereby rendering not only the Temple as holy but even creation itself as the people are expected to complete the sanctity of creation by their observance of divine expectations. The construction of a Temple for the creator god is a typical feature of ancient Near Eastern creation narratives, such as the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* and the Ugaritic *Baal Cycle*. Israel/Judah is no exception to this norm.

V.

In conclusion, let me observe that we modern scholars have been somewhat limited in our understanding of the correlation between creation and sacred space in reading the Pentateuch, largely because we tend to limit our understanding of creation to Genesis 1:1-2:3 and Genesis 2:4-4:26 or perhaps even the so-called primeval history in Genesis 1-11. But creation is conceived as an ongoing process in the Pentateuch insofar as it envisions the nation of Israel/Judah as a nation of priests. As part of that creation, Israel and Judah are tasked with the responsibility to observe divine expectations that will enable them to create a just and holy society in the world. But we must also recognize that our understanding of YHWH is limited. We have tended to consider YHWH to be a transcendent G-d, which is well and good, but we must also recognize YHWH as an imminent G-d, who works from within creation to achieve its sanctification as well.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Umberto Cassuto, “The Israelite Epic,” *Biblical and Oriental Studies* (2 vols.; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1975) 2:69-111, 2:80-99; idem, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967) 177-182.

<sup>2</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 5751/1991) 14; cf. M. Zohary, *Plants of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 140-141.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Impotence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

<sup>4</sup> George W. Coats, *Exodus 1-18* (FOTL 2A; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999) 34-60; William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18* (AB 2; New York: Doubleday, 1999) 180-286; Thomas B. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus* (ECC; Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1999) 94-175.

<sup>5</sup> For discussion of the role of Moses as prophet in the earliest levels of the Pentateuchal narratives, see Jeffrey Stackert, *A Prophet Like Moses: Prophecy, Law, and Israelite Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> E.g., Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of G-d and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Esther J. Hamori, “When Gods were Men” *The Embodied G-d in Biblical and Near Eastern Literature* (BZAW 384; Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008). For discussion of the use of temporal imagery metaphorically to depict the presence of G-d in a finite world, particularly in relation to Exodus 19; Isaiah 6; and Ezekiel 1, see Marvin A. Sweeney, *Jewish Mysticism: From Ancient Times Through Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), esp. 73-77, 129-137, 148-156.

<sup>7</sup> See note 2 above.

<sup>8</sup> Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 227-229.

<sup>9</sup> See esp. Coats, *Exodus 1-18*, 60-96; Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 286-461; Dozeman, *Exodus*, 176-298.

<sup>10</sup> Aloysius Fitzgerald, F.S.C., *The L-rd of the East Wind* (CBQMS 34; Washington, DC: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> “Israel, Land of (Geographical Survey),” *Encyclopedia Judaica*, edited by C. Roth et al (Jerusalem: Keter, n.d.), 9:189-190.

<sup>12</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, “the Literary-Historical Dimensions of Intertextuality in Exodus—Numbers,” *Second Wave Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (ed., M. Grohmann and H. C. P. Kim; SBLResBibSt 93; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2019) 41-52; idem, “Samuel’s Institutional Identity in the Deuteronomistic History,” *Constructs of Prophecy in the Former and Latter Prophets and Other Texts* (eds., L. L. Grabbe and M. Nissinen; ANEM 4; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011) 165-174.

<sup>13</sup> Coats, *Exodus 1-18*, 99-106; cf. Dozeman, *Exodus*, 300-305, who cites other scholars as well.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985).

<sup>15</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, “Shabbat: An Epistemological Principle for Holiness, Sustainability, and Justice in the Pentateuch,” *Christian Origins and the New Testament in the Greco-Roman Context: Essays in Honor of Dennis R. MacDonald* (eds., M. Froelich et al; Claremont, CA: Claremont Press, 2016) 53-81.

<sup>16</sup> William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19-40* (AB 2A; New York: Doubleday, 2006) 310-722; Dozeman, *Exodus*, 569-766.