

The desert itinerary notices of Exodus: their narrative, semiotic, and theological functions

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RESUMEN Este ensayo examina los elementos que dan cohesión a la primera época desértica: los vínculos entre Egipto y el Sinaí como dos polos opuestos fundamentales para la identidad presente y futura de Israel. También analiza la marcha militar real por la cual el rey victorioso recuerda su victoria sobre Egipto mediante los votos de vasallaje de Israel al Señor en el Sinaí y la construcción de un palacio. La entrada en pleno desierto desata una serie de experiencias que imponen a las huestes de Dios la necesidad de aprender un nuevo modo de ser y vivir. En este estado de transición Israel no se identifica ni con el modo de ser egipcio ni sinaítico. El ensayo termina con breves sugerencias para una lectura teológica del desierto, centrada en la escatología, la separación y la transición.

PALABRAS CLAVE Éxodo, itinerario, desierto, teología.

SUMMARY *This essay examines those aspects which unify the first desert epoch: the links between Egypt and Sinai as two opposing poles fundamental for Israel's present and future identity, and the royal military march which memorializes the victorious king's triumph over Egypt by means of Israel's voluntary submission to the Lord at Sinai and the construction of a palace. Entrance into the desert unleashes a series of experiences which force the hosts of the Lord to learn a new way of life. In this transition Israel identifies itself neither by the Egyptian nor by the Sinaitic mode of being. The essay ends with brief suggestions for a theology of the desert, focused on the themes of eschatology, separation, and transition.*

KEY WORDS *Exodus, itinerary, desert, theology.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Scholarship on the itineraries in the Pentateuch suggests they function as structural elements of P in the epic traditions of Exodus and Numbers¹. Frank

1 FRANK MOORE CROSS, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic. Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA 1973) 308, 317. Thus also GEORGE W. COATS, "The Wilderness Itiner-

M. Cross argues that the marches from Egypt to Rephidim and from Sinai to Moab are each structured by six itinerary formulas². According to Graham I. Davies, however, only Exodus 19,1 and Numbers 10,12; 20,1a and 22,1 represent P and the rest D. This conclusion suggests that P was concerned only with transitions and that D composed the desert tradition as one single movement³ which serves as a transition between the desert narrative and the conquest⁴. Davies concludes that the present form of the itinerary formulas of the Pentateuch form a chain which describes Israel's journey from Rameses in Egypt (Exod 12,37), to the plains of Moab across from Jericho (Num 22,1).

ary": *CBO* 34 (1972) 147, and for 15,22; 16:1; 17,1; 19,1-2, MARK S. SMITH, *The Pilgrimage Pattern in Exodus* (Sheffield 1997) 227, 232.

- 2 This is an artificial numerical balance given that there are more itinerary notices (Exod 12,37a; 13,20; 14,1ss; 15,22; 16,1; 17,1; 19,2; Num 10,12; 20,1a; 20,22; 21,10s and 22,1; Exod 14,1ss and Num 21,10s have more than one each). J. T. WALSH, "From Egypt to Moab. A Source Critical Analysis of the Wilderness Itinerary": *CBO* 39 (1977) 21, lists Exod 12,37; 13,17-18a.20; 14,2; 15,22.23.27; 16,1; 17,1; 19,1-2; Num 10,12.33; 11,35; 12,16; 14,25; 20,1a.22; 21,4.10.11.12.13.16.18b.19b. 20. 33; 22,1; COATS, "The Wilderness Itinerary", 135, lists Exod 12,37a; 13,20; 15,22a.27; 16,1; 17,1ab*; 19,2; Num 11,35; 12.16; 20,1. 22; 21,4a.10.11.12.13. 16.18b.19a.19b.20; 22,11 to which he adds Exod 14,2; 15,23a*; 19,1 and Num 10,12. Although similar, those mentioned by G. I. DAVIES, "The Wilderness Itineraries and the Composition of the Pentateuch": *VT* 33 (1983) 1-13; G. I. DAVIES, "The Wilderness Itineraries: A Comparative Study": *TynBul* 25 (1974) 52, are not the same. To avoid confusion, the second article by Davies will be cited below as "A Comparative Study." See also J. SEVERINO CROATTO, "Exodus 1-15: Algunas claves literarias y teológicas para entender el Pentateuco": *EstBib* 52 (1994) 167-194, esp. 169-178. RICHARD ADAMIAK employs different reconstructions of the desert epoch to investigate the theme of divine retribution in his *Justice and History in the Old Testament. The Evolution of Divine Retribution in the Historiographies of the Wilderness Generation* (Cleveland 1982).
- 3 G. I. DAVIES, "The Wilderness Itineraries"; 12; W. JOHNSTONE, "From the Sea to the Mountain. Exodus 15,22-19,2: A Case-Study in Editorial Techniques"; in: M. VERVENNE (dir.), *Studies in the Book of Exodus* (Leuven 1996) 245-263, proposes that a pre-P version included only Exod 15,22aba and 19,2b and that D supplied the intervening material.
- 4 See G. I. DAVIES, "The Wilderness Itineraries"; 8; COATS, 136, for the function of the chain in its present form. Coats also concludes that the itinerary tradition does not extend beyond the Tetrteuch because of stylistic differences between these and those of Joshua in, "The Wilderness Itinerary"; 141. Within the Pentateuch the connections between the itineraries and the conquest are limited to the trans-Jordan area. The Deuteronomy itineraries represent another theme. See PATRICK D. MILLER, "The Wilderness Journey in Deuteronomy: Style, Structure, and Theology in Deuteronomy 1-3": *Covenant Quarterly* 55 (1997) 50-68.

Although this itinerary chain describes one long march from Egypt to the borders of Canaan, they are clustered in two distinct journeys—one from Egypt to Sinai and another from Sinai to the plains of Moab—⁵separated from each other by a long narrative (Exod 19-Num 10) and temporal (Num 1,1) distance⁶. According to Benno Jacob, the movement to and from Sinai underscores the itinerary's importance and contributes to a significant difference in meaning between the two desert epochs⁷. Because it is at the same time Israel's place of arrival and departure Sinai functions as a narrative axis on two levels: it separates the two desert itineraries and it distinguishes be-

5 See brief descriptions in BENNO JACOB, *The Second Book of the Bible. Exodus. Translated and introduced by Walter Jacob* (Hoboken, NJ 1992) 511; CROATTO, 172.

6 Exegesis which focuses on the history of traditions tends to treat Israel's stay in the desert as one long epoch, rather than the two outlined above. Similarly treatments of desert spirituality. See, for example, GERHARD VON RAD, *Theologie des Alten Testaments I* (München 1958) 279-287; DIVO BARSOTTI, *Spiritualité de L'Exode. Cahiers de la Pierre-Qui-Vivre*, trans. Claude Poncet (Bilbao 1959); VICENTE SERRANO, *Espiritualidad del desierto* (Madrid 1968); "Desierto", in: STEFANO DE FIORES – TULLO GOFFI (dirs.), *Nuevo Diccionario de Espiritualidad* (Madrid 41991) 443-458; GISBERT GRESHAKE, "Wüstenväter Heute": *IKaZ* 33 (2004) 435-436; GERMAINE BIENAMÉ, "Un retour du paradis dans le désert de l'Exode selon une tradition juive", in: P. BEAUCHAMP (dir.), *La Creation dans l'Orient ancien: congres de l'ACFEB* (Lille 1985) 429-449. Even Paul Beauchamp's synchronic treatment fails to distinguish between the two epochs. See his, *Ley, Profetas, Sabios. Lectura sincrónica del Antiguo Testamento* (Madrid 1977) 44-50; ROLF RENDTORFF, *Theologie des Alten Testaments. Ein kanonischer Entwurf I: Kanonischer Grundlegung* (Neukirchen-Vluyn 1999) 44-48. Also H. D. PREUSS, *Old Testament Theology I* (Philadelphia 1995) 79-80; ULRICH MAUSER, *Christ in the Wilderness. The Wilderness Theme in the Second Gospel and its Basis in the Biblical Tradition* (London 1963) 20-36; TERRY L. BURDEN, *The Kerygma of the Wilderness Traditions in the Hebrew Bible* (New York 1994); and, but with a surprising twist, GEORGE H. WILLIAMS, *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought. The Biblical Experience of the Desert in the History of Christianity & the Paradise Theme in the Theological Idea of the University* (New York 1962).

7 According to Benno Jacob the Sinai instructions explains why God punishes Israel in the Numbers march and not in Exodus: "Beginning with Sinai, Israel had become responsible for its actions and could be punished. Earlier they had just escaped from their Egyptian prison and from the flood of sea; they were akin to someone recovering from a severe illness who must be treated with care and forbearance... we had no divine commandment before Sinai, nor was any punishment threatened or carried out". JACOB, 516. BREVARD S. CHILDS, *The Book of Exodus. A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia 1974) 258, argues for two different itinerary patterns. The one in Exodus treats the people's genuine needs; the one in Numbers, focuses on complaints.

tween two Israelite identities. The former because of the long narrative stay at the mountain, the latter because the Israel that leaves Sinai is not the one that arrived; divine self-disclosure and fundamental instruction has forever altered her. In order to better understand the identity of the Israel who arrived at Sinai we proceed to examine the move from Egypt to Sinai, with a special focus on the transition from the one to the other as narrated in 15,22-18,27⁸. This essay, then, will examine the itinerary chain of Exodus (12,37; 13,17.20; 14,10.16.19²; 15,22; 16,1; 17,1; 19,1-2) in order to describe its narrative function, to define the meaning of the desert as narrated in 15,22-18,27 and to suggest the theological significance of the desert in this narrative section.

II. FROM EGYPT TO SINAI: THE FUNCTION OF THE ITINERARY CHAIN IN EXODUS

The Exodus itinerary chain has three narrative functions: it links two geographies, it connects the Sinai arrival with the Passover departure, and it discloses the military character of Israel's desert march.

1. GEOGRAPHIC LINKAGE

The first itinerary notice appears after the tenth plague and the last describes Israel's move to Sinai (12,37; 13,17.20; 14,10.16.19²; 15,22; 16,1; 17,1; 19,1,2)⁹. This suggests that they do not structure the entire book of Exodus, as J. Severino Croatto argues¹⁰, but only the journey from Rameses to Sinai.

8 A generally accepted segmentation. See JUAN GUILLÉN TORRALBA, *Exodus* (Texto y Comentario; Estella 1992) 96-109; FÉLIX GARCÍA LÓPEZ, *El Pentateuco* (IEB 3a; Estella 2003) 173-177. CLAUDE WIÉNER, *El libro del Éxodus* (Cuadernos bíblicos 54; Estella 2000) 26, prefers to see 15,22-16,36 in relationship with the Passover and 17,1-18,27 with 19-24, a position based on ERICH ZENGER, *Israel am Sinai. Analysen und Interpretationen zu Exodus 17-34* (Altenberge 1982) 27-29.

9 The verb *nāsa`* in Exod 14,10 and 19 respectively describes Egypt and the theophanic cloud; the jussive of v. 16 instructs Israel to begin its journey; only v. 19 employs the typical wyqtl: *wayyisa`*.

10 Croatto's argument that itineraries constitute the literary backbone which provides the Penta-

This connection links two geographies, each which represents an experience. As the point of departure on Passover night and the place of Israel's servitude (12,7; 1,11), Rameses represents Egyptian slavery and all its bitterness. It is at once geography and metaphor¹¹; it evokes the bitter memory of oppression and genocide, and of the cosmic destruction at the hands of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Similarly, Sinai is the place of Israel's arrival after three months in the desert, and of Israel's submission to a new sovereign (19,3-8; 24,3,7); it also carries the weight of cosmic symbolism which the ancient world attached to mountains¹². Thus, the itinerary linkage describes a movement from a land of slavery to a mountain of Israel's new servitude; from a land plagued by disorder to a place of reordering through Sinai legislation. By means of this linkage the itineraries set up and maintain a tension between two geographies fundamental for Israel's self-understanding: Egypt and Sinai.

2. THE PASSOVER ARRIVAL

The description of Israel's arrival at Sinai begins, "In the third month after the Israelites left Egypt—on the very day—they came to the Desert of Sinai".

teach with coherence and structure falters on the fact that Abraham's journey is not part of the itinerary chain. Croatto's affirmation of Israel as a pilgrim people, whose journey is incomplete, is correct. Nevertheless, this is a canonical argument that stretches across the Pentateuch and as such goes beyond the journey defined by the itinerary notices (CROATTO, 171, 177).

11 See MICHELLE I. MARCUS, "Geography as an Organizing Principle in the Imperial Art of Shalmaneser III": *Iraq* 49 (1997) 77-90; M. LIVERANI, "The Ideology of the Assyrian Empire," in: Mogens Trolle Larsen (dir.), *Power and Propaganda. A Symposium on Ancient Empires* (Studies in Assyriology 7; Copenhagen 1979) 306-30; JON D. LEVENSON, *Sinai and Zion. A Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis 1985) 116; G. W. GROGAN, "HEILSGEOGRAPHIE. Geography as a Theological Concept": *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 6 (1988) 81-94; DAVID E. SOPHER, *Geography of Religions* (Foundation of Cultural Geography Series; Englewood Cliffs, NJ 1967) 47-78; M. ELIADE, *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion* (New York 1955) 20-65. HANS-J. KLIMHEIT, "Spatial Orientations in Mythical Thinking as Exemplified in Ancient Egypt: Considerations Toward A Geography of Religions": *HR* 14 (1975) 266-281, suggests that Israelite religion reflects more God's historical acts than do their neighbors, for example, Egypt.

12 OTHMAR KEEL, *The Symbols of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of the Psalms* (New York 1978) 113-119.

Compared with the antecedent notices in 12,37; 13,20; 14,19; 15,22.27; 16,1 and 17,1¹³, this itinerary notice stands out because of the phrases “in the third month” and “on the very day”. U. Cassuto and Brevard S. Childs understand *bayyôm hazzeh* to refer to *bahōdeš* and as a further specification of the time of Israel’s arrival at Sinai¹⁴. Keeping this in mind, Thomas B. Dozeman suggest that this unexpected repetition “catches the reader’s attention and becomes the point of emphasis” in a priestly redaction which underscores four mayor events, all characterized by *bayyôm hazzeh*: the first day of the flood (Gen 7,11), the arrival at Sinai (Exod 19,1a), the consecration of the priesthood (Lev 8,34), and the day of atonement (Lev 16,30). The phrase in question occurs nowhere else¹⁵. Dozeman’s analysis explains the use of the phrase in the broader pentateuchal narrative, but not in narrower context of Exodus. Dozeman reasons that this phrase “emphasizes the present significance of this event in relation to the reader, perhaps for cultic reasons”¹⁶. But, what might these cultic reasons be?

Simon J. De Vries argues that the phrase *bayyôm hazzeh* is often equivalent to *b^e `ešem hayyôm hazzeh*, both firmly anchored in the priestly tradition¹⁷. Phrases similar to *bayyôm hazzeh* in 19,1 are also used in 12,14.172. 41.51, all in the Passover narrative, with 12,17.41.51 referring to Israel’s exodus from Egypt. Their clustering around the Passover event suggests that *bayyôm hazzeh* in Exodus evokes the Passover exodus. If this is true, then the phrase’s absence from 15,22-18,27 and reappearance in 19,1 leads to the conclusion that its use in 19,1 not only underscores and reinforces the already existing link between Egypt and Sinai, but also adds another level of meaning, that of the

13 THOMAS B. DOZEMAN, *God on the Mountain. A Study of Redaction, Theology, and Canon in Exodus 19-24* (Atlanta 1989) 91 n. 4.

14 CHILDS, *The Book of Exodus*, 342; CASSUTO, *A Commentary on Exodus*, 224; JOHN I. DURHAM, *Exodus* (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco 1987) 257, 261, relates this day with Moses’ ascent of Sinai: “on the very day they arrived . . . and Moses ascended”.

15 According to DOZEMAN, 92, *bayyôm hazzeh* also occurs in 1 Kgs 2, 26. However, SEAN McEVENUE, *The Narrative Style of the Priestly Writer* (Analecta Biblica 50; Rome 1971) 62 n. 55 adds Josh 7,25 and 1 Sam 11,13.

16 DOZEMAN, 92 n 16. Similarly McEVENUE, 61 n. 55.

17 SIMON J. DE VRIES, *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow. Time and History in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids 1975) 140-151.

Passover¹⁸. This nuanced link between Egypt and Sinai also creates a reading in which the Sinai events are defined by the new reality created on that Passover night: Israel's rescue from Egyptian slavery is not unto freedom but unto another servitude, one soon to be defined by the Sinai covenant. The itinerary chain, then, links two metaphorical geographies and two redemptive events, the Passover and Israel's submission to the covenant. The itinerary chain creates two binomials, Egypt–Sinai and Passover–covenant, each one fundamental aspects of Israel's new identity.

3. THE MILITARY ASPECT OF ISRAEL'S DESERT MARCH

Even before the Exodus event, the text describes Israel in military terms (*šābā'*, 6,26; 7,4). In the exodus event itself the divisions of the Lord (12,17.41.51), her men of valor (12,37; see 10,11 and Num 24,3.15) and armed men (*ḥāmušīm*, 13,18; see Num 32,17; Josh 1,14; 4,12; Judg 7,11) break with Egypt, but do not engage Egypt in battle. Israel fights a first and successful battle under Moses' leadership, against Amalek (17,8-16), in the desert. That the first itinerary notice describes Israel's men as men of valor argues for understanding the journey, begun on Passover night, as a military expedition.

Support for this reading emerges from George W. Coats' proposal of an analogy between Israel's desert's march and the military campaigns of Shalmaneser III²⁰. In his discussion of this analogy, Davies concludes that extant ancient Near East royal military campaign texts may be favorably compared with Numbers 33,1-49. This text, Davies argues, appears to be related exclusively to royal military campaigns²¹, such as those described by Assurnasir-

18 According to K. A. Deurloo, *b'`ešem hayyôm hazzeh* in Josh 5,11c is the final link in the "passover-exodus-desert-entrance to Canaan-passover" chain. Cf. K. A. DEURLOO, "Om Pesach te Kunnen Vieren, Joz. 5:2-9", in: M. BOERTIEN (dir.), *Verkenning in Een Stroomgebied. Proeven van Oudtestamentische Onderzoek. Ter gelegenheid van het afscheid van Prof. Dr. M. A. Beek* (Amsterdam 1974) 48.

19 For more on this Word, see, JEAN-LOUIS SKA, *Le Passage de la Mer. Étude de la construction, du style et de la symbolique d'Ex 14,1-31* (Roma 1986) 14-17.

20 COATS, 147, 148.

21 G. I. DAVIES, "A Comparative Study", 80. See also, ALBRECHT GOETZE, "An Old Babylonian Itinerary": *JCS* 8 (1954) 51-72.

pal, which describe “river-crossings, the problems of finding water, military exploits, hunting, [and] the receiving of tribute”²². This description compares favorably with Israel’s desert march.

The analogy with royal military campaigns allows for a more nuanced understanding of Israel’s journey from Egypt to Sinai. The military characteristics of the exodus community beget a reading that goes beyond the focus on freedom from slavery²³. Although Israel does not behave like an army in the exodus event, the text insists on describing this people in military terms. Being an army is fundamental to Israel’s self-understanding; they will be reminded of that before Sinai, when Amalek attacks. Numbers 1-10 develops Israel’s military identity, by means of the census of the men of fighting age, the organization of the camp in battle order, and the mode of their leaving: “Arise, O Lord, let your enemies be scattered, and your foes flee before you” (Num 10,35). Subsequently Israel engages Sihon and Og (Num 21)²⁴. Upon leaving Egypt, Israel follows its master strategist and tactician (Exod 15,3); the journey from Egypt to Sinai and beyond is a military march.

This reading fits the character of royal military campaigns of the ancient Near East, especially the narratives of a king’s victorious return to the center of his empire, there to celebrate his victories by having a monument, palace or temple constructed in honor his god²⁵. God’s victory march ends at

22 DAVIES, “A Comparative Study”, 58.

23 For example, “Esta situación de servidumbre da paso a dos enseñanzas: el Señor se preocupa de los pobres y escoge a los débiles para salvar”: TORRALBA, 26. See also, J. SEVERINO CROATTO, *Exodus. A Hermeneutics of Freedom* (Maryknoll 1981) 21-23. For a discussion of who the Israel who departed from Egypt, see JON D. LEVENSON, “Exodus and Liberation,” in: *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism* (Louisville 1993) 132-140. Ultimately, the issue in the canonical shape of Exodus is not whether the Israelites were poor, but whose slaves (‘ עַבְדֵי מֶ) they would be, Pharaoh’s or the Lord’s.

24 The people of God do not even lose this identifying characteristic in the NT, Eph 6,10-20.

25 The existence of this royal pattern has been accepted in Ex 15:1-18, Pss 74 and 89, and Is 40-55: P. C. CRAIGIE, “The Poetry of Ugarit and Israel”: *TynBul* 22 (1971) 3-31; HELMER RINGGREN, “Yahvé et Rahab-Léviatan,” in: A CAQUOT – M. DELCOR (dirs.), *Melanges bibliques et orientaux en l’honneur de M. Henri Cazelles* (Neukirchen-Vluyn 1981) 387-393; TRYGGVE N. D. METTINGER, “In Search of the Hidden Structure: YHWH as King in Isaiah 40-55”: *SEÁ* 51-52 (1986-1987) 148-157. The pattern is applied to the entire book of Exodus in ARIE C. LEDER, “The Coherence of Exodus: Narrative Unity and Meaning”: *CTJ* 36 (2001) 251-269. For a discussion of the pattern, see PAUL D. HANSON, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of*

Sinai, the center of his rule over Israel and the nations (15,11-17). There Israel will swear loyalty to her new sovereign, including military responsibilities (23,20-33), and there her sovereign will instruct her in the construction of his dwelling place, a monument to his victory over Egypt and Israel (29,43-46).

Within this analogy of royal military campaigns, Israel's journey cannot be read as an escape of abject and powerless slaves on the way to freedom, but as a narrative of a Great King who—having demonstrated his sovereign power over Egypt and the Sea, and having sustained his troops in the desert—brings Israel to himself at the foot of his imperial throne (19,4; 24,10)²⁶ where she commits herself, with bloody oaths (24,3.8), to be his vassals alone, and to promote only his imperial interests (20,1-5; see 1,11; 5,1-23). The highest expression of this commitment is the construction of the Lord's *miškān*²⁷—not without mutinous rebellion (32-34)—based on the people's voluntary contributions (25,2; 35,5.20-21), instead of the forced construction of Pharaoh's *misk^enôt* in Rameses.

Summary. The linking of opposing geographies and the Passover arrival at Sinai form two aspects of the Exodus itinerary which define Egypt and Sinai as opposite poles fundamental for Israel's self-understanding and future. The royal military campaign aspect of the itinerary defines the arrival at Sinai as that of a victorious King who memorializes his victory over Egypt with the blood oaths of servitude and the construction of a royal palace.

Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology (Philadelphia 1979) 292-334.

26 We assume the iconographic significance of Sinai as the cosmic mountain at whose peak occurs the union of the celestial and earthly spheres. See KEEL, 113; and GEO WIDENGREN, "El lugar de culto. Significado simbólico del santuario en el antiguo oriente próximo," in: *Id.*, *Fenomenología de la religión* (Madrid 1976) 301-329.

27 The possibility of a Word play between *miškān* and *misk^enôt* is reinforced by the Vulgate which translates *misk^enôt* as *tabernaculorum* and also in the *skenomaton* of Aquila, JOHN WILLIAM WEVERS, *Notes on the Greek Text of Exodus* (Septuagint and Cognate Studies 30; Atlanta 1990) 5 n. 10.

III. FROM EGYPT TO SINAI: INTO THE DESERT

The variety of desert geographies—from uninhabitable aridity to semi-habitable, dry and stony places filled with unusual animals and vegetation—requires we define the nature of the desert spaces of the Pentateuch. Specialized literature agrees that these deserts spaces are punished by extreme temperatures and dryness, barely admitting of human life²⁸. Caravans pass through them, but only along well-known oases. Deuteronomy 32,10 links ‘solitude’ with ‘desert’ (see also Job 12,24; 26,) and Jeremiah juxtaposes desert to the fruitful land in a series of visions of judgment (4,23.26). These descriptions express the desert’s metaphorical capacity to depict death and disorder, realities acknowledged by the ancients in their descriptions of deserts as places of primordial chaos, filled with monsters and demons. Like any geographical element belonging to a peculiar narrative worldview, the semi-otics of desert²⁹ contributes significantly to the meaning of the Exodus narrative. Shemaryahu Talmon, for example, writes that “the wilderness is never presented as a goal in itself, but that it serves as the setting of an imposing rite of passage prior to Israel’s reaching the Promised Land”³⁰. Elsewhere he states that the desert

expresses the idea of an unavoidable transition period in which Israel recurrently is prepared for the ultimate transfer from social and spiritual chaos to an integrated social and spiritual order. The ‘trek in the desert’ motif represents on the historical and eschatological level what ‘creatio ex nihilo,’ the transfer from chaos to cosmos, signifies on the cosmic level³¹.

28 “Desierto”, in: XAVIER LEÓN-DUFOUR (dir.), *Vocabulario de teología bíblica* (Barcelona 1988) 226; “Desierto”, in: *Nuevo diccionario de la espiritualidad* 444; S. TALMON, “Wilderness”: in *IDBSup* 946-950.

29 The figurative-symbolic meaning of the desert is widely recognized: “Desierto”, *Nuevo diccionario de espiritualidad* 449-453; SERRANO, 56-76; ENRIQUE FARFAN NAVARRO, *El desierto transformado. Una imagen deuteroisaiana de regeneración* (Analecta Biblica 130; Rome 1992) 109-111.

30 TALMON, “Wilderness”, 947. For the complete argument, see, “The ‘Desert Motif’”.

31 TALMON, “The ‘Desert Motif’”, 37.

Talmon's discussion suggests that the transition from Egypt to Sinai takes Israel through a rite of passage, one which the text's audience joins on every hearing or reading of the Exodus desert narrative.

1. THE RITE OF PASSAGE AND THE ARRIVAL AT SINAI

Using the structure of a rite of passage, Robert L. Cohn proposes to read Israel's pentateuchal desert journey in three stages: a separation from Egypt in which the sea crossing is the final element; a transition (*margen/limen*) of 40 years; and reintegration, the crossing of the Jordan and settlement in the land³². The transitional zone, Cohn writes, depicts a space and time in which the usual norms do not obtain; this ritual space and time consists in overlapping modes of being, in which the former order is no longer valid and the new has not yet been established, but is nevertheless being anticipated under the leadership of ritual elders who shape the liminal beings. It is an abnormal time in which those marginalized from their former way of life form a closely knit community (*communitas*), during which the laws and customs of normal community life may be transgressed³³. This marginalization, writes Victor W. Turner, "is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon"³⁴. For liminal beings, "a threshold people", it is a time of "emptiness at the center"³⁵.

Applying Cohn's thesis more narrowly to Israel's transition from Egypt to Sinai we note that Exodus 1,1-15,21 narrates the separation from the Egyptian, the sea crossing the initiates the transitional zone³⁶, and the offer of and submission to the Sinai covenant (19-24) Israel's becoming a new commu-

32 ROBERT L. COHN, *The Shape of Sacred Space* (AAR Studies in Religion 23; Chico, CA 1981) 12, 13. The rite of passage is technically not complete until Israel's crossing of the Jordan.

33 VICTOR W. TURNER, "Aspectos del ritual *ndembu*", in: *La selva de los símbolos* (Madrid 1999) 101-123.

34 VICTOR W. TURNER, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago 1969) 95.

35 TURNER, *The Ritual Process*, 127.

36 "The desert . . . functions in early prose as a symbol of freedom, which stands in opposition to the massive and burdensome regime of Egypt": LEVENSON, 23, but then he describes Sinai as "a symbol of a new kind of master and a radically different relationship to the state."

nity. Israel's abandoning an ordered, albeit abject, community life on Passover night and crossing the sea fits the ritual separation. The similarities between Israel's stay in the desert and the transitional zone are apparent. Her complaints about the lack of water and food, about the "better" life in Egypt (16,3; 17,3), and the unexpected attack by Amalek describe the difficulties typical of the liminal zone. Moses' leadership and Jethro's counsel (18,13-27) evoke the role of ritual elders. The third stage of the rite of passage, reintegration into the former community fully instructed for a new life, does not appear to match the Sinai events.

Rather than depicting Israel's reintegration into her former community, as would be typical of a rite of passage, Sinai intensifies Israel's separation from her enforced Egyptian vassalage by depicting Israel's voluntary acceptance of the suzerain-vassal covenant the Lord offers (19,8; 24,3.7). The desert transition has taken Israel from one geographic location to another, and from the disorder imposed upon Egypt to the order of the Sinai covenant. In all this, however, Israel remains a vassal people; Sinai does not change that. Sinai reshapes the nature of Israel's identity and loyalties in accordance with the words of its new taskmaster, the Lord who brought them out of Egypt. The third stage of the rite of passage as applied to Exodus is Israel's full integration into the Lord's servitude.

Stage	Location
Separation: Exod 1,1-15,21	Egypt: disorder/service-vassalage (imposed)
Transition: Exod 15,22-18,27	Desert: rebellion/instruction
Integration: Exod 19-24	Sinai: order/service-vassalage (voluntary)

Israel's pre-Sinai desert experience includes instruction, also characteristic of the transition in a rite of passage. What is the nature of this instruction?

2. THE RITE OF PASSAGE AND TORAH TUTORSHIP

Within 15,22-18,27³⁷ the lack of potable water and food, Amalek's sudden attack (17,8-16), and the administration of justice (18,13-27)³⁸, accom-

37 Although 13,17-22 mentions the desert, it is doubtful that Exod 13,17-18a is a summarizing in-

pany Israel's murmuring, rebellion, and declarations about better life in Egypt (16,3; 17,3). Survival skills learned in Egypt, abject submission to Pharaoh's instructions (1,8-22; 5,6-19), are useless in the desert. And Israel has no resources to solve these problems. Israel's liminal experience with divine instruction points to the source that will sustain life in the desert; it also anticipates the basis for their sworn loyalty to her new master.

Clusters of legal vocabulary referring to divine instruction and legal counsel, located primarily in the first and last pericopes of 15,22-18,27, frame the events which provide Israel with water, food, victory over Amalek, and justice for the people. Divine instruction (15,25³⁹; 16,4.28; 18,16.20) sweetens the bitter waters at Marah (15,25.26; see 12,8 and 1,14; 17,1-7; Ps 19,10) and settles the arguments between neighbors; it also accompanies the gift of manna (16,16) and the victory over Amalek (17,16).

judge (<i>šāpaṭ</i>)			18,13.16.22. ²⁶
judgment (<i>mišpaṭ</i>)	15,25		
command (<i>šiwwā</i>)		16,16.24.32.34	18,23
commandment (<i>mišwā</i>)	15,26		
statute (<i>ḥōq</i>)	15,25.26		18,16.20
law (<i>tôrâ</i>)	15,25 (<i>yārâ</i>)	16,4.28	18,16.20
obey (<i>šāma` l'qōl</i>)	15,26		18,19.24

roduction to the desert journey, as suggested by G. W. COATS, "An Exposition for the Wilderness Traditions": *VT* 22.3 (1972) 289, because the basic themes of murmuring and testing are absent. In addition, Israel only reaches the edge of the desert (13,20); she enters the desert only after the sea crossing. From a macro-structural viewpoint, 13,17-22 links two narrative units, Ex 1-15 and 15,22-18:27, by means of a variant of a "linked keyword transitional pattern". See H. VAN DYKE PARUNAK, "Transitional Techniques in the Bible": *JBL* 102 (1981) 532.

38 Amalek's attack demonstrates opposition to Israel's historical project. Jethro's sage advice evokes Moses' first attempts at administering justice (*šāpaṭ*, 18,13.16.22.26; 2,14).

39 On the verb *yārâ* and torah, see WILLIAM H. C. PROPP, *Exodus 1-18* (The Anchor Bible; New York 1999) 577, 582.

Pre-Sinai divine instruction coincides with an element typical of the transition in a rite of passage: instruction by ritual elders⁴⁰ who accompany the liminars during their separation from the previous way of life. Moses and Jethro function as ritual elders for the liminal community; their instruction⁴¹ keeps Israel alive and solves disputes which threaten the social order. Their legal counsel and references to divine instruction create a torah frame which anticipates the voice of Sinai (19,4). In the desert Israel lives not by her own resources, nor does God transform the desert into a land flowing with milk and honey. Rather, Israel begins to learn to live “by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” (Deut 8,3). Pharaoh’s failure to heed divine instruction led to his death; between Egypt and Sinai the Lord tests Israel’s willingness to live by instruction.

Summary. Entry into the desert initiates a series of experiences which point Israel to a new identity and way of life. The old has passed; God is doing something new, if only Israel has the ears to hear. During her march to Sinai there are only hints of divine instruction, indicated by the torah frame; fullness of instruction is not yet theirs. Israel’s liminal experiences begin to wean Israel from dependence upon Egypt; Sinai remains in the future, her new identity and way of life as yet undefined. This depiction of Israel’s desert transition provides important elements for a theology of the desert for the generations of God’s people who continue the journey to God’s promised future.

IV. THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DESERT JOURNEY

Hermetic spirituality practiced in geographic solitude tends to reflect more on the geography of the desert *in se*⁴², than on how Exodus 15,22-18,27

40 With the exception of 16,4.16.24.28.32.34 the clusters create links between Marah and the administration of justice by Moses and Jethro in Exod 18.

41 DIVO BARSOTTI, 171-172, suggests that Jethro and Moses’ meeting, evocative of the Abram-Melchizedek encounter, combines prophetic and cosmic revelation: “La loi que Moïse recevra sur la montagne n’est pas en opposition avec le loi que régit les divers peuples... la Loi... était déjà contenue dans les législations du temps”

42 For an insightful discussion of early desert theology, see, BELDEN C. LANE, “Desert Catechesis: The Landscape and Theology of Early Christian Monasticism”: *ATR* 75.3 (1993) 292-314.

or Numbers 11-22,1 depict the desert experience. Contemporary biblical theology tends to conflate the two desert epochs in the interests of a tradition-historical theology of the desert⁴³. The above study of the Exodus desert narrative suggests that a desert theology should not conflate the two pentateuchal desert narratives, nor focus on the disparate historical traditions, but that it mine the theology of the narrative depiction of Israel's desert experience as described in the canonically distinct desert epochs, each of which presents a unique view of that desert experience for all the generations of committed readers of the biblical text⁴⁴.

Israel's pre-Sinai desert experience as discussed above provides several theological themes. Analysis of the itinerary chain identified the binomials Egypt-Sinai and Passover-Covenant; application of the rite of passage disclosed separation and transition to Sinai. These elements provide the basis for three brief theological commentaries: the Egypt-Sinai connection describes an eschatological tension between what Israel was and what it will become; the separation from Egypt signals that ideological separation from the nations which has characterized Abraham's descendants since the instruction in Genesis 12,1-3; the transition, or the threshold time and space between Egypt and Sinai, discloses theological elements typical of the liminal zone: struggle and militancy. Together these three form the crucial elements of Exodus' desert theology.

1. AN ESCHATOLOGICAL TENSION BETWEEN EGYPT AND SINAI

The juxtaposition of Egypt-Sinai by means of the itinerary chain defines the two poles that shape Israel's identity: the future beckons (Sinai), and the past still seduces (Egypt, 16,3). Meanwhile, the way of life with the new sovereign is only slowly developing, but not without difficulties. In system-

Contemporary spirituality of the desert is not geographically bound; the desert experience is used metaphorically. See, for example, HENRY NOUWEN, *The Way of the Heart. Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry* (New York 1981), and ALESSANDRO PRONZATO, *Meditations on the Sand* (New York 1983).

43 See above, note 6.

44 PIERRE BUIS, *El libro de los Números* (Cuadernos bíblicos 78; Estella 2000) 23, argues that because the desert is nothing but empty space, it is not the place to look for a theology or spirituality of the desert.

atic theological terms, the irruption of justification through the waters of the Sea has placed the people on the way of sanctification in the desert. Their baptism in the Sea has created a new life, but this newly created desert people cannot yet recognize it, nor do they enjoy it. Complaints about the conditions of their new existence are endemic.

The eschatological tension, however, does not disappear with Israel's arrival at Sinai; the antipode Egypt-Sinai becomes Sinai-Canaan (esp. Exod 23.20-33). It is no longer a tension between a past and a future life, but between a new identity and its practice in a new geography, the promised land. The challenges of this Sinai-Canaan tension characterize the second desert epoch (Num 11,16-20) and the Mosaic discourses of Deuteronomy. Together the antipodes Egypt-Sinai and Sinai-Canaan define the negative extremes and the positive center of Israel's desert identity. The three elements are disclosed in Leviticus 18,1-5: neither Egypt nor Canaan will define Israel's conduct, only the divine instruction, received at Sinai. Geographical territory will not define Israel. Consequently Israel will not develop an autochthonous theology, but one shaped by God's instructions.

2. THEOLOGY OF SEPARATION: FROM PASSOVER TO COVENANT

Israel's separation from Egypt, begun on Passover night in Rameses, is not complete until it has crossed the sea on dry ground, thereby declaring God's victory over Egypt by judicial ordeal⁴⁵. The completeness of this separation is such that turning back could only be considered treason against Israel's new master; it would also subvert the divine promise to Abraham (Gen 15,13-14; Exod 2,23-25). With the sea crossing God affirms and upholds the separation of a people from among the nations begun with Abraham (Gen 12,1), an exodus the patriarch himself experienced centuries before the crossing (Gen 12,10-20)⁴⁶.

45 See SIMONE TIKVAH FRYMER-KENSY, *The Judicial Ordeal in the Ancient Near East* (Ph.D. dissertation; Yale 1977); CHARLES F. FENSHAM, "Ordeal by Battle in the Ancient Near East and the Old Testament": in E. VOLTERRA (dir.) *Studi in Onore di Edoardo Volterra* (Milan 1971) 127-135.

46 "Las tribus de Israel en las estepas del Sinaí adquieren conciencia de su solidaridad, y al constituirse en pueblo de Dios, se convierten en algo 'separado', en una 'isla' entre las naciones,

Although contact with the nations continues, Abraham and his descendants are responsible for the assumption and maintenance of the divinely initiated separation, according to following texts: the fundamental instruction requiring Abraham to be blameless in God's presence (Gen 17,1); the patriarchs' contact with Pharaoh and Abimelech (Gen 12,10-20; 20,1-18; 26,1-11); the purchase of Machpelah to avoid Abraham's indebtedness to Ephron (Gen 23); Abraham's prohibition against Isaac's marrying a Canaanite and his insistence that Isaac's wife must abandon the patriarchal home as Abraham himself had done (Gen 24); and the sad episode of Dinah and Shechem which endangered the whole clan (Gen 34, esp. v 30). Under Moses' guidance post-Egypt Israel experiences this isolation for forty years in a space totally incapable of sustaining any people. For the time being this desert people's future remains uncertain, even hopeless, especially because her former means of support (16,3) are no longer available. Dislocated from a known past and its reliable sustenance, and relocated to an unknown and frightening territory, Israel is challenged to begin a new life in the presence of the God who covenanted with the patriarchs, a God whom they are only beginning to know (10,1-2; Ps 106,7abc).

Separation from slavery, its humiliating and perhaps traumatic dependence, helps to identify crucial features for a theology of conversion. The emphasis on separation affirms veteran believers in their justification and sanctification, and it challenges the faith community with the fundamental problem of the church's identity among the nations, especially with respect to the overwhelming power of human culture (Gen 11,1-9; Rom 12,1). Finally, a theology of separation shapes the church's evangelistic task, especially with respect to its initial contacts with those still enslaved to their "Egyptian" past, and the manner in which that past should be confronted and abandoned (Gen 12,1; Ruth 2,11; Eph 4,17-24; Col 3,1-11). All of this understood within the theme of the desert journey, for God's people never leave the desert, not in Exodus, nor in the Pentateuch; they will not escape the eschatological tension typical of the painful transition towards a new way of life.

esclavo de una vocación excepcional—'sed santos, como yo soy santo', 'un reino sacerdotal y una nación santa'—que le exige constantemente una moral de superación": MAXIMILIANO GARCÍA CORDERO, *Teología de la Biblia I: Antiguo Testamento* (Madrid 1970) 97.

3. A THEOLOGY OF TRANSITION: LIFE ON THE THRESHOLD

An assumption fundamental to this theological reflection is that the desert journey, although completed in the historical past, has been converted into an ongoing narrative event; readers of the Exodus desert journey are not so much carried into the past, as confronted by a depiction of Israel in the desert. Furthermore, the insertion of 15,22-18,27 between the sea and the mountain depicts an Israel on the way to but never arriving at Sinai. For that reason, Beauchamp states that “nada anuncia el final del desierto. El hombre no sale del niño como el fruto sale del árbol. Llega un momento en que la lección sólo puede ser repetida y ningún cambio es capaz de aumentar sus posibilidades de ser recibida”⁴⁷. As such, then, the Exodus desert narrative presents the reader with historical information, and a narrative image whose semiotic power locates the reader alongside an Israel on the way to Sinai, a threshold people. Throughout this journey, whispers of torah reach their ears, but they fail to recognize them. To the contrary, they complain about the lack of water, food, and even the absence of their Egyptian nourishment. They test God, are attacked by Amalek and require Moses’ and Jethro’s intervention to settle disputes justly. In this “tiempo sin contenido”⁴⁸ Israel will learn that submission to divine instruction is the only way to the good life (15,25-26; 16,4-5.28-29; 17,5-6; see 17,14; 18,23). Thus she will learn that the Lord is God (16, 6.8.12). Two theological aspects characterize this threshold time and space: the agony of suffering and the burden of battle.

a) The agony of suffering

The desert journey to Sinai opens an epoch of agony from which Israel will not escape. They must die to their Egyptian past (Exod 16.3) and rise to a future whose life emanates only from divine instruction, as depicted in the Marah event where divine instruction sweetened the bitterness of Egyptian slavery (Exod 12,8 and 1,14; and see Ps 19,7-11); without life-giving torah

47 BEAUCHAMP, 47.

48 BEAUCHAMP, 47: “... el tiempo así vivido es una repetición, un tiempo sin contenido: es el mismo maná todos los días (Num 11, 6), es la monotonía del alimento y la saciedad de la duración, el aburrimiento.”

Israel will suffer the diseases of Egypt. Nevertheless, daily life during the desert journey is one of murmuring, rebellions, and testing, including the attempt to manipulate the gift of manna (16, 20.27). Pining for the old way of life and dependence bring about Israel's agony. Thus God insists they put down roots in other soil: "I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not" (16,4 NRSV)⁴⁹. Desert life teaches Israel that "one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (Deut 8,3 NRSV). Painfully relearning the basics of true life characterizes the desert journey in the presence of God. Ezekiel provides hope for the pilgrim: "I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord" (Ezek 37,14 NRSV).

The travelers' agony is intensified by Israel's testing of God (17,2.7) and God's testing of Israel (15,25; 16,4; and see 20,20). If it is true that "God frequently tests humans to know their intentions (Gen 22,1)"⁵⁰, the inverse is true also: Israel tests God to know how he will keep them alive. This bilateral testing discloses how much a reshaping of the will, learning to bring it into harmony with divine instruction, is part of the desert transition. While testing God's will in the Exodus desert epoch does not produce physical death, it does in the second (Num 14,22). This difference between the two epochs may be attributed to the fact that after Sinai the people is no longer considered innocent, but completely committed to the Lord by self-maledictory oath in the context of full instruction. All of that in the presence of the God who is a "devouring fire" (Exod 24,17; 40,38). For that reason the God of the second desert epoch is more dangerous to Israel; they are essentially in the position of Adam and Eve in the Eden: failure to heed divine instruction leads to death.

49 RAYMOND C. VAN LEEUWEN, "What Comes out of God's Mouth: Theological Wordplay in Deuteronomy 8": *CBQ* 47 (1985) 55-57 focuses on the world play between *mišwā* in Deut 8,1 and *mōšā*' in 8,3. The desert's resources do not keep Israel alive, as Fretheim argues when he writes that "God directs Moses towards the resources already present in creation": FRETHEIM, 177.

50 G. GERLEMAN, "Tentar", in: E. JENNI – C. WESTERMANN (dirs.), *Diccionario teológico manual del Antiguo Testamento II* (Madrid 1985) 99.

b) The burden of battle

The desert transition develops Israel's military responsibilities as vassals of a triumphant deity whose power is eternal according to Exodus 15,18: "The Lord will reign forever and ever". It is Israel's burden, especially after covenanting with him at Sinai, to fight those who attack his victory train, as with Amalek, those who prevent his passage, as with Sihon, Og, Balak, or the Canaanite confederacies. It is the burden of Israel's fighting men to be ready to die for their Overlord's glory, not for their own *Lebensraum*. And, as the conflict with Amalek makes clear, Israel must be ready for ever, in the desert (Exod 17,8-16), the land (1 Sam 15; 2 Sam 1,1-16), and even in the dispersion (Esth 3,1). The kings of the earth will bend the knee to Israel's God (Ps. 72; Dan. 4); for the time being, Israel will bear the sword of the Lord.

When Israel herself becomes the reason for conflict, there will be no victory (Num 14,41-45 ; Josh 7; Judg 2,10-19). In order to avoid the Lord's violence against her she must resolutely submit to divine instruction (Exod 18,13-27); it is also the only way she will have success in Canaan (Josh 1,7-8; 23,6-8). If the burden of battle is rooted in her desert experience then Israel will not be tempted, like the nations, to triumph in her own ethnicity, or become dependent on foreign political allegiances. Upon forgetting the desert as fundamental to her existence among the nations, the Lord becomes her enemy, to the point of allowing the nations to destroy the temple and Jerusalem, and remove Israel from God's presence (2 Kgs 24,3.20). The burden of battle does not seek to inculcate a predisposition toward violence, but a single-minded devotion to the only God who rescued Israel from slavery to Egypt. It is a battle as much against those who oppose Israel's God from the outside as it is Israel's battle with herself to deny the God who brought her out of the house of slavery into the desert. It is God's testing of Israel along the desert way, until all threats to the Lord's glory is no more.

V. CONCLUDING COMMENTARY

This essay has shown that the first desert epoch (Exod 15,22-18,27) displays a distinctive narrative, semiotic, and theological function because of its location between Egypt and Sinai, and the links that connect the two. Fur-

thermore, this reading suggests an eschatological theology focusing on Israel's election and its painful transition from one mode of being to another. Further theological study of this desert narrative remains, as well as an exegetical and theological analysis of the desert epoch depicted in Numbers.