

THE FIRSTBORN/THE EXODUS BEGINS

EXODUS 13

Before we get into this lesson, I need to answer a question from Exodus 12:35-36 and the acquisition of the wealth of Egypt by the Israelites. I suggested that part of the reason why God wanted them to have this wealth was to pay them for the years of slavery they endured. The question was essentially, "Are you supporting the concept of reparations?" and "Doesn't that lend support to the argument that reparations should be paid today to the descendants of African-American slaves?" It was asked in the context of the current political arguments being made for that in the USA.

First, the Exodus was a unique, onetime event in the plan of God for history. It is not a doctrinal blueprint for any other people at any other time in history. If God wanted the Israelites to have the wealth of Egypt as payment for their years of slavery, that is His prerogative and it is not applicable to any other people group at any other time. If the people involved at any other time in history want to ask for reparations or, conversely, to pay reparations for harm inflicted on others, that's up to them, but that policy cannot be supported from this event in the Exodus. I'm not saying there are no applications for this dispensation that may be made out of the revelation presented in the Exodus. Just last week while discussing the mixed multitude and the doctrine of separation I presented an application for believers in terms of being in the world but not of the world—i.e., separation.

The modern concept of Liberation Theology includes the payment of reparations and other costly social adjustments that amount to reparations in one form or another. This theology is the product of the socialist fantasies of a liberal Roman Catholic priest who largely based it on the book of Exodus. It is a wholly inappropriate use of the Bible and believers should not be pressured into accepting the concept of reparations based on the Israelites and their acquisition of wealth during the Exodus from Egypt.

Further, the wealth given to the Israelites was given to them by the people who enslaved them at the time. The concept of reparations today would have to be paid by people who had nothing to do with enslaving anyone and who, in fact, detest the idea of slavery. The biblical situation is not analogous to the current situation in the USA. That doesn't mean that people won't try to make the connection and exploit it, but that doesn't make it biblical or correct.

Finally, according to the biblical record, the Egyptians voluntarily gave their wealth to the Israelites. The reparations demanded today are in the form of a governmentally imposed, mandatory, massive redistribution of wealth. The Exodus record does not support that in any way. Strictly speaking, what happened in Egypt was less the concept of reparations as it was the concept that the Egyptians were paying them what they owed them in order to get them to leave. It wasn't a shakedown which is what reparations really are today in our country.

The death of the firstborn in the Exodus judgment on Egypt had significance far beyond what took place at that one time in history. The concept of the firstborn was an important cultural element in the Middle East, but with this event the Lord attached spiritual significance to it.

Firstborn, בְּכֹר, means firstborn, the oldest son, usually referring to the first male offspring. Associated with this is the meaning of prominence in the clan and privileges pertaining to clan and inheritance. In English, this may sound as though it refers to males or females, but there is a feminine form of the word that refers to firstborn females, בְּכִירָה. It is only used in Genesis 19:30-38 where Lot's firstborn daughter convinced her sister to participate in the seduction of their father.

Culturally, the concept of the firstborn is loaded with significance. Generally, the word refers to the firstborn son. That is not specifically stated right here in Exodus 13, but it will be clarified later so we know sons are the issue in the sanctification of the firstborn. We know that females were not held in high esteem in Middle Eastern culture; therefore, they were marginalized and largely ignored in terms of importance reducing the likelihood that it refers to females although some theologians take that position. I do not; I think it refers to males.

Israel did some things to change how women were treated, but it didn't result in a total change in societal attitudes towards women. I couldn't find anything in the Scriptures that specifically prohibited women in the courtyard of the Tabernacle, but I would be shocked if they had been allowed in there. We know

that centuries later, women were not allowed to go into the inner court of the Second Temple. They had a courtyard outside that area which was as close as they could get to the Holy Place. In the museum of Jewish history in Jerusalem just down the street from the Knesset, there are several replicas of synagogues from various places and points in time, and they kept the women and men segregated in separate areas. The area for the men was in the central open area and the women were off to the sides or to the rear sometimes behind screens or lattice work. At the Western Wall, women and men are allowed only in separate areas and not together. There is a library there off the north side of the men's area that women cannot enter. I suspect orthodox synagogues still keep the men and women apart while the more liberal Jewish congregations do not, although, I'm not certain about that.

In the story of Jacob and Esau, Esau despised his birthright, that is, the rights of the firstborn son and sold them to Jacob for a bowl of stew. Selling the birthright was apparently an acceptable thing to do although Esau later claimed Jacob supplanted it (Gen. 27:36) meaning he essentially stole it from him. Supplant, עָקַב, means to deceive or trick someone, but Esau clearly wasn't deceived; he willingly sold his birthright for a bowl of stew. Jacob made the request for the birthright out of selfish motives, but Esau was under no obligation to sell it. Later, Isaac wanted to bless Esau, the firstborn son, but Jacob, the son born second, deceitfully gained or supplanted the blessing that was due the firstborn son.

Genesis 25:31–33 ³¹But Jacob said, “First sell me your birthright.” ³²Esau said, “Behold, I am about to die; so of what use then is the birthright to me?” ³³And Jacob said, “First swear to me”; so he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob.

Genesis 27:19 ¹⁹Jacob said to his father, “I am Esau your firstborn; I have done as you told me. Get up, please, sit and eat of my game, that you may bless me.”

The firstborn son received a special blessing from his father as well as a double inheritance. When Israel was blessing Joseph's sons, he put Ephraim over the firstborn Manasseh which displeased Joseph. Joseph himself was not the firstborn, but Israel gave him the double portion of the inheritance.

Genesis 48:17–18 ¹⁷When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on Ephraim's head, it displeased him; and he grasped his father's hand to remove it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. ¹⁸Joseph said to his father, “Not so, my father, for this one is the firstborn. Place your right hand on his head.” ... ²²“I [Jacob or Israel] give you [Joseph] one portion more than your brothers ...

Further, the firstborn could forfeit his double portion by means of disobedience. That's what happened to Reuben, Jacob's firstborn son; he sinned against his father and lost the inheritance rights of the firstborn. The firstborn also represents the power and strength of his father. That thinking probably played a big role in the fact that the firstborn son of kings was the heir to the throne.

Genesis 49:3–4 ³“Reuben, you are my firstborn; My might and the beginning of my strength, Preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power. ⁴“Uncontrolled as water, you shall not have preeminence, Because you went up to your father's bed; Then you defiled *it*—he went up to my couch.

1 Chronicles 5:1 ¹Now the sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel (for he was the firstborn, but because he defiled his father's bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph the son of Israel; so that he is not enrolled in the genealogy according to the birthright.

Within the family, the firstborn enjoyed privileges and prestige denied the sons born after him.

Genesis 43:33 ³³Now they were seated before him, the firstborn according to his birthright and the youngest according to his youth ...

The concept of preeminence is particularly important and emphasized concerning God the Son who is called the firstborn of God. This is not referring to a physical birth order but to the absolute preeminence of the Son over all things.

Colossians 1:15 ¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn [πρωτότοκος] of all creation.

Romans 8:29 ²⁹For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn [πρωτότοκος] among many brethren;

Hebrews 1:5–6 ⁵For to which of the angels did He ever say, "YOU ARE MY SON, TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU"? And again, "I WILL BE A FATHER TO HIM AND HE SHALL BE A SON TO ME"? ⁶And when He again brings the firstborn [πρωτότοκος] into the world, He says, "AND LET ALL THE ANGELS OF GOD WORSHIP HIM."

The concept that Jesus is the firstborn of all creation has led to serious heresy on the part of those who do not understand what the Bible is saying. The Arians of the fourth century believed Christ was a created being and therefore of a different essence from the Father and subordinate to Him but by the obedience and virtue of His life was nevertheless divine but not deity. Jehovah's Witnesses are the modern incarnation of this cultish heresy.

Preeminence is also the issue when Israel is called the firstborn son of God. Israel was a nation specifically created by God to be the channel through

whom He would reveal Himself to the world beyond the revelation available in the created order.

Exodus 4:22 ²²“Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, “Israel is My son, My firstborn.

When Jesus was referred to as the firstborn of Mary, it was referring to birth order; He was the firstborn son of several sons she would bear.

Luke 2:7 ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn [πρωτότοκος] son ...

Context is all important; it can refer to birth order or it can refer to preeminence, prominence, or superiority.

In ancient Middle Eastern cultures, the firstfruits of everything was dedicated to the gods. That was probably a factor in Yahweh's judgment on the firstborn of Egypt. We also know that under the Mosaic Law, God demanded the firstfruits be offered to Him as well and He would institute procedures for that to take place.

This idea that the firstfruits belong to the deities of pagan religious systems manifested itself in child sacrifice of the firstborn male child to the gods Molech, מֹלֶךְ, and Chemosh, כְּמוֹשׁ. The Israelites were forbidden to do this but they adopted this pagan practice, at least to some extent. Even Solomon eventually practiced it. At least at times, it involved a brass idol with a big belly open at the top which was heated red hot and the baby was placed in it to roast to death and burn. I fail to understand how anyone can do that, but when we look around the world at the atrocities committed today, it becomes apparent that those

who are in Satan can do some pretty horrific things. Archaeologists have found sites of pagan shrines with the bones of infants buried around them. What we are going to see here in Exodus, is that the God of Israel was establishing a process through which the firstborn males, who belonged to Him, could be ransomed rather than sacrificed. Yahweh specifically prohibited this practice among the Israelites.

Leviticus 20:2–5 ²“You shall also say to the sons of Israel: ‘Any man from the sons of Israel or from the aliens sojourning in Israel who gives any of his offspring to Molech [מֹלֶךְ], shall surely be put to death; the people of the land shall stone him with stones. ³‘I will also set My face against that man and will cut him off from among his people, because he has given some of his offspring to Molech [מֹלֶךְ], so as to defile My sanctuary and to profane My holy name. ⁴‘If the people of the land, however, should ever disregard that man when he gives any of his offspring to Molech [מֹלֶךְ], so as not to put him to death, ⁵then I Myself will set My face against that man and against his family, and I will cut off from among their people both him and all those who play the harlot after him, by playing the harlot after Molech [מֹלֶךְ].

Defying this command was partially responsible for the destruction of the Jerusalem and the Temple and the exile of the Jewish people from Judah, and it was part of the reason why Solomon who started his reign so well failed to finish well.

1 Kings 11:7 ⁷Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh [כִּמּוֹשׁ] the detestable idol of Moab, on the mountain which is east of Jerusalem, and for Molech [מֹלֶךְ] the detestable idol of the sons of Ammon.

Jeremiah 32:35 ³⁵“They built the high places of Baal that are in the valley of Ben-hinnom to cause their sons and their daughters to pass through *the fire* to Molech [מֹלֶךְ], which I had not commanded them nor had it entered My mind that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin.

One of the interesting things of note concerning the cultural norms of the firstborn, was that God not only didn't operate according to those norms, He frequently operated counter to them. This was very evident throughout biblical history. He frequently chose the younger over the firstborn to accomplish His purposes. The Lord chose Jacob over Esau, Joseph and Judah over Reuben, Ephraim over Manasseh, Moses over Aaron, David over his brothers, and Solomon over Adonijah. All of those choices reflected the preeminence of the younger over the firstborn contrary to cultural expectations.

The firstborn son had a leadership role in the family under the tutelage of his father and one day he would replace his father as the head of the family. He was an important part of the chain concerning the transmittal of information from one generation to the next. Part of that for the Jews was the knowledge of the Exodus including the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

That background information on the firstborn brings us to Exodus 13 and the doctrine concerning the Israelite firstborn that were founded on and related to the judgment of the firstborn in Egypt. Because Yahweh spared the firstborn of the Israelites during this judgment, those same firstborn sons belonged to Him and they were to be set apart for Him. This included not only the sons, but the animals as well.

Exodus 13:1-2 ¹Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²"Sanctify [קִדַּשׁ] to Me every firstborn [בְּכֹרִי], the first offspring of every womb among the sons of Israel, both of man and beast; it belongs to Me."

Sanctify, *שָׁדַד*, means to be sacred or consecrated. It refers to something or someone dedicated to service and loyalty to God and so involving proper conduct as prescribed for the person or object so dedicated. Basically, it means to be set apart and not available for profane use which, if used that way, would render it unfit to continue to be sanctified or set apart. Sanctification is a picture of being separated from the world and to God. In this case, every firstborn, man and animal, belongs to Yahweh and is to be set apart for Him. This command is applicable to the Israelites; there is no other group of people commanded to sanctify their firstborn sons to God. They were to be separated from the world and set apart to God. This was true of the firstborn, but in a larger sense it was the purpose for which God created Israel in the first place and, indeed, God does call Israel His firstborn son (Ex. 4:22). As a nation, they were set apart to serve Him and to reveal Him to the world. The consecration of the firstborn would serve as a perpetual reminder of the Passover and the night when God spared their lives in Egypt.

It was God who first sanctified the firstborn Israelites. He set them apart and saved them; therefore, they belong to Him. Eventually, in place of all the firstborn of Israel, He substituted the Levites for them.

Numbers 8:14–18 ¹⁴“Thus you shall separate the Levites from among the sons of Israel, and the Levites shall be Mine. ¹⁵“Then after that the Levites may go in to serve the tent of meeting. But you shall cleanse them and present them as a wave offering; ¹⁶for they are wholly given to Me from among the sons of Israel. I have taken them for Myself instead of every first issue of the womb, the firstborn of all the sons of Israel. ¹⁷“For every firstborn among the sons of Israel is Mine, among the men and among the animals; on the day that I struck down all the

firstborn in the land of Egypt I sanctified them for Myself. ¹⁸“But I have taken the Levites instead of every firstborn among the sons of Israel. [see also Numbers 3:12-13].

Next Moses repeated the command to observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread, but he made it clear he was referring to celebrating it in the land after they possess it. At that point, they had no way of knowing they wouldn't be there the very next spring when it became time to celebrate Passover.

Exodus 13:3 ³Moses said to the people, “Remember this day in which you went out from Egypt, from the house of slavery; for by a powerful hand the LORD brought you out from this place. And nothing leavened shall be eaten.

At this point, the Israelites had yet to leave Egypt. Moses was speaking to them as though it was already a done deal. Egypt had been a house of slavery to them, but now they were being set apart to serve the one true God who is mightier than even the mighty nation of Egypt, its impotent Pharaoh god, and its pantheon of other pagan deities.

Exodus 13:4–7 ⁴“On this day in the month of Abib, you are about to go forth. ⁵“It shall be when the LORD brings you to the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Hivite and the Jebusite, which He swore to your fathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, that you shall observe this rite in this month. ⁶“For seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a feast to the LORD. ⁷“Unleavened bread shall be eaten throughout the seven days; and nothing leavened shall be seen among you, nor shall any leaven be seen among you in all your borders.

This confirmed that the Feast of Unleavened Bread was to be observed in the land of Canaan. At that time, they would have been thinking it would be the next spring, but, of course, that didn't happen. Since we have already discussed the particulars of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, there is no need to re-

peat that here; this is largely a repetition of what has already been revealed about the Feast. We have also thoroughly discussed the promise made to the Israelites concerning the land.

Exodus 13:8–10 ⁸“You shall tell your son on that day, saying, ‘It is because of what the LORD did for me when I came out of Egypt.’ ⁹“And it shall serve as a sign to you on your hand, and as a reminder on your forehead, that the law of the LORD may be in your mouth; for with a powerful hand the LORD brought you out of Egypt. ¹⁰“Therefore, you shall keep this ordinance at its appointed time from year to year.

Moses makes this highly personal to them as individual Israelites. Tell “your” son that is what the Lord did for “me” when “I” came out of Egypt. This is part of keeping the memory of the Exodus alive and it is part of their identifying continuity with their past as a Jewish people and nation that has now existed for over 3,500 years.

The reference to the sign on the hand and the reminder on the forehead led to the Jewish practice of wearing phylacteries on the arm and on the forehead. These are leather containers strapped to the arm and tied to the head containing the Scriptures Exodus 13:1-10, 11-16 and Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:13-21. Phylactery, *תפילין* and *φυλακτήριον* in the Greek Septuagint, as a practice originated in this Exodus Scripture. The Hebrew word means a symbolic ornament or sign; a band worn as a remembrance to a past fact as a form of non-verbal communication. The Greek word means to keep, to preserve. The original intent was for the Israelites to remember these things by integrating them into their lives through knowing and living by the Word of God as committed to them through

Moses. As they practice this custom today, it is based on rabbinic instructions in the *Mishna* and like so many things under the auspices of Rabbinic Judaism, they have tended to become religious formalities. They have elaborate rules for how they are constructed, inscribed, and worn.

The religious formality and showboating concerning the public display of their phylacteries was a condemnation the Lord leveled against the scribes and the Pharisees during His ministry.

Matthew 23:5 ⁵“But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries [φύλακτήριον] and lengthen the tassels of *their garments*.

The Lord was not condemning wearing them, He was condemning the formal, outward religious show being put on by those who wore them without any serious consideration of the Word of God they were supposed to represent. They may have even thought of them as some sort of good luck charm or amulet to ward off evil spirits and that too was worthy of condemnation.

Here is a description of the religious formality that accompanies wearing the phylacteries according to Rabbinic Judaism. “The phylacteries were placed on the body in a definite order. The hand is ‘laid’ first to the accompaniment of a special prayer. It lies on the inside of the bared left arm, just above the elbow, so that the case may rest upon the heart. The strap is then tightened and wound first around the left arm, and then around the middle finger of the left hand. The head [phylactery] is next ‘laid’ in the middle of the forehead ‘between the eyes’ with the knot at the back of the head, and the two free ends of the stray

[sic, strap?] falling over the breast in front. Various prayers, benedictions, and Hosea 2:19 were recited as the phylacteries were fixed in position. After the prayers, the [phylacteries] are removed in reverse order, and placed in a bag, which is often beautifully ornamented."¹ They seem to be long on religious style and ritual and short on biblical substance.

I brought this up simply because you will see Orthodox Jews wearing them today and part of the basis for them is the Scripture here in Exodus 13:9. We saw them being worn in Jerusalem. The real intent of the command was to know the Word, do the Word, and remember the deliverance of the Israelites out of Egypt by the mighty hand and outstretched arm of the Lord as it occurred in the Exodus. The focus was not on wearing something but on remembering. Some other Scriptures suggest the placing of the Word on the hands and on the forehead were meant to illustrate truths by means of figurative language and had no literal requirement such as phylacteries attached to them. The Feast itself was like a sign on the hands and reminder on the forehead and as such it served as the continual reminder just as though they had written them on their hands and on their forehead.² Many theologians believe this is a figurative expression relating to constantly thinking on these things.

Proverbs 3:3 ³Do not let kindness and truth leave you; Bind them around your neck, Write them on the tablet of your heart.

¹ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 5 vols., s.v. "phylactery" (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975, 1976), 4:787.

² John D. Hannah, "Exodus" *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, eds. John F. Walvoor and Roy B. Zuck (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor, 2000), 130.

Proverbs 6:20–21 ²⁰My son, observe the commandment of your father And do not forsake the teaching of your mother; ²¹Bind them continually on your heart; Tie them around your neck.

Part of the process for remembering the work God did on their behalf was the celebration of the Feast of Unleavened Bread every year. History would subsequently show they were not faithful to do that and as a result they forgot Yahweh and His work, turned to idolatry, and were expelled from the land, but that would occur centuries in the future. Their failure to remember by means of the Feast contributed to their unfaithfulness.

Next, Moses revealed Yahweh's commands concerning the firstborn.

Exodus 13:11–13 ¹¹“Now when the LORD brings you to the land of the Canaanite, as He swore to you and to your fathers, and gives it to you, ¹²you shall devote to the LORD the first offspring of every womb, and the first offspring of every beast that you own; the males belong to the LORD. ¹³“But every first offspring of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, but if you do not redeem *it*, then you shall break its neck; and every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem.

The first thing of note here is the reiteration of the promise to bring them into a specific land, Canaan. The promise to do that was made to “your fathers,” meaning Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who was later known as Israel. Just as the Israelites as a people and a nation owed their very existence to the supernatural work of God, their entry into and possession of the land would also be the result of the supernatural work of God. While they would participate in conquering the land, Yahweh would lead and direct them giving them orders and guidance and insuring their success, and He would even fight some of their bat-

ties for them. The connection to the land promise suggests this dedication of the firstborn will not be practiced until they are living in the land.

In the culture of the time, the wording “belong to the Lord” would generally indicate a blood sacrifice, but in terms of the firstborn sons, sacrifice was not what Yahweh had in mind. Sacrifice was the fate of the firstborn clean animals. Donkeys were valuable work animals and prestigious mounts for influential and royal men; therefore, the firstborn donkey could be redeemed by the sacrifice of a lamb. Some theologians understand the donkey to be a representation of unclean animals. The redemption price for the firstborn sons was five shekels.

Numbers 18:15–17 ¹⁵“Every first issue of the womb of all flesh, whether man or animal, which they offer to the LORD, shall be yours; nevertheless the firstborn of man you shall surely redeem, and the firstborn of unclean animals you shall redeem. ¹⁶“As to their redemption price, from a month old you shall redeem them, by your valuation, five shekels in silver, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, which is twenty gerahs. ¹⁷“But the firstborn of an ox or the firstborn of a sheep or the firstborn of a goat, you shall not redeem; they are holy. You shall sprinkle their blood on the altar and shall offer up their fat in smoke as an offering by fire, for a soothing aroma to the LORD.

Why must the neck of the donkey be broken, if it was not redeemed? The point is, all the firstborn belonged to God and they could not be kept from God for personal use whether it was a work animal or an animal used for food. If it wasn't redeemed, it had to be destroyed. They could kill it themselves rather than taking it to the Temple for the priests to slaughter, but it could not be converted to their own use.

Exodus 13:14–15 ¹⁴“And it shall be when your son asks you in time to come, saying, ‘What is this?’ then you shall say to him, ‘With a powerful hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. ¹⁵‘It came about, when

Pharaoh was stubborn about letting us go, that the LORD killed every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of beast. Therefore, I sacrifice to the LORD the males, the first offspring of every womb, but every firstborn of my sons I redeem.'

The redemption of the firstborn was also part of the education process for succeeding generations of Israelites. One thing they were to know was the might of their God who saved them from their bondage to the Egyptians. This is a powerful metaphor used in the Pentateuch to describe the omnipotence of God and His work on behalf of the Israelites.

Deuteronomy 4:34³⁴“Or has a god tried to go to take for himself a nation from within *another* nation by trials, by signs and wonders and by war and by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm and by great terrors, as the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes?

The whole procedure beginning with God's ownership of the firstborn told the story of their formation into a nation belonging to Yahweh who rescued them from Egyptian slavery. It is not within the character of God to allow children to be sacrificed to Him; therefore, He allowed the Israelites to redeem the firstborn sons. He still received a sacrificial offering but it was by means of animals suitable for sacrifice. This process served to remind them of these things as well as providing an opportunity for educating their youngsters and uniting the Israelites as a people and as a nation across the generations. The redemption of the firstborn is a sign of the powerful hand of Yahweh that saved them out of Egypt.

Exodus 13:16 ¹⁶“So it shall serve as a sign on your hand and as phylacteries [טֹפֶתֶת] on your forehead, for with a powerful hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt.”

This verse is essentially reiterating what has come before; it confirmed the purpose of the redemption of the firstborn as a memorial designed to keep the Israelites connected to the history of their Exodus out of Egypt.

At this point in the narrative, the journey out of Egypt began to be recounted.

Exodus 13:17–18 ¹⁷Now when Pharaoh had let the people go, God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, even though it was near; for God said, “The people might change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt.” ¹⁸Hence God led the people around by the way of the wilderness to the Red Sea [יַם סוּף]; and the sons of Israel went up in martial array [בַּמַּחֲזֵז] from the land of Egypt.

There was a direct, short route into Canaan from Goshen, paralleling the Mediterranean Sea and used by the Egyptian army, but God did not want the newly freed slaves to go into the land that way. This route was called the *Via Maris* or the way of the Sea, although the Egyptians called it the way of Horus. It would have taken them into Philistia and they were not yet ready to face the armed resistance of the Egyptian army outposts they would have encountered going that way and then the combat that would have been required to defeat the Philistines. The Philistines wielded a potent army; even Joshua was unable to dislodge them from the land. “All the regions of the Philistines” remained to be possessed at the time the land was divided among the tribes of Israel (Josh.13:2) and the Philistines would be a thorn in the side of Israel for centuries after that until the reign of King David. Most theologians believe they had three choices concerning the route. The route along the Mediterranean Sea, the *Via Maris*.

The second route, the way of Shur, went into the Negev to Beersheba, Hebron, and Jerusalem. The third route is now known as "the pilgrim's way, and it runs from the north end of the Gulf of Suez to the north end of the Gulf of Aqaba at Ezion-geber.

We also know that God could have fought their battles to insure their safe, successful entry into the land so we can't discount the idea that He had other purposes for taking them into Sinai rather than directly into Canaan. The remainder of the book of Exodus bears that out and Deuteronomy 8:2 specifically states it.

Deuteronomy 8:2 ²"You shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not.

It must be considered that part of God's purpose for taking them on this route was planned so that the Egyptian army would be destroyed and therefore unable to engage the Israelites in warfare for many years into the future. We know that God did, in fact, drown their army and destroy it in the Red Sea.

Yahweh also told Moses when He called Him into His service at Mt. Sinai on the holy ground of the burning bush, that the people would be brought back to that place to worship Him.

Exodus 3:12 ¹²And He said, "Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain."

It is also worth noting, the Israelites had just come out of many years of slavery; they needed time to regain physical strength, become a more cohesive unit as a nation, train to be an effective fighting force, learn more about the God who brought them out of Egypt, and learn to trust Him—something they never really did learn to do. Yahweh knew they would not be ready to simply leave Egypt and go right into Canaan. They needed to be developed and matured as a group of people capable of being used by God for His purposes. We also know that when Moses had them poised to go into Canaan the people were not trusting God and they did not believe they had the military skills to defeat the Nephilim.

Numbers 14:1–4 ¹Then all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. ²All the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron; and the whole congregation said to them, “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! ³“Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become plunder; would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?” ⁴So they said to one another, “Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt.”

Martial array, *הַמַּחֲזֵק*, means armed, arrayed for battle, or an orderly array. We know that God had referred to them as an army, translated hosts [*צְבָא*], but that probably reflects their potential as much or more than it reflects their reality. In this verse, it refers more to the fact that Moses and the elders of Israel had organized the people into an orderly group for the march out of Egypt.

Red Sea, *יַם סוּף*, literally means Sea of Reeds which most theologians believe refers to the marshy area north of the Suez Canal in the area around the Bitter Lakes. This has led to a lot of controversy concerning the location God

parted the waters to allow safe passage for the Israelites. When we get to the Scripture concerning the crossing in Exodus 14, we will more closely examine this issue.

Joseph made his people promise to carry his bones out of Egypt back to Canaan to be properly buried in the land God had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Obviously, Joseph was aware of the land promise and that is where he wanted his burial place to be.

Genesis 50:24–26 ²⁴Joseph said to his brothers, “I am about to die, but God will surely take care of you and bring you up from this land to the land which He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob.” ²⁵Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, “God will surely take care of you, and you shall carry my bones up from here.” ²⁶So Joseph died at the age of one hundred and ten years; and he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

Moses remembered this request and honored it by taking Joseph's bones with the Israelites when they left Egypt.

Exodus 13:19 ¹⁹Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for he had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, “God will surely take care of you, and you shall carry my bones from here with you.”

Joseph's bones were eventually buried in Shechem.

Joshua 24:32 ³²Now they buried the bones of Joseph, which the sons of Israel brought up from Egypt, at Shechem, in the piece of ground which Jacob had bought from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for one hundred pieces of money; and they became the inheritance of Joseph's sons.

Stephen's defense before the Sanhedrin centuries later seemed to suggest the bones of Joseph's brothers were also taken back to Canaan and interred.

Acts 7:15–16¹⁵“And Jacob went down to Egypt and *there* he and our fathers died. ¹⁶“*From there* they were removed to Shechem and laid in the tomb which Abraham had purchased for a sum of money from the sons of Hamor in Shechem.

Thus far the journey was from Goshen to Succoth to Etham.

Exodus 13:20 ²⁰Then they set out from Succoth and camped in Etham on the edge of the wilderness [מִדְבָּר].

The exact location of either Succoth or Etham is unknown. Once in Etham, the Israelites were on the verge of leaving the settled nation of Egypt proper. They were about to leave what was civilization at that time. Wilderness, מִדְבָּר, means desert, wasteland, or barren wilderness; it refers to a relatively large tract of sparsely inhabited land or virtually empty of habitation, a place providing little or no sustenance. Etham “may be a transliteration of the Egyptian word *khetem*, meaning fortress. Egyptian fortresses extending from the Mediterranean Sea to the Gulf of Suez are known from ancient times.”³ Egypt would have had outposts on their eastern border protecting it and controlling access from the east.

The Exodus account makes it clear that Yahweh was leading them in the way that He wanted them to go. He manifested Himself to them as a pillar alternately appearing as a cloud by day or as a fire by night, and He was a constant presence before them.

Exodus 13:21–22 ²¹The LORD was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. ²²He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people.

³ John J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt: Studies in Exodus* 2nd ed. (Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1986), 166.

Whether this manifestation is of God the Father or of God the Son is unknown, but I would favor God the Son. Jesus, of course, became the God-man and while He hadn't yet assumed His humanity at that time, it seems that He is the member of the Godhead who personally and intimately interacts with humanity.

When we consider all the signs, wonders, and miracles God performed on behalf of the Israelites in Egypt and when we consider His visible presence with them to lead them and guide them on their Exodus from slavery, we wonder how they could ever doubt and rebel the way they did. But then we have to wonder whether or not we would be any different.