

A case of protokos antipathy

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The Bible bestows upon the reader the impression that the Israelites were “**stiff-necked**” thankless people, and recidivist offenders of the covenant that a benevolent God made with them. The definitive exemplars of this type of diatribe are found in Psalms 78 and 106. Yet in the Bible there is also plenty evidence that expose a more balanced interaction between God and Biblical Israel.

The everlasting covenant

We are told that at a certain point God told a seventy-five year old childless man named Abram:
ויאמר יהוה אל-אברם, לך-לך מארצך וממולדתך ומבית אביך, אל-הארץ אשר אראך. ואעשך לגוי גדול, ואברכך ואגדלה שמך; והיה ברכה. ואברכה מברכך, ומקללך אאר; ונברכו בך כל משפחת האדמה.

“Now *YHWH* said to Abram: Get you out of your country, and from your kindred, and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you.

And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and be you a blessing.

And I will bless them that bless you, and him that curses you will I curse; and in you shall all the families of the earth be blessed” (Gen 12:1-3).

At this point in the narrative it is not clear why God approached Abram with this offer. It is not even certain that Abram was God’s first choice. We also do not know why for achieving the Divine’s goal, Abram had to leave his birthplace and his father’s house and go to a certain other land.

Although, it is also not stated here why Abram agreed to God’s proposal, we may assume that at his advanced age he could not forgo the offer of becoming a father. Abram’s excitement was apparently so great that he did not even ask God what is the name of that land, where it was, and whether it was a good or a bad land.

When Abram reached that land God repeats his promise: **לזרעך אתן את-הארץ הזאת** - “**To your seed will I give this land**” (Gen 12:7; similar promises were given to Isaac, Gen 26:3; and to Jacob, Gen 35:12; 48:3-4; 50:24).

This “promised land” apparently was not such a great prize as we hear that immediately after that:

ויהי רעב בארץ; וירד אברם מצרימה לגור שם, כי-כבד הרעב בארץ.

“And there was a famine in the land; and Abram went down into Egypt to sojourn there; for the famine was sore in the land” (Gen 12:10).

According to its description this was a parched land where the water resources were so meager that even small families such as Abraham's and Isaac's will have to quarrel with other people repeatedly about the ownership of water-wells (Gen 21:25-30; 26:15-22, 32). One may wonder why for His supposedly "chosen people" God did not allocate a more fertile and hospitable land.

After the "Lot's captivity affair" God revealed Himself again to Abram and said:

אל-תירא אברם, אנכי מגן לך-שכרך הרבה מאד.

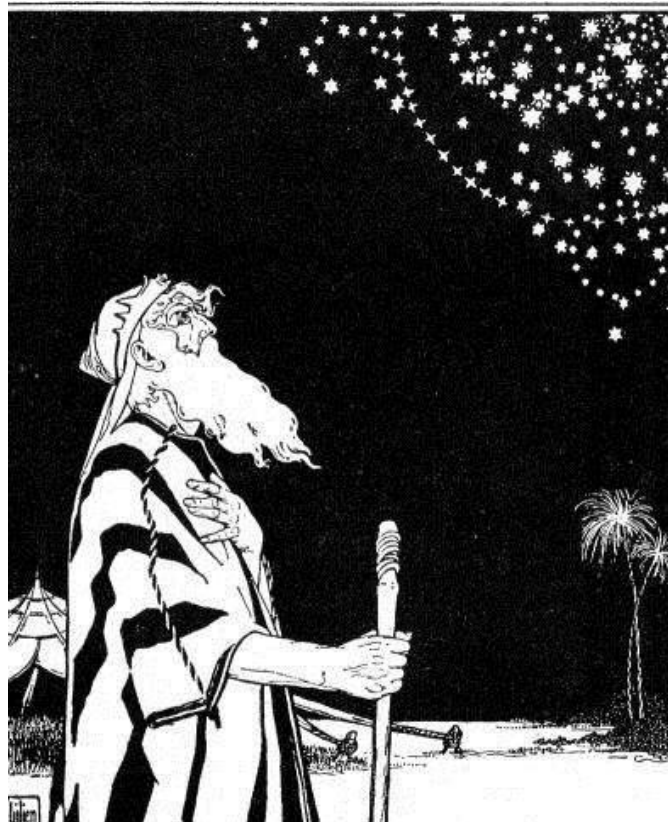
"Fear not, Abram, I am your shield, your reward shall be exceedingly great" (Gen 15:1).

However, it appears that Abram was not interested in divine shielding and rewards, and he reminds God about His initial offer: **ויאמר אברם-הן לי לא נתתה זרע** - **"And Abram said: Behold, to me You have given no seed"** (Gen 15:3).

Now God tells Abram to go out:

ויאמר הבט-נא השמימה וספר הכוכבים-אם-תוכל לספר אתם; ויאמר לו, כה יהיה זרעך.

"And [He] said: Look now toward the sky, and count the stars, if you be able to count them; and He said to him: So shall your seed be" (Gen 15:5; a similar promise was given to Isaac, Gen 26:4; Deu 10:22).



Abraham by E.M. Lilien (1874-1925).

It was indicated by Rocky Kolb that on a clear night no more than 2,500 stars are visible to the unaided eye (1). In the most comprehensive ancient catalogue of stars, written by Klaudios Ptolemaios of Alexandria (Ptolemy; 90-168 AD), there are only 1022 star names (2). Yet to an old childless man even 1,022 descendants is quite an appealing offer.

However, now God tells Abram the bad news in regard to his progeny:

ויאמר לאברם, ידע תדע כי-גר יהיה זרעך בארץ לא להם, ועבדום וענו אתם-ארבע מאות שנה
“**And He said to Abram: Know of a surety that your seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years**” (Gen 15:13).

It would not be surprising if Abram was confounded to hear that God carved such a future for people that had not transgressed and in fact were not yet even born.

It seems that God realized that Abram was shocked and he offered an explanation:

ודור רביעי ישובו הנה: כי לא-שלם עון האמרי עד-הנה.
“**And in the fourth generation they shall come back hither; for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet full**” (Gen 15:16).

The logic here is flawed. Because the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete, the yet unborn progeny of Abram has to be enslaved and tortured for four hundred years?

Furthermore, if indeed “**the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet full**” why, until “the promised land” would be available, Abram and his progeny could not have waited in Abram’s land of nativity? We have not heard that Abram suffered from persecution in his birthplace and we could assume that in comparison with Egypt, his progeny would have fared much better in his birthplace.

Even the divine promise: **ואחרי-כן יצאו ברכש גדול** - “**And afterward shall they come out with great substance**” (Gen 15:14), does not ameliorate this blatant injustice.

Later, after Joshua circumcised the Israelites that were born in the desert, we hear God saying:

ויאמר יהוה אל-יהושע, היום גלתי את-חרפת מצרים מעליכם;
“**And YHWH said to Joshua: This day have I rolled away the reproach of Egypt from off you**” (Jos 5:9).

One has to wonder why God’s pre-ordained servitude of the Israelites in Egypt is later considered as their reproach.

We are told that when Jacob went down to Egypt (at the age of 130, Gen 47:28) he already had several grandchildren. Therefore, there is some incongruity between the information about four generations and a period of four hundred years.

It appears that God did not rush to keep his promise to Abraham, and eleven years will pass before the Egyptian Hagar, the handmaid of Sarai will give birth to Ishmael (Gen16:16). Thirteen

years later (or 25 years after the initial divine promise) God will tell Abram that his ninety year old wife - Sarai, is about to give birth to Isaac with whom (but not with Abram's first born son - Ishmael) God will:

והקמתי את-בריתי אתו לברית עולם, לזרעו אחריו.

“And I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his seed after him” (Gen 17:19).

The features of this covenant were explained to Abram:

והקמתי את-בריתי ביני ובינך, ובין זרעך אחריו לדרתם-לברית עולם: להיות לך לאלהים, ולזרעך אחריו.

ונתתי לך ולזרעך אחריו את ארץ מגריך, את כל-ארץ כנען לאחזת עולם; והייתי להם לאלהים.

ויאמר אלהים אל-אברהם, ואתה את-בריתי תשמר-אתה וזרעך אחריו לדרתם. זאת בריתי אשר תשמרו, ביני וביניכם ובין זרעך אחריו: המול לכם כל-זכר.

“And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your seed after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God to you and to your seed after you.

And I will give to you and to your seed after you, the land of your sojourning, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.

And God said to Abraham: And as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you, and your seed after you throughout their generations.

This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your seed after you: every male among you shall be circumcised” (Gen 17:7-10).

In this covenant the only stipulated obligation of Abram and his progeny is to:

ובן-שמנת ימים ימול לכם כל-זכר לדרתיכם

“And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every male throughout your generations” (Gen 17:12).

Later God's Prophets will accuse the Israelites of carrying out multiple iniquities but we should notice that the Israelites were never accused of not circumcising their sons - their only stipulated obligation in the **“everlasting covenant”** between God and Abraham and his progeny.

Furthermore, we will later hear that all the Israelite men that came out of Egypt were already circumcised (Jos 5:5), a fact that indicates that even under the Egyptian persecution the Israelites kept this commitment, set in the **“everlasting covenant.”**

The first four generations

While Isaac was just a lad God approaches Abraham again:

ויהי אחר הדברים האלה והאלהים נסה את-אברהם; ויאמר אליו, אברהם ויאמר הנני. ויאמר קח-נא את-בנך את-יחידך אשר-אהבת, את-יצחק, ולך-לך אל-ארץ המריה; והעלהו שם לעלה על אחד ההרים אשר אמר אליך

“And it came to pass after these things that God did prove Abraham, and said to him: Abraham; and he said: Here am I.

And He said: Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, even Isaac, and get you into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt-offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell you of” (Gen 21:1-2).

No wonder that the Bible refers to God as: **אלהי אברהם ופחד יצחק** - “**God of Abraham, and the Fear of Isaac**” (Gen 31:42, 53).



The Sacrifice of Isaac. In the mosaic floor of a 6th century AD Synagogue. Beit-Alfa, Israel.



The Sacrifice of Isaac by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571-1610).



An angel prevents the sacrifice of Isaac. Rembrandt. 1634.

As Abraham was about to slaughter Isaac:

ויקרא אליו מלאך יהוה מן-השמים, ויאמר אברהם אברהם; ויאמר הנני.
ויאמר, אל-תשלח ידך אל-הנער, ואל-תעש לו מאומה: כי עתה ידעתי כי-ירא אלהים אתה,
ולא חשכת את-בנך את-יחידך ממני

“And the angel of *YHWH* called to him out of heaven, and said: Abraham, Abraham. And he said: Here am I.

And he said: Lay not your hand upon the lad, neither do you anything to him; for now I know that you are a God-fearing man, seeing you had not withheld your son, your only son, from Me” (Gen 22:11-12).

There is no indication in the Bible that Abraham ever disobeyed God, or did any iniquity. We have therefore to wonder whether it was indeed necessary to confront Abraham with such a horrific trial for testing his obedience. Was not Abraham’s compliance with God’s order to cast out his first born son - Ishmael and his mother - Hagar, a sufficient proof of his obedience (Gen 21:10-12)? Or was not the twenty-five years of unwearingly waiting for the promised birth of Isaac a solid evidence of Abraham’s loyalty to God?

This narrative ends with an odd proclamation:

והתברכו בזרעך כל גווי הארץ, עקב אשר שמעת בקלי.

“And in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because you had hearkened to My voice” (Gen 22:18; see also: Gen 26:4-5).

It is not clear why and how “all the nations of the earth” would benefit from Abraham’s being obedient to God on Mount Moriah. In fact we may wonder whether these words of God indicate that already at this early date God was planning to disperse the progeny of Abraham throughout the world. (See also: Gen 48:19).

“And Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah” (Gen 25:20). As Sarah, her mother-in-law, Rebekah had difficulties in conceiving and when finally she gave birth to twin sons, Isaac was already sixty years old (Gen 25:26). Although Isaac’s first born son - Esau was the favorite of his father (Gen 25:28), Esau, like Abraham’s first born son - Ishmael, was doomed to be side-stepped.

It appears that the younger son - Jacob was not only the favorite of his mother but of God too.



Jacob’s dream. A printed German Bible. 1466.



**Jacob's Dream - El sueño de Jacob (1639) by Jose de Ribera.
Museo del Prado. Madrid.**

Near the town of Luz Jacob had a dream:

והנה יהוה נצב עליו ויאמר, אני יהוה אלהי אברהם אביך ואלהי יצחק; הארץ אשר אתה שכב עליה-לך אתננה ולזרעך.

והיה זרעך כעפר הארץ, ופרצת ימה וקדמה וצפנה ונגבה; ונברכו בך כל-משפחת האדמה ובזרעך.

והנה אנכי עמך ושמרתיך בכל אשר-תלך, והשבתיך אל-האדמה הזאת: כי לא אעזבך, עד אשר אם-עשיתי את אשר-דברתי לך

“And, behold, *YHWH* stood beside him, and said: I am *YHWH*, the God of Abraham your father, and the God of Isaac. The land whereon thou lie, to you will I give it, and to your seed.

And your seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south. And in you and in your seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.

And, behold, I am with you, and will keep you whithersoever you goes, and will bring you back into this land; for I will not leave you, until I have done that which I have spoken to you of” (Gen 28:13-15).

Unlike God’s promise to Abraham (Gen 15:5) and to Isaac (Gen 26:4) that their seed will be numerous as the sky’s stars (while in fact each of them had just two sons), God is promising Jacob, who will have twelve sons, that his seed will be as numerous as the “**dust of the earth.**”

Being aware of his father’s and grandfather’s experience, it appears that Jacob views God’s promise with some reservation and with a guarded attitude:

וידר יעקב נדר לאמר : אם-יהיה אלהים עמדי, ושמרני בדרך הזה אשר אנכי הולך, ונתן-לי לחם לאכל, ובגד ללבש.

ושבתי בשלום אל-בית אבי ; והיה יהוה לי לאלהים.

והאבן הזאת אשר-שמתי מצבה-יהיה בית אלהים ; וכל אשר תתן-לי, עשר אעשרנו לך

“And Jacob vowed a vow, saying: If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on; So that I come back to my father's house in peace, then shall *YHWH* be my God. And this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that You shall give me I will surely give the tenth to You” (Gen 28:20-22).

These words of Jacob indicate that while he was somewhat less than being completely overwhelmed by God’s first revelation to him, yet he was ready to strike a deal with the Divine. In fact, it seems amazing that this stance of Jacob did not offend God.



Jacob und Rachel am Brunnen.

Da aber Jacob sah Rachel die Tochter Labans seiner Mutter Bruders und die Schafe Labans seiner Mutter Bruders, trat er hinzu und wälzte den Stein von dem Loch des Brunnens, und tränkte die Schafe Labans seiner Mutter Bruders; Und küßte Rachel und weinete laut, Und sagte ihr an, daß er ihres Vaters Bruder wäre und Rebecca Sohn.
I 2866. Gen. 29. v. 10—12.

Jacob meets Rachel. August Gaber, 1823-1894.

As he reached Haran Jacob saw Laban’s daughter - Rachel, and immediately fell in love with her. (Gen 29:1-11). It appears that if not for Laban’s trickery, Jacob would (at the age of 54 or older) have married only Rachel (who also had difficulty in conceiving), yet he ended up marrying also her sister Leah. Therefore, unlike his father and grandfather who had two sons each (In fact Abraham had several more sons in his later years), Jacob begot not only Joseph and

Benjamin, the children of Rachel, but also had additional ten sons and a daughter - Dinah, born to Leah and to his wives' handmaids.

Now, for the first time, God does not select a favorite among Jacob's sons and accepts them all as His people. No wonder, that Jacob is associated with the name: "Israel", as this will be the name of the nation that will grow out of his twelve sons.



Jacob Blessing the Sons of Joseph. Rembrandt. 1656.

Like his father Isaac, Jacob loved the first-born of Rachel's two sons - Joseph, more than any other of his sons (Gen 37:3). Yet, when he became old and blind, again like his father Isaac, he gave the preferred blessing to Ephraim, the younger of Joseph's two sons (Gen 48:12-20). We should also notice that none of the future leaders of the Israelites came from the Rubenites, the children of Jacob's first born son. On the other hand, Saul, of the Benjaminites, the children of Benjamin, Jacob's youngest son, will be chosen by God to be the first king of the Israelites (1 Sam 9:1-2, 15-16). These divine selections are in disparity to the law obliging every Israelite father to honor the seniority of his firstborn son, without regard to his personal preferences:

יכיר לתת לו פי שנים, בכל אשר-ימצא לו: כי-הוא ראשית אנו, לו משפט הבכרה.

“He shall acknowledge by giving him a double portion of all that he has; for he is the first-fruits of his strength, the right of the first-born is his” (Deu 21:17).

Prior to the descent to Egypt, we are told about Jacob's household:

**כל-הנפש הבאה ליעקב מצרימה, יצאי ירכו, מלבד נשי בני-יעקב-כל-נפש, ששים ושש.
ובני יוסף אשר-ילד-לו במצרים, נפש שנים: כל-הנפש לבית-יעקב הבאה מצרימה, שבעים**

“All the souls belonging to Jacob that came into Egypt, that came out of his loins, besides Jacob's sons' wives, all the souls were threescore and six. And the sons of Joseph, who were born to him in Egypt, were two souls; all the souls of the house of Jacob, that came into Egypt, were threescore and ten” (Gen 46:26-27; see also: Ex 1:5).

Those that went down to Egypt were the fourth generation after Abraham. If all in all there were among them just seventy males, we may assume that this was the average multiplication rate of this clan.

Even if we discount Pharaoh's order in regard to the Hebrews:

כל-הבן הילוד, היארה תשליכהו - “Every son that is born you shall cast into the river” (Ex 1:22), we would expect that after the next four generations the number of Israelites in Egypt will be at best $70 \times 70 = 4,900$ males. Yet we are told that when the Hebrews left Egypt, supposedly after being there for four generations:

ויסעו בני-ישראל מרעמסס סכתה, כשש-מאות אלף רגלי הגברים, לבד מטף
“And the children of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, beside children” (Ex 12:37).

The discrepancy between these numbers suggests that either a scribe erred when he wrote the numbers of the Hebrew men that left Egypt, or that the number of generations of Jacob's progeny that were in Egypt was greater than eight (and not just the four mentioned in the Book of Genesis).

In addition, if only four generations of Hebrews were in Egypt, then they must have stayed there far less than four hundred years.

Before going down to Egypt, God had revealed Himself again to Jacob:

ויאמר אלהים לישראל במראת הלילה, ויאמר יעקב יעקב; ויאמר, הנני. ויאמר, אנכי האל אלהי אביך; אל-תירא מרדה מצרימה, כי-לגוי גדול אשימך שם. אנכי ארד עמך מצרימה, ואנכי אעלך גם-עלה;

“And God spoke to Israel in the visions of the night, and said: Jacob, Jacob. And he said: Here am I.

And He said: I am God, the God of your father; fear not to go down into Egypt; for I will there make of thee a great nation.

I will go down with you to Egypt; and I will also surely bring you up again” (Gen 46:2-3).

If God kept his promise to Jacob and indeed went down with him to Egypt, we may wonder, how the Divine allowed the Egyptians to enslave and torture the Israelites there for four hundred (or 430, Ex 12:40-41) years.

In addition, why only after four hundred years we hear God telling Moses:

ויאמר יהוה, ראה ראיתי את-עמי אשר במצרים; ואת-צעקתם שמעתי מפני נגשיו, כי ידעתי את-מכאביו. וארד להצילו מיד מצרים ולהעלתו מן-הארץ ההוא, אל-ארץ טובה ורחבה, אל-ארץ זבת חלב ודבש-אל-מקום הכנעני, והחתי, והאמרי והפרזי, והחוי והיבوسی.

ועתה הנה צעקת בני-ישראל באה אלי; וגם-ראיתי את-הלחץ אשר מצרים לחצים אתם.
ועתה לכה ואשלחך אל-פרעה; והוצא את-עמי בני-ישראל ממצרים

“And *YHWH* said: I have surely seen the affliction of My people that are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their pains;

And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good land and a large, to a land flowing with milk and honey; To the place of the Canaanite, and the Hittite, and the Amorite, and the Perizzite, and the Hivite, and the Jebusite.

And now, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come to Me; moreover I have seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them.

Come now therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh, that you may bring forth My people the children of Israel out of Egypt” (Ex 3:7-10).

The Psalmist wrote:

ויבא ישראל מצרים; ויעקב גר בארץ-חם.
ויפר את-עמו מאד; ויעצמהו מצריו.
הפך לבם לשנא עמו; להתנכל בעבדיו

“Israel also came into Egypt; and Jacob sojourned in the land of Ham.

And He increased His people greatly, and made them too mighty for their adversaries.

He turned their heart to hate His people, to deal craftily with His servants” (Ps 105:23-25).

We have not heard that Jacob’s small clan was particularly evil. Furthermore, we just read that their move to Egypt was encouraged by God. Therefore we should wonder why God had to turn the hearts of the Egyptians to hate His people and be malicious to them.

A new covenant



Moses Breaking the Two Tablets of Stone. Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1794-1872).

It appears that prior to going up the mountain to receive God's law, Moses did not inform the Israelites that he would stay there for forty days (Ex 24:12-18). Now we read:

וירא העם כי-בשש משה לרדת מן-ההר ; ויקהל העם על-אהרן, ויאמרו אליו קום עשה-לנו אלהים אשר ילכו לפנינו-כי-זה משה האיש אשר העלנו מארץ מצרים, לא ידענו מה-היה לו
“And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mount, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron, and said to him: Up, make us a god who shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we know not what is become of him” (Ex 32:1).

It appears that even Aaron did not know why Moses had not yet returned. When the Israelites realized that they were now in the middle of an extremely harsh and dangerous wilderness, without a leader and with no communication with the awesome yet frightening God (Ex 20:18-21), they must have been stricken with terror and therefore in desperation they pleaded with Aaron to make them another deity that would lead them out of the wilderness.

In the Book of Deuteronomy we hear Moses himself referring to the wilderness near Mount Horeb: **“And we journeyed from Horeb, and went through all that great and dreadful wilderness which you saw”** (Deu 1:19).

Although, Moses should have been (at least partially) blamed for this ordeal, we are told that as Moses realized what the Israelites have done he became enraged, smashed the tables of stone, apparently inscribed by God (Ex 32:19), and ordered the Levites to kill as many Israelites as they could (Ex 32:26-27). When we hear Moses saying to the Israelites: **אתם חטאתם חטאה גדלה** - “**You have sinned a great sin**” (Ex 32:30), it is clear that Moses did not accept responsibility for his role in this transgression. Furthermore, we hear God saying:

“Whosoever had sinned against Me, him will I blot out of My book” (Ex 32:33). However, as the words of God were transmitted to the Israelites through Moses (Deu 5:23-28), we may wonder whether these were indeed the words of God. As God barred Moses from entering the “promised land” we may wonder whether it was the punishment for his behavior in this incident (Deu 4:21).

In the Book of Numbers we read:

**וידבר יהוה, אל-משה לאמר.
שלח-לך אנשים ויתרו את-ארץ כנען, אשר-אני נתן לבני ישראל: איש אחד איש אחד למטה
אבתיו תשלחו-כל נשיא בהם.**

“And *YHWH* spoke to Moses, saying:
Send you men, that they may spy out the land of Canaan, which I give to the children of Israel; of every tribe of their fathers shall you send a man, everyone a prince among them”
(Num 13:1-2).

However, in the Book of Deuteronomy we find:

ותקרבו אלי כלכם, ותאמרו נשלחה אנשים לפנינו, ויחפרו-לנו את-הארץ; וישבו אתנו דבר-
את-הדרך אשר נעלה-בה, ואת הערים אשר נבא אליהן.
וייטב בעיני הדבר; ואקח מכם שנים עשר אנשים, איש אחד לשבט

“And you came near to me every one of you, and said: Let us send men before us, that they may search the land for us, and bring us back word of the way by which we must go up, and the cities to which we shall come.
And the thing pleased me well; and I took twelve men of you, one man for every tribe” (Deu 1:22-23).

We have therefore to wonder whether it was God who initiated the idea of sending scouts to survey the land or was it requested by the Israelites.



The returning scouts. Giovanni Lanfranco 1582 – 1647.

When the scouts returned to Kadesh, they presented their report to Moses and the Israelites:
ויאמרו, באנו, אל-הארץ אשר שלחתנו; וגם זבת חלב ודבש, הוא-וזה-פריה.
אפס כי-עז העם הישב בארץ; והערים בצרות גדלת מאד, וגם-ילדי הענק ראינו שם
“And [they] said: We came to the land whither thou sent us, and surely it flows with milk and honey; and this is the fruit of it.

Howbeit the people that dwell in the land are fierce, and the cities are fortified, and very great; and moreover we saw the children of Anak there” (Num 13:27-28; see also: Deu 1:28).

Now one of the scouts - Caleb, who did not dispute the report, expressed his opinion:

עלה נעלה וירשנו אתה-כי-יכול נוכל לה

“We should surely go up, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it” (Num 13:30).

It appears the all the other scouts disagreed with this assessment and they said:

לא נוכל לעלות אל-העם: כי-חזק הוא ממנו.

“We are not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we” (Num 13:31).

וכל-העם אשר-ראינו בתוכה, אנשי מדות.

ושם ראינו את-הנפילים בני ענק-מן-הנפלים; ונהי בעינינו כחגבים, וכן היינו בעיניהם.

“And all the people that we saw in it are men of great stature.

And there we saw the Nephilim, the sons of Anak, who come of the Nephilim; and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight” (Num 13:32-33).

Now while Moses kept quiet, we hear that Joshua joins Caleb and together:

ויאמרו אל-כל-עדת בני-ישראל לאמר: הארץ אשר עברנו בה לתור אתה-טובה הארץ מאד מאד.

אם-חפץ בנו יהוה-והביא אתנו אל-הארץ הזאת, ונתנה לנו: ארץ אשר-הוא זבת חלב ודבש. אך ביהוה אל-תמרדו, ואתם אל-תיראו את-עם הארץ כי לחמנו הם; סר צלם מעליהם ויהוה אתנו, אל-תיראם

“And they spoke to all the congregation of the children of Israel, saying: The land, which we passed through to spy it out, is an exceeding good land.

If *YHWH* delights in us, then He will bring us into this land, and give it to us--a land which flows with milk and honey.

Only rebel not against *YHWH*, neither fear you the people of the land; for they are bread for us; their defense is removed from over them, and *YHWH* is with us; fear them not”

(Num 14:7-9).

In the Book of Deuteronomy, it is Moses and not Joshua and Caleb, who is credited for the answer:

ואמר אלכם: לא-תערצון ולא-תיראון מהם.

יהוה אלהיכם ההלך לפניכם הוא ילחם לכם: ככל אשר עשה אתכם במצרים—לעיניכם. ובמדבר אשר ראית, אשר נשאך יהוה אלהיך, כאשר ישא-איש את-בנו-בכל-הדרך אשר הלכתם, עד-באכם עד-המקום הזה

“Then I said to you: Dread not, neither be afraid of them. *YHWH* your God who goes before you, He shall fight for you, according to all that He did for you in Egypt before your eyes.

And in the wilderness, where you have seen how that *YHWH* your God bore you, as a man does bear his son, in all the way that you went, until you came to this place” (Deu 1:29-31).

It appears that even Moses was convinced that the inhabitants of the Promised Land were giants:

שמע ישראל, אתה עבר היום את-הירדן, לבא לרשת גוים, גדלים ועצמים ממך-ערים גדלות ובצרת בשמים.

עם-גדול ורם, בני ענקים: אשר אתה ידעת, ואתה שמעת-מי יתיצב לפני בני ענק.

“Hear, O Israel: you are to pass over the Jordan this day, to go in to dispossess nations greater and mightier than thyself, cities great and fortified up to heaven;

A people great and tall, the sons of the Anakim, whom you know, and of whom you have heard say: Who can stand before the sons of Anak?” (Deu 9:1-2).

The tragedy of the scouts was, that either the Israelites were not too impressed by the way that God carried them through the wilderness, and have not fully trusted His promised help, or that

the Israelites happened to be persuaded by the opinion of the majority of the scouts about the inability of the Israelites to overpower the inhabitants of that land. Furthermore, we are told that indeed the first attempt to conquer that land ended in utter disaster (Num 14:45). It appears that expressing an opinion may be sometimes deadly:

**וימתו האנשים מוצאי דבת-הארץ רעה-במגפה לפני יהוה.
ויהושע בן-נון, וכלב בן-יפנה, חיו מן-האנשים ההם ההלכים לתור את-הארץ.
“Even those men that did bring up an evil report of the land, died by the plague before
YHWH.**

But Joshua the son of Nun, and Caleb the son of Jephunneh, remained alive of those men that went to spy out the land” (Num 14:37-38).

In the Book of Deuteronomy we read:

**ועתה ישראל שמע אל-החקים ואל-המשפטים, אשר אנכי מלמד אתכם לעשות--למען תחיו,
ובאתם וירשתם את-הארץ אשר יהוה אלהי אבותיכם נתן לכם.**

“And now, O Israel, hearken to the statutes and to the ordinances, which I teach you, to do them; that you may live, and go in and possess the land which YHWH, the God of your fathers, gives you” (Deu 4:1; see also: Deu 5:1, 32; 6:1-3).

**ושמרת את-חקיו ואת-מצותיו אשר אנכי מצוך היום, אשר ייטב לך ולבניך אחריו-ולמען
תאריך ימים על-האדמה אשר יהוה אלהיך נתן לך כל-הימים.**

“And you shall keep His statutes, and His commandments, which I command you this day, that it may go well with you, and with thy children after you, and that you may prolong your days upon the land, which YHWH your God gives you, forever” (Deu 4:40; see also: Lev 20:22; Deu 5:33; 6:17-18, 24; 7:11-16).

**רק השמר לך ושמר נפשך מאד, פן-תשכח את-הדברים אשר-ראו עיניך ופן-יסורו מלבבך כל
ימי חיך; והודעתם לבניך ולבני בניך.**

**יום אשר עמדת לפני יהוה אלהיך בחרב, באמר יהוה אלי הקהל-לי את-העם, ואשמעם את-
דברי: אשר ילמדון ליראה אתי כל-הימים אשר הם חיים על-האדמה, ואת-בניהם ילמדון.
“Only take heed to yourself, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which
your eyes saw, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life; but make
them known to your children and your children's children**

**The day that you stood before YHWH your God in Horeb, when YHWH said to me:
Assemble Me the people, and I will make them hear My words that they may learn to fear
Me all the days that they live upon the earth, and that they may teach their children” (Deu
4:9-10).**

**השמרו לכם פן-תשכחו את-ברית יהוה אלהיכם אשר כרת עמכם; ועשיתם לכם פסל תמונת
כל אשר צוך יהוה אלהיך.**

**כי יהוה אלהיך אש אכלה הוא: אל קנא
“Take heed to yourselves, lest you forget the covenant of YHWH your God, which He made
with you, and make you a graven image, even the likeness of anything which YHWH your
God had forbidden you.
For YHWH your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God” (Deu 4:23-24; 6:12-19; 7:4).**

In fact, the divine threats appeared already in the Book of Exodus:

ויאמר אם-שמוע תשמע לקול יהוה אלהיך, והישר בעיניו תעשה והאזנת למצותיו, ושמרת כל-חקיו-כל-המחלה אשר-שמתו במצרים לא-אשים עליך, כי אני יהוה
“And He said: If you wilt diligently hearken to the voice of *YHWH* your God, and will do that which is right in His eyes, and will give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases upon you, which I have put upon the Egyptians; for I am *YHWH* that heals you” (Ex 15:26).

The Israelites must have been stunned and disappointed to hear Moses telling them that in addition to the obligation to circumcise every male child on the eighth day, as stipulated in the “**everlasting covenant**” between God and Abraham and his progeny, they will have from now on to comply also with an entire group of additional laws and regulations (Ex 20:1-17, 23-26; 21:1-23:19; 25:1-31:17; 34:12-26; 35:1-40:14; Lev 1:1-27:34; Num 3:5-6:21; 7:1-9:10; 15:1-31, 37-41; 18:1-19:22; 28:1-30:17; 31:21-30; 35:1-34; Deu 4:16-19; 5:6-21; 6:4-9; 12:1-26:15). These new laws could have been perceived as an action taken by one side to impose changes to the rules regarding the “**everlasting covenant**” between God and Israel, without even asking the Israelites whether they agree to maintain that covenant under these new rules.

Furthermore, the Israelites are now threatened that if they will not comply with these newly imposed laws, they will: utterly perish from off the “**promised land**”; utterly be destroyed (Deu 4:26), be scattered among the peoples; and be left few in number (Deu 4:27).

However, if as a result of their miseries, they will return to God, and hearken to His voice, God will accept them because:
כי אל רחום יהוה אלהיך, לא ירפך ולא ישחיתך; ולא ישכח את-ברית אבתיך אשר נשבע להם
“For *YHWH* your God is a merciful God; He will not fail you, neither destroy you, nor forget the covenant of your fathers which He swore to them” (Deu 4:31).

רק באבתיך חשק יהוה לאהבה אותם; ויבחר בזרעם אחריהם, בכס מכל-העמים-כיום הזה.
“Only *YHWH* had a delight in your fathers to love them, and He chose their seed after them, even you, above all peoples, as it is this day” (Deu 10:15).

כי עם קדוש אתה ליהוה אלהיך: בך בחר יהוה אלהיך להיות לו לעם סגלה, מכל העמים אשר על-פני האדמה.

לא מרבכם מכל-העמים חשק יהוה בכס-ויבחר בכס: כי-אתם המעט מכל-העמים. כי מאהבת יהוה אתכם, ומשמרו את-השבעה אשר נשבע לאבתיכם, הוציא יהוה אתכם ביד חזקה; ויפדך מבית עבדים, מיד פרעה מלך-מצרים.

“For you are a holy people to *YHWH* your God: *YHWH* your God had chosen you to be His own treasure, out of all peoples that are upon the face of the earth.

YHWH did not set His love upon you, nor choose you, because you were more in number than any people--for you were the fewest of all peoples;

But because *YHWH* loved you, and because He would keep the oath which He swore to your fathers, had *YHWH* brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh King of Egypt” (Deu 7:6-8).

It seems quite peculiar that here the Divine does not mention that it was He who determined that the Israelites will be enslaved and tortured in Egypt for four hundred years because “**the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet full.**”

However, the jealous divine also said:

ויאמר יהוה אל-משה, אמר אל-בני-ישראל אתם עם-קשה-ערף-רגע אחד אעלה בקרבך וכליתיד;

“**And YHWH said to Moses: Say to the children of Israel: You are a stiff-necked people; if I go up into the midst of you for one moment, I shall consume you**” (Ex 33:5; see also: Num 14:11-12).

Moses tells the Israelites:

ויאמר יהוה, אלי לאמר: ראיתי את-העם הזה, והנה עם-קשה-ערף הוא. הרף ממני, ואשמידם, ואמחה את-שמים, מתחת השמים; ואעשה, אותך, לגוי-עצום ורב, ממנו.

“**Furthermore YHWH spoke to me, saying: I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiff-necked people;**

Let Me alone, that I may destroy them, and blot out their name from under heaven; and I will make of you a nation mightier and greater than they” (Deu 9:13-14; Num 14:11-12).

After the Exodus

As God already had showed that he prefers the younger sons, it is not surprising that when He was now contemplating the idea of creating for Himself a new nation instead of the Israelites, he is considering Moses, the youngest brother of Aaron and Miriam, as the candidate for the making of such a nation. Is it just coincidental that Moses also had only two sons? Furthermore, we are told that Moses was eighty years old when he returns to Egypt (Ex 7:7), yet at that time Zipporah’s sons, Gershom and Eliezer are described as young children (Ex 4:20, 25; 18:2-6). These circumstances are not unlike those of the Israelite Patriarchs. Years later when the Prophet Samuel was ordered by God to anoint one of the sons of Jesse the Beth-Lehemite to be the King of Israel, God rejects again the first-born son - Eliab, and chooses the youngest of Jesse’s eight sons - David, for that position (1 Sam 16:1-13). David’s successor was Solomon whom “**YHWH loved**” (2 Sam 12:24). Again it appears that God preferred the 10th son of David over his nine older brothers (2 Sam 3:2-5; 5:14).

Now we read:

כי-ילך מלאכי לפניך, והביאך אל-האמרי והחתי, והפרזי והכנעני החוי והיבوسی; והכחדתו
“**For My messenger shall go before you, and bring you in to the Amorite, and the Hittite, and the Perizzite, and the Canaanite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite; and I will cut them off**”
(Ex 23:23; see also Ex 33:2-3)

ושלחתי את-הצרעה לפניך; וגרשה את-החוי את-הכנעני ואת-החתי-מלפניך
“**And I will send the hornet before you, which shall drive out the Hivite, the Canaanite, and the Hittite, from before you**” (Ex 23:28, see also: Ex 34:11; Deu 7:20).

לא-יתיצב איש בפניכם: פחדכם ומוראכם יתן יהוה אלהיכם על-פני כל-הארץ אשר תדרכו-
בה, כאשר דבר לכם.

“There shall no man be able to stand against you: *YHWH* your God shall lay the fear of you and the dread of you upon all the land that you shall tread upon, as He had spoken to you” (Deu 11:25).

ועברתם את-הירדן וישבתם בארץ אשר-יהוה אלהיכם מנחיל אתכם; והניח לכם מכל-
איביכם מסביב, וישבתם בטח

“But when you go over the Jordan, and dwell in the land which *YHWH* your God caused you to inherit, and He gives you rest from all your enemies round about, so that you dwell in safety” (Deu 12:10).

However, we read in the Book of Joshua that Jabin king of Hazor, Jobab king of Madon, and the kings of Shimron and Achshaph, and the kings that were on the north, in the hill-country and in the Arabah, and in the Lowland, and in the regions of Dor on the west. They were joined also by the Canaanite on the east and on the west, and the Amorite, and the Hittite, and the Perizzite, and the Jebusite in the hill-country, and the Hivite under Hermon:

ויעדו כל המלכים האלה; ויבאו ויחנו יחדו אל-מי מרום, להלחם עם-ישראל.

“And all these kings met together, and they came and pitched together at the waters of Merom, to fight with Israel” (Jos 11:1-5).

We also read in the Book of Joshua:

ואת-היבوسی יושבי ירושלים, לא-יוכלו (יכלו) בני-יהודה להורישם;

“And as for the Jebusites, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the children of Judah could not drive them out” (Jos 15:63; see also: Jos 16:10; 17:12-13).

We may wonder whether the writer of the Book of Deuteronomy was aware of the content of the Book of Joshua, which also describes the many other wars of Joshua against the inhabitants of the “promised land”, wars that are in utter contrast to the assurance given in verses 11:25 and 12:10 of the Book of Deuteronomy:

כי יביאך יהוה אלהיך אל-הארץ אשר-אתה בא-שמה לרשתה; ונשל גויים-רבים מפניך החתי והגרגשי והאמרי והכנעני והפרזי, והחוי והיבوسی-שבעה גויים, רבים ועצומים ממך.

ונתנם יהוה אלהיך לפניך-והכיתם: החרם תחרים אתם, לא-תכרת להם ברית ולא תחנם.

“When *YHWH* your God shall bring you into the land whither you go to possess it, and shall cast out many nations before you, the Hittite, and the Girgashite, and the Amorite, and the Canaanite, and the Perizzite, and the Hivite, and the Jebusite, seven nations greater and mightier than you;

And when *YHWH* your God shall deliver them up before you, and you shall smite them; then you shall utterly destroy them; you shall make no covenant with them, nor show mercy to them” (Deu 7:1-2; see also: Ex 23:31; Deu 4:38).

While the list of nations that inhabit the “promised land” is not completely fixed (e.g. Gen 15:19-21 ver. Deu 7:1-2), it is rather odd that the names of the nations that would be the most bitter and persistent enemies of the Israelites - Moab, the children of Ammon, and the Philistines do not appear in any of these lists.

כי-אוריש גויים מפניך, והרחבתי את-גבלך; ולא-יחמד איש את-ארצך

“For I will cast out nations before you, and enlarge your borders; neither shall any man covet your land” (Ex 34:24).

The later invasions of the Egyptians, Arameans, Assyrians, and Babylonians stand in stark contrast to this assurance.

כי-יהוה אלהיך ברכך, כאשר דבר-לך; והעבטת גוים רבים, ואתה לא תעבט, ומשלת בגוים רבים, ובך לא ימשלו

“For YHWH your God will bless you, as He promised you; and you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow; and you shall rule over many nations, but they shall not rule over you” (Deu 15:6; see also: Deu 28:12).

There is no evidence in the Bible that this assurance ever materialized.

Whether God will “cut off” or “drive out” or “cast out” these nations is not clear. It is also not certain whether it will be God or the Israelites that will carry out these actions.

In the Book of Joshua we read the following statement:

ויתן יהוה לישראל את-כל-הארץ אשר נשבע לתת לאבותם; וירשוה, וישבו בה. וינח יהוה להם מסביב, ככל אשר-נשבע לאבותם; ולא-עמד איש בפניהם מכל-איביהם-את כל-איביהם נתן יהוה בידם.

לא-נפל דבר-מכל הדבר הטוב אשר-דבר יהוה אל-בית ישראל: הכל בא

“So YHWH gave to Israel all the land which He swore to give to their fathers; and they possessed it, and dwelt therein.

And YHWH gave them rest round about, according to all that He swore to their fathers; and there stood not a man of all their enemies against them; YHWH delivered all their enemies into their hand.

There failed not aught of any good thing which YHWH had spoken to the house of Israel; all came to pass” (Jos 21:43-45).

However, this statement must have been introduced by a writer who was not aware of the content of the Books of Judges and Samuel.

We are told that six hundred thousand Israelite men with their families left Egypt (Ex 12:37; see also: Num 11:21) or 601,730 (Num 26:51), or 603,550 (Nu 1:46; 2:32). Therefore, the Israelites must have been a serious force to reckon with.

In fact, when the Israelites were near Moab, we hear:

ויגר מואב מפני העם מאד-כי רב-הוא; ויקץ מואב מפני בני ישראל. ויאמר מואב אל-זקני מדין, עתה ילחכו הקהל את-כל-סביבתינו, כלחך השור את ירק השדה; “And Moab was sore afraid of the people, because they were many; and Moab was overcome with dread because of the children of Israel.

And Moab said to the elders of Midian: Now will this multitude lick up all that is round about us, as the ox licks up the grass of the field” (Num 22:3-4).

Yet in the Book of Exodus we read about the pace in which God will drive out the nations from the “promised land”:

לא אגרשנו מפניך בשנה אחת: פן-תהיה הארץ שממה ורבה עליך חית השדה.
מעט מעט אגרשנו מפניך, עד אשר תפרה ונחלת את-הארץ

“I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate, and the beasts of the field multiply against you.

By little and little I will drive them out from before you, until you be increased, and inherit the land” (Ex 23:29-30; see also Deu 7:22).

There appears to be some inconsistency between portraying the Israelites as exceedingly numerous, and the doubts about their ability to swiftly conquer the “promised land.”

In spite of the many wars conducted by Joshua, many nations remained in the “promised land” (Jos 23:4). We are told that in fact it was God who:

וינח יהוה את-הגוים האלה לבלתי הורישם מהר; ולא נתנם ביד-יהושע.

“So YHWH left those nations, without driving them out hastily; neither delivered He them into the hand of Joshua” (Jud 2:23).

These nations included:

חמשת סרני פלשתים, וכל-הכנעני והצידני, והחוי, ישב הר הלבנון-מהר בעל חרמון, עד לבוא חמת

“Namely, the five lords of the Philistines, and all the Canaanites, and the Zidonians, and the Hivites that dwelt in mount Lebanon, from mount Baal-hermon to the entrance of Hamath” (Jud 3:3).

Apparently, there were two motives for this divine action:

רק למען דעת דרות בני-ישראל, ללמדם מלחמה-רק אשר-לפנים לא ידעום

“Only that the generations of the children of Israel might know, to teach them war, at the least such as beforetime knew nothing thereof” (Jud 3:2).

ויהיו לנסות בם את-ישראל-לדעת, הישמעו את-מצות יהוה, אשר-צוה את-אבותם ביד-משה

“And they were there, to prove Israel by them, to know whether they would hearken to the commandments of YHWH, which He commanded their fathers by the hand of Moses” (Jud 3:4).

It seems unmerited that while the Israelites are told: **“You shall not try YHWH your God”** (Deu 6:16), God is trying repeatedly the Israelites.

After leaving Egypt the Israelites experienced further suffering: of deadly thirst (Ex 15:22-24; 17:1-3; Num 20:1-13; Deu 8:15), hunger (Ex 16:2-3; Num 21:4-5), monotony of diet (Ex 16:35; Num 11:1-9; Deu 8:16), snake bites (Num 21:6-9), plagues (Num 11:33), and hostile people (Ex 17:8; Num 14:44-45). That such afflictions caused some of the Israelites to complain is only natural, and it does not justify the characterization of the people as being thankless.

Now in the Book of Deuteronomy we read:

וזכרת את-כל-הדרך אשר הוליכך יהוה אלהיך זה ארבעים שנה-במדבר: למען ענתך לנסתך, לדעת את-אשר בלבבך התשמר מצותו-אם-לא.

ויענך, וירעבך, ויאכלך את-המן אשר לא-ידעת ולא ידעון אבתיך: למען הודיעך כי לא על-
הלחם לבדו יחיה האדם-כי על-כל-מוצא פי-יהוה יחיה האדם

“And you shall remember all the way which *YHWH* your God had led you these forty years in the wilderness, that He might afflict you, to prove you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments, or no.

And He afflicted you, and suffered you to hunger, and fed you with manna, which you knew not, neither did your fathers know; that He might make you know that man does not live by bread only, but by everything that proceed out of the mouth of *YHWH* does man live” (Deu 8:2-3).

The Prophet Jeremiah delivers God’s words:

אני יהוה חקר לב, בחן כליות: ולתת לאיש כדרכו כפרי מעלליו

“I *YHWH* search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings” (Jer 17:10; see also: Jer 6:27; 11:20; 12:3; 20:12; Ps 7:10; 17:3; 26:2; 66:10; 139:23).

The average biblical Israelite was probably reasoning that if God indeed knows what humans are thinking, why was there a need to try the Israelites by afflicting them in the wilderness for forty years? Or by preventing them from swiftly casting out their enemies from the “promised land”? Is this compatible with a God that is compassionate and merciful?

Conclusion

Forty years after leaving Egypt and prior to the crossing of the Jordan we hear God:

וידעת היום כי יהוה אלהיך הוא-העבר לפניך אש אכלה-הוא ישמידם והוא יכניעם לפניך;
והורשתם והאבדתם מהר, כאשר דבר יהוה לך.

לרשת את-אל-תאמר בלבבך, בהדף יהוה אלהיך אתם מלפניך לאמר, בצדקתי הביאני יהוה
הארץ הזאת: וברשעת הגוים האלה יהוה מורישם מפניך.

לא בצדקתך ובישר לבבך אתה בא לרשת את-ארצם: כי ברשעת הגוים האלה, יהוה אלהיך
מורישם מפניך, ולמען הקים את-הדבר אשר נשבע יהוה לאבתיך, לאברהם ליצחק וליעקב.
וידעת, כי לא בצדקתך יהוה אלהיך נתן לך את-הארץ הטובה הזאת-לרשתה: כי עם-קשה-
ערף אתה

“Know therefore this day, that *YHWH* your God is He who goes over before you as a devouring fire; He will destroy them, and He will bring them down before you; so shall you drive them out, and make them to perish quickly, as *YHWH* had spoken to you.

Speak not you in your heart, after that *YHWH* your God had thrust them out from before you, saying: For my righteousness *YHWH* had brought me in to possess this land; where-as for the wickedness of these nations *YHWH* does drive them out from before you. Not for your righteousness, or for the uprightness of your heart, do you go in to possess their land; but for the wickedness of these nations *YHWH* your God does drive them out from before you, and that He may establish the word which *YHWH* swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Know therefore that it is not for your righteousness that *YHWH* your God gives you this good land to possess it; for you are a stiff-necked people” (Deu 9:3-6; see also: Lev 20:23).

The Israelites must have been perplexed to hear these divine words and realize that they are but a tool of God for punishing some wicked nations. After being enslaved and tortured for four hundred years for iniquity not theirs, it is a small wonder that the Hebrews became “stiff-necked.”

As shown above, biblical history indicates that God had some persistent dislike of first-born sons. In fact, the most devastating affliction (the 10th) that fell upon the Egyptians was:

ויהי בחצי הלילה ויהוה הכה כל-בכור בארץ מצרים, מבכר פרעה הישב על-כסאו עד בכור השבי אשר בבית הבור; וכל בכור בהמה

“And it came to pass at midnight, that *YHWH* smote all the first-born in the land of Egypt, from the first-born of Pharaoh that sat on his throne to the first-born of the captive that was in the dungeon; and all the first-born of cattle” (Ex 12:29).



Lamentations over the Death of the Firstborn of Egypt. Charles Sprague Pearce (1877).

This affliction would forever be celebrated by the Israelites as miraculous because the God that killed every first-born in Egypt on that night, including the first born of the captive in the dungeon and all the first-born of the cattle (who were blameless), yet He:

פסח על-בתי בני-ישראל במצרים בנגפו את-מצרים, ואת-בתינו הציל;

“For that He passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when He smote the Egyptians, and delivered our houses” (Ex 12:27).

Shortly after leaving Egypt Moses instructs the Israelites: “all the first-born of man among your sons shall you redeem” (Ex 13:13). The reasoning for this religious obligation faithfully observed by the Israelites “to this day”:

והיה כי-ישאלך בנך מחר-לאמר מה-זאת: ואמרת אליו-בחזק יד הוציאנו יהוה ממצרים, מבית עבדים.

ויהי כי-הקשה פרעה לשלחנו, ויהרג יהוה כל-בכור בארץ מצרים, מבכר אדם ועד-בכור בהמה; על-כן אני זבח ליהוה, כל-פטר רחם הזכרים, וכל-בכור בני אפדה

“And it shall be when thy son asks you in time to come, saying: What is this? That you shall say to him: By strength of hand *YHWH* brought us out from Egypt, from the house of bondage;

And it came to pass, when Pharaoh would hardly let us go that *YHWH* slew all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the first-born of man, and the first-born of beast; therefore I sacrifice to *YHWH* all that opens the womb, being males; but all the first-born of my sons I redeem” (Ex 13:14-15).

So what the Israelites have to conclude when they hear God ordering Moses:

ואמרת אל-פרעה: כה אמר יהוה, בני בכרי ישראל

“And you shall say to Pharaoh: Thus said *YHWH*: Israel is My son, My first-born” (Ex 4:22).

God’s persistent, but unexplained preference of the younger child was already evident in the second generation of humanity. We learn that, for unexplained reason God rejected the offering of Cain - Adam’s first born son, but respected the offering of his younger brother - Abel (Gen 4:1-5).

Israel did not choose to be God’s first born and it is seems that it is just their bad luck that God happened to dislike first-born sons (defined as animosity to primogeniture, or as prototokos antipathy).

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