

‘To Serve the Egyptians’ vs ‘To Serve God’ (cf. Exod 14:12; 35:19): Service as a Key Motivation For the Exodus

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ABSTRACT: Contemporary studies of the Book of Exodus accord significant importance to the theme of Israel, the people of God, being emancipated from a state of ‘service to Pharaoh’ to ‘service to God’. However, our understanding of this is underdetermined. Many see it merely as a pretext for the exodus; others link the idea of ‘service to God’ with worship. A literary analysis of the places in Exodus that feature the theme of ‘service’ makes it possible not only to confirm the relevance of ‘service to God’ to the book as a whole but also to define it outside its usual cultic context as the ‘life’ of God’s people.

KEYWORDS: Exodus, service, liberation, Pharaoh, worship

The Book of Exodus, despite the diversity of its literary material, is a monumental narrative – both literary and theological – account of the liberation of God’s people, known as the exodus. While its relationship to its potential historical background remains a subject of debate among modern scholars, its fundamental significance remains undisputed.¹ In the memory of the people of God, this liberation acquired a fundamental character, becoming the model for all subsequent liberations and emancipations. This is already revealed in the Book of Exodus, where the account of the exodus occupies the first 15 chapters.² In the background, it is not difficult to see the playing out of the issue of whom Israel is to serve: Pharaoh or God. The narrative in Exod 14, which moves to the seashore, depicts the moment when Israel sheds the fear of Pharaoh and his army and learns to fear God. After this,

1 A discussion of various aspects of the biblical account of the exodus and its potential historical background is given by J. Lemański, “Exodus – pomiędzy historią, mitem i koncepcją teologiczną,” *BA* 4/2 (2014) 279–311, <https://doi.org/10.31743/ba.476>.

2 Cf. G. Fischer, “Exodus 1–15 – eine Erzählung,” *Studies in the Book of Exodus: Redaction – Reception – Interpretation* (ed. M. Vervenne) (BETL 126; Leuven: Leuven University Press – Peeters 1996) 149–178. The author is aware of the incompleteness of his thesis on Exod 1–15 as a story (p. 178), but it has been recognised and developed in the works of other researchers, see H. Utzschneider – W. Oswald, “Structure and Plot of the Biblical Exodus Narrative,” *Exodus 1–15* (IEKAT; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2012), https://books.google.pl/books?id=irt4DwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=inauthor:%22Helmut+Utzschneider%22&hl=pl&newbks=1&newbks_redir=0&sa=X&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false [access: 6.06.2024]. See also J. Lemański, *Księga Wypięcia. Wstęp. Przegląd z oryginału. Komentarz* (NKB.ST 2; Częstochowa: Edycja Świętego Pawła 2009) 31–35, where he discusses various concepts of the structure of the Book of Exodus.

the narrative ‘spills over’ beyond the exodus to tell what it means to serve a God who has chosen to be in the midst of a liberated people.³ From the very beginning, the exodus is to happen and will happen for the sake of serving (!) God.⁴

This paper will identify and analyse, using the tools of literary analysis, the places in the epic account of the exodus that are crucial to understanding what service to God is. Existing studies of the problem correctly point to the essential significance of the emancipation of God’s people in the exodus: the abandonment of service to Pharaoh and the transition to the service of YHWH (see § 1). This raises the obvious questions of the meaning of such a process: whom will Israel serve, Pharaoh or YHWH? What is it to serve YHWH, in whose name the exodus is to take place? The formulation of the questions highlights the theological significance of the process, as well as of each of its stages: the divine command given to Moses to depart from Egypt (see § 2), the dramatic confrontation with Pharaoh both within Egypt and at the shores of the Sea of Reeds (see § 3), and the fully committed engagement of Israel in constructing a sanctuary for God in the wilderness (see § 4).

1. ‘Service’ as a Unifying Motif of the Book of Exodus

The emancipation of Israel, alongside its liberation and emergence as the people of God, constitutes one of the most prominent theological themes of the book and, at the same time, serves as its unifying thread. The significance of this theme was already emphasised by Georges Auzou in his commentary on the Book of Exodus, as reflected in the title of his work: *De la servitude au service*.⁵ In the opening pages of his commentary, he elaborates on the idea expressed in that title. He argues for the presence of a genuine unity in the book, grounded in the chronological presentation of episodes structured around two major events: the exodus and the covenant. Auzou does not disregard the book’s literary complexity, which stems from the multitude of episodes, the diversity of literary material, and the variety of themes offered to the reader for reflection. However, he maintains that behind this complexity lies a profound theological concept that gave rise to the book and provided unity to its diverse elements – a unity encapsulated in the title proposed by the author.⁶ He reiterates his thesis throughout his commentary, ultimately expressing it as follows: service, as understood by the Bible, is the true teaching of the book, and the goal towards which it guides its reader.⁷

³ Cf. Lemański, “Exodus,” 311.

⁴ Cf. L. Alonso Schökel, *Salvezza e liberazione: L’Esodo* (Epifania della Parola 8; Bologna: EDB 1996) 39–40.

⁵ References to the book will be made based on its Italian edition, G. Auzou, *Dalla servitù al servizio. Il libro dell’Esodo* (Lettura pastorale della Bibbia; Bologna: EDB 1975; French ed. 1961).

⁶ Cf. Auzou, *Dalla servitù*, 8.

⁷ Cf. Auzou, *Dalla servitù*, 19.

In his argument, he cites philological observations, particularly the use of the Hebrew verb עָבַד and its derivatives in the Book of Exodus.⁸ He notes that this root, which is widely represented in other biblical books and typically conveys the notion of rendering service or performing work on behalf of someone to whom one is subordinate, takes on various nuances in Exodus depending on the context, the nature of the subordinate party, and the kind of work performed. Two primary usages of the root deserve attention. First, it denotes forced, subjugated labour on behalf of Pharaoh, expressing a state of bondage or dependence (e.g. Exod 1:13–14; 2:23; 6:5; 14:12; 20:2). Second, it is used in reference to certain individuals such as Moses, or to groups engaged in actions directed towards God, particularly in the context of worship or cultic service (e.g. Exod 4:10; 14:31; 32:13; 35:24). He concludes that 'service' in the Book of Exodus becomes a disposition of the heart – and thus of the whole person – a life animated by the spirit of deep faith, lived in an attitude of submission to God.⁹ In the following pages of his commentary, Auzou revisits this conclusion while analysing texts that include terms derived from the root עָבַד. Drawing on this foundation, he further develops the meaning of these terms in specific literary contexts: the calling of Moses (Exod 3:7–15), the ritual of the Passover (Exod 12:21–27), the Decalogue (Exod 20:1–7), freedom expressed through service (Exod 21:2–11), and the liturgical Torah (Exod 25–31; 35–40).¹⁰

Auzou's work, published in the early 1960s, was part of a new trend in the interpretation of the Book of Exodus at the time.¹¹ The authors of this emerging approach set themselves the ambitious goal of uncovering, within the literary complexity of the Book of Exodus, the history of the religious thought of God's people.¹² Among the commentaries representative of this trend are the works published simultaneously in 1974 by Childs and Schmidt,¹³ as well as Durham's commentary, released in the 1980s. Durham articulates the question of the book's unity in the following way:

The Book of Exodus must be read as a whole. Despite the strands of narrative and legal and sacerdotal source-material that are clearly visible in the forty chapters that make up this book, and despite the fact that is a compilation whose layers are still at least partly visible and to a degree recoverable, the Book of Exodus must be considered as a whole piece of theological literature, quite deliberately put into the form in which we have it, for very specific purposes.¹⁴

⁸ The following comments refer to the chapter titled 'Servire', cf. Auzou, *Dalla servitù*, 108–110.

⁹ Cf. Auzou, *Dalla servitù*, 110.

¹⁰ Cf. Auzou, *Dalla servitù*, 114, 161n, 230n, 254–256, 283–292.

¹¹ Cf. M. Vervenne, "Current Tendencies and Developments in the Study of the Book of Exodus," *Studies in the Book of Exodus: Redaction – Reception – Interpretation* (ed. M. Vervenne) (BETL 126; Leuven: Leuven University Press – Peeters 1996) 23.

¹² Cf. Auzou, *Dalla servitù*, 11.

¹³ W.H. Schmidt, *Exodus 1–6* (BKAT 2/1; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener 1974); B.S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press 1974).

¹⁴ J.I. Durham, *Exodus* (WBC 3; Waco, TX: Word Books 1987) XX.

The opinion expressed in the second part of the quotation – that theology played a decisive role in shaping the current literary form of the book – opens the way for the search for a theological keystone or key. In various studies within this interpretative approach to the Book of Exodus, different theological themes have been proposed: the presence of God, the knowledge of YHWH, creation, Israel as the chosen nation, liberation, and the emancipation from slavery into a life of service.¹⁵

Within this interpretative framework, Auzou's work cannot even be considered pioneering, as the year of publication might otherwise suggest.¹⁶ Moreover, Auzou's commentary does not align with the scope of those mentioned above, suggesting a disregard for the complex textual history. Nevertheless, in those sections where the author engages in in-depth historical–critical analysis of the text of Exodus, he demonstrates a clear understanding of its multilayered structure. Thus, the proposal to view the emancipation of Israel as the theological keystone is not an attempt to evade the intricate field of historical–critical research, but rather a consequence of embracing the unifying and organizing role of theological intention in the composition of the book.

The perspective proposed by Auzou – from service to Pharaoh to service to God – has been recognised by scholars of the Book of Exodus. This is evidenced by numerous studies, introductions, commentaries, and articles that reference this idea, though often without explicit mention of Auzou himself. For instance, Arie C. Leder, first in 1999 in considerable detail and later in 2001 more briefly, points to the presence of the themes of service to Pharaoh and to God in the Book of Exodus.¹⁷ He argues that 'an examination of the beginning and ending of Exodus uncovers several themes indicated by the repetition of key words or phrases. They are blessing, filling the earth, building, slavery, and the mountain.'¹⁸ Service is one of several themes that form the structural framework of the Book of Exodus. In one of his conclusions, he states: "This frame tells the reader that the narrator takes Israel from slavery to Pharaoh to service in the presence of God. The narrator tells this story by organizing the paragraphs, or subunits, into the narrative before us."¹⁹ In this, he closely aligns with Auzou's thought, who is convinced of the fundamental importance of Israel's emancipation throughout the Book of Exodus. However, his final conclusion – resulting from an analysis of vocabulary and the connections between paragraphs and subunits – is as follows:

15 A thorough analysis of the theological keys to the Book of Exodus is offered by Lemański, accompanied by an extensive body of relevant literature (see *Księga Wyjścia*, 37–49).

16 Vervenne attributes priority in this regard to Benno Jacob (*Das zweite Buch der Tora: Exodus* [ed. E.I. Jacob] [s.l. 1940?]), cf. M. Vervenne, "Current Tendencies," 22.

17 A.C. Leder, "Reading Exodus to Learn and Learning to Read Exodus," *CTJ* 34 (1999) 11–35, especially 21; A.C. Leder, "The Coherence of Exodus Narrative Unity and Meaning Arie," *CTJ* 36 (2001) 251–269, especially 266.

18 Leder, "Reading Exodus," 17.

19 Leder, "Reading Exodus," 22.

This thematic statement can be further reduced to: By mighty signs of power the Lord rescues Israel from Pharaoh and brings her to his presence at Sinai in order to dwell in her midst by means of the tabernacle. Exod 29:43–46 could be considered the narrative's own thematic statement.²⁰

In this respect, however, he significantly departs from Auzou's thesis.

Other scholars, Helmut Utzschneider and Wolfgang Oswald, draw attention to the integrative function of the theme of service (Exod 12:25) within the context of the narrative concerning the celebration of Passover (Exod 12–13, especially 12:25), as it connects the two main strands of the book: the narrative of the events in Egypt and the establishment of worship in the wilderness. He also expresses the view that the scope of 'service', as it appears in the Book of Exodus, extends beyond the book itself: 'The antonymous semantic field of 'forced labor' and, above, liberation from it, also remains part of the memory and is connected with every future celebration of the Passover festival.'²¹

The Polish biblical scholar Janusz Lemański addresses the theme of service to Pharaoh versus service to God on two occasions and, in a broader sense, in his works on the Book of Exodus. He first does so in his commentary, and later in an extensive introduction to the Pentateuch.²² 'This is perhaps the most evident theological theme that defines the fundamental theological logic of the entire Book of Exodus: the transition from forced service to Pharaoh to cultic service to YHWH.'²³ Such a clearly expressed opinion, although with a certain ('perhaps') qualification, is difficult to find in the scholar's earlier work, the commentary on the Book of Exodus, even in the extensive paragraph devoted to this topic. Thus, it should be seen as the result of the author's reflection on the matter and the formulation of a more refined interpretation. Unfortunately, beyond this initial sentence, Lemański largely repeats the core ideas already presented in the commentary in subsequent pages.²⁴ In both works, the theme of emancipation is incorporated into what, for Lemański, is the central concept: liberation. The subsequent sections of both studies are, in fact, devoted to various aspects of liberation in the Book of Exodus: liberation as a new creation, as a political and social act, and as an opening towards worship. It is in this last context that significant formulations appear: 'Liberation consists not only in being freed from bondage, but also in being freed for the service of God.'²⁵ Through such statements, Lemański expresses the conviction that the theme of service constitutes an integral part of the main thread of the Book of Exodus – namely, liberation.

²⁰ Leder, "Reading Exodus," 35.

²¹ W. Oswald – H. Utzschneider, "Divine Service as Sign of Freedom – The Exodus Narrative as the Cult Legend of the Passover-Marzot Festival," *Exodus 1–15* (IEKAT; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2014), https://books.google.pl/books?id=irt4DwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=inauthor:%22Helmut+Utzschneider%22&hl=pl&newbks=1&newbks_redir=0&sa=X&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false [access: 6.06.2024].

²² Cf. Lemański, *Księga Wyjścia*, 42–48; J. Lemański, *Tora – Pięcioksiąg. Wprowadzenie w zagadnienia teologiczne i historyczno-krytyczne* (Szczecin: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Szczecińskiego 2020) 443–447.

²³ Lemański, *Tora*, 443.

²⁴ Cf., e.g. Lemański, *Księga Wyjścia*, 44; and Lemański, *Tora*, 444.

²⁵ Lemański, *Księga Wyjścia*, 47; Lemański, *Tora*, 445.

A reading of both of Lemański's texts ultimately confirms the significance of the theme of service in the Book of Exodus. It is intrinsically linked to the theme of liberation. It therefore takes the form of emancipation – a transition from service to Pharaoh to service to God. However, one aspect that escapes not only Lemański but also other scholars who engage with this theme is that service significantly reshapes the very concept of liberation. Through the integral incorporation of service into the book's narrative, liberation is no longer portrayed simply as the recovery of freedom, but as a readiness for service.

The significance of the theme of service in the Book of Exodus – strongly implied, though cautiously formulated, in Lemański's writings – serves as the conceptual starting point for the present study. In the following chapters, I will examine how this theme appears across various sections of the book in order to explore and substantiate Lemański's claim that liberation in Exodus is ultimately not an end in itself but a transition into a life of service to God.

2. 'Serving God' Is Not a Pretext

The idea of service to God as a purpose for leaving Egypt appears for the first time on the lips of God himself during his dialogue with Moses (Exod 3:7–12), which begins with the theophany (Exod 3:1–6):

ויאמר כִּי־אֱהִיָּה עִמָּךְ וְזֶה־לְךָ הָאוֹת כִּי אֲנִי שְׁלַחְתִּיךָ בְּהוֹצִיאֲךָ אֶת־הָעָם מִמִּצְרַיִם תַּעֲבֹדוּן אֶת־יְהוָה עַל הָהָר הַזֶּה
And He said, 'I will be with you. And this will be the sign for you (sg.) that I have sent you: when you (sg.) bring the people out of Egypt, you (pl.) will serve [תַּעֲבֹדוּן] God on this mountain.' (Exod 3:12)

God's words are a reaction to Moses' first objection (v. 11) to being sent (v. 10a). 'To serve God on this mountain' (Exod 3:12b) is a sign to convince Moses that he is sent and that the task entrusted to him is feasible.²⁶ This is not, however, the first occurrence of the verb 'to serve' (עָבַד) in Exodus. It appears in the first paragraphs of the book to refer to rendering service to Pharaoh (Exod 1:13, 14). In God's words, for the first time, the meaning of the term shifts from slave service to Pharaoh to service to God. The sign is a promise of a new reality, which is already revealed in the calling of Moses. His mission will be fulfilled in the life of a liberated people who offer praise to God.

In the next section, recounting Moses' return from the land of Midian to Egypt (Exod 4:19–23), the motif of leading out of Egypt and service returns in God's words, which constitute another detailed instruction given to Moses (Exod 4:21–23). In His words to Moses, God does not repeat himself. During the first dialogue, God points to new 'unsaid' aspects of the mission: the necessity to do 'all miracles' before Pharaoh (v. 21a),

26 Cf. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 56–60 (especially 60), 74; Lemański, *Księga Wyjścia*, 149.

Pharaoh's resistance (v. 21b), God's fatherly attitude to the oppressed people (v. 22), and the need to speak offensive words to Pharaoh:

ואמר אליך שלח את־בני ויעבדני ותמאן לשלחו הנה אנכי הרג את־בנך בכרך

and I told you, 'Let my son go, so he may serve me [ויעבדני]'. But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son. (Exod 4:23)

God needs 'cooperation', and through Moses calls Pharaoh to it; the exodus and the service of YHWH 'are entrusted' to Pharaoh's decision.²⁷

The motifs of exodus, service, and miracles become central in the following scenes: the first encounter with Pharaoh (Exod 5:1–6:1), the confirmation of Moses' mission (Exod 6:2–7:7), and finally the extensive narrative of the plagues (Exod 7:8–11:10). Moses, the voice of God to an enslaved people (Exod 4:29–31; 6:6) and to Pharaoh (Exod 3:10, 18; 4:12; 6:10), demands again and again from the latter that Israel be allowed to go into the desert. Pharaoh's long series of rejections,²⁸ indicating his stubbornness, not only becomes the occasion for further interventions; it further highlights the importance of the goal of serving God (7:16, 26; 8:16, 25; 9:1, 13; 10:3).

At first glance, especially in view of Moses' propensity for negotiation (cf., e.g. Exod 8:21–24) and his use of understatement while doing so (how would offering a sacrifice in Egypt offend the Egyptians? cf. v. 22), the 'service' appears to be merely a tactical pretext. Clearly, Pharaoh is to be led astray. This seems to be all about the possibility of escape: the increasingly fanciful arguments Moses makes to Pharaoh for letting the people go (8:22; 10:9, 26) tend to escalate rather than reduce the tension. Each successive encounter between Moses and Pharaoh culminates in a demonstration of the former's dominance over the latter, until the poised slave leader takes his leave of Pharaoh forever (10:29). Although 'service' is officially only a pretext, it expresses a reality that transcends it. Israel's desire to 'serve God' is not merely the result of a planned escape: it is consistently linked to the wilderness (Exod 3:18; 5:1, 3; 7:16; 8:23, 24) and the consequent need to go on the road. However, this meaning cannot be interpreted solely as an escape plan.²⁹

The site of Moses' first encounter with God, 'God's Mount Horeb', is located 'beyond the desert'. Moses reaches it after leaving the customary place of sheep grazing (Exod 3:1). He is already a member of a new community: the Midianite clan led by Jethro. This was made possible by Moses marrying one of the daughters of the Midianite priest (Exod 2:16–22). This entire change in circumstances, however, stems from his earlier flight from Egypt (Exod 2:15), which initiated the sequence of events leading to his new life in Midian.

²⁷ Cf. J. Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology. I. Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity 2003) 354. The problematic nature of the Exodus texts that speak of Pharaoh's hardness is discussed in detail by J. Lemański, cf. "Serce faraona" – odpowiedzialność osobista czy bezwolne poddanie się działaniu Boga?, *CTO* 1 (2017) 35–58.

²⁸ Cf. Lemański, "Serce faraona," 44–50.

²⁹ Cf. Lemański, *Księga Wyjścia*, 154.

The desert provides a malleable backdrop and delimits the geographical space of this new phase of Moses' life. It determines the course of events (meeting his future wife, Sephorah, at the well [Exod 2:15], his way of life – herding sheep [Exod 3:1]), the kinds of relationships that determine membership of a community (in this case, a clan led by Reuel/Jethro, father of Sephorah and priest of the Midianites), and the new status Moses acquires as a result.³⁰ Before the Israelites and the new Pharaoh, Moses would not stand as the adopted son of an Egyptian princess or as an outlaw,³¹ but as the head of a family provided with goods (Exod 4:20).³²

The consistent identification of the desert as the site for organising the feast must be read in the context of these new experiences of Moses: his life outside Egypt and the mention of Israel's current condition woven into the narrative (Exod 2:23b; cf. 1:8–14). While Moses becomes the head of the family, the leader of the clan (Exod 4:20), Israel lives amid the Egyptians; it has become a nation of brickmakers (Exod 5:7–8, 14, 18, 19), the basic building blocks of urban spaces. Israel has already been harnessed to the erection of cities, Pithom and Rameses (Exod 1:11), but it does not 'construct' communities. In the eyes of the Egyptians and their Hebrew collaborators, the Israelites are servants of Pharaoh (Exod 5:16). Through hard labour (Exod 1:11; 2:11; 5:4, 5; 6:6, 7) in creating urban spaces, they are assigned the status of slaves.

The same people of Israel have no romantic expectations of the desert. This is evident through their utterances, for example, in the moment of crisis at the Sea of Reeds (Exod 14:11, 12). In the words addressed to Moses (Exod 14:12b), the people reject the possibility of life in the wilderness. Other such utterances became their 'ritual chant' or 'complaining motif', during their wanderings through the desert (cf., e.g. Exod 15:24–25; 16:2–3, 6–8). Therefore, Moses' request to Pharaoh is not simply a demand for 'a kind of religious holiday, a custom well known to the Egyptians.' Nor is it a form of subterfuge, although indeed, 'Pharaoh is not informed of the proper place of celebration.'³³ Its meaning goes beyond both. Its meaning, from the outset, is deeply inscribed in Moses' current experience, now to be shared by the people whose guidance he receives at the command of God himself. Hence, the epic account of the Exodus cannot describe the 'service to God in the wilderness' as anything other than a sign (Exod 3:12). Its implications cannot be reduced to the immediate context of Moses' epiphany or treated solely as a promise.³⁴

30 Cf. Utzschneider – Oswald, "Moses Marries," *Exodus*, https://books.google.pl/books?id=irt4DwAAQB-AJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=inauthor:%22Helmuth+Utzschneider%22&hl=pl&newbks=1&newbks_redir=0&sa=X&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&cf=false [access: 6.06.2024].

31 Cf. Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 102.

32 Cf. Lemański, *Księga Wyjścia*, 168.

33 Cf. Lemański, *Księga Wyjścia*, 153, 154.

34 In the commentaries (see footnote 4), these are the two dominant explanations of God's statement to Moses. However, due to the importance of the term in the Hebrew Bible (cf. F.J. Helfmeyer, "אֹת, 'ôth," *TLOT* I, 183–185, and F. Stolz, "אֹת, 'ôth," *TLOT* I, 69) and in the Book of Exodus itself, where, alongside the plagues (Exod 7:3 and others; cf. Lemański, "Serce faraona," 45), 'sign' refers to Sabbath rest (Exod 31:13, 17; see S. van den Eynde, "Keeping God's Sabbath: אֹת and בְּרִית' (Exod 31:12–17)," *Studies in the Book of Exodus*:

3. The Incompatibility of 'Serving God' and 'Serving the Egyptians'

Descendants of Jacob-Israel (Exod 1:1) cannot celebrate their God in the land of Pharaoh because no celebration can be held in the midst of a tyrannical³⁵ and therefore falsely constructed society. Moreover, readers of Exodus should recognise that Pharaoh's command to kill Hebrew infants (Exod 1:22) is not merely a narrative prelude to the birth of Moses,³⁶ but the ultimate signal for Israel's departure from a death-dealing society.³⁷ With the Pharaoh's command, the entire narrative of the Exodus becomes unambiguous, despite the various motifs running through it. It is a narrative of life and death.³⁸ The one who gives life to Israel is God, and Pharaoh brings death. It is only from this perspective that one can argue that serving God and serving Pharaoh are fundamentally contradictory.³⁹ To avoid confusion, the matter will now be considered on a lexical level.

During the first 'scorched' encounter with Pharaoh (Exod 5:1–5), Moses and his brother Aaron, fortified by earlier events (Exod 4:19–31), address him with an authoritative demand:

כה־אמר יהוה אלהי ישראל שלח את־עמי ויהגו לי במדבר

Thus says YHWH, the God of Israel: Let My people go and they may hold a feast to Me in the wilderness. (Exod 5:1)

After Pharaoh's quick reply rejecting their claim (v. 2), they change tone, formulating their request (v. 3) in the manner of God's words spoken at the burning bush (cf. Exod 3:18b):

אלהי העברים נקרא עלינו נלכה נא דרך שלשת ימים במדבר ונזבחה ליהוה אלהינו

The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Now let us take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to YHWH our God ... (Exod 5:3)

Redaction – Reception – Interpretation [ed. M. Vervenne] [BETL 126; Leuven: Leuven University Press – Peeters 1996] 501–511), these explanations should be considered too restrictive. Exod 3:12 is the first occurrence of the term in the Book of Exodus and hence opens up all other possibilities.

35 Utzschneider and Oswald define the social situation in Egypt presented in Exodus using a characteristic expression: 'the hegemonic Egyptian milieu', see "Moses the Young Man," *Exodus*, https://books.google.pl/books?id=irt4DwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=inauthor:%22Helmut+Utzschneider%22&hl=pl&newbks=18&newbks_redir=0&sa=X&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&cf=false [access: 6.06.2024].

36 Cf. Lemański, *Księga Wyjścia*, 99.

37 Cf. G. Lohfink, *Im Ringen um die Vernunft: Reden über Israel, die Kirche und die Europäische Aufklärung* (Freiburg – Basel – Wien: Herder 2016) 122n.

38 A closer look at the significance of Exod 1: Pharaoh's command and his other reprisals against Israel for the entire Book of Exodus is provided by P. Weimar, "Exodus 1,10–2,10 als Eröffnungskomposition des Exodusbuch," *Studies in the Book of Exodus: Redaction – Reception – Interpretation* (ed. M. Vervenne) (BETL 126; Leuven: Leuven University Press – Peeters 1996) 201–204.

39 Cf. Lemański, *Księga Wyjścia*, 47–48, 153; Lemański, "Serce faraona," 36.

There is a great deal of imprudence in Moses and Aaron's first words and accompanying gestures (they stand before Pharaoh unaccompanied by their elders; cf. Exod 3:14). However, the words (Exod 5:1b, 3) are not the cause of the failure of their mission. God, knowing Pharaoh's heart, foresaw this situation (Exod 4:21–23). Later on, Pharaoh's progressive resistance and the recurring requests of the brothers will form an essential element of the Pharaoh–Moses relationship (Exod 7:8–11:10).⁴⁰ Its constant element is the request to be allowed to organise service in the desert (Exod 5:1; 7:26; 8:16, 23; 9:1, 13; 10:3, 9, 25–26). To properly understand the Pharaoh–Moses relationship, it is necessary to trace how the request is formulated.

In the first of the statements quoted, the brothers speak of 'making a feast'. The verb *הג*, together with its derivatives, appears repeatedly in the pages of the Hebrew Bible.⁴¹ Among its various meanings in the Book of Exodus, it refers to the three great annual Jewish feasts of Passover (Pesach), Weeks (Shavuot), and Tabernacles (Sukkot) (cf. Exod 23:14–16),⁴² which are combined with pilgrimage. On Moses' lips, the concept returns only in one of his last encounters with Pharaoh, immediately preceding the eighth plague (Exod 10:9).

When the brothers speak again during their meeting with Pharaoh (Exod 5:3), their tone and vocabulary change. The verb *הג* is replaced by 'to offer a sacrifice' – *זבח*. This indicates that the brothers are taking a step back, giving up their ingenuity in formulating their demands and returning to the words spoken by God at Mount Horeb (Exod 3:18). The verb *זבח* expresses a form of worship that is realised by slaughtering animals and, unlike *הג*, which does not appear again in the plague narrative after Exod 5:1, it continues to be used throughout this section.⁴³ It reappears in the taunting statements of Pharaoh:

כִּי־נִרְפִים הֵם עַל־יָכֵן הֵם צֹעֲקִים לֵאמֹר נִלְכָּה נִזְבַּחָה לֵאלֹהֵינוּ

They are lazy. Therefore they cry: Let us go and sacrifice to our God. (Exod 5:8b [cf. 5:17])

It also appears on the lips of both Pharaoh and Moses in the context of accounts of plagues: the second plague of frogs (Exod 8:4), the fourth of swarms of insects (Exod 8:21, 22 [x2], 23–25), and the ninth of darkness (Exod 10:25). It forms an important part of the sections

40 Cf. Weimar, "Exodus," 204–207.

41 Verbal forms of the root *הג* appear sixteen times, and the noun appears sixty-two times in the OT. In the Book of Exodus, it appears three times as a verb (5:1; 12:14; 23:14) and twelve times as the noun (10:9; 12:14; 13:6; 23:15, 16 [x2], 18; 32:5; 34:18, 22 [x2], 25).

42 The text mentions the following festivals: *חג המצות* (v. 15), *חג הקציר* (v. 16a), *חג האסף* (v. 16b). The meaning of these expressions is discussed by Lemański, *Księga Wjścia*, 501n. The significance of the literary processes involved in merging the northern and Judean festivals, which underlie the current form of Exod 23:14–16, is extensively examined by B.R. Goldstein and A. Cooper ("The Festivals of Israel and Judah and the Literary History of the Pentateuch," *JAOS* 110/1 [1990] 19–31, especially 27).

43 The verb *זבח* appears twenty-seven times in the Book of Exodus. Its final occurrence is in Exod 34:25. The last occurrence of the verb *הג* is in Exod 23:14; see footnote 41.

originating in the pre-priestly tradition of narratives tending to portray Pharaoh as increasingly humiliated, while YHWH becomes increasingly powerful.⁴⁴

A parallel way of formulating the purpose of Moses and Aaron's setting out from Egypt into the desert is expressed by the verb עבד. What is striking is its abundant use in this context (Exod 3:12; 4:23; 7:16, 26; 8:16; 9:1, 13; 10:3, 7, 8, 11, 24, 26 [x2]; 12:31). However, crucial for understanding its presence in this part of the Exodus narrative is that its first appearance occurs well before the brothers' audience with Pharaoh. The situation of the Israelites in Egypt after the new Pharaoh comes to power and begins to oppress Israel is expressed (Exod 1:8, 9) by means of this verb and the noun derived from it, עֶבֶדָה:⁴⁵

ויעבדו מצרים את־בני ישראל בפרך

and the Egyptians enslaved the sons of Israel ruthlessly (Exod 1:13 [cf. also v. 14])

Verses 13 and 14 provide a good start to a longer 'story' in which the Israelites' service in Egypt will serve as the reference point for the key event – the liberation. This will be reflected in the granting of various laws to Israel, for example the central Pentateuchal law on the Sabbath (Deut 5:12–15) or the regulations (cf. Lev 25:43, 46, 53) on the handling of slaves.⁴⁶ Another consequence of liberation is the biblical concept of Egypt as a house of slaves (cf., e.g. Exod 13:3, 14; 20:2; Deut 5:6; Jer 34:13).

These verses depict serving Pharaoh as hard physical labour accompanied by cruelty (cf. Ezek 34:4); this is indicated by the combination of the *hifil* verbal form of the root עבד with the rare noun פֶּרֶךְ.⁴⁷ It is an experience of brutal enslavement (Exod 5:16; 6:5). The people are 'integrated' into the social system of Egypt; they take their place as performers of public works under various supervisors (Exod 1:11), both external and appointed from their midst (Exod 5:15). This situation makes it impossible for Israel, in the face of Pharaoh, to think and speak of themselves as anything other than 'your servants' (Exod 5:15, 16). In this way, they indicate how deeply they have blended into the fabric of the surrounding community. In addition to the general terms 'people' (עַם) or 'Egyptians' (Exod 10:6; 11:3), the inhabitants of Egypt are referred to in Exodus by the term 'his

⁴⁴ Cf. Lemański, *Księga Wyjścia*, 215; T. Römer, "From the Call of Moses to the Parting of the Sea: Reflections on the Priestly Version of the Exodus Narrative," *Book of Exodus: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation* (eds. T.B. Dozeman – C.A. Evans – J.N. Lohr) (VTSup 164; Leiden: Brill 2014) 139–144; Lemański, "Serce faraona," 44–47.

⁴⁵ The statistics for this noun are also noteworthy. It appears twenty-three times throughout the Book of Exodus (see n. 31). In Exod 1:14 alone, it occurs three times, all of them referring to occupations on behalf of Pharaoh, giving this noun the meaning of 'hard work, indentured servitude'. This meaning differs from the common definition of the term: 'work' or 'service'. Cf. H. Ringgren – U. Ruterswörden – H. Simian-Yofre, "עָבַד, 'āḇad," *TDOT* X, 390, 403–404.

⁴⁶ Cf. M. Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus* (Heritage of Biblical Israel 2; New York: Behrman 1969) 53.

⁴⁷ It should be noted that the verb is used in this text in the rare *hifil* form. Its second occurrence in this form appears in Exod 6:5, where the Egyptians are described as אֹתָם מַעֲבִדִּים, that is, those who oppress the Israelites. Lemański expresses the opinion that the combination of a verb used in this way with a noun פֶּרֶךְ should be assigned the meaning 'cruelty' (*Księga Wyjścia*, 107).

servants', that is, Pharaoh's (Exod 5:21; 7:10, 20, 28, 29; 8:5, 7, 17, 20, 25, 27; 9:14; 20:30, 34; 10:1, 6, 7; 11:3, 8; 12:30).⁴⁸ However, even these servants turn out in the course of the narrative to be the masters of others (Exod 9:20, 21). The Egyptians form a slave community within which there is no room for any other kind of relationship. It is a community actively seeking to create a system of slave dependency.⁴⁹

This vision of society provides the correct perspective for interpreting the purpose of the exodus as 'service to God'. The Book of Exodus, as already mentioned, uses the verb 'to serve' (עבד) and its derivatives to express this, in parallel with the use of the terms 'feast' and 'sacrifice'. However, the key meaning of the expression 'serving God' lies in the state of the Egyptian community. The exodus is not only about escaping the closed system of slavery; it is also about the need to create a new community, an expression that becomes the concept of 'service to God'.⁵⁰ A true feast, a true sacrifice, and finally a true service (and thus a true worship of God, cf., e.g. Exod 15), require a true social form. This is why Israel must go into the desert to 'serve God' there. As long as Israel serves Pharaoh, it cannot serve God.

It is therefore almost tragic to read the words of the panic-stricken people shouting over the Sea of Reeds⁵¹ at the sight of Pharaoh and his chariots. They address Moses as follows:

המבלי אין־קברים במצרים לקחתנו למות במדבר
מה־זאת עשית לנו להוציאנו ממצרים
הלא־זה הדבר אשר דברנו אליך במצרים לאמר
חדל ממנו ונעבדה את־מצרים כי טוב לנו עבד את־מצרים ממתנו במדבר

Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you took us away to die in the wilderness?

What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt?

Isn't this the word that we spoke to you in Egypt,

Leave us alone and we may serve the Egyptians. For better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness. (Exod 14:11–12)

48 'In any case, the unexpected resistance of the Israelites to the attempt by the new king and his people to decimate them appears to have been inhibited, if not foiled completely. Accordingly, the third section of the episode (vv. 13–14) introduces a certain break in the action. This is signified by the renewed introduction of the actors (they are "re-nominalized") and by their renaming. The "people" of the king or his exponents are now called "Egypt" in general, the "people of the Israelites" is simply called "the Israelites." The terminology of forced labor also changes or is supplemented,' Utzschneider – Oswald, "Episode 1: Exod 1:8–14 Synchronic Analysis," *Exodus*, https://books.google.pl/books?id=wW8iEAAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=inauthor:%22Helmut+Utzschneider%22&hl=pl&newbks=1&newbks_redir=0&sa=X&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false [access: 19.03.2025].

49 Cf. Lohfink, *Im Ringen um die Vernunft*, 121–123. Ringgren's opinion on slavery in Egypt remains valid: 'Slave owners included temples, kings, and, beginning with the Old Kingdom, also officials, priests, officers, and others. The number of private slaves was relatively small.' Ringgren – Ruttersworden – Simian-Yofre, דִּבְעִי, 389–390.

50 Cf. Lohfink, *Im Ringen um die Vernunft*, 123.

51 The matter of the location of this event and the sea passage itself is discussed in detail by J.C. Gertz, "The Miracle at the Sea. Remarks on the Recent Discussion about Origin and Composition of the Exodus Narrative," *Book of Exodus: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation* (eds. T.B. Dozeman – C.A. Evans – J.N. Lohr) (VTSup 164; Leiden: Brill 2014) 103–117; J. Lemański, "W poszukiwaniu najstarszej literackiej wersji 'cudu nad morzem' (Wj 13,17–15,21)," *BA* 6/1 (2016) 36–38, <https://doi.org/10.31743/ba.1258>.

The Israelites express many opposites: death in Egypt vs death in the desert (v. 11). The plan of escape is yours, they say to Moses (v. 11b), our plan was different (v. 12a). Behind this last formulation hides another key reference to service: 'serve God in the wilderness' vs 'serve the Egyptians in Egypt'. These form an insurmountable opposition: either a feast or slavery, either God's service or slave service. They cannot be combined. Even if the Israelites say that it is 'better for them to serve the Egyptian', contrasting this with 'death in the desert', serving the Egyptians is not recognised as life.

4. 'To Serve God' vs 'To Live' of the People of God

Moses' insistence on offering sacrifices outside Egypt is more than a pretext – 'pouring sand in Pharaoh's eyes' or 'creating a smokescreen'. The Israelites need to perform a feast before God in order to live! The feast will only become possible when Israel is free; then it can begin almost automatically, immediately ... spontaneously (!). And so it does. Hardly has the sea been crossed (Exod 14:22) and Pharaoh and his chariots been swallowed up by the water (Exod 14:28), when the people begin their first communal feast. The festive atmosphere on the shore of the Sea of Reeds⁵² opens the hearts of the people to the coming fulfilment of the sign of God's promise: 'To worship God on this mountain' (Exod 3:12b).⁵³

Moses intones a hymn (Exod 15:1).⁵⁴ The people's singing is a response of faith to the event at the sea.⁵⁵ It is directed towards God as the sole author of the deliverance, in which the people played little or no role.⁵⁶ Therefore, in the middle of the hymn, these words are sung: 'Who among the gods like You, o YHWH? Who like You, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders' (Exod 15:11). With this poem, Israel's deliverance

52 The jubilant song at the Red Sea is not, however, the first festival celebrated by Israel in the narrative of the Book of Exodus. Already in Exod 12–13, the Israelites carry out the ritual instructions of the Passover as commanded by God (cf. Exod 12:28). 'Pasqua è una «festa» solenne, un «servizio» sacro, un «ordine» stabilito da Dio perché duri, una celebrazione dell'anniversario che il popolo di Dio dovrà sempre osservare. È il compito esclusivo di tutto il popolo di Dio.' Auzou, *Dalla servitù*, 171.

53 Cf. Auzou, *Dalla servitù*, 182. On the notion of 'sign', see above pp. 7 and 8 with n. 34.

54 Exod 15:20–21 mentions the song of Miriam (Aaron's sister) and the women accompanying her. The relationship of this group to Moses and the Israelites (mentioned in Exod 15:1) is unclear; see the discussion by J.G. Janzen, "Song of Moses, Song of Miriam: Who Is Seconding Whom?", *CBQ* 54/2 (1992) 215–216. Although the meaning of this episode remains unclear, it certainly emphasises the start of the festival, which is already taking place on the shores of the Sea of Reeds; cf. M. Jasiński, "Miriam – zapomniana bohaterka *Exodusu*," *VV* 19 (2011) 43–51, <https://doi.org/10.31743/vv.2026>. Another unclear text that speaks of women's service is Exod 38:8; cf. Lemański, *Księga Wyjścia*, 663n; D. Erbele-Küster, "Der Dienst der Frauen am Eingang des Zeltheiligtums (Exod 38:8) – Kultisch-religiöse Verortungen von Frauen in Exodus und Leviticus," *The Interpretation of Exodus: Studies in Honour of Cornelis Houtman* (ed. R. Roukema) (CBET 44; Leuven – Paris – Dudley, MA: Peeters 2006) 265–282.

55 'The witness of the ancient poem in Exod 15 celebrates victory and continues to be the fundamental confession,' B.S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old Testament and New Testament: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress 1993) 130.

56 Cf. Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 249.

from Egypt is realised: 'You have led in your mercy the people, whom you redeemed ...' (Exod 15:13a). It is also stretched in time (vv. 13b–17), well beyond the horizon of events from the Sea of Reeds, on the shore of which Moses stands (v. 1):

You guided them by Your strength to Your holy habitation. The peoples will hear and tremble; anguish will seize the inhabitants of Philistia. Then the chiefs of Edom will be terrified; trembling will seize the leaders of Moab; all the inhabitants of Canaan will melt away (Exod 15:13b–15).

'The God of our fathers' (Exod 3:13, 15, 16; 4:5 and others), who acted in Israel's history, is the same who acts now and will act in the future. The apparent disruption of chronological order in the hymn was not a problem for the Hebrew Bible's editors.⁵⁷ The epic style allowed him to freely link the past and the present, without overlooking the specifics of historical situations.⁵⁸ An important aspect of this process of consolidating and integrating different historical traditions is the ahistorical evocation of key institutions, such as 'Your holy habitation' (Exod 15:13b); hence, in the text, this is done without any mention of the location of such a sanctuary.⁵⁹ 'The God of our fathers' does not limit himself to the liberation of his people; he leads them to his holy place to 'plant' them in worship (Exod 15:17).⁶⁰

The end of slavery to Pharaoh and the beginning of service to God resound in the words of Moses' hymn to the Israelites. The content of this service is not only worship of the true God but his constant presence throughout the life of the 'planted' community (Exod 15:17). God has pointed to Sinai as the place for its realization (Exod 3:12); now, here at the Sea of Reeds, the moment of its solemn inauguration is drawing near and, above all, its establishment 'for all times and forever' (Exod 15:18).

To this establishment belongs the Tent-Temple, the execution of which is described in the greatest detail in the closely related though not identical accounts of Exod 25–31 and 35–40. The theme of 'slave service' and 'divine service' is taken up at the outset in chapters 35 and 36. This, however, already takes place using a new vocabulary with limited reference to the 'classical' verb עָבַד and its derivatives, though this word is still important for maintaining continuity between 'service to Pharaoh' and 'service to God'.⁶¹

The meticulous descriptions, works of priestly tradition,⁶² of the making of the Tent-Temple do not give a comprehensive idea of the appearance of this structure. The purpose of these elaborate narratives is to emphasise the connection between the command to

57 Cf. R.G. Kratz, "Israel als Staat und als Volk," *ZTK* 97/1 (2000) 13.

58 Cf. Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 250.

59 Cf. Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 252; Lemański, *Księga Wyjścia*, 339.

60 Cf. Lemański, *Księga Wyjścia*, 341.

61 The noun עֲבָדָה appears 10 times in the Book of Exodus: 27:19; 35:21, 24; 36:1, 3, 5; 38:21; 39:32, 40, 42; the verb עָבַד only twice: Exod 32:13; 34:21.

62 The presence of traces of 'post-priestly' redaction in Exodus is developed in detail by E. Otto, "Die nachpriesterschriftliche Pentateuchredaktion im Buch Exodus," *Studies in the Book of Exodus: Redaction – Reception – Interpretation* (ed. M. Vervenne) (BETL 126; Leuven: Leuven University Press – Peeters 1996) 61–111. He comments on the aims and direction of priestly redaction of the texts in a number of places. Concerning the

construct the tabernacle (Exod 26:1–37) and its execution by Moses and the people (Exod 36:8–38). Much of this description is pure idealisation: the sanctuary of the desert is depicted as a dismantled temple, half the size of the Jerusalem Temple, which served as the model for this reconstruction. But it is not all made up here. The image of a 'prefabricated' sanctuary collides with the idea – so firmly rooted in tradition that the authors of our description could not quite eliminate it – that the tabernacle was a tent.⁶³ In other words, the uniqueness of the Tent-Temple lies primarily in the fact that it can be moved. It can be assembled and then set up again. It is meant to accompany Israel on its journey through the desert.

Paradoxically, despite its mobility, this structure became the very symbol of divine holiness and God's abiding dwelling among his people (Exod 29:42–46); and, ultimately due to the numerous intertextual connections between the priestly narratives of the tabernacle's setting up (Exod 25–31, 35–40) and the creation account (Gen 1–2), the tabernacle emerges as a symbol of the consummation of all creation.⁶⁴ It is said of this tabernacle that Aaron and his sons will enter 'to do service [לשרת] in the holy place' (Exod 35:19). And the craftsmen working on its construction receive the materials necessary for the work, brought by the Israelites 'for the work of the service [עבודת] of the holy place' (Exod 36:3). Again, although using different terms, the texts speak of 'service'. The verb עבד and its derivatives, familiar from the first chapters of the Book of Exodus, appear now to describe the work of craftsmanship aimed at preparing a portable sanctuary (Exod 27:19; 35:21, 24; 36:5; 38:21; 39:32, 42), or the worship itself (Exod 30:16; 36:1, 3; 39:40). The verb שרת, used in Exod 35:19, and its derivatives appear first in Exod 24:13, to convey the nature of Joshua's mission (cf. also Exod 33:11). This is not a slave service: Joshua is Moses' assistant and helper.⁶⁵ The use of the שרת elsewhere, in the context of Aaron and his sons' worship (Exod 28:35, 43; 29:30; 30:20; 35:19; 39:1, 26, 41), indicates that Joshua's assistance to Moses has a sacred dimension. This aspect of service, conceived as the assistance of a specific person (e.g. Gen 29:15, 18, 20), is the original and proper distinction between the terms שרת and עבד.⁶⁶

More important than the terminology, however, is the fact that the issue of 'service' returns in a new context. Everything is different in the desert. The Israelites no longer serve as slaves – the verb עבד and its derivatives last appear in Exod 34:21 – but as free people. This newness is expressed in the influx of gifts (Exod 35:20–29), their high material quality (Exod 35:5b–9, 22b–24), their excess (Exod 36:3b–7), the people's commitment of their own talents (Exod 35:10, 25; 36:2), and their voluntarily giving all this up for the erection

priestly origin of Exod 25–31 and 35–40 (Lev 9), he formulates his views on pages 99–101. See also C. Berner, "Gab es einen vorpriesterlichen Meerwunderbericht?", *Bib* 95/1 (2014) 1–25 and above in n. 51.

⁶³ Cf. R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel. II. Religious Institutions* (New York: McGraw-Hill 1965) 294.

⁶⁴ Cf. Lemański, *Księga Wyjścia*, 527n; and the comprehensive documentation prepared by P. Weimar, *Studien zur Priesterschrift* (FAT 56; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2008) 271–305.

⁶⁵ Cf. Lemański, *Księga Wyjścia*, 521.

⁶⁶ Cf. C. Westermann, "שרת, šrt pi. to serve," *TLOT* III, 1406.

of the Tent-Temple. The latter aspect, voluntariness, even becomes the leitmotif of the narrative of the preparation for the erection of the tabernacle, in the small literary unit of Exod 35:1–36:7.⁶⁷

קחו מאתכם תרומה ליהוה כל נדיב לבו יביאה את תרומת יהוה זהב

Take from among you a contribution for YHWH. Everyone whose heart is willing shall bring it as YHWH's offering: ... (Exod 35:5; cf. 35:22)

ויבאו כל־איש אשר־נשאו לבו וכל אשר נדבה רוחו אתו הביאו את־תרומת יהוה למלאכת אהל מועד ולכל־עבדתו ולבגדי הקדש

ויבאו האנשים על־הנשים כל נדיב לב הביאו חח ונזם וטבעת וכומז כל־כלי זהב וכל־איש אשר הניף תנופת זהב ליהוה
And all men came, whose heart stirred them, and everyone whose spirit moved them, and brought the contribution for YHWH to be used for the Tent of Meeting, and for all its service, and for the holy garments.

And all men and women came. Everyone whose heart was willing brought brooches and earrings and signet rings and armlets, all sorts of gold objects—every man dedicating an offering of gold to YHWH. (Exod 35:21–22 [cf. also Exod 35:26; 36:2])

כל־איש ואשה אשר נדב לבם אתם להביא לכל־המלאכה אשר צוה יהוה לעשות ביד־משה הביאו בני־ישראל נדבה ליהוה

Every man and woman whose heart moved them to bring something for all the work that YHWH had commanded to be done through Moses, the Israelites brought it as a freewill offering to YHWH. (Exod 35:29 [cf. also 36:3])

The main theme of these sentences is expressed by the terms 'כל נדיב לבו' ('everyone whose heart is willing'), 'כל־איש אשר־נשאו לבו וכל אשר נדבה רוחו אתו' ('everyone who was willing and whose heart moved them'), and 'נדבה ליהוה' ('freewill offerings to the YHWH'). With these, the Book of Exodus wishes once again to show the contrast with slavery in Egypt. Israelite men and women are no longer sweatshop slaves of Pharaoh, the supposed king-god;⁶⁸ now, they serve the true God. This service can only take place in total freedom – not as freedom of choice or mere disposition, but as something born from a stirring of the heart. This service can only take place in total freedom. In contrast to the situation in Egypt, the Israelites were no longer building anything, not even cities for Pharaoh (Pithom and Rameses);⁶⁹ in the desert, they would build a 'dwelling for God' (Exod 26:1–37).⁷⁰ It is in it that the glory of God dwells (Exod 40:34–38), making it the second wandering Sinai.⁷¹ In it is reflected the fullness of the world to whom God, having completed his work on the seventh day, gave blessing (Exod 39:32, 43; cf. Gen 2:1–3). It is then that God will become

67 Cf. Lemański, *Księga Wyjścia*, 648–650, 660–661.

68 Cf. D.P. Silverman, *Ancient Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press 2003) 106–113.

69 Cf. Lemański, *Księga Wyjścia*, 106; B.U. Schipper, "Raamses, Pithom, and the Exodus: A Critical Evaluation of Ex 1:11," *VT* 65/2 (2015) 265–288.

70 Cf. Lemański, *Księga Wyjścia*, 547.

71 Cf. B. Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus* (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV 1992) 1032.

fully present in Israel, and there will be a final coming to his 'knowledge' on the part of the people:

And I will dwell among the sons of Israel and will be their God. Then they will know that I am YHWH, their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt so that I might dwell among them. I am YHWH, their God (Exod 29:45–46).

These sentences describe God's instructions to the Israelites regarding the construction of the Tent-Temple (Exod 25–31). Therefore, they are in the future tense. They will become the present at the end of the Book of Exodus. There, the actual dwelling of God among his people is realised:

And the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of YHWH filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon it, and the glory of YHWH filled the tabernacle (Exod 40:34–35).

This closing text of Exodus once again confirms what was already clear in the song of victory at the Sea of Reeds. The escape from Egypt – the exodus – not only leads from slavery to freedom but also to the freedom that is the knowledge of the true God and service to him. This service is realised by willingly, voluntarily, and, above all, indivisibly abiding with him. This truth, hitherto expressed in the stories of the erection of the Tent-Temple, has already found expression in the events at the foot of Mount Sinai before the tent was erected there (Exod 32–34). These stories about the idolatrous cult at the foot of Sinai (Exod 32) and the subsequent forgiveness through the mediation of Moses (Exod 33:1–34:9) answers the fundamental question of Israel's new situation: whether and under what conditions God can be present among them (Exod 29:45–46; 33:16; 34:9). The story of the golden calf is not only the focus for the other texts forming this unit of Exodus: it calls everything into question – even God's own work of having liberated his people so that they might serve him in the faithfulness of the covenant.⁷² Its significance derives from the divine instructions given at Sinai (Exod 19–31); it represents their drastic rupture and hence appears as a threat to the arrangement between God and the people.⁷³ The story of the golden calf shows that, despite liberation, despite the majesty of Sinai (cf., e.g. Exod 24:10, 16–17) and the resulting fear, without the presence of Moses (Exod 24:13), there is apostasy. This is a deviation, a departure. From this point on, any history of liberation will be, at the same time, a history of deviance, of human resistance and rebellion against God.⁷⁴ When man has gained freedom from false gods – whether they are called Pharaoh or any other name – he

⁷² Cf. Auzou, *Dalla servitù*, 265.

⁷³ Cf. Lemański, *Księga Wyjścia*, 610. The situation presented in Exod 32 is accurately expressed in the words of Jacob: 'The golden calf represented the most grievous sin of the people in the desert. It placed in question the planned erection of the sanctuary, and also the entire future of the people' (*Second Book of the Bible*, 935–936).

⁷⁴ Cf. Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 579.

is given the opportunity to know the true God and to open himself to God in freedom. The sheer difficulty of embracing this freedom with God is demonstrated by the Israelites, who, even after seeing all the signs and wonders, prefer to become Pharaoh's slaves again instead of daring a new freedom with God (cf. once again Exod 14:11–12). At the foot of Sinai, instead of the offer given by God, they chose their own method of realising the way of being with their liberator.

The Book of Exodus is devoid of any illusions. Firstly, the statement refers to attaining freedom. It does not say merely that it is a very difficult thing to win freedom, but that it is an impossible thing for a man to do. The stories of the Exodus almost insistently point out that neither Moses nor the Israelites (Exod 3:11, 4:10–12) succeed in getting out of Egypt on their own (Exod 3:7–8, 6:6–7, 13:14, 14:13–14, 20:2). It is shown again and again that it is God himself who performs the exodus. It is not done by Moses, who resists from the very beginning (Exod 3:11);⁷⁵ nor, certainly, by the people, whose 'breath unlike God's was short' (מִקְצֹר רוּחַ; Exod 6:9). They remain under the pressure of slave labour (וּמַעֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה; Exod 6:9);⁷⁶ they remain sceptical, panic at the end, and want to return to slavery. The exodus is made possible only by God. It is a miracle of pure grace, possible because God 'had a long breath' (Exod 14:21; cf. also Gen 1:2; Exod 10:13, 19; 15:8, 10)⁷⁷ and the people respond repeatedly to his initiative. It is not Israel that fights against the Egyptians; it is God who fights on Israel's side. This is vividly seen in Moses' words (Exod 14:13–14). The Israelites have just reached the Sea of Reeds; they are preparing to cross, but have not yet done so. It is, therefore, an extremely difficult situation. It is at this point that the riders and chariots of the Egyptians appear on the horizon:

And Moses said to the people, 'Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of YHWH, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. YHWH will fight for you, and you have only to be silent' (Exod 14:13–14).

Secondly, the Book of Exodus is not naïve in its assessment of the condition of the liberated. Its diagnosis is devastating: 'And the Lord said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people"' (Exod 32:9; cf. 33:3, 5, 9).

The juxtaposition of this diagnosis with the aforementioned leitmotif of the 'willing heart' allows one to appreciate God's action of forgiveness.⁷⁸ It constitutes, after liberation, a further impulse to undertake the willing, voluntary, and undivided service of YHWH.

⁷⁵ Auzou makes a keen observation when he writes, as the Book of Exodus vividly shows through the figure of Moses, whose own condition at the beginning of his mission is marked by fear, hesitation, and a deep sense of inadequacy: 'I timori e le esitazioni di Mosè, la sua perplessità davanti alla formidabile impresa da compiere sono stati notati dalle differenti tradizioni (qui, al v. 13: E; in 4,1.10: J; in 6,12.30: P)' (*Dalla servitù*, 114).

⁷⁶ Cf. Lemański, *Księga Wypięcia*, 199.

⁷⁷ Cf. the title of a dissertation on a fragment of Exod 1–14 by H. Utzschneider, *Gottes langer Atem. Die Exodus-erzählung (Ex 1–14) in ästhetischer und historischer Sicht* (SBS 166; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk 1996).

⁷⁸ Cf. Jacob, *Second*, 936.

The narrative complex of Exod 32–34 is the fruit of a centuries-long effort by Israel to assimilate God's forgiveness and thus to understand its own condition. The Deuteronomistic redaction, which reworked a pre-existing tradition about the idolatrous worship of 'a god by human appointment' at Sinai and linked it to the tradition about 'Jeroboam's sin',⁷⁹ played a significant role in its formation. Priestly tradition supplemented it with further episodes (Exod 33:7–34:9) from Israel's various religious traditions. Throughout history, these have had to deal with what had hitherto been impossible – forgiveness, which is difficult to identify precisely: 'Be attentive to him and obey his voice; do not rebel toward him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him' (Exod 23:21).

God's forgiveness brings this conflict to a resolution. This resolution, however, does not constitute the end of the narrative. Divine forgiveness only makes possible what God intended for his people: participation in the construction of the sanctuary (Exod 35–39).⁸⁰

The fruit of these processes becomes the proclamation of God's forgiveness. Its source is found in the very nature of the God of Israel, who is merciful:

YHWH, YHWH, God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in mercy and truth, who preserves mercy for thousands, who forgives offense and rebellion and sin, and He certainly does not leave unpunished, visiting the offense of the fathers on the sons and the son's sons, to the third and the fourth generation (Exod 34:6b–7).

Such is YHWH, the God of 'the Mount' (Exod 3:12b), the God of Mount Sinai (cf. Exod 24:16, 31:18, 34:2), whom Israel has come to know and experience. This is the God who conquers human sin, 'the wickedness of the fathers' because he finds in himself the mysterious reasons that move him to love man (Exod 34:6–7, cf. 20:5–6),⁸¹ and now the community of liberated slaves standing at the foot of the mountain. The proclamation, 'YHWH, YHWH, God merciful and gracious' (Exod 34:6b) opens the way to the life of the community of Israel, conceived more broadly than the people gathered at/around Mount Sinai: 'for thousands ... the fathers on the sons and the son's sons, to the third and the fourth generation' (Exod 34:7).⁸² The consequence of the proclamation, as indicated by the cited narrative complex of Exod 35–40, is an understanding of Israel's life conceived as a service to God.

Conclusion

Responding to the question of the relationship between the epic narrative of the Exodus and its potential historical background, Lemański summarises his exploration as follows:

⁷⁹ Cf. Lemański, *Księga Wyjścia*, 603.

⁸⁰ Leder, "The Coherence of Exodus," 260.

⁸¹ Cf. Auzou, *Dalla servitù*, 276n.

⁸² Cf. Weimar, *Studien zur Priesterschrift*, 327–336.

Nevertheless, it [the Book of Exodus] is a theological work growing out of some historical experience. It represents an attempt at a comprehensive reading of Israel's place and role in God's plans for the world. It thus tells first and foremost the story of Israel's birth as a chosen people.⁸³

In a succinct summary, he also reserves space for the question of 'service to Pharaoh' and 'service to God':

The landmark [for the birth of Israel] miracle at the Sea of Reeds (Exod 14) and the miraculous crossing of the Jordan (Josh 3–4), and the entry into Canaan, described later in the same way, represent two boundary events. In the first case, the end of slave service to Pharaoh is marked, and in the second, the end of the time spent in the desert, understood as a time of learning how to serve God ... In the background of the Exodus narrative (Exod 1–15), it is not difficult to see that the game is precisely about whom Israel is to 'serve': Pharaoh (slave service) or YHWH (cultic service). In this context, the narrative of Exod 14 depicts the moment when Israel sheds its fear of Pharaoh and his army and learns to show fear of God. After that, the story is only about how to serve God, so that He always resides amid Israel.⁸⁴

It is difficult to disagree with the main thrust of this summary. However, the details, especially those relating to the service of God, need clarification.

The coherent narrative of the Book of Exodus – beginning with the description of Egyptian bondage and service to Pharaoh, reaching its climax in the experience of the exodus and the liberation brought about by YHWH, and then extending into the account of the events at Sinai concerning the 'service of God' – speaks far more profoundly. Service to Pharaoh is presented as a total act carried out in the shadow of death. From this perspective, the service to God cannot be reduced to just a part – even the most essential one – of Israel's life. Not even if that part is called the worship of YHWH. It is an act that is thought of and referred to as 'living'.

Before worship begins, as described in Leviticus, Israel has a new experience: precisely the service of God. This happens through the liberation of the heart and through concrete actions characterised by spontaneity and voluntariness, aimed at organising worship. This is why service cannot be seen as a pretext for the exodus, but rather as its real purpose. The exodus is about service, even though this sounds paradoxical today and raises objections in the Pharaoh and his ilk about the way of life of the renewed people of God. It is the 'service of God' that is the spontaneous work of this whole community, which in it tastes the gift of freedom; both that which flows from God's act of liberation and that which comes from his merciful nature.

⁸³ Lemański, "Exodus," 311.

⁸⁴ Lemański, "Exodus," 311.

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