

What the Bible Is Not Confused About: Blood, Life, and the Plagues of Egypt

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Methodology: Letting the Bible Build Its Own World

In this series, What the Bible Is Not Confused About, we begin by letting the Bible describe its own universe. Rather than beginning with the religious answers we already inherited or the answers we wish to find in the text, we begin with a different question: what assumptions does the narrative itself appear to make about the world?

What does the Torah expect its audience to already understand without explanation? What fears, obligations, and moral instincts are taken for granted inside the story?

The plagues of Egypt are often approached primarily as displays of divine power. But before the plagues even begin, the Torah pauses over a different problem: Moses is convinced that the Israelites will not believe him.

And when we consider the stakes, that fear makes sense to us. For an enslaved people, believing Moses is not merely theological agreement. His message is not simply about faith; it is about liberation. To believe Moses means risking defiance against Egypt, the greatest power in their world. To believe Moses is to begin stepping toward rebellion.

Exodus 4:1

(1) But Moses spoke up and said,
“What if they do not believe me and
do not listen to me, but say: GOD did
not appear to you?”

שמות ד:א'

(א) וַיַּעַן מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר וַיהוָה
לֹא־יֵאֱמִינוּ לִי וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ בְּקוֹלִי
כִּי יֹאמְרוּ לֹא־נִרְאָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ יְהוָה:

Being scared to rebel against Egypt explains why the people might be afraid to act. But it does not fully explain why Moses thinks they will not believe him.

So we have to sharpen the question: why does Moses continue to think the Israelites will not believe, even after multiple miracles?

What would a sign need to show Israel that ordinary power, spectacle, or wonder could not?

Exodus 4:2-9

(2) GOD said to him, “What is that in your hand?”
 “A rod.” (3) “Cast it on the ground.” He cast it on the ground and it became a snake; and Moses recoiled from it. (4) Then GOD said to Moses, “Put out your hand and grasp it by the tail”—he put out his hand and seized it, and it became a rod in his hand— (5) “that they may believe that the ETERNAL, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, did appear to you.” (6) GOD said to him further, “Put your hand into your bosom.” He put his hand into his bosom; and when he took it out, his hand was encrusted with snowy scales! (7) And [God] said, “Put your hand back into your bosom.”—He put his hand back into his bosom; and when he took it out of his bosom, there it was again like the rest of his body.— (8) “And if they do not believe you or pay heed to the first sign, they will believe the

שמות ד':ב'-ט'

(ב) וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו יְהוָה
 (מזה) [מה־זֶה] בְּיָדְךָ וַיֹּאמֶר
 מִטָּה: (ג) וַיֹּאמֶר הֲשַׁלְּכֶהוּ
 אֶרְצָה וַיִּשְׁלַכְהוּ אֶרְצָה וַיְהִי
 לְנָחָשׁ וַיִּנָּס מִפְּנָיו: (ד)
 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה שְׁלַח
 יָדְךָ וְאַחֲזוּ בְּזַנְבוֹ וַיִּשְׁלַח יָדוֹ
 וַיִּחְזַק בּוֹ וַיְהִי לְמִטָּה בְּכַפּוֹ:
 (ה) לְמַעַן יֵאמְיִנוּ כִּי־נִרְאָה
 אֱלֹהֶיךָ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתַם אֱלֹהֵי
 אֲבֹרָהֶם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹהֵי
 יַעֲקֹב: (ו) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לוֹ עוֹד
 הִבֵּאתִי יָדְךָ בְּחִיקוֹךָ וַיָּבֵא יָדוֹ
 בְּחִיקוֹ וַיּוֹצֵאֶהָ וְהָיָה יָדוֹ
 מְצֻרֶעַת כַּשָּׁלֵג: (ז) וַיֹּאמֶר הָשִׁב
 יָדְךָ אֶל־חִיקְךָ וַיֵּשֶׁב יָדוֹ
 אֶל־חִיקוֹ וַיּוֹצֵאֶהָ מִחִיקוֹ
 וְהָיָה־שָׁבָה כַּבְּשָׂרוֹ: (ח) וְהָיָה
 אִם־לֹא יֵאמְיִנוּ לְךָ וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ
 לְקַל הָאֵת הָרִאשׁוֹן וְהָאֲמִינוּ
 לְקַל הָאֵת הָאַחֲרוֹן:

second. (9) **And if they are not convinced by both these signs and still do not heed you, take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and it—the water that you take from the Nile—will turn to blood on the dry ground.”**

(ט) וְהָיָה אִם-לֹא יֵאֱמִינוּ גַם
לְשֵׁנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים וְלֹא
יִשְׁמְעוּן לְקוֹלְךָ וְלִקְחָתָּ מִמֵּי
הַיָּאֵר וְשִׁפְכָתָּ הַיְבֻשָּׁה וְהָיוּ
הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר תִּקַּח מִן-הַיָּאֵר
וְהָיוּ לְדָם בַּיְבֻשָׁת׃

One detail in this exchange is easy to miss: Moses is not worried that the Egyptians will disbelieve him. His fear is entirely about Israel.

Egypt already has power, priests, and magicians who can perform signs and wonders. Pharaoh does not need convincing that power exists. Israel needs convincing that justice exists.

So now we are given multiple signs, but only the last sign is designed to work when all else would fail. To understand that, let's play a game of: which one of these is not like the others?

The first sign can be performed anywhere: Moses throws down the staff, and it becomes a snake.

The second sign can also be performed anywhere: Moses places his hand into his cloak, and it becomes afflicted and then restored.

But the third sign is different. Moses cannot simply perform it anywhere. It is the only sign he cannot perform with God at the burning bush. It requires something he does not have there: water from the Nile.

That means the final sign is not only a miracle. It is bound to Egypt. It requires the river. And it points to a place already carrying meaning in the story.

So the question becomes: Why would water from the Nile becoming blood be the sign that finally convinces the Israelites that God sent Moses?

Before we can answer that, we need to understand how the Torah thinks about blood, life, guilt, and justice.

Genesis 4:8-11

(8) Cain said to his brother Abel ... and when they were in the field, Cain set upon his brother Abel and killed him. (9) GOD said to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” And he said, “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” (10) “What have you done? Hark, your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground! (11) **Therefore, you shall be more cursed than the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother’s blood from your hand.**

בראשית ד':ח-י"א

(ח) וַיֹּאמֶר קַיִן אֶל-הֶבֶל אָחִיו וַיְהִי בִּהְיוֹתָם בַּשָּׂדֶה וַיִּקָּם קַיִן אֶל-הֶבֶל אָחִיו וַיַּהַרְגֵהוּ: (ט) וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-הֵינְן אֵי הֶבֶל אָחִיךָ וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יָדַעְתִּי הֲשֹׁמֵר אָחִי אָנֹכִי: (י) וַיֹּאמֶר מֶה עָשִׂיתָ קוֹל דְּמֵי אָחִיךָ צֹעֲקִים אֵלַי מִן-הָאֲדָמָה: (יא) וְעַתָּה אָרִיר אֶתְּךָ מִן-הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר פָּצְתָה אֶת-פִּיהָ לְקַחַת אֶת-דַּמִּי אֶחָיִךְ מִיָּדְךָ:

Why does Abel’s blood cry out from the ground?

The Torah could have simply said that Abel was murdered. Instead, the ground becomes part of the story. It has received the blood, and the blood continues to speak from there.

Already in Genesis, spilled life does not simply disappear. It leaves a claim in the place where it was received.

Leviticus 17:11-14

(11) For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have assigned it to you for making expiation for your lives upon the altar; it is the blood, as life, that effects expiation. (12) Therefore I say to the Israelite people: No

ויקרא י"ז:יא-י"ד

(יא) כִּי נַפֶּשׁ הַבֶּשֶׂר בַּדָּם הוּא וְאֲנִי נָתַתִּיו לָכֶם עַל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לְכַפֵּר עַל-נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם כִּי-הַדָּם הוּא בְּנַפֶּשׁ יְכַפֵּר: (יב) עַל-כֵּן אִמַּרְתִּי לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כָּל-נַפֶּשׁ

person among you shall partake of blood, nor shall the stranger who resides among you partake of blood. (13) And regarding anyone, whether an Israelite or a stranger who resides among them, who hunts down an animal or a bird that may be eaten: they shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth. (14) For the life of all flesh—its blood is its life. Therefore I say to the Israelite people: You shall not partake of the blood of any flesh, for the life of all flesh is its blood. Anyone who partakes of it shall be cut off.

מִכֶּם לֹא־תֹאכַל דָּם וְהַגֵּר הַגֵּר
 בְּתוֹכְכֶם לֹא־יֹאכַל דָּם: (יג)
 וְאִישׁ אִישׁ מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וּמִן־הַגֵּר
 הַגֵּר בְּתוֹכְכֶם אֲשֶׁר יִצְוֶה צִיד חַיָּה
 אוֹ־עוֹף אֲשֶׁר יֹאכַל וְשִׁפְךָ
 אֶת־דָּמוֹ וְכִסָּהוּ בְּעֶפֶר: (יד)
 כִּי־נַפְשׁ כָּל־בֶּשֶׂר דָּמוֹ בְּנַפְשׁוֹ
 הוּא וְאָמַר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל דָּם
 כָּל־בֶּשֶׂר לֹא תֹאכְלוּ כִּי נַפֶּשׁ
 כָּל־בֶּשֶׂר דָּמוֹ הוּא כָּל־אֲכָלְיוֹ
 יִכָּרֵת:

Leviticus now pushes the idea further. Blood is not merely associated with life. Blood is life. How is this to be understood?

Ramban on Leviticus 17:14:1

(1) THE BLOOD THEREOF IS 'B'NAFSHO' (ALL ONE WITH THE LIFE THEREOF). First it stated, *For the life of the flesh is in the blood*. Then it changed and said [in Verse 14 before us], *For as to the life of all flesh, the blood thereof is all one with the life thereof*, meaning to say that the blood is the life, and the life is in the blood, as both are mixed together, similarly to wine when diluted with water, in which case the water is in the wine and the wine in the water, and each one is "in" the other. Afterwards it explained [in the

רמב"ן על ויקרא י"ז:י"ד:א'
 (א) דָּמוֹ בְּנַפְשׁוֹ הוּא אָמַר תְּחִלָּה
 (ויקרא י"ז:י"ד:א) "כִּי נַפֶּשׁ הַבֶּשֶׂר
 בְּדָם הִיא"; אַחֲרַיִךְ הִפְךָ וְאָמַר
 "כִּי נַפֶּשׁ כָּל בֶּשֶׂר דָּמוֹ בְּנַפְשׁוֹ
 הוּא", לֹמַר כִּי הַדָּם הוּא הַנַּפֶּשׁ
 וְהַנַּפֶּשׁ הִיא בְּדָם שְׁשֻׁנֵיהֶם
 מְעֻרְבִין יַחַד, וְיִהְיֶה זֶה כְּעֵינֵינוּ
 הַמְזוּוג בְּמַיִם, שְׁהַמַּיִם בֵּינֵינוּ וְהַיַּיִן
 בְּמַיִם כָּל אֶחָד בְּחֻבְרוֹ; וְאָח"כ
 פִּרֵשׁ "כִּי הַדָּם הוּא הַנַּפֶּשׁ"
 עֲצָמוֹ, לֹמַר שֶׁהָיוּ לְבֶשֶׂר אֶחָד
 לֹא יִתְפָּרְדוּ, לֹא יִמָּצָא דָם בְּלֹא

second half of Verse 14 before us, stating *for the life of all flesh is the blood thereof*], that the blood is the very life, meaning to say that both have become one inseparable substance, so that you can never find blood without life nor life without blood...

נֶפֶשׁ וְלֹא נֶפֶשׁ בְּלֹא דָם, כִּידוּעַ
 בְּרוּחַ אֲשֶׁר תִּחְלָתוּ מִן הַלֵּב
 שֶׁהוּא הַיּוֹלֵי לְרוּחוֹת כֶּלֶן, וּמִמֶּנּוּ
 יבֹא הַזֵּן שְׁעוֹשֶׂה הַדָּם, וְהַדָּם
 הוּא הַמּוֹלִידוֹ וְהַמְקַיְמוֹ, כְּעֵנִין
 הַגֵּלֶם וְהַצּוּרָה בְּכֹל בְּעָלֵי הַגּוֹף,
 שֶׁלֹּא יִמָּצֵא הָאֶחָד בְּלֹתֵי
 הָאֲחֵר...

Ramban sharpens the point: blood and life are not two separate things placed next to each other. They are mixed together, like wine and water, until they become inseparable.

So when the Torah speaks about blood, it is not treating blood as a loose symbol for life. Blood is the visible presence of life itself.

If that is true, then spilled blood is not merely evidence that death happened. It represents life taken from the world. And if that life was taken unjustly, then the blood does not simply disappear. The life represented by that blood remains unresolved. It cries out even after the person has died.

And that creates the next question: Who is responsible for answering that cry?

Numbers 35:19

(19) It is the blood-avenger who shall put the murderer to death; that is who shall put them to death upon encounter.

במדבר ל"ה:י"ט

(יט) גֹּאֵל הַדָּם הוּא יָמִית
 אֶת־הַרֹצֵחַ בְּפִגְעוֹ־בּוֹ הוּא יִמָּתְנוּ:

The Torah's answer is startlingly concrete: the go'el ha-dam, the blood-avenger. Notice how little explanation the Torah gives. It does not pause to introduce the blood-avenger as a strange institution. It assumes the audience already understands who this person is and what obligation they carry.

In the Torah's world, if your life were taken, you would know whose responsibility your blood would become. You would know who was obligated to answer for you.

That is difficult for most of us to feel now. We do not live in a Jewish world where cities of refuge, blood vengeance, and kinship obligation are immediate social realities. But the Torah assumes a world where spilled life is not anonymous. Blood creates personal obligation.

And now the Torah widens the idea. The blood-avenger is not only about personal vengeance. The law also asks where the blood was received, what happens to the land, and whether spilled life can ever simply be ignored.

Numbers 35:20-33

(20) So, too, if one pushed another in hate or hurled something at them on purpose and death resulted, (21) or if one struck with their hand in enmity and death resulted, the assailant shall be put to death; that person is a murderer. The blood-avenger shall put the murderer to death upon encounter. (22) But if the person pushed them without malice aforethought or hurled any object at them unintentionally, (23) or inadvertently dropped upon them any deadly object of stone, and death resulted—though not being an enemy and not seeking to harm— (24) in such cases the

במדבר ל"ה:כ"ל-ל"ג

(כ) וְאִם-בְּשִׁנְאָה יִהְדָּפוּ אוֹ-הַשְּׁלִיךְ עָלָיו בְּצַדִּיקָה וַיָּמָת: (כא) אוֹ בְּאֵיבָה הִכָּהוּ בְּיָדוֹ וַיָּמָת מוֹת-יָוָם הַמִּכָּה לְצִיחַ הוּא גֹאֵל הַדָּם יָמִית אֶת-הַרְצִיחַ בְּפָגְעוֹ-בּוֹ: (כב) וְאִם-בְּפֶתַע בְּלֹא-אֵיבָה הִדְפוּ אוֹ-הַשְּׁלִיךְ עָלָיו כָּל-כְּלִי בְּלֹא צַדִּיקָה: (כג) אוֹ בְּכֹל-אֶבֶן אֲשֶׁר-יָמוֹת בָּהּ בְּלֹא רְאוֹת וַיִּפֹּל עָלָיו וַיָּמָת וְהוּא לֹא-אוֹיֵב לוֹ וְלֹא מִבְּקֶשׁ רָעָתוֹ: (כד) וְשִׁפְטוּ הָעֵדָה בֵּין

assembly shall decide between the slayer and the blood-avenger. (25) The assembly shall protect the manslayer from the blood-avenger, and the assembly shall restore the former to the same city of refuge, and there he shall remain until the death of the high priest who was anointed with the sacred oil. (26) **But if the manslayer ever goes outside the limits of that city of refuge, (27) and is found by the blood-avenger outside the limits of the city of refuge, and if the blood-avenger kills the manslayer, there is no bloodguilt on that account.** (28) For the slayer must remain inside the city of refuge until the death of the high priest; after the death of the high priest, the manslayer may return home. (29) Such shall be your law of procedure throughout the ages in all your settlements. (30) If anyone slays a person, the manslayer may be executed only on the evidence of witnesses; the testimony of a single witness against a person shall not suffice for a sentence of death. (31) **You may not accept a ransom for the life of a murderer who is guilty of a capital crime; [a murderer] must be put to death.** (32) Nor may you accept ransom in lieu of flight to a city of refuge, enabling someone to return home before the death of the

הַמִּכָּה וּבֵין גֹּאֵל הַדָּם עַל
הַמְשַׁפְּטִים הָאֵלֶּה: (כה)
וְהִצִּילוּ הָעֵדָה אֶת־הַרֹצֵחַ מִיַּד
גֹּאֵל הַדָּם וְהִשִּׁיבוּ אֹתוֹ הָעֵדָה
אֶל־עִיר מְקַלְטוֹ אֲשֶׁר־נָס
שָׁמָּה וַיֵּשֶׁב בָּהּ עַד־מוֹת
הַכֹּהֵן הַגָּדֹל אֲשֶׁר־מָשַׁח אֹתוֹ
בְּשֶׁמֶן הַקֹּדֶשׁ: (כו) וְאִם־יֵצֵא
יֵצֵא הַרֹצֵחַ אֶת־גְּבוּל עִיר
מְקַלְטוֹ אֲשֶׁר יָנוּס שָׁמָּה:
(כז) וּמָצָא אֹתוֹ גֹּאֵל הַדָּם
מִחוּץ לְגְבוּל עִיר מְקַלְטוֹ
וְרָצַח גֹּאֵל הַדָּם אֶת־הַרֹצֵחַ
אֵין לוֹ דָּם: (כח) כִּי בְעִיר
מְקַלְטוֹ יֵשֶׁב עַד־מוֹת הַכֹּהֵן
הַגָּדֹל וְאַחֲרֵי מוֹת הַכֹּהֵן הַגָּדֹל
יָשׁוּב הַרֹצֵחַ אֶל־אֶרֶץ אַחֲזָתוֹ:
(כט) וְהָיוּ אֵלֶּה לָּכֶם לְחֻקֹּת
מִשְׁפָּט לְדוֹרֹתֵיכֶם בְּכֹל
מוֹשְׁבֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל: (ל)
כָּל־מִכָּה־נֶפֶשׁ לְפִי עֵדִים
יִרְצַח אֶת־הַרֹצֵחַ וְעַד אֶחָד
לֹא־יִעָנֶה בְּנֶפֶשׁ לְמוֹת: (לא)
וְלֹא־תִקְחוּ כֹפֶר לְנֶפֶשׁ רֹצֵחַ
אֲשֶׁר־הוּא רָשָׁע לְמוֹת
כִּי־מוֹת יוּמָת: (לב)
וְלֹא־תִקְחוּ כֹפֶר לְנוֹס אֶל־עִיר

priest.

(33) You shall not pollute the land in which you live; for blood pollutes the land, and the land can have no expiation for blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of the one who shed it.

מִקְלָטוֹ לָשׁוּב לְשֶׁבֶת בְּאֶרֶץ
עַד־מוֹת הַכֹּהֵן: (לג)
וְלֹא־תַחְנִיפוּ אֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר
אַתֶּם בָּהּ כִּי הַדָּם הוּא יַחְנִיף
אֶת־הָאָרֶץ וְלֹא־יִכְפֹּר
לְדָם אֲשֶׁר שִׁפְדָּה בָּהּ כִּי־אֵם
בְּדָם שִׁפְכוּ:

Now the idea hinted at in Genesis becomes law.

Abel's blood cried out from the ground. The ground had opened its mouth to receive his blood, and Cain is told that he is now more cursed than that ground. The implication is striking: even the ground has been affected by receiving innocent blood, while Cain bears the greater curse because he is the murderer.

Numbers now names the principle directly: bloodshed pollutes the land. Bloodshed is not only a crime against a person. In the Torah's world, spilled life leaves a moral stain in the place where it was received. That stain does not disappear simply because time has passed or the victim has died. It remains unresolved until it is answered.

So now we can return to Egypt with a different question: If blood can cry out from the ground, and bloodshed can pollute the place where it was received, what would it mean for the Nile itself to become blood?

Exodus 1:15-24

(15) The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, (16) saying, "When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live." (17) The midwives, fearing God, did not do as

שמות א':ט"ו-כ"ד

(טו) וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם
לְמִי־לֶדֶת הָעִבְרִיִּית אֲשֶׁר שָׂם
הָאִחַת שִׁפְרָה וְשֵׁם הַשֵּׁנִית
פּוּעָה: (טז) וַיֹּאמֶר בְּיַלְדֹכֶן
אֶת־הָעִבְרִיִּית וּרְאִיתָן
עַל־הָאֲבָנִים אִם־בֵּן הוּא וְהַמַּתָּן

the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live ... (20) And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied and increased greatly. (21) And [God] established households for the midwives, because they feared God. (22) **Then Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, “Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.”**

אֹתוֹ וְאִם־בֵּת הוּא וְחָיָה: (יז)
 וַתִּירָאֵן הַמִּיֻּלְדֹת אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים
 וְלֹא עָשׂוּ כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהֵן מִלֶּדֶד
 מִצְרַיִם וַתַּחֲיֶינן אֶת־הַיְלָדִים: ...
 (כ) וַיִּיטֵב אֱלֹהִים לַמִּיֻּלְדֹת וַיִּרְב
 הָעָם וַיַּעֲצֻמוּ מְאֹד: (כא) וַיְהִי
 כִּי־יִרְאוּ הַמִּיֻּלְדֹת אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים
 וַיַּעַשׂ לָהֶם בָּתִּים: (כב) וַיִּצְוּ
 פְּרֹעֹה לְכָל־עַמּוֹ לֵאמֹר כָּל־יֶחֱבֹן
 הַיְלֹד הַיְאֹרָה תִשְׁלִיכֶהוּ
 וְכָל־הַבֵּת תַּחֲיֶינן: {פ}

Pharaoh does not merely enslave Israel. He commands the Nile to receive Israelite life. And in the world the Torah has been building, murder does not disappear once the act is over. Blood continues to cry out, even if only God can hear it. Blood affects the place where it is received. Blood creates obligation.

But throughout this period of suffering, God has appeared silent. So when God finally speaks again in Exodus 6, the question is not only whether God will rescue Israel from slavery. The question is whether God will answer what Egypt has done.

Exodus 6:2-6

(2) God spoke to Moses and said to him, “I am GOD. (3) I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name GOD [YHWH]. (4) I also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners. (5) I have now heard the moaning of the

שמות ו':ב-ו'

(ב) וַיְדַבֵּר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה
 וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי יְהוָה: (ג) וַיֹּאמֶר
 אֶל־אַבְרָהָם אֶל־יִצְחָק וְאֶל־יַעֲקֹב
 בְּאֵל שַׁדַּי וּשְׁמִי יְהוָה לֹא נִודַעְתִּי
 לָהֶם: (ד) וְגַם הִקְמַתִי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי
 אִתָּם לְתֵת לָהֶם אֶת־אֶרֶץ כְּנָעַן
 אֶת אֶרֶץ מִגְרֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר־גָּרוּ בָּהּ:
 (ה) וְגַם אֲנִי שָׁמַעְתִּי אֶת־נַאֲקַת

Israelites because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage, and I have remembered My covenant. (6) Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: I am GOD. I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. **I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary judgments.**

בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם
מֵעֲבָדִים אַתֶּם וְאֶזְכֹּר אֶת־בְּרִיתִי:
(ו) לֵכֵן אֲמַר לְבְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲנִי
יְהוָה וְהוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מִתַּחַת
סִבְלַת מִצְרַיִם וְהִצַּלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם
מֵעֲבָדְתֶּם וְגֵאלְתִּי אֶתְכֶם בְּזְרוּעַ
נְטוּיָה וּבְשִׁפְטִים גְּדֹלִים:

God says, “I will redeem you” — ve-ga’alti etchem.

Redemption is not only escape from labor. It is God stepping into Israel’s story as the one who remembers, claims, and answers for their lives.

The same Torah world that speaks of the go’el ha-dam, the one responsible to answer for blood, now describes God as the one who will redeem Israel. This does not reduce redemption to vengeance. But it does mean that redemption belongs to a world of kinship, obligation, memory, and justice.

Israel is not abandoned. Israel is not anonymous. Israel has a redeemer.

And once God claims Israel as His own, the warning about the firstborn becomes much harder to treat as random punishment.

Exodus 4:22-23

(22) Then you shall say to Pharaoh, **‘Thus says GOD: Israel is My first-born son.**(23) I have said to you, “Let My son go, that he may worship Me,” yet you refuse to let him go. **Now I will slay your first-born son.’**”

שמות ד':כ"ב-כ"ג

(כב) וְאָמַרְתָּ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה כֹּה אָמַר
יְהוָה בְּנִי בְכוֹרִי יִשְׂרָאֵל: (כג)
וְאָמַר אֵלַיךְ שְׁלַח אֶת־בְּנִי
וְיַעֲבֹדֵנִי וְתִמְאַן לְשַׁלְּחוֹ הַנֶּה
אֲנֹכִי הִרְגָה אֶת־בְּנֶךָ בְּכֹרֶךָ:

For the modern reader, this warning can feel sudden or disproportionate. But the Torah may expect its audience to recognize the moral logic unfolding underneath the story.

Egypt has already targeted Israel's children. The Nile has already received life taken unjustly. God has now named Israel as His firstborn. And God has spoken in the language of redemption.

The Torah is not introducing random violence. It is laying the groundwork for the justice the Israelite reader has been waiting for since Pharaoh commanded the children to be thrown into the Nile.

If blood is life, if spilled life cries out, and if innocent blood creates obligation, then Egypt's crime cannot simply remain beneath the surface of the water.

So when the plagues begin, they begin at the place where Egypt tried to make Israelite life disappear. They begin at the Nile.

Exodus 7:20-21

(20) Moses and Aaron did just as GOD commanded: he lifted up the rod and struck the water in the Nile in the sight of Pharaoh and his courtiers, and all the water in the Nile was turned into blood (21) and the fish in the Nile died. The Nile stank so that the Egyptians could not drink water from the Nile; **and there was blood throughout the land of Egypt.**

שמות ז':כ-כ"א

(כ) וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כֵן מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן
כַּאֲשֶׁר | צִוָּה יְהוָה וַיִּרָם בַּמֶּטֶה
וַיִּךְ אֶת־הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר בַּיָּאֵר לְעֵינֵי
פְּרֹעֹה וּלְעֵינֵי עֲבָדָיו וַיִּהְיֶה כֶּסֶף
כָּל־הַמַּיִם אֲשֶׁר־בַּיָּאֵר לְדָם: (כא)
וְהַדְּגָה אֲשֶׁר־בַּיָּאֵר מָתָה וַיִּבְאֵשׁ
הַיָּאֵר וְלֹא־יָכְלוּ מִצְרַיִם לְשָׁתוֹת
מַיִם מִן־הַיָּאֵר וַיְהִי הַדָּם
בְּכָל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:

Here, the private sign given to Moses in Exodus 4 becomes the first plague before Egypt.

For Israel, Nile water becomes blood on dry land. No fish die. No river stinks. The sign is enough because Israel can understand what blood means.

But Egypt does not merely need a sign. Egypt needs to be confronted.

So when the Nile turns to blood before Pharaoh, death enters the image. The fish die. The Nile stinks. And blood spreads through all the land of Egypt.

The river reveals what Egypt tried to bury.

For Israel, this is recognition and justice. God knows what happened there. The water did not swallow their suffering into silence.

For Egypt, it is exposure and warning. Their violence has been seen, named, and returned to them as blood. But the blood does not stay buried in the river. It spreads throughout all the land of Egypt. Once blood fills Egypt, death has already been announced. The final plague is no longer a surprise. The story has already told us where justice is going.

Exodus 11:5-6

(5) and every [male] first-born in the land of Egypt shall die, from the first-born of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the first-born of the slave woman who is behind the millstones; and all the first-born of the cattle. (6) And there shall be a loud cry in all the land of Egypt, such as has never been or will ever be again;

שמות י"א:ה-ו'

(ה) וּמֵת כָּל־בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם
מִבְּכוֹר פַּרְעֹה הַיֹּשֵׁב עַל־כִּסְאוֹ
עַד בְּכוֹר הַשֹּׁפְחָה אֲשֶׁר אַחַר
הַרְחִימָם וְכָל בְּכוֹר בְּהֵמָה: (ו)
וְהִי־תָה זְעָקָה גְדוֹלָה בְּכָל־אֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר כָּמֹהוּ לֹא נִהְיִתָה
וְכָמֹהוּ לֹא תִסָּף:

The final plague is devastating. The Torah does not soften it. It lets us hear the cry

that will fill all of Egypt.

But by now, the Torah has taught us that the story's cries did not begin in Egypt's houses on the night of the firstborn. Abel's blood cried from the ground. Israel cried from bondage. And the Nile had already received the lives Pharaoh tried to erase.

So we return to Moses' original fear: What if they do not believe me?

Maybe Moses was not only afraid that he would not be believed. Maybe he feared that the Israelites would not be able to believe that God had been anything other than silent.

The deeper question was whether Israel could believe that the God of their ancestors had truly seen what Egypt had done. Whether their suffering had been remembered. Whether the lives taken from them had created a claim that God would answer.

The Nile turning to blood says yes. God saw. God remembered. God came to redeem.

Once blood from the Nile fills Egypt, redemption has been announced. Egypt targeted Israel's children. God names Israel His firstborn. The death of Egypt's firstborn is not a random escalation. It is the terrible answer of justice to the capital crime Pharaoh began at the water.

And here the Torah's moral world becomes even sharper. God builds the houses of the midwives who preserve life, while Pharaoh, who tried to destroy Israel's children, brings death upon the houses of Egypt.

The plagues, then, are not random acts of destruction. They unfold within a world where blood is life, life creates obligation, and God refuses to let innocent life disappear unanswered.

That is something the Bible is not confused about.