The Motif of the Egyptian Bondage: Observations on its Literary Origins and its Redactional Development in the Exodus Narrative (Exod 1-15)

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ABSTRACT

The paper is dedicated to one aspect treated in my recently finished *Habilitationsschrift* on the literary development of the Exodus narrative. While it is widely assumed that the motif of the Egyptian bondage constitutes one of the cornerstones of the Exodus tradition, a redaction critical analysis of the relevant passages in Exod 1-3; 5 shows that this assumption is unfounded. In its earliest literary form, the Exodus narrative lacks any explicit reference to the enslavement of the Israelites but rather mentions the 'misery' of a socially marginalized group. The idea that this misery is due to the Israelites' enslavement already reflects a later development which then continued in a variety of redactional additions providing further details. In this gradual process which was mainly driven by innerbiblical exegesis, the picture of the Egyptian bondage slowly took shape.

1. INTRODUCTION

Within the last decades, the paradigm of the Documentary Hypothesis has been shattered almost completely. In contrast to the once widespread belief that the Tetrateuch (Gen–Num) consists of the sources J, E and P, present scholarship finds its only remaining consensus in the distinction between priestly and non-priestly material. Furthermore, it has become increasingly clear that vast parts of the non-priestly material are in fact post-priestly which means that they presuppose (at least) the basic stratum of the Priestly Code (P^G), be it an independent source or a redactional layer. Regardless of how the latter point is decided, there can be no doubt that the author of P was at least familiar with an existing pre-priestly narrative thread. Thus, in spite of the three sources of the Documentary Hypothesis, one can nowadays assume three basic stages of literary development within the Tetrateuchal narrative: a pre-priestly, a priestly and a post-priestly.[1] In the following, this model will serve as the interpretive framework for determining the redactional horizon of the bondage motif within the Exodus narrative.

[1] See Reinhard G. Kratz, *The Composition of the Narrative Books of the Old Testament* (London/New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 225–229, 300–303.

2. The Missing of the Bondage Motif in the earliest pre-priestly stratum of the Exodus narrative

During the long reception history of the Old Testament the motif of the Egyptian bondage has gained such a prominent place that it is almost automatically taken as an authentic piece of tradition. It therefore comes as quite a surprise that there is no literary evidence to support this claim. The Exodus narrative in its earliest literary form lacks any explicit reference to the enslavement of the Israelites. The narrative began with the account of Moses' birth and his growing up under the care of Pharaoh's daughter (Exod 2:1–10*), and it continued in Exod 2:11–15* with Moses slaying an Egyptian and fleeing to Midian.[2] The only reference to the Israelites' forced labor (Exod 2:11aβ: 'and he [sc. Moses] saw their forced labor' – וירא בסבלתם) is a later addition which becomes clear from the repetition of the verb וירא ('and he saw') in Exod 2:11b.[3] Originally, Exod 2:11aαb only mentioned that Moses went out to his brothers and became witness of how one of them was hit by an Egyptian. Without Exod 2:11aβ, the usual interpretation that the verse describes an overseer hitting a slave loses its only solid piece of textual evidence. Surely, the said situation could still be implied, but this is not explicitly stated and may therefore only count as one option among others. The only thing that can be known for certain is that it was the preferred option of the author of Exod 2:11aβ who explicitly introduced the motif of the Israelites' forced labor in order to specify the narrative setting for the first encounter between Moses and his people. We will get back to Exod 2:11aβ in our discussion of Exod 1:11–12.[4]

The next passage that provides information on the situation of the Israelites is the revelation scene situated at the Burning Bush (Exod 3).[5] Only a few verses of the chapter belong to the earliest pre-priestly stratum of the exodus narrative where they followed directly upon Exod 2:15bβ$_1$ ('and he settled in the land of Midian' – וישב בארץ מדין). In its reconstructed form the basic layer of Exod 3 reads as follows:

3:1*	Now Moses was keeping the flock of the Priest of Midian. And he led the flock beyond the wilderness and came to	ומשה היה רעה את צאן כהן מדין וינהג את הצאן אחר המדבר ויבא חרבה

[2] See Christoph Levin, *Der Jahwist* (FRLANT 157; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1993), 317–325; Kratz, *The Composition of the Narrative Books*, 282.

[3] See Levin, *Der Jahwist*, 322.

[4] Cf. below, 2.2.

[5] On the following see Christoph Berner, *Die Exoduserzählung: Das literarische Werden einer Ursprungslegende Israels* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010 [forthcoming]), ch. 2, sec. 2.2.1.

	the wasteland.	
3:2b	And he looked, and behold, a bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.	וירא והנה הסנה בער באש והסנה איננו אכל
3:3a	Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight."	ויאמר משה אסרה נא ואראה את המראה הגדל הזה
3:4a	When YHWH saw that he had turned aside to see,	וירא יהוה כי סר לראות
3:5a	he said, "Come no closer!"	ויאמר אל תקרב הלם
3:6b	Then Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at the deity.	ויסתר משה פניו כי ירא מהביט אל האלהים
3:7aα	And YHWH said, "I have surely observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt,	ויאמר יהוה ראה ראיתי את עני עמי אשר במצרים
3:8a	and I have come down to deliver them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land.	וארד להצילו מיד מצרים ולהעלתו מן הארץ ההוא אל ארץ טובה ורחבה
3:10*	Now go and bring forth my people out of Egypt."	ועתה לכה והוצא את עמי ממצרים

Again, the text is completely silent about the Israelites' forced labor. Surely Exod 3:7a mentions their 'misery' (עֳנִי), but the term is not only quite vague, it is also not at all idiomatic in the context of slavery. The Old Testament never identifies the 'miserable one' (עָנִי) with the slave, but uses the former term to denote a spectrum of phenomena related to social marginalization:

> "in [Exod] 22:24 [עָנִי] is used to designate someone who socially is an underdog; one who possesses little or no land and so lacks a ready source of income; who has no power and influence and always runs the risk of falling victim to those who belong to the top social classes; with the foreigner (Lev. 19:10) and the widow and orphan (e.g. Isa. 10:2) he belongs to those who are often without rights and the victim of social oppression (Isa. 3:14f.; 11:4; Amos 4:1; 5:12; Ps. 35:10); YHWH cares about them (22:22)."[6]

When YHWH declares in Exod 3:7a that he has observed the misery of his people in Egypt one should therefore not think of slaves, but rather of a marginalized group of Israelites in Egypt the precise social status of which remains unclear. Despite the lack of sources it is nevertheless tempting to suggest a possible connection with fugitives from the Northern Kingdom who

[6] Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus* (vol. 1; HCOT; Kampen: Kok, 1993), 243.

may have come to Egypt after the downfall of Samaria in 722 BCE. Circles of this kind do at least constitute a plausible background for the idea of the Exodus as an answer to the question how Israel may continue without state and royal dynasty.

Be this as it may, it is at least safe to conclude that Exod 3:7a provides no positive evidence in favor of an enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt. The same applies to Exod 3:8aα because YHWH's announcement to deliver (נצל Hif'il) the Israelites from the hands of the Egyptians (מיד מצרים) is again not idiomatic for the liberation of slaves. In its present context, the phrase rather has military connotations[7] and already seems to anticipate the destruction of the Egyptian forces at the Sea of Reeds (Exod 14). At least, the account of this event did originally follow almost directly upon the revelation scene at the burning bush. The Commissioning of Moses in Exod 3:10* and the beginning of the account of the miracle at the sea (Exod 14:5a) were at first only connected by a set of short notes recounting the return of Moses (Exod 4:18*, 20aβ: 'And Moses went and returned to the land of Egypt.' – וילך משה וישב ארצה מצרים) and the first two stations of the Israelites' wanderings (Exod 12:37; 13:20, 21aα*).[8] Conversely, this means that the story of the Pharaoh increasing the burden of the Israelites (Exod 5), which has often been judged as an authentic piece of tradition, was not part of the earliest Exodus narrative. It will in fact prove to be a fairly late post-priestly addition. That it cannot be original does already result from the simple observation that the burden of the Israelites has to exist before it can be increased. In other words, Exod 5 is dependent upon Exod 1:11–14 where the motif of the Israelites' forced labor is introduced and where it is further specified that one of their tasks was the making of bricks, which is then aggravated in Exod 5. Details of that kind are as alien to the earliest Exodus narrative as the motif of the Egyptian bondage itself.

3. The Literary Origins of the Bondage Motif (Exod 1:11–14)

It is one of the few undisputed facts in Pentateuchal criticism that Exod 1:13–14 do – at least in substance – belong to the original priestly narrative (P^G).[9] The two verses describe how the Egyptians made the lives of the Israelites bitter by imposing on them a hard service (עבדה קשה). The motif is taken up again by the priestly writer in Exod 2:23aβ; 6:5–9 which shows beyond doubt that the idea of the Egyptian bondage is firmly rooted within P^G. However, the decisive question is whether the priestly writer already found the motif as part of a further elaborated version of the pre-priestly Exodus narrative or whether he

[7] Cf. e.g. Josh 9:26; Judg 6:9; 8:34; 9:17; 1 Sam 7:3, 14; 10:18; 12:10–11; 14:48; 17:37; 2 Kgs 17:39; 18:29, 33–35.

[8] See Berner, *Die Exoduserzählung*, ch. 3, sec. 1.

[9] See e.g. Kratz, *The Composition of the Narrative Books*, 241.

introduced it himself. The answer depends on the literary relationship between Exod 1:13–14 and the two preceding non-priestly verses Exod 1:11–12 which mention that the Israelites were enslaved by Egyptian work masters. Needless to say, this relationship cannot be established without considering the redactional history of the entire chapter which will therefore be briefly sketched in the following.

Exod 1 serves as a literary bridge between the end of the story of Joseph (Gen 50) and the beginning of the Exodus narrative (Exod 2), and it is impossible to reconstruct a basic layer that is independent of the narrative sequence preceding in the Book of Genesis.[10] In fact, the basic layer of Exod 1 must be identical with the earliest literary hinge between the story of Joseph and the Exodus narrative. Quite recently there is a tendency to assume that this hinge was first established by P^G and can be found in Exod 1:(1–5,) 7, 13–14.[11] Consequently, the non-priestly material in Exod 1:6, 8–12, 15–22, which was classically divided among the sources J and E, would now have to be attributed to a post-priestly redactional phase. Although it is certainly true that there is little evidence for a Yahwistic source incorporating the stories of the Patriarchs and the Exodus into a coherent narrative, the possibility of a pre-priestly redaction connecting the two formerly independent stories with each other should not that easily be dismissed. On the contrary, the literary evidence shows quite clearly that such a pre-priestly connection must have existed, because the priestly thread in the Joseph story suffers from serious gaps that are only filled by the non-priestly narrative.[12] These findings strongly indicate that P^G is not a formerly independent source, but rather a redactional layer, an observation already made by Karl Heinrich GRAF in 1867,[13] shortly before the Documentary Hypothesis started its triumphal procession in the wake of Julius WELLHAUSEN.

[10] See Kratz, *The Composition of the Narrative Books*, 279–295; Berner, *Die Exoduserzählung*, ch. 2, sec. 1. Differently Jan Christian Gertz, *Tradition und Redaktion in der Exoduserzählung: Untersuchungen zur Endredaktion des Pentateuch* (FRLANT 186; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 380–388. Gertz claims that Exod 1:11–12, 15–22* did belong to the earliest version of the Exodus narrative, but he is forced to assume that its original beginning has not been preserved.

[11] See Erhard Blum, "The Literary Connection between the Books of Genesis and Exodus and the End of the Book of Joshua," in: *A Farewell to the Yahwist? The Composition of the Pentateuch in Recent European Interpretation* (ed. T.B. Dozeman et al.; SBLSymS; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 89–106; Jan Christian Gertz, "The Transition between the Books of Genesis and Exodus," in: *A Farewell to the Yahwist?*, 73–87; Konrad Schmid, "The So-Called Yahwist and the Literary Gap between Genesis and Exodus," in: *A Farewell to the Yahwist?*, 29–50.

[12] See John van Seters, "The Report of the Yahwist's Demise Has Been Greatly Exaggerated!," in: *A Farewell to the Yahwist?*, 143–157 (here: 147–150); Berner, *Die Exoduserzählung*, ch. 2, sec. 1.1.

[13] See Karl Heinrich Graf, "Die s.g. Grundschrift des Pentateuchs," *AWEAT 1* (1867), 466–477.

The literary development of Exod 1 began with a short pre-priestly hinge in Exod 1:6*, 8–9, 10*, 22 which connected Gen 50:21 and Exod 2:1.[14] After the death of Joseph a new Pharaoh arises who sees the Egyptians threatened by the immense proliferation of the Israelites and therefore orders to throw all of their male newborn children into the Nile. This command, devised as a narrative link to the exposure of Moses (Exod 2:1–10), should later trigger the story of YHWH slaying the firstborn children of the Egyptians (Exod 12:29–33*) out of which the complex cycle of plagues would then gradually evolve.[15] It should be noted that the pre-priestly author of Exod 12:29–33* was also responsible for a number of additions to Exod 3 which prepare for Moses' first appearance before Pharaoh (Exod 5:1–2*). Among these additions, Exod 3:9 is of crucial importance for our question, because the verse states that YHWH has heard the cry (צעקה) of the Israelites[16] and has become aware of their oppression (לחץ) through the Egyptians. Like עני in Exod 3:7a, the term לחץ is also not idiomatic in the context of forced labor, but again rather designates the oppression of socially marginalized groups (cf. Exod 22:20; 23:9). Most likely, the author thought precisely of the measures taken by Pharaoh in Exod 1:22. The threatened lives of their newborn sons cause the Israelites to cry out, and this cry makes YHWH take action (cf. Exod 22:22!). Moreover, it already anticipates the loud cry uttered by the Egyptians when they become aware that YHWH has slain their firstborn children (Exod 12:30aβ).

Evidently, the author who has created the story on the death of the Egyptian firstborns depicts the situation of the Israelites still very much in the same way as it was depicted in the earliest literary stratum of the Exodus narrative. He shows no awareness of the motif of forced labor, wherefore it seems reasonable to conclude that he was not yet familiar with Exod 1:11–12. This brings us back to the place of the latter verses within the redactional history of Exod 1. In a first step, the basic layer (Exod 1:6*, 8–9, 10*, 22) was expanded with the story of the Hebrew midwives in Exod 1:15–21*. It portrays a first and unsuccessful attempt of Pharaoh to get rid of the newborn male children of the Israelites and was primarily created as a side piece to the story of the commissioning of the Hebrew nurse in Exod 2:7–10aα. In stark contrast to the kind patronage of Pharaoh's daughter who ensures the wellbeing of the foundling, her father

[14] See Berner, *Die Exoduserzählung*, ch. 2, sec. 1.2. Similarly Levin, *Der Jahwist*, 313–321; David M. Carr, "What is Required to Identify Pre-Priestly Narrative Connections Between Genesis and Exodus? Some General Reflections and Specific Cases," in: *A Farewell to the Yahwist?*, 159–180 (here: 167–175).

[15] See Berner, *Die Exoduserzählung*, ch. 3.

[16] The mention of the Israelites' cry in Exod 3:7bα* (ואת צעקתם שמעתי) is part of the same redactional layer. That the cry was caused by ‚his taskmasters' (מפני נגשיו) already reflects a later development which is clearly indicated by the change from the plural to the singular. Together with Exod 3:7bβ, the phrase was added as a reference to the events described in Exod 5. Cf. below, 2.3.

shows his malignity and folly by attempting to make the Hebrew midwives an instrument in his evil plans.[17]

Both stories are still of pre-priestly origin, and the same finally also applies to Exod 1:11–12* which were inserted between Exod 1:10* and the beginning of the story of the midwives (Exod 1:15). Like in Exod 1:15–21*, 22, the two verses focus on the proliferation of the Israelites, which the Egyptians now try to check by imposing on them forced labor (סבלות). By noting that despite these measures the Israelites continued to multiply and thus caused dread among the Egyptians (Exod 1:12) the author defined a new point of departure for the actions taken in Exod 1:15–21*, 22. The smooth transition between Exod 1:12 and 1:15 was only later interrupted by the priestly writer who added Exod 1:13–14* and thus further accentuated the motif of Israel's forced labor he had already found in Exod 1:11–12*. The ultimate evidence for this development is provided by the P^G itself: in Exod 6:6 the writer first takes up the non-priestly term סבלות from Exod 1:11 and then supplements it with the priestly term עבדה from 1:13–14*. Exod 6:6 thus precisely reproduces the sequence from Exod 1:11–14* which can only mean that the priestly writer deliberately refers to this passage on the Egyptian bondage the second part of which (Exod 1:13–14*) he had created himself. Consequently, the first part (Exod 1:11–12*) must be of pre-priestly origin.

Taking a closer look at Exod 1:11–12 one notices that the verses show clear traces of literary growth. Exod 1:11b which provides detailed information on the building activities of the Israelites interrupts the argument of the passage and has to be judged as a later addition.[18] The original pre-priestly text only comprised Exod 1:11a, 12 and read as follows:

1:11a	And they set work masters over them to oppress them with forced labor.	וישימו עליו שרי מסים למען ענתו בסבלתם
1:12	But the more they oppressed them, the more they multiplied and spread, so that they came to dread the Israelites.	וכאשר יענו אתו כן ירבה וכן יפרץ ויקצו מפני בני ישראל

The pre-priestly author of Exod 1:11a, 12 is the first one who explicitly stated that the Egyptians had enslaved the Israelites. He takes up the phrase from Exod 3:7a mentioning the misery (עני) of the Israelites and specifies it by declaring that the Egyptians oppressed them (ענה) with forced labor (סבלות). This new interpretation he then integrated into the account of Moses' first encounter with

[17] See Berner, *Die Exoduserzählung*, ch. 2, sec. 1.3.

[18] See Donald B. Redford, "Exodus I 11," *VT 13* (1963), 401–418 (here: 414–415); Levin, *Der Jahwist*, 314.

his people: Exod 2:11aβ (וירא בסבלתם) relates that Moses becomes aware of his people's forced labor, just like YHWH will declare in Exod 3:7a that he has become aware of the Israelites' misery (ראה ראיתי את עני עמי). Whether the author had any clear idea of what precisely the forced labor involved remains his secret. That the Israelites built the store cities Pithom and Rameses (Exod 1:11b) is a piece of information that was supplemented only later. It has left no further traces within the Exodus narrative and finds its most telling parallel in 1 Kgs 9:19 where the store cities of Solomon are mentioned. Most likely, 1 Kgs 9:19 is dependent on Exod 1:11b and aims to demonstrate that Solomon's slaves used to construct the same types of cities that had been erected by the Israelites enslaved in Egypt. As one consequently must exclude that 1 Kgs 9:19 influenced the statement in Exod 1:11b, the background of the latter verse remains obscure. It cannot be explained as the result of innerbiblical exegesis, but may instead reflect the situation of Jewish diaspora groups somehow connected to the places Pithom and Rameses.[19]

The dread that befalls the Egyptians when they become aware that the Israelites continue to multiply despite the measures taken (Exod 1:12) forms the point of departure for the priestly writer who describes how the burden is even intensified (Exod 1:13–14aα*):

1:13	And the Egyptians made the Israelites serve with rigor	ויעבדו מצרים את בני ישראל בפרך
1:14aα*	and they made their lives bitter with hard service.	וימררו את חייהם בעבדה קשה

Again, only these general remarks are original while the idea that the service included work in mortar and brick (Exod 1:14aα_{fin}: בחמר ובלבנים) and all kinds of field labor (Exod 1:14aβ: ובכל עבדה בשדה) is the result of later editorial work. Both specifications are only loosely connected to the preceding clause and are completely irrelevant for the remaining priestly passages in the Exodus narrative where the details of the Israelites' hard work (עבדה) are never referred to again. Moreover, it can be shown that the details provided by Exod 1:14 are completely inspired by innerbiblical exegesis. The background for the specification in Exod 1:14aα_{fin} is found in Gen 11:3 where the elsewhere unattested combination of the terms 'mortar' (חמר) and 'brick' (לבנה) occurs again. The intertextual connection was triggered by the reasoning of Pharaoh in Exod 1:10* ('Come, let us deal wisely with them, lest they multiply' – הבה נתחכמה לו פן ירבה) which is strongly reminiscent of the plans devised by the generation of the Tower (Gen

[19] A more detailed discussion of the issue is provided in my forthcoming article "The Egyptian Bondage and Solomon's Forced Labor: Literary Connections between Exod 1-15 and 1 Kgs 1-12," in: *Pentateuch, Hexateuch, or Enneteuch: Identifying Literary Works in Genesis through Kings* (ed. T.B. Dozeman et al.; SBLSymS; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010).

11:3aα: 'Come, let us make bricks' – הבה נלבנה לבנים; Gen 11:4: 'Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower ..., lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth' – הבה נבנה לנו עיר ומגדל ... פן נמוץ על פני כל הארץ). By specifying that the Israelites were forced to work with the building materials of the Tower the author of Exod 1:14aα$_{fin}$ tried to demonstrate that the hybris of the Egyptians was not inferior to that of the generation building the Tower.

An even later addition is found in Exod 1:14aβ where it is specified that the Israelites were also forced to do all kinds of field labor. The roots of this idea do no longer lie in the Book of Genesis, but in the Exodus narrative itself, namely in the post-priestly hail plague.[20] Exod 9:21 recounts that some of Pharaoh's officials ignored Moses' warnings and left their servants (עבדים) in the fields (בשדה). Although it was originally implied that these servants were Egyptians, the motif of the Israelites' service (עבדה) did also leave room for the interpretation that they were Israelites. Precisely this interpretation has triggered the addition of Exod 1:14aβ which explicitly includes field labor among the duties of the Israelite slaves. Exod 1:14b which binds back the list of duties to the general statement in Exod 1:13 is part of the same post-priestly layer that gave Exod 1:13–14 their final form. While the details provided by Exod 1:14aβb have found no further echo within the Exodus narrative and might therefore represent a very late addition, the older idea of the Israelites' work in mortar and brick (Exod 1:14aα$_{fin}$) has inspired the story of Pharaoh increasing their burden (Exod 5) which will be treated in the following paragraph.

4. The Increasing of the Burden: Bricks without Straw (Exod 5)

Exod 5 recounts how the first appearance of Moses and Aaron at the Egyptian court ended in a complete failure. Pharaoh is not only totally unimpressed by their demand to go a three days' journey into the desert to sacrifice to YHWH, but (rightly) suspects a pathetic excuse devised to obscure the Israelites' real plans. As a punishment, he orders that the taskmasters shall no longer give the people the straw to make bricks. Instead, the Israelites now have to gather straw for themselves although the required quantity of bricks is not reduced (Exod 5:6–9*). In its original form (Exod 5:6–13*, 22–23; 6:1), the story continued to tell how the Israelites were forced by their Egyptian taskmasters to comply with the new terms (Exod 5:10–13*) whereupon Moses turns to YHWH with heavy accusations: not only had YHWH failed to fulfill his promise to save the Israelites, their situation had become even worse (Exod 5:22–23). The story culminates with YHWH's reply in Exod 6:1 where he renews his announcement to save the Israelites. The verse prepares for the older priestly revelation scene

[20] On the post-priestly origins of the plague see Levin, *Der Jahwist*, 337; Gertz, *Tradition und Redaktion*, 132–152.

following in Exod 6:2ff. which now reads like an explication of the announcement in Exod 6:1.

The main purpose of the story on the increasing of the burden is to solve a contradiction that had emerged during the post-priestly development of the Exodus narrative. Exod 4:1–4, 6–8, 31a represent a fairly late post-priestly addition which aims at showing that Moses managed to make the people believe in his message of deliverance by working two miraculous actions. This faith of the people stands in sharp contrast to the disobedience with which they meet Moses' message in Exod 6:9 (P^G). In order to explain this sudden change of behavior of the formerly faithful people the author of Exod 5:6–13*, 22–23; 6:1 has created a new situation by increasing the burden.[21] The faith of the people is thus heavily unsettled, and it becomes understandable that they do no longer want to listen to Moses 'because of their discouraged spirit and their hard work' (Exod 6:9bβγ P^G) which in light of Exod 5:6–13* is now all the harder. An even later development is tangible in Exod 5:5, 14–21 where the tale gains the characteristic traits of the murmuring stories. In this context, the Israelite supervisors (שטרים) are introduced to negotiate with Pharaoh and to blame Moses and Aaron after these negotiations have failed (Exod 5:20–21). Like these supervisors, also the Egyptian taskmasters (נגשים) first mentioned by the author of Exod 5:6*, 10*, 13 have to be judged as scribal inventions which add to a late literary picture of the Egyptian bondage. The said taskmasters have finally also made their way to Exod 3 where a redactor claimed that they were responsible for the cry(ing) of the Israelites (Exod 3:7bα_{fin}: מפני נגשיו). He finished by stating that YHWH had also become aware of his people's pain (Exod 3:7bβ: כי ידעתי את מכאביו), a thought obviously inspired by Exod 5:14a according to which the Israelite supervisors were hit.[22]

[21] Similarly GERTZ, *Tradition und Redaktion*, 344, who is however mistaken when he claims that Exod 5:3–6:1 is a homogenious literary unit created by the final redaction of the Pentateuch. The literary development of the passage is in fact much more complex. The basic literary stratum of Exod 5 ist constituted by Exod 5:1–2*, two verses that are still pre-priestly in origin and were once directly followed by the account of YHWH slaying the Egyptian firstborns in Exod 12:29–33*. In a next step, a sequence of three pre-priestly plagues (Exod 7:14–8:28*) was inserted between Exod 5:2 and 12:29, whereupon the priestly writer added the revelation scene in Exod 6:2–7:7*: it directly connected to Exod 5:2 from where it takes up the question of YHWH's identity and established a new perspective on the three plagues following in Exod 7:14–8:28 by claming that it is in fact Aaron who is the spokesman before Pharaoh. Already in an advanced post-priestly phase of development, the first encounter between Moses and Pharaoh (Exod 5:1–2*) was supplemented with Exod 5:3–4* where the author of Exod 3:16–19a, 20; 8:4b, 21b–24a describes how Moses and the Elders started the negotiations on the alleged sacrifice in the wilderness. Only after Exod 5 had reached this state of development was the basic stratum of the story of the increasing of the burden added. See Berner, *Die Exoduserzählung*, ch. 3.

[22] The idea that the Egyptians made used to castigate their Israelite slaves is not expressed elsewhere in the Exodus narrative.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The motif of the Egyptian bondage is not a genuine part of the earliest literary strata of the Exodus narrative[23] which only mention the Israelites' misery (Exod 3:7a: עני) and their oppression through the Egyptians (Exod 3:9b: לחץ). Neither of the two terms is idiomatic in the context of forced labor, but they rather denote the ill treatment of socially marginalized groups. While the precise implications of the Israelites' misery remain obscure, their oppression is most likely to be identified with Pharaoh's order to kill all of their newborn sons (Exod 1:22). That the Israelites were enslaved by the Egyptians is a thought which is first explicitly expressed by the late pre-priestly author of Exod 1:11a, 12; 2:11aβ who introduces the term סבלות. It is taken up and reinterpreted by the priestly writer who speaks of the hard labor (Exod 1:14aα*: עבדה קשה) which makes the Israelites' life bitter.[24] Interestingly, neither Exod 1:11a, 12 nor the priestly passage in Exod 1:13–14* specify any details of the forced labor. The building of the store cities (Exod 1:11b) is a later interpolation, and the same applies to the details mentioned in Exod 1:14aα$_{fin}$βb which both point to a post-priestly background. That the Israelites' service involved all kinds of field labor (Exod 1:14aβb) is a thought inspired by the mention of the servants in the fields (Exod 9:21) while the older notion of the Israelites working in mortar in brick (Exod 1:14aα$_{fin}$) has been developed in light of Gen 11:3 where the same building materials are used to construct the Tower.

The brick motif was then further developed by the author of Exod 5:6–13*, 22–23; 6:1 who describes the increasing of the burden in order to explain why the Israelites reacted with disobedience (Exod 6:9 P^{G}) after they at first had faithfully accepted the message of deliverance (Exod 4:31). Already in its final form including the murmuring passages in Exod 5:5, 14–20 the story has then given rise to the short note in Exod 3:7bα$_{fin}$β which mentions how the people suffered from the evil treatment through their supervisors. In sum, the picture of the Egyptian bondage as it is painted by the Exodus narrative is neither original nor historically reliable. Rather, it has developed as a multi-layered literary fiction which is primarily due to the exegetical skill of learned scribes.

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[23] See already Levin, *Der Jahwist*, 314; Kratz, *The Composition of the Narrative Books*, 280.

[24] It should be noted that by introducing the term עבדה the priestly writer possibly alluded to the demand of the Israelites to go and serve (עבד) YHWH which is attested already in the pre-priestly plagues (Exod 7:16*, 26; 8:16). Again, there is no textual evidence to support the claim that prior to the addition of P^{G} the service of YHWH was meant to contrast the servitude in Egypt. Rather, the motif seems to be due to a literary connection between the Exodus und the revelation at mount Sinai which was first established in Exod 3:12aβγb. See Berner, *Die Exoduserzählung*, ch. 2, sec. 2.2.1.