

From *LXX*
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IX.

Ornias

When we cross back out of *Assiyah*, the world of making and doing, over the Jordan, the river of descent, it is as our father Joshua had promised: “When your children ask their fathers in time to come, ‘What do these stones mean?’ then you shall let your children know, ‘Israel passed over this Jordan on dry ground.’ For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we passed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty; that you may fear the Lord your God forever.” We pass the stones laid by our father Joshua in reverent silence. We all know what they are; we do not need to be told. We are not tourists here. We are part of a great solemn procession. The great walls of water on either side of us surge and churn but do not pass a drop. The ground glistens beneath our feet but our sandals do not become wet. As we walk we feel the *ruach ha’shem* upon us, the *nishmat chayim*, the holy breath of life, the wind with which el-Adonay once blew life into the first man Adam and now dries the waters and breaks our hearts of stone. The wind seems to come from all directions at once, and from under our feet.

A moment after the last of us has stepped up onto the midbar, the dry land on the other side of the Jordan, the waters close back over the place we have just crossed. We feel this happen. We see it with our spiritual eyes. We do not look back.

This now that stretches before us is the kingdom of formation. This is the kingdom of *yetzirah*, the first room of the *malchut yetzirah*. It is a dark room, ceilings rubbed with charcoal, walls dimly lit with distant fires. We have crossed over here to be transformed, to be burned with the fire of the Lord. We have crossed over in order to escort the soul of Asaph, Joseph, from slavery into freedom.

As we step up onto the midbar we separate. I stroll over to my group. A guy with a parchment asks me my name. I tell him. He pores over his list for a minute, finds me, jabs at the parchment with his quill, says “Ornias, house of Simeon, over there,” jerks his head to the right. I walk over and find Nehemiah, Asaph, Elkanah, and Basha standing about sort of stiffly as if waiting for a bus.

“Ornias,” they say. “Dude.”

“Boys,” I say.

“Took you long enough,” they say.

“What’s this all about?” I say.

They shrug. “Nobody knows. Supposed to be VI from each tribe. We’re waiting on the rest.”

“Been waiting long?” I say.

“A while,” Nehemiah says.

“Who’s missing from ours?” I say.

“Dakis.”

“Oh,” I say. “Okay.”

I don’t know how long we wait. *Assiyah* is the world of time. We have left that now. I’m hungry, I know that much. I remember reading in the Torah that it takes III months of wandering in the midbar to lose the hunger for flesh: the attachment of the *nefesh*-breath to the body. I’m pretty sure I’ll have no idea when III months have passed, unless one day I wake up eager for the angel bread that Israel ate while wandering here in the midbar for XL years. Then I’ll know, I suppose. Then I’ll say to myself, “Ornias, you’ve been here III months.” How else, I have no idea. There are no calendars in the midbar. There just aren’t. It’s an ontological impossibility.

Eventually, though, the rolls must have been filled with the new arrivals, for we are mustered for an announcement. The guy with the parchment stands in front of us.

“I am,” he says, “Asaph of the house of Levi. I have been assigned to gather us all together here for the trek to Egypt.” Egypt, huh? “We are LXXII in all, VI from each tribe.

“Of the house of Levi, in addition to myself, Asaph, there are Ezekiah, Zachariah, Yohanan, Ezekiah, Elisha.

“Of the house of Reuben, Yehudha, Simon, Samuel, Adayya, Mathias, Eschlemias.

“Of the house of Simeon, Nehemiah, Asaph, Elkanah, Basha, Ornias, Dakis.

“Of the house of Yehudha, Yehonatan, Abrasha, Elisha, Ananias, Chabrias.

“Of the house of Naptali, Yitzhak, Yakob, Yehoshua, Sabbataeus, Simon, Levi.

“Of the house of Issakar, Yehudha, Asaph, Simon, Zacharias, Samuel, Shmaya.

“Of the house of Zaboulon, Shabbetai, Sidaiyyahu, Yakob, Yitzhak, Yesayahu, Nathanyel.

“Of the house of Manasseh, Tzidkiya, Manoah, Yehoshua, Tzefanyahu, Yohanan, Yehonatan.

“Of the house of Efrayim, Eliyakim, Abraham, Manoah, Gedalyahu, Daniyyel.

“Of the house of Asher, Yeremiah, Eleazar, Zachariah, Barabas, Elisha, Dvir.

“Of the house of Dan, Samuel, Asaph, Yehudha, Yonathan, Chabu, Dishon.

“Of the house of Binyamin, Yisroyel, Yohanan, Elkanah, Chagiya, Baruch, Ezekiel. Let’s go.”

“Hey, wait,” somebody sings out.

Asaph turns around.

“Yes?”

“What the hell *is* all this?”

“Yeah,” somebody else chimes in. “Why are we going to Egypt?”

“And where can a guy get some grub around here?”

“And some women!”

“Yeah, women!”

“They had women in the Exodus!”

“But,” somebody else says, “they didn’t have babies. They didn’t reproduce.”

“So,” one of the others retorts, “does that mean they didn’t fuck?”

“Maybe they fucked angelically.”

“Maybe they fucked angel bread.”

“Maybe they fucked angels. *That’d* be something.”

“Maybe angels fucked *them*. Ja ever think about *that*?”

“Gentlemen, gentlemen!” Asaph yells. “Please! It will all be made clear to you in good time.”

“Good time ain’t good enough, Asaph,” someone yells back. “We want to know *now*.”

“That is not how it is written,” Asaph says sort of lamely.

“Written, shmitten!” someone yells. “Tell us!”

“You don’t know, do you, fuckface!”

“You’re as much in the dark about all this as we are, you dickless wonder!”

“Please, please, there is no call for vulgarity,” Asaph tries.

“No call for vulgarity he says!”

“May the *moyl* circumcise his first son and bless the wrong piece!”

“May his tapeworm be constipated!”

“May they name a disease after him!”

“May the Lord plant beets in his stomach!”

“May his insides churn like a music box!”

“May city buses with no mufflers run through his stomach!”

“May all his teeth fall out, except one!”

Asaph throws up his hands histrionically, turns, and stalks out over the midbar, gesticulating as he goes. After a while we all follow him, still muttering a little.

We walk across the midbar. It is a desolate landscape under charcoal skies. We do not stop to rest or sleep. When we get hungry, we munch wearily on manna. It lies on the ground all about us. We bend down and pick up a loaf and bite at it for a while, then cast it aside when we can eat no more. Our teeth masticate the tough rubbery bread until we can gag it down. I won’t tell you the things people say about it. The names they call it. They compare it to many unpleasant things back home. Some of them are quite vulgar.

There is no pillar of fire to guide us. I don’t know where that came from, in the Torah. Never mind a pillar of cloud. We could not have seen it. There is no day.

After a while we begin to see a flame ahead of us. It seems very close, but we walk and walk and it does not grow larger. All distances seem foreshortened here, all perspective flattened. We walk and we walk and all eyes are on the flame.

Speculation is rife. Some say it is the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, burning still with the righteous wrath of the Lord. Some say it is Egypt, our destination, drawing us to it by its light. Some say it is a huge out-of-control

midbar party, where we will finally get booze, girls, and party snacks, not necessarily in that order.

As we approach, it gradually becomes clear that it is a mountain, on fire. And when I say on fire, I mean *on fire*. This is no Mt. Horeb with a brush fire. The whole mountain is on fire. The mountain *is* fire. It is the fire of the angel Mavet, the angel of death. It is the fire that burns and does not consume. Behind the raging of the fire we can hear some sort of deep guttural grumbling or shouting, but can make out no words. It just sounds like somebody is really annoyed.

Somebody really *big*.

It is not until we are standing right in front of the mountain that we can understand the words. This is the voice of the Lord. We stop to hear it.

The voice keeps repeating the same X words:

Ki tikneh eved ivri shesh shanim ya'avod uvashvi'it yetse lachofshi.

We are all learned men. We all recognize the words. They are from the instructions on slavery in the IInd book of Moses: “When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve VI years, and in the VIIth he shall go free.”

In the Torah the angel Metatron lifts up the bones of Asaph and carries them through the gates to the Yam Sof, the Sea of Ending or of Perishing. He passes through the Yam Sof on dry land, and enters into the midbar to begin the process of *chofesh*, becoming free. Asaph is our leader, there is an Asaph in my tribe's group of VI, there are other Asaphim in other groups, but we are also retracing Metatron's passage in reverse, from the Jordan to the Yam Sof, and we are carrying Asaph from slavery to freedom. For the Lord our God worked VI days in the creation of the earth, and on the VIIth he rested; so too shall the slave be freed from his indentured labor in the VIIth year. And so too, we are told, shall the man labor for VI decades a slave to his body, to ignorance and vanity, to passion and power, to dreams and despair, but in the VIIth he shall be set free.

I think it's safe to say most of us felt a little weirded out by all this.

But then Asaph walks toward the mountain. Under his arm, to our great surprise, he has a young goat. He's been carrying meat all this way? The kid squirms and bleats a little. We watch with a certain degree of resentment.

We've been chewing on fucking manna for God knows how long now, and he's got a fucking *kid* with him?

I mean, of course it's for the burnt offering. We all know that. Still, we can't help muttering a little amongst ourselves.

We're still slaves.

There seems to be some sort of ancient altar up there. He says the prayers, slits the goat's throat, steps back. Whoosh, an arm of flame snakes out of the mountain and just fucking nukes that goat. It's very cool.

"Yeah!" we all yell. "Hoo, *baby!* Eat that motherfucker *up!*"

But then there comes a part we'd forgotten. Two of Asaph's tribesmen, Ezekiah and Elisha, step up to the altar holding firepans. Bits and pieces of the altar are still on fire. It looks like the rock itself is burning. They shake some incense into their firepans and hold them close enough to one of the little altar fires to get the incense burning. It's the strange fire the Torah tells us about in the IIIrd book of Moses, the *aysh zerah*. The fire that the Lord had not commanded them. The sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu. We know what's going to happen now. That arm of flame comes snaking out again and gobbles up Ezekiah and Elisha. The places they were standing smoke for a while after they are eaten by the Lord. The self-immolation. The self-sacrifice of the Lord's servants, to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf.

Now we are LXX.

Just before the angel Mosheh was summoned to the mountaintop to receive the Law, the angel and Aaron and Aaron's two sons Nadab and Abihu took LXX elders of Israel to the mountain to view the Lord our God. They were the LXX souls who merited a vision of God. There were likewise LXX members of the house of Jacob that came down into Egypt. We are now those LXX. Before, we were six from each tribe. Now we are the LXX members of the house of Jacob, who is also called Israel, that went down to Egypt. Now we are the LXX Israelite elders who went up the mountain to see the countenance of the Lord.

God knows how much longer we walked before we saw the Yam Sof stretched out below us. The Sof is the end, the ending, the final barrier we must cross before reaching our destination. Just as the Ayn Sof is the perfection without endings, without bounds, so is the Yam Sof the Sea of the Ending, the Extremity of the Earth.

Asaph steps into the water, and the sea parts before him. Water is *mayim*. Heaven is *sh'mayim*, of water. In the division of the waters, life is created. The infinite light of the Ayn Sof descends through the worlds into the waters and, in parting, makes all things new. *Yihi ohr*, let there be light. The life waters pull back and the *yavasha* opens beneath them, the virgin earth. From out of this earth is born Adam. From out of this earth I too will be reborn as a living man, as *nefesh chayah*, a living soul.

Some powerful magic has brought us here, to this place, to this rebirth. Soon we will meet its source. Soon we will learn what task awaits us.

The passage across the Yam Sof is longer than that across the River of Descent. As we walk across the dry land at the bottom of the sea, the walls of water quivering beside us, a sense of time begins to return. We can tell from the ache in our legs how long we have been walking. IV hours, at least. Maybe V.

The sun comes out too. It doesn't rise; it fades in. Like it was there the whole time, but behind really really dark clouds. The clouds gradually thin and disappear, leaving the sun. Everybody's spirits pick up. Some cheer. "Go, sun! Yeah! Kick some ass, golden orb!"

Unfortunately, it's a setting sun. It lasts maybe an hour above the horizon. The grumbling now is mighty. "Come on, dammit, give us the damn sun for Chrissake! We've been walking in darkness for a fucking eternity already! We get sunlight for a fucking *hour*? What *is* this shit?"

At the other side the waters close behind us. A man stands before us. He stretches out both arms.

"Greetings," he says in a loud voice. "I am Reb Eleazar, your Caller. I have called you back from Palestine to Egypt, to perform a divine task in Alexandria, the city of Alexander the Great."