

## EXODUS, RITUAL, COGNITION—AND MEMORY<sup>1</sup>

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### *I. Introduction*

Memory is sometimes seen as a mainly inner phenomenon taking place in individual minds. But what a memory stores, how it organizes its content, and the period of time for which it stores a specific content, is not only a question of individual cognition, but also of external, social and cultural frames, according to recent insights in both cultural and cognitive theory. This article examines the interrelations between cultural and autobiographical memory and the role of religious narrative with respect to this problem, focusing on explicit means for transmission of cultural memory to individuals in the Exodus narrative of the Hebrew Bible. The thesis is that the Exodus narrative offers an example of how a religious medium may affect the mind. In the Exodus narrative, questions of memory, ritual, narrative and the fantastic are intricately interwoven. For that reason it constitutes an interesting area of study in relation to the current debate in the cognitive study of religion revolving around the questions of the transmission of counterintuitive representations and belief. Although I am no specialist in the field of the cognitive study of religion, I hope that this paper may nevertheless contribute meaningfully to the discussions. Presently, I introduce the two perspectives employed in this article, current theories of cultural memory and theories on the fantastic from contemporary literary criticism, after which I will proceed to the case study.

### *II. Cultural Memory*

The French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs developed the concept of collective memory in the 1920s.<sup>2</sup> Halbwachs disregarded the bodily, neuronal and brain physiological basis for memory. Instead, he investigated the social frames without which no individual memory could constitute itself. “Es gibt kein mögliches Gedächtnis ausserhalb derjenigen Bezugsrahmen, deren sich die in der Gesellschaft lebenden Menschen bedienen, um ihre Erinnerungen zu fixieren und wiederzufinden,” Halbwachs holds.<sup>3</sup> Memory is something that grows in humans in the socialization process. Only individuals “have” memory, but this memory is collectively shaped. Memory—also personal memory—comes into being only in communication and interaction within the frames of social groups. Halbwachs thus places the collective as the subject of memory, and he coins terms such as “collective memory” and “national memory.” He sees memory as playing a decisive role in the formation of collective identity. Basing their point of departure on Halbwachs, Jan Assmann<sup>4</sup> and Aleida Assmann<sup>5</sup> developed the concept of cultural

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<sup>1</sup> This contribution is a slightly revised and expanded version of my article “Fantastic Re-Collection: Cultural vs. Autobiographical Memory in the Exodus Narrative”, which is chapter 10 in a book edited by A.W. Geertz and J.S. Jensen: *Religious Narrative, Cognition and Culture. Image and Word in the Mind of Narrative*, Equinox, London, 2011, 191-208. My paper at the CB annual meeting in January 2011 had the above title “Exodus, Ritual, Cognition and Memory” and it was based on this article.

<sup>2</sup> Halbwachs, M. 1925 [1975]. *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*. Here, I’ve cited from the German translation: *Das Gedächtnis und seine soziale Bedingungen*, 1985, Frankfurt am Main.

<sup>3</sup> Halbwachs, *Gedächtnis*, 1985, 121.

<sup>4</sup> Assmann, J. 1992, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung, und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*. München: Verlag C.H. Beck.

<sup>5</sup> Assmann, A. 1999, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*. München: Verlag C.H. Beck.

memory as something different from the terms ‘memory,’ ‘social memory’ and ‘collective memory’ as used by Halbwachs. While the Assmanns are indebted to Halbwachs in important ways, they put his insights into a new framework in which collective memory is seen as a cultural matter that is played out within various social frameworks. The term cultural memory emphasizes the extent to which shared memories of the past are the “products of mediation, textualization and multiple acts of communication”. These are “not just regrettable deviations from the spontaneously produced memory of the participants, but rather a precondition for the operation of memories across generations”, for the production of collective memories in the long term.<sup>6</sup> Jan Assmann distinguishes between two phases of collective memory: communicative memory, corresponding to the phase when multiple narratives by participants and eyewitnesses circulate and compete with each other, and cultural memory proper, corresponding to the much longer phase when all eyewitnesses and participants have died out and a society has only relics and stories left as a reminder of past experience.<sup>7</sup> To offer an example, we may say that our shared memories of World War I are predominantly the product of films, books, commemorative ceremonies, etc. As stressed recently by Rigney, cultural memory in this way is always external in the sense that it pertains by definition to other people’s experiences as these have been relayed to us through various media and multiple acts of communication.<sup>8</sup> To the extent that cultural memory is not a product of direct experience, it is by definition a matter of vicarious recollection.<sup>9</sup> This type of research indicates that we also need to look at memorial practices and mnemonic techniques at a cultural level and see how these interact with individual cognition. I suggest that the Exodus narrative provides an interesting case in that regard.

### III. *The Fantastic*

“The fantastic” or “fantasy theory” refers to a literary critical perspective developed in the twentieth century which concerns itself with the cultural phenomenon of the fantastic, especially in the form of so-called fantastic literature.<sup>10</sup> It is a literature of monsters, metamorphoses, miracles, strange and unnatural occurrences, apparitions, supernatural beings, etc. Although definitions vary within the field of fantasy theory, recent conceptualizations of the fantastic see it as a mode of narration that cuts across genres, or as a set of strategies that narratives can use to variable degrees.<sup>11</sup> It is a fuzzy-edged category within which we may identify and describe sub-types characterized by specific determinants (semantic, pragmatic, etc.) in a more detailed way, while simultaneously retaining their basic relatedness within the overall category of the fantastic. Fantastic elements may appear in all types of media to varying degrees, yet we may still distinguish works in which the fantastic mode is dominant (e.g. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, James’

<sup>6</sup> Rigney, A. 2005, “Plenitude, Scarcity, and the Production of Cultural Memory” in *Journal of European Studies* 35, 1/2, 209-226, quote on p.214.

<sup>7</sup> Assmann 1992, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, 48–66.

<sup>8</sup> Rigney’s Foucault-based position thus seems to be somewhat akin to K.J. Gergen’s social constructionist position on self-memory; a position in which accounts of memory gain their meaning through their usage, not within the mind nor within the text but within social relationships (Gergen 1994, 81, 100).

<sup>9</sup> Rigney, 2005, “Plenitude”.

<sup>10</sup> See Todorov, Tz. 1973 [1975], *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; Brooke-Rose, C. 1981, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal: Studies in Narrative and Structure, especially of the fantastic*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Jackson, R. 1981, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. London: Methuen; Cornwell, N. 1990, *The Literary Fantastic. From Gothic to Postmodernism*. London: Harvester/Wheatsheaf; Lachmann, R. 2002, *Erzählte Phantastik. Zu Phantasiegeschichte und Semantik phantastischer Texte*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

<sup>11</sup> Lachmann 2002, *Erzählte Phantastik*; Ivanovic, C., J. Lehmann, and M. May (eds). 2003. *Phantastik–Kultur oder Kultur? Aspekte eines Phänomens in Kunst, Literatur und Film*. Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler.

“The Turn of the Screw”, the Exodus narrative) from such in which it is not (e.g. *Hamlet*, the Book of Ruth). Fantastic literature is thus seen as a type of literature which actively creates new and alternative worlds by transgressing or violating the boundaries of the real, the normal and the natural. The fantastic is seen as a function of language and cognition; as a mode of narration attempting to describe the other and the absent. This theory formation may thus supply a literary perspective to the debate on counterintuitiveness in the study of religion. Many narratives may be fantastic narratives, but only a specific subgroup of these are then specifically religious fantastic narratives (similarly with counter-intuitiveness: only some of it is religious),<sup>12</sup> and the important thing for scholars of religion is to sort out the specific religious determinants. The fantastic provides literary-critical concepts for the specific types of counterintuitive representations and embeds them in a narrative framework which offers an opportunity to analyze them, not in their singularity, but as part of a set of such representations put to specific use in a narrative. Yet the idea of counter-intuitiveness and the underlying distinction of the intuitive vs. the counter-intuitive still forms the basis of the category of the fantastic.<sup>13</sup> But the fantastic is more than a question of representations; it is a question of the use of representations in narrativity. The advantage of speaking of the fantastic as a narrative mode is that we may then distinguish between narratives dominated by the fantastic and such that, although they may implicitly rely on some violation of intuitive cognitive categorization, they are not dominated by it.<sup>14</sup> In other words, it enables us to construct a typology of the spectrum of fantasy dominance in narratives. Were we to do that, we would find that the Exodus narrative is a religious narrative highly dominated by the fantastic. Upon analysis we will also see that it explicitly deals with questions of memory and belief.

#### IV. *The Exodus Case*

Major strands in biblical and Jewish tradition attest that it is the narrative of the fantastic events taking place outside of the promised land and before the foundation of the monarchy, rather than the narrative of statehood, that is decisive for the identity and self-understanding of the collective of “Israel.” The peculiar thing about the Exodus narrative<sup>15</sup> is thus not only its central importance as the narrative traditions about the origins of Israel and its founding as an ethnic unit and of its religion and institutions, but also this same narrative’s fantastic character: we find all the major<sup>16</sup> miraculous, counterintuitive/supernatural occurrences of the Hebrew Bible in this text. However, none of the eyewitnesses to these formative events come to enter the promised land according to the narrative of the Exodus. Therefore the collective memory of the founding events must be transformed from a ‘biographical’ to a cultural memory.<sup>17</sup> The Exodus narrative deals with this problem by establishing specific mnemonic practices for the purpose of shaping the memories of

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Pyysiäinen, I. 2001, “Cognition, Emotion and Religious Experience”. In *Religion in Mind: Cognitive Perspectives on Religious Belief, Ritual, and Experience*, edited by J. Andresen, 70-93. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>13</sup> See Feldt, L. 2006, ‘Signs of Wonder—Traces of Doubt: The Fantastic in the Exodus Narrative.’ In N. Hönke and M. Baumbach (eds). *Fremde Wirklichkeiten. Literarische Phantastik und Antike Literatur*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter: 311-338; and Feldt, L. 2012, *The Fantastic in Religious Narrative from Exodus to Elisha*, London: Equinox.

<sup>14</sup> We may also encounter religious narratives in which the fantastic is not dominant, e.g. the biblical Book of Ruth.

<sup>15</sup> In this context “the Exodus narrative” is understood as roughly corresponding to chapters 1–18 of Shemot, the second book of the Hebrew Bible, i.e. the pre-Sinai-pericope.

<sup>16</sup> Of course we find fantastic events elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. I only mean to say that the major ones occur here.

<sup>17</sup> See Assmann 1992, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, 48–66.

individuals in later generations; a set of practices meant to (re-)produce cultural memory in individuals, belief and social cohesion. The majority of them are linked to the Passover ritual which becomes the central identity marker for the Israelites, cf. Ex. 12,14 where the ritual is called *zikkārôn*, memorial. Religious narrative and ritual are interwoven in this text, combined with explicit reflection on the instigation of memory and belief. For this reason the Exodus narrative offers interesting material with respect to the question of how religious narrative may affect memory. I will argue that the two basic questions that this narrative attempts to answer are, first, how is remembrance ensured? and second, how is belief ensured in relation to the fantastic events? Both of these questions are intimately linked to the question of social cohesion or the construction of a collective identity.

### V. *The Fantastic in Exodus*

The Exodus narrative is constructed as an image-intensive narrative full of multivocal and ambivalent imagery about a group of people's intense, shocking, violent, emotion-evoking experience at a specific point in time. Figure 1, below, is a survey of some of the major types of fantastic strategies used in the narrative. Let me now analyze these types of fantastic strategies in more detail.

Figure 1. Major types of fantastic strategies used in Exodus 1-18

<p>1. <i>Metamorphoses</i> a) <i>Physical</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A staff turns into a snake (Ex 4,1-5)</li> <li>- A healthy hand turns into a leprous hand (Ex 4,6-8)</li> <li>- Water from a river turns into blood (Ex 4,9)</li> <li>- Dust turns into mosquitoes (or gnats) (Ex 8,12-15)</li> <li>- Healthy cattle turn into sick cattle (except certain specific cattle owned by the Hebrew people) (Ex 9,1-7)</li> <li>- Soot from an oven turns into a dust cloud which produces a rash that produces boils in humans and animals (Ex 9,8-12)</li> <li>- An ocean turns into dry land (the parting of the sea) at a specific moment (Ex 14,21-22)</li> <li>- Bitter water turns into fresh water (Ex 15,22-25)</li> </ul>
<p>b) <i>mental</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Changes of inimical attitude into a friendly attitude in an entire people (Ex 11,3; 12,36)</li> <li>- The hardening of a specific person's heart (Pharaoh) (<i>passim</i>)</li> <li>- The creation of panic in a specific army at a specific point in time (Egyptian army when attacking Hebrew people) (Ex 14,24-25)</li> </ul>
<p>2. <i>Adynata (impossible events)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A bush burns without being consumed, and it speaks, too (Ex 3,1-6)</li> <li>- A strange type of bread falls like dew (rain) in the morning in specific amounts (Ex 16,1-36)</li> <li>- Water produced from a rock (17,1-7)</li> <li>- A pillar of cloud appears during the day to guide the Israelites (13,21-22)</li> <li>- A pillar of fire appears during the night to guide the Israelites (Ex 13,21-22)</li> <li>- The supernatural murder attempt on Moses (Ex 4,24-26)</li> <li>- The supernatural killing of all firstborn humans and animals among the Egyptian people (Ex 11,4-8; 12,29-33)</li> <li>- The sudden appearance of a flock of birds at the camp site (Ex 16,2-13)</li> <li>- Moses' raised arms cause a military victory (Ex 17,8-16)</li> </ul>
<p>3. <i>Hyperbolizations</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Extreme fertility in a specific group of people (Ex 1,7.10.12.20)</li> <li>- Frogs appear in extreme amounts at a specific time and place (Ex 7,26-8,11)</li> <li>- Flies appear in extreme amounts ditto (Ex 8,16-28)</li> <li>- Grasshoppers devouring all produce appear in extreme amounts ditto (Ex 10,1-20)</li> <li>- Sudden hail storm (thunder, hail, fire, lightning) which kills humans, animals (but not the Israelites and their animals) and vegetation, at</li> </ul>

	specific time/place (Ex 9,13-35) - A three-day darkness in all of Egypt except in a specific place (where the Israelites live) (Ex 10,21-29) <sup>18</sup>
4. 'Coincidences'	- That Moses as a child is found by pharaoh's daughter and 'adopted' by her (Ex 2,5-10) - Moses' coming to sit down by a specific well in Midian (2,15ff) - That the location of the burning bush incident being the same as that of the revelation at Mt. Sinai (Ex 3,12) - That Aaron is on the way to meet Moses when the deity speaks to Moses in the burning bush (Ex 4,14)
5 Paradoxes	- All of the cattle of Egypt are killed in 9:6 and then they are alive to be killed again in 9:16-19, 21, 25; they are alive again in 10:25, and then mentioned as firstling animals in 11:5 and 12:29 when all of the cattle should already be dead - The horses on which pharaoh pursues the Israelites—when the horses have presumably already been killed in a plague - The imitation by the Egyptian magicians of Moses and Aaron's signs (water to blood, frogs) - the interplay between YHWH hardening pharaoh's heart <sup>19</sup> and pharaoh doing it <sup>20</sup>

### 1. Metamorphoses

From the starting position of everyday reality, a metamorphosis represents a violation of the normal order of things.<sup>21</sup> Metamorphoses are spectacular boundary-transgressions that the text itself presents as disturbances of order and inversions of existing assumptions about phenomena.<sup>22</sup> The metamorphoses of Exodus come in two kinds: category metamorphoses and kind metamorphoses. The category metamorphoses consist of phenomena changing their basic ontological category, for instance from artefact to animal (staff to snake), natural object to body fluid (water to blood), natural object to animal (dust to gnats), and natural object to illness (soot to dust to rash to boils). The following are attested: tool > animal, natural object > body fluid, element > animal, natural object > natural object > illness. Second, kind metamorphoses, i.e. metamorphoses within the same basic ontological category,<sup>23</sup> changing its status or kind, for instance

<sup>18</sup> The line ends *w<sup>e</sup>yāmēš hōšek*. The verb may be derived from the roots *mšy* 'draw from the water', *mwš*, 'depart', and *mšš* 'grope, feel'. The form is hiphil, perhaps suggesting that the darkness will cause people to grope, not necessarily that the darkness is tangible (Houtman, C. 1996: *Exodus: Historical Commentary on the Old Testament*. II. Kampen: Kok Publishing House, 122-123; Propp, W.H.C. 1999: *Exodus 1–18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. I. Anchor Bible Commentaries; New York: Doubleday, 340).

<sup>19</sup> This was also listed as a mental metamorphosis. But it is also paradoxical because of the simultaneous positing of opposites.

<sup>20</sup> Another 'paradox' that should be mentioned here is that in 9:22, 25 all the plants are destroyed, but in 9:31 and 10:5 some vegetation is left. This paradox is, however, resolved text-internally by the naturalistic interpretations / comments in 9:31-32 and 10:5.

<sup>21</sup> Metamorphosis is a powerful means for phantasmagenesis, says Lachmann (Lachmann 2002, *Erzählte Phantastik*, 116).

<sup>22</sup> Lachmann 2002, *Erzählte Phantastik*, 7.

<sup>23</sup> In the distinctions between ontological category, kind concept and cultural concept, I rely on research in cognitive categorization, see Hirschfeld and Gelman, eds., 1994; *Mapping the Mind: Domain Specificity in Cognition and Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; see also Boyer, P. 1994, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas. A Cognitive Theory of Religion*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, and Boyer's article from 2000: 'Functional Origins of Religious Concepts: Ontological and Strategic Selection in Evolved Minds.' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 6.2: 195-214; Sørensen, J. 2000a "Den magiske illusion? En kognitiv tilgang til magiske ritualer" *Tidsskriftet Antropologi* 41: 65–77, and Sørensen, J. 2000b, *Essence, Schema and Ritual Action: Towards a Cognitive Theory of Magic*, Ph.D.-dissertation, Aarhus Uni-

such as from one state of an element to another (bitter water to fresh water), or from one physical condition to another (healthy hand to sick hand), or from one kind of element to another (water to dry land). As for changes of state, we see moves from a positive state or condition (e.g. healthy) to a negative state (sick) and from a negative state (bitter water) to a positive state (fresh water). Similar processes are seen in the mental metamorphoses, which, in a sense, represent kind metamorphoses in that a change of attitude or heart does not fundamentally violate or transgress any basic ontological category. In the Exodus narrative, the narrator (and s/he only) claims that the mental metamorphoses of especially Pharaoh and to some extent the Egyptians have a supernatural cause and therefore they too entail a category transgression. The metamorphoses in Exodus are staged as boundary-transgressions, disturbances, violations of the normal by means of various strategies: their spectacular character is signalled in the text by the persuasion effect<sup>24</sup> that they are ascribed, i.e. upon seeing or experiencing these signs,<sup>25</sup> people will, according to the deity Yahweh's utterances in the narrative, come to believe that the phenomena in question have a supernatural cause.<sup>25</sup> The spectacular character is further signalled by means of the emotional reactions of the personae of the text, especially fear<sup>26</sup> and an oscillation or uncertain wavering state between belief and disbelief.<sup>27</sup>

## 2. *Adynata or impossible events*

With regard to the inexplicable events attested in Exodus, the question of what makes these events impossible or inexplicable immediately arises. How does the text alert us to the fact that something out of the ordinary is going on? This is done by means of inversions or violations of standard assumptions about the phenomena in question either with regard to its basic ontological category, with respect to its kind (cf. above), or with respect to culturally specific assumptions. If we look at the inexplicable events in Exodus from this angle, and go through the individual events, we see both violations of ontological categories, e.g. a voice (PERSON) coming from a bush (PLANT); kind concept violations, e.g. a fire (kind-concept) that does not consume, bread (kind-concept and cultural concept) falling from the sky like rain (bread is dry, human-made and related to the earth); and cultural concept violations like the sudden, voluntary appearance of a flock of birds that people normally hunt for (prey) at the campsite. Some of the events even violate more than one type, for instance a pillar (cultural concept) cannot be made of cloud (violation of kind and cultural concept) nor can it guide people on their way (violation of basic ontological category ARTEFACT). If we examine the inexplicable events as a group, only three dif-

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versity concerning religious representations. Research in cognitive categorization seems to indicate at least five basic intuitive ontological categories: PERSON, ANIMAL, PLANT, ARTEFACT, NATURAL OBJECT. This level is considered unconscious, intuitive, automatic and universal and it concerns the experience of phenomena and forces in the world (up-down, the characteristics of physical objects, etc.) and encompasses both ontological concepts (person, animal, plant, etc.) and kind-concepts (cat, hammer, etc.) The second type of assumptions, the culturally specific conceptualizations concern culturally specific structurations of semantic elements like "mother," "fuel" or "love," etc., which depend on the basic categorization, but where the specific construction and use is culturally variable. See Sørensen, J. 2007 *A Cognitive Theory of Magic*. Lanham, New York, Toronto, Plymouth: Altamira Press/Rowman and Littlefield for an up-to-date and detailed discussion.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Hebrew 'ôt, e.g., Ex 4,8; 7,3; 8,23; 10,1-2 et al.

<sup>25</sup> E.g. Exodus 4:1-9. However, that is not exactly how it goes. The personae of the narrative react to these signs with doubt, hesitation, suspicion, belief. We will return to this below in the section entitled "Purposes and Effects of the Fantastic Strategies".

<sup>26</sup> Exodus 4:3; 14:25.

<sup>27</sup> Exodus 7; 8; 9; 14:31; 15.

ferent semantic fields are used: the alimentary,<sup>28</sup> the atmospheric/natural phenomenon,<sup>29</sup> the anthropological/personal.<sup>30</sup> The alimentary type represents systematic inversions of what constitutes ordinary food according to the Hebrew Bible: manna is an imaginary, fantastic type of bread raining from the sky. It is a type of food which, contrary to ordinary types of food, does not require work,<sup>31</sup> it is free, it is collected and not harvested, it cannot be stored,<sup>32</sup> a type of food which is not in limited supply - everybody gets what s/he needs – no more, no less. In all of these respects, the phenomenon of manna is oppositional to ordinary bread, and thus it represents a systematic inversion of the normal in the Hebrew Bible: farming and subsequent bread-making.<sup>33</sup> The appearance of the flock of birds is equally oppositional to ordinary forms of food in that it is also a work-free type of food which inverts not only cattle farming but also hunting, in that the prey here approaches the hunter, not the other way around. The water produced from the rock by striking it with the staff also represents a magico-miraculous type of nourishment, which is work-free, instantly produced *ex nihilo* and oppositional to the ordinary. As such, all three types of alimentary apparitions thus represent inversions of the ordinary, everyday world of culture, which includes bread, farming, hunting and gathering. The atmospheric/natural phenomenon type of apparition also represents inversions of the known and natural: neither fire nor clouds normally behave in this manner. What we see is a transfer of expectations from the PERSON category to the NATURAL OBJECT category, enabling clouds and fire to guide. Further, there is a transfer of expectations from the ARTEFACT to the NATURAL OBJECT category, allowing us to see clouds and fire as pillars. The anthropological type of apparition, the supernatural persona Yahweh and the demon Mashchit<sup>34</sup> as killers of the Egyptian firstborn, draws upon standard inferences and expectations to the category of PERSON, yet violates the category at certain points: no two persons can kill that many children in such a short period of time, they are invisible, and yet they are assumed to have intentions, etc. What is represented by means of these events is thus a world in which both ontological categories, kind concepts and cultural concepts are violated and transgressed, in which culture, the normal and the known, is fundamentally inverted.

### 3. Hyperboles

Hyperbole is one of the most prominent fantastic strategies in the narrative, and the reiterated, cumulative hypertrophy leads beyond the merely improbable towards the figure of *adynaton*, the impossible. Characteristic of all of the hyperbolic processes presented in the narrative is that they bring along with them the possibility that they could be little else than exceptional natural phenomena on an unfamiliar scale. However, it is the unprecedented convergence of calamities, the reiterations of hypertrophy, that make them into fantastic events. The hyperbolizations occur in the natural phenomenon area (human fertility is increased to an extreme degree, frogs, flies and grasshoppers appear in extreme amounts at a specific time and place, etc.). The closeness of the phenomena to natural events and processes is noteworthy. This closeness opens a possibility for

<sup>28</sup> Manna, water, birds, Exodus 16–17.

<sup>29</sup> Burning bush, pillar of cloud, pillar of fire, Exodus 3, Exodus 13.

<sup>30</sup> Murder attempt on Moses, murder of firstborn, Exodus 4, Exodus 12.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Gen 3:17.

<sup>32</sup> It rots if stored, cf. Ex 16:20.

<sup>33</sup> Jensen, H.J.L. 2000, *Den fortærende ild. Strukturelle analyser af narrative og rituelle tekster i Det gamle Testamente*. Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 239.

<sup>34</sup> In Hebrew Bible scholarship there is an ongoing discussion as to whether a demon is present in the text, which is ambiguous (cf. Exodus 12:23 vs. 12:29). Further discussion in van Seters, J. 1994, *The Life of Moses: The Yahwist as Historian in Exodus-Numbers*, Kampen: Kok-Pharos Publishing House, 114.

doubt or hesitation as to the cause of the phenomena: is there really a supernatural cause for these events, in terms of an explicit intervention? The closeness to ordinary, natural phenomena can be said to create a space for a “double readability”.<sup>35</sup> This is seen for instance in the hyperbolic fertility of Israel in Exodus 1, in the descriptions of the promised land as blatantly phantasmatic while still being a concrete land area that they are travelling towards, and in the mixture of causes evoked for the boils in Exod. 9:8 compared to the easiness of intervention evoked in 9:15. Another example is the hail of 9:18, which also contains a double readability in its closeness to a natural process. This double readability is spelled out by the text in 9:20 and 9:21 in the separation of those who believe from those who do not. The explicit mention of an east wind and a west wind in Exod. 10:13, 19 to explain the appearance of the locusts and their disappearance adds to the feeling that a natural phenomenon is involved.<sup>36</sup> On the one hand, this type of fantastic event is easier for a recipient to connect to, because of the known and everyday nature of the occurrences (children, frogs, flies, hail, darkness), and because it locates the presence of the superhuman in the ordinary, or extends the ordinary towards the extraordinary. The recipient gets recognizable features to connect to and is drawn further into the fantastic realm by the depiction of natural processes as strange and unfamiliar, effecting both fear and wonder. On the other hand, the signs of the fantastic as signs of excess or exaggeration alienate the natural, the ordinary, in a phantasmagoria so much more disconcertingly by its closeness to the ordinary. Familiar objects, experiences and processes like childbirth or grasshoppers are staged as strange, unusual, unfamiliar, and this creates an uncanny effect, removing them from the world of everyday experience. The fantastic character of the natural processes provoke the recipient to see them in new ways—as disconcerting and alien, or as vivid and wondrous. In this way, they contribute to creating a discourse of ambivalence or doubt.

#### 4. “Coincidences”

In addition to the literary figures that provide the verbal and argumentative means to create the fantastic, there is also the “*lebensweltliche Faktor*” of coincidence or chance, says Lachmann. “Coincidence” marks the questionable moment in which the other, the unexpected and inexplicable, enters into an existing, normal process and disturbs its coordinates. The opposition coincidence/non-coincidence is central; it is an opposition that the fantastic text reacts to by placing the question of whether it is one or the other in the foreground.<sup>37</sup> The ambivalence of a coincidence may be used positively by the fantastic narrative in such a way that its (possible) contingency and its (possible) meaningfulness are brought into play together, so that the barrier between them is transgressed in both directions. This oscillation between the poles creates an effect of insecurity or uncertainty. In Exodus, the events are staged not as coincidences, but rather as meaningful events, and so the strange events and appearances are not *Trugbilder*, but rather explained by the text as supernatural signs of a transempirical being. In this way, the meaning ascription that transforms unknown into known, and inexplicable to explicable, acquires a soteriological aspect.<sup>38</sup> This is what happens in the present narrative when the supernatural persona or the narrator offers authoritative interpretations of the “coincidences” as caused<sup>39</sup> and willed by him, yet the ambivalence of the coincidences remains present as a destabilizing factor.

<sup>35</sup> See Lachmann 2002, *Erzählte Phantastik*, 20. The double readability is also apparent in the scholarly commentaries on the text—some interpret the phenomena as natural, some as supernatural, see Feldt *The Fantastic*, ch.1.

<sup>36</sup> Sabourin, L. 1971, ‘Old Testament Miracles.’ In *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 1: 227-261, see here p. 237.

<sup>37</sup> Lachmann 2002, *Erzählte Phantastik*, 117.

<sup>38</sup> Lachmann 2002, *Erzählte Phantastik*, 137.

<sup>39</sup> This, however, is not done for all the ‘coincidences’, for instance the finding of the child Moses by pharaoh’s daughter.



### 5. *Paradoxes*

In the Exodus narrative, one finds several ‘paradoxes’ in Lachmann’s sense of mistakes, contradictions, auto-referentiality, and the use of contradictory elements that challenge the mimetic-illusionist assumptions of the reader.<sup>40</sup> The ‘paradoxes’ of the narrative confirm and strengthen the fantastic effect of the narrative, even if they, taken by themselves, are not fantastic strategies and cannot in themselves produce a fantastic effect. Lachmann’s concept of literary paradox does not conform to the philosophical definitions of paradox, but involves for instance turning the hierarchy of values upside down, the paradox of a full description of a monster which is then claimed to be ‘impossible’, self-referentiality, contradictions, inconsistencies, mistakes and undecidability.<sup>41</sup> An interesting example is found in Exod. 9:6 where all of the Egyptian cattle die. Strangely, in Exod. 9:19 the cattle are alive again—to be killed again in another plague (9:25), and to be offered to Israel as sacrificial animals (10:25), even if the Egyptians no longer possess any cattle. Some die once more in the plague of the firstborn (11:5; 12:29), while the horses also drown in the sea (14:28; 15:1, 4, 19, 21).<sup>42</sup> These contradictions appear too close to each other in the narrative to possibly have gone unnoticed by any recipient or redactor, also in the ancient world. They are too blatant. Even if the text has been put together from different sources, then why would the redactors leave such obvious inconsistencies or contradictions there, in full view? I argue that these contradictions demand interpretation; they have their own functions when combined with the other fantastic strategies of the narrative and contribute to the fantastic effect.<sup>43</sup>

Some paradoxes of the Exodus narrative take the form of inconsistencies and contradictions that appear very close to each other in the narrative and so are quite conspicuous. Others are central themes of the narrative and traditional exegetical cruxes like the imitation in the contest of magicians and the hardening of pharaoh’s heart. By means of these paradoxes, the narrative flaunts its constructed character and casts doubt on the objectivizing claims of the narrator and deity.<sup>44</sup> The paradoxes obscure the text’s referential claims, create ambiguity, and further stimulate an epistemology of uncertainty. The contest of magicians, YHWH’s hardening of pharaoh’s heart vs. his own hardening of it, and the self-contradictory use of cattle are employed

<sup>40</sup> Lachmann 2002, *Erzählte Phantastik*, 108-111.

<sup>41</sup> Lachmann 2002, *Erzählte Phantastik*, 108-111.

<sup>42</sup> Also, in Exod. 9:22, 25 ‘all the field’s plants’ are destroyed, yet in 9:31 and 10:5 some vegetation is left. Exod. 9:31-32 can be seen as text-internal naturalistic comment. It was difficult to accept that *all* the crops were spoilt—‘could that really have happened?’ Another apparent contradiction, which is difficult to explain, is that between Moses’ statement in Exod. 10:29 (‘I’ll see your face no more’) and pharaoh’s address to Moses and Aaron in 12:31-32. Another paradox is that of how the Egyptian magicians could duplicate the plague of blood if there was no water. I do not agree with Propp that ‘the real answer’ lies in 7:24 (that the Egyptians can obtain water by digging; Propp, 1999, *Exodus*, 325). In the ancient world, this paradox generated many speculations (Gregory of Nyssa, Ibn Ezra, Augustine etc.; see Houtman 1996, *Exodus: Historical Commentary on the Old Testament*. II. Kampen: Kok Publishing House, 30 for references. Another difficulty is how people could survive for seven days without water, something that was also recognized as impossible in the ancient world (Houtman 1996, *Exodus*, 29-30). The question is whether 7:24 describes a successful or a failed attempt to obtain drinking water up against the statements of 7:19, 21. Even if one would argue that the Egyptians were successful in obtaining drinking water by digging, the issue is left unresolved by the text—stimulating reflection.

<sup>43</sup> In the interpretation of Roman epic, scholars have begun to interpret inconsistencies and paradoxes rather than explaining them away as signs of the unfinished or unrevised state of the texts in question; see, e.g., O’Hara, J. 2007, *Inconsistency in Roman Epic: Studies in Catullus, Lucretius, Vergil, Ovid and Lucan*. Roman Literature and its Contexts; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. O’Hara suggests that inconsistencies in Roman epics testify to a poetics of fragmentation and a cultivation of multiple perspectives, and argues that inconsistencies are always devices that demand interpretation.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Feldt *The Fantastic*, ch. 3.

in contexts that assert reference at the same time that they obscure it. By means of these elements, the narrative points self-reflectively towards its own artifice. The recipient is left unsettled, destabilized. The narrative display of enigmatic occurrences thus works not just towards an assertion of power but is also about eliciting disturbance, interruption and unsettling expectations.

### *Summary*

In the Exodus narrative, a clear interpretation of the fantastic events is given in the narrator's voice, as we shall see in the next section. However, there are also discontinuities in the text which function as an underlying discourse that comments upon or even contradicts the authoritative, overt ideology of the text—and this discourse is connected to the types of fantastic strategies used and the way they are introduced in the narrative. As we saw above, some of the fantastic strategies used to generate the phantasms played with the possibility of other interpretations than the supernatural, namely the events being un-extraordinary and normal. However, their fantastic, unusual character or supernatural cause was still asserted in the text. Familiar objects, experiences and processes like childbirth or grasshoppers were staged as strange, unusual, unfamiliar, removing them from the world of everyday experience. The fantastic character of the natural processes provoked us to see them in new ways, while simultaneously retaining the possibility that they might be nothing more than natural events. In this way, they contributed to creating a discourse of ambivalence or doubt, a fair distance from the clear belief and a common, ethnic identity posited by narrator and deity that we will encounter below. This discourse of doubt, amplified in the reactions of the protagonists (see below), plays an important role in the text. The phantasms clearly assist in the verbal and narrative representation of the transempirical to the recipients. This will become clearer as we review the purposes and effects of the fantastic, below.

### *VI. The Purposes and Effects of the Fantastic in Exodus*

The purposes of the fantastic events are staged as the transempirical persona, Yahweh's words in direct speech, and they are uttered at various points throughout the narrative. However, they may be summed up in six points:

1. Rescue from suffering and slavery: 3:7–11; 6:6
2. Land donation/appropriation: 3:7–11; 6:8
3. Ethnogenesis: 3:7–11; 6:7; 7:5; 7:17; 8:19; 9:17; 12:13; 14:4; 14:18
4. Demonstration of divine power: 11:9; 14:4; 14:17
5. Inducement of belief: Israelites: 4:5. Egyptians and Pharaoh: 7:5; 7:17; 8:19; 9:14,16–17; 12:13; 14:4; 14:18
6. Instigation of memory and memory practices: 10:2; 12:14

If redundancy is emphasis then we may conclude that ethnogenesis (3) and inducement of belief (5) are the most important purposes according to the supernatural protagonist. If we have a closer look, we see that the remaining purposes are connected to these two as means. The first purpose (1) forms the enabling premise for the subsequent ones. The second purpose (2) couples the collective, ethnic identity to a land area which belongs to the deity according to the narrative. This purpose is, then, intimately linked to the overarching purpose of ethnogenesis, the creation of a common identity for the Israelites as a people. This collective identity is specified as the property of the transempirical persona (Ex 3:7, 10; 5:1; 6:7; 7:4, 16; 8:1, 8:20–23; 9:1, 13–17, 27; 10:3–4; 12:31; 16:4), which means that the counterintuitive/transempirical and the normal/empirical are connected from the outset according to the narrative. The sixth purpose is crucial because this is what provides the causal link between the counterintuitive/transempirical realm (dominated by

the transempirical persona Yahweh) and the normal, everyday realm of human life. Pascal Boyer (among others) has pointed out that mere counter-intuitiveness is not enough to instigate “religion,” specification of the causal link between the counterintuitive and the normal is necessary in order to produce religion.<sup>45</sup> Thus, the function of the Passover ritual may not be to convey any specific meaning but rather to establish a causal link between the supernatural and the ordinary, and that causal link is memory. The fourth purpose, demonstration of divine power, is connected to the inducement of belief: the fantastic events are meant to induce belief because according to the supernatural protagonist they demonstrate divine power. The second overarching purpose—that of the inducement of belief - is crucial because one would think that belief would be the causal link between the counterintuitive and the normal. But according to the narrative—as I will demonstrate in the following—it does not work like that. The fantastic events are, according to the deity, meant to provide orientation, social cohesion (a strong collective self), and belief, but the fantastic produces neither. The fantastic events produce belief and doubt, orientation and disorientation, - and the amount of disorientation and doubt produced seems even to exceed that of belief. This is where memorial narrative comes in. I will return to the question of memory and memorial practices shortly, but first I will demonstrate the effects of the fantastic events as divided onto the personae of the narrative:<sup>46</sup>

### Effects

PERSONA	REACTION TO THE FANTASTIC
Moses	<p><b>Hesitation, puzzlement:</b> Categorizes his vision of the burning bush as 'an apparition' [Hebrew mar'eh]: 3,3f</p> <p><b>Doubt:</b> doubts that the Israelites will listen to him and that they will believe in Yahweh: 4,1; 4,10; 4,13; 6,12; that Pharaoh will listen: 6,12; 6,30</p> <p><b>Fear:</b> 6,3</p> <p><b>Suspicion:</b> Interprets Yahweh's actions as evil, doubts his intentions: 5,22</p> <p><b>Exhortation to Pharaoh to believe:</b> 8,6; 9,29</p> <p><b>Belief:</b> 10,6; 12,23; 16,6</p> <p><b>Recognition of Yahweh's ethnogenetic purpose:</b> 12,23</p> <p><b>Exhortation to remember:</b> 12,27; 13,3-9</p> <p><b>Exhortation to people to believe:</b> 14,14; 15,26;</p> <p><b>Praise:</b> Ch. 15</p>
The Israelite people	<p>Doubt: <b>15,24; 16,2</b></p> <p>Suspicion: <b>Suspects the deity's intentions of being evil, murderous, interprets the fantastic as lethal threat: 14,11; 16,3; 17,2-3</b></p> <p><b>Rejection of ethnogenetic purpose:</b> Prefer slavery in Egypt to starvation in the wilderness, wish they would have died in Egypt with the Egyptians (i.e. that there would have been no ethnogenesis): 14,12; 16,3</p>
The king, Pharaoh	<p><b>Rejection, disbelief:</b> <i>passim</i></p> <p><b>Acceptance, belief:</b> <i>passim</i></p>
The Egyptian people	<p><b>Pain/suffering:</b> 12,30;</p> <p><b>Acceptance of ethnogenesis:</b> 12,31-32;</p> <p><b>Fear:</b> 12,33; 14,25</p> <p><b>Belief:</b> 8,15; 10,7</p>

As we see, the amount of doubt, suspicion, rejection and disorientation is surprisingly great in all of these speakers, in direct opposition to the supernatural persona's stated purpose. People are disoriented, confused, bewildered. The fantastic events are staged as emotionally and cognitively

<sup>45</sup> Boyer 1994, *Naturalness*, 42–43, 125–154.

<sup>46</sup> While the distinctions between personae and narrator are common in narrative analyses, it seems proper to note that they are used here in accordance with Mieke Bal's theory of narrative (Bal, M. 1997, *Narratology*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press). She makes an analytical distinction in the analyses of narrative between text, story and fabula. The narrative analysis offered here focuses on the text-layer.

disorienting experiences; shocking, violent and emotion-evoking episodes.<sup>47</sup> And as staged by the Exodus narrative, such experiences do not lead to belief. But naturally, the narrative does not leave us with doubt and ambivalence. When we look closer at the Exodus narrative, we discover a pattern in the reactions to the fantastic. It seems that being closer to the events results in less belief. Direct experience seems to lead to doubt and disorientation (e.g. Ex 14:10–12 and cf. above), whereas narration or interpretation by Moses or the narrator leads to belief and orientation. The narrator is a type of omniscient external narrator who may survey past, present and future effortlessly, and s/he is the only speaker who is never disoriented.

### VII. *The Narrator*

<b>3<sup>rd</sup> person external narrator explanations</b>	<p>The fantastic signs are signs of Yahweh's concern, remembrance, and commitment to the people: 2,23-25; 4,30; 14,30</p> <p>The signs produce belief: 4,31; 9,20; 12,50; 14,31</p> <p>Hearing about the signs produce belief: 4,31</p> <p>A promise of signs/purposes leads to rejection: 6,9</p> <p>Yahweh's wonders are better than the wonders of the Egyptian magicians: 7,13</p> <p>The fantastic events are related to origins: 9,24</p> <p>The wonders are ethnogenetic: 9,26; 10,23</p> <p>Israelites trust Yahweh: 14,8</p> <p>Israelites don't trust Yahweh and Moses: 14,10; 16,20; 16,27</p>
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The quandary between orientation and disorientation, belief and doubt, or the state of doubt and hesitation that the eyewitnesses to the events find themselves in, raises the central question of belief: if they are indeed bewildered and disoriented, how is belief, a strong collective self, and orientation ensured?

### VIII. *Levels of Narration*<sup>48</sup> *in Exodus*

As we have seen above, the fantastic events do not have the function of founding and orientating the Israelite collective self. Social cohesion is not established by the events at the Exodus, and they do not induce belief—and when they do—then only momentarily. The events are also disorienting, disconcerting, and provoke doubt and hesitation. As hinted at above, the two types of responses to the fantastic events (belief/doubt, orientation/disorientation) correspond to levels of narration. There is a level of narration and a point of focalisation where Israel is formed as a strong collective self, and is oriented in time and space by the narrative of the fantastic events, and where people do come to believe. But this occurs only at a level of narration twice removed from the events, as it were: in the narration of the narration of the events, that is—when the narrative narrates that it narrates. When retold, re-narrated, the fantastic narrative gives a sense of

<sup>47</sup> Might they be likened to similar episodes in rituals? Sometimes, it is assumed that such extreme events provide the novice with “a new awareness of the structure of the cosmos and their place within it” (Whitehouse, H. 2000, *Arguments and Icons: Divergent Modes of Religiosity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 20). But as Houseman points out, it is not clear what this new awareness consists of. There seems to be a lack of evidence that novices absorb a great amount of new information. Rather, it seems that the extreme experiences question the system's core ideas, rather than introduce new ones (Houseman, M. 2002, Review of Whitehouse, *Arguments*, in *Journal of Ritual Studies* 16(2), 18-22, see here p.19). Clearly, this could resemble Victor Turner's point about ritual symbolism leading to awareness of and reflection upon axiomatic cultural values (Turner, V. 1967, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press). This point seems to be corroborated by the Exodus material, where the surprising revelations and fantastic events have the effect not only of orienting—their intended purpose according to the supernatural persona (which is often accepted by commentators, even though the connection between miracles and belief is rather tenuous)—but clearly also of disorienting. The presence of both makes possible a questioning of core cultural ideas, is reflection-enabling, and therefore makes possible both belief and rejection.

<sup>48</sup> The concept of levels of narration as well as other narratological concepts in this article are used according to Bal, *Narratology*, 1997.

direction, induces belief and orients people’s lives in time and space. There is a distinction in the text between those to whom this is narrated, the narratees, and those who experience the events, the eyewitnesses. At the level of narration and point of focalization staged as the point of view of the contemporaries, the eyewitnesses, we find disorientation, confusion and disintegration as a result of the fantastic events, whereas the narratees are presented as believers. The construction of the levels of narration seems to tell us that with narration comes distance and thus orientation. The diagram below illustrates this point.

<i>Level of narration</i>	<i>Teller's time</i>	<i>Position of teller in relation to told</i>	<i>Point of focalization</i>	<i>Effect of the fantastic</i>
Narration of narrated fantastic events	'Present', moment of recollecting	Distance	Later generations	Belief Orientation Differentiation Clear identity for Israel
Narration of fantastic events	'Past', recollected moment	Proximity	Contemporaries	Doubt Disorientation Tension or dialectic between disorientation, un-differentiation, a weak collective self, and belief, orientation, differentiation and a strong collective self

On the one hand the text communicates the importance of one, common self for the collective of Israel, but on the other hand this necessity is argued by means of a memorial narrative of the past, which shows clearly that this same identity was not there.<sup>49</sup> This means that “the category ‘Israel’ is an ideal, normative category—more than a historical factual category”.<sup>50</sup> The consequence is that what the Exodus narrative portrays as ‘past’ (see the lower row above) is really a description of the ‘present’. And the ‘present,’ the upper row in the diagram above, is, rather, the future, because it signals what it desires to achieve; it is a utopian vision. The collective self of this narrative is not there in the ‘present’ either, but is, rather, a fantasy for the future.<sup>51</sup> The Exodus narrative is, as most commentators agree, a founding epic embodying Israel’s memory of its fantastic origins, but it also discloses an interweaving of two conflicting perspectives in relation to that fantastic origin: one of unity, belief, orientation, and satisfaction/fulfilment, but also one of disintegration, disbelief, disorientation, and disappointment.<sup>52</sup> What the diagram shows is that narration, according to this cultural model, is crucial for the formation of belief, orientation and stabilization of the collective self. The oscillation between belief and doubt present in the text is absolutely necessary, for without it the problem of the text would not be clearly stated: how do we secure belief and orientation of the collective self? The text implies that this can be achieved

<sup>49</sup> As H.J.L. Jensen explains, history begins and ends in catastrophes because Israel did not worship its god, because Israel was not aware of its true collective identity, worshipped other gods, mixed with other peoples in marriage and so lost its ethnic specificity; in short because Israel did not remember (Jensen, H.J.L., 1998, *Gammeltestamentlig religion*, Kbh: ANIS, 17–18).

<sup>50</sup> Jensen, H.J.L. 1998, *Gammeltestamentlig*, 17.

<sup>51</sup> The Exodus narrative explores a possible future by means of a narrative about the past, about origin; the fantastic strategies are used to create an origin, which may alter the future.

<sup>52</sup> It is thus a religious narrative which has room for both a relativistic tendency (cultivating a dialogue between differing understandings of experience) and a fundamentalistic tendency (laying down one coherent, dominant narrative). For the distinction relativistic vs. fundamentalistic, see Ochs, E. and Capps, L., 1996, “Narrating the Self” in *Annual Review of Anthropology* 25: 19-43, see here p. 32.

by means of memorial narrative. But that is jumping ahead of things. For how exactly is the link between fantastic events and memory established?

### *IX. Narrative Integration, Ritual and Mnemonic Practices*

The interplay between narrative and embedded ritual here turns out to be important, for it is in ritual that the link between memorial narrative and the fantastic is established. The participants in the ritual are staged as eyewitnesses to the fantastic events by means of specific bodily practices that replicate the original Passover meal: food prepared in the same way, eaten at the same time of day, wearing the same type of clothing, and, importantly, in the same atmosphere of fear (Ex 12:11).<sup>53</sup> 27 All of these are likely to have emotional effect. The ritual is performed vicariously for the eyewitness generation, and the participants are meant to mimic the original situation in detail as staged in the narrative. But narrative is also used as a means to integrate past, present and future, eyewitnesses and narratees, initiates and initiators, fathers and children. The fathers (eyewitnesses) in the Exodus narrative did not come to enter the land (they died in the Wilderness) and so were never able to participate in the re-tellings in the land that the narrative with embedded ritual prescribes (Ex 12:14, 24–27). This point stresses that the positions of eyewitness vs. narratee, and father vs. son, are ideal and transferable: the present sons will in due course occupy the father-position, the eyewitness position. In and through the ritual, narrator position is then merged with eyewitness position, so that the vicarious “eyewitnesses” (the narratees in the text-external world) come to possess and transmit the authoritative interpretation that the narrator of the Exodus possesses and transmits in the Hebrew Bible narrative (but which the eyewitnesses in the story did not possess). An important religious trait of this narrative comes out in the direct reader appeals forming part of the embedded ritual. This is where the text attempts to transgress the boundary between narrated world and reader’s world by means of deixis: explicit reference to the reader/listener by means of the second person pronoun, see Exodus chapters 12 and 13 (*passim*). Yahweh explains how to perform the ritual and how to explain it to the later generations, the children of the eyewitnesses of the Exodus. But the eyewitnesses of the Exodus narrative (including Moses) cannot have told it to their children themselves because they died in the wilderness, and therefore the use of deixis in the ritual prescriptions functions as a means for establishing integration between cultural narrative and autobiographical narrative. But in and through the embedded ritual, further means for establishing the narrative integration that blends or merges narrator (possessing the authoritative interpretation of the events) and eyewitness (characterized by confusion and disorientation) positions are specified. Let us have a look at the mnemonic practices established in Exodus (the majority of which are linked to the Passover ritual) to further pursue the question of memory. The narrative thematizes the question of memory explicitly: the Israelites are presented as forgetful and in constant need of new fantastic events, ever more miracles. No matter how often they are presented with miracles, wonders, violent killings and other extreme events, no matter how awesome and fantastic the things that take place, they do not have a lasting effect, because the Israelites forget them almost immediately and doubt the supernatural agent that performed them.<sup>54</sup> This leads us to look for explicit strategies for the preservation of memory in the narrative. The Exodus narrative instigates a set of mnemonic practices, no less than nine different ones, used for the transmission to and education of later generations.

<sup>53</sup> *ḥippazon* connotes a combination of fear and haste. Eating with *ḥippazon* is unusual, a violation of table manners. See Propp, W.H.C. 1998, *Exodus*, 397.

<sup>54</sup> For examples, see the shifts from Ch. 12 (Yahweh’s killing of all firstborn in Egypt) to Ch. 14:10–12; from Ch. 14–15 (the separating of the sea) to Ch. 15:24; from Ch. 15:25 (transformation of bitter water to fresh water) to 16:3, from Ch. 16:4ff. (manna) to Ch. 16:20, 27; from 16:4ff. (manna) to 17:2, etc.

1. Familial, (vicarious) autobiographical narration (father to son): 10:2; 12:26
2. Oral repetition:<sup>55</sup> 13:9
3. Marking/offering all firstborn of humans and cattle as Yahweh's (the Consecration of the Firstborn):<sup>56</sup> 13,13
- and explicitly within the framework of the Seder-meal/Passover ritual:
  4. Bodily markers: 13,9.16
  5. Temporal markers: 12,14.17.42
  6. Alimentary markers: 12,4-10.15.20
  7. Vestimentary markers: 12,11
  8. Emotional markers: 12,11
  9. Boundary markers (liminal symbolism) in relation to familial houses: 12,7.13

These are the mnemonic sites that reflect and manage the threat of oblivion in the narrative; a set of practices meant to produce memory and social cohesion. As we see, the majority of them are linked to the Passover ritual, which becomes the central identity marker for the Israelites. Memory means to confess or affirm one's adherence to the group by re-telling the narrative and performing the ritual as a remembrance of the events of the Exodus (cf. Ex 12:14).<sup>57</sup> These mnemonic techniques show how to maintain memory, how to avoid oblivion; they are the how of memory in Exodus. Let us now consider the relations between cultural memory and individual memory.

#### *X. Cultural Memory—Individual Memory?*

Cultural memory in the form of religious narrative is always external in the sense that it pertains to other people's narratively mediated experience as relayed to us through various media and multiple acts of communication. Even if people undergo comparable experiences, the cultural memory of those experiences is the ongoing result of public communication and the circulation of memories in mediated form. We have here seen an example of how memory circulation and transmission may be culturally formed. How does this relate to research in autobiographical memory? In his book from 2002, Scott Atran argues the need for narrative consolidation when it comes to individual memory of intense religious rituals. Individual memories need social support and narrative consolidation in order to be recalled readily.<sup>58</sup> And if this is true for intense initiation rituals based in stressful and striking memories,<sup>59</sup> then it is probably even more so in the case of less intense rituals. And why not also in the case of image-intensive, fantastic religious narrative? Research in autobiographical<sup>60</sup> memory and narrative and consciousness suggest that

<sup>55</sup> The Hebrew text says that *tôrât YHWH* is to be in the mouth of the individual, which signals orality. Torah here connotes "teaching" rather than any particular law, see Propp, 1998, *Exodus. Tôrat YHWH* may mean both "teaching from" and "teaching about" Yahweh. The latter is more likely than the former, in view of the preceding narrative taking place before the Sinai event, and probably refers to Yahweh's extraordinary actions at the Exodus.

<sup>56</sup> Which could not have been celebrated with the Egyptians in pursuit, since it is a seven day festival (Propp 1998, *Exodus*, 429).

<sup>57</sup> According to this cultural model, oral narratives and autobiographical narration and ritual in a family setting have the power to establish enduring bonds between individuals and deity.

<sup>58</sup> Atran, S. 2002, *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 161–163.

<sup>59</sup> Atran argues that we should not confound memories of stressful events with memories of striking events. In the case of striking events, the need for narrative consolidation is even greater (Atran, *Gods*, 2002, 162–165).

<sup>60</sup> For a definition see Neisser (1994, 1)

narrative plays a crucial role in the formation of mind.<sup>61</sup> Professor of psychology Mark Freeman has shown how autobiographical memory is necessarily narrative in character, that imagination is inevitably involved and combined with the inputs of others, literary conventions and cultural scripts.<sup>62</sup> But the conflation of autobiographical memory, narrativity and imagination does not necessarily imply untruthfulness. Life narration and self memory are (also) about imagining and meaning making (poiesis).<sup>63</sup>

The Exodus narrative combined with the Passover ritual is an annually repeated performance, but there is no logical doctrine connected to it, and what is to be remembered—the fantastic experience—is very imaginative. The Exodus narrative tells of emotionally arousing experiences and autobiographical memory of a spatiotemporally specific kind; of sacred and revelatory events with a once-in-a-lifetime quality. The fantastic events do not ensure social solidarity among co-participants contrary to what the narrator and the deity tell us. Narrative consolidation and memorial practices connected especially to the body are stipulated as necessary in order for the fantastic events to ensure social solidarity and group cohesion, belief and orientation. The narrative seems to show that autobiographical memory can be staged, that it can be vicarious,<sup>64</sup> and that rare but exceptionally salient experience may be culturally mediated. Importantly, it also shows that memory may concern the future and how to live a good life more than the past and what happened then. This religious narrative forms a memorial narrative of a specific type meant to be supplanted to individuals in later generations. This happens by using specific textual and practical strategies that place later generations in a vicarious eyewitness position that blends with the narrator's position in the Hebrew Bible and so comes to possess the authoritative interpretation of the fantastic events. Those who experienced the events (according to the narrative) are doubtful, weak in memory, confused and disoriented, while those who 'experience' the events through narrative mediation are believers, strong in memory, and oriented. Individual memory thus seems to need cultural aid in the form of narrative and bodily practices according to this religious narrative, in order to secure belief and transmission of the fantastic.

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<sup>61</sup> Fireman, G.D., McVay, T.E., Flanagan, O.J., eds. 2003, *Narrative and Consciousness: Literature, Psychology and the Brain*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Geertz, A.W.G. 2004, "Cognitive Approaches to the Study of Religion", in *New Approaches to the Study of Religion*, vol.2, edited by P. Antes, A.W. Geertz, and R.R. Warne, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 347-399; Kihlstrom, J.F. 2003, "Memory, Autobiography, History". Online paper, Berkeley, at <<http://ist-socrates.berkeley.edu/kihlstrm/rmpaa00.htm>>; Ochs and Capps, "Narrating", 1996.

<sup>62</sup> See also Bruner 1991, "Self-making and World-making." *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 25(1): 67–78.

<sup>63</sup> Freeman, M. 2003, "Rethinking the Fictive, Reclaiming the Real: Autobiography, Narrative Time, and the Burden of Truth" in Fireman et al. eds. 2003 *Narrative and Consciousness*, 115-128 – see here p.125. Remembering the past means redescribing the past. Such redescriptions may be true in the sense of truths that we now assert of the past. Yet they need not necessarily have happened (see also Hacking, I. 1995, *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the New Sciences of Memory*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 249, reference in Freeman, M. 2003, "Rethinking"), an important point in the present context. Freeman concludes that autobiographical narratives are not only about what happened when, and how the events can be emplotted, but also about how to live a good life.

<sup>64</sup> Neisser, U. and Fivush, R. 1994, *The Remembering Self: Construction and Accuracy in the Self-Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 2 stated that self-narratives may concern things that we do not remember (although Neisser generally argues that it does matter what 'really' happened). Within memory studies it is generally acknowledged that not only in relation to cultural memory but also in relation to individual, episodic memory, vivid recollections can be completely fabricated; we may have convincing memories of things that never happened (references in Neisser and Fivush, *Remembering Self*, 1994, 5).



## Memory Transformations as Staged by the Exodus Narrative

Type of memory	<i>Autobiographical memory</i>	transforms into >	<i>cultural memory</i>	transforms into >	<i>autobiographical memory</i>
Means of transformation		narrative		narrative and bodily practices	

*XI. Concluding Remarks*

This reading of the Exodus narrative offers a case of autobiographical memory that is narratively and ritually mediated, or, in other words, culturally staged. It seems that fantastic religious narratives may produce specific effects in individual memory when coupled with ritual action that enhances transmission and belief. The Exodus narrative presents a set of cultural techniques for anchoring cultural memory to autobiographical memory. The narrative first narratively stages the move from autobiographical memorial narrative to cultural memorial narrative, but subsequently, it provokes the move from cultural memorial narrative to vicarious autobiographical narrative by means of specific techniques—textual (deixis), narrative (familial narration), and ritual (primarily bodily) practices. Narrative is thus used as one of the primary means for creating continuity between past, present and imagined worlds. Narrative is also the fundamental mediating link between individual and collective selves. This reading thus confirms what has been suggested by others, that narrative plays a crucial role in the formation of mind between the individual and the social. The individual self here becomes integrated into the collective self, using narrative as a primary vehicle for self-definition.<sup>65</sup> The narrative with its embedded ritual constitutes membership in the Israelite community and is used as a resource for socialization. It offers a case of individual memory being formed by religious narrative, the memory thus produced being vicarious but nevertheless efficient. This leads to the question of whether it is only collective ritual performances (as suggested elsewhere, see Whitehouse, *Arguments and Icons*, 2000 and the Review Forum in *Journal of Ritual Studies* 16, 2002) that may provide participants with surprising, emotion-arousing experience—the building-blocks of episodic memory? Is there really such a great difference between “narrating” and “pretending”? May not skilfully imagined and narrated actions be just as intense as actions actually performed? Is not the violence in the intense initiation rites, so central in the recent memory debates in the study of religion, while severe and distressing for participants, still staged, make-believe?<sup>66</sup> Scott Atran says:

Extreme religious rituals of initiation arouse existential anxieties by culturally *mimicking* and *manipulating* the seemingly capricious and uncontrollable situations that naturally provoke them: terror and risk of death from unidentifiable sources, the menace of infirmity and starvation through physical ordeal and deprivation, the injustice of whimsical oppression, sudden isolation and loneliness.<sup>67</sup>

What I wish to emphasize here are the words “mimicking” and “manipulating,” for in initiation rituals even of the most extreme type, initiates do not usually die, starve to death, or lose health permanently. It is make-believe, the violence is staged. Is the difference to narrated, fantasized

<sup>65</sup> Interestingly, Louis J. Cozolino suggests that the self as a matrix of learning and memory is organized into narratives. Underlying these narratives are hidden layers of neural networks. He sees the brain as sculpted in the context of social relationships, and the self as reflective of and shaped by social interactions, even if functioning on the basis of neural processing (Cozolino, L.J., 2002, *The Neuroscience of Psychotherapy: Building and Rebuilding the Human Brain*. New York and London: W. Norton and Company, p. 154, 167, 170-171).

<sup>66</sup> Ochs and Capps have also suggested similarities between narrative and rituals in relation to socialization (Ochs and Capps 1996, 31).

<sup>67</sup> Atran 2002, *In Gods*, 165, my emphasis.

action really that great? Such actions, whether narrated or ritually performed, are not “real life,” they are one step away from actuality.<sup>68</sup> And this leads us back to the question of the entanglement of memory and imagination that we have discussed here.<sup>69</sup> Philosopher Paul Ricoeur suggests that

...imagination and memory have as a common trait the presence of the absent and as a differential trait, on the one hand, the bracketing of any positing of reality and the vision of something unreal, and on the other, the positing of an earlier reality.<sup>70</sup>

If the difference between memory and imagination lies in the bracketing of the positing of reality and the vision of something fantastic on the one hand, and the positing of an earlier reality on the other, then the interesting thing about memory in the Exodus narrative is that this difference seems to be collapsed. This leaves us with a fantastic type of recollection. Exodus stages its narrative and its fantastic events as something in between memory and imagination, and thus it “shares the authority of recollection with the play of imagination”.<sup>71</sup> This is a blend which shows itself to be very powerful. The narrative combined with the embedded Passover ritual stabilizes the encounter between imagination and memory by anchoring it in familial narration and bodily practices.

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<sup>68</sup> See Schechner, R. 1993, “Ritual, Violence and Creativity”. In *Creativity/Anthropology*, edited by S. Lavie, K. Narayan, and R. Rosaldo, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 296-320, see here p.313–314.

<sup>69</sup> K.J. Gergen says “...unless it is theatre, it will not be recognizable as self-remembrance at all” (Gergen, K.J. 1994, “Mind, Text and Society: Self-Memory in Social Context”. In Neisser and Fivush, *Remembering Self*, 78-104, see here p. 95).

<sup>70</sup> P. Ricoeur 2004, *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Translated from the French by K. Blamey and D. Pellauer. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 44.

<sup>71</sup> R. Schechner 1993, “Ritual”, 318.