

# THE OLD ENGLISH EXODUS. A VERSE TRANSLATION

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## Abstract

*Exodus* is one of the richest and most vivid works in the Old English canon as well as a fascinating confluence of Germanic and Christian traditions. The absence of a complete verse translation in print reflects the relative neglect of biblical narrative in favour of the much translated *Beowulf* and the elegies. Translation is required if this imbalance is to be redressed beyond the sphere of Anglo-Saxonist scholarship. This translation adopts the stress metre and alliterative scheme of the original and attempts to convey something of its vigour and evocativeness. Notes provide a brief introduction to important thematic issues and references in the poem and refer to salient critical discussions.

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## *Introduction*

The text of the Old English *Exodus* is preserved in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Junius 11. Of various edited versions, the most recent and comprehensive single-poem edition is that of Lucas (1994). This has been used as the basis of the present translation, and the very few departures from his text are indicated in the Notes. The only other modern edition with full apparatus is that of Irving (1953) which, while to some extent rendered redundant by Lucas, is still worth consulting, especially given Irving's contrasting and more sceptical attitude to allegorical readings of the poem. Other older editions are of interest only to editors and to historians of Old English criticism and have therefore not been cited.

*Exodus* has been four times translated into English prose but, other than S. B. Greenfield's rendition of the first 275 lines, no English verse translation has ever been published. This no doubt reflects the general preference for *Beowulf* and the traditional Germanic subject matter over biblical narrative. Yet the traditional heroic and elegiac material is not on the whole any less didactic than its Cædmonian counterparts; and these latter not only employ heroism and elegy in the service of biblical narrative, they do so with comparable energy and poetic evocation. In translation, therefore, justice can no more be done to the original without form, rhythmic drive and poetic cadence than in the case of *Beowulf* or the *Seafarer*. *Exodus* is one of the richest treasures in the Old English canon and a major crux in the confluence of Germanic and Mediterranean



cultures. It deserves a higher profile than it has so far received beyond the sometimes forbidding confines of Anglo-Saxonist scholarship.

This translation employs an approximation to the four main-stress line of the original, though no attempt has been made to conform to the five types of half-line deduced by Sievers or their various sub-categories. The alliterative scheme has also been partially preserved but with the following concessions: the majority of lines contain only two alliterating feet, unlike the original in which three is the norm; and while a general attempt has been made to alliterate the third foot with the first and/or second but not the fourth, this rule has been relaxed sufficiently to permit occasional lines with irregular alliteration (usually second with fourth) and very occasional lines with none at all. These expedients have been adopted on the grounds that an intermittent slackening of form is less detrimental than awkward articulation contrived to preserve it.

An overall effort has been made to produce a translation that stays close to the the original, but this can only be done to a certain degree if the result is to be not merely verse but something that can aspire to the name of poetry. Narrative and dramatic rather than lyric as this kind of Old English poem may be, rhythm and cadence still matter. They cannot be routinely sacrificed to sense, or *vice versa*. The balance between the two must be struck pragmatically and felt for anew with every line, and this process relies on intuition at least as much as on analysis. A translation based on these principles cannot hope to be very satisfactory for the purposes of close analysis, but a strictly literal translation devoid of rhythm and grace also loses something important to literary understanding. It is simply not the business of translations to provide texts for close verbal analysis.

As far as tone is concerned, the deliberately rarefied poetic diction of the Old English word-hoard, and the 1300 years since its probable date of composition, cause difficulties in a modern poetic era deeply suspicious of archaism and the ornate. Some concession must be made to the contemporary taste for plain language. It would clearly not be satisfactory to adopt some long-dead stratum of the language such as the pseudo-biblical style in which Gordon's prose translation is couched. Therefore, an attempt has been made to keep the word order and the greater part of the vocabulary within the bounds of modern usage. Obviously it would not do, on the other hand, to transform the poem into something like the casual anecdotal-ditty style of contemporary fashionable verse. Too complete an absorption into a modern idiom would turn it into a very different kind of poem. Concreteness is the by-word of modern verse, and Old English possesses a great deal of it, as Seamus Heaney observes in the 'four-square' quality that drew him to *Beowulf*; but it is worth emphasizing that the concreteness of Old English is

uniquely combined with highly abstract vocabulary, ornate style and a certain rhetorical grandeur. It is this that gives it much of its special tone, and if a translation has occasionally a touch of the remote and alien, a sense that the language is and is not that of our time, it is the truer for it.

*Exodus*

Mark!

The whole earth has heard men tell  
 the judgements of Moses to the generations  
 and the wide fame of his wondrous laws –  
 after this bitter journey the blessing of life  
 5 beyond the skies for each blissful soul,  
 for each of the living a lasting design –  
 this we have heard. Hear now who will!

The God of armies exalted the man  
 with His own might in the open desert,  
 10 Lord ever almighty, constant King,  
 and trusted Moses with many wonders.  
 God loved the lord of his people,  
 the quick-minded man of wisdom  
 and bold commander. He curbed Pharaoh's race,  
 15 God's enemies, with his scourging rod  
 when the Giver of victories granted the lives  
 of his own kin to the keen-hearted chief,  
 and for the sons of Abraham a homeland at last.  
 That was a great reward and a gracious God  
 20 who upheld him in arms against awful foes;  
 he triumphed in battle over countless tribes  
 and shattered their sovereignty. This was the first time  
 that the God of hosts held speech with Moses:  
 He told him many true wonders there,  
 25 how the wise Lord had fashioned this world,  
 the earth's orb and the sky above,  
 established a kingdom; and He uttered His name,  
 unknown then still by the sons of men,  
 though to the fathers' wise race much was known.

Heaven had strengthened the host's commander  
 with true might, and made exalted  
 Pharaoh's enemy, for the onward march.  
 It was not long then after nine great plagues  
 that death struck down the stronger nation,  
 35 gold-guardians perished – grief was awakened,  
 the ring of hall-joys was robbed of its wealth –  
 in the middle of night the Almighty struck,  
 murdered the first-born of his folk's oppressors,  
 and shattered their idols: as the slayer passed over,

40 their loathsome tormentor, the land choked  
with dead corpses – the company departed.  
Anguish was everywhere, little world's ease,  
the hands of the laughter-smiths lay idle,  
and the people were granted a grim journey,  
45 the migrant race – they robbed their enemy.  
Heaven erupted in hellish shrines  
and devilry toppled. That day won fame  
over middle-earth when the multitude left.  
And so, cursed of old, the Egyptians  
50 were bound in suffering many seasons long  
for thinking to keep the kindred of Moses  
forever from making their favoured journey,  
so long desired, if the Lord had allowed them.

The army thronged eagerly under their chief,  
55 their kith and kin's courageous leader.  
He led the people past perilous lairs,  
through regions and lands of ferocious men,  
down narrow defiles and devious paths,  
until battle-scarred bordermen barred their passage.  
60 A helmet of cloud covered their land.  
The marches were filled with fortress dwellings –  
Moses threaded them through that maze.

Then two nights' journey out of Egypt's grasp,  
that famous commander called on the host  
65 of clamorous troops to camp themselves  
round the city of Etham, whole armies together  
in the borderlands, the best of forces.  
Dangers drove them onto northern routes;  
Ethiopian land they knew lay to the south,  
70 burnt-out hill-scapes and black races  
under coal-hot heaven. There holy God  
shielded His folk from the frightful heat:  
arched a roof-beam over the burning heaven,  
spread a sacred canvas against the scorching air –  
75 a soaring cloud had split heaven  
and earth asunder with its awesome mass,  
directing the troops as it drank the surging  
fire of heaven. Folk gazed up  
joyfully wondering. Daylight's warden  
80 shifted over the sky; God had stretched  
in his wisdom a sail over the sun's course –  
though no man could have made out the mast-ropes  
or the sail-yard cross that shipped it there,  
no man on earth for all his craft,  
85 or how the mighty pavilion was pitched  
when He gave this glory to grace the Lord's  
faithful followers. The third camp then  
heartened the people. The whole army saw  
the holy sails soaring above them,

90 bright wonders of the air; they easily saw then,  
the Israelite troops, that the Lord had come,  
the God of hosts, to guide their camping.  
Fire and cloud forged on before them  
in the brilliant sky, broad pillars  
95 dividing between them the days and nights,  
high-thanes of the Holy Ghost,  
for the whole breadth of the brave men's journey.

Next day then I heard that the hardy people  
rang out the clear-voiced call of their horns  
100 in glorious tumult. The troops assembled  
at Moses' word in a mighty force  
of the Lord's chosen under their famous chief,  
eager for action. Over them they saw  
the beacon of life beckoning them on:  
105 the sail at their head, the seamen followed  
along life's floodway. The folk exulted,  
a mighty hubbub. Heaven's beacon rose  
every evening, another wonder  
splendid in the setting track of the sun,  
110 to shine its light on the scene below,  
a burning pillar. Bright pools of light  
flooded the warriors' way from above,  
their shields glistened; shadows melted away,  
the dark shades of night crept aside  
115 to hold their dens. Heaven's candle flared;  
this new night-watch was needed to guard  
over the host lest horrors of the desert  
clutch at them suddenly and sunder their lives,  
grey heath-terrors, great storms of the sea.  
120 This fore-runner had fiery tresses,  
bright rays brandishing terror  
of hot flame on the heads of the army,  
of burning them up in the open waste  
unless they were bold and obeyed Moses;  
125 swathed in light it shone – shields gleamed.

The ranks kept sight of the right path  
and the beacon above, till at land's end before them  
the sea's fastness stopped the host,  
eager to be onward. A field-camp sprang up,  
130 weary men rested, well-trained stewards  
handed out rations, renewing their strength;  
when the trumpet sounded seafarers spread  
tents across the hills. That halt was the fourth  
rest for the troops, by the Red Sea.

135 Sudden news swept through the army  
of inland pursuit. Panic reared up,  
men feared death. The fugitives waited  
for their hostile trackers, who held them so long

homeless in times of torment, locked  
 140 fast in oppression. They flouted the treaty,  
 though the elder Pharaoh already had granted . . .

*At this point there is a lacuna in the manuscript. Lucas argues on paleographical grounds that 80 lines of the poem have been lost. The 'treaty' of 140 is presumably that by which the Pharaoh of Joseph's time had given the Israelites leave to settle the land of Goshen (Genesis 45:16–20). The text appears to resume with reference to the prosperity this elder Pharaoh gained by following Joseph's advice (Genesis 47:23). The missing lines therefore are probably concerned with the details of relations between Pharaoh and Joseph. The later Pharaoh, however, did not recognize the treaty and sought to limit the increase of the Israelites (Exodus 1:8–10). The poem takes up this breakdown in relations at 144.*

. . . so Pharaoh controlled his countrymen's wealth,  
 the people's treasure, and prospered greatly.  
 That was all forgotten when anger grew  
 145 among the Egyptians at Israelite claims,  
 and they dealt out death to Joseph's race,  
 stirred up strife and swallowed the treaty.  
 Battle-lust surged hot round their hearts,  
 men's fiercest passion; those pledge-breakers  
 150 meant to reward their rescue with treachery,  
 so that Moses' people would pay dearly  
 for that day's work, if God decreed  
 Egyptian success on their slaughterous journey.

Hope drained from the hearts of the men  
 155 when they saw Pharaoh's army advancing on them  
 from the southern routes, shaking boar-spears  
 as they came on, their cavalry gleaming –  
 spears were shouldered as slaughter beckoned,  
 trumpets sang and shields flashed –  
 160 brandishing banners on the borderland march.  
 The horn-billed raven hailed the skies  
 over doomed men, dark picker of the slain;  
 battle-fowl screamed greedy for slaughter,  
 the dewy-feathered ones; wolves chanted  
 165 a hideous evensong eager for flesh,  
 reckless beasts, riding the track  
 of the foe-men's army for a feast of death;  
 March-prowlers howled in the middle of night,  
 doomed souls panicked – the people were trapped.

Proud thanes came prancing at times  
 170 along the highway on their horses' backs.  
 The king rode there by the royal standard  
 alongside the army, leading his men;  
 this warlord sternly strapped on his helmet  
 175 under the shining standard, steadied his face-guard  
 expecting slaughter, shook his corselet  
 and called on the host to hold their ranks

firmly abreast. The friends watched  
these landmen come on with loathing gaze.  
180 Dauntless warriors wove about Pharaoh,  
grey-haired sword-wolves saluting battle,  
thirsty for bloodshed, bound to their lord.  
He had chosen all told two thousand  
magnificent men from among his nation –  
185 all of them kings and kinsmen themselves –  
according to old customs of ancestry:  
and each of these leaders led out  
every member of the male race  
he could find who was fit to fight at that time.  
190 These land-lubbers were linked together  
in a corps of princes. The comforting horn  
gave frequent signals to show the young men,  
the mustered warriors, where to bear arms.  
So the lords drove on the dark host,  
195 foe after foe, the force of a nation  
thronging in thousands; they thirsted for action.  
In that mighty troop every man had sworn  
to cut down the Israelite kindred with swords  
in the early dawn, to avenge their brothers.  
200 Seeing this a wailing went up in the camp,  
a hideous evensong, horrors unmanned them,  
mailcoats trapped them; as the tumult advanced  
brave boasts fled. The foe came on ruthlessly  
in war-bright mail – till the mighty angel  
205 guarding the people drove the proud ones aside,  
so the enemies could see each other no longer  
eye to eye: the advance was blocked.

The fugitives now had a night-long reprieve,  
though on either side enemies waited,  
210 army or ocean-flood, no other path.  
Losing all hope of the promised homeland  
they sat on the slopes in shadowy garments,  
expecting sorrow; slumped together,  
brother warriors waited the onset  
215 of the direr army – till at dawn's breaking  
Moses told men to sound brass trumpets,  
gathering folk, telling fighters to rise,  
put on their corselets, bear courage in mind,  
seize their bright armour and band together  
220 on the shore at the signal. Soldiers quickly  
obeyed the battle-call, braced for action;  
when they heard the sound the seafarers tramped  
across the hills with their tents, troops in a hurry.  
Against deadly foes that day they numbered  
225 twelve battalions of brave men  
marching forth; the force was excited.  
In each battalion were fifty troops  
of noble stock, selected to carry

230 their shields in combat for the cause of the people;  
 in each troop there were ten hundred  
 spearmen all told, a splendid array  
 of fighting men in that famous host:  
 a warlike force. Weaklings were turned  
 away from the ranks by the army's leaders,  
 235 those whose youth would not yet allow them  
 to beat off the foe with their fists from behind  
 the shield's cover and the corselet's defence,  
 those who had never known a wound  
 over the board's rim and could boast no scar  
 240 to show for their spear-play. Nor could shaky old men,  
 grey-haired fighters, flourish in battle  
 if their strength faltered before the troops –  
 they bore stature in mind when sorting the ranks,  
 how in the nation's cause courage with honour  
 245 would hold out, and how each man's strength  
 would measure up to the matching of spears.  
 Now the strong-armed host stood assembled,  
 spoiling for action. The standard rose up,  
 brightest of beacons, beside the sea;  
 250 they had all been waiting for this wonder to break  
 shining over shields through the sky's doors.

Before the host a herald leapt up,  
 a bold war-speaker, waved his shield  
 and called for captains to silence the army  
 255 so all men might hear Moses speak.  
 The kingdom's warden wished to address  
 the chosen host in his hallowed voice;  
 he spoke with honour, the army's leader:

260 'Do not be afraid, though Pharaoh has brought  
 a vast swathe of sword-fighters,  
 men beyond counting. Through my hand  
 the mighty Lord will lay down  
 the payment this day their deeds have earned,  
 so they may live no longer here  
 265 to plague the Israelite people with woes.  
 Dead warriors will not harm you,  
 fated troopers; the time is over  
 of their fleeting lives. God's lore  
 has escaped your breasts – be better advised,  
 270 give honour to glory's Prince,  
 pray to the Lord of life for grace  
 and the blessing of triumph on the track before you.  
 This is Abraham's everlasting God,  
 the Prince of creation protecting this host  
 275 with His mighty hand, heroic and strong.'

The lord of living men lifted his voice  
 high and loud as he hailed the army:



280 'Look! You see a sudden wonder  
before your eyes, my fondest people,  
now I myself and that mightier hand  
have struck the tide with my greenwood token.  
The waves mount up, the waters swiftly  
work into ramparts. The road is dry,  
285 the flood sundered by a silvery path,  
the earth's old foundations; in all the world  
I have never heard mention of men traversing  
these mottled grounds, which again the tide  
shall cover over to the end of time.  
The south wind has stripped the sea-depths away,  
290 the ocean blast; the billows draw back,  
the current spurts sand. I say truly  
that mighty God has given you favour,  
you happy men, as of old. Haste is best now  
for fleeing out of your enemies' grasp,  
295 now that the Ruler has raised up the streams  
of the Red Sea in a shield-wall.  
See these bulwarks, built up stupendous  
to the sky's limit, a splendid wave-track.'

300 After these words the army rose,  
spirited men: the sea held still.  
The host swung up their standards by the shore  
and raised bright shields. The sea-wall towered  
upright above the Israelite force  
for a day's length lending protection.  
305 The warriors were all of one mind,  
holding the covenant close to their hearts:  
they had no scorn for the holy teaching  
when the loved one's voice lapsed into silence,  
and their chorus after it, as action approached.

310 The fourth tribe was the first to go then:  
the soldiers advanced on the sea in ranks,  
Judah's tribe, traversing green ground,  
hastening across the unheard of path  
before their kinsmen. And the King almighty  
315 gave him deep reward for that day's work  
when his winning deeds won him glory:  
he was to hold whole sovereignty  
over the kingdom, and his kinsmen's esteem.

320 High over shields a standard was raised  
to serve for a banner as they braved the sea,  
a golden lion gleaming above them –  
bravest of beasts, best of peoples.  
While the army's leader was living still  
325 they'd endure no shame from any nation  
for long, as they raised their ranks of spears  
in battle order. The onrush swept forward

with brisk hand-play from bold young heroes,  
 unshaken warriors, weapons scything,  
 the sword's bloody trail and the troop's onslaught,  
 330 the jarring of helmets, as Judah advanced.

Next after that section the seamen paraded,  
 Reuben's sons; the seafarers bore  
 their shields over the salt-sea marsh,  
 men in multitude, a mighty host  
 335 hastening uncowed. But he had undone  
 his lordship with sins, so that later he followed  
 behind his loved one – his brother took over  
 first-born's rights in ruling the nation,  
 his wealth and class; he was no coward though.

Behind them Simeon's son came on  
 with troops of his people pressing forward –  
 banners swirled above the army –  
 the third tribe to thrust onward  
 with dewy shafts. Dawn appeared  
 345 over the ocean, God's early beacon,  
 the sea-bright morning. Men went forward.

One after another the warbands advanced  
 in iron-clad waves – one man guided  
 the greatest of forces, and from it won glory –  
 350 on the way forth, following the cloud,  
 tribe after tribe. And each tribe's status  
 was known by all after Moses  
 explained their ancestry. They had all one father,  
 a dear leader who gained their land-right,  
 355 wise at heart and well loved.  
 He fathered a race of resolute men,  
 a holy nation, this noble patriarch,  
 an Israelite people pleasing to God –  
 as old men masterfully tell,  
 360 who know most well the nation's lore,  
 and of men's lineage and life's creation.  
 Noah traversed new floods  
 with his three sons, that splendid ruler,  
 the deepest-known deluge of waters  
 365 that ever was in this world's kingdom.  
 He had in his heart the holy covenant:  
 so he led out on the ocean-streams  
 a treasure-hoard beyond all telling.  
 The wise seafarer sorted by number  
 370 the everlasting legacy of all creatures  
 upon the earth in that exculpation,  
 founding generations, fathers and mothers  
 of many descendants, more diverse  
 than men may count; and each kind of seed  
 375 enjoyed by mortals under the heavens

was stored up in the ship's bosom.  
As we are told in the words of wise men,  
Abraham's father by folk-reckoning  
was ninth in line of Noah's descendants.  
380 That is the Abraham the God of angels  
shaped a new name for, and near and far  
trusted holy tribes to his keeping,  
the leading of nations. He lived in exile.  
385 Later he led forth his most loved child  
at God's command; they climbed the highlands,  
father and son, to the summit of Zion.  
They gained a pledge there – glory appeared to them –  
a holy high covenant, heard of by men.  
390 There later the sage son of David,  
a glorious king, in his great wisdom  
built a tremendous temple to God,  
a sacred pavilion – of all earth's princes  
he was the wisest in this world's realm –  
the highest and holiest, most heard of by men,  
395 the mightiest and most renowned that men's children  
have ever raised on the rim of the earth.  
To this location Abraham led  
his son Isaac, and struck up a fire  
(the first soul-slayer was not more doomed),  
400 intending to give his heir to the flames,  
the best of men to the blazing pyre,  
his beloved son sacrificed in triumph –  
in all the earth his only descendant,  
his people's legacy so long awaited,  
405 his life's comfort and long-standing hope.  
It was clear to see, when he caught the boy  
fast in his palms and pulled out his sword –  
the edge groaned – that this great man  
valued less dearly the days of his son  
410 than keeping faith with the King of heaven.  
Royal Abraham raised himself up,  
meaning to slay his own son and heir,  
a child still, with stained edges,  
to lay him low if the Lord wished it;  
415 the noble father did not desire  
this holy sacrifice – but seized his child.  
A voice came then calling from heaven,  
the accents of glory, to hold him back:

420 'Do not slay, Abraham, your own child,  
your own son with your weapon. The truth is witnessed,  
now that the King of all creatures has tried you:  
you have held firm your faith in the Lord  
and kept the covenant – that will come to blessings  
for you and your own for all your days,  
425 unfailling till the end of life.  
Could the son of man need a stronger pledge?

Heaven and earth cannot hold  
 the word of His glory, which is wider far  
 than the face of the earth may ever encompass,  
 430 the world's circuit and the sky above,  
 the ocean's expanse and the weeping air.  
 The Prince of angels swears you an oath,  
 the God of hosts and the Holder of fate,  
 true Giver of triumph, by the terms of His life:  
 435 that no men on earth, for all their craft,  
 will truly be able to tell in words  
 the endless number of all your kin,  
 of shield-warriors and women together,  
 unless one becomes so wise at heart  
 440 that he alone can hope to number  
 the stones of earth and the stars of heaven,  
 the sands of the sea-cliffs and the salt-laden waves;  
 for they shall possess the province of Canaan  
 as far as Egypt's indwelling race,  
 445 your own tribe between the seas,  
 free-born sons, the finest of people.'

*At this point there is a lacuna in the manuscript. Lucas argues on paleographical grounds that 66 lines of the poem have been lost. The missing lines presumably deal with the completion of the Israelite crossing of the Red Sea, the Egyptian advance into the passage, and the actions of Moses and God to bring the sea down upon them. The poem resumes with the drowning of the Egyptians.*

Terror transfixed them; the flood's horror  
 swamped their souls, the sea threatened death.  
 Blood swirled through the sloping waters,  
 450 the sea spat gore, the seething waves  
 were a cauldron of weapons; carnage streamed on high.  
 The Egyptian troops were turned on their heels,  
 the sudden danger sent them flying  
 to seek their homes, shy of battle –  
 455 their goading was quenched. The grim rolling waves  
 darkened above them; of that army not one  
 found home again, but fate locked them in  
 under the waves. Where the way had been clear  
 the ocean thundered – the army was drowned –  
 460 and the waters heaved. A howling storm  
 of men's despair mounted the heavens;  
 enemies cried out as the air darkened,  
 in doomed voices. Blood dyed the flood;  
 as the ramparts collapsed the cruel sea's destruction  
 465 lashed the sky. The splendid princes  
 perished in their corps. The clamour died away  
 beyond the waves; wet shields glistened.  
 The wall of sea-water shrouded the men,  
 the thundering deep. Deadly fetters  
 470 held the troops fast, helpless to move,  
 sunk by their armour. The sand waited

for fate to descend, when the streaming flood  
would come seeking again its settled course,  
the ever-cold sea to its old foundations,  
475 salt waves of sheer distress,  
a cruel spirit that smashed its foes.  
The mild blue air was mingled with gore.  
The bursting ocean reared bloody horrors  
over the sailors' journey, till the just Ruler  
480 made clear his mind through Moses' hand  
and widened the hunt of His waters' embrace,  
sent the flood foaming over fate-stricken men –  
sea smashed against land, the sky was disturbed.  
Ramparts gave way, waves burst,  
485 sea-towers melted, when the mighty One struck  
the damned people of that proud nation  
with the hallowed hand of heaven's Warden.  
They could not restrain the course of the allies,  
the waters' fury – He wiped out many  
490 in shrieking terror; the sea roared,  
towered, then slapped down – horror swelled  
at the seething fetters – foamy-bosomed,  
the handwork of God fell high from above  
on the field of battle; the flood's Guardian  
495 struck the waters with an ancient weapon,  
and that death-blow took off the troops beneath,  
the sinful band. Their souls departed  
pale as the flood, fully outflanked  
when they bowed down before His will,  
500 the fiercest of waves. The force of Egypt,  
oppressors once, perished utterly  
and Pharaoh with his men. He found soon enough  
when he came to ground that God's enemy  
was not so strong as the sea's Keeper –  
505 he thought that sword-embraces would sway  
the awful battle. Egypt received  
a deep reward for that day's work:  
not one man of that measureless army  
came home again, no hero to tell  
510 their journey's tale and take the news  
of annihilation to neighbouring towns,  
speak to queens of their sovereigns' fall,  
but death at sea swallowed the army,  
even the herald. He who had means  
515 flattened men's boasting. They fought against God.

Moses spoke on the seashore then,  
giving the Israelites eternal wisdom,  
holy words from the high-minded man,  
deep truths. That day's work was famed  
520 no less than the laws that the Lord gave him  
in words of truth on their wandering journey,  
as men still find stated in books.

If life's beholder, bright in the bosom,  
bone-house's warden, wishes to unlock  
525 a copious good with the keys of the spirit:  
then the secret is won, wisdom springs forth.  
For it has wise words in its keeping,  
and eagerly longs to bring light to our minds  
so we need not fail of God's fellowship,  
530 the Maker's mercy. He will grant us more  
now that bookmen show us better teachings,  
more lasting delights. Life's joy here is fleeting,  
smeared in sin and sent forth in exile,  
a beggar's portion. Deprived of home  
535 we hold this hall of guests in sorrow,  
mourning in mind, remembering hell  
fixed under earth with fire and worms,  
the ever-open pit of every foulness,  
where the arch-thieves age and early death  
540 now hold dominion. The day of fate is coming  
upon middle-earth, one mightiest power,  
in labour with deeds. The Lord Himself  
will measure out doom in the meeting-place  
when he leads the ranks of the righteous on,  
545 the happy souls, to heaven above  
where there is light and life and a limitless joy.  
Battalions in bliss will be breathing His praise,  
the Glory-king, with his hosts forever.

The gentlest of men, mightiest in strength,  
550 ready in counsel, raised his voice now  
in ringing tones; the ranks heard in silence  
the ordained one's will – a wonder appeared to them –  
the redeeming voice of their valiant leader:

'Great is this company, our commander is strong,  
555 the best of guides who guards our journey.  
He has granted our kindred the Canaanite land  
with cities and wealth for our wide kingdom;  
He will make good now the promise He gave,  
the Lord of angels, with oaths long ago  
560 to our fore-fathers in far off days,  
so long as you hold to the holy teachings,  
conquer all your enemies and keep  
in triumph your kingdom between the seas  
in the mead-halls of men: mighty shall be your fame.'

565 After these words – the army was glad –  
trumpets rang out rejoicing beautifully,  
banners trailed. The tribes were on land;  
the pillar of glory had guided the host,  
the holy people, in God's protection.  
570 Shield-bearers celebrated snatching their lives  
from the enemy's reach, though they'd risked them direly

under the roof of water. They saw walls standing there,  
 the sea seemed all bloody where they'd borne through their arms.  
 Rescued from the host they erupted in battle-song,  
 575 the army raised up a ringing chant –  
 they praised the Lord for His precious deed –  
 warriors sang to glory. Women chimed in  
 with the mighty troop in their martial song,  
 as awe-thrilled voices sang of all those wonders.  
 580 The African woman was easy to find then  
 on the ocean's shore, adorned with gold.  
 Neck-rings were raised in hands,  
 plunder was seized; the people were happy  
 beholding the prize – their bondage was over.  
 585 On the shore the sea's survivors dealt out  
 those ancient treasures by tribal standard,  
 shields and armour; they shared out by right  
 the gold and weaving, the wealth of Joseph,  
 men's glorious goods. Its guardians lay  
 590 on the field of death, foremost of nations.

## Notes

**2–3** *the judgements of Moses . . . wondrous laws*: presumably refers to the Pentateuch.

**8–32** These lines take God's appearance to Moses in the burning bush as their point of departure, but include a wide-ranging survey of Moses's career.

**8** *the man*: Moses.

**15** *God's enemies*: literally, Pharaoh and his Egyptian people. The poet possibly intends the reader to follow the allegorical practice of equating Pharaoh with the devil and Egypt with hell; thus Moses equals Christ and his *scourging rod* (15) is the Cross. Scholarly opinion is divided on the degree to which the poet intended these parallels to be drawn.

**20–22** *upheld him in arms . . . shattered their sovereignty*: a reference to the Israelites' future wars against various peoples.

**34** *death struck down the stronger nation*: the slaying of the Egyptian first-born by the Passover Angel, the tenth and final plague inflicted on the Egyptians by God in His wrath at Pharaoh's detaining of the Israelite people.

**40** *their loathsome tormentor*: the Passover Angel, loathsome from the Egyptian perspective. At several points the poem momentarily presents the Egyptians' emotional viewpoint without any warning.

**41** *dead corpses – the company departed* (land ðrysmýde / deadra hræwum – dugoð forð gewat): the company could mean either the slaughtered Egyptian first-born departing to hell or the Israelite people released by Pharaoh. The reference is perhaps deliberately ambivalent.

**43** *the people were granted a grim journey*: the Israelites' departure is grim for the Egyptians who lose their work-force, another instance of the Egyptian perspective momentarily surfacing (cf. 40).

**44** *they robbed their enemy*: Pharaoh is deprived both of the Egyptian first-born and of his Israelite work-force. The ambivalent reference here may be deliberate.

**46** *heaven erupted in hellish shrines*: widespread legend held that an unhistorical Christ caused the Egyptian idols to be shattered while descending to free the Israelites (Lucas cites pseudo-Bede, *In Exodum* [12.15]). The descent of divine power into Egypt to free the Israelites typifies the harrowing of hell: possibly pertinent here.

**59** *bordermen*: the insistent emphasis on borderlands and their inhabitants (cf. 61, 67, 160) is puzzling. The poet is perhaps emphasizing the transitional nature of the Israelite journey, but this does not seem a very satisfying explanation.

**69** *Ethiopian land*: Ethiopia is not mentioned in Exodus or any known commentary. The reason for its introduction here is unknown; it may simply be a conveniently exotic location.

**73–74** *roof-beam . . . sacred canvas*: the guiding pillar of cloud serves also (though not in Exodus) as protection from the heat of the sun. Lucas argues that the cloud is also being described as the roof of a sheltering tent, a *mighty pavilion* (85) (*feldhusa mæst*), to be equated allegorically with the Tabernacle. His identification is at least plausible.

**81ff.** *a sail*: in this passage nautical imagery transforms the cloud-pillar allegorically into the Ship of the Church.

**83** *sail-yard cross*: allegorically, the holy Cross.

**87** *the third camp*: Etham, as described at 66.

**93** *fire and cloud*: the first mention of the pillar of fire that took the place of the pillar of cloud by night.

**104** *the beacon of life*: literally the cloud-pillar, allegorically the Cross.

**105–06** *the sail . . . life's floodway*: allegorically the Israelites are sailors on the sea-voyage of life towards the heavenly harbour. From this point on they are frequently referred to as 'seafarers', which of course they are also in a literal sense as they cross the Red Sea. Another possible explanation for the nautical imagery is reference to Anglo-Saxon migration mythology. The English were highly conscious of their continental past and their migration across the channel to Britain. It was this decisive event that ultimately made possible their relatively early conversion to Christianity. Thus the migration could be seen figuratively as a journey from the pagan past through the waters of baptism to salvation, a homeland and, ultimately, heaven. *Exodus*, if this is correct, is remarkably rich in layers of meaning. See Howe (1989).

**136** *inland pursuit*: the Egyptians are several times referred to as 'inland' people. In contrast to the Israelites they will neither cross the Red Sea safely nor make a spiritual voyage to heaven. They are landlocked, or condemned to hell.

**144–45** *All that was forgotten . . . over being resisted*: the Old English is obscure here. Lucas reads 'Ealles þæs forgeton, siððan grame wurdon, / Egypta cyn, ymb antwigða: / heo . . .' (translatable as 'All hesitation was forgotten when the Egyptians became angry'). Alternatively: 'Ealles þæs forgeton siðan grame wurdon, / Egypta cyn, ymb antwig, / ða heo . . .' (MS). For this translation the latter reading has been adopted (as also by Jack (1994)).

**156** *boar-spears*: probably decorated with boars rather than being hunting weapons. The boar was sacred to the fertility god Freyr and was thought to protect those who wore its image.

**161–64** *horn-billed raven . . . wolves*: the traditional Anglo-Saxon 'beasts-of-battle', a poetic convention frequently used to anticipate battle and slaughter.

**168** *march-prowlers*: the wolves again.

**178** *The friends*: the Israelite people. Their affection for each other is emphasized in contrast to their hatred for the Egyptians.

**190** *land-lubbers*: see note to 136.

**248** *The standard*: the cloud-pillar.

**278–98** The parting of the Red Sea is not described directly by the poet but reported by Moses.

**281** *greenwood token*: literally the rod of Moses; as a rod of living wood it was a symbol of salvation. It is also probably intended to be a figure both of the Cross and of the Tree of Life. There was a tradition of depicting the Cross as a green tree and thus associating it with the Tree of Life. The poet here links all three figures, referring back to



Paradise and forward to the Redemption at a crucial moment in biblical history. See Hall (1991).

**308–09** *when the loved one's voice . . . as action approached*: the Old English is obscure here (*siððan leofes leoð læste near / sweg swiðrode ond sances bland*). Lucas interprets: 'when the speech of the loved one, his voice, and his variation of pitch dwindled away nearer to performance'. However, Jack (1994) considers 'nearer to performance' an unjustifiable reading of 'læste near', and presumes 'sweg' and 'sances bland' refer to the Israelites. The latter reading has been adopted for this translation.

**317** *whole sovereignty*: Judah later became the most powerful of the tribes.

**321** *a golden lion*: there is precedent in scriptural commentary for Judah's tribe having a lion standard; the lion was also a well-established Christological image; and there was a Germanic tradition of cultic standards which the poet may have been conscious of here. Wright (1990) argues that this detail is a resonant meeting of traditions.

**326–30** *The onrush swept forward . . . as Judah advanced*: the Israelite crossing is described in terms appropriate to combat although no fighting actually takes place. Cross and Tucker (1960) explain this by interpreting the Red Sea crossing as an allegory for baptism. The Christian catechumen approaches baptism as a soldier fighting off assailants (sins).

**335–39** *He had undone . . . no coward though*: Reuben forfeited his right to primacy by sleeping with his father Jacob's concubine. The primacy thus passed to Judah and, apart from this anomaly, the tribes enter the Red Sea in strict order of precedence, as the poet carefully emphasizes.

**337** *behind his loved one*: Reuben follows behind Judah (or possibly Moses) in the Red Sea crossing.

**353–446** *They had all one father*: Abraham. Here the poem moves into a long digression on the history of the Patriarchs, emphasizing faith and obedience and culminating in Abraham's covenant with God for the Promised Land, which the exodus will eventually bring to fruition.

**381** *a new name*: Abraham rather than Abram.

**383** *He lived in exile*: Abraham leads a nomadic life in search of the Promised Land but never reaches it himself.

**384** *Later he led forth his most loved child*: his son Isaac.

**389** *There later*: commentary tradition explicitly identified the site of Abraham's offering with the site of the Temple.

**399** *the first soul-slayer was not more doomed*: the Old English is obscure here in both syntax and meaning (*adfyr onbran / fyrst ferhðbana no þy fæggra wæs 398b–399*). One solution, adopted by Lucas, is to take 399 as a self-contained parenthetical clause and identify the first *soul-slayer* with Adam; neither Adam nor Isaac are doomed because God intervenes to save both.

**445** *between the seas*: a traditional Germanic phrase (*be sæm tweonum*) more appropriate to Scandinavia (cf. *Beowulf* 858). The poet might mean here the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, but the intended geography, if any is intended, is uncertain.

**447–515** This horrific 69-line description of the Egyptians' destruction has as its source a mere single verse: 'And the waters returned, and covered the chariots, and the horsemen, and all the host of Pharaoh that came into the sea after them; there remained not so much as one of them' (Exodus 14:28). Trask (1973) argues that the details correspond to the destruction of the world on Doomsday: the sea rages and turns to blood, the land is flooded, people are seized by fear, structures (here the 'ramparts' (484) of water) collapse, vast numbers die, etc.

**479** *the seafarers' journey*: the Israelites.

**507** *a deep reward (deop lean)*: obviously ironic, and possibly a reference to the depths of hell as well as the depths of the sea.

**514** *even the herald* (eac þon spelbodan): the death even of the herald may be a resonant detail of considerable poignance. Tidings of death and defeat are required in order for a people to commemorate the event in song or poetry and so regain some dignity and comprehension of their destiny. In Germanic culture the generic 'messenger' can both report the news of disaster and take upon himself the task of descanting upon its significance; the famous speech of the Geatish messenger in *Beowulf* is a perfect example. See Marsden (1995).

**520** *the laws that the Lord gave him*: presumably the Ten Commandments.

**523–530** *If life's beholder . . . the Maker's mercy: life's beholder* (lifes wealhstod), more literally 'translator', is the intellect. This passage seems to describe the intellect interpreting (or 'unlocking') the letter of holy scripture to reveal the spirit, its symbolical or allegorical meaning.

**531** *now that bookmen show us better teachings*: probably a reference to the Church Fathers, who interpret the scriptures for mankind.

**540** *the day of fate* (eftwyrd): the Day of Judgement.

**554** *our commander*: God.

**580** *The African woman was easy to find then*: Moses's wife, who is African, is prominent in the celebrations, as for instance is the queen Wealhðeow in *Beowulf* whenever celebrations take place at the Danish court.

**583–90** The Israelites seize the treasure and weapons of the drowned Egyptians. Vickrey (1989) argues that this represents the adornment of the Church through the delivery of mankind from the devil (here represented by Pharaoh); mankind is traditionally the treasure of the devil reclaimed by Redemption. Vickrey's argument is plausible but not provable.

**588** *the wealth of Joseph*: Joseph accumulated enormous wealth which passed to Pharaoh when he died.

**589–90** *Its guardians . . . foremost of nations*: the Egyptians. It is hard to know whether *foremost of nations* (drihtfolca mæst) is supposed to be wholly ironic or at least partially a touch of pathos. For a discussion of the poet's moral sympathies in the poem as a whole, see Kruger (1994).

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