Transcendental phenomenology brings added dimensions to the study of human experiences through qualitative research. Grasping and using its philosophical tenets such as noema, noesis, noeses, noetic, and epoche in a meaningful way can be challenging, given their abstraction and complexity (Moustakas, 1994). This paper provides a conceptual framework for deeper understanding and, therefore, more meaningful practice using parallels that emerge from the lived experiences of two biblical leaders, Pharaoh (of the Exodus) and Saul/Paul. An additional layer of the framework provides integration with theories of decision-making and organizational outcomes.

Transcendental phenomenology (TPh), largely developed by Husserl, is a philosophical approach to qualitative research methodology seeking to understand human experience (Moustakas, 1994). Pure TPh is grounded in the concept and conditioned upon setting aside all preconceived ideas (epoche) to see phenomena through unclouded glasses, thereby allowing the true meaning of phenomena to naturally emerge with and within their own identity (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas discusses at length Husserl's philosophical underpinnings of TPh. Though philosophically sensible, the terminology somehow lacks clarity even when defined. For example, noema is defined as “not the real object but the phenomenon, not the tree but the appearance of the tree” (p. 29), that which is “perceived as such” (p. 30), and “that which is experienced, the what of experience, the object-correlate” (p. 69). The term noesis is defined as the “perfect self-evidence” (p. 30), the “the act of perceiving, feeling, thinking, remembering, or judging ...” (p. 69), the “way in which the what is experienced, the experiencing, or act of experiencing, the subject-correlate” (p. 69). Noeses is defined as “bring[ing] into being the consciousness of something” (p. 69). In true philosophical style, even with multiple definitions of each term, there remains a question of “what?”. These terms when understood create more value and richness in the study of human experience, yet perhaps are shunned due to a lack of opportunity to apply them in a familiar context.

This exegetical research first discusses Husserl's transcendental phenomenology constructs of noema, noesis, and epoche as presented by Moustakas (1994), followed by discussion of elements that affect individual decision-making. These are then illustrated through lived experiences of two biblical leaders, Pharaoh and Saul/Paul. The lives of Pharaoh and Saul/Paul share some striking similarities that serve well at providing relevant examples of Hussrel’s philosophical constructs and the import these have on leader decision-making. This is accomplished through a comparative
study of Pharaoh’s lived experiences during and after the plagues (Exodus 7 – 12; 14) and the lived experiences of Saul/Paul before and after his Damascus road encounter (Acts 7 – 28).

**Literature Review**

Phenomenology is a form of inquiry that seeks to understand human experience (Moustakas, 1994), to explore phenomena and how it is perceived and experienced by individuals in the phenomenological event (Lester, 1999). Moustakas (1994) posits phenomenology as an appropriate tool for exploring and describing shared experiences related to phenomena. Phenomenology within the realm of religion is a highly debated topic. Blum (2012), however, advocates for its use and positioned it as that which can “offer an interpretation of religion or of religious experience and consciousness” (p. 1029) and that which “seeks to disclose the meaning encapsulated and expressed in the religious discourse, text, or experience under analysis” (p. 1030). Blum added that phenomenology “seeks to describe and interpret the perspective of the religious subject or the experience that the subject regards as real” (p. 1030). Blum clarified the role of phenomenologist, stating the primary interest is “in the experience of that which the subject takes to be transcendent, rather than in the transcendent itself” (p. 1030). Perhaps most succinct and relevant is Padgett’s (2008) definition of phenomenology: “explor[ing] the lived experience of a phenomenon” (p. 35). The word phenomenon originates from phaenesthai, a Greek word meaning to “flare up” or “appear,” and its construct comes from phaino, a Greek word meaning to “bring to light, to place in brightness ...” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 26). Although the light is to provide clarity in order to see things authentically, the process of seeing requires epoche.

**Epoche**

Husserl introduced the concept of consciously setting aside current thoughts, beliefs, and judgments which lend themselves to bias with use of the Greek word epoche, “meaning to stay away from or abstain” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). Moustakas noted that epoche is a conscious process of identification and subsequent quarantine of naturally occurring thought patterns. Blum (2012) described epoche as “the suspension of this natural attitude” (p. 1032), “allowing things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness, and to look and see them again, as if for the first time” (p. 85). Moustakas (1994) notes the difficulty, and yet necessity, of the process in order that “we may see with new eyes in a naïve and completely open manner” and “suspend everything that interferes with fresh vision” (p. 86). The process is continual throughout as the mind sometimes wanders, and each thought previously set aside must be done so again through acknowledgement, followed by the intentional act (Moustakas, 1994). It is through epoche that one becomes able to perceive and receive that which is communicated without tainting its purity with preconceived beliefs, thoughts, or judgments (Moustakas, 1994). The source of these is based on experiences which result in the construction of individual noesis and noema, noetic reference, and noematic meaning.
Noesis, Noema, Noetic-Noematic

Noetic-noematic schema represents the connection between an individual and the world (Sousa, 2014). Noesis, noema, and the noetic-noematic correlates are critical to understanding transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). The noetic is derived from noesis and the noematic from the noema (Moustakas, 1994). The noema and noesis are inseparable (Ashworth & Greasley, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Yet the definitions and examples are often clouded with ambiguity, leaving novice researchers with more questions than answers. In response, this section attempts to synthesize Moustakas’ definitions and descriptions, as well as provide additional examples before discussion in the context of biblical leaders.

Noema is defined as “not the real object but the phenomenon, “not the tree but the appearance of the tree” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 29), that which is “perceived as such” (p. 30), and “that which is experienced, the what of experience, the object-correlate” (p. 69). Moustakas describes the appearance of the tree as unique to an individual and based on multiple factors such as lighting, angle, and life experiences. Noema ascribes meaning to what one sees, touches, thinks, or feels, noting that each experience has meaning for an individual (noematic meaning) (Moustakas, 1994). Blanchard (2013) distills a succinct meaning of noema, defining it as a social phenomenon.

Moustakas (1994) explains noesis as the “perfect self-evidence” (p. 30), “the act of perceiving, feeling, thinking, remembering, or judging ...” (p. 69). Noesis is the way in which a noema is experienced (Moustakas, 1994); it is one’s internal perspective that defines the noema (Blanchard, 2013).

Usage is often the best teacher, and, therefore, some examples of noema/noematic meaning and noesis/noetic framework are included. Ashworth and Greasley (2009) identify noesis as the “mental orientation to learning” and noema as that which is to be learned (i.e., studied) through one’s perceptions or interpretations. Ashworth and Greasley describe a scenario of a dyslexic student who struggles with learning (noesis) and who dislikes and avoids interacting with the textbooks, declaring that learning is too difficult and laborious (noema). Moustakas’ (1994) example was describing his own reaction to a situation in which he received medical advice (noema) for a health condition as critical disbelief and distrust (noematic meaning). Moustakas recognized that the source of the noematic meaning was his noesis, or noetic framework, which was formed through a prior experience with medical professionals in which healthcare decisions had a tragic impact on a sibling. Flood (2006) identifies noesis and noema in the Bible. Flood points to the text itself as the noesis or noetic framework, and its noema are its reader(s) as “the object of the text’s noesis or noetic process,” or the noema can be an “extra-textual source to which it bears witness, [such as] the voice in the burning bush ... ” (p. 506). Blanchard (2013) provides two strong and clear examples: First, he describes an elevator full of people (the noema) facing the doors and buttons because that is what convention has taught (noesis). If an individual were to get on the elevator and face the opposite way, the noema (social phenomenon) would be disrupted, because it goes against the noetic framework established by convention. Blanchard’s second example described an individual as observing two people from a distance, not knowing their
relationship. The individual must set aside immediate musings (epoche) and continue observing to determine if perhaps the two individuals are family, romantically involved, or another social phenomenon (noema) (Blanchard, 2013). In summary, noema is the observable phenomenon—and is texturally rich. Noesis is the internal structure/structuring that drives interpretation of the noema—the noetic framework produces noematic meaning. It is these which must be set aside in order to have valid inquiry as a researcher and objective decision-making as a leader.

**Individual Decision-making and Inherent Vulnerabilities**

Organizational decisions determine the company’s trajectory, and poor decisions have the power to change the trajectory and negatively impact organizational outcomes (Ivancevich, Konopaske, & Matteson, 2011; Mellahi & Wilkinson, 2004). For organizations with a powerful leader and without external or board governance, poor decisions can be catastrophic, because, as Sharpanskykh (2009) states, individuals make decisions within the context of self—self-needs, abilities, perception of organizational environment, and social structure. Given the self-focus, these individual decisions are vulnerable to overconfidence (Fast, Sivanathan, Mayer, & Galinsky, 2011), commitment escalation, and risk (Ivancevich et al., 2011).

**Overconfidence**

Overconfidence describes an individual’s self-magnified knowledge, superiority, and accuracy (Fast et al., 2011). Fast et al. state that power results in overconfidence, an inflated sense of being able to personally affect and/or manage outcomes through personal action or ability. This “illusory control” perpetuates repetition of belief in self, belief in accuracy of self-knowledge, and continuation of the decision-making logic. (Fast et al., 2011). In a meta-analysis of extant literature on decision-making, Sleesman, Conlon, McNamara, and Miles (2012) found and validated that overconfidence in decision-making is an antecedent to escalation of commitment.

**Commitment Escalation**

Geiger, Robertson, and Irwin (1998) describe escalating commitment behavior as when an individual continues pursuit of an objective or decision despite indicators that failing results will not change. Leaders feel compelled to have consistency of decision and therefore, despite evidence, remain committed to a decision in spite of observable failure, as though the initial decision had been correct (Sinha, Inkson, & Barker, 2012). This arises from a sense of self-justification about the current or previous decision and leads to internal pressure to continue commitment to the decision to prove its correctness (Geiger et al., 1998), even in the face of new information and/or undeniably negative outcomes, when, clearly, new decisions should have been made (Maner, Gailliot, & Butz, 2007). In some sense, it seems the risk of being wrong outweighs all other influences.
Risk Aversion and Power

When decision makers are afraid of risk, the decisions made tend to be risk averse. Though appearing safe, these risk averse decisions may not be best in the long-term interest of the organization (Ivancevich et al., 2011). Risk aversion and/or avoidance can stem from fear of losing power and/or position due to negative outcomes from risky decisions. This occurs primarily when concerned with loss of legitimate power and/or position by someone with coercive power (Ivancevich et al., 2011; Maner, Gailliot, & Butz, 2007). Given the findings of Fast et al. (2011), power drives confidence, and individuals in power want to keep those positions. It appears there may be a loop of power exertion and power maintenance driven by the need to be powerful and the fear of losing such power.

Illustration of Conceptual Framework through Lived Experiences of Biblical Leaders

This illustrative framework of the philosophical constructs and applicability of phenomenological paradigms is based on a comparative study of Pharaoh’s lived experiences during and after the plagues (Exodus 7 – 12; 14 NKJV) and the lived experiences of Saul/Paul before and after his Damascus road encounter (Acts 7 – 28). During these times, each oppressed God’s people (Ex 5; Acts 7, 8), received direct revelations from God (Ex 5 – 14; Acts 9), and experienced three days of darkness (Ex 10:21-23; Acts 9:8, 9). Within these contexts, noema, noesis, epoche, and how these influence decision-making will be illustrated.

Pharaoh

As Exodus opens in Egypt, Joseph has just died (Ex 1:6), the children of Israel were highly favored and blessed, and a new king appeared—a king who did not know Joseph (Ex 2:6-7) nor all that he had done for Egypt (Gen 41: 37- 47:26), nor would he have cared. This pharaoh was from a different dynasty than the previous pharaoh (Nichol, 1953). He expelled the previous dynasty and its people, which had been friendly toward the Israelites, and this pharaoh was not (Nichol, 1953). This new ruler was fearful that the multitudes of the Israelites would turn against the Egyptians and side with their enemies and decreed that heavy oppression must be used to subdue the Israelites (Ex 1:9-14). He also attempted genocide of the Israelites through the killing of the male children being birthed (1:15-22). Against this backdrop the story of the birth of Moses through his call to rescue Israel is told (Ex 2-6). In the next seven chapters (Ex 7-14), the story of Moses and Aaron as God’s mouthpieces to Pharaoh takes place. It is in this covenantal act of freeing His people (Ex 6:1-8) that the word given to Abram regarding the time of sojourn and affliction of His people in a foreign land has fulfilled its time (Gen 15:13), the same spoken of by Paul in Galatians 3:17.

Pharaohs were all-powerful in the land (Gen 41:40), and though they kept advisors, the pharaoh was still the decision-maker for the territory under rule. As Moses and Aaron approached Pharaoh with God’s command to free His people, Pharaoh’s embrace of power, control, and defiance
surfaces in his first response: “Who is the Lord, that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, nor will I let Israel go” (Ex 5:2). Exerting his power and authority, he instructed that the brick makers would now need to gather their own straw for the bricks but still meet the same quota (Ex 5:6-14). As the drama unfolds in chapters 6 - 14, Pharaoh demonstrates the same prideful stubbornness. At each request by Moses for Pharaoh to heed the word of God to free His people, Pharaoh resisted and made the decision not to free the Israelites (Ex 6 - 11).

Pharaoh’s life experiences resulted in a noesis built by position, power, authority, and ethnic elitism. This noetic construct resulted in the social phenomenon, the noema, of class and status differentiation, and noematic feelings of superiority and entitlement. In each scene of the pre-Exodus events, including the pre-plague request by Moses and Aaron, Pharaoh is provided demonstration of a power greater than his own. Yet, his decision to disregard God remains. The stakes continually heighten, yet Pharaoh does not relent. After each manifestation of God’s power, Pharaoh had the chance to make a different decision. He had the opportunity to set aside his noetic and noematic schema—to experience an epoche in order to see things as they really were; however, he did not. In the scenes of the first and second plagues (water becomes blood; frogs), Pharaoh justified his disbelief, disobedience, and decision, since his magicians and sorcerers replicated the plague (Ex 7:22,23; 8:7, 15). During the second plague (frogs), Pharaoh told Moses he would free the people if Moses would petition and provide relief from the frogs, but when relief was wrought, Pharaoh remained committed to his decision and reneged. The magicians could not replicate the third plague (lice), and told Pharaoh it was “the finger of God,” but Pharaoh would not relent (Ex 8:18, 19). Beginning with the fourth plague (flies), God provided even more clarity for Pharaoh by afflicting only the Egyptians and not the Israelites (Ex 8:21-23). Pharaoh once again declared a changed decision and pled for mercy; yet once relief was provided, Pharaoh remained committed to his original decision (v. 28-32). The fifth plague brought disease that killed all of the Egyptian’s livestock, but Pharaoh did not repent (Ex 9:1-7). The sixth plague brought boils to all of the Egyptian people, but Pharaoh did not repent (Ex 9:8-12). The seventh plague brought torrential hail that destroyed crops and structures. At this, Pharaoh declared that God was righteous, he and his people were sinners, and that he would therefore let God’s people go upon relief from the hail. When the relief came, Pharaoh reneged once again, remaining committed to his rebellious decision (Ex 9:13-35). The eighth plague brought locusts which ate everything left after the death of the livestock and the destructive hail, including every tree—so many locusts they would fill every house and cover the face of the earth (Ex 10:1-6). At this point (before the locusts arrived), Pharaoh’s advisors finally spoke up to Pharaoh, noting the utter destruction of Egypt and urging Pharaoh to obey God and let the Israelites go and serve the Lord in order to avoid further catastrophe (v. 7). Pharaoh, however, only offered a compromised decision that the Israelite men could go. So the plague of locusts came as God had warned, and did so much damage that “there remained nothing green on the trees or on the plants of the field throughout all of Egypt” (v. 16). In response, Pharaoh repeated his declaration of having sinned against God, and he begged for relief from the locusts, which God provided. Yet Pharaoh then refused to change his mind (vs. 16-20). The ninth plague brought darkness—darkness so heavy it could be “felt”–and it lasted for three days (v. 21, 22). Practically all of Egypt was annihilated, all because of Pharaoh’s unwillingness to admit that God’s sovereignty was greater than his authority. The three days of darkness provided
ample opportunity, again, for Pharaoh to intentionally shift his frames of reference— to set aside his noesis of supremacy and privilege and his noema of power. It was a period of time Pharaoh could have used to reevaluate the state of the land and people that had resulted from his decision and continued commitment to that decision. At any point had he done this and experienced an epoche, it would have enabled him to see the error of his pride, overconfidence, and desire for power, and the kingdom and the people would not have suffered such catastrophic loss. Pharaoh once again offered Moses a compromise that all could go, but no flocks and herds could be taken, which was still not a changed decision (Ex 10:24-28). Sadly, Pharaoh’s decision brought about the tenth and last plague, death of the firstborn, which physically and emotionally devastated his people (Ex 11:1-10; 12:29, 30). In spite of multiple tangible evidences of an unwise decision, counsel from advisors, the obliteration of crops and structures, and the physical and emotional sufferings of his people, Pharaoh remained in a state of continued escalation of commitment. Only after the death of the firstborn did Pharaoh finally acquiesce to God’s instruction to let Israel go (Ex 12:31). However, even after all that the people had personally endured (thirst, frogs, lice, flies, boils, hunger from loss of crops, eerie darkness, and death of children), and that the land and livestock had suffered (frogs, lice, flies, disease, hail, locusts), he returned to his original decision, determined not to lose power and not to submit to God’s sovereignty (Ex 14:5). This escalation of commitment to the previous decision eventually led to additional tragic losses.

Based on Sleesman, Conlon, McNamara, and Miles’ (2012) categorical and sub-categorical classifications of escalation determinants, Pharaoh’s action encompassed the following aspects of escalation as identified by category, theory, and definition:

- **Project:** subjective expected utility theory: personal preference for decision.
- **Psychological:** self-justification theory: a) self-confidence results in disregard of negative results from decision due to over-confidence of self-ability to reverse probable negative outcomes, and b) ego threat in which decision-maker is highly sensitized to others’ opinions and thus does not want to be wrong, in order to guard reputation.
- **Social:** self-presentation theory: decision-maker is concerned about others’ opinions and critique of the decision and wants to “save face” (p. 543).
- **Structural:** agency theory: decision-maker acts in best self-interest, even though not in the best interest of the organization.

In Pharaoh’s quest to capture and oppress the Israelites once again, he led his most able military men, over 600 of them, and all of the requisite military resources (chariots, horses, support troops, etc.) to their demise (Ex 14:27, 28). The end result of Pharaoh’s immovable and irrational decision was the severe suffering of the people, animals, agriculture, economy, and a devastatingly high death toll.

**Saul/Paul**

Saul of Tarsus (Acts 9:11) first appears at the end of a long narrative portraying Stephen’s recount of the history of Israel and its leaders (Acts 7). This discourse served as an indictment against the current leaders (Wiersbe, 1989) and resulted in the climactic and violent death of Stephen. Saul is
identified first as the one in front of whom Stephen’s murderers laid their robes to be guarded (Acts 7:58; 22:20). Saul was highly educated as a Hebrew and was a Pharisee (Acts 22:3; 26:5; 2 Cor 11:22; Phil 3:5), and he also held Roman citizenship (Acts 22:28). Saul was a persecutor of the church in Jerusalem and any believers of the “Way,” wreaking havoc with the church by kidnapping people from their homes, beating them, and putting them in prison (Acts 8:1-3, 22:4, 22:19; Gal 1:13, 14, 23). The fact that women were included in his persecution speaks to the fervor of his acting on his beliefs (Wiersbe, 1989). At the time of his pivotal experience, he was on his way to perpetrate more of this behavior specifically against the believers in Damascus—to arrest and imprison them (Acts 9:1,2). Saul is referred to as Paul for the first time in Acts 13:9 and the name Paul is used thereafter. Nichol (1953) notes that there are differing theories regarding his names, the most plausible for these purposes being the number of multilingual peoples at the time and the name variations in different languages. Thus Saul was his Hebrew name and Paul, the Roman version of the same name (Nichol, 1953). Given that Saul’s ministry from this point forward (Acts 13:9) is primarily to non-Jews, it is understandable that he is referred to by his non-Jewish name, except during his recounting of his testimony (Acts 22:7, 13; 26:14) (Nichol, 1953). Saul/Paul’s noetic framework, based on his quality Jewish upbringing, excellent education, and dual citizenship, led to his noema of entitlement, religious fervor, pride of heritage, and leadership as a Pharisee. These noetic-noematic dynamics manifested in wanton persecution of those who believed in the Messiah, which Saul considered to be the work of God. So he obtained open warrants for “any who were of the Way” and set out for Damascus (Acts 9:2). Intent on arresting believers, God essentially arrested him first (Acts 9:1-4).

Saul’s testimony of this event is found in Acts 9:1-10; 22:1-21; and 26:12-18, as he recounts suddenly being amidst an intensely bright light, falling to the ground, and being questioned by the Lord about his persecution of Him (Jesus), to which he responds by asking what he should do. Saul was without sight for three days—three days of darkness (Acts 9:9), and it was a time of epoche for Saul that is evidenced by his inquiry to the Lord for instruction. Saul’s three days of darkness were spent setting aside all suppositions and reframing his noetic perspective and its noematic meaning. This is evidenced by his embrace of the knowledge that although he thought he was working for God, he was actually persecuting Him (9:5; 22:7; 26:15), and acceptance of the calling on his life to witness before “Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel” (9:15). He later explained that his witness was to tell of what was and what would be revealed (26:16) and, ironically, to “open their eyes [Jews and Gentiles], to turn them from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me” (26:18). Saul heard and received the counsel about his purposeful decision to persecute believers and, through an epoche, accepted God’s counsel, rescinded his decision, and changed the trajectory of his life. In comparison to Pharaoh’s determinants of escalation, Saul’s experience was the direct opposite. Based on Saul’s submission to God, and the acceptance and fulfillment of his mission, it becomes clear that Saul acknowledged God’s power and sovereignty, set aside his personal preferences, tempered self-confidence and ego, and disregarded others’ negative opinions of his newly constructed noetic-noematic paradigm. Paul’s humility, in response to direct revelation from God, prevented escalation of commitment (Owens...
& Hekman, 2012) and contributed to his successful work among the Gentiles and the building of the first century church.

**Conclusion**

The concepts of noema, noesis, noetic-noematic, and epoche in transcendental phenomenology exist in relative abstraction and complexity (Moustakas, 1994), and often lack relevant examples. Offering insight through establishment of parallels between these theoretical concepts and lived experiences of the biblical leaders Pharaoh (of the Exodus) and Saul/Paul contributes to the body of knowledge in this area. Pharaoh and Saul each oppressed God’s people (Ex 5; Acts 7, 8), a manifestation of their noema and noesis; received direct revelation of God (Ex 5 – 14; Acts 9) as contradiction to current direction and as a prompt for epoche; and were each allotted three days of darkness (Ex 10:21-23; Acts 9:8, 9), during which to each had opportunity to embrace an epoche of their respective noematic and noetic paradigms. The decisions each of these leaders made with regard to setting aside presuppositions to see things as they really were, rather than their own perceptions and constructions had vastly different results. Pharaoh was not willing to fully experience an epoche and, consumed by his own noetic and noematic paradigms, led his empire (i.e., organization) to suffer interminable losses and be gutted of leadership and resources (Ex 7:1 - 14: 28, 29). Saul, however, experienced an epoche as he set aside his paradigms in order to see things differently (Acts 9:5-9) and consequently led the effort to build the first century church (i.e., organization). These narratives also illustrate the intricacies and potential vulnerabilities of leader decision-making and the highly variable outcomes dependent upon leaders that demonstrate obstinance and commitment escalation, or humility to accept reality and rescind poor decisions.

**About the Author**

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