

THE EXODUS IN BIBLICAL MEMORY

RONALD HENDEL

University of California, Berkeley, CA 94720-1940

tradition (which is a product of oblivion and memory)

—Jorge Luis Borges

The exodus from Egypt is a focal point of ancient Israelite religion. Virtually every kind of religious literature in the Hebrew Bible—prose narrative, liturgical poetry, didactic prose, and prophecy—celebrates the exodus as a foundational event.¹ Israelite ritual, law, and ethics are often grounded in the precedent and memory of the exodus. In the Decalogue, Yahweh identifies himself as the one “who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Exod 20:2 = Deut 5:6). In the covenantal language of this passage and many others, the deliverance from Egypt is the main historical warrant for the religious bond between Yahweh and Israel; it is the gracious act of the great lord for his people on which rests the superstructure of Israelite belief and practice. In some texts (and featured prominently in the Passover Haggadah), the historical distance of the exodus event is drawn into the present by the elastic quality of genealogical time: “You shall tell your son on that day, ‘It is because of what Yahweh did for me when he brought me out of Egypt’” (Exod 13:8; cf. Deut 6:20–25). In its existential actuality, the exodus, more than any other event of the Hebrew Bible, embodies William Faulkner’s adage: “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”²

Given the centrality of the exodus, it is not surprising that scholars have expended much energy trying to ascertain its historical content. Recent decades have seen a diminution of William F. Albright’s confidence that the exodus was

¹ See D. Daube, *The Exodus Pattern in the Bible* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963); Y. Zakovitch, “*And You Shall Tell Your Son . . .*”: *The Concept of the Exodus in the Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1991). The only significant exception is wisdom literature, which has led some scholars to view this genre as heterodox; but see J. J. Collins, “The Biblical Precedent for Natural Theology,” *JAAR Supplement* 45 (1977): 35–52; and J. Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 90–94.

² William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun* (New York: Random House, 1951), 92.

undoubtedly a historical event.³ He thought it “quite unreasonable to deny its [viz., the biblical account of the exodus] substantial accuracy” and assigned to the exodus a date of ca. 1297 B.C.E.⁴ This position contrasts, for example, with the recent history of ancient Israel by John Hayes and Maxwell Miller, which consigns the exodus to the shadowy realm of folk tradition into which critical historiography cannot penetrate.⁵ While the designation of folk tradition or folk history is apt for the general picture of the exodus, it does not necessarily follow that critical historiography has no point of entry into this tradition. Rather, I would suggest, the historian has much to investigate regarding the collective memories of a culture.⁶

Cultural memories tend to be a mixture of historical truth and fiction, composed of “authentic” historical details, folklore motifs, ethnic self-fashioning, ideological claims, and narrative imagination.⁷ They are communicated orally and in written texts and circulate in a wide discursive network. For the collec-

³ Recent valuable treatments of the exodus and history include B. Halpern, “The Exodus and the Israelite Historians,” *Erlsr* 24 (1993): 89–96; idem, “The Exodus from Egypt: Myth or Reality,” in *The Rise of Ancient Israel* (ed. H. Shanks; Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1992), 86–117; A. Malamat, “The Exodus: Egyptian Analogies,” in *Exodus: The Egyptian Evidence* (ed. E. S. Frerichs and L. H. Lesko; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 15–26; C. A. Redmount, “Bitter Lives: Israel in and out of Egypt,” in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World* (ed. M. D. Coogan; New York: Oxford, 1998), 79–121; and below n. 14. A vigorous defense of the Albrightian position is offered by J. K. Hoffmeier (*Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997]), though he acknowledges “the absence of direct archaeological or historical evidence” for this position (p. x).

⁴ W. F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan: A Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths* (New York: Doubleday, 1968), 164; the date is defended on p. 159. Albright’s views are codified in J. Bright, *A History of Israel* (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 118–25.

⁵ J. M. Miller and J. H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 67–68, 78; similarly, J. A. Soggin, *An Introduction to the History of Israel and Judah* (2d ed.; London: SCM, 1993), 26–27, 108–39.

⁶ A pertinent example is Yosef Yerushalmi’s subtle book *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (expanded ed.; New York: Schocken, 1989), in which he explores the vicissitudes of Jewish memory and conceptions of the past from biblical times to the present. Other important recent contributions include A. Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley: University of California, 1993), 3–21 (“Collective Memory and Historical Consciousness”); and P. Burke, *Varieties of Cultural History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 43–59 (“History as Social Memory”). For biblical studies, see N. K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), 83–87 (“Tradition Formation as Sociohistorical Symbolization”); and recently J. Blenkinsopp, “Memory, Tradition, and the Construction of the Past in Ancient Israel,” *BTB* 27 (1997): 76–82; and I. Pardes, *The Biography of Ancient Israel: National Narratives in the Bible* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). See also the classic studies of M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (ed., trans., and introduction by L. A. Coser; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁷ An illuminating case study in the modern Middle East is A. Shryock, *Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination: Oral History and Textual Authority in Tribal Jordan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

tive memories of the exodus, the Bible is our primary written source (including its constituent documentary sources), but we may plausibly assume that the written texts depend in various ways on earlier discourses, both oral and written. The collective memory of the exodus is, in this sense, situated in a history of discourses.

In a recent book, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, the Egyptologist Jan Assmann advocates an approach to cultural memories that he calls “mnemohistory.”⁸

Unlike history proper, mnemohistory is concerned not with the past as such, but only with the past as it is remembered. It surveys the story-lines of tradition, the webs of intertextuality, the diachronic continuities and discontinuities of reading the past. Mnemohistory is not the opposite of history, but rather is one of its branches or subdisciplines, such as intellectual history, social history, the history of mentalities, or the history of ideas. . . . Mnemohistory is reception theory applied to history.⁹

The data for mnemohistory are texts, artifacts, and other evidence of cultural discourse about the remembered past, and its object is to discern how such discourses are constituted and how they serve to inform and influence the cultural present. Assmann emphasizes that this kind of study focuses on the ways a culture “shap[es] an identity by reconstructing its past.”¹⁰ The habits of cultural life and the multifarious interests of the present exert selective pressures on collective memories of the past, creating a version of the past with present relevance. How the past becomes a meaningful frame for the present is the particular burden of mnemohistory.

In biblical studies this type of inquiry has some analogues in the history-of-religions school of Hermann Gunkel and Hugo Gressmann, particularly in its focus on the products of tradition and not primarily on the reconstruction of critical history. Moreover, like much of Gunkel’s work, it seeks to locate the discursive settings of such traditions, their *Sitze im Leben*, in order to explore the social and institutional structures in which they circulate. This kind of inquiry also takes its bearings from the *Annales* school of historiography, which emphasizes the social contexts and functions of history. Lucian Febvre stated that “organizing the past in accordance with the needs of the present, that is what one could call the social function of history.”¹¹ Mnemohistory is concerned with the social function of history in this sense.

⁸ Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); see my review in *BAR* 24, no. 2 (1998): 68.

⁹ Assmann, *Moses*, 8–9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹¹ L. Febvre, “A New Kind of History,” in *A New Kind of History: From the Writings of Febvre* (ed. P. Burke; New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 41.

The past and the present are interrelated in collective memory, and the task of mnemohistory is to chart the forces, strains, and transformations in this relationship. The analytic movement is from history to discourse and back again, rather than holding the memories still as “evidence” for critical historical reconstruction. A mnemohistory of the exodus will survey history and memory to discern their mutual and interrelated traces, to see how the remembered past is constructed and reinterpreted, and how collective identity hinges on the remembered past.

I. Pharaohs and Slaves

The pharaoh of the exodus is not named. This is a point of frustration for the historian, but for the task of mnemohistory it is a potentially fruitful sign of selective memory. Why should the name of Pharaoh be a blank, with no surrogate name inserted in its place? This may be a case of inadvertent forgetting with no guiding motive, just as one effortlessly forgets the names of past presidents or prime ministers. Or it could be a sign of the stock function of this figure, as in the nameless pharaoh who takes Sarah into his harem (Gen 12:15–20) or the pharaoh who exalts Joseph (Gen 41).¹² But, in the exodus, the blank of Pharaoh’s identity may also function as a strategic feature of the tradition, providing a movable boundary of inclusion for those who share this memory.

The oppressive rule of Pharaoh and the enslavement of the ancestors—these are memories that could have been shared by many segments of the population of early Israel. It is plausible that some people in early Israel had indeed escaped from slavery in Egypt. The Egyptian names of Moses, Phineas, and Hophni are perhaps testimony to the Egyptian origin of some of the Levite lineages.¹³ But—and this is the important point—for the exodus story to take root in early Israel it was necessary for it to pertain to the remembered past of settlers who did *not* immigrate from Egypt.¹⁴ By leaving the name of Pharaoh a

¹² See A. Reinhartz, “Why Ask My Name?” *Anonymity and Identity in Biblical Narrative* (New York: Oxford, 1998), 139–41.

¹³ On these names, see recently D. B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 417–19.

¹⁴ This point is emphasized by the archaeological record of early Israelite sites, in which there is no obvious Egyptian influence on the material culture (pots, tools, architecture, village layout, etc.); nor is there any noticeable Egyptian influence on the Hebrew language or script. Such influences would be expected had there been any sizable immigration of population groups from Egypt. On these matters, see the thorough survey of J. Weinstein, “Exodus and Archaeological Reality,” in *Exodus: The Egyptian Evidence*, ed. Frerichs and Lesko, 87–103; and (in the same volume) D. B. Redford, “Observations on the Sojourn of the Bene-Israel,” 57–66; W. G. Dever, “Is There Any Archaeological Evidence for the Exodus,” 67–86.

blank, the memory of Egyptian oppression could extend to all who had felt the oppression of Pharaoh at any time in the remembered past. This extension of reference extends broadly throughout Canaan during the Egyptian empire of the Late Bronze Age.

From the conquests of Thutmose III (1479–1425 B.C.E.) through the reign of Ramesses III (1186–1154 B.C.E.) or Ramesses IV (1154–1148), the land of Canaan was a province of the Egyptian empire.¹⁵ Egyptian power manifested itself in various ways and with varying degrees of intensity throughout this period.¹⁶ The Egyptian administration was largely concerned with control of trade routes and the appropriation of resources from its northern province. The objects of taxation and tribute included wood, precious metals and copper, gemstones, glass, foodstuffs—and also people. Slaves were demanded as tribute from the rulers of the Canaanite city-states, who presumably rounded them up from the local population or captured them from other towns. The correspondence between Canaanite rulers and the Egyptian pharaoh discovered at El Amarna (dating to ca. 1360–1335) record the following human tribute sent to or requisitioned by Pharaoh:¹⁷

10 women sent by ‘Abdi-Ašarti of Amurru (EA 64)

46 females and 5 males sent by Milkilu of Gezer (EA 268)

[x] prisoners and 8 porters sent by ‘Abdi-Ḥeba of Jerusalem (EA 287)

10 slaves, 21 girls, and [8]0 prisoners sent by ‘Abdi-Ḥeba of Jerusalem (EA 288)

¹⁵ The boundaries of Egyptian rule varied according to the fluctuating fortunes of the Mitannian and Hittite empires to the north, but generally included the settled portions of what we call Syro-Palestine; see Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel*, 166–69. The dates (from the “low chronology”) are cited from N. Grimal, *A History of Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 392–93. On the chronology of the end of the Egyptian empire, see J. Weinstein, “The Collapse of the Egyptian Empire in the Southern Levant,” in *The Crisis Years: The 12th Century B.C. from Beyond the Danube to the Tigris* (ed. W. A. Ward and M. S. Joukowski; Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1992), 142–50.

¹⁶ See especially Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel*, 125–237; J. M. Weinstein, “The Egyptian Empire in Palestine: A Reassessment,” *BASOR* 241 (1981): 1–28; I. Singer, “Egyptians, Canaanites, and Philistines in the Period of the Emergence of Israel,” *From Nomadism to Monarchy: Archaeological and Historical Aspects of Early Israel* (ed. I. Finkelstein and N. Na‘aman; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1994), 284–95; and C. R. Higginbotham, “The Egyptianizing of Canaan,” *BAR* 24, no. 3 (1998): 36–43, 69, and references.

¹⁷ The following expands the data in W. Helck, *Die Beziehungen Ägyptens zu Vorderasien im 3. und 2. Jahrtausend v. Chr.* (2d ed.; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1971), 348. The Amarna letters are cited according to the edition and translation of W. L. Moran, *The Amarna Letters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

20 girls sent by Šubandu (place unknown; EA 301)

[x +] 1 young servants, 10 servants, and 10 maidservants sent by an unknown ruler (EA 309)

[2]0 first-class slaves requisitioned by Pharaoh (along with the ruler's daughter in marriage; EA 99)

40 female cupbearers requisitioned by Pharaoh of Milkilu of Gezer (EA 369)

Comparable shipments of human tribute, we presume, continued before and after the brief period of the Amarna archive.

A second, apparently larger category of Canaanite slaves consisted of prisoners of war captured and brought to Egypt by military campaigns.¹⁸ The Egyptian term for such foreign captives was *sqr.w-nh*, literally, "bound for life." Thutmose III, the founder of the Egyptian empire, claims to have taken over 7,300 Canaanite prisoners of war, and his son, Amenhotep II, claims to have taken over 89,600 Canaanite captives. In Ramesside times, the capture of Canaanite prisoners was a regular anthem in accounts of military conquests, as in the following account of Ramesses III:

I have brought back in great numbers those that my sword has spared, with their hands tied behind their backs before my horses, and their wives and children in tens of thousands, and their livestock in hundreds of thousands. I have imprisoned their leaders in fortresses bearing my name, and I have added to them chief archers and tribal chiefs, branded and enslaved, tattooed with my name, and their wives and children have been treated in the same way.¹⁹

Along with the capture of prisoners of war, there is evidence of the deportation of sizable Canaanite populations to Egypt.²⁰ The huge number of captives listed by Amenhotep II has been interpreted as a deliberate policy of mass deportation of subject peoples, aptly described by Donald Redford as "tactics of terror."²¹ An inscription of Thutmose IV notes that the captured Canaanite

¹⁸ On the following data, see Helck, *Beziehungen*, 342–47; Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel*, 221–27; A. Loprieno, "Slaves," in *The Egyptians* (ed. S. Donadoni; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 200–212.

¹⁹ *Harris Papyrus I*; trans. Loprieno, "Slaves," 204–5.

²⁰ See Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel*, 207–9; idem, *Egypt and Canaan in the New Kingdom* (Beersheva: Ben-Gurion University, 1990), 37–39; A. Amer, "Asiatic Prisoners Taken in the Reign of Amenophis II," *Scripta Mediterranea* 5 (1984): 27–28.

²¹ Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel*, 164; so proposed by Amer ("Asiatic Prisoners," 27): "Such an unusually large number of captives (including whole families) may have been taken for the purpose of reducing the population and breaking its morale through mass deportation."

inhabitants of Gezer were resettled in Thebes.²² A letter from Akhenaten to the ruler of Damascus requests the deportation of a group of ‘Apiru to Nubia.²³ An inscription of Ramesses II boasts of displacing Asiatics to Africa, and vice versa:

He has placed the Shasu Asiatics into the western land,
he has settled the Libyans in the hills (of Asia),
filling the fortresses that he has built
with people captured by his mighty arm.²⁴

It has been argued that the deportation of local populations was a regular tool of Egyptian imperial policy.²⁵

In addition to Canaanites taken into Egyptian slavery by means of vassal tribute, military conquest, and mass deportation, Canaanites were sold into slavery for purely financial reasons.²⁶ In the Amarna letters, Rib-Hadda, ruler of Byblos, repeatedly reminds Pharaoh that his people have sold their sons and daughters in order to buy grain.²⁷ A tantalizing Egyptian record, reminiscent of the Joseph story, states: “His porters sold him to the Egyptians, and they seized him and took his goods.”²⁸ During the Ramesside period there were slave merchants in Egypt who dealt in foreign slaves, and legal systems were developed to regulate the purchase and sale of slaves by private individuals. Though Egyptians could become “servants” (*bꜥk*) for financial or legal reasons, the legal status of “slave” (*ḥm*) was reserved for foreigners.²⁹

Many of the foreign slaves ended up working on the vast estates of the Egyptian temples. A regular motif in Ramesside inscriptions is the boast of “stocking (the temple’s) workhouse with male and female slaves of His

²² “The settlement of the fortification of *Mn-ḥprw-r* with Kharu whom his majesty captured in the city of Gezer” (trans. J. M. Weinstein, “The Egyptian Empire in Palestine: A Reassessment,” *BASOR* 241 [1981]: 14; cf. *ANET*, 246).

²³ Kamid el-Loz 1: “Send me the ‘Apiru of the pastureland(?) concerning whom I wrote you as follows, ‘I will place them in the cities of the land of Kush to dwell in them, inasmuch as I have plundered them’” (trans. Redford, *Egypt and Canaan*, 38–39).

²⁴ Trans. E. Bresciani, “Foreigners,” in *The Egyptians*, ed. Donadoni, 235.

²⁵ Amer compares this New Kingdom practice with the policy of mass deportation in the Hittite and the Middle Assyrian empires and later, greatly expanded, in the Neo-Assyrian empire (“Asiatic Prisoners,” 27–28).

²⁶ See Helck, *Beziehungen*, 348–49; Redford, *Egypt Canaan, and Israel*, 221; Loprieno, “Slaves,” 205–6.

²⁷ “For two years I have been repeatedly robbed of my grain, we have no grain to eat. What can I say to my peasantry? Their sons, their daughters, the furnishings of their houses are gone, since they have been sold in the land of Yarimuta for provisions to keep us alive” (EA 85; trans. Moran, *Amarna*, 156; cf. EA 74, 75, 81, 90).

²⁸ Trans. A. F. Rainey, apud Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel*, 221.

²⁹ Loprieno notes that *bꜥk* can designate Egyptians or foreigners, but *ḥm* designates only foreigners (“Slaves,” 209).

Majesty's captivity."³⁰ Egyptian temples also owned land and towns in Canaan. According to records from the last years of the empire, the temple of Amun owned 56 Canaanite towns and the temple of Re owned 103.³¹ Natural resources and slaves were presumably among the benefits that accrued to the temples from their Canaanite properties.

The evidence surveyed above suggests that many of the local settlers in early Israel had memories, direct or indirect, of Egyptian slavery.³² These memories were linked to no single pharaoh, but to pharaoh as such, that is, to the array of pharaohs whose military campaigns, vassal tributes, mass deportations, and support of the slave trade forced many Canaanites into Egyptian slavery. Not all of these slaves need to have escaped with Moses—or to have escaped at all—to create the bitter memory of Egyptian slavery among the early population of Israel. In this cultural setting, the story of a miraculous deliverance from Egyptian slavery would find ready ears. The indefiniteness of the memory of *which* pharaoh may be a sign of the widespread resonance of this collective memory.³³

The Egyptian empire was crumbling during the early decades of Israelite culture, and it is no surprise that the settlers defined themselves, at least in part, as former victims of an oppressive regime. Memories of shared suffering are potent ingredients in the formation and persistence of ethnic identity.³⁴ The nameless pharaoh of the oppression is, in this sense, an emblem of collective memory.

II. Signs and Wonders

The redemption of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt is, according to Exodus, effected by a series of plagues. Yahweh calls these plagues "my signs and won-

³⁰ Trans. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel*, 209.

³¹ Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel*, 209.

³² On the identities of these local settlers, note that the Philistine incursions and settlement in the early twelfth century B.C.E. probably displaced many Canaanites from the plains into the highlands of early Israel; see L. E. Stager, "The Impact of the Sea Peoples in Canaan (1185–1050 BCE)," in *The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land* (ed. T. E. Levy; New York: Facts On File, 1995), 348.

³³ It is worth noting that Egyptian control over Canaan grew more pervasive and oppressive in the later imperial period, the thirteenth and early twelfth centuries B.C.E.; see Weinstein, "Egyptian Empire," 17–22; Singer, "Egyptians, Canaanites, and Philistines," 284–94.

³⁴ See M. Nash, *The Cauldron of Ethnicity in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 10–17, 112–29, for ethnicity as a social-psychological construction of shared difference and a "refuge for the embattled"; see also the insightful treatment of these issues in antiquity in A. D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986). On issues of ethnicity in ancient Israel, see the articles in *Ethnicity and the Bible* (ed. M. C. Brett; Leiden: Brill, 1996).

ders" (מִפְתִּי . . . אֶתְהִיךָ, Exod 7:3). Through these signs and wonders the Egyptians will know Yahweh (Exod 7:5), and the Israelites are instructed to recount the story of these wonders to future generations so that they too will know Yahweh (Exod 10:1–2). The plagues are also called collectively קִנְפָה (Exod 9:14) and נָעַע (Exod 11:1), literally, "injury, wound." In their present form and redaction, the plagues are best comprehended as products of Israelite folklore and narrative imagination.³⁵ But it is also possible that the Egyptian plagues are, at least in part, a transformation and elaboration of the memory of real plagues, such as often occurred in the ancient world.³⁶ In the terms of mnemohistory, event and motif may intersect in the tradition of the plagues.

The idea that Yahweh has the power to send deadly or debilitating diseases—as in the plagues of pestilence (דָּבָר) and pox (שָׁחִין)³⁷—is found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. A pestilence (דָּבָר) is sent upon Israel because of David's census (2 Sam 24); a deadly plague (מַנְפֶּדֶת) afflicts the Philistines when they capture the Ark of the Covenant (1 Sam 5–6);³⁸ and "great plagues" (גְּדֹלִים נְעִים) befall Pharaoh's house because of the abduction of Sarai (Gen 12:17).³⁹ In the poem of Hab 3, Yahweh is accompanied on his fearsome march by דָּבָר and רָשָׁף, a doubled personification of "pestilence, plague."⁴⁰ The "destroyer" (מַשְׁחִית) sent by Yahweh in Exod 12:23 to kill the Egyptian firstborns is probably a variant of these plague demons.⁴¹ In his ability to inflict devastating diseases, Yahweh shares the role of other more specialized gods of disease, such as Canaanite Resheph or Mesopotamian Nergal.⁴²

Debilitating diseases similar to those in Exodus are also included among

³⁵ See the exemplary treatment of folkloristic, compositional, and redactional aspects of the plagues in W. H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1–18* (AB 2; New York: Doubleday, 1999), 286–354.

³⁶ On the evidence for epidemics in the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean, see W. H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 77–81, 99–109.

³⁷ "Pestilence" (דָּבָר) kills the animals in Exod 9:1–7 (JE); "pox" (שָׁחִין) afflicts human and animal in Exod 9:8–12 (P). Probably also connected with the biblical concept of disease is the "destroyer" (מַשְׁחִית) who kills the firstborns of human and animal in Exod 12:23 (JE); see below.

³⁸ This disease is often identified with the bubonic plague because of the association of rodents and "buboes" (עֲפָלִים) in 1 Sam 5–6; see P. K. McCarter, *I Samuel* (AB 8; New York: Doubleday, 1980), 119–26.

³⁹ The latter is a literary foreshadowing of the plagues on Pharaoh's house in Exodus; see U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis. Part II: From Noah to Abraham* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1964), 334–37; and recently M. Z. Brettler, *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel* (London: Routledge, 1995), 51–55.

⁴⁰ See J. Day, "New Light on the Mythological Background of the Allusion to Resheph in Habakkuk iii 5," *VT* 29 (1979): 353–55; G. del Olmo Lete, "Deber," *DDD*, 438–39; P. Xella, "Resheph," *DDD*, 1324–30.

⁴¹ S. A. Meier ("Destroyer," *DDD*, 458): "the Destroyer in Exod 12:23 belongs to the class of plague deities broadly attested in the ancient Near East."

⁴² These gods also share complementary aspects as gods of battle and the underworld; see Xella, "Resheph," 1325–26; A. Livingstone, "Nergal," *DDD*, 1170–72.

the covenant curses in biblical and other texts. In a clear reference to the exodus story, the covenant curses of Deut 28 include the “Egyptian pox” (שִׁחַיִן מִצְרַיִם, Deut 28:27) and the “Egyptian diseases” (מַדְוָה מִצְרַיִם, Deut 28:60). Extrabiblical treaties often invoke a panoply of diseases among the treaty curses.⁴³

Several of the Egyptian plagues that belong to the category of natural calamity rather than disease are also paralleled elsewhere. The Sefire inscription (eighth century B.C.E.) relating a treaty between two Syrian kings includes the following curse:

[May Ha]dad [pour (over it)] every sort of evil (that exists) on earth and in heaven and every sort of trouble; and may he shower upon Arpad [ha]il-[stones]! For seven years may the locust devour (Arpad), and for seven years may the worm eat. (Sefire I.25–28)⁴⁴

As scholars have noted, the sequence of hail and locusts in this inscription is the same as in Exod 9–10 (and recalled in Ps 105:32–35), perhaps suggesting a common pool of West Semitic curse formulae.⁴⁵ The plague of darkness (Exod 10:21–23) also is found in biblical and extrabiblical documents, particularly in prophetic oracles of judgment (Amos 8:9; Mic 3:6; Joel 2:10; 3:4; 4:15).⁴⁶

Given the availability of such plague motifs—including diseases and natural calamities—in the religious and literary traditions of Israel, it is not necessary to conjecture that the plagues are memories of actual plagues in Egypt. It is sufficient to observe that the plagues may have been introduced into the exodus story at any time as the effective “signs and wonders” of Yahweh. But it is also possible that the Egyptian plagues reflect, at least in part, collective memories of real plagues during the period of the Egyptian empire. There is ample evidence for a devastating outbreak of disease—and its collective trauma—during this period.

Assmann has pointed out the similarity of the plague motif in Exodus to some late Egyptian traditions in which diseases are associated with ancient heresies.⁴⁷ In one version of this tradition, attributed to Manetho (an Egyptian

⁴³ See D. R. Hillers, *Treaty-Curses and the Old Testament Prophets* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1964); and S. Parpola and K. Watanabe, *Neo-Assyrian Treaties and Loyalty Oaths* (SAA 2; Helsinki: Helsinki University, 1988).

⁴⁴ Trans. J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Aramaic Inscriptions of Sefire* (2d ed.; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1995), 45.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴⁶ Note also the prophetic oracle delivered by Balaam in the seventh-century B.C.E. inscription from Deir ‘Allā (I.5–7): “The g[ods] gathered together; the Šaddayin took their places as the assembly. And they said to [?], ‘Sew up, bolt up the heavens in your cloud, ordaining darkness instead of eternal light’” (trans. J. A. Hackett, *The Balaam Text from Deir ‘Allā* [HSM 31; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980], 29).

⁴⁷ Assmann, *Moses*, 39–41.

priest of the third century B.C.E.), King Amenophis removed all the lepers and other impure people of Egypt to the city of Avaris, whereupon these people joined with the “shepherds” from Jerusalem (who had previously been expelled from Avaris) in revolt against the king. The victorious lepers and shepherds ruled Egypt in lawless and heretical fashion for thirteen years.⁴⁸ As Egyptologists have noted, this tradition seems to conflate the despised memory of the heretic king Akhenaton (born Amenhotep IV, who ruled at Amarna for thirteen years) with the hated rule of the Hyksos (literally, “foreign ruler”) dynasty, who ruled in Avaris and were remembered as “shepherd-kings” from Canaan.⁴⁹ The disease—leprosy in Manetho, unspecified in other accounts—may be, as Redford and Assmann have argued, a distorted memory of an actual epidemic that swept across the Near East during and after the reign of Akhenaten for ca. twenty years in the mid to late fourteenth century B.C.E.⁵⁰ A contemporary Egyptian medical text (see below) calls this disease “the Canaanite illness.”⁵¹

The following texts, from archives at Amarna, Ugarit, and Boğazköy, indicate the extent of this deadly fourteenth-century epidemic:

Letter from Cyprus (EA 35)

Behold, the hand of Nergal is now in my country; he has slain all the men of my country. . . . The hand of Nergal is in my country and in my own house. There was a young wife of mine that now, my brother, is dead.⁵²

Letter from Şumur (EA 96; quoting a letter from Byblos)

As to your saying, “I will not permit men from Şumur to enter my city. There is a pestilence in Şumur.”⁵³

⁴⁸ This account is preserved in Josephus, *C. Ap.* 1.227–53; other versions of this tradition are attributed to Hecataeus of Abdera (fourth century B.C.E.); Chaeremon, an Egyptian priest (first century C.E.); and others; see the recent thorough treatment of E. S. Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 41–72.

⁴⁹ See D. B. Redford, “The Hyksos Invasion in History and Tradition,” *Or* 39 (1970): 48–50; idem, *Pharaonic King Lists, Annals and Day-Books: A Contribution to the Study of the Egyptian Sense of History* (Mississauga, ON: Benben, 1986), 276–96; Assmann, *Moses*, 29–39. Note Redford’s conclusion (*King Lists*, 294): “What the tale does prove is that the Amarna debacle, with all its characters and events, had not been lost to the collective memory of Egypt, but had survived in some form.” Pseudo-Manetho (see previous note) explicitly associates this story with Moses and the Exodus.

⁵⁰ Redford, “Hyksos,” 44–51; Assmann, *Moses*, 25–27; see also Helck, *Beziehungen*, 183.

⁵¹ See H. Goedicke, “The Canaanite Illness,” *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 11 (1984): 91–105; and Assmann, *Moses*, 27. The Egyptian term is *t-nt-mw*, literally, “that of the Canaanites.”

⁵² Trans. Moran, *Amarna*, 107–8. On the idiom “hand of DN” as a reference to plague, see the Ugaritic letter below, and J. J. M. Roberts, “The Hand of Yahweh,” *VT* 21 (1971): 246–49 (esp. 247–48 for a discussion of EA 35 and CTA 53).

⁵³ Trans. Moran, *Amarna*, 170.

Letter from Megiddo (EA 244)

Behold, the city is consumed by pestilence, by plague.⁵⁴

Letter from Byblos (EA 362)

As to his having said before the king, "There is a pestilence in the lands," the king, my lord, should not listen to the words of other men. There is no pestilence in the lands. It has been over for a long time.⁵⁵

Ugaritic letter (RS 4.475 = CTA 53 = CAT 2.10)

Concerning Targūdassi and Kalbiyu, I have heard of the blows (with which) they have been stricken. Now if they have not been stricken, then send (word) to me. Also, the hand of a god is here, for death (here) is very strong.⁵⁶

Hittite royal inscription (KUB 14.8 = CTH 378; the "Plague Prayers of Murshili II")

The Hatti land has been cruelly afflicted by the plague. For twenty years now men have been dying in my father's days, in my brother's days, and in my own since I have become the priest of the gods. When men are dying in the Hatti land like this, the plague is in no way over. . . . My father sent foot soldiers and charioteers who attacked the country of Amqu, Egyptian territory. . . . He vanquished and smote the foot soldiers and the charioteers of the country of Egypt. But when they brought back to the Hatti land the prisoners which they had taken, a plague broke out among the prisoners and they began to die. When they moved the prisoners to the Hatti land, these prisoners carried the plague into the Hatti land. From that day on people have been dying in the Hatti land.⁵⁷

Egyptian royal inscription (Tutankhamen's "Restoration Stela")

The land was in grave disease (*sni-mnt*).

The gods have forsaken this land.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Trans. Moran, *Amarna*, 298 and nn. 1 and 5 (translation slightly adapted in accord with Moran's notes).

⁵⁵ Trans. Moran, *Amarna*, 360.

⁵⁶ Trans. D. Pardee, "As Strong as Death," in *Love and Death in the Ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of Marvin H. Pope* (ed. J. H. Marks and R. M. Good; Guilford: Four Quarters, 1987), 66. E. Lipiński has noted that the context of this letter is plausibly the epidemic considered here, allowing the identification of its author, Ewri-Šarri, with the equivalently named ^mEN-LUGAL, a "servant" of Niqmadu II (ca. 1380–1340) named in RS 16.247 ("Allusions historiques dans la correspondance ougaritique de Ras Shamra: Lettre de Ewri-Šarri à Pilsiya," *UF* 13 [1981]: 123–26). Lipiński suggests that Ewri-Šarri may have been a Ugaritic diplomat at the Hittite court making inquiries about two missing merchants. For other treatments of this letter, see A. Caquot, J.-M. de Tarragon, and J. L. Cunchillos, *Textes ougaritiques*, Tome II, *Textes religieux, rituels, correspondance* (Paris: Cerf, 1989), 275–80 and references.

⁵⁷ Trans. A. Goetze, *ANET*, 394–95; see also R. Lebrun, *Hymnes et prières hittites* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Centre d'histoire des religions, 1980), 192–239; and T. Bryce, *The Kingdom of the Hittites* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 223–25.

⁵⁸ Trans. Assmann, *Moses*, 27; see also Redford, "Hyksos," 46. It is uncertain whether the

Wolfgang Helck notes that “this epidemic seems at that time to have afflicted the whole Near Eastern world.”⁵⁹ Assmann calls it “the worst epidemic which this region knew in antiquity.”⁶⁰ Though it is impossible to identify the disease, it seems to have been virulent and lethal, on the order of smallpox or bubonic plague.⁶¹

Two Egyptian spells against the “Canaanite illness” give access to contemporary subjective responses to this disease. A spell from a medical papyrus contemporary with the fourteenth-century B.C.E. epidemic instructs the healer to recite a chant from Keftui (Crete), “Saantaka-papiuaia-aiamaantarakukara,” over a poultice of fermented drink, urine, and *sd.t*.⁶² A somewhat more illuminating spell is from an earlier outbreak of this disease, from a medical papyrus of the sixteenth century B.C.E. The healer is instructed to say, “Who is wise as Re, who is wise as Re?” and to “blacken the body with charcoal to capture the god [the cause of the disease]” and say, “Just as Seth fought against the sea, so Seth will fight against you, O Canaanite, so that you shall not enter into the son of such-and-such.”⁶³

In the mythical rhetoric of this spell, the Canaanite god responsible for the disease is homologized with the chaos monster, Sea, whom Seth vanquished. This is an allusion to the well-known Canaanite myth in which Baal (whom the Egyptians equated with Seth) vanquished Sea, thereby establishing order in the cosmos and securing his eternal kingship.⁶⁴ The disease is conceived by the

term *sni-mnt* refers to an actual disease in this instance or whether it is meant metaphorically; Redford and Assmann incline to the former.

⁵⁹ Helck, *Beziehungen*, 183.

⁶⁰ Assmann, *Moses*, 27.

⁶¹ Goedicke (“Illness,” 92, 95) identifies this illness with bubonic plague because of the reference to charcoal color in the spell (see below). Interestingly, two Egyptian mummies of the twelfth century B.C.E. (one of which is Ramesses V) have been diagnosed with smallpox; see A. T. Sandison, “Diseases in Ancient Egypt,” in *Mummies, Disease, and Ancient Cultures* (ed. A. and E. Cockburn; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 32; J. E. Harris and K. R. Weeks, *X-Raying the Pharaohs* (New York: Scribner’s, 1973), 166.

⁶² *London Medical Papyrus* 11.4–6; trans. Bresciani, “Foreigners,” 240; cf. translations in Goedicke, “Illness,” 102; J. F. Borghouts, *Ancient Egyptian Magical Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 37 (no. 57). Goedicke (“Illness,” 101 n. 49) notes G. Möller’s assignment of this papyrus to the reign of Tutankhamen (ca. 1336–1327 B.C.E.).

⁶³ *Hearst Medical Papyrus* 11.12–15; trans. E. Bresciani, “Foreigners,” 240; cf. translations in Goedicke, “Illness,” 94; and Borghouts, *Magical Texts*, 37 (no. 56). Goedicke (“Illness,” 99) dates this papyrus to ca. 1520 B.C.E.

⁶⁴ *CAT* 1.1–1.6; see the recent translation by M. S. Smith, “The Baal Cycle,” in *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (ed. S. B. Parker; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 81–180. On the knowledge of the mythology of Baal in Egypt, see R. Stadelmann, *Syrisch-palästinensische Gottheiten in Ägypten* (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 32–47, 125–33; and translations of the *Astarte Papyrus* by J. A. Wilson, *ANET*, 17–18; and R. K. Ritner, *The Context of Scripture*, vol. 1 (ed. W. W. Hallo; Leiden: Brill, 1997), 35–36.

Egyptians according to a mythic pattern—remarkably, a *Canaanite* mythic pattern—and, as required by the myth, order prevails over chaos. The patient is cured, at least according to the performative theory implicit in the spell.⁶⁵

I would suggest that this subjective reading of the cause and cure of the “Canaanite illness” illustrates how such a trauma may have been appropriated by the Canaanite precursors of Israel. The Egyptians blamed a Canaanite god for this disease, and some Canaanites may have construed its source similarly. But from the Canaanite point of view, the cultural signs of this mythic pattern would have been reversed—the divine agent of the disease would not be the evil “Canaanite,” a force of chaos, but the righteous Divine Warrior who sends his deadly plague against the chaotic enemy.⁶⁶ The enemy, from the Canaanite point of view, would most plausibly be identified as Pharaoh, the ruling power of the Egyptian empire. Note that plagues are often conceived of as divine punishment for royal sins, as in the sin of Shuppiluliuma in the Plague Prayer of Murshili (see above).⁶⁷ The chain of causality that accounts for the plague implicates the king, as is a common understanding of the nature of plagues in the ancient world.⁶⁸

At the time of the fourteenth-century epidemic, the Egyptian empire in Canaan was well established, and the despotic policies outlined above were in force. Was the deadly epidemic remembered as God’s rebuke for the oppressive rule of Pharaoh? Were the “signs and wonders” by which Yahweh defeated Pharaoh a distant memory of the trauma of epidemic, turned against the Egyptian enemy by “the hand of Yahweh” (Exod 9:3 [יְד־יְהוָה], 15 [יָד־י])⁶⁹ and elaborated in Israelite tradition? In the biblical account, the plagues are shaped by narrative strategies and ethnic boundaries, limiting the most deadly plague to the Egyptian firstborn sons, with the Hebrew sons saved by the sign of paschal blood, a rite more effective than Egyptian magic.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ See the apt comments on the performative and mythical aspects of Egyptian magic in J. F. Borghouts, “Magical Practices among the Villagers,” in *Pharaoh’s Workers: The Villagers of Deir el Medina* (ed. L. H. Lesko; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 120–22.

⁶⁶ On the righteous wrath of the Divine Warrior—a role of Canaanite Baal and Israelite Yahweh—see F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 91–163.

⁶⁷ “My father sinned and transgressed against the word of the Hattian Storm-god, my Lord. But I have not sinned in any respect. It is only too true, however, that the father’s sin falls upon the son” (trans. Goetze, *ANET*, 395).

⁶⁸ Cf. Gen 12:17; 2 Sam 24; the Egyptian memory of Akhenaten (see above); and the sins of Agamemnon (*Iliad* I) and Oedipus in Greek tradition.

⁶⁹ On the “hand of DN” as the agent of plague, see Roberts, “Hand of Yahweh”; and cf. the role of the “destroyer” (הַשְׁחִיתָה) as the hand of Yahweh in Exod 12:23.

⁷⁰ On the thematics of the death of firstborn (and other) sons in the exodus story, see Exod 1:15–22; 4:22–26; 13:2, 11–15; and Propp, *Exodus*, 454–59.

If the outbreak of the “Canaanite illness” was as widespread and deadly as the textual data indicate, it must have made an impact on popular memory. Egyptian memories of the outbreak seem to have persisted until Hellenistic times and later.⁷¹ It may be that an Israelite version of these memories left its traces in the “Egyptian diseases” of Exodus—a cultural inversion of the “Canaanite illness”—among the signs and wonders that the Israelites are instructed to remember in story.

III. Moses: Mediator of Memory

Yahweh’s “signs and wonders” are sent through the agency of Moses, the incomparable man “whom Yahweh knew face to face” (Deut 34:10). The story of Moses’ birth, life, and death forms a frame for the stories of the exodus and wanderings, the long transition from slavery in Egypt to freedom as Yahweh’s people on the threshold of the Promised Land. The genre of the Pentateuch as a whole has been characterized as “the biography of Moses.”⁷² In the ancestral history recounted in the Pentateuch, Moses is the savior and founder of the people. Of what, we may ask, is Moses the memory?

A recent treatment of this question by Rudolf Smend concludes, convincingly in my view, that the details of Moses’ life that best withstand historical scrutiny—and hence are the most likely to be historical—are his name and his marriage to a Midianite woman.⁷³ Everything else about Moses’ life is so interwoven with narrative motifs and religious ideology that it is impossible to disengage the history from the tradition.⁷⁴ But Moses’ name and his wife’s ethnicity are details that, in Smend’s judgment, are unlikely to have been invented by tradition. The name is Egyptian, a fact that has been forgotten in biblical tradition.⁷⁵ And the Midianite affiliation seems too peculiar to have been invented

⁷¹ See n. 49 above.

⁷² R. P. Knierim argues that the genre and subject of the Pentateuch as a whole are best described as “the biography of Moses” (“The Composition of the Pentateuch,” in Knierim, *The Task of Old Testament Theology: Method and Cases* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], 372–79). This oversimplifies, but correctly emphasizes the centrality of Moses.

⁷³ Rudolf Smend, “Mose als geschichtliche Gestalt,” *Historische Zeitschrift* 260 (1995): 1–19.

⁷⁴ For some traditional themes and patterns in the life of Moses, see Propp, *Exodus*, 32–34, 155–60, 241–43; R. S. Hendel, *The Epic of the Patriarch: The Jacob Cycle and the Narrative Traditions of Canaan and Israel* (HSM 42; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 137–65; D. Irvin, “The Joseph and Moses Stories as Narrative in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Narrative,” in *Israelite and Judaeon History* (ed. J. H. Hayes and J. M. Miller; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 180–209; T. H. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 223–35.

⁷⁵ The Egyptian name *Mose* was common in the era of the Ramesside kings: it is part of the names of the New Kingdom pharaohs, Ahmose, Thutmose, and Amenmose; see Redford, *Egypt*,

by folklore or ideology.⁷⁶ These items meet the test of “dissimilarity,” that is, they go against the grain of Israelite culture and tradition and so may plausibly be regarded as accurate historical memories. From these details, Smend draws a plausible minimal sketch:

The bearer of an Egyptian name, presumably living or having lived in Egypt, linked with a bedouin tribe encamped in the region of Sinai-southern Palestine-northern Arabia by marriage to a priestly family, therefore with one foot inside and the other outside Egypt.⁷⁷

If the historical Moses remains for the most part obscured from view, this minimal sketch is extremely suggestive for the mnemohistory of Moses. In these few details, Moses presents the figure of a mediator, someone betwixt-and-between, “with one foot inside and the other outside Egypt.” This aspect of his character recurs in many of the narratives about Moses in the Pentateuch. Moses’ multiple roles in biblical memory may best be linked together by his status as a mediator, one who bridges differences and frictions among various categories of biblical thought and experience. Moses is the unique man, the likes of whom “never again arose in Israel,” in large part because he combines the traits of so many opposed and even incompatible categories. Because he is the multifaceted man, he is able to unite together all of the stories of Exodus, Sinai, and wanderings into a coherent collective memory. The functions of Moses as a mediator are extraordinarily rich, perhaps allowing a glimpse into the relation between memory and history in the figure of Moses.

Canaan, and Israel, 417–18. Note that the *š* in *mōšeh* reflects an early phase of phonetic correspondence for Egyptian *s*, cf. the normal first-millennium correspondence with *s* as in *raʿamsēs* (Exod 1:11) and other loanwords; see Y. Muchiki, *Egyptian Proper Names and Loanwords in North-West Semitic* (SBLDS 173; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 259–64, with the review of J. F. Quack, *Review of Biblical Literature* [<http://www.bookreviews.org>] (2000). On the likelihood that *Mose* was a royal nickname for the reigning pharaoh during the Ramesside era, see A. H. Gardiner, “The Egyptian Origin of Some English Personal Names,” *JAOS* 56 (1936): 193; R. O. Faulkner, “Egypt: From the Inception of the Nineteenth Dynasty to the Death of Ramesses III,” *CAH* 2/2:236. It is, I think, a historical irony that the name of Moses may also signify his (unnamed) royal adversaries.

⁷⁶ On Moses’ (and Yahweh’s) Midianite connection, see recently F. M. Cross, *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 53–70; L. E. Stager, “Forging an Identity: The Emergence of Ancient Israel,” in *Oxford History of the Biblical World*, ed. Coogan, 142–49; M. Weinfeld, “The Tribal League at Sinai,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (ed. P. D. Miller, Jr., P. D. Hanson, and S. D. McBride; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 303–14; W. H. Schmidt, *Exodus, Sinai und Mose* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983), 110–29; cf. J. Van Seters, *The Life of Moses: The Yahwist as Historian in Exodus–Numbers* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994); and the speculative reconstruction of E. A. Knauf, *Midian: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte Palästinas und Nordanabians am Ende des 2. Jahrtausends v. Chr.* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1988), 50–56, 135–41.

⁷⁷ Smend, “Mose,” 16.

The clashing and often contradictory domains mediated by Moses in biblical memory include the following (with other mediating terms in parentheses):

<i>social status</i>	slave : free person
<i>ethnicity</i>	Egyptian : (Midianite) : Israelite
<i>ruling authority</i>	Pharaoh : Yahweh tribal elders : Yahweh
<i>geography</i>	Egypt : (wilderness) : Land of Israel
<i>theology</i>	Yahweh : Israelites/humans
<i>lineage relations</i>	tribe : (Levite) : tribe

In each of these domains, Moses is the mediator par excellence, the one who effects a crucial transformation or sustains a defining relationship.

1. *Social status*. Moses delivers the Hebrews from bondage and makes them a free and independent people. This is the great passage of identity, the symbolic rite of passage that constitutes Israel as “the people of Yahweh” (עַם יְהוָה). Moses is the human agent of this rite of passage and, appropriately, he has already experienced this passage himself. In the story of his birth he is born a slave, the son of Hebrews, who gains a new status as a free person as a result of his passage into and deliverance from the Nile.⁷⁸ The inner conflict between his status as a free man and his people’s state of slavery leads Moses to slay the Egyptian that he sees striking his fellow Hebrew (Exod 2: 11). After this initial crude act of justice, Moses flees and later returns to finish the task of liberation. In his own story, Moses experiences and bridges the categories of slave and free man, making him an apt mediator for the transformation of his people. Ironically, the people don’t take well to this transformation, as the stories of the “murmurings” relate, so the transformation of the people is not completed until the next generation, which grows to maturity in freedom (Num 14:20–35).

2. *Ethnicity*. The story of Moses’ birth also makes this child in some sense both Israelite and Egyptian. He is born a Hebrew, but adopted and raised by Pharaoh’s daughter as an Egyptian. The daughters of the Midianite priest relate, after Moses delivers them from their oppressors, “An Egyptian saved us

⁷⁸ Note the thematic echoes in this scene: his vessel of salvation is an “ark” (תִּבְיָה), perhaps echoing the ark (תִּבְיָה) in which the human family was earlier saved from the flood; this ark is placed in the “reeds” (סִיף) of the river, anticipating the later deliverance of the people at the “Re(e)d Sea” (יַם סוּף). On these correspondences, see U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967), 18–19; Zakovitch, *Concept of the Exodus*, 104; J. Van Seters, *Life of Moses*, 29–34.

from the hand of the shepherds" (Exod 2:19). By his upbringing he is an Egyptian; he marries into a Midianite family, but by birth he is an Israelite. This blurred identity makes Moses an apt person to mediate between the Egyptians and the Israelites, to be Yahweh's appointed savior to "deliver my people Israel from Egypt" (Exod 3:10) and bring them to his holy mountain.

3. *Ruling authority.* Moses delivers the people from one king to the authority of another, from Pharaoh to Yahweh. Both are presented as legitimate rulers in their domains, but Israel belongs to Yahweh's rule. Moses possesses traits that are associated with both ruling authorities. As the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter, he is a member of Pharaoh's household, even a potential king. As Yahweh's chosen savior, Moses is placed in the position of "god" to Aaron, who becomes Moses' "mouth" (Exod 4:16). The authority of Yahweh devolves onto Moses, who functions as Yahweh's agent on earth. The mingling of traits—Moses as heir of Pharaoh and agent of Yahweh—makes Moses an apt mediator between these opposed authorities.

Moses also mediates between Yahweh's rule and the authority of the tribal elders. In Exod 19:7, "Moses came and called to the elders of the people and set before them all these words which Yahweh had commanded him, and all the people answered together. . . ." Moses is the link between Yahweh and the elders, who bring the people to the covenant. Moses leads the elders into the direct presence of Yahweh on the holy mountain, "and they saw God, and they ate and drank" (Exod 24:9), clearly signaling their sacral, authoritative status.

4. *Geography.* The life of Moses spans the geographical opposition of Egypt and Israel. Born in Egypt, he flees to Midian and returns to Egypt at Yahweh's behest to lead Israel in its escape from Egypt. He leads the people back to the holy mountain, and thence through the desert to the land of Israel. As in the transition from slavery to freedom, Moses has already experienced the passage out of Egypt, making it appropriate for him to lead the rest of the people in their passage. Moses' death on the threshold of the Promised Land, after viewing the whole land, leaves him betwixt and between, neither in Egypt nor in the Promised Land.⁷⁹ Moses' geographical movements mark him as a mediator in the spatial transformation of the people.

5. *Theology.* Moses' role as a mediator between Israel and Yahweh (and concurrently between humans and Yahweh) is basic to his place in biblical

⁷⁹ Cross (*From Epic*, 58) has noted that the site of Moses' grave was in the ancestral territory of Reuben, but this has been forgotten in the present form of the tradition, for which this region is Moab (Deut 34:6). What an earlier stage of the tradition might have looked like is an intriguing question; see Cross's comments (*From Epic*, 60–61) on the parallelism between Mt. Nebo and Mt. Sinai.

memory. He is recalled as the only human whom “Yahweh knew face to face” (Deut 34:10). He ascends the sacred mountain to speak with Yahweh and receive his laws, which he relays to the people. At the theophany at the mountain, the people tell Moses in fear, “You speak with us and we shall hear, but let not God speak with us, lest we die” (Exod 20:19). Moses is the unique man who can speak with God and with the people, mediating the human domain with the divine. Jethro describes Moses’ position as a mediator aptly: “you must be in front of God (מִלִּפְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים) to the people” (Exod 18:19). Interestingly, as the divine/human mediator, Moses begins to partake of some aspects of divinity. He emanates God’s awesome aura after being in God’s presence, and he has to cover himself before the people, because they fear his radiant face (Exod 34:29–35).⁸⁰

6. *Lineage relations.* Within the social structure of Israel, Moses is the mediator among the tribes. He joins the tribes together in the exodus from Egypt and confirms their new sacred identity in the covenant at the sacred mountain. In the covenant ceremony of Exod 24:3–8, he builds an altar and twelve standing stones “for the twelve tribes of Israel,” and joins the tribes in blood kinship under the covenant.⁸¹ Later he and the tribal elders command the people to build an altar and standing stones in the Promised Land for another covenant ceremony (Deut 27:1–8). In addition to forging a unity among the tribes as a “holy people” (קִדְוָה, Exod 19:6). Moses also adjudicates legal disputes (e.g., Exod 18:13–27) and assigns territorial allocations to the tribes (Num 32; 34–36).

The personal and institutional authority that enables Moses to mediate among the tribes in these various ways also pertains to his status as a Levite. Moses is a member of the tribe of Levi, which makes him a part of Israel, but this tribe itself has a betwixt-and-between status, both like and unlike the other tribes. It is a landless tribe, enabling Moses to assign territory without the taint of self-interest. It is also the tribe of priests, for whom the tasks of religious mediation between people and God are central duties. As a mediator within the lineage structures of Israel, Moses acts as an exponent of priestly roles and responsibilities.⁸²

⁸⁰ On this curious text, see recently W. L. Propp, “The Skin of Moses’ Face: Transfigured or Disfigured?” *CBQ* 49 (1987): 375–86; M. Haran, “The Shining of Moses’ Face: A Case Study in Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Iconography,” in *In the Shelter of Elyon: Essays on Ancient Palestinian Life and Literature in Honor of C. W. Ahlström* (ed. W. B. Barrick and J. R. Spencer; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 159–73.

⁸¹ See R. S. Hendel, “Sacrifice as a Cultural System: The Ritual Symbolism of Exodus 24,3–8,” *ZAW* 101 (1989): 366–90.

⁸² On the priesthood as a mediating and cross-cutting institution in Israelite society, see N. K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), 320; L. E. Stager, “The Archaeology

An important and curious aspect of Moses' role as mediator in many of these stories is the degree to which his mediation is incomplete or has serious slippage. With regard to social status, Moses does not wholly succeed in making the slaves free, for the people retain a "slave mentality" in their desire to return to Egypt whenever things get difficult (Exod 14:10–12; 16:1–3; 17:1–3; etc.). Similarly, Moses does not wholly establish a stable ruling authority linking the tribes and Yahweh, since the people and their leaders continually rebel—including some of his fellow Levites (Exod 32; Num 16). Geographically, his mediation from Egypt to the Promised Land is unfinished, since Moses is not allowed to complete the journey and dies in the plains of Moab (Deut 34:1–4). Even theologically, Moses' mediation between Yahweh and Israel is fraught with peril, with Yahweh occasionally threatening to destroy the people, or Moses asking to be relieved of his burden (Exod 32:9–14; Num 11:14–15). As the mediator par excellence, Moses is a complex and ultimately tragic figure, dying outside the Promised Land because of his own sin (Num 20:1–13) or because of the sins of the people (Deut 1:37).⁸³

As a figure of memory, Moses' role as mediator may be related to the betwixt-and-between qualities of a dimly perceived historical Moses. In biblical discourse, he becomes the mediator of many aspects of Israelite memory and identity. His end is also, in a different way, a mediating force. His death and burial outside the land—in a place that "no one knows" (Deut 34:6)—correlate on a symbolic level with the extraterritorial site of the sacred mountain, Sinai/Horeb. The twin memories of the sacred mountain and of Moses belong to all Israel. And yet the present location of these memories—Sinai/Horeb and Moses' tomb—are forgotten.⁸⁴ Perhaps to belong to all the people's memory it is necessary for both to be indeterminate, in no-man's land, absent to the present. These are memories that function in biblical thought as unifying principles, joining many different things together, but they are to be found only in the past.

IV. Conclusions: Time and the Exodus

The collective memories that constitute the story of the exodus include the Egyptian oppression, the plagues, and the towering figure of Moses. Each

of the Family in Ancient Israel," *BASOR* 260 (1985): 27–28. On the further cleavages among the priestly lineages, see Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 195–215; S. L. Cook, "Innerbiblical Interpretation in Ezekiel 44," *JBL* 114 (1995): 193–208 and references.

⁸³ On these and related texts, see recently W. H. C. Propp, "Why Moses Could Not Enter the Promised Land," *BRev* 14, no. 3 (1998): 36–43 and references.

⁸⁴ See R. S. Hendel, "Where is Mount Sinai?" *BRev* 16, no. 3 (2000): 8; J. D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985), 19–23.

aspect of this complex tale may contain traces of historical events and persons, mingled together with mythic motifs, themes, and structures—the stuff that makes the past truly memorable.⁸⁵ The past uninterpreted would be a mere collection of facts. The past as people remember it is the meaningful past, the past as perceived and colored by subjective concepts, hopes, and fears. Memory is always selective, and it is organized and embroidered according to the desires of the present (i.e., the present situation of the memorious agent). The historically true and the symbolically true are interwoven in such a way that the past authorizes and encompasses the present. The exodus, in this sense, is not a punctual past but ongoing, a past continuous.

A useful model for the temporal dimensions of the exodus story is the tripartite rhythm of historical time outlined by Fernand Braudel—event, conjuncture, and *longue durée*.⁸⁶ The event belongs to the temporal rhythm of everyday life; it is history on a human scale. The conjuncture is a process on the scale of social time, such as the rise and fall of an empire or large-scale economic cycles. The *longue durée* is the largest scale of time, the scale of geological time or the life span of the human species. Seen from these multiple vantages, the memory of the exodus partakes of all three time scales.

The historical events are the most difficult to isolate, since they have been transposed into the larger scales. I have observed above that certain actions and policies of the Egyptian empire in Canaan may be discerned in the portrait of the Egyptian oppression. A devastating epidemic in the late fourteenth century, interpreted as an act of divine punishment, may be distantly recalled in the story of the Egyptian plagues. A historical figure named Moses may have been transformed into the savior and mediator of all Israel, perhaps generalized from the memory of a smaller group.

The conjunctures of social time are somewhat easier to discern in the story. The exodus is the story of the birth of a people, a social and ethnic unity, that emerges in Israel beginning in the Iron Age. This forging of identity is a process that extends over the lifetime of Israelite society. The processes of ethnic self-definition are evident in the symbolic rites of passage in the exodus story: the people are separated and delivered from the house of bondage; transformed into a new identity as the “people of Yahweh” at the holy mountain; and reincorporated into the Promised Land with their new identity in place. The story as a whole defines the collective identity and ethnic boundaries of the people, providing a common foundation for social and religious life. The social function of history is evident in the processes of ethnic self-definition in the story and in the annual festival (Passover) that reenacts this collective memory.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ See the characterization of the biblical “epic” (particularly JE) in Cross, *From Epic*, 22–40.

⁸⁶ F. Braudel, *On History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 25–54.

⁸⁷ On the symbolism of rites of passage and the social functions of the Passover rite, see Hen-

The time scale of the *longue durée* in the exodus story is appreciable in light of the continual resonance of this story in Western history.⁸⁸ As a story of deliverance from oppression, the birth of freedom, and the divine sanction of human rights and responsibilities, the exodus story has served as a paradigm for over two and a half millennia.⁸⁹ From Second Isaiah to Nelson Mandela, the images and ideas of the exodus persist. There is something in the story that pertains to the human spirit irrespective of cultural difference.⁹⁰ The human condition is illuminated by the encounters of Moses and Pharaoh, Yahweh and Israel, the holy mountain and the Promised Land. The exodus is a paradigm, or a congeries of paradigms, of human oppression and salvation in the temporal horizon of the *longue durée*.

The memory of the exodus is not just a memory of historical events, but a conflation of history and memory that suits the conditions of different qualities of time. To view the exodus with an eye to only one of these—whether to historical events, social functions, or enduring themes—is to misjudge the complexity and multiplicity of the whole. The mnemohistory of the exodus is a story of various pasts as they converge in the intersecting times of ancient lives, a particular people, and humanity writ large.⁹¹

del, "Sacrifice as a Cultural System," 374–75, 384–87; and N. Walls, "Pesah and Cultic Assimilation in Biblical Narrative" (forthcoming). On the transformation of Passover from a local sacrificial feast to a temple pilgrimage festival, see B. M. Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 53–97. Also of interest is the emphasis on commemorative ceremonies (including Passover) in P. Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 41–71.

⁸⁸ See the insightful treatment of M. Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

⁸⁹ I prescind from current controversies in liberation theology, but note J. D. Levenson's thoughtful essay, "Exodus and Liberation," in his *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville: Westminster/Knox, 1993), 127–59—though it is worth observing that in the classic Jewish theology of the exodus (as embodied in the Passover Haggadah), the giving of the law is a very subsidiary theme.

⁹⁰ Note Braudel's argument (*On History*, 44, 75–76) that Claude Lévi-Strauss's researches into the "deepest, least conscious layers" of kinship, myth, ceremonies, and institutions pertain to the *longue durée*.

⁹¹ My thanks to Bill Propp and Dina Stein for their insightful comments on earlier drafts.