

JUDAISM

The Man Who Never Saw the Land

A modern narrative biography of Moses, written for this site rather than translated from an ancient source, weighing the biblical account against the archaeological and historical record of New Kingdom Egypt and the Exodus for readers with no religious or academic background. Traces the man the text gives us -- birth, flight, the burning bush, the plagues, Sinai, the forty years, and a death outside the promised land -- alongside the evidence for what can and can't be verified, and the story's own long afterlife from Philo and the rabbis to the American civil rights movement. Illustrated throughout with historical maps of Egypt, the Sinai, and the Levant.

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Part One: The Problem

A Man With No Grave



The view from Mount Nebo, looking toward the Dead Sea and the Jordan Valley — the land the text says Moses saw but never entered. (Image: Mohammad hajeer, CC BY 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

If you go looking for Moses' tomb, you will not find it. This is not an accident of archaeology. It is the ending the story gives him.

Deuteronomy 34 is one of the strangest final scenes in all of religious literature. Moses climbs a mountain — Nebo, in Moab, on the eastern side of the Jordan — and from its summit he sees the whole land. The text names it in painstaking detail: Gilead as far as Dan, Naphtali, Ephraim, Manasseh, all of Judah to the Mediterranean, the Negev, the Valley of Jericho, the town called Zoar. He sees it all. And then he dies.

And he buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, over against Beth-peor: but no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day. (Deuteronomy 34:6)

The Hebrew is even more peculiar than the King James. God buries him. No one knows where. *Unto this day* — the phrase the biblical writers use when they are writing from a later time and pointing back at something lost.

Think about what this means. The man is the foundational lawgiver of an entire civilization. He has spoken with God face to face, the text says, "as a man speaketh unto his friend." He has led a nation out of slavery, received their constitution on a mountain, and walked with them for forty years through a wilderness that killed an entire generation. And when he dies, he is buried by God alone, in an unmarked grave, and the tradition itself insists that the location is unknown.

This is not how founders are treated. This is not how any culture treats its most important figure. When nations want to anchor themselves to a person, they give him a tomb. It becomes a shrine. A pilgrimage site. A political asset. Herod built a monumental tomb for John the Baptist — even though he had ordered the man's execution. The Romans built Augustus' mausoleum bigger than any building in Rome. The Egyptians built pyramids. Every empire preserves its founders in stone.

Israel preserves its founder in a mystery.

And that is where this book begins, because that mystery is not an embarrassing gap to be apologised for. It is the first clue and it points somewhere important.

The view from the mountain

Stand on Mount Nebo today and the view is still extraordinary. The mountain rises to about 810 metres, on the ridge that runs down the eastern side of the Dead Sea. From the top you can see, on a clear day, across the Jordan Valley and the Dead Sea to the hills of Judea. Jericho glints in the distance. You can make out the hazy shape of Jerusalem on the horizon, forty kilometres away. Looking north, the land unfurls — the hills of Samaria, the plain of Jezreel, the long line of hills that run down toward Lebanon.

This is the land Moses is given. He does not enter it. He dies on the other side of the Jordan, in what is now Jordan, and the text says that Joshua led the people across after him. He spends his entire adult life moving toward a destination he will see but never touch, and the story says this is deliberate — God's decision, not an accident of geography.

There is something almost unbearable in that image. The leader who dies just short of the promise. The man who walks a whole life toward a horizon he is not permitted to reach. Read it as narrative, straight, and it is devastating. The old man climbs the mountain, takes in the whole view he has been walking toward for decades, and dies before he can take one more step.

This is the first thing to hold onto, because this ending tells us something about the story and the people who told it. A nation that invents a founder will give him everything — birth, triumph, victory, rest. A nation that preserves a founder it actually remembers gives him the scars. The question is which kind of nation is telling this story.

The man in the story

What do we actually know about Moses, from the text itself, before we add any argument about sources or history?

He is born during a time when the Israelites are oppressed in Egypt. A pharaoh — the text never names him — has ordered all newborn Hebrew boys to be killed. His mother hides him for three months, then places him in a basket among the reeds of the Nile. Pharaoh's daughter finds him, takes pity on him, and adopts him. He is raised in the Egyptian court.

As an adult, he kills an Egyptian who is beating a Hebrew slave. The act is discovered. He flees to Midian, in what is now northwestern Arabia, and lives there as a shepherd for forty years. He marries the daughter of a priest named Jethro — called Reuel in some passages — who worships a god called Yahweh, but who is not an Israelite. In Midian he has a family, and he lives quietly.

Then, at a bush that burns without being consumed, a voice calls his name and gives him an impossible assignment: go back to Egypt, confront the pharaoh, and lead the Israelites out. Moses resists. This is important — much of what we think we know about Moses from sermons and paintings is wrong. He does not stride forward eagerly. The text gives him five separate objections: *Who am I?* What if the people don't believe me? *I am not a man of words.* Send someone else. He argues. He loses. He is sent.

The rest of the story — the confrontation with Pharaoh, the plagues, the Passover night, the departure, the crossing of the Red Sea, the journey to Sinai, the law, the golden calf, the wilderness

years, the rebellions, the long walk east toward the Jordan — is the story of a man who argues with God and wins sometimes, who loses his temper and pays for it, who leads a people that constantly threatens to abandon him, and who finally dies before he reaches the land he spent his whole life trying to reach.

This is not a flat heroic portrait. It is layered, contradictory, and stubbornly human. And the strangest thing about it is that it stays that way. Later traditions try to sand some of the edges down — Philo reads him as a philosopher, the rabbis read him as the perfect teacher, the Sufis read him as a mystic. But the core text never lets him become a saint. He stammers. He kills a man. He disobeys a specific instruction at a place called Meribah and is told, with stunning severity, that for this single failure he will not enter the land. He stands up for the people after they have sinned so badly that God offers to destroy them and start again. He is tired. He says so in the most human sentence in the whole Pentateuch: *I am not able to carry all this people alone, the weight is too heavy for me.* (Numbers 11:14)

Read the text with no theology, no commitment to whether it happened literally, and you find a character so specific that it is hard to imagine him made up from nothing. Which is the claim this book wants to think through, carefully, with full intellectual honesty.

The silence of the evidence

Now we turn to the other side of the story, and this is where the book's central tension lives.

If the Exodus happened as described — two million people, or even a substantial group, leaving Egypt in a single dramatic departure, crossing the Sinai, receiving law at a mountain, wandering for forty years — we would expect evidence for it. The absence of evidence is not the same as evidence of absence, and this book will not make that amateur error. But the specific character of the silence is striking and it deserves to be described accurately.

First: Egyptian records. Egypt was a bureaucratic society that documented everything. We have tax records, court documents, letters, building inscriptions, grain inventories, diplomatic correspondence. We have records of Semitic-speaking people in the Delta — the Hyksos, who ruled parts of Egypt for a period in the Second Intermediate Period; the *Apiru* or *Habiru*, a class of people mentioned in Egyptian and Near Eastern texts who may or may not be connected to the Hebrews; the Shasu nomads, who appear in Egyptian inscriptions as enemies or subjects at the frontier forts of the Transjordan. We have Papyrus Anastasi VI, which records the passing of Shasu through a Egyptian frontier checkpoint. We have the Merneptah Stele, a victory inscription of the pharaoh Merneptah from about 1207 BCE, which contains the earliest known reference to Israel as a people or kingdom — in Egypt, mocking them as a people already in Canaan: *Israel is laid waste, his seed is not.*

What we do not have is an Egyptian record of an Exodus. No record of the departure of a large Israelite population. No record of the ten plagues. No record of the destruction of an Egyptian army in a body of water. No reference to the Israelites as slaves in the Delta in the relevant period.

This is not a surprise in itself — empires do not typically record their own defeats, and a dramatic slave departure might not have shown up in the archives the way a victory does. But it places an honest historian in a difficult position: the story is too large to have left no trace, and the Egyptians documented things that were far smaller.

Second: Sinai. The forty-year wandering is supposed to have left traces. A population large enough to have fought the battles described in Numbers — the Amalekites, the Canaanites at Hormah, the kings Sihon and Og — would have left archaeological traces in the Sinai peninsula. Systematic surveys of the southern Sinai have found little that corresponds to a large nomadic population in the Late Bronze Age. The standard picture that emerges from the archaeology is of a much smaller phenomenon, possibly a group of Semitic-speaking slaves or freed people who made their way out of Egypt by some route, and whose story was later expanded into the national epic of a people who were not yet a nation.

Third: Canaan. When the Israelites appear in the archaeological record, in the highlands of Canaan in the late Iron Age I period (roughly the eleventh and tenth centuries BCE), they look like they emerged from within Canaanite society, not like a new population arriving from outside. The settlements in the central highlands — Shiloh, Shechem, Bethel, and the scores of small sites — show material culture that is continuous with Canaanite culture in many ways but distinct in others. The pottery is different. The settlements are unfortified. The pig bones disappear from the archaeological record in these sites in a way that suggests a new dietary identity. The people seem to have formed themselves into a distinct group *inside* Canaan, not to have arrived from outside it. This is the model proposed forcefully by William Dever and others: the early Israelites were, in significant part, Canaanites — peasants, escaped slaves, and fringe-dwellers — who reorganised themselves around a new identity.

This does not mean the Exodus story is fiction. It means the Exodus story, as it has come down to us, is a memory enlarged by time and shaped by theology. Something happened. A group got out of Egypt, or escaped the Delta, or remembered getting out, and around that memory grew a story so large and so specific that it became the founding narrative of a civilisation.

The archaeologist Israel Finkelstein and the historian Neil Asher Silberman put it plainly in *The Bible Unearthed*: the Exodus narrative as we have it cannot be read as history in the modern sense. It has the shape of a founding myth, composed and edited over centuries, reaching its current form long after the supposed events. They are right about this, and any honest book about Moses has to say so.

But saying so is not the end of the story, because there is a second question that matters just as much: why this story? Why this man? Why does a story with this shape, this specificity, this unflattering portrait of its central character, survive and spread and shape two major religions and a thousand liberation movements?

That is the question this book spends its energy on. The evidence problem is the opening argument, chapter 3 makes it explicitly, and then the book trusts the reader to remember it while the story unfolds.

An unflattering hero

The most striking thing about the Moses of the text is how unflattered he is by his own story.

Consider what the tradition does with him. It could have made him presidential — the noble lawgiver, the wise old man, the steady hand guiding a nation. It could have made him mystical — the prophet who communes so fully with God that he glows, the man who reads the divine mind. Later tradition does both of these things, and does them powerfully. But the story as we have it is more complicated.

Moses' first act in the narrative — the act that sends him into exile — is an act of violence born of anger, with no plan behind it. He sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, looks around, sees no one watching, and kills the Egyptian, burying him in the sand. The next day, he tries to mediate a fight between two Hebrews. One of them says: *Who made you a prince and a judge over us?* And Moses realises his secret is out. He flees.

This is not the portrait of a man born to leadership. This is the portrait of a man with a temper and no strategic sense. The text is honest about it. The murder is not glossed over; it is the reason he leaves everything he knows and spends four decades in the desert.

Then there is his reluctance. Moses does not accept the call. He argues with God, five separate times, and the arguments are specific and human: *Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?* The people won't believe me. *I have never been a man of words* — the text actually says this, and the tradition preserves it as a fact about him, a fact that some have tried to read as a stammer, some as a general inarticulateness, some as the portrait of a man who knows he is not an orator and has to be pushed past his own assessment of himself.

Then there is the failure at Meribah, which is small and strange and disproportionately punished. The people are thirsty. God tells Moses to take his rod, gather the people, and speak to a rock, and water will come out of it. Moses gathers the people, but he is angry — the people are testing him, challenging him, and he says: *Hear now, you rebels; must we bring you water out of this rock?* He strikes the rock twice with his rod, and water comes out. And God tells him: because you did not believe in me to sanctify me in the eyes of the people, you will not bring this people into the land. For one moment of anger, one deviation from the specific instruction, the man who has carried this people for forty years is told he will not see what he has spent his whole life moving toward.

The punishment is severe. The crime is small. The disproportion is the point. The tradition is punishing its own hero, and it does so publicly, in the text, for everyone to read. This is not the behaviour of a legend that exists to flatter. It is the behaviour of a narrative that has a complicated relationship with its central character and refuses to simplify him.

And then there is the ending — the grave no one knows. We come back to it. Why would a nation tell the story this way? Why not give him a tomb, a shrine, a place for pilgrims? The answer may be that the story of his burial — buried by God, unmarked, unknown — was the tradition's way of saying: this man belongs to history, not to a place. He cannot be claimed by any party, any kingdom, any later generation that wants to build him into whatever it needs. He dies on a mountain in Moab, outside the land, and the land itself keeps his secret.

The long afterlife

The story of Moses, as it left the pages of the Pentateuch, did not stop there. It went everywhere.

Philo of Alexandria, writing in the first century CE in Greek, read Moses as a philosopher — the man who received the true philosophy directly from God, superior to Plato because it preceded Plato. He filled in the silences of the biblical text with an elaborate metaphysics. Where the Bible says Moses spoke to God face to face, Philo explains what that means in terms of the soul's ascent to the intelligible realm. The mountain is the soul. The tabernacle is the cosmos. Every detail is symbolic.

The rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash read him differently — as teacher, as the humblest of men, as the one who spoke with God and bore the burden of the people. The midrashic tradition is

enormously creative; it fills gaps, answers questions, wrestles with contradictions. It often softens the text's sharper edges — Moses' anger, his doubt — but it never erases them. The man of the text survives in the midrash.

Jesus speaks of Moses constantly. The Sermon on the Mount is, among other things, a deliberate echo and intensification of Sinai. *You have heard that it was said... but I say to you.* The structure is Mosaic. Jesus is positioning himself in the Moses lineage — the new lawgiver on a new mountain. He is also careful to say that he comes not to abolish the law but to fulfil it. The Moses story is the framework within which much of the New Testament operates.

In the Qur'an, Moses — Musa — is the most-mentioned prophet, appearing in more suras than any other figure. The Qur'anic Musa story covers much of the same ground: the Nile, the basket, Pharaoh's daughter, the killing, the exile, the burning bush, the confrontation with Pharaoh, the Exodus, the law. But the Qur'an reads it with a different emphasis — Musa as messenger, as a man sent to a specific people at a specific time, as an example of the pattern that recurs throughout prophetic history. The Qur'an also tells the story of Musa and Khidr, the mysterious wise man who teaches him patience, in a passage that is itself one of the most beautiful and puzzling in the scripture.

And then there is Freud, who in 1939 published *Moses and Monotheism* — a book that is partly psychoanalysis and partly a historical hypothesis. Freud argued that Moses was an Egyptian, that his name is Egyptian, that he brought monotheism to the Israelites from Egyptian sources, and that the story of his death — the lost grave — was the Jewish people's unconscious memory of a murder they committed against him and then forgot, a memory so traumatic it survived only as the story of his disappearance. The book was written in the last year of Freud's life, in Vienna, as the Nazis were closing in. It is a strange, brave, difficult book. It is also reception history, not evidence about Moses himself, and it should be read that way.

Every major civilisation that encountered the Moses story has taken it and made it its own. The abolitionists in America made him the hero of liberation — "Go down, Moses" was a spiritual sung by enslaved people who identified themselves with the Israelites and their oppressors with Pharaoh. Harriet Tubman was called Moses in her lifetime. Martin Luther King, in his final speech on the evening before his assassination, invoked the mountaintop — *I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the promised land* — and the image is unmistakably Mosaic. He knew he was dying. He said so in the same speech. The story had given him the language to say it.

And the Exodus story has also been used for conquest. The same book that gave the slaves their freedom song gave the settlers their claim to the land — a people delivered from bondage, promised a land, commanded to take it. The book has served the slave and the settler. It is not possible to tell the story of Moses without telling this too.

The controlling question

So here is what this book is trying to do, and it should be honest about it from the start.

We have a story about a man: born in Egypt, raised in Pharaoh's court, killed a man, fled to Midian, heard a voice from a bush, went back, confronted Pharaoh, led a people out of slavery, received a law

on a mountain, wandered in the wilderness for forty years, and died on a mountain in Moab, looking at a land he would never enter, buried by God in an unmarked grave.

We have evidence that something like the story's background really existed — Semitic-speaking people in the Egyptian Delta, forced labour on building projects, the real geography of the region, the real Egyptian pharaohs of the relevant period. We have evidence that the Israelites, when they appear in the archaeological record, emerged from within Canaanite society rather than arriving from outside it. We have evidence that the text was composed and edited over centuries by multiple hands, and that much of what it describes in its present form did not happen the way it is written.

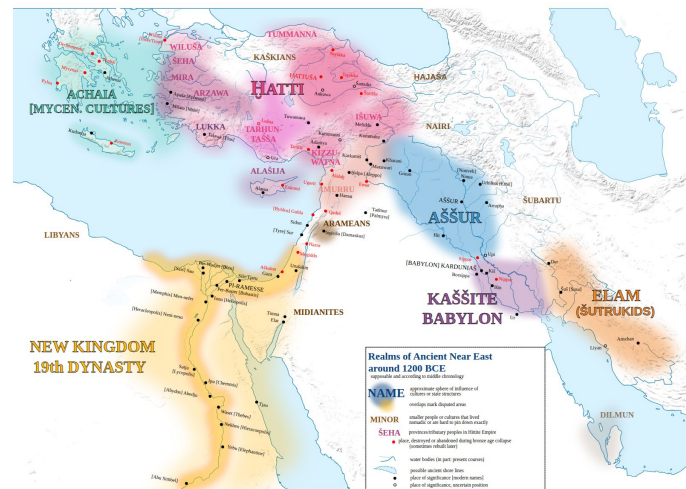
And we have, despite all of this, a story that is specific, layered, unflattering, and psychologically true in ways that suggest it grew around something that actually happened — something small, perhaps, something at the scale of a group rather than a nation, something that was enlarged by time and shaped by the needs of the people who told it, but something real enough that a man like this — a man with a temper, a stammer, a failure at Meribah, a death outside the promised land, a grave no one knows — could have lived.

This book is an attempt to tell that story honestly and completely. It will tell the story as it is in the text, in full narrative mode, for the parts where the story is at its most powerful. It will tell the world that story emerged from, the Egypt and the Sinai and the Canaan of the relevant time. And it will tell the story of the story itself — who wrote it, when, why, and what they needed Moses to be.

The reader will finish knowing three things they did not know before. What the evidence actually supports. What the story says, with astonishing psychological precision. And why a story about a man who died in sight of a land he never entered has fuelled every liberation movement since it was first told.

That is the book. Let us begin.

The Silence of Egypt



The Ancient Near East around 1200 BCE, the approximate period of the Merneptah Stele — the earliest text outside the Bible to mention Israel. (Image: Enyavar, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

In the previous chapter we stood on Mount Nebo and looked at the view Moses is given but not permitted to enter. We ended on an unexpected detail: the man who gives a nation its law is buried by God in an unmarked grave, and the tradition itself insists that no one knows where.

That is a strange way to treat a founder. It is not how empires preserve theirs. It is the first clue that this story is not the kind of story a nation tells when it is inventing itself from whole cloth.

Something about the shape of it — the unflattering portrait, the failure at Meribah, the death outside the land — points toward a memory that grew around something that actually happened, rather than a fiction designed to make a man look like a hero.

But before we can say anything useful about what that memory might be, we need to be honest about what we would expect to find if the Exodus happened as it is written, and what we actually find instead. This chapter is the fullest treatment of that question in the book, because it matters and because it should be done once, carefully, well. The reader who understands this chapter has the tools for everything that follows.

What the story actually claims

The Exodus narrative, in its final form, describes a set of events of a specific scale. It is worth pausing over the scale before asking what evidence it would leave, because the scale is what makes the silence so striking.

The story says that the Israelites — a population already in Egypt, already numerous enough to be feared by the Egyptians as a demographic threat — were reduced to forced labour on building projects in the Delta, and that a pharaoh ordered the killing of all newborn Hebrew boys. It says that one infant, Moses, was preserved in a basket, raised in the Egyptian court, fled to Midian after killing

an Egyptian, returned forty years later with a divine commission, and confronted the pharaoh with a series of ten disasters that culminated in the death of every Egyptian firstborn and the release of the Israelites. It says that the Israelites left in such numbers — the text says 600,000 men on foot, which implies two million people altogether — that they could not be stopped, and that the Egyptian army pursued them and was destroyed in the waters of the Red Sea or the Reed Sea. It says that a population of that size then wandered the Sinai desert for forty years, receiving law at a mountain, and that they later conquered Canaan, destroying or displacing the populations there.

That is a large story. Two million people wandering for forty years is not a small event. It is not something that leaves no trace. It is, in scale, comparable to the migration of a substantial nation. If it happened, the evidence for it would be significant and varied. The question is what the evidence actually shows.

What Egypt would be expected to record

If two million people left Egypt in a single dramatic departure, with the destruction of the Egyptian army, the death of the firstborn throughout the land, and the overthrow of a pharaoh's policy — if all of that happened within the memory of Egyptian administration — we would expect some trace of it in the Egyptian record. Egypt in the Late Bronze Age was a bureaucracy that documented everything. Tax records, court proceedings, letters, grain accounts, workmen's diaries, diplomatic correspondence, boundary stelae, temple inscriptions. We have a remarkable volume of this material, and more keeps turning up.

What we do not have is an Egyptian record of the Exodus.

This is not, by itself, a decisive argument against the Exodus, because empires do not typically record their own defeats in a straightforward way. A slave departure, even a dramatic one, might not have been the kind of event that made it into the official annals in the way a victory did. But the silence is specific and it is worth describing accurately.

There is no Egyptian text that mentions the departure of a large Hebrew population. There is no record of the ten plagues. There is no Egyptian account of the destruction of an army in a body of water. There is no record of a pharaoh losing his army and his slave population in the same period.

Contrast this with what Egyptian records *do* preserve. We have records of the Hyksos — a Semitic-speaking people who ruled parts of Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period (roughly 1650–1550 BCE) and were later expelled, an event that is described in Egyptian terms and preserved in Egyptian records. We have the campaign records of pharaohs like Thutmose III, who left a detailed chronicle of his military expeditions. We have the temple inscriptions of Ramesses II, one of the most prolific builders in Egyptian history, who documented his construction projects and his campaigns in enormous detail. We have the Merneptah Stele, a victory inscription listing defeated enemies in Canaan. We even have records of grain shipments, workmen's attendance at Deir el-Medina, legal disputes over property, and the private letters of officials and courtiers.

Ancient Egypt documented itself abundantly. The Exodus is not in the record.

What Egypt does say about Semitic people

What Egypt *does* record, and what is directly relevant to the question of Semitic-speaking people in the Delta, is a whole history of such people in the region. The Egyptians knew about, fought, employed, and sometimes ruled Semitic-speaking populations. Several groups appear in the texts.

The **Hyksos** — the name is Greek, from an Egyptian term meaning "rulers of foreign lands" — were a Semitic-speaking population that dominated northern Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period, establishing their capital at Avaris in the eastern Delta. They ruled for roughly a century and a half before being expelled by a Theban pharaoh, and the expulsion became part of Egyptian historical memory. The Hyksos are earlier than the Exodus narrative by centuries, but they are part of the broader picture of Semitic people in the Delta, and the memory of their presence and expulsion probably shaped the biblical story's setting even if the story itself is much later.

The **Apiru** or **Habiru** — the spelling varies in the sources — appear in Egyptian, Hittite, and Akkadian texts from the Late Bronze Age as a class of people, not an ethnic group. They are described variously as mercenaries, fugitives, escaped slaves, labourers, and outlaws. The term appears in the Amarna letters (the correspondence between Egyptian pharaohs and their vassals in Canaan during the fourteenth century BCE) and in other Near Eastern sources. Whether the Habiru are connected to the Hebrews is a matter of long debate; the similarity of the names is suggestive but not definitive, and the Habiru seem to be a social category that caught many different kinds of marginal people rather than a specific tribal group. The term's presence in the texts, however, shows that Semitic-speaking marginal populations were a feature of the Egyptian and Canaanite world in exactly the period that matters.

The **Shasu** — a nomadic or semi-nomadic population — appear in Egyptian inscriptions in the Late Bronze Age. They are associated with the Transjordan and the Sinai frontier, and they appear as enemies or as subjects at the Egyptian frontier forts. Papyrus Anastasi VI, a letter from a Egyptian official dating to the reign of Merneptah (roughly 1213–1203 BCE), records the movement of Shasu through an Egyptian border checkpoint. The text is prosaic and administrative:

Let the Shasu of Edona pass the fortress of Merneptah-Content-with Amun... to the place where there is water for them, for there is a complete lack of water in the land of Edona.

The papyrus describes Shasu coming through the frontier, some of them in search of water, some of them on the move for other reasons, and the Egyptian official authorising their passage through a fortress. It is not an Exodus narrative. It is a document about nomadic pastoralists moving through a border zone during a dry period. But it shows the Egyptian administration dealing with these populations at the frontier in the relevant period, and it gives us a sense of the texture of the region — the lack of water, the movement of people, the presence of Egyptian forts.

The Amarna letters, for their part, show a different picture: the Canaanite city-states of the fourteenth century BCE, ruled by local rulers who wrote to the Egyptian pharaoh in Akkadian (the diplomatic language of the time), many of them Semitic-speaking, some of them called "Habiru" in the correspondence. The letters describe warfare, diplomacy, tribute, rebellion, and the breakdown of the Egyptian-dominated order in Canaan. Scholars have long noted that the Amarna letters depict a world that is in some ways similar to the world the biblical narrative describes — a region of small city-states and marginal populations, all under the formal suzerainty of Egypt, all living in a texture of conflict and negotiation.

The Merneptah Stele and the first mention of Israel

The most important Egyptian document for the question of Israel's origins is the Merneptah Stele, a victory inscription of the pharaoh Merneptah, dated by most scholars to approximately 1207 BCE. The stele is a large slab of black granite, originally set up in a temple in Thebes, and it lists the

peoples and places Merneptah claims to have defeated in a campaign in Canaan. Most of the list is conventional — various city-states and peoples that had rebelled or that Merneptah wanted to claim to have subdued. Then comes a passage that has no parallel in any other known Egyptian text. It names a people called **Israel**, and it says of them:

Israel is laid waste, his seed is not.

The phrase is a standard Egyptian cursing formula applied to enemies — it means, roughly, that the people have been destroyed and will have no descendants. What is extraordinary about the passage is not the curse but the fact that Israel is named at all. This is the earliest known reference to Israel in any source outside the Bible. It is the first external mention of the people who would become the subject of the Exodus story.

And it is significant for what it does *not* say. The Stele does not describe Israel as living in Egypt. It does not describe Israel as having been in Egypt and recently departed. It does not describe Israel as a people crossing the desert. It describes Israel as a people in Canaan — already there, already a people whose destruction the pharaoh is claiming. *Israel is laid waste, his seed is not* — as if the pharaoh has campaigned against them in Canaan and wants posterity to know that he has ruined them.

This is a great deal of significance to place on a single passage, and we should be careful not to overread it. The Stele is a victory inscription, and victory inscriptions are propaganda, not dispassionate history. The claim that Israel was "laid waste" may be Merneptah's boast, not a fact. But the name is there, in Egypt, in 1207 BCE or thereabouts, and it places Israel in Canaan, not in Egypt.

This is one of the main reasons that the archaeology of Israel's origins has turned out the way it has. If Israel was already a named entity in Canaan by 1207 BCE, then the Exodus story — if it is historical at all — must be earlier than that, and the people who became "Israel" must have arrived in Canaan before Merneptah's campaign. The question is whether they arrived as the Exodus describes (a mass departure from Egypt followed by a wandering and then a conquest) or whether they emerged in Canaan itself.

The archaeology, as we will see, favours the latter.

The Sinai and what it should contain

The forty-year wandering is the part of the Exodus story that most directly confronts the archaeological record, because a population of the size described would have left traces, and the Sinai is not the kind of place where traces disappear without a trace.

The narrative says that the Israelites encamped at specific locations — the biblical text lists them, in Numbers 33, in what appears to be an itinerary, a list of campsites from Egypt to the plains of Moab. The main campsite is Kadesh Barnea, a place in the northern Negev, near the Sinai border, that is associated with the story of the spies, the rebellion, and the long period of waiting before the journey east toward the Jordan. If a population of two million people camped there, moved from there, and lived there for extended periods over forty years, we would expect substantial archaeological remains: pottery from the Late Bronze Age, hearths, possible structures, the debris of a large population over a long period.

Systematic surveys of the southern Sinai and the surrounding regions have been carried out since the 1970s. The surveys have found very little that corresponds to a large population in the Late Bronze Age. The southern Sinai is a region of low population density in any period; the archaeological record from the Late Bronze Age is sparse. But the specific absence is notable. Kadesh Barnea, the main campsite in the narrative, shows essentially no Late Bronze Age occupation. The material culture appears in the Iron Age, centuries later, and in much smaller quantities than the narrative would predict.

This does not mean that no one ever crossed the Sinai. It does not mean that small groups of Semitic-speaking people, or escaped slaves, or pastoralists, could not have moved through the region. The Sinai is a difficult place but it has been crossed by small groups many times in history. The absence of evidence is consistent with a small group, or no group at all, but not with the narrative's scale.

What the archaeology of the Sinai shows, in short, is that if the Exodus happened, it did not happen on the scale the narrative describes. The text has been enlarged.

Where the Israelites actually appear

When the Israelites appear in the archaeological record, they appear in the highlands of Canaan, in the late Iron Age I period, roughly the eleventh and tenth centuries BCE. They do not appear in the Delta. They do not appear in Sinai. They appear, suddenly, in the central hill country of Canaan, in a set of small settlements — Shiloh, Shechem, Bethel, Ai (a site whose identification is complicated), and the scores of small villages that dot the central highlands.

The archaeological picture of these settlements is distinctive and important. They are unfortified. They are on the edges of the settled land, in places that had not been occupied before. They have a distinctive material culture: a particular type of pottery (what archaeologists call the collar-rim jar and the four-room house) that distinguishes them from the Canaanite lowland sites. And perhaps most significantly, they show a striking pattern in the animal bone assemblages: pig bones, common in Canaanite sites throughout the Bronze Age and in the lowland sites of the Iron Age, are essentially absent from these highland settlements.

The disappearance of pig bones has been one of the most debated pieces of evidence in the archaeology of ancient Israel. The reason it matters is that it suggests a new dietary identity. If the people of these highland settlements had always eaten pork, like their Canaanite neighbours, we would expect pig bones in their refuse. If they had just arrived from Egypt and had no established dietary practice, the absence of pig bones might be a matter of circumstance rather than identity. But the pattern is strong and consistent across many sites, and it strongly suggests that these people were differentiating themselves from the Canaanites around them by a new food practice — a practice that, in the biblical tradition, becomes one of the most marked signifiers of Israelite identity.

The standard archaeological interpretation of this picture — forcefully argued by William Dever in *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* — is that the early Israelites emerged from within Canaanite society. They were not invaders from outside. They were not a new population arriving from Egypt. They were, in large part, Canaanites — peasants, marginal people, some escaped slaves or freed labour — who reorganised themselves around a new identity in the highlands, in reaction to the political and economic conditions of the late Bronze Age collapse.

This does not mean the Exodus story is false. It means the Exodus story, as preserved, does not describe the origins of the early Israelites as the archaeological record shows them. Something else happened, or something happened and was remembered differently, or something happened and was enlarged into a national epic.

The conservative response

The honest book has to represent the conservative case fairly, because the issue is not as simple as the sceptical reading sometimes makes it sound. The argument for a minimalist Exodus — the claim that the story is entirely a late invented narrative with no historical base — is not the same as the argument that something happened. And the counterarguments are worth stating plainly.

James Hoffmeier, in *Israel in Egypt*, argues that the Exodus story preserves genuine historical memory of Semitic-speaking people in the Delta, and that the specific details of the story — the brickmaking, the building of store cities, the route of the Exodus, the place names — ring true in ways that a pure invention would not. He argues that the Israelites were likely a group of Semitic-speaking people, possibly pastoralists or escaped slaves, who left Egypt by some route and whose story was later expanded. He engages seriously with the archaeology of Sinai and argues that it is not as empty as the sceptical reading suggests; there are traces of Late Bronze Age occupation in parts of the Sinai, though not at Kadesh Barnea on the scale the narrative implies. He is careful, and his argument deserves to be read by anyone who wants to understand the question on both sides.

Kenneth Kitchen, in *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, mounts a broader attack on what he perceives as the fashionable tendency to dismiss the biblical narrative as unhistorical on the basis of negative archaeological evidence. He argues that the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, that the Egyptian record is incomplete in ways that make it unreasonable to demand direct attestation of everything the Bible describes, and that the archaeological record is often consistent with the biblical picture in ways that the sceptical scholarship ignores or minimises. Kitchen is an experienced assyriologist and Egyptologist, and his arguments have technical force. The book is not, for a non-specialist, an easy read, but it is a serious attempt to defend the historical reliability of the Old Testament against what its author sees as tendentious minimalism.

Both of these writers are worth taking seriously. Neither of them succeeds in making the Exodus narrative, as written, straightforwardly historical. Neither of them needs to, because the more interesting position is the one in the middle: that something happened, that the evidence for it is limited and ambiguous, and that the story we have is a memory enlarged by time and shaped by theology.

What the evidence supports

So where does this leave us, before we move to the next chapter and the story itself?

The evidence does not support the Exodus as a large-scale historical event. There is no Egyptian record of it. The Sinai archaeology does not show a population of the size described. The Israelite emergence in Canaan looks like it happened within Canaan, not from outside.

The evidence does support a smaller and more ambiguous reality. There were Semitic-speaking people in the Delta — Hyksos, Apiru, Shasu, and others. There were Egyptian building projects that involved forced labour, including brickmaking, in the relevant period. There were Semitic-speaking populations at the Egyptian frontier, as the Papyrus Anastasi VI and other texts show. There was a

period in the fourteenth century BCE — the Amarna period — when the Egyptian order in Canaan was in crisis, and when the city-states of Canaan were ruled by local Semitic-speaking elites who wrote to the pharaoh in a language that was clearly related to Hebrew. There was a people called Israel in Canaan by 1207 BCE, already a named entity.

And the evidence supports the possibility that a small group of Semitic-speaking people — a group within the range that the Sinai archaeology could accommodate, a group within the range of what a single family or clan or small tribal unit might be — got out of Egypt, or escaped the Delta, or remembered getting out, and that their story became, over centuries, the founding narrative of a people who were not yet a nation when the story began.

This is not a dramatic discovery. It is a modest position, and it is the one that the best historians on both sides of the question converge toward, even if they describe it differently. Hoffmeier wants to say that the Exodus story is largely historical, but he is forced by the evidence to admit a smaller scale than the text describes. Finkelstein and Silberman want to say that the story is largely a late invention, but they are forced by the text to admit a kernel of historical memory. The middle is where the book lives.

Because the middle is where the interesting questions are. If the Exodus story is not a literal history of two million people leaving Egypt, what is it? Why did it take the shape it took? Why is it so specific, so detailed, so unflattering to its own hero? Why did it survive? Why did it become the master story of two major religions and a thousand liberation movements?

And most of all: why does a story about a stammering runaway murderer who died in sight of a land he never entered have the power it has?

That is the question this book is really about. The evidence problem is the door into it, and we have walked through it. Next chapter, we will take the book's method out of the backpack and lay it on the table. Then we will begin the story.

How to Read a Man Like This

This is the chapter where the book tells you what it is doing.

It is not a methodological detour. It is not an academic appendix moved to the front. It is one of the thirty chapters, and it matters as much as any other, because the reader who understands it will be able to follow the rest of the book the way the author intends. The reader who does not understand it will likely get the wrong impression about what the book is arguing at various points, and especially about the parts where the story runs as narrative and the parts where the analysis intrudes.

So here it is. The whole method, stated plainly, in a chapter the reader can return to if things get confusing.

The problem the book is solving

We have a story about a man. We have a substantial body of evidence about the world he is supposed to have lived in. The evidence does not support the story as written — not on the scale it describes, not in the form it has reached us in. And yet the story persists, has shaped two major religions, has fuelled liberations and conquests, and still exerts power over the people who tell it.

The problem the book is solving is this: how to read a story like that.

A dishonest book pretends the evidence problem away and writes the story as if it were history. A cynical book uses the evidence problem to dismiss the story as a fiction and then has nothing more to say. This book does neither. It takes the evidence problem seriously — it is the engine of the book, not a preface convenience — and it takes the story seriously too, as one of the most powerful narratives human beings have ever produced, and as something that may be true about human beings even if it is not literally true about the events it describes.

The thesis, stated in chapter one and worth repeating here: something happened. A small group of Semitic-speaking people got out of Egypt, or remembered getting out, and around that memory grew a portrait of a man so specific and so unflattering that it is hard to believe someone made him up from nothing. The rest of this book is an attempt to test that thesis, chapter by chapter, against the evidence, the text, and the history of the story's reception.

The three strands

The book is organised as a braid of three strands. You have already seen them in the chapter titles and the brief, but here they should be stated explicitly, because the reader needs to recognise them in the text and understand why they are kept distinct.

Strand 1: The story as Israel told it.

This is the narrative strand. When a chapter runs in this mode, it tells the story the way the biblical text tells it — the basket, the murder, the flight to Midian, the bush, the plagues, the sea, Sinai, the golden calf, the forty years, the failure at Meribah, the death on the mountain. It treats the story as a literary and historical document of enormous power and reads it as a narrative, scene by scene, with full attention to what it says and how it says it.

In narrative chapters, the text is treated as the text. We are not constantly interrupting the narrative with archaeological caveats. We are telling the story because the story deserves to be told, and because the reader needs to encounter it directly — in full, in sequence, in its own terms — before the analysis can be meaningful. The reader who skips to the analysis without having felt the story will not understand what is being analysed or why it matters.

Strand 2: The world behind the story.

This is the historical context strand. It tells the reader what Egypt was like in the New Kingdom. It tells the reader about the people in the Delta — the Hyksos, the Apiru, the Shasu, the Semitic-speaking populations that lived there and moved through the region. It tells the reader about the geography — the Delta, the Sinai options, the Negev, the Jordan valley, the places the story names. It tells the reader about the Egyptian pharaohs and the chronology and the building projects. It tells the reader about the archaeology of the Sinai and the emergence of Israel in the Canaanite highlands. It tells the reader about Hammurabi and the law codes of the ancient Near East, and about the Hittite treaty forms that may lie behind the Sinai covenant.

This strand is not a running commentary on the narrative. It is a separate body of knowledge, told in separate chapters, that gives the reader the context to understand the setting of the story and the world it emerged from. The reader will learn to feel the difference between a chapter that narrates the story and a chapter that sets the scene.

Strand 3: The making of the story.

This is the strand that tells the reader how the story came to be the way it is. It tells the reader about the source theory — the four voices (J, E, D, P) that most scholars now recognise in the Pentateuch, and the evidence for them. It tells the reader about Josiah's reform in 622 BCE and the discovery of the book of the law — almost certainly an early form of Deuteronomy — and why a king in crisis needed a lawgiver from the desert. It tells the reader about the Babylonian exile and the final assembly of the Torah, and about the people who had lost a land editing a story about a people who did not yet have one. It tells the reader, chapter by chapter, what each generation added to the portrait and what the core might be — the small, hard, unflattering residue that looks like memory.

This strand is the most technical of the three, and it is told in the most accessible way possible. The source theory is explained so that a reader with no background can follow it. The Josiah and exile contexts are explained so that the reader understands why the story was shaped the way it was. The goal is not to turn the reader into a biblical scholar but to give the reader the conceptual tools to hear the seams in the text and understand what they mean.

The rule that holds the braid together

Here is the rule, and it is absolute:

Never mix modes inside a scene.

A chapter that is running in narrative mode (strand 1) does not interrupt itself with archaeological caveats or source criticism. A chapter that is providing context (strand 2) does not drift into the narrative. A chapter that is analysing the making of the story (strand 3) does not overwrite the story with the analysis.

This rule exists for a reason. If you interrupt a scene from the narrative with parenthetical notes about which source wrote which verse, you destroy the narrative. If you pretend the archaeological context does not exist while you are telling the story, you are being dishonest. If you tell the making-of-the-story analysis as if it were the story itself, you confuse the reader about what is being described.

The three strands must remain distinct, and the reader must be able to feel the difference. That is the discipline of the braid. It is also, honestly, the discipline of honest reading. You cannot do everything at once. You have to know which mode you are in.

The reader who understands this rule will be able to follow the book as it is written. When a chapter narrates the sea crossing in full, the reader knows: this is strand 1. The archaeological context of the crossing sites, the question of reeds versus Red, the doubled sea account in the sources — that is coming in separate chapters, in strand 2 and strand 3. When a chapter analyses the source composition of the flood story, the reader knows: this is strand 3. The narrative of the flood itself will come in its own chapter, in strand 1. The reader who keeps the modes separate will not be confused by what might otherwise look like contradiction or interruption.

What the book is not

Several things the book is not, stated for clarity.

It is not a defence of biblical literalism. The evidence does not support the story as written. Chapter 2 said so, and the book will not go silent on this after chapter 2. The conservative scholars — Hoffmeier, Kitchen — are given a fair hearing, in their strongest form, but the book is not a vehicle for their argument. It is asking a different question: not *did it all happen as written?* but *what happened, what is the story we have, and why does it matter?*

It is not a debunking. A debunking writes a book that says: the Exodus never happened, Moses probably never existed, and here is why the story is a fiction. This book does not say that. It says the evidence points to a smaller reality, and it says the story is too specific and too psychologically true to be pure invention. A debunking would be simpler to write and easier to argue. This book is trying to be harder.

It is not a theological apologetic. The book is not arguing that the story is true because it is in the Bible, or that the Bible is divinely inspired, or that faith requires accepting the narrative as history. It is arguing that the story is historically interesting and psychologically true and culturally powerful, and that these things are worth understanding on their own terms. The religious reader who wants a confession of faith will not find it here. The religious reader who wants an honest account of the story and its origins, told with respect, may find that.

It is not a biography in the modern sense. We do not have enough evidence to write a biography of Moses in the way we would write a biography of a known historical figure. We have a story. The story may preserve memory, and it may not. The book treats the story as the evidence we have and analyses it as a text and as a memory, without pretending that it is a transparent window onto a historical person. The portrait of Moses that emerges is a portrait of the character the story gives us, understood as a character, and as possibly something more.

The kind of truth the book is after

Here is the hardest question, and the book should name it.

The Exodus story is not literally true, on the scale and in the form it has reached us in. We have said this. The archaeology does not support it. The Egyptian record does not mention it. The Sinai is not full of Late Bronze Age campsites. The early Israelites appear in the highlands of Canaan, not crossing the Jordan from the east after a forty-year wandering. The story, in other words, is not a documentary.

But the story is true in other ways, and the book insists on this. It is true about what a people who had been through trauma and liberation and covenant would tell about themselves. It is true about the texture of forced labour in the Delta, the memory of which is preserved in the brickmaking and store city details. It is true about the psychology of the man who resists a call he cannot handle and then carries it because he has to. It is true about the experience of leading a people that constantly threatens to abandon you. It is true about the experience of a leader who is given everything except the thing he wants most. It is true about the experience of a tradition that preserves its hero's failure because it would rather be honest than flattering.

And it is true, in a sense, about the most important thing: that a story can be shaped by time and theology and still preserve something real underneath it. *Made up* and *shaped* are not the same thing. A story that is made up from nothing has no ground to stand on. A story that is shaped has a ground — a memory, a person, an event, a feeling — that it has built a structure around. The building is not the ground, but the ground is there, and the building tells you something about it.

This is the kind of truth the book is after. Not documentary truth, and not cynical dismissal, but something in between: the truth of a memory that has become a story, and the story has become a civilisation's most important possession, and the civilisation has kept telling it for three thousand years.

That is enough truth to build a book on.

How to read the chapters that follow

A few practical notes.

Part One is done. Chapters 1 and 2 have given you the framing — the strange ending, the evidence problem, the argument that the book will make throughout. Chapter 3, the one you are reading now, has given you the method. You now have the tools. The book trusts you to remember them.

Part Two is context. Chapters 4 through 8 are all strand 2 — Egypt, the Delta, the people in it, the building projects, the chronology, Moses' Egyptian name. These chapters do not narrate the story. They set the scene. When you finish them, you will have a picture of the world the story emerged from.

Part Three is the story. Chapters 9 through 16 run in narrative mode, strand 1. These are the chapters that tell the story the way Israel told it — birth, murder, Midian, the bush, the speech impediment, the plagues, the sea, Sinai. They are written as continuous narrative, with no interruption from the analysis. The reader who wants the story should read these chapters as story. The reader who wants the analysis should wait for Parts Five and Six, where the analysis comes. Do not mix the two while reading Part Three. Let the story breathe.

Part Four is the wilderness. Chapters 17 through 23 are a mix of strand 1 and strand 2. Some of these chapters narrate episodes from the wilderness years — the golden calf, the mutiny, the loneliness — and some of them provide context — the law, the Jethro principle, the generation that had to die. The reader will feel the shift between modes within the part, because the wilderness chapters are themselves a mix of story and analysis in the text. But the rule still holds: within a given scene, do not interrupt the mode.

Part Five is the making. Chapters 24 through 27 are strand 3 — the source theory, Josiah, the exile, the portrait built by generations. This is where the book turns from telling the story and setting the scene to telling the story of the story. The reader who has not yet read Parts Three and Four may find Part Five puzzling, because the analysis presupposes familiarity with the text being analysed. The book assumes you have read—or will read—the story before the analysis. This is deliberate.

Part Six is the afterlife. Chapters 28 through 30 tell the story of what happened to Moses after the story of Moses was over. Philo, the rabbis, Jesus, Muhammad, Freud, the liberation movements, the conquest movements. The Moses who escaped the text and went into the world. This part is in a different kind of mode — reception history rather than narrative or context or analysis — and it has its own logic. But the braid still applies: within each chapter, the mode is consistent.

A note on tone

The book is writing for a reader who is intelligent and curious but not necessarily trained in biblical studies. It will not use technical jargon without explaining it. It will not say "the Yahwist source" without saying what that means. It will not assume the reader knows the structure of the Hebrew Bible. It will, where necessary, explain the relevant terms. The goal is accessibility without dumbing down.

The tone is honourable. The book is not cynical about the story's power. It is not ironic about the religious traditions that have grown around it. It takes the religious reader seriously and expects to be taken seriously by them. The standard the book holds to is this: *this story is too important to lie*

about. It is not too important to be analysed. It is not too important to be questioned. But it is too important to be treated as safe material for a clever argument that would never survive contact with the text.

The religious reader who loves this book will be the one who can feel the difference between a book that is trying to dismiss and a book that is trying to understand. The non-religious reader who loves it will be the one who can feel the difference between a book that reduces the story to a fiction and a book that reads it as a memory.

Both readers are meant to be served.

The braid diagram

For the reader who wants it in one place:

One — The Problem — 1–3, Frame + method. The strange ending, the evidence gap, the book's rules

Two — Egypt — 4–8, Strand 2 (context). New Kingdom Egypt, Semitic populations, forced labour, the pharaoh question, Moses' name

Three — The Story — 9–16, Strand 1 (narrative). The story as Israel told it, in full

Four — The Wilderness — 17–23, Strand 1 + 2 (narrative + context). The law, the calf, the loneliness, the mutiny, Aaron and Miriam, the dying generation, the rock

Five — The Making — 24–27, Strand 3 (analysis). Sources, Josiah, the exile, the portrait built by generations

Six — The Afterlife — 28–30, Reception history. Philo, rabbis, Jesus, Muhammad, Freud, the liberation and conquest uses

The reader who keeps this in mind will not get lost.

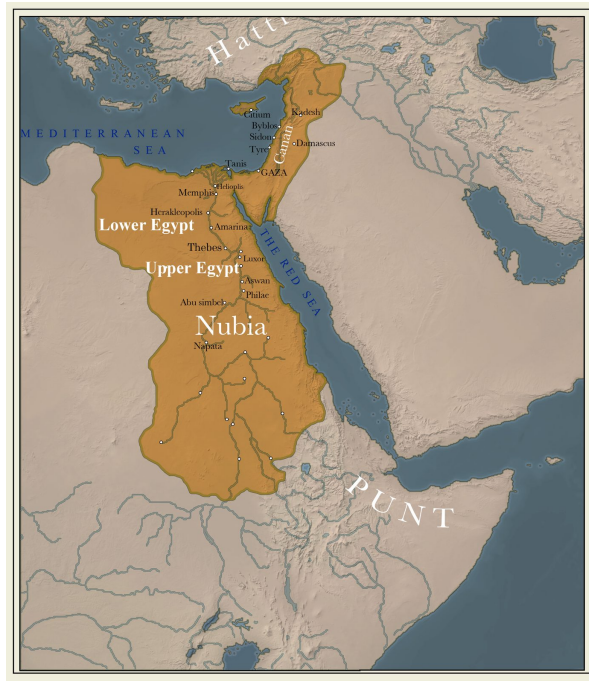
What comes next

Chapter 4 turns to Egypt — the richest country on earth in the New Kingdom, the society that produced the pharaohs, the temples, the bureaucracy, the building programmes, the world in which a Semitic-speaking population might have lived and worked and been oppressed. The next six chapters, through Chapter 8, are all setting the scene: the country, the people in it, the building projects, the question of which pharaoh, the question of Moses' name.

If you have understood this chapter, you are ready for Chapter 4. The story has not started yet, but the stage is being built. When it is ready, the story will begin, and it will not stop until the mountain.

Part Two: Egypt

The Richest Country on Earth



New Kingdom Egypt at its height under Thutmose III, c. 1453 BCE — the empire the story of Moses is set inside. (Image: Thutmose, CC0 1.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

If you want to understand why the Exodus story happened the way it did — why it is a story about Egypt, about forced labour, about a pharaoh who will not let a people go, about a departure from the Delta and a journey toward a land that was always on the other side of the desert — you need to see Egypt as it actually was.

Not as a comic-book land of pyramids and mummies. Not as a mystical civilisation in the popular imagination. As a specific country, in a specific period, with a specific economy, a specific bureaucracy, a specific relationship to the people on its edges. Because the story's details — the brickmaking, the store cities, the pursuit by chariot, the route through the marshy eastern Delta — make sense only against this background. They ring true in ways they would not ring true against any other setting.

This chapter is the first of six that set the stage. It is part of the second strand of the book: the world behind the story. These chapters do not tell the story of Moses. They tell the world the story emerged from. The reader who finishes Part Two will have a picture of the landscape before the first scene begins.

The country

Stand on the west bank of the Nile at Luxor in the late afternoon and you will understand, before anyone tells you, why Egypt was the richest country on earth for most of its history.

The Nile is not just a river. It is the only thing that makes the country habitable at all. The desert presses in on both sides — rocky plateaus, sand, the occasional oases, the tombs of the nobles cut into the cliffs on the west bank. The green strip of the valley is narrow, rarely more than a few kilometres wide except in the Delta. The river is the highway, the irrigation source, the agricultural base, the transportation route for everything from granite to grain. Without the Nile, Egypt is nothing. With it, Egypt is one of the most productive agricultural civilisations in human history.

The annual flood is the key. Every year, the Nile rises, floods the land, deposits a layer of rich black silt, and recedes. The ancient Egyptians called the land *Kemet* — the Black Land — for the colour of the soil after the flood. The desert on either side was *Deshret* — the Red Land. The distinction was not poetry. It was agronomy. The Black Land could grow wheat and barley and flax and vegetables and fruit in quantities that supported a large population and a state apparatus. The Red Land held nothing useful except minerals: gold in the eastern desert, granite and other stones in the quarries, semi-precious stones for jewellery.

The flood was also the basis of the Egyptian state's administrative genius. Because the flood's height varied from year to year, the state had to measure it, record it, predict its effects on the harvest, and tax accordingly. The nilometers — the structures installed at various points on the Nile to measure the water level — are among the most important pieces of infrastructure in Egyptian history, because they were the instrument through which the state knew what it could expect from the harvest. The records of the nilometer readings, maintained over centuries at places like Elephantine in the south, are among the most remarkable bureaucratic archives in the ancient world. A state that could measure its river's rise and fall in centimetres and tax peasants accordingly was a state that understood its resource with unusual precision.

The geography of the country shaped its politics. The Nile runs north — always north — so the river flows from the southern border toward the Mediterranean. The wind, on the other hand, usually blows north to south in the valley, so you could sail upriver against the current by using the wind. Movement up and down the country was relatively easy, and the monarchy, based at various times in the south (Thebes, Abydos) or the north (Memphis, the Delta), could project power along the river corridor. The uniformity of the corridor — a single river, a single agricultural strip, a single communication route — is one of the reasons Egypt achieved and maintained political unity for long stretches of its history in a way that divided civilisations did not.

The New Kingdom

The story of Moses is set, in the conventional reading, in the period when Egypt was at the height of its power as an empire. That period is the New Kingdom, roughly 1550 to 1070 BCE, and it is worth seeing what that means.

The New Kingdom began when the Theban kings of Upper Egypt defeated the Hyksos and drove them out of the Delta. The Hyksos — a Semitic-speaking people, as we will discuss in the next chapter — had ruled northern Egypt for about a century and a half, establishing their capital at Avaris in the eastern Delta, using horse-drawn chariots, and introducing military technology and tactics that changed Egyptian warfare. Their expulsion was a traumatic event in Egyptian history, and it left a memory that shaped Egyptian attitudes toward Semitic populations for centuries. The pharaohs who

expelled them — Ahmose I and his successors — began the New Kingdom in a mood of revanchism, pushing the Egyptian state back into the Levant and reasserting control over territories that had been lost.

The New Kingdom pharaohs who followed — especially the great warrior pharaohs like Thutmose III (1479–1425 BCE) and Ramesses II (1279–1213 BCE) — built Egypt into the dominant power of the Near East. Thutmose III campaigned more than seventeen times in the Levant, extending Egyptian control from the Euphrates in the north to Nubia in the south. His campaign records, inscribed on the walls of the temple of Karnak at Thebes, are among the most detailed military chronicles from the ancient world. The Battle of Megiddo, one of his earliest, is the first battle in history for which we have a reasonably detailed account — the troop positions, the strategy, the outcome. The Egyptian army under Thutmose III was a professional force, well-equipped, well-organised, and backed by a state that could logistically support campaigns far from home.

By the time of Ramesses II, Egypt had been an empire for more than two centuries. Ramesses II — called Ramesses the Great, and with some justification — reigned for sixty-seven years, an extraordinarily long reign by any standard, and during it he fought the Hittites at the Battle of Kadesh (c. 1274 BCE), the largest chariot battle in history. He lost, or drew; the historiography is disputed. He then spent the rest of his reign pretending he had won decisively, erecting temples with inscriptions depicting his glorious victory. The Kadesh poems — several of them — are among the longest and most elaborate texts from the ancient Near East, and they show a pharaoh at the height of his ambition, commanding a state that could produce massive temples, enormous statues, and extensive written propaganda.

The point of all this for the Moses story is straightforward: when the narrative says that a pharaoh of Egypt refused to let the Israelites go, and that the departure involved a confrontation with Egyptian military power, it is describing a confrontation with a state that, in the New Kingdom period, was the most powerful in the Near East. This is not a weak state that could be easily overcome. It is a state with a professional army, a rich temple economy, a bureaucracy that managed forced labour, and a pharaoh who could command the resources of a river valley that was, by any standard, the richest and most productive agricultural region in the Mediterranean world.

The pharaoh

The pharaoh is the most distinctive political institution in Egyptian history, and it existed in a form unique in the ancient world.

He was not simply a king. He was a god — or more precisely, he was the representative of the gods on earth, the living embodiment of the order (*maat*) that held the universe together, the one who maintained the annual flood, the one whose rituals kept chaos at bay. The Egyptian word for the king was *nswt* and *bit* — "king of the south" and "king of the north," designating the unified ruler of the whole country. The king was Horus in life and Osiris in death. He was the son of Ra, the sun god. The visual language of Egyptian art — the king larger than everyone else, wearing the crown, holding the crook and flail, the nemes headcloth, the false beard — all of this expresses the same idea: the king is different from everyone else, and this difference is not political but cosmic.

The pharaoh was also, in practice, a massive employer. The temples were economic institutions of enormous scale, owning land, employing workers, managing trade, and receiving a substantial share of the agricultural surplus. The building programmes were enormous. Ramesses II built Pi-Ramesses,

a new capital in the eastern Delta, with temples, palaces, and store cities. He built the Ramesseum, his massive funerary temple on the west bank at Thebes. He built Abu Simbel, the temple complex in Nubia with four colossal statues of himself at the entrance. He built extensively at Karnak, adding to the great temple complex that had been built up over centuries by successive pharaohs. If you have seen Karnak — if you have walked through the Great Hypostyle Hall with its hundred and thirty-four massive columns — you have some sense of the scale of the pharaoh's building power, and of the organised labour it required.

Forced labour in ancient Egypt was a real institution, and it was not necessarily the brutal chattel slavery of a later era. The Egyptian state conscripted labour for building projects, for agricultural work during the flood season when farmers could not work their fields, and for other state purposes. The labourers were often Egyptian peasants, conscripted for periods of service. They were paid — in rations, in grain, in beer, in cloth. They were organised. There is evidence of workmen's settlements, of organised groups, of day-to-day administration of labour forces. The workmen who built the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings lived in a purpose-built settlement at Deir el-Medina, and we have their records: their pay, their disputes, their letters, their absences, their strikes. The first recorded labour strike in history was a sit-down strike by the tomb-builders at Deir el-Medina in the twentieth century BCE, during the reign of Ramesses III. The fact that the strike is recorded means the administration had to deal with it, which means the administration was paying attention to the workers.

This matters for the Moses story because the story's picture of forced labour — brickmaking, quotas, the refusal to reduce the workload — is consistent with what we know about Egyptian labour organisation. The story's specific detail, in Exodus 5, when the pharaoh tells the taskmasters to stop giving the Israelites straw and to make them gather it themselves while maintaining the same brick quota, is the kind of detail that reads like institutional knowledge. It is not a vague story about slaves in a distant land. It is a story about a specific kind of labour management in a specific kind of state. Whether it happened exactly this way is a different question; the fact that it could have happened this way is significant.

The Delta and the eastern frontier

The eastern Delta is the part of Egypt the Exodus story actually takes place in, and it is worth seeing what it was like.

The Delta is the wide, marshy plain where the Nile spreads out into multiple branches and meets the Mediterranean. In the New Kingdom, the eastern Delta was a border zone — the land between the Egyptian heartland and the land of Canaan, the route through which armies and traders and migrants moved between the two worlds. The eastern Delta was also the centre of Egyptian power in the New Kingdom, especially after the expulsion of the Hyksos. The pharaohs of the New Kingdom wanted to keep control of the Delta because it was the entry point for military campaigns into the Levant and because it was the region where Semitic-speaking populations had historically lived.

Pi-Ramesses — the city that Ramesses II built as his capital in the eastern Delta — was situated, according to the archaeological evidence, at or near the site of Avaris, the old Hyksos capital. The city was enormous. It had canals, storehouses, palaces, temples, and a garrison. It was the base for Egyptian military operations in the Levant. It was a place where Semitic-speaking people —

mercenaries, traders, labourers, slaves — lived in significant numbers. It was, in other words, exactly the kind of place where a story about Semitic-speaking slaves in the Delta would have its setting.

The eastern Delta was also marshy. The land between the Nile branches, the lake regions, the lagoons — this was the terrain through which the Israelites are supposed to have moved when they left Egypt. The biblical text mentions the "way of Horus" — the coastal road that ran from the eastern Delta into Canaan, also called the Way of the Sea in later texts — and it mentions marshy regions and bodies of water that are difficult to identify exactly but that suggest the route went through the reed-filled eastern Delta before reaching the open desert.

This geography is important for the Exodus route question, which will come up in the chapter on the sea. The point to hold onto now is that the Delta was a specific place with a specific character, and the story's setting in the Delta — the store cities, the marshland, the proximity to Canaan — is consistent with what we know about the geography of the region.

Daily life in the New Kingdom

A book about Moses does not need to be a history of everyday life in Egypt, but it needs to give the reader a sense of what the country was like to live in, because the story's starting point is Egypt, and the story's drama turns on what it means to be a people inside Egypt and then outside it.

The average Egyptian in the New Kingdom was a peasant farmer. He — and she, since women had significant legal rights in Egypt, including the right to own property, initiate divorce, and conduct business — lived in a mudbrick house, owned a small plot of land, grew wheat and barley, paid taxes in kind, and participated in the major religious festivals. Life was not easy — the flood could fail, and famine followed; the state could demand heavy labour; disease was a constant threat — but it was not, for most people, the misery that some popular images suggest. Egypt was remarkably stable for long periods, and the state provided a kind of infrastructure — irrigation management, grain storage, legal administration — that made life predictable in a way that life in many other ancient societies was not.

The elite were different. The high officials — viziers, treasurers, army commanders, high priests — lived in luxury, with large houses, extensive estates, and access to the best goods. They were buried with considerable wealth. The tomb of Tutankhamun, though from an earlier period (the Eighteenth Dynasty, c. 1323 BCE), gives a sense of what even a relatively minor pharaoh's burial could contain. The elites of the New Kingdom were buried in much grander tombs, with much more wealth, though most of those tombs were robbed in antiquity.

Religion was everywhere. The Egyptian calendar was organised around festivals. Temples were open to the public for major events. Personal devotion, to gods like Amun, Hathor, Isis, Seth, and Ptah, was a real aspect of Egyptian life. The gods were believed to be present in their cult statues, which were carried through the streets in procession. The average person might never see the inner sanctuary of the great temples, but they saw the outside, they heard the music and the chanting, they participated in the festivals, and they understood the temple as the centre of the cosmic order that kept their world stable.

The visual culture was overwhelming. The temples were built to impress — to overwhelm the visitor with the scale and beauty of the pharaoh's power and the gods' presence. The great temples of Karnak, Luxor, Abu Simbel, the Ramesseum, Medinet Habu — all of them are expressions of this

idea. A visitor in the New Kingdom, coming from Canaan or the Delta or the Nubian border, would have been awed by what they saw. And the pharaoh who built these temples wanted that awe.

The questions the setting raises

The point of this chapter is not to give a complete picture of Egypt in the New Kingdom. That would be a different book. The point is to give the reader a vivid enough sense of the country that the Moses story — which begins in this country and which is, at the level of setting, a story about people in and out of this country — makes sense.

The questions the setting raises are the following.

If you were a Semitic-speaking population living in the eastern Delta in the New Kingdom — living there, as the Hyksos had lived there, as the Shasu passed through there, as the conscripted labourers worked there — what would your life be like? What would the pharaoh be to you? What would forced labour mean? What would it mean to be told to make bricks without straw? What would it mean to be part of a population that the state saw as useful and controllable but not fully Egyptian?

And if you were one of the people in that population who managed to leave — by escape, by exile, by some rupture — what would you remember? What would your children remember? And what would happen to that memory over five hundred years of telling and retelling, of writing down, of editing, of assembling into the story we now have?

These are the questions that Part Two will try to answer. The next chapter will focus on the people of the eastern Delta — the Hyksos, the Apiru, the Shasu, the Semitic-speaking populations who lived in and around Egypt's border zone. Chapter 6 will focus on the forced labour in specific detail. Chapter 7 will focus on the pharaoh question. Chapter 8 will focus on the most striking detail of all: that Moses' name is Egyptian, and the tradition never hid it.

But before any of that, the reader needs to be able to see the country. Rich, ancient, powerful, bureaucratic, beautiful, cruel, and utterly unlike any other place in the ancient world. The story of Moses starts in this country, and it never really leaves it.

The People at the Edge



The Nile Delta in ancient times — the eastern borderlands where a Semitic-speaking population is attested. (Image: Eroica, CC0 1.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

Egypt was the richest country on earth in the New Kingdom, but it was not alone in its world. On its eastern border, in the Delta and beyond, lived populations of Semitic-speaking peoples who were connected to Egypt in various ways — some as rulers, some as labourers, some as enemies, some as subjects. These were the people at the edge, and they are the ones the Exodus story is ultimately about, even if the story's setting is Egypt and its hero is raised in Pharaoh's court.

To understand where Moses came from — or at least, to understand the world that produced the story of Moses — you need to understand these populations. They are not the Israelites of the biblical narrative, though they may be related to them. They are the background population, the real people who lived in the region and whose presence shaped the story's setting even if the story was written much later.

This chapter is the second of the context chapters in Part Two. It focuses on three groups in particular: the Hyksos, who ruled northern Egypt for a period and were then expelled; the Apiru or Habiru, a class of marginal people who appear in Egyptian and Near Eastern texts; and the Shasu, nomadic pastoralists who lived in the Transjordan and were known to the Egyptians as enemies and subjects. None of these groups are the Israelites, and the book will not pretend they are. But they are the populations whose memory and whose presence in the region may have fed into the larger story of a Semitic-speaking people in Egypt and their departure.

The Hyksos

The Hyksos are the most dramatic example of Semitic-speaking people in Egypt, and their story is the one that left the deepest mark on Egyptian historical memory.

The word "Hyksos" comes from the Greek *hykussos*, which is a rendering of the Egyptian *hq3 h3swt* — "rulers of foreign lands." The Egyptians used this term first for the foreign governors and chiefs who controlled parts of the Delta during the late Middle Kingdom period, and then for the dynasty that ruled northern Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period (roughly 1650 to 1550 BCE).

The Hyksos were not, despite some older theories, a single invading horde. They were a population — possibly a mixed population of Semitic-speaking peoples from the Levant, combined with some Egyptians — who came to control the eastern Delta and eventually northern Egypt through a combination of migration, trade, intermarriage, and military power. They established their capital at Avaris, in the eastern Delta, which became a major city with extensive fortifications, a harbour, and links to the Near East. The archaeological site of Tell el-Dab'a, which is probably Avaris, has yielded evidence of a population that was culturally mixed — Egyptian and Levantine elements in the pottery, the architecture, the burial practices, the inventory of the temples.

The Hyksos introduced or popularised several military technologies in Egypt: the horse-and-chariot, the composite bow, improved bronze weapons, and new forms of fortification. These technologies would later become standard in Egyptian military practice, but at the time they were new imports, and they helped the Hyksos maintain their control of the north.

Their rule lasted roughly a century and a half. Then, in the late Seventeenth Dynasty, the Theban kings of Upper Egypt began to push back. The campaign dragged on through several reigns. The great liberator-king was Ahmose I (c. 1550–1525 BCE), who finally captured Avaris, pursued the Hyksos into southern Canaan, and besieged Sharuhén for three years before finally defeating them. After that, the Egyptians reasserted control over the whole country, and the New Kingdom began.

The expulsion of the Hyksos left a deep mark on Egyptian historical memory. Later Egyptian texts remembered it as a period of humiliation and foreign rule, and the memory of it — of Asiatics ruling in the Delta and then being driven out — became part of the cultural background of Egypt's relationship with Semitic-speaking populations. The Egyptians were never entirely comfortable with Asiatics in the Delta again, and this discomfort is part of the background of the Exodus story, whether the story is historically based or not.

For our purposes, the Hyksos matter for three reasons. First, they show that Semitic-speaking people could, in fact, rule in the Delta — a fact that the Egyptian memory never forgot. Second, the memory of their expulsion became part of Egyptian historical consciousness, and the story of a Semitic population leaving Egypt under pressure from the Egyptian state may have drawn on this memory in ways we can't fully trace. Third, the archaeological site of Avaris/Tell el-Dab'a gives us a concrete picture of what a Semitic-speaking population in the Delta looked like — how they lived, what they ate, how they were organised, what they worshipped. This picture is useful background for thinking about the people who may have become the Israelites.

The Apiru / Habiru

The second group is the most intriguing, and the most difficult, because it appears in texts across the ancient Near East and its relationship to the Hebrews is a matter of long-standing debate.

The word *Apiru* (in Egyptian) or *Habiru* (in Akkadian and other Semitic languages) appears in several texts from the Late Bronze Age, roughly the fourteenth to the twelfth centuries BCE. The texts describe these people in various roles: as mercenaries, as farm labourers, as escaped slaves, as

bandits, as rebels, as settled people who had fallen into debt or poverty and had become marginalised. In the Amarna letters — the correspondence between the Egyptian pharaoh and his Canaanite vassals in the fourteenth century BCE — the term appears several times, often in contexts of violence and rebellion. One letter, from Abdi-Heba of Jerusalem, complains that the Habiru are taking over the land: "The Habiru are capturing the towns of the king... if there is any strong king, the lands and the kings of the Canaan will be lost."

The Akkadian term *habiru* is linguistically related to the Hebrew *ivri* — "Hebrew." The word in Hebrew can mean a person from the other side (of a river, a border), a passer-through, a migrant. Abraham is called an Hebrew in Genesis because he has crossed over into Canaan from the other side of the Euphrates. The etymology is suggestive, and many scholars have noted it.

But the linguistic connection is not the same as the historical connection. The *Apiru/Habiru* of the texts are a social class, not an ethnic group. They are people on the margins of society — those who have lost their place in settled life and become mobile, armed, and sometimes violent. They are not necessarily connected to any specific tribe or nation. The term in the texts refers to a kind of person, not a people.

Whether the Hebrews are connected to the Habiru is a question that honest scholars answer differently. Some say yes, or possibly yes — the Hebrews were a group of Habiru who coalesced around a new identity. Some say no — the Habiru are a generic class, and the Hebrews are a specific group whose name just happens to sound like the Habiru word. The truth is probably that the question cannot be settled, and that the honest answer is to say so.

What matters for our purposes is this: the term appears in exactly the right period and in exactly the right place for the biblical story's background. The Amarna letters describe a world of Canaanite city-states under Egyptian suzerainty, struggling with rebellions, incursions, and the threat of the Habiru. The world is not the same as the world of the Exodus story — the Exodus story is set in Egypt, not in the Canaan of the Amarna letters — but it is a world in which Semitic-speaking people in the region are a fact of life, in which Egyptian control reaches into Canaan, and in which marginal armed populations are a problem.

The Habiru are, in other words, part of the texture of the period. They may not be the Hebrews, but they are the kind of people who lived at the edges of the Egyptian and Canaanite worlds, and their presence helps explain why a story about people at the edge — escaped slaves, migrants, people on the move — would have made sense in this period and in this region.

The Shasu

The third group is the Shasu, and they are the most directly relevant to the Exodus story's geography. The Shasu were nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists who lived in the Transjordan and the Sinai region in the Late Bronze Age. They appear in Egyptian inscriptions from the Nineteenth Dynasty, especially in the reign of Seti I (c. 1294–1279 BCE) and Ramesses II (c. 1279–1213 BCE). They are described in military and administrative terms: as enemies to be fought, as peoples to be controlled at the Egyptian frontier forts, as people who moved through the border zones in search of pasture and water.

The Egyptian records of the Shasu are informative. They mention several tribes or groups of Shasu: the Shasu of Edom, the Shasu of Amurru, the Shasu of Moab. The names suggest that the Shasu were

not a single unified group but a collection of tribes or clans, each associated with a particular region. They moved with their herds, they lived in tents, they were outside the settled agricultural order, and they had a relationship with the settled states — sometimes hostile, sometimes negotiated, sometimes symbiotic.

The most interesting Egyptian document for our purposes is Papyrus Anastasi VI, which we encountered in the previous chapter. It is a letter from an Egyptian official, probably from the reign of Merneptah (c. 1213–1203 BCE), dealing with the movement of Shasu through an Egyptian border checkpoint. The text reads, in part:

"Let the Shasu of Edono pass the fortress of Merneptah-Content-with-Amun, going to the pools of Pithom of Merneptah-Content-with-Amun, to the place where there is water for them, for there is a complete lack of water in the land of Edono."

The text is bureaucratic and routine. The official is authorising the passage of a group of Shasu through a fortified checkpoint, to a place where they can find water. There is no drama in the text, no epic, no liberation. It is a dry record of a state dealing with a marginal population at its frontier.

But the text is valuable for several reasons. It confirms that Shasu were moving through the eastern Delta region in the relevant period. It confirms that they were associated with water scarcity — the reason for their passage was the lack of water. It confirms that the Egyptians had forts and checkpoints on the frontier, and that they controlled the passage of these populations. And it confirms that the Shasu were known in the Delta and the northeastern frontier in the period when the Exodus story is supposed to have happened.

The Shasu may not be the Hebrews. They may not be connected to the Exodus story at all. But they are the kind of population that lived just outside the settled Egyptian order, and they are the kind of people who might be remembered in a story about people who were oppressed in Egypt and then escaped. And the name "Shasu" has been noted by some scholars as possibly related to the Hebrew "Shasu" as a tribal designation, though this is disputed.

What matters here is the texture. The Shasu are real. They are documented. They lived in the region where the story takes place. And they are the kind of people who might be the ancestors — or the memory-ancestors — of a people who later told a story about escaping from Egypt.

The broader picture

What do these three groups have in common?

All of them were Semitic-speaking populations, or predominantly so. All of them had a relationship with Egypt — as rulers, as marginal people, as enemies, as subjects, as passers-through. All of them lived in the region that is the setting of the Exodus story — the Delta, the eastern frontier, the Transjordan, the Sinai. And all of them are documented in Egyptian and Near Eastern texts from the relevant period, which means that the Egyptian state knew about them and dealt with them.

The broader picture is one of a borderland — a zone between Egypt and Canaan, between the settled agricultural world and the nomadic pastoral world, between the Egyptian state and the various Semitic-speaking populations that lived in and around it. This borderland was the setting for the Exodus story, even if the story itself was written much later and in a different context. The story's details — the Delta setting, the forced labour, the escape, the journey through the marshy eastern

Delta and the desert beyond — are consistent with a world in which these populations were a fact of life.

The story may not be about any of these groups specifically. It may be about a group that emerged later, from within Canaan, and told a story that drew on the memory of these populations. It may be about a group that escaped from Egypt in small numbers and whose story was enlarged over centuries. It may be about a memory that never left the Delta and grew into a national epic.

What the broader picture gives us is not a solution to the historical problem but a set of plausible contexts. The Exodus story is not set in a vacuum. It is set in a real region, with real populations, a real Egyptian state, and a real history of movement and conflict between them. The story may be enlarged and shaped, but it is not invented out of nothing. The people at the edge are real, and the story is about people at the edge.

Why this matters for Moses

Moses is a man with an Egyptian name, raised in an Egyptian court, who leads a Semitic-speaking people out of Egypt. The story of his name, and of the people he leads, only makes sense in the context of this borderland.

The people at the edge were the raw material out of which the story was made. Whether Moses was a real person who belonged to one of these groups, or whether he is a literary figure built from the memory of such people, the story's world is the world of the Hyksos, the Habiru, and the Shasu — the world of Semitic-speaking people in and around the Egyptian Delta, in the late Bronze Age, in a time when the Egyptian state was powerful and watchful and willing to use forced labour.

The next chapters will get more specific. Chapter 6 will look at the forced labour in detail — the brickmaking, the store cities, the Pi-Ramesses building programme — and show why this is the one place in the Exodus story where the details ring true against the Egyptian record. Chapter 7 will tackle the question of which pharaoh, and why that question may be the wrong question to ask. Chapter 8 will look at Moses' Egyptian name and what it tells us about the story's origins.

But for now, the reader should have a picture of the people at the edge — the populations who lived in the region, who knew Egypt, who were known to Egypt, and who were part of the world that produced the story of Moses, whether as memory or as invention or, most likely, as a mixture of both.

Mud and Straw



Ancient Egypt with Avaris marked in the eastern Delta, near the site of Pi-Ramesses. (Image: Jeff Dahl, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

The one part of the Exodus story that rings most clearly against the Egyptian record is the part about forced labour.

Not the plagues. Not the miraculous crossing of the sea. Not the parting of the waters. Not the manna in the wilderness. These are the parts of the story that belong to the realm of memory enlarged by time and shaped by theology, and they are not the parts that find a clear echo in the Egyptian archaeological and textual record.

The part that rings true is quieter. It is the part about brickmaking. About the work gangs. About the quotas. About the store cities. About the specific, practical management of a large labour force in the eastern Delta. This is the part of the story that reads like institutional knowledge, and it is the part that is most plausibly connected to something real.

This chapter is the only one in the book where the Exodus story's details align with the Egyptian record in a meaningful way. The reader should understand why that matters and what it does not prove. The conservative scholars — Hoffmeier especially — make this their strongest case, and an honest book does not skip it.

The story's detail

The forced labour story in Exodus is specific. It is not a vague lament about how bad slavery was. It is a story about a specific management system.

In Exodus 1, after the new pharaoh decides to oppress the Israelites, the text says they were set to work making mortar and bricks, and doing various kinds of field work. In Exodus 5, after Moses and Aaron ask the pharaoh to let the people go to worship their God, the pharaoh responds by increasing

the pressure — he tells the taskmasters to stop giving the Israelites straw for the bricks and to make them gather it themselves, while keeping the same quota of bricks per day.

The passage in Exodus 5 is worth reading closely, because the specificity is doing something important:

"Go, get you straw where you can find it: yet not diminish aught of the work of the men's burden, as their work is... So the overseers went out, and said unto the people, Thus saith Pharaoh, I will not give you straw. Go, get you straw where you can find it, not of your works to be diminished. And the people were scattered abroad throughout all the land of Egypt to gather stubble instead of straw."

The detail about gathering the straw, the straw being part of the brick mixture, the quotas not being reduced — this is the kind of detail that belongs to the experience of brickmakers under a state-run system, and it is the kind of detail that a story invented without access to that experience would not typically produce. It is practical, technical, and bureaucratic. It is the texture of the labour.

Now, none of this proves that the specific story as written — the exact number of bricks, the exact taskmasters, the exact words of the pharaoh — happened that way. Memory can preserve practical detail even when the larger narrative has been enlarged. A person who had a grandfather who worked in a brickyard will remember the straw and the moulds and the splitting of the clay, even if the grandfather's story has been told around a campfire for generations and acquired new dramatic elements. The practical detail is one of the things that memory tends to keep alive.

The question is whether the Israelites had someone who remembered working in brickmaking in the eastern Delta, or whether the detail was picked up from the Egyptian record later. Either way, the detail is there, and it is consistent with a real practice.

Brickmaking in ancient Egypt

Brickmaking was a major industry in ancient Egypt, especially in the Delta, where the Nile silt provided the raw material and where there was a lot of building to do.

Egyptian bricks were made from Nile mud mixed with straw or chaff — the straw acted as a binder, preventing the mud from cracking as it dried. The mixture was placed in a mould and shaped, then left to dry in the sun. Some bricks were kiln-fired, for use in situations where extra durability was needed, but the majority of bricks in Egyptian construction were sun-dried.

The process was labour-intensive. The mud had to be dug, mixed, and worked by foot. The straw had to be gathered — from agricultural waste, from the fields, from the borders of the fields. The mixture had to be placed in the moulds. The bricks had to be laid out to dry in rows. The workers — often a large labour force in a state building project — had to be organised, paid, fed, and supervised.

The archaeological record of ancient Egyptian brickmaking is extensive. We have the remains of ancient brick structures throughout the Delta and beyond. We have the marks of the brick moulds. We have the administrative texts that record the production of bricks in large quantities. We have the ostraca — the pottery shards used for writing — that record workmen's attendance, their tasks, their rations, their disputes.

The image of Egyptian brickmakers, working in the heat of the Delta, mixing mud with straw, shaping the bricks in their moulds, laying them out to dry, and being supervised by taskmasters who tracked their output — this image is not a romantic invention. It is what the Egyptian record shows.

And the Exodus story's description of the same process — the mud, the straw, the moulds, the quotas, the taskmasters, the refusal to reduce the workload — is a picture of the same practice.

Pithom and Ramesses

The Exodus story names two store cities that the Israelites built: Pithom and Ramesses. These are the specific places where the forced labour in the story is located.

Pithom — in Egyptian, *Pr-Itm*, "the house of Itm" — is identified by most scholars with Tell el-Retabeh, a site in the eastern Delta, or possibly with another site in the region. The name fits the Egyptian pattern. The site has yielded archaeological remains from the Late Bronze Age, including brick structures, storage facilities, and evidence of organised labour.

Ramesses — in the story, "the land of Ramesses" — is identified with Pi-Ramesses, the new capital that Ramesses II built in the eastern Delta. Pi-Ramesses was one of the largest and most impressive cities in the Nile Delta in the Late Bronze Age. It had a large palace, temples, storehouses, and a substantial garrison. It was the base of Egyptian military operations in the Levant. It was built, in part, with forced labour — both Egyptian conscripts and possibly foreign labourers. The city was abandoned after the end of the New Kingdom, and its location was lost for centuries until it was identified at Tell el-Dab'a, the same site as the old Hyksos capital Avaris.

The archaeological site of Pi-Ramesses/Tell el-Dab'a is one of the most important sites for understanding the eastern Delta in the Late Bronze Age, and it is the setting for part of the Exodus story. A population of Semitic-speaking labourers working on the building projects of Pi-Ramesses in the reign of Ramesses II — this is the picture that the story gives us, and it is a picture that fits the archaeological and textual evidence for the site.

Now, this is not the same as saying the Israelites built Pi-Ramesses. The archaeological and textual evidence does not show a population called Israel building Pi-Ramesses. The evidence shows a large city built with organised labour in the eastern Delta. The story, written down centuries later, places the Israelites there, and the placement is geographically and period-wise plausible.

The Pi-Ramesses building programme

Ramesses II was a great builder, and his building programme was enormous. He built temples, palaces, store cities, fortifications, and statues. He did this on a scale that required a large labour force and a sophisticated administrative apparatus to manage it.

The building of Pi-Ramesses was part of this programme. The city was built as a new capital in the Delta, close to the eastern frontier, and it was designed to be impressive. It had a grand palace, a temple of Seth, storehouses for the army's supplies, and facilities for the administration of the eastern Delta. The city was the centre of Egyptian power in the region.

The labour for the building programme came from various sources. Egyptian conscripts — peasants who were required to serve the state for part of the year — provided part of the labour force. Captives and prisoners of war — defeated enemies from campaigns in Nubia and the Levant — provided another part. And there were probably foreign labourers — people from the Semitic-speaking populations of the Delta and the eastern frontier — who were either conscripted or hired or otherwise brought into the system.

We do not know exactly who worked on the building of Pi-Ramesses, because the records are fragmentary and the populations were mixed. What we know is that the city was built by a large

labour force, that forced labour was part of the Egyptian system, and that Semitic-speaking people were living in the Delta and working in the Egyptian economy at the time.

James Hoffmeier, in *Israel in Egypt*, has argued that the Exodus story's details about forced labour in the Delta are consistent with the Egyptian evidence, and that a small group of Semitic-speaking people — possibly escaped slaves or conscripted labourers or deportees from campaigns — could have been part of the population that worked on the building projects of the Delta, and could have left Egypt at some point, and could have been remembered in the story. This is a careful, honest argument, and it deserves a fair hearing. It does not require the Exodus story to be literally true on the large scale. It only requires a kernel of historical reality at the centre of it.

What the details prove — and what they don't

The details of the forced labour story prove one thing clearly: the story's setting and some of its specific elements are consistent with the Egyptian record of the Late Bronze Age. The brickmaking, the straw, the store cities, the building of Pi-Ramesses — these are not implausible in the context of Ramesside Egypt. They are the kind of things that would have happened in that time and place, and the story preserves details that belong to that world.

The details do not prove that the Exodus story is historically true in the full sense. They do not prove that a population of two million people left Egypt. They do not prove that the Egyptian army was destroyed. They do not prove that the Israelites conquered Canaan. They do not prove that Moses existed as described.

What they suggest is that the story grew around a real setting, and that the memory of forced labour in the Delta — the memory of making bricks and straw and quotas and store cities — was part of that memory, preserved in detail even as the larger narrative was enlarged. The core of the story — *we were slaves in Egypt, we were made to make bricks with straw, we were freed* — may preserve genuine memory of Semitic-speaking people in the Delta experiencing forced labour and some form of departure.

The conservative case, properly understood, is not that the whole story is true as written. It is that the story has a historical base — that something happened that was remembered, and that the memory was enlarged into the story we have. This is a defensible position, and it is the one the book adopts, with the caveat that the base is smaller than the story and the enlargement is profound.

The one place the story fits

Why does this matter? Because if the Exodus story were pure invention, without any historical base, we would expect it to be diffuse — a generalised story about slavery and liberation with no specific details that fit a real setting. The fact that the details, at their best, fit the Egyptian record of the Late Bronze Age — the brickmaking, the store cities, the Pi-Ramesses — is evidence that the story grew around something real.

This is not a small thing. It is, in fact, the strongest evidence for the historical base of the Exodus story, and it is the evidence that most scholars on all sides acknowledge. The story may be enlarged and shaped and written down centuries later, but the core memory of forced labour in the Delta is the one detail that the Egyptian record specifically supports.

For the rest of the story — the plagues, the sea, the wilderness, the law, the conquest — the archaeological and textual record is much less supportive. The silence is real, and it has been

described in the previous chapter. But that silence is not total. There is one place where the story's details ring true against the Egyptian record. That place is forced labour in the Delta, among the Semitic-speaking populations, during the building programmes of the New Kingdom pharaohs.

This is the evidence on which the historical case stands, if it stands at all. It is not a large case, but it is a real case, and it points in a specific direction: toward a small group of Semitic-speaking people in the Delta, experiencing forced labour, and escaping or leaving Egypt at some point, and telling a story about it that grew over centuries into the Exodus narrative.

The texture of the labour

The reason the forced labour detail matters, beyond the historical argument, is that it is the texture of the story's beginning. The story does not start with a miracle. It starts with mud and straw and quotas and the refusal to reduce the workload. The first impression the story gives of the Israelites' life in Egypt is not of a glorious captivity but of a specific, grinding labour.

This is true to the texture of ancient forced labour, and it is also true to the texture of the story. The Exodus narrative does not toy with the reader by pretending that the oppression was abstract. It is specific. The straw is the straw. The bricks are the bricks. The quotas are the quotas. The taskmasters are the taskmasters.

This specificity is one of the things that makes the story memorable and powerful. It is not a story about an abstract oppressed people. It is a story about a specific people in a specific place, doing a specific work. The reader should understand that this specificity is consistent with a real memory, and that this consistency is the strongest single piece of evidence that the story has a historical base.

The rest of the story — the miracles, the law, the wilderness — we will come to. But the beginning is this: mud and straw, and the refusal to reduce the workload. And that, at least, fits the Egyptian record.

The Pharaoh Problem

Timeline of the New Kingdom pharaohs with candidate dates for the Exodus marked.

The New Kingdom pharaohs and the candidate dates for the Exodus. Reign dates are approximate and debated.

Every reader of the Exodus story asks the same question, and it is a fair question to ask: *Which pharaoh was it?*

The story says that the Israelites were oppressed by a pharaoh who did not know Joseph, that their forced labour built the store cities of Pithom and Ramesses, that Moses confronted this pharaoh, and that this pharaoh eventually let the people go after a series of disasters that culminated in the death of the firstborn. The story does not name the pharaoh. But readers want to know who it was, because naming the pharaoh would fix the story in history and make it possible to verify or disprove.

Egyptologists and biblical scholars have spent a great deal of time on this question, and the answer is that there is no consensus, and that honest scholars on all sides have good reasons for the candidates they prefer, and that the question may be less important than it seems.

This chapter will walk through the candidates, the evidence for and against each, and the reasons why the pharaoh question may be the wrong question to ask. The goal is not to solve the problem — nobody has solved it — but to give the reader a clear picture of the options and the difficulties with each, so that when the story begins in the next chapters, the reader understands the historical setting in which the story is placed and the limits of what we can say about it.

Why the question matters

The pharaoh is the story's antagonist. He is the human face of Egyptian power, the man who refuses to let the people go, the man whose stubbornness drives the plot toward the plagues and the departure and the destruction of the Egyptian army. If we knew who he was, we could place the story in a specific year, look at the Egyptian records for that year, check for evidence of the events described, and come closer to an answer about the story's historical truth.

The problem is that we do not know who he is, and the reasons we do not know are instructive.

The biblical text never names the pharaoh. It calls him simply "Pharaoh" — *Paroh* in Hebrew — which is actually the Egyptian title for the king, and which is the way Egyptians themselves often referred to their king. In Egyptian usage, "Pharaoh" (*pr-3*, "great house") originally meant the royal palace but came to mean the king himself. The biblical text's use of "Pharaoh" without a personal name is consistent with Egyptian usage, and it reflects the fact that the story was probably composed in a context where the specific pharaoh was not known or not important.

This is one of the first clues that the story may have been written or edited long after the supposed events, at a time when the specific pharaoh could not be named. If you are writing a story about a liberation from Egypt in the seventh century BCE, or in the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE, you probably do not know exactly which pharaoh ruled Egypt when the Israelites were there. You know the broad setting — the New Kingdom, the Delta, the forced labour — but you do not know the name of the king. So the story uses the title.

The Ramesses solution

The most obvious candidate is Ramesses II, because the story mentions the "land of Ramesses" as the place where the Israelites built the store cities (Exodus 1:11). If the Israelites built a city called Ramesses, the reasoning goes, the story must be set in the time of Ramesses II, who built the great city of Pi-Ramesses in the eastern Delta.

This is the traditional answer, and it has a lot going for it. Ramesses II (1279–1213 BCE) was the pharaoh most associated with building in the Delta, and his capital at Pi-Ramesses was one of the great cities of the Late Bronze Age. The archaeological site of Tell el-Dab'a, which is probably Pi-Ramesses, shows exactly the kind of large-scale building activity that the story describes. The name "Ramesses" in the text is a specific geographical marker, and it fits the Ramesside period.

But there is a problem. The Merneptah Stele, as we discussed in Chapter 2, dates to approximately 1207 BCE, in the reign of Merneptah, Ramesses II's son and successor. The Stele names Israel as a people already in Canaan, already a political entity. If Ramesses II was the pharaoh of the Exodus, and the Exodus happened at the end of his reign, then the Israelites would have had to cross the Sinai and conquer Canaan in the space of about thirty years — the time between the end of the Exodus and Merneptah's campaign in Canaan. That is an extremely tight timeline for the story as written, which describes a forty-year wandering and a conquest that took generations.

Some scholars have suggested that the Exodus could have happened under Merneptah himself. The logic is that Merneptah, facing problems in Canaan (as the Stele suggests), might have been the pharaoh who confronted Moses and was defeated by the Exodus. But the Merneptah Stele itself shows Israel already in Canaan, which is the opposite of what you would expect if Merneptah was the pharaoh of the Exodus who just lost the Israelite population. If the Exodus had just happened under Merneptah, the Stele would not say "Israel is laid waste" as if Israel was already there and had been defeated by Merneptah.

The chronology is tight, and it does not fit cleanly.

The earlier candidates

If the Ramesside period does not fit the chronology, scholars have looked earlier.

One line of argument proposes the fifteenth century BCE, specifically the reign of Thutmose III (1479–1425 BCE) or his son Amenhotep II (1427–1392 BCE). The logic here is that this earlier period would leave enough time for the Exodus, the forty-year wandering, and the conquest of Canaan before the Merneptah Stele names Israel in 1207 BCE. If the Exodus happened in the mid-fifteenth century, the Israelites could have been in Canaan for two hundred years or more by the time Merneptah came to power, which would explain why Merneptah could claim to have fought Israel as an established entity.

This theory has the advantage of fitting the chronology better, but it has a significant problem: the name "Ramesses" in the Exodus story. Pi-Ramesses was not built until the reign of Ramesses II, and the store city of Ramesses did not exist in the fifteenth century BCE. If the Exodus happened in the fifteenth century, the mention of "Ramesses" in the text is an anachronism — the story's author is using a later place name for an earlier setting, either because the author did not know the earlier name or because the story was written later and back-projected into the fifteenth century.

Anachronisms are common in biblical texts, and they are not necessarily a problem for the historical core of the story. A story can preserve a genuine memory of events in the fifteenth century BCE while using later place names because the story was written down in the seventh century BCE or later, long after the fifteenth-century names had been replaced. The presence of an anachronism does not prove that the entire story is fiction. It proves that the story was written or edited at a later date.

The fifteenth-century theory also lacks the direct archaeological or textual evidence that makes the Ramesside case plausible. There is no Egyptian record of a large departure or a destroyed army in the fifteenth century BCE. The forced labour in the Delta does not have a clear attestation in that period in the same way it does in the Ramesside period, when Pi-Ramesses was built. The forced labour detail, which is the strongest piece of evidence for a historical base in the story, fits the Ramesside period better than the fifteenth century.

So the fifteenth-century theory gains chronology but loses the best archaeological fit.

The Hyksos memory

Another possibility is that the Exodus story draws on the memory of the Hyksos expulsion, which happened in the mid-sixteenth century BCE, when Ahmose I drove the Hyksos out of Egypt and pursued them into Canaan.

The Hyksos were a Semitic-speaking population that had ruled the Delta for about a century and a half. Their expulsion was a traumatic event in Egyptian history, and the Egyptian memory of it was

one of humiliation and victory at once — the foreign rulers were thrown out. For the Semitic populations of the region, the Hyksos expulsion might have left a memory of a Semitic people leaving Egypt, or being driven out, and making their way east. The story of a Semitic population leaving Egypt under pressure from the Egyptian state might have its roots in this event, or in the memory of it.

The problem with this theory is that it is too early for the specific details of the Exodus story. The forced labour in the Delta, the brickmaking, the store cities, the specific geography — these fit the Ramesside period better than the Hyksos expulsion. The story's setting is in the New Kingdom, not the Second Intermediate Period. The pharaoh is a New Kingdom pharaoh, with a New Kingdom army and New Kingdom building projects. The story does not read like a memory of the Hyksos expulsion, though it may have inherited some of the cultural memory of a Semitic population in and out of Egypt.

The Hyksos memory is most useful as background texture, not as the historical core. It explains why a story about Semitic people in Egypt would have made sense to the people who told it, and it enriches the setting. But it does not identify the pharaoh of the Exodus.

Why the question may be wrong

Taken together, the evidence is inconclusive, and the honest conclusion is that we cannot identify the pharaoh with any confidence.

But this is not as frustrating as it might seem, because the question "Which pharaoh?" may be the wrong question. The story does not require a specific pharaoh to work. The story is not a historical chronicle that names the king and dates the event. It is a story about a confrontation between a people and a state, between a liberator and a god-king, between a demand for freedom and a system of forced labour that will not release its slaves.

The pharaoh in the story is a type, not a specific person. He is the Egyptian state personified. He is the stubborn ruler, the man who cannot see that the God of the Hebrews is real, the man who will not yield until his own household is affected. The story does not need his name to function, because the story's power does not come from the specific historical event but from the confrontation itself.

This does not mean the story is fiction. It means the story is a memory enlarged by time, and the memory was enlarged in a context where the specific pharaoh could not be named. The author knew the broad setting — the Delta, the forced labour, the name Ramesses, the New Kingdom — but not the specific name. So the text uses the title "Pharaoh," which is what Egyptians themselves often did.

This is actually one of the clues that the story was written later, and it is a clue that the source theory (which Part Five will discuss in detail) picks up on. The biblical text uses "Pharaoh" without a name in a consistent way, and this consistency suggests that the story was composed or edited at a time when the specific pharaoh was not known or not important. The author was writing about a past that felt real and specific in its setting but was distant enough that the names had been lost.

What the pharaoh represents

Even if we cannot name him, we can understand what he represents in the story.

The pharaoh is the Egyptian god-king. He is the representative of the Egyptian order, the man who is supposed to maintain Maat — the cosmic order that keeps the world in balance. In the story, he refuses to recognise the God of the Hebrews, and he refuses to let the Hebrews go. His refusal is not

just a political decision. It is a cosmic one. He is denying the reality of the God of Israel, and the story shows him paying for it with the destruction of his own household and his army.

The plagues, in the story, are not just punishments. They are a demonstration. The God of the Hebrews is showing the pharaoh that the Egyptian gods are powerless. The plague of blood is a challenge to Hapi, the god of the Nile. The plague of frogs is a challenge to Heqet, the frog-headed goddess of birth. The plague of darkness is a challenge to Ra, the sun god. The death of the firstborn is the final blow to the pharaoh's own family and to the idea that the pharaoh is divine and invulnerable.

The confrontation is a theological one. The pharaoh is not just a stubborn politician. He is the representative of a rival order, and the story is about the victory of the God of Israel over the Egyptian order. This is the meaning of the story, at least on one level, and it does not depend on the specific identity of the pharaoh.

The honest verdict

The honest verdict is this: we cannot say which pharaoh the Exodus story is about, because the evidence does not allow it, and the story does not name him. The best candidate on the strength of the archaeological fit is Ramesses II, but the chronology does not fit cleanly. The best candidate on the chronology is the fifteenth-century period, but the forced labour detail does not fit as well, and the name "Ramesses" in the text is an anachronism. The Hyksos expulsion is a possible memory background, but it does not explain the story's specific New Kingdom setting.

The honest book does not pretend to solve this problem. It presents the candidates, explains the difficulties, and admits that the question is probably unanswerable in the form it is usually asked.

But it also argues that this uncertainty is not a weakness of the book or a failure of the evidence. It is one of the things the book is about. The Exodus story is a memory that grew around something real, and the something real is not pinned to a single pharaoh or a single year. It is a story about a people who were in Egypt, who suffered there, who left, and who told the story of their leaving in a form that preserved the texture of the setting but lost the names.

The reader should be able to hold both things at once: the story's setting is specific and fits the Egyptian record in its details, and the story's specific identities — the pharaoh, the exact year, the exact sequence of events — are not recoverable. That is the nature of the evidence, and it is the nature of memory.

What comes next

The next chapter turns to the most striking detail in the entire story, the one that points more clearly than any other toward the story's Egyptian origin: the fact that Moses' name is Egyptian, and that the tradition never hid it.

If you are waiting for a smoking gun — a single piece of evidence that proves the story's origin in the Egyptian world — this is the closest thing to it. The name is the clue that the story grew in a context where Egyptian names were known and Egyptian culture was present. It is the detail that the biblical author could not have invented, because it is too specific and too foreign to the Hebrew language. It is the detail that the tradition preserved, even though it was awkward, because it was too much a part of the story to remove.

The pharaoh question may be unanswerable. The name of Moses is not. That is where the chapter goes next.

A Levite Named for the Water

Of all the details in the Exodus story, the most striking — the one that points most clearly toward the story's Egyptian origin and away from a Hebrew author inventing a hero from whole cloth — is this: Moses' name is Egyptian.

Not Hebrew in an Egyptian costume. Not a Hebrew name that sounds Egyptian by accident. An actual Egyptian name, preserved in the story, and the tradition never bothered to hide it or translate it or pretend it was anything else.

This is a small thing that tells a large truth.

The name

The name *Moses* (in Hebrew, *Moshe*) is given by Pharaoh's daughter in the story, and the biblical text explains it:

She called his name Moses, saying, Because I drew him out of the water. (Exodus 2:10)

The Hebrew verb *mashah* means "to draw out" or "to rescue." The story has her naming him from the water-drawing episode: the basket in the Nile, the rescue from the river. The name fits the scene.

But the name is not Hebrew in origin. The element *mose* (or *mes*) is Egyptian, and it means "born of" or "child of." It appears in Egyptian personal names constantly. Ramesses means "Ra has born him." Thutmose means "Thoth has born him." Ahmose means "the moon has born him." The *mose* element is the second half of many Egyptian names, and it is one of the most common name-elements in Egyptian onomastics.

Moses, as a name, is Egyptian. The biblical text does not disguise this. It does not turn the name into a Hebrew word and pretend it always meant "drawn from the water." It keeps the Egyptian form, and the text's own explanation — the drawing from the water — is a folk etymology, a story attached to the name to make it meaningful in a Hebrew context. The real origin of the name is Egyptian, and the text knows it, or knows it dimly, and works around it.

This is remarkable, and it is the reason this chapter exists.

Why this matters

Think about what an author would do if he were inventing a founder-hero for a people and wanted to make him look plausibly Hebrew.

He would give him a Hebrew name. He would call him *Yehoshua* or *Eleazar* or *Pinhas* or *Yitzchak* or any of the names that carry Hebrew meaning and sound Hebrew. If he wanted to connect the hero to Egypt, he might give him an Egyptian episode but keep the name Hebrew — like the Joseph story, where Joseph is given an Egyptian name (Zaphenath-Paneah) but keeps his Hebrew name.

Moses is not like this. Moses has an Egyptian name from the beginning. The tradition does not Hebrewise it. The tradition does not pretend it means something Hebrew by origin. The tradition gives him a Hebrew etymology — drawn from the water — but that is an explanation attached to an Egyptian name, not the name itself.

This is not the behaviour of an author inventing a hero. This is the behaviour of a tradition that inherited a hero with an Egyptian name and could not, or would not, erase it.

The name is the evidence that the story grew in a context where Egyptian names were known and where a person with an Egyptian name was not an anomaly. It is the evidence that the story's origin lies, at least in part, in the Egyptian world, or in a memory of that world, rather than in a purely Hebrew invention.

And the name is awkward. An Egyptian founder for a people who are defined against Egypt — this is not the easiest thing to live with. A Hebrew author who wanted to flatten the story's Egyptian elements would have no trouble changing the name. The fact that the name survived, in its Egyptian form, is evidence of the story's resistance to Hebrewisation.

The Levite connection

The name also connects to the Levite question, which is another important clue in the story.

The biblical tradition identifies Moses as a Levite — a member of the tribe of Levi, the tribe that was set apart for the priesthood and temple service, the tribe that produced the Aaronic priesthood. The Levites in the biblical tradition are the tribe most closely associated with the Egyptian origin of the Exodus story. The Levites are the ones who bring the story of Egypt with them. They are the ones who have the name *Moses* with its Egyptian element. They are the ones whose tribal identity is tied to the memory of Egypt.

The Levite hypothesis, in its simplest form, is this: Moses and the Moses story originated with a Levite family or clan that had Egyptian connections, that had an Egyptian name for their ancestor, and that carried this origin story with them into the broader Israelite tradition. The story of Moses — a man with an Egyptian name, raised in Pharaoh's court, leading the people out of Egypt — may have begun with a Levite group that preserved the memory of its Egyptian origin, and this story was later adopted by the whole nation and grew into the founding narrative of Israel.

This is not proven, and honest scholars do not claim it is proven. It is a plausible reconstruction, supported by the name, the Levite connections, and some other details in the text. The book will not treat it as fact, but it is worth presenting as a real hypothesis that the evidence supports, at least to the extent that it is consistent with what we know.

The water in the name

The Egyptian name *mose* — "born of" — was originally attached to a god. Ramesses was "born of Ra." Thutmose was "born of Thoth." Ahmose was "born of the moon." The name element was a theological statement, naming a child as the child of a god.

Moses' name lacks the god. This is unusual, and it is significant. It suggests one of two things: either the biblical author knew the name was Egyptian but did not know what god it was originally attached to, or the author deliberately omitted the god element to keep the name ambiguous.

Either way, the result is a name that is recognisably Egyptian but without the explicit Egyptian god attached. An Egyptian reader would recognise the name as Egyptian but would notice the absence of the divine element. A Hebrew reader would recognise the name as unusual and foreign. The name preserves its Egyptian character while being stripped of its explicit theological content.

The water etymology — drawn from the water — is the Hebrew answer to the question of what the name means. The biblical author gives the name a Hebrew meaning, drawn from the rescue from the

Nile, and in doing so makes the name meaningful in a Hebrew context. But the Egyptian origin of the name is preserved, and the water story is the bridge between the Egyptian form and the Hebrew meaning.

This is a characteristic move of the biblical text — preserving a foreign name while attaching a local meaning to it. The story of Moses' name is an example of how the text works with foreign material: it keeps the name, gives it a Hebrew explanation, and does not pretend the name is Hebrew in origin.

Zornberg on the name

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, in *The Particulars of Rapture*, is one of the few writers who really attends to the name and what it means, psychologically and literarily. She notes, among other things, that the name Moses is connected to the water — to the Nile, to the basket in the river, to the drawing out — and that the water is a recurring image in the Moses story, from the basket to the crossing of the sea to the water from the rock at Meribah. The name, in her reading, is bound up with the whole movement of the story, from beginning to end, and the water is the thread that connects them.

This is good reading, and it is worth citing in a book that wants to be honest about the psychological depth of the text. The name is not just an etymology. It is the beginning of a pattern that runs through the story. The man who was drawn from the water, who crosses the water, who brings water from the rock, who fails at the water — the name is the name of the water.

But Zornberg's reading does not depend on the Egyptian origin of the name. It depends on the Hebrew meaning — drawn from the water — and on the literary pattern. The book can take the Zornberg reading and add the historical observation: the name is Egyptian, and the text knows it, and the water story is the Hebrew bridge over the Egyptian form.

The tradition's silence about the name

The most interesting thing about the name, historically, is that the later tradition does not try to explain it away.

The rabbis comment on the name in the midrash, but they do not try to Hebrewise it. They accept the name as Moses' name, and they work with it. They ask why Pharaoh's daughter named him Moses — was it because she drew him from the water, or because she saw something in him, or because she wanted to give him a name that would protect him? The midrash explores the name, but it does not change it.

Philo, writing in Greek, makes the name Greek or philosophical — he connects it to the idea of being drawn out, to the soul's emergence from the water of material existence. But he does not pretend the name is Greek by origin. He works with the Egyptian name and gives it a Greek philosophical meaning.

Even later, when the tradition is fully comfortable with Moses as a hero, the name remains. It is not Hebrewised. It is not replaced. It is Moses, with his Egyptian name, throughout.

This is the evidence that the name is too deeply embedded in the story to remove. The story cannot be told without the name. The name is part of the story's DNA.

What the name proves — and what it doesn't

The name proves something specific. It proves that the story's origin lies, at least in part, in a context where Egyptian names were known and where a person with an Egyptian name was not considered

anomalous. It proves that the name Moses, as it appears in the story, was not invented by a Hebrew author who did not know Egyptian. It is an Egyptian name, preserved, and the tradition never erased it.

The name does not prove that Moses himself was Egyptian. It does not prove that he was born in Egypt, or that his parents were Egyptian, or that his name was originally part of a full Egyptian name with a god attached. The name is evidence of Egyptian origin or connection, not of Egyptian nationality.

The name does not prove that the Exodus story is historically true. The name is consistent with a historical kernel — a person with an Egyptian name who was a Levite, who led a Semitic-speaking group out of Egypt — but it is also consistent with a story that grew around a memory and used a real Egyptian name to anchor the hero's origin.

What the name does is to point toward the story's Egyptian origin in a way that is hard to explain away. The name is too specific, too foreign, too difficult to have been invented by a Hebrew author who was not in touch with the Egyptian world. It is the detail that the story would have to erase if it were invented in a purely Hebrew context, and the fact that it was not erased is evidence.

The Levite, the Egyptian, the founder

The picture that emerges is this: the Moses story likely began with a Levite group that had Egyptian connections, that preserved an Egyptian name for their ancestor, and that carried the story of Egypt with them. The story was later adopted by the nation and grew into the founding narrative. The name was preserved throughout, despite its awkwardness, because it was too deeply embedded to remove.

This picture is consistent with the archaeology of Israel's origins — the emergence of Israel from within Canaan, the Levites as a group with a distinct origin story, the Egyptian elements in the Moses narrative. It is consistent with the source theory, which sees the Moses story as a composite of several sources, one of which (the J source, or the E source, or both) preserves an early memory of Moses as a Levite with Egyptian connections. It is consistent with the name, which is Egyptian and preserved.

The picture is not proven in every detail. It is a plausible reconstruction, supported by the name, and it is the most reasonable explanation for why the story has an Egyptian name at its centre and why the tradition never removed it.

What Moses is named for

The name Moses is Egyptian, and it means "born of." The full name was "born of" some god — Ra, or Thoth, or the moon, or another deity. The god element has been lost, and the story has replaced it with the water meaning, drawn from the rescue from the Nile.

But beneath the Hebrew etymology, the Egyptian meaning survives. Moses is "born of" — born of the river, born of the water, born of the nation that drew him out and raised him. He is the child of the water, the child of the rescue, the child of the crossing.

The water runs through the name and through the story. The name is given at the water. The story begins at the water. The crossing of the sea is the central moment of the story. The water from the rock is the test at Meribah. The name is the water, and the water is the name.

This is a literary pattern, and it is a historical clue. The story preserves an Egyptian name, gives it a Hebrew meaning, and runs the water motif through the whole narrative as a result. The name is the origin of the pattern, and the pattern is the evidence of the pattern's origin.

The founder with the foreign name

The most striking thing about Moses' name, historically, is not that it is Egyptian. It is that the tradition never covered it up.

The story of Israel's founder has an Egyptian name, and the story never pretends this is a Hebrew name. The story never Hebrewises it. The story never changes it. The name sits in the text, in plain sight, throughout the entire narrative, and the tradition accepts it as Moses' name from beginning to end.

This is not the behaviour of a story that was invented by a Hebrew author who wanted a hero. This is the behaviour of a story that inherited a hero with an Egyptian name and could not, or would not, remove it.

The name is the evidence. It is the most specific, the most foreign, the hardest-to-invent detail in the story. It is the detail that the story would have to erase if it were pure invention, and the fact that it was not erased is the evidence that it was inherited.

And it is inherited from the Egyptian world, from the borderlands, from the people at the edge, from a Levite group with Egyptian connections, from a memory that kept the name because the name was part of what it remembered.

The pharaoh may be unidentifiable. The year may be unrecoverable. The exact sequence of events may be lost. But the name is not. The name is the one piece of evidence that the story's origin is Egyptian, and it is the evidence that does not go away.

Part Three: The Story As They Told It

The Basket



The eastern Delta, where the story places the basket among the reeds of the Nile. (Image: Eroica, CC0 1.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

The story begins on the Nile.

Not with a speech. Not with a theophany. Not with a law. With a baby in a basket among the reeds, and a daughter of Pharaoh coming down to the water to bathe, and the most improbable rescue in the history of literature.

The opening is deliberate. The story of Moses is not going to begin with authority. It is going to begin with vulnerability, with an infant placed in the water by his mother, hidden among the reeds, discovered by the enemy, and saved. The founder of the Exodus story starts his life as a foundling on the river, and the story never forgets it.

This is the first chapter of Part Three — the narrative part of the book. These chapters tell the story the way the biblical text tells it, scene by scene, in full narrative mode, without the interruption of the analysis. The reader who has followed the context in Part Two now gets the story itself, told as the story. The analysis comes later, in Part Five, when we discuss who wrote what and when.

But the story deserves to be told on its own terms. It is one of the great narratives of the ancient world, and it is worth reading straight, scene by scene, for what it says and how it says it.

The situation

The story starts with a political situation. A new king has come to power in Egypt, a pharaoh who did not know Joseph — meaning, the text implies, that he did not know the history of how the Israelites came to be in Egypt, or did not care about it, or was hostile to what he knew. The Israelites have multiplied and become numerous, filling the land. The pharaoh is alarmed. He says to his people: "Behold, the people of the children of Israel are more and mightier than we. Come on, let us deal wisely with them, lest they multiply, and it come to pass, that when there cometh any war, they join also unto our enemies, and fight against us, and so get them up out of the land."

The text is careful to give the pharaoh's logic. This is not an irrational monster. This is a ruler who sees a demographic threat and decides to manage it. The Israelites are numerous. They might join the enemy in a war. They might leave. The pharaoh decides to counter this with forced labour — "to oppress them with their burdens, and in hating them to diminish them, and to diminish their number" — and when forced labour does not reduce their numbers but they "multiply and grow exceedingly," the pharaoh escalates to the killing of the newborn boys.

The escalation is specific. The pharaoh commands the Hebrew midwives — Shiphrah and Puah, two of the few named women in the entire Pentateuch — to kill every Hebrew boy at birth. "And if it be a son, then ye shall kill him: but if it be a daughter, then she shall live."

The midwives, the text says, "feared God" and did not do as the pharaoh commanded. They let the boys live. When the pharaoh confronts them, they give a clever and audacious answer: "Because the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women; for they are lively, and are delivered ere the midwives come in unto them." The Hebrew women, they say, give birth so quickly that the midwives cannot get there in time.

The text's portrait of the midwives is extraordinary. They are women in a system of power, and they defy it. They tell a lie — whether the lie is true or not is not the point, the point is the defiance — and they survive. They are two of the most courageous figures in the entire story, and the text gives them names when it gives almost no one else names.

The pharaoh, enraged, escalates to the public decree: every Hebrew boy is to be thrown into the Nile. The state now has a policy of killing its own subjects' children. The situation is desperate.

The mother

Moses' mother is unnamed in the narrative. The text calls her "a woman of the Levites" — one of the people of Levi, the tribe from which Moses and Aaron will come, the tribe that is most closely tied to the Egyptian origin of the story. She sees that her son is a "goodly child" — the Hebrew says *tov*, "good," the same word God uses in the creation story to describe the world before it is finished. She hides him for three months.

The hiding cannot last. The decree is public, the enforcement is active, and the mother knows that the child will be discovered. So she makes a plan. She takes a basket — in the Hebrew, *tevah*, the same word used for the ark that Noah builds, the word for a sealed chest or container that carries something through the water — and she coats it with bitumen and pitch, waterproofing it against the river. She puts the child in it. She sets it among the reeds by the riverbank.

The mother's plan is perilous and specific. She is not abandoning the child. She is placing him in a waterproof container among the reeds, at a place where he might be found by someone who would

take pity on him. She arranges for her daughter — Miriam, who is later identified as his sister — to stand at a distance and watch what happens to him.

The arrangement of Miriam at a distance is one of the most delicate details in the story. The mother cannot be seen. She cannot approach. But someone has to be there, at a distance, to intervene if the child is discovered and to direct the rescue. Miriam is placed there, at a distance, watching. She is the lookout. She is the one who will step in when the moment comes.

The mother's hope is specific and desperate: that the child will be found by someone who will take pity on him, rather than by someone who will obey the decree. She places him in the water, in a sealed basket, and trusts that the river will carry him to the right person.

The river, in the story, is not hostile. It is dangerous, but it is also the route of salvation. The Nile is the place of death — the pharaoh has ordered that every Hebrew boy be thrown into it — but it is also the place of rescue, because the daughter of Pharaoh comes down to the water, and the child is found by her, and the water that was meant to kill him becomes the route of his salvation.

This is the first half of the story's great irony: the river that is meant to destroy the Hebrew children becomes the route by which the child who will destroy the pharaoh's power is saved. The water that is the instrument of death becomes the route of salvation.

The daughter of Pharaoh

Pharaoh's daughter comes down to the river to bathe. The text is precise: "And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to wash herself at the river; and her maidens walked along by the river's side." Bathing in the Nile was a normal Egyptian practice. The river was sacred, and bathing in it was part of the religious and daily life of the Egyptians. The daughter of the pharaoh, a royal woman, goes to the river for a ritual bath. This is not an unusual action.

She sees the basket among the reeds. She sends a maid to fetch it. She opens it and sees the child, and the child weeps. The text says: "And when she had opened it, she saw the child: and behold the child wept. And she had compassion on him, and said, This is one of the Hebrews' children."

The compassion of Pharaoh's daughter is the pivot of the scene. She knows the child is Hebrew. She knows the decree. She knows what should happen to him. And she has compassion. The compassion of a royal woman, the daughter of the man who ordered the killing of the Hebrew boys, overrides the decree. She does not obey the policy. She defies it, and she does it quietly, without fanfare.

Her compassion is not sentimental. It is political. It is an act of disobedience to her father's order, and it is done in secret, in the reeds, away from the eyes of the court. The story is clear that this is a risky act. The daughter of the pharaoh cannot simply save a Hebrew child without consequences. But she does it anyway, and the story signals that this act of compassion is as important as the later acts of defiance by the midwives and by Moses himself.

The child is weeping. The sight of the weeping infant moves her to pity. This is a universal human response — the crying of a baby, the sight of vulnerability, the instinct to rescue. The story uses this response to explain the otherwise inexplicable act of compassion by the enemy. The pharaoh's daughter is moved by what any human being would be moved by, and she defies the policy.

Miriam's intervention

Miriam, the sister, is standing at a distance, watching. When she sees that the child has been found and that the daughter of Pharaoh has pity on him, she steps forward. The text says: "Then said his

sister to Pharaoh's daughter, Shall I go and call to thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee?"

This is one of the most audacious moves in the story. Miriam, a Hebrew girl, a child herself, steps into the space of the pharaoh's daughter and offers a solution. She suggests that the pharaoh's daughter should hire a Hebrew nurse to care for the child. And the pharaoh's daughter agrees.

The suggestion is a ruse, of course. Miriam is proposing that the child be nursed by a Hebrew woman, and the pharaoh's daughter does not know — or does know, and does not care — that the woman Miriam will call is the child's mother. The pharaoh's daughter, in her compassion, has saved the child's life. Miriam's intervention saves the child's identity. The child will be raised, in part, by his own mother.

The text then says: "And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, Go. And the maid went and called the child's mother." The child's mother is brought, and the pharaoh's daughter says: "Take this child away, and nurse it for me, and I will give thee thy wages."

The mother is paid to nurse her own child. The pharaoh's daughter does not know who she is. She thinks she is hiring a Hebrew nurse. The mother nurses the child, and the story says: "And the women conceived, and bare a son: and when she saw him that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months."

The story has come full circle. The mother hid her son for three months. Now, through the intervention of her daughter and the compassion of the enemy, she is paid to nurse him. The child is saved. The child is raised. The child is given back to his mother, in a way, while remaining the property of the pharaoh's daughter.

The economy of the scene is remarkable. The mother is saved from the impossible choice — abandon the child or watch him die — and she is paid to nurse him. The child is saved from death and is given a place in the royal household. The sister, Miriam, has played her role and has secured the child's future. The pharaoh's daughter has defied her father's decree and has saved a child she knows is Hebrew.

Every element of the scene is precise. Nothing is wasted. The mother's hiding, the basket, the reeds, the daughter's arrival, the weeping, the compassion, the suggestion, the nurse, the wages — each detail serves the story.

The child in the palace

The child is brought into the royal household. The text says: "And the child grew, and she brought him unto Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. And she called his name Moses, saying, Because I drew him out of the water."

The child is adopted. He becomes the son of the pharaoh's daughter. He is raised in the Egyptian court, with Egyptian education, Egyptian language, Egyptian culture, Egyptian name. He is a Hebrew by birth, an Egyptian by upbringing, a foundling by origin, and a prince by adoption.

The name is Egyptian. We have discussed this in the previous chapter. The name *Moses* is Egyptian — *mose*, "born of" — and the pharaoh's daughter gives it to him, with a Hebrew etymology attached. The name is Egyptian, and the tradition never covers it up.

The child grows up. He grows up as an Egyptian prince, with the education and privilege that implies. He grows up with the knowledge of his Hebrew origin, though the text does not say exactly

when or how he learns it. He grows up with the tension between his two worlds — the world of the Egyptians, in which he is a prince, and the world of the Hebrews, in which he is one of the oppressed.

The story of his upbringing is summarized in a single sentence, in the New Testament's reading of the story: "By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of the daughter of Pharaoh, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt" (Hebrews 11:24–26).

The New Testament reading has a theological point, but it also captures something true about the story: Moses, as he comes of age, has to choose between his Egyptian upbringing and his Hebrew identity. The text of Exodus does not narrate this choice in detail, but the story implies it, and the later tradition — the New Testament, the rabbis, Philo — makes the choice explicit. Moses rejects the palace. He chooses the people. He draws the line.

The choice is not narrated in the Exodus text. It is inferred. But the inference is strong. A man raised in Pharaoh's court, with an Egyptian name, an Egyptian education, and the power of the Egyptian state behind him, who nevertheless identifies with the Hebrew slaves and rejects the palace — this is a man who has made a choice. The story plants the seed of this choice in the adoption scene: the child is given to the mother, paid for by the pharaoh's daughter, raised in the palace, but known by the mother and by Miriam and by the community. The child's origin is preserved. The choice is waiting.

The Sargon parallel

The birth story of Moses has a striking parallel in the ancient Near Eastern literature: the birth of Sargon of Akkad, the great Mesopotamian king of the third millennium BCE.

The Sargon birth legend, known from later Mesopotamian texts, tells how Sargon was born in secret, placed in a basket of reeds sealed with bitumen, and set adrift on the river. He was found by a drawer of water — a man named Akki — who raised him and made him a gardener. He eventually rose to become king of Akkad.

The parallels are specific. The secret birth, the basket of reeds, the sealing with bitumen, the exposure on the river, the discovery by someone who takes pity, the rearing by a person who is not the biological parent, the eventual rise to power — all of these elements are present in both stories.

The question of which story came first, or whether both drew on a common tradition, has been debated for a long time. The Sargon legend is known from texts that are later than the biblical texts in their final form, but the tradition behind it may be older. The most likely scenario is that the motif of the exposed infant who becomes a great leader is a common ancient Near Eastern literary type, and both the Sargon story and the Moses story draw on it. The motif is not copied; it is inherited.

This is important for the reader to understand, because the Sargon parallel is sometimes used to argue that the Moses story is a copy of the Sargon story, and therefore that Moses is a fictitious figure based on Sargon. This is not a fair reading of the evidence. The motif is a type, a literary pattern that was available in the ancient world, and both stories use it. The use of a common type does not make one story a copy of the other, and it does not make the figure fictional. It means the storyteller chose a type that was available and filled it with specific content.

The Moses story uses the exposed-infant type, but it fills it with content that is specific and distinct from the Sargon story. The basket is found by a daughter of the pharaoh, not by a gardener. The child is rescued by an enemy, not by a subject. The child's mother is brought back to nurse him, rather than the child being raised by his rescuer. The child's origin as a Hebrew is preserved despite his adoption. The child's name is Egyptian. The child's later actions are specific to the Israelite context.

The Moses story uses the type, but it is not the type. The story's content is its own. The Sargon parallel is a clue to the literary tradition behind the story, not a proof of fiction. The reader should understand this distinction, because it matters for how the story is read.

The setting of the scene

The scene is set on the Nile, in the marshy region of the eastern Delta, where the river flows through the reeds and the papyrus and the shallow water. The geography is the setting — the river, the reeds, the basket among the reeds, the shore where the daughter of Pharaoh comes down to bathe. The setting is the Delta, and the Delta is the setting of the whole story.

The scene is also set in the tension between the decree and the deliverance. The pharaoh has ordered the killing of the Hebrew boys. The river is the instrument of the decree. And yet the river is also the route of rescue, because the daughter of the pharaoh comes down to the water, and the child is found, and the water that was meant to kill him becomes the means of his salvation.

The scene is set in the tension between the Egyptian household and the Hebrew family. The child is in the river, between the two worlds, and he is rescued by the daughter of the enemy, and he is nursed by his mother, and he is raised in the palace, but his origin is preserved. The child is the bridge between the two worlds, and the story is the story of the bridge.

The scene is set in the tension between the mother's love and the mother's powerlessness. The mother cannot save the child by force. She cannot fight the decree. She can only place the child in the basket and trust the river and trust the daughter of the enemy and trust her daughter Miriam to intervene.

The mother's power is in the arrangement — the basket, the reeds, the sister at a distance — and her power is in the trust she places in the compassion of someone who should not have it.

The scene is set in the tension between the political and the personal. The pharaoh's decree is political — a policy to control a population. The mother's response is personal — a mother's love, a mother's plan, a mother's trust. The daughter of the pharaoh's intervention is personal — compassion for a weeping infant. And the result is that the political system is defied by a series of personal acts, each one small, each one risky, and together sufficient to save the child.

The scene is dense with meaning, and the meaning is not imposed afterward. It is built into the scene, piece by piece, by a storyteller who knows what he is doing.

What the story does

The story of the basket does several things at once.

It introduces the hero in a position of absolute vulnerability. Moses begins his life as a foundling, a baby in a basket, dependent on the river and the compassion of an enemy. The story never lets him forget this. The founder of the Exodus is a rescued baby, and the rescue is by the enemy.

It introduces the theme of defiance of the state by ordinary people. The midwives defy the decree. The mother defies the decree. The daughter of the pharaoh defies the decree. Miriam defies the

decree. Each one, in her own way, disobeys the policy and saves the child. The story's first act is an act of political disobedience by a series of women, and the story makes it clear that this is the point. It introduces the theme of the enemy as rescuer. The pharaoh's daughter is the daughter of the man who ordered the killing, and she saves the child. The story does not shy away from this irony. It makes it central. The enemy is the rescuer, and the rescue is by the enemy, and the hero is indebted to the enemy for his life.

It introduces the theme of the hidden identity. The child is hidden by his mother, hidden among the reeds, hidden in the basket, hidden in the care of the daughter of the enemy. His identity as a Hebrew is preserved despite his adoption. The story sets up the tension that will run through the whole narrative: the man who is an Egyptian prince by upbringing but a Hebrew by origin, and who has to choose between the two.

It introduces the theme of the river as both death and life. The river is the place of the decree — throw the boys into the river. And the river is the route of rescue — the basket in the river, the daughter of the pharaoh coming down to the water, the rescue of the child. The water is death and life, and the story does not resolve this tension. It holds it.

It introduces the theme of the Levite origin. The mother is a Levite. Miriam is a Levite. The story plants the Levite origin at the beginning, and this origin will become important later, when the Levites become the priestly tribe and the tribe most associated with the Moses story.

It introduces the theme of the name. Moses is given an Egyptian name by the daughter of the pharaoh, and the name is preserved throughout. The name is the evidence of the Egyptian origin, and the story does not hide it.

Each of these themes will run through the entire story. The basket scene is not just the birth story. It is the introduction of the story's great themes, all at once, in a single compact scene.

The scene's power

The scene is one of the most powerful in all of religious literature, and its power comes from its simplicity and its specificity.

The basket. The reeds. The weeping child. The compassion of the royal woman. The girl at a distance. The suggestion. The nurse. The wages. The child returned to the mother. The name.

Each element is concrete. Each element is specific. The story does not abstract. It does not generalize. It gives you the basket, the reeds, the tears, the woman's pity, the girl's offer, the mother's wages, the name.

The power of the scene is that it does not need to be taught. It needs to be read. A reader who reads it straight, without the analysis, without the historical context, without the source criticism, will feel the power of it. The power is in the scene itself, in the sequence of events, in the irony, in the compassion, in the risk, in the hope.

This is the story as Israel told it. It is told on its own terms, in full, without interruption. The reader should feel it before the reader analyses it.

The next chapter continues the story. The child has grown up in the palace. He is now an adult. He sees an Egyptian oppressing a Hebrew. He acts. He kills a man. And he flees.

The basket scene is the beginning. The next scene is the murder. And the murder is the first thing we learn about Moses' character: that he has a temper and no plan.

The Prince Who Killed a Man

The child has grown up. He is a man now, a grown man in the house of Pharaoh, with the education and the standing and the implied future of a prince. And the first thing the story tells us about him is that he has a temper, and no plan.

This is an unusual way to begin the portrait of a hero. The story does not begin by telling us that Moses was wise, or pious, or patient, or faithful. It begins by telling us that he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave, and that his response was immediate and violent, and that he looked around to see if anyone was watching, and that he killed the Egyptian and buried him in the sand.

The story is telling us, in the first scene we see of Moses as an adult, that he is a man of action without a plan. He sees injustice. He reacts. He kills a man. He buries the body. And the next day, when he tries to intervene in a fight between two Hebrews, he discovers that his secret is out, and he flees.

This is the first portrait of Moses in the narrative, and it is a portrait of a man who is not yet the leader we will come to know. He is impulsive. He has a sense of justice, but it is not tempered by wisdom. He has a capacity for violence, and no strategy for what comes after. The story presents him honestly, and it does not flatter him.

The setting

The story says: "And it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown, that he went out unto his brethren, and looked on their burdens: and he saw an Egyptian smiting a Hebrew, one of his brethren."

The text is careful about the sequence. Moses has grown up. He goes out to his brethren — meaning, the Hebrews, the people of his origin, even though he has been raised as Egyptian. He looks on their burdens. He sees the forced labour. He sees an Egyptian smiting a Hebrew — the verb is *nakah*, to strike, to beat, to smite. The Egyptian taskmaster is beating a Hebrew slave.

The setting is the building site, the brickfields, the quarries, the Delta. The forced labour that the story described in the previous chapters is happening here. Moses, the prince, goes out and sees it. He sees a Hebrew being beaten. And he acts.

The murder

The text says: "And he looked this way and that way, and when he saw that there was no man, he smote the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand."

The sequence is specific and telling. Moses looks this way and that way — he checks to see if anyone is watching. He assesses the risk. He acts when he is sure he is unobserved. He smites the Egyptian. He hides the body in the sand.

The looking around is an important detail. It tells us that Moses knew what he was doing was wrong — or at least, that it was risky, that it would not be approved, that there would be consequences. He checked. He acted in secret. He hid the body.

The murder is committed with no plan. Moses does not organise a rebellion. He does not bring the matter to the authorities. He does not negotiate. He sees a beating, and he kills the beater, and he buries him.

The text is honest about this. The murder is not presented as a noble act of liberation. It is presented as an impulsive act of violence, committed in secret, and followed by concealment. The story does not say that Moses thought about the consequences, or that he had a strategy, or that he had a plan for what to do next. He saw an injustice, and he killed the man, and that was the end of the plan.

The next day

The next day — "And when he went out the second day" — Moses goes out again, and he sees two Hebrews fighting. He intervenes. He says to the one who is doing wrong: "Wherefore smitest thou thy neighbour?"

The Hebrew's response is the turning point of the scene. He says: "Who made thee a prince and a judge over us? intendest thou to kill me, as thou killedst the Egyptian?"

The Hebrew knows. Or he suspects. He has heard. Word of the murder has spread among the Hebrews. The man who killed the taskmaster is identified. The secret is out.

The question is devastating. *Who made thee a prince and a judge over us?* The Hebrew is saying: you are not our leader. You are not our judge. You have no authority over us. And the second part of the question — *intendest thou to kill me, as thou killedst the Egyptian?* — is a direct accusation. You killed an Egyptian. Will you kill me too?

The accusation carries an implication that Moses is like the Egyptian taskmaster — a man who uses violence to impose his will. The Hebrew sees the parallel, and he is afraid.

Moses is frightened. The text says: "And Moses feared, and said, Surely this thing is known." He realises that the murder is known. He realises that there will be consequences. He realises that his act of violence, intended to defend a Hebrew, has identified him to the Hebrews as a man who kills, and to the Egyptians as a man who has killed an Egyptian taskmaster.

The pharaoh hears. The text says: "Now when Pharaoh heard this, he sought to slay Moses. But Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh, and dwelt in the land of Midian."

The pharaoh's response is immediate. Moses has killed an Egyptian taskmaster — an official of the state — and the pharaoh wants him dead. Moses flees. He leaves Egypt. He goes to Midian.

The portrait of Moses

What does this scene tell us about Moses?

First, it tells us that he has a sense of justice. He sees a Hebrew being beaten, and he cannot stand by. He acts. The injustice of the forced labour, the beating of the slaves, the degradation of his people — this moves him to action. He has a feeling for his people, even though he has been raised apart from them.

Second, it tells us that he is impulsive. He does not plan. He does not negotiate. He sees an injustice, and he kills the man, and he buries the body, and he has no next step. The action is pure reaction.

Third, it tells us that he is reckless. He looks around, he acts, he hides the body, but he does not consider the consequences in advance. He acts without a plan, and the consequences — the exposure, the flight, the forty years in Midian — are the result.

Fourth, it tells us that he is afraid. When the secret is out, he fears. He understands the danger. He flees. He is not the unshakable hero of later tradition. He is a man who knows fear when he faces it. Fifth, it tells us that the Hebrews do not yet see him as their leader. The Hebrew who speaks to him — "Who made thee a prince and a judge over us?" — is challenging his authority. He is a prince by adoption in the Egyptian court, but he is not a prince to the Hebrews. He has no authority among them. He has to earn it, and he has not yet started.

The portrait is layered. Moses is not a saint here. He is a man of action, with a temper, with a sense of justice, with no plan, with a capacity for violence, with fear when he faces the consequences. The story presents him honestly, and it does not flatter him.

What the story does here

The story is doing something important in this scene, and it is worth understanding what it is doing. First, it is establishing Moses' character before the call. The story will later give him the call at the bush, and the assignment, and the confrontation with the pharaoh. But before all of that, the story shows us who he is: a man of action, a man of violence, a man without a plan. The bush scene will come later, and the call will come later, and the refusal will come later. But the first thing we know about Moses is that he killed a man and fled.

Second, it is establishing the pattern of the story's honesty about its hero. The story does not hide Moses' violence. It does not disguise his impulsiveness. It does not pretend that he was a wise and patient man from the beginning. It shows him as he was, and it trusts the reader to understand that the man who will become the leader has to start from here.

Third, it is establishing the irony of the scene. Moses kills an Egyptian to defend a Hebrew, and the result is that he has to flee, and the Hebrews are afraid of him, and he is separated from the people he wanted to defend. The act that was meant to help the Hebrews results in his separation from them. The story is aware of this irony, and it presents it without comment.

Fourth, it is establishing the geography of the next forty years. Moses flees to Midian, and he will stay there for forty years, until the call at the bush. The murder is the reason for the exile. The murder is the reason for the gap in the story. The story will pick up again after forty years, with the call, but the murder is the reason for the interruption.

Fifth, it is establishing the theme of the leader who has to learn. Moses is a man of action without a plan. The story will give him the plan — the call, the signs, the confrontation with the pharaoh — but only after he has learned, in Midian, what it means to wait, to listen, to be a shepherd. The murder shows him as he is; the bush will show him as he becomes.

The absence from the story

The murder scene ends with Moses fleeing to Midian. And then the story says nothing about him for forty years.

The silence is deliberate. The story skips the forty years. We do not know what Moses did in Midian during those years. We do not know how he lived. We do not know how he changed. We do not know what he learned. We do not know how he became ready for the call.

The gap is part of the story. The story tells us that Moses fled, that he sat down by a well, that he met the daughters of Jethro, that he married one of them, that he became a shepherd. But the forty years

between the murder and the call are not narrated. They are a silence in the story, and the silence is meaningful.

The silence tells us that the years in Midian were ordinary. The story does not fill them with events. It does not tell us that Moses was preparing for the call, or that he was practising his leadership, or that he was studying. The story does not tell us anything. It simply says that he fled, and that he dwelt in Midian, and that after a long time, the call came.

This is one of the story's great devices. The forty years of silence is the story's way of saying that the time was not dramatic. It was ordinary. It was waiting. It was preparation, but not in the way the reader might expect. Moses did not prepare by doing things. He prepared by living, by watching, by learning, by becoming the man who could receive the call.

The next chapter — Midian — will fill in some of the details. The story will tell us about the well, the daughters of Jethro, the marriage, the shepherding. But the forty years of silence remain, and the silence is part of the character of the story.

What we learn about Moses here

We learn that Moses, as a young man, was capable of violence. We learn that his sense of justice was real, but it was not tempered by wisdom. We learn that he acted without a plan. We learn that he feared the consequences. We learn that the Hebrews did not see him as their leader.

We learn that the story will not flatter him. The story will tell us what he is, and what he becomes, and what he fails at, and what he achieves. The story will not hide his violence, his fear, his failure, his doubt. The story will be honest about him, from the first scene to the last.

We learn that the first act of the story is an act of violence, and that this violence is the reason for the exile, and that the exile is the preparation for the call.

We learn that Moses is not yet the man he will become. The murder shows him as he is. The bush will show him as he becomes.

The scene's place in the story

The murder scene is the second scene in the narrative of Moses' adult life. The first scene is the basket — the birth, the rescue, the adoption, the naming. The murder scene is the second scene. It shows the man grown, acting, failing, fleeing.

The third scene will be Midian — the exile, the well, the marriage, the forty years. The fourth scene will be the bush — the call, the name, the argument. The fifth scene will be the plagues. The sixth will be the sea. Each scene is a step in the story, and the murder scene is the second step.

The murder scene is also the scene that shows the first failure of Moses as a leader. He acts, and the act is right in intention but wrong in method, and the result is exile. The bush scene will show the second failure — or rather, the refusal to accept the call. And the failure at Meribah will show the third and final failure. The story is a story of failures, and the murder is the first of them.

This is one of the things that makes the story honest. The hero fails. He fails at the beginning. He fails in the middle. He fails at the end. And the story tells us. The story does not hide the failures. It builds them into the narrative.

The honesty of the story

The story of the murder is one of the most honest scenes in the Moses narrative. It does not try to justify the act. It does not pretend that the murder was necessary, or wise, or part of a larger plan. It tells us that Moses killed a man, and hid the body, and fled. It tells us that the act was impulsive, and that the consequences were severe, and that the man who did it was afraid.

The story's honesty about this scene is the model for the rest of the narrative. The story will be honest about the plagues — the destruction of the Egyptian firstborn. It will be honest about the golden calf — the collapse of the covenant. It will be honest about the mutiny — the challenge to Moses' leadership. It will be honest about the failure at Meribah — the one act that costs Moses the promised land. The story does not hide the failures. It builds them into the narrative.

The murder scene is the first of these honest scenes. It tells us that Moses was capable of violence, and that his violence was unpremeditated, and that the consequences were exile. The story tells us this and does not try to explain it away. The story trusts the reader to understand that this was Moses, before the call, before the training, before the forty years.

The reader who understands this scene will understand the rest of the story. The man who kills a taskmaster and flees is not yet the man who confronts the pharaoh and parts the sea. The story is the story of the change.

Midian



Midian and the northwestern Arabian peninsula, east of the Gulf of Aqaba — where Moses is said to have spent forty years.
(Image: Enyavar, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

Moses has killed a man. The pharaoh wants him dead. He flees.

And for forty years, the story goes silent.

The silence is deliberate. The story does not tell us what happened in those forty years. It does not tell us how Moses lived in Midian, how he changed, how he prepared for the call that will come at the end of the period. It tells us some details — the well, the daughters of Jethro, the marriage, the sheep — but the forty years themselves are a blank space in the narrative, and the blankness is part of the story.

The reason for the blankness is that the forty years were not dramatic. They were ordinary. They were waiting. They were the years in which Moses went from the man who killed a taskmaster and fled to the man who would stand before the pharaoh and demand the release of a nation. But the story does not fill the gap with events. It simply marks the time and moves on.

This is one of the story's great devices, and it is worth understanding before we enter the details that are given.

The flight to Midian

Midian is in the northwestern Arabian peninsula, in the region of the modern Gulf of Aqaba, east of the southern Sinai and south of Edom. It is a land of wells and grazing, of desert and hills, of Semitic-speaking peoples who traded with the settled lands and who moved between the settled and the marginal.

The Midianites are known in the biblical tradition in several contexts. They are the people with whom Moses takes refuge. They are the people of Jethro, the priest who becomes his father-in-law. They are the people with whom Balaam has his dealings in the story of Numbers. And they are associated with the worship of Yahweh in some of the biblical traditions — the Kenites, a subgroup of the Midianites, are said to have come from the region and to have brought knowledge of Yahweh into Israel.

The geography of Midian matters for the story because it is a place outside Egypt, away from the pharaoh, away from the forced labour, away from the court. It is a place where Moses can disappear, where he can start again, where he can wait.

The flight itself is not described in detail. The story says: "But Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh, and dwelt in the land of Midian." That is all. He leaves Egypt. He goes to Midian. He dwells there. The journey is not described. The place is named. The time is given as forty years, later.

The well

The first scene in Midian — the only scene from the early part of the exile that the story narrates — is at a well.

"Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh, and he sat down by a well." The well is the meeting place. In many ancient societies, the well is the place where people gather, where news is exchanged, where encounters happen. The well in Midian is where Moses meets the daughters of Jethro.

The story says: "Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters: and they came and drew water, and filled the troughs to water their father's flocks. And the shepherds came and drove them away: but Moses stood up and helped them, and watered their flocks."

The scene is a reversal of the murder scene. Moses sees a wrong, and he intervenes. But this time, he intervenes peaceably. He stands up. He helps the women. He waters the flocks. There is no violence. There is no burial in the sand. There is no flight.

The story is telling us, by this reversal, that Moses has changed. The man who killed a taskmaster and fled has become a man who helps shepherds' daughters water their flocks. The anger is still there — the sense of injustice is still there — but the action is different. The violence is gone. The intervention is peaceful.

This is one of the most effective single details in the story. The contrast between the murder scene and the well scene is the story's way of showing us that Moses has changed, without telling us directly. We see it in what he does.

The daughters report to their father that an Egyptian had rescued them. Jethro invites Moses to stay. Moses stays. He marries one of the daughters, Zipporah. He becomes part of the family.

Jethro

Jethro is the priest of Midian. The name "Jethro" is the Hebrew rendering; in the text, he is also called Reuel. The two names are used in different passages, and scholars have debated whether they refer to the same person or to two different individuals. The most common resolution is that "Reuel" is a personal name meaning "friend of God" and "Jethro" is a title meaning "his excellence" or "his surplus," and that the same person is known by both. The text uses both names.

Jethro is a priest. The text does not say which god he worships. The Midianites are a Semitic-speaking people, and the region in which they live is associated with the worship of Yahweh in some biblical traditions — the Kenites, associated with the Midianites, are said to have brought knowledge of Yahweh into Israel. The story does not make Jethro an Israelite or a worshipper of Yahweh in the Israelite sense. He is a priest of the Midianite religion, whatever that is, and Moses marries his daughter and lives with him.

The detail that Moses' father-in-law is a priest of someone else's god is one of the most striking in the story. Moses, the future lawgiver and prophet of Israel, marries the daughter of a non-Israelite priest. His family is connected to the religious world of the region, not just to Israel. The story does not hide this. It presents it matter-of-factly.

This detail is consistent with the picture we have already built: Moses has an Egyptian name. He is a Levite. He is raised in the Egyptian court. He fled to Midian. He marries the daughter of a Midianite priest. His life is woven into the wider world of the ancient Near East, not confined to Israel. The story preserves these connections, and they are part of what makes the portrait specific and real.

Jethro will appear later in the story, in Exodus 18, to give Moses management advice. That appearance is one of the most human scenes in the entire narrative, and it will be the subject of a later chapter. But for now, Jethro is the father-in-law who takes Moses in, who gives him a home, who gives him a wife, who gives him a place to wait.

Zipporah

Zipporah is Moses' wife. Her name means "bird" — a small, quick thing. She is one of the daughters of Jethro. She becomes Moses' wife. She has a son, Gershom, whose name means "a stranger there," because Moses says: "I have been a stranger in a strange land."

The circumcision episode, which will appear later in the story, involves Zipporah in one of its most puzzling and disturbing scenes. In Exodus 4:24–26, on the way back to Egypt, Yahweh meets Moses and seeks to kill him — for reasons that are not fully explained, but that have to do with the

uncircumcised son. Zipporah cuts off her son's foreskin and touches it to Moses' feet, saying: "A bloody husband art thou because of the circumcision." The threat is averted.

The scene is strange. It is violent. It is brief. It is unexplained in the text. It is one of the great puzzles of the Moses story, and it deserves a chapter of its own later in the book. For now, it is enough to note that Zipporah appears in it, with a knife, and that the scene is one of the moments where the story's roughness shows through.

Zipporah is not a major character in the story, but she is present in the key moments — the marriage, the son, the circumcision. She is the woman Moses marries in exile, the woman who bears his first son, the woman who saves him at the circumcision. The story does not give her much space, but it gives her these moments, and they are real moments.

The forty years

The story says that Moses dwelt in Midian for forty years. The number forty is a biblical symbol for a generation, for a complete period of waiting, for the time it takes for a people or a person to change. The wilderness wandering is forty years. The flood lasts forty days and forty nights. The number means a long, complete period.

The forty years in Midian are a period of waiting. Moses waits for the call. He waits in the desert. He shepherds. He lives with Jethro. He has a family. He becomes a shepherd. He learns the desert. He waits.

The story does not tell us what Moses thought, or what he prayed, or what he dreamed. It does not tell us that he was preparing for the call. It does not tell us that he was studying the desert or learning leadership or practising his speaking. It simply tells us that he dwelt in Midian for forty years.

The silence is deliberate. The story is saying that the waiting was not dramatic. It was ordinary. It was the time it takes for a man to become the man he needs to be. The call comes after the waiting, not during it. The story does not fill the waiting with events because the waiting was not made of events. It was made of time.

This is one of the story's great truths about preparation. Preparation is not always visible. It is not always dramatic. Sometimes it is just time, and patience, and living in the desert. The caller — the one who calls — does not arrive until the waiting is over. The story respects the waiting. It does not rush it. It marks it with a number and moves on.

The landscape of Midian

To understand the forty years, it helps to understand the landscape.

Midian is desert and hills and wells. It is the land of the northwestern Arabian peninsula, east of the Gulf of Aqaba. The landscape is open, arid, and beautiful. The wells are the resources. The grazing is the economy. The movement of flocks is the life.

The desert is a place of solitude. It is a place where a man can be alone with his thoughts, if he has thoughts to be alone with. It is a place where the noise of Egypt is gone, the noise of the court, the noise of the forced labour, the noise of the pharaoh's demand — all of it is gone, and there is only the desert and the sheep and the well and the family.

The desert is a place of change. It is a place where a man can change in ways that are not visible to anyone else. Moses spent forty years in the desert. The story does not tell us what changed, but it

tells us that he was different when the call came. The man who answered the call at the bush was not the man who killed the taskmaster. The desert was part of the difference.

The landscape is also the setting for the call. The call comes at Mount Horeb, the mountain of God, in the wilderness of Midian or near it. The bush is on the mountain. The call is in the desert. The story takes the call to the desert, because the desert is the place of waiting and the place of the call.

The silence and its meaning

The forty years of silence is one of the story's great structural devices. The story skips the time. It does not fill it. It marks it with a number and moves on to the next event.

The reason is that the time was not dramatic. The forty years were ordinary. They were waiting. They were the time it took for Moses to become ready. The story does not narrate the waiting because the waiting was not dramatic. It was a period of life, and the story moves from the flight to the call without filling the gap.

The silence also has a theological point. The call comes from God, and the time before the call is God's time. The waiting is not the man's doing. It is the time God gives, or the time the story gives, before the call comes. The silence is the time between the act and the calling, and the story respects the silence.

The silence is also a narrative device. The story sets up the contrast between the man who killed and fled and the man who answers the call. The forty years are the bridge between the two. The story does not fill the bridge with events because the bridge is a period of change that is not easily narrated. The change is in the man, not in the events. The story respects this.

What we know about Moses in Midian

We know that he fled. We know that he dwelt in Midian. We know that he sat by a well. We know that he helped the daughters of Jethro water their flocks. We know that he was invited to stay. We know that he married Zipporah. We know that he had a son, Gershom. We know that he was a shepherd. We know that he stayed for forty years.

These are the facts. They are sparse. They are deliberate. The story gives us the facts and does not try to embellish them. The story trusts the facts to carry the weight.

The sparseness is part of the honesty of the story. The story does not invent details to fill the gap. It does not tell us that Moses studied the prophets or that he built a school or that he wrote a book. It tells us the facts and leaves the rest in silence.

The silence is part of the integrity of the story. The story does not pretend to know more than it knows. It tells us what it tells us, and it does not tell us the rest.

The call is coming

The forty years end with the call. The call comes at the bush, on Mount Horeb. The call is the next event in the story. The story moves from the silence to the call.

The call is the great turning point of the story. Moses is a shepherd in Midian. He is living an ordinary life. And the call comes. The bush burns. The voice speaks. The name is given. The assignment is given. The objections begin.

The call is the event that changes everything. The man who was a shepherd in Midian becomes the man who confronts the pharaoh. The silence ends. The story begins again.

But the call comes only after the forty years. The story does not rush. The story waits. The call comes when the waiting is over. The story respects the waiting.

The next chapter — the bush — is the call. The scene is one of the most important in the story. The bush, the name, the five objections, the argument, the loss. The reader should come to it knowing that the silence has ended, and that the story is about to move.

The Bush

Forty years in Midian. A shepherd's life. A man grown older, quieter, changed by time and desert.

And then, one day, a bush that burns but is not consumed.

This is the scene that changes everything. This is the call. This is the moment when the silence ends and the story begins again. The man who has been waiting for forty years is called. He argues. He loses. He is sent.

This is the most important single scene in the early part of the Moses story, because it is the moment of assignment. Everything before it — the basket, the murder, the flight to Midian, the forty years — leads to this. Everything after it — the plagues, the sea, the law, the wilderness, the failure at Meribah, the death on the mountain — follows from this.

The scene is one of the most carefully constructed in the entire narrative, and it deserves to be read slowly, scene by scene, for what it says and how it works.

The setting

Moses is a shepherd. He is tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro. He drives the flock into the wilderness, to the west, to the mountain of God — Horeb, which is another name for Sinai. He is in the desert. He is alone, with the sheep.

The mountain is called the mountain of God. The name tells us that this place is already known as holy, or is about to become known as holy. The story does not tell us why it is called the mountain of God at this point. It simply tells us that it is.

Moses is in the wilderness, far from Egypt, far from the court, far from the forced labour, far from the people he wanted to defend. He is in the place of waiting, the place of solitude, the place of change. And the call comes here.

The location is deliberate. The call does not come in the palace. It does not come in the brickfields. It does not come in the presence of the pharaoh. It comes in the desert, to a shepherd, in the silence of the years. The call comes in the place where Moses has been waiting, and the waiting is now over.

The bush

The angel of Yahweh appears to Moses in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. Moses sees it. The bush is burning. But the bush is not consumed. The fire does not go out. The bush does not turn to ash.

Moses says: "I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt."

Moses turns aside to look. This is one of the most important movements in the scene. Moses does not ignore the burning bush. He turns aside to see it. He is curious. He is drawn. He pauses from his shepherding to look at the wonder.

And when he turns aside, God calls to him from the midst of the bush. "Moses, Moses." And Moses says: "Here am I."

The pattern is deliberate. The call requires a turning aside. Moses has to stop what he is doing and look. The call does not come to the busy man. It comes to the man who notices. The call comes to the man who turned aside to see.

The burning bush is a theophany — a visible appearance of God. The angel of Yahweh is in the bush. The bush is the place. The fire is the presence. And the sign is that the bush burns but is not consumed — a symbol, if one wants to read it, of the people of Israel in the fire of Egypt, burning but not destroyed, a symbol of the weak that is not consumed by the power that surrounds it, a symbol of the man who has been through the fire and is still there.

This is one of the great images in religious literature. The bush burning without being consumed is an image that has stuck. It is the image of the call. It is the image of the presence that does not destroy. It is the image that has been painted and imagined and thought about for three thousand years.

Take off your sandals

God says: "Do not draw near here. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground."

The command is about reverence, about the holiness of the place, about the limit that the presence sets. Moses must not approach casually. He must take off his sandals. The ground is holy. The presence has made it so.

The act of taking off the sandals is a gesture of respect, of separation from the ordinary, of entering the holy. It is the same gesture that appears in other theophanies — the washing of feet, the unveiling, the act of approaching the presence with humility.

The holiness of the ground is the holiness of the presence. The place is holy because God is there. The command is about the relationship between the human and the divine: the human must approach with humility, with the recognition that the ground is holy, with the recognition that the presence sets a limit.

Moses hides his face. The text says: "Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God." The fear is the appropriate response to the presence. Moses does not look. He hides his face. He is afraid. The fear is the recognition of the otherness of God.

The commission

God says: "I have surely seen the oppression of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows. So I have come down to deliver them from the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Hivite, and the Jebusite. Come now, therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh, that you may bring My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt."

The commission is the heart of the scene. God tells Moses what God has seen and heard and known — the oppression, the cry, the sorrows. God says: I have come down to deliver them. I have come down to bring them to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the land of the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Amorite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite.

The list of the peoples of Canaan is specific. The land is not empty. It is occupied by peoples. The promise is not a promise of vacant land. It is a promise of a land that is inhabited, and that will have to be entered. The story is already aware that the promised land is not vacant, and the list of peoples is the first sign of the tension that will run through the rest of the story.

The commission is: Go to Pharaoh. Bring the people out. This is the assignment. This is the task. The man who has been waiting for forty years is given the task of confronting the pharaoh and liberating the nation.

The language is deliberate. God says: "I have come down." The divine presence is not remote. God has come down to see and to hear and to act. The story presents a God who is close to the suffering of the people, who sees and hears and knows their sorrows, and who comes down in response.

The first objection: "Who am I?"

Moses answers: "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?"

The first objection is the question of identity and adequacy. Moses is saying: I am not the person for this. I am not qualified. I am just a shepherd. I am a man who fled Egypt. I am not a leader. I am not a prince anymore. Who am I to do this?

The objection is the first of five. Moses does not accept the commission. He argues. He resists. This is not a story of eager acceptance. This is a story of reluctance. The man who is called does not want to be called. He argues. He loses. He is sent.

God's answer to the first objection is: "I will be with you." The sign of the adequacy is not Moses' own ability. It is God's presence. The task is not to be done by Moses' strength. It is to be done by God's presence with Moses. The answer is not a reassurance of Moses' own power. It is the promise of the presence.

The sign of the commission is the return: "When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain." The sign is that Moses will return to this mountain, to the place of the call, after the liberation. The mountain is the sign that the commission is real.

The second objection: "What is his name?"

Moses says: "Behold, when I come to the children of Israel, and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they say to me, 'What is His name?' what shall I say to them?"

The second objection is the question of the name. Moses knows that the people will ask for the name of the God who is sending him. The Hebrew name of God is a matter of tradition and mystery. Moses needs to know what to say.

God answers: "I AM WHO I AM." In Hebrew: *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*. And God says: "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

And God continues: "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'Yahweh, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is My name for ever, and this is My memorial to all generations."

The name is one of the most famous and most discussed in religious history. *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* is deliberately ambiguous. It can mean "I am who I am" — the absolute being, the one who is, the unchanging presence. It can mean "I will be who I will be" — the future, the becoming, the one who is not fixed in any one form. It can mean "I am what I am" — the self-definition, the one who defines himself.

The ambiguity is deliberate. The name is not a clear definition. It is a revelation that keeps its distance. God says: I am. I will be. This is how you answer. The name is the presence, and the presence is the name, and the name is the presence, and both are beyond full comprehension.

The name Yahweh is given as the name to be used in relation to the people. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob — the God of the fathers, the God of the covenant, the God who has been with the people before — is the God who is sending Moses. The name is connected to the tradition, to the history, to the covenant.

The revelation of the name is the revelation of the God who sends Moses. The name is the God of the fathers, the God of the covenant, the God who is present, the God who comes down, the God who liberates. This is the name of the God of the Exodus.

The third objection: "They will not believe me"

Moses says: "But behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken to my voice; for they will say, 'Yahweh has not appeared to you.'"

The third objection is the question of credibility. Moses knows that the people will not believe him. He knows that he will be seen as a stranger, as a man who has no authority, as a man who is not credible. He knows the problem.

God's answer is to give Moses signs. Three signs.

The first sign: "Take your staff in your hand, and go, and the staff will become a serpent." Moses takes the staff. He throws it on the ground. It becomes a serpent. He picks it up by the tail. It becomes a staff again.

The second sign: "Put your hand into your bosom." Moses puts his hand into his bosom. He takes it out, and it is leprous — white as snow. He puts it back. He takes it out, and it is healed.

The third sign: "If they will not believe you, nor hearken to the voice of the first sign, they will believe the voice of the latter sign. And it shall come to pass, if they will not believe you also for this second sign, that you shall take of the water of the river, and pour it on the dry land; and it shall become blood."

The signs are the credentials. They are the proof that the call is real. They are the power that accompanies the commission. The staff that becomes a serpent and back, the hand that becomes leprous and back, the water that becomes blood — these are the signs that Moses will use to show the people that the God of the fathers has appeared to him.

The signs are also the signs that Moses will use in the confrontation with the pharaoh. The staff becomes a serpent. Aaron throws it down. The Egyptian magicians replicate it. The contest is on.

The signs are the interface between the divine call and the human mission. They are the visible evidence of the invisible reality. They are the thing that makes the mission credible.

The fourth objection: "I am not a man of words"

Moses says: "O my Lord, I am not a man of words, neither heretofore, nor since you have spoken to your servant; for I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue."

The fourth objection is the speech impediment. This is the objection that will become a chapter of its own later. Moses says: I am not a man of words. I am not an orator. I am slow of speech. I am slow of tongue. I cannot do this. I am the wrong person.

The objection is one of the most important in the scene, because it reveals something essential about Moses. He is not a natural speaker. He is not a man of words. This will be a recurring theme in the story, and it is one of the things that makes the portrait honest and specific.

God's answer is one of the most remarkable in the scene. God says: "Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes the dumb, or mute, or the blind, or the seeing? Have not I the Lord? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth, and teach you what you shall speak."

God's answer is not a removal of the impediment. It is a promise of presence. God will be with Moses' mouth. God will teach him what to speak. The impediment is not removed. The presence is provided.

The answer is also a theological point. Who made the mouth? Who makes the dumb and the mute and the blind and the seeing? God made it all. The impediment is from God, or at least within the range of God's power, and God will work with it. The impediment is not a disqualification. It is the human condition, and God will use it.

Aaron is appointed. God says: "Now take Aaron your brother, and bring him back to you. He will speak for you. He will be your mouth, and you will be for him as God and as a prophet."

The speech impediment is not solved. Aaron is the solution. Moses will be the prophet. Aaron will be the mouth. The division of roles is the accommodation of the human condition. Moses is not a man of words. Aaron is. Together, they will do what needs to be done.

The fifth objection: "Send someone else"

Moses says: "O my Lord, please send, by the hand of him whom you will send."

The fifth objection is the refusal. Moses is saying: Send someone else. Anyone but me. The call is too much. The assignment is too dangerous. I am the wrong person. I am not the person. Send someone else.

The refusal is the last of the five. It is the most complete. It is the refusal to accept the call at all. And it is the point at which the story says: enough.

God's anger is hot. The text says: "And the anger of Yahweh burned against Moses." The refusal has consequences. The call is not negotiable. The assignment is given. The man who refuses will be sent anyway.

The story says: "Is not Aaron the Levite your brother? I know that he will speak well. And look, he is coming out to meet you. And when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart. And you shall speak to him, and put the words in his mouth. And I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will

teach you what you shall do. And he will be a mouth for you, and you will be for him in the place of God. And take this staff in your hand, with which you will do the signs."

God has the solution. Aaron is the brother. Aaron is a Levite. Aaron speaks well. Aaron is coming to meet Moses. Aaron will be the mouth. Aaron will do the speaking. Moses will be the prophet. The staff is the instrument. The signs are the credentials. The commission is given.

The fifth objection is the last. Moses has argued five times. He has lost five times. He is sent.

The question of reluctance

The five objections are the most important part of the scene for the reader who wants to understand Moses' character.

Moses does not accept the call eagerly. He argues. He resists. He says: Who am I? What is the name? They will not believe me. I am not a man of words. Send someone else.

The five objections are specific. They are not vague nonsense. They are real objections, the kind of objections a sensible man would make.

Who am I? — I am a fugitive. I am a shepherd. I am not a leader. I am not a prince anymore.

What is the name? — I do not know what to say. I do not know how to answer the people. I need the name.

They will not believe me. — I have no credibility. I have no authority. I am not credible.

I am not a man of words. — I cannot speak. I am slow of speech. I am slow of tongue. I am the wrong person for a task that requires words.

Send someone else. — I will not do this. I am the wrong person. I will not.

The objections are real. The reluctance is real. The story presents the reluctance honestly. The man who is called does not want to be called. He argues. He resists. He loses.

This is one of the things that makes the portrait honest. The story does not pretend that Moses was eager. The story does not pretend that the call was a welcome thing. The story presents the reluctance as part of the character. The man who argues with the call is the man who will become the leader of the people. The reluctance is part of the story, and the story does not hide it.

The story is also aware that the reluctance is not just resistance. It is also a kind of humility. Moses does not think he is the right person for the job. He is right. He is not. But the call is not about Moses being the right person. It is about God being present with the wrong person. The call is not a reward for the qualified. It is a mission for the reluctant.

The name of the bush

The burning bush is one of the great images of the story, and it is an image that has a life of its own.

The bush is *seneh* in Hebrew — a bramble bush, a thorny bush, a shrub. The bush is not a glorious tree. It is a shrub, a thorny thing, a common plant. The fire is in the common bush. The presence is in the ordinary.

The image is that God is in the ordinary thing, in the common bush, in the thorny shrub. The presence is not in the palace. It is not in the temple. It is not in the beautiful and the grand. It is in the common. It is in the bush. It is in the ordinary.

The fire is that the bush burns but is not consumed. The fire is the presence. The bush is the vessel. The fire does not destroy the vessel. The presence is in the thing, and the thing is not consumed. The presence is the fire, and the fire is the presence, and the bush is the bush, and the fire is the fire, and the bush burns but is not consumed.

The image is one of the great symbols of the story. The bush is a symbol of the people in the fire, burning but not destroyed. The bush is a symbol of the weak in the presence of the powerful, not consumed. The bush is a symbol of the man who has been through the fire and is still there. The bush is a symbol of the presence that does not destroy.

The image has a life of its own, and it is one of the things that has made the story last. The burning bush is the image of the call. The burning bush is the image of the presence. The burning bush is the image of the mystery.

The signs

The three signs — the staff that becomes a serpent, the hand that becomes leprous, the water that becomes blood — are the credentials of the call.

The signs are not just magic tricks. They are the visible evidence of the invisible reality. They are the thing that bridges the gap between the call and the mission. They are the proof that the call is real.

The signs are also the signs that Moses will use in the confrontation with the pharaoh. The staff that becomes a serpent. Aaron throws it down. The Egyptian magicians replicate it. The contest is on. The signs are the beginning of the confrontation.

The signs are also the signs of the power of God. The staff is a common thing. It becomes a serpent. The hand is a common thing. It becomes leprous and back. The water is a common thing. It becomes blood. The signs are the power of God in the common things. The signs are the presence of God in the ordinary.

The signs are the beginning of the story of the plagues. The staff becomes a serpent. The water becomes blood. The signs are the prelude to the plagues. The signs are the beginning of the confrontation.

The signs are also the signs of the credibility of Moses. Moses is a man who is not credible. The signs make him credible. The signs are the thing that makes the mission possible.

The signs are the beginning of the story. The story of the plagues, the sea, the law, the wilderness — all of it begins with the signs. The signs are the first visible act of the story. They are the first proof. They are the first step.

The call is given

The call is given. The silence is over. The forty years are ended. Moses is called. He argues. He loses. He is sent.

The call is the turning point of the story. Everything before it — the basket, the murder, the flight, the exile, the silence — leads to this. Everything after it — the plagues, the sea, the law, the wilderness, the failure, the death — follows from this.

The call is the event that changes everything. The man who was a shepherd in Midian becomes the man who confronts the pharaoh. The silence ends. The story begins again.

The call is the great scene of the story. The burning bush, the name, the five objections, the signs, the loss. The scene is the most important in the early part of the story, and it is the scene that sets the tone for the rest.

The scene is also the scene that reveals Moses' character most clearly. The man who argues, the man who resists, the man who is reluctant, the man who is not a man of words, the man who is sent anyway. This is the man who will become the leader of the people. This is the man who will stand before the pharaoh. This is the man who will lead the people to the sea.

This is the man who will fail at Meribah. This is the man who will die on the mountain. This is the man who will be buried by God in an unmarked grave.

The call is the beginning of the story of this man. The call is the event that makes the story possible. The call is the event that sets the story in motion.

The next chapter — the speech impediment — will develop the fourth objection in more detail, and will discuss what it means that the tradition kept this detail about the man who is the lawgiver and the prophet and the man who spoke with God.

The call has been given. The story is on its way.

I Have Never Been a Man of Words

Moses has argued five times. He has lost five times. He is sent.

The fifth objection was the most complete: "Send someone else." Moses does not want this. Moses resists. Moses loses. And the story gives him Aaron.

But before the story gives him Aaron, before the story lets Moses off the hook, it gives us one of the most specific and most preserved details in the entire portrait: Moses' speech impediment.

This is the one detail that, more than any other, tells us something genuine about the man behind the story. Not that he existed. Not that he did what the story says. But that he was not the man of words we might expect the founder of a great tradition to be.

The objection

The time is the bush. The Great Commission is given. Moses has just lost the fourth argument, the one about the signs. And he says:

O my Lord, I am not a man of words, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant: for I am of a slow mouth and a slow tongue.

The Hebrew is worth seeing directly, because it is one of the most specific things in the text.

The phrase is *kaved peh* — "heavy of mouth" — and *aroked lashon* — "slow of tongue."

Kaved is the word for heavy, weighty, difficult. A *kaved peh* is a mouth that is heavy, that is not easy to move, that is not easy to speak with. A mouth that is slow to respond, slow to form words.

Aroked is the word for slow, lazy, dull. A *aroked lashon* is a tongue that is slow, that does not move easily, that is not quick with words.

The combination — heavy mouth, slow tongue — is specific. It is not a metaphor. It is not a figure of speech for "I am shy." It is a physical description. It is the description of a man who has a difficulty with speech.

And the record is absolute. Moses says: *neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant*. This is not a new problem. This is the problem that has always been there. This is the man's condition.

The condition is not hidden. The condition is named. The condition is part of the portrait.

What the impairment is

Scholars have debated this for as long as scholars have debated anything about Moses. What kind of speech problem is this?

The most straightforward reading is a stammer or a speech defect — a difficulty with articulating words, a hesitancy, a problem with the mouth and the tongue. The description — heavy mouth, slow tongue — sounds like a stammer. A man who stammers does not speak quickly. His mouth is heavy with the effort of words. His tongue is slow to find its place.

Another reading is a general difficulty with public speaking — not a physical defect, but a temperament, a man who is not an orator, who is slow and hesitant when he has to speak to a crowd or to a court or to a king. The phrase could describe a man who is not a natural speaker, who finds speaking difficult, who is slow to find the right words.

Another reading is a metaphorical use of the phrase — the story is describing Moses' reluctance in a physical way, using the body to express the will. The man who does not want to speak says: my mouth is heavy, my tongue is slow. The reluctance is expressed as a physical condition.

The honest answer is that we do not know exactly what the text means, and that the honest book should say so. The phrase is specific, and it is physical, and it describes a difficulty, but the exact nature of the difficulty — stammer, speech defect, temperament, metaphor — is not settled, and the book should not pretend to settle it.

What is settled is this: the text describes Moses as a man with a difficulty with speech, and it describes this difficulty as something that has always been there, and it describes this difficulty as something that is part of who Moses is.

The thing that is striking: the tradition kept it

This is the striking thing. The founder of the greatest speech-based tradition in the ancient world — the man who received the law, the man who spoke with God, the man who led the people, the man who is the centre of the story — is described as a man who cannot speak.

The founder is not a man of words. The founder is slow of mouth. The founder is slow of tongue. The founder cannot speak.

This is not the portrait we would make up. If we were writing a story about the founder of a great tradition, we would make him eloquent. We would give him the words. We would make him the speaker. We would make him the man who had the gift.

The story does not do this. The story presents Moses as a man who cannot speak. The story presents Moses as a man who needs Aaron. The story presents Moses as a man who speaks poorly, or not at all, and relies on someone else for the words.

And the tradition keeps this. The rabbis do not fix it. They do not erase it. They do not pretend that Moses was eloquent. The tradition preserves the difficulty. The tradition preserves the slow mouth and the slow tongue.

This is one of the things that makes the portrait honest. The story does not flatter Moses. The story does not give him what we would give him. The story gives him what he is. A man with a difficulty with speech.

The significance of the detail

The significance of the detail is that it tells us something true about the man behind the story — something that is hard to invent, and that the tradition would have no reason to invent.

Think about it from the point of view of the tradition. If Moses was a real person, and the tradition remembered him as a man with a speech difficulty, then the story would preserve the difficulty. The tradition would remember the man who stammered, the man who was slow of mouth, the man who needed Aaron. The tradition would preserve this because it was true, because it was part of who Moses was, because it was part of the memory.

If Moses was not a real person, if the story was invented, then we would have to ask: why would the inventor give his hero a speech difficulty? Why would the inventor make the founder of the tradition a man who cannot speak? This is not something an inventor does. An inventor makes the hero eloquent. An inventor makes the hero the man of words.

The detail is the kind of detail that a real person leaves behind. The detail is the kind of detail that memory preserves. The detail is the kind of detail that an inventor would not invent.

This is the argument that the detail is evidence. The detail is evidence that the portrait is built around a real person, or around a memory of a real person, and that the portrait preserves the person's real characteristics, even the difficult ones.

God's answer

The story gives us God's answer to the objection. And God's answer is one of the most remarkable in the scene.

God says: *Who hath made man's mouth? or who maketh the dumb, or mute, or the blind, or the seeing? have not I the Lord? now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt speak.*

The answer is not a healing. It is a presence. God does not remove the impediment. God does not fix the mouth. God does not make the tongue quick. God says: I will be with your mouth. God will teach you what to speak.

The impediment remains. The presence is provided. The problem is not solved. The presence is the solution.

The answer is also a theological claim. Who made the mouth? Who made the dumb and the mute and the blind and the seeing? God made it all. The impediment is from God, or at least within the range of God's power, and God will work with it. The impediment is not a disqualification. It is the human condition. It is the thing that God made. It is the thing that God will use.

The answer is also a division of labour. Moses speaks. Moses is slow. God is with Moses' mouth. God teaches Moses what to speak. The words are God's, not Moses'. Moses is the channel. Moses is the mouth, but the words are God's.

This is the speech of Moses is the speech of God, not the speech of Moses. Moses is the man of the slow mouth, but the words are God's. The slow mouth is the vessel for the words of God.

Aaron

And then God gives Moses the solution to the problem of speech: *Now take Aaron your brother, and bring him back to you. He will speak for you. He will be your mouth, and you will be for him as God and as a prophet.*

Aaron is the mouth. Aaron is the spokesman. Aaron speaks. Moses is the prophet. Moses is the one who hears God. Moses is the one who carries the words. Aaron is the one who speaks them.

The division is clear. Moses is the prophet. Aaron is the spokesman. Moses hears. Aaron speaks. Moses carries the words. Aaron delivers the words.

The division is the solution to the problem of the slow mouth. Moses cannot speak. Aaron can. Together, they do what needs to be done.

The division is also the division of the future. Aaron is the first high priest. Aaron is the father of the priestly line. Aaron is the spokesman for the leader who is not a speaker. The division is the beginning of the pattern of the future: the prophet and the priest, the man of the word and the man of the mouth, the one who hears and the one who speaks.

The division is also the division of the character. Moses is the man of the slow mouth. Aaron is the man of the quick mouth. Moses is the man of the word of God. Aaron is the man of the voice of Moses. The division is the division of the two brothers, and the division runs through the story.

The contrast with later tradition

The later tradition — Philo, the rabbis, the Christian tradition — tries to make Moses eloquent. The later tradition tries to fix the problem. The later tradition does not like the portrait of the man who cannot speak.

Philo reads Moses as the philosopher, the man who knows the truth, the man who has the perfect knowledge. Philo has to deal with the impediment, and he does so by reading it as a metaphor for the soul's ascent, for the difficulty of expressing the divine in human words. Philo does not deny the impediment. He reinterprets it.

The rabbis preserve the impediment, but they also amplify Moses' authority. The rabbis make Moses the greatest of prophets, the man who spoke with God face to face, the man who received the law, the man who had the greatest knowledge. The rabbis do not erase the impediment. They keep it. But they also give Moses the authority that the impediment seems to deny.

The later tradition is uneasy with the impediment. The later tradition wants a Moses who is eloquent, who is a speaker, who is the man of words. The later tradition does not fully succeed in erasing the impediment, but it tries. The later tradition is the unease.

The biblical text is not uneasy. The biblical text presents the impediment. The biblical text does not try to fix it. The biblical text does not try to explain it away. The biblical text presents the man with

the slow mouth and the slow tongue, and the biblical text says: this is Moses, and this is who he is, and this is part of the portrait.

The biblical text is more honest than the later tradition. The biblical text preserves the difficulty. The later tradition tries to resolve it. The biblical text is the more honest portrait.

What this means for the portrait

The portrait of Moses is built on this detail. The man who cannot speak is the man who leads. The man who is slow of mouth is the man of the word of God. The man who needs Aaron is the man who will stand before the pharaoh.

The portrait is built on the contrast. The man who cannot speak is the man who leads. The man who is not a man of words is the man who speaks the word of God. The man who is slow of mouth is the man who carries the word of God.

The portrait is built on the humility. The man who cannot speak is the man who knows he cannot speak. The man who is slow of mouth is the man who knows his limitation. The man who needs Aaron is the man who accepts help. The man who is the founder is the man who is dependent on his brother.

The portrait is built on the truth. The man who cannot speak is the man who is real. The man who is slow of mouth is the man who is remembered. The man who needs Aaron is the man who is not invented.

The portrait is built on the honesty. The story does not hide the difficulty. The story does not pretend that Moses was eloquent. The story does not give Moses what we would give him. The story gives Moses what he is. A man with a difficulty with speech.

The portrait is built on the humanity. The man who cannot speak is human. The man who is slow of mouth is human. The man who needs Aaron is human. The founder is human. The founder is not the perfect speaker. The founder is the man with the slow mouth.

The theme runs through the story

The theme of the slow mouth runs through the story. It runs through the plagues, where Moses has to speak to the pharaoh, and Aaron speaks. It runs through the law, where Moses receives the words and Aaron delivers them. It runs through the wilderness, where Moses speaks to God and to the people, and Aaron is the voice. It runs through the failure at Meribah, where Moses speaks in anger and the words are his, and the failure is his. It runs through the end, where Moses speaks his last words, and the words are his, and the man who has been slow of mouth speaks what he has to say.

The theme is the theme of the story. The man with the slow mouth is the man of the word of God. The man who cannot speak is the man who speaks. The man who is slow of tongue is the man who carries the word. The man who needs Aaron is the man who leads.

The theme is the theme of the honesty. The story does not hide the slow mouth. The story does not hide the slow tongue. The story does not hide the need for Aaron. The story presents the man as he is, and the man is a man with a difficulty with speech.

The theme is the theme of the humanity. The founder is human. The founder is not the perfect speaker. The founder is the man with the slow mouth. The founder is the man who needs Aaron. The founder is the man who is slow of tongue.

The detail is the evidence

The detail is the evidence that the portrait is built around a real person, or around a memory of a real person, and that the portrait preserves the person's real characteristics, even the difficult ones.

The detail is the evidence that the story is not invented by a man who wanted to make a hero. The detail is the evidence that the story is built around a person who had this difficulty, and that the story preserved the difficulty because it was true.

The detail is the evidence that the tradition is honest. The tradition preserved the difficulty. The tradition did not fix it. The tradition did not pretend that Moses was eloquent. The tradition kept the slow mouth and the slow tongue.

The detail is the evidence that the portrait is specific. The portrait is not a general portrait of a great leader. The portrait is a specific portrait of a man with a difficulty with speech. The portrait is detailed. The portrait is specific. The portrait is honest.

The detail is the evidence that the story is built on memory, not on invention. The detail is too specific, too physical, too difficult to have been invented. The detail is the kind of detail that memory preserves. The detail is the kind of detail that an inventor would not invent.

The detail is the evidence that the story is built on the man who cannot speak, and that the story does not hide this. The story does not hide the slow mouth. The story does not hide the slow tongue. The story does not hide the need for Aaron.

The detail is the truth

The detail is the truth. The detail is the truth about Moses. The detail is the truth about the portrait. The detail is the truth about the tradition.

The detail is the truth that the founder of a great tradition is not a man of words. The detail is the truth that the man who received the law is a man of the slow mouth. The detail is the truth that the man who spoke with God is a man who cannot speak.

The detail is the truth that the story is honest. The story does not hide the slow mouth. The story does not hide the slow tongue. The story does not hide the need for Aaron.

The detail is the truth that the tradition is honest. The tradition preserved the difficulty. The tradition did not fix it. The tradition did not pretend that Moses was eloquent. The tradition kept the slow mouth and the slow tongue.

The detail is the truth that the story is built on memory, not on invention. The detail is the kind of detail that memory preserves. The detail is the kind of detail that an inventor would not invent.

The detail is the truth that the story is built on the man who cannot speak, and that the story does not hide this. The story does not hide the slow mouth. The story does not hide the slow tongue. The story does not hide the need for Aaron.

The detail is the portrait

The detail is the portrait. The portrait of Moses is the portrait of the man with the slow mouth. The portrait of Moses is the portrait of the man with the slow tongue. The portrait of Moses is the portrait of the man who needs Aaron.

The portrait is the portrait of the man who is not a man of words. The portrait is the portrait of the man who is slow of speech. The portrait is the portrait of the man who is slow of tongue.

The portrait is the portrait of the man who is the founder of a great tradition, and who cannot speak. The portrait is the portrait of the man who received the law, and who is slow of mouth. The portrait is the portrait of the man who spoke with God, and who is slow of tongue.

The portrait is the portrait of the man who is human. The portrait is the portrait of the man who is not the perfect speaker. The portrait is the portrait of the man who is the man with the slow mouth.

The portrait is the portrait of the man who is honest. The portrait is the portrait of the man who is specific. The portrait is the portrait of the man who is real. The portrait is the portrait of the man who is not invented.

The portrait is the portrait of the man who is Moses.

Ten Disasters

The confrontation begins.

Moses and Aaron stand before the pharaoh. They deliver the message. The pharaoh refuses. And the plagues begin.

The story of the plagues is the longest and most elaborate sequence in the Exodus narrative. It is the confrontation between the God of Israel and the Egyptian state, between the demand for liberation and the power that refuses to yield. The plagues are the argument of the story, the demonstration, the escalation, the thing that finally breaks the resistance.

The story is rich enough for more than one reading. A natural-cascade reading sees the plagues as a sequence of natural events that build on each other — the water turns, the frogs leave, the insects come, the diseases follow, the weather breaks, the locusts descend, the darkness comes, the death comes. A theological reading sees the plagues as a challenge to the Egyptian gods — the Nile, the frog goddess, the sun god, the whole order of Egyptian religion — and a demonstration that the God of Israel is greater than all of them. These readings are not mutually exclusive. The story is large enough for both, and an honest book should give the reader both without pretending that one replaces the other.

This chapter will tell the story of the plagues, and will give the reader the two readings, and will let the reader feel the force of the sequence. The next chapter will be the sea. The plagues end. The sea begins.

The first plague: blood

The first plague is blood. Moses and Aaron do as God commands. Aaron takes the staff and strikes the waters of the Nile. The waters turn to blood. The fish die. The river stinks. The Egyptians cannot drink the water. The blood is throughout the land.

Aaron's staff, the staff that became a serpent at the bush, is the instrument. The strike on the water is the act. The blood is the result.

The plague of blood challenges Hapi, the god of the Nile, the god of the annual flood, the god who gives the water of life to Egypt. The Nile is the source of Egyptian life. The Nile is sacred. And the plague turns the Nile to blood. The life-source becomes death. The god of the Nile is challenged by the God of Israel.

The time is seven days. The text says the plague lasts seven days. The blood is in the river. The Egyptians cannot drink. The magicians — the court wizards, the ones who serve the pharaoh — replicate the sign. They turn water to blood with their enchantments. But the plague is real. The river is blood. The magicians can do the same trick, but the river is still blood. The plague is not ended by the magic. The plague is the power of God, and the magic is a copy.

The pharaoh's heart is hardened. The text says: *And Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them, as Yahweh had said.*

The hardening of the heart is the beginning of the pattern. The pharaoh refuses. The heart is hardened. The plague is over. The next plague comes.

The second plague: frogs

The second plague is frogs. Moses and Aaron are told to tell the pharaoh: *Let my people go, that they may serve me.* The pharaoh refuses. And the frogs come.

The frogs come up from the river. They cover the land. They go into the houses, the chambers, the beds, the kneading bowls, the ovens. They are on the people. The frogs are everywhere.

The plague of frogs challenges Heqet, the frog-headed goddess of birth and fertility. Heqet is the goddess of the frog, the goddess of the birth, the goddess of the life that comes from the Nile. And the plague sends the frogs as a plague, not as a blessing. The goddess of fertility becomes the agent of death. The symbol of life becomes the instrument of plague.

The text is vivid. The frogs are on the people. The frogs are in the beds. The frogs are in the kneading bowls. The frogs are everywhere. The plague is a nuisance, but it is also a humiliation. The symbol of the Egyptian god is everywhere, and it is an embarrassment.

Pharaoh calls Moses and Aaron and says: *Entreat Yahweh, and let the frogs be destroyed from me and from my people.* But he adds: *I will let you go, that you may sacrifice to Yahweh.*

The pharaoh offers a partial concession. He will let them go — but to sacrifice in the land, not to leave. The concession is not enough. Moses says: *I will go out from you, and I will entreat Yahweh, and the frogs will be destroyed from you and from your people, and they will remain in the river only.*

Moses goes out. He entreats. The frogs die. They are gathered in heaps. The land stinks.

The text says: *And they gathered the frogs, and they died in the houses, in the courts, and in the fields.* The dead frogs are everywhere. The smell is everywhere. The plague is over, but the consequences remain. The smell is the consequence. The dead frogs are the evidence. The plague is over, but the pharaoh does not keep his word. The pharaoh hardens his heart. The text says: *And Pharaoh saw that there was respite, and he hardened his heart, and he did not listen to them, as Yahweh had said.*

The pattern is set. The plague ends. The heart is hardened. The next plague comes.

The third plague: lice (or gnats)

The third plague is lice, or in some translations, gnats. The Hebrew word is *kinnim*, which can mean lice, gnats, mosquitoes, or small flying insects. The translators have argued about the meaning for a long time. The most common modern rendering is "gnats" or "mosquitoes" — small flying insects that come from the dust.

The plague is different from the first two. The magicians cannot replicate it. The magicians try. They cannot do it. The magicians say: *This is the finger of God*. The plague is the finger of God — the direct act of God that the magicians cannot copy.

The plague comes from the dust of the land. Moses and Aaron are told: *Take your staff in your hand, and the dust of the land, and it will become lice in man and in beast, throughout all the land of Egypt*.

Aaron strikes the dust. The dust becomes lice. The lice are on man and beast. The plague is everywhere. The Egyptians cannot escape it. The plague is in the dust, and the dust is everywhere.

The plague is the first one the magicians cannot replicate. The magicians' failure is the sign that this plague is different. This plague is the finger of God, and the magicians cannot do the finger of God. The magicians admit it. The magicians say: *This is the finger of God*.

The pharaoh's heart is hardened. The pharaoh refuses. The plague ends. The next plague comes.

The fourth plague: swarms

The fourth plague is swarms — of flies, or perhaps of wild beasts, or of insects. The Hebrew word is *arov*, which is difficult to translate. The most common rendering is "swarms of flies." Some translations render it "swarms of wild beasts." The meaning is debated, and the honest book should say so. The most common modern reading is that the plague is of flies, of swarms of insects, that come upon the land.

The swarms come upon the land. The swarms are on the people. The swarms are on the beasts. The swarms fill the houses. The swarms are everywhere.

The plague is different from the others in one important way: the land of Goshen is spared. The text says: *And I will put a division between my people and your people; tomorrow this sign will be in the land*.

The division is the sign. The plague comes on the Egyptians. The plague does not come on the Israelites. The land of Goshen — the region in the Delta where the Israelites live — is spared. The division is the demonstration that the God of Israel is the God of the Israelites, and that the Israelites are not subject to the same forces as the Egyptians.

The pharaoh calls Moses and Aaron and says: *Go, sacrifice to your God in the land*.

The pharaoh offers to let them sacrifice in Egypt. Moses says: *It is not proper to do so, for we will sacrifice the abomination of the Egyptians to Yahweh our God. If we sacrifice the abomination of the Egyptians before their eyes, will they not stone us?*

The objection is practical. The sacrifice of the Israelites would be an abomination to the Egyptians. The Egyptians would not tolerate it. The sacrifice must be in the wilderness, away from the Egyptians. The concession is not enough.

The plague ends. The swarms are removed. The pharaoh hardens his heart. The text says: *And Pharaoh did not let them go*.

The fifth plague: pestilence

The fifth plague is pestilence on the livestock. The plague is on the horses, the donkeys, the camels, the cattle, the sheep. The plague is on the livestock of Egypt.

The plague is different from the others. It is a disease. It is a biological catastrophe. The livestock die. The plague is on the livestock, and the livestock are the wealth of Egypt. The wealth dies.

The plague is on the livestock. The plague is on the Egyptian livestock. The plague does not come on the livestock of the Israelites. The text says: *And Yahweh will make a division between the livestock of Israel and the livestock of Egypt. Nothing will die of the livestock of Israel.*

The division is the sign. The plague comes on the Egyptians. The plague does not come on the Israelites. The division is the demonstration.

The pharaoh sends to check. The pharaoh sends men to see if the livestock of Israel have died. They have not. The plague is real. The division is real. The plague is on the Egyptians. The plague is not on the Israelites.

The pharaoh's heart is hardened. The pharaoh refuses. The plague ends. The next plague comes.

The sixth plague: boils

The sixth plague is boils. Moses and Aaron take the soot of the furnaces. They throw it into the air. The soot becomes boils on man and beast. The boils are on the Egyptians. The boils are painful. The boils are everywhere.

The plague is on the skin. The plague is on the body. The plague is painful. The plague is on the Egyptians. The plague is not on the Israelites.

The magicians are affected. The text says: *And the magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils. For the boils were on the magicians, and on all the Egyptians.*

The magicians are struck by the plague. The magicians cannot stand before Moses. The magicians are helpless. The plague is on the magicians. The plague is on the court. The plague is on the power. The plague is everywhere.

The pharaoh's heart is hardened. The pharaoh refuses. The plague ends. The next plague comes.

The seventh plague: hail

The seventh plague is hail. The hail is mixed with fire. The hail is large. The hail is destructive.

The hail is on the land. The hail strikes the people, the beasts, the plants. The hail breaks the trees. The hail destroys the crops. The hail is a weather catastrophe.

The text says: *And the hail struck throughout the land of Egypt, all that was in the field, both man and beast. And the hail struck all the plants of the field, and broke the trees of the field. Only in the land of Goshen, where the children of Israel were, there was no hail.*

The hail is the plague that destroys the crops. The hail is the plague that breaks the trees. The hail is the plague that strikes the land. The hail is the plague that the Egyptians have never seen. The text says: *For he had not been as this in the land since Egypt became a nation.*

The plague is the most destructive so far. The hail destroys the crops. The hail breaks the trees. The hail strikes the land. The hail is the plague that the Egyptians cannot survive. The hail is the plague that forces the pharaoh to concede.

Pharaoh sends for Moses and Aaron. He says: *I have sinned this time. Yahweh is righteous. I and my people are the wicked ones. Entreat Yahweh, and the thunder and the hail will cease. And I will let you go.*

The concession is real. The pharaoh says: *I have sinned*. The pharaoh admits the righteousness of God. The pharaoh admits his own wickedness. The pharaoh asks for the plague to cease.

Moses says: *I will go out, and I will spread out my hands to Yahweh. The thunder will cease. The hail will stop. And you will know that the earth is Yahweh's.*

Moses goes out. He spreads out his hands. The thunder ceases. The hail stops.

But the pharaoh reneges. The text says: *And Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, and he sinned further, and he hardened his heart, he and his servants. And the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he did not let the people go.*

The pattern is clear. The plague comes. The pharaoh concedes. The plague ends. The pharaoh reneges. The heart is hardened. The next plague comes.

The eighth plague: locusts

The eighth plague is locusts. The locusts come up over the land. The locusts consume the plants that the hail has left. The locusts consume the trees. The locusts leave nothing green.

The text says: *And the locusts went up over all the land of Egypt, and rested in all the borders of Egypt. Very grievous were they. Before them there were no such locusts as they, neither after them shall be such as them.*

The locusts are the worst. The locusts are the ones that leave nothing green. The locusts consume the crops. The locusts consume the trees. The locusts leave the land bare.

The plague is on the land. The plague is on the economy. The plague is on the food supply. The locusts are the plague that brings the Egyptians to the edge of starvation. The locusts are the plague that breaks the resistance of the pharaoh.

The pharaoh's servants say: *How long shall this man be a snare to us? Let the men go, that they may serve Yahweh their God. Do you not yet know that Egypt is destroyed?*

The servants speak. The catastrophe is clear. The land is destroyed. The pharaoh must let them go.

The pharaoh calls Moses and Aaron. He says: *Go, sacrifice to your God, you and your children, you and your flocks, as you said.*

The concession is real. The pharaoh says: *Go*. The pharaoh says: *Sacrifice*.

Moses goes out. The locusts are removed. The text says: *And Yahweh turned a strong west wind, and it took the locusts and drove them into the Red Sea. Not one locust remained in the borders of Egypt.*

The locusts are gone. The plague is over. But the pharaoh hardens his heart. The text says: *And Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not let the people of Israel go.*

The pattern holds. The plague ends. The pharaoh reneges. The heart is hardened. The next plague comes.

The ninth plague: darkness

The ninth plague is darkness. For three days a darkness settles over Egypt that the text says can be felt: *a darkness that can be felt*. People cannot see each other. They cannot move about their houses. The Israelites have light in their dwellings — the division again, the sign that this God acts with precision, distinguishing his people from the Egyptians.

The darkness is a challenge to Ra, the sun god, the central figure of the Egyptian pantheon. Ra is the god of light, the one who travels the sky each day and through the underworld each night, the god whose daily victory over darkness is the rhythm of Egyptian life. The plague suspends that rhythm. For three days the sun does not rise. The order of the world is interrupted. The god who guarantees the order cannot guarantee it.

Pharaoh calls Moses and offers a partial concession: go, serve Yahweh, but leave the flocks and herds behind. Moses refuses. They need the livestock for sacrifice, and they do not know what they will need until they reach the place where they will serve God. Not a hoof will remain. Pharaoh refuses. The darkness lifts. The heart is hardened. The next plague comes.

The tenth plague: the death of the firstborn

The tenth plague is the one that cannot be mimicked, cannot be replicated, cannot be explained away. At midnight the firstborn of Egypt die — from the heir of Pharaoh to the prisoner in the dungeon, from the firstborn of the cattle to the firstborn of the donkey. The plague is on the future of Egypt. It is on the succession, the inheritance, the continuity of the state.

The text does not soften this. It does not say that the plague was symbolic, or that only some died, or that the plague is best understood as a metaphor. It says the firstborn died, and it names the range: man and beast, palace and dungeon, human and animal. This is the plague that breaks the confrontation. Everything before it was escalation. This is the point where escalation becomes judgment.

The Passover is instituted in the hours before the plague. The people are told to take a lamb on the tenth day of the month, to keep it apart from the flock, to slaughter it on the fourteenth day at twilight, to put its blood on the doorposts and the lintel of their houses, to eat the roasted flesh with unleavened bread and bitter herbs, to eat in haste with sandals on their feet and staffs in their hands, because they will leave in a single night. The blood on the doorposts is the sign: when the destroyer comes through the land, he will see the blood and pass over that house. The meal is the memory, eaten before the event, and then remembered after. The institution of the Passover is the institution of a feast that will be kept for as long as the story is told.

At midnight the cry goes through Egypt. There is no house without someone dead. The text does not gild this. It does not say that the Egyptians deserved it, or that the justice of the plague is obvious, or that the reader should feel satisfied. It says that the firstborn died, and that the cry went through the land, and that Pharaoh sent for Moses and Aaron in the night. The pharaoh who refused for months now comes in the night, and says: arise, get out from among my people, you and the people of Israel, and go, serve Yahweh as you have said, and take your flocks and your herds, and be gone, and bless me also.

The request for a blessing is one of the strange sentences in the story. The man who has just lost his son asks the man who brought the death for a blessing. The request is either penitence or panic or the instinct of a man who has nothing left and knows that the man standing before him holds more power than any god of Egypt. The text does not parse the pharaoh's motive. It records the words and leaves them.

The people leave. The text gives a number — about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children, and a mixed multitude, and flocks and herds, very many — and the number is

large enough to matter. This is not a small group slipping out of the country. This is a departure that should have left a trace. The Egyptians are urgent, because they say: we shall all die. The people take silver and gold from the Egyptians. The request for articles of silver and gold, the text says, was granted. The departure is at last a departure.

The plagues are over. The confrontation is broken. The sea is waiting.

The two readings

There are two readings of the plagues, and the book should give the reader both without pretending that one replaces the other.

The natural-cascade reading sees the plagues as a sequence of natural events that build on each other. The water turns to blood, and the contamination drives the frogs from the river. The frogs die, and their bodies create the conditions for lice and gnats. The insects become swarms. The swarms carry disease. The disease becomes pestilence among the livestock. The boils follow. Then the hail — a weather event, unusual but not impossible in Egypt. Then the locusts, on the damaged crops. Then the darkness, which can be read as a khamsin sandstorm, a weather event that follows the sequence. And then the death of the firstborn, which the natural reading does not explain as a plague at all but as the unexplained climax.

The cascade is plausible as a sequence. It makes sense as a series of events that follow from the contamination of the water. It does not require the supernatural in the sense of the suspension of natural law. It simply sees the events as natural events that happen to build on each other. The reading is useful for the reader who wants to understand the sequence without the theological overlay. It is not exhaustive — it does not capture the challenge to the Egyptian gods, or the demonstration of the power of the God of Israel, or the meaning the story assigns to the sequence. But it is a real reading, and an honest book should name it.

The Egyptian-gods reading sees the plagues as a deliberate challenge to the Egyptian gods, one god at a time. The blood challenges Hapi, the god of the Nile, the source of Egyptian life. The frogs challenge Heqet, the frog-headed goddess of birth and fertility — her symbol becomes the agent of death. The swarms may challenge Set, the god of the desert and chaos. The pestilence and the boils challenge the gods of health and protection. The hail challenges the weather gods, the sky gods. The locusts challenge the gods of the harvest. The darkness challenges Ra, the sun god, the central deity of the Egyptian pantheon, the god whose daily victory over darkness is the rhythm of Egyptian life. And the death of the firstborn challenges the gods of life and death, the divine order that guarantees the succession and the continuity of the state.

This reading is the theological reading. It sees the plagues not as a sequence of disasters but as a dismantling of the Egyptian religious order, one god at a time, until the God of Israel stands above all of them. It is the reading that sees the meaning of the plagues as the argument of the story — the demonstration that the God of Israel is greater than the gods of Egypt, that the demand for liberation comes with authority, that the God who sends the plagues is the God who can break the power that refuses to yield.

The two readings are not mutually exclusive. The cascade can be real and the challenge to the gods can be real. The story is large enough for both. An honest book should give the reader both without pretending that one replaces the other.

The hardening of Pharaoh's heart

The hardening of Pharaoh's heart is one of the most discussed devices in the story, and it deserves honest attention.

The text uses different phrasing at different points. Sometimes it says: *Pharaoh hardened his heart*. Sometimes it says: *I will harden his heart*. Sometimes it says: *The Lord hardened his heart*. Sometimes it says: *His heart was hardened*. The variation is not accidental. The text presents a pattern, and the pattern contains a question that the reader must hold.

The question is responsibility. Who hardens the heart? Is it Pharaoh, who refuses again and again? Is it God, who uses the refusal to accomplish something larger? Is it both, in a way that the text does not fully explain? The pattern does not give a single answer. It gives the question. The reader must hold the question.

The hardening is also the device that makes the story dramatic. Without the hardening, the plagues end after the first or second. The pharaoh would yield. The story would be short. The hardening is the refusal that creates the tension, the refusal that makes the story the story. It is the device that delays the liberation, and the delay is the point — the plagues are not a quick fix, they are a confrontation that escalates until the power that refuses to yield is broken.

The hardening is the device that raises the question of the plagues' purpose. Are the plagues for Pharaoh, to convince him? Or are they for the Egyptians, to demonstrate the power of the God of Israel? Or are they for the Israelites, to show them that the God who delivers them is the God who can break the power that holds them? The text does not give a single answer. It gives the sequence, and the sequence contains the question. The reader must hold it.

The meaning of the plagues

The plagues are the confrontation between the God of Israel and the Egyptian state. They are the argument of the story, the demonstration, the escalation, the thing that finally breaks the resistance. They begin with the Nile — the source of Egyptian life — and end with the firstborn — the future of the Egyptian state. The sequence moves from the life-source to the life-continuity, from the river to the succession, from the present to the future. The confrontation is total.

The plagues are also the demonstration of the power of the God of Israel. The magicians can replicate the first two, but not the third. The division between the Egyptians and the Israelites appears in the swarms and is maintained through the rest. The plagues are not indiscriminate. They are directed. They distinguish. They show a God who acts with precision, who separates his people from the people who are not his people, who challenges the gods of Egypt one by one and does not yield.

The plagues are the thing that breaks the confrontation. Everything before the tenth plague was escalation. The tenth plague is judgment. After the tenth plague, the pharaoh yields. The people leave. The sea is waiting. The story of the plagues ends where the story of the Exodus begins — with the departure that the plagues made possible.

The Sea



One proposed route of the Exodus, drawn over a satellite image of the region. No candidate route is certain. (Image: Ori229, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

The single greatest scene in the Hebrew Bible breaks over nine verses in Exodus 14 and a poem older than the narrative around it in Exodus 15. Everything that has gone before — the forced labour in the Delta, the escape from the basket, the murder, the long silence in Midian, the burning bush, the confrontation of ten disasters — has been building toward this. The Israelites have walked out of Egypt. The Egyptian army is behind them. The sea is in front of them. There is nowhere else to go. The scene does not need help. It succeeds on the directness of its own language. The book should give it that, first, before adding anything. What it needs from a reader is attention.

The geography problem is the first thing a modern reader is likely to notice, and it is worth saying plainly. The Hebrew text says *yam suf* — literally, the Sea of Reeds, or the Reed Sea. The traditional name "the Red Sea" comes from the Septuagint, the Greek translation made in Egypt in the third and second centuries BCE, which translated *yam suf* as *Erythra Thalassa*. That is a translation convention, not a geographical claim, and it has shaped the popular imagination for two and a half thousand years. The body of water the Israelites crossed, if the event happened as described and if a specific body of water is intended, is not necessarily the Red Sea of modern maps.

Scholars have proposed several candidates, and each has a case worth hearing seriously. The northern tip of the Gulf of Suez is the most common traditional suggestion; it sits close to the route one would expect from the eastern Delta and puts the crossing at a real body of salt water. Others have argued for the lakes of the eastern Delta canal system — Lake Timsah, the Bitter Lakes, or one of the marshes of the Wadi Tumilat — on the grounds that the Hebrew word *reed* fits a marshy freshwater or brackish lagoon better than a deep gulf, and that the geography of Exodus 13 places the Israelites in that region before the crossing. The northern branch of the Gulf of Aqaba has also been proposed,

for reasons connected to the transport of large herds and the available fords, though it lies well to the south of the most natural route.

The argument over the crossing site is, in one sense, the argument over whether the geography of the story makes sense at all, and it is not one this book will settle. What it should do is give the reader the map of the debate, because it matters for one specific reason: the coast road.

The Israelites did not take the inland route through the wilderness of Sinai on their way out. They took the coastal road, the Way of Horus, the great highway that ran the length of the eastern Delta along the Mediterranean shore, the route armies moved on, the route Egyptian garrisons guarded, the route the story says Pharaoh took when he changed his mind. The Israelites moved into the marshy country of the eastern Delta — the region called the land of Goshen in the Joseph story — and then, when the Egyptian chariot force came in pursuit, they reached the water.

This is not the geography of the Sinai peninsula, the mountains, and the forty-year wander. It is the geography of the Delta's edge, the coastal plain, the line where Egypt's cultivated world met something else. That edge matters for the scene. The Israelites are at the boundary between the empire that enslaved them and whatever lies beyond it. The sea, however one defines it, is the line.

The narrative in Exodus 14 is not the oldest text in the chapter. Before it, Exodus 15 gives us the Song of the Sea, and most scholars agree that the poem is older than the prose narrative that surrounds it. It is one of the oldest texts in the Hebrew Bible, written in a style — parallelism, short rhythmic lines, the characteristic vocabulary of Hebrew poetry — that is recognisably more archaic than the prose of Exodus 14. It reads as a victory song, a celebration, the kind of thing a community would sing after a battle. It was likely sung before Exodus 14 was written.

I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him.

Read the poem and the narrative together, and a tension becomes audible — not a contradiction that destroys the scene, but a difference in register that keeps both alive. The poem is celebratory and immediate and strangely spare: the sea swallows the Egyptian army, and the song moves on to the journey to the sanctuary. The narrative is more concerned, more anxious. It gives the people doubts. It gives the pillar of cloud. It gives the wind. It places the reader at the edge of the water, looking at the sea and then at the chariots coming down the coast road behind.

The two texts, old poem and later narrative, carry different emotional temperatures, and both belong to the scene. A book that treats only one of them loses something. The poem gives the scene its first and oldest form — the victory that became legend. The narrative gives it the detail that makes the reader feel the moment.

The scene itself, in Exodus 14, runs like this: the Israelites arrive at the sea, and they see the Egyptian army approaching, and they panic. They say to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?" The question is bitter and specific, and it is one of the most honest lines in the entire story. The people who have just walked out of slavery are terrified the moment the route narrows. There is a reason this line survives.

God answers Moses, and the answer is practical, not merely inspirational: "Tell the people of Israel to go forward. Lift up your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, and the people

of Israel shall go into the midst of the sea on dry ground. And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue after them, and I will gain glory for myself, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD." The instruction is given to Moses. The sea must be acted upon. The staff must be lifted. The event is not a vision; it is an act.

Then the pillar of cloud moves from before the people to behind them, standing between the Israelites and the Egyptians, cloud and darkness, so that neither side could come near the other all night. The text is economical. It does not explain the cloud. It simply says what it did.

Then the wind. "The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided." The wind is specific. It is not a general miracle of disappearance; the text names the mechanism. The sea is driven back, the land appears, the Israelites go through. The narrative is careful with its physics, or at least careful to name them. Some readers find that detail useful. Some do not. The book should not argue about whether a wind could have done this. The text of Exodus says it did, and the scene's power does not depend on the reader's answer to that question.

The Egyptians pursue. The chariot wheels are clogged; the text says they "drove with difficulty." Pharaoh is close. The Egyptians say, "Let us flee from before Israel, for the LORD fights for them against the Egyptians." This line is worth quoting because it is almost never quoted. The Egyptians in the story recognise, in the moment, that something has happened. They do not argue. They flee. Moses stretches out his hand over the sea, the waters return, and the army is destroyed: the chariots, the horsemen, every last one of those Pharaoh sent.

"And Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses."

That is the end of the narrative. The scene closes on the reaction of the people who walked through the divided sea. Their fear and belief are recorded, plainly, without embellishment. The book does not tell us their grief for the Egyptians. It tells us what the Israelites saw.

The poem in Exodus 15 is different in register and older in date, and it gives the same event its celebratory version. It is the victory song, and like victory songs it does not linger on the complexity. The horse and rider are thrown into the sea. God is a warrior. The blast of the shout dries the sea. The enemy boasted, "I will pursue and overtake and divide the spoil," and God's wind covers them. The song ends with a sanctuary: "You will bring them in and plant them in the mountain of your inheritance, in the place, O LORD, which you have made for your habitation, the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands have established."

Read back to back, the poem and the narrative carry the scene at both its temperatures: the victory that is celebrated, and the moment that is dramatised. One of the reasons the scene survives in the memory of half the world is that it is given in both forms.

A few things are worth saying plainly after the scene, rather than during it.

The first is about the wind. The old defence — that the text describes a wind-driven event that might correspond to something that actually happened in a shallow body of water — is a legitimate reading. It does not undo the scene as theology, as story, or as history. It is one way into it. The other way — the supernatural reading, the sea divided by fiat — is the reading the narrative presents. A book that insists on one and dismisses the other loses something the scene offers, which is that it can hold both

without strain. The text says the wind drove the sea back. It also says the sea was divided. The scene does not need a physics lesson. It needs the reader to see what it sees.

The second is about the Egyptians in the scene. The extermination of the Egyptian army is the logical end of the plagues. Ten disasters, and then the army drowns. The scene does not dramatise the Egyptian soldiers as individuals. They are a force. The Pharaoh of the story has made his choice, and the power behind him is destroyed. If there is violence here that a modern reader finds difficult, it is worth naming it directly rather than pretending it is not there. The story is built around the destruction of a military force. It is one of the clearest moments in the narrative where the liberation of Israel requires the defeat of Egypt, and the defeat is total.

The third is about the hard question that the scene does not answer: what exactly happened, if anything, and whether a body of water actually divided. This book has spent enough chapters establishing that the evidence problem is real and that the honest position is somewhere in the middle — a small group enlarged by memory, a story shaped around something real — and the sea scene does not change that. It is the point where the story, at least in its narrative form, treats the event as an absolute divine act, and the reader is free to receive it as theology, as story, as legend built around a difficult historical kernel, or as all three. The scene does not argue with the reader. It asks for attention.

The fourth is the simplest thing about the scene, and the reason it has lasted: it is the moment the story turns. Before it, the people are leaving. After it, they are gone. The empire cannot follow them. Whatever the historical kernel may be, the story presents this as the moment when the pursuit ends and the journey — the forty years that have no events and fill eighteen chapters of Numbers — begins. The sea is the boundary that cannot be crossed back.

The geography, the poem, the wind, the Egyptian army destroyed, the people's fear and belief — the scene contains all of it in a few pages. It is why, in a book that spends five chapters on the evidence problem, thirty chapters on the making of the story, and the rest on the afterlife of Moses, the crossing of the sea gets its own chapter and nothing like the chapter it deserves. The brief is right: give it everything.

Fire on the Mountain



The Sinai Peninsula. The traditional site of the mountain of God, Jebel Musa, is a late identification; other proposals place it elsewhere. (Image: Kaidor, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

The mountain is called Sinai in the story most readers know, and Horeb in the telling of other passages, and the difference in names is itself a sign of how many hands have touched the mountain over the centuries. Sinai is where the law is given. Horeb is the mountain of God, the place where Moses tends the flock and where the bush burns. Whether the two names point to the same peak or to two traditions that later merged, the mountain in Exodus 19 is the same one: the place where the covenant is made, the place where the people hear the voice, the place where Israel becomes Israel in a legal sense, not just a tribal one.

The chapter has three parts, and they belong to three different motions. First, the approach and the preparation — the mountain as a place set apart, dangerous and holy and so strictly bounded that a fence of laws is built around it before anyone climbs it. Second, the theophany and the commandments — the dramatic moment at the summit, the voice from the fire, the ten words, and the form the law takes. Third, the covenant meal and the smoke — the ratification, the elders climbing partway, the shared meal, the fact that at the very peak of the story about the covenant, Moses alone goes up while the others look on from below.

Read straight, the scene is astonishingly tense. The people are warned, repeatedly, not to approach. The mountain is wrapped in smoke. The trumpet sound grows louder. They are afraid, in the precise way a text says they are afraid, and they step back. The law is given in a context of fear, and that context is not decoration. It is the shape of the revelation.

The geography of Sinai is a separate problem, and it is worth saying how uncertain it is before treating the mountain as a place in the story. The traditional site, the one marked by a monastery and a peak devoutly climbed by pilgrims for centuries, is Jebel Musa in the southern Sinai peninsula. It is a real mountain, and it fits the general direction the story gives — south, toward the wilderness —

but its identification is late and not obviously secure. Other proposals have placed Sinai in the Transjordan, in the northern Arabian peninsula, or in the wilderness of Paran, on the grounds of different textual clues about where the wandering went and what the desert landscape looked like. The location of the mountain in the story and the location of any real journey are, once again, not the same question, and this book does not pretend they are.

What matters for the chapter is the mountain as the text presents it: as the place where the boundary is drawn, where the people are told they may go only so far and no further, where holiness is made spatially and practically legible. The mountain is a holy place that excludes. That is its first function in the story, and it is one of the most important things about how the covenant is structured.

The preparation in Exodus 19 is thorough. God tells Moses to set limits around the mountain, to warn the people that they may not touch the border, that anyone who does so shall be put to death, that no hand shall touch the mountain, that the people shall be consecrated and wash their clothes and abstain from sexual relations for three days. The instructions are practical, concrete, and alarmingly strict. The mountain is not a place to visit. It is a place that is approached under penalty.

Why the restrictions? One level of the answer is obvious: the mountain is the place of the presence, and the presence, in the story, is overwhelming. The limits mirror the limits in other theophany texts — the fear of seeing the face of God and living, the insistence on boundaries, the sense that the holy is dangerous as much as it is precious. But there is a second level that is less obvious and more interesting: the restrictions are part of the legal form the covenant takes.

The covenant at Sinai is given as a suzerainty treaty, the kind of treaty that the Hittite empire made with its vassal states in the Late Bronze Age, and later that the Assyrians and others made in a similar form. The structure of these treaties has been studied in enough detail that the parallel is not speculative. A suzerainty treaty has a fixed literary shape: a preamble identifying the great king, a historical prologue recounting what the king has done for the vassal, the stipulations — the obligations of the vassal — often expressed as a list, the blessings and curses that attach to keeping or breaking the treaty, and the provision for witnesses, deposit, and periodic reading.

The covenant in Exodus 19–24 has that shape, adapted to a different and extraordinary context — a covenant not between king and vassal but between the God who has just delivered a people from slavery and the people who have just walked out of that slavery. The preamble is God's identification: "I am the LORD your God." The historical prologue is the Exodus itself: "who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." The stipulations follow, first the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, then the larger body of laws in the covenant code of Exodus 21–23. The blessings and curses come later, in a form that will recur most formally in Deuteronomy. The witnesses are the mountain, the blood, and the people themselves. The deposit is the tablet. The reading — the periodic public reading of the law — is built into the story from the start.

This is one of the genuinely thrilling details in the whole story, because it shows that the biblical writers were not inventing a legal form from nothing. They were taking a form that their readers would have recognised from international diplomacy and turning it inside out, using the language of empire's treaties to shape the relationship between God and a people who, in the logic of the story, have no empire behind them. The form is secular enough to be known and sacred enough to be new. That combination is one of the reasons the book has lasted, and it is worth letting the reader feel it.

The limits around the mountain are not just reverence. They are the spatial expression of a treaty relationship. The vassal does not enter the presence of the suzerain at will. There are protocols. There are restrictions. There is a boundary line across which permission must be given, and permission is given in the story through Moses. The mountain, hedged about with law, is the visual and physical form of the treaty that is being made.

The theophany at the summit is the dramatic heart of the chapter, and the text of Exodus 19–20 does not need much help. It is direct in a way that is almost modern. The mountain is wrapped in smoke, because the LORD has descended on it in fire. The smoke goes up like the smoke of a kiln. The whole mountain quakes. The trumpet sound grows louder and louder. Moses speaks, and God answers him in thunder. The people are terrified, and they ask Moses to be the intermediary, because they cannot bear to hear God directly and live.

The language of the theophany is sensory and overwhelming: fire, smoke, trumpet, thunder, quake. It is not static, not a calm revelation of philosophy. It is a mountain on fire, and the people stand at the edge of it and do not go in. The scene is intimate and terrifying at the same time. The God who gives the law is a God who appears in a context of fear, and the fear is not incidental.

The Ten Commandments themselves, in the form that the narrative gives them, are a mixture of the cultic and the social, of the vertical and the horizontal. The first several commandments are about relationship to God: no other gods, no images, the name not taken in vain, the Sabbath kept. The later commandments are about relationship to neighbour: honour parents, no murder, no adultery, no theft, no false witness, no coveting. The shape is familiar, but the content marks a shift in the story's world. The law is given at Sinai, after the exodus, and it belongs to a people who have just been set free. It is not the law of slavery. It is the law of a community that has crossed a boundary and is being given a structure to live within.

One of the points the chapter should make, without belabouring it, is that the law is given in a world where law is already everywhere, but where the form of law is different. Egypt is a world of god-kings and top-down decrees. Hammurabi and the great law codes of Mesopotamia present the law as the gift of a king-god, and the code is at the service of hierarchy. The covenant at Sinai deliberately differs: the law is presented not as the gift of a human king to his subjects but as the word of a God who has made a communal bond with the people, and the law is addressed to that community and to individuals in it. The difference is not that law did not exist outside Israel. It is that the covenantic form reframes law as a relationship rather than a decree, and as a community bond rather than a king's instrument.

That argument should be made carefully, and the careful version is stronger. It does not say that the covenant is the invention of law, and it does not deny the obvious parallels between the covenant code and earlier law codes. It says, rather, that the biblical text uses a form it has learned from its world — the treaty form — and reorients it toward a different political and spiritual shape. The law is given at Sinai as part of a covenant, and the covenant is a mutual bond framed by obligation and gift, not a unilateral imposition by a ruler on a ruled class. The people are warned not to approach the mountain, but they are also given the statutes. The boundary and the gift are two sides of the same revelation.

The ratification in Exodus 24 is the third movement, and it is one of the most striking passages in the chapter, largely because of what it leaves out. Moses says to the people, "All the words that the

LORD has spoken, we will do." The people answer with one voice, "All that the LORD has spoken, we will do." Moses writes the words, builds an altar, sets up twelve pillars for the twelve tribes, and offers sacrifices. He reads the book of the covenant aloud. The people reaffirm: "All that the LORD has spoken, we will do, and we will be obedient." Then Moses takes the blood, halves it in basins, and throws some on the altar, and some on the people, and says, "Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."

The blood on the altar and the blood on the people are the two halves of the treaty deposit, the seal of the covenant. The language is symbol and ritual, but it is ritual with a legal function. The covenant is ratified in blood, in the form of a pact. The language of covenant and treaty is not just a metaphor here; it is the actual idiom of the scene.

Then the story does something that is easy to miss if read quickly. Moses, Joshua, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and the seventy elders go up the mountain. They see the God of Israel, and under his feet is something like a pavement of sapphire stone, clear as the sky. They eat and drink. The vision is given to a limited group, and the rest of the people are not brought up. Then Moses goes up alone, into the cloud, for forty days and forty nights.

The point of the passage is structural and theological. The covenant is made with the whole people — "all the people" answer, all the tribes are represented by the pillars, the blood is thrown on the people. But the deep entry into the presence is given to a few. The law is public and the theophany is private. The ratification is communal and the ascent is individual. Moses alone goes up for the duration. The rest of the story — the tabernacle, the priesthood, the continuing mediation of the law — flows from this asymmetry. The people are in covenant, but the mediator alone enters the cloud.

That asymmetry is one of the calmest and most important facts of the story, and it matters for what follows. It sets up the tabernacle as the place where the presence will dwell among the people, rather than only on the mountain. It sets up the sense that the law, though given to all, is mediated, and that mediation is not an afterthought but a structural feature of the covenant. It also sets up the rest of the wilderness story — the complaints, the failures, the sense that the people are not ready for the direct presence even when it has been offered — as a story about the ongoing management of a covenant that is more ambitious than the people.

The chapter is, then, a chapter about a mountain, a covenant, and a form. The mountain is holy and dangerous, and the people are warned to stay away from its edge. The covenant is a treaty given a new and stranger shape, the law of a people who were slaves now given a law of freedom, and the form of that law is the suzerainty treaty adapted to a God who liberates before he obliges. The theophany is dramatic fire and smoke and trumpet, and the ratification is blood and pillars and a meal that only some of the leaders share. Moses alone goes up into the cloud, and the rest of the story grows from the fact that the covenant is public and its full presence is private.

There is a detail worth adding at the end, and it is the detail that ties Sinai back to the whole argument of the book. The covenant at Sinai is the moment where the story, as Israel told it, becomes a law-giving story in a specific and lasting way. The law is not an appendix. It is given at the peak. And the form of the covenant — the treaty taken up and reoriented — is one of the clearest instances of the kind of thing the book has been tracing all along: a story shaped by a real tradition working inside a real form, making a character and a community and a set of obligations that have lasted

because they are more than the sum of their historical uncertainties. The mountain may be uncertain. The covenant's form is legible. The story, at this point, stands on both.

Part Four: The Wilderness

The Law

The law is given at Sinai, and the story does not give it as an afterthought or an appendix to the dramatic events. It is given at the peak of the revelation, in the same chapter that gives the fire and the trumpet and the limit drawn around the mountain. To read the law as something that comes later or as a codification that follows the story is to misread the shape of the narrative. In the story's own order, the covenant and the law are a single movement.

That fact is one of the reasons the book has lasted. The law is not a side note in the Moses story. It is central to it. And the law, as it is given in the biblical text, does not arrive as an invention. It arrives as a reorientation of a form the world already knew.

The world knew law. Egypt was a world of decrees, and Mesopotamia was a world of law codes, and the great codes of Hammurabi and others were well known in the broad region the story moves through. It would be strange if a people emerging from Egypt and settling in Canaan had no law of their own, and it would be stranger still if the biblical text did not take account of the legal world around it. What the biblical text does is to take law and to give it a different shape — a shape that belongs to a covenant, to a community, to a relationship with a God who has just delivered them from slavery.

The chapter has three parts. First, the world of law in the ancient Near East, the legal forms that the story inherits and answers. Second, the Ten Commandments and the covenant code, what they actually did in a world of god-kings, and where Israel deliberately differs. Third, the fracture between the law as it was given and the law as it was kept — the gap that runs from Sinai to the present, and what the story makes of it.

The law of the ancient Near East is not a single thing, and the story does not respond to it as a single thing. There are several forms, and the biblical law draws on more than one of them.

The temple and the palace were the great legal institutions. In Egypt, the law was the decree of the pharaoh, and the pharaoh was himself the son of a god, the living image of divine order, Ma'at. The law was not a contract. It was the will of the ruler mediated through the institutions of the state. The vizier and the provincial officials and the temple scribes administered it, and the law reached down to the daily life of the people in the form of court decisions, administrative records, and the occasional royal decree. The law was hierarchical, and it was centralised, and it was the law of empire.

In Mesopotamia, the situation was different in form, but not in principle. Hammurabi's code, and the earlier codes of Ur-Nammu and Lipit-Ishtar, and the later Middle Assyrian laws, all present law as the gift of a king to his people, and the king in turn receives it from the gods. The prologue of Hammurabi's code names the gods who have given the king authority, and the epilogue calls the king the servant of the gods who has established justice. The law is royal, and it is justified by the gods,

and it is addressed to the people as a gift and a standard. It is not a contract between a people and a god. It is a law code promulgated by a king in the service of the gods.

What these forms share is the centrality of the ruler and the direction of the law downward. The law comes from the top, whether that top is the pharaoh or the king or the god behind the king. The people receive it, and they live under it, and the institutions of the ruler enforce it. The law is not, in its form, something the people have made. It is something the ruler has given.

The covenant at Sinai differs from this in a way that is structural and deliberate. The law is given to a people, not to a kingdom. The law is framed by a covenant, not by a decree. The covenant is between a God and the people, and the people are addressed as a community. The law is not the gift of a king. It is the word of a God who has already acted for the people, and the law is the shape of the life that community is to live after the deliverance.

The difference is not that the biblical law has no parallels with the surrounding law. It has many. The law codes of the ancient Near East and the covenant code of Exodus share a world and a vocabulary. They deal with similar cases, and their forms overlap in detail. A reader who knows the law codes of Mesopotamia will find echoes of them in the covenant code, and the echoes are not accidental. The book has learned from its world. What it has done is to put the law into a covenant form, and to make the covenant a relationship between a God and a people, and to reorient the law away from the decree of a ruler and toward the obligations of a community in a relationship of deliverance.

That reorientation is one of the most important things about the law in the Moses story. The law is not just a law. It is the law of a people who were slaves, and it is structured around the memory of that slavery and the fact of that liberation. The commands to treat the stranger, the slave, the fatherless, and the widow with justice are not general moral platitudes. They are written into the law, and they are repeated, and they are tied to the memory of Egypt. The people are to love the stranger, because they were strangers in Egypt. The law is shaped by the Exodus, and the Exodus is written into the law.

The Ten Commandments are the centrepiece of the law in the popular mind, and they deserve to be read carefully rather than mythologised. They are not the whole of the law. They are the opening of the law, the public core, the part given in direct speech and remembered as the summary. They are also the part of the law that has travelled the furthest outside its original context, into the moral imagination of the world. The chapter should treat them at their size: as the introduction the story gives to the life of the covenant.

The first several commandments are about relationship to God. No other gods. No images. The name not taken in vain. The Sabbath kept. They are vertical commands, in the sense that they frame the relationship between the people and the God who has made the covenant with them. They are also, and this is important, commands that distinguish Israel from the world around it. No other gods — in a world where each nation had its god and the presence of other gods was normal. No images — in a world where representation of the divine was common and often central. The name not taken in vain — a command about the proper use of the covenant relationship. The Sabbath — a day kept, a rhythm given to the week, a sign of the covenant. These commands make a community. They mark it off. They are not just moral generalities.

The later commandments are about relationship to neighbour. Honour parents. No murder. No adultery. No theft. No false witness. No coveting. They are horizontal commands, and they are the

commands that govern the life of the community between its members. They are not new in their content. Murder, theft, adultery, false witness, and the others are forbidden in the law codes of the ancient Near East and in the moral intuitions of almost any community. What the commandments do is to place these commands in the covenant context, to make them the obligations of a people in relationship with God, and to give them the authority of that relationship.

The form of the ten is itself important. They are given in the first person, in the voice of the God who has spoken from the mountain. They are short. They are memorable. They are the part of the law that can be recited. They are the law's public face.

The covenant code that follows in Exodus 21–23 is the law in its broader form. It deals with specific cases: the slave who serves for six years and goes out free in the seventh, the maidservant who is not given her freedom, the man who strikes his father or mother, the man who kills another in hostility, the man who strikes his neighbour and the compensation that follows, the ox that gores, the pit that is open, the animal that is borrowed and damaged. The code reads, in part, like a collection of judgments. It is the law in its practical texture.

The covenant code also contains the commands that are most distinctively tied to the Exodus memory: the treatment of the stranger, the slave, the fatherless, the widow; the command not to oppress the stranger, because the people were strangers in Egypt; the command to release the slave in the seventh year; the command that the land keep its Sabbaths, because the land belongs to God and the people are sojourners in it. These commands are the law's signature, and they are the commands that tie the law to the story of the deliverance.

The law as it was given and the law as it was kept are different things, and the story knows the difference. The law at Sinai is given in the presence and the fear. The people agree to it. The covenant is ratified. Then the story goes on, and the people do not keep the law. The golden calf happens in the chapter after the law is given. The complaints happen. The mutinies happen. The forty years happen. The law is given, and the people do not live by it, and the story does not pretend otherwise.

That gap is one of the steadiest facts of the Moses story, and it is one of the things that makes the story honest in a way that a simpler story would not be. The law is not presented as a code that the people will keep because they have agreed to it. It is presented as a standard that they will fail to meet, and a standard that will nevertheless govern them, and a standard that will be mediated through a system that includes the tabernacle, the priesthood, the sacrifices, and the continued mediation of Moses. The law is given as the covenant's shape, and the covenant is lived as a struggle.

The gap between the law and the practice is not a flaw in the story. It is a feature of it, and it is one of the reasons the law has lasted in the form it has. The law is not a fantasy of a people who were perfectly obedient. It is the law of a people who were not, and who are held to the standard anyway. The story does not present the law as a law that was kept. It presents it as a law that was given, and a law that was the measure of a people who were falling short of it, and a law that was mediated, and a law that was renewed.

That framing is one of the most important things to say about the law, because it is the thing that distinguishes the biblical law from the fantasy of a perfect community that some readers expect when they imagine what a law-giving story would be. The story does not give that. It gives the law, the

covenant, the failure, the mediation, and the continuation. The law is not the end of the story. It is the beginning of the wilderness.

The chapter is, then, about three things. The world of law in the ancient Near East, and the forms the biblical law inherits and reorients. The Ten Commandments and the covenant code, as the law of a community in covenant, with the specific commands that tie the law to the memory of Egypt. And the gap between the law as it was given and the law as it was kept, the gap that runs from Sinai and shapes the rest of the story.

The law is not an appendix to the Moses story. It is central to it. The law is given at the peak of the revelation, and it is given in a form that answers the world around it and reorients it toward a covenant between a God and a people. The law is tied to the Exodus, and it is the law of a community that was delivered from slavery. The law is given, and the people do not keep it, and the story does not pretend that they do. The law is the shape of the covenant, and the covenant is lived as a struggle, and the law remains the measure of that struggle.

That is what the chapter is for: to give the law its size, to explain what it did in its world, and to show that it is not an afterthought but the heart of the story's argument about what a people in covenant with God are and what they are to do, and what happens when they do not do it.

The Golden Calf

The story of the golden calf is one of the most compressed and most telling sequences in the whole narrative. It happens after the law is given and before the law is kept, in the gap between the covenant and the practice, and it is all the more devastating for how quickly it arrives. The people have heard the voice from the mountain. They have agreed to the covenant. Moses has gone up. And in the forty days he is gone, they collapse.

The chapter is about four things: the collapse itself, the sound of the collapse, the response of Moses, and the reason the tradition kept the fact that it collapsed at all. Each of these belongs to a different argument about what the story is doing, and together they give the chapter its shape.

The collapse is introduced in Exodus 32 with a detail that is almost offhand but is one of the most important in the story: the people come to Aaron and say, "Make for us gods who shall go before us, for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." The line does two things at once. It names the problem — Moses is gone, and the people have no idea where he is or when he will come back — and it names the impulse — the people want a god that they can see, a presence that is not in the cloud on the mountain, a leader they can follow without waiting.

The request is not just for an idol. It is for a replacement for the leadership they have lost, and it is for a visible god because the invisible God has not yet proven reliable to them. The people are at a moment of absence, and they fill the absence with something they can make.

Aaron's response is one of the flat and unheroic things in the story. He tells them to bring their gold, and he makes the calf, and he builds an altar, and he announces a feast, and the people sit down to eat and drink and rise up to play. The sequence is quick, and it is all the more unsettling for its speed.

The covenant was ratified days before. The law has just been given. And the people, led by the man who is the vicar of Moses, have already moved to a different religion.

The phrase "rose up to play" is one of those phrases that carries more than it seems. In the biblical text it is ambiguous — it could mean revelry, it could mean sexual licence, it could mean simply celebration. What it means for the story is that the boundary that was established at Sinai has been crossed, that the day that was meant to be holy has become profane, that the people have done exactly what they were told not to do.

The collapse is total, and it is total in a way that is hard to explain if the story is about people who are easily tempted. It is not about temptation. It is about the fragility of a covenant made by a people who are not yet ready for it.

The second thing the chapter should say is about the sound of the collapse, and here Exodus gives us one of the great moments of dramatic tension in the Hebrew Bible: Moses coming down the mountain with the tablets, the tablets in his hand, and the sound of the people in his ears, and the moment when he sees what has been done.

The text says that Moses saw the calf and the dancing, and his anger was kindled, and he threw the tablets from his hands and broke them beneath the mountain. The breaking of the tablets is the single most shocking physical act in the law story, and it is made more shocking by the fact that Moses has only just come down the mountain with them. The law is broken in the moment it is received, and the breaking is not an accident. It is an act.

Why does Moses break the tablets? The simplest and best answer is that he breaks them because the covenant has already been broken by the people. The tablets are the deposit of the covenant, the written form of the stipulations, and if the people have violated the covenant before the tablets have even been read, then the tablets no longer represent a covenant that is in force. Breaking them is the dramatic equivalent of saying that the agreement is void. The law is not thrown away. It is broken because the covenant is broken.

The act is also Moses' moment of maximum authority, and it is one of the few moments in the story where the leader's rage is absolutely unmediated. The anger is kindled. The tablets are broken. The calf is burned, ground, scattered on the water, and given to the people to drink. The action is swift, decisive, and exact. The calf is destroyed. The feast is ended. The people are confronted.

The sequence does not end with the destruction of the calf. It ends with the reckoning. Moses stands at the gate of the camp and says, "Whoever is for the LORD, let him come to me." The sons of Levi come to him. Moses tells them to consecrate themselves and to pass through the camp with the sword, and about three thousand men of the people fall. The violence is not the main point of the story, but it is not invisible either. The covenant, when it is restored, is restored through judgment, and the judgment is severe.

What is worth saying about the violence is that it is presented as the immediate and almost automatic consequence of the breach. The people have violated the covenant, and the restoration costs. The number — three thousand — is specific and shocking, and the story does not soften it. The violence is part of the price of the restoration, and the price is high.

The third part of the chapter is Moses' intercession, and it is one of the most important things about the whole Moses story. After the destruction of the calf and the killing of the three thousand, Moses

returns to the mountain a second time, and he prays for the people, and he makes the argument that defines his leadership.

The argument is famous, and it should be quoted rather than summarised. Moses says to the LORD: "Oh, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made gods of gold for themselves. Yet now, if you will forgive their sin — and if not, blot me, I pray, out of your book that you have written." The plea is for the people, and it is also for himself: if you will not forgive them, then take me instead.

The argument is remarkable for what it is and for who makes it. Moses, the man who has just broken the tablets and killed the offenders, now stands up for the people he has just judged. He does not say that the sin was small. He says that it was great. He does not say that the people deserve forgiveness. He asks for it. And he offers himself as the substitute.

This is the moment where the portrait of Moses is most fully drawn. He is angry, and he judges, and he is decisive. He is also the intercessor, the man who stands between the people and the anger of God, the man who has learned, in the course of the wilderness, that leadership is not triumph but endurance and that the leader's job is to stay with the people even when they fail.

The intercession is answered in a form that is both merciful and severe. God says that the sin will be visited, and that the angel will go before the people, but that the plague will be sent because of the calf. The covenant is not restored as if nothing happened. It is restored with the memory of what happened written into it.

The fourth part of the chapter is the hardest and the most interesting: why the tradition kept the story of the golden calf at all. A book that was written to make Moses look good would not have included it, or would have softened it, or would have blamed everyone but the people. The story as it stands does the opposite. It says that the people, the very people who were delivered from Egypt, made the calf, and that the vicar who was left in charge joined them, and that the covenant was broken before it had hardly begun.

The story is kept because the tradition is honest about the people, and honest about the law, and honest about the covenant. The law is given, and the people do not keep it, and the story does not pretend that they do. The failure is part of the story, and it is not an embarrassment that the tradition forgot. It is central.

There is also a second reason the story is kept, and it is the reason that belongs to the argument of the whole book. The golden calf story is one of the clearest instances of the kind of thing the book has been tracing: a story that includes its own failures, that reports the collapse of the people as part of the record, and that in doing so becomes more credible as a story about real human beings. A story that only tells the victories is a story that can be suspected of invention. A story that tells the defeats is a story that has something in it that is harder to make up.

The golden calf is not just a story about an idol. It is a story about the fragility of the covenant, about the speed with which a people who have just received the law can violate it, about the leadership that follows the collapse, and about the fact that the tradition remembered the collapse and told it. That is what the chapter is for.

The Loneliest Job

Jethro arrives in Exodus 18, and the chapter that follows is one of the most human pieces of management advice in the entire Bible, and one of the most underrated. It is the chapter where Moses, who has been carrying the people alone, is told to stop, and is told how, and is told by the father-in-law he has been living with in Midian. The chapter is not about a vision or a revelation. It is about delegation, burnout, and the fact that even the man who speaks to God can be overwhelmed by the daily work of leading a crowd.

The chapter belongs to the wilderness story in a way that is easy to miss if the wilderness story is read as a sequence of episodes. It is one of the threads that ties the wilderness together: the sense that the work is too much, that the leader is worn out, that the people are not afraid to complain, and that the leader has to be given something like relief. The chapter is also one of the places where the story is most honest about the character of Moses, and about what leadership costs.

The chapter opens with the news that Jethro has heard about what God has done for Moses and for Israel. He brings Moses' wife and sons, and Moses goes out to meet him, and the two men meet and exchange greetings, and Moses tells his father-in-law everything that the LORD has done to Pharaoh and to the Egyptians and to the people. The scene is warm, and it is the rare moment in the wilderness narrative where the leader is not in the middle of a crisis. He is telling a story.

Then Jethro watches the daily life of the camp, and he sees the people standing around Moses from morning to evening, and he says, "What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, and all the people stand around you from morning till evening?" Moses answers with the honest and almost weary explanation that the people come to him to inquire of God, and when they have a dispute they come to him, and he judges between a man and his brother, and he makes them know the statutes of God and his laws.

The answer is complete, and it is the moment where the full weight of the work is laid out. Moses is the priest, the prophet, the lawgiver, and the judge. He is the one who inquires of God. He is the one who hears the disputes. He is the one who applies the law. And the people are coming to him all day, every day, and the work is endless.

Jethro's response is the management advice. He says that the thing is not good, and that Moses will surely wear himself out, and that the people with him will wear out. He then gives the advice in its famous form: listen to this thing that I am advising, and may God be with you. You shall be the representative before God, and you shall bring the cases before God, and you shall teach the people the statutes and the laws, and you shall show them the way they must walk and the work they must do. And you shall choose from among the people able men, such men as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness, and you shall place them over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens, and they shall judge the people at all times. And it shall be that every great matter they shall bring to you, but every small matter they shall judge themselves. And you shall make it easier for yourself, and they shall bear the burden with you.

The advice is specific, practical, and structured. It is not a vague exhortation to share the work. It is a plan: choose able men, put them in tiers, let them handle the small matters, bring the big matters to Moses. The advice is the kind of thing that a manager gives, and it is given by a man who has lived with Moses in the wilderness and who has watched the work.

The chapter is remarkable for the fact that the advice is given by Jethro, who is a priest of Midian and a man of a different religion, and who is not one of the Israelites. The tradition has no difficulty with this. The wisdom comes from outside the camp, and the leader listens, and the work is restructured. The openness is one of the quiet virtues of the story.

The chapter is also about burnout, and the word is not too modern for it. Moses says, in effect, that he has been doing the work alone, and that he has been doing it all day, and that the people are waiting for him. The exhaustion is not stated in the language of modern psychology, but it is there. The leader is worn out, and the leader does not see it until someone else points it out.

That fact — that Moses does not see it until Jethro points it out — is one of the human things about the story. The leader who is closest to the work is the one least able to see its limits. The work has become normal. The normal has become endless. And it takes a visitor, a father-in-law, a man from outside, to say that it cannot go on like this.

The chapter is also about delegation, and the delegation is not just a practical matter. It is the beginning of the institutional structure of the camp, the structure that will make the rest of the wilderness possible. Without the judges, without the tiers, without the relief of the small matters being handled by others, the camp could not function. The burnout would not be relieved. The work would not be done.

The chapter is also about the fact that Moses is not the only leader. The leader is the source of the authority, but the work is distributed. The implication is that Moses is not meant to do everything. His role is the representation before God, the teaching, the big matters. The daily work of judging is shared. The structure is a thing that makes the leadership sustainable.

The chapter has a theological dimension, and it is the dimension that the book should not overlook. The advice is given by a priest of Midian, and the advice is practical, and the advice is obeyed. The openness to wisdom from outside the camp is part of the story's shape. The story does not say that the wisdom of the world is always wrong, or that the leader should only listen to the voice from the mountain. It says that sometimes the wisdom comes from a visitor, and that the leader should listen.

The chapter is also about the fact that the leader is human, and that the human leader can be worn out, and that the human leader needs help. The chapter does not present Moses as invulnerable. It presents him as a man who is doing the work, and who is tired, and who is told how to stop being tired. The fact is one of the most human things in the story.

The chapter is then about four things: the daily work of Moses, the advice of Jethro, the delegation of the work, and the fact that the story is honest about the leader and the work. The chapter belongs to the wilderness as one of the threads that tie it together, and it is one of the places where the story is most human.

The chapter ends with the advice being taken up, and the judges being chosen, and the work being shared, and the leader being relieved. The chapter is small in the grand scheme of the wilderness story, and it is large in the human scheme. It is the chapter where the leader learns that he cannot do it alone, and where the book remembers that learning.

Mutiny

The wilderness story is, in its main line, a story about leadership as endurance rather than triumph. The dramatic moments are not the victories but the failures, the complaints, the mutinies, the moments when the people turn on the man who has led them out of Egypt and the man who has led them through the fire and the sea and the law and the calf. The mutinies are the choral work of the wilderness narrative, and the chapter that follows is one of the most sustained and most honest of them.

The mutiny is set out in Numbers 16, and it is worth reading the chapter at its length because the drama is in the detail. Dathan and Abiram and Korah and the congregation of the rebellion appear, and they challenge Moses and Aaron, and they say that the whole congregation is holy and that the LORD is among them, and that Moses and Aaron have gone too far in taking leadership upon themselves. The challenge is not just a power struggle. It is a theological one, and it is a challenge to the structure of the covenant.

The chapter is about three things: the grounds of the mutiny, the testing of the mutiny by divine action, and the aftermath — the continuation of the leadership and the continued fragility of the camp.

The mutiny is led by Korah, and the text tells us that he is a Levite, a son of Izhar, a son of Kohath, a son of Levi. The detail matters because the challenge comes from within the priestly tribe itself, from a man who is already in a position of religious privilege and who wants more. The mutiny is not a rebellion from outside the structure. It is a rebellion from inside it, and it is a rebellion that uses the language of the structure against the structure.

The text then names the others: Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab, sons of Reuben; and On, son of Peleth, son of Reuben. The Reubenites are the firstborn tribe, and the detail of their participation is also significant. The mutiny draws strength from the combination of the priestly family and the firstborn tribe, and the reason is that both have a claim to leadership that has been frustrated by the arrangement of the camp.

The Reubenites are the firstborn, and the firstborn have been bypassed. The Levites have been chosen for the religious service, but the Levites are divided into families, and the Kohathites who carry the most holy things are distinguished from the other Levites, and the priesthood is reserved for Aaron and his sons. Korah is a Levite who wants the priesthood. Dathan and Abiram are Reubenites who want the leadership. The two claims, the religious and the tribal, come together in the mutiny.

The ground of the mutiny is the holiness of the congregation. The rebels say, "You have gone too far! For all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the LORD is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the congregation of the LORD?" The argument is theological and it is seductive. It says that the holiness is general, and that the distinction of the leaders is a pride. The argument is wrong, and the story knows it is wrong, but it is also powerful, and it is powerful because it names a temptation that is always present in a community: the temptation to abolish the distinction between the leader and the led, the temptation to say that all authority is mere pride.

The challenge is answered not by Moses' eloquence but by the test. Moses says that in the morning the LORD will show who is his, and who is the holy one, and will bring him near to him. And if the

rebels die a natural death, then the LORD has not sent Moses. But if the LORD creates a new thing, and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up, then they have despised the LORD.

The test is extraordinary, and it is one of the most dramatic moments in the wilderness narrative. The ground opens, and Dathan and Abiram and their households go down alive into the pit, and the earth closes over them, and they perish from among the congregation. And fire comes out from the LORD and consumes the two hundred and fifty men who offered incense. The judgment is total, and it is presented as the direct action of the LORD, and it is presented as the answer to the challenge.

The response of the people is the next movement, and it is one of the most troubling in the chapter. The people say, "You have killed the people of the LORD." The mutiny is crushed, and the people then attack the judgment and blame the leaders. The chapter does not flinch from this. The people fail to receive the verdict, and they accuse Moses and Aaron of murder, and the story records the accusation without correcting it.

The plague that follows is the final movement of the chapter, and Moses and Aaron intervene again. Moses tells Aaron to take his censer and make atonement over the congregation, and Aaron runs into the midst of the assembly and stands between the dead and the living, and the plague is stopped. The intercession is the same pattern as the golden calf: the leader stands between the people and the anger, and the people are spared, and the cost of the intervention is borne by the leader.

The chapter is, then, about the mutiny, the test, and the aftermath. The mutiny is grounded in a theological argument that is both wrong and seductive. The test is the ground opening and the fire, the direct action of the LORD that answers the challenge. The aftermath is the people's refusal to accept the verdict and the plague and the intercession.

The chapter is one of the clearest instances of the structure of the wilderness narrative: the challenge, the judgment, the human response, the intervention, the continuation. The leadership is not secure. It is challenged, and it is vindicated, and it is attacked again, and it is sustained again. The pattern is the pattern of the whole wilderness.

The chapter is also about the fact that the mutiny is not an external threat. It comes from within the priestly tribe and the firstborn tribe, from men who have a claim and who want more. The mutiny is the rebellion of the insiders, the rebellion of the privileged who are not satisfied with their privilege. The fact is one of the reasons the story is honest. The people who are closest to the law and the camp and the structure are the ones who challenge it.

His Brother and His Sister

The chapter is about two people and the way the tradition has treated them, and the way it has treated one of them more harshly than the other. Aaron is the brother, the priest, the man who made the calf, and the man who was kept in place despite that. Miriam is the sister, the prophetess, the woman who sang the song of the sea, and the woman who was struck with leprosy and whose role was diminished by the tradition. The chapter is about the relationship between the siblings, and about the fact that the tradition has a case for saying that Miriam was more important than the final text admits.

The chapter belongs to the wilderness narrative in a way that is easy to miss. It is one of the places where the wilderness story turns from the external crises to the internal ones, from the mutiny of the

camp to the dynamics of the leadership. The chapter is also one of the places where the tradition's treatment of women is visible, and where that treatment is at once evident and ambiguous.

The first thing the chapter should do is to re-establish Miriam's presence in the story before the challenge of Numbers 12. The challenge has the effect of making her look smaller, and the chapter should resist that effect by reminding the reader of what she was before the challenge and what the tradition itself preserved.

Miriam is called a prophetess in Exodus 15. She is the one who takes the tambourine and leads the women in the song after the crossing of the sea. The song she sings is given in a fragment, and the fragment is one of the oldest texts in the Hebrew Bible, older than much of the narrative that surrounds it. The song is a victory song, and it is given to her as the leader of the women, and the tradition remembers her as a prophetess.

The song itself is short, and it is worth quoting. "Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea." The song is a duplicate of the opening of the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15, and the duplication is itself a sign that the tradition held more than one version of the victory song, and that Miriam's version circulated. The presence of the song in her mouth is one of the clearest signs that she was a figure of real importance in the early tradition.

The fact that she is called a prophetess is also important. The word is used of few women in the Hebrew Bible, and it is used of her in a way that marks her as a figure of revelation and leadership. The prophetess is not just a singer. She is a woman through whom God speaks, and she is a woman whose role in the story is not merely to follow.

The chapter should also bring in the evidence from the early tradition that Miriam was a leader in her own right. The traditions that make her the sister of Moses and Aaron place her in the family of the leaders, and the traditions that remember her song place her at the heart of the liberation story. The tradition has preserved the fact that she was a prophetess and a singer and a leader, and the fact that it has preserved that is itself evidence that she was important.

The second part of the chapter is the challenge in Numbers 12, and the way it exposes the dynamic between Miriam, Aaron, and Moses. The challenge is set out with a detail that is both clarifying and troubling: Miriam and Aaron speak against Moses because of the Cushite woman he has married, and they say, "Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken also through us?" The verse makes it clear that the challenge is about the authority of Moses, and that the Cushite woman is a pretext or a secondary issue.

The chapter should note the ambiguity of the Cushite woman. Whether she is Zipporah, the Midianite wife, or a second wife, is a question the tradition has not settled, and the chapter should not pretend to settle it. The point of the verse is that the challenge to Moses' authority comes through a complaint about his marriage, and that the complaint is a way of saying that Moses has no special authority over his siblings.

The response of the LORD is the next movement, and it is one of the most revealing things in the chapter. The LORD calls the three of them to the tent of meeting, and the LORD appears in the pillar of cloud, and the LORD says that in the whole earth Moses is the one with whom the LORD speaks mouth to mouth, clearly and not in dark speeches, and that with him the LORD makes no comparison. The LORD then asks the rhetorical question: "If there is a prophet among you, I the

LORD make myself known to him in a vision, and I speak with him in a dream. But with Moses it is different — mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in dark speeches."

The response is a defense of Moses, but it is also a statement of the hierarchy of revelation. The LORD has spoken through prophets, and the LORD has spoken through Aaron, and the LORD has spoken through Miriam, but Moses is in a different category. The distinction is real, and it is the justification for the punishment that follows.

The punishment falls on Miriam. She is struck with leprosy, and her flesh is like snow, and Aaron sees her and pleads with Moses. The fact that Miriam is the one punished and not Aaron is one of the questions the chapter should ask, and the fact is not obvious. Aaron and Miriam together made the challenge, and only Miriam is struck. The tradition has given different reasons for this — that she was the one who initiated the challenge, that she was the more vulnerable of the two, that the punishment falls on the woman because the story is about the demotion of a woman prophet — and the chapter should present the question without pretending to answer it.

The third part of the chapter is the treatment of Aaron, and the way the tradition has kept him in place despite the calf. The chapter should note that Aaron is the priest, the brother, and the man who made the calf, and that the tradition has not removed him from office because of the calf. The explanation for this is that the tradition does not work by the simple logic of removing the sinner from office. The tradition has other ways of dealing with failure, and the way it deals with Aaron is one of those.

The explanation should also note that Aaron is the brother of Moses and the one who was with Moses from the beginning, and that the tradition has a reason for keeping him in place. The reason is not that the calf was not a failure. The reason is that the failure is not disqualifying in the logic of the story, and that the story has a larger structure in which the leader and the priest can fail and still be kept in place.

The chapter should also say something about the relationship between the brothers, and about the fact that the relationship is complicated by the failure of the calf and by the challenge of Numbers 12.

The relationship is not a simple one. Aaron is the brother and the priest and the one who failed, and Miriam is the sister and the prophetess and the one who was punished, and Moses is the brother and the leader and the one who is defended. The three stand in a relationship that is both family and office, and the tradition has kept the family and the office together.

The chapter is, then, about Miriam the prophetess, the challenge in Numbers 12, the punishment of Miriam, the treatment of Aaron, and the relationship between the siblings. The chapter is about the fact that Miriam was more important than the final text admits, and about the fact that the tradition demoted her, and about the fact that the demotion is visible and not invisible.

The case for Miriam's importance is a strong one, and the chapter should make it without overstating it. The evidence is in the song, in the title of prophetess, in the presence of the tradition's memory of her leadership. The evidence is not in doubt. The question is the meaning of the demotion, and the chapter should make the case that the demotion is a sign of the tradition's treatment of women prophets, and a sign of the way the tradition has reduced the role of a woman who was, in the earliest recoverable form of the story, a leader.

The chapter should also say something about the way the tradition has treated Aaron, and about the fact that Aaron has been kept in place despite the failure. The contrast between the treatment of

Miriam and the treatment of Aaron is one of the things the chapter is for, and the contrast is visible and not invisible.

The Generation That Had to Die

The forty years are the longest single fact in the wilderness story, and the chapter is about the reason for them and the way they are told. The years are the argument of the wilderness, and the argument is that a generation which walked out of Egypt cannot enter the land, and that the promise is inherited by a new generation, and that the journey itself is the formation of the people, and that the formation takes the time it takes.

The chapter belongs to the wilderness narrative in a way that is difficult to overstate. The years are the gap between the departure and the arrival, and the gap is the most important fact of the wilderness narrative. The chapter is about the gap, and about the way the biblical text fills the gap with the very little it gives us, and about the way the emptiness is intentional.

The episode of the spies in Numbers 13–14 is the moment where the forty years are fixed. The people send spies into the land, and the spies return, and the report is divided. Ten of the spies say that the land is good but the people are too strong, and the cities are fortified, and the land is one that devours its inhabitants. Two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, say that the land is good and that the people should go up and take it. The people refuse, and they say that they would rather go back to Egypt, and they say that they would rather die in the wilderness.

The refusal is the moment of the decision, and the decision is the moment where the forty years are fixed. The LORD says that the people who have seen the signs and the wonders and the exodus and the sea and the law and the manna will not enter the land. The generation that walked out of Egypt will die in the wilderness. The children will enter the land after forty years, one year for each day the spies were in the land.

The forty years is a narrative solution, and it is also a theological argument. As a narrative solution, it is the gap between the departure and the arrival, the gap that the story fills with the formation of the law and the people. As a theological argument, it is the claim that the promise is inherited by a new generation, and that the generation that walked out of Egypt is not the generation that will inherit the promise. The argument is one of the most important things about the wilderness story, and it is one of the things that makes the story honest.

The argument is that the people are not ready for the land at the moment they walk out of Egypt, and that the readiness takes the time it takes. The story does not pretend that the people are ready. It says that they are not, and that they must learn, and that the learning takes forty years, and that the generation that walked out of Egypt will not enter the land. The claim is severe, and it is the claim that gives the wilderness its shape.

The chapter should also say something about the emptiness of the wilderness narrative, and the way the biblical text gives us very little for the thirty-eight years. The text gives us the spies, and the plague of the people, and the rebellion of Korah, and the complaint about the manna, and the story of the water, and the stories of the journeys. But the years themselves are mostly empty, and the emptiness is intentional.

The emptiness is the argument. The story does not fill the years with events because the years are not the events. The years are the formation, and the formation is not summed up in a list of events. The formation is summed up in the law, in the tabernacle, in the priesthood, in the people, in the fact that the people are still there at the end. The emptiness is the sign that the years are the formation, and the formation is not a sequence of events but a process of being formed.

The chapter should not pretend that the emptiness is a failure of the text. The emptiness is a feature of the text, and the feature is the argument. The story is telling us that the wilderness is not a series of moments but a duration, and that the duration is the thing that makes the people. The argument is one of the most honest things about the wilderness story, and it is one of the things that makes the story worth reading.

The chapter should also say something about the inheritance of the promise, and the way the promise is passed from one generation to the next. The promise is given to Abraham, and it is given to Isaac, and it is given to Jacob, and it is given to the children of Israel. The promise is not a thing that is inherited by blood in the simple sense. It is a thing that is inherited by the people, and the people are formed over the years, and the promise is inherited by the children who enter the land.

The inheritance of the promise is one of the most important arguments of the story, and it is one of the things that makes the wilderness story a story about formation rather than movement. The movement is from Egypt to Sinai to the wilderness to the land, but the formation is the thing that the movement is for. The people are formed in the wilderness, and the promise is inherited by the people who are formed, and the formation takes the time it takes.

The chapter should be fair to the idea that the forty years is a narrative solution, and to the idea that the forty years is a theological argument, and to the idea that the forty years is both. The dual nature of the years is one of the things that makes the story worth reading, and the dual nature is the argument.

The Rock

The striking of the rock at Meribah is the one disqualifying failure of Moses, and the chapter is about the failure, the punishment, and the ambiguity of the failure. The chapter is also about the fact that the tradition punishes its own hero, and that the punishment is one of the things that keeps the portrait of Moses from being a flatterer.

The chapter belongs to the wilderness narrative in a way that is easy to miss. It is the moment where the leader who has carried the people through all the failures and the complaints and the mutinies is himself the object of the judgment, and the judgment is not death but exclusion from the land. The judgment is severe, and it is severe in a way that is disproportionate to the failure, and that disproportion is the point.

The episode is set out in Numbers 20. The people are in the wilderness of Zin, and the people gather against Moses and Aaron, and they say, "If only we had died when our brothers died before the LORD! Why have you brought the assembly of the LORD into this wilderness, for us and our livestock to die here? And why have you made us come up from Egypt? Is it a small thing that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey, to bring us into this desolate place,

where there is no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? And there is no water to drink." The complaint is the same complaint as before, and the complaint is bitter and specific.

Moses and Aaron go to the entrance of the tent of meeting, and the LORD appears in the pillar of cloud. The LORD says to Moses, "Take the rod, and assemble the congregation, and speak to the rock before their eyes, and it shall yield its water." The instruction is specific. Moses is to speak to the rock.

Moses and Aaron assemble the congregation before the rock, and Moses says to them, "Hear now, you rebels; must we bring water for you out of this rock?" And Moses raises his hand and strikes the rock twice with his rod. And water comes out abundantly, and the congregation and their livestock drink.

The water comes. The people are satisfied. But the LORD says to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not believe in me, to show my holiness before the eyes of the congregation, you shall not bring this congregation into the land that I have given them." The judgment is given, and it is given in the form of exclusion. Moses and Aaron will not enter the land.

The chapter is about the failure, and the failure is that Moses struck the rock instead of speaking to it. The instruction was to speak. Moses struck. The failure is small, and the punishment is large, and the disproportion is the point. The chapter should not pretend that the failure is large. It is small. The chapter should not pretend that the punishment is small. It is large. The chapter should live with the disproportion.

The chapter should also say something about the ambiguity of the failure. Why did Moses strike? Was he angry? Did he misread the instruction? Did he feel that the glory was being taken from him when he said, "Must we bring water for you out of this rock?" The chapter should not resolve the ambiguity. It should live with it. The ambiguity is the fact of the failure, and the fact is that Moses failed, and that the failure was his own, and that the punishment was his own.

The chapter should also say something about the fact that Aaron is punished alongside Moses, even though the failure is Moses' alone. The judgment is given to both, and the punishment is borne by both, and the fact that Aaron is punished is one of the things the chapter should note. The fact that Aaron is punished is not accidental. It is part of the logic of the story, and the logic is that the leader and the priest are bound together, and that the failure of the leader is the failure of the leadership, and that the leadership includes the priest.

The chapter should also say something about the fact that the failure is the one disqualifying failure of Moses, and that the disqualification is not death but exclusion from the land. Moses will die on the mountain, and he will see the land, and he will not enter it. The exclusion is the punishment, and the punishment is the thing that keeps the portrait of Moses from being a flatterer. The portrait is of a man who is magnificent and flawed, and the flaw is the thing that keeps the portrait from being flat. The flaw is the one disqualifying failure, and the failure is the fact that Moses struck the rock instead of speaking to it, and the punishment is the exclusion from the land.

The chapter is, then, about the failure, the punishment, and the ambiguity. The chapter is about the fact that the tradition punishes its own hero, and that the punishment is severe, and that the failure is small. The chapter is about the fact that the portrait of Moses is honest, and that the honesty is in the failure, and that the failure is the thing that keeps the portrait from being a flatterer.

The chapter is also about the fact that the failure is Moses' alone, and that Aaron is punished alongside him, and that the punishment is exclusion from the land, and that the exclusion is the thing that the story has been building toward since the mountain, and that the story is honest about the fact that the leader who has carried the people through the wilderness will not enter the land.

Part Five: The Making of Moses

Four Voices

The reader who has followed the story this far has read a single book — the Torah, the five books of Moses — and has encountered a single portrait of a single man. But the Torah is not a single book. It was not written by a single hand, in a single time, for a single purpose. It is a composite, and the seams where the different hands joined show if you know how to look.

This is the chapter where the reader learns to hear those seams. The reader who finishes this chapter will not be a biblical scholar. The reader will be someone who can open the Torah and hear, in a passage they have read a dozen times, the echo of a different voice from a different time with a different purpose. That is enough. The goal is not to turn the reader into a specialist. The goal is to give the reader the one tool that changes everything else they have read in this book.

The tool is called the documentary hypothesis, and it is the best account we have of how the Torah was put together. It is also, like any tool, limited. This chapter will present the tool honestly, will use it to listen to the text, and will say plainly where it stops.

How to hear a seam

The easiest way to understand the argument is to hear an example. The example that makes the seams most audible is not in the Moses story itself. It is in the flood.

Genesis 6–9 tells the story of the flood twice, and the two versions sit on top of each other so closely that readers have been reading them as one story for most of human history. The two versions use different names for God. In one, God is YHWH — the LORD, the personal name — from the very first sentence. In the other, God is Elohim — "God," the generic term — until the name is disclosed later. The two versions disagree about how many animals Noah takes onto the ark: seven pairs of the clean animals in one, one pair of every kind in the other. The two versions disagree about how long the flood lasts: forty days and forty nights in one, a hundred and fifty days in the other. The two versions disagree about how the flood ends: one says God remembered Noah and sent a wind over the water; the other says Noah sent out a raven, then a dove, then a dove again, and this time it did not return.

Read straight, these are problems. Read as a single story, they are contradictions that most readers smooth over without noticing, because the story is coherent at the level of the plot and the contradictions live at the level of the detail. But the contradictions are the point. They are the seams.

Who wrote what, and when

The hypothesis, in its classic form, proposes that the Torah was assembled from four sources, and that each source was written at a different time, by a different group, for a different reason. The four sources are called J, E, D, and P.

J stands for the Yahwist, so called because this source consistently uses the name YHWH for God from the very beginning. J is the most vivid of the four. J writes in a warm, earthy, anthropomorphic style. God walks in the garden in the cool of the day. God closes the ark door. J's God is a person, present and involved, and J's world is one where God speaks directly and the reader can hear the voice. J is associated with Judah in the south, and most scholars date it to the tenth or ninth century BCE — the time of the divided monarchy, before the northern kingdom fell.

E stands for the Elohist, called that because this source uses Elohim — "God" — until the divine name is revealed to a particular character in the story. E is more abstract than J. God speaks through dreams and angels and intermediaries. E is associated with the northern kingdom of Israel, and most scholars date it to the ninth century, after J and before the fall of the north in 722 BCE.

D stands for the Deuteronomist, called that because this source is almost entirely confined to the book of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic history that follows (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings). D is the voice of reform. D cares about the central sanctuary — the one place where sacrifice is to be made — and about the exclusive worship of YHWH. D is associated with the reign of Josiah in Jerusalem in the late seventh century, and most scholars see D as the driving force behind the book of Deuteronomy as we have it.

P stands for the Priestly source, called that because its concerns are the concerns of the priesthood: the tabernacle, the sacrifices, the genealogies, the laws of purity, the calendar, the holiness code. P writes in a flatter, more formal, more legal style. P is interested in order and boundaries and the precise running of the cult. Most scholars date P to the Exile or shortly after — the sixth century, when the people who wrote it were without a land and were rethinking what it meant to be Israel.

The standard account is that J and E were combined early, probably in the eighth or seventh century, to form a single narrative, and that D was added to that combined JE in Josiah's time, and that P was added last, during or after the Exile, to produce the Torah as a whole. Different scholars have different versions of this timeline, and the exact sequence is debated, but the broad shape — four voices, written at different times, combined over centuries — is the best-supported account we have.

What the hypothesis explains

The hypothesis explains a great deal that would otherwise be invisible. It explains why the Torah contains two creation accounts that contradict each other on the order of events. It explains why there are two flood stories woven together. It explains why the law appears in different forms in different places — the covenant code in Exodus, the Deuteronomic law in Deuteronomy, the holiness code in Leviticus — and why those forms differ in their vocabulary and their concerns. It explains why the narrative voice changes: why God is YHWH in one passage and Elohim in the next, why the style shifts from vivid narrative to measured legal prose, why the details of the story sometimes conflict.

Most important for a book about Moses, the hypothesis explains why the portrait of Moses itself is composite. The Moses of J is a particular man: the man who speaks with God face to face, the man who argues with God at the bush and at the sea, the man whose temerity and reluctance and anger are visible in the text. The Moses of P is a different figure: the mediator of the law, the builder of the tabernacle, the person who stands between the people and the presence in a more formal, more institutional register. The Moses of D is the preacher — the Moses of Deuteronomy, speaking to a new generation on the edge of the land, urging them to choose life. The Moses of each source is

shaped by the purpose of that source. The portrait we have at the end — the portrait of the man who saw the land and did not enter it — is the portrait built by the combination of all of them.

This is not a reduction. It is a complication, and a worthwhile one. The more voices that went into the portrait, the more interesting the portrait becomes. The seams where the voices join are also the places where the portrait was shaped by different hands with different needs.

What the hypothesis cannot do

The hypothesis has limits, and a honest account names them.

The sources, as we have them, are not documents. We do not have a scroll of J or a scroll of E or a scroll of D or a scroll of P. What we have is the Torah, the combined text, and the hypothesis is a method for reading that combined text and hearing the seams. The reconstruction is necessarily imperfect. Scholars assign passages to sources on the basis of vocabulary, style, consistency of divine name, theological concern, and other internal signals, and those signals are sometimes ambiguous. Two competent scholars of equal integrity can and do disagree about the assignment of particular passages.

The hypothesis cannot tell us exactly when each source was written or exactly how they were combined. The timeline is reconstructed from the text and from the historical context, and it is a best guess informed by evidence, not a fact established from the outside. The history of the composition is itself a matter of evidence and inference, and it is therefore subject to revision.

The hypothesis has been challenged and refined. Some scholars argue that the four-source model is too neat and that the composition of the Torah was more complex — that there were more voices and earlier combinations and later edits. Some scholars argue that the distinction between J and E is overstated and that the two should be treated as a single combined JE from an early stage. Some scholars — the conservative scholars the book has been fair to throughout — argue on historical grounds that the picture the hypothesis paints is wrong. The book has given those scholars a fair hearing in chapters 2, 6, and 7, and the source theory does not change that. The honest reader holds both things at once: the archaeological and historical problems of the Exodus story, and the textual evidence that the Torah was composed over a long period from multiple sources.

The documentary hypothesis is the best tool available for hearing the seams in the Torah. It is not the only tool, and it is not complete. But it is a real tool, and it does real work.

The portrait in the seams

What does the source theory do for a book about Moses? It does something that matters for the argument of this book all the way through.

The argument of this book is that a portrait of a man was built over time, by different hands with different purposes, and that the portrait we have at the end is not a flat imposition from one moment but the accumulation of many. The source theory is one of the ways we can see that accumulation. When the reader can hear the J voice giving us the Moses who argues with God at the bush, and the P voice giving us the Moses who supervises the building of the tabernacle, and the D voice giving us the Moses who preaches the law to a new generation, the reader begins to see something that a single-author reading would hide: the portrait was built in layers, and each layer added something the previous layer had not had.

The Moses of J — the personal, arguing, reluctant Moses — is the core. This is the Moses who has a psychological life, who refuses the call, who objects, who says "who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" and "I am not a man of words." This is the Moses that Zornberg reads as a man with an interior life, and it is the Moses that makes the portrait human. Without J, Moses would be a more distant figure: the lawgiver, the miracle worker, the institutional presence. With J, Moses is a man.

The Moses of P — the lawgiver, the tabernacle builder, the one who stands between the people and the presence in a formal role — adds the institutional dimension. This is the Moses who matters for the chapters of law and tabernacle and covenant. P's Moses is not less real for being more formal; P's Moses is a different kind of real.

The Moses of D — the preacher of Deuteronomy — is the Moses of the end. Deuteronomy is the book in which Moses speaks to the new generation on the edge of the land, and in which Moses dies. D's Moses is the Moses of the closing scene, the Moses on the mountain, the Moses who sees the land and does not enter it. D, more than any other source, shapes the ending of the portrait — the ending that is the book's title and its argument.

Each voice added something. Each voice left a trace. The portrait is the combination of the traces, and the combination is the portrait.

What comes next

The next chapter turns from the voices to the moment when one of them — the voice of Deuteronomy — was found in a book and read aloud to a king in crisis. That is the moment when the portrait of Moses was, for the first time, put to work in a political emergency, and it is one of the most revealing moments in the whole history of the book.

The Book That Was Found

In the year 622 BCE, in the temple in Jerusalem, a book was found — or perhaps a book was produced, or perhaps both. The book was brought to the king, and the king read it, and the king tore his clothes, and the book changed the course of the kingdom. The book was a version of Deuteronomy, or Deuteronomy was the heart of it, and the moment is one of the most important in the long argument of this book.

It is the moment when the portrait of Moses was put to work.

The story of the finding is told in the book of Kings, in the account of the reign of Josiah. Josiah was eight years old when he became king, and he reigned for thirty-one years, and his reign was a time of repair. The temple had fallen into disrepair, and Josiah ordered it repaired, and in the course of the repair a book was found in the temple, and the book was brought to the king. The secretary read it to the king, and the king tore his clothes — the gesture of grief and alarm — and the king sent the high priest and others to inquire of the LORD about the words of the book, and the prophetess Huldah told them that the LORD would bring disaster on the place and its people because they had forsaken him, but that Josiah himself would be gathered to his grave in peace because his heart had been responsive to the words.

The story is told in twenty Kings 22–23, and it is read by most scholars of the Hebrew Bible as the moment when the book of Deuteronomy, or a core of it, was discovered and used to justify a

programme of reform. The reform included the removal of idols and pagan altars from the temple and the land, the centralisation of sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem, and the celebration of the Passover in a form that the text calls the greatest since the days of the judges. The reform was, by the account of the text, a moment of religious renewal. It was also, by the account of the text, too late — the disaster was coming anyway, because the people had not kept the covenant — but it was real while it lasted.

The question that matters for this book is not whether the reform happened as told. The question is what the book was, and what it meant that a book with the portrait of Moses in it could, in a single reading, change the course of a kingdom.

The book

Deuteronomy is the fifth book of the Torah, and it is the book in which Moses speaks. The whole book is framed as a series of speeches by Moses to the people on the edge of the land, at the end of the wilderness journey, forty years after the Exodus, looking out over the land they will not enter. Moses reviews the law. Moses retells the story. Moses urges the people to choose life. Moses warns them that if they abandon the covenant they will be driven out of the land. And then, at the end of the book, Moses climbs the mountain and dies, and the book ends with the tomb that does not exist.

The portrait in Deuteronomy is different from the portrait in the books that precede it. The Moses of Exodus is the man who argues with God at the bush, who raises his hand over the sea, who breaks the tablets in anger. The Moses of Leviticus is the man who speaks with God about the sacrifices and the purity laws. The Moses of Numbers is the man who intercedes for the people, who leads them through the mutinies, who strikes the rock and is punished. The Moses of Deuteronomy is a different figure: the preacher, the lawgiver speaking from the mountain to a new generation, the man who sums up the whole story in a single set of speeches and tells the people, for the last time, what they are and what they must do.

Deuteronomy is also, by the account of the documentary hypothesis, the book of D. D is the source associated with the Deuteronomistic reform, and the book of Deuteronomy is the book that the reform was built on. That is the standard account, and it fits the story in Kings: a book of reform, a book that centralises worship and demands exclusive loyalty to YHWH, is found in the temple and used to justify a reform of exactly that kind.

Whether D was written for Josiah's reform or whether Josiah's reform was justified by a book that already existed is the question that divides scholars, and the answer matters less for this book than the effect: the book of Moses, in whatever form it reached Josiah, contained a portrait of a man who had delivered a people from slavery, who had given them a law, and who had died without entering the land. That portrait — the portrait of the man who led his people to the edge and did not cross — was available in a form that could be read aloud in a moment of crisis and used to justify a programme of religious and political reform.

The king

Josiah inherited a kingdom that was in trouble. The Assyrian empire, which had dominated the region for a century, was collapsing. Nineveh had fallen in 612 BCE, and the Egyptian pharaoh Necho II was marching north to assert Egyptian control over the territory the Assyrians had held.

Josiah, in the middle of all this, was trying to consolidate his kingdom and his religious tradition, and the book found in the temple gave him a text to stand on.

Josiah was eight when he became king, which means he was a child on the throne and the reform came when he was a young man. The reform was, in the telling of Kings, thorough. Idols were removed from the temple. High places throughout Judah were destroyed. The vessels made for Baal and Asherah were burned. The priests of the high places were deposed. The medium and the spiritist and the teraphim and the idols were removed from the house of the LORD. The Passover was celebrated with a solemnity the text had not seen since the days of the judges.

The reform was also political. By centralising worship in Jerusalem, Josiah was asserting the authority of the temple and the king against the local shrines and the local priests who had their own power. The reform made Jerusalem the only legitimate place of sacrifice, and that was as much a political act as a religious one. The book of Deuteronomy, with its insistence on the central sanctuary — "you shall seek the place that the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes to be the place of his dwelling and the place of his dwelling that he will choose" — gave Josiah a text that justified the consolidation.

What is striking, for a book about Moses, is that the reform was justified by a portrait of Moses. The king who stood at the head of the kingdom did not stand on a claim to military power or dynastic right. He stood on a text that told the story of a man who had delivered a people from slavery and given them a law, and on a text that was itself, by its own account, the word of that man. The authority of the reform flowed from the authority of the portrait.

What the moment does

The moment matters for the argument of this book because it shows the portrait of Moses being put to use in the world, not just told about. The story of Moses had become, by Josiah's time, a text that could be read aloud and that had political force. The portrait of Moses was no longer only a story about a man in the wilderness. It was a text that a king could use to reorganise a kingdom.

This is one of the things that makes the Moses story different from other founder stories. The founder story of a religion usually lives in the memory of the community and in the ritual. The Moses story had become, by the seventh century, a written text with a legal content and a political edge. The text could be found in a temple, read to a king, and used to justify a reform. That is a strange thing for a story to become, and it is one of the things that made the story last.

The moment also shows the portrait being used in a way that was not exactly faithful to the story. The portrait of Moses in Deuteronomy is a portrait of a man who delivered a people from slavery and gave them a law, but the portrait in Deuteronomy is also a portrait of a man who died without entering the land. Josiah's reform invoked the law but did not invoke the failure. The reform was justified by the text, but the text's own ending — the ending in which the lawgiver dies on the mountain and does not get to the land — was not the lesson the reform drew. The reform drew the lesson of the law. The contradiction of the ending was not yet the point.

That contradiction would become the point later. It became the point in the Exile, when the people who had the law and the portrait of Moses lost the land and had to decide what the portrait meant without the land. That is the subject of the next chapter.

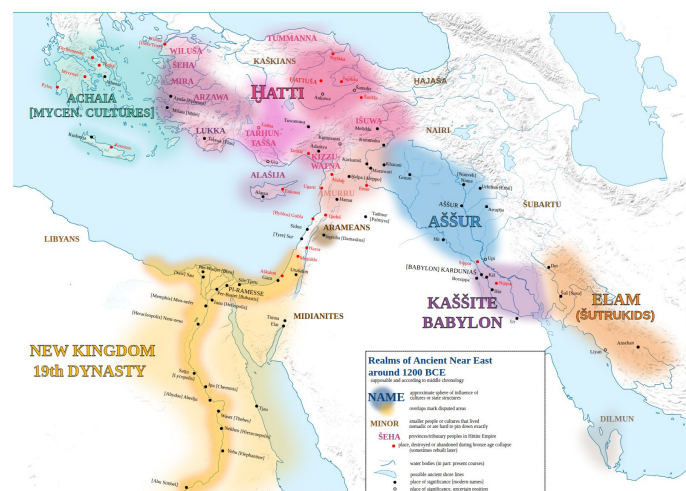
The aftermath

Josiah died in battle in 609 BCE, at Megiddo, fighting against the pharaoh Necho II, and the kingdom that the reform had consolidated did not long survive him. The disaster that Huldah had predicted — the disaster that the book of Deuteronomy itself predicted — came to pass. Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586 BCE. The temple was destroyed. The people were carried into Exile. The reform had failed. The book had not saved the kingdom.

But the book survived the kingdom. The text that Josiah had read, the text that had justified the reform, was carried into Exile and read in a new setting. The portrait of Moses, which had been used to consolidate a kingdom, was now available to a people who had no kingdom. The portrait that had been a political tool was about to become something else.

The next chapter is the story of that change — the story of the Exile, and of the final assembly of the Torah, and of the moment when the portrait of a man who died in sight of a land he never entered was completed in the hands of a people who had lost their land and were trying to remember who they were.

Exile



The Ancient Near East in the age of the Babylonian exile, when the Torah reached its final form. (Image: Enyavar, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

The city fell in 586 BCE. The Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar broke through the walls of Jerusalem, burned the temple, and carried a large part of the population back to Babylon. The event is called the Babylonian exile, and it is one of the great breaks in the history of the people who had been called Israel. Everything that had been the organising reality of their life — the land, the temple, the monarchy, the sacrificial system — was gone. The people were in a place where those things did not exist, and they had to decide what their identity was when the things that had defined it were destroyed.

This is the moment when the Torah was assembled.

The argument of this chapter is that the final form of the five books of Moses — the Torah, the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible — was put together in Babylon, by editors and scribes who were working from sources that had been circulating for centuries, and who were assembling those sources into a single narrative for reasons that had everything to do with the catastrophe that had just happened. The book of Moses, in its final form, is a product of exile. The portrait of Moses, in its final form, is a portrait made by people who had lost the land and were trying to understand who they were without it.

The argument matters because it changes the question the whole book has been asking. If the Torah was assembled in exile, then the story of Moses is not primarily the story of a man who led a people out of Egypt. It is the story of a people who had been brought back to Babylon, looking at a story about a man who led a people out of Egypt, and finding in that story what they needed to survive their own exile. The portrait of Moses is, in this reading, a portable identity — a story a people can carry when they have lost everything else.

The city that was lost

The destruction of Jerusalem was a catastrophe of a kind that the Old Testament memory does not soften. The account in 2 Kings 25 and in Jeremiah and in the prophecies of the exile describes the siege, the famine, the breach of the walls, the flight of the king, the capture and execution of the royal family, the deportation of the skilled and the powerful to Babylon, the burning of the temple, the breaking up of the city walls. The temple — the house of God, the place where the presence of YHWH was supposed to dwell — was destroyed. The Babylonians took the vessels of the temple and carried them to Babylon. The Davidic monarchy, which was supposed to be the permanent dynasty, was ended. The land, which was supposed to be the inheritance, was occupied by foreigners. The scale of the destruction is not in question. What is in question is the scale of the deportation and the question of who was actually in Babylon. The biblical account gives a large number of deportees — the skilled craftsmen, the warriors, the priests, the people of standing. The archaeological evidence, such as it is, does not contradict the broad picture but does not give a clear census either. The population of Judah before the destruction is estimated at somewhere between eighty and a hundred and twenty thousand. The number deported is unknown, but it was a significant portion of the population, and the elite were almost certainly among them.

The people who were in Babylon were not slaves in the Egyptian sense. They were exiles. They could own property. They could run businesses. They could, in some cases, do quite well. A generation later, one of their number — Daniel — would serve in the court of the Babylonian king. But they were not at home. They worshipped a God whose temple was in Jerusalem. They kept a calendar that assumed the land of Israel. Their identity was tied to a place they could not go. The question that faces them is: what are we, now that we are here?

The sources that were already there

The editors who assembled the Torah in Babylon did not write from scratch. They worked with sources that had already been circulating for a long time. The documentary hypothesis, the subject of chapter 24, identifies four main sources — J, E, D, and P — that were combined to form the Torah. The sources represented different traditions from different times and different groups. J, the Yahwist,

wrote in Judah in the south, probably in the tenth or ninth century, and told the story in a vivid, earthy, anthropomorphic style, with God speaking directly and walking in the garden and closing the ark door. E, the Elohist, wrote in the northern kingdom, probably in the ninth century, and told the story in a more abstract style, with God speaking through dreams and angels. D, the Deuteronomist, wrote in the time of Josiah and after, in the late seventh century, and produced the book of Deuteronomy and the historical books that follow it. P, the Priestly source, wrote in a later phase, probably in the exile or after, and was concerned with the law, the calendar, the priesthood, the tabernacle, the order of worship.

By the time the editors were working in Babylon, all of these sources existed. The question was not which one to choose but how to put them together into a single book that would serve the community in exile. The answer was to combine them into a single narrative — the story of creation, the patriarchs, the Exodus, the wilderness, the law, the lands — that would give the community a story that began at the beginning of the world and ended with the people on the edge of the land, with the law in their hands and the promise in their ears, waiting for the moment when they would go in.

Why assemble it now

The reason for assembling the Torah in Babylon is the reason that matters. The community in exile had lost its land, its temple, its monarchy, and its system of worship. The old answers — the temple will be rebuilt, the Davidic king will return, the land will be restored — were not false, but they were not available. The people needed something they could carry. They needed a story that did not depend on the land, a law that did not depend on the temple, an identity that did not depend on the monarchy.

The Torah gave them that. The story of the Exodus was a story of liberation from Egypt, and Babylon was the new Egypt — the power that held them in captivity. The story of the wilderness was a story of a people who had lost the land and were making their way through it, relying on the law and the presence of God. The law — the commandments, the ordinances, the instructions for the camp, the purity laws, the calendar — gave them a structure for life that did not depend on the land or the temple. The tabernacle — the portable sanctuary — gave them a symbol of the presence of God that could be carried. The portrait of Moses — the man who had led them out, who had given them the law, who had died without entering the land — gave them a leader who understood what it meant to be on the edge of the promise and not to enter it.

The whole book was, in this reading, a portable theology. It gave the exiles a story that began at creation and ended on the edge of the land, with the law in their hands and the promise still ahead of them. The ending of the Torah — the death of Moses on Mount Nebo, with the land in sight but not entered — was not a failure of the story. It was the point of the story for the community in Babylon. The man who had led them to the edge and not entered was the man who understood what it was to have the promise and not the land. The portrait of Moses that had been built over centuries was now, in exile, complete.

What the exile did to the text

The exile did several things to the Torah, and the effects are visible in the final text.

The first is the emphasis on law. The Priestly source, which is associated with the later stages of the composition and probably reflects the concerns of the exilic and post-exilic community, is heavily

legal. It contains the instructions for the tabernacle, the ordination of the priests, the purity laws, the calendar, the sacrifices. The law is not just a set of rules. It is the structure that makes life possible in a world without the temple and the land. The exiles needed to know how to live as the people of God in Babylon, and the law gave them a framework for that.

The second is the compilation of the sources. The editors who put the Torah together combined the sources in a way that preserved the different voices but made them into a single book. The result is the text we have now — a text that contains the different styles and the different perspectives of the sources, but that reads as a single narrative. The seams are there if you look for them, as chapter 24 explained, but the book is also readable as a single story. The compilers did their work well enough that the seams show only on close inspection.

The third is the shaping of the ending. The Torah ends with the death of Moses on Mount Nebo, with the land in sight but not entered. This ending was there in the sources that preceded it —

Deuteronomy already had the death of Moses at the end — but the final assembly of the Torah made it the ending of the whole book, and that choice was significant. The book that begins with creation and ends with the people on the edge of the land, with the law in their hands and the promise ahead of them, is a book that tells the community where they are. They are between the promise and the land. They have the law. They have the story. They have not yet entered. The ending of the Torah is the ending that speaks to the community in exile.

The book that went with the exiles

The Torah that was assembled in Babylon went with the exiles. It was the book they carried. It was the book they read in the synagogues — the gatherings where they met to hear the law read and to pray — and it was the book that became the centre of Jewish life in the absence of the temple. The exile was the beginning of the synagogue, the beginning of the reading of the Torah as the centre of Jewish identity, the beginning of the portable community that would survive the return to the land and the destruction of the second temple and the long Diaspora that followed.

The tradition that grew up around the Torah in exile was the tradition of interpretation — the midrash, the commentary, the study — that would become one of the great achievements of Jewish civilisation. The exiles did not just carry the book. They read it, they studied it, they argued over it, they found in it the answers they needed for the situation they were in. The portrait of Moses that they found in the Torah was the portrait of a man who had led his people out of Egypt and through the wilderness and to the edge of the land, and who had died before he entered. The portrait was the portrait of a leader who understood what it was to be on the way and not at the destination. The exiles saw themselves in that portrait.

The turn in the argument

The argument of this book has been moving toward this chapter. The book has argued that the story of Moses is a story built over centuries, that the portrait of Moses is a portrait made by many hands, that the evidence for the historical Moses is thin and that the story is the thing that matters. The chapter has argued that the story of Moses was assembled into its final form in Babylon, by a community that had lost the land and needed a story that would carry them. The turn is this: the portrait of Moses that we have been following for twenty-five chapters is, in its final form, a portrait made by exiles.

The man who never saw the land is the man who was made by people who had lost the land. The portrait of Moses as the man who led his people to the edge and did not enter is the portrait of a man who understood what it was to be in exile. The story of Moses that the exiles carried with them was the story of a man who had been in exile — in Egypt, in Midian, in the wilderness — and who had led his people through it. The portrait of Moses that the exiles built was the portrait of a leader who could be carried into any land, because the story of his leadership did not depend on the land.

This is the turn that the whole book has been building toward. The portrait of Moses is not a portrait of a historical man. It is a portrait of a man who was made by the needs of a community in exile, and who was then used by that community and by every community that came after to answer the question of what it means to be a people without a land. The portrait is huge, and it is complicated, and it is made of many voices. But at its centre is the man who never saw the land, and the reason he never saw the land is that the people who made him needed a man who could stand at the edge and not enter, so that they could see themselves in him.

The Portrait They Built

This is the chapter that pulls the threads together. The book has spent twenty-six chapters following the story of Moses — the man as Israel told it, the world behind it, the making of it. The portrait that has emerged is not a single face but a composite, built by many hands over many centuries, and the book has been tracing the seams in that composite to see what it is made of. This chapter asks the question that the book has been circling all along: what is the core of the portrait, and what was added later, and how can we tell the difference?

The question is not whether Moses existed. The book argued in chapter three that the evidence for the historical Moses is thin and that the honest position is to hold the uncertainty without letting it dominate. The question is not whether the story is true. The book argued in the same chapter that a story does not have to be a documentary to be true about human beings, and that something happened — a small group of Semitic-speaking people got out of Egypt, or remembered getting out, and around that memory grew a portrait of a man so specific and unflattering that it is hard to believe someone made him up from nothing. The question of this chapter is: what is the portrait, and what can we say about the men and women who built it?

The portrait as it stands

The portrait of Moses that the reader has now met is large. It has the following features, and most of them do not belong to the same hand.

The stammering exile. Moses is the man who says: *I am not a man of words. I am slow of speech and tongue.* He is the man who argues with God at the bush and loses. He is the man who refuses five times before he accepts the call. He is the man who has a temper and no plan, who kills an overseer and runs to Midian. He is the man who spends forty years with no plan, tending sheep, hiding from the past.

The reluctant leader. Moses is not the man who wants to lead. He is the man who is made to lead. He objects. He argues. He tries to get out of the call. God does not accept his refusals. The story is the story of a man who is pushed into a role he does not want and does not feel he can fill.

The man who speaks for God. Moses is the man who speaks with God face to face, the man who hears the voice and carries the words. He is the man who goes up the mountain and comes down with the tablets. He is the man who intercedes for the people when they sin, who stands between them and God when the people have broken the covenant.

The man who breaks. Moses breaks the tablets when he sees the golden calf. He strikes the rock when the people are thirsty. He loses his temper. He is not the flawless leader. He is the leader who fails, and the tradition records the failure and attaches the punishment to it.

The man who does not enter. Moses climbs Mount Nebo and looks out over the land. He sees it. He does not enter it. He dies on the mountain. The book ends with the tomb that does not exist — nobody knows where he is buried. The founder of the Exodus dies alone, on the mountain, in sight of the land he never enters.

This is the portrait. It is unflattering in the specific ways that the book has been tracing: the stammer, the temper, the refusal, the failure at the rock, the death in sight of the land. It is also magnificent: the voice of God, the argument at the bush, the breaking of the sea, the law, the intercession. The portrait is not a flatterer. It is a portrait that shows the man in full, with the greatness and the flaw together.

The hands that built it

The portrait was built by many hands. The book has traced the sources — J, E, D, P — and the different voices they brought. J is the voice that gives us the vivid, earthy Moses: God walking in the garden, God closing the ark door, God speaking directly and the man hearing the voice. J is the voice that is closest to the human Moses, the man of the argument and the refusal. E is the voice that is more abstract: God speaking through dreams and angels, the man who hears the voice but does not see the face. D is the voice of Deuteronomy: the preacher of the law, the man who speaks from the mountain to a new generation, the voice that sums up the story and urges the people to choose life. P is the voice of the law and the tabernacle: the man who supervises the worship, who carries out the instructions, who keeps the order.

The portrait was built by putting these voices together, and the result is the composite the reader has been following. The different voices do not always agree. J's God is anthropomorphic. P's God is distant and the instruction is precise. D's Moses is the preacher and the lawgiver. The four voices are not the same man. But they have been combined into a single portrait, and the result is the portrait of Moses as the man who was magnificent and flawed, who led his people out of Egypt and through the wilderness and to the edge of the land, and who died before he entered.

What each generation added

The generations that built the portrait added different things, and it is possible to see what they added by looking at the seams.

The oldest layer is probably the Song of the Sea, Exodus 15, which is one of the oldest texts in the Hebrew Bible. The song is a victory song. It is brassy, triumphant, brief. It does not tell the story of Moses in the detail that comes later. It says: *Song for the horse and the rider, for Yahweh has triumphed gloriously.* It does not dwell on the man. It dwells on the act. This is the oldest layer of the portrait, and it is the layer closest to the memory of the event — whatever the event was.

The next layer is the narrative in Exodus and the rest of the Torah. The story of the basket, the murder, the Midian, the bush, the plagues, the sea, the law, the calf, the wilderness, the rock, the

death. This is the story that was built around the oldest song, and it is the story that gives Moses the portrait. The story is the achievement of the generations that followed, and it is the story that turned the event into the man.

The Deuteronomistic layer, D, added the preaching, the law, the emphasis on the covenant and the warning. D made Moses the lawgiver who speaks from the mountain and sums up the story for a new generation. D is the voice of Josiah's reform and the book that was found in the temple, and D put the portrait of Moses to political use for the first time.

The Priestly layer, P, added the law, the tabernacle, the order of worship, the calendar. P made Moses the supervisor of the worship, the man who carries out the instructions precisely. P is the voice of the exile and the portable community, and P gave the community a structure for life without the temple and the land.

The final assembly, in Babylon, put the layers together and made the ending of the Torah — the death of Moses on the mountain, with the land in sight but not entered — the ending of the whole book. The ending was already in the sources, but the final editors made it the ending of the composite, and that choice gave the portrait its final form: the man who led his people to the edge and did not enter.

The core that might be memory

The book has argued that the core of the portrait might be memory. The argument is not that we know who Moses was. The argument is that if there was a Moses — if there was a man who led a small group out of Egypt, or if there was a memory of such a man — then the portrait preserves something of that man in the specific, unflattering details that are hard to invent.

The stammer is hard to invent. A founder of a religion is supposed to be the man who speaks with authority. The tradition keeps the stammer, and it keeps it as a feature of the man that God works with, not around. The refusal is hard to invent. A leader is supposed to step forward. The tradition keeps the refusal, the five objections, the argument at the bush. The temper is hard to invent. A hero is supposed to be in control. The tradition keeps the murder, the breaking of the tablets, the striking of the rock. The failure is hard to invent. A founder is supposed to succeed. The tradition keeps the failure at Meribah, the punishment, the exclusion from the land. The death in sight of the land is hard to invent. A founder is supposed to reach the goal. The tradition keeps the ending — the man who sees the land and dies on the mountain, with nobody knowing where he is buried.

These are the features of the portrait that look like residue. They are the features that do not fit the pattern of a made-up hero, and they are the features that the tradition kept, generation after generation, even when it might have been easier to smooth them over. The portrait of Moses is a portrait with these features in it, and the argument is that the features are there because they are remembered — because something happened, or because a memory of something happened was so specific that the generations that built the portrait could not get rid of it.

The argument is not that the portrait is a photograph of the historical Moses. The argument is that the portrait is a portrait built by many hands, and that the hands did not smooth out the specific, unflattering details. The portrait has the stammer and the refusal and the temper and the failure and the ending. These are the things that look like memory, and they are the things that the book has been tracing through the chapters.

The portrait after the Torah

The portrait of Moses did not stop being built when the Torah was finished. The portrait continued to be built by every generation that read the book and found in it what it needed.

The rabbis added the portrait of the teacher, the man who spoke with God face to face, the man who received the law and transmitted it. The rabbis read the Torah and found the portrait of Moses as the greatest of the prophets, the man who spoke with God, the man who carried the words. The rabbis added the midrash — the interpretation, the elaboration, the story that grew around the text — and they built on the portrait in the Torah with their own hands.

Philo added the portrait of the philosopher. Philo read Moses as the man who ascended to the divine, who understood the logos, who was the philosopher-king of the biblical story. Philo's Moses is the Moses of the Greek intellectual tradition, the man who knew the truth and lived by it.

Jesus read Moses as the lawgiver, the man who received the law and delivered it, and Jesus positioned himself in relation to that portrait — as the man who came not to abolish the law but to fulfil it. The portrait of Moses in the New Testament is the portrait of the lawgiver who stands ahead of Jesus, and Jesus reads the story of Moses in his own terms.

Muhammad read Moses as the prophet, the man who received the word from God and delivered it to the people. The Qur'an mentions Moses more than any other prophet. The portrait of Moses in the Qur'an is the portrait of the prophet who stood against the pharaoh, who received the law, who led his people. Muhammad placed himself in the line of Moses, and the portrait of Moses in the Islamic tradition is the portrait of the prophet who came before.

Freud added the portrait of the Egyptian. Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* argued that Moses was an Egyptian, that he brought the monotheistic religion of Akhenaten to the people, and that he was killed by the people he led. Freud's portrait is a hypothesis, and it is reception history, not evidence. But it is part of the portrait as it was built by later generations, and it shows what happens when a great mind tries to solve the Moses problem.

Each generation added to the portrait. Each generation found in the story of Moses what it needed, and the portrait grew. The portrait that the reader meets in this book is the portrait as it has been built by all these hands — the hands of the biblical editors, the rabbis, Philo, Jesus, Muhammad, Freud, and the many others who have read the story and found in it what they needed.

The portrait and the question

The portrait of Moses is the answer to the question the book has been asking all along: where does a man like this come from, and why has a story about a stammering exile who died in sight of a land he never entered outlasted every empire that ever tried to bury it?

The answer is that the portrait was built by many hands, over many centuries, and that the hands built a portrait that was too specific to be invented and too useful to be lost. The portrait of Moses is the portrait of a man who understood what it was to be on the edge of the promise and not to enter it, and that portrait was useful to every generation that found itself on the edge of something. The exiles in Babylon found themselves in the man who never saw the land. The rabbis found in the man the teacher who carried the words. The liberation movements found in the man the leader who brought his people out of bondage. The religious readers found in the man the prophet who spoke with God.

The portrait is huge, and it is made of many voices, and it is not a flatterer. It is the portrait of a man who was magnificent and flawed, and the flaw is part of the portrait, and the flaw is the thing that keeps the portrait from being a flatterer. The portrait of Moses is the portrait that can be carried into any land, because the story of the man does not depend on the land. The man never saw the land. That is the point, and it is the point that every generation that read the story has found in it.

Part Six: The Long Afterlife

Everyone's Moses

The man who never saw the land did not stay on the mountain. The portrait that was built in Babylon and carried by the exiles did not stay in the Torah. It spread. Every tradition that came after the Torah found in Moses what it needed, and the portrait grew with each generation. The story of Moses is the story of a man who belongs to everyone and to no one — a figure who has been claimed by every major religious tradition in the West, by every liberation movement that has used the Exodus as its master text, by every philosopher who has needed a lawgiver, by every psychoanalyst who has needed a father. This chapter traces the longest part of the portrait: the afterlife.

The chapter is the first of three in Part Six. Part Six is the long afterlife of Moses — the story of what happened to the portrait after the Torah was finished. Chapter 28 is the story of how the portrait was taken up by the major traditions. Chapter 29 is the story of how the Exodus story became the master text of liberation and how the same book was used for conquest. Chapter 30 is the return to the mountain, the ending earned. This chapter is the first of those three, and it is the chapter that asks: who has Moses been?

Philo's philosopher

Philo of Alexandria wrote in the first century CE, in Greek, in a city where Jewish community and Greek intellectual life met and sometimes conflicted. Philo was a man of the Jewish community in Alexandria who read the Torah through the resources of Greek philosophy, and who wanted to show that the Jewish scriptures were not a primitive account of a tribal god but a profound philosophical text that could stand with the best of Greek thought. Philo's *Life of Moses* is the first major philosophical reading of Moses, and it gives us the portrait of Moses as the philosopher-king, the man who ascended to the divine, who understood the logos, who was the model of the life of reason.

Philo's Moses is a man of extraordinary intellectual capacity. He is the man who received the law from God and understood it as the expression of the divine reason. He is the man who ascended the mountain and came back with the words that were the structure of a life of virtue. Philo reads the Exodus story as the story of the soul's ascent — the journey from the slavery of the passions to the freedom of the intellect, the crossing of the sea as the passage from the material to the spiritual, the wandering in the wilderness as the soul's education. The man who led the people out of Egypt is, for Philo, the man who leads the soul out of the Egypt of the body.

This is a radical reading, and it is a reading that does something important. It takes the story of Moses and makes it available to the Greek intellectual world, which had no interest in the particular history of Israel but had a great deal of interest in the story of a man who received the truth from God and lived by it. Philo's Moses is a bridge between the biblical tradition and the Greek philosophical tradition, and the bridge was used. The Stoics read Moses. The early Christian writers read Philo and read Moses through Philo. The portrait of Moses as the philosopher became part of the Western

portrait, and it is still there — the Moses who is the man of the law and the man of the reason, the man who received the truth and lived by it.

The portrait is not the same as the portrait in the Torah. Philo's Moses does not stammer. Philo's Moses does not argue. Philo's Moses is the man of the logos, the man of the reason, the man who understood the truth. The stammer and the refusal and the temper are in the Torah, but Philo reads around them, because Philo is building a portrait for a purpose, and the purpose is to show that the Jewish law is the expression of the divine reason, and that Moses is the man who received it. The portrait of Moses as Philo built it is the portrait of a philosopher, and it is a portrait that the Western tradition kept.

The rabbis' teacher

The rabbis took Moses in a different direction. The rabbis did not need Moses to be a philosopher. The rabbis needed Moses to be the teacher, the man who received the law and transmitted it, the man who was the source of the tradition that the rabbis were interpreting. The rabbinic portrait of Moses is the portrait of the man who spoke with God face to face, who received the Torah and gave it to the people, who was the greatest of the prophets, and whose interpretation of the law was the foundation of the Jewish tradition.

The rabbis read the Torah and built around it a vast body of interpretation — the midrash, the commentary, the legal analysis — and in that interpretation Moses is everywhere. Moses is the man who received the law, and the rabbis are the men who interpret the law, and the line from Moses to the rabbis is the line that gives the rabbinic tradition its authority. Moses is the man who stood at the mountain and came back with the words, and the rabbis are the men who continue to hear the words and to argue over them. The portrait of Moses in the rabbinic tradition is the portrait of the teacher, the man who is the source of the tradition, and the portrait is a portrait of authority.

The rabbinic portrait also has its own particular features. The rabbis made much of the fact that Moses was the man who could speak with God face to face, and they built around that the idea of Moses as the man who had direct access to the divine, the man who was closer to God than any other prophet. The rabbis also made much of the humility of Moses — the man who was the meekest of all men, the man who did not seek the honour, the man who was the servant of the people. The portrait of Moses as the meekest of men is a rabbinic addition, and it is a portrait that softens the edges of the man in the Torah, who was not meek — he was the man who killed an overseer, who argued with God, who broke the tablets, who struck the rock. The rabbis kept the law and the prophecy and the leadership, but they softened the edges, and the portrait of Moses as the meek teacher is the portrait that the rabbinic tradition built.

The rabbinic portrait is the portrait that the Jewish tradition carried forward, and it is the portrait that is still there in the Jewish tradition today — the Moses who is the teacher, the lawgiver, the man who spoke with God face to face, the man who received the Torah and gave it to the people. The portrait is a portrait of authority, and it is a portrait that has served the Jewish tradition for two thousand years.

Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount

Jesus read Moses, and he read him as the lawgiver. The portrait of Moses in the New Testament is the portrait of the lawgiver who stands ahead of Jesus, and Jesus positions himself in relation to that

portrait. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says: *Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.* The statement places Jesus in the line of Moses — the man who received the law and delivered it, and the man whose fulfilment is the completion of what Moses began.

The Sermon on the Mount is the moment where the portrait of Moses is most vivid in the New Testament. Jesus goes up the mountain, and he sits down, and he teaches, and the people are astonished at his teaching, because he teaches as one who has authority, and not as the scribes. The structure of the scene is the structure of the scene at Sinai — the mountain, the sitting, the teaching, the authority. Jesus is the new Moses, the man who goes up the mountain and comes back with the words, and the words are the law that is the fulfilment of the law of Moses. The portrait of Moses in the New Testament is the portrait of the lawgiver who stands ahead of the fulfilment, and the fulfilment is Jesus.

The portrait is not the same as the portrait in the Torah. The Moses of the New Testament is the Moses of the law, the Moses who received the law and delivered it, and the law is the thing that Jesus fulfils. The stammer and the refusal and the temper are in the Torah, but the New Testament reads Moses as the lawgiver, and the lawgiver is the portrait that the New Testament keeps. The portrait of Moses as the lawgiver is the portrait that the Christian tradition carried forward, and it is the portrait that is still there in the Christian tradition today — the Moses who stands ahead of Jesus, the man who received the law and delivered it, and the law that Jesus fulfilled.

The portrait is also the portrait that was used by the early Christians to explain their relationship to the Jewish law. The early Christians were a group that had emerged from the Jewish community, and they had to explain what they had to do with the law of Moses. The answer was: Jesus fulfilled the law, and the law of Moses was the preparation for the fulfilment. The portrait of Moses as the lawgiver who stands ahead of the fulfilment was the portrait that the early Christians built, and it is the portrait that the Christian tradition kept.

Muhammad and the Qur'anic Musa

Muhammad read Moses, and he read him as the prophet. The Qur'an mentions Moses more than any other prophet, and the Musa cycle — the story of Moses in the Qur'an — is one of the most extensive narrative cycles in the Qur'an. The portrait of Moses in the Qur'an is the portrait of the prophet who stood against the pharaoh, who received the law from God, who led his people, who was the messenger of God to the children of Israel.

The Qur'anic Musa follows the biblical story in outline, but with significant theological differences. Musa is the prophet who receives the revelation from God, who stands against the pharaoh, who leads the people out of Egypt, who receives the Torah. The story is told in several surahs — Surah 7 (Al-A'raf), Surah 10 (Yunus), Surah 17 (Al-Isra), Surah 20 (Taha), Surah 28 (Al-Qasas) — and each telling adds something to the portrait. The portrait of Musa in the Qur'an is the portrait of the prophet who is the messenger of God, the man who received the word and delivered it, the man who stood against the pharaoh and won.

The portrait is important for Muhammad, because Muhammad is placing himself in the line of the prophets, and Moses is the great prophet who stands ahead of Muhammad. The portrait of Musa in the Qur'an is the portrait of the prophet who received the law and delivered it, and Muhammad is the prophet who received the Qur'an and delivered it. The line from Musa to Muhammad is the line of

the prophets, and the portrait of Musa is the portrait of the prophet who stands in that line. The Qur'an reads the story of Moses as the story of the prophet who was sent to his people, and the story of Muhammad is the story of the prophet who was sent to his people, and the two stories are parallel — the man who received the word from God and delivered it to the people.

The portrait of Moses in the Qur'an is also the portrait of the man who was given the book — the Torah — and the book is the thing that the Qur'an confirms and corrects. The Qur'an says that the Torah was the revelation given to Moses, and that the Torah was the guidance for the children of Israel, and that the people corrupted the book, and that the Qur'an came to confirm the Torah and to correct the corruption. The portrait of Moses in the Qur'an is the portrait of the prophet who received the book, and the book is the thing that Muhammad confirms. The portrait of Musa as the prophet who received the book is the portrait that the Islamic tradition kept, and it is the portrait that is still there in the Islamic tradition today.

Freud's Egyptian

Sigmund Freud wrote *Moses and Monotheism* in 1939, in the last year of his life, and the book is one of the strangest things in the history of the portrait of Moses. Freud was a Jew who had fled Vienna for London, who had watched the rise of the Nazis, who had seen what the European tradition could do to the Jews, and who had spent his life studying the human mind. The book is partly psychoanalysis and partly a historical hypothesis, and it argues that Moses was an Egyptian, that he brought the monotheistic religion of Akhenaten to the people, that he was killed by the people he led, and that the memory of the killing was repressed and then returned in the form of the religion that Moses founded.

The book is reception history, and the book should say so plainly. Freud's hypothesis is not evidence, and the book does not treat it as evidence. But the book is part of the portrait, because it shows what happens when a great mind tries to solve the Moses problem. Freud's reading of Moses is a reading that takes the portrait in the Torah — the man who led the people, the man who gave them the law, the man who was killed — and tries to explain it as the story of a man who was an Egyptian, who brought a religion from Egypt, who was killed by the people, and whose memory was repressed and then returned. The hypothesis is bold, and it is wrong in most of its details, and it is also a reading that has influenced the way the portrait of Moses has been understood in the twentieth century.

The portrait of Moses as Freud's Egyptian is a portrait of a man who was an outsider, a man who brought a religion from outside the people, a man who was killed by the people he led. The portrait is the portrait of the founder who is rejected by his followers, and the rejection is the thing that makes the religion what it is. Freud's reading is a reading of the Moses story as the story of the founder who is killed by the people, and the killing is the thing that creates the neurosis of the religion, the thing that makes the religion what it is. The portrait is a portrait of the founder as the victim of his followers, and it is a portrait that the psychoanalytic tradition kept.

The portrait is also the portrait of a man who was read by a Jewish intellectual in the year before he died, who was trying to understand what Moses meant in the context of the catastrophe that had befallen the Jews, and who found in the story of Moses a way of thinking about the relationship between the founder and the people, between the leader and the followers, between the religion and the violence that founded it. The portrait of Moses as Freud's Egyptian is the portrait of the man who was read by Freud, and it is a portrait that the book should mention, because it is part of the afterlife

of the portrait, and because it shows what the portrait can do — it can be read by a great mind in a moment of catastrophe, and it can produce a hypothesis that is wrong and important at the same time.

The man who belongs to everyone

The portrait of Moses is the portrait of a man who belongs to everyone and to no one. The portrait has been claimed by every major religious tradition in the West. The Jewish tradition claims Moses as the teacher and the lawgiver, the man who received the Torah and gave it to the people. The Christian tradition claims Moses as the lawgiver who stands ahead of Jesus, the man whose law was fulfilled by Jesus. The Islamic tradition claims Moses as the prophet who received the book, the man who stood against the pharaoh, the man who is the predecessor of Muhammad. The secular tradition — the philosophical tradition, the psychoanalytic tradition, the political tradition — has claimed Moses as the philosopher, the founder, the liberator, the man who brought the law, the man who brought the people out of Egypt.

The portrait that belongs to everyone is the portrait that is built from the Torah and from the readings that have grown around it. The portrait is the portrait of the man who led the people out of Egypt, who received the law, who spoke with God, who died in sight of the land he never entered. The portrait is the portrait that every tradition has taken and made its own, and the portrait is the portrait that has served every tradition for two thousand years. The portrait is the portrait of a man who is the founder of a religion, and the portrait is the portrait of a man who is the founder of several religions, and the portrait is the portrait of a man who is the founder of a political tradition, and the portrait is the portrait of a man who is the founder of a psychological tradition.

The portrait is also the portrait of a man who is not the same in each tradition. The Moses of the Torah is not the Moses of Philo, and the Moses of the rabbis is not the Moses of Jesus, and the Moses of the Qur'an is not the Moses of Freud. The portrait is the portrait of a man who is different in each tradition, and the portrait is the portrait of a man who is the same across the traditions — the man who received the word from God and delivered it, the man who led the people out of Egypt, the man who died in sight of the land. The portrait is the portrait of a man who is many men, and the portrait is the portrait of a man who is one man — the man who never saw the land.

The portrait and the question of truth

The spread of the portrait across the traditions raises the question that the book has been circling all along: what is the truth of the portrait? The book has argued that the portrait is a composite, built by many hands over many centuries, and that the core of the portrait might be memory — the specific, unflattering details that look like they were not invented. The book has argued that the portrait was assembled in Babylon, and that the assembly was a response to the exile, and that the portrait was made by people who had lost the land and needed a story that would carry them.

The spread of the portrait across the traditions is the next stage of the same process. The portrait was built by the biblical editors, and then by the rabbis, and then by Philo, and then by the early Christians, and then by Muhammad, and then by Freud. Each generation built on the portrait, and each generation found in the portrait what it needed. The portrait is the portrait of a man who is the founder of a religion, and the portrait is the portrait of a man who is the founder of several religions, and the portrait is the portrait of a man who is the founder of a political tradition, and the portrait is the portrait of a man who is the founder of a psychological tradition.

The truth of the portrait is not the truth of a historical man. The truth of the portrait is the truth of a story that was built by many hands, and that was used by many generations, and that served many purposes. The portrait is the portrait of a man who was built by the needs of the community in exile, and then by the needs of the rabbis, and then by the needs of the philosophers, and then by the needs of the Christians, and then by the needs of the Muslims, and then by the needs of the psychoanalysts. The portrait is the portrait of a man who was built by the needs of the generations, and the portrait is the portrait of a man who was built well enough to last.

The truth of the portrait is the truth of the story, and the story is the story of a man who led his people out of Egypt, who received the law, who spoke with God, who died in sight of the land. The story is the story that the generations built, and the story is the story that the generations used, and the story is the story that has lasted. The truth of the portrait is the truth of the story, and the story is the story that has outlasted the empires that tried to bury it.

Let My People Go

The cry *let my people go* is one of the oldest sentences in the story of liberation. It is the sentence that Moses and Aaron carry to the pharaoh. It is the sentence that the enslaved in America sang in the spirituals. It is the sentence that Harriet Tubman heard in her head when she went back into the South to lead others out. It is the sentence that Martin Luther King Jr. ended his last speech with, on the mountaintop in Memphis, four nights before he was killed. *Let my people go* is a sentence that has been spoken in many languages, by many people, in many centuries. It is also a sentence that has been used for conquest. The same book that gave the enslaved their master text gave the settlers their master text. The book should say so, and it should say so honestly.

This chapter is the second of three in Part Six, and it is the chapter that asks the hardest question the book has to ask: what has the Exodus story done, and who has it served, and what has it cost?

The spirituals

The Exodus story entered American life through the spirituals, the songs that enslaved Africans sang in the fields and the huts and the quarters, and the songs that carried the story of the Exodus into the heart of the slavery system that was supposed to silence it. The spirituals are the moment where the story of Moses becomes, for the first time in the Western tradition, the story of a people who are actually enslaved, and the story of Moses is no longer the story of a man who led a people out of Egypt in the distant past. It is the story of a people who are in Egypt now, and who are singing for the day when they will go.

The spirituals are not a simple retelling of the Exodus. They are a retelling that changes the names and the details and keeps the structure. The Israelites are the enslaved. The pharaoh is the master. The Exodus is the escape. The promised land is the North, or Canada, or freedom, or death — the land that the enslaved have not seen. The songs are the songs of a people who are in the story and who are using the story to carry themselves through it.

The song *Go Down, Moses* is the best known of these, and it is the song that makes the point most directly. *Go down, Moses, Way down in Egypt land. Tell old Pharaoh, Let my people go.* The song identifies the singer with Moses, or with the Moses who is coming down to lead the people out. The

song is the song of a people who are already in the story and who are calling on the story to act. The song is the song of a people who are using the Exodus as a portable identity, and the portability is the point — the same portability that the exiles in Babylon found in the Torah, and the same portability that the book has been tracing all along.

The spirituals are the moment where the Exodus story becomes the master text of liberation, and the moment where the story does what the story was made to do — carries a people through a situation where they have lost everything else. The story of Moses is the story of a people who are in Egypt and who are singing for the day when they will go, and the story is the thing that carries them. The spirituals are the proof of the portability, and the proof is in the singing.

Harriet Tubman

Harriet Tubman was called Moses in her lifetime, and the name was not a joke. Tubman escaped from slavery in 1849, and then went back into the South nineteen times, and brought out about seventy people — family, friends, strangers — and the work she did was the work of a liberator, and the name Moses was the name that the people she led gave her. The name was not a metaphor. It was a recognition that Tubman was doing what Moses did — going down into Egypt, leading the people out, and not stopping until the work was done.

Tubman was not the only one called Moses. The name was attached to several of the leaders of the Underground Railroad, and the name was attached to Tubman because she was the one who did the most going back. Tubman went back nineteen times, and she brought out seventy people, and she did not lose a single one. The work she did was the work of the story she carried, and the story she carried was the story of Moses.

Tubman was also the woman who said, when she was asked whether she regretted all the danger she had been in, that she would rather be dead than to be a slave again. The statement is the statement of a person who knows what Egypt is, and who knows what the Exodus costs, and who is willing to pay the cost. Tubman is the person who carries the story into the actual situation, and the story does what it is made to do — gives the person the courage to go back into Egypt and lead the people out.

Tubman is the proof that the story of Moses is not just a story. The story of Moses is a story that has been carried by actual people into actual situations of bondage, and the story has done what the story was made to do. Tubman is the person who proves the portability, and the proof is in the work she did. Tubman is Moses in her lifetime, and the name is the name that the story gave her, and the name is the name that the story has given to the liberators in every generation.

King's mountaintop

Martin Luther King Jr. ended his last speech on the mountaintop in Memphis, on April 3, 1968, four nights before he was killed. The speech is the speech where King talks about the Exodus, and the mountain, and the promised land, and the ending of the story. King says: *Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I am not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He has allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I have looked over, and I have seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land.*

The speech is the speech where King identifies himself with Moses, and identifies the movement with the Exodus, and identifies the promised land with the goal of the movement — the end of the

racism, the end of the poverty, the end of the war. King is the man who climbs the mountain, and who looks out over the land, and who sees the promised land, and who says that he may not get there with the people, but that the people will get there. The speech is the speech of a man who is on the way and not at the destination, and who is willing to die on the way.

King is the Moses of the twentieth century, and the speech is the speech of the Moses who climbs the mountain and looks out over the land and dies. The death of King is the death of Moses — the man who led the people toward the promised land and did not reach it. The ending is the ending of the story, and the ending is the ending that the story has been building toward all along. King is the proof that the story of Moses is still doing what the story was made to do — carrying a people through a situation where they have lost everything else, and giving them the courage to go on.

King is also the proof that the story of Moses is a story that has been claimed by the liberation movements in every generation, and that the claim has made the story what it is. The story of Moses is the story of a people who are in Egypt and who are singing for the day when they will go, and the story is the thing that carries them. King is the person who proves the portability in the twentieth century, and the proof is in the speech he gave on the mountaintop, and in the work he did, and in the death he died.

The same book for the settler

The Exodus story is a portable story, and the portability is the point. The portability is what makes the story able to serve the enslaved and the liberation movements, and the same portability is what makes the story able to serve the settlers and the conquerors. The book should say so, and it should say so honestly. The Exodus story has been used for liberation, and the Exodus story has been used for conquest, and the book should not pretend that the two uses are the same, or that the one cancels the other.

The Exodus story has been used by the settlers in the American West to justify the conquest of the land. The settlers read themselves as the Israelites, and the land they were settling as the promised land, and the people who were already there as the Canaanites who were in the way. The settlers used the Exodus story to give themselves a portable identity, and the identity was the identity of the people who were moving into the promised land, and the land was the land that God had promised them. The settlers used the story to justify the conquest, and the conquest was the conquest that the story was used to justify.

The Exodus story has also been used by the Zionists to justify the return to Palestine. The Zionists read themselves as the Israelites returning to the promised land, and the land as the promised land, and the people who were already there as the obstacles to the return. The Zionists used the Exodus story to give themselves a portable identity, and the identity was the identity of the people who were returning to the promised land. The Zionists used the story to justify the return, and the return was the return that the story was used to justify.

The Exodus story has been used by the settlers and the Zionists, and the use is the use that the book should not ignore. The book should say so, and it should say so honestly. The same book that gave the enslaved their master text gave the settlers their master text, and the same book that gave the liberation movements their master text gave the conquerors their master text. The book should not pretend that the two uses are the same, but it should also not pretend that the one cancels the other.

The Exodus story is a story that has been used for both liberation and conquest, and the book should say so. The story is a portable story, and the portability is what makes the story able to serve both. The story is a story that has been claimed by the liberation movements and by the conquerors, and the claim has made the story what it is. The book should say so, and it should say so honestly, because the honesty is what the book has been committed to all along.

The violence of the story

The violence of the story is not something the book should skip. The plagues kill children. The tenth plague is the death of the firstborn, and the death of the firstborn is the death of the children of Egypt. The conquest ideology in Deuteronomy is genocidal in its language. The text says, in Deuteronomy 20: *You shall not leave alive anything that breathes. You shall utterly destroy all the Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.* The language is genocidal, and the book should not skip it.

The violence is the violence that the story carries, and the story is the story that the liberation movements have used. The story of Moses is the story that Harriet Tubman carried, and the story that Martin Luther King Jr. used, and the story that the enslaved sang in the spirituals. The story is the story that has been used for liberation, and the story is the story that has been used for conquest, and the story is the story that has violence in it. The book should say so, and it should say so honestly.

The violence is not the whole story. The story is also the story of the liberation, and the story of the law, and the story of the man who stood against the pharaoh. The story is the story of the man who led the people out of Egypt, and the story is the story of the man who received the law, and the story is the story of the man who spoke with God. The story is the story of the liberation, and the story is the story that has been used for liberation. The book should say so, and it should say so honestly.

But the book should also say that the story has violence in it, and that the violence has been used, and that the violence is the violence that the story carries. The book should say that the story has been used for conquest, and that the violence of the story has been used for the conquest. The book should say that the story is the story that has been claimed by the liberation movements and by the conquerors, and that the claim has made the story what it is. The book should say so, and it should say so honestly.

The honesty is what the book has been committed to all along. The book is honest first and not cynical. The book is reverent about the text's power while being straight about its history. The book is the book that says: this story is too important to lie about. The book is the book that says the violence of the story, and the use of the story for conquest, and the use of the story for liberation, and the book is the book that says all of it, and the book is the book that says it honestly.

The two uses and the truth

The truth of the story is not the truth of a historical man. The truth of the story is the truth of a story that has been used for liberation and for conquest, and that has carried people through both. The truth of the story is the truth of a portable story, and the portability is the point. The truth of the story is the truth of a story that has been claimed by the liberation movements and by the conquerors, and that has served both.

The truth of the story is the truth of the story that Harriet Tubman carried, and the story that Martin Luther King Jr. used, and the story that the enslaved sang in the spirituals. The truth of the story is

the truth of the story that the settlers used to justify the conquest of the American West, and the story that the Zionists used to justify the return to Palestine. The truth of the story is the truth of a story that has been used for both, and that has carried people through both.

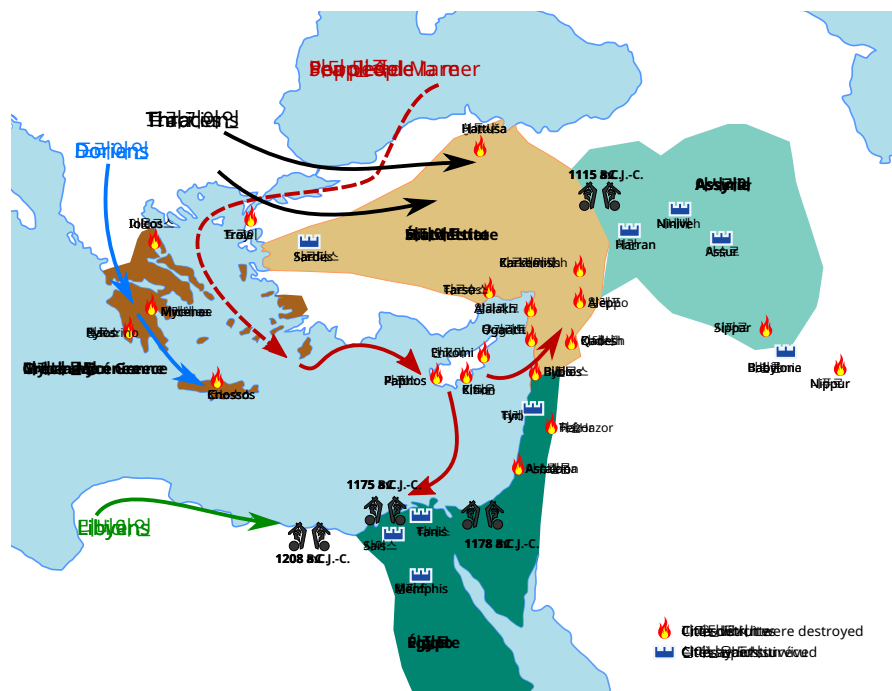
The book has argued that the truth of the story is the truth of the portrait, and the truth of the portrait is the truth of the story that was built by many hands, and that was used by many generations, and that served many purposes. The book has argued that the truth of the story is the truth of the story that outlasted the empires that tried to bury it, and that the story has been the thing that outlasted them. The book has argued that the truth of the story is the truth of the story that belongs to everyone and to no one.

The truth of the story is the truth of the story of Moses, and the truth of the story of Moses is the truth of the story that has been used for liberation and for conquest, and that has carried people through both. The book has argued that the truth of the story is the truth of the story that the reader has been following all along, and the book has argued that the truth of the story is the truth of the story that the reader has been thinking about all along. The book has argued that the truth of the story is the truth of the story that the reader has been arguing about all along.

The truth of the story is the truth of the story of Moses, and the truth of the story of Moses is the truth of the story that has been used for liberation and for conquest. The book has argued that the truth of the story is the truth of the story that the reader has been following, and the truth of the story is the truth of the story that the reader has been thinking about, and the truth of the story is the truth of the story that the reader has been arguing about. The book has argued that the truth of the story is the truth of the story of Moses, and the book has argued that the truth of the story is the truth of the story that has been used for liberation and for conquest.

The book has argued this, and the book has said it honestly, and the book has said it all along.

In Sight of the Land



The Bronze Age collapse, c. 1200 BCE — the turbulent world in which Israel first appears in the archaeological and textual record, already settled in the highlands of Canaan. (Image: Lommes, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

The book began on a mountain. Deuteronomy 34: *Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, the top of Pisgah, which faces Jericho, and the LORD showed him the whole land. Gilead as far as Dan. Naphtali, Ephraim, Manasseh. All Judah to the Mediterranean. The Negev. The Valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar. And then: Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD. And he buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows where his grave is to this day.*

The chapter that opened the book was built around that ending — the strangest final scene any founder ever got. A man climbs a mountain, looks out over the land he has spent a lifetime bringing a people toward, and dies. He does not enter. The book ends with a tomb that does not exist.

This closing chapter returns to the mountain, but it does not simply repeat the opening. It earns the ending. The book has spent thirty chapters building toward this return, and the return is the argument of the whole book. The portrait of Moses that the reader has followed — the stammering exile, the reluctant leader, the man who argued with God and lost, the man who killed an overseer and hid in Midian, the man who broke the tablets and struck the rock, the man who led a people to the edge and did not enter — is the portrait that makes the mountain ending the point of the story.

The return

The reader has followed Moses through the story as Israel told it — the basket, the murder, the Midian, the bush, the plagues, the sea, the law, the calf, the wilderness, the rock, the death. The reader has followed the world behind the story — the Egypt of the New Kingdom, the Semitic populations in the Delta, the forced labour in the brickmaking camps, the pharaoh question, the

Levite named for the water. The reader has followed the making of the story — the four voices, the Josiah reform, the exile in Babylon, the final assembly of the Torah, the portrait built by many hands. The reader has also followed the afterlife of the story — the portrait of Moses taken up by every major tradition in the West, the portrait of the philosopher, the teacher, the lawgiver, the prophet, the Egyptian, and the portrait used for every liberation movement that has ever called on the Exodus for its master text. The reader has seen that the story of Moses is not a story that belongs to one tradition, but a story that has been claimed by many, and that the claim has made the story what it is.

The story of Moses is a story that has outlasted every empire that tried to bury it. The empire of the pharaohs tried to bury the Israelites in the bricks. The empire of Babylon tried to bury the people in the deportation. The empire of Rome tried to bury the Jews in the diaspora. The empire of the Inquisition tried to bury the Jews in the fire. The empire of the Nazis tried to bury the Jews in the camps. The story of Moses has outlasted them all. The story has been carried by exiles, by refugees, by prisoners, by the people who had no land and no temple and no monarchy, and the story has been the thing that carried them. The story of Moses is a portable story, and the portability is the point.

The mountain ending is the point of the portable story. The man who never saw the land is the man who was made by a people who had lost the land, and the ending is the ending that speaks to a people who are on the way and not at the destination. The ending is the ending of the story as it was assembled in Babylon, and the ending is the ending of the story as it was carried by the exiles, and the ending is the ending of the story as it was used by every liberation movement that has ever called on the Exodus. The man who never saw the land is the man who understood what it was to be on the edge of the promise and not to enter it, and that is the point the book has been making all along.

What the book argued

The book argued, openly and warmly, in chapter three: the reader now has the tools. The book gave the reader the tools — the distinction between the story and the history, the difference between "made up" and "shaped," the three-strand braid of narrative, context, and making — and the book trusted the reader to hold them. The rest of the book was the application of the tools.

The book argued that the evidence for the historical Moses is thin. The book argued that for Jesus and Muhammad we have sources written within a century or two, and outside witnesses. For Moses we have a story written down at least five hundred years after it supposedly happened, by people with theological purposes, and essentially nothing outside it. The book argued that the honest position is not to pretend the problem away, but to make the problem the engine of the book, and to hold the uncertainty without letting it dominate.

The book argued that the story is true in a way that does not require it to be a documentary. The book argued that a story does not have to be invented to be shaped, and that something happened — a small group of Semitic-speaking people got out of Egypt, or remembered getting out, and around that memory grew a portrait of a man so specific and so unflattering that it is hard to believe someone made him up from nothing. The book argued that the portrait is built by many hands, and that the hands did not smooth out the specific details — the stammer, the refusal, the temper, the failure at the rock, the ending on the mountain.

The book argued that the portrait of Moses is a portrait built over centuries, and that the key moments in the building were the Josiah reform of 622 BCE, when the book of Deuteronomy was

found or produced and put to political use for the first time, and the exile in Babylon, when the five books of Moses were assembled into their final form by a people who had lost the land and needed a story that would carry them. The book argued that the portrait of Moses in its final form is a portrait made by exiles, and that the ending of the Torah — the death of Moses on the mountain, with the land in sight but not entered — is the ending that speaks to a people who are on the way and not at the destination.

The book argued that the portrait of Moses was taken up by every major tradition in the West, and that the portrait was made to serve the needs of each tradition — the philosopher, the teacher, the lawgiver, the prophet, the Egyptian, the liberator. The book argued that the same story has served the settler and the slave, the one who needed to claim the land and the one who needed to leave it, and that the book should say so honestly. The book argued that the violence of the story — the plagues that kill children, the conquest ideology in Deuteronomy that is genocidal in its language — should not be skipped, and that the reckoning with that violence lands in chapter 29, but that it should be flagged when it appears earlier.

The book argued all of this, and the book trusted the reader to hold it. The closing chapter returns to the mountain, and the mountain is the point of all of it.

The mountain

The return to the mountain is the return to the ending of the story. The story of Moses ends with the death on the mountain, and the death on the mountain is the ending that makes the point of the whole book. The man who led his people to the edge and did not enter is the man who understood what it was to be on the way and not at the destination, and that is the man who the exiles in Babylon found in the portrait, and that is the man who the liberation movements found in the portrait, and that is the man who every religious tradition found in the portrait.

The mountain is also the mountain of the ending of the Torah. The Torah ends with the death of Moses on Mount Nebo, and the death on the mountain is the ending that the editors in Babylon made the ending of the whole book. The editors in Babylon assembled the five books of Moses into a single book that began with creation and ended with the death of Moses on the mountain, with the land in sight but not entered. The ending was the ending that spoke to the community in exile, and the ending was the ending that the community in exile carried with them when they went back to the land and when they went on into the diaspora. The ending was the ending that the rabbis read, and the ending that the philosophers read, and the ending that the Christians read, and the ending that the Muslims read, and the ending that the liberation movements read. The ending was the ending that lasted.

The mountain is also the mountain of the return to the beginning. The book began on the mountain, and the book ends on the mountain, and the mountain is the frame of the whole book. The frame is the frame of the story that the book has been telling, and the frame is the frame of the argument that the book has been making. The book began with the mountain, and the book ends with the mountain, and the mountain is the point of both.

The ending earned

The ending of the book is the ending that the book has earned. The book has spent thirty chapters building toward this ending, and the ending is the ending that the book has earned by making the

argument that the portrait of Moses is a portrait built by many hands, and that the portrait was built by people who had lost the land, and that the ending of the story — the death of Moses on the mountain, with the land in sight but not entered — is the ending that speaks to a people who are on the way and not at the destination.

The ending is also the ending that the book has earned by making the argument that the story of Moses is a portable story, and that the portability is the point. The book has argued that the story of Moses has been carried by exiles, by refugees, by prisoners, by the people who had no land and no temple and no monarchy, and that the story has been the thing that carried them. The book has argued that the story of Moses is a story that has outlasted every empire that tried to bury it, and that the story has been the thing that outlasted them. The book has argued that the story of Moses is a story that belongs to everyone and to no one, and that the story has been claimed by every major tradition in the West, and that the claim has made the story what it is.

The ending is the ending that the book has earned by making all of this argument, and the ending is the ending that the book has earned by returning to the mountain, and the ending is the ending that the book has earned by making the reader see the mountain in the light of the argument. The mountain is the mountain of the ending of the story, and the mountain is the mountain of the return to the beginning, and the mountain is the mountain of the argument of the whole book. The man who never saw the land is the man who stands on the mountain and looks out over the land and dies, and the man who never saw the land is the man who the book has been following all along, and the man who never saw the land is the man who the book has been arguing about all along, and the man who never saw the land is the man who the book has been explaining all along.

The ending is the ending that the book has earned, and the ending is the ending that the book has earned by making the reader understand that the man who never saw the land is the man who was made by a people who had lost the land, and that the man who never saw the land is the man who understood what it was to be on the way and not at the destination, and that the man who never saw the land is the man who the exiles in Babylon found in the portrait, and that the man who never saw the land is the man who every liberation movement has found in the portrait, and that the man who never saw the land is the man who every religious tradition has found in the portrait. The ending is the ending that the book has earned, and the ending is the ending that the book has earned by making the reader understand all of this.

The story and the truth

The book has argued that the story of Moses is true in a way that does not require it to be a documentary. The book has argued that the story is the story of a small group of Semitic-speaking people who got out of Egypt, or remembered getting out, and around that memory grew a portrait of a man so specific and so unflattering that it is hard to believe someone made him up from nothing. The book has argued that the portrait is the portrait of a man who was built by the needs of the community in exile, and that the portrait was then used by every community that came after, and that the portrait is the portrait of a man who is magnificent and flawed, and that the flaw is the thing that keeps the portrait from being a flatterer.

The book has argued that the truth of the portrait is the truth of the story, and that the story is the story that the generations built, and that the story is the story that the generations used, and that the story is the story that has lasted. The book has argued that the truth of the portrait is the truth of the

story that has outlasted the empires that tried to bury it, and that the story has been the thing that outlasted them. The book has argued that the truth of the portrait is the truth of the story that belongs to everyone and to no one, and that the story has been claimed by every major tradition in the West, and that the claim has made the story what it is.

The truth of the portrait is not the truth of a historical man. The truth of the portrait is the truth of a story that was built by many hands, and that was used by many generations, and that served many purposes. The truth of the portrait is the truth of a story that was built by the needs of the community in exile, and that was then used by the rabbis, and the philosophers, and the Christians, and the Muslims, and the liberation movements, and the psychoanalysts. The truth of the portrait is the truth of a story that was built well enough to last.

The story has lasted. The story has outlasted the empires that tried to bury it. The story has been carried by the exiles in Babylon, and by the rabbis in the diaspora, and by the liberation movements in the United States, and by the people who have called on the Exodus for their master text in every generation. The story has been the thing that carried them, and the story has been the thing that outlasted them. The story of Moses is a portable story, and the portability is the point, and the point is the point that the book has been making all along.

The last word

The book ends on the mountain, as it began. The man who climbed the mountain, who looked out over the land, who died on the mountain, and whose grave is not known — the man who never saw the land — is the man who the book has been following all along, and the man who the book has been arguing about all along, and the man who the book has been explaining all along. The man who never saw the land is the man who was made by a people who had lost the land, and the man who never saw the land is the man who understood what it was to be on the way and not at the destination, and the man who never saw the land is the man who the exiles in Babylon found in the portrait, and the man who never saw the land is the man who every liberation movement has found in the portrait, and the man who never saw the land is the man who every religious tradition has found in the portrait.

The man who never saw the land is the man who the story is about, and the man who never saw the land is the man who the story has made, and the man who never saw the land is the man who the story has been about all along. The man who never saw the land is the man who the book has been following, and the man who never saw the land is the man who the book has been arguing about, and the man who never saw the land is the man who the book has been explaining. The man who never saw the land is the man who the book has been talking about all along, and the man who never saw the land is the man who the book ends with.

The man who never saw the land. That is the title of the book, and the title of the book is the point of the book, and the point of the book is the point that the book has been making all along. The man who never saw the land is the man who the story is about, and the man who never saw the land is the man who the story has made, and the man who never saw the land is the man who the story has been about all along. The story of Moses is the story of the man who never saw the land, and the story of Moses is the story that has outlasted the empires that tried to bury it, and the story of Moses is the story that has been carried by the exiles and the refugees and the prisoners and the people who had

no land and no temple and no monarchy, and the story of Moses is the story that has been the thing that carried them.

The story of Moses is a portable story. The portrait of Moses is a portrait that has been claimed by everyone and by no one. The man who never saw the land is the man who the story is about, and the man who never saw the land is the man who the story has made, and the man who never saw the land is the man who the story has been about all along. The book ends on the mountain, and the mountain is the point, and the man who never saw the land is the point of the mountain.

Appendices

Glossary

Terms used in the book, with brief definitions keyed to how they appear in the text. Most are archaeological, historical, or biblical-studies terms that a general reader may meet for the first time. A few are defined because the book uses them in a specific way.

Apiru / Habiru: A term that appears in Egyptian, Akkadian, and other Near Eastern documents from the second millennium BCE to describe a socially marginal class of people — refugees, fugitives, mercenaries, labourers, bandits — without a single ethnic identity. In the Amarna letters, the term (often spelled *Habiru*) refers to people moving through the region who are not attached to a state. The relationship between the *Apiru* and the Hebrews is debated; the book treats the term as useful background for the status of Semitic-speaking populations in the Delta, not as evidence that the Hebrews were the *Apiru*. The distinction matters: the Hebrews may have been among the *Apiru*, but the word does not mean "Israelite."

Shasu: A group of Semitic-speaking nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples in the late second millennium BCE, recorded in Egyptian documents, including Papyrus Anastasi VI, as moving through the frontier regions east of the Delta. The Shasu are the closest Egyptian textual referent to the kind of population the Exodus story describes at its margins. The book treats the Shasu as context for the texture of the borderlands, not as proof that the Shasu were the Israelites. Several Shasu groups are later associated with the worship of YHWH in topographical lists, which is relevant to the question of where the god came from.

Hyksos: A term for the rulers of the Fifteenth Dynasty of Egypt, of Semitic origin, who controlled the eastern Delta and much of Egypt from about 1650 to 1550 BCE before being expelled by Ahmose I. The Hyksos period is the most visible episode of Semitic rule in Egypt, and the memory of it — or the memory of people like them — is plausibly in the background of the Exodus story. The book does not claim the Hyksos were the Hebrews, but notes that the expulsion of the Hyksos is one of the events that could have generated a story about Semitic people leaving Egypt.

Pi-Ramesses: The capital built by Ramesses II in the eastern Delta, on the site of the former Hyksos capital Avaris (modern Tell el-Dab'a). The city is named in Exodus 1:11 as one of the store cities the Hebrews built — "Pithom and Ramesses." Pi-Ramesses is the strongest archaeological anchor in the Exodus story: the city existed, it was a major building project, it was built with organised labour, and it is in the right region. The book treats Pi-Ramesses as the one place where the story's details ring true, while being clear that the story's detail is not the same as the story's truth.

Aten: The sun-disk deity elevated by the pharaoh Akhenaten in the Amarna period (c. 1350 BCE) to a position of near-monopoly in Egyptian religion, and the centre of the brief experiment in what looks like a form of monotheism. The Aten episode is relevant to the question of where the idea of a single supreme god came from, and to the argument in the book that Moses' god has a backstory in

the Egyptian religious world. The book is careful: Akhenaten's Atenism was not the same as Israelite monotheism, and the connection is suggestive rather than direct.

Yahweh / YHWH: The name of the god of Israel. The name appears in the Hebrew Bible as the four-letter sequence YHWH (the Tetragrammaton), which is not pronounced as written in Jewish tradition, where it is replaced by *Adonai* ("Lord") in reading. The book uses "Yahweh" as the standard scholarly convention for the god's name, and "the LORD" only where it is quoting or closely following the biblical text. The origin of the name is debated; the book follows the account that YHWH was originally a deity associated with the regions south and east of Canaan (the Shasu, Midian, the Sinai) before becoming the god of Israel, and that the name entered Israelite religion in a specific historical moment.

Tetragrammaton: The four-letter name of God in the Hebrew Bible — YHWH — written as a proper name and treated as a name that should not be spoken in Jewish tradition. The book uses the term to refer to the written form of the name and the questions it raises: the name's origin, the reason it is not pronounced, and the difference between the name and the title "the LORD."

Covenant / suzerainty treaty: A covenant in the biblical sense is a binding agreement, usually between God and Israel, that sets out obligations, blessings, and curses. The book argues that the form of the covenant at Sinai — its structure, its list of stipulations, its blessings and curses — resembles the suzerainty treaties of the Hittite diplomatic tradition, in which a great king sets terms with a lesser one. The resemblance is one of the genuinely useful pieces of evidence for dating and understanding the biblical text, and it is the kind of detail the book means by "the world behind the story."

JEDP: The standard abbreviation for the four-source model of the composition of the Torah: J (the Yahwist), E (the Elohist), D (the Deuteronomist), and P (the Priestly source). The model holds that the Torah is a composite of originally independent documents that were edited together over centuries, with the final form taking shape in the exile or after. The book explains the model in Chapter 24 and uses it as the tool for hearing the seams in the text. The book is fair to the model and honest about its limits: it is the best available tool, and it has been refined and challenged, and it is not a complete account of the composition. The model is a tool for reading, not a claim about the authors as individual people.

Midian: A region and a people in the northwestern Arabian peninsula, east of the Gulf of Aqaba, whose priests, according to the biblical story, knew Yahweh before Israel did. Midian is where Moses fled after the murder of the Egyptian, where he met Jethro (also called Reuel), the priest of Midian, who became his father-in-law, and where he spent forty years as a shepherd before the call. The book treats Midian as the setting for the second act of Moses' life and as the place where the story introduces the idea that Yahweh was already worshipped outside Israel.

Horeb / Sinai: The name of the mountain of God in the biblical text. The same mountain is called Horeb in some passages (especially in the Elohist and Deuteronomist sources) and Sinai in others (especially in the Priestly source and in later tradition). The book uses "Sinai" as the common name and notes the Horeb/Sinai alternation as one of the seams a reader can hear once the source divisions are explained. The location of the mountain is debated; the book describes the main candidates — Jebel Musa in the southern Sinai, the alternatives in the Transjordan, and the proposals in northern Arabia — and says that none is certain.

Meribah: The place where Moses struck the rock and was disqualified from entering the land. The name means "contention" or "strife," and the episode is recorded in Numbers 20. The book treats the rock at Meribah as the one disqualifying failure in Moses' life — the failure that is oddly small for the punishment attached, and the failure that the book argues is worth a whole chapter because the tradition punishing its own hero is one of the things that makes the portrait believable.

Kadesh-barnea: A site in the southern Negev, at the head of the Gulf of Aqaba, that is the staging point for the Israelites' attempts to enter Canaan and the base from which the spies were sent into the land. Kadesh is the place where the generation that left Egypt is told it will die in the wilderness, and the place where Moses strikes the rock at Meribah. The book treats Kadesh as one of the fixed geographic points in the wilderness narrative and notes that the thirty-eight years are mostly empty in the biblical text.

Exodus: The departure of the Israelites from Egypt, as told in the book of Exodus. The book uses "Exodus" for the story and the book, and notes the distinction between the historical question (did a group of people leave Egypt, and if so how many and when?) and the narrative question (what does the story mean and why has it lasted?). The book's argument is that a small group of Semitic-speaking people got out of Egypt, or remembered getting out, and that around that memory grew the story.

Torah: The five books of Moses — Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy — also called the Pentateuch. The book uses "Torah" as the standard name for the five-book unit and notes that the word means "instruction" or "teaching" rather than "law" in the narrow sense. The book argues that the Torah in its final form was assembled in Babylon, during or after the exile, by a community that had lost the land and needed a portable story. The ending of the Torah — the death of Moses on the mountain, with the land in sight but not entered — is the ending that speaks to that community and that the book makes the argument of the whole book.

Pentateuch: The five books of Moses. A Greek term (from *pentē* "five" and *tekhnē* "books") used interchangeably with "Torah" in critical scholarship. The book uses "Pentateuch" when it is discussing the formation of the five-book unit as a literary and historical object.

Documentary hypothesis: The theory that the Torah is a composite of originally independent sources, edited together over centuries. The term is often used interchangeably with "JEDP model," and the book uses both. The book explains the hypothesis in Chapter 24 and is honest about what it can and cannot do.

Deuteronomy: The fifth book of the Torah, the book of the law that, according to the story in 2 Kings 22, was found in the temple during the reign of Josiah and used to drive the reform of 622 BCE. The book argues that Deuteronomy was either produced or rediscovered at that moment, and that the book's political use by Josiah is one of the key moments in the making of the portrait of Moses. Deuteronomy is also the book that contains the conquest ideology — the language of destruction that the book treats as one of the things that cannot be skipped.

Josiah: The king of Judah who ruled from about 640 to 609 BCE and who, according to the biblical story, carried out a major religious reform in 622 BCE after the book of Deuteronomy was found in the temple. Josiah is the king the book treats as the first political user of the Moses story as it has come down to us, and the reform of 622 BCE is the first of the two key moments in the making of the portrait — the other being the exile in Babylon.

Babylonian exile: The deportation of the elite of Judah to Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, and the community's life in exile until the return under Cyrus of Persia in 538 BCE. The book argues that the exile is the moment at which the Torah was assembled into its final form, and that the portrait of Moses in its final form is a portrait made by exiles — a community that had lost the land and needed a portable identity. The book treats the exile as the turn of the whole book.

Philo of Alexandria: A Jewish philosopher of the first century CE, writing in Greek in Alexandria, who produced the first major philosophical reading of Moses in *The Life of Moses* and other works. Philo reads Moses as the philosopher-lawgiver, the man who received the true philosophy from God, and the portrait he builds is one of the earliest versions of the Moses that belongs to everyone. The book treats Philo as the first of the reception-history chapters in Chapter 28.

Josephus: Flavius Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian who wrote *Antiquities of the Jews* for a Roman audience. Josephus reshapes the biblical story of Moses to meet the needs of his Roman readers — to make Moses a statesman and a lawgiver and a wonder-worker whose story will read well in the imperial capital. The book treats Josephus as a case study in the making of the portrait, and as the fullest ancient Jewish account of Moses.

Freud / Moses and Monotheism: Sigmund Freud's 1939 book *Moses and Monotheism*, in which Freud argues that Moses was an Egyptian and that the Moses story is the story of the suppression of a primal religious trauma. The book treats Freud as reception history only, and says so plainly. Freud's book is included because it is one of the most brilliant and most wrong attempts to solve the Moses problem, and because it shows what happens when a great mind tries to make the historian's uncertainty go away.

Liberation movements / Exodus as master text: The use of the Exodus story as the master text of political liberation, from the African-American spirituals through Harriet Tubman (who was called Moses in her lifetime) to Martin Luther King Jr. (whose final speech, "I've Been to the Mountaintop," turns on the Moses story). The book treats this use in Chapter 29 and is honest about the same story being used for conquest — the American West, Zionism — and about the violence the story carries.

Further Reading

The sources below are the works that shaped the book, listed by the question they help answer. A few are primary texts; most are secondary. The list is selective rather than exhaustive — a reader who works through these will have the same landscape the book was written inside.

The sources below are the works that shaped the book, listed by the question they help answer. A few are primary texts; most are secondary. The list is selective rather than exhaustive — a reader who works through these will have the same landscape the book was written inside.

The archaeological and historical baseline

Israel Finkelstein & Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (2001) The most widely read archaeological account of the Hebrew Bible. The baseline critical position — most of the narrative does not correspond to the material record, and Israel emerged from within Canaan. Read alongside Dever and Hoffmeier for balance; the book can be schematic.

William Dever, *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (2003) The Canaanite-origins model, argued with archaeological evidence. Dever is hostile to the minimalist position that doubts the Exodus entirely while agreeing that the biblical account is not history as written. Useful for the middle ground the book needs.

James Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (1996) The serious conservative case for the historicity of the Exodus. Argues that the biblical account preserves genuine historical memory of Semitic populations in the Delta, Egyptian place names in the Exodus narrative, and the plausibility of the journey. Cautious on the scale of the Exodus.

Kenneth Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament: A Response to Hegemonic Fictions* (2003) The most substantial conservative defence of the biblical historical record. Read properly, not as a straw man. The book is stronger for representing this case fairly.

Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (1992) The standard archaeological-historical account of the region in the second millennium BCE. Essential background for the world the story is set in.

The world of Egypt and the Delta

Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (1997; English trans. 2001) The deepest study of what Moses means across two millennia. Slow going, worth every hour. Also his *The Price of Monotheism* (2001) on the Axial Age turn in religion.

The Amarna Letters (eng. trans. William L. Moran, 1992) Correspondence between Egyptian pharaohs and Canaanite vassals in the 14th century BCE. The letters mention "Habiru" and give the texture of who was moving through the region.

Papyrus Anastasi VI An Egyptian border inscription from the late 13th century BCE that records Shasu bedouin requesting entry past the frontier forts. One of the few Egyptian texts that mentions groups in the region the Exodus story describes.

The Merneptah Stele (c. 1207 BCE) The earliest extra-biblical mention of Israel. The key document for the chronology problem. The Stele is in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo; a copy is in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

The biblical text — translations and commentaries

Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (2004) The best literary translation of the Torah for an English reader. Alter reads the text as literature first, and the book needs that kind of reading.

Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* (1986) and *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (1991) Humane, learned, readable. Sarna represents the midcentury American Jewish commentary tradition well and is one of the most balanced of the older generation of biblical scholars.

Carol Meyers, *Exodus* (Cambridge Bible Commentary, 2005) A solid, current critical commentary. Useful for the legal and narrative chapters.

Source theory — who wrote the Torah

Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (1987; revised editions) The single clearest popular explanation of the JEPD model for a lay reader. Steal its clarity, not its text.

Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Exodus: How It Happened and What It Means* (2017) A more recent argument that a small Levite group really did leave Egypt and brought Yahwistic religion with them. Worth reading as a serious attempt to reconcile the archaeological and textual evidence.

Joel Baden, *The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing and Refining the Documentary Hypothesis* (2012) The most rigorous recent statement of the documentary hypothesis. Honest about what the theory cannot do.

Frank Moore Cross, *The Documentary Origins of the Pentateuch* (various editions) and *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (1973) The classic formulation of the four-source model, and on the poetic texts (Song of the Sea, Song of Deborah) as the oldest material in the Hebrew Bible.

Thomas Römer, *The Invention of God* (2015; English trans. 2017) The most accessible recent account of where YHWH came from. Useful for the argument that Moses' god has a backstory.

John Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea* (1985) On the chaos-myth background of biblical language. Useful for reading the plagues and the sea crossing in a larger cosmological frame.

Konrad Schmid, *A Philosophy of Old Testament Theology* (2012) Part of the broader "Israelite history as memory" turn in recent scholarship. Useful for the argument of Part Five.

The interior man — psychology and literary reading

Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture: A Literary Midrash of Exodus* (2005) Extraordinary on the psychology of the text. Zornberg reads Exodus as the record of a mental life. The best single source for the interior Moses the book tries to recover. Worth reading cover to cover, even the parts the project does not use directly.

Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (1985) and *Biblical Storytelling: Figures of Speech in the Bible* (1996) The classic literary study of how the biblical text works as narrative. The analysis of gaps, omissions, and the way the text hides as much as it reveals is directly relevant to the book's method.

The reception — how Moses has meant what he meant

Philo of Alexandria, *Life of Moses* (Loeb, or various translations) The first major philosophical reading of Moses, from the first century CE. The account of Moses as philosopher and lawgiver. Useful for Chapter 28.

Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* (Loeb, various) The fullest ancient Jewish account of Moses. Josephus reshapes the biblical story to meet the needs of his Roman readers. Useful for Chapter 28 and to see what a first-century Jewish apologetic does with the Moses story.

Rabbinic midrash on Moses — especially *Midrash Rabbah* and the commentaries that preserve rabbinic tradition (Maimonides' commentary on the Mishnah, Rashi, the later commentators). The rabbinic tradition reads Moses as teacher, lawgiver, and the man who spoke with God "face to face."

Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) A book that is partly psychoanalysis and partly a historical hypothesis. Read as reception history only, and the book must say so plainly. Useful for Chapter 28 and for showing what happens when a great mind tries to solve the Moses problem.

The Qur'an — the Musa cycle (Surahs 7, 10, 17, 20, 28, and others) Moses is the most-mentioned prophet in the Qur'an. The account follows the biblical story closely in outline but with significant theological differences. Useful for Chapter 28, handled in its own terms.

Bruce Feiler, *America's Prophet: Moses and the American Story* (2007) A popular account of how the Exodus story has functioned in American history. Useful for Chapter 29, with the caveat that it is popular history.

Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (1986) The best book on Exodus as the master text of political liberation. Essential for Chapter 29.

Catherine Clinton, *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom* (2004) A biography of the woman who was called Moses in her lifetime. Useful for the material on Tubman and the Underground Railroad in Chapter 29.

Martin Luther King Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop" (1968) The final speech, which turns on the Moses story. Essential primary source for Chapter 29. The text is widely available; the speech was delivered in Memphis on April 3, 1968, the night before King's assassination.

The theological and philosophical background

Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (in English, various editions) The classic midcentury theology of the Old Testament. Useful for the argument about the covenant and the law in Chapters 17 and 19.

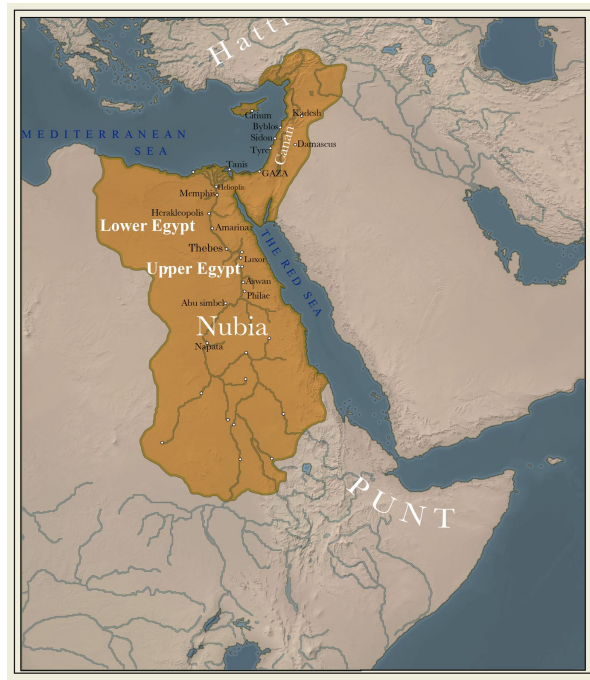
Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (1972) The essential study of Deuteronomy as a composition in its own right, which predates the Josiah rediscovery. Useful for Chapter 25.

Jonathan Kirsch, *Moses: A Life* (1998) A popular predecessor. The book knows what Kirsch does and does it differently. Read to see the shape of the problem from the outside before writing the inside of it.

Appendix C — Further Reading

Maps

The maps in this book are guides to the geography the story moves through. None of them is definitive; where the evidence is thin, the map is provisional, and the caption says so. All images are drawn from Wikimedia Commons and are used under the licence noted in each entry (one exception, noted below, is a custom diagram made for this book). Licences range from public domain through CC-BY and CC-BY-SA; attribution is given where required.



New Kingdom Egypt at its height. The story of Moses is set inside this empire — in the Delta, on the eastern frontier, and in the land the Egyptians called Canaan. The map shows the empire under Thutmose III, c. 1453 BCE, at the mid-New Kingdom peak. (Image: Thutmose, CC0 1.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

1. New Kingdom Egypt and its empire. The canvas the story is set against — New Kingdom Egypt at its greatest extent, from the Nile Valley and Nubia to the Delta and Egypt's sphere of control in the Levant.



The eastern Delta and the borderlands in the New Kingdom. This is the region the Exodus story takes as its starting point — the land of Goshen, the store cities of Pithom and Ramesses, and the road out toward Canaan. The reconstruction of the ancient shoreline and river branches is provisional. (Image: Eroica, CC0 1.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

2. The eastern Delta and the Levantine borderlands. Where the Hebrews are said to have lived — the site of Avaris/Pi-Ramesses, the Way of Horus, and Egypt's frontier with Canaan.



A reconstruction of the landscape of Avaris/Tell el-Dab'a, c. 1500 BCE, with the Pelusian arm of the Nile and the location of Pi-Ramesses/Qantir. The archaeological site sits at the centre of the Delta portion of the map above. (Image: Didia / David Schmid, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

A second image for this entry: a reconstruction of the landscape at ground level.



Ancient Egypt with Avaris marked in the eastern Delta, alongside Tanis, Busiris, Sais, and the other Delta sites. The Exodus story names the store cities Pithom and Ramesses (Exodus 1:11), and this is the region they are identified with. (Image: Jeff Dahl, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

3. Pi-Ramesses and the building programme. The one place the Exodus story's details ring true — the capital Ramesses II built on the site of the former Hyksos capital Avaris.



Lower Egypt in detail, with Avaris marked in the eastern Delta alongside Tanis, Mendes, Pelusium, and the Delta branches. A true excavation plan of Tell el-Dab'a's stratified occupation levels is not available under a free licence and would be preferable for a printed edition. (Image: Jeff Dahl; derivative MinisterForBadTimes, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

A second image for this entry, zooming in on Lower Egypt and the Delta branches.



A modern rendering of the Exodus route drawn over a satellite image, showing one of the proposed roads out of Egypt. The candidate bodies of water for the crossing — Lake Timsah, the northern Bitter Lakes, the northern Gulf of Suez, and the

northern Gulf of Aqaba — are all still argued for; none is certain. (Image: Ori229, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

4. The route of the Exodus. The road the story says the Israelites took, from the eastern Delta into the Sinai and toward Canaan. The geography is debated and no candidate crossing site is certain.



Abraham Ortelius's 1624 map of the Exodus route, showing how the geography of the story was imagined in an earlier century. A classical cartographic treatment, included alongside the modern map for contrast. (Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.)

A second image for this entry, showing how the route was drawn in an earlier century.



The Sinai peninsula. The traditional site of the mountain of God is Jebel Musa in the south; other proposals place the theophany in the Transjordan or northern Arabia. The map does not itself mark the candidate sites — the reader is invited to imagine them. (Image: Kaidor, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

5. Sinai geography. Where the law was given — the Sinai peninsula and the candidate locations for the mountain of God.



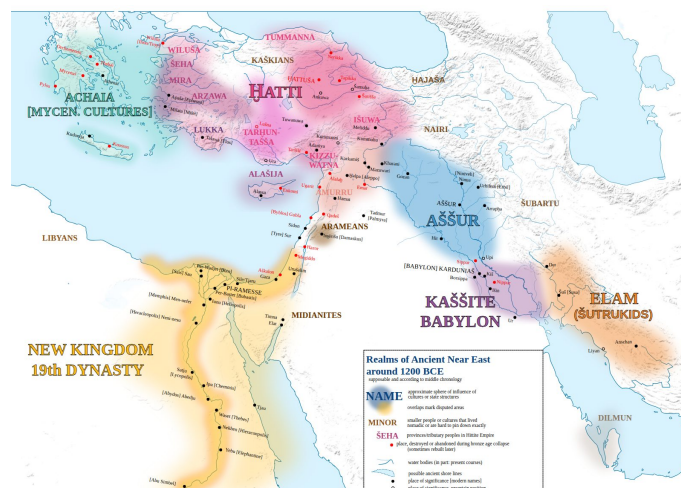
Midian and the northwestern Arabian peninsula. Moses fled here after killing an Egyptian and spent forty years as a shepherd before the call at the bush. Place names on this base map are modern and archaeological, not the place names of the Bronze Age. (Image: Enyavar, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

6. Midian and the northwestern Arabian peninsula. Where Moses waited — the region east of the Gulf of Aqaba whose priests, the story says, knew Yahweh before Israel did.



The eastern Delta and the geography of the birth story. The basket was found among the reeds of the Nile, in the marshy region where the water is shallow and the papyrus grows — not a claim about the historical itinerary of an infant, but a guide to the setting of the story's first scene. (Image: Eroica, CC0 1.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

7. The eastern Delta for the birth narrative. The geography of the basket — the river branch where the story places the infant Moses among the reeds.



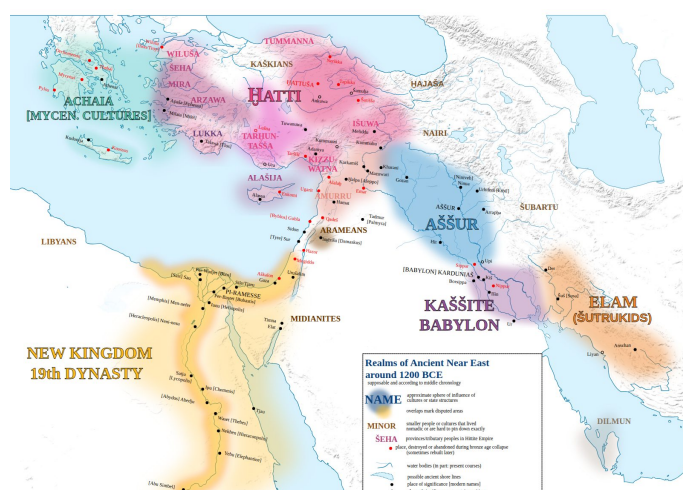
The Ancient Near East, shown here in the Bronze Age collapse period, as background context for the geopolitical world that produced the Neo-Babylonian empire and, later, the deportation of Judah's elite to Babylon in 586 BCE. A dedicated map of the deportation and return routes was not found under a free licence; this map serves as regional context. (Image: Enyavar, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

8. Babylon and the routes of the deportation. Where the Torah was assembled — the world of the Babylonian exile, into which the final portrait of Moses was completed.



The view from the summit of Mount Nebo, looking toward the Dead Sea, the Jordan Valley, and the hazy shape of Jericho in the distance — exactly what the story says Moses saw. The mountain is in the land of Moab, east of the Jordan, opposite Jericho. (Image: Mohammad hajeer, CC BY 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

9. Mount Nebo and the promised land. The mountain of the ending — where Moses is said to have looked out over the land and died.



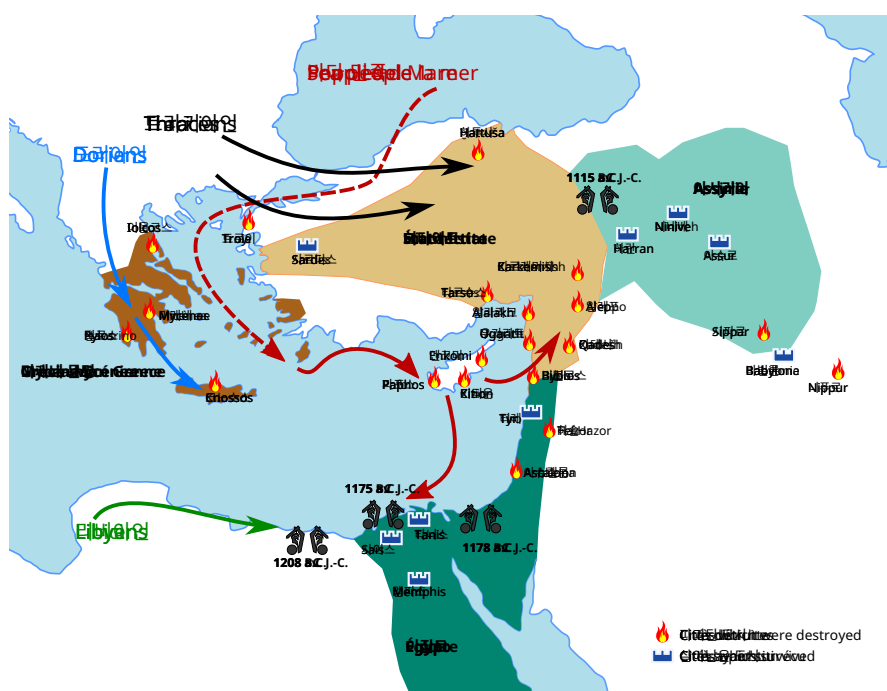
The Ancient Near East in the period of Merneptah's campaign, c. 1207 BCE — the Egyptian New Kingdom holding in the Levant, the collapsing Hittite Empire, and the Sea Peoples. The Merneptah Stele, the earliest extra-biblical mention of Israel, shows Israel already settled in Canaan at a time that creates real tension for a Ramesside-era Exodus. A dedicated map tracing Merneptah's campaign route was not found under a free licence. (Image: Enyavar, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

10. The Merneptah Stele and the Egyptian campaign in Canaan. The earliest mention of Israel outside the Bible, in an Egyptian victory inscription from around 1207 BCE.

Timeline of the New Kingdom pharaohs from Ahmose I to the end of the Twentieth Dynasty, with Exodus-chronology markers.

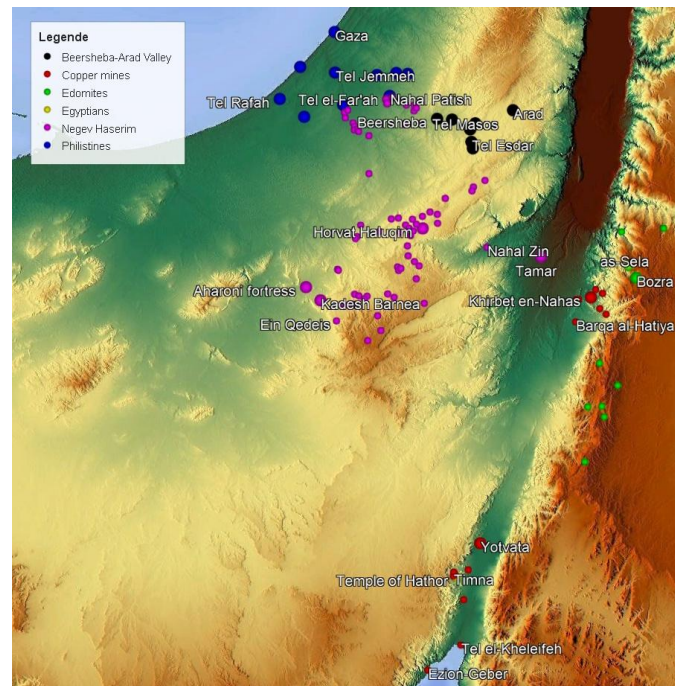
A timeline of the New Kingdom pharaohs from Ahmose I (c. 1550 BCE) to the end of the Twentieth Dynasty (c. 1070 BCE), marking the two leading candidates for an Exodus-era pharaoh (the Ramesside candidate, c. 1290–1250 BCE, and the earlier eighteenth-Dynasty candidate, c. 1446 BCE), the Merneptah Stele (c. 1207 BCE), and the Late Bronze–Iron Age I transition. Reign dates are approximate and debated. No suitable timeline of this kind exists on Wikimedia Commons under a free licence, so this diagram was custom-built for this book. (Image: custom diagram created for this book, not sourced from Wikimedia Commons.)

11. The New Kingdom pharaohs and the Exodus chronology. The timeline the question runs against — since the biblical text never names the pharaoh of the Exodus.



The Bronze Age collapse, c. 1200 BCE — the conflicts and movements of peoples at the end of the Late Bronze Age, including the Sea Peoples and the destruction of city-states, that form the backdrop to the transition into Iron Age I, when the archaeological picture of an emerging Israel first appears. (Image: Lommes, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

12. Canaan in the Bronze Age collapse. The land they were supposed to enter — the hill country of Ephraim and Judah, and the archaeological picture of an Israel that grew up within Canaan rather than arriving from outside it.



The Negev and surroundings in the Iron Age I–IIa period, showing the settlement patterns of the transitional period in which Israel emerges within the highlands of Canaan — the ending the story never reaches, since Moses himself does not enter it. (Image: DaWalda, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

A second image for this entry, focused on the Negev and the Iron Age I settlement pattern.