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My New Book, "Moses and the Original Torah", 1961.

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MY NEW BOOK • "MOSES AND THE ORIGINAL TORAH"

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Friends have asked me why I chose to write a book on Moses. Ever since my student days I have always stood in reverent admiration before this spiritual giant. I have always regarded him as the foremost pioneer in the realm of religion, whose revolutionary insights and teachings were in the nature of a break-through and ushered in a new era in the spiritual development of mankind.

I have also been somewhat resentful of the manner in which some historians of religion, and so-called Higher Biblical critics have relegated Moses to a vague legendary periphery in the history of religion. He lived so long ago, they argued, more than three thousand years ago -- that advanced ethical teachings could not possibly be ascribed to him. Whatever he taught must have been rudimentary, and imperfectly developed, and whatever there is exalted in his teaching must be the product of a later age.

These historians of religion and theologians have applied, knowingly or not, the doctrine of evolution to man's spiritual life in the same way as it is applied to all organic life. But the parallel is quite unwarranted. What is intrinsically exalted in man's spiritual life does not necessarily come late in time. As often as not it was projected very early by some extraordinary spiritual personality. His age may not be ready for him. His teachings outlive his age.

The evolution of a moral ideal follows a line of its own. Moral ideals do not evolve from unconscious human behavior. Nor is their advance necessarily slow and gradual. Often they come as a flash of light. It is futile to attempt to trace the development of a religious culture to impersonal forces and to apply evolutionistic processes and judgments to it. It is often the fortuitous appearance of a forceful personality, possessed of a new idea, which gives new

substance and direction to a people's religious life, and no one can explain how and why he appeared. It is one of the unaccountable "accidents" in the spiritual and intellectual history of the human race.

Moses was not a product of his age. He did not borrow his revolutionary ideas from his environment. Just how he came to entertain his ideas is no greater mystery than the radical insights which come to all men of genius. The appearance of any great personality in history is unpredictable and his endowments are inexplicable. He leaps into his age unexpectedly like lightning out of darkness and his generation may grant him or deny him scope and opportunity. To be sure, he does not operate in a vacuum, but whatever truth he reveals wells up on his soul with the force of an immediate and overpowering apprehension. Whatever he conceives of intellectually or experiences spiritually is a new act of creation and is his very own.

Some scholars have maintained that it was not really Moses who was responsible for the great ethical teachings which are found in the Torah, but the later prophets. They trace the beginnings of spiritual Judaism to the literary prophets of the eighth through the sixth century B.C.E. Prior to that time, they maintain, the religion of Israel was little different from the religions of all its heathen neighbors. It was the literary prophets who introduced new concepts of religion and ethics, radical new departures in ways of thinking about God and of worshipping Him. There are even those who maintain that Judaism actually began with the reformation of Josiah in 621 B.C.E.

Nothing can be further from the truth. It was not the prophets of Israel from Amos down, nor the earlier non-literary prophets, Samuel, Nathan, Gad and Elijah, who created the religion of Israel. They would have been the last to

make any such claim. They never conceived of themselves as innovators or originators of the ideas that they proclaimed. They regarded themselves as having been sent to remind the people of what they had forgotten, to recall them to a faith and a way of life which their ancestors had chosen to adopt but which their descendants had chosen to ignore.

They came to alert the people to the moral corruption of their age and to warn them of the retribution which was sure to follow. The prophet was, in very truth, Mochiah Basha'ar, he "who reproveth in the gate" (Isa. 29:21). He summoned the nation to repentance for sins committed against the moral laws which were very well known to them. Jeremiah clearly defined the mission of the prophet. When God brought the people of Israel out of Egypt, He gave them this command: "Obey my voice, and I will be your God" (Jer. 7:23). But they did not obey. Whereupon God sent them time and again His servants, the prophets. Yet they did not listen to them and did not obey the voice of God. They did not accept musar, correction (Jer. 6:21-28). The people consistently refused to accept correction (Jer. 5:3). The function of the prophet was to bring musar, a call to repentance. The prophets spoke with the authority of divine inspiration, but always as the restorers of the true and ancient faith to a generation that had ignored or forgotten it (Ezek. 2:3-5).

What was new in their preaching was the extraordinary earnestness and passionate intensity with which they uttered their message. Theirs was a spiritual and ethical fervor utterly unknown in the ancient world. While in their restatements of the centuries-old parables of their faith, they did not add anything new to the original Torah, they elaborated upon it, plumbed its depths, and applied it to their times with force, uncompromising frankness, and impartiality. There is genuine originality to such rare and consecrated discipleship.

What was also substantially new in their preaching concerned the future -- Aharit Ha-Yamin -- the end of days. Beyond the present they projected a vision of distant time when all the nations of the earth would acknowledge YHWH as their God and would live by His law. They saw men and nations reconciled at last in a universal brotherhood of peace. They entertained the hope that Israel, first-born to the idea of the one universal spiritual God, might serve as "a light to the nations" guiding them to the happy consummation of a free, just, and united world community (Isa. 2:2-4). This is especially true of the prophets of the sixth century who preached comfort and hope and pointed to new horizons to their broken, defeated, and dispersed people. They introduced the Messianic motif which was to gain such emphasis in subsequent centuries.

In the original Torah of Moses, there is no reference to disarmament or universal peace. One finds in the "words" deep concern for the protection of the stranger -- "You shall love the stranger." But it remained for the literary prophets of the eighth century onward to draw the ultimate implications of the idea of human brotherhood in terms of universal disarmament and of a peaceful society of nations founded upon law. It required centuries of living as a nation among nations for the ethical idea of a warless, international community to ripen among the spiritual leaders of Israel. The generation of Moses was as yet far removed from that experience and from that vision. The high plateau from which this wider panorama of mankind could be seen had not yet been reached.

What were the great, new ideas of Moses which are the core of the Torah -- the Torah of Moses -- as we now have it?

Moses, of course, taught monotheism but he did not originate it. Abraham did. The Hebrews had a religious tradition which centered in the worship of one God long before some of them migrated to Egypt. They traced it back to their racial progenitors, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Even before Abraham left his home in Harran in northern Mesopotamia (c. 1800 B.C.E.) to go to Canaan, his faith and that of his household was basically monotheistic. He worshiped a supreme deity who created heaven and earth (Gen. 15:22), by the name of El Elyon or El Shaddai (Exod. 6:12).

There is no indication in all the early biblical records that in the patriarchal age the Hebrews worshiped any other god, or that their God shared His sovereignty with other gods or goddesses. The altars and memorial stones which the Patriarchs erected during their migrations through Canaan were dedicated exclusively to the one God of heaven and earth. It is of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that Moses spoke to Pharaoh and to the Children of Israel. It is to the Patriarchs that the Jewish people throughout subsequent ages invariably traced the origin of their faith -- not to Moses or the later prophets. The Bible speaks of the Torah of Moses but never to the God of Moses, only of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The religion which Moses gave to his people was not an entirely new religion, but an old religion to which he gave depth, range and new horizons. With him the religion ~~xxxxxx~~ of the early Hebrews was transformed into a unique and distinctive faith that differed in some ways from the religion of the Patriarchs and in many ways differed radically from the religion of ~~the~~ all other peoples. The Israelites were the only people in antiquity who had ever been enslaved in a foreign land and had experienced the joy and quickening of a sudden liberation and who were now on their way back to their ancestral home. The exploited

Egyptian masses, in spite of their wretchedness and serfdom, never in their long history, revolted against the existing order. The Israelites had broken with their past. Moses was resolved to capitalize upon their unique and exhilarating experience and to mold them into a new and different kind of society. These men could really start fresh; they were truly new-born. Fleeing from Egypt, they were not encumbered by temple, priesthood, or royalty. They were no longer chained to ancient laws and to immemorial customs. They were, in fact, a classless society that was free to organize its life on new patterns.

Moses spelled out the full implications of the worship of this one God -- whom the Patriarchs had called "El Elyon", "El Shaddai" -- to whom he gave the additional name of YHVH -- "the Accomplisher" -- He who performs and fulfills" -- "He who brings to pass whatever He promises." By freeing the Hebrew slaves from the bondage of Egypt, God had fulfilled the promise which He had made to the forefathers of the Hebrews. This God was now prepared to make a covenant with them as a people, even as He had made a covenant with their ancestors, individually with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But, before YHVH would make such a covenant, before He would become their Guardian and Protector in the future, they must first commit themselves to a way of life acceptable to Him. They must accept a new discipline. They must pledge themselves to resist the ways of the heathen, their idolatries and their immoralities.

YHVH, Moses told the people, was a very exacting God, an El Kadosh, an exclusive and holy God. He will not tolerate the worship of any other gods. He is El Kana, a jealous God, not in the sense of being envious of any other god. No other gods existed of whom He need be jealous. YHVH is the only God. But He is intolerant of those who would persist in worshiping other gods alongside

of Him. He demands of His people, whom He has especially chosen, not alone an exclusive devotion, but a career of relentless opposition to the worship of other gods. "You shall worship no other god". "You shall tear down their altars, and break their pillars, and cut down their Asherim." This is a new note. The Patriarchs were monotheists, to be sure, but not militantly so; they were not iconoclasts.

But this intolerance of the worship of other gods, and of the making of images, should not lead us to the hasty conclusion that the God to Whose worship Moses summoned his people was a stern inexorable being, a tyrannical ruler, a relentless judge. In the theophany on Sinai, YHWH revealed Himself to Moses as "YHWH, YHWH, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in mercy and faithfulness, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin" (Exod. 34:6-7).

Forces of nature are relentless. They cannot change. But YHWH is not a force of nature. He is the God of nature and of man. He can forgive and change and heal and redeem. "He made known his ways to Moses,...As a father pities his children, so YHWH pities those who revere Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust" (Ps. 103).

Moses was the first religious teacher of mankind who rejected the attributes of the dreadful, the implacable, and the incalculable, which the ancients so frequently ascribed to their gods. He taught his people to think of YHWH, the sole God of the Universe, as the Compassionate, the Loving and the Forgiving.

Along with the new note of active opposition to polytheism is the thoroughgoing prohibition against the making of graven images, for purposes of worship. The image often becomes a substitute for the idea and often distorts and displaces it.

An idea which is represented in material form may lead to moral aberrations. Thus the attempt to represent God as Creator in physical imagery and ritual led to phallic symbols and to the cult of sacred prostitution. But to think of God abstractly, inwardly, in terms of attributes of life and love, of goodness, justice, and mercy is to stir man's inner life to move in these very directions. A moral compulsion is set to work. The outer image frequently comes between God and man. An imageless God inspires resourcefulness in the spirit of man and enhances the vitality of his inner life. Man becomes self-driven to explore the abstract idea to its ultimate conclusions. The awareness of a great spiritual truth compels a man to go in quest of the source of that truth and to seek new revelations from ~~him~~ "the God who hides Himself." He who thinks of the spirit spiritually must forever go beyond. "The keynote of idolatry is contentment with the prevalent gods" (Alfred North Whitehead).

Moses instructed the people whom he had led out of Egypt, that the way to worship this One, imageless God is through a life of holiness -- not through sacrifices, or magic, or mere ritual and ceremony -- but through justice, love, charity, brotherhood -- through the love of one's neighbor, and the love of the stranger, through reverence for the aged, by honoring one's parents, by not bearing false witness or hating or taking vengeance, or oppressing or exploiting the poor and the weak.

Some of these ethical ideas were not unknown in the ancient world. The roots of moral beginnings are generally hidden and difficult to trace. The uniqueness of the Mosaic Torah resides in the fact that these and other exalted ethical ideas were made peremptory divine mandates, the essentials of faith, and the only true way of worshipping YHWH. Moses set ethical values fast in the religious life of man. They became an integral part of religion, postulates of

theology, and thereafter and for all time remained an inseparable part of true religion. A new synthesis and orientation were thus achieved for the spiritual life of mankind, a bold new design, a major shift of emphasis, away from the magical, the mythological, the ritualistic and towards the ethical, the human in religion.

Moses was resolved to make of the motley crowd of slaves whom we had led out of Egypt, a people -- and a different kind of a people in the ancient world -- a unique people, an -- one that would be bound eternally, by a covenant, to a spiritual and ethical life-purpose -- "a kingdom of priests and a holy people" which would forever be dedicated to new faith, a new mode of worship and a new way of life.

Where are these fundamental teachings of Moses to be found? What is the original Torah which he gave to Israel? What parts of the Pentateuch can actually be traced to him?

The "Decalogue", the Ten "Words" or Commandments (debarim) are in all likelihood part of the original Torah, though not necessarily in their present form or order. They are fundamental teachings of a universal moral character, of high generality, precisely the kind of doctrine which Moses, intent upon fashioning a new society of free men dedicated to the worship, through righteousness, of the one unseen and unrepresented God, would announce to the people. But the Decalogue is not the whole of the original Torah. It is not intended to be complete and all-inclusive. It is an excerpt of the original Torah. It was a common practice to make short "excerpts" or "epitomes" out of larger codes for special purposes. Ten was a common type of arrangement; groupings of ten were both convenient and an aid to memory.

But there are other "Words" of the same character as those of the Decalogue which are found elsewhere in the Torah. They are found in the three codes: The Book of the Covenant, in Exodus, chapters 20-23, the so-called Holiness Code in Leviticus, chapters 19-26, and chapters 5-28 in Deuteronomy. But, taken together, and making due allowance for later editing, the Words which are found in the three codes constitute the original Torah of Moses.

How shall we characterize these "Words" as a whole, this original Torah of Moses, from which all else in Judaism developed?

There is little of formal theology in these Words which constitute the original Torah of Moses, other than the two foundation doctrines of the faith -- the unity of God and the prohibition of images. There is no doctrine here of inherent human depravity and of the need for atonement, redemption, or salvation. The sorrows and despair of the world are not dwelt on, and no way of escape is offered from the trammels of existence. There are no magical formulae here by means of which to constrain the deity, nor any technique of divination by which to ascertain His will. Nothing is said about preexistence, reincarnation, transmigration, a judgment day, resurrection, or immortality. No messiah is promised, no world renewal, no future age, and no kingdom not of this world. Here are clearly indicated ethical guideposts, pointing the way toward a sound and orderly way of life for the individual and society. Here are standards of behavior which do not transcend the limits of man's powers. "For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off" (Deut. 30:11). While mindful of the frailties of man and of the pitiless impediments of his life on earth, demands are nevertheless made upon him, and goals are set for him which call for unremitting spiritual

effort and aspiration toward the good life and the good society. This is the original Torah which Moses set before the children of Israel according to the command of YHWH -- a Torah of monumental simplicity, of lucid clarity, of great depths, but of no mysteries.

