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Articles, "By a Prophet the Lord Brought Up Israel Out of Egypt,"
Essays on the Occasion of the Seventieth Anniversary of Dropsie
University, reprint, 1979.

Reprint From
**ESSAYS ON THE OCCASION OF THE
SEVENTIETH ANNIVERSARY
OF
THE DROPSIE UNIVERSITY
(1909-1979)**



“By A Prophet The Lord Brought Up Israel Out of Egypt”

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I SHALL FOREVER be grateful to Dr. Zeitlin for long mornings spent in his Drake Hotel apartment. There were books everywhere and learning. During the first years we talked about my thesis on the Maimonidean controversy for which he was advisor and referee. Later we talked of many things, including my interest in the treatment accorded to Moses by our tradition.

Dr. Zeitlin guided me to Artapanus and through Josephus. He helped me to recognize the richness of the midrashic materials on Moses which circulated during Hellenistic times. Out of these talks came my paper on “Moses and the Hungry Birds” (*JQR*, Vol. 64, pp. 123–153) in which I suggested *inter alia* that Moses had been worshipped as an intercessor by some among the para-military Judean clans who came down to Egypt with the Persians and the Ptolemies.

The more I reflected on the profusion of such Hellenistic embellishments the more I became conscious of the marked contrast between the number and nature of these eulogistic traditions, and the diffidence of the Torah biography and of the conventional references to Moses in the other canonized books. Surely, numerous stories about Moses must have circulated in pre-exilic times. The Hellenistic midrash had not sprung up full-blown. Yet, the Torah editors were remarkably parsimonious in providing details of Moses' life. Why? The more I pondered this question the more it became apparent that not only had the Torah narrative kept a tight rein on legendary embellishments of Moses' biography, but that the editors had reshaped popular history to reduce Moses' leadership role. Why? The nature of the Biblical material makes any explanation necessarily highly conjectural; but, I believe, the attempt is worth making and I gratefully dedicate this piece to my revered teacher.

* * * * *

Rudolf Kittel belonged to a distinguished generation of German scholars who, around the turn of the century, elaborated and refined the then current text critical approach to the Hebrew Bible. Late in his career, in 1925 to be exact, Kittel published a popular book, *Great Men and Movements in Israel*, in which he outlined what had happened in Biblical times as these events had been reconstructed by the scholars of his generation. Though designed

for a non-professional audience, the book was highly praised by scholars and continued to attract attention.* Thirty years later Emil Kraeling would describe it as "a noble book."¹ Ten years ago Theodor H. Gaster felt it useful to prepare critical notes to a reprint edition.²

Kittel organized his history around the biographies of Old Testament personages. He began with Moses. Why did he begin with Moses rather than with Abraham? Kittel did not consider it possible to disentangle the real Abraham from the patriarchal legends; yet, with Moses he felt on more solid ground. Indeed, Kittel not only was prepared to differentiate fact from legendary addition in the Biblical account of Moses; but to provide a physical description of the man: "the tall and powerful frame, the well-poised head, the sharp penetrating eyes of the leader, of the victor of man over obstacles, the firm hand of the ruler ever alert and faithful to his duty. . . ."³

All this is pure invention. The Bible tells us a good deal about various events in Moses' life but no line of Bible text provides a physical description of the man.⁴ We do not know if he was tall or short, thin or fat, dark skinned or light; whether, in fact, he had what might be considered a commanding presence. Kittel simply projected his own image of the hero on to a man whom he believed to have been heroic. This process is no more scholarly than the research behind all those illustrated books of Bible stories which fill popular libraries in which Moses always is presented as tall, dark, well-muscled and prepossessing. Paid illustrators can be forgiven; after all, they have to provide features; but scholars should know better. Kittel here had ceased to be a critical scholar and had become a creative writer and artful propagandist. As Gaster has shown, Kittel reveals here his political life as a passionate German nationalist, part of that generation of post World War I revanchists who clamored for a noble leader, a *fuehrer*, who would lift the Reich from the bourgeois tawdriness of the Weimar Republic to glory.⁵ This side of the Holocaust it seems particularly grotesque to find Moses recast as one of Wagner's Teutonic heroes, but our argument is not simply with Kittel's politics or even with his preconception that heroes come with a six foot frame, blue eyes and blonde hair. Our question goes to Kittel's conception of Moses as a man of affairs and political skill. Kittel stands for many scholars and populists who have written that the Bible presents a Moses who

* I am grateful to Peter Machinist of Arizona State University who read this paper carefully and whose criticisms were most helpful. Needless to say, he is in no way responsible for the thesis or any mistakes which remain.

¹ Kraeling, Emil, *The Old Testament Since the Reformation*, Harper & Row, N. Y. C. 1955, p. 298.

² Kittel, Rudolf, *Great Men and Moments in Israel*, Ktav, N. Y. C., 1968.

³ Kittel, p. 19.

⁴ Exod. 4:10. "I have never been a man of words . . . I am slow of speech and slow of tongue" seems to be conventional hyperbole, not an actual physical description.

⁵ Kittel, pp. XVI-XVII.

is larger than life, dynamic, a man of imposing will, brave and daring.⁶ The image of Moses as Seigfried shocks everyone, but the image of Moses as a leader of men and a hero does not; though well it should. I suggest that the received text reflects a conscious effort not to present Moses in this guise and that his portrait reflects some of the central religious forces at work at the heart of the Torah enterprise.

In common usage, we use the term hero to denote either a man of great courage and initiative or the chief character in a saga or chronicle. Kittel has no doubt that Moses is a hero in both senses of the word:

From earliest times in Israel, generation after generation has told the story of the great man who, even before the Israelites could be called a nation, led them from Egypt, the house of bondage, into freedom and a new life. He broke the Egyptian yoke, led his hosts into the desert where he gave them the God whom they afterwards worshipped, gave them the code of laws of their God, and finally led them through the desert to the land which they had learned to look upon as their own. Through all the ages Moses has been honored as the helper in need, the leader, the founder of the nation, but most revered as the messenger of the new God and His laws.⁷

Kittel assumed that Moses was the central figure in the pivotal events chronicled in Exodus-Deuteronomy and that as the central figure in these happenings his will and ability made happen what did happen. My reading suggests that the Torah presents Moses as an obedient servitor rather than as a man of initiative, as a holy man rather than as a practical man of affairs.

⁶ The list of such works is legion. I cite only one writer, Elias Auerbach, an exile from the Reich Kittel's Fuehrer built:

The superiority of (Moses) his spirit was so immense that it would not have been surprising if he had immediately been raised up as a god-man. At no time did he succumb to this temptation! And in addition he had to have all the ability of a statesman and army commander; he had to be able to assume the leadership of a people and to deal with the pressing dangers of every hour; he needed infallible judgment and the ability to make prompt decisions. He had to give the right command at the right moment. He required never-flagging power of will to carry things through, and the ability to probe into the smallest details in order to make possible their execution. He was unfeeling to the point of cruelty in order to break opposition and annihilate opponents. But he was not cruel; on the contrary he was just; violent in anger and "full of jealousy" when some principle was to be guarded and deviations from the novel way had to be averted. In addition he had infinite patience and forbearance with the weakest of the weak who indeed were no giants as he was. A tireless teacher who by example and instruction so filled a new generation with his ideas that they endured after his death. And yet he was so close to the heart of the simplest one that all trusted his judgment and saw in him the father to whom they could come with all their trials, troubles and disagreements. He "bore the burden of the people." He had to provide food and water. He had to give guidance on the way and provide security; he had to "stem the careless selfishness of the people and within his community enforce subordination" etc. Auerbach, Elias, *Moses*, Wayne University Press, Detroit, 1975, pp. 215-6.

⁷ Kittel, p. 19.

For our purposes let us put aside the much-debated question of the historicity of Moses. Lacking extra Biblical confirmation any search for the historical Moses begins in conjecture and ends in uncertainty. I have no doubt that Moses lived and played a major role in some of the events with which the received text associates him, but the biography of the man is beyond reconstruction. Why do I come down for the historicity of Moses? As I shall show, the text makes a conscious effort to diminish his role and it seems to me unlikely that editors would invent someone whose presence in the narrative would cause them embarrassment. No one deliberately creates problems for himself.

I want to concentrate on Kittel's other assumption, the typically modern assumption born out of recent research into the pious literary conventions of Near Eastern writing and out of our inbred humanism; that however the Exodus and the Covenant may have been perceived and reported by the Israelites, these events can only have been human achievements, and that since the received tradition gives Moses pride of place in those stories he was, in fact, the actual liberator and lawgiver.

Is this assumption faithful to the Torah's version of these events? I invite you to reread the Exodus-Numbers narratives which deal with Moses. Read carefully; but, for the moment, pay more attention to the narrative of the received text than to all you know about its various strata. Pay particular attention to those paragraphs which describe Moses after he assumes a public role and go right through to the end of the first telling of these events in the book of Numbers.⁸ Notice that nowhere does the received text suggest that Moses broke Pharaoh's will: "the Lord struck down all the first-born in the land of Egypt" (Exod. 12:29); "That very day the Lord led the Israelites from the land of Egypt, troop by troop" (Exod. 12:15); or that Moses led his people in the wilderness, "The Lord went before them in a pillar of cloud by day to guide them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night . . ." (Exod. 13:20); or that Moses presented to them the God whom they afterwards worshipped, "the Lord called to him (Moses) from the mountain saying, 'thus shall you say to the house of Jacob . . . if you obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples'" (Exod. 19:35). Always it is God who is the liberator and leader: "the Lord continued: 'I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians, and bring them out of the land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the home of the Canaanites . . . (Exod. 3:8).

More often than not Moses is pictured as a trustworthy ambassador carrying out the royal will. Moses makes no move to return to Egypt until God

⁸ Most private scenes occur in chapters 1-3 of Exodus and precede Moses' commissioning, but not all (*cf.* Num. 10:29 ff.). Interestingly, almost all such material is assigned to the older strata of the received tradition.

orders him to go. His mission in Egypt is to carry God's message and to announce God's miracles. He has no latitude to act on his own. It is not Moses' skill as a diplomat, but the forceful logic of God's plagues which persuade Pharaoh. When faced with a difficult decision Moses retires to the Tent of Meeting to consult God. Moses does not determine the daily line of march; he humbly follows the lead of God. Moses does not lead the army in battle. It is God who determines which of the neighboring people are to be attacked and with which negotiations are to be entered. Moses does not provision the people. God provides manna and quail. Moses does not make law, he repeats law which God makes known to him. When Moses' authority is challenged God defends him.

In his public role Moses carries with him the staff which announced his role as God's ambassador and which was the agency through which God's power manifested itself. This rod, which began life as a mundane shepherd's tool, had been transformed at Moses' commissioning by God's word into a staff of power and served ever after as an unmistakable sign that the bearer was not an ordinary man but God's agent. When God wishes to display His power He orders Moses to lift the rod or cast it down. When, on God's command, the staff is held high the armies of Israel are victorious. When, at God's command, it is held over the rock, water gushes forth from the rock. The rod's power is God's, not Moses'. It is the staff which signals that Moses is *eved adonai*, God's servant or agent (Deut. 34:5). No other figure in the prophetic tradition is provided by God with a similar badge of office. Moses is pictured as the foremost among God's emissaries, as first among those designated God's man, *ish ha-elohim*.⁹

Moses is depicted as agent, not as principal; as holy man not as political activist.¹⁰ Indeed, one can come away from a reading of the Exodus-Numbers narrative convinced that more often than not Moses is depicted as a puppet being manipulated from above. That most readers push away any such impression testifies to the central role of Moses in the living religious traditions and to the fact that we come to Moses' public

⁹ Deut. 33:1, Josh. 14:6, Ps. 90:1. *ish-ha-elohim* refers to a divine messenger (Judg. 13:8) or prophet (I Sam. 2:27, 9:6 etc.) who brings God's words to an individual. Though both labels, *ish-ha-elohim* and *eved-adonai*, in relation to Moses occur in the Torah only in the concluding chapters of Deuteronomy, these sections are assigned to earlier strata *ish-ha-elohim* (E) and *Eved Adonia* (J), and were conventional terms during Israelite times.

¹⁰ As in all areas of Biblical interpretation there are exceptions. Most exceptions appear in the J stratum: Moses on his own offers a sacrifice before ascending Sinai (Exod. 24:4); welcomes the prophetic powers of Eldad and Medad (Num. 11:26 ff.); sends diplomatic messages to the king of Edom (Num. 20:14 ff.); and negotiates with Reuben and Gad (Numbers 32). Consistency was not the hallmark of the editing process; (cf. Exod. 32:19 ff., Exod. 36:2 ff., Exod. 37:43); but the impression is inescapable that there was a concerted effort to present Moses as agent, not actor. The intercession texts will be discussed later.

career after a number of incidents from his early life in which Moses does seem to have a will and personality of his own. Moses is his own creature when he strikes down a taskmaster and when he interferes in a quarrel between two Hebrew slaves (Exod. 2:11-12). Moses is his own master in the lovely pastoral by the well when he protects the daughters of Jethro from the local bully boys (Exod. 2:16-21). Presumably, he acted on his own while tending Jethro's flock (Exod. 3:1). There was no need to force theology upon biography in these domestic scenes; but once Moses has turned aside to see the flaming bush and is commissioned there is evidence that the editors have gone well beyond the requirements of conventional piety in shaping the text so as to define Moses' role as merely God's agent. "Come I will send you to Pharaoh" (Exod. 3:10), "and the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain and Moses went up" (Exod. 19:20) . . . "The Lord said to Moses: 'Carve two tablets of stone like the first,' . . . so Moses carved two tablets of stone like the first" (Exod. 34:1, 4). Moses says as much: "The Lord sent me to do all these things. They are not of my own devising" (Num. 16:28).

Behind the received text lies a perception of Moses as holy man. Holy men lead by the word rather than by the whip. People do their bidding out of fear of unseen consequences rather than out of fear of their police. The text never suggests that Moses had either police or troops at his disposal. When nobles challenge his authority Moses has no recourse than to turn to God. When his own family challenges his authority, God comes to Moses' aid and the text underscores Moses' lack of authority and his non-political nature: "Now Moses was a very humble man, more so than any other man on earth" (Num. 12:3). When Moses requires lieutenants he must ask for volunteers: "Whoever is for the Lord, come here" (Exod. 33:26). Moses is not present at Israel's battles as a general, but as the shaman who brings God's power: "Whenever Moses held up his hand (with the rod of God in it) Israel prevailed; but whenever he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed" (Exod. 17:11). As was the custom of shamans and holy men in many societies, Moses lived apart. His tent was set up ". . . at some distance from the camp . . . whenever Moses went out to the Tent, all the people would rise and stand each at the entrance to his tent" (Exod. 33:7-8). It is believed that God visits the holy man in that tent set apart (Exod. 33:10). When he is or has been with God his face seems radiant (Exod. 34:27). The sense of mystery seems to have been deliberately heightened. Moses veils his face after he has been with God, but only then (Exod. 34:29).

The received account in Exodus-Numbers seems at times to go out of its way to diminish Moses' private virtues in order to contrast these to the power which emanated from him during his public career when God's puissance flowed through him. This is particularly evident in some of the pre-commissioning scenes where Moses is allowed to appear as his own

master. Take the description of his attack on an Egyptian taskmaster. "He saw the Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen. He turned this way and that and seeing no one about he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand" (Exod. 2:11-12). When the next day Moses discovers that the matter is known, the text reports that Moses was frightened and that he fled. Heroes do not strike down unsuspecting victims, work desperately to hide all traces of their deed, and flee into the night. Heroes proclaim their defiance and attack their enemies openly. A hero may prudently retire before a superior force, but he does not flee in panic. If he retires from the field it is to fight another day. Moses flees out of fear and there is no talk of returning to the fray. After the stabbing of the taskmaster, Moses is never again pictured with a weapon in his hands. The long pastoral in Midian is set against the continuing suffering of the Hebrews in Egypt; yet, nowhere is it suggested that Moses gave the slaves much thought. The Torah does not report any move on Moses' part to aid the slaves; out of sight seems to have been out of mind, until God orders him to go. When God orders Moses to return, the saga suggests that far from being eager to accept this chance to be of service, Moses repeatedly attempted to excuse himself: "Please, O Lord, make someone else your agent" (Exod. 4:13).

Once you finish the book of Numbers pause a moment to clear your head and turn to the book of Deuteronomy. Here the theme of Moses as the courtier-agent and obedient messenger is not as consistently developed. The very form of the book suggests this change of emphasis. Deuteronomy is presented as several valedictory speeches shaped by Moses. In these speeches Moses asserts, *inter alia*, that he, on his own initiative, had been responsible for the organization of the judicial system, the appointment of the spies, the choice of cities of refuge and the division of land among the tribes. Moses seems to be the organizer of the great ceremony of covenant affirmation (Deut. 27:11 ff.). But even in this tradition Moses' accomplishments remain modest and he is pictured most frequently as God's trustworthy agent. God determines the line of march. God "scouts the place where you are to encamp" (Deut. 1:32). God determines which kings shall be treated with and which engaged in battle. God is responsible for military victories. The law is from God and reported without change or addition. God punishes the people when they delay entering the Promised Land. The point is made forceably that the costly defeat at Hormah occurred not because Moses had stayed in the camp but because God had not gone out with the host (Deut. 1:42 ff.). In his initial speech Moses reminds the people that God has "carried the tribes as a Father carries his son, all the way that you traveled until you came to this place" (Deut. 1:31).

In Deuteronomy Moses is both agent and actor, but God is the chief actor. For reasons which can only be guessed at the editors did not feel the need to drain Moses' biography of all evidence of initiative and power.

Recently Moshe Weinfeld and others have emphasized various wisdom elements in Deuteronomy. Is this willingness to give some due to Moses, the man, a product of the fact that Deuteronomy was shaped in circles influenced by a "humanistic" tradition?¹¹ Perhaps, but Deuteronomy's "humanism" must not be overemphasized. When all is said and done liberation and law are God's achievements and His alone. "This day I begin to put the dread and fear of you upon the peoples everywhere under heaven so that they shall tremble and quake because of you whenever they hear you mentioned" (Deut. 2:24). The familiar eulogy a Deuteronomist editor added to his scroll by way of conclusion praises not a heroic leader or a royal figure but a prophet-agent "whom the Lord singled out, face to face, for the various signs and portents the Lord sent him to display in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his courtiers and his whole country, and for all the great might and awesome power that God displayed before all Israel" (Deut. 34:10-11). It is God who makes the exodus possible, not Moses. It is God who legislates and leads, not Moses. The portrait offered neither assigns to Moses primacy of place nor attributes to Moses the power of political office or the virtues of personal initiative or military skill. If these be the attributes of a hero, it must be said that Moses is not presented as hero. If these be the attributes of a man of affairs, it must be said that Moses is not presented as a power broker. It is his faithfulness and loyalty that is praised rather than his initiative or daring.

I know of no other national saga in which the founding father is treated with so little sense of his own presence. Generally, such recitals tell of wise leaders who promulgate just laws and who lead their armies to brilliant victory, albeit with the help of the gods. Moses never straps on a sword or rides out to battle in a war chariot. Moses is never pictured as enthroned. He is often depicted prostrate before God at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting (Num. 20:6). When challenged, powerful kings quickly dispatch those who dare to rebel. When Dathan and Abiran refuse Moses' summons he can only plead to God for help (Num. 16:12-15). Kings establish dynasties. Moses' sons fade from view.¹² The all wise leaders of saga make provision for the nation's future before their death. When Moses is informed that he is about to die he can only petition God: "Let the Lord . . . appoint someone over the community . . . so that the Lord's community may not be like sheep that have no shepherd" (Num. 27:15-17). Kings promulgate law. Moses is a secretary who transcribes the law God dictates to him.

¹¹ The current debate on the extent of the "humanism" of the wisdom literature may well force us to make other guesses to explain the Deuteronomic treatment of Moses, cf. Crenshaw, James ed., *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, Ktav, N. Y. C., 1976.

¹² The mosaic lineage of the priest Gershom (Judg. 18:30) remains conjectural and has no parallel in the Torah narrative.

This treatment of Moses was deliberate. As their literature reveals, the Israelites enjoyed heroic saga as well as any other people. We have parts of such a saga in the Deuteronomic version of Israel's most famous king, David. The comparison of the Moses and the David material is revealing. Moses is never physically described. Young David is "ruddy, and withal of beautiful eyes, and goodly to look upon" (I Sam. 16:12). In one version the young David is already "a mighty man of valour, and a man of war, and prudent in affairs and a comely person" (I Sam. 16:18). In another version the young David is an inexperienced shepherd (I Sam. 16:11). In both versions he becomes a fearless warrior who has many killings to his fame and a brilliant field commander who remains in the field for a good part of his life and who returns to combat even when he has been crowned.

In the David epic the sense of God's control of events is present but attenuated. The text is full of the expressions of conventional piety, "and David waxed greater and greater for the Lord was with him" (II Sam. 5:10), but the story is essentially stock aretology, the tale of a hero who is a daring soldier, a man of overwhelming ambition, even great lust; a capable political organizer and manipulator and a larger than life figure whose virtues and vices are outsized. Samuel anoints David in the name of God and tells David to return to private life. God commissions Moses directly; and thereafter, Moses has no private life. As king, David rules by fiat. He breaks new ceremonial ground by his acts (II Sam. 6, II Sam. 12). Moses is pictured as unwilling or unable to act except in response to specific instructions from God. David takes advice from a variety of counselors and makes his own decision. Generally, Moses accepts advice only from God. David is a master strategist as well as trained soldier. Moses never leads Israel's troops or plans strategy. David must hire court prophets like Nathan to know God's will. God speaks directly to Moses who is not only his agent but his prophet. When Absalom rebels against David, the king sends mercenaries to put down the uprising. When Korah rebels, Moses throws himself prostrate and God has the earth swallow up the opposition. When David sins, his are the sins of ambition, cruelty, lust and power. When Moses sins he stands guilty of not having followed with absolute fidelity a ritual instruction about the handling of God's rod. Moses is married before his public career begins and as far as the Torah is concerned that is the end of his sexual interests. David's love affairs are amply described and unceasing.

The image of Moses as the obedient emissary of God, whose authority is charismatic rather than the authority of office, is too consistent to permit the possibility that it was drawn haphazardly. The force behind this image seems to reflect some of the strongest and most consistent elements of the emerging Biblical faith, particularly faith in the redeemer God. Certainly it does not seem to be the result of a revisionist decision, such as we have seen in recent years in China and Russia, to discredit a once powerful leader

whose policies are now denounced. One has only to reread the eulogy with which Deuteronomy concludes to recognize the respect in which Moses continued to be held.

Introductions to the Bible conventionally describe the material in Genesis-Kings as sacred history. As Von Rad has pointed out, the term is misleading if it suggests a national literature whose purpose was limited to that of chronicle detailing God's original redemption and His up-till-now providential care of Israel.¹³ The Torah emerged from liturgical materials which served not simply as a record, but as an evocation. The recital was significant because it called forth God's presence and power. The recital of the original redemption summoned God's redeeming power into the here and now.

This assumption is suggested both by what we know of the Israelite cult, particularly such covenant renewal ceremonies as is described in Joshua 24; and by the special interest in history reflected in what remains of the literature. In other West Asian cultures history seems to have been an occasional interest with attention focused on court related materials; dynastic lists and military campaigns; and cult related materials: evidence of a shrine's legitimacy and antiquity. In ancient Israel history emerges as a central and critical component of the religious culture. Why? Certainly the Israelites believed that their history served to prove God's choice of Israel and to vindicate God's fidelity to His part of the covenant bargain.¹⁴ This is certainly true, but not a complete explanation. In Israel history was turned into liturgy as an outgrowth of certain assumptions about the power of a recital of God's redemptive acts. "The Israelites came to a historical way of thinking, and then to historical writing, by way of their belief in the sovereignty of God in history."¹⁵ In one sense these histories are no more than a particular form of praise of God. Song and psalms of praise were not simply pious exercises, but power laden acts designed to evoke an existential display of God's redemptive might. Certainly some of Israel's early songs lift up God's power in the hope of stimulating God's continuing care. The Song of the Sea says it clearly: "I will sing to the Lord for He has triumphed gloriously . . . He is become my salvation . . . In Your strength You guide them (Your people) to Your holy abode. The peoples hear, they tremble . . . (Exod. 15). Deborah's song has a similar purpose. She is to "utter a song" (Judg. 5:12) that the power of the Lord may go forth. The liturgical recita-

¹³ Von Rad, Gerhard, *The Problem of the Hexateuch*, McGraw Hill, N. Y. C., 1965, pp. 3 ff.

¹⁴ Burrows, Millar, "Ancient Israel" in *The Idea of History in the Ancient Near East* R. Denton, Ed., Yale University Press, 1953, pp. 99-131; Von Rad, Gerhard, *The Beginnings of Historical Writing in Ancient Israel*, Von Rad, *Studies*, pp. 166-204.

¹⁵ Von Rad, "Historical Writings," p. 170.

tion of redemptions past—song—clearly was deemed effective in calling forth God's power.¹⁶

There are significant reasons to believe that the narrative of Exodus-Numbers and perhaps also Deuteronomy reflect the interests of such liturgists and are an outgrowth of familiar formulae of praise whose public recitation had the forces of confirming the covenant, of affirming the God who had delivered the nation from bondage and of summoning the God who would deliver them from present dangers.

What little we know about Israelite rites suggests that they included public recitals of God's saving acts—history, apparently organized not only to educate the people about the significance of the founding events, but to please the King of kings by rehearsing His victories in well turned phrases, much as oriental courtiers offer an emperor their salaams in the expectation that such courtesies and panegyrics will open his ears and soften his heart to their requests. The Middle-Eastern courtier made no attempt to limit his praise and was careful to list all of the royal accomplishments and to associate no one else with the king's victories. Power belonged to the king alone and not to his viceroy or general.

For example, Deuteronomy contains this early Passover form:

When, in time to come, your son asks you, "What means the exhortation, laws, and rules which the Lord our God has enjoined upon you?" you shall say to your son, "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and the Lord freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand. The Lord wrought before our eyes marvelous and destructive signs and portents in Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household; and us He freed from there, that He might take us and give us the land that He had promised on oath to our fathers. Then the Lord commanded for us to observe all these laws, to revere the Lord our God, for our lasting good and for our survival, as is now the case. It will be, therefore, to our merit before the Lord our God to observe faithfully this whole instruction, as He has commanded us" (Deut. 6:20-25).

The Israelite understood that the purpose of this Passover exercise was to gain merit, to have some hope of immediate benefit. God alone is praised. Moses is not mentioned. Deuteronomy also contains a formula recited when farmers brought to a shrine the first fruits of their harvest. A priest takes the offering and the faithful are told to recite:

¹⁶ In the ancient Middle East worship was dominated by concern for ritual precision. Every act and chant had its power laden function. The priestly histories describe the function of the Temple singers with the verb נָבֵא (I Chron. 25:1 ff.) a post-exilic recollection of the power of song to evoke the presence of God.

My father was a fugitive Aramean . . . The Egyptians dealt harshly with us . . . We called unto the Lord . . . and the Lord heard our plea and saw our plight . . . The Lord freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and by portends. He brought us to this place, and gave us this land . . . wherefore I now bring its first fruits of the soil which you, O Lord, have given me (Deut. 26:5-10).

The purpose of this exercise is a practical one "so that you may enjoy all the bounty that the Lord your God has bestowed upon you and your household" (Deut. 26:11). Moses is not mentioned. God and God alone is praised. Psalm 135, generally credited as a pre-exilic piece composed for and sung during shrine worship, lifts up a similar picture of the God's saving acts.

I know that the Lord is great . . .
 He it was who smote the first born of Egypt
 both of man and of beast
 Who in thy midst, O Egypt
 Sent signs and wonders
 Against Pharaoh and all his servants
 Who smote many waters
 and slew mighty kings . . .
 And gave their Lord as a heritage
 A heritage to his people
 Thy name, O Lord, endures forever
 Thy renown, O Lord, throughout all ages
 For the Lord will vindicate his people
 and have compassion on his servants (Ps. 135:5, 8-14).

Again, God and God alone is praised. Again, Moses is not mentioned. Again, the praise is preface to petition and a help in that direction. Such liturgies emphasized faith in a God whose power is revealed in history and encouraged humble submission to a God who controls providentially the fate of the nation(s). Moses is missing from these recitations, though he does appear in a recital attributed to Joshua (Josh. 24:2-13). Here the text makes it clear that Moses is merely a useful agent: "I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt . . . afterward I brought you out . . ." (Josh. 24:5). Such liturgies lifted up the form which emerged as Torah and set the limits which shaped the presentation of Moses. Had Moses been associated with events other than the critical beginnings of the national history when God's display of His power established His claim over Israel and His promise to Israel, he might have been drawn along quite different lines.

It is now impossible to recover the original elements in the popular Israelite biography of Moses or when and how these elements were reshaped into the figure of God's holy man known to us from the received tradition. What is clear is that the received text reflects the concerns of liturgists and priests rather than of the folk. Moses' treatment reflects an orthodox concern to magnify God's power and declare Him, Redeemer.¹⁷

I do not claim that the present Torah narrative was ever used liturgically, though parts of it certainly were; but that it was shaped by familiar liturgical attitudes and formed with the thought that its text would have practical effect. The Torah narrative is a statement of faith, proof of the redeeming power of God and a raising up of God, a lifting up of the promise of the redemption yet to come. Interest in this form reflects a time of uncertainty and trauma. A sovereign people, secure in the possessions in its land, will present a commemorative pageant on the Fourth of July. An unsettled people will not be satisfied with pageants dedicated to the glories of yesteryear. Pageant must lead to promise. Moses could not help against the Moabites or the Philistines, but God could; so by song and recitation they affirmed the God who had redeemed and evoked a new display of His redemptive powers. Washington and Valley Forge read Moses and Kadesh Barnea—dim in significance and God's mighty hand and outstretched arm come center stage. The leader recedes and the miraculous staff comes to the fore.

The cradle legend apart, the Moses who is presented to us in the Torah is not fashioned on an imperial model nor is he given the usual attributes of a hero. Moses' courage is not that of the battlefield nor his skill that of the decisive leader; rather his image reflects the attributes of the holy man. His skill is that of the prophet and his courage rests on his willingness to intercede to protect his people from an angry God. Late in the seventh pre-Christian century God announced through Jeremiah a severe drought. Jeremiah relayed the oracle in an artfully composed diatribe in which the prophet underlined the rightness of God's act. The drought is deserved. The nation's sins were so black that not even a man of proven prayer power could intercede effectively with God on the nation's behalf. "Then God said to me: 'even were Moses and Samuel to stand before Me, I would still have no sympathy for his people. Pass them out of my sight. Let them go.' " (Jer. 15:1). The role of intercessor is archaic and modern readers often fail to notice Moses in this role, yet, it is a role in which he is frequently described. A few incidents will stand for many. When the people fashioned

¹⁷ Those few psalms which mention Moses (77:21, 99:6, 103:7, 105:26, 106:18, 23, 32) laud him as God's agent and underscore that he was the servant and not the master. "Thou dist lead Thy people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron" (77:21). "He sent Moses His servant and Aaron whom He had chosen" (105:26).

the Golden Calf, God bitterly condemns the nation. Moses is told that this stiff-necked, faithless motley of ex-slaves will be eliminated. God will fashion for Himself another nation out of Moses' family. At this critical juncture Moses steps out of his role as obedient courtier and becomes the heroic minister who risks his life to change the imperial mind. " 'Let not your anger blaze forth against your people' . . . and the Lord renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon His people" (Exod. 32:10-14). A year later, at the Kadesh Barnea camp, when the spies so frighten the council with their report of the well-defended Canaanite cities that the elders refuse to obey God's order for an immediate attack, God again pronounces the nation's death sentence. Again Moses intercedes: "Let my Lord's forbearance be great . . . pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to your great kindness, as you have forgiven this people ever since Egypt" (Num. 14:13-20). Moses is described as a well-known intercessor who was frequently approached for this service:

They set out from Mount Hor by the road to the Sea of Reeds to skirt the land of Edom. But the people grew restive on the journey, and the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water, and we have come to loathe this miserable food." The Lord sent seraph serpents among the people. They bit the people and many of the Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said "We sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you. Intercede with the Lord to take away the serpents from us!" And Moses interceded for the people (Num. 21:4-6).

An intercessor might petition his God to act for someone's benefit or against an enemy. We are shown Moses interceding with God, asking Him to turn away from the offering of certain rebels (Num. 16:15). In most of the reported cases Moses' intercession met with success; but not always. When Miriam badmouthed Moses because of his marriage to a Cushite woman God punished her with "snow white scales," presumably leprosy; then "Moses called out unto the Lord, saying 'O Lord, pray heal her' " (Num. 12:13), but God refused an immediate reprieve and Miriam suffered for a week before she was cured. The role of the intercessor belongs to the image of the holy man and the prophet, not to the practical man of affairs.

Theoretically, the independent power of a prayermaster is incompatible with a faith which emphasizes God's control of history and God's *hesed*, His covenant loyalty. If God is just and dependable what reason or right would anyone have to intercede with Him? But the evidence is clear that Moses is presented as an idealized type of a familiar class of holy men who interceded for individuals or the community and who were venerated and feared for their success in this role.

A peculiar and special meaning of heroism among the Israelites is suggested by this aspect of the Moses tradition. It was a risky business to be courtier to a pharaoh or an Assyrian emperor or to the King of kings. The courtier who tries to change the royal mind draws the sultan's attention to himself, sometimes with unwanted results. "The wrath of a king is as messengers of death" (Prov. 16:14). When Moses interceded with God after the sin of the Golden Calf he knew that his life was on the line. "If you will forgive their sins, well and good; but if not, erase me from the record you have written" (Exod. 32:32).

The mindset of the Israelite was markedly different from ours; but man is by nature a pragmatic beast, and in every age men have turned to faith to secure prosperity and security. Today we tinker with political structures or we turn to the laboratory or the research institute for answers. We operate with the assumption 'can do.' The Israelite operated with the assumption 'only God can do.' The Israelites looked to God to rectify the insecurity of his society. Change came slowly, if at all. All experience seemed to confirm the observation that God, not man, controlled history. Naturally, it was to his interest to discover how he could persuade God to his benefit. The Israelite faith insisted that God based His decisions on a published covenant to which He had committed himself. Fidelity to the covenant was taught as the key to security; but since no nation or individual is that constant in his actions, it was desirable that there be extra covenantal means of winning God's favor. A special hero emerges; the person who could effectively plead with God when the nation or individual failed in his duty, which is to say, whenever evil befell man or people.

If what I am describing smacks suspiciously of the later Christian cult of saints, so be it. The similarities are real. To be sure, apologists can marshal an impressive array of rabbinic texts which prohibit praying to any save God. "If trouble comes to a person, let him not cry to Michael or Gabriel, but let him cry unto Me" (P. T. Ber. 9:12); but the evidence is overwhelming that throughout their history the Jewish people did consult holy men. The last chapter of a second century B.C.E. apocalypse, *The Testament of Moses*, features a scene in which Moses announces his impending death. Joshua, the chosen successor, immediately prostrates himself, openly grieving. What is his chief concern? "Who shall pray for them"¹⁸ which is to say 'how will the tribes survive without having available a proven intercessor?' To this pious writer it was not Moses' competence as leader which would be missed, but the proven power of Moses' prayer. In early rabbinic times the popular faith knew of *Tzaddikm* whose lives had been so exemplary that they had built up with God a deposit of merits which they could draw on when necessary. Throughout Jewish history the Torah's report of Moses' life provided the popular faith with its model of such an intercessor.

¹⁸ Testament 11:11 cf. also 12:6.

How did a holy man prove that he is holy? He spoke God's words. He announced God's redeeming acts. He cured illness. He pleaded with God for rain. He performed ritual and oracular acts which were expected of him. He brought the symbols of God to the battlefield. Moses' role as prophet was the unique and ultimate proof of his holiness. In exilic and post-exilic times the emphasis seems to shift from prophet-intercessor to prophet-mediator. By then the idea that a unique covenant relationship bound Israel and God was commonly accepted as was the idea that the terms of the covenant had been announced by Moses. Several versions of this critical event existed: the law had been given on the mountain of revelation; the law had been given on the mountain and during the remaining years of the wilderness trek; the law had been given at various times to Moses who published it at a great covenant ceremony just before his death. The inconsistencies in the Exodus-Numbers and Deuteronomy narratives reflect an imperfect amalgam of these traditions; but, clearly, the thrust of piety and tradition operated over the centuries to ascribe all law deemed covenant to the mediation of Moses. By post-exilic time the identification of Israel's oracular law with the rule mediated by Moses was conventional and uncontested. The law is given "through the hand of Moses" (I Chron. 6:34, 15:15, 22:13; II Chron. 33:8, 34:14). Outside a few mentions of Moses for genealogical purposes (I Chron. 23:14-15, 26:14) and two references to Moses as builder of the desert tabernacle (I Chron. 21:29; II Chron. 1:3); post-exilic priestly writings make no reference to Moses except to identify him with the law that he had mediated: "The Torah of God which was given through the agency of Moses" (Neh. 10:30), the Torah of Moses (Exod. 3:2; Neh. 8:14, 9:14; II Chron. 23:18, 30:11), the book of Moses (Ezek. 6:18; Neh. 13:12; I Chron. 35:12), the book of the Torah of Moses (Neh. 8:1), the commandments of Moses (II Chron. 8:13), the Torah in the book of Moses (II Chron. 25:4). The single reference to Moses in post-exilic prophecy appears in the concluding piety of the scroll of Malachi and indicates simply: "Remember the law of Moses, my servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb for all Israel" (3:22).

The law is not by Moses but delivered by Moses. Moses is not lawgiver but prophet-mediator of God's law. When Near Eastern emperors promulgated basic law, law often similar in style and even substance to the Biblical rules, the king is described as having been ordered by Shamash or another god to issue the rule; but there is no attempt to hide the king's initiative and authority in the matter. Shamash reveals abstract justice to the king. The king translates the divine abstraction 'justice' into discrete rules. He claims to make his law conform to justice; but the law is his.¹⁹ The Biblical

¹⁹ Greenberg, Moshe, "Some Postulates of Biblical Criminal Law," in *The Jewish Expression*, ed. Goldin, Judah, Bantam, N. Y. C., 1970, p. 21.

law is God's and God's alone. Moses does not write a law book based on his own feelings or research, but receives the law from God and repeats the law to the tribes or writes it down for posterity as if he were a stenographer taking God's dictation. The interest is not in the man but in the message.

Moses, as presented to us by the Torah text, is an exception to the rule that the legends of great men grow through the centuries. If anything, the received text diminishes Moses' role. He is *ish-ha-elohim* God's man, and not his own man; *eved adonai* God's faithful servitor, not a powerful leader in his own right. Moses is emissary of God's word, not a royal figure. It is best to think of the Moses of the received text as having been drawn after the model of Near Eastern holy men and prophets. His is not the heroism of the sagas but the heroism of the charismatic. He is presented to us not as a leader of men but as the servant of God.

From earliest times in Israel, generation after generation has told the story of the great God who . . .

