

CHAPTER ONE

The Biblical Moses

And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I.

Exodus 3:4

This chapter is devoted to reading the original story of Moses and noting the many odd things that come up in it. The story stretches over the Books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, but barely a tenth of that length is devoted to familiar plot elements: the baby in the bulrushes, the killing of the overseer, the burning bush, the liberation from Egypt, the parting of the Red Sea, the rock that gives water, the march through the wilderness to reach the Promised Land, the tables of the law, the Golden Calf. Many chapters are not narrative at all but quote God giving to Moses additional laws, instructions about building the holy Tabernacle, and descriptions of what Levite priests should wear. A smaller number narrate episodes such as Korah's rebellion or the encounter with Balak and Balaam. Why do we read the Bible so selectively? What is the function of all God's instructions we tend to leave out? And what about episodes deemed inexplicable?

One of the most puzzling cruxes occurs on the way from Midian to Egypt, where Moses has been commanded by God to lead the Israelites to freedom. One night, God seeks to kill Moses, whereupon Zipporah, Moses'

Midianite wife, who has accompanied him, picks up a sharp rock, cuts off the foreskin of their son (who also accompanies them), throws the cut-off mass at his (whose?) feet, and declares, “a bloody husband art thou to me” (Exod. 4:24–26). God lets Moses go. What does this all mean?

In the Pentateuch edited by J. H. Hertz, this passage is glossed in part as follows:

sought to kill him. An anthropomorphic way of saying that Moses fell suddenly into a serious illness. Many commentators connect this sudden illness of Moses with his postponing, for some reason, the circumcision of his son. Tradition ascribes this omission to the influence of Jethro and Zipporah, who may have desired the circumcision postponed to the 13th year, as was customary among the Bedouin tribes. However, in the previous verse Moses had warned Pharaoh that disobedience of God’s will carried dire punishment with it: and he himself should, therefore, on no account have permitted any postponement of a duty incumbent upon him.¹

Thus, through this literal and empirical reading of the passage, it seems as though all obscurities have been cleared up, at least enough of them for the consequences of failing to do one’s duty to come through loud and clear.

The transformation of unclarified questions into useful lessons is even more apparent in the Pentateuch published in 1986 by the Judaica Press, with extracts or summaries of the commentary of Samson Raphael Hirsch.² The more enigmatic, the more didactic, it seems.

24. [*God confronted him.*] The same God Who had just sent Moses forth with a most lofty mission, which Moses was preparing to carry out, now abruptly confronted him and considered it better that he should die. The verses that follow make it clear why Moses was so suddenly placed in danger of death. He had neglected to circumcise his son. He had gone forth to accomplish the deliverance whose import would be based solely on *milab* [the word—B.J.], and now he himself was about to introduce into that people an uncircumcised son. God considered it better to have Moses die than to have him set out on his mission with such an unfortunate example for his people.

This, it seems to us, should be the interpretation of [“considered it

better . . .”] Interpreted literally as [“and He sought (to kill him)”], it would be a very harsh characterization of God. God the All-Merciful never “seeks” to “kill” a man; if it is His will that a man should die, then that man will die. But interpreted in the manner suggested here, this passage teaches us the significant lesson that the plans of God cannot be influenced by *any* human being. . . . To God no man, not even one such as Moses, is indispensable. . . .

25. [*Hirsch cites a statement by Rabbi Eliezer of Modai in the Mekhita to Parshath Yitbro (Exodus 18:1–20:23) to the effect that Yitbro had agreed to have Tziporah marry Moses only under the condition that the first son of this union should remain a heathen and not be circumcised. Also, Hirsch points out that Tziporah, not being of Jewish origin, may have been naturally reluctant to see her son undergo the pain and the dangers of circumcision. . . . She therefore quickly circumcised her son with her own hands, cast the boy's foreskin at her husband's feet and said to him, as Hirsch puts it: “I have done this because you have become a ‘bridegroom of death’ on my account.”*]

26. [*According to Hirsch, Tziporah felt that this incident would ensure the observance of circumcision for all time to come. If even a man like Moses, who had been charged with a Divine mission, nearly lost his life for failing to circumcise his son, what Jew in future would dare be guilty of the same neglect?*]³

Circumcision, then, in Moses' day as well as in ours, is a sign in the flesh of all newborn males of membership among God's “chosen people.” It is also a sign of the covenant God established with Abraham and renewed with Moses. In other words, it is the visible sign of belonging; a sign of voluntary submission and sanctification.

By the time Saint Paul (né Saul) plays around with the flesh and the spirit in order to explain Christianity, the inadequacy of having circumcised flesh without the corresponding circumcised spirit—indeed, the sufficiency of having spiritual faith, whether or not one has a sign of sanctification in the body—the specialness of the body becomes literal, while the spiritual becomes figurative. Judaism, as Paul explains it, is legalistic and literal, but Christian goodness is a spiritual grace that requires no law. If one strictly observes the laws of Judaism, one remains only within the law, but with Christ, one rises above it.

Moses indeed becomes the mouthpiece of a vast array of detailed laws, as we shall see, but he also appears to be the first user of “circumcision” in a figurative sense. Long before the birth of Christ, and simultaneous with the very origins of biblical Israel, in other words, Moses can cry out to God (twice):

And Moses spake before the Lord, saying, Behold the children of Israel have not hearkened unto me; how then shall Pharaoh hear me, who am of uncircumcised lips? (Exod. 6:12)

And Moses said before the lord, Behold, I am of uncircumcised lips, and how shall Pharaoh hearken unto me? (Exod. 6:30)

The Judaica Press edition of the Five Books of Moses avoids the difficulty by translating “uncircumcised” lips as “unpliant” lips. The Hertz edition says, “*of uncircumcised lips, i.e., with lips closed or impeded, not properly prepared to deliver an all-important message.*”⁴ This constitutes a medical reading of “uncircumcised lips”: the surgical sense of genital cutting is transferred upward to Moses’ already known difficulties with speech. Nevertheless, Moses shows himself a canny manipulator of the figurative potential of even the most surgical meaning of circumcision. As Jonathan Kirsch puts it, “Even something so basic and so concrete as the ritual of circumcision was put to use by Moses as a metaphor for an even more intimate commandment. ‘Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart,’ thundered Moses, suggesting that God sought a heartfelt spiritual commitment and not merely a sign carved into the flesh (Deut. 10:16).”⁵ It did not take Christianity, in other words, to imagine a correspondence between the spirit and the flesh, but it *did* take Christianity to imagine them so far apart.

What *about* Moses’ speech difficulties, anyway? Why does Moses, in his third attempt to depict his lack of authority to speak for the Israelites, tell God, “O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant: but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue” (Exod. 4:10). There have been many theories to explain Moses’ speech impediment. Especially since this passage is followed by one in which an exasperated God says to Moses, “Is not Aaron the Levite thy brother? I know

that he can speak well. . . . And he shall be thy spokesman unto the people: and he shall be, even he shall be to thee instead of a mouth, and thou shalt be to him instead of God” (Exod. 4:14, 16).

One explanation, then, is that Aaron is a more eloquent public speaker than Moses, and will be believed by the suspicious Israelites. Schoenberg, as we will see, built his whole opera, *Moses and Aaron*, around this opposition between Aaron’s eloquence and Moses’ message.

Here is what Hertz has to say about it:

slow of speech, and of a slow tongue. Lit. ‘heavy of speech and heavy of tongue.’ He may have had an actual impediment in his speech. Rabbinic legend tells that Moses when a child was one day taken by Pharaoh on his knee. He thereupon grasped Pharaoh’s crown and placed it on his head. The astrologers were horror-struck. ‘Let two braziers be brought’—they counselled; ‘one filled with gold, the other with glowing coals; and set them before him. If he grasps the gold, it will be safer for Pharaoh to put the possible usurper to death.’ When the braziers were brought, the hand of Moses was stretching for the gold, but the angel Gabriel guided it to the coals. The child plucked out a burning coal and put it to his lips, and for life remained ‘heavy of speech and heavy of tongue.’⁶

The explanation in the Hirsch volume goes as follows: “I have difficulty starting to speak, under any circumstances; besides, I have a lisp. I have no command over my tongue.’ It is sad when a public speaker, particularly one who seeks to sway large audiences, can elicit nothing but laughter from his listeners . . .”⁷ And Nahum Sarna glosses Moses’ reluctance to answer God’s call as follows:

He who would be a leader of people, a spokesman who has to negotiate Egyptian court, must possess oratorical skills. But Moses feels himself to be inadequate to the task. He lacks persuasive eloquence. Whether the text means that he literally suffers from some speech defect or that after the passage of years away from Egypt his fluency in the language of the land had deteriorated,⁸ or whether he simply asserts his inexperience and native reserve regarding the art of public speaking, it is hard to say.⁹

All the commentators I have read, in other words, see in Moses' worries about speaking for the children of Israel some sort of *personal* characteristic—whether a stammer or a native reserve—that makes him ill equipped to perform his task. But what if Moses' "uncircumcised lips" have simply not been sanctified by a lifetime of faithful service to the God of Abraham? What if he has strayed far away from the God of his fathers, as his brother Aaron has not? Moses is quick to collaborate with God in making Aaron chief priest and making the priesthood belong to Aaron's family. Of course, it's Moses' family, too, so Moses' designation of the Levites as priests may have other motives.

But, in any case, it makes sense if the task of leading people much more knowledgeable about things Jewish should give Moses pause. And indeed the people's quickness to doubt him is attested in many subsequent episodes. The Egyptians, as well as the Hebrews, circumcised their male children, and so, somewhere along the way, Moses was no doubt circumcised. But as the sign of participation in God's covenant, Moses was clearly right to see others as more qualified. On the other hand, who was more equipped to speak to Pharaoh? This adds to the ambiguity of the expression "Let my people go" and brings us back to the question of political representation. God's spokesman, with some justice, has major doubts about his ability to perform the role.

The second half of the Book of Exodus and most of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy as well are transcriptions of God's words to Moses or Moses' to the people, detailing the laws and ordinances by which the children of Israel are expected to live. The episode of the Golden Calf leads to a detailed description of how to make the Lord's Tabernacle. Many of God's instructions concern the proper procedures for sacrifices, the proper behavior and dress for the priests, and the proper form for worship. It will be recalled that the first request Moses and Aaron make to Pharaoh is to let the Israelites go three days into the desert and sacrifice to their Lord. Whether or not this is a covert request for freedom, it indicates that it is considered perfectly natural to renew the covenant with, and propitiate, one's newly restored god.

As for the detailed instructions for building a movable tabernacle, they must be meant to contrast with that most loathed form of worship, idolatry. The same golden earrings that, melted, go into the making of the form of a calf can be pounded thin to cover the parts of the Tabernacle. The making of a *place* for a god is quite different from making the *form* of a god. And the Tabernacle had to be mobile because the people were mobile. Their god was not visualizable—indeed, not visible—but nevertheless could be a presence among them as they wandered. The land he promised to them was not uninhabited, but he would ensure their victory. He said to his people, not “I am the only god,” but “Thou shalt have no other gods before me.” In other words, this invisible god who claimed the loyalty of the people wanted an exclusive relation with them, and was different from other gods. He had no form—could not be the basis for an image—and, like the serpent into which Aaron’s rod was changed, he ate up all others. This god’s monotheism was in fact a victory over polytheism, idolatry, and, later, the Canaanites. Worshiping a golden calf was a double abomination: going back to idolatry and having another god before him. As Moses repeatedly tells the doubting people, “Your murmurings are not against us, but against the Lord” (Exod. 16:8).

With all this emphasis on what made this god different from others, it is not surprising that he would give extensive instructions about how to build the Tabernacle and how to worship. He also supplements the Ten Commandments with many rules dictated to Moses.

The function of writing is also new, and unclear. Moses takes dictation from God about the laws of his covenant, and Moses is called the author (or scribe) of the first five books of the Bible. There was a huge difference between Egyptian writing (hieroglyphics—pictorial—thus, idolatrous) and God’s writing (Hebrew—nonpictorial). Moses thus inaugurated the sacred script in which the Bible is written. The prohibition on graven images is a prohibition on images: twice in his instructions about the Tabernacle God refers to engraving—but always of words, not of images. The priest is to wear on his shoulders the names of the tribes of Israel “like the engravings of

a signet” and fashion a plate of pure gold that says, “HOLINESS TO THE LORD” (Exod. 28:11, 36). God appears in a cloud and a fire—*signs* of divinity but not at all images. God’s finger writes—and Moses rewrites—the two tables containing the Ten Commandments, which Moses, in his anger at the people’s “corruption,” broke. Two “Tables of Testimony” are supposed to be put in the ark of the Tabernacle, but whether this means, as it seems to in Exodus, the stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments or the Torah that Moses is in the process of writing down, as seems to be the holy object today, is not clear. In either case, what is sacred is *writing*.

If the large majority of space in the Five Books of Moses is non-narrative, then, it should not surprise us that so much attention is given to God’s instructions. Even where there are narrative moments, they tend to be enigmatic:

And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married; for he had married an Ethiopian woman.
(Num. 12:1)

Take Aaron and Eleazar his son and bring them unto mount Hor: And strip Aaron of his garments, and put them upon Eleazar his son; and Aaron shall be gathered unto his people, and shall die there. (Num. 20:25, 26)

Indeed, the death of Moses on Mount Nebo without entering the Promised Land (Deut. 34:7) is irrefutable proof for some that Moses could not be the author of the Five Books of Moses. Who can narrate his own death?

Who is this Ethiopian woman, and why did Aaron and Miriam speak against Moses for her sake? The Bible tells us no more about her. Josephus narrates Moses’ exploits as an Egyptian general, in particular against the Ethiopians, one of whose princesses was so impressed by his valor that she insisted on marrying him. Which didn’t prevent Moses from accepting Jethro’s gift of one of his daughters. Thus either the Ethiopian woman was Zipporah and the Midianites were dark skinned or this passage is the remnant of a story that Josephus, too, attests. In any case, polygamy was

not infrequent among the early Hebrews. But was racism? Did Miriam and Aaron taunt Moses because Zipporah was dark skinned? Or did they chide him for going outside the Israelites, for marrying a Midianite or an Ethiopian, not one of their own people? The Books of Moses spend quite a lot of time detailing the bloodlines of the twelve tribes, and Moses certainly messes up that picture. At the same time, the Bible is full of these “unofficial” families.