

USES *and*
ABUSES
of MOSES

*Literary Representations since
the Enlightenment*

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P R E F A C E

Over forty years ago, in *Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus* (1972), I discussed twenty twentieth-century novels in which the pattern of the Gospels prefigures the lives of modern heroes exemplifying ideologies ranging from Christian Socialism to Marxism and in styles ranging from mythic to parodistic. After that biblical and even Mosaic interval, it seems only fitting to turn with similar aspirations to Jesus' typological counterpart and the most popular hero in the Hebrew Bible. Contrary to the earlier history of the story as related by Jan Assmann in his brilliant *Moses the Egyptian* (1997), it is no longer the case that "the Moses-Egypt story is told not by poets but by scholars" (17). Indeed, Moses has been treated more frequently in literature and art than any other Old Testament figure.

Moses, the liberator of the Israelites and their principal lawgiver, is not only mentioned more often (eighty times) in the New Testament than any other figure from the Hebrew Bible, which is commonly known as the Old Testament. He also prefigures Jesus just as Jesus prefigured the modern protagonists discussed in my earlier work. Like Jesus (and other mythic heroes—Sargon the Great, Heracles, Oedipus, Romulus and Remus—threatened at birth with death) Moses was rescued shortly after birth from a ruler who ordered the death of all newborn male children. He too emerged transfigured from his encounter with God on a mountain. Both magically fed the multitudes: Jesus with loaves and fishes and Moses with quail and manna from heaven. Just as Jesus transformed water into wine at the wedding of Cana, Moses produced water from a stone by striking it with his rod. Both controlled the waters: Jesus by walking upon the lake and Moses by dividing the waters of the sea. And Jesus saw himself as the fulfiller of Moses' law.

The modern novels dealing with Jesus are almost exclusively post-figurations, that is, modern actions based on the pattern of the Gospels. Most of the Moses fictions, in contrast and for reasons discussed in the following chapters, are historical novels in which modern ideologies are

imposed retrospectively upon the ancient actions reported in the Pentateuch or, as they are also known, the Books of Moses or Torah. Yet the lives of both these preeminent biblical heroes, of Christianity and Judaism respectively, present patterns upon which the most urgent contemporary concerns can readily be imposed. It is my project in the following chapters to understand how this is accomplished in these fictional “mirrors of Moses” (one of my discarded titles).

I have been living in daily contact with Moses for some fifteen years through the painting *Moses and the Burning Bush*, by the Israeli artist David Avisar, which hangs in our dining room, and a Karshi figurine of Moses with the Tables of Law standing on my desk. Prior to that, for many years I sat in the Princeton University Chapel while Moses, holding the Tables of Law under his left arm, gazed sternly down from his stained-glass window at entering freshmen and graduating seniors—and presumably also at the faculty and administration. In more recent years I have admired the striking bas-relief images of Moses receiving the Tables of Law and Miriam at the well, designed and executed by the sculptor John Goodyear, that adorn the granite walls flanking the entrance to the Jewish Center in Princeton, which I pass several times a week on my evening strolls. (A third relief, on another wall, not visible from the entrance, depicts the rescue of the infant Moses.)

While all these visible representations provide ample opportunity for reflection, the literary potentialities of the topic first occurred to me when, in a wholly different context, I had reason to study closely the libretto and music for Arnold Schönberg’s opera *Moses und Aron*, which is discussed in chapter 6. The composer-librettist’s innovative adaptation of the biblical text alerted me to the possibilities of the story, which up to then I had known only in its pentateuchal form—and in its treatment by Cecil B. DeMille.

As I looked further, I became aware of an extensive body of literary works that exploit the story of Moses for a variety of ideological purposes. That led me, in turn, to the different interpretations of the history (or legend) over the course of the centuries, which I survey in the introduction. The following chapters take up, in a loosely chronological order, the works, principally but by no means exclusively in German and English, that reflect various ideological and historical circumstances of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

No study of this sort can be exhaustive. I am already aware, notably through entries in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (14:540–42), of several works that were either unavailable to me or whose language I am unable to read. But, with almost a hundred works in various languages treated, I have aspired to a representative thoroughness down to my cutoff date of 2012. I found an unanticipated wealth and variety of treatments, ranging from operas to brief poems, from poetic dramas to lengthy novels, from verse epics to parodistic short stories—treatments that expose a profusion of ideological views of Moses, from the most devout to the wholly secular, from the religious to the political.

In general, I have retained the spelling of biblical names, whenever they are self-evident, as used by the various authors in their different languages: Zipporah, for instance, appears variously as Sefira, Sippora, Ciphora, Tsippora, and Zeforah, among others. In the rare cases of possible confusion I have added the standard English form in parentheses. I have also retained, from case to case, the various designations for the Hebrew deity. As for Moses—whose name also occurs as Mose, Moïse, Moshe, Moïseh, and Ptahmose—I have indicated the form used by the respective authors but, for stylistic smoothness, have recurred to “Moses” in my own narrative. All quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the editions cited in the bibliography. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own. For translations of verse I have included the original in parentheses or brackets.

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As usual my family has been my primary source of reference. My daughter, Margaret Ziolkowski, professor of Slavic languages at Miami University, discussed with me the standing of the Ukrainian poet Ivan Franko. My son Jan Ziolkowski, professor of medieval Latin at Harvard University, helped me over some linguistic hurdles of late classical Latin. My son Eric Ziolkowski, professor of religious studies at Lafayette College, who took a continuing and professionally knowledgeable interest in my project, provided me with numerous references and helpful information. As always, of course, it was my wife, Yetta, who had to bear with me patiently through the highs and lows of research, reading, and composition while offering invariably incisive comments, criticism, and encouragement.

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Introduction

USES AND ABUSES

A quick glance at Google generates a multitude of references comparing Moses and Hitler. In a YouTube oration Jakob Bösch calls them “brothers in spirit.”¹ William P. Meyers writes that “Adolf Hitler could well be said to have been the Moses of Germany.”² A respected scholar of religion suggests that Thomas Mann’s Moses amounts to “a dark parody of Hitler.”³ Dozens of other examples may be found.

Hitler himself does not often condescend to cite Moses by name. In the remarkable documentation of his anti-Semitism recorded by Dietrich Eckart he speaks contemptuously of various figures from what he calls “the Bible of hatred”: “old Jacob,” “the grain profiteer Joseph” (der Getreidewucherer), “the whore Rahab,” and Moses, who led the “rabble” (Pöbelvolk) with all their “stolen stuff” (zusammengestohlenes Zeug) out of Egypt and consolidated them with the proto-Communist cry, “Proletarians of all lands, unite!”⁴ In his anti-Semitic diatribes Hitler repeatedly asserts that Judaism is not a religion but a race: “The Mosaic religion is nothing other than a theory for the preservation of the Jewish race.”⁵ Shortly after becoming chancellor in the newly elected National Socialist regime, Hitler railed against “the God of the deserts, that crazed, stupid, vengeful Asiatic despot with his powers to make laws” and predicted (implicitly as a new Moses), “The day will come when I shall hold up against these commandments the tables of a new law. And history will recognize our movement as the great battle for humanity’s liberation, a liberation from the curse of Mount Sinai.”⁶

Why cite these allusions, which many people find offensive? Because they illustrate vividly the manner in which the biblical figure of Moses can be co-opted for ideological purposes, ranging, as we shall see, from religious to secular, from socialist to fascist, from the historical to the psychological, and shifting from generation to generation to reflect the most urgent concerns of the times.

During the very years when Hitler was ranting against Moses and the Jews, Winston Churchill published a remarkable account, "Moses: The Leader of a People" (1932), in which he called Moses "the greatest of the prophets," "the national hero," and "the supreme law-giver" (299–301).⁷ Churchill assures us that "all these things happened just as they are set out according to Holy Writ" and insists that Moses was a historical man, "one of the greatest of human beings," rejecting scornfully "all those learned and laboured myths that Moses was but a legendary figure upon whom the priesthood and the people hung their essential social, moral, and religious ordinances" (310). Yet he retells the Bible story in wholly modern and rational terms.

According to Churchill, the rapidly expanding band of nomads who, centuries earlier, had sought asylum in Egypt "had become a social, political, and industrial problem," and "a wave of anti-Semitism swept across the land" (300). Reduced to the capacity of state serfs, "their ceaseless multiplication became a growing embarrassment. There was a limit to the store depots that were required, and the available labourers soon exceeded the opportunities for their useful or economic employment. The Egyptian government fell back on birth control" (301). The child Moses is adopted by Pharaoh's daughter, "but he is no Egyptian, no child of the sheltered progeny of the Nile valley. The wild blood of the desert, the potent blood of Beni Israel not yet mingled with the Hittite infusions, is in his veins" (302). When he sees an Egyptian beating an Israelite, "the call of blood surges in him. He slays the Egyptian amid the loud and continuing applause of the insurgents of the ages" (303). Pharaoh had to act. "Very likely Egyptian public opinion—and there is always public opinion where there is the slightest pretence of civilization—fixed upon this act of violence as a final proof that the weakness of the government toward these overweening strangers and intruders had reached its limit" (303).

There is no need to recapitulate the remainder of the familiar story, which Churchill continues to relate in modernizing terms—and often with a sense of personal identification. About the sojourn among the Midianites: “Every prophet has to come from civilization, but every prophet has to go into the wilderness” for periods of isolation and meditation (304). When Moses returns to Egypt, “great interest attaches to the behaviour of Pharaoh. Across the centuries we feel the modernity of his actions” (305). When the first mild plagues tempt him to let the Israelites depart, “this serious concession arrested all his building plans and caused considerable derangement in the economic life of the country. It was very like a general strike” (306). When the Israelites had departed, the resentment among the Egyptians, “combined with the regrets of the government at the loss of so many capable labourers and subjects, constituted a kind of situation to which very few Parliaments of the present age would be insensible” (308). Churchill goes on to account rationally for the various miracles: “Everyone knows that the pollution of rivers, the flies, frogs, lice, sandstorms, and pestilence among men and cattle, are the well-known afflictions of the East. The most skeptical person can readily believe that they occurred with exceptional frequency at this juncture. The strong north wind which is said to have blown back the waters of the Red Sea may well have been assisted by a seismic and volcanic disturbance” (309). But to Churchill’s mind, “all these purely rationalist and scientific explanations only prove the truth of the Bible story” (309). He concludes his essay, which contains unmistakable subjective elements—for instance, his own speech impediment and his service in the “wilderness” of India, Sudan, and South Africa—with a peroration on the historicity of Moses, prophet, national hero, and lawgiver, and the truth of the biblical account.

Almost half a century later another writer offered “Moses: Portrait of a Leader” (1976).⁸ But Elie Wiesel’s version, which borrows heavily from Midrashic legends and Hasidic tales, features a more specifically Jewish leader than Churchill’s. “Moses remains a living figure,” he writes in his introduction (xi). “The calls he issued long ago to a people casting off its bonds reverberate to this day and we are bound by his laws. Were it not for his memory, which encompasses us all, the Jew would not be Jewish, or more precisely, he would have ceased to exist” (xi–xii). Like Churchill,

he accepts the truth of the biblical account but makes no effort to rationalize the miracles, which he simply skips. He sometimes offers surprising new motivations. His Moses flees to the Midian following his slaying of the brutal overseer—not out of fear of Pharaoh, whose anger he could easily have assuaged, but out of disappointment because his act had been betrayed by the very Jew he saved (188–89). He is dismayed on his return to Egypt to discover that the oppressed Jews want to remain slaves until a number of non-Jewish slaves and Egyptians decide to join the movement (192). After the disaster with the golden calf “Moses’ outbursts of anger, even his abdication are understandable. This people he had chosen never gave him anything but worries” (196), yet he never lost faith in his people. Wiesel’s Moses, whom he calls “*Moshe Rabbénu*, our Master Moses” (182), has a passion for social justice and possesses organizational genius, but “unlike the founders of other religions or great leaders in other traditions, Moses is depicted as human, both great and fallible” (182). And unlike many mythic heroes, he has “no supernatural powers, no passion for the occult” (202).

Why, then, did Wiesel write about Moses? For his contemporary relevance: “Jewish history unfolds in the present” (xi). His account begins with two nonbiblical legends, both concerning death: Moses’ curiosity about the death agonies of Rabbi Akiba; and his refusal to accept death when his own hour comes. “The reader cannot help but be troubled by Moses’ violent passion for life” (180). Toward the end of his narrative Wiesel returns to his initial question: “Why was Moses so attached to life, to the point of opposing God’s will?” (201). It was, Wiesel suggests, the final message of a man who was “a humanist in all things” (202). Namely, it was “his way of protesting heaven’s use of death to diminish, stimulate and ultimately crush man[,] . . . his final act of behalf of his people” (201). Like Churchill’s, his Moses is a great leader—but above all a leader of the Jews. This most inspired prophet wished “by his example to tell us, through centuries and generations to come, that to live as a man, as a Jew, means to say yes to life, to fight—even against the Almighty—for every spark, for every breath of life” (201–2).

We have seen three pronouncedly ideological uses of Moses: by Hitler in his anti-Semitic rants against the Jews, by the Holocaust survivor Wiesel as a model for the will of the Jewish people to survive precisely the

genocidal efforts of people like Hitler, and by Churchill as the exemplary leader for all men in an age threatened by destruction.

Recent decades have witnessed, if anything, an intensification in the appropriation of Moses for ideological purposes (in works that I discuss below in more specific contexts). In 2014 the headline of an article in a leading German newspaper proclaimed, “Moses and the Exodus Belong to the Favorite Themes of Our Spiritual History.”⁹ And an op-ed in the *New York Times* hailed Moses, with all his flaws and virtues, as a wholly human leader and Exodus as “a vision of a life marked by travel and change.”¹⁰

Susan A. Handelman regards the proponents of what she calls “rabbinic interpretation in modern literary theory” as “a kind of substitute theology”—notably Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Harold Bloom—as “slayers of Moses.”¹¹ She apparently posits Moses’ name as a code word for traditional interpretations of the law and the text as practiced in the Greco-Roman tradition and brought into the present by German Protestant theology. Michael Walzer, for whom “the Book of Exodus (together with the Book of Numbers) is certainly the first description of revolutionary politics” (134) as well as “the source of messianic politics” (146), regards Moses as essentially a political leader (12).¹² Bluma Goldstein finds that the Moses figures in the works of four German and Austrian writers offer “illuminating insight into the peculiar and passionate struggle with Jewish identity.”¹³ Moses provides ideal material for Jan Assmann’s theory of “mnemohistory”—that is, the study of the past not as historical fact but as it is remembered.¹⁴ Allen Dwight Callahan argues that Moses was long regarded by African Americans as the “venerable ideal of African American Leadership,”¹⁵ a view sharply opposed by Michael Lackey in “Moses, Man of Oppression: A Twentieth-Century African American Critique of Western Theocracy.” For the contributors to *A Feminist Companion to the Bible: Exodus to Deuteronomy* Moses is an icon of male hegemony; one author even contends that Miriam’s designation as “the prophet” even before Moses “undercuts a hierarchy of authority with a male at the top”¹⁶—a position subsequently exemplified by

“a woman’s commentary on the Torah” titled *The Five Books of Miriam*.¹⁷ Barbara Johnson traces Moses’ emergence as “a hero of mainstream culture” whose Jewishness has been erased by the different cultures that have taken him up.¹⁸ And in her compendium, *Did Moses Exist?* (2014), D. M. Murdoch summarizes doubts about his existence from antiquity to the present, concluding that “the figure of Moses constitutes a mythical compilation of characters, the significant portion of which are solar heroes or sun gods, along with fertility, serpent, storm and wine deities and attributes.”¹⁹

The most familiar, controversial, and influential ideological treatment of Moses appeared earlier, however, in the decade of Hitler and Churchill. I am referring to Sigmund Freud’s last major work, *Moses and Monotheism* (*Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion: Drei Abhandlungen*, 1939),²⁰ which originated in Freud’s never completed project, “The Man Moses: A Historical Novel” (1934). Of the three essays that constitute the work, only the first two (which had appeared in 1937 in the journal *Imago*) deal with Moses’ life; the third and by far the longest one is devoted to Freud’s psychoanalytical analysis of the material, and especially to the development of monotheism among the Jews in the centuries following Moses’ death, in an effort to “cast light on the question: how the Jewish people developed ‘a tragic guilt’ among ‘the qualities that characterize it’” (581).

The work begins with a few pages titled “Moses, an Egyptian.” Hailing Moses as the liberator, lawgiver, and religion founder of the Jewish people, Freud agrees with most historians that Moses was a historical figure. But basing his argument on James H. Breasted’s epoch-making *History of Egypt* (1905) and *The Dawn of Conscience* (1933), he assumes from his name that Moses—*mose*, which occurs frequently in Egyptian names as a suffix meaning “child”—must have been an Egyptian. Freud then cites Otto Rank’s *The Myth of the Hero’s Birth* (*Der Mythos von der Geburt des Helden*, 1909), which establishes a universal mythic pattern: the hero, born of noble parents, is rejected by them—because, like the Sumerian Sargon, his mother is a Vestal Virgin or, like Oedipus, because his father has been warned that his son will kill him—and taken in and raised by humble folk or, like Romulus and Remus, by animals. Why did the Jews invert that classic mythic pattern, making the original family humble and

the second one noble? (Freud, like Wiesel, usually speaks of “Jews” rather than “Israelites” or “Hebrews.”) Because, Freud reasons, they were dealing with history, not myth: they had to make a Jew out of the Egyptian who liberated them. In this case, since the family in which Moses was raised was the reality, the narrator had to invent for the purposes of the mythic pattern, and for national self-esteem, a Jewish family into which he was born, with the result that Moses, unlike normal mythic heroes, did not rise to his glory from humble origins but rather descended from royal heights to save the children of Israel.

The second and longer treatise, “If Moses Was an Egyptian . . .,” discusses the implications of that Egyptian heritage: namely, that the new religion Moses gave the Jews was “an Egyptian religion, albeit not *the* Egyptian one” (471; original emphasis). This leads Freud to a discussion of Pharaoh Amenhotep IV, who assumed the name Ikhnaton (Breasted’s spelling, adopted by Freud) out of respect for Aton (Aten), the sun deity whose worship he proclaimed. Aton had previously been known to the Egyptians but only as one among numerous gods in their polytheistic pantheon. But Ikhnaton’s insistence on monotheistic exclusivity aroused the wrath of a fanatical priesthood, which eradicated all traces of his life and religion following his death. Freud now posits his conclusion: “If Moses was an Egyptian and if he transmitted his own religion to the Jews, then it was that of Ikhnaton, the religion of Aton” (475). (Freud suggests, without claiming any scholarly competence, that the Hebrew name “Adonai” may be identical with Aton.)

As a follower of Ikhnaton, Moses found that his religious belief was no longer acceptable in Egypt. Hence he decided to take it to the Jews and lead them out of Egypt to a land where they would be free to worship this new monotheistic god. The fact that Hebrew was a foreign language for Moses accounts for his legendary heaviness of tongue. However, history repeated itself (according to Ernst Sellin’s *Mose und seine Bedeutung für die israelitisch-jüdische Religionsgeschichte* [1922], whose theory Freud accepted):²¹ in the course of their exodus the Jews, tiring of Moses’ enlightened despotism and unable spiritually to comprehend his insistence on the new monotheism, turned against their Egyptian liberator, murdered him, and discarded his religion. “While the tame Egyptians waited until destiny had removed the sacred person of Pharaoh [Ikhnaton], the

wild Semites took fate into their own hands and got the tyrant out of the way” (496–97).

At some point during their wandering the Jews encountered another tribe of Semitic people, worshippers of the local volcanic god Jahweh,²² and took on their religion as professed by the Midianite priest Jethro: hence the two names for god, Jahweh and Adonai, in the Mosaic books. Jethro’s son-in-law was also named Moses, a fact that eventually led to a conflation of him as a priest of Jahweh with the Egyptian Moses and his belief in Aton/Aten. How does the rejected monotheism of the Egyptian Moses fit into this history? Freud speculates that such a great lord as the Egyptian Moses would hardly have gone unaccompanied to the Jews: he brought along a group of followers, his scribes, who became the Levites. They and their successors preserved the memory of Moses’ monotheism long after his death. “In the course of the long periods—from the departure from Egypt down to the fixation of the biblical text under Ezra and Nehemiah—the Jahweh religion had turned back almost to the point of identification with the original religion of Moses” (496). In his concluding paragraph Freud summarizes his theory.

To the known dualities of this history—*two* peoples who come together for the formation of the nation; *two* kingdoms into which this nation is divided; *two* names for the deity in the basic writings of the Bible—we add two new ones: *two* establishments of religion, the first suppressed by the second and later nevertheless appearing victoriously after it; *two* founders of religion, both of whom are called Moses and whose personalities we must keep separate from each other. (501; original emphasis)

There is no need to add further particulars from Freud’s imaginative and often fascinating argument, hardly a detail of which—from Jahweh as a volcanic deity and the monotheism in the Egyptian cult of Aton to the murder of Moses—is original but may be found, as discussed below, in earlier works, some dating to the eighteenth century. What matters for our purposes is the fact that the biography and history of the first two sections of *Moses and Monotheism* are introduced essentially as background material for the theoretical and ideological exposition of the much longer third part, “Moses, His People, and the Monotheistic Religion.”

Here Freud brings all the apparatus of his psychoanalytical theory to bear on the Moses story as well as the theory of religion as developed earlier in his *Totem and Taboo* (1913). (Freud is keenly aware that his “great man” theory of history stands in contrast to the contemporaneously fashionable theories that emphasized principally social and economic factors [553].) In brief: Moses, as “father” of the Jews, is the “super-ego” (Über-ich) murdered by the aggressive “id” (Es) of the still primitive people (562–63). Their murder of Moses produced among the Jews a “traumatic neurosis” that, during a long period of incubation, was repressed as a “latent memory” (516) and created a “longing for the messiah who will return and bring to his people salvation and the promised domination of the world” (537). Eventually maturing, they became self-confident enough to accept the repressed memory and the monotheistic religion (the super-ego) it includes. This history explains, for Freud, the typical characteristics of the Jewish people, among whom he decidedly includes himself.

I have reviewed several of the more striking and typical examples of what I have termed the uses and abuses of Moses. My title, of course, echoes Nietzsche’s meditation *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life* (the conventional if imprecise translation of *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*, 1874). By “abuse,” however, I do not have in mind what Nietzsche meant by “disadvantage” (Nachteil). I take it to designate not merely such gross distortions as that of Hitler or, as we shall see below, Nazi propaganda generally, but, more broadly, any blatantly ideological adaptation of Moses’ name and life beyond his traditional biblical roles as liberator, lawgiver, and religious prophet of the Hebrews. I do not wish by the term to propose any rigorous category or to imply, from case to case, any moral or aesthetic judgment. Indeed, some of these so-called abuses have resulted in ingenious theories, amusing twists, and imaginative literary creations.

Returning now to the biblical source: there Moses appears in various roles. He is the liberator who leads his people out of Egypt and unifies them against all outsiders. He transmits the laws by which they must