

# From Slavery to Freedom: The Hebrew Odyssey

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In Western literature, the journey is one of the most common metaphors for life. From *The Pilgrim's Progress* to *Huckleberry Finn*, writers have trumpeted the obvious fact that life is fluid, not static. Who does not recognize that even the most controlled existence is a wild roller-coaster ride thrusting individuals and peoples from the lower depths to the dazzling heights, seemingly without reason and beyond prediction? What human cannot recognize his own experience in Dante's chilling report, "In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost"?<sup>1</sup> And who but the most cynical does not admire Tennyson's Ulysses in his determination "to seek a newer world...to sail beyond the sunset...to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yeild"?<sup>2</sup>

The fundamental epic of Hebrew literature and life is also the story of a journey, of a people's movement from "a dark wood" to "a newer world." It is a five-hundred year saga transporting God's chosen tribe from prosperity to slavery, and, just at the limit of their endurance, back once more to the Promised Land of milk and honey. The beginning of the biblical epic is difficult to pinpoint. The journey of life starts, of course, with creation itself, and the Hebrew tribe enters the action in Chapter Eleven of Genesis with the opening of the cycle of stories surrounding the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. However, it is in the next generation, the period of Jacob's son Joseph, that the stories begin to reflect not merely the personal experiences of the protagonists but, through them, the fate of a nation. Thus the Joseph narrative seems a fitting, if somewhat arbitrary, point to begin an analysis of the Hebrews' amazing odyssey.

## I. The Story of Joseph (Genesis 37-50)

Thomas Hardy, recognizing his immense literary debt to the Bible, once remarked, "In these Bible lives and adventures there is the spherical completeness of perfect art."<sup>3</sup> No portion of biblical literature bears out Hardy's contention more convincingly than does the Joseph narrative. Its unified construction, complex design, and significant themes must certainly qualify the tale as one of the finest of pre-modern short stories.

The general outline of the Joseph narrative is probably familiar to almost every literate person. A classic success story unfolds in the account of the arrogant young man, captured by his angry brothers and sold as a slave in a foreign land, who then rises to the pinnacles of fame and power while saving his civilization from disaster. This portion of the Pentateuch epic accounts for the presence of the Hebrews in Egypt about

sixteen hundred B.C., but Joseph's story begins in his homeland, Canaan, where the young man is the favorite among Jacob's twelve sons.

One might wonder why in a traditional society a younger son should be chosen above his ten older brothers; nonetheless, that fact represents a continuation of an important biblical pattern, begun with Cain and Able, of choosing the youngest or least likely candidate for special recognition or blessing. The Hebrews perhaps felt that these unpredictable choices reflected God's selection of themselves, rather than the powerful and sophisticated societies of Egypt or Mesopotamia, as His special people. One detail of the account does give another clue to Joseph's elevated status in that he and his younger brother, Benjamin, are the only children of Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel.

Symbolic of Joseph's high position is his robe, given to him by his father. Generations of Sunday School children, who may remember little else about their Sabbath morning endeavors, still sparkle with recognition on hearing mention of Joseph's "coat of many colors." Sadly, the best modern evidence suggests that this most famous of all garments was not multi-colored at all. Recent translations of the Bible usually refer to it as simply a "full-length robe." That description clearly makes the point that wearing such clothing, with arms and legs encumbered by folds of material, set Joseph above the physical labor expected of his older brothers. One suspects, however, that the more memorable "coat of many colors" will remain the Sunday School favorite.

The hatred and disgust which the brothers feel for Joseph seem richly deserved. Not only does the haughty youngster parade before them in his royal robes while checking on their work, but he even tells them of his dreams in which all the brothers will one day be his servants. Who could blame these tough, hard working herdsmen for wanting to be rid of such an impudent nuisance? Here in the open fields, where Joseph is beyond Jacob's protection, the brothers decide to put an end to the boy's insulting boasts. Eight of them want to kill him outright, but two, Reuben and Judah, with more merciful inclinations, argue persuasively that he should be sold as a slave to a passing caravan. Interestingly, these two who want to save Joseph represent the two versions of the Joseph story which the editors so skillfully blended. Reuben's involvement was touted by the northern tribes of Israel and Judah's by the Judeans, his descendants who stttled in the southern area around Jerusalem.

In any case, Joseph is saved from death but stripped of his offending tunic and dumped uncerimoniously into an empty pit, without food or water, to await the approaching traders. The sale is made, though not without the complication of intermediary kidnappers who pocket Joseph's purchase price of twenty shekels of silver. Meanwhile, the victim, unconcerned about who profits from his loss of freedom and privilege, is carried off to meet his fate in Egypt. The brothers hide their treachery by dipping the famous cloak in goat's blood and reporting to their inconsolable father that Joseph has been torn apart by a wild beast.

Joseph, however, seems truly lucky or, in biblical terms, blessed. Far from being sold into the mines or galleys, he is purchased as a house servant in the comfortable home of Potiphar, the captain of the Pharaoh's guard. Quickly the young man demon-

strates his abilities and is made chief servant, overseer of the entire household.

Joseph's only problem, and the cause of his second dramatic fall, is that he is simply too handsome. Potiphar's wife, perhaps made lonely by her husband's long hours at the palace, "looked with desire at Joseph, and she said, 'Lie with me'" (Genesis 39:7). Joseph, too virtuous for his own good, refuses to betray his master's trust. This rebuff so angers the mistress that she rips off his tunic and uses it to support a revengeful lie that she has been raped by her number one servant. Potiphar has no choice but to at least publically accept his wife's account of the incident above that of his slave. However, Joseph's light punishment in being merely sent to prison rather than executed suggests that his master may have entertained private doubts about who was really trying to seduce whom!

The use of Joseph's clothes to frame his guilt marks a further development of one of the story's controlling structural elements. Clothes in the Joseph narrative function as symbols of transition. First, Joseph lost his famous multi-colored, or full-length, tunic when he was thrown into the pit by his brothers. Now, on entering prison, he again moves from one life to another, and again he has lost his clothes. Later when Joseph is summoned from prison to assume a rank of power, the storyteller carefully inserts the detail that he once again changes his clothes (Genesis 41:14).

Not unexpectedly, Joseph, a natural leader, rises rapidly to a position of dominance, even within the sharp limitations of prison life. He quickly wins the favor of the chief jailor and is appointed a trustee in charge of all the other inmates. Joseph's cyclical movement from a position of mastery to one of degradation to mastery once again is another important pattern in the story. Each movement until his summons from the Pharaoh is a step down (favorite son to slave, slave to prisoner), but within the bounds of these increasingly restrictive situations, Joseph always rises to the highest possible level.

A related and paradoxical theme is that for Joseph prisons are places of preservation as well as confinement. His first prison is the pit into which his brothers throw him. The pit is certainly a most unpleasant environment, but it is preferable to death, the alternative which the brothers discuss. Likewise, slave labor in the house of Potiphar is undoubtedly a humiliating form of imprisonment for the proud young Canaanite, but it is better than slavery almost anywhere else in Egypt. Finally, the prison itself, while restricting Joseph's life even more, is still a place of preservation since it saves him from death, the expected fate of a slave found guilty of adultery with a high official's wife.

Chapter Forty returns to the subject of dreams, where Joseph's troubles began. Dreams were taken seriously by the Hebrews and Egyptians, as well as by almost all other ancient peoples. The general belief was that dreams were the most frequently used and most reliable channels of communication between the spiritual realm and the world of men. Probably one reason why Joseph's original dreams of mastery so infuriated his brothers is that they suspected the visions might come true. Indeed, this paradox of dreams which become reality is another important structural element in

the story. The narrative contains three pairs of dreams, all of which are eventually realized. The first dreams are predictions of Joseph's future; the second set provide the means for him to gain release from prison; and the correct interpretation of the third set, Pharaoh's dreams, earns for Joseph the prime ministership of Egypt.

The second pair of dreams, those of the Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker, are explained by Joseph while the two palace servants are his prison mates. This exercise serves mainly to establish his credibility as a diviner. The cupbearer dreams of once again producing fine wine for the king, and Joseph accurately predicts that in three days the man will be called back to the palace and given his old position. Nonetheless, the ungrateful butler forgets his promise to commend Joseph to the Pharaoh. In contrast to the good fortune of the cupbearer, the unlucky baker, who dreams of his bread being devoured by birds, is told straightforwardly that in three days he will be hanged and his own body left to be eaten by birds. The fulfillment of that gruesome prediction firmly establishes Joseph's interpretation credentials and suggests to the reader that the protagonist's earlier dreams of glory were not idle boasts.

Most important, of course, are the Pharaoh's dreams which, because of the ruler's position, may reflect the destiny of all Egypt. Like Joseph, the Pharaoh has two dreams with the same meaning. Moreover, the King's dreams, like Joseph's, seem unnatural in that the weaker or younger element dominates the stronger or older. The Pharaoh is severely troubled by a vision of seven emaciated cows devouring seven strong ones yet remaining deathly frail. Similarly, seven withered ears of corn which consume an equal number of plump, golden ones without increasing in size or health haunt the Pharaoh's troubled sleep. When Joseph, at last remembered by the cupbearer, is summoned to the monarch's side, he quickly divines what the court wise men could not: Egypt will experience seven prosperous, bountiful years followed by seven years of failed harvests and famine. Clearly, if disaster is to be avoided, the Pharaoh must act quickly to provide for the coming bad years. Recognizing a capable man when he sees one, the Pharaoh, in fairy tale fashion, transforms Joseph from prisoner to potentate. Symbolic of his new rank, Joseph receives the Pharaoh's signet ring, a "blank check" to issue commands in the name of the King. He is also supplied with fine clothes, golden jewellery, a highborn wife, and the reins to the Pharaoh's "second chariot" (Genesis 41:43), presumably the Egyptian equivalent of modern America's "Air Force Two."

As Egypt's chief administrator, Joseph works with honesty and diligence to insure the country's future food supply. He commands that during each of the seven good years, twenty per cent of every crop must be stored. Thus, when the blighted years arrive, Egypt has plenty of food and even becomes a food exporter to hungry neighboring nations.

Still, however, a nagging question remains. How was Joseph, a thirty-year-old foreign prisoner-slave, able to rise so quickly in xenophobic Egypt? One fascinating answer was suggested by the first century A.D. Jewish historian Josephus who maintained that from about 1630 to 1480 B.C., the time of Joseph, Egypt was ruled by invading

Asian conquerors called the Hyksos people. According to that conjecture, the pharaoh who elevated Joseph, himself a foreigner, would think it quite reasonable to place a Canaanite viceroy above the defeated Egyptians. There is little historical evidence for or against the theory. Egyptian writings make no mention of it, but that may be simply because their historians found the subject too unpleasant to talk about.<sup>4</sup> In any case, Josephus' Hyksos account makes the Joseph story a bit more credible and also offers an explanation as to why, several hundred years later in the time of Moses, the again-independent Egyptians decided to enslave the previously welcomed descendants of Joseph.

The reader might also wonder why Joseph, with all of Egypt at his bidding, makes no recorded attempt to contact his beloved father during the seven prosperous years. That, however, would spoil the touching drama of reunion toward which the entire story builds. As the famine worsens throughout the eastern Mediterranean region, a hungry Jacob sends the ten older brothers to Egypt to buy food, keeping only the now-favored Benjamin at home. As a plot necessity, the mighty Joseph is personally conducting grain sales on the day they arrive. He recognizes them immediately, but, of course, they do not know him, and, in fulfillment of Joseph's dreams, they bow to the ground before him (Genesis 42:6).

Though he does sell his brothers food, Joseph treats them very harshly. He accuses them of being foreign spies, seizes Simeon as a hostage, and warns the remaining brothers not to return to Egypt unless they bring Benjamin with them. Jacob cannot bear the thought of sending his youngest, most-loved son on such a dangerous journey, but the threat of starvation leaves him little choice. Thus the brothers, including Benjamin, trudge westward a second time to buy food and face the wrath of their unknown sibling. Joseph remains as cruel as before, pretending to believe that Benjamin has stolen his cup used for divination and therefore ordering the boy captured and held as his personal slave. Only the moving pleas of Judah save the lad from the fate which Joseph himself had previously suffered.

Why is Joseph so unkind? The most apparent answer is simple revenge, and perhaps that is a factor. However, such a base emotion seems unworthy of one of the Hebrews' greatest heroes. More acceptably, Joseph's treatment of his brothers can be seen as a psychologically credible testing of their family loyalty. In the past they had been willing to destroy the family unity and break their father's heart to rid themselves of Joseph. Now Joseph needs to learn if they have changed or if they will still sacrifice a brother's freedom and their father's emotions for personal convenience. Happily, the change is obvious. The brothers, like Joseph, have become more mature and wise since the last family crisis. Judah's stirring appeal ends with one of the Bible's most touching pronouncements of selfless love: "Now, therefore, please let your servant [Judah] remain instead of the lad, a slave to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers. For how shall I go up to my father if the lad is not with me, lest I see the evil that would overtake my father?" (Genesis 44:33-34).

Joseph, realizing that no further testing is necessary and overwhelmed by Judah's

offer, weepingly, forgivingly, reveals himself to his brothers, while inviting them to return to Egypt with their father and settle in the Nile Delta area as permanent state guests. The Pharaoh, happy for another opportunity to show his gratitude to Joseph, enthusiastically agrees to the plan. Thus Jacob, with seventy male and uncounted female family members, leaves Canaan, the Promised Land to which his descendants will not return for three hundred fifty years. Nonetheless, for the moment, the ending of the Joseph narrative seems an exceptionally happy one.

Joseph, himself, touches on the theme of the story when he tells his brothers, "Do not be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life" (Genesis 45:5). The preservation of life over the forces of waste and destruction is, indeed, the main point of the story. Throughout the narrative, every act of waste is countered by a divinely blessed act of preservation. This pattern is particularly evident in the seemingly disconnected Chapter Thirty-Eight account of Judah's family. Two of his sons, successively, marry the same woman. Yet, they "waste their seed" (38:9) and she cannot become pregnant. Finally, desperate for children and disguised as a prostitute, the twice-widowed Tamar tricks Judah himself into lying with her. The result of that encounter is twin boys, clear evidence that in God's eyes even incest is preferable to waste. The baker, in his dream, wastes his wares and so dies; the cupbearer is productive and lives. The brothers waste Joseph and suffer in consequence; they preserve Benjamin and prosper. The message is abundantly clear: the preservation of life and love is the first duty of humanity.

At the end of the story, Jacob's family is together, truly together, for the first time. Now no one objects when Jacob bestows on Joseph the well-deserved birthright, a double portion of inheritance, through the adoption of Joseph's two sons. The family is not even too surprised when the old patriarch gives his stronger blessing to Joseph's younger son in preference to the older. For at last all the brothers have learned that life is not simple, that traditions and customs are not absolute, that dreams are not always illusory, and that the ways of God are not necessarily those of men.

## II. The Story of Moses (Exodus 1-20, 32; Numbers 13-14, 20, 22; Deuteronomy 33-34)

Joseph's peaceful death, the natural result of one hundred ten years of adventurous living, marks the conclusion of the book of Genesis. Before his death, he requests his family to carry his body, mummified in the Egyptian fashion, back to Canaan with them when they depart from Egypt. However, the Hebrews appear to have scant reason for wanting to leave their new homes in the lush Nile Delta where food is plentiful, life is comparatively easy, and the government continues to offer them favored treatment as honored guests.

Unfortunately, any reader with even the vaguest knowledge of history or human nature must realize that such an ideal situation is too good to last. In the first chapter of Exodus, which represents a time leap of perhaps three hundred fifty years from the

close of Genesis, the wheel of fortune takes a dizzy and disasterous turn for the Hebrews. The first hint of trouble comes in verse seven which reports a great increase in the Hebrew population. The most common expository mode in biblical literature is understatement, but in verse seven the storyteller uses multiple repetitions to reinforce the significance of the Hebrew population explosion: "The sons of Isral were *fruitful* and *increased* greatly, and *multiplied* and *became exceedingly mighty*, so that the land was *filled* with them" (italics mine).

This verse serves two purposes in the narration. First, the word choices are intended to echo those in Genesis 1:28 in which God enjoins his people to "Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth." Clearly the Hebrews are on the path of destiny; God, after all, promised to make Abraham the father of a "multitude," not the mere seventy at the time of Joseph. But the second function of the repetitious number concepts in verse seven is ominous. The words serve as an implied warning that, though a few foreign guests may have been an interesting diversion for the Egyptians, the later presence of a large alien minority fills them with distrust and fear. Perhaps the Egyptians were familiar enough with the above quoted verse from Genesis to know that it concludes, "...subdue it and rule over...every living thing that moves on the earth" (Genesis 1:28).

In verse eight of Exodus, Chapter One, the real trouble begins: "A new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." If Josephus was right about Joseph's tenure in Egypt coming during the rule of the Hyksos people, then this verse is doubly significant, for the new king, in contrast to the Pharaoh of Joseph's time, is a native Egyptian. In any case, this new king, often assumed to be the great Ramses II, has a talent for political rabble rousing. He tells his people, "Behold, the people of the sons of Israel are more and mightier than we" (Exodus 1:9). This, of course, is a ridiculous exaggeration, but the common Egyptians, perhaps thirsting for a bit of revenge after their humiliating subjection to the Hyksos, seem happy to believe their king. Thus there develops a strong Egyptian national consensus on the decision to repress the foreigners and gradually drive them into absolute servitude.

Nonetheless, even the harsh conditions of state slavery do not halt the increase in numbers among Yahveh's chosen people. The Hebrews' job is to build two new "storage cities" in the northeastern Delta, presumably for use as supply bases during Egyptian military campaigns against the people of the Fertile Crescent. Normally, the life span of slave construction laborers was mercifully short, but it is a sign of God's hidden presence among His people in Egypt that they seem to thrive on such repression.

In a second effort to stop the Hebrews' population growth, the Pharaoh calls in the two Hebrew midwives. (Strange that if the Hebrews' numbers are really so vast there are only two midwives!) The King's orders are that the midwives must kill all Hebrew male babies at birth, while the females, presumably no threat to the kingdom, will be allowed to live. The two women, however, fear God more than the Pharaoh, and they fail to kill even a single baby boy. When the King demands an

explanation, they offer an insultingly nationalistic reply which must have infuriated the Pharaoh as much as it delighted their descendants, centuries later, who told the story around campfires: "The Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women; for they are vigorous, and they give birth before the midwife can get to them" (Exodus 1:19).

God rewards the midwives, but the King is not amused by their comments. Concluding that the women are unreliable, the monarch orders all his people to throw infant Hebrew boys into the Nile. Thus the human god of the Egyptians, representing all the power, wealth, and pride of mankind, moves into a position of irreconcilable conflict with Yahweh, the living, though presently unseen, God of the Hebrews. The central question of the Exodus story is clearly delineated: which power will the Hebrews serve? The Pharaoh demands death, slavery, and decrease, while God offers the promise of life, freedom, and multiplication.

With the beginning of Chapter Two, the storyteller changes the subject of narration from death to life. Into the midst of the hostile environment produced by the Pharaoh is born the next great Hebrew leader. The drama surrounding Moses' birth and struggle for survival is not unusual in such ancient folktales. The thoughtful reader is reminded of the accounts of non-biblical figures such as Oedipus, Romulus and Cyrus whose unusual experiences in infancy marked them as special, exalted personages. Most memorable of all is the similar case, more than a thousand years after Moses, of another Hebrew baby boy, born in a stable in Bethlehem of Judea, who survived the death edict of another king by fleeing with his parents, ironically, to the safety of Egypt.

However, Moses' parents, unlike Mary and Joseph, are not free to run away. They desperately want to save their beautiful new baby, but the situation seems hopeless. For three months his mother somehow manages to hide him, presumably in their house. However, as his cries grow ever louder, the risk of being discovered increases frighteningly. The mother's next step, one of the many wonderfully ironic details surrounding Moses' birth, is to throw the baby into the Nile as the King has commanded. First, however, she places him in a small, waterproof basket which she hides among the reeds near the riverbank. Moses' sister is left to watch the tiny boat with its precious cargo. Suddenly, in what would appear to be a stroke of great misfortune, an Egyptian princess, the daughter of the King, appears and, hearing Moses' cries, orders the basket to be drawn from the river and brought to her. Surprisingly, instead of sending the baby to be killed, the delighted princess adopts the child as her own. Meanwhile, Moses' quick-witted sister emerges from her observation post and offers to find a suitable Hebrew nurse for the child, and the princess happily agrees to the plan. Thus the Pharaoh, through his daughter, pays Moses' own mother to care for the infant who will one day nearly destroy the kingdom. Another fascinating irony in the story is that, though the Egyptian ruler saw no danger in letting baby girls live, a succession of females, including his own daughter, is responsible for preserving his nemesis. It would seem that the power of Yahweh, hidden like Moses among the reeds, is nonetheless at work in subtle ways.

The involvement of the Pharaoh's daughter enriches the tale by making the con-



flict more universal. Her presence, like that of the Midianite priest who later helps Moses, makes the story more than a black and white, “us vs. them,” struggle. The issue is beyond nationalism; it is the eternal moral combat between good and evil.

The name which the princess gives to her newly-adopted son has given rise to some interesting speculation. Chapter Two, verse ten reads, “And she named him Moses, and said, ‘Because I drew him out of the water.’” In Hebrew, the child’s name is “Mosheh,” and apparently the storyteller saw a similarity between that name and the Hebrew verb *Mashah*, meaning “to draw out.” That unlikely connection between name and verb presents another irony: the princess’ Hebrew was not very polished, for what she took to mean “he whom I have drawn out” actually meant “he who draws out,” an obvious foreshadowing of Moses’ role in leading the exodus. Unfortunately, however, it seems beyond credibility that the princess would give her child a Hebrew name. Most likely “Moses” simply means “son.” It is the same root found in such common Egyptian names as Ramses, “son of Ra” and Thutmose, “son of Thut or Thoth.”

The Bible says little of Moses’ boyhood and youth in the Egyptian royal palace. Obviously, however, the young prince wants for nothing and grows up accustomed to wealth, power, and leadership. Nonetheless, Moses suffers from very divided loyalties. Somehow he knows or senses the secret of his origins, and, though his life is thoroughly Egyptian, his heart is increasingly with his Hebrew brothers.

One day as he is watching the slaves at their toil, he sees an Egyptian guard beating one of them. Moses’ impulsive reaction is to hit the guard and, perhaps unintentionally, kill him. The Great Liberator thus strikes his first of many blows for justice and freedom. He hides the victim’s body in the sand, assuming that since there are no other Egyptians nearby, the secret of his crime is safe with the Hebrews whom he has tried to help.

However, the next development shows how firmly the Hebrews are within the grip of a slave mentality, looking only to their masters for authority. The day after his crime, Moses again goes out among “his brethren” and sees two slaves fighting with each other. This small conflict is symbolic of a complete breakdown in the community and tribal spirit which Joseph worked so hard to build. When Moses tries to intervene in the dispute, he is rebuffed, the first of many times his leadership is rejected by his people. The two men stop fighting only long enough to berate Moses and caustically inform him that only true Egyptians have any authority over them. They are slaves indeed! Of more immediate concern to Moses, however, is their revelation that news of the murdered guard has spread throughout the camp. Moses realizes that the authorities also will soon know, and so the young prince becomes a fugitive, slipping quickly out of Egypt. His personal flight to freedom takes him in the same direction as the great exodus he will lead years later. He crosses the Sinai Peninsula to Midian, the western part of modern Arabia and the closest non-Egyptian territory.

Once in Midian, the exile wastes no time in getting settled. Just after his arrival in the new land, Moses sits down by a well, the location of many biblical encounters, particularly between men and women. As the weary traveller rests beside the water,

seven daughters of a Midianite priest approach with their flocks. When some rough, unchivalrous shepherds try to jump the queue and drive the young ladies away, the gallant Moses quickly routs the villains and helps the priest's daughters finish their chores. Their father is so impressed with the unknown crusader for justice that he invites Moses to his home, feeds the young man supper, and, rather hastily, offers Moses his daughter, Zipporah, for a wife. Moses accepts all of the priest's hospitality, including the wife, but, though he settles in Midian, it is not his home. His longing to be with the Hebrews is clearly suggested by the name which Moses gives to his first son, Gershom, which means something like "alien visitor."

At the end of Chapter Two, however, the observant reader receives a clear signal that Moses and the Hebrews will not remain aliens forever. As the suffering of His chosen people increases, we are at last told that "God *heard* their groaning; and God *remembered* His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And God *saw* the sons of Israel, and God *took notice* of them" (Exodus 2:24-25, italics mine). Here, as with the population terms in Chapter One, repetition is a harbinger of change. The time has come for God's active participation in the battered lives of His people.

Moses' knowledge that he has been chosen for leadership comes to him in a most dramatic way, a direct encounter with God. As Moses is shepherding the flocks of Jethro, his father-in-law, he sees the famous burning bush, covered with flames but not being consumed. As a symbol for inexhaustible energy, the creative dynamo of the universe, a blazing bush seems strikingly appropriate. Moses is told to remove his shoes because he stands on holy ground, a custom still practiced by Moslems when entering a mosque. The message Moses receives is that God is now ready to relieve the suffering of the Hebrews and bring them out of Egypt to "a land of milk and honey." Moses enthusiastically favors that idea, but he is stunned and humbled when God tells him, "I will send you to Pharaoh" (Exodus 3:10).

The task confronting Moses seems utterly impossible. He, a hunted fugitive, rejected by his own people, is supposed to return to the land of their enslavement, win their confidence in himself and a god whom they have long since forgotten, and lead a rebellion against the most powerful nation on earth. One can only sympathize when Moses responds to the assignment with a bewildered, unspoken exclamation of "Who? Me?"

Moses first concrete objection is that the Hebrews do not even know who their god is anymore. This separation from God is quite understandable. After hundreds of years in Egypt, Jacob's descendants are undoubtedly more familiar with the Egyptian gods than with their own. Moses, therefore, asks God quite directly what His name is. The response provides the Bible's most explicit clue about the Hebrews' understanding of the nature of their god. The thundering divine reply from the midst of the burning bush is, "I AM WHO I AM....Say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.' " (Exodus 3:14). Thus it would seem that for the Hebrews, God is Existence Itself, the cosmic Life Force, pulsing throughout the universe, articulated by a verb which in Hebrew requires no tense: I WAS, I AM, I WILL BE.

The reluctant new leader presents a list of other excuses in explaining why he cannot do the job God has assigned him, but his objections are all summarily dismissed. Perhaps Moses' most convincing argument is that he has some sort of speech defect and is, therefore, unqualified to speak before the Pharaoh. To this point, God relents only so far as to assign Aaron, Moses' older brother, as his assistant and spokesman. Thus, unable to escape the task which must be done, Moses prepares to return to Egypt with his family.

En route, he has a strange experience which seems somewhat reminiscent of Jacob's wrestling match with God reported in Chapter Thirty-Two of Genesis. Moses' most bizarre rendezvous with Yahweh, reported in garbled, fragmentary fashion in Exodus, Chapter Four, appears to be another test of God's chosen agent to certify that he is truly devoted to Hebrew traditions and religious law. During the journey, "...at the lodging place on the way the Lord met him and sought to put him to death" (Exodus 4:24). Presumably, he is afflicted with some sort of serious illness, the cure for which would certainly raise the eyebrows of a modern medical practitioner: "Then Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin and threw it at Moses' feet.... So He let him alone" (Exodus 4: 25-26). The circumcision of Moses' son seems a vicarious reaffirmation of the great leader's own faith. Since the word *feet* in the above quotation is undoubtedly a euphemism for genitals, Moses' escape from death is accomplished by a symbolic second circumcision, marking him as the chosen among the chosen.

The rest of the journey back to Egypt passes without incident, and, on arrival, Moses quickly begins to organize the Hebrew slaves. He and Aaron hold meetings with the leaders and win their support for a bargaining session with the Pharaoh. However, when he is ushered into the august presence of Egypt's human god, Moses does not, as in the Hollywood version of the story, demand exit visas to Canaan. To be sure, Moses does thunder the famous words, "Let my people go!" but he does not ask that the Hebrews be allowed to leave permanently. Such a request would obviously have been denied since the slaves were an important economic resource in the Pharaoh's muscle-powered kingdom. Instead, Moses deceitfully requests permission for the Hebrews to travel three days into the desert, celebrate a religious feast there, and then return to their jobs. However, the Pharaoh, seeing no reason to grant his slaves a week's vacation, angrily responds that if they have time to think of such foolishness, then they are not busy enough. Thereupon, he gives the command that the Hebrews must make just as many bricks as before, but they must now find their own production materials in their "spare time." The people's response, setting a pattern which will become distressingly familiar whenever trouble strikes during the Exodus, is to blame all their misfortune on Moses: "May the Lord look upon you and judge you, for you have made us odious in Pharaoh's sight" (Exodus 5:21). Meanwhile, Moses, dejected from his initial failure, passes the blame to God: "O Lord, why hast Thou brought harm to this people? Why didst Thou ever send me?" (Exodus 5:22).

Clearly the struggle for freedom is not going to be easy. Since the Bible is the Hebrews' book, we sense from the beginning which side will win. However, any

storyteller knows that drama requires conflict, and that conflict, to be engaging as literature, should be between approximately equal forces. The Pharaoh's position is strong. He, too, is a god, with all the power of Egypt at his disposal. On the other hand, one defeat is not enough to permanently discourage Moses. God assures his spokesman of ultimate victory but ominously warns, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart that I may multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 7:3). Apparently, God wants resistance so that He will have an excuse for showing the Egyptians His powers.

On Moses' next visit to the royal palace, he and Aaron engage in a magic arts competition with the wise men and sorcerers of the Court. After trading a few easy tricks with the Pharaoh's magicians, Moses produces major excitement by turning all the water of the life-sustaining Nile to blood. The King's men, however, are not to be easily outdone, and, after considerable consultation and effort, they are able to duplicate the sanguinary transformation. In the next round of competition, Moses calls forth a plague of frogs to infest every corner of the land of Egypt. Again, however, the sorcerers are able to match the feat, presumably doubling the number of amphibians in the process. Nonetheless, while the royal conjurers can seemingly create frogs, they cannot remove them. Thus, at last, the haughty Pharaoh appeals to Moses to remove the frogs and promises in return that the Hebrews may make their pilgrimage out into the desert. Predictably, however, the King's acquiescence is short-lived and "When the Pharaoh saw that there was relief, he hardened his heart and did not listen to them" (Exodus 8:15).

When the Pharaoh thus breaks his pledge to temporarily release the Hebrews, Moses quickly applies more divine persuasion in the form of a series of plagues. The pattern has already been set: as Egypt is in the grips of each disaster, the Pharaoh relents, but when conditions improve, he "hardens his heart." The court magicians disappear from view, as the conflict has reached beyond their powers of participation. The stage is now occupied only by the principals: the Lord of the Hebrews, punishing his human rival with devastating force, and the heart-hardened Pharaoh, stubbornly, proudly resisting. The calamities which sweep down upon Egypt shake the society to its roots and spread destruction throughout the land. After the frogs come gnats and other insects. Then all the livestock in the country die, followed by a plague of boils on every Egyptian's skin. To insure that vegetation does not escape the general despoilment, God next sends a violent hail storm, followed by wave after wave of hungry locusts. After all these natural disasters, in a curse portentous of the approaching final catastrophe, God causes thick, unbroken darkness to fall upon the land for three days.

The final plague is the most horrible and thus the best remembered: "Now it came about at midnight that the Lord struck all the first-born in the land of Egypt, from the first-born of the Pharaoh...to the first-born of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the first-born of cattle" (Exodus 12:29). This mass execution, like the other plagues, is nowhere recorded in non-biblical history. All the plagues, however, can

be explained as natural disasters which, occurring over many years, might have been regulated, exaggerated, and dramatized for the purposes of the narrative. In any case, the unidentified Pharaoh in the story at last recognizes the superiority of the Hebrews' god and summons Moses and Aaron in the middle of the night. He capitulates with the words, "Rise up, get out from among my people, both you and the sons of Israel" (Exodus 12:31).

One fact that is clearly historical is that in the thirteenth century B.C. Egypt was in decline and under attack by invaders from the sea, probably Phoenicians. Also, for the first time in three centuries, Egypt had lost military control of Canaan, the Hebrews' destination. Thus, with Egypt greatly weakened by invasions and perhaps by natural disasters as well, the time does, indeed, seem ripe for the slaves to make their escape.

The last bloody plague and the resulting departure from Egypt have been commemorated by Jews ever since in the Passover Festival. The name is supposedly derived from the detail that the angel of death "passed over" the Hebrew homes which had been ritualistically decorated with lambs' blood on the doorposts and lintels. The festival is also known as the Feast of Unleavened Bread in recognition of the Hebrews' precipitous departure from Egypt. They left so hurriedly that the bread for their morning breakfast had no time to rise. Actually, the Passover Festival, in some form, almost certainly pre-dates the time of Moses. It was the Hebrews' version of the almost universal springtime fertility rites. Thus, the holiday is a good example of the common cultural practice of giving new associations to old customs.

The Exodus begins, quite understandably, in a mood of excitement and high spirits. Carrying the bones of Joseph with them, the former slaves set out on their long journey to freedom and promise. They are, quite literally, led by God, in the shape of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Some rationalists have suggested that the cloud and the fire might have been Mount Sinai in a state of volcanic eruption, while others prefer the theory that the smoke and fire were from a glowing brazier carried by the Hebrew guides. There seems no doubt, however, that the storyteller actually meant just what he said. The Hebrews are led by a divine presence, and, at least for literary purposes, there is no reason to question the detail.

Despite the journey's smooth beginning, the final victory is not yet won. Pharaoh, after burying his son and so many of his people, "hardens his heart" once again. Personally leading the full Egyptian army of more than six hundred chariots, plus horsemen and foot soldiers, the bitter king races out into the desert to reclaim his property and return the Hebrews to the brick yards. The escapees' trouble is compounded by the fact that before them lies the Red Sea, or more accurately, the Gulf of Suez, a seemingly impassable barrier preventing further eastward flight. Not very surprisingly, their response to such danger is to turn against Moses, their hero of the previous day. United in cowardice, the Hebrews berate Moses and charge, "It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." (Exodus 14:12).

However, for God the vengeful Egyptian army and the foaming waves of the sea

are mere props in the climactic final act of literature's greatest escape drama. The Lord tells Moses to stretch out his hand over the sea, and in response He causes a strong east wind to blow all night long, piling up the water and creating a path of dry land on the sea bed which the Hebrews hurry across. In hot pursuit, the Pharaoh and his army plunge into the sea behind the fleeing Hebrews. Moses, now safely on the other side with his people, once more stretches out his hand, "And the waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen, even Pharaoh's entire army...not even one of them remained" (Exodus 14:28). The victory is complete. The Pharaoh, mightiest of men, floats in ignoble death in the midst of a sea which takes no measure of his greatness. Meanwhile, the Hebrews celebrate. They have much to be thankful for: their freedom, their remarkable leader, their fatherly God, and the Land of Promise which lies before them.

Yet, one seemingly unassailable characteristic of real life and thus of serious literature is that unblemished contentment is as ephemeral as a lovely spring flower plucked from its roots. The Hebrews' ecstasy in new-found freedom quickly withers before the reality of life in the desert. Soon they are complaining to Moses again and even beginning to create a fantasy about the good old days in Egypt: "Would that we had died...in Egypt, when we sat by pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger" (Exodus 16:3). God responds to the ungracious demands of His people by providing them with manna, a bread-like substance which miraculously appears on the ground every day except the Sabbath, and with quails, which fly into the camp at sunset and wait patiently to be captured and eaten. Next the children of Israel, with their usual dramatic flair, demand that something be done about the water shortage which, quite predictably, complicates their lives in the desert: "Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us...with thirst?" (Exodus 17:3). Moses' solution is to strike a rock with his well-worn staff and produce from the boulder a spring of sweet, fresh water.

Clearly, the food and water stories reflect, in legendary form, the very real problems of providing basic necessities for a large group of people travelling in a barren wasteland. The actual number of Hebrews making the journey is the subject of much speculation. The figure provided in Exodus, six hundred thousand men plus women and children, is clearly an exaggeration. The seventy members of the family of Jacob who came to Egypt at the time of Joseph could hardly have multiplied so astronomically in only three or four hundred years. Also, the logistics of moving such a multitude across the wilderness would have been insurmountable. Walking even ten abreast through the Red Sea, for example, the approximately two million Hebrew men, women, and children would have needed several days for all to escape the approaching army. Or imagine two million people drinking from a single water tap as the Hebrews do at their rock! A more realistic guess regarding the number of people involved in the Exodus might be something like five thousand. However, the figures reported in the Bible may not be total distortions. Very likely, as the Hebrews conquered and assimilated the native peoples of Canaan, their numbers multiplied rapidly. Thus by

the time the Exodus account was written, perhaps three hundred years after the event, the total population of Israel and Judea was quite large indeed. No doubt those assimilated Canaanites would have adopted the Hebrews' ancestors as their own, just as modern Americans think of the George Washington—Thomas Jefferson group as the founders of their country even though most Americans' ancestors lived in Europe, Africa or Asia at the time the United States was established.

In any case, Moses is beset by a new problem after solving the food and water crises: even in the desert, the Hebrews encounter native peoples who view the former slaves as an invading enemy force. The first such military threat to the people of Israel comes from the tribal chieftan Amalek. Thus, characteristic of human priorities, the Hebrews are forced to form a military organization before any other elements of their new society have been developed. Joshua, Moses' eventual successor, is given command of the new army, which manages to defeat the forces of Amalek only because Moses stands on a hill above the battlefield with his weary arms outstretched, letting the power of God flow through him to the Hebrew soldiers below. In this first battle, as in the many that follow, the storyteller takes pains to explain that the victory is not the Hebrews' but their God's.

After the military force has been established and tested in battle, the need for political and judicial structures to serve the Hebrews also becomes apparent. Moses' father-in-law visits the camp and warns that the Great Helmsman cannot continue to provide all leadership and settle all disputes for a group so large and so contentious. As a result, a tightly hierarchical social structure is established, with Moses appointing 'leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens' (Exodus 18:21). Thus, at last, the people can begin to solve some of their own minor problems. Moses is freed to deal with the major issues and, one might hope, to get some much needed rest.

Very soon, however, a new development propels Moses to once again become the sole voice of authority among his people. In the third month after leaving Egypt, the Hebrews approach Mount Sinai. The actual location of that holy mountain is unknown, though for many centuries it has been arbitrarily designated as the highest peak in the peninsula which shares its name. The mountain's volcanic activity indicated to the Hebrews that God was present on it: "Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the Lord descended upon it in fire...and the whole mountain quaked violently" (Exodus 19:18). For the Hebrews, who had spent all of their lives in the flat Nile Delta, such a display must, indeed, have been awesome proof of the power and majesty of their God.

After the travelers arrive at the base of the mountain, God calls Moses to come up to the fiery summit, a request with which the Hebrew leader bravely complies. This is, of course, the second time Moses has been called to a holy mountain for conversation with God. In fact, both encounters probably occur on the same mountain. Internal evidence convinces many scholars that the Mt. Horeb of Chapter Three where Moses speaks with the burning bush and the Mt. Sinai of Chapter Nineteen where he receives the Law are, in fact, the same peak.<sup>6</sup> In any case, the two mountaintop ex-

periences certainly mark parallel highlights in the great leader's life. In his first meeting with God, Moses is given instructions on how to save his people from slavery, and in the second meeting he is given the Law, which becomes the guide and inspiration for the Hebrews throughout all generations to save them from sin.

The Law itself, epitomized in the Ten Commandments of Chapter Twenty, is a renewal of the covenant between God and His people. God promises that if the Hebrews keep these laws, He will bless them; if they break or ignore the laws, He will punish them. The covenant formula of the Decalogue is similar to a feudal treaty between a king and his vassals, especially as promulgated by the Hittites in Moses' time. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the laws themselves are anything but Hebrew in origin. Of the Ten Commandments, the first four are religious, while the last six are social. The injunction to keep the Sabbath day suggests that the list is from a time much later than that of Moses, as Sabbath observances did not become well established among the Hebrews until the fifth or sixth century B.C. Very probably, the Commandments themselves, as well as the extensive codes which follow, were developed through custom, decree, and revelation over many centuries until the priestly editors gave final form to the Hebrew bedrock after the Babylonian exile.

The difficulty of keeping the Law is illustrated by the famous incident of the golden calf. As Moses makes his triumphant descent from the mountain carrying the tablets of the Law, he is met with the shocking scene of the Hebrews worshiping a foreign idol. The calf, almost certainly a bull, was the cult animal of the Canaanite god Baal. That suggests, of course, that this story too is based on events which actually occurred much later, after the Hebrews' entry into Canaan. The offenders may have intended for their golden bull to represent Yahweh, not Baal, but such fine distinctions are lost on Moses who, in anger and disgust, smashes the stone tablets beside the mountain path. The shattered tablets are symbolic of the equally shattered covenant, now abrogated by the disobedient Hebrews. God, offended and angry as a spurned lover, wants to destroy the entire tribe and build a new nation from the descendants of Moses. However, Moses, angry as he is, shows himself capable of more insight and compassion than God at this point in the drama. The Hebrew leader reminds God of His promises to the Patriarchs to bring their descendants to the Promised Land, and he warns God that other peoples will laugh at Him or be critical of Him if he does not properly care for His people. Thus, calmed and rational once again, "The Lord changed His mind about the harm which He said he would do to His people" (Exodus 32:14).

Nonetheless, the idolaters do not completely escape punishment. Moses orders the calf to be ground to powder and mixed with water. Those who worshipped the calf must then drink it, perhaps as a reminder that God is truly internal! Finally, the leaders of the revolt against Yahweh are put to the sword. Amazingly, however, Aaron, who actually produced the calf, escapes without even a verbal reprimand for his major part in the scandal. One wonders if part of the narrative has been suppressed at this point to protect the memory of Moses' otherwise valuable assistant. At any rate, the case at last can be closed, and in Chapter Thirty-Four God rewrites the



tablets to signify that the covenant has been established once again.

The journey continues, but after the events on Mount Sinai, the account of the travels becomes fragmentary. The few interesting sections which report the Hebrews' progress are interspersed among seemingly endless legal codes, census reports, and instructions on the proper methods and rituals of worship, all of which are without literary interest. However, one important episode which profoundly affects the Hebrews' future is reported in the thirteenth and fourteenth chapters of the book of Numbers. According to this account, the Hebrews at last reach the border of Canaan, and Moses prudently sends in twelve spies, one from each tribe, to assess the enemies' strength. After the traditional "forty days" absence, the spies return, carrying quantities of beautiful fruit. They report that Canaan is, indeed, a land of milk and honey, but ten of them are convinced that conquest is impossible, saying, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they are too strong for us" (Numbers 13:31). As always, the Hebrews are quick to believe that disaster is upon them, and they begin to bitterly attack Moses' leadership: "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt.... Why is the Lord bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword?.... Let us appoint a [new] leader and return to Egypt" (Numbers 14:2-4). Two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, from the two tribes which later become the dominant ones, argue that the Canaanites can be defeated, "If the Lord is pleased with us then He will bring us into this land, and give it to us" (Numbers 14:8). However, their voices are lost in the whimpering roar of pessimism.

Yahweh, furious with his faithless people, repeats the threat which He made at the time of the golden calf incident: "I will smite them with pestilence and dispossess them, and I will make you [Moses] into a nation greater and mightier than they" (Numbers 14:12). Moses, using the same argument that was so successful on Mt. Sinai, reminds God that He must protect His reputation: "The Egyptians will hear of it...the nations who have heard of Thy fame will say, 'Because the Lord could not bring this people into the land which He promised them by oath, therefore He slaughtered them in the wilderness'" (Numbers 14:13, 16). Moses adds in conclusion that the Lord must show himself to be a God of love, not vengeance. Once more, because of the debating skills of their leader, the Hebrews win a reprieve from death. However, God declares that of all the assembly, only Caleb and Joshua may enter the new land. The group must wander in the wilderness for "forty years," waiting for everyone over the age of twenty to die before their children, with renewed faith, can take possession of the Promised Land. At last, the sobered people decide that they were wrong to reject Joshua and Caleb's advice, and they plan a military campaign against Canaan. However, without God's support, they are doomed; the battle is lost, and they retreat into the wilderness.

During their years of wandering, the Hebrews are, quite naturally, in conflict with certain other desert tribes. Given the aggressive territorial instincts of human beings, it is impossible for one large group to cross land claimed by another group without trouble resulting. Moses and his military adjunct, Joshua, must keep the people con-

stantly prepared to fight for their lives. Numerous battles and victories are reported, the most interesting of which is recorded in the book of Numbers from Chapter Twenty-Two to Chapter Twenty-Four:

The story of Balaam and his talking donkey has always been a popular favorite. It combines the charm of a fable with the humor of multiple frustrations for the "bad guys." In the tale, Balaam enjoys an enormous reputation as a seer and conjurer. Balak, the king of the Moabites who live in the desert south of Canaan, sends two delegations of elders and princes to Balaam offering him great rewards to come to Moab and curse the invading Hebrews. Since Balaam's home is at Pethor on the Euphrates River, the Moabites must travel nearly six hundred fifty kilometers to make their plea for occult assistance. The account of Balaam's response is somewhat garbled, reflecting editorial difficulties in combining two or more contradictory traditions. At first, following the instructions of the Hebrews' God, Balaam refuses to go to Moab, but later Yahweh permits him to make the journey after enjoining him to speak only the words which God will put in his mouth. However, when Balaam is en route to Moab, the seemingly fickle diety becomes "angry because he was going" (Numbers 22:22). Three times an angel of the Lord, invisible to Balaam, blocks the donkey's path. The donkey, baffled by Balaam's demands for more speed in disregard of the sword-toting angel, takes the only reasonable actions in the situation: first she stops, the second time she presses against the wall next to the path, and finally she lies down in bewilderment. Balaam, however, in a great hurry to collect the reward which has been promised him, is angered by the animal's behavior. The frustrated seer beats the donkey, each time more vigorously.

Yet, as is always the case in fables, it is the man rather than the beast who needs to learn a lesson. The donkey, verbally challenging her master, points out that she has always been a faithful servant and, therefore, must have some good reason for her strange behavior. At that moment Balaam's eyes are opened, and he gets his first look at the avenging angel who has thus far halted his progress. The celestial centurian gruffly explains that the abused donkey has saved Balaam's life by turning aside from danger. He also demands that Balaam speak only as directed by God when he reaches Moab. Of course, according to the other, intertwined version of the story, the prophet had already agreed to that condition before leaving Pethor, hence the apparent contradiction.

After Balaam arrives in Moab, it is Balak's turn to be frustrated. The King prepares an elaborate setting for what everyone assumes will be an effective curse against the invaders. Balaam orders Balak to "Build seven altars for me here, and prepare seven bulls and seven rams for me here" (Numbers 23:1). The King, sensing victory, carefully follows all the directives. The drama and suspense build as Balaam comes on stage and begins the ceremony. Soon, however, Balak's smiles of anticipation are replaced by shock and incredulity. This famous and powerful seer from afar, whom he has imported at great trouble and expense, proceeds not to curse the enemies but to bless them! Surely there is some mistake! Balak demands that Balaam move to

another location where, perhaps, a curse on the Hebrews may be forthcoming. However, the results are the same. Four times Balaam delivers oracles in Moab, and each time the Hebrews are blessed and the Moabites are cursed. Balaam is sent away, obviously without being paid. The moral of the fable has been delivered: He who trusts in foreign gods and occult powers is doomed to defeat by the omnipotent Yahweh.

The seemingly endless years of wandering do eventually pass, and a new generation of Hebrews stand at the border of Canaan. They are filled with the same anticipation which their parents knew, but they have deeper faith and freer spirits. Having never experienced slavery, they are much less likely to quake in subjection before any threatening force; and having always known Yahweh as their God, they are staunchly committed to monotheism and to the divine covenant.

For Moses, the edge of the Promised Land is literally the end of the trail. The book of Deuteronomy is purported to be the leader's final address to his people. In the book, clearly written long after Moses' death, the Hebrews are reminded of their special relationship with God, enjoined to scrupulous obedience of the Law, and finally blessed by their departing prophet. The blessing, presented in Chapter Thirty-Three, is given tribe by tribe and seems very similar in form to the one spoken by Jacob in Genesis, Chapter Forty-Nine. Finally, in the last chapter of the Pentateuch, Moses again climbs a mountain for his third recorded "face to face" encounter with God. This is on Mount Nebo, just across the Jordan River from Jerico and the Land of Promise. From the top of the mountain, Moses demonstrates remarkable eyesight for a man of one hundred twenty years, taking in almost all of Canaan in a single spectacular view. Then, after he has seen the land, the Lawgiver enters his well-deserved eternal rest, and his body is buried by God in an unmarked, unknown grave.

A disturbing question about Moses' death scene is why he is not permitted to enter the land which he has tried almost all his life to reach. God tells him clearly, "I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there" (Deuteronomy 34:4). How unfair! Who could be more deserving of the Promise than the leader who made the entry possible? The Bible offers scant reason for Moses' final disappointment: In the book of Numbers, Chapter Twenty retells the story of the water from the wilderness rock. According to this version, Moses is supposed to merely speak to the rock, and God becomes angry when he strikes it instead. As punishment for disobedience, the Lord tells both Moses and Aaron, "Because you have not believed me... therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them" (Numbers 20:12). So it seems that after a lifetime of great service to his people and to God, Moses is denied his final reward because he once hit a rock with a stick!

However, there is a more satisfying literary explanation for this less than pleasing end of Moses' life: This greatest of Hebrew leaders, the Liberator, the Lawgiver, is still a human being and, therefore, incapable of total fulfillment. Several times in his eventful life, Moses stands on the very threshold of divinity, but, of course, he may not cross over. In the ecstasy which follows the Red Sea crossing, Moses must feel super-human joy, but the mood is quickly shattered by the all-too-human reality of com-

plaints, bickering, and disobedience. When he receives the tablets from Yahweh on Mt. Sinai, Moses is closer to God than any man has ever been before, but even at that moment the golden calf is under construction in the camp below. And finally at the very border of the Land of Promise, with the life-long goal in clear view, Moses is once again stopped. How unfair! How human! Like all mankind, Moses spends his life pursuing goals in the wilderness and facing the frustrations of human limitations. Franz Kafka, fascinated by the image of the great man held back at the border of fulfillment, writes a fitting epitaph for Moses and for mankind: "This dying vision of it [Canaan] can only be intended to illustrate how incomplete a moment is human life.... Moses fails to enter Canaan not because his life is too short but because it is a human life."

### III. The Story of Joshua (Joshua 1-12, 20, 23-24).

Joshua, formerly Moses' military aide, assumes leadership of the Hebrews immediately after Moses' death. He is blessed, both by his predecessor and by God, and, as a warrior-politician, he seems exactly the person the Hebrews need to lead the conquest of Canaan. All through the Pentateuch one reads of the Promised Land, but in the book of Joshua one discovers that what has been promised is not the land outright, but only the opportunity to fight for it. Like all worthwhile achievements, the re-possession of Canaan must be a struggle.

In the first chapter of Joshua's story, the Lord tells him the boundries of the conquest, an expanse of territory which even the kingdom of David at its height failed to occupy. Nonetheless, the Hebrews begin the process confident of victory through divine assistance. The occupation of the land is to be a united effort. Even the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh, who have already settled in Transjordan, agree to help their cousins secure their own territories. The first twelve chapters of Joshua describe a relatively short, carefully planned and almost flawlessly executed military campaign ending in the establishment of Hebrew control over most of Canaan. No matter that historians insist the process involved hundreds of years of sporadic infiltration activity by a mixture of loosely related peoples all termed Hebrews; for the chroniclers who produced the book of Joshua, the invasion was swift, and total conquest in the name of Yahweh was never in doubt.

Since the Hebrews enter Canaan from the east, their first target is the city of Jerico, an ancient oasis and trade center on an important caravan route. Like all the Canaanite cities, Jerico was small by modern standards, not more than a few hectares in size with a population of less than ten thousand. Canaanite cities were independent, often mutually antagonistic units, each with its own petty king. The Hebrews are able to exploit their enemies' disunity by fighting only one city-state at a time. Before attacking Jerico, Joshua manages to slip two spies into the city. However, their valuable information is threatened when the king is informed of their presence. The spies are saved only by help from a most unlikely source. A prostitute named Rahab agrees to hide the scouts and help them escape in exchange for a pledge that her family will

be spared when the city is attacked. The harlot's activities give her the status of folk heroine among the Hebrews, and in the lengthy, contrived genealogy which opens the gospel of Matthew, written a thousand years later, she is honored as the great, great grandmother of the mighty King David.

After receiving the spies report that the city of Jerico is, indeed, vulnerable, Joshua at last gives the order to cross the Jordan River and enter the Promised Land. The crossing scene, recorded in Chapter Three, presents another miraculous holding back of waters. The storyteller's careful use of parallelism is intended to show that just as God's dividing of the Red Sea permitted escape from Egypt, so now His damming of the Jordan makes the entry into Canaan possible. Symbolic of God's power in this scene is the ark of the covenant, the wooden casket containing the tablets of the Law. This ark is carried by the priests at the front of all processions. During the crossing, the priests stand with the ark in midstream to ensure the dry passage of all their tribesmen. In commemoration of the event, Joshua commands that a circle of twelve stones be set up near the riverbank at Gilgal. In a final act of preparation, Joshua performs the circumcision operation on all the males in the camp. For some unexplained reason, new baby boys were not consecrated by the procedure during the years of wilderness wandering. Also at this point in the story the manna ceases to fall, and the children of Israel begin to eat the produce of their new land. Finally, an angel appears to tell Joshua that the time has come to move against the walled city of Jerico.

Joshua and his men, probably assisted by disaffected members of the local population, quickly lay a siege around the walls. However, entry into the city can only be accomplished with heavenly help. In an elaborate spectacle which must have jarred the nerves of the defenders within the walls as much as it has delighted all generations since who love a good story, the Israeites, led by the ark, march around the city once a day for six days. Then on the seventh day, they march around seven times, while seven priests blow seven trumpets. In a final deafening crescendo, all the people shout a great shout and the famous walls fall down flat (Joshua 6:5). The suggestion is often made that the fortifications were really destroyed by an earthquake, but such an auspiciously timed natural event would be as miraculous as the scene reported in Joshua. A more feasible theory might simply be that Rahab opened the gate. But again, naturalistic explanations of folk legends are not within the province of literary study. For us, and certainly for the Hebrews, the walls truly do "come tumbling down."

Plunder is not the object of the conquest. Joshua forbids his warriors to keep anything for themselves when they enter and totally destroy the city. Only articles made of precious metals are to be saved for "the treasury of the Lord" (Joshua 6:19). Since the victory is God's, the spoils must be His also. The Lord apparently believes that exposure to the people of Canaan or their possessions will tarnish the purity of His people. Thus the invaders are directed to follow a ruthless scorched-earth policy. Jerico, which sets the pattern for later conquests, is burned to the ground and its inhabitants, men, women, and children, are all slaughtered. Even the ground upon which the city stood is cursed. Obviously, Yahweh of the Hebrews has not yet evolved into

the universal Spirit of love whom we meet later in the Bible.

According to the Joshua account, the Hebrew advance into Canaan proceeds smoothly except for one setback at the city of Ai near Jerico. The force sent to level that Canaanite center is defeated and makes an ignominious retreat. Joshua quickly discerns that the disaster has been caused by a soldier named Achan who could not resist keeping some gold and silver for his personal treasury during the sack of Jerico. To punish the criminal and re-establish God's grace, the Hebrews drag Achan and his entire family to the edge of the camp. There, "All Israel stoned them with stones; and they burned them with fire after they had stoned them with stones" (Joshua 7:25).

Once the offender has been creamated, Ai quickly falls to the next attack, and all Canaan trembles in fear of the relentless invaders. The leaders of one city, Gibeon, trick Joshua into signing a vassalage agreement whereby their city will serve the Israelites in return for being spared the sword. The Gibeonites accomplish their mission by pretending to be from a long distance away, though, in fact, they live in the midst of the newly conquered territories. While it seems very doubtful that Joshua or his God would honor a treaty thus obtained by deceit, the incident does serve to explain to later generations of Israelites why many Canaanites remained after the conquest and were gradually assimilated into the Hebrew population.

One further incident during Joshua's military campaigns has inspired a great deal of discussion. In the midst of a battle against a confederacy of five kings who have attacked Gibeon because of its surrender, Joshua issues his most famous command: "'O sun, stand still at Gibeon,/And O moon in the valley of Aijalon.'/So the sun stood still, and the moon stopped,/Until the nation avenged themselves of their enemies" (Joshua 10:12-13). In the long, sad history of conflict between science and religion, these verses have been used to "prove," among other things, that Copernicus was wrong: If the sun does not move around the earth, then surely Joshua could not "stop" it. How unfortunate that so often symbolic truths about a people's awareness of their God have been degraded by an untenable factual defense!

With or without the manipulation of celestial mechanics, Joshua and his troops move on to defeat thirty-one city-states in all. The land is theirs, though the conquests by no means match those outlined by God in the first chapter of the book. The territories are divided among the tribes, with only the tribe of Levi receiving no block of land to call its own because the Levites, as priests to all the tribes, must live scattered throughout the land. The twelve Hebrew clans, like the Canaanites who preceded them, have no central political organization and are linked only by a common history and religion.

One interesting idea which they all do accept, however, is the concept of "cities of refuge" (Joshua 20:1-9). This system provides for a series of six cities, scattered throughout Israel, which are "off limits" to the vengeful relatives of someone who has been killed. Thus an accused man can immediately run to one of these cities and be protected while the city elders try to determine whether the death was accidental or a case of murder. In this way, Joshua's plan provides a means of ameliorating the

Semitic common law, still prevalent in some twentieth century Middle Eastern villages, which holds that one who kills any person, even unintentionally, may be immediately executed by the relatives of the slain person.

After the difficulties of land division are resolved, sometimes by casting lots, Joshua delivers his farewell advice and blessings to his people (Joshua 23–24) and prepares to die contentedly. During his one hundred ten years, he has been privileged to complete the entire Hebrew journey. A former slave who becomes the master of a new nation, a military chieftan who becomes a political and religious leader as well, Joshua has been truly blessed. The ending of the Hexateuch provides the images of a cycle completed. By careful artistic design, the storyteller has the body of Joshua and the bones of Joseph, who also died at the age of one hundred ten, buried at the same time in their beloved Land of Promise. Joseph began the Hebrew odyssey by calling his family to Egypt, and Joshua completed the task of leading them back home four centuries later. The two, separated by time, are united not only in death but also in their lives of devotion and service to their people and their God. The journey is over. Joseph, Joshua, and the incomprable Moses are free at last from the toils of travel, and the Hebrews, now Israelites, stand at the dawning of a new era in their history. Indeed, another journey is only beginning!

#### Notes

1. Dante Alighieri, "Inferno," *The Divine Comedy*, canto I, l. 85.
2. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Ulysses," *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, M.H. Abrams and others, eds. (New York: Norton, 1968), p. 843.
3. Thomas Hardy, quoted in *Our Roving Bible: Tracing Its Influence Through English and American Literature* by Lawrence E. Nelson (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1945), p. 186.
4. Isaac Asimov, *Asimov's to the Bible: The Old Testament* (New York: Avon, 1968), p. 108.
5. Asimov, p. 128.
6. John Gray, "The Book of Exodus," *The Interpreter's One Volume Commentary on the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), p. 38.
7. Franz Kafka, quoted in "Moses: Tragedy and Sublimity," by Hillel Barzel in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, Kenneth R.R. Gros Louis and others, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), p. 129.
8. Robert Houston Smith, "The Book of Joshua," *The Interpreter's Commentary*, p. 133.

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## Summary

# From Slavery to Freedom: The Hebrew Odyssey

Daniel B. Kasten

Of all the journey stories in Western literature, none is of more central importance than the biblical epic of the Hebrew people's movements from Canaan to Egypt and back to Canaan, the Promised Land. It is essentially the story of three men whose lives have assumed legendary proportions: Joseph, who is responsible for calling the Hebrews to Egypt, is a temperamental dandy, an inexhaustible planner, and, ultimately, a grand preserver. Moses, the child prince in the enemy court, becomes the greatest leader in Hebrew history by reluctantly but faithfully following the call of God. He is the only man ever to talk with God "face to face," yet he dies short of the total fulfillment of entry into the Promised Land. Joshua, Moses aide and military commander, is the man who completes the journey. His skill as a battlefield strategist, coupled with his dedication to his God and people, make him the ideal leader for the Hebrews during their conquest and settlement of the new land. Three men, three very different stories, but one purpose and one goal: the re-establishment of the Hebrews' lost Eden in the Land of Promise.