

Chapter 1

‘THE HEART ENTICED’: THE EXODUS FROM EGYPT AS A RESPONSE TO THE THREAT OF ASSIMILATION

In Alexandria

Has time taken off its clothes of trembling
and decked itself out in riches,
and has earth put on fine-spun linen
and set its beds in gold brocade?¹
All the fields of the Nile are checkered,
as though the bloom of Goshen²
were woven straps of a breastplate,
and lush oases dark-hued yarn,
and Raamses and Pithom laminated goldleaf.³
Girls on the riverbank, a bevy of fawns,
Linger, their wrists heavy with bangles—
anklets clipping their gait.

The heart enticed⁴
forgets its age, remembers boys or girls
in the garden of Eden, in Egypt, along the Pishon,⁵
running on the green to the river's edge;
the wheat is emerald tinged with red,
and robed in needlework;⁶
it sways to the whim of the sea breeze,
as though bowing in thanks to the Lord...

Yehuda Halevi⁷

1. Ezek. 26.16.
2. Gen. 45.10.
3. Exod. 28.28.
4. Deut. 11.16.
5. Gen. 2.11.
6. Ps. 45.14-15.
7. *Poems from the Diwan* (trans. G. Levin; London: Anvil, 2002), p. 125.

*Israel in Egypt*⁸

It is a truth universally acknowledged that oppressive slavery and persecution are the problems to which the exodus⁹ from Egypt was the solution.¹⁰ The Israelites suffered bitterly and longed to escape, God heard their cry and freed them with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, and all the rest is history. Most biblical scholarship and faith teaching proceeds from this point.¹¹ The book of Exodus is ‘one of the most gripping narratives of the Hebrew Bible—the account of the escape of an oppressed people from bondage to freedom...’,¹² and ‘bondage and oppression are the key ideas in the Exodus story’.¹³ Underlying my approach to Exodus is the unexpected conclusion that its authors did not see Egypt as the evil empire *par excellence*, although it has been thus characterized by many commentators in the meantime, but rather as the apex of the seductive other.¹⁴ Oppression or no oppression, Jews and, I would argue, their biblical ancestors, were intoxicated by the idea (if not the reality) of Egypt. Yehuda Halevi’s love-song to Alexandria, mapping Temple language onto Egyptian topography, is an exquisite mediaeval example of this phenomenon and, as I read the Bible, it is already present in the book of Exodus.

8. This chapter is dedicated to our friends Simon, Shoshana, Daniel and Sarah Goldhill, who make Cambridge a little less Egypt.

9. Throughout this chapter, I use ‘exodus’ with a lower case to refer to the event and ‘Exodus’ with upper case to refer to the book.

10. Profuse thanks to Sam Andrews, during whose Bar Mitzvah lessons the argument underlying this chapter first occurred to me; to Graham Davies, for discussing it with me at a formative stage; to Ellen Davis, Simon Goldhill, Hyman Gross, Gershon Hepner, Joel Kaminsky, Peter Lipton and Anthony Smith for their comments on earlier versions of this chapter; to Cheryl Exum for inviting me to present this material as a seminar paper at Sheffield University, and to John Barton for the same at Oxford University. In each case I benefited greatly from discussion following the papers.

11. See G. Larsson, *Bound For Freedom: The Book of Exodus in Jewish and Christian Traditions* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), especially pp. 4-111.

12. C. Meyers, *Exodus* (New Cambridge Bible Commentary; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 33. I offer this one example from a recent commentary that I admire, but I could have cited almost any commentary on the book of Exodus, regardless of age, provenance or perspective.

13. See also M. Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), p. 33.

14. For a discussion of the polarised perceptions of Egypt, see L.H. Feldman, *Studies in Josephus’ Re-Written Bible* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1998), pp. 74-89. Josephus is characterised as generally positive towards Pharaoh, reflecting his sense of being beholden to Titus and Vespasian. Philo, by contrast, is extremely negative. Rabbinic commentaries comprise the entire spectrum of responses to Egypt.

Jon Levenson stops just shy of a radical counter-reading of the kind I have in mind when, in line with many rabbinic commentators, he questions the centrality of liberation in the exodus story on the basis that slavery in Egypt is replaced not by freedom, but by service to God.¹⁵ That Levenson does not dispense entirely with the liberation motif may be explained by his commitment in this article to J.H. Yoder's idea that '*what for*' matters more than *what from*' (my italics).¹⁶ Had Levenson focused less on worship and more on promised land, surely a central long-term goal of Exodus in its final form, he might have concluded differently. 'What from' may not matter when 'what for' is service to God; it can easily be argued that the particular form of Israel's slavery had no bearing on the form of its worship. But 'what from' certainly does affect 'what for' when both 'what from' and 'what for' concern experiences of nationhood and national identity. The *Passover Haggadah* makes the obvious point: Israel became a nation in Egypt.¹⁷ For

15. 'Exodus and Liberation', in *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), pp. 127-60.

16. 'Exodus and Liberation', pp. 145-46.

17. See, e.g., N. Glatzer (ed.), *The Schocken Passover Haggadah* (New York: Schocken Books, 1953): "And he became there a nation", teaching us that the Israelites were distinguishable there' (p. 41). I was fascinated to read Shani Berrin's personal observations on the Haggadah's use of 'distinguishable' in 'Anti-Semitism, Assimilation, and Ancient Jewish Apologia: The Story of the Exodus in the Writings of Josephus Flavius', *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies* 19 (2005), pp. 20-34 (24). Berrin goes to the heart of my own enterprise: 'In reading Josephus' description of the material success of the Israelites in Egypt, I was struck by the potential homiletical value of an ironic reading of a line in the *haggada* in a similar vein. In its exposition of Deut. 26.5, "and they became there" [in Egypt], "a great, mighty, and multitudinous nation"', the *haggada* states that the word "nation" (*goy*) indicates that the Israelites were "distinctive there" (*metzuyyanim sham*). Although it will not have been the author's original intention, for me, this statement reverberates, anachronistically, with irony. The very word that is used to show the unique nature of the Jews while they were in Egypt is the word "*goy*", a word used today, often derogatorily, to describe a non-Jew, or perhaps a Jew who acts like a non-Jew. That is the opposite of the biblical usage here. As for being distinctive, *metzuyyanim*, the point of the midrash is that the Israelites in Egypt retained their separate identities, avoiding assimilation with the Egyptians. As the Rabbis famously tell us, the Israelites retained their traditional language, clothing, and names (cf. *Lev. R.* 32; *Pesiqta Zutarta Deut.* 46a). However, my own mental association with the word "*metzuyyan*" is of excellence, the mark I sought on exams and essays when I was in school, a High Distinction. This is not a connotation of separatism but rather of elitism. In contemporary terms, I am describing the somewhat paradoxical situation in which some Jews will attempt to be *metzuyyanim* by putting on black hats and isolating themselves from secular society, avoiding "the *goyim*", whereas others will attempt to be *metzuyyanim* by over-achieving in secular spheres, and materialistic acquisitions, taking pride in Jewish Nobel Prize winners, or the over-representation of Jews in the arts. My contemporised reading of this line of

this reason, we should surely be mining the biblical accounts of Israel's experience in Egypt for insights into its emerging sense of nationhood.

My conclusions in this chapter shed no light on the 'historical' Egypt, but only the Egypt of historiography, ideology and the imagination. The authors of Exodus wrote about the past as a way of writing about themselves, portraying Israel in Egypt in the light of their own concerns.¹⁸ I suggest that alongside the fear of destruction at the hands of a powerful enemy was loss of identity through assimilation. As for who 'they' were, I remain committed to the increasingly unfashionable view that Exodus made up of the oldest material in the Pentateuch, and had a form recognisable to us by the eighth century BCE. I envisage Deuteronomy as a primarily seventh-century composition (chs. 12–26) with an exilic frame. Deuteronomy seems to me best understood as a rewriting of Exodus,¹⁹ and the eighth-century prophets seem best read in the light of the Covenant Code. Fortunately, given the prevailing dissent over dating biblical texts, and in view of a recent tendency to place Exodus in the postexilic period,²⁰ my findings in this chapter are not especially date-sensitive. As far as I can tell, concerns about assimilation cannot be isolated to one particular stratum of Exodus, but are evenly distributed throughout the text.

Levenson is not alone in paying little attention to the national focus of Exodus. Perhaps the Promised Land remained just that because Christians were inclined to spiritualise it, while Diaspora Jews tended until recently to treat Zion as an aspirational ideal—the 'next year in Jerusalem' of the Passover Seder²¹—rather than a geographic entity they might soon repopulate. An interesting example of a commentator who does highlight the national focus is L. Dykstra, a Christian writing for a faith-based audience, who claims that modern Americans have more in common with Egyptians than Israelites, and urges them to read Exodus with a view to their treatment of

the *haggada* reflects some aspects of classic Jewish neuroses that are familiar themes in modern literature and popular culture. In his assertions that the Israelites built the pyramids, and his claims of Israelite economic success, Josephus exemplifies this struggle to ensure that the Jews are recognised as being every bit as good as the other nations...and more than a bit better. For Josephus, the distinctiveness of the Jews does not lie in their having had a separate set of non-Egyptian values, but rather in their having excelled beyond the Egyptians at playing the Egyptians' own game.'

18. Following, e.g., M.Z. Brettler, *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel* (London: Routledge, 1995) and Y. Amit, *History and Ideology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

19. B.M. Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

20. J. Van Seters, *A Law Book for the Diaspora: Revision in the Study of the Covenant Code* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

21. The concluding words of the formal section of the Passover evening home service.

people at the margins of their own society.²² Dykstra's reading is provocative in all the right ways and deserves attention, but from the perspective of an academic Bible scholar, even a liberal Jewish Zionist concerned about the present-day state of Israel, identification with ancient Israelites remains more relevant than identification with ancient Egyptians. I have in mind not the Israelites who star in the narrative, but rather their literary creators—the scribes and politicians for whom Egypt was a mirror that reflected a reverse image of their own nationalist ideals. In a much-discussed interpretation of Gen. 1.1, the mediaeval Jewish commentator Rashi asks why the Torah begins with creation instead of the first commandment:²³ 'And this day shall be a memorial for you. You should celebrate it as Festival to the LORD throughout the ages; you shall celebrate it as an institution for all time' (Exod. 12.14).²⁴ Rashi's answer to his own question is defensive: should the nations accuse Israel of forcibly occupying their land, Israel can respond that, since the whole world belongs to God, he can give Israel to whichever people he chooses. But among the many alternative answers to Rashi's evocative question is one I cannot over-emphasize. The biblical authors used the account of Israel in Egypt, and what led them there, as a text to explore concepts of nationhood. We would be denied an invaluable source of insight into Israel's sense of itself as a nation had they started writing, and if we were to start reading, at Exod. 12.14.²⁵

Interpretative Implications

In general, the readings I seek to complicate in this book hold no particular interest for me in and of themselves; they represent one approach to the text, and I offer another interpretation. Not surprisingly, I am inclined to find my own readings more attractive than those I counter—I doubt I would have taken the time to write the book had that not been the case—but I have no special mission to promote, say, cyclical and spatial conceptions of time over a linear notion. An exception in one direction is the widely held assumption that biblical writers saw their religion as morally and spiritually superior to other ancient Near Eastern religions. I understand why this claim

22. *Set Them Free: The Other Side of Exodus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

23. Rashi on Gen. 1.1.

24. Biblical citations follow *Tanakh, The Holy Scriptures* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985–99), hereafter *NJPS*.

25. Exodus 1–12 arguably had a greater impact than Genesis on the national consciousness as reflected in the Bible. This may be because Genesis was written after Exodus and therefore plays a smaller role than Exodus in other biblical texts, or because Genesis reflects a paradigm that is essentially non-national (no monarchy, capital city, institutionalized religion or government) versus the (somewhat paradoxically, given Israel's post-biblical history) more influential national paradigm offered by Exodus.

is made—even if the biblical text does not actively promote this point of view, it certainly permits it—and yet I believe it has harmful consequences and is best dispelled. The reading I am about to complicate in this first chapter represents an exception in the other direction. Jews and Christians have long used Exodus to encourage the oppressed and persecuted of later generations. If I thought I could undermine the messages of the *Passover Haggadah* and Liberation Theology by diluting the message of freedom for the oppressed, I might not have embarked on this project.

Yet having commented on the positive value of the liberation motif, I cannot proceed without noting some problematic aspects of liberation as a theological and political idea. The liberation theme properly played out requires clear-cut and straightforward enemies and victims. This makes it a poor fit with Exodus, which does not describe a dramatic crisis to which God responded in order to resolve it, but a messy situation, partly but not straightforwardly initiated by God (witness the tension between 3.10, where God speaks of leaving Egypt, and 3.18, where he tells Moses to request permission to spend three days *in the wilderness*), that requires careful and continued divine stage-management. This particular messiness is theological, but it has obvious political parallels. Objectors to the 2003 invasion of Iraq highlighted conflicting views about liberation as a root problem. The west saw themselves as liberators, while Iraqis, even opponents of Saddam Hussein, saw the west as colonialists replacing a regime that, however undesirable, was at least home-grown, with one whose values were alien to the society it was ‘liberating’. More fundamentally, the liberation model depends on a black and white portrayal of a situation that would be better rendered in multiple shades of grey. While circumstances exist in which victims and oppressors can be readily distinguished and identified, we more often encounter situations in which good and bad are not readily disentangled, and where a failure to acknowledge that complexity aggravates the problem. It is unfortunate, too, that the slavery and persecution motif has eclipsed all other thematic concerns, even though it is not necessarily the most meaningful focus for every generation of Exodus readers. While Jews should and do discuss persecution and liberation at Passover, both concepts remain, for better and worse, fairly abstract for many in the present generation.²⁶

A further negative aspect of liberation is that victimhood—even when grounded in historical experience—is a shallow and ultimately unhelpful mechanism for constructing and promoting identity. Even if people are

26. At our 2006 Passover Seder, when the arguments presented in this chapter were at the very forefront of my mind, I was moved to hear Jews of all ages from the UK, Israel, Mexico, Brazil and the USA discussing the challenges of creating a Jewish identity in a multicultural society.

willing to throw in their lot with a particular group on the basis of persecution, of themselves or of recent ancestors, they are unlikely to be able to communicate the value of their affiliation to future generations once persecution becomes a distant memory. Moreover, liberation has the disadvantage of requiring an enemy, real or rhetorical, which can lead to enduring hostility towards the people in question. Interestingly, in view of my overall argument here, Egypt has not been a particular magnet for Jewish hostility to the other, even during times when Israel was at war with Egypt; Amalek fills that role.

I want to make some brief observations now about liberation and national identity.²⁷ As indicated by the following remarks by John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith—which can serve for our purposes as a working definition of nationalism—these two concepts are inextricably linked:

Nationalism was, first of all, a doctrine of popular freedom and sovereignty. The people must be liberated—that is, free from any external constraint; they must determine their own destiny and be masters in their own house; they must control their own resources; they must obey their own 'inner' voice. But that entailed fraternity. The people must be united; they must dissolve all internal divisions; they must be gathered together in a single historic territory, a homeland; and they must have legal equality and share a single public culture. But which culture and what territory? Only a homeland that was 'theirs' by historic rights, the land of their forebears; only a culture that was 'theirs' as a heritage, passed down the generations, and therefore an expression of their authentic identity.²⁸

In a stimulating British Academy lecture on Nationalism and the Covenant,²⁹ Smith argued that the concept of nationalism was not secular and emerging from Nineteenth Century German Romanticism, as is usually supposed, but rather religious and emerging whole from the Hebrew Bible without the transforming influences of Christianity. He emphasized repeatedly the centrality of liberation in the construction of a national entity and a national identity. At this point it may be helpful to make a distinction between two different kinds of liberation, 'freedom from' and 'freedom to', only one of which sits comfortably alongside the covenantal nationalism discussed by Smith. 'Freedom from,' the form of liberation that Smith calls 'liberty from oppressors', is highly compatible with the nationalist project. It offers escape from tyranny as an explanation for why the national entity was created in the first place, and provides continued justification for its existence in the form of security from surrounding enemies. 'Freedom to'

27. For more on biblical nationalism, see S. Grosby, *Biblical Ideas of Nationality, Ancient and Modern* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002).

28. J. Hutchinson and A.D. Smith (eds.), *Nationalism* (Oxford Readers; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 4.

29. London, 4 May, 2006.

relates to individual rights for members of a national entity and is at the very least in tension with covenantal nationalism. Covenantal nationalism prioritises observance and obedience to the law, and it is hard to see how ‘freedom to’ can easily coexist with these features of nationalism. It is not my task here to consider the history of interpretation and how the liberation came to feature so prominently in the Exodus story as interpreted by later readers, but I note in passing that ‘freedom to’, though not compatible with the nationalist project, is indispensable for minority groups in a Diaspora setting or when living under foreign rule. It seems plausible, then, that the ‘freedom to’ component of the Exodus story—minimal in the biblical text itself, as I shall show—was incorporated later, when long-term Diaspora was an issue, and highlighted later still, perhaps by Jewish interpreters living under Roman rule. It is, after all, a central theme of the Passover Haggadah, which also emerged in this period. It seems equally plausible that the emphasis on ‘freedom to’ led to a greater emphasis on ‘freedom from’; the assertion of identity goes hand in hand with differentiation from the other, which is achieved all too often by generating hostility.

My second observation about liberation and nationalism follows from what I have just said: liberation requires an enemy. The book of Exodus was written by people with their own land and two different versions of their founding history: (1) they were driven there by a persecuting enemy; (2) they went because they were in danger of losing something valuable that could best be preserved and extended within a national structure. The two accounts are not incompatible, and may even be symbiotic, but the question of which to privilege is of critical significance, especially in relation to the place of outsiders in the new land. During his gap year in Jerusalem, the time when I was writing this chapter, my son visited *Yad Vashem*, Israel’s Holocaust museum. It was a powerful experience for him, not least because all four of his paternal great-grandparents perished in Germany. Yet although he found the last exhibit—Israeli children singing *Hatikvah*—immensely moving, he could not help thinking that the causal relationship between persecution and the founding of the State of Israel, historically grounded as it is, is no longer the best take-home message of *Yad Vashem*, and that a plea to rise up against all forms of persecution, wherever it occurred, might be more appropriate. In this chapter, I reflect on the take-home message of the book of Exodus.

Assimilation and Persecution

The interweaving of assimilation and persecution occurs in the Bible itself, where threats from external enemies such as Assyria and Babylon are linked to Israel’s straying after other gods (a symptom of assimilation or, more likely, a metaphor for it). Since settled immigrants are often

loath to uproot, later writers may have sought to persuade their audience that staying in Egypt or its equivalent was not an option (Isa. 40.9-11). In present times, some, mainly ultra-Orthodox, Jews have made shocking claims that the Holocaust was caused by the assimilation of German Jews.³⁰ In these cases, the victims of persecution themselves create a connection between assimilation and persecution, but the sense in which the two are linked is more than a political abstraction. Assimilation, and its close corollary, collaboration (two forms of sleeping with the enemy), have always represented one response to the threat of persecution, especially among Diaspora Jews or Jews living in the land under foreign rule. It is easy to see how those who preferred resistance, or believed that assimilation was no protection, as was the case in Nazi Germany, moved from seeing assimilation as an undesirable or ineffective *response* to persecution to presenting it as a *cause*. The book of Exodus works through the assimilation/persecution dynamic.

Exodus 1.7 is not alone in suggesting a typological connection between successful integration and persecution in which integration comes first. A similar pattern occurs in Num. 22.2-6, where Balak king of Moab attempts to deal with Israel's growth and success by employing a prophet to curse it:

Balak son of Zippor saw all Israel had done to the Amorites. Moab was alarmed because the people was so numerous. Moab dreaded the Israelites, and Moab said to the elders of Midian, 'Now this horde will lick clean all that is about us as an ox licks up the grass of the field.' Balak son of Zippor, who was king of Moab at that time, sent messengers to Balaam son of Beor in Pethor, which is by the Euphrates, in the land of his kinsfolk, to invite him, saying, There is a people that came out of Egypt; it hides the earth from view, and it is settled next to me. Come then, put the curse on this people, since they are too numerous (עֲצוּם) for me; perhaps I can defeat them and drive them out of the land'.

In this case, Balak reacts on the basis of Israel's track record in the territory of the Amorites rather than on the basis of first-hand experience, but the essential ingredients are the same. Israel's expansion is threatening and leads its neighbours to attempt to reduce their numbers. The same pattern is reiterated with regard to Egypt in the para-liturgical Deut. 26.5-10:³¹

30. To be fair to Chief Rabbi Bakshi-Doron and his followers, their view is consistent with biblical theology. It is those of us who are happy to say that the Babylonian Exile was caused by divine retribution for Israel's infidelity, yet shocked by the suggestion that God engineered the Holocaust to punish Europe's rapidly assimilating Jews, who are inconsistent.

31. Strikingly similar vocabulary in all three texts (esp. עֲצוּם, great, or עֲצוּם וְרַב, great and populous) suggests a compositional or redactional relationship.

You shall then recite as follows before the LORD your God: ‘My father was a fugitive Aramaean. He went down to Egypt with meagre numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and populous (עצום ורב) nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labour on us. We cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery and our oppression. The LORD freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Wherefore I now bring the first fruits of the soil which you, O LORD, have given me.’

The impression of inordinate prosperity is important. That Israel flourished in Egypt prior to enslavement—foreigners were not automatically exploited as *Gastarbeitern*—emphasizes that persecution was not the default position in Egypt. Moreover, subsequent history makes it hard to see the interplay of assimilation and persecution either as a distinctively Egyptian response to Israel, or as a literary or theological trope. It is rather a reflection of human experience: successful immigrants attract attention, arouse jealousy and resentment, are accused of disloyalty, and are treated as scapegoats during periods of economic and social instability. In the case of Exodus, we cannot rule out the possibility that a narrative reflecting genuine experiences of persecution is used here for the ideological purpose of fighting assimilation. It is worth noting, though, that slavery and persecution are rarely presented as a serious threat to Israelite survival, whereas the twin threats of assimilation and lost identity are ubiquitous.³² Leviticus 18.1-4 gives a sense of what I have in mind:

The LORD God spoke to Moses, saying, speak to the Israelite people and say to them: I the LORD am your God. You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelt, or the land of Canaan to which I am taking you; nor shall you follow their laws. My rules alone shall you observe, and faithfully follow My laws. I the LORD am your God.

Judging from the contents of the rest of Leviticus 18, the ‘practices’ mentioned here are forbidden sexual relationships. Elsewhere, intermarriage is associated with a security in the land:

You shall not intermarry with them: do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your children away from Me to worship other gods, and the LORD’s anger will blaze forth against you and He will promptly wipe you out (Deut. 7.3-4).³³

In both Leviticus 18 and Deuteronomy 7, sleeping with the wrong person is equated with following foreign gods, rejecting God and his laws, and

32. Examples can be found in Lev. 18.1-4; Deut. 7.3-4, 13.7-12; Judg. 2.10-19; 1 Kgs 11.1-5; Ezra 10.12-15; and in many other places.

33. See also Ezra 10.12-15.

the eventual loss of security in the land. And as noted above, assimilation is almost always identified as the starting point for persecution where the two occur together, not *vice versa*; God uses Israel's enemies to punish Israel for assimilation, and later punishes the enemies for punishing Israel.³⁴ The standard biblical typology of assimilation and persecution does not, of course, establish beyond doubt that the same pattern occurs in Exodus. But given the typological prominence of the Exodus motif in the rest of the Bible, it is worth investigating other texts as possible sources of evidence. It goes without saying that the Bible is not a monolithic text. It was written and redacted over a period of at least eight hundred years, and expresses a multitude of voices and points of view. There is no single common thread leading straight to the gingerbread house of key biblical themes. Yet despite the Bible's diverse interests and perspectives, it is possible to identify a unifying preoccupation with Israel's relations with the people who live around and within it, and the impact of those relations on Israelite identity.

Narratively speaking, this preoccupation begins in Genesis 1, where unformed chaos is controlled by means of division and separation—light from darkness, water from water, day from night—and all life forms are created according to their different kind. It continues in the patriarchal narratives where, among many other themes and concerns, brothers representing tribes and nations, as well as themselves, engage in a sustained dance of separation and reunion; in Leviticus and Numbers, where the pervading notion of holiness, the verbal root of which signifies 'set apart', is based on classification and categorisation; and on into Deuteronomy, where the land is emptied of its Canaanite inhabitants so that Israel can exist in the safety of a vacuum of its own. Even primarily military threats, such as the many attacks against Solomon (1 Kgs 11.14-40) and Assyria's defeat of the Northern Kingdom and invasion of the Southern Kingdom (2 Kgs 17-19), are presented with an eye to the threat of willing, if reluctant, submission and the subsequent loss of Israelite identity. The prophets who address these matters are torn between representing other nations as hostile enemies on the one hand and attractive past or potential lovers on the other. In the event, the latter predominates; Israel is a constitutionally unfaithful wife who cannot cope with the demands of monogamy (Hos. 1-3), that is, an unnecessarily insecure people desperate to ally itself with other nations, especially Egypt. Whereas the threat of slavery is rarely prominent outside Exodus, anxiety about subjugation to more powerful states, especially Egypt, assimilation, and lost identity are threats that crop up again and again.

34. See, e.g., the fate predicted for Babylon in Isa. 47.

Representing Egypt

The representation of Egypt in biblical texts outside Exodus is instructive. I once published an article that opened with the observation that Israel's symbolic arch-enemy was not Egypt, as might have been anticipated, but rather Amalek, a people that was either extinct or insignificant by the time the process of demonization began.³⁵ At the time, I saw this as a tribute to the ethical sensitivities of biblical authors, but I am unfortunately obliged to qualify my compliment in the light of my conclusions here. I now think the biblical writers' interest in creating a symbolic enemy was not humanitarian, as I had believed and hoped; rather, there was no biblical tradition of Egypt as a particularly potent enemy. Post-biblical texts, such as the Passover Haggadah, that demonize Pharaoh may have been filling a surprising gap in the literature. For the biblical writers, Egypt was certainly a harsh regime, though arguably no harsher than the Solomonic empire for its inhabitants. Several texts suggest parallels between the two—Isa. 19.1-4, for example, and the laws of the king in Deut. 17.14-20 and 1 Sam. 8.11-18, where the king in question may be Solomon or Sennacherib or some combination of the two. Moreover, the harshness the biblical writers had in mind was manifested primarily in taxation and demands for participation in building projects. We cannot exclude the possibility that the little overt persecution that exists in Exodus other than the death decree in ch. 1 was a polemic against all powerful monarchic regimes, foreign or Israelite.³⁶ Be that as it may, Egypt was not only a harsh regime; it was also the place to which Israel turned at times of adversity, in other words, a place of longing. This is especially evident in Isaiah 30 and 31, where Israel is criticized for turning to Egypt for help against Assyria when the people should have relied upon God, and in Jeremiah 42–44, where Israelites are criticized for fleeing to Egypt when they should have submitted to Babylon for a limited period of divine punishment. Isaiah 48.20, 'Go forth from Babylon, flee from Chaldea', signals the end of this period. Although there are more oracles of greater length against Egypt—see for example Isaiah 19, Jeremiah 46 and Ezekiel 29—than against the Philistines, Moabites, Ammonites, Babylonians, Edom, Tyre and Damascus, the explanation seems to lie in the politics of the day, not in the memory of the Exodus. Egypt, along with Babylon/Assyria, attracts more attention than the other nations because

35. 'Remembering Amalek: A Positive Biblical Role Model for Dealing with Negative Scriptural Types', in D.F. Ford and G.N. Stanton (eds.), *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom: Scripture and Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2003), pp. 139-53.

36. M. Oblath, 'Of Pharaohs and Kings—Whence the Exodus', *JSOT* 87 (2000), pp. 23-43, understands the authors of Exodus to be thinking about Solomon when they wrote about Pharaoh.

its relationship with Israel was especially fraught over a long period of time. The dynamic in which Egypt as oppressive enemy vies with Egypt as inappropriate ally is clearly evident in 'historical' texts such as 1 Kings 3 and 11, where it applies to Solomon and Jeroboam, and all these concerns may be played out in narrative terms in Gen. 12.10-20, where Abraham is promised a land of his own, but goes down to Egypt as soon as the going gets tough.³⁷

In several important respects, the Babylonian Exile functions as a watershed as far as Egypt is concerned; texts from that period emphasize the miraculous bringing out of Israel from Egypt in a way that earlier texts do not. This is especially evident in Isaiah 40–55, where the exodus from Egypt is offered as a precedent for a return to Judah from Babylon. In these texts, we see strong evidence of a dynamic tradition in relation to Egypt; in the hands of that prophet, the Exodus motif was transformed, reapplied and imbued with a new significance for a new generation in new political circumstances. Deuteronomy makes a similar use of the Exodus motif, though the majority of references occur in Deuteronomy's so-called exilic frame, where it is linked explicitly to the Babylonian exile,³⁸ as opposed to in what many scholars identify as Deuteronomy's pre-exilic core (chs 12–26). A significant exception is Deut. 26.5-10, the 'wandering Aramaean' text discussed above, as well as the law of the king in 17.16 and the rules on admission to the community in 23.8. There is no space here to analyse all Deuteronomy's references to Egypt, but the latter text in particular suggests a relatively positive outlook. Ammonites and Moabites can *never* join the congregation of the LORD—for failing to supply sustenance in the wilderness and for hiring Balaam, futilely as it turns out, to curse Israel. That children born to Egyptians must be excluded for a mere three generations may suggest that whatever happened in Egypt was not too dire.

As with the representations of Egypt discussed above, the Egypt/Mesopotamia parallel is complex. Some rabbinic commentaries portray Mesopotamia as a place of suffering, but the Bible contains much less evidence than we might wish that it was seen negatively at the time. On the contrary, the people who experienced it were extraordinarily quiet about what actually happened there, perhaps through a wish to avoid a jarring disjunction

37. I see Gen. 12.10-20 as an exilic text, polemicizing against Egypt in the way that Jeremiah does in chs. 42–44, and developing a negative typology of Egypt in the service of a structural parallel with Babylon. See my discussion of the wife-sister texts in *Revisions of the Night: Politics and Promises in the Patriarchal Dreams of Genesis* (Sheffield: JSOTSup, 288; Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), Chapter 1 (on Abimelech's dream).

38. H. Newton, 'How and to What Ends Does the Book of Deuteronomy Invoke Memories of the Exodus Event?' (unpublished undergraduate dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Divinity, Cambridge University, 2004).

between the prophetic conception of the Babylonian Exile as a punishment for sin and the positive experience of the exiles themselves. Would the author of Isaiah 40–55 have needed to work so hard on his manifesto for return had he not been addressing happily assimilated Jews? Indeed, their distilled presentation of their experience—including, I would say, in Genesis 29–31, where Jacob’s tenure with Laban is a type of Israel’s exile in Babylon—corresponds closely with the biblical presentation of Egypt as I have sketched it here. An important text in this connection is Ezek. 20.7-9, a rare or even unique assertion that Israel worshipped Egyptian gods in Egypt and that God brought them out to avoid punishing them in the sight of the nations—for the sake of his own reputation. Independently of this, God had promised Israel their own land (Ezek. 20.6), but the catalyst for departure was idolatry, not slavery. This suggests that Ezekiel, at least, was far more concerned with assimilation, a natural partner with idolatry, than with persecution, not generally linked to the worship of other gods. The so-called anti-idol polemics in Isaiah 40–55, which I characterize in a later chapter as part of an internal religious debate in which the prophet polemicizes against the priestly cult, may perhaps point in the same direction.³⁹ On the one hand, then, life in the Diaspora was not necessarily unpleasant and the temptation to assimilate was ever-present. On the other hand, the authors or redactors needed to create negative associations for the Diaspora, not least to discourage assimilation. These needs may explain the presence, later incorporation, or even later enhancement of the themes of slavery and oppression into the Exodus story.

Egypt in Exodus

How does the ambivalence towards Egypt I have sketched here relate to Exodus? In the first instance, it should caution against an overly simple reading. Even the most overtly hostile of the texts mentioned above does not portray Egypt as ‘the evil other’ and those, such as Isaiah 19, that use the language of oppression do so in the context of a strong monarchy, not racial persecution. As in Exodus itself, this last point is eclipsed in translations such as the NJPS rendering of Isa. 19.4, ‘And I will place the Egyptians at the mercy of a harsh master, and a ruthless king shall rule them’, which uses ‘ruthless’ instead of the less loaded ‘strong’. So rather than thinking about Egyptians as an evil people single-mindedly committed to the routine oppression of minorities, we should perhaps consider Egypt as a complex society whose citizens included some who persecuted others *in extremis*. Persecution is the outcome in both cases, but we evaluate the persecutors differently depending on our underlying assumptions about their motivations.

39. I am grateful to Joel Kaminsky for pointing this out (personal communication).

I shall try to show now that the image of Egypt as a complex society fits better in Exodus than the notion of homogenous oppressors.

Exodus in its final form makes it clear that foreigners were not automatically persecuted in Egypt:⁴⁰

But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them. A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, 'Look, the Israelite people are much too numerous for us. Let us deal shrewdly with them, so that they may not increase; otherwise in the event of a war they may join our enemies in fighting against us and rise from the ground. So they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labour... (Exod. 1.7-11a).

On this account, Israel had thrived there since the time of Joseph; its problems began when its inordinate success was seen as a threat to the host culture. The fear that Israel might join with an enemy and rise against Egypt was neither baseless paranoia nor an exclusively Egyptian anxiety. The same typology occurs elsewhere, and, historically speaking, this is probably what happened in Babylon;⁴¹ the Pharaoh who forgot Joseph is a type of

40. I take this to be a priestly addition to Exodus.

41. Another possible example is **בפרך** in Exod. 1.13. *NIPS* is typical in translating this as 'ruthlessly', but its use in Lev. 25, which surely, given the subject matter, has in mind Exod. 1.13, suggests that this translation may be inappropriate. Lev. 25.35-55 is about terms and conditions of ownership of slaves, not about the quality of their treatment. Its main distinction is between the ownership of Israelites versus non-Israelites. Israelites can be owned, but not in perpetuity, while non-Israelites can be owned in perpetuity (although **גר והושב** in v. 35 is a complication). Elsewhere, Egypt is usually invoked to remind Israelites not to abuse non-Israelites on the basis that they were strangers/resident aliens in Egypt. Here it is different; Egypt is invoked to remind Israelites that God redeemed them from Pharaoh, that they are thus God's slaves, and that they cannot therefore be owned by each other or by anyone else. **פרך** is used only in relation to Israelites (25.42, 46, 53). The prohibition of **פרך** in relation to Israelites could be taken to imply that it is acceptable in relation to non-Israelites: you cannot do this to Israelites, but you can do it to non-Israelites. If so, the allusion to Exod. 1.13 is not just different from the norm, it is incompatible with it. The implication of the allusion would be: Pharaoh treated you with **פרך**, so you cannot treat each other with **פרך**, but you can treat foreigners with **פרך**. Not only is this illogical, but it would come close to the use of Exodus to justify the abuse of foreigners. **פרך** is juxtaposed in v. 43 with the slightly odd formula, **ויראת מאלהיך**. Three of the other four occurrences of this phrase in Leviticus occur unambiguously in relation to a vulnerable group—the elderly (19.32), the blind (19.14), the impoverished (25.36). The fourth (25.17) occurs in the context of purchases and sales around the time of the jubilee, when both parties are potentially vulnerable. This suggests that **פרך** might signify exploitation or taking advantage; the Israelites are warned not to exploit other Israelites at their time of need, perhaps in this case by making them sign away their freedom permanently. This analysis, if correct, argues against the translation 'ruthlessly' for **בפרך**. Pharaoh certainly seems to have given the Israelites less favourable terms of employment following his

Nebuchadnezzar, while the Israelites in Egypt are typological forerunners of the exiles in Babylon who joined ranks with Cyrus in opposition to the Babylonian status quo. Pharaoh's edict was not unprovoked violence, but an inhumane and deeply inappropriate response to perceived and justified fear.

Another indication that persecution is not at the heart of Exodus is the more or less complete absence of examples of what might fairly be called persecution. As several scholars have observed, the evidence usually cited against Egypt is not all that condemning. Was it really so terrible that Pharaoh forced the Israelites to gather their own straw without reducing their output?⁴² The dominant trend in the history of interpretation characterising Israel's slavery as oppressive has tended to rely on loaded English translations such as 'bondage' instead of 'work' for עבדה, as in 2.23. At the same time, modern sensibilities about slavery have masked the obvious point: Pharaoh was typical of ancient Near Eastern slave owners, and what Exodus describes is basically *corvée* labour. Pharaoh's demand that the Israelites gather their own straw may be seen as 'a classic union busting move' designed 'to humiliate anyone trying to improve working conditions'.⁴³ This is an employment crisis centred on the impossibility of serving two masters, God and Pharaoh. It is instigated by God, through the demand that Israelites worship him in the wilderness, and exacerbated by Pharaoh with his accusations of shirking and unreasonable productivity demands. From a later Jewish perspective, this is all too familiar: another Jewish (unfortunately and misleadingly labelled) 'holiday'? No wonder some nineteenth-century German Reform Jews were tempted to move Shabbat to Sunday. This tension is the crux of Moses' original request to Pharaoh, Let my people go! Later commentators, seeking to embed the theme of liberation from slavery, are inclined to quote Moses out of context. But in the first instance, it applied not to liberation from slavery or to entry to the Promised Land, but to a simple request for permission to observe a religious festival that was not in the Egyptian calendar. There is, of course, room to read this demand as the opening move in a negotiating strategy that culminates in escape and contributes to Pharaoh's obstinacy. Yet it is worth paying attention to the precise nature of the 'excuses' offered, which surely reflect what were perceived by the authors as areas of heightened tension and sensitivity. Even if Moses' request to observe a festival was just a means to an end, and

observation that they were becoming too numerous and powerful, but we cannot be sure that he treated them ruthlessly.

42. H. Gressman, cited by B.S. Childs, *Exodus: A Critical Theological Commentary* (Old Testament Library; London: SCM Press, 1974) aptly describes Pharaoh's command that the Israelites should gather their own straw as *Kinderspiel* (p. 11).

43. Joel Kaminsky, personal communication, May, 2006.

Pharaoh's increasing the workload was simply a convenient form of oppression, the choice in each case points to the bigger picture. God and Pharaoh demand different kinds of service—God wants sacrifices while Pharaoh wants bricks and mortar. It may or may not be pertinent to this discussion that, assuming that a Temple was built and Israelites built it, God eventually wants both, on which subject, more below.

The single clear-cut, no argument case of persecution in Exodus is Pharaoh's decree that all baby boys—by which all *Hebrew* baby boys is presumably intended—must be put to death. Yet even this element of the narrative is more entangled than it at first appears. Scholars identify the death decree as a plot device enabling narrators to make use of a standard 'birth of the hero' story in which a child is abandoned, loses contact with his family and his people, and yet grows up to interact with them in some striking way—often as a leader or king.⁴⁴ In parallel stories, they claim, the baby was usually abandoned at birth, but since exposing babies was not an Israelite practice, the writers needed an alternative mechanism for transporting Moses from his parental home to Pharaoh's palace. That the writers were sensitive to a contrast between Egyptian and Israelite practices in this realm is supported by the parallel contrast between Hagar the Egyptian's response to Ishmael's seemingly imminent death in the wilderness in Genesis 21—she leaves him under a bush (v. 15) and sits down at a distance (v. 16)—and Abraham's response to Isaac's apparently imminent death in Genesis 22—he holds the knife himself. Hagar's behaviour, especially juxtaposed with Abraham's, evokes exposure, as described also in Exod. 2.3-4, where Miriam too waits at a distance. At any rate, Pharaoh's death decree simultaneously achieved this end and cemented the hostility between Egyptians and Israelites that would lead to Israel's eviction. That it was a plot device and not an inherent part of the narrative is suggested by the striking lack of interest in it as the narrative unfolds. One might have expected a justificatory reference to the decree in relation to the death of the firstborn, for example, but the firstborn plague is linked to Pharaoh's stubbornness—'When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD slew every first-born in the land of Egypt, the first-born of both man and beast. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD every first male issue of the womb, but redeem every first-born among my sons' (13.15). It looks forward—Israelite firstborn sons will henceforth belong to God—not backwards. And neither is the decree mentioned, as might have been expected given the aquatic parallels, in connection with the Egyptians drowned in the Reed Sea.

Even as it is articulated, Pharaoh's decree is complex. Phase one, all Israelite babies must be killed at birth, is easily overturned by mere midwives. Phase two amounts to severe population control: 'Every boy that is born

44. Childs, *Exodus*, pp. 4-8.

you shall throw into the Nile' (1.22). While horrifyingly inhumane, this is not far removed from present-day population laws in some countries. And once again, even if Pharaoh did intend the death of the baby boys, a woman easily overturns the decree; the intervention of Pharaoh's daughter shows that righteous people live in Egypt and are willing to stand up for the good, even against their own fathers, and even when their own father is king! Pharaoh tells all his people—not explicitly just Israelites, though that seems most likely—to throw their baby boys into (literally 'towards'—a possible hint that exposure was intended?) the river. Moses' mother complies, either absolutely or more or less, depending on the weight of the directional *heh* (ה), when she puts Moses on the bank of the Nile. Pharaoh's daughter disobeys when she takes him back: '...and she sent her slave girl and she fetched it' (2.5).⁴⁵ Her act of defiance is intensified and memorialized when, according to the Hebrew text, at least, she equates the name Moses with her action in rescuing him: ותקרא שמו משה ותאמר כי מן הים משיתירו, 'And she called him Moses saying, "For I drew him out of the river"' (2.10). The naming of Moses thus mirrors the precise respect in which he functions as a microcosm for Israel. The one who, following the Hebrew meaning of his name, draws Israel out of Egypt is himself multiply drawn—out of the bosom of his family, out of the Nile, and out of Pharaoh's palace. At any rate, the account of Pharaoh's decree and his daughter's resistance is important, both for its demonstration that the killing was motivated by fear and an interest in population control, not by irrational hatred, and for making the point that not all Egyptians were enemies of Israel.

Even the characterisation of Pharaoh implied above—a persecutor counterbalanced by his virtuous daughter—is overly simplistic. The information that Pharaoh had forgotten Joseph hints that the death decree was a political decision grounded in reason, not irrational hatred. Had Pharaoh remembered Joseph, and thus been able to factor Joseph's contribution into the equation, he might have acted differently towards the Israelites. That Pharaoh was ultimately a reasonable man who responded to external evidence is indicated by the repeated need to harden his heart, as we see in Exod. 9.12, 10.1, and 11.10. Surely this feature of the narrative would sit uneasily in a text constructed to demonize Pharaoh? The evil tyrant post-biblical commentators love to portray would hardly need cardiac Viagra. The hardening of Pharaoh's heart has long proved problematic for commentators, who wonder why God prolonged Israelite and intensified Egyptian suffering. The motif has served as a magnet for the most empathic exegesis, as well as for the more predictable character assassination. The mediaeval Italian commentator Sforza sees the hardening of Pharaoh's heart as a divinely

45. J.C. Exum, *Plotted, Shot and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (JSOTSup, 215; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), p. 85.

given opportunity for repentance, stressing that each successive hardening allows Pharaoh to repent afresh and accrue fresh benefit.⁴⁶ The liberation theme properly played out requires clear-cut and straightforward enemies and victims. The hardening of Pharaoh's heart undermines his stature as a worthy enemy. At the worst, the notion that, left to his own devices, Pharaoh was not quite bad enough is seriously problematic. At best, God's intervention complicates the picture, much as it is complicated images of Egyptian slaves and Israelites with their own resident aliens. Egypt was not a dramatic crisis to which God responded in order to resolve, but a messy situation that required careful stage-management if the desired outcome was to be achieved.

That it was not the intention of Exodus to demonize Egypt or Egyptians is suggested by certain features of the description of the departure. For a persecuted people, the Israelites exhibit remarkably little fear when it comes to their enemies. The plagues served as the first nails in the coffin of Hebrew-Egyptian relations, much as those that afflicted Pharaoh and his household in Genesis 12 made it impossible for Abraham to go back to Egypt: 'But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues on account of Sarai, the wife of Abram... and Pharaoh put men in charge of him [Abraham] and they sent him off with his wife and all that he possessed' (Gen. 12.17-20).⁴⁷ Notably, co-existence is possible in similar narratives without plagues, as is revealed by a comparison of the wife-sister story in Genesis 12 with those in Genesis 20 and 26. I see the Genesis wife-sister stories as later than Exodus, and therefore able to fulfil the role of commentaries on Exodus, but even with a different theory of composition, the parallels are significant. Plagues render more or less untenable a relationship that can thrive in the same conditions minus plagues.

The Reed Sea crossing can likewise be read as a mechanism for keeping Israel out of Egypt, though not for keeping Egypt out of Israel, as evidenced by the 'mixed multitude'.⁴⁸ Adopting the belt and braces approach to world domination, God ensures that the Reed Sea crossing preserves both the distance between the pursuing Egyptians and their Israelite quarry and, in the long term, the distance between the Israelites and Egypt. The violent drowning of Pharaoh and his army put paid to any hope Israel might have of return, and if the memory of closing waters was not deterrent enough, the forty years spent on a journey that could have been made in three days reinforced the message that Egypt was a place of the past. As the narrative unfolds, these precautions are shown to be necessary; the Israelites are not

46. Sforzo, *Commentary on Exodus, ad loc.*

47. Lipton, *Revisions of the Night*, pp. 35-62.

48. I am grateful to Joel Kaminsky for pointing out the significance of the עַרְבֵי רֶבֶק, the mixed multitude.

afraid of the Egyptians—the wilderness is a bigger threat to them: ‘And they said to Moses, “Was it for the want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to die in the wilderness?”’ (14.11). Even as the Egyptian army advances, the Israelites want to return to Egypt: ‘Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying, “Let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness?”’ (14.12). This is precisely as God anticipated: ‘...for God said, “The people may have a change of heart when they see war and want to return to Egypt”’ (13.17). Israel’s longing for Egypt does not, of course, preclude serious persecution. The nostalgia that *some* Jews from Berlin or Vienna experienced for certain aspects of German or Viennese culture is an extreme historical example of this phenomenon.⁴⁹ But Exodus is a literary text, not an account of recent history or the psychology of survivors, and it is hard to see why its authors would compromise their ideological and theological messages unless they had to. It is also important to note that all Israel clamours to return to Egypt, not just isolated individuals with unusual priorities. All these signs of widespread longing suggest that, from the perspective of the Exodus authors, life in Egypt was not so bad.

The Egyptian attitude towards Israel is complex. There is little evidence of outright racial hostility. The case of hostility most often cited—the Egyptian who beats the Hebrew (Exod. 2.11-12)—is severely undermined by the episode immediately following in which a Hebrew beats (the same verb) his fellow Hebrew. As individual cases of violent aggression, these may reflect negatively on society at large, but they are not evidence of racial hatred between Egyptians and Israelites. The prevailing Egyptian attitude towards Israel seems rather to be poised between generosity and fear. The generous behaviour of Pharaoh’s daughter, and possibly also of the midwives, has already been noted. As I shall discuss in more detail below, the text makes it clear that Egyptians and Israelites were living alongside each other. Although God had to ensure that the Egyptians were well-disposed towards the Israelites when they came to borrow silver and gold—not a cup of sugar, after all!—they are described as neighbours. In certain respects, Goshen functioned as a ghetto, though possibly closer in spirit to Hampstead or Westchester than to Warsaw, but not all Exodus narratives—notably those mentioned directly above, where neighbours are Egyptian—assume that Israelites lived in Goshen. The Egyptian response to God’s advance warning about the plagues indicates that there were God-fearers among them. Egyptians who feared the LORD’s word brought their slaves, presumably not Hebrews, and animals indoors to safety, while those who did not exposed their property to the storm (9.20-21). Later retellings, especially

49. Some exegetes might infer from this that Exodus is indeed a historical recollection, but that reading is not an option for me.

in the Passover Haggadah, quote Exodus selectively to give the impression that Israelites left before the bread could rise because they feared for their lives: 'And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had taken out of Egypt, for it was not leavened since they had been driven out of Egypt and could not delay; nor had they prepared any provision for themselves' (12.39). But why were they driven out of Egypt? Because the Egyptians feared for their own lives: 'The Egyptians urged the people on, impatient to have them leave the country, for they said, "We shall all be dead"' (12.33). This sheds a new light on the 'bread of affliction'; it seems to have been the Egyptians, not the Israelites, who were afflicted. Once the Israelites had left, the Egyptians had to be urged or even forced by God to pursue them: 'Then I will stiffen [lit. 'strengthen'] Pharaoh's heart and he will pursue them, that I may gain glory through Pharaoh and all his host' (14.4), and 'Pharaoh and his courtiers had a change of heart about the people' (14.5). The picture that emerges from Exodus is by no means straightforward, but it does not readily support the standard simple reading of it.

The question underlying Exodus concerns the feasibility or otherwise of successful integration into a country ruled or occupied by foreigners while yet preserving a separate ethnic identity—the biblical *sine qua non*. The answer seems to be that successful integration will lead inevitably to persecution, which is presented simultaneously as its consequence and the catalyst for the solution. Above all, as noted above, persecution following assimilation is not a problem that is specific to Egypt; it could happen anywhere. Indeed, one might say that, among Jews at least, the exodus story has remained central precisely because it has so often been replicated elsewhere. The Egyptian experience points to the need for self-governance in a land of one's own, where there is no risk of persecution at the hands of insecure rulers in search of scapegoats? And of course a land of one's own is precisely the solution that is offered:

And the LORD continued, 'I have marked well the plight of My people in Egypt and have heeded their outcry because of their taskmasters; yes, I am mindful of their sufferings. I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians, to bring them out of that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the region of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites' (Exod. 3.7-8).

Yet, as noted above, Egypt, unlike Amalek (Exod. 17.16; Deut. 25.19) is not a biblical arch-enemy, but the place to which Israel turns with longing in adversity. God predicts that Israel will want to return to Egypt the moment it is confronted with an enemy: 'Now when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by the way of the Philistines, although it was nearer; for God said, "The people may have a change of heart when they see war, and return to Egypt"' (Exod. 13.17). This reflects Israel's behaviour over

many centuries and in relation to many enemies (e.g. 2 Kgs 12.4; 18.21; Jer. 42.9-22; Isa. 36.6; Ezek. 29.15-16). Even the aspects of Egyptian life most often held up for criticism by the biblical authors are not without attraction. Egypt evokes uncontrolled sex and licentiousness: 'You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelt' (Lev. 18.3). It is a land full of Mrs Robinsons (Potiphar's wife, Gen. 39) and Calvin Klein underwear models ('She lusted for concubinage with them, whose members were like those of asses and whose organs were like those of stallions', Ezek. 23.20). And yet sexual fertility can be positive, even in texts that privilege men born of initially or apparently barren women.⁵⁰ In the first instance, at least, it reflects well on Egypt that Hagar the Egyptian is spontaneously fertile (Gen. 16.4), whereas Sarah the Israelite needs help to conceive (Gen. 16.1).

The biblical opposition of spontaneous Egyptian versus divinely aided Israelite human fertility is replicated in the agricultural sphere. Yehuda Halevi's equation of Egypt and Eden stands firmly in a biblical tradition (Gen. 13.10; Ezek. 31.1-14). Israelites long for the produce of Egypt: 'We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic' (Num. 11.5). And nor is this mere wilderness whining; Deut. 11.10 contrasts Israel to Egypt to the apparent disadvantage of the latter: 'For the land that you are about to enter and possess is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come. There the grain you sowed had to be watered by your own labors, like a vegetable garden'. Yet the effect is almost the opposite. Since foot can be a euphemism for phallus, and sowing for sex, while seed is an idiom for offspring, and moisture a desirable pre-condition for fertility,⁵¹ there is more to this than farming techniques. Small wonder the Israelites got tired of manna in the wilderness.

I have already made the point that Egyptians and Israelites were not rigidly separated; this was not an apartheid state, and there is no indication of a master class of Egyptian slave owners set up in clear opposition to an underclass of Hebrew slaves. The Egyptians have their own masters and slaves: '...from the first-born of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the first-born of the slave-girl who is behind the millstones' (11.5, 12.29). The Israelites live alongside them as neighbours: '...they should ask to borrow, each man from his neighbour and each woman from her neighbour' (11.2). They have their own leaders: 'and the foremen of the Israelites, whom the taskmasters had set over them, were beaten' (5.14). And they have their own second-class citizens: 'Each woman shall borrow from her neighbour

50. See the birth narratives of Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Samson, and Samuel.

51. Cf. Gen. 2.6; 18.12, where I take עֲדָנָה to signify moisture (desire), as well as pleasure.

[closer to 'house-mate'] and the lodger [or slave/concubine]⁵² in her house' (3.22). This is especially clear in those few situations in which Egyptians and Israelites interact directly without mediation. Even in the vicinity of the 'high stakes' first-born death decree, there is confusion about identity. Are the midwives Egyptian or Hebrew? If Egyptian, as I think, why do they have Hebrew names (1.15), why are they serving Israelites in this capacity, and why do they heed God over Pharaoh: 'The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live' (1.17)? And if Hebrew, why do they speak of fellow Israelite women with a detached objectivity, as if they were animals: 'The midwives said to Pharaoh, "Because the Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women: they are vigorous. Before the midwife can come to them, they have given birth"' (1.19). And why does God reward them for doing no more than they should be expected to do for their own people: 'And because the midwives feared God, he established households for them' (1.21)? At the risk of sounding postmodern, it seems to me that uncertainty may be the point here. The first-born decree is the identity crisis that demands clarity where formerly there was ambiguity.

Identity in the Egypt of Exodus was more fluid than we usually suppose, as is clear from the twice-repeated instruction that the Israelites should leave with 'borrowed' silver and gold:

Each woman shall borrow from her neighbour and the lodger in her house objects of silver and gold, and clothing, and you shall put these on your sons and daughters, thus stripping the Egyptians (3.22).

And:

'Tell the people to borrow, each man from his neighbour and each woman from hers, objects of silver and gold.' The LORD disposed the Egyptians favourably towards the people. Moreover, Moses himself was much esteemed in the land of Egypt, among Pharaoh's courtiers and among the people (11.2-3).

The references to divine intervention may be read as a gloss to explain what is not readily explicable in light of the narrative sandwiched between these two passages, at least as it is generally construed. Would slaves live 'next door', even metaphorically, to non-slaves in a society as polarised as Egypt is claimed to have been? And even if so, would Israelite slaves be on sufficiently good terms with their neighbours to 'borrow' silver and gold, especially at a tense time (labour disputes), and when their departure, along with the silver and gold they had 'borrowed', must have seemed imminent? The

52. The meaning of the Hebrew *תַּרְגָּמָה* is uncertain. It may be a *hapax legomenon* denoting slave-concubine (cf. Job. 19.15-16), as D. Daube suggests in *The Exodus Pattern in the Bible* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1963), pp. 53-54. Alternatively, it may be a construct of a feminine *תַּרְגָּמָה*.

word in 3.22 above translated ‘lodger’—evoking the image of a household struggling to make ends meet and taking in paying guests—is גַּר. Elsewhere in Exodus itself, and in texts that refer to it, NJPS translates גַּר as ‘stranger’: ‘You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt’ (22.20). But גַּר can plausibly be translated as ‘resident alien’ or even ‘guest-worker’. Far from being strangers and migrant workers in straightforward opposition to the host culture, the Israelites have their own strangers and guest-workers. Yet again, the Hebrew blurs distinctions and preserves ambiguities that collapse under the weight of English translations.

That the Israelites have strangers in their houses and the Egyptians are servants (slaves) of Pharaoh is underlined in the account of the death of the firstborn:

...every first-born in the land of Egypt shall die, from the first-born of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the first-born of the slave girl who is behind the millstones; and all the first-born of the cattle (11.5).

This confusing state of affairs is elaborated in a midrash in which distinctions that clearly existed in the minds of its authors (hence the reference to ‘taskmasters’) are carefully blurred:

The taskmasters were Egyptians but the officers were Israelites, one taskmaster being appointed over ten officers and one officer over ten Israelites. The taskmasters used to go the officers’ houses early in the morning to drag them out to work at cock-crow. Once an Egyptian taskmaster went to a Jewish officer and set eyes upon his wife who was beautiful without blemish. He waited for cock-crow, when he dragged the officer out of his house and then returned to lie with the woman who thought that it was her husband, with the result that she became pregnant with him. When her husband returned, he discovered the Egyptian emerging from his house. He then asked her, Did he touch you? She replied, Yes, for I thought it was you. When the taskmaster realised that he was caught, he made him go back to his hard labour, smiting him and trying to slay him. When Moses saw this, he knew by means of the Holy Spirit what had happened in the house and what the Egyptian was about to do in the field, so he said, This man certainly deserves his death, as it is written: And he that smites any man mortally shall surely be put to death. Moreover, since he cohabited with the wife of Dathan he deserves slaying, as it is said: Both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death (*Exodus Rabbah* 1.28).

Read on one level, this midrash is sinister; the appointment of some Israelites to oversee others is disturbingly evocative of the organisation of Jews in Nazi Germany.⁵³ More constructively, it provides Moses with a stronger

53. I thank Joel Kaminsky for making me confront a comparison that, though it had occurred to me, I had avoided thinking through.

justification than that offered by Exodus for murdering the Egyptian taskmaster, though one wonders if its authors had in mind the similarities between him and King David, and what we should infer about their understanding of Exodus and monarchy if they did. Most pertinently for us, and staying closer to the biblical text, it draws attention to the iceberg tip of a complex society where identities are confusingly blurred: Israelite 'officers' mediate between Egyptian taskmasters and other Israelites, women do not recognize their own husbands in bed, with all that that entails concerning circumcision, and sexual activity across the boundaries presumably produces mixed offspring.

Distinction and Separation

Yet another kind of evidence that the authors of Exodus were concerned with assimilation is the narrative prominence of the twin themes of distinction and separation. This is especially evident in relation to the plagues. The accounts of the first two plagues, blood and frogs, mention only Egyptian victims, thus separating Israel and Egypt in human terms. A geographic separation occurs with the lice; the region of Goshen is exempt, and Israelites living there will not be affected:

But on that day I will set apart (והפליית) a region of Goshen, where My people dwell, so that no swarm of insects shall be there, that you may know that I the LORD am in the midst of the land. And I will make a distinction (פדה) between My people and your people (8.18-19).

Neither והפליית nor פדה unambiguously signifies separation and distinction, but the context justifies the NJPS translations 'set apart' and 'make a distinction', and the ensuing plagues continue to highlight these themes (9.6-7, 26; 10.23; 11.6-7). All this reaches a painful conclusion with the plague of the first-born:

And there shall be a loud cry in all the land of Egypt, such as has never been or will ever be again; but not a dog shall snarl at any of the Israelites, at man or beast—in order that you may know that the LORD makes a distinction between Israel and Egypt (11.6-7).

Until this point, the overt concern of the plague narratives has been divine power as an end in itself, demonstrated for the joint benefit of Israel and Egypt (9.16). The plague of the first-born introduces the new notion that Israel must know something, namely that it is different from Egypt. As with self-selection, is this the message of choice for a group of persecuted slaves or their typological successors? Surely they would have little difficulty in distinguishing between themselves and their oppressors if they were living in the ghetto culture we usually envisage? That differentiation is offered as the divine justification for the final and most destructive plague suggests

that the need to make distinctions was very great indeed, and therefore that the threat of assimilation was potent. As noted above, the need for separation is also underlined by the Reed Sea crossing which, in the short term, preserves a safe distance between the pursuing Egyptians and their Israelite quarry but, in the long term, achieves the crucial objective of preventing Israel from returning to Egypt. This is both physical—the waves will not part a second time—and political—the violent drowning of Pharaoh and his army make peaceful co-existence an unrealistic dream.

The Risk of Exaggeration: How Oppressive Was Slavery in Egypt?

Exodus tells a story of redemption, that is the transfer of ownership from Pharaoh to God. Even commentators who acknowledge this, admitting that God does not free Israel but takes possession of them, are inclined to emphasize the contrast between slave and servant, and between the exploitative Pharaoh and God the fair employer whose employees *chose* to work for him.⁵⁴ The Babylonian Talmud *Shabbat* 88a conveys a different impression. As it tells it, God held Mount Sinai over Israel's heads like a barrel while 'offering' the commandments. The Babylonian Talmud *Avodah Zarah* 2b tells the same story, and even has the nations arguing with God on the basis of this apparent favouritism. Since God forced Israel to accept the Torah, but made no parallel attempt to coerce the nations, how can he criticize the nations for failing to accept the Torah? While this is a post-biblical spin with its own theological motivations, it is consistent with the Bible itself, where Israel's free will in the matter is not emphasized, any more than its liberation from slavery is emphasized.⁵⁵ Freedom and freewill are imported together into the Exodus story.

54. A typical 'faith community' example: ' "Avadim Hayenu": We were slaves of Pharaoh, begins our response to "Mah Nishtanah". So are we now a free people in a free land? In *Parshat Behar*, God tells us that in the jubilee year all land must revert to its original owner, כִּי לִי הָאָרֶץ "ki li ha aretz": because the land belongs to God and is not ours to sell. And any Israelite who is slave to another must be released, כִּי לִי יִרְשָׁאֵל עֲבָדִים "ki li bnei Yisrael avadim": for the children of Israel are my slaves. Can it be that we have been delivered from slavery in Egypt only to become slaves in another place? Not if עֲבָדִים "avadim" is understood to mean servants, not slaves. There is a world of difference between being servants of a hostile ruler in a foreign country, and serving God by carefully stewarding the land which has been promised to us: that is the liberation we celebrate together at *Pesach*' (E. Grazin, *Limmud* e-mail Torah commentary, 16 May 2006).

55. See J.D. Levenson, 'Covenant and Consent: Biblical Reflections on the Occasion of the 200th Anniversary of the United States Constitution', in D.M. Goldenberg (ed.), *The Judeo-Christian Tradition and the US Constitution: Proceedings of a Conference at Annenberg Research Institute, November 16-17, 1987* (Philadelphia: Annenberg Research Institute, 1989), pp. 71-82.

Post-biblical Judaism designates Passover as זמן חרותנו, the time of our freedom, and חג החרות, festival of freedom, but the freedom is not in the Bible itself and must be incorporated from a wordplay on Exod. 32.16.⁵⁶ Later commentators, embedding the theme of slavery versus freedom, quote out of context 'Let my people go' (5.1), and overlook God's explicit request for service, '...you shall worship God at this mountain' (3.12). Despite the fact that the Hebrew צַד is almost always rendered 'go out', many English translations, including NJPS, take the liberty of translating צַד throughout Exodus as 'go free': 'Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall *free* my people, the Israelites, from Egypt' (3.10). That 'bringing out' is not synonymous for 'liberating' is indicated by the jarring juxtaposition in NJPS of the announcements that the LORD 'freed' the Israelites from Egypt (12.51) and that every first-born *belongs* to God (13.2). This hardly sounds like freedom as usually construed.

Deuteronomy's sabbath command merits particular attention in a discussion of slavery versus service:

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. Six days shall you labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your ox or your ass, or any of your cattle, or the stranger in your settlements, so that your male and female slave may rest as you do. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the LORD your God freed you from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the sabbath day (Deut. 5.12-15).

As traditionally read, the instruction to include male and female slaves in the sabbath rest implies a contrast with Egypt, where this did not occur.⁵⁷ But several counter-readings come to mind. First, commandments one and two arguably offer Egypt as a justification for God's demand for exclusivity: God brought you out of Egypt (away from competing demands) and now you should neither have other gods nor serve them. Deuteronomy's sabbath commandment may use Egypt similarly as a reinforcement of God's right to demand service in the face of the competing demands that must have existed, especially in a discussion about slaves. God asks to be served through a day of complete rest by all occupants of the land, human and animal. The fact that he brought Israel into the land entitles him to make this demand, and the reference to slaves in Egypt may be a subtle acknowledgement that

56. Commenting on 'The writing was of God, engraved on the Tablets' (Exod. 32.16), R. Yehoshua ben Levi said, 'Do not read "engraved", but rather "freedom", for no one is free but one who engages in the Law' (*Mishnah Avot* 6.2).

57. G.W. Hepner, *Legal Friction: The Interplay of Law and Narrative and Identity Politics in Biblical Israel* (New York: Peter Lang, in preparation).

Israelites may find it particularly difficult to give their own slaves a day off, but have a special obligation to do so. A comparison with the sabbath command in Exod. 20.8-11 supports this reading. The reference there to creation justifies the command: God rested so you should rest and, by the way, he made you so should do what he asks. Similarly, God ended your slavery so he could order you to rest, and by the way, since he owns you, you must do what he says! It is also worth asking whether a desire for imitation is implicit in both sabbath commands. Since God rested on the sabbath, Israel should rest. And since God is a slave-owner who requires his slaves to rest, so Israelites should be slave-owners who require their slaves to rest. On this reading, what actually happened to Israel in Egypt is neither here nor there. At any event, we should avoid making the easy inference that references to slavery in Egypt necessarily reflect unfavourably upon Egypt, and should at the very least read them in the context of the Bible's general interest in apodictic law.

The relative unimportance of freedom in the Exodus narrative is also indicated by the initial catalyst for Israel's departure. As noted above, the tension between God and Pharaoh is exposed when God demands worship in the wilderness: 'Now therefore let us go a distance of three days into the wilderness to sacrifice to the LORD our God' (3.18). Yet God makes Pharaoh refuse to let the people go to meet his demand: 'I, however will stiffen his heart so that he will not let the people go' (4.21). The conflict between Israel's two masters is intensified when Pharaoh accuses the Israelites of shirking, citing religious conflicts of interest: 'For they are shirkers; that is why they cry, "Let us go and sacrifice to the LORD our God"' (5.8). This conflict between state and religion is the crux of Moses' original request to Pharaoh: 'Let My people go that they may celebrate a festival for Me in the wilderness' (5.1). Exodus treats the servant with two masters dilemma, often explored *vis-à-vis* kingship (cf. 1 Sam. 8.7; Est. 3.2),⁵⁸ as a conflict of interest that is ultimately unmanageable, rendering the Diaspora untenable in the long-term.⁵⁹ The conflict is raised in its most basic form; God and Pharaoh both want to be served, Pharaoh via building projects and God via worship. The choice is crystallized in the formulaic **בֵּית עֲבָדִים**, house of bondage. The concept of the 'house of bondage' is so familiar that we rarely pause to reflect on its meaning, but its significance is not obvious. Given that the Israelites were not actually imprisoned in Egypt, the term must be more metaphorical than literal, and it is tempting to see it as a variant of the

58. The fact that kingship is not explored in Exodus has serious implications for the questions I am asking in this chapter, and merits more attention than I can give it here.

59. W.H. Propp, *Exodus: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary* (Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1999), pp. 434-35.

fiery furnace in which Israel is purified through hardship (Ezek. 22.17-22). Yet the broader contexts in which it occurs suggest another interpretation. All but one (Jer. 34.13) of the occurrences outside Exodus are embedded in warnings against false worship and following other gods (Deut. 5.6; 6.12; 7.8; 8.14; 13.6, 11; Josh. 24.17; Mic. 6.4). Perhaps the term *בֵּית עֲבָדִים*, house of bondage, was chosen not to evoke Egypt, but to evoke Temple service (house of service), the desired alternative.

It is important to note that the Bible is not an abolitionist manifesto. On the contrary, it is assumed throughout that some form of slavery is inevitable and even desirable, and the account of Israel's experience in Egypt is a basis of fair treatment of slaves:

'Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the LORD your God freed you (*וַיֹּצִיאֲךָ*, lit. brought you out), from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the sabbath day' (Deut. 5.15, see also 15.12-15).

The first laws mentioned after Sinai concern the manumission of slaves ('When you buy a Hebrew slave', Exod. 21.1), but 'freedom' is by no means presented as their aspirational ideal. In extremis, slavery can be a mechanism for offering support and protection to the weak and disadvantaged, as is suggested by links in Exodus and beyond between *עֶבֶד*, slave, and *גֵּר*, stranger or resident alien, *יְתוֹם*, orphan, and *אַלְמָנָה*, widow. These are Israel's disadvantaged, second-class citizens: 'You shall not subvert the rights of the stranger or the fatherless' (Deut. 24.17). And Egypt is a primary justification for treating them well: 'Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore do I enjoin you to observe this commandment' (Deut. 24.18). This formula is often read as if it instructs Do not oppress strangers because *you were oppressed* in the land of Egypt, but, as in the case of the Sabbath command discussed above, this is not what is said. The text does not evaluate Israel's experience in Egypt, either positively or negatively. Rather, the fact that God redeemed (purchased, but without paying the bill, as it happens) Israel from Pharaoh is used to justify a certain set of demands they must meet in their own land, including the fair treatment of those dependent upon them.

Finally, I note in passing that slavery has a function in Exodus that is unconnected with persecution and oppression. A person who was purchased as a slave automatically lost all prior status. Pharaoh's ownership stripped Israel of whatever affiliations, social or otherwise, it may have had, and the erasing of prior loyalties (familial, tribal), allowing God to 'adopt' Israel as a son, was arguably the first step in nation-building.⁶⁰ In this sense, the

60. J.L.R. Melnyk, 'When Israel Was a Child: Ancient Near Eastern Adoption Formulas and the Relationship between God and Israel', in M. Patrick Graham *et al.*

period of slavery in Egypt functioned as a form of clarification, much as the flood functions in Genesis to wipe out the inevitable confusion of primeval origins. It would be nice, though probably unrealistic, to say that slavery in Egypt paved the way for democracy in Israel. More likely, it offered the chance for a clean slate that was quickly filled with new social elites and hierarchies.

Moses as Evidence of the Assimilation Theme

A very different kind of textual evidence for the centrality of assimilation in Exodus may be detected in the representation of Moses, especially in the book's mainly biographical prologue. The opening chapters of Exodus are most readily glossed as an introduction to the hero of the rest of the book. Moses is the man who leads Israel out of Egypt to the brink of the Promised Land, and into whose hands the Sinai laws are given. Surely we need to know something about him? The answer to that question is, not necessarily. In contrast to, say, Homer, the Bible is strikingly short on biographical information about its central figures. Of Abraham, we know only his place in a genealogy, that his wife was barren, and that God issued him with a set of demands. What we learn about Abraham as a person emerges piecemeal from narratives that report events in the period that is our concern; the text is silent about Abraham's life before that time. That this is counter-intuitive may explain why many Jews search Genesis in vain for the midrashic account of Abraham's misspent youth as an assistant in his father's idol shop. But a lack of interest, or even perhaps an active suppression, of biographical information is characteristic of biblical literature in general. In prophetic texts, even Elijah who, unlike the classical prophets, features in a narrative where this sort of information could theoretically be provided, pops up in the middle of a sentence and in the middle of his life: 'Elijah the Tishbite, an inhabitant, said to Ahab, "As the LORD lives, the God whom I serve, there will be no dew or rain except at my bidding"' (1 Kgs 17.1). What applies to the characters that inhabit biblical texts applies also to its authors. In striking contrast to Greek writers from a similar period, Israel's self-declared historians provide no information about themselves, not even their names. In the biblical world, then, we should by no means expect biographical information about the lives and personalities of even the most important figures. The account of Moses' childhood and pre-'prophetic' call youth in Egypt is not predictable but, rather, exceptional. So why is it there?

One possible answer is the inclination of biblical narratives to extract the general and the political from the individual and private. Jacob, for

example, is of interest both as an ancestor of Israel and because he represents a paradigm according to which future generations can validate themselves and justify their actions. On this reading, Moses is a paradigm for Israel—what happens to him will happen to the people. Where Moses differs from Jacob, though, is the sense in which his early life is a prologue to the action, not the action itself. In this respect, Exodus 1–3 is closer to Hosea 1–3 than to Genesis narrative, less a complex paradigm on the Jacob model than a microcosm to highlight simple parallels. In Hosea 1–3, the prophet marries a woman who is constitutionally unfaithful, discovers that she is indeed unfaithful, isolates her, and takes her back. In the rest of the book, the pattern is repeated with God and Israel. Given the absence of character analysis or psychological insight in Hosea 1–3, unlike the Genesis Jacob cycle, it is hard to imagine that its authors intended to illuminate the rest of the book in those terms; their interest is structural. The Exodus prologue too lacks the kind of biographical information that establishes Moses' credentials or explains why he became the sort of leader he did, as is the case with stories about the young David. It even supplies information that is effectively incompatible with what follows. If Moses was raised in Pharaoh's palace by Pharaoh's daughter, for example, why did he not rely on nepotism to extract Israel from Egypt? As it is, there is barely a hint that Moses is even familiar with Pharaoh, let alone a member of his household. This suggests that the point of the prologue was not to generate psychological insights about Moses, but to highlight basic structural parallels between his life and Israel's history.

In what sense, then, does the early life of Moses serve as a microcosm of Israel as I have described it? First, and perhaps foremost, is the emphasis on hiddenness in relation to Moses, especially in the early parts of the narrative. Moses is hidden, literally by his mother (Exod. 2.2-4) and metaphorically in Pharaoh's house (Exod. 2.9-10), making him structurally similar to Joseph, whom I shall discuss in detail below, and Esther, who is likewise hidden in the king's palace (Est. 2.10), and whose name is changed to one that sounds at once suitably Persian and evokes hiddenness in Hebrew (Est. 2.7). But whereas Joseph and Esther achieve what they do from within the system, Moses must leave it. The emphasis on Moses' hiddenness begins as soon as he is introduced:

The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she *hid* him for three months. When she could *hide* him no longer, she got a wicker basket for him and caulked it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child into it and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. And his sister stationed herself at a distance to see what would befall him (Exod. 2.2-4).

At first Moses is unambiguously hidden, presumably in his mother's house. Later he is semi-concealed in a basket and among the Nile reeds—given the identification between Egypt and the Nile, the latter is already a half-

way house to Egypt—and finally he is fully concealed—even his name is changed, assuming he was named by his parents before he was weaned and taken to Pharaoh’s house:

So the woman took the child and nursed it. When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh’s daughter, who made him her son. She named him Moses, explaining, ‘I drew him out of the water’ (Exod. 2.9b-10).

Pharaoh’s daughter’s naming of Moses, especially a name that evokes being drawn from water, a symbolic birth experience, represents the another stage of his hiddenness, and Moses subsequently tries to conceal (סָתַר; cf. Esther) his face at the burning bush (Exod. 3.6). But what precisely is being concealed? Above all, it is Moses’ identity that is hidden, but, in contrast to other similar cases, the text suggests from the outset that it will not remain concealed. Moses’ name indicates that he was destined to be drawn out, first from his original Israelite background, symbolized by his rebirth from the Nile, but ultimately out of Egypt, symbolized by his Reed Sea crossing, another symbolic birth.⁶¹

An interesting ambiguity in the Exodus narrative centres on the question of whether Moses is newly born or reborn. God tells him that he is the God of a father Moses seems not to have known: ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’ (3.6).⁶² This parallels Israel, whose relationship with God is at once newly established by Moses and based on a pre-existing promise to the patriarchs. There is a sense in which both Moses and Israel discover their roots, and yet the practical impact that they had roots to discover is slight to non-existent. Moses must have known that he was a Hebrew, but there is no obvious sense that he is *returning* to his people. The text reports neither how he knew about his ethnic origins (a lot depends upon the age at which he was thought to have grown up; see Exod. 2.10, where he is returned by his mother to Pharaoh’s daughter), nor the practical implications of that knowledge. The ambiguity surrounding Moses’ identity is mirrored in the question of whether or not he is ‘going home’ in geographic terms. The promised land is precisely that—promised; Exodus contains practically no indication that Moses’ ancestors had previously lived there, and had thus begun to fulfil God’s promise to Abraham in Gen. 12.1-3. Indeed, Moses’ relationship with the land is even more tenuous than his relationship with the people. He was born among Hebrews, but not in Canaan—hence the complete absence of verbs of return; we have יָצָא, go out, but no שָׁב, go back.

61. A.G. Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), pp. 223-24, writes evocatively of God at the Reed Sea as Israel’s midwife.

62. Since אֲבִיךָ, your father, is singular, it may refer not to the patriarchs, but to Moses’ own father, with the names of the patriarchs being added later.

All this is true for Israel, as well as for Moses. We are told that the Israelites had ancestors, but nothing of how they knew or what they thought about them. Canaan is not the home to which the Israelites are returning, but the land their ancestors were promised that *they* (apparently the generation of 'Egyptian' Hebrews, not the patriarchs themselves) would be given.⁶³ On one level, the Exodus story makes no sense in its present form unless prior identification with Israel as a people and a land is assumed, and yet the two are not connected as strongly as one might have anticipated. The choice to present the land of Canaan in this particular way is especially striking given its role throughout the Bible and, as it turns out, throughout Jewish history, in preserving a collective identity.

Exodus opens with a list of the people who came down to Egypt with Joseph (1.1-5). If the Joseph narrative links Genesis to Exodus, this text links Exodus to Genesis. Although it is short and almost formulaic, the details turn out to be telling. In Genesis, the land of Canaan is central. Famine in the land drives the brothers to Egypt in the first place (Gen. 42.2), and once there they go backwards and forwards between Egypt and Canaan, transporting food and bringing family members who had stayed behind. Ultimately even Jacob leaves Canaan but, when he dies, he is taken back by Joseph and buried there. In Exodus 1, the land slips from view and the focus shifts to the family. The complete silence about the land of Canaan is essential to the unfolding Exodus narrative. We are about to hear the story of the journey to the *promised* land, and when the patriarchs are invoked, it is invariably as the recipients of that promise, not as former residents of or sojourners in the land. Since Exodus gives no sense that the Israelites are going home, a reference to the land in Exodus 1 would produce all the wrong expectations.

Another important feature underlined by the Moses microcosm is self-selection in relation to identity:

Some time after that, when Moses had grown up, he *went out*, מִצְרַיִם, to his kinsfolk and saw their labors. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsmen. He turned this way and that and, seeing no one about, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand (Exod. 2.11-12).

Just as Moses went out of Pharaoh's palace, so will Israel go out of Egypt, and just as an act of violence forces Moses to decide whether he is an

63. The early references to the patriarchs (Exod. 3.6, 16; 4.5) do not refer to the promise of land, but simply identify God as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Later, the patriarchs are linked to the land, but only as recipients of a promise concerning their descendants, not as inhabitants of the land themselves: 'Then the LORD said to Moses, "Set out from here, you and the people that you have brought up from the land of Egypt, to the land which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, "To your offspring I will give it"' (Exod. 33.1).

Egyptian or an Israelite, so violence forces even assimilated Israelites to move firmly into one camp or the other, and eventually precludes a return passage across the Reed Sea. The final act of self-selection occurs with the command to put blood on the door posts:

And the blood on the houses where you are staying shall be a sign for you: when I see the blood I will pass over you, so that no plague will destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt (12.13).

This instruction effectively shifts responsibility from God to Israel, and the effect of the shift is to emphasize assimilation, at least alongside and even perhaps over persecution as the significant threat. People would not usually have the choice at this advanced stage to remove themselves from the clutches of persecutors; external help or a change of heart on the part of the persecutors is required. Assimilation, on the other hand, does not take the form of a crisis, and thus allows space and time for self-determination. Moreover, internal pressures as well as external are involved, thus making it easier for those affected to decide to change the course of events. Even at an advanced stage of assimilation, it is possible to reverse the process and hold fast to the original identity. Self-determination of this kind is not usually an option for the persecuted. The decision to convert to the religion of the persecutors would, of course, represent a counter example, but it does not apply in this case.

As well as settling the important question of precisely who left Egypt, self-selection addresses the even bigger question: who is, or who will be, an Israelite? The answer provided by this text is: whoever puts blood on his doorpost. According to the narrative's own logic, Egyptians who observed the activity of their neighbours and decided to follow suit could have avoided the firstborn plague and left with everyone else. Israelites who ignored the warning, on the other hand, would have perished along with the Egyptians. This last factor is inconvenient for the traditional reading, and is thus often overlooked; as noted above, persecuted slaves would not have been given the choice to assimilate. The theme of assimilation is highlighted by a midrash on the word חמשיים (fifths, columns?) in Exod. 13.18, which claims that only a small proportion of Israelites left Egypt, the rest dying under cover of the three days of darkness,⁶⁴ perhaps to save

64. See *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael* (trans. J.Z. Lauterbach; Skokie: Varda Books, 1933), *Pisha* 12.79-88: 'Hamushim means one in five. Some say one in fifty. Some say one in five hundred. Rabbi Nehorai says: [I swear by] the Temple Service! It was not one in five hundred that went out [but fewer]. It says, "I made you into myriads like the grass of the field" (Ezek. 15.7), and it says, "The children of Israel were fruitful and swarmed and multiplied and became huge" (Exod. 1.6)—a woman would give birth to six at one time. And you say that one in five hundred went out?! [I swear by] the Temple Service! It was not one in five hundred that went out [but fewer]. Rather, many Jews died in Egypt. When did they die? During the three days of darkness, as it says, "People could not see

divine embarrassment,⁶⁵ or perhaps because the midrashic author equated darkness with assimilation. The Jews who died in Egypt were those who kept their identities in the dark ('people could not see each other', Exod. 10.23)—*incognito ergo sum*.⁶⁶ Assimilation anxiety likewise underlies the teaching attributed to Rabbi Eliezer ha-Kappar: Israel possessed four particular virtues in Egypt—they were chaste, they avoided slander, they did not change their names, and they did not change their language.⁶⁷ The confused and confusing situation about who died—not to mention how they died (divine anger?)—finds a more positive echo in the account of who eventually left Egypt. Presumably Egyptians formed part of the mixed multitude (12.38), showing that the division was neither strictly ethnic nor class-based, but based on those who chose to throw in their lot.

Moses and Joseph as Evidence of Assimilation

A crucial component of Aaron Wildavsky's argument in his stimulating book on assimilation in the Joseph narrative is the idea that Moses represents Joseph in reverse.⁶⁸ Wildavsky assumes the texts in question were written in the order in which they appear, and thus concludes that Moses was introduced to undo what Joseph has done. I see the compositional primacy the other way around, with Exodus written before the Joseph narrative, and I conclude that Joseph is introduced to do whatever Moses effectively undoes. Joseph does many things, but above all he assimilates into Egypt. This suggests that the authors of the Joseph narrative saw Exodus as a solution to the problem of assimilation, and that their task was to show how that problem came to exist. Joseph was thus shaped in opposition to Moses, and the parallels enhanced by editorial additions to Exodus, mainly in ch. 2. Both Joseph and Moses are physically attractive (Gen. 39.6 cf. Exod. 2.2), a feature mentioned at precisely the point of immersion in Egypt (cf. also Sarah entering Egypt, Gen. 12.14). Moses is hidden, **נִצְפָן** (Exod. 2.2,3) and indeed subsequently hides, **סָתַר**, his face (Exod. 3.6), while Joseph's Egyptian name, **צַפְנַת פַּעֲנָח**, Zaphenath-paneah, sounds like 'hidden face'

each other" (Exod. 10.23). They were burying their dead, and they thanked and praised God that their enemies could not see and rejoice at their downfall.'

65. Cf. *Exod. R.* 14.3.

66. I learned this phrase from H. Soloveitchik, 'Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy', *Tradition* 28.4 (1994), pp. ????. Soloveitchik says he learned it from his college days (n. 43).

67. *Mekhilta de Rabbi Ishmael, Pisha* 5.17.

68. A. Wildavsky, *Assimilation versus Separation: Joseph the Administrator and the Politics of Religion in Biblical Israel* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2002), pp. 192-96, for many other parallels. Wildavsky too sees Moses undoing the assimilation created by Joseph, but, unlike me, assumes that Exodus is the later text.

in Hebrew (Gen. 41.45). Moses is left by the Nile in response to a decree by Pharaoh (Exod. 2.3), and Pharaoh stands by the Nile in the dream that Joseph interprets at the start of his ascent (Gen. 41.3). Moses is drawn from the water (Exod. 2.10), while Joseph is drawn (Gen. 37.1) from a pit in which there is no water (Gen. 37.24). Both narratives feature the apparent absence of witnesses at the scene of a crime at the moment they 'leave' the bosom, metaphorical or actual, of Egypt: compare 'He turned this way and that and saw that there was no man' (Exod. 2.12) with '...and there was no man from the men of the house there' (Gen. 39.11). Moses goes to a well in the land of Midian (Exod. 2.15), while Joseph is drawn from a waterless pit by Midianites (Gen. 37.28) who seem otherwise superfluous to the narrative—they double with the Ishmaelites.⁶⁹ On the face of it, both Moses and Joseph are accomplished assimilators; Moses assimilated successfully into Midian as well as in Egypt. Yet there are differences between them. The Egyptians acknowledge the impact of God on Joseph's life (Gen. 41.31), but they do not involve themselves in the details. Moses' Midianite family, by contrast, do not merely recognize and benefit from his relationship with God; at the very least, they become fellow-travellers, and at the most they participate. Zipporah saves Moses from God's attempt to kill him by circumcising their son (Exod. 4.24-26), and Jethro provides the infrastructure for the application of Sinai law (Exod. 18.13-27). The dynamic between Moses and the various non-Israelites in whose midst he lives is quite different than that between Joseph and the Egyptians and, in the end, only Moses comes out of Egypt alive.

Conclusions

The almost universally held assumption that Exodus is about oppressive slavery and persecution misses a crucial trick. It provides an inspiring model of resistance, but offers little or nothing in the way of guidance for those who find themselves wanting to sleep with the enemy. The Exodus solution to that particular problem is seclusion in a land of one's own, but this raises a still more important matter that standard interpretations pass over in silence. Nationally speaking, Israel's experience in Egypt is formative. By allowing a more complex reading of Exodus that incorporates concerns about identity, we permit at the same time a richer national template to come into focus. This template is evident throughout the chapters that

69. See E.L. Greenstein, 'An Equivocal Reading of the Sale of Joseph', in K. Gros Louis (ed.), *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, II (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1982), pp. 114-25. See also R. Pirson, *The Lord of the Dreams: A Semantic and Literary Analysis of Genesis 37-50* (Sheffield: JSOTSup, 355; Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), pp. 69-79.

describe Israel's sojourn in Egypt, but its implications for the new nation are clearest in relation to Exod. 12.43-51:

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron: This is the law of the Passover offering: no foreigner, בן־נכר, shall eat of it. But any slave a man has bought may eat of it once he has been circumcised. No bound or hired helper shall eat of it. It shall be eaten in one house: you shall not take any of the flesh outside the house; nor shall you break a bone of it. The whole community of Israel shall offer it. If a stranger, גר, who dwells with you would offer the Passover to the LORD, all his males must be circumcised; then he shall be admitted to offer it; he shall then be as a citizen of the country, אִזְרָח הָאֶרֶץ. But no uncircumcised person may eat of it. There shall be one law for the citizen and one for the stranger who dwells among you. And all the Israelites did so; as the LORD had commanded Moses and Aaron, so they did. That very day the LORD freed the Israelites from the land of Egypt, troop by troop.

The designation of Passover as God's eternal night of vigil for all Israelites (12.42) is followed by an attempt to construct a nation around who may or may not eat the Pesach offering (Exod. 12.43-51). It will not be a nation without borders or immigration controls (no foreigners or temporary workers can participate, 12.45), but the stranger, גר, and by implication the slave, עבד, will have the rights of full citizens conditional upon circumcision (12.44). Here begins the story of people whose hearts, though enticed, were not seduced, and were thus given an extraordinary opportunity. Needless to say, the cost was high, not least in terms of Egyptian lives lost, and the bill everlasting: the eternal requirements to consecrate to God all first-born men and animals (13.1, 15), and to celebrate Passover annually (13.6). But the intended benefit was a just society, shaped by lessons learned in Egypt and distilled through the liturgical lens of the events that accompanied Israel's birth as a nation.