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Leadership, Self-Governance and Nationhood in the Hebrew Bible

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Abstract: This article extends prior work on the political theory of the Hebrew Bible. Previous papers presented the Garden of Eden story as a prolegomenon outlining concepts of legitimate authority; the stories of the Dark Age and the Flood as justifying the role of government and law in human society; the accounts of the Patriarchs as an exploration of patriarchal organization; and the early chapters of the book of Exodus as comparing and contrasting nomadism, dependency, slavery and nationhood as models of political organization. The present paper examines the biblical author's ideas about self-governances as a step towards the achievement of nationhood. Key elements of self-governance are a population to be organized, a need for organization, a leader capable of performing the organizing task, and political action to establish the group's autonomy. The author provides a remarkably sophisticated treatment of charismatic leadership and the tension between the leader's personal and political identities.

* * *

This article analyzes the stories in the book of Exodus about leadership and self governance within the Hebrew community. I argue that these narratives form part of an extended analysis of political ideas – a political philosophy – which rivals in sophistication, and probably predates, the theories developed by Plato and Aristotle in the Greek world.

As outlined in prior work, the Garden of Eden story serves as a prolegomenon to the Bible's political theory and also offers an impressive analysis of the question of political obligation – why people are required to obey their political rulers. The stories of the Dark Age after the expulsion of Adam and Eve address the question of anarchy: whether it is possible for human beings to lead a good and decent life in the absence of government and law (the author's answer is no).[1] The history of the patriarchs and matriarchs from the book of Genesis address the nature, source and legitimacy of power in families. The opening chapters of the book of Exodus introduce the question of *political authority*: authority over people not connected by close family ties. The author demonstrates that nationhood is superior to nomadism, dependency, and slavery as a means for promoting human flourishing in societies that have grown past the point where they can be governed by family authority.

This proposition leads to an inquiry into how a people not constituted as a nation can achieve that status. The basic elements of nationhood in the author's account are self-governance, laws, and control over territory. Chapters 2–15 of the book of Exodus address the issue of self-governance. The author identifies and analyzes the following prerequisites: (a) a group with a sense of identity sufficient to make self-governance meaningful; (b) a sufficient reason to seek self-governing status; (c) a leader capable of organizing the group into a political force; and (d) action establishing the group's power to control its destiny.

[1] I use the term "author" as a conventional way of denoting the creator of the biblical narratives without implying anything in particular about the identity of this source.

Identity

One precondition to self-governance is the presence of a group with a sufficient sense of ethnic or cultural identity to make self-governance meaningful. The Israelites satisfy this condition. They share a common history: they all trace their lineage to the figure of Jacob and his children. Traditions such as God's promises to the patriarchs and Joseph's wish that his bones be buried in Canaan provide a source for ethnic solidarity. Distinctive cultural markers also work to separate the Hebrews from the Egyptians: Hebrews will not eat the tendon attached to the socket of the hip (Gen 32:32); Egyptians will not eat with the Hebrews at all (Gen 43:32).

Need

These historical and cultural differences provide raw material for a people to move toward political organization. But they are not in themselves a basis for a self-governing community. On the contrary, the book of Exodus describes the Hebrews as deeply assimilated within Egyptian society. Without a need for organization, the Hebrews would be content to live in a state of dependency indefinitely, allowing the Egyptian state to provide governance for them. The need for organization arises only when a new pharaoh begins to oppress the Israelites, leaving them with no recourse other than political organization as a means for resisting tyranny.[2]

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[2] History attests many instances in which a group that had not previously had a strong sense of identity became more ethnically identified because of oppression. English colonists in what is now the United States became aware of a new identity as Americans in the face of what they perceived as oppressive treatment by the British Crown; many Jews became more conscious of their shared identity as a result of the atrocity of the Holocaust.

Leadership

Even the experience of oppression is not enough in itself to trigger a movement toward self-governance. The Israelites groan under the oppression but do nothing to fight it. The passive resistance exercised by the midwives only serves to underscore the lack of political action. And the problem is even deeper than the lack of active resistance: the author describes a poisonous environment in which some Hebrews collaborate with the slave drivers, either by becoming foremen of work crews or by informing on malcontents (Exod 2:14–15; 5:14). The author displays a deep understanding of the tendency of some people to identify with and support aggressors in exchange for small favors that enhance their power or protect them from harm.

The Bible thus demonstrates that ethnic identity and even the experience of oppression are not in themselves a sufficient basis for achieving self-governing status. The missing feature is *leadership*. It is only when Moses appears on the scene that the Hebrews organize for political action; and it is only due to the intervention of Moses that they are able to become a free and autonomous people. By introducing the figure of Moses, the author is able to venture into a sophisticated exploration of the nature of leadership—an investigation as profound as anything produced in the Western intellectual tradition up to the time of Max Weber.

As elsewhere in the Bible's political theory, the setup frames the issue for analysis. Consider the social background of the Moses stories. Moses comes on the scene at a time when the Israelites have no political organization other than an ineffectual council of elders. This feature of the setup—the nearly complete lack of indigenous

political organization—clears away the confounding factor of established institutions. Leaders in political systems draw much of their power from the authority conferred by their offices. The authority of office is not the author's interest at this point, however. He is interested in a different sort of authority: one that arises out of a person's character or personality and that does not depend on preexisting structures of power, office, or legitimacy. This is what the German sociologist Max Weber termed *charismatic* authority: the power of "natural leaders" who are "neither officeholders nor incumbents of an 'occupation.'"[3] These natural leaders, who arise in times of "psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious, political distress," are "holders of specific gifts of the body and spirit; and these gifts have been believed to be supernatural, not accessible to everybody."[4]

Moses is a paradigm of Weber's charismatic leader.[5] He serves his fellow Hebrews for no remuneration or personal gain. He does not seek power and in fact resists God's commission to lead the Israelites—so stoutly as to irritate the deity (Exod 4:14). He arises as a liberator at a time when his people are suffering from all the stresses on Weber's list. Moses, moreover, has no authority of office. Although he is the adopted grandson of Pharaoh, he occupies no position in the Egyptian state. He has no power over the slave driver whom he observes beating the Hebrew laborer. Nor does he possess legal or traditional authority with his own people. He is not a member of the council of elders. His father is a person of no distinction or position. Moses is a Levite, a tribe with no

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[3] Max Weber, *From Max Weber* (trans. H. H. Gerth and C. W. Mills; New York: Oxford University Press, 1946; orig. publ. 1906–1924), 245.
[4] Ibid.
[5] On the figure of Moses as a paradigm of leadership, see especially Aaron Wildavsky, *The Nursing Father: Moses as a Political Leader* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1984).

claim to leadership rights. His wife is a foreigner. He has not even lived among the Hebrews, having been raised as a member of Egyptian society and then, as an adult, residing with his father-in-law in Midian.

Despite his lack of any qualifications for office, Moses possesses gifts of body and spirit of the sort that Weber identified with charismatic leaders.

1. Moses is associated with other leaders whose histories and exploits were presumably known in the culture:

(a) The detail in Exod 2:3–10 of Moses being set adrift in a basket parallels a tradition of Mesopotamian hero stories, most notably the birth legend of Sargon of Akkad, who like Moses was delivered in secret, concealed by his mother in a basket, and set adrift on a river.[6]

(b) The history of Moses alludes to the figure of Noah. Like Noah, Moses is chosen by God at a time when the world has deteriorated into a state of evil and danger. Like Noah, Moses is set adrift in a body of water in a vessel lined with pitch, and like Noah, he winds up surviving the journey and saving his people.

(c) The story also alludes, although indirectly and inexactly, to the Bible's stories about Joseph. Like Joseph, Moses attracts the notice of an Egyptian woman, assimilates

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[6] For a classic treatment, see Brevard S. Childs, "The Birth of Moses," *JBL* 84 (1965): 109–22. On the parallels between Moses and Sargon, see B. Lewis, *The Sargon Legend: A Study of the Akkadian Text and the Hero Who Was Exposed at Birth* (ASORDS; Cambridge: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1980); Donald B. Redford, "The Literary Motif of the Exposed Child," *Numen* 14 (1967): 209-28; Berman, *Created Equal*, 143–66. The narrative also contains echoes of Mesopotamian flood stories, further underscoring Moses' status as the leader *par excellence*. Consider the Atrahasis Epic, which may have circulated in some form in ancient Israel. In Atrahasis, humans are put to work on public-works projects, relieving the lesser gods of the burden; in Exod, the Hebrews are put to work on public-works projects, relieving Egyptians of the burden. In Atrahasis, Enlil is irritated because the human population has increased; in Exod, Pharaoh is bothered because the Hebrew population has increased. Both Enlil and Pharaoh implement measures to suppress the growth of the population. In both cases the measures fail. In both stories the oppressor increases the pressure by attempting genocide. In both a savior-hero sets out on a dangerous journey in a vessel lined with pitch; the hero survives the journey; and the hero winds up saving the threatened community.

into Egyptian society and becomes a member of the elite himself, and ends up rescuing his people from danger and distress.

2. Moses displays special gifts of body and spirit:

(a) As a child, he seems to have been exceptionally beautiful—attractive enough to cause the Egyptian princess to fall for him at first sight.

(b) As a man, he is physically powerful—strong enough to kill an Egyptian overseer without breaking a sweat.

(c) He (along with his brother) possesses magical powers that exceed even the skills of Egypt's best sorcerers.

(d) He is specially favored by God, who reveals himself and who communicates with him freely and often.

3. Moses displays classic qualities of character that mark a person for leadership: he is inspired by a sense of justice;[7] protects the vulnerable;[8] is courageous;[9] is educated;[10] has experience outside his homeland;[11] is favored by God;[12] is humble;[13]

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[7] Exod 2:11–12.
[8] Exod 2:17.
[9] He displays courage on several occasions, starting with his youthful attack on the Egyptian slave driver and his intervention in the fight between the Hebrew workers. Moses returns to Egypt even though he was facing a death sentence when he left. He displays courage by confronting Pharaoh with the audacious demand to let his people go.
[10] Although nothing in the Bible mentions Moses' education, several texts assume that he was literate (e.g., Exod 17:14; 24:4). A tradition of Jewish commentary extending back to Philo and Josephus portrays him as having been schooled. Christian Scriptures are to the same effect: Acts 7:22 says that "Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action." Some modern commentators also assume that Moses received schooling in Egypt. See, e.g., William Foxwell Albright, "Moses in Historical and Theological Perspective," in *Magnalia Dei: The Mighty Acts of God* (ed. F. M. Cross, W. E. Lemke, and P. D. Miller; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), 123; Childs, "The Birth of Moses," 109–22 (noting that Moses' adoption at the court provides a basis for speculation on his training as a prince).
[11] George W. Coats, "Moses in Midian," *JBL* 92 (1973): 3–10.
[12] See especially Norman Habel, "The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives," *ZAW* 77 (1965): 297–323.
[13] Num 12:3. On the biblical concept of humility, see George W. Coats, "Moses in Midian," 20.

delegates authority;[14] perseveres in the face of obstacles;[15] and displays skills in diplomacy and negotiation.[16] In the real world, of course, no leader is likely to manifest all these attributes, at least not to the superlative degree displayed by Moses. But Moses, as an idealized figure, is capable of expressing them all. He is, in Weber's terms, an "ideal type"—a heuristic model of leadership who incorporates the fundamental attributes that are associated with this social role.[17]

Transition to Leadership

Having established Moses as an ideal leader, the author's next task is to explore the *transition to leadership*: to demonstrate how an individual without political authority becomes a figure who speaks for the people as a whole. The setup here is the exchange between God and Moses at the burning bush. Moses initially resists when God commands him to return to Egypt and liberate the Hebrews. He asks God "what if they do not

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[14] He protests that he is halting of speech, thus inducing God to supply Aaron to speak for Moses (Exod 4:14–17; 6:12–13; 7:1–2). Later, his father-in-law Jethro advises Moses to appoint subordinate judges to serve as a permanent court, deciding the easy cases themselves and referring the difficult ones to Moses (Exod 18:22). When Moses goes up the mountain to receive the law, he delegates to Aaron and Hur the responsibility for resolving disputes in his absence (Exod 24:13–14). Moses delegates the job of military command to Joshua, supervising Joshua's battle with the Amalekites from a hill overlooking the conflict with the assistance of his aides Aaron and Hur (Exod 17:10–12).

[15] Pharaoh repeatedly rejects Moses' demands to let the Hebrews go, and Moses repeatedly returns to renew the demand. The Israelites give in to resentment against Moses and his leadership, but he never wavers from his course. The desert itself resists the progress of the Hebrew refugees, refusing them both water and food, but Moses with the help of God manages to supply enough of both.

[16] As a young man, Moses does not opt for the diplomatic solution to conflicts: he kills the Egyptian overseer, even though doing so would accomplish little in terms of alleviating the sufferings of his people. Later, as he matures, his diplomatic skills improve. Moses, in his early interactions with Pharaoh, speaks as a supplicant, deferring to the great king and seeking permission to leave based on humanitarian grounds. Cleverly, he does not demand that Pharaoh free the Hebrews altogether but only asks that they be allowed to depart temporarily in order to worship God in the wilderness. The request is clearly a ruse, but one with enough credibility to offer Pharaoh cover against having to acknowledge a defeat. It is only when Pharaoh proves to be obstinate that Moses' polite requests take on more of the features of demands or threats. Moses' skills at negotiation, moreover, are not limited to Pharaoh; he also brings some of the same qualities to bear in his interactions with God. The biblical commentator Yochanan Muffs insightfully illustrates the various ways in which Moses, in his dealings with God, employs clever strategies in an attempt to induce the deity into meeting his needs, ranging from appeals to God's ego, to reminders of past promises, to claims of being personally insulted, to outright moral blackmail. Yochanan Muffs, *Love and Joy: Law, Language and Religion in Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1992), 11–16.

[17] See Ari Z. Zivotofsky, "The Leadership Qualities of Moses," *Judaism* 43 (1994): 258–69.

believe me or listen to me and say 'The Lord did not appear to you'" (Exod 4:1). God responds by telling Moses to throw his staff on the ground, where it turns into a snake (Exod 4:3). God tells him to grasp the snake by the tail, whereupon it turns back into a staff (Exod 4:4). God tells Moses to put his hand inside the fold of his cloak; when he draws his hand out the skin is diseased (Exod 4:6). God tells Moses to put his hand back in his cloak, and when he withdraws it a second time it is healthy (Exod 4:7). God continues by telling Moses that if the Israelites do not accept either of the first two signs, he is to take water from the Nile and pour it out, and the water will turn into blood (Exod 4:9). Moses now protests that he is slow of speech, and God responds that he will "teach [Moses] what to say" (Exod 4:10–11). When Moses persists by asking God to send someone else in his stead, God gets angry and informs Moses that Aaron "will speak to the people for you, and it will be as if he were your mouth and as if you were God to him" (Exod 4:13–16).

This setup presents three key elements: Moses' staff, his rod, and his voice (the water that turns into blood will be discussed later). Each of these items carries a symbolic meaning that would have been understood in the culture of ancient Israel.

1. The rod is a symbol of a ruler's *political authority*. Rods and scepters (highly ornamented rods) are a ubiquitous symbol of political authority in the ancient Near East.[18] They serve the same function in the Bible. Moses repeatedly uses his rod as an

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[18] The Egyptian hieroglyph for "nobleman" or "official" depicts a man carrying the staff of office, and the image of a scepter was an element of the word "to rule." See Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998). Pharaohs are often depicted holding scepters. See J. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Text and Pictures* (2 vols.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), 1:177. A palette from Hierakonpolis shows King Narmer of the First Dynasty holding a scepter and smiting a kneeling prisoner. See Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East*, vol. 1, ill. 84. Scepters as symbols of political authority also appear ubiquitously in the royal iconography of Mesopotamia. See Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East*, 1:177;

instrument of power in the contest with the Egyptian authorities (Exod 7:15–17; 9:23; 10:13). At the Sea of Reeds, Moses raises his rod to part the waters (Exod 14:16). In the desert, he uses his rod to extract water from a stone (Exod 17:5–7; Num 20:11). The rod also has efficacy in warfare: Moses uses it to empower the Israelites in their battle with the Amalekites (Exod 17:8–11). The common feature of all of these events is that Moses is using his rod to exercise *political* authority: conducting diplomatic negotiations; engaging in public works projects; and carrying out military operations.[19]

2. The hand is a symbol of the ruler's *military power*. It appears ubiquitously in this role in ancient Near Eastern iconography.[20] In the Bible, the hand is used to symbolize might and power;[21] it is also employed to connote agency,[22] responsibility,[23] possession,[24] conflict,[25] oath-taking,[26] identity,[27] delegation of power,[28] and prayer.[29]

Arthur E. Whatham, "The Meaning of the Ring and Rod in Babylonian-Assyrian Sculpture," *BW* 26 (1905): 120–23.

[19] Other biblical texts also recognize the rod or scepter as symbol of political authority, either within Israel (Gen 49:10; Num 24:17; Ps 2:9; 89:32; 110:2), or among the nations (Isa 14:5; Esth 4:11; Jer 48:17; Amos 1:5, 8; Zech 10:11).

[20] Annals of Egyptian military campaigns refer to the "arm" of the king as a synecdoche of military might. For example, the annals of Thutmose III's military campaign in Asia record the king as saying, "My father Amon strengthened the arm [of my majesty]." Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East*, 1:177. Later in the same text, the king rallies his troops with the cry "[extol the might of] his majesty, because his arm is greater than [that of any king]" (1:178). When the battle is won, the defeated soldiers come to beg mercy from the king "because his arm was so great" (1:178). Annals of a later campaign by Seti I laud the king as being "mighty of arm," "potent with his arm," and "knowing (how to) place his hand" (1:182). The same holds for arms and hands in sculpture or representational art. Pritchard's *The Ancient Near East* reveals that important officials are often portrayed with hands raised above the waist, usually with the right held above the left. The leader's hands also appear, in many cases, to be exaggerated in size relative to the ruler's body. These images convey the message that the ruler is awesome, fearful, and powerful.

[21] E.g., Gen 49:24; Exod 3:19–20; 6:1; 7:4; 9:15; 13:3, 9, 14; 15:6; 32:11; Deut 5:15; 6:21; 7:8, 19; Josh 2:24; Judg 2:15; 1 Sam 5:6–9; 6:5; 7:3, 8. Secondarily, the hand of God can be used to swear an oath (e.g., Exod 6:8; Num 24:30) and perform acts of creation or establishment (e.g., Exod 15:17; Deut 3:24; 32:39).

[22] Gen 3:22; 4:11; 22:10; 41:44; Deut 2:7; 12:7, 18; 15:10; 17:7; 28:8, 20, 32; 31:29; 33:7; Judg 9:33; 1 Sam 7:10.

[23] E.g., Gen 37:27; Josh 2:19.

[24] E.g., Gen 16:6; 21:30; 31:42; Exod 3:21; 22:8; 23:15; 29:24–25; 32:15; 34:4, 20; Deut 9:15–17; 10:3; 13:17; 26:4; Judg 18:10; 1 Sam 12:4–5.

[25] E.g., Gen 16:12; 32:11.

[26] E.g., Gen 24:2, 9; Deut 32:40.

[27] Gen 27:17, 22–23.

While these usages show variation—as would be expected, given the importance of the hand in human life—the central tendency is political and military: the hand signifies domination,[30] strength in combat,[31] and the performance of mighty acts against enemies.[32]

3. The voice is an instrument of *command*. God's voice manifests itself to Moses at the burning bush and commissions him to rescue the Israelites; God speaks words of command to Moses repeatedly during the struggle with Pharaoh and later during the wilderness wanderings. Moses, too, uses his voice as an instrument of command, passing on to Aaron God's instructions and giving instructions to the Israelites during their travels in the wilderness.

4. The political meanings of the rod, hand, and voice tend to merge into one another. Sometimes Moses is described as using his hands to achieve political or military results, even though other texts indicate that he is holding his rod (e.g., Exod 17:9–11). In Isaiah, the voice is equated with the rod: "he will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked" (Isa 11:4). But Num 20:1–13 suggests a difference between these instrumentalities: Moses is barred from entering the promised land because he brought water from a rock with his rod rather than his voice.[33] From a political perspective, the rod, hand, and voice express somewhat different attributes of political authority: the rod reflects the specific exercise of political power,

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[28] Gen 40:11–13, 21; Deut 34:9.
[29] E.g., Exod 9:29–33.
[30] E.g., Gen 9:2; 14:20; Exod 14:30; 18:9; Lev 26:25; Deut 1:27; 2:24, 30; 3:3; 7:24; 20:13; 21:10; Josh 2:24; 6:2; 7:7; 8:1, 7; 9:25; 10:8, 19, 30; 11:8; 24:8, 11; Judg 1:2; 2:16, 18, 23; 3:8, 10, 28; 4:2, 7, 14; 6:1, 13, 14; 7:2, 7–14; 8:3, 7, 34; 10:7; 11:21, 30–32; 13:1; 16:23; 1 Sam 4:3, 8.
[31] Judg 4:24; 14:6.
[32] E.g., Exod 7:19; 8:5–6; 10:12, 21–22; 14:16–27; 15:9; 17:9–12.
[33] See Eugene Arden, "How Moses Failed God," *JBL* 76 (1957): 50–52.

which may be delegated (Aaron uses his own rod during the conflict with Pharaoh); the hand represents the basic source of sovereign power; and the voice represents the power of command.

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Having identified the political symbolism of the hand, rod, and voice, let us turn to Moses' call narrative. This text displays the following pattern:

1. Moses' rod turns into a snake and back into a rod.
2. Moses' healthy hand turns into a diseased hand and back into a healthy hand.
3. God says that Nile water will become blood when Moses pours it on the land.
4. Moses protests that his speech is impaired; God says he will teach Moses what to say.
5. God promises to supply Aaron as Moses' spokesman.

We can observe a common feature among the items on the list: the transition from good to bad and back again to good. Moses' rod, a good and useful tool when used to manage sheep, becomes a frightening and dangerous snake when thrown on the ground before it is returned to its former state. Moses' hand, an important part of his body, is made useless and diseased before being restored to health. Water, something good and essential, is turned into something bad and frightening—blood on the ground. Here, the text displays a break in the pattern, in that the blood is not converted back into water. But the author keeps the basic structure in place by describing how Moses' defective voice will be made adequate for the task at hand. The pattern is the same: good becomes bad (water becomes blood) and bad becomes good (a defective voice becomes an adequate one). The break is due to problems in carrying out the pattern for Moses' voice: it will not be very convincing to either the Egyptians or the Hebrews for Moses to suddenly display a speech defect, since speech defects can be feigned. The author supplies the detail of the

Nile water converting into blood in order to maintain the pattern. The structure of this narrative is therefore:

Good	*Bad*	*Good*
Healthy Hand	Diseased Hand	Healthy Hand
Rod	Snake	Rod
Water	Blood Defective Speech	Effective Speech

We are now in a position to interpret God's interaction with Moses in light of political theory. The narrative defines three time periods:

1. Before Moses is called to leadership, the attributes in question are sufficient for their intended purposes. Moses' hand is a good instrument; he can use it for productive work or in fights with other individuals (the Egyptian slave driver) or small groups (the shepherds in Midian). His rod, likewise, is a good tool for use in herding sheep. As to Moses' voice, the text is commonly read to suggest that it is originally defective: Moses is halting of speech. Yet nothing in the Bible actually displays Moses with a speech defect. He is, in fact, quite capable of expressing himself effectively. Even in the very interchange in which he protests that his speech is inadequate, he has no difficulty in making his concerns understood and in employing sophisticated rhetorical techniques when he does so.[34] Moses is, in fact, an orator with superb abilities—as evidenced by the book of Deuteronomy, which is a transcription of a speech given by Moses to the Israelites at the borders of the promised land. God may have helped him give this speech,

[34] See Muffs, *Love and Joy*, 11–14.

but it is an impressive performance nonetheless. A political interpretation suggests that prior to his call to leadership, Moses' speech is adequate for its purpose. There is no reason to posit, as some have done, that he had some form of physical defect or that Moses forgets how to speak Egyptian during his time in Midian.[35]

2. After Moses is called, but before he assumes leadership over Israel, each of these instrumentalities becomes dysfunctional. These details represent the fact that a leader's personal body and accoutrements are never adequate, in themselves, for the task of governance. Moses' hand is sufficient in a fight with a single Egyptian but inadequate in a contest with the Egyptian military, one of the most powerful forces in the world. His rod is good for herding sheep but ineffective as a tool for political pressure. His voice is sufficient for personal conversations but not loud enough to command multitudes. The inadequacy of Moses' personal body and accoutrements as instruments of political power is symbolized by their deformation into dysfunctional states during the call. It is in this light that we should understand Moses' speech defect: his protest that he is slow of speech reflects his awareness of the inadequacy of his personal voice for accomplishing the daunting job God has set for him.[36]

3. Once Moses becomes a leader, these attributes are restored to working order. This detail captures a distinctive quality of elevation to office: the leader's body, to all

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[35] See, e.g., Jeffrey H. Tigay, '"Heavy of Mouth' and 'Heavy of Tongue': On Moses' Speech Difficulty," *BASOR* 231 (1978): 57–67; S. Levin, "The Speech Defect of Moses," *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 86 (1992): 632–33; Stuart Pollack, "The Speech Defect of Moses," *JBQ* 26 (1998): 121–23; S. T. Lachs, "Exodus IV, 11: Evidence for Emendation," *VT* 26 (1976): 249–50.

[36] The same idea—the inadequacy of the chosen leader in the face of God's call—is a common feature of other biblical call narratives (cf. Judg 6:15; 1 Sam 9:21). See J. A. Soggin, *Judges: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 120 ("any man called directly to serve the God of Israel is by the nature of things unworthy, so that the theme appears on many occasions).

appearances, is the same as before, but the person has been transformed.[37] The hand, rod, and voice are now not those of Moses the individual but rather those of Moses the political leader. In this capacity they are adequate to accomplish their job.[38]

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[37] The tension between the leader's human body and his or her political body stimulated much thought in medieval Europe. The classic analysis is Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957). Kantorowicz's focus is on the Tudor political and legal doctrine which held that the king possessed two distinct bodies: his physical body, which was mortal, fallible, material, corruptible, subject to the folly of youth and the ravages of age—in short, human; and his kingly body, which was immortal, omnipresent, invisible, immune from error, and incapable even of contemplating wrongdoing. According to Tudor legal doctrine, because the king's body was incorruptible and perfect, what the king does in his body politic cannot be invalidated or frustrated by any disability in his natural body.

The mystery of the mortality and fallibility of political leaders was also expressed in ancient Near Eastern contexts. The humanity of the king was a problem for Egyptian political practice, which conceived of the pharaoh as a living god. If the pharaoh was a god, he could not die; but since pharaohs did die, the Egyptian state needed an ideology for explaining this phenomenon: the elaborate cult of the afterlife and the ostentatious tombs constructed for the kings as their future residences were a response. In Mesopotamia, in contrast, kings were not conceived of as gods, and so the inconvenient fact of their deaths was less problematic; but even so, Mesopotamian political practice and iconography exalted and magnified the physical body of the king, portraying him as larger, more robust, and more powerful than ordinary mortals. See Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern Religion as the Integration of Society and Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

[38] Several elements of ancient Israelite ritual appear designed to capture the idea of a transformation of the person associated with his elevation to office. The details are a bit unclear, perhaps because the nature of the ceremony changed over time, but it seemed to involve anointment—the pouring of oil on the ritual subject by a priest or other authorized person—as a key element. The importance of the ceremony of anointment is attested by the references in Sam to the king as "Yahweh's anointed" (e.g., 1 Sam 12:3, 5; 16:6; 26:9, 11, 16, 23). Similar functions could have been served by other elements, such as processions, the dressing of the subject in splendid garments, or the placing of a crown on the king's head. There is even some evidence that the ritual of coronation reflected the "good-bad-good" pattern of the call narrative; some have conjectured that the king underwent a form of ritual humiliation at his coronation. The humiliation of the subject, if it occurred, could be a representation of the fact that only with the conferral of political authority is the king's human body adequate to the tasks of governing. An excellent summary and analysis is Baruch Halpern, *The Constitution of the Monarchy in Israel* (HSM 25; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1981), 125–48.

The phenomenon of a person transitioning between the identities of a private citizen and a political leader is familiar even today. Rituals of installation in office—inaugurations, swearing-in ceremonies, and the like—are still extensively utilized even in today's demystified society. The function of these rituals is to convert the identity of the inductee into that of the holder of an office—accomplishing the twin potential benefits of encouraging the officeholder to identify with his new social role, and therefore to act appropriately in fulfilling his duties, and also encouraging witnesses to accept the inductee as the legitimate holder of the office. See Geoffrey P. Miller, "The Legal Function of Ritual," *CKLR* 80 (2005): 1181–233. When the American political commentator Walter Lippman observed that "in all men who lead multitudes of human beings there is a bit of magic" (Ronald Steele, *Walter Lippman and the American Century* [Boston: Little Brown, 1980], 519), he may have referred, in part, to the transformation that occurs when an ordinary person becomes endowed with political power. The individual who assumes the political role remains an ordinary human body even while his identity is transmuted into a different status. This issue—the humanity of the leader—causes a certain anxiety because it always threatens to undermine his political status. And, indeed, political leaders are sometimes undone by their bodily foibles, especially in the United

Political Action

The transition to self-governance, as we have seen, requires the confluence of three factors: a group capable of being organized; a need for organization; and a leader capable of performing the task of organization. These factors, however, are still not enough to achieve self-governance. They must come together through the actual exercise of political power. This matter is addressed in the narratives of the oppression and the struggle with Pharaoh.

The author demonstrates that the political action necessary to achieve self-governance is neither quick nor easy. In typically systematic fashion, he analyzes three phases of political organization.

1. He begins with the oppression. Pharaoh's motivations and actions appear puzzling at first. Why is Egypt's king so concerned about Hebrew population growth, given that this very development has supplied him with the labor force to build his store cities? And why do his policies seem so poorly designed? Putting the Israelites to hard labor hardly seems like a promising way to limit their numbers and in fact proves ineffective (Exod 1:12). Killing newborn boys seems somewhat more rational as a population-control measure, but even this has drawbacks. The limiting factor for population growth is not boys but *girls*: as illustrated by Jacob's extended family, one man can have children at the same time by several women. If Pharaoh had really wished

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States, which seems to be blessed with a particularly onerous set of moral demands that call on leaders to display exemplary conduct in their personal lives. The American singer-songwriter Bob Dylan captured the paradox of the political leader's personal body in his song "It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)": "Even the President of the United States sometimes must have to stand naked."

to limit the Israelite population, he should have killed off the girls.[39] Moreover, killing the boys is in conflict with Pharaoh's wish to retain his labor force.[40] He seems to be cutting off his nose to spite his face. And what is the connection between Pharaoh's wish to prevent the Hebrews from leaving Egypt and his worry that they will support the enemies of Egypt in the event of an invasion? If Pharaoh's anxiety is about a threat to national security, he ought to kick the Hebrews out, not imprison them as a restive population within his borders.[41]

These puzzles have led some critics to posit plural sources as a means for resolving the inconsistencies. Yet the plot tensions can more parsimoniously be resolved when Pharaoh's actions are understood as furthering a single objective. Pharaoh, the ultimate contingency planner, observes that the Hebrews have grown in population to the point that they represent both a threat to his rule, if they make common cause with an enemy, and also a benefit to the Egyptian state, because of their value as a labor force. Pharaoh wishes to prevent the Hebrews from supporting an enemy and also wants to keep them from leaving his territory and thus depriving him of a labor force. Pharaoh recognizes that neither of these outcomes can occur unless the Hebrews engage in collective action. If they remain a disorganized mass they will never fight against Egypt and will never escape. Pharaoh's overriding objective, therefore, is to prevent the Hebrews from becoming politically organized.

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[39] See James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1997), 289.
[40] See, e.g., George W. Coats, "Moses in Midian," 46; Childs, "The Birth of Moses," 117 ("Slaves are not destroyed, but maintained as a labor supply!").
[41] See Van Seters, *The Life of Moses*, 21–22.

Once it is understood that Pharaoh's objective is to prevent the Hebrews from becoming politically organized, his policies appear consistent and rational—similar, in fact, to the strategies of control and domination adopted by totalitarian societies of the present day.[42] Placing the Hebrews in hard labor is not only a way to build cities; it is also a means for demoralizing them and destroying their will to resist. The author illustrates the effect of this policy in his account of Moses and the slave driver. As far as we know Moses is not looking for trouble when he goes out to the worksite. Yet he happens upon an Egyptian beating a Hebrew. The fact that a random sample of Egyptian-Hebrew interactions generates a case of abuse suggests that such incidents were common. The author thus implies that beatings were a systematic policy of the Egyptian state. The behavior of the Hebrew worker confirms the efficacy of this policy. There is only one Egyptian around—Moses verifies this by looking right and left before attacking the slave driver. It seems that the worker could have fought back. But instead the worker passively submits. He appears too demoralized to resist.

Backing this policy of beatings and abuse is a system of surveillance worthy of the East German *Stasi*. Pharaoh's slave drivers keep a careful watch on the Hebrews. Moses understands this very well: he looks around before he assaults the Egyptian to make sure he is not observed, and then he buries the body in the sand to hide the evidence (Exod 2:12). Pharaoh also apparently keeps a network of informants within the Hebrew community. When Moses intercedes to break up a fight among his fellow Hebrews, the one who is in the wrong asks him, "Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian?" (Exod 2:14). The comment is a thinly

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[42] See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968).

veiled threat to rat him out. Even if the words are empty bluster, Moses recognizes that the community does not keep secrets. Moses' fear on realizing that the matter had "become known" among the Hebrews can be explained only if his people are supplying information to Pharaoh (Exod 2:14). Moses was right to be fearful, as it turns out, because Pharaoh does learn about what happened, apparently through Hebrew rather than Egyptian channels (Exod 2:15).

Egypt's system of monitoring and surveillance is backed by an efficacious threat of punishment. Again the story of Moses and the slave driver provides an illustration. When Moses kills the Egyptian, he is not committing a garden-variety murder. He is engaging in political action. This is why the Hebrew wrongdoer associates Moses' intercession in his brawl with the earlier killing of the slave driver: in both cases Moses is claiming authority based on a Hebrew political identity. This is also why Pharaoh condemns Moses to death (Exod 2:15). While the death penalty might seem an appropriate sanction for an act of murder, Moses is Pharaoh's grandson. Presumably the elites would not ordinarily have to answer with their lives for an assault on a commoner. The severity of Pharaoh's response suggests that Moses is being treated as an enemy of the state rather than a common criminal. Moses understands the efficiency of the Egyptian government in carrying out Pharaoh's commands. He does not attempt to persuade Pharaoh to relent, nor does he go into hiding within Egypt. Instead, he finds sanctuary with the priest of Midian (Exod 2:21).

Pharaoh is not content, however, with administering a system of repression based on abuse, surveillance, and retribution. He supplements these strategies with a policy of genocide. The most persuasive reason for the pogrom is that Pharaoh has received a

warning that a future leader will be born among the Hebrews, and he wants to prevent that leader from growing to maturity and organizing the Hebrew population to resist his rule. Since he does not know who the leader will be, he adopts the precaution of killing all the boys. Once the time predicted for the birth of the leader has expired, Pharaoh, confident that he has dealt with the threat, no longer needs to continue killing off boys and allows the decree to lapse—thus explaining why there are six hundred thousand Hebrew men around at the time of the exodus.

An obvious problem with this theory is that the Bible does not report that Pharaoh received a warning about the birth of a Hebrew liberator. But it would have been difficult for the author to devise a narrative in which Pharaoh is supplied with this information. God knows about Moses' future, of course, and could have warned Pharaoh about him. But the author does not want to impugn God for sparking a pogrom. Nor is it appealing to convey the information to Pharaoh from Egyptian sources, such as wise men, or through a dream or vision; these strategies would give too much dignity to the Egyptians and also would overshadow the call narrative in Exod 3 in which God reveals Moses' future. Faced with intractable narrative difficulties, the author portrays Pharaoh acting *as if* he was trying to kill off a future Hebrew leader while attributing a different and unconvincing motivation to his actions.[43]

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[43] Later Jewish tradition understood Pharaoh's motivation in this light, as an attempt to kill off a future leader. See Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible*, 505. The Christian tradition has a similar view. Matt 2:16, in a text that alludes back to the Moses story, reports that King Herod ordered the death of all boys under two years old in Bethlehem and its vicinity, in an attempt to kill off the future king of the Jews. Unlike the author of the Moses story, the Christian author can be explicit about Herod's motivation because the narrative dilemmas are not present: the annunciation has already occurred, so the Magi's report to Herod does not steal its thunder, and Herod is not dignified by his knowledge of the information because he extracts it by trick. For a contrasting view on Pharaoh's motivation, see Childs, "The Birth of Moses," 109.

From the standpoint of political theory, the author's objective is to illustrate the difficulties associated with initiating a program of political organization. Groups that are not self-governing will exist under conditions of either dependency or slavery. In either case they will be subject to the authority of a superior power. That power is unlikely to allow them to become politically organized, for the same reasons that trouble Pharaoh: the newly organized people may behave disloyally, thus threatening the security of the dominant power, or they may seek to leave, thus depriving the dominant power of the economic advantages they offer by virtue of their presence in the land.

2. When Moses returns to Egypt charged with God's commission to rescue the Hebrews, the focus shifts away from Pharaoh's efforts to prevent the population from becoming organized and moves to the contest between the politically organized people and the state that is oppressing them.[44] Even though the outcome is foreordained, the author goes to great lengths to extend the struggle. The motif of God hardening Pharaoh's heart exploits the situation for maximum effect: the audience gets to repeat the pleasure of seeing Pharaoh humiliated and defeated, while denying Pharaoh any credit for courage or persistence. This technique undoubtedly delighted the audience in ancient times, much as it does at Passover celebrations in Jewish households today.

The prolonged nature of the struggle with Pharaoh, however, has another purpose. Pharaoh is obdurate. In spite of repeated demonstrations that Moses and Aaron possess superior supernatural powers, and despite having every reason to believe that they will

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[44] The organization of the Hebrews, as depicted by the author, is not what we would associate today with a movement for national liberation. The people themselves have virtually nothing to do with it. The author tells us that although the elders believed Moses, the people did not (Exod 6:9). Moses and Aaron have no help at all from the masses. Although the author excuses the people for their disbelief by blaming it on the cruelties they suffer at the hands of the Egyptians, the excuse rings hollow. Here, as elsewhere, the author is wary of mass political movements and distrustful of political action at the grass-roots level.

not cease to inflict harm on Egypt until they achieve their demands, Pharaoh continues to interpose obstacles to letting the Israelites go. The message is that even after a people organize politically, they are likely to encounter persistent and even escalating resistance from the established authorities who, for understandable reasons, do not want to allow other groups to grow into rivals for power.

3. Even after Pharaoh allows the Hebrews to leave, he changes his mind and sets out in pursuit of the fleeing masses. The Israelites, who are trapped between the Egyptians and the sea, lose heart and bewail the fate they see approaching. Moses, however, rescues them again by (with God's help) parting the sea and then closing it in on the pursuing chariots (Exod 14:23–31).

Like the stories of the conflict with Pharaoh in Egypt, the miracle at the Sea of Reeds would have delighted an audience who could rejoice in the victory and in the humiliation of a hated foe. But this story also has a political message. The message is that even after a people have achieved self-governance, that status is not necessarily secure. Other forces, threatened by the autonomy of the group, may seek to take it away, just as Pharaoh does with the fleeing Israelites. The text warns that the threat to reclaim domination over a newly autonomous group is far from theoretical: the Israelites were on the verge of extermination and were only rescued by a saving act of God.

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Taken together, the narratives of the oppression, the liberation, and the miracle at the Sea of Reeds emphasize that even with the benefits of group identity, a need for organization, and effective leadership, a people may face an extended struggle before achieving the goal of self-governance. This message is both an accurate description of the

challenges facing many ethnic minorities—Kurds, Tamils, Basques, Kosovars, and others come to mind in the present day—as well as a measure of the value that the author places on achieving self-governance. He tells his readers that however much the Israelites suffered in their struggles for liberation, the suffering was worthwhile in terms of the goal achieved.

Liberation

With the miracle at the Sea of Reeds, the Israelites finally achieve self-governance. Egypt no longer has any claim on them—at least as long as they stay out of Egyptian territory. Their fate, for better or worse, is in their own hands and in the hands of their God. The author marks the importance of the event by alluding to other events in Israel's national narrative in which the Israelite people achieved liberation from bondage: Jacob's escape from Laban[45] and (projecting forward) Deborah and Barak's victory over the Canaanite Sisera.[46] These allusions and references associate the liberation of the

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[45] As in the exodus story, the Jacob-Laban episode involves a period of protracted bargaining in which the guest repeatedly asks leave to depart and the host objects. As in Exod, the sojourn starts off with a long period of harmony following by a cooling due to the host's perception that the guest has become too successful (Gen 31:2). Like the Israelites of the exodus, Jacob is put to hard labor—not slavery, to be sure, but at least work for which he was not given adequate compensation (Gen 31:6–7). Like Moses, Jacob is instructed by God to take his people and leave for the promised land (Gen 31:3). Like the Israelites in Egypt, Jacob and his family flee in secrecy and haste (Gen 31:16–20). Like the Israelites, Jacob's clan despoils their host before going, thus symbolizing the finality of their departure (Gen 31:19). See G. W. Coats, "Despoiling the Egyptians," *VT* 18 (1968): 450–57. As in Exod, the host does not accept the guest's flight and sets off in pursuit (Gen 31:23) but is unable to prevent the fugitives from leaving (Gen 31:43–44). As in Exod, the hero of the Jacob story undertakes an extended detour into a wilderness—indeed, much the same territory that the Israelites encounter in their wanderings of the exodus (compare Gen 32:3 with Deut 2:1–8). As in the exodus story, Jacob finally arrives at the promised land and establishes himself along with his sons, the eponymous ancestors of the tribes who later enter the land under Joshua. For an insightful account of the parallels between the texts, see David Daube, *The Exodus Pattern in the Bible* (All Souls Studies 2; London: Faber & Faber, 1963).

[46] Here, too, the Israelites fall under the hand of a foreign power—not Egypt but rather a Canaanite group. A hero, Deborah, arises as a liberator of the oppressed people. Like Pharaoh in pursuit of the Israelites of the exodus, Sisera takes after the Israelites with an overwhelming chariot force (Judg 4:12–13). As in Exod, the chariot force is utterly defeated due to God's intervention. Judg 4:15–16 indicates that Sisera was defeated in battle, but Deborah's victory song tells another story: it was the Kishon River that carried away Sisera's chariots (Judg 5:20–21). The parallel between the Egyptian chariot forces being swept away at the

Israelites in the exodus story with other episodes in which ancestors of later inhabitants of Israel achieved the blessings of independence and self-governance.

Self-governance, however, is only one of the conditions for nationhood. In subsequent texts, the author explores the other two conditions—laws (considered in Exod) and control over territory (addressed in Josh) – which need to be establish before a people can truly claim to be a nation. Before turning to those issues, however, it is useful to examine how the author uses the events at Mount Sinai to expand on two important concepts of obligation first set forth in the Eden narrative: revelation and consent of the governed. I will address these issues in forthcoming papers.

Sea of Reeds, in Exod, and the Canaanite chariot forces being swept away by the Kishon River, in Judg, would not have been lost on the author's readers. Finally, as in the story from Judg, the liberation of the Israelites in the miracle of the sea is celebrated by a song placed in the mouth of a woman. In the case of Judg, the relevant text is the Song of Deborah (Judg 5:1–31); in the case of Exod, it is the Song of Miriam (Exod 15:21). These texts symbolize the conclusion of a process of liberation in which the Israelites overcome overwhelming forces and achieve the blessings of liberation and self-governance.