

Exodus and Memory

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Abstract

The Biblical Book of Exodus is the narrative version of the great transformation from polytheism to Biblical monotheism in the Ancient World. The interest of the story, in which ancient Egypt plays such an important and sinister role, lies not in what really happened but how, by whom, when, in which form, and for what purpose it was told in the course of millennia. The story is about the revolutionary birth of both a people and a religion. It has a political and a religious aspect and both aspects are inseparably linked. It is a story of liberation (from Egypt) and to commitment (to “Law” and covenant)—from Egyptian slavery to Divine service. It involves a great amount of violence that is both of a political nature (Egyptian oppression of the Israelites, the “plagues” against the Egyptians) and of a religious one (the massacre after the cult of the Golden Calf)—the “founding violence” that typically accompanies the birth of something radically new.

The Biblical story of the Exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt is THE story, the story of stories, arguably the greatest, in any event the most consequential story ever told—though perhaps not literally experienced—in human history. It is a story that in

its endless tellings and retellings, variations, and transformations changed and formed the human world in which we are living. Given this world-changing importance, it is only natural that scholarly attention has primarily focused on the question what really happened when the children of Israel went out of Egypt, i.e., what archaeological, epigraphic, and other evidence may tell us about its historical background. In this contribution, however, I will direct my attention in the opposite direction and not ask about what really happened, but who remembered the story, following a Latin scholastic hexameter teaching how to deal with historical sources:

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Quís, quid, ubí, quibus auxiliís, cur, quómodo, cuándo?
 Who? what? where? by what means? why? how?
 and when?¹

This is not to say that there is no historical background at all behind the story of the Exodus from Egypt and that it is futile to investigate all possible sources. On the contrary, it is quite probable that a great many historical experiences and memories lie behind and went into the Biblical story though certainly not this one gigantic and miraculous event of liberation, election, and revelation. It is only to say that the story acquired its world-changing momentum only in its reception history and whereas the historical events behind it may turn out to be rather trivial, its real importance is a question of memory rather than history (cf. Hendel 2001; see also Hendel, Chap. 5).

The theme of this story is not only (a) the origin of a people that still exists as the only ancient people that survived with its ethnic and religious identity through the fall of the Ancient World, but also, what is even more decisive, (b) the origin of monotheism that has become the prevailing religious orientation in most parts of the world. The story itself has become the model of many a story of liberation, emancipation, and salvation including its secular transformations such as Marxism and socialism (see Walzer 1985)—and even psychoanalysis if we think of the importance Sigmund Freud attached to Moses and Exodus.

In my book *Moses the Egyptian*, which I wrote in California 20 years ago, I tried to define the conceptual core of the Exodus narrative as the “Mosaic distinction” between true and false religion or true and false Gods (Assmann 1997; see also Assmann 2007, 2010). This theory has met with much criticism and I would not hold it any longer. The distinction as such, and as a defining feature of monotheism, still seems to

me irrefutable, but I would no longer call it “mosaic.”

It is true that the distinction between true and false in religion seems somehow implied in the prohibition of the worship of other gods and images, but it becomes a question of truth only later in antiquity with a certain concept of revelation. The Torah at Mt Sinai is not “revealed” but simply “given” and its power does not rest on its truth but on God’s power and authority that has delivered Israel from Egyptian bondage. Here, Hobbes is right who stated that *auctoritas non veritas facit legem*. In its aspect of law, the torah is not about true and false, but about right and wrong.

The story of the Exodus draws several distinctions that have nothing to do with true and false. In itself it is divided in two parts: the liberation from Egyptian bondage (chs. 1–15) and the formation of the covenant on Mt Sinai (chs. 19–40). This looks like another distinction, that of liberation and binding, but the point of the narrative is that this is one and the same: liberation means binding and binding means liberation. The first part draws quite obviously the distinction between bondage and freedom, whereas the second part, the covenant, draws first the distinction between the chosen and the non-chosen, Israel and the peoples, and second, within the covenant, the distinction between friend and foe, those who love God and keep his commandments and those who don’t. Both distinctions are very firmly drawn; Israel is separated from the nations to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod 19:6), and to his friends God will show his mercy and loving-kindness up to the 1000th generation, but the sins of the second he will punish on the third and fourth generations, because God is a jealous God (Exod 20:5–6; Deut 5:9–10).

There is no question of truth and falsehood here. Decisive is the fact that the distinction between friend and foe and God’s jealousy and wrath does only work within the covenant and must be carefully distinguished from the distinction between Israel and the other peoples. The other nations are neither foes nor their gods false and nonexistent. On the contrary, they

¹ The earliest exact quote is attributed to Cicero by Aquinas, *Sum. Theol.* II-I:Q7:3; cf. Cicero, *De inv.* 1.27 [1:41].

are very existent and Israel must forswear worshipping them. What God requests of his people is faithfulness, not truth and the metaphors and models for this unprecedented concept of covenant are sonship, matrimony, and political alliance. If there is any "Mosaic distinction," it is the distinction between matrimonial faithfulness and adultery, political loyalty and apostasy, filial love and rebellion, and, in this sense, between friend and foe, love and wrath.

There is, however, one very important case where the boundary between within and without is blurred and the distinction between friend and foe is extended to the outer, however restricted, sphere. This is the concept of "Holy War." In the case of Holy War, external peoples are promoted to the rank of enemies of God and objects of his wrath. This extension, however, is very restricted and concerns only the "seven peoples" who reside in the land that God has promised to give the Israelites (Deut 7:1–6). For these peoples, the tolerance towards the other nations is suspended and the Israelites are not only allowed but bound by sacred obligation to expel and exterminate them. The rules of Holy warfare are (1) the war is waged on divine command, (2) the enemy is consecrated to God, nothing must stay alive, no bounty must be taken, and everything is to be heaped up and burned on the market place.

This concept is specific neither to Israel nor to monotheism. In one form or the other it is common in the ancient world (Sa-Moon 1989; von der Way 1992; Lang 2011). It may be characterized as "occasional monolatry" in the sense of creating a specific and more intense, even monolatrous relationship between a warlord and a specific deity. In a certain situation which reminds one of Carl Schmitt's concept of "Ernstfall," (see Schmitt 1996) a people or a king puts all his hope on one singular deity and ensures his or her support by forswearing or consecrating the bounty (*herem* in Hebrew). It is very probable that the specific form of monotheism that originated in Israel with the early prophets at the end of the eighth century BC developed out of this custom of holy warfare and occasional monolatry.

The story of Exodus as we know it is a book of the Hebrew Bible, the second book of Moses or the Pentateuch, the Jewish Torah. But it is quite evident that before its integration into the Torah, it must have led a literary life of its own, and even before its *literary* life the story will certainly have circulated in *oral tradition* as a myth.²

Taking Exodus as a myth does not mean that we are dealing here with pure fiction without any historical core. Myths may very well be based on historical experiences. The decisive property of a myth is that it is a well known and widely shared foundational story irrespective of its historical or fictional base. Golgatha is a myth, but few people doubt that a historical person by the name of Jeshua ha-Nosri has in actual fact been executed by crucifixion. The same may apply to the Exodus from Egypt of a tribe by the name of Yisrael. But this is exactly the kind of question that I would like to put in brackets. My question, again, is not what really happened but who told the story, why, when, to whom, and how?

The first allusions to the myth occur with the early prophets, Hosea, Amos, and Micah³:

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." (Hosea 11:1).

"I brought you out of Egypt and led you 40 years through the desert." (Amos 2:10).

"Did I not lead you out of Egypt and released you from serfdom and send before you Moses, Aaron and Miriam?" (Micah 6:4).

If we ask our mnemohistorical questions: who? when? why? the answers are obvious. These prophets were ardent mono-Yahwists, as I would like to call them. They were certainly not monotheists, because their core concept is loyalty, fidelity, faithfulness, and Hosea's core metaphor for this loyalty is matrimony respective to adultery. What is the point of faithfulness if

² For the textual history of Exodus cf., e.g., Schmid 1999.

³ If those Biblical scholars are right who date the Song of the Sea (Exod 15) to a very early date (ninth century BC and earlier), because of its highly archaic language, this poem should count for the oldest allusion to the Exodus myth.

there are no other gods? What is the reproach of adultery if there are no other men with whom to betray the bridegroom or husband? Hosea's concept of loyalty presupposes a world full of other gods with whom Israel is all too prone to commit adultery. Another image is the sonship of Israel and it is in this context that the Exodus myth is alluded to: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." (Hos 11:1)⁴

What we may retain from this first allusion to the Exodus myth is the idea of a very close and intimate relationship between God and Israel, based on an act of salvation (from Egyptian bondage) and election (out of other nations and tribes). The prophets preach what one could call a "monotheism of faithfulness," acknowledging the existence of other gods but demanding exclusive and absolute loyalty to one specific god who proved himself the savior and liberator from Egyptian bondage. The prophets want to remind Israel, especially the Northern Kingdom, of this singular relationship.

When? This is the decisive question: in a time of utmost danger and affliction by the hand of the Assyrians. The prophets foresaw and witnessed the fall of the Northern Kingdom. If there ever was an "Ernstfall" in the Schmittian sense, it was now, at the end of the eighth century BC. It was the hour of decision and of "occasional monolatry": to put all one's hope on the One god able to help, to save, to liberate.

We must, however, not assume that this prophetic monotheism of loyalty and faithfulness became the general religion of Ancient Israel. What we are reading in the books of the early prophets is the voice of an opposition that met with strong rejection and even persecution (see Smith 1971). The Exodus-and-Moses narrative was the foundational story of this movement. When 100 years later the Assyrian Empire collapsed, there was a moment of hope.

On the throne at Jerusalem sat Josiah, a king who was open to the new religious ideas. He was presented a book that turned up in the course of restoration work in the temple and that is commonly identified with the first version of Deuteronomy (2 Kg 22–23). This book gives the new idea of a monotheism of faithfulness the form of a political treaty which the authors adapted from Assyrian loyalty oaths and vassal treaties.⁵ It is the same politicized concept of the ancient idea of faithfulness and love between Yahweh and Israel that we meet with in the Book of Exodus. The treaty or "covenant" is no longer a metaphor, such as matrimony or sonship, but the real thing. The whole system of political relations, between the gods and the king, the king and the subjects, the king and his vassals, is now transformed into the religious system of the monotheism of faithfulness and the one relation of god and people, i.e., the liberating god and the liberated people.

These political treaties are frequently based on a historical recapitulation that found the actual alliance in a friendly past (Baltzer 1964). The Exodus myth fulfills this function of historical frame. The various stipulations, commandments, and prohibitions that form the body of the treaty receive their meaning from the story of liberation from Egyptian bondage. Against the background of this story, the covenant appears as an instrument of freedom.

A political alliance between a god and a people is an absolutely new, unheard of, and unprecedented concept. As such, it requires a specific amount of historical motivation and explanation. This is the reason **why** the story is told. As stressed above, we are dealing here not with just "a" story, but with "THE" story, the foundation of the covenant that is the foundation of the people of Israel and of Jewish and Christian religion.

The revolutionary concept of the covenant between the people and God implies a triple

⁴ Both images, by the way, come from the Egyptian and Babylonian imagery of sacred kingship. In Egypt, Pharaoh is held to be the son of god and in Babylonia, the king is wedded to the divine world by a *hieros gamos*.

⁵ See Otto 1999; Steymans 1995. King Manasseh must have been among the vassals who swore loyalty to Esarhaddon, see Steymans 2006; Otto 2007: 119.

process of theologization: (1) the theologization of the *political* concept of alliance, (2) the transformation of a *secular* law code into *ius divinum*—the torah—and of (3) *human* history into sacred history.⁶ Therefore, the torah has these three aspects and functions: of a law code, a treaty, and sacred historiography.

In Deuteronomy, the Exodus narrative functions only as a frame. The main theme of the book is the law of the covenant. It is, however, highly probable that at the same time, in the second half of the seventh century BC, there existed also an early literary version of the Exodus narrative. At the beginning of the sixth century, the catastrophe of the Northern Kingdom repeated itself with respect to the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Jerusalem was conquered, the temple destroyed, and the elite deported into exile. This time, however, they were able to take with them a body of literature, a codification of their sacred traditions which allowed them to survive 50 and more years of Babylonian exile. It is during this time that the new religion, the monotheism of faithfulness, became the dominating belief and practice.⁷

When the exiles returned to Jerusalem, they brought with them their new code of religious beliefs and practices, which was also a criterion of identity and belonging. Being a Jew and belonging to Israel as the people of God was now defined by observance of the Law. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah report the conflicts

that arose with the population that remained in the land and had in ignorance of this new code of Jewishness adopted Canaanite customs, formed mixed marriages, and begot Jewish-Canaanite children. The Exodus narrative with its strong and exclusivist ideas of liberation, election, covenant, friend and foe now acquired a very decisive meaning, provoking a more liberal counter-narrative.

In the same way as the book of Ruth may be read as a counter-narrative to Ezra's and Nehemiah's policy of forced divorce, the narrative of the patriarchs appears as a counter-narrative to the Exodus-Moses narrative (see esp., Schmid 1999). In this myth, God also forms a covenant, but not with a people but with an individual, Abraham, to whom is promised to become the ancestor of a people. This covenant, however, is not spelled out in a body of legislation. The only criterion of belonging is circumcision as the "sign of the covenant," and, of course, Abrahamic descent. A common element of both myths of origin is allochthony, foreign provenance. Abraham is called to Canaan from Mesopotamia, Israel from Egypt. In both narratives, the motif of foreign provenance is an expression of the defining difference between the people of the covenant—in the patriarch myth a family, in the Exodus myth a nation—and the surrounding peoples. The relation of the immigrants to their host country, however, is completely different.

In the Exodus myth, the land is to be conquered and its inhabitants to be slain or expelled. In the patriarch myth, the land is to be bought, the relations between the Abraham family and the inhabitants are friendly. Whereas in the Exodus myth the Canaanite deities are abhorred, Abraham and Melchizedek, the priest-king of (Jeru)Salem, find out that their god is one and the same. The god of the patriarch myth is the universal creator of heaven and earth; the god of the Exodus myth is the very particular liberator "who brought thee out of Egypt, the house of bondage." The patriarch myth is determined by a spirit of liberalism, humanism, and pacifism; the Exodus myth shows a spirit of revolutionary radicalism

⁶ Ronald Hendel points out to me that even in the Code of Hammurapi the (secular) law receives a divine foundation since the king is shown before Shamash, the god of the sun and of justice to whom he is responsible. However, Hammurapi, not Shamash, acts as legislator here, whereas in the torah the laws are given by Yahweh, not by Moses. Hammurapi is bound to formulate his laws in conformity with the divine idea of justice, whereas Moses is bound to promulgate the divine laws in conformity with Yahweh's dictation.

⁷ Up to this point, the monotheism of faithfulness as propagated by the early prophets was just a—much contested—minority position within a generally syncretistic Israel worshipping other gods (Ba'alim and Asherôth) besides Yahweh. Only among the exile community did it achieve a position of dominance.

implying a lot of violence: first the violent treatment of the Israelites by the Egyptians; then the violent treatment of the Egyptians by God in the ten plagues; after the liberation the sometimes violent opposition that Moses and Aaron meet with the “murmuring” people; and after the formation of the covenant the extremely violent reactions of the “jealous god” against law-breakers, defectors, and disobedience.

It is easy to imagine parties behind these stories, a more radical one promoting the Exodus narrative and a more liberal one promoting the patriarch narrative.⁸

At a later stage, both narratives are brought together, making the patriarch myth the prehistory of the Exodus myth, combining both by means of the Joseph novella. This combined narrative must have led a literary life of its own before being integrated in a history of huge scope, starting after the model of the Babylonian and Egyptian king-lists with cosmogony and integrating the Babylonian story of the flood.

In the Book of Exodus, the compact myth is unfolded in a sequence of core scenes: (1) the suffering of the children of Israel in Egypt, the house of serfdom, (2) the birth, upbringing, flight, and vocation of Moses as savior, (3) the negotiations of Moses and Aaron with Pharaoh and the ten plagues by means of which God forces Pharaoh to yield, (4) the exodus proper, from the night of passover to the miracle at the sea of rushes, (5) the revelation of the Law at Mt Sinai with the crisis of the Golden Calf, and (6) instructions for the tabernacle.

We are dealing here with a careful composition, with a beginning, middle, and end. The tabernacle is a perfect ending of the story that could have ended there. This motif concludes the emergence of a new religion by describing its institution. It fulfills the promise of God to dwell among his people. This is far more decisive than what follows. In Leviticus and Numbers, the story continues with (7): the 40 years of

wandering in the wilderness, more legislation, and more crises. The severest crises are the episode of the spies leading to God’s verdict to ban the present generation from entering the Promised Land, and the scene at Shittim, the last station before entering the Promised Land, where the Israelites accept an invitation by the Moabites to join in a feast of their god Baal Peor, and 24,000 are slain by a plague in consequence of the transgression. Deuteronomy is a summarizing recapitulation on the eve of crossing the Jordan.

The last scene, (8) the conquest, is told in the book of Joshua which is cut off from the Torah proper and relegated to the second order, the prophets. The Torah ends with the death of Moses. This is highly significant. The story that begins with the suffering of the children of Israel in the hands of the Egyptians ends, not with the conquest of Canaan, but with the death of Moses, turning the sacred narrative into a biography of Moses.

Narrative structure is determined by the correspondence of beginning and end in terms of lack—lack liquidated. The lack is clearly represented by the suffering of Israel in Egypt. It is liquidated by the lifework of Moses who has turned a mass of slaves into the people of God and has instituted a covenant in form of a law, a cult, and a temple. This status the Israelites have achieved even before entering the Promised Land, and it is, therefore, independent of their dwelling there. The point of the narrative is not conquest—from destitution to possession—but liberation: from serfdom to freedom. The Bible is careful in drawing the distinction between savior and conqueror and in assigning the conqueror to the second rank.

The lasting achievement of Moses is the covenant that God has formed through his mediation with the people. This goal has been achieved on Mt Sinai, in the no-man’s-land between Egypt and Palestine, especially with the construction of the tabernacle that ensures God’s presence among his people, notably a portable sanctuary. The covenant has only to be *remembered* in the Promised Land in order to enjoy the freedom that the liberation from Egyptian serfdom has bestowed on the people.

⁸ See also Bernhard Lang, *Buch der Kriege*, 10–13; 45–47. The late date of the patriarch stories vis à vis the Exodus story follows from the scarcity of references to Abraham outside the book of Genesis.

To be and to remain free means to stay within the covenant and its stipulations. To abandon the covenant means to fall into the hands of other slaveholders and symbolically to return to Egypt.

Perhaps the most remarkable and strangest section of the Exodus narrative is on the ten plagues. In the economy of the narrative, the scene fulfills two functions: it compensates the Israelites for their suffering by punishing their tormentors, the Egyptians, and it makes clear beyond any doubt that the Israelites have not been expelled but delivered from Egypt. Nevertheless, one major plague would have fulfilled this function. Why ten of them? Their sequence, too, does not show a clear climactic logic.

1. Turning the water of the Nile into blood
2. Frogs
3. Lice
4. Insects
5. Pestilence striking livestock
6. Boils hitting man and beast
7. Hail smiting man, beast, and plants
8. Locusts
9. Darkness

The tenth plague, the killing of the firstborn, is set apart by a totally different form of narration. I shall come back to that.

The multiplication of the motif of the plague by the factor 10 has a clear mnemonic function. Like the ten commandments, it is based on the human hands with their ten fingers.⁹ However, the plagues are not grouped into two pentads (such as the 10 commandments in Jewish counting) but in three triads plus the tenth plague that stands apart. They are grouped in triads by the formula “in the morning” and other markers. The plagues are *signs* to be remembered like the ten commandments. It is not one punishing and liberating event. It is a message to be forever retained and taken to heart.

The theme of memory is central in the Book of Exodus. As a historical narrative, it is in itself

an act of memory. It remembers an event of the past that according to Biblical chronology took place in the fifteenth century BC, thus in the Late Bronze Age. As we have seen with the early prophets Amos and Hosea, this memory was already alive in the late eighth century BC, in the time of Homer, who also looked back to the late Bronze Age in telling the story of the Trojan War. The eighth and seventh centuries were generally a time of looking back across the break that the end of the Bronze Age and the first centuries of the Iron Age had brought about in the Mediterranean and Near Eastern World. In Egypt, we are dealing with a period of a very pronounced archaism. Texts were copied and architectural, sculptural, and pictorial models were carefully followed that date back to the second and third millennia BC. The Neo-Assyrian empire even turned into a digging society trying by means of systematic excavations to reach to the traces of the Sargonid Empire, the twenty-third century BC that was held to be a Golden Age and a model of cultural and political perfection (Maul 2001; Jonker 1995).

This was a time of general reorientation where the past began to matter in various conspicuous forms as a “normative past” that must by all means be remembered and followed as a source of political, legal, religious, and artistic models and norms. For Israel, the Exodus fulfilled precisely this function of a normative past—in such a degree of normativity, however, that has no parallel in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Greece. For Israel looked not only back like its neighbors, it looked also forward. The story of Exodus is a story of promise. The element of promise distinguishes the covenant from other treaties and law-codes.

Normally, a law is coupled with a sanction. The commandments and prohibitions of the covenant, however, are additionally associated with a promise. Keeping the covenant will be rewarded by the possession of, and blissful life in, the Promised Land, meaning reproduction, fertility, victory over enemies, peace, and prosperity. The treaty at Mt Sinai looks back to the Exodus from Egypt and forward to an unlimited future in the Promised Land—on the condition of staying faithfully by the covenant and its

⁹The Mishnaic collection of proverbs *Pirqê Avôt* has in its 5th section a collection of decades, three of which occur in the Exodus narrative: the ten plagues, ten commandments, and ten cases of “murmuring” of the people during their wandering in the wilderness.

613 statutes, commandments, and prohibitions. All depends on this one condition: that the covenant will not be neglected or even broken.

In order to secure the keeping of the covenant, a mnemotechnique has to be devised. This corresponds to traditional usage. Treaties have to be laid down in writing on durable material, e.g., on a silver tablet to be deposited in the temple but also—and this is decisive—to be read aloud at regular intervals before the two parties. The Assyrian king Esarhaddon devised yet another ritual of commemoration. He summoned his subjects and vassals to the capital in order to swear an oath of loyalty to his designated successor Assurbanipal. Foreseeing, however, that the change of frame, when the subjects and vassals will have returned to their various homes, will cause forgetting, Esarhaddon devised a mnemonic ritual:

Water from a sarsaru jar, she [i.e., Ishtar] gave them to drink,

A goblet she half filled with water from the sarsaru jar and gave it them saying:

You speak in your heart: Ishtar, a narrow one [i.e., watchful—or locally restricted?] is she.

But then you will go away to your towns and your districts,

You will eat bread and forget these oaths.

But as soon as you drink from this water,

You will remind yourself and you will keep this swearing-in which I have enacted on behalf of king Esarhaddon.¹⁰

The Book of Exodus contains instructions for a similar though much more elaborate ritual of commemoration. This is contained in Chapter 12 and 13 including the report of the tenth plague, the killing of the firstborn in Egypt.

And the LORD spake unto Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying, This month *shall be* unto you the beginning of months: it *shall be* the first month of the year to you. Speak ye unto all the congregation of Israel, saying, In the tenth *day* of this month they shall take to them every man a lamb, according to the house of *their* fathers, a lamb for an house: and ye shall keep it up until the fourteenth day of the same month: and the

whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill it in the evening. And they shall take of the blood, and strike *it* on the two side posts and on the upper door post of the houses, wherein they shall eat it. And they shall eat the flesh in that night, roast with fire, and unleavened bread; *and* with bitter *herbs* they shall eat it. And thus shall ye eat it; *with* your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and ye shall eat it in haste: it *is* the LORD's passover. Seven days shall ye eat unleavened bread; even the first day ye shall put away leaven out of your houses: for whosoever eateth leavened bread from the first day until the seventh day, that soul shall be cut off from Israel. And ye shall observe *the feast of* unleavened bread; for in this selfsame day have I brought your armies out of the land of Egypt: therefore shall ye observe this day in your generations by an ordinance for ever. (Exod 12:1–18, KJV, verse numbers omitted)

In the same way that the Sarsaru ritual is a ritual of drinking water that reminds the drinkers of the oath they have sworn; the Passover is a ritual of eating unleavened bread that reminds the eater of their hasty departure from Egypt when they had no time to add yeast to their dough. For the same commemorative reason, the ritual has to be performed in the family and not in the temple or synagogue, because the Israelites spent this night in their homes when the killing angel of the Lord haunted the houses of the Egyptians.

The mnemotechnique that Moses devised in order to constantly remind the people of the covenant, its various obligations, and of the story that frames and explains it, surpasses by far anything comparable in the ancient world (see Assmann 2011: 193–205). Like Esarhaddon, Moses foresees that the people will forget their obligations once they will live in the Promised Land, eat bread, and get saturated.¹¹

¹¹ Deuteronomy is especially rich in passages that bespeak the anxiety of forgetting through the change of place, e.g.: “Take heed to thyself that thou forget not the Lord thy God, so as not to keep his commands, and his judgments, and ordinances, which I command thee this day: lest when thou hast eaten and art full, and hast built goodly houses, and dwelt in them; . . . thou shouldest be exalted in heart, and forget the Lord thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” (Deut 8:11–14)

¹⁰ Quoted and translated after Otto 1999: 82.

The Book of Exodus—as well as the myth behind it—is, therefore, not only a *feat* of memory, remembering an event however decisive of the distant past. But it is also and above all the *foundation* of a memory, i.e., part and object of a mnemotechnique that frames and supports the covenant.

And thou shalt shew thy son in that day, saying, *This is done* because of that *which* the LORD did unto me when I came forth out of Egypt.⁹ And it shall be for a sign unto thee upon thine hand, and for a memorial between thine eyes, that the LORD'S law may be in thy mouth: for with a strong hand hath the LORD brought thee out of Egypt.¹⁰ Thou shalt therefore keep this ordinance in his season from year to year. (Exod 13:8–10, cf. 16)

The Exodus is THE decisive memory never to fall into oblivion, and the Book of Exodus is the codification of that memory. “Remember the Exodus” means “remember the covenant” and vice versa. To remember the Exodus and the covenant means always to remember the promise, to look into the future.

In later (medieval) times, in the diaspora, this ritual prescription has been fleshed out in great detail in form of the Seder haggadah.¹² In the Jewish tradition, the memory of the Exodus lives on in two forms: firstly as part of synagogal recitation in which weekly portions (*parashot*) from the entire Torah are read in the course of the year, and secondly in the form of an annual celebration taking place not on the synagogue but at home, with the *pater familias* (and not the Rabbi) acting as master of ceremonies. Moses is scarcely mentioned in the Seder haggadah. This makes the biggest difference between the Book of Exodus where Moses is the protagonist and the myth of Exodus as reenacted in the Seder ceremony.

The Jewish Seder, on the first night of Pesach, is the festive and liturgical realization of the commandment “Thou shalt teach your son and your son’s son”, viz., that we have been slaves in Egypt and that the Lord redeemed us from bondage with a strong hand and an outstretched arm.

It is a teach-in to remember the connection between history and covenant, law and liberation. The story must be told and the questions be asked in the “we” and “us”-key. Why do we perform these rites and obey these laws? Because we have been slaves in Egypt.

In the same way as this “we” includes every Jew in addition to those who once emigrated from Egypt 3500 years ago, the concepts of Egypt and Pharaoh extend to every form of oppression and violence where and whenever they occur. A Jew is someone who was liberated from Egypt and who is free insofar as he/she commits himself/herself to the covenant and its prescriptions. In liturgical memory, history is turned into myth, into a set of archetypal patterns with regard to which the present is made transparent so that they shine through and render the present readable. In the *New York Times* one could read some years ago:

For thousands of years, Jews have affirmed that by participating in the Passover Seder, we not only remember the Exodus, but actually relive it, bringing its transformative power into our own lives.¹³

This is an excellent definition of liturgical memory. “In every generation,” the Pesach Haggadah prescribes, “a man should look upon himself as if he came forth from Egypt” (Shire et al. 1998: 36). The Seder teaches identity through identification. It is about the transformation of history into memory, to make a certain past “our” past and to let everyone participate in or even identify with this past as “his/her” past. One could even go so far as to speak of a transformation of semantic memory, i.e., something we have learned, into episodic memory, something we have lived, albeit in the form of a ritual play, of an “as if.”

The function of the Seder is to provide a frame for remembering the Exodus, not only by liturgical recitation of the written texts of the Haggadah, but also and above all by improvised “conversational remembering” (Middleton 1997). Frames, as Erving Goffman has shown, organize

¹² I am using the Hebrew-German edition *Die Pessach Haggada* (Shire et al. 1998). Translations mine.

¹³ Ad of the journal *Tikkun* in *New York Times* of March 22, 2002.

our everyday life (Goffman 1974). Thus, they relieve us from reflection and enable spontaneous action. With the Seder, we move on to the level of non-everyday behavior. This shift from an everyday frame to a festive and an exceptional one is explicitly marked and foregrounded in the Haggadah, the script for the feast. The arrangements have to be so exceptional that they strike the minds of the uninitiated, and the youngest child has to ask the question that will trigger the chain of explanations and commemorations: "Why is this night so different from all other nights?" (Shire et al. 1998: 14). This question addresses precisely the point of framing; it is the question of somebody who lacks the cue: "What is going on here?" The Seder starts with a festive enactment of a frameshift.

Difference is a key word in the Seder ceremony. God is praised for having made a difference: between this night and all other nights, "between the sacred and the profane, between light and darkness, between Shabbat and the other 6 days of the weeks, and between Jews and Gentiles" (Shire et al. 1998: 12)—and between serfdom (*avodah*) and freedom (*herût*), which is the basic theme of the story to be remembered.¹⁴

All these differences are to be made understandable and palpable through the one difference which is sensually staged and brought to the forefront by the striking exceptionality and unfamiliarity of the arrangements and actions, of "what is going on." The children, the uninitiated, are provoked to ask, and the answers given serve the function of an initiation, of conveying and acquiring a new identity. This connection between question, answer, and identity is made clear by the "Midrash of the four sons" (Shire et al. 1998: 18). At several places in the Torah, there occurs the prescription of what to answer when one's son asks about the meaning of the Law or one particular law. These passages are collected in this Midrash

and attributed to four types of sons: the wise one, the wicked one, the simpleton, and the one who does not know how to ask.

The wise one—what does he say? "What are the testimonies, and the statutes and the laws that the LORD our God commanded you?" (Deuteronomy 6,20). So you tell him about the laws of Pesach, that one may not eat anything whatsoever after the Pesach sacrifice.

The wicked one—what does he say? "What is this service to you?" (Exodus 12,26). "To you", and not to him. And since he excluded himself from the people at large, he denies the foundation of our faith. So you blunt his teeth and tell him, "It is because of this that the LORD acted for me when I came forth out of Egypt" (Exodus 13:8). "For me", and not for him; had he been there, he would not have been redeemed.

The simple son—what does he say? "What is this?" (Exodus 13:14). "Tell him, 'with a strong hand God took us out from Egypt, from the house of slavery'" (ibid.).

As for the one who does not know how to ask, you must begin for him, as it is written "and thou shalt tell thy son in that day, saying: It is because of this that the LORD acted for me when I came forth out of Egypt" (Exodus 13:8).

The Midrash of the four sons is a mini-drama about memory, history, and identity. The identity question is expressed by the play with the personal pronouns: I and me, us and our, you and he. The entire ceremony is about telling the story. This is history as it is remembered and told, not as it might have happened. The Seder provides a frame for telling and explaining the story. The important questions to ask are pretty much the same as those codified in the Latin scholastic hexameter quoted above:

Quis, quid, ubi, quibus auxiliis, cur, quomodo, cuándo?

Who? what? where? by what means? why? how? and when?

Who tells the story? The father and the adult participants who play the role of the emigrants from Egypt. To whom? To the children who have to learn to identify with the group of the liberated slaves and to say "we" and "us" with respect to the ancient story. "Why?" Because it is this story that tells us who we are. When? On the occasion of the annual return of the time when this event is believed to have happened, the spring time of the

¹⁴ *Herût* "freedom" is not a Biblical term. The Bible uses the word *avodah* "service" both for the Egyptian serfdom and for the service of God. It opposes the liberating service of God and the oppressive service of Pharaoh.

offering of the first fruits. By which means, in which form? In the form of a “symposium” (the Haggadah prescribes or recommends to eat and drink in “reclining posture”, i.e., in Greek and Roman style: Shire et al. 1998: 12) and in a combination of liturgical and conversational remembering.

Even the recital of the ten plagues forms part of the Seder liturgy, spilling some drops of wine with every mention of a plague (Shire et al. 1998: 27):

1. blood (*dam*)
2. frogs (*tz^efardea^c*)
3. lice (*kinnîm*)
4. insects (*‘arov*)
5. pestilence (*dævæ*r)
6. boils (*sh^ehîn*)
7. hail (*barad*)
8. locusts (*arbæh*)
9. darkness (*hôshek*)
10. killing the firstborn (*makkat b^ekôrot*)

Trauma and triumph go together in liturgical memory. The triumph culminates in the crossing of the Red Sea where the persecuting Egyptians are drowned. This is the decisive act of liberation. The keyword is *b^e-yad hazaqah* “with strong arm.” Again and again this formula recurs in the liturgy. Its theological meaning is to represent the liberation as God’s—and not Moses’—work, as a sign of God’s power (Hoffmeier 1997).

Liturgical memory—in the same way as cultural memory—provides a society with a connective structure working both in the social and temporal dimensions. In the social dimension, it works as a social cement binding human beings to fellow human beings and creates a common space of experience, expectation, and action that provides trust, confidence, and orientation. In the temporal dimension, cultural connectivity works as a principle of continuity linking past, present, and future, in that it creates meaning, memory, and expectation by integrating the images and stories of the past into an ever-progressing present. This aspect is the basis of myths and historical narratives such as the Exodus from Egypt.

Both aspects, the normative/social and the narrative/temporal one—the aspect of instruction and the aspect of narration—consolidate belonging or identity, enable an individual to say “we.”

In the Seder feast, however, the past is not only remembered but performed. The celebration does not scrupulously follow a fixed model, a ritual prescription, but it re-presents or “presentifies,” in the sense of making present, by a form of actual reliving. The recitation of the Haggadah is complemented by all kinds of improvised contributions about “our” sufferings in Egypt and the delights of liberation.

The themes of promise and future are also very prominent in the Seder liturgy that closes with the proclamation *le-shanah ha-ba’ah bi-yerushalayim* “next year in Jerusalem!” (Shire et al. 1998: 52)—the expression of hope founded on memory. Only he who remembers is able to look with confidence into the future.

This is the utopian aspect of the Exodus narrative. Like so many utopian texts, Exodus starts with a departure, with leaving home, setting out for an unknown goal in order to finally and in most cases unexpectedly arrive at an island where ideal conditions prevail. In Bacon’s *Nova Atlantis* which is typical of the genre in this respect, the newcomers have to undergo a moral transformation in order to be accepted into the new community and its ideal constitution and institutions. If we apply this pattern to the Exodus, the parallels but also the differences become obvious. The departure is not for the absolutely unknown, there is a clearly indicated goal, first Mt Sinai and then Canaan. Nevertheless, there is a departure, there is an ideal constitution—to be received at Mt Sinai—and there is the land of milk and honey, a clear model of Cockaigne, the Schlaraffenland. The Book of Exodus, to be sure, is not meant as a utopia, such as, e.g., Plato’s *nomoi*. The constitution as spelled out in the *saefaer* ha-berîit is to be real, and not ideal, is to be lived and not just aspired to. The Promised Land is not some fictional island of bliss but a very real geographic unit. Still, there is a utopian element in the book and the myth of Exodus that is responsible for its extraordinary radiance and

its being so much alive inside and outside of Judaism.

The puritans in the early seventeenth century, the time when Francis Bacon wrote *Nova Atlantis*, crossed the Atlantic Ocean and set out for America as a New Promised Land, identifying with the children of Israel going out of Egypt. This was an act of memory as much as it was a revolutionary step forward into something new, a new society, a new constitution, a new attempt at becoming the people of God and performing the covenant as laid down in the Bible. The same may be said of the Puritan revolution, the civil wars, and Oliver Cromwell's protectorate from 1642 to 1659.

Exodus—as a myth, a book, and a symbol—refers to that revolutionary turn in the history of a large part of mankind we are used to describe as the turn from polytheism to monotheism. The Exodus from Egypt is the narrative articulation of this act of emancipation, disembedding and distancing of a much larger scope. It is the move from what I have proposed to call “cosmotheism” (Assmann 1993), where the divine is conceived of and worshipped as immanent in nature—leading ultimately to the idea that nature or cosmos is God, the visible manifestation of a hidden deity—to a religion that draws a categorical distinction between God and the world, defining god as transcendent in the sense of strict extra-mundaneity.

The Exodus of the children of Israel from Egypt stands for the emancipation of humanity from its embeddedness in the world, its political, natural, and cultural powers, and for the emancipation of the divine from mundane immanence. Cosmotheism seems to me to be a far more adequate term than polytheism. Most “pagan” religions may be characterized as “cosmogonic monotheism”: they recognize *one* God as origin of the world including heaven and earth, gods and men, and emphasize the oneness of god and the unity of the world. In antiquity, this basic religious conviction led to the idea of a supreme being that is both “hypercosmic” and “cosmic,” transcendent and immanent, transcendent in its oneness and immanent in its differentiated multiplicity. The world that turned monotheistic with the Christianization of the Roman Empire had

already come to emphasize the unity of god. The turn or exodus was not from polytheism but from cosmotheism to monotheism.

Seen in this light, we realize that this exodus has never fully been completed. There have always been relapses, counter-movements in the direction, not of poly- but of cosmotheism. The most powerful of these cosmotheistic trends is neo-platonism in its various branches such as hermeticism and all kinds of mystic and esoteric traditions including Kabbalah. The persisting presence of cosmotheism in Western tradition made it necessary to renew the power and pathos of Exodus in several waves of iconoclasm, emancipation, and even emigration, starting with the Reformation, especially in its extreme form of Calvinism and Puritanism, and Enlightenment, especially in its pronounced anti-clericalism (*écrasez l'infame*). It was this indefeatable, at times latent, at times manifest, continuity of cosmotheism that kept the idea, the myth, the book, and the symbol of Exodus alive.

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For editing this manuscript I am indebted to Thomas Schabert for English editing to Anton Melnar, for reading the manuscript and for valuable comments I would like to thank Friedrich Reuter (Joh. Salzburg), Arjo Goldwasser (Hebrew University Jerusalem), Christoph Jordan (GREA), Malcom H. Wilson, and Et. Zohar (Hebrew Union College-Jewish Theological Seminary in New York), and Hans-Dieter Schmitt (Hebrew University of Jerusalem), and who were helpful with the Bible texts and citations.

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