MOSES:  
THE SERVANT  
OF YAHWEH

? Born  
c. 1280 B.C. Led Exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt  
c. 1240 B.C. Died

The history of the ancient Hebrews crisscrossed the histories of the other peoples of the ancient Near East throughout antiquity. The patriarch Abraham came from the Sumerian city of Ur. The “promised land” to which he went was that of the Canaanites, a people clearly documented in the nonbiblical sources of the second millennium B.C. Abraham and his people contended with such historical nations as the Amorites, the Hittites, the Assyrians, and the Philistines. Jacob served Laban “the Aramean” and married his daughters Leah and Rachel. Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt by his jealous brothers but found favor with the pharaoh, who proclaimed, “Behold, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.”

Yet in none of the records of these other historical peoples is there any reference to the ancient Hebrews, to any of their leaders’ names, or to any of the events so graphically depicted in the opening books of the Old Testament—not a single contemporary document, not a stele nor a carving, not even a scribbled reference on a dusty shard. There is no Egyptian record of a pharaoh who raised Joseph up nor of a successor “which knew not Joseph,” neither a reference to any Egyptian vizier or court figure whose name might possibly have been Joseph nor a single Egyptian reference to the Hebrew tribes descended from Joseph’s brothers, who came at his behest to dwell in the land of Goshen.

But despite the maddening silence of the nonbiblical sources, the biblical history of the early Hebrews remains a history. It moves
through time, generation after generation; events have the ring of authenticity about them, the “thicknes" and stubborn uniqueness of genuine historical events; and the characters, both major and minor, have the solid individuality of historical personalities. The history of these people and events is, in the phrase of Martin Buber, a “saga history," a history that is partially visible and susceptible to modern historical analysis, but partially hidden in what Abram Leon Sachar calls “the grey morning of folk-memory and fable."2

This is the case not only with the patriarchs but also with the great hero figure who stands between the patriarchs and historical Israel: Moses, the founder of the Hebrew nation. The events surrounding the figure and the accomplishments of Moses are the watershed of Hebrew history, of the religion of Judaism, and of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. To quote Martin Buber again, “The meeting of a people with events so enormous that it cannot ascribe them to its own plans and their realisation, but must perceive in them deeds performed by heavenly powers, is of the genuine substance of history."3

3Buber, Moses, p. 16.
The Moses of Exodus

The only source for the story of Moses and the enormous events surrounding him is the Old Testament book of Exodus. For Moses, like the patriarchs before him, is not mentioned in any nonbiblical source or record. The account in Exodus begins with that nameless Egyptian pharaoh “which knew not Joseph,” and with a drastic change in the fortunes of those Hebrews who had come to Egypt at Joseph’s invitation. No longer did they enjoy “the fat of the land.” This pharaoh was fearful of their numbers and enslaved them to build “store cities” for him, Pithom and Ramses. But the Hebrews increased even in affliction until the pharaoh decreed that every male Hebrew baby be cast into the Nile; daughters were to be spared. It was at this crucial juncture of events that Moses was born, to parents both of whom were of the house of Levi. After three months, when she could hide him no longer, his mother laid the infant in a basket of bulrushes daubed with bitumen and pitch, and placed it in the reeds at the river’s edge. Here the baby was discovered by the pharaoh’s daughter, taken by her, given the name Moses, and raised in her household as her own son.

One day, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and looked on their burdens; and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his people. He looked this way and that, and seeing no one he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. When he went out the next day, behold, two Hebrews were struggling together; and he said to the man that did the wrong, “Why do you strike your fellow?” He answered, “Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” Then Moses was afraid, and thought, “Surely the thing is known.” When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses.

But Moses fled from Pharaoh, and stayed in the land of Mid’ian; and he sat down by a well. Now the priest of Mid’ian had seven daughters; and they came and drew water, and filled the troughs to water their father’s flock. The shepherds came and drove them away; but Moses stood up and helped them, and watered their flock. When they came to their father Reu’el, he said, “How is it that you have come so soon today?” They said, “An Egyptian delivered us out of the hand of the shepherds, and even drew water for us and watered the flock.” He said to his daughters, “And where is he? Why have you left the man? Call him, that he may eat bread.” And Moses was content to dwell with the man, and he gave Moses his daughter Zippo’rah. . . .

Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Mid’ian; and he led his flock to the west side of the wilder-
ness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush; and he looked, and lo, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, “I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt.” When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here am I.” Then he said, “Do not come near; put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” And he said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, “I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Per’izzites, the Hivites, and the Jeb’usites. And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt.”

At first Moses was reluctant to accept God’s mission: he was neither worthy nor eloquent enough. But God convinced him by miracles, by the promise of his own divine support, and commanded Moses’ brother Aaron to go with him. So Moses and his family and his brother Aaron returned to Egypt and to yet another pharaoh and put God’s command to him. But not only did the pharaoh refuse to let the enslaved Hebrews go, he increased their misery: “Let heavier work be laid upon the men that they may labor at it and pay no regard to bying words” (5:9).

Once more Moses and Aaron went to the pharaoh. Once more the pharaoh contemptuously refused. And God brought upon the land a series of plagues, including a plague of frogs, one of gnats and flies, and a plague that killed the Egyptians’ flocks and herds but spared those of the Hebrews. Each time the pharaoh would promise to comply, only to recant and be set upon by yet another plague—hail and locusts and a “thick darkness.” At last God brought the most terrible plague of all: “The Lord slew all the first-born in the land of Egypt, both the first-born of man and the first-born of cattle” (13:15). Again the children of Israel were spared, and the ceremony of Passover thereupon established, for the vengeful Lord “passed over” their houses with the doorposts marked with the blood of sacrificial lambs. Among the Egyptian dead was the pharaoh’s own first-born son. He was at last ready to let the Israelites go. He summoned Moses and Aaron and said, “Rise up, go forth from among my people, both you and the people of Israel” (12:31).
When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, "Lest the people repent when they see war, and return to Egypt." But God led the people round by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea.

And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night; the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. And the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went in after them into the midst of the sea, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen. And in the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and of cloud looked down upon the host of the Egyptians, and discomfited the host of the Egyptians, clogging their chariot wheels so that they drove heavily; and the Egyptians said, "Let us flee from before Israel, for the Lord fights for them against the Egyptians."

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots, and upon their horsemen." So Moses stretched forth his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its wonted flow when the morning appeared; and the Egyptians fled into it, and the Lord routed the Egyptians in the midst of the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen and all the host of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not so much as one of them remained. But the people of Israel walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left.

Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore. And Israel saw the great work which the Lord did against the Egyptians, and the people feared the Lord; and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.

Once across the Red Sea and in the wilderness of Sinai, the people suffered hunger and thirst. In spite of God's gifts of manna from heaven, of flights of quail and

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4The land of the Philistines was in Canaan, along the eastern Mediterranean from Egypt to Ekron. [All notes are the editor's unless identified otherwise.]
bitter springs that he changed to sweet water, the people “murmured against Moses” and against God. They had to fight against the Amalekites, and Moses struggled to develop among them a sense of nationhood and a government.

On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone forth out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai . . . and there Israel encamped before the mountain. And Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him out of the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.”

So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the Lord had commanded him. And all the people answered together and said, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do.” And Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord. And the Lord said to Moses, “Lo, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak to you, and may also believe you for ever.” . . .

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God; and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. And Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and the smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain quaked greatly. And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. And the Lord came down upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain; and the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up . . .

And God spoke all these words, saying,

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

“You shall have no other gods before me.

“You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing
steady love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.

“You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

“Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

“Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you.

“You shall not kill.

“You shall not commit adultery.

“You shall not steal.

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

“You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.”

Now when all the people perceived the thunderings and the lightnings and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled; and they stood afar off, and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will hear; but let not God speak to us, lest we die.” And Moses said to the people, “Do not fear; for God has come to prove you, and that the fear of him may be before your eyes, that you may not sin.”

Moses between Myth and History

ERNEST RENAN

Through the long historical development of Judaism and of Christian history, the main line of those traditions tended to accept without serious question the absolute truth of the biblical narrative and raised no questions about the historicity of biblical people and events. It was only in the age of the Enlightenment that such questions began to be raised. In the late seventeenth century, Spinoza had cast doubt on the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, and advocated a rational and historical interpretation of the Bible. In the course of the late eighteenth century and especially the nineteenth, the notion of the historical interpretation of the Bible became commonly accepted, prompted in
part by the nineteenth-century enthusiasm for the new “scientific” historiography and in part by the popularity of Near Eastern archaeology. But even as these trends developed, religious fundamentalism had reached an almost frantic pitch; and one of its cardinal principles was biblical literalism. At the center of the resulting whirlwind of controversy stood the French historian Ernest Renan (1823–1892).

As a young man, Renan had trained for the priesthood, but he left his training and the Catholic church in 1845 over the question of the incompatibility of the church’s teaching with modern historical criticism. Renan’s dedication to historical criticism, in particular as it applied to the history of religion, dated from this time. He went on to become a distinguished Semitic scholar and professor of Hebrew Studies at the Collège de France and eventually a member of the French Academy. He also became one of the most controversial public figures of his time. In 1863 he wrote his most famous book, a massive Life of Jesus. It was a thoroughgoing piece of rational skepticism in which he interpreted Jesus as “an incomparable man,” but a man nevertheless. The book and the author were vilified by orthodox critics both Catholic and Protestant, and both the book and Renan became celebrated, even notorious.

In the next twenty years, Renan returned to his Semitic studies and began work on his most important book, a five-volume History of the People of Israel. By this time he had somewhat tempered the sharp-edged rationalism that had characterized his Life of Jesus. He saw instead the process of Hebrew history evolving as a demonstration of the human capacity for faith. He was, in short, a scholar yearning to believe, to find a way for the historian to accept the myth and folklore that stood as so much of the history of the ancient Hebrews. One of his critics has characterized his History of the People of Israel as “providing less a history than a half imaginative reconstruction of society and religion before the historical period.” Renan himself wrote in the preface of the book, “We do not need to know, in histories of this kind, how things happened; it is sufficient for us to know how they might have happened” (p. xvii).

We turn now to his account in History of the People of Israel of Moses and his age.

Moses is completely buried by the legends which have grown up over him, and though he very probably existed, it is impossible to speak of him as we do of other deified or transformed men. His name appears to be Egyptian. Mosé is probably the name of Ahmos, Amosis, shortened at the beginning. According to the prevalent tradition, Moses was a Levi, and . . . this name probably was used to designate the Egyptians whose services were required for the worship and who followed Israel into the desert. The name of Aharon, perhaps, is derived in a similar way. Moses appears to us at first as having been

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The fact of his killing an Egyptian in a moment of instinctive indignation has nothing improbable about it. His relations with the Arab Midianites, a species of Hebrews not reduced to servitude by Egypt, and with the Idumean Kenites, especially with a certain Ieter or Jethro, whose daughter he is said to have married, also seem to have a semi-historical character. With regard to whether he was really the leader of the revolt and the guide of fugitive Israel, it is unquestionably quite possible that an Egyptian functionary of mixed race, told to keep watch over his brethren, may have . . . been the author of the deliverance. But it is also possible that all these narratives of the Exodus, into which fable has penetrated so deeply, may be even more mythical than is generally supposed, and that the only fact which can be depended upon out of them all is the departure from Egypt of Israel and its entry into the peninsula of Sinai.

It does not seem as if the Israelites and their companions had any other object in view, before they left Pa-Rameses, except to escape the tyranny of Pharaoh . . .

Having escaped from what they always called “the house of bondage,” the people of Israel found themselves face to face with what is perhaps the most inhospitable desert under heaven . . .

The narratives of the incidents which occurred during this march, which afterwards became the basis of a religion, or, to speak more correctly, of universal religion, all of them attribute the principal part to Mosé. I have already pointed out that this theory can only be accepted with considerable reserve, but it is probable, nevertheless, that the activity of the semi-Egyptian Hebrew, who seems to have had much to do with the preparations for the exodus, was again manifested during the marches through the desert. Another Levite, named Ahron, or Aharon (an Egyptian name, perhaps), stands out side by side with him, as well as a woman named Miriam, who, according to the legend, were his brother and sister. Some narratives attached more importance to these persons than do the versions which have come down to us.

There is perhaps some foundation for what we are told as to the relations which Moses established with the tribes to the east of Egypt, and these relations would have been useful to him in the difficult task which he had assumed. But one hesitates about speaking of the shadows dimly outlined in the darkness of profound night as real personages . . .

The voyage of Israel through the desert was a passage, not a sojourn; but the impression which this short period of miserable existance left upon the minds of the people was very deep. All the circumstances, of which a more or less distorted recollection was preserved, were regarded as sacramental, and the theocratic caste afterwards moulded them to the purposes of its religious policy. The
slightest incidents were magnified, and the manna and the quails were adduced as proofs that the people had been miraculously fed, and that God himself had been their guide, and had marched before them in the way. Upon these vast solitary plains, where the atmosphere is so luminous, the presence of a tribe can be detected from afar by the smoke which ascends straight up towards the sky. Night time is often chosen for a march, and in that case a lighted lantern, fastened on to the end of a long pole, is often used as a rallying sign. This column, invisible by day, luminous by night, was the very God of Israel, guiding his people through these solitudes. This good genius of the desert had shown such a special affection for Israel that the people came to invoke him in a quite personal way. The God who had brought Israel out of Egypt and enabled them to live in “the land of thirst” was not the absolute Elohim, the great God, King, and Providence of the whole universe. He was a god who had a special affection for Israel, who had bought them as merchandise. How far we are here from the ancient patriarchal God, just and universal! The new god of whom I am speaking is in the highest degree partial. His providence has only one aim, and that is to watch over Israel. He is not as yet the god of a nation, for a nation is the produce of the marriage of a group of men with some land, and Israel has no land; but he is the god of a tribe in every sense of the word. . . .

A protecting god needs a proper name, for the protecting god is a person; he becomes identified with those whom he protects. . . .

By a process of ideas which it is impossible now to follow out, the protecting god of Israel was called Jahveh. Each step towards the formation of the national idea was, it will be seen, accompanied by a degradation in the theology of Israel. The national idea was in favour of a god who would think only of the nation, who in the interests of the nation would be cruel, unjust, and hostile to the whole human race. Jahvéism commenced, to all intents and purposes, the day that Israel became egotistical as a nation principle; and it grew with the nation, becoming an obliteration of the sublime and true idea of the primitive Elohim. Fortunately there was in the genius of Israel something superior to national prejudices. The old Elohim was never to die; it was to survive Jahvéism, or rather to assimilate it. . . .

The people clamoured for Mnévis and Hathor. It is doubtful whether Mosé was so much opposed to this idolatrous worship as was afterwards asserted, for we find that a brazen serpent said to have

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6Renan is here making a distinction that other scholars make too between Yahweh, the God of Moses, and El or Elohim, the earlier God of the patriarchs.
been set up by him was in existence until the reign of Hezekiah, who broke it in pieces.

At a later date it was asserted that Moses had lifted up and placed upon a pole, as a talisman against the bite of the serpents, this mysterious Nehustan. Both versions may be true, for it is not at all impossible that Moses may have been, in some ways, one of those sorcerers whom Egypt possessed, or who came from the banks of the Euphrates. No alterations are too great to have taken place after the lapse of five or six centuries, when a religious genius as powerful as that of the Hebrews is working upon an oral tradition which is above all things non-resistant and susceptible of any degree of transformation.

Horeb, or Sinai, from the most remote antiquity, was the object of religious worship on the part of the people of Hebrew or of Arab origin who roamed about those parts. They made pilgrimages there. The Semites of Egypt went there frequently to offer up sacrifices. They believed that their god resided there. The holy mountain spread terror a long way around it. It was called par excellence "the mountain of Elohim," or "the mountain of God." It was admitted that the Elohim resided on its summits, snowy or shining, limpid as crystal or gloomy and enveloped with a terrible covering of mist.

Sinai was therefore above all a mountain of terror. Certain spots were considered holy, and one could not walk on them without taking off one's shoes. The general belief was that one could not see the god and live. Even his presence killed. The common people could not approach him.

Even those who enjoyed the honour of conversing with him face to face expiated that honour by death. It was related that one day, in Horeb, Moses wished to see the glory of this terrible god. The god took him, placed him in the cleft of a rock, made him stand up, covered him with his large open hand, and passed by. Then he withdrew his hand so that Moses saw his back parts. Had Moses seen his face he would have died.

The god of Sinai, it will be seen, was a god of lightning. His theophanies took place in the storm, in the midst of the flashing of lightning. The ancient Iahveh had already perhaps possessed some of these characteristics. Iahveh besides was decidedly beginning to play the part of the tutelary god of Israel, and was replacing the old Elohim in the imagination of the people. It was therefore only natural that they should identify Iahveh with the god through whose lands they were passing and whose terrible influence they thought that they felt.

What really happened when, from the camp of Rephidim, the tribe entered the rocky defiles of the Horeb? Impossible to say.

Two things only can be perceived. The first is that from the commencement of the Sinaitic epoch it became the custom to regard
Iahveh as appearing in the form of a vision of flame. For clothing he had a thick cloud, for voice the thunder. In the storm he rode upon the wind and made the clouds his chariot. . . .

A second well-ascertained fact, not less remarkable, is that the Iahveh of the Hebrews, when definitely constituted, lived in Sinai, as Jupiter and the Grecian gods lived in Olympus. His dwelling was on the mountain top, especially when the summit was hidden from sight by heavy clouds. From thence he burst forth with horrible sounds, lightning, flames of fire, and thunder. The fundamental image of the Hebrew religion and poetry is the theophany of Iahveh appearing like an aurora borealis to judge the world. . . .

Sinai became therefore the Olympus of Israel, the place from whence all the luminous apparitions of Iahveh issued. It was only natural that when they desired a Thora from Iahveh they made him reveal it on Mount Sinai or Mount Horeb. At this remote epoch, that is to say when Israel went up to the mountain of God, did the people think that they heard some lesson? Did Moses take advantage of the circumstance to inculcate certain precepts? The little influence exercised by those precepts in the daily life of Israel, during the six or seven hundred years which followed, favours the belief that they never existed. It appears probable at least that the people left the holy mountain filled with terror and persuaded that a powerful god inhabited its peaks. There were no doubt sacrifices offered and altars erected. There was, above all, a startling recollection. The people had really seen the god of the holy mountain.

**Moses and the Modern World**

**DANIEL JEREMY SILVER**

In the foregoing selection we sampled the nineteenth-century historian Ernest Renan's historical scholarship moving to accept the myth and folklore "that stood as so much of the history of the ancient Hebrews" and of Moses. The debate that Moses was the leader of the biblical Hebrews, was exiled in Sinai for forty years, and received the Ten Commandments from God has continued into the twentieth century. The following selection is from Images of Moses, by Daniel Jeremy Silver. A rabbi's son who was himself a rabbi and a distinguished scholar of Hebrew studies, Silver examines, as one reviewer of the book states it, "the diverse literary, artistic, pietistic, and historical treatment of the biblical Moses."7 Silver

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goes on to point out that the successive treatments of Moses reflect the values and the ethnic/political strategies of the various authors.

The past is irretrievable, but ideas and artifacts live on as constitutive elements in civilization. Moses is dead but an ideal of Moses lives. Ahad Ha-Am\(^8\) says, in effect, Turn away from what cannot be accomplished. It doesn’t matter that Jews can’t resurrect Moses; what matters is that they understand and respond to the Moses who lives in the hearts of the Jewish people.

The modern spirit is existential. It researches the dead Moses but cares about the living Moses. History cannot establish meaning—the meaning is in the moment, existentialism insists—but modern thought has used the discipline of history quite effectively to free itself from the grip of the past. Medieval thought valued order, assumed a static universe governed by eternal truths, and consecrated the prerogatives of class and status as elemental parts of God’s design. Modernists used history to prove that God’s design is dynamic, not static, and that all claims to privilege based on the authority of the tradition have no foundation in God’s design.

When Jews were allowed to enter the modern world they willingly subjected their tradition to historical analysis. History was the basic discipline of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment. The early Haskalah concentrated on non-Biblical subjects like the synagogue, the sermon, and the liturgy, issues which were being debated between traditionalists and reformers. But it was not long before the Bible was subjected to similar analyses. The rabbis had tended to treat Judaism as a conclusion, a single tradition since Sinai. Haskalah saw Judaism as process. The more historical research was pursued the more apparent it became that Judaism was and is the organic, therefore ever-changing, religious civilization of the Jewish people.

As long as Jews lived in cultures dominated by the Muslim and Christian traditions, critical theories suggesting that Moses may never have lived received little or no support. However bitter the religious polemic between the religious communities, the existence of Moses or his virtue as a leader never became a controversial issue. The New Testament had used Moses as a witness to Jesus’ mission. The Quran had listed Moses among God’s apostles. In modern times the emergence of religiously neutral pockets of population in Western society, particularly in the universities, removed Moses from the list of historic figures whose life and worth scholars could take for granted. The more the Torah texts were analyzed, the more questions were raised about the life and work of the original Moses. In 1905 the

\(^8\)A contemporary Mosaic scholar.
German historian Eduard Meyer (1835—1930), who had gained international fame for his work in Pharaonic chronology, lent the weight of his scholarly distinction to those who argued that search for the historical Moses would never be successful because the existing texts do not provide the kind of material a researcher would need to recover a historic figure (Die Mose Sagen und die Lewiten, 1905). An equally famed disciple, Martin Noth, took the same position. Pending any unexpected discoveries, studied agnosticism remains today the most creditable scholarly stance.

History brings all certainties into question, including all the certainties which have developed around the Torah. If there was no Moses, how could there be a Torat Moshe? One would have expected scholarly agnosticism about Moses to cause an angry defensive reaction throughout the Jewish world. Actually, the reaction was milder than might have been anticipated. The traditionalists simply declared that as the Word of God the Torah was a unique document which could not be subjected to the forms of analysis useful in understanding all other literature; and the modernists simply declared that, however the Torah came into being, it was a new force in the world whose results were far-reaching and culturally seminal, and that no reinterpretation of Moses' role would increase or diminish the Torah's value. Martin Noth put it this way, "The core of the Sinai tradition was a historical occurrence, however little it may be historically grasped in detail. . . . The gradually developing tradition of the Pentateuch, the religious content of which is quite without parallel, becomes a clear token of the particularity and qualitative uniqueness of Israel's position among the nations" (Noth 136–37). The Midrashic cast of mind which Jews had developed over the centuries predisposed them to look behind the surface meaning of a text, the so-called facts, to its philosophic or psychological implications and to value these implications as much as the facts. As we have seen, the Midrash had for centuries been presenting the Moses who lived in each generation's soul. Since Moses had never died in Jewish consciousness, the exhumation of the original Moses did not seem to be an urgent issue and the academic search for the historical Moses began as and remained an almost entirely non-Jewish enterprise pursued by such scholars as Hugo Gressmann (Mose und Seine Zeit, 1913) and Paul Volz (Mose, 1907). . . .

Using similar philosophic tools, Martin Buber (1878–1965) expanded on this approach in his book, Moses (1944). Moses is not, as the title suggests, a biography but, rather, an essay in Biblical appreciation. Buber assumes the existence of a historic Moses and offers as proof the inescapable impression, which he feels any sympathetic reader will come away with, of a sensitive and powerful spirit behind and within various Torah narratives. Buber's approach rests on a postulate he took over from the studies of philologists and students
of ancient languages and literatures (particularly the Iranologist, Ernst Herzfeld) who had concluded that the classic sagas were not purely literary inventions but literary elaborations of someone's dramatic personal experience, particularly the radical surprise a writer or singer felt at some unexpected event he had participated in or witnessed. . . .

Buber's Moses is a God-intoxicated man, a mystic, an active leader always conscious of the responsibilities of office, and "an undivided entire person who, as such, receives the message and as such endeavors to establish that message in life" (Buber 200). In this last respect Moses is unique. There are many leaders of men, but few who, like Moses, are possessed of an original vision and able to transform their society according to it. . . .

The Burning Bush episode becomes a classic model of the moment of tension when one feels prudence war with commitment in his soul, when "God commands and man resists" (Buber 46). The Torah language captures and refracts the moment of recognition when Moses becomes aware of a compelling mission and aware that he must choose to respond to it. Sinai becomes a collective moment of recognition when the community under Moses' guidance senses its destiny. Buber thought of himself as an analytical scholar, but in reality he was an old-fashioned Midrashist who uses throughout the old technique of interpreting the text from within the text; he does so brilliantly and reveals much, but his conclusions are impressionistic, not historical. The Torah text simply does not reveal to every sensitive reader the afterglow of a series of I-Thou meetings between the prophet and God. . . . I discover little of Moses' personal experience in the Torah. What I discover there is a record of the community's meeting with God and its awe before God's redemptive power. I find it unlikely that a text which consistently diminishes Moses' role would be shaped around Moses' personal experiences. . . .

I was forcibly struck by the tendency of Jews to push aside the historical questions in favor of the Midrashic approach when my father, Abba Hillel Silver (1893—1963), published a historical evaluation of Moses, Moses and the Original Torah. His arguments apart, what fascinated me at the time and since was the resounding silence which greeted the book's publication (1959). Despite his worldwide fame as a scholar and leader in the Jewish world, the book sold poorly and was rarely reviewed in the Jewish press. I read this silence as a way of saying that the historical question he posed did not merit the effort he had invested in trying to answer it and perhaps should not have been asked at all. I came to believe that most Jews shy away from the search for the historical Moses out of an instinctive feeling that Judaism's credibility does not depend on, and cannot be allowed to appear to depend on, the historical accuracy of the Torah's narrative.
Using the judgments and tools of Biblical criticism, Silver sought to recover the original Moses and the original Torah, the actual teaching of Moses. He argues that Moses' original words dealt with the unity of God and righteousness and are found in the familiar Decalogue (Exod. 20; Deut. 5) and various other parts of the law, specifically those apodictic oracles (devarim) which are the “you shall” and “you shall not” commandments. He describes Moses as a religious pioneer who refined the basically monotheistic faith of the patriarchs by adding to it the covenant of righteousness, a thorough-going opposition to idolatry, and a sense of national mission.

According to Silver, the birth stories are legends. Moses was actually born in Egypt, and Egyptian religion and culture were essential parts of his upbringing. Moses, he writes, was affected by the religious ferment of the thirteenth century B.C.E. which centered on Akhenaten, the Pharaoh who destroyed many of Egypt's shrines and made the worship of Aten, the sun god, into a state religion. Moses' religious teachings go beyond Akhenaten's short-lived reformation, far beyond this Pharaoh who sensed a single high God but never abandoned a symbolized god, never denied the divinity of other gods, and never rejected the divinity of the pharaohs and pharaonic claims to absolute power. In many ways Moses' Torah represents a reaction to what he had seen in Egypt. It outlaws incest, a common feature of Egyptian society, and puts an end to lifelong slavery. It rejects the idea of kings who claim to be gods incarnate and wield unlimited power. The God to whom Moses bound himself and his people is a zealous God intolerant of the worship of other gods and the making of images, but in relation to His people a “God merciful and just, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Silver 29). Moses' major theological insight, which catalyzed a radical shift in religious history, is a vision of God which denies that dread and implacability are the essential attributes of His being. In his view this newfound faith in a dependable and caring God made possible the study of science and of political philosophies with some expectation of useful findings about society's future. The argument is close and scholarly, but it is doubtful that a dispassionate outside observer would accept the author's arguments as ineluctable. The more interesting question is why Silver broke with the general Jewish silence and explored the historical questions which surround Moses' life. I have always felt that he did so because he was not really raising the historical issues. He was convinced in the deepest recesses of his being that Moses was "the foremost religious genius of all times," the creator of the Jewish people, and the effective founder of the faith. Therefore, the problem, as he saw it, was not whether Moses had lived but what was the nature of Moses' accomplishment, which is really the question, In what does Judaism's uniqueness consist?
Questions for Review and Study

1. Write an essay dealing with Mosaic criticism in the eighteenth century; in the nineteenth century; in the twentieth century.
2. Was Moses a figure of myth or a figure of history? Discuss.
3. Discuss the Ten Commandments. How do they relate to the age of the ancient Hebrews? How do they relate to contemporary society?
4. In what setting did God convey his Holy Law to Moses and the people of Israel? What is the significance of this setting?
5. Are there any obvious borrowings in Mosaic Judaism from the religion of Egypt?

Questions for Comparison

1. Compare Moses and Socrates (pp. 39–65) as creators of distinctively Hebrew and Greek attitudes. Of whom do we know most, and by what means? What were their messages, for whom were they meant, and what were the sources of their truths? How did each define the virtuous life? To what extent did each represent a break from his culture’s past? What problems do interpreters face when defining the “true” Moses and Socrates? Whose thought exerts a greater influence on (your) culture? Explain.

Suggestions for Further Reading

There are several attractive modern synthetic biographical-historical treatments of Moses, among the most readable is the Moses by David Daiches. Elias Auerbach’s Moses is a more controversial and technical book by an established authority. Also see Kings without Privilege, by A. Graeme Auld, and Moses and Pharao, by Gary North. Moses, the Revelation and the Covenant, by Martin Buber, one of the most influential figures in modern religious history, is the first book to create a Moses of history.

Three works of interpretation may also be recommended. Daniel Jeremy Silver’s Images of Moses is a well-written, fascinating history and historiography of Moses; students will find the first five chapters particularly useful. It is excerpted in this chapter. Robert Polzin’s Moses and the Deuteronomist is a more detailed and scholarly work of interpretation, especially the first two chapters, which deal with Moses as he appears in the biblical book of Deuteronomy. Aaron Wildavsky’s The Nursing Father, although not an especially profound scholarly book, is an interesting essay on the theme of Moses as a political leader. Baruch Halpern’s “The Development of Israelite Monotheism,” is also an interesting interpretive essay.

Most of the books of William Foxwell Albright can be recommended, especially From the Stone Age to Christianity and The Archaeology of Palestine.
Among the many histories of Israel, three are especially appropriate for students: *Ancient Israel*, by Harry M. Orlinsky, *A History of the Jews*, by Abram Leon Sachar, and *A History of Israel*, by John Bright. Two further works by great European authorities are also excellent, though they are somewhat technical and detailed: Roland de Vaux's *The Early History of Israel* and Martin Noth's *The History of Israel*. See also Noth's *Exodus*. Finally, there is the famous and controversial work by Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, which, though it has been bitterly criticized, is Freud's own pioneer work in psychohistory. (Titles with an asterisk are out of print.)


