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Dramatizing the Torah: Plays about Moses

by Norman J. Fedder

Much has been written about Judaism's "superstar": many scholarly studies and novels have appeared but relatively little drama—especially when one considers the infinite number of plays about Jesus. Regarding the Old Testament, playwrights have been more interested in such figures as Adam, Noah, Joseph, David, Jonah, and Job; or, maybe, less *intimidated*. For none are as imposing as Moses, who dominates four of the five books associated with him—the foundation of Jewish and Christian faith—known by the Jews as The Torah. Among modern plays about Moses are Isaac Rosenberg's *Moses* (1916), Lawrence Langner's *Moses* (1924), Arnold Schoenberg's *Moses and Aaron* (1932), Christopher Fry's *The Firstborn* (1948), Cecil B. deMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956), Anthony Burgess' *Moses, The Lawgiver* (1975), and Elizabeth Swados' *The Haggadah* (1982). While each of these works will be considered, those of deMille, Burgess, and Fry will receive extensive treatment because they are the best known and follow the Torah most closely.

***Moses* by Isaac Rosenberg**

Two scenes constitute Rosenberg's short play. In Scene 1, Moses reveals his determination to prevail over Egypt; and in Scene 2, two Hebrews quarrel over Moses, a drugged overseer beats one of them senseless, and Moses enters and kills the Egyptian. Rosenberg departs from the traditional portrait of the divinely inspired and guided Moses to create a liberator empowered by his own will, "all a-bristle" with self-confidence and zeal to take action against everything that is enslaving to the human spirit:

I am sick of priests and forms
This rigid dry-boned refinement.
As ladies' perfumes are
Obnoxious to stern natures,
This miasma of a rotting god
Is to me.

Who has made the forest a park?
Who has changed the wolf to a dog?
And put the horse in harness?
And man's mind in a groove?

I heard the one spirit cry in them,
'Break this metamorphosis,
Disenchant my lying body,
Only putrefaction is free,

And I, Freedom, am not.
Moses! touch us thou!' (141-42)

However, *Moses* is really more a dramatic poem than a theatre piece--consisting largely of long verse monologues, rich in original and startling word pictures, but too static in action and complex in syntax to be effective on the stage.

***Moses* by Lawrence Langner**

This full-length play by Lawrence Langner goes decidedly further than its one-act namesake in remaking Moses. The great lawgiver is now the *villain* of the piece, weighing down humankind with his harsh commandments—particularly his antipathy to graven images. These symbolize for the playwright the world of the artist, championed by Moses' sister, Miriam. Thus the making and worship of the golden calf is for Langner, not the nadir of civilization, but the acme! Yet, granting this deliberate inversion of the Torah, the play is so blatant in its blasphemy that the characters are flattened-out, denying them both credibility and interest.

***Moses and Aaron* by Arnold Schoenberg**

Schoenberg, like Langner, places the conflict between two symbolical characters at the center of his work: in this case, a three-act opera (the last act of which has not been musicalized). The polarity of values is also similar. Aaron, rather than Miriam, is in conflict with Moses. The latter's commitment to an ineffable God and a morality of pure spirit is pitted against Aaron's awareness of the people's need for a tangible Deity and a life of the senses. Aaron's God commands allegiance through signs and wonders—rods changing into serpents, hands made leprous, water becoming blood, and sacred images. However, Schoenberg is clearly in Moses' corner. Aaron goes too far. The golden image he makes to becalm the people bestializes them. But Aaron defends his action against Moses' ire, to the point of claiming that the tablets of the law are "images also." Moses responds to this by breaking them and imprisoning Aaron; who is, finally, freed by Moses, but falls down in death. This sharply contrasts with the original, where the two are reconciled, and Aaron dies highly respected and widely mourned. *Moses and Aaron* is a bold conception, carried through by an equally daring score. The character contrast inherent in the Torah is developed to mythic proportions with maximum effectiveness.

***The Haggadah* by Elizabeth Swados**

Subtitled "A Passover Cantata," composed by Swados with texts by Elie Wiesel and others, this play is essentially a musical dramatization of the Passover seder (ritual meal). It generally follows the order of the seder and has the same quality of combining stories, prayers, commentaries, and ceremonies "in memory of the departure from Egypt." Swados interweaves excerpts from the Haggadah (text of the seder) and elsewhere with episodes from the life of Moses (not included in the Haggadah). These are narrated, sung, and danced by a chorus of twenty; and illustrated with props, scenery, masks, and projections. The only dialogue is spoken

through life-size puppets; the only characters are Moses, played by a boy who mimes the action as it is narrated, and Pharaoh, portrayed by a huge stylized head raised and lowered from the top of a stylized pyramid. The image *The Haggadah* evokes of Moses is playful and exuberant, acknowledging the pain of enslavement and bloodshed, but transmuting it into the joy of freedom and celebration.

Cecil B. deMille's *The Ten Commandments*

So well known is this film, that when most people picture Moses they see the face and form of Charlton Heston! He is tall, handsome, muscular, intelligent, kindly, the greatest of all warriors, the finest of all statesmen, highly respected by men, dearly adored by women. He is the image of melodrama's typical hero, engaged in a battle to the death with two equally typical villains—dark-complected and sinister-looking, hated by the men they oppress and despised by the women they exploit: the Egyptian Pharaoh, Rameses (Yul Brynner) and the Hebrew collaborator, Dathan (Edward G. Robinson). The Torah has been reduced to a simplistic saga of physical conflict, romantic intrigue, and extravagant spectacle.

A Torah, one would surmise, not “out of Zion” but Hollywood. Clearly, the non-biblical aspects of deMille's screenplay, with an eye to popular appeal, must be of his own invention. “Not at all,” insists Henry S. Noerdlinger, in his *Moses and Egypt: The Documentation to the Motion Picture The Ten Commandments*:

Cecil B. deMille's genius as a storyteller, his inherent talent as a dramatist in the direct and universal language of the cinema, are known and proven. For the picture *The Ten Commandments*, the facets of Moses' life that are not recorded in the Bible could have been invented and written into scenes harmonious with the Old Testament story. But Mr. deMille, his associate producer and writers—Messrs. Wilcoxon, MacKenzie, Lasky, Gariss and Frank—did not have to invent them. They had been set down in writing some 1,600 to 2,400 years ago. The missing years of Moses' life have survived in this very ancient literature. (13)

The ancient literature to which he refers includes Philo's *On the Life of Moses*, Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities*, Eusebius' *Preparation for the Gospel*, and the *Midrash* (Interpretation) of the Jews. Noerdlinger goes on to demonstrate that he and his fellow scholars were painstaking in their efforts to determine, as far as they could, the exact nature of the architecture, clothing, arts, crafts, adornments, food, and entertainment of the ancient Egyptians. This accuracy of detail is reflected in the scenery, props, and costumes of the film; and, therefore: “To bring these events and the man who lived them to the screen was approached with responsibility, with conscientiousness and with intelligence.” (13) But, mostly, with *tastelessness*. That such a meretricious and mindless movie could be made after so much effort at “authenticity” is disturbing—although it is less a matter of the enormity of the creative task and more a result of deMille's “proven genius” as a cinematic *pander*.

So the point not be missed, we hear in stentorian tones at the start, that God has given man the power to “choose between good and evil” and to concoct the melodrama that follows of “one [good] man standing alone against an [evil] empire.” We hear of this man, at first, as the “deliverer.” He will be, it has been prophesied, a Hebrew child who will grow up and overthrow Pharaoh. As in the Torah, Pharaoh responds by decreeing the death of all new born Hebrew males; and to prevent this happening to her son, Moses’ mother Yochabel (Yocheved) puts him in a basket and floats him down the Nile, where he is watched over by his sister, Miriam; until Pharaoh’s sister (not daughter), Bithiah, retrieves and adopts the child against the warnings of her maidservant, Memnet, who realizes that the child is a Hebrew.

The Bible is “taciturn on Moses’ life,” Noerdlinger writes, “from this precise moment to his killing of the Egyptian as a grown man. This is the moment when we draw fully from the ancient sources to paint as complete a portrait of Moses as possible.” (19) A portrait which in every way inflates the original to the dimensions of *hagiography*, the making of Moses into a supersaint. We see him first as a great general, returning in triumph from his conquest of Ethiopia. He is adored by the kindly Pharaoh, Seti, who prefers Moses over his own son, Rameses, as the heir to the throne and the woman who goes with it. This beautiful (non-biblical) princess, Nephreteri, is equally infatuated with Moses. Nothing the man does is less than remarkable. When challenged by Rameses to direct the building of Seti’s city at Goshen, Moses does so, not only with optimum success, but with loving concern for the welfare of the Hebrew slaves who labor at building it. Against the will of the Egyptian overseers, he takes the part of the outspoken Joshua and saves a woman who is about to be crushed under a huge stone—a woman who, *coincidentally*, turns out to be Yochabel. He is instinctively hostile to Egyptian polytheism. With grain stored for their deities, he feeds the starving Israelites and preempts the giving of the law at Sinai by creating the Sabbath! In consequence, Seti proclaims that Moses will be the new Pharaoh.

This is too much for Memnet. She must reveal that Moses is the son of a Hebrew slave. Why she tells Nephreteri, who promptly kills her for her trouble, is anybody’s guess; but why Nephreteri is dumb enough to tell Moses is beyond comprehension—given the fact that she ought to know well enough that our boy scout will now be honor-bound to leave her and seek out his origins. While the Torah doesn’t tell us that Moses was aware of his Hebrew parentage, the traditions assume it. However, Noerdlinger writes that deMille couldn’t have his Moses be such a “man of duplicity....A man of such high ethical and moral standards could not have been loyal both to Pharaoh and to the enslaved Israelites.” (21) This “high ethical” Moses is hardly fazed by the knowledge of his slave origin—far from it; it transforms him into an *abolitionist*: “I must find the meaning of what I am—why a Hebrew or any man must be a slave.”

So he strips himself of his Egyptian finery and labors with his fellow Israelites in the mud of the brickyard. But Nephreteri can’t keep her hands off her now filthy lover, still resplendent under the slime. Wrapping herself around him, she pleads: “You stubborn, splendid, adorable fool. Return to me...you can free the slaves when you’re Pharaoh.” Of course this sensible idea is scrapped for the sake of Moses’ honor and deMille’s picture. Moses nobly rejects her crass

offer and proceeds from there, as in the Torah account, to kill an Egyptian whom he finds brutally whipping an Israelite. Wouldn't you know that the victim would be none other than Joshua, Moses' future right-hand man and successor, and that Joshua would now declare Moses to be the deliverer of prophesy. And who should be spying on them but the wicked Dathan, whom Rameses has hired to get the goods on said deliverer. Rameses had already promised Seti that if this person did indeed exist, he would bring him to Pharaoh in chains. And so Rameses does, revealing to Seti (what by this time you would imagine all of Egypt ought to know) that Moses is a Hebrew. Unhappily, Seti declares that Moses cannot be his heir; Rameses will now have that honor. And Moses tells Seti that he is not the deliverer, but if he could free the slaves he would, so opposed is he to "the evil that men should turn people into beasts of burden because they are of another creed or race."

But Rameses has Moses banished to the desert, not executed, to prevent his being made into a martyr—and ending the picture at this point. This differs from the Torah version in which Moses was "frightened" when he realized that the murder was known; and he "fled" from Egypt to escape Pharaoh's vengeance. But that would not be "in keeping with Moses' noble character," according to Noerdlinger (22). In the desert, he is "cleansed for God's great purpose." He arrives at last in the land of Midian, at the point of death from dehydration and starvation; but, of course, with sufficient strength to drive away a gang of shepherds who won't let Jethro's seven daughters water their flock. Much is made of his winning Sephora (Zipporah), one of these daughters, and of capping his triumphs by making it big in the wool trade!

Now he is ready for the final glory, to become Israel's *deliverer* and be commanded by none other than God at nearby Mount Sinai. The ever-burning bush not only flames and crackles in living color, but is equipped with state-of-the-art stereo. The voice of God manages to sound even more affected than the holy groan of Heston as it booms out its demand that Moses return to Egypt and redeem his people; to which Moses replies as he does in the Torah: "Who am I? How can I lead them?" One is tempted to admonish him at this point: "Are you kidding? You're Charlton Heston! Where were you when your director was inflating your Moses to near-immortal proportions?" But, of course, that kind of fake humility is expected of Hollywood heroes—along with a fake hair-do! The "burning light of God's own presence" has not only turned Moses' hair gray, but sprayed it up skyward. This heaven-sent hairiness will be more than a match for the bald new pharaoh, Rameses, because Seti has died with Moses' name on his lips despite his vow to forget him.

Not long after, Moses and Aaron (a minor character in the film) confront Rameses and demand that he let the Israelites go. Rameses responds by making things even harder for the slaves; they will be denied the straw they need to make bricks, but their required daily quota will not be reduced. The people turn on Moses and are about to kill him; but he is saved by Nephreteri, whose attempt to win him back is repulsed by the new, holy Moses.

Then God responds to Rameses' obstinacy by having Moses bring down the ten plagues on Egypt, three of which are graphically portrayed in the film: we see the waters polluted by blood,

the land ravaged by hail, and the firstborn meeting their death (when Rameses persists in his refusal, spurred on by the vengeful Nephreteri). This last plague turns the tables on Rameses' plan to murder *Israel's* firstborn. But Nephreteri has taken this as an opportunity to get Sephora away from Moses and back to Midian, by warning her of her son's imminent death. However, when Nephreteri tells this to Moses in an effort to reclaim him for herself, he tells her that it is *her* son who will die. And when he rejects her plea to reverse this, she denounces Moses and defies God's verdict.

Moses celebrates the first Passover, as in the Torah, where he is joined by none other than his step-mother, Bithiah, "a great light" shining from her face. She is at one with the Israelites now and will depart with them; for there is "no stranger for those who seek God's mercy." But for those who *don't*, there is the lethal green fog which slithers throughout Egypt, destroying all her first-born—Rameses' and Nephreteri's son chief among them. At last, Rameses summons the deliverer and gives in to him: "You have conquered, Moses. Go out, Moses." This gives the "genius of the universal language of cinema" the opportunity to have the camera lavishly linger on his "cast of thousands" of all shapes, colors, and temperaments as they depart from Egypt with the bones of Joseph and all they can carry of their own and their oppressors' possessions. However, "hell hath no fury" like a Nephreteri scorned: she fires up Rameses to pursue the Israelites; and as for Moses, she murmurs, "kill him with your own hands." This gives deMille the opportunity to pull out all the cinematic stops. We see Pharaoh's chariots bearing down on the Israelites, as they approach the sea, ready to wipe them all out; while, egged on by Dathan, they blame Moses for their imminent death. Moses responds by leaping on a rock, arms and hair upraised, proclaiming: "Behold His mighty hand!" The great sea parts to let Israel through, as God's pillar of fire keeps the Egyptians at bay, till the Israelites pass through and the fire subsides and the Egyptians storm after. Then Moses' hands and hair go up again to bring the sea back over their foes. Not only does our hero vanquish our villain, he converts him! "His god *is* God" are Rameses' last words.

But not Dathan's—who takes over now as chief bad guy. It is *Dathan* who proclaims that Moses will never return from Mount Sinai; it is Dathan who demands that Aaron make "a god of gold" to replace the God of Israel; and it is Dathan who promotes the orgy which becomes the calf worship. Meanwhile back on the mountain, Moses faces the blank tablets, on which God will inscribe the commandments big time! With a cue, as Noerdlinger quotes him, from Philo:

I should suppose that God wrought on this occasion a miracle of a truly holy kind by bidding...sound to be created in the air more marvelous than all instruments...[by] giving shape and tension to the air and changing it to flaming fire....Then from the midst of the fire that streamed from heaven there sounded forth...a voice, for the flame became articulated speech. (39-40)

So the master showman brings back the pillar of fire and the stereophonic sound and combines them as the talking, flaming finger of God which leaps out from the pillar to burn the words into the tablets—while at appropriate moments, such as "Thou shalt not make a graven image," the

camera cuts back to the orgy below. But this literal rendering of Philo's attempt to imagine the ineffable is an affront to both Philo and God. Far from "a miracle of a truly holy kind," we get a spectacle of a truly sleazy kind—divine revelation as sci-fi, God as Godzilla. As the Israelites carouse around the calf, the voice of deMille's God seems to have gotten into the soundtrack. We hear the same souped-up speech hinting at lurid details the censors have spared us from the heavy hand of the master pander. Urged on by Dathan, the people work themselves up to a satanic frenzy and are just about to sacrifice a young woman to the calf, when Moses appears with the commandments in his arms. This is followed by the final Hollywood stand-off between Moses and Dathan. As he does in the Torah, but much later, Dathan declares a rebellion against Moses, who summons all who are with him to his side, and proceeds with the final fireworks. He hurls the tablets at the golden calf which bursts into flames, and (as in the Torah) the earth opens, swallowing up Dathan and his ilk.

Not much can follow this act, so the film moves swiftly to the final moments, revealing that Moses must die without entering the land, because (God knows how) this man of perfect faith has disobeyed the Deity. He appoints Joshua his successor and hands him the five books, copied down from God, a verse of which (lest the point may have escaped the audience) he commands of Joshua: "Proclaim liberty throughout the land." Then Moses walks off into the sunset.

***Moses, The Lawgiver* by Anthony Burgess**

I turn next to the teleplay, featuring Burt Lancaster as Moses, because it was also made for popular consumption, but with considerably greater artistry and taste. The script is by Anthony Burgess, revised in production by co-writer Vittorio Bonicelli, and director Gianfrance deBosio. Burgess' epic poem, published as *Moses—a narrative*, forms the basis for this work. Since for Burgess the "major aesthetic problem was the linguistic one, as it always is with historical or mythic subjects," he writes in his Foreword to the poem, that he preceded "the assembly of a shooting script with a more or less literary production....Verse moves more quickly, and the rhythm of verse permits of a speech midway between the mythical and colloquial." (5) Because much of the teleplay's dialogue is identical with that of the poem, I have used the latter as the source of my quotations.

Moses, The Lawgiver attempts to make the characters, settings, costumes, and music as authentic as possible. It was filmed in Israel and the Sinai desert; most of the characters, including some of the principals, are swarthy, Middle-Eastern types; and the background music is Hebraic in flavor. In contrast with the WASP faces, antiseptic settings, garish costumes, and maudlin sounds of *The Ten Commandments*, the general sense is one of rough-edged *actuality*. Most significant is the difference in the character of Moses. While he is depicted as a person, in the words of the narrator, who was "raised in the courts of Pharaoh and learned the arts and the skills of a true Prince of Egypt," he is hardly Heston's macho man for all seasons. Lancaster's Moses has all the doubts, fears, and misgivings which the Torah attributes to him.

The teleplay begins, like the screenplay, with Moses being found by the Egyptian princess,

but forgoes the latter's non-biblical depiction of Moses' supposed military, political, and romantic achievements. It's not long before we observe him witnessing the sufferings of his people—consigned to supervise them by the Pharaoh-to-be because Moses wouldn't take the youth crocodile hunting. As in the Torah and the screenplay, Moses kills the Egyptian overseer who had been whipping an Israelite, Dathan, in this version (after the *Midrash*). Fearful that *he* will be blamed for the crime, Dathan turns Moses in. The teleplay, like the Torah, has Moses run away from Egypt to escape punishment, though not before we see him reunited with his parents and his siblings, Miriam and Aaron. Aaron believes that no good will come of all this, but Miriam looks forward to Moses' return in the "time of the setting free."

Following the Torah, Lancaster's Moses (like Heston's, but, happily, less hyper) journeys across the desert to Midian, drives away the hostile shepherds from Jethro's daughters, marries one of them, Zipporah, and settles down to the life of a shepherd. Back in Egypt, however, the old Pharaoh has died, and the youth with whom Moses had been so close now ascends to the throne. The new Pharaoh sends out messengers to invite Moses back. But Moses refuses, he has his "own kingdom" now. But he can't refuse God, who speaks to him, soon after, from the burning bush in a voice as mellow as Lancaster's, which, in fact, it *is*. This is the case, thereafter, whenever God speaks; and it makes the matter more credible. God seems to be speaking through Moses' thoughts, not a studio sound system.

The confrontation with Pharaoh and subsequent liberation is decidedly less sensational and more complex than in the film. Moses returns to Egypt to confront a Pharaoh who, at first, welcomes his old friend warmly: "You belong to Egypt. / To us." (49) Moses responds in denial: "I reject Egypt. / I embrace my people." (50) But his people are not so quick to reciprocate. Although Miriam, as she had prophesied, is delighted at his return, Aaron, as before, is not certain. He entreats Pharaoh for Moses, as God had commanded, to let Israel go; but when Pharaoh not only refuses them, but makes things even harder, Aaron sides with the Israelite foremen who denounce Moses. "I want no more of it," Aaron tells his brother—whose ambivalent response is typical of the Lancaster Moses:

The voice spoke
True. It made no false promises.
Nothing will be easy.
But the Lord did make. One error. The error of choosing
Me. (55)

Nonetheless, Moses persists in his cause and the reluctant Aaron continues as his spokesman, responding to the arrogance of Pharaoh by bringing down the ten plagues. These are depicted as natural occurrences, rather than supernatural oddities, in keeping with the visual restraint of the production. As in the screenplay (and the Torah), Pharaoh alternately relents and refuses as the plagues come and go until the final one, the slaying of the firstborn; and this occurs during the Passover meal, breaking not only Pharaoh's will, but his faith. He sees his own god as a "sham," and cries out to Moses:

Leave my people in peace.
Go, serve your God in what manner you will.
And come no more into Egypt. (73)

Yet Moses only looks forward to more trouble. He calls it a “Terrible thing, a terrible burden, and the / Burden is just beginning.” (70-71)

Needless to say, the events that follow validate Moses’ misgivings: the rehardening of Pharaoh’s heart and his pursuit of the Israelites, culminating in the parting of the sea and the drowning of the Egyptians. These are dramatized with considerably less fanfare and greater realism than in the film. The pillar of cloud by day which precedes the Israelites could well be swirling desert dust; the pillar of fire by night, a shaft of fireflies; and the parting and closing of the sea, the consequence of a powerful wind—not cinematic trickery. And when the women dance, led by Miriam, in celebration of the victory, the music and movement evoke the Sinai desert, not Malibu beach. The result is to have the events seem that much more miraculous in appearing so natural.

Since less time is taken with Moses’ Egyptian career, his desert experience is given greater emphasis. As in the film, the people, led by Dathan, can’t abide the hardships of the journey, and yearn for “the fleshpots of Egypt.” Even Aaron’s wife would forgo the Promised Land and settle down at an oasis along the way. But, changed as he is by Moses and his cause, Aaron denies her:

No. We have to have more than a mere oasis....
There is a new kind of human being we call Israel....
Seeking the appointed place....
It is a formless lump so far—it has to be molded,
Kneaded like bread. But when it is made,
This new being, when it lives and breathes and follows
The laws that sustain it, there will be no end to it. (90)

Moses is less sanguine. After satisfying another of the people’s never-ending grievances, he cries out, “I am sick of you.... / But God help me, you are all I have.” (91) So, in spite of his misgivings, Moses persists in his commitment to give God’s law to Israel—the covenant which he now reveals to them:

God is not a
Demon of the rivers, or of fire or air.
He is not a stone idol— He is a spirit,
And it is as spirit that men must worship him.
So there shall be no making of gods of stone
Or wood or iron or silver. Nor shall the name of God
Be thrown in the air like a ball or kicked like a
pebble.

The very name is sacred and its use shall be sacred.
The day of rest, which is God's day, shall be sacred--
 Given to the contemplation of the eternal,
While the body rests from labor. It shall be a day
For the family, and the family itself
Shall be seen on that day as sacred. Nay the family
And the bond of marriage, and the children that are
The fruit of that bond, shall always be bound in a
 garland
Of love and honor. And what a man owns shall be sacred,
Since it comes from God—be it his goods or his life.
Both are inviolate—no killing, no stealing. Nay,
 more:
No coveting of the things our brothers possess,
For sin begins in desire. Above all, we are free,
Free beings, copies of God
Who is the first and last free being—free
Even to choose to enter the covenant
With him, with him who made us. (101-02)

Then Moses asks the people: "Will you accept the covenant?" (102) They unanimously and enthusiastically reply in the affirmative, only to break it with equal zeal when Moses ascends the mountain to receive from God the tablets of the covenant.

In the film, Dathan's role far exceeds Aaron's in making and worshipping the golden calf and in fighting the final blood-and-guts battle to the photo-finish. In the teleplay, Aaron's moral dilemma is emphasized. At first, he denies the people's demands, enjoining them to remember the covenant, but, urged on by his wife, he is at last prevailed upon to help them make an "image for their poor minds to cling to." (112) Nevertheless, when the calf is completed, Aaron wants the people to see it, not as an idol, but a symbol:

God
Has no body, God is in no one place.
God is spirit, and spirit is unshackled by the
Chains of time and space. God is everywhere.
The image you see before you is not God— The very idea is absurd. But it will serve
To remind you of God, each day as you pass it. (113-14)

But the calf, to Aaron's horror, reminds the people of the furthest thing from God; they drink and drug themselves into a homicidal orgy—raping and killing each other in worship of their golden deity. Aaron is so traumatized by this and ridden with guilt that all he can do upon Moses' return is stare at him in silence and tears. Moses, crying out that "the covenant is broken," has the worshippers put to death and, publicly, hurls the tablets of the law to the ground, breaking them.

But he forgives Aaron; and, much to the latter's embarrassment and over his protests, appoints him High Priest of Israel. Different from *The Ten Commandments* which, true to its title, climaxes with the giving, breaking, and regiving of the law; *Moses, The Lawgiver* proceeds beyond this point to show the outcome of God's continued faith in Israel. Moses has the people swear again to keep the covenant and they journey on; but not without further backsliding and rebellion. This hardens Moses into demanding "punctilious observance of the law;" and he has a man stoned to death for chopping down a tree on the Sabbath. Dathan defies what he considers the injustice and brutality of this sentence, and Moses cries out to God in torment: "I am sick to death of the burden of rule I bear....In humility I ask—let your servant / Go, let your servant go." (131) But God will not release him:

Moses, my servant Moses,
I will ride you as a horseman rides a horse.
You will always know my weight on your back,
My spurs on your flank. I will never let you go.
You have doubted, and you will doubt again and again,
But, in spite of your doubts, you will bear the burden
To life's end. You will lead your people to the land
That is promised, since that is my will. You will lead them,
But you yourself will never eat or drink
Of the fruit of the fulfillment of the promise.
I will never let you go, but I will never
Let you enter. Nor will any one
Of your generation, sick with the doubt
Of the Lord's promise, ever enter that land. (131-132)

It is as God wills. Moses must lead the people on and endure another rebellion, led by Dathan and his followers whom the earth swallows up (as in the Torah and the film). Finally, because Moses "doubted God," God denies him entry into the land. Yet he can't believe that "doubt" was his real sin. Was it because he loved the people "too little" as Aaron loved them "too much?" Was it because he "loved the law more?" But we *have* seen Moses "question the law"--unlike his sentence of death on the man who worked on the Sabbath--when the Lawgiver grants to women the right of inheritance which had solely been the privilege of men. However, while he lashes out at God as "hard and unforgiving," he concludes by exhorting the people to "keep the commandments./ Love justice and mercy. Love the Lord, our God / For his ways are the ways of justice and mercy." (188)

Lancaster's Moses is a deeply troubled man, far removed from Heston's self-assured titan. In *The Ten Commandments* the message is clear: the God-inspired Moses triumphs over tyranny and brings "truth, justice and the American way" to humankind. In *Moses, The Lawgiver*, however, the meaning of his relation to God is uncertain. Without question, the Moses of the Torah is as much in conflict with God as he is with Israel and Egypt. But, out of this struggle comes a *greater* faith; and in the final book, Deuteronomy, he proclaims that faith to his people.

However, at the end of the teleplay, while praising the God of “justice and mercy,” Moses remains as confused as the viewers by this “hard, unforgiving God” who is, nevertheless, “with him.”

The Firstborn by Christopher Fry

In my view, Fry’s portrait of Moses avoids the melodrama of the film and the confusion of the teleplay, while incorporating their artistic strong points. Fry presents us with a hero as sensitive as Burgess’ and as single-minded as deMille’s. This is done by limiting the action to the time between Moses’ arrival from Midian and his departure from Egypt, and by focusing the theme on his conflicting loyalties between the nation that raised him and the people who bore him. Each of the eight major characters has a stake in this dilemma and each undergoes a painful change in the process.

1. MOSES

Fry, like deMille, adopts the conception of Moses as a great warrior from Josephus and Eusebius. The Pharaoh, Seti, wants Moses back from Midian where, as the Torah tells us, he had been banished for killing an Egyptian slavemaster. Moses is needed to lead the army against an impending invasion by Libya. Different from the film, little is made of his military skill except to contrast with his newfound moral vision. Upon arrival, Moses sets Seti straight on this:

I am not who you think. I am a stranger...
The prince of Egypt
Died the day he fled...
I am the Hebrew
Smitten out of the shadow of that prince...
I have business with Egypt, one more victory for her....
That she should come to see her own shame
And discover justice for my people. (15)

Moses achieves that justice in the course of the play; but at the dreadful price of the death of Pharaoh’s son and heir, Rameses—an expense Moses’ conscience failed to account for and cannot easily afford:

Do you see the ambush I have blundered into?
I heard God, as though hearing were understanding.
But he kept his hands hidden from me. He spoke,
But while he spoke he pointed...he pointed
At Rameses, and I couldn’t see!...
Why had I not thought of him?
I had such a tremendous heart. I saw the passion of
 bewilderment

Drawing off from the earth. But can we go forward
Only by the ravage of what we value? (75-76)

2. AARON

Fry, like Schoenberg and in accord with the Torah, characterizes Aaron as a pragmatic foil to his visionary brother. Confronting Pharaoh for Moses, Aaron is, typically, all facts and figures:

Twelve hundred thousand Israelites are under
Your dominion. Of these two hundred and twenty thousand
Only, are men. The rest are in the proportion
Of four hundred and fifty thousand women
And five hundred and thirty thousand children....
Here I have [Death's] estimate: between April and July
Six hundred and one deaths suffered in old age
But an old age of forced labour, their backs bent
twice,
Under the weight of years and under the mule-whip.
Also thirty-eight deaths of healthy men
Who made some show of reluctance or momentary
Impatience....(14)

The mysterious and miraculous are far from Aaron's understanding. To Moses he admits that he can hardly fathom the fact of the first plague:

What's this?
Isn't there confusion enough? Confusion I call it!
A contradiction of what we have always known
To be conclusive: an ugly and impossible
Mistake in nature. And you, you of all men
Accept it, identify yourself with it. It must be
Denied. What has become of you since yesterday?
Is it not possible still to be plain men
Dealing with a plain situation? Must we see
Visions? You were an unchallengeable leader once.
That is the man I follow. A plain soldier. (47)

However, his experience with Moses transforms Aaron:

He has me by the scruff of the heart and I ask
No questions. I've begun to believe that the reasonable
Is an invention of man, altogether in opposition

To the facts of creation, though I wish it hadn't
Occurred to me. (70)

He is ready for redemption.

3. SETI and 4. RAMESES

There is a bad pharaoh and a good one, as in *The Ten Commandments*, with identical names but reversed attributes. In *The Firstborn*, Seti is the bad one; and Rameses, the good. But the former is not your standard villain; there's method in his meanness. Seti's response to Aaron's death toll is as sensible as it is eloquent:

...Am I to compose the epitaphs
For every individual grave of this trying summer?
I have my figures. I do not need yours.
I have put men to a purpose who otherwise
Would have had not the least meaning. (15)

Seti remains steadfast in his purpose by increasing the burdens of the Hebrews and practicing deceit on Moses. But the death of his beloved son finally breaks him. Rameses, on the other hand, idolizes Moses—offering not only to make him a general but to free Israel when Rameses becomes Pharaoh. And when Miriam's son, Shendi, is about to be beaten by two overseers, the Egyptian intervenes in the Hebrew's behalf and, later, goes so far as to make him an overseer. While Moses rejects "using" Rameses as the means through which to prevail over Pharaoh, the prince still attempts to persuade his father to yield to Moses; but Rameses becomes disillusioned by Shendi's behaving no better than the overseers who persecuted him. Finally and ironically, it is Rameses' life that must be forfeited for the obduracy of his father.

5. MIRIAM

Miriam is depicted as opposed to Moses' mission from the start:

He's a dangermaker still.
I have a son
And that is all I rest on. There's a man
Who should have been my brother. A king's daughter
Swallowed him and spat out this outlaw. I'll
Not have any more in the family.
I'll keep my nights of sleep, and I'll keep
My son. (20)

Only at the end is she compelled to follow Moses from Egypt. This contrasts strikingly with the Miriam of the Torah and the other two plays who is fully supportive of the liberation.

6. SHENDI

Her son, Shendi (with no Torah antecedent), is even more hostile to Moses:

My uncle, is it? The great fellow that was.
The man who thought he was Egypt. Have you come
To try again, murderer? (30)

So anxious is he to prove himself as an overseer that he “drives the Hebrews harder than any Egyptian,” and dies, as one of *their* firstborn, despite his eleventh hour attempt to return to the tribe:

I'll be what I was. I am Shendi, a Jew.
How can my blood alter and make me Egyptian?
I only wanted to be free! [*He tears off the Egyptian
uniform*]
Look: Egypt comes away—it's no part of me.
It's easily off. The body is all I am--
It is Shendi, the Jew, Shendi, Shendi, a Jew,
A Jew! Isn't it so? Then why am I dying? (78)

7. ANATH-BITHIAH

Anath-Bithiah, Seti's sister and Moses' stepmother, is a major character in this play in contrast with the others. Equally repelled by Moses' rebellion as by Pharaoh's deceit, she is decidedly more real than deMille's version of the woman, who winds up eating matzoh with the faithful and accompanying them out of Egypt! Finally, it is Anath-Bithiah who challenges Moses' despair over the death of Rameses, whom the liberator cannot prevent from dying as the price of Israel's freedom:

You have the freedom of the darkness, Moses.
Why do you wait? Haven't you recognized
The triumph of your purpose? Your twelve hundred
Thousand souls, out there in the dungeon of the night,
Are waiting to hear the long bolts grate back.
Rameses has died,
And the air stands ready in the wilderness to take you in.
Rameses has died. Tomorrow the lizards
Will be sparkling on the rocks. Why aren't you dancing
With such liberty for such starving souls? (88)

8. TEUSRET

Finally, there is Rameses' younger sister, Teusret, whose naivete and playfulness contrast with the seriousness of the situation and the other characters. Her childhood innocence is shattered by her brother's death, as she vainly describes to his dead form, the beauty of his bride not to be:

I have seen her. O Rameses,
Are you so taken with the dark
That what has dazzled me won't open your eyes?
Rameses, she has come so gifted for you,
With a fable of rubies, and pearls like seeds of the
 moon.
Doesn't their brightness come to you? Do they glimmer
Nowhere in the cupboards of your sleep? (89)

Fry makes every effort to place the miraculous aspects of the story in the background in order to concentrate on the moral ones. This, of course, differs markedly from the film and the teleplay. While it is true that visualization is central to these media as compared with the verbalization peculiar to the theatre, the stage play manages, more than the previous two, to make the supernatural credible. No attempt is made to dramatize Moses' dialogues with the Deity. The voice from the burning bush is heard through the power of Moses' words as he comes to know the full import of God's presence:

Where shall I look for triumph?
Somewhere, not beyond our scope, is a power

Participating but unharnessed, waiting
To be led towards us. (32)

My people shall become themselves,
By reason of their own God who speaks within them. (41)

*[A distant long cracking sound of thunder. MOSES
jerks back his head to listen]*

Are we overheard? Behind
The door that shuts us into life, there is
An ear...
It is not as we suppose!
What league have we, the human, with the greater
Than human? Am I given the power
To do what I am?
What says the infinite eavesdropper?

[From horizon to horizon the sky is beaten into

thunder] (43)

You appeal to Moses,
But Moses is now only a name and an obedience.
It is the God of the Hebrews, springing out
Of unknown ambush, a vigor moving
In a great shadow, who draws the supple bow
Of his mystery, to loose the punishing arrow
Feathered with my fate; he who in his hour
Broke the irreparable dam which kept his thought,
Released the spumy cataract birth and death
To storm across time and the world;
He who in his morning
Drew open the furious petals of the sun;
He who through his iron fingers
Lets all go, lets all waste and go,
Except, dearly retained, in his palm, the soul;
He, the God of my living, the God of the Hebrews,
Has stooped beside Israel
And wept my life like a tear of passion
Onto the iniquity of Egypt. (65-66)

The plagues, also, are not depicted onstage, but their harrowing effect on the populace permeates the language and dominates the action of the latter two of the play's three acts. Seti's contemptuous refusal in Act I to let Moses lead his people "into the wilderness for a space, to find their god" results in that god's bringing down the plagues on Egypt in Acts II and III. Act II begins with plague 1:

The water
Is blood. The river floods it over the fields.
The wells stink of it. (45)

There follows a description of plagues 2 through 8 which had resulted from Seti's continued intransigence: "The stews of creation" had "their way with Egypt" in the form of "a plague of frogs," after which bodies and brains became "slutted with lice" and then "lusted of flies;" followed by "disease" which swept "all the cattle" and, then, the nation was turned "loathsome with boils;" while hail "stamped out the gardens and cracked the skulls of birds," and locusts "devoured the last leaf of the old life." (55-57) Yet Seti persists in his refusal, resulting in plague 9 which concludes Act II:

Look at the sky! A sea of cloud, blind-black, Is pouring on to the beaches of the sun!...
It is here! The darkness! (66)

Act III brings with it the final plague:

Tonight, at midnight
God will unfasten the hawk of death from his
Grave wrist, to let it rake our world,
Descend and obliterate the firstborn of Egypt,
All the firstborn, cattle, flocks, and men:
Mortality lunging in the midnight fields
And bridging in the beds; a sombre visit
Such as no nation has known before. Upon all
Egypt! (74)

Fry's poetry succeeds, for the most part, in rendering the complexity of the characters and the mystery of God's presence among them. It is decidedly more successful as poetic dialogue than Rosenberg's but is, at times, distractingly ornate and/or obscure, holding back the action while the characters hold forth. The relationship between Moses and Rameses is also problematic. The play's central theme is Moses' recognition that "we go forward only by the ravage of what we value." What he presumably values is Rameses, who must die so that Israel may be redeemed. But while Rameses has indicated considerable admiration for Moses, the latter hasn't responded in kind. Not until Act III does Moses indicate any sympathy for Egypt or doubt regarding the justice of his cause. As Fry has acknowledged in *An Experience of Critics*: "The critics felt, very reasonably, that the affection between Moses and Rameses had been so barely touched on that three-quarters of the impact of Moses' realization was lost." (32)

I do not know why the necessity of God
Should feed on grief; but it seems so. And to know it
Is not to grieve less, but to see grief grow big
With what has died, and in some spirit differently
Bear it back to life.
There is a wilderness between my blood and peace. (88)

In his *Images of Moses*, Rabbi Silver maintains: "Any biography of Moses, however learned, remains an imaginative exercise which reveals more of the writer's conceptions than of the actual life history of Israel's most famous hero." (4) So with any dramatizations, and so with any critique of them. In this "writer's conceptions," each of these plays, praiseworthy or flawed, is well worth our study—inspiring us to return to the source with greater insight, or challenge to write our own version!

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