



Moses

*in the
Three Monotheistic Faiths*

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Palestinian Academic Society for the Study of International Affairs

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Foreword

Dr. Mahdi Abdul Hadi

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When we conduct interfaith dialogue it should be with the realization that its aim is not to choose between different faiths, or to emphasize differences between various schools of thought, but to stress the responsibility of scholars and religious leaders to explain their beliefs and positions, especially in times of crisis, and to resist the temptation to depict certain ideas in a negative if not distorted way.

In today's environment one might view Moses' actions such as the killing of one person whilst defending another as murder, or unjustified violence and maybe even terrorism. Others will not go to that extreme but will find a way to explain or excuse his actions. The danger is that the episode may be taken out of context and used as a weapon to attack or label others. This leads us to the most challenging aspect of such a dialogue, intra-faith dialogue, or that amongst a single faith group concerning their holy text and its various interpretation, which will inevitably lead to different schools of thought.

There are differences in the detailed stories about Moses in the texts of the three monotheistic faiths and historians disagree on facts such as when Moses lived. For example the date of the exodus from Egypt is said to be either in 1495 BC, 1290 BC, 1224 BC, 1215 BC or 1204 BC. In the various texts Moses is said to have married the daughter of a priest who was either one of two sisters or one of seven. There are other differences as well regarding the specific facts of Moses' life.

However when we read the Torah, Bible or the Qur'an, it is Moses personality that is the most striking feature of the story and the interpretations put on the various events of his life, not the factual differences between the accounts. It is the wisdom to be found in each religion, the relevance of the story of Moses to how we live our lives today that is important. By learning about how the story of Moses is presented in each religion we can understand more about his message and about his successes and failures.

A confident rabbi can be critical about Moses, just as a Christian priest who is too loyal to the text of the Bible cannot separate himself from the strong words in it, because God's words are so powerful and so convincing to him that he cannot live without them or distance himself from them. The key to engaging in successful interfaith dialogue is to acknowledge that other interpretations are possible and that there can be much to be gained from being prepared to listen to the stories of others. There is room for others to draw a line between what is history, legend or faith.

The Muslim is here to share with the Christians and the Jews the fact that he or she believes in Moses too, and aims to respect and honor all the prophets without exception. Yet he or she wants to enjoy the story as it is revealed in various verses of the Qur'an and not just from one place, and to take pride and joy from knowing it and learning more about it. This process of learning is not complete but is ongoing; more is being learned all the time, especially through dialogue between scholars.

The aim of the PASSIA religious dialogue sessions is to bring Christians, Jews and Muslims together and encourage them to share with one another their respective holy books and traditions. The aim is to promote harmony and co-existence by demonstrating that although factual differences are to be found in each text, these should not be obstacles to good relations or something which others are demanded to endorse and approve. What is important is the search for wisdom and understanding common to all. Representatives of each faith have much to gain by sharing their holy books and interpretations with one another and by doing so they can enrich and strengthen their own faith.

A key goal of such a dialogue is to maintain harmony and to avoid clashes or disputes. We cannot ignore the fact though that we will come across those who are either extremist or fundamentalist, in all of the three faiths. But none of them can impose on the others their version of a story or a text, nor can they resign and leave the 'house' because most of them will claim they are responsible for defending what they believe. The great challenge we now face is to ensure that no one person or group hijacks religion or dictates to others his or her interpretations.

Moses in the Jewish Tradition

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Jewish Tradition views the purpose of the Biblical narrative as part and parcel of the revealed text as a whole – to serve as a guide to live in accordance with Divine Will. Thus I will not go in to the plethora of legends associated with the personality and activity of Moses the Prophet our Teacher in Jewish Tradition, but rather focus on what is seen as the essential message of the Biblical narrative.

Accordingly the purpose of the anecdotal material concerning Moses in the Book of Exodus is not seen as a preoccupation with Moses' biographical background, but rather to facilitate greater insight into the theological truths reflected in the Torah (the 5 books). While the Book of Exodus does introduce us to the context in which Moses is born and reared, it then however presents us in the second chapter of the book with three vignettes, which are designed to do much more than provide biographical information.

Our biblical commentators have noted that while in Exodus Chapter 2 v. 10 it states "and the lad grew up", in the next verse it states "and Moses grew up". With some homiletical latitude, they suggest that whereas the former refers to Moses' physical development, the latter refers to his re-

ligio-ethical development. Undoubtedly this moral maturation is precisely the subject of focus in these vignettes that follow.

Moses has grown up in the security and insulation of the royal palace. His moral development becomes apparent with his exit from that detachment, as it is written, “he went out unto his brothers”. Perhaps becoming properly acquainted with their plight for the first time – certainly identifying with it with unprecedented intensity – Moses is immediately challenged by what he sees. Indeed, either (as the ancient midrashic homily would have it) in order to save the life of one of the Israelite slaves, or simply incensed beyond control by the inhumane treatment he observed, he smites and kills an Egyptian, presumably one of the taskmasters.

The next vignette in the next verse refers to the second day (which in Hebrew could mean “the next day”, or “on another day”), when he comes across two Israelites fighting and seeks to pacify them. Here Moses’ moral growth is evident beyond the basic sense of identity with his people in the face of oppression. He perceives the destructiveness of internal dissent and rancor and desires peaceful and harmonious relations between members of the community themselves. However, in this episode, he discovers his personal jeopardy, flees Egypt and arrives in Midian, where we are presented with the third vignette. Moses springs to the defense of the daughters of Jethro tending their father’s flocks, who are harassed at the well by local shepherds. Moses’ sense of absolute justice is now revealed as not restricted only to his own people, but expressed in relation to all and especially the vulnerable. Indeed Moses’ understanding of vulnerability, in particular that of the alien, is now his personal experience. When his first son is born to him and Zipporah Jethro’s daughter, he names him Gershom, meaning “a stranger there” declaring, “for I have been a stranger in a foreign land” (Exodus 2 v.22).

Added to these vignettes is a homiletical (midrashic) exposition of the next narrative in the Biblical text. Moses is tending Jethro’s flocks “beyond the desert” at Horeb, where he experiences a theophany at the burn-

ing bush. Here he receives the revelation, which affirms the fundamental moral truths he has intuitively perceived. Inflicting suffering and persecution are wrong. There is a transcendent righteousness and its source, the One God, "I am that I am", that is the truth and essence of reality – declares it so affirming deliverance and liberation of the children of Israel from such oppression.

The millennia old Midrash paints a beautiful image in which the Rabbis seek to embellish this Biblical narrative and further emphasize the essential quality in Moses' moral growth that is at the heart of his understanding of the Divine Will and thus his suitability to be its agent. The Midrash takes its cue from the phrase in Exodus 3 v.1 "and Moses led his flock beyond the desert". What was he doing so far away, asks the Midrash? The explanation, we are told, is that Moses discovered that a lamb was lost and went to look for it and found that it had strayed looking for water and was now exhausted. When Moses found it he said "I didn't realize how thirsty you were and now you are exhausted" and he lifted it up onto his shoulders in order to take it back home. Upon seeing this the Almighty declared "such a compassionate one, is the appropriate person to take my people out of bondage"!

Returning to the Biblical text; at the heart of Moses' personal revelation is his perception of the Character of God. Indeed, therein lies the revolutionary nature of Biblical monotheism. The concept of one god was not new. We know that such contention had previously been made for Akhenaton in Egypt, just as it was made in Babylon for Marduk and elsewhere for others entitled "supreme God of Gods". The revolutionary aspect of Biblical monotheism lies in its perception of the One God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, as a moral God (cf. Deut. 10 v.17), of justice (Exodus 23 v.7), for whom all unrighteousness is an abomination (Deut. 25 v.16). Thus, for the first time, morality was represented as a prophetic revelation, as the supreme moral Will of God.

In this context the Bible reveals a new model in human history that Moses epitomizes – the messenger prophet. As opposed to former expressions of religion, religious authority is vested not in the form of a powerful magician, not even a priest, nor a conqueror, but a messenger of God. Such a thing had never been heard of before (Y. Kaufman, *The Religion of Israel*, p. 284) and resulted in a new paradigm for the prophetic and charismatic figures that emerged from the Biblical Tradition. Moses commences his vocation as such, with particular focus on his people and their liberation, revealing God's Nature and Will, not only as moved by compassion for His People's suffering, but also as dutiful and loyal to His Covenant made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Exodus 6 v.3-8).

Yet the theological and moral ramifications of this understanding of the Divine character and Will are of course, of universal import. To begin with if this world is the domain of one supreme moral God, how was it that His Will was not universally observed? What was the source of all this struggle and tension in our world? The kind of mythological interpretation of a clash of divine forces that prevailed in the pre-Mosaic world outlook was no longer tenable. Instead a new understanding came into being – the historical-moral dimension expressed in human defiance of God. History was conceived of as a struggle between the Will of God and the human will that chooses to disobey the former. There is accordingly in Mosaic Scripture, no principle of evil alongside the One Supreme Benevolent Power, but rather, evil is the necessary consequence of the freedom given to human beings, enabling them to defy God and choose sin. Accordingly, the confrontation in which God is involved at the dawning of Moses' career, is not the result of the opposition of other gods or invisible forces, but results from a human source in the form of a defiant pagan and immoral empire in the persons of Pharaoh and his magicians.

God controls all nature – there is no room for a “battle of gods”, but man does not yet know Him or refuses to heed His command. “Who is God that I should hearken to His voice”, “I do not know God” says Pharaoh in Exodus 5 v.2. This confrontation of the Will of God that Moses represents

on the one hand, with the human evil personified in Pharaoh on the other, is the beginning of the Israelite struggle – the struggle of ethical monotheism with pagan immoral society.

The idea is expressed in an unparalleled myth. God revealed himself not to one visionary, a priest or a sage, but to a whole people. The word of God, the Divine Will, was communicated to a whole community. Morality was thus transferred from the realm of wisdom to the realm of prophecy, the realm of the absolute Divine Command. Accordingly, while the position of Moses as messenger-prophet transcends the tribal organization, going beyond the elders as the apostle of God; his purpose as leader, judge and legislator (Exodus 18 v.13) is to ensure that the Divine Will is expressed in the moral legal norms of the community; it is the people as a whole that is called to take up the burden of being “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”, as the vehicle for the struggle and triumph of the Divine Will – and bring about the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.

Moses’ commitment to this ideal is evidenced powerfully in Numbers 11 v.16-30 on the occasion when two persons by the names of Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp and Joshua, Moses’ servant, wants his master to stop them. “Are you jealous for me” is Moses’ modest and inspiring response, “would that all the Lord’s people were prophets”.

Indeed Moses’ dedication to the role of the people as a whole goes so far as intervening with God when the latter is portrayed as contemplating the destruction of the people for its sinfulness (after the sin of the Golden Calf; the evil report of the spies; and the rebellion of Korah). For Moses, the destruction of the people, even if the people are sinful, ultimately undermines the struggle for the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth itself and he pleads with God accordingly (Exodus 32 v.10-14; and Numbers 14 v.12-20). In the bold theology of the Hebrew Bible, God Himself accepts and endorses Moses’ position.

Nevertheless, the ultimate goal for which Moses aspires as reflected in the Torah – namely the sanctification of God’s Name in the world – comes above all through the people’s commitment to and practice of the Will of God as stated in Lev. 22 v.31 and 32, and also Deut 4 v.5-8 which is perceived as the very reflection of God’s Character. Through the Exodus, God is revealed as the Lord of History (Exodus 6 v.3), truthful and steadfast in His word and promise (ibid v.8) and awesome in his destruction of injustice and falsehood (Exodus 3 v.20 and 12 v.12).

Yet above all, Moses knows the most profound Attribute in the Divine Character – as stated in Deut 4 v.31 “For the Lord your God is a compassionate God”. And just as He heard the oppressed people’s cry in Egypt (Exodus 3 v.7) he continues to respond to the cry of the poor and oppressed as stated in Exodus 22 v.22 & 26. Indeed, what Moses knows from his own experience, is clarified for him directly as the Divine Attributes, revealed in the theophany recorded in Exodus 34 v.6 (and also in Numbers 14 v.18), precisely in the context of his abovementioned interventions seeking forgiveness on behalf of the people; “...God is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abundant in loving-kindness and truthfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin...”.

Note that out of all the Attributes that could be afforded to God, these are the ones that are portrayed as the quintessential attributes. Accordingly, the sages of the Mishnah and Talmud, undoubtedly echoing the most ancient traditional exegesis, understand the meaning of the Tetragrammaton, the name of God revealed with the Exodus, to denote the quality of Mercy, as opposed to the name Elohim, denoting the quality of Justice.

The attribute of Justice is fundamental to the Mosaic conception of God (cf. Exodus 23 v.7); so fundamental that when God is portrayed as contemplating an action that seems to defy natural justice, Moses confronts the Lord of Justice in Numbers 16 v.22 with the words “O Lord of the spirits of all flesh, one man sins and You would vent Your anger on the

whole congregation?” With these words Moses echoes those of Abraham in Genesis 18 v.25 concerning the fate of Sodom: “will the Judge of the whole world not do justice?” Indeed Genesis 18 v.19 describes “the way of the Lord” to be “justice and righteousness”. Moreover, Moses’ first preoccupation after the Exodus (in addition to guaranteeing provision and security) is the administration of justice to all (Exodus 18 v.13).

However as mentioned, the central Attribute that Moses recognizes in the Divine Character is that of Compassion, of mercy and love and forgiveness; and Justice and Mercy are not always in consonance with one another. Accordingly, the Midrash anthropo-morphically depicts the Divine prayer that the celestial quality of Mercy should triumph over the quality of Justice, in effect telling us that in our world in the tension between Justice and Mercy, it is Mercy that should prevail.

Thus the very commandment to sanctify God’s Name in the world, by being holy because He is holy (Leviticus 19 v.1) and the commandments to cleave to God (Deut. 10. v20) and to walk in His ways (Deut. 13 v.5) are understood to mean to emulate the Divine Attributes. As the second Century sage Abba Shaul puts it; “Just as He is compassionate and merciful, so you be compassionate and merciful” (Mekhilta, Canticles, 3). Similarly in the Babylonian Talmud, tractate Sotah 14a, we are told “Just as the Lord clothes the naked, as He did with Adam and Eve, so you should clothe the naked. Just as the Lord visits the sick, as He did with Abraham (after his circumcision), so you should visit the sick. Just as the Lord comforts the bereaved, as He did with Isaac (after the death of Sarah), so you should comfort the bereaved. Just as the Lord buries the dead, as He did with Moses, so you should bury the dead.”

Indeed, the nineteenth chapter of Leviticus which begins with the injunction mentioned above “You shall be holy”, is overwhelmingly made up of social ethical commandments, reaching a climax with the Golden Rule in Leviticus 19 v.18 “And you shall love your neighbor as yourself, I am the Lord”.

Yet while these ethical commandments emanate from the Divine Character itself that is revealed to Moses, they are supported by the insights of human experience, above all the experience of alienation and vulnerability, that Moses and the Children of Israel had experienced both separately and together.

As Exodus 23. v.9 declares “You shall not oppress the stranger for you know the soul, (the feelings) of the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt”; “...the stranger you shall not afflict...you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt, I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19 v.34. Similarly, Exodus 22, v.20; Deut. 10, v.19; 24 v. 18, 22). So important, apparently, is the memory of this experience of having been a stranger for ensuring moral conduct, that we are reminded of it time and again. According to the Talmud (BT), Bava Metzia 59b, thirty six times the reminder is reiterated in order to prevent the real danger that those who have been through the experience of victimization as aliens will seek to forget their experience and lose sensitivity for those who are now in such a position. Indeed, in Deut 23 v.8 the experience of having been a stranger is even called upon to expunge bitter feelings towards the nation of the oppressors themselves.

As opposed to the views of the Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, the Divine instruction that Moses conveys, envisions an ethical society in which all persons are capable of living up to the moral standards to which it aspires. The ancient Alexandrian Jewish philosopher Philo describes this society as a “democracy” in that “it honors equality and has law and justice for all (including) its rulers”. Aristotle on the other hand, does not believe that the populace at large is capable of the necessary self-restraint. Democratic societies he declares “have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention...incompatible with personal security or property rights...as short in their lives as they are violent in their deaths”.

The inevitable consequence of this Greek viewpoint however, is the permanent denial of dignity and opportunity to whole-scale sections of soci-

ety, i.e. some form of totalitarianism. The Mosaic code has a far grander view of human capabilities throughout all segments of human society. A view that Philo describes as democratic. Yet it understands full well the principle articulated by Erich Fromm in his study of the totalitarian impulse, that “freedom from” (i.e. license) cannot endure without “freedom to” (i.e. the self-discipline not to abuse lack of constraints). Indeed if the populace is unable to control itself, democracy is a recipe for anarchy. Thus the education of the people in discipline and restraint, necessary for greater awareness and respect, is essential if the society as a whole is to embrace a social vision for all its members. Accordingly, Torah – the Divine instruction of this way of life – while born out of the Divine Will, also seeks to generate a consciousness of that Will and the Divine Presence, in our personal and social lives. It does this through a comprehensive discipline, a way of life that requires our consciousness in all matters even the most basic down to the way we eat and drink.

The value of discipline for the establishment of the Kingdom of God would have been more than apparent for Moses. We may speculate as to what extent in retrospect, Moses did or did not consider his killing of the Egyptian taskmaster to have been a hasty action lacking in self-restraint. There are those modern commentators who have suggested that his remorse for such, had a profound influence upon him and his understanding of the Divine Will (C. Potok, Wanderings p.65). One way or another, he had certainly experienced first hand, the destructive degeneracy of unrestrained power and of the idolatry that enables one person or group to exploit and victimize others. In perceiving the evil of such, versus the goodness and value of humane behavior, Moses would have clearly recognized the relationship between discipline and morality. There is thus a profound link between the ritual and social-ethical, in the moral Weltanschauung of the Mosaic code.

Undoubtedly Moses’ personal experience growing up in the royal palace giving him a sense of self-esteem and then experiencing oppression and

Moses

servitude prepared him for a comprehensive vision of moral liberation, ethical conduct and a religiously disciplined way of life.

Accordingly while the Bible presents Abraham Isaac and Jacob as the original ethical-monotheistic prototypes, Moses is the individual who is chosen to be the vehicle through which the fullness of Divine Revelation is brought down to humankind, revealing a comprehensive way of moral living and religious striving for the fulfillment of human potential and destiny.

Moses in the Light of the New Testament

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The name 'Moses' is mentioned in the New Testament more than any other Old Testament personality. He is mentioned 79 times especially as 'legislator', 'prophet' and 'role model' for the New Testament. Moses is cited notably in comparisons drawn between Judaism and Christianity, usually to express Judaism's fulfillment in Christianity.

I. Moses as Writer of the Pentateuch and Lawgiver

In the apostolic period, Christians believed that Moses was the author of the Pentateuch and the lawgiver. The Synoptic texts and Acts frequently refer to Moses in connection with the law (e.g., "Law of Moses," "Moses commanded", "Moses said", "Moses wrote," "Moses allowed," and similar constructions (Mark 1:44, Matt 8:4, Luke 5:14; Mark 7:10; 10:3-4; Mark 12:19; Matt 22:24; Luke 20:28; Matt 19:7-8; Acts 3:22; 26:22). Some of these citations are explained below:

- 1) "Law of Moses": Luke 2:22 states, "*When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord*". This text shows the faithfulness of Jesus' parents to the Law.

- 2) "Moses commanded" - *When some Pharisees¹ asked Jesus about marriage and divorce," Why did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard"* (Matt.19:7-8).
- 3) "Moses said" - *When the Pharisees and scribes gathered around Jesus to discuss with him the tradition of the elders, "Jesus said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition. For Moses said, Honour thy father and thy mother; and, whoso curseth father or mother, let him die the death. But ye say, if a man shall say to his father or mother, It is Corban, that is to say, a gift, by whatsoever thou, mightiest be profited by me; he shall be free...Making the word of God of none effect through your tradition."* (Mark 7:8-13).
- 4) "Moses wrote" - *When the Sadducees came to Jesus objecting about the resurrection on the basis of Mosaic law saying: "Master, Moses wrote unto us, If a man's brother die, and leave his wife behind him, and leave no children, that his brother take his wife, and raise up seed unto his brother... and Jesus answering said unto them, Do ye not therefore err, because ye know not the scriptures, neither the power of God"* (Mark12:18-25).
- 5) "Moses' Seat" - *Sitting on the "seat of Moses" refers generally to sitting in the place of authority and majesty. Sitting on the "Seat of Moses" is a symbol of the role of Moses in authority. Here it indicates the official authority of scribes to teach. In this sense Jesus said to the multitude and to his disciples: 'the scribes and the Pharisees seated themselves in "Moses' seat" (Matt 23:1, 2). This chair in a synagogue was a symbol of the legal authority of Moses, which the*

¹ Pharisees are a religious party believing in the law, in the tradition and in the resurrection. Jesus denounced Pharisaism partly because of the hypocrisy of some its representatives who "says, and do not" (Matt23:3), but partly also because Pharisaism had compromised God's absolute and righteous demand (Mt15:3) see I. Abrahams, *Studies in Pharisaism and the Gospels*, New York 1967.

scribes and Pharisees felt they inherited as teachers of Jewish law. So they have the authority of interpretation of the law. It was the seat for the most distinguished elder and was next to the ark of the Torah in the synagogue.² Jesus recognizes this authority of the scribes who generally belong to the Pharisees.³

- 6) "The book of Moses" - In the Synoptic and Acts the Pentateuch itself is designated as "The book of Moses" (Mark 12:26), the "Law of Moses" (Luke 2:22; 24:44; Acts 13:39; 15:5; 28:23), or just "Moses" (Luke 16:29,31; 31:20:37; 24:27; Acts 15:21). Therefore as the author of the five books of the Law, Moses was under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit so that what he wrote was God-breathed (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21). Thus the five books of Moses, whose human author was the servant of God, are also the Word of God.
- 7) Moses and Jesus: John the Evangelist affirms that God spoke to Moses (John 9:29) and that Moses gave not only the Law (7:19) and the circumcision (7:22) but also wrote of Jesus in the Law (1:45; 5:46). According to this argument, those who truly believed the writings of Moses would thereby believe Jesus: "*For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me*" (5:46). Thus, rejection of Jesus in fact leads to Moses' accusation of that person, because he doesn't understand the real meaning of the Law; i.e. the approach toward the sublime revelation in Christ (1:17, 6:32, 7:22-23, 9:28-29). Apart from this, being a disciple of Moses is incompatible with being a follower of Jesus (9:28).

On the other hand John refers to the superiority of Jesus over Moses when he says: "*For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ*" (1:17). John expresses the fulfillment of the law by Jesus and shows the difference between the Mosaic Law and grace. The Mosaic

² Such chairs of solid stone have been found in synagogue ruins at Dura Europos, Chorazin and Hammath S. of Tiberias. See E. Kraeling, *Bible Atlas*. Chicago 1956, 378.

³ D. Allison, "Jesus and Moses", in *Expository Times*, Surrey 1987, 203-205.

Law demands obedience, though it has no power to give life. Grace, on the other hand, forgives and the truth shall make free⁴ (John 8:32).

II. Moses as Prophet

A prophet is one who speaks the words of God on behalf of God. He listens to the words of God or he sees visions, then he proclaims what he has heard or has seen (Deuteronomy 7:18). He receives words and proclaims to others what reached him from the message. The prophet also declares concerning events, which will happen in the future. Moses played both of these prophetic roles. The books of the New Testament describe Moses as prophet. He prophesied the coming of Messiah and his suffering. Three principal texts suffice as confirmation:

- 1) The conversation of Jesus with the disciples of Emmaus⁵: After the crucifixion, two of the disciples, who were on their way from Jerusalem, met the risen Christ there without recognizing him (Luke 24:13). Jesus said to them: *"O fools, and slow of heart to believe all the prophets have spoken: Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself"* (Luke 24: 25-27)." This episode is one of the most important in the gospels in explaining the transformation, which the disciples of the earthly Jesus underwent after his resurrection. From being mere eyewitnesses, they became heralds of the risen Christ whom they recognized in the breaking of the bread (Luke

⁴ It is not intended here neither political freedom nor the self interior control that the persons may arrive to it through his mind but the freedom against the lie (John 8:44) and against the death (John 8:24 , 51). This freedom is the power on the life abundantly (John 10:10) through the union with the Son and the Father (John 3:3). This eschatological freedom is a gift tied with truth that man reaches it through Jesus.

⁵ Emmaus is identified with Imwas, about 29 km northwest of Jerusalem. In the Persian period, it was known as Hamthan, a name, which means "hot springs"; this is a reference to the springs near the city, which are mentioned in the Jewish sources.

24:35) and in the study of the Scripture, i.e. from Moses to all the prophets (Luke 24:32. 45). This combination became the basis for the principal form of worship of the new faith.

- 2) The sermon of Peter⁶ in Solomon's porch in Jerusalem: The opening chapters of Acts leave no doubt about Peter's role as leader. He was the spokesman. He preached the first sermon to his fellow Jews, assuring that he recognized Moses as a prophet, just as Moses himself recognized Jesus as a prophet: "*For Moses truly said unto the fathers, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you*" (Acts 3: 22). Moses served as a prophet who delivered God's words to the people. He was to be the pattern for all true prophets who followed, culminating in Jesus, the Messiah (Deut 18:15, 18). We may conclude that Jesus is indeed a prophet like Moses (Acts 3:22, John 1:21, 6:14, 7:14), but he is greater than a prophet (Matt 12:6, Luke 11:32). Yet for Matthew, Jesus is superior: Moses' presence at the transfiguration confirms Jesus' sonship (Matt 17:1-8), and that sonship is clearly superior to Moses' status as God's prophet (Heb 3:1-6). On the other hand, no Jew belongs to the people of God if he has not accepted Jesus or will accept him (Acts 15:14).
- 3) Stephen's sermon: Stephen⁷ was a Jew from the Diaspora living in Jerusalem. He accepted Christianity and was one of the seven deacons chosen by the disciples to care for the widows and other needy people in the community of Jerusalem (Acts 6:1-5). Stephen is called

⁶ Peter (Simon): One of the original twelve apostles and their leader following Jesus' ascension. Originally from the village of Bethsaida on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee (John 1:44) He was married and a fisherman by trade together with his brother Andrew (Mark 1:16). His home was in Capernaum (Mark 1:21). When Jesus called him, he was given the added name Cepha (Aramaic: "stone", Greek: "Peter", hence Peter). After Jesus' ascension, Peter was very clearly the leader.

⁷ Stephen is a Greek word means a crown. According to some traditions, his place of execution is near the present St. Stephan's Gate (also called the Lion's Gate). Before his death Stephan prayed for those about to stone him: "Lord, do not charge them with this sin" (Acts 7:60). The martyrdom of Stephan was watched with approval by the young Saul; later to be called Paul (Acts 7:58-8:1).

“a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5). When he taught in the synagogue of Diaspora Jews, opponents accused him of blasphemy and brought him to the Jewish council (Acts 6:11-12). False witnesses charged him with preaching “Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs which Moses delivered to us” (Acts 6:13-14). When the high priest gave Stephen the opportunity to defend himself, he delivered a sermon showing that he respected Moses (7:20-43), the Law (7:38) and the Temple (7:4). Then he added how Moses himself prophesied of the coming prophet after him who is the Christ (7:37). Then he blamed the Jews for resisting Moses (7:39-42) and denounced them because they refused Christ himself and killed him. Acts records: “*Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye. Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? And they have slain them which showed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have been now the betrayers and murderers*” (Acts 7:52-53). Stephan shows that Moses is a symbol and type of Jesus. As the Jews refused Moses, so they refused Christ and killed him⁸.

III. Moses as a Model of Life in the New Testament

There are many references in the New Testament to Moses' life, and his experiences are used as role models for the New Testament. In fact, Moses was the greatest figure in the Old Testament, for he was its human founder and as such was an image of Christ (Heb 3:1-6).

- 1) Birth of Moses: There are similarities between the form of the story of the birth of Moses and that of the story of the birth of Jesus. Both figures were saved from death in their infancy. As Pharaoh searched for the Israelite children to kill them and Moses was saved (Exodus 2:1-10), so Herod searched for the infants in Bethlehem to kill them

⁸ L. Johnson, *The Literary Function of Possessions in Luke - Acts*, Missoula 1977, 70-76.

and Jesus was saved (Matt 2:13-18). The birth of Moses is also mentioned by Stephan (Acts 7:2) and author of the letter to the Hebrews (Heb 11:23)⁹.

- 2) Refusal of Pharaoh's fatherhood: Moses refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter (Exodus 2:10-15), for he would lose his religion. The author of the Hebrews comments on this episode saying: *"He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt (Heb 11:24-25). Jesus also refused the kingdom of the world, because he could not accept it without obeying the requirements of the devil (Luke 4:5-8).*
- 3) Magicians of Egypt: Paul refers to the Magicians of Egypt when he warns of the terrible times of the last days saying: *"In the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy. With natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good Traitors, heady, high-minded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God... Now as Jannes and Jambres withstood Moses so do these also resist the truth."* (2 Tim 3:1-8).
- 4) Flight of Moses: As Moses fled from Pharaoh who sought to slay him and dwelt in the land of Midian (Exodus 2:13-15), so Jesus fled from Herod who sought to kill him and dwelt in Egypt (Matt: 2:13-15).
- 5) The Burning Bush: The burning¹⁰ bush was the means by which God attracted Moses' attention and revealed Himself at the time of Moses' call to become Israel's deliverer (Exodus 3:2-4). The blazing flame which did not consume the bush and had no human agent to

⁹ R. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, New York 1977, 110-119.

¹⁰ Burning (the act of consuming combustible material by fire), is used in Scripture in both a literal and figurative sense, signifying total consecration to God (Lev 6:9).

kindle it illustrated to Moses the self-sufficiency and unapproachable holiness of God.¹¹ The flame is a symbol of deity as Exodus illustrates: *‘The angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush’* (Exodus 3:2 cf. Gen 3:24; 15:17; Exodus 13:21; 19:18). The audible voice of God declaring the holiness of the place enabled Moses to recognize that God was dwelling in the bush, as he later recalled (Deut 33:16). So Jesus did not hesitate to use the bush to prove the resurrection of the dead when he called the Lord “the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”. (Luke 20:37 cf. Exodus 3:6).

- 6) Mighty in words and in deeds: Stephan, the first Christian martyr, described Moses with these words: “ *He was mighty in words and in deeds* ” (Acts 7:22). These are the same words that disciples of Emmaus used for Jesus (Luke 24:19).
- 7) Passover: The biblical account (Exodus 12) associates the name with events relating to the tenth plague. When God passed through Egypt, smiting every firstborn in the land, he spared the firstborn of the Israelites, by “passing over” their house whose doorposts and lintels were marked by the blood of the paschal lamb as He had ordered. Thus, the Passover is the first of three major festivals in the Jewish liturgical calendar, celebrating the most significant event in Israel’s history, the deliverance from Egypt. The letter to the Hebrews refers to Passover, focusing on the faith of Moses: “*Through faith Moses kept the Passover, and the sprinkling of blood, lest he that destroyed the firstborn should touch them.*” (Heb 11:28). Paul also refers to the Jewish Passover: “*Purge out therefore the old leaven that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us*” (1Cor 5:7). The leaven is the symbol of corruption (Matt16:6) and malice and wickedness (1Cor 5:8), while the lump is the symbol of sincerity and truth. (1Cor 5:8).

¹¹ Burning bush is not a symbol of the afflictions of Israel in Egypt as many commentators have suggested.

All four Gospels also state that towards the end of his life, Jesus wished to share a Passover meal with his disciples (Matt 26:2-19; Mark 14:1-16; Luke 22:1-15; John 11:55-12:2). The Synoptic Gospels identify the last Supper with the Passover meal. At that meal Jesus inaugurated the observance of the meal of thanksgiving (Eucharist), in which his disciples would remember his work and death until he came again. For early Christians, the last Supper became the new feast commemorating deliverance by Christ.¹²

The liturgical Book of the Passover obliges destroying the leaven left in the house, sacrificing the paschal lamb and eating the lump. All these are images of Christ, who is the real paschal lamb that spoils the leaven of sin and opens the possibility of walking in the Paschal way built on truth and sincerity.

- 8) Mediator of the covenant: As Moses was the mediator of the Old Testament, so Jesus is the mediator of the New Testament. Moses cut the covenant by means of the blood of goats and calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, sprinkled it on the scroll and all the people, but Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people by his blood (Heb 9:11-22). So, *"the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises"* (Heb 8:6).
- 9) Crossing through the Red Sea: The Letter to Hebrews focuses on the faith of Moses and his people when they crossed the Red Sea and presents it as a lesson for Christians: *"By faith they passed through the Red Sea as dry land: which the Egyptians assaying to do were drowned"* (Heb 11:29).

¹² Passover begins on the 15th of Nisan, and lasts for seven days, during which only unleavened bread may be eaten, in commemoration of an event linked with the Exodus. In their haste to leave Egypt, the Israelites took their dough before it was leaved, baking it into unleavened bread (Exodus 12:34, 39). This bread, to which Deuteronomy 16:3 refers as "the bread of affliction," is known as מצה, "Mitza".

There is another explicit reference to the Red Sea Crossing in Revelation. It depicts those who conquered the beast and are standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands while *“they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb.”* (Revelation 15:3). The phrase, “the song of Moses, the servant of God” is reminiscent of Exodus 14:31-15:21 where Moses and the people of Israel sing a song to the Lord extolling God’s power and exulting in the destruction of their enemies. As that song in Exodus (14:31-15:21) was sung on the shore of the Red Sea, so in Rev 15:3 will the victorious martyrs sing beside the sea of glass glorifying the Lord.

- 10) The Exodus: Paul refers to the exodus in his letter to the Corinthians. He writes;” *Our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and did all eat the same spiritual meat; and did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ”* (1Cor 10:1-4). He shows that Moses is a type of Jesus; the clouds (Exodus 13:21) and sea crossing (Exodus 14:22) are symbols of Christian Baptism,¹³ and the manna¹⁴ (Exodus 16:4-35) and water from the rock (Exodus 17:5-6; Num 20:7-11) are symbols of the Eucharist.

The letter to the Hebrews refers to Massah and Meribah¹⁵ (Exodus 17:7), the miracles of the Exodus and the punishment that God sent for forty years to the people who refused the gift of God and caused His wrath on them:” *Wherefore (as the Holy Ghost said, today if ye will*

¹³ Exodus: In Cor 10:2 Paul expresses that all those who passed through the Exodus were “baptized into Moses (eis Moysen) in the cloud and in the sea”. The phrase eis Moysen is modeled on the baptismal formula eis christen (Rom 6:3); Gal 3:27).

¹⁴ Jesus referred to manna as the “bread of heaven” adding that he himself was the “living bread which came down from heaven”. Anyone who partook of this bread would live forever (John6:31-35; cf I Cor 10:3; Rev 2:17).

¹⁵ Massah and Meribah: names of two places in Rephidim, so called because it was there the Children of Israel tempted the Lord, saying “Is the Lord among us, or not?” (Exodus17:7). The cause of the quarrel (Massah and Meribah both mean quarrel in Hebrew) was the lack of water at Rephidim.

hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation in the day of temptation in the wilderness: When your fathers tempted me, proved me and saw my works forty years. Wherefore I was grieved with that generation, and said, they do always err in their heart; and they have not known my ways. So I sware in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest” (3:9-11).

In the Transfiguration scene Moses appears along with Elijah and both talk about Jesus’ exodus (ἐξοδόν) (Luke 9:13), which he must accomplish by his death, resurrection and ascension. This new exodus helps the faithful to approach God. The mystery will be completed in Jerusalem, center of the history of salvation. As representatives of the Israel of old, Moses and Elijah disappear, leaving Jesus alone. The instruction by the heavenly voice to listen to Jesus “relates him intimately to the reshaping of Israel as God’s people”.¹⁶

- 11) Leadership of Moses: The letter to the Hebrews refers to the many verses describing the leadership of Moses over the people of Israel when they leave Egypt (3:16, 18). Some of the characteristics of that leadership include: Levitical priesthood (7:14), the tabernacle he made for the cult (8:5), the Law he gave to people (9:19; 10:28), and the fear and trembling of Moses on Sinai (12:21). The letter to the Hebrews tries to compare these characteristics with that of Christianity and finds the superiority of Christianity over Judaism in all cases. In only one text is Moses unrivaled. The text, which describes Moses as a model of faith, presents him as one of those in the great cloud of witnesses (12:1) who believe in Jesus. The addressees are encouraged to run with patience the race that is set before them (12:1).
- 12) The Law: The gospels depict Jesus as a practicing Jew who observed the Law - he attended synagogue on the Sabbath (Mark 1:21; 3:1), went to Jerusalem for the pilgrim festivals (Mark 11:1; Luke 2:41), wore the ritual fringes on garments (Mark 6:56) and came “not to

¹⁶ Fitzmyer, Luke 1-IX *Anchor Bible*, 795.

destroy but to fulfill” the Law (Matt5:17). The Law represents the will of God; it is not in itself sufficient to ensure salvation but reaches fulfillment only through the teaching of Jesus.

As Moses gave the Law¹⁷ on Mount Sinai (Ex.34:29-35), so Jesus delivered his sermon on the Beatitudes on the Mount (Matt.5-7). De-litzsch has called the Mount of Beatitudes the “Sinai of the New Testament.” This sermon presents Jesus as possessor of authority to proclaim the will of God. Moses gave the law of human life, while Jesus gave the law of spiritual life. The Law sets before man a perfect standard of conduct, but it does not supply the means whereby that standard may now be attained (Rom 7:21-25); the Gospel supplies the means whereby God’s standard of righteousness might be acquired by the believer through faith in Christ (Matt 5:20; Rom 8:1-4; Gal 2:21; Phil 3:9). In other words, the Law promises life on terms of perfect obedience (Lev 18:5 Luke 10:20; Gal 3:10), a requirement now impossible for man (Acts 13:3; Rom 3:20; Gal 2:16); the Gospel promises life on terms of faith in the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ (Rom 5:18-19; Phil 2:8). The Law leads to Christ (Gal3: 19-25), and on the basis of faith in Jesus Christ the Gospel pronounces man righteous (Rom 3:22-28; 1 Cor1:30 Phil 3:9). John affirmed this idea by saying: “*For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ*” (John1:17).

For Paul the Law is excellent and divine (Rom3:2; 7:12, 14; Gal 2:21), but its impact on man is ambiguous as it reveals sinfulness without providing delivery from it. The Law cannot therefore be seen as final and calls for another dispensation. This idea points towards the new era inaugurated by Christ (Gal 3:23; Col 2:17). Christians can attain justification (Gal 3:2) by faith, guided by love

¹⁷ The main source of law in the Bible is the Pentateuch, which, besides the Ten Commandments, contains more than 6000 regulations said to have been dictated by God to Moses. They are interspersed among the historical narrative in three main collections: the Book of the Covenant (Ex 20:22-22-23), the priestly rules (most of Lev, and Num 5:5-6:21; 15:1-30; 18:28-30; 35:9-34 and the Book of the Deuteronomy (chaps 12-26).

(Gal 5:14); Christ's death and resurrection mean that he has taken upon himself the curse invoked by the Law and therefore no one is bound by it any longer (Gal 2:19; 3:13; Rom 7:4, 6). Both Gentiles and Jews were saved by the grace of Jesus (Acts 15:11). The purpose of the Law was not to save man but to lead him to Jesus the Savior.

Paul refers to the covenant of Law (i.e. of Moses) as covenant of the letter, while the covenant of Christ is the covenant of the Spirit. The Law of Moses is a letter as it requires from man obedience that he cannot do, thereby leading him to death (Rom 7:5). The literal use of the Law lets it become an inert formula (2 Cor 3:14). The Old Testament text does not complete the Old one, but it is a transition from what is written to what is lived in the heart: the text without the spirit kills, just as the spirit without a text has no voice (Jr.31:31; Ezekiel 36:26). Paul illustrates this comparison between the letter and the spirit of the Law by saying: "*Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God...He has enabled us to be ministers of new covenant- not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life*" (2 Cor 3:4-6 cf. Galatians also).

- 13) The glory on the face of Moses: The shining face of Moses was temporary and the result of his meeting with God (Ex 34:29-35). It is a personal privilege on contrary of the grace granted to all Christians. Paul states: "*We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory*" (2 Cor 3:18). In this text Paul opposes "the dispensation of condemnation" and "the dispensation of righteousness (of Spirit)". The former came with such splendor that Moses had to veil his face because of the brightness it reflected (3:7), a splendor that nevertheless was not lasting. In contrast, for Paul the dispensation of righteousness (of Spirit) far exceeds in splendor and is a permanent dispensation (3:11).

Within the same passage the veil image is also applied to Jews. In Paul's view, "to this day whenever Moses (i.e. the Law) is read, a

veil lies over their minds” (3:15) But Christians, however, “with unveiled face” behold as in a mirror “the glory of the Lord” and are “being changed into his likenesses“(3:18). This comparison suggests that while Moses who represents that dispensation, which has been superseded, he is that revelation which the Jews failed to perceive but which becomes comprehensible for one who “turns to the Lord” (3:16).¹⁸

14) Manna: The food eaten by the children of Israel during their 40 years in the desert (Ex 16:14-31), manna made its first appearance in the Wilderness of Sin when the Israelites protested to Moses and Aaron that they did not have sufficient food. God thereupon provided them with manna. Jesus referred to Manna as the “*bread of heaven*”, adding that he himself was “living bread which came down from heaven”. Anyone who partook of this bread would live forever (John 6:31-35; cf. I Cor 10:3; Rev 2:17).

15) Copper (Bronze) Serpent: When the Israelites were stricken by serpents as a punishment during their wandering in the desert, God commanded Moses to set up a copper serpent on a standard: the symbol had a therapeutic effect and anyone bitten by the venomous serpents could be healed by merely looking at it (Num 2:8-9). The author of Wisdom interprets the text in Numbers to mean mercy. It adds that the copper serpent has no power in itself.

John drew a parallel between the experience of Jesus and the story of the copper serpent, showing that Jesus who was lifted on the Cross is more sublime than the copper serpent, because he has power in himself. John finds in this a reminder of the Law and a sign of salvation that God set out for all peoples (John 3:14-17).

16) Affliction: The letter to the Hebrews states that both Moses and Jesus shared the suffering of affliction with the people of God. “*Moses chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time*”(Heb 11:25).

¹⁸ E. Wong, The Lord is the Spirit (2Cor 3, 17) *ETL* 61, 1985, 48-72.

- 17) Faithful in God's house: The letter to the Hebrews shows that Moses and Jesus are both faithful in God's house, but Jesus is on a superior level: Moses being faithful in God's house as a servant and one of the God's household (i.e. faithful community), while Jesus is faithful in God's house as son and builder. *"Jesus was faithful to him that appointed him, as also Moses was faithful in his entire house. For this man was worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as he who hath built the house hath more honor than the house.... And Moses verily was faithful in his entire house, as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken after; But Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are we"* (Heb 3:1-6).
- 18) Refusal of Israel: Moses was rejected ((Ex 2:13-15), as was Jesus (Acts 3:13-14). Stephan describes Moses as a prototype of Jesus, who came to bring salvation (Acts:7:25), wonders and signs (Acts 7:36) and to be the mediator between God and the people (Acts 7:38). He was rejected by Israel, just as *"Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not"*(Heb 7:25).
- 19) Resistance of the false teachers: Jude, brother of Jacob, and Paul refer in two texts to Moses as they warn of the risk of false teachers. In the first text, Jude describes the attitude of false teachers toward the body of Moses in the presence of the angels (Jude 1:9). In the second text Paul refers to the Magicians that have resisted Moses (as was mentioned in Ex 7:11, 22).

Conclusion

We may conclude that the text of the New Testament focuses principally on three characteristics: Moses as lawgiver, prophet and model of life, with reference to the superiority of Jesus. While Moses brought the Law, however (Matt 19:7, Mark 10:3, John 7:22), Jesus brought grace and truth (John 1:17).

Moses is seen as the prophet who points the way to Jesus (Luke 24:27, 44; John 5:45; Acts 3:22; 26:22). In the transfiguration, Moses (representing the Law) and Elijah (representing prophecy) stand with Jesus who is the fulfillment of both (Matt 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36).

On various occasions Moses' contribution is praised, but with stress on the superiority of Jesus (John 6:32; Heb 3:2f). At the same time, Jesus expresses his recognition of the Law of Moses, which he has come to fulfill, not to change (Matt 5:17). He fulfilled the ceremonial,¹⁹ civil and moral law by perfectly obeying God's commandments. By his obedience, he became the sinner's perfect righteousness for the broken law (Matt 3:15; Rom 10:3-4; 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 4:4-5). The ceremonial observances of the Law that He observed (Luke 2:21-27) and the basic rituals of the law (Mark 1:21; 14:12) that He taught others to observe (Luke 5: 14:14; 17:14) were valid up until the cross (Mt 27 27:521). Thus Moses acts as a guide to knowledge of the will of God and is part of the plan for our sanctification. At the same time, the requirement of the Law is fulfilled only by "the Holy Spirit as He works and through the believer in Jesus (Rom 8:3-4) who is the" *the way and the truth and the life*" (John 14:6).

¹⁹ Jesus fulfilled the ceremonial law by observing its rites (Lk2:21-27).

Prophet Moses: The Islamic Narrative

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Introduction

This paper attempts to reconstruct and reflect the story and status that Prophet Moses¹ (Peace be upon him) has occupied in the Islamic worldview. It is based primarily on the Qur'an where most of the narrative exists fragmented in different chapters. In essence, he had two roles to fulfill. The first was similar to all prophets and messengers; propagation of monotheism or *Tawhid*. The other was to deliver the Children of Israel from the bitter bondage and servitude that they endured in Egypt. Destination: The Holy Land.

It is important to maintain a certain healthy distance when dealing with the story of Prophet Moses because it is organically related to the story of the Children of Israel. The challenge is to read the narrative covering the distant past in its own historical perspective and not to allow it to color the contemporary scene. The other problem is allowing the present to color the reading of the past. At relevant junctures, I shall entertain some problems that emerged from mixing both worlds. I would like to mention here one verse that hopefully would help in creating a psychological buffer zone against generalizations and misconceptions:

“Of the people of Moses there is a section (ummah) who guide and do justice in the light of truth.” Qur'an, 7: 159

The story of Prophet Moses and the Children of Israel in Egypt goes back to the days of Prophet Joseph when he became part of the authority, assuming the responsibility for the economy of Egypt which was about to experience a severe famine. He had a plan to face this situation which he shared with the king and after the he was assured that his “rank was firmly established”, he asked to be entrusted with the task of managing the granaries in preparation for the “lean years”:

“[Joseph] said [to the King]: Set me over the storehouses of the land: I will indeed guard them, as one that knows [their importance]” Qur’an, 12: 55

While the Egyptians trusted Prophet Joseph’s administration and practical wisdom, his call to monotheism essentially faced the same fate like that of Prophet Moses. The latter formed the context for the following verse:

“And to you there came Joseph in times gone by, with Clear Signs, but ye ceased not to doubt of the [mission] for which he had come: at length, when he died, ye said: ‘No Messenger will God send after him.’ Thus doth God leave to stray such as transgress and live in doubt.” Qur’an, 40: 35

Prophet Joseph did well enough to bring his parents and brothers:

“Then when they entered the presence of Joseph, he provided a home for his parents with himself, and said: “Enter ye Egypt [all] in safety, God willing.”ⁱⁱ Qur’an, 12: 99

Therefore, Prophet Jacob and all the twelve tribes were in Egypt; Prophet Moses was one of their descendants. Yet, the days of good living for the Children of Israel were numbered. The Qur’an reminds them of the bad times when they were persecuted:

“And remember, We delivered you from the people of Pharaoh: they set you hard tasks and punishment, slaughtered your sons

and let your womenfolk live; therein was a tremendous trial from your Lord.” Qur’an, 2: 49

The story of persecution was reiterated in another chapter in the Qur’an:

“Truly Pharaoh elated himself in the land and broke up its people into sections, depressing a small group amongst them: their sons he slew, but he kept alive their females: for indeed he was a maker of mischief.” Qur’an, 28: 4

This Infant Was Destined to Survive!

Prophet Moses, as an infant, was about to face the same fate as the other Israelite male infants, yet Allah SWT had a different plan for him. His mother received divine inspiration to put him in a box and to put him in the water:

“So We sent this inspiration to the mother of Moses: “Suckle (thy child), but when thou hast fears about him, cast him into the river, but fear not nor grieve: for We shall restore him to thee, and We shall make him one of Our Messengers.” Qur’an, 28: 7

Ironically, the waves carried Prophet Moses to the very people who threatened his life; he landed in front of the family of the Pharaoh:

“Then the people of Pharaoh picked him up [from the river]: [it was intended] that [Moses] should be to them an adversary and a cause of sorrow: for Pharaoh and Haman and [all] of their hosts were men of sin.” Qur’an, 28: 8

It appears that the Pharaoh’s wife, not being aware of the destiny of this infant, was crucial in preserving the life of Prophet Moses:

“The wife of the Pharaoh said: “[Here is] a joy of the eye, for me and for thee: slay him not. It may be that he will be of use to us,

or we may adopt him as a son.” And they perceived not [what they were doing].” Qur’an, 28: 9

The Qur’an narrates how Prophet’s Moses’ mother was about to disclose the identity of the baby, for she had a broken heart. She asked his sister to keep track of what was happening to him. It was the will of God that he would not suckle from any other woman. His sister, who was acting as if she was in the vicinity as a coincidence, suggested that a household she knew were ready to take care of him on behalf of the Pharaoh’s family. He was back in his mother’s care and this was a Sign from God to her about the future of her son:

“Thus did We restore him to his mother, that her eye might be comforted, that she might not grieve, and that she might know that the promise of God is true; but most of them do not understand.” Qur’an, 28: 13

Prophet Moses Reaching Maturity

There aren’t many details about Prophet Moses’ adolescence in the Qur’an. In fact, the scene in the Qur’anic narrative shifts from infancy to maturity directly:

“When he reached full age, and was firmly established [in life], We bestowed on him wisdom and knowledge: for thus do We reward those who do good.” Qur’an, 28: 14

Despite Prophet Moses’ prolonged relationship with the house of the Pharaoh, his character was neither tainted with their beliefs nor reflected a shift in his loyalty to his people. That he was on the side of his people surfaced when a fight took place between an Israelite and another man:

“And he entered the city at a time when its people were not watching: and he found there two men fighting – one of his own people, and the other, of his foes. Now the man of his own peo-

ple appealed to him against his foe, and Moses struck with his fist and made an end from him..." [Qur'an, 28: 15]

He immediately realized that what he had done was evil and that he wronged himself. He repented and asked God for forgiveness:

"...He said: "This is an [evil] work of Satan: for he is an enemy that manifestly misleads.

He prayed: "O my Lord! I have indeed wronged my soul! Do Thou then forgive me! So [God] forgave him: for He is the Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful." Qur'an, 28:15-16.

Yet, this was not the end of the story. Apparently, as a result of what happened at the hand of Prophet Moses, though not intentional, led the leaders of the city to conspire against him. It seems that his fears of reprisal were justified. There was only one more test to go through before he became aware of the dangers surrounding him, which led him to flee the city:

So he saw the morning in the city, looking about, in a state of fear, when behold, the man who had, the day before, sought his help [again]. Moses said to him: "thou art truly, it is clear, a quarrelsome fellow!"

Then, when he decided to lay hold of the man who was an enemy to both of them that man said: "O Moses! Is it thy intention to slay me as thou slewest a man yesterday? Thy intention is none other than to become a powerful violent man in the land, and not to be one who sets things right!" Qur'an, 28: 18-19

At that particular moment, Prophet Moses received a warning that a verdict in his case had been reached. They intended to kill him:

And there came a man, running, from the furthest end of the city. He said: "O Moses! The chiefs are taking counsel together about

thee, to slay thee so get thee away, for I do give thee sincere advice.” Qur’an, 28: 20

Prophet Moses took the news seriously and he ran for his life:

“He therefore got away therefrom, looking about, in a state of fear. He prayed: “O my lord! Save me from people given to wrongdoing.”” Qur’an, 28: 21

A “Decade” of Preparation in Exile

The next stage was in Prophet Moses’ life could be described as the years of preparation for his great role as a prophet who will be entrusted with the liberation of the Children of Israel. So the question is: What kind of preparation does a prophet get?

When Prophet Moses left the Pharaoh’s territory and arrived in Madyan, he had no plans. He was now in a safe haven and among a different people. It is customary for travelers of old times to follow roads that have stations at sources of fresh water such as wells, especially when one lives on the edge of the desert. Upon his arrival at the watering place of Madyan, he saw two women who were keeping back their flocks. He inquired why they do not water their flocks and the answer was that they do not water the animals until the other [male] shepherds do so, and that their father was an old man. He watered their flocks and sat in the shade. He prayed to God for a way out of his difficulties. His supplication reflected a desperate situation:

“So he watered [their flocks] for them; then he turned back to the shade, and said: “O my Lord! Truly am I in need of any good that Thou dost send me!” Qur’an, 28: 24

He was hardly done with this supplication when one of the two women returned. She informed him of her father’s intention to reward him for his

help. This invitation rescued him from his worries and proved to be the beginning of a new life:

“...My father invites thee that he may reward thee for having watered [our flocks] for us...” Qur’an, 28: 25

Prophet Moses was comforted by the old man who told him, after listening to his story, that he has no reason to fear for he escaped from the unjust people. One of the daughters suggested to her father that he hire Prophet Moses as a shepherd. The offer, in the old man’s words, was as follows:

“...I intend to wed one of these my daughters to thee, on condition that thou serve me for eight years; but if thou complete ten years, it will be [grace] from thee. But I intend not to place thee under difficulty: thou wilt find me, indeed, if God wills, one of the righteous.” Qur’an, 28: 27

Prophet Moses accepted the offer without specifying which one of the two terms he would fulfill; he retained the freedom to fulfill either of them. Muslim scholars differed in determining which of the two terms Moses fulfilled. No number of years was mentioned in the Qur’an regarding the end of Prophet Moses’ end of service. The verse that addressed this part speaks of “*the*” term (*al-ajal*):

“Now when Moses had finished *the* term...” Qur’an, 28: 29

In a tradition narrated in *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, Sa`id bin Jubair said:

“A Jew from Hira asked me which one of the two periods Musa (i.e. Moses) completed. I said, “I don’t know, [but wait] till I see the most learned ‘Arab and enquire him about it.” So, I went to Ibn ‘Abbas and asked him. He replied, “Moses completed the longer and better period.” Ibn ‘Abbas added, “No doubt, an apostle of Allah always does what he says.”ⁱⁱⁱ

While I am spiritually inclined to accept that Prophet Moses fulfilled the longer term as it is in the best interest of his father-in-law, I find myself giving more weight to the first of the two terms (i.e. eight years) as it is the only binding one and fulfills Prophet Moses obligation. One can argue that what is best could be understood in the light of the mission that Prophet Moses was prepared for. It could be that it was in the best interest of the Children of Israel that he would become a prophet and hasten to their rescue two years “earlier”! Therefore, it would seem as if it was a choice between two “bests”; yet, the benefit of the community at large comes first.

The question remains: what is the significance of this period in his life?

To explain this period I am going to use a tradition of Prophet Muhammad in which he stated that every prophet was a shepherd. The question is how does this tradition help in understanding this particular period of Prophet Moses’ life and, in fact, of any other prophet?

A few years back I was at Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem during the “Night of Power” (*Laylat-ul-Qadr*)^{iv} which is traditionally anticipated on the night of the 27th of Ramadan. After performing the night prayer and the special *Tarawih* prayers that are performed during Ramadan, I sat in a circle of learning in which a man from the *Jama’at Al-Tabligh* group was preaching. Drawing on his own personal experience as a shepherd he explained the impact this job has on the personality of the shepherd. He said that one learns to take care of the animals to the degree that if a lamb is born when it is cold, the shepherd would take off his jacket to cover the lamb. Taking care of animals is the first step in the direction of taking care of people. In another tradition, Prophet Muhammad said: “All of you are shepherds and all of you are responsible for your flocks”

This period of preparation sounded like a pre-requisite course before becoming a prophet. One might add the patience that one has to learn in such a profession, which appears to be a good exercise in endurance. In addition, whenever I observed shepherds with their flocks, they were usu-

ally alone and sometimes at a distance. But, are the shepherds really alone? A certain connectedness must be established with the cosmos, raising questions, marveling at the vast creation and natural phenomena, and ultimately bringing a spiritual dimension to the picture.

Becoming a Prophet

When Prophet Moses fulfilled the terms of his contract with his father-in-law, he took his family and left. It is not apparent where he was heading and it is unlikely that he was going back to where he could be persecuted for killing the Egyptian. One might sight Prophet Moses' concern regarding this aspect when he was informed of his new mission and vocation as a Messenger who should face the Pharaoh:

“He said: “O my Lord! I have slain a man among them, and I fear lest they slay me.” Qur’an, 28: 33

At any rate, while traveling he perceived a fire in the direction of Mount Tur. It seems that he was neither in familiar territory nor did he know the way. This is why he included the possibility of finding guidance. He asked his family to stay behind telling them that he might get information from the people surrounding the fire, or at least he will bring them a burning firebrand so that they may warm themselves. He went to the fire as a normal person; he returned a Prophet:

“But when he came to the [fire], a voice was heard from the right bank of the valley, from a tree in hallowed ground: “O Moses! Verily I am Allah, the Lord of the World” Qur’an, 28: 30

All this was in the Divine plan. In another chapter the same story is repeated with the following words that stress the sense of destiny:

“...Then didst thou tarry a number of years with the people of Madyan. Then didst thou come hither as ordained, O Moses! And I have prepared thee for Myself [for service]” Qur’an, 20: 40-41

Prophet Moses became aware of the miracles that he was empowered with. The nature of some of the miracles, which God granted to him, presented a challenge to the prevailing culture, which boasted sorcery and magic:

“And what is that in thy right hand, O Moses?”

He said: “It is my rod: on it I lean; with it I beat down fodder for my flocks; and in it I find other uses.”

[God] said, “Throw it, O Moses!”

He threw it, and behold! It was a snake, active in motion.

[God] said, “Seize it and fear not: We shall return it at once to its former condition” Qur’an, 20: 17-20

Prophet Moses reaction was that he was afraid. Another narrative showed his emotions and movement:

“Now do thou throw thy rod!” But when he saw it moving [of its own accord] as if it had been a snake, he turned back in retreat, and retracted not his steps: “O Moses!” [It was said], “Draw near, and fear not: for thou art of those who are secure.” Qur’an, 28- 31

Prophet Moses, who had a dark complexion, was granted another miracle; his hand would turn white upon moving it to his bosom. These two miracles were his credentials; he would present them later on to the Pharaoh and his entourage. There will be other miracles associated with saving the Children of Israel and destroying the Pharaoh.

Prophet Moses subsequent words reflected his fears as a human being; he was still not aware of what prophecy entails! Every prophet was protected until the message is delivered and the mission accomplished. Prophet Moses was worried about two things: the first is that he killed an Egyptian and he feared revenge, and the other is that he was not eloquent in speech and wanted his brother Aaron to be on his side to help him present his case and to defend him if he was discredited:

“[God] said: “We will certainly strengthen thy arm through thy brother, and invest, and invest you both with authority, so they shall not be able to touch you: with Our Signs shall ye triumph- you two as well as those who follow you.” Qur’an, 28: 35

The Nature of Revelation

Prophet Moses’ trip in the direction of the fire in the “Holy Valley” was not the only time that God spoke to him. He would return and he would receive the Torah. There are different references to the nature and content of this revelation. It is interesting to realize all those who were targeted with the Torah:

“It was We who revealed the Torah: therein was guidance and light. By its standard have been judged the Jews, by the Prophets who submitted themselves [to God’s], by the Rabbis and the doctors of Law: for to them was entrusted the protection of God’s Book, and they were witnesses thereto...” Qur’an, 5: 44

The Qur’an provides examples of what is revealed in the Torah:

“We ordained for therein for them: “Life for life, eye for eye, nose for nose, ear for ear, tooth for tooth, and wounds equal for equal.” But if anyone remits retaliation by way of charity, it is an act of atonement for himself. And if any fail to judge by [the light of] what God hath revealed, they are [considered] wrong-doers.” Qur’an, 5: 45

The status of the Torah can be seen in describing the mission of Prophet Jesus Christ (Peace be upon him) who, in addition to receiving the Gospel (*Al-Injil*), confirmed the validity of the previous revelation:

“And in their footsteps We sent Jesus the son of Mary, confirming the Torah that had come before him: we sent him the Gospel: therein was guidance and light, and confirmation of the Torah

that had come before him: a guidance and admonition to those who fear God.” Qur’an, 5: 46

The relationship of the Qur’an to all previous revelation, including the Torah and the Gospel, manifests itself in the following verse:

“To thee [O Muhammad!] We sent the Book (i.e. the Qur’an) in truth, confirming the Scriptures that came before it, and *mu-hayminan`alayh...*” Qur’an, 5: 48

It might look strange to end the English “translation” of the verse, which is in fact an interpretation, with the a transliteration of the Arabic wording of these two words. I think that there is no direct equivalent to ‘*mu-haymin*’ in English. The etymology of the word revolves around the notion of a superceding authority. The meaning indicates that the Qur’an has the authority to guard the original messages, hence the ‘confirmation’, against corruption and human editions. This explains the Qur’anic position that such changes took place already:

“Can ye entertain the hope that they will believe in you?- seeing that a party of them heard the Word of God, and perverted it knowingly after they understood it.” Qur’an, 2: 75

“Then woe to those who write the Book with their own hands, and then say: “This is from God,” to traffic with it for a miserable price!-Woe to them for what their hands do write, and for the gain they make thereby.” Qur’an, 2: 79

In addition to mentioning the Torah by name, the Qur’an mentions the Tablets (*Al-Atwah*), which will be mentioned subsequently in the story of the Golden Calf. The Torah is also described as the ‘Book’ (*Al-Kitab*):

“We gave Moses the Book, and made it a Guide to the Children of Israel, [commanding]: “Take not other than Me as Caretaker [of your affairs].” Qur’an, 17: 2

“We did reveal to Moses the Book after We had destroyed the earlier generations, [to give] insight to people, and Guidance and Mercy, that they might receive admonition.” Qur’an, 28: 43

Furthermore, the Qur’an uses the word ‘Scriptures’ to refer to what Prophets Abraham and Moses received:

“Nay [behold], ye prefer the life of this world; but the Hereafter is better and more enduring. And this is in the Scriptures (*Suhuf*) of the earliest [Revelations]-the Scriptures of Abraham and Moses.” Qur’an, 87: 16-19

Face to Face with the Pharaoh

Strengthened by God’s assurances and equipped with the miracles, Prophets Moses and Aaron set for the Pharaoh:

“[God] said: “Fear not: For I am with you: I hear and see [everything]”

“So go ye both to him, and say: “Verily, we are Messengers sent by thy Lord: Send forth, therefore, the Children of Israel with us, and afflict them not: With a Sign, indeed, have we come from thy Lord! And peace to all who follow guidance!” Qur’an, 20: 46-47

Prophets Moses and Aaron were instructed to speak with the Pharaoh softly so that he may heed and accept their message which would save him and his people:

“But speak to him mildly; perchance he may take warning or fear [God]” Qur’an, 20: 44

threw their ropes and rods; they³seemed as if they were lively and moving. Prophet Moses began to worry. He again received a revelation that assured him of victory:

“We said: “Fear not! For thou hast indeed the upper hand”
Qur’an, 20: 68

Prophet Moses was encouraged and he threw his rod which swallowed up their magic. The result stunned the magicians and the Pharaoh. The magicians recognized that what Prophet Moses brought has nothing to do with magic. This was their field of expertise and they threw themselves in prostration. They believed in the Lord of Aaron and Moses. The Pharaoh, on the other hand, could not accept the stunning results. His ego was hurt and rather than believing like they did, he fabricated a lie:

“[Pharaoh] said: “Believe ye in him before I give you permission? Surely this must be your leader, who taught you magic! Be sure I will cut off your hands and feet on opposite sides, and I will have you crucified on trunks of palm trees...” Qur’an, 20: 71

The former magicians now were not deterred by the severity of the punishment. They were hopeful that God will forgive them what they have done under the influence of the Pharaoh. That was one round that the Pharaoh had lost.

The Children of Israel Fleeing Egypt

Following the defeat of the magicians, only a few of Prophet Moses’ people believed in his message. They were still afraid of the Pharaoh, which is typical of any people who suffer from persecution and live under oppression and for a long time:

“But none believed in Moses except some of his people’s progeny, because of the fear of Pharaoh and his notables, lest they

should persecute them, and certainly Pharaoh was tyrant on the earth and one who transgressed all bounds.” Qur’an, 10: 83

There is evidence in the Qur’an that there was a period that lapsed before fleeing Egypt and that Prophets Moses and Aaron settled down for a while. This time was probably used in empowering the Children of Israel and increasing their faith in preparation for the day when they would take that bold step and escape tyranny:

“We inspired Moses and his brother with this message: “Provide dwellings for your People in Egypt, make your dwellings into places of worship, and establish regular prayers: and give Glad Tidings to those who believe!” Qur’an, 10: 87

This period was marked by more calamities and hardships for the Children of Israel. They probably expected that the presence of Prophet Moses amongst them would bring an abrupt end to their ordeal. They complained about the systematic harm that they endured. This was the result of continued state persecution:

“Said the chiefs of Pharaoh’s people: “Wilt thou leave Moses and his people to spread mischief in the land, and to abandon thee and thy gods?” He said: “Their male children will we slay; [only] their females will we save alive; and we have over them [power] irresistible.” Qur’an, 7: 127

This call from the chiefs was translated into public policy vis-à-vis the Children of Israel. Prophet Moses asked his people to have patience, to have trust in God and to seek His help. They told him that they were harmed before and after his arrival. He gave them the Glad Tidings that the end result might be favorable; God will destroy their enemy and they will inherit the land. God sent a total of nine Signs to the Pharaoh and his people so that they may heed:

“We punished the people of Pharaoh with years [of draught] and shortness of crops; that they might receive admonition.” Qur’an, 7: 130

It seems that this was not enough to teach them a lesson. They remained defiant for a while until different punishments befell them. They have ridiculed the Signs and accused Prophet Moses of magic and sorcery:

“But when he came to them with Our Signs, behold, they ridiculed them.” Qur’an, 43: 47

Then they could not tolerate the punishment anymore, they would negotiate with Prophet Moses an end to it, that he would pray to God to stop the punishment in exchange for their belief in him. They did not keep their promises:

“So We sent [plagues] on them: Wholesale Death, locusts, lice, frogs, and blood: Signs openly self-explained: but they were steeped in arrogance, a people given to sin. Every time the Penalty fell on them, they said: “O Moses! On our behalf call on thy Lord in virtue of His promise to thee: If thou wilt remove the penalty from us, we shall truly believe in thee, and we shall send away the Children of Israel with thee.”

“But every time We removed the Penalty from them according to a fixed term which they had to fulfill-Behold!- they broke their word!” Qur’an, 7: 134-35

It became apparent that the Pharaoh and his people neither wanted to believe in Prophet Moses’ message nor did they want to set the Children of Israel free. After some time, Prophet Moses received inspiration to go ahead and take the Children of Israel away from the miserable life that they had endured for such a long time. After being subjected to a humiliating life for so long, they were ready to take that bold step and leap into another phase of their history:

“We sent an inspiration to Moses: “Travel by night with my servants, and strike a dry path for them through the sea, without fear of being overtaken [by Pharaoh] and without [any other] fear.” Qur’an, 20: 77

By traveling at night under the cover of darkness, Prophet Moses and his people had a head start. Yet, their movement would still be considered slow compared to the army that does not include elderly, women and children. The Pharaoh and his army followed them at sunrise. There was a point when both parties could see each other. This led the Children of Israel to believe that they were about to be caught. Not only the speed of the Pharaoh and his army that worried them; they were facing the sea which would have prevented them from going any further. This was the time and place where Divine Providence manifested itself in the miracle of splitting the sea. A path was miraculously created when Prophet Moses received revelation to hit the sea with his rod:

“So they pursued them at sunrise. And when the two bodies saw each other, the people of Moses said: “We are sure to be overtaken.” [Moses] said: “By no means! My Lord is with me! Soon will He guide me!” Then We told Moses by inspiration: “Strike the sea with thy rod.” So it divided, and each separate part became like the huge, firm mass of a mountain.” Qur’an, 26: 60-63

That newly created path was their way to safety, but for the Pharaoh and his army it was the end of their mischief on earth. They were lured into that path in order not to leave alive; the sea closed on them:

“And We made the other party approach thither. We delivered Moses and all who were with him: but We drowned the others.” Qur’an, 26: 64-66

“Then Pharaoh pursued them with his forces, but the waters completely overwhelmed them and covered them up.” Qur’an, 20: 78

Once the Pharaoh realized that death was inevitable he had a “change” of heart:

“...At length, when overwhelmed with the flood, he said: “I believe that there is no god except Him Whom the Children of Israel believe in: I am of those who submit [to God in Islam].”
Qur’an, 10: 90

Is repentance when death is eminent accepted? The answer that he received was negative. His superficial belief was in vain:

“Now! But a little while before wast thou in rebellion! And thou didst mischief [and violence]! This day shall We save thy body as a Sign to those who come after thee! But verily, many among people are heedless of Our Signs!” Qur’an, 10: 91-92

The answer that the Pharaoh received is in line with the declared general position in the Qur’an regarding those who repent when they come face to face with death:

“Of no effect is the repentance of those who continue to do evil, until Death faces one of them, and he says: “Now have I repented indeed”; nor of those who die rejecting Faith; for them have We prepared a punishment most grievous.” Qur’an, 4: 18

But for what reason the Pharaoh’s body was saved? There is a need to have an overview of the dialogue that took place between him and Prophet Moses when the latter returned to Egypt. It reflects the personality and the worldview of the Pharaoh and, therefore, the rationale for saving his body.

When Prophet Moses was chosen as a prophet, his immediate mission was to reach out to the Pharaoh:

“Go thou to Pharaoh. For he had indeed transgressed all bounds; and say to him ‘Wouldst thou that thou shouldst be purified [from sin]? And that I guide thee to thy Lord, so thou shouldst fear Him?’ Then did [Moses] show him the Great Sign. But [Pharaoh] rejected it and disobeyed [guidance]. Further, he turned his back, striving hard [against God]. Then he collected [his people] and made a proclamation, saying, “**I am your Lord, Most High.**” Qur’an, 79: 17-24

It was such a proclamation -the essence of which was reiterated in other verses^v- in which the Pharaoh presented himself as God that explains why his body was saved. The message to his people is that this “god” is dead. How could they believe in a god that dies? His body was saved as a Sign for those who come after him. Subsequent generations of human beings should refrain from the divinization of other human beings. Apparently, not all of humanity grasped this message!

A Liberated People: Prophet Moses and the Children of Israel

The “end” of the Pharaoh’s story simply marked the beginning of a new episode of the history of the Children of Israel. That flight from the Pharaoh brought one major obstacle to an end. They were free to pursue two paths at once, one spiritual and the other physical: belief in the One God and going to the Holy Land:

“O my people! Enter the Holy Land which God hath assigned (*kataba*) unto you, and turn not back ignominiously, for then will ye be overthrown to your own ruin.” Qur’an, 5: 21

What is the meaning of this verse? What are the political implications? What is the message for Muslims? After all, it is mentioned in the Qur’an?

This verse could be read in two very different ways, each one arriving at a very different meaning. The first way as shown above divides the verse into two parts, the first of which ends after “years”. This way of dividing

“The people of Moses made, in his absence, out of their ornaments, [an idol for worship in] the image of a calf; it seemed to low...” Qur’an, 7: 148

Before his return from his appointment, Prophet Moses was informed about their affair:

“[God] said: “We have tested thy people in thy absence: the Samarian has led them astray.” Qur’an, 20: 85

Prophet Moses was very upset. He returned to his people in a state of indignation and sorrow. He reprimanded them and thought that his brother might have disobeyed him, for Prophet Moses thought that his brother should have followed him when the idol was created. Prophet Aaron’s position was against this act of theirs:

“Aaron had already, before this said to them: “O my people! Ye are being tested in this: for verily your Lord is [God] Most Gracious. So follow me and obey my command.” Qur’an, 20: 90

Not being aware of all this, Prophet Moses shook his brother in disbelief. Prophet Aaron defended his position saying and explained his rationale for not following him. It was the unity of the Israelites which was at stake:

“[Aaron] replied: “O son of my mother! Seize [me] not by my beard nor by [the hair of] my head! Truly I feared lest thou shouldst say, ‘Thou hast caused a division among the Children of Israel, and thou didst not respect my word!’” Qur’an, 20: 94

There was yet another practical reason. The Children of Israel threatened to kill Prophet Aaron:

“When Moses came back to his people, angry and grieved, he said: “Evil is that ye have done in my place in my absence: did

ye make haste to bring on the judgment of your Lord?” He put down the Tablets [that contain God’s Message], seized his brother by [the hair of] his head, and dragged him to him. Aaron said: “Son of my mother! The people did indeed reckon me as naught, and went near to slaying me! Make not the enemies rejoice over my misfortune, nor count thou me amongst the people of sin.” Qur’an, 7: 150

What Prophet Moses did next was questioning the motives of the Samaritan for his actions. Ultimately, Prophet Moses destroyed the idol bringing that episode to an end:

“[Moses] said: “Get thee gone! But thy [punishment] in this life will be that thou wilt say, ‘Touch me not’; and moreover [for a future penalty] thou hast a promise that will not fail. Now look at thy god, of whom thou hast become a devoted worshipper: We will certainly [melt] it in a blazing fire and scatter it broadcast in the sea!” Qur’an, 20: 97

The last step was a precautionary measure against the possibility of retaining anything of the idol that might still create problems for those whose faith is weak. It was a thorough uprooting of the idol from the physical world. To uproot it from the hearts is a more difficult task. Prophet Moses asked his people to repent and he requested that they should kill themselves in order to atone for their grave sin of worshipping the Golden Calf.

It could be stated that these problems emerged from being raised in a cultural milieu dominated by idolatry. A god is something touched and seen. This might explain the next out of the ordinary request; the Children of Israel demanded to see God as a condition for believing:

“And remember ye said: “O Moses! We shall never believe in thee until we see God manifestly,” but ye were dazed by thunder and lightning even as ye looked on. Then We raised you up from

after your death; ye had a chance to be grateful. And We gave you Manna and quails...” Qur’an, 2: 55-57

The sequence of the events could be described as follows: creating the calf, destroying it, knowledge of the punishment, seeking forgiveness and being forgiven. Regarding the punishment, a verse stated that:

“Those who took the calf [for worshipping] will indeed be overwhelmed with wrath from their Lord, and with shame in this life: thus We do recompense those who invent [falsehood].”
Qur’an, 7: 152

This verse was followed by another one reflecting on the possibility of repentance and forgiveness, and that God is Oft-Forgiving and Most Merciful. Subsequently, the narrative goes on to describe what Prophet Moses did to attain forgiveness for his people. He selected seventy men to go with him to ask God for forgiveness:

“And Moses chose seventy of his people for Our place of meeting: when they were seized with violent quaking, he prayed: “O my Lord! If it had been Thy Will Thou couldst have destroyed, long before, both them and me: wouldst Thou destroy us for the deeds of the foolish ones among us? This is no more than Thy trial: by it Thou causest whom Thou wilt to stray, and Thou leadest whom Thou wilt into the right path. Thou art our Protector: SO forgive us and give us Thy mercy; for Thou art the Best of those who forgive.” Qur’an, 7: 155

The “violent quaking” was a result of asking to see God. They were still skeptical despite being witnesses to all the Signs that God sent with Prophet Moses to the Pharaoh and later on as favors such as the Manna and quails...etc. Prophet Moses himself, in a different context, asked to see God. The difference is that it was a *bona fide* request; he did know that humans cannot see God:

When Moses came to the place appointed by Us, and his Lord addressed him, he said: "O my Lord! Show [thyself] to me, that I may look upon thee. God said: "By no means canst thou see Me [direct]; but look upon the mount; if it abide in its place, then shalt thou see Me." When his Lord manifested His glory on the mount, He made it as dust, and Moses fell down in a swoon. When he recovered his sense he said: "Glory be to Thee! To Thee I turn in repentance, and I am the first to believe." Qur'an, 7: 143

It seems that Prophet Moses went through different stages of learning. He was required to go and learn from the Good Servant. This parable took place in Chapter 18 (verses 60-82). This was part of the preparation of Prophet Moses and also the preparation of his young companion, whom the hadith describes as Prophet Yosha` Ben Noon (i.e. Joshua).

Going back to the story of entering the Holy Land, we find that the Children of Israel were reluctant to go ahead. In fact, they were afraid of the people who lived there because of their reputation for being very strong:

"They said: "O Moses! In this land are a people of exceeding strength: Never shall we enter it until they leave it. If [once] they leave, then shall we enter [the Holy Land]." Qur'an. 5: 22

Yet, this was not the position of all of them. Two men, who are described as God-fearing, intervened and advised the Children of Israel against defying God and that they only need to put their trust in Him. Yet, to no avail; they remained defiant and reiterated the same position using a language that is disrespectful:

"They said: "O Moses! While they remain there, never shall we be able to enter, to the end of time. Go thou and thy Lord, and fight ye two, while we sit here [waiting for the outcome]." Qur'an, 5: 24

What did they reap as a result of being rebellious? Forty years freeze on entering the Holy Land:

“God said: Therefore will the land be out of their reach for forty years: in distraction will they wander through the land: but sorrow thou not over these rebellious people.” Qur’an, 5: 26

By the time these forty years lapsed, a new generation emerged. They were qualified to enter the Holy Land. The older Israelites, including Prophets Moses and Aaron, did not make it, though they were roaming all these years around the Holy Land.

One of the Signs that took place during this period was that God sent down Manna and quails so that the Children of Israel may eat. Prophet Moses asked God for water:

“And remember Moses prayed for water for his people. We said: “Strike the rock with thy staff.” Then gushed forth therefrom twelve springs. Each group new its own place for water. So eat and drink of the sustenance provided by God. And do neither evil nor mischief on the [face of the] earth.” Qur’an, 2: 60

The Children of Israel complained against the God-given sustenance:

“And remember ye said: “O Moses! We cannot endure one kind of food [all the time]. So beseech thy Lord for us to produce for us of what the earth growth- its pot-herbs, and cucumbers, its garlic, lentils and onions.” He said: “Will ye exchange the better for the worse? Go ye down to any [other] region (*Misran*), and ye shall find what you want. They were covered with humiliation and misery; they drew on themselves the wrath of God. This because they went on rejecting the Signs of God and slaying His Messengers without just cause. This because they rebelled and went on transgressing” Qur’an, 2: 61

There were other instances of transgression. This is story of those who violated the Sabbath:

“And well ye knew those amongst you who transgressed in the matter of the Sabbath: We said to them: “Be ye apes, despised and rejected.” So We made it an example to their own time and to their posterity and a lesson to those who fear God.” Qur’an, 2: 65-66

There are several issues attached to these verses. First of all, what is the nature of this apeness? Was it a physical or spiritual metamorphosis? And what are the political implications?

It is my understanding that God metamorphosed them into real apes. There are two different kinds of pronouns used in the above two verses in relation to those who were metamorphosed. In the first instance, plural masculine pronoun was used to refer to them before the change took place. After they were changed, plural feminine pronoun was used to refer to them. The word ‘monkeys’ (*qiradah*) in Arabic is feminine.

At any rate, those who were metamorphosed did not have progeny. Therefore, it is not acceptable to refer to human beings, who are dignified by God, as their children or grandchildren. Stories of Divine punishment are intended for their moral message to all of us. There is a continuous challenge to sincerely conform to Divine Will while enjoying outward and inward peace at the same time.

Another issue is that these verses are clear about who violated the Sabbath. It was the *few* amongst the Children of Israel. The verse refers to “those amongst you” (*minkum*). This means that no stereotyped generalizations could be made.^{viii}

Prophet Moses had to endure the reaction of the Children of Israel when had another request. He informed me that God was asking them to slaughter a cow. There were no specific details regarding the cow and had

they slaughtered any cow it would have fulfilled the requirement. Yet, they made a jest out of it in the form of a lengthy litigation:

“And remember Moses said to his people: “God commands that ye sacrifice a heifer. They said: “Makest thou a laughing-stock of us?”

He said: “God save me from being an ignorant!”

They said: “Beseech on our behalf thy Lord to make plain to us what [heifer] it is!”

He said: “He says: the heifer should be neither too old nor too young, but of middling age: now do what ye are commanded!”

They said: “Beseech on our behalf thy Lord to make plain to us her color.”

He said: “He says: a fawn-colored heifer, pure and rich in tone, the admiration of beholders!”

They said: “Beseech on our behalf thy Lord to make plain to us what she is: to us are all heifers alike: we wish indeed for guidance if God wills.”

He said: “He says: a heifer not trained to till the soil or water the fields; sound and without blemish.”

They said: “Now hast thou brought the truth. Then they offered her in sacrifice, but not with goodwill.

Qur’an, 2: 67-71

The reason for slaughtering the cow in the Qur’an was simply to revive someone who was killed in order to testify about the assassin. The previous questions were all frivolous.

What might be described as non-submitting ethos that prevailed at the time led future communications to take a different twist. It reached the stage where God established the Covenant with the Children of Israel, under peculiar circumstances:

“And remember We took your Covenant and We raised above you [the towering height of] Mount Tur [Sinai]: “Hold firmly to what We have given you and bring [ever] to remembrance what is therein: perchance ye may fear God.” Qur’an, 2: 63

Prophet Moses’s name is the most mentioned in the Qur’an, and there are many additional contexts where his name appears. As is the case with the Qur’anic narrative in the case of every prophet, the moral lesson is the most important. I believe that this paper had already put together a somewhat ‘unified’ narrative out of the numerous and fragmented stories of Prophet Moses. He remains, as one interpretation goes, one of the Messengers who had strived hard (*Uli Al-`Azim min Al-Rusul*). It remains the case that he stood his ground against the Pharaoh, the unjust usurper of power of that time.

I would like to conclude this story by yet another very meaningful verse (37:120):

“Peace and salutation to Moses and Aaron”

ENDNOTES:

ⁱ Arabic: Musa.

ⁱⁱ This beautiful supplication of Prophet Joseph is probably the first thing that could be read in Arabic at the main entrance of Cairo's International Airport.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, Volume 3, Book 48, Number 849:

^{iv} This is the night in which the Qur'an was revealed. See Qur'an, chapter 97 (i.e. *Al-Qadr*) which is dedicated to this theme for other details. Muslims attempt to spend the whole night in prayers, recitation of the Qur'an and learning.

^v Cf Qur'an, 26: 28

^{vi} Sayyed Qutub, *Fi Zilaal Al-Qur'an*, 12th edition (Beirut: Dar Al-Shuruq, 1986) vol. 2, p. 871.

^{vii} Mustafa Abu Sway, "The Holy Land, Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa Mosque in the Islamic Sources"; *Journal of the Central Conference of American Rabbis* (CCAR) Fall 2000, 60-68

^{viii} Muslims who use slogans that connect this historical event with contemporary Jews are not being faithful to the Islamic worldview. Frankly, I feel ashamed when these slogans are used. It is imperative for Muslims to be just with everyone, friend and foe. Muslims should exhibit magnanimity in the attempt to resolve modern conflicts.

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