Moses the Persian?
Exodus 2, the ›Other‹ and Biblical ›Mnemohistory‹

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In a stunning tour de force Jan Assmann has traced the making of Moses the »Egyptian« in European intellectual history from hellenistic antiquity to Freud.[1] Linking Moses' monotheism with the suppressed memory of the religious revolution of Akhenaten (14th century BC), Assmann shows how Egyptomania or Egyptophobia shaped a specific comprehension of the historical and imaginary intertwining of the fates of symbolic Israel and Egypt. Understandably, his treatment of »Moses« skips the Middle Ages. The book also leaves the Hebrew Bible aside.[2] The omission likewise makes sense. After all, how is it possible to inscribe into a ›mnemohistory‹ which is nevertheless carefully constructed around chronological sequence the work of authors and redactors who have noxiously resisted identification, let alone a date?[3]

Assmann's Moses has little to do with a ›historical‹ figure, or with a specifically Jewish one. Egypt is a contrivance. Perhaps, then, a different book of ›mnemohistory‹ can explore the history of the collective memories that shaped the redactional and final figure of the biblical Moses. Such a book, unlike Assmann's Moses, cannot, at first glance, rely on precise dates, nor on external sources.[4] Its point of departure, I suspect,

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1 J. Assmann, Moses the Egyptian. The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism, 1997.

2 This is the main criticism leveled, for example, by B. Britt in an otherwise glowing review, Moses, Monotheism and Memory, RStR 26 (2000), 316. For my own part, I am less comfortable with the millennial memory gap that must be bridged with modern assumptions about trauma and preservation.

3 The term ›mnemohistory‹ signifies, according to Assmann, the history of cultural memory (15 et passim).

4 Scholarly controversies regarding the redactional stages of the Pentateuch and of the HB in general, like the intellectuals surveyed by Assmann, often reflect fashions and individual concerns that have little to do with the text itself. For one recent evaluation that ›pushes‹ the final redacted HB to a ›hellenistic‹ era, N.P. Lemche, The Old Testament: A Hellenistic Book?, SJOT 7 (1993), 163–193. Lemche wishes to bring the HB and the NT together as products of the same period. He suggests, inter alia, (in order to demonstrate that the Persian period »does not meet the requirements of being the time when the historical books of the OT were written down«, 184) that Xenophon's An-

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must be an investigation of the contrasting images of Egypt (rather than of Moses) in the Hebrew Bible itself.[5] Herein lies both a contradiction and a possible key. The Egypt of Moses is the antithesis of the benevolent and hospitable realm that had embraced the first ancestral couple (Gen 12) and the talented Joseph and his family (Gen 39f.) in time of famine. It is this charitable Genesis-Egypt that hellenistic writers promoted when they sought to vilify Jews by ›reviving‹ the millennium-old memory of Akhenaten. With this bizarre historical scheme of appropriating the past begins a process of inversion which culminates, strangely enough, in Freud. Thus far Assmann.

The centrality of Egypt in the biblical Exodus account is self evidence. But its commemorative performance, at least as outlined in Deut 6,12 and 8,14, omits Moses altogether, as indeed does the poetry of Ex 15 which, however, is carefully placed in Moses' mouth. Yet, the focality of Moses seems likewise an entrenched feature of the Exodus.[6] Whether both were integral components of the fragments of memory which the redactors of the biblical texts put together remains a matter of conjecture.

In this article I focus on one question: why was Moses placed in Egypt in the first place? In other words, why did the redactor(s) of this phase of Israelite ›ancient history‹ cast Moses as an Egyptian alumnus and subsequently as a deliverer from Egyptian and not, say, Babylonian or even Persian bondage, especially if one subscribes to an exilic or

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abasis (400 BC) reflects the »heyday of the Persian empire« (186). This is hardly the case as every scholar of Greek and Persian antiquity knows. Between 401 and 399, for example, a rebellion in Egypt led to the expulsion of the Persian rulers, an event that dominated Persian politics for another half a century (A. Kuhrt, The Ancient Near East, 1995, 673 and the various contributions in Achaemenid History vol. 1–8, 1987–94). The very success of Xenophon's group of mercenaries suggests that the central Achaemenid government could not marshal sufficient support to eliminate such groups even after the death of a pretender. Moreover, even a cursory reading of the HB and the NT demonstrates the unlikelihood of a close date of composition. I do agree with Lemche, however, about the lamentable neglect of the Persian period among scholars. This, too, I suspect, reflect a predilection for ›western sources‹, and of course a specific linguistic framework. Following Lemche, Thompson dates the theophanies of Ex 3 and 6, in his mind examples of ›inclusive monotheism‹ to somewhere between 450 and 150 BC (T.L. Thompson, How Yahweh became God: Exodus 3 and 6 and the Heart of the Pentateuch, JSOT 68 [1995], 57–74).

[5] Cf. Friedman's view of Israel's history as a journey from Egypt to Egypt, R.E. Friedman, From Egypt to Egypt: Dtr1 and Dtr2, in: Traditions in Transformation: Turning Points in Biblical Faith, eds. B. Halpern/J.D. Levenson, 1981, 167–192.

[6] Recent studies of Moses, a perennial favorite of biographers and of intellectual inquiries into the making of the Pentateuch include, J. Nohrberg, Like Unto Moses, 1995, and J. Kirsch, Moses: A Life, 1998.

post exilic date of Pentateuchal redaction? The selection of Egypt seems hardly a foregone conclusion. It cannot be vouchsafed by the antiquity of traditions relating to Israel in Egypt because we know nothing about either the origins or the narrative development of such traditions.[7] Most of the episodes that accompany the biblical Exodus take place in a desert, a no man's land that could have been situated practically anywhere in the Near East. Indeed, only the first chapters in the present book of Exodus are anchored in Egypt. Beyond the Red Sea, Egypt becomes a memory in which idolatry and plenty pose two poles of alternate revulsion and nostalgic attraction.

As my title indicates, this study deals with a latent choice. Long ago scholars have pointed to similarities between the story of Moses' birth and infancy and archetypal patterns of heroic characters.[8] Motifs of exposure, miraculous rescue, translation into a different environment from that of birth, ›recognition‹ and ›rediscovery‹, and the rightful gaining of the right of birth appear with frequency and repetition. Important narrative-inversions have also been noted, such as the presentation of the abandoning family in Ex 2 as humble rather than noble, and the finding/raising family as royal rather than lowly.[9] Similarities with specific texts have also been drawn, primarily with one version of the ›autobiography‹ of Sargon of Agade (2296–2240 BC) which boasts a noble mother (but a low born father) who puts her infant son in a basket and unto the river whence he is [logically] saved by a drawer of water to become a gardener before the goddess Ishtar bestows her favor on him.[10]

Yet, the closest, most intriguing and instructive parallels between the tale of Moses' origins and other ›heroic‹ biographies are not with Sargon's tale but rather with the concocted biography of Cyrus the Persian (559–530), the creator of the Achaemenid empire and the one identifiable foreign ruler whom the Hebrew Bible regards with admiration.[11]

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7 P.R. Davies, In Search of ›Ancient Israel‹, 1995; and the various articles in Can a ›History of Israel‹ be Written?, ed. L.L. Grabbe, 1997. One further notes the absence of reference to Egypt in Ex 15. Indeed, only Pharaoh's chariots are mentioned (Ex 15,4).

8 Assmann, 150, with S. Freud, Moses and Monotheism, trans. K. Jones, 1955, 9, and O. Rank, Der Mythus von der Geburt des Helden, 1909. See also G.W. Coats, Moses. Heroic man, Man of God, 1988, 36ff. For a recent taxonomy of heroism, D.A. Miller, The Epic Hero, 2000, esp. ch. 2 (heroic biography). I find G.S. Kirk, Myth. Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures, 1970, particularly useful.

9 Assmann, ibid.

10 ANET, 119, with B. Lewis, The Sargon Legend: A Study of the Akkadian Text and the Tale of the Hero who was Exposed at Birth, 1980. Note that the earliest preserved text comes from 8th century Nineveh, Kuhrt, ANE, 46–50.

11 Similarities have already been adduced but I have not found a study that deals specifically with Cyrus and Moses. Cyrus' biography is narrated in Herodotus 1.107–130. I emphatically do not claim any relationship, direct or indirect, between Herodotus and

In its Herodotean version the narrative includes orders to expose a royal baby; the transfer of baby from a loyal henchman to the hands of a herdsman; the saving of baby's life by the herdsman's courageous wife; and adolescence marked by the foundling imperious temper as he whips a noble playmate. Cyrus' ›nativity‹ tale is also one of the most explicit statements of the morphology of a heroic birth. Above all, it is a myth with a date and a hero with a verifiable history.

Because of such similarities the entire Moses narrative has been regarded, not without reason, as a ›heroic saga‹, replete with the ›signs‹ that characterize a heroic male.[12] Such conventionality also prompted Noth to view the early part of Moses' biography (Ex 2) as late and secondary, stopping short of questioning its relevance to the narrative itself.[13] But this is precisely the question that ought to be addressed. What, indeed, is the function of this apparently derivative tale which also presents similarities with other biblical tales?[14] Scholars have successfully avoided this question by dealing with the entire Moses narrative rather than with its distinct components. If, however, the quest for Israel leads through a quest for Moses, the scholarly journey into the depth of Israelite identity must begin at the very start, with imagined biblical beginnings.[15]

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the biblical text, unlike S. Mandell/D.N. Freedman, The Relationship between Herodotus' History and Primary History, 1993, whose analysis does not rely on any detailed comparison.

12 Coates, passim.

13 M. Noth, A History of Pentateuchal Traditions, trans. B.W. Anderson, 1972, 162.

14 J. Nohrberg, Like Unto Moses, 180f., for many parallels between the biography of Moses and other biblical events.

15 A search to unravel Moses' biblical beginning also suggests a new venue of researching the ever problematic question of Mosaic monotheism. For recent speculations about an Assyrian link and provenance, S. Parpola, Monotheism in Ancient Syria in One God or Many? Concepts of Divinity in the Ancient World, ed. B.N. Porter, 2000, 165–209, with the reservations of B.N. Porter, The Anxiety of Multiplicity. Concepts of Divinity as One and Many in Ancient Assyria, in: Eadem, One God or Many?, 211–271. Recent scholarship has tended to postpone the ›birth‹ of biblical monotheism to the Deuteronomistic school with its insistent iconoclasm, K. van der Toorn, The Iconic Book Analogies between the Babylonian Cult of Images and the Veneration of the Torah, in: Idem, ed. The Image and the Book. Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East, 1997, 229–248, and other articles in the same collection. For possible Zoroastrian-Persian links, O. Lorenz, Das ›Ahnen-und Götterstatuen Verbot‹ im Dekalog und die Einzigkeit Jahwes, in: Ein Gott allein, eds. W. Dietrich/M.A. Klopfenstein, 1994, 491–527, esp. 514. Concluding his account of Cyrus' childhood, Herodotus adds an intriguing comment: »The Persians have no images of the gods, no temples and no altars, and consider the use of them a sign of folly«. (1.131). Zoroastrianism and Exodus' monotheism merit a separate investigation.

My argument runs as follows: Moses' Egyptian biography (Ex 2), which contains significant variations on common mythic themes (as has been generally observed), also provides deliberate narrative inversions of Cyrus' biography. These ›twists‹ reveal a paradox: if indeed Cyrus was the model, as seems likely, why did the redactional shapers of Moses not cast or rather recast their hero as a ›Jewish‹ version of a much-admired monarch whom the prophet »Isaiah« hails as a »messiah« and a »shepherd« of Yahweh (44,28; 45,1), whose fame the Persians celebrated in song and story and the Greeks in a lengthy biography and an imaginative educational treatise.[16] In this Persian guise Moses would have become instantly recognizable and, moreover, would have fitted into an Abrahamic Mesopotamian lineage. Instead, the redactor(s) of Ex 2, embedding Moses in a picturesque Egyptian context, elected to depict him as a foundling on Egyptian soil and as a divinely appointed avenger of the iniquities inflicted by Egypt on a specific minority.

This depiction must raise suspicions on several scores. As already suggested, it is wholly contradictory to the image of the benign and hospitable Egyptian land of Genesis. Moreover, the Egypt of Ex 1 is a led by a xenophobic regime with a self appointed mission to eliminate ›foreigners‹ who had been part of the land for at least a generation (by one account, Ex 1,6) if not for centuries (according to Ex 12,40f.). Besides an inexplicably induced fear of one Pharaoh, the narrative does not explain either the enslavement or the plan of annihilation. The Egypt of Ex 1f. is a new entity presided by a new and hostile monarch with a short memory (Ex 1,8). It is, however, an Egypt ripe for a change or rather a lesson. In the Bible this ›illumination‹ or learning through suffering is entrusted to Moses, a native of the land appointed as an emissary of the God of the Hebrews. In reality, the conquest of Egypt was the apogee of Persian achievements, contemplated probably by Cyrus himself and accomplished by his son Cambyses barely five years after Cyrus' death. With the Achaemenid annexation of Egypt the mighty history of Pharaonic Egypt came to a sudden and hitherto inconceivable end.

Through a series of divinely instigated plagues the book of Exodus outlines a ›campaign‹ that demonstrates the frailty of the Pharaoh in his own land vis-à-vis a superior power (Yahweh). The resultant separation between Egypt and Israel is both permanent and painful. Its inherent drama is as powerful as the ›decline and fall of Egypt‹ in the late sixth century, at least as contemplated and presented by Herodotus. If Herodotus' approach to the Egyptian debacle is colored by his knowledge of the defeat of Egypt's conquerors on Greek soil, the redactor(s) of Ex 1f.

[16] Herodotus 1.107f. and below; Xenophon, Cyropaedia 1.2.1.

appear(s) to have contemplated an Egypt that has just been defeated and humiliated.

If acceptable, my linking of Moses with Cyrus, and the making of the »Egyptian« Moses with the Persian conquest of Egypt has far reaching implications. It can help us, for the first time, to date a biblical redactional layer with precision hitherto unavailable. Instead of consigning redactional enterprise to a nebulous realm of exilic or post exilic eras, it becomes possible to assign a precise date to, at least, one redactional thread.

1. From Cyrus to Moses: The Birth of a Hero

Let me begin with a few observations. Although the Hebrew Bible is replete with scenes of annunciation, there is no announcement as such in Ex 2.[17] No word of God or of an angel alerts the parents to the birth of a son destined for a particular role in Israelite annals. Nor is there a dream warning a prospective parent or grandparent of the dangerous or daring exploits of an offspring. This is an important and, as I shall argue, a deliberate omission. It stands in marked contrast not only with biblical traditions of ›miraculous‹ births but also with traditional heroic accounts, such as Cyrus', which warn an elder male of the imminent birth (or pregnancy of the mother) of a child who will one day threaten his life and throne.

The child, doomed to death by decree (Ex 1), is saved by a daughter of the king and, ironically, brought up in the palace itself (Ex 2). By making the royal decree a general rather than a specific one (unlike the Cyrus' tale), Ex 1 provides a deliberate twist on the theme of consigning future heroes to death. For myths deposit decisions which assign death in the hands of a relative whose very life is threatened by the predicted birth of a son (or a grandson). Ex 1f. paradoxically unites the deadly monarch with one of the objects of his deadly decree.

When Ex 2 records the building of the basket by one baby's mother, the activity reflects a certain measure of compliance although the prior concealment of the baby points to a record of recalcitrance. Between royal orders, Hebrew defiance and compliance, the birth of Moses seems not merely a register of fertility but a landmark in a long history of an unequal struggle between the might of the Pharaoh and the helplessness of the enslaved Hebrews. It is precisely the absence of conventional ›heroic‹ elements that embeds the appearance of the »Egyptian« Moses not only in the records of a specific family but in the annals of Israel in Egypt.

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[17] R. Alter, How Convention Helps us Read: The Case of the Bible's Annunciation Type-Scene, Prooftexts 3 (1983), 115–130.

Ex 2 does not conjure up separation between baby and parents directly at birth, an element which constitutes a vital ingredient of heroic myths. When the Levite mother is forced to part with her baby she does not abandon him altogether but remains firmly in the picture. Cyrus' story features a unique scheme. In order to save the royal baby the wife of the herdsman must effect a switch between a dead and a live child. The biblical redactor does not engage in narrating in what guise an Egyptian princess could introduce a Hebrew child as her own son. Yet, the story is implicitly replete with corpses of dead children, first of Hebrew baby males who had not been rescued and then of Egyptian first born whose demise ushers the deliverance of the Hebrew slaves.

Enclosed in a basket, in itself a sign of identity, Moses repeats in reverse the pattern of ›heroic‹ exposure. The basket is supposed to save him but it may also cause his death. This is why the name ›Moses‹ reflects a double play, for the act of ›drawing out of water‹ signifies deliverance (the same that God will perform to save the Israelites out of the threatening waters of the Red Sea or the sea of Reeds), and it also suggests that the river could have engulfed the basket out of sight and out of rescue range. In shutting the infant in the basket the mother, giver of birth, becomes potentially the agent of death. But she also obeys the royal commands, thus showing herself a loyal subject of the ruler of the land. Imitation becomes reversal. The naming of the child is left to an Egyptian princess who herself remains nameless.

Biblical annals often entrust the naming of the newly born to their mothers. Ex 2 transfers this maternal right into the hands of a woman who is neither the natural mother nor a Hebrew. The name she chooses designates the circumstances of her discovery. The text further implies that the child remains nameless until he is weaned and ›restored‹ to the palace. Herein lies another touch of irony: in his home of birth the child remains nameless, and consequently statusless. In other words, he is a bastard. Only in an Egyptian palace, a remote and alien environment, he gains legitimacy, a name and social status.

Through Cyrus and Moses the lives of women who are far apart are intertwined. By interceding on behalf of the royal child, the herdsman's wife who saves Cyrus' life does what his mother could not have accomplished, namely bring the process of birth to a successful conclusion. Through Moses, a foreign princess, apparently childless, acquires a child by deluding death. Yet, while Cyrus' mother is removed from the tale until her son is restored to her by her own father, Moses' mother recruits her daughter to help, all the while leaving the husband in the background. In the agon between the feminine and the masculine in both tales, the crucial initiative is taken by women. Cyrus' father briefly reemerges. Moses' father disappears from the records of his family. This is only one paradox of a story that centers on a future deliverer.

Like other ›heroic‹ children, Moses is brought up away from home. Yet, and here is another significant difference, the abandoned children of myth who are destined to royalty are usually brought up in a humble surroundings (Oedipus being an interesting exception), the opposite of the palace of their birthright. Moses is brought up in a palace, a counterlandscape to the unassuming abode of his paternal home. Ex 2 maps a geography in which the home is near the palace although the royal residence remains a remote entity. In this, too, the tale counters conventional mythical geography which tends to remove the exposed child to a place far away from his natal home. In Ex 2 the separation is more mental than physical, more a basic gap that can never be bridged than a temporary distance destined to be closed.

Near death and ›rebirth‹ shape the identity of Moses along a deceptively simple course. Cyrus' tale traces a double thread of identity, one recognizable through innate qualities which the ›shepherd's son‹ manifests in contact with peers; another through a specific act of recognition by an authoritative member (usually male) of the family of origin. Thus Cyrus' grandfather recognizes his allegedly dead grandson and bestows on him a social identity. He also believes that by reuniting him with his natural parents the danger of usurpation is averted. The recognition in Moses' case falls to Yahweh. Moses' own actions when he ventures out of the palace imply sympathy with the oppressed in general and an innate sense of justice but hardly a specific Hebrew identity.

Both tales trace a chain of recognition but here, too, the biblical narrative provides a curious variation. Harpagus, the royal retainer of Cyrus' grandfather, ›recognizes‹ the danger in exposing a child of a woman who may one day become a queen. The herdsman and his wife recognize the true identity of the baby that Harpagus had passed on to them. In Ex 2 the princess recognizes the ethnic identity of the exposed child. Then a Hebrew girl, in fact the baby's sister, identifies a suitable agent of sustenance who happens to be the baby's own mother. Duplications overlap with confusion of temporality to produce a system of echoes in which essentials play on themselves to form internal cross references. In this ambiguous zone words are exchanged for images which are then reexchanged for words. To discover his true vocation Moses has to become a herdsman, a choice of »profession« that can only be interpreted as an ironic twist on the traditional role of the saving herdsmen of so many heroic myths. In Ex 2 the child saved by a princess turns into a herdsman, rather than into a prince, in order to save his people from his own ›grandfather‹.

2. *The Meaning of Myth*

Moses' birth tale demonstrates not only the subjecting of myth to questioning but also the flexibility of myths of origins. Because myths also provide political statements, the narratives about Cyrus and about Moses also address relations between Persians and Medes, and between ›Jews‹ and Egypt. To gain his ›rightful‹ inheritance Cyrus must be a scion of the ruling Mede family but also a member of a noble Persian clan. His career choice is determined by his birth. Herodotus suggests that such tales of nativity made Cyrus appear superhuman and account for his success in war.[18] To occupy a dominant position among his own people Moses must be descended from the Hebrews. Hence the obligatory if contrived genealogy which obscures whatever may make him appear as an imported hero. Egyptian palaces of origin and Midiantie abodes of identity are carefully concealed by insertion at a chronological distance from a Hebrew home.

Cyrus' very life seems a result of a series of choices made by persons meant to execute him. The story itself moves from one reluctant executioner to another but ultimately there is no real choice because of the divine or fated nature of the events.[19] At the opening of the book of Exodus an Egyptian monarch is determined to eliminate all the Hebrew male babies. The tale of one of these, likewise dictated by fate or rather by Yahweh, illustrates not only the enormity of such a royal desire but also its futility. Neither Astyages, king of Media, nor the Pharoah, ruler of Egypt, have an independent existence outside the myth of the heroic nativity and the lives they attempt to control.

Myth is also at work within the narrative itself. Tinkering with myth means that the redactor could project an interplay between ›myth‹ and ›history‹, thus intertwining two versions. Herodotus' success in projecting the historical and the mythical Cyrus as a single entity can be measured by the remarkable nachleben of the character, both in antiquity and even in our own day.[20] In Cyrus' case the process is particularly intriguing for we have his own version of his origins as well as other variations on the same theme (below). Official communications assert Cyrus' royal descent not through a mixed Mede-Persian line but through a purely bred Persian royalty. Cyrus' propaganda further pres-

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[18] Her 1.201–204, with J.A.S. Evans, Herodotus, Explorer of the Past, 1991, 21.

[19] T. Harrison, Divinity and History. The Religion of Herodotus, 2000, 236, with A. Maddalena, L'umano e il divino in Erodoto, in: Studi di filosofia greca, eds. V.E. Alfieri/M. Untersteiner, 1950, 57–84.

[20] The former is well represented by Xenophon's Cyropaedeia (The Education of Cyrus); the latter can be seen in M. Mallowan, Cyrus the Great 558–529 BC, Iran 10 (1972), 1–17, rev. version in: CHIr, ed. I. Gershevitch, 1985, 392–400.

ents him as a liberator of the oppressed, clearly a motif with certain vogue:

> The inhabitants of Babylon, who against the will [of the gods …], a yoke unsuitable for them, I allowed them to find rest from their exhaustion, their servitude I loosened …[21]

In reality, his policy hardly differed from that of his Assyrian and Mede predecessors, nor indeed the rhetoric of conquest and liberation.[22]

To justify the conquest of Media, myth accredits Cyrus with mixed parentage, Persian and Median. In this way the annexation of Media becomes a predetermined rather than an arbitrary act. Ex 2 ensures a double Hebrew lineage for Moses (who himself will later become the spouse of a Midianite). Such an emphasis on parentage is crucial. Besides consigning his parents to an ordinary and even lowly rank, the myth of Moses is careful to cast them as descendants of Jacob/Israel. Perhaps it reflects polemics against intermarriage (Cf. Ex 34; Num 12). Paradoxically, this very insistence on humble Hebrew parentage undermines Moses' claim to a royal or semi-divine status, a vital element of all the heroic myths. This, I suspect, is one reason why Moses must be brought into an Egyptian palace. The destined liberator of God's people cannot be a mere Levite. He must know the Egyptians and the pharaoh at first hand, and not through an experience of slavery, in order to carry his divinely appointed mission of leading the Hebrews out of Egypt. And while Ex 2 refrains from casting the pharaoh's as Moses' grandfather, the relationship is implicit enough.

The book of Exodus opens with a tribute to patrilineal filiation. Such a beginning makes the female figures of Ex 1 f. equivocal. In Ex 2 the mother stands in for the father, acting in place of man by exposing the child. We are not told whether the exposure of other babies had been performed by fathers. The story questions the birth itself. It postulates a distinction between birth from a same-creed couple and one by a ›mother‹ alone. And it questions lineage. For it questions the true point of origin – is Moses ›made‹ in his own natal home or in his Egyptian adoptive home? Subsequent events suggest that there is an innate knowledge of the self. But the tale of death and rebirth hints at the depth of the dilemma of identity when a child is taken away from home at birth.

In the drama that accompanies the story of birth, exposure and rescue women alone embody legitimacy and piety and slaves are conflated with the free. Within this subversive context even the meaning of what it means to be a Hebrew is in danger of conflation. Awareness is placed in the desert, a liminal space where Moses will have to reshape national

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[21] Text in A. Kuhrt, Ancient Near East, 602.

[22] J. Wiesehofer, Kyros und die unterworfenen Völker. Ein Beitrag zur Entstehung von Geschichtsbewusstsein, Quaderni di storia 26 (1987), 107–126.

identity away from Egypt and from the land of the mythic ancestors. Because the story of Moses is intertwined into a narrative that is essentially the history of God's deeds, the elements of recognition which provides a crucial turning point in heroic myths cannot be entrusted into the hands of a mere mortal. Moses' parents are deemed superfluous since their recognition of their son cannot advance the plot. Nor can an admission on the part of the Egyptian princess regarding the true identity of her adopted son. The only source of recognition, besides the self, must be God. This is also why Ex 3f. reads like a burlesque of other scenes of private epiphany.[23] Its human actor, a prince turned a herdsman, seems poised to follow the footsteps of the conventional (non-Hebraic) heroic types while its divine actor seems equally determined to mold Moses into a missionary.

A reading of Ex 2 shows how its general ›secular‹ layout links Moses with recognizable ›national‹ heroes of other cultures while preserving a ›sacred‹ thread that connects its hero with a specific Israelite fate. Both hero and land present two faces. There is a generous Egypt of the past which is briefly reflected in an act of individual kindness. And there is a discourse of the present which shows Egypt as a superior power, exerting unjustly its authority over a helpless minority. In this discourse the Hebrews are strangers to the land and the Egyptian government is a hostile entity ripe for punishment.

In the interchange between myth and history the present breaks through the surface of the past, and the future. By shifting familial alliances the birth story recorded by Herodotus reflects the glorification of what had been in reality a peaceful shift of power. Because Herodotus is interested in presenting his Greek readers with a creditable explanation of the Persian imperial drive his portrait of Cyrus is underlined with a specific nomos, a custom-law that supposedly dictates an inevitable drive to acquire an empire. Such an explanation accounts not only for the extraordinary success of the Achaemenid but also for their defeat in Greece.[24]

3. Myth, Biblical Mnemohistory and Reality: The Persian Conquest of Egypt and the Shaping of Exodus 2

A ›biography‹ of Cyrus, as recorded and handled by Herodotus, provides both an outline and a commentary on the myths of heroic birth. It suggests that a switch at birth is vital for the double nature of the hero. It transfers the hero from his natural domestic environment to

[23] S.A. Geller, The God of the Covenant, in: One God or Many? Concepts of Divinity in the Ancient World, ed. B.N. Porter, 2000, 304–308 (article: 273–319).

[24] Evans, passim; Harrison, passim.

an alien one where, nevertheless, his ›true‹ character emerges. And it provides a context for a major historical change, namely the decline of the Medes and the rise of Persia, and ultimately an account of the meteoric acquisition of an empire which is matched, according to Herodotus, by its equally dazzling defeat in Greece. Through a peculiarly Herodotean intertwining of political reality with traditional mythic elements, the historian presents and explains the spectacular rise of Persia to imperial dominance under Cyrus. This extraordinary ascent culminated in the acquisition of Egypt not by Cyrus, who died unexpectedly in the land of the Massagetae, but by his son Cambyses, soon afterwards. The conquest of Egypt in 525 was not only the most momentous event in Persia's imperial history (in spite of the Greeks' own view of their victory) but also the most controversial in western eyes.

That the fall of Egypt was perceived as a turning point in the history of the Near East is clear from the sheer length of the Herodotean excursus on Egypt (the whole of book 2). The very antiquity of Egypt, so antithetical to the newness of Achaemenid Persia (and of the Greek poleis as well), exerted considerable fascination on historians, like Herodotus, so conscious of the value of the past in determining identity. Herodotus even presented Egypt as the cradle of Greek religion.[25] With so marked a sympathy for Egypt, it is hardly surprising that he accused Cambyses of insanity in general and of mad impiety in particular.[26] The apogee of this madness was reflected in the encounter between Cambyses and the Apis bull which he not only stabbed but also ridiculed as a god fit only for Egyptians.[27] In Herodotus' eyes only a madman would ridicule holy places and religious customs.[28]

Cambyses, like Cyrus, was both an initiator and a victim of the dynastic ethics which dictated unremitting imperialism. Strikingly, it was precisely this drive that provided a documented stimulus to the rise of a new kind of Greek historiography and drama. For there is no Herodotus without Persia and indeed no Greek self identity without the Persian failed invasion.[29] In other words, the Persian thrust westward

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[25] Her. 2.50; Harrison, Appendix 2 (on gods), with W. Burkert, Herodot über die Namen der Götter. Polytheismus als historisches Problem, MH 42 (1985), 121–132. In general, T.S. Brown, Herodotus in Egypt, Ancient World 17 (1988), 77–98.

[26] T.S. Brown, Herodotus' Portrait of Cambyses, Hist. 31 (1982), 387–403. On Cambyses' religious policies in Egypt, Kuhrt, 662, who suggests that Cambyses in fact respected rather than spurned Egyptian religion.

[27] Her. 3.29, with some interesting repercussion for an interpretation of the golden calf episode in Ex 32, as I will demonstrate elsewhere.

[28] Her. 2.37–8.

[29] E. Hall, Inventing the Barbarian. Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy, 1989.

determined the shaping of Greek drama and historiography.[30] Here I suggest that the Persian thrust southward, to Egypt, played a similarly crucial role in determining the identity of Moses and by extension of the Jews of Persia.

Both the books of Esther and of Daniel attest an ongoing fascination with Persia and a marked desire to weave Jewish history into the fabric of the great empire. The scroll of Esther plants a beautiful Jewish maiden in the royal harem; Daniel describes the miraculous elevation of a talented Judahite.[31]Ezra-Nehemiah provides a ›realistic‹ account of the effects of Cyrus' policies on one group of minority to which Esther and Daniel belonged. Taken together, the adventures of three Jewish heroes in Persia (Esther, Mordechai, Daniel) and the vicissitudes of the Jewish community of Persian Yehud reflect an exceptional interest in intertwining the history of the Jews with the annals of Persia.

Through a fanciful genealogy Herodotus connects Astyages, the last ruler of the Medes, with his Persian conqueror. He also presents the former as a tyrant, and thus as a ruler deserving deposition. Ex 2 connects its protagonist with the Egyptian court through an adoptive mother. To present the extraordinary essence of Cyrus' conquests, Herodotus details not only his campaign against Babylon but the history of Babylon itself. To bring home the meaning of liberation, Ex 1f. explores the vagaries of Egyptian royalty, and Ex 7–14 the ›campaigns‹ which God, through Moses and Aaron, led against the Pharaoh. The monumentality of the conquest of Egypt by Cambyses is reflected in the extraordinary length of Herodotean unfolding of Egyptian history.[32] The everlasting hatred of Egypt is reflected in the opening of the Decalogue which characterizes God as the One who liberated the Israelites from Egyptian yoke and which anathematizes the most typical aspect of Egyptian religion, the veneration of images.[33]

Why, then, Egypt? Cyrus' mythic biography suggests a fertile breeding ground for endowing contemporary or near contemporary heroes with a context that legitimizes their wars and their dynasties. For

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30 Drews, 43.

31 This is not the place to plunge into the thorny questions of the date of either Esther or of Daniel (that of Ezra/Nehemiah seems better attested around 450 BC, see my The Silent Women of Yehud, JJS 52 (2000). For placing Daniel in the fifth century, T.C. Mitchell, Achaemenid History and the Book of Daniel, in: Mesopotamia and Iran in the Persian Period: Conquest and Imperialism 539–331 BC, ed. J. Curtis, 1997, 68–78, esp. 74. On Daniel, Mordechai and Zerubbabel as literary fictions which purport to insert Jews into an ›international‹ Achaemenid elite, J. Weinberg, The International Elite of the Achaemenid Empire: Reality and Fiction, ZAW 111 (1999), 583–608.

32 Drews, 75.

33 See my The Ten Commandments (forthcoming).

Herodotus the Greek the conquest of Egypt provided an opportunity to explore the personalities of the Persian conquerors and the history of conquered territories. In this double presentation, Cyrus' irrepressible drive to acquire an empire inevitably led to Egypt and to Greece. But the expansion also brought criticism. Symbolizing the termination of Egypt's glory, the Persianization of Egypt disrupted and brutalized the old tenor of Egyptian history. Whatever the truth of this Herodotean vituperation might have been, it is difficult to find traces of Persian counter propaganda that vilifies rather than glorifies Egypt.[34] One exception, I believe, is the final casting of Ex 1 f.

Cyrus' propaganda presented Cyrus as a deliverer of Babylon from servitude (above). Whether Cambyses portrayed himself as the liberator of Egypt is unclear. The book of Exodus casts Moses as the liberator of one enslaved nation on Egyptian soil. The molding of this ›savior‹ was unmistakably ›Cyrean‹ for by 525 Cyrus had already become, it seems, an object of mythification. In Jewish eyes the rise of Cyrus and the conquest Babylon signaled the possibility of a new start. The conquest of Egypt confirmed the power of the Achaemenid to carry out their settlement policies. Cyrus allowed the Jews to rebuild the destroyed sanctuary in Jerusalem. The permission appeared nothing short of a miracle. It was a reenactment of the Exodus itself, as the narrative of Ezra so clearly demonstrates.

But this was an Exodus from Babylon, and not from Egypt. And here was a dilemma. The myth of Cyrus' nativity must have offered an irresistible model, but the conquest of Egypt provided a remote yet immediate context. The result was a Hebrew hero with recognizable Persian elements but with Egypt as a sphere of operations. For the redactors of Ex 1 f. the end of Egypt provided an appropriate and predictable context for the contest between piety and impiety, justice and iniquity. It was a land recently ›liberated‹ and hence a territory where oppression could be envisaged as well as its end.

Like Cyrus' ›biography‹ Ex 2 suggests a narrative, an exegesis and a ›reality‹. It traces a consistent counter thread by opposing every major aspect of the Cyrus' story. In the course of the private theophany of Ex 4 Moses learns about his Hebrew or Yahwist identity. God brings about a ›reunification‹ with his brother, Aaron. But it takes an exodus from Egypt to reunite him with his sister, and many miracles to ›unite‹ him with his own people. Cyrus finds helpers and can appeal to decades of Mede oppression. In myth he wages war against his own grandfather in order to win the throne. Moses can only appeal to his own brother, and

[34] Kuhrt, 646, on Persian attempts to manipulate lingering resentment against the Pharoah Amasis and his dynasty, perhaps as a justification of the dethronement of his murderer.

must oppose his own Egyptian ›grandfather‹ in a war that is conducted without an army and without ordinary weapons. Nor can he muster the support of his own people.

In a bid for Persian favor, ingenious collectors of Israelite annals concocted a hero of their own whose resemblance to Cyrus was immediate and uncanny. But they created a hero who could not lay claim to Mesopotamian royalty, nor one capable of leading rival armies. As a non-Persian and non-Mede, Moses cannot become a contender to the throne. But he can represent a minority in Persia with aspirations of its own. By making Moses an ›Egyptian‹, a liminal man with pure Hebrew ancestry on the one hand and an Egyptian royal upbringing on the other, the makers of the Exodus saga created a unique hero. A private avenger of injustice, he is ideally positioned to become a ›national‹ savior. And he alone can also sever the intimate and longstanding ties between Israel and Egypt. Moses exemplifies the culmination of the transformation of Egypt from a hospitable into a hostile entity. His story provided an excuse and justification for the most extravagant undertaking of the Achaemenids, namely the conquest and annexation of Egypt.

If this reconstruction is plausible, it has the potential of illuminating one stage in the vexed and much discussed history of the making of the Pentateuch itself. I do not wish to venture at this point beyond Ex 1f. My analysis provides, however, a precise historical context for the casting of the early ›history‹ of Moses along the specific lines which Ex 1f. adopts. The date of Herodotus' Histories (430) furnishes a terminus ante quem for the making of Moses the Egyptian. Cyrus' own reign, and very likely his death (529), furnish the terminus post quem for the birth of the stories which circulated about his early life.

Within this framework (c. 530–430), I would venture to suggest that Cyrus' generosity towards the Jewish community in his realm, reflected in the resettlement of Jerusalem and the creation of Yehud, and the controversial conquest of Egypt by Cyrus' son were the two events that supplied the impetus for the shaping of the Exodus as a narrative of liberation from the yoke of the unjust Egypt. In no other period such a recasting of the protagonists makes sense. Within this context, the unexpected subjugation of Egypt as well as the establishment of Yehud provided the possibility of envisioning the Exodus not as an internal movement from one province to another but as a journey of liberation from a mighty kingdom to a promised land. It is therefore possible to narrow down the redaction of Ex 1f. to c. 530–525, between Cyrus' death and the conquest of Egypt. This is a narrow range indeed.

In sum, mirroring Persian anti-Egyptian propaganda, Ex 1f. casts Egypt as a land of iniquities, its ruler as an unjust ruler, and the Hebrews as ill-treated slaves. Against this setting, the conquest of Egypt by Persia in the time of the narrative's redaction echoed the divine demand to set

the Hebrews free from their Egyptian bondage. Stated otherwise, the historical Achaemenids, already sponsoring a return to Jerusalem, received a prompting for their program of westward expansion from the Jewish intellects of his realm. Cambyses conquered Egypt. The Exodus' hostile and iniquitous Egypt was ripe for conquest, just as it had been ripe centuries before to witness Moses' liberating mission.[35]

Moses' Egyptian ›biography‹ in Ex 2, which contains significant variations on common mythic themes, as has been generally observed, also provides deliberate narrative inversions of one ›nativity‹ tale in particular, that of Cyrus the great. His rule marks a crucial turning point in Persian as well as in Jewish and Egyptian history. Cyrus allowed Jews to return to Judaea and to rebuild the Jerusalem temple; he also embarked on an ambitious plan of conquest that led his son, Cambyses, barely five years after Cyrus' unexpected death, to conquer and annex Egypt. This last action stunned Persia's neighbors, as the lengthy Egyptian excursus of Herodotus demonstrates. Egypt's end also met with criticism, fueled by Cambyses mocking of the land's divinities. To counterbalance this censure the redactor(s) of the Exodus, and specifically of Ex 2, planted their hero in a xenophobic Egypt headed by a blood thirsty monarch whose actions vis-á-vis his Hebrew subjects merited divine retribution. In reality, the punishment was administered by the Persians; in the book of Exodus it was Yahweh, through Moses, who dealt Egypt a series of mortal blows. By juxtaposing Herodotus' account of Cyrus' birth saga with that of Moses, this article further suggests a precise date of redaction for Ex 2.

Die ägyptische Biographie Moses in Ex 2, die, wie allgemein beobachtet wurde, beachtenswerte Varianten von verbreiteten mythischen Themen enthält, beinhaltet dabei auch eine bewusste erzählerische Umgestaltung einer »Geburts«-Erzählung im besonderen, nämlich die von Cyrus dem Großen. Seine Herrschaft stellt nämlich einen entscheidenden Wendepunkt sowohl in der persischen als auch in der jüdischen und ägyptischen Geschichte dar. So erlaubte Cyrus den Juden, nach Judäa zurückzukehren und den Jerusalemer Tempel wiederaufzubauen; er ließ sich auch auf einen ehrgeizigen Eroberungsplan ein, der seinen Sohn Kambyses, kaum fünf Jahre nach Cyrus' unerwarteten Tod, bewog, Ägypten zu erobern und zu annektieren. Diese zuletzt genannte Aktion erstaunte Persiens Nachbarn, wie der weitschweifige ägyptische Exkurs von Herodot zeigt. Ägyptens Ende traf auch auf Kritik, ausgelöst durch die Verspottung der Landgottheiten durch Kambyses. Um ein Gegengesicht zu dieser Kritik zu schaffen, haben der (die) Redaktor(en) des Exodus, und speziell die von Ex 2, ihren Helden in ein fremdenfeindliches Ägypten verpflanzt, das von einem blutrünstigen Monarchen regiert wird und dessen Aktionen gegen seine hebräischen Untertanen göttliche Strafe verdienten. In Wirklichkeit wurde die Strafe von den Persern durchgeführt: Im Buch Exodus war es Jahwe, der durch Mose Ägypten eine Serie von tödlichen Schlägen austeilte. Indem der vorliegende Artikel den Bericht Herodots von der Geburtssage des Cyrus mit dem über Mose vergleicht, schlägt er damit ein genaues Datum für die Redaktion von Ex 2 vor.

[35] I am grateful to Athalya Brenner for her attentive reading of the manuscript and for her illuminating comments.

La »biographie de Moïse« en Ex 2, qui contient – ainsi qu'on l'a souvent noté – des variantes significatives sur des thèmes mythiques, présente également une inversion narrative d'un récit de naissance, à savoir celui de Cyrus le Grand. Son règne marque en effet un changement marquant, aussi bien dans l'histoire perse que juive et égyptienne. Cyrus autorisa les Juifs à retourner en Judée et reconstruire le Temple de Jérusalem; il s'engagea également dans un projet d'expansion ambitieux qui entraîna son fils Cambyse, à peine cinq ans après la mort inattendue de son père, à conquérir et à annexer l'Égypte. Cette dernière action étonna les voisins de la Perse, ainsi que le démontre le long excursus d'Hérodote sur l' Égypte. La fin de l'Égypte fut aussi critiquée et attribuée aux moqueries de Cambyse quant aux divinités du pays. Pour contrebalancer cette censure, le(s) rédacteur(s) de l'Exode, et spécialement d'Ex 2, ont transplanté leur héros dans une Égypte xénophobe, dominée par un souverain assoiffé de sang et dont les actions hostiles à l'égard de ses sujets hébraïques méritaient toute la colère divine. En fait, la punition fut exécutée par les Perses; dans le livre de l'Exode, c'est Yahwèh, par l'intermédiaire de Moïse, qui asséna à l'Égypte une série de coups mortels. En comparant le récit d'Hérodote de la naissance de Cyrus avec celui de la naissance de Moïse, cette étude propose une datation précise pour la rédaction d'Ex 2.