

REMEMBERING MOSES AS A MODEL OF ISRAELITE AND EARLY JEWISH IDENTITY¹

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Abstract

There are numerous depictions of Moses in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible: Leader and lawgiver, miracle worker, prophet and priest, etc. This contribution argues that one should refrain from reconstructing a linear, almost evolutionary, development of Moses as a model of Israelite and early Jewish identity. Instead, it will be suggested that deuteronomistic traditions evolved during the latter part of the monarchy and the exile (7th and 6th century BCE). On the one hand, some deuteronomistic traditions remembered Moses as a leader exhibiting qualities in stark contrast to Assyrian and Judean kings; while other deuteronomistic traditions propose Moses to be the ideal prophet that is called to be the spokesperson for God amongst his people. Concurrently, priestly traditions flourished in the Persian and Hellenistic periods (6th to 4th century BCE), that remembered Moses as a lawgiver and an intermediary. On a methodological level, it will be proposed that collective memory studies allow research to move beyond the futile attempts to establish the historicity of Moses and the exodus. Appreciating the evolving of theological traditions as the result of the collective memories negotiated amongst believing communities, the role Moses played as a paradigmatic model for the maintenance of Israelite and Jewish identity amidst Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian and Hellenistic onslaughts is presented in a new light.

Key words: Collective memory, Jewish identity, Moses

1. Introduction

Is it possible to describe Moses as a model of Israelite and early Jewish identity in terms of a series of interlocking or overlapping theological traditions and religious memories? This probably confronts us with the old philosophical question concerned with the search for criteria for *identity over time* (Scruton 2004:303-305).

There are numerous depictions of Moses in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible: Leader and lawgiver, miracle worker, prophet and priest, etc. This contribution argues that one should refrain from reconstructing a linear, almost evolutionary development of Moses as a model for Israelite and early Jewish identity. Instead it will be suggested that initially Moses was remembered as a leader and a prophet in the different strands of deuteronomistic traditions during the latter part of the Monarchy and the Exile (7th-6th Century BCE).

¹ This paper was delivered at the conference of the International Organization of the Old Testament in Ljubljana, Slovenia, during July 2007, with the financial support of the National Research Foundation. Any opinions, findings and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author and therefore the NRF does not accept any liability in regard thereto.

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On a methodological level, it will be proposed that collective memory studies allow research to move beyond the futile attempts to establish the historicity of Moses (and the exodus!). Appreciating the evolving of theological traditions as the result of the collective memories negotiated amongst believing communities, the role Moses played as a paradigmatic model for the maintenance of Israelite and Jewish identity amidst Assyrian, Babylonian and Hellenistic onslaughts is highlighted.

Was Jan Assmann correct to juxtapose Moses and pharaoh Akhenaten in terms of history and memory? *Moses is a figure of memory and not of history, while Akhenaten is figure of history but not of memory* (Assmann 1997:2).

2. Moses as a Historical Figure

The very influential WF Albright (1976:120) argued that Moses as a biblical tradition *is strongly supported by historical analogy, and is now being confirmed by a rapid increasing mass of evidence uncovered by archaeologists and philologists*. One of Albright's best known students, John Bright (1981:127), went further and advocated: *The events of exodus and Sinai require a personality behind them... To deny that role of Moses would force us to posit another person of the same name!*

The flip side of the coin of the quest for the historical Moses is articulated by John van Seters (1983:361-362) who, without mincing words come to the following conclusion: *The quest for the historical Moses is a futile exercise. He now belongs only to legend*. In a more recent publication Van Seters (2002:194) quite rightly points out that no extant Egyptian record makes any reference to Moses or the events that took place during the exodus.

At the beginning of 2007 James Hoffmeier (2007:41) responded by revisiting some current archaeological results in Egypt: *I have shown that the Biblical description of the entry into Egypt, the enslavement and the Exodus are all plausible. I have also shown that several of the geographical sites on the Exodus route are attested in Egyptian records of the New Kingdom*. Although Moses is not mentioned by name, the "minimalist" presupposition that all *realia* reflected in Exodus presuppose the 7th to the 6th Century BCE should not be accepted for granted (Hoffmeier 2007:37).

The jury is still out on what can be considered to be *historical* amongst the Moses traditions. In recent publications on Moses, Eckart Otto (2002:1535-1536; see also 2006) identifies Exodus 2:15b-22 as the oldest part of the Moses narratives. In this narrative Moses is linked to Midian, in the arid southern part of Palestine which corresponds with the oldest references of Yahweh coming from Edom. These recent publications by Otto echo what Martin Noth argued in the 1940's that the only historically reliable traditions we have about Moses are the ones referring to his marriage to a Midianite (Ex 4) and his burial place (according to Deut 34 on Mt Nebo in Moab).

Let us briefly look at the traditions related to the birth and death of Moses.

Scholars like Freud (1939), Coats (1988) and Assmann (1997) have *pointed to similarities between the stories of Moses' birth and infancy and archetypal patterns of heroic characters* (Zlotnick-Sivan 2004:191). In these heroic birth stories motifs such as miraculous rescue, relocation into a contrasting environment, recognition and rediscovery abound – one of the most popular parallels in this regard is the remarkable birth of Sargon of Agade (end of the third millennium). Since neo-Assyrian kings (first millennium) associated themselves with the ancient Sargon of Akkad, Otto (2002:1536-1537) postulates the emergence of a

Moses narrative that criticizes the neo-Assyrian royal ideology. It might be that the heroic Moses is contracted with the enslaving presence of the neo-Assyrian king Sargon II (721-705 BCE). The Moses tradition was not only shaped by the internal dynamics of Israel but also by the external forces that challenged and forged Israel as a nation (Sparks 2005:280).

Hagid Zlotnick-Sivan (2004:191) has suggested a very intriguing and potentially instructive alternative parallel with the birth narrative of Cyrus in the biography by Herodotus (1.107-130). Cyrus, the founder of the Achaemenid empire (ca 540) was the only foreign ruler that the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible refers to as a *messiah* (Isa 45:1). According to Zlotnick-Sivan (2004:203) the premeditated resemblance between the births of Moses and Cyrus constitutes a *bid for Persian favour* and mirrors *Persian anti-Egyptian propaganda* of that time.

The tradition about the death of Moses is closely connected with Mount Nebo in Transjordan (Deut 34:1-6). Moses climbed Mount Nebo from where the Lord showed him the entire Promised Land. There he dies and is buried by the Lord and *to this day no one knows where his grave is* (Deut 34:6). Dijkstra (2006:21) suggests that one of the military campaigns of the Moabite king Mesha destroyed the area surrounding Nebo and that Moses' tomb was destroyed after 841 BCE.

3. Moses as a Figure of Memory

Recent research on Moses moved away from the preoccupation with the quest for the historical Moses and is more interested in matters related to memory, representation and reception (Britt 2000:313). In an erudite but somewhat speculative monograph on "Moses the Egyptian" Jan Assmann (1997) attempts to write a history of Moses memories – a "mnemo-history" of Moses. His point of departure is the *monotheistic religious reform* of Akhnaten in the Amarna period. These Late Bronze Age events are then linked with the Egyptian historian of the third century BCE, Manetho, who described Moses as an *Egyptian monotheistic priest* who lead a group of rebelling lepers out of Egypt and who was killed in the process (Britt 2000:316).

Due to this reconstruction of the past Assmann has to explain the millennium that elapsed between the monotheistic pharaoh Akhnaten and Moses as the rebellious monotheistic Egyptian priest. This gap in time is bridged by the suggestion that after the shortlived monotheistic reform of Akhnaten, the polytheistic priests carefully wiped out all signs of the reform. The memory persisted and re-emerged in the time of Moses as a *normative inversion of the Amarna tradition and of Moses himself* (Britt 2000:316).

Moses seems to remain a figure firmly rooted in the memories and traditions of Israelite and Jewish communities up to the 3rd Century BCE (Dijkstra 2006:18). It is indeed only in the third Century that that an extra-Biblical source refers to Moses – the abovementioned reference by Manetho (Stern 1976:78-86).

According to the memories of Moses embedded in the extant traditions, he never crossed the Jordan River. It is in Midian that Moses is called to become the leader of the Exodus (Ex 3-4) and this call narrative is framed by a description of his initial stay in Midian as a place of refuge (Ex 2:11-25) and by an account of his marriage to a Midianite (Ex 4:18-26). Dijkstra (2006:35) identifies the earliest memories of Moses as those related to the depiction of Moses as a "man of God" (*ish elohim*). Stretching the existing evidence to the limits of credulity Dijkstra (2006:33-35) describes the early Moses as a *miracle working Man of God, who with his Nehushtan* (miraculous serpent staff) *wandered the places of southern Transjordan*. Although there is no unambiguous evidence of such a

“Moses”, comparisons with Elijah and Balaam might prove useful as similar “men of God,” who functioned as religious functionaries in the Transjordan.

4. Moses as Model of Identity

Due to his emphasis on the dialectic nature of the canonical process, Childs (1979:41) is of the opinion that *the literature formed the identity of the religious community which in turn shaped the literature*. The so-called “books of Moses”, or the “psalms of David” and the “proverbs of Solomon” are probably examples of how persons functioned as models of identity in the process of finalizing authoritative collections of religious texts that eventually became the Old Testament/Hebrew canon.

4.1 Deuteronomic/Deuteronomistic Tradition

In Deuteronomy Moses is portrayed in the following ways:

Moses *leader* of Israel during the Exodus (Deut 1-3).

Moses, a *lawgiver* and *interpreter of the law* (Deut 5:5, 27). The structure of Deuteronomy as a whole is also instructive in this regard: In Deuteronomy 1-11 the Decalogue in chapter 5 is framed and interpreted by motivational speeches by Moses recalling events in the history of Israel. Even the catalogue of legal instructions in Deuteronomy 12-26 forms part of a speech or homily by Moses on the plains of Moab to prepare Israel before entering the Promised Land. There is also the distinct possibility that chapters 12-26 (Deuteronomic Code) “represents a cultic reform of worship in the time of Josiah” (Van Seters 2002:202).

In Deuteronomy 18 Moses is presented as the *model for all true prophets*. In a certain sense the religious leadership performed by Moses was prophetic in nature and one should therefore not interpret these different views of Moses in isolation (van Seters 2002:203). The prophetic priority of Moses is emphasized by the statement after his death on Nebo that since then there has not been a prophet like Moses (Deut 34:10). In a certain sense being lawgiver and prophet at the same time, all legal instructions formulated by Moses becomes prophetic (this synthesis probably speeded up the canonization of the Torah and the *Nebi'im!*). It is still a bit mystifying that so few references are made to Moses in the prophetic literature and all but one (Hos 12:13) are late texts (Van Seters 2002:203).

Moses also functions as an *intercessor or mediator* when he has to bear the wrath of the Lord against Israel (Deut 1:37 and 3:25-26). With his death it seems as if Moses becomes a suffering mediator when he is not allowed to enter the Promised Land, although he interceded on behalf of others in this regard (Deut 34). In this regard one is also reminded that Moses is referred to as the *servant of the Lord* and the servant as suffering mediator plays an important role in Isaiah 40-55.

The *Word of the Lord* has the highest priority and Moses is the *direct recipient and sole mediator of it* (Johnstone 2001:173).

4.2 J-tradition

Although I am still in two minds about the existence and dating of Yahwistic texts, John van Seters (2002:200-204) recently identified the following J-sections representing what he considers the older version of the Moses tradition in Exodus to Numbers:

The first few chapters in Exodus present Moses as a leader who is totally dependent on Yahweh for all his actions.

During the climax of the deliverance at the Re(e)d Sea (Ex 13:17-14:31) Moses plays a very passive role and primarily encourages the Israelites to trust the Lord.

Moses as leader of the Exodus is not portrayed with any “royal trappings to maintain control” such as a bodyguard or even a court (van Seters 2002:201).

During later military campaigns in the Transjordan area, Moses seems recede into the background.

The portrayal of Moses as lawgiver is closely related to the Sinai/Horeb theophany and his extended stay on the mountain in the presence of God (Ex 19-20).

The most important J corpus of legal instruction is found in the “Book of the Covenant” (Ex 20:22-23:33). These are all given through Moses as a foundation of the covenant between God and his people.

4.3 Priestly Tradition

By and large I follow two recent reconstructions of the Priestly tradition by E Otto (2002:1536-1537; Otto 2006):

During the *Exile* the Exodus narrative and its image of *Moses as leader* was adapted by inserting Moses as the *mediator* on Sinai/Horeb.

At the same time the *Priestly authors* reinterpret Moses during the Exile to become the counterpart of the Babylonian king and this plays an important role in the shaping of narratives such as the so-called plague narratives (Ex 7-9) that seem to reflect a Babylonian and not a Egyptian context.

Moses is the *obedient servant* who follows the commands of the Lord to the letter, in stark contrast to the disobedient earthly kings (Ex 14).

In early *post-Exilic* texts numerous *Priestly elaborations* are added to the description of the construction of the tabernacle that coincided with the construction of the second temple (Ex 35-Lev 9). According to these texts Moses is viewed as the one who founded the Israelite religion at Sinai, the same religion that now required the building of the second temple in Jerusalem (Otto 2002:1536-1537; Otto 2006).

In passing I would like to note that the references to Moses by the Levitical singers in the Psalter require closer scrutiny: Moses is mentioned no less than six times in Book IV of the Psalter (99:6; 103:7; 105:26; 106:16, 23, 32) and this fourth Book is introduced by Psalm 90 as a psalm of Moses!

During the *Persian period* Moses as lawgiver and interpreter of the law receives renewed attention and becomes the central human figure in the Pentateuch. Otto (2006) considers it likely that this image of Moses provided motivation for a group of priests who in post-Exilic times had to fulfil roles the absent king could not perform. These priests also replaced the prophets as primary spokespersons of God (vide Moses as

model prophet who needed Aaron – the founder of the priesthood – to communicate on his behalf!).

4.4 Post-biblical Moses Traditions

In the post-biblical traditions the process of the reinterpretation of Moses was continued:

Qumran (*1QM/War Scroll & 1 IQTa Temple Scroll* etc.): Moses is by far the dominating figure in the majority of the texts. The Torah was closely linked to Moses who was seen as the *servant of God* and even as his *messiah* (Bowley 2001:181). According to Flavius Josephus (*Jud War* 2:145) the reverence for Moses as lawgiver was so great that anyone that blasphemed him was put to death.

Philo of Alexandria (*De Vita Mosis*): Moses is presented as king, philosopher, lawgiver, prophet and priest *par excellence!*

Flavius Josephus (*Contra Apionem*): According to this Jewish historian the Egyptian historian Manetho describes Moses as an Egyptian priest who sided with a group of leprous Israelites who were then expelled from Egypt (Propp 2000:921).

5. Conclusion

The shift of focus from history to memory in the study of Moses allows research to go beyond grappling with the unsolvable problem of the supposed historicity of Moses. The memory of Moses is not primarily concerned whether there was a person in history called Moses, but is much more interested in the way in which Moses was remembered in different periods of time and within various theological traditions (Assmann 1997:9).

Any argument that the biblical traditions concerned with Moses personifies the origin of Israel as a nation – recently by Illana Pardes (2000) – runs the risk of being anachronistic in the sense that they apply modern sociological and psychological theories without appreciating the ever present “ugly ditch” between then and now. These studies do remind the modern reader of biblical narratives that each generation tends to remember a specific image of Moses that resonate with their context or even their own self-image. Sociology and Psychology still have a major contribution to make in how remembering results in a certain perception of Moses (or any other event or person) emerge.

Furthermore, the different manifestations of the Moses traditions seem to allow some insight into the process of religious and cultural identity formation and reformulation. The remarkable diversity in the Moses traditions might serve a significant indicator how the religious identity of Israel and early Judaism developed in a non-linear or non-evolutionary way. If *we are what we remember* then the obvious advantage of a focus on memory is its potential to comprehend elements of the evolving process of identity formation (Assmann 1997:14).

Therefore this contribution was not so much interested in establishing whether Moses truly was a charismatic leader, a courageous prophet or a foundational lawgiver and establisher of a religion. The study of Moses as a figure of memory provides some indication of the exciting potential of memory research, going beyond the quagmire of positivistic historicism.

Finally: It has become obvious that memory and tradition are overlapping terms (Smith 2004:128). Commemoration can be described as a collective and ongoing effort by any culture to preserve and maintain a certain identity (even if it requires some adaptation), and

tradition as “historically extended, socially embodied argument” that also establishes some continuity with the past.

Where tradition history in the past concentrated on conceptual trends that can be linked to specific interest groups (i.e. call narrative and prophets), collective memory has the complementary interest in reflection on institutional memory – family, royal court, local sanctuary and temple (first and second). Tradition can be accessed through the historical investigation of written records and the descriptions of festive enactments (i.e. Passover), while cultural communities develop an almost “autobiographical memory” rooted in the collective experience.

The remarkable diversity of Moses images can possibly be explained as the result of the impact of the royal court and first temple on the perception of Moses as leader that was different from the disobedient Judean monarchs and the belligerent Assyrian emperors. The emergence of Moses as prophet during the exile is possibly closely related to the situation that no normal cultic activity was possible in an unclean environment – therefore prophets had to be redefined to act as intermediaries and rethink the past to make sense of the traumatic present.

The temple-dominated post-exilic period provides the ideal context for Moses as law-giver and interpreter to flourish. To come to grips with the institutional influence on the text of the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, the research on collective memory might prove to be a reservoir of knowledge that will increase in value and significance.

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