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Moses and Liminality

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by

David J. Krouwer

June 2015

Advisor: Alison Schofield

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Abstract

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Chapter 1: The Liminal Israelites

The Hebrew Bible contains many stories of liminal characters and tales about transitions undergone by the Israelite people. Figures in the Hebrew Bible speak with God, receive divine visions and dreams, and occasionally come into contact with God and his angels. One figure, however, stands out among the rest in his liminal qualities, actions, and transitions through which he leads the Israelites, and that figure is Moses. The Mosaic narrative spans from the book of Exodus through the book of Deuteronomy, and is a story containing many liminal events and transitions, led by Moses, the most liminal figure in the Hebrew Bible.

Moses is best understood as the quintessential Biblical liminal figure; his identity is liminal, he is associated with liminal space, and he is the transitional guide for the Israelites in their rite of passage. This status made him the ideal tool for the divine task of transition that was assigned to him, and his role was essentially to guide Israel through her coming of age ceremony. The Israelites transitioned from slaves to citizens, from a people with a nameless God to one who knows the personal name of their deity, and from a lawless people to a nation bound by covenant.¹ The Israelites completed these transitions by following Moses through the wilderness, a period marked by symbolic water crossings at the start and finish of this liminal journey.

¹ The Hebrews become slaves in Egypt (Exodus 1:9-14); the Hebrews are freed (Exodus 14-15). Moses learns the personal name of God (Exodus 3:13-15), and the Hebrews receive the divine law (see Exodus 19 when the Hebrews camp at Sinai, commencing the lawgiving that continues through the book of Deuteronomy).

The wilderness period, beginning in the book of Exodus at the crossing of the Red Sea and ending in the book of Joshua with the crossing of the Jordan River, is a liminal period in the biblical narrative. This is made evident by its setting in liminal space (i.e. the wilderness and upon Mount Sinai), the inclusion of liminal events (i.e. divine communication), and the significant transitions that the Hebrews underwent, transitions that often necessitate liminal instruments such as water, fire, or a liminal guide. Analyzing these texts through the lens of narrative criticism demonstrates that Moses was God's liminal instrument used to guide Israel through her coming of age ceremony. This interpretation of the liminality of Moses and the wilderness period is supported by the beliefs and expectations of those who settled Khirbet Qumran in the latter half of the Second Temple period. Located near the Dead Sea, this settlement supported a wilderness community with messianic and eschatological expectations and a great interest in Moses, made evident through the Dead Sea Scrolls. Just as the Hebrews required a liminal period in order to mature before the conquest of the Promised Land, so the Qumranites also reenacted a liminal period in the wilderness with the end goal of retaking the Promised Land. This goal is further supported by the eschatological, messianic, and Mosaic texts discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Mosaic Parameters: Methodology and Scope

This paper will utilize a narrative critical approach² to analyze Moses as a literary figure whose role in the biblical narrative was to act as God's liminal instrument to guide

² This paper will primarily follow the model of narrative criticism as described by David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell from their collaborative book *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*. For a detailed history of the development and use of narrative criticism in religious studies, see Gunn's entry "Narrative Criticism," pages 201-229 in *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application* (ed. Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1999).

the Israelites through their coming of age ceremony, a rite of passage in which the Israelites matured as a nation and thus became qualified and responsible for upholding God's laws and taking control and care of the Promised Land. The narrative critical approach places focus on the actual text being read as a whole and how the reader interprets it, rather than a historical or source critical approach, which attempt to discern between different authors, editors, and historical context of when the text was written.

Often [narrative criticism] has meant interpreting the existing text (in its 'final form') in terms primarily of its own story world, seen as replete with meaning, rather than understanding the text by attempting to reconstruct its sources and editorial history, its original setting and audience, and its author's or editor's intention in writing.³

Since the main focus of narrative criticism is the narrative content, historical questions are secondary but not completely ignored. "None of this means that we think the Bible to have nothing to do with history. It simply means that, by and large, we are not addressing historical questions directly."⁴

Significantly, this approach does not suggest that there is any one correct reading of a text. Multiple interpretations of the same text are possible and each could potentially be considered a "correct" reading. David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell criticize historical critics for positing that theirs was the "correct" methodology working toward the "correct" interpretation:

In the same vein, but perhaps even more important, was the assumption that what was being expounded by the historical critic was, if not the correct meaning of the text, at least a step towards the correct meaning. There are two questions here. One is whether critics (readers) think of texts as having ultimately only a single right meaning. The other is

³ David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 201.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

whether critics think that there is a single right method of interpretation. For most historical critics the answer to both questions was, yes. The critic was seeking the right meaning, and historical criticism was the correct method by which to seek it. Historical criticism, indeed, was the summit of the interpretational pyramid. All those layers below were merely relics of bygone mistakes, centuries of wrong interpretations. (The arrogance of this position is, of course, breathtaking, but recognizably Western.)⁵

A historical analysis of texts also encounters the problem of determining how close a source is to its original, and that trying to find the “original” does not do justice to the popular or mainstream version of a text with which a reading community is familiar.

Historical criticism accorded a privilege to the notion of ‘original’ which is both problematic in itself (why stop at the ‘sources’, why not the sources of the sources?) and also devastating to the value of the text most people actually read, namely the ‘final’ canonical text.⁶

Thus in the narrative critical approach the widely read “popular” text is preferred over the “original” text constructed through historical and source criticism, yet this approach does not completely ignore history nor deny that these texts are composite works developed over centuries with contributions from many authors, editors, and copiers.

The interplay between the text and its author(s), editor(s), and readers plays an important role in the narrative critical method. “The whole of narrative criticism may be seen as an analysis of the narrative content, with the context of relationships between authors, texts, and readers.”⁷ This approach works to isolate themes and literary devices used in the text that guide the reader toward a certain reading of the text, and whether such a reading was in fact the author’s or editor’s intended one.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷ W. Randolph Tate, “Narrative Criticism” in *Interpreting the Bible: A Handbook of Terms and Methods* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006), 231.

The implied author may assume on the part of the implied reader a set of values, literary competence, and background. But there is no way to assure that every reader will satisfy this assumption. Both the text and the reader are characterized by indeterminacy. On the one hand, even if we assume that the role of the implied reader may be completely defined, no single reader can perfectly and completely conform to the role the text provides for the implied reader.⁸

Thus despite the best efforts of an author or editor, a text's desired interpretation may or may not be achieved, depending on the cultural background, experiences, and values of the reading audience. "Meaning must be a function of the relationships, experiences, and connections that the implied reader is called upon to create. Everything within the narrative world comes together to create the context and meaning."⁹ The narrative necessitates a reader, and the reader interprets according to his or her background, culture, and understanding of the text itself. "Narrative criticism assumes that the story does not exist autonomously within the text but comes into being through the interaction between the text and the reader."¹⁰

This methodology also distinguishes between the reality of the real world and the reality within the narrative. "The narrative critic does not identify the narrative world with the real world."¹¹ The narrative reality could have its roots in the real world, however the story ought not to be taken as a literal history or a "real" portrayal of what actually happened. The message of the narrative comes through interpretation, which is not necessarily a literal reading. "The objects, persons, and events in the narrative may not correspond to anything in the real world. Narrative criticism rejects any necessary

⁸ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 233.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 231.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 232.

one-to-one correspondence between the real and narrative worlds.”¹² This method will allow for an analysis of the character of Moses and themes in the Pentateuch without being hindered by questions of historical reliability or accuracy.

The *narrative* reality is where the value in a text lies, not in its historical reality. “Through artistic forms and strategies, the story world assumes its own reality, a reality that is capable of communicating its own truth.”¹³ One must also acknowledge that all those who influence a given text do so according to their own predispositions and agendas.

All authors and editors serve ideological agendas, expressed or unexpressed, and shape their account accordingly. In practice, then, there must always be a distance between the narrative world and the world of ‘what actually happened.’ Indeed, we could argue that there is no such thing as ‘what actually happened’; there are only stories (or histories) of what happened, always relative to the perspective of the story-teller (historian).¹⁴

Thus, this methodology treats the Bible as literature. Although the text is acknowledged as an incredibly complex work composed over centuries by a number of writers, editors, and copiers, this analysis treats the narrative as a unified story rather than an amalgam of independent contributing sources. “Narrative critics tend to read the Bible as literature and, unlike source or redactional critics, assume that the texts are unified rather than discontinuous. Historical questions, though not ignored, are secondary to questions about the flow and structure of the story.”¹⁵

¹² *Ibid.*, 232.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 231.

¹⁴ Gunn and Fewell, *Narrative*, 6.

¹⁵ T. K. Beal, K. A. Keefer, and T. Linafelt, “Literary Theory, Literary Criticism, and the Bible,” *DBI* 2:83.

Certain characteristics of the Mosaic narrative have suggested that a narrative critical approach is most appropriate. The qualities of the text suggest that literary tools take precedence over relating historical details about the Mosaic narrative. For example,

On the journey from Egypt to Sinai, we find accounts of the divine provision of manna and quails for the Israelites in Exodus 16, a composite J and P narrative, and of the miraculous production of water from a rock in Exodus 17:1-7, probably E. Alternate versions of these events are reported on the journey from Sinai to Canaan, manna and quails in Numbers 11, probably E, and water from the rock in Numbers 20, which is P. The final editors of the Pentateuch have thus bracketed the stay at Sinai with parallel episodes.¹⁶

In an instance where the Documentary Hypothesis can explain *how* parallel episodes became included in the same narrative, the relevance lies in that the final editors of the book of Exodus framed the Sinai event in this way, and that despite parallel events in separate sources, the editors were more concerned with conveying the text's message than "what really happened."

Furthermore, certain significant historical details that one would expect to find in a historical account are absent from the book of Exodus, implying the primary interests of the authors/editors were in narrative, not history. "Neither the pharaoh who begins the persecution of the Hebrews nor his successor, the pharaoh of the Exodus itself, is named, and their characters are devoid of particulars by which we might be able to identify them."¹⁷ Although scholars have attempted to recreate the biblical timeline, thus

¹⁶ Michael D. Coogan, *A Brief Introduction to the Old Testament: The Hebrew Bible in its Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 96. J, P, and E refer to three of the four sources that contributed to the Pentateuch according to the Documentary Hypothesis. This theory was introduced by Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918) and suggests that the Torah is a composite work of four distinct sources, J, E, D, and P, each with its own characteristics.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 87.

determining which historical pharaohs are the literary pharaohs of the Exodus narrative,¹⁸ these details were not of great concern to the biblical authors and editors.

The manuscripts from the Pentateuch found at Qumran show a high consistency with the modern Torah,¹⁹ and thus the analysis of the modern Torah will also apply to the versions of the text that the Qumranites read, making a narrative critical method is appropriate, reasonable, and effective for the study of the Mosaic narrative in the Second Temple period. There is little need to engage source critical methods or hypotheses regarding the modern Pentateuch because these interwoven sources were already established at that time. Not only did the Qumranites have a Torah very close to the modern Pentateuch, making the analysis of one applicable to the other, they also likely interpreted the Mosaic narrative in the same way suggested in this study, i.e. as a liminal wilderness period being a prerequisite to a major change in historical eras.

¹⁸ “This would make Merneptah’s father, Rameses II (1279-1213), the pharaoh of the Exodus, and his father, Seti I (1294-1279), the pharaoh who began the persecution of the Hebrews. This is the view held by most, but by no means all, biblical scholars.” (Coogan, *Old Testament*, 90)

¹⁹ Although differences are present between the Masoretic Text and the manuscripts of the Torah found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, the collection of these five books as a unit and their ordering is consistent with the MT. The textual variances are not significant enough to suggest any major thematic differences, and thus although differences do exist, none are significant enough to suggest that the meaning of the narrative challenges or contradicts the MT. For a more detailed discussion of the textual variances between the scrolls and the MT see chapter 6 in James VanderKam and Peter Flint, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Their Significance for Understanding the Bible, Judaism, Jesus, and Christianity* (New York: HarperOne, 2002).

Chapter 2: Liminality

Before further exploring the literary qualities of Moses' character, a brief description of liminality is in order. The idea was first introduced in Arnold Van Gennep's book *The Rites of Passage*, where he developed the idea within a cultural anthropological context, primarily as it related to transitional rites of passage.²⁰ The idea was further developed by Victor Turner in his book *The Ritual Process*,²¹ and since then has found applications in a variety of additional fields including political science, international relations, and religious studies.

Van Gennep divided the overarching category of "rites of passage" into three sets of rites: "preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation)."²² In the context of the biblical narrative, the preliminary rites marked the Hebrews' escape from Egypt and included, as an example, the Hebrews' smearing of lamb's blood on their doorposts to distinguish them from the Egyptians.²³ After leaving Egypt, the Hebrews experienced their liminal rites, i.e. the

²⁰ Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (trans. Monika B. Vizadom and Gabrielle L Caffee; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960),

²¹ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New Brunswick: AldineTransaction, 1969, 1997, 2008).

²² Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 11. Due to the scope of this paper being by and large limited to the Mosaic narrative, the postliminal rites, i.e. the conquest period following the crossing of the Jordan River, will not be discussed.

²³ Exodus 12:7.

reception of the law at Mount Sinai.²⁴ Finally, they experienced their rite of incorporation by means of conquest of the Promised Land after they crossed the Jordan River.²⁵

Turner further developed this idea and coined the phrase “betwixt and between” as a way of characterizing liminality in general, as well as liminal people, entities, and states.

The attributes of liminality or of liminal personae (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.²⁶

Turner also distinguished between two primary types of liminality:

first, the liminality that characterizes *rituals of status elevation*, in which the ritual subject or novice is being conveyed irreversibly from a lower to a higher position in an institutionalized system of such positions. Secondly, the liminality frequently found in cyclical and calendrical ritual, usually of a collective kind, in which, at certain culturally defined points in the seasonal cycle, groups or categories of persons who habitually occupy low status positions in the social structure are positively enjoined to exercise ritual authority over their superiors; and they in their turn, must accept with good will their ritual degradation. Such rites may be described as *rituals of status reversal*.²⁷

It is the former type that is of concern at present. In biblical terms, the Hebrews as a people were the ritual subject or novice, and they transitioned from the status of slaves to the higher status of citizens of a new nation by virtue of the liminal wilderness period between these two states.

²⁴ See Exodus 19, 31, 34.

²⁵ Joshua 3:14-17.

²⁶ Turner, *Ritual Process*, 95.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 167.

Connotations of Liminality

There are a few relevant characteristics and phenomena associated with liminality. In addition to transitional rites of passage including birth, social puberty,²⁸ advancement to a higher class, and death,²⁹ it is associated with further transitional, marginal, and hybrid³⁰ states and entities such as darkness, wilderness, and being in the womb.³¹ Furthermore, “as a threshold situation, liminality is also a vital moment of creativity, a potential platform for renewing the societal make-up.”³² These are periods of pronounced change for the ritual participant or group, and indeed the wilderness period of the Hebrews provided a creative period of transition that included the most significant changes in the culture and religion of the Israelite people.

Liminality also carries connotations of danger and power. The danger lies in the uncertainty of liminal states and entities; they do not have fixed boundaries or conform to cultural categories, making them productive but also unpredictable. “Danger lies in transitional states, simply because transition is neither one state nor the next, it is undefinable. The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others.”³³ Because liminality is by definition unbounded, it is also

²⁸ Van Gennep distinguishes between social puberty, i.e. when a child goes through cultural puberty rites, and physical puberty, i.e. when a child goes through biological puberty.

²⁹ Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 3.

³⁰ Although “hybridity” ought not be equated with “liminality,” the two terms are related in the sense that both deal with intermediary and indeterminate states between categories (in the case of hybridity) and states (in the case of liminality). Although these terms are not used interchangeably they are certainly connected in their connotations of non-belonging, potential impurity, and potential danger and power.

³¹ Turner, *Ritual Process*, 5.

³² Maria Mälksoo, “The Challenge of Liminality for International Relations Theory,” *RIS* 38, No. 2 (2012): 481.

associated with power. This is not to say that liminality is boundless, but rather is not bound by regulations of either the previous or coming state. Because these states are not bound, they are creative and thus powerful, able to receive input from sources outside of either state on either side of the transition, and thus are powerful states by virtue of their creative potential. “The danger which is risked by boundary transgression is power.”³⁴ Liminal states and entities are not bound by either fixed state that they are between; they are productive, powerful as a result of their productive potential, however they are therefore also unpredictable.³⁵

Distinguishing the Liminal

For this study it will be beneficial to separate the liminal into three categories: liminal space, liminal events and periods, and liminal entities. Each distinction will remain true to Van Gennep and Turner’s understanding of the liminal, but will also contain slight nuances and allow for a more focused understanding of Moses’ role in the Pentateuch. Liminal events and periods correspond to Van Gennep’s liminal rites of passage, liminal space corresponds to his “neutral zones,” and liminal entities include both Turner’s “liminal personae” and also ritual instruments that are used in transitional rites, such as water and fire.³⁶

³³ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 1966), 119.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 199.

³⁵ For example, see chapter 4 (“Pregnancy and Childbirth”) of Van Gennep’s *Rites of Passage*, which demonstrates that pregnancy is often accompanied by ritual practices that prevent the danger that this liminal state imposes on the rest of the community.

³⁶ For Van Gennep’s overview of liminal rites of passage see chapter 1 in Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*; for a description of “neutral zones” see the same work, page 18; for Turner’s description of “liminal personae” see Turner, *Ritual Process*, 95.

Liminal space can refer to either specific or general locations, as well as geographical features that are liminal in nature. Van Gennep describes these spaces thusly, using the term “neutral zones”:

The neutral zones are ordinarily deserts, marshes, and most frequently virgin forests where everyone has full rights to travel and hunt. Because of the pivoting of sacredness, the territories on either side of the neutral zone are sacred in relation to whoever is in the zone, but the zone, in turn, is sacred for the inhabitants of the adjacent territories. Whoever passes from one to the other finds himself physically and magico-religiously³⁷ in a special situation for a certain length of time: he wavers between two worlds. It is this situation which I have designated a transition, and one of the purposes of this book is to demonstrate that this symbolic and spatial area of transition may be found in more or less pronounced form in all the ceremonies which accompany the passage from one social and magico-religious position to another.³⁸

The wilderness through which the Hebrews wandered is a perfect example of liminal space; it is between two recognizable territories, Egypt and the Promised Land. It is a space denoting transition, and the Israelites found themselves in a magico-religious state during this period.

Liminal events and periods typically produce recognizable and significant transitions. Any rite or interaction between this world and the otherworldly necessitates a liminal period, “So great is the incompatibility between the profane and the sacred worlds that a man cannot pass from one to the other without going through an intermediate

³⁷ Van Gennep defines “magico-religious” thusly: “*Dynamism* designates the impersonal theory of mana; *animism*, the personalistic theory, whether the power personified be a single or a multiple being, animal or plant (e.g., a totem), anthropomorphic or amorphous (e.g., God). These theories constitute *religion*, whose techniques (ceremonies, rites, services) I call *magic*. Since the practice and the theory are inseparable—the theory without the practice becoming metaphysics, and the practice on the basis of a different theory becoming science—the term I will at all times use is the adjective *magico-religious*.” (Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 13).

³⁸ Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 18.

stage.”³⁹ Birth, death, and otherworldly interaction all involve bridging the gap between realms, and so are intrinsically liminal in nature. Otherworldly interaction can involve visions of the otherworldly, communication with beings from another realm, and also sacrifice, in which the essence of the sacrifice crosses the border between realms in order for the recipient to receive it. Significantly, these events and periods often also incorporate liminal space and entities, such as water and fire to assist with sacrifice, and wilderness and mountains to facilitate otherworldly interaction.

Liminal entities can refer to both people and instruments. Turner’s description of liminal people is as expected; they are betwixt and between conventional categories, and thus have inconclusive identities. “The attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* (‘threshold people’) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space.”⁴⁰ Mary Douglas⁴¹ describes people in marginal states as “people who are somehow left out in the patterning of society, who are placeless. They may be doing nothing morally wrong, but their status is indefinable.”⁴² Turner describes those in liminal periods similarly, that “During the intervening ‘liminal’ period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the ‘passenger’) are ambiguous; he passes through a

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁰ Turner, *Ritual Process*, 95.

⁴¹ Although Douglas does not explicitly refer to liminality in her book *Purity and Danger*, her ideas certainly pertain to the liminal despite her not explicitly using the word. As Iver B. Neumann states, “Douglas does not put the category of liminality at the centre of her analysis, preferring to focus on the conceptual pair of purity and danger, but her theorizing clearly hails from the liminal tradition.” (Iver B. Neumann, “Introduction to the Forum on Liminality,” *RIS* 3, No. 2 (2012), 474.)

⁴² Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 118.

cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state.”⁴³ Thus liminal persons are those who are culturally ambiguous, whose identities are indeterminate, and who are placeless in the world with no real land to call home.

Liminal instruments are not always liminal because of their own nature, but are widely used in liminal practices and thus have connotations of liminality. Water and fire, for example, are not intrinsically liminal, but are often used in connection with purification rituals, which are liminal in the sense that they significantly change the status of an object, transitioning it from impure to pure. In the book of Exodus, for example, ritual purity is emphasized when the sons of Aaron were to offer sacrifices. God told Moses that he needed to make a bronze basin, fill it with water, and wash their hands and feet with this water in order “to make an offering by fire to the LORD...so that they may not die. They shall wash their hands and their feet, so that they may not die: it shall be a perpetual ordinance for them, for him and for his descendants throughout their generations.”⁴⁴ In this case the water and fire were tools of liminality; the water transformed the priest from one state to another, i.e. from ritually impure to ritually pure, and the fire helped transition the sacrifice from earth to the otherworldly realm in order to be received by God. In general, as attested in other instances throughout the Hebrew Bible, things that do become contaminated or need to be ritually purified in order to allow for divine interaction are treated with water, which plays a central role in ritual purification and decontamination.⁴⁵

⁴³ Turner, *Ritual Process*, 94.

⁴⁴ Exodus 30:20-21, NRSV.

⁴⁵ See Exodus 30:18-21; Leviticus 1:9, 13;5:1-3; 6:28; 8:6; Numbers 31:23.

Liminality in the Ancient Near East

In early ancient Near Eastern mythology, the boundary between this world and the other was not as definite as it later came to be. Tzvi Abusch describes the early otherworldly borders thusly:

Initially, Mesopotamian mythology grew out of and gave expression to this religion of fertility and thus recognized the fluidity as well as the cyclical nature of movement between earth and the netherworld. These two realms formed a continuum, and thus movement back and forth between the world of the living and that of the dead was possible and was even part of the natural order. Life and death themselves were parts of the same continuum. Even the separation of the human and the divine was not yet definitive, for divinity and deathlessness did not coincide, and thus gods, like humans, could die and sojourn in the netherworld.⁴⁶

Over the course of the development of mythology⁴⁷ in the ancient Near East these boundaries became more defined and more difficult to transcend. Although it was not impossible to cross these boundaries, it became more difficult without the aid of liminality, such as experiencing a liminal event or entering liminal space. This realm was separated from the otherworldly realm, and, “consequently, one could no longer belong to two realms at the same time, and movement from one realm to another tended to become permanent and irreversible.”⁴⁸ This worldview is developed in the Pentateuch and by the time of Moses the boundary between heaven and earth was established,⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Tzvi Abusch, “Ascent to the Stars in a Mesopotamian Ritual: Social Metaphor and Religious Experience,” in *Death, Ecstasy, and Other Worldly Journeys* (ed. John J. Collins and Michael Fishbane; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 15-16.

⁴⁷ By “mythology” I do not mean to delegitimize or question the authenticity of any religious beliefs; I am using the term to refer to stories and traditions of a religious nature, i.e. relating to beliefs regarding the otherworldly.

⁴⁸ Abusch, “Ascent,” 16.

⁴⁹ Approaching the book of Genesis from a narrative perspective reflects this development of an open to closed border between this world and the otherworldly. In the Garden of Eden God’s physical presence appeared on earth (see, in particular, Genesis 3:8, “They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the

making Moses' close relationship with God particularly unique. The boundary between this world and the next was definite and dangerous, and the transition from one world to the next was assumed to be permanent.⁵⁰

Categories, Order, and Holiness

As previously established, liminality refers to places, entities, and events that defy cultural categories, that lie betwixt and between conventional understanding. Therefore, one must understand the process of categorization in order to properly understand how liminality functions. Categorization is how human societies and cultures order the world in order to understand and properly interact with it. The result of places, entities, and events that do not properly conform to socially constructed categories is discomfort. "Where pure categories do not apply, feelings of insecurity and danger ensue."⁵¹ It is this construction of fixed categories that allows for the existence of liminality, as "liminality is a function of categories. It would by definition be impossible for a social world to exist without shared categories."⁵² Categories establish order in the world, and create social comfort by means of separation.

Indeed, separation is one of the original connotations contained in the word translated from the Hebrew root "קדש" as "holy." Holy things ought to be separated from

garden" [NRSV]). Later in Genesis trouble arises from divine beings breaching the earthly border (see Genesis 6:1-5), as well as humans attempting to breach the divine border (i.e. the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:4-9). After this point in the narrative there are isolated incidents of divine interaction (see Genesis 18, when God appears to Abraham and Sarah, and Genesis 32:28-30, when Jacob wrestled with God), but it is evident that these are exceptional cases and that in general, the border was closed between realms.

⁵⁰ Very few exceptions to this exist in Jewish tradition, but include Enoch, Elijah, Melchizedek, and Moses.

⁵¹ Iver B. Neumann, "Introduction to the Forum on Liminality," *RIS* 38, No. 2 (2012), 474.

⁵² Neumann, "Forum on Liminality," 477.

the profane, “For us sacred things and places are to be protected from defilement. Holiness and impurity are at opposite poles.”⁵³

the Hebrew root of k-d-sh, which is usually translated as Holy, is based on the idea of separation. Aware of the difficulty translating k-d-sh straight into Holy, Ronald Knox’s version of the Old Testament uses ‘set apart’. Thus the grand lines ‘Be ye Holy, Because I am Holy’ are rather thinly rendered: ‘I am the Lord your God, who rescued you from the land of Egypt; I am set apart and you must be set apart like me. (Lev. 11:45)’⁵⁴

Even if some regard this translation as “thin” compared to others that translate the Hebrew as “holy,” it provides a dimension to the text that would otherwise be lost in translation. It is the setting apart that establishes the sacred; it is the categorization that creates order.

A similar example is found in Leviticus chapter 20, where God describes having set apart his people from the other nations. “You shall be holy to me; for I the LORD am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine.”⁵⁵ The Israelites were separated from the other nations of the earth, put in the category of the sacred, set apart from the impurity of the surrounding nations.

An additional connotation of the same Hebrew root is that of completeness, which extends to the importance of belonging completely to a given category. “We can conclude that holiness is exemplified by completeness. Holiness requires that individuals shall conform to the class to which they belong. And holiness requires that different classes of things shall not be confused.”⁵⁶ In short, “Holiness means keeping distinct the

⁵³ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 9.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁵ Leviticus 20:26, NRSV.

⁵⁶ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 67.

categories of creation. It therefore involves correct definition, discrimination and order.”⁵⁷

The creation of order through categorization is particularly evident in the dietary laws of the Hebrew Bible. According to Douglas, these laws did not arise from hygienic, aesthetic, safety, or moral issues,⁵⁸ but rather from a specific cultural understanding of species categorization. She takes the text itself as a starting point, putting aside previously proposed explanations for the origins of these restrictions.

The only sound approach is to forget hygiene, aesthetics, morals and instinctive revulsion, even to forget the Canaanites and the Zoroastrian Magi, and start with the texts. Since each of the injunctions is prefaced by the command to be holy, so they must be explained by that command.⁵⁹

Thus Douglas establishes that by virtue of the associated command to “be holy,” the dietary laws are connected with this word that implies separation and, more importantly, completeness. “To be holy is to be whole, to be one; holiness is unity, integrity, perfection of the individual and of the kind. The dietary rules merely develop the metaphor of holiness on the same lines.”⁶⁰

To support her theory, Douglas provides the categories that an animal must conform to in order to be considered clean, which include physical characteristics, natural habits, and modes of transportation. She shows that land animals need to generally conform to the characteristics and behavior of cattle, which involves rumination and

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵⁸ For a detailed history of previous interpretations of the dietary laws in Leviticus see the third chapter in Douglas, *Purity and Danger*.

⁵⁹ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 62.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

having cloven hooves.⁶¹ Regarding the creation in Genesis, “In the firmament two-legged fowls fly with wings. In the water scaly fish swim with fins. On the earth four-legged animals hop, jump, or walk. Any class of creatures which is not equipped for the right kind of locomotion in its element is contrary to holiness.”⁶² Thus animals that live in the water yet do not have scales are unclean, as they do not properly conform to their category. Furthermore, swarming “is an indeterminate form of movement. Since the main animal categories are defined by their typical movement, ‘swarming’ which is not a mode of propulsion proper to any particular element, cuts across the basic classification.”⁶³ Douglas thus conclusively demonstrates that the dietary laws in the Hebrew Bible derive from categorization, and that which does not conform to a proper category should be avoided. “In general the underlying principle of cleanness in animals is that they shall conform fully to their class. Those species are unclean which are imperfect members of their class, or whose class itself confounds the general scheme of the world.”⁶⁴ It is this same principle that living things must conform to their class and category that establishes Moses’ hybrid identity, meaning that he represents a break in the divine order established through categorization and thus qualified for his transitional task yet unable to enter God’s territory, i.e. the Promised Land.

Just as the dietary laws resulted from an avoidance of liminality, further restrictions derive from the discomfort and potential danger caused by crossing between categories. The Hebrew Bible is concerned with mixing things that cross categories,

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 69.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

whether it involves crossing sacred and profane space, mixing fabrics,⁶⁵ or animals that do not properly conform to only one category, whether they are real or mythical.

Mythical creatures are often hybrids, beasts that are neither one animal nor another but cross categories between species. Taking a biblical example, the cherubim are hybrid creatures that are part human and part winged lion. These types of creatures are indeed dangerous because of their liminality but also derive power from it. They often protect borders and thresholds such as city gates, sacred areas, and in the Hebrew Bible the Arc of the Covenant, which was a liminal object located on earth but with strong connections to the otherworldly, guarded by two cherubim which sat atop the Arc with their wings spread out.⁶⁶

An additional rule based on the avoidance of mixing categories prohibits the consumption of blood by humans.⁶⁷ Blood is the life force of a creature and “because it is life, it belongs to God.”⁶⁸ This prohibition attempts to prevent an abominable mixture; to ingest blood is likened to combining two separate lives of two different species, or mixing the earthly with the divine: putting what belongs to God in the body of a human. Additionally, one “shall not practice augury or witchcraft,”⁶⁹ and “A man or a woman

⁶⁵ Leviticus 19:19.

⁶⁶ For hybrid creatures guarding city gates, see, for example, the human-headed winged bulls from Dur Sharrukin (modern Khorsabad), now housed at the Louvre. See also Genesis 3:24, when God placed cherubim to guard the entrance to the Garden of Eden, and Exodus 25:18-20; 37:7-9 for descriptions of the cherubim on the Arc of the Covenant.

⁶⁷ Leviticus 17:14.

⁶⁸ Blake Leyerle, “Blood is Seed,” *TJOR* 81 (2001): 28.

⁶⁹ Leviticus 19:26, NRSV.

who is a medium or a wizard shall be put to death.”⁷⁰ These types of activities involve crossing the border between this world and the otherworldly, attempting to utilize power from another realm on earth; they are activities that cross the categories of sacred and profane and thus are prohibited in Leviticus.

In addition to the danger of mixing the divine with the worldly, the Hebrew Bible also restricts crossing earthly categories, which is particularly evident in sexual regulations. The mixing of human and animal seed⁷¹ is strictly forbidden and is punishable by death, both for the human and the animal.⁷² This is also likely why the text prohibits male homosexual acts and marrying women who are not virgins.⁷³ Acts of this sort, from an ancient perspective, mixed the seed of two different men, essentially mixing two separate life forces.⁷⁴ Such an event would cause a rupture in the order that God created through separation, organization, and categorization. Order is created through these processes; mixing of this sort is a liminal process, causing cross-contamination, creating things that are betwixt and between conventional categories.

The biblical text also makes a distinction between the people of Israel and all other peoples of the earth. This distinction is first seen in God’s choosing of Abraham to be the father of his chosen people,⁷⁵ and is made more evident during the story of the

⁷⁰ Leviticus 20:27, NRSV.

⁷¹ Mixing seeds of crops is forbidden as well (Deuteronomy 22:9).

⁷² Leviticus 18:22-23; 20:15-16. Significantly, “The word ‘perversion’ [from Lev. 18:23] is a significant mistranslation of the rare Hebrew word *tebhel*, which has as its meaning mixing or confusion.” (Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 66).

⁷³ Leviticus 18:22; 21:14.

⁷⁴ Non-virgin women would already have received another male’s seed, and homosexual male intercourse would cause one male who already has his own seed to receive another’s.

Hebrews living as slaves in Egypt. Both the people and the land of Egypt were set in opposition to the Israelites. During some of the plagues inflicted upon Egypt the Israelites and their property were distinguished from the Egyptians and their property.⁷⁶ After the people successfully escaped Egypt, God commanded them never to return there again.⁷⁷ To return to Egypt would involve mixing the people that God separated, crossing the categories of God's people and their oppressors.

The divide between the Israelites and the other nations of the earth is further demonstrated in the prohibition against taking foreign wives or making covenants with people that the Israelites were going to conquer; such acts would lead to the worship of foreign gods and the possibility of eating food sacrificed to them.⁷⁸ God made distinctions between the pure and impure, the sacred and profane, the local and the foreign, and mixing these categories or crossing these boundaries is portrayed negatively in the Pentateuch, and thus was strictly prohibited and often punishable by death.

Above and Below

Liminal states, places, and people are common to many religious traditions. Prophets, mediums, shamans, etc., all function within a liminal environment; whereas their physical bodies may reside on earth, their mind or spirit becomes open to messages from the otherworldly or, in some cases, actually travels to another realm.

Some of the journeys therefore are reported to take place bodily, some of them 'in spirit,' and some of them—like the apostle Paul's to heaven (2 Cor. 12:2-4)—in an unknown way. Some, perhaps most of them, lead to

⁷⁵ See Genesis 17.

⁷⁶ Exodus 8:22, 23; 9:4, 22-26; 11:7.

⁷⁷ Deuteronomy 17:16.

⁷⁸ Exodus 34:10-16; Numbers 25:1-2.

the realm of the dead or to part of it, and some to new worlds, while some disclose overlapping, invisible worlds. Some are in space, some are in time, and some are in both.⁷⁹

What divine insight and communication do is open the door between this world and the otherworldly. Otherworldly communication and experiences are intrinsically liminal events, as they involve elements from two separate categories mixing together, creating a temporary connection between the human and divine realms.

Certain geographical locations facilitate liminal experiences between people and the otherworldly. The most typical liminal settings are wilderness and mountains.⁸⁰ The desert is a harsh place where one can go to purify their mind and soul without distraction of luxury and city life. Mountains are physically as close to the heavens as one can be; indeed other cultures held that their deities resided upon mountaintops (ex. Mount Olympus), and thus these liminal peaks allow for greater ease in communication with the divine.

The most significant revelation came to Moses on Mount Sinai⁸¹ in the wilderness, geographically encompassing both of these liminal spaces. Even when Moses was not on a mountain, the Mosaic narrative makes it clear that divine interaction must take place in the wilderness, for example in Exodus chapters 5 and 8 when Moses

⁷⁹ I. P. Couliano, *Out of this World: Otherworldly Journeys from Gilgamesh to Albert Einstein* (Boston: Shambhala, 1991), 6.

⁸⁰ In addition to Moses encountering God in the wilderness and on mountains, see also Hagar's divine encounters with God's angels in the wilderness in Genesis 16 and 21, and also mountains being divine residences (and thus liminal, connecting the worldly and otherworldly) in Greek mythology, i.e. Mount Olympus (see Barry B. Powell, *Classical Myth* [6th ed.; New York: Pearson, 2009], in particular chapters 1, 7, and 8).

⁸¹ The scholarly consensus is that the Pentateuch preserves two traditions of where Moses received God's law: J and P use Mount Sinai, whereas E and D use Horeb. For the present treatment of a literary thematic Moses these separate traditions do not pose significant problems, as both traditions engage similar themes and both tell of Moses on a mountain in the wilderness.

needed to journey three days into the wilderness in order to sacrifice to God. Within cities and communal living in general, places of meeting are established to facilitate liminality and divine interaction and communication.

Liminal experiences are often viewed as dangerous, and in the Hebrew Bible it is evident that interacting with God is one of the most dangerous and even life-threatening experiences that one can have. Coogan sums up the forbidden nature of liminality in a variety of stories in the book of Genesis that are believed to have come from the J source:

J highlights the impassable boundary between the divine and human realms, and any attempt to cross it is a violation of the divinely imposed order that Yahweh moves quickly to stop. Thus, in the garden of Eden story, by eating the forbidden fruit the man and the woman became like gods (Gen 3:22), and part of their punishment was banishment from the garden, so that they could no longer have access to the tree of life and become immortal and thus fully divine. Likewise, the sexual union of the sons of God with human women (Gen 6:1-4) violated the principle of separation, and Yahweh imposed a limit on the life span of their offspring. The same theme is also found in the story of the tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9), which relates how humans tried to reach the divine home in the sky.⁸²

This theme of the impassability of liminal boundaries continues through the next four books of the Torah. Death comes to those who even step foot on God's mountain, let alone achieve any sort of proximity to the deity.⁸³ God set up a boundary around this territory; only those with divine permission and were ritually pure could cross over into his liminal territory where interaction could take place between humans and the divine. Here the boundary between worldly and divine was permeable, however only for select individuals at specific times. Any person or animal that so much as touched the edge of

⁸² Coogan, *Old Testament*, 47.

⁸³ Exodus 19:12-13. See also 2 Samuel 6:7; God kills Uzzah "because he reached out his hand to the ark" NRSV.

Mount Sinai was to be put to death and, furthermore, must be killed with projectiles; they were not even to be touched.⁸⁴ Only Moses and Aaron were permitted to ascend the mountain; those that disobeyed would be killed. There was a barrier between profane space and the liminal space in which one could interact with God, a barrier “which if transgressed, will turn the moment of destiny into one of disaster.”⁸⁵

Wilderness

Wilderness is liminal space, and therefore is also potentially dangerous space due to the intrinsic qualities of liminality previously established. Whereas cities have access to water, contain a multitude of people, a system of roads and both residential and commercial structures, the wilderness is mostly bereft of humanity or any signs of it. Liminal places are those with heightened access to the otherworldly, which includes both the heavens and the underworld. In the Jewish tradition, on the Day of Atonement, two goats are sacrificed, however only one is sacrificed to God. “The other is designated as ‘for Azazel,’ an obscure term probably referring to some sort of demon, often translated as the ‘scapegoat.’ The sins of the community are symbolically transferred to this goat, which is then released in the wilderness.”⁸⁶ In this case, the wilderness serves as a space that allows for the transfer of sins from this world to another. The wilderness is also dangerous; one risks starvation, dehydration, exposure to the elements, and one is threatened by unforeseen danger and attacks. Despite these dangers, or perhaps because of them, the wilderness is considered an optimal location for divine encounters. “The

⁸⁴ Exodus 19:12-13.

⁸⁵ Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 1985), 15.

⁸⁶ Coogan, *Old Testament*, 125.

‘desert’ is frontier territory. Living on some kind of physical boundary symbolizes a state of liminality – of living between two worlds, the material and the spiritual.”⁸⁷

The wilderness is not always a desirable place to be. Although it is where one may encounter God, making it desirable for those seeking a closer relationship with their deity, it was also “conceived as a forbidding, even demonic area.”⁸⁸ Later Jewish groups saw the wilderness as the ideal location to create a settlement, such as the members of the Jewish community at Qumran, who left cities in order to create a religious settlement in the desert near the Dead Sea. To the Israelites leaving Egypt, however, the wilderness was but a burdensome phase during their coming of age ceremony. They often complained to Moses, saying, “it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”⁸⁹ Fearing the realistic plausibility of death, the Israelites saw slavery as a superior alternative to dwelling in the wilderness, even with the divine promise of their own land. Considering the grave importance of a proper burial, this statement shows just how dire their situation was, and just how dangerous and miserable prolonged settlement in the wilderness is.

Mountains

Mountains were regarded as highly symbolic, religious, and liminal spaces in many ancient religious traditions. Although not all mountains are liminal, certain mountains embody liminality by connecting this world with the otherworldly, such as Mount Sinai and later, Mount Zion, which contained the temple, God’s residence on

⁸⁷ Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 91.

⁸⁸ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 23.

⁸⁹ Exodus 14:12, NRSV.

earth.⁹⁰ Citing Richard J. Clifford's work, Jon D. Levenson outlines the three significant features of the "cosmic mountain," mountains with a particularly high level of religious significance:

First, one of the most important aspects of the cosmic mountain is that it is 'the meeting place of the gods,' like the Greek Olympus. Second, it is also the 'battleground of conflicting natural forces.' Third, and most significantly, the cosmic mountain is the 'meeting place of heaven and earth,' the tangent of celestial and mundane reality. And since it is the meeting place of heaven and earth, it follows that the mountain is also 'the place where effective decrees are issued,' in other words, the moral as well as the physical capital of the universe, a place 'involved in the government and stability of the Cosmos.'⁹¹

Engaging Mircea Eliade's work, Levenson elaborates on the second feature, the cosmic mountain as the axis mundi:

The cosmic mountain is a kind of fulcrum for the universe; it is on the line to which all the regions of the universe are referred, and it is somehow available to each of them. The base of the mountain lies in the chaotic underworld, and its head reaches into the heavens. On it, messages can be passed from heaven to earth and *vice versa*. It is the prime place of communication between transcendent and mundane reality.⁹²

The cosmic mountain, in short, is a particular mountain that constitutes highly liminal space by virtue of its increased religious significance, since this mountain is one on which one is able to best communicate with the otherworldly. Significantly, the cosmic mountain need not be a permanent place. As it will be shown later, some cosmic

⁹⁰ God predicts that Solomon would build the temple in 2 Samuel 7:13, and "In the fourth year the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid, in the month of Ziv. In the eleventh year, in the month of Bul, which is the eighth month, the house was finished in all its parts, and according to all its specifications. [Solomon] was seven years in building it." (1 Kings 6:37-38, NRSV).

⁹¹ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 111-112. From Richard J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and the Old Testament*, HSM 4 (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1972) 3; see also A. Ohler, *Mythologische Elemente im Alten Testament* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1969) 154-73.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 122. From Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Cleveland and New York: Meridan, 1958), 375.

mountains are more liminal than others. Some mountains are only temporarily cosmic, used for a liminal periods by a specific people experiencing a liminal stage of their cultural development and maturity.

Chapter 3: The Liminality of Moses

Moses is associated with liminality from the time of his birth until his death. He was the ideal instrument for God's plan. According to the narrative, he is an embodiment of liminality. His task was to lead the Israelites through the most significant transitions of their people. Although his mission is depicted as extraordinarily difficult, he was not allowed to reap the rewards of his and his people's suffering: entry into and inhabitation of Promised Land. Although this may seem harsh and unfair, it is best not to read this as a cruel and unusual punishment. God's decision not to allow Moses to inherit his share of the Promised Land is best understood in the context of Moses' role to serve liminal means and ends. Moses was neither a slave in Egypt nor would he be an Israelite in the land of Israel; he was but the guiding tool of their liminal sojourn.

Moses' Identity

Moses' identity as a liminal figure was established very early on in his life. Afraid of the Hebrews becoming too numerous, the Pharaoh commanded that all Hebrew male newborns be killed.⁹³ Just three months after his birth, Moses was associated with death. He only lived because his mother floated him down the Nile in a basket, and the Pharaoh's daughter rescued him, adopted him, and gave him an Egyptian name.⁹⁴ Moses thus had a mixed identity: in certain respects he was both Hebrew and Egyptian.

⁹³ Exodus 1:16, 22.

⁹⁴ Exodus 2:5-10.

Although born a Hebrew, Moses' identity for the majority of the former part of his life was Egyptian. Moses seems to have been legally adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter, as "Pharaoh's daughter said to her, 'Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages.' So the woman took the child and nursed it."⁹⁵ Whereas earlier verses indeed *suggest* that Moses was adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter, this passage makes the adoption official, "The contract of wages would probably have indicated to the ancient audience that the boy had become legally adopted."⁹⁶ Furthermore, "If we had any reason to doubt, the text uses the finale to remove any doubt that the child belonged to her: she names him."⁹⁷

Although the text itself offers an etymology for Moses' name, many have questioned the authenticity of the textual claim and have offered alternative etymologies. Adding to the ambiguity of Moses' identity is his being given an Egyptian name with a Hebrew etymology. Furthermore, the name "Moses" is only given to him after he has grown up, thus the Hebrew name by which he would have been called by his biological mother is unknown. "Despite the usual custom of the mother or father naming the child at birth, this special boy does not receive one."⁹⁸ The account in the book of Exodus states, "When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took

⁹⁵ Exodus 2:9, NRSV.

⁹⁶ Joel N. Lohr, *Chosen and Unchosen: Conceptions of Election in the Pentateuch and Jewish-Christian Interpretation*, (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 120.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 116. Lohr includes in a footnote, "Of the approximately 25 occurrences of this construction in the OT (i.e., a woman is said to conceive and give birth), I know of only 2 other examples in which the child remains nameless, though in these instances the offspring are symbolic of blessing more generally, not specific children to be remembered (1 Sam 2:21; 2 Kgs 4:17).

him as her son. She named him Moses, ‘because,’ she said, ‘I drew him out of the water’⁹⁹ (Heb. ותקרא שמו משה ותאמר כי מן-המים משיתו).

The Egyptian etymology for the name “Moses” suggests a different meaning than the Hebrew verb משה, “to draw out.” “It is similar to many other princes’ or pharaohs’ names in antiquity, despite missing its counterpart genitive proper noun. It means ‘son’, ‘living-one’, or perhaps simply ‘child’ (from the Egyptian root *msi* ‘to give birth’).”¹⁰⁰ As Joel N. Lohr argues, Moses’ name foreshadows events and themes to come, even though the author was not familiar with the Egyptian etymology. “The Egyptian name also points to a theme I have suggested earlier: life. Although the storyteller seems unaware of the link, Moses is ‘one who lives’, an indicator of Israel’s future.”¹⁰¹

The fact that even Moses’ name obscures his identity further shows the extent of his liminality. Even his name identifies him as an intermediary character, not fully Egyptian nor fully Hebrew. He does not have a Hebrew name and an Egyptian name, but rather one hybrid name that encompasses both elements. “When a child is named, he is both individualized and incorporated into society.”¹⁰² Moses, however, is not incorporated into society in a traditional way. Rather than belonging to one culture and receiving his name from within it, his name represents his hybrid identity; he was not simply incorporated into society, he was named as a liminal entity that encompasses both the society of Egypt as well as that of the Hebrews. As Maurice D. Harris observes, “Most of us have our feet planted in more than one cultural setting, more than one

⁹⁹ Exodus 2:10, NRSV.

¹⁰⁰ Lohr, *Chosen and Unchosen*, 121.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹⁰² Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 62.

community of meeting.”¹⁰³ Moses indeed had his feet planted in more than one cultural setting, in his case identifying with both the narratives protagonists and antagonists. His identity encompasses elements from both the Hebrew slaves and the Egyptian oppressors, constructing his identity from two opposing categories. Identity, however, is a product of much more than heritage and name, but also is determined by one’s actions during their lifetime.

In the narrative sequence in Exodus, the event immediately following Moses’ naming is his murder of an Egyptian.¹⁰⁴ Afterwards he fled to Midian where he married Zipporah, the daughter of a foreign priest.¹⁰⁵ The first few recorded events of Moses’ life all establish him as a liminal figure that crosses boundaries that are later strictly prohibited by God. Born a Hebrew, he faced death immediately after his birth, was adopted by an Egyptian and given an Egyptian name, killed an Egyptian, and took a foreign wife. Moses was a wanderer without a real home and with a hybrid identity of both his kinsfolk and their oppressors.

Indeed from the beginning of the Mosaic narrative, Moses is established as a complex character, certainly not exceedingly righteous or blameless, yet this is precisely why he was such an effective instrument in Israel’s development. “We meet Moses the adopted child; Moses the ex-con; Moses the failure; Moses the intermarrier.”¹⁰⁶ Moses’ plethora of traits and actions cause Harris to characterize Moses as an “insider/outsider”; he is both one of the Israelites although simultaneously *not* one of them. “His upbringing

¹⁰³ Harris, *Moses*, 11.

¹⁰⁴ Exodus 2:11-12.

¹⁰⁵ Exodus 2:12-21.

¹⁰⁶ Harris, *Moses*, xv.

in the Pharaoh's court, his marriage to a non-Israelite woman, and even his failure to set foot in the sacred land of his people all place him at the margins of the Israelite community. Moses is, in fact, both an outsider and an insider."¹⁰⁷

Moses' status as an insider and outsider is precisely what qualified him for his task, as Harris comments, "There's a productive, creative perspective that outsider-insiders often have to offer."¹⁰⁸ It is Moses' liminality, his status as an insider-outsider, that allows him to make these creative and productive changes to the formative stages of the religion of the Hebrews, and guides them through their early development from slaves in Egypt to a landowning lawful people. "Moses teaches us that religion finds its spark, and perhaps its ability to be a force for positive transformation in the world, when people with a foot in and a foot outside play an important part in the religious community."¹⁰⁹ In other words, liminal figures play a vital role in religious change, and indeed Moses inhabited the liminal space of religious transformation, guiding the Israelites through their religious coming of age ceremony.

Moses and Law

The most common epithet applied to Moses is that of lawgiver.¹¹⁰ Indeed it was his most impactful contribution to the Jewish religion, as it provided a divine code by which to live one's life. Much of the Pentateuch is dedicated to the law that Moses

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, xvii-xviii.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹¹⁰ Biblical mention of Moses outside of the Pentateuch often refers to him in the context of the "law of Moses," the "book of Moses," or that which God commanded "through Moses" or "by Moses," thus consistently connecting him to the law. See, for example, Joshua 8:32; 23:6, Judges 3:4, 1 Kings 2:3, 2 Kings 14:6; 23:25, 2 Chronicles 23:18; 25:4, Ezra 3:2; 6:18; 7:6, Nehemiah 8:1; 8:14, Daniel 9:11, 13.

received directly from God, and this event also has great importance to later Rabbinic tradition that holds that Moses not only received the written law upon Mount Sinai, but also the oral Torah, which was also passed down through the generations by word of mouth until finally written down after the destruction of the second temple.¹¹¹

There are two points of interest in relation to Moses and law. First, the revelation of law was indeed a very crucial point in the Hebrews' transition, as they changed from a lawless people to one bound by the Mosaic covenant, the covenant with the most stipulations in the Hebrew Bible. Second, the stories in the Pentateuch that involve the law further establish the liminality of the Mosaic period, a time when even the law was not yet concrete.

What will follow are a few instances in the Pentateuch showing that even after Moses received the law from God it was still open to interpretation and debate, which took place through Moses, the intermediary. "Moses is open to receiving his input and advice, and he trusts that it is right for him to incorporate it into the emerging body of law and justice that this newly forming nation will have."¹¹² Furthermore, input to the developing Israelite system of law was not only restricted to Israelites. It was Jethro, a Midianite, who suggested that Moses set up a series of judges so that he would only hear the most difficult cases. Thus, "the establishment of a major institution, the judiciary, is attributed to a non-Israelite."¹¹³

¹¹¹ See Babylonian Talmud Eruvin 54b; Jerusalem Talmud Hagigah 1:8 (76a).

¹¹² Harris, *Moses*, 34.

¹¹³ Coogan, *Old Testament*, 97. In the following passage, Coogan also notes that "In the Deuteronomic version of this event (Deut 1:9-18), the institution of the judiciary is presented as if it were Moses's idea, and Jethro is not mentioned, perhaps because of some discomfort with the attribution of the institution to Jethro."

During the wilderness period the law itself seemed to be in a liminal state, open to change and not fully set and established. With regards to inheritance, “Inheritance was patrilineal, that is, it went from father to sons, with the oldest son getting twice as much as his brothers.”¹¹⁴ Not all were happy with this divine dictation, however, such as the five daughters of Zelophehad. Their father died without leaving a son as an heir, so the daughters complained to Moses, asking “Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father’s brothers.”¹¹⁵ Moses took their case to God, who replies, “The daughters of Zelophehad are right in what they are saying; you shall indeed let them possess an inheritance among their father’s brothers and pass the inheritance of their father on to them.”¹¹⁶ Thus God amends God’s original law, further showing that during this liminal period even the Torah could be changed given the proper circumstances.

A similar episode occurs in Numbers 36. In this story, “The heads of the ancestral houses of the clans of the descendants of Gilead son of Machir son of Manasseh, of the Josephite clans, came forward and spoke in the presence of Moses and the leaders,”¹¹⁷ and once again complained about the difficulties that the daughters of Zelophehad were having with the inheritance laws. In this case, however, the heads of the clans are arguing that if the daughters marry into another tribe, “then their inheritance will be taken from the inheritance of our ancestors and added to the inheritance of the tribe into which they marry; so it will be taken away from the allotted portion of our

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹¹⁵ Numbers 27:4, NRSV.

¹¹⁶ Numbers 27:7, NRSV.

¹¹⁷ Numbers 36:1, NRSV.

inheritance.”¹¹⁸ These two episodes show that there were circumstances in which questioning God’s law resulted in its amendment. Harris claims that “the Law of Moses...is subject to repeated appeal. It can change.”¹¹⁹ Perhaps this claim is best placed in past tense; indeed Mosaic Law is still interpreted, although it is no longer subject to appeal or change. There was a time and place in which one could challenge God’s laws with even a chance of success, and that place and time was in the wilderness before the conquest of the Promised Land, and only through Moses, God’s liminal tool.

Moses and Water

In the Hebrew Bible, water is often used as a purifying agent, a tool associated with liminality that can turn impurity into purity. Although seen as a purifying agent, it is also symbolic of chaos and is tied to God’s creation of the world as accounted in the first chapter of the Book of Genesis. Creation involved the separating of the waters, and the flooding of the earth in Genesis was essentially an undoing and redoing of creation, when both the waters from below and the waters from above burst forth.¹²⁰ In the Hebrew Bible, water is often the liminal bridge between two opposing forces, order and chaos, and between two opposing states, pure and impure.

The Mosaic narrative has elements of both the waters of chaos as well as the waters of purity. The first of the ten plagues brought upon Egypt was turning the water of the Nile into blood, polluting the life sources of the Egyptian civilization.¹²¹ Moses also performed the symbolically opposite act; he turned the bitter water at Marah into

¹¹⁸ Numbers 36:3, NRSV.

¹¹⁹ Harris, *Moses*, 65.

¹²⁰ Genesis 1:6-8; 7:11-12.

¹²¹ Exodus 7:17-22.

sweet water, good to drink.¹²² On two separate occasions Moses had the power to take water and transfer it from one category to the other: from sweet to bitter and from bitter to sweet.

God also gave Moses the power to bring forth water from a rock on two occasions. First, Moses struck the rock at Horeb, which then produced good drinking water for the Israelites.¹²³ Later, when the Israelites were camped in Kadesh, God told Moses to take his staff and command a rock to bring forth water. Instead of speaking to the rock, however, Moses struck it twice with his staff. Although the rock did yield water, God does not allow Moses or Aaron to enter the Promised Land, as Moses struck the rock rather than spoke to it.¹²⁴ “This puzzling punishment, hardly proportionate to the offense, is probably an attempt by P to rationalize why Moses, the divinely chosen leader, did not himself complete the journey from Egypt to Canaan; this is only one of several explanations given for that problematic detail.”¹²⁵

Deuteronomy offers a different explanation, one followed by Psalm 106:32-33. According to it, Moses is being punished vicariously for the people’s sin in the spies episode (see Num 13-14), when the people were reluctant to attack the land: “Even with me the LORD was angry on your account, saying ‘You also shall not enter there’” (Deut 1:37). As a result, despite his repeated requests, Yahweh refuses to allow Moses to enter the land.¹²⁶

Whatever the reason, it would seem an overly harsh consequence given Moses’ important role. Understanding Moses literarily, as a liminar, who *must* not enter the Promised

¹²² Exodus 15:22-25.

¹²³ Exodus 17:6.

¹²⁴ Numbers 20:7-12.

¹²⁵ Coogan, *Old Testament*, 141.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 157.

Land, however, renders God's punishment as far less unfair, but instead rather understandable.

Perhaps the most famous story of Moses and water is his parting of the Red Sea.¹²⁷ Moses stretched his hand over the sea, God parted it, and "the Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left."¹²⁸ This event not only echoes the parting of the waters in the creation story, but also marks the starting point of the creation of a new people.

The rite of passage between the parts of an object that has been halved, or between two branches, or under something, is one which must, in a certain number of cases, be interpreted as a direct rite of passage by means of which a person leaves on world behind him and enters a new one.¹²⁹

Although this is not a biblical covenant making ceremony, such as the covenant made with Abraham in Genesis 15, the similarities between the two are clear. Although in the Book of Exodus it was not a sacrificial animal being halved and walked through and thus establishing a covenant, rather the sea was halved and walked through, marking not the creation of a covenant but rather the entrance into the liminal period in which God's covenant with Moses would be made.

Thus the passage through the Red Sea marked the true commencement of the Hebrews' coming of age ceremony, the beginning of her trials in the wilderness. The event is paralleled at the end of this journey as they cross the Jordan River, when Israel

¹²⁷"Red Sea" or, literally, "Sea of Reeds," (Heb. ים סוף). "Although this can occasionally refer to either of the two northern arms of the Red Sea, the Gulf of Suez (Num 33:11) and the Gulf of Aqaba/Eilat (Num 14:25; 1 Kings 9:26), it literally means 'sea of reeds,' and the most likely geography of the Exodus locates it just east of the region where the Hebrews lived." (Coogan, Old Testament, 91)

¹²⁸ Exodus 14:22, NRSV.

¹²⁹ Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 19. For biblical references to halved animals marking transitions (in these cases, covenant making) see Genesis 15:9-11 and Jeremiah 34:18-19.

has matured as a people and thus is ready and willing to accept God's command and conquer the Promised Land.

The crossings of the bodies of water bracket this formative period, and the accounts of the crossing of the Sea of Reeds at the beginning (Ex 14-15) and of the Jordan River at the end (Josh 3) are deliberately paralleled: In both events, the waters stand up in a heap (Ex 15:8; Josh 3:16), and the Israelites cross 'on dry ground' (Ex 14:22; Josh 3:17; 4:22).¹³⁰

Each crossing marked the end of one state and the beginning of another. The Hebrews escaped from slavery as they crossed the Red Sea and begin their liminal journey, and upon crossing the Jordan they ended their liminal sojourn and became soldiers in God's army, poised to take over the land that was promised to them. "P implies that the event at the sea is a new creation... What is being created here, however, is not the cosmos, but rather Israel itself, by Yahweh, the one who causes everything to exist."¹³¹ These water crossings invoke actual creation by God; he uses the liminal space and his liminal instrument to transition his people into maturity, prepared to take control of their nation under God's command.

A noteworthy episode from the book of Genesis further shows the highly significant role of water in marking the transitions into liminal periods. Chapters 6-8 tell the story of the great flood, God's undoing of nearly all of creation. The flood was a mass cleansing of the wickedness and corruption that was upon the earth, when "all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened."¹³²

¹³⁰ Coogan, *Old Testament*, 93.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹³² Genesis 7:11, NRSV.

In this story God rejoins the waters separated at creation,¹³³ followed by a liminal period in which the flood continued and everything died that was not on the ark,¹³⁴ and finally the postliminal stage when the transition was complete and God made the covenant with Noah.¹³⁵ Similarly, God used water to mark the beginning of the liminal period of the Israelites in the book of Exodus, when God helped Moses part the sea, only for the water to come crashing down on the pursuing Egyptians.¹³⁶ Once again, the righteous were saved, unaffected by the chaotic waters surrounding them, and continued on to establish a new covenant with God, while the wicked were punished and drowned in a flood called in by God.

Moses on a Mountain in the Wilderness

The wilderness is the ultimate liminal place; it is where the boundaries between heaven and earth are more permeable, a boundary that is even more ill defined on a mountaintop. It was, therefore, the ideal place for the author of Exodus to place Moses to communicate with God and receive divine revelation.

Once Moses accepted his divine task, he and Aaron implored the Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to worship their God in the wilderness. They were not able to worship God in the cities of Egypt; they had to travel three days into the wilderness in order to offer up sacrifices to God.¹³⁷ The text offers two reasons for needing to go into the wilderness to sacrifice to God. In one version, Moses and Aaron explain to Pharaoh that if they could

¹³³ Genesis 1:6-7.

¹³⁴ Genesis 7:17-24.

¹³⁵ Genesis 8:21-9:17.

¹³⁶ Exodus 14:26-29.

¹³⁷ Exodus 5:3; 8:27.

not make this sacrifice, God would “fall upon us with pestilence or sword.”¹³⁸ In another passage, Moses explains to Pharaoh that if they offered a sacrifice in Egypt, they risked offending the Egyptians and being stoned to death.¹³⁹ Thus, according to the narrative, Moses needed to enter the wilderness in order to sacrifice, and that they indeed needed to sacrifice, establishing presence in liminal space a prerequisite to making offerings to God. Furthermore, this act was inherently dangerous, facing death either by God or by the Egyptians if he failed to carry out God’s will.

Once out of Egypt, Moses spent the rest of his life in the wilderness, with a significant amount of time receiving the divine law on Mount Sinai. This mountain was indeed the “cosmic mountain” at this point in the narrative, although it did not remain as such. This location itself was liminal. It was an important place used by God during this period of the Hebrews’ transitions, but was eventually replaced by Mount Zion in Jerusalem as the new axis mundi. Sinai was nothing more than an intermediary locus during Israel’s coming of age; “the mountain itself had no ongoing significance for the people who believed their destiny was transformed there.”¹⁴⁰ The exact location of Mount Sinai is still unknown.¹⁴¹ After having transferred all of the cosmic connotations to Mount Zion, the physical mountain of Sinai was no longer important; it was but another liminal instrument in the maturation of Israel.

¹³⁸ Exodus 5:3, NRSV.

¹³⁹ Exodus 8:26.

¹⁴⁰ Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 89.

¹⁴¹ “Its identification with Jebel Musa, on which a Christian monastery stands today, is relatively recent and open to doubt” (Levenson, *Sinai and Zion*, 16. See also J. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981], 124-125).

Although the physical mountain only had temporary significance, its significance during that time was among the most important events in the Hebrew Bible. It was the place where Moses received the Torah and one of the two places that Moses communicated with God. Significantly, Moses did not communicate with God in the same way most do in the Hebrew Bible; Moses had a uniquely personal relationship with God, attributable primarily to his role as a liminal instrument.

Moses' Relationship with God

Moses was the last person in the Hebrew Bible to have such a close relationship with God. Since communication with God is by nature a liminal experience, crossing the boundary between the worldly and otherworldly realms, one would expect that the more liminal a person is, the easier it would be to make a connection with the spiritual world. Not only did he act as God's interpreter, hearing cases brought before him by the Israelites and conveying the divine will,¹⁴² he also spoke directly to God in a way unlike any other person in the Hebrew Bible.

Moses' first encounter with God was at the burning bush on Mount Horeb. As the narrative states, "There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed."¹⁴³ God was calling his liminal instrument, Moses, from another liminal element: fire. This tale also first establishes God's mountain as such, as it uses this location to create a link between heaven and earth. "At the burning bush, [Moses] enters liminal space (אדמת-קדש הוּא) and

¹⁴² Exodus 18:13-16.

¹⁴³ Exodus 3:2, NRSV

YHWH commissions him to lead Israel out of Egypt.”¹⁴⁴ It is in this space that Moses first speaks with God, and also the place in which Moses learns God’s personal name.

Ordinarily, “Divine figures show reluctance to give their names elsewhere in the Bible (Gen 32:29; Judg 13:17-18) and in other literatures, for naming suggests control, and knowing a deity’s name would allow the deity to be manipulated.”¹⁴⁵ Although it does not seem particularly difficult for Moses to ascertain this information, the episode does contain certain peculiarities that suggest that this episode reflects the preservation of multiple traditions combined into one narrative. “Moses asks God what his name is. God replies three times, with a slightly different answer in each.”¹⁴⁶ When Moses asked God his name,

God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” God also said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you’: This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.”¹⁴⁷

Later, God reiterated that the tetragrammaton, God’s personal name, was not made known to Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob,¹⁴⁸ although previous biblical figures do indeed know their God by this name. “In [J] in Genesis the deity is known as Yahweh by Noah (8:20),

¹⁴⁴ Nevada Levi DeLapp, “Ezekiel as Moses—Israel as Pharaoh: Reverberations of the Exodus Narrative in Ezekiel” in *Reverberations of the Exodus in Scripture* (ed. Michael R. Fox; Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 55.

¹⁴⁵ Coogan, *Old Testament*, 80.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁴⁷ Exodus 3:14-15, NRSV.

¹⁴⁸ Exodus 6:3.

Abraham (12:8; 15:7; 24:6), Isaac (25:21), Jacob (27:20; 28:13), and others.”¹⁴⁹ In P and E, however, “it was not until the time of Moses that the divine name was revealed.”¹⁵⁰ In a case when source criticism can explain the contradictions in who first learned God’s personal name, what is important at present is that according to at least one tradition, preserved in the book of Exodus, Moses was the first to learn God’s name. God’s revealing of this personal name to Moses was the beginning of a personal relationship between God and Moses and, by extension, between God and the people.

Moses indeed had a close connection to God, although the Hebrew Bible is not consistent in precisely how close he got to God. “Moses is paradoxically presented to us as a man who spoke with God face to face, and yet who was also told by God that no human could see God’s face and live.”¹⁵¹ In one of Moses’ divine encounters, it is evident that seeing God is a potentially lethal action.

[God] said, “you [Moses] cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live...while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”¹⁵²

The text makes it clear that looking upon God’s face will surely result in death; Moses lives because he was only allowed to gaze upon God’s back after he had passed.

Elsewhere, however, Moses is described as having a very personal relationship with God, and was able to look upon him, contradictory to the warning given in Exodus 33. In one event Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel all “saw the

¹⁴⁹ Coogan, *Old Testament*, 43.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁵¹ Harris, *Moses*, xx.

¹⁵² Exodus 33:20-23, NRSV.

God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone.”¹⁵³

Unlike the encounter previously described, there is no hint of danger here, for Moses or anyone else in his company. It is noteworthy, however, that this seemingly safe divine encounter does not explicitly mention seeing God’s face, but that they simply saw “the God of Israel” (Heb. יראו את אלהי ישראל).

Furthermore, contradictory to God’s warning not to look upon the divine face, Moses is described three times in the Hebrew Bible as one who spoke face to face with God. God would “speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend,”¹⁵⁴ and the book of Deuteronomy closes with a similar statement: “Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face.”¹⁵⁵ Moses was unique in his relationship with God, unlike any other prophet with whom God communicated.

And [God] said, “Hear my words: When there are prophets among you, I the LORD make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams. Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. With him I speak face to face – clearly, not in riddles; and he beholds the form of the LORD.”¹⁵⁶

Moses’ relationship with God was uniquely personal; a type of relationship that has never since been equaled by another human being. His liminality allowed him to have a this relationship with God; Moses spoke face to face with God, not in dreams or visions, not in riddles or parables, but as if he were casually speaking with a friend.

There is an additional episode of non-Mosaic divine encounter in the Pentateuch that deserves mention, as it further shows the danger and irregularity of interacting with

¹⁵³ Exodus 24:10, NRSV.

¹⁵⁴ Exodus 33:11, NRSV.

¹⁵⁵ Deuteronomy 34:10, NRSV.

¹⁵⁶ Numbers 12:6-8, NRSV.

God after the boundary between the divine and earthly realms was established earlier in the narrative. In Genesis 32, Jacob was trying to avoid death by the hand of his brother Esau, and the following ensued:

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peniel, saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved."¹⁵⁷

Indeed this passage tells the very liminal story of Jacob's encounter with God, and is framed as a liminal event in a number of ways. The setting is liminal: Jacob is at a place where he encountered angels, and proclaimed "'This is God's camp!' So he called that place Mahanaim" (Heb. מַחֲנַיִם).¹⁵⁸ Jacob also fears for his life because of his brother Esau; the episode has strong connotations with death. Jacob then physically interacts with God, and goes through the important and recognizable transition of having his name changed, accompanied by a blessing from God Himself.

In this episode there was real danger surrounding Jacob. He was avoiding death by the hand of Esau, and instead is attacked by God. There was the potential danger from Esau before Jacob wrestled with God, the danger posed by the wrestling match itself, and the remembered danger, when Jacob realized whom he had wrestled with and, accordingly, named the place Peniel (Heb. פְּנִיאֵל), because he saw God face to face yet did

¹⁵⁷ Genesis 32:24-30, NRSV.

¹⁵⁸ Genesis 32:1-2, NRSV.

not die. By virtue of this verse, it is evident that the expectation following seeing the face of God was indeed death.

Moses and Death

Death can be understood as the final liminal experience of life. It is the event that marks the transition from this life to what lies ahead, whether it be heaven, hell, nothingness, reincarnation, or Sheol: the dark, dank afterlife model of the Hebrew Bible.¹⁵⁹ “In addition to this complex world of the living, there is the world preceding life and the one which follows death.”¹⁶⁰ Whatever one believes about the afterlife, death is still the final transition of one’s existence, and unsurprisingly, Moses was surrounded by death until his own.

As previously established, Moses was associated with death from the beginning of his life. His association with death did not cease after murdering an Egyptian, but rather his connection with death only strengthened as the narrative continued. Furthermore, the Pharaoh’s decree to kill all Hebrew males was not the last time Moses was almost killed. According to the Hebrew Bible it was in fact God himself who tried to kill Moses just before he met his brother in the wilderness.

The brief passage when God nearly killed Moses comes at a bizarre point in the narrative, as it occurs just after God entrusted Moses with his divine task. Moses was on his way to Egypt in order to carry out God’s will, but

¹⁵⁹ For biblical mention of Sheol see as examples Genesis 37:35; 42:38; 44:29, Numbers 16:30, 33, Deuteronomy 32:22, as well as a number of passages from Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Isaiah. For further reading on Sheol, in particular its commonalities with the Greek “Hades,” see Coogan, *Old Testament*, 392-393.

¹⁶⁰ Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, 189.

ויהי בדרך במלון ויפגשו יהוה ויבקש המיתו ותקח צפרה צר ותכרת את-ערלת
בנה ותגע לרגליו ותאמר כי חתן-דמים אתה לי וירף ממנו אז אמרה חתן דמים למולת
On the way, at a place where they spent the night, the LORD met him and
tried to kill him. But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin,
and touched Moses' feet with it, and said, "Truly you are a bridegroom of
blood to me!" So he let him alone. It was then she said, "A bridegroom of
blood by circumcision."¹⁶¹

This passage has been troublesome to interpret. Some scholars have pointed out that this passage "is reminiscent of Genesis 32:22-32, in which a divine adversary attacks Jacob at night, and it anticipates the divine attack on the Egyptians, also at night (Ex 12:29-32)."¹⁶² Others believe that this is but a remnant of the full story; certain parts have been lost that would lend illuminating details on how to interpret this passage. Furthermore, the Hebrew text is not specific in who God actually attacked, "the difficulties of identifying the actors and explaining their actions lend this brief vignette the surrealism of a nightmare."¹⁶³ As for God's motive for attacking Moses, "G. Vermes has assembled the earliest Jewish interpretations, almost all of which infer that Moses has failed to circumcise his son, thereby angering Yahweh and provoking his assault."¹⁶⁴ Others suggest that "neither Moses's son nor Moses himself has been circumcised. Yahweh attacks Moses, perhaps because he is not circumcised."¹⁶⁵ It is also possible that God wanted to punish Moses for murdering the Egyptian. However, "Yahweh's problem is that he has two irreconcilable plans for Moses: he wants both to dispatch him to Egypt to

¹⁶¹ Exodus 4:24-26, NRSV.

¹⁶² Coogan, *Old Testament*, 82.

¹⁶³ William H. Propp, "That Bloody Bridegroom (Exodus IV 24-6)," *VT* 43 (1993): 496.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 500.

¹⁶⁵ Michael D. Coogan, *A Brief Introduction to the Old Testament: The Hebrew Bible in its Context*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 82.

liberate Israel and to punish him for his old transgression.”¹⁶⁶ Whatever God’s motivation was, what is important at present is the continuing theme of Moses being surrounded by death, which indeed continues throughout the Mosaic narrative.

As Moses led the Israelites through the wilderness, he often heard complaints from the people about the lack of food and water in the desert. Moses became so tired of the complaints that at one point he requested that God kill him then and there to relieve him of his burden of the people.¹⁶⁷ God did not, although he became irritated with the complaints of the people as well, and so he declared that every Israelite over 20 years old who complained against God would die in the wilderness.¹⁶⁸ All of a sudden Moses was surrounded by a doomed generation of Israelites, leading people who were already declared dead through the desert. Reflecting on Moses’ life just prior to his death, he had murdered once, almost been murdered twice, he had asked to be killed, he had carried the bones of a dead man, Joseph, with him,¹⁶⁹ and he had wandered through the wilderness in the company of a doomed generation of Hebrews.

At 120 years of age God told Moses to ascend Mount Nebo, gaze upon the Promised Land from a distance, and die.¹⁷⁰ Moses did not die a natural death; he died “at the LORD’s command,”¹⁷¹ although “his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not

¹⁶⁶ Propp, “Bloody Bridegroom,” 505.

¹⁶⁷ Numbers 11:14-15.

¹⁶⁸ Numbers 14:29.

¹⁶⁹ Exodus 13:19.

¹⁷⁰ Deuteronomy 32:48-52.

¹⁷¹ Deuteronomy 34:5, NRSV. “the Hebrew literally means ‘at the mouth of Yahweh,’ recalling the special intimate knowledge that Moses had of the deity: He knew him ‘mouth to mouth’ (Num 12:8; see Deut

abated,¹⁷² and he was buried in an unmarked grave.¹⁷³ Although Mount Nebo cannot be considered a cosmic mountain,¹⁷⁴ it is liminal both in its association with Moses' burial as well as its change in association after the conquest, when it became part of the territory of the tribe of Reuben,¹⁷⁵ thus undergoing its own change from a mountain in a foreign land to being a part of the Israelite's territory. Thus Mount Nebo is a liminal mountain because of its association with death, its association with God's presence (even if only during one episode),¹⁷⁶ and its transition from a location in the wilderness to a part of the territory of the Promised Land. In addition to death itself being a liminal event, Moses died in such a way that further connects him to the otherworldly and in a place rich with liminal symbolism, on a liminal mountain in the wilderness.

There is an additional liminal phenomenon related to Moses' death: the discontinuation of his lineage. "In the ancient Near East, lineage was precious. Through posterity, a person had a hope for some kind of immortality. That is why God's key promise to Abraham in Genesis is that he will become the father of a multitude."¹⁷⁷ Moses lineage, however, becomes lost, despite the book of Exodus stating that he indeed had two sons, the route through which profession, possessions, and lineage progress.

34:10; NRSV: "face to face"). In rabbinic tradition this was interpreted literally: Moses died when God kissed him." (Coogan, 157).

¹⁷² Deuteronomy 34:7, NRSV.

¹⁷³ Deuteronomy 34:6.

¹⁷⁴ Mount Nebo does not meet the previously established criteria to qualify as a cosmic mountain; it is not a meeting place of the gods, a battleground of natural forces, or a meeting place of heaven and earth.

¹⁷⁵ Joshua 13:15-23.

¹⁷⁶ Deuteronomy 34:4 suggests that because God spoke to Moses there, God was indeed on Mount Nebo.

¹⁷⁷ Harris, *Moses*, 7.

Although the leadership roles that Moses held were passed down, they were not done so through Moses' children. Moses' role as guide is given to Joshua;¹⁷⁸ his religious duties are delegated to his brother Aaron and his descendants. Moses' sons are mentioned in passing in further biblical books,¹⁷⁹ although not as inheritors of leadership positions comparable to that of their father. That Moses' lineage is eventually lost and never given much attention suggests further that Moses was not a figure of permanent importance within Judaism; he was a liminal figure who was not meant to persist but rather a temporary instrument of God who helped Israel mature into adulthood.

The Hebrews Cross the Jordan

Although it would be anachronistic to call the Mosaic narrative the story of the Hebrews' Bat Mitzvah, that is essentially what the latter four books of the Pentateuch relate. The Bat Mitzvah marks the transition from childhood to adulthood, when one literally becomes a "daughter of the commandment," thus bound by God's covenant. It marks the assumption of responsibility, the duty to observe and uphold God's law as it is written in the Torah. The transition from childhood to adulthood is a liminal event in one's life, and the Mosaic narrative tells the story of the nation of the Hebrews' coming of age; when the people transition from lawless to covenant bound, from worshipping a nameless deity to knowing the personal name of their God, and from slaves to inhabitants of the Promised Land. "The exodus, then, was not designed to create a new people, but to take an existing people, Israel, and to make of that people an intermediary between God and the world of nations, one that by its example and teachings would persuade them

¹⁷⁸ Deuteronomy 34:9; Joshua 1:1-9, 16-18.

¹⁷⁹ Gershom is mentioned in three verses: Judges 18:30, 1 Chronicles 23:15, 26:24. Eliezer is mentioned in three verses in 1 Chronicles 23:15, 17, 26:25

also to seek him.”¹⁸⁰ For this liminal event in Israel’s history there needed to be a liminal tool, thus Moses was established from start to finish, inside and out, as God’s liminal instrument for the Hebrews’ transition into adulthood.

The Hebrews did not, however, maintain control of the Promised Land forever. The destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the exile of the people by the hands of the Babylonians in 586 BCE marked the beginning of Jewish subservience under foreign rule.¹⁸¹ It was not until the Maccabean Revolt in the second century BCE that the Jewish people were once again able to establish autonomous rule of the Promised Land. Even when the Jews once again controlled the lands they had once conquered after the wilderness period, not all groups recognized the Hasmonean (i.e., Maccabean) authority in Jerusalem, in particular the group that inhabited the desert site of Qumran near the western bank of the Dead Sea.

¹⁸⁰ Eugene H. Merrill, “The Meaning and Significance of the Exodus Event,” in *Reverberations of the Exodus in Scripture* (ed. Michael R. Fox; Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 9.

¹⁸¹ After a period of Babylonian control the Jewish people remained under the control of the Persian Empire and, later, Hellenistic Empire. For a concise history of the ruling powers in the ancient Near East see Martin S. Jaffee, *Early Judaism: Religious Worlds of the First Judaic Millennium* (Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 2006), chapter 1.

Chapter 4: The Community at Khirbet Qumran

Indeed, this liminal interpretation of Moses is supported by the early interpretations of the Pentateuch of at least one group of Jews, certainly the Jewish group that inhabited the site of Qumran during the latter half of the second temple period. This community of Jews, often referred to as the Yahad,¹⁸² retreated to the desert¹⁸³ to seek lives of moral and ritual purity in a time of perceived contamination of the temple priesthood. As previously noted, the wilderness is a liminal setting, and was the setting where Moses wandered with the Hebrews from Egypt and in this space that Moses received divine revelation at Sinai.

It is not surprising that this group, having retreated to the wilderness in order to purify themselves, had a close connection with Moses and indeed sought to emulate him. Ultimately the Jewish sect living in Khirbet Qumran sought to reenact the wilderness period in order to undergo a parallel rite of passage to the one that Moses brought the

¹⁸² Heb. “יָהָד” a self-designated title (see, for example, 1QS 1.1,12,16). It is possible that even this name stems from the Mosaic narrative, “In his article ‘Sinai revisited,’ James VanderKam has argued convincingly that Sinai was recollected in the *Yahad’s* annual covenant renewal ceremony described in S and may even be the source of the term *Yahad*, which appears in the description of the Sinai community in Exod 19:8.”(Alison Schofield, “Re-Placing Priestly Space: The Wilderness as Heterotopia in the Dead Sea Scrolls, in *A Teacher for All Generations: Essays in Honor of James C. VanderKam* [ed. Eric F. Mason; Leiden: Brill, 2012], 482).

¹⁸³ Despite the Scrolls being discovered near the site of Qumran, many scholars now recognize that the settlement at Qumran was likely but a part of a larger movement. “The view that the S tradition was not intended for a single group, and that the yahad was not confined to one settlement in the wilderness, but was a broader phenomenon (Schofield, Collins), also seems to me right, and we have been influenced too long by the fact that the scrolls were found at Qumran.”(Michael A. Knibb, “The Community of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Introduction,” *DSD* 16, No. 3 [2009]: 306). See also Alison Schofield, *From Qumran to the Yahad: A New Paradigm of Textual Development for the Community Rule* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

Israelites through in the Pentateuch. “The sectarians saw themselves as living a pristine life like that of the Israelites in the period of desert wandering. Further, they saw themselves as having gone into the desert to receive the Torah, just as Israel had in the period of the Exodus.”¹⁸⁴ The strict rules of their community and great concern with the Law of Moses reflect the importance that the period of wandering had to this community. Their retreat to the wilderness paralleled Moses leading the Hebrews out of Egypt, and their messianic and eschatological expectations in which they would once again control the Promised Land are comparable to the postliminal conquest in the book of Joshua.

Of the many controversies surrounding the Dead Sea Scrolls, of great importance are the debates regarding who lived at Khirbet Qumran and what their relationship was to the library found in the surrounding caves.¹⁸⁵ First proposed by Eleazar Sukenik, most scholars accept the Essene Hypothesis, the suggestion that the scrolls ought to be associated with the Essenes, a Jewish group during the second temple period known through non-biblical ancient sources.¹⁸⁶ “From the beginning of scrolls studies to the present, the most widely adopted view has been that the Qumran community was a small

¹⁸⁴ Lawrence H. Schiffman, “Origin and Early History of the Qumran Sect,” *BA* 58, No. 1 (Mar., 1995): 46.

¹⁸⁵ James VanderKam and Peter Flint suggest four possible answers: the scrolls were associated with a known Jewish group; they were associated with an unknown Jewish group; the scrolls were associated with the nation rather than a single group; or that the scrolls were associated with a Christian group (James VanderKam and Peter Flint, *The Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Their Significance for Understanding the Bible, Judaism, Jesus, and Christianity* [New York: HarperCollins, 2002], 239).

¹⁸⁶ The Essenes were primarily known through Pliny the Elder’s (23-79 CE) work *Natural History* (5.17, 4 [73]), Josephus’ *Jewish War* (2.119-161) and *Jewish Antiquities* (13.171-173; 18.18-22), and Philo’s *Every Good Man is Free* (75-91) and *Hypothetica: Apology for the Jews* (see VanderKam and Flint, *Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 240-242. One should note that these authors were referring to the Essenes, not the Yahad; their descriptions were based off of a much larger movement than only the beliefs and practices at Qumran. Additionally, “Both Josephus and Philo are describing first-century CE Essenes, and it is open to doubt whether these descriptions accurately profile the second or first-century BCE movement” (Philip R. Davies, “Eschatology at Qumran,” *JBD* 104 No. 1 (Mar., 1985): 45). Nevertheless, the descriptions are relatively consistent with the content of the scrolls so despite these problems, these sources are accepted as generally accurate.

branch of the larger Essene movement.”¹⁸⁷ It is probable that this Essene movement was comprised of Zadokite priests with ties to the temple, yet due to the perceived corruption of the Hasmonean rulers they separated themselves from the larger Sadducean group and formed their own movement.

The earliest members of the sect must have been Sadducees who were unwilling to accept the situation that came into being in the aftermath of the Maccabean revolt (168-164 B.C.E.). The Maccabees replaced the Zadokite high priesthood with their own priests, reducing the Zadokites to a subsidiary position for as long as Hasmonean rule lasted. It has long been theorized that this is how the Qumran sect originated. Some disaffected Zadokites separated themselves from their brethren in Jerusalem and formed the sect. This is why the sect to often refers to itself, or its leaders, as the “Sons of Zadok.”¹⁸⁸

Lawrence Schiffman explains the eventual radical and non-Sadducean beliefs represented in the Qumran corpus as a natural development of the continual rejection of this group by the temple administration.

This theory has been challenged because it does not explain the more sectarian or radical tendencies, including the animated polemics and the hatred for outsiders, so often found in the later sectarian texts. Yet this is precisely the point. It is in these later texts that one sees the results of the schism. After attempts such as this letter to reconcile and win over the Hasmoneans and the remaining Jerusalem Sadducees to their system of temple practice, the Qumran Zadokites developed, over time, the sectarian mentality of the despised, the rejected, and the abandoned; so they began to look upon themselves as the true Israel and to condemn and despise all others. All of history, ancient as well as contemporary, was not interpreted as figuring and prefiguring this new history.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ VanderKam and Flint, *Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 240.

¹⁸⁸ Lawrence H. Schiffman, “The New Halakhic Letter (4QMMT) and the Origins of the Dead Sea Sect,” *BA* 53 No. 2 (June, 1990): 69.

¹⁸⁹ Schiffman, “New Halakhic Letter,” 69-70.

Thus the messianic and eschatological beliefs of this group were likely a result of the schism between the Yahad, the group that saw themselves as the correct inheritors of the Jewish tradition, and the temple administration in Jerusalem, run by the Hasmoneans.

Although the identification of the group at Qumran has not reached a unanimous consensus, the Essene Hypothesis will be accepted at present, in line with VanderKam and Flint's views, "The hypothesis accepted here is that a small group of Essenes occupied the area and was responsible for the scrolls, whether members copied or wrote them or the community simply possessed them."¹⁹⁰ Whether or not the Qumranites wrote or copied these scrolls¹⁹¹ is not of grave importance, but assuming that these texts were read and used by this community is enough to analyze the group's beliefs, in particular how they relate to Moses and the Torah. "If all of the texts were associated with this group, we may use all of them as indicators of its beliefs or theological convictions. Even the presence of scrolls neither written nor copied at Qumran says something about which texts were read by the group."¹⁹² Indeed the documents display a high degree of consistency with regards to general beliefs, attitudes, and expectations.

Wilderness: A Better Time, a Better Place

Before analyzing how this group understood Moses, one must understand why this group settled Khirbet Qumran, what they believed, and what they hoped to accomplish. These questions can be answered through ancient sources that mention Essene beliefs and practices, a general overview of themes and beliefs found in the

¹⁹⁰ VanderKam and Flint, *Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 255.

¹⁹¹ "The presence of several inkwells at the site makes it likely that some were written or copied there." (VanderKam and Flint, *Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 239).

¹⁹² VanderKam and Flint, *Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 255.

scrolls, and an analysis of how the beliefs and expectations of this group culminated in the settling of a wilderness site near the Dead Sea.

The prevailing view regarding *why* this group of Jews moved to Qumran was because they were in theological conflict with the temple priesthood and the Hasmonean leadership, the government that assumed control after the Maccabean Revolt (167-160 BCE).

Most historians suspect that the Yakhad originated in a group of Jerusalem priestly families claiming descent from Zadok. Reputed to have been a descendent of Aaron, Zadok had been appointed high priest by King Solomon (1 Kings 2:35). His descendants dominated the Jerusalem temple throughout much of the history of ancient Yehudah and, it appears, were installed in the high priesthood during the Persian and Hellenistic periods as well. This changed in the wake of the Maccabean wars. By 152 BCE the high priesthood was filled by members of the non-Zadokite Hasmonean family. The founders of the Yakhad, it is argued, may have been demoted or deprived of their due by the new order.¹⁹³

Thus these Essenes likely saw the Hasmonean rulers as corrupt and power hungry, assuming positions of authority that they were not qualified for according to the rules of their religious tradition. It was not only the Hasmoneans assuming roles meant for the Zadokites that put this Essene group at odds with the ruling powers, but also certain beliefs and practices of the official administration, such as a conflict of religious calendars.

the nature of the Yakhad as a religious community was bound up with its principled opposition to the official Jewish administration controlling the temple. It's calendrical system, for example, was a solar calendar similar to that of the book of Jubilees, and thus contradicted the calendar by which the timing of Jerusalem's festivals was calculated.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹³ Martin S. Jaffee, *Early Judaism: Religious Worlds of the First Judaic Millennium* (Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 2006), 139-140.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 142.

Thus, “It seems that disputes about such matters are what led them to leave the Temple community and forge their own way in a self-imposed exile.”¹⁹⁵ This particular group of Essenes retreated to the wilderness and settled at Khirbet Qumran, where they maintained a community determined to preserve ritual purity and thus prepare for the eschaton, when once again the righteous would control the Promised Land.

The reason that the wilderness was chosen as the location for the Qumranites’ retreat was likely because of their desire to emulate Moses and the wilderness period. Seeking God in the wilderness has additional attestation in the Hebrew Bible, in particular the book of Isaiah. Isaiah 40:3¹⁹⁶ reads:

“קול קורא במדבר פנו דרך יהוה ישרו בערבה מסלה לאלהינו”

The New Revised Standard Version translates this passage as: “A voice cries out: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.’” Because of the lack of punctuation, however, different groups interpreted this passage differently. In the Gospel of John, the author puts these words in the mouth of John the Baptist, “He said, ‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet Isaiah said.”¹⁹⁷ Indeed, the former translation and interpretation appears to be the way that the members of the community at Qumran read this passage; one ought to retreat to the wilderness in order to attain purity and bring about the era of God.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵ VanderKam and Flint, *Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 263.

¹⁹⁶ This verse is also quoted in the *Community Rule*, (1QS) 8:14.

¹⁹⁷ John 1:23, NRSV.

Indeed, many scholars of the Scrolls have previously observed the connection between the community at Qumran and the Mosaic narrative. Relocating themselves to the desert has been interpreted as a desire to re-experience the Sinaitic experience and emulate the wilderness period of the Pentateuch.

Biblically speaking, the wilderness was the frequent backdrop for divine self-revelation, but what is more for the sectarians, it is way the place for divinely-sanctioned legal practice, spoken from the authoritative perspective of Sinai. The choice to establish themselves ‘in the desert’ or ‘on the path to the desert,’ symbolizing the study of the Law, reflects their desire to appeal to the sacred ground of Sinai.¹⁹⁹

Just as Sinai was a stop on the way to the Promised Land, so the Yahad saw Qumran as a temporary settlement. Like the Hebrews in the Pentateuch, the Qumranites did not believe that their settlement in the desert was permanent, but rather that they were living in the desert temporarily in wait of the turn of the era, when they would once again control the temple administration in Jerusalem.

Some scholars have noticed that the language of living in “camps” has linguistically tied connected the Yahad with the Hebrews in the wilderness.²⁰⁰ “Francis Schmidt suggests that the choice of the camp as a model would have been appropriate for a community waiting for the Messiah, hearkening back to a time when God directly intervened for Israel.”²⁰¹ Indeed, the Yahad sought to emulate the wilderness period, a

¹⁹⁸ This is supported by the fact that “The authors do not cite the beginning of Isa 40:3, ‘a voice is calling’ (קול קורא), but begin the quote using disjunctive syntax with במדבר in first position, emphasizing that the wilderness reference is the key point of connection to the pretext.”(Schofield, “Priestly Space,” 480).

¹⁹⁹ Schofield, “Priestly Space,” 481.

²⁰⁰ “Particularly in D the authors imagine themselves to be living in ‘camps,’ a term occurring over fifteen times (CD 9:11; 10:23; 14:3; 4QD^c 7 ii 14, etc.; cf. 4Q511 2 i 7), and camp terminology pervades the *War Scroll* (fourteen times), a text in which the sectarians apply the purity rules of the wilderness camp to the sectarian war camp.” (Schofield, “Priestly Space, 483).

time when the Israelites had a direct link to God through Moses, “whom the LORD knew face to face.”²⁰²

The Teacher of Righteousness

Another significant aspect of the study of this community is the Teacher of Righteousness, typically interpreted as one of the founders of the Yaḥad. “The vast majority of scholars agree that the Righteous Teacher is the one who characteristically shaped the Qumran Community, while the Wicked Priest is a Hasmonean Leader.”²⁰³ The Teacher was likely a priestly figure, made evident by the community’s overarching concern with correct practice and interpretation of law, as well as the expectation of a priestly messiah who resembled the Teacher. “The community conceived of the definitive, eschatological High Priest in the image and likeness of the historical Teacher.”²⁰⁴ Thus the teacher, like Moses, was closely associated with the divine law.

Although keeping within the narrative critical approach, there are details outside of the Qumran literature about the historical Teacher of Righteousness that could help illuminate how the Yaḥad perceived him. Significantly, the Teacher of Righteousness likely took control of a nondescript or nonexistent group, led the group into the wilderness, i.e. Qumran,²⁰⁵ and then died before the expected eschaton.

²⁰¹ Schofield, “Priestly Space,” 483. Citing Frances Schmidt, *How the Temple Thinks: Identity and Social Cohesion in Ancient Judaism* (trans. J. E. Crowley; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 145.

²⁰² Deuteronomy 34:10, NRSV.

²⁰³ Géza Xeravits, “From the Forefathers to the ‘Angry Lion’: Qumran and the Hasmoneans,” in *The Books of the Maccabees: History, Theology, Ideology: Papers of the Second International Conference on the Deuterocanonical Books* (ed. Géza Xeravits and Jzsef Zsengell’r; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 212.

²⁰⁴ John J. Collins, “‘He Shall Not Judge by What his Eyes See’: Messianic Authority in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” *DSD* 2, No. 2 (June, 1995): 160.

The Teacher of Righteousness assumed leadership of the sect and introduced his teachings; at that time or shortly thereafter the sect moved to its site in the wilderness at Qumran. Both the archaeological dating of the site and the literary materials about Damascus confirm the fact.²⁰⁶

The view that the Teacher of Righteousness was seen by the Yaḥad as a new Moses has biblical precedent in Deuteronomy 18, which states,

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable.²⁰⁷

This passage was certainly important to the Yaḥad, as it was cited in one of their texts, 4QTestimonia.²⁰⁸ Ultimately, the Teacher of Righteousness should be read as a new Moses, due to his close relationship with the law, his leading the community to the wilderness, and his death before the re-entering the Promised Land.

²⁰⁵ Although the use of “Damascus” in the Damascus Document has led many to believe that this group was associated with this historical city, others have argued that this was in fact a code word for Qumran. “We know that the sectarians, especially in the *Zadokite Fragments* [i.e. CD], often spoke in code words. We find all kinds of pseudonyms for actual personages, yet almost never a personal name that would allow a definite identification. The Jewish sects of the day are never mentioned by name even though we see numerous references to them designated with code words in the sectarian texts. Why then should we fall into the trap of taking place names literally? Rather it is more likely that ‘Damascus’ is a code word for Qumran.” (Schiffman, “Origin and Early History,” 45).

²⁰⁶ Schiffman, “Origin and Early History,” 44.

²⁰⁷ Deuteronomy 18:18-19, NRSV.

²⁰⁸ 4Q175 5-8.

Chapter 5: Literature from Qumran

In addition to the biblical books at Qumran there were also a number of non-biblical texts discovered there, some previously known and some previously unknown. Of the non-biblical texts, some are believed to be authored by the Essenes, whereas others seem to be read and considered authoritative by them, yet were probably composed earlier and are not considered “sectarian,” such as the book of Jubilees. “I share the consensus view that the Scrolls represent the library of a Jewish sect, most probably to be identified as the Essenes. They were not necessarily all produced at Qumran.”²⁰⁹ Significantly, the texts not authored by the Qumranites still show consistency with the beliefs and expectations of the Yahad. “The Community collected not only their own writings but a significant number of pre-Qumranic and extra-Qumranic material as well. Yet, all this ‘non-sectarian’ material is compatible with the views of the Community.”²¹⁰ In particular, keeping with the view that the Yahad was at odds with the Hasmoneans, “The library evidently includes material that was not sectarian in origin, but is conspicuously lacking in material that can be characterized as

²⁰⁹ John J. Collins, “‘He Shall Not Judge by What his Eyes See’: Messianic Authority in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” *DSD* 2, No. 2 (June, 1995): 146.

²¹⁰ Géza Xeravits, “From the Forefathers to the ‘Angry Lion’: Qumran and the Hasmoneans,” in *The Books of the Maccabees: History, Theology, Ideology: Papers of the Second International Conference on the Deuterocanonical Books* (ed. Géza Xeravits and Jzsef Zsengell’r; Leiden: Brill, 2007), 216.

pro-Hasmonean or as Pharisaic,”²¹¹ further supporting the identification of the Qumraites as Essenes.

The Torah at Qumran

Some of the most important texts to the Yahad were these five books of the Torah, made evident by the content of the documents, their authorship traditionally being attributed to Moses,²¹² and the comparatively high number of manuscripts found of these works. Of the biblical books, the book of Psalms was the most highly attested from the Qumran documents, of which 36 copies were found. The Torah accounts for five of the next six most frequently attested biblical books from Qumran,²¹³ indicating the centrality of these books in this community.

In the scrolls, Moses is primarily associated with the Torah. “Of the nearly 100 references to Moses by name in Qumran literature, all but a handful relate directly to the Torah, and more specifically to its legal material.”²¹⁴ One must have accepted the Mosaic Torah before being initiated,²¹⁵ “joining the Yahad is contingent upon one’s sweating ‘to return to the Torah of Moses.’”²¹⁶ Furthermore, this community appears to have held their own legal material on equal footing with the Torah of Moses. Bowley observes that “in several places authors of the sectarian literature imply that rejection of

²¹¹ Collins, “He Shall Not Judge,” 146.

²¹² See Coogan, *Old Testament*, 41.

²¹³ 30 manuscripts of Deuteronomy were found, 20 of Genesis, 17 of Exodus, 15 of Leviticus, and 8 of Numbers (source: VanderKam and Flint, *Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 150).

²¹⁴ Bowley, “Moses in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” 160.

²¹⁵ See, for example, 1QS v 8.

²¹⁶ Bowley, “Moses in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” 161.

the teachings of the Yahad was tantamount to rejecting the Torah.”²¹⁷ In addition to the Mosaic Law and the sectarian law, the excavations of this area also yielded texts related to the Torah, which, due to the importance of the Pentateuch to this community, were not intended to replace these Mosaic texts, but rather to supplement them.

Torah Supplements

One such text is the *Temple Scroll*, a document containing legal material like that of Deuteronomy, regulations regarding ritual purity,²¹⁸ and a description of a future temple. The *Temple Scroll* is unique not just among the scrolls, but in Jewish literature in general, as it “is based on Deuteronomy but presented as God’s word spoken in the first person at Sinai.”²¹⁹ It is primarily a legal document, however it was meant to supplement already existing legal material, not replace it.

The redactor did not really intend his Torah to eliminate the need for the canonical one or he would certainly have prohibited such transgressions as murder and adultery, which are never mentioned in the *Temple Scroll*. Rather, the author/redactor chose aspects of the law about which he wanted to polemicize with the dominant views of the Pharisees and the political and cultic order of the day in Hasmonean Palestine.²²⁰

Unfortunately, “the introduction...did not survive to perhaps instruct us how it was meant to be read.”²²¹ While some see this text as “a polemic against Hasmonean policies and

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 165.

²¹⁸ As will be later shown, ritual purity, in particular washing with water, played a central role in communal life at Qumran. For references to purifying water in the *Temple Scroll* see, for example, 11Q19 xlix 11-16-19.

²¹⁹ Tigchelaar, “The Dead Sea Scrolls,” 216.

²²⁰ Lawrence H. Schiffman, “The Theology of the Temple Scroll,” *JQR* New Series 85, No. 1/2, Papers on the Dead Sea Scrolls (Jul.-Oct., 1994): 110.

²²¹ Bowley, “Moses in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” 178.

Pharisaic rulings,²²² it is first and foremost a legal text that places the reader in a very unique set of sandals.

In the *Temple Scroll*, Moses' name "is omitted and the text instead presents itself as direct speech from God."²²³ Although the original intent of the author is unknown, reading the text certainly gives the reader a unique perspective: he is not reading the words of God related by Moses, he is reading the words of God from God Himself, giving the reader a Sinaitic experience. "By means of the second person singular pronoun, the reader is placed in the position of Moses, as the direct addressee of divine revelation on Mount Sinai."²²⁴ Interestingly, "As Schiffman has argued, the *Temple Scroll* is not a Moses pseudepigraphon but rather a divine pseudepigraphon."²²⁵ Thus the *Temple Scroll* is a document that would seem to place the reader in the sandals of Moses, to put the reader in the prophet's position and take part in the liminal wilderness period from the books of the Pentateuch. This document is consistent with the general belief that the Qumranites were attempting to re-experience the liminal wilderness period in the Pentateuch, as they attempted to place themselves in the role of divine revelation upon Mount Siani.

This text also offers insight into the beliefs that Qumranites had about the end of days and the establishment of God's new kingdom. The text describes a temple, however

²²² Tigchelaar, "The Dead Sea Scrolls," 216.

²²³ Bowley, "Moses in the Dead Sea Scrolls," 177.

²²⁴ Najman, *Seconding Sinai*, 68. Citing Lawrence H. Schiffman, "The Temple Scroll and the Halakhic Pseudepigrapha of the Second Temple Period," in *Pseudepigraphic Perspectives: The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Proceedings of the International Symposium of the Orion Center for the Study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Associated Literature, 12-14 January, 1997* (ed. Esther G. Chazon and Michael E. Stone, Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah 31. Leiden: Brill, 1999), 131.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

“The temple depicted matches none of Israel’s historical sanctuaries. It was meant as a blueprint for a new temple to be built in the future when the right people were in control.”²²⁶ This text supports the notion that the Yahad believed in an ending of the present age and the coming of a new era in which the righteous would once again assume control of the temple cult.

The content of the *Temple Scroll* is also consistent with that of the book of *Jubilees*, an additional example of a legal religious text making its claim to authority through Moses. A Jewish calendrical text known through its preservation in Ethiopic,²²⁷ *Jubilees* “presents itself as a record of what really happened when Moses spent forty days with God on Mount Sinai.”²²⁸ In this text, Moses is accompanied by one of God’s angels during the Sinaitic revelation.

According to the composer of *Jubilees*, there was a witness on Sinai who saw what actually transpired between God and Moses. This witness, a mysterious figure called ‘the Angel of the Presence,’ is also a participant in the revelation. In fact, he appears to be the narrator of most of the book of *Jubilees* from the second chapter on.²²⁹

The importance that *Jubilees* had at Qumran is evident through its references in other documents. “Though citations and references to *Jubilees* in other Dead Sea Scrolls are lacking introductory formulae that indicate its Mosaic...it seems certain that the revelatory claims of *Jubilees* and even its Mosaic origins were accepted by the sect.”²³⁰

²²⁶ VanderKam, James. *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 81.

²²⁷ “Before the Qumran finds, *Jubilees* could be studied in a full Ethiopic version that became available to Western scholars in the mid-nineteenth century, when the first copy was brought from Ethiopia to Europe by a missionary.” (VanderKam, *Scrolls and the Bible*, 73-74).

²²⁸ Jaffee, *Early Judaism*, 70.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

The scrolls yielded 14 or 15²³¹ copies of this text, and “Both the large number of copies and the several works related to it show that this book was much used at Qumran.”²³²

Like the *Temple Scroll*, it seems that the author of *Jubilees* intended it to be read in addition to the Torah, not to replace it.

It seems unlikely that the writer, or at least the people of the scrolls, believed *Jubilees* rendered Genesis-Exodus obsolete. So, for example, he refers to Genesis as the first Torah (*Jub.* 6:22; cf. 30:12) – hardly a title that expresses a negative verdict on it, and he notes that it too was revealed by the same angel of the presence who discloses *Jubilees* to Moses. It seems more in tune with the evidence to say that the writer of *Jubilees* saw his work as a supplement to the pentateuchal narratives or as a guide to reading them properly.²³³

This is also not to say that the author or readers of *Jubilees* thought that the Torah was incomplete. Whereas the *Temple Scroll* functioned to place the reader in the liminal role of the Israelites in the wilderness during the Sinaitic event, *Jubilees* operated to further ground the reading community’s belief in the solar calendar by elaborating on its timelessness and divine origin, communicated to mankind through Moses and one of God’s angels.

²³⁰ Bowley, “Moses in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” 176. As references to *Jubilees* in other documents, Bowley cites CD 10:7-10, 16:2-3, 4Q228 1 i.

²³¹ “14, or, if one follows J.T. Milik’s view regarding 4Q217, 15.” (VanderKam, *Scrolls and the Bible*, 76).

²³² Peter W. Flint, “Noncanonical Writings in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Apocrypha, Other Previously Known Writings, Pseudepigrapha,” in *The Bible at Qumran: Text, Shape, and Interpretation* (ed. Peter W. Flint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 102. Despite the comparatively large number of copies of this text found among the scrolls, “these numerous fragmentary copies do not provide a large amount of the text of *Jubilees* (parts of 214 [possibly 217] verses from a total of 1307 in the book)” (Vanderkam, *Scrolls and the Bible*, 75).

²³³ VanderKam, *Scrolls and the Bible*, 76-77.

One of the central themes of *Jubilees* is the importance of the correct calendar.²³⁴

All of history, according to the text, can be separated into orderly jubilee periods, and self-asserts its authority as the correct and divine calendar.

Prominent themes include: its espousal of the 364-day calendar, its division of the course of history into 94-year jubilee periods, and its practice of dating covenants to the third month (especially the fifteenth day), which may have inspired the practice at Qumran of renewing the covenant annually on the Festival of Weeks.²³⁵

Many have read the support of this calendar as an anti-Hasmonean polemic, a political standpoint indeed assumed by the Yahad.

Jubilees's advocacy of this ritual calendar seems to be a direct response to the Hasmonean priests' use of a system of leap years to solve the Torah's calendrical puzzle. We must assume, therefore, that those who composed *Jubilees* or regarded it as persuasive were critical of the Hasmonean regime. *Jubilees* expresses that criticism through its account of revelation. Instead of confronting the Hasmonean regime explicitly, it undermines its religious legitimacy by presenting a new account of how Moses received the Torah and an alternate version of what that Torah contained. If *Jubilees* is an account of the revelation to Moses, then the interpretation of the Torah of Moses housed in the Hasmonean temple is not.²³⁶

This interpretation fits with the Qumranites support of the calendar described in *Jubilees*, the anti-Hasmonean tendencies of the group, and their focus on Moses and Sinai as the liminal period in which God had a close relationship with his people, guiding them on the right path in order to inherit the Promised Land.

In addition to its function as a polemic against Hasmonean policy, the calendrical cycle also serves a theological function, namely periodization of history into orderly eras,

²³⁴ The details of the calendar discrepancies will not be discussed in this paper, although the primary difference stems from whether to follow a solar or luni-solar calendar.

²³⁵ Flint, "Noncanonical Writings," 103.

²³⁶ Jaffee, *Early Judaism*, 73.

the transitions between which corresponding with significant historical events. One of these changes indeed took place in the wilderness at Sinai.

Testuz has suggested that the period of forty-nine jubilees represents a complete era in world history. If that is true, then the reference to the passing of that period of time at the end of Jubilees (50:4) was written to call attention to the fact that a new era in world history had begun with the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai.²³⁷

Significantly, the Qumranites believed that they lived close to another of these significant historical transitions, and that a great war was imminent in which the righteous would conquer and once again control the Promised Land.

²³⁷ O. S. Wintermute, "Jubilees: A New Translation and Introduction," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha vol. 2: Expansions of the "Old Testament" and Legends, Wisdom, and Philosophical Literature, Prayers, Psalms and Odes, Fragments of Lost Judeo-Hellenistic Works* (ed. James H. Charlesworth; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1983), 39. Citing M. Testuz, *Les Idées religieuses du livre des Jubilés* (Geneva, 1960), 138-140.

Chapter 6: Beliefs at Qumran

Certain characteristics of belief at Qumran demonstrate that this group saw themselves as emulating the wilderness period of the Pentateuch, and that they expected a future redemption in which there would be a final battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil, with the latter being vanquished. Characteristic beliefs of the Yahad were messianism, eschatology, ritual purity, and the belief in divine periodization and order of time, which suggested that God had predetermined everything according to a divine plan and that they were living during the end of a corrupt age and the era of God was imminent.²³⁸

Purity

One of the main characteristics of the Qumran community was their preoccupation with purity.²³⁹ Strict rules of the community are stated in the appropriately titled *Community Rule* text,²⁴⁰ which describe a number of rules regarding everyday behavior within the group. Many of these general rules of conduct appear to be a direct result of attempting to keep their community free of impurity, and it is possible that

²³⁸ See for examples of an eschatological battle 1Q33 I 1-3, 1QSa i 1; messianism 1QS ix 10-11, 1QSa ii 12, 14, 20, CD xiv 19; xix 10-11; xx 1; ritual purity 11Q19 xlix 11-16-1 19, 1QS iii 4-6; iv 20-22; v 1-2, 13-14; CD x 10-13; periodization of history 1Q33 i 8-9, xiv 13, 1QS iii 15-19, iv 16-17, xi 11, CD ii 5-10.

²³⁹ For a more detailed account of the Yahad's preoccupation with ritual and moral purity, see Eyal Regev, "Abominated Temple and a Holy Community: The Formation of the Notions of Purity and Impurity in Qumran," *DSD* 10, No. 2 (2003): 243-278.

²⁴⁰ Also known as Serekh ha-Yahad, this text is widely agreed upon to be a product of the Qumran community. (Géza Xeravits, "The Early History of Qumran's Messianic Expectations," *ETL* 76 No. 1 [Apr. 2000]: 118).

“With the Jerusalem temple polluted, the members of the Yahad saw their own communal life as a pure sacrificial offering that alone brought atonement and purification from the increasingly heavy weight of Israel’s sinfulness.”²⁴¹

One of the main themes in the *Community Rule* is the separation from outsiders. The text states that those in the Yahad “are to separate from the congregation of perverse men,”²⁴² and this theme continues throughout the other rules in the document. As previously shown, the idea of holiness is rooted in separation, and mixing the sacred and the profane together leads to impurity and contamination. Simply by means of physically separating themselves from their theological enemies, the Yahad sought to purify themselves and increase the holiness amongst their community.

Both textual and archaeological evidence further supports the importance of purity at Qumran. Excavations of the site unearthed water reservoirs, which some scholars believe were used for ritual washing and purification. “While there were one unstopped and two stepped cisterns in Period Ia, Period Ib had a total of five stepped and two unstepped cisterns.”²⁴³ Bryant G. Wood conclusively demonstrates that taking population, water consumption, rainfall, evaporation rates, and construction of these cisterns into consideration, the most logical conclusion is that some of these cisterns were indeed mikvehs, Jewish baths used to create states of ritual purity.

²⁴¹ Jaffee, *Early Judaism*, 145.

²⁴² 1QS 5:1-2, trans. M. Wise, M. Abegg, and E. Cook with N. Gordon.

²⁴³ Bryant G. Wood, “To Dip or Sprinkle? The Qumran Cisterns in Perspective,” *BASOR* 256 (Autumn, 1984): 51. Wood follows R. de Vaux’s dating of Period Ia “to the time of John Hyrcanus, ca. 135-104 B.C., or possibly a little before,” and Period Ib “from the reign of John Hyrcanus (135-104 B.C.) to the earthquake of 31 B.C.” (Wood, “To Dip or Sprinkle,” 46, 49, from R. de Vaux, *Archaeology and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (London: Oxford University, 1973), 5, 18-24.

The subsistence requirements of the community confirm what was suspected from the design and evolution of the water system at Qumran: that the stepped cisterns served other than a utilitarian function. Unless we imagine that the sectarians were constructing luxurious swimming pools, or assume a vastly overdesigned system or a much larger population than the evidence indicates, we must conclude that the stepped cisterns were used for religious rites. The number, size, and design of the stepped cisterns indicate that they were used frequently by a relatively large number of people. The small baths, on the other hand, were no doubt reserved for special ceremonies for individuals, such as initiation rites or the purification of a member who had fallen from grace.²⁴⁴

Indeed, this hypothesis is further supported by the literature from Qumran, as multiple texts associated with the community relate significance to waters of purity.

As previously noted water plays an important role as a purifying agent, and indeed the texts from Qumran demonstrate that ritual purity played a central role in the practice at Qumran. “Their documents speak vaguely about ‘entering into the water,’ and of being cleansed by ‘waters of impurity’ and ‘waters of washing.’”²⁴⁵ Additional mention of water as a purifying agent already referenced in the Damascus Document and the Temple Scroll (see footnote 228), in tandem with the identification of multiple mikve’ot at the site of Qumran, indeed show that ritual purity was a central concern to the Jewish group at Qumran, and that water played an important role in maintaining their ritual purity.²⁴⁶ This ritual purity, maintained by using the liminal instrument water, kept them in a state of perpetual divine favor, grounding their beliefs that they were indeed the

²⁴⁴ Wood, “Dip or Sprinkle,” 58.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 45. Wood cites 1QS 3:4-5, 8-9, 5:13-14.

²⁴⁶ Wood also cites Josephus to further support the importance of ritual at purity at Qumran, assuming that the Qumranites were a branch of the Essene movement. “If the inhabitants of Qumran were Essenes, as many believe, then the remarks of Josephus in this regard are also relevant. He records that ritual bathing was part of the daily routine of members of the sect: ‘...and when they have clothed themselves in white veils, they then bathe their bodies in cold water. And after this purification is over, they every one meet together in an apartment of their own...’” (Wood, “Dip or Sprinkle,” 46, citing Josephus, *Wars*, 11, viii, 5).

true nation of Israel and that they would be the ones to inherit the Promised Land and the temple in the new age to come.

Periodization of History

As previously stated, two of the main functions of *Jubilees* were to affirm the solar calendar and establish an orderly structure to the periodization of history. Periodization of history and the imminent eschaton are common themes in apocalyptic works, and they typically present the intended audience as living in the final age prior to a combination of the return of God, a final battle, and a final judgment.²⁴⁷ This trend holds true at Qumran, as “the people of Qumran believed they were living in the final age of world history.”²⁴⁸ Multiple Qumranic texts previously mentioned include these themes of periodization of history, the coming eschaton, often accompanied by the arrival of the messiah(s), and the start of a new age in which the righteous will take control of that which they had been denied, in the case of the Yahad, the temple in Jerusalem. Texts such as the *War Scroll* seemed to serve as a guide for the final eschatological battle, in which the sons of light (presumably the Yahad) would make war with the sons of darkness. “[The *War Scroll*] sketches a dualistic picture of the final conflict, when the forces of evil under Belial and his spirits will be annihilated.”²⁴⁹

Furthermore, the Yahad believed that this periodization of history was a part of God’s all-encompassing plan. Evidence from outside the scrolls suggests that the

²⁴⁷ For a detailed history of the apocalyptic genre see chapter 1 in John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998),

²⁴⁸ VanderKam and Flint, *Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 237.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 220.

Essenes believed that everything in life was predetermined,²⁵⁰ and indeed textual evidence from the scrolls corroborates this belief.²⁵¹ “Their understanding of the created order, of history, and of the life beyond began with the confession that there is one God who is the creator of all. He is not only omnipotent and omniscient, but also continues to rule what he made, usually through angelic agents.”²⁵² Ultimately the Qumranites saw themselves in the final age before the final battle between the cosmic forces of good and evil. In preparation for this transition in historical era, they voluntarily set up a liminal community in the wilderness and abided by strict purity laws, proving that they were ritually pure enough to complete the rite of passage into the coming age. Those at Qumran “believed that God’s restoration would come at the time determined for it...[and] their task was to maintain holiness until that day comes.”²⁵³

Messianism and Eschatology

Although the texts from Qumran do suggest that the group to which these texts belonged believed in the coming messiah and the imminence of the eschaton, these texts do not construct a coherent belief system with regards to these expectations.

The fact is that if the scrolls are not unanimous in depicting either community organization or eschatological doctrine, but both fluctuate, there remains little ground for identifying a common perception of reality,

²⁵⁰ See Josephus, *Antiquities* 13.171-173; 18.18. “Philo’s accounts of the Essenes are in *Quod omnis probus liver sit* 12-13; *Hypothetica* 11.1-18; and, most fully, *De vita contemplative*, concerning the related Therapeutae, his ‘contemplative’ as opposed to ‘practical’ Essenes,” (Davies, “Eschatology,” 43 (fn.)).

²⁵¹ See, for example, the *Community Rule* 3.13-4.26, the *Thanksgiving Psalms* 9.7-9, 19-20, 23-25, and the *Damascus Document* 2.7-10.

²⁵² VanderKam and Flint, *Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, 255.

²⁵³ Russell C. D. Arnold, “Qumran Prayer as an Act of Righteousness,” *TJQ* Vol. 95, No. 3 (Summer, 2005): 529.

and even less ground for assuming that this perception remained constant throughout the history of the community.²⁵⁴

Philip Davies points out that eschatological expectations are subject to ideological fluctuations, as imminent beliefs by their nature cannot survive any significant length of time without being dismissed or amended.

those who view the society of Qumran as constituted and dominated by eschatological expectation do not reckon with the utter unlikelihood of any group's sustaining such expectation in an unaltered form over two hundred years. Even the Christian church was unable to sustain its eschatological fervor for more than a few decades without encountering the need for reformulation.²⁵⁵

Despite the disagreement amongst scrolls and scholars regarding the eschatological beliefs at Qumran, it can be assumed with relative certainty that although the particulars of the beliefs about the final days according to the Yahad are not known with certitude, they did possess *a* belief in the end of days. The textual representation of the periodization of history suggests that this group did believe in the end of days, even if the particulars is unclear. For example, "The Damascus Document 6:11 mentions a figure, 'one who will teach righteousness,' who will bring an end to the interim dispensation at the 'end of days.' The implication is that his appearance will herald the restoration of the remnant to its land."²⁵⁶ Thus the Qumranites looked with hope to the future, when the current historical age would close and a new would open, possibly accompanied by a messianic figure.

²⁵⁴ Philip R. Davies, "Eschatology at Qumran," *JBD* 104 No. 1 (Mar., 1985): 41.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

Similar to the eschatological issues, the scrolls do not portray a consistent message with regards to messianic expectations.²⁵⁷ It is evident, however, that the Qumranites did expect a messianic figure in addition to the imminent eschaton, when God would defeat the forces of evil and the world would experience a transition as history shifted from one era to the next.

Indeed, “messianic language in the scrolls is not uniform”²⁵⁸ The term “messiah” (Heb. משיח) “In its simplest meaning, it denotes ‘one who is anointed with oil.’ More expansively, it identifies a person consecrated to a divinely appointed task.”²⁵⁹ It is unclear whether the Qumranites expected one messiah or two, and what kind of messiah he would be, i.e. a priestly or a royal messiah. “The Damascus Document expects the arrival of one messiah, except for CD 7.13-8.1 where two eschatological protagonists are present.”²⁶⁰

If the Qumranites expected two messiahs, it seems that one would be a priest and the other a king.²⁶¹ The mention of a prophet in relation to these messiahs, as well the mention of “Moses his messiah”²⁶² has led some to suggest that Moses would have played a role in the eschatology of the Yihad. “The covenanters of Qumran employed the paradigm of a royal Davidic Messiah and also of a priestly Messiah from the line of

²⁵⁷ For a detailed picture of different theories about messianic expectations at Qumran, see Xeravits, “Messianic Expectations,” and chapter 11 in VanderKam and Flint, *Meaning of the Dead Sea Scrolls*.

²⁵⁸ Davies, “Eschatology,” 40.

²⁵⁹ Jaffee, *Early Judaism*, 92.

²⁶⁰ Xeravits, “Messianic Expectations,” 117.

²⁶¹ See 1QS 9:11, which mentions a prophet as well as the messiahs of Aaron and Israel (Heb. עד בוא נביא ומשיחי אהרון וישראל).

²⁶² Apocryphon of Moses (4Q377) 2 ii 4-6. (Heb. מושה משיחו)

Aaron. A third paradigm within the literature of this community was that of a *prophet* who was held to be in continuity with the tradition of Moses.²⁶³ Thus, “Even eschatological thought at Qumran was influenced by the figure of Moses.”²⁶⁴ Overall, the eschatological and messianic expectations of this community reflect the importance of the wilderness period in the Pentateuch and their attempt to reenact it, which they believed would establish them on the side of God when God’s new kingdom was to be established.

The redemption from Egypt and the desert wandering, crowned by the revelation at Sinai, were for the sectarian a paradigm of that which would be once again repeated in the end of days in which he was soon to share. He himself would experience the great battles and tribulations. For the present, however, he would strive to live in the perfect holiness of the future age. As a result, he would eventually merit the experience of the revelation of God’s glory in the end of days, a promise he felt certain would be fulfilled in his lifetime.²⁶⁵

Thus even though the precise beliefs about the number of messiahs that were expected and the exact details of the End of Days are unclear in the text, it is evident that this community did hold beliefs in the coming of a new era in which the righteous would once again control the Promised Land, a belief based in the Pentateuch upon Moses and the wandering Hebrews before the first conquest of the same land.

²⁶³ Paul E. Hughes, “Moses’ Birth Story: A Biblical Matrix for Prophetic Messianism,” in *Eschatology, Messianism, and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (ed. Craig A. Evans and Peter W. Flint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 12.

²⁶⁴ Bowley, “Moses in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” 173.

²⁶⁵ Lawrence H. Schiffman, “The Eschatological Community of the Serekh ha-‘Edah,” *PAAJR* 51 (1984): 129.

Chapter 7: Reading the Past, Looking to the Future

The Yaḥad idealized the past and hoped for the return of God's kingdom. Their preoccupation with ritual purity, seclusion in the desert, and beliefs about the eschaton and coming messiah portray a community that sought to emulate the Israelites that followed Moses through the wilderness. The Yaḥad's emulation of the wilderness period supports the narrative analysis of Moses as a liminal character, as it appears that is how the Qumranites understood him as well, evident from their similar use of liminal space, their concern with maintaining purity in their community by means of separation, and their captivation with Moses.

The Mosaic narrative contained in the Pentateuch tells of Israel's journey into adulthood, a journey led by Moses, a liminal instrument of God used to guarantee the success of the Israelites' rite of passage into maturity and assumption of responsibility. This liminal period in history, delineated by crossings of parted waters, was the most significant transition in the history of the Israelite people. This transition could not have been achieved without Moses, the pinnacle of liminality in the biblical texts. Because of Moses, God's liminal instrument who embodied liminality through his mixed identity, association with death, and close relationship with the otherworldly, the Israelites successfully transitioned from slavery in Egypt to citizens of a nation, they learned the name of their God, and they received the Torah through God's most famous intermediary, Moses.

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