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Circumcising the Mouth of Moses: The Idolatrous Status of Yahweh's Mediator Among the Idols of Ancient Mesopotamia

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Abstract

The thesis of this dissertation is that in the defining moment in which he is transformed from "uncircumcised of lips" to "god to Pharaoh" (Ex 6:28-7:1), Moses is best understood as Yahweh's idol, undergoing a status change akin to the induction ritual for ancient Mesopotamian idols, the *Mīs Pî* ("Washing/Purifying of the Mouth"). To make this point, I argue that Moses and idols be compared with respect to their status as mediator between divine and human realms. With their respective status changes, not only are idols and Moses transformed on an ontological level, but so are their relationships to their deities and communities.

The major insights gained through this comparison are made possible by my comparative method. The resulting, new reading of Moses's status change challenges religious and scholarly traditions pertaining to Moses's development, including the notion that the burning bush scene constitutes Moses's transformation. By highlighting how Moses is portrayed as Yahweh's idol, I also complicate the traditional understanding of Moses as Yahweh's servant, lawgiver, and prophet. Moses's status as idol explains the unique features of his character and role within the Hebrew Bible, including the horns or rays of light emanating from his face (Exod 34:29-35) and his special position with respect to Yahweh, the tabernacle, and Israelite society (Num 12:1-9).

This comparison also provides a case study in the role historical context plays in the portrayal of religious figures and the formation of religious systems. The ways in which Moses both fits and does not fit the model of mediation represented by Mesopotamian idols speaks to one of the major projects of the biblical authors: to inspire their audience to move from idol-centered polytheism to aniconism and, eventually, monotheism. This move became even more desirable against the backdrop of sixth- century Babylon, in which the idol of Marduk and the story of Moses were in direct competition. Thus, on my reading, the biblical portrayal of Moses is not only patterned after ancient Mesopotamian idols in general, but emerges in direct historical conversation with one specific idol, that of the god Marduk.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABBREVIATIONS

AB   Anchor Bible

AH   Art History

AJA   *American Journal of Archaeology*

Akk.   Akkadian

AOAT   Alter Orient und Altes Testament

ASOR   American Schools of Oriental Research

ASV   American Standard Version

BASOR   *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*

BCE   Before the Common Era

BDB   Brown, F., S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Oxford, 1907.

BETL   Bibliotheca ephmeridum theologicarum lovaniensium

BibInt   *Biblical Interpretation*

BJS   Brown Judaic Studies

BM   British Museum

BN   *Biblische Notizen*

BR   Babylonian Recension

CAD   *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*. Chicago, 1956-2010

CahRB   Cahiers de la Revue biblique

CBET   Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology

CBQ	*Catholic Bible Quarterly*
CE	Common Era
ConBOT	Coniectanea biblica: Old Testament Series
CWS	Classics of Western Spirituality. New York, 1978-
DJD	Discoveries in the Judean Desert
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls
ECC	Eerdmans Critical Commentary
ESV	English Standard Version
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
GKC	*Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*. Edited by E. Kautzsch. Translated by A. E. Cowley. 28th ed. Oxford, 2006
HALOT	Koehler, L., W. Baumgartner, and J.J. Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Translated and edited under the supervision of M. E. J. Richardson. 5 vols. Leiden, 1994-2000
Heb.	Hebrew
IT	Incantation Text
JANER	*Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religion*
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JNES	*Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
JRitSt	*Journal of Ritual Studies*
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series

JSQ	*Jewish Studies Quarterly*
l.	line
ll.	lines
LEB	Lexham English Bible
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NCBC	New Cambridge Bible Commentary
NIB	*New Interpreter's Bible*
NIV	New International Version
NJPS	New Jewish Publication Society
NKJV	New King James Version
NR	Nineveh Recension
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OBO	Orbis biblicus et orientalis
OECT	Oxford Early Christian Texts. Edited by H. Chadwick. Oxford, 1970-
OLA	Orientalia lovaniensia analecta
OTL	Old Testament Library
P	Priestly Source
r.	reigned
RHR	*Revue de l'histoire des religions*

SAA   State Archives of Assyria

SAALT   State Archives of Assyria Literary Texts

SAOC   Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization

SBLDS   Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series

SBLMS   Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series

SBLSem   Society of Biblical Literature Semeia Studies

Sef   *Sefarad*

STT   Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

TO   Targum Onkelos

TuL27   Assur Tablet A.418 (*TOD UND LEBEN* 27)

UBS   United Bible Societies

WAW   Writings of the Ancient World

ZAW   *Zeitschrift für die altentestamentliche Wissenschaft*

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CHAPTER ONE: AN ICONIC UNDERSTANDING OF MOSES

> On the day Yahweh spoke to Moses in the land of Egypt, Yahweh spoke to Moses saying, 'I am Yahweh. Speak to Pharaoh, king of Egypt, all that I speak to you.' Moses said before Yahweh, 'Behold, I am uncircumcised of lips. How will Pharaoh listen to me?' Yahweh said to Moses, 'See, I have made you God to Pharaoh. Aaron, your brother, will be your prophet.' (Exodus 6:28-7:1)[1]

This is the most pivotal moment of Moses's life, but because it is so briefly described, it is often lost among the more famous scenes of the Book of Exodus, such as the burning bush and the crossing of the Red Sea. Yet, this circumcision of Moses's lips is the transformation that grants Moses the status change necessary to bring the Hebrew people out of Egypt. If Moses is to succeed, he must become no less than god to Pharaoh. Moses knows this status change requires that his lips be metaphorically "circumcised," and challenges Yahweh with this requirement, not once, but twice (Exod 6:12, 30).

The question remains, What exactly is Moses arguing and why is he making his argument with the phrase "uncircumcised of lips"? Why use language so striking, even disturbing, in its imagery? Surely ancient Israelites understood circumcision, physically of the penis (e.g., Gen 17) and figuratively of the heart (Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 9:25 [26]; Ezek 44:7, 9) or even ears (Jer 6:10), but why the application of circumcision

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[1] All translations from the Hebrew Bible are the author's own, unless noted otherwise.

language to the lips or mouth in Exod 6? Furthermore, why would the uncircumcised state of Moses's lips affect Pharaoh's ability to listen?

Consider Yahweh's response. What change occurs in the negative space between Moses's question and Yahweh's imperative, "see," that Moses is supposed to witness, consider, and act upon? What is it about this exchange that suddenly renders Moses more powerful than the most powerful person on earth — Pharaoh, the god-king — where Moses was impotent previously? Why do Moses's attempts to fulfill Yahweh's command fail up until this point, but succeed hereafter?

In Exod 3-4, Yahweh calls Moses to lead his people out of Egyptian slavery and gives him signs to perform so that the people will believe Moses is indeed Yahweh's messenger. Moses gains the confidence of the people through performing these signs, but then when he approaches Pharaoh, his attempt at mediating between Egypt's god-king and the enslaved Hebrews backfires. Pharaoh refuses to let the slaves go on a three-day journey to avoid the calamity of an unhappy god, and punishes Moses's request, requiring the slaves to double their work by gathering their own straw. This angers the slaves against Moses, as it is a breech of trust, and also angers Moses against Yahweh, whom he accuses of doing evil, lying, and sending Moses in the first place (5:20-23).

In response, Yahweh reiterates the promise of liberation, but the people will not listen when Moses relays the message "because of their broken spirit and harsh slavery" (6:9, ESV). Yahweh commands Moses to return to Pharaoh, and it is at this point in the narrative that Moses's strange argument appears for the first time: "Behold, the

children of Israel have not listened to me. How then will Pharaoh listen to me? I am uncircumcised of lips! . . . But Yahweh spoke to Moses and Aaron and gave them charge about the people of Israel and about Pharaoh king of Egypt" (6:12-13). Yahweh thus ignores Moses's specific challenge by simply repeating himself.

After a brief interlude containing Moses's genealogy (Exod 6:14-27), comes the exchange that is at the center of this investigation into and analysis of Moses's status change from "uncircumcised of lips" to "god to Pharaoh." Once Moses's mouth is "circumcised," he is able to channel the power of Yahweh and act as an effective intermediary on both Yahweh's and Israel's behalf. Immediately after the exchange in Exod 6:28-7:6, Moses and Aaron, who are 80 and 83 years old, respectively, win a contest against Pharaoh's magicians (7:10-13), bring about the famous ten plagues (7:14-12:32), and lead the people out of Egypt (12:33-15:21). Then, after three months, Moses receives the Ten Commandments and other regulations at Sinai, before leading the people through the wilderness for forty years.

During this time, Moses speaks with Yahweh "face to face" (Exod 33:11; Num 14:14; Deut 5:4, 34:10) or "mouth to mouth" (Num 12:8) on a regular basis and wears a veil in order to hide the brilliant light radiating from his face (Exod 34:29-35). At the age of 120, though "his eye was undimmed and his vigor unabated," Moses climbs Mount Nebo, which is just east of the Promised Land, and dies in the presence of Yahweh. Moses is then buried in the valley, in an unknown location (Deut. 34:1-12).

While these traditions about Moses are going through their last major revision in the period of the Babylonian exile (mid-6th century BCE), a Babylonian craftsman is fixing the details of a commissioned statue and an *ašipu*-priest is collecting materials and preparing for the next two days. The men meet the next day, perhaps before dawn, when the craftsman places the statue into the care of the *ašipu*, who recites and repeats a few incantations before leaving. From the craftsman's shop, the *ašipu* leads a torchlit procession to the riverbank, singing and reciting poetry along the way. There, the *ašipu* lays out a reed-mat to seat the statue with its gaze toward the west, before setting up reed-huts and a wide variety of offerings for the chief deities of the Babylonian pantheon. All the while, the *ašipu* recites incantations, asking the deities to be present and to cleanse the mouth of the statue, which has yet to fulfill its purpose. The *ašipu* again takes the hand of the statue, this time leading a procession from the riverbank into the orchard, where he seats it on a linen cloth, this time, facing east. He spends the rest of the day and well into the night reciting, offering, invoking the gods of Babylon, and purifying the statue, operating by the light of censers, torches, and the stars.

Day two begins in the orchard with one last major cycle of reed items, cloth, offerings, incantations, and invocations. As he moves through the written tablets that outline the sequence of these two days, the *ašipu* performs two interrelated ceremonies that he learned during his training: the *Mīs Pî*, "Washing of the Mouth," which purifies the statue of human contamination, and the *Pīt Pî*, "Opening of the Mouth," which enables it to serve its designated function as an idol. After these are carried out in

sequence, multiple times, then comes the climax of the ceremony. Into the right ear of the statue, he whispers, "You are counted among your brother gods." In the left ear, "From today, may your destiny be counted as divinity; with your brother gods you are counted; approach the king who knows your voice; approach your temple."[2] The statue is now an idol, a conduit of the divine.

In order to confirm the idol's divinity, the craftsman is brought from the city to the orchard, where he ceremonially denies his involvement in the forming and fixing of the idol. The *ašipu* responds with praises from the incantation tablets he has brought with him. During this particular series of incantations, the *ašipu* proclaims aloud the evidence of the statue's successful transformation from object to deity. The idol is now physically set apart with "an awe-inspiring halo" and brilliant radiance, the symbol of his lordliness and divine origin in both heaven and earth, proof to onlookers that he is indeed filled with divine presence.[3]

Then, hand in hand, the *ašipu* and the luminous idol proceed from the orchard, to the center of the city, where the temple is situated. After an offering at the temple gate, the *ašipu* takes the god's hand and causes it to enter the sanctuary, where it sits in the innermost chamber. The chief gods are invoked one last time, with a simple offering, after which the mouth of the idol is washed once again, to ensure that all human

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[2] Christopher Walker and Michael Dick, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian Mīs Pî Ritual*, SAALT 1 (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2001), 65. NR 165-71.

[3] Walker and Dick, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 150. IT 3, 51-55.

contamination is left behind. Finally, the idol is sitting in his designated space, from

which he will mediate between divinity and his subjects for the remainder of his life.

Throughout both ancient Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt, the most commonly

attested ritual is this Opening of the Mouth, the means by which something or someone is

transformed from an earthly being into a deity.[4] In Mesopotamia, this series of rituals was

almost always applied to idols, and transformed them from a statue to a deity. Today, this

series of rituals is referred to as the *Mīs Pî*, "Washing of the Mouth," although it also

includes the climactic *Pīt Pî*, "Opening of the Mouth."[5] Historical references for the *Mīs*

Pî are few, but extant sources do suggest that Mesopotamians all throughout the region

practiced it in a variety of forms from at least the 3rd millennium BCE, through the

Seleucid Period (3rd-2nd centuries BCE), a minimum period of 2,000 years.[6] The *Mīs Pî*

was also performed to renew idols that had fallen into disrepair or been damaged.[7]

In Egypt, the Opening of the Mouth was initially instituted as the centerpiece of

funerary practices and a means to animate the soul (*ka*) of the royal dead, so that the soul

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[4] The Hittites of Anatolia had similar induction ceremonies for idols, but extant sources do not provide enough information for a thorough comparison. Billie Jean Collins, "A Statue for the Deity: Cult Images in Hittite Anatolia," Pages 13-42 in *Cult Image and Divine Representation in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Neal H. Walls (Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2005), 29. Richard H. Beal, "Dividing a God," Pages 197-208 in *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World*, ed. Paul Mirecki and Marvin Meyer (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

[5] The Akkadian *Mīs Pî* translates as "Washing of the Mouth." This action is one component of the ritual procedure which also includes *Pīt Pî* "Opening of the Mouth." As *Mīs Pî* is the term used in the field of Assyriology to refer to the entire series of rituals, I have adopted it here. Occasionally the ritual was performed on objects other than an idol, including apotropaic figurines, a leather bag used for divination, a river, jewels mounted on the king's chariot for protection, and cult symbols. Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 13.

[6] Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 18-29.

[7] Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 227-45.

may live among the gods in the afterlife. Textual evidence suggests that the Opening of the Mouth was practiced as such from at least the middle of the Old Kingdom (24th-century BCE), through the late Greco-Roman period (3rd-century CE), a span of 2,700 years. During the Late Period (7th-4th centuries BCE), the funerary ritual was incorporated into temple liturgies throughout the land, and was performed annually on images engraved on the walls, to enable the gods and goddesses depicted in those images to operate on behalf of the temple and to watch over the rituals performed therein.[8] This latter version of the ritual is most analogous to the Mesopotamian version with respect to its object and purpose, and, perhaps coincidentally, the shift in application from deceased royalty to images of the divine roughly coincides with the dating of the Mesopotamian textual evidence, described below. By the late Greco-Roman period, the Opening of the Mouth expanded into the domestic sphere, where magicians performed the ritual on miniatures of temples and cultic objects designed for household devotional use.[9]

What is common to the Opening of the Mouth ritual, throughout space and time, is that it symbolizes rebirth into a new, divine nature. The evidence that the essence of the object has indeed been transformed is the completion of the Opening of the Mouth ritual, the physical manifestation of holiness through radiating light, and the subsequent

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[8] Eugene Cruz-Uribe, "Opening of the Mouth as Temple Ritual," Pages 69-74 in *Gold of Praise: Studies on Ancient Egypt in Honor of Edward F. Wente*, ed. Emily Teeter and John A. Larson, SAOC 58 (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1999).

[9] Ian S. Moyer and Jacco Dieleman, "Miniaturization and the Opening of the Mouth in a Greek Magical Text (*PGM* XII.270-350)," *JANER* 3 (2003): 47-72.

solidarity the object experiences in relation to the divine, all of which legitimate the object in the eye of its beholder as a form of divine presence.

The Opening of the Mouth is suggestive for interpreting Exod 6:28-7:1, as Moses seeks for himself authorization and status like that conferred by this ritual. After Moses twice states "I am uncircumcised of lips" (Exod 6:12, 30), he receives the status "god to Pharaoh" (7:1). Moses is transformed from a powerless person to a god greater than Pharaoh and the entire Egyptian pantheon, finally having the capabilities and credentials necessary to complete the task of leading the people out of Egypt, unto life with Yahweh. Furthermore, Moses radiates light (Exod 34:29-35) and speaks with Yahweh "face to face" (33:7-11; Deut 34:10) or "mouth to mouth" (Num 12:6-8). These elements of Moses's new way of being speak to the comparability of Moses's status as "god to Pharaoh" to the divine status of those who undergo the Opening of the Mouth.

The version of the Opening of the Mouth that is most relevant to the status change of Moses is the ancient Mesopotamian *Mīs Pî*, as it was applied to idols. Of the numerous iterations of the Opening of the Mouth attested in ancient Near Eastern sources, only the Mesopotamian version of the ritual enables an earthly office, that of mediator. In the ancient Near East, idols were the ones who mediated between divine and human realms, ensuring that the divine word and works manifested *on earth*, before and on behalf of a human audience. In the biblical narrative, Moses, too, acts as an earthly conduit of the divine word and works, who mediates between Yahweh and Israel to their mutual benefit. Since the primary subject of this investigation is the change in Moses's status from

common man to mediator between Yahweh and humankind, whether represented by Pharaoh or the Hebrew people, it then makes sense to illuminate Moses's status change via comparison with that of other ancient Near Eastern mediators — idols.

Thesis and Scope

The thesis of this dissertation is that in the defining moment in which he is transformed from "uncircumcised of lips" to "god to Pharaoh" (Exod 6:28-7:1), Moses is best understood as Yahweh's idol, undergoing a status change akin to the induction ritual for ancient Mesopotamian idols, the *Mīs Pî* ("Washing/Purifying of the Mouth"). To make this point, I argue that Moses and idols be compared with respect to their status as mediator between divine and human realms. For both Moses and idols, the requirements, nature, and results of this status change are complex, as the office of mediator involves transforming the individual to his or her very core. In fact, both the *Mīs Pî* and the circumcision of Moses's lips are so transformative that they are constituted as rebirth, the process by which that which already is enters the world and operates in a new way from that point onward. With their respective status changes, not only are idols and Moses transformed, but so are their relationships to their deities and also to their communities.

The major insights gained in the course of this comparison are made possible through my comparative method, which is tailor-made for this project. The resulting, new reading of Moses's status change offered by this method challenges several traditions pertaining to Moses's development from a fugitive shepherd to the hero of the Hebrew people. For example, my analysis of the *Mīs Pî* as a rebirth calls for a decentering of the

burning bush episode (Exod 3:1-4:17) as the moment of Moses's transformation, and

draws attention to Exod 6:28-7:1 as the locus of Moses's status change. In addition to this

shift from the burning bush to the circumcision of Moses's lips, my decision to read

Moses in light of the *Mīs Pî* also leads me to put forth a new etymological explanation of

the name of Moses, *Mošeh*. Whereas previous religious and scholarly traditions

understand *Mošeh* as "he who was drawn out [of water]" (Hebrew) or "a son, he who is

born" (Egyptian), here I read *Mošeh* as "he who is washed, pure" (Akkadian), an

etymology which reflects the Semitic root *m-š/s-weak*, helping to highlight my argument

that the figure of Moses is best read through the lens of the *Mīs Pî* ritual.

By highlighting how Moses is portrayed as Yahweh's idol, I also complicate the

traditional understanding of Moses as Yahweh's servant, lawgiver, and prophet that has

been perpetuated throughout the history of interpretation, even within the Hebrew Bible

(e.g., Josh 8:31-32; Mal 4:4; Ezra 3:2). The category of idol explains the uncommon

elements of Moses's way of being in the world, including those that are not accounted for

by categories such as prophet, priest, or judge. It is through the status of idol and this

status alone that Moses is able to be "god to Pharaoh" (Exod 7:1), that is, God to the god-

king of Egypt. However, Moses's status is not limited to his encounters with Pharaoh and

the exodus out of Egypt, but remains in effect until his death. The life-long nature of

Moses's status as mediator explains the unique features of his character and role within

the Hebrew Bible, including the horns or rays of light emanating from his face (Exod

34:29-35) and his special position with respect to both the tabernacle and Israelite society, including its other leaders (Num 12:1-9).

In addition to the above contributions to understanding Moses and idols, this comparison also serves a broader purpose as a case study in the role that historical context plays in the portrayal of religious figures and, relatedly, the formation of religious systems. The ways in which Moses both fits and does not fit the model of mediation represented by idols, particularly those from ancient Mesopotamia, speaks to one of the overarching projects of the biblical authors: to inspire their audience to make the theological and practical move from the more ancient model of idol-centered polytheism to aniconism and, eventually, monotheism. This move became even more desirable for the biblical authors against the backdrop of 6th-century Babylon, in which the idol of Marduk and the story of Moses were in direct competition. Thus, on my reading, the biblical portrayal of Moses is not only patterned after Mesopotamian idols in general, but emerges in direct historical conversation with one specific idol, vis-à-vis the god Marduk.

In this way, my project is, at its core, about the tension between biblical religion and popular religion, between a vision of what some believed religion ought to be and what was actually practiced among the people. It is about authors providing audiences with a new paradigm of belief and practice, one that engages common ideas and competing materials, while reworking them to fit within the aniconic religious framework

for which the biblical authors argue.[10] It is well attested in the archaeological record, and

also the Book of Kings and many of the Hebrew prophets, that the ancient Israelites, as a

whole, did not conform to the biblical model of religion; sometimes they even questioned

its legitimacy (e.g., Jer 44:15-18). Therefore, one cannot assume that what the authors of

the Pentateuch or other biblical texts argue is an accurate reflection of what the average

Israelite thought or believed. On the contrary, the biblical authors are trying to convince

the Israelites of what they *ought* to think or believe, and go to great rhetorical and

creative lengths to do so.

  The Moses-idol comparison is expressed in the overall structure of Moses's life,

with strong allusions to the Opening of the Mouth ritual at the moment of his status

change from "uncircumcised of lips" to "god to Pharaoh" (Exod 6:28-7:1), his radiant

face, and, finally, the efficacy and intimacy of his relationship with Yahweh. The biblical

authors' goal in evoking these concepts and images is to elicit a particular response from

their audience, to convince the Israelites or Judeans that aniconism (and, eventually,

aniconic monotheism) is a more fitting choice than the more popular religious model of

the day, idol-centered polytheism.[11]

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[10] For a few examples of the biblical authors' arguments against the use of images, see Exod 20:4-6; Lev 26:1; Deut 4:15-31; 5:8-10; 2 Kgs 17:12-23; 21:11; Psa 97:7; 106:19-20; Isa 40:18-20; 41:6-7; 44:9-22; 48:5; Jer 2:28; 10:3-15; 16:20; Hab 2:18-19.

[11] On the slow development of monotheism in ancient Israel, see Thomas Römer, *The Invention of God* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015). Nili Fox, "Concepts of God in Israel and the Question of Monotheism," Pages 326-45 in *Text, Artifact, and Image: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion*, eds. Gary Beckman and Theodore J. Lewis (Providence: Brown University, 2006). Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Robert Karl Gnuse, *No Other Gods: Emergent Monotheism in Israel*, JSOTSup 241 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

Since aniconism constitutes a break with the standard, idol-centered polytheism that was prevalent throughout the ancient world, the burden of arguing a new paradigm lies with the biblical authors. However, this does not require that they start from scratch; in fact, diverging too strongly from the norm may jeopardize the acceptance and longevity of a new paradigm. The reason idol-centered polytheism is the standard model of religion from at least the mid-third millennium BCE, through the early Common Era, and continues to be practiced in parts of the world today, is that it meets certain needs and expectations that, for many, are essential to the religious experience.

One of these perceived needs is for a mediator to bridge humanity and divinity. Despite the fact idols were the standard format of divine-human mediator throughout the ancient Near East, that does not entail that mediators could not be conceived of any other way. Comparing idols and Moses with respect to status change illuminates those elements of the office of divine-human mediator that idols and Moses both share and fulfill. At the same time, the differences between idols and Moses point to those characteristics of idols that the biblical authors found problematic and thus nuanced or reconfigured to suit an ideological need, a need rooted in a particular historical and cultural context.

Here, that context is ancient Mesopotamia in the 7th-6th centuries BCE, and, within that, the experience of the Judean exiles in 6th-century Babylon.[12] This context is

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[12] Another reason I do not focus on the Egyptian material is that it spans so many texts, centuries, and locations that it is not reasonable to offer a full treatment here, especially while doing comparison. The fact that the Mesopotamian *Mīs Pî* texts are limited to two sources works to my advantage, as this limits my investigation to the 7th-6th centuries BCE and the cities of Nineveh and Babylon. Also, the Egyptian use of the Opening of the Mouth as a temple ritual related to images of the divine is a relatively late development in the life of the ceremony; however, as this shift in use temporally coincides with both the biblical and Mesopotamian texts at hand, Egyptian sources are noted where relevant.

determined by the temporal boundaries of the textual witnesses to the *Mīs Pî*, as well as the dating of those traditions about Moses that are most pertinent to the topic of status change.[13] In the process of arguing an alternative paradigm of divine-human mediation, the biblical authors describe Moses as the most elevated of human beings, in ways deeply symbolic to their ancient audiences and neighbors. From the vantage point of the modern audience, this symbolism stands out all the more-so in comparison with idols, and especially that of Marduk, who was the chief deity of the city of Babylon long before and long after the arrival of the Judean exiles in the late 6th-century BCE.

Overview

The remaining sections of this chapter present the texts and method that make this comparison possible. The core chapters of this dissertation, two through six, are divided into individual treatments of the respective status changes of idols (ch.2) and Moses (ch. 3), and comparisons between idols and Moses with respect to various aspects of status change (chs.4-6). Each of the arguments presented in those chapters come together in support of my overarching thesis that Moses and idols ought to be compared with respect to their status as mediator between divinity and humanity. In the process of arguing this comparison, I provide insight into the nature and function of both idols and Moses, and a case study of the role historical context plays in the formation of religious traditions, whether the shapers of tradition follow the status quo or whether they break it.

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[13] The dating of these texts is discussed in the section "Textual Evidence on the Topic."

In chapter two, I begin with the idol induction process in Mesopotamia in order to set up my analysis of Moses's induction into the office of mediator. I argue that an idol's status change was portrayed by ancient Mesopotamian priests and officials as a rebirth from a seemingly idle figure into the divine realm, using the paronomasia idle/idol to guide my discussion. By then turning my attention to the idol of Marduk, chief deity of the city of Babylon, I demonstrate the relevance of 7th-6th-century BCE Babylon as the historical context most pertinent to my comparison of Moses and idols, and also set-up the historical framework for my analysis of Moses. The pivotal observation around which this analysis of historical context revolves is that the annual, twelve-day *akitu*-fesitval, which was centered around the procession of Marduk's idol to and from the city of Babylon, concluded just two days before the ancient springtime festival of Passover, which celebrates and memorializes the exodus from Egypt, brought about through Moses's status as "god to Pharaoh."[14] This juxtaposition of holidays sets the stage for my comparison of Moses and idols, as it illustrates a potential, historical interface between idol-centered polytheism and aniconic Yahwism.

In chapter three I focus exclusively on Moses, arguing that his status change is portrayed as a rebirth from one "uncircumcised of lips" (Exod 6:12, 30) to "god to Pharaoh" (7:1). This rereading challenges past and current scholarship on Moses, because, with this relatively new information on the status change of idols, as described

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[14] I am aware of the debate about the history and date of Passover, but since I am working in Exodus, I read along with Exod 12:18; 23:14-19; 34:18-26, which places the holiday on the fourteenth day of the month of Nisan. For the general contours of the debate, see J. Gordon McConville, "Deuteronomy's Unification of Passover and Maṣṣôt: A Response to Bernard M. Levinson," *JBL* 119 (2000): 47-58.

in Mesopotamian *Mīs Pî* ritual and incantation texts, new insights into the status change of Moses are now possible. Chapter three closes with the suggestion that a different reading of Moses's transformation ought to be considered in light of the evidence provided by the *Mīs Pî*. This reading is undertaken in chapters four through six.

Chapter four is the crux of my argument. I present the case for rereading Moses's status change, using the insights gained from analyzing the *Mīs Pî* in order to better understand the circumcision of Moses's lips. After demonstrating the symbolism attached to the language of circumcision, *Mīs Pî* (Washing of the Mouth), and *Pit Pi* (Opening of the Mouth), I compare idols and Moses with respect to what status change entails at a core level. The result is an understanding of Moses's essential nature as *Mošeh*, "he who is pure," which I argue by proposing an Akkadian etymology of Moses's name, one that is illuminated through the process of comparison.

Chapters five and six support the claims of previous chapters by elaborating on those areas that are essential to fully understanding the Moses-idol comparison. In chapter five, I argue that the language used for Moses's horned radiance (Exod 34:29-35), the sign that his status change is complete, draws two analogies: one between Moses and idols and the other between Moses and the gods in general. This demonstrates more explicitly the tension between aniconism, on the one hand, and idol-centered polytheism, on the other, a theme which carries into chapter six and there becomes more prominent.

Chapter six argues that the special status of both Moses and idols is performed in their relationships to the deity, sacred space, and the human community he or she serves.

This conclusion emphasizes that the mediator is an absolute necessity in bridging divine and human realms. Without a mediator on par with Moses and idols, the connections between deity, sacred space, and human community are moot; the status of mediator is inextricably linked to the presence of the divine on earth and, by extension, the well-being of the community.

Chapter 7 is the concluding chapter. There, I offer some final thoughts on the significance of the similarities and differences between idols and Moses, then conclude with suggestions for further research and the implications of this project for Biblical Studies and related fields.

Previous Work on Moses, Idols, and the Opening of the Mouth

The comparison between Moses and idols has been made briefly on at least four other occasions, three of which are interpretations of Exod 6:28-7:1. The first and most ancient of these comparisons comes from the Book of Exodus itself:

> When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered themselves together to Aaron and said to him, 'Rise up, make a god (*ʾĕlōhîm*) for us who shall go before us. As for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him' . . . so he took [gold] from their hand and formed it with a graving tool, and he made it into a cast calf. They said 'This is your god (*ʾēlleh ʾĕlōhêkā*), Israel, who brought you out from the land of Egypt.' (Exodus 32:1, 4)[15]

When the people grow skeptical of whether Moses is coming back, their instinct is not to choose another leader from among them, but to replace Moses with the infamous golden calf. Aaron, Moses's brother and prophet, approves of the idea that Moses may be

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[15] Here, I translate the plural *ʾĕlōhîm*, "god, God, gods," in the singular, "god," to match the fact that only one golden calf is forged in the ensuing narrative.

adequately replaced by an idol, to the point of making the golden calf himself. At the end

of this scene, after the calf is destroyed and the people are punished for their indiscretion,

Yahweh reaffirms Moses as he who "brought the people up out of the land of

Egypt" (33:1), rather than the golden calf. Here, Yahweh uses the same language that the

Israelites use to describe both Moses (32:1, 23) and his golden replacement (32:4, 8). By

using the same language, without correcting its usage, Yahweh confirms the

comparability of "Moses, the man" (32:1) and the "god of gold" (32:4, 8, 31), while

simultaneously establishing a strong preference for Moses as the ideal mediator.

The second comparison of Moses and idols comes from Targum Pseudo-Jonathan

(Ps-Jon), an Aramaic blend of translation and aggadic traditions, dating to the mid-first

millennium of the Common Era.[16] Ps-Jon translates Yahweh's response to Moses in Exod

7:1, "I have made you god to Pharaoh," as "I have made you an idol (*dḥylʾ*) to Pharaoh,

just like his god." This noun *dḥyl,* "idol," comes from the Semitic root *dḥl,* "to fear,

revere," thus the idol is known as a "fearful thing" or "object of fear, reverence." Ps-Jon

does not comment on the reasoning or implications of the choice of *dḥylʾ* over *ʾĕlōhîm*,

"god, gods," but, nonetheless, makes a connection between Moses and idols.

The third comparison of Moses and idols appears in William Propp's commentary

on Exod 6:12, and is allotted only two sentences: "Like the polytheist's idol, a prophet's

body temporarily houses the divine presence. Thus, just as Mesopotamians animated their

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[16] On the dating of Ps-Jon, see Robert Hayward, "The Date of Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Some Comments,"
Pages 126-54 in *Targums and the Transmission of Scripture into Judaism and Christianity*, Studies in the
Aramaic Interpretation of Scripture 10 (Boston: Brill, 2010).

icons with a ritual 'opening of the mouth' so must an Israelite prophet possess a pure, unimpeded, 'circumcised' mouth."[17] This brief comparison of the induction processes of Moses and idols, while drawing a comparison that is certainly worthy of exploration, is problematic for reasons addressed in this and later chapters, including Propp's focus on similarity alone.

In addition to the above comparisons of Moses and idols, there is another scholar who brings to bear the Opening of the Mouth ritual on the question of what happens in Exod 6:28-7:1. In *The Bridling of the Tongue and the Opening of the Mouth in Biblical Prophecy,* Gregory Yuri Glazov focuses, not on idols in particular, but on the Opening of the Mouth more broadly.[18] Glazov limits his interpretation to verses in which Moses speaks about his own mouth as impeded (Exod 4:10; 6:12, 30), and to the question of what it is that closes and opens Moses's mouth. As the title of his book suggests, Glazov's overarching project is to better understand prophetic statements about the prophet's own speech; thus, this analysis assumes that Exod 4:10; 6:12, 30 belong to the genre "prophetic call narrative." Glazov performs his analysis using Egyptian sources relating to the Opening of the Mouth, biblical versions, Targumim, and Rabbinic tradition.

My approach and assumptions differ from those of Glazov in various ways. First, I look eastward, toward Mesopotamia, for both the textual evidence and the historical

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[17] William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* AB 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 274.

[18] Gregory Yuri Glazov, *The Bridling of the Tongue and the Opening of the Mouth in Biblical Prophecy*, JSOTSup 311 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001). Meyers adopts Glazov's suggestion. Carol Meyers, *Exodus*, NCBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 61.

context that is most contemporary with the biblical text. Second, for reasons spelled out in chapter three below, I do not hold the position that Exod 4:10; 6:12, 30 belong to the genre of prophetic call narrative. Therefore, my interpretation is not limited to the pericopes in which these passages are located, nor is my interpretation limited by the categories of prophecy, the office of prophet, or prophetic literature. Finally, whereas Glazov's comparison is carried out with the goal of illuminating the function of speech-statements in biblical prophecy, my comparison focuses on the status change of mediators, as represented by both Moses and idols. With this difference in focus comes a difference in the selection of primary texts.

Textual Evidence on the Topic

The comparison of Moses and idols is based on primary texts from the Hebrew Bible and ancient Mesopotamia which either prescribe, illuminate, or strongly allude to *Mīs Pî* and *Pīt Pî* rituals. These texts are described here with an eye for how their physical and literary form informs my treatment of their content, including my method of comparison. Where relevant, other primary texts, such as letters, narratives, prayers, and official decrees are also incorporated into the following chapters, as are elements of material culture, especially images and iconography.

Even though this project is limited to the Hebrew Bible and sources from ancient Mesopotamia, it is important to understand the depth and breadth of the influence of the Opening of the Mouth ritual throughout the ancient Near East. To this end, I have included information about texts relevant to the Egyptian version of the Opening of the

Mouth. These texts are more numerous, more informative, and more wide-spread across

geography and time-period than those found in the region of Mesopotamia. This

abundance of primary source material, although not at the center of the present

comparison, communicates just how imbedded and vital was the Opening of the Mouth to

ancient Near Eastern religions, and supports the idea that this ritual was widely-known

and highly regarded as the sole means of induction into the divine realm. Understanding

the history and nature of the Egyptian texts, as well as the care with which traditions

about the Opening of the Mouth were preserved, adapted, and carried out, helps one

maintain this broader perspective, which is easy to lose in the course of comparison.

Biblical Texts

The central texts to the Moses-idol comparison are Exod 6:28-7:1, Exod

34:29-35, and Num 12:1-9, all three of which were considered by early source critics to

belong to the Priestly-Source (P).[19] However, the more recent and ongoing discussion

pertaining to the nature of the sources of the Pentateuch divides these passages into P

(Exod 6:2-7:7), an earlier Non-P source with P additions (Exod 34:29-35), and Non-P

(Num 12:1-9).[20] While drawing from a variety of sources to make my case for Moses

may be handled differently by source critics, I take this variety as an opportunity to speak

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[19] For a snapshot of how the main schools of thought divided the Pentateuch into sources, prior to the recent resurgence of interest in source critical scholarship, see Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: Summit Books, 1987), 250-55.

[20] Thomas B. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, ECC (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2009), 103-11, 753-55. A different summary of source critical issues in Exod 3:1-7:7 may be found in Jaeyoung Jeon, *The Call of Moses and the Exodus Story: A Redactional-Critical Study in Exodus 3-4 and 5-13*, FAT 2, Reihe 60 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 188-89, 199-206, 238.

about the collective perspective of the biblical authors, without dividing them into ideological camps on the issue of Moses's status. Although the sources of Exodus and Numbers may be divided into Non-P and P (or other scholarly categories), the inclusion of all of the present material suggests a certain level of cohesiveness, at least in the eyes of P, who edited Non-P as they saw fit. The fact that I am able to draw evidence from a variety of sources suggests that the allusions the biblical authors make to idols in their descriptions of Moses as mediator spring from a cultural well that both precedes and is shared by the Pentateuch's sources.

Since my arguments are not source-critical in nature, and supported by diverse sources, even where the focus is on one particular passage, I continue to refer to the "biblical authors" as those responsible for portraying Moses in a particular way. I do note source-critical information and bibliography where relevant. That being said, I agree with the majority of biblical scholarship which places the last major editing phase of the Pentateuch in the 6th-century BCE, which coincides with the Babylonian exile and, possibly, the return from Babylon to Judea. This timeframe provides a specific cultural context for the Moses-idol comparison that sheds light on its form and function in the overarching narrative of the Pentateuch, as well as how the authors of the Pentateuch engage their inherited cultural context.

Mesopotamian Texts

The timeframe of the 6th-century BCE is also dictated by the Mesopotamian sources upon which I draw. Like so many texts from ancient Mesopotamia, no complete

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copy of any text related to the *Mīs Pî* ritual has survived. As of today, there are three main sources for its reconstruction: the Nineveh Recension (NR; 7th-century BCE), the Babylonian Recension (BR; 6th-century BCE), and a series of five incantation tablets (8-5th centuries BCE), the dates of which limit the scope of the following comparison to the 7th-6th centuries. All of these sources have been transcribed and translated in a single volume, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian Mīs Pî Ritual.*[21] The two recensions reflect different versions of *Mīs Pî*, each version including different details and a different order of incantations, yet when NR and BR are compared with respect to the macro-structure of the ritual, the overall order is notably similar.[22]

Both NR and BR fall into the genre "ritual texts" because they describe how to perform a specific series of actions and are written tersely, almost in outline format, as they are part of a larger body of priestly training. For example, the ritual texts tell the initiated officiant to complete certain tasks, such as "offer a sacrifice" or "inspect the altar," but never explain how to do so. This suggests that whoever is reading these texts knows the details of what these prescriptions entail and is intensely familiar with the details of the entire ritual and sacrificial system, including how to prepare for the ritual, what materials to gather, and in what quantities. This speaks to how much knowledge, information, and training was required to carry out the *Mīs Pî* with success.

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[21] Christopher Walker and Michael Dick, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian Mīs Pî Ritual,* SAALT 1 (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2001).

[22] Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia,* 29-30.

In antiquity, these ritual texts were accompanied by a series from another genre, incantation texts. These incantations fill out the *Mīs Pî* ritual by providing recitations to be spoken at predetermined moments, which are noted in the ritual text. However, the NR and the incantations found at the same location and belonging to the same time period do not display a clear and consistent relationship to one another, neither in their nature nor in their order. Therefore, it is not clear if the extant incantation texts relate directly to the NR or BR, or if they relate to another recension (or recensions) altogether.

The Nineveh Recension

The majority of extant texts related to *Mīs Pî* are fragmentary and come from Assurbanipal's library at Nineveh, the capital city of the Neo-Assyrian empire, and date to the 7th-century BCE. Assurbanipal's library contained several copies of the NR of the *Mīs Pî* ritual text, so there are points of overlap between fragments of different copies that have allowed Assyriologists to reconstruct all or part of 204 lines.[23] The exact length of the original text cannot currently be determined and none of the extant fragments contain information regarding their sources or scribal history.[24] Once reassembled, these fragments attest to a particular version of the ritual, hence the designation *NR*. Three additional fragments, found among Neo-Babylonian school texts at Nippur, suggest that this particular version of the *Mīs Pî* was also practiced beyond of the city of Nineveh.[25]

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[23] Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia,* 30.

[24] Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia,* 28, 34-35.

[25] Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia,* 28.

The Babylonian Recension

A single tablet excavated in the city of Babylon and now housed in the British Museum (BM 45749) contains the only known copy of the *Babylonian Recension* (BR) of the *Mīs Pî*. The tablet is broken across its midsection, but since its edges are intact, it is clear that it contains 35 lines on both the obverse and reverse. The Akkadian is characteristic of the Neo-Babylonian or Persian period, which gives it a date somewhere in the 6th-century BCE, roughly one century after the NR.

My close, personal inspection of the tablet revealed that this particular scribe was highly skilled and his materials are of an equally high quality.[26] His writing is evenly spaced and aligned, and the text fits snugly within the available space and lines. The clay is smooth and without blemish, either from the clay source or the kiln, and contains no visible inclusions except trace amounts of an element that creates a subtle glittering effect. The tablet fits in one hand (13.2 x 9cm) and is convex on the reverse, for a comfortable and practical fit.[27] Such quality and care speak to the high status and importance of the tablet's content.

The colophon on this particular tablet provides a great deal of information regarding its history, and also has significant implications for my method and argumentation. This colophon demonstrates that the fine quality of the tablet is a result of

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[26] In February 2012, I visited the reading room at the British Museum, where I had the opportunity to handle and photograph BM 45749 and other *Mīs Pî* tablets. High-resolution, black and white photographs may be found on the disc accompanying Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*.

[27] These details are not mentioned in any other scholarly treatment of this text.

its intended destination, Esagila, the temple of Marduk, chief deity of the city of Babylon,

as well as the Neo-Babylonian empire. The colophon reads:

> The initiate may show it to the initiate. The uninitiated may not see it. Taboo
> (*ikkib*) of the great Enlil, Marduk. According to the wording of the tablet, the copy
> of a red-burnt (*ṣirpi sāmi*) tablet of Nabû-etel-ilāni, the son of Dābibi, the
> incantation-priest (*ašipi*). Iddina-Nabû, the son of Luḫdu-Nabû, the *ašipu*-priest,
> for the life of his soul and for the prolonging of his days, has written (it) and set it
> in Esagila.[28]

The scribe's statements that this tablet was intended for deposit in Marduk's temple,

Esagila, and that it was Marduk who set the taboo upon "the uninitiated" reading it

suggests that this particular copy of the *Mīs Pî* had as its object the idol of Marduk. The

full significance of this suggestion is taken up in later chapters; here, I simply draw

attention to the connection between Marduk and the BR of the *Mīs Pî*.

In addition to illuminating the occasion of the inscription of this tablet, these lines

are packed with information about the priestly and scribal culture surrounding *Mīs Pî* and

the professional code by which its texts are to be handled. First, the colophon sets strict

parameters regarding who may access the tablet. The dual assertion that an initiate may

show an initiate and that the uninitiated may not see it is underscored by referring to the

forbidden act as *ikkib*, "taboo" or "anathema" to Marduk.[29]

Secondly, the colophon suggests that this particular tablet may have been

inscribed to replace one that was damaged. This is in keeping with a practice connected

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[28] Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia,* 82.

[29] *CAD* I, 55a-57b. For more on the meaning of *ikkub*, "taboo," see M. J. Geller, "Taboo in Ancient
Mesopotamia," *JCS* 42 (1990): 105-17.

to the *Mīs Pî* itself, wherein a damaged idol is either disposed of properly and replaced, or physically and ritually restored to its proper use. In the case of the "red-burnt" or "discolored red" tablet mentioned in the colophon, it is possible that this alludes to the practice of replacing damaged ritual objects, though the author does not say explicitly.

Third, the colophon tells the reader the identity, patrilineal descent, and specific occupation of both the scribe and the scribe whom he copied, which also provides the genealogy of the content itself. Although there is no extant record of when these scribes were active, what is clear is that the identity of both the scribe and the scribe he was copying served to validate the content of the tablet. It is also relevant that both the copy and the exemplar were inscribed by initiates — *ašipu*-priests — and not standard scribes.

Ašipu is a designation in professional Akkadian texts for a priest who specializes in magic and incantations, but whose primary role is that of an exorcist.[30] This is the category of priest who carries out *Mīs Pî*. Connecting back to the warning that opens this colophon, references to the *ašipu* suggests two things: that access to knowledge about the specifics of *Mīs Pî* was guarded and reserved for only a certain class of priest, and that only the officiants of *Mīs Pî* were intimately familiar with the ritual tablets that guided their practice. According to this particular colophon, the *ašipu* were the sole producers of *Mīs Pî* texts and the sole practitioners of the ritual in 6th-century Babylon.[31] These

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[30] *CAD* A2, 431a-35a.

[31] This is not consistent throughout the history of the ritual. See Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia,* 15-16.

specifications limit what one may argue about the *Mīs Pî* texts and their reception, which

offers further support for my method, described in the section "Method" below.

Incantation Texts

In various places in both NR and BR, the officiant is directed to recite a particular

incantation, but the incantation itself is not included in the ritual text. These incantations

are on a separate series of tablets, which are keyed into the ritual at the appropriate times

with a system of catch-phrases and, sometimes, colophons indicating the number of each

tablet within the series. Other tablets containing similar incantations, but no catch-phrases

or numbering, are also viable sources for reconstructing these specific texts.[32]

Available evidence suggests that there were five incantation tablets connected to

BR and six to eight connected to NR, yet only five can be reconstructed at the present

time.[33] The fragments used to reproduce the extant texts come from Nineveh, Assur,

Sultantepe (Turkey), Hama (Syria), Babylon, Sippar, Nippur, Nimrud, and Uruk, and are

mostly dated from the 8th-5th centuries BCE. The majority of the fragments originate in

7th-century library of Assurbanipal, where the NR was also uncovered; many are

designated by their colophons as being copied specifically for this library.[34]

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[32] Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia,* 86.

[33] Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia,* 31.

[34] Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia,* 27-29. F. N. H. Al-Rawi and A. R. George, "Tablets from the Sippar Library V. An Incantation from Mīs pî." *Iraq* 57 (1995): 225-28. While such designations clarify the intended destination of these tablets, they also complicate the historical question of how texts were used in priestly practice. For example, it is not clear whether these texts were written from oral tradition for the sake of placing them in the library, while the priests continued to operate from memory alone, or if similar tablets were used by priests as they performed various rituals.

The incantations are written in one of two ways: either in full, or using the catchwords "Incantation for X."[35] Scribes also divided incantations into parts using long draws of the flat edge of a reed, so one recitation is not mistaken as part of another. Taken together, these observations suggest that priesthoods in Mesopotamia worked with the understanding that some knowledge ought to be memorized, and other knowledge is sufficiently accessed through written word. This prioritization of knowledge is crucial for understanding the *Mīs Pî* because it suggests which elements of the ritual were common to priestly practice and which were distinct to the *Mīs Pî*. Furthermore, religious poetry is loaded with theological concepts and imagery in a way that ritual texts are not. These incantation texts provide insight into the symbolic nature and elements of the *Mīs Pî* that is impossible to obtain with any certainty from the ritual texts alone.

Egyptian Texts and Artifacts

In ancient Egypt, the Opening of the Mouth is arguably the most commonly attested ritual for millennia, which recalls just how prevalent this ritual was in ancient Near Eastern religious systems.[36] The majority of witnesses come from funerary texts, such as the Pyramid and Coffin Texts, the Book of the Dead, and the Book of the Opening the Mouth, which contain the most extensive materials pertaining to this ritual. Additional sources include papyri from various periods and locations, and in various

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[35] X being whatever action the incantation accompanies.

[36] Mariam F. Ayad, "The Selection and Layout of the Opening of the Mouth Scenes in the Chapel of Amenirdis I at Medinet Habu," *JARCE* 41 (2004): 113.

scripts and dialects.[37] These are supported by inscriptional evidence from temples dating

from the Old Kingdom (2686-2181 BCE) through the Ptolemaic Era (332-30 BCE),

inscriptions and images in Theban tombs from the New Kingdom (1550-1069 BCE)

onward, plus numerous stelae and other artifacts excavated throughout the country.[38]

Pyramid Texts and Coffin Texts

In the latter half of the Old Kingdom, trained professionals began to inscribe a

series of rituals and spells on the corridors and inner chambers of royal pyramids. These

inscriptions, known as the Pyramid Texts, are the oldest body of Egyptian religious

writing and the oldest representatives of Egyptian literature.[39] The central focus of the

Pyramid Texts, written in the tombs of kings and queens at Saqqara (2353-2107 BCE), is

the Opening of the Mouth ritual and ensuring that its benefits are received by the royalty

who occupies the tomb. For example, the earliest extant version of the Pyramid Texts,

from the pyramid of Unis, opens with a series of recitations followed by a libation, then

incense offering. The mouth of Unis is then ritually cleansed and opened in preparation

for a special feast and successful resurrection into the divine realm.[40]

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[37] Mark Smith, *The Liturgy of the Opening of the Mouth for Breathing* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1993).

[38] R. Bjerre Finnestad, "The Meaning and Purpose of Opening the Mouth in Mortuary Contexts," *Numen* 25 (1978): 118. Alan R. Schulman, "The Iconographic Theme 'Opening the Mouth' on Stelae," *JARCE* 21 (1984): 169-96. This abundance of evidence, drawn from such a long period of history and from so many different sites, complicates any attempt to describe the ritual succinctly and in full.

[39] James P. Allen, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, WAW 23 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 1.

[40] Allen, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts,* 17-61.

By the end of the Old Kingdom, it was fashionable among non-royal Egyptians to

have passages of Pyramid Texts inscribed on papyri, stelae, canopic chests, coffins,

sarcophagi, and funerary monuments, along with newer texts. Scholars refer to the latter

as Coffin Texts, because they are most often written on the inside of wooden coffins used

for burying wealthy Egyptians during the Middle Kingdom.[41] In regards to the Opening

of the Mouth, the Coffin Texts provide both evidence for the continuity of the ritual and

information regarding its reception and evolution. Beginning in the New Kingdom (ca.

1550 BCE), most of the content of the Pyramid Texts and, to a lesser extent, the Coffin

Texts were incorporated into new funerary compositions, such as the Book of the Dead

and the Book of the Opening of the Mouth. The Pyramid Texts continued to be copied as

a self contained collection and used through the end of the pharaonic age (332 BCE).[42]

Book of the Dead

The Book of the Dead is a funerary text that serves as a general guide to the

Otherworld and contains spells and incantations for life after physical death. It first

appears at the dawn of the New Kingdom (ca.1550 BCE), a period of prosperity and

growth. Of the 192 spells contained within the book, 113 have a predecessor in either the

Coffin Texts or Pyramid Texts.[43] The most widely attested version of the Book of the

Dead is the Theban recension, with the longest (78 ft. x 15 in.) and best preserved copy

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[41] R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*, *Vol. 1* (Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips Ltd., 1978), Preface.

[42] Allen, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts,* 1.

[43] Barry Kemp, *How to Read the Egyptian Book of the Dead* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 5.

being the Papyrus of Ani, who was a scribe sometime during the 18th Dynasty (1550-1295 BCE).[44]

This papyrus details the scribe's journey into the Otherworld, including his initiation into the afterlife via the opening of his mouth with an iron implement by the god of light and air, Shu (spell 22-23). The function of the Opening of the Mouth ritual in the Book of the Dead is to enliven the soul of the deceased in a way that brings about the best possible afterlife. For the ancient Egyptians, this meant the ability to attain divine attributes, communicate and feast with the gods, and receive divine protection from harm.

Book of the Opening the Mouth

The only English translation of the Egyptian Book of the Opening of the Mouth is E. A. Wallis Budge's eclectic version, published in 1909.[45] It was edited from three different copies dating to the New Kingdom tombs of Seti I (19th Dynasty), Butehai-Ȧmen (20th Dynasty), and Peṭā-Ȧmen-ȧpt (26th Dynasty). Budge considers all three texts to be faithful descriptions of ceremonies dating as early as Neolithic times, despite the texts' relatively modern provenance.[46] Budge also suggests various stages in the evolution of the ritual, which became increasingly complex from Predynastic Egypt through the early centuries of the Common Era.[47]

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[44] E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Dead* (New Hyde Park, N.Y.: University Books, 1960), 26, 217.

[45] E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Book of the Opening of the Mouth* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. Ltd., 1909).

[46] Budge, *The Book of the Opening of the Mouth*, v, 8.

[47] Budge, *The Book of the Opening of the Mouth*, vii-viii, 1-8.

Budge's version of the Book of the Opening of the Mouth is comprehensive, containing thirty ceremonies as part of the ritual, plus a number of supplementary ceremonies. Accompanying incantations and directions regarding specific organic substances and iron implements are included in these texts. Each of the three copies Budge uses are accompanied by vignettes, which provide visual information regarding what are presumably the most important stages of the ritual.

Artifacts

In addition to texts and vignettes, archaeologists have also discovered what is perhaps the most important tool used in the Opening of the Mouth ritual, the *pesesh-kef*. This is a bi-furcated knife tool, made from a variety of materials, which is often accompanied by small bottles or vases. These artifacts are typically found inside tombs and as a set, along with one or more of the above texts relating to the Opening of the Mouth. The *pesesh-kef* was in use at least as early as the Old Kingdom and remained an element of this ritual for millennia. It was also used to sever the umbilical cords of infants, a dual usage which emphasizes the idea that the ritual's function is the successful rebirth of the soul into the Otherworld.[48]

Method

The method of comparison I apply throughout this analysis is two-fold; on the one hand, I argue for an historical link between the portrayal of Moses and the use of idols in the ancient Near East; on the other hand, I also use a method of comparison which yields

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[48] W. Benson Harer Jr., "Peseshkef: The First Special-Purpose Surgical Instrument," *Obstetrics and Gynecology* 83 (1994): 1053-55. For an example of the *pesesh-kef* and accompanying vessels, see BM5526.

insight, independent of any historical overlap. The interpretive toolkit that makes possible the non-historical comparison of Moses and idols features the concepts of *third term* (J. Z. Smith) and *thick description* (Clifford Geertz), which come together to form a fruitful and ethical method of comparison. As I explain below, both of these tools add value to my study of Moses and idols, even if there were no historical link between them. Before I describe this comparative method in detail, I must first explain what this comparison between Moses and idols assumes about the historical relationship between the biblical authors and the *Mīs Pî* ritual and texts. Then, I am in position to discuss how these assumptions inform my choice of comparative (non-historically based) method.

My main assumption with regard to the historical aspect of this comparison is that the biblical authors and their contemporaries had a working knowledge of idols, which includes the possibility of familiarity with the *Mīs Pî*. The possible permutations of the level and complexity of this working knowledge are most clearly represented on a spectrum. On the minimum end of this spectrum, those who did not use idols still knew about them because of the widespread use of idols in local temples and neighboring homes, regardless of the geographical area in which one was located. I envision this working knowledge as a baseline understanding that idols are an available, popular feature of religion throughout the region, from Egypt, to Anatolia, to Mesopotamia, and beyond. On the other end of the spectrum, the maximum amount of knowledge a person could have about idols is represented by the *ašipu*-priest, the specialist responsible for the ritual life of idols and their induction via the *Mīs Pî* in ancient Mesopotamia.

The comparison between Moses and idols works regardless of where the biblical authors and their contemporaries are located on this spectrum. However, as I argue in chapter two, there are specific historical contexts in which this comparison would have been all the more striking. Here, I argue that the authors of the biblical texts in which Moses is compared to an idol are somewhere in the middle of this spectrum, leaning toward a relatively more complex working knowledge of idols, yet not able to access the deepest permutation of that knowledge.

The biblical authors most likely did not, even *could* not, have had direct access to those texts related to the *Mīs Pî*. This is supported by the strict prohibition contained in the colophon of BR, discussed above, against "the uninitiated" seeing the *Mīs Pî* tablets; even within the Mesopotamian hierarchy of religious officiants, only the highest class of priests could access these texts or perform the ritual. This historical point eliminates the possibility of arguing for textual dependence — the notion that the biblical authors knew the *Mīs Pî* through their own personal reading the actual ritual tablets. The historical connection between the *Mīs Pî* and the portrayal of Moses that I *do* argue for exists independent of this notion of textual dependence.

While the *Mīs Pî* texts were reserved for only the *ašipu* and much of the ritual was performed in private, all of the extant *Mīs Pî* tablets and tablet fragments, excavated throughout the region of Mesopotamia, suggest that the induction of idols did include public elements, such as oral performance and various processions. In the Babylonian version of the ritual, this included the main street running through the capital city,

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Processional Way. While only an *ašipu*-priest could access the actual ritual and incantation tablets, the public elements of the ritual included proclamations of theology and symbolic statements about the form and purpose of the *Mīs Pî* ritual. Anyone who happened to be within earshot had the opportunity to know about such practices, even if only at the level of a commoner. This mode of engagement with idols in general and with the *Mīs Pî* ritual more specifically inspires the biblical author's portrayal of Moses; in effect, I argue that the author models Moses's status using a pre-existing framework applied to idols by the author's ancient Mesopotamian neighbors, whether near or far.

Having described the historical element, I now turn to describing the comparative aspect of this project. As I explain below, comparison is useful as an analytic tool, *aside* from any historical connection between Moses and idols. Since the goal of my comparison is two-fold — to illuminate the situation in which the biblical authors found themselves, and to produce insight into the status changes of both idols and Moses — my method must help me accomplish both of these tasks. It must also take into consideration the critiques of comparison as it is has been, and generally continues to be, carried out in Biblical Studies.[49] With these goals in mind, I have engineered a hybrid method of comparison, a combination of interpretive approaches designed to enhance the best features and avoid the possible pitfalls of each of its elements. This combination allows me to redescribe those figures being compared, independent of historical connection.

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[49] I deal with these critiques in more detail in the following pages. On the history and current status of comparative method in the field of Biblical Studies, including a summary of the major criticisms and contributors, see Christopher B. Hays, *Hidden Riches: A Sourcebook for the Comparative Study of the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 15-38.

The comparative method adapted here represents an interdisciplinary approach to comparison, which imports tried and tested elements primarily from Religious Studies into the conversation between Assyriology and Biblical Studies.[50] Despite all of the nuanced ways one might talk about what makes for a healthy comparison, there is one concept in particular that acts as the linchpin of the entire comparative process. This linchpin is most often referred to as the *third term*, and credited to Jonathan Z. Smith. This so-called third term is the topic of the scholar's choosing under which he or she draws together two texts or items.[51] By analogy, the third term is like the third leg of a tripod. It stabilizes comparison so that the scholar may produce a clear and focused snapshot of that which they set out to analyze and redescribe. Without this third leg, the comparison usually cannot stand, falling before a proper snapshot can be produced.

Although Smith himself struggles to define the third term succinctly, its practical application is fairly straightforward.[52] For example, I compare Moses and idols *with respect to* the process of status change; thus, status change is the third term of my

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[50] The negative effects of comparison done poorly are summarized in Gary Beckman and Theodore J. Lewis, "Introduction," Pages XI-XIX in *Text, Artifact, and Image: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion*, eds. Gary Beckman and Theodore J. Lewis (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2006), xii-xiii.

[51] Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 51, 99. On the role of the scholar in comparison, see Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual," Pages 53-65 in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 53. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 51-53, 115. Kimberly C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, "Introduction," Pages 1-22 in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*, eds. Kimberly C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 17. Clifford Geertz, "Anti Anti-Relativism," Pages 42-67 in *Available Light: Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 59, 65.

[52] One of the most helpful pieces on Smith's concept of *third term* is David Frankfurter, "Comparison and the Study of Religions of Late Antiquity," Pages 83-98 in *Comparer en histoire des religions antiques, Controverses et propositions*, eds. Claude Calame and Bruce Lincoln (Liège: Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2012).

comparison. It is the "with respect to," the question, external variable, or concern that governs the analysis, whether the topic is Moses, idols, or their respective historical contexts. Using the third term of status change guides my comparison by keeping it on a clear and narrow path, which is mapped in advance and marked along the way via sign-posts, keeping the reader attuned to where they are on the journey.[53]

This application of a third term also provides me with a constructive outlet for my own scholarly voice, acknowledging — in addition to and beyond the historical connection already mentioned — my own position in orchestrating a particular conversation between Moses and idols, and making suggestions about their respective contexts. This allows me to focus on particular areas and, in turn, also allows me to offer analytical insight into the much larger frameworks of ancient Mesopotamian and biblical religious traditions, in addition to the various ways in which those frameworks reflect and are reflected by their respective contexts. Conceptualizing comparison in this way allows me to examine systems of status change, moving beyond the details of texts. Minutiae — such as imagery, grammar, and phrases — remain important and necessary tools for analyzing Moses and idols, but these tools are part of a much larger toolkit that includes other implements and bodies of knowledge, especially cultural context.

It is worth mentioning at this time that, just as no text is ever *written* apart from the cultural context of its authors, so no text is ever *read* apart from the cultural context of its *readers*. As a scholar, I have a responsibility to be aware of my own cultural,

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[53] Robert C. Hunt, *Beyond Relativism: Rethinking Comparability in Cultural Anthropology* (Plymouth, UK: AltaMira Press, 2007), 157.

personal, and intellectual reading glasses, and this responsibility requires that I be intentional about how and to what end I compare. While the close and problematic nature of the overlap between Moses and idols makes their comparison intriguing, it also serves as a call for a method of comparison that is intentional, cautious, and acknowledges the voice of the scholar.[54]

Furthermore, the analogy of comparison as a conversation reinforces the importance of ethical relations by reminding the scholar that one is dealing with a *human* subject, albeit through texts. The scholar stays an outsider, yet insight and understanding are attainable because the goal of historical investigation and comparison is not to tell *exactly* how things were, but how they may be conceived, envisioned, or redescribed, and thus understood anew.[55] For example, analyzing and comparing Moses and idols with respect to status change allows me to redescribe the symbolic processes by which one became a mediator between human and divine in ancient Mesopotamia and the Hebrew Bible, and what these processes reveal about their respective societies.

Such a wide-reaching, yet concentrated, conception of the comparative endeavor is rooted in what Clifford Geertz, the 20th-century ethnographer, refers to as *thick description.* Smith draws on the work of Geertz because of Geertz's basic tenet that a thorough, complex, and contextualized description of a single object of study leads to a

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[54] Jonathan Z. Smith, "What a Difference a Difference Makes," Pages 251-302 in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 253. "The radically 'other' is merely 'other'; the proximate 'other' is problematic."

[55] Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 52.

richer understanding of its respective society and the complexities of that society than any large-scale survey.[56] The ultimate goal of thick description is to analyze a narrowly defined phenomenon in a way that enables the researcher to make a suggestion about the culture at large. This narrow focus makes thick description particularly useful for working with ancient cultures, because it enables one to connect objects, including texts, to their larger cultural environment, in the absence of living members of that culture.[57]

This is where *third term* and *thick description* complement one another. Third term determines the focus of thick description, while thick description provides what Geertz calls "embodied stuff on which to feed," that is, an outsider's redescription of an object.[58] This redescription brings to light a new understanding of both the third term, and the object's historical and cultural context. After I complete the work of thick description for both idols and Moses — expressly treating them as separate, unrelated figures — I then begin the work of comparison. In what follows, I redescribe Moses and idols in terms of status change, then develop those redescriptions using comparison. These redescriptions not only illuminate processes of status change, but also yield insight into the experiences, challenges, and concerns native to ancient Mesopotamian and Israelite/Judean societies. In short, one comes away from thick description with a better understanding of the ways

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[56] Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," Pages 3-32 in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 20.

[57] However, one cannot take a single case study as the world in a teacup or simply make observations like a fly on the wall. According to Geertz, these fallacies can be avoided by keeping two things in mind: that the goal is to provide food for thought, rather than a definitive answer, and that the object of study comments on more than just itself. Geertz, "Thick Description," 21-23.

[58] Geertz, "Thick Description," 23.

in which humankind makes meaning out of its experience.[59] These meaning-making

experiences may then be placed in comparative perspective.

Comparing Moses and idols in this way, with the end-goal of understanding the

process of meaning-making for their respective and shared societies, helps me avoid the

major pitfalls of the comparative endeavor. As the conversation about comparative

method in Biblical Studies stands today, there are four main critiques: that comparison 1)

often results in oversimplification, 2) pays attention to similarity but not difference, 3)

limits itself to arguments for textual dependence, and 4) fails to contribute to a better

understanding of the cultural contexts out of which the compared texts emerged.[60] The

hybrid nature of my comparative method is what allows it to address all four of these

concerns. Thick description prevents oversimplification; it also furthers scholarly

conversation about the different ways in which ancient Near Eastern communities made

meaning out of their experiences. The attention to difference that this method calls for

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[59] Geertz, "Thick Description," 10, 30.

[60] For an example of a critique of arguments for textual dependence, see Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). On oversimplification, see David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996). On lack of attention to context, see Shemaryahu Talmon, "The 'Comparative Method' in Biblical Interpretation - Principles and Problems," Pages 381-419 in *Essential Papers on Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn (New York: New York University Press, 1991). On similarity and difference, see William W. Hallo, "Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Their Relevance for Biblical Exegesis," Pages XXIII-XXVIII in *Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World*, Vol. 1 of *The Context of Scripture*, ed. William W. Hallo (Leiden: Brill, 1997). "Compare and Contrast: The Contextual Approach to Biblical Literature," Pages 1-30 in *The Bible in the Light of Cuneiform Literature: Scripture in Context III*, Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies 8, eds. William W. Hallo, Bruce William Jones, and Gerald L. Mattingly (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon Press, 1990). "Biblical History in its Near Eastern Setting," Pages 1-26 in *Scripture in Context: Essays on the Comparative Method*, eds. Carl D. Evans, William W. Hallo, and John B. White (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1980). The caution against oversimplification is another reason why I do not engage the Egyptian materials in this comparison. Keeping the list of primary sources short reduces the risk of oversimplifying the texts, the rituals, and the individuals responsible for their form and content.

addresses one of the criticisms of comparison, while expanding the comparison and pushing it deeper into the *third term*.

By defining my methodological task — to compare Moses and idols with respect to status change, using *thick description* to redescribe them and their relationship to their contexts — narrowly from the outset, I set myself up for an analysis that produces insight into processes of status change, the office of mediator, and the contextual variables that account for the differences between Moses and idols. Furthermore, the insight gained into Moses, idols, and their respective cultural contexts as a result of this comparison itself constitutes an argument for rethinking how comparison is done in Biblical Studies.

The method of comparing while keeping in mind a particular third term — status change — keeps my comparison narrow and directed, opening the possibility to plunge into the issue of status change more deeply than if I were to compare Moses and idols broadly. Paradoxically, the narrow focus provided by third term comparison allows, even encourages, me to speak about greater, related issues. Such issues include, but are not limited to, the influence of cultural context on the biblical authors, the anxiety of arguing for aniconism while living in the epicenter of idol-centered polytheism, and the tension between attraction and repulsion in the human experience of the numinous — or at least that which is believed to represent or embody the numinous.

Conclusion

Having provided a basic understanding of my project, primary texts, and method, I now turn to the subject at hand. In the following two chapters, I offer thick descriptions

first of the status change of idols, then the status change of Moses. These separate, though related, treatments provide the foundational understanding necessary for the comparison that takes place in chapters four through six. The first step is to analyze what makes an idol an idol, using a wide-variety of primary texts that contribute to a better understanding of the essential nature of ancient Mesopotamian idols, as well as their lifecycle.

CHAPTER TWO: FROM IDLE TO IDOL

In order to compare Moses and ancient Mesopotamian idols, I must first establish

a foundational understanding of what made an idol an idol, and the role idols played in

their cultural contexts. The first clear mention of an idol comes from the military record

of Lugal-zagesi (ca. 2340 BCE), who plundered the main temple of the city Sagub,

"robbed the goddess Amageštin of her precious metal and lapis-lazuli and threw her in

the well."[61] Lugal-zagesi shamed Amageštin and her patrons by stealing her image,

stripping its ornamentation, skinning it by pealing off the precious metal overlay, and

drowning the remains in the city's drinking water.[62]

This custom of mocking the gods of conquered people by kidnapping or harming

their images is one of the most commonly attested practices concerning idols in the

historical records of ancient Mesopotamia, and, as Lugal-zagesi demonstrates, was a

point of pride among conquering kings. In fact, a much later king, Tiglath-pileser III,

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[61] Walker and Michael, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 5. Hallo adds "before the neo-Sumerian period, divine cult statues are attested neither in the excavations from Mesopotamia nor in the texts." William W. Hallo, "Cult Statue and Divine Image: A Preliminary Study," Pages 1-18 in *Scripture in Context II: More Essays on the Comparative Method,* ed. William W. Hallo, James C. Moyer, and Leo G. Perdue (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 8. For a detailed discussion of the origins of cult statues, see Agnès Spycket, *Les Statues de Culte dans les Textes Mesopotamiens des Origines a la I$_{re}$ Dynastie de Babylone,* CahRB 9 (Paris: Gabalda, 1968).

[62] Deut 7:25 prohibits such activity "The carved images of their gods you shall burn with fire. You shall not covet the silver or the gold that is on them or take it for yourselves, lest you be ensnared by it, for it is an abomination to the Lord your God" (ESV). Another, later example of a goddess having her garments stolen is published in Jan Gerrit Dercksen, "The Goddess Who Was Robbed of Her Jewellery: Ishtar and her Priest in an Assyrian Colony," *Anatolica* XLI (2015): 37-59.

commissioned a scene depicting the capture of enemy gods to be carved into the wall

panels of his central palace at Nimrud, in commemoration of his military victories and

the resettlement of his prisoners-of-war in 745 BCE.[63]

However, Lugal-zagesi's account of the Amageštin ordeal is more than the earliest

known mention of idols and the earliest attestation of their being kidnapped during

wartime. The way in which Lugal-zagesi speaks of the ordeal also illustrates a paradox:

that an idol was thought of as a passive object that was subject to human manipulation

and, simultaneously, as the incarnation of a powerful cosmic deity.[64] An idol could be

picked up, carted away, and desecrated by whomever made their way into its cella, yet

such an act was carried out in wartime because the withdrawal of the idol signaled the

withdrawal of the deity's presence, power, and protection.[65] Rulers and militaries

acknowledged this paradox and enacted it every time they carried off another people's

god(s) or whenever they took precautions against the theft of their own.

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[63] *Removal of Enemy Gods* (WA 118931 + 118934), 728 BCE, British Museum, London, Accessed January 14, 2015, http://www.arcalog.com/image-library/museums/assyria/tiglath-pileser-iii. For a literary description, see also Esarhaddon's account of transporting the gods of Babylon. A translation is available in Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia,* 26-27.

[64] The quote from the record of Lugal-zagesi also demonstrates that, at least on a linguistic level, the statue of a deity is equivalent to the deity itself. This is further supported by the use of the determinative DINGER, "god, deity," placed before words referring to the image of the divine. Benjamin Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*, 21. In the *Mīs Pî* ritual, the statue is always referred to as "the god." See also Michael B. Dick, "The Relationship between the Cult Image and the Deity in Mesopotamia," Pages 111-16 in *Intellectual Life in the Ancient Near East: Papers Presented at the 43rd Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale Prague, July 1-5, 1996,* ed. Jiří Prosecký (Prague: Oriental Institute, 1998).

[65] Hallo, "Cult Statue and Divine Image," 8. For a detailed analysis of this practice and its effects, see Morton Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah and Israel in the Eighth and Seventh Centuries B.C.E.,* SBLMS 19 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974), 9-41.

In 671-670 BCE, according to official reports, an oracle tasked King Esarhaddon of Assyria with repairing and returning the gods of Babylon, who his father Sennacherib captured in 689 BCE. In Esarhaddon's report, he himself lamented the paradox of a handmade idol. In the same breath, he also expressed how he dealt with the problem. With hands lifted, he prayed to Aššur and Marduk, chief gods of the cities of Assyria and Babylon, respectively, saying:

> Whose right is it, O great gods, to create gods and goddesses in a place where man dare not trespass? This task of refurbishing (the statues), which you have constantly been allotting to me (by oracle) is difficult! Is it the right of deaf and blind human beings who are ignorant of themselves and remain in ignorance throughout their lives? The making of (images of) the gods and goddesses is your right, it is in your hands; so I beseech you, create (the gods), and in your exalted holy of holies may what you yourselves have in your heart be brought about in accordance with your unalterable word.[66]

This prayer closes with a request to endow the craftsmen with as high an understanding and skill as Ea, the Creator. The text then shifts to first-person narrative which details Esarhaddon's involvement in the remainder of this task, including his appointment of a long list of craftsmen, determined by divination. Whether this prayer reflects true piety or simply the expected religious mores of the day, its author operates with an understanding that there is a correct way to speak about idols, one that illustrates both the paradox of divinities made by humans and the solution to the problems that paradox poses.

The solution to the paradox of a divine being crafted by human hands is not one Esarhaddon invented, but one that had been in place since at least the third millennium,

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[66] Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 25.

when both idols and the *Mīs Pî* emerged. The solution is to involve the gods in the process of transforming seemingly idle materials into an idol, to believe that the gods inspire that process, and for the gods to honor human efforts by residing in the final product. Over the centuries, priests created and adapted the *Mīs Pî* and other practices pertaining to idols as a system through which to address the disharmony created by the paradox of a divine image being fabricated by human hands and from earthly materials. They took what was available to them, both physically and culturally, and used it in an attempt to express the inexpressible nature of the divine, a dilemma humankind still wrestles with today.[67] From at least as early as Lugal-zagesi, through Esarhaddon's day, and continuing into the modern era, this paradox and the resulting struggle have caused some to criticize, even mock, the use of idols.[68] This chapter explains how ancient Mesopotamians understood the inner- and outer-workings of idols, and the rhetorical and ritual systems that allowed them to conceive of idle materials as divine beings.

To this end, I use the paronomasia "idle" and "idol" to emphasize that what distinguishes between an inanimate statue, on one hand, and an earthy manifestation of a deity, on the other, is perspective and context. By moving just one letter and substituting the vowel, the word "idle" becomes "idol," a difference that is subtle to the ear, yet clear to the eye, and results in an entirely different meaning. The difference in meaning is most

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[67] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), 139.

[68] This critique was made famous by the impassioned remarks of biblical prophets for whom the paradox of idols triggered strong feelings of abhorrence (e.g., Deutero-Isaiah, Jeremiah). See also Moses Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* (12th-century). Heschel, *Man's Quest for God*, 117-44.

observable when the words are read in context. In fact, since they are different parts of speech altogether, "idle" and "idol" cannot be mistaken for one another.

Similarly, the journey from idle materials to an idol is one of perspective and context. To an outsider, there is little that distinguishes idle statues and idols, at first glance. However, once one begins to understand how idols worked in their ancient Mesopotamian context, the difference between an idle statue and an idol, which served as the earthly manifestation of the deity, becomes clear. An idol cannot be mistaken as an idle object because it is in an entirely different category. To understand the inner- and outer-workings of idols, I must explain how ancient Mesopotamians themselves spoke of idols, and the rhetoric and ritual processes by which the "idle" was transformed into an idol — a divine being manifest in earthly materials.

What one witnesses when comparing Mesopotamian sources related to idols and biblical materials on Moses are the different ways in which priests throughout Mesopotamia, on one hand, and biblical authors, on the other, dealt with the cognitive dissonance created by the religious phenomena of idol-making. The proper biblical response to the prophet Jeremiah's question "Can man make for himself gods?" is to exclaim "Such are not gods!" (Jer 16:20). For those who do make use of idols, the answer is not "Yes, humans can make the divine!" but more akin to "Of course not, but we *can* partner with the gods and invite them to reside among us in response to our best efforts."

This chapter offers a thick description of what those best efforts looked like for ancient Mesopotamians. In the course of this description, I argue that the *Mīs Pî* was

considered to be so transformative that the ancient Mesopotamians constituted the successful performance of the ritual as a rebirth. Since there is no extant treatise or account of what any particular Mesopotamian thought regarding idols, I may arrive at an understanding of idols and their role as mediators in ancient Mesopotamia only through careful analysis. The issue at the forefront of this particular analysis is the process of status change — how the ancient Mesopotamians conceived of and enacted the transformation of seemingly idle materials into an idol — and the desired end that was achieved through that process.

In order to address this two-fold issue, I begin with what the Mesopotamians imagined happened *before* the beginning, in the primordial formlessness out of which life emerged. This analysis of creation themes within the *Mīs Pî* ritual is where the analogy of birth becomes most prominent. After analyzing the symbolic process by which the idle became an idol, I then provide a case study as to how this concept of idol was enacted and performed in the life of the city of Babylon, using the idol of Marduk for reasons discussed throughout this chapter. While this investigation is certainly worthwhile on its own accord, the resulting redescription of idols, Babylon, and Marduk also provides the context, depth, and foundational understanding of idols necessary for my discussion of Moses's status change in chapter three, and my comparison of idols and Moses in chapters four through six.

The Origins of Idols

In ancient Mesopotamia, every facet of the fabrication, initiation, and life of idols was handled with great care. In piecing together what little information one may glean about idols from written sources of a variety of genres, including royal accounts, letters, and *Mīs Pî* ritual and incantation texts, the picture that emerges is one in which those responsible for making and inducting idols went to great lengths to elicit the original act of creation, when the primeval god and goddess, Apsû and Tiāmat, "mingled their waters" and produced the first generation of gods.[69] In modern, literary terms, rituals surrounding the production of idols employ imagery associated with creation and birth in order to enact the metaphor of the divine statue being "born in heaven," despite being "made on earth."[70] Those involved in the production of idols ritually recreated the scene themselves. Before the scene of creation could be recreated, the idol first had to be made.

Although the production of idols required collaboration between oracles, scholars, priests, and craftsmen of many varieties, the materials and specifications of an idol's fabrication were ultimately decided by the king. The difficulty of his task was not simply to choose the design correctly, but to be sensitive to the input of the divine in the process. In his account of refashioning the statues of gods in response to the prompting of an

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[69] "Epic of Creation" (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1996], 1:353).

[70] As Dick explains,"…*Born in Heaven, Made on Earth* paraphrases the Akkadian bilingual incantation found in STT 200:11-19 and reflects the critical theological synergy between heaven and earth reflected in making the cult image." Michael B. Dick, "Introduction," Pages VII-XII in *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Making of the Cult Image in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Michael B. Dick (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), xi.

oracle, partially quoted above, Esarhaddon attributes all of his decision making to the

unambiguous results of divination. He emphasizes that "all the extispicies were in perfect

agreement" and gave "a reliable, positive answer" (line 23) concerning where the work

was to be done, by whom, and to where the gods would be transported upon

completion.[71] These craftsmen were chosen by the gods through Esarhaddon based on the

understanding and skill they were allotted by the divine, with the assurance that they

would carry out the divine will (17-20).

Divination also relayed that the king was to command the workers, saying, "Do it

quickly, pay attention, and be careful; do not let up, do not direct your attention

elsewhere" (26). Esarhaddon even went so far as to dress the gods according to their will

and even "adorned their necks and filled their breasts, exactly as the great lord Marduk

wanted" (37). Esarhaddon recorded his involvement in the project in a way that justifies

his decisions to his companions, reflecting the expectation that he rely on the will of the

gods in all matters pertaining to idols.

However, letters written by priests and scholars to Esarhaddon and his son,

Ashurbanipal, reveal that every detail of the construction of idols (and their abodes) was

approved and every resource was supplied by the king, according to his own will. This

included everything from the thickness and refinement level of the gold used as overlay,

to material for inlays that formed the facial features, to which gems were used in their

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[71] "Esarhaddon's Renewal of the Gods," 671-0 BCE, quoted in Walker and Dick, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 25-6.

crowns, and what was inscribed on their pedestals.[72] In the event of a disagreement among craftsmen, or if a statue was being made in another city, a priest or scholar might even send a drawing of the proposed options, asking for the king's decision.[73]

It is also clear from these letters that the quality, quantity, and type of materials were highly regulated, at least according to official records. Toward the end of his reign, Esarhaddon commissioned the remodeling of the temple to Marduk, called Esagila, in the city of Babylon. As part of this project, he ordered the construction of numerous cult statues all at once, overwhelming the craftsmen, who, as a result, were behind schedule and asked the king to send more workers to speed the process.[74]

There were also times when work was temporarily halted due to limited access to the temple treasury, where the most precious materials were stored, or problems with expected shipments of lapis lazuli, gold, and other materials selected from around the known world, in addition to local resources.[75] These shipments required certain traveling officials to weigh and inspect the materials upon arrival, before they could be handed off to the craftsmen. If these officials were in a different city, the priest had no choice but to

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[72] Steven W. Cole and Peter Machinist, eds., *Letters from Priests to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal,* SAA XIII (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1998), No. 28-29, 52, 174, 179. Simo Parpola, ed., *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars,* SAA X (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1993), No. 358.

[73] Cole and Machinist, *Letters from Priests*, No. 34.

[74] Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, No. 252, 368. Cole and Machinist, *Letters from Priests*, No. 168.

[75] Cole and Machinist, *Letters from Priests*, No. 127, 174. Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, No. 349. Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, "What Goes In Is What Comes Out - Materials for Creating Cult Statues," Pages 3-23 in *Text, Artifact, and Image: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion*, eds. Gary Beckman and Theodore J. Lewis (Providence: Brown University, 2006), 8-11. Irving Finkel, *The Ark Before Noah: Decoding the Story of the Flood* (New York: Nan A. Talese, 2014), 17.

wait or request to use another material instead.[76] The king was consulted through the

entire process, and little was completed without his approval. Priests were held

accountable for detailed records of all transactions and for ensuring that everyone, from

suppliers of raw materials, to craftsmen, fulfilled their responsibilities.[77]

Thanks to progress reports Esarhaddon's scholars and priests wrote to the king,

there are a handful of practical, first-hand examples of what the construction of idols

entailed. The craftsmen overlaid the face and hands of the wooden idol first, and if metal

for the remainder of the body was not available, it was permissible to hide unfinished

portions with garments and a tiara until a later date.[78] In some cases, facial features,

including the hair and chin, were distinguished using stone inlays, which are also attested

in the archaeological record of the temple at Kalhu (Calah), whose priests wrote to

Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal regularly.[79] Finally, various types of ornamentation,

including but not limited to crowns with precious stones, rosettes of gold, and jewelry,

especially necklaces or breastplates, were fashioned last.[80] Once all elements were

complete, priests invited the king to the ceremonial dressing of the statue which took

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[76] Cole and Machinist, *Letters from Priests*, No. 127.

[77] Cole and Machinist, *Letters from Priests*, No. 39, 179.

[78] Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, No. 349.

[79] Cole and Machinist, *Letters from Priests*, No. 52. For a photograph of inlays, see 46.

[80] Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, No. 41, 349. Cole and Machinist, *Letters from Priests*, No. 174. See also Esarhaddon's report (Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Mesopotamia*, 26-27) and The Descent of Ishtar into the Netherworld.

place in the deity's temple, where it sat upon an inscribed pedestal plated with either gold or silver.[81]

In Mesopotamian myth and literature, there is a rhetoric of divine essence associated with specific materials used for idol-making, especially the wood used for their core. This begins to address the question of how an idol "made on earth" may also be "born in heaven." For example, the wood preferred for the core of Marduk's statues came from the *mēsu*-tree. In the Erra epic (11th-8th centuries BCE), Marduk asks:

> Where is the *mēsu*-tree, flesh of the gods, suited to the king of the Universe,
> The holy/pure, tree, the princely young man (*eṭlu ṣīru*), suitable for lordship,
> Which in the broad sea its roots extend in the water to below the Netherworld to a
>   distance of a hundred double-hours' walk,
> and whose branches above touch the heaven of [Anu] (the highest heaven)?[82]

As Victor Hurowitz has noted, this is no ordinary tree, but one of cosmic proportions. Its roots reach beyond the Netherworld, its branches, to the highest heaven; it is the very flesh of the gods, holy, and suited for the king of all.[83] This ability to encompass the universe is a common trait of the divine in Mesopotamian literature.[84]

Furthermore, the Akkadian *mēsu* is a bilingual word that can also be taken as the Sumerian MES, a pun with the alternate meaning *eṭlu ṣīru,* "princely young man."[85]

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[81] Cole and Machinist, *Letters from Priests*, No. 39, 176, 179.

[82] Hurowitz, "What Goes In Is What Comes Out," 12.

[83] Similarly, the *bīnu*-tree, a more popular choice of wood, is referred to as *eṣemti ilī*, "bone of the gods" The botanic identification of both *mēsu* and *bīnu* trees is unknown. Hurowitz, "What Goes In Is What Comes Out," 6, 11-13. The tamarisk was also a common choice of wood for an idol. See IT 1/2 B: 1-14.

[84] Hurowitz, "What Goes In Is What Comes Out," 12-13.

[85] Hurowitz, "What Goes In Is What Comes Out," 13. "Erra and Ishum" translated by Stephanie Dalley (*Context of Scripture*, 1:407 n.22).

Though both *eṭlu*, "young man," and *ṣīru,* "princely," are common epithets of gods and kings, the only place they are known to occur together, other than the quote above, is as an epithet of Marduk.[86] The poetic parallel between the epithet of Marduk and the essence of the *mēsu*-tree suggests that, in this particular case, the material used for the core of the cult statue bore the essence of the god before it was even fashioned.

This is also echoed in the *Mīs Pî* incantation "As you go/come out," performed by the priest as he escorts the god to Ea for approval (NR 66; STT 199:13-40). Sixteen times, he iterates variations of the line "as you come out from the pure forest, wood of the pure forest" (IT 1/2; STT 199:14), each time using a new topographical feature in place of the word "forest." By the time the priest reaches the end of these repetitive lines, he has verbalized the purity of creation thirty-two times in the spirit of expressing whence this wooden form has "come out in greatness" to meet the other gods (STT 199:13). This portion of the incantation ends by also describing the wood as a cosmic tree, "bright wood, (like) the spring of a stream, which is born in the pure Heavens, spreads out on the clean earth, your branches grow up to Heaven, Enki [Ea] makes your root drink up pure water from the Underworld" (IT 1/2; STT 199:30-31).[87] Thus, the physical core of the idol is envisioned as an *axis mundi*, connecting heaven, earth, and the subterranean. In Mesopotamian cultures, the subterranean is represented by the Apsû, the freshwater whose mythical nature is discussed below.

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[86] Hurowitz, "What Goes In Is What Comes Out," 13. For *eṭlu* and *ṣīru* separately, see *CAD* E, 407a-11a and *CAD* Ṣ, 210a-13b.

[87] Enki is the Sumerian god who later becomes known as Ea.

On a practical level, it is unclear whether certain trees were preferred because of their mythical qualities, or whether they were attributed mythical qualities because of their use in idols. Whatever the case, to bring pure wood into the temple was to introduce an *axis mundi* into the sanctuary.[88] Materials employed in crafting cult statues that were not already attributed divine qualities were rendered sacred through ritual purification.[89] Whether by nature or through ritual, the perspective that the materials comprising the statue of a deity were endowed with divine essence *before the idol was fashioned* is the key to bridging the gap between idle materials and an idol.

Since a craftsman (*mummu*) dealt with materials that were already considered divine, his job was not to create divinity, but to alter divinity's physical form. This nuance eliminated the paradox of a human fashioning a god; it is no longer an issue. Furthermore, *mummu* "craftsman, creator" is also an epithet of the creator god, Ea, and his son, Marduk.[90] The use of *mummu* to describe the human who fashions an idol aligns the workman with the creator deity himself, and his actions with Ea's acts of creation.

To take the argument that an idol is the work of the gods even further, the *Mīs Pî* also includes a series of rituals by which the craftsmen ceremoniously deny their involvement in bringing the god into the world. On the first day of the ceremony, the

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[88] Hurowitz, "What Goes In Is What Comes Out," 13. Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 57 n.67. Since, as Lambert suggests, the Mesopotamian pantheon evolved from the deification of parts and aspects of nature, identifying a tree with a deity is not illogical. Wilfred George Lambert, "Ancient Mesopotamian Gods: Superstition, Philosophy, Theology," *RHR* 207 (1990): 129.

[89] Hurowitz, "What Goes In Is What Comes Out," 14-17.

[90] *mummu* also applied to the goddesses Tiāmat, and Ishtar, albeit to a lesser extent. For further applications of *mummu*, see *CAD* M2, 197a-98b.

priest performs the Mouth-Washing (*Mīs Pî*) and the Mouth-Opening (*Pīt Pî*) in the "house of the craftsmen" (*bīt mummu*; NR 55-64), and leads a procession of "as many of the craftsmen as [approached] that god and their equipment together with that god" to the riverbank (NR 68-69), where various tools are implanted in the thigh of a ram and thrown into the river (NR 78-80 [damaged], 90-91; BR 8-9).

On the second day of the *Mīs Pî*, the *ašipu*-priest brings the involvement of the craftsmen to a close by positioning them before the gods. Here, the NR is damaged beyond reconstruction for a space of three lines (NR 176-78), but the BR supplies the missing information — or at least the Babylonian version of it. After the craftsmen are in position and their tools laid before the gods, the ritual tablet instructs the *ašipu*-priest, "bind their hands with a scarf; and cut (them off) with a knife of tamarisk wood... You make them say: 'I did not make him (the statue), Ninagal (who is) Ea (god) of the smith made him'" (BR 51-52). The NR picks back up with a much longer version of this statement in which each craftsman swears before the gods three times that it was not he who made the statue, but various manifestations of Ea, the divine Craftsman (NR 179-86). This brings me full circle, to the prayer of Esarhaddon, in which he expresses the idea that the craftsmen are able to complete their work only if imbued with an understanding and skill level as high as Ea's.

Although their involvement in the construction of the idol never disappears, the portions of the *Mīs Pî* that center around the craftsmen form an important transition in the life of the idol. As will be discussed in chapter four, the *Mīs Pî* ritual purifies the idol

which enables its induction into temple life. My concern here is simply that in order for the *Mīs Pî* to enable the god to become pure and perfect, the image must be released of the human aspect of its origin, despite the fact that it is to human involvement that it owes its embodiment.[91] The denial of the craftsmen regarding any aspect of the god's creation is integral to the efficacy of the ritual, because any ambiguity about the idol's divine nature and heavenly origin must be erased. The idol must be spoken of and perceived as eternally divine, a point underscored by the fact that the *Mīs Pî* never refers to an idol as anything less than a god. The idol is not symbolic but real; what is symbolic are the rituals surrounding it, especially those related to lifecycle changes.[92]

The Lifecycle of Idols

If I were to edit just a single word of Qohelet's wisdom, it would illustrate the mystery of how an idol comes to be: "As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of [*Ea*] who makes everything" (Eccl 11:5, ESV). The same is true of an idol; from its very inception, it is a supernatural fusion of divine spirit and earthly matter, even before its materials are brought together and its limbs are fashioned in the "womb," the house of the craftsmen. At the end of the pregnancy, the idol is born into the world to live its destined life. The passage from womb to world is fraught with danger, so the process must be aided by one

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[91] Angelika Berlejung, "Washing the Mouth: The Consecration of Divine Images in Mesopotamia," Pages 45-72 in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, CBET 21, ed. Karel van der Toorn (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1997), 46.

[92] Zainab Bahrani, "Assault and Abduction: the Fate of the Royal Image in the Ancient Near East," *AH* 18.3 (1995): 381.

well-versed in such matters. Although the king was involved intimately with every aspect of the idol's manufacture, he is not involved with its ritual birth into temple service. It is the *ašipu*-priest, a specialist, who orchestrates and performs the ritual procedure.

Although the ritual texts of the *Mīs Pî* do not explicitly call it a birthing process, the notion of birth is inherent to the ritual itself. This is evidenced by the frequent passive use of the Akkadian *(w)alādu* (Heb. *yld*), "to give birth," "to beget," in the incantations that accompany the *Mīs Pî,* which describe the emergence of the god.[93] This is in addition to other Akkadian and Sumerian literary sources in which gods are said to be born of other gods.[94] Furthermore, both the *Mīs Pî* ritual and incantation texts use the familial terms "father," "brother," and "mother" in reference to the god's relationship to other deities.[95] However, it is of utmost concern for he who performs *Mīs Pî* that it be understood, not as a simple analogy to birth, but as a true, *divine* birth. The practitioner is instructed to use language and visuals that elicit the divine memory of the primordial past and effectively connect that past to the present moment. The dominant motif that works to achieve this end is the Apsû, the primordial subterranean waters. This motif is presented both verbally through references and incantations, and also visually and symbolically through the choice of location and use of reeds throughout the ritual.

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[93] Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, "The Mesopotamian God Image, from Womb to Tomb," *JAOS* 123 (2003): 151-53. NR 189-90. BR 3.

[94] Hurowitz, "The Mesopotamian God Image, from Womb to Tomb," 151-53.

[95] E.g., NR 61, 63, 89, 93, 165, 168. BR 4. Berlejung, "Washing the Mouth," 64.

Invoking the Apsû

The opening lines of Enuma Eliš, the mythological epic of creation culminating in

the enthronement of the god Marduk, who will continue to appear in the course of this

investigation, provide a basic understanding of what the Apsû is, how it functions within

Mīs Pî, and its connection to divine birth:

> When on high no name was given to heaven,
> Nor below was the netherworld called by name,
> Primeval Apsû was their progenitor,
> And matrix-Tiamat was she who bore them all,
> They were mingling their waters together,
> No cane brake was intertwined nor thicket matted close.
> When no gods at all had been brought forth,
> Nor called by names, none destinies ordained,
> Then were the gods formed within the(se two).[96]

Throughout Mesopotamian mythology, Apsû and Tiāmat, the first father and mother, are

representative of fresh-water and salt-water, respectively. As the Enuma Eliš progresses,

the author soon reveals that primeval Apsû is not only the cosmic father from which all

divinity descends, but he is also violently irritable. He plots the death of his noisy

children, but Ea vanquishes Apsû in his freshwater abode before he can succeed.

Afterward, Ea rests in Apsû's chamber and likes the "profound quiet" so much

that he decides to move in. There Ea and his wife, Damkina, dwell in splendor. Then,

> In the cella of destinies, the abode of designs //
> In the midst of holy Apsû was Marduk formed!
> Ea his father begot him,
> Damkina his mother was confined with him.

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[96] "Epic of Creation" (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1996], 1:353).

> He suckled at the breasts of goddesses,
> The attendant who raised him endowed him well with glories.[97]

This brief passage highlights both the essence of the Apsû and the communal aspect of divine living, including the collective rearing of children. The Apsû is openly conceived of as the original cella, the term also used for the inner-chamber of a temple where the deity resides and whose access is limited to very few people, or only one person. If that temple was of stone and mudbrick construction, typical of ancient Mesopotamian and Levantine architecture, the resulting experience was of a dark, cool place, tinged with the scent of moisture and organic smells. There was no light except for that which the officiant brought in with him, throwing shadows around the room and onto the deity as he moved. The cella was like no other place, except the recesses of the earth. This experience emphasized the divine otherness and mystery of the one who resides here and the other-worldliness of the true Apsû, of which this space is a replica. The original Apsû is the design house of Ea, the Creator, the origin of all creative energy, and the place where all destinies are determined.

It is to this place, the true Apsû and the abode of Ea, that the god, as idol, must go in order to be integrated into the divine family and to have its destiny determined. Therefore, most of the *Mīs Pî* occurs at the riverbank, the liminal space between the Apsû and the human realm, which constitutes the perfect place to make the transition from "made on earth" to "born in heaven." From here, the priest must invoke both the Apsû

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[97] "Epic of Creation" (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1996], 1:356). See also IT 4 A 21-35, B 35-38.

and its resident, the Creator, Ea. This is done through incantations, the majority of which are not presently available, but it is certain that they had titles such as "Apsû-temple, to determine fates" (NR 19; cf. BR 14), "Quay of the Apsû, pure quay" (NR 20; BR 14), "King, lord of the deep," and "Enki [Ea], king of the Apsû" (BR 10), appealing to the pure, powerful, and royal nature of the Apsû and he who resides there. Once Ea's attention is garnered, the priest invites him to stay and participate in the ritual by providing a spread of offerings, inviting gods from Ea's inner-circle, and providing everyone with his or her own private reed-hut from which to enjoy themselves. The priest goes away until sometime after dark, and it is then that Ea learns why the priest is hosting a banquet with "best beer" and trying to get him "full of joy" (NR 51, 63).

When the priest returns by torchlight, he is carrying a live ram and holding hands with another being (NR 65-67). This is Ea's long lost son, coming to meet his father for the first time (NR 61-94). The craftsmen come along to swear in the presence of the gods that they have nothing to do with this, but that the child is truly Ea's. The priest begs him to instate the god to its rightful place among the divine family, saying "He who comes, his mouth is washed; [...... with] his brothers, let him be counted; . . . that god, oh Ea, his mouth is washed; [...... with] his brothers, count him" (NR 88-89, 92-93). After the priest vouches for the god, he leaves it overnight, presumably so it may socialize and Ea can decide if it actually belongs among them. Once Ea determines the god's destiny to be a favorable one, it is integrated into the divine family. Then, on the second day, it takes its seat in the cella of the temple bearing its name, and lives the life of a fellow god.

Reeds, *Axis Mundi*, and the Cosmic Threshold

At its core, the *Mīs Pî* is a purification rite. Its officiant is concerned with not only

the purity of the materials and workshop from of which the idol is crafted, but also with

maintaining that purity as he or she moves the idol from place to place, acts upon it, and

eventually transports it into its cella. The *Mīs Pî* requires dozens of different ingredients

for the constant purification of the idol, such as syrup, ghee, and libations. However, in

both the ritual and incantation texts, one ingredient stands above the rest as most

praiseworthy and efficacious. Reeds and structures made of reed have great symbolic

import for the *Mīs Pî* and tie together creation, Apsû, purity, and birth.

On a practical level, reeds were the primary building material along the rivers of

Mesopotamia due to their availability, strength, and water-tight properties. In fact, from

antiquity until the mid-20th century, reeds were commonly used for residential and ship

building along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.[98] They grow in the damp ground or

standing waters along riverbanks and can reach anywhere from 2-6 meters in height,

visually connecting water, land, and sky on a vertical axis. On a horizontal axis, they act

as a distinctive boundary between rivers and habitable land. It is, perhaps, because of

these properties that the *Mīs Pî* symbolically portrays reeds as playing a dual role: as an

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[98] Finkel, *Ark Before Noah*, 133-55. Includes many historic images and photographs. See also Dominique Collon, *First Impressions: Cylinder Seals in the Ancient Near East* (London: British Museum Press, 2005), 174, fig. 807.

axis mundi, uniting heaven, earth, and Apsû, on one hand, and, on the other hand, as a "cosmic threshold" dividing sacred and common.[99]

On the vertical plane, reeds unite heaven, earth, and Apsû. The incantation "Reed Which Comes from the Pure Apsû" poetically describes reeds as "carefully tended in the pure house of the Apsû" and also "reed of the gods . . . whose destiny Enki [Ea] fixed" (NR 15; IT 1/2 A: 21-25). In addition to their direct relation to the Apsû, reeds are the means by which other gods access the generative waters of the Creator, acting as a sort of drinking straw connecting the Apsû and the heavens.[100] Since they are rooted in a "pure pool" or "pure place" and act as conduits of the primordial, creative, freshwaters, the *Mīs Pî* describes reeds as especially pure and particularly potent for purifying both gods and humans (IT 1/2 B: 27-49).[101] In fact, their power to purify is so great that an idol whose mouth has been washed using reeds is said to be "pure like heaven" and even visibly "bright like the center of heaven" (IT 1/2 B: 27-49). The idea that reeds are rooted in the Apsû, have the power to affect the purity of earthly beings and materials, and quench the gods in the heavenly realm, speaks to their role as an *axis mundi*, a point at which heaven, earth, and the subterranean come together in power.

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[99] Berlejung describes the territory beside the river where the *Mīs Pî* was carried out as a "cosmic threshold." She is specifically concerned with the location of the ritual in the city of Babylon, the Ekarzagina. Here, I am concerned only with its generic location, as it is described in the ritual texts: "on the bank of a river" (NR 2; cf. BR 6). Neither the Nineveh nor the Babylonian Recension specify a location with a proper name, only the river, the gardens, and the canals. Berlejung, "Washing the Mouth," 50-51. Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 52 n.36.

[100] "the gods and goddesses take the Euphrates water of Enki [Ea] in the reed, they take it from that reed" (IT 1/2 A: 26).

[101] Berlejung, "Washing the Mouth," 52.

On the horizontal plane, reeds grow in the space between the "pure Apsû" and civilized life, acting symbolically as a cosmic threshold between two realms. Unlike the idol seated in its cella in the midst of the city, reeds dwell on the periphery. One cannot draw near the abode of Ea without first making one's way through their thicket, a major challenge which divides the most sacred Apsû and whoever approaches. This ability to literally and symbolically divide between sacred and common also characterizes reed items made for ritual use.

Throughout the *Mīs Pî*, the priest is required to build and use various items made of reed (*qanû*), namely, reed-bundles (*uri(g)gallu*), reed-huts (*šutukku*), and reed-mats (*burû*). In the incantation "Reed Which Comes from the Apsû," the plant itself is called "little *buginnu*," a little water-tight vessel or trough used to carry liquid (IT 1/2 A: 22).[102] In the *Mīs Pî*, what reeds carry is the pure, life-giving water of the Apsû and these primordial waters cannot escape these water-tight vessels. Therefore, when reeds are bundled together, they have the power to enclose and insulate sacred space.[103] No sacredness can escape and nothing common or impure may enter. The officiant assembles many reed-bundles (*uri(g)gallu*) to make reed-huts, one for each deity he summons to the *Mīs Pî*.[104] He does this once in the countryside, after which he recites two incantations, "Reed Which Comes from the Apsû" and "Reed Whose Heart Is Pure and Good," and

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[102] *CAD* B, 306-07.

[103] *CAD* U/W, 223-25. Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 53 n.41.

[104] For an image, see the cylinder seal in Collon, *First Impressions*, fig. 803.

once in the orchard at the riverbank (NR 5-16, 71; cf. BR 6-7, 12).[105] It is the sacredness

of the spaces he creates that enables these gods to reside therein, in close proximity to the

priest and the inductee whom he presents.[106]

As for the god undergoing the *Mīs Pî*, it, too, receives the benefit of the "pure and

good" reed. Not only are various types of reed listed among the ingredients applied to the

idol for its purification, but it is also set upon a reed-mat among the huts of the other gods

(NR 71, 95-96; BR 6-7, 12; IT 1/2 B: 27-38). This mat insulates the god from the ground,

thus protecting it from any impurities it may contract.[107] The journey from the house of

the craftsmen, to the orchard, to the river, to the cella, is a hazardous journey, fraught

with danger of contamination and any ill-will a god or person might bear against that

deity.[108] The reed mat offers protection from the elements and powers which could

gravely affect the god's pure status and the efficacy of its birth from one mode of being

into the next. This protective aspect and the connection between reed vessels and birth are

highlighted in Mesopotamian birth incantations, which parallel troubled fetuses in

amniotic fluid and reed-vessels filled with precious goods, which the gods steer in a

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[105] BR preserves the order 1) riverbank, then 2) orchard. It also specifies that a reed-hut is to be set up "on the right of the sanctuary" in the cella (62).

[106] It is in the midst of these huts that the priest presents the equipment of the craftsmen on the first day and the offerings for Ea, Shamash, and Asalluḫi on the second day, after which the destiny of the god is determined (NR 99, 109).

[107] Berlejung, "Washing the Mouth," 55 n.46. Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 58 n.74.

[108] Berlejung, "Washing the Mouth," 67-68.

turbulent sea.[109] In fact, some of these incantations appeal to Ea [Enki], the Creator, for the safe passage of the child, a motif which is also present in the *Mīs Pî* in relation to the birth of the god.[110]

Whether the birth is human, as in the case of birth incantations, or divine, as in the *Mīs Pî*, the source of safe passage is the same for both. It is the Creator who has the power to render that life's destiny as favorable and it is the officiant who has the ability to entreat that god. By invoking the chaotic primordial waters that resulted in the creation of the first gods and the Creator who resides therein, and by using reeds that possess the power to create protective, sacred spaces, and to connect heaven, earth, and Apsû, he who performs the *Mīs Pî* ritually recreates the moment in which the gods were born. By bringing the past into the present and enabling the gods to dwell in the midst of the ceremony, the priest enacts the successful birth of the god from the "womb," the house of the craftsmen, into the community of the gods.

The Death and Resurrection of Idols

The idea that an idol experiences birth, life, and community implies that it will also experience death. When an idol is damaged, whether by mishap, the natural decay of its materials, malice, theft, or enemy intervention, it is considered deceased.[111] If the idol

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[109] Finkel, *Ark Before Noah*, 135. Barbara Böck, "Proverbs 30:18-19 in the Light of Ancient Mesopotamian Cuneiform Texts," *Sef* 69 (2009): 272-74. Martin Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting* (Groningen: Styx, 2000), 10-11, 62-63. Graham Cunningham, *Deliver Me From Evil: Mesopotamian Incantations 2500-1500* (Roma: Pontifico Instituto Biblico, 1997), 107-08.

[110] Gertrud Farber, "Another Old Babylonian Childbirth Incantation," *JNES* 43 (1984): 311-16.

[111] Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, No. 24, 247. Hurowitz, "The Mesopotamian God Image, from Womb to Tomb," 155-56. Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 22-27.

can be physically restored, then it can also be ritually renewed or "resurrected."

According to *TuL* 27 (7th-6th centuries BCE), a composite text which explains what to do

when a god dies, the initiate covers the idol, takes it outside, and intercedes on its behalf

while the lamentation priest, royal family, and general population mourn its death (l.

1-18).[112] The lamentations and offerings continue while the craftsmen make repairs, then

the god's mouth is washed and it is reinstated (l.19-22, 31-55').

This custom is reflected in Esarhaddon's report about the renewal of the gods,

discussed above. When he inherited the throne of Assyria from his father, Sennacherib,

Esarhaddon also inherited the gods of Babylon, whom his father captured and stowed

away in 689 BCE. In a move toward political harmony and solidarity, Esarhaddon

commissioned the rebuilding of Babylon's main temple, Esagila, which was dedicated to

the deity Marduk, and returned its idols, newly refurbished and ready for installation.[113]

Esarhaddon did not live to see the completion of the project, but his son, Ashurbanipal,

finished the work in the first year of his reign (668 BCE).[114]

Alternatively, "if the work of that god which has suffered damage is not suitable

for renewal, it should not be restored!" (*TuL* 27 l.23-24). A priest is to wrap the god's

belongings in linen, along with 30 minas of copper and 10 of tin, and tie the bundle to the

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[112] *TuL 27* is available in Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia,* 227-46.

[113] Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 24-25. Nathaniel B. Levtow, *Images of Others: Iconic Politics in Ancient Israel*, Biblical and Judaic Studies from the University of California, San Diego 11, ed. William H. Propp (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 109-12. Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, No. 247. Barbara Nevling Porter, *Images, Power, and Politics: Figurative Aspects of Esarhaddon's Babylonian Policy* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1993), 41-75.

[114] Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 24.

god. Then, "on a night when nobody walks," he sends the god into the river before Ea, its

father (l.25-29). Ea thus brings the god's lifecycle to a close by assuming responsibility

for its deceased body, just as he was once responsible for its birth and divine life.

In the absence of any theoretical statement regarding the essential nature of an

idol, one can only surmise what its death meant for the deity.[115] Given the cosmic, eternal

nature of the Mesopotamian gods and their ability to manifest in multiple places at once,

it does not logically follow that the death of an idol would force the deity into non-

existence.[116] Rather, the god's return to its father, the Creator, suggests that its being is

simply reassumed into the pool of divinity from which it came. But, as Qohelet (Eccl

11:3) and other wisdom literature would argue, as natural as certain processes may seem,

there is always an element of mystery involved, especially when it comes to the unseen.

In this case, it is not clear what happens to the idol after its return to the Apsû from which

it came, but perhaps that is the point. It is for Ea, and only Ea, to know.

The Function of Idols

Once an idol is safely inducted or birthed into the divine community, it

experiences a particular kind of private life among its fellow gods and is described as

exhibiting physical signs of divinity. These are the topics of subsequent chapters, but are

worth mentioning here in the spirit of offering a thick description of the overall process

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[115] Finkel, *Ark Before Noah*, 66.

[116] Sommer, *Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*, 12-24.

by which idle materials become a functional idol. Here, the focus is how idols function in the public sphere once they are inducted into the community of the gods.

Given the example of king Esarhaddon, whose involvement in the manufacture of idols is preserved both in royal letters and in his own account, it comes as no surprise that the idol served both a religious and a political function. The disparity, discussed above, between what Esarhaddon's statements about placing the process of constructing an idol in the hands of the gods and his actual control over every minutiae of their construction, as expressed in correspondences, suggests that the idol's function is similarly double-edged. The idol operates both in support of imperial power and social order, on one hand, and in support of the notion of divine mystery and efficacy, on the other. The underlying characteristic of these two functions is that the idol connects all life, both on the horizontal plane (i.e., society) and on the vertical plane (i.e., heaven, earth, and Apsû).

Overall, the political function of an idol is to keep human power structures in proper relationship with the gods and with the people. For example, the presence of an idol validated the reign of whoever sat upon the throne. In the letter of Adad-šumu-uṣur, exorcist under kings Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal, he responds to the king's inquiry as to whether it was good for certain individuals to come into his presence, saying,

> Let them come up together . . . The king, my lord, is the chosen one of the great gods; the shadow of the king, my lord, is pleasant for everything. Let them come up and run around in the sweet and pleasant shadow of the king. . . . The well-known proverb says: "Man is a shadow of god". [But] is man a shadow of man too? The king is the perfect likeness (*muššulu*) of the god.[117]

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[117] Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, No. 207.

The Akkadian *muššulu*, "likeness," also bears the meaning "image, replica, representation" and is used most often to note physical form.[118] Additionally, it is derived from the verb *mašālu* "to be similar, equal, of equal rank."[119] This suggests that, not only do the (image of the) god and king look alike, but they are also considered equals in terms of status, at least in private correspondence.[120]

On the other hand, the idol also ensured that the king was subservient and acted humbly. In fact, the first instruction the newly inducted god received was, "Approach [the king who knows your voice]" (NR 169). The god's first matter of business was to develop a relationship with the king, but not just any king who happened to be on the throne. The king must have been willing to be subservient in the relationship, wherein he followed the god like a sheep follows its shepherd, emphasizing the position of the king relative to that of the god. This underscores the fact that the primary function of an idol was to guide the king and society in all necessary matters and to intercede on behalf of "the sheep" whenever a being or power, whether earthly or heavenly, sought to do harm.

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[118] *CAD* M2, 281.

[119] *CAD* M1, 355-58.

[120] In the 3rd-2nd millennia, Mesopotamian kings were worshipped as gods. See Cole and Machinist, *Letters from Priests*, xiii-xv. Irene J. Winter, "'Idols of the King': Royal Images as Recipients of Ritual Action in Ancient Mesopotamia," *JRitSt* 6 (1992):13-42. In the 1st millennium, it is unclear whether the king was considered divine or only to have divine attributes. This is because the language and imagery connecting the king to the divine became suggestive rather than insistent. See Tallay Ornan, "The Godlike Semblance of a King: The Case of Sennacherib's Rock Reliefs," Pages 161-78 in *Ancient Near Eastern Art in Context: Studies in Honor of Irene J. Winter by Her Students*, ed. Marian Feldman and Jack Cheng (Leuven: Brill, 2007). This may be a result of the view that to control one's image was to control one's destiny or the fact that when people see a king as divine, it heightens their expectations. Bahrani, "Assault and Abduction," 363-82. On divinity as a motif in ancient Mesopotamian and biblical literature, see Danny Mathews, *Royal Motifs in the Pentateuchal Portrayal of Moses*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 571 (New York: T & T Clark, 2012), 61-67.

This tight bond between god and king was designed as a preventative measure against the king becoming tyrannical and a force that can be used for good or ill. As long as the god was enthroned in its temple and the king acted according to its principles and will, the god interceded on his behalf and, by extension, the behalf of his subjects. If the god was ignored, misrepresented, or rendered absent via kidnapping or death, one could not be sure how strongly the deity would react and that was a dangerous situation.[121] As a result, the king was in regular communication with priests, scholars, oracles, and other learned officials who guide his decisions regarding how to interact properly with an idol.

One *Mīs Pî* incantation connects the dots between proper practice, king, idol, and political or social stability:

> That throne is placed in a pure place, on a pedestal. //
> May the king of the upper [country] bring heavy tribute.
> May the foundation of its throne be firm, let them [the gods] place it in security.
> May the foundation of its throne be stable forever like a mountain![122]

By drawing parallels between the proper execution of the *Mīs Pî* ritual expressed by the purity and elevation of the god's pedestal, the king's provision of heavy tribute, and the firmness, security, and stability of the god's throne, the author expresses the interrelatedness of divinely sanctioned security and proper human action. The idol must first be installed properly via the *Mīs Pî*, then the king, who is the symbol of civilized society, could offer tribute. Only then was stability ensured. If the deity was not present

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[121] Levtow, *Images of Others*, 112-18.

[122] IT 5 B: 22ab, 28-30ab. Levtow uses line 30b to demonstrate that a secure city required a secure cult. He also speaks of the *Mīs Pî* as a theo-political enthronement ritual. Levtow, *Images of Others*, 126.

in his or her proper place, or if that deity and its place are not properly maintained, then social order was tentative. It was only through the proper presence and maintenance of the deity that protection and intercession between human and divine realms was possible. It was the divine presence that enabled the existence and prosperity of civilization and all of its power structures, and no one had more to lose than the king.

The visible, literal presence of the deity assured the ancient Mesopotamians that the invisible, cosmic deity was present. Likewise, the idol's willingness and ability to receive tangible gifts and offerings ensured that the deity was content and on their side. On a political and societal level, the physical presence of idols and devotion to them functioned as means of signifying, even bringing about, the resources and political stability upon which civilized life depends. This made the effort of giving and collecting taxes for the construction and maintenance of an idol and its temple worthwhile. The rhetoric of divine mystery and efficacy also works to achieve the loyalty of devotees.

Following Michael Dick, I have used the phrases "born in heaven" and "made on earth" throughout these sections because, together, they illustrate both the paradox of a divinity fashioned by human hands, with which I began my analysis of the life of idols, and the Mesopotamian solution to said paradox.[123] When it comes to the question of the religious function of an idol, "born in heaven/made on earth" provides an answer and, since both phrases are borrowed from the *Mīs Pî*, could not be more relevant. Rather than rejecting idols, Mesopotamian religious leaders and devotees embraced the paradox they

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[123] Dick, "Introduction," in *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth*, xi.

represent and engaged it in a way that promotes a sense of connection to the divine, without divesting it of its otherness. The narrative that gods are born, live within and affect society, form family and community, experience death, and exist in a limited anthropomorphic form all contributed to a sense of relatability through shared experience.

On the other hand, an idol was divine, a cosmic being unlike humans in a myriad of ways, whose mysteries were a locus of dissonance. Though it was born and died, it was also eternal. It could access realms to which it could not physically travel, plus, it had no choice but to rely on human beings if it was to go anywhere at all. It was made of wood and other earthly materials, yet somehow heard, ate, acted, and affected the day to day life of mortals. Somehow, despite the mysterious nature of it all, an idol was the effective intercessor and mediator between heaven and earth, society's protector, and supplier of needs, all of which were designed to elicit awe, gratitude, and devotion.

The tension between familiarity and otherness was balanced in such a way that it captivated the religious imagination and held its attention, usually for a lifetime. It was the religious function of an idol to provide the mind with "bodied stuff on which to feed."[124] It was the face of the unseeable face, a visible form of the invisible, a location of the ethereal, and a sensory experience of the intangible. It created a sense of connection, empathy, even love for the divine because its anthropomorphic form and lifecycle communicated that there is something of the follower in it and it in the follower, despite the vast differences between them. Its corporeality did not detract from experience,

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[124] This phrase is borrowed from Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description," 23.

although it has that potential, but emboldened the religious mind to wrestle with the paradox of an embodied deity, to ponder the mystery of how it all works, and to believe in the efficacy of supplication and worship. Through this process, the idle became an idol.

The political and religious function of an idol is illustrated, perhaps most clearly, in the case of the idol of Marduk, chief deity of the city of Babylon and, eventually, the Neo-Babylonian empire. Recall that not only are the 7th-6th centuries relevant as the context in which the extant *Mīs Pî* tablets were produced, but also that the one extant copy of the BR of the *Mīs Pî* was initially intended for deposit into Esagila. Because Esagila is Marduk's temple in the city of Babylon, the fact that the BR was intended for deposit in that temple suggests it is the idol of Marduk himself that is being inducted in the BR. This makes Marduk, discussed throughout this chapter as king of the gods, creator, and "princely young man," all the more relevant to my redescription of idols and my comparison to Moses. These considerations also warrant attention to the historical context of 7th-6th century Babylon as the setting for the *Mīs Pî*, although this certainly was not the only historical and geographical context in which the *Mīs Pî* was performed.

Babylon, the Idol of Marduk, and Moses

Long before the 7th-6th centuries BCE, the city of Babylon was relatively large, covering 400 hectares (988.4 acres), and surrounded by a double wall, 17.2m (56.4ft)

wide.[125] Atop this wall, watchmen patrolled on horseback and by chariot, while

commoners used it to travel from one side of the city to another. This monumental

architectural feature was surrounded by an 80m (262.5ft) wide moat fed by the Euphrates

River, and contained eight gates, the most elaborate of which was the northernmost, the

Gate of Ishtar or Ishtar Gate.

The Euphrates ran through the heart of the city, dividing east and west, with all of

its monumental architecture, including palaces, temples, and a five to seven story

ziggurat, located on the eastern shore. At the height of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, King

Nebuchadnezzar II (r. 605-562 BCE) more than doubled the city's surface area from 400

ha to almost 900 ha, far surpassing the capital cities of previous empires.[126]

Nebuchadnezzar II also conserved the more ancient city, and made some of its already

famous features more extravagant through wealth and labor acquired via conquest.

In the first half of the 6th-century BCE, the same period wherein the Babylonian

Recension of the *Mīs Pî* was inscribed, and exilic communities, including the Judean

elite, were forcibly resettled in Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar II erected a second double-

wide wall (25m; 82ft.), this one with towers 44m apart, around the city's eastern half.

This wall increased the protection of the capital city, doubled its acreage, and

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[125] The details of the following physical description of the city of Babylon are to be found in the following two articles, unless otherwise noted: Olof Pedersén, "Work on a Digital Model of Babylon Using Archaeological and Textual Evidence," Pages 9-22 in *Proceedings of the International Conference Near Eastern Capital Cities in the 2nd and 1st Millennium B.C.: Archaeological and Textual Evidence, Torino, May 14-15th, 2010*, Mesopotamia: Rivista di Archeologia, Epigrafia e Storia Orientale Antica XLVI (Firenze: Le Lettere, 2011). Marc van de Mieroop*, "Reading Babylon," *AJA* 107 (2003): 257-75.

[126] The new size, 900 ha, is just over 1/10th of the size of Manhattan Island (8,746.4 ha). The largest known city before Nebuchadnezzar II's project was the Neo-Assyrian capital of Nineveh, which measured 700 ha.

encompassed the new summer palace situated 2km north of the city proper. The wall

consisted of two lines, connecting with the Euphrates to form a triangle. The Euphrates

served as the natural barrier from the west, while supplying the water for a second 80m

wide moat, this one encircling the new outer wall.

While the features and plan of Nebuchadnezzar's city certainly communicated

power and prestige to the outsider, to those who knew and lived ancient Mesopotamian

culture, the city of Babylon communicated much more. The capital city Babylon — *Bab-*

ili, "the Gate of the Gods" — was the center of creation and its official theology was

expressed at every turn.[127] According to Babylonian records, the designated name of each

street, gate, architectural feature, and shrine made a theological statement about at least

one of the gods. For example, the street leading into and out of the Marduk Gate was

called ᵈ*marduk reʾi māti(kur)šu*, "Marduk is the Shepherd of His Land," and the city wall

as a whole was referred to as *imgur Enlil*, "Enlil Showed Favor."[128]

The road most central to Babylonian life and culture, both literally and

symbolically, was the Processional Way, which began outside of the city and served as its

north-south axis. This road led to and from the center of the city, where the two most

ancient and revered of Babylon's buildings were situated, the ziggurat Etemenanki,

"House, the Foundation Platform of Heavens and Underworld," and the temple complex

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[127] For a full semiotic reading of the city of Babylon as described in primary sources, see Van de Mieroop, "Reading Babylon," 257-75.

[128] For these and many other examples, see A. R. George, *Babylonian Topographical Texts*, OLA 40 (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1992), 67-69.

Esagila, "House whose Top is High," both of which were dedicated to the creator and keeper of cosmic and social order, the chief deity Marduk.[129]

Marduk and the *Akitu*-Festival

As the creator deity who instituted order in the midst of chaos, Marduk was the perfect choice of a god to govern the city that identified itself as built upon the primordial mound that arose out of the even more ancient waters of creation, the Apsû.[130] This primordial Apsû was associated with the waters of the Euphrates River, which ran through the city and surrounded it in the form of a moat, giving those who approached the image or impression of Babylon rising out of the mythical, primordial sea, with the ziggurat reaching toward the heavens at its center. Thus, Nabopolassar (r. 626-05 BCE) named the inner city wall "the firm frontier as old as time itself," harkening back to the moment of creation.[131] As a result, Babylon was the linchpin or axis that joined the universe together, connecting Apsû, earth, and divine realm through devotion to Marduk as creator and sustainer of that which makes all living organisms, including societies, successful, and that is proper order.

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[129] Most of what is known about Marduk as a divine figure comes from the two stories *Enuma Eliš* and *Ludlul Bel Nemeqi*, epithets scattered throughout the historical record, proper theophoric nouns, and the hundreds of extant prayers and psalms dedicated to him. Many of these prayers and psalms can be found in the following volumes: Takayoshi Oshima, *Babylonian Prayers to Marduk*, Orientalische Religionen in der Antike 7 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011). S. Langdon, *Babylonian Penitential Psalms*, OECT 6 (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1927). For an overview of Marduk and his rise to supremacy, see Takayoshi Oshima, "The Babylonian God Marduk," Pages 348-60 in *The Babylonian World*, ed. Gwendolyn Leick (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 2009).

[130] Van de Mieroop, "Reading Babylon," 262-64.

[131] F. Al-Rawi, "Nabopolassar's Restoration Work on the Wall Imgur-Enlil at Babylon," *Iraq* 47 (1985): 5-6.

In the 18th-century BCE, when King Hammurabi first made Babylon the capital

city of Sumer and Akkad, he elevated Marduk from a lesser-god to a "great god" among

the great gods and the city's patron deity, with supreme power over all peoples.[132] The

symbol of Marduk, the triangular spade, first appears in legal documents and iconography

of this period.[133] Although the meaning of the association between Marduk and the spade

is uncertain, it does suggest that this deity, like many of his ancient Near Eastern

counterparts, originated as a local agricultural god.[134] Up until this period, Marduk was

an obscure figure, at least according to the historical record, but from the Old Babylonian

period (20th-16th centuries BCE) onward, he grew in importance and complexity

throughout the region of Mesopotamia.

Marduk's status was elevated once again in the 12th-century BCE by King

Nebuchadnezzar I, who deemed Marduk "king of the gods," placing him above all other

deities.[135] By the end of the second millennium, Marduk was simply known as *Bel*, "the

Lord" (cf. Ba'al of the Levant). By the end of the Middle Babylonian period (16th-10th

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[132] *Codex Hammurabi* i 1-26 W. G. Lambert, "The Reign of Nebuchadnezzar I: A Turning Point in the History of Ancient Mesopotamian Religion," Pages 3-13 in *The Seed of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of T.J. Meek*, ed. W.S. McCullough (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), 3-7.

[133] For an example of iconography, see Tallay Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol: Pictoral Representation of Deities in Mesopotamia and the Biblical Image Ban*, OBO 213 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), fig. 157, 201-02, 206.

[134] Ritter C. Nils, "Spade," *Iconography of Deities and Demons in the Ancient Near East: An Iconic Dictionary with Special Emphasis on First-Millennium BCE Palestine/Israel*, ed. Christoph Uehlinger (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming 2016), Accessed March 16, 2016, http://www.religionswissenschaft.uzh.ch/idd/prepublication_5.php.

[135] Lambert, "The Reign of Nebuchadnezzar I," 6. There were also unofficial statements to this effect that date to earlier than Nebuchadnezzar I, but his is the first official document proclaiming Marduk king of the divine realm.

centuries BCE), Marduk had been syncretized with no less than fifty deities, whose

names came to represent aspects of Marduk rather than independent powers.[136] This

absorption of other deities into the figure of Marduk continued throughout the history of

Babylon, resulting in an ever increasing number of epithets by which he came to be

known — the most widely attested being king of the gods, architect of heavens and earth,

creator of life, supplier of water, god of abundance, and savior of the people.[137]

One feature of Marduk's earthly existence in Babylon that emphasized his

majesty and produced a certain aura of mystique was that the idol of Marduk and his

entourage came into view only once a year, during the spring *akitu*-festival. Otherwise

known as the New Year Festival, the *akitu*-festival was named after the climactic Great

Procession of the deities from the urban temple of Marduk, Esagila, to the rural temple,

Akitu, and back again. During their three-day stay in the *akitu*-temple, Marduk divided

his wealth among the other gods and determined the fate of his city for the coming

year.[138] This once-yearly procession was so important to the city's identity that it inspired

the name of the street upon which it occurred, Processional Way, pressing the

significance and memory of this event daily onto the minds of Babylon's residents.

The procession of Marduk and his entourage, both human and divine, began and

ended at Esagila, but the festival involved gods and officiants from the entire region.

Gods represented by their idols were escorted into the city of Babylon from all over the

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[136] Oshima, "The Babylonian God Marduk," 349.

[137] Oshima, "The Babylonian God Marduk," 348.

[138] Van de Mieroop, "Reading Babylon," 272. Oshima, "The Babylonian God Marduk," 356.

empire, most of them by boat, in keeping with a tradition that dates back to the third millennium.[139] Some of these deities — Ishtar, Zababa, Urash, Shamash, Adad, and Enlil — were connected to Babylon permanently, through the naming of the city gates, with each gate oriented toward the hometown of the deity whose name the gate bore.[140] This gathering repeated the gathering of the gods described in the Babylonian creation epic, and thus set the stage for a lively celebration of cosmic significance. This gathering was also politically significant, as it affirmed alliances and Babylon's role as the capital of the territory; a deity's presence or absence was symbolic of its patron city's connection or disconnection from the empire as a whole.[141] During the *akitu*-festival, the year's booty was divided among the gods and taken back to their respective homes in support of local operations, especially military plans.

Once assembled in Esagila, Marduk and his companions journeyed to the *akitu*-temple, an event of great visual and ritual import requiring ritual performance at various stops along the way. The journey from cella, into the ante-chamber, the courtyard, and then into public view initiated the public's first opportunity to see the idols of Marduk and his compatriots. The idols and their attendants moved north along the Processional Way, past the ziggurat reaching toward the heavens, the temple of Marduk's son Nabu, then two royal palaces where the famous Hanging Gardens were located, all before passing through the Ishtar Gate, an impressive, multi-chamber structure followed by a

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[139] Van de Mieroop, "Reading Babylon," 271.

[140] Van de Mieroop, "Reading Babylon," 271.

[141] Van de Mieroop, "Reading Babylon," 271-72.

long, open-air corridor that connected the city to the world outside. All the while, the king

held the hand of Marduk's idol, signifying their mutual allegiance and good relations.[142]

The procession was elaborate, a true spectacle of opulence, fitting only for the

occasion. Chariots of rare wood, fine metal, and precious stone were pulled by only the

most prestigious of Babylonian society, carrying the precious goods that were to be

distributed at the *akitu*-temple, alongside the gods and their attendants.[143] The convoy

included live animals, produce of the fields and gardens, and loads of precious metal and

stone. Once the procession reached the Euphrates, the idols boarded an equally elaborate

ship and sailed off toward the wilderness, where the *akitu*-temple was located.[144] The

wilderness was associated with chaos, but by his presence, Marduk ordered that chaos,

repeating the act of creation which he first performed countless years ago.

After three nights in the *akitu*-temple, the festival entered its final stages, as the

idol of Marduk journeyed back to his private cella at Esagila, from which he would

intercede until the following year, according to his measure of the city. Marduk's annual

return signified his continual ability to keep the powers of chaos at bay, and also reified

Babylon's status as the ordering principle of the empire. As the idol of Marduk

approached Babylon from the open country, he witnessed the city's sprawling walls on

the horizon, a line pierced only by the ziggurat whose immensity could only be grasped

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[142] Oshima, "The Babylonian God Marduk," 356.

[143] For a details of the procession and convoy, see Van de Mieroop, "Reading Babylon," 271-73.

[144] The exact location is presently unknown.

from a distance. Marduk and his boat floated down the Euphrates, past the city's outer

wall and summer palace, embarking on dry land just northwest of the inner-city.

This was the second opportunity of the festival for the people of the city to see the

otherwise unseen Marduk, and for Marduk to gaze upon his city and its people. The idol

returned the same way he left, first through the open-air corridor of the Processional Way,

200m long with walls 15.2m (50ft.) tall, covered with glazed blue bricks, yellow floral

patterns, and repeated gold reliefs of lions, each 2m (6ft.) in length. This would have been

the most opportune time to witness the idol, albeit from a distance, using the tops of these

walls as a vantage point from which to gaze upon Marduk's muscular body, horned cap,

and celestial garments as he disappeared inside the Ishtar Gate.[145] This gate repeats the

same artistic motif as the Processional Way, but with an important difference. Instead of

lions representing Ishtar, the protective mother goddess, the images now alternate

between bulls and dragons, both of which represent Marduk and his power over chaos.[146]

This scene welcomes Marduk home, into the city that proudly bears his presence,

power, and legacy as creator of the cosmos, while also marking the city as set apart to

Marduk and subject to his grace. With this impression stamped in the idol's mind, it

proceeded past the northern and southern palaces, the temple to Nabu (Marduk's son), the

ziggurat Etemenanki, and, finally entered into Esagila, his private home. From there, the

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[145] For an image of Marduk preserved on a cylinder seal, see Oshima, "The Babylonian God Marduk," 350.

[146] For more on the Ishtar Gate, see Joachim Marzahn, *The Ishtar Gate: The Processional Way, the New Year Festival of Babylon* (Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin - Vorderasiatisches Museum, 1992). On the significance of the trio of beasts, see Chikako E. Watanabe, "The Symbolic Role of Animals in Babylon: A Contextual Approach to the Lion, the Bull and the *Mušuššu*," *Iraq* 77 (2015): 215-24.

idol — Marduk's embodiment and the people's mediator — spent the next year enacting

the fate of the city as determined on those first twelve days of the spring month of

Nisannu (March/April), until the next *akitu*-festival, when the order of creation was once

again enacted and confirmed.

<div align="center">The Idol of Marduk and Moses</div>

However impressive and symbolically laden, neither the city's grandeur nor

Marduk's supremacy stopped Cyrus of Persia when he captured Babylon and thus

overtook the Neo-Babylonian Empire in 539 BCE. Yet, Babylon remained the largest city

in the history of the ancient Mediterranean until imperial Rome, eliciting awe among the

Greeks.[147] It also remained the political center of southern Mesopotamia until its status

began to decline around 300 BCE, a few decades into Greek control of the region.

Although the city of Babylon lost its political power in the waning years of the

first millennium BCE, the legacy of Marduk and his city continued long afterward, with

Marduk veneration persisting at least eight hundred years after the fall of the Neo-

Babylonian Empire. In the Greco-Roman period, Marduk — also known by the name

Bel, "the Lord," since the end of the second millennium — was assumed into the more

western pantheon as Zeus Belos (Greek) or Jupiter Belus (Latin) and worshipped

throughout the empire primarily as a god of war. Furthermore, according to the

Babylonian Talmud, the temple Esagila remained the site of Marduk worship and

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[147] Including Aristotle, Herodotus, and Xenophon. For a summary of the classical sources and related issues, see Stephanie Dalley, "Nineveh, Babylon and the Hanging Gardens: Cuneiform and Classical Sources Reconciled," *Iraq* 56 (1994): 45-58.

pilgrimage until at least the 3rd-century of the Common Era, despite the fact that the more ancient city of Babylon lay in ruins.[148]

During this period from the 6th-century BCE to the 3rd-century CE — almost 1,000 years — and likely beyond, there was a significant juxtaposition that occurred in the city of Babylon around the time of the *akitu*-festival. This festival was held the first twelve days of the lunar month of Nisannu, which is also known as the Hebrew month of Nisan. On the evening of the fourteenth day, less than two days after the close of the *akitu*-festival, began the eight-day festival of Passover, during which the community of Judean exiles, later known as Jews, commemorated a different procession. This procession is none other that the journey of the Hebrew people out of Egypt, through the power of Yahweh as enacted through his chosen intermediary, Moses.

From the time the Judean elite were taken captive by Babylon until Marduk worship faded, sometime in the Byzantine or Islamic Era, the Babylonian Judeans or Jews followed temporally the public celebration of Marduk's qualities as creator and deliverer with their own celebration of Yahweh's same characteristics. Yahweh's work as creator and deliver of the Hebrew people is demonstrated most strongly in the story of the exodus out of Egypt, unto a life with Yahweh in their midst. Through the story of the construction of the tabernacle and the mediation of Moses, the authors of the exodus traditions make clear the theological claim that Yahweh's presence is with the people no matter where they go — a particularly important claim for those in exile.

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[148] Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah, 11b. Oshima, "The Babylonian God Marduk," 356. Stephanie Dalley, "Bel at Palmyra and Elsewhere in the Parthian Period," *Aram* 7 (1995): 143.

Furthermore, unlike Marduk, whose manifestation or idol is seen only once a year, Yahweh chooses to be seen every day, and Moses, Yahweh's mediator and representative, lives on through the divine word he proclaimed many years ago. Perhaps most importantly, Yahweh does not manifest in natural materials, such as wood, stone, and metal, but in the supernatural, independent of human fabrication and aid. In an attempt to argue their own theology and paradigm for divine-human mediation, exilic authors and redactors of the Pentateuch juxtaposed these competing images of Yahweh and Marduk, Moses and idol, in the imagination of the exilic community.

As the heirs of the exiles' traditions moved away from 6th-century Babylon with respect to both space and time, this basic understanding dissipated of how historical context shaped the Pentateuch's portrayals of Yahweh and Moses. Marduk's name is mentioned only once in the Hebrew Bible, when Jeremiah prophesies against Babylon and her idols, saying, "Merodach is dismayed" (Jer 50:2). Like most of what is now known about ancient Mesopotamia, knowledge of the influence of the figure of Marduk on the composition and content of the Hebrew Bible remained buried for millennia.

Conclusion

With this relatively new access to ancient Mesopotamian sources, the construction, essence, and lifecycle of idols, in addition to the implications of idol-centered worship for human communities, may be described anew. The Mesopotamians knew an idol was a hand-crafted object of wood, metal, and stone, but also believed it became greater than the sum of its parts through the involvement of the gods in its

fabrication and induction. Ritual actions became a way of changing the status of idle

materials, that they may be considered an idol, a manifestation of the divine who

mediates on behalf of deity and society. For the Mesopotamians of the 7th-6th centuries

BCE and beyond, the *Mīs Pî* was central to this status change. This series of purification

and induction rituals, as well as their accompanying incantations, allowed the population

to embrace as an object of great symbolic significance and creative tension the cognitive

dissonance created by the idea of a hand-made god.

In order to answer the question of how the status of an idol changed from that of

an idle statue to that of the incarnation of a cosmic deity, I redescribed the rhetoric and

ritual process ancient Mesopotamians performed in order to orchestrate this change in

status. I used primary materials to redescribe the idol's journey from the house of the

craftsmen, through the Apsû, and into the cella — from womb, to birth, to destiny. By

focusing on creation motifs and the interplay between human and divine involvement, I

also explained the origins, birth, function, and death of idols, all of which are shrouded in

an element of mystery.

Without understanding how idols were conceived of in ancient Mesopotamia or

the historical context of the city of Babylon in the 7th-6th centuries BCE, the following

comparison between idols and Moses with respect to status change is two-dimensional.

The rich context of the city of Babylon adds depth to this comparison by rooting it in a

particular historical moment, enlightening more than just idols and Moses but also the

interplay between these figures and their context. From the perspective of the biblical

authors living in Babylonian exile, the context of Babylon was shared geographically, but religiously was completely other.

In response, the biblical authors attempted to distinguish their traditions and theologies in contradistinction to the surrounding milieux, but within limited means. The biblical authors did not take Yahweh on procession through city and steppe — which would have been inconsistent with their theological views — but they did tell stories, they did write, and they did share these materials, thus solidifying the memory of Yahweh and the idolatrous function of his intermediary, Moses.

CHAPTER THREE: FROM MISFIT TO MEDIATOR

Even today, over 200 years since the first excavation of Babylon, people still refer to the city and empire as symbolic of power run amok, and as the paragon of evil and decadence. This is largely due to the dramatic rhetoric against Babylon contained within the Bible, whose authors — both in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament — portray the city as deeply wicked and doomed to divine judgment for its actions against Judah in the 6th-century BCE (e.g., Isa 13-14; Jer 51; Rev 14:8, 17:5). Only over the past two centuries have Babylon, its material culture, activities, and systems of thought, religion, and governance become gradually available for accurate redescription.

Included among those elements of ancient Mesopotamian life which may now be redescribed is the system by which idols were crafted, inducted, and maintained, as argued in chapter two. While using primary source materials from ancient Mesopotamia to redescribe idols, the process of their status change, and the webs of symbolism surrounding them is a task worthy on its own merit, the resulting analysis is also useful for thinking through some of the larger questions of what was involved in becoming a mediator between heaven and earth, and an embodiment of the divine in the ancient Near East. In fact, the redescription of the status change of idols offered in chapter two has much to suggest about the status change of Moses. The two elements of the lives of idols

that are most pertinent to the following analysis of Exod 3:1-7:7 are, first, that the idle is

not actually idle, but, in fact, imbued with divine presence, and, second, that the idol must

be functionally "born" or "reborn" in order for that divine presence to come forth. This

two-fold transformation of embodying the divine presence and induction into the office

of mediator sheds light on the transformation of Moses as it unfolds in Exod 3:1-7:7.

However, bringing the Mesopotamian *Mīs Pî* to bear on the question of Moses's

status change challenges the vast majority of interpretative history. These challenges

come to light only in the course of redescribing the status change of ancient

Mesopotamian idols, a task which was not possible in the years between the fall of

ancient Babylon and 2001 CE, when the *Mīs Pî* ritual and incantation texts were first

published in their entirety and all in one volume.[149] Therefore, before comparing Moses

to Mesopotamian idols with respect to status change, I must first analyze Moses's

transition from misfit to mediator in light of the two-fold requirement of status change

illuminated through my description of the status change of idols. In so doing, I argue why

the Moses-idol comparison is warranted in the first place, despite the general consensus

among the biblical authors that idols should not be part of Israel's religious framework.

The paradox of idols — that they were considered to be both passive objects that

were subject to human manipulation, and, simultaneously, incarnations of powerful

cosmic deities — was well known to the biblical authors, many of whom rejected the

concept of an idol altogether and spoke explicitly against their use in religious practice.

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[149] Walker and Dick, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia.*

For the most part, the authors of the Pentateuch and Deuteronomistic History prohibit or condemn the use of idols without offering an explanation as to why (e.g., Exod 20:4-6; Lev 26:1; Deut 5:8-10). When they do give a reason, it is usually vague, the most popular reasons being that God hates certain images, that they lead to sin, or that idols are something other nations use and are therefore off-limits to Israel (e.g., Deut 4:15-31; 2 Kgs 17:12-23; 21:11).[150] The substance of the rationale is left for the audience to decide, or, perhaps, was so well known in antiquity that the authors did not feel the need to elaborate. The prophets, however, took a different approach.

For the biblical prophets, the paradox of idols triggered a strong sense of abhorrence and impassioned remarks.[151] For example, Jeremiah calls those who revere idols "stupid and foolish" (Jer 10:8), and states that, "every goldsmith is put to shame by his idols, for his images are false, and there is no spirit [breath] in them. They are worthless, a work of delusion; at the time of their punishment they shall perish" (10:14-15 ESV; cf. 51:17-18).[152] Jeremiah even goes so far as to state that God will execute judgment against the images of Babylon, specifically, and that their punishment will result in violence, shame, and groaning throughout the land (51:47-53).

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[150] See also Psa 97:7; 106:19-20 and satirical narratives, such as the fabrication and theft of Micah's cult image (Judg 17-18), and Yahweh's contest with Dagon (1 Sam 5:1-5).

[151] For example, see Isa 40:18-20; 41:6-7; 44:9-22; 48:5; Jer 2:28; 10:3-15; 16:20; Hab 2:18-19.

[152] For an in-depth analysis of Jer 10:1-16, see Marilyn J. Lundberg, "The Mis-Pi Rituals and Incantations and Jeremiah 10:1-16," Pages 210-27 in *Uprooting and Planting: Essays on Jeremiah for Leslie Allen*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 459, ed. John Goldingay (New York: T & T Clark, 2007).

During Judah's exile in Babylon, around the same time the Pentateuch was being

redacted and the exilic community witnessed the procession of Marduk's idol, Deutero-

Isaiah also attested to this sentiment.

> All who fashion idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit. Their witnesses neither see nor know, that they may be put to shame. Who fashions a god or casts an idol that is profitable for nothing? Behold, all his companions shall be put to shame. The craftsmen are only human. (Isa 44:9-11)

The prophet goes on to mock the humanness of the process of crafting an idol and the

feebleness of its materials, concluding with his assessment that the error of the craftsmen

and their companions stems from a lack of spiritual discernment, blindness to the true

God, and the inability to comprehend reality (44:12-20). This language either betrays

Deutero-Isaiah's ignorance of how idols work or is a prime example of what Michael

Dick calls "a conscious distortion forged in polemic," suggesting that if Deutero-Isaiah

knew enough about an idol's construction to mock the process, then he must have also

known about the rhetoric and rituals that affect an idol's status change, and did not

consider them efficacious in his critique.[153]

Either way, the biblical prophets stigmatize idols by ascribing physical and mental

inaptitude, even disability, to both idols and their craftsmen, and do not engage in a

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[153] Michael B. Dick, "Prophetic Parodies of Making the Cult Image," Pages 1-54 in *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Making of the Cult Image in the Ancient Near East,* ed. Michael B. Dick (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 45. See also Richard J. Clifford, "The Function of Idol Passages in Second Isaiah," *CBQ* 42 (1980): 450-64. Michael Brennan Dick, "Second Isaiah's Parody on Making a Cult Image: (Isaiah 40:18-20; 41:6-7) and the Babylonian Mīs Pî," Pages 193-202 in *"Lasset uns Brücken bauen..." Collected Communications to the XVth Congress of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament, Cambridge 1995* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1998).

discussion of the complex web of symbols and rituals that make the idle an idol.[154] Given

the complexity of an idol, it is difficult to imagine that the Mesopotamian craftsmen

would not have responded to Israel's prophets with the sentiment that there was somehow

a misunderstanding. Chapter two covered the purpose of an idol and how the *Mīs Pî*,

"Washing of the Mouth," affected an idol's status change from that of an idle statue to

that of an effective, earthly manifestation of the divine. The same must be done for

Moses, whose status changes from one "uncircumcised of lips" (Exod 6:12, 30) to

mediator of Yahweh, at a moment's notice. Furthermore, thinking through the issues of

Moses's status change highlights the usefulness of comparing him to idols, and, more

specifically, the utility of *third term* as an interpretive guide.

Since antiquity, the most prominent interpretation of Moses's status change is that

the burning bush episode is the "prophetic call narrative" wherein Moses is transformed

from a fugitive shepherd in Midian to the deliverer of the Hebrew people out of Egypt

(Exod 3:1-4:17). Yet, despite the longevity and popularity of this reading, it does not take

into account the fact that all of the revelations, signs, and happenings of Exod 3:1-4:17

are collectively inadequate for the task Moses must face. Yahweh promises to be with

Moses (3:12), specifically his mouth (4:12), and to perform miracles through him (4:2-9),

yet this divine power does not flow through Moses in a way that brings about the change

in the Hebrews' situation that Yahweh promises. As a result, Moses challenges Yahweh to

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[154] Saul M. Olyan, "The Ascription of Physical Disability as a Stigmatizing Strategy in Biblical Iconic Polemics," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 9 (2009): 1-15.

reconsider his strategy. If Moses's mission is to be successful, he must be greater than

Pharaoh — and Pharaoh is considered a god.

Therefore, I propose that the locus of Moses's status change is not the burning

bush scene, but is Exod 6:28-7:1, wherein Yahweh elevates Moses's status from

"uncircumcised of lips" to "god (*ʾĕlōhîm*) to Pharaoh." This proposition is supported, in

part, by Moses's ability to bring about the series of events that immediately follows —

the ten plagues. In the course of arguing for a shift in understanding regarding the

location of Moses's transformation, I also argue that, like the *Mīs Pî*, Moses's status

change is constituted as the rebirth of one who *already* embodies the divine. The

symbolic circumcision of his lips is so transformative that it alters Moses's fundamental

way of being in the world. The exact nature of Moses's new way of being is the subject

of chapters four through six. Here, I lay the second part of the foundation for comparison,

which I began constructing in chapter two, by walking through the implications of the

Mīs Pî for understanding Moses's transformation, including the analogy of rebirth.

In order to make the case that Moses's status change occurs on the eve of the ten

plagues (6:28-7:1) rather than at the burning bush (3:1-4:17), I must rethink the standard

interpretation of Exod 3:1-7:7 as a whole. There are two specific issues within this

section of Exodus that the Mesopotamian *Mīs Pî* highlights when juxtaposed with the

Moses narrative. The first is the nature of the problem with Moses's mouth (4:10-17;

6:12, 30); the second is the nature of Moses's status change, that is, what it means that

Moses becomes "god to Pharaoh" (7:1; cf. 4:16). Once these two issues are analyzed,

then I am able to read Exod 3:1-7:7 in light of the *Mīs Pî*, resulting in a new proposal for understanding how Moses's transformation works within this extended call narrative.

The Traditional Interpretation of Exodus 3:1-7:7

Throughout the history of interpretation, the most common and logical way of reading Exod 3:1-7:7 has been to designate the burning bush episode as Moses's prophetic call and transformation (Exod 3:1-4:17), the ensuing dangers and difficulties as expected, preliminary challenges (4:18-6:1), and the remaining material as the renewal of Moses's commission (6:2-7:7). Within this framework, the first dialogue between Moses and Yahweh, the one at the burning, yet unconsumed, bush, is the "ultimate prophetic interaction" that changes Moses's status from a fugitive shepherd in Midian to the prophet of Israel's deliverance, thus empowering him to deliver the people through the prophetic word of Yahweh.[155] When Moses objects to his calling, as is expected of prophets, God responds by promising his presence, which "underwrites Moses' mission and authority," and therefore enables Yahweh's heroic relationship with his people.[156]

However, like any powerful leader, Moses's public emergence is not without controversy and a few initial setbacks. Challenges, such as running into opposition from the current regime, are to be expected, especially if that regime is an oppressive one.[157] In

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[155] Carol Meyers, *Exodus*, NCBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 55, 69. See also Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical Theological Commentary,* OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 55-56. Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 17. Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus,* Historical Commentary on the Old Testament, 2 vols. (Kampen: Kok Publishing House, 1993), 1:327, 523.

[156] George W. Coats, *Moses: Heroic Man, Man of God*, JSOTSup 57 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 69; Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 17.

[157] Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 22.

addition to initiating Moses's entrance into public leadership, the account of his and

Aaron's failure before Pharaoh also serves as a "penetrating commentary on the tyrant in

action," one which proves that there is no way to make the best of the Hebrews'

situation.[158] They *must* be delivered. As such, the fact that the interaction with Pharaoh

backfires and the slaves' burdens are increased sets the stage for the narrative of the ten

plagues, both in terms of justifying their severity and also by creating a certain degree of

anxiety about what will happen next.[159] For the power of Yahweh to best shine through,

the narrator must convey just how bad the situation is and how much worse Pharaoh can

make it on a whim.[160]

It is after this initial upset that Moses enters into another extended dialogue with

Yahweh (Exod 6:2-7:7).[161] This conversation centers on the issue of Moses's status in the

eyes of the people and Pharaoh, and is generally interpreted in one of two ways: either as

parallel to the burning bush conversation, or as supplanting the former conversation in

light of more recent events.[162] There are also those who hold the middle-ground position,

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[158] Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 106. See also Houtman, *Exodus*, 1:480.

[159] On 4:18-6:1 as preparation for the plagues narrative and a preview of the contest with Pharaoh, see Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 27. Noel D. Osborn and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on Exodus*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1999), 106. Jeon, *The Call of Moses and the Exodus Story*, 208-15.

[160] On the use of 5:1-6:1 to demonstrate the severity of the situation, see Meyers, *Exodus,* 67.

[161] There are different schools of thought on where to divide the text. Meyers takes 5:22-7:7 as the second dialogue, whereas others divide at 6:2-7:7. Meyers, *Exodus*, 55.

[162] For an example the parallel view, see Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 23-24. Albrecht Alt, *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion*, trans. R. A. Wilson (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 14-15. For an explanation of supplanting view, see David Damrosch, *The Narrative Covenant: Transformations of Genre in the Growth of Biblical Literature* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 304. Mark S. Smith, *The Pilgrimage Pattern in Exodus*, JSOTSup 239 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 202-204.

which states that the two conversations were originally parallel traditions regarding the same event, but since they now stand in sequential order, one cannot help but to read them in light of one another.[163] This is expressed by the fact that many commentators choose the term(s) "reassurance," "renewal," or "recommission" to describe the purpose of Exod 6:2-7:7. This language also suggests that it is common to read this conversation between Moses and Yahweh as standing in the shadow of the burning bush event.

In modern scholarship, this tripartite division of Exod 3:1-7:7 often begins with source criticism, which generally assigns the burning bush scene to the Yahwist (J) or Non-Priestly (Non-P) Source (Exod 3:1-4:17) and Moses's recommissioning to the later Priestly Source (P; 6:2-7:7).[164] The source of the intervening text (4:18-6:1) is not clear, but this does not detract from its literary function as a bridge between these two call narrative traditions.[165] The division into sources also explains some of the oddities of the text, such as the placement of Moses's genealogy in the middle of a conversation, a location which most scholars rightly perceive as an interruption (6:14-27).

These categorical distinctions are drawn by contrasting the burning bush narrative and recommissioning, with respect to their portrayals of Moses, descriptions of his mission, characterizations of the deity, and the addition of the plagues tradition.[166] In this

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[163] Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 111.

[164] For an overview of the different schools of thought regarding the source divisions of Exod 3:1-7:7, see Jeon, *The Call of Moses and the Exodus Story*, 188-89, 199-206, 238. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, 97-111.

[165] Jeon, *The Call of Moses and the Exodus Story*, 207-15.

[166] Smith, *The Pilgrimage Pattern in Exodus*, 202-04.

interpretive vein, the differences or shifts in perspective between the burning bush event

and Moses's recommission are a result of the composite nature of the text itself, with P

attempting to either add to or supplant earlier tradition. Whatever the historical

relationship between Exod 3:1-4:17 and 6:2-7:7, the stage is now set for the extended

contest with Pharaoh (7:8-12:32).

The Problem with Moses's Mouth

With an overview of the most common interpretation of Exod 3:1-7:7 in mind, I

now focus on the two specific issues within this section of Exodus that complicate this

interpretive framework, and ultimately decenter the burning bush as the moment of

Moses's status change. The nature of the problem with Moses's mouth is the first issue

highlighted by reading the Moses narrative in light of the Mesopotamian *Mīs Pî*. When

Moses speaks with Yahweh at the burning bush, a series of objections that Moses poses

and the deity addresses — all of which have to do with Moses's status — constitutes the

majority of their conversation.

Like any proper leader in the Bible, Moses first questions his choseness, saying,

"Who am I that I shall go to Pharaoh and that I shall bring out the sons of Israel from

Egypt?" (Exod 3:11) to which God responds "I will be with you" (3:12). After Moses's

objection regarding the messenger is sated, he proceeds to question both the message

(3:13) and its recipients (4:1). The deity demonstrates that these are valid concerns by

equipping Moses with the tetragrammaton (3:14), dictating exactly what Moses is to say

(3:14-18), and supplying three physical, repeatable signs of his appointment (4:1-9).

However, when Moses revisits the issue of his own suitability, Yahweh's patience turns to burning anger (4:14). Moses responds to Yahweh saying, "Oh my lord (*bî 'ădōnāy*), not a man of words [am] I, neither since yesterday, nor the day before, nor since you have been speaking to your servant, for heavy of mouth (*kəbad-peh*) and heavy of tongue (*ûkəbad lāšôn*) am I" (Exod 4:10). This fourth objection strikes a nerve with Yahweh, eliciting divine frustration, yet Moses remains steadfast in his objection — according to most translators.

The sentiment of Moses's closing statement "Oh my lord, please send someone else" (Exod 4:13 ESV; cf. NRSV, LEB, NIV, NKJV) is not clear in the Hebrew. Literally, his statement reads "Oh my lord (*bî 'ădōnāy*), please send by the hand you will send (*šəlaḥ-nā' bəyad-tišlāḥ*)," a statement which contains considerable ambiguity regarding what Moses is actually saying. It is unclear whether he has accepted his position or whether he is, indeed, imploring *'ădōnāy* to send someone else. Either way, if Moses is trying to make a point about his feebleness or lack of communication skills, he has done so successfully. Yahweh is furious and forces a new arrangement involving Aaron, Moses's brother, who will speak on behalf of Moses to the people (4:14-16) while Moses remains accountable for performing the signs (4:17). It is on this note that Yahweh closes the conversation.

That is, until Moses's and Aaron's interaction with Pharaoh results in increased duties for the slaves, and the people refuse to listen as a result (Exod 5:1-6:10). At this point, Moses reopens the issue of the status of his mouth, twice pressing Yahweh into

conversation and with different language than at the burning bush. The first time is in

response to God reissuing the command to tell Pharaoh to release the Hebrews. Moses

objects, saying "Behold, the children of Israel do not listen to me, so how then will

Pharaoh hear me when I myself am *uncircumcised of lips* (ʿăral śəpātāyim)?" (6:12).[167]

Yahweh treats the objection as a rhetorical question, reiterating his command rather than

addressing the issue Moses so poignantly presents.

The third time Moses pushes the issue, it is again in response to Yahweh's

command to tell Pharaoh all he says. Again, Moses objects: "Behold, I am uncircumcised

of lips (ʿăral śəpātayim), so how shall Pharaoh listen to me?" (Exod 6:30). Finally,

Yahweh enacts a solution: "See, I have made you god to Pharaoh and Aaron, your

brother, shall be your prophet" (7:1). Thus, Yahweh changes Moses's status, transforming

him from "uncircumcised of lips" to "god to Pharaoh." Before I analyze the nature of

Moses's transformation and Yahweh's hesitancy to act on his behalf with respect to this

issue, I must first examine the nature of Moses's request.

The Three Main Interpretive Traditions

Interpretations of what Moses is referring to when he makes the above statements

pertaining to his mouth (Exod 4:10), tongue (4:10), and lips (6:12, 30) generally fall into

one of three categories: either a language barrier, physical disability, or general feeling of

unsuitability expressed through metaphor. The first explanation of Moses's objections is

that, because he has been away for so long, he does not adequately remember how to

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[167] Italics mine.

speak either Hebrew (4:10) or Egyptian (6:12, 30). The idea that Aaron was Moses's translator is at least as old as Targums Onkelos (TO) and Neofiti, both of which were penned in the early centuries of the Common Era and refer to Aaron as *mtwrgmn*, "translator, interpreter" (7:1). The root of this interpretation lies in the general context of the story in which Moses's has been away from Egypt for a considerable amount of time, but is also rooted in comparison with Ezekiel 3:5-6, the only other place in the Hebrew Bible where part of the mouth is described as *kəbad*, "heavy."

In Ezek 3:5-6, Yahweh tells Ezekiel that he has not been sent to a people "deep of lip and heavy of tongue (*wəkibdê lāšôn*)," whose words he cannot understand, but to the children of Israel, who simply do not listen (Ezek 3:5-6; cf. Isa 33:19). For many years, this parallel, paired with other biblical descriptions of foreign tongues as unintelligible (e.g., Deut 28:49; Isa 18:2, 7; 28:11; 33:19; Jer 5:15; Ps 81:6) supported the interpretation that Moses forgot his Hebrew and Egyptian and therefore needed his brother, Aaron, to serve as translator.[168] This interpretation that Moses's difficulty is a language barrier is logical in the course of the narrative. However, another interpretive possibility has opened up in recent decades due to archaeological findings and developments in comparative Semitics.

These advances enabled Jeffrey Tigay to argue that ancient descriptions of foreign languages and accents as unintelligible, stammering, or otherwise defective, are an

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[168] Jeffry H. Tigay, "'Heavy of Mouth' and 'Heavy of Tongue' On Moses' Speech Difficulty," *BASOR* 231 (1978), 58. Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 211.

extension of terms denoting literal speech impediments.[169] This brings me to the second

camp into which interpreters generally situate themselves, that Moses suffered from a

physical disability.[170] This is, perhaps, the most ancient interpretation, as the LXX

renders "heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue" as "weak voiced (ἰσχνόφωνος) and slow

of tongue (βραδύγλωσσος)" (4:10). The LXX also translates "uncircumcised lips" as both

"without speech (ἄλογός)" (6:12) and "weak voiced (ισχνόφωνος)" (6:30), an

interpretation which both quiets, even silences, Moses, and harmonizes the vocabulary of

Exod 4:10 and 6:30 in the process. Even Philo of Alexandria, whose default approach to

the Torah was to allegorize, argued that Moses's ineloquence was literal, a result of the

shock of theophany, and part of the process of grappling with beautiful thoughts.[171]

Looking to other ancient Near Eastern uses of the idiom "heavy of [body part],"

the findings do indeed suggest that Moses was somehow disabled. Appearances of the

phrase "heavy of mouth" in Akkadian medical texts suggest that the problem with

Moses's mouth was "unquestionably a medical symptom" that is an oral manifestation of

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[169] Tigay, "'Heavy of Mouth' and 'Heavy of Tongue' On Moses' Speech Difficulty," 58.

[170] Similarly, Midrash Rabbah (Exodus 1.26) attributes the problem with Moses's mouth to a physical deformity, but in this case the culprit is a hot coal. In brief, the story is that toddler Moses took the crown of Pharaoh and placed it on his own head, which frightened the prophesying magicians. The magicians then tested Moses to determine his intent by placing in front of him a golden vessel and a live coal. If he took the vessel, Moses would be killed; if he took the coal, it would prove that he had no sense and was not a threat to the throne. Baby Moses was about to reach for the gold when the angel Gabriel intervened, causing Moses to grab to coal and touch it to his mouth, thereby becoming "slow of speech and tongue." S. M. Lehrman, *Exodus*, Vol. 3 in *Midrash Rabbah*, ed. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon (London: Soncino Press, 1951), 33-34.

[171] Louis H. Feldman, *Philo's Portrayal of Moses in the Context of Ancient Judaism*, Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity Series 15 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 81, 85.

one of several possible syndromes.[172] Any possible alternative problems, such as

ineloquence and unpersuasiveness, would not find their parallel in medical texts.[173]

According to interpreters in this camp, such figurative readings are expressed by Moses's

remark "Not a man of words am I" (Exod 4:10), but the addition of "heavy of mouth and

tongue am I" brings a certain specificity to the situation that should not be ignored or

turned into a metaphor.[174]

The interpretation that the Hebrew of Moses's objections reflects a literal

disability continues to be a working assumption for many translators and commentators.

For example, the NRSV, NASB, NJPS, and LEB, among others, all render "heavy of

mouth and heavy of tongue" as "*slow* of speech and *slow* of tongue" (Exod 4:10), a

translation that seeks to familiarize the original sense of "heavy," but also takes an

interpretive stance. Each of these translations also render the phrase "I am uncircumcised

of lips" (6:12, 30) as a reference to some difficulty with the speech-faculty, yielding

translations such as "I am a man of impeded speech" (NJPS), "a poor speaker" (NRSV,

LEB), and "unskilled in speech" (NASB), while providing the literal translation in a

footnote.[175]

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[172] Tigay, "'Heavy of Mouth' and 'Heavy of Tongue' on Moses' Speech Difficulty," 60. From a clinical perspective, there is a connection between stuttering, reversed asymmetries in mouth opening, and aberrant hemispheric control in the brain. See Chris Code, Michelle Lincoln, and Rebekah Dredge, "Asymmetries in Mouth Opening During Word Generation in Male Stuttering and Non-Stuttering Participants," *Laterality* 10 (2005): 471-86.

[173] Tigay, "'Heavy of Mouth' and 'Heavy of Tongue' on Moses' Speech Difficulty," 59.

[174] Tigay, "'Heavy of Mouth' and 'Heavy of Tongue' on Moses' Speech Difficulty," 61. Nyasha Junior and Jeremy Schipper, "Mosaic Disability and Identity in Exodus 4:10; 6:12, 30," *BibInt* 16 (2008): 428-41.

[175] This approach is also common in commentaries with new translations. For example, Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 49, 109. Houtman, *Exodus,* 1:404, 506, 522.

Also following this interpretation, scholars in disability studies note that Moses's self-identity hinges on whatever issue he has with his mouth. In fact, it is Moses's preoccupation with his mouth that allows him to circumvent questions about his own ethnic identity and his relationships to both the Hebrews and the Egyptians.[176] Additionally, it is through the stigma biblical authors assign to such disability, via the language of defect, that they are able to emphasize both Yahweh's superiority and Moses's dependence upon it, two points which are particularly important for the narrator, given the miraculous nature of the scenes that follow.[177] This understanding of Moses's mouth issue as the hinge of his identity and that which shapes his relationship with Yahweh is helpful to my comparison of Moses and idols. Although I propose a different solution to the problem of Moses's mouth, I agree that this status change Moses undergoes is the hub around which his identity and relationship with Yahweh revolve.

Finally, the third category of interpretation is that of metaphor. Although there is no consensus as to the referent of the metaphors "heavy of mouth," "heavy of tongue" (Exod 4:10), or "uncircumcised of lip" (6:12, 30), the import of these metaphors is clear — Moses believes himself incapable of bringing the Hebrews out of Egypt.[178] This interpretation is generally supported through comparison to the call narratives of the biblical prophets, most notably Isaiah and Jeremiah, whose summons to the prophetic

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[176] Junior and Schipper, "Mosaic Disability and Identity in Exodus 4:10; 6:12, 30," 428-41.

[177] Saul M. Olyan, *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 10, 37.

[178] Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 274. Osborn and Hatton, *A Handbook on Exodus*, 139.

office include an objection related to speech capabilities and an ensuing sign from the deity (Isa 6:1-7; Jer 1:6-10; cf. Isa 49:2).[179] Similarly, Yahweh tells Ezekiel, the prophet, to open his mouth and receive the prophetic word (Ezek 2:8, 3:2) and that his mouth will be opened in Yahweh's timing, so that he is no longer mute (3:27, 24:27, 33:22).

In this line of interpretation, Moses's string of objections are viewed as the crux of an extended prophetic call narrative that stretches across the whole of Exodus 3:1-7:7.[180] This characterization emphasizes the metaphoric nature of Moses's language and its emblematic, even stereotypical, role as the counter-argument of a newly minted prophet.[181] As such, commentators in this vein deem the possibility that Moses's objections refer to a physical disability just as unlikely as if an angel took a burning coal from the temple of Yahweh and literally burnt Isaiah's mouth with it (Isa 6:5-7). Instead, the objections serve as metaphoric expressions of prophetic reluctance to God's plan that eventually culminate in Moses's initiation into his role as the effective spokesperson of Yahweh, as well as establish both Aaron and the divine presence in their proper places, respective to Moses (Exod 4:10-17; 6:28-7:7).[182]

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[179] For example, James Nohrnberg, *Like Unto Moses: The Constituting of an Interruption*, Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 189-207.

[180] Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 54-55, 73-79. Meyers, *Exodus*, 61.

[181] Meyers, *Exodus*, 61. Coats, *Moses*, 68.

[182] For example, Glazov includes a chapter on Moses' call narrative in a volume dedicated to biblical prophecy. Glazov, "The Opening of the Mouth of Moses," in *The Bridling of the Tongue and the Opening of the Mouth in Biblical Prophecy*. Meyers, *Exodus*, 61. Coats, *Moses*, 68-69. Also Nohrnberg, "Prophet Unto Pharaoh," in *Like Unto Moses*, 189-207.

Critique and Analysis

Before demonstrating the limitations common to all three interpretive camps, I

analyze each on its own accord, beginning with the last. The interpretation that Moses's

objections are part of an extended prophetic call narrative, spanning Exod 3:1-7:7, is the

result of comparisons that do not attend to difference. While this section of Exodus does

bear some similarity to the call narrative genre, this categorization alone does not account

for the complexity of Exod 3:1-7:7, the severity of the issue of Moses's mouth, Yahweh's

response to Moses's mouth-related complaints, or the ways in which the Pentateuch

speaks about Moses's task and vocation.

The inclusion of eight objection-reassurance cycles is one of many differences

between the burning bush episode and prophetic call narratives that is not discussed in

most comparisons.[183] Following the work of form critic Norman Habel, many scholars

identify a prophetic call narrative by the inclusion of six elements: divine confrontation,

introductory word, commission, objection, reassurance, and sign.[184] In each of the books

of Isaiah and Jeremiah, this formula takes seven verses to complete (Isa 6:1-7; Jer

1:4-10). For Ezekiel, the element of objection is not present; the other five elements come

to pass over the course of a single, detailed vision (Ezek 1:1-3:15). As Childs points out,

all of these formulary elements are found in Moses's first exchange with Yahweh (Exod

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[183] These 8 cycles are as follows: a) Exodus 3:11-12, b) 3:13-22, c) 4:1-9, d) 4:10-12, e) 4:13-17, f) 5:22-6:8, g) 6:10-13, and h) 6:28-7:7.

[184] Norman Habel, "The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives," *ZAW* 77 (1965): 297-323.

3:1-12), after which one would expect the prophetic challenge and response to cease.[185]

However, the narrative continues through seven more cycles of objection and

reassurance, most often with an accompanying sign, stretching over four chapters.

Childs attributes this phenomena to the activities of the book's redactors, who

included multiple traditions by adding them to the narrative.[186] However, even if they

belong to different sources, Moses's string of objections is carefully crafted, as he moves

from questioning his identity as the proper messenger, to questioning the message itself,

then the message's recipients, and, finally, the faculty by which this message is to be

delivered, his lips. It is this final issue that becomes central and intensifies the longer it

goes unresolved. Moses's questions are not presented as a collection or list of

disconnected traditions, but work together to present an argument that is tailored to a

specific problem having to do with the status of Moses's mouth.[187] Therefore, if the

burning bush scene is to be categorized as a call narrative, then that narrative must stretch

through Exod 7:7, thus including the final resolution of the problems presented.

While Habel's six criteria are all indeed met in the call narratives of Moses,

Isaiah, Jeremiah, and, to some extent, Ezekiel, that does not entail that Moses's status is

best understood in comparison with those who hold prophetic office. Moses's position

and his call narrative do display some overlap with those of the prophets, but to explain

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[185] Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 53-54.

[186] Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 54.

[187] I analyze this specific problem in chapter four.

Exod 3:1-7:7 only in terms of the narrowly defined genre "prophetic call narrative" misses the richness and complexity of the textual unit, not to mention the status of Moses.

Another difference that calls into question the interpretation of Exod 3:1-7:7 as a call narrative of *prophets* is the way in which Yahweh responds to speech-oriented issues. In the extant call narratives of the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel each receive an immediate, physical, effective, and seemingly private gesture that is accompanied with affirming words from the deity. A seraphim touches Isaiah's mouth with a coal from the altar (Isa 6:6-7), Yahweh puts out his hand and touches Jeremiah's mouth (Jer 1:9), Ezekiel is fed a scroll (Ezek 2:8-3:3), and all three receive words of assurance that the issue has been taken care of. As a result, they go forth as conduits of God's word. Not so with Moses.

No matter which dialogue between God and Moses one determines to be the end of the prophetic call narrative, whether the first exchange at the burning bush (Exod 3:1-12) or on the eve of the ten plagues (6:28-7:7), there is no such sign directed at Moses's mouth. Yahweh gives Moses messages to relay, signs to perform in order to inspire belief, and promises to be with Moses's mouth and to teach him what to say, but Moses is not "touched" and the problem with his mouth is not remedied until Exod 6:28-7:1. Even then, Exodus includes no tradition as to how exactly Moses's mouth comes to be "circumcised." Instead, Aaron is introduced into the equation and it is he who acts as a prophet — Moses's prophet (4:14-17; 7:1-7).

This brings me to the final point of difference between Moses and the prophets that I would like to discuss here, and that is vocational responsibility. Although traditionally Moses is well known as a prophet *par excellence*, he is never actually called a prophet in the Pentateuch.[188] Rather, he alone is in a class above the prophets (Num 12:6-8), comes to be known as "a man of the gods" (Deut 33:1; cf. Josh 14:6; Ps 90:1), and remains a unique figure in ancient Israelite history (Deut 18:15-22; 34:10). Within the burning bush narrative, Moses is called to a *task*, not an *office*.[189] At this point in the narrative, Moses's only commission is to get the people out of Egypt (Exod 3:10, 12, 17); the author does not mention the office of prophet or any other office, for that matter.

As Moses's story progresses, his position becomes farther reaching than any of the biblical prophets'. None of the prophets are responsible for any of the following tasks, all of which are part of Moses's legacy: approaching a foreign king, leading a people across continents, receiving and implementing legislative and cultic regulations, commissioning and overseeing the construction and consecration of Yahweh's abode, and

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[188] The issue of whether Moses is a prophet, a proto-prophet, or not a prophet at all is a point of contention that cannot be addressed fully in the space of this dissertation. The Pentateuch discusses "a prophet like Moses" (Deut 18:15-22, 34:10) but it is Miriam who is a prophet (Exod 15:20) and Aaron is analogous to a prophet in respect to his position between Moses and the people (7:1). The interpretation of Moses as a prophet is alluded to as early as Hosea 12:13 and has certainly held the majority opinion regarding Moses's role in the Pentateuch, throughout the history of interpretation. However, this role is brought into question by the fact that Moses is never directly called a prophet in the Pentateuch, but is considered above them (Num 12:6-8). David L. Petersen, "The Ambiguous Role of Moses as Prophet," Pages 311-24 in *Israel's Prophets and Israel's Past: Essays on the Relationship of Prophetic Texts and Israelite History in Honor of John H. Hayes*, ed. Brad E. Kelle and Megan Bishop Moore (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 311-24. A comparison of Exod 3:1-7:7 and the call narratives of the prophets that is thoroughly attentive to difference is yet to be written. Here, it is sufficient to say that any historical relationship between Exodus 3:1-7:7 and the prophetic books is tentative and any such comparison ought to be analyzed further.

[189] The same is true of Isaiah, who is called not to *be* a prophet, but to speak prophetic words to the people and king(s) of Israel. However, Isaiah *is* called a prophet on numerous occasions (Isa 37:2; 38:1; 39:3; cf. 2 Kgs 19:2; 20:1, 11, 14).

judging cases, let alone from within the divine residence. Although it is arguable that Moses does have some prophetic qualities, such as the ability to receive and disseminate God's messages, as well as perform divinely sanctioned miracles and signs, there are more aspects to Moses's person and profession than any biblical prophet experiences.[190] If Moses does qualify as a prophet, it is only one line on an extensive resumé.

Taken together, these differences between the call narratives of Moses and the prophets, on the one hand, and between the responsibilities of Moses and prophets, on the other hand, complicate the traditional understanding of Exod 3:1-7:7 as an extended *prophetic* call narrative. Yet, despite the limitations of categorizing Exod 3:1-7:7 as representative of this genre, the criteria offered by form criticism are helpful for arguing the narrative unity of these four-plus chapters. In fact, reading Exod 3:1-7:7 as a unified text, despite its composite nature, allows me to offer my own contribution — to redescribe the status change of Moses in light of the framework for the status change of idols that is offered by the *Mīs Pî*.

Before I may turn my attention to rereading Exod 3:1-7:7 in light of ancient Mesopotamian idols and the *Mīs Pî*, I must examine the other two interpretive traditions on the issue of Moses's mouth. While arguments that "heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue" (Exod 4:10) and "uncircumcised of lips" (6:12, 30) refer to disability or a language barrier are logical at the level of individual words and phrases, such interpretations do not account for the larger narrative context of the references to Moses's

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[190] These are discussed further in chapter six.

mouth. If I pan back from the specific language of "heavy" and "uncircumcised," I find that Moses's objections are always part of a longer statement wherein his ultimate concern is credibility in the eyes of the Hebrews (4:10) and Pharaoh (6:12, 30).

This concern is so overwhelming to Moses that the knowledge, words, and miraculous signs with which Yahweh equips him hold no promise at resolving the issue, neither does Yahweh's repeated vow to be with Moses and his mouth as the deliverance unfolds. Only the initial arrangement with Aaron brings Moses's objections to a halt, and even then his silence is contingent upon efficacy. The issue is not Moses's capability, what he can or cannot *say or do*, because God himself tells Moses what to say and shows him the supernatural signs that he can indeed perform. Moses's concern is that neither Pharaoh nor the Hebrews perceive him in a way that enables Moses's to carry out his commission of bringing the people out of Egypt.

As Moses perceives his situation, he holds that there is something that must be done to his mouth if he is going to be able to make the Hebrews believe in Yahweh's plan and earn the attention of Pharaoh. Yet throughout his entire career and all his confrontations with Pharaoh, the Hebrews, and his fellow leaders, Moses is the only one who mentions that there is a problem with his mouth, and he speaks of it with only Yahweh and, possibly, Aaron (Exod 4:28).[191] Moreover, the problem is remedied with Yahweh's utterance, "See, I have made you god to Pharaoh and Aaron, your brother, shall be your prophet" (7:1), a statement that has to do with perceived status, not remedying

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[191] Junior and Schipper make this observation regarding the Book of Exodus. The claim holds for the whole Pentateuch. Junior and Schipper, "Mosaic Disability and Identity in Exodus 10; 6:12, 30," 439.

physical disability or restoring forgotten languages. Besides, if it were the case that

Yahweh healed Moses from either disability or memory loss, then there would be no need

for Aaron to remain in his position as Moses's intermediary or prophet because fixing the

issue of Moses's mouth would render Aaron's help unnecessary.

When it comes to the problem with Moses's mouth, the three most common

interpretations — that he has forgotten his Hebrew and Egyptian, suffers from a physical

disability, or engages Yahweh using formulaic language common to prophets — all share

two assumptions. The first is the assumption that the expressions "heavy of mouth and

heavy of tongue" (Exod 4:10) and "uncircumcised of lips" (6:12, 30) are synonymous or

at least different ways of expressing the same problem. The practice of harmonizing these

phrases is at least as old as the LXX and TO, both of which match the uncircumcision

language of Exod 6:12, 30 to the "heavy" language of 4:10. This set an early precedence

for the treatment of these phrases and marks an interpretive step which is echoed

throughout rabbinic literature and modern scholarship.[192] Most modern translations

circumvent the issue by maintaining a difference in language, but translate figuratively so

that both objections still carry the same meaning (e.g., NRSV, NASB, NJPS, LEB).

However, the meaning of neither objection is immediately clear in the Hebrew,

regardless of whether the phrases are treated separately or taken together. Juxtapositions

designed to demonstrate the interchangeability of *kəbad*, "heavy," and *ʿăral*,

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[192] Tigay appeals directly to the practices of Targums Onkelos and Neofiti to justify his harmonization of *ʿrl*
to *kvd*, and also gives examples of rabbinic texts that do the same. Tigay, "'Heavy of Mouth' and 'Heavy of
Tongue' on Moses' Speech Difficulty," 57.

"uncircumcised," do not embrace the different connotations and nuances of the individual terms. For example, Tigay aligns "make its ears heavy...lest...it hear with its ears" (Isa 6:10; cf. Isa 59:1; Zech 7:11) with "their ear is uncircumcised, so that they cannot pay heed" (Jer 6:10) to suggest that "heavy" and "uncircumcised" express the same figurative problem, what he calls "a malfunction of the organ."[193] However, this parallel does not take into account the fact that not only are there differences in meaning between *kəbad*, "heavy," and *ʿăral*, "uncircumcised," but each of these terms elicits an entire web of symbolism on its own accord. In fact, as I discuss later in this chapter, the shift from *kəbad* to *ʿăral* has implications for understanding how Exod 3:1-7:7 works as a whole, and, by extension, the issue of Moses's mouth and identity.[194]

The same holds for the correspondence Tigay makes between "Pharaoh's heart is hard (lit. 'heavy'), he refuses..." (Exod 7:14) and "Then shall their uncircumcised heart humble itself..." (Lev 26:41). Immediately after placing these verses opposite one another, Tigay goes on to argue that *kəbad*, "heavy" refers to physical disability, but does not apply this conclusion across the board. To do so would be logically inconsistent, yielding the conclusion that Pharaoh's stubbornness was caused by a physical malformation (Exod 7:14) and that the author of Leviticus held that people with heart defects would be particularly humble in the future (Lev 26:41). Tigay is correct to suggest that, idiomatically, both *kəbad* and *ʿăral* can be used to refer to malfunctioning

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[193] For example, see Tigay, "'Heavy of Mouth' and 'Heavy of Tongue' on Moses' Speech Difficulty," 57-8.

[194] This is the main subject of chapter four.

organs, but other biblical uses of these terms in conjunction with body parts suggest that the malfunction need not be literal, nor do *kəbad* and *ʿăral* carry the same connotations. This point is underscored in chapter four, where I examine the literal and metaphoric nuances of the term *ʿăral*, "uncircumcised," as a foundational piece of my comparison between Moses and ancient Mesopotamian idols with respect to status change.

Furthermore, treatments of *kəbad*, "heavy," and *ʿăral*, "uncircumcised," as synonymous most often read this particular use of *ʿăral* in light of *kəbad*, thus granting priority to *kəbad* as the term that illuminates Moses's complaint.[195] While it does make logical sense to read *ʿăral śəpātayim*, "uncircumcised of lips" (6:12, 30) in light of *kəbad-peh ûkəbad lāšôn*, "heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue" (4:10) given that the latter appears first in the narrative, *kəbad* simply does not have the same potency or connotations as *ʿăral śəpātayim*.

Most importantly, this harmonization also renders Moses's shift in language irrelevant to the overarching narrative, but it is, in fact, integral. The presence of different language can be explained by the composite nature of Exod 3:1-7:7, but categorizing each verse according to its respective literary source does not explain how this shift in language functions within the narrative as a whole.[196] This shift also supports my interpretation that Exod 3:1-4:17 and 6:2-7:7 refer to different phases of Moses's

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[195] For example, Tigay, "'Heavy of Mouth' and 'Heavy of Tongue' on Moses' Speech Difficulty," 57. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 21, 33.

[196] On the division of Exod 3:1-7:7 into sources, see Jeon, *The Call of Moses and the Exodus Story*, 188-89, 199-206, 238. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, 97-111.

transformation. Harmonization also does not engage the question that drives my investigation into Moses's status change — why the phrase "uncircumcised of lips"?

The second assumption that informs all three strands of interpretation is that the burning bush episode (Exod 3:1-4:17) is sufficient to affect the necessary change in Moses's being. If what happens at the burning bush is Moses's prophetic call narrative, then one would expect the various signs Moses amasses through the first three objection and response cycles (i.e., worship at Sinai, the tetragrammaton, the diseased hand made whole, the staff turned serpent, water turned to blood) to ensure his success, and the inclusion of Aaron to soften his feeling of inadequacy. Additionally, if Moses's issue is a speech impediment, forgotten language, or ineloquence, then the arrangement with Aaron ought to remedy the situation. Instead, the multi-faceted arsenal with which Yahweh sends Moses back to Egypt highlights just how heavy is the failure of his commission and the utter difficulty of the task at hand.

At first, Moses succeeds in inspiring the Hebrews' belief through the divine word he relays to Aaron and the signs he himself performs (Exod 4:28-31), but these words and signs are no match for the harsh reality of Pharaoh's response to Yahweh's command, a command which comes through the mouth of Aaron via Moses (5:1-9). In the eyes of the Hebrew people, and for good reason, supernatural signs and divine messages are outweighed by the practical power of Pharaoh. Now, instead of building the people's belief in his commission from the ground-level, Moses must work from a negative; the same holds true for the Pharaoh that he and Aaron just provoked. If Moses's commission

is to be a success, Yahweh must intervene above and beyond the expectations of either

the Hebrews or the Egyptians; he must make Moses "god to Pharaoh."

God to Pharaoh

The nature of the problem with Moses's mouth is the first specific issue within

Exod 3:1-7:7 that is highlighted by my work on the Mesopotamian *Mīs Pî*; the second of

these issues that I must address in preparation for my comparison of Moses and idols is

intimately related to the first and that is the nature of Moses's status change. Of all the

scenes and sayings that establish comparability between Moses and ancient

Mesopotamian idols, the exchange in which Moses complains about a symbolic problem

with his mouth and Yahweh then responds by making him "god to Pharaoh" is, perhaps,

the most striking (Exod 6:28-7:1). Before I may propose a new reading of these matters, I

must first analyze how Moses's status change has been interpreted throughout history.

This analysis will illuminate the usefulness of a new reading of Exod 3:1-7:7 as a whole,

one which warrants placing Moses and idols in conversation with one another.

"God to Pharaoh" as an Analogy

Since the beginning of the known history of biblical interpretation, there has

always been discomfort about Yahweh's statement *rəʾēh nətattîkā ʾĕlōhîm ləparʿōh*

wəʾahărōn ʾāḥîkā yihəyeh nəbîʾekā, "See, I have made you god to Pharaoh and Aaron,

your brother, shall be your prophet" (Exod 7:1). Among scribal communities, this

phrasing is left without comment. For example, the oldest extant manuscript fragment of

the Book of Exodus, 4Q22 paleoExodus[m], preserves the same reading of Exod 7:1 that is

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found in the Masoretic Text (MT) used today.[197] Although both scribal groups had

mechanisms by which they could comment on or offer corrections to troubling words and

phrases, neither the scribes who penned the Dead Sea Scrolls, nor the scribes of

Masoretic tradition marked Yahweh's statement as unusual or problematic. However,

those who translate or otherwise interpret "god to Pharaoh" have to decide how this phase

ought to be understood, and therein lies a discomfort.

The unease interpreters generally experience about the polytheistic implications

of Yahweh's statement is usually handled by interpreting "god to Pharaoh" as an analogy.

This interpretation manifests itself in one of four ways: through modifications to the word

ʾĕlōhîm "god," aligning Moses and the divine *with respect to* a particular aspect, placing

parameters around the application of the title "god," or any combination of the above.

The first, modifying ʾĕlōhîm, has been the standard treatment of Exod 7:1 since the

earliest translations of the Hebrew Bible and is a practice which continues today. For

example, the LXX renders "god to Pharaoh" as "god *of* Pharaoh" (θεὸν Φαραω),

suggesting that Moses is as much of a god as any of the other deities Pharaoh regards,

which, of course, are no gods at all according to the Bible. Another ancient translation,

Targum Onkelos, changes ʾĕlōhîm altogether and translates "god (ʾĕlōhîm) to Pharaoh" as

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[197] *4Q22 paleoExodus m* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2010). Patrick W. Skehan, Eugene Ulrich, Judith E. Sanderson, *Qumran Cave 4.V: Palaeo-Hebrew and Greek Biblical Manuscripts*, DJD IX (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 72, pl. VII. Digitized fragment available through The Leon Levy Digital Scrolls Library of the Israel Antiquities Authority. Accessed March 17, 2016, http://www.deadseascrolls.org.il/explore-the-archive/image/B-298147

"*teacher* (*rb*) to Pharaoh," setting precedence for Exodus Rabbah and other rabbinic works to interpret ʾĕlōhîm as meaning something other than a divine being.[198]

Among modern translators, the most common approach is to modify the noun ʾĕlōhîm by supplying a preposition, resulting in the popular translations "*like* god to Pharaoh" (e.g., ESV, NRSV) and "*as* god to Pharaoh" (e.g., LEB, NASB, NKJV, NIV). This treatment of Exod 7:1, the Hebrew of which does not modify ʾĕlōhîm in any way, is often justified by appealing to Yahweh's response to Moses after his first mouth-related objection, "heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue am I" (Exod 4:10-17).[199] This is when Aaron is first introduced as Moses's right-hand man. As part of Yahweh's explanation of how the arrangement is going to work, he says to Moses ". . . as for him, he will be *like* a mouth (*ləpeh*) to you, and as for you, you shall be *like* a god (*lē'lōhîm*) to him" (4:16). Here, ʾĕlōhîm is accompanied by the attached preposition *lāmed*, which carries the interpretive option of indicating a simile or comparison. Given the poetic parallelism of the line and the *lāmed* attached to the metaphor "mouth" used to describe Aaron's role in relation to Moses, the use of a preposition in Exod 4:16 is fitting. However, this does not entail that the same reading ought to be imported into Yahweh's explanation of Moses's role in relation to Pharaoh, as it is presented in Exod 7:1.

Historically, commentaries and other expositions of Exodus 7:1 have argued for a wide-range of interpretations of Moses's status as "god to Pharaoh" and what that means

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[198] Israel Drazin, *Targum Onkelos to Exodus: An English Translation of the Text with Analysis and Commentary* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Publishing, 1990), 87-88 n.1-2.

[199] For example, Meyers, *Exodus,* 69. Coats, *Moses*, 69.

in the context of the narrative. In antiquity, certain traditions and thinkers held that Moses was divine; however, the vast majority of commentators, especially those from Jewish and early Christian circles, interpreted the text in a way that avoids or explains away any claim to divinity.[200] The most common type of argument is that Moses is analogous to the divine in some way, even if only in relation to Pharaoh. For example, Gregory of Nyssa, the 4th-century bishop, explains that Moses might be considered god to Pharaoh because one who understands matters of faith "right away becomes a god to those who resist the truth, who have been distracted to a material and unsubstantial delusion."[201] In this analogy, Moses is *like* god *with respect to* his acceptance of and ability to focus on the truth. Pharaoh, on the other hand, is resistant and distracted by delusion. Such an interpretive approach persists in modern commentaries, with some authors openly identifying analogy as their interpretive approach.[202]

Another common way of dealing with Moses's status as "god to Pharaoh" is to emphasize the phrase *to Pharaoh*. By limiting Moses's divine(like) nature to his interactions with Pharaoh (Exod 7:1) and Aaron (4:16), scholars are free to argue that Moses's status is temporary and extends only to the functional aspects of these specific relationships.[203] The uses of *(lə) ʾĕlōhîm* in Exod 4:16 and 7:1 serve only to situate Aaron

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[200] For a synopsis of the many ways in which Moses's divinity is interpreted in ancient Judaism, see Feldman, *Philo's Portrayal of Moses in the Context of Ancient Judaism*, 331-57.

[201] Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson. *Gregory of Nyssa, The Life of Moses: Translation, Introduction, and Notes*, CWS (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), II.35.

[202] For example Meyers, *Exodus*, 69.

[203] Coats, *Moses*, 69-70.

and Pharaoh with respect to Moses.[204] Again, this interpretation falls under the category

of analogy. Here, Pharaoh, Moses, and Aaron are compared to humans, gods, and

prophets, respectively, *with respect to* their mode of relating to one another. Moses

interacts with Pharaoh *like* a god interacts with humans (or, perhaps, other gods), plus he

interacts with Aaron *like* a deity interacts with its prophet. In this interpretation, Moses's

god-ness does not extend beyond the confines of these two relationships.

<div align="center">Critique and Analysis</div>

The instinct to read "god to Pharaoh" as an analogy, even going so far as to

impose an analogical reading by supplying "like" or "as" where there is no preposition in

the Hebrew, misses what the author is doing. If one reads the Bible as the product of the

ancient Near East and examines how other leaders are spoken of among Israel's

neighbors, it soon becomes evident that referring to a leader as divine or as having divine

qualities was the convention of the day. In ancient Egypt, Pharaohs were considered

gods.[205] In Mesopotamia, kings were considered gods in some eras and were said to have

divine attributes in others.[206] Among the ancient Greeks, it was common for heroes and

legendary leaders to be considered divine or godlike, especially in the works of Homer.[207]

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[204] E. Theodore Mullen, Jr. *Ethnic Myths and Pentateuchal Foundations: A New Approach to the Formation on the Pentateuch*, SBLSem (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 179.

[205] Gary A. Rendsburg, "Moses as Equal to Pharaoh," Pages 201-19 in *Text, Artifact, and Image: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion*, eds. Gary Beckman and Theodore J. Lewis (Providence: Brown University, 2006), 201-19.

[206] See note 121.

[207] Feldman, *Philo's Portrayal of Moses in the Context of Ancient Judaism*, 331-32.

Given the Pentateuch's historical context, there is a strong probability that the audience to which the Book of Exodus was originally aimed expected a similar claim to be made about Moses. For Moses to be called *ʾĕlōhîm* with no modifiers, that is, as literally a god rather than as analogous to God in certain respects, would not have been out of the ordinary in the ancient Near East. What is unusual about the title's application to Moses is precisely that it is applied to Moses — a child born into slavery, adopted by the royal house, and who ran into the wilderness when faced with danger. What is striking is not that Moses is called "god" by God himself, but the notion that it is this Moses to whom Pharaoh, the divine king of a powerful nation, would submit.

Reading Moses's status change in light of this context also illuminates the fact that calling Moses "god" is actually necessary to the story and not a title to be softened by making it into an analogy. It is suitable for Moses to be *like* a god (*lē'lōhîm*) to Aaron because Aaron is his older brother, who knows Moses personally and in all his humanity. Pharaoh is another situation altogether. As the hardness of Pharaoh's heart suggests, Pharaoh, in his capacity as a divine being, is probably not interested in confrontation with someone who is sort-of like a god with respect to a particular trait or set of traits, let alone the prophet of a foreign god. As his reaction to increase the labor of the Hebrews so boldly proves, Pharaoh simply does what he wants when it comes to those of lesser status, especially when he is challenged to do the opposite. It is at this point in the narrative of Exodus that it becomes clear to Moses, as well as to those who are reading or

hearing this story, that if Moses is going to affect change, his status must not only match

Pharaoh's status as a god, but must supersede it.

What is difficult about this reading, and the reason it has not been wholly

embraced over the past 2,000-plus years of interpretation, is that this is the same Moses

who will soon receive the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:1-17) and be credited by later

traditions as the founder of aniconic monotheism. Interpreting Moses as a god, even if

only to Pharaoh, poses a threat to the idea of a single, cosmic deity, the first

commandment, and a fair amount of Moses's own teachings as they are presented in the

Pentateuch. Calling Moses "god" is inconsistent with much of what Moses himself says

about proper worship and religion, yet Moses's status as god over the god-king becomes

evident when Pharaoh's firstborn is struck dead (12:29) and his charioteers are drowned

in the sea (14:26-28; 15:4-5). Even Pharaoh's notoriously hard heart is moved to

submission, if only temporarily (12:31-32).

This logical inconsistency is why it is helpful, even necessary, to describe Moses

in terms of an idol. The comparison between Moses and ancient Mesopotamian idols

helps to reconcile the god language of Exod 7:1, the function of Moses's status change

within the narrative, and the religious values the authors of the Pentateuch will later

espouse. Before I present fully the weight and contours of this comparison, there is one

last piece of foundational understanding I must secure. In order to illustrate how Moses's

status change is comparable to that of an idol's, with respect to the dual requirements of

first embodying the deity, then being reborn into the office of mediator, I must propose a new location, nature, and function of Moses's status change within Exod 3:1-7:7.

A Proposal for Rereading Exodus 3:1-7:7

Moses's string of eight objections, beginning with "Who am I?" in Exod 3:11 and ending with "I am uncircumcised of lips" in 6:12, 30, all work toward Moses's argument that his status needs to be drastically changed if his commission is to succeed. The more Yahweh ignores Moses's questions, the more drastic the plight of the Hebrew people becomes; the more Moses restates his concern, the greater the intensity of his language. Finally, Moses finds the words that grab the deity's attention and elicit a direct response "Behold, I am uncircumcised of lips, so how shall Pharaoh listen to me?" (Exod 6:30; cf. 6:12). These objections are woven throughout the text of Exod 3:1-7:7 and serve as a thread which ties together the various sources and redactional layers, leading toward the anticipated status change for which Moses has been arguing.

The juxtaposition of the burning bush dialogue (Exod 3:1-4:17) and the second conversation between Moses and Yahweh (6:2-7:7) adds a layer of complexity to this section of Exodus that cannot be expounded upon fully within the confines of the commentary genre. In this particular instance, the latter story, attributed to the P source, does not simply parallel or supersede the Non-P version, but prompts us to reread the burning bush event through the "priestly filter" present in the second conversation, at the end of which Moses becomes god to Pharaoh (7:1).[208] If I follow P's lead, then the

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[208] Smith, *Pilgrimage Pattern in Exodus*, 202. On this division into P and Non-P, see Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, 97-111.

common reading of "uncircumcised of lips" (6:12, 30) as subservient or secondary to "heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue" (4:10) ought to be reversed. Rather, the issue of Moses's mouth becomes clearer when it is read in retrospect and with an eye for symbolic, ritual language that may have been part of the priestly repertoire.

This proposal does not undercut the importance of Exod 3:1-4:17 as the initiation of God's relationship with Moses and the beginning of Israel's deliverance from bondage. The messages and signs Yahweh provides Moses in the wilderness do play an important role in initiating the Hebrews' belief (Exod 4:28-31) and in the contest with Pharaoh's magicians (7:8-25). Yet however empowering these may be for Moses and Aaron, they do not solve what Moses perceives to be the fundamental problem standing in the way of this mission's success. The arrangement with Aaron in Exod 4:10-17 does not address Moses's issue; if it is a language barrier, a disability, or general unease in Exod 4:10, then Moses's issue in 6:12, 30 is something else.

If the addition of Aaron is an effective remedy for Moses's first complaint, then the second is of a different nature. That something is still amiss in Moses's being is suggested through Yahweh's attack in the night, which triggers Moses's wife to perform an emergency circumcision, and also his immediate failure before Pharaoh (Exod 4:24-6:1).[209] The text does indeed support Coats's assertion that the burning bush event establishes God's presence in and with Moses (3:12, 14; 4:5, 11-12, 15), but I would like

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[209] There is no general consensus as to the role of the "bridegroom of blood" scene since the cryptic nature of the pericope prevents a clear interpretation (4:24-26). However, almost all commentaries have a sizable section devoted to these three verses, some of which are visually separated from the main text of the commentary. For example, see Meyers, *Exodus*, 64-66. Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 233-41.

to expand this interpretation further.[210] If Exod 3:1-4:17 is about God's presence in

Moses, then that presence is somehow impeded during Moses's return journey and initial

visit in Pharaoh's court. However, this is not an issue after Exod 6:2-7:7.

It then follows that, if Exod 3:1-4:17 is about God's presence in Moses, then

6:2-7:7 is about enabling that same presence to effectively channel through Yahweh's

chosen mediator. This two-part transformation reflects ancient Near Eastern ideas about

the nature and induction of mediators, as communicated in the *Mīs Pî* and other literature

relevant to understanding idols. The dual requirement that Yahweh's presence be

established in and with Moses, and that Moses be "reborn" so that Yahweh's presence

might move through him explains the form and function of Exod 3:1-7:7 as a whole.

This framework also explains the author's placement of Moses's genealogy, and

his use of circumcision and "god" language. Exod 6:2-7:7 is not simply a reconfiguring

of 3:1-4:17, but has an entirely different, albeit related, goal in mind. There are some

similarities between the two conversations, but if one reads with an eye for *difference*,

especially the differences in how God reacts to Moses's complaints, then a difference in

purpose also comes to the surface. The first two times Moses complains about his mouth

(Exod 4:10; 6:12), Yahweh does not respond directly, but circumvents the issue or ignores

it altogether. However, in the negative space between 6:30 and 7:1, something does occur.

Moses is relieved of his uncircumcised lips and, as a result, becomes "god to

Pharaoh" (7:1). Not *like* god or *as* god, but god. As Moses's first confrontation with

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[210] Coats, *Moses*, 69.

Pharaoh proves, he must become a god, with no modifiers, in order to accomplish his mission.

Yet just before the moment of Moses's transformation from misfit to mediator, between his two utterances of the phrase "I am uncircumcised of lips" (Exod 6:12, 30), the narrator interrupts the momentum of the story and provides the most detailed genealogy of the Hebrew Bible (6:14-27).[211] The expansive form of this genealogy and its placement at this juncture in the narrative breaks the biblical convention of genealogy keeping. Traditionally, biblical genealogies include only the most pertinent lineage and come before the birth of the character (e.g., Gen 5; 11:10-26; 25:12-26; Exod 1:1-5; Ruth 4:18-22). However, this one includes distant relatives and comes in the middle of what is arguably one of Moses's most important conversations with Yahweh. This pericope is often interpreted as an interruption, designed to grant Moses authority in a way befitting of the P-source, who has a characteristic affinity for genealogies and lists.[212]

However, I interpret this genealogy as serving two additional and indispensable functions. First of all, genealogies draw attention to the character's human origins. P is reminding the audience that Moses and Aaron are flesh and blood, from a known family, whose kin can be traced in detail. Just in case the reader misses this point, it is made explicit in the two verses that bridge the genealogy and Moses's status change, "*These*

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[211] Although it only covers four generations, tracing both Moses and his brother Aaron to their common ancestor, Levi, this genealogy is unusual in its expansiveness. This one does not simply trace Moses back to Levi, but includes information regarding Levi's older brothers, Moses and Aaron's cousins and their cousins' children, and Aaron's wife, children, and grandchild. Interestingly, this genealogy does not include Moses's son(s), only Aaron's.

[212] Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, 169.

are the Aaron and Moses to whom the Lord said: 'Bring out the people of Israel from the land of Egypt by their hosts.' *It was they* who spoke to Pharaoh king of Egypt about bringing the people of Israel from Egypt, *this Moses and Aaron*" (Exod 6:26-27 ESV).[213] By emphasizing the humanity of Moses, P manages the audience's interpretation of Moses's status as "god to Pharaoh" (7:1) by setting a counter-weight to the transformation scene which follows.

The second function of Moses's genealogy is subtle, but even more suggestive for my comparison of Moses and idols. It is not a coincidence that redaction history placed this piece of text in its current location, between Moses's first utterance of "uncircumcised of lips" (Exod 6:12) and his re-utterance, which finally results in his transformation. In light of the *Mīs Pî*, I argue that by placing this genealogy on the eve of Moses's transformation rather than prior to his physical birth, where one would expect, the author suggests that this is the point at which Moses's destined life truly begins — he is now reborn into his new life as Yahweh's mediating idol.

Moses's change in status, from a misfit to the mediator of Yahweh, from "uncircumcised of lips" to "god to Pharaoh" (6:30-7:1), is cast as nothing less than a rebirth. Like an idol, Moses, too, is presented as one who must pass from one mode of existence into another, but may do so only in accordance with the divine will. Moses's status change is constituted as a rebirth from his prior state in which he was "uncircumcised of lips," into his new life as "god to Pharaoh" and mediator between

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[213] Italics mine.

divine and human realms. This language of rebirth is also fitting with the metaphor of

uncircumcision, as only those males who are less than a week old may be characterized

as such, without the term taking on negative connotations. Yahweh's symbolic

"circumcision" of Moses's lips ushers him into a new mode of existence, defined by a

status that is markedly different from any other status portrayed in the Hebrew Bible.

Conclusion

Placing the "circumcision" of Moses's mouth (Exod 6:28-7:1) at the center of

Moses's status change, suggests that his transformation requires two steps: the infusion of

the divine presence in and with his being, and the enabling of that presence to flow

through its conduit. It is the latter step that is most problematic for Moses and the point

after which his transformation is complete. If I read Moses's status change in light of the

status change of an idol, which is divine from its inception but is only functionally "born"

through the *Mīs Pî* ceremony, then the divine presence within Moses and his (re)birth into

his position as Yahweh's mediator makes more sense. Reading his transition through this

particular comparison also serves to highlight and explain the paradoxical nature of

Moses's existence, as a limited corporeal being who signifies the divine presence and

through whom a cosmic deity mediates.

This comparison requires that one hold the tension between the aniconic messages

of the biblical authors, on the one hand, and the polytheistic implications of Yahweh's

statement that Moses is "god to Pharaoh," on the other hand. Only then does the value of

the comparison between Moses and ancient Mesopotamian idols come to light in a way

that both challenges and furthers traditional interpretations of Moses's status change,

including his relationship with Yahweh.

Yet unlike the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, the symbolism of the "circumcision"

of Moses's mouth is not found in a performative act on the part of Yahweh. Rather, it is in

the very words chosen for this exchange. In the following chapter, I focus on the

language of "uncircumcised of lips" and "god to Pharaoh" (Exod 6:30-7:1), and read this

language in comparison with that of the *Mīs Pî*. In the course of this analysis, the full

significance of Moses's status change comes into the foreground, and the nature and

implications of this status change may be read in a new light.

CHAPTER FOUR: CIRCUMCISING THE MOUTH OF MOSES

Idols that have undergone the status change from idle materials to a manifestation of the divine via the *Mīs Pî* provide helpful comparative material for understanding the status change of Moses. Chapters two and three provided thick descriptions of the *Mīs Pî* and Moses's transformation, respectively, as processes of status change likened to birth and resulting in divine standing. These status changes — from idle materials to an idol and from "uncircumcised of lips" (*ʿăral śəpātāyim*) to "god to Pharaoh" — are enacted by a shift in nature elicited by symbolic word and action.

In this chapter, I compare the circumcision of Moses's lips (Exod 6:28-7:1) and the *Mīs Pî*, "washing, purification of the mouth" ritual with respect to the shift in essential nature that this status change requires. This comparison is preceded by two arguments, the first in relation to Moses and the second in relation to idols. First, Moses's language of "uncircumcised of lips" reflects a derogatory sentiment within the Hebrew (Israelite) community, and relates specifically to Moses's inability to contribute to the fulfillment of Yahweh's promise to Abraham for land and progeny. Second, the objective of the *Mīs Pî*, including the element of *Pīt Pî*, "opening the mouth," was to prepare and enable the idol to act as the conduit of the divine word. Without the proper enactment of the divine word, there could be no security, whether political, social, or agricultural,

because it was the proper presence of and engagement with the divine word that made possible life itself, from plant to person to civilization.

Placing the evidence for both of these arguments in comparative perspective yields two additional and related arguments. The historical, etymological origin of the name Moses, *Mošeh*, comes from the same Semitic root as the word, "washing, purification," in the phrase *Mīs Pî*, "washing, purification of the mouth," thus offering a new possibility for identifying Moses as "he who is washed, pure." By analogy with idols and the *Mīs Pî*, this etymology assigns to Moses a special status that both precedes and enables the circumcision of his mouth, after which he is able to act as the conduit of the divine word. It is only after the circumcision of Moses's mouth that his identity as "he who is pure" is able to come to fruition.

That being said, my second argument is that the central focus of the status changes of both Moses and idols is the shift in their essential natures that makes possible mediation between divinity and humanity, rather than the actual processes of status change themselves. For both the biblical authors and the authors of the *Mīs Pî*, what was of utmost importance was not whether people understood exactly how the status changes of Moses and idols, respectively, were carried out, but whether the audience understood the full significance of the status change that had occurred. That significance is the central focus of this chapter.

I develop these arguments by engaging a three-fold question: *what* do these status changes achieve, *how* do they achieve it, and *why* is the result so important for their

respective audiences? Engaging the answers to this question for both the *Mīs Pî* and

Moses highlights those areas of comparison that are potentially the most fruitful for

understanding the nature of the status change of mediators. Perhaps the most important of

these observations is that both the circumcision of Moses's lips (Exod 6:28-7:1) and the

Mīs Pî share the ultimate goal of enabling the divine word to issue forth from the deity,

through its chosen medium, and into society. This word may be issued only through a

mediator destined for such a task and set apart as such. According to both the Hebrew

Bible and *Mīs Pî* texts, this divine word is essential to the individual and collective lives

of the community associated with the deity; without this word, there is no well-being.

The Biblical Language of Uncircumcision

In chapter three, I analyzed what Moses requests when he complains "I am

uncircumcised of lips" (Exod 6:12, 30) by examining Yahweh's response, "See, I have

made you god to Pharaoh" (7:1). Although "divine status" with respect to Pharaoh is the

obvious answer provided by the text, this does not explain how Moses expects his status

change to come to fruition. In order to understand what change Moses's complaint is

designed to elicit, I must look not only at God's response, but also at the language of the

complaint itself. Moses uses "uncircumcised" at this moment in the narrative precisely

because it is a loaded term.

Whether in literal usage or in metaphor, the biblical language of "circumcised" or

"uncircumcised" elicits a carefully crafted web of symbolism. A thorough analysis of

other uses of circumcision language in the Hebrew Bible demonstrates that, at its core,

demarcating between circumcised and uncircumcised is related to three interwoven

matters: one's insider or outsider status with respect to the Abrahamic Covenant, the

inherent dignity or shame associated with insider or outsider status, respectively, and, in

the exilic period, purity and impurity. Moses's use of "uncircumcised of lips" reflects the

biblical authors' understanding of his essential nature and what it is about Moses that

Yahweh needs to change in order for him to carry out his commission. Assessing how

circumcision language is used elsewhere allows one to see what issues Moses's complaint

is designed to elicit and why he speaks of his status change with such peculiar imagery. It

also sets the stage for comparison with the *Mīs Pî*.

Uncircumcision as a Physical State

The origins of the practice of surgically removing the foreskin at a given time in a

man's life are uncertain. Some theorize that the act mimics agricultural pruning, which

increases the fertility of certain plants and, by analogy, also increases male reproductive

capabilities.[214] Others hold that the practice is about purifying the genitals from any

biological ambiguity, thus perfecting one's sex.[215] There are many other theories as to the

origin of circumcision, the abundance of which suggests that no all-inclusive statement

can be made as to its purpose.[216] If one wants to know the rationale for circumcision in

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[214] See Leviticus 19:23. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, "The Fruitful Cut," Pages 141-76 in *The Savage in Judaism: An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 141-76.

[215] Mary Nyangweso Wangila, *Female Circumcision: The Interplay of Religion, Culture, and Gender in Kenya*, Women from the Margins (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 99-100, 103.

[216] For a summary of the main theories, see Thomas O. Beidelman, "Circumcision," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones (New York: Macmillian, 2005), 3: 1798-1800.

this or that culture, one must examine the ways in which that particular culture

understands it.

In the Hebrew Bible, circumcision is *the* marker of distinction between those men

who belong to the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 15, 17) — Yahweh's dual vow that the

people of Israel shall be innumerable and possess the Promised Land — and those men

who do not belong to it. Uncircumcision is associated with foreigners, specifically those

who infringe upon Israel's population and their possession of the land. To call one

"uncircumcised" is to insult and shame them, akin to calling that person a "dirty

foreigner." In the exilic period, these negative connotations expand to include impurity.

"Uncircumcised" as an Insult to Outsiders of the Abrahamic Covenant

Genesis 17:1-14 is clear that physical circumcision is the visible mark of

induction into the Abrahamic Covenant. Most references to those who are *uncircumcised*

use the term as an emasculating insult against those who are not descended from

Abraham, whether near neighbors or enemies from afar.[217] For example, it is a shame for

an Israelite to marry either "one who is uncircumcised" (Gen 34:14) or "a woman from

among the uncircumcised" (Judg 14:3).[218]

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[217] Gen 34:14; Judg 14:3; 15:18; 1 Sam 14:6; 17:26, 36; 31:4; 2 Sam 1:20; Jer 9:26; Ezek 28:10; 31:18; 32:19, 21, 24-30, 32; Hab 2:16; 1 Chr 10:4; The other six references describe men who are about to be circumcised (Gen 17:14; Josh 5:7), men who are prohibited from partaking of Passover (Exod 12:48), and certain foreigners who are prohibited from the temple (Ezek 44:7-9) or Zion (Isa 52:1). These are discussed in later sections.

[218] In their respective literary contexts, both of these statements are uttered just before a violent conflict with near neighbors, the former between the sons of Jacob and Hamor, and the latter between Samson and the Philistines.

In fact, the authors whose traditions comprise the Deuteronomistic History apply this insult to the Philistines regularly. It is a shame to have one's corpse "fall into the hands of the uncircumcised" (Judg 15:18), or for "the daughters of the uncircumcised" to have reason to rejoice (2 Sam 1:20). It is even preferable to be killed by one's armor-bearer, or to kill oneself, rather than be at the mercy of "these uncircumcised" (1 Sam 31:4; 1 Chr 10:4). The uncircumcised may also be interpreted as oblivious, as Jonathan infiltrates the "garrison of these uncircumcised" (1 Sam 14:6) using only his wit and the help of his aide. Finally, Goliath is the "uncircumcised Philistine" extraordinaire, who cannot defy the armies of the living God (17:26), nor threaten the shepherd boy who has struck down both lions and bears (17:36). In each instance, the adjective "uncircumcised" applies to those who seek negatively to affect Israel's capacity to live into Yahweh's promises, either by harming the people or threatening to take over the land.

By extension, the language of uncircumcision also conveys a sense of fault, shame, and disgust. These sentiments are amplified in the prophets, some of who also apply "uncircumcised" to each of Israel's enemies. The prophet Ezekiel uses uncircumcision as a mark of condemnation upon Israel's enemies — Tyre, Egypt, Assyria, Elam, Meshech-Tubal, Edom, Sidon, and the other "princes of the north" (Ezek 32:19-32; cf. 31:18). He even concentrates this language so that the audience cannot miss it, using "uncircumcised" ten times in a span of thirteen verses, driving the point that Israel's enemies are synonymous with those who are uncircumcised and, as a result, bear a dishonor that follows them through life, death, and even Sheol (32:19-32).

The prophet Habakkuk also shames using the language of uncircumcision when he prophesies against Babylon, "You will have your fill of shame instead of glory; Drink, yourself, and show your uncircumcision" (Hab 2:16). For Habakkuk, the most poignant image to convey the severity of Babylon's impending indignity is a drunkard who humiliates himself by exposing the very body part which bears the mark of his disfavor. In this context, inebriated pride in one's uncircumcised state is an illustration of the depth of shame that befalls only the most notorious of enemies, Babylon.

"Uncircumcised" as Unclean

The use of "uncircumcised" as an insult or as shaming language is likely related to its association with uncleanness. The biblical authors are disdainful of the state of uncircumcision in general, but it is Deutero-Isaiah and Ezekiel, both writing during the exile, who draw a parallel between uncircumcised and unclean. This suggests that perhaps uncircumcision, like impurity, may have been viewed as a pollutant of the sacred and threat to holiness, in addition to its ramifications for the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant.[219] According to Ezekiel, Yahweh prohibits foreigners from entering his sanctuary because they are characterized as "uncircumcised of heart and uncircumcised of flesh" (Ezek 44:7-9). Their uncircumcision is said to profane the house of God, thus disqualifying them from entering sacred space and worshipping Yahweh at the temple.[220]

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[219] For more on uncleanness as a threat to holiness and what that means in the Hebrew Bible, see David P. Wright, "Unclean and Clean," *ABD* 6:735.

[220] Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 274.

Similarly, Deutero-Isaiah pairs together "uncircumcised" and "unclean" (ʿārēl wəṭāmēʾ). In an oracle of salvation, he proclaims, "Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion; put on the garments of your glory, O Jerusalem, the holy city; for there shall never again come into you (yābōʾ-bāk) the uncircumcised (ʿārēl) or the unclean (wəṭāmēʾ)" (Isa 52:1). The prophet draws a parallel between the holy city being tainted by ritual impurity (ṭāmēʾ), on the one hand, and a glorious lady being forcefully penetrated (bōʾ-b) by one who is uncircumcised, on the other. It is not clear if Deutero-Isaiah viewed uncircumcised males as ritually unclean and a threat to holiness, if he is simply using poetry to reassure Jerusalem that it will not be invaded by foreign armies, or if the ambiguity reflects both possibilities. What is clear is that, for Ezekiel and Deutero-Isaiah, uncircumcision is on par with defilement or uncleanness. Not only are the uncircumcised denied access to that which is holy, but their mere presence contaminates that which is pure, threatens the balance of holiness, and, by extension, Israel's prosperity and presence in the Promised Land.

Social and Symbolic Effects of Physical Circumcision

To be uncircumcised is to remain outside of God's covenant with Abraham; to be circumcised is to be inducted into that covenant relationship. The removal of one's foreskin signifies the removal of the negative attributes of shame, fault, foreignness, and danger attributed to those who exist outside of God's promise, and, at the same time, imbues one with special standing among the people of the earth (Deut 10:10-22). It is the initiatory rite by which a male's status is changed from that of an outsider in the eyes of

Yahweh and his people, to a member of the ethno-religious community that is Israel (Gen 17:1-14; Exod 12:43-49; Lev 12:3; Josh 5:1-9), with all of the responsibilities this status change entails.[221]

Furthermore, he who is circumcised is no longer disqualified from entering the holy city (Isa 52:1) or God's house (Ezek 44:7-9) on the grounds of his uncircumcision. Although there is no biblical reference that speaks of circumcision as a purification rite, the fact that both Deutero-Isaiah and Ezekiel draw a parallel between uncircumcision and uncleanness suggests that perhaps circumcision may have been considered a type of purification in the exilic or post-exilic period. Deutero-Isaiah goes so far as to borrow the technical term *ṭāmēʾ*, "unclean, impure," from priestly language (Isa 52:1), and Ezekiel, who was a priest at the time of Judah's exile, connects uncircumcision, both literal and metaphoric, with defilement (Ezek 44:7-9). If this is the case, it then follows that circumcision, whether of the heart or foreskin, might remedy the situation.

Whether one is inducted into the covenant community via circumcision on the eighth day of life or undergoes this initiation of their own freewill, the procedure cannot be undone. One is demarcated for life. Yet, despite its physical permanence, the ritual of

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[221] Meyers, *Exodus*, 64-66. Ziony Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches* (London: Continuum, 2001), 665. Mullen, Jr., *Ethnic Myths and Pentateuchal Foundations*, 180. Nohrnberg, *Like Unto Moses*, 163. This new status also has an apotropaic quality, protecting the initiate from supernatural forces (Exod 4:26-28). Meyers suggests that the association of circumcision and protection is, perhaps, why the biblical rite is the only known instance in which the procedure is prescribed for newborns, rather than adolescents or men who are soon to be married. In antiquity, the risk of performing circumcision on an infant was much greater than waiting until later in life. This is often used as a counter-argument against the idea that ancient Israelite circumcision is related primarily to fertility practices. Meyers, *Exodus*, 64-66.

circumcision does not guarantee the permanence of its benefits. Circumcision initiates

one into the people of Israel, but with this new status comes much responsibility.

Uncircumcision as a Metaphoric State

Thanks to Moses's complaint about his "uncircumcised lips" (Exod 6:12, 30), one

is already aware of the fact that certain biblical authors apply circumcision language to

non-phallic body parts in order to achieve a certain rhetorical effect. What is yet unclear

is what exactly the metaphor of "uncircumcised lips" communicates. Although the only

time this metaphor is applied to lips specifically is in the course of Moses's complaints in

Exod 6, other applications of the metaphor shed light on Moses's choice of imagery.

Whenever something from the physical world is made into a metaphor, it brings certain

connotations with it, but may leave others behind. The full import must be determined on

a case-by-case basis.

As a metaphor, circumcision language is always tied to practical support of the

lifestyle necessary to secure the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant, a fruitful

population and possession of the Promised Land. In addition to all of the negative

connotations associated with the status "uncircumcised," this status also refers,

specifically, to one's inability to translate the divine word into proper behavior, which is a

threat to the security of the promises Yahweh made to Abraham. Israelites who live as if

they are outsiders to God's covenant community, while bearing the mark on their flesh,

are said to be "uncircumcised of heart" (Lev 26:41; Jer 9:26 [25]; cf. Ezek 44:7, 9) or

"uncircumcised of ear" (Jer 6:10). In order to inspire change, biblical authors impart

blame, insult, their own personal disgust, and connotations of impurity by employing

uncircumcision language. This is the underlying force of the metaphor, with each author

adding his own nuance.

The Uncircumcised Heart

At the most simplistic level of interpretation, the uncircumcised heart is one

characterized by obstinance toward God and his word. Leviticus 26:41 describes the

uncircumcised heart as one that commits treachery against God and walks opposite of his

ways, forcing God to displace Israel from its land and thus revoke his own covenant. "If

then their uncircumcised heart is humbled and they make amends for their iniquity . . ."

then God will remember his covenant with the patriarchs and also the land. Before God

restores Israel to its land, he will give it the Sabbath rest it deserves (Lev 26:41-45). In

this scenario, the uncircumcised state of Israel's heart leads to God's amnesia in regard to

his covenant with Abraham, in which he promised the Promised Land. The only way to

remind God is to "circumcise" one's heart by applying humility and making amends.

Jeremiah also associates the uncircumcised heart with a pride that leads to

eviction from the land, but heightens the metaphor by juxtaposing it with physical

uncircumcision: "'Behold, the days are coming,' declares Yahweh, 'when I will punish

all who are circumcised [only] in the foreskin . . . for all the uncircumcised nations (*kol-*

haggôyim ʿărēlîm) and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised of heart (*ʿarəlê-*

lēb)'" (Jer 9:25-26 [24-25]). For Jeremiah, physical circumcision is of no benefit if the

nation's heart is uncircumcised; that is, if Israel acts like every other nation, rather than

the chosen people of God. If the symbolic significance of such an intimately placed reminder of one's chosenness is ignored, it is as if the procedure was never carried out. This is worse than having never been circumcised at all. Therefore, Israel's hypocrisy, highlighted by Jeremiah's accusation that its dedication is only skin-deep, evokes God's punishment via foreign powers, as promised in Lev 26:41-45.

The prophet Ezekiel also places "uncircumcised of heart and uncircumcised of flesh" (Ezek 44:7, 9) on par with one another. Although he speaks exclusively of foreigners living among Israel, the parallel suggests that literal uncircumcision and metaphoric uncircumcision are equally negative in the eyes of the prophet. Furthermore, both uncircumcised hearts and uncircumcised flesh hold the potential to pollute that which is pure, and are therefore excluded from God's dwelling, as previously discussed. Yet obstinance, disobedience, and uncleanness do not describe the root of the problem, as they are all *symptoms* of an uncircumcised heart.

The Circumcised Heart

If I read Moses's statements about what a *circumcised* heart does and why, with the significance of physical circumcision and metaphorical uncircumcision in mind, then a positive definition emerges. During his final days in the wilderness with the Israelites, on the eve of their entrance into the land promised to Abraham and his descendants, Moses twice speaks of the circumcised heart (Deut 10:16; 30:6). The first time is preceded by a recounting of how the law came into Israel's possession (10:1-11), a summary of what God requires (10:12-13), and the idea that the very God who owns the

universe "set his heart in love" on Israel's patriarchs and chose their offspring of all

people (10:14-15). This all serves as a preamble to Moses's command, which he directs

to Israel as a collective whole, *ûmaltem ʾēt ʿārlat ləbabkem wəʾārpəkem lōʾ taqšû ʿôd*

"Circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and the back of your neck, you shall no longer

harden [i.e., be no longer stubborn, ESV]" (Deut 10:16).

Deuteronomy 10:16 is an example of chiastic structure, which draws two

parallels; one between "circumcise" and "no longer harden," and the other between

"foreskin of your heart" and "the back of your neck." At first glance, these parallels seem

to suggest that "circumcise the foreskin of your heart" and "no longer harden the back of

your neck" are analogous. In this framework, the injunction to circumcise the heart is a

call to docility, to soften the will and allow oneself to be led by God, just as a bridled

animal must choose between stiffening its neck or trusting a master it can feel but not see.

This is why many translators interpret the idiom "no longer harden the back of your

neck" as meaning "be no longer stubborn" (ESV; cf. NRSV).

However, the two phrases are not analogous but antithetical, as the message

conveyed by stiff-neck imagery does not apply to circumcision. Metaphoric circumcision

in the Hebrew Bible is not a call to docility but a call to actively choose to abide by the

divine will. Circumcision is an active removal of part of one's natural being, a painful,

performative act, that binds a person to an entire corpus of responsibility, most of which

requires action. The author couches circumcision of the heart as the proper response to

God's provision of statutes and laws, his cosmic power, and his love for the children of

their forefathers (Deut 10:12-15). Then, after issuing the command to "circumcise the foreskin of your heart" (10:16), Moses gives an additional rationale as to why it is imperative to live with God's covenant at the center of life — because God's justice is a call to love others, and to fear, serve, and cling to the divine in all matters (10:17-22).

To have a "circumcised heart" means that one is set apart as dedicated to the well-being of all who live under the shelter of the Abrahamic Covenant. This demarcation is so transformative that it cannot be undone. This transformation is evidenced by a life lived according to the statutes of Yahweh. The initiation into this mode of existence is painful, as it requires a forceful removal of part of the identity with which one was born, but on the other side of the suffering is the ability to create a just society and to live in proper relationship with the "God of gods" and one another (Deut 10:12-22).

Moses's second and final reference to a circumcised heart comes at the metaphor from a different angle. He describes a future time, after Israel has been handed over to enemy nations as punishment for her transgressions, when the descendants of Abraham recall the blessings and curses of God's covenant, repent, and are restored in abundance (Deut 30:1-5). Then, a strange turn of events occurs: "Yahweh, your God, will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, to love Yahweh, your God, with all your heart and with all your soul, for the sake of your life" (Deut 30:6). In this future time, Israel will not be commanded to circumcise their hearts or to love God, as before, but Yahweh himself will enact this transformation within his people. This is the only place in the Bible where the responsibility for changing the status of a heart from uncircumcised to

circumcised lies with Yahweh rather than the individual. It is also the only place that

names explicitly the rationale for circumcising the heart as life itself.[222]

The Uncircumcised Ear

There is only one instance of uncircumcision as a metaphor applied to the ears,

but it is fittingly the least elusive use of circumcision metaphors in all biblical literature.

It is also the most relevant for understanding Moses's "uncircumcised lips" (Exod 6:12,

30) because it relates uncircumcision to the inability to engage properly the word of

Yahweh. In an oracle against Jerusalem, Jeremiah prophecies, "To whom shall I speak

and call as a witness, that they will listen? Behold, uncircumcised [is] their ear, they are

not able to listen attentively. Behold, the word of Yahweh shall be like a disgrace to them,

[for] they do not take pleasure in it" (Jer 6:10). The person with an uncircumcised ear is

one incapable of engaging the word of Yahweh because he or she simply does not find it

pleasurable. Therefore, according to the prophet, that same word will bring disgrace.

The connection between the uncircumcision of the ear or heart, imperviousness to

the stipulations expressed via the word of Yahweh, and divine disfavor leading to a

weakening of the positive situation promised through the Abrahamic Covenant, is

consistent throughout the above passages. Without a permanent change in the inner-status

of the individual or collective whole with respect to the word of Yahweh, Israel is in

danger of losing the rights that come with its responsibilities. One who is uncircumcised,

whether literally or metaphorically, bears shame as an outsider to God's covenant with

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[222] Picking up on the language of the Deuteronomist, Jeremiah also commands Israel to circumcise the heart. However, his rationale is simply so that Israel might escape impending wrath. See Jer 4:4; 9:25-26.

Abraham and acts against that covenant. On the other hand, one who is circumcised bears the mark of inclusion into the covenant and acts upon the divine word to the benefit of the community. The issue is black-and-white; there is no lukewarm or neutral position.

The word of Yahweh brings either blessing or curse depending upon one's circumcision or uncircumcision. One who lacks this status change, either literally or metaphorically, is a threat to the community, because it is only after proper initiation that one learns obedience to the word of Yahweh. This obedience is what enables the people of Israel to increase in number and possess the land. If the word is not kept, the land is defiled, and will vomit the people out (e.g., Lev 18:28; 20:22) via the military might of a foreign, uncircumcised people (e.g., Jer 9:26-27; Ezek 32:1-10).

All of the aforementioned, negative connotations are part of the answer to the question with which this project began, "Why does Moses speak of his status change in terms of circumcision?" When I bring to bear upon the phrase, "uncircumcised of lips," the complex web of symbolism elicited by Moses's language, what comes to light is the poignancy, urgency, and derogatory tone of Moses's complaint. Moses's lips act as an enemy of the Abrahamic Covenant because, instead of furthering the cause of the people, Moses's words incite Pharaoh to anger, and this anger results in harm to the Hebrew people and, furthermore, delays the fulfillment of Yahweh's promise to Abraham.

Why "Uncircumcised of Lips" (Exod 6:12, 30)

The content and creation language of the opening chapters of Exodus make it clear that the Hebrew people "were fruitful and multiplied" (cf. Gen 1:28; Exod 1:7)

during the centuries in Egypt.[223] The first half of God's covenant, the promise that

innumerable descendants would come from the line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has

come to fruition (Gen 15:5; Exod 1:1-12). As 400 years of slavery draw to a close (Gen

15:13-16), it is time for the second promise of the Abrahamic Covenant to be fulfilled —

Israel must possess the Promised Land (Gen 15:18-21).

Moses's task is to initiate and orchestrate the fulfillment of this second promise by

bringing the people out of Egypt and into the land of Canaan (Exod 3:8). He is to do this

by going to Pharaoh and communicating the word and power of the divine presence that

accompanies him (3:10-4:17). However, his mouth proves unable to achieve the desired

effect. When Moses first speaks with Pharaoh on behalf of his commission, the

confrontation results in a worsening of the quality of life of the Hebrew people and

threatens their future presence in the land. In response to Moses's request to let the people

go into the wilderness for three days to sacrifice to Yahweh, lest he bring pestilence or

violence upon them (5:3), Pharaoh increases the burden of the Hebrews (5:7-9), who are

beaten both verbally and physically when they cannot meet the new demands (5:16-17).

Furthermore, the people are "scattered throughout all the land of Egypt" (5:13), which

prohibits the organization of an exodus, let alone a journey to the Promised Land. In his

conversation with Pharaoh, Moses's mouth inadvertently acts like "those uncircumcised"

discussed previously, those who violently threaten Israel's well-being and possession of

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[223] For creation language as a theme throughout Exod 1-2, see Gordon F. Davies, *Israel in Egypt: Reading Exodus 1-2*, JSOTSup 135 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992).

the land in other parts of the Hebrew Bible. Moses's attempt to bring the people out of Egypt pushes them deeper into its grasp.

What keeps Moses from success is not a matter of his will, the idiomatic stiffness of the back of his neck (Deut 10:16), but of initiation. Within the course of the burning bush narrative, Moses asks Yahweh repeatedly and in different ways to ensure that he is capable of affecting the desired change in the lived experience of the Hebrew people and each time Yahweh makes a promise that ensures Moses's success, whether it be the promise of his own presence (Exod 3:12), the trust of the people (3:18), miraculous displays of Yahweh's power (3:20), or a series of signs for Moses to perform (4:1-17). When Moses's initial efforts before Pharaoh fail (5:1-22), the trust of the people is broken (5:20; 6:9). However, Yahweh reasserts his promise of deliverance, commands Moses to repeat it to the Hebrews, who now reject him (6:1-9), and demands that Moses approach Pharaoh yet again (6:10-11). Moses's objection to returning to Pharaoh is not a refusal of his commission, but rather an attempt to address a practical concern regarding Yahweh's use of Moses as a mediator between the divine and Pharaoh on behalf of the Hebrews.

Moses is understandably skeptical of the idea that returning to Pharaoh with the imperative to let the people go indefinitely (6:11) will yield a better result than asking for a three-day leave (5:3). His objection, "Behold, the people of Israel have not listened to me. How then shall Pharaoh listen to me, for I am uncircumcised of lips?" (6:12) contains a valid question, one which points to a lack in Moses that Yahweh has yet to address, as the reason for the current situation. Moses holds that if his lips are circumcised, then

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Pharaoh will listen. This reading challenges interpretations which view Moses as unwilling to step into his leadership role, even to the point of obstinance.[224] Moses does try to confront Pharaoh, but since he has not undergone initiation into a state from which he is capable of acting and speaking on behalf of God's covenant promise, his word operates as an enemy against promise and people alike, rather than as an effective intermediary who brings those promises into fulfillment and the people into freedom.

Moses's use of uncircumcision language to express his interpretation of the situation at hand is particularly poignant. In light of the above arguments with respect to the literal and metaphoric import of circumcision and uncircumcision imagery, I suggest that his choice of words brings to bear — upon himself — the connotation of an enemy who threatens Israel's well-being and possession of the land, i.e., one who endangers the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant. Just as the uncircumcised heart and ear are aware of the word of Yahweh, but have not undergone the transformation that allows them to act on its behalf, so too the lips of Moses contain the word Yahweh supplies, but have not experienced the initiation that renders them effective conduits of that word. Yet while it is Yahweh's commission for Moses to speak this divine word for the freedom of the people, it is Moses's commissioned mouth which contaminates the mission from the very start.

My argument is that Moses cannot affect the necessary status change himself, because it is not a matter of ritual performance or will, but of divine transformation. He cannot will his mouth into the necessary state; if he could, he would not repeatedly ask

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[224] For example, Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 71.

for Yahweh's intervention. God must intervene and he does (Exod 7:1; cf. Deut 30:6). Moses recognizes the implications of his status change upon perceiving it (7:1) and acts accordingly as soon as Yahweh finishes speaking (7:6).

The tension communicated by Moses's choice of uncircumcision language falls away, and he does not hesitate to re-confront Pharaoh. In Exod 6:12, Moses points to his uncircumcised lips as something Yahweh must tend to before Moses can go back Pharaoh. In Exod 7:6, immediately after Yahweh circumcises Moses's lips and reasserts the command to return to Pharaoh, both Moses and Aaron do "just as Yahweh commanded them" and without question.

The practical power of this status change is illustrated in the ensuing narrative of the ten plagues (Exod 7:14-12:32), wherein Moses mediates successfully between Yahweh and Pharaoh no less than ten times, albeit to Pharaoh's demise (cf. 14:23-29; 15:1-12, 19).[225] This sequence of events leads to Pharaoh's release of the Hebrew people (12:31-32), and their miraculous march across the Re(e)d Sea and into freedom (13:17-15:21). After Moses's lips are circumcised, his words and actions before Pharaoh no longer act against the Abrahamic Covenant and its community by negatively affecting their ability to leave Egypt, but reach their full potential as conduits of divine power, coming into the human realm through Moses as Yahweh's chosen mediator. Moses's commission to bring the people out of Egypt and into the Promised Land (3:7-12) is now

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[225] Sometimes with the help of Aaron, but it is always Moses who hears the voice of Yahweh, not Aaron.

in progress. He is now able to translate the divine word into the kind of action that supports his two-fold commission.

While I have tied together Moses's commission, his complaint "I am uncircumcised of lips," the Abrahamic Covenant, and the situation of the Hebrew people, there is one outstanding issue. The connection between circumcision language and the Abrahamic Covenant alone does not answer how it is that Moses becomes "god to Pharaoh" (Exod 7:1). In no other instance of circumcision language within the Hebrew Bible is there a connection between circumcision and becoming the spokesman of Yahweh, let alone being called "god" (ʾĕlōhîm) by God himself; neither is there an instance of circumcision language wherein Yahweh is held responsible for enacting the transformation, either literally or metaphorically.[226] This is underscored by the fact that Moses confronts Yahweh with the issue, not once (Exod 6:12), but twice (Exod 6:30).

This is where the parallel that both Deutero-Isaiah (Isa 52:1) and Ezekiel (Ezek 44:7-9) draw between uncircumcision and impurity may point in a helpful direction. In metaphorically "circumcising" Moses's lips, Yahweh makes relevant the categories of pure and impure, which were irrelevant when Moses's status was "uncircumcised of lips." Now that Moses's lips are circumcised, the question becomes, is Moses purified? If so, when and how does this shift relate to his new status vis-à-vis the Abrahamic Covenant? Since the connection between circumcision and the Abrahamic Covenant always places the responsibility for transformation with the individual, the fact that

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[226] With the exception of Deut 30:6, in which it is said that Yahweh will circumcise the hearts of the people at a future time. Unlike in Exod 6, Yahweh will not need to be coerced.

Moses cannot enact this status change himself points to an explanation beyond or in addition to the connection between circumcision and covenant allegiance.

The biblical text jumps from Moses's complaint "I am uncircumcised of lips" (Exod 6:30, cf. 6:12) to Yahweh's statement, "See, I have made you god to Pharaoh and Aaron, your brother, shall be your prophet" (Exod 7:1). What constitutes the change Moses is supposed to see at this moment is unclear. The author does not describe the difference Moses perceives in his own being, a difference which empowers him as *the* ambassador of Yahweh's word before Pharaoh. The biblical author leaves little to no information as to what change Yahweh makes to Moses's essential nature.

The Hebrew Bible does not provide enough data points to explain the full web of symbolism elicited by "uncircumcised lips." However, if I take Deutero-Isaiah and Ezekiel's cue, and engage purification as a viable interpretive option, I begin to understand the shift that makes Moses "god to Pharaoh" (Exod 7:1). In order to do so, I must look beyond the confines of Moses's use of circumcision language and also beyond the confines of the Hebrew Bible, in which Moses's transformation is unrivaled in stature. Rather, I must look to other instances of initiation into divinity in which purification and/or the mouth is involved, such as the *Mīs Pî*.

The Language of *Mīs Pî*

The *Mīs Pî* has come to be known as such in Assyriology and related fields because this Akkadian phrase, "washing, purification of the mouth," describes the function of the ritual process more so than any other phrase, plus the phrase is itself

repeated throughout the ritual texts (NR 24, 58; BR 2-3, 11, 16, 24). Even a cursory

reading of the primary texts associated with the *Mīs Pî*, not to mention secondary

literature, confirms that the overall concern of the ritual is to purify the idol's mouth in

preparation for the *opening* of the mouth, the final act which signifies the idol's

preparedness for life in the divine community.[227]

Additionally, despite the fact that the NR and BR were scribed in different cities

and in different centuries, both open with the phrase *enūma pî ili temessû*, "when you

wash/purify (*temessû*; from *mesû* [*masāu, mešû*]) the mouth (*pî*) of a god," identifying

the primary function of the ritual immediately. However, such a cursory reading does not

tell everything one needs to know about the *effects* of purification in the *Mīs Pî*, let alone

the ways in which the status change of an idol is comparable to that of Moses. In order to

argue that both of these status changes have as their utmost concern the mysterious

phenomenon of the divine word entering the human realm through the deity's chosen

mediator, I must examine closely the nuances of the *Mīs Pî*'s two most important phases

— *Mīs Pî*, "washing, purification of the mouth," and *Pīt Pî*, "opening of the mouth."

Purification from Humanity unto Divinity

For the modern scholar, defining purity as it was understood in ancient Near

Eastern religions is an endless chasing of the elusive. Those writing in the ancient Near

East, specifically Mesopotamia, did not leave behind theoretical works that explain their

conceptions of the world or the systems within which they operated. As a result, there is

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[227] For examples, see chapter two and notes.

no systematic explanation of purity available. Also lacking is a systematic description of operational purity practices from Mesopotamia that would allow one to theorize what purification signified to the average person and priest.[228] Yet the notion of purity is spread throughout Mesopotamian literature, regardless of language, genre, or time-period, suggesting that the idea was such a part of the fabric of society that most everyone, from commoner to king, had some understanding of what was meant by "pure."[229]

Although a basic definition of purity would be helpful for my analysis, the task at hand is not dependent upon such. I am not concerned with defining what purity *is* but, rather, with understanding what purity *does* on the earthly plane, that is, the practical outcomes of purification on that entity which is rendered pure, particularly via the *Mīs Pî* ritual. This specificity keeps my analysis from becoming another exercise in chasing the elusive, while providing the material necessary to inform my comparison.

The description presented in chapter two of how idle materials became an earthly manifestation of the divine (i.e., an idol) in ancient Mesopotamia resists more than a

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[228] Michaël Guichard and Lionel Marti, "Purity in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Paleo-Babylonian and Neo-Assyrian Periods," Pages 47-113 in *Purity and the Forming of Religious Traditions in the Ancient Mediterranean World and Ancient Judaism,* ed. Christian Frevel and Christophe Nihan (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 47. Even when there are systematic descriptions of purity related practices (the Pentateuch), the definition of purity remains elusive. For example, see Christophe Nihan, "Forms and Functions of Purity in Leviticus," Pages 311-67 in *Purity and the Forming of Religious Traditions in the Ancient Mediterranean World and Ancient Judaism,* ed. Christian Frevel and Christophe Nihan (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

[229] Guichard and Marti, "Purity in Ancient Mesopotamia," 47. Additional examples of scholarship which theorizes purity in ancient Mesopotamia include Harold W. Attridge, "Pollution, Sin, Atonement, Salvation," Pages 71-83 in *Religions of the Ancient World: A Guide*, ed. Sarah Iles Johnston (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). Fritz Stolz, "Dimensions and Transformations of Purification Ideas," Pages 211-29 in *Transformations of the Inner Self in Ancient Religions*, Studies in the History of Religions 83, ed. Jan Assman and Guy G. Stroumsa (Leiden: Brill, 1999). On the same phenomena in ancient Egypt, see Joachim Friedrich Quack, "Conceptions of Purity in Egyptian Religion," Pages 115-58 in *Purity and the Forming of Religious Traditions in the Ancient Mediterranean World and Ancient Judaism,* ed. Christian Frevel and Christophe Nihan (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

passing mention of purity, precisely because purification is so vital to the idol induction process that it requires its own analysis. From chapter two, I recall a few basic ideas about the role of purity in the life of an idol: a) the raw-materials out of which an idol was constructed were considered pure and divine in origin, but contact with the human realm rendered those materials impure, b) the purification of an idol was complete only after it was released of the human aspect of its fabrication, signified by the symbolic chopping of the craftsmen's hands and the drowning of their tools, c) the purification of the mouth was enacted by the application of organic materials, such as syrup, ghee (a type of butter), herbs, and pure-water from the Apsû, while reciting incantations, and d) the resulting pure state could be negatively affected so that there were specific occasions upon which the idol's purity needed to be renewed and the *Mīs Pî* re-performed.

One matter that those who study purity and purification rituals in ancient Mesopotamia generally agree upon is that the goal of purification was to remove contamination that was introduced by human sources.[230] The *Mīs Pî* is a prime example of this, as illustrated by the rituals that surround the idol's craftsmen and the incantations which explain those actions, discussed in chapter two. Broadly speaking, common Akkadian words for "pure" (e.g., *ebbu, ellu*, *namru*) have a basic sense of "clean, brilliant, shining," and their opposites denote a lack of such cleanliness and brilliance.[231]

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[230] John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 115. Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 14.

[231] Karel van der Toorn, "Sin, Pollution, and Purity: Mesopotamia," Pages 496-513 in *Religions of the Ancient World: A Guide*, ed. Sarah Iles Johnston (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 499.

The language of cleanliness or brilliance is not about hygiene, but stands as a metaphor for moral, physical, spiritual, and social perfection.[232] The issue is that such qualities belong to the gods, and are not native to the human experience. This essential difference between divine and human nature is what makes any encounter between the realms so dangerous. Outside of the divine presence, impurity is innocuous, but it is inevitably contracted upon participation in human society.[233] This is why humans must be rendered pure before an encounter with the divine.[234]

The gods are aware of and guard against sources of impurity that are not always detected by humans, which is why officiants of the *Mīs Pî* were so highly trained. For example, in one of the *Mīs Pî* incantation texts, Marduk himself lists eighteen sources of impurity that he interacted with as he walked through the city, finally stating to Ea, "show me what you would do" (IT 6/8 25). In short, Ea's answer is for Marduk to purify the city using the craft of the *āšipu* priest (IT 6/8 42), a solution which suggests that the gods were also constrained by the issues impurity presented and shared with humans the need for purification rituals.

The *āšipu*, as stated in chapter one, are those who perform the *Mīs Pî* and other purification-related rituals. This class of priest was all male, chosen on the basis of their

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[232] Van der Toorn, "Sin, Pollution, and Purity," 500.

[233] Van der Toorn, "Sin, Pollution, and Purity," 500.

[234] This is the concern of the 7th-century BCE priest who wrote to either King Esarhaddon or King Assurbanipal, expressing concern that he witnessed common men committing two transgressions: bearing the statue of Ištar, and entering the temple precincts. Cole and Machinist, eds., *Letters from Priests to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal*, No. 152.

blamelessness and physical wholeness, and were highly trained in the skill of diagnostics,

the determination of potential sources of impurity, as well as medical ailments.[235] Their

knowledge was so vital to the livelihood of human society that, among temple personnel,

the *āšipu* were ranked second only to those considered spouses of the gods.[236]

During the course of the *Mīs Pî*, the *āšipu* performed many metaphoric actions,

the significance of which was explained in the accompanying recitations. The first word

of the phrase *Mīs Pî, mīsu*, is a noun that simply means "washing," but because of the

term's appearance in ritual texts and the purificatory *function* of such washing as

expressed in incantation texts, *mīsu* has come to bear the connotation "purification" or

"(ritual) washing."[237] The same applies to the adjective *mesû*, "wash, clean, refined (said

of metals)," and the verb *mesû* (*masāu, mešû*), "to wash, clean, refine metals, settle

accounts, clear records."[238]

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[235] Robert D. Biggs, "Medicine, Surgery, and Public Health in Ancient Mesopotamia," Pages 1911-24 in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 1919-21. Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 149.

[236] F. A. M. Wiggerman, "Theologies, Priests, and Worship in Ancient Mesopotamia," Pages 1857-70 in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 1864-65.

[237] *CAD* M2, 112a-113a. The noun *mēsu* also refers to a special wood used in idols and refined gold and silver, the purified construction materials most often used for idols and temples. See *CAD* M2, 33b-35a. Also Cole and Machinist, eds., *Letters from Priests to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal,* No. 28. *Mēsu* takes on these definition, in part, because of its relation to the verb *mesû* (also *masāu* or *mešû*), meaning "to wash, to clean," also attested in Arabic (*msḥ* "to wash, wipe, clean, anoint." *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*) and Aramaic (*mšy, mš'* "to feel, rub, wash"; *Dictionary of Targumim, Talmud and Midrashic Literature*; *Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon*), and secondarily "to refine metals."

[238] *CAD* M2, 29b-34b. For comparisons of *mīsu* "(ritual) washing" and other verbs related to applying materials via rubbing, see Barbara Böck, "When You Perform the Ritual of 'Rubbing': On Medicine and Magic in Ancient Mesopotamia," *JNES* 62 (2003): 1-16. Stefan Nowicki, "Acquiring of the Ritual Purity By Mechanical and Magical Means in the Ancient Near Eastern Rituals," Pages 171-87 in *Here & There Across the Ancient Near East: Studies in Honor of Krystyna Lyczkowska*, ed. Olga Drewnowska (Warszawa: Agade, 2009).

In the ritual texts, explicit reference to purity is sparse. Whereas the word *mīsu/*

mesû "washing/to wash," occurs nine times in what remains of NR and eight times in BR,

the adjective "clean, pure" (*ellu*; KÙ) occurs only in the phrase "pure water," which is an

ingredient employed in the ritual (*mê ellûti*; NR 42, 56; no instances in BR), and in the

titles of incantations to which the ritual texts refer (BR 48, 54, 59; no instances in NR).[239]

Similarly, the verb "to cleanse, purify" (*elēlu*) appears only once and only in NR: "you

purify the area" (*eqla tullal*; NR 42). No reference to purifying the idol or its mouth is

contained within the ritual texts, only references to washing and opening its mouth.

The opposite is true for the *Mīs Pî* incantation texts, within which the main theme

is itself purity.[240] References to "pure" (*ellu*; KÙ), "clean" (*ebbu*; SIKIL), and "brilliant,

bright" (*namru*; DADAG) objects, as well as the act of making them so, abound

throughout the extant incantations.[241] While "pure" and "clean" often occur as a pair

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[239] There are two other phrases in the ritual texts that relate to purity, *šuluḫḫu* "rite of purification" (NR 140; *CAD* Š3, 260), the object of which is unclear due to a lacuna, and *takpirtu* "purification rite, wiping" (BR 48; *CAD* T, 85a) from *kapāru* "to wipe off, smear, purify magically" (*CAD* K, 178a), the object of which is unclear from context. For more on *kuppuru* as "to wipe, rub; purify by wiping" and the related noun *takpertu*, see David P. Wright, "Appendix 2: Akkadian *Kuppuru*" in *The Disposal of Impurity: Elimination Rites in the Bible and in Hittite and Mesopotamian Literature*, SBLDS 101 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987).

[240] The titles of non-extant incantations given in the ritual texts suggest that those also centered on the theme of purity. For example, "Pure reed, long reed, pure node of a reed" (NR 8) and "Pure statue, suited to the great '*me*'" (BR 48).

[241] For "pure," "clean," and "bright, brilliant" I have given the terms in both the Akkadian language (italics) and Sumerian logograms (small caps), as most of the incantation material is preserved in Sumerian. "Pure" most commonly appears as the logogram KÙ. On the distinction between *ellu* "pure" and *ebbu* "clean" in earlier periods, see Guichard and Marti, "Purity in Ancient Mesopotamia," 51. On the history, usage, and relation between the terms "pure" and "holy" in Sumerian, Akkadian, and, by comparison, Hebrew, see E. Jan Wilson, *"Holiness" and "Purity" in Mesopotamia*, AOAT 237 (Kevelaer, Germany: Butzon und Bercker, 1994).

(e.g., IT 1/2 A 31, B 1), it is the trio "pure . . . clean . . . bright . . ." that appears in the

most commonly repeated refrain of the entire corpus of *Mīs Pî* incantation texts.

> May the god become pure (KÙ) like heaven,
> Clean (SIKIL) like the earth,
> Bright (DADAG) like the center of heaven.
> May the evil tongue stand aside (IT 1/2 B 10-13)

This blessing occurs frequently as the closing statement of the incantations which are said

over the individual ingredients with which "[the *āšipu*] cleansed (SIKIL) and made bright

(DADAG) the mouth of the god" in the course of the mouth-washing (e.g., IT 1/2 B); it is

also found in many other *Mīs Pî* incantations, whether in whole or in part (e.g., IT 3 B

1-4). The refrain draws the hearer's attention toward heaven, then to the earth, then back

to the center of heaven, a journey which stops evil itself, thus protecting the idol.

This path also reflects the cycle of divine energy as the idol relays it from heaven,

projects it onto the earth, and returns to the heavenly gods the good or ill it receives

during the course of its time as an idol. The terms "pure," "clean," and "bright" parallel

one another, thrice emphasizing the goal of separating the idol from the negative,

contagious effects of life within human society. Furthermore, the refrain states that such

purification, when successful, restrains evil speech, an effect that is the mirror-opposite of

the ritual's ultimate goal of enabling the divine word to issue forth.

These lines appear similarly no less than twenty-four times in extant incantation

texts, meaning that the *āšipu* speaks this theology of idols at least as many times during

the course of the two-day ritual.[242] The metaphoric action of "washing" (*mīsu*) in the

ritual texts is explained in the incantation texts as that action which renders the idol pure,

clean, and/or bright. This interplay between deed and word is necessary because the

status change of an idol is dependent upon not just action, but the proper understanding of

that action. By pairing symbolic gesture with recitation, the *Mīs Pî* (and those who

developed it) encourages proper understanding on the part of the officiant and any

witnesses, as it connects spectacle and proper theology. By giving voice to the official

theology of the temple, the *āšipu* guards himself and others from misunderstanding the

pure nature of the idol — as well as underestimating the necessity of that pure state.

The Necessity of Purification for Opening the Mouth of an Idol

Finally, after the *āšipu* has washed the mouth of the idol seven or "twice seven

times" (i.e., fourteen times; IT 3 B 92-93) he and the idol are now ready for the opening

of the mouth (*Pīt Pî*) portion of the ritual.[243] This is the climax of the transformative

process, and the moment at which an idol changes from one who *holds* divinity to one

who *transmits* divinity.[244] It is not enough for the idol to embody the divine; it must also

become the conduit of the divine if the idol is to meet the destiny for which it is birthed.

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[242] IT 1/2 B 10-13, 22-25, 34-37, 46-49, 73-76, 86-88, 100-02; IT 1/2 C 10-13, 35-36, 48-49; IT 1/2 STT 199 9-11, 20'-21', 40'-41', 45'-46'; IT 3 B 1-4, 38-41, 94-96; IT 4 A 28-29; IT 1/2 4 B 18-20; IT 5 B 4-6, 38-40; IT 5 C 7-9, 18; IT 6/8 63-66.

[243] Seven times in NR (see Walker and Dick's notes on lines 58, 104, 108, 150, 161) and fourteen times in BR (see Walker and Dick's notes on lines 2, 16, 24, 26, 28-36, 47, 63).

[244] Berlejung puts it another way: the *Mīs Pî* is to establish purity and enable contact between divine and human worlds, thus charging its positive powers; the *Pīt Pî* is to activate those powers. Berlejung, "Washing the Mouth," 45.

Like the term "washing" (*mīsu*) in the washing of the mouth, the term

"opening" (*pītu*) draws its symbolic significance from context. The noun *pītu* means

primarily "break, opening, breach," such as that of a canal or other waterway, and is used

most often in idiomatic expressions; it takes on a ritual connotation only because of the

word's inclusion in the titles of various "opening" rituals (e.g., of the gate, the house, the

mouth).[245] In the *Mīs Pî* ritual texts, *pītu* occurs only in the phrase *mīs pî pīt pî teppuš*

"you perform the washing of the mouth [and] opening of the mouth" as part of the proper

title for the "opening of the mouth" ritual.[246] No specific instructions are mentioned, only

that the *āšipu* is required to perform the *Pīt Pî*, therefore little information about the form

of the ritual is available.[247] The only way I may gain insight into the *Pīt Pî* is to examine

what the incantation texts say about its particular *function.*

The object of both the "washing" (*mīsu*) and the "opening" (*pītu*) is, of course, the

mouth (*pû*) of the idol. The function of the repeated washings followed by the act of

opening operates on two levels, the literal and the symbolic. The literal function is the

one most often talked about in scholarship and that is the ability of the idol of receive

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[245] The same holds true for both the adjective (*petû*; 1. "open," 2. "remote") and verb (*petû*; 1. "to open a door, gate, etc." 2. "to open something sealed, slit open a body, make an opening for a foundation, pit, etc." 3. "to bare, uncover, unveil, reveal, uncoil"); The third meaning of *pītu* is rare, and that is "the clasp of a necklace" *CAD* P, 445a-47a.

[246] NR 58, 104, 108, 150, 161. Neither the word *pītu* nor the phrase *pīt pî* appear in what remains of BR, in contrast to the fourteen occurrences of *mīs pî.* This limited usage, paired with a lack of exposition on the actual process of the *Pīt Pî* within the *Mīs Pî* ritual text, suggests that the author of the tablets assumes his audience knows what the *Pīt Pî* entails. This, in turn, suggests that a separate series of tablets or an unwritten oral tradition was the source of instruction pertaining to the *pīt pî* facet of the idol induction ceremony.

[247] IT 3 B 92-93 mentions that, in one iteration of the ritual, the materials used in the "opening" consisted of "syrup, ghee, cedar, (and) cyprus" (cf. line 113, which lists "cedar, cyprus, oil, and syrup of the hills").

offerings of food, drink, and incense on the deity's behalf.[248] The incantation texts agree

that "this statue cannot smell incense without the 'Opening of the Mouth' ceremony; it

cannot eat food nor drink water" (IT 3 B 70-71; cf. line 36; IT 4 19).

However, this narrow focus on the anthropomorphic elements of the life of an idol

betrays its role as the embodiment of the divine on earth. Although meals, libations, and

incense were indeed offered before idols, as evidenced in images from ancient

Mesopotamia, this physical understanding of idols as simply the digestive systems of the

gods ignores their higher (and more serious) purpose, as expressed both within the *Mīs Pî*

incantation texts and in the concept of "mouth" (*pû*) itself.[249]

The Akkadian term *pû* does mean "mouth" as in the physical part of the body, but

this is only one of many applications of the word. Most other usages refer to that which

the mouth produces: communication.[250] Whether it be in the form of command,

instruction, advice, opinion, speech, oral tradition, authorship, or the content of a

document, all of these meanings and more fall under the umbrella of *pû*, "mouth." For

example, one who advises a superior might say something like *ša pî ilīm bēlī līpuš*, "my

lord should act according to the command/order/rule (*pî*) of the gods," or might give a

report, such as *šarrum pî šībī išʾalma*, "the king asked for the declaration/testimony (*pî*)

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[248] Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 114-15. Walker and Dick, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 14. Edward M. Curtis, "Images in Mesopotamia and the Bible: A Comparative Study," Pages 31-56 in *The Bible in Light of Cuneiform Literature: Scripture in Context III*, Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies 8, ed. William W. Hallo, Bruce William Jones, and Gerald L. Mattingly (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellon Press, 1990), 44. Hurowitz, "The Mesopotamian God Image, from Womb to Tomb," 147.

[249] For examples of such images, see Collon, *First Impressions*, fig. 809-36.

[250] *CAD* P, 453a-71a.

of witnesses."[251] Therefore, when applied to an idol, the *Mīs Pî*, and the *Pīt Pî*, the noun

pû refers not only to the physical mouth of the deity's representative on earth, but also

refers to the "washing, purification" and "opening" of the divine word itself.

Although the reception of offerings is also important, the divine word and its

presence in the universe is that which is the underpinning of all life. As the *āšipu* recites

to Ea, Shamash, and Asalluḫi:

> . . . you alone are the great gods who direct
> the decisions of the heavens and earth, of springs and seas
> *your utterance is life, your pronouncement is well being,*
> *the work of your mouth is life itself,*
> you alone bestride the farthest heavens,
> you dispel evil (and) establish the good . . . (IT 3 B 17-22)[252]

This reliance on the utterance, pronouncement, and work of the gods' mouths is why the

opening of the mouth is the climax of the induction ceremony through which it becomes

a member of the divine community. Such life-giving and sustaining utterances are not

possible with a closed mouth. That is why it is only after the channel for the divine word

is open that the divinity of an idol is brought to completion (IT 4 C 15-18), it is set on its

dais, and begins operating as an intermediary between divine and human communities.

The divine word is responsible not only for the existence of life, but also its

flourishing, since it is the word that dispels evil and establishes good. Once the idol is

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[251] The former example comes from Georges Dossin and André Finet, *Archives royales de Mari: X Correspondance féminine* (Paris: Librarie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, 1978), No. 11, line 16-17. The latter comes from Muazzez Çiğ, H. Kizilyay, and F. R. Kraus, *Eski babil zamanina alt Nippur hukukî vesikalari: Altbabylonische Rechtsurkunden aus Nippur.* Eski Eserler ve Müzeler Genel Müdürlüğü yayinlarindan 3 (Istanbul: Milli Eğitim Basimevi, 1952), text 163, line 10.

[252] Italics added.

fully operative, the blessing "may the evil tongue stand aside" that is echoed throughout

the incantation texts may be fulfilled at the deity's discretion. This is where the two

purposes of the opening of the mouth, receiving offerings through the senses and acting

as a conduit of the divine word, come together. The reception of offerings maintains the

god's favor, but it is the idol's ability to act as the conduit of the divine word that makes

the deity's favor — or lack thereof — such a powerful force for good or ill. The "opening

of the mouth" is indispensable, for an idol's ability to function as the conduit of the

divine word determines ultimately whether the people receive the goodness, protection,

agricultural prosperity, and fertility upon which life depends (IT 4 A 23-64). The

movement of the divine word into the earthly realm through the mouth of the mediator is,

perhaps, the most important element of the mediatory office, regardless of whether that

mediator is an idol or a person like Moses.

Comparing Moses and Idols

With the symbolic implications of the language of circumcision, the *Mīs Pî*, and

the *Pīt Pî* in tow, I now bring to bear these actions and their respective webs of

symbolism upon one another. Through the preceding sections of this chapter, I have

answered the question of what Moses is asking when he twice complains "I am

uncircumcised of lips" (Exod 6:12, 30). What he is demanding of Yahweh at this critical

juncture of the exodus story is that his process of transformation be brought to

completion. Yahweh has promised to be with Moses and his mouth (3:12; 4:12), yet this

divine presence is yet to move through Moses in a way that affects positive change. Both

Moses and Yahweh know that, in order for Yahweh's plan to work, Moses must become "god to Pharaoh" (Exod 7:1).

This shift requires that any ambiguity between divine and human be erased. Both Moses and the *āšipu*-priest, who performs the *Mīs Pî*, elicit this shift in essence, while crediting the deity/deities with the actual transformation. Broadly speaking, the status change of idols was a two-stage process of "washing, purifying" then "opening" their mouths, a status change which was conceived of as a rebirth, since successful passage into a new state of being was the desired effect. How this framing of the *Mīs Pî* can help one think through the transformation of Moses is the subject of the following comparison, therefore it is divided into two sections: purifying and circumcising.

Washing, Purifying Moses

Three months after Moses's birth into the physical world, the servant of Pharaoh's daughter retrieves an infant from the river. The princess names the child *Mošeh* "Moses," saying, "Because from the water, I drew him (*məšîtīhû*)" (Exod 2:10).[253] While this folk etymology fits well within the "floating foundling" narrative, if *mšh* "to draw (from water)" is indeed the Hebrew root beneath the form *Mošeh*, then the grammar of Moses's name is problematic. *Mošeh* most closely fits the active participle "he who draws" or "he who is drawing," but, as the infant did not draw his own basket out of the river, the occasion of his naming leads one to expect a passive form, such as *Mašu*, "he who *is drawn*." This difficulty, coupled with the narrative's statement that it is an Egyptian who

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[253] The root *mšh* "to draw," is attested only twice in the Hebrew Bible, here and when David sings, "[God] drew me out (*yamšēnî*) of many waters" (2 Sam 22:17; cf. Ps 18:17).

names Moses, has led many to accept the idea that perhaps the name is historically

related to the Egyptian *mś(w)*, "child, son" or "is born."[254] In this scenario, "Moses" is an

abbreviated form of a theophoric name, whose long version has been lost to history, but

quite possibly proclaimed the boy to be a deity incarnate.[255]

    Still, the given Hebrew etymology is flawed and the Egyptian, incomplete. In the

ancient Near East, where a person's name and identity are intertwined, this is a

problem.[256] However, if I look eastward, toward Mesopotamia, for suggestions about the

etymology of *Mošeh*, I come across another historical possibility — and a surprisingly

familiar term. If one translates the Hebrew *Mošeh* through the lens of comparative

Semitics, the ensuing translation clarifies any confusion about Moses's name and, by

extension, his identity: "he who is washed, pure." The Akkadian parallel to the Hebrew

root *mšh* is *mesû*, sometimes *masāu* or *mešû*, "to (ritually) wash, purify" — the same verb

that is used consistently throughout the Mīs Pî ritual and incantation texts in reference to

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[254] W. O. E. Oesterley and Theodore H. Robinson, *A History of Israel*, Vol.1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), 81. J. Gwyn Griffiths, "The Egyptian Derivation of the Name Moses," *JNES* 12 (1953): 225-31.

[255] E.g., Thut*mose* (Thut*mosis*) III "[the god] Thoth was born." While it is tempting to corral this Egyptian connection into the pen of evidence for Moses as an idol or a god, this specific piece is conjectural. Without knowledge of his full Egyptian name, it is impossible to confirm what the etymology suggests other than the fact that Moses is born and male.

[256] If I look at the name Mošeh through only these languages, what is reflected back is the incompleteness of Moses's identity. Moses's challenge is not that he is fully Hebrew, fully Egyptian, and commissioned to stand in the gap in-between, but that he is not properly either and fails to connect with either group unless by Yahweh's assistance. This interpretation is in contrast to the statements of commentators who interpret the dual-etymology of *Mošeh* as emblematic of his dual identity, a personal difficulty that ends up being the key to Israel's deliverance. For example, Carol Meyers, *Exodus*, 44. Mathews, *Royal Motifs in the Pentateuchal Portrayal of Moses*, 50-51.

purifying the mouth of an idol in preparation for its opening.[257] Unlike the biblical and possible Egyptian etymologies, this one elevates Moses's nature and anticipates his eventual transformation into one who acts as a conduit of the divine word. Moses is "he who is washed, pure" from infancy, but, like an idol, his mouth is not "circumcised" or "opened" until the ordained time.

To add yet another layer to this understanding of Moses, in chapter two I mentioned that the Akkadian *mēsu*, often *mēšu*, refers to the *mēsu*-tree, whose wood was used for the core of idols, especially those of Marduk.[258] This is the species spoken of as a cosmic tree, connecting heaven and earth, and considered both pure and divine in nature. *Mēsu* also comes from the Sumerian MES, which has the double meaning of either *mēsu*-tree or *eṭlu ṣīru*, "princely young man," an epithet which applies only to this tree and to Marduk, chief god of the city of Babylon.[259]

It is this Marduk whose temple, Esagila, was at the center of the capital city of Babylon and, by extension, the Neo-Babylonian Empire. It was rebuilt, including the refashioning and reinstatement of its idols, under the direction of King Esarhaddon of Assyria. Esarhaddon's son, King Assurbanipal, finished the project in 668 BCE, just over 100 years before the Judean exiles were brought to Babylon. During the exilic period,

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[257] The Egyptian version of the Opening of the Mouth ritual usually goes by the title *wpt-r*. The verb *wpi* "to open" entails dividing, splitting, or separating. Sometimes the title *wn-r* is used, with *wn* emphasizing the element of accessibility and exposure. Ann Macy Roth, "Opening of the Mouth," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Donald B. Redford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), Accessed December 23, 2015, http://0-www.oxfordreference.com.bianca.penlib.du.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780195102345.001.0001/acref-9780195102345-e-0532?rskey=Q5l1r4&result=1.

[258] *CAD* M2, 33b-34b. Hurowitz, "What Goes In Is What Comes Out," 12-13.

[259] *CAD* Ṣ, 211b. Hurowitz, "What Goes In Is What Comes Out," 13.

according to the Babylonian topographical text, *Tintur*, there stood forty-three cult centers within the city that were dedicated to the great gods, including Marduk, plus fifty-five daises dedicated to Marduk alone.[260] Thus, these shrines and diases were ever present before the Judean exiles who walked about the city of Babylon in the 6th-century BCE.

Thanks to the various applications of the Akkadian cognate *mēsu* (*mēšu*), including its connection to the popular god Marduk, it is now possible to redescribe Moses as "he who is washed, pure" in a way that renders him analogous to idols. This new etymology also suggest that the biblical authors may have crafted this Moses-idol comparison with the idol of a specific god, Marduk, as the rhetorical target. Moses's status as "god to Pharaoh" (Exod 7:1) is not yet complete, as one outstanding issue remains. He may be "washed, pure," but this designation is irrelevant because his lips are not "circumcised"; Moses's speech has yet to effect change on behalf of the covenant community.

Circumcising the Mouth of Moses

After the failure of his confrontation with Pharaoh in Exod 5, which results in increased labor upon the Hebrew people, Moses knows that Yahweh has not yet completed his transformative work. Moses's assessment that the problem has something to do with the capabilities of his mouth is indeed correct, although the issue is neither stuttering, prophetic resistance, nor foreign language. As Yahweh's response, "see, I have made you god to Pharaoh and Aaron, your brother, shall be your prophet" (Exod 7:1),

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[260] George, *Babylonian Topographical Texts*, 67, ll. 82-83. For maps, see 24, 141.

confirms, the issue is one of much greater significance — Moses's lack of divine

standing, especially with respect to his inability to act as a conduit of Yahweh's word.

The evidence that Yahweh brings this status change to completion is not limited to

Yahweh's own utterance, but is equally visible in the difference between how Moses

operates pre- and post-circumcision of the lips (e.g., cf. Exod 5; 7:7-15:21). In chapter

three, I discussed the circumcision of Moses's lips as a sort of hinge around which the

exodus narrative pivots, especially with respect to Moses's efficaciousness. I also

concluded that Moses's status change, similar to that of an idol, is presented as a rebirth

into a new, powerful mode of existence that enables he who is reborn to work on behalf

of both the deity and the community the deity supports by serving as the channel of that

deity. Within the exodus narrative and the narrative of Moses's life as a whole, the

circumcision of his lips serves as that which enables the divine word to flow through

Moses and into society, whether Egyptian, Hebrew, or otherwise.

This is essential both for conversing with Pharaoh in the period leading up to the

exodus, and also for communicating the word of Yahweh to the Hebrew people for the

next forty years. The Hebrew people are covenanted — bound by blood and oath — to

the word of Yahweh as it comes to and through Moses on Mount Sinai (Exod 24:3-8).

Yahweh expects the people to bind themselves to the divine word in response to their

witness of his power to destroy and to deliver, which was exemplified in Yahweh's

actions toward Egypt and the Hebrew people (19:4). After reminding them of what they

just saw, Yahweh adds, "Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my

covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is

mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (19:5-6). Obedience

to Yahweh's voice and the keeping of his covenant are that which enable Israel's special

status as Yahweh's people. The combination of "voice" and "covenant" emphasizes that it

is the divine *word* that enables the livelihood of this newly minted nation. This word

comes to their ears only through Moses.

From this covenant arrangement on, adherence to the divine word is what makes

the difference between the destroyed and the delivered. This is why Yahweh prefaces the

stipulation of obedience by first calling attention to the contrast between his treatment of

Egypt and his treatment of Israel. Yahweh presents this contrast as *the* reason for obeying

and keeping the divine word, which comes to the people through Moses.[261] For both the

Hebrews and ancient Mesopotamian communities, the word of their respective deities

bound the people to both obedience to that word, and to a particular kind of life, one

marked by signs of the deity's favor. In both biblical and Mesopotamian contexts, the

divine word is that which enables the divine to affect the earthly plane, for good or ill.

Yet despite the fact that their status changes are similar in some respects, the webs

of symbolism elicited by the language of the *Mīs Pî* and the language of circumcision do

not completely overlap. This supports my claim that the biblical authors did not borrow

directly from the *Mīs Pî* but rather drew on the ancient model of a divine-human mediator

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[261] Furthermore, the Sinai Covenant and its stipulations are renewed four times in Israel's history, at
moments that are crucial to its identity as Yahweh's people and the fulfillment of his promise to Abraham
for progeny and Promised Land: before the building of the tabernacle (Exod 34:10-28), on the eve of the
Conquest (Deut 29), during the Conquest (Josh 8:30-35), and after the settlement of Canaan (Josh 24:1-13).

that idols exemplify. The choice of "circumcise" rather than "open" (*petû*; or "bare, uncover, unveil, reveal"), which would make the comparison of Moses and idols more direct, draws attention to major differences between Moses's status change and that of an idol. "I am uncircumcised of lips" (Exod 6:12, 30) refers to being outside of the covenant community and, perhaps relatedly, imports connotations of fault, shame, and impurity. The adjective "uncircumcised" also gives voice to the observation that Moses's uncircumcised lips act against the promises for progeny and land spelled out in the Abrahamic Covenant. The metaphor of "uncircumcised lips" puts a characteristically Yahwistic spin on the ancient Near Eastern idea that a mouth needed to be pure and open in order to act as the mouthpiece of the divine. Although all of these systems of oral purification share an underlying concern for life and prosperity, "uncircumcised" adds a layer of symbolism that speaks specifically to the audience of the biblical authors.

Furthermore, there is one characteristic of circumcision that is not found in the *Mīs Pî* ritual and incantation texts: permanence. In chapter two, I presented the ancient Mesopotamian idea that the effects of the *Mīs Pî* can be undone should the idol contract impurity or become physically damaged. Not so with circumcision. Moses's circumcision language is not just about using a metaphor that his audience would understand and appreciate, or to relate Moses's commission to the Abrahamic Covenant. It also takes the need for "opening the mouth" to a more complicated level. This difference, highlighted by my comparative method, allows me to add the element of permanence to my redescription of Moses's status and to reinterpret the *Mīs Pî* by drawing attention to its

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potential impermanence. Yes, Moses's complaint is about his need to transition from one state to another, but he also needs to stay in that new state longterm if he is going to continue in his capacity as the mouthpiece of the deity to the people. Moses wants and needs the status change to be permanent, because with that status comes a certain kind of life, one which will be explored in the following chapters.

Putting the *Mīs Pî* and *Pīt Pî* in conversation with the circumcision of Moses's lips makes it tempting to read into the negative space between "I am uncircumcised of lips" (Exod 6:30) and "See, I have made you god to Pharaoh" (7:1) an elaborate ritual on par with the Mesopotamian induction of idols. However, in the (presumably) seconds between Moses's complaint and Yahweh's response, the transformation is already complete. Yahweh's only stipulation is that Moses "see" (*rəʾēh*) the status change; that he perceive the transformation of his own nature and act in light of that which he now observes. This is the most important moment in Moses's life, as it informs his way of being in the world, yet the *how* of Moses's transformation remains a mystery. Instead, the author focuses on the *effect* of Moses's status change: from the second Moses's status change is complete, so too is his transformation into his new role as "god to Pharaoh" and Yahweh's mediator before Israel.

A similar situation holds for the ancient Mesopotamian idol undergoing the *Mīs Pî* and *Pīt Pî*. Although this is arguably the most important moment in the life of the idol, and certainly the climactic moment of its status change, neither the NR nor BR contain written instructions regarding what exactly these actions of "washing/purifying the

mouth" and "opening the mouth" entail, only where they fit within the chain of ceremonial actions and incantations. It is likely that the *āšipu* priest knew these specific procedures via oral tradition, but the fact that the precise procedures for the most important elements of the induction ritual are unknown within the *Mīs Pî* texts suggests that the proper focus is not so much *how* the procedure is performed, but the *significance* of the procedure.

By omitting the exact mechanisms of the *Mīs Pî* and *Pīt Pî*, the authors of the *Mīs Pî* tablets minimize the officiant's and divine audience's ability to get caught up in the fine points of performance. The authors of the *Mīs Pî* further promote the focus on symbolism by requiring the recitation of numerous incantations that are heavy with symbolic, theological language, which continually explain the significance of the *Mīs Pî* and redirect the *āšipu* and his audience toward the web of symbolism that his ritual acts are designed to elicit. As Yahweh points out to Moses in Exod 7:1, what is important is not what happens in the negative space between the command to "open the mouth" and the act of opening, but that the change in status be perceived properly and acted upon by he who is transformed by the deity (e.g., NR 164-72). What is most important is not how the mediator becomes marked for divine service, but how the mediator and his or her audience understand and respond to that mark of service.

Conclusion

By comparing *what* these processes of induction achieve, *how* they achieve it, and *why* the result is so important for their respective audiences, I have redescribed Moses's

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very nature. Comparing the circumcision of Moses's lips (Exod 6:28-7:1) and the *Mīs Pî*
with respect to status change allows one to understand Moses as "he who is washed,
pure" from infancy, an identity which eventually becomes the ground of Yahweh's
decision to "circumcise" Moses's lips. Once Moses's lips are "circumcised," then his
identity as "he who is washed, pure" is able to come into the foreground and Moses is
able to enact his commission to bring the people out of Egypt. This rereading renders
Moses both analogous to an idol, and particular among his fellow mediators.

The comparison of idols and Moses also illuminates that which is most important
about the moment of status change, and that is the symbolic significance of the
transformation and its intended effects, rather than the process itself. With this focus on
the nature and result of transformation, both the *Mīs Pî* texts and Exod 6:28-7:1 look
beyond the moment of status change, to the subsequent functioning of their respective
intermediaries. The authors of these text are also concerned about how these
intermediaries are understood by their intended audiences, both divine and human, and go
to great rhetorical lengths to provide a nuanced and culturally specific vision of the
essential shift this status change requires. At the same time, the authors of the *Mīs Pî* and
Exod 6:28-7:1 also maintain the mystery of how such transformation actually occurs.

Induction into the office of divine-human mediator is signified upon its
completion by the onset of a luminous radiance emitting from the very face of the initiate.
This imagery, as it is applied to both Moses and idols, is theologically loaded and has
much to suggest about their respective natures and their lives post-transformation. This

terror-inducing light is designed as a testament to the divine aspects of the initiated, and a witness to the efficacy of the circumcision of Moses's lips and the *Mīs Pî* induction ceremony. This emblem of divinity serves as a reminder of the mediator's status change and the reality of its new existence.

CHAPTER FIVE: A SUITABLE EMBLEM OF DIVINITY

No status change is complete without a sign of that new status. For both Moses

and ancient Mesopotamian idols, this sign is described by biblical and Mesopotamian

authors, respectively, as a distinct, uncontrollable, glow radiating from the face of the

mediator. This "shining forth" is not just an effect of status change via the circumcision

of the lips (Exod 6:28-7:1) or *Mīs Pî*, but is the confirmation that the moving pieces that

come along with that status change — one's relationships to the deity, divine abode,

divine word, and community — are all operating properly. Belief that the mediator was

indeed speaking on behalf of the deity, via the divine presence within that particular

individual, was a matter of simply perceiving the obvious about the mediator's nature.

The symbol of luminosity is more ancient than either Moses or idols, and

therefore places them both in a much larger stream of tradition than that of their

respective narratives and cultural contexts. At the same time, the imagery of "shining

forth" bears particular connotations in the ancient Near East that are context-specific. The

history and nuances of the metaphor of radiance and its import for understanding the

status change of both Moses and idols is the subject of this chapter. When it comes to

Moses in particular, this element of the idol-Moses comparison is nuanced in the biblical

text in a way that serves a dual purpose: to argue against the use of idols specifically, and to align Moses with the gods of the ancient Near East more generally.

To arrive at this conclusion, I first analyze how Moses's radiance is spoken of in Exod 34:29-35. This leads quickly to three interpretive possibilities: either the skin of Moses's face is shining, the skin of his face is horned (*qāran*), or it is somehow both. I argue that this ambiguity is intentional and purposeful, using the images of both radiance and horns simultaneously in order to draw a comparison between Moses and idols, while aligning Moses with divinity. Then, I delve into the ramifications of this rendering by examining first the luminosity of idols, then the imagery of horns, approaching both light and horns as metaphors, and with an eye for what each metaphor suggests about the nature of their subjects. Finally, I conclude with a three-fold comparison of Moses, idols, and horned figures, with respect to the message that the symbolic imagery of radiance/ horns relays about status. This comparison is then followed by an assessment of its implications for understanding how Moses is portrayed in the Pentateuch, and what this contributes to the Moses-idol comparison in general.

One conundrum this comparison explains is why Moses's radiance/horns appear twenty-seven chapters after his status change (Exod 7:1) and not immediately, as one might expect given the immediate appearance of radiance in the *Mīs Pî*. This contrast in timing points toward a greater issue in the overarching narrative of Exodus than Moses's status, and that is the construction and consecration of the tabernacle as the sign that the exodus event is finally complete. Moses's status change is not just about Moses, but is

intimately connected to the establishment of Yahweh's earthly abode and, by extension, the community he serves.

Veiled Light and a Role Reversal

The appearance of divine radiance, which symbolizes the maturation of Moses's status as the embodiment of Yahweh, coincides with Moses's third descent from Mount Sinai. When Moses first goes up the mountain, he receives the Sinai Covenant and the people bind themselves to that covenant (Exod 19:1-24:8); the second time, he receives instructions for the tabernacle, then is confronted with Israel's golden calf debacle upon his return (24:9-32:30). The third time Moses goes up, it is to mediate between the Hebrew people and Yahweh regarding the punishment of Israel (32:31-34:28). At this time, Moses sees the glory of Yahweh, and, under Yahweh's instruction, inscribes a copy of the "tablets of the testimony" to replace the ones "written with the finger of God," which Moses broke upon seeing the golden calf (31:18; 32:19; 32:31-34:28).

When Moses comes down from Mount Sinai with the two replacement tablets in his hand, he "did not know that the skin of his face shone (*qāran*) because he had been talking with God" (Exod 34:29). The author of this passage attributes Moses's radiance to his conversational relationship with Yahweh; Moses's newfound luminosity is the direct result of his proximity to the deity.[262] The metaphor of light signifies Moses as the earthly

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[262] On Exod 34:29-35 as the P-source, see Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 609. Peter J. Kearny, "Creation and Liturgy: The P Redaction of Ex 25-40" *ZAW* 89.3 (1977), 375-86; repr., Pages 119-32 in *Cult and Cosmos: Tilting Toward a Temple-Centered Theology*, ed. L. Michael Morales (Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 126. Other scholars argue that Exod 34:29-35 is Non-P with P additions. For example, see Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, 753.

manifestation of the divine glory that he encounters, albeit in a limited fashion, just prior

to his third descent from Mount Sinai (33:12-34:9).[263]

The light that emanates from Moses's face serves a number of specific purposes.

Broadly speaking, its primary function is to draw a parallel between Moses and

Yahweh.[264] In the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh is often described poetically as emanating

bright light (e.g., Deut 33:2; Ezek 1:27-28; Hab 3:4; Ps 4:6, 31:16; Job 29:3; Dan 9:17),

which symbolizes divine favor in cases where the author specifies that the source of light

is Yahweh's face (e.g., Num 6:25; Ps 80:19, 119:135). The only time a person besides

Moses is said to shine is when one is full of wisdom (Eccl 8:1; Dan 12:3), but the author

of Exod 34:29 is clear: Moses's shining is a direct result of talking with Yahweh.[265] In the

process of relating to the deity, Moses comes not only to embody and represent Yahweh

to the Hebrew people, but also to signify Yahweh's favor through the radiance of his face.

The focus of Exod 34:29-35 is not the transformation of Moses's essential nature

in the presence of Yahweh — that was established in Exod 6:28-7:1 — but rather how

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[263] Mathews, *Royal Motifs in the Pentateuchal Portrayal of Moses*, 58, 63. Meyers, *Exodus*, 266. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 221. Sommer, *Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*, 68.

[264] On luminosity as drawing a parallel between Yahweh and Moses, see Kearny, "Creation and Liturgy," 126. Meyers, *Exodus*, 226-27. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 221. One literal interpretation of this passage is that Moses was burned by the theophany and the scar tissue of his face is what shone. William H. Propp, "The Skin of Moses' Face — Transfigured or Disfigured?" *CBQ* 49 (1987): 375-86. See also Nohrnberg, *Like Unto Moses*, 7. On luminosity as a reminder of the theophany at Sinai, see F. Polak, "Theophany and Mediator: The Unfolding of a Theme in the Book of Exodus," Pages 113-48 in *Studies in the Book of Exodus: Redaction, Reception, Interpretation*, BETL 126, ed. Marc Vervenne (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1996), 147.

[265] Of course this does not exclude the possibility of characterizing Moses as wise or connecting his relationship with Yahweh to Moses's ability to act wisely. As P points out, Moses's luminosity is about something greater than wisdom. Texts poetically describing the future Israel or Zion also use the image of radiance (Isa 60:1), or a shining crown (Zech 9:16; Ps 132:18).

Moses's transformation is signified in the presence of his audience. Now that Moses has

interceded on behalf of Israel with great success, and inscribed the tablets of the

testimony of Yahweh with his own hands (Exod 32:1-34:28), the author confirms that

Israel's leader has indeed entered the role of mediator.[266] The advent of Moses's

luminosity signifies not only his induction into the life of an intermediary, but also his

maturation into that role via his relationship with Yahweh and, by extension, sacred space

and the divine word.[267] However, this sign is not aimed at Moses, who is ignorant of the

radiance of his own face at the outset (34:29), but is designed for Aaron and "all the

people of Israel" who behold his face with fear to the point of running away (34:30-31).

That being said, Moses's luminosity also signals a shift in his relationships, as it

creates a literal boundary between the mediator and the community he serves. Most

commentators interpret correctly Moses's radiance as a symbol of his closeness with

Yahweh, but there is an additional element at work. This radiance also divides Moses and

his people, alienating him even from his own family. Exodus 34:30 specifies that Aaron,

Moses's brother, is to be counted among "all the people of Israel" who are collectively

terrified at the spectacle of Moses's skin, which shines in perpetuity. This sight makes

Moses's human encounters uncomfortable to the point that he decides to veil his face,

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[266] Klaas Spronk, "The Picture of Moses in the History of Interpretation," Pages 253-64 in *The Interpretation of Exodus: Studies in Honor of Cornelius Houtman*, ed. Riemer Roukema, Bert Jan Lietaert Peerbolte, Klaas Spronk, and Jan-Wim Wesselius (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 258-59.

[267] Rainer Albertz, "Moses as Mediator of Divine Salvation: The Late Exilic Book of Exodus (Exod 1-34)," Pages 53-72 in *Enigmas and Images: Studies in Honor of Tryggve N. D. Mettinger*, ConBOT 58, ed. Göran Eidevall and Blaženka Scheuer (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011). Meyers, *Exodus*, 266-67. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 220-21.

revealing the light only when speaking with Yahweh and relaying the message to the people (34:33-35).[268]

This ongoing practice of veiling before the people and unveiling before Yahweh speaks to the idea that Moses's entire identity — professional, social, and otherwise — has been absorbed by his function as intermediary.[269] Similar to the way in which the veil (*pārōket*) of the tabernacle shields the divine presence from view for the safety of humankind, so Moses's veil (*masweh*) conceals the divine presence he emanates, so that others need not live in fear at the sight of their leader.[270] The sign of Moses's status and relationship with Yahweh costs him his ability to interact plainly with others; as a result of his "face to face" contact with the deity, Moses eventually forgoes any face to face contact with his fellow human beings, with the exception that he does proclaim to the people as a whole that which Yahweh commands, as soon as he exits the tent (34:34-35).

Similar to the idea that no one can see God's face and live, the face that has seen Yahweh cannot be seen by others.[271] Moses is the only person who can go into the

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[268] On Moses's radiance as a point of discomfort, see Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 610. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 221.

[269] On veiling as a symbol of Moses's assumed identity, see Meyers, *Exodus*, 266-67. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 221.

[270] Some scholars read the veil in Exod 34:29-35 as an etiology for a primitive ritual practice (attested no where else in the Bible) of Moses wearing a mask when he officiates. This has been debunked by Menahem Haran, "The Shining of Moses' Face: A Case Study in Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Iconography," Pages 159-73 in *In the Shelter of Elyon:Essays on Ancient Palestinian Life and Literature in Honor of G.W. Ahlström*, JSOTSup 31, eds. W. Boyd Barrick and John R. Spencer (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984). See also Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 610. However, this reading still persists in some scholarship, e.g., Thomas B. Dozeman, "Masking Moses and Mosaic Authority in Torah," *JBL* 119 (2000): 21-45.

[271] Ronald S. Hendel, "Aniconism and Anthropomorphism," Pages 205-28 in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, CBET 21, ed. Karel van der Toorn (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1997), 220.

theophany or behind the veil of the tabernacle in order to speak with and behold Yahweh, but in so doing, renders himself almost as inaccessible, behind a veil (*masweh*) of a different sort. This is the cost Moses pays for his special status as the embodiment of the divine. Only in his function as intermediary and in his "face to face" (Exod 33:11; Deut 34:10) or "mouth to mouth" (Num 12:8) relationship with Yahweh does Moses have an identity of his own; in every other interaction, his identity is that of mediator. This way of life is opposite of what is normative in the Pentateuch — Moses can bare his face comfortably *only* before Yahweh, whereas commoners cannot see Yahweh and live.

To understand fully how Moses's radiance operates in the overarching narrative of the Pentateuch, and the significance of its appearance at this juncture in the Book of Exodus, especially in relation to the tabernacle, I must examine how this radiance is described. Each of the three times the author of Exod 34:29-35 describes Moses's luminous glow, the subject is always the skin of Moses's face (ʿ*ôr pānāyw,* ʿ*ôr pānê mōšeh*), and the verb is always *qāran*, a combination which is most often translated "the skin of his face shone" (Exod 34: 29, 30, 35; ASV, ESV, LEB, NKJV, NRSV; cf. "was radiant" NIV). Most commentaries and scholarly works addressing this passage include a brief discussion of a second option for reading *qāran ôr pānāyw* "the skin of his face was horned."[272] Generally, this reading is deemed incorrect or too literal, in favor of the

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[272] For example, Childs, *Exodus*, 604. Osborn and Hatton, *A Handbook on Exodus*, 817. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 220.

[273] For example, Childs, *Exodus*, 604. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, 220.

interpretation "shone."[273] Yet despite any discomfort elicited by the image of Moses having horns, linguistically both "shone" and "was horned" are viable options.[274]

As Jerome, the 4th-century CE scribe first credited with translating *qāran* as "horned," illustrates, it is quite possible to interpret Exod 34:29-35 as stating that the skin of Moses's face has horns.[275] This is especially true if, like Jerome, one is working from an unpointed text, with only the root consonants *qrn*. In most Semitic languages, including other instances of the root in Biblical Hebrew (e.g., Ps 69:32), *qrn* means primarily "horn, having horns, the place where horns grow" (Akkadian *qarnu*; Arabic *qarn*; Aramaic *qarnaʾ*; Ethiopic *qarn;* Phoenician, Ugaritic *qrn*).[276] However, ancient Hebrew and Akkadian also use *qrn* to refer to something that resembles the shape of a horn or something that protrudes. For example, *qrn* may also refer to a horn-shaped container (e.g., 1 Sam 16:1, 13; 1 Kgs 1:39), an architectural or structural feature resembling a horn (e.g., Exod 27:2), or an isolated hill projecting from the landscape (Isa 51:1; Amos 6:13).[277] At the end of its semantic range, as the root's usage crosses over into

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[274] This discomfort is well-founded, as images and translations of a horned Moses became conflated with the horned-devil in Medieval Europe, thus leading to anti-Semitic images of "devil Jews" and the belief that Jews had horns. This is possibly why the Masoretes chose to point the consonants *qrn* as *qāran* a verb which could mean "to shine," rather than the segholate noun *qeren* which would definitely mean "horn."

[275] Jerome's translation of Exod 34:35 in the Vulgate reads *faciem egredientis Mosi esse cornutam* "the face of Moses . . . was horned." Jerome's translation inspired images of Moses as having horns, the most famous being Michelangelo's status of Moses in San Pietro in Rome. By extension, in the Middle Ages, Jews were also portrayed as having horns. In the modern era, even GoogleTranslate modifies the meaning of Jerome's translation: when one puts the above Latin phrase into GoogleTranslate, the English result is "Moses's face was radiant," thus changing *cornutam* "horned" to "radiant. If one enters *cornutam* by itself, Google translates correctly as "horned," not "radiant."

[276] "*qeren*," *HALOT*, Logos digital edition. "*qrn*," *BDB* 1:901b. "*qarnu*," *CAD* Q, 134a-40b.

[277] For these and other secondary usages in Akkadian, see "*qarnu*," *CAD* Q, 137a-40b.

the realm of metaphor, it is possible that *qrn* does refer to sending forth light, a usage often interpreted as rays or beams of light extending from someone or something in a horn-like fashion (e.g., Hab 3:4).[278]

Reading *qrn* as "shone" became the favored option early in the history of interpretation, at least as early as the ancient translations into Greek (2nd-century BCE) and Aramaic (2nd-6th centuries CE), and remains the dominate reading today.[279] Grammars and dictionaries consider the Hebrew *qāran* to be a denominative verb derived from the more primitive noun *qeren*, whose exact origin is dubious although it certainly comes to be associated with horns.[280] This lack of clarity, paired with the fact that Exod 34:29-35 is the only place in the Hebrew Bible where the form *qāran* is attested, makes possible the interpretation "the skin of Moses's face shone."

This one word, *qrn*, is the only word in Exod 34:29-35 or elsewhere that describes how Moses's appearance is affected by his speaking with Yahweh. There are no synonyms or other descriptors to help one determine which meaning is more appropriate, horns or light. As a result of this unresolvable ambiguity, I suggest that the author's use of the root *qrn*, "to be horned" or "to shine," be understood as intentional; a pun designed to elicit simultaneously both meanings and their respective connotations. As I show in the

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[278] For a fuller discussion, see the section "Option Three: Purposeful Ambiguity" below.

[279] LXX reads δεδόξασται from δοξάζω, "to think, imagine, suppose, fancy, conjecture, begin to glow"; Targum Onkelos reads *sgy zyw yqrᵓ dᵓpôhy* "the splendor of the glory of his face increased"; Targum Pseudo-Jonathan similarly "shone."

[280] GKC §82

following sections, either way one reads *qrn,* as describing either a horned visage or

radiance on par with that of Yahweh, the associated image draws an analogy to the gods.

A Suitable Emblem of Divinity

In chapter four, I explored the repeated refrain from the *Mīs Pî* incantation texts

"May the god become pure like heaven, clean like the earth, bright (DADAG) like the

center of heaven; May the evil tongue stand aside" (IT 1/2 B 10-13). I have discussed

what it entails for an idol to be "pure" (*ellu*; KÙ) and "clean" (*ebbu*; SIKIL); I now

continue my discussion of the life of an idol by unpacking what it means for the god to be

"bright" (*namru*; DADAG) like the sun, and how that relates to purity, being in a clean

state, and the idol's stilling effect on the "evil tongue." What I find is that "bright" comes

between "pure . . . clean," on the one hand, and the stillness of the "evil tongue," on the

other hand, because brightness is the sign of status change. As such, it bridges the idol's

pure state and his or her ability to affect positively the balance between good and evil.

The symbolic import of radiance serves as the indispensable link that connects the idol's

inner-transformation to its work in the world at large.

Before making this argument about the form and function of luminosity in the *Mīs

Pî*, I must say a few words about the language of radiance, as it relates to my

understanding of the ancient Mesopotamian approach to the phenomenon this language

represents. Due to the richness and breadth of vocabulary, both Sumerian and Akkadian,

used to describe the phenomenon of radiating light in ancient Mesopotamian literature, I

have chosen to remain within the bounds of the *Mīs Pî* ritual and incantation texts. Yet

even within the limits of the *Mīs Pî*, a vast number of terms are employed. This is further

complicated by the fact that most *Mīs Pî* incantations relating to luminosity are bilingual,

which is helpful when investigating the root of an idea if the translation from Sumerian to

Akkadian is consistent, but here that is not the case. For example, Sumerian NÍ

"splendor" is translated into Akkadian as *pul(u)ḫtu* (IT 3 B 99-100), *namrirru* (IT 5 A 1),

and *rašubbata* (IT 5 A 2), all of which have to do with splendor generally, but carry

difference nuances. Such inconsistency makes a precise etymology or history of the

development of the symbolic language of brilliance difficult to pinpoint.

These inconsistencies suggest that, at some point in time, ancient Mesopotamians,

even trained religious officiants and scribes, adopted a fluid approach to terms relating to

divine radiance, as opposed to a strict use of specific terms on specific occasions.[281] The

increase of nuanced language related to luminosity in the time between the Sumerian

Vorlage and its Akkadian translation speaks both to an increased, culture-wide interest in

the phenomena of radiance, and also to the desire to convey the entire web of symbolism

that NÍ "splendor" came to express in the intervening centuries.

The proliferation of language related to divine radiance was encouraged further

by the poetic, spoken nature of the incantation texts. Like poetry and other performance-

oriented genres, incantation texts rely heavily on devices such as synonym, parallelism,

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[281] For a more in-depth treatment of the language surrounding divine radiance and arguments for specific usages of terms, see Shawn Zelig Aster, *The Unbeatable Light: Melammu and Its Biblical Parallels*, AOAT 384 (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2012). Elena Cassin, *La Splendeur Divine: Introduction à l'Étude de la Mentalité Mésopotmaienne*, Civilisations et Sociétés 8 (Paris: Mouton & Co., 1968). A. L. Oppenheim, "Akkadian *pul(u)ḫ(t)u* and *melammu*," *JAOS* 63 (1943): 31-34.

nuance, and auditory features in order to express eloquently that which it has set out to

express and to elicit the desired response from its audience. This attribute of incantation

texts, paired with inconsistencies in translation between Sumerian and Akkadian in

bilingual *Mīs Pî* incantation texts, suggests that providing the audience with a snapshot of

radiance's web of symbolism was more important to the Akkadian translator of the *Mīs Pî*

incantations than the specifics of the individual terms that comprise that web.[282] Thus, the

purpose of my investigation is not to understand the intricacies of the language of

luminosity, but to use that language as a tool for better understanding the web of

symbolism that the translator of the *Mīs Pî* wanted to convey.

In many ancient cultures throughout the world, particularly Mesopotamia,

radiance is an attribute associated with the gods and, by extension, their images.[283]

Luminosity as a divine characteristic or mark of divinity is rooted in a belief in astral

deities, and is therefore one of the oldest — if not *the* oldest — descriptor of the divine.

Yet, such luminosity is not depicted in art until the Neo-Assyrian period (10-7th centuries

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[282] In addition to the examples that follow, Oppenheim offers the example of Sumerian *NÍ* being translated into Akkadian as both *puluḫtu* "terror" and *ramânu* "self." According to Oppenheim, both of these translations miss the sense of the Sumerian *Vorlage* but, in so doing, add their own nuance to the text and expand their respective semantic ranges. Oppenheim, "Akkadian *pul(u)ḫ(t)u* and *melammu*," 33.

[283] Anthony Green, "Ancient Mesopotamian Religious Iconography," Pages 1837-56 in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 1842. Irene J. Winter, "Radiance as an Aesthetic Value in the Art of Mesopotamia (With Some Indian Parallels)," Pages 123-32 in *Art, the Integral Vision: A Volume of Essay in Felicitation of Kapila Vatsyayan*, ed. B. N. Saraswati, S. C. Malik, and Madhu Khanna (New Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 1994). Winter also speaks of radiance as a sign applied to buildings, particularly temples whose interior is overlain with precious metal, and also various cult objects.

BCE).[284] Once luminosity is represented iconographically, the deity(-ies) and their

images are pictured as anthropomorphic beings, surrounded by stars in orbit.[285]

As this imagery and its symbolism developed over the centuries and millennia, it

came to refer to at least three related elements: the literal shining from a physical source,

such as precious metal or jewels, the inherent power for which shining is a metaphor or

sign, and the appropriate emotional response on the part of the audience.[286] On the literal

level, according to *Mīs Pî* incantation texts, what gives an idol its visible glow is the

"majestic crown, which is endowed with awesome splendor (NÍ-GAL)" (IT 5 A 1) that is

placed upon its head at the conclusion of the induction ceremony (NR 193; BR 56,

64-65). The idol's "pure crown" of gold, "whose appearance is gleaming red," touches

the heavens and casts radiance over the lands like the sun, and is "perfected as a suitable

emblem of divinity" (IT 5 A 1-18). Such a crown, so poetically described, testifies to the

divine nature of the idol who wears it by acting as visual proof of the divine presence

within. Its brilliance is then expanded to include the whole of the idol, which, according

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[284] Mehmet-Ali Ataç, "The *Melammu* as Divine Epiphany and Usurped Identity," Pages 296-313 in *Ancient Near Eastern Art in Context: Studies in Honor of Irene J. Winter by Her Students*, ed. Jack Cheng and Marian H. Feldman (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 295 n1. Green, "Ancient Mesopotamian Religious Iconography," 1842.

[285] For examples of such iconography, see Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 108, fig. 87. Collon, *First Impressions*, fig. 342, 432, 793. Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, fig. 101, 124-25, 162.

[286] Winter, "Radiance as an Aesthetic Value in the Art of Mesopotamia," 129. Cf. Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 130.

to the *Mīs Pî*, is "shining" (MUL MUL = *nabāṭu* [Heb. *nvṭ*, cf. Num 12:8]) with "great splendor (NÍ-GAL)" (IT 3 B 99-109; cf. 49-54).[287]

The fabrication and ritual installment of an idol's crown is handled by craftsmen and officiants in ways that parallel the *Mīs Pî*, which suggests that the symbol of the mediator's operational status is just as important as is the status of the mediator itself. Like idols and their component parts, the red-hued gold (IT 5 B 2) and precious stones of the crown are subject to ritual processes, which, like the *Mīs Pî*, has the three-fold goal of purification, cleansing, and making bright (IT A 13). Also, like an idol, the process of making and inducting the crown into service requires cooperation between divine and human realms. While incantation and other theologically motivated texts attribute the construction and destiny of the illustrious crown to the gods (e.g., IT 5 A 6-11), letters between Assyrian kings and their priests and scholars testify to the complexity and sensitivity with which the humans worked who were involved in the processes of planning, acquiring materials, and crafting idols.[288] The parallels between an idol and its crown speak to the idea that the manifestation of brilliance is integral to the

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[287] Some read descriptions of luminous idols and deities as reference to the fact that many idols were overlain with precious metals, although this is never explicit in the *Mīs Pî* texts. Van der Toorn argues that a favorable omen may be obtained through polishing the idol's metal skin. Karel van der Toorn, "The Iconic Book: Analogies between the Babylonian Cult of Images and the Veneration of the Torah," Pages 229-48 in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, CBET 21, ed. Karel van der Toorn (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1997), 234-35. Michael B. Dick, "The Mesopotamian Cult Statue: A Sacramental Encounter with Divinity," Pages 43-68 in *Cult Image and Divine Representation in the Ancient Near East*, ASOR Book Series 10, ed. Neal H. Walls (Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2005), 50.

[288] E.g., Parpola, ed., *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, No. 41. Cole and Machinist, eds., *Letters from Priests to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal*, No. 174.

transformation process; the *Mīs Pî* is incomplete without the visual sign that the idol's

status has changed.

However, the idol's crown is not the *source* of its status, but the *sign* of its status,

a metaphor for the divine radiance within.[289] Once the idol's initiation via *Mīs Pî*,

"washing, purification of the mouth," is complete, its brilliance is enacted as an outward

manifestation of the idol's status change (IT 3 B 49-54), and the radiant power with

which the gods themselves invest the statue (IT 1/2 C 15-36). In some incantations, the

idol that radiates light and the god who endows that light are described with the same

language, emphasizing the source-to-source nature of divine radiance. For example, the

god Girra, "bearer of the awesome radiance of the gods (*šalummat* DINGIR-*uti*)," "whom

Ea endowed with awe-inspiring splendor (MELIM-ḪUŠ)," is the one responsible for

bestowing radiance onto the idol (IT 1/2 C 15-36). Using similar language, the *Mīs Pî*

goes on to describe the idol as one who bears "radiance (*šalummatam*) fitting of

lordliness" and whose face or outer appearance is "encircled with splendor

(*melamme*)" (IT 3 B 51-52). Both overlapping terms, *šalummatu* and *melammu*

(MELIM), generally mean "radiance, awe-inspiring glory."[290]

The word *melammu*, however, is an abstract noun, whose exact meaning is a

moving target, and, as such, has inspired much scholarly theorizing and comparison.[291] In

Mesopotamian literature, *melammu* is a phenomenon of light, but is also terrifying and

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[289] Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 130-31.

[290] Oppenheim, "Akkadian *pul(u)ḫ(t)u* and *melammu*," 33.

[291] For an entire volume dedicated to the term, see Aster, *Unbeatable Light.*

awe-inspiring, which is why it is shared with everything endowed with divine power or purified by divine presence.[292] It is represented in ancient Mesopotamian texts and iconography in various forms, but most often as, what Leo Oppenheim once called, "supernatural head-gear."[293] Limited to the general area of the face or head, *melammu* is not a passive aura, but a sort of force-field or charged energy, an uncontrollable and natural outpouring of the divine within.[294] In many cases, *melammu* is paired with *puluḫtu,* "terror-inducing," which emphasizes the function of *melammu* for both the idol and its audience — to inspire emotions ranging from awe, to fear, to terror, all of which elicit reverence.[295] As a result of the divine nature of this *melammu,* the idol cannot be seen without a certain degree of discomfort on the part of one who gazes upon it.[296]

Though I have covered the physical, symbolic, and emotional referents to which an idol's luminosity point, in this case, there is another referent at play, and that is the effect brilliance has on the idol itself. Immediately after the *Mīs Pî,* "mouth-washing," and *Pīt Pî* "mouth-opening," when the officiate swings his censer and torch over the idol (NR 59, 151), Girra's bright appearance (*zimešu namruti*) lights up (*unammaru*) the darkness (IT 1/2 C 27-28) and makes the idol "bright (*namru*) like the center of heaven."

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[292] Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 130.

[293] Oppenheim, "Akkadian *pul(u)ḫ(t)u* and *melammu*," 31.

[294] Winter, "Radiance as an Aesthetic Value in the Art of Mesopotamia," 126-27.

[295] Although in some cases, "personality" may be a more applicable definition of *puluḫtu*. Oppenheim, "Akkadian *pul(u)ḫ(t)u* and *melammu*," 33. Winter, "Radiance as an Aesthetic Value in the Art of Mesopotamia," 128.

[296] Oppenheim, "Akkadian *pul(u)ḫ(t)u* and *melammu*," 32.

Recall from chapter four that this latter phrase, "bright like the center of heaven," is repeated numerous times throughout the *Mīs Pî* as part of the refrain with which I began this section; in fact, according to extant incantation texts, this comparison to the sun was recited no less than twenty-four times during the course of the ritual.[297]

This adjective *namru* "bright, radiant" and its verbal form, *namāru*, "to dawn, shine brightly," are the most common Akkadian terms the authors of the *Mīs Pî* use to describe the radiance of idols. In addition to brilliance and light, words with the root *nmr* are also associated with being happy, healthy, and shining with goodwill.[298] Although in many cases *namru* is synonymous with both *šalummatu* and *melammu* discussed above, the nuances of health and happiness (*namru*), on the one hand, and terror and awe (*melammu*), on the other hand, demonstrate the this phenomenon of divine radiance is where reverence and well-being connect. While an idol's radiance, the visual sign of its divinity, is destined to elicit uncomfortable, humbling emotions on the part of the audience, it also serves to orient the idol toward health and happiness, both of which are necessary if it is to act on behalf of the health and happiness of others.

The onset of brilliance is the last in a series of events, which includes being purified and made clean, that enables the idol to make "the evil tongue stand aside," that is, to protect its constituents, in addition to shining forth favor. This element of protection

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[297] IT 1/2 B 10-13, 22-25, 34-37, 46-49, 73-76, 86-88, 100-02; IT 1/2 C 10-13, 35-36, 48-49; IT 1/2 STT 199 9-11, 20'-21', 40'-41', 45'-46'; IT 3 B 1-4, 38-41, 94-96; IT 4 A 28-29; IT 1/2 4 B 18-20; IT 5 B 4-6, 38-40; IT 5 C 7-9, 18; IT 6/8 63-66.

[298] *CAD* N1, 209b, 239b.

is an extension of the promise of prosperity and human flourishing described in previous chapters, but, like so many other aspects of an idol's operation, this brilliance does not come without responsibility.

An idol's brightness is designed to occur in perpetuity. It is not only the capstone of the transformation process, but a continual sign that all is well with the idol's status, and an ever-present symbol of the divine presence. Such brilliance and the need for its continuation underscores human involvement in the life of the idol and the maintenance of its attribute as *namru*, "bright, shining forth light, happiness, and health." Like an idol's purity and cleanness, its luminosity may also be negatively affected by human negligence. The gods are sometimes said to wear their radiance like a crown or garment that can also be taken off, depending on the deity's decision.[299] Although the idol does not have the means to take off its own physical crown, it does have the power to remove that for which the luminous crown is a sign — divine favor and efficacy in its role as mediator. If an idol is unkempt, decommissioned, or dies, even with its crown upon its head, its radiance degrades to the point of disappearing.[300] It is up to human beings to maintain the deity's capacity to shine upon them, both literally and metaphorically.

Option One, The Skin of His Face Shone

Some of the similarities and differences between Moses and idols with respect to divine radiance connect to streams of thought which I entered previously, while others

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[299] Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 131.

[300] Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 130-31.

offer new insight into the usefulness of the Moses-idol comparison for rethinking the process of Moses's status change. For both Moses and idols, divine radiance acts as a visual status-symbol by drawing an unmistakable parallel between the mediator and the divinity it embodies, effectively alienates the mediator from humanity further, and shines forth with the goal of communicating divine presence and favor in a way that elicits reverence from its intended audience.[301]

The differences in the Moses-idol comparison also work to underscore the claims made thus far. Although for both Moses and idols, divine radiance is concentrated about the head, it is not clear what the authors of Exod 34:29-35 imagine regarding the literal source of his shining, whereas for idols it is a physical crown. Yet, no matter the source of luminosity, the metaphor remains the same. Radiance symbolizes the indwelling of the divine presence. It is a sign, aimed at the people, on the behalf of all involved — deity, mediator, and commoners alike. For Moses, this radiance lasts indefinitely; for idols, it lasts only as long as it is maintained by human efforts.

Both of these differences highlight the absence of human involvement in the status change of Moses, in contrast to the status change of idols, which presupposes a high degree of training, orchestration, and funding. Although both Moses and idols have "mouth to mouth" relationships with their respective deities, and are granted privileges and the status-symbol of radiance that elevate them above commoners in order to develop a relationship of reverence, their relationships with human beings differ on the issue of

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[301] These same themes continue to reemerge throughout the following chapters.

cooperation or dependency. Moses's status does not require collaboration with or the resources of the Hebrew people. In fact, as Yahweh's offer to eliminate the Hebrews and make a nation out of Moses illustrates (Exod 32:10), Moses's status does not depend on the presence of the people at all, let alone their support of his status and subsequent life-style, but on his position with respect to Yahweh.

The difference that helps me unpack the role of Moses's luminosity in the overarching narrative of the Pentateuch has to do with the timing of the onset of divine radiance. In engaging this point of difference, I also address why it is here, not in Exod 7, just after the circumcision of his lips, that the capstone of his transformation — radiance — finally appears. For Moses, radiance begins to shine forth (Exod 34:29-35) a considerable amount of time after the circumcision of his lips (6:28-7:1), but for idols, it is part of the conclusion of the *Mīs Pî*, "washing, purification of the mouth," performed just after the climactic *Pīt Pî*, "opening of the mouth," portion of the ritual is complete. The time lag in Moses's radiance, where one might expect it to manifest more quickly based on the Moses-idol comparison, is a difference that points to a greater similarity.

The fact that Moses's status change is not confirmed via radiance until Exod 34:29-35 suggests that the purpose of his status is farther reaching than just getting the Hebrew people out of Egypt by becoming "god to Pharaoh" (Exod 7:1). The radiance of Moses's facial skin and the radiance of an idol, the signs of their status as "god," both arrive as the mediator enters the final stages of preparation for a life of coming and going into and out of the cella of the official, central shrine, where the deity resides.

Moses's status is confirmed at the dawn of a new era, just after the Sinai event and before the Hebrew people collectively embark on the construction of the tabernacle, a task whose completion drastically alters their way of life and ability to access Yahweh. Within the Book of Exodus, God progressively increases his presence among the Hebrew people, from being remote (Exod 2:23-25), to appearing via theophany to Moses alone (3-4), to working miracles from a distance (7-16), to appearing to the people collectively via theophany on Mount Sinai (19-34), then, finally, to living among the people in a portable tent shrine (40). Throughout all of these changes, the common factor that determines the relationship with the Hebrew people and Yahweh is not their behavior or even the Abrahamic Covenant, but the figure and status of Moses.[302]

Although the Hebrews know of their ancestral god before the exodus event (e.g., Exod 1:17; 3:13-17), it is not until Moses returns from Midian on a mission of deliverance that God begins to speak and act, and this only through Moses.[303] Plus, God returns with a new name — Yahweh — and therefore a new identity, including a new preference for how he interacts with human beings (3:13-15, 6:3). Whatever understanding or traditions this generation of Hebrews may have received about this deity, they are now obsolete. When Moses returns to Egypt from Midian, he returns with Yahweh, and the two are never far apart.

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[302] The biblical authors do credit the Abrahamic Covenant as the reason why Yahweh chooses to free the people from Egypt, although he does need prompting first (Exod 2:23-25; 6:4-5). However, upon the golden calf incident, what keeps Yahweh from destroying the people is primarily Moses's relationship with Yahweh and effectiveness as mediator (e.g., 32:9-14; 33:1-3, 12-23 [especially v.17]). See also Coats, *The Moses Traditions*, 67-71. *Moses*, 21, 111-12, 135, 173-75.

[303] Though Aaron is sometimes involved as Moses's "mouthpiece" (4:14-17) or "prophet" (7:1).

As their relationship progresses, so too does the level of Moses's access to the divine presence until, finally, that presence grants him a status-symbol that signals to the Hebrew people his readiness for "face to face" (Exod 33:11; Deut 34:10) and "mouth to mouth" (Num 12:8) exchanges with the divine. Moses's subsequent meetings with Yahweh take place at the pre-determined spot, before the ark of the testimony, in the Holy of Holies (Exod 25:22; 30:6, 36; Num 7:89; 17:19 [17:4]), which no one else in Israel's history accesses with such freedom and regularity. Moses then conveys the matters he and Yahweh speak of to the people directly (e.g., Exod 34:34-35).

Without Moses's status, the people would not have the requisite knowledge of how to enable Yahweh's presence to remain safely in their midst (e.g., Exod 19:21-24; 20:19; 28:43, 33:3). Moses's fulfillment of his role as one who is circumcised of lips (6:28-7:1), symbolically purified for the sake of mediating between divine and human realms, enables Yahweh to reside in the midst of this new nation, and to shape its fate and prosperity, wherever it may go. The consecration of the tabernacle and its cella marks the beginning of a new mode of relationship for Yahweh, Moses, and the Hebrew people.

As for idols, their mouths are opened, the source and symbol of their radiance is installed, and they are placed in the cella all in less than a day. Their relationship to the deity they represent operates in full capacity from their induction into the divine community onward, at least according to *Mīs Pî* texts. As in the case of Moses, the cella is where an idol becomes the *axis mundi*, connecting the vertical and horizontal planes for the sake of the mediated, both divine and human. However, for ancient

Mesopotamians, there are innumerable idols in play, hundreds for the same god or goddess, and often all within the same small geographical area, perhaps even within the same temple or shrine.[304] Divine radiance is attributed to all of these idols, so long as they function at capacity, but in the Hebrew Bible, this attribute is reserved for Yahweh and Moses alone (Exod 34:29-35; cf. e.g., Num 6:25; Deut 33:2; Ezek 1:27-28; Hab 3:4; Ps 4:6, 31:16, 80:19, 119:135; Job 29:3).

This theme of the singularity of Moses's experience runs through my extended comparison of Moses and idols, as it speaks to the larger historical context in which the Pentateuch's writers found themselves. Before concluding my exposition of the function of Moses's radiant or horned visage (Exod 34:29-35), there is one more layer of symbolism to unpack. As discussed already, the Moses-idol comparison is only one interpretive direction in which Moses's shining (*qāran*) may go. Linguistically, the Hebrew *qrn* "to shine" has no Akkadian parallel with the same meaning. In Akkadian, as in most other Semitic languages, the root *qrn* (*qarnu*) is associated with having horns. Therefore, in order to understand the import of the reading "the skin of [Moses's] face had horns" (Exod 34:29, 30, 35), especially in the context of Babylonian exile, I must examine the metaphor of horns and its role in ancient Near Eastern texts, iconography, and imagination, with a focus on Mesopotamian and biblical sources.

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[304] George, *Babylonian Topographical Texts*, 69, ll. 82-88.

From Aurochs to Imagery

Either way one interprets it, the Semitic root *qrn* is an odd choice for describing

Moses. First of all, *qrn* is rare in Biblical Hebrew, especially as a verb. If the author

meant *qrn* to be read "the skin of [Moses's] face *shone*" (Exod 34:29, 30, 35), there is a

much more common root for "to shine, light up," and that is *ʾôr,* which is often paired

with the face, most commonly that of Yahweh (e.g., Num 6:25; Ps 31:17, 67:2, 80:4, 8;

119:35; Dan 9:17), although it is used for humans as well (e.g., Eccl 8:1). Thus, the

ambiguity introduced by *qrn* may easily have been avoided; in fact, it would be easier to

communicate Moses's radiance without ambiguity, than to select this rare root, assign an

even more rare usage, and repeat it in identical form twice (34:29, 30, 35). Secondly, *qrn*

seems an odd choice because this is the only place in the Hebrew Bible where the history

of interpretation suggests that it has to do with light, rather than horns, despite the fact

that "horn" or "to grow/have horns" is its primary usage in Hebrew, as well as in

comparative Semitics.

For most of the history of biblical interpretation, the idea of someone having

horns is peculiar, or even offensive, as horns came to be identified with the devil

beginning in medieval Europe. Besides, many other religious figures from around the

globe are marked as saints or holy-persons by an aura of light around the head,

sometimes referred to as a halo, so Moses is in good company when placed in this line of

imagery. However, the image of an anthropomorphic figure having horns was neither odd

nor uncommon in the ancient Near East. In fact, the antiquity and proliferation of

religious imagery related to horns is the reason one cannot claim unequivocally that

luminosity is the oldest symbol of the sacred, as horns are the one symbol that appears

even earlier and more often, beginning in prehistoric times.[305]

The image of horns, whether portrayed in iconography or incorporated into

textual descriptions, is taken from the bull, as marker of strength and virility. Beginning

at least 11,000 years ago, there were three species of wild bovine, or *aurochsen*, that

roamed North Africa, India, and Eurasia, respectively, spanning from the Atlantic to the

Pacific coasts. Between 10,000-8,000 years ago, people began to domesticate members of

each species independently, although it is not clear when or where the North African

species may have been tamed. The first domestication of this animal occurred around the

same time and in two villages, Çayönü in Southern Turkey and Dja'de el Mughara in

Northern Syria.[306] From this original eighty domesticated females, descended the entire

species of taurine cattle, the most common species of bovine in the world today.[307]

However, *aurochsen*, in their wild form, by no means disappeared once domestic

cattle come onto the scene, but continued to roam the woodlands and shrub-lands until

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[305] For example, see Ian Hodder and Lynn Meskell, "A 'Curious and Sometimes a Trifle Macabre Artistry': Some Aspects of Symbolism in Neolithic Turkey," *Current Anthropology* 52 (2011): 242. Manfred Lurker, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt: An Illustrated Dictionary* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1974), 36. G. A. Wainwright, *The Sky-Religion in Egypt: Its Antiquity and Effects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), 9.

[306] Ruth Bollongino, Joachim Burger, Adam Powell, Marjan Mashkour, Jean-Denis Vigne, and Mark G. Thomas, "Modern Taurine Cattle Descended from Small Number of Near Eastern Founders," *Molecular Biology and Evolution* 29 (2012): 2101-4.

[307] Bollongino, et. al., "Modern Taurine Cattle Descended from Small Number of Near Eastern Founders," 2101-4.

the last known member of the Eurasian species died in Poland in 1627 CE.[308] With a

shoulder height of 1.8 m (6 ft.), a weight of anywhere between 700-1,500 kg

(1,500-3,300 lbs.), and horns 80 cm (31 in.) in length and 10-20 cm (4-8 in.) in diameter,

the male *aurochs* was an impressive creature. Any interaction with it, chance or

otherwise, was likely to be memorable, as it was one of the largest herbivores of the post-

glacial period. Such encounters were memorialized in some of the earliest examples of

art, including the famous Chauvet Cave (ca. 30,000 BCE) and Lascaux Cave paintings in

France (ca. 15,000 BCE), the latter of which includes a 4.6 m (15 ft.) drawing of an

aurochs spread across the ceiling, 3.7 m (12 ft.) above the floor.[309]

In the ancient Near East and Egypt, from prehistoric times and throughout

antiquity, the *aurochs*, as well as the domesticated taurine bull, was emblematic of raw

power. Alongside the lion, the bull occupied the highest place in the hierarchy of the

natural world, and represented the opposition between nature and culture, danger and

defense.[310] Even into modern times, the domestic bull maintains its wild tendencies,

especially when provoked. As the most dangerous part of this awe-inspiring beast, the

aurochs's horns came to symbolize the power of the entire animal, in addition to their

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[308] Mieczyslaw Rokosz', "History of the Aurochs (*Bos Taurus Primigenius*) in Poland," *Animal Genetic Resources Information* 16 (1995): 11.

[309] Guy Bar-Oz and Simcha Lev-Yadun, "Paleolithic Cave Rock Art, Animal Coloration, and Specific Animal Habitats," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 109 (2012), Accessed August 23, 2015, http://www.pnas.org/content/109/20/E1212.full. Gary Snyder, "Entering the Fiftieth Millennium," *Profession* (1997): 37.

[310] Catherine Breniquet, "Animals in Mesopotamian Art," Pages 145-68 in *A History of the Animal World in the Ancient Near East*, Handbook of Oriental Studies 64, ed. Billie Jean Collins (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 158.

own destructive and protective qualities.[311] Like the domesticated bull, male *aurochsen* were solitary, which made sighting and hunting them more difficult than herds of females and calves, which also roamed the wood- and shrub-land.[312] In some contexts, hunting male *aurochsen* successfully brought prestige to the individual and his cohorts, which is one of the reasons why their hunt is often portrayed in art, and their skulls, or at least horns, were often kept and displayed in public and before the gods.[313]

Throughout the ancient Near East, since before *aurochsen* were domesticated, these skulls and/or horns were affixed to buildings, installed in religious shrines, and attached to the corners of altars.[314] Eventually, the tri-fold symbolism of power, danger, and protection came to exist independent of the presence of authentic horns taken from the animal itself. Ancient Near Eastern archaeological, iconographic, and textual records contain innumerable examples of stone, metal, clay, and other materials being shaped into the form of a bull or of bull horns and used in the same way that authentic horns were used in previous times, from the Nahal Mishmar crowns (ca. 3,500 BCE), to the Egyptian Hierakonpolis and Narmer Palettes (ca. 3,100 BCE), to the temples of Mesopotamia as pictured on cylinder seals, and the four-horned altars of the Bronze and Iron Age Levant

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[311] Hodder and Meskell, "A 'Curious and Sometimes a Trifle Macabre Artistry'," 237.

[312] Hodder and Meskell, "A 'Curious and Sometimes a Trifle Macabre Artistry'," 243.

[313] Hodder and Mezkell, "A 'Curious and Sometimes a Trifle Macabre Artistry'," 243.

[314] For examples, see Hodder and Meskell, "A 'Curious and Sometimes a Trifle Macabre Artistry'," 242. Lurker, *The Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt*, 36. Wainwright, *The Sky-Religion in Egypt*, 9.

(e.g., Arad, Beer-Sheva, Ekron, Megiddo), including those described in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Exod 27:2; 29:31; 37:25; 38:2; Jer 17:1; Ezek 43:15, 20; Amos 3:14).[315]

The combination of virility and horns enables the bull, whether a wild *aurochs* or domesticated cattle, to destroy his enemies and protect his territory, as well as the more vulnerable members of his species. Their horns, then, became emblematic of incontestable power, with the purpose of destruction and protection, and the image of them was enough to ensure that people associated this characteristic with whatever object bull-horns were placed upon. Therefore, placing horns on objects such as public buildings and sacred spaces, including altars, marked them as locations of power, a power which both threatened destruction upon enemies and promised protection for those in need of it.[316] In some contexts, kings who displayed such power by fighting against their enemies on behalf of their land and subjects were portrayed or spoken of metaphorically as bulls (e.g., Narmer Palette, Victory Stele of Naram-Sin).[317] Yet this symbolism resonated most loudly in the *religious* imagination, as bull-related epithets, imagery, and iconography were used to characterize gods throughout the ancient Near East, from the Nile to the Tigris and beyond.

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[315] Irit Ziffer, "A Note on the Nahal Mishmar 'Crowns'," Pages 47-68 in *Ancient Near Eastern Art in Context: Studies in Honor of Irene J. Winter by Her Students*, eds. Jack Cheng and Marian H. Feldman (Leiden: Brill, 2007). Collon, *First Impressions*, 172, No. 27i, 743.

[316] For example, in 1 Kgs 1:50-51 and 2:28, Adonijah and Joab, respectively, grab the horns of the altar at Shiloh out of fear, in order to beg sanctuary from their political adversaries.

[317] *Victory of Naram-Sin, King of Akkad*, ca.2250 BCE, Louvre, Paris, Accessed April 24, 2016, http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/victory-stele-naram-sin. The Egyptian Museum, whose collection includes the Narmer (Hierakonpolis) Palette, does not have a licensed photograph of the artifact available on their website. A photograph and drawing of the palette may be found at http://condor.depaul.edu/sbucking/narmer_palette.htm. Accessed April 24, 2016.

Of course most of the gods to which people attributed bull-like qualities were

male deities at or near the top of their pantheon, and were either already associated with

the powers of destruction and protection or came to be associated with these qualities as a

result of the bull symbolism.[318] Each region of the ancient Near East had at least one god

for whom the analogy of the bull was most apt, who is referred to in texts and inscriptions

as "the Bull," and who is portrayed as the animal or as an anthropomorphic figure, either

with horns or wearing a horned cap. In Egypt, this was the god Horus, in Anatolia it was

the unnamed storm-god, in Mesopotamia one example was Gugalanna (literally "Great

Bull of Heaven"), in the Levant, it was both El and his son Baal, and for the authors of

the Hebrew Bible, it was Yahweh (e.g., Num 23:22, Isa 10:13).

In ancient Mesopotamia, and also Syro-Palestine and Anatolia, the bull and his

characteristic strength was associated primarily with the storm-god, known by many

names throughout the region, from archaic times through antiquity.[319] As is the case with

most ancient Near Eastern storm-gods, who were said to be in control of agricultural

productivity, the bull or horned-god symbolized whichever male deity was regarded in

that particular context as the consort of the Mother-goddess, the female deity in charge of

human fertility.[320] The Sumerian god Gugalanna, "Great Bull of Heaven" and first

husband of Ereškigal, Queen of the Underworld, is the oldest known Mesopotamian deity

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[318] In some contexts, horns were a marker of divinity in general, regardless of sex, gender, or deity. This is discussed further below.

[319] Alberto R. W. Green, *The Storm-God in the Ancient Near East*, BJS 8 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 18-88. Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 47.

[320] Green, *The Storm-God in the Ancient Near East*, 19.

to be associated with the bull. He is also identified with the constellation known better by

its Greek name, Taurus, the bull figure that appears among the stars during the spring

equinox, and marks the Babylonian New Year, or Akitu, which coincides with the

beginning of the agricultural season. From the Old Babylonian Period (20-16th centuries

BCE) onward, the symbol of the bull was typically associated with the god who

brandishes lightning, thus confirming his identity as the storm-god.[321]

For the most part, animals were demythologized early in the Mesopotamian

pantheon, as the gods soon became anthropomorphic in the human imagination, yet

images that harken back to the bull, whether *aurochs* or domesticated, remained symbolic

of power, destruction, and protection, as well as agricultural fertility. By extension, bull

horns remained a meaning-laden and popular visual motif, well into the Neo-Babylonian

period (626-539 BCE), as they continued to communicate unbridled power and the ability

to destroy and protect simultaneously.[322]

From the early third millennium BCE into the Neo-Babylonian (626-539 BCE)

and Achaemenid Periods (539-332 BCE), a horned cap, with either a pair or pairs of

horns protruding from the front or sides, or with up to seven pairs of horns stacked upon

one another, became the distinctive headdress of divinity.[323] This symbol was not applied

consistently to any particular major deity, but rather stood for the divine realm as a

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[321] Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 47, fig. 89. Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 233, fig. 25-27, 42. Collon, *First Impressions*, fig. 269, 560, 788.

[322] Green, *The Storm-God in the Ancient Near East*, 18-88.

[323] Collon, *First Impressions*, 35, 165.

whole.[324] In some contexts, such as Kassite Period (15-12th centuries BCE) *kudurrus*, which were large, polished, stones inscribed with land grants, the horned cap is represented sitting alone atop an altar or possibly a doorway, without attachment to any particular god, as the symbol of divine witness to the agreement at hand.[325] However, these examples are few. For most of its long history, this head-gear was not disembodied, but placed upon various deities, or rather, their idols, as symbols of their divine status.[326]

In the Hebrew Bible, bull and horn imagery is applied to Yahweh in two ways. The first is exactly what one might expect given the above description of the symbolic import of the bull. The author of Num 23:22 likens Yahweh to the horns of a wild ox, protecting Israel against Egypt, and, similarly, Isa 10:13 likens him to a bull bringing down foreign kings who are enemies of Zion.

Another analogy between Yahweh and bulls is drawn by the most common idiom used to describe Yahweh's anger, and that is "his nostrils grew hot" (e.g., Exod 15:8; 32:10; Isa 11:4; Ps 18:15; Job 4:9). This idiom conjures the image of Yahweh as a snorting bull with flared, if not steaming, nostrils, preparing for conflict. As with a bull, the metaphor of visible heat vaporizing from Yahweh's nostrils serves as a threat of violence to whomever has angered Yahweh within that particular pericope, usually by endangering the well-being of Israel, even if sometimes the offender is Israel itself (e.g.,

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[324] Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 102-03.

[325] For examples, see Black and Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, fig. 80, 90. Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, fig. 44.

[326] For examples, see Collon, *First Impressions*, fig. 4, 102-07, 765-72. Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 2, 37, 97a, 117.

Exod 32:10). The imagery of a bull or a horn as a metaphor for Yahweh's power,

particularly as it manifests in the destructive and protective elements of his personality,

functions as an expression of that which is made clear in other parts of the Hebrew Bible,

independent of such language: that Yahweh is a deity who protects the well-being of

those who serve him, even at the expense of others.

Option Two, The Skin of His Face was Horned

Given the above analysis of the foundation, symbolism, and use of horn imagery

in the ancient Near East in general, and in Mesopotamia and the Hebrew Bible in

particular, the description "the skin of [Moses's] face was horned (*qāran*)" has much to

suggest about the mouthpiece of Yahweh as he appears before the Hebrew people. First of

all, the appearance of horns is a metaphor that underscores Moses's strength in his role as

mediator, including his power to destroy and protect at will. Moses displays these

qualities just prior to his horned appearance, in the course of the golden calf episode,

wherein he prevents Yahweh from wiping out the people, pulverizes the calf to make the

people drink it, orchestrates the killing of 3,000 men, then demands that Yahweh remain

among the people, lest they die (Exod 32). In this context, horns may be considered the

marker of Moses's ability — and Yahweh's permission — to fulfill the symbolic role of

the bull as an unrivaled destroyer and protector on behalf of the greater good of the

Hebrew people, even if it is at the expense of certain individuals.

Secondly, the verb *qāran* "to be horned" (Akk: *qarnu*) leads one to ask whether an allusion to the infamous golden calf episode is intended.[327] Given that the Hebrew people, under the leadership of Aaron, constructed the calf as a replacement for Moses when they considered him missing (Exod 32:1), the short answer is "yes," Moses's horns (or even shining) may be read as a supercessionist statement about the newly minted golden calf. The golden calf that the people fabricate to replace Moses, he grinds to dust (32:20), and forces them to ingest. The message is clear that Moses is not to be likened to a calf, which is vulnerable and dependent upon others, still suckling from its mother. However, in the same breath, the authors of Exod 32-34 liken Moses to a bull, a mature, solitary, and virile male who is best unprovoked. Like an angered bull, ready to use his powerful horns to destroy, "Moses's nostril burned hot" (Exod 32:19) against Israel at the sight of the calf. It is this reaction that brings about the calf's demise, as well as 3,000 human deaths, and all without Yahweh's command, rebuke, or reprimand. This idiom for righteous anger is applied to both Yahweh and Moses within the same passage (32:10-22) and thus draws yet another parallel between the deity and the mediator.

The next morning, Moses ascends Mount Sinai to speak with Yahweh, in order to determine what is to be done (Exod 32:30), and in the course of this inquiry, Moses is endowed with horns. After a series of conversations with the deity, during which Moses convinces him to remain with the people for their protection, Moses sees the glory of Yahweh (33:12-34:9). At some unknown point in this series of interactions with the

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[327] Polak, "Theophany and Mediator," 141. Sarna, *JPS Commentary: Exodus*, 221. Spronk, "The Picture of Moses in the History of Interpretation," 258.

divine, Moses receives his horned visage as the symbol of both his status as the

embodiment of Yahweh, and the reverent nature of his relationship to the people, as they

are the first to perceive this sign (Exod 34:29). Moses descends the mountain and, like

the bull, stands before Yahweh and the people, mature in his strength and identity, and

prepared to intervene as he sees fit. As the repercussions of the golden calf decision

illustrate, Moses's intermediary role comes with the power and permission to destroy and

protect as necessary.

In addition to emphasizing certain characteristics of Moses, which stand in

contrast to those of a calf, and providing Moses's audience with the correct interpretation

of his character, the image of Moses as horned prompts an analogy with the gods of the

ancient Near East, including Yahweh. Whether evoked by the imagery of its emblematic

horns or other allusions to the animal, such as idiomatic references to the heat of one's

nostrils, the symbolism of the bull is reserved primarily for deities and their images.[328]

Depending on which literary source and to which period and location one attributes

Moses's description as Israel's horned-one (Exod 34:29-35), one might argue that his

horns serve as a polemic against one deity or shrine in particular.[329] However, the

longevity and broad geographic use of the bull analogy to characterize certain gods, in

addition to the evolution of the horned-cap as a generic marker of the divine, makes the

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[328] The exception is mentioned above, in early-dynastic Egypt, when certain kings were depicted in terms of the bull because of their success in war. Such examples include the Hierakonpolis and Narmer Pallettes.

[329] For example, Jeroboam's calves at Dan and Bethel (1 Kgs 12:25-33; cf. 2 Kgs 17:21-22; 23:15). Wesley I. Toews, *Monarchy and Religious Institution in Israel Under Jeroboam I*, SBLMS 47 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993), 123-34. Youn Ho Chung, *The Sin of the Calf: The Rise of the Bible's Negative Attitude Toward the Golden Calf*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 523 (New York: T & T Clark, 2010).

target of said polemic difficult to pinpoint, especially if bull or horn imagery is the central point of comparison.

In focusing on such a narrow line of interpretation, it is easy to lose sight of what the narrative context of the passage itself contributes to one's understanding of Moses's horned-state. It is not necessary to look to the pantheon of Mesopotamia, or any other culture, in order to understand the function of Moses's horns within the biblical narrative, although I do take this extra step with a different purpose in the closing chapter. Moses does not descend from Mount Sinai with a horned (or luminous) visage as an *indirect* affront to Baal, Horus, Gugalanna, or any other ancient Near Eastern deity; Moses descends with a horned visage because of his *direct* correlation with Yahweh. Horns are the sign of Moses's power and the danger and protection that come with it. This sign is intended for Moses's audience, both as confirmation of the divine nature of these attributes, which they have just witnessed in action, and in order that the people may revere Moses, in addition to the word he relays from the deity (Exod 34:32-35).

Option Three, Purposeful Ambiguity

Rather than choosing between the two possible interpretations of *kî qāran ʿôr pānāyw* "that the skin of [Moses's] face shone" or "that the skin of [Moses's] face had horns," Rashi, the medieval French commentator, offers his readers an interpretation of Moses's appearance that combines the two images. In Exod 34:29, on the phrase *kî qāran* "that . . . shone" or "that . . . had horns," Rashi writes, "Similar language as *qarnayim* [two horns], for the light was [continuously] glistening and projecting as if from a horn

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(*qeren*)."[330] This nuanced interpretation, which embraces the ambiguity of the Hebrew text, became as prevalent in Jewish tradition as Rashi's commentary itself. It is also attested similarly in Christian tradition. For example, *Historie des Ouden en Nieuwen Testaments*, a Dutch illustrated companion to the Bible printed in 1722, contains a copper print that portrays Moses with two points of light shining from his forehead, and, perhaps coincidently, standing next to a bull (Figure 1, Appendix 1).[331] What these interpreters likely do not realize is that, in wrestling with the ambiguity of the Hebrew *qāran*, they also preserve a deep connection between divine radiance and bull-horn imagery.

As demonstrated above, both shining and bull imagery are rooted in the ancient Near Eastern tradition of astral deities, as scenes of heavenly life played out in the sky and upon the religious imagination nightly. At some point in ancient Near Eastern prehistory, humans brought together celestial bodies and earthly forms in their conception of the divine. By the time the Sumerians began writing in Mesopotamia around 3,200 BCE, the aforementioned god Gugalanna, "Great Bull of Heaven," was associated with the bull-shaped constellation that appears in the northern hemisphere around the spring equinox. As time progressed, and more people throughout the ancient Near East began to live in settlements and cities, ideas about the gods and their participation in human affairs changed. The gods became anthropomorphic; yet the association of deities with celestial

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[330] Abraham Ben Isaiah and Benjamin Sharfman, *The Pentateuch and Rashi's Commentary: A Linear Translation into English*, Vol. 2 (Brooklyn: S. S. & R. Publishing, 1950), 436.

[331] Antoni Schoonenburg, Pieter Visser, Evert en Jan Visscher, and Gerard onder de Linden, *Historie des Ouden en Nieuwen Testaments, Verrykt met veele Printverbeeldingen In koper gefneeden Tweede Deel* (Amsterdam: Boekverkoopers,1722), 119.

light continued through the metaphor and imagery of luminosity, and the association of particular gods with bull-like virility endured through the imagery of horns.

The imagery of radiant light and the imagery of the bull are by no means mutually exclusive. In fact, there are numerous examples from ancient Mesopotamia wherein the two motifs overlap in a way that expresses continuity between divine horns and light "bright like the center of heaven." For example, the sun god Shamash is often portrayed with both a horned cap and rays of light emanating from the region of his shoulders and head.[332] Another example comes from a bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian prayer, dedicated to both the high-god Enlil (Ellil) and his consort Ninlil, the mother goddess.

In the Mesopotamian pantheon, Enlil is known as a father-figure, creator, "raging storm," and "wild bull," and is one of the few deities associated with the horned cap in the Neo-Assyrian Period, during which he is known by the name Assur (911-609 BCE).[333] In the course of this prayer, the penitent one recites:

> In the mountains like a strong wild-ox he maketh his abode.
> His horns are lighted up like the brightness of the sun.
> Like the star of heaven, they herald (the dawn): they are full of brilliance.[334]

In this particular example, the horns of the deity are in and of themselves sources of light, comparable to celestial bodies in their brilliance. These three elements come together in this prayer for the sake of communicating to Enlil and to the reciter what it is about this

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[332] Collon, *First Impressions*, 167, No. 102-05, 765-68.

[333] Black and Green, *God, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 76.

[334] Friedrich Delitztch and Paul Haupt, *Beiträge zur Assyriologie und semitischen Sprachwissenschaft, Vol. 10* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1913), 18-19, cf. 53.

deity that causes one to approach him in a time of need. In light of the discussions of

radiance and horns above, I suggest that Enlil's radiant horns signify his disposition

toward goodwill, his incontestable power, and his ability to use that power for either

destruction or protection. Such descriptions of the divine are packed with layer upon

layer of symbolism, which may be excavated to a certain extent, but what is perhaps most

striking is the imagery's impression upon the imagination.[335]

This is also the case with descriptions of those who embody the divine. Even in

the *Mīs Pî* incantation texts, it is not clear when descriptions are intended as literal and

when they are intended as metaphor.[336] For example, an idol's literal brilliance may be

brought about by inlays or garments of metal and jewels, such a crown, which, of course

must be polished in order for its luminosity to persist, but extant images of what idols

looked like illustrate that not all idols wore crowns.[337] Therefore, physical elements that

display a certain radiance, as well as verbal descriptions of luminosity, are to be taken as

sign-posts, pointing beyond the physical, toward a particular kind of metaphor.

However, this metaphorical aspect by no means denigrates the importance of the

physical form. On the contrary, it elevates the corporeal idol as the means by which the

necessary symbolism is presented, thus clarifying the nature of the deity which lies

beyond. Since the gods themselves are never actually seen, literary and visual snapshots

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[335] Alasdair Livingstone, *Mystical and Mythological Explanatory Works of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 93.

[336] Livingstone, *Mystical and Mythological Explanatory Works of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, 102.

[337] For example, Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, fig. 119a-b.

are essential for a proper understanding of the divine. Understanding the gods means being familiar with how those gods are represented, and knowing what is meant by their symbolism. For example, an idol's radiance signifies its status as mediator, the divine presence within, its orientation toward health and goodwill, and the reverence one ought to feel as a result of its presence. If it is alternatively or additionally portrayed as having horns or wearing a horned headdress or crown, this adds another layer of symbolism, one that communicates utmost power, and a propensity for both destruction and protection.

As for Moses, whether one reads the skin of his face as shining, horned, or somehow both, the image functions as a metaphor for the nature of the deity whose presence lies behind this visual manifestation. Not only does the appearance of the symbol(s) of light/horns signify the completion of Moses's status change before the Hebrew people, but it also communicates something profound about the nature of Moses — that the divine presence channels through him, that he is inclined toward Israel's well-being, and that he has the power to go to great lengths to ensure it. By consistently drawing parallels between Moses and Yahweh, in addition to the steady increase in the intensity of their relationship, the authors of the Book Exodus build up to the radiant, horned appearance of Moses's face.

By the time the audience arrives at the description of his radiance/horns, Moses has already entered his role as mediator, as exemplified through the golden calf debacle (Exod 32), and has attained a rapport with Yahweh that enables them to speak "face to face" (Exod 33:11; Deut 34:10). However, Moses's complicated and trying journey

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toward status change is all for nothing if the people do not believe it. They need a sign. To this end, Yahweh affects Moses's nature in a way that results in the appearance of brilliant horns, an image that brings with it a complex web of symbolism and a rich history of interpretation. Such a luminous, horned visage works as a metaphor on the part of the author to ensure that all who see or hear of Moses's appearance perceive that which Yahweh has made obvious about Moses — that he is Israel's lone, awe-inspiring mediator, and Yahweh's sole embodiment, mouthpiece, and friend.

Finally, another layer of significance is added to the image of Moses's radiance/ horns by the observation that this sort of literary delay finds its parallel in the interpretation of the tabernacle as the culmination of the creation story, which begins in Gen 1.[338] This interpretation of Israel's sacred space is made possible through comparison with the Babylonian story Enuma Eliš, discussed in chapter two, which serves to elevate the deity Marduk as the founder of all creation, with city of Babylon and the temple Esagila at its center. In placing the emergence of Moses's radiance/horns on the eve of the tabernacle's construction, rather than immediately after his shift from "uncircumcised of lips" to "god to Pharaoh" (Exod 6:30-7:1), the author brings together the narratives of creation, Moses's status as Yahweh's idol, and the tabernacle. This convergence of narratives contributes to the argument that Moses's status and the onset of his radiance/ horns are not limited to Moses and his relationship to Pharaoh, but function in support of a larger narrative project.

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[338] Mark K. George, *Israel's Tabernacle as Social Space*, Ancient Israel and Its Literature 2 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 184-89.

In this framework, the author places the overarching narrative of Gen-Exod in direct conversation with Enuma Eliš. In so doing, the biblical author is also drawing two specific comparisons, one between the Marduk and Yahweh, and the other between Marduk's idol and Yahweh's idol, i.e., Moses — all of whom are represented in literature and iconography as emanating radiance and displaying horns.[339] As the installation of Marduk's temple (Esagila) and idol are necessary for establishing the deity's reign over his creation, so too are the erection of the tabernacle and Moses's status as idol integral to the story of the creator deity Yahweh. Moses's status is essential to bringing the Hebrews' life with Yahweh to fruition, a theme which I explore in depth in chapter six.

Conclusion

The onset of Moses's radiance/horns looks backward to what Moses has accomplished in his role as mediator since being made "god to Pharaoh" (Exod 7:1), and forward to the construction and consecration of the tabernacle (Exod 35-40). Like the opening of the mouth of an idol, the circumcision of Moses's lips is geared toward his daily operation as the mouthpiece of the deity, whether acting from the deity's home — the cella or Holy of Holies — or out in the community. The timing of the onset of this sign that Moses's status change is indeed complete demonstrates that the purpose of Yahweh making Moses "god to Pharaoh" in Exod 7:1 is neither temporary, nor focused

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[339] As discussed previously, the fact that the colophon of the BR of the *Mīs Pî* states that the tablet was intended for use in Esagila, Marduk's temple, suggests that the BR was applied to Marduk's idol. The BR and accompanying incantations describe the idol as radiant, as discussed throughout this chapter. For an example of an illustration of a scene from the Enuma Eliš in which Marduk wearing a horned cap, see Collon, *First Impressions*, fig. 850; cf. Collon, 246, 462, 960; Ornan, *Triumph of the Symbol*, fig. 78

solely upon the departure from Egypt. The Hebrew people need someone to be "god to Pharaoh" in Exod 7-15 because Pharaoh needs to be overpowered. As the people move into the wilderness and an existence governed by the presence of Yahweh, they continue to need someone who will outshine Pharaoh with respect to power, status before the divine, and protection.

Moses's special status as the embodiment of Yahweh enables the Hebrew people to escape from bondage, but this is only the beginning of their story. In being freed *from* one situation, they are freed *unto* another. The exodus event does not end with the closing of the Re(e)d Sea upon Pharaoh's armies, but with the erection of the tabernacle and the descent of the continuous presence of Yahweh into the inner chamber. However, this new way of life, with a deity living in the midst of its people, is not possible without a mediator (cf. Exod 32:9-14; 33:1-3, 12-17), especially in the dangerous beginning stages of the relationship.

In order for this arrangement to work, both Yahweh and the Hebrew people need someone who can bridge the gap between divinity and humanity, who can go to and from the cella, learning and teaching simultaneously, until enough experience and knowledge has passed for both this deity and this new nation to understand what it entails to be in each other's presence. Yahweh must learn from Moses what it means to live peacefully in the midst a people, and Israel must learn from Moses what it is to both behold and be beholden by Yahweh. Whether or not they will do so is another story.

CHAPTER SIX: MOUTH TO MOUTH

The status change that both Moses and idols experience is not an end, but rather a means. Since the purpose of both the opening of an idol's mouth and the circumcision of Moses's lips is to induct the initiate into its intermediary role, the final step in comparing these two processes of transformation is to examine their respective outcomes. The comparison between Moses and idols in the previous chapter, with respect to the sign of their status change, led to the insight that Moses's new status is not just about getting the Hebrew people *out of* Egypt by becoming "god to Pharaoh" (Exod 7:1), but is also about ushering and settling them *into* a mode of existence defined by the presence of the deity, who resides in their midst once the tabernacle is established (Exod 40). In this chapter, I pick up where the former left off and examine the outcomes of the status change of Moses and idols as they manifest in their respective tabernacle and temple systems.[340]

For the Hebrew people, the introduction of the tabernacle brings with it a new mode of relating to and conceptualizing Yahweh, and thus signifies a shift in the

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[340] By "tabernacle system" (Moses) or "temple system" (idols), I mean the items, persons, concepts, and regulations that governs that space and how one operates within that space. Examples include, but are not limited to, the physical objects that comprise the tabernacle or temple, the ordering of its chambers and antechamber, the associated offerings system, and purification regulations, as well as the personnel, their qualifications (e.g., ancestry, age, state of body), duties, and limitations. These are discussed further where relevant, but not exhaustively. For in-depth explanations of such systems, see Michael B. Hundley, *Gods in Dwellings: Temples and Divine Presence in the Ancient Near East*, WAWS 3 (Williston, VT: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013). Wiggermann, "Theologies, Priests, and Worship in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*. R. E. Friedman, "Tabernacle," *ABD* 6:292-300.

relationship between the deity and the general population. The success of this shift is not

possible without a mediator, especially in the beginning stages, before the practices

necessary for Israel's survival are ingrained in the collective and individual psyche. While

the completion of Moses's status change is signified by horns and/or radiance (Exod

43:29-35), it is his day-to-day efficacy that is the true test of his intermediary capabilities.

For thirty-eight of the forty years Moses spends as leader, he meets with Yahweh

in the tabernacle, then relays Yahweh's word to the people (Exod 25:22; 30:6, 36; Num

7:89; 17:19 [17:4]; cf. Exod 33:7-11). Paired with the findings discussed in previous

chapters, this observation suggests that how Moses operates once the tabernacle is

complete is the ultimate manifestation of his status change. It is not until this mode of

operation comes into effect that Moses fulfills his destiny as Israel's mediator, because it

is not until the tabernacle that Moses's task of delivering the people *from* Egypt *unto* life

with Yahweh is complete (Exod 3).

This argument for the primacy of Moses's tabernacle experience as the resolution

of the circumcision of his lips (Exod 6:28-7:1) is further supported by comparison with

the *Mīs Pî* and subsequent lives of idols. Through comparison of Moses and idols with

respect to the effects of their respective status changes, especially in relation to their

deities, sacred space, and their human communities, the *purpose* of the mediator status

comes to light. Here, in the final core chapter, I argue that the role of this special status is

to allow the mediator to both cross the boundaries between divinity and humanity, and to

give physical form to those boundaries. These boundaries are exemplified in the

mediator's relationship to the sacred space associated with his or her tradition — for Moses, this is the tabernacle, and for idols, their respective temples, for example Marduk's Esagila. This is where the contrast between the mediator and all other earthly beings is most strongly illustrated, because no other figure, including high-ranking religious personnel, can traverse the boundaries that mediators both cross and create.

In order to demonstrate that the crossing and construction of boundaries is the ultimate purpose of both the *Mīs Pî* and the circumcision of Moses's lips, I begin with what the mediator's intended life, lived in such close proximity and relationship to the deity, actually entails. For both Moses and idols, their respective statuses are accompanied by privileges and, to some extent, disadvantages, all of which work together in service of the deity and populace. Status shapes the lives of idols and Moses in ways that serve to maximize their intermediary capabilities, even though this status is maintained at a cost.

While at the core of this analysis is the relationship between mediator, deity, and sacred space, there are other relationships at play. For both Moses and idols, their identification with the divine serves as a point of tension for their respective human audiences. The similarity lies in the goal of said tension — to elicit reverence for the mediator as the representative of the deity and the being upon whose efficacy the livelihood of the people depends. However, this tension plays out differently for Moses than it does for idols because of the deep differences in their respective natures. Despite the similarity, one deep difference emerges as a dominant feature of the Moses-idol

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comparison, and that is that Moses's status elevates his humanity, while an idol's status constrains his or her divinity. This and other differences between Moses and idols with respect to the effects of status change point to the tension between the aniconism of the biblical authors and the idol-centered polytheism of their cultural milieux, and the ways in which this tension shapes the biblical portrayal of Moses.

By understanding Moses, idols, and how these figures operate in their capacity as intermediaries, then placing them in comparative perspective, one may better understand both parties as intermediary figures and also as products of the ancient Near Eastern context out of which they emerged. In chapters four and five, I examined how Moses and idols become intermediaries, then unpacked the imagery and implications of the visual sign that the intermediary is indeed operative. Here, I look into the mediator's life as it is lived post-transformation with an eye for the practical implications of this new status. To this end, I examine, first and foremost, how the mediator's status affects his or her relationship with the deity, and how this status is represented in the tabernacle or temple systems. Then, I evaluate how these matters affect the life of the community. By performing these analyses for first Moses, then idols, I establish the necessary framework for arguing the points that emerge in the course of comparison.

The Public and Private Life of Moses

In order to examine how the biblical authors portray Moses's relationship with Yahweh as it manifests during the tabernacle period, I must look beyond the confines of the Sinai pericope. Exodus concludes with the construction and consecration of the

tabernacle, as well as Yahweh's indwelling (Exod 40). Leviticus follows immediately with regulations for the daily and seasonal operations of the tabernacle, then Numbers opens with nine and a half chapters on how to properly move the camp (Num 1:1-10:10). Finally, more than two years after the Passover in Egypt, the people leave Mount Sinai (Num 10:10-36) and, for the first time, orient the camp with respect to the tabernacle.

At this point, upon Israel's departure from Sinai, Moses's efficacy as intermediary and the nature of his relationship with Yahweh resurface as topics of discussion or, rather, grumbling. As soon as the Israelites set out from Sinai, they lodge a series of complaints against Yahweh (Num 11:1-3), then against Moses (Num 11:4-35), then Moses's relationship with Yahweh (Num 12:1-16), then twice against both Moses and Aaron (Num 13:1-14:45; 16:1-50). This series of conflicts occupies most of Num 11-16, and it is in this context that the biblical authors clarify Moses's status vis-à-vis Yahweh, and thus distinguish him from the rest of the Israelites. In Num 12:6-8, Yahweh explains that which the people have yet to understand or internalize — the nature, purpose, and inherent power of Moses's special status, and the proper response to that status. In addition to the appropriateness of both its narrative context and content, Num 12:6-8 illuminates the very elements of Moses's status that are the subject of this chapter, including his ability to converse with Yahweh with an intimacy that is unparalleled in the Hebrew Bible; therefore, this passage is at the center of the following analysis.[341]

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[341] This move from Exod 34:29-35 to Num 12:1-9 is also justified by Dozeman's source critical work. Dozeman argues that Num 11-12 is a continuation of Non-P's treatment of the theme of Mosaic authority, which left off at Exod 34:29-35 due to P's insertion of Exod 35-Num 10. Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus*, 755.

Mouth to Mouth with Yahweh

While stopped at Hazeroth, on the journey from Sinai to the wilderness of Paran, Miriam and Aaron speak against their brother Moses. Thinking of themselves as sharing his status as the spokesman of Yahweh, they pose a rhetorical question, "But only through Moses has Yahweh spoken? Has he not also spoken through us?" Yahweh hears their challenge and, because Moses is "very humble, more so than all people who [were] on the face of the earth" (12:3), challenges them in return.

Yahweh calls Moses, Aaron, and Miriam out to the tent of meeting and, through the doorway, says to Aaron and Miriam:

> 6 … Hear now my words: When there is a prophet among you, in the vision [directed] to him, I shall make myself known; in the dream, I shall speak with him. 7 Not so [with] my servant Moses. In all my house, he [is] faithful. 8 Mouth to mouth, I speak with him, clearly and not in riddles; the form of Yahweh, he beholds. On what account were you not afraid to speak against my servant, against Moses?" 9 The anger of Yahweh burned hot against them, and he departed.

In this encounter, Yahweh rejects the assumption that Moses's status is on par with that of either Aaron, the high priest and representative of the priesthood, or Miriam, the prophetess (Exod 15:20). In so doing, he clarifies the distinctive nature of Moses's status, above and beyond that of priest or prophet(ess), by offering insight into Moses private experiences with the divine, yet Yahweh refrains from labeling Moses. Moses stands alone in a category for which there is no terminology, so a description is in order.

The authors of Num 12:6-8 focuses on three characteristics of Yahweh's relationship with Moses: singularity, intimacy, and directness. The authors also attribute

their description to Yahweh himself because, after all, only Moses and Yahweh witness

their interactions firsthand. First, Yahweh separates Moses from the prophets, of which

there are many during the desert wanderings (e.g., Num 11:16-30) including Miriam, and

states definitively that interpretive modes of communication, such as prophetic dreams

and visions, are irrelevant in his dealings with Moses (12:6-7). Yahweh reasons that

Moses — not the prophets, nor Miriam, nor Aaron the high priest — is most faithful or

trustworthy (*neʾĕmān*) in all Yahweh's house (12:7).

The phrase *bəkol-bĕtî neʾĕmān hûʾ* "In all my house, he [is] faithful" may also be

translated as "He is entrusted with all my house," emphasizing Moses's absolute

authority and also the level of rapport he has with Yahweh.[342] Whether Moses is most

faithful, most authoritative, or, perhaps, both, the point of Yahweh's statement is that

Moses's status requires its own set of parameters. Moses's standing with respect to

Yahweh opens up the possibility of a more elevated relationship with Yahweh than that

which Miriam and Aaron perceive to be the highest level of divine-human interaction.

Second, Yahweh emphasizes the intimacy he and Moses share in a way that

encapsulates the form, content, and result of that connection. *Peh ʾel-peh ʾădaber-bô*

ûmarʾeh wəlōʾ bəḥîdōt ûtəmunat yhwh yabît "Mouth to mouth, I speak with him, clearly

and not in riddles; the form of Yahweh, he beholds" (Num 12:8). The phrase *peh ʾel-peh*,

"mouth to mouth," which occurs no where else in the Bible, is a metaphor that applies

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[342] On the authority of Moses as unequalled in Israel's history, see Deut 34:10-12. Coats, *The Moses Tradition*, 79-80. Petersen, "The Ambiguous Role of Moses as Prophet," 316. Jeffrey H. Tigay, "The Significance of the End of Deuteronomy (34:10-12)," Pages 137-43 in *Texts, Temples and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996).

only to Moses, expressing his solidarity with Yahweh in voice and purpose.[343] Instead of dreams and visions, Yahweh uses words and these words are what Moses speaks. What flows from Yahweh's mouth flows through Moses's mouth; the two are to be perceived as functionally synonymous.

Finally, Yahweh communicates this material directly, *ûmarʾeh wəlōʾ bəḥîdōt* "clearly and not in riddles" (Num 12:8). This stands in contrast to modes that require interpretation, such as dreams and visions (e.g., Amos 7:1-9; Jer 1:11-16). There is no need for mystery or interpretation between Moses and Yahweh, because Moses's special status renders him capable of hearing the divine word plainly, and also being in the direct company of the divine, as discussed in more depth below.

This conversational mode is consistent with how Moses interacts with Yahweh in the Sinai narrative (Exod 19-Num 10). Moses approaches Yahweh without any of the usual filters that render theophany survivable, such as a cloud, fire, angels, or visions. For example, the thick cloud that sits on Mount Sinai while Moses receives the covenant is not to protect Moses, but so that the people hear the sound of theophany and believe Moses in perpetuity (Exod 19:9). In fact, Moses then enters the cloud and remains in Yahweh's presence forty days and nights (Exod 24:18; cf. 31:18, 34:28).

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[343] Most commentators rightly emphasize the directness of communication, e.g., Thomas B. Dozeman, "The Book of Numbers," Pages 1-268 in *Numbers - 2 Samuel*, Vol. 2 in *NIB*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 110. Martin Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), 95-96. Dennis T. Olson, *Numbers*, Interpretation 4 (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996), 71-72. Milgrom adds "The uniqueness of Moses is the sole theme of this chapter" i.e., Num 12. Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 93. Here, I have a slightly different emphasis, and that it the intimacy that Moses and Yahweh share.

This level of interaction is made possible by Moses's status change (Exod 7:1). During the burning bush theophany, Moses hides his face while Yahweh speaks indirectly, through an angel or messenger disguised as a flame (3:2, 6). The first theophany Moses experiences *after* the circumcision of his lips (6:28-7:1) is on Mount Sinai (19), where he alone is able to approach the top of the mountain where Yahweh has descended. If anyone else, priest, commoner, even livestock, so much as touches the mountain, they die (19:12-13, 20-24; cf. 34:3; Deut 18:16).[344] Everyone else must maintain a certain distance from Yahweh's theophany, yet Moses is able to walk into the center of the cloud that protects everyone else from the divine glory (*kəbod*) that resides within (Exod 19:16-20; 24:15-18; 34:3-4).[345] Once there, Moses and Yahweh spend their time in conversation: "Moses spoke and God answered him with a voice" (Exod 19:19; cf. 25:22, 29:42, Num 7:89). While the authors make no mention of Moses seeing the form or face of Yahweh during the Sinai theophany, this conversational mode eventually becomes normative (cf., Exod 24, 33-34).

The phrases "mouth to mouth" (Num 12:8) and, in other places, "face to face" (Exod 33:11; Deut 34:10), used to describe Moses's relationship with Yahweh, constitute a motif expressing the degree of access and human-divine boundary crossing

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[344] Exod 19:24 contains a tradition that Aaron went up with Moses to receive the Covenant Code (Exod 20-23), but only Moses enters the thick cloud and speaks with Yahweh (20:15-18; cf. 24:15-18). A similar scene occurs when Joshua goes up the mountain with Moses in Exod 24:13 (cf. 33:11).

[345] F. Polak, "Theophany and Mediator," 135, 138-41.

that Moses experiences.[346] The metaphor of seeing the divine face is at the heart of the

relationship between Yahweh and Moses.[347] Although throughout the ancient Near East, it

was not appropriate to look a superior in the face or approach them without invitation,

Moses metaphorically looks Yahweh in the face on a regular basis and approaches him at

will (e.g., Exod 33:9; Num 7:89).[348] Such boldness may be interpreted as a sign of

intimacy or audacity, depending upon one's comportment, yet Moses is interpreted as

speaking with God "face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Exod 33:11), that is, as

an equal with whom he has a personal and amicable relationship.[349] By virtue of the

status with which Yahweh imbues Moses, the two gather and interact as peers, conversing

without barrier in language or comprehension (Num 12:8).

What differentiates Moses's experience of Yahweh in the tabernacle, as described

in Num 12:6-8, from his experience on Mount Sinai is the claim *təmunat yhwh yabît* "the

form of Yahweh, he [Moses] beholds" (Num 12:8). In Exod 33:17-34:28, just before the

onset of Moses's horns and/or radiance, Moses appeals to his relationship with Yahweh in

order to see Yahweh's glory directly and Yahweh agrees on this same basis. However,

even then Yahweh limits Moses's exposure to the divine form and shields him from all

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[346] On "face to face" as motif, see Coats, *The Moses Traditions*, 80. On facial contact as access and boundary crossing, see Simeon Chavel, "The Face of God and the Etiquette of Eye-Contact: Visitation, Pilgrimage, and Prophetic Vision in Ancient Israelite and Early Jewish Imagination," *JSQ* 19 (2012): 9.

[347] For an analysis of different ways of "seeing" Yahweh and of "seeing" as the key to understanding the Moses-Yahweh relationship, see Smith, *The Pilgrimage Pattern in Exodus*, 100-08.

[348] On rules of etiquette, see Chavel, "The Face of God and the Etiquette of Eye-Contact," 41-42.

[349] On eye contact as a sign of intimacy or audacity, see Chavel, "The Face of God and the Etiquette of Eye-Contact," 9.

but his glorious backside. By the time the people leave Sinai (Num 10) and Aaron and Miriam speak against Moses (Num 12), Moses's experience of the divine presence is portrayed as completely uninhibited, even visually. In the same breath wherein Yahweh states that he speaks with Moses "mouth to mouth . . . clearly and not in riddles" (Num 12:8), Yahweh also states that Moses beholds (*yabît*) the form (*təmunah*) of Yahweh.

What exactly this means remains a conundrum. Although the term *təmunah* "form, manifestation" most often appears in relation to idols that represent the "form" of a particular species or entity (e.g., Exod 20:4; Deut 4:15-16, 23-25), it is not clear as to what *təmunat yhwh* "form of Yahweh" refers. Some argue that the presence of the term *təmunah* in passages prohibiting images alludes to an older tradition in which a physical representation of Yahweh resided in the inner chamber of the tabernacle.[350] Although this proposition is intriguing, it misses seeing the face as a metaphor indicative of intimacy. Unfortunately, the only counterpart for the Hebrew *təmunah* in ancient semitic languages is the equally problematic Ugaritic *tmn*, which also means "form."[351] However, the elusive, abstract nature of this term to describe what Moses encounters when he communes with Yahweh may be why the author chose this particular term to begin with.

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[350] E.g., Herbert Niehr, "In Search of Yahweh's Cult Statue in the First Temple," Pages 73-96 in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, CBET 21, ed. Karel van der Toorn (Leuven: Uitgeverij Press, 1997), 84. Christopher Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary in Iron Age Palestine and the Search for Yahweh's Cult Images," Pages 97-156 in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, CBET 21, ed. Karel van der Toorn (Leuven: Uitgeverij Press, 1997), 148.

[351] Smith, *Pilgrimage Pattern in Exodus*, 100-02.

Only Moses sees the form of Yahweh (cf., Deut 4:12, 15; Ps 17:15); it cannot be

concretely described by those outside of their relationship, only vaguely imagined.

While the authors of the Pentateuch are ambiguous as to what Moses experiences

in his encounters with Yahweh, they are clear about the effect that this experience has on

Moses's essential nature. Where comparative Semitics does offer a helpful rereading of

"he beholds the form of Yahweh" (Num 12:8), is in the verb *nvṭ* "to behold, look at," a

verb whose meaning in cognate languages suits this comparison well: the Arabic *nabaṭa*

translates as "to gush forth, spring forth," the Ugaritic *nbṭ* "to shine forth, come into

view," and the Akkadian *nabāṭu* "to gleam brightly." This suggests that the Hebrew

təmunat yhwh yabît may be translated according to the traditional rendering "he beholds

the form of Yahweh," meaning that Moses *perceives* divinity, or it may be translated as

"he shone forth the form of Yahweh," meaning that Moses *emanates* divinity. This latter

reading is further supported by Exod 34:29-35, which describes the skin of Moses's face

as shining and/or horned continuously after Moses sees the glory of Yahweh.

The viability of these two readings suggests that both phenomena occur, perhaps

simultaneously and in reciprocal relationship. Given the dual meaning above, I propose

that the goal of the author of Num 12:8 is not to describe Moses's experience, but rather

to describe the effect that experience has upon Moses and what that effect says about his

status and nature. Moses's unparalleled access to Yahweh's presence is not only governed

by his special status, it is also the key to maintaining his status as the manifestation of

Yahweh. Whatever Moses beholds in his encounters with Yahweh, he then manifests it to

the people. In addition to the revelation Moses receives in each close encounter with

Yahweh, his very being is transformed continually by the experience.

Moses's Status and the Tabernacle System

With the relationship between Moses's status and his relationship with Yahweh in

mind, I now turn to how this dynamic is represented in the tabernacle system. Perhaps the

most difficult interpretive issue with respect to Moses's place within the tabernacle

system is how far into the divine abode Moses is permitted to go. Numerous references

throughout Exodus and Numbers suggest that Moses meets with Yahweh in the Most

Holy Place (Exod 25:22; 30:6, 36; Num 7:89; 17:19 [17:4]), the innermost chamber

where the deity resides, which is separated from the Holy Place by an elaborate veil

(*pārōket*; Exod 26:31-35). However, these references are ambiguous.[352] While they are

clear that Moses meets with Yahweh before the mercy seat upon the ark of the testimony

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[352] This is complicated by the fact that the traditions represented in the Pentateuch offer competing constructions of how Yahweh appears, and different perspectives on whether the tent of meeting (*ʾōhel mô ʿēd*) and tabernacle (*miškān*; "dwelling") are separate structures, or synonymous. The general consensus is that J/E portrays Yahweh as regularly visiting earth, while P portrays Yahweh as living in heaven. For P, the tent of meeting or tabernacle contain items which symbolize Yahweh's presence among the people, but he himself does not live there. J/E presents the tabernacle and tent as different structures (e.g., Exod 33:7-11 describes Moses going to the tent of meeting before the tabernacle is built), while P later merges these two traditions. For more on these source issues, see Joaquim Azevedo, "At the Door of Paradise: A Contextual Interpretation of Gen. 4:7," *BN* 100 (1999); repr., Pages 167-82 in *Cult and Cosmos: Tilting Toward a Temple-Centered Theology*, ed. L. Michael Morales (Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 179. Alan M. Cooper and Bernard R. Goldstein, "At the Entrance to the Tent: More Cultic Resonances in Biblical Narrative," *JBL* 116 (1997): 201-15. P. Kyle McCarter, Jr. "Aspects of the Religion of the Israelite Monarchy: Biblical and Epigraphic Data," Page 137-55 in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross*, eds. Patrick D. Miller Jr., Paul D. Hanson, S. Dean McBride (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 148. Osborn and Hatton, *A Handbook on Exodus*, 783. Benjamin D. Sommer, "Conflicting Constructions of Divine Presence in the Priestly Tabernacle," *Biblical Interpretation* 9 (2001): 41-63. *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*, 12-79.

(cf. Exod 25:10-22), the above references do not specify where Moses stands in relation to the veil, only that he meets with Yahweh "there."[353]

The history of interpretation clouds the issue of Moses's direct access to Yahweh because of the theological tension produced by the suggestion that Moses's enters the Most Holy Place. For example, Targum Onkelos, an Aramaic translation from the early Common Era, edits Num 12:8 in a way that prevents one from understanding Moses as relating to Yahweh as clearly and uninhibited as such references suggest. Onkelos reinterprets Yahweh's statement in Num 12:8 as "*Speech with speech*, I spoke with him, *in a vision* and not in riddles, and he sees the *likeness of the glory* of Yahweh," thus emending the text to reflect what Onkelos argues to be the proper meaning.[354]

Other ways of addressing the discomfort surrounding Moses's level of access are attested throughout reception history, well into the modern era and in various media. For example, in a copper plate etching from *Historie des Ouden en Nieuwen Testaments*, a Dutch illustrated companion to the Bible printed in 1722, Moses is portrayed in the inner

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[353] One of these references, Exod 30:6, mentions the veil but is this mention is problematic at a text-critical level to the point that the entire clause containing the word may be considered the result of scribal error. The clause which includes the term "veil" is likely the result of misspelling, leading to dittography. In the MT, the verse reads "You shall set it [the alter of incense] before the veil (*prkt* [*pārōket*]) which is upon the ark of the testimony, before the mercy-seat (*kprt* [*kapōret*]) which is over the testimony, where I shall meet with you there." The first inconsistency is that before the veil and before the mercy-seat are two different locations; the second is that the veil does not hang upon or above (ʿ*al*) the ark, but before it (*lipnê*). There are regulations about what is inside (*mibêt*) and outside (*miḥûṣ*) the veil, but only here is there mention of it being *over* the ark. This suggests that, in Exod 30:6, *pārōket* is the result of scribal misspelling where *kapōret* was intended. When read this way, "before the mercy-seat (*kapōret*) which is over the testimony" is redundant. Additionally, this phrase is not attested in the SP, nor the LXX, which supports reading Exod 30:6 as "You shall set it [incense] before the mercy-seat which is upon the ark of the testimony, where I shall meet with you there." This is the most likely reading, since it is the *kaporet* which is upon the ark of the testimony and the function of incense is to veil one from the direct presence of Yahweh once inside the Holy of Holies (e.g., Lev 16:2, 11-19).

[354] Italics added to highlight differences between MT and TO.

chamber, before the ark (Figure 2, Appendix 1).[355] However, the artist includes two

compromises: the form of Yahweh is covered by smoke or cloud, and Moses shields his

face with his arm while bracing his body. Such a hybrid interpretation grants Moses

access to the Holy of Holies, but compromises the plainness of his interaction with

Yahweh by including cloaking agents and portraying Moses as having difficulty in

Yahweh's presence, lest the illustrator elevate Moses too highly.

One modern example of this tension comes from Jacob Milgrom, who argues that

Moses cannot enter the Holy of Holies, but stands before the veil that conceals the ark.

He lists Jewish sources, from Targumim through Medieval commentaries, which support

the tradition that Moses heard Yahweh's voice from the public courtyard of the tabernacle

instead.[356] However, the five biblical references Milgrom lists in support of the image of

Moses separated from the ark by the veil are the same aforementioned references which

support the opposite reading, that Moses indeed has access to the Most Holy Place.

The biblical evidence for where Moses situates himself while serving as mediator

in the tabernacle is ambiguous at best. This ambiguity is further supported by the fact

that, unlike priests, there are no stated qualifications for Moses to go before Yahweh at

the mercy seat, such as standing outside the veil, bringing incense, or purification.[357]

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[355] Schoonenburg, et. al., *Historie des Ouden en Nieuwen Testaments, Verrykt met veele Printverbeeldingen In koper gefneeden Tweede Deel*, 114.

[356] Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 134.

[357] In Exod 30:6, 36, God instructs Moses where to place the altar of incense for use by the priests. Moses himself if not required to use it as a cloaking agent.

There are passages in which Moses speaks with Yahweh from outside the Holy of Holies, at the opening of the tent (e.g., Exod 40:35; Num 9:15-16), but this does not negate the interpretation that Moses enters the inner chamber of Yahweh's dwelling at regular intervals. It does, however, clarify that Moses does not do so on every occasion.

What is essential for understanding how Moses's status is represented in the tabernacle system is that which is clear: whether Moses enters the inner chamber, the antechamber, stays at the opening of the tent, or engages Yahweh beyond the confines of the tabernacle complex, his ability to relate to Yahweh and to fulfill his role as mediator is not diminished or enhanced by his spatial location. This distinguishes Moses from the priests, including the high priest, who may enter only certain areas at certain times, officiate in only certain ways, and only under certain circumstances. If Moses does indeed access the Holy of Holies, he experiences the divine presence in a way that not even the high priest experiences it on the one day of the year that he may enter.

On Yom Kippur, the high priest must shield himself with incense (Lev 16:2, 11-19) and announce his whereabouts constantly via the bells attached to his garment, lest he die (Exod 28:33-35; cf. 39:25-26), but this is not the case with Moses. Even if Moses does not enter the inner chamber, the fact that he enters the tabernacle at all is an anomaly because Moses is not a priest. Wherever Moses goes, his access to the divine is unrestricted. This stands in stark contrast to the experiences of the high priest and prophets, including Aaron and Miriam, not to mention the common person.

In answering the question of how Moses's status and his ensuing relationship with Yahweh is represented within the tabernacle system, what emerges is that Moses's status renders him above or at least outside of that system. This statement speaks emphatically to the unparalleled height of his status, and is also suggestive for understanding why Moses's role has been misunderstood in the history of interpretation. As one of unique standing, without parallel in the Hebrew Bible, Moses cannot be understood in terms of the other roles of the tabernacle, such as priest or prophet. The question that now remains is, if Moses operates above and beyond the tabernacle system, why then is the tabernacle so important for understanding the outcomes of Moses's status change?

Although Moses's status renders him exempt from the restrictions of the tabernacle system, his status is still connected to the tabernacle in two ways. The first connection is that Moses is the only one whom Yahweh entrusts with the plan and establishment of the tabernacle (Exod 25-40), including the induction of its priestly personnel (Exod 29; Lev 8). While Yahweh fills the craftsmen Bezalel and Oholiab with the "Spirit of God" to devise artistic designs (Exod 31:1-11; 35:30-36:1) and puts skill into the minds of the craftsmen whose hearts are stirred to contribute (36:1-2), Moses remains the project supervisor, collecting and disseminating the building materials (36:3-6), ensuring that everything is built to plan (25:9, 40; Num 8:4), and assembling and consecrating the final product himself (40:1-33). Due to his status as "he who is pure" and "circumcised" of lips, Moses is the only logical choice for this task. This sequence of events supports the argument that Moses's status exists independent of the

tabernacle system; in fact, the existence of the tabernacle system depends on Moses's status, as no one else is qualified or commissioned for such a task at this time.

The second connection between Moses's status and the tabernacle is that the tabernacle serves as the central shrine where Moses most often meets with Yahweh. This arrangement is of a utilitarian nature, as Moses may mediate in any number of places, but it is most logical to go to where the deity resides if one is to speak with him. What is perhaps less obvious than the utility of the tabernacle for meeting with the deity who resides within is the conclusion that the tabernacle functions as the stage upon which Moses's status is performed. The contrast between Moses's status and that of every other religious officiant or object — priest, prophet, and tabernacle included — is what communicates the height of Moses's status to Moses's intended audience, Israel. In addition to the language of distinction, exemplified in Num 12:6-8, the tabernacle offers yet another point of contrast that highlights Moses's special status.

The outcomes of Moses's status change are his intimate relationship with Yahweh and his distinctiveness from other Israelites, including those in high office. Yet however elevated Moses's status as mediator and mouthpiece may be, it does not come without cost. The distinctions that are so important for understanding Moses's status are also a regular point of frustration and contention among the Israelite people and cause friction in Moses's relationships with others, including Aaron and Miriam, his siblings and fellow

leaders (Num 12).[358] The tension this creates within Israelite society causes Moses much distress, and — when it erupts into rebellion — loss of human life (e.g., Exod 32; Num 11, 14, 16). On the other hand, if the Israelites honor Moses's and Yahweh's singularity in voice and purpose, the result is a priestly and holy nation characterized by Yahweh's favor (Exod 19:5-6; cf. Lev 26; Deut 28). The role this exchange between tension and acceptance plays in achieving a certain outcome becomes more apparent when the outcomes of Moses's status change are compared with those of the status change of idols. For idols, the status of mediator also bears a certain tension, as the idol both crosses and creates boundaries that are enacted within the confines of civilized society.

The Private and Public Lives of Idols

The intended outcome of the status change of an ancient Mesopotamian idol is its intermediary function, which is made possible by its identification with the deity it embodies and acceptance into the divine community. These relationships are then represented in the day-to-day operations of the temple system. At the center of this system is the idol; the temple system cannot function without it. As the home of the earthly manifestation of the deity, the temple and the activities of its human attendants, all depend on the idol's physical presence. On the other hand, the idol cannot function without the temple system either. Since the idol's well-being depends on receiving the services and goods the temple system provides, it too is constrained by this system.

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[358] On Moses's status as a point of imbalance for his personal life, see Stephen Garfinkel, "The Man Moses, the Leader Moses," Pages 17-33 in *Jewish Religious Leadership: Image and Reality*, ed. Jack Wertheimer (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 2004), 29-31.

In the absence of works explaining how an idol operates, reconstructing the lives of idols in a meaningful way requires engagement with primary source materials from a variety of genres, although there do remain gaps in the written record. Since the extant *Mīs Pî*, "washing of the mouth," texts discussed thus far date to the 7-6th centuries BCE, I have limited the pool of primary sources to those centuries. These sources include *Mīs Pî* ritual and incantation texts, Babylonian topographical texts, pictorial seals, and various letters addressed to Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal from priests and scholars. Each of these sources looks at idols from a different perspective, providing as well-rounded and fruitful an understanding as possible, given the limitations.

In order to understand the *Mīs Pî* more deeply, I must examine the idol's relationship with the deity it embodies, and the kind of life its status change entails: a life of privilege, responsibility, and tension as it bridges divinity and humanity. In what follows, I focus on the interconnectedness of the life of the idol, the temple system, and its associated human community. Then, after illuminating how an idol's status as mediator shapes his or her life and the lives of those around it, I compare idols and Moses in a way that describes mediators as those who both cross and construct divine-human boundaries.

<div align="center">The Idol as Deity</div>

The life of an idol is best described as that of a privileged socialite whose power as an intermediary and ability to network with other deities come together in service of its human community. These privileges, discussed below, and the ability to relate to other

beings, whether human or divine, are contingent upon the idol's identity as a god and its status as a member of the divine community, initiated through the *Mīs Pî*. Recall from chapter two that an idol is considered a god from its very inception and created in cooperation with the gods. The *Mīs Pî* does not link the deity and image, but consolidates their preexisting connection by eliminating any trace of human involvement through purification rituals, which are described as rebirth into the divine community.[359] The gods' approval of the idol's intended destiny is signified when the officiant places the idol on its throne and dias, in its cella, with all of its garments in place (NR 192-94; BR 55-56, 61-64), and the being becomes "bright like the center of heaven."[360] However, the idol's installation and radiance are only the beginning of its new mode of existence.

At the same time that the deity and idol are coterminous with one another, the deity's existence is also fluid. The deity resides in the idol, but is not limited to its form and may be simultaneously present in other areas of the universe, such as, heaven, earth, Apsû, and even other idols.[361] For the practical purposes of the cult, the deity and idol are synonymous, but on the mythical, theological level, the deity resides out in the cosmos, free to act at will, without human attendants.[362] This fluidity creates a relationship of

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[359] Angelika Berlejung, "Washing the Mouth," 71.

[360] Recall from chapter five that the phrase "bright like the center of heaven" is used as a descriptor of the idol no less than twenty-four times.

[361] For more on the fluidity model, see Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*, 12-57.

[362] A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1964), 184. On synonymity, Dick adds that meals were said to be placed before the god, not the statue, therefore the god was the reality. By contrast, meals offered to the king were offered to his statues. Dick, "Mesopotamian Cult Statue," 49.

identity and difference between idol and deity, but also between idol and humanity, as

people engage the mystery of how that which is "born in heaven" operates on earth.[363]

Part of this mystery is how the divine word, the source of all life (IT 3 B 17-22),

penetrates the earthly realm and affects human existence. The efficacy of this word is

related directly to the connection between idol and deity, and is also one of the most

important outcomes of the status change wrought by the *Mīs Pî*. The words of the gods

are placed in the mouth of the idol due to this status. In the *Mīs Pî* incantation "As You

Grew Up," the officiant says to the idol "Marduk, the son of Eridu, has placed an

incantation in your mouth" (IT 4 A 13) then cites the Opening of the Mouth (*Pīt Pî*) and

the favor of Ea, the creator god, as that which enable these words to enter. The divine

word is not received in a way that requires interpretation, but comes directly from the

divine source to the idol's mouth, a metaphor that communicates the mediator's solidarity

with the deity in voice and purpose.

Where interpretation is necessary is in the movement of the divine word from the

mouth of an idol to the hearing of the people. The word spoken by the idol, whether

originating with the idol itself or with another divine source, was most often revealed by

the gods to individual humans via omens, dreams, prophetic messages, and celestial

occurrences, which required a certain amount of training to interpret. When people

wanted to know something that the gods had not yet communicated, those learned in the

art of divination could actively uncover the divine will, using tools such as extispicy (i.e.,

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[363] On the relationship of identity and difference between idol and deity, see Dick, "Mesopotamian Cult Statue," 53. Dick, "Relationship Between Cult Image and Deity," 111-16.

the reading of animal entrails) and casting lots. These rituals were performed on a regular

basis, but also as situations arose within society, such as the decision to go to war.

However, the idol was not simply the messenger of the deity, but could enact its

own will. The refrain repeated throughout the *Mīs Pî* incantation texts, "May Shamash

[the sun god] heed your true decision (*din kittika*)," is spoken just before the line about

Marduk's placement of the divine word in the mouth of the idol (IT 4 A 12). The

juxtaposition of these seemingly competing ideas emphasizes the fact that, although an

idol transmits the will of the gods, it does regularly and actively make its own *din kittu*

"decision of truth" or "judgment of justice," verdicts which are heeded by even the

highest gods.[364] The relationship between an idol, the deity that dwells within it, and

other deities is ideally one of direct communication and reciprocity, governed by a

freewill exercised within the parameters and order of divine society.

<div align="center">Idols at Home</div>

At the same time that an idol has freewill, its activities are highly regulated by the

temple system into which it is born. In fact, the success of its intermediary endeavors

depends on the quality of life he or she is provided. One outcome of the *Mīs Pî* is that it

enables the idol's senses actively to engage the earthly realm and therefore receive

offerings of food, drink, and incense. However, these sensory experiences are not an end,

but a means to a much greater goal, and that is for the idol to operate on a daily basis as

the intermediary between the divine realm and his or her human community.

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[364] *CAD* D, 150b; K, 468b.

From the time idols appear in the historical record, around the mid-third millennium BCE, they are portrayed as sitting or standing in their shrines, traveling about in their chariots or boats, and bearing symbols of their authority.[365] This basic description of an idol as enshrined, yet portable, and identified by their garb, holds for millennia. Initially, major gods were at home in one city only, and visited other gods in their home cities, but as Mesopotamian culture spread north along the Tigris and Euphrates, individual gods began to take up residence in multiple cities simultaneously.[366]

The temples of the gods, where idols resided, were conceived of as divine houses, an anthropomorphism with implications for the daily operations of the temple-system. The word "palace, temple" in both Akkadian (*ēkallum*) and Hebrew (*hêkāl*) has its origin in the Sumerian term for the abode of the deity, É.GAL, "big house."[367] In Akkadian, the word translated as "temple" is often simply *bītu*, "house" (cf. Ugaritic *bit ilani* "house of the gods"). For example, in the *Mīs Pî*, the *ašipu* is instructed to whisper [*ana bītika……*] *qurub*, "approach [your temple/house…]," into the idol's right ear just before escorting it into the cella of its newly purified temple (NR 170; IT 6/8 46-48).

The construction and maintenance of the god's house was the responsibility of the ruler, with the aid of his advisors, and the consent of the deity. Many of the extant letters written by priests and scholars to kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal address the theme

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[365] Green, "Ancient Mesopotamian Religious Iconography," 1842.

[366] Wiggermann, "Theologies, Priests, and Worship in Ancient Mesopotamia," 1861.

[367] David Marcus, "Akkadian," Pages 19-42 in *Beyond Babel: A Handbook for Biblical Hebrew and Related Languages* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 29

of rebuilding the temples of Assyria and Babylon, including replacing or refurbishing damaged idols.[368] The king spared little to no expense on the building and maintenance of a temple because the idol gave earthly reality to the numinous powers of the universe.[369] The temple provided that power, the idol, with an earthly dwelling, and with the presence of that idol came the opportunity to gain the god's favor.

The success of human efforts in the construction and maintenance of the temple complex are portrayed as dependent upon divine involvement. It was the job of humans to build and keep the temple, but it is the great gods "who make sanctuaries great, who set the foundations of the throne diases" (IT 3 B 8-9).[370] Regardless of the cost of the investment or to whom the task of construction was given, the endeavor was deemed worthwhile because the well-being of society depended upon the divine presence residing favorably in its midst. On the other hand, the deity also had the option to depart, should the idol or its temple be neglected and fall into disrepair.[371]

Once the house and its idol(s) were completed, adorned, and purified, the religious functionary placed the idol in the cella, on its *parakku,* "throne-dias," upon which the *šubtu,* "seat" or "pedestal" of the god was located. Depending on the deity and

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[368] For example, Parpola, ed., *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, No. 21, 247, 349, 355, 358, 368. Cole and Machinist, eds., *Letters from Priests to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal*, No. 39, 161-70, 173-80.

[369] Thorkild Jacobsen, "Formative Tendencies in Sumerian Religion," Pages 1-15 in *Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture*, ed. William L. Moran (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 9.

[370] For an image of the gods building a temple, see Collon, *First Impressions*, fig. 802.

[371] Dick gives the example of gods flying from their images to heaven, like birds. See Dick, "The Mesopotamian Cult Statue," 57.

temple architecture, this pedestal may have been encased in a recessed niche, which

shielded the deity from human interference. The concern for shielding is also reflected in

the design of temples themselves, which, as in many regions throughout the ancient Near

East, required that the deity reside in the cella, removed from the outside world via one or

more antecellas, typically built along the same axis and marked off by doorways, gates,

or curtains. The idol could be viewed only if one were in the cella itself, behind the

barrier, or if all co-axillary barriers happen to be open at the same time.[372]

One had to be particularly careful in the vicinity of an idol, lest it decide to

violently protect itself from improper contact or gaze. Temples were accessed by

functionaries, and, at times, high-ranking officers and royalty, but only within certain

limits.[373] According to one letter, an unnamed king and his priests worked together to

plan when and how the king could best access the goddess Ištar in order to gain her

favor.[374] Another example comes from Assyrian conquerers, who did not enter the

sanctuaries of their captives, but prayed outside in the courtyard instead.[375] Although they

captured a god's territory, they also respected the god's boundaries as demarcated by the

language of temple architecture, a language that the conquerers knew well due to the

proliferation of multi-chambered temples throughout the ancient Near East.

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[372] Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 186. For contemporaneous images of what temples may have looked like, see Collon, *First Impressions*, fig. 27i, 800-01, 805-06, 809, 826.

[373] Due to the scarcity of sources on temple regulations, it is debatable as to whom, to what degree, and under what circumstances an idol was accessible, plus such limitations likely varied across space, time, social standing, and level of deity.

[374] Cole and Machinist, *Letters from Priests to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal*, 149.

[375] Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 186.

The anthropomorphism of a temple as the private house of a god suggests that idols used their temples for a variety of human-like activities, including eating, sleeping, family living, preparing for the day, and relaxation. However, since an idol was physically incapable of performing any of these tasks on its own, it relied on a constant stream of attendants to act on its behalf. Religious personnel were some of the highest ranking individuals in ancient Near Eastern societies, including Mesopotamia, but to the gods, they were servants, a dynamic fitting with the paterfamilias lifestyle idols reflected, required, and embodied.[376]

From its cella, the idol acted and was acted upon according to the preexisting customs of the temple system. All of the necessary elements for the deity's embodied existence, including its daily meals, clothing, hygiene, purity, transportation, and the orchestration of its social and ceremonial calendar, were entrusted to a network of priests and officiants. One of the areas where the historical record is found wanting, perhaps due to the role of oral tradition, is how exactly priests and other functionaries enacted these daily activities, but the few extant examples do provide sufficient witness to the idol's reliance on the temple system for its intermediary capabilities. For example, the energy of the idol's twice-daily meal, which consisted of a moderate sized meal of fine meat and produce, was absorbed by the idol as a source of vitality, necessary for proper

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[376] Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 193. Wiggermann, "Theologies, Priests, and Worship in Ancient Mesopotamia," 1862. Jacobsen, "Formative Tendencies in Sumerian Religion," 10-11.

functioning.[377] The sustenance mysteriously enlivened the idol-deity, inspiring it to act favorably toward its human community, while reminding it of the goods upon which both the people and the temple system depended.

Another example is the requirement that an idol be properly dressed. Ritual requirements governed how the idol's attendant changed its clothes, what the idol wore, and when. The information presently available about the ritual dressing of an idol suggests that it occurred on regular and special occasions, included numerous personnel, and required incantations.[378] What an idol wore and how it wore it was of serious concern because divine clothing communicated a great deal about the idol's individual identity. Instead of bodily or facial features, the idol was identified by its attire and paraphernalia, such as the design of its tiara or the presence of a particular symbol.[379]

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[377] After the meal, leftovers were then taken to the king. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 188-89. Wiggermann, "Theologies, Priests, and Worship in Ancient Mesopotamia," 1863. W. G. Lambert, "Donations of Food and Drink to the Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia," Pages 191-201 in *Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the International Conference organized by the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven from the 17th to the 20th of April 1991*, OLA 55, ed. J. Quaegebeur (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1993), 194. The meal is one of many instances in which the king related to the divine, with the well-being of god, king, and, society in view. For images, see Collon, *First Impressions*, fig. 757, 811. On moderation, see Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 188-89. For a description of the goods and rituals involved in the meal, see Lambert, "Donations of Food and Drink to the Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia," 195-99. Lambert argues that the idol's partaking of a meal is a different concept than the larger scale sacrifices of the Hebrew Bible and Egypt; there is no parallel in ancient Mesopotamia.

[378] According to a letter addressed to the king from Rašil, chief attendant of the god Bel, clothing ceremonies required at least three people, and were part of preparations for significant feats and events, such as the grand opening of a gate. Cole and Machinist, *Letters from Priests to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal,* No. 176. Additionally, during the *Mīs Pî*, the *ašipu* performed the incantation "exalted garment, *lamaḫuššu*-garment of white linen," (NR 192; BR 55), presumably while employing a ritual procedure not detailed in *Mīs Pî* texts.

[379] This underscores the idea that an idol stands for the deity, without resembling it. Curtis, "Images in Mesopotamia and the Bible: A Comparative Study," 38. Oppenheim gives the example of backlash caused by Nabonidus' attempt to change the sun-god's tiara. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 185.

Furthermore, the quality and composition of divine apparel also communicated information about the god, including its mood and plans for the city.[380] Whatever the details of clothing and ceremonies may have been, what is clear is that, in the ancient Mesopotamian temple system, proper communication of the idol's identity was dependent upon its adherence to temple rituals and customs surrounding proper dress. The observation emphasizes the notion that the life of the idol is inextricably linked to the temple system, whether the idol is at home or beyond the temple compound.

Idol Travels

The analogy of the temple as a house also suggests that the idol is not physically bound to the temple at all times. In addition to its home life, an idol must socialize with other idols in other locations and visit certain places. This schedule was organized and maintained by a network of priests and related officials. While on procession, idols were free both to see and be seen, to review the well-being of the city, and to show themselves to the public. These processions were also celebrated with ceremonies and dancing.[381] The act of publicly honoring the notion that the gods regularly assembled to socialize and decide matters relevant to human affairs promoted and maintained a certain level of

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[380] Dick, "The Mesopotamian Cult Statue," 50. For more on the symbolism of an idol's attire, see Eiko Matsushima, "Divine Statues in Ancient Mesopotamia: Their Fashioning and Clothing and their Interaction with Society," Pages 209-19 in *Official Cult and Popular Religion in the Ancient Near East: Papers on the First Colloquium on the Ancient Near East — The City and its Life held at the Middle Eastern Culture Center in Japan (Mitaka, Tokyo) March 20-22, 1992*, ed. Eiko Matsushima (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1993).

[381] Collon, *First Impressions*, fig. 755.

[382] On theological unity on a national level, see Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 185-87.

theological unity.[382] It also honored and acknowledged the value of the particularity of each deity and its respective temple.

In the ancient Near East, there was no easy or safe way to carry a solid, often large, statue. Some processions involved the enthroned deities resting upon the shoulders of human carriers via two poles, while others required the idol to be transported in a boat or even on the back of a beast.[383] Idol transportation entailed certain obvious dangers, such as damage to the physical form, but there were other dangers as well, such as the imprisonment and questioning of its guards, or the theft of the idol itself.[384] Those charged with transporting idols reported safe passage to the king upon arrival. They also reported if they found other idols in the wrong location, which suggests that not all attendants were responsible, attentive, or capable.[385]

The details of where an idol was supposed to be and for what purposes were coordinated by temple officials, in conjunction with the king and the officials of other temples.[386] Most, if not all, divine dwellings in ancient Mesopotamia included gardens or a yard where outdoor ceremonies took place, usually those that involved the deity and the

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[383] *Removal of Enemy Gods* (WA 118931 + 118934), 728 BCE, British Museum, London, Accessed January 14, 2015, http://www.arcalog.com/image-library/museums/assyria/tiglath-pileser-iii. For a literary description, see also Esarhaddon's account of transporting the gods of Babylon. A translation is available in Walker and Dick, *Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia,* 26-27. For examples of seals, see Collon, *First Impressions*, fig. 717, 723, 756, 807-08.

[384] Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, No. 24. Cole and Machinist, *Letters from Priests to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal*, No. 153, 157, 190.

[385] Cole and Machinist, *Letters from Priests to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal*, No. 48, 153.

[386] For scheduling mishaps, see Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, No. 260, 355.

other members of its divine household. The deity could also host divine guests from other

temples or visit those deities itself, either for routine rituals or on special occasions.

Whether alone or in groups, idols were taxied by their human servants for a wide variety

of social events, including, but not limited to, divine weddings, field trips, festivals,

parties, and New Year's celebrations in the *akītu*-house, a multi-purpose temple on the

outskirts of Babylon that served as a divine vacation home.[387]

Although there are many aspects of the social lives of idols that seem like mere

entertainment or marks of privilege, an idol's relationships with other gods were integral

to the functioning of the temple system that enabled the idol to act upon its status as

mediator. For example, each deity named in *Mīs Pî* ritual and incantation texts has a

practical effect on the life of an idol, whether it imbues the idol with an aspect of itself,

such as divine radiance, or grants it a specific tool that enables its success, such as

protection or food (IT 4 B 36-38). Each favor is indispensable if the idol is to fulfill its

destiny with the efficaciousness and abundance wished upon it by the *ašipu* (IT 4 B

36-64). Without the favor of so many deities, with each playing his or her part, the being

and life of an idol is incomplete.

What is not mentioned explicitly in these sources is the indispensability of the

human attendant. The work attributed to deities was, in reality, most often the

responsibility of human functionaries working within the temple system. Throughout *Mīs*

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[387] Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, No. 260, 355. Cole and Machinist, *Letters from Priests to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal*, No. 58, 59, 70, 147, 153, 189. For images of divine banquets, see Collon, *First Impressions*, fig. 818-23.

Pî incantations, various gods and goddesses are attributed with the formation, nurturing, maturation, and purification of the idol (IT 4 A 21-35, B 35-38).[388] For example, Ea, the creator god, is attributed with bringing the idol's divinity to completion and preparing its mouth to receive meals (IT 4 A 17-20), but it is the *ašipu* who spends two days performing the ritual, not to mention preparation and clean-up. By enabling the gods to socialize, the religious officiants of ancient Mesopotamia afforded the opportunity for the social network of their deities to remain strong and effective, while fulfilling ritual obligations requiring the presence of multiple deities. The *Mīs Pî*, which requires many deities to be present, to feast with one another, and to collectively decide the fate of the idol as a proposed initiate, is just one illustration of the complexity of the social lives of idols and the implications of those interactions in areas where the divine and human worlds intersect.

The Human Without

For all of their seemingly human needs and concerns, anthropomorphic talk about deities, especially idols, is nothing more than a launching point for engaging that which cannot be fully grasped. Idols do not literally speak, nor do they literally eat, drink, sleep, or socialize. Anthropomorphisms are a way of understanding the divine using language that connects to the human experience, yet the analogy of the gods as human only goes so far. While idols may have elicited feelings of community and solidarity, it was also important for their followers to remember the otherness of the numinous power within

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[388] See also "Epic of Creation" (Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* [Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 1996], 1:356).

the idol, as well as the notion that the deity is in fact much greater and more fluid than the embodied form of the idol suggests. The service of maintaining this presence via the temple system was costly for the human community but the relationship between idol and human was perceived as mutually beneficial when carried out correctly, and a worthy cause, as the purpose of the efforts — the welfare of the people and service of the gods — was greater than the sum of all of its parts.

While the idol remained aloof, human participation in idol-centered ritual gave stability to the institution of the temple, which circulated goods and revenue. The god as idol was the heart and hub of the temple system; the temple system was the hub of society.[389] Temple operations required large amounts of agricultural goods, plus raw and finished goods, especially gems, acquired through trade, mining, and skilled labor.[390] The standing need for such materials generated a wide variety of paying jobs, careers, and specializations, positively affecting the economy as long as the temple generated enough income and the land generated enough produce.

The one matter beyond human control that affected the entire cycle of agricultural supply and temple demand was whether enough goods were available. Only the gods could control nature. This dilemma ensured that the temple system remained focused on its center, the idol, since the fate of the land, the well-being of the temple system, and the human community were inextricably linked. This is expressed in a *Mīs Pî* incantation

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[389] On the connection between city, temple, and economy, see Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 187-91.

[390] Cole and Machinist, *Letters from Priests to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal*, XI.

text, which states that the produce of the fields and flocks belongs to the deity and their

prosperity is a direct result of the idol's divine status and "true decision" (IT 4 A 44-57).

In symbiotic relationship, the worshippers ate from the god's table, and he or she also ate

from theirs; if one lacked, whether by negligence or necessity, then both lacked.

The relationship between ancient Mesopotamian idols, the temple system, and

humans is further complicated by the fact that, although temples were publicly supported

through gifts, taxation, and labor, they were not places of public worship.[391] There were

other means of worship, both public and private, that were common among the populace.

Little is known about these facilities except they were numerous, spread throughout

urban and likely rural areas, and referenced using the same language as the grand cultic

centers. Babylonian record keepers maintained lists of the names and locations of these

facilities, which suggests that these sites did not challenge the primacy of the temple, but

were in fact encouraged. This is further supported by a *Mīs Pî* incantation, which states

that the great gods Ea, Shamash, and Asalluḫi "inspect[ed] all the throne diases of god

and goddess" (IT 2 B 16) as part of their responsibility to oversee human activities.[392]

As noted in chapter four, *Tintur*, the theologically oriented, Babylonian

topographical text that is well represented in the library of Assurbanipal (7th-century

BCE), summarizes that there were forty-three cult centers of the great gods, including the

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[391] Lambert, "Donations of Food and Drink to the Gods in Ancient Mesopotamia," 19.

[392] This is, perhaps, connected to the practice of inscribing diases with epithets, prayers, and hymns, in addition to presenting offerings, whose presence were designed to elicit and maintain the gods' life-enabling favor.

temple Esagila, dedicated to Marduk (*Tintur* IV 82). Additionally, just within the city of

Babylon itself, there were said to be fifty-five diases (*parakku*) dedicated to Marduk, plus

1,286 diases, shrines, and stations dedicated to various other deities — all installed and

active in a space about one-tenth the size of Manhattan Island (800-900ha; cf.

8,746ha).[393] Some of these were kept inside, but most were outdoors, concentrated in

gates, streets, niches on building exteriors, and temple entryways throughout the city, so

that the public could access the gods even though they could not access the temples.[394]

The idea that the gods are so central to the identity of the city and population that

they be worshiped literally on every street corner, plus the wide distribution of cheap

replicas of idols found in the archaeological record, speaks to the centrality of idols in

ancient Mesopotamian tradition.[395] The cult, whether practiced inside or outside the

temple, simply could not operate without a functional idol at its center, and there was no

adequate substitute for an anthropomorphic embodiment of the deity.[396]

Comparison

The status change of Moses and idols takes immediate effect but the relationships

connected to their intermediary functions continue to unfold over the course of their lives,

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[393] For the size of the city of Babylon at its height, including maps, see Pedersén, "Work on a Digital Model of Babylon Using Archaeological and Textual Evidence," 13. Van de Mieroop, "Reading Babylon," 260. For the total number of shrines in the city of Babylon, see George, *Babylonian Topographical Texts*, 69, ll. 82-88. The individual shrines and diases to Marduk are named in George, *Babylonian Topographical Texts*, 59-62.

[394] George, *Babylonian Topographical Texts*, 12.

[395] Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia*, 184.

[396] Wiggermann, "Theologies, Priests, and Worship in Ancient Mesopotamia," 1862. Matsushima, "Divine Statues in Ancient Mesopotamia," 212. Sommer, *Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*, 22.

affecting the experience of not just the initiate, but also his or her audience. Given the many nuances in the above descriptions of how status change shapes the lives of mediators, one could assemble a list or chart of the similarities and differences in the lives of Moses and idols. However, the interest of this comparison is not what sort of list one may generate, but to what larger issues similarities and differences point. In order to arrive at these larger issues, I now compare Moses and idols with respect to the outcome of their status change and in a way that provides analytical insight into the model of divine-human mediator as it manifests in the figures of Moses and idols. The focal point provided by my third term — the outcome of status change — allows me to gain a deeper understanding of both Moses and idols than would a broad approach. To this end, I continue to focus on the interrelationship between mediator, deity, tabernacle or temple system, and human community, with an eye for similarity, difference, and what all of the above contributes to my understanding of Moses, idols, and their respective contexts.

Several deep differences become apparent through comparison, and are explained by connecting Moses and idols back to their respective contexts. In short, the biblical authors' portrayal of Moses reflects a tension between the need for an intermediary on par with an idol, and the desire to maintain and promote aniconism, especially aniconic Yahwism. Since idols were a normative part of religion for over 1,000 years before Israel first appears in the historical record (ca.1204 BCE), the burden of arguing a new paradigm lies with the biblical authors.

The Missing Model

The outcomes of the status changes of both Moses and idols — their new modes of relating to the deity they embody, the tabernacle or temple system, and humankind — all work to strengthen their respective intercessory functions. However, in the process of serving *as* — not *at*, but *as* — the intersection of the vertical and horizontal axis, the mediator finds him or herself in a peculiar, sometimes precarious, situation. This situation is more complicated for Moses than it is for idols, because of the issue of category. While idols were a common phenomenon throughout the ancient Near East and a familiar classification of deity with a specific intermediary function, Moses stands alone.

The tension surrounding idols, that is, the push and pull between identity and difference, is one that their constituents expect, because it is one of the defining traits that makes an idol an idol. By the time the 7th-6th century BCE copies of the Nineveh and Babylonian Recensions of the *Mīs Pî* ritual and incantation texts were scribed, idols had been in use, popularized, and made an enduring feature of political, religious, and social life for almost 2,000 years. The category of "idol" and all that idols entailed was part of the fabric of ancient Mesopotamian life and culture, and, as the lists of *Tintur* suggest, examples could be found in temples, on street corners, and in any nook or cranny.

Through analysis of the *Mīs Pî*, the human responsibility to navigate between idol-as-earthly and idol-as-divine emerges as the locus of discomfort, both for those who practice idol-centered religion, and also for those who reject idols altogether. For those who do embrace the concept of idol, an idol is a full member of the divine community.

The simultaneous attraction and repulsion one experiences in its presence is due to the contrast between the numinous presence within the idol and its human form; between the absolute power an idol embodies and disseminates, and the fragility of the human world into which the idol is birthed and upon which it acts. Navigating this tension requires a temple system, plus all the requisite labor and materials, in order to achieve and maintain equilibrium, tilted just enough to encourage prosperity (e.g., IT 4 A 44-57).

For those who reject idols, such as some of the biblical authors, this same tension between earthly and divine aspects creates a dissonance of a different sort. Ancient Israelite society, as envisioned by the biblical authors, rejects the category and office of "idol." However, the biblical authors did have a working definition of what an idol was and how it functioned in the religious imagination. Those who prohibited the use of idols knew that idols would still be attractive to their intended audiences, despite the prohibition; because of this attraction, the biblical authors needed something or someone to fit the model of what an idol does, to bridge humanity and divinity in a way that promoted Israel's flourishing (e.g., Exod 19:5-6; Lev 26; Deut 28), without promoting the ideas that accompany idol-centered systems, in particular the idea that divinity would inhabit a material, impermanent form.

Crossing Boundaries

The circumcision of Moses's lips and the *Mīs Pî* each serve as an initiation into a life marked by divine-human boundary crossing. This new life requires much of the initiate, including utmost integrity, mutual trust between oneself and the deity, and

tension in one's relationships with members of the human community. Although

anthropomorphic or human aspects of the lives of Moses and idols are never fully erased,

the overall effect of induction into divine community is the ability to cross certain

boundaries that cannot be crossed by other categories of beings. This is what sets both

idols and Moses apart from humanity, in a class of their own, above priest and prophet, as

they are the only beings in their respective cultures who are capable of moving fluidly

between the holy and the common at will and at a moment's notice, a fluidity which

benefits their respective communities, in spite of the personal and public costs.

For both Moses and idols, their identification with the deity they embody is

primary. This relationship is what makes their access to the divine abode and their

position with respect to the divine word possible. Without such close association and

direct communication with the deity, regardless of how this plays out in sacred space,

neither Moses nor idols could function as an intermediary, only as an interpreter. Since

the movement of the divine word is at the center of the intermediary's purpose, he or she

must relate to the deity at a level that allows the word to flow "mouth to mouth."

The theme of the mouth is emphasized, not just in the circumcision of Moses's

lips and the *Mīs Pî*, "washing of the mouth," but also in the imagery of Moses speaking

with Yahweh "mouth to mouth" (Num 12:8) and of Marduk placing incantations in the

mouths of idols (IT 4 A 13). The continuity of this shared image in both biblical and

Mesopotamian sources speaks to the idea that what is at stake for Moses, idols, and their

respective audiences is not whether the word is interpreted properly, which would be the

case if the intermediary were at the level of prophet or priest, but whether they are truly connected to the deity with whom the word originates. Both biblical authors and ancient Mesopotamians required that the divine word be received by the mediator as directly as possible, without an interpretive filter, all while acknowledging the boundaries of divine-human communication that they themselves could not cross.

Creating Boundaries

Comparing Moses and idols, I find myself conceptualizing them as two sides of the same coin, sharing the same substance while marked by different stamps. In this analogy, the shared substance is the perceived need for an intermediary and the stamps are conflicting cultural contexts. Throughout this project, I discuss the various contexts that inform the differences between Moses and idols; here, I focus on those differences themselves.

The major factor that complicates Moses's transformed life that is not part of an idol's experience is his humanity. While Moses is called "god to Pharaoh" (Exod 7:1) and functions in his relationship with Yahweh at a higher level than priest or prophet (e.g., Num 12:6-8), speaking with the deity "face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" on a regular basis (Exod 33:11; cf. Deut 34:10), Moses never becomes god to Yahweh or to Israel, for that matter. He remains human — limitations (Exod 18; Num 11), mistakes (Num 20:10-13), and all — though in a category all his own. The biblical authors go to great lengths to ensure that the singularity of Moses's status is understood (e.g., Num 12;

Deut 34), but they are careful not to elevate him too highly, lest he become a stumbling block toward aniconism and monotheism.

To this end, the only title that is attributed to Moses consistently throughout the Hebrew Bible is "[God's] servant Moses." In every place "servant" is attached to Moses's name, whether the speech is placed in the mouth of Yahweh himself or spoken a third party, it is to elicit a feeling of reverence toward Moses by appeal to his close proximity to Yahweh and his work on behalf of the divine word (Exod 14:31; Num 12:7-8; Josh 9:24; 2 Kgs 21:8; Neh 1:7; Mal 4:4). The designation "servant of Yahweh" places Moses in a special category between common persons and the divine, simultaneously refreshing the memory of Moses bowing to Yahweh (e.g., Exod 34:8), and acknowledging his role as the right-hand man who makes possible Yahweh's work in the world through Israel.

The major factor that complicates an idol's transformed life that is not part of Moses's experience is its complete divinity. An idol is considered divine from its very inception, and is never reduced to the status of a statue or the sum of its anthropomorphic qualities. It remains a deity in perpetuity, and is treated as divine even in death. The *Mīs Pî* recensions and other texts relevant to the study of idols constantly emphasize the divinity of the statue and downplay those aspects of an idol that reflect human involvement in its birth and life. The theological focus is the indwelling deity, not his or her materiality and all of the trappings that come with it.

When it comes to the mediator's relationship to the tabernacle or temple system, the Moses-as-human and idol-as-divine distinction is balanced in a perhaps unexpected

way, one which is illuminated by the process of analyzing and comparing Moses and idols with respect to aspects of status change. Moses relates to the tabernacle system as an actor acts upon a stage. The skill of Moses's performance of his intermediary role does not depend on the existence of the tabernacle, where he stands, his ancestry, and so on, but on his ability to communicate the word he is given and to internalize and convey the persona he is destined to embody. Moses's Yahweh-given status as mediator *par excellence* renders him above the tabernacle system.

Despite Moses's independence from the tabernacle, the tabernacle remains the most appropriate and expected place for him to perform his status. Moses sets the mechanics of the tabernacle in motion and fulfills his status as mediator within its precincts, but he is not part of the system itself. This is further supported by the observation that after Moses bows out of his role, the tabernacle continues to function in his absence. This underscores the idea that it is the presence of Yahweh that is the focal point of the tabernacle system, not Moses the mediator.

By contrast, idols are the center point around which ancient Mesopotamian temple systems revolve and these systems are also necessary for the idol to enact its intermediary function. The interconnectedness of idol and temple highlights the difference between the idol and the deity who indwells it, as the former is bound to preexisting rules, regulations, and norms, while the deity is envisioned as fluid and independent of earthly constraints. The paradox of the idol as both "born in heaven" and "made on earth" imposes limitations on the embodied deity that the cosmic deity does not experience. The

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boundedness of the idol to the temple system illustrates that the status change of an idol inducts it into a life characterized by limitation. As a physical manifestation of the divine, the idol is simultaneously synonymous with and separate from the deity it embodies.

This difference between Moses's relationship to the tabernacle system and an idol's relationship to the temple system calls attention to the role of status in the life and identity of the mediator. As for Moses, his status elevates his humanity. His status as mediator between humanity and divinity is primary, and his human nature is increasingly irrelevant. This status and the relationship with Yahweh that this status enables render Moses above all of Israel and exempt from the divinely ordained order of the tabernacle system that he himself institutes. Moses's status is best described as "god to Pharaoh" (Exod 7:1) because as the story of the exodus, from slavery unto life with Yahweh in the midst of the camp, unfolds, Moses's position as greater than the most elevated person on the planet, the god-king of Egypt, becomes more and more apparent.

As for idols, their status imposes constraints upon their divinity. Therefore, their divine nature is the primary source of their identity, over and above their status as mediator. The language of divinity is vital to the reception of the idol as an active intermediary bridging divine and human realms, because without this language and the deep notion that housing and attending to the idol has practical implications for human flourishing, the idol is simply an idle statue. The manner in which an idol's status as mediator is represented in the temple system, in some ways, challenges the idea that the idol has power over divine and human affairs; after all, it cannot even change its own

clothes. However, if one holds that the idol is divine and understands it as a representative of just a small portion of the much greater being it embodies, then the religious imagination may expand to make room for the mystery of how that which is "born in heaven" affects change here on earth.

Conclusion

By legitimating Moses and idols via the circumcision of the lips and *Mīs Pî*, respectively, and continuing to argue for their status by portraying the outcomes of status change in a particular way, both biblical authors and ancient Mesopotamian religious functionaries seek to elicit a particular response among the members of their human communities. The proper human response when faced with the relationship that either Moses or an idol has with divinity, sacred space, and the divine word is reverence for the intermediary, the deity he or she represents, and the divine word that has power over life and death. There are many similarities and differences in the specifics of the lives of Moses and idols, but the goal of both of their respective status changes and ensuing lives is to be the conduit of the divine word on behalf of divine and human communities.

Despite the common factors that make up the shared core of their respective identities, the deep differences between Moses and idols are rooted in the larger issue of category, which is informed by cultural context. What emerges in the course of comparison is a tension between the polytheistic, idol-centered status quo that was a deeply engrained and continuous part of the fabric of the ancient Near East, including the land periodically known as Israel, and the desire on the part of the biblical authors to

argue against the use of images. The interplay between similarity and difference in the

idol-Moses comparison ensured that the ancient Near Eastern requirements for an

intermediary figure were met, while reasoning a new paradigm of thought and practice.

CHAPTER SEVEN: STILL NO GRAVEN IMAGE

When the idol of Marduk emerged from Esagila, or when Moses emerged from Yahweh's tabernacle, their appearances both provided evidence for the divine presence, and were a means of enlivening in their respective audiences certain tensions, hopes, and fears. This special status of mediator was sometimes challenged by members of their ancient audiences, but, by and large, the mediator status of idols and Moses remained central *and* necessary to their respective traditions. Without idols, temple systems could not function, which is to say that there would be no hub of society; without Moses, there would be no tabernacle, which was the literal social and religious center for the generations of Israelites who journeyed through the wilderness and the symbolic, near mythic center for those who lived in later generations.

The juxtaposition of the *akitu*-festival — which featured the procession of Marduk's idol around Babylon and into the wilderness — with the celebration of Passover — the commemoration of Yahweh and Moses leading the procession of Israel out of Egyptian bondage and into the wilderness — provides the historical and religious occasion for a dialogue between ancient Mesopotamian idols and biblical traditions pertaining to Moses. Here, I offer a few concluding comments about the historical relationship between idols and the character of Moses, with an eye for the interplay of

similarity and difference in my rereadings of these figures, who are both so integral to their respective traditions. I then conclude with suggestions for further research and present the implications of this study for Biblical Studies and related academic fields.

The Difference Difference Makes[397]

The process of becoming familiar with Moses's strangeness highlights just how peculiar — and vital — is the person of Moses and his particular status in the overarching project of the Hebrew Bible. A similar statement may be said of idols. Through the process of redescribing their status change and modes of existence pre- and post-transformation, I highlight the indispensability of idols to the project of polytheism, in addition to illuminating the inner-workings of temple-based polytheism itself. One major difference that seems so obvious, yet is still deserving of attention, is the difference between Moses and idols with respect to form, and the implications of that difference.

While my comparison in its entirety has cast much light on the Pentateuch's portrayal of Moses, illuminating his status change and, by extension, many of the interpretive quandaries surrounding his character, his general mode of being remains an oddity in the history of religion — for a human being. As argued throughout my comparison, Moses's status is conjoined with his particular mode of mediation, which is distinguished as of a higher status than other forms of mediation, such as priesthood or prophecy, throughout the Pentateuch. However, my redescription of idols suggests that the "face to face" (Exod 33:11; Deut 34:10) or "mouth to mouth" (Num 12:8) intimacy

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[397] This heading recalls intentionally one of Jonathan Z. Smith's most important essays on comparative method, "What a Difference a Difference Makes."

that characterizes Moses's relationship with Yahweh also characterizes the relationship

between an idol and the deity he or she embodies. Moses's status is not unique in the

ancient Near East, but rather it is common among idols. Where Moses's status is distinct

is within the text of the Hebrew Bible, and among human beings.

Whether one thinks of Moses as a person in history, a literary character, or some

combination thereof, the sharp contrast between a flesh-and-blood human being and a

decorated figure carved of wood or stone points toward an equally sharp contrast between

the religious frameworks within which Moses and idols operate. This latter contrast is

argued in other chapters, so I do not belabor those points here. Rather, I use this

opportunity to discuss the implications of Moses's humanity for the authors of the

Pentateuch and their audience(s), and to consider the formative power of the competition

between aniconic Yahwism and idol-centered worship, particularly that of Marduk.

The humanity of Moses — including his ability to tend to his own physical needs,

to argue with Yahweh, and to go to and from the tabernacle without an attendant — is not

only fitting with aniconism, but also emphasizes both Moses's singularity and his

temporality. This works to the advantage of the biblical authors because it allows them to

establish Moses as an exceptional model, while at the same time preventing any attempt

to venerate or replicate him. In fact, the mysterious burial of Moses (Deut 34:6; cf. Jude

1:9) precludes anyone from visiting his remains for any reason, including veneration or

personal transformation.[398] The only way to access Moses's status and the relationship to

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[398] However, this attempt at preventing veneration is not remembered by all communities, as there are
Jewish, Christian, and Muslim shrines to Moses in various regional communities throughout Jordan.

Yahweh that Moses's status entails is through Moses himself; the only way to access

Moses and the divine word that comes forth through Moses in the course of his

relationship with Yahweh is through the biblical text, as it was shaped by its authors.

Thus, Moses's humanity, singularity, and temporality constitute an argument for

the Pentateuch itself as that which makes divine-human mediation *accessible*. What made

this mediation *possible* in the first place, according to the biblical authors, is Moses's

status change. Yet, Moses's status is finite; it applies to only one figure, for only one

period of time, and, even for those in Babylonian exile, that time is portrayed as long ago.

The only possible way to access and understand Moses's status and its fruits is through

the Pentateuch — which is, of course, another way of saying that the only possible way to

access and understand Moses's status is through the Pentateuch's *authors*.

As I consider the annual juxtaposition of the *akitu*-festival of the Babylonians and

the Passover of the Judeans (later, Jews) as the historical and religious context of one of

the most formative periods for the Pentateuch, my analysis of the similarities and

differences between idols and Moses becomes more than an exercise in comparative

method. One of the outcomes of my comparison and analysis is a more nuanced

understanding of the role of historical and cultural context in the shaping of traditions,

particularly the traditions of a displaced minority who continuously seeks to maintain its

sense of community as that community is forced to adapt to circumstances beyond its

control. What the biblical authors could control is how they shaped, shared, and passed

down the stories and traditions for which they are known. As more information comes to

light about the ancient Near Eastern milieux of the Hebrew Bible and its authors, more

avenues of research and lines of interpretation will continue to become possible.

Suggestions for Further Research

As stated at the outset of this project, I limit myself here to the issue of status

change and to the figures of Moses and ancient Mesopotamia idols for a number of

reasons. I chose status change as an analytical category because that is what both Exod

6:28-7:1 and the *Mīs Pî* are about, at their core. Although there are other materials about

status change, including prophetic call narratives and Egyptian material related to the

Opening of the Mouth ceremony, only Exod 6:28-7:1 and the *Mīs Pî* enable a "mouth to

mouth" intimacy with the deity that allows one to mediate between divinity and

humanity. Moses is more than a prophet, like the Hebrew prophets, or the royal dead, as

in the Egyptian version of the Opening of the Mouth; he is Yahweh's idol.

There are many potentially fruitful directions in which one might take this project

from here, both in terms of primary materials and in terms of method or interpretive lens.

One suggestion is to attend to the Egyptian Opening of the Mouth materials. As described

in chapter one, the major primary texts relating to the Egyptian Opening of the Mouth

include the *Pyramid Texts*, *Coffin Texts*, *Book of the Dead*, and *Book of the Opening of*

the Mouth, plus various artifacts. Because of the difference between the purpose of the

Opening of the Mouth in Egypt — to enliven the royal dead in the afterlife — and the

purpose of the *Mīs Pî/Pīt Pî* in Mesopotamia, comparison between Egyptian materials

and the biblical Moses with respect to status change is a different sort of project. There

are certain limitations to performing that comparison, which I do not venture into here, but the project may be done well if one sets appropriate parameters from the beginning.

In terms of method, the choice to bring together Moses and idols over the issue of status change was a conscious decision based on my own particular interest in all three of these elements, plus the process of comparison itself. That being said, there are many ways in which a scholar with different interests might perform this work. One might apply the concept of third term comparison in a different way, either by choosing an alternative to "status change" as the directing force of the comparison, or by applying the third term of status change to different objects. For example, whereas I chose to compare Moses and idols with respect to status change, a scholar with different interests might compare them with respect to oracular forms, miraculous acts, or the function of ritual. One could also add to the topic of "status change" by analyzing and comparing figures or items other than Moses and idols, such as kings, priests, sacred spaces, or holy objects.

This project might also be expanded beyond its current boundaries through the application of other approaches. Other scholars may not be interested in comparative method, but instead analyze the issue of Moses's status change or that of idols with a different set of tools. Since I am concerned with advocating for a particular method of comparison, that is my primary method. However, an examination of Moses's status change with source criticism as the primary approach, for example, might look very different from what I have set out to do here.

The three interpretive modes that come to mind that hold the most promise for producing additional insight into idols and/or Moses are iconographical analysis, spatial analysis, and reception history. Throughout this project, I note many iconographic representations of idols and their activities, as well as literary descriptions of their appearance, but do not venture into a complete analysis except on the issues of luminosity and hornedness. There has yet to be a systematic, art historical examination of idols added to the repertoire of scholarly literature, but such a volume would be timely and much appreciated in this blossoming field of idol studies.

Spatial analysis is another tool that may fruitfully be brought to bear on the issue of status change, since both Moses and idols experience and perform their respective statuses in different ways and in various locations. The *Mīs Pî* is particularly ripe for spatial analysis, as each location mentioned throughout the ritual and incantation texts is deeply and mythologically symbolic in and of itself. Each of these locations contributes to a much greater, intricate web of symbolism that includes the holy spaces of ancient Mesopotamian temple complexes and extends out through the city, into the wilderness.

With respect to Moses, such analysis may provide insight into the various spatial representations of his status, particularly in the Sinai narrative, wherein Moses moves constantly between the divine cloud resting on the mountain and the people camped at its base. There is also a case to be made that there is a significant shift in the people's understanding of Moses between the Sinai narrative and the wilderness wanderings, and that this is, in part, due to the shift from mountain top to tabernacle as the location of

Moses's meetings with Yahweh. However, this is another project for another time, one best performed with a different set of tools than those applied here.

One final suggestion is to further research and analyze how the statuses of both idols and Moses are handled in reception history. By understanding the various reasons that monotheistic religions reject the use of idols, beginning with the rhetoric of the biblical authors, one comes to a better understanding of the task of redescribing idols from ancient Near Eastern primary texts and artifacts. Almost no Jewish, Christian, or Muslim commentators have a neutral position on the use of idols in divine worship, and rightly so given the prohibitions of their respective holy texts and traditions. For the person writing about idols, one must be aware of the imbedded nature of anti-idol sentiment, not only in potential readers, but perhaps also within the author themselves. While this awareness has shaped the ways in which I redescribe idols, this project only grazes the issue of how idols are understood in reception history.

Similarly, I have only scratched the surface of how Moses and his status have been interpreted throughout the ages. Here, I deal with how Moses's status is expressed within the biblical text itself and extend beyond the confines of the Pentateuch only to illustrate the longterm trends and difficulties in interpretation that this project addresses. Most extra-biblical iterations and interpretations of Moses's character and status, beginning with ancient translations and continuing in scholarship today, display tension and uncertainty surrounding how Moses's status is to be properly understood and expressed. This tension takes on different forms in different contexts and within different

traditions, whether expressed in visual art or in writing, and is worthy of exploration on its own terms, either in whole or in part.

Implications

As stated in chapter one, this project is significant because of both *what* I compare and *how* I compare. For the sake of clarity and ease, the following implications of this analysis are divided along these lines, with content on one side and method on the other. The fields that this comparison has the most potential to affect are those of Assyriology, Biblical Studies, Judaic Studies, and Religious Studies, in particular Comparative Religion and Material Religion; other relevant fields include Anthropology, Art History, History, and perhaps Sociology.

In terms of what I compare, Moses and idols are an unusual pairing. By shining a spotlight on Moses's status and doing so in an unconventional way, I offer a new understanding of one of the most emblematic figures of the Bible, the central figure of Judaism, and an important figure for Christianity and Islam. This new understanding also has implications for the history of the development of aniconic monotheism, as it highlights one of the historical moments and textual spaces in which this development was negotiated and perpetuated among communities living among cultures whose default mode of religious life was idol-centered polytheism. However, because this pairing is unusual in scholarship, this comparison may raise a host of questions about the implications of this reading, especially in relation to Moses's role as the founding figure of aniconic monotheism and the Jewish faith.

Similarly, I also offer a new understanding of ancient Mesopotamian idols that has implications for how a modern audience understands and imagines an idol's nature and utility. In contrast to treatments of Moses, this area of study is relatively new, but is beginning to gain more attention in Assyriology and related fields now that the extant *Mīs Pî* texts are available and in a single volume, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian Mīs Pî Ritual*.[399] To further one's understanding of idols is to further one's understanding of that which shaped ancient Mesopotamian civilization to its core. The idol was the center of society, including all of society's power structures, but, most importantly, it was that which actively connected heaven, earth, and underworld, and thus enabled life. Proper understanding of the status and function of the idol, as well as how that status played out in the life of the city, is the key to properly understanding the ordering principle of Mesopotamian civilization. As such, my redescription of idols has strong implications for the study of ancient Mesopotamian history, religion, culture, and politics.

Finally, I turn to the implications of *how* I compare. The ability of my comparison to yield insight into Moses, idols, and status change, as well as greater contextual and historical issues, makes a case for third term comparison as a fruitful method of analysis. Although this method is not new to the field of Comparative Religion, its potential has yet to be fully explored in the field of Biblical Studies. This application of third term comparison marks a departure from the methodological norm of Biblical Studies, and

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[399] Christopher Walker and Michael Dick, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian Mīs Pî Ritual* (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2001).

offers another way of conceiving of the comparative endeavor, one which allows scholars to compare disparate objects and texts without having to claim that one descended from the other. That being said, this method of comparison is a step forward in amending the relationship between Biblical Studies and related fields, especially Assyriology, Egyptology, Hittitology, and Northwest Semitics. By slowing the process of comparison, narrowing its focus, and requiring the scholar to declare his or her intention from the beginning, the third term guides the scholar and thus protects them from accusations that related fields have brought against comparative efforts in Biblical Studies in recent decades, including oversimplification, dehumanization, and hasty conclusion making.

The greatest challenge of this kind of comparison is that, like all good things, it takes time. It requires deep familiarity with those texts and cultures one compares, but it also requires deep familiarity with oneself and the role of the scholar in the comparative process. This awareness is simultaneously the greatest challenge and greatest benefit of comparison done properly. The concept *third term* draws attention to the subjectivity of the scholar and gives that subjectivity a clearly defined direction in which to steer one's comparison. In comparing Moses and idols with respect to status change, I become the mediator of these mediators, directing their conversation in a way that brings out the similarities and differences that point toward something greater. That something greater is the shared experience of both attraction and repulsion when faced with the numinous powers of the universe, whether those powers are known as Marduk, Yahweh, or by any other name.

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Figure 1: Copper Plate Etching, "Exod. XXXIX en XL," *Historie des Ouden en Nieuwen Testaments*, 1722

Figure 2: Copper Plate Etching, "Exod. XL v.17-21," *Historie des Ouden en Nieuwen Testaments*, 1722