

THE RELIGIOUS EVOLUTION IN THE ISRAELITE NATION

In an earlier chapter, when we discussed the meaning of the name Israel, we assumed it to have been "Asera – El (Ashera El)". We stressed that there was reason to suppose the Israelites had worshipped the Ashera, i. e. the trees Ela and Alon (Terebinth and Oak). From the verse "...I am the Lord; And I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac and unto Jacob, by the name of God Almighty (in the Hebrew verse El-Shaddai – אֱלֹהֵי שַׁדַּי N. G.) but by my name JEHOVAH was I not known to them"¹. We ascertain that El-Shaddai was the name of the Israelite deity till their descent into Egypt, and its meaning is, as we have seen, "God of the fields". The Bible tells us that the Israelites were in Egypt for 430 years². They leave Egypt under the leadership of Moses, who gives them a monotheistic religion. The Bible depicts the Israelites as a wandering nation, herdsmen like the Bedouines of our day until their descent into Egypt they worshipped trees, which means they were at the level of fetishism – a low level of religious development, from which they were suddenly transferred to monotheism, a very high level in religious development. All this is done without telling us about any evolution towards it. This nation "jumps" from a state of being "on the verge " of development to a state of being nearly at the highest peak of religious development, overtaking the Egyptians who were known to have achieved a high cultural level. We cannot, therefore, explain such a development unless we assume that this monotheistic conception was not originally evolved in the Israelite nation, but was brought to them from the outside.

According to the Bible, Moses, who was the founder of monotheism, was a Hebrew brought up in the house of the Pharaoh, and when reaching the age of eighty years, (Ex. 7: 7) returned to his own people. Freud in his book "Moses and Monotheism"³ conjectures that Moses was an Egyptian, and believes that the aim of the narrative about Moses being saved from the waters of the Nile by the daughter of the Pharaoh, and brought up by her till he returns to his people, comes to mask the Egyptian origin of Moses⁴

1 Ex. 6: 2 – 3. (El – Shaddai was translated God Almighty)

2 Ex. 12: 40.

3 See: Freud, *Moise et Monotheism*.

4 The belief that Moses is an Egyptian name, is not exclusive to Freud. Renan, Breasted and others already referred to it. Renan, *Histoire Du Peuple D'israel*, pp. 159–160.

According to Freud, Moses, who was an Egyptian, gave the Israelites an Egyptian religion. It is known that Akhenathon (Amenhotep IV) enforced in Egypt the worship of a god by the name Aten. Because of the phonetical resemblance between the names Aten, Adon – Adonai, and because of the similarity between the principles of the religion of Aten and that of Adonai, Freud assumed that the monotheistic religion that Moses gave to the Israelites was the religion of Aten, and he accordingly fixed the date of the Exodus after the Akhenaton period.

As the Biblical narrative goes, Moses demanded that the king of Egypt let the Israelites go out of his country. From this narrative we get the impression that Moses stands firmly upon the fulfilment of his demand. Moses addresses the Pharaoh demanding "Let my people go, that they may serve me, And if thou refuse to let them go, behold, I will smite all thy borders..."⁵ The king of Egypt refuses and then the ten plagues are brought upon him and his people until at last he agrees to let the people go. At one stage, the Pharaoh agrees to send the people, but without their flocks. Moses, instead of "jumping" at the chance and accepting the offer (the logical reaction of any man who is supposed to be under slavery) refuses to leave Egypt, and remains firmly upon his resolve. Moreover, his answer to the Pharaoh is that not only will they not leave without their flocks, but "Thou must give us also sacrifices and burnt offerings that we may sacrifice unto the Lord our God"⁶. How amazing is the language which the Bible ascribes to Moses, e. g. "but let not Pharaoh deal deceitfully any more in not letting the people go"⁷, or the commanding language "Let my people go...For if thou refuse..." (Ex. 9: 1–2), or his impertinence in telling the Pharaoh "Thou must give us also sacrifices.' etc. When the Pharaoh loses patience and tells Moses "Get thee from me, take heed to thyself, see my face no more; for in that day thou seest my face thou shalt die" (Ex. 10: 28), Moses answers that he is leaving, but that a day would come when "all these thy servants shall come down unto me, and bow down themselves unto me saying, Get thee out, and all the people that follow thee; and after that I will go out. And he went out from Pharaoh in a great anger".⁸ These harsh words, so highly mortifying, are ascribed to Moses who is considered a member of the slave families. This is quite extraordinary,

Griffith, *The Egyptian Derivation of The Name Moses*, JNES, XII, 1953, pp. 225–231.

Conder, *The Syrian Stone Lore*, p. 121 (notes).

Lods, *ISREL*, p. 192.

Albright, *A Revision of Early Hebrew Chronology*, JPOS, 920–1921, p. 67.

Cassuto, U., *A commentary on the Book of Exodus*, p. 11. (Hebrew).

5 Ex. 8: 1–2 (In the Hebrew text Ex. 7: 26–27)

6 Ex. 10: 24–26.

7 Ex. 8: 29 (In the Hebrew text Ex. 8: 25)

8 Ex. 11: 8

and goes against common sense. In fact, what prevents Pharaoh from killing Moses? No doubt, we may explain the biblical text quite simply by saying that this narrative in the Bible is a merely a fine legend. In order to glorify its hero, the Israelite nation ascribes to Moses a wonderfully divine power which permitted him to speak to the Pharaoh as an equal. Such was the approach of many scholars who did not give much value to the biblical narratives.

But can the facts be explained otherwise?

We saw in a previous chapter⁹ that the Exodus occurred in c. 1446 B. C. According to the Bible Moses was eighty years old at the time of the Exodus.¹⁰ We can therefore fix Moses birth c. 1526 B. C. If Moses is the son of the daughter of the Pharaoh as might be assumed from Freud's theory, then most probably the Pharaoh who reigned at about 1526 B. C. was Moses grandfather. As we know, during this period Thutmose I reigned as Pharaoh¹¹, and his daughter was the queen Hatsepsut. It is customary in the orient to name the grandchild after his grandfather¹². Most probably Moses name was at first Thutmose, and the prefix Thut was later dropped. This assumption explains the narrative of the Exodus in the Bible.

Before the reign of Amenhotep II, Thutmose III reigned as Pharaoh, persecuting many of the royal house and those related to the queen Hatsepsut. To cite Breasted: "no doubt those who did not flee were surely sorry for it".¹³ Most probably Moses also ran away, to Midian according to the Bible, and became a shepherd of the flocks of Yithro the Midianite priest. It seems that during this period of loneliness he developed his personal monotheistic philosophy. With the death of Thutmose III and the ascent of Amenhotep II (Amenophis II), Moses returns to Egypt. He is the grandchild of Thutmose I, i. e. the uncle of Amenhotep II, king of Egypt, and therefore has rights to the throne as well. Just as anyone with a philosophical idea would do, Moses is interested in propagating his monotheistic religion. He most probably relinquishes his rights to the throne, but instead demands possession of the slaves in whom he finds large scope for the propagation of his creed . Then begins a bargaining between Amenhotep II and Moses, and we can now understand the resolute language ascribed to Moses speaking to the Pharaoh, and why the Pharaoh does not harm him since he is his uncle. Indeed, the Bible itself states that: "...the man Moses was very great in the land of Egypt,

9 Chapter 2.

10 Ex. 7: 7 "And Moses was fourscore years old... when they spake unto pharaoh."

11 According to Petrie Thutmose I reigned 1541–1516. B. C. According to Breasted 1557–1501. B. C.

12 See for ex: Ganneau, Hiram, King of Tyre, PEF, 1880, pp. 174–181

13 See: Pere Bouvier, La pierre et P. Jouquet, *Precis de L'histoire*, p. 141

in the sight of Pharaoh's servants, and in the sight of the people".¹⁴ without enlarging in what sense he is great¹⁵.

In his book "Moses and Monotheism", Freud remarks that circumcision was an Egyptian custom, and the reason for enforcing this custom on the Israelites was, according to him, that Moses himself was an Egyptian.

Let us add to this the existence of two laws in the Bible which are ascribed to Moses: 1) "An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord; even to their tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of the Lord for ever: Because they met you not with bread and with water in the way, when ye came forth out of Egypt; ...thou shalt not seek their peace nor their prosperity all thy days for ever"¹⁶. 2) "Thou shalt not abhor an Egyptian, because thou wast a stranger in his land. The children that are begotten of them shall enter into the congregation of the Lord in their third generation."¹⁷ The strange peculiarity of these two laws is that the Ammonites and Moabites who are, according to the Bible, racially related to the Israelites – being descendants of Lot, Abraham's nephew – are not allowed to enter into the congregation FOR EVER, because they did not offer the Israelites bread and water when they came out of Egypt.

On the other hand, the Egyptians who had imposed forced labour upon the Israelites for decades, embittered their lives, and had commanded that "Every son that is born ye shall cast into the river"¹⁸ These Egyptians are permitted to enter the congregation in the third generation, and the explanation offered in the Bible for this law is very odd and even ridiculous: "because thou wast a stranger in his land". But if Moses himself was an Egyptian and the Israelite nation also included Egyptian elements, then such a law is explicable.

Let us assume that Moses was not an Egyptian, but as the Bible describes him – a Hebrew saved from the waters of the Nile by Pharaoh's daughter, and brought up in the house of the Pharaoh. Grown old at eighty (Ex. 7: 7), he returns to his people – the Hebrew one. Yet in Pharaoh's house – was he brought up as a Hebrew or as an Egyptian? It is self-evident that even if we accept the biblical version, we must agree that Moses' education was an Egyptian one.

Whether he was a Hebrew, as in the biblical version, or an Egyptian as in Freud's version, his whole outlook and knowledge was Egyptian, and we have to assume that the religion he gave the Israelites must have been based

14 Ex. 11: 3.

15 Let us note that Manetho, by Josephus (Contra Apion. I-26), says that Moses was an Egyptian priest by the name of Asarsif. However he points out (ibid. 16), that this remark is made according to hearsay alone.

16 Deut. 23: 3-6

17 Deut. 23: 7-8 (In the Hebrew text 8-9)

18 Ex. 1: 22

on Egyptian culture. There is reason to assume, with Freud, that this religion resembles the religion of Aten. But Freud was in error when he fixed the date of the Exodus immediately after the Akhenathon period. The grounds for his mistake lies in his assuming that Akhenathon established this religion. Let us not forget that only about seventy years elapsed from the time of the Exodus till the accession to the throne by Akhenathon. This religion probably leaves a strong impression on him, and when he ascends the throne, he enforces this religion of the God Aten Adon¹⁹ on Egypt. With the Israelite people, he believes in the same religion and in the same God, and there is an identity of religious interests between him and the Israelite people. Most probably this is also the reason why he did not come to the rescue of the Canaanite kings in their war against the Israelites²⁰.

With the Exodus a new era commences for the Israelites – the period of the worship of one God Adon. But when they received this new religion, did they stop worshipping the Ashera? From the verse "Thou shalt not plant thee a grove of any trees (in Hebrew–Ashera any tree אַשְׁרָה כִּלְעֵץ) near unto the altar of the Lord thy God, which thou shalt make thee"²¹. We can conclude that they linked their old deity with the new one, and formed a combination of the two, making it necessary to issue this warning commandment.

The Israelites sojourned in Egypt for 430 years²². Reason demands that in such a long period of time they came under the influence of the Egyptians and learned their ways. The narrative about the worship of the golden calf in the desert proves how deeply they were influenced by the Egyptians. We find support for this in the following verses "...and made myself known unto them in the land of Egypt...Then said I unto them, cast ye away every man the abomination of his eyes, and defile not yourselves with the idols of Egypt...But they rebelled against me, and would not hearken unto me: they did not every man cast away the abominations of their eyes, neither did they forsake the idols of Egypt."²³ "Neither left she her whoredoms brought from Egypt: for in her youth they lay with her."²⁴ "Because they have done that

19 There are scholars who consider "Jehovah" the name of the Israelite God. This will be discussed later, and meanwhile we shall continue to call the Israelite God "Adon".

20 The accepted belief is that Akhenathon did not come to the help of the Canaanite kings in the el-Amarna period because he was occupied in establishing his monotheistic religion and therefore did not pay attention to his political affairs and the events in Canaan.

21 Deut. 16: 21. The Hebrew verse reads: "Lo tita lekha Ashera kol etz ezel mizbakh adonai elohekha" – "לא־תִטַּע לְךָ אֲשֵׁרָה כִּלְעֵץ אֶצֶל מִזְבַּח יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ"

22 Ex. 12: 40

23 Ezk. 20: 5–8

24 Ezk. 23: 8

which was evil in my sight, and have provoked me to anger, since that day their fathers came forth out of Egypt, even unto this day."²⁵

The Israelites leave Egypt with the religion of their deity Adon, given them by Moses. Because of the novelty of this religion it seems that part of the people – probably a very large part – still continues to worship the Ashera, as they used to do before. They also continue to worship the calf (bull) and perhaps also other Egyptian deities which they had adopted during their long stay in Egypt. Moses who professes a new religion, his own creation, fights against these elements. This much can be learnt from the biblical narratives. Following the golden calf episode Moses calls "Who is on the Lord's side? Let him come unto me". The people divide into two parts, with one part killing the other which had worshipped the calf.²⁶ Similar events occur in the Baal – Peor, Korah, and other incidents.²⁷

In this connection it is worth adding the words spoken about Joshua when he was appointed as leader: "And they answered Joshua saying, All that thou commanded us we will do, and whithersoever thou sendest us, we will go. According as we hearkened unto Moses in all things, so will we hearken unto thee: only the Lord thy God be with thee, as he was with Moses. WHOSOEVER HE BE THAT DOTTH REBEL AGAINST THY COMMANDMENT, AND WILL NOT HEARKEN UNTO THY WORDS in all that thou commandest him, HE SHALL BE PUT TO DEATH: only be strong and of a good courage." (My emphasis – N. G.)²⁸ This line of thought can be found in Moses words also: "For I know thy rebellion, and thy stiff neck: behold while I am yet alive with you this day, ye have been rebellious against the Lord; and how much more after my death?" (Deut. 31: 27). i. e. if while I am alive and have been so stern with you, you are rebellious what shall I expect after my death?

Moses in the desert is a strong, firm leader, resolute about the strict observance of his ideas, and the performance of his commands. Anyone who rebels against him, such as Korah, or the calf worshippers, is killed. During this period of the wandering in the desert, the religion of the God of Israel is kept in its full monotheistic form, because Moses cares about its observance and enforcement. With the death of Moses the people of Israel enter a new era – the era of the conquest of the land of Canaan and the settlement in the land. Moses is dead. During his lifetime he had to act firmly with the people to keep faith with his ideas. We must assume therefore that without the presence of someone who would stand firmly on the observance of the monotheistic religion, the people were liable to return to the worship of their

25 2Kn. 21: 15

26 Ex. 32

27 Nu. 25 ; 11 ; 15: 32– 36 ; 16; 17

28 Jos. 1: 16 –18

former deities – the Ashera, the calf and the other deities they worshipped in Egypt. This in fact is what we learn from the Bible. Joshua speaks to the people and demands: "Now therefore fear the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the Lord. And if it seems evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."²⁹; "Now therefore put away, said he, the strange gods which are among you"³⁰.

Such is the situation during Joshua's time, and there is reason to assume that it deteriorated after his death and the death of the Elders. The people then resume worshipping the Ashera etc."And Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders that over lived Joshua, and which had known all the works of the Lord, that he did for Israel. . And there arose another generation after them, which knew not the Lord, nor yet the works which he had done for Israel."³¹

It seems, however, that the efforts of Moses were not in vain: the welding furnace of the desert and Joshua's lifetime succeeded in implanting the monotheistic "creed of Adon" within a part of the nation. Therefore, when the nation of Israel settled in the land, we read in the Bible that they worship the God Adon – Adonai, besides the Ashera the Bull and other deities. When the prophet Samuel addresses the Israelites to return unto the Lord, he emphasizes "and serve him only". (1Sam. 7, 3.). The worship of multitude of deities including Adon does not accord with the monotheistic principles of the Adon religion, and cannot coexist with it. So it was quite natural that the God Adon had to descend from his high monotheistic level to a henotheistic level. By force of circumstance, the God Adon becomes a henotheistic god in the land of Israel, taking its place at the head of the deities in the Israelite Pantheon. From this, I believe, the word "Adon" in Hebrew eventually aquired the meaning of "Master" or "Head" e. g. Adon Haolam – Master (Ruler)of the world, Adon habait – Head of the household, etc. Because of their Ashera worship they are called the "sons of Ashera El " (i. e. the sons of the God Ashera) or the "sons of Israel".

29 Jos. 24: 14 – 16

30 Jos. 24: 23

31 Ju. 2: 7–11; see also Jos. 24: 31.