

Brandeis University
Crown Center for Middle East Studies
Crown Paper 4 November 2010

LI KULLI FIR'AWN MUSA:
The Myth of Moses and Pharaoh
in the Iranian Revolution in
Comparative Perspective

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Myth and Revolution

MYTHS HAVE PLAYED IMPORTANT ROLES IN MANY REVOLUTIONS. The very use of the word “revolution” to denote a major sociopolitical upheaval that replaces one order with another attests to this, for “revolution” originally referred to the movement of one celestial body around another in a full circle, testifying to the fact that political revolutions were originally seen as enabling the reestablishment of a primordial order, not the establishment of a new one.¹ Thus, the French revolutionaries of 1789 were inspired by ancient Roman ideals, and the French revolution was in turn one source of inspiration for the Iranian revolutionaries of 1906 and the Ottoman revolutionaries of 1908.² Revolutions contain elements of the cyclical “eternal return” that characterizes myths and the rituals associated with them, in that at least some revolutionaries interpret their situation as constituting a replay of a paradigmatic previous event, and pattern their actions, consciously or unconsciously, on those who acted out that paradigmatic previous event. Karl Marx saw this clearly when he wrote in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*: “Just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language.” And he immediately gives examples: “Thus Luther donned the mask of the Apostle Paul, the Revolution of 1789 to 1814 draped itself alternatively as the Roman republic and the Roman Empire, and the revolution of 1848 knew nothing better to do than to parody, now 1789, now the revolutionary tradition of 1793 to 1795.”³ Oddly enough, two years earlier Marx himself had likened the revolution of 1848 to a primordial model when he wrote: “The revolution, which finds here not its end, but its organizational beginning, is no short-lived revolution. The present generation is like the Jews

whom Moses led through the wilderness.”⁴ That the analogy to the story of Moses rebelling against Pharaoh and thereby liberating his people seemingly occurred to Marx spontaneously when, in a more analytical moment, he would make fun of such analogies, points to the power of the Mosaic myth in the imagination of revolutionaries.

The American sociologist Lewis Feuer in his *Ideology and Ideologists* went so far as to state that “[e]very ideology in some fashion repeats the Mosaic myth,—the dramatic story of the liberation of the Hebrew tribes by Moses.” For him, this myth has the following series of situations and incidents:

- 1) A people is oppressed;
- 2) a young man, not himself of the oppressed, appears;
- 3) moved by sympathy, he intervenes, and strikes down an oppressor’s henchman;
- 4) he flees, or goes into exile;
- 5) he experiences the call to redeem the oppressed people;
- 6) he returns to demand freedom for the oppressed;
- 7) he is spurned by the tyrannical ruler;
- 8) he leads the actions which, after initial defeats, overwhelm the oppressor;
- 9) he imparts a new sacred doctrine, a new law of life, to his people;
- 10) he liberates the oppressed people;
- 11) the newly liberated people relapse from loyalty to their historic mission;
- 12) almost disillusioned, their leader imposes a collective discipline on the people to re-educate them morally for their new life;
- 13) a false prophet arises who rebels against the leader’s authoritarian rule, but he is destroyed; [and]
- 14) the leader, now the revered lawgiver, dies, as he glimpses from afar a new existence.⁵

Using the Mosaic myth, Feuer discusses a wide variety of ideologies, movements, and schools of thought highlighting the nefarious impact ideologies and ideologists of the left and the right have had on the advancement of civilization. He concludes that “when intellectuals cease to be ideologists ... they will find a vocation more enduring than any that myth can confer, more sincere because without self-illusion.”⁶

A more sympathetic and culturally bound interpretation of the impact that the story of Moses and Pharaoh has had on subsequent revolutionaries is given by Michael Walzer in his book *Exodus and Revolution*. He concludes that that story “isn’t

a story told everywhere; it isn't a universal pattern; it belongs to the West, more particularly to Jews and Christians in the West."⁷

But although the story of Moses and Pharaoh may not be a "universal pattern," it does not belong exclusively to the West either, for it is also known to Muslims and resonates powerfully with them. This article analyzes the role that the Mosaic myth played in Iranian Islamism, the revolution of 1978/79, and the establishment of the Islamic Republic. The term "myth" is used here not in the casual, and by now common, sense of "fiction" or even "lie," but in the sense of a primordial model that defines reality and that is often reenacted periodically in the form of ritual. In Mircea Eliade's definition, "myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time. ... In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality ..., or only a fragment of reality ... [such as] a particular kind of human behavior. ... Myth tells only of that which *really* happened. ... In short, myths describe the various and sometimes dramatic breakthroughs of the sacred ... into the world. It is this sudden breakthrough of the sacred that really *establishes* the world and makes it what it is today."⁸

Most scholars today admit the historicity of Moses,⁹ but this does not render use of the term "myth" inappropriate, for as Eliade wrote elsewhere, "popular memory finds difficulty in retaining individual events and real figures" and thus modifies the historical event "after two or three centuries, in such a way that it can enter into the mold of the archaic mentality, which cannot accept what is individual and preserves only what is exemplary."¹⁰ In the case at hand, as Sigmund Freud put it, "no historian can regard the Biblical account of Moses and the Exodus as other than a pious myth, which transformed a remote tradition in the interest of its own tendencies."¹¹ The mythologization of the birth, life, and exploits of Moses is clearly evident from the fact that the accounts in the Bible and the Koran parallel those of other mythical heroes and adhere to a pattern observable in such figures as Oedipus, Theseus, Watu Gunung (Java), and King Arthur.¹²

By definition, myth belongs to a collective, and functions to justify, support, and inspire the existence and action of a community, a people, a professional group, or a secret society.¹³ I contend that the sacred history of Moses's struggle against Pharaoh is a myth whose reenactment by the ideologues of the Islamic revolution, especially Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers, is as important to understanding the revolution and the regime that it begot as are the uniquely Shiite myths and rituals on which scholars have hitherto focused their attention: specifically, the expectation that the hidden twelfth Imam, who disappeared from view, will return one day as Mahdi (Messiah), to reestablish justice and the true faith; and the

martyrdom of the third Imam, Husayn b. Ali, who was killed in 680 CE at Kerbala while defending his kith and kin against the forces of the Umayyad caliph Yazid I.¹⁴

The triumphant return of Ruhollah Khomeini to Iran in early 1978, followed by his assumption of the title *Imam*, which Iranian (but not Arab) Shiites had traditionally reserved for their twelve infallible Imams of the Twelver branch of Shiism, was interpreted by many as a fulfillment of the millenarian expectations of the Twelver Shiites—the more so since it occurred at the end of the fourteenth century at a time when, as at the end of any century, “eschatological pressures”¹⁵ ran high. And it may indeed be that the culture of waiting for a messianic savior that pervades Shiite society predisposed Iranians to accept Khomeini as a charismatic leader.¹⁶

Myths mobilize people more if they are associated with a ritual, for only then can they be relived regularly by individuals.¹⁷ No ritual commemorates the disappearance of the twelfth Imam,¹⁸ and his Parousia not yet having taken place, a ritual reenacting his return is a logical impossibility. By contrast, the myth of Husayn, which contains the sacred history of the epic struggle between the forces of good and evil as exemplified by the Prophet’s grandson Husayn and the caliph Yazid respectively, is commemorated once every lunar year during the first ten days of the month of Muharram in a number of rituals, the best known being the processions of flagellants.¹⁹ As the central theme of these rituals is Husayn’s struggle against oppressive rule, the processions have often turned into protest demonstrations against the government of the day, which on these occasions becomes identified with the (from a Shiite point of view) illegitimate caliph Yazid. Already in June 1963, Khomeini used the fervor engendered by Muharram to preach against the Shah, and his arrest at the height of the festival generated riots in which hundreds were killed. In 1978, anti-regime demonstrators regularly invoked the Lord of the Martyrs, as Husayn b. Ali is known among Shiites, as a role model, culminating in the Muharram days of December, when millions of people walked through the streets of Tehran demanding the Shah’s departure. These demonstrations played a key role in persuading first the Shah’s Western backers and then himself that his days as ruler were numbered.²⁰

The future clerical rulers of Iran quite consciously exploited the myth of Husayn to mobilize believers, and after they came to power they organized a number of scholarly seminars to analyze and celebrate its relevance to the revolution’s success.²¹ In the first scholarly book about the revolution to appear in English, the anthropologist Michael Fischer coined the term “Kerbala paradigm” for the ideological matrix provided by the story of Husayn.²² It is noteworthy, however, that the cover of the book showed a revolutionary poster depicting Khomeini as Moses and the Shah as Pharaoh, with a caption saying in Arabic: *Li kulli fir’awn Musa*—For every Pharaoh there is a Moses.²³



The Kerbala paradigm was of great use to the Iranian revolutionaries while the struggle against the Shah, the Yazid of the age, lasted, but the success of the revolution contrasted sharply with the denouement of the battle of Kerbala, in which Husayn and all but one of his male relatives and followers perished. The myth of Husayn had not become obsolete just yet, however, for in 1979, Muharram coincided with the seizure of the American hostages, which turned the wrath of the flagellants-turned-demonstrators against the United States;²⁴ and after the invasion of Iran by Saddam Hussein in September 1980, the Islamic Republic used

the Kerbala paradigm to motivate its soldiers in the war against Iraq.²⁵ But there was one thing the myth of Husayn could not do: namely, provide a primordial model for governing. For this, the Islamic republicans had to turn to the rule of the Prophet Muhammad himself and to the caliphate of Ali b. Abi Tālib, whom Shiites consider their first Imam and who was the only Twelver Imam ever to exercise his right to rule.²⁶ In contrast to the Prophet Muhammad, however, and the first, third, and twelfth Twelver Shiite Imams, each of whom inspired an aspect of the Iranian revolution and the subsequent establishment of a new political order, the figure of Moses was an inspiration not only in the struggle against the Shah but also with respect to the Islamic Republic that followed, for he was, in Freud's concise characterization, "a Jew who wanted to free his compatriots from the service of an Egyptian overlord and lead them out of the country to develop an independent and self-confident existence—a feat he actually achieved."²⁷

Before delving into the actual use made of the myth of Moses, I would like to propose that theologians, ideologues, statesmen, and religious leaders relate to it (and to other myths) in two ways—which, following Isaiah Berlin, I call "naive" and "sentimental." Berlin divided artists into two categories based on these terms,²⁸ and his thinking on the issue has been summarized as follows:

The "naïve" artist is whole and undivided, at one with himself and his world; he is not self-conscious, and his art is a natural and undistorted expression of what he directly sees and feels, for its own sake and not in pursuit of any ulterior purpose. The "sentimental" artist, on the other hand, has fallen from the primordial state of unity and harmony, which he seeks, often with a desperate sense of urgency, to restore through his work; but he pursues an ideal which is ultimately unattainable in any finite medium.²⁹

Applied to the Iranian case, a man like Khomeini was quintessentially "naive," while a man like Ali Shari'ati, whom some consider the ideologue of the Iranian revolution,³⁰ falls squarely into the "sentimental" category.³¹ But before examining in what ways Iranian Islamists have drawn on the story of Moses and Pharaoh, I will adduce a few examples from other religious traditions, the point being to show that Iran's revolution and the ideology that guided its dominant components are much less alien and unintelligible to a Western audience than has been imagined.

The Mosaic Myth in the Abrahamic Religions

Moses is a central figure in all Abrahamic world religions.³² Much ink has been spilled in the attempt to explain how the Koran's *Nabi Musa* relates to the Judeo-Christian Moses of the Bible;³³ but these debates are not relevant to this article, which is concerned with parallels rather than filiations.

Judaism

It is only in Judaism that the myth of the Exodus is associated with a yearly ritual, Passover, when the events are narrated during the Seder, the ritual meal.³⁴ The ritual ends with the words “Next year in Jerusalem,” which has kept alive the consciousness of exile among Jews over the centuries and has made *aliyah*, the return to the Holy Land after the dispersals of the Jews in the sixth century BCE and the first century BCE, a symbolic replay of the liberation from Egyptian rule. No wonder, then, that the foundation of the State of Israel was for many Jews “naively” (in Berlin’s terms) reminiscent of the Exodus.³⁵ As Michael Walzer puts it, “Exodus has always stood at the very center of Jewish religious thought and has played a part in each of the reiterated attempts at a Jewish politics, from the Maccabean revolt to the Zionist movement.”³⁶ If the Exodus paradigm is not as dominant as one would expect it to be in Zionist thought, this is because many Zionists, such as Ben-Gurion, wished to make a new beginning and look to the future rather than to the past.³⁷ Religious Zionists, moreover, have increasingly tended to see the establishment of a Jewish state in messianic terms.³⁸ As an example of a “sentimental” use of the Mosaic myth, one can adduce the evacuation of Ethiopia’s Jews to Israel in the 1980s, which was called “Operation Moses.”³⁹ Since then it has been established that the Beta Israel (“Falasha[s]”) are not descendants of Jews who had migrated from Palestine to northeastern Africa.⁴⁰

Christianity

For Christians, the Exodus is a prefiguring of Christ’s death and resurrection, which represent what is seen as a greater and more universal liberation than that of the biblical Exodus.⁴¹ Nonetheless, the story of Moses and Pharaoh, unmediated by Jesus, has directly inspired a great many Christian movements and individuals. Savonarola referred to Pope Alexander VI, who

had excommunicated him, as “Pharaoh,” implying that he himself was Moses.⁴² The Puritans who crossed the Atlantic in their own mind left the “Egypt” of old England for the “Canaan” of New England;⁴³ in fact, the leader of the second group of settlers, John Winthrop, “regarded himself as the Moses and the leader of a new and even more important exodus.”⁴⁴ But this flight from Pharaoh did not prevent the Puritans’ descendants from acting pharaonically vis-à-vis the Mormons, who ended up fleeing to distant Utah—a migration which they, too, likened to the biblical Exodus.⁴⁵ In fact, the story of Moses has played a major role in American culture,⁴⁶ including in the culture and narratives of African Americans. Examples of black leaders who have been likened to Moses include Henry Adams, an illiterate ex-slave who led an “exodus” of thousands of cotton workers from the South to Kansas in 1879–80;⁴⁷ Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican-born intellectual who boasted that he had discovered fascism before Mussolini;⁴⁸ and most recently Martin Luther King, Jr., who made copious use of the Moses topos in his utterances, including in his famous last speech before his assassination.⁴⁹

In South Africa, the Dutch settlers, moved by their special brand of Calvinist piety, compared the wilderness of the frontier to that within which Moses journeyed.⁵⁰ When they came under pressure from the British and moved into the interior of the continent in what became known as the Great Trek, the primordial myth of the Exodus was soon used to provide retroactive meaning.⁵¹ It became doubly relevant: Not only were people physically on the move,⁵² but Pharaoh had now found a contemporary avatar in the shape of the British.⁵³ President Paul Kruger of Transvaal invoked Moses to explain his acts;⁵⁴ and at his funeral, one of the speakers observed that

[t]he relation between President Kruger and his people reminds one of the relation between Moses and the Israelites, and not without reason. Even as the Israelites were led from the authority of the Egyptians, so also Kruger’s people were taken from the governmental authority, and both found their freedom in another land, where they made their own laws and served God in their own way.⁵⁵

In light of the prevalence of the Exodus motif in Afrikaner political mythology, it is ironic that in the 1970s and 1980s it also became a key element in the rhetorical repertoire of the political opponents of the structures set up by Kruger’s heirs.⁵⁶ In fact, a collection of essays analyzing various aspects of the Exodus in the Judeo-Christian tradition featured an exordial statement by the Catholic theologian Hans Küng in which he talked *only* about South Africa and the need to overthrow apartheid.⁵⁷

If references to Moses and the Exodus in the discourse of Puritans, Mormons, and probably Afrikaners were instances of a “naïve” reception of the myth, the prime example of its “sentimental” invocation is furnished by the liberation theology of the 1970s and 1980s, which, influenced by Marxist notions of class struggle and Leninist notions of imperialism as refined by Latin American dependency theory, interpreted the world as being neatly divided between “oppressors” and “oppressed”—with the struggle between the two, including the inevitable victory of the “oppressed,” being foreshadowed by Moses’s struggle with and victory over Pharaoh, a primordial event liberation theologians came to call the “Exodus paradigm.”⁵⁸ Even by the verbose standards of ideologues, the liberation theologians harked back to Moses and Pharaoh with a repetitiveness that would tempt one to speak of a cliché were it not for the realization that they did not write for the edification of scholars but for the mobilization of Christians on the disfavored side of class, racial,⁵⁹ continental,⁶⁰ and gender⁶¹ lines, so as to hasten their emancipation.⁶² At the heart of the argumentation lay a mythological mindset, as is clear from the following two quotations. The Protestant Brazilian liberation theologian Rubem Alves argued that

[t]he Exodus was the experience which created the consciousness of the people of Israel. The people formed the structuring centre which determined its way of organising time and space. Note that I am not saying simply that the Exodus is part of the contents of the consciousness of the people of Israel. If that were the case, the Exodus would be one item of information among others. More than an item of information, it is *its structuring centre*, in that it determines the integrating logic, the principle of organisation and interpretation of historical experience. That is why the Exodus does not persist as a secondary experience. ... It has come to be *the paradigm* for the interpretation of *all space and all time*.⁶³

The interpretation of Exodus conveyed in these lines is consonant with Eliade’s definition of myth as a story that tells how, “through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence.”

And in a work entirely dedicated to Exodus, José Severino Croatto, an Argentine Catholic liberation theologian, owns that

the Hebrews were not content with the unadorned data on Moses in the Exodus account—even though the leader of the liberation had *already* been mythologized. So they enlarged his figure with innumerable apocryphal episodes, each more extraordinary than the last. This is not to be viewed as an eagerness to indulge in fabulation

but as a hermeneutical expression of a profound understanding of the key-personage of their history.⁶⁴

Although the mythologization of Moses is admitted by Croatto, the motivation behind it is, in the true manner of ideologues, affirmed rather than proven—which means that to a reader who does not share Croatto’s psychological insights into the ancient Hebrews’ true motivations, Eliade’s aforementioned explanation seems more plausible. Also of interest is what Croatto offers as a principle of hermeneutics: “A human event does not exhaust itself simply by occurring, nor in the chronicle that describes it. It has the capacity to generate other happenings. The meaning of the more recent event is found to be already included within the prior event. As the chain of events lengthens, its significance retrospectively accumulates in that remote starting point.”⁶⁵ This reads as though “events” had agency. In fact, it is humans who assign significance to events, and the compulsion to read one event in terms of a previous one—or, conversely, to invest a previous event with the meaning of a subsequent one—has nothing to do with the events themselves and everything to do with the human propensity to mythologize.⁶⁶

The use of the Exodus paradigm by liberation theology has been the object of all sorts of criticism on theological grounds.⁶⁷ One noteworthy aspect of the liberation theological version of the myth of Moses in the Christian tradition is that it is truncated. The “Exodus paradigm” leaves out the less edifying parts of the story, such as the injunction to the Levites to kill those who succumbed to idolatry,⁶⁸ as well as the massacre of the Canaanites after their land was taken by the Israelites.⁶⁹ Machiavelli recognized this when he wrote: “He who reads the Bible with discernment will see that, in order that Moses might set about making laws and institutions, he had to kill a very great number of men who, out of envy and nothing else, were opposed to his plans.”⁷⁰

On this issue, the “naive” New England Puritans and South African Boers, who consciously identified the natives of their “promised lands”—respectively, Native Americans and Africans (or, as they would have said, “Indians” and “Kaffirs”)—with the Canaanites and justified their dispossession of these natives by invoking the myth of Moses and Pharaoh,⁷¹ were more honest than contemporary “sentimental” liberation theologians, who tend to ignore both those who choose to worship a golden calf (not an unreasonable thing to do, after all, from the perspective of the religious pluralism that inheres in today’s sociocultural reality, a reality that provides the context in which, according to the hermeneutists, scripture should be interpreted!), and the Canaanites.⁷² In this regard, the Methodist minister and historian John A. Newton has written:

The shadow side of Exodus, in the ill-treatment and expropriation of the “Canaanites” or “Gentiles,” however, is a warning that the Exodus pattern, construed in literalist Old Testament terms, has exacted a heavy toll in human suffering ... only Martin Luther King’s non-violent campaign for Negro rights and dignity, and for reconciliation of Black and White, points unambiguously to what is for Christians *the* Exodus, the “Exodus” which Jesus, by his death and resurrection, “was to accomplish in Jerusalem” (Luke 9:31).⁷³

Islam

The sacred history of Islam does not begin with the prophecy of Muhammad, and the Koran in fact includes accounts of the anguish and struggles of previous prophets, most of whom are also mentioned (although not necessarily as prophets) in the Bible.⁷⁴ In the Koran, stories that the Hebrew Bible uses to explain particular chapters in the history of the Jewish people have the function of illustrating how the true believer must behave; Koranic characters are thus moral paradigms, emblematic of all who are good or evil.⁷⁵ Among these characters, Moses and Pharaoh are particularly prominent: the Koran mentions Moses 126 (by other counts, 136) times, and Pharaoh is referred to 74 times.⁷⁶

Moses is seen as the prophet most like Muhammad, for Muslims interpret Deuteronomy 18:18, “I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee [Moses], and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him,” as foretelling the coming of the Prophet of Islam, for the latter’s life and career follow the same pattern as Moses’s, making him much more “like unto [Moses]” than Jesus—who, coming between Moses and Muhammad, might be thought of first in this context.⁷⁷ As one would expect, Muslim tradition accords Muhammad a higher rank than Moses, arguing that while the latter swooned when he heard God’s voice (7:143), the former was actually strong enough to bear the sight of God when he went on the *mirāj*.⁷⁸ But there is also a hadith according to which Muhammad asked his followers not to prefer him to Moses.⁷⁹ Like most other tales of pre-Muhammadan prophets, the verses that deal with Moses and his struggles were said to be revealed to Muhammad in the middle period of his career, a time of crisis when he had to overcome great difficulties—and they were meant, Muslims believe, to console and hearten him.⁸⁰ The stories of Moses thus serve as a matrix that enables Muhammad to understand his own prophetic experience.⁸¹

Pharaoh, for his part, is “the chief villain of the Koran”,⁸² even in hell he is the leader of the damned (Koran 28:41). In Islamic tradition, the “Pharaoh of Moses” (*Fir’awn*

Mūsā) is the epitome of the swaggering and arrogant despot. But Pharaoh is not merely a despot; he embodies blasphemous pretension to divinity.⁸³

On the whole, the account of Moses's life offered in the Koran is remarkably similar to that given in the Hebrew Bible, but there are subtle differences. Most important for purposes of this discussion is that in the Koran, Moses is sent by God to Pharaoh not merely to seek the liberation of his people, the Israelites, but to confront the ruler, who regarded himself as a god. In the Koran, Moses invites both the Pharaoh and his subjects to submit to God. Pharaoh refuses, for which he ultimately pays with his life; by contrast, his court sorcerers, beaten at their own game by Moses, do submit in the end (26:47). The traditional view among Muslims, accordingly, is that Moses was sent by God to propagate Islam and fight the Pharaoh's false religion, which had deified the ruler; his message, therefore, was universal. By the same token, the idea of migration that is so central to the biblical version of the story, and that people on the move such as the English settlers in North America and Dutch settlers in South Africa found so appealing, is not prominent in the Islamic tradition.

The Koran is not the only source for Muslims' understanding of Moses and his life. They knew of the Exodus narrative (and other stories) from translations of the Torah and the Passover Haggadah,⁸⁴ some of which found their way into a genre of books called *Qisas al-Anbiyā'* (Stories of the Prophets), all of which contain chapters recounting the story of Moses in which the references in the Koran are connected with information gleaned from earlier scripture. But it is revealing, with respect to Muslims' universalistic understanding of Moses, that the scenes from the life of Moses that Muslim artists have most often chosen to graphically depict relate to his struggle against paganism in its manifold manifestations.⁸⁵ The upshot is that just as Moses's message was vindicated, so would, in time, be that of Muhammad.

It is not surprising, therefore, that among contemporary Muslims, the story of Moses and Pharaoh has acquired the status of a myth which gives meaning to their own experience. If Pharaoh is a figure whose "mythopoeic effects continue to be felt down to the modern era,"⁸⁶ the same is true of Moses. To give a few examples, in Pakistan, some considered the not very pious founder of Pakistan, M. A. Jinnah, a Moses,⁸⁷ while in Egypt, Sayyid Qutb, one of the founders of modern Islamism, devoted a significant part of his massive commentary on the Koran, *Fi zilāl al-Qur'ān*, to explicating the exemplary nature of Moses's struggle against Pharaoh, which in his case was especially emotionally charged since he identified President Nasser, on whose orders he was ultimately killed in 1966, with the Pharaoh of the Koran.⁸⁸ When Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, was in turn assassinated in 1981, the assassin, Khalid al-Islambuli, shouted after opening fire: "I am Khalid al-Islambouli, I have killed Pharaoh, and I do not fear death."⁸⁹

Given the currency of the Moses and Pharaoh motif in South Africa, it is not altogether astonishing that the myth of Moses and Pharaoh has been given the greatest Islamic elaboration by a South African thinker Farid Esack, an anti-apartheid activist who, after studying in a madrasa in Pakistan, came into contact with Christian liberation theology. When conservative South African Muslim leaders argued for accepting the apartheid regime's offer of consultation by pointing out that even Moses had accepted Pharaoh's invitation to talk to him, Esack opposed their conciliatory stance in a sarcastically titled booklet.⁹⁰ Having been made aware, from his reading of Ali Shari'ati (about whom more below),⁹¹ of the paradigmatic power of Moses's struggle against Pharaoh, Esack took over the notion of the "Exodus paradigm" from liberation theology and applied it in a Muslim context.⁹²

In light of the prevalence of the term "Exodus paradigm," the reader might wonder why I avoid it. I do so for three reasons. First, the term derives from the Hebrew Bible, and its Koranic equivalent would probably be "Shu'arā paradigm," for it is in the Sura Shu'arā that the story of Moses and Pharaoh is told most expansively. Second, I do not know of any Arabic or Persian equivalent of the word "exodus" that evokes associations similar to the ones it elicits among Jews and Christians. The concept that comes closest to it, *hijra*, refers to the Prophet Muhammad's temporary departure for Medina from Mecca. While some have argued that this move was inspired by the Israelites' departure from Egypt,⁹³ for the purposes of Muslim mythology it is more important to note that the *hijra* itself became a myth—inspiring, to name only three examples, the kharijites;⁹⁴ many of the Muslim Indians who went to Pakistan after Partition and became known as *muhajirs*; and the terrorist group that killed Anwar Sadat and that called itself *Takfir wa l-hijra* (Excommunication and Departure). Finally, the word "exodus" refers to an aspect of the story which is central in the Hebrew Bible—namely, the departure of the Israelites and their founding of a new polity—but which does not occur in the Koran, where the emphasis is on confronting the infidel Pharaoh.

Moses and Pharaoh in Iranian Political Islam

While the Islamic tradition regarding Moses and Pharaoh is shared by Muslim Iranians,⁹⁵ there is one detail of that story that gives it added resonance to Shiites, and that is the belief that Ali b. Abi Tālib's relation to the Prophet Muhammad, his cousin and father-in-law, is analogous to Aaron's relation to his brother Moses. This is based on Koran 20:29-30, "And give me as assistant from my family / Aaron my brother / to strengthen my task / and share my task," and on the "Hadith of

Manzila,” a prophetic tradition according to which Muhammad likened Ali’s relationship to himself to that of Aaron to Moses.⁹⁶ While this tradition is common to Sunnis and Shiites, the latter derive from it proof of Ali’s claim as successor to the Prophet, which Sunnis deny.

This analogy has left traces in popular religiosity. Thus the medieval Isma‘ili Shiite poet Naser Khosrow⁹⁷ wrote:

*Cho Hārūn-e Musā bud ‘Ali dar din
Ham an bāz o ham neshin-e Mohammad
Beh mahshar bebusand Hārūn o Musā
Radā-ye ‘Ali o āstin- Mohammad.*

Like the Aaron of Moses, Ali was in religion
The associate and companion of Muhammad.
At the Last Judgment, Aaron and Moses will kiss
The Mantle of Ali and the Sleeve of Muhammad.⁹⁸

Among South Asian Twelver Shiites, Ali’s sons Hasan and Husayn are frequently referred to by the names of Aaron’s sons, Shabbar and Shabbir, respectively.⁹⁹ Imam Husayn, for his part, is considered heir to all prophets, including Moses.¹⁰⁰ As he leaves Medina to answer the call of the people of Kufa, Husayn is reminded of Moses’s flight from Egypt to Madyan and at different stages of the trip recites verses 21–24 of Sura al-Qisas, which deal with that event.¹⁰¹

Not surprisingly, the struggle of Moses against the Pharaoh is often mentioned alongside that of Husayn against Yazid.¹⁰² The Marxist Indo-Pakistani poet Shabbir Hasan Josh (1898–1982) even went so far as to call Karl Marx *Hamdam-e Shabbir o badkh‘āh-e Yazid, Musā-e nowbahr-e fer‘on-e jadid*, or “the soul mate of Shabbir (the Urdu rendering of Shubayr—i.e., Husayn) and the enemy of Yazid, the Moses of the new sea of the new Pharaoh.” Thus Marx himself is dressed up in the costumes of the past.¹⁰³

The Naive Reenactment of the Myth: Khomeini

The founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–89), first burst on the political scene of Iran in 1943, when he published a book entitled *The Exposure of Secrets*.¹⁰⁴ In this book he severely attacked the regime of Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1926–41), which had ended in the wake of the Allied invasion of Iran in 1941. Although the invasion had led to a liberalization of Iranian politics that allowed the ulema to reclaim some of the influence on public life they had

lost under Reza Shah, most ulema refrained from entering the political fray, an attitude encouraged by Ayatollah Hoseyn Borujerdi (1875–1961), who became the highest religious authority of Twelver Shiites in 1946 and settled in Qom. Among those clerics who were politically active, the most prominent was Ayatollah Abolqāsem Kāshāni (1882–1962),¹⁰⁵ a politician much admired by Khomeini.¹⁰⁶ In the spring of 1944, Kāshāni was in hiding in Shemirān, north of Tehran (on June 18 he was arrested by the Allies and exiled to Lebanon), and it may very well be the apathy shown on this occasion by other ulema that induced Khomeini to criticize them in a message issued on May 4, 1944. He called on his colleagues to defy the government, and the justification he gave was taken from the story of Moses. After quoting the Koran, he stated, “It is rising for God when Moses with his staff defeated the Pharaonians and destroyed their throne and crown. It is rising for God when the Last of the Prophets single-handedly triumphed over all the habits and beliefs of the *jāhiliya* (pre-Islamic age of ignorance), overthrew the idols in God’s house, and established monotheism and piety.”¹⁰⁷

But the consensus of the Shiite ulema was not to get involved in politics, a policy that became official at a conference on the subject of politics and the clergy held in Qom in early 1949, which concluded that “those who choose to wear clerical garb ... should abstain from intermingling in the affairs of politicians and political parties or becoming tools for their goals.”¹⁰⁸ Khomeini grudgingly adhered to this line, until the death of Ayatollah Borujerdi in 1961 freed him of the obligation to abide by the latter’s quietist stand.

Khomeini’s confrontation with the monarchy recommenced in 1963, when Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1941–79) began establishing a more dictatorial regime than the one that had prevailed since the coup d’état of 1953. As violations of the constitution of 1906 became more flagrant, Khomeini first entreated the ruler to mend his ways and adhere to the basic law of 1906. This can be interpreted as an emulation of Moses, who, as recounted in Sura 26 (*Shu’arā*) of the Koran, summoned Pharaoh and his courtiers to accept God. The confrontation came to a head on Ashura, the tenth of the lunar month of Muharram (June 5, 1963). At a time when the grief of the believers was peaking, Khomeini addressed the crowds in Qom. After reminding the listeners of the evil doings of Yazid and drawing implicit parallels with the Shah, some of whose policies he harshly criticized, he addressed the Shah directly:

Let me give you some advice, Mr. Shah! Dear Mr. Shah, I advise you to desist in this policy and act like this. I don’t want the people to offer up thanks if your masters should decide one day that you must leave. I don’t want you to become like your father.

After reminding his audience that Reza Shah's forced departure from Iran in the wake of the Allied invasion of 1941 had made people happy, he continued addressing the Shah:

Shah, I don't wish the same to happen to you; I don't want you to become like your father. Listen to my advice, listen to the [ulema] of Islam. ... You miserable wretch, forty-five years of your life have passed; isn't it time for you to think and reflect a little, to ponder about where all this is leading you, to learn a lesson from the experience of your father?¹⁰⁹

Far from listening to Khomeini, however, the Shah persevered in his policies, and in 1964 he exiled Khomeini, first to Turkey and then to Najaf in Iraq.

The Shah soon provided Khomeini with the motivation to radicalize his opposition to the regime. In the late 1960s, preparations began for a big celebration to mark the 2,500th anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire by Cyrus. This was to be the apotheosis of the monarchy, linking the current Shah to the Achaemenid ruler, but in the eyes of Khomeini the cost of the lavish celebration (and perhaps the exaltation of pre-Islamic Iran) deprived the Shah of the last shred of legitimacy that he had enjoyed under the constitution. From admonishing the ruler to abide by the fundamental law, he now turned to delegitimizing the constitution itself. This took the form of a series of lectures on Islamic government, given in 1970, which were later published as a treatise under the title *Hokumat-e Eslāmi* (Islamic government). In it, Khomeini argued for *Velāyat-e Faqih* (often translated as "Dominion of the Jurisprudent"),¹¹⁰ a system of clerical theocracy that, although taking its cue from some marginal earlier strands in Twelver Shiism,¹¹¹ amounted to a clear break with conventional Shiite thinking.¹¹²

As might be expected in a work that breaks with tradition, Khomeini uses a step-by-step mode of reasoning to convince the reader of the legitimacy of his innovation.¹¹³ In his justification of clerical rule, Khomeini first quotes a tradition to the effect that the ulema are the heirs to the Prophet—who, we might add, was also a worldly ruler. But comparing himself to the Prophet would have been presumptuous, even perhaps blasphemous, and so Khomeini adds two more hadith according to which the Prophet Muhammad said, "The [ulema] of my community are like the prophets preceding me" and "The [ulema] of my community are like the prophets of the Children of Israel," along with a tradition attributed to the eighth Imam, according to which "[t]he rank of the *faqih* (jurist) in the present age is like that of the prophets of the children of Israel."¹¹⁴ Having established the connection between his own status group (the ulema) and the prophets of the

Israelites, Khomeini turns to the most illustrious among these. Noting that Moses was a “mere shepherd,” he adds:

[A]s a result of his innate ability and his steadfastness, he overthrew the rule of the Pharaoh with a staff. Now imagine that staff in the hands of you and me; would we have been able to achieve the same result?¹¹⁵

And he concludes:

It is obvious that Moses himself was one of the prophets of the children of Israel, and that all of the functions that existed for [Muhammad] also existed for Moses, with a difference, of course, in rank, station, and degree. We deduce from the general scope of the word “rank” in this tradition, therefore, that the same function of rulership and governance that Moses exercised exists also for the *fuqaha* [jurists].¹¹⁶

He then explicitly compares the Shah to the Pharaoh,¹¹⁷ and interprets the Koran’s version of Moses’s struggle against Pharaoh as an injunction to Muslims to oppose latter-day Pharaohs—that is, the Shah.¹¹⁸

A few months before the actual celebration, Khomeini issued a statement in which he exhorted the ulema to speak up and oppose the Shah in order to save Islam, even if they themselves were treated well by the regime. “From the beginning of history, oppressive (*jāber*) governments have been opposed by the prophets and the ulema. Did they not know what they were doing?! If God sends Moses to eliminate the *shāhanshāh*, did he not know ... that one must not oppose the *shāh*? ... Tabari relates that the Prophet said that *malik al-muluk* [the king of kings, = *shāhanshāh*] is the most cursed (*manfur*) word for me, meaning *shāhanshāh*, this is a cursed word if applied to a human being, it belongs to God.”¹¹⁹ In the summer of 1972, in another message to the Iranian people, Khomeini returned to the theme of Moses when he exhorted soldiers to wait for the right moment to rise against the Shah: “Oh soldiers, Moses-like, in the embrace (*āghush*) of Pharaoh, wait for the day when the roots of corruption will be cut off. You gallant soldiers of the Ruler of the Age (may God hasten his victory) [i.e., that of the twelfth Imam] who have been dragged to the barracks, with full courage strengthen your military training. Hopefully, like Moses, who was brought up in the household of Pharaoh [but] put an end to his oppression, you too will one day under the command of a righteous officeholder (*maqām*) cut off these wicked hands and root out corruption and oppression.”¹²⁰

The Sentimental Reenactment of the Myth: Ali Shari'ati and Zahrā Rahnavard

Where Khomeini used the well-known stories of Moses and his struggles to inspire his followers or justify his policies, Ali Shari'ati, the “ideologue of the Islamic Revolution,” went further and attempted to construct an entire ideological edifice around the eternal struggle between good and evil. He returns to this theme in many of his speeches and writings, providing a striking confirmation of Feuer's observation that “[a]n ideology is never content with the narrative of the myth; the drama must be shown to be deducible from the laws of existence itself.”¹²¹ Moses and Pharaoh play only a minor role in this eternal conflict, however—the archetypal struggle between oppressors and oppressed, between exploiter and exploited, being that between Cain and Abel.¹²² The two brothers stand at the beginning of two long lines of antagonistic figures, each respectively leading the forces of good and evil in their time. In a talk on Imam Husayn, Shari'ati observed that

[i]n these two alignments, which have always and everywhere been at war with each other—right and wrong, justice and injustice, monotheism and polytheism, faith and disbelief, people and nobles, and deprived (*mostaz'af*) and arrogant (*mostakbar*), two chains of inheritance assume the leadership of the two factions: Abel and Cain, Abraham and Nimrod, Moses and Pharaoh, John [the Baptist] and Herodius, Jesus and Caesar, Muhammad and Quraysh ... Ali and Mu'awiya, ... and now, Husayn and Yazid!¹²³

The term Shari'ati used to signify “deprived”—*mostaz'af/mustad'af*—derives from the story of Moses as told in the Koran, where we read (28:4) that Pharaoh split his people into different groups and impoverished one of them, but it is this group that is destined to inherit Pharaoh's might. Elsewhere in the Koran, those who have been impoverished/deprived are designated as *mustad'af*, pronounced *mostaz'af* in Persian.¹²⁴ Shari'ati's revival of the term caught on after the revolution, as we will see.

Shari'ati explicates the nature of oppression and injustice by dividing it into three complementary types. Throughout history, he claims, Cain has had three faces: worldly ruler, economic ruler, and religious ruler. The prophets, “all of whom have been shepherds or industrial workers,” have risen against these powers. In the case of Moses, these three powers were personified in Pharaoh, Qarun, and Bal'am-e Ba'ur.¹²⁵ Like Cain and Abel, Balaam does not appear in the Koran, where in 40:23-24 we read: “We sent Moses with Our signs and clear authority to Pharaoh, Haman, and Qarun.” However, some Koranic commentaries do mention him.¹²⁶

If Shari'ati referred to Moses only in passing and as one example of the never-ending struggle between oppressors and oppressed, one of his followers, Zahrā Rahnavard,¹²⁷ devoted an entire book, entitled *Accompanying the Uprising of Moses*, to explicating the contemporary relevance of Moses.¹²⁸ The book's account of the life of Moses essentially follows the sequence of events as set forth in the *Qisas al-anbiyā'* literature, in the sense that a narrative of the life of Moses is constructed using verses from the Koran which are then connected with passages that explain the significance of the verse and fill in gaps in the story.¹²⁹

The ideological function of the book is clearly noticeable when Rahnavard's choice of words betokens contemporary preoccupations or conceptualizations, or when she draws inferences about the present era. The jargon of the Iranian Left leaves traces, such as "When Moses rebelled he was still young and did not have a clear class basis, and when he was chosen as a prophet he was a toiler."¹³⁰ The urban geography of Tehran, with its poor, insalubrious, and hot South and its affluent, Westernized, and cooler North, comes to mind when we read that Moses sometimes visited the oppressed people in the "depths of the poorest parts of the city," while at other times, dressed in the best clothes, he would "socialize with his guardians in the most well-equipped houses in the most climatically pleasant parts of the city."¹³¹ The Iranian revolutionaries' obsession with the incessant fun the country's elites were believed to be having¹³² finds a reflection in the assertion that when Moses witnessed the reveling of the Pharaonians, he would be reminded of his weak and oppressed compatriots.¹³³ Consequently, he fought for "all the toilers of Egypt" and left the company of the "palace dwellers."¹³⁴ Rahnavard agrees with Shari'ati that Pharaonic oppression had three faces, but she identifies the third member of this unholy trinity as the Koranic Hāmān, who for her represents the bureaucracy.¹³⁵ The collectivism and anti-capitalism of the Iranian revolutionaries is in evidence when she asserts that Pharaoh and his supporters among the nobility had "profiteering and individualist values."¹³⁶

Explicit references to the present age are rare in the book, and when they occur they are lodged in long footnotes and do not involve Iran. The original migration of the Israelites from Canaan to Egypt, and the role they played in the flourishing of Egyptian civilization, reminds her of Blacks in decadent America, who are accepting Islam in growing numbers.¹³⁷ Jews, for their part, had become corrupted owing to the long time they spent among the Egyptians, and they proved incapable of remedying their mental, practical, and historical shortcomings even when they were guided by Moses and other prophets. They bequeathed their corruption to their offspring, as evidenced by their opposition to the Prophet Muhammad. She concludes: "You see how their rich and powerful press the economic and exploitative pulse with their forcible fingers, and perhaps the Koran's discussion of the Jews can reveal to us the permanent rules (*qavā'id*) [that govern] them and

their role in history.”¹³⁸ Finally, the plagues that God sent down on the Egyptians are likened to the air pollution that causes so much illness in the “decadent and developed societies”¹³⁹—in contrast, one assumes, to the pristine air of Tehran.

Lest it be thought that this attempt to fit an ancient legend into the Procrustean bed of contemporary political relevance is unique to the intellectually confused imagery of revolutionary Third World ideologues, let it be pointed out that a respected American political scientist (and past president of the American Political Science Association), Aaron Wildavsky, published a thick volume in which he analyzed what he thought one could learn regarding leadership from the Bible’s tales about Moses.¹⁴⁰

The excerpts given above show that while Khomeini’s rhetoric uses the struggle between Moses and Pharaoh unselfconsciously and spontaneously—“naively”—Shari’ati and Rahnavard represent a “sentimental” reading of the myth of Moses and Pharaoh. The story of Moses and his conflict with Pharaoh is harnessed to “re-create” the “state of unity and harmony” between traditional beliefs and the modern world—a harmony that, according to these believers, the changing lifestyles of the middle class and the ideological challenges of the Marxist Left had destroyed.

The Social Reenactment of the Myth: The Revolution of 1978–79

Against the background of such writings as those we’ve presented above, the invocation of Moses and Pharaoh during the revolution of 1978 came naturally. Posters, pamphlets, and tracts appeared that called Khomeini the “Moses of the Age.”¹⁴¹ Rhymed slogans and graffiti played a major role in the revolution of 1978–79, most of the former being made up by a rhymester who later came to be called “minister of slogans.” Two relevant wall slogans were: “If Pharaoh and his troops, and if the Qurayshi nobles were not able to prevail over the followers of Allah, the Shah and his executioners will not be victorious over us either,” and, when the Shah had left, “Finally we have been able to bring Pharaoh and the Pharaonians to their knees.” And when the Shah settled in Egypt upon his departure from Iran, one rhymed slogan declared:

*Beh hemmat-e Khomeini Pahlavi darbedar shod
Fer'on-e qarn-e bistom dar Mesr mostaqarr shod.*

By the effort of Khomeini, Pahlavi has become homeless
The Pharaoh of the twentieth century has settled in Egypt.¹⁴²

Having dispatched one Pharaoh to exile, Khomeini turned his attention to the one next-door to Iran: Addressing the members of the High Majlis of the Islamic revolution of Iraq, a Shiite exile organization based in Iran, Khomeini urged them, on September 20, 1983, to follow the example of Moses, who rebelled against the Pharaoh to establish justice rather than to establish his own rule¹⁴³—advice not devoid of a certain irony, given the establishment of clerical rule in Iran a few years earlier.

A decade later, Moses became relevant to Iran's neighbor to the East. In the early 1990s, a little book entitled *Lessons for Struggle from the Uprising of Moses* was published in Qom; it is dedicated to the “Moses of the age, the idol-smasher of the century, the Imam of the Umma, the great Khomeini, in the light of whose teachings we have found true Islam again.”¹⁴⁴ The first paragraph of the book explains the contemporary relevance of the story of Moses, which is called the “greatest model for all revolutionary and jihadist (*jehādgar*) people.” The “tactics (*tāktik*) used by the shepherd against the Pharaoh,” it maintains, “are so novel and instructive that it would seem that the Koran lays out the fighting methods for today.” The book's aim, it proclaims, is to show that the methods and tactics used by Moses against the tyrannical Shah [*sic*] of Egypt can inspire Afghans who are fighting a jihad against the Pharaonic and Marxist regime in Afghanistan and provide a rebuttal to those who claim that Islam does not possess the science of how to fight against corrupt regimes and who insist that the methods of struggle have to be learned from the Marxists.¹⁴⁵ To clinch the point, the author writes that although the Pharaoh mentioned in the Koran was probably Ramses II or his son Merenptah, his name is never mentioned, and that is because “God wanted to make us understand that He does not care about persons, and that what matters is the regime (*rezhim*), and that one has to struggle against all Pharaonic political systems.”¹⁴⁶

While the invocation of Moses and Pharaoh has become rare in the revolutionary discourse of the Islamic Republic, it did reappear in the mid-1990s, when it was retroactively applied to Imam Musa Sadr (1929–78), the charismatic leader of Lebanon's Shiites, who mysteriously disappeared in Libya in 1978.¹⁴⁷ In a book entitled *Imam Musa Sadr, the Hope of the Deprived*, the author claims that Ayatollah Sadr al-Din Sadr named his son Musa, “a beautiful name that reminds every human being of struggle against oppression and opposition to *Tāghut*,” because he was born in 1929, a time when people were subjected to “the savage behavior of the Pharaonians of the age” (i.e., Reza Shah's regime).¹⁴⁸ Here we reach the height of sentimental myth appropriation, for the fact of the matter is that Ayatollah Sadr al-Din Sadr was far more likely, as a Twelver Shiite cleric, to name his son after the seventh Twelver Shiite Imam, Musā al-Kāzim, than after the prophet of the same name. In fact, Sadr, a longtime resident of Mashhad, named his three sons Reza,

Musa, and Ali, the three elements of the name of the eighth Twelver Shiite Imam, Ali b. Musā al-Ridā/Rezā, who is buried in Mashhad.¹⁴⁹

The Institutional Reenactment of the Myth: The Islamic Republic of Iran

Although the biblical Moses did not live to see his people establish their rule in the Holy Land, the figure of Moses and the idea of theocracy are closely intertwined in Western thought.¹⁵⁰ The establishment of the “Islamic Republic,” the first theocracy of modern times, by Ayatollah Khomeini, the “Moses of the age,” seems to indicate that this intertwining occurs outside the Judeo-Christian West as well.

The term “theocracy” itself was coined around 94 CE by the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, who noted that “some have entrusted the power of government to monarchies, others to the rule of the few, others again to the masses. But our legislator took no notice of any of these, but instituted the government as what one might call – to force an expression – a ‘theocracy,’ ascribing to God the rule and power.” What this means in practice is spelled out later in the text:

For us, who are convinced that the law was originally laid down in accordance with God’s will, it would not be pious to fail to maintain it. What part of it would one change? What finer law could one invent? What could one bring from elsewhere as an improvement? What about the whole structure of the constitution? What could be finer and more just than [a structure] that had made God governor of the universe, that commits to the priests in concert the management of the most important matters, and, in turn, has entrusted to the high priest of all the governance of the other priests?” The priests exercise “close supervision of the law and of the other life-habits; for the priests have been appointed as general overseers, as judges in disputes, and with responsibility for punishing those condemned.”¹⁵¹

Roughly nineteen centuries after Josephus, Khomeini echoed these ideas when he wrote in his “Islamic Government”: “The fundamental difference between Islamic government ... and constitutional monarchies and republics ... is this: Whereas the representatives of the people or the monarch in such regimes engage in legislation, in Islam the legislative power and competence to establish laws belong exclusively to God Almighty.” Since “God’s laws were not revealed merely for the time of the Prophet, only to be abandoned thereafter,” it follows that “Islamic government is a government of law.” And as rulers should ideally know the law they are supposed to apply, “the true rulers are the [ulema] themselves,” and they must, among other things, also “attend to the penal provisions of Islam.”¹⁵²

The resemblance between the formulations of Josephus, who was a priest himself, and those of Khomeini, a member of the ulema, is not accidental, of course. As a Jew, Josephus considered the priests (*kohanim*) to be by definition successors of Aaron, while, as we saw earlier, Khomeini argued that the ulema fulfill the same role as rulers as the prophets did, among them Moses and Aaron.¹⁵³ The parallels do not end there. The Iranian constitution of 1979, as amended in 1989, provided for an “Islamic Republic,” a term reminiscent of the “theocratic republic” that Baruch Spinoza thought encapsulated the constitutional form of the Jewish ideal of theocracy.¹⁵⁴ Both are characterized by priestly/ulema oversight of a political system in which some administrative functions are carried out by laymen.

After the triumph of the revolution, the vocabulary of the Koran became a prominent part of the new regime’s jargon. Perhaps to preempt their leftist rivals, whose discourse spoke of “exploitation” and gave great prominence to the “toiling masses,” the Islamists adopted the term *mostaz’af*, which had been popularized by Shari’ati, to designate the poor—among whom, to the disappointment of the Left, they found their power base. Expropriated companies were combined into a holding and given to the newly established “Mostazafan Foundation,” which now controls about a fourth of Iran’s economy.¹⁵⁵ The perpetrators of *istid’āf*—the old elite—were given the designation *tāghuti*, from *tāghut*,¹⁵⁶ which means “an idol, a demon, or any object worshipped (excepting God), particularly an ancient idol in Mecca.” Internationally, the word *istikbār* (arrogance) came to denote imperialism and has been applied to the United States.

Conclusion

The Protestant Pilgrim Fathers and the Catholic friar Savonarola, Afrikaner trekkers and anti-apartheid liberation theologians, the founders of the State of Israel and three decades later those of the Islamic Republic: They were all inspired, to a greater or lesser degree, by the myth of Moses and Pharaoh. That a myth should be so versatile need not astonish, since, as Roger Caillois reminds us, it is in the very nature of myths that they respond to the most diverse entreaties.¹⁵⁷

The ubiquity of the Mosaic myth has been a mixed blessing for humanity, however. In the words of the Dutch religious historian Anton Weiler, “Exodus has, in the course of Christian history, proved to be not only a paradigm that gives hope, but also one that is very dangerous.”¹⁵⁸ In light of the plight of the Palestinians and that of the millions of Iranians driven into exile by the Iranian revolution, to say nothing of the many others who have been persecuted inside Iran for disagreeing with the “Moses of the age” or his legacy, this statement is valid with respect to Jewish and Muslim history as well.¹⁵⁹

Three decades after the Islamic revolution, millions of Iranians risked their lives in the summer of 2009 to demonstrate against what they believed to be an egregiously rigged presidential election when Zahrā Rahnavard's husband, Mir Hosein Musavi, who had caught the imagination of younger Iranians by promising more respect for the same individualist values his wife had denounced in her book on Moses, was declared the loser by an implausibly large margin. This popular movement has been widely (and correctly) interpreted as a protest against the increasingly oppressive policies of the regime since 2004. But in a sense it was also a logical result of the revolution itself, for it was the successful outcome of the 1978–79 revolution that proved to the citizenry that they were capable of taking their destiny into their own hands. One is reminded here of Harvey Cox calling the Exodus event a “secularization of politics” because it was “an act of insurrection against a duly constituted monarch, a pharaoh whose relationship to the sun-god Re constituted his claim to political sovereignty” and because it “symbolized the deliverance of man out of a sacral-political order and into history and social change, out of religiously legitimated monarchs and into a world where political leadership would be based on power gained by the capacity to accomplish specific social objectives.”¹⁶⁰

The last Shah claimed divine grace as a source of legitimacy,¹⁶¹ and the Islamic Republic put an end to his rule. Far from proclaiming itself a messianic movement, however, the revolution of 1978–79 promised to create a more just system of government here and now, while believers waited for the Mahdi to manifest himself. Khomeini was quite explicit about this: He argued that since the reasons for the twelfth Imam's occultation were beyond human understanding,¹⁶² believers should not wait for him to reveal himself but should try to establish Islamic government even in his absence.¹⁶³ Of the political quietism of a leading cleric (possibly Grand Ayatollah Khui?), to whom Khomeini ascribed the following argument—“If the Imam of the Age ... thinks it necessary, he will come. I cannot claim to be more concerned for Islam than he is; so if the Imam sees what is happening, let him come himself to remedy our affairs! Why should I do anything?”—Khomeini said in 1978 that it was “the logic of people who wanted to avoid responsibility.”¹⁶⁴ As people *took* responsibility, a dynamic was unleashed which, despite the constitutionally mandated oversight of the political system by the clergy, had the unanticipated consequence of leading to a certain “secularization” of politics, where “secularization” denotes not a waning of religious belief per se but, to recall Harvey Cox's formulation, the “deliverance of man out of a sacral-political order and into history and social change.”¹⁶⁵ Thirty years after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, this dynamic took a new turn.

In a country of 70 million people, however, a variety of political and religious sensibilities coexist and compete, and a civil rights movement keen on rolling

back theocracy is not, therefore, the only consequence of the disenchantment with clerical rule; there are other options, other responses. Exodus, to quote Michael Walzer one last time, “begins with a concrete evil and ends (or doesn’t quite end) with a partial success. ... So far is the end of the story from the end of days that there is more than enough room for the backsliding and renewed oppression that repeatedly *transform the hope of Exodus into messianic fantasy*. Messianism has its origins in disappointment.”¹⁶⁶ It is precisely the multiple disappointments that Iranians have experienced over the last three decades, as clerical theocrats who promised a more just and moral society became themselves corrupt and oppressive, that go a long way toward explaining the rise in messianic expectations among many Twelver Shiites in Iran. Today the Jamkaran Mosque south of Tehran, believed to be the place where the twelfth Imam will reappear any day,¹⁶⁷ attracts more visitors than Khomeini’s nearby mausoleum.¹⁶⁸ But that is another story.

Endnotes

I would like to thank Kamran Aghaie, Patrice Brodeur, Nick Burk, Wade Cutler, William Graham, Sohail Hashmi, S. Akbar Hyder, Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, James McCann, Hassan Mneimneh, Vera Moreen, Roy P. Mottahedeh, Haggai Ram, Cyrus Schayegh, Hossein Ziai, two anonymous readers, and especially Robert Cohen for their numerous ideas, insights, and corrections.

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- 8 Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), pp. 5–6. Emphasis in original.
- 9 See T. L. Thompson, "The Joseph and Moses Narratives: Historical Reconstructions of the Narratives," in *Israelite and Judaeon History*, ed. J. H. Hayes and J. M. Miller (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1977), pp. 149–66.
- 10 Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: or, Cosmos and History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 42–44.

- 11 Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), p. 38.
- 12 Lord Raglan [Fitzroy Richard Somerset, 4th Baron Raglan], *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth, and Drama* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956, first published 1936), pp. 173–85. In fact, the adherence of Moses to the ideal-typical Oedipus is equaled only by Theseus, and surpassed by none. These parallels need not disconcert all but the most literal-minded believers, for, as medieval scholastics used to say, *Quidquid recipitur modo recipientis recipitur*: “Whatever is received is received in the manner of the recipient,” and the “manner of the recipient” in ancient times was informed by a mythological understanding of the world.
- 13 Roger Caillois, *Le mythe et l’homme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938, 1987), p. 154.
- 14 See Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi’i Islam* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 28–33, 161–71, 238–43; and Heinz Halm, *Shi’a Islam: From Religion to Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 1997), pp. 8–21, 28–30, and 41–85.
- 15 As the term is used by Paul J. Alexander in “Medieval Apocalypses as Historical Sources,” *The American Historical Review* 73:4 (April 1968) p. 1002.
- 16 Saïd Amir Arjomand, “Millennial Beliefs, Hierocratic Authority, and Revolution in Shi’ite Iran,” in *The Political Dimensions of Religion*, ed. Saïd Amir Arjomand (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 219–39. Although a few zealots suggested sotto voce that Khomeini might be the hidden Imam who had finally come out of occultation, he himself considered this suggestion too absurd to dignify with a denial.
- 17 Caillois, *Le mythe et l’homme*, p. 29.
- 18 Though his birthday on the fifteenth of Sha’ban is an annual occasion of great joy among the Twelver Shiites in Iran, this holiday was introduced only in the nineteenth century.
- 19 These processions resemble those of Christian penitents on Good Friday and may have Christian origins. See Yitzhak Nakash, “An Attempt to Trace the Origin of the Rituals of ‘Āshūrā,” *Die Welt des Islams* 33:2 (November 1993), pp. 161–81.
- 20 Donald A. Brane, “Shi’i martyr conscience and the Iranian Revolution,” *Encounter* 45 (Autumn 1982), pp. 377–93; Abdolrahman Mahdjoub, “La manifestation, le martyre: Du révolutionnaire à l’étatique,” *Peuples Méditerranéens* 29 (1984), pp. 17–40; Farhad Khosrowkhavar, “Le martyre révolutionnaire en Iran,” *Social Compass*, 43:1 (March 1996), pp. 83–100; and Farhad Khosrowkhavar, *L’islamisme et la mort: Le martyre révolutionnaire en Iran* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1995).

- 21 See *Majmu'eh-ye maqālāt-e kongereh-ye beyn al-melali-e Emām Khomeyni (S) va farhang-e 'āshurā*, 3 vols. (Tehran: Mo'asseseh-ye Nashr-e Āsār-e Emām Khomeyni, 1374–75 [1995–97]).
- 22 Michael M. J. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).
- 23 On revolutionary posters, see Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iranian* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).
- 24 Fischer, *Iran*, pp. 232–39.
- 25 Werner Schmucker, "Iranische Märtyrertestamente," *Welt des Islams* 27 (1987), pp. 185–249; Dawud Gholamasad, "Weltanschauliche und sozialpsychologische Aspekte der iranischen Kriegsführung," *Orient* 30 (1989), pp. 557–69, 653–54; and Haggay Ram, *Myth and Mobilization in Revolutionary Iran: The Use of the Friday Congregational Sermon* (Washington, DC: The American University Press, 1994).
- 26 Haggay Ram, "The Myth of the Early Islamic Government: The Legitimization of the Islamic Regime," in *Iranian Studies* 24:1–4 (1991), pp. 37–54.
- 27 Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, p. 30. Emphasis added.
- 28 Isaiah Berlin, "The 'Naïveté' of Verdi," in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), pp. 287–95. Berlin borrowed this distinction from Friedrich Schiller, who had applied it only to poets. Schiller's ideas are contained in his essay "Über Naive und Sentimentalische Dichtung," in *Schillers Werke*, vol. 10, ed. Ernst Jenny (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1946), pp. 208–321.
- 29 Roger Hausheer, "Introduction" to Berlin, *Against the Current*, p. xlvii.
- 30 For critical analyses of Shari'ati, see Shahrough Akhavi, "Shariati's Social Thought," in *Religion and Politics in Iran*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 125–44; Ali Reza Sheikholeslami, "From Religious Accommodation to Religious Revolution: The Transformation of Shi'ism in Iran," in *The State, Religion, and Ethnic Politics: Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan*, ed. Ali Banuazizi and Myron Weiner (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1986), esp. pp. 248–49; H. E. Chehabi, *Iranian Politics and Religious Modernism: The Liberation Movement of Iran under the Shah and Khomeini* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1990), pp. 68–84 and 204–7; and Hamid Dabashi *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), pp. 102–46. For a more sympathetic analysis, see Ali Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of Ali Shari'ati* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998).

- 31 The fall from “the primordial state of unity and harmony” on the part of ideologues like Ali Shari’ati is magisterially analyzed by the Iranian philosopher Daryush Shayegan in a number of works. See his *Qu’est-ce qu’une révolution religieuse?* (Paris: Les Presses d’aujourd’hui, 1982); *Cultural Schizophrenia: Islamic Societies Confronting the West* (London: Saqi, 1992); and *Sous les ciels du monde: Entretiens avec Ramin Jahanbegloo* (Paris: Editions du Felin, 1992).
- 32 See H. Cazelles et al., *Moïse: L’homme de l’alliance* (Tournai: Desclée, 1955).
- 33 For a good introduction to the problems involved, see Brannon M. Wheeler, *Moses in the Quran and Islamic Exegesis* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2002), “Introduction.” This book does not analyze the story of Moses’s confrontation with Pharaoh, however.
- 34 For a discussion of the association between the Exodus and Passover, see Irving Greenberg, “Judaism as an Exodus Religion: Passover,” chapter 2 in *The Jewish Way: Living the Holidays* (New York: Summit, 1988). See also footnote 159, below.
- 35 See, for instance, Pinchas Lapide, “Exodus in the Jewish Tradition,” in *Exodus: A Lasting Paradigm*, ed. Bas van Iersel and Anton Weiler (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987), pp. 47–55.
- 36 Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, p. 6. See also pp. 137–38.
- 37 Anita Shapira, “Ben-Gurion and the Bible: The Forging of an Historical Narrative?” *Middle Eastern Studies* 33:4 (1997), pp. 654, 659. However, other Zionists “devoted substantial place” in their mythology to the Maccabean revolt and the Hasmonean wars and the later uprisings against the Romans.” (Ibid., p. 658). Cf. Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), where among all the foundational myths of Zionism the Exodus is given very little room. The same is true in Nurith Gertz, *Myths in Israeli Culture* (London: Frank Cass, 2000).
- 38 Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, pp. 136–41.
- 39 Tudor Parfitt, *Operation Moses: The Untold Story of the Secret Exodus of the Falasha from Ethiopia* (Briarcliff Manor, NY: Stein & Day, 1985). Two years later another writer averred that the Ethiopian Jews were “remnants of one of the lost tribes of Israel” who were determined “to go back to their ancestral home.” Claire Safran, *Secret Exodus* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987), p. ix. Continuing the practice of naming resettlement schemes after biblical figures, there was subsequently an “Operation Solomon” and even an “Operation Joshua.” See Stephen Spector, *Operation Solomon: The Daring Rescue of the Ethiopian Jews* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 13. One might add a third and more cynical invocation of the Mosaic myth. An example would be Leon Uris’s novel *Exodus*, which depicts Arabs, in Wesley Kort’s analysis, as “unruly, undisciplined, dirty, and

unproductive,” and ascribes to the Jewish settlers the task of establishing a society that will “guard His laws, which are the cornerstone of man’s moral existence.” To dissociate prejudice from Jewish characters in the novel, it is an American Christian, Kitty, who makes the most racist statements about Arabs while complimenting the settlers. See Wesley Kort, “Exodus and its Biblical Paradigm,” in van Iersel and Weiler, *Exodus*, esp. pp. 76–78; see also Aziz S. Sahwell, *Exodus: A Distortion of Truth* (New York: Arab Information Center, 1960).

- 40 The ethnogenesis of the Jews of Ethiopia is exceedingly complicated. For the definitive study see Steven Kaplan, *The Beta Israel (Falasha) in Ethiopia: From Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1992).
- 41 Jay Casey, “The Exodus Theme in the Book of Revelation against the Background of the New Testament,” in van Iersel and Weiler, *Exodus*, pp. 34–43.
- 42 Roberto Ridolfi, *The Life of Girolamo Savonarola*, trans. Cecil Grayson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959), p. 217. In his last year, Savonarola gave a series of sermons commonly referred to as the “Exodus sermons”; they are collected in Girolamo Savonarola, *Prediche sopra l’Esodo* (Rome: A. Belaretti, 1955–56).
- 43 John Newton, “Analysis of Programmatic Texts of Exodus Movements,” in van Iersel and Weiler, *Exodus*, p. 56.
- 44 Anton Weiler, “The Experience of Communities of Religious Refugees,” in van Iersel and Weiler, *Exodus*, p. 68.
- 45 Newton, “Analysis of Programmatic Texts of Exodus Movements,” pp. 60–62. See also Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses* (New York: Knopf, 1995).
- 46 See Melanie J. Wright, *Moses in America: The Cultural Uses of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- 47 Morgan Peoples, “Seeking a Promised Land for Freedmen: A Decade of Secret Actions by a Shreveport ‘Moses,’ 1870–1880,” *North Louisiana Historical Association Journal* 11:1 (Winter 1980), pp. 13–22. For a study of the “Kansas Exodus,” see Robert G. Athearn, *In Search of Canaan: Black Migration to Kansas, 1879–80* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1978).
- 48 E. David Cronon, *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1955).
- 49 Dave Dennis, “A Modern Day Moses,” in *Rhetoric, Religion and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954–1965*, ed. Davis W. Houck and David E. Dixon (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006).

- 50 J. Alton Templin, *Ideology on a Frontier: The Theological Foundation of Afrikaner Nationalism, 1652–1910* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), p. 33.
- 51 “If in later times analogies would be drawn between the Trek and the departure of Israel from Egypt,” however, “it was certainly not true that at the outset the Trek was conceived in terms of a long wished-for emancipation or inspired by political visions of a promised land.” André du Toit and Hermann Giliomee, eds., *Afrikaner Political Thought: Analysis and Documents, vol. 1: 1780–1850* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 200.
- 52 *Ibid.*, pp. 115, 117, 142n4, 282, 286.
- 53 *Ibid.*, pp. 99, 181, 287. President Pretorius referred to the British as a Pharaoh: *Ibid.*, pp. 87, 209.
- 54 *Ibid.*, pp. 216, 226.
- 55 Coenraad Beyers, “Laaste Lewensjare en Heengaan van President Kruger,” in *Argief-Jaarboek vir Suid-Afrikaanse Geskiedenis* 4 (1941), p. 60.
- 56 One thinks, of course, of Chief Albert Luthuli’s book *Let My People Go* (New York: World, 1969).
- 57 Hans Küng, “The Hour of Truth for South Africa,” in van Iersel and Weiler, *Exodus*, pp. xi–xii. For an overview of how black South African theologians drew on the Exodus theme in their struggle against apartheid, see Jannie Malan, “A Complement to the Exodus Motif in Theology,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 61 (December 1987), pp. 3–13.
- 58 See, in particular, Enrique Dussel, “Exodus as a Paradigm for Liberation Theology,” in van Iersel and Weiler, *Exodus*, pp. 83–92, and J. Severino Croatto, *Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom*, trans. Salvator Attanasio (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1981).
- 59 Josiah Young, “Exodus as a Paradigm for the [sic] Black Theology,” in van Iersel and Weiler, *Exodus*, pp. 93–99.
- 60 For Africa, see Jean-Marc Ela, “Une lecture africaine de l’Exode,” in *Le Cri de l’homme africain* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1980), pp. 40–51; for Latin America, see Croatto, *Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom*.
- 61 Dianne Bergant, “Exodus as a Paradigm in Feminist Theology,” in van Iersel and Weiler, *Exodus*, pp. 100–106.

- 62 One might speculate whether inhering in liberation theologians' constant invocations of "liberation" is the primitive belief that "naming" is equivalent to "creating." Cf. Caillois, *Le mythe et l'homme*, p. 48.
- 63 In "Pueblo de Diós y la liberación del hombre," *Fichas ISAL* 3/26 (1979), p. 9, as quoted in Dussel, "Exodus as a Paradigm for Liberation Theology," p. 84. Emphasis in original.
- 64 Croatto, *Exodus*, p. 26. Emphasis in original.
- 65 *Ibid.*, p. 1. This line of thought is based on what H. G. Gadamer called "the historical effect" – that is, the capacity of a human event to generate other happenings.
- 66 The origins of this propensity are still mysterious. Roger Caillois sought them in biology – see his *Le mythe et l'homme*.
- 67 See, for example, J. Loader, "Exodus, Liberation Theology and Theological Argument," *Journal of Theology of Southern Africa* 59 (July 1987), pp. 3–18.
- 68 The reference is to *Exodus* 32:25–28, where the sons of Levi are ordered to "slay every man his brother, ... his companion, ... and his neighbor" if they had taken to worshipping the golden calf, which resulted in three thousand deaths.
- 69 To get around this, George E. Mendenhall argued that the conquest of Canaan was part of a revolution against tyrannical oppression. See his "The Hebrew Conquest of Palestine," in *The Biblical Archaeologist* 25:3 (September 1962), pp. 66–67.
- 70 *The Discourses of Niccolò Machiavelli*, trans. Leslie J. Walker (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1950), p. 486.
- 71 See F. A. van Jaarsveld, "The Ideas of the Afrikaner on his Calling and Mission," in van Jaarsveld, *The Afrikaner's Interpretation of South African History* (Cape Town: Simondium, 1964). pp. 1–32, and Newton, "Analysis of Programmatic Texts of Exodus Movements," pp. 59–60.
- 72 Although, given their Leninist inspiration, one would not be surprised to read somewhere that in order to cook an omelet, Moses had to break some eggs . . .
- 73 Newton, "Analysis of Programmatic Texts of Exodus Movements," p. 62.
- 74 Roberto Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'ān and Muslim Literature* (London: Curzon, 2002).
- 75 Angelika Neuwirth, "Erzählen als kanonischer Prozeß: Die Mose-Erzählung im Wandel der Quranischen Geschichte," in *Islamstudien ohne Ende: Festschrift für*

Werner Ende zum 65. Geburtstag, ed. Rainer Brunner, Monika Gronke, Jens Peter Laut, and Ulrich Rebstock (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2002), p. 323.

- 76 See *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., s.vv. "Mūsā," "Fir'awn." On Moses, see also Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'ān*, pp. 31–35.
- 77 The similarities are as follows: Both Moses and Muhammad, but not Jesus, had ordinary births, married and had children, experienced normal deaths, were both prophets and rulers, had to emigrate as adults, gained victories over their enemies that were both moral and physical, had their revelations written down in their own lifetime, dispensed teachings that were both spiritual and legal, and had their leadership first rejected and then accepted by their people. Furthermore, it is argued, the "brethren" of the Israelites were Ishmaelites, which points to Muhammad rather than to Jesus, who was an Israelite himself and thus not one "among their brethren." H. M. Baagil, M.D., *Christian-Muslim Dialogue* (London: Dar al-Dawa Book Shop, n.d.), p. 40. This interpretation differs from the classical Jewish interpretation of this text, according to which "brethren" means specifically other Jews, thus excluding "Ishmaelites." Early Christians took the "prophet" mentioned here to mean Jesus, but contemporary Christian exegesis does not. I thank the Reverend Donald Deer for this information.
- 78 This has led to a saying in Persian (*shenidan key bovad mānand-e didan*) which connotes that being an eyewitness to something outweighs knowing about it from hearsay. It has been quoted by a number of poets, such as Ashraf al-Din al-Hoseyni (better known as Nasim-e Shomāl), who wrote: "*Mohammad didan o Musā shenidan / Shenidan key bovad mānand-e didan*" (Muhammad saw and Moses heard; hearing is not like seeing). Mohammad-Ali Haqiqat Semnāni, *Zarb al-masalhā-ye manzum-e fārsi* (Tehran: Gozāreh, 1374 [1995]), pp. 289–90.
- 79 Annemarie Schimmel, *Und Muhammad ist Sein Prophet: Die Verehrung des Propheten in der islamischen Frömmigkeit* (Munich: Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1981, 1995), pp. 91–94.
- 80 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- 81 Neuwirth, "Erzählen als kanonischer Prozeß," p. 343.
- 82 William C. Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-'Arabī's Cosmology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998), p. 53.
- 83 Eric Ormsby, "The Faith of Pharaoh: A Disputed Question in Islamic Theology," *Studia Islamica* 98/99 (2004), p. 7.
- 84 In fact, Jewish and Muslim traditions regarding Moses have fertilized each other. See A. Fodor, "The Rod of Moses in Arabic Magic," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hung* 32:1 (1978), pp. 1–21; H. Schwarzbaum, "A Jewish Moses Legend

of Islamic Provenance," in *Fields of Offerings: Studies in Honor of Raphael Patai* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1983), pp. 99–110; A. El'ad, "Some Aspects of the Islamic Traditions Regarding the Site of the Grave of Moses," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 11 (1988), pp. 1–15; and V. B. Moreen, "Moses in Muhammad's Light," *Journal of Turkish Studies* 18 (1994), pp. 185–200.

- 85 Rachel Milstein, "The Iconography of Moses in Islamic Art," *Jewish Art* 12–13 (1986/87), pp. 199–212.
- 86 Neuwirth, "Erzählen als kanonischer Prozeß," p. 327.
- 87 E. H. Enver, *The Modern Moses: A Brief Biography of M. A. Jinnah* (Karachi: Jinnah Memorial Institute, 1990).
- 88 A. H. Johns, "Let My People Go! Sayyid Qutb and the Vocation of Moses," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 1 (1990), pp. 143–70.
- 89 Gilles Kepel, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt: The Prophet and the Pharaoh*, trans. Jon Rothschild (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 191. After the assassin's execution, the Islamic Republic of Iran commemorated him with a stamp, and to this day a street in central Tehran is named after him.
- 90 Farid Esack, *But Mūsā went to Fir'aun* (Salt River: Call of Islam, 1989). The Koranic verse cited to justify negotiations is "Then go to the Pharaoh, as he has become exceedingly rebellious. Speak to him gently. He may possibly take heed or may come to have fear" (20:43–44).
- 91 Farid Esack, personal communication.
- 92 Farid Esack, "The Exodus Paradigm in the Qur'ān in the Light of Re-interpretative Islamic Thought in South Africa," *Islamochristiana* 17 (1992), and *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), pp. 194–206.
- 93 Cf. Richard Bell, *Origins of Islam in Its Christian Environment* (London: Frank Cass, 1968), p. 123.
- 94 Adherents of the third branch of Islam, whose adepts live in Oman, Zanzibar, and the Mزاب region of Algeria.
- 95 For instance, in his seminal defense of constitutionalism, Ayatollah Muhammad-Husayn Na'ini (1860–1936) refers to Pharaoh repeatedly as the symbol of despotism. Ayatollah Mohammad-Husayn Nā'ini, *Tanbih al-umma wa tanzih al-milla, yā hokumat az nazar-e eslām* (Tehran: Sherkat-e Sahāmi-ye Enteshār, n.d.), pp. 4, 65, 84, 125.

- 96 See, for instance, al-Shaykh al-Sadduq, *al-Hidāya* (Qom: Mu'assisa al-Imām al-Hādī, 1418 [1997–98]), p. 160, and al-Shaykh al-Tusi, *al-Amāli* (Qom: Dār al-thiqāfa li 'atbā' a wa l-nasr wa l-tawzi', 1414 [1993–94]), pp. 556–57. The analogy can be observed in daily life as well: Iranian Jews frequently swear by Moses and Aaron as Muslims do by Muhammad and Ali. See Sorour S. Soroudi, "Judeo-Persian Religious Oath Formulas as Compared with Non-Jewish Iranian Traditions," in *Persian Literature and Judeo-Persian Culture: The Collected Writings of Sorour S. Soroudi*, ed. H. E. Chehabi (Boston: Ilex Foundation and Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 2010), p. 289.
- 97 On whom see Alice C. Hunsberger, *Nasir Khusraw, The Ruby of Badakhshan: A Portrait of the Persian Poet, Traveller, and Philosopher* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001).
- 98 *Loghatnāmeḥ-ye Dehkhodā*, 1st edition, vol. 46, s.v. "Musā," p. 80.
- 99 Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 79. The names Shabbar and Shabbir do not appear in the Koran and seem to belong to Islamic folk tradition.
- 100 One of the most popular prayers during Muharram is *Ziyārat-e Vāres* (Prayer of the Heir), where Husayn is successively saluted as heir to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, Ali, Hasan, and Fatima.
- 101 See Abd al-Ali Bāzargān, *Dar sāyeh-ye sarv-e āzādi* (Tehran: Enteshār, 1378 [1999]), pp. 213–15, for a contemporary rendering of the connection.
- 102 It is noteworthy that in his study of the Sunni Sayyid Qutb, Olivier Carré surmised that for Qutb, Nasser was a Yazid, showing the power of the Kerbala paradigm even among Sunnis. See his *Mystique et politique: Lecture révolutionnaire du Coran par Sayyid Qutb, frère musulman radical* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1984), pp. 125, 137.
- 103 Josh does not stand alone. For an attempt to read Mao Zedong in terms of Moses, see Ita Sheres and Arthur Springer, "Moses, Mao, and the Messiah: The Politics of Redemption," *The Centennial Review* 17:4 (Fall 1973), pp. 379–99.
- 104 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, *Kashf al-asrār* (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Khalq, n.d.).
- 105 On Kāshāni, see Yann Richard, "Ayatollah Kashani: Precursor of the Islamic Republic?" in Keddie, *Religion and Politics in Iran*.
- 106 Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), pp. 63–64.
- 107 Ruhollah Khomeini, in a message dated 11 Jumādi I 1363 [May 4, 1944], *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. 1 (Tehran: Vezārat-e Ershād, 1361 [1983]), p. 3.

- 108 Majid Yazdi, "Patterns of Clerical Political Behavior in Postwar Iran, 1941–53," *Middle Eastern Studies* 26 (July 1990): p. 286.
- 109 "The Afternoon of Ashura," in *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, translated and annotated by Hamid Algar (Berkeley, CA: Mizan, 1981), pp. 178, 179.
- 110 On Khomeini's doctrine, see Hamid Enayat, "Iran: Khomeini's Concept of the Guardianship of the Jurisconsult," in *Islam in the Political Process*, ed. James Piscatori (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
- 111 Hamid Dabashi, "Early Propagation of *Wilayat-i Faqih* and Mulla Ahmad Naraqi," in *Expectation of the Millennium: Shi'ism in History*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Hamid Dabashi, and Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 288–300.
- 112 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, "Islamic Government," in Algar, *Islam and Revolution*. An earlier English translation was published in the United States under the title of *Khomeini's Mein Kampf*, showing that even in America some could not comprehend Khomeini except as an avatar of a previous archetype.
- 113 See Michael M. J. Fischer and Mehdi Abedi, *Debating Muslims: Cultural Dialogues in Postmodernity and Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), pp. 128–43, for an analysis of Khomeini's reasoning.
- 114 Khomeini, "Islamic Government," pp. 100–101, 107.
- 115 *Ibid.*, p. 134.
- 116 *Ibid.*, pp. 107–8.
- 117 *Ibid.*, pp. 219–20.
- 118 *Ibid.*, pp. 226–27.
- 119 Ruhollah Khomeini, "Message to the Iranian Nation of 6 Khordād 1350 (May 27, 1971)," *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. 1 (Tehran: Vezārat-e Ershād, 1361 [1983]), p. 173.
- 120 Ruhollah Khomeini, "Message to the Iranian nation of 20 Shahrivar 1351" (September 11, 1972), *Sahifeh-ye Nur*, vol. 1 (Tehran: Vezārat-e Ershād, 1361 [1983]), pp. 190–91.
- 121 Feuer, *Ideology and the Ideologists*, p. 17.
- 122 Cain and Abel are not named in the Koran, and Shari'ati probably got this idea from René Guénon, who elaborated on this theme in his *Le règne de la quantité et*

- les signes des temps* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), pp. 195–204. In a footnote that Shari'ati may have liked, Guénon explains that the conflict between Iran and Turan (a *leitmotif* of Iran's mythical history as contained in the *Shāhnāme*) is not ethnic but rather is due to the former being agriculturalists and the latter pastoralists. This is shown, he avers, by the common roots of "Aryan" and the Latin verb *arare* (Ibid., p. 198n1).
- 123 Ali Shari'ati, "Hoseyn vāres-e 'ālam," in *Hoseyn vāres-e 'ālam*, Majmu'eh-ye āsar 19 (Tehran: Enteshārāt-e Qalam, 1361 [1982]), p. 17.
- 124 See R. B. Serjeant, "The Da'if and the Mustad'af and the Status Accorded Them in the Qur'an," *Journal for Islamic Studies* 7 (1987), pp. 32–47.
- 125 Ali Shari'ati, "Binesh-e tārikhi-ye shi'eh," in *Hoseyn vāres-e ālam*, Majmu'eh-ye asar 19 (Tehran: Enteshārāt-e Qalam, 1361 [1982]), pp. 242–43.
- 126 See *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., s.v. "Bal'am," and Fred Leemhuis, "Bal'am in Early Quranic Commentaries," in *The Prestige of the Pagan Prophet Balaam in Judaism, Early Christianity and Islam*, ed. George H. van Kooten and Jacques van Ruiten (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2008), pp. 303–8.
- 127 Zahrā Rahnavard became an Islamist in the 1970s; between 1998 and 2006 she was president of al-Zahrā University.
- 128 Zahrā Rahnavard, *Hamrāh bā qiyām-e Musā*, new ed. (Houston: Book Distribution Center, 1356 [1977]).
- 129 Rahnavard does not reference any *Qisas* work but refers often to the *Tafsir al-Mizān* of 'Allāmeḥ Tabātabā'i.
- 130 Rahnavard, *Hamrāh bā qiyām-e Musā*, p. 13n5.
- 131 Ibid., p. 23.
- 132 Cf. Savonarola's condemnation of Florentine "vanities," which he likened to the Egyptians' "luxuries." Quoted in Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, p. 34.
- 133 Rahnavard, *Hamrāh bā qiyām-e Musā*, p. 26.
- 134 Ibid., pp. 80, 81.
- 135 Ibid., p. 98.
- 136 Ibid., p. 61.
- 137 Ibid., p. 1n1.

- 138 Ibid., p. 11n4.
- 139 Ibid., p. 110n105.
- 140 Aaron Wildavsky, *The Nursing Father: Moses as a Political Leader* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1984).
- 141 In something of a sideshow to the revolution, Jews, who had much to fear, legitimized their status in Iranian society by emphasizing that they were followers of Moses. On occasion they were advised by sympathetic Muslim activists who helped them draft pro-revolutionary pamphlets in a language that Muslim revolutionaries would recognize as being in a kindred spirit. I have this information from Professor Mohieddīn Mesbahi, who was himself involved in Shiraz. Personal communication, February 8, 2000, Oxford.
- 142 *Farhang-e she'ārha-ye enqelāb-e eslāmi* (Tehran: Markaz-e Asnād-e Enqelāb-e Eslāmi, 1379 [2000]), pp. 364, 217, and 46, respectively.
- 143 *Sahifeh-ye nur*, vol. 18 (Tehran: Vezārat-e Ershād, 1986), pp. 113–14.
- 144 Hoseyn-Ali Yazdāni, *Dars-e mobārezeh az qiyām-e Hazrat-e Musā* (Qom: Daftar-e Enteshārāt-e Eslāmi, 1994), p. 4.
- 145 Ibid., pp. 6–7.
- 146 Ibid., pp. 84–85.
- 147 Fouad Ajami, *The Vanished Imam* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).
- 148 Abd al-Rahim Abāzari, *Emām Musā Sadr: omīd-e mahrumān* (Tehran: Sazemān-e Tablighāt-e Eslāmi, 1374 [1995]), pp. 18–19.
- 149 Personal e-mail message from Professor Hossein Modarressi of Princeton University, November 19, 2009.
- 150 See Dr. Adolf Jacobus, *Der Gottesstaat* (Berlin: C.A. Schwetschke, 1923), pp. 29–36, and Ernst Michael Dörrfuss, *Mose in den Chronikbüchern: Garant theokratischer Zukunftserwartung* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1994).
- 151 Steve Mason, ed., *Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary*, vol. 10: *Against Apion*, trans. John M. G. Barclay (with commentary) (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 261–63; 273–75, 294. Brackets in original.
- 152 Khomeini, “Islamic Government,” pp. 55, 41, 56, 60, 63.
- 153 On Aaron as a Muslim prophet, see *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new ed., s.v. “Hārūn.”

- 154 Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, in *The Chief Works*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1951), chap. 17.
- 155 See Houshang Amir-Ahmadi, "Bonyads," *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, vol. 4 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), and Suzanne Maloney, "Agents or Obstacles? Parastatal Foundations and Challenges for Iranian Development," in *The Economy of Iran: Dilemmas of an Islamic State*, ed. Parvin Alizadeh (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), pp. 145–76.
- 156 Two etymologies have been proposed for this word. One would derive it from the root t-gh-y, of which the derivatives *tughyān* (rebellion, sedition) and *tāghī* (rebel, tyrant) are used in Persian. The other etymology derives the word from the Egyptian god Thot.
- 157 "Le mythe ... répond par sa nature aux plus diverses sollicitations." Caillois, *Le mythe et l'homme*, p. 18.
- 158 Weiler, "The Experience of Communities of Religious Refugees," in van Iersel and Weiler, *Exodus*, p. 71.
- 159 For a suggestive meditation on how Passover has been used in Israel to "other" Arabs, see Adi Ophir, "From Pharaoh to Saddam Hussein: The Reproduction of the Other in the Passover Haggadah," in *The Other in Jewish Thought and History: Constructions of Jewish Culture and Identity*, ed. Laurence J. Silberstein and Robert L. Cohn (New York: New York University Press, 1994), pp. 205–35.
- 160 Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 25–26.
- 161 Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi did not make use of the Qajar title "Shadow of God" (*Zellollāh/Dhill Allāh*), but the pre-Islamic concept of divine grace, *fareh-e izadi*, was often used in official rhetoric, although its application to him was more often implied than stated; it was triumphantly spelled out in all its historical inevitability a year before the monarchy collapsed. See Pio Filippani-Ronconi, "The Tradition of Sacred Kingship in Iran," in *Iran under the Pahlavis*, ed. George Lenczowski (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1978), pp. 51–83.
- 162 For a discussion of this concept, see Jassim M. Hussain, *The Occultation of the Twelfth Imam* (London: Muhammadi Trust, 1982).
- 163 Sabine Schmidtke, "Modern Modifications in the Shī'i Doctrine of the Expectation of the Mahdi (*Intizār al-Mahdi*): The Case of Khumaini," *Orient* 28 (1987), pp. 389–406.
- 164 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, "In Commemoration of the First Martyrs of the Revolution," in Algar, *Islam and Revolution*, p. 220.

- 165 For a discussion of this seemingly paradoxical outcome of the revolution, see Yasuki Matsunaga, "The Secularization of a *Faqih*-Headed Revolutionary Islamic State in Iran: Its Mechanism, Processes, and Prospects," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 29:3 (2009), pp. 468–82.
- 166 Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, p. 146. Emphasis added.
- 167 On the Jamkaran site, see Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, "Jamkarān et Māhān: Deux pèlerinages insolites en Iran," in *Lieux d'islam: Culte et cultures de l'Afrique à Java*, ed. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi (Paris: Éditions Autrement, 1996), pp. 154–67.
- 168 See Mariella Ourghi, *Schiitischer Messianismus und Mahdī-Glaube in der Neuzeit* (Würzburg: Ergon, 2008), pp. 205–40, and Abbas Amanat, "Messianic Aspirations in Contemporary Iran," in Amanat, *Apocalyptic Islam and Iranian Shi'ism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), pp. 221–51. On the messianism of President Mahmud Ahmadinejad, see Mohebat Ahdiyyih, "Ahmadinejad and the Mahdi," *Middle East Quarterly* (2008), pp. 27–36, and Mariella Ourghi, "'Ein Licht umgab mich ...': Die eschatologische Visionen des iranischen Präsidenten Mahmūd Ahmadīnezād," *Die Welt des Islams* 49:2 (2009), pp. 163–80.

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