Novelizing Myth in Sholem Asch's Moses

• *Vladimir Tumanov*

INTRODUCTION

SHOLEM Asch's epic novel *Moses* has been criticized for a number of shortcomings. One of the main reproaches has do with Asch's attempt to present myth as history in a serious and at times "stuffily reverential" style (Siegel 194). Leslie Fiedler compares Asch's retelling of Exodus-Deuteronomy to Thomas Mann's version of Genesis in *Joseph and his Brothers* and argues that Asch, unlike Mann, lacks the irony of Mann's approach which is essential for handling mythological material in the modern age. Fiedler maintains that Mann's novel is superior to Asch's because Mann does not try to modernize the original material by rationalizing it (Fiedler 73-4). While there is much truth in what Fiedler says about *Moses,* the contrast between Mann and Asch is not quite so clear-cut. Undoubtedly, the two authors did handle their material in radically different ways. However, both authors were writing modern realistic novels, i.e., they were dealing with a genre that demands structural coherence. And in this respect one must not overemphasize the difference between Asch's and Mann's treatment of myth.

T. Apter points out that, unlike the modern novel, myth suffers from too much precision, coherence, detail and vividness: "The form of the novel [...] with its mass of secular and particular detail, is not suited to the essentially allusive quality of myth [...]; myth — as a richly symbolic tale — actually gains effectiveness by indeterminate or many-faceted explanation [...]; profane inconsistency is irrelevant to myth" (95-96). On the other hand, inconsistency is very detrimental to the novel genre in that the modern realistic novel cannot tolerate loose ends and contradictions in the manner that myth does. This implies that any author who transforms ancient mythological material into the novel form has to infuse it with a certain amount of rationalism that is

foreign to the original. And this means that modernization is an inevitable corollary of the novelistic form when it comes to the transition from biblical hypotexts to hypertexts.[1]

In this respect both Mann and Asch confronted one of the main problems of reading the Pentateuch: source division. The Pentateuch contains contradictions and redundancies that have been explained in various ways by theologians and especially midrashic thinkers over many centuries. Why is God's mountain called Horeb in some parts of the Pentateuch (Exodus 3:1 and Deuteronomy 9:8-17) and Sinai in others (Exodus 19:2 and 34:1-2)? Why does Moses set up the Tabernacle outside the Israelite encampment (Exodus 33:7) *before* it is actually constructed on God's orders (Exodus 36)? Why does Jacob put his grandsons Ephraim and Manasseh on his lap (Genesis 48:12) even though earlier we are told that they are already young men (Genesis 47:28)? Such puzzling elements are linked to what modern biblical scholarship calls the Documentary Hypothesis. The Documentary Hypothesis is a concept that goes back to the nineteenth century when Old Testament scholars began to reject the traditional notion that the Pentateuch had been written by Moses. It was discovered that four sources or *documents* constituted the Pentateuch. The authors of these documents are known as 1) the Yahwist or J because he refers to God as Yahweh; 2) the Elohist or E because he refers to God as Elohim; 3) the Priestly writer or P because he focuses on matters of religious regulations, dogma, theology and especially the role of priests in Israelite society; and 4) the Deuteronomist or D who is responsible for most of Deuteronomy.[2]

These authors wrote at different times and with different ideological goals in mind. According to Richard Friedman, J was located in the southern Kingdom of Judah and wrote sometime between 848 and 722 B.C.E, while E lived in the northern kingdom of Israel and worked roughly between 922 and 722 B.C.E. (Friedman 87, 210). Then, sometime after 722 B.C.E., when the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians and the E text found its way to Judah with the refugees from Israel, J and E were combined into JE (Friedman 87; also cf. Noth 20-37). P wrote after JE,3 and much of his discourse is an often negative reaction to JE. This had to do with the fact that the political and theological interests of P were very different from those of JE (Friedman

188-90 and see below). After Babylonian exile, i.e., after 538 B.C.E., JE was combined with P and D into what is today known as the Pentateuch. The person who combined them is known as R for Redactor, and this combination of disparate documents and visions gave rise to many of the problem passages in the Pentateuch. To this must be added the fact that the individual authors worked with oral traditions (cf. Noth 39) which, when combined with each other or with contributions from a given author in a given document, sometimes also created certain problems of coherence, e.g., the question of the forbidden trees in J's Garden of Eden story where there appears to be oscillation between one or two trees that are off limits to humans (cf. Barr 57-60).

In light of the above, I would argue that both Mann and Asch engaged in what I call *stitching*, i.e., an attempt to stitch up the fabric of the Pentateuch by introducing links, motivation and plausibility in order to satisfy the modern reader's need for naturalizing literary narrative. Jonathan Culler's notion of *naturalization* is helpful in this connection: "To naturalize [a text] [...] is to make the text intelligible by relating it to various models of coherence [...]. [Naturalization] is an inevitable function of reading [...] The Russian formalists [...] spoke of naturalization under the heading of 'motivation' [...]" (159). Culler discusses naturalization in terms of various levels of *vraisemblance* of which the first one, referred to as The Real, can be linked to biblical stitching. The Real has to do with common sense and basic logic: "The most elementary paradigms of action are located at this level: if someone begins to laugh they will eventually stop laughing, if they set out on a journey they will either arrive or abandon the trip" (Culler 141).

It is precisely this kind of logic that Mann seeks to maintain in *Joseph and his Brothers* when he devotes a considerable amount of rationalizing effort to such questions as: 1) why Isaac acts as if nothing has happened when he blesses Jacob and sends him to find a wife in Aram (Genesis 27:46 - 28:1-9 [P's domain]) even though in the preceding chapter Isaac is shattered to find out that Jacob has tricked him by stealing Esau's birthright (Genesis 27:1-45 [J's domain]; cf. Mann 200, 216); 2) why Joseph is and is not sold by his brothers; 3) why Joseph is and is not thrown into a well by his brothers; 4) why Joseph is taken away both by

Midianite and Ishmaelite merchants; and 5) why Reuben first allows Joseph to be taken away by the merchants and then goes to rescue him from the well (Genesis 37:12-36 [J and E combined]; cf. Mann 587, 592, 598, 679). I have discussed Mann's stitching elsewhere (cf. Tumanov 1999) and will therefore devote this article to analyzing the same phenomenon in Asch's *Moses*. I intend to concentrate on three stories that deal with a recurring theme in the Pentateuch: crime and punishment in the wilderness. These stories are: the apostasy at Peor, Korah's rebellion and Miriam's challenge.

Genocide

The issue of characterization is an important one for the transition from biblical hypotext to novelistic hypertext. The sketchy outlines of mythical figures gain psychological depth as they migrate into the modern novel. We see this, for example, in Michel Tournier's *Gaspard, Melchior et Balthazar* where the barely discernible Magi from the Gospel of Matthew become fully-developed and sophisticated characters who are transformed by their journey toward the infant Jesus (cf. Tournier and Tumanov 1997). This is particularly pertinent to the figure of Moses. As Siegel puts it, "the Biblical Moses is a bare, stylized, lore-encrusted figure who at life's end proves as inscrutable as in youth. His few personal traits flash too briefly to make humanizing him easy. [...] Asch seeks for his Moses the human touches that the Bible chroniclers thought extraneous" (192). The humanization of Moses in Asch's novel revolves to a large extent around the question of motivation: reasons for actions which remain problematic in the patchwork of biblical narrative are rationalized by the author for the purpose of structural coherence. The extent to which this is essential to the norms of modern fiction is pointed out by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren: "A character must be credible—must make sense, must be able to command our belief. [...] His thoughts and actions must be coherent. If the characters in a story simply don't make sense, we have to reject the story" (173).

Asch's treatment of this question is exemplified by the way in which the holy war against Midian is dealt with in *Moses*. This is a particularly challenging episode from Numbers 31:1-54 where God orders Moses to attack the Midianites. The Israelites

kill all the men of Midian, but when Moses learns that the women are still alive, he is outraged and orders that this "over-sight" be corrected. Commenting on Numbers 31, Conrad L'Heureux writes about the "skepticism aroused by the unrealistic elements within the story itself [inter alia] [...] the conflict with older traditions of harmony between Moses and Midian (Exod 18:1-27; Num 10:28-32)" (92). We know from Exodus 3:1 that Moses's family history is tied up with the Midianites: Moses marries into a Midianite family and has two half-Midianite children by Zipporah, the daughter of Jethro, a Midianite priest. Jethro is presented as treating Moses very well, namely, he gives Moses asylum when the latter is fleeing from Egypt after having killed an Egyptian task-master (Ex 2:11-20). From Exodus 18:1-27 and Numbers 10:29-32 we learn of continuing good relations between Moses and his Midianite father-in-law when Moses becomes the leader of Israel and takes his people out of Egypt into the wilderness.

In light of all this, the unrealistic element, to which L'Heureux refers in the passage cited above, is Moses's zeal in the massacre of Midian. Moses does not hesitate for a moment when he obeys God's command to attack the Midianites, and he even appears to do more than God has asked. Whereas God orders that Midian be punished without giving any more explicit instructions, Moses makes sure that the punishment is a genocide. Now, given that in other instances Moses seeks to ward off God's wrath against people close to him (cf. Numbers 16 and below), how can Moses so easily ignore his personal involvement with Midian and his own family?

The answer has to do with the fact that the older traditions of good relations between Israel and Midian, and especially the links between Jethro's family and Moses come to us from J and E (Exod 3:1 and 18:1-27). It is no wonder that J and E do not mention the massacre of Midian by the Israelites: this genocide comes from P who is responsible for Numbers 31. This contradiction becomes the focus of a major stitching effort by Asch. To begin with Asch devotes a great deal of attention to the cause of God's order to attack Midian. According to P, God seeks to punish Midian for a specific offence, as we learn from the following remark by Moses: "Have you allowed all the women to live? [...] They were the ones who followed Balaam's advice and were the

means of turning the Israelites away from the Lord in what happened at Peor, so that a plague struck the Lord's people" (Num 31:15-18). Thus, the attack is intended to chastise the Midianites for what they have done to Israel at Peor. However, Midian's role in the Peor incident is by no means a clear-cut issue.

Baal Peor

In the hypotext the apostasy at Peor is presented in two versions which together present a puzzling picture. Numbers 1-5 is from J, and it tells how the women of Moab incite Israelite men to worship the god Baal through sacred copulation. The second version (Num 6-18) comes from P, and it offers an alternate account of the same events at Peor. Instead of many temptresses, P has only one non-Israelite woman (Kozbi) who seduces only one Israelite man (Zimri). Most noteworthy is the fact that P's temptress is not a Moabite, as in J, but a Midianite. How can the Midianites and the Moabites be to blame for the same evil done to the Israelites at the same time without some explicit link between Moab's and Midian's subversive action at Peor? The Pentateuch provides no such link, since J and P are joined only through sequential juxtaposition. This leaves the guilt of either Moab or Midian unclear, which is especially problematic with respect to Midian in light of its good relations with Israel elsewhere in the Pentateuch.

According to Friedman, P took the older tradition from J about the Moabite subversion at Baal Peor and altered it for his own political purposes. Friedman argues that P was a supporter of the Aaronid priesthood, which meant that in a number instances P wrote alternative versions of certain stories from JE in order to present Aaron in a favorable light on the one hand, and on the other hand, to downplay Moses wherever possible. The purpose was to defend the claims of the Aaronid priests against the claims of a rival priesthood: the Mushites, i.e., those who traced their ancestry back to Moses (Friedman 189-90). Thus, as Friedman argues, P has a Midianite (rather than J's Moabite) woman act as idolatrous temptress at Peor in order to implicitly besmirch Moses, since the latter was linked by established tradition to Midian by marriage (204). On the other hand, in P's account it is Phineas, the grandson of Aaron, who puts an end to the apostasy by killing the Midianite woman and the Israelite

man while the two are in each other's arms (Num 25:7-9). To reward Phineas, God promises the priesthood exclusively to the descendants of Aaron (Num 25:10-13), which is P's ultimate objective.

The point is that the addition of P's anti-Midianite account both in the apostasy at Peor in Numbers 25 and in the genocide perpetrated by Moses in Numbers 31 creates an impression of imbalance and implausibility. L'Heureux points out that in linking the massacre of Midian with the Peor incident, P was writing a midrashic text, taking up "the tradition of the 'day of Midian' (Isa 9:3; Ps 83:10), which originally pertained to the defeat of the Midianites by Gideon (Judg 6-8), and created an idealized version of this victory projected back to the time of Moses" (91-2). And in light of Friedman's idea that P picked Midian as the corrupter at Peor in order to besmirch Moses and the Mushites, the whole notion of Midian's guilt appears rather contrived and out of place.

In order to motivate Moses's willingness to commit genocide in the hypertext, Asch needed to clear up this confusion by explaining how exactly Midian is guilty for what happens at Baal Peor. To resolve this problem, Asch presents the incident at Baal Peor as a "conspiracy for the corruption of Israel" between Moab and Midian (468). In this manner the Midianites from P (Num 25:6-18) appear to have been there at Peor right from the beginning, i.e., in J's domain (Num 25:1-5). In this context of textual retrojection the fraternization with Moabite women from J is linked with the Midianite temptress through the establishment of a connection between the Israelite men involved in both versions. Thus, in *Moses* we are told that two men—Jonadab and Osnath—are first ensnared by the Moabite prostitutes (453-4: J's domain). Then Asch says that Jonadab and Osnath were warriors under the command of Zimri, the man who cavorts with Kozbi the Midianite in P. This motivates the following statement: "It was to [Zimri] that Jonadab and Osnath had first carried the report of the whoring booths which the daughters of Moab had set up opposite the encampment of Israel" (Asch 462). Thus, when Asch introduces "Kozbi, daughter of Zur, prince of a father's house in Midian" (463), the Moabite-Midianite connection is overtly established. And then Zimri explicitly connects the non-Israelite women from J and P in an address to the crowd: "Men of Israel!

Our brothers, the peoples of Moab *and Midian*, have sent their daughters to us; not as to enemies, but as to friends" (Asch 468; my italics).

One further issue resolved by Asch's hypertext has to do with the punishment unleashed against the Israelites for their role in the Baal Peor incident. In P's segment we read: "[Phineas] drove the spear through both of them — through the Israelite and into the [Midianite] woman's body. Then the plague against the Israelites was stopped; but those who died in the plague numbered 24,000" (Num 25:8-9). The problem is that this plague has not been mentioned anywhere before, and its introduction in medias res adds one more element of artificiality to the agglutination of P's version to J's and the role of Midian in the apostasy (cf. Friedman 204). Asch makes sure that the plague has a beginning by introducing the following thought that occurs to Moses when he sees Kozbi and Zimri enter a tent to copulate: "Would it not be well for God to send a pestilence now, to destroy this people which He had brought with so many wonders to the gates of its land? And this, indeed, is what happened. The pestilence struck, and Moses had not the heart to implore Jehovah to arrest it" (Asch 469).

By establishing the "exact" role of Midian in the Baal Peor incident, Asch places the genocide of Midian from Numbers 31 on firmer structural ground. However, this does not resolve the contradiction between, on the one hand, P's description of Midian's hostility toward Israel at Peor and, on the other hand, JE's references to Moses's family ties with the Midianites. Even if the Midianites are guilty for what happened at Peor, how can Moses be so easily willing to massacre his own family and/or the family's tribe? Asch solves this problem by concentrating on the identity of Jethro, Moses's father-in-law and a Midianite leader.

Jethro or Reuel?

The name of Moses's father-in-law varies depending on the source document where it appears. It is in J's document that we first encounter the Midianite priest Reuel whose daughters Moses meets at a well: "When the girls returned to Reuel their father, he asked them, 'Why have you returned so early today?' They answered: 'An Egyptian rescued us from the shepherds" (Ex 2:18). J calls him Reuel also in Numbers 10:29. Subsequently,

Moses marries Reuel's daughter Zipporah and lives with his in-laws. However, E calls the same character Jethro: "Then Moses went back to Jethro his father-in-law and said to him: "Let me go back to my own people in Egypt to see if any of them are still alive'" (Ex 4:18; also cf. Ex 3:1 and 18:1-27).4

This type of contradiction is very difficult to discount or to ignore because it has to do with a fundamental sense-making mechanism in narrative: naming. A proper name is a very special element in narrative because it is the central means of characterization. As S. Cohan and L. Shires point out, "characterization assembles traits at a proper name so that the name can serve as a substitution for those traits" (75). Without stable character markers narrative can crumble into meaninglessness, since events and states would no longer be attributable to specific agents. This would undermine the causal chains that are so fundamental to story-telling. Therefore, when a biblical character is designated by more than one name, this is typically accounted for in the text itself, e.g., Jacob becomes Israel in Genesis 32:28 after wrestling with God at Peniel: "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome." We do not have this with respect to Jethro-Reuel, and the matter is complicated even further in Judges 4:11 where Hobab (Reuel's son in Numbers 10:29) is referred to as Moses's *hoten* which can mean either father-in-law or brother-in-law (L'Heureux 84). So who then is Moses's father-in-law?

Asch could have solved the Jethro-Reuel problem by relying on a well-known midrash that accounts for this character's names. This tradition is based on the assumption that Moses's father-in-law converted completely from paganism to Judaism (cf. Exodus Rabbah 1:32). Thus, L. Ginzberg writes:

> Jethro's transformation from an idolatrous piest into a God-fearing man is conveyed by his seven names. He was called Jether, because the Torah contains and "additional" section about him; Jethro, he "overflowed" with good deeds; Hobab, "the beloved son of God"; Reuel, "the friend of God"; Heber, the "associate of God"; Putiel, "he that hath renounced idolatry"; and Keni, he that was "zealous" for God, and "acquired" the Torah (vol. 2, 290).

However, "Reuel" in the sense suggested above would have made it that much more difficult for Asch to motivate Moses's genocidal zeal. How can Moses so easily massacre a people whose chief priest is a full convert to Judaism and hence part of Israel?

Therefore, Asch decided to place his explanation for "Reuel" in a different context and turned to a theme fundamental to the identity of the Israelites in *Moses*. This is the relationship between the Chosen People and other groups who acknowledge Yahweh. Nothing links the Egyptians and the Israelites, since the Egyptians are unaware of Yahweh and must be forced by the plagues to acknowledge His existence. The Pharaoh says to Moses and Aaron: "Who is Jehovah that I should listen to Him, that I should send forth Israel? I know of no Jehovah, and I will not send forth Israel" (Asch 119; cf. Exodus 5:2). However, in *Moses* peoples, such as the Midianites or the Moabites, are presented as Israel's cousins. Given their common roots, these "relatives" are not entirely foreign to Israel's religion and consider Yahweh to be a divinity. Therefore, throughout his novel Asch keeps coming back to the same issue: why are these cousin peoples not part of Israel?

In *Moses* there are two reasons for this. First of all, Yahweh's abstractness is in conflict with traditional paganism, as is evident from what Jethro says to Moses: "Ah, it had slipped my mind that thy Spirit is a jealous Spirit. Did not thy forefather Abraham destroy the idols of his father Terah? All of us would serve the one great Spirit if we but knew how. He is without name and without place; and gods must have both" (Asch 86). Unlike the Pharaoh, Jethro believes in Yahweh's existence, but he and other Midianites cannot serve Him properly because He is not an idol. This pinpoints Asch's insistence on the uniqueness of the Israelite religion in the context of the ancient Near East, which is partially corroborated by J. McKenzie: "We know of no other ancient Near Eastern god who was not *visually* represented" (1287; my italics).

The second reason has to do with the clash between monotheism and polytheism. Asch conceives of Balaam, the seer associated with Moab and Midian, as someone who accepts Yahweh but, like Jethro, cannot devote himself entirely to the Israelite god: "Do I not know who Jehovah is? I have always been

a follower of Jehovah. [...] Ah, if He were only not so jealous of the other gods! Why should it irk Thee, Jehovah, that there are other gods?" (Asch 430-1). Thus, in addition to Yahweh's abstractness, His uniqueness creates an ideological wall between Israel and its cousins: throughout *Moses* it is made clear that no other gods exist, and whoever is truly loyal to Yahweh adopts this position.[5]

With all this in mind, we can now see in what context the stitching of the Jethro-Reuel dichotomy takes place in *Moses*. When Jethro finds out that Moses has only one name, he says:

> It is not well for a man to have but one name. It is easy to work magic on him when he has no secret name for his concealment. As a sign of my faith in thee, my son, I will entrust thee with the secret of my hidden name. I have many names, but the name which I carry for my family, my family name [...] is Reuel. For others I am Jethro, or Jether, but for thee from now on I am Reuel. Thou too must have a secret name. When one will seek to work magic on thee by the name Moses, he will not reach thee, for thou wilt be hidden in thy secret name [...]." While Jethro conducted the ritual, Moses looked about him and saw the many idols and images, and the instruments of magic, which filled the house [...] and he said to himself: "The Spirit of my fathers wills that [...] I should live among teraphim [idols], but that I should believe in Him and be faithful to Him" (Asch 87).

This is not a fully Judaized Reuel but a pagan with some Jewish sympathies: not enough to become part of Israel. In this manner Asch stresses the fundamental differences between Moses and all those who believe in Yahweh but do not share Israel relationship with the deity. Jethro appears as a foil to Moses, just as Israel's cousin's are a foil to the Chosen People when the latter submits to Yahweh. It now becomes that much easier to have a Moses willing to massacre the Midianites.

However, several other problems remain: all attributable to P's anti-Midianite account which comes into conflict with the older traditions from JE. Even if Jethro-Reuel is not a true Israelite, he is still part of Moses's family, which means that at

least on those grounds it is difficult to accept Moses's cold-blooded resolve in P's account of the genocide in Numbers 31. Therefore, Asch stitches up P with JE by presenting the massacre of the Midianites in the context of Moses's *reluctance* to carry out God's command: "He found it difficult in the extreme to send out a punitive expedition against that people. Had he not dwelt in their midst so many years? Had not Jethro concealed him from Pharaoh? Had not his own wife Zipporah, now long dead, been a Midianitess?" (474) But then, having added this touch of plausibility in the hypertext, Asch uses the paganism of Jethro's family (and of all the Midianites by extension) as a way of motivating Moses's decision to carry out God's command in the context of the apostasy at Peor: "Before his mind's eye rose the picture of his wife Zipporah, as she stood by the well with the other daughters of Jethro. Princesses they had been, all of them! And daughters of Midian like these had been instructed in whoredom for the undoing of Israel [at Peor]. A Zipporah had perhaps been among the wretched temptresses! Such a people must be punished" (Asch 474-5).

Finally, to make it even easier for Moses to act in such a situation, Asch makes sure that the actual members of Moses's family are no longer alive. Zipporah is "now long dead" (474) by the time of the massacre, and so is Jethro. What is more, Jethro's death is used as yet another means of motivating the genocide. In *Moses* a priest of Baal tells Zimri during the apostasy at Peor that the Midianites murdered Jethro for his ties with Yahweh (Asch 466). Thus, even Jethro's *partial* service to Yahweh (cf. Asch 87) was abhorrent to the Midianites whose wickedness is thereby stressed that much more. And so, with all this mass of motivating detail, Asch makes sure that the genocide of Midian appears plausible whatever one may think of its moral aspects.6

KORAH ET AL.

One of the most notable challenges to Moses's authority in the desert is a rebellion described in two different versions by P and J in Numbers 16. These versions were later combined to read like a continuous narrative, however, as Friedman points out, "for two thousand years people read this as one story, and it was confusing. It seemed to be taking place at two different locations at the same time. At some points it was at the tent of the rebels.

At other points it was at the Tent of the Meeting. At some points the rebels were just Dathan and Abiram. At other points it was Korah and his company" (195-6). According to P, a Levite called Korah and 250 backers say to Moses and Aaron: "You have gone too far! The whole community is holy, every one of them, and the Lord is with them. Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord's assembly?" (Num 16:3). For this challenge the rebels are destroyed by God. (Num 16:35). J tells a similar but different story about a different group. They are Reubenites called Dathan and Abiram (Num 16:1-2), and they complain about having been taken out of Egypt by Moses (Num 16:13-14). For this outrage they are swallowed up by the earth (Num 16:32). That the rebellion from J was originally an independent story is attested to, among other things, by the fact that only Dathan and Abiram (but not Korah) are mentioned as the rebels elsewhere in the Bible, e.g., Deuteronomy 11:6 and Psalms 106:16-17.

According to Friedman, the challenge of Korah the Levite is directed at Aaron, namely, at Aaron's exclusive right to burn incense. As mentioned above, P's aim was to defend the prerogatives of the Aaronid priesthood, and since Aaron represents this formation, and given that in P's time the Levites were assistants to the priests but not priests themselves, Korah's death constitutes an affirmation of priestly exclusivity (cf. L'Heureux 86; Coats 184; Num 17:1-5). J, who was not defending the Aaronid priesthood, concentrates on Moses and his relationship with the Israelites. This is why Dathan's group reproaches Moses for taking them out of Egypt (Friedman 196). And it is the difference between the targets of the two respective rebellions (Aaron in P and Moses in J) that serves as the thread with which Asch stitches up the two stories.

In *Moses* Asch presents Korah, Dathan and Abiram as collaborating rebel leaders (372). This is in agreement with the midrashic account offered in Ginzberg (287). What differs from Ginzberg is the way in which Asch accounts for one statement that pinpoints the discrepancy between J's and P's respective versions. Because P has only Korah as the rebel leader, here is how Moses reacts to God's intention to punish the rebellion by annihilating the whole assembly: "O God, God of the spirits of all mankind, will you be angry with the entire assembly when only one man sins?" (Num 16:22). There is only one man because

Dathan and Abiram are in J. To make matters even more confusing, P and J have been combined in such a way that Moses's statement about "one man" comes *after* not only the description of Korah's defiance but also the rejection of Moses by Dathan and Abiram. So clearly three culprits have been presented through the J/P combination, and yet Moses mentions only one in his plea to God.

Asch deals with this issue by considering the precise nature of Korah's challenge and the reproaches addressed to Moses by Dathan and Abiram. As stated earlier, Korah challenges Aaron, i.e., the priesthood. And since the priesthood's role is to mediate between God and Israel, the entire relationship between God and His people is in question. This is so fundamental that Asch presents Korah's rebellion as outweighing that of Dathan and Abiram in the mind of Moses. Asch follows the spirit of the hypotext closely when he has Korah say: "Didst thou not say once that this was a kingdom of priests, and each man may bring his own sacrifice before Jehovah? Wherefore, then, hast thou made Aaron the high priest, and his sons priests, and bidden the people pay heavy tribute to them?" (373-4) On the other hand, Moses perceives the grumbling of Dathan and Abiram as less fundamental. They represent the fatigue of the Israelites from all the privations in the desert: "[Moses] had seen Dathan and Abiram among Korah's people; he considered them more honorable men than Korah, more genuinely afflicted by the sufferings of the people. [...] Now, as always, he ignored the promptings of pride, and sent messengers to Dathan and Abiram" (Asch 374-5). This gradation of guilt allows Asch to motivate the fact that in the hypotext Moses sends emissaries of peace to Dathan's and Abiram's tents (cf. Num 16:12) whereas no such gesture is made toward Korah. In this manner Asch uses P's perspective in order to represent Moses's mental process (see above).

The author's reliance on P is ironic because, as B. Siegel points out with respect to *Moses* in general, Asch's "denigration of legalist or priestly attitudes toward worship moves him to his sharpest deviation from Scripture" (192). As Siegel's argument suggests, generally, Asch adopts the JE (non-Aaronid) perspective: "Asch makes ritual and sacrifice mere priestly devices, concessions wrung from a reluctant Moses by an ambitious Aaron, aided by a superstitious, semi-barbaric tribal horde" (193).

However, Asch's gradation of guilt is only an element of Moses's own reasoning and a means of motivating the reference to a single guilty man. In the hypotext both J and P have equally guilty rebels worthy of divine punishment. And the question of their punishment in the combined J/P text presents yet another problem, namely, the impression that the destruction of the rebels appears suspended. Just when God is about to punish Korah's group and tells everyone to stand away from them in P (Num 16:24), a J passage is introduced where Moses counter-challenges Dathan and Abiram (Num 16:25-26, 27b-30). The result is an anticlimax, since after God's openly stated intention to kill Korah's group, no immediate punishment arrives. Secondly, the location of the punishment varies because of the source differences. In P Korah's group appears to be by the Tent of the Meeting when God says to Moses and Aaron: "Separate yourselves from this assembly so I can put an end to them at once" (Num 16:21). In J Dathan and Abiram are next to their own tents when the earth swallows them up along with their families (Num 16:31-32).

Asch deals with the anticlimax in the account of Korah's demise by not having God proclaim out loud His intention to destroy the rebels: "Then God spoke to Moses, and instructed him. But neither Korah nor his congregation heard the warning and instruction which God now uttered in the ears of Moses" (377). Thus, with no overt reference to killing Korah's group, the need for *immediate* punishment disappears. This, in turn, gives Korah the chance to move plausibly from the Tent of the Meeting to his family tent, making it possible for Asch to unify the location of the punishment in contrast to the the discrepancy in the hypotext. The last element in this unification process is the following statement: "Although Korah was a Levite, his tent was placed by the tents of Dathan and Abiram. And now the three stood at the entrances of the their tents; and their followers encircled them" (377; cf. Ginzberg 288). Thus, not only does Asch motivate the movement of Korah away from the Tent of the Meeting, but he also finds a way of accounting for the fact that the hypotext appears to present Korah's death and that of Dathan and Abiram as taking place in one location and in different places at the same time.

However, the harmonization of the culprits, as well the

time and place of their punishment, does not exhaust the problems associated with this rebellion in the desert. The account of Korah's challenge goes back to an old oral tradition, but P adds another rebellion to reinforce the message behind the first one. Right after witnessing God's wrath against Korah in Numbers 16, in Numbers 17 the Israelites appear undaunted and reproach Moses and Aaron for Korah's death. As in the previous chapter, here too, God orders Moses and Aaron to stand aside in order to annihilate the (new) insurgents. Only Aaron's intercession saves the assembly (Num 17:6-15). The behavior of the Israelites in this passage appears highly implausible, given that they have just witnessed what happened to Korah for murmuring against Aaron. As L'Heureux explains, "this account does not seem to go back to an independent oral tradition but to be based completely on the information provided in the preceding chapter. The passage follows the structure of the murmuring stories and reinforces the exclusive right of the Aaronids to offer incense. The account reflects power struggles concerning cultic issues during the postexilic period" (86). Therefore, in order to really drive home his political point, P supplements an old murmuring story with a poorly motivated sequel of his own.

Finding the foolhardiness of the second rebellion right after Korah's death highly puzzling, Asch felt the need to stitch the original insurgency with P's invention. In order to do this Asch goes back to something that happens to the Israelites before Korah's rebellion. After hearing the report of Moses's spies about Canaan, the Israelites are afraid to enter the promised land for fear of its inhabitants (Asch 362 and Num 14:1-10). For this lack of faith in Yahweh's guidance, God condemns the present generation never to see Canaan and die in the desert (Asch 366 and Num 14:29). When the Israelites realize that their entire Exodus will have been in vain if they don't enter the Promised Land, they are stunned. However, their remorse is useless, since the sentence has been pronounced, and there is no turning back: "What will happen to us now? Is it for this that we left Egypt, that our bones shall bleach in the desert sands? Shall we truly never see real earth again?" (Asch 367; cf. Num 14:40) It is this absolute despair that Asch uses in order to motivate P's sequel rebellion: "In the access of blind despair which seized on the Bnai Israel when they learned their punishment, when they understood that they were

to wander among the sandstorms of the deserts until they died [...] nothing terrified them now — not even the dreadful fate which had overtaken Korah and his congregation" (Asch 378). Thus, in *Moses* the Israelites feel that now they have nothing to lose: they have been condemned to die in the desert, and they may as well die now. One of them exclaims: "I fear nothing or no one. Let him thrust me down alive into the pit, as he did with Korah" (Asch 379). In this manner the hypertext makes the two successive rebellions from the hypotext appear much more plausibly related.

MIRIAM'S LEPROSY

The last crime and punishment story involving stitching in *Moses* that I would like to discuss is the pericope of the snow-white Miriam in Numbers 12. The story comes from the pen of one author, although scholars disagree whether it is J or E (L'Heureux 85). However, within this document two different oral traditions have been introduced (cf. Coats 262). Verses 1, 10, 12-16 tell us about Miriam who complains about Moses's Cushite wife. It is unclear what exactly Miriam is objecting to, but she is punished by God who strikes her with leprosy for a week (makes her skin snow-white). Interwoven with this tradition is another story: verses 2, 3, 4-9, 11. Here Aaron complains about Moses's special relationship with God, and God explains that this relationship is indeed unique and unmatched: "When a prophet of the Lord is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord" (Num 12:6-8).

The combination of these two strands has lead to problems which Asch felt compelled to resolve as a modern novelist. There appears to be no explicit connection between the first verse ("Miriam and Aaron began to talk against Moses because of his Cushite wife, for he had married a Cushite") and the second verse ("'Has the Lord spoken only through Moses?' they asked. 'Hasn't the Lord also spoken through us?'") (Num 12:1-2). The inclusion of Aaron in the complaint about the wife is merely the result of the combination of the two traditions (Coats 261). Among other things, this is indicated by the fact that only Miriam is punished (Num 12:12-16). Coats argues that the tradi-

tion that deals with the complaint about the wife involves a minor offense: considerably less important than those of Korah, Dathan and Abiram (262). However, Aaron's complaint about Moses's relationship with God is much more serious, and, as Friedman maintains, is a reflection of the rivalries among the different Israelite priesthood groups. Thus, here we appear to have an anti-Aaronid attack, seeking to challenge the claims to exclusivity of Judah's official clergy (Friedman 78). Aaron is put in his place: the rival Mushite priesthood is presented as being dearer to God than the Aaronids (cf. Coats 263-4).

For Asch it was important to establish a clear connection between the two disparate strands present in this pericope without eliminating the significance of either. For this he turns to a well-known traditional explanation of Miriam's complaint about Moses's wife. Cush is viewed as a reference to Ethiopia, i.e., Moses's wife is black (cf. L'Heureux 85 and Friedman 78). Thus, Miriam in *Moses* complains that her brother has contaminated Israel by taking a foreign spouse: "It is a great sin which thou takest on thyself. Because of thee all Israel will be made to stumble. All the men of Israel will follow thy example and will bring strange women into their tents; and they will pollute the tents of Israel with abominations" (349). This fits in well with the theme which informs the upcoming apostasy incident at Peor; however, Moses responds that God's will is to allow this kind of marriage if the women are fully Judaized: "And I cannot turn to the right or to the left, away from the *will of God*" (349; my italics). Using the notion of knowing the "will of God" as a stitching mechanism, Asch brings in the Aaron strand, i.e., the complaint from Numbers 12:2 about Moses's special relationship with God: "'Is it Jehovah that speaks, or is it thou, Moses?' asked Miriam. 'We too know the *will of God*!" (349; my italics). Thus, whereas in the hypotext the will of God concerns the role of priests, in the hypertext the will of God concerns both Aaron's role and the Cushite wife.

In order to account for the fact that only Miriam is punished in the hypotext (Num 12:10), Asch does something which in fact reconstructs the original tradition about the complaint against Moses's wife. Instead of making Miriam and Aaron equally active in this matter, as does the hypotext, Asch makes Miriam the instigator of the complaint. Aaron is not absent, but his role is

downplayed (Asch 345-49). Within the same logical framework, Asch also seeks to suggest why Aaron is not punished. One would expect that the person who combined the two traditions in Numbers would have sought to harmonize them by having both Aaron and Miriam stricken with leprosy, just as he has them both playing the same role in making the complaint about Moses's wife. However, this would have made Aaron unfit for the priesthood, since no one stricken with leprosy could have continued to serve as a priest (Friedman 78). Therefore, however much the biblical pericope seeks to belittle Aaron and his line, there was no way of changing the well-known tradition that Aaron was the first priest of the Israelites. Asch relies on this historical context in order to account for Aaron's impunity in the hypotext: "And Aaron, seeing the leprous woman, felt his knees yielding with fear. It seemed to him that his own body was burning with the disease, and he would be excluded from the priesthood, thrust forth from the congregation of Israel—and he threw himself at the feet of Moses" (Asch 351). Whereas in the hypotextual source of this passage (Num 12:11) there is no reference to the consequences of Aaron's possible punishment by leprosy, Asch brings in this detail in order to smooth out yet another problematic issue concerning the reception of the Pentateuch in the modern age.

CONCLUSION

The presence of stitching in Asch's *Moses*, as in Mann's *Joseph and his Brothers*, sheds light on certain fundamental aspects of modern realistic literary narrative. The degree to which the expectations of readers today differ from the norms of ancient narrative illustrates the development of story-telling over three millennia. As R. Clifford and R. Murphy point out, "the ancient East had a tolerance for versions, for different stories of the same event. Successive editions of the Gilgamesh Epic and of *Enuma Elish*, as well as the Bible's telling of the exodus-conquest differently in the prose passages of the Pentateuch and in the poetry of many psalms, illustrate this tolerance" (8). However, when it comes to modern literature, Brooks and Warren point out that "a piece of fiction is a unity, in so far as the piece of fiction is successful" (xviii) and "if we reject a story because it is, as we ordinarily say, unconvincing, we are appealing to the truth of coher-

ence: the story does not hang together in its own terms, and therefore whatever meaning it may claim to possess does not really come out of the experience of the story. Most of our problems with stories have to do with offences against the truth of coherence" (277). Therefore, authors like Asch and Mann, by infusing well-known biblical stories with the modern logic of motivation and structural unity, seek to bridge a gap of naturalization which separates the vastly different literary conventions of our times and antiquity.

In this respect literary history can be likened to the development of rabbinic literature in Judaism. Rabbinic literature constituted an attempt by later generations to come to terms with biblical texts in social contexts considerably different from those which saw the creation of the Bible (cf. Brown, Perkins and Saldarini 1080). The Talmud, the Mishna and the numerous midrashes were a way of trying to apply Scripture to new values and ideologies, as well as to account for the contradictions and inconsistencies in the Bible. This literature was consulted both by Asch and Mann (Siegel 193), considerably influencing *Moses* and *Joseph and his Brothers*. Just as the rabbinic literature reflects the development of theological and legal thought over a vast amount of time, so too, the stitching phenomenon illustrates how far literary art has evolved. However, the subject-matter loses nothing of its original appeal when it undergoes literary transformation. Moses, Joseph, Jacob and all the other remote figures from the Pentateuch are still interesting, still compelling, still meaningful on their own merit as they migrate from the Pentateuch into novels, such as *Moses* and *Joseph and his Brothers*. Thanks to the modern novel, these characters live again, as they did so very long ago among the tents of an ancient people.

University of Western Ontario

NOTES

1. Here is Gérard Genette's definition of hypertextuality: "J'entends par là toute rélation unissant un texte B (que j'appellerai hypertexte) à un texte antérieur A (que j'appellerai, bien sûr, hypotexte)

sur lequel il se greffe de manière qui n'est pas celle d'un commentaire [...]. J'appelle donc hypertexte tout texte dérivé d'un texte antérieur [...]" (11-14).

2. In fact D is divided into two sub-sources: D1 and D2.
3. Friedman places P between 722 and 609 B.C.E., but the more traditional dating conceives of P as writing later. G. von Rad, for example, argues that P wrote after the exile of the Israelites in Babylon c. 538-450 B.C.E. (von Rad, 25).
4. It is noteworthy that the Alliance biblique version of the Bible seeks to harmonize the name of Moses's father-in-law by calling him Jethro everywhere and adding a note on the Jethro-Reuel alternation (see Ex 2:16).
5. This is in fact anachronistic with respect to the Mosaic period. McKenzie points out: "As for unicity, in Israel there is no clear and unambiguous denial of the existence of gods other than Yahweh before Dt-Isa in the 6th cent. B.C. [...] For the Israelites there is nothing they can ask from any other god and nothing to fear from any other god. This is not an explicit profession of monotheism, but it is to treat other gods as negligible" (1287).
6. In a passage typical of what Asch has been so criticized for, the moral issue at hand is dealt with in the following manner: "Moses was a son of his time. [...] No one will be found to excuse or to justify the action of Moses against the Midianites; but, without attempting an excuse or justification, there is something to be said concerning the war of annihilation against Midian in the light of that moral attitude which characterized Moses" (477). This is interesting to consider in light of what a modern biblical scholar such as L'Heureux has to say about Numbers 31: "Our modern distress at the genocide depicted in this chapter is alleviated in part by the knowledge that these events did not really happen. Nonetheless, the fact that the human extermination envisaged here could even be contemplated in an idealized narrative indicates the magnitude of the hermeneutical task which must be undertaken before the Bible can be applied in a way that makes contemporary theological sense" (92).

REFERENCES

Apter, T.E. *Thomas Mann: The Devil's Advocate.* London: Macmillan. 1978.

Asch, Sholem. *Moses.* Trans. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1951.

Barr, James. *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality.* London: SCM Press Ltd, 1992.

Brooks, Cleanth and Robert Penn Warren. *Understanding Fiction*. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1959.

Brown, R. E., P. Perkins and A. J. Saldarini. "Apocrypha; Dead Sea Scrolls; Other Jewish Literature." In *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990, 1055-1082.

Clifford, Richard J. and Roland E. Murphy. "Genesis." In *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990, 8-43.

Coats, George W. *Rebellion in the Wilderness: The Murmuring Motif in the Wilderness Traditions of the Old Testament*. Nashville: Abington Press, 1968.

Cohan, S. and L. Shires. *Telling Stories: A Theoretical Analysis of Narrative Fiction*. London: Routledge: 1988).

Culler, Jonathan. *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature*. London: Routledge, 1975.

Fiedler, Leslie. "Exodus: Adaptation by Sholem Asch." *Commentary* 13 (January 1952-June 1952) 72-5.

Friedman, Richard E. *Who Wrote the Bible*. New York: Summit Books, 1987.

Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsestes*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982.

Ginzberg, Louis. *The Legends of the Jews*. Vol. 1-5. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1947.

Holy Bible: New International Version. New Brunswick, NJ: New York International Bible Society, 1978.

La Bible. Alliance biblique universelle, 1992.

L'Heureux, Conrad E. "Numbers." In *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland E. Murphy. London:
Geoffrey Chapman, 1990, 80-93.

McKenzie, John L. "Aspects of Old Testament Thought." In *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Eds. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Roland
E. Murphy. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990, 1284-1315.

Mann, Thomas. *Joseph und seine Brüder*. In *Stockholmer Gesamtausgabe der Werke von Thomas Mann*. Oldenbrug: S. Fischer Verlag, 1962.

Noth, Martin. *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*. Trans. Bernhard W. Anderson. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972.

Siegel, Ben. *The Controversial Sholem Asch: An Introduction to his Fiction*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1976.

Tournier, Michel. *Gaspard, Melchior et Balthazar*. Paris: Gallimard, 1980.

Tumanov, Vladimir. "Stitching Joseph's Coat in Thomas Mann's *Joseph und seine Brüder*." *Neophilologus* (forthcoming 1999).

"The First Temptation of the Last Magus: a Comparison of Michel "Taor, prince de Mangalore" Edzard Schaper's *Die Legende vom vierten König* and Henry van Dyke's *The Story of the Other Wise Man.*" *Orbis Litterarum* 52 (1997) 280-97.

Von Rad, Gerhard. *Genesis: A Commentary.* Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972.