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Kenneth Hanson*Ph. D., Professor of Judaic Studies at the University of Central Florida, Orlando, the USA***Кенет Хенсен***професор євбраїстики та близькосхідних студій університету Центральної Флориди, Орlando, США*

MOSES AND THE MALCONTENTS: POLITICAL LESSONS IN THE WILDERNESS OF SINAI

Автор намагається окреслити межі «анти-Мойсеєвої» традиції, яка, на думку автора, майже очевидна в оповіді, що знаходиться в основі Тори. Професор Хенсен бере на себе сміливість стверджувати, що біблійна оповідь не лише посилює «автократичне лідерство» великого законодавця, а й зберігає ознаки квазі-незалежної літературної субтечії, що тяжіє до поняття політичної тиранії. Виступаючи проти представників влади, ця течія пізніше перетворилась в яскраво-виражений анти-Давидівський, антимонархічний рух. Незважаючи на те, що деякі науковці намагаються окреслити двозначне ставлення Ізраїлю до своїх монархів, професор Хенсен робить спроби відслідкувати етапи розвитку цієї течії аж до витоків, до Мойсея. Його підхід передбачає вивчення оповіді Мойсея, яка проллє світло на традицію розколу, який виник навколо нього. Очевидно, що виступи проти Мойсея є одним із центральних елементів біблійної оповіді; водночас, політичні наслідки цієї події були суттєво недооцінені. Дискусія деяких коментаторів (включно з Фрейдом) про те, що в певний момент народ Ізраїлю, який довго страждав від автократичного способу правління Мойсея, зрештою вбили його, знаходить своє підтвердження в світлі прихованих політичних уроків священного тексту.

Майже три тисячі років промайнуло від Мойсеєвого обрахунку творення світу, до того часу, коли євреї, помиляючись, попросили в Бога царя. До того часу їхня форма правління більше нагадувала республіку, яку очолювали суддя та старшини племен. Єврейський народ ніколи не мав царя. А коли люди, відображаючи ідолопоклонницькі настрої, віддають данину монархам, то не варто дивуватись, що Всемогутній Бог невдоволений урядом, який захопив прерогативу небес. В світлі цього

коментаря автор вважає доречним припущення про те, що Біблія не лише нав'язує авторитарну форму правління, а й вміщує антимонархічний підтекст, який розміщено в оповіді більшого розміру.

Тривалий час велася дискусія про те, що в Біблії вміщено упередження щодо царя Саула і погляди, спрямовані проти царя Давида. Як зазначає Сімха Брукс, Саул, на початку свого правління, поведився як справедливий суддя. Лише згодом знаходимо полеміку, спрямовану проти нього, оскільки перший цар Ізраїлю став символом репресивної монархії. Саул, насправді, сприймається як свідчення ранньої конфедерації племен, своєрідної республіки.

Історія Авесалома, в якій Давид надає перевагу своєму племені Юди, провокує громадянську війну, яка ледве не призвела до його краху. Вона віддзеркалює одну з традицій, спрямованих проти Давида, яка чітко представлена в Біблійному викладі. Позитивне сприйняття Давида, його месіанської ролі, бере свій початок з пізніших рукописів царських редакторів, які прислужували при дворі Давида. Дві зазначені літературні традиції заперечують одна одну, однак немає сумніву, яка є канонічною, оскільки історію пишуть переможці.

Мойсей – автократ і відгомін незгоди.

Джерела, які підтримують і виступають проти Давида, є відгомном раних поглядів на великого ізраїльського законодавця, Мойсея. Він – втілення свободи і емансипації. Як релігійний символ, він надихнув мільйони. Не дивлячись на це, в біблійній оповіді (хоча і мудро завуальованій) він виступає не менше, ніж автократ, давнє втілення тиранічного правління.

Традиційно Мойсея описують як неприступного, майже як Бога. Незважаючи на це, проникливі читачі Святого письма вже давно помітили численні скарги на Божого посланця, які, здається, ніколи не припиняються.

Коли настає час нескінченного перерахунку скарг, які звучать на адресу Мойсея упродовж тривалої подорожі євреїв у дикій місцевості, значна кількість біблеїстів переконані, що серед євреїв була значна частина налаштованих проти Мойсея. На думку автора, це була своєрідна течія «Брута», яку ледве згадують у тексті Біблії. Схоже на те, що ці скаржники, можливо, приховували значне напруження між владою одинака-лідера та індивідуалізмом «дванадцяти племен», які хотіли зберегти свій характер і право на самовизначення перед лицем всемогутнього Мойсея.

Ми чуємо голоси протесту біля гірких вод Мари, де люди скаржаться на відсутність чистьох води. Мойсей дивним чином очищує

води, кинувши посох в брудну калюжу. Ми знову чуємо скарги, коли залишились без їжі і Мойсей каже їм, що їхні звинувачення проти нього є насправді скаргами проти Бога. З того моменту він і його брат Аарон стають представниками Вищої сили.

Варто зазначити, що інша частина оповіді змальовує Мойсея як такого, який вирішує питання конфлікту між людьми. Унаслідок такого розвитку подій, його тесть Джекро робить припущення про те, що Мойсей призначив «деяких спроможних чоловіків» співлідерами єврейського народу: лідерами тисяч, сотень, півсотень і десятків. Вони мають слугувати суддями на тривалій основі. Лише найскладніші випадки Мойсей вирішив розглядати особисто сам. Нам залишається лише гадати – що це все означає? Можливо це все – більше ніж результат вибуху численних невдоволень в таборі євреїв? А можливо – така розв'язка представляє завуальоване відображення потреби у розподілі влади серед більшої спільноти?

Мойсей навіть запитує Бога про дозвіл поділитися владою (начебто йому потрібен такий дозвіл). Хоча, з іншого боку, такий запит, можливо, приховує його розуміння того факту, що в таборі зростає неспокій через його зростаючу тиранію.

А можливо, євреї-вигнанці вже втомилися від такого «небесного диктатора»? Можливо, Мойсей усвідомив, що розподіл влади, який привів до формування політичного органу, був єдиним виходом для нього як для лідера? Мойсей здійснив крок, який привів до децентралізації влади. В будь-якому випадку, він створив перший в історії прецедент для формування незалежної системи судочинства.

Конституція «Об'єднаних племен».

В ході запровадження значних законодавчих обмежень, які складають значну частину біблійної оповіді виявляється політично важлива річ. Мойсеєві вдалося вирішити конфлікт, ставши на шлях «інституалізації». Він забезпечує необхідну структуру для групи вигнанців, даючи їм своєрідну «конституцію». В той час цей набір законів, ця «Тора» визначала межі впорядкованого правління, окреслювала «соціальний контакт» між правлячими і підлеглими. Батьки-засновники США зрозуміли ці давні принципи і втілили їх в життя, передавши «узаконену свободу» громадянському суспільству.

Звичне припущення, як наслідок дискусії в тому, що золотий тілець є заміником Бога, однак, на думку автора статті, це не зовсім точно. Нам слід вбачати в золотому тільці заміника Мойсею, від якого єврейський народ був залежний. Він (тілець) міг бути посередником між євреями і Богом. На політичному рівні, схоже на те, що

Біблія говорить нам не покладатися на єдиного лідера (власне влада Мойсея навіть не обговорювалася). В іншому випадку це знак незрілості, це – скочування до інфантильності. Політичний ідеал Біблії – не сліпий послух авторитарним лідерам, а культивування прямого договору з Богом, без посередників. Іронія полягає в тому, що знищення «анти-Мойсеєвої» фракції відкрило двері до повної залежності від Мойсея і проклало шлях до золотого тільця.

У статті професор Хенсен також аналізує так звану «преторіанську гвардію», під якою він розуміє плем'я Мойсея, Левитів. Після вказівок Мойсея знищити невдоволених, вони стають священиками.

Авто статті також ставить питання про останні дні Мойсея. І тут, на його думку, виникає непорозуміння. Великому Божому посланцю заборонено увійти до Землі обітованої. Єдиним поясненням слугує той факт, що замість того, щоб заговорити до скелі, коли євреї знемагали від спраги, Мойсей вдарив по ній посохом. За це Бог призначив Мойсею померти на горі Пісга.

Наведені факти змушують замислитись над деякими моментами, які зазначають деякі коментатори, на кшталт Фрейда про те, що в певний момент, ті ж самі люди, які довго терпіли автократичне правління Мойсея, зрештою не витримали, повстали і вбили Мойсея? Багато традиціоналістів припускають, що Мойсей був убитий своїм власним народом і, що, можливо, Біблія приховує цей факт. Відсутні прямі вказівки на такий перебіг подій. Хоча, якщо уважно вивчити обставини смерті Мойсея, то теорія вбивства вже не здається такою неімовірною, як може видатися з першого погляду. Вона може бути імовірною.

Abstract

The focus of this research is to explore the contours of the «anti-Moses» tradition that is almost certainly present in the narrative underlying the Torah. I argue that the biblical narrative not only takes aim at the increasingly «autocratic» leadership of the great lawgiver, but preserves a quasi-independent literary sub-current, that chafes at the notion of political tyranny. Ever at odds with overly ambitious power figures, the same stream is later in evidence as a distinct «anti-Davidic»/«anti-monarchy» source. While some delineate the ambivalent attitude of Israel toward its monarchs, I seek to trace this current back to its origins in the Mosaic accounts. The approach involves an overview of the Moses narrative, so as to shed new light on the tradition of dissent surrounding him. Indeed, the anti-Moses chord of dissent is one of the central elements of the biblical account; but

its political implications have been largely overlooked. The contention of certain commentators (including Freud) that at some point the people of Israel, having long suffered the indignity of Moses' autocratic governance, ultimately assassinated him gains new relevance in light of the hidden political lessons of the sacred text.

Introduction: Bifurcated Views of Power

No not an oath, If not by the face of men, the sufferance of our souls, the time's abuse-If these motives be weak, break off betimes, and every men hence to his idle bed; So let high sighted tyranny rage on, till each man drop by lottery. (Brutus, in Shakespeare's Julius Caesar)

A series of essays published in the New York Journal between October 1787 and April 1788 were penned anonymously by one «Brutus,» in deference to the assassin of Julius Caesar, who in turn did his deed to «save» the Roman Republic. The real author was most likely a New York judge by the name of Robert Yates, a delegate to the Constitutional Convention and a noted anti-federalist. His admonitions about the potential abuses of power by an overly strong executive branch served as a serious counter-balance to the arguments of pro-federalist Alexander Hamilton.

Yates' voice was of course only one of many, who distrusted centralized power and who looked, not only to the Greco-Roman legacy, but to the biblical narrative as well. Indeed, the biblical caution regarding monarchy and the natural tendency of developing societies toward state tyranny became a key element in early American political thought. Thomas Paine, in his classic *Common Sense*, drew the analogy in the clearest of terms:

Near three thousand years passed away, from the Mosaic account of the creation, till the Jews under a national delusion requested a king. Till then their form of government ... was a kind of Republic, administered by a judge and the elders of the tribes. Kings they had none... And when a man... reflects on the idolatrous homage which is paid to the persons of kings, he need not wonder that the Almighty...should disapprove a form of government which so impiously invades the prerogative of Heaven.

In light of such commentary, it is more than relevant to consider the suggestion of modern critical scholarship of the sacred text, that the Bible engages, not merely in occasional literary «swipes» at «authoritarian» rule, but contains an independent anti-monarchy subtext, sandwiched into the larger narrative¹.

¹ Some have argued that the anti-monarchy source was perhaps added by a textual editor of the exile, presenting a commentary on the unsavory character of Israel's kings. Eichrodt, Spicer, Anderson and others delineate the ambivalent attitude of Israel toward monarchy and trace it back to its origins. See John A. Wood, *Perspectives*

The notion that biblical narrative contains bifurcated views of its heroes is hardly novel. It has, for example, long been argued that the Bible contains a pro-Saul bias in various «Saul traditions» and anti-David perspectives in «Davidic material.»² As Simcha Brooks observes, Saul, at the beginning of his reign, behaved in a manner consistent with that of a righteous «judge.» It is only later that we find anti-Saul polemic, as Israel's first king becomes a symbol of oppressive monarchy, which David's rise was supposed to alleviate. Saul may in fact be seen as an emblem of the early Israelite tribal confederacy, the «kind of Republic» of which Thomas Paine opined. It might even be seen as egalitarian and «genteel» when compared to the authoritarian rule of the Davidic house.

The Absalom story, in which David's preferential treatment of his own tribe of Judah provokes a civil war that nearly brings him down, contains one of a number of anti-David traditions preserved in the narrative³. The positive, even «messianic» view of David derived from the hand of a later royal editor, in service of the house of David, sewing together the accounts (doubtless handed down by word-of-mouth), decades or even centuries later. The two literary streams are at war with each other, but there is no doubt which emerges with canonical stature. History of course is written by the victors.

Moses the Autocrat, and Echoes of Dissent

The pro- and anti- David sources, I argue, amount to a literary echo of an earlier bifurcated view of Israel's great Lawgiver, Moses. More than a literary character, he is a marble figure, a Michelangelo sculpture with rays of divine light emanating from his furrowed brow. He is also an emblem of freedom and emancipation. As a religious symbol he has inspired untold millions, and he is beyond reproach. Nonetheless, he may be seen in the same biblical narrative (though cleverly camouflaged) as nothing less than an autocrat – an ancient emblem of tyrannical rule.

Moses is ultimately commissioned by God in the famous «burning bush» incident to return to Egypt and confront the pharaoh. On his way back, however, we find a curious account almost submerged in the larger

on War in the Bible (Macon, GA: Mercer Univ. Press, 1998), 29. See also Barry Bandstra, *Reading the Old Testament* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 2008), 249, 258; Joseph P. Schultz, *Judaism and the Gentile Faiths: Comparative Studies in Religion* (East Brunswick, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1981), 150.

² See Lester L. Grabbe, *Israel in Transition 2: From Late Bronze II to Iron IIA* (New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 109; Simcha Shalom Brooks, *Saul and the Monarchy: A New Look* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2005), 46-47.

³ Lester L. Grabbe, *Israel in Transition: From Late Bronze II to Iron IIA* (New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 227.

epic. We are told that God encounters Moses as he overnights by the roadside and attempts to kill him. His wife Zipporah comes to the rescue, armed with a knife; but rather than fending off God with the weapon, she severs her son's foreskin. (The biblical account is vague at this point, relating that she «cast it at his feet» without specifying to whose feet «his» refers – Moses' or perhaps God's.) Apparently, the prior command that Abraham circumcise his descendants had been neglected, and this was Zipporah's attempt to rectify the oversight. God seems to be placated, for the text relates, «So he let him alone.» Zipporah, however, slings an accusation against her husband: «A bridegroom of blood you are to me!» (Ex. 4:24-26).

Researchers have long noticed that the story interrupts the flow of the narrative, as though someone has interjected it into the account⁴. It also seems odd that God would seek to kill the very man he has groomed as the great deliverer, a man who has served him faithfully for some forty years. Some believe that the story may be transposed from a later period in Moses' career and that the Bible may be hinting at the existence of an «anti-Moses tradition» that is perennially distrustful of power figures who are a trifle too big for their sandals. In short, we may be looking at a narrative in which God becomes a surrogate for the multitude of complainers and dissenters who later surface to challenge Moses' authority.

In tradition Moses is depicted as being almost as unassailable as the Almighty. Nonetheless, discerning readers of the Scriptures have long noticed the serious tide of «grumbling and complaining» against God's deliverer, that never seems to dissipate.

When it comes to the endless litany of complaint that dogged Moses throughout the wilderness wanderings, not a few biblical scholars are convinced that there must have been considerable «anti-Moses» sentiment among the early Israelites. I suggest it represents a sort of the «Brutus» current, only slightly submerged in the text. It appears that these «complainers» might well be cloaking the larger tension between the authority of a single leader and the individualism of the «Twelve Tribes,» who wanted to preserve their own character and self-determination in the face of the all-powerful Moses. We hear their voices of protest at the bitter waters of Marah, where the people decry the lack of fresh water⁵. Moses

⁴ See William Dumbrell, «Exodus 4, 24-26: A Textual Re-Examination,» *Harvard Theological Review* (Cambridge, MA, 1972); Bernard P. Robinson, «Zipporah to the Rescue: A Contextual Study of Exodus 4:24-6,» *VT* 36 (1986: 450); H. Kosmala, «The 'Bloody Husband,»» *VT* 12 (1962): 18.

⁵ «Source criticism» continues to baffle researchers of the biblical text. Scholars have sought in vain to isolate separate authors of the stories of murmuring, based

miraculously purifies the waters by hurling a log into the brackish pool. We hear them complain again, that they are without food, and Moses tells them that their accusations against him are really against God, since he and his brother Aaron are in fact agents of the Divine.

It is curious, that the next part of the story depicts Moses wearing himself out settling disputes among the people. In response to this development, his father-in-law, Jethro, makes the timely suggestion that he appoint «some capable men» as co-leaders of the people: leaders of thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. They are to serve as judges on an ongoing basis. Only the most difficult cases should be brought to Moses personally. We are left wondering what all of this signifies. Perhaps this is more than merely the end result of the outbreak of so many childish squabbles in the camp. Perhaps it represents the camouflaged reflection of a demand for distribution of power among the larger community⁶.

Elsewhere the Bible depicts Moses asking God for permission to distribute his authority (as if he needed such permission):⁷

Could it be, however, that Moses' «request» merely masks what he well knows is increasing unrest within the Israelite camp over his growing «tyranny»? Could it be that the Hebrew refugees had had enough of their «divine dictator»? Perhaps Moses realized that coming up with some way to share his power with what amounted to a «body politic» was the only way he could survive as their leader. Moses, to his credit, gives ground to

upon the language of complaint. The Hebrew *lun* («to murmur, complain») is sometimes attributed to the P («Priestly») author, who presumably wrote his account during or after the Babylonian captivity (500s B.C.E.). However, the same term also appears in passages with scant evidence of «Priestly» authorship, such as the one cited here, regarding the bitter waters of Marah. See Thomas Dozeman, *Exodus: Eerdmans Critical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 357-8.

⁶ It was long ago pointed out that it was Moses who, upon consulting with Jethro, appointed all the administrative officers, setting bounds on their authority. Even in his «power sharing» he established «autocratic rule» over the community, seeing to it that he himself would serve as autocrat. See Merritt Munson, *The History of Moses and the Israelites* (Chicago: Religio-Philosophical Publishing Assoc., 1865), 128.

⁷ I am not able to bear all this people alone, because it is too heavy for me. And if You are going to part this way with me, I beg You to kill me at once, if I have found favor in Your sight, and let me not see my misery. And the LORD said to Moses, Gather to Me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people, and the officers over them. And bring them to the tabernacle of the congregation so that they may stand there with you. And I will come down and talk with you there. And I will take of the spirit on you, and will put it on them, and they shall bear the burden of the people with you so that you do not bear it yourself alone. (Numbers 11:14-17)

the impetus, from wherever it came, toward decentralization. Perhaps he is aware of the «Brutus movement» among the people and hopes that this kind of power sharing will placate the malcontents. In any case, he seems to have established history's first precedent for an independent judiciary⁸.

The Constitution of the «United Tribes»

In the process of laying out the multitude of legal strictures that occupy significant portions of the ongoing narrative, something very important and politically vital is transpiring. Moses is settling his revolution down, taking the path of «institutionalization». He is providing needed structure for his band of refugees, giving them a «constitution» of sorts⁹. In time, this set of laws, this «Torah,» would provide a framework for orderly rule, a «social contract» between the governors and the governed. America's Founders understood these ancient principles as conveying an «ordered liberty,» maintained by a «civil society.»

Whether Moses ever existed or how much if any of the Torah might have originated in his day is hardly relevant to the more important issues of what Scripture reveals regarding ancient «political» tensions at the dawning of the Israelite nation. The multiple pangs of a nation being born are reflected in the sundry details of the ongoing narrative. Moses, the law-giver, has remained enveloped in Sinai's thick darkness for forty days, and there is little to keep a rambunctious horde preoccupied. We are told they erect an infamous golden calf and fall into idolatry, coupled with various orgiastic festivities.

The common assumption, in the midst of the debauchery, is that the golden calf is a substitute for God, but this is hardly accurate. We should more properly see the golden calf as a substitute for Moses, on whom they had grown dependent as an intermediary between themselves and God. On a political level, the Bible seems to be telling us that reliance on a single leader (the very kind of unquestioned authority Moses cultivated) is not a sign of maturity, but of immaturity. It is a regression to infantility¹⁰. The

⁸ It is striking that Yahwistic ethics insist on a reliable, independent judiciary. See Walter Brueggemann and Patrick Miller, *The Covenanted Self: Explorations in Law and Covenant*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 92. As Max Dimont notes in his classic tome, civil authority in ancient Israel was to be independent of the priesthood. See *The Jews, God and History* (New York: Penguin, 1962, 2004), 34.

⁹ Max Dimont (*ibid.*) observes a strong resemblance between the philosophic character of American constitutional law and the ancient law code of Moses. Both the U.S. Constitution and biblical law share the principle that local governments (state/tribal), as well as individuals, can do anything not specifically denied them.

¹⁰ It is pointed out that the role of Moses as intermediary only comes to pass due to the terror of the people at hearing God's utterance directly. It is at their insistence

political ideal of the Bible is not «blind obedience» to authoritarian leaders, but the cultivation of a direct compact with the Divine, without recourse to intermediaries¹¹. Ironically, once the «anti-Moses» faction (the «Brutus» current) in the camp is quashed, the door to dependency on Moses – and the golden calf when he vanished atop Sinai – is flung open.

Moses, coming down the mountain, is not pleased. God warns him that his people have corrupted themselves and offers to destroy them and make a new nation from his progeny. Moses issues a ringing interrogatory, coupled with a call to action:

Who is on the Lord's side? let him come to me! (Exodus 32:26)

The Praetorian Guard

Who should respond but Moses' own tribe, the Levites, who gather around the lawgiver and receive his horrific instructions? They are to go through the camp, swords in hand, slaughtering all who had participated in the idolatrous behavior, including their neighbors, friends, brothers, sons. By the time it is over some three thousand fellow Israelites will have fallen. The violence is on such a scale that its biblical sanction is at the very least troublesome. Moreover, it is just as difficult to come to grips with the fact that the directive is given by Moses, who is elsewhere described as «more humble than anyone else on earth» (Numbers 12:3).

Many find it odd that such are the prerequisites for godly service, and that from now on the Levites will be the priestly tribe – the ones who will perform sacrifice and tend God's altar. For this they are well-known in religious history. They are not as well-known for their political role, as Moses' personal «Praetorian Guard,» just as brutal as Caesar's military cohort, ready and eager to slay without hesitation the «Brutus» of the regime.

Moses' regime, in any case, will not go unchallenged. What about the other eleven tribes? Why does one tribe have to be privileged above all the others? The next challenge, oddly enough, arises from the ranks of the Levites themselves. A member of a particular Levite clan named Korakh is joined by three members of the tribe of Reuben – Dathan, Abiram, and On.

It seems the «Brutus» current in the biblical text has reared its head again. Whichever editorial hand was responsible for the «final» Masoretic

that God accepts the role of Moses as spokesman. This only serves to highlight their immaturity. See John Van Seters, *A Law Book for the Diaspora: Revision in the Study of the Covenant Code* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003), 54.

¹¹ Nonetheless, Moses' intermediary role establishes him prophet «par excellence,» a model for the future need of revelation and interpretation. See Ryan O'Down, *The Wisdom of Torah: Epistemology in Euteronomy and the Wisdom Literature* (Gottingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 70.

version of the Torah, it was deemed fit not to suppress the many stories about opposition to the great lawgiver¹². Nevertheless, the narrative is written in such a way that Moses is affirmed in the eyes of all Israel, for all time.

Korakh and his friends are to appear on the morrow, bearing fire and incense in their censers. The troublemakers respond:

We will not come up. Is it not enough that you have brought us up out of a land that flows with milk and honey, to kill us in the wilderness? Must you also seize dominion over us? (Numbers 16:12-13)

The accusation is nothing short of calling Moses a «divine dictator»¹³. In the end Korakh summons the whole community in a mighty confrontation, face-to-face with the supreme lawgiver. In one of the most vivid depictions in the entire biblical canon, the ground itself opens up and swallows the whole troupe of rebels. Once again Moses' «divine dictatorship» has been confirmed.

It is clear, however, that the people continue to harbor resentment against Moses' «tyranny.» The book of Numbers tells us that they complain yet again: «You have killed some of God's people!» (Num. 16:41)¹⁴.

¹² It should be noted that one theory holds the murmuring tradition to be a later narrative revision of an earlier tradition, reworking what had been a positive narrative of Moses' leadership into a negative account of rebellion. This may be explained as an effort of the later Jerusalem royal court to depict the breakaway northern kingdom of Israel as inheritors of the tradition of disobedience, forfeiting divine election and opening the door for the election of David and Zion. Nevertheless, even if the tradition of complaint represents a later redaction, it is likely that it is historically rooted in the rebellion of Dathan and Abiram (Num. 16:13), who demonstrate resistance to Moses among the ranks of the people themselves. See George W. Coats, *Moses: Heroic Man, Man of God* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 109-110. It is also hypothesized that the introduction of Korakh may represent one of the last stages of the story's development. Some have argued that the controversy between the Levites and the sons of Aaron may reflect an actual controversy within ancient Israel's historic priesthood. See Dennis Olson, *Numbers* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1996), 102.

¹³ An interesting literary feature is Dathan and Abiram's use of Moses' own phrase, from Num. 16:9, *ha-me'at* («Is it but a small thing (*ha-me'at*) that the God of Israel has separated you ...?») to sarcastically ridicule Moses. An alternate translation of Num. 16:13 reads: «Is it but a small thing (*ha-me'at*) that you brought us up...?» See Hershey H. Friedman, «Humor in the Hebrew Bible,» *Humor – International Journal of Humor Research* 13:4 (2000): 271.

¹⁴ Two distinct patterns are observed in murmuring narratives. One centers on complaint over genuine need, the other on complaint in the absence of such need, culminating in divine judgment. It is suggested that these patterns influenced each other, the differences being leveled to some extent over time. See Terence Fretheim,

Given what they have just witnessed, this is remarkable audacity, indeed hutzpah, and suggests to some critics that the anti-Moses («Brutus») sentiment was strong enough to propel the dissenters to risk life and limb. On account of this «treason,» we are told that a devastating plague breaks out, that would have destroyed the whole camp had not Aaron intervened by standing in their midst with his sanctified fire pan.

We begin to wonder when enough is enough, especially as we find even more internal purgation on the way.

It all comes about when the Hebrews are camped in the land of Moab, en-route to Canaan, and they begin to cohabit with the Moabite women. Moses' response is characteristically brutal. He orders all the Israelite leaders who had participated in the idolatry to be impaled facing the sun, in order to assuage God's wrath.

The grandson of Aaron, named Pinkhas (Phineas), apparently schooled in the brutality that runs in the family, follows an Israelite and his female friend into the family tent. Catching them in a moment of intimacy, he grabs a spear and runs them through, completely piercing the Israelite, into the woman's abdomen. Only then is this latest plague lifted, having felled a total of twenty-four thousand. Pinkhas for his part is commended for having deflected the divine anger¹⁵. We are told that upon him is bestowed God's «Covenant of Peace.» Peace? After such grotesque slaughter? Of course, one way to achieve peace is simply to eliminate one's «enemies.»

Assassination?

In the final analysis there are at least a few researchers who have engaged in a bit of daring, unorthodox speculation, revolving around the end of the lawgiver's life. As we read about the last days of Moses, something rather odd strikes us. The great deliverer is not allowed to enter the Promised Land. The single reason given by the Bible on which account Moses is sentenced to die on Mt. Pisgah is that when the people had earlier complained of thirst, and when God directed him to speak to a rock, whereupon water would miraculously gush out, Moses instead struck the rock with his staff.

Interpretation: Exodus (Louisville, KY, Hohn Knox, 1991), 173.

¹⁵ Moses orders the extermination of all the Midianites, but is disappointed when Phineas spares the women and children. He subsequently commands that all be slaughtered but the virgins, who will be given to the troops. This is yet another example Moses' violent and bloodthirsty character. See Richard Gabriel, *Gods of our Fathers: the Memory of Egypt in Judaism and Christianity* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press), 81-82

Given the incredulity of the story as a whole, an audacious theory has arisen. It is suggested that the anti-Moses faction never abated, but in fact intensified in the face of the lawgiver's unrelenting autocracy. Moreover, the people had experienced not only triumphs during the course of their forty-year sojourn, but bad decisions as well, merciless exterminatory campaigns against surrounding peoples (Midianites, Ammonites, Amalekites and others), and humiliating attacks on themselves by Moses' «Praetorian Guard,» the Levites. Could it be, as certain commentators (Freud included) speculate, that at some point the same people who had long chafed under Moses' autocratic rule finally rose up and struck him down?

Many traditionalists understandably recoil at the thought that Moses, the ancient paragon of virtue, may have been killed by his own people, and that the Bible may be «covering» for him. We do in fact have to be careful before glibly assenting to such a theory, since even those who advance it admit that there is not a shred of hard evidence to back up the supposition. Nonetheless, when the rather peculiar circumstances of Moses' death are examined with a discerning eye, the murder theory might not be as spectacular as it might be regarded at first blush. It therefore remains, at the very least, a distinct plausibility. «Et tu, Brute...».