MOSES’ TONGUE

Marc Shell

As a child I had a habit, frequently ineradicable among young stutterers, of preferring the weak vowel. Instead of saying “da-da-daddy,” for example, I would say “duh-duh-daddy.” The English-language term schwa—sometimes called the “murmur vowel”—names this ub sound.¹ My teachers in Hebrew school taught me that schwa was related to sheva, which is the sign in written Hebrew “placed under a consonant letter to express [what Jewish grammarians regard as] the absence of a following vowel sound,” and, they always emphasized, it was “an arbitrary alteration of šbāv’, emptiness, vanity.”² As such, the schwa recalled for me the Mosaic commandment that we should never speak lashav (vainly) about adonai (God):

Lo tisa etshem-adonai eloheycha lashav ki lo yenakeh adonai et asher-yisa etshmo lashav. [Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain.].³

Does this commandment mean that one should not use the name of God for any frivolous or malicious purpose or in magic? Or does it outlaw using God’s name in guaranteeing commercial contracts? Or does it only prohibit “swear

². Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “sheva.” See also “schwa.”
³. King James Version. The “Ten Commandments” are listed, with one slight variation, at Exodus 20:2–14 and Deuteronomy 5:6–18.

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words”? In Hebrew school, my friends and I compared this Mosaic commandment with the prophet Ezekiel’s complaint about the vanity of false prophets (Ezek. 13:6–9). But, as a young stutterer, I took Moses to mean something like, “Don’t use the schwa vowel.” And for me, that meaning amounted to “Don’t stutter.” This was a regulation that, once internalized, all but assured that I would stutter.

My most unbearable stuttering experience in Hebrew school was the unavoidable one at the beginning of every class. I would be called upon to announce my presence during the alphabetical roll call. Mr. Teicher—a stern and always disapproving teacher—would begin to read out the roll in predictable, inexorable sequence. There was plenty of time for me to anticipate my failure. I trembled fearfully, more and more, until my name, me-ir, came up. “Me-ir, are you present?”

Every stammering schoolchild rehearses the phrase, “I am present,” in his head—over and over and over again—during the hours-long minutes before his turn comes up. (Stutterers who have difficulty saying their own names sometimes resort to changing their names to easily pronounceable ones. Soon afterward, however, they discover that their new, once easily pronounceable names, have now become difficult to pronounce.) Not a few stutterers—including many who have gone on to prominence in the field of stuttering therapy—dropped out of school on account of their stuttering.4 And many young scholars who stutter do not go on to do graduate work because they fear that they will fail oral examinations—even as I failed fourth grade in elementary school.5

In Hebrew school, I would try, always unsuccessfully, to answer, in Hebrew, ani poh (“I [am] present”). But the schwa—a-a-a-a-ani—was too much for me; and my fear of stuttering helped precipitate the failure I feared. Stuttering at Hebrew school was so difficult an experience for me that I often played hooky all day in order to avoid being there at all. (Many stutterers play hooky.)6 On such days, I would hide out from Mr. Teicher at the local French-language library. I would read the Five Books of Moses and identify with Adam, who hid among the trees when God called to him: “Where are you?” (Gen. 3:8). And I would especially read over the passage in Exodus where God calls out “Moses, Moses” from the burning bush in Midian (Ex. 3:4).

Moses had a severe speech impediment of his own. Yet somehow Moses managed to get out a magnificent answer, bineni (“I am here”), when called. I knew that it was more difficult for Moses, as a stutterer, to answer bineni even

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4. For example, Einer Boberg was a severe stutterer, so afraid of teasing that he quit school at age fifteen. He eventually managed to conquer his fears and continue his education.

5. See the case of “Bill,” who does not go on to do a year of work at Oxford: “The oral dissertation required of him he could not fulfill. He was too broken to make the attempt.” See Abraham Kanter and A. S. Kohn, —And the Stutterer Talked (Boston, MA: Humphries, 1938), 157.

6. For an example, see Marty Jezer’s memoir, Stuttering: A Life Bound Up in Words (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 91.
than it was for Abraham to say *bineni* when God sought him out to ask for the sacrifice of Isaac his son.7 *Hineni* eventually became a great prayer of mediation between the congregation’s emissary and God: the cantor, both dummy- and ventriloquist-like, recites a private prayer that begins *bineni* as he takes over the crucial synagogue service on the morning of Rosh Hashanah.

My colleague and former officemate Neil Schmitz, at SUNY Buffalo, is right to insist, in his first person account “To the Speech Clinic,” that “at some point in the stutterer’s early life there must be a question—a question so powerful that it is forgotten, because all that is remembered is the circumstance. I am obliged to speak.” “It is not what is to be said that makes the stutterer hesitate,” Schmitz claims, “but that it must be said.”8

### At the Burning Bush

At the burning bush, God tells Moses to speak for him. Why Moses?

On the face of it, God’s choice of Moses to be his dummy spokesperson is odd. Moses is not a person who speaks well. Presumably, an omnipotent God could cure Moses of his speech impediment. (God says so himself, though in the form of three questions: “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?”)9 Isaiah reminds us that “the tongue of the stutters shall be ready to speak distinctly.”10 God’s capacity to cure “tonguelessness” is a principal aspect of the miracle of Pope Leo III’s tongue-restoration.11 There is also the story reported in the Gospel According to Saint Mark: “And they [the disciples] brought to him [Jesus] a man who . . . had an impediment in his speech; and they besought him to lay his hand upon him. And taking him aside from the multitude privately . . . he spat and touched his tongue; and looking up to heaven, he sighed, and said to him, *Eph’phatha,* that is, Be opened. And his . . . tongue was released, and he spoke plainly” (7:32–35).12 Most relevantly for our present purpose, there is Moses’ own report about Balaam’s talking ass: “And the Lord opened the mouth of the ass” (Num. 22:28).13 An ass is a creature that has no faculty for speech, but in Numbers an ass speaks eloquently to the pagan prophet Balaam. God also made Balaam’s mouth utter blessings

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7. Abraham’s response (to God, to Isaac, and to the angel who halted the sacrifice of Isaac) was likewise *bineni* (Gen. 22:1, 22:7, 22:11). So also Isaiah, when God asks “Whom shall I send, / And who will go for us?” (Isa. 6:8).
rather than curses—they are Balaam’s words that Jews recite every time they enter a synagogue: “How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, and thy tabernacles, O Israel!” (Num. 24:5). If God could make an ass speak, and could make an enemy speak well of Israel, surely God could heal Moses’ tongue.

In some religious traditions Moses actually asks to be cured of his stuttering. So in the Qur’an Moses says, “O my Lord! Expand my breast for me, / And make my affair easy to me, / And loose the knot from my tongue, / (That) they may understand my word.” And Allah cures him. Some Christian interpreters likewise expect that God’s presence ought to cure Moses of his speech defect. (The Easy-To-Read Translation thus has Moses say, “And now, even after talking to you, I am still not a good speaker” [Ex. 4:10]). But Moses makes no explicit request in Exodus to be cured, and he is not cured. (The Knox Translation of 1955 even emphasizes that the appearance of God, while not the cause of the stutter that Moses has already apparently had for years, is a factor that “exacerbates” it. Says Knox’s Moses at Exodus 4:10, “I am more faltering, more tongue-tied, than ever.”)

The Stuttering God

Moses is not the only being to hesitate at the burning bush. God does too. Is that why he seeks out a stutterer? Like a teacher reading out the roll, Moses demands that God speak out the ineffable name: “What [is] his name?” (Ex. 3:13). The stutterer James Malcolm Rymer was right to stress, in his first person account, The Unspeakable; or, The Life and Adventures of a Stammerer (1855), God’s relevant status as “unspeakable.” But God says in the Hebrew of Exodus 3:14, eheyeh asher eheyeh (“I am that I am” in the King James Version). The prophet Isaiah recalls this passage in his reduplicative paraphrase at 51:12, anokhi anokhi hu (“I, even I, am He” [King James Version]). The Septuagint’s Greek rendering of Isaiah’s paraphrase—ego eimi ego eimi (“I am I am”)—likewise brings out the repetition or existential doubling in the Hebrew. The Latin of Saint Jerome’s Vulgate—ego ego (“I, I”)—suggests indeed a divine stutter.

When I was coming up the speech ladder in the 1950s, my francophone Jesuit teachers interpreted Jerome’s “ego ego” mainly in terms of Jesus’ self-presentation in the Gospel According to Saint John (“Before Abraham was, I am”). But I had my doubts, since we all knew well the anglophone Protestant

16. Robert Young, Young’s Literal Translation of the Holy Bible (1898; Grand Rapids, MI: Barker, 1953); square brackets inserted by Young.
17. See James Malcolm Rymer, preface to The Unspeakable; or, The Life and Adventures of a Stammerer (London: Clarke and Beeton, 1855).
doggerel that mocked the divine antiname: “I Am I Am, I Am I Am, / What kind of name is I Am I Am?” This version of the doggerel is quoted from “I Am I Am According to Dr. Seuss,” a poem published in the journal *Theology Today.* At the time, Dr. Seuss (Theodor Seuss Geisel) had already authored books and animated movies featuring Gerald McBoing Boing—the little boy who spoke only in non-animate sound effects. Celebrated as a talking-animal poet, Dr. Seuss made hay from making puns and fun of “childish” speech defects like mine. (Dr. Seuss went on to write about “Sam-I-Am” in *Green Eggs and Ham* [1960].)

God as ventriloquist needed a spokesman because he was unable to speak directly to the people. We will see that the dummy Moses, whom he required to speak for him, was both too much and too little like God to do the job. We will also see, though, that the most important aspect of the job would seem to require that the Hebrews’ monotheistic legislator and alphabetical scribe be a stutterer.

**Heavy and Uncircumcised**

But my tongue is not flexible. Thought is easy; speech is laborious.
—*Arnold Schoenberg, Moses and Aron*

The tongue is not an efficient servant of the intelligence.
—*Pseudo-Aristotle, Problems 11.1902b*

Moses frames his reluctance to call on Pharaoh in terms of two kinds of speech impediment. The first is that he is “heavy of speech”; the second, that he has “uncircumcised lips.”

The passage relevant to the first (Ex. 4:11) is translated thus by George M. Lamsa, an Assyrian from “Kurdistan”: “O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore nor since thou hast spoken to thy servant; for I am a stutterer and slow [kaved] of speech.” Lamsa was an expert translator from his native Aramaic (Syriac), often said by scholars to be much like ancient Hebrew. However, the Hebrew term *kaved* would seem to mean, “literally,” something like the English *heavy,* which is how a few translations deal with the term. The second time that Moses brings up his impediment, the dialogue goes:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: “Go and tell Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the Israelites depart from his land.” But Moses appealed to the Lord, saying: “The Israelites would not listen to me; how then should Pharaoh heed me—a man of impeded speech!” (Ex. 6:10–13)

There are various alternates for the translation of impeded speech.24 The more literal translators have it that Moses claims to be “of uncircumcised lips.”25 The German Elberfelder has the relevant passage as “ich unbeschnittene Lippen habe”—slightly varying the terminology from the great Bibel (1545) of Martin Luther. (Luther’s momentous “conversion” of July 2, 1505—the day he decided to become an Augustinian monk—took place near the felicitously named town of Stotternheim, sometimes glossed as “Home of Stuttering.”) Rashi said in the eleventh century that “uncircumcised” means “closed” or “stopped up,” and he gives several examples from other biblical verses to corroborate his view.26 Some of these verses relate to circumcision events.27 A few involve physical “deformity” linked with language disability. But none tell us what it really means to have “closed” lips.

Only earlier and later events in Moses’ life—and likewise in the concomitant history of monotheism and alphabetical writing—help us understand what’s wrong, or what’s right, with Moses’ tongue. We will consider first how Moses

of the Original Sacred Name Bible). “I am a poor speaker, slow and hesitant” (Today’s English Version). “I am a slow speaker and not able to speak well” (Jerusalem Bible [Catholic]). “When I get up before a crowd my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth (The Word Made Fresh).


24. These variants include “unskilled in speech” (New American Standard Bible), “of deficient and impeded speech” (Amplified Bible), and “no orator” (New Living Translation). French translators offer up moi qui n’ai pas la parole facile (Louis Segond) and je n’ai pas la parole facile (Bible de Semeur). German translations include Ich bin einfach ein zu schlechter Redner (Hoffnung für Alle).


26. Rashi is Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac, who lived in what is now France. “Uncircumcised lips” (aral sefatayim) occurs at Ex. 6:12 and 6:30. Rashi commenting on 6:12 says: “aral sefatayim: atum sefatayim (one whose lips are blocked). Likewise, I [Rashi] say that all instances of the term orla mean blocked.” Rashi gives six examples from Jeremiah and Habakkuk. Rambam uses aral sefatayim as opposed to ragil. An aral sefatayim is not learned and is unable to recite statutory prayer (la’arokh tefilla) and praises. In some way his lips are “blocked” (uncircumcised). Isaiah (at 52:1) takes circumcision as a symbol of purity, and we read of uncircumcised ears (Jer. 6:10), lips (Ex. 6:12, 30), and hearts (Lev. 26:41). The fruit of a tree that is unclean is spoken of as uncircumcised (Lev. 19:23). Various texts of both the Hebrew Bible and New Testament refer to circumcision as spiritual, inward, a purification of the heart (see Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Ezek. 44:7; Acts 7:51; Rom. 2:28; Col. 2:11).

27. On Moses’ way to Egypt, there occurs one of the most mysterious episodes in the Bible (Ex. 4:24–26). God, for reasons unexplained, seeks to kill Moses, and Zipporah comes to the rescue: with a sharp stone she circumcises “her son”—which one is not specified—and holds the severed foreskin to Moses’ “feet” (a euphemism, perhaps, for genitals), saying: “Surely a bloody husband art thou to me.” As a result, God spares Moses, with Zipporah reiterating, “A bloody husband thou art, because of the circumcision.” Modern readers guess at the possible meanings but see also such older essays as Johannes Milenius, Tispurah koretet ‘orlat benah, seu Dissertatio philologica de Zippura praeputium filii sui abscondente: Exod. IV, 24, 25, 26 (Stockholm: Laurentii Salvi, 1758); and Andreas Stein, Tispurah kurtah, sive De circumcissione Zipporae: Exercitium academicum, quod ex Cap. IV. v. 24, 25, & 26 Exod. (Jena, Germany: Literis Samuelis Krebsi, 1663).
talked in terms of how he walked, then interpret how he talked in terms of aspects of his life that have to do with burning, nursing, forgetting, multilingualism, and alphabetization.

Walking the Talk

... just as when we are children, we always have less control over hand and feet and at a still younger age cannot walk at all, so the young cannot control their tongue.

—Pseudo-Aristotle, Problems 11.902b

We tend to forget it: Moses had trouble walking as well as talking. He really needed that staff of his. Sometimes his staff did not suffice. Moses was sometimes unable to stand on his own legs—or even to lift up his own hands because they, too, were “heavy.” At the battle of Adonai-nissi against the Amalekites (associated with Balaam), Moses required a stone chair on which to sit. Human shoulders then propped up his arms and hands:

And it came to pass, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed: and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses’ hands were heavy [ki-vae-deem]; and they took a stone, and put it under him, and he sat thereon; and Aaron and Hur stayed up his hands, the one on the one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. (Ex. 17:11–12)

Had Aaron and Hur not provided Moses with lapidary “wheelchair” and humanoid “crutches,” the Israelites would have been destroyed. Instead, they destroyed the Amalekites, who were descendants of Esau. Esau was, according to one theory, the “stranger” with whom Jacob had had a famous wrestling match. (Other theories say it was God.) On account of that match, Jacob, thereafter known as Israel, became so crippled that he had to use a staff.

The “heaviness” of Moses’ hands, to which the Torah refers, was partly the result of Moses’ having to stand, arms outstretched, for a long period of time, without the aid of his usual prosthesis, his staff. Yet Exodus had already identi-

28. For Aaron and Hur propping up Moses’ weak arms in battle, see Marc Shell, Stutter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, forthcoming), 2.


30. On Esau as Jacob’s wrestling partner, see Marc Shell, Polio and Its Aftermath (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).
fied “heaviness”—which here qualifies his weakness of limb—as the principal factor explaining his stutter. When God had commanded Moses to tell Pharaoh to let his people go, Moses was reluctant to take on the mission because, as he insisted, he had a heavy (ke-va’d) tongue (Ex. 4:10). The same brother, Aaron, who at Pharaoh’s court had become the stuttering Moses’ prosthetic mouthpiece, became at Adonai-nissi a prosthetic support of one of Moses’ lame arms. Moses’ physical weakness goes “hand in hand” with his oral one. The Knox Translation of Exodus brings out this relationship by thus translating Moses’ comment about his having a heavy tongue: “Then Moses said, Lord, have patience with me; but all my life I have been a man of little eloquence, and now that Thou, my Master, hast spoken to me, I am more faltering, more tongue-tied than ever.” The English word falter can indicate problems both with walking and with talking. (“He felt his legs falter,” writes Richard Wiseman in his Treatise on Wounds [1672];31 “Thy tongue falters in thy mouth,” writes John Fisher [1535]).32

By some accounts, the Egyptian princes with whom Moses has been associated and even identified are likewise lame of leg or arm. Philip Glass thus displays Moses’ prototype as lame in his opera Aknaten (1984).33 Freud, though, gives short shrift to the literal lameness of Aknaten (presumably Amenophis IV) and likewise to the literal lameness of Moses.34 Freud focuses instead, in his last work Moses and Monotheism, on the monotheistic aspects of Aknaten’s rule—to which James Henry Breasted in his 1894 dissertation devoted much attention.35 And, following Arthur Weigall, Freud also looks to a stuttering likeness, supposedly uncanny, between the sound of the apparently Hebrew word adonai (God), with its schwa, and the sound of the seemingly Egyptian aten or atum.36

Moses’ lameness partly explains why he always has his staff (matteh) about him. We first learn about that staff in the section of Exodus where we hear Moses complain about his speech disorder. God responds to Moses’ carping about his speaking disability with a question:

What [is] that in thine hand? And [Moses] said, A rod. And [God] said, Cast it on the ground. And [Moses] cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from before it. And the Lord said unto Moses,

31. Richard Wiseman, Treatise on Wounds (London: Royston, 1672), I. ix. 120, spelling updated; MS.
33. Glass suggests that, according to the archaeological records, Aknaten was “distorted physically, that is, had a physical distortion.” See John Richardson, Refractions of Masculinity: Ambivalence and Androgyny in Philip Glass’s Opera “Aknaten” and Selected Recent Works (Jyväskylä, Finland: University of Jyväskylä, 1995), 49.
34. See Jan Assman, Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).
Put forth thine hand, and take it by the tail. And [Moses] put forth his hand, and caught it, and it became a rod in his hand: That they may believe that the Lord God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath appeared unto thee. (Ex. 4:2–5)\textsuperscript{37}

Perhaps Moses’ staff is a Hermetic caduceus like the serpentine staff of cure-all Asclepias.\textsuperscript{38} In any case, the staff serves to remind us that Moses’ ancestor Jacob was lame of hip (as the result of a wrestling match) and carried a staff; that Jews are descendants of Jacob, called \textit{yisrael} (Israel), meaning “he who wrestles . . . with God”; and that Jacob is said by some to have leaned on his staff when passing on his blessing to his sons\textsuperscript{39} and when crossing the Red Sea on his way to Egypt.\textsuperscript{40} Not surprisingly, the view is widespread that the stuttering Moses’ staff and the stumbling Jacob’s staff are the same. Moses’ wife Zipporah herself apparently said so.\textsuperscript{41}

Jewish families, descendants of Jacob (or Israel), celebrate every spring the holiday called \textit{pesach} (Passover). One etymology has it that the name comes from the Angel of Death “passing over” the Jews at the time of the tenth plague. A lesser known etymology is that \textit{pesach} has the same root as the Hebrew word meaning “to hobble.”\textsuperscript{42} That word is used with reference to another lame Jew-

\textsuperscript{37} King James Version.

\textsuperscript{38} Asclepias studied the art of healing with the centaur Cheron. Cheron is often represented with a serpent coiled around a staff. The name of Asclepias may be derived from the Greek \textit{askalabos}, meaning “serpent.” His knotted staff, the origin of which can be traced to a magician’s wand used by the Egyptians (and by Moses?), has a single serpent entwined around it. For centuries this staff, though with a double serpent, has been the symbol of the medical profession and known as the caduceus.

\textsuperscript{39} Some writers (for an early example, see Hebrews 11:21) say that, when the time came for Israel (né Jacob) to bless, he did it “leaning upon his staff.” This gesture was presumably symbolic of the night of wrestling with God and the resulting change in his name and life.

\textsuperscript{40} See Midrash Yelamdenu (Yalkut on Ps. ex. § 869): “the staff with which Jacob crossed the Jordan is identical with . . . the holy rod with which Moses worked” \textit{(Jewish Encyclopedia, s.v. “Aaron’s Rod”).}

\textsuperscript{41} Pirke D’Rebbe Eliezer, \textsuperscript{40} gives the history of the staff: “Created at twilight, before the Sabbath, it was given to Adam in the Garden of Eden. Adam gave it to Enoch, who gave it to Methuselah; he in turn passed it on to Noah. Noah bequeathed it to his son Shem, who transmitted it to Abraham. From Abraham to Isaac, and then to Jacob, who took it with him to Egypt. Jacob gave it to Joseph; upon Joseph’s death, all his possessions were removed to Pharaoh’s place. Jethro, one of Pharaoh’s advisers, desired it, whereupon he took it and stuck it in the ground in his garden in Midian. From then on no one could pull out the staff until Moses came. He read the Hebrew letters on the staff, and pulled it out readily. Knowing then that Moses was the redeemer of Israel, Jethro gave him his daughter Zipporah in marriage.” It was while a shepherd to Jethro that Moses investigated the phenomenon of the Burning Bush, and God asked him, “what is that in your hand?” (Parshat Balak, trans. Yosil Rosenzweig, July 19, 1997, www.ujcvp.org/adath_jeshurun/vortify/balak.html [accessed July 27, 2005].)

\textsuperscript{42} The etymology of \textit{pesach} has been disputed because it is indeed uncertain. See Judah Benzion Segal, \textit{The Hebrew Passover from the Earliest Times to A.D. 70} (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), and Roland de Vaux, \textit{Ancient Israel: Social Institutions} (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), vol. 1. The verb occurs in Isa. 31:5 with the connotation of “to protect,” but Brevard S. Childs suggests that this usage was already influenced by the Exodus tradition: see Childs, \textit{Exodus: A Commentary} (London: S.C.M. Press, 1974), 183 n. 11.
ish prince, Mephibosheth, who was a model for the polio novel *The Little Lame Prince*. The English term *hobble* is cognate with the Dutch term *boblen*, meaning “stammer, stutter.”

**Expelling the Cripples**

Egypt, Moses’ native land, is the source of human beings’ earliest visual record of crippling like that caused by polio. The Glyptotek Museum’s “polio stele,” our first “written” record of a virus infection, consists of a hieroglyph from Memphis, the capital of ancient Egypt, drawn in approximately 1400 BC. It depicts someone (perhaps a temple priest) showing typical clinical signs of paralytic polio.

The stele alludes to the epidemic plague recalled in both Egyptian and Hebrew cultural history and mythology. In some versions, a group of people were expelled from Egypt not because their deity caused an epidemic plague (like the calamities that Moses brings on the Egyptians and that Moses’ deity safeguards the Hebrews against) but because these people carried an infectious disease. Pharaoh isolated them in order to protect others from getting ill. Many writers take Moses to have been an Egyptian—among them Manetho, Strabo, Toland, and Freud. And many ancient authors, including the Roman historian Tacitus, claim that the exodus began because Bocchorius (as Tacitus calls Pharaoh) consulted with the oracle of Hammon and tried to rid Egypt of the portion of the population whose bodies had been deformed (*tabes quae corpora foedaret*). Only then did a leader (Moses) arise from among those with deformed bodies. We do not know whether the long-lived historical memory of this *tabes* should be associated with *tabes dorsalis* (now called “creeping paralysis”), syphilis, leprosy, polio, or some other deforming illness. Eduard Meyer, whose influential *Aegyptische Chronologie* develops this thesis, was writing at a time of polio epidemic in the first years of the twentieth century.

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45. The relationship between the Israelites and a group of lepers (who suffered from “the Asiatic illness”) that had been expelled is taken up by Eduard Meyer in his *Aegyptische Chronologie* (Berlin: Verlag der Königl. Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1904), esp. 92–95. Cf. Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, esp. 29.


47. Tacitus, *Historia*, 5:3.

48. “Plurimi auctores consentiunt orta per Aegyptum tabe quae corpora foedaret, regem Bocchorim adito Hammonis oraculo remedium petentem purgare regnum et id genus hominum ut invisum deis alias in terras avehere iussum” (Tacitus, *Historia*, 5:3).

49. In many of the Greek and Roman stories, it is a plague (some say leprosy—a most serious problem of pollution among the Jews) that separates the Egyptians from the aliens, in which case it is the plague that gives rise in some way to the latter’s Jewishness. (Leprosy, one should add, often leads to paralysis. The same doctors often work on both paralytic polio and leprosy; an example is William Lloyd Aycock at Harvard.)
Burning of the Hand or Tongue

One gloss on Moses’ speech impediment has it that infant Moses was injured during the course of a contest with Pharaoh’s counselors (at this time Moses was presumably still without language—literally *infans*). Moses had worried some of Pharaoh’s counselors by making an occasional grab for Pharaoh’s crown. So these counselors offered baby Moses a choice of two plates: one with burning coals on...
it and the other with gold. The infant was directed now by the angel Gabriel: Moses chose the coals. Hence Moses burnt his tongue, either by placing a live coal in his mouth or by attempting to cool off his hand in his mouth. There is some dispute as to the details—and many different illustrations—in the Jewish and Christian traditions. Still, this ancient story has it that Moses’ stuttering is the result of politically needful physical damage to his tongue during infancy. That damage gives Moses what one stutterer calls a “handicap in the mouth.”

The tale is silent about any long-term handicap to Moses’ hand of the sort about which we learn at the battle of Adonai-nissi.

50. Midrash Rabbah on Exodus 1:16; cf. Encyclopedia Judaica, 12:396. Islamic tradition has a similar story, as reported at Encyclopedia Judaica, 12:403. The same story is found in Midrash Jalkut on Exodus, and also in Shalshelet Hakabalab (see the text notes in J. M. Rodwell’s translation of Qur’an, Sura 20).

51. For this term, see Jezer, Stuttering, 222.
Most Muslims reject the tongue-burning story. After all, they also insist that Moses was cured of his stutter. Moses, they suggest, must have been bodily perfect. Many Jews, on the other hand, are willing to entertain not only the notion that Moses was bodily imperfect but that he had other bad traits as well:

A certain king, having heard of Moses’ fame, sent a renowned painter to portray Moses’ features. On the painter’s return with the portrait the king showed it to his sages, who unanimously proclaimed that the features portrayed were those of a degenerate. The astonished king journeyed to the camp of Moses and observed for himself that the portrait did not lie. Moses admitted that the sages were right and that he had been given from birth many evil traits of character but that he had held them under control and succeeded in conquering them. This, the narrative concludes, was Moses’ greatness, that, in spite of his tremendous handicaps, he managed to become the man of God.52

Some rabbis have attempted to ban further publication of legends putting down Moses’ character.53 But most Jews accept the idea that there was something odd, if not also wrong, with Moses’ tongue (langue)—and hence also with his various languages.

**Moses’ Tridental Language**

The chronology of Moses’ life divides into three, forty-year geolinguistic divisions (Egyptian, Midianite, and Hebrew). These chronologically equal periods match Moses’ association with three women (Batya, Zipporah, and Jochebed).

**Egyptian**: first is the Egyptian-speaking Batya, the noblewoman who was Moses’ adoptive mother. During his forty years’ “sojourn” in Egypt, Moses learned the tongue of Batya, who was Pharaoh’s daughter and/or sister. (Presumably, Moses believed that Batya was his biological mother in the same ambiguous way that lame, punning Oedipus believed mistakenly that Corinthian Merope was his biological mother.) If we believe the New Testament Book of Acts, moreover, Moses also learned hieroglyphic writing and the Egyptian legal and religious lore.54 Some argue that really the only written language Moses could have known, before leaving Egypt, was Egyptian hieroglyphs. In keeping with this view, Freud—who follows here such other “historians” as the Greek-writing Egyptian priest Manetho of Sebbenytos, the Latin-writing Roman geographer

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52. From the commentary on the Mishnah entitled *Tiferet Yisrael*, on Tractate Kiddushin, end, n. 77, as trans. in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 12:400.
53. See *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 12:400.
54. Acts 7:22 (King James Version) reads, “And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds.” The New Century Version reads: “The Egyptians taught Moses everything they knew, and he was a powerful man in what he said and did.”
Strabo, and the English-writing Irish scholar John Toland—insists that Moses was essentially if not also biologically an Egyptian. Did Moses also learn to speak a little Hebrew during his first forty years? Perhaps so. As an infant, only a few days old, before being set out on the Nile, Moses would have heard Hebrew from his biological mother Jochebed and from his siblings Aaron and Miriam. (It is left unwritten whether this period was long enough for him to have been circumcised.) After being plucked out of the Nile, Moses probably learned a good deal of Hebrew from Jochebed, who then became his nurse mother. Moses clearly knew some Hebrew when, at age forty, he killed the overseer of Hebrew-speaking slaves. That incident led to Moses’ fleeing to Midian.

**Midianite:** the flight to Midian marks the beginning of Moses’ second geolinguistic period. Goethe, in his essay “Israel in the Desert” (1819), writes that we meet Moses in exile in Midian as one who is “barely able to communicate.” Presumably, Moses’ high-style Egyptian and infantile Hebrew wouldn’t do there. At forty years old, Moses was de facto again an “infant” and had to pick up the Midianite tongue along with the customs and traditions of that people. From among the Midianites, Moses took a wife, Zipporah, daughter of the Midianite “high priest” Jethro (also called Reuel). The notorious passage in the Torah in which his wife Zipporah flings his son’s foreskin at Moses is, as Rashi suggests, not unrelated to the question of Moses’ “circumcised tongue.” (Circumcision as such is sometimes understood in terms of writing and elision.) In his “Experiment Solitary Touching Stuttering,” Francis Bacon too writes of “Moses, who was linguae praepeditae.” (Lingua means “the tongue or a tonguelike organ” as well as “a language,” and praeputium means “the foreskin, the prepuce.” Curiously, Freud does not really pick up the hint.) Zipporah has an important role in one of the earliest works on the subject of Moses, the drama *Exagoge* by Ezekielos the Poet, a Jewish playwright. The Midianites lived by Mount Sinai and held that


60. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “lingua,” 1.a and 2.a; and s.v. “praeputium.”

mountain in awe. Moses was around eighty years old at the time that God, from the burning bush at Mount Sinai, told him to go back to Egypt. Moses by then had spoken the Midianite tongue, perhaps almost exclusively, for forty years. (The topos is picked up by Zora Neale Hurston in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*.) The Hebrew-language Torah leaves unsaid what spoken language, if any, God used when he spoke with Moses at the burning bush, or which language Moses used.

_Hebrew:_ we have seen that the Hebrew-speaking Jochebed, Moses’ biological mother, became his nurse mother after Moses’ adoptive mother Batya hired her. (One legend has it that Moses refused milk from the first nursemaid whom Batya hired, perhaps because it was unclean or nonkosher.) In Midian, Moses might well have forgotten a good deal of his Hebrew mother’s tongue; by the same token he might have forgotten some of his spoken Egyptian. So argued Rashbam in the twelfth century: Moses told God that, since he had left Egypt at a young age and was now eighty, he lacked fluency in the Egyptian language and would have to stutter to find the proper words. Moreover, since Midian, which had a strange system of writing (now called “alphabetical”), Moses might have begun to develop a different attitude toward the “hieroglyphical” writing he had learned in Egypt. We may speculate that Moses stuttered for the reason that, as a Hebrew who did not know that he was a Hebrew, he had forgotten who he (really) was—at least in terms of “ethnic” identity. One consequence of exile and enslavement is how easily it comes about that one’s tongue will “cleave to the roof of [one’s] mouth.”

Thus, Psalm 137, in its concern with such forced emigration and forgetfulness of the homeland as often befell slaves, suggests that the consequence of slavery in Babylon is a form of hand-and-mouth disability: “…By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres. For there our captors / required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! / Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth.”

After the Babylonian exile due to Nebuchadnezzar, most of the Israeli people forgot the Hebrew language and were able to say only one prayer. If anyone

62. Some hold that even the Torah considers Jethro to be “the father-in-law” of the Jewish religion; he suggests its political and judicial organization (Ex. 18:13–27). He also praises God after the liberation of the Jews (18:9–12).


64. Rashbam, Commentary on Exodus 4:10. Rabbi Samuel ben Meir, or Rashbam, was Rashi’s grandson and a Tosafot commentator in France.

65. Revised Standard Version.

66. Jewish exiles sometimes spoke “distorted” versions of the languages of their diasporic homes according to supposed regulations about the use of a sacred language. David Cohen (Sefer Avraham Yagel Yitzchak Yeranen [Brooklyn, NY: Artscroll Mesorah, 2000], 126), suggests that this so-called distortion helps explain the development of languages like Ladino and Yiddish (he refers to Even HaEzer and Talmud Yerushalmi [Shabbat]).
stood in danger of forgetting his people, it would be the infant Moses. Is that one reason for translating Moses' first complaint to God as, “When I get up before a crowd my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth”? (That is the translation of Moses' words to God in *The Word Made Fresh*.) From talking with Egyptian travelers, Midianite-speaking Moses might also have noted that both Egyptian and Hebrew had changed during his forty-year absence from Egypt. Forty years is a long time—enough, as it would turn out, even to build or rebuild a people, its culture, its language.

So Moses, required by Sinai's God to speak to Pharaoh, might have felt heavy of tongue at the burning bush because he had burned his tongue, or did not know Egyptian very well, or had forgotten the Promised Land (or had never known of it at all).

**Let My People Go: Which Language?**

Go down, Moses,  
Way down in Egypt-land  
Tell old Pharaoh  
To let my people go.  
—*African-American spiritual*

It is not clear to us (and maybe not clear to Moses either) which language God wants Moses to use when he speaks before Pharaoh. When Moses gives his reason for hesitating to take on the job, is he thinking of his inability to speak well in *one particular* language or another—Egyptian? Hebrew? Midianite?—or in *any and all* languages? The prophet Ezekiel's task is thus apparently much easier than Moses' was, and he knows it: “And he said unto me, Son of man, go, get thee unto the house of Israel, and speak with my words unto them. For thou art not sent to a people of a strange speech and of an hard language, but to the house of Israel” (Ezek. 3:4–5). (As a child playing hooky in Montreal, I used to wonder whether my observation that infants from bilingual homes often “babble” differently in different languages was relevant to the infant Moses' speech impediment. My assumption about multilingual babbling has since become the subject of scientific study.)

Is the long-term emigrant Moses prone to stutter in Egyptian, say, on account of his having lost the *diplomatic* language of Egypt? That is the suggestion of the emigrant Rambam (he had left Spain for Egypt) in the twelfth century.

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68. King James Version.


70. Rambam is Rabbi Moses ben Maimon—Maimonides. His own emigration history is worth recalling here: his family fled Almohad, Spain, for Fez, Morocco, and eventually settled in Forstatt, Egypt.
Or was God requiring Moses to speak Hebrew to Pharaoh, his adoptive grandfather? An outburst in Hebrew would be one way for God—through his dummy Moses—to announce to Pharaoh that the slaves had now become a nation in their own right. Herder, millennia later, would say that a nation, or Volk or gens, simply is its language. If Pharaoh were a late-eighteenth-century monarch, he would understand the gesture of a rebellious Jew using baby Hebrew in the royal court—even if the king himself knew no Hebrew whatever. Was Moses worried that, if he spoke Hebrew, Pharaoh would be unable to understand the particular meaning of his words? Or was he more afraid that, if Pharaoh understood the gesture of his using Hebrew, Pharaoh's heart would harden?

The Dummy Brother

A ventriloquist God, himself something of a stutterer, suggests, in response to the stutterer Moses’ hint that God find another dummy to go to Pharaoh, that Moses become a ventriloquist and find himself a dummy of his own (Ex. 4:13–15). Enter now, the Hebrew-speaking Aaron, brother of Moses. Aaron is the elder brother. (One view has it that Moses hesitated to accept God’s mission because Moses thought that the honor, such as it was, should go to the senior brother.) From now on, Moses’ brother Aaron speaks for Moses as if he were Moses’ Lordkeeper. (The “Lordkeeper”—an official title—spoke for the stuttering English King Charles I. Charles was the ostensible author of the strangely iconodule best seller Eikon Basilike, and he called himself unfit to speak in propria persona: “Now, because I am unfit for much speaking, I mean to bring up the fashion of my predecessors, to have my Lordkeeper speak for me in most things.”)

The Torah often refers to Moses and Aaron as if they two were one subject. It is almost, in the grammar of Exodus, as if stuttering Moses and fluent Aaron were Siamese twins. Recognizing the ekphrastic, conjoined personification at work, the Torah (often) uses a singular verb with a double subject: “Moses and Aaron goes.” Or sometimes it uses a singular subject with a plural verb: “Moses go” or “Aaron go.” The Qur’an renders the brothers even more explicitly corporate.

The Torah’s frequently plural name (elohim) for its apparently single God (adonai) is a related problem, expressed nowhere more clearly than in a need for written law.

71. “When God told Moses to deliver a message to Pharaoh, Moses assumed that he was to speak in the Egyptian language. . . . [God] told him, ‘I have appointed you a master over Pharaoh. Thus, he is your inferior, and you are the head of a major empire. Consequently, in accordance with proper protocol, you will address him in Lashon Hakodesh [the Holy Language]—Hebrew. Do not be concerned about his inability to understand Hebrew because Aaron will be your interpreter.” Moshe Bogomilsky, Vedibarta Bam: And You Shall Speak of Them (Brooklyn, NY: Bogomilsky, 1995–97), Exodus 6:30–7:1.


When the stutterer Moses travels from Midian to Egypt in order to join up with his fluent brother, Moses knows more or less three languages. What language did Moses and Aaron speak to each other as they started out on their conjoint, ventriloquist-dummy career? Perhaps it was the infant Hebrew that Moses remembered from having played with his Hebrew-speaking nurse mother Jochebed’s son some eighty years earlier. Or perhaps Aaron knew some Egyptian. Ultimately, it may not matter (much) which of these languages they used when speaking with each other. In terms of the great intellectual, spiritual, and legislative journey that the consanguineous, collactaneous, and conjoint brothers had to make during the following forty years, both the Hebrew language and the Egyptian language were seriously defective—from the perspective of the Jewish God. Hebrew was not a written language at that time, and the Jews needed a written language. Egyptian, though a written language, was also defective: it relied on a hieroglyphic, an image-based, system of representation that was anathema to the Jewish God. (Some scholars understand hieroglyphic script as purely conceptual or nonrepresentational writing, but their overly historical view is, as we shall see, beside the philosophical point. So too is the opposite view: that alphabets are partly representational.) As soon as the Jews left Egypt, these twinned problems—that Hebrew was not a written language and that Egyptian was an inappropriately written language—became clearly significant. At this point, the writing system of Midianite—a language that Moses the stutterer could read and write, while his fluently speaking brother could not—came to the forefront of Jewish spiritual history, where it has remained ever since.

Scholars have long believed that Moses picked up something from the Midianites as well as something from the Egyptians. Usually they say that Moses got the idea of a violent God in Midian and the idea of monotheism in Egypt. These scholars would do well to focus also on the linguistic factors at work in Moses’ multicultural background. The tablets of the law obtained by Moses on Mount Sinai were apparently written in the North Semitic alphabet, or aleph-tov, of Midian. (This speculation is related to a claim made in the first fragment attributed

74. See Leonard Kriegel, *Falling into Life: Essays* (San Francisco, CA: North Point, 1991), 161. A polio survivor, Kriegel, in his essay “From the Burning Bush,” calls Aaron “a kind of verbal aide-de-camp” and thus “the first editor.”

75. See Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 18.

76. See, e.g., de Certeau, *Writing of History*, 269, and of course Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism*.

77. For aleph-tov, see Robert K. Logan, *The Alphabet Effect: The Impact of the Phonic Alphabet on the Development of Western Civilization* (New York: Morrow, 1986); there is still considerable debate about the Proto-Sinaitic script found at Serabit el Khadim; cf. note 91 below. Moses’ feelings about his forty years in Midian are unclear. In Num. 31:15–18, after his soldiers had killed all of the men among the Midianites, Moses—despite his own intimate connection to Midian—ordered his army officers to kill all of
to the Greco-Jewish historian Eupolemus in the second century BC,\textsuperscript{78} and it is supported by scholars like Hubert Grimme.)\textsuperscript{79}

So the two brothers needed each other: the elder was able to speak properly, like most people; but only the younger, the socially handicapped, knew how to write properly. The laws retrieved from Mount Sinai had to be written in an alphabetical, nonpictographic language such as Moses had learned in Midian. In order to accomplish God’s purpose, Moses needed the linguistic help of Aaron to prepare the geographic exodus from Egypt, but he also needed the Midianite alphabet to express the spiritual exodus from Egyptian creed and the spiritual entrance to a new religion. The tablets of the law, themselves graven, include the quintessentially important prohibition of “graven images,” so it stands to reason that the tablets should not be graven with images or hieroglyphs. The alphabet was crucial in the reformation of Israel as a literate, iconoclastic people.

Still, even the newly Hebrew, Midianite alphabet was, in some small way, pictographic, not absolutely unlike Egyptian hieroglyphs. It is all too easy to confuse some North Semitic letters with some hieroglyphs: that is, to confuse some more-or-less pictographic or acrophonic—yet still transitionally alphabetic—symbols with the older, idol-reminiscent signs. The decalogue, which commands, “Thou shall not make unto thee any graven image,” was itself graven, like the Golden Calf. The English word \textit{graven} in the King James Version is not a bad translation of the Hebrew \textit{pesel}. And the same God who disallows the graven image (\textit{pesel}) actually enjoins Moses to engrave (\textit{pisal-licha}) the second set of stone tablets of the law (Ex. 34:1). No matter how worried Moses might be that his iconodule people would misunderstand the stone tablets and their new symbols—the alphabet—as images, God insists that Moses produce tablets at least like the ones that he smashed when provoked by the Golden Calf: “\textit{Pisal-licha} two stone tablets like unto the first . . . which thou didst break.”

Whatever Aaron’s fluency in spoken Hebrew, his understanding of the distinction between idol-reminiscent hieroglyphs and alphabetical written characters is inadequate. Nowhere is the inadequacy clearer than when he goes along with the making of the Golden Calf, soon after the exodus from Egypt and at precisely the moment when his brother is on Mount Sinai receiving the laws: “And [Aaron] received the gold at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving

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the male children and the nonvirgin females but to save alive all of the virgin girls for his troops. The Israelites had already taken the animals and goods of the Midianites and burned their towns in divinely commanded revenge “regarding the matter of Peor” (recounted in Num. 25:1–9).
In the Middle Egyptian Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor, from which this writing is taken, the servant speaks to his master: "You must answer when questioned. You must speak to the king with presence of mind. You must answer without stammering! A man's mouth can save him . . ." (Miriam Lichtheim, Ancient Egyptian Literature, 3 vols. [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973], 1:212).

In the writing, the seated man with hand to mouth is the determinative used after verbs (and other words) for speaking, thinking, eating, and feeling. The Egyptian verb *nitit* is one of a set of verbs with a preformative *n*- and a reduplicated biliteral root (in this case, *it*, keeping in mind that *i* is a consonant here). These verbs are generally intransitive, often reflexive, and frequently iterative, conveying repeated or continuous action. See Alan Gardiner, Egyptian Grammar, 3rd ed. (London: Griffith Institute, Ashmolean Museum, 1957), 212, § 276; and Giovanni Conti, Studi sul bilitterismo in semitico e in egiziano (Florence: Istituto di linguistica e di lingue orientali, Università di Firenze, 1980).
tool, and made a molten calf” (Ex. 32:4). Making an Egyptian idol—the graven image of a calf—is not the act of a man who has transcended representational symbolization or understands alphabetical writing. (Muslim tradition denies Aaron’s backsliding in much the way that it denies Moses’ stutter: the Qur’an introduces one “al-Samiri” into the narrative, and it is al-Samiri, not Aaron, who makes the idol.)

Moses disliked graven imagery so deeply that he smashed the graven tablets that God had given to him in the presence of Aaron’s graven idol. (An engraving of Rembrandt’s Moses Smashing the Tables of the Law hangs in the Freud Museum in London.) Such anger is often associated with those who stutter, or happer. (William Horman writes in his Vulgaria [1519] about “a foul anger: in the which the mouth foams, the nostrils drop, and the tongue happers.”) The same anger came to the fore when Moses violently struck the rock in the desert; and some interpreters claim that anger helps to explain Moses’ buffing. (Buffing denotes “speak[ing] with obstructed and explosive utterance, . . . stutter[ing].”)

The Golden Calf that so angered Moses was probably a representation of Hator—an Egyptian cow-deity often shown with a solar disk flanked by horns on her head. The Theban Hator was considered a goddess of the dead and wore the interestingly “acrophonic” hieroglyph for “west” (amenta) on her head. From this viewpoint, Moses might have objected to the Golden Calf not merely because it was an idol, and in particular the idol/goddess of love, dance, and alcohol—Hator. He might have objected also because Hator could have had on her head an exemplar of the system of quasi-representational writing that Moses was trying to reject. The Golden Calf may have been a linguistic shibboleth-in-reverse, which could help to explain the demigenocide that an acrophone precipitated among the Jewish population after their crossing of the Red Sea.

Arnold Schoenberg, in his great opera Moses and Aron (1926–32), suggests how “Aron,” when he allows for the worship of the Golden Calf, himself stands for something so presumably material as the idol. Moses, on the other hand, stands for something so ideally immaterial as alphabetic writing. Moses’ words

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80. Revised Standard Version.
82. The engraving is a copy of Rembrandt’s painting Moses Smashing the Tables of the Law (1659), oil on canvas, which hangs in the Gemäldegalerie, Berlin.
83. William Horman, Vulgaria (Sentences in English and Latin) (London: Richard Pynson, 1519), 75, spelling updated; MS. For the word happer, see Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “happer.”
86. The writing system might use the initial sound or acrophone rather than the entire syllable. Thus bee could stand for /bee/, /bah/, /boe/, /beh/, and so on. A “picture” of a bee and also “simplified” representations of it might be acrophonic pictograms.
87. In Moses and Aron, Moses is a bass-baritone, barking out the Word of God in sprechstimme, unable to convey to the people his vision of an all-powerful, invisible deity. Aron (the name was shortened in the title of the opera by the superstitious Schoenberg to prevent it from having thirteen letters) is a lyric tenor who “sells” Moses’ visions to the Israelites with conjuring tricks and visible miracles—water turning to blood, a staff becoming a serpent, the pillar of fire, and the Golden Calf.
fail in the public sphere, where they are most needed, because of the relative difficulty of the alphabetic abstraction required to conceive the Hebrew God. Thus Schoenberg’s insightful opera “ends” with Moses’ plaint about how words fail him: “O word, thou word, that I lack! (Moses sinks to the ground in despair).”\(^{88}\) As Michael Gielen says, “[Moses’] vocabulary is quite limited. He uses immense concepts like ‘eternal,’ ‘omnipotent,’ etc., whereas Aaron is much more fluent and more nimble at speaking.”\(^{89}\)

The “source” of the alphabet seems to me and other scholars to have been Midian, where Moses spent the middle forty years of his life. But it does not follow that Moses was the only Jew to pick up on it there. It even seems likely that the Jews already had long-standing relations in Midian. First, Jacob’s youngest son Joseph was sold into slavery (instead of dying in the pit into which his brothers had cast him) thanks to the mediation of Midianite traders.\(^{90}\) The way to slavery in Egypt was thus by way of Midian, even as the way out of idolatry in Egypt was by way of Midian. Second, Pharaoh’s Semitic slaves probably worked the turquoise mine at Serabit el-Khadem—in the Sinai desert near one of the spots that scholars say was the historical Mount Sinai.\(^{91}\) By Midianite trading, the Jews were brought to Egypt as slaves; by Midianite writing, the Jews were freed.

**Law Codes**

Also laws were first written by Moses for the Jews.

—*Eupolemus*, Fragment 1

Moses’ speech impediment indicates a kind of legislative capacity. (It is the law of Moses that Martin Luther criticizes when Luther puts down stammering in his commentary on Galatians.)\(^{92}\) By the same token, Moses’ stutter suggests how

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88. As trans. by Allen Forte.

89. Gielen is conductor of a fine recording of this opera (Phillips 1974), which is also the soundtrack for the movie; he is also a composer in his own right and a student of Josef Polnauer (who studied early on with Schoenberg).

90. Ex. 37:28–36 (American Standard Version): “Then there passed by Midianites, merchants; and they [Joseph’s brothers] drew and lifted up Joseph out of the pit, and sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver: and they brought Joseph into Egypt. . . . And the Midianites sold him into Egypt unto Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh’s, the captain of the guard.”


92. Martin Luther, *A Commentary on Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians*, trans. Theodore Graebner, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, n.d.): “The conscience ought to know only Christ. To say this is easy, but in times of trial, when the conscience writhes in the presence of God, it is not so easy to do. At such times we are to believe in Christ as if there were no Law or sin anywhere, but only Christ. We ought to say to the Law: ‘Mister Law, I do not get you. You stutter so much. I don’t think that you have anything to say to me’” (Luther on verse 3, chap. 4).
inability to get words out makes for acting out—and for action. (In the great Translation Scene in Faust [1808], Goethe allies the biblical Moses with Faust’s transformation of Word into Deed.)

Other cultures too feature innovative legislators or rulers who stutter. Battus consulted the oracle on account of his stutter and came thus to found the Greek colony at Cyrene in Libya (630 BC). (One legend has it that Battus’s name means “stutterer.”) The stuttering Roman Emperor Claudius (41–54 AD) made new laws on the subject of language and added three letters to the Roman alphabet. The Huron lawgiver Dekanawida (sixteenth century) stuttered, which is sometimes educed as an explanation for why and how he formed, through his spokesperson Hiawatha, the great alliance with the Iroquois. There are also the iconoclast Byzantine Emperor Michael II “the Stutterer” (820–29); the French King Louis II (877–889); Bohemund III “the Stutterer,” Prince of Antioch (1163–1201); the British King George VI (1937–52); and King Charles I of England, already discussed.

Consider as well Camille Desmoulins (1760–94), whose speech impediment has long been an interest of novelists, playwrights, and biographers. Desmoulins was a notary who, on account of his stutter, had no law clients. But when it came to politics, Desmoulins finally found his persona or speaking voice. Called “the first republican of France,” Desmoulins became fluent on July 12, 1789. On that day, famously, he was the man who called the crowd “to arms” and, as some say, commenced the French Revolution. After that day, Desmoulins’s medium of fluency became writing—the revolutionary press of pamphlets and newspapers.

95. For Claudius’s relevant legislation, see Shell, Stutter, chap. 6, esp. sec. 5.
96. Dekanawida (also spelled Dekanahwidah and Dekanawidah) likely means something like “two rivers flowing together” as well as “Siamese twin.” He convinced the fifty leaders of the Iroquois nation to sit at a grand council to work out problems peacefully. In this way, it is sometimes said, he created the world’s first representative government. Benjamin Franklin, who studied the Iroquois, proposed that the new United States adopt a similar system. See Alice Beck Kehoe, North American Indians: A Comprehensive Account, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1992).
97. In Hilary Mantel’s novel, A Place of Greater Safety (London: Viking, 1992), 402, Danton seems to argue that Desmoulins’s stutter was a key to understanding him: “In the old days, [Camille] claimed that his stutter was a complete obstacle to successful pleading [in court]. Of course, when one is used to it, it might discomfort, irritate or embarrass. But Hérault has pointed out that Camille has wrung some extraordinary verdicts from distraught judges. Certainly I have observed that Camille’s stutter comes and goes. It goes when he is angry or wishes forcibly to make a point; it comes when he feels put upon, and when he wishes to show people that he is in fact a nice person who is really not quite able to cope.”
Do legislators stutter because speech dysfunction helps create political language? Enthusiastic prophets such as Jeremiah and Isaiah are given precise instructions about what they should say to the people and to rulers. But the reluctant, speech-impeded Moses is given room for creativity. The Hebrew word tzit-tzit refers to the 613 fringes of thread attached to the corners of the prayer shawl that male adult Jews are commanded to wear; each fringe signals one of the laws that Moses, the stuttering legislator, passed on. The term tzit-tzit suggests Moses’s stutter: it is a “pure” reduplicative, like murmur and barbar.

Cure-Alls

The Jewish God made no offer to repair Moses’ heavy tongue. God called upon Aaron to be Moses’ spokesperson instead.

But the Christian deity cures even mutes. The Douay Bible’s “comment” (1609) on the Isaiah passage, “The tongue of mafflers [stutterers] shall speak readily and plain,” is: “This prophecy of maffling or imperfect tongues, to speak readily, is fulfilled in the Church of Christ.” Not surprisingly, then, the Christian apostles did not need the same prosthetic aids that Moses required: spokespersons like Aaron and alphabetic writing borrowed from Midianite. When Jesus sent forth his apostles, and warned them about opposition and persecution, his enthusiastic dummies were unafraid. Along with his command to spread the gospel was his promise that God would be with their mouths: “When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what

101 The numerical values of the Hebrew letters in the word tzit-tzit add up to 600. If you add five knots and eight strings, then the sum is 613, which is the number of Mosaic commandments.

you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but
the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.” (Matt. 10:19–20).

God’s being “with the mouths of his disciples” is at the very center of Pen-
tecostal Christianity and its endorsement of enthusiastic ventriloquism. On the
day of Pentecost, it was “given to them what they should speak.” For it was not
took full control of their mouths so that they said not one word except what He
wanted spoken. And He wanted only one thing said: ‘. . . they spoke the wonder-
ful works of God’ ” (Acts 2:11). For the Book of Acts, Christology would seem
to overcome the problems about language and multilingualism that inform the
story of Moses.

We have asked which particular language Moses speaks to Pharaoh. The
Book of Acts seeks to void this question by overcoming (or sublating) the very
notion of particular tongues. The familiar may become an other one or the all-
fulfilling none:

And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one
accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as
of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were
sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire,
and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy
Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them
utterance. And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out
every nation under heaven. Now when this was noised abroad, the
multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every
man heard them speak in his own language. And they were all amazed
and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which
speak Galilaeans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue,
wherein we were born? Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the
dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judaea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus,
and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya
about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and
Arabians, we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works
of God. (Acts 2:1–11)

Acts obviates the problems posed by the stuttering barbarians of Babel and, like-
wise, puts down all the down-to-earth ways we muddle through despite our prob-
lems with language and communication. The Book of Acts posits a perfection of

104. See the multilingual web site of David Wilkersen: www.tsulpitseries.org/english/undated/tsmouth.html
(accessed July 28, 2005).
105. But then, some people find Christology itself a kind of stuttering—as when my old neighbor Leonard Cohen
sings, “Oh bless thee continuous stutter / Of the word being made into flesh,” in “The Window” (1979) on his
album Recent Songs.
106. King James Version.
absolutely fluent simultaneous translations by which to overcome every ordinary
and political issue of communication in a postalphabetical Promised Land.

Moses—as any happener, buffer, or cripple might—irascibly struck a des-
ert rock when he was told to talk it into producing water. The failure to speak
persuasively to a stone is apparently why this thrice infanted stutterer was not
allowed to enter the Promised Land. He had also smashed the engraved tablets
of the law—more stones—when he could not communicate his anger adequately
in words. Still, it seems likely that, had Moses, or another of his socially disabled
ilk, not really destroyed the first set of tablets and then really carried down the
second, there would have been no Promised Land for anyone to write about as a
spiritual ideal.

A Glottal Catch

A glottal stop is, in Webster’s words, “the speech sound produced by momen-
tary complete closure of the glottis, followed by an explosive release.” The word
for stutter in some languages contains the glottal stop, or glottal catch, which is
“a complete stoppage of the breath-stream by the vocal cords.” In English,
speakers make this stop “between the two oh’s of ‘Oh-oh!,’ when spoken in sur-
prise or reproof.” The feel is very much like a cough—which is how Henry
Sweet, a model for George Bernard Shaw’s Professor Higgins in Pygmalion
(1916), described it in his Handbook of Phonetics (1877) and History of English Sounds
(1888). Among languages where glottal stops play an important role is the
Native American Chumash.

In written Hebrew, the first letter, aleph, is not, as it is often said to be,
“silent.” The aleph indicates the glottal stop with which stutterers are so famil-
lar—and the letter is also the alphabetic counterpart of a hieroglyph associ-
ated with the ox or cow, and hence with idolatry and the Golden Calf. The

107. See Num. 20:12. For legends about the striking of
the rock, see Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews,
trans. Henriette Szold (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publica-
108. Robert Anderson Hall, Introductory Linguistics (Phil-
adelphia, PA: Chilton, 1964), 42.
110. Henry Sweet, A History of English Sounds from the
stop is produced by a sudden shutting or opening of the
glottis, as in a cough.” See also Sweet, A Handbook of Pho-
element of this ‘glottal catch’ is an ordinary cough.”
111. For the glottal stop in the Chumash language, see
also the two essays on this language and its stops in Pro-
cedings of the Meeting of the Society for the Study of the Indig-
enous Languages of the Americas, July 2–4, 1993 (Berkeley,
CA: Survey of California and Other Indian Languages,
1994) and essays in Hakan-Pennitian Workshop, July 3, 1993,
ed. Margaret Langdon (Berkeley, CA: Survey of Califor-
nia and Other Indian Languages, 1994).
112. John F. A. Sawyer, A Modern Introduction to Bibli-
cal Hebrew (Stocksfield, UK: Oriel, 1976), 8: “Aleph not
pronounced, except between vowels where it stands for a
glottal stop.”
and Phoenician aleph, lit. ‘ox’; the character may have
developed from the hieroglyph of an ox’s head.”
sound of the sudden opening or shutting of the glottis with an emission of breath encapsulates Moses’ difficult role as legislator in a context where the One God is revolted by images; where the divine prophet stutters; where the divine name is unpronounceable as written; and where the system of writing, while alphabetic, is borrowed from a polytheistic and still partially hieroglyphic tradition.

The language-stymied Jewish exile Paul Celan ends his great poem “Frankfurt, September” at the point where the glottal stop, or Kehlkopfverschlusslaut (literally, occlusion of the head of the throat), all but impossibly manages almost to break forth into the song that alone would grant fluency:

Die Simili-Dohle
Frühstückt

Der Kehlkopfverschlusslaut
singt

My teacher John Felstiner translates thus: “The simulate / jackdaw / breakfasts // The glottal stop / Sings.”114 In Mosaic tradition, only the glottal stop could sing. Nikolai Popov and Heather McHugh translate “Die Simili- / Dohle” as “the pseudo-jackdaw (cough-caw’s double)—the hyphenated “cough-caw” recalling the Czech word kavka, meaning “jackdaw,” and recalling as well the Jewish Czech author Kafka, who died in silence when an infection utterly stopped up his larynx.115


115. So Popov and McHugh point out in the preface to their translation.
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