1

The Journey Begins

The Sea

> A journey is called that because you cannot know what you will discover, what you will do with what you find, or what you find will do to you.
>
> —James Baldwin, *I Am Not Your Negro*

The wilderness narrative begins as the Israelites leave Egypt in highly dramatic fashion.[1] They spend days in anticipation, meticulously preparing for the meal of their lives, which they eat huddled in their homes while Egypt sleeps. Roasted lamb is consumed hurriedly and in horror while God strikes down every Egyptian firstborn, the crimson smear on the Israelite doorposts the only thing standing between their families and the same fate. Fortified for the long road ahead, they have barely begun the journey out of Egypt when Moses tells them to turn back. It is not time to leave, not *quite* yet.

Having obeyed their leader's command, the Israelites find themselves standing on the edge of redemption only to be faced with the Egyptian army hurtling toward them on one side, and on the other – the sea. As they face the terrifying prospect of death either way, Moses stretches his hand over the water, and a path appears. God holds back the Egyptians barely long enough for the Israelites to escape on dry ground. From the other side they witness the breathtaking spectacle of the waves crashing down over their enemies before they leave the quieted sea behind and face the long, dangerous journey through the wilderness that now confronts them.

Will they survive? We know the answer because we know how the story ends. Here at the beginning, the Israelites' future hangs in the balance until the very last moment. They may not yet be in the wilderness, but their

departure from Egypt through the sea in Exodus 14 is written like a wilderness story, an opening salvo that signals what lies ahead. As is typical of the episodes still to come, the Israelites face a circumstance that puts their survival in jeopardy and complain to Moses about it, calling his leadership into question. Moses responds, as does God, and a miraculous event eliminates the threat before they move on to the next stage of their journey.

The circumstance here is not the typical sort of threat to survival we will confront in the wilderness, although this is understandable given the character of the sea episode as a transition out of Egypt – they face not lack of water or food, or snakes that bite, but the clear and present danger of annihilation at the hands of the Egyptian army or suffocation beneath the waves. We are pulled into the drama as we get to see this circumstance from multiple perspectives. The narrator describes Pharaoh preparing his army and setting out in pursuit (Exodus 14:5–9), but our vantage point then switches to that of the Israelites standing at the edge of the sea. We lift our eyes along with them to see all the chariots of Egypt barreling in their direction, Pharaoh himself leading the charge (Exodus 14:10).

What the Israelites see when they look up provokes an emotional response: "They were very afraid" (Exodus 14:10). Fear is the emotion we tend to feel when we perceive a significant threat to our well-being of which we are not entirely in control, whether to our physical existence, to people we love, or to goals that are important to us. Emotions are not "blind forces that have no selectivity or intelligence about them," according to Martha Nussbaum's account in *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. They involve judgment about what is important for our flourishing. Such judgments can be thoughtful, conscious, and deliberative; they can also be reflexive, a matter of habit or instinct. Either way, they can involve cultural influence and social pressure, but they are judgments nonetheless.[2] Fear is no exception. We experience it as individuals, of course, but it is also a political emotion when it is felt across members of a society about a perceived threat to their collective well-being.[3]

Fear can prompt thoughtful analysis of what really constitutes a threat, how to prioritize threats, and how to respond to them. Yet, as Nussbaum observes, it also "has a way of running ahead of careful thought," generating a "stampede to hasty action, prompted by insecurity." As such, fear is at odds with what binds us together. It easily undermines trust; it can destroy relationships and tear societies apart.[4] The episode at the sea may be the first time the Israelites experience fear in the wilderness narrative, but it is far from the last, and a driving question throughout is what they will do with this potentially dangerous emotion.

Here at the sea, the Israelites initially cry out to God, an open-ended plea for help that exposes their vulnerability in what appears to be an utterly hopeless situation (Exodus 14:10). When they turn to Moses, however, they are not afraid but angry, and they blame him for landing them in this mess (Exodus 14:11–12). Their complaint gives us as much reason to question their character as his. As their leader, Moses is supposed to ensure their survival, but his command to turn back to the sea, where imminent death appears inevitable, quite reasonably looks to them like poor judgment, if not outright malice. Their complaint is as prescient as it is sarcastic: "Was it for lack of graves in Egypt that you took us to die in the wilderness?" It looks ahead to the death of the entire exodus generation after Sinai, particularly to the "graves of coveting" in Numbers 11. Yet that fate is not Moses's doing; their own rebellious nature is to blame.

The Israelites continue with a we-told-you-so: "Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, when we said 'Let us be so we may serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness'?" They do not actually say such a thing earlier in the narrative, so their accusation rings hollow. This gratuitous rhetorical question complements the sarcasm in the first part of their complaint and fits with their rebellious character. Yet we might also wonder whether this is a fundamentally different kind of reaction to their circumstances than their fearful cry for divine help at the end of verse 10. Especially because Moses responds to their fear and not to their anger (Exodus 14:13–14), we can sense a tension at this point in the narrative. Are the Israelites afraid because of their circumstances? Or are they angry about what they judge to be poor leadership?

One way to navigate this tension is to take it as evidence that two different versions of the story have been combined. This is easy to do if we are attuned to the idea that the Torah has a discernible literary history and are looking for signs of it. The Israelites cry out to God *and* complain to Moses; this has often been taken as a doublet, each response attributed to a different version of the narrative. These two versions have been tracked across a number of other perceived doublets and contradictions, and Exodus 14 is a rare case in which proponents of both the Documentary Hypothesis and supplementary models agree that two relatively complete versions have been combined.[5] They disagree only on whether the combined text has itself been updated. The Documentary Hypothesis would have us read the Israelites' cry to God in Exodus 14:10 as part of one independent narrative source (P) and the complaint against Moses in

verses 11–12 as part of another (J). Readers working with a supplementary model often take the complaint as a part of a later revision of the combined text.[6]

These models are efforts to address what is fundamentally a literary problem. The coherence of pentateuchal narrative quite obviously breaks down at some points, and to proceed as though such tensions do not exist is a failure to do justice to the complexity and richness of the text. Yet tension is also an element of how literature *works*. As we read, we are constantly making judgments about the genre of a text, taking note of what themes are emerging, and noticing how the characters develop, how the plot progresses, how time and place work together to establish a setting, and what role that setting plays in the narrative. All these activities, as Wolfgang Iser argues in *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, help us build a coherent understanding of the narrative, which evolves as we fit each new piece of information into the picture we have already built at any given point as we make our way through the text. A horizon, or point of tension, occurs when we encounter a new feature that prompts us to renegotiate that understanding. Many tensions are productive and eventually either resolved or left in such a way as to contribute to our sense of what the text means. So it is premature to attribute different elements of a text to different authors – to interpret a tension as a fracture in the text, a sign of editorial work, of literary history – before we have explored the role of that tension in the fabric of the narrative, or engaged deeply in what Iser calls "consistency-building."[7]

To put it differently, if the history of the Torah is fundamentally a literary problem, it matters how well we read. Ideally, we would be able to see its evolution across different versions, but extant manuscripts give us material evidence only for the latest stages, so we must rely on our interpretive abilities to sort out the earlier ones.[8] Historical criticism as typically practiced involves applying one or another model of composition history to a given text, with the goal of reconstructing whatever sources or layers our model teaches us to look for. We tend to leave holistic readings that are concerned with what the text means and how it might be significant to those who are interested in working only with the so-called final form.[9] Yet finding the fractures that let us differentiate sources or layers certainly involves making interpretive judgments, and these are likely to be much more sound if we ground them in a deep and thorough reading of the text. As Meir Sternberg put it, "the task of decomposition calls for the most sensitive response to the arts of

composition."[10] Historical readers must also be literary readers, as the quality of our historical-critical analyses will depend on the strength of our interpretive judgments.

When we dig a bit deeper into what appear to be tensions between God and Moses, fear and anger, exodus and wilderness, we find that these elements work together in ways that are crucial for understanding the narrative. It is possible for the Israelites to fear *both* the Egyptians *and* the possibility of death in the wilderness. Indeed it is this liminal position between Egypt and the wilderness that propels the story forward.[11] Having traveled from Rameses to Succoth and then to Etham, the Israelites find themselves at the edge of the wilderness (Exodus 12:37; 13:20) and on the cusp of success when their next move positions them with threats of death on both sides and no way out – at least not that they can see. The entire mission appears to be doomed *because they did what Moses told them to do*: "Turn back and camp before Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, before Baal-zephon. You shall camp facing it, by the sea" (Exodus 14:2).[12]

Why would Moses put the Israelites in jeopardy like this, just when they could taste freedom? Our vantage point outside the narrative gives us a privileged view; we can see how the episode ends and that the command to turn back to the sea came ultimately from God. But the Israelites are *in medias res*. They imagine the ending that looks inevitable from where they sit, on the brink of death rather than the redemption they expected, and interpret their predicament accordingly: it is the fault of their very own leader, and it feels like an egregious betrayal of trust. Moses's first encounter with God on a mountain in the wilderness established his role in this story – to shepherd the Israelites out of Egypt – and gave him a series of signs to perform in order to inspire in them trust that he could and would fulfill it.[13] Now the Israelites have almost made it out of Egypt. It looks like their trust has paid off. Yet Moses's command to turn back, to undo what had already in effect been accomplished, leaves them not only terrified but livid at their leader's apparent failure to do his job. In this mix of anger, fear, and hopelessness – the result of being caught between Egypt and the wilderness with nowhere to turn – they revert to what feels known, comfortable, and safe.

Fear and anger are also deeply linked. As we encounter different elements of the narrative, knowledge we have about them may prove relevant to understanding their role in the text. In this case, what we know about human emotions should give us pause about attributing the Israelites' cry to God and their complaint against Moses to different

versions of the story. Like all emotions, according to Nussbaum's account, fear and anger have in common a vulnerability with respect to something in the world that is significant for our well-being. Yet these two are particularly close to one another. Fear involves a threat, or the potential for a wrong to occur, while anger is a response to a wrong that has already occurred. They are also closely linked *in this story*. The threat involves the potential for death, either by drowning in the sea or at the hands of the Egyptian army, while the perceived wrong was committed by Moses, whose command has exposed them to this very threat.

Fear and anger together heighten our feeling of vulnerability and tend to make us want to seek retribution for wrongs done or at least lay blame. Blame can involve holding an individual accountable or at least distancing ourselves from them. The Israelites take their best shot at both here. They accuse Moses of dereliction of duty, arguing that he seeks their demise rather than their well-being, and they wish they could return to Egypt, to a time before any of this had happened. Blame cannot itself remove a threat or repair a wrong, but it can restore at least the illusion of control, which mitigates the feeling of profound vulnerability – the only salve that might be possible for the Israelites under the circumstances.[14]

The Israelites' fear is thought to contrast not only with their angry complaint against Moses but also with the idea that they leave Egypt willfully and with purpose ("with raised hand," Exodus 14:8).[15] If a distinction between fear, on the one hand, and anger and determination, on the other, were to hold, it might let us track two versions into other parts of the narrative. But the idea that the Israelites' determination in verse 8 is at odds with their fear in verse 10 weakens considerably when we look at plot and character development. We know from the beginning of the story that the Egyptians are going to pursue because the narrator tells us, but the Israelites do not know this until they see them coming, a development that is both terrifying and unexpected given that Pharaoh asked them to leave after the death of the firstborn (Exodus 12:31–33).[16] Fear is not a static trait of the Israelites in one version of the story versus the other but a state that emerges in response to a change in circumstances within the story.[17]

This shift from determination to fear is also tied to a central theme in the narrative. The expression "with raised hand" not only conveys the idea of purpose but is also used to express the LORD's role as a divine warrior who will fight and win on behalf of his people.[18] The Israelites are characterized as an army as they march out of Egypt, but the use of this particular expression conveys that they are leading themselves instead of

being led by God, and it implies that they do not trust God any more than they trust Moses.[19] This is the very thematic tension that will come to a head at the sea, where they are forced to realize their impotence, and be resolved by the end of the story, when they come to trust God and Moses alike. Once we go beyond initial perceptions and work to ground our sense of narrative coherence (or lack thereof) in the fabric of plot, character, and thematic development, the idea that two independent versions of the sea crossing have been combined in this episode begins to unravel.

The Israelites' wish notwithstanding, it is too late to return to Egypt because Pharaoh and his army are blocking the way. If the Israelites *could* act on their interpretation of their circumstances, they would doom themselves. The potential for tragedy here is ripe, and the text bears some of the features of this genre as Aristotle defined it. The Israelites' limited perspective – they cannot see that Moses is actually facilitating their redemption, not undermining it – and their propensity to turn fear into blame lead them into an unwittingly erroneous complaint against Moses, which involves the potential for two ironic reversals. "Let us be so that we may *serve* the Egyptians" (Exodus 14:12) is not only a desire to move away from redemption rather than toward it; it is also a reversal of Moses's request to Pharaoh to let the Israelites go so they may worship (or *serve*) God (Exodus 7:16). The Israelites appear not to realize the implications of what they are saying – that they would rather remain in servitude to a foreign king than worship God in freedom. "What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?" (Exodus 14:11) is also a reversal of the exodus formula ("to bring out of Egypt"), as the Israelites use it to speak of pending doom rather than salvation. Fear has a way of turning us into our own worst enemy, prompting us to act against what may ultimately result in our flourishing. Authoritarian leaders know this well and cultivate fear in order to further their personal and political interests.

Yet their helplessness freezes the Israelites in place, unable to act, and the ending of this episode is *not* ridden with pathos as one would expect in a tragedy because God and Moses together create a way for the Israelites to get out of Egypt and repair their trust.[20] When the LORD intervenes to instruct Moses what to do next, he lays out their respective roles in what is about to transpire: "'Now, *as for* you, raise your staff and hold out your arm over the sea'" (Exodus 14:16) and "'*For my part*, I will stiffen the hearts of the Egyptians so that they go in after them'" (Exodus 14:17).[21] The fact that they work as a team strengthens our sense

that the Israelites' cry to God and their complaint to Moses in verses 11–12, which set up the problem, belong together, too. Together they save the Israelites not only from their predicament but also from the potentially tragic consequences of their own thoughts and actions.

It takes the rest of the episode to achieve this resolution. Moses's response to the Israelites in Exodus 14:13–14 begins to repair their profoundly damaged trust. He does not repeat God's instructions verbatim. That was for his ears, and, in any case, the Israelites would likely not believe him if he did repeat them; at this point they need the experience of salvation in order to restore their trust. *Witness* plays an important role in the development of the episode. What the Israelites see – the threat of the approaching army and the sea as an apparent barrier to their escape – turns their determination to fear. To turn that fear into trust, Moses realizes, will require them to see for their own eyes a way out of their predicament. He may not tell them what is about to happen, but he does give them a frame for understanding its significance: "Witness the act of salvation that the LORD will perform for you today." He also acknowledges their fear, as well as the anger and blame that have come from it, by naming and then neutralizing the threat: "Although you see the Egyptians today, you will never see them again." It is only when they witness the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea and see that this is God's doing that they move from self-determination to reliance on God and come to trust in Moses (verses 30–31).[22]

Moses may not reveal what God said, but he does convey to the Israelites what was implicit in those instructions – namely, that everyone involved has a role in what is about to transpire. The Israelites' task is to remain situated and quiet, to wait and watch until the means of their salvation appears and they are able to move again. Moses's words are not only encouraging. They also imply that salvation will require the people to exercise cautious patience and take the risk to trust that God and Moses will follow through, even when trust is on terribly shaky ground.

As for the LORD, Moses tells the Israelites that he will fight for them. He appears on the scene in two forms – a messenger and a pillar of cloud – and moves from the head of the Israelite army to a rearguard position in order to protect them from the threat behind (Exodus 14:19–20). He then throws the Egyptian army into panic (verse 24), exercising a form of psychological warfare characteristic of Assyrian royal ideology, one perhaps best known to students of the Hebrew Bible from Sennacherib's encounter with King Hezekiah, who is overwhelmed by fear of the Assyrian king's "lordly brilliance" and agrees to pay tribute, keeping

the Assyrians at bay and Judah independent, at least for the time being.[23] This mishmash of divine imagery is often treated as a fracture in the text. The pillar of cloud that throws the Egyptians into a panic (verses 19–20, 24–25) is thought to be part of a separate version of the narrative from the one in which God dries up the sea (verses 15–18, 21–23), attributed to J and P, respectively.[24] The pillar of cloud and the messenger are also thought to be from two different versions; some think those were two independent sources (the pillar of cloud from J and the messenger from E), while others think the messenger was added after the two were combined.[25]

These readings are problematic on multiple fronts. The first splits up a key development in the narrative. God tells Moses that one outcome of the sea event is that "the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD" (Exodus 14:18). This verse is part of the P version according to the usual reading, but what God predicts here actually happens in verse 25, which is thought to be part of a different version of the story (J). These go together and ought to be part of the same version; to separate them destroys the fabric of the narrative.

As for the mishmash of messenger, pillar of cloud, and psychological warfare, this may be best explained as a purposeful combination of elements taken from different contexts.[26] Iser explains how authors select elements of what he calls "cultural repertoire" – by which he means anything that can be deployed in a text, including references to other texts, geography, social phenomena, historical events, ideas, motifs, genres, and expressions – that they know and that their readers are also likely to know and blend them together in order to develop a narrative. Interpreting a text involves not only navigating plot, character, and thematic development but also recognizing elements of cultural repertoire and the contexts from which they come and noticing how they are put in conversation with one another, often with great creativity, to generate possibilities of meaning.

The LORD appears as a pillar of cloud when he descends upon the tent of meeting in order to speak with Moses. The people can *see* the cloud and know – trust – that what Moses tells them did, in fact, come from God (Exodus 33:9–10). In the sea episode, the fact that God takes this visible form is critical in the Israelites' transformation from fear to trust. The LORD appears as a messenger when he commissions Moses (Exodus 3:2) and when he leads Israel into the land (Exodus 23:20–23; 32:34; 33:2). The fact that God also takes the form of a messenger in the sea episode enables us to tie all of these elements together: God in this

recognizable form is their savior not just at the sea but from the beginning to the end of the story.

It is also significant that the pillar of cloud and the messenger function like the "lordly brilliance" of a king at the head of his army.[27] Armies may be necessary in practice to win wars, but Assyrian royal ideology focuses exclusively on the king, who alone is depicted as responsible for military victories, as though the army just sits back and watches.[28] This idea was taken from the imperial culture to which Israel was once subject and put to work in the sea episode in order to facilitate the transformation of the Israelites from self-determined, to fearful when they realize their impotence, and ultimately to a place of trust that can fuel a successful journey home. God, like the Assyrian king, is depicted as the sole force in control of victory.

Human agency is not written out of the story, however. When the LORD throws the Egyptian army into panic from his position in the pillar of cloud, the Egyptians recognize what is going on and who is responsible, and they take the initiative to flee (Exodus 14:25–28). Readers looking for two different versions of this story tend to see the idea that they flee (and God has to throw them into the sea) as at odds with the idea that the sea covers them when it returns to its normal place because their chariots have gotten stuck.[29] Yet God's act of binding the chariot wheels simply orchestrates the situation to guarantee the desired outcome; it inhibits their flight and ensures that they do not get out of the seabed before the waters return. Information is structured through this section of the story to create a sense of the Egyptians' impending doom. The fact that the narrator tells us about the bound wheels before the Egyptians decide to flee (verse 25) enables us to see the futility of their effort even as we learn of it. Similarly, by the time they actually do flee (verse 27), we already have an image of the sea returning to its place. We do not need the narrator to tell us that the waters covered the chariots and horsemen in verse 28 because we have already been able to anticipate it. Still, along with the new information that not a single Egyptian remained, verse 28 offers a sense of finality by stating how it is that God "shook off" the Egyptians – making easy work of them as though they were a locust, a leaf, or some loose dirt – and a contrast with the Israelites' salvation along the same miraculous route (verse 29).[30]

Agency is also an issue at the beginning of the story. Pharaoh is told that the Israelites have fled, reconsiders his decision to let them leave, and musters his army to pursue them (Exodus 14:5–7). God has already foreseen his logic and shares it with Moses: they are lost and would be

easy to overtake (verse 3). Some readers find a tension with the idea that God strengthened Pharaoh's resolve, which they read as an alternative cause for his change of heart. Did Pharaoh pursue of his own accord? Or did God make him do it? The order of elements in God's speech to Moses can be taken to suggest the latter if it is read as strict chronological description – God strengthens Pharaoh's resolve, then he pursues (verse 4) – while God's intervention comes last in the narration (verse 8). One way to handle this apparent discrepancy is to propose that God's intervention in verse 8 is misplaced and should come before Pharaoh musters his army in verse 5; this would restore a version in which Pharaoh's actions are all God's doing.[31] Another way is to attribute the different understandings to different versions of the narrative. Yet the difference in order between God's speech to Moses and the narration may be overstated, as even God's speech begins with Pharaoh's perception of the Israelites being stuck, which already implies that he will decide to pursue. Readings that try to disentangle human and divine agency obscure the narrative and theological complexity here. As with the Egyptians' flight later in the story, the LORD is intervening to ensure that what they are already doing of their own accord results in the outcome he announced in his speech to Moses.[32] The Egyptians' demise in the sea episode is thus a partnership of sorts between themselves and God, not unlike the teamwork involving God and Moses.

As for Moses, he begins with an exhortation to the Israelites: "Do not be afraid." Recognizing the context from which this element of repertoire comes is crucial for interpreting the sea episode and Moses's role in it. It has long been understood as encouragement to soldiers who are about to go to war and is thought to be most at home in Deuteronomy; as such, Moses's use of it to launch his response to the Israelites in Exodus 14:13–14 is commonly thought to reflect Deuteronomistic influence on the sea episode.[33] Yet, as Martti Nissinen has shown us, it is ultimately at home in Assyrian prophecies and letters, where it is used in a variety of situations, from formal to colloquial, and cannot be linked only to war. It is, broadly speaking, "an exhortation to show fearlessness before illegitimate powers and to give up unjustified anxiety, which causes a state of paralysis and inability to act."[34] Its imperial context may be as, if not more, salient than its Deuteronomistic one. Moreover, its military character is complicated here because, while the Israelites are characterized as soldiers, they do not – indeed *cannot*, in this instance – fight. Moses's encouragement must be of a different nature.

The character of Moses's response to the Israelites is curious, especially in the wake of their sarcastic complaint that blames him for their seemingly pending deaths (Exodus 14:11–12). A defensive retort might seem more believable than "do not be afraid," and for some readers the apparent disjunct is sufficient reason to think that the complaint and Moses's response cannot be part of the same version of the story.[35] Yet we can also understand that Moses is making a choice to engage their fear instead of their anger in order to help them overcome what makes them angry.[36] Far from encouraging the Israelites to fight, he encourages them to be still – what Nissinen terms a "quietist" use of the formula.[37] Moses exhorts them not only to be patient but also to fill the space of their stillness with reflection that might help them change their outlook on the situation. They cannot (yet) move, but they can loosen their grip on fear that the situation will result in their demise and be more open to the possibility that an act of deliverance is coming.[38] This space also gives them the opportunity to see that they may have misjudged Moses's motive for instructing them to turn back. Someone who seeks your death tends not to offer encouragement that you will survive. Rather than provoking a downward spiral of conflict by defending himself against the Israelites' misguided accusations, Moses makes room for a transformation within them that, along with God's act of deliverance, can restore the trust that has been so badly broken. This is *leadership*.

The expression "do not be afraid," as Nissinen points out, "belongs firmly to the language of Assyrian royal ideology as a sign of the divine acceptance of the king's rule."[39] If that context is relevant here (and I would submit that it is), Moses plays the role of deity, while the Israelites play the role of king – not unlike the relationship of Moses to Aaron in Exodus 4:16. We will see *Moses* play the role of king as we move further into the wilderness narrative, but perhaps the sea episode portends a leadership role for the Israelites as well.

In the meantime, we must contend with the nature of Moses's role as it is laid out here at the beginning. The encouragement formula is used by several types of individual within the Hebrew Bible: priest, king, and prophet.[40] Perhaps Moses is a little of all of them rolled into one (this will, in fact, turn out to be the case over the course of the wilderness narrative). Central to this episode, though, where trust is such a powerful theme, is the fact that what Moses says will happen actually comes to pass, the sign of a true prophet according to Deuteronomy 18:21–22. Moses's role here is to hold his arm out over the sea, and he follows this

instruction to the letter. The command in Exodus 14:16 is repeated nearly verbatim when Moses executes it (verse 21), and this parity of command and execution happens again when the sea is brought back over the heads of the Egyptians (verses 26–27). The fact that Moses does exactly what God tells him to do says something about his character – namely, that he has integrity when it comes to representing what God says, whether in word or in deed. Leaders who act with integrity go a long way to restoring trust and repairing damaged social fabric.

Of course, it says this to those of us reading the text, who are privy to the narration and the exchanges between Moses and God, and not to the Israelites within the story, who do not hear God's instructions but only see what Moses does. So there is a rhetorical dimension to the sea crossing episode, as the text implies that we readers also have a trust issue with Moses that needs to be repaired. This has not come up in the narrative thus far, but perhaps it may yet as we move into the wilderness. The Israelites do, however, see Moses's arm gesturing in the direction of the sea. When the way out of their predicament appears in that very place and they finally do get to experience salvation, it will become clear that Moses faithfully represented what God would do when he responded to the Israelites' complaint, and even when he inexplicably told them to turn back to the sea.

This sense of Moses's character is further enhanced if we recognize the similarities between him and the prophet Samuel, who is acknowledged as trustworthy by all Israel (1 Samuel 3:20). Moses speaks like Samuel when he responds to the Israelites' complaint. The expression "'Do not be afraid. Stand by and witness the act of salvation that the LORD will perform for you today'" (Exodus 14:13) is nearly identical to what Samuel says when striving to clear himself of responsibility for establishing a king over Israel in 1 Samuel 12:16. Moses is also described like the quintessential kingmaker as the episode winds down. When Samuel prays to God to send thunder and rain in that same text, it is effective: "All the people stood in great awe of the LORD and of Samuel" (1 Samuel 12:18). The same language is used of God and Moses here in the sea episode: "The people stood in awe of the LORD; they trusted the LORD and Moses, his servant" (Exodus 14:31). These links to Deuteronomistic literature, coupled with the repetition of "Israel saw" in Exodus 14:30 and 31, have led some readers to treat verse 31 as a later addition to the episode.[41] Repetition can be a good way to accommodate a revision to an existing text, but it can also be used in composition, so we must judge in each case by looking at the content and how it fits (or fails to fit) with the

rest of the narrative. In this case, the allusions to Samuel support the characterization of Moses elsewhere in the episode, so they are unlikely to be later additions and are better understood as one thread in a complex web of entanglements with Israelite literature both within the Torah and beyond it.

The Israelites' fear and anger, so palpable in their complaint, are in the end repaired in a single stroke. Their experience at the sea teaches them not only to trust Moses but also, in a clever instance of wordplay on the multivocal Hebrew verb "to fear," to feel the right kind of fear (awe rather than dread) of the right individual (God rather than Pharaoh). The sea episode is in one sense a primer on what constitutes good leadership – encouraging thoughtful reflection over angry action driven by fear, inspiring trust through the integrity of one's words and actions, and producing results – a theme that runs throughout the wilderness narrative. What is more, it becomes clear that the Israelites must be able to trust their leaders if they are to have a proper relationship with God. Far from seeking their deaths, Moses has not only fulfilled his mission of liberating the Israelites from Egypt but also helped them right their view of the deity who is their only true king.

SPLITTING THE SEA

We have long had a tendency to see the wilderness complaint episodes as simple and straightforward at their core, either positive stories of divine provision or negative stories about human rebellion.[42] Yet, judging by this first instance, they are not only thematically but also generically, emotionally, theologically, and even philosophically complex. The sea episode raises profound questions about leadership, plumbs the dynamics of tragedy and salvation, and explores the toxic mix of fear, anger, and blame. It also challenges us to think about how context and perspective play a role in how we interpret our circumstances, as well as how our actions are linked to those interpretations. Like the Israelites, we fly partially blind, yet we must decide how to maneuver in the world based on what we *can* see, and our actions may turn out to have tragic results if we cannot also trust others who see things we do not. We can also appreciate the artistry of this episode as well as its coherence; as Sternberg intimated, we cannot achieve a good understanding of one without the other.

Yet we do encounter signs of the Torah's literary history as we read, including in the sea episode. Some perceived tensions – such as those

between fear and anger, God and Moses as protagonists of the story, and exodus and wilderness – are productive. These elements relate to one another within the narrative world and together create rich possibilities for meaning. Others are *not* productive. One such tension in the sea episode arises when the pillar of cloud moves from the head of the Israelite army to a rearguard position in order to protect them from the pursuing Egyptians (Exodus 14:20). The middle of this verse – "There was the cloud and the darkness, and it lit up the night" – raises several questions: What is casting light? The nearest potential subjects are the cloud and the darkness, and neither of these produces light. Why would *light* prevent the Egyptians from coming near the Israelites? This part of the verse is commonly viewed as an explanatory note that harmonizes the sea episode with Exodus 13:21–22, which identifies a pillar of fire as the Israelites' guide during the night, while the pillar of cloud leads them during the day.[43] Yet the fire may be significant within the sea episode in still another way. God appears in fire alone (not cloud) in Deuteronomy 4–5, where the Israelites not only *see* the fire, like they see the cloud in Exodus 33:9–10 when it descends so that God can speak to Moses, they also *hear* God speaking *to them*.[44] The allusion to fire may not be a simple matter of harmonization. It introduces a new idea, one that complements the idea that the people play a leadership role: they, too, have access to what God says. We will see this idea emerge more fully at a critical point later in the wilderness narrative.[45]

The idea that the Israelites need light to see at night, then, may simply be a means of incorporating this more abstract idea into the narrative. It was acommodated with a gloss, and this explains the framing of the addition. "There was the cloud" tells us what we already know, because the pillar of cloud is introduced in the previous verse, but repeating it lets the scribe gloss it with "and darkness" in order to imply that the Israelites cannot see, and this sets the stage for "and it lit up the night." This is not the last revision of this sort we will encounter in the wilderness narrative.[46] We have to supply the idea that it is *fire* that lights up the night, but this is not difficult given that the pillars of cloud and fire have already been introduced in Exodus 13:21–22. We might consider that the same scribe who added the gloss in Exodus 14:20 (and, likely, reference to the fire in verse 24) added Exodus 13:21–22 in order to provide that frame of reference, if not also Exodus 40:38, where the pillars of fire and cloud are associated with the newly constructed sanctuary, and Numbers 9:15–23, where their role as guide through the wilderness is reiterated as the Israelites leave Sinai.

The most obvious unproductive tension in the sea episode involves different ideas about how the path through the sea is created and who is responsible for the act. In Exodus 14:21–22, the sea is both driven back with a strong east wind and split in two. Iser describes consistency-building as the process of forming a *Gestalt* of the narrative that accounts for its details, their interrelationships within the narrative, and how relevant cultural context for these details might help us make sense of them. Because finding fractures in the narrative is a matter of interpretive judgment, different readings can yield different senses of where they are, but this one is unassailable. It is impossible to form a coherent mental picture of the narrative with both of these actions not only because they are so different but also because a different individual is responsible for each one: God drives it back, but Moses is the one who splits it.[47] We are surely confronted here with residue of the text's literary history, yet we cannot track two independent versions of the sea episode out from here without destroying the fabric of the narrative. Were we to assume the typical source division prematurely, we would be left to interpret two texts of our own making rather than the one that is in front of us.

Indeed, there is little story here to go with Moses splitting the sea, which is not unlike the addition of fire. The whole episode coheres quite tightly except for a few minor spots that are closely focused on splitting the sea and crossing between two walls of water (Exodus 14:16, 21, 22, 21, 22, and 29). These look more like minor bits of editorial work than part of another full version of the narrative, except that they do not just fix mistakes in spelling or grammar or harmonize disparate parts of the narrative; they transform the text in meaningful ways.[48] Splitting the sea evokes Enuma Elish, a Mesopotamian text in which Marduk cuts the primeval sea creature Tiamat in half, and (even more close to home) the method of creation in Genesis 1, where God divides the waters in order to produce dry land. As Thomas Römer notes, the sea episode "deliberately uses the vocabulary of creation in order to describe [God's] intervention for Israel." With this resonance in mind, splitting the sea turns the story into a creation narrative, an account of Israel's rebirth as an independent people.[49]

Yet this reading does not account for the fact that it is *Moses* who splits the sea. To do so, we must look to another context in which splitting a body of water in two is significant. Elijah and Elisha split the Jordan by striking it with Elijah's mantle and cross on dry ground with the water on both sides (2 Kings 2:8, 14), just as the water is "to their right and to their left" when the Israelites cross the sea. The function of this miracle in

2 Kings is to demonstrate the transfer of prophetic authority from Elijah to Elisha for the benefit of the group of prophets who have come down from Jericho to watch, so that they might accept Elisha as Elijah's legitimate successor. Read in this context, Moses's act of splitting the sea reinforces his prophetic character and introduces the theme of his legitimacy.

The role of Elijah's mantle as the device used to divide the waters is played here at the sea by Moses's staff (Exodus 14:16), which is often thought to be an addition to the text because it is an anomaly; Moses otherwise simply holds his arm out, gesturing in the direction of the sea, pointing to the act of salvation that *God* is about to perform.[50] He does not strike anything with the staff (at least not here). Yet the first time he raises his staff (Exodus 7:20), he wields it *himself* to strike the Nile and turn it to blood. It is actually not clear whether the person raising the staff in that first plague episode is Moses or Aaron; both readings are possible, and each may pan out in its own way as we move through the wilderness narrative and have more opportunity to consider Aaron's role in the story. For now, we can note that the act of striking is one Moses will perform again in order to procure water from a rock (Exodus 17:1–7), and, as we will see, that episode is the foundation for Moses's legitimacy as someone who can lead the Israelites through crisis. It is not surprising, then, to see the staff incorporated here at the sea, where his legitimacy as a leader is also questioned and then restored, to accompany the attribution to Moses of a water miracle that results in the salvation of his people.

Does revising the text so that Moses splits the sea instead of God drying it up make this a story about creation or a story about legitimacy? Which reading is better? We may err in framing the question in such a binary way. Literature, in Iser's view, is not mimetic; it does not correspond to the real world or represent it in any simple way. Rather, it plays with elements of the real world in order to present readers with possibilities for seeing the world differently. When an element of cultural repertoire is deployed in a text, it becomes part of the narrative world, severed from any one context and put in creative conversation with other elements. From this remove, which Iser might say is the essence of literature, it can have productive resonances with more than one context. This is a story about *both* Israel's rebirth *and* the legitimacy of its leader, one that resonates with contexts both earlier and later in the Torah. This element of play in literature is serious business, because it is what enables us to reimagine ourselves and the world, and therein lies hope of liberation.[51]

MYTHMAKING IN EARLY JUDAISM

The sea episode has a mythological character even before Moses splits the sea. God's act of drying up the sea evokes a common ancient Near Eastern myth that promotes a deity by depicting him or her as a victorious warrior who can conquer chaos in the form of a personified sea. Because Exodus 14 comes in the context of a narrative that has often been categorized as history, it has often been viewed as a historicized myth. Yet Michael Fishbane points out in *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking* that this reading rests on a misguided understanding not only of myth itself, as a primitive intellectual form, but also of how it was employed by Israelite scribes, who were thought to retain vestiges of it in order to neutralize them. He shows us that they did not merely tolerate myths but actively made them, by deploying mythic motifs in a diverse array of literary contexts in order to express confidence in or appeal to God's power to save in a situation of crisis.

The sea episode in Exodus 14 is just such a creative endeavor. As Fishbane notes, mythmaking is "a learned and literary act that, far from being a feature of degeneration or decreased spontaneity, is often a key factor in the revitalization of earlier sources and is a sign of ongoing cultural creativity."[52] The divine combat motif is here blended with the typical plot structure of a complaint episode and several other elements of cultural repertoire from disparate contexts: cloud and fire as visible images of divine presence, allusions to Samuel, features of tragedy (a characteristically Greek genre), and elements rooted in Assyrian royal ideology. The result is a narrative about Israel's redemption from Egypt that is so generically complex it refuses to let us trap it in the (false) binary of history versus myth.

The mythical element does important work in this text. As Debra Scoggins Balentine notes, the combat myth was commonly used in political discourse, as it "was useful for saying things about, responding to, portraying, and shaping socio-political realities."[53] The sea episode transforms the exodus narrative into a repeatable event.[54] Deliverance from oppression may have happened once, in a specific historical context – or even in multiple historical contexts, as we will see – but what happens at the sea makes liberation a possibility that is universally available, anytime and anywhere.

The idea that the LORD is ultimately and decisively in control, even in the most desperate circumstances, is implicit in his seemingly inexplicable command to change course, as he tells Moses to tell the Israelites to "turn

back and camp before Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, before Baal-zephon" (Exodus 14:2). Use of the verb "to camp" and place-names to indicate movement from one place to another situates this verse within a series of itinerary notices that articulates the Israelites' journey through the wilderness from beginning to end. The itinerary genre is ubiquitous in ancient Near Eastern literature, but the particular form of it used in the wilderness narrative evokes Assyrian annals, a form of royal propaganda in which the king is depicted leading his army to decisive victory that secures control of an empire imagined as universal.[55]

Yet the itinerary notice in Exodus 14:2 is different from the others. The two that precede it bring the Israelites from Rameses to Succoth and then to Etham, where they find themselves at the edge of the wilderness (Exodus 12:37 and 13:20). These itinerary notices, along with most others throughout the wilderness narrative, narrate the Israelites' movement from one place to the next using the verbs "to set out" (נס״ע) for departure and "to camp" (חנ״ה) for arrival and repeating the place-names: "The Israelites set out from Rameses for Succoth" (Exodus 12:37) and "They set out from Succoth and camped at Etham, at the edge of the wilderness" (Exodus 13:20). Exodus 14:2, on the other hand, is framed as direct speech – God dictates a command that Moses is to deliver to the Israelites – and uses the verb "to turn" (שׁו״ב) in order to divert the Israelites' route away from their imminent departure into the wilderness and back into Egypt, toward the sea. This difference is significant because itineraries are rigorously formulaic. No extant itinerary document in the ancient Near East changes form in the middle, and it is not hard to see why: the repetition and connection between one notice and the next are what convey the idea of a coherent route. As we have seen multiple times in our reading of the sea episode, knowledge about how an element of cultural repertoire typically works can aid our interpretive judgments about how it is used in a narrative. When we apply what we know about itineraries, we can easily see that the text is fractured, because this itinerary notice does not work as itineraries are supposed to.

The geography is also problematic in this series of itinerary notices when we consider it in the context of what we know about the ancient landscape. The place-names in the itinerary notices create setting for the wilderness narrative. When the names refer to places whose locations we are more or less clear about, we can judge whether or not they constitute a plausible setting. The itinerary notice in Exodus 14:2 includes places near a sea, but the sequence of stops at Rameses, Succoth, and Etham in Exodus 12:37 and 13:20 takes the Israelites out of Egypt through Wadi

Tumilat, which is nowhere near a sea.[56] The Israelites are "at the edge of the wilderness," about to leave, when they have to turn back into Egypt in order for their departure to take place through the sea. This shift in setting is not necessarily problematic on its own because a route from Wadi Tumilat north to the sea is not implausible.[57] Yet, when we couple the shift in setting with the formally broken chain of itinerary notices, we are left with a sense that the narrative once had the Israelites leave Egypt through Wadi Tumilat, where an episode that involves crossing a sea on dry land would be completely implausible, but was revised in order to bring the Israelites closer to an appropriate setting for this mythological departure. The itinerary genre was used in Exodus 14:2 in order to accommodate this revision to the Israelites' departure in the existing text (Exodus 12:37 and 13:20), but its form was altered so that the command to move comes directly from God, whose control over chaos is an essential element of this episode.[58]

How does this revision change the text? The usual answer to this question assumes that two complete versions of the sea crossing have been woven together in Exodus 14 and understands the change as a matter of narrative chronology. One version (J) situates it in the wilderness, after the Israelites have left Egypt, while the other (P) understands it as the last event of the exodus, the means by which they leave, and this shift is accomplished by the itinerary notice in Exodus 14:2.[59] Yet we have now seen that there is only *one* version of the sea crossing, with some minor (albeit meaningful) updates. Moreover, Exodus 14:2 cannot be an isolated addition because we find elements of the itinerary genre throughout the episode. The command to turn back to the sea does not contain the camping notice typical of other itineraries; that verb is saved for verse 9, where the Egyptians find the Israelites camped (חנ״ה) at the sea, near Pi-hahiroth, before Baal-zephon – the very same location mentioned in verse 2. The departure verb typical of itinerary notices is saved for verse 15, where God tells Moses that it is time for the Israelites to depart (נס״ע), not for a new campsite but to head toward the sea. The messenger of the LORD also departs (נס״ע) in verse 19, also not for a new campsite but to take up its position as Israel's rearguard. The language typical of itineraries is used here not for its typical purpose but to get the players into their appropriate positions for the dramatic act of salvation that is about to occur. We can add the itinerary genre to the list of elements of cultural repertoire that are blended together with great creativity to shape this narrative.

The masterful coherence of this complaint episode, including its use of the itinerary genre, presses us toward a different answer to the question of

how this revision changes the text. The sea crossing was not moved to a different point in the narrative chronology than it occupied in another version. It was added wholesale to a narrative that did not have a sea crossing, in which the exodus was associated only with Passover and the Israelites entered the wilderness after traveling through Rameses and Succoth to Etham. That narrative already has a history, one that, as we will see, is bound up with Israel's history as people – its experiences of crisis, oppression, and liberation. Far from turning myth into history, this new version transforms history into myth so that the wilderness narrative might help its readers imagine a world in which people can trust their leaders, rely upon God, and perhaps themselves be empowered to lead – and to make that world a reality.[60]

THE LANDSCAPE OF THE WILDERNESS NARRATIVE

This new beginning for the wilderness narrative works some real magic. As Sara Milstein eloquently shows us in *Tracking the Master Scribe: Revision through Introduction in Biblical and Mesopotamian Literature*, it was common in the ancient Near East for scribes to transform a text – be it a list of kings, a collection of omens, or a literary work – by supplementing it at the very beginning. A new beginning can be accompanied by other changes throughout the work, particularly at the end. Yet the introduction shoulders the burden of changing how the work is received, which it can do by virtue of the fact that it comes first and sets expectations that readers carry with them into the rest of the text. "First impressions carry weight."[61] We find such revisions not only in Gilgamesh and Adapa or in the stories of Gideon and Saul, as Milstein details, but also in the Torah, and the sea crossing is a particularly dramatic example. Yet Exodus 14 does not come at the front of a text. The wilderness narrative is inseparable from the story of Israel's sojourn in Egypt, so this new introduction comes at a significant transition point *within* the narrative. Still, it does the very same work of transforming how we might read everything in its wake. As we will see throughout this book, the complaint episodes are often of this character: strategically placed, substantive "introductions" that transform the wilderness narrative, each in its own way, by showing us new possibilities for reading the whole.

As we journey into the wilderness, then, we should not expect to travel easily, as though across a flat plain. The text we will encounter is full of

upheavals, protrusions, and difficult terrain – a living, breathing landscape with both emotional and historical dimensions.[62] This book will track the logic of its stratigraphy. Chapter 2 will dig down through several layers of literary geology in the first rock-water episode (Exodus 17) to find Moses playing the role not of a prophet but of a king who earns the trust of his people by ensuring their survival, with courage, ingenuity, and the support of God, the creator and sustainer. This episode is one element of a brilliant act of political rhetoric that has the Israelites face a crisis not with fear or blame but with a simple demand that their sovereign act to ensure their well-being, and he delivers. Chapter 3 will take us to the manna episode (Exodus 16) and the second rock-water episode (Numbers 20). Moses briefly reprises his role as king in the latter, where anger and blame enter the scene as he now personifies a model of kingship that was thought to bring disaster on the people. Yet that ending is paired with a new beginning. The narrative is recast as a triumphant march home from exile, during which the creator himself provides sustenance in the wilderness, and Moses is reimagined as a priest who faithfully renders and interprets the words of God.

The wilderness narrative turns tragic in Chapter 4, where we will consider how the scouts episode (Numbers 13–14) transforms the journey from a triumphant march into a period of wandering. The Israelites let their fear get the better of them, and the result is delayed restoration and death. Yet tragedy for some is opportunity for others, and we also find in this version of the wilderness narrative the return of kingship and a detailed vision for the land. The Korah episode (Numbers 16–17) pins the delay not on a tragic flaw but on outright rebellion and illustrates how fear can be manipulated for political purposes, and Chapter 5 will look at how Aaronide claims to the role of king as well as priest are engineered by Moses, whose reputation for faithful rendering of God's words is severely compromised by the exercise of sophistry. Chapter 6 will then track how the entire wilderness becomes a landscape of rebellion and punishment, with revisions both small and substantive (Numbers 11–12). Yet the idea that leadership should be exercised by exploiting fear did not have the last word, and this final chapter will also explore how Moses redeems himself and Israel from this landscape of death, earning their trust – beginning with the miracle at the sea – and transforming the wilderness into a locus of healing and hope (Exodus 15:22–26 and Numbers 21:4–9).

I am less concerned with laying out a particular model for the literary history of the Torah than I am with exploring how we might read it in both its historical and its literary dimensions. Milstein rightly cautions us

not to be overconfident, to assume that we will be able to reconstruct the process of transmission in minute detail. Yet she emphasizes that we will be well served by taking note of the "cluster of features that distinguish a work from its later revision" and tracking them through the text, which can reveal the contours of the textual landscape.[63] Tracking is an act of interpretation, and we must set out on our journey prepared to carefully observe as many details of the terrain as we can – plot, theme, character roles, setting, wordplay, rhetorical figures, ideas, and agendas – and make judgments about how they are (or are not) interrelated, as well as what contextual knowledge we may need to pull out of our pack to make sense of what we see.

The pages to follow contain an account of my interpretive journey through the wilderness. It is partial – really only a start. The contours I have tracked are based primarily on the complaint episodes, and there is much more terrain to cover. I have provided a set of figures to illustrate my reading of each episode, in both Hebrew and English. These are available on the Cambridge University Press website (www.cambridge.org/Erisman_9781108499750), and I encourage you to have them at the ready. The discussion is necessarily fine-grained at points, and the ability to *see* my reading will help you grasp how these details make a difference. I have avoided Hebrew wherever possible in the body of the book, although it is necessary at points because wordplay is a significant factor in the plot developments, rhetorical strategies, and revisions we will track, and it is not always possible to make this visible in translation. If you do not have Hebrew, though, not to fear; I use it rarely, and when I do, all you need is the ability to recognize similar letter shapes in order to see the connections. Technical discussions are relegated as much as possible to the endnotes.

You may find my account a helpful guide for further exploration (and I hope you do), but it is important not to mistake a map for the journey. If we set out trying to fit everything we find into the categories stipulated by a particular model, we will find ourselves unable to see with our own eyes, and we are sure to miss details and interpretive possibilities that might change our understanding of the Torah and even ourselves as readers. As James Baldwin observes, journeys require us to be open to transformative possibilities. Some of what we discover may be what we were looking for, but our tracking may also take us in quite unexpected directions, as indeed it did me, many times over, and leave us in awe both of what literature can do and of the people responsible for the achievement. My goal in sharing my account is not to insist that you have the very same journey but to show you what might be possible on yours.

The Torah contains no authorial signatures or copyright pages, which makes it challenging to understand just who *is* responsible for it. Its anonymity has long been attributed to the idea that scribes in the ancient Near East were tradents whose primary task was to pass on what they inherited. Yet the truth is considerably more complicated, for at least two reasons. First, as Milstein shows us, the people responsible for producing this literature were not mere copyists but master scribes, and they were not just preserving the meaning of what they transmitted but also transforming it, sometimes quite radically. As we will see through the course of this book, those transformations could be as much political acts as literary ones, exercises of power to interpret the past and shape the future, sometimes with tangible consequences in the present. Second, anonymity was not only a function of letting the tradition speak for itself. It was not even always a value. Prophetic and wisdom texts, as well as psalms, are commonly attributed to known figures; even if these attributions should not be read as claims to authorship as we would understand it today, they speak to a desire to link at least some texts to individuals in the early Jewish literary imagination. Why not texts in the Torah? Our study of the complaint episodes in the wilderness narrative will suggest one possible answer: it may have been a function of genre.[64]

We know little about these master scribes, the flesh-and-blood producers of this literature, apart from the fact that, as Milstein notes, they "made their mark by reshaping, recasting, and reviving the material they inherited" – by their deeds we shall know them (Matthew 7:6).[65] Literary theory has a name for this: the "implied author," or the image of the author that is implicit in how a work is written. Iser's theory of reading allows us to see that authorship is implied in the decisions made about what elements of cultural repertoire are used in a text, how they are combined, and to what end.[66] Our grasp of the implied author at any given time is thus entirely dependent on our reading of the text, which might give us pause. What sense, then, does it make to talk about an author at all?

Yet texts do not write themselves. We may not have access to the people, but we do have access to their work, and it contains information about their skills, their talents, their goals, the constraints under which they worked, and their knowledge of the world in which they lived (both its present and its past). Our understanding of the implied author will shift as our reading does, and there is certainly a risk of making the author in our own image. Yet Iser reminds us that the text is an "other" that we did not make, to which we are accountable, and to which we can (and should) come back again and again in order to improve our

grasp. Even on an experienced reading that accounts for as many of the details of the text as possible, our picture of the author will only ever be partial. A fuzzy image must often suffice, although we may sometimes be able to bring it into sharper focus. Where the text has a fairly clear rhetorical purpose that can be linked to a historical situation, we may get the gift of being able to see at least in whose interest the text was written, even if not the scribe responsible for crafting it.

Reading the Torah is complicated by the need to navigate places where narrative coherence seems to break down. Sometimes we will find, as we have at the sea, that our initial judgments need to be revised, that what looks like a point of incoherence turns out to be a brilliant combination of elements of cultural repertoire. Other times those judgments will stick. The fractures can lead us to see how rhetorical and ideological goals shift, how character roles or strategies for constructing setting change, and how new genres transform what set(s) of norms and expectations we bring to the text as we read it. In these cases, we *can* speak of shifts in implied author and see historical depth in the literary landscape.

It is typical, not to mention convenient, to assign names to the different layers of literary stratigraphy we identify as we navigate these shifts, yet the shorthand we often use – whether J, E, D, and P; HexRed, PentRed, and ThB; or some other scheme – is too easily reified, such that we slip into using these terms as though they refer to extant works (or even flesh-and-blood people) and forget that, at least until we find copies of such works, they are wholly dependent on our interpretive judgments. In order to rein in this tendency, I refer to the versions I have tracked more casually, often by the genres used to emplot them, and I adopt the term "master scribe" as a conceit – in effect, a synonym for "implied author" that is also a nod to ancient scribal culture – with full awareness that the Torah is a collaborative, transhistorical project.[67]

What we do know about these master scribes is what we can readily see in the literature they produced. They were technically skilled, enormously creative, in possession of a high degree of cultural literacy – across multiple ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean cultures, no less – and politically astute. The wilderness narrative, if not the Torah in its entirety, is implicated in any number of threats to the well-being of our ancient Israelite and early Jewish ancestors: foreign domination, exile, internal strife. In each case, our master scribes put their knowledge and skill to work in the interest of their people's survival. Over time, they achieved a truly distinctive work of literature that has itself survived the vicissitudes of history and continues to sustain the people who read it and call it their own.