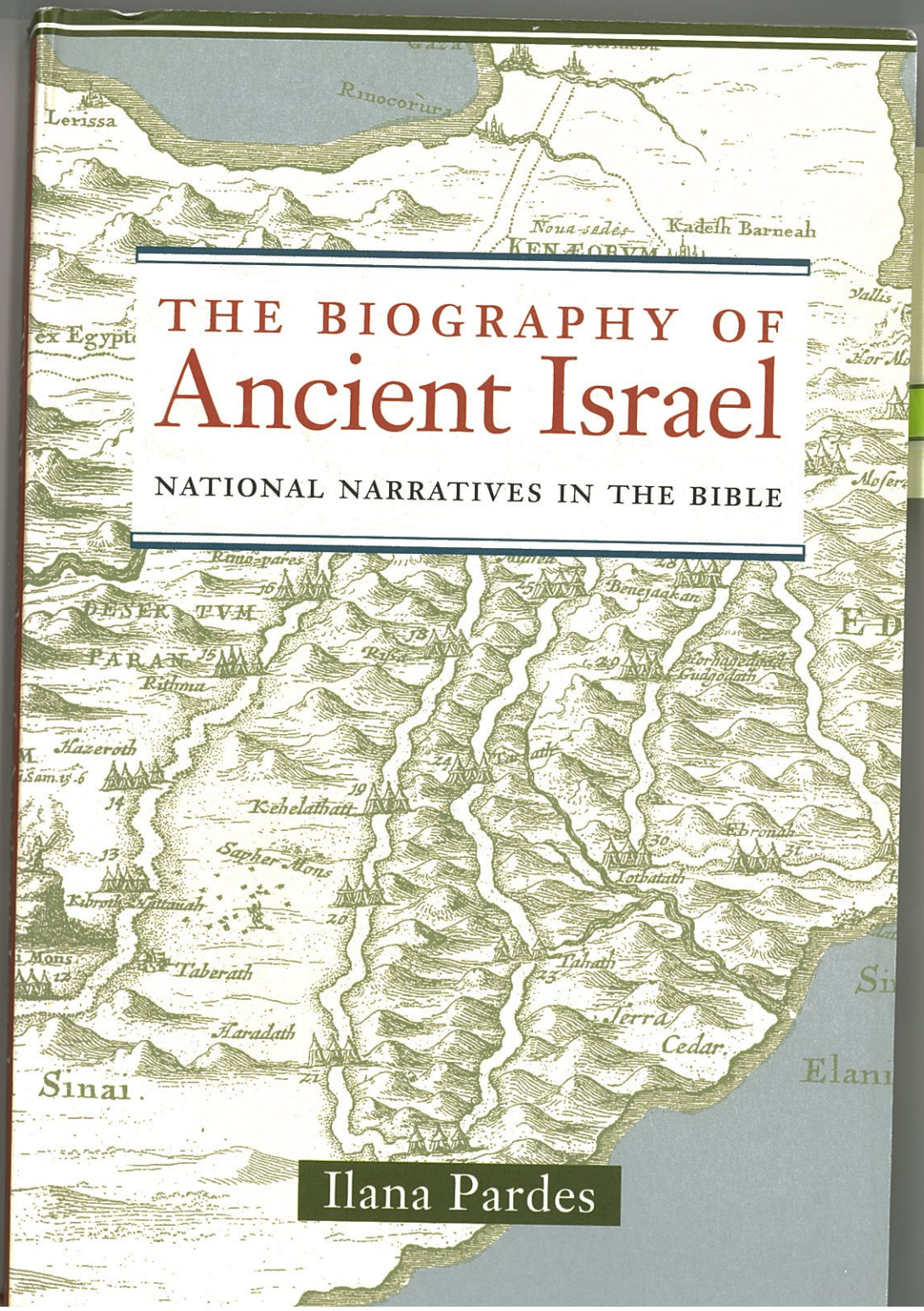
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CHAPTER THREE

Suckling in the Wilderness

The Absent Mother

Feeling the old horror come back—to want and want and not to have.

Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse

Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water.

T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land"

The story of the journey in the desert is punctuated by recurrent statements that chart the various stations Israel passed through on the way from Egypt to the Promised Land: *vayis'u vayachanu,* "and they journeyed from . . . and encamped in." The names of the stations and the time spent in each one—measured in relation to the Exodus, the new calendar's point of departure—are recorded meticulously. A map of the nation's winding wanderings is drawn bit by bit. Yet we know very little about the character of the loci. The stations are almost indistinguishable topographically. There are no lengthy depictions of landscape, or of the heat of a merciless sun, or desert storms. Desert life entails but two central experiences: thirst and hunger.

The first attack of thirst takes place three days after the crossing of the Red Sea, in the desert of Shur. The climactic celebration of deliverance is replaced by an anxiety over water. Water is not to be found. Even when some water is detected in Mara, it is bitter and undrinkable. The people complain. "And the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink?" (Exod. 15:24). The least Moses could do after leading them to such a wasteland, their blunt and angry question seems to suggest, is to provide them with the most elementary substance of all: water. The name of the first stop, "Mara," the feminine form of the word *bitter,* imprints on the map of the desert the sense of acute thirst at the taste of bitter water. Shortly after, in the desert of Zin, "between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departing out of the land of Egypt," the assembly murmurs about hunger and accuses Moses of starving them to death, leading them astray to perish in the wilderness, far from the fullness of the savory fleshpots of Egypt. "Would to God we had died by the hand of the Lord in the Land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full; for ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger" (16:1–3). These are the first two incidents of thirst and hunger. Others will follow as the wanderings continue. Such stories bear witness to the harsh conditions of desert life, to the

scarcity of water and food in arid and uninhabited zones. But their literal significance does not preclude their figurative implications. The voyage into the heart of the desert is a double voyage: both out there in a marked geographic space and within. And accordingly, the names of the stations, especially those invented along the road in commemoration of national scenes, often capture inner realities as they lay out the history of the nation's first reluctant steps.

Thirst and hunger, I would suggest, stand for a sharp and primary sense of loss. To be torn away from Egypt (a feminine noun —like all lands) seems to be analogous to the painful process of weaning, experienced by the infant at the disappearance of the overflowing breast of a nurturing mother.[1] The famous fleshpots of Egypt (*sir habasar*) represent, not merely an Egyptian delicatessen, but also the longed-for flesh of an absent mother. Left high and dry in the wilderness, without the mother's body, without her sweet milk (the very antithesis of bitter water), the children of Israel fear total annihilation. Deserted at birth, they now feel deserted once again in an unbearable exile. The wandering Israelites cry much as the exiles who sat by the rivers of Babylon cried on remembering Zion (Ps. 137:1), only their notion of motherland does not coincide with the official one. Egypt is the land they mourn over, the land of their dreams, not Zion.

The metaphor of national suckling is explicitly dealt with in Numbers 11, at another site of complaint. On this occasion the people once again crave the food they thrived on back in Egypt. Moses, who is quite a complainer himself, turns to God and asks:

> Have I conceived all this people? have I begotten them, that thou shouldest say unto me, Carry them in thy bosom, as a nursing father beareth the sucking child, unto the land which thou swarest unto their fathers? (11:12)

The wandering nation in the wilderness is likened to a vulnerable suckling (*yonek*) who needs to be nursed and carried in the bosom in order to survive. In ancient times breast feeding was regarded as an indispensable gift of life. Without a nursing mother or a wet nurse, an infant had little or no chance of survival. The dangers of infancy were numerous and child mortality high. A whole range of spells and amulets from the ancient Near East disclose the anxieties involved in rearing a child. Thus Egyptian papyri from the early New Kingdom include a spell for the mother's milk, meant to assure its flow and quality. And given the tremendous dependence on the supply of milk, wet nurses acquired high status in the Egyptian royal court and in the households of elite families.[2] Something of this tradition is evident in Genesis 35:8, where the burial of Deborah, Rebekah's wet nurse, under "the oak of weeping" beneath Bethel (a site of worship?), is deemed worthy of recording.[3]

Phyllis Trible quotes Numbers 11:12 in her groundbreaking work, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, to corroborate her notion that God has feminine facets that are no less important than His male traits.[4] She fails to see, however, that God is more often than not represented as male in the Bible and that in this case His maternal capacities are called into question. Moses' rhetorical questions imply that God, who begot the nation and thus is responsible for its well-being, has not been very successful in fulfilling the "child's" needs. And if He has not managed to provide the children of Israel with the much-needed maternal nurturing, why should Moses be capable of assuming the role of the nation's

nurse (*'omen*)?[5] Conceiving a people is not the end of the story. In dreams begin responsibilities. After national birth comes the challenging task of fashioning the breasts that would sustain a people and the bosom that would provide the essential warmth and support throughout the long and turbulent journey to the Promised Land.

The work of Melanie Klein may be illuminating in probing into the significance of the metaphor of suckling in the biblical text. For Klein, the earliest relation of the infant to the body of the nursing mother generates the central drama in the psyche of the infant. "The mother's milk," she writes, "which first stills the baby's pangs of hunger and is given to him by the breast which he comes to love more and more, acquires for him emotional value which cannot be overrated. The breast and its product, which first gratify his self-preservative instinct as well as his sexual desires, come to stand in his mind for love, pleasure and security."[6] The intense gratification at the mother's breast reinforces an idealization that experience tends to frustrate. The child senses the mother's nurturance as insufficient at times and resents her control over it. The breast releases milk in limited quantities and then disappears. Rage at the evasive breast intermingles with fear and anxiety. When the breast is wanted and is not to be found, the infant feels that it is lost forever along with the mother. "The actual experience of weaning greatly reinforces these painful feelings or tends to substantiate these fears; but in so far as the baby never has uninterrupted possession of the breast, and over and over again is in the state of lacking it, one could say that, in a sense, he is in a constant state of being weaned or at least in a state leading up to weaning."[7] Weaning turns out to be the prototype of mourning, a process through

which the infant first experiences loss and comes to terms with it.[8]

Moses' provocative questions may be seen as a comment on suckling and its discontents, on the impossibility of fulfilling even the needs of an individual baby, let alone a nursing nation. They may also imply that a predominantly male God has even less of a chance to produce the required amount of milk. The image of Egypt, the bountiful motherland, cannot so easily be forgotten and replaced. Her loss parches the people's throats and gives rise to intense and painful longings for the life-sustaining maternal gift that was, as it were, stolen from them, gone forever.

The Bible complicates the primary drama of suckling and weaning not only by introducing a Father who plays the role of a mother but also by dealing with the respective perspectives of both the child and the parent (Klein, as some of her critics note, focuses on the former).[9] While the children of Israel are continuously disappointed by God's lack of nurturing, God scolds the grumbling nation for its lack of faith and its insatiability. Anger goes both ways, and "testing" or "trying" too. God tests Israel's capacity to keep His commandments through water and food, and the nation, in its turn, tests God's vigilance and love. Indeed, the same root, *nsh*, is used in both cases. A closer look at the construction of national thirst and hunger is necessary to better understand the shaping of this drama in the biography of ancient Israel.

Thirst: Rocks and Rods

The two major scenes of thirst, in Exodus 17 and Numbers 20, recount the striking of rocks with rods in quest of water. The re-

lation of such scenes to suckling becomes clear in the Song of Moses, where God is praised for enabling the nation to "suck honey out of the rock" (Deut. 32:13). In Exodus and Numbers, however, "sucking" out of rocks is not as ideal or sweet. These are moments of intense conflict, so much so that the station where the first incident takes place is called Massah and Meribah (literally, trial and quarrel) and the water of the second episode is defined as "water of quarrel," *mey meriva*. Let us begin with the earlier quarrel.

> And there was no water for the people to drink. Wherefore the people did chide with Moses, and said, Give us water that we may drink. And Moses said unto them, Why chide ye with me? wherefore do ye tempt the Lord? And the people thirsted there for water; and the people murmured against Moses, and said, Wherefore is this that thou hast brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst? And Moses cried unto the Lord, saying, What shall I do unto this people? they be almost ready to stone me. And the Lord said unto Moses, Go on before the people, and take with thee of the elders of Israel; and thy rod, wherewith thou smotest the river, take in thine hand, and go. Behold, I will stand before thee there upon the rock in Horeb; and thou shalt smite the rock, and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink. And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. (Exod. 17:1–6)

The people are desperate. "Give us water," they demand of Moses (and Aaron presumably), implying that they have supplies of water but are withholding them mercilessly. And when Moses rebukes them for their demands, which he interprets as a trial of God, they blame him for bringing them out of Egypt only to kill

them and their cattle by thirst. The people come close to stoning Moses—or so he claims. Double murder is at stake. The people regard Moses (and God by extension) as a murderer, whereas Moses depicts the people as a lynch mob. Moses is not literally murdered (contra Freud), nor are the people, but such fantasies are in the air. God finally intervenes and introduces the possibility of striking rocks instead of stoning people. Violence does not dissipate; it is now regulated by the magical rod. Moses, we are reminded, struck with the rod before, back in Egypt, when the Nile turned red with blood. It is not accidental that this particular stroke of the rod is mentioned. Here too the question revolves around water (and blood) and the desire to gain control over its sources.[10]

Moses mediates between God and the community. As a leader, he is more of a parent than a child, but then he is human, which means that he has much in common with the people. In striking the rock with his rod, Moses in a sense is more the people's agent than God's. He gives expression to their acute desire to seize God's hidden waters. "Rock" (*tsur*), after all, is one of God's names—and this particular rock is all the more associated with Him for it is the rock of Horev, where He first revealed Himself to Moses and later to the community as a whole.[11] The divine title "Rock" is usually understood as a metaphor for God's force and stability. In this connection it also attests to the difficulties embedded in suckling from a God whose breasts are as hard as rocks and whose milk needs to be drawn out by force. God's body is as stiff as the nation's neck.

The story ends with an etiological remark about the name of the place. It is called Massah and Meribah, we are told, because of the quarrel (*riv*) of the children of Israel, "and because they

tempted [tested, *nasotam*] the Lord, saying, Is the Lord among us, or not?" (Exod. 17:7). The people are enraged at God's absence at a moment when He is needed so badly. Lack of water is regarded as a sign of abandonment. What they are expected to learn from the incident is that even dry rocks can miraculously produce fresh water and that God is present and loving even when he seems to be absent. But the question of divine presence remains provocatively open as it lurks behind the name of this site.

The second scene of rod and rocks takes place toward the end of the journey, at Kadesh. The repetition may seem monotonous at first but is not without significance; it creates a rhythm of a whining child and matches the slow and frustrating pace of a voyage whose end recedes time and again.[12] Each complaint story, however, has its own makeup. There are certain differences between Massah and Meribah and the striking of the rock at Kadesh that point to an escalation of the conflict in the course of the wanderings.

> And there was no water for the congregation: And they gathered themselves together against Moses and against Aaron. And the people chode with Moses, and spake, saying, Would God that we had died when our brethren died before the Lord! . . . And wherefore have ye made us to come up out of Egypt, to bring us in unto this evil place? it is no place of seed . . . neither is there any water to drink. . . . And the Lord spake unto Moses, saying, Take the rod, and gather thou the assembly together, thou, and Aaron thy brother, and speak ye unto the rock before their eyes; and it shall give forth his water, and thou shalt bring forth to them water out of the rock. . . . And Moses and Aaron gathered the congregation together before the rock, and he said unto them, Hear now, ye rebels; must we fetch you water out of this rock? And Moses lifted up his hand, and with his rod he smote the rock twice: and the water came out abundantly. . . . And the Lord spake unto Moses and Aaron, Because ye believed me not, to sanctify me in the eyes of the children of Israel, therefore ye shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them. This is the water of Meribah [quarrel]; because the children of Israel strove with the Lord, and he was sanctified in them. (Num. 20:2–13)

The people grumble as usual, wishing they were back in Egypt, though their complaint now is more elaborate in its depiction of the futility and utter desolation of the desert. What is more, death in the wilderness is no longer mere fantasy. They wish to share the fate of their dead brothers, whom God had killed earlier along the road (the spies, Korah and his congregation, to mention but a few). Their death wish is a sarcastic remark about the heavy cost and futility of national endeavors. Under such circumstances, under such severe thirst, they seem to claim, one can hardly imagine national growth.

Moses loses his temper. He calls the people rebels, then strikes the rock instead of speaking to it as God had commanded. Worse, he strikes the rock twice. Is this why he is punished so severely? Indeed, many commentators trace disbelief in his impatience (e.g., Rashi, Rambam, Shadal). Others have suggested that Moses' conduct comes close to magic. Moses seems to assume the role of a magician in regarding himself and Aaron as those who have the power to bring forth water (20:10), failing to consecrate the divine hand that made the miracle possible.[13] By using the rod—a

traditional tool of the magician—when it was not necessary, Moses further discloses his reliance on magic rather than on God.[14] The text does not yield a clear-cut solution to the riddle of what made God's wrath kindle, but situating this scene within the national drama of suckling and weaning may shed some light on the matter. The angry response of God in this case, I believe, foregrounds the darker facets of suckling out of rocks as it lays bare what is only implicit in Exodus 17: the violent and impious impulses that such striking entails. Striking rocks verges on blasphemy insofar as it implies a struggle with God, a vehement and relentless knocking on His hard, unyielding body. The punishment meted out to Moses and Aaron—death in exile—is modeled on the "sin." Doubting God's capacity to produce water, they are doomed to remain forever in the arid land of the desert, like the rest of their generation.

Manna and Meat

The word *manna* captures the wonder evoked by its appearance in the midst of the wilderness. "Man hu"—What is it? ask the people on seeing the soft flakes of manna covering the "face of the wilderness," mingled with a layer of morning dew (Exod. 16:13–15). The manna is described in poetic language that underlines its miraculous and divine character. God promises to "rain bread from heaven" in response to the people's demand for food (16:4). It is not conventional bread whose source is the earth but rather heavenly bread that comes from above, like rain. The manna is more a liquid than dry food, alleviating both thirst and hunger. The taste of it is exquisite—"like wafers made with honey" (16:31) or rich cream, *leshad hashemen* (Num. 11:8)—and its color white as coriander seed.[15] What is it but heavenly, sweet, creamy milk that allows the entire congregation to nurse at once.

Manna drops from heaven with a primary set of laws, allowing God to "test" the people (*lema'an anasenu*) and see "whether they will walk in [His] law, or no" (Exod. 16:4). Every man is expected to gather manna "according to his eating" (16:18) and leave none until morning. Food is to be distributed justly, so that however much one gathered, it wondrously amounted to one *'omer*.[16] Everyone was worthy of eating manna to the full. But with the Law comes its violation. Some members of the community disobey Moses and keep the gathered manna until the next morning. The manna "bred worms, and stank" (16:20), losing its nu-minous life-giving qualities, becoming susceptible to the deadly forces of decay. More violations follow as the people ignore Moses' instructions and set out to gather manna on the Sabbath. "How long refuse ye to keep my commandments and my laws?" (16:28) asks God, enraged by the excruciatingly slow nature of pedagogical undertakings. The voyage is as long on the parental side.

National pedagogy requires a consideration of future generations as well.

> And Moses said, This is the thing which the Lord commandeth, Fill an omer of it to be kept for your generations; that they may see the bread wherewith I have fed you in the wilderness, when I brought you forth from the land of Egypt. And Moses said unto Aaron, Take a pot, and put an omer full of manna therein, and lay it up before the Lord, to be kept for your generations. . . . And the children of Israel did eat manna forty years, until they came to a land inhabited; they did eat manna, until they came unto the borders of the land of Canaan. (16:32–35)

Moses insists on the preservation of the substance itself, by the ark, as tangible testimony for days to come. Interestingly, the manna is put in a pot that seems to serve as the counterpart of the Egyptian fleshpots. The term for the manna pot, *tsintsenet*, is a unique term (used only in this context) that highlights the unparalleled quality of God's food. The fragility of collective memory, however, is evident in the following break in chronological sequence. A poetic note is inserted for those who have not heard the story of the manna and do not know that the people were fed by heavenly bread until they reached the borders of the Promised Land.[17]

The second story of manna is a more violent one. Here, as in the case of the rock and rod stories, the repetition of the story in Numbers entails an intensification of the quarrel. The nation is older, as it were, and accordingly its nutritional expectations are higher.

> And the children of Israel also wept again, and said, Who shall give us flesh to eat? We remember the fish, which we did eat in Egypt freely; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic: But now our soul is dried away: there is nothing at all, beside this manna, before our eyes. (Num. 11:4–6)

As their appetite grows, the memory of Egypt becomes more fanciful and appetizing. The trauma of slavery, still evident in the first complaint on the bank of the Red Sea (Exod. 14:12), is forgotten once Egypt fades below the horizon. The farther they go into the wilderness, the only "real" hardships seem to be those of desert life. Out of such oblivions spring tales. Egypt's fleshpots now include an abundance of fish, juicy vegetables, and spices.

What the people remember, however, is not entirely groundless. They bring to the fore earlier, sweeter memories of a benevolent Egypt, whose fertile land rescued the patriarchs way back, when famine struck Canaan, and then enabled the initial growth of the nation.[18]

Against this rich culinary Egyptian background, the manna seems terribly pale. Instead of quenching thirst and alleviating hunger, it turns out to be a source of dryness, "drying away" not quite their "soul," as the King James Version has it, but rather their "lives" (*nefesh*). It invades their world from all sides, shriveling up their surroundings, leaving room for nothing else before their eyes. The official parental line defines manna as a divine gift of unsurpassable value and taste, but the people, at this point, perceive it as the very opposite. It is more of a punishment than a gift, and, above all, it lacks the power to replace Egypt. They starve for more substantial food that would delight both their eyes and their stomachs, adding color to the dull diet of the desert. They want flesh, not manna.

This is where Moses' complaint about God's limited nursing powers appears. Exhausted by the heavy burden of the ceaseless demands of the people, he passes on the responsibility for their care to their Father. God accepts the challenge and assures the crying people that there will be meat; in fact, more than enough. "Ye shall not eat one day, nor two days, nor five days, neither ten days, nor twenty days; But even a whole month, until it came out of your nostrils" (Num. 11:19–20). They don't like His food—which means, as every mother knows, that they don't like Him. He'll show them the wonders He can cook up. They'll have more and better food than they ever dreamed of having. Despite God's promise, Moses cannot imagine finding in the desert suffi-

cient food to satisfy the needs of six thousand people. "Shall the flocks and the herds be slain for them, to suffice them? or shall all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, to suffice them?" (Num 11:22). The superlative character of his questions indicates that the desert is no place for extravagant promises, but it also suggests that even if all the fish of the sea and the flocks of the mountains were gathered together, they would not suffice to fulfill the insatiable desires of an ungrateful people. The meat finally comes from the one species Moses did not evoke: birds. But before the quail is delivered, Moses needs to learn a lesson about the distribution of authority. He is not exempt from education.

Food and government are inextricably connected. The people are not simply "pedagogical objects," to use Bhabha's terms, they have a role in the fashioning of law and leadership.[19] The grumbling of the people leads to a different configuration of power as it spurs Moses to better manage the provision of food. Seventy elders are gathered, and the spirit that God "put" on Moses is transferred onto them so that "they shall bear the burden of the people" (Num. 11:17). Others, Eldad and Medad, are touched by the spirit of God and begin to prophesy in the camp without the mediation of Moses. To carry an entire nation one needs more than one bosom.

The quail is presented as a new item in the national diet, although it is already mentioned briefly in Exodus 17. The descent of flesh is as poetic as that of manna. God can "rain" birds, not only bread. A wind of God (the term used is *ruach*, the very term that earlier depicted the emanation of God's spirit from Moses to the elders) blows from the sea, carrying with it quail, gently strewing them around the camp, with much care, so that they land exactly within reach, but a day's journey on each side and no more

than "two cubits high upon the face of the earth" (Num. 11:31; see also Ps. 78:26–31). God moves heaven and earth to fetch the people the flesh they crave, but once again there is a question regarding quantity and limits.

Excited by the sudden appearance of meat, some people gather quail with no sense of limit. Hunger, they suspect, may return at any moment. They gather all day, and then during the night, and the next day as well. Ten omers at least per person. God's response is extreme. Mercilessly, He snatches their lives away, "while the flesh was yet between their teeth" (Num. 11:33), before it was even chewed. Gluttonous cravings are regarded as an unforgivable transgression, an expression of forbidden lust. The wilderness includes, at times, harsh pedagogical practices.[20] Even when food is given one cannot be certain that it will be digested. Death may cut off one's life in the midst of a bite. Here as before the violent incident leaves a mark on the map, for a new name is invented: "And he called the name of that place Kibroth hattaavah [the tombs of lust]: because there they buried the people that lusted" (11:34). In Deuteronomy God actually admits that he starved the nation in the wilderness, subjecting it to numerous hardships. He did so, however, for a reason—much as a loving father disciplines his son (Deut. 8:3–6). This is a more normative account of what takes place in Exodus and Numbers, where the Father's violence seems somewhat excessive and inexplicable: love, lust, jealousy, and rage intersect in unpredictable ways.

In an article entitled "Exodus," Benedict Anderson speaks of exile—whether literal or figurative—as the "nursery of nationality," the condition that gives rise to the acts of imagination necessary for the construction of nationhood.[21] Anderson says nothing about biblical Israel, but his title suggests that the story of the

Exodus encapsulates the intricacies of national formation. Such "nurseries," however, are never that peaceful. The complaint scenes in the wilderness lay bare the violence and difficulties that are part and parcel of the shaping of ancient Israel. The character and future of the newborn nation are negotiated among the people, Moses, and God through complaining (they all complain in one way or another) and testing. To determine the national diet means to determine, among other things, the nature of government as well as the cultural bent of the nation.

The Nursing Goddess and Monotheistic Censorship

When the people long to return to Egypt, they do not merely long for "flesh." Exile entails an agonizing uprooting from a cultural setting and the loss of familiar customs and codes. In the thirst and hunger of the wandering Israelites one can trace religious longings of a forbidden sort, a craving for "strange milk." Egyptian religion was by no means matriarchal (the Egyptian pantheon, like other polytheistic pantheons, was run by supreme male deities), but it had a series of alluring mother goddesses, one of the prominent ones being Isis. Isis, also known as the "lady of enchantments," gained renown for her successful resurrection of her husband-brother, Osiris, and later for saving her son, Horus. She raised her newborn son in secret, hiding him in the papyrus marshes, to protect him from the evil designs of Seth (his uncle). This close guarding of Horus from danger became a frequent point of reference in magical texts concerning cures for children's ailments.[22] One of the most popular images of Isis (both in drawings and in statuettes) was the image of a suckling goddess, expressing milk from her breast, with Horus sitting on her lap.[23]

In the Pyramid Texts, the king is depicted as the living embodiment of Horus, sustained by Isis's divine milk. In other contexts she is defined as the royal wet nurse. In either case, she is regarded as the protecting and nourishing goddess whose milk is crucial to the growth of the king. Goddesses—not only in Egyptian culture—caress kings and heroes in their bosoms and offer their breasts to them. The myth of the birth of the hero develops into the myth of the suckling hero. Rank attributed the nursing of heroes to "lowly" women, or animals, the most prominent example being the suckling of Remus and Romulus by the she-wolf. More often than not, however, milk comes from above in mythological contexts, infused with divine qualities, a curious combination of material and spiritual sustenance that assures the special status of the suckling hero and occasionally grants him a touch of immortality (Hercules, who manages to draw a few drops from Hera's breast, is one such case).[24]

The Bible fashions a different myth, a myth of a nursing Father who brings forth water out of rocks and drops manna and quail from the sky—not merely for an individual hero but for an entire community. It is, however, a God whose work is revealed in history, which means that myth is set against the disorderly character of historical events and the facts of life, such as frustration and death, thirst and hunger. The complex interweaving of myth and history had much to offer but could not preclude longings for a cultural past in which suckling was provided by a more tender Mother, unambiguously female. The separation from the well-established religion of Egypt was not a simple task, nor was there national accord as to the preferable mode of individuation. The heavy reliance of Roman culture on Greek traditions points to another possible route for fashioning a new cul-

tural identity vis-à-vis a powerful precursor.[25] Monotheism, however, required a clear-cut break with other cultures and was willing to admit no debt to earlier sources.

Despite the harshness of monotheistic censorship, the people oppose the Mosaic demand to eradicate the heritage of Egypt and attempt to maintain a few drops of milk from their lost cultural past. When the children of Israel actually give more concrete expression to their repressed desires, they forge a golden calf—not a nursing goddess. But where there is a calf, there must have been a cow.

In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud offers an intriguing account of biblical censorship in his attempt to uncover the murder of Moses by the wandering Israelites.

> The distortion of a text is not unlike a murder. The difficulty lies not in the execution of the deed but in doing away with the traces. One could wish to give the word "distortion" the double meaning to which it has a right, although it is no longer used in this sense. It should mean not only "to change the appearance of," but also "to wrench apart," "to put in another place." That is why in so many textual distortions we may count on finding the suppressed and abnegated material hidden away somewhere, though in an altered shape and torn out of its original connection. Only it is not always easy to recognize it.[26]

Although Freud was not interested in the traces of the mother goddess in the wilderness (this is the one perfect murder he attributes to Judaism), his analysis of the dynamics of repression is most appropriate in this respect. The Calf, I would conjecture, is a distorted and displaced image of Isis. It is a suckling calf that

speaks of the absence of a suckling cow. Isis, one should bear in mind, was represented at times in the shape of a cow or in human form, wearing a cow-horn crown. Some scholars assume that the Golden Calf stands for Apis, the sacred bull of Egyptian religion, but given the fact that what we have here is a calf—not a bull—it is more plausible to see Isis as the primary reference.[27] That Moses grinds the Golden Calf and makes the congregation drink its dust with water reinforces the notion that suckling and weaning are at stake. Moses tries to wean the nation from its yearnings for idolatrous water by drawing a distinction between pure sources and muddy waters, or in Jeremiah's terms, between seeking the "Fount of living water" and "going to Egypt to drink the waters of the Nile" (Jer. 2:13–18).[28]

As I suggested elsewhere, Isis may also be traced, in modified form, in the female figures of the Exodus.[29] Her role of deliverer-nurse-mother-sister-wife is "wrenched apart" as it is divided among the two midwives, Yocheved, Pharaoh's daughter, Miriam, and Zipporah. In the context of the suckling Isis, the most conspicuous parallel is Yocheved. Yocheved nurses Moses against all odds. Moses, who is torn off his mother's breasts when he is put in the basket, among the bulrushes, returns to her bosom unexpectedly. Miriam, as one recalls, tricks Pharaoh's daughter into hiring Yocheved as a wet nurse for her own son. Like Horus, Moses manages to benefit from maternal protection and nurturance despite his persecutors. He is endowed with a double gift of life: first at birth and then in the vulnerable period of infancy. Yocheved's milk loses something of the divine character of Isis's milk, given that she is a mere mortal, but it acquires instead tremendous historical and national value, which is why such an effort is made to preserve it: this is the milk Moses needs to suck in order to re-

turn to his people later on and deliver them; it provides the primary national marking and a lesson about the ways in which Pharaoh's edict may be resisted.

Rise Up, O Well

The dryness of the desert attests to different kinds of maternal absence not only in the heavenly sphere but also in the earthly one. The biography of ancient Israel allots strikingly little space for maternal figures in the wilderness. Once the children of Israel leave Egypt behind, the women who took part in the initial stages of the revolution practically disappear. The two midwives vanish; Yocheved is mentioned again only in genealogies (Exod. 6:20; Num. 26:59), and Zipporah is sent off after delivering Moses from God's wrath at the strange night of "The Bridegroom of Blood" (Exod. 4).

Even Miriam who, more than the others, acquires a visible role on the national stage through her leading of the women in song and dance after the crossing of the Red Sea is struck with leprosy for criticizing Moses' exclusive position and demanding that her prophetic powers be acknowledged (Num. 12).[30] Miriam dies shortly after being shut out of the camp on account of leprosy and is buried in Kadesh. Her death is recorded in a brief statement that is immediately followed by the story of the "water of quarrel": "And the people abode in Kadesh; and Miriam died there, and was buried there. And there was no water for the congregation" (Num. 20:1–2). A noticeable omission lurks between the two verses. No national mourning over her death is mentioned, in contradistinction to the burial scenes of both Aaron and Moses. Are the tears shed over lack of water the missing tears

of mourning?[31] Put differently, does Miriam's death intensify the thirst in the dry palates of the people as it triggers the memory of Egypt's lost fleshpots (mourning piling up on mourning)? Does the severity of the quarrel over water in this site have something to do with Miriam's death? Is the sanctity of Kadesh (the name is a derivation of the word *holy*) related to the fact that Miriam was buried there?

The midrash aptly captured Miriam's special relationship to water in attributing to her a wandering well. The well appears in the midrashic interpretation of Micah 6:4, where Moses, Aaron, and Miriam are listed as the three leaders who brought Israel out of Egypt. The merit of the three deliverers, claims the midrash, ensured that the nation receive various gifts throughout the wanderings in the desert.

> The well was due to the merit of Miriam, who sang by the waters of the Red Sea: *And Miriam sang (wa-ta'an) unto them: Sing ye to the Lord* (Ex. xv, 21), *and by the waters of the well, Then sang Israel this song, Rise Up, O well, sing (enu) ye unto it* (Num. xxi, 17). . . . How was the well constructed? It was rock-shaped like a kind of bee-hive, and wherever they journeyed it rolled along and came with them. (Bamidbar Rabbah I, 2)

The midrash adheres strictly to proof texts and at the same time provides extravagant supplements. If the well is attributed to Miriam, it is because her singing at the Red Sea resonates in the collective singing by the well in Numbers 21:17. The rabbis rely on the similarity between the two occasions and above all on the recurrent use of the root *'anh*—a rare term for singing—in the context of water. The fact that Miriam is already dead in

Numbers 21 does not deter them from reaching this conclusion. On the contrary, the call of the people for the well to "rise up" is seen as proof that after Miriam dies, the well disappears and needs to be restored. The well is "rock-shaped," with many holes like a beehive; it offers an image of a sweet rock (there must be honey in this beehive) that seems more accessible and present than God's Rock; it also provides the missing maternal counterpart to the pillars of cloud and fire.

A Land of Milk and Honey

The need for a more pronounced maternal image in the national imagination, however, did not escape the biblical writers. The biography of ancient Israel does put forth one legitimate mother on the national map: the Promised Land, the land that "floweth with milk and honey."[32] Much has been written about the plenitude conveyed by this expression, but little attention has been given to the choice of milk and honey in particular, that is, to the implied maternal facets of the representation of the land. The word *floweth*, *zavat*, is usually used in the context of bodily fluids, reinforcing the notion that the land is a maternal body, with admirable flowing breasts.[33] From the very beginning in Egypt (Exod. 13:5), Moses and God fashion an infantile dream of wish fulfillment, a land where milk is always available, flowing in abundance, intermingled with honey. In the wilderness the Israelites receive but a partial introduction to these maternal treasures, but in Canaan, presumably, the ultimate pleasure awaits them.

Israel's weaning is terminable and interminable—in part because of the confusing character of the monotheistic God who insists on playing contradictory roles at once. As a patriarchal Father, He is eager to wean the suckling child and to speed up Israel's separation from the maternal fleshpots of Egypt. At the same time God wants to be the ultimate Mother, a Mother whose sweet milk is far superior to that of Egypt, whether it is provided via manna and rocks in the wilderness or via the land, later on in Canaan. The interminability of weaning, however, is also an insightful comment on the ways in which infantile fantasies linger on beyond infancy. I began with the aspects of weaning that are embedded in suckling, the frustrations at an evasive breast, but the opposite is true as well. The desire to suckle and the acute longings for a lost maternal paradise do not disappear with weaning: they still resonate at later stages of one's life.

The Promised Land is imagined as a perfect mother with a perfect nature who can satisfy all the desires of the young nation: plenitude, pleasure, love, and security. The paradisiacal qualities of the locus are elaborated in Isaiah's vision of Jerusalem as the utopian mother:[34]

> Rejoice ye with Jerusalem, and be glad with her . . . that you may suck, and be satisfied with the breasts of her consolations; that you may milk out, and be delighted with the abundance of her glory. For thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river . . . then shall ye suck, ye shall be borne upon her sides, and be dandled upon her knees. As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you. (66:10–13)

Way out there beyond the desert there is an alternative motherland, far better than Egypt, the official line argues. But while the Israelites wander in the wilderness, oscillating between thirst and hunger, Egypt seems far more tangible. And then, as we shall

see, even when Canaan is finally approached, in the story of the spies (Num. 13), the image of utopian suckling falls apart in an uncanny way. Canaan, much like Egypt, is far from being a perfect motherland on closer inspection.

Inscriptions in the Desert

Later traditions turn the desert itself into a longed-for site. Jeremiah recalls nostalgically the days of Israel's "youth" in the wilderness (2:2), and Hosea dreams of a day in which God will allure Israel and bring the nation back to the wilderness to renew the covenant (2:14). These are, no doubt, idealizations of the wandering period, but they are not inattentive to the complexities of its representation in the Pentateuch.[35] Exile is no paradise. And yet the greatest revelation of all takes place on Mount Sinai—not in the Promised Land.[36] For behind the complaints, the thirst, and the hunger that characterize the wanderings in the desert, there is life, a yearning to fill the "howling waste" (Deut. 32:10) of the desert with marks.

Moses and Monotheism, as Michel de Certeau has taught us, takes into account the loss and mourning at the base of historiographical writing. Freud attributes to Moses' death a central role in the nation's history and sees the initial "drowning" of monotheistic religion (like Schiller's song) as the condition that promised its powerful return.[37] What de Certeau and Freud overlook is the more primary loss and mourning that shape biblical historiography: the exile from Egypt and the repression of the Mother. It is this loss that gives rise to the desire to sing to a well, to turn bare rocks into tablets with inscriptions, and to fashion out of a desolate labyrinthian inscape a map.

CHAPTER FOUR

At the Foot of Mount Sinai

National Rites of Initiation

Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob,
and tell the children of Israel;
Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians,
and how I bare you on eagles' wings,
and brought you unto myself.
Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed,
and keep my convenant,
then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me
above all people:
for all the earth is mine:
And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests,
and an holy nation.

Exod. 19:3–6

So proclaims God in the initial ceremonial address to the people at Mount Sinai. It is a climactic point in the biography of ancient Israel, the opening note of the momentous initiation rites of Sinai.