Cultures of the Jews, Volume 1: Mediterranean Origins

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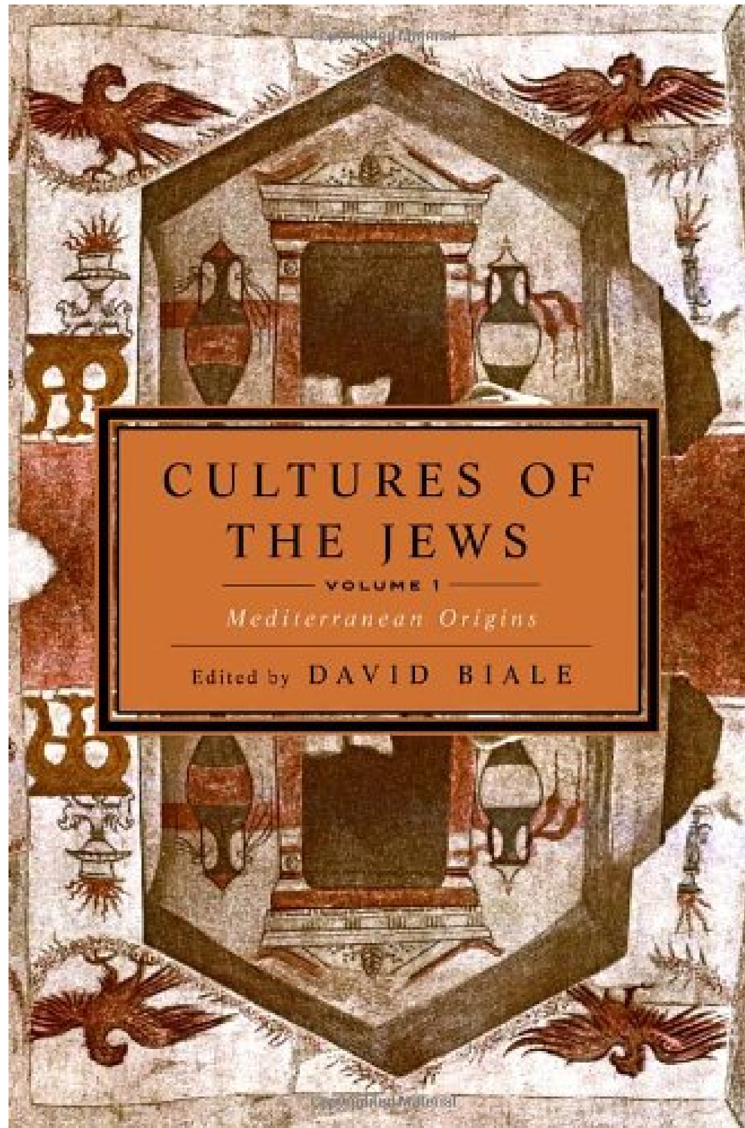

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From Schocken : Cultures of the Jews, Volume 1: Mediterranean Origins before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Cultures of the Jews, Volume 1: Mediterranean Origins:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Delightful cultural historyBy E. L. BessThe editor David Biale explains in the preface that the cultural histories of the Jews are marked by a pattern of assimilation and adaptation to their surrounding cultures. Not remarkable, since this happens with any people group, but more than others the Jews have always insisted upon their distinctiveness. This distinctivesness can only be realized, however, within the context

of their cultural assimilation to the majority culture wherever they are found. It's somewhere in this dynamic that aids in setting a culture of Jews apart.After reading the preface and introduction to this work explaining the project of the book along these lines, I was eager to continue only to be disappointed in the first chapter by Ilana Pardes, entitled 'Imagining the Birth of Ancient Israel: National Metaphors in the Bible'. Far from anything to do with Jewish cultural history, this essay comprised a wholly narrative-critical reading of the biblical account of Israel's origins, which the author presupposes were indeed imagined. While narrative criticism is indeed important, the author was heavy on quasi-poetical language in her description of the stories in Genesis and exodus, reading metaphors that probably, it seemed to me, weren't intended by the authors, e.g., reading the crossing of the Red Sea as an 'initiation rite' or as a 'rebirth'. The essay was illuminating, however, as Pardes (I think aptly) sees the story of Israel in these early books as constituting somewhat of a 'national biography'. Collective Israel seems to be indeed portrayed as a character in the biblical narrative. Its biography parallels that of individual characters in the course of the story, such as Abraham and Moses. Pardes also illuminates the stories in light of comparative ancient mythological literature. The approach was valid, it just seemed to overdraw itself on its heavy metaphorical readings.What was I in for? Was the rest of the book going to emulate this essay in kind? Ronald Hendel quickly salvaged the book for me with his historical approach to the question of Israelite culture at its origins. We read, for example, of the archeology of the first Israelite settlements in Canaan that, 'The material culture in general is a local, rural development of Canaanite culture. This evidence indicates that early Israel was largely a local culture, a variant of regional Canaanite or West Semitic cultural traditions.' (46). Ethnicity, the idea of common descent in contrast to other ethnic groups, we learn is often an artificial construct. Genealogical relations, for example, were often fluid and didn't always reflect biological reality. They're a way to mark off a sense of 'us' versus 'them', even if two groups are quite similar or even share a common heritage, as with the Israelites and Canaanites. Israelite religion is also continuous with Canaanite or West Semitic religion, in both concepts and practices. The high god of the Canaanites, El, for example, shared many essential characteristics with Yahweh: father, creator, wisdom, kindness, etc., and they shared many of the same epithets and imagery. We learn that the Israelites emphasized certain ritual distinctives to express their uniqueness, like circumcision and pork abstinence, probably in light of their Philistine xenophobia (who ate a lot of pork and didn't practice circumcision). These ethnic distinctives were also a way of demarcating boundaries vis a vis other peoples, even if they weren't essentially unique. Most of Israel's Semitic neighbors, and even the Egyptians, practiced circumcision, for example. The Sabbath was a distinctively Israelite institution, however. The prophets, remarkably, often criticized Israel's ethnocentricism in favor of a more universal view of Yahweh's relation to the nations of the earth. Israel turns out to be not so special afterall. 'Are you not like the children of the Cushites to me, O children of Israel?, declares Yahweh', the prophet Amos states. 'Did I not bring Israel out of the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor, and Aram from Kir?' (Amos 9.7).A variety of Jewish texts show a complex interplay between Judaism and Hellenism, one that calls standard dichotomies between Judaism and Hellenism into question. So argues Erich Gruen in his essay, 'Hellenistic Judaism'. He surveys fragments of a number of Jewish authors who wrote in Greek, as well as the books of the Maccabees, the story of Joseph and Asenath, Pseudo-Aristeas, and Philo and Josephus, among others. These writings show that Jewish stated antipathy towards Greek ways was more polemical than reality. These writers utilized Greek modes of thought, genres, and language to express the theological and moral superiority of Judaism. Aspects of Hellenistic culture were a natural vehicle for their emphases. Indeed, some writers in the midst of this cultural superiority play fictionally attributed what was good among Greek thought and practice to the influence of their Hebrew ancestors and cited non-Jewish acknowledgment (real or invented) of Jewish values. Other questions are broached, such as the role of women in Second Temple Jewish society, and the false or irrelevant divide of 'elite' thought and concerns versus 'popular' thought and concerns when reading Second Temple Jewish texts. Finally, Gruen questions the hastily sweeping notion of Diaspora Jews living in a state of discontent and longing for the homeland. Far from it. While various sources show their allegience to their cultural center and its defining symbol, the Temple in Jerusalem, they also demonstrate that Diaspora Jews felt no dejecting sentiments about their state of affairs abroad in the world and that there was equal commitment to flourishing in their own local Diaspora communities.Eric M. Meyers covers some overlapping ground, but his essay, 'Jewish Culture in Greco-Roman Palestine', is broader in its topical scope, though the geographical scope is limited to Palestine. The chronological scope is also broader, from the 5th century bce to the formative rabbinic period. A subtle Greek influence in Palestine can already be detected in the early Persian period, which steadily increased and was not effaced even in the wake of the Maccabean Revolt or among the rabbis. The Hasmoneans continued the process of Hellenism. They took Greek names, titles, and minted coins with Greek inscriptions alongside Hebrew ones. Hellenistic architecture begins to proliferate. One remarkable ostracon from Sepphoris in lower Galilee from around 100bce contains a Greek word written in Hebrew characters, and 1/3rd of all inscriptions from Jerusalem contain Greek inscriptions. The rabbis' exegetical techniques have exact antecedents in Greek methods of exegesis. Rabbi Judah the Prince is remembered as saying, 'Why speak Syriac in Palestine? Talk either Hebrew or Greek'. More than Greek/Jewish interactions, however, Meyers discusses the formation of Jewish sects, Herod the Great's political and architectural achievements, and the gospels as evidence for popular, rural Judaism. We also discover that ossuaries and the practice of secondary burial (often taken to indicate belief in resurrection among Jews)

were not exclusive to Judaism, and that in the time of Jesus women could hold prominent or equal places in public synagogue worship. In fact, we know of heads of synagogues who were women. The rabbis, however, tried to suppress the role of women (one inference I draw from this was that Paul's infamous statements about women in worship may reflect his stricter Pharisaic views). The ideological context for the invention of the Oral Law of the rabbis and the notion of an unbroken chain of tradition from Moses is also astutely discussed by Meyers.Oded Irshai, 'Confronting a Christian Empire: Jewish Culture in the World of Byzantium', explores the plight of Jews both in Palestine and the Diaspora as Christianity conquered the Roman empire. Already a process begun after the First and Second Revolts with the relocation of early rabbinic authority to the north, by the 4th century ce, the Jewish demographic of Palestine was largely contained within Galilee. Palestine had become an attraction for Christian pilgrimage and the seat of a major See in Jerusalem as well as Caesarea. Intense polemic and conflict followed as the Christians attempted to arrogate the heritage of Israel. The Jewish patriarchate instituted by the Romans which governed the affairs of Jews in Palestine and maintained a strong influence in the Diaspora was dissolved by the 5th century ce. With it, the activity and influence of the Palestinian rabbis was in a state of decline, leaving a vacuum for priests, which had survived 70ce, to fill in the synagogues when religious authority shifted there from the academy. Synagogues flourish during this period, despite official edicts against their construction and acts of demolition against them. They become elaborately decorated with paintings and mosaics of images, many incorporating pagan motifs which the Jews had made their own. The effects of Hellenism had pervaded rabbis as well as the masses. A variety of apocalyptic and messianic motifs, contemporaneous with similar Christian developments, find their way into Jewish traditions in the hope that Rome would be overthrown. The struggle of Palestinian and Diaspora Jews with Christians in the Byzantine era gave way to a different center of Jewish tradition outside of the Roman empire to gain itself ascendancy in the Jewish world: Babylonian Jewry.In the next chapter, 'Babylonian Rabbinic Culture', Isaiah Gafni analyzes the influences of living outside the Roman empire in the realm of the Parthians and subsequently the Sassanians. For the Jews in this eastern Diaspora it was generally a tolerable environment, although for centuries conditions there are obscure. Little textual information survives antedating the Talmudic period. Babylonian Jewry had a sense of belonging more to their environment ultimately, as Gafni posits, because of the nation's origins there through Abraham according to the Bible. The extent to which Persian language and religion influenced Babylonian Jewry is also discussed at some length. Not as much can be detected as Hellenism affected Palestinian Jewry, but there is a notable influence in the realm of demonology. For the earlier Second Temple era scholars are divided, and the beliefs posited to be of Persian derivation are found in Palestinian, not Babylonian, pre-Talmudic literature. However, interaction between the two communities helps to account for that.Finally, Reuven Firestone, 'Jewish Culture in the Formative Period of Islam', is as enlightening about early Islam as it is about Arabian Jewry, the subject of this chapter. Firestone pores over several Islamic texts, many of which contain earlier pre-Islamic elements, to extrapolate otherwise unattested aspects of Arabian Jewry and to explain how Judaism helped to shape Islam as much as Islam and pre-Islamic Arab traditions helped to shape Arabian Jewry. Some Jews were receptive to the new prophet Muhammed's revelation. Many were not and were exiled or slaughtered. It is not known when the Arab Jewish community was established. Legends take the place of the historical realities, but while the Jews fit neatly ethnically and culturally among the Arabs, they still maintained a sense of individual identity.Good, profitable, accessible reading.0 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Three StarsBy Lisa MNot bad but I expected some more info from this book.0 of 8 people found the following review helpful. Required TextbookBy Stuff101This was a required textbook that I never opened. If there was a neutral option for it, I would choose it because I didn't actually interact with the book.

Scattered over much of the world throughout most of their history, are the Jews one people or many? How do they resemble and how do they differ from Jews in other places and times? What have their relationships been to the cultures of their neighbors? To address these and similar questions, some of the finest scholars of our day have contributed their insights to Cultures of the Jews, a winner of the National Jewish Book Award upon its hardcover publication in 2002.Constructing their essays around specific cultural artifacts that were created in the period and locale under study, the contributors describe the cultural interactions among different Jewsfrom rabbis and scholars to non-elite groups, including womenas well as between Jews and the surrounding non-Jewish world. What they conclude is that although Jews have always had their own autonomous traditions, Jewish identity cannot be considered the fixed product of either ancient ethnic or religious origins. Rather, it has shifted and assumed new forms in response to the cultural environment in which the Jews have lived.Mediterranean Origins, the first volume in Cultures of the Jews, describes the concept of the People or Nation of Israel that emerges in the Hebrew Bible and the culture of the Israelites in relation to that of neighboring Canaanite groups. It also discusses Jewish cultures in Babylonia, in Palestine during the Greco-Roman and Byzantine periods, and in Arabia during the formative years of Islam.

Lay readers already hooked on Jewish history will be endlessly fascinated, and those seeking a solid state-of-the art introduction to the field will find it here, with ample reference to other, more specialized or canonical works. . . One of

the most nourishing Jewish books we've encountered in some time. . . . Wonderful. The Jerusalem ReportThe writers revel in the new vistas opened by a cultural approach, lavishly providing us, in generous detail, with descriptions of a Jewish world more various than historians have allowed us to glimpse. TikkunBiale has gathered a stellar international group of scholars around the grand theme of Jewish cultural history. The tastes of many different intellectual palates will find various satisfactions here. Jewish Quarterly About the AuthorDavid Biale is the Emanuel Ringelblum Professor of Jewish History at the University of California, Davis.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. IMAGINING THE BIRTH OF ANCIENT ISRAEL: National Metaphors in the Bible The Bible begins not with the culture of the Hebrews but with the origins of culture as such. The initial concern with the origin of civilization is already evident in the story of the Garden of Eden, where Eve and Adam acquire the first taste of knowledge, but it is only in the account of the bold building of the Tower of Babel, East of Eden, that we get a fuller consideration of human culture. Humankind was once one, we are told, and everyone on earth had the same language and the same words (Genesis 11:1). But this era of cultural unity does not last for long. One day the people say to each other Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world (11:4). In response to this challenge against heaven, God shatters the builders dream of grandeur, confounds their language, and scatters them in all directions. Culture, however, is not destroyed. Rather, it assumes a different form. From now on its distinguishing mark is diversity and dispersion. From now on, its distinct site becomes the nation. Of the many nations that branch out in the vast expanses of the earth, Israel is singled out. In the episode following the Tower of Babel, God demands that Abraham leave his birthplace (Ur of the Chaldeans) and go forth (lekh lekha) to the land shown to him. There, God assures him, I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great (Genesis 12:2). Abrahams migration to Canaan offers a new departure. Whereas the sinful homogeneous community of Babel failed, Abrahams descendants, the people God has chosen from a multitude of peoples, seem to hold much promise, destined as they are (unlike the builders of the Tower) to acquire a great name. The primary exile of the first patriarch, his capacity to part from his cultural origins, is construed as an essential rift, a prerequisite for the rise of the nation. Later, in Exodus, the people as a whole will follow a similar route, moving out of Egypt, wandering in the desert, and fashioning the cultural contours of the nation on their way to the Promised Land. Dispersion and exile, however, do not lead to clear-cut borders between cultures. Languages intersect in unexpected ways. The very name Babel, which commemorates the primary linguistic splitting, is also a cross-cultural product. Its meaning in Akkadian is presumably the gate to the gods (bab iley), but in the course of the biblical story it is Hebraized via a pun when it is linked tothe Hebrew root blbl (to confuse). Perhaps this interpretation of Babel is an attempt to mock the pretentious temples of Mesopotamia: the tower that was meant to lead to the gods leads only to confusion. But what turns out to be far more confusing is the lack of clear demarcation between the chosen and the non-chosen. As the history of the children of Israel unfolds, we discover that the rebellious quality of primeval culture does not dissipate once we move into the realm of the chosen ones. Quite the contrary: rebellion is one of the salient features of the chosen nation. The Israelites do not venture to construct brick temples whose tops reach heaven, but their idolatrous cravings betray a similar tendency to transgress sacred boundaries. The question of national identitythe attempt to fathom the entangled relations between Israel and God, between Israel and other nationsis one of the most resonant and unresolvable questions in the Bible. In tackling it, the biblical text relies not on philosophical contemplation but rather on narrative. More specifically, it offers a narrative in which the nation is personified extensively. Any attempt to understand the history of the children of Israel, to fashion a conception of national identity, to grasp communal motives and fantasies, collective memories and oblivions, the Bible seems to suggest, requires a plunge into the intricate twists and turns of the individual life. The nationparticularly in Exodus and Numbersis not an abstract detached concept but rather a grand character with a distinct voice (represented at times in a singular mode) who moans and groans, is euphoric at times, complains frequently, and rebels against Moses and God time and again. Israel has a life story, a biography of sorts. It was conceived in the days of Abraham; its miraculous birth took place with the Exodus, the parting of the Red Sea; then came a long period of childhood and restless adolescence in the wilderness; and finally adulthood was approached with the conquest of Canaan. To be sure, a collective character is necessarily more heterogeneous and less predictable. The Pentateuchs account of national formation resists fixed definitions of the various phases in the nations life cycle. Roughly speaking, chronology is maintained, and yet images of birth, youth, initiation, and suckling intermingle throughout. Thus, the distinct manifestation of national suckling appears only in Numbers 11, where Moses likens the people to a suckling infant in the wilderness, long after the grand-scale initiation at Sinai. But, after all, such boundaries are never that clear in individual biographies either. Infantile dreams may linger on and initiation is rarely exhausted in one rite. National literatures were not common in the ancient world. Israels preoccupation with its reason for being is exceptional in the ancient Near East. In Greece and particularly in Rome, however, narratives concerning national origins are equally important. Israels history bears resemblance to the Roman one. It too involves a divine promise, individuation from a major civilization, a quest for lost roots, a long journey to what is construed as the land of the forefathers, and a gory conquest. What makes the Bible unique is the extent to which the nation is dramatized. In the Aeneid, by way of comparison, the plot revolves round Aeneas. The wanderings between Troy and the promised new land are primarily

Aeneass wanderings: the people remain a rather pale foil. They engage in no conflicteither with Aeneas or the godsthat would grant them access to the central stage. The biblical text is significantly different in its rendering of national drama. Israel is a protagonist whose moves and struggles determine the mapso much so that 40 years of wanderings in the desert are added to the itinerary as a result of the peoples protest against the official preference of Canaan over Egypt. The fashioning of Israel as a character is a forceful unifying strategy, but the metaphor does not yield a homogeneous account of national formation. The biblical text reveals points of tension between different traditions regarding the nations history and character. Even the nations sexual identity is not stable. Although the Pentateuch shapes a male character, referring to the people as am (singular masculine noun), the Prophets, more often than not, represent Israel as female, using Jerusalem or Zion (feminine nouns) as alternative designations. This essay focuses on the intricacies of national imagination in the Pentateuch, and as such it is concerned with the fashioning of a male character who is marked as Gods firstborn son. Double personification is at stakeof God and the nationcreating a familial link between the two. If Romes sacred origin is assured through the divine blood of its founding fathersAeneas is Venuss son, and Romulus and Remus are the offspring of Marsin the case of Israel, the nation as a whole, metaphorically speaking, is Gods son. On sending Moses to Pharaoh to deliver the people, God proclaims: Israel is My first-born son. I have said to you [Pharaoh], Let My son go (Exodus 4:2223). The priority given to Israel by the Father represents a translation into national terms of the reversal of the primogeniture lawa phenomenon so central in the lives of the patriarchs. The late-born nation that came to the stage after all its neighbors had assumed their historical roles is elevated by God to the position of the chosen firstborn. Israel is a chosen nation, Gods nation, but the reason for its chosen-ness remains obscure. It does not succeed in following traditional norms of male heroism, nor does it become an exemplary nation with high moral and religious standards. The more mature Israel, in the plains of Moab, on the threshold of Canaan, is far more established a community than the nascent nation on the way out of Egypt, but this by no means suggests that biblical historiography relies on the principle of progress. Whereas in the initial stages of the journey the children of Israel worship a Golden Calf in a carnivalesque feast, at the last station, just before crossing the Jordan river, they cling to Baal Peor (under the influence of Moabite women), adopting Canaanite religious practices with much enthusiasm. The Song of Moses, with its synoptic presentation of Israels history, regards the nation as an ungrateful son whose conduct fails to improve over time: Do you thus requite the Lord, O dull and witless people? Is not He the Father who created you, fashioned you and made you endure! (Deuteronomy 32:6). Instead of appreciating Gods vigilance, Moses claims, once the nation grew fat it used its new powers to kick (Deuteronomy 32:15). What is most fascinating in the primary biography of ancient Israel is the ambivalence that lies at its very base, an ambivalence that is expressed so poignantly through the intense struggles between the Father (or Moses) and His people. The nation is both the chosen son and the rebel son, and accordingly its relationship with the Father is at once intimate and strained. The fictional quality of the struggle between God and the nation does not preclude the historicity of the text. Israels beginning is situated in historical timesin the days of the Exodusrather than in a mythical in illo tempore. Similarly, God defines Himself, at Sinai and elsewhere, as the one who brought Israel out of Egyptnot as the Creator of primeval times. Even at moments when the biography of ancient Israel relies on mythical materialsprimarily, on the myth of the birth of the hero and the myth of the heros returnthese are inextricably connected with a historiographical drive to record memorable past events and question their meaning. In the Bible, history and literature go hand in hand, more explicitly than in modern historiography, which is why it serves as a paradigmatic case for the examination of the narrative base of national constructions. national birth The metaphor of birth is probably the most resonant anthropomorphic image in national narratives from antiquity to modern times. In fact, it is so resonant one tends to forget that nations are not born literally but are, rather, imagined in these terms. Every nation, however, has its own birth story, or birth stories. The book of Exodus provides an intriguingly complex representation of Israels birth in keeping with the preliminary imaginings of the nation in Genesis. The opening verses of Exodus 1 make clear that Gods reiterated promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacobthe grand national annunciation scenes of Genesisare finally realized. The descendants of Jacob, whose names are listed solemnly, multiply at an uncanny pace and turn into a mighty nation: the nation of the children of Israel. Israel for the first time is not merely Jacobs second, elevated, name but rather a collective designation of a burgeoning community that fills the land. But then we discover that Gods darker prophecy, in the covenant of the parts (Genesis 15:13), is equally fulfilled: Israel is born in a prolonged exile, against Pharaonic bondage. Representing the birth of a nation is not a simple task. The imagining of this dramatic event in Exodus is facilitated by the interweaving of two biographies: the story of the birth of Moses, and that of the nation. The fashioning of Israel as character, here as elsewhere, is inseparable from a complementary narrative strategy: the marking of individuals whose histories are paradigmatic. The nations life story, in other words, is modeled in relation to the biographies of select characters. Abraham, whose departure from Ur serves as prefiguration of the nations exodus, is only the first exemplary figure. The heterogeneity of national imagination in the Bible depends on a variety of representatives. Fragments of the biographies of Isaac, of Jacob, the eponymous father, and even of Hagar, the Egyptian handmaid, whose affliction foreshadows the nations enslavement in Egypt, are also linked in different ways to the nations biography and take part in its construction. On the question of birth, Moses story is of special importance. The analogy between the one and the multitude in this case is more

immediate. Unlike the patriarchal biographies that pertain to a distant past and flicker over the chasm of time, Moses birth occurs within the same historical setting. Moses is a national leader whose history blends with the history of the nation. He is one of many Hebrew babies persecuted by Pharaoh. His story, however, is marked as the exemplary account that sheds light on the collective birth story as it prefigures the deliverance of the nation as a whole from bondage. Moses birth story shares much in common with mythical birth stories. What characterizes the birth of a hero? The conception of the hero is usually impeded by difficulties such as abstinence or prolonged barrenness. During or before pregnancy there is a prophecy, or an oracle cautioning the father against the heros birth; the father tries to shape a different future and gives orders to kill his new-born son; the babe is then placed in a basket or a box and delivered to the waves. Against all odds, however, the hero is saved by animals, or by lowly people, and is suckled by a female animal or by a humble woman. When full grown, he discovers his royal parents, takes revenge on his father, and, recognized by his people, finally achieves rank and honors. Moses story is indeed compatible in many ways with this model: a threatened child, the exposure in the basket, the miraculous deliverance of the foundling, the two sets of parents, and the final acknowledgment of the heros power. But there is a significant difference: Moses true parents are not the royal ones but rather the poor Hebrew slaves. At a moment of national birth, the inversion of the two sets of parents is not without significance. Moses true parents are higher in rank despite their lowly position precisely because they are members of the chosen nation-to-be. the politics of birth The juxtaposition of Moses story and that of the nation entails an adaptation of the myth of the birth of the hero on a national plane. Put differently, it enables the construction of a myth of the birth of the nation. Israels birth, much like that of Moses, takes place against Pharaohs will.