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LEADERSHIP AND FREEDOM:
ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S
MOSES, MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN

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LEADERSHIP AND FREEDOM: ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S MOSES, MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN

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ABSTRACT

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By

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Zora Neale Hurston's novel, Moses, Man of the Mountain, retells the story of the Exodus within the framework of African-American folktale. As Robert Hemenway has noted in Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography, the book was "received with caution" at the time of its first publication, and has been ever since. Many recent critics, as well, have overlooked many important elements within the novel. This thesis argues that the novel is a powerful critique of the roles that choice, chance circumstance, and the influence of others play in shaping "destiny." The reader is invited to imagine the life of Moses as a man, and his relationship with the Hebrews. Hurston also explores the extreme restriction of freedom that occurs when all are not allowed to speak equally. In doing so, the novel invites us to question whether or not self-responsibility can be separated from freedom.

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INTRODUCTION

Zora Neale Hurston's novel, Moses, Man of the Mountain[1], is a retelling of the Exodus which reposits "the sacred myths of the Judeo-Christian tradition in African-American terms and idioms,"[2] with Moses as the greatest hoodoo priest that ever existed. In In a Minor Chord: Three Afro-American Writers and Their Search for Identity, Darwin T. Turner calls Hurston's novel her "most accomplished achievement in fiction"(109). Yet he dismissively sums it up as follows:

> The chief art of the book is abundant comedy. Humor emerges even from the mere contrast of the bombastic speech of the Egyptians, the realistic speech of the educated people, and the credible dialect of the slaves. But a good joke, at best, is merely a joke. Miss Hurston's joke entertains readers but does not comment significantly on life or people.(111)

It is obvious from the essay as a whole that Turner is unusually hostile toward Hurston. For instance, in less than three paragraphs he describes her as "myopic," "naive," "immature," "insecure," and calls her a liar.[3] It is no surprise, then, that he does not take Moses seriously. In fact he begins his discussion of the novel by claiming that Hurston makes Moses the "illegitimate son of Pharaoh's daughter"(110), when in actuality this is not the case.[4] One wonders after this if he even read the book.

What is surprising is that other, more recent critics have overlooked and thus dismissed so many important elements of this novel as well. In his comprehensive work Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Autobiography, Robert E. Hemenway writes that "Hurston's

novel was "received with confusion at the time" of its first publication and has been viewed "with uncertainty ever since." Yet Hemenway as well describes the novel as one which "does not always achieve its own aspirations"(256). In Zora Neale Hurston, another detailed critical analysis of Hurston's work, Lillie P. Howard, although much more sympathetic to the novel, sees Moses's primary importance for Hurston and the reader as "the African hero, Moses, the greatest hoodoo man in the world". Howard acknowledges that Moses fails lead the Hebrews to freedom because he realizes that they must lead themselves. But she sees much of the novel primarily as a description of "certain qualities necessary for the ideal leader"(132).

Although Howard misses the point that an ideal leader of the people should also be one "of" the people, characterizing Moses's choice of Joshua as successor as the passing of knowledge to yet "another great leader"(130), she does much to initiate a serious reconsideration of the novel. But in doing so she over-credits Hurston's "admission" to a friend that she had a "feeling of disappointment"(132) about the book. After all, in her autobiography Dust Tracks on a Road, Hurston "admits" that she regrets all of her books.[5] Deborah E. McDowell, as well, in her Introduction to the HarperPerrenial edition of Moses, calls it a "badly flawed novel"(viii) that nevertheless succeeds at identifying "concerns with racial origins--and perhaps origins more generally--as the genesis of the world's many evils"(xiii).

I argue that what these and other critics overlook is that Moses is a subtle yet powerful critique of the roles that choice, and the

perception of being chosen, play in the shaping of an individual's as well as a people's lives and characters. The novel also explores the ways in which chance circumstances, and the manipulations and influence of others are responsible for a "destiny" that marks one off as distinct from, and thus seemingly better than others. By inviting us to imagine the complexity of the relationship between Moses and the Hebrews, and the extent to which their freedom depends on his leadership, Moses invites us to question whether or not self- responsibility can be separated from freedom.

As Hemenway observes, "the novel turns the biblical Moses . . . into a very special hoodoo man subject to at least some of the defects of the human condition."[6] Making Moses more "human" allows a questioning of his relationship to the Hebrews which seems much easier to develop from this novel than from the traditional story. The novel uses this to explore the nature of the battle, which is who and what the Hebrews should be, between Moses and the Egyptians and the Pharaoh Ta-Phar, and then Moses and the Hebrews. A question of the degree to which Moses's earlier influences prepared him for this battle is combined with the question of his destiny, and it invites us to consider how much the latter may be determined by the former.

But though this destiny leads him to deliver a people and mold a nation, he creates a resentful, and yet eventually worshipful dependency on him, which goes against all his beliefs in freedom. In the end Moses is deeply disappointed that the Hebrews don't seem to understand all that he has worked for over the years. This is becuse he never really helps them to comprehend why he sees their future in

the way that he does. Moses is finally unable to understand that a people whose lives have been forcefully shaped for them for so long cannot immediately take over the task of shaping themselves. No matter how good his intentions, he comes from the same tradition which sees people as material to be molded, and he never fully attempts to change them from molded to molders. Rather than risk the degree of freedom that he has already attained for them Moses instead passes on leadership to Joshua, insuring that this change will not occur. In the end his language constricts the Hebrews even more surely than that of the Egyptians did.

The humor which Turner finds so abundant does show in the constant friction between Moses and the Hebrews. They constantly resist his efforts to make them work and suffer for freedom. When he responds to their hunger in the desert with the argument that they should be glad to go hungry for the sake of a little freedom, they answer, "You brought us out there, didn't you? We want to know if this powerful God you talk about is here amongst us or if He ain't"(205). Having previously equated freedom with the Egyptians' ability to hold slaves to perform their labor for them, the Hebrews seem to expect that freedom for them means the same thing. But the options for them have been limited from the beginning. The novel opens with their submission to the cruel laws of the Egyptians, and closes with their submission to the absolute law of Moses and his god. Whatever the benefits of following Moses have been, they nevertheless have had many fewer options to chose from than he had. Because he has been so responsible for so much of the course of their lives, the Hebrews never gain that degree of freedom that

comes with being wholly responsible for oneself, at least more responsible for themselves than they have been under Pharaoh or Moses.

Moses's control over the Hebrews, and their lack of self-responsibility, are demonstrated in the extreme with his two "co-leaders," Aaron and Miriam. Moses excludes them from sharing real power with him on the basis that they are either too weak, like Aaron, or on the basis that they have no right to seek a position of power, like Miriam. Aaron, Miriam's brother, is everything that Moses's greatest foe, Pharaoh, is without his place as head of state, and, most importantly, without the power of his position and the support it would provide his assumed arrogance. He shares with Pharaoh his selfish inability to truly care for the needs of others, even as he serves those others' desires for personal gain. As such for Moses he does not even merit hatred, but only contempt. And when Moses calls the first meeting of the Hebrew Elders in Egypt and Miriam shows up, he asks, "But what is she doing here? I have called the Elders to me on serious business"(emphasis added, 135). He clearly does not expect her to partake in the decision making, now or ever.

Miriam is, however, much more in the story. It is she who begins the legend of Moses and serves as the catalyst for his initial journey, with her public claim of him as brother. She is in sharp contrast to her mother Jochebed, whose resistant voice is the voice of all mothers who refuse to participate in the annihilation of their own people for either Pharaoh's law or their husbands' fears and resignation, who refuse to give up their belief in "maybe." Yet she

also shares a place with her mother, and with Moses's Egyptian mother and wife Zipporah as well. This place is one of silence and powerlessness, assigned to them by men who define women both by their usefulness and potential threat as distractions to the achievement of men's desires and ambitions. For instance, Moses's first teacher, Mentu, tells Moses that the "female man's" gift to men is the "soothing-balm of lies"(39). And his father-in-law Jethro cautions him that all women are ever "ready to upset the whole world to make an opportunity to dress [themselves] up in ornaments"(109). Women, then, are clearly a mixed blessing at best.

Later in the story, Miriam bitterly envies Zipporah, who is content with those artificial and seductive images of power, the pursuit of which defines a man as unworthy of manhood and thus potential greatness, but which women are expected to desire. At the same time she is denied access to any real influence or power over even herself. Moses, who is taught the definition of woman as possessor of the "gift of the soothing-balm of lies" from his earliest years, dismisses Miriam from serious consideration in a manner distressingly similar to the way in which she has thus far been dismissed from serious consideration by most critics of the novel.

McDowell, however, asserts in her essay that

> "While Hurston does not restore the status of the mother(s) in her telling of the tale, one could say that in putting her mouth on the Mosaic myth, she exposes the structures of gender at its base. In other words, in telling the story of a people's deliverance into a new nation state--a Fatherland, if you will--Hurston says much about the relations between nationalism and masculinity and how, for both, the presence of the feminine is a problem"(xiii).

By articulating the "presence of the feminine" as a problem in a Fatherland, Hurston as well explores the extreme opposite of freedom that occurs when all are not allowed to speak equally. Moses invites us to question whether or not, if a people continue to oppress even a part of themselves, they can truly be free.

Karla F. C. Holloway has argued that "*Moses* begins as an oral text, but since the word has developed just about all the strength it can through oracy, it does not end this way."[1] While I would agree that the novel does not end this way, I disagree that it begins as an oral text. At most, the legend of Moses as the Hebrew "Prince in the palace"[2] (which later gives so much shape to Moses's life-story) begins orally. But the novel itself opens with the Hebrews firmly entangled in the written, legal texts of their Egyptian oppressors. The Pharaoh is presented as the leader of a new, cruel regime, and the new laws he has passed at the start of the novel strip the Hebrews of their citizenry and redefine them as slaves: "Hebrews were disarmed and prevented from becoming citizens of Egypt, they found out that they were aliens, and from one new decree to the next they sank lower and lower"(2). But the most sinister of these decrees is the one that declares that "Positively no more boy babies [are] allowed among Hebrews. Infants defying this law shall be drowned in the Nile"(2). The absurdity of this language is made clear in its stark contrast to the reality of the "Hebrew women [who] shuddered with terror at the indifference of their wombs to the Egyptian law"(1).

It does not matter, of course, that Hebrew babies are no more responsible for their conception, birth, or sex than are any other babies. What matters is that the Egyptians' written decrees defy and redefine the reality of Hebrew lives. Their ostensible reason for

doing so, as Pharaoh condescendingly explains to the them, is only to protect themselves. Apparently the Hebrews, who "had come down into Egypt as the allies and aides of those oppressors of the Egyptian people, and as such had trampled on the proud breast of Egyptian liberty for more than three hundred years"(19), had to be taught a lesson. They should cease complaining and instead be glad to "pay back in a small way"(19), the debt they owed Egypt for the sparing of their lives. This new regime's real goal, however, is to consolidate power in the hands of a few, gain a perpetual labor force, and facilitate the expansion of their empire. As Moses's uncle Ta-Phar later observes when he becomes Pharaoh, "even his military strength rested on these slaves. For, without them men would have to be taken from other things to fill their places"(169).

Pharaoh, and through him Egypt, is able to change the course of the Hebrews' lives because they have the power which enables them to control the language that the Egyptians and the Hebrews share. Only when this is challenged by one more powerful than they are is this reality shaken. Even when Moses firsts challenges the new Pharaoh, this confidence in their control is not disturbed. The first few times that Moses demands of Pharaoh that he let the Hebrews go, Ta-Phar treats his demands as if they were a contest to be easily won. At this point, to him Moses is still nothing more than an upstart who is "bent on being King of something, even if it is nothing but the Hebrews"(141). His priests can also turn their rods into snakes, and when Moses's rod/snake swallows theirs, he sees this as a game of one-upmanship. He engages in similar thinking when

Moses turns Egypt's water to blood, finding that his priests can perform the same "trick."

What he has not realized thus far is that Moses is able to read him quite well. Moses knows the extent of Ta-Phar's arrogance and insecurity, and he welcomes the opportunity to crush that arrogance. Ta-Phar's arrogance is shaken for the first time when his priests seem to duplicate Moses's calling of the frogs. After he feels that the trick has been sufficiently imitated, he commands that the frogs be sent back:

> "That's plenty--a gracious plenty. Now send them on off like Moses did." The officiating priest stopped in his tracks and looked right sheepish at Pharaoh. The frogs kept on coming. "I said stop," Pharaoh said coldly. The frogs kept on coming. "You heard me!" Pharaoh roared. . . . The frogs kept right on coming.(156-7)

Ta-Phar's anger grows in proportion to the degree of his realization that he can no longer force reality to conform to his words. He had relied up until that point on the words and laws of his father to maintain his position. But he has neither the strength nor the position vis-a-vis Moses that his father had, and he is therefore destined to lose this battle. In contrasting these two Pharaohs, Moses shows that their command over language, the power with which they are able to invest it, and the authority with which it invests them determines the degree of their mastery over the Hebrews' lives. Ta-Phar is more concerned with "palace etiquette" and "robes of state to be filled and worn properly" (46), than he is with the state itself. It was his father who transformed the slaves from rich prosperous citizens to slaves. Ta-Phar does not have this

transformational ability, he has only inherited its results, and he cannot strive against one who exercises that ability.

Ta-Phar's powerlessness compliments, rather than contrasts, with his earlier efforts to manipulate and destroy Moses. Unlike Ta-Phar, his father can declare coldly, in response to Moses's request for justice for the Hebrews, that "Egypt has no home problems that I can see. . . . What internal problems we had, got settled before you were born"(62). What he says is Egypt's reality. But Ta-Phar continually worries about possible uprisings, and he sees the Prince Moses as stirring up trouble in order to compete for his place as heir-apparent. He uses here(as he does in later confrontations with Moses) the words of another to protect his position and attack a potential enemy. So when Miriam comes to the palace and demands to speak to Moses as her brother, Ta-Phar seizes that chance to discredit him.

In her article "Feminism and Deconstruction" Mary Poovey argues that by "demonstrating that the idea of presence depends upon language . . . [Jacques] Derrida argues that the presence is always elusive and relational--not the ground of truth but the illusion produced by the endless substitution of signifiers with which we(hopefully but futilely) try to capture it."[3] Moses's position in life is a construction which is maintained by the mutual agreement of those with whom he lives. Like Pharaoh, who destroyed and reconstructed an identity for the Hebrews, Ta-Phar seeks to destroy Moses's identity as Egyptian royalty, a favorite of Pharaoh and most of Egypt, and thus a potential threat, and reconstruct it as that of a lowly Hebrew, fit for nothing but slavery.

The illusion of the constant safety and privilege he has never before questioned is shattered when he reacts in anger to Ta-Phar's charge that he is a Hebrew. It is this attempt at control, and forced transformation, which incites his anger and leads him to kill the overseer:

> The idea of calling him, Prince Moses, a Hebrew! If Ta-Phar thought so, why had he been so hush-mouth about it all these years? For it was no secret that Ta-Phar had never loved him. . . . Had some Hebrew really made such a claim? He didn't believe it. . . . So! The court was really angry with him for asking justice for the Hebrews. "They have decided to destroy me out of hand," Moses reflected. "They are ready to do anything to confirm them in their position, and to do that, they have to prostitute the language. They must blow out the sun and switch on a spotlight."(66)

Yet despite his recognition that Ta-Phar and his supporters manipulate language to control and destroy their enemies, Moses still allows their "prostitution" to manipulate him. He has not yet gained sufficient understanding or mastery of language to counter the power of Pharaoh's court, to be able to resist their attempts to redefine him. He thinks to himself, "I have risked my life and exposed myself to a thousand dangers for such as him"(66), when he sees the overseer beating a fallen slave. In his anger and frustration he kills him, unwittingly providing Ta-Phar with the real means to destroy him; actions which seem to support Ta-Phar's words. His later anger then, when he confronts Ta-Phar to free the Hebrews, is really directed at the power of the Egyptians' law and language. Ta-Phar is only an empty symbol, much like his robes of state.

As Robert Hemenway has observed, Moses's "role in Judeo-Christian tradition was remote, shrouded in biblical dignity. Once he

was demystified, however, the analogy between biblical history and the black American past became real and immediate. . . ."[4] A large part of this demystification occurs through Moses's fictional account of Moses's childhood. Moses is able to eventually overcome the Egyptians in part because his experience in Pharaoh's court has acquainted him with its weaknesses as well as strengths, and provided him with the opportunity to see where real power lies. His position as prince provided him with other advantages as well. He "grows up an extraordinarily wise and imaginative youth, a child given to mysticism who presses the Egyptian priests to teach him their magic."[5] But it is from Mentu, the old stablehand who becomes his friend and mentor, that Moses gains the boldness to question the priests, and from whom he learns the most.

Unlike the nobility of Egypt, Mentu does not use language to destroy or manipulate, but instead to share and to teach. For the Egyptians, there are no questions, only answers. But for Mentu, questions give him the opportunity to provide "answers in the form of stories . . . because they just came to him to tell"(38). This sharing and instruction is as important a lesson for Moses to learn as are the various "answers" that Mentu gives him to his many questions.

Mentu's teachings impart to Moses his views of human nature. He teaches Moses that the role of the "female man" is as companion to the "male man." She is to keep him from destroying himself in despair of life's truths with her "gift of the soothing-balm of lies" (39). He also learns the ways and language of animals. "In fact," for Moses, "they were human by Mentu's interpretations." The monkey

was "a smart aleck person of no importance always trying to imitate his betters and make a mess of things." Some people, he teaches him, believe that old poeple turned into monkeys and that it was "just as well" if Moses refrained from hunting them. Mentu interprets the lizard's language so that Moses will learn that men are foolish when they build too glamorous nests for their mates and that when "one is too old for love, one finds great comfort in good dinners"(39-42).

Snakes are sacred to the Egyptians, and when Moses is a little older, Mentu tells him that when wise men "have attained a certain age of wisdom they enter the serpents"(52). It is all of these lessons which encourage Moses's curiosity to grow, and they "stirred Moses to stealing into the enclosures of the priests"(43), in order to learn their secrets as well. Significantly, he learns from this not to view gods as mysterious and unknowable entities, recognizing the priests' ceremonies as nothing "but the dressing for what goes on behind the scenes"(59). These lessons and experiences combine to make Moses feel both able and eager to battle the "deathless snake that guards the book of Thoth"(53). They help to mold a Moses who feels capable of finding and mastering this book written by a god, that would make him the "greatest priest the world will ever know"(54). So much detail on Moses's background is provided not only to "demystify" him. It also demonstrates that a myriad of factors combined in providing him with the opportunity to be a great priest, as well as shaping the "blind chance in his being chosen to make the Hebrew fiction become a Jewish reality(emphasis added)."[6]

Before Mentu dies, he begs Moses to have him buried as a priest, for Moses, he knows, has "the power to insist." He bequeaths to Moses his own lifelong dream of becoming a great priest, acknowledging that "I couldn't make it from where I started"(58). Mentu recognizes what we should recognize as well, that Moses's upbringing as a prince, something over which he had no control, was at least as responsible for making him a great leader as is any natural ability he may have had. There was no guarantee that he would have had the opportunites and encouragement that he had in this novel, but this speculation on opportunities he may have had again serves to raise the question of how much "blind chance" plays in "choosing" individuals for specific missions in life.

There are other forces explored in the novel as well, which shape Moses as the Hebrews' deliverer as well. The first of these is Zipporah, his wife. When Moses first sees Mount Sinai, he is drawn to reach and explore it. Zipporah and her sisters come to water their cattle at the spring where he is resting. When he sees her struggle to protect her sisters from thieves who have come to steal their cattle, he forgets "the resolve he had made in Egypt to mind his own business and leave other folks' affairs alone"(86). In thankfulness for his efforts, their father, Jethro, invites Moses first to dinner, and then to stay indefinitely. Jethro is indeed a major "force" in determining the path which Moses's life is to take. Presented here as a shrewd yet caring old chieftan, unlucky enough to have only female children, he quickly takes advantage of Moses's attraction to Zipporah. So she becomes only an indirect influence, utilized by Jethro until no longer needed as such.

When Moses first meets Jethro, he sees a man who

> looked as if he was supposed to be listened to, but there was no insistence on his face. He looked capable of guiding people, but he didn't look as if he were determined to do it. Wisdom and a kind of strength were gathered together in the man, but his self-confidence had not driven off simplicity. He knew little sorrow[s] and joys as well as big ones. He looked as if he could understand and talk with shepherds as well as kings. So Moses was not surpised when he spoke to hear him dropping into the idiom of the simple people. It took nothing from his majestic hearing, and somehow it fitted him. Moses was constrained to meet him on his level as he talked.(88)

In this first glimpse of Jethro we see along with Moses the most important lessons that he will learn. As with Mentu, Jethro's character was a lesson in itself. At the end of the novel, when Moses speaks to Jethro the last time before he dies, we see this majesty, wisdom, and authority echoed in Moses. He quiets Jethro's worry that his desire for Moses to deliver the Hebrews kept him from being as happy as he could have been, telling him that "perhaps it was my destiny anyway. . . . Your friendship was would have been worth ten times more"(267).

But when he first meets Jethro he is indeed "constrained to meet him on his level," in what he does as well as how he talks. In fact, "in every case [Jethro] had knowledge and methods far beyond anything that Moses had seen in Egypt"(98). And he begins to use that knowledge immediately. While Jethro is discussing the problem of the cattle thieves with him Zipporah comes in, and for Moses, "something about her made every cell in his body thrust out its head"(90). He doesn't return his attention to Jethro again until she leaves the room, and comments on the damage he intends to do to

those cattle thieves, should they return. Jethro replies, "Oh, you mustn't let my talk drag you into something that may get you hurt. By the way, that oldest girl of mine is named Zipporah. You must excuse me for running my mouth so much that I haven't introduced you to my family." When Moses answers that he must have read his mind, and that he wants to learn the skill himself, Jethro responds that "It is a gift and not a learning"(90).

And yet Moses does learn something of this, after years of long experience. Moses makes a similar comment to Aaron when they first challenge Ta-Phar and Aaron suggests that they petition Pharaoh "now that we got him worried--" Moses cuts him off, saying "I see you don't know people, Aaron. He's not taking this serious yet, but he will when he has to"(147). Moses not only grew up knowing Ta-Phar, but he also has had the benefit of years of living with and observing Jethro's knowledge of people, and of Jethro's use of that knowledge. He is, however, hard pressed to meet Jethro's level of skill. This is one are in which Moses does not surpass his teacher. Jethro's keen observation of Moses's obvious reaction to his eldest daughter provides him with an insight into Moses's character which he is to use at a later date to his advantage, and Moses does not duplicate this to the same degree.

One day while they are out walking and talking Moses thinks to himself of Jethro, "If he only knew what a mess I have made of my life so far, he wouldn't think I am so great"(103). This is in response to Jethro's reminder to Moses of his dream to find the book of Thoth, and his plea not to "over-pull your belly on this love business" because he is an "over-average man" who should not

"waste" himself on a woman (103-4). Moses expresses the desire to "search out all [the] wonders" of Zipporah, but it is not this desire to explore the mysterious that Jethro wants to discourage. His words are chosen carefully to encourage that desire even as he attempts to redirect it:

> What you're feeling now has got its place in life. Desire is the germ of the mind. There is no creation without it. Desire is a woman who is little understood and much slandered when her back is turned. She is a woman with a beautiful face and an ugly back. She drives a strong-legged crowd before her, gilded with the light from her face, and pushing the world before it. Behind her is a limping horde with the cawing black bird of age on its shoulders, screaming imprecations at her back. They are renegades who do not deserve their past. Those who say desire is ugly have poor memories.(104)

Jethro is a man who does deserve his memories. He understands desire and the driving force that it is. His desire, after all, has kept his dreams of delivering the Hebrews from Egypt, and of bringing other people to worship his god, alive for 40 years, until he met a man with enough power to make them come true. Despite his very real love and respect for Moses and his powers, then, it is clear that Jethro uses his skill with language, in combination with his ability to "read" people's thoughts and characters, to influence Moses to adopt the path that Jethro wants him to take. He knows that Moses has not given up his dream of finding the river Koptos and the book of Thoth, but that something is making him settle for the mysteries of a wife, rather than those of all of Nature.

So when Moses finally unburdens himself to Jethro about his past in Egypt, it is not surprising that he is also able to tell him "Some day, you shall go with me to Koptos"(110). Moses's "new

happiness had washed him out"(107), and he no longer feels constrained with Jethro, who is in large part responsible for this happiness. This lack of constraint enables Jethro's advice to take effect. When Zipporah attempts to persuade him that he should return to Egypt and try to become a king, so that she can be a queen, Jethro snaps that she is "just like all the rest of the women--ready to upset the whole world to make an opportunity to dress yourself up in ornaments"(109). This remark echoes what Moses has heard and seen regarding women all his life. The constraint that he felt because of his secret past is gone, he no longer regards Zipporah as the greatest mystery in his life, or her secrets as the most desireable to discover. He is now free to pursue his real love, knowledge and the power it brings.

Jethro's insights into Moses's character enable him to influence Moses in many of the choices he makes, as much as Moses's love for him is responsible for his being open to the full extent of that influence. The detailing of this relationship asks the reader to question the extent to which even a welcomed influence can play in shaping one's life beyond what one can see for oneself. Jethro's ability to "understand and talk with shepherds as well as kings" plays an important role in affecting the Moses of this novel. Significantly, it is after Moses has "found out how to make the excrescence that he called Manna appear on a certain plant"(117), thus surpassing all knowledge that Jethro can teach him, that Jethro judges him ready to climb Mount Sinai. And this occurs before he finds the book of Thoth.

If he had not met Jethro and opened himself up to his influence, the novel asks us to question whether Moses would have been able to find the book and use its power. He could have climbed Mount Sinai, but would he have had that right hand and been "worshipped as a god"(xxiv)? By asking us this question within context of presenting this other concept of Moses "abroad in the world"(xxiii), Moses also questions the idea that Moses, or anyone, was and is especially chosen by anything other than fortuitous circumstances and natural ability. We are asked to question his status as the divinely "chosen" leader of the Hebrews as well.

After he sees Mount Sinai for the first time and then meets Jethro, Moses feels that the mountain "called him as a mother would" and that he should "go up and embrace his mother"(91). But he sees this mountain in relation to, but greater than, the tombs that he remembers from Egypt, viewing it as "the tomb of a god a thousand greater than the pyramids. . . . This was not a mere pile of stone. . . . This sublime earth form was the living place of a god, certainly"(84). When Jethro can no longer forbid Moses to climb this mountain, however, it is not the embrace of a mother that he finds. Instead he finds the "Voice" which commands him to go down to Egypt, deliver the Hebrews from slavery, and bring them to Mount Sinai to worship Jethro's god. It would seem that Moses is indeed divinely chosen.

However, it is somewhat ambiguous as to who, or what, is doing the chosing here. It would not seem to be too much of a coincidence that Jethro's dream of delivering the Hebrews would come from the same Voice. In fact he earlier tells Moses that he can "*feel* the

command to bring other people . . . to know this god and worship him"(105). And he is very straightforward with his ambitions, musing with Moses that "That would really be something--a big crowd like that coming through religion all at one time"(122). But, as Howard has noted, "God as a character does not figure largely in this reproduction of the biblical saga."[7] When Moses refuses for the last time to deliver the Hebrews, Jethro gets angry. His wish has been with him for a long time, and he does not intend to give it up. He hints at his thoughts to Zipporah:

> Well, he might think I'm through with the thing, but first and last he's going to find out different. I ain't been to Koptos, it is true, and had no fight with no never-dying snake, but maybe there is still something about snakes that he can learn. The backside of that mountain may get too hot to hold him yet.(emphasis added, 124)

What is it that Moses still has to learn of snakes? Jethro could be referring to the snake that turns into a rod, but how does he know of this then? Or he could be commenting on the danger of Moses thinking that he's learned all the mysteries there are to know in the world. Or he could be referring to himself. And the "hot" could refer to the burning bush, or it could refer to the command that Moses will receive, making it impossible for him to refuse to go to Egypt. But again, how does Jethro know of this then? If Jethro cannot convince Moses directly, could he manipulate him somehow? Because, as Howard comments, "God" is not a major character in the book, it is up to the reader to notice and decipher the clues which indicate other possibilities than the accepted story allows.

Immediately after Moses leaves the mountain and tells Jethro of his experience, the story informs us that he "seemed to Moses to glow and swell with pleasure" at the news(129). His likeness to the burning bush is unmistakeable, just as his determinition to convince Moses to go to Egypt is paralleled by the "Voice's" insistence that he do the same. Because this is a Moses who in part is based on one who "had the power to command God to go to a peak of a mountain"(xxiii), there is a hint of a question as to whether or not Moses was really "called," or chosen, by a divine authority to save the Hebrews. God does speak later in the novel, and at those times no doubt is left as to whether or not it is that God speaking. Only when Jethro meets with Moses's final resistance does the commanding "Voice," not identified as the Lord God, by anyone but Moses, speak.

As was mentioned, when God speaks to Moses later, His name is explicitly used. That Moses receives the Ten Commandments, and the laws with which to govern the Hebrews, from God is not left to question. But in presenting this crucial incident so ambiguously, Moses leads us to question, not whether or not Moses did a good thing in freeing the Hebrews, but whether or not he was chosen by God to do so. As Hemenway has stated, Moses is "a human being [that] has been called to a god-like task."[8] And it is clear, after his finding the book of Thoth, that he has god-like powers. But it is important to remember that he gained the "secret words that's the keys to God"(117) well before he gained these powers. And he does indeed learn something new about snakes. By inviting us to question these elements which lead to Moses being "chosen" by God, Moses

also allows us to question whether or not he is indeed chosen, if so by whom, or what, and if, in the end, it really matters.

In her autobiography Dust Tracks on a Road, Hurston presents an image of herself as "chosen" bu a mysterious "voice," much like Moses. Indeed a sample from the chapter titles in the table of contents reads much like a synopsis of the questions and problems that shape Moses's life: "My Birthplace," "I Get Born," "The Inside Search," "Wandering," "Research," Books and Things," "My People! My People!" "Love," "Religion," and "Looking Things Over."[1] When she is a child, two white women give Hurston, among other things, a box of books as a reward for demonstrating her reading ability and assuring them that she loves school. She presents these books as opening up a whole new world for her, allowing her things that others in her community could not understand. The books include "Gulliver's Travels, Grimm's Fairy Tales, Dick Whittington, Greek and Roman Myths, and best of all, Norse Tales"(39). Of the Greek myths, she writes, "Hercules moved me the most. I followed him eagerly on his tasks. The story of the choice of Hercules as a boy when he met Pleasure and Duty, and put his hand in that of Duty and followed her steep way to the blue hills of fame and glory, which she pointed out at the end, moved me profoundly. I resolved to be just like him"(39).

Hurston also reads the Bible, but only because, after her mother punishes her by locking her in her room, it "was the only thing there for me to read"(40). She particularly likes the story of David, because "Not one time did David stop and preach about sins and things. All David wanted to know from God was who to kill and

when. He took care of the other details himself. Never a quiet moment"(40). These two stories, of making choice and being chosen, greatly influence her own narrative. But for what has Hurston been chosen, and what will be her "Duty" that leads her by the hand?

Hurston writes later of learning other great things and stories. When she leaves her job as a maid to an actress, she eventually goes to night school and there meets Dwight O.W. Holmes, an English teacher who "was to give me the key to certain things"(107). And later, when she is accepted by the "spirit of Howard"(114), and yet discouraged by her lack of money, Holmes encourages her not to give up. At her job in Washington as a manicurist, she meets many influential men and "learned things by holding the hands of men like that. The talk was of world affairs, national happenings, personalities, the latest quips from the cloakrooms of Congress and such things"(115). And after Howard she studies under the anthropologist Dr Franz Boas, of Columbia University, eventually feeling she has earned the right to call him "Papa."

It is her mother originally, however, who first exhorts Zora "at every opportunity to 'jump at de sun'"(13). And it is her dying mother, and her mother's voice, whom she writes of as failing when she is "called upon to set my will against my father, the village dames and village custom. . ."(63). Later in life, Zora chooses to use the tools she has acquired away from the village to give larger voice to the African-American community from which she writes of as being isolated for so long. Her mother had served as a bridge to that community, and when that link is severed so, seemingly, is her connection. In helping that "voice" to speak to the larger world, she

reaffirms that connection. At the end of the chapter entitled "My People! My People!" Hurson writes that "I maintain that I have been a Negro three times--a Negro baby, a Negro girl, and a Negro woman"(172). Her role as a "chosen" and thus isolated individual is thus shown to be a false one, and exposing it reestablishes her link to "her" people.

Moses, however, is chosen. He serves as the bridge between God's "voice" and the Hebrew community, but he is separate from them in a way that Hurston was not from her community. Yet regardless of the influences of other people and events on Moses, it is nevertheless clear that he makes many choices of his own, just as Hurston did. While living in the palace, he continues to seek out Mentu of his own accord, and encourages his stories by bringing him good food from the Pharaoh's own kitchen. His own curiosity and delight in his military prowess lead him to follow Mentu's encouragement that he learn to ride and sit well enough to lead an army, despite his certainty that his uncle will never allow him to do so. And when he is rewarded for his efforts by being made Commander-in-Chief, he decides to someday abandon that post despite having "worked hard for more than three years to earn it"(55-6).

But when he flees Egypt, Moses makes his most momentous decision. He realizes that "Mentu had aroused his thought, and that once you wake up thought in a man, you can never put it to sleep again"(76). He knows that someday he will seek the book of Thoth, but for now he must get far beyond the borders from Egypt. It is here that Moses both literally and figuratively "crosses over" into a

new life. Though he regrets the circumstances that provided him this chance, he relishes the idea that now he has time to come "around to the hundreds of questions he wanted to ask of Nature." To him, "The man who interprets Nature is always held in great honor. I am going to live and talk with Nature and know her secrets. Then I will be powerful no matter where I may be"(75). In order to do that, he must complete his escape, and he gets the help of an old fisherman, who informs him that at a certain place in the sea during low tide, he can cross without the help of a boat.

When Moses reaches the other side, he realizes that

> He had crossed over. The short sword at his thigh had a jeweled hilt but he had crossed over and so it was no longer the sign of high birth and power. He had crossed over, so he sat down on a rock near the seashore to rest himself. He had crossed over so he was not of the house of Pharaoh. He did not own a palace because he crossed over. He did not have an Ethiopian Princess for a wife. He had crossed over. He did not have friends to sustain him. He had crossed over. He did not have enemies to strain against his strength and power. He had crossed over. He was subject to no law except the laws of tooth and talon. He had crossed over. The sun who was his friend and ancestor in Egypt was arrogant and bitter in Asia. He had corssed over. He felt as empty as a post hole for which he was none of the things he had once been. He was a man sitting on a rock. He had crossed over.(78)

This passage does not, as Howard has argued, show that Moses "is electing the condition of the oppressed, including the fat back, greens and corn meal."[2] In fact he trades possible inheritance to one kingdom for another, the one of Jethro's vision. The glamor and riches of Egypt are only outward signs of power, as Moses well knows. What he wants is the power itself. What this passage does do, in addition to punning on the notion of "crossing" the color line of

black to white, is comment on all that Moses has lost as well as what he is to gain by his decision to cross over the Red Sea. In essence, he has lost himself. He is nothing more at this moment than a "man sitting on a rock."

Herein lies his future potential. As an "empty post hole," he is now ready to be filled by something much more powerful. As Hemenway has noted, "Moses' life will be *transformed* into something entirely new . . . ," but it will not be because he "comes to identify with the oppressed."[3] Instead Moses will be transformed into a man who can singularly create a nation, precisely because his drive to do so is not diluted by too much personal identification with the people. As he later explains to Aaron, "You are much too sensitive to the wishes of the people but you are too unconscious of their needs"(245). In a sense his criticism is unfair, because as a Hebrew, Aaron is much closer to sharing those wishes. Moses has choices that Aaron, and the Hebrews, do not. His exercising of those choices, and the results, have made him able to resist succumbing to his and their wishes. His crossing of the Red Sea, rather than submitting to Pharaoh's anger, is the first of those important choices.

This crossing, which Moses is eager and impatient to complete, contrasts sharply with his later crossing of the Red Sea with the Hebrews. Though it is to save their lives and destroy their enemies, Moses does force the Hebrews to cross the sea as if there were no other choice for their salvation. A man who can command God, however, clearly has other means at his disposal. But he chooses to save the Hebrews in this fashion and when they see their enemies

drowned at their feet, they dance and sing in joy: "And they clapped time on that [song] with their hands and danced and double clapped it off . . . because everybody was happy and felt like clapping and dancing"(194). This is in stark contrast to the manner in which they initially greet the news that they are free to leave Egypt, with silence, the "majority just [sitting] in the doors of their dwellings staring out at life"(180).

In this crossing Moses has inched the Hebrews much closer to believing themselves to be truly free than he could while they were still on the other side of the Red Sea. But in choosing this path for them, he commits himself to being responsible for choosing all such paths. Though he laments for many years that they do not understand or appreciate his efforts, he does come to understand in some measure that "no man may make another free"(282). He cannot expect them to understand where he is leading them, as long as they are led. But he does not, unfortunately, fully appreciate his own insight. Moses is caught between leaving the Hebrews to chose their own path, and risk failing to reach the full, true freedom that he envisions for them, or insuring that they enjoy the relative freedom that he has fought so hard to lead them to by keeping his laws. His decision is to leave the Hebrews in the hands of Joshua, a leader whom he has molded after himself. And his last task, as a result of that decision, is to insure that the Hebrews will continue to follow those laws. But they will follow them not by choice, but by fear:

> [O]ne day he must die as other men died. And they looked upon him as different from other men and followed him only through fear and awe. When he was sickened and crumbled like ordinary

> men, what would become of his laws and statutes? No, Moses must not die among the Hebrews. They must not see him die.(286)

The power that Moses has, which will insure that the Hebrews continue to fear him and follow his god, has not only inspired fear. It has also given the Hebrews the gift of laws and might, and made them into a nation that can vie with other nations for survival and prosperity. Marjorie Pryse has observed that the

> "Puritans believed that the Bible was quite literally God's text. . . . Deriving the source of their own literary power(in sermons and journals as well as religious poetry) from the patriarchal genealogy by which the Bible transmits authority . . . the Puritans bequeathed to suebsequent generations . . . the association between formal authority and written texts. . . ."[4]

It is this same type of genealogy that is explored in Moses. Moses's god-like power, and ability to talk with God, derives from his mastery of the book of Thoth. The authority of this written word is the strength which breaks the power of the Egyptians' words, of their written laws defining the reality of the Hebrews' lives. It is this book which enables Moses to bring down laws written in stone from God and create the nation of Israel. It is those laws which begin to break the Hebrews' belief in themselves as slaves, as still tied to Egyptian custom and religion. And it is the authority of the written word which will continue to define the Hebrews as God's "chosen."

But though the Hebrews could have chosen to stay in Egypt, not surprisingly, they chose instead to follow Moses to freedom. And their options for freedom were limited to one choice, Moses. It is true that he gave them the "gift of language, the voice to express

God and spirit."[5] But is this gift worth the risk of never being free to make their own choices, based not on fear, or limited options, but something better? And if this authority and its laws are obeyed out of fear, even if their creation was well intended, and even if they contain and have achieved much good, is obedience out of fear and ignorance really freedom?

Hurston does not supply easy, pat answers, or quick solutions. Instead, by exploring possibilities of Moses as a real and knowable man, the novel raises the question of whether or not the privileging of the written word, and the doctrine of the Hebrews, spread across the world, was divinely chosen to be the one truth for everyone. Moses's character is a man whose life is shaped as much by individual choice as by the choices and influences and others. How the number of options he has to chose from in life is partly determined by previous influences is compared to the limited number of options the Hebrews have to chose from based on previous influences as well. This exploration allows us to question the degree to which any one individual's, or people's, path in life and through history, is "naturally" or "divinely" privileged over another's. We also must question in the end whether lack of responsibility for one's own choices, and indeed perceived lack of choice, is preferable to the freedom that Moses wishes for Israel, and that <u>Moses</u> implies should be the wish of us all.

LIVING AS A CHOSEN PEOPLE

In his discussion of Moses, Hemenway writes that

> To understand fully what Hurston attempted in this novel, one must remember the identification made by captive black slaves in America with the children of Israel in Egypt, and the resulting role that Moses played in Afro-American folklore. . . . It is the slaves' identity as a chosen people that Hurston utilizes to tell Moses' story, an identity rich with complexity. . . . The chosen people image demonstrates how the slaves created their own imaginative mental world, secure from a degraded status.(258-9)

Moses explores the dangers of this illusion as the premise upon which to base a pursuit of freedom and equality.

In Dust Tracks, Hurston also criticizes the idea that African-Americans are a "chosen" people. She writes that she recognizes the slurs that they cast against themselves as "the Negro poking a little fun at himself. At the same time, just like other people, hoping and wishing he was what the orators said he was"(168). But he is not, she argues, "the noblest and greatest man on earth"(161). "No," she tells the reader, "we will go where the internal drive carries us like everybody else. It is up to the individual. If you haven't got it, you can't show it. If you have got it, you can't hide it"(172). That is her only "chosen" mission; to show that they have "got it" as much as anyone else.

But it is in the unpublished chapter, "Seeing the World as It Is," that she makes the most open attacks against the idea of a chosen people. Hemenway notes that after reading this chapter, "One is

forced to ask what sort of reputation Zora Hurson might have today, had she not felt compelled to respond to a Lippincott editor's note"(288) which suggested she eliminate some of her more controversial opinions. Harsh criticism of the Hebrews of the Old Testament would not have sold well in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, to say the least. We are fortunate today, however, to have access to this chapter and thus some of her more controversial ideas. A particularly fitting example concerns what she had to say on the subject of believing the Hebrews to be a chosen people :

> The Old Testament is devoted to what was right and just from the viewpoint of the Ancient Hebrews. All of their enemies were twenty-two carat evil. They, the Hebrews, were never aggressors. The Lord wanted His children to have a country full of big grapes and tall corn. Incidentally, while they were getting it, they might as well get rid of some trashy tribes that He never did think much of, anyway. With all of its figs and things, Canaan was their destiny. God sent somebody especially to tell them about it.(244-5)

In the published version she criticizes Christianity instead:

> When I studied the history of the great religions of the world, I saw that even in his religion man carried himself along. His worship of strength was there. God was made to look that way too. We see the Emperor Constantine, as pagan as he could lay in his hide, having his famous vision of the cross with the injunction: *"In Hoc Signo Vinces,"* and arising the next day not only to win a great battle, but to start out on his missionary journey with his sword. . . . he had his good points--one of them being a sword--and a seasoned army. And the way he brought sinners to repentance was nothing short of miraculous. Whole tribes and nations fell under conviction just as soon as they heard he was on the way.(200)

This same tone is present in her final comments to her privileged(and probably white) readers, and any non-privileged readers as well:

> You, who play the zig-zag lightening of power over the world, with the grumbling thunder in your wake, think kindly of those who walk in the dust. And you who walk in humble places, think kindly too, of others. There has been no proof in the world so far that you would be less arrogant if you held the lever of power in your hands. Let us all be kissing friends. Consider that with tolerance and patience, we godly demons may breed a noble world in a few hundred generations or so.(209)

I read these passages as Hurston's sarcastic commentary on the privileges of power to manipulate others and bring them under one's own control, on the ability of those who write history to give themselves a favored place in it as special, or "chosen," and on the desire of those with no power to want to replace, and not be equal with, those with power. This same sarcasm gives shape to much of Moses. Werner Sollors has argued that "[p]erhaps a culture can best be understood by critics who lay bare what may be covered up and who question what is taken for granted, even by their own initial hypothesis"(167). It is from this critical position that Hurston utilizes that sarcasm.

In his discussion of Their Eyes Were Watching God, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. asserts that Hurston's rhetorical strategy mediates between "a profoundly lyrical, densely metaphorical, quasi-musical, privileged black oral tradition on the one hand, and a received but not yet fully appropriated standard English literary tradition on the other hand. The quandary for the writer was to find a third term, a bold and novel signifier, informed by these two related yet distinct

literary languages."[1] This description is useful in characterizing the relationship between Moses and the Hebrews as well. Moses, however, is not entirely successful in finding a "third term." He never completely bridges the gap between him and the Hebrews; instead he seeks to build the illusion that he can leap over it at any time, both with the might of his power and his command of language. But as with human beings, command does not always equal complete control, and his several unconscious slips into his "own" language mirrors both the uneasy relationship between him and a chosen yet controlled people, as well as that between the traditional view of Moses, and the view that Hurston utilizes here.

One thing the Hebrews understand is Moses's commanding tone. "Looks like we done swapped one bossman for another," one person observes. "But it was Moses that got us free," Joshua protests. "Oh I don't know about that. This God that done chose us would have got us free somehow. I never did much care for this Moses like some of you all"(181), another answers. What they don't yet understand is just how much Moses was not just instrumental in but also orchestrated their release. They do sense, however, that their obligation is to whomever or whatever secured that release, and they have indeed "swapped one bossman for another." Having always equated freedom with the ruling power and leisure of the Egyptians, they don't realize that true freedom is a very tenuous thing which they have not yet gotten a hold of, and neither do they have the security of the Egyptians' power which would enable them to enjoy leisure. This is what they must learn from Moses. But what Moses never fully grasps, because he has learned to be so wary of misdirected desire,

is that the ability to obtain one's desires is not the same as the power which secures that ability. He over-emphasizes that power, because he hasn't learned from his own life's example that his power merely insured that he could do what he wanted to. He learned from Jethro(whose desire is for the power which can subordinate) to subordinate his own desires to another's, and it is this subordination that he imposes upon the Hebrews.

The Hebrews are not just material to be molded, however. To some extent they participate in that they chose to follow Moses, although they do so because he is endorsed by one of their own(a fact which Jethro knows and takes advantage of). They demonstrate this by their anger with him when they feel he is not holding up his end of the bargain. For instance, just after crossing the Red Sea and watching the Pharaoh's forces be destroyed in the process, the Hebrews storm Moses's tent complaining bitterly of hunger. "If this God you done got us mixed with just had to kill us," they lament, "we sure wish He had of killed us down in Egypt on a full stomach." Moses argues "Now you committeemen that's standing before me, where do you all figure I was going to find enough groceries to feed all of you all?" "That we don't know and we figure it ain't none of our business," they answer. "You brought us out here, didn't you? We want to know if this powerful God you talk about is here amongst us or if He ain't"(204-5). Moses wants them to understand that "being a little hungry for the sake" of freedom(205) is nothing to be distraught about. But the Hebrews equate freedom with the Egyptians' ability to have someone else take care of them. Further, they feel that they have just moved from one master to another,

although one who cares for them as well as controls them. Their demands match their expectations of Moses holding up his end of a deal--the deal that he follow, and they lead.

They show as well an awareness that he manipulates their feelings, and their trust, and can do so because of his mastery over them, reflected in the fact that he can, if he wishes, speak their language, although it is an effort to do so. His efforts do not go unnoticed by the Hebrews. Moses, they note in the desert, "is getting so he talks our language just like we talk it ourselves." Aaron, in his pretentious imitation of Moses, does the opposite, but forgets his high-toned speech in moments of excitement. Moses does the opposite when trying to express a deep and true thought, and "goes back to talking his proper talk when he gets excited, too"(204). This humor demonstrates that Moses never quite gains their full trust. It is not that they understand him better when he speaks either way in particular, for they understand Pharaoh's decrees all too well, and they argue with him vociferously when he speaks as they do. It is rather that they know that their language is unnatural to him, that he has to make an effort to speak as they do, and that that effort is forgotten when he says those things he judges to be of the greatest importance. Thus they cannot really believe in those statements for a long time, always uttered in the high "court" language of the hated Pharaoh.

The more he overcomes this barrier, the more they believe in him. But it takes forty long years of wandering before this will happen. In the end, they offer him a crown in deepest gratitude of his efforts for them. "It ain't much," they tell him, "but it will give

you some idea of how we feel"(268). At this Moses feels a great sadness, believeing that they "had missed the point of his forty-odd years of work"(268). But really they have not. They understand that the crown "ain't much," and they also know from previous requests that he abhors the very idea of a title and palace and the empty vanity they symbolize. What he does not realize, however, is that they understand him and what he wants of them better than he thinks they do. He had at least, he thinks, "produced the physical base for greatness" in the nation of Israel(269). That greatness is the same power that Jethro had earlier sensed in Moses, and he has bequeathed it to Israel through Joshua, his chosen successor. And in offering Moses the crown, acknowledging their awareness that to him it "ain't much," they show an understanding and appreciation of the vision he has for them as free people ruling themselves.

But they also demonstrate that they recognize(even if he won't admit it) that he has always been king, absolute ruler, in all but title. It is true that they are now a nation capable of holding their own against other nations. But having been chosen by another more powerful than they, and having chosen to follow that others' dreams, they have given up the opportunity to follow their own before they knew what it might be. McDowell notes that Hurston was "building on a mountain of tradition when she placed her story in "African-American terms and idioms," and "anticipating its perpetuation" (viii). This tradition includes more than literature, as Howard explains: It consists of "oratory, sermons, and literature," including "[Paul] Dunbar's 'Ante-bellum Sermon,' [James] Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, W.E. Turpin's *O Canaan!* " and "[Richard] Wright's 'Fire

and Cloud",[2] to name a few. Accepting this tradition has meant that the African-American community has also accepted its privileging of the male voice. As Howard has noted in a somewhat different context, Hursotn is describing a Moses who "is the ultimate man, the absolute man"(130). In Dust Tracks Hurston observes that "even in his religion man carried himself along"(200). Through this privileged male voice of Moses, then, the Hebrews will be priviliged as well. Israel is an example to the world. and so, by implication, is the African-American community. They both symbolize the tragedy of a people who will always be enslaved until they recognize the incompatibility of privilege with freedom.

The limit that lack of self-determination imposes on freedom is crystallized in two characters in particular, Aaron and Miriam. Moses plans to pass the mantle of leadership on to Joshua, whom he feel is sufficiently strong and faithful enough to insure that the Hebrews follow Moses's laws reverently. Yet Aaron also has aspirations toward leading the Hebrews. But his desire is to enjoy the perceived personal benefits of leadership, not to aid his people in any subsantial way. Yet just as the Hebrews recognize Aaron as "substitute" leadership(250), Moses recognizes his enslavement to the catering of his people's desires only to fulfill his own vain(in every sense of the word) ambitions.

Jethro reveals, after Moses has received his command from the "voice," that he has already established Aaron as a connection with the Hebrews, and he can speak for Moses as translator and spokesperson. But Moses conflicts with him from the beginning: "This Aaron was a short, squatty man who wanted ornaments. Then

he wanted titles. Then Moses must recognize him as a brother"(131). As Hurston observed in Dust Tracks, self-interest outweighs any commitment to "Race Solidarity" every time(119-20). He shares with Pharaoh a craving for the robes, the symbols of power. Unlike Pharaoh, however, Aaron does not have the inherited sanction of authority, nor will he ever rule over anything. Thus while Moses feels enmity toward Pharaoh and a desire to triumph over him, he reserves only contempt for Aaron.

Aaron is in fact the only one to question Moses's judgement and actions. When they first meet, for example, Aaron implies that one show of power should be enough to change things. He comments to him that "I guess you know your business Moses, but it seems like if we was to present a petition to Pharaoh, now that we got him worried--" But Moses immediately cuts him off: "I see you don't know people, Aaron"(147). It turns out, however, that it isn't so much that Aaron doesn't know people, just that he uses his knowledge of them to advance his own ambitions. This is most evident in his conniving with his sister Miriam. When Moses first comes to Goshen, he calls a meeting of the Hebrew Elders, and Miriam comes with Aaron. "Who is that woman, Aaron?" Moses asks, genuinely surprised that a woman would be there. "I have called the Elders to me on serious business"(emphasis added, 134-35). Aaron counters by arguing that "Miriam is a great prophetess, Moses. Talking about influence, she's got plenty. We couldn't make out without her, that's all. Everybody comes to her to get things straightened out. She's a two-headed woman with power"(135).

Of course Miriam has no real power once Moses arrives on the scene, and we are left in the dark as to how much influence she really had before Moses arrived. In any case Moses is not interested in individualized cures, he has a strong dose of unifying nationalism with which to treat the whole people. Aaron's support of Miriam is the support of the weak for the weak, and he hopes to find strength solely in numbers. But he is no more a match for Moses than Miriam is.

Later Aaron challenges Moses in his and Miriam's name as well, this time with Miriam explicitly encouraging him. Knowing that he cannot openly challenge Moses, Aaron has preferred the tactic of biding his time. But Miriam urges him to speak for her, knowing she cannot speak for herself and have Moses take her seriously. Aaron contends that "we ain't being treated right, Miriam and me. Ain't no ifs and ands about it. We just done had the hog run over us, that's all"(212-13). He again asks that Miriam be given the public recognition as a "big prophet" by Moses that she deserves: "Looks like you could stand her up before the people and tell 'em that you back her up as a prophet and look on her as a great one on--er--equality with the best. It would mean a whole lot to her"(214).

Moses, however, knows that just as Miriam needs Aaron to speak her ambitions, Aaron's main concern is not his sister, but himself. What Miriam wants is real power, not robes of state, and Moses continually denies even the acknowledgement of those desires. So in his reply, he only answers what he knows are Aaron's demands: "You will get all I promised you back in Egypt. I recognize that you need rich regalia to dress in to keep you from feeling like slaves again,

and I will see to it in a lavish way. But don't look for too much else. The Lord usually gives a man what he is worth"(214). (And, one could add, this god gives a woman what she's "worth" as well; at best, illusion, at worst, nothing.)

These robes that Aaron receives, however, are also taken away. For a brief time, Aaron actually leads the people, in worship of the Egyptian idol. But Moses's return exposes Aaron as "naked and capering around like an old goat"(237). Aaron begins to hate Moses then, and begins to anticipate the day when he will replace him: "And from that moment on till the hour he died Aaron kept his eyes on Moses in secret and waited his chance. All he needed was the strength to seize his hour for vengeance. His hate was strong but his heart was weak. From then on for forty years the underhand struggle went on. . . . And always the strength of Moses trampled down the weak cunning of Aaron"(239-40). Even when the fighting men clamor to battle Moses rather than face an unknown adversary in Canaan, Aaron stays in the background. As Moses thinks contemptuously to himself, Aaron is "a snarling hyena, waiting for some lion to make your kill for you"(257). When Moses has led Aaron to the brink of Canaan, he divests that "hyena" of even the symbol of power, exposing Aaron as an weak, useless old man whose only real ambition was to be admired and indeed envied. Moses no longer needs Aaron to speak for him. In fact he hasn't needed him for a long while. Moses finally makes him face the truth that he has been denying all along: "God didn't put no robes on you, Aaron. I put 'em on you and I'm taking them off, because they don't fit you. . . . I thought I needed you for the big job I had to do <u>because you were of the</u>

Hebrews. I did need you too, but you didn't do the job I picked out for you"(emphasis added, 273).

Moses now takes the opportunity to rid Israel of one of its greatest weaknesses, its first politician. He wields the knife himself even as he mocks Aaron with the promise that "God will remember your sacrifice and guard your memories"(275). Aaron was never chosen, merely used. Therefore his memories will mean nothing, which is little less than Moses accounts as the worth of his life. Aaron had not even the power to chose his own successor, for several of his sons are killed at Mount Sinai. It is Moses who passes his robes on to Aaron's son Eleazar, and when they descend the mountain, Eleazar "straighten[s] his figure to set his garments well and fell in beside Moses and they started down the mountain side by side"(276). Hereafter Aaron's descendants will follow and obey Moses's doctrine as Aaron never did.

McDowell writes that "[w]hile the opening of Moses is promising in its attempt to establish a triadic parallel between ancient Hebrew slavery, Negro slavery, and female oppression, that parallel is not sustained throughout the novel." The "persecution of the Hebrew male babies is connected to the suffering of their mothers. . . ." and the "one cannot be considered apart from the other. . . "(xi). She also argues that a further flaw of the novel is that Jochebed's disobedience to husband and state are also not sustained throughout the story(xi). First, I disagree that the parallel she cites is not sustained. McDowell seems to argue this in the context of the suffering of woman-as-mother as the suffering of all women, and the inability to "disobey" the male voice's plans for male children as

the factor of main importance in Hurston's "dramatization of the complex relationship between religion and gender"(xi). Second, I disagree with what seems to be McDowell's implication; that Jochebed's inability to continue to resist her husband's and state's demands to kill her child is a flaw in the novel. Amram and Jochebed hold their breath every day of the child's life in fear that the secret police will descend upon them at any moment. When Amram returns home to tell her that Pharaoh knows that the Hebrews are allowing male babies to live, she resigns herself to giving the child the pitifully slim hope of surviving, by hiding it on the river, "like some others I know"(23). Both Jochebed and Amram surrender to the knowledge that they can no longer "fool the crocodiles"(15) of Pharoah, and thus she builds a last deceptive cover with which to try and fool the crocodiles of the Nile.

Finally, I think that McDowell ignores the possibility that female oppression denies women more than the ability to alleviate the suffering of their children, and more than the ability to say "no" to men. It also denies them the opportunity to say "yes." Miriam is this silenced "yes."

If the men of a "people" are free and yet colonize their own women, then women do not even have the satisfaction of giving birth to potential future leaders; their oppressors instead pick their successors from the material "produced" by their women to mold to their satisfaction without female influence(Moses is not, after all, Jethro's biological son, and Moses choses Joshua, rather than one of his own sons, as leader.). Moses shows that a transferral of power occurs when the potential successors demonstrate their ability(by

being male) and willingness to follow in the footsteps of their forefathers. In this context, Miriam's frustrated desire is the desire for real power and influence. She, who is also "of" the people, will never be considered as a potential leader.

In discussing Jessie Redmon Fauset's story Plum Bun, P. Gabriel Foreman argues that the novel's plot

> is a skeleton which Fauset fleshes out through her exploration of hegemony. Angela realizes that to be an African-American woman in this society is to be powerless. . . . What Angela voices is an American semiotics of power; whiteness, she says herself, is only a sign, a "badge." Because Angela understands that it is power, not whiteness per se, which she ultimately desires, she also recognizes that there are other signs, other badges which stand in its stead.[3]

Miriam recognizes this as well. As the child who failed her mother in a most fundamental way, Miriam flees from the admission of that fear and failure into admiration of the Egyptian princess's robes, jewelry, and servants, her "badge":

> The child and his basket were gone, that was all. And she had not the least idea of where she had gone, nor how. What should she tell her parents? She began to cry.
>
> But her tears did not flow long. Down-stream at some distance she saw a glorious site. A large party of young women dressed in rich clothing was clustered on the bank. The morning sun struck against shining metal ornaments and drew Miriam away from her search for her brother and from her tired and frightened self.(26-7)

Miriam uses these same badges to comfort her mother for the loss of her baby, and to save herself from sure and swift harsh punishment. After she spits out the initial story which calms her mother's anger, she focuses on the details of the princess's dress, the well-groomed appearance of her body and the way she moves,

which indicates never having had to stoop, squat, or haul for a living: The princess "walked like this and smiled at me"; she "had on red sandals and her toenails was red"; she had servants that "danced for her because she was so glad because she had found the child"; and she "had a headdress of blue feathers that fell down over her shoulders in a real pretty way like this"(emphasis added, 30-1). At this point Miriam "grabbed a shawl and draped it over her head and strutted about"(31). But although these details sooth the mother's anger, they don't alleviate her concern. Jochebed wants details of her reaction to the baby, not a litany on her wardrobe. Miriam, however, has failed at her task, and creates this illusion to both hide and protect her in her helpless state. Her mother must be satisfied with Miriam's new concerns, the illusion of control, safety, and power.

It is this same illusion which so captures Miriam's attention when Zipporah comes to the Hebrew camp for the first time. She compares herself to Zipporah and knows that she will never achieve that illusion. Miriam

> looked again and saw the well-cared-for hands and feet of Zipporah, and looked at her own gnarled fists and her square feet all twisted and coarsened by slavery, and almost snarled out loud. She Miriam, had had so little in her life and now this place she had won by hard work and chance was being taken from her by the looks of a Prince's daughter who hadn't done anything but deck herself to come here and bewitch the eyes of foolish women! Miriam boiled with anger and a sense of injustice.(219)

Whatever small position Miriam may have had among the women has just been taken away. She

> saw the admiration of Zipporah in thousands of faces and she felt utterly helpless in the presence of it. . . . She could see women already trying to set down their broad bare feet in the same way that Zipporah set down her dainty sandals. Her walk and her gestures were catching. They were more than willing to take the wife of Moses for a pattern.(219)

What Miriam sees of course is a reflection of her earlier blind adoration of the princess. These women are only as willing to pattern themselves after the "queen" of their present leader as Miriam was under the Egyptian one. The difference is that up until now, she hadn't felt quite as utterly helpless. Zipporah's arrival shows up the lie, and Miriam responds with rage. This response, however, comes after the Hebrews' disobedience, and Aaron's humiliation. Despite the fact that it is Miriam's initial suggestion that the Hebrews give up on Moses and return to their old gods, she is not punished. It appears that she choses that time because she feels safe after this incident. And it is perhaps Moses's inability to hold a woman accountable for so heinous and yet tremendous and serious crime that keeps her safe at this point. But she is not to be safe for long.

Miriam's initial desire to wait on the princess is a desire to be associated with power. But this association is an illusion. Joshua can emulate Moses, because he is truly able to potentially "chosen" in a way that Miriam will never be: the princess, as a woman in no possession of power herself, could not chose even a maid. She would probably never consider one of the hated Hebrew slaves at any rate, but this is beside the point. The point is that her "badge" is invested with more worth than she is; her body exists to "lend . . . support to the female robes of state"(37). Women cannot make cross-cultural

connections because they can't make connections to each other at all, they are defined by their relation to men. It is this awareness that fuels Miriam's rage, which she directs initially Zipporah.

But she makes a further discovery upon her confrontation with Moses: It is not that Zipporah has a "badge" similar to that of the princess, instead it is Zipporah who <u>is</u> the badge. She is a symbol both of Moses's power and of his role as leader, sanctioned by Jethro's power and authority. If she had been able to acknowledge Zipporah's powerlessness as equal to her own, she might have avoided a battle that she could not win. Instead she reacts to Zipporah as a sign of Moses's power, and Zipporah becomes their battleground. Again she confronts Moses through Aaron, and they both insist that it is the people, not they, who dislike her wife for her color. But another debate goes on in between the accusations:

> "It's her color, Moses. She's too dark to be around here."
> "Why?"
> Well, you see the people, that is, the ladyfolks, don't want her ruling over them, dark as she is."
> "In the first place she ain't ruling over nobody and in the second place she's my wife and nobody ain't got nothing to do with how dark or white she is but me."
> "Oh, yes, we have. That's the very thing we don't like. You act like you're the boss of everything. God didn't call you, and you only, you know."
> "Who else did He call, then?"
> "He called me and Miriam too. All three of us is supposed to be on a equal balance."

Of course this is not the case, and Moses tells them so. But he also shows that he knows that this time, Aaron is speaking for both him and Miriam: "I know exactly what's the matter with <u>you two</u> . You want to stand in my shoes which they are much too big for your

feet"(emphasis added). Yet he dismisses Miriam at the same time: "The women all are making admiration over my wife and now Miriam is jealous and spiteful." At this point Miriam speaks, rashly it turns out, for herself: "Miriam jumped in. 'The Lord did call us just as much as He did Moses and it's about time we took our stand in front of the people. I was a prophetess in Israel while he was herding sheep in Midian. And that woman he done brought here to lord it over us, that black Mrs. Pharaoh got to leave here right now"(emphasis added). What Moses is "lording" over them, is his position as the real and only leader of the Hebrews, and the "it," the "badge" of his power in lieu of a crown, is his wife.

Moses attempts to silence Miriam by mocking and humiliating her with her difference from other women:

> Miss Miriam, your case is pitiful. The trouble with you is that nobody ever married you. And when a woman ain't got no man to look after, she takes on the world in place of the man she missed. You are one of those people who learn nothing in the long turnings and twistings of experience. But you better keep my wife's name out of your mouth. That's all I got to say.(245)

Infuriated beyond all caution, Miriam ignores Moses's dire warning to return to her proper role of silence. Mary Helen Washington has argued in her discussion of Their Eyes that "[a]s many feminist critics have pointed out, women do get silenced, even in texts by women, and there are critical places . . . where Janie's voice needs to be heard and is not, places where we would expect her as the subject of the story to speak"(243). But Janie lives in a world which expects silence, or at least compliance, from women. When she voices her own desires and frustrations in contradiction to

authority, she is punished, for example when she tells her grandmother that she doesn't want to marry Logan Killicks. The same is true of Miriam. Not only has she spoken on her own behalf, she has taken God's name into her mouth and claimed that He speaks through her, and Aaron, just as he does through Moses.

This transgression cannot go unpunished and Moses responds with a fury equal to hers. The difference, however, is that he possesses all power; she possesses none, and though her leprosy leaves her after seven days, she is scarred forever. Never will she speak as during those last defiant moments. But, "[n]ow and then she would whisper to whoever happened to be close around. 'He lifted his right hand. I saw him do it. He lifted his right hand and the thing come upon me. I felt it when it come. His right hand was clothed in light'"(246). The next time that she speaks, it is, ironically, in words that sound like prophecy. Moses has sent scouts to Canaan, some of whom have come back with fearful reports of unbeatable armies of giants. Only Joshua and Caleb echo Moses's confidence. But the Hebrews confront Moses in anger and fear of an unknown enemy and he just makes it to the Tabernacle, inviting the Princes and Elders inside. Then he falls suddenly on his face in the door. At this point MIriam "broke a silence of several months. 'Something awful will happen from this. . . . It is a bad sign. He will lift that right hand and Israel will suffer terribly. It is better to do as he says'"(258). Ironically though, her words come too late. Though the Hebrews don't need them(they have her presence as an example to those who would challenge Moses), they ignore her words as well as the warning she embodies.

Some time after her words have proven true and Israel has been wandering the desert, Miriam approaches Moses with a request; she wants to be allowed to die. Openly she recognizes the absolute power he had over her:

> When I found out I couldn't do no more in Israel than you let me, I made up my mind to go on off and die, but I found out I couldn't even do that unless you let me. I saw all them people dead in the wilderness from snake-bites and disease and one thing and another and I looked at their bones and wished it was me. Aaron was waiting for the crown in Canaan, but I just been waiting to die. Now, I ask you please to leave me go. I done tried to be as stiff as you was stout, but I found out I got to come ask you to die. You knew all along and you been waiting for me to come.(264)

Moses says nothing, just finishes looking her over and summing her up. When he is done, the tone of the story echoes that of Moses's pity, and the release it provides is the answer which Miriam has awaited, and she goes to die.

After she dies, Moses halts the Hebrews in their wandering and holds a mourning for thirty days for Miriam. He tells the young and reminds the old of that which the reader has just been made aware, of a time "when the house of the prophetess Miriam was the meeting place of all those who were willing to work for freedom. How she had gathered folks together by two and threes and changed weakness into resolution"(265). Then Moses has a great tomb of rocks piled over her tomb, her final silent resting place.

It is at this point that we reach one of the novel's "thin line[s] between the description and analysis"[4] that Holloway argues Hurston utilizes to demonstrate a character's growing self-awareness. Moses admits silently to himself the extent to which Miriam shaped

his life. For she was, in a sense, always a prophetess, she literally "foretold" his role as the princely brother of the Hebrews. He admits that though she was a woman,

> he had never been able to quite think of her as such. What with her lack of female beauty and female attractions, and her loveless life with one end sunk in slavery and the other twisted and snarled in freedom. He wondered what had hurt her most. He thought how the threads of his life had gotten tangled with the threads of this homely slave woman. He wondered if she had not been born if he would have been standing there in the desert of Zin. In fact, he wondered if the Exodus would have taken place at all. . . . He doubted it.(265)

It is here that Moses's self-analysis fails. He continues to see Miriam's actions, and her visiting the palace and demanding to see her "brother" Moses, as the "stumblings of a woman who couldn't see where she was going. She needed a big tomb so the generations that come after would know her and remember"(266). This big tomb would indeed be a monument. In the end Miriam is as silent as the great mountain that calls to Moses "as a mother would"(91). His inability to see, or admit, the extent to which his absolute control was the force that "twisted and snarled" her life and her body reflects his inability to see that this same power, while "freeing" the Hebrews, is precisely what kept them free. Having made his choices and shaped his and the Hebrews' lives accordingly, Moses sets out to find the lizard "keeper of memories." These memories, however, are not written in stone. The lizard who "tells" Moses about this keeper informs him in fact that there was recently "some dispute on this mountain about the month of the flood. So I traveled [to the keeper] to ask"(286). Moses too becomes interested in

finding this ancient lizard. And so the story reaches its "expected" conclusion; Moses ascends Mount Nebo and leaves the Hebrews to mourn him as lost, ever pursuing the answers from the mouth of authority.

Moses's insight has failed him in that he does not see Miriam as normal. After all, he doesn't even think of her as a woman. For the description and his self-analysis to be unified, Moses would have to recognize, as the reader should, that Miriam is the bitter embodiment of the limited options that all the Hebrews actually have to chose from. Her relationship to Moses, her relationship, or more accurately, isolation, from the other Hebrews reflects the prison that the Hebrews risk being caught in, in being defined by another's words and laws. Through Miriam, and through all the Hebrews, Moses finally forces us to ask if freedom without self-determination and responsibility for everyone can ever really be called freedom.

NOTES

Introduction

[1]Zora Neale Hurston, Moses, Man of the Mountain, (New York: HarperPerrenial, 1991). All references are to this edition of the text.

[2]Deborah E. McDowell, Forward, "Lines of Descent/Dissenting Lines," Moses, Man of the Mountain, (New York: HarperPerrenial, 1991) viii.

[3]Darwin T. Turner, In a Minor Chord: Three Afro-American Writers and Their Search for Identity, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971) 110.

[4]Moses's Egyptian mother is a widow, formerly married to a foreign prince(37).

[5]Zora Neale Hurston, Dust Tracks on a Road, (New York: HarperPerrenial, 1991) 155. All references are to this edition of the text.

[6]Robert E. Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977) 260-1.

Molding a Destiny

[1]Karla F. C. Holloway, The Character of the Word: The Texts of Zora Neale Hurston, (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1987) 40.

[2]Hurston, Moses 35.

[3]Mary Poovey, "Feminism and Deconstruction," Feminist Studies 14.1 (1988): 52.

[4]Hemenway 260.

[5]Hemenway 261.

[6]Hemenway 265.

[7]Lillie P. Howard, Zora Neale Hurston, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980) 116.

Choosing a Destiny

[1]Hurston, Dust Tracks, Table of Contents.

[2]Howard 122.

[3]Hemenway 270.

[4]Marjorie Pryse, "Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and the 'Ancient Power' of Black Women," Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers, ed. Barbara Christian, (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985) 9.

[5]Holloway 61.

Living as a Chosen People

[1]Henry Louis Gates, Jr., The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 174.

[2]Howard 115.

[3]P. Gabrielle Foreman, "Looking Back from Zora, or Talking Out Both Sides My Mouth for Those Who Have Two Ears," Black American Literature Forum, 24.4 Winter 1990: 653.

[4]Holloway 56.

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