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Introduction

A HISTORY OF SIGNS AND WONDERS

What happened to the ancestors is a sign for the children.

—*MIDRASH TANCHUMA*

THE BOOK of Exodus begins with the well-known story of Israel's departure from Egypt. As I suspect most readers will recall, God sends ten catastrophes in order to compel the Egyptians to liberate the Israelites—turning the waters of Egypt into blood; summoning frogs from the river to invade people's homes; afflicting the Egyptians with lice, flies, cattle plague, and boils; unleashing hail and locusts; causing three days of darkness; and finally striking down all the firstborn in Egypt, humans and animals. This is a very old story, and one that may seem like it was frozen in place by the canonization of the five books of Moses. Indeed, over its long history and through countless retellings, many of the core elements have remained more or less intact: the enslavement and suffering at the start of the story, the role of Pharaoh as the villain, the Passover sacrifice offered during the tenth plague, and the redemption of the Israelites at the end.

Yet throughout the centuries, as people have confronted their own plagues—wars, outbreaks, famines, and all manner of natural disaster—they have found ways to adjust this biblical story to reflect their

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situations, investing it with their own fears, trauma, and outrage and using it to figure out how to respond and to find a way forward. Even in our own time, there has been no shortage of occasions that have motivated people to imbue the plagues of the exodus with new meaning, as one can see from how the story has been connected to two recent crises: the Covid-19 pandemic and the Hamas attack against Israel on October 7, 2023, and the ensuing war in Gaza.

The global shutdown in 2020 occurred just a few weeks before Passover, a holiday that involves the recitation of the plagues, so it was inevitable that people would seek to connect them to the pandemic; and in fact, some reported feeling that the plagues were happening again.

There were also religious leaders at the time warning against interpreting the pandemic as a new ten plagues, remembering how damaging it had been when people interpreted AIDS as a biblical plague sent to punish people for their sins.[1] For many others, though, the pandemic did indeed feel like a repetition of the ten plagues, a divine chastisement sent to teach humanity a lesson. Google has a tool that allows one to identify trends in what people are searching for online, and a sudden and very sharp spike in searches for the phrase "ten plagues" in March and April of 2020—a surge of interest greater than what the tool revealed for Passovers of the last twenty years—suggests the pandemic led a lot of people to remember and look into the biblical story.

The relevance of the ten plagues for making sense of Covid was the result of a calendrical coincidence—the story might not have come to mind for as many people if the global shutdown had occurred over the summer or during the fall as opposed to just before Passover. But once introduced into people's consciousness in this way, the story resonated very powerfully as a way of transforming the pandemic into a meaningful and even beneficial experience. In a 1989 essay entitled "What Is an Epidemic?," the sociologist Charles Rosenberg observed that one way that people managed their fear of AIDS was to try to reassert control by narrating the epidemic as a story unfolding according to a discernible plotline.[2] Depictions of Covid-19 as a repetition of the ten plagues, or as an eleventh plague, emerged during the shutdown as such a story, tying the pandemic to Passover in a way that transformed a frightening

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and disorienting experience into a sign from God or the universe that it was time to free oneself from the enslavements of modern life, or to focus on those afflicted by present-day injustice and oppression and liberate them.[3]

A few years later, a different kind of disaster struck—the shocking Hamas attack that killed some 1,200 people and took 250 people hostage, along with Israel's ensuing counterattack against Gaza that killed tens of thousands and displaced its population. As Jews had done with Covid-19, when Passover came around in 2024, they turned to the story of the ten plagues as a way to draw some lessons from the events of October 7. Some invoked the ten plagues as a model for the violent retribution they wanted to see exacted against Hamas for its crimes: "Perhaps the most significant message of the [story] this year," wrote Rabbi Nolan Lebovitz, is "that an overwhelming punishing response is the only appropriate action against such villains."[4] In other versions of the story, it was the Israeli government that was cast in the role of the Egyptians. The journalist Anshel Pfeffer, for instance, published a list of the "self-inflicted ten plagues" imposed on Israel by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.[5] Some of the family members of the hostages, to express their outrage with Netanyahu for celebrating Passover during the ordeal, even staged a ten plagues–related protest outside his home, splashing red paint on a mock Seder table to recall the plague of blood against Pharaoh and then burning the table.[6]

At Passover time in 2020, the ten plagues story had been used to articulate the fear and disorientation caused by the pandemic, and to urge people to reflect on their shortcomings and embrace a need for a radical change of some sort. Three years later, the story took on a very different meaning, expressing—and sometimes enacting—people's anger with those they held responsible. In both crises, comparing an ongoing trauma to the ten plagues helped to impose a narrative structure on a chaotic present and offered guidance about how to respond. Yet how people were using the story—its significance and emotional tonality—was radically different in the two situations. During Covid-19, people had drawn on the story to interpret the pandemic as a call for personal or societal transformation. In the wake of October 7, people used the story

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to call for retribution, to denounce the Israeli government as Pharaoh-like, or to plead for empathy with the Palestinians devastated by the war—an adaptation of the Passover custom of using the recital of the plagues to acknowledge what the Egyptians had to suffer for Israel to go free.

As these examples demonstrate, the ten plagues, though often taken for granted as a vaguely remembered biblical story, can sometimes feel uncannily and urgently relevant. The biblical account was written in a far-off time and place, emerging from ancient Canaan more than 2,500 years ago in an ancient language unfamiliar to most people today, and yet it can be called back to mind as if it were a story about people's own personal circumstances intended as a guide for how to make sense of present-day catastrophe. Scientists can now explain disasters without reference to God, and theologians have come up with more sophisticated ways of interpreting catastrophe religiously, but the core idea of the ten plagues story—that disasters are a sign sent to punish the wicked, to warn people to repent of their sins, and to reestablish justice—continues to ring true for many people, and that view has kept the ten plagues story alive as a way to impose meaning on disaster, assign blame, and express the feelings of powerlessness, guilt, and outrage that the world's injustices can arouse.

What these examples also demonstrate, however, is that the retelling of the ten plagues story is a remarkably flexible and adaptive response to crisis. That too is part of the tale's ability to feel relevant for so long for so many people, and it is what motivates the central aim of this book, which is to understand how people have drawn on the biblical story of the ten plagues to make sense of their own lives. In what follows, we will be exploring what happened to the ten plagues story when people took creative ownership over it, working with details taken from the biblical story—Moses, Pharaoh, and the other characters of the story; the setting in Egypt; the character and sequence of the plagues; and the Passover sacrifice and exodus that follow in their wake—but adapting and expanding on this narrative foundation in light of their own experiences and goals as storytellers. The earliest examples of such retelling come from the Bible itself, from psalms and prophetic texts that retell the plagues, and it continues into our own era, as illustrated by how the

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story was applied to Covid-19 and the events of October 7. This is the history we will be exploring in this book, a history of people reimagining the signs and wonders of the exodus.

This aim, it is worth noting up front, means that our primary focus will not be on the biblical account of the plagues itself. For readers interested in the ten plagues as recounted in Exodus, there are many resources, including a good number of books that treat the ten plagues as historical events, proposing to have uncovered historical or scientific evidence that proves they really happened, as well as commentaries that explain what we know about the authorship of the Exodus account and the circumstances in which it was composed. Our focus, instead, will be the story as it has taken shape in people's imaginations, the story that combines elements from the biblical account with elements imported into it by those who are retelling it. The ten plagues story is, in this sense, not a single story at all but a multigenerational family of stories—thousands and thousands of descendent stories that expand on or reenact the biblical account.

One of the lessons I hope the reader takes away from our exploration of this material is a deeper appreciation of retelling as a way of making sense of life. Many of us have not had the experience of coming up with a completely new story, but we are all of us retellers of stories heard from others or encountered in a book, in an illustration, in a movie, or online, and the act of retelling that story involves its own distinctive form of creativity—repeating an already told story but in a way that injects a little of ourselves into it and that adapts it to new audiences and new circumstances.[7] Such a practice might seem more conservative than creative, an act of preservation and transmission rather than invention. However, as happens every time a joke or a rumor is retold, people always have some reason of their own for repeating the story, something of their own they are aiming to communicate to their audience, and they do not simply pass on what they receive from others without introducing changes in pursuit of those aims. One of my goals in this book, using the ten plagues as an example, is to show how this creative process of adaptation and personalization has reshaped—and is still reshaping—the meaning of the Bible.

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Signs of the Times

This book is what scholars refer to as a reception history, a history of how people in different historical eras and social contexts have interpreted and retold the ten plagues story in light of their own experiences, but it is not organized as a conventional history. Books of this type usually begin with the earliest interpretations of the biblical story and move from there to later periods, and if we were following that model, we'd begin with the earliest known references to the ten plagues found in the Hebrew Bible—the book of Exodus, the Psalms, and the Prophets—move from biblical texts to the earliest known postbiblical interpretations in ancient texts like the Wisdom of Solomon and the writing of the first-century-CE philosopher Philo of Alexandria, and then move from those sources to later interpretations from the Middle Ages and modern times. My problem with a straightforwardly chronological approach is that the retelling of the ten plagues moves in too many directions simultaneously to fit into a single linear narrative.

What I have done instead is organize the book according to the ten plagues themselves, as laid out in Exodus. Each chapter zeros in on something odd or puzzling in the biblical account, some detail or question that distinguishes the plague in question from the other nine, and uses that element to launch an essay about how the plague has been understood, expanded on, visualized, or reenacted in later interpretive tradition. When I first undertook to write this book, I was influenced by recent study of the role of the Bible in giving meaning to disaster, especially books focused on that equally paradigmatic biblical disaster, the flood of Genesis, and tried to model myself methodologically on Lydia Barnett's *After the Flood: Imagining the Global Environment in Early Modern Europe* and *Noah's Arkive* by Jeffrey Cohen and Julian Yates. But as my research deepened, it became clearer and clearer that people retell the ten plagues for all kinds of reasons—to make sense of the disasters they experience, but also to keep children awake at Passover Seders, to envision the end of the world, and to protest injustice. The chapters grew more varied as a result, each one finding its own pathway through the story's history.

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Before turning to the first plague, however, I want to use the rest of this chapter to introduce some background to help orient the reader. Since we won't be following a straight line from ancient to medieval to modern interpretations but moving back and forth between them, it will be helpful to sketch at the outset some history about how the plagues came to play such a central role in collective consciousness, and why people understand the story so differently.

The story owes its status and familiarity to its presence in the Bible as a part of the Exodus story, and for that reason, it will certainly enhance the reading of this book to review the biblical account in Exodus 1–12—the narrative of the Israelites' enslavement in Egypt under the harsh Pharaoh, Moses's encounter with God at the burning bush, the signs and wonders that follow when Moses and his brother Aaron confront Pharaoh in Egypt, and the divine intervention of the last plague, the slaying of the firstborn, that finally compels the Egyptians to let the Israelites go from their bondage and embark for the land promised to their ancestors in Canaan.

But reading, or rereading, the biblical account will not suffice as background. When a person today recalls the ten plagues, they usually aren't simply remembering the story as it is told in Exodus but are recalling the story in some mediated form. They may have first heard it told to them by a parent or read about it in a children's book. They might know the story as recounted in a Passover Seder. They may have first experienced it through a movie or a painting. Even if a person's first encounter with the plagues is the narrative in Exodus, there is a good chance that they know the story from some translation, and different translations, retellings in their own right, can change the meaning of the biblical story in small but important ways.

Consider, for instance, the English expression "signs and wonders," taken from Exodus 7:3, where the phrase is used in reference to the plagues. One consequence of this translation is that the plagues came to be associated in the minds of those reading the English Bible with the emotion of wonder, the feeling of amazement in the presence of a miracle, and an association with miracles was further encouraged by the use of "signs and wonders" in the New Testament to refer to the miracles of

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Jesus and the early church. However, this is not the only way to understand the underlying Hebrew word translated here as "wonders," *mophetim*. The ancient Greek translation of the Torah known as the Septuagint ascribes to it a somewhat different meaning by rendering it as *terata*, portents, a term used in reference to rare and strange events signaling future change and calamity. Both "wonders" and "portents" denote the plagues as extraordinary events, but they have different shades of meaning: one has an association with spectacle—"wonders" are events to behold and be astounded by—while "portents" foreshadow doom, and this small variation in translation encouraged different understandings of the overall story. Reading the word as "wonders," suggesting the plagues were visually arresting, helped to focus people's attention on what it was like to witness them. Reading the word as "portents" associated the plagues with omens, turning them into warnings of a greater disaster to come.

What is true of how we understand a particular biblical phrase like "signs and wonders" is true of the whole ten plagues story. The core of the biblical story comes from the book of Exodus, but what we remember about the story has been filtered through intervening interpretations—translations into Greek, Latin, English, and other languages; biblical commentaries; religious events where the story is retold, such as the Seder or the Sunday sermon; and retellings and expansions of the story in different media like painting and film. In truth, the biblical story can only be encountered these days in a mediated way—even the Hebrew text read in synagogues by Jews today is only known in a medieval form bequeathed to Jews by ancient scribes known as the Masoretes who added vowels and punctuation to make the text more readable. Each intervention in how the story was presented—each translation, each physical reformatting of the biblical text; even a shift in meaning or emotional resonance of a single word—had the potential to change how it was experienced, understood, and remembered.

This kind of modification of the story is even reflected in the expression "the ten plagues" itself, an English translation of the Hebrew *'eser makkot* introduced in ancient rabbinic sources. The phrase itself does not appear in the Hebrew Bible, which never counts up the plagues or

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distinguishes them as a set of ten distinct from other signs and wonders recorded in Exodus, and the fact that Psalms 78 and 105, in brief summaries of the exodus story, only refer to six or seven calamities in a different order from Exodus suggests that the exact number and sequence of plagues did not even register as significant at this very early point in the story's history. Jews only began to refer to ten plagues in the Hellenistic age, and it is only from that point forward that the number ten became important to how people interpreted them.

The translation of *makkot* as "plagues" triggered yet other changes in the understanding of the story. Originally, the two terms meant the same thing—"blows" or "wounds"—and could be applied to any kind of calamity, but by the sixteenth century, the English word "plague" had come to be used as a synonym for "pestilence," a fatal disease that can spread to large groups of people, and that shift in the word's meaning made the ten plagues feel newly relevant for understanding present-day epidemics and pandemics—this is part of the background of why the ten plagues came to mind for so many people during the opening months of Covid-19. We need to factor in the shifting understanding of what the Bible is, and what its language denotes and connotes, to understand why people recount the plagues in such different ways.

We also need to factor in how the biblical account in Exodus was supplemented by other sacred texts. When Jews, Christians, and Muslims retold the story, they were not basing it on Exodus alone, or at all in the case of Muslims, but following the story as recounted in other sources. As a Jew, my understanding of the plagues has been influenced by how they are treated in a booklet known as the Haggadah that is read during the Passover Seder, while a Christian or Muslim reader will know the story not from the Haggadah but in light of the New Testament or from the account of Moses's confrontation with Pharaoh in the Qur'an. All of these sources draw on information that ultimately goes back to the Hebrew Bible, but they present the plagues in different ways, reframing them in different literary and religious contexts, and interpreting them in light of different ideas and beliefs, and as a result of their influence, the story has developed in very different directions within Jewish, Christian, and Islamic tradition.

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The differences in how these sources refer to the plagues is important enough to the history I aim to relate that it is worth looking briefly at what each one says about the plagues and how its influence subsequently affected the way later people understood and related to the story.

Warning Signs and Wake-Up Calls: The Plagues in Christian Tradition

Christian interpretation of the ten plagues goes back to the very beginning of Christianity in the first few centuries of the common era and has been heavily influenced by the writings collected in the New Testament. Verses from Exodus 7–12 come up throughout New Testament writings, but I will mention just two examples that illustrate how the New Testament influenced the way Christians recounted the ten plagues, encouraging them to tie the story to the story of Jesus.

The first example comes from the Gospel of John and its "seven signs," a series of miracles performed by Jesus that begin with a miracle, the turning of water into wine in John 2:1–12, redolent of the first plague, where Moses turns the waters of Egypt into blood. The Jesus of John questions why people need "signs and wonders" in order to believe (see John 4:43–54), but the fact that the gospel adopts the language of signs and wonders, used to refer to the plagues in Exodus 7:3, shows that its author, a Christian at the end of the first century, detected and wanted his readers to see a correspondence between Jesus's miracles and Moses's wonders.

Another early Christian who saw a connection between the ten plagues and Jesus was the author of Revelation, also known as the Apocalypse of John. The last and most cryptic book in the New Testament, Revelation includes a vision of God's final judgment of humanity, the return of Christ, and the establishment of a new heaven and earth. Among the events envisioned, addressed in chapter 16, is a series of seven apocalyptic plagues that were clearly modeled on the plague narrative in Exodus, including plagues that involve water turning to blood, painful sores, darkness, and a terrible hailstorm (figure 1). The correspondence with the ten plagues is not exact, but the resemblance was close enough that later Christians sometimes conflated the two sets of

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FIGURE 1. Angels pouring out the apocalyptic plagues described in Revelation 16, from an illustrated version of the New Testament completed in 1531. The Ottheinrich Bible, p. 298. Alamy.

plagues, seeing the ten plagues in Egypt as an anticipation of the disasters that would devastate humanity at the time of Christ's return. A fifth-century text known as the Apocalypse of Thomas, for instance, elaborated on Revelation with a description of a series of disasters expected to come before the end of the world, and in turn, its influence spawned the widely circulated medieval tradition known as the "Fifteen Signs before Doomsday," a cataloging of apocalyptic ecological catastrophes expected to occur in the weeks leading to the Day of Judgment and Christ's return, including the rising of the sea, the bleeding of trees and other plants, storms, and falling stars.[8]

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Apocalyptic narrative gave Christians a way to develop the correspondence between the ten plagues and the story of Christ, but another, equally important way to expand on the story was the sermon, a genre perhaps inherited from earlier Jewish tradition but developed by early Christians into a highly effective form of spiritual and moral instruction performed in church-related and educational settings. Delivered during Sunday worship gatherings or in the context of holidays and festivals like Easter, the sermon was used not only to develop the connection between the ten plagues and the story of Christ and the Crucifixion but to urge Christians to repent of their sins lest they suffer the same fate as the Egyptians in the story.

A third-century example comes from Origen, a highly prolific writer considered the greatest Christian philosopher before Augustine, a long sermon that aims to uncover a logic behind the progression from one plague to the next.[9] Origen developed many of his sermons for public gatherings and worship, but this sermon seems to have been meant for students of the school that Origen established in Caesarea in 232 CE after being expelled from Alexandria. Using allegorical biblical interpretation to detect hidden meaning in the plagues, he asserted that each one symbolized a field of pagan learning that Christians need to reject for the sake of their soul. The waters of Egypt turned into blood represent the slippery teachings of the philosophers; the frogs of the second plague (which Origen understood to be very noisy) manifest the puffed-up melodies and stories of the poets; the gnats symbolize the stinging words of philosophical argument; and so on for each of the plagues. Origen's point was that Christians should reject the folly of these different kinds of pagan education in favor of a scripture-centered Christian education, and by reading the plagues in light of Christ's sacrifice on the cross, he also discovered in them a ten-step method that would help Christians see through the illusion of material reality, overcome their sins, and develop their souls to more fully appreciate Christ.

An important sermon imputed to Augustine himself was inspired by the New Testament's description of Jesus as a physician who has come to heal the sick (Mark 2:17). The idea was important to Augustine, who emphasized Christ's role as a healer of humankind, and the sermon in

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question, though probably not written by the bishop, was circulated in his name, and it may be that what suggested him as the author was how it built its interpretation of the ten plagues on the concept of sin as a sickness that God seeks to heal.[10] Here, each plague is said to have exposed a spiritual "wound" in humanity, and the cure was to be found in the corresponding commandment in the Ten Commandments. Thus, the first plague, darkening the waters into blood, revealed the murkiness of a mind that refuses to recognize that God, like water, is the source of everything, and the remedy is the first commandment in Exodus 20—"You shall have no other gods beside me." The loquacious frogs of the second plague symbolize the empty prattling of philosophers and heretics who deny the truth of Christ, and the cure for their nonsense is the second commandment—"You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain." The sermon develops similar correspondences for all the remaining plagues and commandments.

Thanks to its association with Augustine, the sermon's effort to establish correspondences between the ten plagues and the Ten Commandments had a major impact on how later Christians understood the plagues. Out of the fifty-seven illustrated Ten Commandment cycles known from Europe from before the sixteenth century—these were listings of the commandments in various forms meant to help Christians learn and remember them—twenty-two connect the commandments and the plagues, listing them side by side or interrelating them in other ways. The resulting list of sins and their punishments offered an alternative to the seven deadly sins that Christians had been using to teach what vices to avoid and helped to establish the Ten Commandments as the spiritual and moral code they remain for many Christians to this day.[11]

Yet another example of how Christians used the sermon to fuse together the story of the plagues with the story of Jesus is a sermon known as "On the Plague of Hail and His Father's Silence," delivered by the bishop Gregory of Nazianzus in 373.[12] This is, as far as I am aware, the earliest example where the ten plagues were used to make sense of a present-day disaster. The town of Nazianzus had recently been devastated by a succession of catastrophes that recalled the biblical plagues—hailstorm, a cattle plague, and a drought—and Gregory's sermon

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explained these events as divine punishment for the community's sins, especially its mistreatment of the poor. In contrast to the Origen and Augustinian sermons, this sermon does not focus on the ten plagues, but Gregory did make reference to them, warning that the calamities that had occurred so far were relatively mild and that God had it in his power to send more devastating plagues—the boils, the locusts, the darkness, and the slaying of the firstborn—if people persisted in their sins. Rather than suffer the full extent of God's wrath, the sermon continues, the sinful ought to recall what the Israelites did to save themselves when they sprinkled the blood of the Passover sacrifice on the doorposts of their homes and train their thoughts on the saving power of Christ's blood.

In some Christian retellings of the story, the ten plagues exemplify a conception of divine justice associated with the Old Testament as opposed to the New Testament and its focus on divine mercy. This is the meaning of the ten plagues in Albert Camus's 1947 novel *The Plague*, where a Jesuit priest named Paneloux, a scholar of Augustine, delivers two sermons over the course of the story.[13] In the first sermon, the priest warns his congregation that the epidemic that has hit their city is divine punishment for turning away from God, and that they need to repent before the death angel comes for them too. In the second sermon, delivered a few months later after the priest's confidence in God is shaken by witnessing the excruciating death of a child named Philippe, Paneloux gives up on explaining God's will in the way he does in the first sermon, but he nonetheless demands absolute faith even in the face of suffering that cannot be understood. As an atheist, Camus was not endorsing either theological explanation—in fact, the novel's narrator doubts that anyone really believes in Paneloux's God—but he was being true to Christian homiletical tradition in imagining a sermon that uses the ten plagues to interpret a present-day disaster as a warning against sin and a call to repentance, and there is also something authentically Christian about the succession of the two sermons, the first inspired by the Old Testament, the second by the New. Paneloux never renounces the concept of divine justice he illustrates with the ten plagues, but he subordinates the story to the story of Christ's suffering through the

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second sermon and its call on the faithful to embrace such suffering themselves. Whether Camus was basing the story on a sermon he heard we do not know, but his novel is true to the deeply rooted Christian tradition of using the sermon to retell the ten plagues in relation to the Crucifixion as a signifier of Old Testament justice as opposed to New Testament mercy.

Dinner-Table Deliverance: The Plagues in Jewish Tradition

To understand Jewish interpretations of the plagues story, it helps to know something about the history of reciting the plagues during the Seder, the ritualized dinner used to celebrate Passover. The term "Passover" and the core elements of the Passover ritual—the sacrifice of a lamb and the consumption of unleavened bread or matzah—come from the ten plagues story itself, from Exodus 12, but other elements of the Seder come from the Mishnah, the earliest authoritative collection of rabbinic teachings that was produced in the third century CE.

The Mishnaic tractate that discusses the laws of Passover, known as Pesahim, does not mention the practice of reciting the ten plagues, but it laid the groundwork for the practice by requiring the leader of the Seder to explain to his son the meaning of a passage in Deuteronomy 26:5–8, a summary of the exodus that, according to early rabbinic interpretation, referred to the plagues in verse 8 (here placed in italics): "A wandering Aramean was my father, and he went down into Egypt and dwelled there, few in number, and he became there a great nation, strong and populous. And the Egyptians abused us, oppressed us, and forced hard labor on us, and we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and he heard our voice and saw our oppression, and our toil, and the strain we were under. *And the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, and with signs and wonders*" (Deuteronomy 26:5–8). The Haggadah, which emerged centuries later in Palestine and Babylonia sometime after the seventh century, is an attempt to fulfill the Mishnah's directive to explain Deuteronomy 26:5–8 to one's son, drawing on the mode of rabbinic interpretation known as midrash to develop its interpretation.

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The Deuteronomy passage does not mention the plagues, but in verse 8, it does echo how they are referred to in Exodus—"a mighty hand and an outstretched arm" echoes a description of the plagues in Exodus 6:6; "signs and wonders," Exodus 7:3—and that suggested this verse as a kind of summary of the plagues part of the story. At some early point, someone thought to make the connection between the verse and the plagues more explicit, incorporating into the Haggadah a midrash that construed Deuteronomy 26:8 as a concise reference to all ten plagues: "With a mighty hand" was understood as a reference to two of the plagues; "and with an outstretched arm" the next two; "with great terror" two more; "with signs" two more; "and with wonders" the last two, squeezing all ten plagues of Exodus into five brief phrases.

This midrash is very terse, but it reflects an approach to the Bible that is very typical of midrash. God, as the early rabbis imagined him, does not create anything superfluous in the world: he operates on a grand scale but also, in a surgical way, on a very small scale, investing the tiniest elements of creation with purpose. As it happens, in fact, rabbinic interpreters of the Bible found evidence that God operated in this way in the ten plagues themselves. His attention to detail is precisely why he chose plagues that involved small creatures like frogs and flies:

> Even those things that you perceive to have no purpose in the world, like flies, fleas, and mosquitoes, are a part of God's plan for creation, as it says [in Genesis 1:31]: "And God saw everything that he made, and behold, it was very good." Rabbi Aha son of Rabbi Hanina said, "Even those creatures that you perceive to be superfluous in the world, like serpents and scorpions, have their place as a part of creation. . . . And you can know this from the fact that . . . had it not been for the frog, how would [God] have punished the Egyptians." (Exodus Rabbah 10.1)[14]

The rabbis applied the same idea to the Torah itself: nothing there was superfluous or purposeless either, not the smallest phrase or word. Even when its language seemed redundant or verbose, as when Deuteronomy 26:8 piles on a series of terms that all refer to the power God displayed in Egypt, midrash asserts that the Torah was not simply

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repeating itself but was using each term to refer to discrete events. In the case of the brief midrash about Deuteronomy 26:8, the midrashist reads the verse as if each phrase within it—"a mighty hand," "an outstretched arm," and so on—had its own distinct meaning, referring not to the plagues in general but to a subset of two plagues. Why two per phrase? The terse passage does not explain itself, but it is probably relevant that the Hebrew for "with a mighty hand," "with an outstretched arm," and "with great terror" involves two words each, while "signs" and "wonders" are in the plural. Treating the tiniest of scriptural details as significant, the midrashic author understood the doubling and pluralization of words as hints that each expression referred to more than one plague, and then deduced from the use of five expressions that each referred to two plagues.

This is the oldest part of what the Haggadah has to say about the ten plagues, attested in the earliest known versions, but the Haggadah was not static, growing over the centuries, and its treatment of the ten plagues expanded accordingly. A second, longer midrash on Deuteronomy 26:8 was added later on, as was a mnemonic acronym formed from the first letter of each of the plagues to remind people of the order of the plagues. At some point before the tenth century, it became customary to recite the ten plagues themselves during the Seder one by one, and there also arose a supplementary tradition, a kind of epilogue inserted into the Haggadah after the recitation of the plagues in which Akiba and other rabbinic sages use midrash to uncover greater numbers of plagues in Egypt and at the Red Sea. We will have occasion to further explore the Haggadah's treatment of the ten plagues later in the book, but what I want to do now is offer a few illustrations of how it has influenced Jewish interpretation and retelling of the story.

One example of that influence involves the mnemonic incorporated into the Haggadah—what appear to be three Hebrew words formed from the first letters of each of the plagues—*detsakh adash be'ahav* (the *d* is for *dam*, "blood"; *ts* for *tsefarde'a*, "frogs"; *k* for *kinnim*, "lice"; etc.). The mnemonic was attributed to Judah, not the Judah the Patriarch credited with creating the Mishnah but a sage from the preceding generation, a student of Akiba and a teacher of Judah the Patriarch known

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for his use of mnemonics; and it was only added to the Haggadah long after the midrash on Deuteronomy 26:8 mentioned earlier (it does not appear in the earliest manuscripts from Palestine, only in a later version from Babylonia).

Why Judah felt the need to develop the acronym is unclear. Perhaps he was simply trying to make sure the plagues were recited in the order in which they appear in Exodus—we know of other ancient enumerations of the plagues that scramble their order, such as the previously mentioned sermon imputed to Augustine, which reverses the fifth and sixth plagues, and the Qur'an has the plagues in a different order too. Perhaps all that Judah was seeking to accomplish was pedagogical—to help people remember the order of the plagues correctly, in the way they had to be reminded of the order of the Passover meal itself. However, there may have been something else at stake in the mnemonic. According to another teaching attributed to Judah, when God instructed Moses to perform the plagues, he ordered him to inscribe the acronym into the staff to ensure that they would occur in that order (Exodus Rabbah 8.3). The plagues were not haphazardly arranged, the midrash suggests; their exact sequence was planned out in advance and was essential to the outcome that God sought to achieve. Perhaps then Judah's acronym as presented in the Haggadah was also a way of suggesting something powerful about reciting the plagues in a particular sequence, just as reciting the words in a spell in the right order can be essential to their ability to produce an effect.

Whatever the original purpose of the acronym, the way it organized the plagues into three mysterious words—*detsakh adash be'ahav*—had an impact on medieval and modern Jewish interpreters of the plagues, who saw the mnemonic as a key to understanding the sequence of the plagues. In this kind of interpretation, there was a logic to the order of the plagues—God chose the plagues and placed them in the sequence in which they occur in Exodus in order to communicate a hidden message to Israel about the nature of his power—and the first letters of each of the plagues revealed this message to those who knew how to interpret them. One example of this approach appears in an eleventh-century commentary called Midrash Leqah Tov, composed by a scholar named

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Tobiah ben Eliezer.[15] In a comment on Exodus 8:13, Tobiah suggests that the plagues were divided into three groups of three because God was following a judicial principle that requires two warnings before someone can be punished for a capital offense: the first two plagues of each unit were preceded by a warning from Moses, while there was no warning for the third plague in each unit—the third, sixth, and ninth plagues.[16] Another ingenious explanation for the alleged tripartite structure of the plagues was suggested by the eleventh-century Isaac ben Asher Halevi of Speyer, who discerned that if one writes the first letters of the third, sixth, and ninth plagues on top of each other, they appear twice, one time by reading horizontally, the other by reading vertically:[17]

כ	ש	ח
נ	ח	ש
מ	נ	כ

Other interpreters who detected messages encoded into what appeared to them as the plagues' three-unit structure include Yehuda ben Eliezer (fourteenth century), Bahya ben Asher (1255–1340), Isaac Abarbanel (1437–1508), the Maharal of Prague (1520–1609), the Malbim (1809–1879), and Samuel Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888), and even Jewish scholars trained in the methods of modern secular scholarship could discern hidden meaning in the plagues under the influence of this tradition: in a modern scholarly commentary by Moshe Greenberg, for example—a predecessor of mine at the University of Pennsylvania—the plagues are structured almost like a three-stanza poem, each of the three sets of plagues revealing something distinct about God's rule of the world.[18] Exodus never claims that the plagues were meant to be bunched into three units, nor does it indicate that there was a message encoded into their number and sequence, but this way of reading them was strongly encouraged by the three-word acronym in the Haggadah.

Another element of the Seder that had a strong influence on how Jews retold the plagues was the recital of the plagues during the Passover meal, a very memorable part of the experience. By the eleventh century, rabbinic culture had extended its influence from its base in the Islamic world into Ashkenaz, a biblical term for the region of Germany and France, and

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there another ten plagues–related Passover custom emerged: spilling drops of wine as each of the ten plagues is recited. Although the custom originated among Ashkenazic communities in Europe, it spread to Sephardic Jews as well, and it is now a part of Passover observance for Jews throughout the world. The original form of the Haggadah as we know it from early manuscripts may not have even included a list of the ten plagues, but thanks in part to the custom of spilling a drop of wine for each plague, an act which recalls the blood of the first plague, reciting them is now one of the most dramatic moments of the Seder, and Jews in different families and communities have come up with various ways of enacting the custom and can supplement it with their own commentary.

Today, among many American Jews, the custom is often explained as an act of empathy for the Egyptians who had to perish during the plagues so that the Israelites could go free. Spilling a drop of wine for each of the plagues is understood as a way of symbolically subtracting from the joy of the holiday in acknowledgment of what the Egyptians suffered. Yet this is not the original meaning of the custom. As the scholar Zvi Ron has demonstrated, this interpretation developed only in the twentieth century in response to an anti-Semitic caricature of the Jews as punitive and vengeful. In earlier eras, the custom was ascribed other meanings.[19]

The earliest known explanation comes from Eleazar of Worms (1176–1238), also known as Eleazar Rokeach, the leader of a movement of pietistic scholars known as Hasidei Ashkenaz. Eleazar, who traced the practice back to his predecessors, suggests a numerological explanation for the custom that ascribed esoteric significance to Hebrew words by assigning numerical values to specific letters (a mode of interpretation known as gematria in Hebrew).[20] Applying this approach to the custom—sixteen drops as he practiced it rather than ten—Eleazar claimed that each drop corresponded to one of the sixteen edges of God's sword, the sixteen mentions of the word "plague" in the book of Jeremiah, the sixteen appearances of the word "life" in Psalm 119, the sixteen times that Jews read the Torah publicly each week, and the sixteen lambs sacrificed in the temple each week, as well as to the numerical value of a pronoun used in Proverbs in reference to Wisdom—

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identified with the Torah in Jewish tradition—which also adds up to sixteen.

The purpose of the custom, according to Eleazar's explanation, was not to express empathy for the Egyptians but to provide Jews with reassurance by evoking God's power—the destructive power of God's sword and of divine plagues, and also the protective, life-sustaining power of the Torah. As Eliezer puts it, the custom teaches "that we will not be injured." Injured by what, he does not explain, but later medieval and early modern references to the custom claim that its purpose was to protect Jews from the plagues being called to mind at that point in the Seder, and to redirect them against those trying to harm the Jews, especially hostile Christians.[21] It may not be a coincidence that in the same period in medieval Europe, the wine consumed during the medieval rite of the Eucharist was similarly double-edged: the wine was thought to transform during the ceremony into the life-saving power of Christ's blood, but when Christ or God wanted to punish a sinner, it could also become a "cup of wrath" that destroyed them.[22] Perhaps the Seder custom developed on the model of this practice, also drawing on the biblical image of the cup of wrath to conjure the power of God's fury against present-day oppressors and enemies.

By the twentieth century, this way of understanding the custom had become an embarrassment for Jews who wanted to integrate into non-Jewish society, and they sought to distance themselves from it. Some, like members of the American Reform movement, tried to eliminate the custom altogether on the grounds that it smacked of superstitiousness and animus against non-Jews. In 1905, the movement produced a version of the Haggadah where the plagues were not recited at all because the practice was deemed "unworthy of enlightened sensitivities."[23] This effort to remove the plagues did not succeed—the custom of reciting them was restored in the Reform movement through an edition of the Haggadah published in the 1970s—but what did take root was the reinterpretation of the custom as an expression of empathy for non-Jews.

Building on this custom, some modern-day Jews have repurposed the recital of the ten plagues as a way of speaking out against forms of injustice that affect Jews and non-Jews alike. In this version of the custom, Jews use

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the plagues to enumerate a list of ten "modern plagues," not natural disasters but forms of human cruelty, inequality, and abuse like poverty, racism, misogyny, and climate change that the Passover participants acknowledge by reciting them out loud and resolve to address. This way of retelling the ten plagues story has particular appeal to Jews on the left end of the political spectrum, and its influence reaches beyond the Seder itself. An example appears in a 1993 book entitled *Specters of Marx*, by the philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), which presents a version of the ten plagues as a litany of injustices caused by capitalism.[24]

This way of retelling the ten plagues has its origins among socialist Jews in Russia and eastern Europe, and it came to the United States when Jews from these regions migrated there in large numbers in the early part of the twentieth century and initiated practices like the Third Seder, an alternative Seder celebrated on the third night of the holiday by the Workmen's Circle, an immigrant mutual aid society that developed a focus on Yiddish culture and social-justice activism.[25] The Third Seder became very popular, sometimes filling up hotel banquet halls, and by the 1950s the custom inspired its own versions of the Haggadah, which included reciting a list of modern plagues such as war, totalitarianism, and racism.[26] While the Third Seder itself is no longer widely celebrated, the practice of reciting the plagues as a way of calling attention to injustice came to be incorporated into the first night of Passover and shapes how the ten plagues are recited by Jews of a liberal or progressive orientation to this day. It has also inspired Passover-inspired protests that deploy the recitation of the plagues as a form of protest theater.

In 1975, for example, a Zionist group known as Betar splattered blood on the floor and dumped live frogs, locusts, and mice at the Pan American World Airways building in New York to decry the plight of Syrian Jews. (Pan Am was the only American airline with service to Syria.) By the 2000s, the practice had also been embraced by environmentalists. In April 2019, for example, the movement Extinction Rebellion, known for nonviolent but disruptive protest, staged a recitation of the plagues to dramatize the threat posed by climate change, linking each one to one of the destructive effects of greenhouse gas emissions.[27] The practice has also inspired socially conscious artists, yielding visualizations of the

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FIGURE 2. The ten plagues as a cell phone display, from Eli Kaplan-Wildmann's *The Recreated Haggadah*. Image reproduced with permission from Eli Kaplan-Wildmann.

ten plagues in various media. Examples include Harriete Estel Berman's "10 Modern Plagues," which uses each plague to highlight a global problem; the "X Plagues" project by Polish artist Natalia Romik, which encloses various objects in socialist-era crystal ware to symbolize the plagues unleashed by capitalism; and a Haggadah from designer Eli Kaplan-Wildmann that presents the plagues as icons on a cell phone display, with each icon symbolizing a "modern plague" such as increasing social disconnection, symbolized by the Delete Contact icon, and the world's depletion of its energy supply, represented as a low-battery bar (figure 2).[28]

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The most recent examples of ten plagues–related activism come from anti-Israel campus protests in 2024 when people on both sides of that political divide adapted the practice to make their point. At Columbia University, Jewish pro-Palestinian protesters staged a Seder where the leader asked participants to call out the plagues that were afflicting the university (answers included policing, misinformation, and capitalism), while in an incident at New York University born of an opposing political perspective, a comedian dressed as Moses asked anti-Israel protesters if Hamas should let its hostages ago, and gifted them a mock plague when they said no. Although it did not occur during Passover, another example from that year is an incident where vandals set crickets loose in the lobby of an apartment building inhabited by a Columbia University executive and splattered red paint around its front door.[29]

The practice of reciting the ten plagues began as a way of explaining Deuteronomy 26:8 to one's children, but already during the Middle Ages, the practice served as a way for Jews to symbolically push back against present-day oppressors; and as the Seder developed in the twentieth century, the custom was repurposed yet again as a call to think beyond one's own redemption and acknowledge the suffering of others. Reenacting the plagues as vandalism is obviously different from recalling them during a Seder, turning the ritual spilling of wine into violence, but it counts as an extension of this tradition, and as such, it too attests to the Haggadah's continued impact on how Jews—and others influenced by Jewish tradition—understand, retell, and reenact the plagues.

Signs Self-Evident Yet Misunderstood: The Plagues in Islamic Tradition

Muslims know the story of the exodus and the plagues not from the Bible but from the Qur'an, the 114-chapter record of what God revealed to the prophet Muhammad between roughly 610 and 632 CE. Although the Qur'an records the experience of Muhammad himself, a good portion of it concerns figures known from the Jewish and Christian Bibles, including Moses, who is mentioned 136 times. There now exists a fair amount of scholarship devoted to the Qur'anic version of the exodus,

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and one central insight from this work is that the Qur'an's depiction of Moses's birth, his effort to deliver signs to the Egyptians, the opposition he faced, and his role in receiving a divine text corresponds to the life of Muhammad as portrayed in the Qur'an. Muhammad is understood by Muslims not just as a successor to the prophet Moses but as a new Moses in his own right, following the same calling, coming up against the same closed-mindedness, and producing his own miraculous signs, and the correspondence between the two prophets is grounded in the distinctive version of the exodus story recounted in the Qur'an.[30]

For all the attention given to Moses and the exodus, however, the plagues are scarcely mentioned, with the notable exception of a verse here and there. The only mention that refers to specific plagues appears in the seventh chapter (or sura) of the Qur'an, known as "The Heights" (al-ʿAraf): "So we plagued them with floods, locusts, lice, frogs, and blood—all as clear signs, but they persisted in arrogance and were a wicked people" (verse 133). The "we" here is spoken by the angel Gabriel as a representative of all the angels, the narrator of the Qur'an, who, according to later Islamic tradition, revealed its content to Muhammad over twenty-three years.

Why does the Qur'an refer to only five plagues, and why in a different order from in Exodus? We will return to these questions later in the book, so suffice it to say for now that the author of the Qur'an, though showing familiarity with the Bible elsewhere in the chapter, was not necessarily basing his understanding of the plagues on Exodus. According to some commentators, for example, the verse's mention of blood does not refer to the waters of Egypt turning into blood or to the blood of the Passover sacrifice, but to a plague of nosebleeds.[31]

Another significant difference from the biblical account concerns how the Qur'an frames the plagues. Its author seems more interested in the episode where Pharaoh's magicians try to match the miracles of Moses by turning their staffs into serpents, referring to it several times, and it treats all the signs of the Exodus story—those performed by Moses before the plagues, the plagues themselves, and events at the sea—as part of a larger history in which God sends various signs to human beings to warn them to submit to God and change their ways.

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As Sura 7 makes clear, humans are prone to disbelieve these signs and to reject the prophets who send them, a pattern that has been repeated since the time of Noah. If anything distinguishes the signs mentioned in verse 133 from earlier signs, it is that they were especially clear or self-evident, designed to be difficult to misinterpret, but even so, Pharaoh and his nobles rejected them just as earlier leaders had scoffed at the signs offered to them by other prophets. The Qur'an's version of the story thus suggests that the opposition Muhammad faced from leaders rejecting his claim to be God's messenger was a repetition of the Egyptians' rejection of Moses and his signs.

Just as the New Testament shaped subsequent Christian retellings of the ten plagues, and the Haggadah determined the course of the story in Jewish tradition, the Qur'an's version of the story, as brief as it is, has left an enduring imprint on how Muslims retell what happened. An example involves the staff that Moses uses to perform the plagues and other miracles of the story. In the biblical account, Moses carries a staff that turns into a snake at the burning bush (Exodus 4:1–3), but it is actually his brother Aaron who handles the wonder-working staff during the confrontation with Pharaoh, turning it into a serpent in Pharaoh's court and using it to bring about the first three plagues. In Sura 7 and other Qur'anic chapters that refer to the confrontation with Pharaoh, it is always Moses, not Aaron, who wields the staff against Pharaoh and his magicians, and that is the version of the story that has been recounted by Muslims ever since.

Beyond what Muslims can glean from the Qur'an about the plagues, they also have another source of information about what happened, a kind of Scripture-centered lore known as Israʾiliyyat, or "Israelisms" in English. Although such material can include stories originating from Christian or Zoroastrian sources, the term, first used in the tenth century, suggests a connection to the Jews, and many of the stories in question came from Jewish sources such as Abdallan b. Salam, a rabbi in Medina and early convert to Islam; Ka'b al-Ahbar, a rabbi from Yemen who converted not long after the death of Muhammad; and Wahb b. Munabbih, another Yemeni convert, perhaps a Jew, who is credited with writing the first book of Israʾiliyyat.[32] Although some

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Muslim scholars regarded these traditions with suspicion, others treated them as a reliable source about the history of God and his prophets in the period before the revelations to Muhammad, and Qur'anic commentators, historians, and poets regularly drew on them.

In the exodus story as presented in Isra'iliyyat, the confrontation with Pharaoh grows more and more elaborate—the serpent in Exodus becomes a great dragon that swallows one of the magicians, for example, and Moses wields the staff against other enemies as well, such as a giant named Og or 'Uj in Arabic. Such was the stature of the staff that, as happened in Christianity, the staff became an important religious relic in Islam, thought to generate blessings and protection for those who gained access to it.[33] But it is always Moses who wields the staff in Islamic tradition, and that idea persists to this day. In 1970 Ayatollah Khomeini called on supporters to wield the staff of Moses against their Pharaonic enemies, one of several ways in which he used Moses's story to symbolize his conflict with the shah of Iran and the West.[34] Fifty years later, inspired by Khomeini's call, an Iranian hacker group decided to call itself Moses' Staff, using as its logo a fist clenching the staff like a dagger to cast its attacks against Israel as a repeat of the plagues that Moses sent against Pharaoh (figure 3).[35]

Lest one think that the staff's use as a weapon is the only role ascribed to it in Islam, I hasten to add that it has been ascribed other meanings and roles as well. In medieval magical tradition, the staff, or divine names thought to have been inscribed into the staff, became important as a source of magical language.[36] In the poem "Masnavi," the thirteenth-century mystic Rumi describes himself as a staff of a hidden Moses, as if his writing were a similar wonder-working instrument.[37] "The Rod of Moses" is also the name of an important poetic-political manifesto published in 1936 by the South Asian philosopher Muhammad Iqbal, and more recently, the Indonesian children's writer Muhammad Vandestra has turned the staff into the narrator of a Harry Potter–esque story about Moses.[38] For all their differences, however, what these portrayals of the staff all share is that they have been influenced by the Qur'an's distinctive version of the exodus where it is Moses, not Aaron, who wields the staff that defeats Pharaoh.

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FIGURE 3. Logo of the Iranian hacker group Moses' Staff.

Wonders to Behold

Almost all of the versions of the ten plagues story that we will consider in this book developed out of or in response to one of these religious traditions. There are some exceptions—such as a few surviving ancient retellings of the story that predate the emergence of Christianity and rabbinic Judaism—but for the most part, we will be focused on Christian, Jewish, and Muslim retellings of the story that build on the story as it was reimagined by early readers of the Bible or the Qur'an. For this reason, it has been a little misleading to refer to the ten plagues story as if it were a single story. The various iterations can all be traced back to a single literary ancestor, but we are really talking about a large, globally dispersed, multibranched tree of related stories that have grown, and are still growing, from narrative seeds planted by the account in Exodus.

For all their differences from one another, however, what unites all the examples we will be looking at in this book is how, in one way or another, every retelling injects its author's personality, beliefs, emotions,

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self-interest, and hopes for the future into the biblical story in a way that mixes together the biblical "then" with the now. Mainstream academic biblical scholars seek to correct such anachronism in how they interpret and explain the Bible, trying to avoid reading themselves into the story of the exodus so that they can understand it on its own terms as the product of minds different from their own, but that is not the kind of insight we are after in this book: the interpreters, storytellers, and artists we will be surveying in the following pages treat the Bible not as an artifact of a bygone age but as a story about their own circumstances, struggles, and futures. In this book, retelling the Bible anachronistically is not a mistake that needs to be corrected but a mode of creativity worthy of study in its own right as the very practice that has kept the Bible alive in people's imaginations for more than two thousand years.

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