

EXCURSUS ON THE ESCHATOLOGICAL REAPPEARANCE OF THE STAFF OF MOSES

As a potent artifact of hierohistory, the mytheme of the miracle-working ‘staff of Moses’ is interwoven throughout the parascriptural eschatological lore of late antique Judaism and early Islam. Now in occlusion, it is destined to reappear during the tumultuous events marking the final days of the present age. Post-talmudic midrashim envision the royal Messiah engaged in a triumphal march to Jerusalem, endowed with the staff of Moses,¹ and the Qur’ān affirms that divine approval of royal leadership will be expressed in the miraculous manifestation of the ‘ark (of the covenant) ... and the relics (بقية) of Moses and the family of Aaron’ (Q 2:247-48), among which is numbered the marvelous staff (see Ṭabarī’s commentary *ad loc.*).² According to *Sefer Zerubbabel*, God would reveal the staff to Hephṣibah, the mother of the Davidic Messiah: it would be recovered from its place of concealment in the city of Tiberias in Galilee,³ and she would efficaciously wield it in the course of her subsequently depicted military

¹ *Num. Rab.* 18.23; *Yal. Šim.* Psalms, §869.

² One Muslim tradition states that the staff of Moses was preserved at Mecca, but was lost during the Qarmaṭī sack of the city in 930. See Ignác Goldziher, *Muslim Studies* (ed. S. M. Stern; trans. C. R. Barber and S. M. Stern; 2 vols.; Chicago: Aldine, 1966-71), 2:326-27.

³ Israel Lévi, “L’apocalypse de Zorobabel et le roi de Perse Siroès,” *REJ* 68 (1914): 135.3-6: והמטה אשר יתן יי לחפצי בה אם מנחם [בן] עמיאל מן שקד הוא גנוז ברקת עיר נפתלי הוא המטה אשר נתן יי לאדם ולמשה ולאהרן וליהושע ולדוד המלך והוא המטה אשר פרח והציץ באהל על יד אהרן ואליהו בן אלעזר גנו אותו ברקת עיר נפתלי והוא טברייא ‘The rod which the Lord will give to Hephṣibah, the mother of Menahem [ben] ‘Amiel, is made of almond-wood; it is hidden in Raqqat, a city in (the territory of) Naphtali. It is the same rod which the Lord previously gave to Adam, Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and King David. It is the same rod which sprouted buds and flowered in the Tent (of Meeting) for the sake of Aaron. Elijah ben Eleazar (i.e., the priest Phineas) concealed it in Raqqat, a city of Naphtali, which is Tiberias.’ See *ibid.* 134.5-6 for the initial appearance of the staff: מטה ישועות האלה יתן יי לחפצי בה אם מנחם בן עמיאל וכוכב גדול יגח לפניה

triumphs. Islamic tradition similarly held that the ‘staff of Moses’ would be one of the sacred relics recovered when the Muslim armies finally conquered Constantinople;⁴ interestingly, there is extant a Byzantine tradition which indeed affirmed that a ceremonial ‘staff of Moses’ was associated with the imperial court of that city.⁵ Expanded descriptions of the mysterious Qur’ānic apocalyptic ‘beast’ (*dābba*) invariably depict it carrying the staff of Moses and using it to differentiate the saved from the damned.⁶

The ‘history’ of the staff is not a topic for discussion in either the Bible or the Qur’ān: therein it is simply a tool which Moses employs in his guise as herdsman, subsequently revealing itself as a physical channel through which God can produce signs and wonders.⁷ Nothing is said in the canonical scriptures about its ownership or even its existence prior to the dialogue between Moses and God at the burning bush, nor do they provide information about the staff’s fate after the death of the lawgiver. It seems likely that the biblical narrator’s reluctance to identify the burial site of Moses (Deut 34:5-6) cast a concomitant aura of mystery around the final disposition of his personal effects. A number of Jewish and Muslim sources

‘The Lord will give a rod (for accomplishing) these salvific acts to Hephṣibah, the mother of Menahem ben ‘Amiel. A great star will shine (read נורה) before her.’

⁴ Saïd Amir Arjomand, “Islamic Apocalypticism in the Classic Period,” in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism* (ed. Bernard McGinn et al.; 3 vols.; New York and London: Continuum, 1998), 2:255. Other treasures to be recovered on that occasion include the Temple vessels and the ark of the covenant. Note also the so-called ‘Apocalypse of Nāth(ā)’ contained in Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *Kitāb al-ḥitan* (ed. Suhayl Zakkār; Beirut: Dār al-Fikr lil-Ṭibā‘ah wa-al-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī‘, 1993), 429-32, wherein it states that after the fall of Constantinople, there will be recovered ‘the gate of Zion, the Ark (with its) stave(s) in place, the earring of Eve, the *kitōn* of Adam; i.e., his clothing or cloak, and the (priestly) finery of Aaron’ (432.4-5). For further discussion of this intriguing ‘apocalypse,’ see Michael Cook, “An Early Islamic Apocalyptic Chronicle,” *JNES* 52 (1993): 25-29; Uri Rubin, *Between Bible and Qur’ān: The Children of Israel and the Islamic Self-Image* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 17; Princeton: Darwin Press, 1999), 259-61; a full translation is now available in David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 21; Princeton: Darwin Press, 2002), 344-50. Might Nāth be a corruption of T(h)āt(h), which was in turn a hermetic designation for Enoch?

⁵ Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus, *Book of Ceremonies* 1.6.24; cited by Samuel Krauss, *Studien zur byzantinisch-jüdischen Geschichte* (Leipzig: Buchhandlung Gustav Fock, 1914), 107; also Heinrich Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran* (repr. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1988), 255 n.2.

⁶ Q 27:82 speaks of the emergence of a ‘beast’ from the earth who will verbally admonish humankind for their unbelief. For its endowment with the staff of Moses, see Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād, *K. al-ḥitan* (ed. Zakkār), 403: ‘the beast will emerge, having with it the staff of Moses and the seal of Solomon (upon whom be peace!), and the face(s) of the believers will be revealed by the staff.’ See also Arjomand, “Islamic Apocalypticism,” 268; Arthur Jeffery, “‘Aṣā,” *EF* 1:680; Armand Abel, “Dābba,” *EF* 2:71; Jaroslav Stetkevych, *Muhammad and the Golden Bough: Reconstructing Arabian Myth* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 142-43 n.32.

⁷ Exod 4:2-5, 17, 20; 7:9-12, 15-21; 8:1, 12-13; 9:23; 10:13; 14:16; 17:5-13; Num 17:16-26; 20:7-12; Q 20:17-21; cf. 2:60; 7:107, 117, 160; 27:10; 28:31. Exod 4:20; 17:9 term it ‘the staff of God’ (מטה האלהים). For a fascinating intercultural discussion on the motif of magic staves or rods, see Stetkevych, *Muhammad and the Golden Bough*, 83-89.

display an understandable tendency to conflate the staff of Moses with the flowering ‘rod of Aaron,’⁸ in which case the post-Mosaic location of the staff should coincide with that of the lost ‘ark of the covenant,’ since that staff is described in the Bible as being deposited for safekeeping in the ark (Num 17:25-26).⁹ The effect of this textual linkage of staff and ark is to subsume the fate of the staff among the numerous legends found among Jews, Christians, and Muslims which voice their anticipation of the reappearance of the ark and the lost Temple vessels at the End of Days.¹⁰

Parascriptural legends supply several explanations for the origin of the staff. One early stream of interpretation simply lists the staff among the ten items which God supposedly created *ex nihilo* on the eve of Sabbath during the initial week of creation.¹¹ Nothing is said in these traditions regarding the staff’s physical properties, such as its appearance, size, shape, or composition, nor is anything explicitly communicated regarding the marvelous powers with which it was supposedly endowed. However, its very inclusion within a list of future ‘wonders’ or ‘anomalies of nature’ hints at the latent possibilities awaiting a creative narrative development.¹²

⁸ Note the remark of Ibn Ezra on Exod 4:20: ומטה האלהים הוא מטה משה והוא מטה אהרן ‘the staff of God is the same as the staff of Moses and the staff of Aaron,’ as well as the excerpt of *Sefer Zerubbabel* cited above. This confusion is discussed further by Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (7 vols.; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1909-38), 6:106-107 n.600; Jeffery, *EF*² 1:680; note also A. Fodor, “The Rod of Moses in Arabic Magic,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 32 (1978): 2; Christine Meilicke, “Moses’ Staff and the Return of the Dead,” *JSQ* 6 (1999): 347.

⁹ See *y. Šeqal.* 6.1, 49c: ‘when the ark was hidden, there were hidden with it the jar of manna, the bottle of oil for anointing, the staff of Aaron with its blooms and almonds, and the box wherein the Philistines returned a guilt-offering to the God of Israel. Who hid it? Josiah hid it.’ See also Heb 9:4; *y. Soṭah* 8.3, 22c; *t. Yoma* 2.15; *t. Soṭah* 13.1; *b. Yoma* 52b; and Q 2:247-48 above. Note also *Massekhet Kelim* 1 (*apud* Jellinek, *BHM* 2:88).

¹⁰ See especially Rivka Nir, *The Destruction of Jerusalem and the Idea of Redemption in the Syriac Apocalypse of Baruch* (SBLEJL 20: Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 43-77. For Islamic traditions regarding the recovery of the ark, see Wilferd Madelung, “Apocalyptic Prophecies in Ḥimṣ in the Umayyad Age,” *JSS* 31 (1986): 149; idem, “The Sufyānī Between Tradition and History,” *Studia Islamica* 63 (1986): 30; Arjomand, “Islamic Apocalypticism,” 255. One early tradition reported by Nu‘aym b. Ḥammād (*K. al-fitan*, 223) states that the Mahdī will recover the Ark from the bottom of the ‘sea of Tiberias,’ a location which should be compared with that of the hiding place of the staff of Moses in *Sefer Zerubbabel*. Note too the curious tradition found in *Re‘uyot Yehezq’el*: שבו עתידין הראהו הר מתחתיו שלנהר שבו עתידין כלי בית המקדש לחזור ‘He (God) showed him (Ezekiel) the mountain at whose base is a river (?) by which the Temple vessels are destined to be restored.’ Text cited from the edition of Ithamar Gruenwald, “Re‘uyot Yehezq’el,” in *Temirin: Texts and Studies in Kabbala and Hasidism, Volume I* (ed. I. Weinstock; Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1972), 110.

¹¹ See *m. ‘Abot* 5.6; *‘Abot R. Nat.* B §37 (Schechter, 48a); *Mek.* Beshalah, Va-yassa’ §5 (Horovitz-Rabin, 171); *Sifre* Deut §355 (Finkelstein, 418); *Tg. Ps-J.* Exod 2:21: חוטרם דאיתבריא בת בניי שימשתא ‘the staff which had been created at twilight (of the sixth day of the creation-week). Note also *Midrash Wa-yosh‘a* (Jellinek, *BHM* 1:42).

¹² These possibilities are succinctly summarized by Isaak Heinemann, *Darkey ha-Aggadah* (2d ed.; Jerusalem/Ramat Gan: Magnes/Masadah, 1954), 30-31.

One interpretive trajectory utilized within Jewish literature supplements the meager scriptural information about the staff by exploiting the surrounding narrative characters and context wherein both Moses and the staff first appear; namely, the refugee sojourn of Moses among the family of the Midianite priest Jethro, herein depicted as a former advisor and court magician to Pharaoh. This is the way the story appears in one recension of the medieval aggadah entitled *Chronicles of Moses*:

Now during that time Jethro had issued a decree and circulated an announcement among all his lands that the person who could come and uproot the staff which was planted in his garden would be given his daughter Zipporah to wed. Kings, mighty princes, and warriors had been coming, but none (of them) had been able to pull up the staff. After Moses was released from prison,¹³ he was walking around in the garden, and he noticed the staff ‘stuck in the ground’:¹⁴ it was made of sapphire, and the Ineffable Name (of God) was engraved upon it. Moses put his hand on the staff and pulled it up from its place with ease, and the staff was in his hand. He returned to the house with the staff in his hand. When Jethro saw the staff in the hand of Moses, he was utterly amazed, and he gave him Zipporah his daughter to be his wife.¹⁵

In this trajectory the staff is described as composed of ‘sapphire’ (ספיר);¹⁶ some sources equate this material with the same precious stone of which the heavenly throne of God is composed.¹⁷ This detail does not necessarily conflict with the notion of the staff’s Sabbath eve creation found in earlier rabbinic sources.

¹³ Recognizing Moses as a fugitive from Pharaoh’s court, Jethro at first imprisoned Moses upon his arrival in Midian. See *Tg. Ps-J. Exod 2:21*.

¹⁴ Gen 28:12.

¹⁵ Translated from the version printed in Jellinek, *BHM 2:7*. Variant versions of Moses’s imprisonment by Jethro and the trial with the magic staff are found in *Midrash Wa-yosha’* (Jellinek, *BHM 1:42-43*), *Yal. Šim. Torah*, §168, and in Oxford Bodleian Ms. Heb. d. 11 (2797) as published by Avigdor Shinan, “Divrey ha-yamim shel Mosheh rabbenu,” *Hasifrut 24* (1977): 111-12, and Eli Yassif, ed., *Sefer ha-Zikronot hu’ Divrey ha-Yamim le-Yerahme’el* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 2001), 166-67.

¹⁶ The tradition that the staff was made of sapphire (סנפירינין) is already visible in *Mek. Beshalah, Va-yass’a* §6 (Horovitz-Rabin, 175.3). Note Rashi *ad Exod 17:6*.

¹⁷ *Tg. Ps-J. Exod 4:20*: ונסיב משה ית חוטרא דנסב מן גינוניתא דחמוי והוא מספיר כורסי יקרא מתקליה ארבעין ויעילי חקיק ומפרש שמא רבא ויקירא סאין ועילוי חקיק ומפרש שמא רבא ויקירא. Text cited from David Rieder, ed., *Targum Jonathan ben Uziel on the Pentateuch* (Jerusalem: Salomon, 1974), 86. The throne’s appearance is compared to that of sapphire in Ezek 1:26 and 10:1; ‘sapphire brickwork’ lies beneath God’s feet in Exod 24:10. Note also *I En. 18:8*.

The staff also bears the imprint of the Ineffable Name of God.¹⁸ Other allied sources multiply descriptive details: it was also engraved with the names of the ten Egyptian plagues, and it supposedly weighed the equivalent of forty *seahs* of grain.¹⁹ A variant version of the *Chronicles of Moses* contained within the so-called ‘*Yerahmeel* Manuscript’ (Oxford Ms. Heb. d. 11 [2797]) interjects the following ‘historical’ data:

This is the staff which was created by God ...²⁰ among the divine works after He finished creating the heavens and the earth and all their hosts (and) the seas, rivers, and all their fish. And when Adam was driven out of the Garden of Eden, he took the staff along with him and used it to work the soil from which he had been taken. The staff eventually came to Noah, and he gave it to Shem and his descendants, and it eventually came into the possession of Abraham the Hebrew. Since Abraham bequeathed all that he owned to Isaac, he also inherited the miracle-working staff (מטה האותיות).²¹ Moreover, when Jacob fled to Paddan Aram, he took it along with him,²² and when he returned to his father at Beersheva, he certainly did not leave it behind. When he went down to Egypt, he took it with him and presented it to Joseph, ‘a portion more than his brothers’ (שכם על אחיו).²³ It came to pass that after Joseph died certain Egyptian officials lived in Joseph’s house, and the staff came into the

¹⁸ For the magical importance of the inscriptions borne by the staff, see Fodor, “Rod of Moses,” 6-15.

¹⁹ *Midr. Tanh.*, Wa’era §9; Tazri’a §8; *Exod. Rab.* 5.6; *Midrash Wa-Yosh’a* (Jellinek, *BHM* 1:42). According to *Tg. Ps.-J.* Exod 31:18, the original set of engraved tablets given to Moses by God on Sinai were hewn from ‘sapphire-stone taken from the Throne of Glory weighing forty *seahs*.’

²⁰ The manuscript contains the unintelligible character string בתבל; similarly, *Yal. Šim.* Torah, §168.

²¹ The same sobriquet occurs in *Yal. Šim.* Ezekiel, §375: ‘during the forty years when Moses shepherded the flock of Jethro with the “miracle-working staff,” no wild beast successfully preyed on them; instead, they (the flock) greatly multiplied and increased.’ *Yal. Šim.* Torah, §168 refers to it as the מטה האותיות or ‘belettered staff.’

An Aramaic rendering of the same epithet appears twice in the early liturgical acrostic *’Ezel Mosheh* as חוטר ניסיה ‘staff of miracles.’ See Joseph Yahalom, “‘Ezel Moshe – According to the Berlin Papyrus,” *Tarbiz* 47 (1978): 173-84; Klaus Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte vom Toten Meer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984), 331-34; also Michael L. Klein, *Genizah Manuscripts of Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch* (2 vols.; Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1986), 1:236-39, where we find the spellings חוטר ניסיה and חוטר ניסייה.

²² According to *Yal. Šim.* Torah, §168, Jacob forcibly took the staff away from his brother Esau.

²³ See Gen 48:22 as interpreted in *b. B. Bat.* 123a. Since Joseph (and his descendants) displace Reuben as ‘first-born’ (see 1 Chr 5:1-2), they merit a ‘double-portion’ (see Deut 21:17) as their inheritance.

possession of Re'uel the Midianite. At the time when he left Egypt, he took it with him and planted it in the middle of his garden.²⁴

This narrative expansion which ties the staff's creation-week point of origin to the expulsion from Eden, Adam the protoplast, and a named chain of custodians first appears within Jewish literary sources in the eighth-century *Pirque de R. Eliezer*.²⁵

That staff was created at twilight (of the sixth day of the creation-week). It was given to Adam the protoplast in the Garden of Eden. Adam gave it to Enoch, Enoch gave it to Noah, Noah gave it to Shem, Shem gave it to Abraham, Abraham gave it to Isaac, Isaac gave it to Jacob, and Jacob brought it down to Egypt and gave it to Joseph his son. After Joseph died, everything in his house was taken and placed in the palace of Pharaoh. Now one of Pharaoh's Egyptian magicians noticed the staff and the lettering which was on it, and he formed a secret desire to own it. He took it away, brought it, and planted it in the garden of Jethro's house. He could observe the staff, but no one could approach it at all. When Moses came to his house, he went into the garden of Jethro's house, saw the staff, and read the letters which were on it. He extended his hand and took it. When Jethro saw what Moses had done, he exclaimed: "This one is destined to redeem Israel from Egypt!" Therefore he gave him his daughter Zipporah as a wife.²⁶

One might compare the more elaborate first-person rendition of this legend found in the *Midrash Wa-Yosh 'a*, a homiletic exposition keyed to Exod 14:30-15:18 which dates from the eleventh or twelfth century:

I told her (i.e., Zipporah) that I wanted to make her my wife, but Zipporah told me that every man who sought to marry one of her father's daughters faced an ordeal by means of a tree which was in his garden. Whenever one approached

²⁴ Shinan, "Divrey ha-yamim," 112; Yassif, *Sefer ha-Zikronot*, 166-67.

²⁵ See however the so-called *Visions of 'Amram* in 4Q546 11 3: זעתיד חטרא דן לאהרון 'this staff is destined for A[aron (?)],' perhaps the remnant of an early roster of the worthies who have custody of the wonder-working staff. See Émile Puech, "Visions de 'Amram^d," in *Qumrân Grotte 4, XXII: Textes araméens, première partie, 4Q529-49* (DJD 31; Oxford: Clarendon, 2001), 363-64.

²⁶ *Pirque R. El.* §40 (Luria, 94a).

it, it would immediately swallow him! I asked her from where he had gotten this tree. She said to <me>:²⁷ ‘This is the staff which the Holy One, blessed be He, created on the eve of the Sabbath when He created His world. The Holy One, blessed be He, entrusted it to Adam the protoplast, and Adam entrusted it to Enoch, Enoch entrusted it to Noah, Noah entrusted it to Shem, Shem entrusted it to Abraham, Abraham entrusted it to Isaac, and Isaac entrusted it to Jacob. Jacob took it back (!) to Egypt²⁸ and entrusted his son Joseph with it. When Joseph died, the Egyptians looted his house and brought that staff into Pharaoh’s palace. My father Jethro was one of the chief magicians of Pharaoh: he saw that staff, secretly coveted it, stole it, and brought it to his own house. On that staff is engraved the Ineffable Name and the ten plagues which the Holy One, blessed be He, is going to bring upon the inhabitants of Egypt’²⁹

It is of interest here to note that a named succession of owners or trustees of the staff plays a prominent role in some Christian and Muslim versions of this legend. One might compare, for example, the narration of the staff’s ‘history’ which we have read above with the form of the legend as it appears in the *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* collection of al-Kisā’ī, an anthology of popular prophetic legends of uncertain date,³⁰ where the staff also is associated with the Garden of Eden:

Shu‘ayb (i.e., Jethro)³¹ said: ‘O Moses, this staff derives from one of the trees of the Garden. It was presented to Adam the day he departed from the Garden, and he leaned upon it. Afterwards Abel leaned upon it, then Seth, Idrīs (i.e., Enoch), Noah, Hūd, Ṣāliḥ, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, and Jacob. Do not let it

²⁷ Read יל instead of the text’s לו.

²⁸ This verb would seem to presuppose reliance upon a fuller narrative wherein the staff enjoyed an earlier sojourn in Egypt, perhaps in conjunction with Abraham’s visit there (Gen 12:10-20). See the excerpt from the *Book of the Bee* below.

²⁹ *Midrash Wa-Yosh’a* (Jellinek, *BHM* 1:42).

³⁰ See Tilman Nagel, “Kisā’ī, Ṣāḥib Qiṣaṣ al-Anbiyā’,” *ET* 5:176. According to Nagel, the earliest manuscript of this work dates from the thirteenth century.

³¹ For the common identification of the qur’ānic prophet Shu‘ayb as biblical Jethro, see Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Islam* (trans. F. M. Young; 1898; repr., New York: Ktav, 1970), 137-42; Brannon M. Wheeler, *Prophets in the Quran: An Introduction to the Quran and Muslim Exegesis* (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), 154-56; Moshe Gil, *Jews in Islamic Countries in the Middle Ages* (trans. David Strassler; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 14-15. Gil suggests that Shu‘ayb might be better explained as Balaam.

depart from your hand; each one of the prophets who handled it was granted victory by God over his adversaries.³²

Al-Kisā'ī provides of course an 'islamicized' version of the staff's career, supplementing and/or replacing a biblical chain of ancestral worthies with a qur'ānic list of early prophets. Its potency is subtly underscored: those who wield the staff will triumph over their foes. Unlike the Jewish renditions, this version of the story does not explicitly inform us how the chronological and generational gap from Jacob to Shu'ayb was bridged. The 'bridegroom ordeal' motif is also lacking from this version; instead, Moses selects the staff from a shed storing similar implements and is initially unaware of its wonder-working prowess. Shu'ayb however immediately recognizes it and attempts to maintain possession to no avail by repeatedly sending Moses back into the shed to select another tool: no matter where he hides it, though, the staff reverts to the hand of Moses.³³

One should also note that al-Kisā'ī's version features an important transitional development in the continuing evolution of the legend. Adam receives the staff from God, as in the *Midrash Wa-Yosh'a* version above.³⁴ However, the material composition of the staff is no longer that of stone quarried from the Divine Throne, but wood; and not just any wood, but wood procured from 'one of the trees of the Garden.' One could explain this change as due to the rationalizing imagination of the storytellers, since a wooden shepherd's staff is a more plausible and comfortable accessory than one of stone. It seems likely too that a growing contextual association of the marvelous staff with the primal inhabitants of the Garden, coupled with their infamous engagement with similarly endowed 'trees' (and a serpent!) in that Garden, influenced a critical transmutation in the staff's origin. The culmination of this trend emerges in Zoharic legendry, wherein the staff of Moses is explicitly traced to the Edenic Tree of Knowledge, and the angels Metatron and Samael are deemed responsible for governing its beneficent and maleficent aspects respectively.³⁵ Yet in contrast to the Jewish versions of this story examined above, wherein God is represented as the creator of

³² Muhammad Ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Kisā'ī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'* (ed. I. Eisenberg; 2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1922-23), 2:208.12-16. See also Bernard Heller, "Mūsā," *EF* 7:639.

³³ Ṭabarī (*Ta'rīkh*, 1:460-61) recounts another tradition wherein Moses and his father-in-law argue over possession of the staff. An angel is forced to intervene in Moses' favor.

³⁴ Another tradition has the angel Gabriel take the staff from Adam after the latter's death and then later present it to Moses, a mode of deliverance which bypasses the putative human chain of trustees. See Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, 1:460-61; Max Grünbaum, *Neue Beiträge zur semitischen Sagenkunde* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1893), 162.

³⁵ A convenient anthology of these passages is provided by Reuven Margalioṭ, *Mal'akey 'elyon* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1945), 97.

the staff, many of these latter traditions take a further step in identifying Adam as the one who first made the staff.

According to the qur'ānic commentators Zamakhsharī and Bayḍāwī, Adam detached a branch from a myrtle-tree in the Garden and fashioned the wonder-working staff from it.³⁶ The choice of this particular species is not accidental: the magical properties of myrtle are renowned in Near Eastern folklore.³⁷ Perhaps even more importantly, the Jewish messianic imposter Abū 'Īsā al-Iṣfahānī is depicted in one Muslim source wielding a 'myrtle rod' (عود آس) which he uses to protect his followers from the military attacks of their persecutors:³⁸ given the close linkages discernable between the recovery of Moses' staff and the advent of the 'True Messiah,' it seems possible that Abū 'Īsā's 'myrtle rod' was intended to represent this powerful token. Other traditions connect the staff with the thorn-bush from which God addresses Moses in Exod 3:1-5 and its qur'ānic parallels.³⁹ This latter identification may also be ultimately linked (at least thematically) with the myrtle.⁴⁰ Adam's staff is subsequently handed down through the subsequent generations until it comes into the possession of Jethro, from whom, as in certain streams of the Jewish and Muslim traditions surveyed above, Moses manages to acquire it. These later traditions also elaborate and enhance the miraculous powers associated with the staff. In the collection of prophetic legends attributed to Tha'labī, we find an extensive catalogue of the staff's endowments: it illuminates darkness, bears fruit when planted into the soil, exudes milk and honey, obliterates mountain and rock, warns of danger, protects both Moses and his flock from predators and assassins while they sleep, and

³⁶ Ad Q 2:60. See Grünbaum, *Neue Beiträge*, 161.

³⁷ See Jacob Z. Lauterbach, "The Origin and Development of Two Sabbath Ceremonies," *HUCA* 15 (1940): 367-424, esp. 392ff.; Ludwig Blau, "Salamander," *JE* 10:646; Fodor, "Rod of Moses," 3 n.10; A. Dietrich, "Ās," *EP², Supplement 1-2* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 87. When Maimonides draws a portrait of a necromancer engaged in his nefarious craft, he depicts him as follows: 'He stands and burns a certain incense, holding and waving a myrtle wand (שרביט של הדס) in his hand, and whispering certain incantations ...' (*Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot 'Avodat Kokhavim* 6.1).

³⁸ Shahrastānī, *Kitāb al-milal wa'l-niḥal* (ed. M. b. Fath Allāh Badrān; 2 vols.; [Cairo]: Matba'at al-Azhar, [1951-55]), 1.506-507; Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis Under Early Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 76.

³⁹ See Q 20:10-16; 28:29-30 and Grünbaum, *Neue Beiträge*, 162; Fodor, "Rod of Moses," 3 n.11.

⁴⁰ *Gen. Rab.* 63.9 (Theodor-Albeck, 692): זה על גבי ר' פינחס בשם ר' לוי משל להדס ועצבוניית שהיו גדילים זה על גבי זה כיון שהגדילו הפריחו זה ריחו וזה חוחיו 'R. Pinhas said in the name of R. Levi, (Jacob and Esau) can be compared to the myrtle and the thorn-bush: while they were growing up, they were interchangeable, but after they matured (and bore fruit), this one was fragrant, but that one had thorns.'

transforms itself into a dragon in order to combat enemies.⁴¹ One can also discern a tendency to depict the inert form or shape of the staff as that of a living serpent. Some sources mention that the top of the staff was forked and crested, and when the staff became a snake, the prongs transformed into a mouth with a forked tongue. When relating the contest between Moses and Pharaoh’s court magicians, al-Kisā’ī states that the staff of Moses shifted into the shape of a seven-headed serpent.⁴² The ninth-century historian Ya‘qūbī recounts how the Egyptian magicians attempted to render their own staffs ‘serpent-like’ by hollowing wooden rods and leather ropes and filling them with mercury; when exposed to heat, these props would wriggle and writhe as if they were living beings.⁴³

The thirteenth-century Christian *Book of the Bee* is perhaps the crowning representative of all these trends: it even devotes a specially subtitled section to the ‘history’ (تاريخ) of the staff, developing and expanding the tradition in the following way:

When Adam and Eve departed from Paradise, Adam—as if knowing he would never again return there—cut off a branch from the Tree of Good and Evil,⁴⁴ which was the fig tree,⁴⁵ took it with him and left. That (branch) served him as a staff all the days of his life. After the death of Adam, his son Seth took it because at that time weapons did not yet exist.⁴⁶ That staff was transferred from hand to hand until it reached Noah. Shem received it from Noah, and from Shem it was handed down to Abraham as a gift from the Paradise of God. Abraham used it to shatter the images, carvings, and idols which his

⁴¹ Heller, “Mūsā,” 7:639; Fodor, “Rod of Moses,” 5-6. See now Tha‘labī, *‘Arā’is al-majālis fī qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’* or “*Lives of the Prophets*” (trans. William M. Brinner; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 294-95.

⁴² Kisā’ī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā’*, 2:216; Fodor, “Rod of Moses,” 15.

⁴³ Ya‘qūbī, *Ta’rīkh* (2 vols.; Beirut: Dār Sādir, 1960), 1.35.6-16; Fodor, “Rod of Moses,” 15 n.89.

⁴⁴ As noted above, the *Zohar*, a product of late thirteenth-century Spanish Jewish circles but rooted in older migratory sources, *also* connects the staff of Moses with the Tree of Knowledge. The mutual attestation of such a distinct mytheme within these two widely disparate cultural contexts suggests an earlier, wider, and perhaps even common currency for this motif.

⁴⁵ This is a popular interpretation based upon the fig’s cooperative behavior in Gen 3:7. See *b. Sanh.* 70b and Ginzberg, *Legends* 5:97-98 n.70.

⁴⁶ Does this laconic comment presume a dependence upon the Enochic myth embedded in *1 En.* 8:1 (cf. 69:6) that the forging of weapons was a technology first acquired from the ‘fallen angels’? Or does it simply express the well attested protective powers of the wonder-working staff?

father had made.⁴⁷ It was on account of this that God said to him: ‘Leave the house of your father, etc.’ (Gen 12:1ff.). The staff remained in his possession every place he dwelt, including Egypt and in Palestine after returning from Egypt. Afterwards Isaac received it, and Jacob received it from Isaac, and Jacob used it while shepherding the flocks of Laban the Aramaean in Paddan-Aram. From Jacob it was received by Judah, the fourth of his sons, and this was the staff which Judah gave to his daughter-in-law Tamar along with his seal and his robe as payment for what he had done.⁴⁸ From him it came to Peretz. Then wars broke out in every land, and an angel took the staff and put it in the Cave of Treasures in the hill country of Moab⁴⁹ until Midian was built. Now there was a certain man in Midian who was just and righteous before God whose name was Jethro. While this one was shepherding his flocks in the hill country, he discovered the Cave and at divine instigation removed the staff.⁵⁰ He used it to shepherd his flocks until he grew old, and after he gave his daughter to Moses, Jethro said to Moses: ‘Come, my son, take the staff and shepherd your flocks!’ As Moses stepped on the threshold of the door, an angel caused the staff to fly out by itself toward Moses.⁵¹ Moses took that staff, and it was with him until the time when God spoke with him on Mount Sinai. When he told him to cast the staff on the ground and he accordingly threw it down, it became a large serpent; and when the Lord said

⁴⁷ Abraham’s smashing of the idols (*sans* staff) is a widespread tale also found in both Jewish and Muslim contexts. See *Jub.* 12:1-14; *Apoc. Abr.* 1:1-8:6; *Gen. Rab.* 38.13; *b. Pesah.* 118a; *b. ‘Erub.* 53a; *Pirque R. El.* §26; Q 6:74-84; 19:41-50; 21:53-73; 26:69-86; 29:16-27; 37:83-98; 43:26-27; 60:4.

⁴⁸ See Gen 38:18, 25. Judah’s staff is equated with those of Moses and Aaron in *Num. Rab.* 18.23; *Yal. Šim.* Torah, §763, paralleled in *Yal. Šim.* Psalms, §869; and *Ba ‘al ha-Ṭürim* to Gen 38:18. Ps 110:2 is the crucial linchpin in this equation.

⁴⁹ This location seems to presuppose a tradition which links the hiding place of the staff with the future grave of Moses (Deut 34:5-6). Cf. also 2 Macc 2:4-8 and the remarks of Andreas Su-Min Ri, *Commentaire de la Caverne des Trésors: Étude sur l’histoire du texte et de ses sources* (CSCO 581; Louvain: Peeters, 2000), 76 n.81.

⁵⁰ Note that this explanation of how Jethro comes to possess the staff differs from that provided in Jewish sources. According to the latter tradition, Jethro acquires the staff in Egypt thanks to his status as an advisor to Pharaoh.

⁵¹ Similar powers of levitation are exhibited in some of the Jewish and Muslim traditions surrounding Moses’ initial acquisition of the staff.

for him to pick it up, he grasped it and it became a staff as before.⁵² This is the staff which God gave him as an assistant and as an agent of deliverance and to be a marvelous wonder: using it he rescued Israel from the oppression of the Egyptians. By the will of the living God it became a large serpent in Egypt. God addressed Moses by means of it, and it swallowed the staff of Pūsdi (פוסדי) the Egyptian witch. He struck the Sea of Reeds with it along its length and its width, and ‘the depths were congealed in the midst of the sea’ (Exod 15:8b). This same staff was in the possession of Moses in the wilderness of Ašīmōn,⁵³ and he used it to strike the solid rock to make water flow copiously (from it).⁵⁴ God then gave serpents the power to destroy them due to His anger over the ‘waters of controversy’ (Num 20:13). Moses prayed to the Lord, and God told him: ‘Make a bronze serpent and raise it on top of the staff, and have the children of Israel look at it so that they might be cured.’⁵⁵ Moses acted as the Lord had commanded him, and he set up a bronze serpent in the wilderness in the sight of all the children of Israel: they looked at it and they were cured.⁵⁶ After the death of all the children of Israel—except for Joshua bar Nun and Caleb bar Yofan’a—they entered the Promised Land, taking the staff along with them due to wars with the

⁵² Cf. Exod 4:3-4.

⁵³ I.e., Hebrew ישימון. See Num 21:20; Deut 32:10; Ps 78:40-41; 106:14; 107:4.

⁵⁴ Cf. Num 20:11.

⁵⁵ Cf. Num 21:8. The Masoretic text is silent about the material from which Moses should fashion the image of the serpent; note Rashi *ad* Num 21:9: ‘He (God) did not tell him to make it of bronze.’ Note however the Peshitta: *ܘܥܫܐ ܠܗ ܥܘܨܦܐ ܕܩܘܨܐ* ‘Make a deadly serpent of bronze ...,’ and compare *Tg. Ps-J.* Num 21:8: *ܘܥܫܐ ܠܗ ܥܘܨܦܐ ܕܩܘܨܐ* ‘God said to Moses: Make a bronze serpent,’ a textual detail which mirrors the identical rendering in the Syriac legend.

⁵⁶ As might be expected, the apotropaic and therapeutic powers of the staff are also exploited in magical texts. A seventh-century silver amulet from Arbela begins: ‘By the staff of Moses (ܘܒܚܘܬܪܐ ܕܡܫܐ) and the head-plate of Aaron the high priest and the signet ring of Solomon and [...] of David and the horns of the altar and the name of the living and enduring God, may you be expelled.’ This text was first published by James A. Montgomery, ‘Some Early Amulets from Palestine,’ *JAOS* 31 (1911): 272-81, at pp. 273-79, and reprinted with some revised readings by Beyer, *Die aramäischen Texte*, 374-75. It was re-published with much improved readings by Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, *Magic Spells and Formulae: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1993), 91-95; note also idem, *Amulets and Magic Bowls: Aramaic Incantations of Late Antiquity* (Jerusalem/Leiden: Magnes/Brill, 1985), 22 n.23. Naveh and Shaked also refer to an unpublished Genizah fragment (ENA 3513.11a) which similarly begins with the invocation: ... ܒܚܘܬܪܐ ܕܡܫܐ ܢܒܝܐ.

Philistines and the Amalekites. Phineas⁵⁷ hid the staff in the desert, beneath the dirt at the gate of Jerusalem (باب صهيون),⁵⁸ and it remained there until Our Lord the Messiah was born. By the will of the Deity He showed the staff to Joseph, the husband of Miriam,⁵⁹ and that staff was in his possession when he fled to Egypt with Our Lord and Miriam, (and) until he returned to Nazareth. After Joseph, his son James—the one called the brother of Our Lord—took it, and Judas Iscariot stole it from James, for he was a thief. When the Jews crucified Our Lord, they lacked sufficient wood for the arms of Our Lord, and Judas due to his wickedness gave them the staff.⁶⁰ This became a judgment and a calamity for them, but a covenant for many (others).⁶¹

Despite its extensive elaboration, one should note that this Syriac narrative shares one interesting motif with the Jewish *Sefer Zerubbabel* account: both stories credit the priest Phineas with concealing the staff until its timely reemergence in the messianic age. This common assignment is undoubtedly due to the early Jewish assimilation of the character Phineas to the prophet Elijah⁶² and that latter figure's well attested role in the recovery of the hidden Temple vessels at the time of redemption.

Why should the staff of Moses be connected with the events surrounding the End of Days? Why do so many biblically grounded religious traditions underscore the recovery or re-manifestation of this staff as an essential sign or token signaling the time of redemption? The 'messianic' associations of the staff are by no means limited to 'orthodox' expressions of late antique prophetism as articulated in Judaism,

⁵⁷ I.e., the son of Eleazar the priest and grandson of Aaron. See Num 25:7-13; 31:6; Josh 22:13-32; 24:33; Judg 20:28; Ps 106:30.

⁵⁸ Is this syntagm a reflex of the 'gate of Zion' (باب صهيون) in the 'Apocalypse of Nāth(ā)' cited above?

⁵⁹ For a typological association of Joseph's 'rod' with the wonder-working staff, cf. *Prot. Jas.* 8:3-9:1. This apocryphal episode undoubtedly underlies the curious legend alluded to in Q 3:44.

⁶⁰ Compare the tradition found in the earlier *Cave of Treasures* that the cross was fashioned from wood which came from the Tree of Life. There is also extant a Jewish tradition that Moses made his staff from a branch which he took from the Tree of Life. See 'Abot R. Natan A, *hosaphah* 2 §4 (Schechter, 157); Ginzberg, *Legends* 6:165 n.958.

⁶¹ Ernest A. Wallis Budge, ed., *The Book of the Bee* (Anecdota Oxoniensia Semitic Series 1.2; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886), 50.4-52.18 (text). Note also Grünbaum, *Neue Beiträge*, 162-63; Speyer, *Erzählungen*, 255; Louis Ginzberg, "Aaron's Rod," *JE* 1:5-6; Meilicke, "Moses' Staff," 359-60. This legend plays no role in the Syriac *Cave of Treasures*, but a cognate version of the story is contained in the Ethiopic book of *Qalēmentos* (i.e., Clement), a work in the *Cave* cycle which was apparently translated from an Arabic *Vorlage*. See Ri, *Commentaire*, 67 and 88.

⁶² *L.A.B.* 48:1; *Tg. Ps-J.* Num 25:12; *Pirqe R. El.* §§8 and 47; Ginzberg, *Legends* 6:316-17 n.3; Robert Hayward, "Phineas—the Same is Elijah: The Origins of a Rabbinic Tradition," *JJS* 29 (1978): 22-34.

Christianity, and Islam. Samaritan eschatology, for example, likewise views possession of the ‘staff of miracles’ as a sign of messianic authenticity.⁶³ And it is surely significant that the earliest literary portrait we possess of Mani, the third-century self-styled ‘messenger of the God of truth to Babylonia’⁶⁴ and the founder of what can arguably be termed the first ‘world religion,’ a religion thoroughly imbued with biblical modes of discourse, depicts him clad in Persian garments ‘carrying a strong ebony-wood staff in his right hand.’⁶⁵ Apart from the important typological alignment of the events and themes of what Saadya Gaon termed the ‘first redemption’ (i.e., the exodus from Egypt) alongside those slated to transpire at the ‘final redemption,’ it would appear that the crucial reason is an exegetical one.

Several biblical texts which are traditionally passed through an eschatological filter feature lexemes that suggest a return of the staff. According to Num 24:17, ‘a star will stride forth from Jacob, and a staff will rise from Israel.’ Interpretative currents extending back into the Second Temple period already decipher the ‘star’ (כוכב) and/or the ‘staff’ (שבט) of this verse as end-time designations for one or more messianic figures.⁶⁶ Ps 110:2, nominally addressed to the newly enthroned ruler in Jerusalem, reinforces this association: ‘the Lord will extend your mighty staff (מטה עיך) out from Zion—dominate your enemies!’ Similarly the Masoretic text of Isa 11:4b also mentions a ‘staff’ (שבט) which the anticipated scion from ‘the stem of Jesse’ (11:1) will use to smite the earth and to slay the wicked.⁶⁷ The textual evocation in these particular passages of imagery conjoining messianic deliverance with a ‘staff’ readily encourages the ancillary idea that the future agent of deliverance, mirroring his ancient Mosaic prototype, will come equipped with a wonder-working ‘staff,’ perhaps even the very effective one previously wielded by Moses.

⁶³ See (for example) the medieval hagiograph *Sefer 'Asaṭīr* 12.24: וקדקד יקום בקשט יכתב ארהותה ואטר: ‘a prince will arise: he will inscribe the true Torah and bear the wonder-working staff in his hand. There will be light and no more darkness. May our Lord hasten this!’ Text cited from the edition published by Ze’ev Ben-Hayyim, “Sefer 'Asaṭīr,” *Tarbiz* 14 (1943): 125. Note also the traditions cited by Jarl E. Fossum, *The Name of God and the Angel of the Lord* (WUNT 36; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1985), 117-19.

⁶⁴ Bīrūnī, *Athār al-bāqīya 'an-il-qurūn al-khālīya: Chronologie orientalischer Völker von Albērūnī* (ed. C. E. Sachau; Leipzig, 1878; repr., Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1923), 207.13.

⁶⁵ *Acta Archelai* 14.3: *in manu vero validissimum baculum tenebat ex lingo ebelino*. The complete text is available in Hegemonius, *Acta Archelai* (ed. C. H. Beeson; GCS 16; Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1906), 22.24-23.1.

⁶⁶ See CD 7:18-20 (= 4Q266 3 III 20-21), where the ‘staff’ of Num 24:17 is explicitly identified as ‘the Prince of the whole Congregation’ (השבט הוא נשיא כל העדה). Note too the LXX translation of שבט by ἄνθρωπος, as well as *T. Levi* 18:3; *T. Jud.* 24:1.

⁶⁷ Note especially 1QSB 5:24, 27-28 for an application of this biblical verse to the eschatological ‘Prince of the Congregation’ (נשיא העדה).