

AARON HENNE  
THE PROCESS OF CREATION

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POINT OF DEPARTURE

*EXAGOGE*

*theatre dybbuk*

IDEA

*Exagoge*, by Ezekiel the Poet, is the first recorded Jewish play, a telling of the biblical exodus narrative in the style of a Greek Tragedy, written during the second century B.C.E., likely in Alexandria. We have available to us only 269 lines, approximately ¼ of the play's length. This little-known work will serve as a jumping off point to create a piece that functions as both a play and a theatrical ritual. theatre dybbuk will complete this ancient play, exploring questions of cultural intersection and communal identity, through a combination of Greek and Hellenistic theatrical techniques, historical references and contemporary considerations.

BACKGROUND – HELLENISM and POLITICAL & RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS

Hellenism is the term generally used by historians to refer to the period from the death of Alexander The Great (323 B.C.E) to the death of Cleopatra and the incorporation of Egypt in the Roman Empire in 30 B.C.E., approximately 40 years before the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

Hellenistic Judaism combined Jewish Religious tradition with Elements of Greek Culture. Its main centers were Alexandria (near Egypt) and Antioch (Northern Syria – Now Turkey).

The Jews living in this particular diaspora had a relatively secure and progressive place in their respective societies, with close ties and economic integration with Judea and friendly relations between the Royal Court and leaders of the Jewish Community.

In 198 BCE Antiochus III conquered Jerusalem, aided by the city's Jewish population. At the beginning of this Seleucid occupation, he granted the Jews a charter allowing Jewish autonomy and the return of Jews to Jerusalem, gave certain privileges to the priests, forbade foreigners and impure animals from the Temple precinct, and allocated official funds for religious practices in the Temple. It was under Seleucid rule, however, that the effects of Hellenization became more pronounced. In 167 BCE, with tensions between Hellenized and observant Jews at their peak, Antiochus outlawed Jewish rites and traditions and desecrated the Temple. In the narrative of I Maccabees, after Antiochus issued his decrees forbidding Jewish religious practice, a rural Jewish priest, Mattathias the Hasmonean sparked the Maccabean revolt by refusing to worship the Greek Gods. Mattathias killed a Hellenistic Jew who stepped forward to offer a sacrifice to an idol in Mattathias' place. He and his five sons fled to the wilderness of Judah. After Mattathias' death, about one year later, in 166 BCE, his son led an army of Jewish dissidents, their efforts at first directed against Hellenizing Jews, of whom there were many.

The Maccabees destroyed pagan altars in the villages and circumcised Jewish boys. The revolt involved many battles, in which the Maccabean forces gained notoriety among the Seleucid army for their use of guerilla tactics. After the victory, the Maccabees entered Jerusalem in triumph and ritually cleansed the Temple. A large Seleucid army was sent to quash the revolt, but returned to Syria on the death of Antiochus IV. Its commander Lysias, preoccupied with internal Seleucid affairs, agreed to a political compromise. The Hasmonean dynasty, which consolidated Jewish rule and was a result of the conflicts mentioned above, lasted until 63 B.C.E.

## THE GREEK THEATRE AND HELLENISTIC DRAMA

Much is known about the Classical Greek Theatre (many of us are, of course, familiar with Euripides, Sophocles, etc...), while not as much is commonly discussed about Hellenistic Tragedy. We are aware that it was greatly influenced by its predecessors and there is evidence that it utilized similar forms, such as choral speech and the delivery of some climactic information through monologue, rather than direct stage action. It may have also utilized the “rule of three actors” and other poetic and structural techniques common to the Greeks. It served as a precursor to Roman Drama and likely influenced that culture's comedies, including the work of Plautus and Terence.

## HELLENISM AND ITS INFLUENCE ON JUDAISM AT THAT TIME

Under the Seleucid rule, there was an explosion of new varieties of Judaism – Apocalyptic Judaism, Hasidim (not to be confused with the modern mystical variety), Essenes, Sadducees, Pharisees and no doubt others.

Jewish ritual practice and imagery, whether by choice or by order, was greatly influenced by the surrounding cultures - Jerusalem was filled with monuments of the pagan cult. Altars were built before the doors of the houses and sacrifices were offered upon them, to make a public display of zeal for the new paganism.

Pharisees were an association of unrelated men bound by common interests who met for common meals and whose main institutional tie was the school – similar to Hellenistic philosophical schools and religious associations.

Many more could be cited, but this gives just a small taste of the ways in which Jewish belief and practice evolved during this time.

## THE DESTRUCTION OF THE SECOND TEMPLE

The Hasmonean Dynasty fell and Jerusalem came to be ruled by Rome.

In the year 66 CE, the Jews of Judea rebelled against their Roman masters. In response, the Emperor Nero dispatched an army under the generalship of Vespasian to restore order. By the year 68, resistance in the northern part of the province had been eradicated and the Romans turned their full attention to the subjugation of Jerusalem. That same year, the Emperor Nero died by his own hand, creating a power vacuum in Rome. In the resultant chaos, Vespasian was declared Emperor and returned to the Imperial City. It fell to his son, Titus, to lead the remaining army in the assault on Jerusalem.

Titus attacks just after Passover in the year 70 CE, by which time Jerusalem's population had swelled to more than double its normal size with Jewish refugees from other besieged lands. Titus' forces battered the city with his catapults, which propel a rain of stone, iron and fire onto the population. By then, the city's defenders are weakened from hunger and perhaps even more so from internal strife. Even so, it takes Titus two months of intense fighting before he is able to breach the outer city walls reach the Temple Mount.

While the Romans are attacking the city on the outside, the Jews are waging a civil war inside. Forces of the various factions are occupying various parts of the city. Most importantly, the Sicarii and the Zealots have control of the Temple Mount. An unlikely alliance of Sadducees and Pharisees, two opposing political factions, makes up the bulk of the moderate forces which rule the rest of the city.

When the moderates attempt to remove the extremists from the Temple Mount, the leader of the Zealots, brings in non-Jewish mercenaries, the Idumeans, who slaughter the moderate Jews. The Zealots destroy the great storehouses of food so that the people would have no choice but to fight or starve.

With the food storehouses destroyed, famine breaks out in the city and desperate people try and sneak outside the walls to forage for food. Anyone that is caught by the Romans is immediately put to death via the standard Roman form of execution - crucifixion. So many die that the city is surrounded by thousands of crucified Jews.

*So the soldiers out of the wrath and hatred they bore the Jews, nailed those they caught, one after one way, and another after another, to the crosses, by way of jest; when their multitude was so great, that room was wanting for the crosses, and crosses wanting for the bodies. (Josephus, Wars 5.11.1)*

Meanwhile, the Romans continue their systematic destruction of the city's defenses, layer by layer, leading eventually to the destruction of the Temple by fire.

#### PERFORMANCE AND RITUAL AS RELIGIOUS RITE

There were four major celebrations, in honor of the Greek god Dionysus. Three of these celebrations--the *City Dionysia* in the spring and the *Lenia* and *Rural Dionysia* in the winter --would involve drama. One of the elements of these celebrations was the dithyramb, a choral ode song to the gods. Greek mythology is the legends and stories behind the Greek gods. The earliest Greek dramas, especially those by Aeschylus (525-456 BCE), drew their plots and characters from these myths.

In Jewish tradition, animal sacrifice could not take place outside of the Great Temple.

Those who lived in the diaspora, therefore, could not participate in ritual sacrifice unless they made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The Passover sacrifice was of special importance, as it commemorated the liberation from Egypt and the journey to Israel, the land which would once again be called home.

In its own way, our modern Passover Seder is a ritual performed in place of this sacrifice.

#### EXAGOGUE:

A play, of which we have 269 lines, likely no more than ¼ of its entire length - It was written by Ezekiel, probably in Alexandria, sometime during the second Century B.C.E. The piece is based upon the Exodus narrative, with Moses as the central figure. The 269 lines are not continuous, instead they are fragments taken from various points in the story. The drama is written in the style of a Greek tragedy, complete with backstory delivered as a monologue in the prologue and a Messenger telling of the climactic confrontation at the Red Sea. The fragments do not include any choral speech and many important plot points are missing. There are elements unusual to the traditional Jewish version of this narrative, inclusive of a reference to a Phoenix (which could possibly be regarded as the play's attempt to integrate other local mythology) and a dream in which Moses sees himself ascending to take his place on God's throne. The play (or, rather, its fragments) has never, as far as I can tell, had a modern presentation.

## THE PIECE:

theatre dybbuk will complete this fragmented work.

In between the fragments, in addition to possible dialogue and monologues in the style and spirit of the original, we may be confronted by bits of political and social considerations current to the time period. These can disrupt/inform upon the ritual being performed and send it in a new direction, requiring that the narrative speak to these concerns.

Also, a chorus will be added (there is evidence that the original likely included one). These choral elements could handle some of the interruptions, as mentioned above.

The chorus could also be used to offer counterpoints, existing outside of the play's narrative. If we go this route, in between the fragments, we would hear stories from today and throughout recorded history. These might include both personal tales from citizens and political speeches from leaders who are oriented towards and within multiple places and cultures.

These narratives would be from any persons who have dealt with being both related to, and removed from, their places of origin and/or their own cultures and histories.

The piece's physical vocabulary would incorporate both Jewish ritual gesture, movement related to Temple Sacrifice and stylization influenced by Greek Theatre practices.

Seven performers is an ideal number for this work. It will allow us to recall the common use of seven in Jewish belief and practice and give us an ample number of performers to create choral work. Seven, with its inherent inability to allow us to break into even groups, also creates a sense of dis-ease. All must shift constantly in order to have balance on stage.



and my mother took me into her arms.

The King's daughter said, "Woman, nurse this child,

And I will pay you for it."

And she named me Moses, because she 30

took me from the wet river bank.

And when the time of my infancy passed,

Mother brought me to the house of the princess,

she recounted all and talked to me

about my lineage and the gifts of God. 35

Therefore while I was in the time of youth,

she took it upon herself to give me a royal rearing and instruction

as if I were her own child.

And when I passed into adulthood,

I came out of the royal palace 40

(For my desire and kingly contrivances brought me out).

And I first saw two men violently scrapping,

one of them was a Hebrew, the other an Egyptian.

And seeing that we were alone with no one else around,

I rescued my brother, but I killed the other one. 45

I buried him in the sand, so that no one

might see and lay bare the murderous deed.

On the morrow once again I saw two men,

both were of the same race and they were fighting,

I said: "Why are your striking a weaker man?" 50

He responded, "Who made you our judge

and magistrate here? Will you kill me,

as you did that man yesterday?" I was afraid

and I said, "How did this become known?"

News of everything quickly reached to the king. 55

And Pharaoh thus sought to take my life.

When I heard this, I took flight from his presence

and now I have wandered to this foreign land.

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Moses: I had a vision of a throne at the top of Sinai.

It was so large that it reached the folds of heaven,

a man of noble birth sat upon it 70

having a crown on his head and holding a large scepter

in his left hand. With his right he motioned for me,

and I stood before the throne.

He gave me the scepter and he told me

to sit on the great throne. He gave me the royal crown 75

and then got off the throne,

and I looked upon the entire earth

and below the earth and above the sky.

A great number of stars fell at my feet,

and I counted all of them. 80

They went by me like a company of troops.

When I woke up from the dream, I was afraid.

Raguel: O stranger, God has given a good sign.

Would that I might live to see these things happen.

Then you will raise up a great throne 85

You will be a judge and lead men.

As for your vision of the entire inhabited earth,

and the things under it and those above the heaven of God:

You will behold the present, the past and the future.

The young artists of the Choir enter and start a rhythm.  
Then, that rhythm grows into a melody of journeys.  
From amongst the crowd, rises a person.  
The person is clothed in attire that feels both modern and timeless. She walks towards the stage, travel bag in hand.  
When she lands, she opens her bag, takes out a piece of fabric, adds it onto her attire. She also takes out a picture frame and looks at it, the photo it holds hidden from the audience.

JENNY

I stayed in my home.  
But outside my window, I could see my sisters  
My cousins  
My people  
Bruised, beaten and burned  
For believing as I do.  
There could be only one religion and it was not ours.  
I could not stay home any longer.  
I could not stay.

One by one, the other cast members, who we will now call the Chorus, arise from the audience and, carrying their bags, also make their way to the stage.  
When the Chorus lands on stage, they open their bags. Pull out pieces of fabric. Wrap them about themselves, adding onto their costumes, so that they all appear to be members of the same community, sharing an aesthetic.  
JENNY hands the picture frame to NICK.

NICK

A stranger  
I suddenly became.  
Behind me was a land that was my home.  
In front of me, nothing but the spray of sea  
Then, I was forced, in chains, into the bowels of the ship  
where it was dark  
I turned inward and there a light shone upon  
Images of those I had to leave behind  
Those who called me son  
Called me father  
Called me friend  
No one called me any of those anymore  
No one saw me. What would I be called when I reached beyond the water?  
How would I be seen?

NICK hands REBECCA the picture frame.

REBECCA

I landed upon the shore, my body broken and my spirit mending. I was still starving, but, I had escaped the blight and soon, I hoped, my belly would be full. All I had wanted was to feed my family, to live a quiet life. But, we Catholics cannot own our own land and no matter how hard we worked, we did not have enough. So, we fed upon potatoes, cheap and easy to grow. They would keep us secure. They would keep us whole. They would keep us.

REBECCA hands ROB the picture frame.

ROB

I will not go back. When the Treaty of Guadalupe was signed, this land, which was Mexico, was suddenly another place, another country. My sisters, my parents, and my brother were already here, for this is where they had made their homes, while I still lived across the newly formed border. I knew I must join them, trading loyalty to a place for loyalty to a family. Now, I will not go back.

ROB hands JONATHAN the picture frame.

JONATHAN

By any measure, our right to be here had been established. For years, my father worked on the transcontinental railroad, waiting to see his children. He bravely lead the way, risking his life so that we might be free. But then, the Congress decided there were too many of us and a law was passed. We could not come. Finally, through a mixture of cunning and courage, we found a way. Our father had died. We were too late.

JONATHAN hands JULIE the picture frame.

JULIE

Living here in the United States, I do not think of my mother. I was born in Soekaboemi, a little town on the Island of Java. World War II started and we escaped to my grandparent's plantation, thinking there would be no violence there. But, that is where they picked my mom up, shoved a gun in her face and put her we know not where. And we could say nothing. Our standing was low and their power great. That is when we decided to leave.

JULIE hands DIANA the picture frame.

DIANA

Our apartment is just down the road. I don't remember coming here from there. One day, there was a knock on the door, and I answered it, and there was this man standing there, brown clothes, as though the color had been leached out of them.

DIANA

(cont'd)

My uncle lived with us from that time on. Whenever there was a knock on that same door, he would say in his Persian inflected English, "Do not answer it. They are coming for me, as they will come for you."

ALL

We are many scattered upon the land  
We are many gathered upon the sand.  
We are many becoming as one.  
We are one people of Midian.

JENNY

When Jacob left Canaan land  
he went down to Egypt having seventy  
souls with him and begot afterward many  
people who were abused and oppressed,  
They had seen suffering  
at the hands of wicked men and mighty forces.

NICK

King Pharaoh, seeing the Hebrew race growing,  
devised much treachery against them,  
torturing men with brickwork and  
the burden of building city towers  
by labor from ill-fated brothers.

REBECCA

Then Pharaoh called for the Hebrew sons  
to be tossed into the deep-flowing water.  
One mother hid her son for three months, but no longer  
could he stay hidden, so she robed him,  
and abandoned him to float down a treacherous river.

ROB

Thereafter the daughter of the king with her maidens  
came down to wash clean her youthful skin.  
And at once when she saw the child, knowing that he was a Hebrew,  
she took him into her arms.

JONATHAN

And then his sister Miriam, who was watching nearby,  
ran to this daughter of the King and said  
“I will find a nurse quickly for this child from among his people?”

JULIE

And soon, his very own mother held him.  
The King’s daughter said, “Woman, nurse this child,  
And I will pay you for it.”

DIANA holds the picture frame in hand. She turns it  
around to face the audience, revealing that it holds a  
photo of a mask.

DIANA

And she named him Moses, because she  
took him from the drowning water.

Each person gets the frame as they speak.

JULIE

And she named him Moses,

JONATHAN

And she named him Moses,

ROB

And she named him Moses,

REBECCA

And she named him Moses,

NICK

And she named him Moses,

The frame is handed to JENNY who puts it aside and  
when she turns around, she is wearing the mask that was  
featured in the photo.

JENNY

And she named me Moses  
Because she took me from the drowning water.