

Moshe Killing the Egyptian – Artwork



ויד משה את המצרי

Arthur Szyk



Moses Kills the Egyptian

Julius Schnorr

Moshe Killing the Egyptian in Art

Introduction

The story of Moshe's killing of the Egyptian in Shemot 2:11-12 serves to introduce the reader to the adult Moshe, and helps shape one's initial perceptions of the leader. Thus, commentators, artists amongst them, have much to say about the incident, questioning Moshe's motivation, justification, and the details of the story itself. The contrast between the two artworks displayed here, the image from Arthur Szyk's Haggadah (1932-1938)^[1] and the engraving from Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld's Picture Bible (1851-1860)^[2] serves to highlight many of the issues and ambiguities of the narrative.

Contrasting Images

Szyk

Szyk's vibrantly colored illustration focuses on just Moshe and the Egyptian taskmaster. The only hint to the beaten Israelite is the whip still clenched in the Egyptian's hand. Moshe is centrally placed, with his club raised against the taskmaster who, in turn, cowers on the floor. The two figures are dressed similarly, and had it not been for the headdress of each, one might not have been able to distinguish friend from foe. In the background, two heads peep from behind a building and watch Moshe's actions.

Schnorr

In contrast to Szyk, Schnorr chooses to depict all three characters of the story. The Egyptian stands in the middle, not just beating but actually choking the Hebrew slave who kneels on the ground, struggling for breath. Moshe balances the image, standing on the other side of the taskmaster. As he unsheathes his sword, he glances behind him, presumably checking for onlookers. Schnorr distinguishes between the statuses of the characters through their clothing. The slave is barely dressed, the taskmaster wears a tunic and hat but stands barefooted, while Moshe is fully garbed and wearing sandals. In the top left background one can see Israelite slaves at work, and a lone figure (unseen by Moshe) peeking out from behind a building, observing the scene.

Relationship to the Biblical Text

The artists' choices reflect certain ambiguities in the Biblical text and different possible interpretive stances:

Cruel Taskmaster or Potential Killer?

The beaten Hebrew does not appear at all in Szyk's image; according to his rendering, Moshe is not trying to stop the beating but rather reacting after the fact. In Schnorr's woodcut, on the other hand, the Hebrew figures prominently, and surprisingly, he is being strangled and not merely whipped. Does the Biblical text

allow for such a reading? Was the Egyptian simply a cruel taskmaster or should he be viewed as a "רודף" (one chasing another to take his life)? The question depends on how the word "מכה" is used in Tanakh. Does it always mean to smite or can it also take on the added connotation of to kill? This difference is crucial for understanding Moshe's actions. Was he simply avenging an unjust beating or was he intervening in medias res, trying to save the life of the Hebrew? For a full discussion, see [Was Moshe a Murderer?](#)

The Witnesses

Schnorr depicts only one onlooker to Moshe's actions. His ethnicity is obscure and a case could be made to identify him as either Israelite or Egyptian. Szyk, in contrast, paints two people whose head coverings would seem to classify them as Hebrews. Which rendering is closer to the description in Sefer Shemot? We are actually not given any clues in the chapter as to the number, nationality or identity of the person/s who observed Moshe and later reported the deed to Paroh. Though one might have thought that it would be an Egyptian, [Shemot Rabbah](#) identifies the talebearers as fellow Hebrews, Datan and Aviram, which would fit well with Szyk's portrayal.^[3]

Choice of Weapon

In Szyk's Haggadah Moshe wields a club, while in Schnorr's image he holds a sword. Moshe's choice of weapon is not specified in the story; we are simply told "וַיִּהְיֶה אֶת הַמַּצְרִי"^[4]. The connotation of the word "וַיִּהְיֶה" is ambiguous. Did Moshe intend merely to hit the Egyptian or was he dealing him a deathblow?^[5] See [Was Moshe a Murderer?](#)

Moshe's Identity

While Szyk chooses to dress Moshe in garb similar to the Egyptian whom he is striking, Schnorr sets Moshe apart both from the Hebrew slaves and from the taskmaster, adorning him with a full cloak and thus marking him as one from a higher class. The different portrayals make one question both how Moshe viewed himself and how he was perceived by others at this stage of the narrative. Did Moshe identify himself as Egyptian or Jew? Were his actions motivated by a feeling of brotherhood or just a strong sense of justice? Did anyone else know he was Jewish or had he been fully integrated into the royal family? See [Moshe's Character](#).

Moshe's Age

Both artists render Moshe as a man in his mid-twenties or thirties. Sefer Shemot, though, leaves his age open to question. We are simply told, "וַיִּגְדֵּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא אֶל אֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם" which allows for a full range of possibilities. In our story, was Moshe a somewhat impetuous youth or was he a more experienced adult, acting not out of rashness but with full knowledge of his actions and their consequences? The question of age bears on later stories as well. How long did Moshe sojourn in Midyan before returning to Egypt? Had he travelled elsewhere en route? See [Chronology of Shemot 2-4](#) for more.

[1] Arthur Szyk (1894-1951) was a Jewish artist, originally from Poland. He worked on his Haggadah during the period of the rise of the Nazi party, and he referenced the political situation in the work, casting the Egyptians as Nazis, drawing the wicked son with a Hitler-like mustache, and the like. Many of these overt allusions were later removed from the images. Recently a new edition of the Haggadah has been produced and images from it can be viewed [here](#).

[2] Schnorr (1794-1872) was a German painter of the Nazarene movement. The engraving was one of over 200 woodcuts he made for a Picture Bible, commissioned in England.

[3] See also [Talmud Bavli Masekhet Nedarim](#) and [Shemot Rabbah](#) which identify the two fighting Hebrews as Datan and Aviram.

[4] Various opinions regarding the method of killing are brought by the various Midrashim and commentators. Some suggest that Moshe hit the Egyptian with his fist, while others propose that that he used a sword or a rock. Yet others say that he cursed him using the Name of Hashem.

[5] Compare with "Cruel Taskmaster or Potential Killer?" above.

Moshe Killing the Egyptian in Art

Sources

BIBLICAL TEXTS

שמות ב': י"א-ט"ו

(יא) וַיְהִי בַיָּמִים הָהֵם וַיִּגְדֹּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא אֶל אָחִיו וַיִּרְא בְּסַבְּלֹתָם וַיִּרְא אִישׁ מִצְרִי מַכֶּה אִישׁ עִבְרִי מֵאָחִיו. (יב) וַיִּפֹּן כֹּה וְכֹה וַיִּרְא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ וַיִּדַּךְ אֶת הַמִּצְרִי וַיִּטְמְנֵהוּ בַּחֹל. (יג) וַיֵּצֵא בַּיּוֹם הַשֵּׁנִי וְהַיְהִי שְׁנֵי אַנְשִׁים עִבְרִים נָצִים וַיֹּאמֶר לְרָשָׁע לָמָּה תִּכֶּה רַעֲד. (יד) וַיֹּאמֶר מִי שְׂמָדָ לְאִישׁ שֶׁר וְשִׁפְט עָלֵינוּ הִלְהַרְגְנִי אַתָּה אֲמַר כֹּאשֶׁר הִרְגִּית אֶת הַמִּצְרִי וַיִּירָא מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר אָכֵן נוֹדַע הַדָּבָר. (טו) וַיִּשְׁמַע פְּרַעֲה אֶת הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה וַיִּבְקֹשׁ לְהַרְגֵּ אֶת מֹשֶׁה וַיִּבְרַח מֹשֶׁה מִפְּנֵי פְרַעֲה וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּאֶרֶץ מִדְּיָן וַיֵּשֶׁב עַל הַבְּאֵר.

CLASSICAL TEXTS

תלמוד בבלי נדרים ס"ד:

אמר רב חסדא, דאמר קרא כי מתו כל האנשים, והא מיתה דנולד הוא, מכאן שפותחין בנולד. ורבנן מאי טעמייהו? קסברי: הנהו מי מיית? והא אמר ר' יוחנן משום ר' שמעון בן יוחי: כל מקום שנאמר נצים ונצבים - אינן אלא דתן ואבירם!

שמות רבה א': כ"ט

ויך את המצרי, במה הרגו ר' אביתר אמר הכהו באגרוף, וי"א מגריפה של טיט נטל והוציא את מוחו, רבנן אמרי הזכיר עליו את השם והרגו שנאמר הלהרגני אתה אומר, ויטמנהו בחול, שלא היה שם אלא ישראל טמנו בפניהן של ישראל שנמשלו לחול, אמר להם אתם משולים כחול מה חול הזה אדם נוטלו מכאן ונותנו לכאן ואין קולו נשמע כך יטמן הדבר הזה ביניכם ולא ישמע, וכן אתה מוצא שלא נשמע הדבר אלא ע"י העברים שנא' ויצא ביום השני והנה שני אנשים עברים נצים, זה דתן ואבירם קראם נצים על שם סופם, הם הם שאמרו דבר זה הם היו שהותירו מן המן, הם היו שאמרו (במדבר יד) נתנה ראש ונשובה מצרימה, הם שהמרו על ים סוף, ד"א נצים שהיו מתכוונין להרוג זה את זה, כמה דתימא (דברים כה) כי ינצו אנשים יחדו, ואמר ר"א במצות של מיתה הכתוב מדבר, ויאמר לרשע למה תכה רעך הכית לא נאמר אלא תכה, מכאן שמשעה שאדם מרים ידו להכות חבירו אף על פי שלא הכהו נקרא רשע, רעך, שהוא רשע כיוצא בך מלמד ששניהם רשעים.

שמות רבה א': ל"א

וישמע פרעה, שעמדו דתן ואבירם והלשינו עליו, ויבקש להרוג את משה, שלח פרעה והביאו סייף שאין כמותה ונתנו יי פעמים על צוארו ונעשה צוארו של משה כעמוד השן ולא הזיקתו שנאמר צוארך כמגדל השן, ויברח

