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Moses—Henry George’s Inspiration

By AHARON H. SHAPIRO*

ABSTRACT. *Henry George* delivered his famous “Moses” lecture in 1878, just one year prior to the publication of his masterwork, *Progress and Poverty*. The many parallels in the thinking of both George and Moses suggest that George may have been greatly inspired by Moses. George appreciated Moses’ concern with improving this world rather than the *hereafter*. Moses, like George, advocated a minimum role for *government*. Moses proposed a thoroughly equitable distribution of the *land* which would generate fair *taxes* and avoid the exploitation so denounced by George. *Land accumulation* by the few would be prevented by requiring the return of *ownership* to the original owners every fifty years. George, the *humanitarian*, is also sympathetic with Mosaic *reforms* restoring human dignity such as the cancellation of oppressive *debt* every seventh year, and relief from drudgery every *sabbath day* and *sabbatical year*.

I

The “Essence” of George’s Social Philosophy

IN JUNE, 1878, Henry George delivered his “Moses” lecture to the Young Men’s Hebrew Association of San Francisco. His address was later repeated in Scotland, England, and New York.¹ According to Edward J. Rose, the “Moses” sermon expresses the essence of George’s social philosophy. It was delivered while George was in the midst of committing to paper the already well formulated views of his masterwork *Progress and Poverty*.²

George was highly critical of contemporary institutionalized religion. He felt that it subordinated the pressing needs of the here and now to the less relevant concerns of the hereafter. He contended that present day Christianity had strayed from the original social objectives of the religion’s founders. George argued that “the Christianity that ignores this social responsibility has really forgotten the teachings of Christ.”³

In contrast, George finds great kinship in the pristine and untainted teachings of the Hebrew codifier, Moses.⁴ George demonstrates in his “Moses” lecture how the social program of Moses, the emancipator, is consonant with his own philosophy and economics. Like Moses, George had hoped to set free a people whom he considered to be in modern industrial bondage.

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This article will attempt to enhance the reader's understanding of how the teachings of the Lawgiver, Moses, served as a major inspiration to George's own thinking. We shall find that three aspects of Moses' personality impressed George: Moses the revolutionary against the conventional wisdom, Moses the political reformer, Moses the social and economic reformer.

II

Moses, The Revolutionary

WE START WITH GEORGE'S OBSERVATION that the Hebrews populated Egypt for perhaps two centuries and should have totally assimilated the views of their taskmasters. Yet, says George, "What is remarkable is the dissimilarity," After all, was not Egypt the dominant civilization of the world "ere Abraham looked upon them"?⁵

We might add that even Patriarch Abraham, the first Hebrew, on his visit to Egypt had been repelled by Egyptian immorality. He was compelled to deny that Sarah was his wife. He feared that he would be murdered since it was common practice for Egyptians to abduct the wives of strangers for sexual purposes.⁶

The followers of Moses, however, rebelled against both the chains and the moral values of their taskmasters. In reproach of Egypt's immorality, Moses found it necessary to remind his flock, "After the doings of the land of Egypt in which you dwelled, shall you not do."⁷

George sympathizes with Moses' problem in dealing with the masses. After leaving Egypt, the people began to succumb to their former Egyptian influences and "the constant disposition of accustomed ideas to reassert themselves in the minds of the people."⁸ The Israelites troubled Moses with their occasional backsliding. They lapsed into a form of Egyptian idolatry with the worship of the golden calf.⁹

Moses gains great respect in the eyes of Henry George for rejecting God's offer to replace the existing Israelites with a new nation composed of Moses and his descendants. This is what George means when he speaks of Moses "subordinating to the good of his people the natural disposition to found a dynasty which in his case would have been so easy."¹⁰ Moses declines the Divine offer in favor of preserving the present, albeit sinful, people, and receives George's praise for "his unselfish desire to make humanity better, happier, nobler."¹¹ Nor is Moses discouraged by the whining of a mob that complains "who will give us meat? How we remember the fish that we ate in Egypt at no expense."¹²

Moses led the Israelites to renounce all the conventional mores of Egypt, the

idolatry, the witchcraft and the sexual promiscuity.¹³ Egypt must be rejected as a land identified with disease.¹⁴

Also repugnant to Moses was the Egyptian ideology that chose to enslave live men in order to build temples and pyramids to honor dead men. Here, George is most perceptive in noting that the Pentateuch of Moses shows almost no explicit concern about afterdeath.⁵

George is impressed with Moses' interest in the living compared to Egyptian involvement with the dead. George comments that anyone can locate the lavish tombs of the ancient Pharaohs even in this day. In contrast, Moses arranged for his own discreet burial so that "no man knoweth of his sepulcher unto this day."¹⁶ George could have also noted that Moses was buried outside the promised land of Canaan; nor were his remains ever transported to, nor any tomb erected in, Canaan. Again, possibly this was intended to encourage reverence for the living teachings of Moses and not merely the deceased personality, Moses.

George sees Moses as the ultimate crusader who will create a new "social state in which deep degrading poverty should be unknown."¹⁷ Does not George identify with Moses who expresses his love for humanity even as he scolds them for their bad conduct? We find *Leviticus* 19 lists an inventory of abominations associated with Egypt, yet concludes on a note of compassion for mankind. Moses declares that a major lesson must be learned from the Egyptian experience. One must love even the stranger, "for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."¹⁸

George and Moses, two revolutionaries with similar goals. To paraphrase George, they both sought to eliminate poverty-driven crime, justice for the rich only, governments made up of politicians who rob the people, hereditary or class distinctions, want in the midst of plenty, and crime that festers even in the shadow of the church.¹⁹

III

Moses, The Political Reformer

GEORGE SPEAKS of the Mosaic state as "a commonwealth of the individual—a commonwealth whose ideal it was that every man should sit under his own vine and fig-tree, with none to vex him or make him afraid."²⁰ While the vine and fig tree illustration is actually post-Moses Scripture,²¹ George is fundamentally correct with respect to the Biblical emphasis on individual freedom. For George, all government is a threat. "We pin our faith to universal suffrage, yet the control of public affairs is passing into the hands of a class of professional politicians, and our governments are becoming a means for the robbery of the people."²²

Moses, too envisions only a minimal role for government. A judicial system

is required since disputes about law and practice are unavoidable. However, there is hardly any need for a legislature since the Divine code is eternal and all comprehensive. The executive or enforcement agent would effectively be the threat of Divine punishment, with perhaps a little help from officers of the court system.²³ Of course, for George, the smaller the government, the less likely it will indulge in levying inappropriate taxes.

Only with great reluctance does Moses condone the possible introduction of a monarchy in the future. The appointment of a king is viewed as an undesirable accommodation to the pressures of the populace. The masses, if they became anxious over national defense might demand, "I will set a king over me like all the nations that are round about me."²⁴ For George, the monarchy would be a regression to Egyptian practices. He contends, "the monarchical principle shows itself . . . as the far reaching influence of the great leader is somewhat spent."²⁵

It is certain that both Moses, and much later, the prophet Samuel, thought of the rule of a king as a poor alternative to a nation of free individuals. They preferred to rely on God who, in time of need, would send a "judge" (not a king). The "judge", with the help of Heaven would repel Israel's enemies.²⁶ Surely George would support Samuel's admonition that the king will "take your sons . . . for himself and his chariots," "he will take your fields," "you shall be his servants," "and you shall cry out in that day because of your king which you shall have chosen; and the Lord will not hear you in that day."²⁷

Indeed, warns Moses, if Israel must have a king, his sovereignty should be severely limited. He must completely abide by the same Mosaic code incumbent upon all other citizens. He is required to write, by his own hand, a copy of the Books of Moses. This scroll of the Torah he must carry with him at all times. Furthermore, he must study the Laws of Moses "all the days of his life so that he may fear the Lord his God, to keep all the words of this law and these statutes, to do them."²⁸

The king is to be chosen by God (a lottery) and not in the fashion of other nations, that simply select the most powerful of their nobility who may have acquired his status by violence. He is also forbidden the self indulgences of most monarchs including the acquisition of large harems of wives, stocks of silver and gold, or large stables of horses for military adventures.²⁹

It took more than two hundred years after the death of Moses before the prophet Samuel finally succumbed to the insistent demands of the people and agreed to anoint King Saul. Shortly afterwards, the selection was reconfirmed by lottery and Divine oracle.³⁰

Despite all the restrictions imposed upon the monarch to safeguard against

tyranny, neither Moses, nor Samuel, nor George, approves any system which makes "the few the masters of the many."³¹

IV

Moses—The Economic and Social Reformer

HENRY GEORGE PRAISES MOSES for having discovered the root of all economic evil, namely, "possession by a class, of the land upon which and from which the whole people must live." In fact, George blames the Egyptian enslavement on domination by greedy landowners.³² It is interesting to speculate that Israel's own ancestor, Joseph, the chief minister of the Pharaoh, may have been the cause of Israel's bondage. Two hundred years before the Exodus, was it not Joseph who cunningly bought up and monopolized much of the land in behalf of the Pharaoh during the seven years of famine?³³

But Moses now intends to prevent exploitation by the voracious landowner. He offers an outline for a highly equitable distribution of the land in the soon to be conquered Canaan. The land would be divided by lottery, which implies that equity would be assured by infallible Divine determination rather than compromised by human error. The acreage would be allocated on the basis of family size.³⁴ Since we find almost no complaints about the fairness of the distribution voiced later in the book of Joshua, it is reasonable to assume that heed was paid to the relative fertility of different parcels of land, with all allotments equal in productive value. In the ideal, the Mosaic distribution would appear as an attempt to avoid the differential and monopoly rents which in George's view are the source of most poverty and the impediment of much progress.

If, for any reason, land should accumulate temporarily in the hands of the few, there was a remedy. The land would eventually revert to the original small landholders at least once each 50 years, on the Jubilee year.³⁵ Any tendency towards large and permanent accumulations of land quickly receive Divine rebuke with the words "And the land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is Mine; for ye are but strangers and settlers with Me."³⁶

While Henry George approves of Moses' attempt at equitable distribution, he suggests that the techniques "may not be suitable for every time and people."³⁷ Undoubtedly, George would prefer his own solution of taxing away the exploitable surplus.

Scholars interpret Moses' remonstrations against moving a neighbor's boundary markers to be more than a mere reiteration of the general prohibition against theft.³⁸ The Mosaic code is not given to superfluous repetitions of the Commandments. A scrutiny of the verse against moving the boundary "which they of old time have set, in thine inheritance which thou shalt inherit, in the land

which the Lord thy God giveth thee to possess it" indicates stern Divine disapproval of any attempts to upset the original equitable land distribution.

To further protect the many from the few, Moses did not give the Levitical tribes an equal share of the land. The tribe of Levi and the sub-group Kohein constituted the priestly class, ministered to the religious needs of the people and were able to wield considerable influence. Despite their leadership role, they were given only small parcels of land and could live only in certain assigned towns and houses. George seems to have overlooked that Moses was himself a Levite, who by his own decree had renounced land ownership and economic power for himself and his heirs.

It follows that George's major obstacle to economic progress, namely "unearned" rental income, is unlikely to manifest itself in the ideal community of Moses. Like George, Moses permits nominal ownership of land. But also like George, Moses considers land ownership more like a Divine loan, given equally to all and not intended for monopoly exploitation.

However, even Henry George would admit that the total problem of poverty is not solved by the elimination of unearned rental income alone. Poverty can also arise in an agrarian society from the vicissitudes of nature such as drought and infestation; in an urban society from disease, accident or any of the multitude of misfortunes that plague human beings.

The Mosaic code is also much concerned with this type of poverty. Deuteronomy anguishes that "the poor shall never cease out of the land."³⁹ So does Henry George over the New Testament equivalent, "the poor ye have always with ye."⁴⁰ George severely criticizes those who quote these passages as a means of evading social responsibility. He would have strengthened his argument if he had noted that Moses responded in the same verse with a strong demand for charity: "thou shalt open thy hand unto the poor and needy brother."⁴¹

Moses, however, does not rely on free-will offerings. He institutes an entire code of compulsory taxes, enforced by Divine wrath and the religious courts.⁴²

George notes the Mosaic obligation "for the reaper to leave something for the gleaner."⁴³ But Moses had also demanded annual tithes and other gifts for the landless Levite and other poor. Failure to observe the tithes would invoke not only severe Divine punishment but in most cases would render the grain religiously inedible and consequently unsalable. The Moses anti-poverty program earns George's praise as the program which instructs, "Do your duty in this world that you may be happier and the world better." In contrast, George condemns those who maintain, "Leave the world to itself that you may save your own soul."⁴⁴

Would George consider the Mosaic tithes to be undesirable taxes on produc-

tion? Not likely. In Moses' purely agrarian economy all rent differentials have been eliminated by an ideal land distribution. In theory all families would produce equal output, hence, taxes on output would fall equally upon all inhabitants. Thus tithes should satisfy George's canons of good taxation.

Another institution admired by George⁴⁵ includes the remission of all debts every seventh (sabbatical) year.⁴⁶ While cancellation of debt may be impractical in a modern society, the idea of abolishing inescapable grinding debt is laudable.

Assuredly, the seventh year abolition of debts demanded of lenders much faith in fellow human beings and in Providence. It is not easy for a lender to subscribe to "beware that there be not in thy wicked heart, saying, The seventh year of release is at hand and thine eye be evil against thy poor brother, and thou lendest him nought; and he cry unto the Lord against thee, and it be a sin unto thee. Thou shalt surely give him, and thine heart shall not be grieved when thou givest unto him because . . . the Lord shall bless thee in all thy works."⁴⁷

V

Conclusion

AS EXPECTED, human faith faltered during the post-biblical years. Hardship was created by the reluctance of lenders to issue loans at the approach of the Sabbatical year. An official circumvention of the sabbatical cancellation was finally devised in the first century B.C. Still, one may remark that our present laws allowing for bankruptcy and a fresh start are not extremely remote from Moses' cancellation rule.

George also congratulates Moses for introducing the Sabbath day. He argues that the day made workers more productive, not less, and "not merely happier but richer."⁴⁸ It should be stressed that this invention of Judaism was unique. To this writer's knowledge, a weekly day of rest for all (even slaves and animals) has been practiced only by Judaism and its daughter religions of Christianity and Islam. Surcease is granted to unending drudgery, and a revival of the spirit is generated by the day of rest. George calls attention to a similar service provided by Moses' sabbatical year during which all farming ceases.⁴⁹ An entire year is devoted to refreshment of the mind, the soul, the very earth itself.⁵⁰

Henry George has focused on the implications of the Sabbath day, the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee Year. These three periods have a common theme, namely, *restitutio ad integrum*, or restoring society to the original wholesome condition that Moses sought to initiate.

The Jubilee restored the original equal claim on the land to all persons. George would do this with his single tax on land.

The Sabbatical year restored many people's equal claim on wealth. George of course ascribed much of the prevailing inequality to landowners' exploitation which his single tax would eliminate.

The Sabbath day and the Sabbatical year, with their cessation of labor restored equal dignity to all human beings. George has suggested, in lieu of a Sabbatical year, relief from labor in the form of a shorter working day.⁵¹

Can we not conclude from this review that the "Moses" essay is much more than an eloquent sermon subordinate to George's more extensive writings? Is it not really essential Henry George? George delivered his Moses lecture in 1878 and published his masterwork, *Progress and Poverty* one year later. In preparation for his speech, George studied and analyzed the ideas of Moses which helped to formulate his later writings. Without doubt Moses of the Bible helped to make George the political, social and economic reformer that he became.

In the spirit of appreciation for George the humanitarian, this writer would say that from Moses to "Moses," there is none like Henry George.

Notes

1. The "Moses" address is found in *The Complete Works of Henry George* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1904, Vol. 8). It is also available as a pamphlet from the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, publisher of the works of Henry George.

2. Edward J. Rose, *Henry George* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1968.)

3. From an address "Thou Shalt Not Steal" before the Anti-Poverty Society, May 8, 1887, in *Complete Works*, Vol. 8, p. 252. For other citations on George's views on religion, see George Raymond Geiger, *The Philosophy of Henry George* (New York: Macmillan, 1933), pp. 336-80.

4. For additional interpretations of George's "Moses," see Rose, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-59 and Charles Albro Barker, *Henry George* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), pp. 248-51.

5. "Moses," p. 8.

6. *Genesis* 12:12.

7. *Leviticus* 18:3.

8. "Moses," p. 11.

9. *Exodus*, 32:10.

10. "Moses," p. 23.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Numbers* 11:4-5.

13. *Leviticus* 18:13.

14. *Deuteronomy* 7:15.

15. "Moses," p. 13. References to the hereafter in the Five Books of Moses are vague such as that Enoch "walked with God, and he was not, for God took him." (*Genesis* 5:24); or allusion to Sheol, a place where the soul lived on in an ethereal shadowy existence (*Genesis*, 37:35 and *Numbers*, 16:33).

16. "Moses," p. 24, with a quote from *Deuteronomy*, 34:37. Note that the *Pentateuch's* primary concern with modifying human behavior in this world, does not diminish the importance of the concept of the hereafter and immortality in Judaism. See *Encyclopedia Judaica*, "Afterlife," (New York: Macmillan, 1971).

17. "Moses," p. 16.
18. *Leviticus*, 19:34; also see *Exodus*, 22:20 and 23:9.
19. "Moses," p. 17–18.
20. "Moses," p. 12.
21. *I-Kings*, 4:25.
22. "Moses," p. 17.
23. *Exodus*, 18:21.
24. *Deuteronomy*, 17:14–20.
25. "Moses," p. 11.
26. *The Book of Judges* describes the episodes of temporary leaders, called judges, such as Jephthah, Samson, Deborah, Gideon and others who arose during the two centuries between Moses and Samuel.
27. *I-Samuel*, 8:11–18.
28. *Deuteronomy*, 17:14–20
29. *Ibid.*
30. *I-Samuel*, 10.
31. "Moses," p. 19.
32. "Moses," p. 18.
33. *Genesis*, 47:20.
34. *Numbers*, 33:54.
35. *Leviticus*, 25:13.
36. *Leviticus*, 25:23.
37. "Moses," p. 19.
38. *Deuteronomy*, 19:24, and the comments of Bachya Abrabanel.
39. *Deuteronomy*, 15:11.
40. A. C. Auchmuty in *The Economics and Philosophy of Henry George* (London, 1980) p. 82, quotes from George's *Social Problems*.
41. *Deuteronomy*, 15:11.
42. Aharon Shapiro, "The Poverty Program of Judaism," *Review of Social Economy*, September, 1971.
43. "Moses," p. 12.
44. "Moses," p. 15.
45. "Moses," p. 12.
46. *Deuteronomy*, 15.
47. *Deuteronomy*, 15:8–9.
48. "Moses," p. 20.
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Leviticus*, 25.
51. "Moses," p. 20.

The Latest Technological Revolution

A STUDY by the U.S. Office of Technology Assessment reports that about 40 percent of all new investment in plant and equipment in the United States now goes to purchase information technology—computers, telecommunications de-