

ISRAEL AT SINAI

A TWO-ACT PLAY ABOUT A SEMINAL EVENT
OF HUMAN HISTORY

BY

JOHANNES ALLGAIER

COLLEGE OF NEW CALEDONIA



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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Jochanam, One of the Elders of Israel

Anna, His Wife

Aaron, Brother of Moses

Joseph, an Attractive Youth

Elders of Israel

Levites

Bezalel.....	}	Artists
Aholiab.....		

Men and Women of the People of Israel

Moses the Prophet

ACT I

SCENE 1

An Egyptian dream landscape by night, with pyramids in the distance. Jochanam lies prostrate before a draped mirror, struggling unsuccessfully to get to his feet. There is the sound of a trumpet getting closer.

JOCHANAM. Oh for a glimpse of Thy face, oh Lord. For I cannot love what my eyes can't behold.

SCENE 2

Darkness. A child crying, gradually winning out over sound of trumpet. Jochanam is awakening in his tent, shown open toward audience, Anna busying herself with her child.

ANNA. *[Sings Hebrew lullaby. Child falls asleep.]*

JOCHANAM. *[Gets up and beholds child]* Thou art indeed just, oh Lord.
[Sits down in troubled contemplation.]

ANNA. Don't be afraid. The Lord has promised us that He will take away all sickness out of our midst if we keep His Covenant. He will not let our first-born son fall prey to the demons of sickness.

JOCHANAM. He killed the first-born of Egypt.

ANNA. [*Aroused*] Man, don't you know that the Egyptians are the enemies of the Lord? He killed their first-born to break their stubborn hearts.

JOCHANAM. It is said that he made them stubborn.

ANNA. [*After a moment's thought*] The greater to reveal His might. [*In tears*] Your troubled mind frightens me.

JOCHANAM. [*Comforting her*] If He didn't want us to use our mind, He wouldn't haven given us one.

ANNA. [*Child cries again; she escapes his embrace to comfort child, who soon falls asleep again*] Oh Jochanam, you may keep His Covenant or you may reject the Lord. It is up to you.

JOCHANAM. Was it up to Pharaoh? Maybe the Lord made him stubborn.

ANNA. [*Beholds child and cries.*]

JOCHANAM. But I love him -- because I can see his face. And I love you also [*embraces her*] -- because I can see your face. And what I see is purity and innocence and love, so much love, not of self, but of our child -- and of me, unworthy as I am, because I cannot forget myself.

ANNA. Oh Jochanam, [*embraces him*] the Lord has promised deliverance to those who keep their faith with Him.

JOCHANAM. Faith? If only it was faith. But it's certainty. He has chosen to reveal Himself to Israel. He doesn't show His face -- but not to let us doubt Him. We must either accept or reject Him. For us there can be no in-between. It's either -- living for Him, or it's death. Anna, I want to -- I *have* to live a little for myself.

ANNA. You mean you want to be selfish?

JOCHANAM. Selfish? If I am to give of myself to you, I must first *have* myself. I can't give you something I don't have. If my self belongs to God ---

ANNA. When will you think you have enough of yourself to start giving?
-- Oh Jochanam, quit these musings. You think too much.

JOCHANAM. And how do you quit thinking?

ANNA. Are you asking a woman? -- By working, by being up the first in the morning and the last at night, by giving of myself so that you can think about giving of yourself. Try mending the tent instead.

JOCHANAM. All right, I'm selfish. But it's -- a selfishness unto death. I sometimes get sick of my very life. I have you, and I have him [*points to child*], and I still get sick of my life -- because -- because I can't be like God. Yes, Anna, I can think of it, like our first parents, and because I can think of it, I want it. No, I can't stop thinking. Once you start, you're stuck with it -- for life. [*Looking at child*] Oh God, forgive my stubbornness. Accept this humble gift of our first-born. Look after him as though he were Thy child rather than mine.

ANNA. Our child will live. He will grow to love the Lord.

JOCHANAM. With you -- I too can be a child again.

ANNA. The Lord wants us to be like children again, but only you can make this choice.

JOCHANAM. I'll make it -- with you. Alone we are nothing -- incomplete. [*More passionate*] Take me away from myself -- deliver me -- let me be like you.

ANNA. [*Extricating herself*] Not now, Jochanam. The Lord is about to do great things for His people. You have seen the fire and the smoke on the mountain, you have heard the Lord's voice in the thunder. He who brought us out of Egypt bids you not to go

near a woman now.

JOCHANAM. Out of Egypt -- into the desert.

The approaching morning reveals other tents in the vicinity. Aaron, tall, ascetic, distinguished by priestly dress and beard, approaches the tent and enters. Jochanam and Anna rise and show their respect.

AARON. The anguish of your soul has brought me here. Is the glory of the Lord as we see it revealed each day not enough for you, my son?

JOCHANAM. Father, mortal eyes are blinded by too much glory. Tell me how my soul can face that glory and not burn. Tell me how I can make a choice -- except one -- in the face of the Almighty who reveals Himself to us each day. Tell me how in the face of Him Who governs all I'm not reduced to -- nothing.

AARON. *[Affected by Jochanam's speech]* When my brother Moses saw the Egyptian strike the Hebrew, such thoughts did not occur to him. He only wanted to help, and to do this he made a choice for the Lord of Justice and Mercy, in Whose name he killed the Egyptian bastard. And the Lord of Justice and Mercy called upon Moses to be His prophet. Henceforth all men of good will are to be His subjects, rather than Pharaoh's. They are to be ruled by Justice and Mercy, rather than by Pharaoh's whip. -- Look at your son. I hear he's not well. How can you look at him and not call upon the Lord of Justice -- and Mercy?

JOCHANAM. *[Bending over the sleeping child]* Oh my son, for you I too will make a choice for the Lord. For you I will sacrifice myself, for without you my life will have lost its meaning.

AARON. For your son only?

JOCHANAM. I mustn't always think of myself, my wife tells me.

AARON. The Lord would rather have your love than your fear. -- Fear the Lord then, if you can't love Him -- yet.

[Laying his hands on the kneeling Jochanam] Oh Lord, I thank Thee that Thou hast brought about this man's repentance. I thank Thee that Thou hast shown to mortal eyes the meaning of this child's sickness *[at these words, Jochanam raises his humbly bowed head and looks Aaron in the eye]*, for all ways lead to good, even if mortal eyes are confounded by them. I give Thee praise, oh Lord, for making him see the unworthiness of his desires and the glory of Thy ways.

[To Jochanam] So must all Israel prepare for opening its heart to the Lord, Who has led the people out of bondage to the freedom of His Justice, while my brother is upon the mountain speaking to God. In the fullness of time he will return, bearing the tokens of God's holy Covenant. Woe to the man and woman who have not made their peace with the Lord, for He has chosen Israel from among all the nations of the earth to be ruled by Justice instead of the whip. And who would be a man and woman so low that they prefer the whip?

SCENE 3

Dusk. Jochanam is walking through the desert alone.

VOICE. Jochanam! *[Jochanam looks at rocks above him, seeing nothing.]* Jochanam! *[Jochanam looks in various directions.]* Jochanam! here! *[Jochanam perceives a beardless figure in a shallow, rocky hollow.]*

JOCHANAM. Joseph -- you here? *[Sits down beside him]*

JOSEPH. I come here often -- to dream of Egypt.

JOCHANAM. The fleshpots of Egypt?

JOSEPH. No, it's not exactly fleshpots. Actually, I wasn't thinking of food at all. Had been thinking of the shore of the Nile after sunset, with its waves gently washing the land -- and the brise -- and people's lives along the river, a thousand years of it. And here I am in the desert, with a people -- seeking their liberty.

JOCHANAM. You could have stayed -- you are Egyptian.

JOSEPH. The parents who raised me are Hebrew. That land along the shore wasn't mine. Early I learned to set my hopes in some other promise, always a step ahead of those who had it all. That promise got into my bones. Only here, in the desert, did I come to love the earth. I've been coming here since Moses went up the mountain -- thinking that the promise may be here.

JOCHANAM. The promise has been pledged with powerful tokens which pale the might of Egypt. The Lord of Israel has laid low Egypt's first-born. He has gone before us, by day a pillar of cloud to guide us, by night a pillar of fire to give us light. He has parted the Red Sea, preparing Israel's flight to freedom, and drowned Pharoah's host. He has fed the people when they were hungry with bread from heaven and stilled their thirst with water from a rock. He has stood by us when we fought Amalek and blotted out all memory of its people from under heaven. And now, at this mountain, it seems as though Israel is poised to declare solemnly its Covenant with -- Reality.

JOSEPH. And are you happy now?

JOCHANAM. No!

JOSEPH. Why is that?

JOCHANAM. Because there isn't anything for me to do, except clobber

some poor Amalektite, whose cause is doomed beforehand because they, too, are up against Reality. If we get drunk -- if there were beer in the desert -- the sombre face of Reality would stare at us through the mist, making a mockery of our ecstasy. When we worship the Lord God of Hosts, it's "Thy will be done, oh Lord," as though we didn't have a will of our own. The art of the stone mason or of the painter, of the poet or the musician, is useless, because who wants illusion if he has seen the Truth? Man is a fighter, and who wants to fight if defeat is impossible? Who wants to love if there's no chance to undo and no chance to be undone! If I didn't exist at all, it would make no difference, and who can be happy knowing this?

JOSEPH. Oh Jochanam, you know my heart better than I know it myself. Here in the desert, exiled from my own people, in a Hebrew, I've found a friend more precious than all the youth of Egypt. What about beauty, Jochanam, is there beauty in the desert?

JOCHANAM. The desert is barrenness, but no barrenness is so barren that one doesn't find a little desert flower in a hollow. And therefore the desert is beautiful -- because of the little desert flowers. Life is a desert, scattered with little desert flowers, in which the spirits of lesser gods manifest themselves. And woe to the man who ignores the flowers -- who doesn't pick them.

JOSEPH. And if he picks them, he destroys beauty.

JOCHANAM. That's to whet his appetite for beauty, to keep alive his interest. Life's a delicate balance. If you pick all the flowers, there are none left. But if you never pick any, you lose interest.

JOSEPH. And then you're taken over by Reality?

JOCHANAM. Yes. Beauty is the hint of the divine in earthly things, in imperfect things. To see it, one has to be satisfied with less than the Lord God of Hosts. One has to live for the moment,

rather than eternity. -- Perfection is death. We need the human smell, with its whiff of corruption -- none of that fragrance of Heaven. Those who seek beauty all in perfection end up with nothing. The Lord is a jealous God who doesn't want to share his Godhead with mortals. But that's where we find beauty -- in mortals, with each precious moment fleeing as we look at it.

JOSEPH. In -- women, you mean?

JOCHANAM. Sometimes. But the love of a woman bears the stigma of practicality. God ordained it that way, you see. One never quite knows whether one breeds or seeks beauty. It doesn't make Him jealous because one can be very lonely with a wife, and the lonely reach out to the Lord. But alone -- man and woman are incomplete, and so each reaches out to his or her fellow. That's why God doesn't like this incompleteness. He wants us to reach out to Him.

JOSEPH. And when you -- love a boy, you preserve this -- incompleteness?

JOCHANAM. Yes -- that's it. You avoid smugness. You don't embrace your other half -- that would make you complete -- but you stay half, ever longing for your other half. You stay on your toes, reaching out to all, never satisfied.

JOSEPH. Never? *[Looking Jochanam in the eye]*

JOCHANAM. No, Joseph.

JOSEPH. Then -- how do you keep alive your interest?

JOCHANAM. Oh -- by thinking about it.

JOSEPH. Passion -- from thought? *[Coming close, putting an arm around Jochanam.]*

JOCHANAM. Why, Joseph -- why me?

JOSEPH. Because I trust you. I trust you more than I have ever trusted anyone, because you're honest with yourself. And that's the honesty that counts. I trust you more than the Truth, because the Truth hurts, and you heal. Men are always rivalling each other for a greater slice of the Truth, but you've shown me the way back to myself -- to Egypt. Jochanam, I'm yours. *[As they embrace passionately, the curtain falls.]*

SCENE 4

In the camp, near Jochanam's tent. Anna and two other women, dressed in black, enter from stage right, while Jochanam enters from stage left. They meet in the middle. Aaron comes forward from the back. The three women and Jochanam look at each other in silent communication. Aaron stares straight ahead.

ANNA. The Lord has chosen not to accept the sacrifice of yourself.
Inscrutable are the ways of the Lord.

Jochanam stands as one who blames himself very much. Anna embraces him and tries to comfort him. Jochanam does not return the embrace. After a while, she guides him back to the tent by supporting and cradling him. Aaron follows.

SCENE 5

Wild, desolate, mountainous region. A single withered tree. Jochanam enters and prepares to hang himself. At the last possible moment, Aaron appears and intervenes by catching Jochanam in his arms.

AARON. The Lord is not only just but also merciful.

JOCHANAM. My child -- my son.

AARON. But He would not be Lord if He showed you mercy while you are His enemy.

Jochanam furiously attacks Aaron, who subdues him easily and holds him in restraint.

JOCHANAM. Leave me alone -- you and your God.

AARON. When you were a slave in Egypt you did not want to be left alone. You eagerly approved the slaying of Egypt's first-born then. And you longed with all your heart for the day when the Lord would manifest Himself to a free people.

JOCHANAM. I did not know then that the price of freedom would be slavery of the will. *[Aaron releases him cautiously.]* I didn't know that accepting the freedom to go where I want would mean that I no longer want anything.

AARON. It's not giving up your will. It's making the Lord's will your own. You can choose to do this or not to do it.

JOCHANAM. And be destroyed if I make the wrong choice. I can either be really free -- and be destroyed, or live as a slave. -- But that is a choice I do have, and nobody can take that away from me.

AARON. I find it easy to make the Lord's will my own -- because I -- love Him, Jochanam. He has stood by my people when they needed Him.

JOCHANAM. And He has been the enemy of Egypt.

AARON. Because they are a stubborn people. He wants to be the Father of all men and women if they acknowledge His Fatherhood.

JOCHANAM. Can the Egyptians call Him Father and still be Egyptians?

AARON. It is not necessary to be Egyptian.

JOCHANAM. But if you are -- Can you submit your will to Him -- and love Him?

AARON. I have seen the glory of the Lord and found that it pales all the glory of Pharaoh.

JOCHANAM. I've seen it too, and I have chosen the beauty of one Egyptian over all the glory of God. What you call the love of the Lord is nothing but the fear of God, of which you speak as though it were a virtue. And what's fear to those who are about to die? Or does your fear extend beyond death? -- I think I shall stay alive for a while -- to see how far your fear does extend. If you would be a lover, Aaron, consider that you are mortal, and lay your fear aside.

AARON. Oh Jochanam, do not mock me. It is almost forty days since I have taken on the stewardship over the people of Israel.
[Sitting down] Each day it becomes harder to keep them in the fear of the Lord. It is barely forty days since Moses has gone up the mountain, since their faith wasn't nourished with the glory of the Lord Himself. And yet something in human nature doesn't *want* to believe. People want his Power, his Glory -- when they *need* it. For the rest they would like to

forget Him. But Israel needs Him -- always. If the people forget the Lord after forty days, what's going to be left of Israel after centuries?

JOCHANAM. Israel will become a nation like others. Unless people called prophets arrive -- to tear open the old wound.

AARON. In a world in which might is right? Israel will fall prey to the law of the jungle. No Jochanam, our only strength is the Lord, and I will set a sign in their midst to remind them of their strength.

JOCHANAM. Their strength lies in themselves. As the meaning of the Truth fades, they recover the courage to trust their own signs.

AARON. No Jochanam. They need the sign to keep alive their faith in God.

JOCHANAM. They need the sign to keep alive their faith in themselves.

AARON. They need the sign to reveal the Reality behind.

JOCHANAM. They need the sign to shield them from It.

AARON. You do not speak to people. If you did ---

JOCHANAM. The people are hypocrites. They don't know what they want. They want God to reveal Himself, but every time He does they become more unhappy. Give them a sign and let's see.

AARON. And if I do give them a sign, and if they do not forget the Reality behind it, will you then see that your unhappiness is not rooted in some deep flaw of God's creation but in your very own perverseness?

JOCHANAM. By God, I will acknowledge it, and if my child turns over in his grave. -- And if they worship the sign, forgetting the Truth

it stands for, if they worship the sign as a token of their will to be like gods, as its creator rather than its creatures, will you then lead the people back to Egypt and prostrate yourself before Pharaoh and say 'Sire, we have been wrong. We have been trying to escape the whip in your hand by fleeing under the protection of a scourge a thousand times more cruel -- the scourge of Reality, in Whose glare we must perish!' Will you say this?

AARON. [*Disturbed*] Jochanam, only God knows for sure what goes on in the hearts and minds of men and women. Who is to say whether they worship themselves or God when they worship the sign?

JOCHANAM. You will be the judge yourself. -- It will be quite clear.

AARON. Then, Jochanam, I will go back to Egypt, and I will say this. And you, what will you do? Will you triumph -- under the whip?

JOCHANAM. I will do what I came here for. I owe my child a death. Those who have seen the face of Reality are no longer fit to live. And you -- you'll let me die, because you'll be glad to escape my glance.

ACT II

SCENE 1

In the camp near Jochanam's tent. Night. Aaron is addressing the Elders of Israel, among them Jochanam.

AARON. It's been almost forty days since Moses has gone up the mountain to be with the Lord alone. To those accustomed to His glory forty days is a long time.

1ST ELDER. Come, make us a sign to go ahead of us. As for your brother, who brought us up from Egypt, we do not know what has become of him. Perhaps he has decided to stay with the Lord. We need a sign to remind ourselves of His glory.

AARON. It must be a sign worthy of the Lord. The desert yields no gold. Let the sign be made from the treasure of all Israel. Let each family give from its wealth, for the Lord dwells in the whole nation. Strip therefore the gold rings from the ears of your wives and daughters, and bring them to me. *[The Elders rise and scatter, except for the three Levites, dark and foreboding figures dressed in black, crouching on the ground. Thunder and lightning, exposing Aaron in the middle of the stage, a tall figure dressed in white.]*

AARON. Why did you, my brothers, not go to gather the gold of Israel for the Lord?

1ST LEVITE. When all betray the Lord, the tribe of Levi remains steadfast. In your heart you know that your sign is an affront to the Almighty.

2ND LEVITE. The Lord knows that you hide from His glory behind your idol.

3RD LEVITE. In your heart you know that your idol is a sign of your boldness in the face of the Lord.

AARON. If I knew I wouldn't make the sign. If you know, why didn't you tell the Elders of Israel?

1ST LEVITE. We are simple fellows. We deal in the simple Truth, and the simple Truth is crowded out by the Masters of flowery speech and lost in the wandering maze of thought.

AARON. Some men and women reject the simple Truth -- just because it's simple. They have a mind -- and a mind likes to explore wandering mazes and to say what it has found in what you call flowery speech. The simple Truth does not appeal to the mind.

2ND LEVITE. You sound as though you were one of them.

AARON. I have a mind too.

3RD LEVITE. The Lord protects us not for our mind but for our devotion. If it wasn't for our devotion you people with a mind wouldn't *live* -- because He would destroy Israel.

AARON. You see, for some people to live isn't everything. Some people would die -- for the freedom of the mind.

1ST LEVITE. Dying is not as easy as you think. You have never been close to those minutes grasping for air, those minutes stretching into a lifetime, because you have lived in the shadow of Moses. And God's anger may not end at the grave. We want to *live*. Oh Aaron, why do you side with those who want to die?

AARON. I don't side with anybody. But -- but the mind is capable of judging life not worth what it is made out to be by the children of Truth -- that the mind madly seeks the Truth, and when it

has found it, it cannot live with it, because the Truth devours the mind. Our first parents could not endure knowing God without wanting to be gods themselves. -- Maybe your mind has already been devoured by the Truth. Or maybe it is too busy making sure that you live. But when you have time to think, you may come to the conclusion that life isn't worth living.

ALL THREE LEVITES. *[not in unison]* Blasphemy! Blasphemy!

The Elders return with the jewelry and lay it down at Aaron's feet.

1ST ELDER. Israel has yielded up its treasure for the making of a sign.

2ND ELDER. For we want to bear witness that the Lord dwells with all the people.

3RD ELDER. And in all His creation.

4TH ELDER. And in all lifeless things under heaven.

AARON. *[Praying]* Oh Lord, accept our humble sacrifice of the gold which adorned our wives and daughters. For the beauty of our wives and daughters is a mere play upon our senses if it is not perceived as an image of Thy beauty. Thou hast, oh Lord, withdrawn Thyself from us with Moses these past forty days to remind us that our hearts and our passions go out to Thee and fasten themselves upon a worthy sign of Thy glory. Oh Lord, grant us that we capture in the image we are about to fashion as much of Thy glory as earthly eyes may behold, and that we will always be mindful of Thy holy Truth which the image is to reveal to us.

ALL. Amen.

SCENE 2

Inside the tent of Bezalel and Aholiab, which also serves as a workshop. Bezalel and Aholiab sleeping. Aaron enters, carrying and dragging a large bag with jewelry.

AARON. Bezalel, Aholiab, awaken. The absence of Moses and the Lord has brought new life to Israel. We shall seek in art what we may not behold in reality. There's work for the artist! Awaken!

AHOLIAB. *[Awakening, slowly]*. Let Israel rest in the shadow of the Truth.

AARON. The Truth has withdrawn itself these past forty days. Forty days is a long time.

AHOLIAB. For those who have beheld the Truth it is but the wink of an eye.

AARON. For you it is. For common folk it is a long time. Their vision needs to be kept alive. The people want you and Bezalel to make them a sign behind which the Truth is revealed.

AHOLIAB. Beware! A sign also conceals the Truth. It depends on the state of your soul. Inscrutable is the depth of the human soul. It loves whatever it pities and hates what it fears.

AARON. Strange are the ways of the artist. The Lord forgives them, for they glorify His name even when they deny Him.

AHOLIAB. Bezalel, wake up. It's forty days since Moses has gone up the mountain to be with the Lord. There may be work for us.

BEZALEL. And what if he comes back, with the vision of God's glory fresh upon him? How can our work withstand his glance?

AARON. God loves His creation. He will forgive if our work fall short of His perfection.

BEZALEL. Our works are earthbound. He lives in the height. He is a jealous God Who would have all of our love. Our works make men and women love the earth.

AARON. He also dwells in all His creation, in every man and woman, in all His creatures, and in all things lifeless.

BEZALEL. And if He dwells in every man and woman, then every man and woman will claim to be like God.

AARON. Come, come, Bezalel. You speak as though men and God were enemies. The people of Israel will not forget that they have been created.

BEZALEL. And that they know how to create.

AARON. God created man in His image. Even as He dwells in every man and woman, He lets us share in His creation. Do not withhold your gifts from the people -- and from God.

AHOLIAB [*to Bezalel*]. If we stand idle now, henceforth we will be mere adorners of His altar. And when we have adorned His altar, our wish will be deemed fulfilled. Bezalel, there's much good in what Aaron has to say.

BEZALEL. There may not be much good to say about a people before whom the Lord went, by day a pillar of cloud to guide them on their journey, by night a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel night and day until they reached this place. There may not be much good to say about those half-way between Heaven and earth, with their tortured brain conceiving of God's freedom while knowing their earthbound captivity. I should be glad to belong to one or the other realm. But while I am cast out from both, I must reach heavenward or yield to the dull earth. -- If there's work to be done, I'll do it.

AARON. Here's the treasure of Israel to do it with. *[Empties his bag before Bezalel and Aholiab. They run their fingers through it with delight.]* All the people have a share in it.

Aholiab gathers dry wood and places it in a hole in the ground. Bezalel lights the fire. The two artists take a large lump of wax and place it on a stove near the fire. All three stand around the fire in such a way that their faces are eerily lit.

AARON. *[Aaron and Aholiab tilt the stool over the fire in such a way that the side of the lump being worked on is heated, while Bezalel gradually strips off, as it were, layers of wax from its underlying form.]* We ask, oh Lord, that Thy sign speak to the soul of a people led away from the banks of the Nile only three months ago, for on earth all things man-made take their form from the human will to shape a landscape.

AHOLIAB. And we ask that its form be grown over centuries, that it go beyond the hopes and fears of any one man or woman, but that it still be bounded by time to become an event instead of a fact.

BEZALEL. We ask that its form bear within the seed of death, so that the sign of the Eternal be to us a fellow creature.

ALL THREE. *[Mustering the lump of wax]* We ask that the sign of Thy glory capture the fleeting moment and seize the jealous place, for we human beings can guess the Eternal only behind an earthly sign. If we behold Its face we die.

AARON. *[With Aholiab tilting the stool slowly]* Let Thy sign, oh Lord, speak to us of great power, for we guess Thy will behind each effort to shape the earth.

AHOLIAB. And let it be power directed towards an end, not the blind power of the sea, the cruel sea, that does not know us.

BEZALEL. *[Stripping off wax]* Let it bespeak the will to use power, for

power forces the elements of chaos into a pattern.

ALL THREE. [*Mustering their work*]. Let Thy sign, oh Lord, proclaim power, for we love nothing as much as the powerful, even though we know they may trample us.

AARON. [*Tilting the stool with Bezalel, while Aholiab shapes the calf's genitals*] We want Thy sign, oh Lord, to stand for the power to beget new life, for it is the most godly of all powers.

BEZALEL. And we want Thy sign to stand for the great chain of love that binds together lovers, friends, children and parents, nations, and all people.

AHOLIAB. We want it to strengthen within us the power to love the flowers in the desert, the glistening stars above, the eyes of maidens, the sleek limbs of youth, and the power to capture their beauty in things we fashion.

ALL THREE. We want Thy sign to reveal to us the power that makes us alive, the power that makes us love the earth and ourselves, for we can't love anybody unless we find love ourselves.

AARON. Let Thy sign, oh Lord, make us feel young, so that we may forget hoary old age for a while, and death that comes to all men and women.

AHOLIAB. Let it make us see things with the eyes of youth, that see behind the Reality that *is* the truth we *desire*.

BEZALEL. And let it give us the courage, oh Lord, to be true to ourselves, for we are forever prone to covenant with Reality.

ALL THREE. Let Thy sign, oh Lord, make our souls young, though our bodies wither away.

BEZALEL. [*While Aaron and Aholiab tilt the stool*] And let Thy sign take away from us all fear that comes from knowing

ourselves, for true self-knowlege overcomes itself and returns to the wisdom of beasts.

AARON. *[as if awakening]* A dumb brute as the sign of the Lord?

BEZALEL. Can you separate the human form from lies?

AARON. *[after reflecting]* The truthfulness of beasts! So be it!

ALL THREE. *[Mustering the calf in its waxen form]* Let Thy sign heal us, oh Lord, for we know too much.

Aholiab places lumps of clay in a wooden tub, pours water over them, and kneads the clay. He and Bezalel carefully take the calf off the stool and place it on its back, with the legs sticking up in the air, while Aaron watches.

AARON. What now?

BEZALEL. The mold -- we need to make a mold to contain the gold.
[Inserts tubes into the four legs of the calf and packs lumps of wet clay around it. When the calf can support itself, Aholiab, now free, assists him.]

AARON. How much knowing is knowing too much?

BEZALEL. Knowledge of good and evil -- the knowledge that makes us human. But in art the serpent eats its own tail -- in art knowledge overcomes itself.

AARON. Are artists something less, or more, than human?

BEZALEL. Sometimes. But in the end the artist overcomes himself -- he overcomes his will to live.

Bezalel and Aholiab lift the shapeless form enclosing the calf off the stool and place it in the fire. Aholiab incites the fire with bellows. Smoke and / or fire from the burning of the wax can be seen emerging from the tubes in its legs.

AARON. Does God create without effort?

BEZALEL. Yes -- He's cursed with power. But all power is no power.
Like knowledge, power overcomes itself. Power maintains
itself with the challenge of the dull matter it wants to shape.
Take away that challenge and power vanishes -- like a
spectre.

*When all the wax making up the calf inside the mold has
burned off, no more fire and smoke emerges from its legs.
Bezalel and Aholiab lift the mold out of the fire with rods and
tongs and set it on the ground.*

AARON. Then our impotence is our bliss?

BEZALEL. If we knew -- but we don't. And so we seek power -- like a
moth seeking the flame.

*Aholiab sets a crucible in the fire and incites the flame with
bellows. Aaron takes the greater part of the jewelry and places
it in crucible.*

AARON. Accept the sacrifice, oh Lord, from every man, woman, and
child, so that all may claim a share in Thy glory.

BEZALEL. *[Tossing the remainder of the jewelry into the crucible]*
Accept this precious metal as a token of Thy glory, for we
human beings cannot distinguish between rarity and worth.
We invest Thy sign with awe, oh Lord, if it costs us dearly -- an
impoverished people in the desert.

AHOLIAB. *[blowing bellows]* Melt the noble metal, which is a sign of
Thy changelessness, oh Lord, for in a world in which all things
change, it gives us a hint of Thy eternity.

ALL THREE. *[Aholiab and Bezalel placing their hands over crucible]*
Accept precious gold, oh Lord, for in a world bound by matter it
is a token of what's most dear to us.

After Aholiab applies a few more blasts from the bellow, the gold is molten. Bezalel and Aholiab heave the crucible out of the fire with tongs and pour the gold into the legs of the mold.

AARON. How it stands there -- waiting its turn to reveal its core -- it looks more like the offering of some dark and forlorn place than the sign of Heaven.

BEZALEL. The dark and forlorn place is the human heart -- struggling to maintain its courage in the face of Heaven. -- Heaven was revealed to us some three months ago. You have awakened Aholiab and Bezalel to reveal the human heart to you. If your brother Moses returns to confirm his revelation, we will have to work on ours, lest the heart perishes.

AARON. Why -- why does Moses champion Heaven, forgetting his own heart?

AHOLIAB. Because he has seen God's back. If he had seen His face, he would have perished.

BEZALEL. If Moses returns in triumph, the human heart will be exiled to a place dark and forlorn, and he who dwells there will be called the Father of Lies, because he insists on his own truth against God's Truth.

AARON. Are man and God at war then?

AHOLIAB. There can be peace, so long as God does not reveal his face -- or His back. That's why we like to behold His sign.

Aholiab takes off the leg tubes of the mold, turns it over right side up and begins to knock the clay off the calf. He and Bezalel lift it on the stool. They polish the calf with rags to reveal its golden lustre.

BEZALEL. Behold the Calf of God.

SCENE 3

As in beginning: Jochanam prostrate before a draped mirror, struggling to get to his feet. Sound of a trumpet getting louder. Jochanam succeeds in getting up. Trembling with effort and fear he seizes a corner of the drape and with an almost unhuman effort rips it off the mirror. The trumpet stops suddenly. Jochanam sees himself.

JOCHANAM. I've seen the face of God, and I die.

SCENE 4

Dawn reveals inside of Jochanam's tent. Jochanam is standing on his bedding.

ANNA. Jochanam! *[She rushes over to him and embraces him. She talks confidently.]* God hasn't revealed Himself these past forty days. He has bethought Himself, and in His mercy understands that we human beings cannot withstand His glance. Aaron has had a sign made that conceals His glory while it lets people know that He's present in His creation. He has announced that today there is to be a pilgrim -- feast to the Lord. Oh, let this mean the beginning of a new life for you and me, and for all our people.

JOCHANAM. But not for our son!

ANNA. Don't make me mourn a husband too. Our son lives in our

hearts. Don't argue with God. We are mere creatures who can't understand their Creator. If we did, wouldn't this be a little like beholding His face?

JOCHANAM. But He claims our love! He rules over us -- and He claims our love! Let Him rule our bodies -- like Pharaoh -- but leave our hearts free. Or let Him command our hearts, but then leave our bodies free. But not both -- we can't breathe. There has to be some part of ourselves that belongs to us. There remains only one thing for Him to do: if He really wants our love, let Him die for us!

ANNA. Can't children love their parents? They rule our bodies and command our hearts.

JOCHANAM. A man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and the two become one flesh.

AARON. Jochanam, that's true for a woman too.

JOCHANAM. Well, you have left your father and mother, Anna.

ANNA. But ---

JOCHANAM. But not your heavenly Father? No, Anna -- no. You can't follow me where I have gone. I'm no ordinary rebel, and He's no ordinary tyrant. I've rebelled against the Lord God of Hosts. I've seen Egypt's first-born dead. I have seen the Red Sea parted and Pharaoh's host drowned. I have been led here by the Lord Himself, by day a pillar of cloud to guide us on our journey, by night a pillar of fire to give us light, so that we could travel night and day. I have heard Him speak to us through his holy prophet Moses, who I know will return to us soon. I can't say I'm shielded by doubt, as they who come after us may claim. I see the Truth as the noon-day sun in the desert, and I look in vain for a shelter. And yet I will not serve Him, the Giver of Life -- and Death. Anna, my life is forfeit. Don't come close to me, lest you also die.

ANNA. *[Throwing herself in his arms]* Then let us die together!

JOCHANAM. *[Eventually extricating himself]* No, Anna. -- The Almighty's hate may reach beyond our death.

ANNA. I'll go with you wherever His hate may take us.

JOCHANAM. You wouldn't say this if you felt what I feel, who am already there.

ANNA. I'll go with you, and you can't stop me.

JOCHANAM. Anna, don't.

ANNA. You think you'll glory in that place all by yourself?

JOCHANAM. You know Joseph the Egyptian?

ANNA. Yes, I know him, and he's very handsome, and I love *you*.

JOCHANAM. Well, I've slept with him.

ANNA. You're saying this because you want me to live.

JOCHANAM. I've betrayed you and your sex. I've broken the holy Covenant between the Lord and His people, and between the Lord and myself, because I wouldn't serve the Lord. I've joined Sodom and Gomorah, and I can't even say I'm sorry, because no one who's hissed the terrible words 'I will not serve' can ever go back to where he was before. You can live by fear, but you can't love by fear. That's why the Lord responds like a jealous lover: He will punish the children for the sins of the father to the third and fourth generation. That's why He has killed our son -- as He has killed Egypt's first-born. That's why He will kill me when I have served His purpose. -- That's the merciful solution. -- You are still salvageable, so get out of my life.

ANNA. You've whored with the unnatural son of a bitch even though you knew it would kill our son?

JOCHANAM. Yes.

ANNA. I'm beginning to understand the meaning of the Covenant. It's to make people do unto others as they would have them do unto them. The meaning of the Law of God is simply this: to rid the world of bastards like you. [*Jochanam walks out of the tent.*]

SCENE 5

In the camp near Jochanam's tent. The Golden Calf on an altar, around it the people, among them Anna, Joseph, the Elders, Aholiab, and Bezalel. Jochanam and Aaron on opposite sides of the stage. Six to twelve youths and/or maidens, in something like Egyptian costume, dance around the Calf to the music of Erik Satie's Gymnopaedies, or a similar piece.

A VERY OLD MAN. Behold the return of holiness to our midst.

1ST WOMAN. Unless it speak to us through human custom, God's very revelation turns into falsehood and conceit.

1ST ELDER. Custom grown over a thousand years along the banks of the holy river. Exiles stay true to themselves by remembering their origin.

1ST MAN. The Truth is not true unless it bears the traces of the human will.

2ND WOMAN. Look at its strength -- muscles and sinews to give strength to the human will.

AARON. Woman, hold your tongue. Pray that you may be held under the sway of the law, for you would be among the first victims

of sinews and muscles if it were otherwise. Pray that the law may be strong enough to prevail over the human will.

JOCHANAM. Are our lives to be governed by fear then -- fear of being ground up by force?

AARON. Let force reign and people will be traded like cattle, as we were in the land of Egypt. Brother will not be safe from brother, and mothers will sacrifice their children, for what comes naturally to animals our brain will teach us to use for selfish gain.

A YOUNG MAN. Ah Aaron, you can't frighten us. Look at the Calf's power to beget life. Our brain helps us turn that awesome power into the passion for life. We love because we know we have that power.

2ND WOMAN. *[Walks over to young man and urges her vanity]*

AARON. Let passion rule, and along with it will come hate. The lust to torture and destroy is the dark twin sister that walks forever with the lust to love. Oh, let not your worship of this sign that I have given you make you forget that you are to be ruled by the Law of God. Oh people of Israel, are three months enough to erase the sting of the whip from your memory?

JOSEPH. Israel will never forget the whip. A people who's escaped its sting will be haunted by its memory. Banish the whip from the slavemaster and it will find its way back to the lover. It is a powerful sign that we belong to each other before we belong to the Truth. The mighty lion may cringe before the whip, but his pride is unbroken by the Truth. With his whip, Pharaoh proclaimed the freedom of the spirit, and whoever would be a lover must be a free spirit. Pharaoh thought he could leave the spirit free, letting his anger go against the body, but the Lord's glory has enslaved the spirit, freeing the body. Henceforth those whose spirit would be free will cry for the whip to enslave the body. I tell you, Aaron, do away with the whip and you do away with love.

AARON. *[Passionately]* Not with the love of God.

OLD MAN. We know the love of God through the love of men and women.

AARON. *[Troubled]* Those who have the love of men and women don't need the love of God.

2ND MAN. Why worry? Let us gather rosebuds while we may.

3RD WOMAN. Look, the Calf is a young bull. It is younger today than tomorrow. So are we all -- younger today than tomorrow.

OLD MAN. Holy Calf, thy youth restoreth joy in me -- the joy beyond hope. Let me eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.

AARON. *[Desperately]* But Israel will live if it follows the Law of God.

JOCHANAM. Let Israel die too - for having been once alive. We know something has been alive when it dies.

AARON. My God, you gave us certainty, and all comes to naught!

OLD MAN. Holy Calf, thou knowest not who thou art. Thou art innocent of law, guilt, and providence. Deliver thy people from knowing themselves, for self-knowledge is pain. Life that knoweth itself is a gaping wound upon the body of nature.

By now the younger people are passionately revelling in one another's arms. Old men and women look about contentedly. Some are drinking. Jochanam watches the scene with detachment. Joseph and Aaron stand rigidly as though uncomfortable. Joseph approaches Jochanam to seek love, but Jochanam, with a gesture of pain, refuses.

JOCHANAM. No, no. Everything I touch is cursed.

JOSEPH. *[Gradually rising above his disappointment, in the antique posture of prayer]* May thy spirit enter my body, holy Calf, so that I may become the lover of the whole earth -- and its

beloved. *[Dances before the Calf. As the dance becomes more frantic, he throws off his upper garment, revealing the typical kilt of the Egyptian. The previous dancers take up cimbals and tambours and accompany him. Gradually he absorbs the attention of all the revellers.]*

THIRD WOMAN. See, the god has entered him.

THIRD MAN. God in the flesh!

As part of his dance, Joseph prostrates himself before the Calf. He is picked up by the maidens of the previous dance and tied to one of the pillars of the altar. He is whipped by the maidens to the clash of cimbals and tambours.

JOSEPH. Among a people who wants to be free I become a slave.

AARON. Behold the man!

ANNA. *[Holding his head by the hair, close to her face]* And among a people who wants to live, you choose death? *[Upon his silence presses a passionate kiss on him]*

JOSEPH. I do.

ANNA. *[Produces a dagger from a fold in her robe and plunges it into Joseph. The noise of cimbals and tambours stops. Retains dagger, which she beholds in horror.]*

JOSEPH. I don't know -- is it agony or -- bliss? Hate or love? Too little life -- or too much? -- An end or a beginning? All is peace, the peace in the One. Only -- do not say it was guilt. *[Dies]*

Off stage, in various directions, ram's horns are sounded, announcing the arrival of Moses. All freeze for a few moments. Moses appears, accompanied by Joshua and carrying the tablets. His appearance is very much that of a "biblical" Moses: white beard, white robe, etc.

MOSES. Forty days I've spent in the presence of the Lord. Forty days you have used to forget your memory of the Truth. Why? Why?

SECOND MAN. We needed gods to go ahead of us, because, as for you, sir, who brought us up from Egypt, we did not know what has become of you.

JOCHANAM. To most of us it seems that we have held the same truth -- then and now, although the truth we lived by until your coming differs from the Truth you bring like day from night. But to some, whose pride is greater than their terror, your Truth looks like a -- lie.

MOSES. A lie? Is God a lie?

JOCHANAM. Yes, a lie -- if it stems from fear or greed. The truth comes from pride. So great will be the fear and greed of those who come after us that they will call the champion of pride itself the Father of Lies.

BEZALEL. Man and woman, you see, having been made in God's image, wants to share in the making of the truth with which he has to live. The making of the truth became easier with each day of those forty days.

AHOLIAB. With each of those forty days some of the Truth became beauty, you see.

AARON. It was so easy -- the people were of one heart, save our brothers, the Levites. I said to the people, 'Those of you who have any gold, strip it off.' They gave it me, I threw it in the fire, and out came this bull calf. It was as if our will had triumphed over stubborn matter; but with you here, my brother, I feel the pull of matter again, and when I think of soaring I get dizzy. Trouble is we can't even blame our madness on the Father of Lies because he hasn't been invented yet.

JOCHANAM. You can blame it on me. I am done with life, because I've become God's enemy. But His hate cannot extend beyond the grave, because hell too hasn't been invented yet. With the freedom from fear of one who is about to die I tell you: it is fear for ourselves and, also, for those whom we love, cold fear turning a man against himself, that makes him bend his knee to a Truth not of his own making. It hurts to bash your head against a wall, but rid yourself of the fear of hurt and you're free, free like gods. Going mad, bashing one's head against the wall, is the closest we can come to being like gods. It is an irresistible temptation, just because we can think of it. The Lord made me fearless because he took my child away.

[Turning to Joseph's body] Poor Joseph! You are even more beautiful in death than in life. -- You've outgrown life. In turning against life you have become like a god. You were for me the idea of the god-like.

[To bystanders] Now the god has been humbled and slain -- by a human, all too human act of a woman. You can say I shared in his godliness as I share in her humanity. Joseph here has been living proof to me that beauty means more than just a tickle of the senses. It means the godly whenever we're not afraid. -- His fate strikes terror into the heart of those who live by fear, for fear narrows the larger vision, and in the larger vision I see the first-born of an entire nation stretched out before those who have betrayed their human vision to God's vision.

Aaron, you threw Israel's gold into the cauldron, but what came out of it was not to your liking. Will you now lead the people back to Egypt and prostrate yourself before Pharaoh and say 'Sire, we have been wrong. We have been trying to escape the whip in your hand by fleeing under the protection of a scourge a thousand times more cruel -- the scourge of Reality, in whose glare we must perish!' Will you say this?
[Aaron looks at Moses in guilt and desperation.] Have the

people worshipped the golden Calf as a sign of God's Truth or their own truth?

MOSES. *[Angry]* Damn the people's truth! Who is on the Lord's side? Come here to me. *[Aaron places himself in the vicinity of Moses, who goes over to the altar and looks at Joseph's body.]* You unnatural sons and daughters of whores! *[Dashes the tablets against the altar, breaking them into many pieces. The Levites, in menacing attire and heavily armed, appear one after the other and surround the stage.]* See if your truth stands up against God's Truth. *[In a display of strength, seizes the Golden Calf and throws it into the fire pit. An impressive display of fireworks emerges from the pit.]*

I'll mix you a drink you'll never forget. Give me a bucket. *[Joshua hands him a large cup from among the drinking vessels littering the scene. After the fireworks have exhausted themselves, Moses reaches into the pit and scoops up the ashes.]* Water! *[Joshua produces a goatskin and pours water into the cup. To the Levites]* Go through the camp from gate to gate and back again. Each of you kill his brother, his friend, his neighbour. *[Some of the Levites go off, others join Moses, who steps up to Young Man accompanied by two Levites with drawn swords. Offers the cup to him.]* Here, swallow your pride. *[Young Man is terrified. Drinks slowly and shakes himself. Moses steps up to Second Woman and offers cup. She drinks in terror. Moses steps up to Very Old Man.]*

VERY OLD MAN. From hereon life would be a bore. *[Shakes his head in refusal and is brutally cut down by Levites. Moses steps up to First Man.]*

MOSES. Your own truth is lies. Drink. *[First Man makes for Moses and the cup but is intercepted by Levites and killed. Moses steps up to Aholiab.]* You have sullied the Lord's face. Drink.

AHOLIAB. Art is an illusion which cannot withstand the glare of Reality. *[Drinks]*

MOSES. *[Stepping up to Bezalel]* You have dragged the Lord's Truth down to earthly bauble. Drink.

BEZALEL. The earth has a strong pull. Forty days were enough to forget the glory of God. *[Drinks. Moses steps up to Anna.]*

MOSES. *[Points to knife in her hand; almost plaintively]* God does not want your death but your repentance. Drink.

ANNA. *[Drops knife. Stands in silent terror, looking at Jochanam.]*

JOCHANAM. The woman has been faithful to the Lord until I led her astray. As for him *[pointing to Joseph's body]* -- she killed God's enemy. *[Anna drinks.]*

MOSES. *[To Jochanam]* Are you coming to the Lord's side? *[Offering him the cup]* The Truth or your self?

JOCHANAM. The Lord has already punished me. He killed my son. I am free at last. *[Jochanam is cut down and dies. Anna throws herself over his body. As Moses steps up to a bystander, offering the cup, the curtain falls.]*

About the Author

Johannes Allgaier was born in Berlin, Germany, in 1935. He came to Vancouver, B.C. in 1956 and took a master's degree in English from the University of British Columbia in 1966. Mr. Allgaier has been teaching English at the College of New Caledonia in Prince George, B.C. since 1974. Previous publications include Philosopher and Barbarian, a play about the Roman statesman and philosopher Boethius, and Pride and Punishment, about the missionary of the Carrier Indians of British Columbia's Central Interior, Father A.-G. Morice. Israel at Sinai is Mr. Allgaier's third play.

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