Erich Neumann’s “Torah” watercolors, consisting of twenty biblical scenes, were painted for his children – ten scenes from the Joseph cycle, and ten from the life of Moses. These representations of key events in the first books of the Hebrew Bible show varying attention to detail. In some, human beings and backgrounds are simplified almost to stick figures and geometric shapes. In others, the biblical persons and dramatic events are more fully developed.

A detail of one painting (“Moses on Mount Sinai”) is used on the cover of *The Roots of Jewish Consciousness, Volume One: Revelation and Apocalypse*. It also appears in greytone within the volume (Figure 1.1). Two more paintings, “Joseph’s Dream” and Vision of the Holy Land,” are printed in color in Volume One.

Shown here are eight of the paintings from Neumann’s “Torah” series. They are listed below in the sequence of corresponding biblical texts.

**Joseph’s dream (Figure 2.2)**

Watercolor: © Erich Neumann (date unknown). Courtesy Erich Neumann Estate.

Joseph, Jacob’s beloved son, dreams that the sun, the moon, and eleven stars are bowing before him (Gen 37:9f). This dream, suggesting Joseph’s dominion over his family, offended his father and outraged his brothers. In Neumann’s series, this image is followed immediately by the one showing Joseph sold into slavery.
Joseph sold into slavery

Watercolor: © Erich Neumann (date unknown). Courtesy Erich Neumann Estate.

Jacob’s favorite son, Joseph, is sold to traders by his older brothers and carried off to slavery in Egypt (Gen 38:28). This event later leads to the long Hebrew sojourn in the land of Egypt, out of which they are finally led by the prophet Moses.

Baby Moses in the Nile

Watercolor: © Erich Neumann (date unknown). Courtesy Erich Neumann Estate.

Because Pharaoh has ordered the deaths of male children born to Hebrew mothers, Moses’ mother weaves and seals a basket for him and sets it floating on the Nile, where he is soon found and adopted by Pharaoh’s daughter. Here, as his older sister watches, the infant Moses floats away in his woven basket (Ex 2:1-4).

Moses and the burning bush

Watercolor: © Erich Neumann (date unknown). Courtesy Erich Neumann Estate.

While tending sheep on Mount Horeb, in the land of Midian, Moses sees a bush that burns but is not consumed. God’s voice, speaking from the bush, commands Moses to go to Pharaoh and tell him to free the people of Israel (Ex 3:1-10).

The plague of thunder and hail

Watercolor: © Erich Neumann (date unknown). Courtesy Erich Neumann Estate.
When Pharaoh repeatedly refuses to free the Hebrew people, God sends plagues upon Egypt, culminating in the great events of the Passover and the Exodus. In the seventh plague, thunder, hail, and fire fall on Egypt, killing every living creature (Ex 9:22-25).

**Moses brings water from the rock**

Watercolor: © Erich Neumann (date unknown). Courtesy Erich Neumann Estate.

In the wilderness, the people complain to Moses that they have no water and even question whether God is with them. Following God’s order, Moses carries his rod to Mount Horeb, where he strikes a rock and brings forth water. He names the place Massah and Meribah, because the people put God to the test (Ex 17:1-7).

**Moses on Mount Sinai (Volume One cover; Figure 1.1)**

Watercolor: © Erich Neumann (date unknown). Courtesy Erich Neumann Estate.

The divine presence burns above the mountain in a red and orange cloud. After Moses has received the Law, YHWH threatens to consume the people with fire for their apostasy with the Golden Calf. Here, lightning falls on the tents at the foot of the mountain, while Moses is shown arguing in the people’s defense (Ex 32:7-14).

**Vision of the Holy Land (Figure 2.1)**

Watercolor: © Erich Neumann (date unknown). Courtesy Erich Neumann Estate.

Before Moses’ death, he is led by God to a mountain peak, to see the land that his people will enter (Deut 34:1-4). Aged Moses, anticipating death, is shown partly buried in the mountain. But the land he sees is alive with color, and at the far left, on a hilltop, stands the city of Jerusalem.
The Transformative Serpent, a detail of which appears on the cover of Volume Two: Hasidism, is from a different series of Neumann’s paintings, symbolically depicting good and evil in creation. The same image, in greytone, appears within the second volume (Figure 3.1).

The Transformative Serpent (Volume Two cover; Figure 3.1)

Watercolor: © Erich Neumann (date unknown). Courtesy Erich Neumann Estate. In the painting the serpent descends from above into the natural earthly realm, out of the blue sky realm held in puffs of white clouds. It traverses through a round, gold disc at the very center of the painting, perhaps representing the symbol of wholeness that bridges the upper and lower realms. On the left —the unconscious side— is a tree with red dots, perhaps referencing apples. This tree has its branches in the sky and roots on earth, forming an axis mundi. The serpent is green, the color of nature with its transformative power. Its head contains red, gold and blue, the colors that represent the lower, middle and upper realms that are at play in this painting. The serpentine movement of this intruding, challenging energy is overwhelming, consuming the entire page. It is inescapable, descending to the earthly realm, depicted by the animals on the left and the rising or setting sun over the blue waters on the right. It is a cosmic, otherworldly serpent compared to the sliver of red on the far left that slithers upward toward the tree of life from the black lower left corner of the painting. The movement of the messenger from above points to the chalice-like shape, a vessel of transformation, held in the red of
deep human emotion, the blood of life that when transformed sends sparks upward, back to the soul and being of God. (NSF)