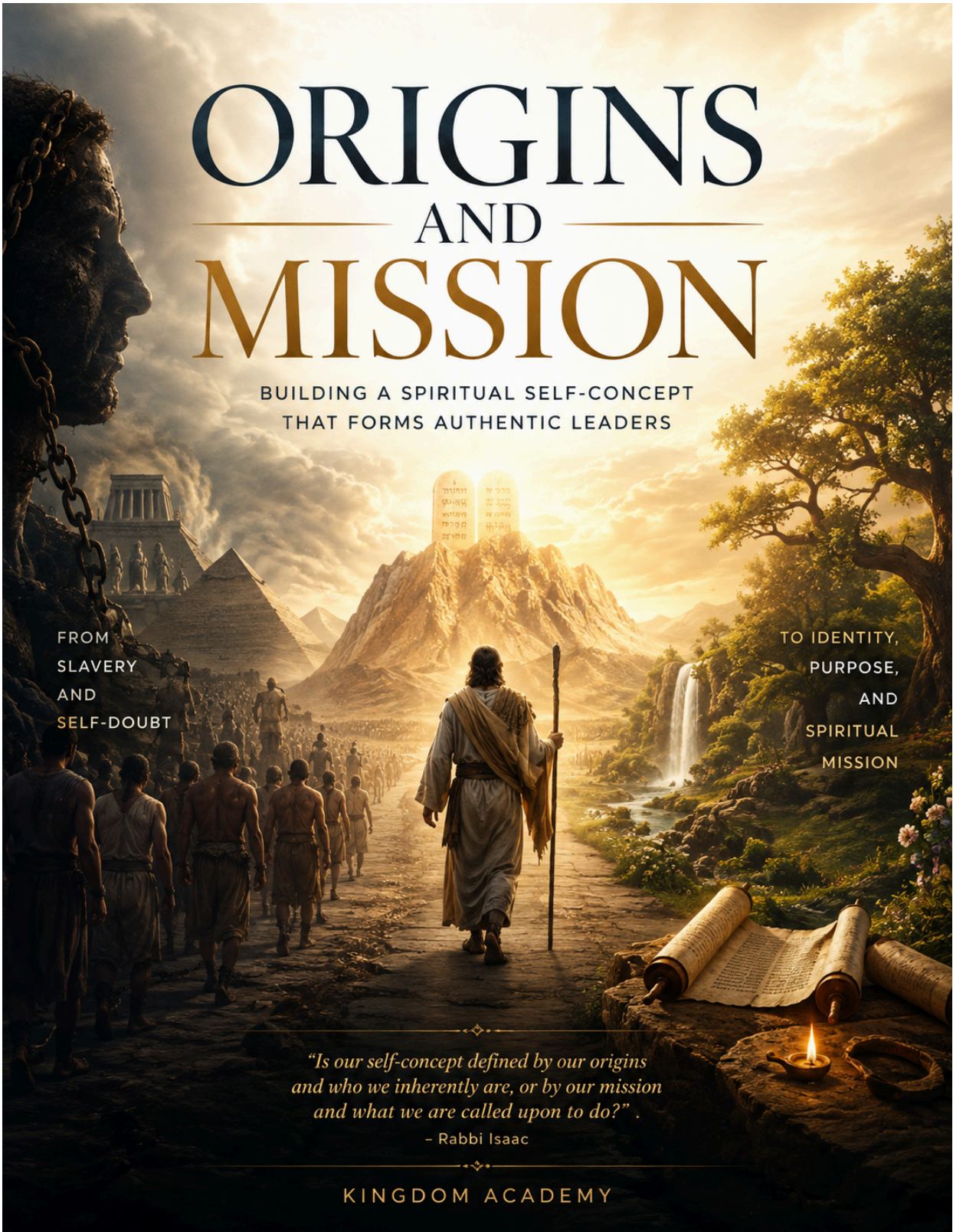




ORIGINS AND MISSION

BUILDING A SPIRITUAL SELF-CONCEPT
THAT FORMS AUTHENTIC LEADERS

FROM
SLAVERY
AND
SELF-DOUBT

TO IDENTITY,
PURPOSE,
AND
SPIRITUAL
MISSION

*"Is our self-concept defined by our origins
and who we inherently are, or by our mission
and what we are called upon to do?"*

- Rabbi Isaac

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The medieval commentator Rabbi Isaac posed a startling question that challenges the very structure of the Jewish Bible: why does the Torah begin with the narrative of Creation and the Patriarchs (Genesis)? (Herczeg, 1999, p. 52) Logically, he argued, it should have begun with the first commandment given to the nascent nation of Israel in Exodus 12:2, "This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months," the inaugural moment of the Jewish people's collective purpose. In raising this question, Rabbi Isaac highlights a profound tension central to human existence: Is our self-concept defined by our origins and who we inherently *are*, or by our mission and what we are called upon to *do*? This paper explores this tension, arguing that a self-concept girded in spirituality emerges from understanding the intersection of our foundational narrative and our unique historical mission. From this understanding and moral development, an authentic leader emerges.

Self-Concept

Exodus chapter one introduces an audience whose lives are entirely shaped by slavery. These people have been taught they are less than animals, worthless, and barely worth keeping alive. The narrative focuses on Moses, who faces a pivotal moment with the burning bush. During this extraordinary encounter with a flame that is never consumed, Moses is called upon to rescue an entire nation—an immense challenge. Moses' first question is, "Who am I?"—a question famously asked by Socrates as well. This self-concept question is central to human consciousness and, as Rogers notes, creates a “gestalt...available to awareness though not necessarily in awareness” (p.203). Rode adds that self-concept includes self-schemas and an understanding of one's past, present, and future selves (p. 329). Like many before and after him,

Moses asks, "Who am I?" Rabbi Isaac may consider the Exodus story the true beginning because, for many people, this question signals a sense of renewal. Confronted with a schema (Piaget, 1929) imposed by others, the Hebrew slaves are now presented with a choice.

Upon Moses' success, God leads this ragtag group of rescued slaves into the desert. After fifty days of wandering, Moses reaches Mount Sinai. In what many Rabbis consider a wedding proposal, God gives Moses and his people a choice for a new identity. One that includes royalty and a relationship with the creator of existence. (English Standard Version 2001, Exodus 19:4-6) The decision to diligently obey goes beyond mere rule-following. According to Peterson, when one is directed toward a goal, grounded in action, one is then moving from what is to what should be. (p. 16) This shift in self-concept is a profound experience that leads to a deeper understanding of the origins of these slaves. At Mount Sinai, God elucidates with the beginning of creation, "Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...'" (Gen. 1:26) A far cry from being less than human, these Israelites are given more than a new story of royalty. The shattering of one schema leads to a new self-concept that each of us bears. Hardy emphasises this point, stating, "You can never change things by fighting against an existing model. You change by creating a new model" (P.19).

This renewed self-concept extends beyond internal transformation. The origin story continues: "the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature." (Gen. 2:7) The Hebrew phrase לִנְפֶשׁ חַיָּה, nephesh hayah, translated as "living creature," is further understood by Targum Onkelos as "speaking being." Unlike other creatures, humans have the unique ability to speak and communicate with God, setting them apart in creation.

Spirituality

Israel's new self-concept and spiritual uniqueness are almost complete. The Genesis text continues with a strange story of a garden and work. "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it." (Gen. 2:15). To work and keep may seem strange in English, but *לְעַבְדָּהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ*, *abad samar*, carry much greater meaning in Hebrew. *Abad* has many meanings, such as work, serve, service, and worship. The eleventh-century commentator Rashi draws the connection that work and worship are one and the same. The Apostle Paul picks up on this idea when he writes to the people of Colosse, "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men." (Col. 3:23) Man is given a purpose to work, which is also to worship. Work is no longer a form of material gain; it is a spiritual act. Slaves living under a tyrannical government viewed work entirely differently. God's transformation of the self-concept is almost complete. Man is given one more duty in this garden, *Samar*. Hebrew is a phenomenological language in which words are pictures or idioms, and each word conveys meaning of its own. *Samar* is translated as "keep it", but it also means to guard or observe. The word picture of *Samar* is one of a shepherd watching over his flock, protecting it from wolves, bears, or lions. Man is given a dual purpose in these two Hebrew words. In our work, we have the opportunity to worship God in everything that we do. We are also to protect, with our very lives, this principle that God has given to every human being, self-concept, and purpose. The theory of focus shaping reality is ancient, as Epictetus is cited as saying, "You become what you give your attention to" (Discourses 4.1). Alhadabi demonstrates how modern science is catching up with ancient wisdom when she states, "Students with higher self-efficacy... derive more pleasure through learning" (p.14). In psychology, the self-concept is not a new theory. Man was created with a self-concept, a sense of uniqueness, and a purpose. This self-concept is wrapped in an Eastern language of community.

The culmination of this transformation is authority and power. Genesis one and two present two accounts: in chapter one, God tells humanity to “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (Gen. 1:28) In chapter two, humans are given authority to name all living creatures.

Rabbi Isaac’s focus on Exodus may reflect the idea that influencing a system of thought is most effective through its purpose and goals, as Hardy describes (p.17). The writer of Hebrews highlights this by stating, “fix your eyes on Jesus” (Hebrews 12:2). For slaves to become a royal priesthood and holy nation, an entire paradigm shift was required. Their transformation involved developing a new self-concept, a sense of uniqueness, purpose, and authority. Complete transition, however, requires a quality akin to *hutzpah* or, in psychological terms, self-efficacy.

Moral Development

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind...” (Romans 12:2). To be transformed, Paul uses the Greek μεταμορφοῦσθε (*metamorphoo*), which means metamorphosis, like a butterfly's transformation. Paul calls everyone to this process of change. According to Erikson (1959), adult development involves increasing complexity and a better quality of life. Eight developmental stages underpin later theories. Avolio (1994) stresses the role of experience and reflection in developing adult leaders, as seen in Paul’s call: “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” In context, a “living sacrifice” refers to an animal dedicated to the Temple, but, upon becoming blemished, serves the rest of its life in Temple service. Paul’s listeners understood this imagery of change. Although rigorous change may appear daunting, Avolio and Gibbons (1989) found

that emotional challenges, high expectations, and guidance can help foster self-efficacy. Paul summarizes this model: “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.” (1 Cor. 11:1)

Plutarch observed, “Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” Moral development is essential, yet is often overlooked. As churches decline and mental illness rises, questions arise: Where does society’s moral character develop? From where does culture draw truth and wisdom? Oxford’s “Brain Rot” word of the year (Oxford University Press, 2024) and research on the cognitive impacts of internet addiction (Firth et al., 2019) and its effects on self-concepts and self-esteem (Yousef et al., 2023) signal a societal crossroads. Revisiting Christ’s commission, “make disciples” (Matthew 28:19), is especially urgent now. Bandura states that “human behavior is developed through modeling. From observing others, one forms a conception of how new behavior patterns are performed.”(p.192) Discipleship in the first century was not an education of knowledge; it was a modeling of a Rabbi. Unlike students in the Western world who learn what the teacher knows, *Talmidim*, disciples of a Rabbi, learned to be just like their Rabbi. (RVL 2024) “Whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.” (1 John 2:6) This is an ancient method of leader development that is highly relational and has the power to reshape culture. In an age that has become isolated, depressed, and anxious from the effects of social media, maybe it's time to remember our roots and reclaim this ancient instructional model.

Conclusion

To many, Rabbi Isaac’s startling question of the structure of the Bible may seem outlandish. Yet, in light of humanity's shaping of the self-concept, one may be wise to question the story we tell about who we are. In a world being influenced by social media, the need for a moral compass is ever-increasing. As the apostle Paul emphasises, transformation is necessary

for every leader. Metamorphosis isn't material; it is a spiritual event. It is through this reshaping of our story that we recreate our self-concept and recognize that the work we do is spiritual. This elucidates the critical nature of moral development for individual character and leader development.

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