

Moses

The shadow of Moses stretches over the entire Old Testament and into the New. His life is so entwined with the founding events in the Israelites' religious identity—the Exodus, the Passover, and the Covenant—that Moses is regarded as the most important prophet in the Hebrew Scriptures. An ancient tradition says he was the author of the Pentateuch; although this is unlikely, his centrality in the accounts certainly qualifies him for this as an honorary title. Moses is one of two figures who appear with Jesus in the Transfiguration, a symbol that Jesus fulfills the Covenant that God first delivered to Moses. This article discusses the meaning of the following sections on different periods of Moses' life:

- “The Birth of Moses”
- “The Call of Moses”
- “Confronting Pharaoh”
- “Leading the Israelites”
- “The Death of Moses”

The Birth of Moses

The birth of Moses is a very funny story. Weren't you laughing out loud when you were reading it? . . . Oh, you weren't? Well, that's the problem with humor, isn't it? Humor can often be lost, because it depends so much on an understanding of a particular context. The humor and irony in the birth story of Moses is like that: you have to know what is expected of kings or the pharaoh to see how comically he is portrayed here.

The ancient societies of the Fertile Crescent were *patriarchal*, meaning that they believed that men were more powerful, better, and had more rights than women. It was a man's job to care for and control the women who depended on him. This meant that a man “ruled over” his wife and his daughters.

Kings ruled over the whole country. One way to illustrate that a king was not strong enough to rule over a country was to show that he could not control women who were dependent on him. The pharaoh in Exodus has no control over women; they repeatedly outsmart him. First, two midwives, that is, two lower-class women, dupe him. They are able to save the Hebrew babies simply by lying to the king. Next he is undone by his own daughter, who finds a baby in the river, and, knowing that he is a Hebrew baby, brings him home to raise as her own. I would have liked to have been a fly on the wall when she came home and told her dad: “I found a Hebrew baby in the river. Can I keep him?” Then the pharaoh is outwitted by Moses' mother, even if he is unaware of it. Not only does the mother exhibit her wisdom by following the pharaoh's orders (she does put the baby in the river), but, with the help of her daughter, she manages to get paid by the pharaoh's daughter to nurse him herself. The great pharaoh is manipulated by women.

Moreover, the pharaoh's original plan showed him to be unwise. The plan was based on his fears, which lead him to make poor decisions. He fears two things. He fears that the Hebrews will become too numerous. However, the way to limit the population of mammals is to cut down on females, not males. He kills the wrong gender to cut down on the number of births, depriving Egypt of males who make up the bulk of his labor force. Also, he fears that the Hebrews will join a foreign army and fight against him. Do infants join armies? Of course not! In fact, by killing the sons of adult males, he gives the fathers of these boys more reason to revolt against him. The pharaoh is not just weak; he is also stupid.

This portrayal of the pharaoh is a parody, ridiculing the character's self-perception. The Egyptians held that the pharaoh was semi-divine because they believed that though his mother was human, his father was the sun god. Israelites found this notion absurd and often parodied this Egyptian belief. They



portrayed the Egyptians, especially the pharaoh, as overly proud. The same ridicule occurs in the text's portrayal of the boastful pharaoh. This parody is part of the folkloric elements of the text.

This delightful story of the birth of Moses highlights some important elements of the Book of Exodus. First, it vividly depicts the oppression and helplessness of the Hebrews. They had no control over their fate and were left to suffer at the hands of a stupid, paranoid king who thought he was a god. Second, it introduces Moses as the one chosen by God from birth to fulfill a special mission. When we see Moses and the Israelites express hesitancy at God's call later in the book, we are supposed to remember what God has already done for them.

The Call of Moses

This complex narrative tells the story of how Moses was first called by God to deliver the Israelites from slavery. Imbedded in the call narrative are texts outlining the character of Moses as a reluctant leader, the revelation of God's name, and brief notices that link the Exodus narratives with the stories of the patriarchs. Let's look at each of these in turn.

The portrayal of Moses seems to go out of its way to depict this biblical hero as an average person. He is not someone seeking power. He does not undertake the contest with Pharaoh to promote his own reputation and power. In fact, time after time, he raises objections to God's call, almost to the point of sinfulness. The objections help to focus attention on God's role in saving the Hebrews. They are saved, but not because a great, powerful leader happened along at the right time. In fact, they are saved by a person with little natural talent for the job; therefore their deliverance must be miraculous.

The call of Moses reflects the understanding of prophecy in ancient Israel. Today we often think that a *prophet* is someone who predicts the future. However, this is not what the ancient Israelites thought. For them a prophet was an intermediary, a spokesperson for God, one who delivered God's messages to the people. This idea is highlighted in the passage concerning Aaron, in which God says that Aaron will be Moses' "mouth," and Moses will be Aaron's "god" (Exodus 4:16). This means that just as Moses hears what God says and voices God's messages to the people, so too Aaron will hear what Moses has to say and will then deliver his message to the pharaoh. This idea is reinforced in Exodus 7:1: "The LORD answered [Moses], 'See! I have made you as God to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother shall act as your prophet.'"

One of the most surprising elements in this story is that the Hebrews, Moses among them, apparently have no idea who this god is that is going to deliver them. In Exodus 3:13–17, Moses notes that the Israelites would need to know who the god is who is sending Moses to deliver them. This suggests that either the Hebrews had forgotten the god that Abraham had worshipped, or that the Hebrews were worshipping many gods and needed to know which of them was sending Moses. God answers by revealing the divine name. The Israelites can now call on God by this proper name, which signifies that they have a personal relationship with this god.

The name itself is a bit odd. It comes from the Hebrew of "to be" and may mean any number of things. The pronunciation, usually given the name *Yahweh*, would suggest something like, "the one who creates," implying that this god was primarily the god who created the world. In other passages in the Bible, a longer version of the name, the LORD of hosts, could also be translated as, "the one who created the heavenly armies." This would suggest that Yahweh was first and foremost a warrior God. The Book of Exodus, however, first states that the name means "the one who is." The name itself was probably deliberately ambiguous so that all of these meanings would be conveyed.

After God reveals the divine name, Yahweh then proceeds to tell Moses, and therefore the Israelites, that this is the same god that the patriarchs and matriarchs had worshipped. This suggests that originally



people thought of the god of Abraham and the god of Moses as two different gods. The author of this passage, however, is stating that they are the same god, the one God, known by different names at different times. This reminds us that the early Israelites believed in the existence of many gods, but that they worshipped only Yahweh.

The connection of the god of Abraham with the god of Moses also connects the locations of Canaan and Egypt. Israel's delivery from slavery is not just delivery *from* somewhere: it is delivery *to* somewhere—that is, to the land where the patriarchs had first settled. This passage recalls the Covenant with the patriarchs and matriarchs, a covenant that promised them a particular homeland.

In sum the call of Moses links the Exodus to the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs. First, it states that the god worshipped by the patriarchs and matriarchs is the same God who calls Moses. Second, it states that God will deliver them back to the land promised to Abraham and his descendants. This passage sums up the main theological framework of the story. Moses is God's human agent who will work wonders to deliver the Israelites. But the reader must remember that deliverance happens because of God's power alone, not because of Moses' power or the people's faithfulness. Salvation comes because God is merciful.

Confronting Pharaoh

Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh continues to build on the themes established in Moses' birth and Moses' call. The confrontation is not between Moses and Pharaoh but between Yahweh and Pharaoh, two gods fighting to establish supremacy. Moses is only God's spokesperson, the very definition of a prophet. This is a contest that Pharaoh cannot afford to lose. His claim to rule is based upon his semi-divinity. Should another people's god prove more powerful than he is, his honor and his ability to govern disappear.

This confrontation is also marked by the introduction of Aaron. The reason given for Aaron's participation is because Moses is a poor speaker. So now Aaron becomes Moses' prophet (see Exodus 6:28—7:2). This would seem to mean that Aaron will be doing all the speaking during the direct confrontations with Pharaoh. Yet a careful reading of each plague account reveals that there is no consistency in this. In most cases it seems that Moses does all the speaking, and Aaron is just performing a ritual action. In some accounts Aaron is missing completely. Scholars believe that the plague cycle combines more than one version of the plagues. In one of these versions, Moses is the central actor. In another version, perhaps written after the return from the Exile when the Temple and the priests who served there were the center of Israelite identity, Aaron takes a prominent role. Because Aaron will become the first high priest, emphasizing this role establishes the importance of the priesthood.

Yahweh is clearly in control throughout the entire contest between Yahweh and Pharaoh. He tells Moses what the final outcome will be as Moses is first returning to Egypt: "So shall you say to Pharaoh: Thus says the LORD: Israel is my son, my first-born. Hence I tell you: Let my son go, that he may serve me. If you refuse to let him go, I warn you, I will kill your son, your first-born." (Ex 4:22–23). The final plague is already predicted in God's first words to Pharaoh.

So why doesn't God just go to the end game, skipping the first nine plagues and delivering the death of the firstborn that will convince Pharaoh to let the Israelites go? At least spare the Egyptians the pain and death of the first nine plagues! Several times God reveals his purpose to Moses; as the author explains to us at one point: "The LORD said to Moses, 'Pharaoh refuses to listen to you that my wonders may be multiplied in the land of Egypt.' Thus, although Moses and Aaron performed these various wonders in Pharaoh's presence, the LORD made Pharaoh obstinate, and he would not let the Israelites leave his land" (Ex 11:9–10).



Why did God wish to multiply his wonders with ten miraculous plagues? Was it for the benefit of the Egyptians? Perhaps it was as a secondary effect. But God's primary audience is the Israelites themselves. He wants to show them beyond any doubt that he is the one, true God, more powerful than the gods of Egypt, the most powerful empire on the planet. One plague could have been written off as a fluke, two plagues a lucky coincidence. But ten? Only the most powerful god could be responsible for that. After three plagues even the Pharaoh's magicians get the point (see Exodus 8:15). As explained earlier, the Israelites probably worshipped, or at least believed in, many different gods. The plagues provided evidence that they had good reason to believe in Yahweh.

To accomplish his purpose, God does something that many modern people find hard to accept: he controls Pharaoh's mind so that Pharaoh will not let the Israelites go even when his magicians, advisors, and the people of Egypt are begging him to do so. Numerous times God announces to Moses, "I will make Pharaoh obstinate." Commentators have tried to explain this so that God doesn't seem so controlling, but the account will not let us do this in any easy way. The story presents us with a God that is intent on making his power known without question, even if that means making Pharaoh even more silly and stupid than presented in the book's opening chapters. Keep in mind that the human authors of this account also saw this as divine justice, the consequences of the Egyptians' cruelty, injustice, and misuse of authority, an authority that ultimately comes from God and should have been used in accordance with God's purposes.

Leading the Israelites

After the dramatic escape from Pharaoh's army through the Reed Sea, Moses leads the Israelites on a forty-year journey through the desert regions in the southern Sinai Peninsula and the Transjordan lands west of Canaan. The people prove to be typical human beings, at various times resentful, ungrateful, unfaithful, and cowardly. Yet through it all, Moses organizes, inspires, pleads, and instructs, acting as a faithful and compassionate mediator between God and the Israelites. Let's look at two things that become apparent during this time: Moses' special relationship with God, and his role as human-divine mediator.

It is at Mount Sinai that Moses' unique relationship with God becomes most apparent. The theophany at Mount Sinai is considered by many interpreters as the pivotal point of the entire Old Testament. This is indicated by the dramatic signs recorded in Exodus 19:16–19, the most impressive appearance of God in the Old Testament. Only Moses is allowed to ascend to the top of the mountain where God's presence had descended. At one point he stays on top of the mountain for forty days (see Exodus 24:18), a symbolic number indicating the fullness of time Moses needed to spend with God to learn the Covenant Law. Later on, when God's presence moved to the meeting tent, we read: "The LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one man speaks to another" (33:11). In this same section, we are told that God calls Moses an intimate friend (33:17).

This unique relationship is critical in understanding Moses' role as mediator. The hardest mediation is between two groups that seem to have little or nothing in common; then there is no common foundation on which to build a relationship. In the case of Yahweh and the Israelites, we seem to have that situation. The Israelites are impure, unfaithful, and immoral. Yahweh is holy: pure, faithful, and good. A mediator who has empathy for both sides is needed, and this is the role Moses ably fulfills. He understands his people; remember his anger at the Egyptian taskmaster and his flash of violence in response. But he also understands God's holiness, an understanding built on his many intimate encounters with Yahweh.

Time and again Moses steps into the breach, interpreting God's Covenant and Law for the Israelites and pleading with God for the Israelites when God is angered by their lack of faith and gratitude. Is it any wonder that the early Jewish Christians saw in Moses a powerful foreshadowing of Christ's role as the



perfect mediator between God and sinful humanity? This is one reason why the Gospel of Matthew sets up clear parallels between Moses and Jesus. Like Moses, Jesus is threatened with death as an infant; like Moses, he spends forty days in the desert; like Moses, he delivers the Law from a mountain.

The Death of Moses

The death of Moses is told at the end of the Book of Deuteronomy. The account has all the characteristics of an epic hero's end (see 32:48—34:12): the hero's glimpse of the results of his labors (see 32:48–52), the hero's blessings on those in his care (see 33:1–29), a death somewhat shrouded in mystery (see 34:5–8), and an epitaph extolling the hero's greatness (see 34:10–2). It is a moving account that evokes feelings of both sadness and joy as this story of God's great prophet comes to an end.

The account begs an explanation of why God did not allow Moses to enter the Promised Land. God gives this reason: "Because both of you [Moses and Aaron] broke faith with me among the Israelites at the waters of Meribath-kadesh in the desert of Zin by failing to manifest my sanctity among the Israelites" (Deuteronomy 32:51). This incident is told in Numbers 20:7–12, but a careful reading reveals that the nature of the offense is not clear. Interpreters have made many suggestions as to what it might have been. The footnote in the New American Bible edition says it was "doubting God's mercy toward the ever-rebellious people." The *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* says two plausible offenses are that Moses struck the rock (twice!) instead of verbally ordering the rock to yield water, thus disobeying God's command; or that he spoke angrily to the assembly (see verse 10), casting a shadow on God's divine mercy.

Whatever the true nature of the offense, perhaps two lessons are to be learned from Moses' "punishment." First, we learn that no human person is without sin, even the greatest and holiest among us. We are reassured that God does not play favorites, and we will all be held accountable for our actions. Second, in a symbolic way, Moses' death overlooking the Promised Land reminds us that our true home is not in this broken world, no matter how enticing a place it may seem. Our eternal destiny and true home await us in Heaven.

(The sections on the birth of Moses and the call of Moses are adapted from *Encountering Ancient Voices: A Guide to Reading the Old Testament* by Corrine L. Carvalho, PhD [Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2006], pages 75–80. The remaining sections were written by Brian Singer-Towns.)

