

Moses at the Red Sea

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Moses sat on a rock that overlooked the shores of the Red Sea. The three-day journey by pack mule, east from his home in the Nile River valley, had brought him a full week of solitary contemplation on this windswept coast. He was considering his options, knowing he must make some decisions and act on them soon.

The situation had become untenable. It had been over a year since he assumed leadership of the Israelites. The initial nine miracles he performed had long since lost their luster—after all, the Israelites were all still slaves, still living in abject poverty. Their masters, as a result of the “plagues” strategy, had become angry and brutal. Since the first of the plagues occurred, the beatings by the guards had been applied more harshly and more randomly. Moses believed that if he unleashed his 10th and final plague, the Egyptian pharaoh would finally let his people go. But how could he kill the firstborn of anyone, let alone the firstborn of the whole kingdom? And what would his people do when they arrived here at the shores of the Red Sea?

The whole tribe seemed to be bickering. The expectations of imminent freedom since the arrival of Moses over a year ago had everyone impatient, wondering what was taking so long. The heads of some of the more powerful families, who had been so supportive just a year ago, were now talking about the lack of results they had experienced, about how

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they were worse off than ever before, and about the possible need for a change in leadership.

Aaron¹ had come to Moses some days earlier with news that after four years of work, enough boats had been built to carry about half of his people across the sea. “Half?” Moses questioned aloud to the sea. “How can I live with myself if I only lead half of us to freedom?” It would take another three years to build enough boats to save everyone. Cash flow was too low to purchase boats from the Africans to the south. Perhaps the women could secretly work in the papyrus scroll works after their Egyptian masters had left for the night. Papyrus scrolls, a product invented by the Egyptians, were highly prized outside of the empire and could easily be sold on the black market. Such a tactic would allow the Israelites to leave in perhaps a year and a half. However, the men couldn’t do it; they were exhausted from their daily working in the mud pits and from the other hard duties forced on them by their Egyptian masters. The women might be able to do it, but the great majority had never worked anywhere but in the home or in the fields, and the conservative elders would fight this idea adamantly. Furthermore, if anyone was caught, there was no doubt the punishment would be severe.

Joshua’s idea of a “ferry barge” that could carry 10 times the number of people that even the largest boat could carry was another option, but many criticized it as outlandish. Joshua had proposed to sail across the Red Sea with 15,000 paces of woven oiled rope that he would anchor at both this side and the other side so that barges could be pulled across. It was physically possible—Joshua had demonstrated

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the technology by pulling a boat across the Nile and back again—so perhaps men on these huge barges could pull themselves hand over hand across the Red Sea. Joshua had calculated that if they dedicated all of their extra resources to manufacturing rope, they could leave on barges within six months. However, should the rope break or a storm hit, the barges would be incapable of navigating themselves safely. They would have to leave before the beginning of the rainy season.

During secret meetings with a captain of a Hittite trade mission to the pharaoh, Moses had been offered passage for his people in exchange for helping the Hittites annex the promised land of Canaan into the Hittite empire. The Hittites had been harsh lords in the past, taxing their subjects to near poverty, but at least they promised that none of the tribes of Israel would be slaves. However, the Hittite captain made no such promises of freedom to their long-lost siblings, the Hebrews, who had remained behind in Canaan hundreds of years ago. Moses dreamed of returning and joining together with his Hebrew brethren to form one empire. He hoped for the Hebrews' welcome and help, not their enmity. Moses was also very

reluctant to turn over their birthright, their promised land of Canaan waiting for them by the sea, to Hittite governance in exchange for their freedom.

Then Moses once again pondered the waking dream he had had in which the Almighty, Great Creator of All, ensured the Israelites safe passage through the Red Sea to the far shores *if they could come up with no better solution of their own*. Moses also knew from his dream that if they used this miracle to obtain freedom, it would come at a guaranteed cost of wandering the desert for 40 years before finding their way home, a home that Moses would never live long enough to see.

The food supply was even more miserable than usual; and with more and more mouths to feed, it would be only a matter of time before people began to starve. The growing chaos made Moses feel nervous and uncomfortable. "Can I do this?" he asked aloud in desperation to the sky, his feelings of inadequacy surfacing again. He knew that he needed a way to get everyone to pull together, to cooperate. We have indeed grown into a great nation, thought Moses, but how do I manage to bring my people to freedom?

Appendix

The Exodus Story from the Old Testament

The Wheel of Time turns, and Ages come and pass, leaving memories that become legend. Legend fades to myth. —Robert Jordan, *The Eye of the World*

The story of the Exodus takes place about 1445 BC. Originally, the Israelites had prospered in Egypt. Joseph, of the coat of many colors, had even become the prime minister of the country. Those days, however, were long forgotten. Over many generations, the Israelites had become slaves to the pharaohs of Egypt. The current pharaoh feared the strength of their numbers (estimated at 2 million). Moses was the firstborn of an Israelite slave family, who saved his life from a "slaying of the firstborn" edict by the pharaoh when they put him in a basket and floated him in the Nile River. Moses, found as an infant by a royal family member, was raised in the

pharaoh's court. He later fell out of favor with the pharaoh, exiled from Egypt, and ended up living as a shepherd in the desert.

As he was tending his flocks in the desert, Moses saw a burning bush that was not consumed by the flames. He went to the bush, and God spoke to him from it: "Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt" (Exodus 3:10). God instructed Moses on what to do when he arrived in Egypt, and Moses agreed to speak to the pharaoh and demand that he release the Israelites.

Moses was initially reluctant to take on this task. He was not a good speaker and feared that he would not be able to present God's case to the pharaoh. God told Moses' brother Aaron to meet Moses in the desert

and travel into Egypt with him. God sent Aaron with Moses to act as Moses' voice: "And Aaron spake all the words which the LORD had spoken unto Moses, and did the signs in the sight of the people" (Exodus 4:30).

In Egypt, Moses, through Aaron, told the pharaoh to free the Israelites by command of the Lord. The pharaoh refused, saying he didn't know the Lord that Moses spoke of, and told the taskmasters to increase the labor burden on the Israelites. The Israelites blamed Moses and Aaron for their worsened conditions. Moses despaired and complained to God. God answered Moses and the Israelites: "Wherefore say unto the children of Israel, I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will rid you out of their bondage, and I will redeem you with a stretched out arm, and with great judgments" (Exodus 6:6).

Moses went before the pharaoh again and demanded the release of his people. The pharaoh laughed, and God, through Moses, turned all of the waters to blood. Another demand was made, another refusal, and another disaster followed. Plagues of frogs, gnats and flies, disease that killed their livestock, disease that caused the Egyptians boils, hailstones, locusts, and days of pitch darkness befell Egypt. The pharaoh promised to let the Israelites go if only Moses would bring an end to the plagues, but he didn't make good on the promise when the plagues were stopped.

Again, Moses and Aaron begged the pharaoh to capitulate and free the Israelites. Again he refused. Then the Lord told Moses that the next plague would take the firstborn of every Egyptian and the firstborn of all the Egyptians' animals. So that the Israelites would avoid the same fate, God instructed them through Moses to each sacrifice a lamb, prepare a special meal, and mark their doorposts with the blood of the lamb. Seeing the blood on the door, the angel of death would pass over their houses.

When the angel of death killed all the firstborn of Egypt, the pharaoh and the Egyptians begged the Israelites to leave. The Egyptians gave them all of their remaining wealth to speed them on their way. Moses led them into the wilderness and God showed them the way to go: "And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them

light; to go by day and night" (Exodus 13:21).

By the time the Israelites reached the Red Sea, the pharaoh had changed his mind about setting them free. He sent his armies after them and trapped them against the sea. The Israelites railed against Moses, thinking their death was certain. Despite all the disasters the Lord had brought against Egypt on the behalf of His people, they still doubted His ability and willingness to save them. Yet God was faithful to the Israelites: "And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the LORD caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided." And the children of Israel went into the midst of the sea upon the dry ground: and the waters were a wall unto them on their right hand, and on their left." (Exodus 14:21-22) The Israelites passed safely through the Red Sea with the Egyptians on their trail. When all the Israelites passed through, the walls of water collapsed in and the Egyptians were drowned. God's people were free from Egypt. Ultimately, it took the Israelites 40 years of wandering until they found their way back to their historical home, and were reunited with the Hebrews living in the promised land of Canaan.

THE HITTITES

The Hittites ruled a great empire that stretched from Mesopotamia to Syria and Palestine. Their empire was at its greatest from 1600 to 1200 BC, and even after the Assyrians gained control of Mesopotamia after 1300 BC, the Hittite cities and territories thrived independently until 717 BC, when the territories were finally conquered by other peoples.

The Hebrew scriptures have little to say about the Hittites, and the Egyptians regarded them as barbarians. In fact, from 1300 to 1200 BC, the Hittites waged a war against Egypt that drained both empires tragically. The Hittites were perhaps one of the most significant peoples in Mesopotamian history. Because their empire was so large and because their primary activity was commerce—trading with all the civilizations and peoples of the Mediterranean—the Hittites were the people primarily responsible for transmitting Mesopotamian thought, law, political structure, economic structure, and ideas around the Mediterranean, from Egypt to Greece.

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PAPYRUS

The writing surface papyrus, named after the plant from which it is made, was manufactured as early as the first Egyptian dynasty, circa 3100 BC. The emergence of writing and the concomitant use of papyrus appear to have been a necessary outcome of the imperial bureaucracy. Papyrus was invariably used by the Egyptians until the AD 800–1000, that is, for 4,000 years. The papyrus product was made by tearing off the “skin” of the papyrus reed. The strips thus formed were first beaten and dried in the sun and then were laid lengthwise and crosswise to attain strength, perhaps with the aid of some glue (made of plants). Finally, the papyrus was stretched and smoothed to be fit for use.

Endnotes

¹Aaron helped his brother Moses speak to the Israelites and the Pharaoh. Moses had a lifelong speech impediment. As a child, Moses had been put to a test by the court magicians. Two braziers—one full of gold and the other hot coals—were put before him to see which he

ROPE

There is evidence of rope being made as far back as 17,000 BC. These early ropes were twisted by hand or braided. The earliest indication of any type of mechanical advantage in making rope comes from early Egyptian evidence relating to the craft. The Egyptians tied rope-making material to a piece of finished rope that was weighted and tied to a stick; the material was then spun around the stick. The spinning imparted a twist to the strand. Three twisted strands would then be twisted together in the opposite direction. Finished rope was oiled for use in water.

would take. If Moses took the gold, he would have to be killed. An angel guided his hand to the coals, and he put one in his mouth, saving his life but ruining his ability to speak clearly.