

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 9

MOSES TO SINAI

Chapters 1 - 19

I. The Link with Genesis.

The Genesis story concludes with Joseph rescuing his father's family---seventy adults plus children---from famine and relocating them in Egypt. Generations pass and Jacob's descendants become the Egyptians' slaves---setting the stage for the greatest rescue, or salvation story, of the Old Testament.

II. Moses, the Would-Be-Rescuer.

The world has seen many instances of slavery, and of liberation from bondage. But only the Children of Israel---also known as the Hebrews, after the name of Eber, an ancient ancestor---have stood helplessly by and watched while their God single-handedly overthrew the oppressor and set his people free. This mighty deliverance is the defining story of the Old Testament Scriptures. Not until the Great Rescue itself will God perform a greater saving deed.

With the passing of generations, the Hebrews multiply into more than a million population. The Egyptian Pharaoh, or king, senses in Israel a potential ally for Egypt's enemies. In desperation, Pharaoh orders the Egyptian midwives to kill every new born Hebrew boy. But the midwives fear God and disobey the king. Finally, Pharaoh orders the Hebrews to throw every new born son into the Nile River, but to keep the daughters alive.

A. A Defiant Mother.

A year or more goes by and one Hebrew mother decides to defy the king's order. For three months, she hides her baby at home. Then, perhaps because he becomes too noisy to hide safely, she makes a wicker basket, lays her baby in the floating crib and places it among the weeds by the bank of the Nile. The mother returns home, but the baby's older sister waits nearby to see what will occur. This is the place where the Egyptian princess regularly comes to bathe.

As expected, the king's daughter discovers the baby and decides to adopt him as her own son. Unaware of their identities and at the suggestion of the baby's sister, the princess hires the baby's own mother to care for the child. The princess names her adopted son Moses. Moses grows up, enjoying all the privileges that belong to the son of Pharaoh's daughter.

B. Moses Frees and Flees.

One day, after Moses is grown, he sees an Egyptian beating a slave. Moses kills the Egyptian and buries him in the sand. Pharaoh learns what Moses has done and tries to kill him in return, but Moses escapes from Egypt and hides in the country of Midian. In Midian, Moses rescues seven sisters from harassment at a community well. The sisters are daughters of Jethro, a Midianite priest, who becomes Moses' father-in-law.

Moses, who once envisioned himself as a deliverer, becomes a shepherd instead, tending Jethro's sheep. Moses pursues this lonely wilderness occupation for 40 years, as his natural ambition and self-reliance slowly drain away. Meanwhile, back in Egypt, the Pharaoh dies. The oppressed Children of Israel sigh under their hardships and cry out in despair.

III. God Comes Down To Deliver.

A. A Divine Encounter.

One day, as Moses pastures his flock near Mount Horeb, also called Mount Sinai, an angel of God appears to him in a blazing fire from the middle of a desert bush. Moses watches the bush, which does not burn up. God speaks to Moses from the bush, identifying himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He has heard the Hebrews' cries for help in Egypt, God says, and he is ready to deliver them from slavery. Then comes the startling announcement---God intends to use Moses to accomplish this task.

The now-humbled Moses protests that he is unable to do anything, and God assures Moses that he will go with him. At this, Moses asks God's name. "I AM THAT I AM," God replies. This mysterious phrase affirms that God is unlimited by time and ability, and it signifies his ever-present power to save. God also tells Moses his "memorial-name," the name which forever reminds God's people of his covenant. It is a

name without vowels in Hebrew, a name so holy that the Jews do not pronounce it. In English letters, it is YHWH or JHVH--- translated sometimes as "Yahweh," "Jehovah" or "the LORD."

On his way to Egypt, Moses meets his brother Aaron, whom God has sent to be his spokesman. When they arrive in Egypt, Moses and Aaron call together the tribal elders of the Hebrews and report all that God has said. The elders believe Moses and worship God who has heard their cry for help. Moses and Aaron tell Pharaoh that Yahweh, the God of Israel commands: "Let my people go." Pharaoh, who is furious, refuses.

B. Power Play of Plagues.

Moses and Aaron offer Pharaoh a second chance to obey God, but the king will hear nothing of it. God then unleashes a series of ten plagues on the Egyptians---a horrendous sequence of every natural catastrophe that occasionally upset Egyptian life, plus other disasters the Egyptians would never imagine. The plagues demonstrate a supernatural source, supernatural timing, supernatural intensity and supernatural selectivity in target.

More than all that, however, the plagues represent warfare between Israel's God and all the gods of Egypt. For these plagues attack and disturb and destroy everything that the Egyptians worship and consider holy. They arrive to demonstrate that there is but one true God. He is Yahweh, the LORD, God of the Hebrews. Because of these plagues, his name will become known throughout the earth.

To begin with, the Nile River---the life-giving irrigation source for all of Egypt's crops---turns to blood, the universal symbol of death. The frogs leave their normal watery habitats and hop into houses, invading bedrooms and kitchens. Pesky insects---first as crawling larvae, then as buzzing flies---swarm everywhere throughout Egypt. Soon no location, indoor or out, is safe. Nowhere, that is, except the area of Goshen, where the Hebrew people live. From this plague forward, God distinguishes between the Egyptians, whom he afflicts in each case, and his own people, who remain unaffected.

Pharaoh briefly relents in word, then changes his mind. Deadly disease kills Egypt's grazing livestock. Moses throws handfuls of soot into the air. As the wind carries the soot over Egypt, boils erupt on the bodies of the Egyptian people and their domestic animals. Moses repeats God's demand to the Pharaoh, whose heart God hardens, and Pharaoh again refuses to obey.

The next day, hailstorm strikes Egypt with a severity never before

recorded. Pounding rain pummels the land. Lightning repeatedly strikes the earth. The storm kills even more of Egypt's remaining livestock and demolishes its agricultural harvest for that season. God tells Moses that there is more to come.

Moses again warns Pharaoh, who again hardens his heart. For a night and a day, God sends an east wind over Egypt, bringing an invasion of locusts that cover the light of the sun. The locusts eat the few remaining crops, but they do not stop with that. They then fill the Egyptians' houses. Pharaoh summons Moses and asks him to pray for God to halt the plague. Moses intercedes for Pharaoh and God shifts the wind to blow the locusts out of Egypt. God again hardens stubborn Pharaoh's heart, and the king does not let God's people go.

Moses next stretches out his hand and God sends a thick darkness over the land of Egypt---a darkness so dense that it can be felt. The Egyptians cannot leave their homes for the darkness, but the Children of Israel enjoy normal light. To the Egyptians, it appears that Ra, the sun-god, must have died. Not for one day only does Ra disappear, but for two days, and then for three. (When God brings about the Great Rescue centuries later, Satan seems to have remembered this humiliation, and tries to turn it back on God. The Great Rescuer also dies for three days and his followers lose all hope.)

C. The 'Pass Over.'

One final plague remains, God tells Moses before Pharaoh expels the Israelites out of Egypt by royal decree. Pharaoh expels the Israelites out of Egypt by royal decree. About midnight, God will pass through the land of Egypt, killing the firstborn of every animal and human in the kingdom. This horrible judgment is all-inclusive, from the first-born of the king on his throne---the Pharaoh's successor, whom Egyptian priests hailed as an incarnate god---to the lowliest slave-girl in the land.

Moses instructs the Israelites to kill a lamb for each household, to roast the meat, and to sprinkle some of the animal's blood down the sides and across the tops of their front doors. Each household is to eat a hasty meal comprised of the roasted lamb, accompanied by unleavened bread and bitter herbs. They are to eat with their traveling clothes on, with sandals on their feet and with walking staffs in hand.

On this night God will see the lamb's blood on each door, and he will "pass over" those houses as he destroys the firstborn of all Egypt. The

Israelites are to mark this event hereafter by making it the beginning month of their calendar. They also are to commemorate God's rescue from slavery by an annual Passover feast. In one house after another across Egypt, the first born child dies, and a wail goes up that echoes throughout the land. Pharaoh finally orders the Hebrews to leave his land. They march out, their animals in tow, wearing Egyptian clothing and carrying Egyptian jewelry of all kinds.

D. Pharaoh's finish.

As the liberated Hebrews approach the Red Sea, Pharaoh leads his army with 600 chariots in pursuit of the escaping slaves. God sends a great wind and divides the sea, and the Children of Israel march through on dry land. The Egyptians drive their chariots into the dry sea bed behind the fleeing Hebrews. God returns the waters to their normal state, drowning Pharaoh and his pursuing army. The Israelites praise God and honor Moses.

IV. On To Mount Sinai.

A. God's Miraculous Provision.

Not even Moses, who grew up in Pharaoh's court, is prepared for the task he now faces. The people are no longer slaves, but, as they quickly realize, that is only half of the story. Accustomed to a predictable life, though often harsh, they now find themselves in an inhospitable and unknown wilderness. As their limited rations run out, they grumble and panic. Time after time, God provides for their needs.

Quail fly directly to the Israelites' camp and cover the ground. When the morning dew evaporates, it leaves as residue a mysterious flake-like substance that is both tasty and nutritious. The people call it "manna," Hebrew for "What is it?" The manna continues throughout their wilderness wanderings, then stops abruptly when they finally enter the Land of Canaan.

When the people complain of thirst, God tells Moses to strike a cliff with his shepherd's staff. Moses obeys and water flows from the rock. Creating streams in the desert. When faced with attack by a marauding desert tribe known as the Amalekites, God empowers the Israelites' hastily-formed and untrained army, and the attackers flee in defeat.

B. The Majestic Mountain.

Less than 90 days after they leave Egypt, the Israelites come to Mount Sinai, the same location where God had appeared to Moses in the burning bush. God instructs Moses to prepare the people for a divine encounter.

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