

Chapter 1
The Pioneering Persons
Moses, the Covenant-Maker

Moses, the first of the pioneers of Israelite faith, lived during the period when the people of Israel were enslaved in Egypt. These tribes, who traced their lineage to Jacob, son of Isaac son of Abraham, had come into Egypt during a time of famine some generations earlier. Having flourished while Joseph, Jacob's son was prime minister of Egypt, their position had deteriorated steadily until under Ramses II, whose long reign covered the years 1290 to 1224 BC, they had become mere slaves of the powerful Pharaoh.

One of Ramses' first acts when he came to the throne was to relocate his capital to a site in the Nile Delta. He chose this location partly because his family had had long associations with this territory but primarily because it commanded the entrance to both Egypt and Canaan. Here he could defend his country against hostile incursions from the east, and from here he could send out his own armies to re-establish Egyptian control over Canaan and the lands beyond. Ramses—one of Egypt's abler rulers and certainly its most vain; he placed statues depicting his royal presence at every crucial point throughout Egypt, numbers of which are standing still today in Cairo, Luxor, and Abu Simbul—used slaves to build his cities, and since the alien Israelites were already living in nearby Goshen, they were incorporated into the slave-gangs in Ramses' construction projects.

In or near this newly-built capital city, at some undated time in the reign of Ramses, Moses was born. His mother was not able to keep the child, however; the Israelite population was increasing so rapidly that the Pharaoh had ordered all male Israelite babies to be exterminated at birth. His mother placed the infant in a rush basket, sealed it tight with clay and tar, and hid him among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. He was rescued from the river by an Egyptian princess, who reared him in the court of Pharaoh himself. Moses, however, continued to think of himself as an Israelite; and when as a young man he saw an Egyptian overseer mistreating Hebrew slaves, he struck out at the overseer and killed him. The deed became known, and Moses was forced to leave Egypt. He fled into the nearby wilderness where he lived with the tribe of Kenites, a clan who may have considered Cain to be their founder.

In his lifetime, Moses was to make three original contributions to the Judeo-Christian faiths. The first came while he was in exile among the Kenites; while there he received a new understanding of the divine name of God.

It happened when Moses was in the field tending sheep. His attention was drawn to a bush that appeared to be burning but was not consumed by the fire. In the Old Testament, fire was frequently a symbol for some revelation of God, and Moses was immediately recognized it as such. He stood before the bush and received directions for the mission he was about to perform for God and God's people. Moses at once wanted to know whether his call was from God so he asked a question common to Egypt in that day; among no other people of antiquity was the search for a hidden divine name as intense as it was among the Egyptians. Moses said to God, "What is your name?" God replied with an enigmatic manner: "I am who I am. Tell them, I am has sent you."

In the Old Testament this strange phrase, "I am who I am," is the self-designation of God where God is giving an insight into God's character: "I will do what I will do." In other words, God controls God's own destiny; God is the one who can say, "I will put into practice the plans I conceive." Can any other than God say this? No human is able to make this assertion; no one has such complete control over his or her own life as to support this claim. We are always bounded by other people, other events, by our own place, our own personality, by the conditions of the time in which we live; these place limitations, and we are able to say, "I will do what I will do and bring into being what I intend."

II.

Moses' second original contribution was his demonstration of God as a deliverer. With Moses as his agent, God's character as deliverer was clearly seen in Israel's exodus from Egypt.

The impact of the exodus can be described in a few words. One day the people of Israel were enslaved in Egypt struggling to build the cities of Ramses under the direction of their Egyptian taskmasters. A few days later, the Israelites were in the desert, free to worship their God and to follow God's directions. They said, "God is our deliverer; God has delivered us from slavery in Egypt."

The delivery was dramatic. Pharaoh had not wanted to let this people go; their labor as slaves was too valuable to the Egyptians to be surrendered voluntarily. At Moses' insistence, however, and under the influences of deadly plagues that engulfed Egypt one after another, Pharaoh was persuaded to send the Israelites into the wilderness. When they were about to leave, Pharaoh changed his mind and sent his troops and chariots to bring them back. As the Israelites drew near to the edge of the water, they were able to pass unharmed through the sea; by the time the Egyptians and their chariots had entered upon the same territory, the winds had blown back the waves, and the horse and their riders were drowned. These covering waters created a barrier between Egyptians and Israelites, and the Egyptians could no longer exercise sovereignty over Israel. Instead, God was their sovereign; God only was the one to whom they had to answer for their own lives.

The precise nature of this deliverance is difficult to describe. The difficulty arose because the story was told over and over again in Israelites circles, and as the years passed there was an

increasing tendency to stress the miraculous aspect of it. Such an interpretation need not be given it and may not have been in the earliest accounts. Plagues of frogs, gnats and flies are common occurrences in the Nile Delta, and hail, locusts, and darkness are natural phenomena that recur with regularity in the region.

Even the deliverance at the edge of the water may have been the result of natural phenomena. The sea in question may not have been the Red Sea at all but the Sea of Reeds, a marshy area of fresh water that lay between the Mediterranean and the Gulf of Suez. The water covering this land was not particularly deep, and travelers to Egypt within the last two centuries have seen this water blown back from time to time. This very thing may have occurred when Moses and the Israelites were perched, precariously, on the edge of the Reed Sea. Nevertheless, while from our vantage point we may be able to give a natural meaning to each of the events, this is not the interpretation that Moses and the people of Israel gave to them. Scripture stresses these things: that there was a deliverance, that God was the deliverer, and that in God's act of deliverance God created a people of God. In Moses' second original contribution he became the agent through whom the true character of God was made known, namely that God is the one who delivers God's people from those things to which they are in bondage.

III.

Moses' third contribution to our faith involved the covenant God made through him with Israel.

Moses brought his usual dramatic flair to this event. He led the liberated people to the base of Mount Sinai where he had them prepare themselves for three days. On the morning of the third day there were thunder and lightning, and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and a loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke and the whole mountain quaked. As the sound of the trumpet grew louder, Moses spoke and God answered him in thunder.

The drama of the event may obscure the most important occurrence of that day: Here Moses took a form of organization of the political life of his time and applied it to the relationship between God and God's people. This application was unique; with the exception of the acts of Jesus himself, it is the most important contribution ever made in the history of religions to describe the dealings God has with humankind. At Mount Sinai Moses bound Israel in a covenant-treaty with God.

This suzerainty treaty, which Moses employed, was operative in the Mideast at this time and within Moses' lifetime had been introduced into Egyptian affairs. The suzerain, or sovereign, who enacted the treaty was no mere ordinary king but a monarch who claimed authority over other kings. Suzerainty treaties were the means by which the reigning king reached out to bring smaller and weaker nations under his control and protection. These covenants contained the following five parts:

- A preamble that identified the king who gave the treaty.
- A prologue which gave a detailed presentation of the historical relation between the great king and his vassal and which always stressed the benevolence of the great king toward the vassal.
- Stipulations of the covenant. Chief among them was the prohibition against the vassal having relationships with any other king. So long, however, as the vassal did not recognize any king above the great king, he was given reasonable freedom in the conduct of the internal affairs of his own kingdom.
- Sealing the covenant: Each contained a statement that the document should be read publicly at stated intervals, to remind the vassal king and his people of their relationship to the great king.
- Blessings and curses: Those who kept the covenant were blessed and those who broke it were to be severely punished.

All five parts of the suzerainty treaty are present in the agreement between God and God's people as delivered by Moses. When God spoke from the mountain, God said to the people, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me." In this God identified as the great king who gave the covenant, and described God's relations with Israel, namely, that God was the God who brought them from slavery in Egypt. Then, in the familiar words of the Ten Commandments, Israel was given the stipulations by which the people were to live. Later portions of the Book of Exodus completed the presentation: Blessings and curses were given for those who kept the covenant and for those who broke it, and a statement was added that the covenant was to be read publicly at stated intervals. This action of Moses was unique. No other people of that time interpreted their national life so completely in terms of a solemn covenant with a single divine sovereign as did Israel under Moses.

Moses was soon to meet opposition from his own people. It began the moment he came down the mountain with the stones of the covenant in hand to find the Israelites worshipping the golden calf; it continued when the people cried in the wilderness for meat; and it came to a climax in open rebellion when spies returned from Canaan with the report that though the land flowed with milk and honey its cities were too well fortified to capture and its people too strong to challenge. In desperation Moses interceded before God for the rebellious people. "The Lord is slow to anger and abounding in mercy," he said in prayer. "Pardon the iniquity of this people, I pray thee, according to the greatness of thy steadfast love, according as thou hast forgiven this people from Egypt even until now." At this prayer God relented and affirmed the decision to bring Israel to the Promised Land. Except for Joshua and Caleb, however, the only two spies who had insisted the people proceed on their march into Canaan, God would permit no person of the wilderness generation to enter the land. Moses was included in that prohibition. Moses—called of God and loyal, agent of the Lord's deliverance of the people and mediator of the covenant, who loved this people with such intensity that he himself faced Yahweh's anger to plead their cause and to petition the Lord their rebellion might be forgiven, who walked at their head as they made their torturous way through the world's most desolate desert and who risked his life in battle on their behalf—this man saw from the distance only the land of Canaan,

and he died in the foreign land of Moab and was buried in an unmarked grave. He was the first in the long line of those servants of the Lord who suffered in God's good cause; as a later prophet was to say,

He was wounded for our transgressions.
He was bruised for our iniquities.
He poured out his soul to death
and was numbered with the transgressors,
yet he bore the sins of many
and made intercession for the transgressors.

The impact of Moses, the pioneering person, was not confined to these chapters in Exodus and Numbers, however; it continued to emerge throughout the rest of Scripture. When Elijah challenged King Ahab, he returned to the mountain of God, where formerly Moses had stood, to receive inspiration from both God and God's spokesperson. In the time of reform under King Josiah, when Judah erased all pagan influences from her life and turned anew to the God of Israel, Moses was the guide and inspiration for these reforms. The prophet Isaiah of Babylon, in the exile of Judah, invoked again the divine name that had sounded under Moses, and the message of God's deliverance was powerfully proclaimed once more. There was a later time under Nehemiah when, in the name of Moses, the people were called to renew their allegiance to God as Moses in the wilderness had called them to loyalty to Yahweh. In the New Testament as well, the name of Moses is mentioned. Most significantly it came in the transfiguration of Jesus. Jesus had gone up to a high mount similar in importance to the mountain of Sinai, and in the presence of his disciples he had been transfigured. Two figures out of the past appeared and conversed with Jesus; one of them was Moses. The influence of Moses began in his own lifetime and extended into the time of Jesus Christ himself, who was to take each of Moses' contributions to religion and in his unique way make them central in the life of his own unique people.