

# Moses: earth's meekest man

## 17. Before the mount

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*Moses and Israel reach Mount Sinai, where, accompanied by awe-inspiring demonstrations of God's power, they are given the commandments that are the basis of God's law.*

**A**T LAST, after over two months and 120 miles of meanderings through the wilderness of Sinai, guided by the cloud of Yahweh's presence, the children of Israel, with Moses at their head, arrived at the Mountain of God. As the cloud rested upon its top, the people spread out their tents, and settled in for what would prove to be almost a year's stay. As Cunningham Geikie writes:

"Safe in the bosom of the mountains, the Hebrews were now ready for the higher organisation required to constitute them a free, independent and self-governing nation. In this, their peculiar relation to God determined the character of the institutions needed. He had redeemed them from slavery, cared for them in the wilderness, and aided them in battle; borne Himself indeed to them as their divine guardian, and marked them as the special objects of His regard. Nor could they fail to be impressed with the dignity conferred on them; for what other people had such a Protector? Egypt, with all its glory and its host of tutelary divinities, had been utterly humbled before Him. Until now unknown among the crowd of gods acknowledged by the nations, Yahweh had shown Himself to be greater than all, and had utterly put them to shame. This Great God above all gods was the Leader and Strength of Israel.

"To be thus the Chosen People involved, however, many obligations on their side. They enjoyed this amazing honour as the descendants of one who had left his native country that he might be faithful to his religion, and who had received the promises they were now to realise, as a reward for his obedience to the Divine will, and the honour he rendered it in his daily life. It was no less obligatory that they, as a nation, should like their great forefather, 'obey His voice and keep His charge, His commandments, His statutes, and His

laws;' (Genesis 26:5), and to secure this it was necessary that these should be so plainly made known, as to furnish a permanent standard and rule of conduct for them in succeeding ages".<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, to meet the God Who was their Saviour would be no light thing and the most salutary experience of their lives, unmatched by any other in the whole history of mankind. After it the people would plead for it never to be repeated, and even faithful Moses would admit, "I exceedingly fear and quake" (Heb. 12:21).

### Preparing to meet with God

The preparation alone served to emphasise the intensity and gravity of the situation. The Egyptians and their gods had been destroyed by distant encounters with the Almighty. Israel were now to experience His very presence. And Moses, in ascending to higher things both physically and spiritually, became the mediator of a covenant between God and His people in the greatest ministry until the Prophet greater than he should come:

"Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, 'This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself. Now if you obey Me fully and keep My covenant, then out of all nations you will be My treasured possession. Although the whole earth is Mine, you will be for Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites'" (Ex. 19:3-6).\*

What a unique privilege; to be first among the nations in relation to God, and to be His ministers for all mankind! No wonder Moses lost no time in assembling the elders of Israel to tell them about it, or that, with such a prospect before them, they

1. Cunningham Geikie, *Hours with the Bible*, Vol. 2, p. 264.

\* Quotations from Exodus 19 and 20 are from the NIV.



**Bedouin and camel on the plain in front of the traditional Mount Sinai.**

responded together, "We will do everything the LORD has said"—although, alas, their acquiescence proved but temporary.

Returning up the mountain, Moses reported what all the elders had said, whereupon the Lord told Moses, "I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that people will hear Me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you".

But now the time had come for precise instructions to be observed in their meeting with Yahweh:

"Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and be ready by the third day, because on that day the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people. Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, 'Be careful that you do not go up the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death. He shall surely be stoned or shot with arrows; not a hand is to be laid on him. Whether man or animal, he shall not be permitted to live.'

Only when the ram's horn sounds a long blast may they go up to the mountain".

It was not right that the children of Israel should meet their God casually, without due preparation and reverence such as would have been accorded earthly dignitaries. Whoever would have dared to appear before a king as the great unwashed? And whoever could possibly appear before the Holiest of all without having restrained themselves even for a little while from the lust of the flesh? Thus sanctified for two days, the people awaited the dawn of the third day in godly fear.

### **The giving of the Ten Commandments**

When it came it began with thunder and lightning around the thick cloud on the top of the mountain, accompanied by a trumpet blast on the ram's horn louder than any human could have blown it, for that was God's signal to the people to approach the foot of the mountain within the boundaries already prescribed. They were to be near enough to hear the voice of Yahweh and witness His almighty power, but not nigh to Him, on pain of

death. For even as they watched, the awfulness of God's presence was revealed in fire that burst out of the cloud amid smoke and roaring like that of a furnace, as if fulfilling the first part of Abraham's sacrificial dream (Gen. 15:17).<sup>2</sup> Greater by far, however, was the roaring of this furnace, for it continued with mounting ferocity until Horeb itself began to tremble violently, and all the while the trumpet grew louder and louder.

Then Moses spoke, and the voice of God answered him, telling him to bring Aaron with him and warn the consecrated priests not to break their bounds. For the moment had come for the giving of God's Law, starting with the famous ten 'words', or commandments, to be a guide for Jew and Christian alike throughout the ages. Indeed, many ancient churches in this country still display them on their walls, painted on either wood or stone as a perpetual reminder of the Divine code. There is no need to rehearse them here. Many of our older readers born before the Second World War learned them by rote while at infant school at a time when they were still considered an essential part of every child's education. Would that it were so still! For the Ten Commandments incorporate all that is needed for a man to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly before God.

God comes first because He is first, and if He were to withdraw His spirit and His breath all flesh would perish together. Therefore His Name must be hallowed and His unique sanctity observed, for He is a jealous God, merciful to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commandments, but punishing only to a few generations the sins of their fathers.

The principle of a holy sabbath of rest must be maintained, being grounded in the work of creation itself, a weekly opportunity for spiritual and physical refreshment. (How sad that Christendom today observes it mainly for the latter and increasingly ignores the former!)

Honourable human relations begin in the family, especially towards those who brought

us into the world, and then spread out to all mankind. Life itself is not cheap, and should not be violently taken away. The property of others is inviolate, as also is another's good reputation. Covetousness of anything belonging to another man, from his wife to his donkey, implies dissatisfaction with what God and honest dealing would provide.

No decalogue in all history has provided such a seal as this on the sinful impulses of mankind that have led to the wicked state of the world in our own day. Their promulgation by the voice of God against the background of a mountain on fire caused trembling and fear in the hearts and minds of those who witnessed it. They stayed at a distance and pleaded with Moses never to have to undergo such an ordeal again. "Speak to us yourself", they said, "and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die".

Moses, who had himself experienced all the terrors of the occasion, nevertheless comforted them, saying, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning". Then he once more approached the thick darkness where God was.

[\(To be continued\)](#)

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2. In his sleep "when the sun was going down", Abraham experienced "an horror of great darkness" typifying his death, after which his "seed" would be strangers in a land that was not theirs, that is, Egypt, and would serve with rigour. But God would judge that nation, and bring out the children of Abraham with great substance, back to their own land. In token of these things, a smoking furnace and a burning lamp passed between the pieces of the sacrifice that Abraham had laid out upon the ground. Both were symbols of the glory of God revealed; first, in the smoking furnace at the giving of the Law, and, second, in the burning lamp representing the Lord Jesus Christ, the true Seed of Abraham, whose light shone "without a cloud between".