

# Moses: earth's meekest man

## 6. Return to Egypt

John Mitchell

*After forty years of exile, Moses at last returns to Egypt, accompanied by his brother Aaron, and convinces the elders of Israel that the time has come for God to save them from their bondage. Yet when the brothers confront Pharaoh with the request to 'let My people go', it is rejected and the bondage made harder, turning the people against Moses and discouraging Moses himself.*

**W**HEN MOSES, having been relieved for the time being of family responsibilities, set out from his overnight lodging place on his way to meet his brother Aaron at "the mountain of God", he could scarcely have anticipated the extent of his pivotal role as God's plenipotentiary. Dealing with the Egyptians and with his own people was to occupy the remaining third of Moses' life as he demonstrated before all mankind that God rules in the kingdom of men, however outwardly powerful they might appear to be, and then went on to lead and to guide God's chosen people to the land and kingdom He had prepared for them.

As he strode on, staff in hand, lacking even one sword as compared with the thousands that were available to Pharaoh, not to mention all his chariots and horsemen, Moses must to any human eye have seemed the unlikeliest challenger ever to face the most powerful nation on earth. Yet, his hesitations and his forebodings behind him, Moses began his endurance in his appointed work "as seeing Him Who is invisible" (Heb. 11:27).

### **The brothers meet**

The rendezvous in Horeb with his older brother had been arranged for them both by God. "Go into the desert to meet Moses"\* had been the instruction to Aaron, who had been on his way even before Moses left Midian. So they met at the mountain of God for the first time in forty years, and what a meeting that must have been! Except for the fact that Aaron kissed Moses, nothing is recorded in Scripture of what passed personally between them; but who can doubt that there took place much catching up on family affairs!

Unless there had been some means of intercourse between them during Moses' exile, which

seems unlikely, both had been starved of information concerning their kith and kin, especially Moses. What, for example, had happened to Amram and Jochebed? And had they suffered at all at the 'downfall' of Moses? Could they be yet alive? And what of Miriam, the brothers' older sister? And, indeed, how had the whole family fared during

the intervening years of slavery under the cruel heel of the Egyptian power? None of these inner and private aspects is mentioned in the Scripture story for the very good reason that they are not germane to the purpose of God. Like the affairs of the Apostle Paul in relation to his parents when he fell from favour before the leaders of the Jews, they are personal, silent, left out.

After the brothers had embraced, the record takes up again with the great commission God had ordained for them: "Moses told Aaron everything the LORD had sent him to say, and also about all the miraculous signs He had commanded him to perform" (Ex. 4:28). Then they made their way together across the Egyptian frontier to the land of Goshen, and thence to the muddy delta of the River Nile, where the children of Israel were engaged in their forced labour of making bricks for their Egyptian overlords.

### **Moses speaks to his people**

Forty years had not diminished Israel's servitude, but neither had it taken away their faith in the God of their fathers, or in His power to save. They had preserved their ancient hierarchies and semblances of worship and responded immediately to the call of Moses and Aaron to a great representative meeting with all the elders of the people. Exactly what transpired in it is not recorded, but there is no doubt that it followed the procedures outlined to Moses before he left Midian.

First there was to be the word of the Lord, and then the signs following. Aaron was the mouthpiece, but the message was as from the lips of Moses, and began with his experience at the

---

\* This and other quotations from Exodus 4-6 are from the NIV.

burning bush: "The LORD [Yahweh], the God of your fathers—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob—has sent me to you . . . [He] appeared to me and said: I have watched over you and have seen what has been done to you in Egypt. And I have promised to bring you up out of your misery in Egypt into the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—a land flowing with milk and honey".

What resonances that statement alone would have in the minds of the elders of Israel! Here was no upstart leader of rebellion against the power of Egypt, but one come to remind them of the promises made to their fathers; to Abraham that he should possess the land, north south, east and west (Gen. 13:14); to Isaac and Jacob that the nation should come through them (26:24; 28:3,4); and to Jacob that God would surely go down to Egypt with them, and as surely bring them back again (46:3,4). Such reminders must have been as music to the ears of the elders of Israel, bowed down with many years of repression and slavery.

But could it really be true? And was Moses the man he said he was; formerly a prince in Egypt, now become God's agent in their midst? What sign had he to establish his authenticity and his bona fides? They had listened intently, now they had to be convinced. Moses stepped forward before them all and threw his staff upon the ground. It became a serpent, the very same from which he had fled at the burning bush. Then he took it by the tail and it turned back into a staff in his hand. This, God had explained to him beforehand, was so that they might believe that Yahweh, the God of their fathers, had appeared to him. Next Moses put his hand into his cloak, and when he took it out again it was leprous as snow in its whiteness. But when he returned it to his cloak and took it out for a second time, it was restored, like the rest of his flesh.

Whether these two signs sufficed to convince the elders is not stated. If not, there was the third, like a threefold cord that is not easily broken. Moses would have taken some water from the Nile, the life blood of the land of Egypt, and have poured it on the ground, whereupon it would indeed have become blood. The elders were convinced, if not by two miracles then by three, and they believed: "And when they heard that the LORD was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshipped".

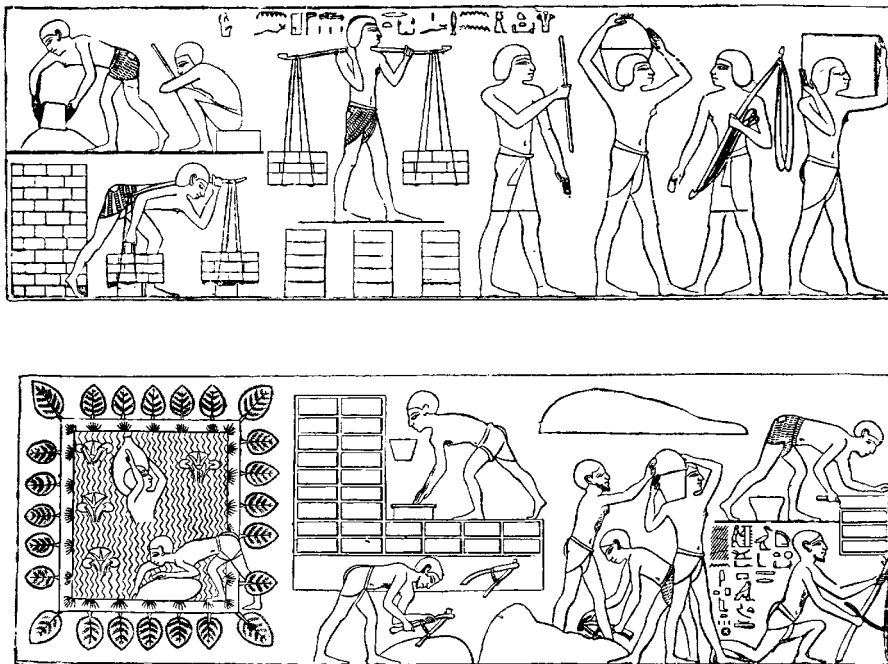
## **An interview with Pharaoh**

Acknowledged now as the national representatives of the children of Israel, and of their God, Moses and Aaron sought an interview with Pharaoh, and when it was granted they made a request in the name of their God. The approach was true, and in a sense diplomatic, because all nations, including Egypt, said and did things in the names of their gods. "The LORD [Yahweh], the God of Israel, says: 'Let My people go, so that they may hold a festival to Me in the desert'", asserted Moses.

But the reception he had from Pharaoh was frosty to say the least. He said, "Who is the LORD [Yahweh], that I should obey Him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD [Yahweh] and I will not let Israel go". The statement that he did not know the God of the Israelites could be taken to mean either that he had never heard of Him (which was possible), or that he would not acknowledge Him. How could the God of what had been a wandering tribe compare with the mighty gods of the great kingdom of Egypt?

But Moses and Aaron insisted, "The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Now let us take a three-day journey into the desert to offer sacrifices to the LORD [Yahweh] our God, or He may strike us with plagues or with the sword". No sacrifices sacred to themselves, yet so abhorrent to the Egyptians, could be offered in the delta area. The Hebrews needed both space and privacy for what they had to do. And was there not more than a hint of the power of their God, as it was soon to be displayed in Egypt, in the reference to plagues and the sword?

Pharaoh, however, would have none of it. It was all a ploy to gain for the Israelites rest from their work. "Why are you taking the people away from their labours?", he demanded of Moses and Aaron. "Look, the people of the land are now numerous, and you are stopping them from working". It was a disappointing and humiliating end to this first interview with the king of Egypt, but worse was to follow. That same day Pharaoh gave this order to the slave drivers and foremen in charge of the people: "You are no longer to supply the people with straw for making bricks; let them go and gather their own straw. But require them to make the same number of bricks as before; don't reduce the quota. They are lazy; that is why they are crying out, 'Let us go and sacrifice to our God.' Make the work harder for the men so that they keep working and pay no attention to lies".



BRICK-MAKING IN EGYPT, UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF TASKMASTERS

(Exod. i. 14; 5. 13).

From a series of wall paintings in a tomb at Abd-el-Gürnah, representing the foreign captives of Thothmes III. employed in building the Temple of Amun at Thebes. Among the inscriptions these words occur : "The taskmaster saith to the labourers 'The stick is in my hand ; be not idle !'"

Scene I. — Inscription : "Captives whom his Majesty carried away, building the Temple of his father Amun." A man emptying a bucket of mud ; a taskmaster with stick looking on. Two men carrying loads of bricks, slung from yokes. A taskmaster with uplifted rod ; two men carrying mud in vessels, and another with yoke and slings.

Scene II. — Here we see two men fetching water in large jars from a pond full of water-lilies ; two others cutting off portions of the clay ; another carrying a load of it to the moulder, who is just turning a brick out of his wooden mould ; another fixing his cutter ; and another settling the bricks in rows to dry. The inscription states that the work is "for the new building of the storehouse of the god Amun of Apt in Thebes."

Reprinted from *Light from the East, or The Witness of the Monuments*, C. J. Ball, 1899.

It was a hard message for the foremen, who were not Egyptians but Hebrews, to convey to their own people: "Go and get your own straw wherever you can find it, but your work will not be reduced at all". The edict could not have come at a worse time. The fact that there was straw to be gleaned shows it was in the springtime around April when the harvest had been gathered in. The Egyptian style of cutting off the grain close

to the ear meant that the standing straw would soon be gathered and burnt. But it was also the season when the hot sand wind from the Sahara desert blew for as long as fifty days together, making the heat almost unbearable. "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread" could rarely have been more literally fulfilled than it was by those Hebrew slaves as they fanned out over the golden landscape gathering lengths of straw that then had

to be chopped into smaller pieces to give cohesion and strength to the bricks made of mud.

### **From bad to worse**

With official backing, the Egyptian taskmasters pressed the people harder than ever, saying, "Complete the work required of you for each day, just as when you had straw", and the Hebrew foremen were beaten when the tally was not maintained. The men felt the injustice of it so keenly that they themselves sent a deputation to Pharaoh, appealing to him, "Why have you treated your servants this way? Your servants are given no straw, yet we are told, 'Make bricks!' Your servants are being beaten, but the fault is with your own people". The confrontation reflected not only the courage of the foremen but also their resentment and fury.

All, however, was to no avail, for it was evident that the vindictiveness came from the king himself. He said, "Lazy, that's what you are—lazy! That is why you keep saying, 'Let us go and sacrifice to the LORD.' Now get to work. You will not be given any straw, yet you must produce your full quota of bricks". The Israelite foremen realised they were in trouble when they heard this, and their resentment turned upon those they thought had brought the calamities upon them. When they left Pharaoh they found Moses and Aaron waiting to meet them, and they said, "May the LORD look upon you and judge you! You have made us a stench to Pharaoh and his servants and have put a sword in their hand to kill us".

Faced with this opposition from his own people whom he had come to defend and to lead, and his own ineffectual approach to Pharaoh, Moses was considerably put out. He could not understand it. He returned to the Lord at some quiet meeting place and poured out his grief and disquiet: "O

Lord", he said, "why have You brought trouble upon this people? Is this why You sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has brought trouble upon this people, and You have not rescued Your people at all".

What an example Moses set in all this! He did not resign or run away at his first buffeting. He returned to the Lord, and his concern throughout was for his people, not for himself. Like us all when we are in trouble, Moses was looking for quick action and early relief, and when it did not come, he questioned why. So the Lord said to Moses, "Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh: Because of My mighty hand he will let them go: because of My mighty hand he will drive them out of his country".

It was not, however, to be a quick and instant departure. Yahweh had not forgotten the covenant He made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to give them the land of Canaan, where they lived as aliens. Therefore Moses must go back to the Israelites and say, "I am the LORD [Yahweh] and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them and will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as My own people, and I will be your God . . . And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the LORD". Moses obeyed, and reported to the Israelites what God had said, but, unlike him, they would not listen because of their discouragement and their cruel bondage.

So again Moses took it to the Lord, Who said to him, "Go, tell Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the Israelites go out of his country". But, his confidence severely shaken, Moses replied, "If the Israelites will not listen to me, why would Pharaoh listen to me, since I speak with faltering lips?".

([To be continued](#))

Moses . . . is at the crossroads—expelled by Pharaoh and rebuked by his people. To whom can he turn? He is in no-man's land, in the strait betwixt two. Aaron is not large enough for this situation: rarely does he comfort or strengthen his brother's hand. Moses comes forth with that quality of living which will mark out his greatness in years to come. The Lord has spoken to him: now he will speak to the Lord. There is no lack of eloquence before God, the prayers of Moses burst forth like water from the rock at the hand of God. The power and privilege of prayer are made known in this man. How do we react to the kind of difficulty which isolates us in daily life, when there is no one but ourselves? Do we sag beneath the burden of the moment? Do we rebel against circumstance and bemoan our lot? Or do we seek strength by going to the Lord in prayer?

Harry Tennant, *Moses My Servant*, pp. 28-9.