

# Moses: earth's meekest man

## 11. The journey begins

John Mitchell

*Before leaving Egypt, the children of Israel assembled together and made their way at the direction of God to the shores of the Red Sea, only to be trapped there by the rapidly pursuing Egyptians. But the hand of the Lord was strong to save them, and, after turning back the waters of the sea to enable them to pass over dryshod, He used those same waters to remove the threat of the Egyptians for ever.*

**A**FTER BONDAGE that had lasted for the best part of a whole lifespan, the children of Israel had been released, loaded with the spoils of Egypt to speed them on their way. Born overnight, the new nation—the first to be called the People of God—had answered the call to assemble on the northeast frontier of Egypt and await further orders. “Summoned in the midst of their Passover Feast, before the dawn of the 15th of the month thenceforth called Abib, every father hurried by the light of the full April moon, with his wife and children, to the rendezvous already appointed—to put himself under the leaders of his tribal division; his little ones and the sick in the panniers of asses, his cattle driven before him, the unbaked bread, wrapped up in his abba on his shoulder”.<sup>1</sup> For many the rallying point at Rameses was virtually on the doorstep, for had they not built it? But many doubtless came from far, and two or three days must have elapsed before all were gathered in one place.

### Marching out

In all, at a conservative estimate, there were around two million Hebrews besides a “mixed multitude” of other released slaves and various malcontents in the huge crowds that at first milled around while the princes of the twelve tribes rallied them to their respective standards. Thereafter the main separation was between the women and children and the 600,000 able-bodied men aged between twenty and sixty years and capable of bearing arms. The extent of their armament is not known, but the general interpretation of a difficult verse in Exodus 13 is that they marched in ranks of five to protect the van, the rear and the flanks when the journey began (v. 18, mg.).

So, not as a disorganised rabble, but as a cohesive and coordinated community on the march, carefully shepherded along, the people and their flocks set out for their first encampment, where their thousands of tents dotted the landscape with a mushroom growth such as had never been seen before. “Shall a nation be born at once?”, asks the

prophet (Isa. 66:8). Here it was in embryo, living in Succoth, meaning ‘booths’ (Ex. 12:37), like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, having for the time that then was no abiding city, but seeking one to come. Indeed, it must have been with high expectations of a quick and glorious march along the Mediterranean seaboard and swift acquisition of the land of Palestine that they prepared to move on at the appointed time. “Next year in Jebus” (not yet known as Jerusalem) would have been their sentiment, if not their actual words.

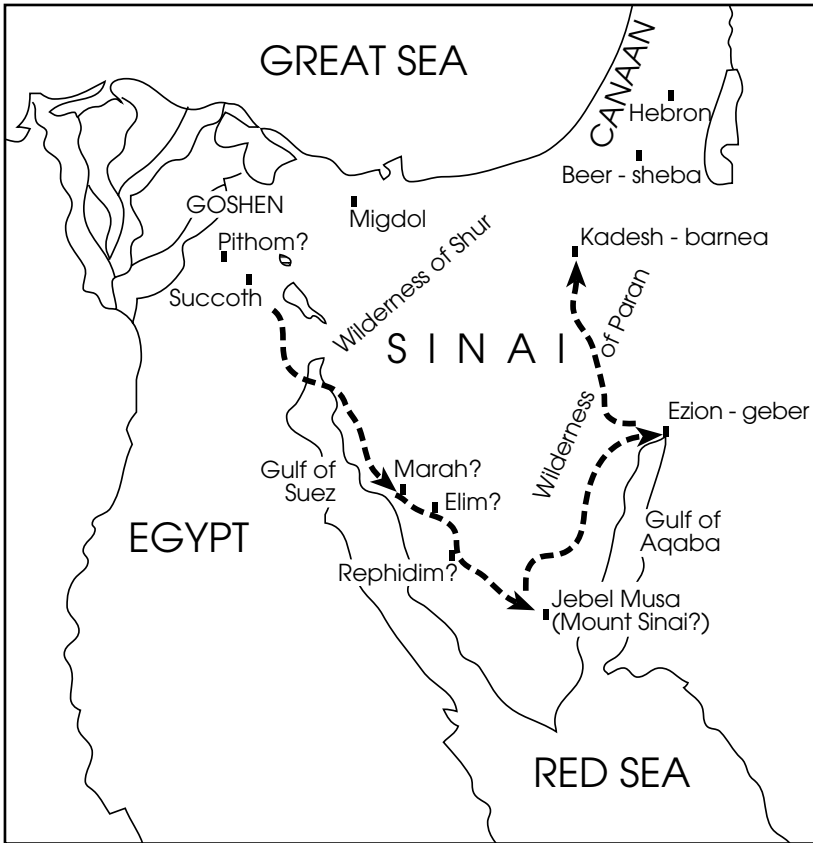
### A change of direction

Hopes were perhaps further enhanced when the almighty presence of God, even of Yahweh Himself, appeared, to lead, to guide and to protect them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night that never departed from them. The nearest they got to the Palestine road, however, was a place called Etham on the edge of the desert (13:20), where God signified through His angels a change of direction that was full of significance and consequence. For one thing, the score with Egypt was not yet settled, and high-handed Pharaoh and his host had still to be dealt with. And secondly, though the Kingdom of God might have its people and its land, if it was to be unique it also had to have its laws.

How far Moses himself had joined in the general expectation of a fairly quick transit to the Promised Land is not revealed. The silence on this point would seem to emphasise his position and his attitude in the great expedition of which

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1. Cunningham Geikie, *Hours with the Bible*, Vol. 2, p. 167.



The traditional route of the Exodus.

he was the leader. Nowhere in the Divine record is there any hint that Moses ever acted other than as a servant in God's house, as the Epistle to the Hebrews describes him (3:5). He never behaves like the prince he had once been, nor gathers around him an inner, favoured circle of men. He is the mediator between Yahweh and His people, carrying out the directions he is given.

So when the Elohim intervened and led the children of Israel, not on the road through the country of the Philistines, though that was shorter, they said, presumably to Moses, "If [the people] face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt" (13:17, NIV), which was not far away. The warlike inhabitants of the five fortresses of the Philistines, at Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath and Ekron, would have comprised a formidable force barring their way. Moreover, as it turned out, they could have found themselves between the upper and nether millstones of the Philistines before and the Egyptians behind. For what they did not know at the time was that Pharaoh, having realised the extent of his

losses with the departure of so many slaves, had decided to pursue them and bring them back to Egypt.

### The Egyptians change their minds

Although this sequence of events is quickly traversed in Scripture, as if it lasted for only a few days, there are those who think it covered a matter of weeks on account of the mortal blow that Yahweh had delivered upon the Egyptians when He slew all their first-born. As the pyramids and even the sands of Egypt testify, the people there set great store on the physical preservation of their dead by means of mummification, which took time and greatly extended the period of mourning. It seems inconceivable that the Egyptians, from Pharaoh downwards, should neglect the obsequies for their first-born to

scurry after the slow-moving Israelites. What did galvanise them in the end was the intelligence they received through their own scouts that the Israelites had changed direction and were now heading southeast towards the shores of the Red Sea. The mourning was past. It was time for action, to teach these rebellious slaves a lesson. And it was all in the purpose of God.

It was Yahweh Himself Who gave Moses His instructions: "Tell the Israelites to turn back and camp near Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea. They are to encamp by the sea, directly opposite Baal Zephon. Pharaoh will think, 'The Israelites are wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert.' And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for Myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am The LORD [Yahweh]"\*.

\* This and other quotations from Exodus 14 are from the NIV.

Accordingly, Pharaoh and his officials were at that moment ruing what they had done in letting their slaves go and losing their services, and were mobilising their forces. Pharaoh had his own special chariot made ready and six hundred of the best chariots, along with all the other chariots of Egypt, with officers over them all. It was a mighty array of the best trained and equipped mobile force in the world at that time, and was expected to cut through the lightly armed Israelites with ease.

Even so, the mobilisation and arranging of Pharaoh's forces in battle array, and the march itself, or rather ride, must have taken the best part of a day, for it was towards evening, when the Israelites were preparing to encamp for the night, that the Egyptians came into view. What the people saw first was a rising cloud of dust in the distance, followed by the occasional glimpse of the army's spears as they flashed back the rays of the setting sun.

### **Trapped by the Egyptians**

In a matter of moments the terrifying portent of it all struck fear and dread into the hearts of the people. They knew, as also did Pharaoh, that they were hemmed in with their backs to the sea, and that there was no way of escape open to them. As they stood no chance at all of fending off the might of Egypt, then, humanly speaking, the fate of God's chosen people was sealed.

Yet all was happening according to the purpose of God and was under His control. Even the location of the camp had been Divinely decided. They had been told they were to encamp "directly opposite Baal Zephon", wherever that was. The exact location has been much disputed because of the way the sands have shifted over more than three millennia since then, but a generally accepted theory is that it was somewhere near the head of the Gulf of Suez where there was a wide band of sea bed that was sufficiently firm for the people and their animals to cross.

But the children of Israel did not know that, or the turn that events would take. They cried out to God, and then, when nothing happened, they turned on Moses saying, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!"

But Moses, faithful prophet of the Lord, refused to be perturbed. "Do not be afraid", he replied. "Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still". With calm restored, there was not a moment to lose. "Why are you crying out to Me?", asked God. "Tell the Israelites to move on. Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground. I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them. And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen. The Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen".

### **Crossing on dry land**

Even as the children of Israel hesitated and Moses raised the rod that had confounded the Egyptians during the plagues, a mighty wind cut across the sea in front of them and forced back its waters to reveal ground firm enough as it dried for them to cross to the other side. When film-makers have tried to represent this great and miraculous event they have depicted it as a huge wall of water on each side of the crossing place. However, although the word *chomah* used here means 'wall', it also means an enclosure, and moreover it is sometimes used in the Scriptures in a metaphorical as well as a literal sense.

But greater by far as a sign of God's protection, even before the children of Israel moved forward to go into the sea in the gathering gloom, was the presence of the angel of God. In the sight of all the people, as the pillar of cloud by day changed to a pillar of fire by night, the presence moved from in front of the host to its rear, there to form a barrier between the people of God and the Egyptian army. Thus it was that, throughout the night, as the people streamed across the sea bed, the cloud brought darkness to Pharaoh's host but light to them, so that the two sides never met and the children of Israel reached the other shore in complete safety.

Meanwhile all Pharaoh's chariots and horsemen were ploughing through the causeway, hoping to overtake their quarry until, in the last watch of the night, Yahweh looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. He made the wheels of their chariots come off so they had difficulty

in driving. "Let's get away from the Israelites!", the charioteers cried. "The LORD is fighting for them against Egypt".

But the realisation came too late, for the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen". Just as the morn was breaking, the tide was turned, the waters returned to their place, and the Lord swept the whole host into the sea. Out of that entire Egyptian army not one man escaped, and

thus the Lord saved Israel out of their hand that day. The host that had been their terror the day before now lay dead in front of them upon the shore.

Small wonder that this display of God's hand on their behalf caused them to fear Him, and put their trust in Him and His servant Moses! And small wonder also that it caused both Moses and the children of Israel to extol and to praise their God as never before!

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

## Israel – forty years on

Nigel Bernard

*This month is the fortieth anniversary of the Six-Day War. Current events in Jerusalem, Hebron and Gaza have their roots in the outcomes of that war. Moreover, these events show that prophecies relating to the time of the end, such as Luke 21, Zechariah 12, Joel 3 and Ezekiel 38, are nearing fulfilment.*

**I**N DANIEL 8 we read, "Then I heard one saint speaking, and another saint said unto that certain saint which spake, How long shall be the vision concerning the daily sacrifice, and the transgression of desolation, to give both the sanctuary and the host to be trodden under foot? And he said unto me, Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed" (vv. 13,14). The phrase, "certain saint", translates the Hebrew word *palmoni*, which according to the AV margin can be rendered "wonderful numberer".

The time period of "two thousand and three hundred days" that *Palmoni* reveals, on the basis of the Bible principle of a "day for a year" (Ezek. 4:6), relates to the period beginning with the invasion of the Middle East by Alexander the Great in 334/3 B.C. and ending with the Six-Day War in 1967. The Lord Jesus quotes the word "trodden" from Daniel 8 in Luke 21: "And they shall fall by the edge of the sword, and shall be led away captive into all nations: and Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled" (v. 24). The capture of the Old City of Jerusalem during the Six-Day War, forty years ago this month, was a key event in relation to this prophecy.

The events of 1967 certainly filled the Brotherhood with wonder, demonstrating why the angel was called "the wonderful numberer". Much has happened during the intervening years, but current events in Israel today are no less significant. Moreover, the reverberations from the Six-Day

War continue strongly to this day.

### Jerusalem

When Armageddon takes place we know that there will be Jews living in Jerusalem, as Zechariah wrote: "For I will gather all nations against Jerusalem to battle; and the city shall be taken, and the houses rifled, and the women ravished; and half of the city shall go forth into captivity, and the residue of the people shall not be cut off from the city" (14:2). When all seems lost, those who are still in the city will be defended: "In that day shall the LORD [Yahweh] defend the inhabitants of Jerusalem; and he that is feeble among them at that day shall be as David; and the house of David shall be as God, as the angel of the LORD [Yahweh] before them" (12:8). We should therefore expect the Jews to continue to dwell in the city, including East Jerusalem, captured in the Six-Day War.

Consistent with the above expectation, it has been recently reported that Israel intends to establish three new settlements in East Jerusalem. This would include around 20,000 homes. The deputy mayor of Jerusalem, Yehoshua Pollak, said that "the intention was to create a contiguous Jewish residential area linking East Jerusalem with