

the meantime. When will the earth be full of the glory of God? When it is filled with those who have been forgiven by God. But God went on to confirm He would not clear the guilty:

“Because all those men which have seen My glory, and My miracles, which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have tempted Me now these ten times, and have not hearkened to My voice; surely they shall not see the land which I swear unto their fathers, neither shall any of them that provoked Me see it: but My servant Caleb, because he had another spirit with him, and hath followed Me fully, him will I bring into the land whereinto he went; and his seed shall possess it” (vv. 22-24).

God is just. He was willing to pardon the people for their wickedness, but He would not

clear the guilty. The rebellious will not find a place in the Promised Land. Caleb was singled out for a special blessing, but the majority who were faithless still faced the consequences of their wickedness.

God is willing to forgive or pardon, but that does not mean we will be spared the consequences of our action. A man might commit a criminal act and later repent and ask God for forgiveness. We may be certain God will forgive, but the man will still be liable for the consequences of his crime, be it in the form of a fine, imprisonment or whatever. In Romans 6:23 Paul wrote, “the wages of sin is death”. This is universally true. Sinners who repent are forgiven, but they still reap the wages of their sin and die.

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

# Moses: earth’s meekest man

## 18. Glory and shame

John Mitchell

*The children of Israel, having received the Law, pledge obedience to it, but soon lapse into idolatry while Moses is in Mount Sinai receiving further revelations.*

**T**HE TRANSACTIONS that took place on Horeb’s height were the supreme encounters with God experienced both by the nation of Israel and by Moses their prophet. The Apostle Paul, in reviewing the privileges that their nation had enjoyed at the hand of Yahweh, listed them as follows: being entrusted with the oracles of God; entering into covenant relationship with Him; becoming His peculiar treasure above all people; being given God’s Law; and glimpsing God’s glory (albeit mainly through cloud and fire) (Rom. 3:2; 9:4). These facets were all experienced at Sinai. And, despite their ill-usage of Moses at the time, he, as their intermediary in all the glory, became the one on whom the nation ever afterwards looked with pride as their greatest prophet.

### **Moses the mediator**

Only the Ten Commandments were conveyed by the voice of Yahweh at Mount Sinai, and this so terrified the people that they pleaded henceforth that Moses should speak to them, not the

Almighty. Thereafter, with Divine approval, Moses became their intermediary with God in an intimacy so close as to be “face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend” (Ex. 33:11). Not until the coming of the Son of God did man have so privileged a relationship again.

Nor was Moses’ experience a ‘one-off’ that lasted for only an hour or a day. The ‘Ten Words’ were only a beginning. Over a period of forty days, when the proper relationship with Yahweh had been established, the commandments were filled out with God’s Law covering all aspects of affairs between God and man, man and man, and the welfare of the nation as a whole. There has never been anything like it in all the jurisprudence of mankind, nor in the manner in which it was given.

Having been invested with the office of mediator, Moses drew near to the dark cloud where God was, while the people stood aloof, and he received a series of precepts in extension of the commandments, and for the making of an altar on which to offer the nation’s sacrifices. Those precepts, too numerous to go into here, ended with an assurance that God’s angel would go before them and bring them into the Promised

Land. They were assiduously set down by Moses in “the book of the covenant” before he called for a solemn assembly and set them before the people. He erected an altar with twelve memorial pillars, one for each tribe, and sacrificed burnt offerings and peace offerings. With the blood he sprinkled the book, which he then read to the people. They for their part renewed their promise of obedience, before being in turn sprinkled in ratification of the covenant with Yahweh.

Meanwhile, God had singled out from the nation a representative group privileged to see a greater manifestation of His glory. He said to Moses, “Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel. You are to worship at a distance, but Moses alone is to approach the LORD”.\* Even at one stage removed, the party then “saw the God of Israel. Under His feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself. But God did not raise His hand against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank”.

### **Moses ascends the mount**

Even higher things, however, were reserved for Moses. The Lord said to him, “Come up to Me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and commands I have written for their instruction”. So the privileged party of elders returned to the people, with Aaron and Hur in charge. Aaron, of course, had shared with Moses much of the burden of leadership of the people, both in Egypt and during the Exodus journey. Hur, according to Josephus, was the husband of Miriam, Moses’ sister,<sup>1</sup> though he is never alluded to in this way in Scripture. If the relationship be true, however, it meant that Moses was entrusting the governance of the people to two men with strong family ties and much experience, on whom he felt he could rely. How sadly, in the event, was he mistaken! To the elders of Israel Moses said, “Wait here for us until we come back to you. Aaron and Hur are with you, and anyone involved in a dispute can go to them”.

Followed only by his servant Joshua, Moses then went up into the mountain of God while the cloud covered it and the glory of the Lord settled upon it. For six days that glory was maintained, and on the seventh day the Lord called to Moses from within the cloud, and there he abode for forty days and forty nights while He instructed him in the details of the Law, the construction of

the tabernacle, and ways in which He was to be worshipped there.

Details of what Moses experienced and saw during his sojourns with the Almighty are not given, but there are indications in other parts of Scripture that they were glorious. For example, with regard to the giving of the Law, Stephen, when railing against the leaders of the Jews for not keeping it, said that it came through “the disposition [*diatagē*, arrangement or institution] of angels” (Acts 7:53); the Apostle Paul says that the Law was “put into effect through angels” (Gal. 3:19, NIV); and the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews writes, “if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment . . .” (Heb. 2:2, NIV).

Moreover, when Moses blessed the Israelites before he died, he referred to the time when Yahweh came from Sinai “with myriads of holy ones” (Deut. 33:2, NIV), a statement that is consistent with David’s inspired comment in Psalm 68 regarding the thousands of angels that were in Sinai, in the holy place (v. 17). All this makes impressive reading regarding the aura in which the Law was given to Moses while he inhabited the cloud and neither ate nor drank for forty days and forty nights.

### **The people turn away**

Meanwhile, affairs in the camp down below had not been going as Moses intended, for towards the end of his sojourn the people had grown restless to such an extent as to question whether Moses had disappeared for ever. With fickleness, fecklessness and shortness of memory concerning the goodness of God and His care over them, the people (including presumably the elders who had so recently witnessed His glory) crowded menacingly around Aaron and demanded that he should make them a god to go before them in place of the God of Moses. But of their leader who had suffered so much on their behalf and had brought them all the way from Egypt, they said, “As for this fellow Moses . . . we don’t know what has happened to him”.

Aaron, thoroughly cowed by their attitude, first sought an easy way out and then tried to rectify the position. “Take off the gold ear-rings

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\* Quotations from Exodus 24 and 32 are from the NIV unless stated otherwise.

1. *Antiquities of the Jews*, 3.2.4.

that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me", he said. He took what they handed him, and, bearing in mind the kind of gods they were familiar with in Egypt, made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then, blasphemously and perfidiously, the people cried, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!" (NKJV). Whereupon Aaron, anxious to retrieve as much of the true religion as possible, built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD [Yahweh]", as though light could mix with darkness, and holiness with utter degradation. For though the people agreed to Aaron's proposal, the last thing they had in mind was a thoroughgoing festival to the Lord.

Accordingly, they rose early next morning and went through the motions of offering sacrifices and presenting fellowship offerings to Yahweh, after which they sat down to eat and drink, and to indulge in licentious dancing and revelry. They had forgotten that Yahweh's "eyes behold, His eyelids try, the children of men" (Ps. 11:4).

### **Moses returns**

Moses' sojourn in the cloud upon the top of the mount was now at an end, and he had received the two tablets of the testimony, inscribed on both sides, front and back, with the writing of God. With them, however, there came, not an answer of peace, but a stark and chilling message: "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have been quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt'. I have seen these people . . . and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave Me alone so that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation".

Was ever so great a test put into the mind of any of the prophets of Israel as was given to Moses at this juncture, and with so seemingly righteous a justification? The people whom he had led and nurtured and endured in all their fractious behaviour were just not worthy of him. So why not have a fresh start without them, a clean sheet based on his own impeccable behaviour?

No abrogation of the covenant with Abraham would be involved, for was not he also a son of Abraham, of whom John the Baptist would later say concerning another rebellious generation, that God could raise up children from the very stones of the desert, if need be?

But Moses was not called the meekest man in all the earth for nothing. Like a great line of outstanding men of God, he put first the welfare of his people and longed for their healing, not their destruction. Fervently he addressed the angel of God's presence and pleaded for Yahweh's favour. "O LORD", he said, "why should Your anger burn against Your people, whom You brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that He brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth'? Turn from Your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on Your people. Remember Your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom You swore by Your own self: 'I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance for ever'".

Then, we are told, Yahweh relented and did not bring on His people the disaster He had threatened. And Moses, his pleadings having been granted, turned and, accompanied by Joshua, went down the mountain, still ablaze with fire, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hands. It appears that the pair were out of sight of the camp for the first part of the descent, and therefore could not see what the people were doing, though they could hear the tumult. Joshua heard the people shouting and said to Moses, "There is the sound of war in the camp". Moses replied, "It is not the sound of victory, it is not the sound of defeat; it is the sound of singing that I hear".

But, despite the heavenly warning Moses had been given, neither of them was prepared for the level of revelry and debauchery that met their gaze when the camp at last came into view. At the sight of God's people singing and dancing around the golden calf, horror and chagrin overcame him. The dancing waned and the singing faltered as, with burning anger, in the sight of all the people, Moses threw the tablets of stone out of his hands, breaking them to pieces at the foot of the mountain.

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