

WORLD RELIGION

Judaism Notes: Moses

In an all-time irony, the savior of the Jewish people is raised in the house of the enemy of the Jews.

The Exodus story is the central event of Jewish history. It is also a model -- in microcosm -- for what happens later throughout the history of the Diaspora. We see again and again the roller-coaster ride from high points to low. Generally, the higher the Jews manage to rise, the lower they fall and then, despite the odds, they rise again.

The story of Exodus recounts the Jews going from a good situation (as when they were welcomed into Egypt by the Pharaoh himself) to a very bad situation (when they were enslaved) to the highest heights, the pinnacles of spirituality (when they were freed from slavery by God Himself and given the Torah at Mount Sinai).

At the point in time when the Exodus story begins the family of 70 individuals that arrived in Egypt at the time of Joseph has grown to a nation of about 3 million people.

The supernatural, rapid increase in the Jewish population has made the Egyptians nervous -- "there are too many of them, what if they rise up against us" -- and Pharaoh issues a genocidal decree: Kill all the Jewish boys. (This is a classic anti-Semitic pattern -- the Jew in the Diaspora is always loyal to his host country, yet can never escape unfounded suspicion of treachery.)

At this point, baby Moses¹ is born. His parents, Amram and Yochevet, decide to hide him, but after a few months they realize that very shortly they will be found out. So his mother, in order to save him somehow, puts him in a waterproof basket and hides it in the reeds of the Nile. As we all know, he is found by none other than the daughter of Pharaoh.

Irony of ironies? It's all part of the plan. As noted earlier, God puts the cure before the disease. This is another classic case.

It does give one pause though -- that the savior of the Jewish people is going to be raised in the house of the ultimate enemy of the Jews. The only modern equivalent would be of some fellow who is meant to overthrow Nazi Germany being raised as Adolf Hitler's adopted grandson. That's what we have here. You realize what a wild story this is if you imagine it in a modern context.

EGYPTIAN HISTORY

By the way, who is the Pharaoh in the story here?

The events of Exodus happened circa 1314-1313 BCE if we translate Jewish chronology into the Christian dating system the world uses today. But that may be misleading. For one thing, the Egyptian chronologies we use in modern world history have only been calculated in the last centuries by scholars who tried to estimate the reigns of the kings of Egypt and Assyria/Babylonia, two of the oldest empires in the world. There's a huge amount of educated guesswork involved in these chronologies. If you open any books on ancient Egypt you'll get lots of different opinions as to when different Pharaohs reigned.

Generally, the Pharaohs associated with the Exodus are Seti and Rameses. (a period called *The New Kingdom* 1550-1050) Rameses II was certainly the great builder of this period of time. And it's interesting that the Bible says that the Jewish slaves built the cities of Pitom and Ramses. (See Exodus 1:11.) Of course, it took them 116 years to build these cities so that covers the reign of more than one Pharaoh.² (A common misconception is that the Jews built the pyramids, but as mentioned previously, these were built a thousand years earlier.)

Now what's fascinating is that after Rameses there was a period of chaos in Egypt; this much we know from available records. This would fit if Egypt was, in fact, destroyed by ten supernatural plagues; they would be in bad state for a number of years afterwards. So there we may have some evidence of it.

The Pharaoh who reigned after Rameses was his son Merneptah who ruled in the late 13th century BCE. Now what's most interesting is that in Thebes (modern Luxor in Egypt), Merneptah carved on a large slab of black granite (known as a "stele") a victory inscription. Known as the Merneptah Stele, it contains a record of Merneptah's military campaigning including the area of Canaan, the Sinai/Israel. And it's the first extra-Biblical mention of "Israel" anywhere in human history. We're talking about something that's around 3,200 years old. And this would correspond in Jewish chronology to some time after the Exodus story.

What does the stele say? "Israel is a widow. Her seed is no more." That is, we've wiped out the Jewish people, they're gone. This means:

1) The Ancient Egyptians lie when they record things. Jews are here today 3,200 years later, they hardly wiped the Jews out; in fact, they're gone. This is not surprising as the ancient people are notorious for lying in their official records.

Objective history was non-existence three thousand years ago. What few events were recorded were usually grossly exaggerated and recorded solely to glorify the accomplishment of the ruler of the country. Egyptian inscriptions of battles show Pharaoh as larger than life slaughtering his enemies. He is always victorious and no dead Egyptians appear anyway. Losses, failures, imperfections and the like are never recorded by any ancient people.³

Like the story of Judah and Tamar, we see yet another example of the unique objectivity of the Bible. Faults and failures must be mentioned, otherwise how could the necessary lessons be learned?

2) At this early time in history, corresponding to the time when the Jews just entered the Promised Land, we have concrete references to a people called Israel in the records of another country. This is very significant piece of archeology.

PRINCE OF EGYPT

Moses grows up as the grandson of Pharaoh, who is then (whoever he was) the most powerful human being on earth, being the ruler of the mightiest nation on earth.

Moses could easily have grown up to be a totally assimilated, totally spoiled Egyptian kid. But the Pharaoh's daughter has hired his own mother as his nanny and so he never loses the connection or the commitment to his people.⁴

It is no surprise therefore that, when one day he sees an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Jew, he cannot stand it and he kills the taskmaster. Then, of course, some Jews inform on him, which is another classic case we're going to see in Jewish history -- Jews informing on other Jews. And Moses has to flee for his life.

Eventually he ends up in the land of Midian, which is across the Sinai Peninsula. There he meets Jethro, an excommunicated priest who has several daughters, one of whom named is Tziporah, Moses marries Moses and Tziporah have two sons, Gershon and Eliezer, (about whom we don't hear much) and he becomes a shepherd.

In this regard he follows the example of the other great leaders of the Jewish people; Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons were all shepherds. So, we have to ask: Why were so many Jewish leaders shepherds?

Now if you've ever watched shepherds at work, you might have noticed that most of them sit around doing nothing except daydreaming. A shepherd has a lot of time to think, and this is an absolute prerequisite for being a prophet. To elevate oneself to the highest level, where one transcends the physical reality and enters a higher dimension of communicating with the Infinite, requires a huge amount of work, and a lot of time to think.⁵

Another reason why Jewish leaders were shepherds has to do with the fact that the work of a shepherd is practice for dealing with large groups of living creatures. Leading the Jews is the hardest job on the planet. One of the great lessons that we need to learn from Jewish history is the difficulty and the challenges of unifying and trying to lead the most individualistic nation on the earth. Being a shepherd is good practice for this daunting task.

THE BURNING BUSH

While Moses is tending the sheep, he has a vision of the burning bush-his first prophetic experience.

The story of Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush is incredibly profound and laden with many deep meanings, but for our purposes in analyzing Jewish history we will consider the burning bush as synonymous with the Jewish people.

The burning bush is burning, but it is never consumed by fire. So, too, the Jewish people seem to be forever a nation in danger of being destroyed yet always miraculously preserved by divine intervention. On another level, we could say that the burning bush is also symbolic of the Jewish people who burn with the fire of Torah, with an ideology that is going to change the world.

When Moses encounters God at the burning bush, God identifies Himself repeatedly (Exodus 3:6, 3:13, 3:15, 3:16, 4:5) as the God of his forefathers -- Abraham, Isaac and Jacob with whom He had made an eternal covenant.

This is an extremely important passage because later on in Jewish history a lot of different people are going to come -- the Christians, for example -- claiming that God changed His mind, abandoned the Jews and made a new covenant (new "testament" to use the Greek term) with them.

But God made an "eternal" covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and He renews the deal at several intervals. We learn that God has a master plan for humanity and the Jews have an absolutely essential part in that plan.

At this juncture, God has decided to bring the Jews out of Egypt. And it's important to keep in mind that God put the Jews in Egypt in the first place -- It says in the Talmud, you have to bless the bad as well as the good. ⁶Traditionally, whenever a Jew hears bad news (ie someone has passed away) the first response is "*Boruch Dayan Emet --Blessed is the truthful Judge (God)*". "There is no concept in Judaism of a devil who does evil and competes with God. God is omniscient and omnipotent and nothing is outside His knowledge or control. While we finite human beings may perceive events as good or bad, from God's infinite perspective everything that happens is part of a master plan and ultimately for the good.

So, in effect, we come to understand that Egypt served as a womb, where the Jews were formed as a nation in a very difficult situation, so that when they would be ready, God could bring them out and establish a special relationship with them.

God tells this to Moses and then commands, "Go back and tell Pharaoh to let My people go."

"LET MY PEOPLE GO"

Moses goes back down to Egypt, confronts the Pharaoh with his brother Aaron, and he says, "The God of my forefathers told me to tell you: 'Let My people go.'" And in response, the Pharaoh is incredulous "What are you talking about? Who is this God? I don't know him."

The ancient Egyptians had around 2,000 gods. They took their spirituality and knowledge of the spiritual world very seriously. Since Pharaoh didn't have a laptop to do a "god-search," you can imagine the Egyptian priests furiously flipping through their lists of the different gods and couldn't find the God that Moses was invoking.

The notion of one, infinite, all-powerful God was an idea that was incomprehensible to the ancient polytheistic people -- it simply did not fit with their fragmented way of viewing the world.

When the Pharaoh won't listen, what does Moses do? Aaron takes his staff and he throws it down and it turns into a snake. If someone did something similar today it would make a very big impression on us, but Pharaoh is not impressed. His magicians can do the same thing. (Even though Aaron's staff then swallows the other staffs)

It is very important to stress that the ancient world understood spirituality in the way we cannot even fathom today. Today we are spiritually on a much lower level. We talk about magic, but magic for us is illusion, not a real manipulation of the forces of nature as they were able to do.

It is a fundamental idea of Judaism that there's a spiritual reality, and that there's a physical reality. You can transcend the physical into the spiritual; you can use the spiritual to manipulate the physical. And you can do this by accessing the dark/impure forces or the light forces. And the Egyptians, who were very spiritually sophisticated, were able to access these dark/impure forces and they knew how to turn a stick into a snake, so they were not impressed by what Moses did.

But Moses was just getting started.