

Moses: The Leader of a People

Winston S. Churchill

And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face; in all the signs and wonders which the Lord sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh, and to all his servants, and to all his land, and in all that mighty hand, and in all the great terror, which Moses shewed in the sight of all Israel.

These closing words of the Book of Deuteronomy are an apt expression of the esteem in which the great leader and liberator of the Hebrew people was held by the generations that succeeded him. He was the greatest of the prophets, who spoke in person to the God of Israel; he was the national hero who led the Chosen People out of the land of bondage, through the perils of the wilderness, and brought them to the very threshold of the Promised Land; he was the supreme law-giver, who received from God that remarkable code upon which the religious, moral, and social life of the nation was so securely founded. Tradition lastly ascribed to him the authorship of the whole Pentateuch, and the mystery that surrounded his death added to his prestige.

Let us first retell the Bible story.

The days were gone when Joseph ruled in Egypt. A century had passed. A new Pharaoh had arisen who knew not Joseph. The nomadic tribe of Bedouins who, in the years of dearth preceding the Great Famine, had sought asylum by the ever-fertile banks of the Nile, had increased and multiplied. From being a band of strangers hospitably received into the wealth of a powerful kingdom, they had become a social, political, and industrial problem. There they were in the 'Land of Goshen' waxing exceedingly, and stretching out every day long arms and competent fingers into the whole life of Egypt. There must have arisen one of those movements with which the modern world is acquainted. A wave of anti-Semitism swept across the land. Gradually, year by year and inch by inch, the Children of Israel were reduced by the policy of the State and the prejudices of its citizens from guests to servants and from servants almost to slaves.

Building was the mania then, and here were strong, skilful, industrious builders. They were made to build. They built for Pharaoh by forced labour treasure cities or store cities, for the real treasure then was grain. Two such cities are mentioned in Exodus — Pithom and Rameses. The Egyptologist Naville has uncovered the city of Pithom, which was indeed built in the time of Rameses, and lies in that 'Land of Goshen' on the north-east frontier, where the Children of Israel were settled. The fluctuations of the Nile could only be provided against by enormous granaries filled in good years. The possession of these granaries constituted the power of government. When a bad season came Pharaoh had the food and dealt it out to man and beast in return for plenary submission. By means of this hard leverage Egyptian civilization rose. Grim times! We may imagine these cities

Moses: The Leader of a People

built by the Israelites in the capacity of state serfs as enormous food-depots upon which the administration relied to preserve the obedience of the populace and the life of the nation.

The Israelites were serviceable folk. They paid their keep, and more. Nevertheless, their ceaseless multiplication became a growing embarrassment. There was a limit to the store depots that were required, and the available labourers soon exceeded the opportunities for their useful or economic employment. The Egyptian government fell back on birth control. By various measures which are bluntly described in the book of Exodus, they sought to arrest the increase of male Israelites. Finally they determined to have the male infants killed. There was evidently at this time a strong tension between the principle of Jewish life and the ruthless force of established Egyptian civilization. It was at this moment that Moses was born.

The laws were hard, and pity played little part in them. But his mother loved her baby dearly, and resolved to evade the laws. With immense difficulty she concealed him till he was three months old. Then the intense will-to-live in the coming generation led her to a bold stratagem. It has its parallels in various ancient legends about great men. Sargon, the famous Sumerian King, was abandoned by his mother in a basket of reeds, and rescued and brought up by a peasant. There are similar stories about the infancies of Romulus and Remus. In this case the only chance for the child was that he should be planted upon the Court. Pharaoh's daughter, the Princess Royal, was accustomed to bathe in the Nile. Her routine was studied. A little ark of bulrushes floated enticingly near the bank from which she took her morning swim. Servants were sent to retrieve it. Inside this floating cradle was a perfect baby . . . 'and the babe wept!' The heart of the Princess melted and she took the little boy in her arms, and vowed he should not perish while her father's writ ran along the Nile. But a little sister of the infant Moses judiciously posted beforehand now approached. 'I know where a nurse can be found.' So the nurse was sought, and the mother came. In the wide economy of an Imperial household a niche was thus found where the baby could be reared.

The years pass. The child is a man, nurtured in the palace or its purlieus, ranking, no doubt, with the many bastards or polygamous offspring of Oriental thrones. But he is no Egyptian, no child of the sheltered progeny of the Nile valley. The wild blood of the desert, the potent blood of Beni Israel not yet mingled with the Hittite infusions, is in his veins. He walks abroad, he sees what is going on. He sees his own race exploited beyond all economic need or social justice. He sees them the drudge of Egypt, consuming their strong life and seed in the upholding of its grandeur, and even grudged the pittance which they earn. He sees them treated as a helot class; they, the free children of the wilderness who came as honoured guests and had worked every hour of their passage! Upon these general impressions he sees an Egyptian beating an Israelite; no doubt a common spectacle, an episode coming to be accepted as part of the daily social routine. But he has no doubts; not for a moment does he hesitate. He knows which side he is on,

and the favours of the Court and the privileged attachments which he had with the ruling and possessing race vanish in a moment. The call of blood surges in him. He slays the Egyptian, amid the loud and continuing applause of the insurgents of the ages.

It was difficult to conceal the corpse; it was even more difficult to conceal the tale. No very lengthy interval seems to have elapsed before it was known throughout the palace that this somewhat nondescript and hitherto favoured denizen had bit the hand that fed him. How easily can we recreate their mood! The most cultured and civilized states and administrations of the present day would have felt with Pharaoh that this was going altogether too far. Very likely Egyptian public opinion — and there is always public opinion where there is the slightest pretence of civilization — fixed upon this act of violence as a final proof that the weakness of the government towards these overweening strangers and intruders had reached its limit. At any rate Pharaoh — which is as good a name as any other for the governing classes in any country at any time under any system — acted. He decreed death upon the murderer. We really cannot blame him; nor can we accuse the subsequent conduct of the slayer. His action also conformed to modern procedure. He fled.

In those days a little island of civilization had grown up under the peculiar physical stimulus of the Nile flood and the Nile mud with all the granary system to grip it together — a tiny island in a vast ocean of bleak and blank starvation. Few and far between were the human beings who were able to support life beyond its shores. There were, indeed, other similar islands in other parts of the world, in Mesopotamia, in Crete, in Mycenae; but to Moses the choice of Egypt or the wilderness, all that was now open, was, in fact, virtually a choice between swift execution and the barest existence which can be conceived.

Moses fled into the Sinai Peninsula. These are the most awful deserts where human life in any form can be supported. There are others, like the vast expanses of the Sahara or the Polar ice, where human beings cannot exist at all. Still, always a very few people have been able to keep body and soul together amid the rigours of the Sinai Peninsula. There are nowadays a few hundred Bedouin inhabitants. But when an aeroplane makes a forced landing in the Sinai Peninsula the pilot nearly always perishes of thirst and starvation. In these dour recesses the fugitive Moses found a local chief and priest named Jethro. With him he took up his abode; he rendered him good service, married his daughter, Zipporah, and dwelt in extreme privation for many years. Every prophet has to come from civilization, but every prophet has to go into the wilderness. He must have a strong impression of a complex society and all that it has to give, and then he must serve periods of isolation and meditation. This is the process by which psychic dynamite is made.

Moses watched the skinny flocks which browsed upon a starveling herbage, and lived a life almost as materially restricted as theirs. He communed within himself, and then one day when the sun rode fierce in the heavens, and the dust-devils and mirages

Moses: The Leader of a People

danced and flickered amid the scrub, he saw The Burning Bush, It burned, yet it was not consumed. It was a prodigy. The more it burned the less it was consumed; it seemed to renew itself from its own self-consumption. Perhaps it was not a bush at all, but his own heart that was aflame with a fire never to be quenched while the earth supports human beings.

God spoke to Moses from the Burning Bush. He said to him in effect: 'You cannot leave your fellow-countrymen in bondage. Death or freedom! Better the wilderness than slavery. You must go back and bring them out. Let them live among this thorn-scrub, or die if they cannot live. But no more let them be chained in the house of bondage.' God went a good deal further. He said from the Burning Bush, now surely inside the frame of Moses, 'I will endow you with superhuman power. There is nothing that man cannot do, if he wills it with enough resolution. Man is the epitome of the universe. All moves and exists as a result of his invincible will, which is My Will.'

Moses did not understand the bulk of this, and asked a great many questions and demanded all kinds of guarantees. God gave all the guarantees. Indeed, Moses persisted so much in his doubts and bargainings that we are told Jehovah (for that was the great new name of this God that spoke from the Burning Bush) became angry. However, in the end He made His contract with the man, and Moses got a fairly reasonable assurance in his own mind that he could work miracles. If he laid his staff upon the ground he was sure it would turn into a snake, and when he picked it up it would become a staff again. Moreover, he stipulated that he must have a spokesman. He was not himself eloquent; he could give the driving force, but he must have a competent orator, some man used to putting cases and dealing in high affairs, as his assistant. Otherwise how could he hold parley with Pharaoh and all the Ministers of the only known civilization his world could show? God met all these requests. A competent politician and trained speaker in the shape of one Aaron would be provided. Moses now remembered his kinsman Aaron, with whom he had been good friends before he had to flee from Egypt. Thereupon action! Jethro is told that his son-in-law intends to start on a great adventure. He gives his full consent. The donkey is saddled; Zipporah, the two children, and the family property are placed upon its back, and through the dust-clouds and blazing sunlight the smallest, most potent and most glorious of all the rescue forces of history starts upon its expedition.

Undue importance can easily be given to the records of the protracted duel between Moses and Pharaoh. The plagues of Egypt are famous, and most of them were the kind of plagues from which Egypt has frequently suffered — pollution of the Nile and the consequent destruction of its fish; multiplication of frogs and their invasion of the land; flies beyond all bearing; lice abounding (but some authorities say they were gnats); the death of cattle; darkness over the face of the earth such as is produced by prolonged sandstorms; the prodigy of hail in the Nile Valley; finally the death of the first-born by pestilence. The local magicians, entering fully into the spirit of the

contest, kept going until the third round, measure for measure and step by step. But when the dust turned into lice they admitted with professional awe that this was 'the finger of God.'

Great interest attaches to the behaviour of Pharaoh. Across the centuries we feel the modernity of his actions. At first he was curious, and open to conviction. Quite mild plagues brought him to reason. He was ready to let the Israelites depart into the wilderness and sacrifice to their potent God. This serious concession arrested all his building plans and caused considerable derangement in the economic life of the country. It was very like a general strike. It was no doubt represented to him that the loss to the national income from this cessation of labour would be disastrous to the State. So he hardened his heart and took back in the evening what he had promised in the dawn, and in the morning what he had promised the night before. The plagues continued; the magicians dropped out. It was a dead-lift struggle between Jehovah and Pharaoh. But Jehovah did not wish to win too easily. The liberation of the Children of Israel was only a part of His high Purpose. Their liberation had to be effected in such a manner as to convince them that they were the Chosen People, with the supreme forces of the universe enlisted in their special interest, should they show themselves faithful. So Jehovah laid on His plagues on the one hand, and hardened the heart of Pharaoh on the other.

It has often happened this way in later times. How often governments and peoples plunge into struggles most reluctantly, terrified of their small beginnings, but once swimming in the torrent go on desperately with immense unsuspected reserves and force in the hopes of emerging triumphantly on the other shore. So Pharaoh and the Egyptian Government, once they had taken the plunge, got themselves into the mood that they would 'see it through'; and this perhaps 'hardened their hearts.' However, the plagues continued and one misfortune after another fell upon the agonized State, until finally a collapse occurred. Pharaoh decided to 'let the people go.'

Amid the general confusion which followed this surrender the Chosen People spoiled the Egyptians. They begged, borrowed, and stole all they could lay their hands upon, and, gathering themselves together laden with treasure, equipment, and provender, launched out from the island of civilization into the awful desert. Their best chance was to cross the isthmus which joins Africa with Asia and make for the regions we now call Palestine. But two reasons which could not be neglected weighed against this. First, the Philistines barred the road. This formidable people had already carried their military organization to a high pitch. The Israelites after 150 years of domestic servitude in Egypt were in no condition to encounter the fierce warriors of the wilds. Secondly, and concurrently, Jehovah had told Moses he must lead the liberated tribe to the neighbourhood of Mount Sinai, where other revelations of the Divine Will would be made known to them.

They marched accordingly to the northern inlet of the Red Sea. There is much dispute as to their numbers. The Bible story says they were 600,000 men, with women

and children in addition. We may without impiety doubt the statistics. A clerical error may so easily have arisen. Even today a nought or two is sometimes misplaced. But more than two thousand years had yet to pass before the 'nought' and all its conveniences was to be at the disposal of mankind. The earlier forms of notation were more liable to error than our own. Unless the climate was very different from the present it is difficult to see how even 6,000 persons could have lived in the Sinai Peninsula without supernatural aid on a considerable and well-organized scale.

But now once again Pharaoh has changed his mind. No doubt the resentment aroused among the Egyptians by the wholesale pillage to which they had been subjected in their hour of panic, combined with the regrets of the government at the loss of so many capable labourers and subjects, constituted a kind of situation to which very few Parliaments of the present age would be insensible. The Egyptian army was mobilized; all the chariots set out in pursuit. The fugitive tribesmen, having reached the shore of a body of water called the 'Yam Suph,' at the extreme northern end of the Gulf of Akaba, were trapped between the sea and Pharaoh's overwhelming host. Their situation was forlorn, their only resource was flight, and flight was barred by salt water.

But Jehovah did not fail. A violent eruption occurred of which the volcanic mountains of these regions still bear the traces. The waters of the sea divided, and the Children of Israel passed dryshod across the inlet. Pharaoh and his host, hotly following them, were swallowed up by the returning waters. Thereafter, guided by a pillar of smoke by day and of fire by night, the Israelites reached the neighbourhood of Mount Sinai. Here Moses received from Jehovah the tables of those fundamental laws which were henceforward to be followed, with occasional lapses, by the highest forms of human society.

We must, at this point, examine briefly the whole question of the miracles. Everyone knows that the pollution of rivers, the flies, frogs, lice, sandstorms, and pestilence among men and cattle, are the well-known afflictions of the East. The most sceptical person can readily believe that they occurred with exceptional frequency at this juncture. The strong north wind which is said to have blown back the waters of the Red Sea may well have been assisted by a seismic and volcanic disturbance. Geologists tell us that the same fault in the earth's structure which cleft the depression of the Dead Sea in Palestine runs unbroken to the Rift Valley in what we now call the Kenya province of East Africa. The Sinai Peninsula was once volcanic, and the Bible descriptions of Mount Sinai both by day and by night are directly explicable by an eruption, which would have provided at once the pillar of cloud by daylight and of fire in the darkness. Flocks of quails frequently arrive exhausted in Egypt in their migrations, and some might well have alighted in the nick of time near the encampments of the Israelites. Renan has described the exudation by certain shrubs in the Sinai Peninsula of a white gummy substance which appears from time to time, and is undoubtedly capable of supplying a form of nourishment.

Moses: The Leader of a People

All these purely rationalistic and scientific explanations only prove the truth of the Bible story. It is silly to waste time arguing whether Jehovah broke His own natural laws to save His Chosen People, or whether He merely made them work in a favourable manner. At any rate there is no doubt about one miracle. This wandering tribe, in many respects indistinguishable from numberless nomadic communities, grasped and proclaimed an idea of which all the genius of Greece and all the power of Rome were incapable. There was to be only one God, a universal God, a God of nations, a just God, a God who would punish in another world a wicked man dying rich and prosperous; a God from whose service the good of the humble and of the weak and poor was inseparable.

Books are written in many languages upon the question of how much of this was due to Moses. Devastating, inexorable modern study and criticism have proved that the Pentateuch constitutes a body of narrative and doctrine which came into being over at least the compass of several centuries. We reject, however, with scorn all those learned and laboured myths that Moses was but a legendary figure upon whom the priesthood and the people hung their essential social, moral, and religious ordinances. We believe that the most scientific view, the most up-to-date and rationalistic conception, will find its fullest satisfaction in taking the Bible story literally, and in identifying one of the greatest of human beings with the most decisive leap forward ever discernible in the human story. We remain unmoved by the tomes of Professor Gradgrind and Dr Dryasdust. We may be sure that all these things happened just as they are set out according to Holy Writ. We may believe that they happened to people not so very different from ourselves, and that the impressions those people received were faithfully recorded and have been transmitted across the centuries with far more accuracy than many of the telegraphed accounts we read of the goings-on of today. In the words of a forgotten work of Mr Gladstone, we rest with assurance upon 'The impregnable rock of Holy Scripture.'

Unluckily the stresses of the Exodus, the long forty years, or whatever the period may have been which was needed in the wilderness to sharpen the Children of Israel from a domesticated race into an armed force of conquering warriors, led them to make undue claims upon Jehovah. They forgot the older tradition which the Pentateuch enshrines. They forgot the enlightened monotheism which under the heretic Pharaoh Akhnaton had left its impression upon Egypt. They appropriated Jehovah to themselves. In Renan's words, they made Him revoltingly partial to the Chosen People. All Divine laws and ordinary equity were suspended or disallowed when they applied to a foreigner, especially to a foreigner whose land and property they required.

But these are the natural errors of the human heart under exceptional stresses. Many centuries were to pass before the God that spake in the Burning Bush was to manifest Himself in a new revelation, which nevertheless was the oldest of all the inspirations of the Hebrew people — as the God not only of Israel, but of all mankind

Moses: The Leader of a People

who wished to serve Him; a God not only of justice, but of mercy; a God not only of self-preservation and survival, but of pity, self-sacrifice, and ineffable love.

Let the men of science and of learning expand their knowledge and probe with their researches every detail of the records which have been preserved to us from these dim ages. All they will do is to fortify the grand simplicity and essential accuracy of the recorded truths which have lighted so far the pilgrimage of man.