

OLD TESTAMENT PERSONALITIES

"III. Moses"

INTRODUCTION It takes four books of the Old Testament to tell the life story of Moses. Sometimes in the midst of those pages you know that you must pull aside the drapes of Oriental imagination and primitive concepts of God to find the real outline of Moses' life and God's leadership. But it is there, and you can, if you will, discern the figure and personality of one whom God used as he used no other up to the time of Jesus for an instrument of revelation.

DEVELOPMENT From the Sunday-school days of our childhood we remember well enough the story of Moses in the bulrushes. He was placed there by a mother who feared Pharaoh's decree of death for all Hebrew male children, and then he was found and adopted by no less a royal personage than Pharaoh's daughter, with a strong assist from Moses' sister, who was engaged by the royal family as his governess. What we do not so well remember is the reason for Pharaoh's edict against the Hebrew boys. The land of Egypt was teeming with the Israelites, and the Egyptians were worried. Up to this point the people of Egypt had managed to keep the situation well in hand. They had put these foreigners in their proper place - working all day and half the night, mixing straw with clay to make bricks - and never let them forget that they were slaves and nothing more.

But still Pharaoh was worried. If the Israelite population continued to grow, there was no knowing when by the sheer weight of their numbers the Hebrews might challenge the Egyptians. So Pharaoh came up with the cool and calloused notion of killing every new baby boy born to an Israelite woman. The only thing was that it didn't work, any more than any "slaughter of the innocents" has ever worked. A Pharaoh's cunning is no match for a mother's love. Moses survived, and ironically, he grew up with all the privileges of an Egyptian prince.

Yet somewhere along the way Moses discovered that he was not an Egyptian but a Hebrew, and it is a sign of his character that, as the author of the book of Hebrews puts it, "he....refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter". So it was that he was out with his kinsfolk one day when he saw one of the Egyptian taskmasters all but beating the life out of a Hebrew slave. And in a fit of impulsive anger Moses promptly finished the Egyptian once and for all. It wasn't long before Pharaoh's police department was investigating, and Moses decided to take to the hills.

He might have lived and died there in the land of Midian, working as a shepherd in the fields, if God had not made it known to Moses in powerful fashion that he had some other plans for him. For a while Moses struggled with God as though it were a great checker game. Moses advanced an argument and God answered that. Another argument. Another answer. Back and forth. Alibis, excuses, worries, rationalizations. But God wouldn't take "no" for an answer, and at last a humble man was on his way to face another Pharaoh on the throne of Egypt, armed with only the credentials of an inner certainty attesting that he was God's ambassador, and prepared only with one speech, "Let my people go".

You know what a hard time Pharaoh gave Moses. Things got worse for the Hebrews before they got better. Pharaoh reacted to Moses' requests by grinding the slaves even more under the heel of Egyptian power. "Make more bricks, and go find your straw" he ordered. And Moses was faced not only with the contempt of Pharaoh but with the resentment of his own people. But God had strange ways of persuading Pharaoh that just maybe this character from the country was not as mad as he sounded, and little by little he began to relent. "All right, go a little distance, but not

too far". "Not enough" said Moses. "All right, take your men folk and go, but no one else". "Not enough" said Moses. "All right, take all your people, but no flocks and herds". "Not enough" said Moses. Until one morning it seemed that the eldest son in every home in Egypt was dead, and Pharaoh sent up the white flag, and 600,000 Hebrew slaves were off for the promised land, led only by Moses and by God. Pharaoh had everything on his side except God, and Moses had nothing on his side - except God. And God has a habit of winning eventually.

The story of the trek through the wilderness is an epic in itself, and we cannot begin to do justice to it here. If Moses breathed a sigh of relief as he started the parade of his people out of Egypt, it must have been succeeded by many sighs of despair. Read those chapters in Exodus sometime and see if you don't have an impulse to shake up the whole lot of Israelites that Moses was trying to help. Ungrateful bunch they were - sniveling and bickering and whining. How short they were - both on memories of the past and faith in the future. "What have you done to us?" they complained to Moses again and again at the slightest barrier in their path. "It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness". And Moses would only bite his lip and make another appointment with God, and soon he was ready to push on.

And so the years passed. And all the while Moses was God's greatest instrument in molding a nation and in transmitting laws to his people. Some of the laws in those four Old Testament books were intended surely for a nomadic people on their march through the wilderness and have no lasting relevance for age after age. But others of those laws are for all people in all times, as for example, the Ten Commandments. This was the mission of the man Moses, then, to deal with the timely and with the timeless, and all the while to fashion a nation as his people plodded on through the desert - and he did it, with an unfailing sense of God's presence and God's guidance.

Until one fine day the forty-year journey was all but finished. One more day's journey and they would be at the Jordan's gorge, and there on the other side was the promised land. Only God said to Moses, "This is the end of the line for you" and so he took him up on Mount Nebo, where Moses could look out over the Promised Land, which his people would soon enter, and then he died. The book of Deuteronomy ends like this, "And there has not risen a prophet since in Israel like Moses".

I want you now to notice three things about Moses and the way in which God worked through this man, for this is the way that God still works.

IN SPITE OF HIS SINS For one thing, God used Moses in spite of his sins. The plain and simple fact is that Moses was a murderer. If he were on trial in one of our courts today, he could not even enter a plea of self-defense. He let his temper get the best of him and proceeded to do to the Egyptian what he Egyptian was doing to the Hebrew slave - only much more conclusively and finally.

I wonder, there on the slopes of Midian, when the sheep were grazing under his watchful care, did his crime ever haunt him? Did he stop to realize that the Egyptian was a man like himself with the same hopes and fears? Did he ever stop to wonder about the Egyptian's family and how they were making out? Ironical, wasn't it, that Moses should be the instrument for publishing God's commandments, one of which makes it very clear that "thou shalt not kill". And there he was with a broken commandment to his own record.

who we are - that we are children of His - our lives have potential for goodness even in spite of some failure.

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But the important thing is that it didn't stop God from using Moses. And the more important thing still is that it has never stopped God from using people. Sometimes we, too, can get bogged down with the knowledge of our unworthiness, as the Book of Common Prayer puts it, "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done". It's a sense of sin. There is no point in minimizing it or trying to gloss over it because it's there and we need to deal with it.

Yet the other part of it is that God never seems to give up, even when we're wallowing around in the mire of some failure and telling ourselves that it's no use, we're no good. I remember when I was a teen-ager and setting out from home, whether for school or a party, my parents would sometimes say, "Remember who you are". And it sometimes annoyed me, for preachers' sons do not always want to be reminded who they are. But they were right. And it seems that God has a habit every now and again of reminding us who we are. He did it with Moses - with Zacchaeus - with Saul - with Augustine - and with a prodigal son - and miracle of it all, he does it still!

IN SPITE OF HIS INADEQUACIES

Second, God used Moses in spite of his inadequacies.

I am sure that his sense of failure and of sinfulness must have been all bound up with his sense of inadequacy. But it wasn't just that. The marching orders that God handed Moses that day in front of the burning bush were just too large and too overwhelming. It would be a little like commissioning any one of us today to bring the process of integration to a speedy and satisfactory conclusion, or to settle all the displaced persons of Palestine who are seeking homes, or to iron out the tensions between East and West. "Go in to Pharaoh, and say to him.....'Let my people go'". I can understand how Moses' heart sank as it began to register just exactly what God had in mind.

I don't doubt for a moment that Moses was perfectly sincere as he tried to convince God otherwise. "But God," he said, "who am I? I am a nobody". "But certainly I will be with Thee," came back the answer. "But, God, even the Israelites will not accept me as their leader" yet God thought otherwise. "But, God, I'm no speaker. I stutter and stammer". And there was the insistent voice again, "I will be with thy mouth". Does it seem strange to you that with all the self-assured leaders and eloquent orators of the time, God should have chosen Moses?

Not really. I can't quite picture God choosing someone who thought that he was just the man for the job, who had all his speeches written out to deliver to Pharaoh and all the routs mapped out through the wilderness, and who could face it all without skipping a heartbeat and feeling a tremor in his soul. "The best work" wrote J. Edgar Park, "is done by people who do not think that they are fitted for it". Of course you can put that truth to absurd extremes. It doesn't mean that we are to seek out the task that by temperament or training we are the least fitted for and eagerly embrace it. But it does mean that when a humble person confronts a large order with his name tag clearly attached, he can move in with the assurance that some power beyond his own will blend with his best efforts to make the difference.

Whoever you are, if you're the least bit reverent and receptive, I challenge you to read that account of Moses' commissioning again without somehow sensing that it is about you, too. So you are headed for teaching or nursing or the law or the business world - and sometimes it looks so hopelessly big and beyond you. So it seems that your home or your work or your church is asking something of you - a one talent person, that some ten-talent genius should be undertaking. So it seems that the forecast for tomorrow in your personal life suggests storms and stresses and decisions and demands that you can't possibly face. And some of us, if we'd stop shouting about our inadequacies, might hear God say, "Good, you're my man. I'm with you!"

IN SPITE OF HIS DISAPPOINTMENTS

Then there is one other thing that has never ceased to amaze me about the relationship between God and Moses. God used Moses in spite of his disappointments. There is a whole catalogue of the discouragements and defeats that befell Moses in those miles and months between Egypt and Palestine. He was caught up in crisis after crisis - sometimes over food and water, sometimes because of the pettiness of the people, sometimes because of the jealousy of his brother and sister - and on it went that way for forty years - yet considering all that he had to contend with, there is remarkably little in the record of Moses' words that suggests bitterness or despair.

If you were reading it or hearing it for the first time, you'd cheer Moses on in the faith that at last it would turn out all right, and finally he would get his reward of rest and respect in the land of milk and honey. It didn't turn out that way at all. And we who yearn for happy endings to stories can't quite accept the picture of Moses on Mount Nebo, looking out over the Promised Land with the knowledge that it's not for him. But the strange thing is there's no record of any protest from Moses, but rather the picture is one of quiet and trusting acceptance. As a matter of record here are the closing lines of his valedictory message: "The eternal God is thy refuge and underneath are the everlasting arms".

How many people come to stand at some time or another on Mount Nebo? A couple makes plans for the future and dreams of retirement, and then right on the threshold of it all, one is taken. Men and women struggle all their years in devotion to some cause - science, peace, human rights - and just on the eve of triumph, they are gone. Again and again life says to us, "I have caused thee to see it with thine eyes, but thou shalt not go over thither". And every once in a while we'll find someone like Moses who can stand there on Mount Nebo - with a look of quite trust and calm acceptance in his eyes.....and able to say with some glad hymn of faith as Moses did:

"God is our refuge and strength.....
Therefore we will not fear.....
The Lord of hosts is with us....."

And so we remember Moses for many reasons, but among them these three: in spite of his sins, his inadequacies, and his discouragements, God made good use of him.

LET US PRAY And now may something of the same spirit that was in thy servant Moses, O God, be also in us. May we remember how thou didst put thy hand on his life and make great use of him in serving mankind - in spite of his sins, his inadequacies, and his discouragements. May we, in our lives, be also used by Thee. In the spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen