

MOSES

A SKETCH OF HIS LIFE AND ACHIEVEMENTS

THERE is still uncertainty whether the Exodus from Egypt took place in the fifteenth century B.C. or in the thirteenth and whether the Pharaoh who oppressed the Israelites was Thothmes III of the eighteenth dynasty or Ramses II of the nineteenth. The opinions of scholars are divided; and for our present purpose it must suffice merely to mention the two possibilities. It is worth adding, however, that, though it is customary to speak of the Pharaoh of the oppression as if there were one only, this is not really warranted by the sacred text. The story of the affliction of the Israelites is introduced by the statement that a new king ascended the throne of Egypt 'who knew not Joseph', (Ex. i, 8). This could mean simply that with the passage of time the benefits conferred on Egypt by Joseph passed into oblivion. But it is probable that the new king belonged to a new dynasty. And if, as is likely, Jacob went down to Egypt during the rule of the Hyksos kings, *circa* 1730-1580, no gratitude would be felt by later native rulers for anything accomplished during the reign of these hated Semitic invaders. In the course of the rest of the story there is no mention of a change of king and it is this silence of the text which has led to the assumption that one Pharaoh only oppressed the people. However, this is not satisfactory evidence, as the Bible is not interested in secular history and records only what has a bearing on the religious history of Israel. Consequently changes on the throne of Egypt during the course of the oppression would not necessarily be mentioned in Exodus. Hence we cannot say whether the Pharaoh under whom Moses was born was the first to oppress the Israelites, or under how many reigns the oppression continued. Whatever the truth may be in this matter, the fact that Moses was born during the oppression was the occasion of his altogether unusual upbringing.

Pharaoh's daughter had a tender heart and took pity on the little child lying among the rushes near the Nile bank. That she adopted him as a son (Ex. ii, 1-10), ensured for him the best home and education possible in Egypt at the time and far superior to what would have been his, had he passed his youth among his own people. The Egyptians were a highly civilized nation. They had a keen eye for beauty, and remarkable skill in the arts of sculpture and architecture. They had an abundant literature and were famous in the Near East for their wisdom. It was in the highest circles of this refined society that Moses passed his youth. Thus alone of the Israelites he 'was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians' (Acts vii, 22). This of itself must have won him pre-eminence among his countrymen, but he had it in him besides to become, as St Stephen put it (*ibid.*), 'mighty in his words and in his deeds'. Not that

he had any natural gift of eloquence. On the contrary, as St Paul's speech was called 'contemptible' (II Cor. x, 10), so Moses described himself as 'heavy of mouth and heavy of tongue' (Ex. iv, 10). He suffered in fact from some impediment of speech (cf. Ex. vi, 12). Aaron, his brother, had to be his 'mouth' and 'speak in his stead to the people' (Ex. iv, 16). But many years were to pass before he had to teach and guide his fellow-Israelites.

His life falls into three periods, to each of which are assigned forty years. He was forty years old (Acts vii, 23), 'when it came into his heart to visit his brethren'. He was 'eighty years old' when he went with Aaron to speak with Pharaoh (Ex. vii, 7). And he was 'a hundred and twenty years old' at the time of his death (Deut. xxxi, 2). According to these figures he spent forty years of private life, of which nothing is recorded, forty years as a fugitive in Madian, and forty years as leader of his people, all, except the period of struggle with Pharaoh, spent in the long wandering from Egypt to Canaan. This schematism combined with the Hebrew use of forty as a round and only approximate number shows that the figures are not meant to be exact. It will be recalled that in the same way forty years are assigned to the reigns of the three successive kings, Saul, David, and Solomon. It should be added that the records indicate that with all their culture and knowledge the Egyptians do not seem to have had a knowledge of their true ages. Among them the number one hundred and ten seems to have been used to signify the limit of extreme old age. The meaning of the figures, therefore, may be taken to be that Moses had reached an age at which he could be expected to act with authority when he attempted to intervene in the struggle between the Israelites (Ex. ii, 13), that he was long absent in Madian, and had reached an advanced age at the time of his death.

The second period of Moses' life began with his flight from Egypt to Madian. This was necessitated by Pharaoh's determination to kill him for having slain an Egyptian in defence of one of his fellow-countrymen (Ex. ii, 11f, 15). The personal courage he had shown on that occasion led him to defend the shepherd daughters of Jethro, the priest of Madian, against the violence of an unspecified number of men. The sequel of this bold act of kindness was his marriage with Saphora, who was one of the seven daughters. In appearance Moses was at this time an Egyptian and was taken to be such (Ex. ii, 19). Probably on account, in part at least, of his long sojourn at the Egyptian court he was not true to the religious practices of his people, as an obscure narration makes it plain that he omitted the circumcision of one at least of his two sons (Ex. iv, 24-6), perhaps out of fear of displeasing his wife. The fidelity of the story to fact is illustrated by the mention of Moses' marriage with a foreign woman and this neglect of circumcision. If the story had been written or edited in later ages with the purpose of edification at all costs,

these facts, which did not make for the honour of the great law-giver, would have been omitted. The same is true of his second marriage, which was with an Ethiopian (Cushite) (Num. xii, 1), for this woman can hardly be identified with Sephora. This marriage was resented by Mary, Moses' sister, and by Aaron.

While living in Madian Moses took charge of his father-in-law's 'flock' (Ex. iii, 1), which may have been of sheep or goats or, indeed, of both together. He thus belongs to the list of famous shepherds and goatherds, in which are the names of Jacob, David and Amos. Later, it was on Jethro's advice that Moses eased his burden of government by appointing rulers over sections of the people to judge the easier cases (Ex. xviii, 13-26).

The third period began with the divine mission to return to Egypt to free his people. This charge was given in the vision of the Burning Bush (Ex. iii-iv). There is still discussion whether God then revealed his sacred name of Yahweh for the first time (Ex. iii, 15). The text strongly suggests that Moses knew or suspected that God was known among his countrymen by a name that was unknown to him. He had lived all his life away from them, at the court of Pharaoh's daughter and in Madian. He seems to have foreseen incredulity if he could not tell his people the name of God who had sent him. 'Lo, I shall go to the children of Israel and say to them: The God of your fathers hath sent me to you. If they should say to me: What is his name? what shall I say to them?' (Ex. iii, 13). If in answer to this question he had given a name that the Israelites had never heard before, it would have been an obstacle to the acceptance of his mission. If this is correct, it is evidence of what would be expected, viz. that Moses was not well-informed about the religion of his people.

Apart from the liberation from Egypt (Ex. v-xii), the story of the remainder of Moses' life is that of the forty years' sojourn in the wilderness and its main outline is too well known to be summarized here. But something must be said of his troubles, his faults, and his virtues. His task was certainly a formidable one, for he had to bear the burden of a 'stiff-necked' people (Ex. xxxii, 9; xxxiii, 3, 5; xxxiv, 9; Deut. ix, 6, 13; x, 16). In spite of the miracles they had seen wrought on their behalf in Egypt they lacked trust in God and were constantly murmuring and complaining, for lack of water (Ex. xv, 24; xvii, 3; Num. xx, 5), of food (Ex. xvi, 3; see also Num. xi, 1; xxi, 5). On one occasion the people so far forgot their indebtedness to Moses that he had reason to fear for his life: 'Yet a little more and they will stone me' (Ex. xvii, 4). And it was not only the common people who proved so ungrateful. Even those nearest and dearest to him, from whom he had the right to look for support and encouragement, found fault with and gave way to jealousy against him, as did Mary and Aaron (Num. xii, 1f). On another occasion

there was even open rebellion under the leadership of Core, Dathan and Abiron (Num. xvi). And although God vindicated his servant by the speedy punishment of the offenders, such ingratitude and opposition must have caused great distress to Moses. Other instances of such opposition and murmuring are related (Ex. ii, 14 ; v, 21 ; vi, 3 ; xiv, 11f ; Num. xiv, 2f).

Even more distressing to Moses than the personal affronts to himself were the lack of trust in God and the grave breaches of his commandments. 'The Lord said to Moses : How long will this people contemn me ? How long will they not believe in me for all the signs that I have wrought in the midst of them ?' (Num. xiv, 11). Very soon after receiving the decalogue and with the portents of Egypt fresh in their minds, while Moses was yet in the mountain with God, they violated the precept never to make a graven image, and set up the golden calf : 'This is thy God, O Israel, who has brought thee up out of the land of Egypt' (Ex. xxxii, 4 ; cf. xx, 4). And not only did the people thus transgress, but even Aaron set up an altar before the image and proclaimed 'Tomorrow will be a feast in honour of Yahweh' (Ex. xxxii, 5). But far worse was to follow. When the people was shortly to enter the promised land, they took to fornication with the daughters of Moab, and when invited to the sacrifices of their gods 'the people did eat and adored their gods' (Num. xxv, 2). It cannot have been a surprise though it must have been heartbreaking to Moses, when shortly before his death and the end of the long pilgrimage in the desert God announced to him : 'Behold thou shalt sleep with thy fathers, and this people will rise up and go afornicating after strange gods in the land to which it goeth in to dwell : they will forsake me, and will make void the covenant, which I have made with them' (Deut. xxxi, 16).

No wonder that the burden on Moses' shoulders seemed at times more than he could bear. He made his complaint to God : 'Why hast thou afflicted thy servant ? Wherefore do I not find favour before thee ? And why hast thou laid the weight of all this people upon me ? . . . I am not able alone to bear all this people, because it is too heavy for me' (Num. xi, 11, 14). So intense was his affliction that death seemed preferable : 'I beseech thee to kill me, and let me find grace in thy eyes, that I be not afflicted with so great evils' (Num. xi, 15). So to speak was no sign of virtue in Moses ; but the fault, if in the anguish of his soul fault there was, was slight and received no rebuke from God, who on the contrary arranged for the easing of Moses' burden (vv. 16f). On a previous occasion when Moses showed pusillanimity and lack of trust in God by almost refusing the mission to liberate Israel, God was angry with him (Ex. iv, 14).

Here it may be remarked how frankly and humbly Moses relates his own weaknesses and shortcomings. In addition to the examples

mentioned in the last paragraph there is the confession of his failure to circumcise his son (Ex. iv, 24ff), and the offence which so displeased God as to merit Moses' exclusion from the land of promise. To this allusion is made on several occasions (Num. xx, 12 ; xxvii, 14 ; Deut. i, 37 ; iii, 26 ; xxxi, 2 ; xxxii, 51 ; xxxiv, 4, probably post-Mosaic). From Num. xx, 12 ; 'Because you have not trusted me' and Num. xxvii, 14 'because you were rebellious against my command' it appears that the fault of Moses was a failure to carry out the divine command just as it was given to him, the failure being due to a lack of trust based perhaps on the unworthiness of the people. Ps. cv (cvi) 33 in its allusion to this incident further charges Moses with having 'spoken rashly with his lips', a reference to Moses' reprehension of the people (Num. xx, 10). God had ordered Moses to 'speak to the rock' (Num. xx, 8). This he did not do. Instead he struck the rock twice. Both in Deut. i, 37 and iii, 26 Moses tells the people that God was angry with him on their account. That is to say that it was the obstinacy and rebelliousness of the people which occasioned Moses' fault.

This constant recurrence to his shortcomings is a sign of great virtue in Moses. He was completely devoid of the spirit of pride. His spirit of forgiveness is illustrated by his prayer to God to heal his sister Mary of leprosy although it was inflicted on her in punishment of her envy of him and evil talk against him (Num. xii, 13). This same forgiving spirit and at the same time unbounded devotion to his people is manifested in his petitions to God to spare them after some of their gravest transgressions. Thus after the worship of the golden calf he prayed : 'Either forgive them this trespass ; or if thou do not, strike me out of the book that thou hast written' (Ex. xxxii, 31f). The doctrine of eternal bliss with God had not been revealed, and Moses speaks of 'the book of the living' (Ps. lxxviii [lxxix] 29), that is of those alive in this world. He prays to die if God will not spare his people. He had the same great spirit which led St Paul in the same sense to desire to be an anathema for his brethren (Rom. ix, 2). See St Jerome, *Ep. ad Algasiam* 121, qu. 9 (PL 22, 1028). Num. xiv, 19f records another successful prayer of Moses for the forgiveness of his people.

On the subject of Moses' virtues a word must be said of Num. xii, 3 : 'Moses was a man exceeding meek above all men that dwelt upon earth'. Accepting this to refer to 'meekness' some have argued that Moses could have written so of himself ; others, as A Lapide have considered the sentence a later addition. In subsequent usage the word combined the double notion of suffering affliction with patience, but here it seems to refer merely to the multitude of Moses' troubles and afflictions. This is favoured by the context which treats of the hostility of Mary and Aaron, those nearest and dearest to the great legislator. An allied word has the bare sense of 'affliction' in Ex. iii, 7 and Deut. xvi, 3, and

another allied word has the meaning of 'in distressed circumstances' 'needy' in Deut. xxiv, 12, 14f. This is not, of course, to say that Moses was not meek, as his ready forgiveness in this very instance shows that he was. Just anger is not opposed to meekness and Moses often had occasion to manifest it (Ex. xi, 9; Lev. x, 16; Ex. xxxii, 19).

Moses' supernatural privileges may be briefly referred to. He was a prophet, that is, one commissioned to speak in the name of and with the authority of God: 'I shall be in thy mouth' (Ex. iv; 15). And he speaks of himself as a prophet in the passage where he foretells that God will send Israel that succession of prophets which was to end with Christ: 'The Lord thy God will raise up to thee a prophet of thy nation and of thy brethren like unto me' (Deut. xviii, 15). As a prophet God himself set Moses above all others: 'If there be among you a prophet of the Lord, I will appear to him in a vision, or I will speak to him in a dream. But it is not so with my servant Moses, who is most faithful in all my house; for I speak to him mouth to mouth, and plainly and not by riddles and figures doth he see the Lord' (Hebrew text, 'by riddles, and the form of the Lord doth he see') Num. xii, 6-8. So Ex. xxxiii, 11 'The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man is wont to speak to his friend'. Moses did not, of course, see God as he is in himself, but in some familiar apparition. When he came forth from these intimate colloquies with God, Moses' 'face was horned' (Ex. xxxiv, 29-35). That is, the effulgence of God's presence caused the prophet's face to shine with beams or rays of light, which are metaphorically called horns. On two occasions Moses was forty days and forty nights alone with God in the mountain, and on neither occasion did he either eat or drink; Ex. xxiv, 18 with Deut. ix, 9 describe the first occasion and Ex. xxxiv, 28 the second. On Moses' office as a miracle-worker and as a law-giver it is not necessary to dilate, as almost every page of the last four books of the Pentateuch bears witness to his power and authority in both respects.

Such then was Moses—prophet, miracle-worker, legislator, friend of God, leader of his people. He may justly be called the second father of his race and its founder as a nation. He freed them from the bondage of Egypt, ruled them in the wilderness, gave them a religious and social code that bound them in a close federal unity. But even he was not allowed to set foot on the soil of the promised land to which he led his nation. Such is God's displeasure at any breach of his holy law that this great and virtuous man was condemned to die in sight of the land he had so long desired.

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