

3 August 2014

Foundations: Moses

Exodus 1-4

So Jacob and his family moved to Egypt. Joseph – eleventh of Jacob’s twelve sons – had been sold into Egypt as a slave, but he had risen to a place of power there, and from that position was able to preserve his family during a severe famine. Joseph had two sons by his Egyptian wife: Manasseh and Ephraim. In fact, all of Jacob’s sons were fruitful. And his grandchildren and great-grandchildren, too. In short, the Israelite population in Egypt grew impressively.

In time, that first generation of Hebrew immigrants died, as did the Egyptian Pharaoh who had made Joseph his right hand man. A new Pharaoh came to power in Egypt, a Pharaoh who did not know Joseph and who saw the booming Hebrew population as a threat. “What shall we do?” he asked his council. “These foreigners who live among us will soon be stronger than we are. If we go to war with the vile Hittites or someone else, they could join our enemies and overwhelm us!” So it was decided that they needed to “deal harshly” with that immigrant population. They made them slaves, forced them to do the worst jobs, and treated them as less than human.

There’s a cycle that always seems to take place when this happens – when the dominant people in a land grows afraid of another resident ethnic group. Because of their fear, they oppress the minority population – so as to keep them under control. But because they are treating that people with unjust harshness, they grow even more afraid. What if they revolt against our treatment? So they oppress them more harshly . . . and grow even more afraid. The root of nearly all hatred is fear, and the greater the fear, the greater the hatred. And it didn’t work. Egyptian persecution didn’t stop the Hebrews from having children, and so Pharaoh escalated the oppression. He summoned the Hebrew midwives, and instructed them that when they assisted at births, they were quietly to kill all the boys. They didn’t. When Pharaoh called them back in to ask why they had disobeyed him, they said, “It’s not our fault. Hebrew women are just tougher than your delicate Egyptian women. By the time we get there, the babies are already born.” Pharaoh’s next step? Genocide. He sent his soldiers to kill every Hebrew boy under the age of two. In this cycle of oppression, whenever it takes place, genocide is always the logical final step.

Now among the Hebrews was a woman named Jochabed, from the tribe of Levi. She had two children already, a boy named Aaron and a daughter named Miriam, who were old enough to escape the slaughter, but then she had another baby. A boy. And she looked at him, and he was beautiful in her eyes, and she loved him, so she hid him in her home. And when the Egyptian soldiers began searching houses, she put the child in a basket – waterproofed by a layer of pitch – and hid it among the reeds at the edge of the Nile, leaving her daughter Miriam there to keep watch.

It looked as if this plan was about to go terribly wrong. A group of noble Egyptian women came down to wash in the river – near where the baby lay in his floating bassinet. And then, of course, the boy woke up and began to cry. There was nothing Miriam could do but watch. One of the women – the one that the other women all seemed to be attending – followed the sound, found the baby, and picked him up. “Ssh,” she said. “This must be one of the Hebrew babies that my father has ordered his soldiers to murder. Ssh, don’t cry. No one’s going to hurt you. Would you like to come live in the palace with me?”

At that point Miriam appeared. “He’s very young, my lady. Would you like me to find a woman who could keep him for you until he’s weaned?”

The princess smiled. “That would be very helpful, child. Thank you. I’ll make sure he’s safe until he can be brought to me. Now, we need to give him a name. How about calling him ‘Drawn Out’ because I drew him out of the water. What is the Hebrew word for ‘drawn out’?”

“Moshe.”

“Let’s make it sound a little more Egyptian. Let’s call him, Moses.”

And that was how it happened that the youngest child of a family of the tribe of Levi was raised in luxury in the king’s palace while his people were treated like dogs just beyond the palace walls. Now Exodus doesn’t tell us anything about those years of privilege, but young Moses evidently never forgot who his people really were, and it came about that one day he ventured outside the comfortable walls of his royal home and saw how his people were really being treated. Specifically, he saw an Egyptian foreman savagely beating a Hebrew slave. Outraged, Moses picked up a rock and bashed in the head of the Egyptian foreman. Then he hid the body and went home. It’s hard to know what he expected to happen. Did he think that his people, who lived with daily beatings and forced labor from dawn to dusk, would be grateful to him for pausing from his afternoon stroll to help one of them? Who knows what he thought. But the oppressed Israelites didn’t cheer and throw flowers. They reported him. “It wasn’t one of us. It was that guy Moses. One of yours.”

And *that* was how it happened that the young Hebrew raised as a prince in a life of ease became a wanted man, a fugitive, a refugee. Moses fled Egypt, heading into the desert where few would follow and, eventually, came out the other side to the land of Midian. There he made a new, and very different life. He married a Midianite girl named Zipporah, the daughter of a Midianite priest named Jethro, and became a shepherd, trying to keep a scraggly flock alive in the bare wastes of the Sinai Desert. He and Zipporah had a son, whom Moses called Gershom, from the Hebrew *ger*, which means “stranger,” for he said, “I am a stranger in a strange land.”

From slave child to prince to refugee with a price on his head. Moses’ life had been quite an up-and-down ride. But he hadn’t seen anything yet.

“Moses! Moses!”

Moses had taken the sheep with the sheep farther afield than usual. He was deep in the wilderness, on the slopes of a mountain that is sometimes called Sinai, sometimes called Horeb, and there he saw a strange sight: a bush that was in full flame – but wasn’t burning up. He watched for a moment, but no branches crumbled into ash, no leaves curled. It was a fire that blazed but did not devour. Moses turned aside to look more closely. And when the Lord saw that he had turned aside, he called him by name. Twice. “Moses! Moses!”

Moses said, “Here I am.”

“Take off your sandals, Moses. For this scrubby mountainside is holy ground.” Moses obeyed. The voice continued, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Moses hid his face in awe. The Lord went on, “I have seen the misery of my oppressed people, and I have heard their cries. I have come to deliver them and restore them to the land I promised their fathers, a land flowing with milk and honey.” Moses nodded approvingly. It was about time God did something. The Lord said, “And so I am sending you. Go to Pharaoh and tell him to let my people go.”

“Me?”

“Yes.”

“Lord, who am I to do that?”

“It doesn’t matter who you are. I will be with you.”

“No. Seriously, God. I’m nobody. I could never do that. And even if I did go back to Egypt – which I do *not* intend to do – no one would believe me. *The God of your fathers has sent me.* That’ll be persuasive. What do I say then? What if they ask me your name? What’ll I say?”

“Why do you people always want to know my name? My name is not who I am. I am is who I am. I am the one who is, the one who will be, the only one who might ever be. I am every name, every wind, every good, every breath. I am who I am, and that’s enough. Tell them I AM sent you. Let that be my name.” And Moses shrank in the presence of all that is, and all that is spoke to Moses. “You will go first to the elders of Israel and gather them. Tell them that the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob has heard their cries and has sent you. Tell them that I will bring them up from Egypt and into the land of Canaan. They will listen to you. Then go to Pharaoh and tell him that the God of the Hebrews demands that his people be allowed to go three days’ journey into the desert to worship.”

“And Pharaoh will listen too?”

“Well, no. I’ll have to persuade him. But he will let you go.”

“Wait! Stop right there. I was almost . . . I haven’t agreed to this yet. I have some more questions. You say that the people will listen to me. What if they don’t?”

“What’s that in your hand, Moses?”

“A staff.”

“Throw it on the ground.” So Moses did, and immediately it became a snake, and Moses ran from it. “Now, pick it up again. By the tail.”

And it was a staff again.

“You want more, Moses? Put your hand in your cloak and pull it out, it will be leprous. Put it back in and pull it out, it will be healed. Dip some water from the Nile and pour it on the ground, and it will become blood. You want magic? You want signs? Hey, presto! . . . Now what, Moses?”

“It’s just that . . . I don’t talk so good. You know how you have to make speeches in school? Well, no, I guess you don’t. Well, I was terrible at it. I get tongue-tied and start stammering, and –”

“Moses, who made your lips and tongue to speak? Who made their ears to hear? I did.”

“It’s just –”

“It’s just what, Moses?”

“I don’t want to do it! Find somebody else! . . . Please. I’m scared.”

“I told you I would be with you.”

“It’s not enough.”

“It is, actually. You just don’t know it yet. All right. I’m sending your brother Aaron to meet you. Aaron talks real good. He can speak for you if you get nervous.”

Moses took a deep breath. “Why me, God?”

“You turned aside.”

“All right, God. I’ll go to Egypt. I’ll talk to the elders. I’ll stand before Pharaoh. I’ll do what you say, and I won’t fight you any more.”

“Oh, now Moses, don’t make promises you aren’t going to keep. You’ll fight me plenty in the years to come.”

“I will?”

“Oh, yes.”

“And you’re all right with that?”

“I am.”

Moses met his brother Aaron on the road, and together they went to Egypt. There, they assembled the elders of Israel and told them, “We have come from the One Who Is, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God who hears the cry of the oppressed, and he has heard your cry and has sent us to bring you home.”

Exodus 4:31. “The people believed; and when they heard that the Lord had given heed to the Israelites and that he had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped.”