

Lesson 5: The Call of Moses (Exodus 1-5)

Pharaoh and Egypt

We now turn to the most central events in the Old Testament: the call of Moses, the Passover and the Exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land. The book of Exodus contains the key historical events that define the Old Testament people as a nation chosen by God for His covenant. It is a history of how the Lord made the “sons of Jacob” (hence, the Israelites) into the “people of God,” that is, a people who have been set apart for the salvific mission of the covenant. The ancient Rabbis considered the Exodus events as *the* defining period in the history of Israel, and it is the context within which we can best understand the saving work of Christ.

The Book of Genesis ends with the death and burial of Joseph, the greatest of the sons of Jacob. Exodus picks up the story 430 years later, when Egypt has a new king who has changed his view of Jacob’s descendants, the Israelites. Remembering back to Genesis, Joseph and his family held a privileged place in Egypt even though they were foreigners. The situation, however, is much different at the beginning of Exodus. The sacred writer says of Pharaoh that he did not “know” (in Hebrew, *yada*) Joseph.¹⁰³ At first glance this seems strange since Pharaoh would have had the best education of anyone in Egypt. He certainly would have known the history of Egypt, how Egypt had been spared from famine and how it gained the upper hand economically and politically through the wisdom of a Hebrew named Joseph. In fact, it was due in large part to the skill and power of Joseph that enabled this current pharaoh to enjoy the position of power that he enjoys. For him not to know who Joseph is would be like a U.S President to say he had never heard of Thomas Jefferson. This, however, is not what the author means.

The Hebrew word *yada* is loaded with much deeper meaning than simply intellectual knowledge. The term is meant to convey a meaning of kinship, or a form of covenant relationship. Hence, this word implies that Joseph and his people had a covenantal relationship with political benefits that the new pharaoh no longer recognizes. In short, a new political situation is being described, and the beginning of Exodus is meant to contrast the people of Pharaoh, the oppressors, against the Israelites, the victims of oppression.

Interestingly, Pharaoh’s name is not mentioned. Here is one of the most important events of antiquity and a main character is not named, why? It seems the author intentionally omits his name as an insult. By not recording Pharaoh’s name, he disappears from the history books. It is a subtle, yet profound insult. This is another reminder that by reading a text carefully quite a bit can be inferred from what is not explicitly stated.

Pharaoh’s concern over the growing strength of the people of Israel and his desire to secure power leads him to devise a sinister plan against them. He says, “Come let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply and...join our enemies and fight against us.”¹⁰⁴ So, Pharaoh sets slave drivers over the Israelites in order to afflict them with heavy

¹⁰³ Exodus 1:8

¹⁰⁴ Exodus 1:9-10

burdens. His selfish hope is to make them so busy that they would forget about God and their unique identity, and so Egypt would benefit from all their time and energy. It is interesting to note that the devil often uses a similar strategy to this day. Frequently, Christians remark that they would go to church or pray more if only they had the time. If we are too busy to make time for God then the devil has nearly won his battle for our souls. Pharaoh counts on the principle that if he keeps the Israelites overburdened, their loyalty would remain with him and not with the Lord.¹⁰⁵

In the midst of the persecution, God empowers Israel to continue to grow in numbers and power. “But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad.”¹⁰⁶ This is an important aspect of God’s *modus operandi*. God allows difficulties and temptations to come upon us to exercise us in virtue. God the Father does not want to simply give us good things but to make us good. In order for that to happen He has to allow for struggles that call for virtue to come into our lives so that we will exercise the virtues called for and become the sons and daughters He desires. There is a big difference between having good things and being good. Through the battle to overcome difficulties we have the opportunity to grow in virtue and become better people. Spiritual growth can come most when one is challenged with difficulties, even suffering.

Needless to say, we are frustrated, even angered, when trials come, but without them we will not have the opportunity to grow in virtue and grace. So we pray for blessings, but sometimes blessings come clothed as trials. This was the case with the Israelites under the new Pharaoh, it was the case with the early Church and the persecution of the first Christians, and it is still true for us today if we allow grace to work through the hardships. This is very different from the “health and wealth” Gospel that is sometimes preached today. God’s blessings cannot be judged from external appearances, but from how the soul is affected.

One of the central themes in Exodus is related to the Hebrew word *avad*. We first see this word in the characterization of how the Egyptians persecute the Israelites. The Israelites were made to “serve with vigor.”¹⁰⁷ This word “to serve” is translated from the Hebrew word *avad*, which means “to serve,” but can also have the deeper meaning “to worship.” In fact, the word liturgy is derived from the Greek work for worship, *leitourgia*. Liturgy is to serve the Lord in worship. Pharaoh wants the Israelites to *avad* Pharaoh and the Egyptian gods, not the Lord. Sadly, the reality is that this is exactly what has happened. The Israelites are enslaved in Egypt, but, as will become clear as the story develops, they are also spiritually enslaved. They have entered the Egyptian culture of idolatry, paganism and polytheism (the belief in many gods). Their physical slavery is an outward manifestation of their spiritual slavery. Throughout Exodus we will see that God calls Moses and the people to *avad* Him. Moses will lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt to *avad* the Lord.

¹⁰⁵ For an insightful and enjoyable read about the tactics of the devil, read *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis.

¹⁰⁶ Exodus 1:12

¹⁰⁷ Exodus 1:13-14

Even though the Israelites are entirely integrated into the Egyptian culture, Pharaoh fears their growing numbers. In an attempt to control their size he enacts a deadly scheme. Pharaoh commands the midwives of the Hebrew people to kill all of the Hebrew boys by throwing them into the Nile River. In this way, Pharaoh attempts to prevent Israel from raising an army against him in the future by diminishing the male population. Pharaoh also wants to destroy the sons of the Israelites so that the Hebrew women will have no other option than to marry Egyptian men, thereby consolidating Egyptian power and wealth. In this respect, what the Israelites suffer is worse than slavery because their future as a people is at stake.¹⁰⁸

Moses

As the story continues, a young Hebrew mother takes poetic license with Pharaoh's edict. When her son is born she follows the law and casts him into the Nile, but she first puts him in a basket that floats.¹⁰⁹ Curiously, the Hebrew word used here for 'basket' is the same word as "ark," echoing Noah and how his family was saved from the waters.¹¹⁰ The mother of the young boy abandons her son into the hands of God, trusting that this is the best way to save him. The basket is found by Pharaoh's daughter who saves the boy and names him Moses, which means "to draw out of the water." Thus, he is saved through water by means of an ark, like Noah.¹ The name "Moses" is both descriptive of his beginnings and, as we will see with the Exodus, his vocation. Moses is drawn from the waters of the Nile and Moses will draw God's people from the water of the Red Sea.

Ironically, Moses is raised as part of Pharaoh's household and receives a privileged upbringing with the best education and all the comforts of royalty. He is a Hebrew but lives as an Egyptian. This all changes, however, when his anger flares and he kills an Egyptian slave driver.¹¹² The man who will receive the Ten Commandments kills another man. Again, we see that God does not choose His messengers for their virtue. Moses thought that he could free the Israelites by his own violent hand, thus revealing his pride and self-reliance. God is going to liberate His people, by his own "strong arm," not by the strength of Moses. The murder is discovered and so Moses must flee into the wilderness for fear of his own life. In a sense, Moses' own personal exile to freedom anticipates what will happen with the nation of Israel.

It is tempting to think that these early events in Moses' life happen in a short time span, but he is roughly forty years old when he flees Egypt and it is about another forty years before God calls him. God does not work quickly. The Lord is more interested in the formation of the person and the soul than accomplishing tasks and projects quickly; and the transformation of the soul takes time.

¹⁰⁸ This event will be echoed in the New Testament when Herod "sent and killed all the male children who were two years old or under." (Matthew 2:16)

¹⁰⁹ Exodus 2:3

¹¹⁰ cf. Genesis 6:14-9:18

¹ This repetition of images is an important interpretive key to reading the Scriptures. Repetition draws attention to key points.

¹¹² Exodus 2:11-15

The Burning Bush

Moses lives as a shepherd, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro the priest of Midian. The Midianites are a religious people, however they worship many gods. This gives a clue to Moses' understanding of the nature of religion. He is part of the Hebrew descendents, but was raised as an Egyptian. It is in the desert at Mt. Horeb (what will later be called Mt. Sinai – Hebrew for “burning bush”) that God first addresses Moses.¹¹³ In the form of a burning bush God identifies Himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.¹¹⁴ Why? By naming these three patriarchs, God clearly distinguishes Himself. If He had just said Abraham, the Midianites or Ishmaelites, or even the Egyptians could claim God as theirs since they are also descendents of Abraham. By naming Isaac and Jacob God makes it clear that He is the God of those who belong to the one covenant given to Abraham through Isaac and Jacob. At the burning bush God also instructs Moses to take off his sandals. Christian writers have seen this gesture as an act of humility and detachment in the face of the presence of God. No one can gain access to God unless he first detaches himself from every earthly attachment. It also suggests that there is something fitting about treating sacred space differently from other places, which is why it is appropriate for churches and chapels to be entered with a greater sense of dignity than simply an assembly hall.

It is at this moment that God reveals to Moses his vocation to lead His people from bondage to the Egyptians. “I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters...come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt.”¹¹⁵ Moses protests; this is too much for him to consider, especially since the last time Moses was in Egypt Pharaoh wanted to kill him. But God answers Moses' concerns with the promise of His divine help, “But I will be with you.”¹¹⁶ This speaks to the essence of the spiritual life. God recognizes that we cannot do it alone; we need Him. With God we can do much more than we can accomplish on our own. Our task is to trust that God will be with us as we follow His call.

The Lord then promises Moses that the people will worship (“avad”) Yahweh at that very spot.¹¹⁷ Hence, the purpose of Moses' mission is not so much to free the Israelites from slavery, but to lead them to worship the one, true God. Thus, the challenge of the entire Exodus experience is “Whom will you serve, oh Israel?”¹¹⁸ This choice, answered selfishly by Lucifer and Adam and Eve, is put before each of us. How we live our lives (or in this context, whom we “avad”) identifies our personal answer to this defining question. Is the work of our lives simply to elevate ourselves, or is it directed to the glory

¹¹³ The Bible often reports important events as having happened on a mountain so it is usually an image to draw special attention to the event.

¹¹⁴ Some writers see the burning bush as an image of the Church, which survives unblemished although it suffers persecution.

¹¹⁵ Exodus 3:7-10

¹¹⁶ Exodus 3:12

¹¹⁷ Exodus 3:12b

¹¹⁸ Joshua will eventually lead the people to *avad* Yahweh just before they enter the Promised Land.

“Choose this day whom you will serve...as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” (Joshua 24:15)

of God? This is the task of Moses, to bring the Chosen People back into an intimate relationship with the Lord – a relationship that worships the one true God.

Having received all of this new information Moses asks God the simple question, “What is your name?” Up to this point God’s name had not been revealed in the Bible. This is an important point. In the Old Testament the name defines the person. It explains who you are and what is the nature of your vocation (i.e. Moses literally means “to draw out of water”). To know someone’s name is also to tap into the power and authority of that individual. Consequently, to invoke the name of a deity is to invoke the presence and power of the deity. If you know the name you have access to the power. Curiously, it is worth noting that no miracle had been performed in Genesis until this moment. Once God reveals his name (Yahweh = “I AM WHO AM”), one miracle follows another, beginning in chapter four with the staff turning into a serpent.¹¹⁹ The question also reveals Moses’ perspective. As someone raised in the Egyptian culture, Moses likely believed in many gods. So, his question to the Lord could imply, “Which god are you?” That is, “Which of the many gods that we acknowledge are you?” God’s chosen people had grown accustomed to the worship of false gods. In fact, the prophet Ezekiel makes known that Israel was addicted to the idolatry of false gods.¹²⁰ So we see that they are not true to the religion of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and God’s revelation of Himself in this new way is a reminder to Moses that there is only one God.¹²¹

The divine name “I AM WHO AM” seems strange but it is a profound revelation of the nature of God. It refers to what God is in His essence; He is being itself. While this is a theological revelation, it is also a deep insight into the philosophical notion of God. Yahweh cannot be adequately described as all-powerful or all-knowing, rather, He is the source of all being, and His existence is not dependent on anything outside of Himself. Another key characteristic of this name is that God identifies Himself as one.

Yahweh then gives Moses his mission: to tell Israel and Pharaoh that God has heard the cry of His people and promises to bring them up out of Egypt and slavery into the land flowing with milk and honey. God acknowledges that it is time to bring His people out of slavery. Although Moses must have thought God was speaking about physical slavery, we will see that the Lord is speaking more about spiritual bondage to sin and idolatry.

“Let My People Go”

It is interesting to note that God’s first request for Pharaoh is to simply let the Israelites go for three days into the desert to worship God and then return to Egypt to resume their work. It does not seem to be a very large request, and yet God acknowledges from the outset that Pharaoh will deny the request. The Lord says to Moses, “I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and smite Egypt with all the wonders which I will do in it; after that he will let you

¹¹⁹ Exodus 4:2-5

¹²⁰ Ezekiel 20:2-8

¹²¹ CCC, #446

go.”¹²² This phrase “I will stretch out my hand” is used in the New Testament to invoke this story of Moses and the Exodus. In one of his healings of a leper the Gospel writer says, “He stretched out his hand.”¹²³ This language is meant to recall the action of God in the Exodus and connect Jesus and Moses. Moses frees the people from slavery in Egypt; Jesus frees us from the slavery to sin. Jesus institutes a new and eternal Exodus through the liberation He brings from sin. Again, it is important to read the Scriptures closely in order to pick up the subtle yet profound connections implicit in the text.

Moses argues with God, saying he is not capable of fulfilling the mission. God is not persuaded. To help Moses believe Yahweh performs three miracles.¹²⁴ God knows our faith sometimes needs help, and just as Moses received a sign to confirm his mission, we should not be afraid to look around us to see the hand of God revealing Himself to us for specific action. It may not be as obvious as a stick turning into a snake, but God does still reveal Himself to us through concrete events if we only have the eyes of faith to see them. In the end, God gives Moses the simple yet total assurance, “I will be with you.”¹²⁵ With the presence of God we are capable of doing much more than we could ever do on our own.

Moses then begins his mission by going to Pharaoh and demanding that the Israelites be allowed to go into the wilderness on a three days journey and hold a “feast” to God.¹²⁶ This word is a liturgical word, warning Pharaoh that the one, true, God demands worship (*avad*) from his people. The reference to the ‘three days journey’ again implies that the Israelites will return. Pharaoh responds with a hard heart by saying, “Who is the Lord that I should heed his voice and let Israel go? I do not *know* (*yada*) the Lord, and moreover will not let his people go.”¹²⁷ Pharaoh then orders the taskmasters to increase the workload for the Israelites so much that they have no time to think about their God. Pharaoh employs a devious truth: without rest, man cannot worship the Lord. This is a lesson for us today, for it is still just as true. It is why God will give them the Ten Commandments, legislating them to rest on the Sabbath. For it is only through leisure time that God’s people can turn their hearts and minds to God.¹²⁸ Leisure is to make time to reflect on the questions of life. It leads to wonder, which in turn should lead the mind and heart to God. This is why it is so critical to consistently set time aside to pray and meditate. Ultimately, leisure and the meditation on God is what God created us for, and the devil wants to keep us so busy that we do not have the time to worship and meditate.

¹²² Exodus 3:19-20

¹²³ Mark 1:41

¹²⁴ Exodus 4:2-9

¹²⁵ Exodus 4:12, 15

¹²⁶ Exodus 5:1

¹²⁷ Exodus 5:2

¹²⁸ Classically, this is the purpose of leisure: to spend time in prayer and the activities that raise up the human soul. For a short but profound treatment of leisure read *Leisure: the Basis of Culture* by Joseph Pieper.

It is important to remember that a relationship with God is not about a matter of time it is about a matter of love. We make time for the things that we love. Our busyness is often a matter of putting our temporal goals and desires ahead of our relationship with our Creator. When we do this, we end up unhappy, confused, and as we shall see over and over again with Israel, enslaved and exiled. Thus, we must give time to prayer, family, and friends in order to live balanced lives and follow the example set by Moses.