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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

UNIT 10: MOSES

TEXTBOOK READINGS:

Read chapter 2 “Exodus” in *Discovering the Bible*.

Read chapters 8 “Moses” and 13 “Puah and Shiprah” in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders* when noted.

BIBLICAL TEXT:

Read Exodus chapters 1-6 in the Bible carefully before reading the following information.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

The book of Exodus begins with a Pharaoh who did not know Joseph coming to power, and the subsequent enslavement of the Hebrew people who had multiplied in Egypt (Exodus 1:6-14). The increasingly brutal enslavement eventually turned to genocide as the Egyptian king decreed the killing of male Hebrew children (Exodus 1:15-22). Exodus briefly tells the story of the courageous midwives who resisted this decree (see chapter 13 in the course textbook), but the king then decreed that the newborn Hebrew males be thrown into the River Nile. It was during this time that Moses was born.

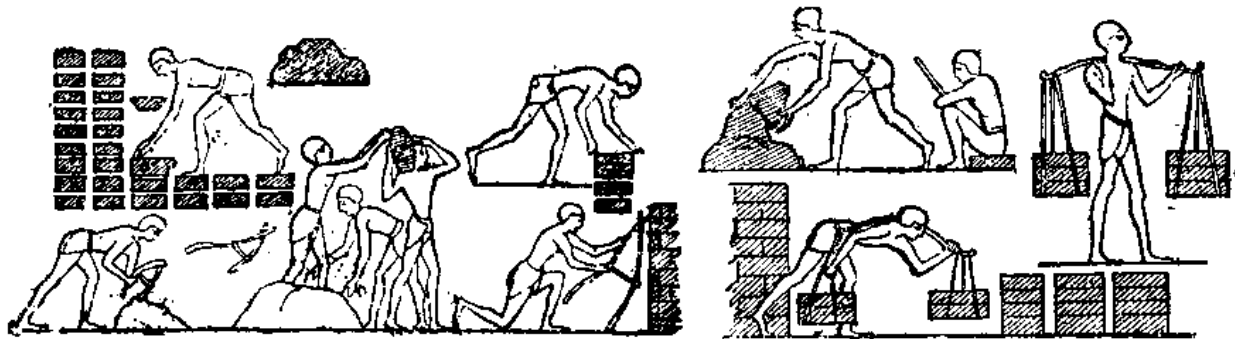
Skeptics sometimes claim that the story of the infant Moses being placed in a basket of reeds in the River Nile – to escape the slaughter perpetrated by the pharaoh – is a retelling of part of an earlier Mesopotamian story called “The Legend of Sargon.” In that story, a king named Sargon claims that his mother was a priestess who attempted to cover up the birth of her baby by placing him in a reed basket which she let drift away on the Euphrates River. According to the story, the baby was found by a servant who raised him under the guidance of the goddess Inanna.

While this story may seem startlingly like that of Moses at first sight, there are very real reasons why the accounts cannot be associated. Most scholars of ancient Mesopotamia agree that the Legend of Sargon does not date to the time of Sargon the Great (c. 2334–2284 BC), but to the reign of Sargon II (722–705 BC), who lived well after the time the book of Exodus is believed to have been written. Additionally, in telling the story of Moses’ infancy, the book of Exodus uses a number of terms that are clearly based on ancient Egyptian words (see Note 1) – showing that the Hebrew account was not influenced by a Mesopotamian one, but doubtless originated in Egypt. Actually, there are a number of similar stories from the ancient world – simply and sadly because infant abandonment was so commonly practiced – so there is no real reason to doubt the reality of the story in Exodus regarding the young Moses.

The name Moses, given to the infant by his adoptive princess mother (Exodus 2:10), is interesting. If it is understood as an Egyptian name (it is unlikely that the princess would have given him a Hebrew name), it would seem to represent a form of the Egyptian word *mes* “born of,” or “child of.” This word is found in many names of the New Kingdom (the time of Moses) such as Ra-meses – “Born of Ra.” Considering that Moses was found in the Nile, the Egyptian princess may have called the infant something like “X-meses” meaning “born of X” (X being one of the gods of the Nile), and Moses may have later dropped the pagan prefix from his name. In its Hebrew form, *moshe*, the name of Moses is similar to the Hebrew word for “to draw out,” as we see in Exodus 2:10, and this verse seems to provide a meaning for the name that was understandable from either the Egyptian or Hebrew perspective.

Acts 7:22 tells us that Moses was educated in “all the wisdom of the Egyptians,” and in recent years it has become apparent that in Moses’ time special schools were associated with the royal palaces. Not only were the children of the Egyptian royalty educated there, but children of foreign dignitaries were also brought and educated alongside the young Egyptians in these schools. This enabled the Egyptians to “export” their own culture and values by way of the educated children they returned to their native areas, and also allowed children of elite Egyptian families to learn about other cultures and to better understand them. The young Moses would have fit into such a system well and could have learned a great deal there.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:



Scene showing slaves making bricks. Tomb of Rekhmire, c. 1460 BC, Thebes, Egypt. Image: After Maspero.

When he reached adulthood, Moses is said to have spent time away from the palace observing the situation regarding the enslavement of his people, the Hebrews. When he saw one being beaten (the word implies in a possibly life-threatening manner), he killed the slave taskmaster and soon after fled to the area of Midian out of fear of punishment by the pharaoh (Exodus 2:11-15). Midian was in northern Arabia, quite distant from Egypt, but it was probably the closest area Moses could reach that was outside of Egyptian control and influence.

This episode is sometimes said to be reminiscent of the ancient Egyptian “Tale of Sinuhe” [si-noo-wee] that tells of a man who fled from Egypt fearing the anger of the Pharaoh and who lived with a tent-dwelling tribe, marrying the daughter of their chief, before eventually returning to Egypt to stand before the pharaoh. However, the absolute power of ancient monarchs meant that endangered individuals often had to flee to avoid royal persecution, and there are a number of stories of such events.

We see more aspects of Moses' character in the events occurring while he was in Midian (see chapter 8 in the course textbook), and it was while he was in that area that Moses experienced the appearance of God in the "burning bush" episode. Many natural explanations have been suggested for this phenomenon – ranging from bushes that might have exuded flammable gases to plants covered with brightly colored leaves. None of these explanations is convincing, and the simplest explanation is that the bush was burning, but miraculously not burning up – as Exodus tells us (Exodus 3:2-3).

The word used for bush in this incident is an unusual one, *seneh*, and its similarity to *sinai* in Hebrew is interesting, as that is the area where Moses was at this point (Exodus 3:1) – the burning bush and voice of God were a small foreshadowing of the fire and voice of God later revealed also at Sinai.

But in the smaller and more intimate conversation God had with Moses at this point, we learn a great deal both about Moses and about God. Speaking from the burning bush, God told Moses of his intention to rescue the Hebrews from slavery and to bring them into "a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey ... So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt" (Exodus 3:8, 10).

Despite his reservations and excuses, Moses finally accepted God's call – though not before God gave him the miraculous signs such as the rod/serpent and the diseased/healed hand that he could use before the Israelites and Pharaoh (Exodus 4:1-9). But there are two particularly difficult passages in this section of Scripture that we need to understand. First, God told Moses:

When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But *I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go*. Then say to Pharaoh, "This is what the Lord says: Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, "Let my son go, so he may worship me." But you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son.' (Exodus 4:21-23)

This matter of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart is mentioned twenty times in the book of Exodus. Sometimes it is said that Pharaoh hardens his own heart, but at other times – as here – Pharaoh's heart is said to be hardened by the Lord. The question arising from this is how God could punish Pharaoh and the Egyptians if it were God who had hardened his heart not to free the Israelites. But it is likely that God chose to do this because he had already decided to punish the Egyptians as a result of their cruelty toward the Hebrew slaves and the widespread genocide they had enacted against the Hebrew children. In that sense, God "hardening" Pharaoh's heart would simply mean that God encouraged Pharaoh to maintain his own unwillingness to free the Israelites, even when he was tempted to let them go by the plagues God began to send.

The next difficult passage is not as easy to understand. As Moses goes on his way to Egypt, accompanied by his wife Zipporah and his sons, we read:

At a lodging place on the way, the Lord met Moses and was about to kill him. But Zipporah took a flint knife, cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it. "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me," she said. So the Lord let him alone. (At that time she said "bridegroom of blood," referring to circumcision). (Exodus 4:24-26)

It is not made clear why God sought to kill Moses, but reading between the lines it seems that it was because he had failed to circumcise his son – as we must presume God had instructed him. Circumcision was a command given to Abraham and all his male descendants (Genesis 17:9-12) and was widely practiced in ancient Egypt and some, though not all, surrounding nations. But it would seem that Moses'

Midianite wife had not wanted him to circumcise their son and only did so when it became apparent that Moses would be killed if they did not obey God's command. Just as in the stories of the patriarchs, the description of Moses' life includes several very honest accounts of family dysfunctionality – incidents that show a certain degree of tension is always present – and perhaps unavoidable – within families. The unflattering honesty of this account is also a mark of the character of its author, Moses.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

The book of Exodus reveals a lot about the character of Moses. His many positive traits, such as his great patience, and especially his humility (see Numbers 12:3; etc.), are clear. But there can be a tension between proper humility and necessary confidence. We see this in the incident of the burning bush when Moses asked God: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (Exodus 3:11). When he asked this question, God did not discuss Moses' qualifications with him, he simply said: "I will be with you" (Exodus 3:12). But then Moses continued: "Pardon your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent ... I am slow of speech and tongue.... Please send someone else" (Exodus 4:10, 13). Although this episode shows his extreme humility, Moses' reluctance to take on the task God gave him – perhaps mixed with a measure of fear of returning to Egypt – did not please God. We are told God became angry with Moses (Exodus 4:14) and gave three facts to discount Moses' excuses – facts that we can apply in our own calling.

First, God reminded Moses that he had already equipped him to do the job. God said to him: "Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" (Exodus 4:11). We should all remember that God has already given us the basic ability to do what he calls us to do. Second, God told Moses: "Now go; I will help you speak" (Exodus 4:12). God also promises to make up any deficits we may have. Finally, God told Moses: "and [I] will teach you what to say" (Exodus 4:12). God even promises to do the work through us – if we will just go do it!

We also learn a lot about God through his interactions with Moses, especially in the burning bush episode. God spoke to Moses in this incident as "the God of your father[s], the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob" (Exodus 3:6 and see Acts 7:32), in which the word "God" is translated from the Hebrew word *Elohim* – the impersonal transcendent name of God we saw in the opening verses of Genesis. But *Elohim* was also a general word for god, as we also saw in Unit 3, and that is why Moses said to God: "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" (Exodus 3:13).

This probably does not mean that the Israelites did not know about God and needed to be told who he was, but that Moses, raised as an Egyptian, did not know God's name and was asking it in terms of his own credibility with the Hebrews who might question him to test him. In either case, Moses was saying in effect, "I know you are God, but what is your name?" It was to this question that God answered: "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:14).

God followed the statement, "I am who/what I am," or "I will be who/what I will be," as the Hebrew could be translated, by giving his personal name of imminence, Yahweh: "Say to the Israelites, 'The LORD [Yahweh], the God of your fathers – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob – has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:15). This seems to be the first Biblical usage of the name "Yahweh," (see Note 2), and we can see the great significance of this name in that God told Moses: "This is my name forever, the name you shall call me from generation to generation" (Exodus 3:15).

In the ancient world, a person's name was usually directly connected to the nature of the individual and, as a result, the names of gods were believed to hold their identities and were often kept secret (just as we might keep our identifying information and passwords secret nowadays). In Egypt, for example, the sun god Re had a hidden name known only to his daughter Isis, and in the Bible the divine being who wrestled with Jacob was unwilling to tell the patriarch his name (Genesis 32:24-29). So In telling Moses his name, Yahweh, God not only revealed his name, but also his identity, and when God said "I am who/what I am," he was giving Moses an elaboration or clarification of the name Yahweh. We know this because in Exodus 3:14 it is clear that God uses "I am" and "Yahweh" interchangeably.

The significance of the name Yahweh or "I am" is twofold. First, it shows God as the Self-Existent, Eternal God – which we know from the root meaning of the word. Second, it shows God as a relational being – which we know from the word's usage in the Bible. Yahweh is only used in the Old Testament when the writer is speaking about God's relationship with individuals or his people in general. A clear example of this is found in Psalm 19 where David uses the name Elohim in the first six verses of the psalm in speaking about God's interaction with the material world. Then, in the rest of the psalm, he uses the name Yahweh in discussing God's relationship with those who know him and who obey his laws.

Of all the events occurring in Moses' early life, the revelation of God's name Yahweh was the most important by far. It was the beginning of a more personal relationship between God and his people as we will see in the next unit of this course.

* Note 1: An interesting example of this is the "basket" in which Moses was placed. The Hebrew word used in Exodus for this is *tebat* which derives from the Egyptian word for a "box" or "container." The only other place the word appears in the Bible is when Moses uses it for Noah's Ark – the two "arks" being used respectively to save Noah (along with his family) and Moses (and by extension, his family, the Hebrews) from destruction.

* Note 2: In Exodus 6:2-3 God says to Moses: "I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the Lord [Yahweh] I did not make myself fully known to them." Yet the name Yahweh appears 162 times in Genesis and in 34 of these cases the name is used by the patriarchs themselves. But this need not be contradictory. It is possible that the patriarchs did not understand the name's meaning or significance; that they knew God but not to the degree that God revealed himself to Moses; or that the name was not known in the earlier period but because he knew God's name was Yahweh Moses wrote it retrospectively into the books he authored. An important point in favor of this last possibility is that in the early chapters of Genesis the name appears as "Yahweh Elohim" – in other words "the God Yahweh."

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics:

What are some of the ways our knowledge of the ancient Near East sheds light on the early life of Moses?

How would you explain to a friend why God made Pharaoh more stubborn to not free the Israelites?

What is the meaning and significance of the name Yahweh?

Looking Below the Surface:

Why do you think God apparently did not reveal his name Yahweh until the time of Moses?

Everyday Applications: Is there something that, like Moses, we hesitate to do for God? Why?