

Liberation

Exodus 1:1-15:21

Slavery

For two centuries, the family of Jacob-Israel herded sheep and goats in the fertile Nile delta. After the arid pastures of southern Canaan, this was sheep heaven. The flocks were prolific, and so were the humans.

The Egyptians left the filthy Hebrew shepherds alone with their animals and their strange uncivilized customs. In two hundred years the children of Israel picked up very little from the art, literature, religion, science and social life of the culture only miles away. They simply milked their goats, sheared their sheep, clung stubbornly to their one God, and multiplied. Soon there were thousands of them.

Meanwhile, Joseph was forgotten in the Egyptian court. The dynasties of the Middle Kingdom were overrun by Hyksos, a Semitic people who regarded their fellow Semites as rivals. And the Egyptian lords who finally rooted the Hyksos out of their country were in no mood to be harboring huge enclaves of Semitic foreigners. After all (reasoned Pharaoh Ahmose, the founder of the eighteenth Egyptian dynasty and the man who finally expelled the Hyksos), if war breaks out, these Israelites

might side with our enemies and then leave when we are overwhelmed again.

Ahmose was not about to let that happen. And since he wanted to build some fine cities for his glorious new dynasty, he enslaved all the Israelites, appointed slave masters to keep them in line, and assigned them to forced labor in his fields and brickworks. But the more the Egyptians drove the Israelites, the more they seemed to breed like rabbits. Exasperated, the pharaoh decreed that all Hebrew boys must be killed at birth.

A Savior is Born?

But Jochebed, a descendant of Jacob's son Levi, resolved to protect her son from the slave masters. When he was three months old, she put him in a basket and floated it in the Nile. Pharaoh's daughter came down to bathe, found the baby, and on a whim decided to raise him. Not even Ahmose could dissuade his daughter, so a Hebrew joined the royal family. The princess named him Moses, which meant "is born" in Egyptian (her father's name meant "[the god] Ah is born"), but which happened to sound like the Hebrew for "to draw out."

Moses was raised as an Egyptian noble, studying astronomy and astrology, music, history, literature, and the practical wisdom of a sophisticated society. But while on the outside he was a smooth-chinned Egyptian aristocrat, on the inside he became a Hebrew hothead. He would go out to the fields and construction sites to watch his kinsmen and grind his teeth when a slave driver abused one of them.

One day when Moses was about forty, he lost his cool and killed an Egyptian who was brutalizing an Israelite. The next day he saw two Hebrews fighting and intervened. One of the men shot back, "Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian?"

His crime was known! Soon the current pharaoh (probably Thutmose III) was out to arrest and execute him. Moses fled to Midian, southeastern Sinai. (See map, page 342.) The semidesert and its tribes of wandering shepherds were a sharp change for a man raised in the luxurious Egyptian court, but Moses was safe from retribution. He married the daughter of a pagan priest and

bore a son. For forty years he followed his father-in-law's flocks from summer to winter pasture and back again.

The Emissary Commissioned

Meanwhile, Thutmose died and another pharaoh took the throne. The Israelites began to cry out to their God for freedom. That was what He was waiting for. He had not forgotten His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He had told Abraham that the chosen family would become slaves in a foreign land. The whole thing was a scheme to get the Israelites out of Canaan and off by themselves for a few hundred years. There they could multiply numerically without attracting hostile attention in Canaan. At the same time, the Canaanites could become thoroughly depraved and deserving of judgment. And the Israelites could get enough of a taste of bondage to make them sick of authoritarian rule and desperate for a strong and merciful God.

For as long as they were sleek and happy in Goshen, they were not desperate. They remembered the God of Jacob, but they forgot both His awesome majesty and His desire for the kind of friendship He'd had with Abraham. They rarely, if ever, used His name, Yahweh. He was just their tribal god.

That attitude was going to end. Yahweh grieved to put His children through the anguish of bondage, but they had needed the discipline. And now He was about to liberate them.

His grand plan centered around a certain broken-down, eighty-year-old shepherd in the wastes of Sinai. Moses was a long way from the refined gentleman he had been. Wind-burned and sun-darkened, his beard long and his hair wild, he was typecast to play the desert prophet marching into the Egyptian court. But Moses didn't see it that way at all.

One dusty day in the shadow of Mount Sinai, the shepherd caught sight of a bush on fire but not being consumed. As he drew near, a voice from within the flames called his name. "Do not come any closer," said the voice. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground. I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Moses was terrified.

"I have indeed seen the misery of My people in Egypt," God

went on. "So I have come down to rescue them. So I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring My people the Israelites out of Egypt."

What? thought Moses. *Me? "Who am I?" Do You know me? I'm the murderer who ran for his life forty years ago. I tried to help my people then, and look where it got me.*

"I will be with you," God replied. So it doesn't matter who you are.

Moses was thinking fast. Not having been raised among his Hebrew kin, he knew rather little about the God of Abraham. *What if the Israelites ask for Your name? What should I say?* he wanted to know.

"I AM WHO I AM" declared the voice in the flame. I am Yahweh, the God of Abraham.

I AM. In Hebrew not just, "I exist," but "I am actively present." I am with you. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob called this God *Yahweh*, "He is," but now the significance of the name began to become clear. Unlike the gods of Mesopotamia, Canaan, and Egypt, this God intended to be intimately present in the affairs of His people, no matter where they sojourned and what they suffered. He had been "I am with you" to childless Abraham, to Jacob fleeing alone to an unknown land, and to Joseph in the dungeon. And He was "I will be with you" to Moses facing Pharaoh and to the Israelites journeying back to Canaan.

Trust me, the wind whispered. But as Yahweh unfolded His plan—the elders of Israel will listen to you, but Pharaoh will laugh in your face until I do works of supernatural power to convince him—Moses grew more and more alarmed. "What if they don't believe me?" I could lose my neck!

Yahweh gave him a couple of minor supernatural feats to impress his audience, but Moses was not comforted. *I'm a lousy preacher*, he protested. *I'm definitely not Your man for addressing the Egyptian court.*

Yahweh was losing His temper. *I made you with your mouth and your brains, didn't I? Do you think I don't know what I'm doing?* Cutting the argument short, Yahweh stated that Moses' brother Aaron was a fine speaker and would be Moses' mouthpiece to Pharaoh. The debate was over. Moses was left speechless before the smoldering bush wishing he had never been born.

Yahweh Versus Egypt

The elders of Israel were delighted when Moses told them Yahweh was about to liberate them and turned his staff into a snake to prove it. But the meeting with Pharaoh fulfilled Moses' worst fears. The lord of Egypt sat haughtily on his throne, flanked by his counselors and sorcerers, wearing his high royal headdress with its golden cobra on the front. The king was a veritable serpent himself. Not only did he deny Israel the right to go to the desert for a three-day worship festival (he regarded it as a flimsy ruse), but he decreed that since the Hebrews had time to sit around fomenting rebellion, they had time to gather their own straw to make bricks for the city they were building. That was the end of the interview. And later, when the Hebrews failed to meet their brick quota because they were out gathering straw, they were flogged. The Israelite foremen vented their fury at Moses and Aaron, who had caused this impossible situation.

Moses, in turn, let Yahweh have it, saying, "Why have you brought trouble upon this people? Is this why you sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble upon this people, and you have not rescued your people at all."

Yahweh told Moses to relax. I have a covenant with Abraham, He said. I am He Who Is With You, and when I get through with Pharaoh, you and all Egypt and Israel will know what that means.

Reluctantly, Moses went back to Pharaoh. The staff-into-snake stunt did not impress him; his own magicians were able to do the same thing by the power of the Egyptian gods (who were really servants of the Snake himself). So the next morning, Yahweh sent Moses to meet Pharaoh by the Nile after his bath and tell him, "By this you will know that I am Yahweh, He Who Is Present: With the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water of the Nile, and it will be changed into blood. The fish in the Nile will die, and the river will stink; the Egyptians will not be able to drink the water."

That failed to move Pharaoh, so the next week Yahweh caused the Nile's frogs to multiply rapidly and infest Egypt's

houses, the beds, even the ovens and kneading troughs. Frogs everywhere! It was revolting. Pharaoh's sorcerers were helpless to get rid of the critters.

Yahweh was ridiculing two of Egypt's chief gods. Ha'pi, the Nile god, was supposed to make sure that the river stayed life-giving and not destructive. The frog goddess Heqit supposedly governed human fertility and assisted women in childbirth. But Yahweh mocked, *So you like frogs in your beds, ladies? Okay, I'll give you frogs!*

Pharaoh gave in to Moses just long enough for the frogs to die, then reneged. This business of repent and unrepent became a pattern as Yahweh sent in turn gnats, biting flies, a livestock disease carried by the flies, a related human skin disease, and the worst hailstorm in Egyptian history. The Egyptian gods in charge of animals, crops, and health did nothing. Pharaoh's officials (financially ruined in the loss of herds and crops) urged him to give in before the eighth plague hit. But Pharaoh just could not bring himself to lose so many excellent slaves.

Yahweh had selected this particular man to be king of Egypt at this time because He knew this pharaoh would harden his heart against Moses' pleas. Indeed, the Bible goes so far as to also say that Yahweh Himself hardened Pharaoh's heart. To people trained in Western logic, these two statements may seem to contradict each other. But the biblical writers were Orientals, and to them it was not only possible but necessary to hold certain apparent opposites in tension. "Both/and," not "either/or," was their approach. Yahweh had chosen and formed this pharaoh in order that His "name might be proclaimed in all the earth" (Exodus 9:16). It was all part of Yahweh's plan to reveal Himself to the nations who had turned their back on Him and no longer knew anything about Him. Yet Pharaoh was still free to choose—he was not Yahweh's puppet—so he remained morally responsible for his choices. Yahweh was able to turn even His enemies' choices to serve His plans.

So the wheat, spelt, and fruit trees that had survived the hail were devoured by locusts in plague number eight. When that didn't move Pharaoh, a sandstorm blew in so thick that the sun was obscured and the whole land, except Goshen, was reduced

to darkness for three days. This was an insult to Egypt's greatest god: Ra, the sun.

By now Pharaoh was ready to bargain, but Moses' position remained all or nothing. "Just as you say," Moses retorted as he walked out. "But tomorrow you will be begging us to leave Egypt, because at midnight tonight every firstborn son of man and beast in this country will die."

Escape

He left Pharaoh and his officials to chew on that one, and returned to prepare the Israelites for the final plague. It was spring; the goats and sheep were giving birth. Yahweh had decreed that from now on, this month (Abib) would be the first month of the year. And tonight, and each year on the fourteenth of Abib, each Israelite household must slaughter a year-old, flawless male lamb at twilight. They must smear some of its blood on the doorframes of their houses, then roast the meat and eat it with bitter herbs and unleavened bread while being dressed and ready to leave home. For tonight Yahweh would pass through Egypt, and in every home not marked with lamb's blood He would strike the firstborn dead. The blood would warn death to pass over the house that believed in Yahweh, so the annual commemoration would be called Passover. Once again, the blood of a substitute stood between Yahweh's people and death.

At midnight, wailing could be heard from every non-Israelite home in Egypt. From Pharaoh to the least slave to the cattle—every family lost its firstborn. Pharaoh ordered Moses and Aaron to get out of Egypt, they and their people. The Egyptians, who by this time held Moses and Israel in high respect, were glad to give the Israelites their silver, gold, and fine clothing, if only they would leave immediately. Thousands of Israelites set out east, and not a few Egyptians joined them, having been convinced that Yahweh was greater than the gods of Egypt. Many of the joiners were probably slaves and laborers hoping for a better life with these impressive Hebrews.

Moses led the throng, carrying with him the bones of Joseph. Leading the fugitives was a glowing cloud that shaded them from

the intense sun during the day and lit their way by night. The cloud was called the "glory" of Yahweh, a physical manifestation of His presence.

Across the Reed Sea

Following Yahweh's instructions, Moses led the people by the desert road to the "Sea of Reeds" (Exodus 13:18, Hebrew).¹ Moses told the crowd to camp by the sea. For Pharaoh had changed his mind yet again and was in hot pursuit with his whole army in chariots. Yahweh wanted Pharaoh to think he had Israel helplessly pinned against the sea.

The Israelites were certainly convinced. "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die?" they wailed at Moses. This was not the last time they would wail at Moses. But Moses told them that if they would just shut up, Yahweh would fight for them.

Yahweh wanted Egypt to remember that He was the God Who Is Present. So all night long a strong east wind blew back the waters of the sea. Toward morning, the whole Israelite cavalcade was able to walk across the deep lake bed. When the Egyptians pursued, Yahweh jammed their chariot wheels in the mud. As horses reared and men cursed, the water swept back into the sea bed and swallowed all of them up. The Israelites stood wide-eyed on the opposite side watching the bodies wash up onto the shore. They were starting to take Yahweh and His envoy Moses seriously.

For a while the crowd was silent as the cries of the dying faded into the breeze. Then Aaron's sister Miriam, a prophetess, began to lead the women in a dance. They shook their tambourines, sang, and shouted their thanks to Yahweh:

Who among the gods is like you, O [Yahweh]?

Who is like you—

majestic in holiness,

awesome in glory,

working wonders?

You stretched out your right hand

and the earth swallowed them. (Exodus 15:11-12)

NOTE

1. This was probably one of the large freshwater lakes between the Gulf of Suez and the Mediterranean Sea. The Hebrew name *Yam Suph*, "Sea of Reeds," included what we now call the Red Sea, the gulfs of Suez and Aqabah, and these lakes. Greek translators rendered *Yam Suph* as "Red Sea," and some modern commentators think the Israelites crossed that large saltwater body. But the Hebrew name in Exodus could mean one of the gulfs or lakes, and most scholars lean toward the latter.