

CHAPTER 7

Moses

Liberator, Lawgiver, and Leader of His People



God Sends Moses to Free the Israelites

The Pharaoh in the time of Joseph belonged to the Hyksos ('hik-sos) or "Shepherd Kings." The Hyksos were people from Asia who had invaded and conquered Lower Egypt, that is, the part near the delta, in the eighteenth and seventeenth centuries B.C. Upper Egypt, that is, the part near the source of the Nile, was governed by Egyptian princes, who finally succeeded in driving out the "Shepherd Kings" and uniting Upper and Lower Egypt under the rule of the Egyptian kings. When the Hyksos were driven out by the native kings, the lot of the Hebrews in Egypt became sad and hard. They had lived peacefully in Lower Egypt under the Hyksos kings. Joseph, a foreigner in Egypt, had been given his position of power by a Hyksos Pharaoh, himself a foreigner.

By the time Joseph died, and for a while afterward, the number of Israelites had increased greatly. Then a new king, an Egyptian who had not known Joseph, ascended the throne. Fearing that the Israelites would become too powerful, he laid burdens on them in many ways, and finally reduced them to slave labor. They were no longer permitted to hold positions of trust and honor as they once had been under the Hyksos. If God had not watched over His people, their ruin would have been simply a question of time. Divine Providence, however, again manifested itself. God raised up a leader, Moses, out of the tribe of Levi. He was destined to free the Israelites from the slavery of Egypt, and to lead them to the Promised Land.

In the next few chapters we shall see how God guided and protected the Chosen People of the Old Testament, even as He



guides and protects His Chosen People of the New Testament if they remain faithful to Him. We shall learn how Moses led the Israelites for forty years. During this whole period his virtues were tested and exercised by many trials and hardships. As the story unfolds, we shall see how in many ways this journey is an image of our life “in this valley of tears,” where God tests us by allowing us to be tempted while giving us help along our way.

Moses Is Saved From the Nile

Shortly before Moses was born the Pharaoh had ordered the drowning of every boy born to the Israelites. Moses’ mother succeeded in hiding him for three months. When she found she could no longer keep his birth a secret, she placed the infant in a basket of bulrushes and put the basket into the water near the edge of the river Nile. She told the baby’s sister Mariam to watch at a short distance so that she could see what happened to the child.

Soon after, Pharaoh’s daughter came to bathe at the same spot. Seeing the

TERMS TO KNOW

- edict
- Egypt
- Aaron
- Red Sea
- plague
- Pharaoh
- Promised Land
- Amalecites
- Nile River
- Mt. Horeb
- Yahweh
- manna
- Madian
- Egyptians
- Passover
- quail
- Gesen
- Jethro
- Paschal Lamb
- Raphidim
- Israelites
- Sepphora
- Mara



Moses was to be the deliverer of his people. In this he clearly resembles Christ, the Savior of His people. The Church discovered this, and so uses Moses as a figure of Christ. He was miraculously preserved from an edict of Pharaoh, as later, in the plan of God, Christ as a Child was to be saved from the edict of Herod during the slaughter of the innocents.

basket, she ordered one of her maids to bring it to her. On opening it and seeing the child she said, “It is one of the Hebrews’ children” (Ex 2:6). She decided to rear it as her son. Mariam now approached the princess. She asked if she should call a Hebrew woman to take care of it. When told she could, she brought her own mother as nurse for her baby brother. Thus God saw to it that Moses was reared by his own mother. When he was old enough, he was brought to the princess, who treated him as her own son. She called him Moses, an Egyptian word meaning “son,” which in Hebrew sounds like the word for “drawn from the water.”

Moses Leaves Egypt

Even though Moses had been raised an Egyptian, he did not disregard the sufferings to which his own people were subjected. On one occasion, while visiting in Gessen, he saw an Egyptian beating one of the Hebrews. As no one was near, Moses struck the Egyptian and killed him. When he found out that Pharaoh had learned of his deed and sought his life, he determined to leave at once. He fled to Madian, a country in Arabia, south of Palestine.

Moses lived as a shepherd in Madian for a number of years. He married Sephora (‘zep-fō-rə), a daughter of Jethro

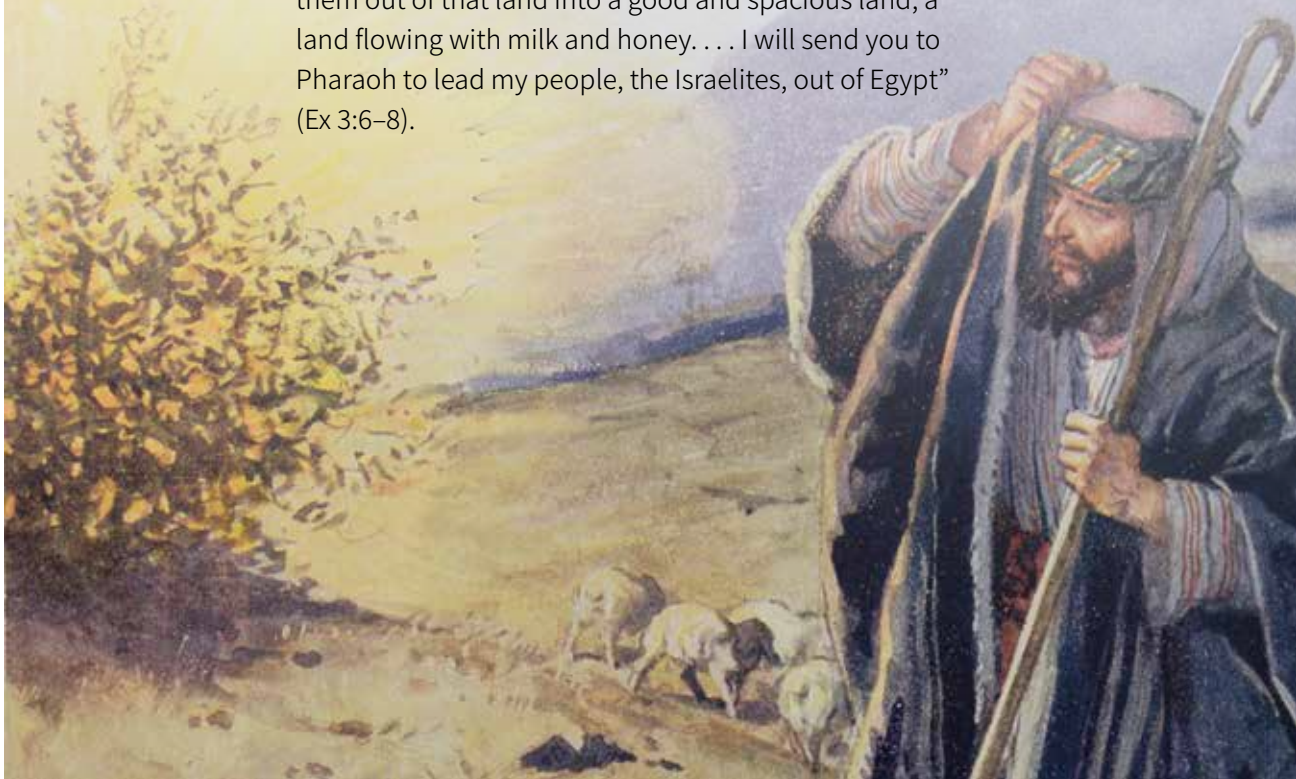
(‘jeth-rō), also called Raguel, the man whose flocks he tended.

During Moses’ stay in Madian, the Pharaoh from whom he had fled died. The new king did nothing to relieve the sufferings of the Israelites. In their trouble the Israelites called upon God, who as always heard their prayers and remembered the covenant He had made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The Burning Bush

One day Moses drove the flocks of his father-in-law to a place referred to in the Old Testament as Mt. Horeb (‘hōr-eb) or Mt. Sinai (‘sī-nī). God appeared to Moses under the appearance of a flame of fire in the midst of a bush. He said:

“I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob. . . . I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians and lead them out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey. . . . I will send you to Pharaoh to lead my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt” (Ex 3:6–8).





Understanding the Name “I AM”

When we read that God replied to Moses by saying His name was “I am who am,” it can be a little confusing. What exactly does this mean? To understand this, just remember that God Himself is pure existence. You exist because God gave you existence, so you say, “I am (your name)”. But God’s existence does not depend on anything else, so He is just “I AM.” Everything depends on Him for its existence, but He depends on no one for His own. If it’s still a difficult thing to get your mind around, don’t worry, because trying to understand the deep mysteries of God is difficult even for brilliant theologians!

“I will be with you . . .,” God assured Moses, when he tried to make objections. When Moses asked God to tell him who He was, God replied, “I am who am . . . say to the Israelites; the Lord (Yahweh), the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent me to you” (Ex 3:14–15). Thus God revealed Himself to Moses under the title of Yahweh, which in Hebrew sounds like the word for “He is,” or “He causes to be.” The Hebrews understood this name to mean that their God really exists. In this He showed Himself unlike the false gods of the heathens.

Later the Hebrews developed so great a fear of violating the Second Commandment that they used the title “Lord” (Adonai) (ä-dō-nä-ē) when they came across the name “Yahweh” in the sacred text. That is how “Lord” came into use as a name for God.

Moses Returns to Egypt

Moses began his great work of freeing the Israelites. He always carried in his hand “the rod of God” with which he was to work signs and wonders. Aaron, his brother and spokesman, went with him. The two gathered together the Israelites and made known to them the mission they had received from God. They proved this by working signs and wonders before all the people.

Then Moses and Aaron presented themselves before the Pharaoh and asked permission for the Hebrews to go into the desert to offer sacrifice. The king refused their request. At God's command, ten successive scourges, known as the Plagues, came upon Egypt. They are as follows:



The Ten Plagues of Egypt

First Plague—The waters of the Nile turned to blood.

Second Plague—Frogs came forth from the waters, covered the land, and even entered the houses.

Third Plague—Swarms of gnats bothered man and beast.

Fourth Plague—A pestilence of flies annoyed the people.

Fifth Plague—A cattle disease killed the beasts of the Egyptians but spared those of the Israelites.

Sixth Plague—Boils broke out on men and beasts.

Seventh Plague—A terrible hailstorm destroyed their crops.

Eighth Plague—Locusts devoured what the hailstorm had left.

Ninth Plague—A horrible darkness covered all Egypt except the land of Gessen, the dwelling place of the Israelites.

Tenth Plague—An angel killed the first born of man and beast.

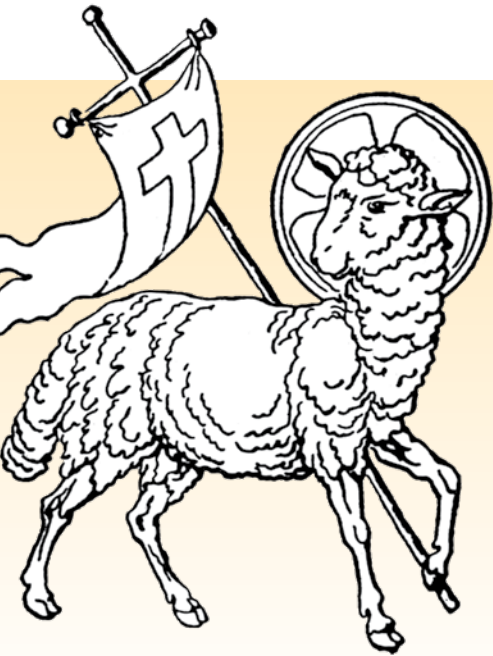


During the first plague the Pharaoh begged Moses and Aaron to ask God to stop it. He agreed to let the Israelites go into the desert to offer sacrifices. However, no sooner had the plague ended than he went back on his word and was as cruel as before. In the same way after each of the next eight plagues Pharaoh agreed, went back on his word, and was punished by the succeeding plague. Finally God sent the terrible tenth plague.

The Paschal Lamb, a Figure of Christ, the Lamb of God

The tenth plague was the killing of the firstborn; it was the most terrible of all. Before sending this last proof of His justice, God commanded Moses and Aaron to assemble the Israelites and to order each family to prepare a lamb without blemish. These families were to sacrifice it on the fourteenth day of the month, sprinkle their doorposts with its blood, and then roast the lamb and eat it with unleavened bread and wild lettuce. They were to eat it standing, clothed for a journey.

This was not an unusual command, for as shepherds these people were accustomed to sacrifice a lamb each spring to obtain good flocks and to ward off evil spirits. Here, however, the usual practice of offering the lamb takes on a new meaning.



The Paschal Lamb is one of the best known figures of Christ, the Lamb of God, who was sacrificed to free God's Chosen People. In how many ways does the Paschal Lamb give us a better understanding of Christ, our Paschal Lamb?

Since no leavened bread was used during the week of the Pasch, our Savior used unleavened bread when He instituted the Eucharist at the Passover meal. That is why unleavened bread is used at Mass. It should remind us that the Eucharist is the fulfillment of the Paschal sacrifice which God instituted to prepare for this most wonderful of all sacraments.

By this sacrifice of the Paschal Lamb and by the delivery of the Israelites who offered and ate it, God prepared the way for the coming of that other Lamb who would be sacrificed to free His people from the slavery of sin and would lead them to the Promised Land.

The Death of the Firstborn

At midnight after the fourteenth day, the angel of death passed through the land of Egypt and killed the firstborn in every house, even in the palace of Pharaoh, because the doorposts were not sprinkled with the blood of the lamb.

The king was deeply shaken by the death of his eldest son, and was struck with fear by the punishment which God had dealt to every Egyptian family. He begged Moses and Aaron to see to it that the Israelites would depart immediately. This they gladly did.

The March to the Red Sea

The Chosen People set off for the Red Sea. On modern maps the Red Sea is a large body of water lying between Egypt and Arabia. It has two arms to the north, the one on the east today is called the Gulf of Akabah ('äk-ə-bä), and the one on the west the Gulf of Suez.

At the time when the Israelites left Egypt, the northern end of the western arm of the Red Sea (the Gulf of Suez) extended as far north as the Bitter Lakes. It is now commonly held that the crossing of the sea took place either north or south of the Bitter Lakes.

The Bible story tells us that the Lord went before His Chosen People by day in a Pillar of Cloud, and by night in a Pillar of Fire. He did this in order to show them the way through the dangerous lands.

In thus protecting the Israelites God wished to teach us that Christ and the Holy Spirit would lead the Christians through the shadow of sin to the light of grace. The Holy Spirit, in the person of the Church's leaders, continues to guide His flock safely through many dangers to the real Promised Land, our heavenly home.

Pharaoh Follows the Israelites

Pharaoh soon regretted that he had let his cheap labor supply go. Hearing, after three days, that they were still near the Red Sea, and thinking that they would be cut off from all escape, he gathered his army together and set out in pursuit of them. When the Israelites saw the Egyptians coming behind them, they were frightened and called upon the Lord for help. Moses calmed them saying, “Fear not! Stand your ground, and you will see the victory the Lord will win for you today. These Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again. The Lord himself will fight for you; you have only to keep still” (Ex 14:13–14).

The Red Sea Triumph

The angel of the Lord who had gone before the Israelites in the Pillar of Cloud now passed to the rear and kept the Egyptians from coming closer to them. To the Egyptians this Pillar was a dark cloud, but it illumined the night for the Israelites.

Almighty God then told Moses to lift up his rod, and stretch forth his hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites might cross it on dry ground. He obeyed and the waters opened. The Israelites passed over to the other side in safety.

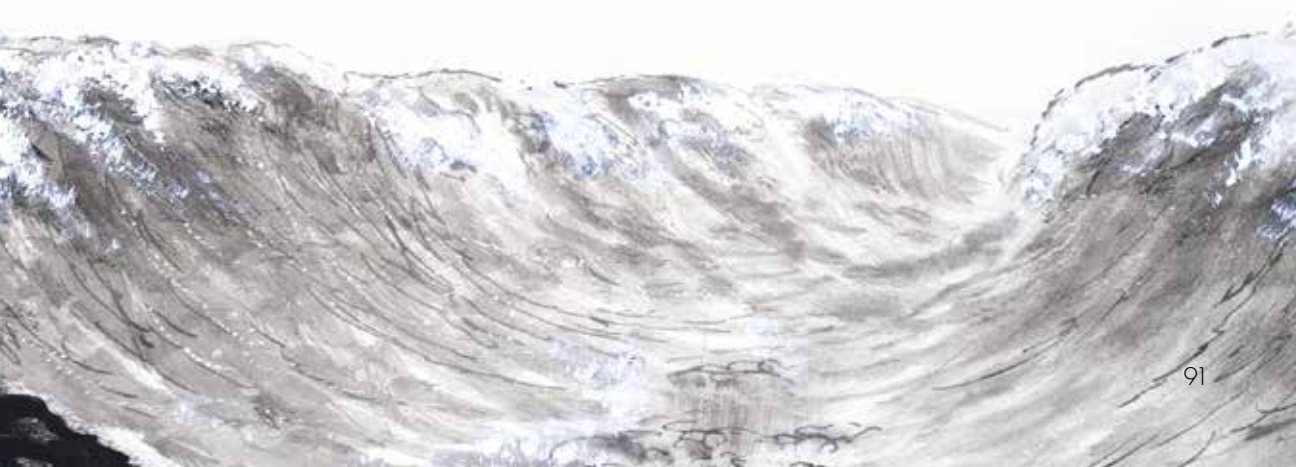


The Egyptians followed them into what proved to be a fatal trap. God said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the waters may flow back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and their charioteers” (Ex 14:26). He obeyed, and the waters swept back to their former place so quickly that the Egyptians were swallowed by the waves. In this way the Lord delivered Israel from the Egyptians, showing how He can and will always protect those who love and obey Him.

The Miracle at the Fountain of Mara

After their miraculous escape the Jews traveled from the Red Sea to Mount Sinai. During the journey they were to suffer many hardships. However, God did not forsake His Chosen People, and through Moses He worked several miracles to strengthen their faith and lessen their sufferings.

After crossing the Red Sea the Israelites marched for three days through the desert. They were unable to find any water. Finally, they came to a fountain; its waters, however, were so bitter that they could not be taken, and thus the Hebrews call it *Mara*, a Hebrew word for bitter. Then God told Moses to throw a piece of wood into the fountain and at once the bitter waters became sweet.



God Sends Quail and Manna

When the supplies which the Israelites had brought from Egypt began to fail, they started to complain against Moses for having led them to this desert place. In Egypt they had plenty; here they knew only hunger, thirst, blazing heat, numbing cold, danger, and hardship. Moses prayed, and God listened to his prayer. He sent quail to provide food for them. The people killed all they needed.

The next morning He continued to look out for their needs. A wonderful food fell from heaven. Everyone cried, “Manna,” “what is it?” Thus we have the word *manna*. It was a miraculous food which fell during the night and in the early morning covered the ground around the Israelite camp. The manna was a small, white, crisp substance which tasted like wheaten bread mixed with

honey. Though it could be eaten just as it fell from heaven, it could also be fixed in different ways to suit every taste.

By telling the story of the quail and manna the author pointed out that God was watching over His Chosen People. His care provided sufficient food when it was accepted.



Does the thought occur to you that by the manna, the miraculous bread which nourished the children of Israel, God was suggesting something that would be done later? Though the Israelites did not know it, we realize that God was preparing for the Bread of Life which He would send down from heaven in the New Testament. Can we not receive the Holy Eucharist each morning? It is not as sweet as honey? Does it not fit every taste and need? Does it not nourish us as we journey to the Promised Land? How wise God is! How great His love for us!

The Waters of Horeb

The Israelites continued their journey through the desert until they arrived at a place called Raphidim ('räf-i-dēm). Here again they found no water, and again they complained against Moses. By God's orders, Moses struck the rock of Horeb with his rod, and immediately water gushed forth.

This rock from which the waters flowed when struck with the rod of Moses points to the Rock and Foundation Stone of the New Testament, Christ, who said, "He, however, who drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him shall become in him a fountain of water springing up into life everlasting" (Jn 4:13–14). These waters are likened to divine grace. This grace flows to the children of God through the sacraments of Christ's Church.

Try to see the many ways in which the forty years spent in the desert by the Chosen People of the Old Testament, with water and food (manna) from God, lead our minds to our sojourn on earth. After being freed from the slavery of sin by passing through the waters of Baptism, we are fed by the Eucharist until we also reach the Promised Land (heaven).

The Battle With the Amalecites

At Raphidim the Israelites fought their first battle. It was against the Amalecites (ä-'mäl-ək-ītz), a people whom Hebrew tradition connected with the eldest son of Esau. Moses knew that the battle could not be won by the ordinary means of warfare alone. His people had been too long in slavery and had lost the courage and spirit necessary for success in battle.

Joshua was placed in command of a group of the most courageous Israelites. With his small band he marched against the enemy. Holding the rod of God in his hands, Moses climbed a nearby hill, accompanied by Aaron and another companion. From there he watched the course of the battle. Moses extended his hands and prayed for success in the battle. As long as his

hands remained outstretched, Israel was successful. As soon as he let them down even a little, the Amalecites gained ground. When his hands grew weary, his two companions held them up. At sunset the Israelites returned to their camp victorious.

As Moses with outstretched arms prayed on the mount for the salvation of his people, he foreshadowed Christ who, at a later date, was to pray with outstretched arms on the cross for the salvation of all nations. Thus he reminds us that we by our prayers and good works should hold up the arms of Christ in His bishops and priests as they pray and work for the success of Christ's Kingdom.

Can you see how this incident gives us a fine example of prayer? Moses used every human means to insure success, but he added to his efforts the force of holy prayers.

This should impress upon our minds the all-important fact that we can do nothing of ourselves, but that we can do all things with the help of almighty God, especially if we persevere in prayer despite weariness and discouragement.



FOR ME TO REVIEW

Questions and Exercises

Part 1: Complete these statements

1. _____ was to be sacrificed on the fourteenth day of the month.
2. _____ illumined the night for the Israelites.
3. _____ was God's title, which sounded like the Hebrew word for "He is," or "He causes to be."
4. _____ were scourges or misfortunes.
5. _____ was told to lead the Israelites out of Egypt.

6. _____ were defeated by the Israelites.
7. _____ was the spokesman for Moses.
8. _____ prefigured the Holy Eucharist.
9. _____ prefigured heaven.
10. _____ a Hebrew word for bitter.

Part 2: Questions to Check Your Reading

1. How was Moses saved from the edict of Pharaoh?
2. What mission did God give Moses?
3. Why did God send the plagues to Egypt?
4. How did Pharaoh oppress the Israelites?
5. How did God help the Israelites cross the Red Sea?
6. Name several great miracles worked by God for the Israelites on their journey from the Red Sea to Mount Sinai.
7. Why did God send manna from heaven?



FOR ME TO DO

1. Read from the Bible an account of one of the ten plagues and report on it to your class (Ex 7–12).
2. Explain the following Old Testament types in relationship to their fulfillment in the New Testament:
 - a) the Paschal Lamb
 - b) the passage through the Red Sea
 - c) the manna
 - d) the Israelites' forty years in the desert
3. Name some instances showing Moses' confidence in God.
4. Make a map to show the route of the Israelites from Egypt to the Promised Land. Retell the story for your classmates.