

## CHAPTER III

### MOSES

Nearly four hundred years passed after the children of Israel migrated into the territory of Goshen. They saw the retreat of the Hyksos. They were the foreign Semitic kings under whom Joseph served.

Not a word of all this is reported in the compressed narratives of the Bible. The touchstone for inclusion in the Old Testament was the simple question: did it affect the sons of Abraham and their understanding of their noble heritage and mission?

And Joseph died, and all his brethren, and all that generation. And the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly,... Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph. (Exodus 1:608)

With these words the Bible introduces the momentous adventure that gave birth to the Jewish nation.

Toward the end of the fourth century of the Israelites' sojourn, Egypt was threatened by the armies of the Hittites. They poured down from the mountains of Asia Minor. The new King became easy. What if these foreigners, the Israelites, were to join the invading forces?

He decreed they be conscripted for the exhausting labor of making and laying bricks for the building of massive cities on the Delta.

The more they were oppressed, the more the Israelites seemed to multiply. Tribal pride glimmers through the tale of the two Israelite midwives. The Pharaoh ordered to kill all baby boys at birth. But they gave clever excuses and allowed the babies to live. Then the Pharaoh commanded that every son born to the Hebrews be thrown into the Nile.

### THE BABE IN THE BULRUSHES

Into the challenge of this unhappy situation a boy was born to a devout Israelite couple. How could his crying be hid from the soldiers on the narrow streets? For three months his mother Jochebed and his three-year-old brother, Aaron, kept the secret of his presence.

Finally, Jochebed took a desperate chance. Probably she was familiar with the Semitic folk tale of King Sargon I. As a tiny baby Sargon was rescued from a basket floating on the River Euphrates where his destitute mother had placed him. Jochebed fashioned a small, watertight basket, cradled her infant son inside and set it afloat among the reeds of the Nile. On the shore his sister, Miriam watched faithfully over him. Then

the Pharaoh's daughter came to the river to bathe. At the princess' command the strange basket was brought ashore. Miriam boldly stepped forward and offered to find a Hebrew nurse for the wailing infant. Jochebed nursed her son unhampered until he was weaned.

Pharaoh's daughter named the child "Moses," and adopted him as her own son. From this background of loyalty, courage and love was launched the career of the Hebrew leader. His strength, tenacity and towering faith were to lay the foundation of the Jewish nation and of western civilization.

Moses was cared for in his mother's home. Amid the warmth of his family he learned the traditions and the troubles of his people. When he was old enough he joined his foster mother in the palace of the Pharaoh.

### MURDER

At that time Egypt was second to none in culture, artistry, political power and in trade. Through the perfumed, brightly painted halls of the palace moved influential priests of many gods. There were poets, generals and defeated kings, merchants, mathematicians and magicians. From the scribes the young princes, Moses among them, learned to sing their lessons, to write, and to read the Egyptian hieroglyphs. In his heart Moses never forsook his own people. He never forgot that he was one of them.

One day he was walking in the fields and came upon an Egyptian taskmaster cruelly beating an Israelite. Moses' frustration and hot resentment flared. No one was in sight as he struck the Egyptian a blow that killed him. Quickly he hid the body in the sand.

The following day he found two Israelites fighting. When he intervened, one of them turned viciously to him and snarled,

Who made thee a prince and a judge over us? Intendest thou to kill me, as thou killedst the Egyptian? (Exodus 2:14)

Moses was stunned. His own kin failed to recognize his loyalty to them. He realized the murder was probably known all through the palace. He fled southward through the wilderness towards the mountains of Sinai. There a man could hide. What a burden of grief he carried as he fled from the law. He followed the lonely old trails through sun scorched wastelands into exile.

Days later a group of young women approached to water their father's flocks. Shepherds lounging nearby tried to drive them away. Moses came to their rescue and helped them with their work. This gracious incident opened to him the house of Jethro. He was a wise and kindly Midianite priest. Moses eventually married his daughter. Thus Moses, schooled in the knowledge of Egypt, became a shepherd in a nomadic tribe of Midianites.

### THE BURNING BUSH

The years passed. Through travelers' gossip Moses learned that the Pharaoh he had known was dead. His son (records indicate Ramses II) reigned in his stead. Moses continued to shepherd his father-in-law's flocks. His native alertness and thirst for understanding were never lost. His thoughts often returned to the miserable plight of his kinsmen in Goshen.

One day a message came clearly to him. His own mission and awesome responsibility fell into focus. It happened this way:

A thorn bush grew among the rocks beside the trail. It seemed that flames were leaping from it. Yet the bush was not destroyed. How could this be? Moses stepped aside to see. His uplifted, searching thought beheld the glory of the presence of God. Had not the God of his forefathers promised that he would be the God of their descendants "to all generations?" Could Egyptian taskmasters, poverty, misery or any other force annul God's promise? The Divine Voice came to him as it had to his listening ancestors long ago:

I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God. And the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt,... And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey;... Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt. (Exodus 3:6-8,10)

Moses recoiled from such a task. Had he not thrown away his place of influence in Pharaoh's court by a murderous act of temper? But the ineffable Voice reassured him:

Certainly I will be with thee:... (Exodus 3:12)

Moses had a limited knowledge of God. Through the years since Jacob's death, his people had been subjected to the influence of many heathen gods. He wondered if the Israelites remembered the God their forefathers had know.

And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, And shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? What shall I say unto them? And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I Am hath sent me unto you. (Exodus 3:13,14)

Here was a definition that transcended even Abraham's and Jacob's understanding.

Modern students of antiquity have in the last few decades unearthed tablets that speak the language of Moses. Through them we may now understand that cryptic phrase, I AM THAT I AM, to mean, "He Causes to be what Comes into Existence," (William F. Albright) which can be paraphrased, "I am Creative Existence." In the light of this tremendous new concept, a sense of utter unfitness overwhelmed Moses. He recalled his reasons for leaving Egypt and demurred again:

But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken to my voice: for they will say, the Lord hath not appeared unto thee. And the Lord said unto him, What is that in thine hand? And he said, A rod. And he said, Cast it on the ground. And he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from before it. And the Lord said unto Moses, Put forth thine hand, and take it by the tail. And he put forth his hand, and caught it, and it became a rod in his hand. (Exodus 4:1-4)

God showed him that disease might suddenly appear upon his body, and as quickly disappear. Moses realized that material appearances need not be binding to one who is conscious of the Divine Presence.

Convinced at last of the reality and power of the great I AM, Moses resolutely shouldered his awesome assignment. With this new knowledge he must lead his people out of bondage. He must bring them into the freedom which only allegiance to the God of Existence can give. He returned the flocks to Jethro, received the older man's blessing and set out for Egypt.

### LET MY PEOPLE GO

With his brother Aaron as spokesman, Moses obtained an audience with the new Pharaoh on behalf of the children of Israel.

The God of the Hebrews hath met with us: let us go, we pray thee, three days' journey into the desert, and sacrifice unto the Lord our God;... (Exodus 5:3)

The busy Pharaoh snapped that he didn't know the Hebrew slaves' God; and to his foremen he gave orders that these laborers, with time on their hands to think of festivals, must be saddled yet more heavily with work. Impossible tasks and brutal beatings became the lot of the Israelites. "You have put a sword in their hands to slay us," (Exodus 5:21) the elders snarled as they met Moses and Aaron in the street.

Bewildered and brokenhearted, Moses turned to God. Nothing but evil had come to his people so far. Refreshed by humble prayer his faith was renewed. Moses told his kinsmen what the Lord had said:

I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God: and ye shall know that I am the Lord your God, which bringeth you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. (Exodus 6:7)

However, the people in their anguish would no longer listen. Moses realized he must change his approach.

The belief in magic was common in those days. The natural went unrecognized. The common people never doubted that every happening was the effect of magic. The young mother putting her baby to sleep sang incantations to exorcise the evil that lurked in the shadows. The rich man called for a magician to cure the mildew in his granaries. In this atmosphere of abject superstition, a man who could handle the occult could command immense respect and influence. Since magic was the accepted medium for divine communications, he who bore a mission from Creative Existence would deal magically with the enemies of his people.

Rod in hand and Aaron at his side, Moses boldly returned to Pharaoh. He told Aaron to throw down his rod. It became a serpent. Understanding dawned on Pharaoh. These were no common slaves! Pharaoh called his own magicians. They threw their rods to the floor and they became serpents. But then Moses' serpent swallowed up the others.

Days and weeks of spiraling proof of the outstanding power of Israel's God continued. Before each mighty sign Moses warned Pharaoh,

The Lord God of the Hebrews hath sent me unto thee, saying, Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness.  
(Exodus 7:16)

Time after time the frightened Pharaoh made promises. Then he would break his word the moment the affliction was withdrawn.

Moses and Aaron turned the Nile red like waters red like blood. This made them unfit to drink. The Egyptian magicians did likewise. Hordes of frogs appeared. They invaded even the beds and kneading bowls of the Egyptians. This too the Egyptians imitated. Still following God's instructions, Moses caused a plague of lice on man and beast. Here the magicians failed but Pharaoh remained adamant. Swarms of flies filled the Egyptians' houses. A plague fell on all their domestic animals. All this time the children of Israel, in the corner of the Nile Delta, were untouched and prospering.

Moses caused an epidemic of boils on man and beast. The defeated magicians could not stand before him. They had boils too. Again Moses warned Pharaoh,

Thus saith the Lord God of the Hebrews, Let my people go, that they may serve me. (Exodus 9:13)

When the Pharaoh refused, thunder, lightning and heavy hail swept the land. This left the crops in ruins. Black clouds of locusts annihilated what the hail had left. Finally Pharaoh's servants begged him, "Let the men go; knowest thou not yet that Egypt is destroyed?"

But he would not. Three days of thick darkness still failed to move him.

These plagues were not new to Egypt. In varying forms, they have harassed the people of the Nile from earliest antiquity down to modern times. However by their strength and timeliness Moses proved that mysterious truth, which even in the twentieth century is only slightly comprehended, that even nature, rightly understood, is subject to God oriented men.

As the Psalmist expressed it, centuries after Moses' time

Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet. (Psalms 8:6)

### THE PASSOVER

One last terrible Plague Moses must present. The Lord commanded him to tell the Pharaoh,

Thus saith the Lord, Israel is my son, even my firstborn: And I say unto thee, Let my son go, that he may serve me: and if thou refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay thy son, even thy firstborn. (Exodus 4:22,23)

Moses was confident that release was near. He gave last minute instructions to the Israelites. Each family must slaughter a lamb, roast it and feast on it, so that they do not depart hungering. Every Israelite's door must be marked with the blood of the lamb. This was a pledge and public proclamation of allegiance to the God of Israel. In the courage and faith of this pledge lay protection from the pestilence that was to fall on the land.

What bitter wailing filled the streets of Rameses that fateful night. Death struck in every Egyptian home! At midnight the bereaved Pharaoh sent hurriedly for Moses and Aaron.

Rise up, and get you forth from among my people, both ye and the children of Israel; and go, serve the Lord, as ye have said. (Exodus 12:31)

Word of their freedom passed quickly. Men gathered protesting animals. Women wrapped in cloth their kneading troughs of still-unleavened bread. Then they guided sleepy children out into the spring moonlight and down the road toward Succoth. As with any group of dedicated people there were hangers-on, adventurers, opportunists, and

idlers attracted by activity. These would later, on various occasions, jeopardize the whole undertaking. But no one noticed them that night.

Today in modern Jewish homes throughout the world that spring night more than three thousand years ago is still celebrated in the solemn Passover ritual. "Why is this night different from all others?" a Jewish child asks. Then follows the story of how death passed over the blood marked homes of Israel's descendants. This tells how the nucleus of the Jewish nation, exalted by faith in the God of their fathers, turned away that night from Egyptian bondage, with its material security, to resume the search for the promised land, the "city that hath foundations," destined for the sons of Abraham.

### CROSSING THE REED SEA

The coastal road was firmly guarded by Egyptian forts. Moses dared not lead his motley caravan that route. At God's command, he set up camp on the shores of the Reed Sea.

Meanwhile the Hebrew servants were sorely missed. "Why have we let Israel go from serving us?" the Egyptians asked themselves. Warned that the slaves were not coming back, Pharaoh sent his war-chariots thundering after them. The children of Israel, camped facing the Reed Sea, looked back across the plains and saw their former masters closing in on them. Bold dreams of freedom vanished before the certainty of cruel punishment. Terrified, they shouted at Moses,

Is not this the word that we did tell thee in Egypt, saying, Let us alone, that we may serve the Egyptians? For it had been better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness. (Exodus 14:12)

Moses, unwavering in his knowledge of the rightness of this venture, replied with the fundamental law of those who served the eternal I Am:

Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will show you today:... The Lord shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace. (Exodus 14:13,14)

Moses held out his rod over the sea, and a strong wind blew from the east. It was so strong that the water was pushed aside, revealing the lake floor.

And the Lord said unto Moses, Speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward. (Exodus 14:15)

Many had faith in the rod's magic. A few probably rejoiced in the might of their newfound God. All of them had their confidence in Moses' leadership restored. The descendants of Jacob, called Israel, obediently stepped into the lakebed. All that night the fierce wind blew. Every man, woman and child and all their flocks reached the other shore.

Dawn came and the Egyptians saw them escaping. They whipped their horses forward into the lakebed. The horses' hooves sank into the mire. Chariot wheels stuck and were pulled off by the plunging animals. The wind died down. The water flowed back and the Egyptian army drowned.

Safe on the Eastern shore, Moses' sister Miriam seized a tambourine. Joined by the other women she danced and sang a song of gratitude. The triumphant words of her song are among the most ancient quoted in Scripture:

Sing ye to the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea. (Exodus 15:21)

### ON THROUGH THE WILDERNESS

The peoples' faith in Moses and in his God was still confused and fragile. Three days after their triumph over the Egyptians they came to an oasis. The water was too bitter to drink! Their joy and trust vanished. They confronted Moses saying, "What shall we drink?" Moses, at God's direction, found a certain type of wood. When he threw it into the water it absorbed the bitterness. Then he explained to the children of Israel their own relationship and responsibility to their God:

If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight, and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, have brought upon the Egyptians: for I am the Lord that healeth thee. (Exodus 15:26)

Reassured and comforted once more, the Israelites moved forward to the nearby oasis of Elim. There they found "twelve wells of water and three score and ten palm trees." In using the numbers twelve and seventy the narrator imparts not so much the physical description (for counting was seldom important to the Hebrews), but the peaceful concept of adequate, orderly water supply and divinely provided protection from the searing sun. There at the oasis they rested for a time.

They pressed on again, testing over and over the power of their fathers' God. The short spring season faded as they marched through the parched plains of the wilderness of Sin. (Sin is one of the names of a moon-god.) Food and forage became increasingly difficult to find. More and more they talked of the fish, cucumbers, melons and garlic which they'd taken for granted back in Egypt. Hopes of the Promised Land were dimmed by their misery.

They complained to Moses and Aaron:

Would to God we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full; for ye



have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger. (Exodus 16:3)

Patiently, Moses reminded them that he was just God's servant. He tried to reassure them that their God would meet his people's needs. As he and Aaron talked, the clouds on the horizon behind them blazed with such exceptional radiance that the people were convinced that they were looking at the glory of God. When the cool evening wind blew strongly across the camp, it brought multitudes of low flying quail. They were easily captured. In the morning, when the sun had dried the dew,

Behold, upon the face of the wilderness, there lay a small round thing, as small as the hoar frost on the ground. (Exodus 16:14)

They called it "manna" (what is it?) and gathered it eagerly, for it tasted like fresh oil and honey.

Supernatural? No. The miracle lay in the fact that food was there when needed. From their winter quarters in inland Africa, great numbers of birds annually wing their way northward across the Sinai Peninsula; and the "small round thing" is thought to have been the bead-like sugary excretion of certain insects that feed on the tough desert Tamarisk, which gives welcome supplement of sweetness even to modern diets.

The wonders of that evening and morning were written permanently in the Hebrew memory. This added to the growing backlog of proof of God's ever present care for his people.

The Israelites walked on from oasis to oasis. They went through glaring sunlight, shimmering heat and suddenly chilly nights. Even the most devout followers were sorely tested by the hardships so unexpected on their journey to the Promised Land. Many in the crowd were mere adventurers, content to share good fortune, but not to accept responsibility for maintaining the trust in Moses' God. In these, the wild loneliness, the ever-present hunger, the tongue-thickening thirst engendered growing anger. At the oasis of Rephidim, they found no water. Then they turned on Moses with such savage fury, he cried out to God,

What shall I do unto these people? They be almost ready to stone me. (Exodus 17:4)

Quietly the answer came. Was not this the Sinai area where he had cared for his father-in-law's sheep? He no doubt knew that the porous limestone rocks of the region often harbor quantities of water. Through God-given wisdom, he selected a favorable spot. By a blow with his staff to the face of the rock he shattered the sand-polished crust and releasing the water. Moses had located a hidden source of water. He named the place Massah and Meribah, "testing and contention." This proof of constant provision for their needs became yet another anchor for Israel's faith.

Trouble of another sort arose. Occasional nomadic tribes wandered to and fro with their flocks in the wilderness of Sin. Such was the tribe of the Amalekites. They were descendants of Jacob's brother Esau. They set out to drive the children of Israel from the region. Moses quickly appointed Joshua as captain. He sent him with selected men against the desert warriors. Then Moses, with Aaron and a man named Hur, climbed a hill from which they could survey the battlefield. With his arms uplifted in supplication and praise to God he saw Joshua's forces victorious. But even Moses' great strength flagged. He lowered his arms. The Israelites were forced to retreat! There could be no intermission, no lapse from the attitude of prayer and trust. Moses seated himself upon a stone. With Aaron and Hur one on either side they held up his arms until the evening. Joshua and his men returned victorious.

Moses built an altar there and offered a sacrifice of thanksgiving. Nevertheless, to Joshua he said prophetically,

...the Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.  
(Exodus 17:16)

## SINAI

Once more Moses roused his people to go forward. The way was steeper. Suddenly a wide valley lay before them. On its far side rose the majestic, red granite mass of Mount Sinai. There Moses bade Israel to set up camp.

Can we be certain of the details of what occurred at Mount Sinai? Unfortunately, no; for the greater the event, the more people tend to smother it in their own words. So we have at least three different versions of the deeply important happenings of the next few months. They were written down and woven together over a period of six or seven centuries. We are not ever certain of the location of the mountain called Sinai and Horeb. But the main events are clear.

As God had spoken to Moses at the burning bush, so the Divine Voice spoke to him again:

Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.  
(Exodus 19:3-6)

When Moses had repeated these words to the elders of Israel,

...all the people answered together and said, All that the Lord hath spoken we will do. (Exodus 19:8)

Then Moses commanded them to purify themselves and wash their clothes, in preparation for a sacred revelation of God. On the third morning,

there were thunderings and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the voice of the trumpet exceeding loud... (Exodus 19:16)

And the Voice of the Lord spoke:

I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.  
 Thou shalt have no other gods before me.  
 Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image...  
 Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain...  
 Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy ....  
 Honor thy father and thy mother:...  
 Thou shalt not kill.  
 Thy shalt not commit adultery.  
 Thou shalt not steal.  
 Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor.  
 Thy shalt not covet .... (Exodus 20:2-17)

Thus the Ten Commandments were given into the stewardship of the children of Israel. These were practical rules for all mankind for living in harmony with one another. The civilization of the western world is based on them.

### THE GOLDEN CALF

Trembling with fear at their awesome experience, the Israelites returned to their tents. Moses put Aaron and Hur in command of the camp, while he, with Joshua at his side, climbed the steep mountainside to talk with his God. His people saw him disappear into the sun-emblazoned clouds,

and the sight of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire on the top of the mount in the eyes of the children of Israel.  
 (Exodus 24:17)

Day after day Moses remained in the stillness of the mountaintop. He learned through communion with his God how to conduct this mighty project. The Ten Commandments were written on two tablets of stone that they might be taught to the Israelites. Then after forty days and forty nights (the number is often symbolic of a

completed spiritual experience) he descended. He carried the two stone tablets in his hands.

What of the people who had waited on the plain. Many were like the thorny plants that were withering in the fierce summer sun. They were faced with the increasing scarcity of food. They were overshadowed by the looming, imprisoning masses of the mountains with their pastel shadows, mysteriously changing as the sun crossed the searing sky. Above all they were surrounded by the intense silence.

How strange and frightening all these must have seemed to these fugitive bricklayers. Until three months before their world had been the bustling green delta land of Goshen! Their covenant with the God of Moses was scarcely understood. For all they knew their leader was lost in the strangely glorious cloud. How they longed for a familiar sound, the comfort of accustomed ritual! At last Aaron succumbed to their pleadings. With jewelry which they eagerly offered, he fashioned for them a golden calf. (Later he would tell Moses, rather weakly, that he had merely cast the gold into the fire, "and out came this calf.")

And they said, These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. (Exodus 32:4)

So it was that Moses and Joshua, making their way down the mountain, heard a mystifying sound of revelry. Soon they were looking down into the camp. They saw a pagan scene of singing and dancing with a golden calf at the center of their adoration.

For a moment blind rage shook Moses. He threw the precious stone tablets from him. They shattered on the craggy rocks below. Then he strode into the camp and ordered that the golden calf be burned in the fire. It was ground to powder and strewn upon the water. He demanded that the children of Israel drink it.

They understood. Had they not often heard the Canaanite tale of a god reduced to nothing by being ground to powder? Every man, woman and child symbolically partook of the lesson. But it was not enough. Rebellion was running wild. The excited people were out of control. Moses chose trusted men and sent them among the tents. The camp was wracked with bloodshed, neighbor against neighbor, brother against brother, until the rebels were slain.

Burdened with grief at the waywardness of his people, Moses toiled back up the mountain to pray:

...Oh, this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them gods of gold. Yet now, it thou wilt forgive their sin --; and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written. (Exodus 32:31,32)

### TIDE TABERNACLE

Forty days and forty nights Moses neither ate nor drank. He searched earnestly for increased wisdom. He listened for the voice of his God. Specific rules for ordering the details of camp life, many of them based on the old Mesopotamian laws, were unfolded to him. The Ten Commandments were patiently inscribed again on tablets of stone.

Above all, in compassionate understanding of the doubts and confusion of these unhappy fugitives, Moses was given the plans for a wonderful, comforting gift: a tabernacle. It would be a portable sanctuary which would accompany them on all their journeys. It served as a constant reminder of the ever presence of their God. Such sacred tents were not then, and are not now, unknown among nomad tribes. But the tabernacle of the children of Israel was unique in the history of the world. In it was neither image nor symbol of their God. It was only a box, or ark, containing the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments.

In the blessed inspiration of his experience Moses descended again into the camp. His face shone with such a light that Aaron and the people were afraid to look upon him. After the tabernacle had been fashioned Moses set it up far off from the camp. He called it the Tabernacle of the congregation.

And it came to pass that every one which sought the Lord went out unto the tabernacle of the congregation, which was without the camp .... And it came to pass, as Moses entered into the tabernacle, the cloudy pillar descended, and stood at the door of the tabernacle, and the Lord talked with Moses. And all the people saw the cloudy pillar stand at the tabernacle door: and all the people rose up and worshipped, every man in his tent door  
(Exodus 33:7,9,10)

At the foot of Mount Sinai, consciousness dawned upon the children of Israel that they were indeed a chosen and protected people, heir to the search and mission of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

### FORTY LONG YEARS

And it came to pass on the twentieth day of the second month, in the second year, that the cloud was taken up from off the tabernacle of the testimony. (Numbers 10:11)

The lamps and the incense burners had been extinguished. This was the signal to march. The children of Israel folded their tents to take up the journey out of the wilderness of Sinai.

They were no longer the undisciplined horde that had left Egypt over a year earlier. They were divided into twelve groups. These corresponded to the families of

Jacob's twelve sons. These would be known hereafter as "the twelve tribes of Israel." To seventy trusted elders Moses delegated authority to settle all minor disputes among the travelers. This freed him from burdensome tasks and gave to them the beginnings of self-government. They had a guide, a Midianite nomad, who knew the passes and watering places of the desolate land.

More important than all else was the rallying point, the tent of meeting. This protected the ark in which lay the tablets of stone. It was carried by specially delegated officers and followed by other priests. The tabernacle was always in the lead. When it stopped the whole caravan stopped. When it advanced the Israelites followed. A pillar of cloud by day and a glow of light by night led them in all their journeys. Did this glow of fire perhaps mark the position of the priests as they marched ahead of the hosts? Perhaps they were carrying the customary firepots, tending the glowing embers that would quickly start the campfires when the congregation halted. The cloud and the fire would remain forever in memory as comforting evidence of God's guidance "in the way wherein they should go."

It was an eleven day journey from Mount Horeb (Sinai) to Kadesh-Barnea. There were plentiful springs to supply the flocks. After a few days' journey to the north the green hills of Canaan rose ahead of them. Moses bade the children of Israel pitch their tents near the water. Then he sent twelve carefully chosen men, one from each tribe, to survey the Promised Land.

Forty days the people waited. At last the spies strode into camp bringing pomegranates and figs. Two of the men bore a staff on which hung a single cluster of grapes. "Surely the land floweth with milk and honey!" they told their delighted kinsmen. Caleb, one of the searchers, called out eagerly,

Let us go up at once, and possess it, for we are well able to overcome it.  
(Numbers 13:30)

And Joshua, also one of the twelve, concurred. However, to the consternation of the children of Israel, ten of the spies refused flatly.

We are not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we. And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, which come of the giants; and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight. (Numbers 13:31,33)

What a black night that was! Women wept desolately in the tents. Discouraged, angry men gathered in knots to discuss their desperate predicament. The talk was of electing a captain to lead them back to Egypt. In vain, Joshua and Caleb tried to reason with them:

If the Lord delight in us, then he will bring us into this land and give it to us;... Only rebel not ye against the Lord, neither fear ye the people of the

land; for they are bread for us: (meaning they are easy prey) their defense is departed from them, and the Lord is with us: fear them not. (Numbers 14:8,9)

But the despairing people even spoke of stoning them.

Moses turned as always to commune with God. Could this slave-minded people, who had so often proved God's ever present care, yet still dared not reach out for their freedom, ever come into the Promised Land? If they failed, who would believe the power or even the existence of I AM? God's wisdom gave the answer. Moses went with the dreadful message to the assembled elders of Israel.

As truly as I live, saith the Lord,... Your carcasses shall fall in the wilderness;... But your little ones,...them shall I bring in, and they shall know the land that you have despised. Your children shall wander in the wilderness forty years,... until your carcasses are wasted in the wilderness. (Numbers 14:28 29,30,33)

The appalling sentence crushed every vestige of rebellion. Early in the morning the people came to Moses. They admitted that they had sinned and were now ready to go up to the land the Lord had promised. But it was too late. Not loyalty to their God, but dread of the desert, was their motive. Moses warned them that the Lord would not go with them.

Nevertheless they went. Without the ark of the covenant of the Lord to bless them, without Moses to direct them, they marched off in their willfulness to storm up the hills of Canaan. The Canaanites and Amalekites were firmly entrenched on the hilltops. They were quite accustomed to the onslaughts of envious desert nomads. They rushed down the hillsides like a swarm of angry bees. They completely routed the uninspired descendants of Jacob.

As the Lord had decreed there followed year upon year when the homeless slaves roamed the "great and terrible wilderness" of Sinai. When Abraham had passed this way centuries before the land had supported small villages and thriving, carefully irrigated farms. Since those days an army from the north had swept through the land. They brutally destroyed wells and ditches, orchards and vineyards. (Probably this was the army of the four kings, from whom Abraham rescued Lot.) The ravished land had never been reclaimed. The children of Israel were pitted against a bleak waste of drifting sand and desert shrubs.

They were not a docile band. Distressed and discouraged, they rebelled with any upstart who spoke against Moses and Aaron. They became so tired of the manna that they wailed "our soul loatheth" it.

In this mood they tramped, sandal-shod or barefooted, gathering brush for their fires in the snake-infested hills. Many died of snakebite. Moses raised high a brass effigy of a serpent and whoever raised his eyes and thoughts to it was healed.

Moses' kindly patience was sorely tried. Somewhere in the vicinity of Kadesh-Barnea desperate lack of water gave rise again to anger and recrimination. Moses sought out the place which God's wisdom designated -- a place which he later named, as at Rephidim, Massah and Meribah.

And Moses and Aaron gathered the congregation together before the rock, and he said unto them, Hear now, ye rebels; must we fetch you water out of this rock? (Numbers 20:10)

Twice he struck the rock and water gushed out abundantly. There was drink for the Israelites and their flocks. But for Moses there was grief that would cling until the day of his death. He had forgotten to give God the glory.

Gradually the older people died. The children knew nothing of softness and self-indulgence. It was a time of intense training. Under Moses' guidance they drew together in tribal unity and in consciousness of their God. They prepared for the mission which their fathers had failed at. Rituals of sacrifice, protective laws of cleanliness, of foods edible and inedible, and rules of social conduct kept them mindful of their Creator. Again and again they rehearsed the wonderful events in Egypt and the miraculous care that had been theirs in the desert. The sagas of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob took on nearness and firm reality. These story loving people sat beneath the brilliant night sky and told again the old Mesopotamian accounts of the beginnings of life, revised to reflect their deepening understanding.

## FIRST CONQUEST

Thirty-eight years the children of Israel lived as nomads in the desert. Then, at God's command, they turned again toward the Promised Land. Moses sent a courteous request to the king of Edom

Let us pass, I pray thee, through thy country; we will not pass through the fields, or through the vineyards, neither will we drink of the water of the wells; we will go by the king's highway, we will not turn to the right hand nor to the left, until we have passed thy borders. (Numbers 20:17)

Edom answered that he would come out with the sword if Israel attempted to pass through. Unwilling to commit his people to battle, Moses led them by a long detour around Edom. They went around the powerful land of Moab. They traveled eastward close to the Arabian desert, rather than by the direct king's highway. At the river Arnon, east of the Salt Sea, he paused and sent a like message to Sihon, king of the Amorites. Sihon's answer was to gather all his people and come storming out against Israel.



The Israelites asserted themselves. They met Sihon in battle and utterly defeated him. They took possession of his land, a narrow strip some eighty kilometers long. Much of it was choice grazing land. The children of Israel were landowners at last.

For a time they settled near the cities of the Amorites. They conquered other villages in the vicinity. Then they looked northward, where the cities were protected by high walls. There the great stature of the men had frightened the earlier Israelite explorers. The Lord bade Moses go out to battle. Og and all his people fell before the resolute hosts of Israel. Now the children of Israel were masters of forests and pastures reaching nearly as far north as the sea of Chinnereth, later known as the Sea of Galilee. The tribes of Reuben and Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh, all cattle breeders, quickly settled on the rich grazing lands.

### BALAAM AND BALAK

On the plains across the river Jordan from the Promised Land, Moses bade the Israelites set up their camp. In the highlands to the south, Balak, king of Moab, grew alarmed at the vast, orderly array of their black tents. He had heard reports of their amazing military might. Rather than risk battle he requested a famous soothsayer named Balaam to come and curse these people.

This soothsayer oracles were typical of the ritual of the times:

Balaam the son of Beor hath said, and the man whose eyes are open hath said: He hath said, which heard the words of God, which saw the vision of the Almighty, falling into a trance, but having his eyes open: How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, and thy tabernacles, O Israel! (Numbers 24:3-5)

Behold, I have received commandment to bless: and he hath blessed; and I cannot reverse it. Surely there is no enchantment against Jacob, neither is there any divination against Israel: according to this time it shall be said of Jacob and of Israel, What hath God wrought! (Numbers 23:20,23)

Balaam said, moreover:

I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a star out of Jacob, and a Scepter shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth. (Numbers 24:17)

The infuriated king of Moab dismissed Balaam, but Israel had been blessed; there could be no reversal.

Yet Balak triumphed without a battle. The children of Israel, lulled by military success and leaving themselves unguarded against more insidious attacks, welcomed

Moabite women into camp. Soon the Israelites were joining in their pagan rites. Illness more deadly than battle swept through the wayward camp. Once more a terrible purge of the unfaithful drew the descendants of Israel back to their purpose.

### MOSES' LAST DAYS

Moses' tremendous task was nearly finished. The shores of Canaan lay only a short distance to the west. Humbly he implored God that he might cross over Jordan to see the land. But that dreadful day when he brought water from the rock now stood between him and the Land of Promise. He had succumbed to the pride of personal accomplishment. Could he stand with his kinsmen on the soil of Canaan with no trace of self-congratulation? With no suggestion that he had been, at least in part, the power that had brought them there? The mighty leader of Israel must forego even the shadow of temptation to self-aggrandizement before the glory of his God. He would not be permitted to cross over Jordan.

With tenderness and yearning over these people for whom he had lived, Moses turned to preparing them for the years ahead. He recalled to them the cauterizing experiences of their parents in the desert, and the myriad proofs of God's watchful care. They must never forget to destroy ruthlessly the people, the idols and the sacred places of Canaan, or else the tiny band of Israel would be swallowed up in the heathen land.

In his last discourses, which he commanded to be written in a book and memorized, he told them:

I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live .... The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms: and he shall thrust out the enemy from before thee; and shall say, Destroy them. Happy art thou, O Israel: who is like unto thee, O people saved by the Lord, the shield of thy help, and who is the sword of thy excellency! And thine enemies shall be found liars unto thee; and thou shalt tread upon their high places. (Deuteronomy 30:19; 33:27,29)

To Moses' uplifted consciousness it was clear that the future must bring other deeply inspired and loving leaders to guide the people into ever fuller understanding of Creative Existence. He assured them:

The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him shall ye hearken. (Deuteronomy 18:15)

Completely surrendering self he followed God's command as always. Moses at last turned from the children of Israel to climb the slopes of Mount Pisgah. From its summit he looked out upon the Promised Land. There ran the Jordan River in its deep, tropical valley, winding down from the north to the Salt Sea, which shone dully beneath the barren Western hills. There lay Jericho, white beside the palm-studded oasis, the rough mountain face rising abruptly behind it. Beyond the tumbled, tree-greened highlands lay the Mediterranean Sea a hundred kilometers away. This was to be the stage on which the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Israel would meet temptations, failures, and occasionally, glorious triumphs as they put to the test their understanding of Moses' teachings.

On the mountain, "on this side of Jordan" Moses died. The place or manners of his burial have never been known.