

# I

## MOSES

### A HEART ON A MISSION

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HOLLYWOOD WOULD HAVE had to invent Moses if God had not created him. His story contains all the elements of great epics. The guy with everything going for him blows his advantage. Noble dreams of great accomplishment apparently fall victim to immaturity. However, the potential career detour provides an offstage recovery program. Unexpected turns of events thrust the hero back into the limelight. Deferred dreams come true. And this is only two of the three acts! Moses' drama holds us mesmerized, whether acted out by Charlton Heston in a Cecil B. DeMille production or drawn out by the imaginative talents of a Dreamworks animator.

Spiritual leaders find Moses especially engaging. They identify with much that he endured. High expectations. Public confidence accompanied by private self-doubt. Humiliation. Fickle followers. Draining conflicts. Exhilarating revelations. Miraculous divine interventions. Tedious and debilitating trivia. Fear of failure. Decisive victories. Ambivalent triumphs. Loneliness. Privileged relationship with God.

Moses stands as the colossus of the Old Testament. The legacy of his leadership, the Exodus, occupies center stage as the central event of the nearly fifteen hundred years of Old Testament history. He has commanded the admiration of millions for his mission to liberate oppressed slaves and for his contribution of the Decalogue to human civilization.

Our interest in Moses grows out of the remarkable case study he presents for studying divine heart-shaping dynamics. The subplots of culture, call, community, communion, conflict, and the commonplace present themselves with rare clarity. The Hebrew scriptures give us unusual exposure

to so ancient a figure. Our hearts go out to him from the moment of his birth. We find ourselves strangely forgiving of his youthful impetuosity and fits of anger. We cheer for him against Pharaoh. We envy his mountaintop meetings with the Almighty. We wonder to ourselves if we would have endured so much (some of us think we already have) without similar disqualification in the end from entering the Promised Land. Not a few of us secretly wonder if Moses got the shaft or the royal treatment at Nebo.

We feel such kinship with Moses in his leadership challenges. We feel admiration for him because of his accomplishments. We feel challenged by him without being intimidated. His obvious flaws make him approachable but do not take away from his achievements. We too want to succeed in spite of our own flaws. That is why we eagerly search for clues in Moses' own heart-shaping that will instruct our own.

## Beginnings and Family Relationships

Before Moses could leverage leadership or even speak a syllable, his life was being providentially superintended in order to prepare him for his unique assignment. Miraculous deliverances and Moses began a very early association. While other Hebrew slave parents were grieving over their losses, Jochebed and Amram were successfully hiding their baby boy from Egyptian authorities and subsequent death. The bulrushes plan worked beyond their wildest dreams. Pharaoh's daughter could not possibly have imagined the events she set in motion when she responded to her maternal instincts. Miriam too proved equal to the moment. Moses would be raised as an adopted Egyptian prince in Pharaoh's court. However, he spent his early months in his Hebrew home, where his mother could whisper into the young prince's ear the things she wanted in his heart. To the ancient Hebrews, nothing happened outside the will of God. Jochebed would believe that God had spared her son for some special reason. She would surely pass this belief on to her son.

This early scripting of a "great expectations" mentality figured prominently in God's heart-shaping preparation of the leader of the Exodus. From his earliest moments, Moses would have a sense of destiny cultivated in him. Robert Clinton (*The Making of a Leader*, 1988), professor of Christian leadership at Fuller Theological Seminary, identifies this "sense of destiny" (p. 238) as a key insight into leadership effectiveness. He defines this awareness as a belief that God has his hand on the leader for a very special purpose or purposes. This belief is tied to an event or set of events that confirm to the leader that he or she has been chosen by God for a life mission. Yahweh made sure that Moses, the future deliv-

erer, would grow up with the knowledge that he himself had been delivered through divine intervention.

Moses apparently enjoyed a significant connectedness to his family of origin. At some point, he discovered that he owed his life to Miriam, insight that forged a special bond between them. Miriam played a leadership role in the Exodus experience, particularly the early wilderness wanderings. She generally supported her younger brother. When she rebelled against Moses' leadership, Yahweh judged her by immediately giving her leprosy. Moses pleaded for her life and forgave Miriam quickly despite the seriousness of her rebellion.

Similar dynamics also characterized Moses' relationship with Aaron. They apparently enjoyed enough time together for Moses to gain respect for and confidence in his older brother. At the burning bush, Moses implored Yahweh to let him recruit Aaron as a leadership partner. Aaron would come in handy for at least two reasons. First, he apparently knew how to talk in front of a crowd. Second, Moses needed someone who still had connections with the folk back in Egypt. Aaron did serve Moses well as a contact person with the Hebrew slaves and as his right-hand man. He, like Miriam, received grace from his younger brother on several occasions. The golden calf episode alone raised serious questions about Aaron's leadership. However, God and Moses honored Aaron by setting his tribe apart as priests.

Although Moses was the undisputed leader of the Exodus, he was not alone in leadership. Many treatments of his leadership ignore this significant fact. Miriam and Aaron formed part of a family triumvirate giving leadership to the liberated nation. The three became a leadership community that faced together the critical challenges of the wilderness sojourn. Despite their failings, Aaron and Miriam contributed to Moses' success. For his part, Moses remained faithful to his brother and sister till their end.

## The Prince of Egypt

Yahweh secured arrangements for Moses to grow up the child of two cultures, both of which he would need to understand in order to fulfill his unique role in history. His family of origin provided his Hebrew grounding.

His experience of Egyptian culture would be very different from that of his kinsmen slaves, thanks to none other than the daughter of the same Pharaoh that wanted Moses never to grow up. Why did this boy capture her heart? What prompted her to defy her own father's wishes about this

child? What price, if any, did she pay to give Moses his head start in life? Surely Moses' savior told him of the day she had rescued him from the bulrushes along the banks of the Nile. What expectations did she add to those of Jochebed?

Moses, then, developed personally in an atmosphere that heightened his uniqueness. The dynamic of his childhood and early adult years would set most young men to wondering about their destiny. In Moses' case, his unusual circumstances almost certainly conspired to make him feel "different" from the others.

An interview with any great leader will often uncover this same insight into their self-perception. Like Moses, they feel somehow different from others. This awareness often begins in childhood and continues throughout adolescence and young adult development. The sense of apartness signals part of the heart-shaping activity for leadership. It affords the necessary self-differentiation that one needs to provide effective leadership to others. (Leadership is the healthy expression of this dynamic. A sense of being different taken to extremes leads to pathological behaviors wherein people become disconnected from those around them.) In Moses' case, the confluence of these forces predisposed him for leadership.

Pharaoh provided the training that fashioned the future emancipator of the Hebrews. As a prince of Egypt, Moses would be schooled in leadership practices. He would study law. He would learn to express himself and to handle responsibility and authority. He would be expected to become adept in problem solving and project management because the royal building projects were superintended by members of Pharaoh's house. Moses would become versed in Egyptian religion.

All of these fundamental elements of training prepared Moses for different aspects of his assignment to be leader of the Exodus. God spoke his Ten Commandments to a legally trained mind. Moses the expert in law served as judge and eventually established a system of lower and upper magistrates when the stress of his handling each case himself became too great. His familiarity with Egyptian religion elevated his effectiveness as ambassador of Yahweh, God of the slaves. Each plague demonstrated the superiority of Moses' God over the gods of the Egyptian pantheon. Moses' understanding of the royal priesthood of Egypt provided a rich background to the covenant he would receive from Yahweh at Sinai (Exod. 19:1–6). The Israelites were to serve a role that Moses had observed in the halls of Pharaoh from his youth. The ex-slaves were now to be Yahweh's royal priests, carrying out his will and serving as his ambassadors.

We have no clue as to how Moses fared in Pharaoh's court. Was he ostracized as a foreigner? Was he made to feel second-class? Or did he stand out as a symbol of slave-class achievement and become a celebrated

prince? At some point, he learned how he had been brought to Pharaoh's household. He obviously maintained some contact with kinsmen. Every sight of a Hebrew slave served as a reminder of his special reprieve in life. The constant personal observations of his people's plight apparently grated on Moses' soul.

## A False Start

One wonders how long Moses' anger seethed about the treatment of his fellow Hebrews at the hands of their Egyptian taskmasters. He probably witnessed Egyptian brutality to Hebrew slaves more than once. He may have harbored notions as a young man of redeeming his people. Maybe he lobbied unsuccessfully for reform, hoping to use his influence to change slave treatment. Perhaps Moses intervened many times on behalf of the slaves. But one day he snapped. In a blind rage, he killed the Egyptian oppressor whom he had caught mistreating a Hebrew slave. His opportunity to work within the system to better his people's lot ran out with his victim's blood into the Egyptian sand.

Whatever fantasies Moses might have entertained about being heralded as a hero among his own people were crushed the next day. His attempted intervention into a dispute between two Hebrew slaves proved to be a mixed bag. It probably saved his life, because he learned from them that his crime was known. But the rebuff he received from the slaves introduced him to an ingratitude that he would experience time and time again on the part of those he was trying to lead. This type of scenario may not have been covered in the "leadership curriculum" at Pharaoh's court.

Moses experienced what all leaders ultimately fear—rejection by the people they are called to lead. Part of his internal scripting had come true. As already noted, Moses' uniqueness had set him apart from those around him from the beginning. He was a child of two cultures, who never completely belonged to either. Moses would always stand apart from his people. More than any other biblical leader, Moses seems profoundly alienated from his leadership constituency most of the time. He was never quite accepted by the Hebrews.

These dynamics would play out over the succeeding decades. For the moment, whatever disillusionment Moses had suffered from his initial attempt to deliver his people had to be temporarily ignored. He had to get ready for the escape into the desert.

## Flight into the Desert

Within a dozen verses after Moses' birth narrative, we find him in danger from Pharaoh again. The prince had become avenger (Exod. 2:11–12),

then would-be judge (2:13–14), then fugitive from justice (2:15). Moses' struggle to liberate, to rescue, to make right of wrong, to champion the oppressed had erupted in lethal fury. It cost him his privileged position and could cost him his life if he stayed around. He did not.

The fleeing fugitive became immediately embroiled in another combative situation. Not far into the Midianite desert, Moses encountered seven young women in distress at a local watering hole. The women's attempts at drawing water were being thwarted by some ruffian shepherds. Moses must have been an intimidating figure. Singlehandedly, he rescued the women from the harassment of the hoodlums. He further attended to their plight by personally drawing water and distributing it to their flock. His bravery and kindness landed him a dinner invitation, a wife, and a job. It turned out to be a productive afternoon.

Some significant themes emerge in the early Moses. These themes reflect similar realities for many spiritual leaders. Moses had a strong internal sense of right and wrong. This compass propelled him into personal intervention on behalf of others, even if it involved conflict. He was particularly sensitive to the needs of the underprivileged. Standing up for slaves and women did not "enhance one's résumé" in the second millennium before Christ. The crusader, liberator heart was unmistakable in the young prince.

Leaders often become leaders because of the same internal drive evidenced by Moses. They are driven by causes and willing to personally risk involvement. As with Moses, the leader's early attempts often end in frustration and even failure. Many leaders' life stories bear remarkable resemblance to this early part of Moses' saga. Consumed with their passion, they frequently overplay their ambition, abuse their position or power, and get into trouble with some authority. Their early mistakes threaten to derail their life missions.

Some spiritual leaders are sent into exile for their leadership blunders. Fortunately, not all of these accept their desert exile as the final chapter of their lives. They learn from their early conflicts. Most important, their hearts remain connected to and energized by their earlier passion.

Moses' heart certainly did. He could have sat at the Midianite well and watched the plight of Jethro's daughters with a detached passivity. However, he overcame whatever reticence his previous intervention efforts may have engendered in him. His refusal to let early failure quell his heart's passion kept him in the game. Moses could not have known that at the time. He did what he did because he obeyed his heart. That conflict at the well revealed the mettle of leadership resident in the young man's heart.

This story reveals another aspect of leader heart-shaping. The subplot of conflict often appears early in the spiritual leader's life script. The

leader's response becomes formative for leadership potential. If the leader resists risk after early skirmishes, the heart is stunted by lack of courage. Passion fades. Early promise gives way to mediocrity and lackluster performance. Personal vision shrinks to fit life circumstances rather than creating tension for realization of a preferred future. On the other hand, if leaders decide to continue the personal pursuit of passion, they put themselves in a posture of openness to continued heart-shaping by God.

Perhaps you have your own story of early tragedy and subsequent exile because of some conflict or misjudgment on your part. You may still be in the exile period of your life. What will keep this from being the final chapter for you will be your decision to play out your heart dreams in the desert. You may think you have lost your position, or platform, or power, but if you pursue your call, you can still be a player. You may not be able to see past your past, but do act out your future. Do this no matter how small the situation or how seemingly insignificant the encounter. You can never know the ramifications of your courage for your reentry and your contribution to the world.

## Gifts of the Desert

Moses owed a great deal to his wilderness sojourn. If Egypt had provided leadership training for royal sons, Midian served as graduate school for turning an outlawed son into the leader of a slave liberation movement. The Midianite culture and experience shaped Moses in profound ways.

Chief among these influences was Jethro, the Midianite priest. Besides providing Moses with a daughter to marry and a job, Jethro served as the key male figure in Moses' midlife. Perhaps Jethro fulfilled the role of the father Moses never had. Cut off from his natural father at an early age, and significantly distanced from his adoptive father, Moses needed a father figure to make the transition from leader "wannabe" to real leader of God's people.

Jethro's involvement in Moses' life became a heart-shaping relationship through his support of Moses' call. When Moses returned from the burning bush, he was at a decidedly vulnerable spot. He had to convince others of his need to redirect his life. Jethro could have made life difficult for Moses or could have crushed his new passion if he had failed to support Moses' experience. Fortunately, the Midianite immediately released Moses from his clan responsibilities. The priest blessed him in his new endeavor. Moses probably had never experienced the blessing of a father before. Jethro took care of Moses' own family during the Exodus period when Moses confronted Pharaoh in Egypt. When the Exodus had been accomplished, Jethro came to Moses at Sinai to deliver his family back to

him. At the reunion, Moses recounted for Jethro all of the events of the Exodus. The priest genuinely celebrated the accomplishments of his son-in-law. He also gave Moses some good management advice about establishing a legal system. Moses had created a huge bottleneck of justice by trying to handle all of the disputes on his own. Jethro's fatherly advice kept the Exodus from stalling early on.

Moses' eager acceptance of Jethro's advice reflected how strong the sense of trust had grown between them. This trust had been forged in community. We are not told at what point Jethro discovered that the Egyptian he had taken in was really a Hebrew fugitive from the law. We do not know when he became aware of Moses' incredible life story. We can wonder at what point Moses confessed to being a prince on the lam. Obviously when the truth came out, it did not jeopardize his standing with Jethro. Moses was fully accepted and not cast out or turned over to Pharaoh.

The recounting of leaders' life journeys usually turns up a Jethro or two. These individuals are God's gifts to the leader to provide extraordinary affirmation, encouragement, and guidance. They frequently, but not always, arise from outside the family system. They typically surface during times of the leader's self-doubt and at points when the leader's life mission is crystallizing. These God-sent Jethros offer almost unconditional acceptance of the leader, yet they maintain an accountability of presence that implicates itself into the leader's choices. They invest heavily in the leader, believe in the leader's potential, and provide real help at just the right time. Some, like the Midianite priest, provide financial assistance, a support system, and spiritual guidance. They do this without "owning" the leader. They release the leader to his or her life's work and celebrate the leader's accomplishments. In short, they are a heart-shaping instrument of God.

The Midianite clan of Jethro probably provided Moses the strongest community of his life. They nurtured him during his middle years. Their impact can be seen in the names of Moses' children. The name of his first-born, Gershom, signaled that though Moses had become an alien in a foreign land, he had found a home (Exod. 18:2–3). The law of Moses would eventually reflect a high value on showing hospitality to strangers. Moses' naming of his second son, Eliezer, reflected his gratitude at being rescued from Pharaoh's sword (Exod. 18:4). God had delivered Moses *from* Egypt but had also delivered him *to* Jethro's family.

## The Desert School of Leadership

We can wonder how Moses evaluated the first forty years of his life in Egypt as he reflected on them during his shepherding years. Had he given up on



his people? Could he ever trust the Hebrews? Did he long to be vindicated with them? Did he still want to punish the Egyptians for their oppression?

The torture of unrequited dreams rivaled the torment that the wilderness inflicted on shepherds. To fulfill their assignments, the shepherds had to search for water, watch for predators, and patiently deal with the animals in their care. The unrelenting application of these skills built into Moses the instincts he would need to shepherd a slave people through the unfamiliar territory of not only the desert, but also of freedom.

Shepherding leadership differed significantly from the Egyptian style of leadership that Moses had been taught, a model of authoritarian power and whiplash persuasion employed by taskmasters, princes, and Pharaohs. The desert school of leadership built accountability and stewardship into Moses' character. He tended someone else's flock. He was responsible for his father-in-law's assets. He had to demonstrate not only trustworthiness but also resourcefulness to ensure the sustainability of the flock. Moses' Exodus leadership would draw from these wilderness lessons. He would tend Another's flock, assuming responsibility for food, water, safety, and flock perpetuity. These commonplace activities of shepherds shaped Moses' heart into the heart of a shepherd leader.

Moses demonstrated another quality that was honed during these four decades. He developed a remarkable attention to detail. Shepherds learn to look for signs that could spell the difference between life and death, gain or loss. Hundreds and thousands of daily decisions shaped Moses' capacity to pay attention. Scanning the sky, scanning the horizon, looking carefully at individual flock members built powers of observation.

Moses' attention to detail would serve him well. He had to recall extensive private conversations with Yahweh. He took care to repeat God's instructions precisely to Pharaoh. He relayed to the Hebrews intricate laws, concerning a wide spectrum of behaviors, ranging from hygiene to Sabbath observance. He laid out the directions for construction of the Tabernacle in exquisite detail. The lawgiver and judge had to rely on keen powers of observation that related to people as well. He knew motives and consequences of attitudes and actions. Most of the law he related from God dealt with interactions among people.

One additional benefit from spending years in the desert would pay off during the wilderness wanderings. Moses had to learn wilderness survival techniques. The searches for food and water led him to know the area like the back of his hand. He would pick up valuable information about the tribes of the region. He would learn to be at home in the desert so he could teach others to do the same.

Moses probably never would have imagined that these daily, commonplace struggles of the shepherd were training him for a great life

work. He had the heart of a prince and developed the heart of a shepherd, the heart of the privileged free, and the heart of the disenfranchised. He had the heart of a leader shaped by God to play the central role in Old Testament history.

## Recalled from Reserves into Active Duty

What a difference a day can make. At the bush that burned but would not burn up, Moses accepted a “person-to-person call” from God that would establish the legacy of his life. Whatever Moses had made of his life was now going to come under reevaluation. Broken dreams, disillusionment, fear, insignificance were all going to be gathered up, not for discarding, but for reshaping in the fire of the call.

The voice from the bush identified himself as the God of Moses’ ancestors. This revelation had to be thrilling to Moses. This meant that the ancient patriarchal stories he had heard, presumably first told to him by his mother, were true! Moses would later commit the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph to writing.

Yahweh then tapped into Moses’ heart hunger, identifying himself with Moses’ own yearning for the deliverance of the Hebrews. Moses seemed reluctant to let old passions be stirred. His excuses were counterpunches to protect himself from vulnerability and even more from disappointment. He let God know that he had dialed up the wrong man. His “who am I?” was rhetorical. Possibly for years, Moses had answered his own question with a resignation that he was a nobody, a failure, having disappointed both his mothers’ great expectations for him.

God stripped away Moses’ initial objection by telling Moses that he would not be representing himself in Egypt but that he would be representing Yahweh. “Well, then, who are you?” Moses fired back. God’s answer gave Israel a proper name for the God of their fathers. Yahweh assured Moses that he would get a hearing with the Hebrews. Remembering the last time he had tried to help Hebrews in trouble, Moses told Yahweh that they probably would not believe him. Even God’s miraculous signs still were unconvincing to Moses. He told God that he was not a good speaker, and when God answered this objection, he finally flatly asked God to go get someone else for the job.

At this point in the encounter, God’s patience with Moses’ self-absorption and pity ran out. He got angry with Moses (it would not be the last time) for his whining and excuses (these would also continue). Yahweh had providentially protected Moses from Pharaoh twice—at birth and when he killed the Egyptian officer. Yahweh had carefully shepherded his life so

that Moses was uniquely qualified for this assignment. He understood Hebrew hopes. He understood Egyptian court culture. He was at home in the wilderness. God had plans for a mission that no one else could accomplish. Moses was the man!

Only God knows how many would-be leaders turn away from the burning bush. Having decided their own destiny, they close themselves off from the call of God on their lives, or their preoccupation with themselves prevents them from being open to a mission larger than their own definition of possibilities. They have “shrinkwrapped” God down to the size of their personal frailties and limitations. They fail to allow for divine contingencies. Not willing to risk or to explore a world that has something besides themselves at the center, they never make it onto God’s stage. Often waiting for the big break, they are counting on something other than the voice of God to give them a leadership role. They live out their lives in the desert of reserve status.

Moses finally acceded to God’s commission. Thus began a remarkable relationship between a human being and God. Moses had to be closer to God than any other human of his day. Moses would have to deliver the word of God to Pharaoh. He could not misspeak words of such import. Moses would take down the very law of God for his people. The scribe of God had to know the One speaking and understand him clearly. Moses’ writings would present the world with knowledge of creation, the Flood, the great stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as told to him by God himself. These revelations would be entrusted by Yahweh only to someone familiar with him, a great friend, a man accustomed to audience with God.

Moses would come to find his greatest sense of belonging in his communion with the God of the burning bush. His constant sense of being an alien among those he lived with and served had carved out in his heart a huge place for God to inhabit. Maybe this deficiency established in Moses a heart hunger to establish community with God. God frequently targets the dark places, the holes in the leader’s heart. When God works through deficiencies, he frequently increases the leader’s awareness of dependency on him. Moses’ reliance on Yahweh became a signature of his leadership style.

Perhaps the notion that God works through weaknesses represents a liberating idea for you. Some of your great heart hungers may still be unsatisfied. God may be using these to create space for himself in your heart. As long as you look to others, to achievement, or to anything but God to fill the void, the hunger will be your master, fueling your drivenness or discontent. Many leaders, unaware of or unwilling to face the holes in

their own heart, wreck their lives trying to plug the gap with more work, more attention, more power, more . . . whatever. God desires to fill the heart spaces with himself.

## Power Struggles

Moses' appointment with destiny landed him in an adversarial position with the most powerful person in the ancient world. By the time of Moses, pharaohs had ruled Egypt for centuries. They had achieved a godlike status, considered by many to be a divine incarnation. The pharaohs had patronized and surrounded themselves with a powerful group of priests who enforced their reign and ensured that their divine will was accomplished. Pharaoh's wishes were law and not open to dispute.

Pharaoh sniffed in disgust at the demands of Moses and Aaron. He would not countenance the demands from the God of the Hebrew slaves. Just to drive home the point that he was not to be messed with, he issued the famous make-brick-without-straw order. This cunning and cruel move was designed to do two things. First, Pharaoh demonstrated his disregard for any god other than those in his service. Second, his tactic placed Moses' leadership in jeopardy with his own people. In one stroke, the king of Egypt figured he had nipped any slave uprising in the bud, demoralizing the Hebrews and destroying their leadership team's credibility.

The Hebrews played their part just as Pharaoh expected. They immediately buckled, blaming Moses and Aaron for their increased burden. Under normal conditions, up against standard-fare agitators, this would have been the end of the story. But Pharaoh miscalculated on two scores. First, Moses was not an ordinary man. His passion had been set on fire by the fire of the burning bush. Despite his initial reluctance, he had reentered Egypt as a man on a mission. Second, Pharaoh thought he had a problem with Moses. In fact, he had picked a fight with a bigger Adversary. The contest was over before it started. Pharaoh just did not know it yet.

Neither did Moses. Apparently he counted on either one knockout blow or Pharaoh for some reason granting his request. However, the situation immediately deteriorated. One has to wonder if the old tapes of his early attempts at being a rescuer began to play in Moses' head. His early efforts at exodus were fast shaping up to be another failed attempt. Moses took his insecurities to Yahweh. "Since I speak with faltering lips, why would Pharaoh listen to me" (Exod. 6:30)? This was Moses' way of reminding God of his objections back at the bush, a refrain of "I told you so."

Yahweh's response to Moses was to inform the disheartened leader that he was in for a fight. Things were going to get worse before they got better. Pharaoh would resist every request from Yahweh. But, Yahweh assured Moses, Pharaoh would eventually yield after suffering for his refusal to let God's people go. Yahweh repeated this assurance during each of his encounters with Moses during the early days of skirmish. The certainty of Yahweh steeled Moses for battle.

Many spiritual leaders identify with this part of Moses' experience. Leaders, believing that they are operating on clear instruction from the Lord, sometimes run into early opposition that throws them a curve. Rather than responding positively to their efforts, the situation actually worsens. What seemed like a good idea suddenly appears to be a foolish endeavor. "What could I have been thinking?" leaders ask themselves. Sometimes a leader's internal doubts find an external echo in the opinions of others who question the leader's ability. If the leader has made public promises of deliverance or of a better tomorrow, that leader is particularly vulnerable to criticism.

Without exception, all great spiritual leaders throughout history have found themselves in circumstances in which their leadership is both challenged and imperiled. They also have experienced situations in which they have no recourse but God, times when conventional wisdom called their convictions into question, times when even those they seek to serve ridiculed them for their attempts. All of these circumstances established thresholds of pain that they had to tolerate to pursue their mission. Spiritual heroes learn that pain and conflict are part of the package. It just goes with the territory.

In some cases, God will clue leaders in to the conflict they must endure. The powers that keep people in bondage do not relinquish control very easily. Whether it is addiction, or dysfunction, or sin habits, or economic-political control, the Pharaohs of this world scoff at the claims of Almighty God. Leaders delude themselves if they think victory comes without conflict.

This discussion does not intend to glorify the spiritual leader who relishes combat. Some leaders incite conflict through immature power plays. Others create contests purely for self-aggrandizement. Still others do not even know that they themselves bring on persistent conflict through their own unresolved issues with authority or lack of people skills.

The leaders who grow through conflict learn to reflect on their own actions. They take responsibility for their contribution to the situation. In doing so, they allow God to carry on his heart-shaping activity in the pressure cooker of conflict. Maturity begins to be in evidence when leaders

who find themselves arrayed against the enemies of God worry more for God's reputation than for their own. Not seeking conflict, they nonetheless refuse to shrink from it if obedience to his call places them in the arena.

Yahweh's predictions to Moses proved to be accurate. In a series of confrontations, God proved his superiority over all other gods and leveled judgment against Pharaoh. Throughout the contest, Moses never asserted his own agenda. He refused to become the issue. He did not focus on his own personal sense of rejection. Moses knew the struggle was not about him. The battle was between Yahweh and Pharaoh. Moses played the role of messenger. God used Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh to teach Moses that the battle rises or falls on obedience. If the leader champions God's agenda, spiritual breakthroughs redraw the spiritual landscape. Captives are set free. God is declared the winner.

## **A Love-Hate Relationship**

Moses' initial confrontation with Pharaoh set up another, more challenging contest, especially in terms of emotional and spiritual wear and tear on him. Moses would endure protracted criticism and opposition from the Hebrews. One of the reasons that spiritual leaders of all ages admire Moses is their identification with his struggles at this point.

Just a few examples of the fickleness of the Hebrews suffice to chronicle the rocky relationship between them and their leader. When Moses delivered whatever was the going request of the day (water, food, and so forth), the people tolerated him and even went along with him. But his line of credit was forever short. Any failure on his part to deliver brought swift criticism, murmuring, and rebellion. When they faced hunger, they charged, "You have brought us out into the desert to starve this entire assembly to death" (Exod. 16:3). When thirsty, they whined, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst" (Exod. 17:3)? When tired of manna on the menu, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost" (Num. 11:5).

Moses, like every spiritual leader since, had to marvel at the capacity of people to idealize or to reinvent the past. "What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert" (Exod. 14:11b–12). The leader, of course, is to blame for all difficulties encountered en route to the Promised Land. And sometimes, at the very door of God's delivery on his

promises, the spiritual leader hears what Moses heard, “We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt” (Num. 14:4).

God’s people exasperated Moses. Of interest to us is how the heart of Moses was affected by this wilderness community of liberated slaves. “What am I to do with these people?” he frequently complained to God. Moses’ own feelings toward them expressed the ambivalence that he felt coming from their side of the relationship. At times, he was so angry at them that he had them punished, even to death. At other times, he interceded for them before Yahweh, who more than once threatened to kill them himself.

The ongoing dialogue between Moses and Yahweh about the Hebrews offers rare glimpses of heart-shaping at work. Both Moses’ passion for righteousness and his shepherd heart bleed through the conversations. It is interesting that Moses often displayed one face to the people—usually that of judgment and threats. But when he was with Yahweh, listening to God’s intentions to do just what he himself had threatened to do, Moses often presented a different attitude. He begged Yahweh not to abandon the people. Moses knew that if God did abandon them, it would mean certain death, as well as a negation of Yahweh’s intervention in Egypt. When Yahweh afflicted the people, it was Moses who pleaded their case. Moses’ heart grew each time he interceded for the people. Constant intercession seems to be the prescription for retaining a shepherd’s long-suffering heart. One mark of genuine spiritual greatness is compassion for one’s tormentors.

Moses cast his lot with the people, once asking that he be punished himself instead of them. On another occasion, Moses refused Yahweh’s proposal to start a new line of people through Moses, thus cutting off the rebellious Hebrews. God’s dialogues with Moses about the fate of Israel helped draw out Moses’ own heart about the people. These encounters stand as witness to the greatness of the man Moses had come to be. He would be counted with the Israelites even when they would not receive him. He would plead for their forgiveness when they sinned. Moses sacrificed his own chance to forgo the trials of the wilderness, choosing instead to identify with the people he had led out of bondage. He would suffer their same lot—death—instead of entering the Promised Land. His overriding concern focused on preserving the link of the people with Yahweh.

Spiritual communities are sometimes burned by leaders who have not cast their lot with them. Some leaders use people to further their own positions. Some spiritual leaders have not developed the shepherd’s heart of sacrifice for their people. Even in doing spiritual things, or building great ministries, they reflect more the heart of Pharaoh than the heart of Moses.

On the other hand, some spiritual communities give their leaders a taste of what the Hebrews gave Moses. They never fully embrace the leader. The leader experiences rejection. The people's attitude and actions may simply reflect a spiritual immaturity on their part. The leader represents the tension of demands placed by God on his people. The people may refuse or resist the responsibility to grow. Sometimes the community wants the leader's blessing, but fears the leader's connectedness with God.

This dynamic between Moses and the Hebrews reveals one of the mysteries of heart-shaping. Moses' yearning for the belonging that he never fully experienced caused him to fight for it on behalf of the people he led. They were to be a people "belonging to God" (Exod. 19:5). Sometimes God creates within leaders a desire to experience something they themselves have been denied. This desire fuels a passion in them to make sure that others experience something that they themselves yearn for.

## Face to Face

The character of the communion that Moses enjoyed with Yahweh proves unique among Bible figures. "The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend" (Exod. 33:11). Sinai summits, tent meetings, glowing countenance, private burial with God as the lone pallbearer—these are images of Moses' personal interaction with Yahweh. They provide venues for intense, divine heart-sculpting activity.

God conducted a lot of business with Moses at Sinai. When Yahweh commissioned Moses at the burning bush, he also instructed Moses to bring Israel back to the mountain once the Exodus was accomplished. Moses obeyed. Israel camped at the base of the mountain while Moses made several trips up the rocky slopes to meet with Yahweh. Aaron sometimes accompanied him, as did Joshua. The elders were allowed only part-way up. Most of the time, Moses met with God by himself. Probably no one minded. God's presence was accompanied by lightning and thunder, clouds of smoke, and fire. Moses could approach and disappear into the cauldron of divine presence. Twice he spent forty days sequestered with Yahweh. No other mortal has ever experienced such prolonged exposure and audience with Almighty God on location planet Earth.

The initial Sinai summit occurred between two and three months after the liberation from Egypt. At that meeting, Yahweh revealed to Moses his master plan. Yahweh covenanted with Israel to be in partnership in his redemptive mission in the world. God designated them a "kingdom of priests" (Exod. 19:6), signifying their special status with him. The Hebrews and their descendants were his personal representatives on earth.



The ex-slaves would hear this covenant imagery in the light of their Egypt experience. Royal priests were powerful figures who partnered with Pharaoh in ruling the kingdom. This announcement provided a huge promotion for the house of Jacob from the bottom of the social order to the lofty position of royal priests.

The importance of this covenant can hardly be overstated. Its impact reached well beyond those first recipients. When searching for words to convey the mission of the Christian movement, the apostle Peter chose these same words and imagery: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a people belonging to God” (1 Pet. 2:9a). Followers of Jesus inherited the mission that Israel received from Yahweh at Sinai. In the vision of the apostle John on Patmos, the gathered church at the end of history is celebrated as “kingdom and priests” (Rev. 1:6; 5:10). This idea, first enunciated by God to Moses at Sinai, stretches across time and into eternity.

Moses became the first to grasp this part of the heart of God. At Sinai, he “received” the picture of a God on a mission in the world. He captured the heartbeat of a God intent on creating a people who would join him in his redemptive efforts.

This insight not only would shape Moses’ heart but also would frame the subsequent understandings of God in Judaism and Christianity. Moses would later cast the patriarchal narratives to reflect the revelations at Sinai. He would highlight the theme of a God in search of relationships with people. The story line he developed in Genesis recounted the beginnings of humanity in general and Abraham’s seed in particular. The drama of human beginnings would be staged against this backdrop of a God determined to establish a missional partnership with part of humanity in order to establish a relationship with all creatures bearing his divine image.

The pair of forty-days-and-forty-nights Sinai sojourns gave the world the Ten Commandments. The first set of stones, written in the hand of God, shattered when an angry Moses flung them down at his sight of the golden calf. The second set survived, and humankind became the possessor of its initial set of laws expressly grounded in divine will.

Another feature of Moses’ communion with God on Sinai was his fascination with the name and glory of God. Both of these elements figured prominently at Moses’ call experience. The glory of God caused the bush to glow, attracting Moses’ attention. During the ensuing exchange, Moses asked for God’s name. The fact that Yahweh disclosed his name to Moses and through him to the Hebrews confirmed their special status. Moses responded to this with a jealousy for the Lord’s name, or reputation.

He did not want it tarnished by the actions of the people or by Yahweh himself. Moses considered God's presence a physical sign of God's commitment to Israel. This is why Moses pleads with Yahweh, "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth" (Exod. 33:15–16)?

Moses also continued to be fascinated by God's glory. In his boldest request, Moses asked for a full view of Yahweh's glory (Exod. 33:18). The Lord granted his request. Yahweh gave Moses the gift of his glory in such a profound way that Moses' face glowed even after he left Yahweh's presence.

The huge failure of Moses' leadership, the famous striking of the rock, proved so disastrous for him precisely because of the close communion he had experienced with God. In the Numbers 20 episode, God appeared to Moses in his glory and gave explicit instructions about how Moses was to perform the miracle of causing the rock to yield water. Moses crowded in on God's glory by seeming himself to procure water. Yahweh called the action a lack of trust and a failure to honor God before the people.

Every spiritual leader faces this same test. The stewardship of intimacy with the Almighty carries with it a heightened sense of accountability. Obedience to do what is disclosed provides the only continued guarantee of enjoying all God has in store. God does not want his spokespeople relying on past techniques or methodologies (previously, in Exodus 19, the rock issued water when Moses struck it). He wishes the leader to rely on him.

This episode diminishes but does not erase the legacy of the great liberator of the Old Testament. Moses serves as the great archetype of the Deliverer. It is not enough to be delivered *from* something. The trick is to be delivered *to* something. At 40 years of age, Moses could have gotten the Israelites out of Egypt. Not until he was 120 years old could he deliver them to the banks of the Jordan. He could accomplish his call only by his constantly submitting to God's heart-shaping activity. And having gotten his people ready for their next chapter, Moses moved on to his.

The graduation ceremony at Nebo was attended by an Audience of One.