

## JESUS & MOSES

We will go all the way back to Abraham next week. Today I call you to contemplate the effect – the impact – of the life of Moses on the boy Jesus. Abraham is the Father of Faith – the Father of Judaism. But Moses is the Founder. With Abraham, our faith became a possibility. With Moses, it became a reality – a Covenant People – “Let’s stop fooling around and do it.”

Well, “fooling around” is hardly accurate in application to the Patriarchs. And Brewster, Bradford, Cotton, and the others were hardly “fooling around” when they left everything and risked everything to come to a new world (America) in the hope of shaping a more faithful society. The early Puritans were like Abraham and the Patriarchs. But our country was “founded” by George Washington. I don’t mean he did it without God or the people, but he was the agent. He was the miracle-worker. It was impossible: He had no chance. He was out-classed at every point. There were never enough men or supplies to defy the British army. His friends betrayed him; the Congress would not pay his troops; his men kept deserting; the outcome was obvious and disastrous. George just kept on losing, and retreating, and losing ... until he won. George and his army were so pathetic, the British never could take him seriously.

Moses is the George Washington of Judaism. What did he have going for him? An unreliable brother, and an unstable walking stick that kept thinking it was a serpent. And if you know anything about the Garden of Eden, you know that serpents are not always to be trusted. Of course, Moses had friends in high places, but that was altogether unseen and uncertain. So with this, Moses walked into the presence of Pharaoh, the most powerful leader of the most powerful empire on earth, and said, “*The Unknown, the unseeable says, ‘Let my people go.’*”

All Pharaoh had to do was snap his fingers and Moses would be no more. But Pharaoh could not take him seriously. It was amusing, even entertaining – at first. The story says God hardened Pharaoh’s heart. That means Pharaoh was proud. He could not imagine that there could be any threat to his might and power – never mind from this false prince, turned Bedouin, with delusions of grandeur.

But Moses kept losing, and retreating, and insisting ... until he won. How could that possibly happen? Simple: The Unseen One was real. So the slaves went out of Egypt. And on the Holy Mountain in the wilderness, they received the Covenant – they married the Unseen One, becoming his People, for better or for worse ... and forever. A lot of it has been for worse, because they would not keep the Covenant (Torah). But breaking the precepts does not break the Covenant itself, not with this God. The connection holds – however tenuous, however denied. At least it has for the last thirty-three hundred years or so.

What would a young Jewish boy from Nazareth think about Moses? A boy more thoughtful, more sensitive, more connected to the history and religion of His people than most any boy you can imagine? Moses – the delivered one who delivered others. That was the very essence of his name. He had been saved as a baby in the bulrushes, when Pharaoh had ordered his men to kill all the male babies of the Hebrews. Later we would tell stories to claim that Jesus was a new Moses: how He also escaped being killed when all the male babies were being slaughtered; how His parents would take Him to Egypt, that He might come out of Egypt like His great forebear had.

Moses grew up like a young prince in Egypt. But he murdered an Egyptian guard who was mistreating the Hebrews, and then fled into the vast wilderness of Sinai, and perhaps beyond. For many years he was a nomad, attached to a Midianite priest named Jethro, and he married Jethro's daughter, Zipporah (bird). He had two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. A quiet, peaceful, uneventful life – perhaps the only happy years of his life – until that day on the slopes of the mountain, when Moses ran into the Living God. Then the delivered one became The Deliverer – plagues and Passover, Torah and testing – and out of it Judaism was formed and founded.

Thirteen or fourteen hundred years later, the boy Jesus was trying to understand. Could any mortal man be greater than Moses? Could God do more to show compassion and caring for the world than he did through Moses and the release from Egypt? Could God in any way make his will plainer than he did in the Covenant? It was all so clear and beautiful and compelling. And no human could have dreamed it up or pulled it off. It was a beacon to the whole world – a light to the nations. Incredible!

So how do you explain the Roman soldiers all over Israel so many generations later? How do you explain the endless defeats by Philistines, Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians? How do you explain the split between North and South, and the bitter civil wars? How do you explain the long list of wicked and apostate kings, the continuing idolatry, the endless injustice against everything Torah commanded? For that matter, how do you explain the long history that also contained times of incredible heroism, faithfulness, and sacrifice ... but for what? For this travesty of a holy nation, with bad priests, rotten kings, and a corrupt temple? And what manner of future or hope did Israel have now? Moses was real, but what had it all come to? Where was the God who had delivered them from Egypt so long ago? What chance was there for any kind of deliverance that would last now?

You don't think little boys think such thoughts? This one did! Year after year. I suspect the inner game – deadly earnest – seldom stopped for long. Could we start another rebellion? What would come of it? Could we reform the temple? How long would it last? Would God raise up a new Moses? What could a Moses do in this situation? What kind of hope could ever last in this world? Was there no help for all the suffering and confusion and despair?

Then came John the Baptist and his incredible reform: Let's go back to the Jordan, wash all the past away, come into the Promised Land again, clean – only this time, to keep the Covenant – to really mean it. The Covenant was wonderful, but already it was clear: people could not keep it – not well enough to make the difference. “God, why don't you do something?! Why don't you send us a new leader, a new Moses!?” Well, Jesus came out of the water ... and the dove descended ... and God said, “*I am* doing something, and it's you.”

You cannot be a new Moses if you do not know and revere the first Moses. That is the purpose of these sermons. Jesus did not come out of nowhere. You cannot start from scratch. If you love a Jesus who loved Moses, are you not also connected to Moses? You do know, I presume, that the first four generations of Christians – Jew, Greek, or whatever – had only the Old Testament for Scripture. They continued to study it, or started to study it if they had not before, because they knew it was the context out of which Jesus came. Only once was there a serious attempt to delete the Old Testament from Christian Scripture: Marcion wanted only the Gospel of Luke and the letters of Paul to be

Holy Scripture for Christians. The entire church rose up and said, “This is ignorant, stupid, and wrong.” It was the first heresy. (Marcion was expelled from the church in 144 A.D.) Yet in *our* time, the vast majority of Christians are perpetrating this very heresy, not by conviction but by sloth. They do not try to delete the Old Testament from their Bible; they simply do not bother to read or ponder it. Heresy by default. Sometimes we pray about it on Communion Sunday: “We have left undone those things which we ought to have done.” We know more about movie stars, famous today and forgotten tomorrow – some of them not even great spiritual giants – but we have no time for Moses, or Jeremiah?

Jesus is the New Moses – a Moses of a different dimension. It is the major theme of the Gospel of Matthew. It is a frequent awareness in all Christian perspective. Moses established the Covenant on Mount Sinai. Jesus establishes a New Covenant, only it is on the inside, on the heart – a life of prayer for every believer. Moses tried to establish a Holy Nation on earth – a nation that would become a light to all the nations. Jesus tries to establish a Kingdom not of this world – a people – a faith family not married to place or possessions or political success. This world can neither create nor kill Christendom. Judaism, by the way, ended up being this way too, though that was not its dream. We are, after all, from the same God, the same principles, and the same purpose – and we will be joined again one day, as the NEW Testament states and reiterates over and over again.

Nevertheless, to see the key (oversimplified): Jesus takes what Moses did and translates it from the physical world to the spiritual dimension. Moses delivered the people from an evil Pharaoh – from earthly slavery. Jesus delivers from spiritual bondage – sin, death, and the Devil. Moses declared that the great goal was moving into the Promised Land, where the Covenant would be enacted and demonstrated. Jesus talks about a Promised Land of a different dimension – eternity in Heaven. Moses revealed a Law – a pattern of behavior – that all must keep and that, if kept, would bring peace and prosperity and a good life to everybody on earth. Jesus reveals a Gospel – a relationship with the Holy Spirit – that each individual carries “in the heart.” And it is to guide each person in a world that will neither honor nor understand such love and behavior. Moses thought that life on earth could be redeemed, could be made beautiful – if we would all obey the Covenant. Jesus knows that life here will never be good – that obeying God will get us

into even more trouble than ever – but He invites us to be redeemed ... to let ourselves be changed by the presence of God ... to live for an unseen Kingdom no matter what is going on all around us.

Every Christian is supposed to know that the ethical precepts of the Torah are right and good, and that behavior which falls beneath this standard is unacceptable to any of God's people. But the Christian knows that life is subtle, and that this realm is alienated from God. Therefore, the Holy Spirit may have many instructions, assignments, appeals, and requests that go beyond, or put new perspective on, what we are to be about on any given day or situation. Often we fall back on Torah when the channels are clogged and we cannot "hear" or "feel" the Spirit's guidance. But we are living servants of the living Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ. Nothing stays static or cut-and-dried for very long.

Hopefully you are seeing, if you have not already seen it for years, that the parallels are numerous, if not endless: Deliverance from earthly slavery, and deliverance from spiritual bondage. Torah, and Gospel. Covenant on the mountain, and Sermon on the Mount. A holy nation, and a holy spiritual community. Promised Land, and Heaven. Prosperity on earth, and prosperity for eternity.

Thoughtful Christians have long believed that Jesus came to fulfill Judaism, not to split it. But in a broken world, things tend to break. However much we work for reconciliation, the reality of that great hope and promise is not in our hands, and often not in our power. That is no excuse whatsoever for us not to go on receiving it, living for it, working for reconciliation – our own reconciliation with God, and our own reconciliation with whoever is willing to seek it with us.

In the maze of such vast parallels between Jesus and Moses, I would like to leave you with three more-specific pictures.

1) The first one comes from Jesus' teachings, and I include it to make it clear that Jesus did think about such things. First of all, while in the wilderness years (Numbers 21:8), the Israelites came into a region full of poisonous snakes. If we had more time, we might explore the connection between their bitching and complaining and the appearance of the poisonous snakes. In any case, it got pretty terrifying, and a number of them had died from the snakebites. Naturally they wanted Moses to pray about it and ask God to remove the snakes. Moses prayed, and there are huge principles of prayer revealed in what

happened. The Lord did not remove the snakes. The snakes were the result of all their rebellion, backbiting, negative attitudes, etc. The snakes would go when they stopped being rebellious, backbiting, and negative, and changed their attitudes. But God told Moses to make a bronze serpent (*Nehushtan*) so that when the people were bitten, they could look at the bronze serpent and save their lives. “You are going to go on being bitten, but you do not have to die.” Sometimes God seems pretty harsh to us. But if you reward bitching and complaining, where does it end?

Anyway, whether that registers or not, Jesus (John 3:14) compares Himself to the bronze serpent in the wilderness. Jesus is talking to Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin who has come to Him in the night. Jesus says that like Moses lifted up the bronze serpent in the wilderness, so Jesus must be lifted up – on the Cross – so that those bitten by the spiritual death of this world may see Him, and discover eternal life.

2) “*The day of Pentecost had come, and they were all together in one place.*” (Acts 2:1) Many Christians, at least around here, know the story of the birthday of the church. After the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the disciples were instructed to wait in Jerusalem until they were clothed with power from on high. Jesus had given them plenty of indications (though they did not really understand it beforehand) that after His death and resurrection, He would come to them as Holy Spirit – Paraclete – Counselor – to be with them “unto the end of the age.” The coming of the Holy Spirit is what moves the Christian Faith from the story of the individual (Jesus) to a world religion – to a spiritual WAY of Life that all His followers are invited into and participate in. We call it Pentecost – the coming of the Holy Spirit, the Holy *Nephesh*.

Only, the story starts out, “*The day of Pentecost had come.*” Pentecost was already here before Pentecost? Yes, of course. The Feast of Weeks – first fruits of the wheat harvest – one of the three great religious festivals of Judaism. Why “Pentecost”? It comes fifty days after the first day of Passover. Why would celebrating the wheat harvest be such a high religious celebration? It is a day of great thanksgiving, I am told. Well, we have a Thanksgiving Day in our culture, and some people think it has religious overtones. But is there any spiritual significance to Pentecost in the Jewish tradition? Well, they rejoice that there will

be food to eat. And some of my Jewish friends leave it right there. Lots of my American friends leave it right there with our Thanksgiving Day too, so how can I complain? Of course, in our day, lots of Jews do not know any more about Judaism than many Christians know about Christianity. So maybe nobody is being obtuse or misleading us on purpose.

*Shavuot.* Fifty days after the Exodus, the Israelites received the Torah on Mount Sinai. Can you hear the thunderclap? There were quite a few of those! It was the end and objective of all God had started and accomplished from the time Moses first saw that burning bush. Most of the world today and even half of Judaism try to pretend that God just freed the people from Egypt as an object lesson against slavery. Well, good. I believe God hates slavery too. But after they were freed, then what?! Freedom is its own slavery if it has no rhyme or reason or purpose or dedication. God had more in mind from the beginning. *“Moses said to God, ‘Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?’ God said, ‘But I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain.’”* (Exodus 3:12)

Pentecost is the WEDDING – the celebration of the marriage between God and Israel. They take vows together. Torah is given and received on Pentecost. Don’t you find it just a little bit interesting that Jesus chooses this day for His followers to receive – to be given – the Holy Spirit? Is there some way to miss the realization that Jesus is raising the ante, from Old Covenant to New Covenant – from Torah to indwelling Holy Spirit – and on purpose? “I am the New Moses – this is the New Covenant, written on your hearts.” Why do they call the church “The Bride of Christ”? Pentecost is about weddings – sealing the bonds – both the Old Pentecost and the New. Only, there is a slight jump in dimensions. Don’t you find that just a little bit interesting?

3) If I asked you what was the most dramatic moment in Moses’ story, what would you say? Some people say it was the crossing of the Red (Reed) Sea. Who is to say they are wrong? It is at least the top runner for the most stupid move in all world history on the part of the Egyptians. I mean, the slaves had been freed – they had gone off because of the might and mayhem of some power far greater than Pharaoh himself. Then at the last minute came this bright idea: “We have lost our firstborn; let’s not lose our slaves as well. Maybe the power that wrested

them from us will have gone to sleep.” So off went the soldiers after the slaves. Stupid, and they all died. So when did Judaism celebrate the parting of the Reed Sea? They didn’t! It is a minor appendage to the story, an anticlimax. The real drama had already taken place.

When did Israel celebrate its release from bondage? Passover! That’s the big one. The death of the firstborn was what finally secured their release from bondage. Pharaoh’s own evil had brought down the wrath of God on Pharaoh and his people. There had been warning after warning ... plague after plague ... appeal after appeal. Finally they were given a way to escape the disaster: blood on the doorpost and lintel was a sign of obedience – acknowledgment that the firstborn belonged to God. The Egyptians could have saved their children too, by the way.

So, what is Passover in the story of the New Moses? There is no escape – no blood on doorpost or lintel can save the firstborn Son of God. For the first Moses there was Passover. For the New Moses there is Crucifixion. And once again, the timing does not allow us to claim accident or coincidence. The dimensional leap is staggering. From our firstborn to his firstborn. The transformation of principle knocks the breath out of us. At least it does mine. I try to grasp it, and think I will never be able to breathe again. At least not for fifty days – when the *Nephesh* comes again ... and far clearer than ever before. What was won, or bought, by the blood of the Passover? What is won, or bought, by the blood of the New Moses, the firstborn Son of God? It is not a competition. They are not in a fight. The first lays the groundwork which illuminates and makes possible the second.

PRAYER

We have never been on the Mount of Transfiguration, Lord. Never heard You talking with Moses – never have known what the two of you said to each other. But it seems pretty clear that you were friends. Everywhere through Old and New Testament, it seems pretty clear that you were friends.

We wonder why that does not seem more obvious to more people. We wonder why it does not seem obvious to us sometimes, or why we sometimes forget it altogether. And since any friend of Yours is a friend of ours, well, we hope we will not forget it so easily in the future.

We want to thank You also now for all the amazing dimensions there were to Your life here on earth. We have been thinking about it for many years now, and still it surprises us at times, catches us off guard, inspires us, and also sometimes shames and judges us. We know You are far more than the stories we know about You – that Your mercy and love and reconciliation are even greater than all we have experienced so far. So we pray that You will continue to teach us how to trust and love You. And because we already do, insofar as we have awakened to Your grace, we are grateful. Amen.