

Moses (Part 2)

Our last lesson concerned one of the greatest men of God who ever lived: Moses, whom the Muslims know by the name Musa. His life is naturally divided into three periods of forty years each: forty in the royal court as the adopted son of the daughter of Pharaoh, king of Egypt; forty as a shepherd in the desert of Midian where he had run away after killing an Egyptian who was mistreating an Israelite; and forty leading the people of Israel. When he was still in the desert, the God of his ancestors appeared to him and gave him the mission of getting the people of Israel out of the slavery in which they were held in Egypt.

After a series of ten plagues that God brought on the Egyptians, Pharaoh was convinced to let them go. It was at this point that we paused in the story of Moses. In the current study, we will attempt to complete our summary of the work of this servant of God.

THE CROSSING OF THE RED SEA

When Pharaoh said that the Israelites could leave his country, they set out in an orderly way with over 600,000 men, not counting the women, children and elderly. God did not take them on the most direct route to Canaan. Instead He had them take a roundabout way through the desert, which took them to the Red Sea.

Meanwhile, "When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds about the people and said, 'What have we done? We have released Israel from serving us'" (Exodus 14:5). Thinking that the Israelites had taken the wrong route and were now roaming panic-stricken, prisoners of the desert, he had his chariot prepared and left to pursue them with his army and all the chariots of Egypt.

When the Israelites saw that Pharaoh and his army were following and about to reach them, they were very afraid, trapped between the sea on one side and the Egyptian army on the other. But God told Moses to take his rod and stretch it out over the sea. The Lord made a strong wind blow and push back the sea and leave dry land. The waters separated and the people walked across on the dry land with the water forming walls on either side of them. The Egyptians followed them, but when the Israelites had finished crossing the sea, God made the water return to its usual place, drowning the whole army. The Israelites,

finding themselves outside the Egyptian territory and completely delivered from the hands of their enemy, burst into praises to God.

This crossing of the waters of the Red Sea reminds Christians of the waters of baptism. When a penitent believer rises from the water of his baptism, his deliverance from sin takes effect and he rejoices that he is no longer of this world that is under the judgment of God.

THE LAW GIVEN AT MT. SINAI (THE TORAH)

The Israelites, led by Moses, left the Red Sea and advanced into the desert. Each time they encountered a difficulty or challenge, they forgot the power and favor that God had shown them and they began to complain bitterly. But God always showed himself capable of providing for their needs, even in the desert supplying food and water for this nation of more than two million people.

After three months, they came near to Mount Sinai. This would be the place where God would make a formal covenant with Israel. He promised them protection and blessings of all kinds and from them He demanded obedience to the commandments He would give them. God told Moses to climb the mountain while the people waited below. God gave Moses a whole range of laws that the Israelites were to obey, the Torah. The Torah is mentioned twenty times in the Qur'an, which repeatedly recognizes its authenticity. For example, the Qur'an says in the third Surah, "He has sent down the Book to you with truth, which fulfills [the predictions] in the Scriptures that preceded it: He sent down the Torah and the Gospel in the past as guidance for mankind..." (3:3,4). In another passage, Allah says to Muhammad on the subject of the Jews, "But why do they come to you for judgment when they have the Torah, which enshrines God's own judgment?" (5:43).

When God gave the law to Moses, He himself wrote ten commandments, a kind of summary of hundreds of others, on tablets of stone. Here is the list:

1. Do not have other gods besides me.
2. Do not make an idol for yourself; do not bow down before them.
3. Do not misuse the name of the Lord your God.

4. Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. Do not murder.
7. Do not commit adultery.
8. Do not steal.
9. Do not give false testimony against your neighbor.
10. Do not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor.

There were, of course, many other laws, including commandments concerning the way the Israelites were to approach God in worship. But the tablets of stone with the Ten Commandments were a symbol of the whole covenant which God made with the nation. This covenant would govern the relationship between God and the people of Israel until it was replaced by a new covenant that God would offer to all nations. The Bible says in Hebrews 8:6, "But Jesus has now obtained a superior ministry, and to that degree He is the mediator of a better covenant, which has been legally enacted on better promises."

HIS DISOBEDIENCE

After having received the law from God, the people were led toward the border of the country of Canaan. But through a lack of faith, the Israelites rebelled and did not want to enter the country and take possession of it. Despite the promises of God and the numerous demonstrations of His great power, the people were afraid of the inhabitants of the country. So God swore that this generation would die in the desert and it would be their children who would be given the promised land. This is how those who were adults during the exodus from Egypt were condemned to wander in the desert for forty years until they all died and the next generation was ready to make the conquest of Canaan. Moses continued to lead Israel until his death.

During this time, Moses showed himself to be faithful toward God and patient toward an obstinate and rebellious people. On many occasions, God became angry with the Israelites because of their murmurings, their rebellions and their lack of confidence in Him, and He expressed the intention of destroying them completely. But Moses never failed to intercede on behalf of the people and to ask God to forgive them. He had great qualities and deserved the honor accorded to him in the Word of God. But as we

have seen, the Bible does not hide the faults of the people it describes. Like all other human beings, Moses had his weaknesses. Like us, he committed faults and bore the consequences.

The most notable case is described in the book of Numbers, chapter 20. The Israelites had arrived in another place where there was no water. Instead of humbly praying to the Lord for help, they chose to complain to Moses and unfairly accuse him of wanting to make them die of thirst. So the Lord told Moses:

"Take the staff and assemble the community. You and your brother Aaron are to speak to the rock while they watch, and it will yield its water. You will bring out water for them from the rock and provide drink for the community and their livestock.' ...

Moses and Aaron summoned the assembly in front of the rock, and Moses said to them, 'Listen, you rebels! Must we bring water out of this rock for you?' Then Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his staff, so that a great amount of water gushed out, and the community and their livestock drank.

But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not trust Me to show My holiness in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this assembly into the land I have given them.'" (Numbers 20:8-12).

We see that Moses committed a double sin on this occasion. 1) God had told Moses to speak to the rock for it to give water, but Moses struck the rock with his rod—he did not obey the order God had given. 2) Also, Moses did not give God the glory for this miracle. He and his brother used language which suggested that it was they (rather than God) who gave the people water from the rock. From God's point of view, they didn't believe in Him, because true faith in God implies obedience, even down to the details. Because of this disobedience, Moses and Aaron did not have the privilege of setting foot in the land of Canaan that God had promised. They died before the conquest of the land began.

Muslims are sometimes shocked or offended to hear such things about prophets of God. But the prophets, despite their virtues, were human beings, sinners. In several passages, the Qur'an attributes sin to Muhammad. In Surah 40, for example, Allah tells

him, “We gave Moses Our guidance, and made the Children of Israel the inheritors of the Book—a guide and an admonition to men of understanding. So be patient, for what God has promised is sure to come. Ask forgiveness for your sins; praise your Lord morning and evening” (40:53-55).

CONCLUSION

Why does the Bible tell us not only about acts of courage and faithfulness but also the failures and sins? Certainly we can say that God does not show favoritism and the narratives in His Word are 100 percent reliable because they do not deform history to protect the reputation of individuals. It does not hide the truth. But we could also say that God gives us the chance to learn lessons from the mistakes of others so that we don't do the same things. This is what we read in 1 Corinthians 10:11,12: “Now these things happened to them as examples, and they were written as a warning to us, on whom the ends of the ages have come. So, whoever thinks he stands must be careful not to fall.” We must be humble and vigilant for people are never completely safe from temptation or weakness.

Let us imitate the great men of God, like Moses, where they followed God's will and let us learn to avoid their errors.