

THE WOMEN AROUND MOSES

MOSHE REISS

Moses is the foremost of all prophets of Israel, and the outstanding personality of the Bible. God calls upon him to take on *the role of God* (Ex. 4:16; 7:1). He is known as *Moshe Rabbenu* [Moses our Teacher], as "the Man of Faith," as "The Servant of God," and as "The Man of God." He is God's law-giver, and God declares him to be the one to whom *My household is entrusted* (Num. 12:8). He is warrior, statesman, prophet and a mystic – a truly remarkable personality.

Moses is the ultimate "Spiritual Man," and his repute in biblical time and after is awesome. A midrash goes so far as to say that while the Israelites in Egypt and the desert were at almost the lowest possible level of impurity (49 out of 50), Moses was at almost the highest possible level of purity (49 out of 50). Presumably, 50 would be for a perfect man.

For the children of Israel, who feared to speak to God directly, Moses is their mediator, to whom they say: *'Do not let God speak to us or we shall die'* (Ex. 20:16). Moses, however, can speak to God face to face: *Since then there has never been such a prophet in Israel as Moses, the man whom God knew face to face* (Deut. 34:10). In Hebrew usage, "knew" connotes a level of intimacy beyond speaking face to face. In the Kabbalah, where "wisdom" means secret knowledge of God, Moses is called Father of Wisdom.¹ At his end, *the Servant of the Lord died . . . on the mouth of the Lord* (34:5); that is, with the kiss of God who buried him and alone knows where he is buried (34:6).

It is notable that Moses was both nurtured and protected by women. This, I would suggest, contributed greatly – perhaps even essentially – to his unique greatness. This begins within his family of father, mother, and two siblings. In the narratives of Genesis, the families of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs are dysfunctional, with a high level of sibling rivalry. In contrast, Moses and his brother and sister act together in concert and all three are blessed by God;

Moshe Reiss, a former resident of New Haven, Connecticut, is a rabbi and has a B.A. from Brooklyn College and a Ph.D. in economics from Oxford University. He was a lecturer at Columbia University, and assistant to the rabbi of Yale University. He is now a resident of Israel, where he writes and lectures. He has written a book Messengers of God, which appears on his website: www.moshereiss.org. He was recently a visiting professor at the Catholic University of Leuven.

Moses as the supreme prophet, Aaron as High Priest, and Miriam as prophetess.

In the order of the text, the first mention of Moses is when a man and a woman of the tribe of Levi are married and he is born to them (Ex. 2:1-2). Only in a later passage does it appear that he had an older brother and sister (2:4; 4:14). It is as though he were both a firstborn and a youngest child. A midrash explains this: Balaam, the pagan prophet who appears in Numbers 22-24, predicted that a Hebrew boy would be born in Egypt who would overthrow the kingdom. Therefore, the pharaoh ordered that all the male children of the Hebrew slaves be drowned at birth; a rather irrational edict, since the Hebrew males supplied his slave labor. Amram, a leader of the Hebrews, declared that all the men should divorce their wives and cease begetting children. His daughter Miriam argued that her father's decree was worse than Pharaoh's, since Pharaoh wanted to kill the boys while Amram would eliminate both boys and girls. Persuaded by this reasoning, Amram remarried his wife Jochebed and Moses was the first child of the remarriage.²

The Pharaoh's plan to cut off the male Hebrews was frustrated by the midwives Shifrah and Puah (Ex. 1:15-19), who would not obey his orders to kill the boys that they delivered. (We are not told whether they themselves were Hebrews or Egyptians.) It may be, though it is not stated, that Shifrah or Puah helped Jochebed preserve the life of her newborn son. After hiding him for three months, Jochebed placed him in an ark and set it upon the waters of the River Nile. There the child was found by an Egyptian princess, whom midrash identifies with the Batya, a name that means Daughter of God, who appears in I Chronicles 4:18.

She realized that this was one of the Hebrew babies condemned by her father, but chose to save him. Miriam, who had been keeping secret watch on her brother, then came forth and offered to find a Hebrew wet-nurse for the foundling. The princess agreed, perhaps not trusting an Egyptian nurse who might betray her charge. And thus, Jochebed was engaged to nurse her own child.

It was the princess who gave the boy the Egyptian name Moses, and raised him at the royal court. (We do not know what name Jochebed gave him when he was born.) The young Moses, who may have learned justice and righteousness from the example of his own adopted mother, grew up to take ac-

THE WOMEN AROUND MOSES

tion when he came upon injustice. But this action took the form of killing an Egyptian overseer who was beating a Hebrew slave. When he learned that the action was known and talked about, he feared that Pharaoh would take his life, and fled from Egypt.

Moses made his way as far as Midian, on the opposite side of the Sinai, and there he encountered the seven daughters of the priest Reuel (also called Jethro). Once again, he acted to protect the weak; this time by helping the sisters against rough shepherds trying to keep them from watering their flocks. Reuel then offered him hospitality and his daughter Zipporah in marriage. This father-in-law, who was not an Israelite, became a surrogate father to Moses, and his only male role model.

After the epiphany at the Burning Bush and God's announcement of Moses' mission to save the children of Israel, Moses sets out for Egypt with Zipporah and their two sons. Then come three very strange verses in Exodus 4:24-26:

At a night encampment on the way, the Lord encountered him and sought to kill him. So Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched his legs with it saying, 'You are truly a bridegroom of blood to me!' And when He let him alone, she added, 'A bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision.'

Whatever the meaning of these verses, Zipporah, the only woman known to circumcise her son, saved Moses from God's wrath.

When Zelophehad died, his five daughters asked why their father's name should be lost, and requested '*Give us his property*' (Num. 27:1-4). Moses asked a ruling from God, and God confirmed the justice of the daughters' position. Moses, who had received the Law from God, did not at any other time seek a confirmation of it. Perhaps he thought his primarily male audience needed a ruling from God to persuade them that males and females were equal in the Law.

Is this because Moses had a feeling for women different from that of other men? It was women who nurtured and protected him, and perhaps that is why he is perfect male model for the Israelites.

NOTES

1. Philo, the great Jewish leader and scholar in Alexandria, wrote a biography of Moses. In his introduction, Philo suggests that Moses was the "greatest and most perfect of men." Philo, *De Vita Moyseis*, trans. F.H. Coulson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935) p. 1. He also

calls Moses "the most excellent king" and "the most perfect ruler." He believed that Moses was destined to be the next Pharaoh, a theme also found in midrashim. There are other interpretations of Moses where he is a Majestic Man. In *Aegyptiaca*, a third-century BCE biography in Greek, Moses is a military general. As noted in D.J. Silver, *Images of Moses* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), books apparently written in the first century BCE, are entitled *The Secret Book of Moses*, *Key of Moses*, *The Chemistry of Moses*, *The Maza of Moses* and *The Diptosis of Moses*, all presenting Moses as a wizard and magician. See: www.moshereiss.org, chapter on Moses.

2. Midrash Exodus quoted in Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973) pp. 287-288.

עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

2005

April	Ezekiel	21 - 48
May	Hosea	1 - 14
	Joel	1 - 4
	Amos	1 - 9
June	Obadiah	1
	Jonah	1 - 4
	Micah	1 - 7
	Nahum	1 - 3
	Habakkuk	1 - 3
	Zephaniah	1 - 3
	Haggai	1 - 2
	Zechariah	1 - 4
July	Zechariah	5 - 14
	Malachi	1 - 3
	Psalms	1 - 15
August	Psalms	16 - 43