

MOSES: The Servant of God

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CHAPTER TWO

HIS MOTHER'S FAITH

“By faith Moses, when he was born, was hid three months of his parents, because they saw he was a proper child; and they were not afraid of the king’s commandment” Hebrews 11:23.

IT was on a very unfriendly world that the little babe opened his eyes. Without, all was as fair as nature and art could make it. Hard by the mean cottage, which for a brief space was to shelter him, the mighty Nile rolled between its reedy banks, reflecting on its broad bosom the deep azure of the arching heavens by day, and the starry constellations of the night.

Within the easy distance of a maiden’s morning walk stood the great city of Memphis, metropolis of Egypt and seat of the Court; center of trade, and art, and war, and religion; the focus to which the national life converged.

Past that cottage-home would go royal processions, as in solemn state the monarch went forth to war, or came down to the Nile brink to worship. Priests from all parts of the land would pass it on their way to the mighty Temple of Phthah, whose pillared avenues, and sculptured galleries, and hieroglyphed chambers, were the result of centuries of industry, and told the story of the generations that had built them; but how little would they dream that the site of that humble cottage would attract the interest of generations to the end of time, when their lordly temple had fallen into an indistinguishable heap!

And the perpetual supply of leeks and melons and garlic, of barley and wheat and rye, of delicate fabrics from the loom, for which the Egyptians became so famous, of spice and balm for the vast City of the Dead, and of all the multitudinous provision for the demands of a large and wealthy population, must have covered the neighboring roads with an unceasing stream of camels and asses and caravans, and the river with an innumerable flotilla of boats, barges, and ships.

Not far away, across the level sands, were the Pyramids, which even then were becoming venerable with age, and were destined to remain for forty centuries, witnesses alike to man’s instinctive belief in his immortality, and to his selfish indifference to the anguish of his fellows. Amid these circumstances of wealth and splendor the little babe was born to an unkindly lot.

He belonged to an alien race.

More than three hundred years before, the forefathers of his people had emigrated from the neighboring land of Palestine, at the invitation of the Prime Minister of the time, who was connected with them by the ties of kinship and race. The king had welcomed them as likely to be valuable allies; for he also belonged to a foreign race, and sat on an unstable throne. At his command they had settled in the best of the land, a strip of green, called Goshen, situated amid vast tracks of sand. There they prospered and multiplied, till they numbered near upon two million souls. But they remained as distinct a people as they are now in every nation under heaven, and as such were open to suspicious hate.

He belonged to an oppressed race.

A different dynasty had succeeded to that which welcomed them, and one to whom the name of Joseph had no charm. At the time of which we write a tiny cloud of impending war trembled on the Eastern sky, and suggested to the reigning monarch the fear that there might be a coalition between his enemies and the Hebrew race, which had grown into such numbers and might, as to be very formidable. He resolved, therefore, to wear them out, and to reduce both their numbers and their spirit by the rigor of their lot.

Suddenly, the shepherds of Goshen found themselves drafted for service in the brickfields, under the eye and whip of cruel taskmasters, who exacted from them daily a certain tale of bricks; or they performed service in the field, drawing water from the river for the irrigation of the land, and toiling in the cultivation of the soil. **“And all their service wherein they made them serve was with rigour”**; as if every occasion was eagerly taken advantage of for dealing out cruel and merciless punishment.

The father of the little household was, probably, compelled to bear his share in the bondage and blows which made the existence of his people so bitter. From morning to night he would toil, naked, beneath the burning sun, returning often with bleeding wounds torn open by the scourge, and inclined to question the very existence of God and his character for mercy. Very dark was the night which lay heavily on the chosen people in these years of cruel enslavement.

He was born at a time of unusual trouble.

The household consisted of father and mother, of an elder sister, some fifteen years of age, marvelously gifted with the power of song, and of a little brother, Aaron, a bright and merry boy of three years of age. When the latter was born, there was apparently no special need of secrecy; for the king was trying to attain his object by the vigorous policy we have above described. But during the interval, he had discovered that it was not stringent enough to attain his end; and he had, therefore, added to it a scheme for the destruction of all the male children, by casting them into the river as they were born.

It is not likely that this decree was in active operation for more than a few months. It was a spasm of cruelty which was inspired by sudden fear; but was too utterly opposed to the better instincts of human nature to secure for itself a permanent position in the practice of Pharaoh's subordinates. But whilst it lasted, it was the bitterest element in all that bitter sorrow.

Privation, hardship, scorn, and rigor, are easy to bear, if only the beloved circle of the home is left intact; but when that is threatened, and the little fledglings are menaced by the bird of prey, the waters of a full cup are wrung out. Generally, the birth of a child, and especially of a boy, was heralded with unstinted joy: but now it was the subject of anxiety, and almost of dread. There was no glad anticipation, no welcome, no rapture, to compensate for the mother's anguish, in the thought that a man was born into the world. Yet in spite of all, **“the people multiplied and became very mighty.”**

The edict remained in operation for but a short time, but it was during its enforcement that Moses was born. This is God's way. In the darkest hours of the night his tread draws near across the billows.

- As the day of execution is breaking, the angel comes to Peter's cell.
- When the scaffold for Mordecai is complete, the royal sleeplessness leads to a reaction in favour of the threatened race.

Ah, soul, it may have to come to the worst with thee ere thou art delivered; but thou wilt be! God may keep thee waiting; but will be ever be mindful of his covenant, and will appear to fulfil his inviolable word.

He was the child of believing parents.

We know but little of them. The father is said to have been **“a man of the house of Levi,”** and we learn afterwards that his name was Amram, and descended from Kohath, the son of Levi; but the tribe of Levi had then no special importance in fact, it seemed destined to be divided in Jacob, and scattered in Israel. The mother, Jochebed, belonged to the same tribe, and, indeed, was related to her husband in a closer consanguinity than was afterwards permitted. They were humble folk, glad enough to receive **“wages”** from the hand of wealth and royalty; but they preserved the best religious traditions of their nation, and in this contrasted favorably with many of their race.

Dean Stanley has shown that the sojourn in Egypt had produced a very deleterious result on the children of Israel. **“The old freedom, the old energy, above all, the old religion of the patriarchal age, had faded away.”**

There are clear evidences in the later Scriptures that the people participated in the idolatrous rites of the land of their adoption. **“Your fathers,”** said Joshua, **“served other gods in Egypt”** (Joshua 24:14). And through the lips of Ezekiel, the Lord reminded the nation, at a later date, of their early unfaithfulness.

“In the day that I lifted up mine hand unto them, to bring them forth of the land of Egypt into a land flowing with milk and honey, the glory of all lands. Then said I unto them, Cast ye away every man the abominations of his eyes, and defile not yourselves with the idols of Egypt; I am the Lord your God. But they rebelled against Me, and would not hearken unto Me; they did not every man cast away the abominations of their eyes, neither did they forsake the idols of Egypt” (Ezekiel 20:6-8).

The Sabbath was forgotten; the rite of circumcision, the significant token of the covenant, fell into disuse; the comparative purity of their forefathers proved unable to resist the licentious attractions of heathen festivals, to which in after years they perpetually recurred.

But evidently there were some families who remained faithful amid the prevalent corruption.

Amongst these was that, into which this child was born. The sacred covenant between God and their race was reverently remembered, and held by a faith which dared to believe that, sooner or later, God must interpose.

The treasured stories which are preserved to us in the book of Genesis would be carefully taught to the children as soon as their hearts could appreciate, and their memories preserve them. The first-born, Aaron, would be set apart, with some kind of consecration, to perform the functions of the priest of the household. And Miriam, the first Mary of Scripture, would be taught to use her sweet, clear, voice in the praise and worship of the God of their fathers. But their religious life was still more manifested by their faith.

“By faith Moses, when he was born, was hid three months of his parents, because they saw he was a proper child; and they were not afraid of the king’s commandment.”

We have often been furnished with a picture depicting the anxiety with which his parents received their new-born babe, the distress of Amram, and the fears of Jochebed. Such a picture may be true of others of the Hebrew parents, but it is not true of them. **“They were not afraid.”**

When it was announced to Jochebed that she had borne a boy, she was enabled to cast the care of him on God, and to receive the assurance that he should come to no hurt. And as the couple bent over their child, in that peasant’s hut, and saw his exceeding goodliness, the conviction grew in their hearts that a great destiny awaited him; and that in some way he would live to see the expiration of the time of slavery, foretold centuries before in words which had passed from lip to lip, the one rift of light amid the blackness of their night. Josephus says that a dream announced to Amram that Moses would be the deliverer of his people.

Could those down-trodden serfs ever forget what God had told their great ancestor, when the horror of a great darkness had fallen on his soul?

“Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them, and they shall afflict them four hundred years, . . . but in the fourth generation they shall come hither again” (Genesis 15:13, 16).

The slow-moving years had at last accumulated to the prescribed number. Four hundred years had nearly, if not quite, elapsed. The promise must be on the point of fulfillment. The words, **“they shall come out”** (Genesis 15:14) rang like a peal of bells in the mother’s heart; and there was a confidence nurtured by the Spirit of God, and by the loveliness of her child, who was **“goodly”** (Exodus 2:2), **“proper”** (Hebrews 11:23), and **“exceeding fair”** (Acts 7:20), that in some way he should share in that Exodus.

She was not always on the *qui vive* for the step of officer or midwife. She would take all ordinary precaution; but she would never give way to excessive fear. Sometimes when her heart grew sick she would betake herself to her knees, and plead the Divine promise on which she had been caused to hope.

The whole family lived on that woman's faith, as men live on bread; and God's angels bent over the unconscious babe, shielding it with their tenderest care, and whispering their love-words into its ear.

Finally, the mother was led by the good Spirit of God to weave the papyrus rushes into a little ark, or boat, coating it with bitumen, to make it impervious to wet. There she put the child with many a kiss, closed the lid upon its sweet face, with her own hands bore it to the water's edge, and placed it tenderly among the flags that grew there. She knew that Pharaoh's daughter came there to bathe, and it might be that she would notice and befriend the little foundling. Or, if not, the God whom she trusted would help her in some other way. But all the while she never lost her simple, steadfast faith. **"The Lord was her light and her salvation: whom should she fear? The Lord was the strength of her life: of whom should she be afraid? When her enemies and foes came upon her to eat up her flesh, they would stumble and fall. Though an host should encamp against her, yet should she not fear."**

Miriam was set to watch, not with any thought of harm that would ensue, whether from unfriendly hand, or from beast of prey, but simply to see **"what would be done to him"**; and Jochebed went back to her house, fighting a mother's natural anxiety by a faith which had enclasped the very arm of the living God, who could not fail her, though the heavens should fall, or the pyramids be hurled into the broad bosom of the Nile. That is faith. Can we wonder at the faith of the man who was born of such a mother, and nurtured in such a home?

~ end of chapter 2 ~

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