

## CHAPTER 10 | LESSON 2 Kingdoms and Captivity

## Moses: Prophet and Leader

*Moses was a simple man who became a great prophet. He led the enslaved Hebrews from Egypt to Canaan, the Promised Land.*

Moses was probably born sometime in the 13th century B.C. His parents lived in Egypt. They were Hebrews—people who were enslaved by the Egyptian pharaohs. The pharaohs forced the Hebrews to work on Egypt's many construction projects. Yet the pharaoh of Moses' time knew that a Hebrew population grown too large might rebel. To keep the population stable, the pharaoh ordered the killing of all Hebrew babies that were male.

**A Narrow Escape** Moses' mother wanted to protect him. She placed him in a watertight basket and floated it down the Nile River. The pharaoh's daughter found the basket at the water's edge. She took Moses back to the palace and raised him as her own. Moses was a grown man before he learned that he was a Hebrew.

This account of Moses' early escape from death appears in the Book of Exodus in the Torah, or Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew Bible is the source of much that is known about Moses.

**Flight** When Moses was a young man, he killed an Egyptian supervisor who was beating a Hebrew slave. At that time Moses still did not know that he, too, was a Hebrew. His action was an angry response to the supervisor's cruelty. Moses soon realized that he would be punished for killing a man in pharaoh's service. He fled to Midian, where he worked as a shepherd for a man named Jethro. Moses married Jethro's daughter, Zipporah.

**Chosen to Lead** It was at this point that the life of Moses took an incredible turn. According to the Hebrew Bible, God appeared to Moses in the form of a burning bush. He told Moses to return to Egypt and free his people, the Hebrews. Moses had no desire to be a leader or a hero. He asked God to send someone else. He pointed out that he stammered and would not be a good choice for convincing the pharaoh to give the Hebrews



their freedom. God told him to enlist the help of Aaron, Moses' older brother, who was well spoken. Moses felt that he had no choice but to obey.

**Exodus** The Book of Exodus recounts the story of how Moses led the Hebrews out of Egypt. *Exodus* means "the departure of many people." He and Aaron asked that the Hebrews be released. When the pharaoh refused, Moses followed God's instructions. He told Aaron to hold his staff over the river, which turned the water to blood. Water turned to blood throughout Egypt. There was no water to drink. This was the first of ten plagues, or misfortunes, that God sent to the Egyptians.

The second plague was one of frogs, which were everywhere. This time the pharaoh promised to let the Hebrews leave if Moses would get rid of the frogs. Moses did so but the pharaoh refused to keep his promise. One plague followed another, each one worse than the one before. The Egyptians were overrun with gnats and flies. Their farm animals became ill. Then both the Egyptians

## HISTORY MAKERS: MOSES CONTINUED

and their animals began to suffer from boils. A terrible hailstorm killed anyone out in the open. (Moses had warned the Hebrews to take cover.) Swarms of locusts destroyed the Egyptians' crops. Darkness shut out the sun for three days, making it almost impossible to see.

The tenth plague was the most terrible. So that the Hebrews would be protected, God gave them instructions through Moses. They were told to kill a lamb on the fourteenth day of the month. Then they were to roast and eat the lamb, after having smeared some of its blood over the doors of their houses. Seeing the blood, the Lord would pass over their homes. That night God killed the oldest child in every Egyptian household, including that of the pharaoh. Only then did the pharaoh allow the Hebrews to leave. The Jewish holy day of Passover is a celebration of this event.

The pharaoh once again went back on this promise. After the Hebrews left, he sent an army to bring them back. With the soldiers behind them, the people reached the edge of a large body of water. God told Moses to raise his staff above the water. He did so, and two walls of water rose up, creating a dry path. The Hebrews walked between the walls of water to the far shore. The pursuing army followed. But before the soldiers could reach the Hebrews, the walls of water flowed back into the sea, killing the pursuers.

Moses led his people into the Sinai Desert. There they spent 40 years before finally reaching Canaan, the land that God had promised them. They endured many hardships. During that time, Moses continued to bring God's messages to the people. These include the Ten Commandments, God's rules for right living. They were inscribed on stone tablets, which Moses received on Mount Sinai. When he came back down the mountain with the tablets, Moses discovered that the Hebrews had been worshipping a false God. In anger, Moses smashed the tablets.

Moses eventually asked God to forgive the Hebrews and received a second set of tablets.

The Ten Commandments form the basis of a covenant, or agreement, between God and his people. This covenant is the heart of Judaism, the Jewish religion.

Chapter 26 of Exodus contains precise instructions for making an ark—a case for the stone tablets. The ark is described as having rings through which poles were placed so that the ark could be carried. It became known as the Ark of the Covenant.

Moses succeeded in leading his people to the Jordan River. He climbed Mount Pisgah, where he was able to see the Promised Land on the river's far side. Moses died on the mountain. He is said to have been 120 years old. His people reached the Promised Land without him.

Moses was the greatest of the Old Testament prophets—those who speak for God. He is also acknowledged as one of the founders of Judaism, the Jewish religion. Biblical scholars continue to argue about whether Moses wrote the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. Often referred to as the Books of Moses, they make up the Torah, or the Pentateuch, the sacred book of Judaism.

## Review Questions

1. Why did Moses' mother float him in a basket?
2. Why were the Egyptians forced to suffer ten plagues?
3. What was the exodus?

## Critical Thinking

4. **Summarizing** In what ways was Moses a leader?
5. **Drawing Conclusions** Why is Moses considered a founder of Judaism?
6. **Evaluating Information** Why might God have chosen Moses?