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MOSES

fl. 13th c. B.C.

Probably no person in history has been so widely admired as the great Hebrew prophet Moses. Furthermore, his fame, as well as the number of people who respect him, has steadily grown throughout the ages. It is most likely that Moses flourished in the thirteenth century B.C., since Ramses II, generally thought to be the pharaoh of the Exodus story, died in 1237 B.C. During Moses' lifetime, as the Book of Exodus makes clear, there were a fair number of Hebrews who disagreed with his policies. Within five centuries, however, Moses was revered by all the Jewish people. By 500 A.D., his fame and reputation had spread, along with Christianity, throughout much of Europe. A century later, Muhammad recognized Moses as a true prophet, and with the spread of Islam, Moses became an admired figure throughout the Moslem world (even in Egypt). Today, some thirty-two centuries after he lived, Moses is honored by Jews, Christians, and

Moslems alike, and is even respected by many agnostics. Thanks to modern communications, he is probably even better known today than he was in the past.

Despite his renown, reliable information concerning Moses' life is scarce. There has even been speculation (not accepted by most scholars) that Moses was an Egyptian, since his name is of Egyptian, rather than Hebrew, origin. (It means "child" or "son," and occurs as part of the name of several famous pharaohs.) The Old Testament stories concerning Moses can hardly be accepted at face value, since they involve a large number of miracles. The stories of the burning bush, or of Moses turning his staff into a serpent, for example, are basically miraculous in nature; and it does tax one's credulity, perhaps, to believe that Moses, who was already eighty years old at the time of the Exodus, still managed to lead the Hebrews in a forty-year trip through the desert. Surely, we would like to know exactly what the real Moses accomplished before his story was buried in an avalanche of legends.

Many persons have tried to give natural interpretations to the Biblical stories of the ten plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea. However, most of the favorite Old Testament stories concerning Moses are legendary, with analogues in other mythologies. The story of Moses and the bulrushes, for instance, is strikingly similar to a Babylonian story concerning Sargon of Akkad, a great king who reigned about 2360-2305 B.C.

In general, there are three major achievements attributed to Moses. First, he is credited with being the political figure who led the Hebrews in the Exodus from Egypt. On this point, at least, it is clear that he deserves credit. Second, he is the reputed author of the first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), which are often referred to as the "Five Books of Moses," and which constitute the Jewish *Torah*. These books include the Mosaic Code, the set of laws which in principle governed the conduct of the Jews in biblical times, and which include the Ten Commandments. In view of the enormous influence which the *Torah* as a whole and

the Ten Commandments in particular have had, their author would surely deserve to be considered a man of great and enduring influence. However, most biblical scholars agree that Moses was *not* the sole author of these books. The books were apparently written by several authors, and the great bulk of the material was not put into writing until considerably after Moses' death. It is possible that Moses played some role in codifying existing Hebrew customs, or even in originating Hebrew laws, but there is really no way of judging how great his role was.

Third, many people consider Moses to be the founder of Jewish monotheism. In one sense, there is no basis at all for such a claim. Our only source of information concerning Moses is the Old Testament; and the Old Testament explicitly and unambiguously credits Abraham with being the founder of monotheism. Nevertheless, it is quite clear that Jewish monotheism would have died out had it not been for Moses, and he unquestionably played the crucial role in its preservation and transmission. In this, of course, lies his greatest importance, since Christianity and Islam, the two largest religions in the world, are both derived from Jewish monotheism. The idea of one true God, which Moses believed in so passionately, has eventually spread through a large part of the world.



*"Moses with the Ten Commandments,"
by Guido Reni.*