



A Monster Named Moses

Talk about auspicious beginnings; the very first event related in the story of Moses' adult life is his murder of an Egyptian who he chances upon in the act of beating up on a Hebrew. Fearing punishment, Moses flees to Midian, marries a local girl, and lives in peace and plenty until the age of eighty. Then Yahweh (the trademarked god¹ of the Jews), apparently thinking that this fugitive killer is the ideal man to help slaughter Egyptians, calls to him from a burning bush.

These days, most people think of the story of Moses and the Pharaoh in terms of epic, Technicolor movies, especially *The Ten Commandments*. In this version of the story, the Hebrews (I use the term "Hebrews" rather than "Jews" here to distinguish between an ancient tribe and a current race/culture.) were portrayed as severely oppressed slaves, ruthlessly starved, beaten, and forced to build pyramids until God finally managed to convince the heartless Pharaoh to set them free. But, as so often happens in the entertainment world, the movie version differs widely from the original book. Of course, very few people bother to read the book. Who can blame them? *Exodus* is a long, poorly written, difficult-to-follow story. Therefore, I shall save you the effort of wading through the original by presenting the basic plot here. I encourage you, however, to check my facts against the original should you have any doubts about this distillation.

To begin with, the Hebrews were not slaves in Egypt. You might recall the story of Joseph (the one with the nice coat), who was sold by his brothers into slavery. [GEN 37] Joseph ended up in Egypt and, after some initial tough times, so impressed the Pharaoh with his dream interpretations that he was appointed ruler of the country — you just can't get any further away from slavery than that. Using his new powers, Joseph invited his father, Jacob

(also known as Israel) and his eleven brothers and their families to come down to Egypt where they could better survive the famine they were all suffering through. Joseph got the Pharaoh to give his family "the best of the land of Egypt." [GEN 45:18] Here the twelve tribes of Israel—as the families of the twelve sons of Jacob became known—lived for 430 years. In that time, their number grew to something between two and three million people. (600,000 adult males plus women, children, the elderly, servants, and slaves.) [EX 12:37] They raised their own cattle, sheep, and other animals; grew their own crops on their own land (the "best in Egypt"); had their own craftsmen; and enjoyed a varied and well-seasoned diet. [NUM 11:5 & 18] Towards the end of their stay, the Hebrews (a.k.a. "Israelites") had grown "too many and too mighty" [EX 1:9] and the Egyptian leaders were afraid of them and had begun to try and oppress them. So, when Moses said "let my people go" he wasn't pleading for the release of a few downtrodden slaves, he was asking the Pharaoh to give up a good portion of the population and wealth of the Egyptian nation.

As leader, it was undoubtedly one of the Pharaoh's primary jobs to keep the country safe, powerful, and in one piece; so, it was natural to resist Moses' request for succession. Think of President Lincoln's response to the proposed "exodus" of the Southern States of America in 1860. But, even if the Pharaoh had been inclined to let his guests of four centuries depart in peace, he simply couldn't do so because the game was rigged against him from the beginning. When god first spoke to Moses—from the burning bush on Mount Horeb [a.k.a. Mt. Sinai]—He was very clear about his intent to prevent the Pharaoh from giving-in to the Hebrews' demands: "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles which I have put in your power; but *I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.*" [EX 4:21 & 7:3]

And that's what happened; each time Pharaoh told Moses that the Hebrews could leave, god forced him to change his mind. In other words, god had planned to torment the Egyptians with all sorts of grotesque plagues, and the Pharaoh was just a puppet god used to provide an excuse for drawing the torment out. The purpose of all this is stated clearly by god: "that I may show these signs of mine among them, and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your son's son how I have made sport of the Egyptians." [EX 10:1-2]

More Heart Hardening

The Pharaoh was not the only Biblical character prevented from doing right just so Yahweh could inflict greater punishment. When Joshua was wiping out all the people of Canaan, the good book tells us: "There was not a city that made peace with the people of Israel . . . For it was the Lord's doing to harden their hearts that they should come against Israel in battle, in order that they should be utterly destroyed, and should receive no mercy, but be exterminated, as the Lord commanded." [Josh 11:20]

Then there was the time when the sons of Eli were abusing the privileges of priesthood by having sex with their female assistants. (Yes, such practices have always been with us.) Eli finds out and warns his sons to stop this behavior, but "they would not listen to the voice of their father; for it was the will of the Lord to slay them." [1Sam 2:25]

The Hebrews went so far with this that they blamed Yahweh for their own failure to follow His teachings: "O Lord, why dost thou make us err from thy ways and harden our heart, so that we fear thee not?" [Isaiah 63:17]

Time and again, Yahweh either forces people to do the wrong thing or prevents them from doing the right thing, just so He can make a more splendid display of power.

Who was He trying so desperately to impress?

More on Egypt

Remembering that most all Egyptians (millions of them) were innocent of any oppression of their Hebrew neighbors, and that the Egyptian

ruler was forcibly prevented from stopping the spectacle of plagues, consider the following details: Yahweh told Moses to lie to the Pharaoh, asking only for a few days in the country to perform sacrifices, although he planned all along to leave Egypt permanently. God told Moses to have the Israelites "borrow" gold and jewels from their Egyptian friends and neighbors, with no intention of returning it. God poisoned the country's only river and killed all the fish. God killed all of the Egyptian's cattle, along with their "horses, asses, camels, herds, and flocks." [EX 9:3-6] God infested the land with frogs, gnats, flies, and locusts. God inflicted painful and debilitating boils on the skin of all Egyptians. God sent a hail and lightning storm that destroyed all growing crops and killed all the slaves and servants working in the fields. And, for the grand finale, on the infamous night celebrated today as Passover, god murdered the oldest child of every family in Egypt. (Note that most families would lose several members, because many of the grandparents and parents would be the oldest children of their respective parents.)

As a sort of encore, a few days later, god made the Pharaoh take what was left of the Egyptian army out to be drowned.

Thus did the god of Abraham make sport of the Egyptians.

This is a story of deceit and thievery, of treachery and torture, of a god who murders thousands of innocent children in cold-blood just to make a name for himself. This is the most horrifying and evil story ever imagined by man.

And, quite clearly, it *was* imagined. Not only is it an affront to reason and common sense, it is internally inconsistent (the cattle are killed on three separate occasions, [11EX 9:6, 9:20, 12:29] the dead horses manage to pull chariots, [EX 9:3, 14:9] frogs swarm from waters poisoned a week before, [EX 7:22, 8:6] etc.), and nowhere in the vast and detailed records that the Egyptians kept of their own history is there any mention of such momentous events.

A Tribe of Warriors

To be Jewish means that your mother is Jewish or that you have gone through a prescribed conversion process. To describe what Jews look like, act like, or think like would require describing each person of Jewish faith separately, since every "group" is really just a collection of different (often radically different) individuals. There is no typical Jew, any more than there is a typical woman. Nevertheless, popular American/European literary and entertainment media have a noticeable tendency to cast Jews as people whose strengths lie much more in the mental realms than in the more "macho" physical pursuits. As a group, Jews certainly have a long history of being persecuted. Altogether, and with many obvious exceptions (Israeli commandos come to mind), Jews are generally thought of as rather meek and mild people, perhaps even stoop-shouldered from the heavy burdens they bear.

The Hebrews of the Old Testament weren't like that at all.

Although enslaved by the Babylonians and later conquered and occupied by the Romans, for a thousand years or more the Hebrews were the toughest and meanest guys in the neighborhood. Their history is chock full of stories of invading other tribes, killing, maiming, raping, and enslaving the people and looting, burning, and generally destroying settlements all over the Middle East. They were a warrior race whose powerful armies usually crushed their opponents. Let's face it, if the Hebrews hadn't won most of their battles, we'd be reading some other tribe's history in the Old Testament. Losers rarely get to tell their side of the story.

More Moses

After helping to destroy a good deal of the people and infrastructure of Egypt, Moses leads his tribe of millions, "equipped for battle," [EX 13:18] across the desert, intending to destroy a good deal of the people and infrastructure of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, [EX 3:8] whose luck it is to be the current residents of Canaan, which is promised to the

Israelites. It seems that Yahweh used to be the god of this land, but its occupants failed to follow his orders, so he has abandoned them and chosen the Israelites to get vengeance. If the Israelites follow Yahweh's orders precisely, they will be empowered to vanquish the larger Canaanite armies and live forever in the land of milk and honey.

Nepotism in Extremis

Soon after the Israelites had made good their escape, Moses set up an organization that has become the envy of every tyrant since, to wit:

- Only the Levite tribe could come near the holy tent.
- Only Aaron and his sons could enter the tent and commune with god.
- The other tribes of Israel had to support the Levites.
- Only Moses heard Yahweh announce these rules.
- Moses was a Levite. Aaron was Moses' brother.

Any questions?

40 Years of Slaughter

The story of this journey, if faithfully told on film today, would receive an X rating for violence and sex. One scene that illustrates both themes concerns an Israelite male who brings a foreign woman into his tent for a bit of lovemaking. Unfortunately, he is spied by a fellow named Phinehas, who sneaks in with a spear and pierces both man and woman "through her body." (She must have been on top.) As a reward for committing this double murder, Moses gives Phinehas a "covenant of peace" and grants "perpetual priesthood" to his descendants. [NUM 25:6-13]

As the Israelites traveled, they acted more like an army on the prowl than a bunch of refugees seeking the promised land. They avoided the stronger nations and attacked the weaker ones. And when the Israelites attacked, the result wasn't pretty:

"And the Lord God hearkened to the voice of Israel, and gave over the Canaanites

[the kingdom of Arad]; and they utterly destroyed them and their cities; so the name of the place was called 'Destruction.' " [NUM 21:3]

"And Israel slew [the king of the Amorites] with the edge of the sword and took possession of his land." [NUM 21:24]

"So they slew [the king of Bashan], and his sons, and all his people, until there was not one survivor left to him; and they possessed his land." [NUM 21:35]

The most telling conquest of all was Moses' last. Forty some years after he left Midian, Moses returns to destroy the people that had given him peaceful shelter. "They warred against Midian, as the Lord commanded Moses, and slew every male. ... took captive the women of Midian and their little ones; and they took as booty all their cattle, their flocks, and all their goods." [NUM 31:7+] And [pay attention now, this is the highlight] when the soldiers returned to Moses, he berated them for allowing the women and children to live, ordered that all male children and all non-virgin females should be killed, and gave the virgins to the conquering soldiers for their sexual sport (after the priests had taken their share).

Other than all the killing and raping, the grandest moment in the Israelite's trek is the stop-over at Mt. Horeb to pick up some advice from Yahweh himself. Unfortunately for the peripatetic masses, all they get to see is a huge, dark cloud hovering near the mountaintop; Moses alone gets the privilege of meeting the boss in person — and he only sees a bright light. Yahweh, according to

Moses, had warned the Israelites "not go up into the mountain or touch the border of it; whoever touches the mountain shall be put to death." [Ex 19:12] Instead, "the people stood afar off" and only listened to Yahweh's voice, which sounded to them like thunder. Fortunately, Moses was around to interpret, otherwise the world would have missed out, not only on the ten commandments, but on about 100 other ordinances including specifying the proper stone [Ex 20:25] for building altars and the protocol for selling a daughter into slavery. [Ex 21:7]

The Big Ten commandments themselves, are familiar to most of us, and need not be analyzed extensively here. Suffice it to say that the rules against killing, stealing, and adultery were only meant to apply to Jewish victims. The bringer of what came to be known as "Mosaic Law" was a man who often practiced, encouraged, and ordered murder, thievery, and rape — and then blamed his actions on his god.

The great American patriot, Thomas Paine's words seem most fitting here: "Whenever we read the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and torturous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness, with which more than half the Bible is filled, it would be more consistent that we called it the word of a demon, than the word of God. It is a history of wickedness, that has served to corrupt and brutalize mankind ... it is a book of lies, wickedness, and blasphemy; for what can be greater blasphemy than to ascribe the wickedness of man to the orders of the Almighty?"²

Does It Really Matter?

Expending all this energy and time to criticize a fictional character may strike some as equivalent to arguing the merits of Superman versus Batman — unproductive and irrelevant, since neither they nor Moses ever existed. But, the point is that those who wrote the first five books of the Old Testament, and all the Hebrews/Israelites/Jews and Christians who since have revered and promoted these books, thought that this monstrous character was heroic, and his terrible deeds worth celebrating. Millions still think that way today.

It is in these horrific tales that we find the roots of many of The Most Insidious Lies.



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¹ Monotheism is the belief that there is only one God (generally capitalized). Numerous passages in the Old Testament indicate that the Hebrews thought that there were many gods other than their own. Therefore, except for direct quotations, I use the lower-case “god” when referring to their proprietary god: Yahweh.

² Paine, Thomas, *The Age of Reason*, 1794, pp. 7 & 33.