

## **Moses**

*“Listen to my words: When a prophet of the Lord is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?”*

*Numbers 12:6-8*

Strangely, it was not Abraham, but his grandson Jacob, who gave Israel its historic national name when God changed Jacob’s name to Israel. But if Jacob gave the nation its name and patriarchal twelve tribes, it was Moses who gave it its distinctive identity, laws and culture.

Moses was not only the most influential of all Israelis of history before Jesus, according to Josephus, the Jewish historian, he was believed to have invented Hebrew writing, and the only one to make considerable impact on the ancient world. Many other illustrious ancient writers and historians either credited or copied Moses’ laws of culture and civilization. Josephus claimed Moses invented the word “*love*” and was the first true legislator in world history. Even the pagan writer Numenius, in the second century AD, said Plato was “*a Moses who spoke Greek*”.

The governing “system” communicated by God to and through Moses, was the first to embody the double merits of the rule of law and equality before the law. Later, the Jewish philosopher, Philo, described the practice as “*democracy*”, which he defined as “*the most law-abiding and best of constitutions*”. Philo’s concept of democracy, however, did not mean “*rule by all the people*”, but “*a form of government which honours equality and has law and justice for its rulers*”—a form of *democratic theocracy* implying a higher authority defining law and justice. A thousand years before Philo, Moses had defined “*democratic theocracy*” directly from God Himself—Law from God and willing obedience from His people.

Following on Abraham’s death his divine vision of “*enforced exile and bondage*” from Canaan became a reality when Jacob and his family moved from famine-stricken Canaan to Egypt to benefit from Jacob’s son, Joseph’s, amazing rise to power and influence with the reigning Pharaoh. At that time Jacob’s total family numbered only seventy members. After Joseph’s death the family of Jacob/Israel multiplied greatly and, without the favour of a reigning Pharaoh, they were made into slave labourers for the grandiose building expansions of the later Pharaohs. During the four hundred years of their exile from Canaan Egypt had become the world’s greatest empire under several notable Pharaohs—Amen-hotep, Thotmes and their offspring. Babylonia was also emerging under equally notable Sargon and Hammurabi. The Hyksos empire was in decline; and the Mediterranean maritime Phoenicians established a major presence in Canaan, the small but strategic territory between Mesopotamia and Egypt.

In Canaan the indigenous Canaanites were mostly dominated by the descendants of Ishmael, Abraham’s firstborn son to his wife’s maid, with their greatly multiplied “*Twelve Tribes*” sons of Esau. They had constructed a chain of cities and built highways along the sea-side from Mount Carmel in the south to Byblos and Ras Sharma in the north. They gradually produced glass, dye, and from the forests they cut and used the timbers for ships required by the expanding Phoenicians, producing a nation of sailors and merchants to establish

commercial relationships across the world.

From the point of view of divine *interest*, God continued to develop His relationship with the children of Abraham through Isaac, Jacob and Joseph—but for the four hundred years prophesied to Abraham in his prophetic vision there was divine silence from the death of Joseph to the birth of Moses. From the point of view of divine *history*, however, God’s next major revelation did not occur until the time of Moses. This next stage of the revelation of God’s purpose in history picked up from where the divine promise to Abram ended: “*I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterwards they will come out with great possessions.*” That nation was Egypt.

At the time Egypt was emerging as one of the most powerful nations in the region known as the *New Kingdom Dynasty*. When Abraham left Ur for Canaan the Middle Kingdom of Egypt had reached the classical stage of Egyptian literature. Its earliest pyramid, the Step Pyramid was already more than 700 years old and a new era of pyramid building was on its way. It was also an era of jewellery and other artistic development. From the time of Joseph, Egypt had become an even more powerful nation, its influence stretching from the fourth cataract of the Nile in Central Africa to the River Euphrates in Mesopotamia, dominating the many small kingdoms and tribal territories between these two great rivers. In this period several Pharaohs ruled over the powerful Egyptian empire.

Following the death of Joseph, as the requirements of the growing administration, a developing culture, a demanding priesthood, and a military presence, imposed the necessity for a vast labour force to sustain them, successive Pharaohs first used, then plundered, and, finally, enslaved the exiled Israelis in the region of Goshen in Egypt, left in a foreign land without a protector in the royal palace.

After the decline of the *Twelfth Dynasty* of the Middle Kingdom of Egypt, the Pharaoh Thutmosis I, had built Egypt into a rich and powerful kingdom, thoroughly subduing Cush (Ethiopia) to the south and Syria to the north. A later Thutmosis III, was an excellent administrator, when he was not fighting administrators he was consolidating his victories into a “*New Egyptian Empire*”. He had

ruined temples rebuilt and brilliantly ornamented, constructed monuments and sculptures, and initiated vast building projects with the forced labour of his captives and the plunder and tribute of conquered countries. The Pharaoh Amen-hotep, preferably called Akhenaten, and his extraordinary queen Nefertiti, had introduced a ruthless, political, social and religious reform of the nation, reduced the powers of the priesthood, sought to eradicate the worship of the many traditional nature gods, and deified both himself and the River Nile.

During this period of their exile in Egypt the offspring of Jacob/Israel had multiplied rapidly, as God had instructed them to “*be fruitful and multiply*”, and from being about seventy members of a large family in the time of Joseph, by the time of the reign of Pharaoh Rameses II they numbered some two million men, women and children. Egypt’s population at the time was reckoned to be about seven million.

Under Rameses II the *Nineteenth Dynasty* of Egypt in the fourteenth century BC grew into one of its greatest periods. With 600,000 foot soldiers, 24,000 cavalry, and 27,000 chariots, he defeated the powerful Hittite nation to the north, destroying their attempt to subjugate Canaan and threaten Egypt. He built cities and temples of great grandeur and beauty, one of them named after himself and dedicated to himself as a god—*Pi-Rameses*—constructed by the now-enslaved Israelites. Rameses the Second had launched the most ambitious construction programme Egypt had known since the days of the pyramid builders some fifteen hundred years before. He renamed the former capital of the Hyksos, Avaris, with his own name and made it a centre of religious practices as well as commerce and art. Each quarter of the city featured a temple consecrated to a different god; and he had erected four towering idols almost seventy-feet high at each quarter. In the centre of the city was the royal palace—“*a place of dazzling halls and lapis lazuli,*” according to reports from Midianite merchants who visited Egypt.

The rapid proliferation of Israelites—or Hebrews, as they were known from Abraham’s reputed ancestor, Eber—was a cause of

increasing concern to the Egyptians, and the ruthless Pharaoh Rameses II ordered the Egyptian midwives to kill off all Hebrew male children at birth, but to preserve the females. This latest imposition, on top of all the burdens they already carried made their circumstances intolerable, and the Israelites prayed to God for their promised deliverer.

Religiously, the Egyptians were mostly a polytheistic nation, except for one short period of monotheism. The most popular belief was in the trinity of *Osiris, Isis and Horus*, originating from the earlier Babylonian empire. Later, the sun (*Aten*) was worshiped as *Ra*, the sun-god. *Ptah*, the deified human-headed god was located in the venerated city of Memphis. The various forms of religion practised were permeated with the occult, the rituals including spirit-invocatory dances; and the most important religious writing was the *Book of the Dead*, a guide book to the next world for the use of the soul.

It was during this period of enforced exile in Egypt that Moses was born. His parents were members of the obscure tribe of Levi, and devout believers in the promises of God to Abram, and they were aware that the time of God's promised deliverance "*after four hundred years*" to Abram was imminent. Moses learned from his earliest years, therefore, that he could be God's promised deliverer of Israel from their bondage and exile, despite the royal decree from Pharaoh that all Hebrew male children were to be killed at birth.

The conviction of the parents that Moses would be the "*deliverer*" led them to devise a daring plan to introduce Moses into the royal household of Egypt by placing him in a water-proofed basket of reeds where they knew the daughter of Pharaoh was accustomed to bathe in the river near to them. The Egyptian princess did not do this because there were no baths in the royal palace, but because such immersion in the "sacred" river was viewed as spiritually meritorious worship of the River Nile god as Egypt's greatest provider. The genius of Moses' parents' plan was that the discovery by the princess of a live child in the sacred river would persuade her that it was "a gift of the god." The plan succeeded, and the princess was so moved with reverential awe and compassion for the child that she responded

immediately to the mother of Moses, who was standing nearby in anticipation, when she offered to look after the child as a wet-nurse with her daughter as a child-minder. The princess agreed and Moses was introduced into the royal household and eventually officially adopted as her son, a prince of Egypt.

Moses grew up knowing the history of his people, especially of their time of deliverance and later divine destiny at the same time as he learned all the skills of a prince of the royal palace of Egypt. He knew every word of the story of the slave Joseph, son of Jacob/Israel, who became the most powerful statesman in Egypt, and dreamed of emulating him. Meanwhile he lived a life of sophisticated luxury and elegance. Shaved, bathed and oiled with perfumes, and wearing the white linen robe and jewelled collar and ear-studs of a royal prince, he moved with practised ease and elegance in the royal palace blazing with gold, lapis lazuli and turquoise, surrounded by black granite, human-headed lions and roseate granite sphinxes. His living quarters in the palace were light and spacious, luxuriously furnished, and his brilliantly flowered gardens had marbled paved walks with shady trees and scented arbours.

All Egyptian princes and nobles were taught in the arts and sciences by personal tutors, later going on to the great universities of Hermopolis and On. The university of On was built around the Temple of the Sun, where the sacred hawk sat in its golden cage and the sacred calf lay on its purple bed, each supposed to be a living representative of the presiding deity of the Temple. Three times a day incense was offered by the priests to the sacred beasts, and once a month sacrifice was made. There he learned the two forms of writing used at the time: the hieroglyphic, representing sounds and objects by pictures; and the hieratic, a sort of cursive language developed from the hieroglyphic. He also studied arithmetic and geometry, medicine, law, chemistry, philosophy, music and astronomy, and religion.

Musicians, troubadours and acrobatic dancers from Egypt and its tributary territories entertained the many guests from other nations visiting the famed court of the Pharaohs. Black Nubian military officers, Libyan diplomats, Bedouin merchants, Phoenician sailing

captains, Syrian horse-traders, Hittite mercenaries, all were of fascinating interest to Moses, but among all the splendour and focus of admiring attention as the favoured son of Pharaoh's daughter, he was conscious of his divine destiny as God's instrument of deliverance of his people.

By the time he was forty years of age Moses knew that he had the ability to rule Egypt. He also knew that there was no way in which he would ever be in a position to do so. Although he was the favoured adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter, and although it was highly likely that she would be preferred as ruler after Pharaoh's death, and she might even wish Moses to succeed her, Moses himself was convinced that his destiny was to be the deliverer of his own people from Egyptian bondage. So, while Moses was educated in Egypt's famous universities, schooled in royal protocol, trained in military strategy and command, and groomed in political and diplomatic skills inherited from Sumerian and Babylonian ancestors, he was also taught in the Semitic religious history from Adam through Shem and Enoch, Noah and Abraham.

All of this experience passed through his mind in splintered and bewildering mental images as he watched his fellow-Israelis working as servants in the royal palaces, or in the houses of Egyptian nobles, or when he saw them as slaves as he walked the streets of the city, or went through the countryside in litter or chariot to gaze at the mighty pyramids. He wondered what might be the bridge that would span the gap between his privileged royal status and the hopeless servitude of his fellow-countrymen.

These were his thoughts one day as he stopped to watch a group of Israel's workmen building one of the many new structures—mansions, temples, universities, amphitheatres—spreading throughout the expanding wealthy nation of Egypt. Most of the buildings had been constructed literally brick-by-brick from the blood, sweat, tears and lives of his fellow-countrymen as they were forced to assemble the materials of the bricks, mould and dry them, and build them into the walls and rooms and roofs under the brutal supervision and whips of Egyptian overseers, knowing that

was to be their fate until the early day they died.

As Moses watched them reflectively one of the patrolling overseers halted at an Israeli worker near Moses. Moses had noticed the workman because he was stopping frequently to cough and spit, the bloody phlegm indicating that he had some kind of chest sickness. The overseer had shouted at the man for falling behind the others, and when the Israeli stopped and began another bout of coughing with bloody spittle the overseer used his stick to beat him mercilessly.

Moses looked around quickly to see if there were other overseers in the vicinity, saw none, and he felt for the ornamental dagger in the girdle of his robe. Then he paused as he considered the consequences of a murdered Egyptian body by Egyptian dagger found among the Israelis. But he had also been taught hand-to-hand combat in his military training, and he stepped forward behind the unsuspecting overseer, and with one blow of his hand at the neck of the overseer he killed him.

The other Israelis had stopped working, astonished at the sight of a supposedly wealthy Egyptian noble intervening on behalf of an Israeli slave. Moses told them to bury the body quickly and to get on with their work. If the overseer with a broken neck were found it would mean death for all the Israeli labourers. As they began digging a hole for the body Moses walked away quickly without another word.

Moses had a restless night as a consequence, and the following day he decided to visit the same building site. When he arrived there was a dispute of some kind among the Israeli labourers, and two of them started fighting each other. Moses guessed the dispute might be over his action the previous day, and he approached them to help settle the dispute. He was stunned when one of the combatants snarled at him, "*Who made you a prince or judge over us? Are you going to kill me as you killed the Egyptian overseer yesterday?*"

Moses realised they had identified him, and not just as an Egyptian noble, with the words, "*Who made you a prince or judge over us?*" They had probably told other Israelis of the incident, and

this would spread quickly through overseers and officials to eventually reach the palace. Moses turned away quickly from the group of now silent Israeli builders, his mind a confused mixture of fears of the possible consequences, and anger and frustration at being misunderstood and rejected, and the immediate and long-term possibilities. What would happen to his parents? What would happen to his adoptive princess mother? If he did take a stand over the beating of a sick Israeli slave the issue was not of sufficient merit or importance for him either to win an argument or launch a rebellion. Most bewildering of all, where was Israel's God in all this, and why did He not appear or intervene to help him? Had He not prepared him, Moses, as His deliverer?

By the time Moses reached the palace the tumultuous confusion had subsided and his mind was thinking clearly again. The only realistic solution was to flee—palace, home, Egypt—and hide himself from Pharaoh's anticipated wrath. It would be an admission of guilt to some degree, but without his presence or evidence other than the word of the slaves, the issue would soon disappear. His broken-hearted family would have their dreams destroyed; his princess mother, too, would also be desolated, her pride in him and plans for him in ruins. But, at least, with his disappearance they would survive, discredited but not dead.

Moses quickly assembled the oldest suitable clothes he could find to withstand travel and weather, basic food to last for some time. He had his servant take the bags to the stables, only telling him he was going to the countryside for an extended visit. At the stables he took only two pack-mules, and waited until there was no-one around to slip away from the palace grounds. In his ordinary clothing, and leading two pack-mules, he quickly merged with other Egyptians in the city streets as someone returning to the countryside. Anything more he needed he could buy with the money he had in the packs on the mules. He would lose himself among the wandering tribes in the deserts to the east of Egypt.

Forty years passed in the uneventful seasonal pursuits of rural tribal life, and from being an Egyptian in culture, language and dress,

and an anonymous nomadic desert traveller, Moses was now indistinguishable from his adopted Midianite family and tribe far to the east of Egypt. He was eighty years of age and resigned to never seeing his family in Egypt again; he wasn't even sure that he could speak his own Hebrew language again as on occasions he had to make a mental effort to recall certain familiar phrases.

He was idly reflecting on these things one day as he led the family flock of sheep across a stretch of desert in a search for fresh pasture when he became aware of a bush on fire ahead of him. He gave it no particular attention as a bush burning in a barren desert in the hot sun of noon-day was not uncommon. His Egyptian education had taught him that the sun striking exposed metal or bituminous soil could cause a flame and burning.

But as he came closer he became aware that there was no smoke from the flame, so it could not be bituminous; and, also, in the time it had taken from first becoming aware of the burning, the flame had not diminished. When he had watered the sheep at the small oasis he went to gaze at the still burning bush. As he approached he could see that the branches of the bush while on fire, and encircled by flames, were not being consumed.

He stopped in front of the bush and a voice spoke from the centre of the flames: "*Moses!*" There was no doubt in Moses' mind; a voice had spoken his name from the midst of the flames. He found it difficult to accept, but he decided to test the experience and responded, "*Here I am*".

There was no doubt this time. The voice spoke with authority: "*Do not come any closer. Put off your shoes from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground*".

Moses' thoughts were in turmoil as beyond the bush he was aware of the surrounding desert, the hazy outlines of Mount Sinai, and the distant waters of the gulf. In all this emptiness was it true that he was standing in the presence of Israel's God? As if in reply to his inner question the voice of God spoke again: "*I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob*".

With these momentous words Moses knew he was indeed in the

presence of Israel's God. He pulled his headscarf over his face so that he would not look directly at the flaming bush, for it was a Hebrew belief that to look on the face of God was to die. God spoke again:

*"I have certainly seen the suffering of my people in Egypt, and I am aware of their treatment at the hands of their overseers"*.

Moses felt a sudden flash of guilt from a flashback of the incident when he had killed the Egyptian overseer, but the Voice was continuing:

*"I know their sorrows. I am now ready to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them to a spacious and productive land, to Canaan presently occupied by a variety of tribes. I am aware of the prayers and pleas of the people of Israel, I have noted the oppression of the Egyptians, and I have decided to send you, Moses, to Pharaoh to deliver my people of Israel from Egypt."*

There was no doubting the message or the authority of the Voice, but Moses had had forty years to remember and regret his experience as a presumed deliverer of God's people. He had not forgotten his fear at the scene, his panic, his precipitate flight from his accusing fellow-countrymen and an angry Pharaoh.

The Pharaoh at the time of Moses' flight from Egypt to Midian had ruined temples rebuilt and brilliantly ornamented, constructed monuments and sculptures with incredibly detailed pictorial records of Egyptian life and history, and had initiated vast building projects with the forced labour of his captives and the plunder and tribute of conquered countries. The children of the subdued monarchs in Asia and elsewhere were taken to Egypt as hostages, where they were educated to succeed their fathers with a due understanding of the might of Pharaoh to protect and to punish.

It was not humility, mock or otherwise, that made Moses so reluctant to do what God had commanded. He was literally paralyzed with fear at the thought. To ask Pharaoh to let two million Israeli people leave Egypt was ludicrous beyond imagining, it would mean the ruin of the country. The Voice was understanding but inflexible:

*"I will certainly be with you. And this will be a sign for you that I*

*have sent you. When you have delivered my people out of Egypt you will serve me on this very mountain of Sinai where you are now living.”*

For the first time Moses began to feel something other than fear and panic, a faint stirring of excitement deep within him such as he had experienced before his first battle. He was actually talking with Israel’s God, being divinely commissioned to be God’s deliverer of the Israelites. But – who would believe him? There was no record of any of the many Egyptian gods ever speaking to Pharaohs or priests; and the Hebrew God had been silent since the time of Abraham.

He said hesitantly, *“When I go to the people of Israel and tell them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you with this message’, and they say to me ‘What is his name?’ what do I say to them?”*

The Voice of God was like the sound of a trumpet to Moses, clear and commanding:

*“I AM THAT I AM. Jehovah. You will say to the children of Israel, Jehovah the Eternal has sent you. Also, you will say ‘The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent you. This is my name and my memorial for time and for eternity to all creation.*

*“Now go, gather the elders of the tribes of Israel together and say to them ‘The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, appeared to me and said, ‘I have certainly appeared and am aware of all that has happened to you in Egypt; and I will deliver you now from the affliction of Egypt and bring you to the land of Canaan as I promised’. They will listen to you I assure you, and you and the elders will go to Pharaoh and say, ‘The Lord God of the Hebrews has met with us and commands you to set us free to go three days journey into the desert to sacrifice to the Lord our God’ But I can tell you that Pharaoh will not let you go, by every means in his power; but I will use my power to afflict Egypt and in the end he will let you go. I will even arrange for the people of Israel to have favour with people of Egypt so that they will be happy to see you go and will provide you with gold, silver and precious jewels to do so.”<sup>31</sup>*

<sup>31</sup>Exodus 30:1 ff

As the words of God expanded the vision beyond easing the yoke of bondage on the people of Israel to include a bloodless exit from Egypt with exuberant gifts, and the promise of a golden future in a gloriously productive land freed from the resident enemies, Moses experienced a sudden flood of doubt. It was too wishful-thinking to be believable. Perhaps he was having a heat-induced hallucination of some kind? He addressed God directly:

*“What happens if the people will not believe me? They will say God did not appear or speak to me; it was an illusion or something.”*

“God said obliquely, *“What is that I your hand?”*

Moses looked at his shepherd’s staff. *“A staff”* he replied.

God said, *“Throw it on the ground”*.

Moses dropped it and instantaneously it became a poisonous snake. Moses jumped backwards in fear.

*“Pick it up,”* God commanded inflexibly.

Moses approached it hesitantly, the beady eyes of the deadly reptile fixed on him balefully. He slowly reached forward to the snake’s tail and, as he touched it, it became his staff again.

*“This,”* God said, *“is so that they will believe that the Lord God of their fathers has certainly appeared to you. Now, put your hand inside your robe.”*

Moses obeyed, and when he took it out again it had all the sickly white signs of leprosy. Before Moss could react God told him to put his hand back into his robe; and when he had done so and had taken out again it was back to normal. God continued:

*“If they still do not believe you or the first miracle, they will believe the second. The first is to produce life out of a piece of dead wood, and the second is to disturb the health of the body, and then to cure it. If they do not believe these miracles, or listen to what you say, take some water from the River Nile—which they worship as a god—and pour it on the dry ground. It will immediately become blood.”*

As he listened to the voice of God—believing now that was a

certainty—Moses felt a sudden overwhelming sense of inadequacy. The succession of unprecedented events, from the first sight of the burning-bush through the speaking vision from God of the physical deliverance of Israel from Egypt to the conquest of Canaan, to the apparently limitless powers over creation to be displayed by a God calling Himself “*the Eternal*”, had left him feeling numbed and inadequate. Forty years before he would have responded differently, but he was now eighty years of age, exiled and religiously compromised in a pagan tribe. It was not just a matter of going to disbelieving fellow-Israelites, or an incredulous Pharaoh; there were the immediate practical issues of what he was to say to his wife, Zipporah, sons, and Jethro his father-in-law.

Eventually he said slowly and regretfully, “*Lord, I have never really been eloquent in speech as you must have observed. I have never been skilled in debates.*”

God was relentless: “*Who made your mouth? Who makes people deaf or dumb? Who gives sight or makes blind? Is it not I who speak here with you. Say no more. Go, and I will help you speak and teach you what to say.*”

Moses’ fear and frustration at not being understood swept away all his previous restraint, and he said desperately, “*Please, Lord, send someone else.*”

There was a momentary silence, heavier and more potent than the silence of the desert, and then God said with detectable anger, “*Then I will use your brother, Aaron, who can certainly speak. He is already on his way to here to visit you. You will do and speak as I say to him, and I will aid you both to speak and do what I desire. He will be your mouth to the people, and you will be to him as God. Now, take this staff in your hand and go and do the miracles I command you.*”

The flames on the burning-bush disappeared, and Moses was not surprised to see that the bush itself remained in its natural state, untainted by fire. He turned away and decided to camp overnight at the oasis while he thought over the events of the meeting and its implications for him. In the distance to the west he saw a small cloud of dust which he concluded was a large caravan of merchants.

In the late afternoon, as he was settling the sheep for the night and starting to prepare an evening meal, the caravan of wealthy Midianite merchants arrived at the oasis. They invited Moses to join them for a meal as they had plentiful supplies, and Moses helped to water their animals. As they were settling down to eat one of the members of the caravan approached Moses with some hesitation, and then Moses suddenly realized he was looking at his brother, Aaron.

As they exchanged details of their meeting with the delighted Midianite merchants it was not such a remarkable coincidence as it first appeared. Some years after he had arrived in Midian, and settled there, Moses, when he heard that there was a new Pharaoh in Egypt, had sent a message to his family by a Midianite merchant who traded spices and perfumes in Egypt, to inform them of his location. The merchant had brought a reply on his return and had agreed to do the same over the years.

But Aaron's visit was not just for family reasons, he informed Moses, but in a dream he had been told by God to visit Moses and to bring him back to Egypt. Moses told Aaron the details of his recent experience at the burning-bush, and the divine command for them both to speak to the elders of Israel, and to the Pharaoh of Egypt, regarding their deliverance from bondage. When they had exhausted the discussion of consequences they left the caravan to go and see Moses' Midianite family.

Moses did not give them the details of his meeting with and commission from God, simply saying that there were some family matters that required them both in Egypt. Jethro as priest gave them his approval and blessing but Zipporah and his sons were not so pleased. Zipporah was reluctant to leave her country and community, and Moses would not have insisted, but Jethro was adamant that her place was with Moses on his return to Egypt to meet other members of his family there.

On the night prior to his departure from Midian God appeared to Moses in a vision with a further command:

*“When you arrive in Egypt be certain to perform before Pharaoh all the miracles that I will show you, and have given you the power*

*to do. He will not listen to you because it is my purpose to harden his heart not to let you go. At that time you will say to Pharaoh, 'This is my message from the Lord: "Israel is my first-born son, and I have told you to let my son go so he can worship me. But, because you have refused to let him go, I will kill your first-born son"'*

Moses had had mixed feelings about his commission from God since the arrival of his brother Aaron. His presence beside Moses was a constant reminder of his own prevarication and attempted duplicity with his supposed inadequacies in order to avoid God's command. It had been an implicit admission that he did not really believe God had the power to do what He was saying he would do to Pharaoh and Israel. Now that Aaron was here with him, and was preparing to do what God said, God had demonstrated to him in this new vision and command that, ultimately, he was going to have to accept that God was going to work through him alone in demonstrating all aspects of His divine power. The sooner he accepted that the better he would be able to tell Pharaoh, *"My God will kill your first-born son because you will not let go His first-born son, Israel."* Even the thought of this left Moses appalled as he considered the accumulating expansion of consequences not only for himself and Aaron but also for Israel and the Egyptians—with him and Aaron in the eye of the hurricane precipitated.

A few days later on his journey Moses' fears and doomsday expectations were jolted further. They had stopped at a travellers' inn for the night and when the others retired Moses went outside the inn for a time of quiet meditation. He was turning over in his mind a possible sequence of potential consequences arising from his upcoming meeting with Pharaoh—assuming that there would be one or more than one!—when he became conscious of a sudden lightening of the dark night, a rushing sound like wind in the trees, a tightening in his chest as his fear accelerated that he was about to be swept from life into darkness and death. Then there came the rolling thunder of words of judgement from God:

*"Why have you not circumcised your son as I commanded?"*

The experience disappeared as quickly as it had appeared and Moses sat in the dark night panting for breath and sweating profusely. He did not need an interpretation of the vision. He had ignored God's divine requirement for every Hebrew male child to be circumcised because it was not a practice of the Midianites among whom he was living. He had discussed the practice with Zipporah but she had been opposed to such a rite and he had dropped the subject. Now, when he was being commanded by God to be the messenger of death of the first-born son of Pharaoh as a consequence of ignoring God, a similar sentence of death had just been hovering over Moses for ignoring the divine command of circumcision for his own son.

When he awoke Zipporah and told her of the experience and his determination to obey God and have Gershon circumcised she was furiously angry. Gershon was no longer a child, but an adult male, and it was a meaningless and barbaric practice anyway. But faced with Moses' determination she eventually agreed and, in her rage, she threw the bloody foreskin at the feet of Moses with the embittered words, "*You are a bloody husband to me*".

Moses was chastened by his responsibility for the neglect, but at the same time he was conscious that God was preparing him for the enormous task ahead by reminding him that he was to be a spokesman and instrument of God's purpose and, as such, would have to without blemish as much as possible. The God who was prepared to kill him for disobedience would without doubt destroy Pharaoh for his disobedience. He, Moses, like Zipporah and Gershon, would just have to submit himself to the knife and blood of God's judgement on his own life as a sign of his total obedience and consecration to the service of God.

Their entrance into the capital city of Egypt, Memphis, brought back many memories to Moses. It was the city that Abraham and Sarah had visited following on their first arrival in Canaan from Ur almost five hundred years before. It was where Joseph, after being sold as a slave, became a ruler only second to the Pharaoh of that time. It was where Moses had been brought up, and educated in all the wisdom of Egypt. Outside the city they passed the gigantic cemetery

—in keeping with the Egyptian belief in immortality—sixty miles long and two miles wide. It began at the Pyramids in the north, and ended at the Lahun Pyramid in the south-east “*city of the dead*”, containing the remains of millions of animals and Pharaohs as well as men and women citizens. It was evidence that the most read book in the libraries of Egypt was “*The Book of the Dead*”.

Memphis at this time was Egypt’s chief centre of learning and religion, eight miles long by four miles wide, dominated at its centre by the magnificent “*Cathedral of Egypt*” dedicated to the god *Apis*. Towering avenues of gleaming alabaster sphinxes linked the temples of *Ptah*, *Isis* and *Osiris*. The chief objects of worship in the city, *Ptah* and the sacred *Apis* bull, were evident everywhere. According to Egyptian belief *Ptah* was the “Mind of the Universe” who created all gods and humans by thinking them into existence, and was especially worshipped by artists, artisans and scholars. *Osiris* was the god of the dead and the living, responsible for controlling all aspects of life current and future. Soaring over them all was the gigantic statue of Pharaoh Rameses II, ruler of the expanded Ninth Dynasty of Egypt’s greatest New Kingdom.

The city had a half-million inhabitants crowding its streets with shoppers, shoulder-litters and chariots; jostling between business houses, villas with walled gardens, tree-filled parks and palaces of the aristocracy. As he advanced step-by-step through the city Moses wondered at both the possible reception of his message from God to Pharaoh and the likely consequences if or when all the Israelites left Egypt.

They passed the many universities and libraries where Moses had received his earlier education. These institutions, in addition to extensive literature about Egypt’s own history, culture and religion, also contained thousands of tablets and scrolls –Sumerian, Akkadian, Eblaite and Canaanite—which were also part of Moses’ education. They included the Mara Tablets giving detailed information about customs, language and personal names of ancient patriarchs in Canaan. None of them mentioned any speaking God.

Moses and Aaron continued through the city to the region of

Goshen where their ancestor Joseph had been given the right to live by the then Pharaoh. Because they were originally herders of sheep, goats and cattle, and the Egyptians were worshippers of nature gods, especially animals, it had become a region occupied solely by the pastoral people of Israel.

Their first task was to call a meeting of the elders of Israel to communicate the message from God. Aaron of course was well known to all of them, and held in high esteem because as a Levite he was of the tribe of priests, but Moses was an object of great interest, because of his past history which most of them knew from the public outcry at the time of his disappearance and its cause. So it was Aaron who laid before them all that God had said to Moses regarding what he and Moses had to go and say to Pharaoh regarding letting Israel depart from their bondage in Egypt.

The great excitement generated by the news that the God of the Hebrews had actually appeared at last to address Moses was tempered by the enormity of the vision He had outlined to Moses to deliver to Pharaoh. It looked at times in the discussions as if the divine proposal would not have the approval of the elders, and it was only the inflexible determination of Moses and Aaron to go ahead with or without their permission that persuaded the tribal elders to give their reluctant approval.

When Pharaoh dismissed Moses and Aaron, and their God, contemptuously, and in addition ordered the Egyptian slave-masters to increase the burdens on the Israeli people by finding the straw to make the bricks for the building projects while still maintaining the previous quotas, they did more than complain to Moses and Aaron—they refused to support them if they continued with their mission to Pharaoh. Moses was so despondent that he asked God again to send someone else.

God did not seem either surprised by the Israelis' refusal, or impressed by Moses' request. He insisted that he and Aaron keep to His plan and accept His assurances that all would be well. He said to Moses emphatically:

*“Look, I have made you, Moses, like a messenger of God to*

*Pharaoh; and Aaron he regards as a prophet. So he will listen, but not obey you, because I have hardened his convictions in order that he will do what I say in my time.”*

Sure enough, Pharaoh heard what they had to say, then, as God had foretold, for evidence that they truly spoke for God he demanded that they do a miracle in front of him. As commanded by God, Aaron threw Moses' shepherd staff in front of him and it became a snake. Pharaoh just shrugged his shoulders, smiled contemptuously, and called for the royal sorcerers. They did the same with their rods, but then Aaron's staff/snake ate up all the other snakes! This caused exclamations of surprise among the royal officials, and some consternation, but Pharaoh was not impressed and sent them away.

This was only the beginning of a series of the most challenging and exciting period of Moses' life to that time. God sent him and Aaron to Pharaoh every few days with an increasingly catastrophic series of supernatural plagues – ten in number, the same number as their most worshipped but demonstrably powerless Egyptian gods!—over the next few months. To make matters worse for the Egyptians, none of the plagues affected the Israelites or their animals in their separately inhabited Goshen region of Egypt.

As the character, intensity and consequences of the plagues intensified Pharaoh seemed unable or unwilling to terminate either discussions or negotiations with Moses over the specific terms of God's ultimata. For example, he offered to permit only the men to go, but the women and children to remain; or, to let men and livestock go, but the women and children to remain. Eventually, with the nation of Egypt facing ruin from the sequence of disastrous plagues and the rebellion of the Egyptian officials and people, Pharaoh conceded defeat and agreed to let all the people of Israel leave Egypt. But, for some reason, known only to himself and God, he changed his mind yet again. This time, God told Moses and Aaron to prepare the people of Israel for departure, because the tenth plague would destroy every Egyptian first-born male man and animal.

Then God instructed Moses to inform every Israelite household to

kill an unblemished lamb, save the blood in basins, cook the lamb for eating with unleavened bread, and prepare to leave Egypt in the morning. The blood in the basins was to be sprinkled on the door-posts and upper lintel of each Israelite house, because God was sending an angel of death to kill every male where there was no blood. The solemn ceremony was to celebrate for ever the “*Feast of Passover*”, because when the angel of death saw the blood he would “*pass over*” the Israelites and save them.

Before Moses did this God told him that the Israeli people had to ask the Egyptians for contributions of gold, silver and jewels as compensation for their years of slavery, and this would be used for a purpose that He would describe later. On the day the Israeli people left Egypt the sounds of r their songs of praise were mixed with the wails of distress from the Egyptians who had lost their first-born sons and animals.

This enthusiasm and joy remained with them for the next few days until they reached the barrier of the Red Sea, where also they became aware that they were being pursued by the Egyptian army. There was pandemonium and panic, with the people complaining to Moses that they had not been warned about these possibilities.

When Moses spoke to God about the crisis God reminded him what was in his hand, and Moses looked at his staff and remembered to stretch out his staff towards the Red Sea. When he did this the waters divided into two walls, and the people walked across to the other side on dry land! What was even more miraculous was that the Egyptians, who were pursuing could not see any of this happening because God made the cloud that was light above the Israelis to show the way through the Red Sea became black above the Egyptians. Also, as soon as they had reached the far side, the divided walls of water fell on the pursuing Egyptian army chariots and horses, and destroyed them all.

However, this further cause of praise and rejoicing only lasted for a few days on the other side of the Red Sea when they were in the desert and with no water for washing or thirst. Moving such a vast company of people from one camp to the next was not like an

organized army on the march; it meant going in short stages of six or eight hours because the advance party was arriving at the day's destination about the same time as the last party was departing from their previous evening's camp. Their pace was determined by the youngest or weakest members. As far as Moses was concerned it was miraculous that no-one was ill or even complaining about the journey—that is, until they reached what was known as the oasis of Marah and found that the only available water was undrinkable.

The ensuing litany of complaints escalated into an uproar of objections about all sorts of deprivations, some wishing they had never left Egypt. When Moses spoke to God about the problem, God told him to cast a certain piece of wood into the water and immediately it became sweet, ending the complaints. Moses' procedure for talking with God was to set up a "tent of meeting" on the outskirts of the camping area, where the divinely bestowed *Shekinah*<sup>32</sup> Cloud of Glory, stopped at the end of each day's march, and from there he would address God in the Cloud of Glory. The sign of God's Presence was usually an illumination of the Cloud which disappeared when the conversation ended. In this manner everyone could see when Moses spoke with God.

Two weeks later, at a place called Elim, there was another community-wide rebellion about the food situation. This was a problem in the forefront of all their minds as they travelled deeper into the desert and their Egyptian supplies diminished until all that they had was increasingly stale bread and water. So the community demanded to know when they were going to have something more appetizing to eat, like the food they had in Egypt.

When Moses spoke to God again about the problem he was told that God would supply special food from heaven, called manna, which would be sufficient to sustain them during the desert journey. But it would have to be gathered fresh every day, and not stored overnight, because it would be inedible by morning. At the same time God said he would also supply the meat they craved and, sure enough, that evening the clouds gathering overhead dropped huge masses of quails for the people to eat meat. So they had fresh bread from heaven

<sup>32</sup>Shekinah: Hebrew expression derived from "to dwell"; also meaning "radiance, glory, presence of God". The nearest Hebrew equivalent to the Holy Spirit, the medium between the creature's corporeality and divine transcendence.

in the morning, and fresh meat from heaven in the evening every day.

Three weeks after leaving Egypt they reached the part of the desert where it met the mountains of the Horeb and Sinai peninsula and the southern shores of the Red Sea, and at the command of God in the Cloud they camped there while He called Moses to go up the mountain for special instructions.

There was an air of rising expectancy in the community as both Moses and the Cloud of Glory moved up the slopes of the mountain until he disappeared from sight. When Moses returned it was with a message from God regarding a divine **Covenant** which, if they would obey in every detail, they would be His chosen people, a treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Three months to the day from the time the Israeli people left Egypt they arrived in the vicinity of the twin mountains, Horeb and Sinai, and camped in the desert beneath. It was the southernmost point of the great inverted triangle lying between the two arms of the Red Sea. It was the beating heart reservoir of 20,000 square miles of sand, sandstone, limestone and granite mountains broken up into very irregular and fantastic forms. It was surrounded by barren and sandy stretches of two hundred feet high sand dunes, interspersed with salt marshes and well-watered oases with their picturesque groves of date palms. It was a great cross-roads in the region of one of the most ancient roadways, "*the Way of the Sea*" between the great nations to the north, east and south. At the centre of the region was the great Plateau of the Tih, rising to a height of four thousand feet above the sea and broken into a vast region of mountain ranges with streams draining into the "*River of Egypt*".

It was at the foot of this striking range of wild and rugged mountain peaks arising from the surrounding barren desert that the people of Israel encamped, and God called to Moses to come up into the cloud-covered mountain range of Horeb and Sinai for a meeting with him. Moses wondered whether the "*three months*" period since they had left Egypt was the "*three days*" of Israel's separation from idolatrous Egypt, or simply a symbolic period of **Covenant** testing for the people of Israel. The awesome setting of a divinely selected

Moses and God conversing in the cloud-clad mountain, while the massed community of Israel encamped in the desert beneath, was emphasised when the pillar of cloud lifted from above the tent of meeting and went with Moses to become evidence of the presence of God as it gleamed with its central ethereal fire. From this “*Cloud of Glory*” God spoke to Moses with solemn emphasis:

*“This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and the people of Israel. You have seen what I have done to the Egyptians, and how I carried you on the wings of eagles not to just this place but to myself. Now, if you obey me with all your heart, and keep the Covenant I made with your fathers, then out of the nations in the world you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole world is mine you alone will be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, representing me to the others and the others to me, because you are consecrated to me and my holiness. Go and speak these words to the people of Israel, and then return to me here with their decision”.*

When Moses returned to the gathered community of Israel he called the elders of the people together and informed them of the momentous words of God. The elders delivered the divine message to each of their tribes, clans and families, and then returned to Moses with the unanimous commitment: “*We will do everything the Lord has said in the **Covenant**”.*

Moses returned to the mountain with their confirmation of obedience and God said to him:

*“First, I am going to increase the density, darkness and fire of the cloud and increase the sound of my voice so that all the people will hear what I am going to say to you. Then I want you to go down to the people again and make them ready for my purposed ceremony of consecration three days from now. Tell them they must not approach the foot of this mountain out of curiosity or any other reason or they will surely die. Anyone seen to do so will be stoned to death or killed by arrows, but not handled in any way. This applies to animals as well as people. Only when they hear the sound of a trumpet are they to approach near to the mountains but not to touch it”.*

On the morning of the third day the anticipatory silence of the people was intensified as the usual grey-white cloud on the mountain darkened, and then was lit by lightning flashes accompanied by rolling peals of thunder. During a break between peals there was the sudden blast of a trumpet. The whole community of Israelis stood transfixed with expectant fear as they waited to hear the voice of God.

The clouds thickened and became shot through with great tongues of flame so that they looked like monstrous billows of smoke from some gigantic furnace, while the whole mountain trembled with great convulsions. Somewhere in this heavenly phantasmagoria there came again the sound of a trumpet rising to a piercing crescendo. The elders of the tribes reported to Moses that the people were in terror of being confronted by a personal God and were demanding that Moses speak with God alone on their behalf:

Moses assured them: *“Do not be afraid! God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will restrain you from sinning.”*

Then Moses, accompanied by Aaron, went up into the mountain, and God them in solemnly measured words the divinely stipulated terms of their agreed *Covenant* with Him for their acknowledgment and binding agreement:

*“I am the Lord God who brought you up out of Egypt. You shall have no other gods before me.*

*”You shall not make any kind of idol for yourselves, either in heavenly or earthly form. You shall not bow down before them or worship them for I am a jealous God who will punish those to the third and fourth generation who prefer other gods before me; although I will show love forever to those who keep my commandments.*

*“You shall not profane, or misuse, my Name in any way, the Name of the Lord your God, for I will consider anyone guilty who misuses my Name.*

*“Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. You have six days to do your work but the seventh day is to be devoted to the Lord your God. Not only you but anyone associated with your family, your servants, your animals, and anyone associated with your*

*household. For I myself, after creating the heavens and earth in six days rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Sabbath, or seventh, day is devoted and made holy for me.*

*Honour your father and mother at all times so that you have long life in the land which I am giving to you.*

*“You shall not murder.*

*“You shall not commit adultery.*

*“You shall not steal.*

*“You shall not give false witness against your neighbours.*

*“You shall not covet your neighbour’s wife, nor his servants, not his animals, or anything that belongs to your neighbours.”*

With these Ten Laws, or “**Decalogue**”, God gave to the people of Israel His basic requirements for them to live their lives well-pleasing to their holy God. It established a framework within which they could become children in the household of God, which would also permit all others—“*aliens*, or strangers—to have similar privileges on the same basis.

Moses knew of only one other nation with a system of laws for governing its people: Babylon, with the **Code of Hammurabi**, developed some four hundred years earlier in Babylon’s first dynasty. These had consisted of 218 case laws from legal decisions applied to economic, family, criminal and civil circumstances derived from earlier Sumerian practices. The **Code of Hammurabi**, although postulated to apply to a wider realm than Babylonia, was limited to a ruling class and not inclusive of every individual of a whole nation, much less than the whole world. Also, Moses knew it made no claims to divine inspiration or authority as its source, and its only association with religion was the stela set up in the Temple of *Marduk*, the national god of Babylon.

To Moses, the “*Ten Commandments of God*”, or **Decalogue**, just communicated to him by God, was a more detailed form of moral government for the whole world than the **Code of Hammurabi**, and for all nations and their peoples to come. It was a more detailed version of the post-Flood divine principles given to Noah to be

observed by “the second age of man” from the time of Noah to all nations of the world for all time.

As Moses pondered on this he felt a growing excitement and conviction that he must also record these laws and statutes and principles for later generations, not only of Israel but of the whole world. These were the principles of God’s proposed kingdom on earth and not just rules for the people of Israel.

Moses was deeply impressed with the fact that this God he was just beginning to know was not only interested in the major issues such as laws for Israel and the nations, but also in something so minor as the rights of servants in Israel. This, with God’s care for the health and provision of food in the desert for Israel, was an increasing revelation into the person and nature of God. There was little likelihood of his forgetting the demonstrated powers of that God as he carried the evidence in his hand every day with his shepherd’s staff and its divinely bestowed powers. But these past events did not have the immediacy of the unfolding person-to-person revelations from God regarding His plans for Israel and the world over the past few days in the mountain. But God was speaking to him again:

*“If someone strikes a man and kills him he must certainly be put to death. However, if he does not do it intentionally, and I permit it to happen, then he must flee to a safe place I will prepare for such a possibility. But if the murder is done deliberately with malice, even if he clings to my altar in supplication, take him away and put him to death.*

*“Anyone who strikes or curses his father or mother must be put to death.*

*“Anyone who kidnaps another and either trades him for ransom, or kills him, when he is caught must be put to death.*

*“If any men quarrel and one strikes the other with implement or fist so that he is confined to bed, the one who did will not be considered responsible if the injured party gets up and is able to walk with the help of staff. However, he must pay the injured party for his lost time, until he is completely healed”.*

God went on to provide a list of instructions regarding variations of punishments striking a woman, or servant. If the injury was serious, *“life was to be taken for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.”*

Moses was surprised, without knowing the reason. He knew about this arcane law of *lex talionis* developed by Babylonians for criminals to receive punishment exactly proportionate to the crime against the victim, often literally. There were differences of opinion in earlier societies regarding the literalisms of the widely accepted law, and it was the specific nature of the law laid down by God which Moses found surprising, especially following on the modifying of the law on accidental and murder with intent. He would like to hear more about this from God, especially regarding the taking of *“life for life”* distinction.

But God was continuing with the application of the law to animals:

*“If a bull gores a man to death the bull must be stoned to death, and its meat not eaten; but the owner of the bull will not be held responsible. However, if the bull has a previous habit of goring, and the owner has been aware and has ignored it, and it kills, that bull and the owner must both be put to death. If there is an agreement between the parties that monetary payment is acceptable then the guilty party can be redeemed from death . . .”*

God continued to give Moses a list of social and criminal laws and statutes covering damages to animals, individuals and property, with the respective just compensations depending on the circumstances. In addition, there were death penalties for sorcerers and sorceresses; anyone who had sexual relations with an animal; and idolaters of gods other than the God of Israel.

In addition to the *“Laws of Punishment”* there were *“Laws of Justice and Money”* Restitution for harm done was accompanied by varied compensation: sometimes these were calculated at five-to-one in the case of cattle, or four-to-one in the case of sheep, or

one-for one-, or a fifth, or even a half-percent for injury recompense. No interest was to be charged for the loan of money; no advantage was to be taken of widows or orphans; no cloak or coat was to be taken as a pledge without returning it by night-fall. *At all times they were to remember they were a holy people and that God was compassionate.*

As Moses listened to the growing record of laws and statutes and principles he had little time to reflect on them as he was busy writing them on his prepared scrolls, his "***Book of the Covenant***". Days passed into night and he was not conscious of time passing, or even of being hungry. He was only conscious of being with the God of the universe, talking with Him intimately about the laws which would make Israel the chosen nation of God to communicate these laws in turn to enlighten all the nations of the world. He was not only listening to history being made, and living it, he was making it.

When Moses and Joshua returned seven days later to the mountain the surrounding thick cloud had an inner pillar of the ethereal light which had preceded the Israelis all the way from Egypt to Sinai. To the Israelis gathered at the foot of the mountain it looked as if the top of the mountain was on fire as the under-sides of the dark clouds reflected the intense glow from the central pillar of cloud. From this pillar of cloud God spoke again to Moses:

*"I want you to construct a dwelling-place for me on the earth, a sanctuary in which I can be worshiped by the people of Israel. To reflect my glory the sanctuary will have to be designed, and approved in all its essentials by me, for I your God am holy, and all who approach me must be holy.*

*"So, first, call on all the people to make a free-will offering to me for the construction of the sanctuary. Each offering must be prompted by a willing heart and not coerced in any way. Here is a list of my requirements for the sanctuary: gold, silver and bronze; fine linen like silk spun from the fibres of flax straw, and dyed blue, purple and scarlet derived from shell-fish and worms; the coarse black hair from long-haired goats; ram-skins dyed red after all the wool is removed; sea cows from the Red Sea; acacia wood; olive oil for the lights;*

*spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense; and onyx stones and other gems . . .”*

For forty days and nights Moses was on the mountain recording the detailed instructions regarding the building of the sanctuary to be built for the Presence of God on earth among His people. At the end of forty days Moses and Joshua returned to the encampment below, carrying the two *Tablets of the Decalogue* and the additional scrolls of the accumulating “*Book of the Covenant*”.

While Moses had been on the mountain the people of Israel had become restless with the extended absence and eventually, convinced that something disastrous had happened to him such as becoming sick and dying, or even that God had taken him. Either way they had become susceptible to the mounting proposals of the more outspoken individuals from the priestly tribe of Levi who convinced them that they should make an Egyptian bull-calf idol as a god and seek instructions from it about a possible return to Egypt. When they brought this proposal to Aaron, he was reluctant to oppose his fellow-tribesmen and he added his own suggestion: “*Get some of our gold ear-rings and jewellery and bring them to me*” and, when they did this, he gave instructions to make a wooden image of a bull-calf, melted the gold and gave the idol a golden “skin”.

Aaron’s compliance was not because he believed their superstitions but in order to gain time for Moses to return and take command of the increasingly difficult situation. When the bull-calf idol was completed he suggested building an altar to use up more time, and then sought a compromise by proposing “*Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord*”. But the next day the celebrations quickly deteriorated, the singing and dancing around the altar and the golden calf became more abandoned and libidinous into a drunken and erotic orgy.

Moses heard the sounds of this revelry from a distance, and while he was puzzling over the cause, God spoke to him angrily:

*“This people I have brought from Egypt have become corrupt. They have disregarded my commandments and their Covenant*

*commitments and are already worshiping an idolatrous bull-calf, praising it in my Name as having brought them out of Egypt. They are a stiff-necked impossible people whom I will now destroy and raise up another great nation from you.”*

Moses was appalled, both by the conduct of the Israelis and also at the possibility of God destroying them. Why could they not grasp the astonishing vision being given to them by God? What had happened in forty days to change their passionate consecration to God and holiness of life into pagan idolatry and rejection? How could they forget so easily their delivering God from Egypt and worship a ridiculous hand-made idol? Were the angry gods of Egypt following them and corrupting the Israelis as they corrupted Egypt? He refused to consider God’s alternative proposal of raising another nation from him. Joshua’s first reaction was that the camp had been attacked and that the noises they heard were from the battle, but Moses disagreed, saying bitterly, *“It is the sound of victory, not of defeat, but of singing.”*

When they reached the foot of the mountain and approached the camp Moses saw the golden bull-calf on the altar, and the idolatrous revelry, he was livid with rage. He hurled the two ***Tablets of the Decalogue*** to the ground among the drunken, dancing celebrators, smashing them into fragments, and causing the celebrations to stop in shocked silence. Pushing his way through the retreating crowds he strode towards the golden bull-calf and hurled it into the sacrificial fire on the altar. Consumed by a vast rage he pulled the melted idol from the flames with ashes of the altar and, picking up a nearby boulder, he smashed the idol into powder among the ashes. Taking handfuls of this he threw them into wine-pots and water-pots standing around, and gave harshly-worded orders to every Israeli to drink the polluted liquid. The milling crowds were so intimidated by Moses’ all-consuming fury that they obeyed without protest.

Moses was not finished. Turning to his older brother, Aaron, he demanded furiously why he had taken part in such conspicuous sin.

*“Do not be angry”, Aaron pleaded fearfully. “You know what these people are like. They persuaded me to do what they wanted when you did not appear for so long. I just threw the gold into the fire and it came out that calf.”*

Moses looked at his brother incredulously. It was difficult enough to believe that he could be talked into any form of cooperation in the idolatry, but it was beyond belief to claim that the golden calf created itself in the flames. Was he suggesting some supernatural elements? When the humiliated Aaron had nothing more to say Moses ordered him to call on all those who supported Moses in his present actions with the idol and altar to come and stand beside him. The tribal leaders of Levi came promptly and stood next to him, and Aaron joined them. Moses ordered them:

*“Each one of you take a sword and go throughout the camp and kill each brother and friend and neighbour who took part in this idolatrous sin against God.”*

By the time the Levites had finished their bloody task of investigating the original perpetrators of the idolatry three thousand people had been killed. Moses partly consoled them with the words:

*“You have been set apart by the Lord today, for you made a choice against your own sons and brothers, and He has blessed you this day.”*

The next day Moses called the community together and told them, *“You have committed a great sin. But now I will go up to the Lord, and perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.”*

Despite his own rage he was concerned that God, in his divine anger, might destroy the people of Israel, and on his return to the mountain he pleaded with God: *“These people have committed a great sin, but please forgive them—if not, then blot me also out of the **Book of the Covenant** you have agreed.”*

Moses was conscious that God’s reply was distinctly stern:

*“Whoever has sinned against me I will blot out of the **Book**, and that does not apply to you. Return to the people and continue your*

*journey to the Promised Land. When the appropriate time comes I will punish the people for this great sin. I will not go with you in person, but I will send my angel with you as I promised. Inform the people that they are stubborn and ungrateful, and if I were present personally with them I would destroy them without a moment's delay”.*

Changing the subject, God told Moses that He had chosen two men—Bezaleel, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah; and Ohaliab, son of Ahisamah, of the tribe of Dan—to help with the construction of the sanctuary, the “**Tabernacle**”, or his dwelling-place among the people. He had fitted them with the necessary spirit of God and all the requisite skills to make everything for the Tabernacle. They would be assisted by selected craftsmen to help them to complete the work according to His plan.

Moses was relieved that the crisis was over for the time being, but now he was beginning to feel confident enough with this God to ask a question he had been pondering for some time:

*“You have been telling me, ‘Lead these people’, but you have not yet let me know the identity of this angel who is to go with us. You know me by my name of Moses, and you have indicated that you are pleased with me. If that is so, then please teach me more about you and your ways so that I may know you and continue to find favour in your eyes. Remember that this nation is your people.”*

For a moment Moses thought that he had gone too far with this God he was just beginning to know, and with whom he wanted a closer relationship, but God replied, “*My Presence will go with you and in this assurance you can rest in contentment.*”

Moses replied gratefully, “*If your Presence does not go with us then do not let us go further from this place. If you do not go with us how is it possible for anyone to know that you are truly with us or for us? What else makes us different from all other nations than that we see your face?*”

There was silence for a short period, and Moses again wondered whether he was endangering his personal relationship with God by his persistence, but then God answered him: *“All right. I will certainly do what you have requested, because of my delight in you personally, and I know who and what you are.”*

Moses was exultant at the extent and potential of his developing relationship with God. In a burst of daring enthusiasm he blurted, *“Now, please show me your glory!”*

The spontaneous words were no sooner out of his mouth when he was swept by an overwhelming fear at his temerity. This was Israel’s God of Creation, **“The Eternal”**, he was addressing. This was the fearsome God of Noah, who had destroyed most of the world at that time in a Flood, and he, Moses, had just asked him to see Him in all His glory. Only six months before he had even been afraid to look at Him in the bush as he stood inarticulate with his sandals off! But God was speaking words of comfort and approval:

*“I will cause all my glory to pass before you, and I will demonstrate to you the power and significance of why I am known as ‘Lord—the Eternal’ to you personally. You will see and understand my person, character and purpose; how that in justice I will have mercy, and in punishment I will have compassion. But you cannot see my face, for no-one can see my face and live.*

*“There is a place close to where you are standing now where you may stand in a cleft of the rock. I will cause my Presence in all its glory to pass before you there; but I will protect you by the shadow of my hand from the otherwise inevitable consequence of death. When I have passed I will remove the shadow, and you will see the substance of my Presence from behind, and you will have seen what no-one else has ever seen.”*

Then, like the soaring notes of a trumpet, God spoke the words:

*“I am the Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, with infinite love and faithfulness for all manner of sins, yet not leaving the guilty unpunished to the third and fourth generations.”*

Moses stood in silent awe and wonder, his mind inflamed with the splendour and majesty of God as the glory of Israel's God passed before him in indescribable grandeur. It was an anticipatory experience of heaven and eternity. He was not just the chosen servant of God; he was a favoured child of God. He did not know it at the time, but his whole being was transformed with a divine radiance, seen by the people of Israel when he returned to the camp . . . When the glory of God had gone, some time later God spoke again to Moses in more practical tone:

*“Bring me two tablets of stone like the first ones, and I will write again the same words as before the originals were broken. Be ready in the morning to return here to present yourself to me. No-one is to come with you, nor to come anywhere near to the mountain, not even the cattle or sheep.”*

Moses was aware of the change of tone in God's voice as it changed from intimate friendship to serious warning. But he felt he had to make the attempt to divert God from His postponed decision to punish Israel, and he feared for the people's future as God's chosen people. A true priest had to represent the interests of the people to God, as well as the interests of God to the people. He fell to his knees on the ground, and said,

*“O Lord, if I, your servant, have found favour in your eyes then I plead with you to continue your Presence with us. It is true this is a stubborn people given to sin, but forgive us, I pray, and keep us as your inheritance.”*

God replied:

*“Here I give you my oath by unilateral Covenant. I will do unprecedented miracles among your people such as the nations of the world have never seen. Do the things I have told you throughout these days on the mountain and I will drive out from Canaan where you are going every resident tribe and nation. But be careful to make no treaties with any of them and destroy all their altars and sacred stones, for I am a jealous God. Do not fashion gods from metals. Keep*

*the Feasts, and the Sabbaths. Write these words in the Book of the Covenant.”*

It was an awesome undertaking but agreed by the whole community and Moses returned to the mountain with their agreement. Moses returned shortly with further instructions from God for the people to prepare to consecrate themselves in anticipation of their divine calling. Over the following three days they were to wash their bodies and clothes, and refrain from sexual intercourse. Then, when Moses returned to the mountains for further commands from God, they were not to approach the foot of the mountain out of curiosity or any other reason or they would die.

On the morning of the third day there was a heightened sense of anticipation in the encampment as the mountain became enshrouded with ominous dark clouds, followed by rolling peals of thunder and flashes of lightning, culminating with a piercing sound of a trumpet. At the sound Moses signalled to the people to gather at the foot of the mountain where the dark roiling clouds were now aflame with the redness of fire, and the whole mountain trembled violently. At the command of God Moses stepped into the divine maelstrom and slowly disappeared from sight.

Some time afterwards he returned to say that God had sent him to bring Aaron, his two sons, Nadab and Abihu, plus seventy elders with him into His Presence. When they reached the place near the top of the mountain where Moses had already met with God, the clouds which had surrounded them parted to reveal an expanse like a crystal ceiling, with the immensity of intensely blue skies beyond. In that expanse was a throne, and from that throne angels descended with food and drink and – utterly incredible as it seemed to all of them – they ate and drank in the Presence of the Almighty God, while God spoke from the throne regarding the details of His *Covenant*. The experience confirmed to all of them that Moses was indeed a close intimate of their Hebrew God with a unique access to His Presence at all times<sup>33</sup>.

There was a period of intense activity as the whole community

<sup>33</sup> Exodus 24 vv 9-11

contributed gold, silver, jewels to the *Tent of Meeting* while the furnishings and vessels for the *Tabernacle* were being made and assembled. The sum of all the sacrificial offerings and festivals involved in the completed structure would produce a people fitted by God to live together with Him in

unrestricted holiness, blessing, pleasure, love and joy in a beautiful and productive creation. Moses re-read the words of God:

*“If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees their fruits. Your sowing and harvests will know no interruption, you will never be hungry and you will always be safe.*

*“There will be peace in the land, with no enemies, no animal predators, no threats of any kind. Your children as well as your crops will multiply. I will be your God and will dwell among you, and you will be my people. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt.”*

All of this was on the mind of Moses as he dictated the instructions from God to the God-selected individuals responsible for the Tabernacle, its furnishing and services. On the mountain with God he had been overwhelmed by the immensity and majesty of the glory of God, together with his own acceptance as channel of the divine purposes, but now in the God-directed minutiae of the revelation of the Tabernacle, God was giving to and through him to the people of Israel and the world a detailed item-by-item unfolding of the means by which any sinful creature could be made holy enough to enter the Presence of the Almighty God. In a world where over three thousand gods were being worshiped in innumerable nations and tribes, where arrogant and duplicitous priesthoods claimed the prerogatives of kings—and more!—often living lives of questionable morality while exacting dubious worship in the names and authorities of their distant unreachable deities, he, Moses, leader of a small homeless rabble in a barren desert had been given by a real and living God the promise of eternal salvation for all.

Day after day, as the many parts of the Tabernacle were

assembled Moses supervised the details of the sacrificial offerings, the festivals and the practical requirements of individual and communal hygiene; and Aaron supervised the making of the priests' garments, and the requirements of their services in preparing the animals and ingredients of the various offerings. The tribe of Levi had been consecrated by God to be the priesthood on behalf of the people of Israel, and the other eleven tribes were responsible to provide for their needs at all levels. Moses marvelled at the intricacy, efficiency and beauty of the unfolding revelation of the redemptive approach to the holy Presence of God, and he was impressed to note that in his written instructions from God the word "holy" appeared over 150 times.

Moses was becoming increasingly conscious that God was not just providing him with a succession of laws to mould His chosen people into a nation such as the world had never known, but a theocratic nation of individuals made holy by God in order to be—as He had declared to Abraham—“*a light to enlighten the nations*”. It meant nothing less than being God's witnesses for holiness to all the world for all time. It meant the removal of evil, the defeat of Satan, and the recovery of all that their first parents, Adam and Eve, and their later offspring had lost.

He had been only superficially conscious of all of this when listening to God, and writing down the details in the *Book of the Covenant*, but now with reflection, and as he watched the *Tabernacle* becoming a reality, the divine purpose was dawning on him. The *Covenant* stipulations regarding the sacrificial offerings, Sabbaths and festivals; the long lists of statutes regarding righteous living and crime, court procedures, marriage and divorce, family inheritance, inter-personal relationships; the precepts for personal holiness; did not just derive from the revelations *from* God; they were truly revelations *of* God. The creatures created from dust and made into the image of God were now being instructed by God as to how—despite their sins—they could be transformed into God-likeness. Nothing less than “*holy as the Lord God is holy*” in God's own words.

So as Moses watched the Tabernacle furnishings, vessels,

ingredients, representations such as cherubim, bells, pomegranates, designs and ornamentation and patterns, the separation of animals into parts and applications, he sought to go beyond the rational metaphysics and myths and even moral theories of the philosophers and priests claiming intellectual perceptions from human experience or arcane insight, and to reach into interpreting the detailed revelations as coming from the mind of God with the intention of making the creature He had created into the image of Himself. The commandments were divine **Law**. The statutes were divine **Principles**. The precepts were divine **Conduct**.

There would never be a greater opportunity to forge a people in the image of God than in this infertile, sun-scorched wasteland, gathered at the foot of a cloud-covered, flame-wrapped mountain, with the sounds of heavenly trumpet blasts and God's own voice ringing in the ears of a people to be bound in a **Covenant** of obedience to an improbable God, and for the revelation of that God to be carried throughout the world as "*a light to enlighten all nations.*" Truly a God worthy of His promises to Abraham and Noah.

The **Covenant Tablets of the Decalogue** to be placed in the *Ark of the Covenant* were not just tokens of kinship, not just articles of agreement. They were the declarations of a unique relationship, of a heavenly Father and His earthly children, "*Israel is my son*". They were the bonds of union between a divine Husband in heaven and His holy wife, Israel, on earth. God had chosen to be married to Israel, not just because of a promise to Abraham, but because of unmerited love. Such love required an equal response of worthiness: to be a holy nation.

All of this made God's revelations to Moses different from all human revelations. This made God's **Law** different from human laws. What God willed His creatures must do because of His love and holiness. Failure to obey was not just an infringement, but a sin. The laws of other nations could pardon a man for murder, but murder in God's **Law** was to take life – God's sole prerogative as the Creator—to sin against God; therefore the life-recompense belonged solely to God and not man's conception of justice or mercy. God had chosen

Israel because of His love. He had become Father and Husband and Ruler of Israel because of love; therefore God demanded of Israel, that they love God, they love their neighbours, and they love the strangers among them. God was not just seeking obedient citizens for the kingdom of heaven, but a loving response to Himself and all creatures for eternity.

Moses now recalled the mysterious words of God spoken to him at the burning-bush: “*When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain*”. The statement had puzzled Moses at the time, and later when he reflected on its possible significance: Recently he had come to accept that it meant the separation of himself from the people to speak with God on the mountain as intermediary: a priest representing God to the people of Israel, and representing the people to God. But now he was realizing a different more profound meaning behind the words. His service for God and Israel was more than just being a channel of communications, or a recorder of experiences. It also meant being a diviner of the mind of God, a sharer in the meaning of worship of God, a revealer of the divine mysteries of redemption, and the perfecter of sinful creatures by grace and love. He recalled the other words of God: “*You shall be as God to Pharaoh, and Aaron as your prophet*”. To be truly God’s priest, he would have to be made “*like God*”—and that was what was happening to him as he served God “*on this mountain*”.

The forty days and nights on the mountain had made him a “*servant of God*”; but the forty nine days from the first day of worship in the completed Tabernacle—the new “*Tent of Meeting*”—when the Cloud of God’s Presence came down over the inner *Holy of Holies*, to the completion of the sacrificial offerings and the Cloud moved away on the final stage of their journey to the Promised Land, had made him a true priest of God. Aaron was high priest functionally representing the people of *Israel to God in the Tabernacle procedures*; but Moses was a greater priest because he represented *God to the people of Israel and the world* by ensuring their daily obedience to His *Covenant*. A priest was not just someone

who “speaks for God”, but is one with spiritual access to God, spiritual perception and understanding of what is in God’s mind.

Moses had a sudden thought as he was meditating about the respective responsibilities of priests and prophets. God had said that the Tabernacle was “*a pattern of things in the heavens*”, earthly shadows of the substance in heaven. But what if the Tabernacle and its services were also spiritual shadows of something yet to be revealed? His mind was reaching back into the past when the patriarchs spoke prophetically of events happening in the future. There was Jacob prophesying about a ruler from the tribe of Judah with a sceptre, a “*messiah*” or “*anointed one*”:

*“The sceptre will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, **until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his**”.* (my emphasis)

Who was this person who would rule the nations? Who was this one who would combine the offices of priest, prophet and ruler in his person—obviously God’s “*anointed one*”, the “*messiah*”? “If he combined the virtues of priest, prophet and ruler in his person then the Tabernacle with all its symbolism would be simply a shadow of this Anointed One from God

Until this moment he had been occupied with the day-to-day physical and spiritual needs of Israel, and in more recent days the personal spiritual implications for himself. He had come to accept himself as one of a specially chosen line of special representative chosen by God to reveal His purposes in Creation: Adam and Eve before they sinned; Enoch as he walked with God; Noah before and after the Flood; Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph. But he, Moses, was uniquely different as God was not just visiting him but instructing him about a permanent dwelling-place among His people on earth; a place on earth patterned from a Temple/Throne in heaven, from which He or His “*anointed one*” would rule Israel and the world in the future.

This meant that the details of the *Covenant* given to him by God and enabling sinful creatures to be made holy and fit to worship a

holy God, as he had thought, would also be regulations enabling these holy saints to assist in the rule of the kingdom of God in the future after the manner of the angels of God presently functioning between heaven and earth. Holiness as God was unfolding it in the sacrificial offerings made human creatures fit to stand in His Presence, but also it signified physical perfection in the redeemed individuals, and thereby fitted to rule over God's creation as God had intended for the sinless Adam in the beginning of human creation. The animals in the offerings had to be perfect. The furniture and vessels in the Tabernacle had to be perfect; the priests who conducted the services had to be perfect. This perfection was possible through the sacrificial death of the unblemished animals and the presentation of their life-blood on the altar before God. Would the future Messiah from God also have to be killed to produce perfect people?

It was a monumental vision both for himself and for the people of Israel, nothing less than being perfect people in a commitment to make a perfect world. From what he knew of the world in his time Moses knew it was humanly impossible; but with the help of the God who had demonstrated His powers in Egypt before people and gods, who had brought them this far, and who had provided His plan for His people now and in the Promised Land, it was divinely possible. God's Presence in the Cloud of Glory over the Holy of Holies was His personal guarantee of eventual triumph.

On the twentieth day of the second month of the second year since leaving Egypt the people of Israel departed from Mount Sinai when the *Cloud of Glory* above the Tabernacle moved ahead of the encampment. They had arrived at Mount Sinai a disorganized mixed rabble of acquired pagan beliefs and practices, and they left a community of Children of God, a royal priesthood anointed by God, a holy people consecrated to the Almighty God.

A few months later they arrived at the small town of Kadesh Barnea on the southern borders of Canaan. Kadesh Barnea was an oasis located in a small lush valley with a cluster of clear fresh springs and extensive pasturelands. Here God told Moses to send out a scouting expedition of twelve men, one from each of the twelve

tribes, to explore the land of Canaan ahead of their entering it. Actually, there was no “land” of Canaan as such; Canaan was the name of unknown origin given to the many disparate tribes living in the region between Egypt and Syria. Nations to the south, such as Egypt, or to the north, such as Syria and Babylon, and from the eastern Great Sea coast such as the Hittites and Phoenicians, had all marched across, or left behind remnants, to colonize it with tribes. It was a conglomeration of races and gods and cultures, together with the original tribal descendants of Abraham from his Egyptian maid, Hagar, and those from his second wife, Keturah, and from Lot, his nephew, all with their varied claims, jealousies and antagonisms directed against the incoming people of Israel.

In these circumstances it was a reasonable precaution to send out spies for an exploratory survey of potential obstacles and resistance to prepare the Israelis. Moses’ instructions to the twelve spies were to survey the land from north to south, and east to west. The journey would involve 150 miles from the Negev desert in the south to Rehab near Lebo Hanath in the north; and 80 miles from Hebron in the east, to the Philistine-occupied sea-coast in the west, and it would take an estimated forty days.

When the forty days of exploration were completed the twelve spies returned to Kadesh where the people of Israel anxiously awaited their report. The twelve spies agreed that it was indeed a productive land, and they had brought back with them a large sample of grapes from the valley of Eschol which required two of them to carry. But then opinions diverged when ten of them reported that the land was heavily fortified and likely to be well defended by Amalekites, Hivites, Jebusites, Amorites and Philistines against invaders. Only Joshua and Caleb presented an encouraging report, despite the admitted numbers and strengths of the various inhabitants. Caleb was especially confident, declaring categorically, “*We should definitely take possession of the land.*” But the optimistic reports of Joshua and Caleb only intensified the opposition of their ten companions, who insisted:

*“We cannot defeat these people because they are far stronger than*

*us. This is a land that has swallowed up several empires who invaded then withdrew. The people are mostly physical giants descended from the nephilim, who were a mixture of demons and humans. We are like grasshoppers in our own eyes compared with them, and without doubt we look the same to them.”*

The insistent pessimism of the ten spies had an expanding and depressing effect on the people of Israel, and the disappointed response from the ten spies was fuelled by recent memories of deprivation and hopes deferred while in the desert. The murmured complaints swelled in volume and there were shouts at Moses, *“We should have remained and died in Egypt, or even in the desert . . . Why did God ever bring us out of Egypt to die here or in the so-called Promised Land? . . . We should return to Egypt under a new leader”*.

To Moses and Aaron listening to the rising crescendo of anger, this was not just an exaggerated complaint about desert hardships and food, as had happened on previous occasions; this was outright rebellion against God and against the sworn **Covenant**, with potentially terrifying consequences. Joshua and Caleb were consumed with anger and tore their clothes, covering their heads and bodies with handfuls of dust, and declared:

*“The land we saw was a good land, as God said. If we remain true to God and the Covenant He will give us this land. Only do not rebel against God. Do not be afraid of the people of Canaan, because we will devour them as God promised. They have no protection, and God is with us.”*

But the response of the people was a sustained roar of *“No more . . . No Moses . . . Egypt. Egypt . . . Egypt . . .”* followed by a hail of stones. Moses and Aaron signalled to Joshua and Caleb to follow them, and they walked away from the enraged Israelis towards the *Tent of Meeting* and threw themselves on the ground beneath the hovering *Cloud of Glory*. Before they could speak the *Cloud* flamed with the *Presence of God*, and His voice spoke in anger:

*“How long will these people despise me and my Covenant? How*

*long will they refuse to believe the miraculous powers I have shown them? I will destroy them and make of you a greater and stronger nation than they.”*

From his prone position Moses shook his head in frustrated weeping despair, and lifted his hand in protest and appeal:

*“Then the Egyptians will hear about the failure to accomplish your purpose. They have already spread the news about your intended purpose and the tribes of Canaan know about it. They all know that you have spoken face to face with this people, and that your Cloud travels with us day and night. If you destroy this rebellious people with a stroke as they rightly deserve the nations of the world who hear about it will say you, the Almighty God, were not able to do what you said about bringing them to the Promised Land.”*

Aaron, Joshua and Caleb lifted their heads to look at the anguished Moses in startled amazement as they heard him address God for the first time in such personally frank terms. Aaron and Joshua had been with him on the mountain on occasions, but never heard him converse with God, but Moses was absorbed in his own grief and passion, and continued;

*“Now, O God, is the time to display all your divine power, love, mercy and compassion, a God who even forgives the sin of rebellion, and forgives the sin of His people. By all means punish those who are guilty of fomenting the rebellion, but have mercy on those who ignorantly followed not realizing the consequences.*

Moses’ passionate plea was apparently approved by God, who replied:

*“I forgive them as you request. However, as surely as I live and my glory fills not only this Tabernacle but also the whole earth, not a single one of those people who saw my glory and power in the miraculous signs I demonstrated in Egypt, and in the desert. I repeat, not one of them will ever see the land I promised to them and their forefathers on oath in the Covenant. No-one who has despised me, my*

*words and my Name, will ever set foot in the land.*

*“But Joshua and Caleb, who are of a different spirit altogether, and who also obeyed me fully, will be brought into the land they explored and reported on favourably, and their descendants will inherit. As for the others, tell them to turn their backs on Canaan and return to the desert and the Red sea. There the very things they feared will really happen to them: their bodies will fall and be buried there. Only their children under twenty-one will be spared to return to Canaan and enjoy the provision their parents rejected. In the desert those who complained will live as nomadic shepherds for forty years—one year for every day the land was explored and rejected—and they will die there. In the forty years, unlike the previous year in the desert, they will suffer for their sins of rebellion and will die in the desert without hope.”*

The light in the *Cloud* died as God withdrew and Moses, Aaron and Caleb rose to their feet wearily. They had been personally exonerated, but the weight of God’s punishment for the people of Israel, just though it was, lay heavily on them. It was not just the fact that they, too, would have to wait out the forty years in the desert with the guilty rebels, but also the enormous disappointment to be borne daily by the rebellious people with only the expectation of a death without hope at the end.

Before Moses had called the people together to hear the judgement of God against them God had already struck down with a deadly plague the ten spies who had brought the negative report from Canaan. This, with the report from Moses of God’s judgment on them, stunned the people of Israel and there were loud cries of grief, repentance and despair. Several of the leaders among them ignored the advice of Moses to return to their tents and accept God’s judgement quietly, and they declared their intention, after confessing their sin, to march into Canaan regardless. Moses warned them that they were not equipped on their own to attack even the first of the tribes on the borders of Canaan, but they went ahead anyway, and were decimated.

Moses was overwhelmed by this and other likely catastrophic consequences of Israel's rebellion in the future. To come so close to the Promised Land—less than fifty miles away—after four hundred years since God's promise to Abraham, a year after the historic deliverance from Egypt, and a divine revelation of a national, universal and eternal destiny, and then have a whole generation of Israelis wiped out because of malcontents and rabble-rousers, left him stunned and dispirited.

It was true that God had left the door open for the next generation of Israelis, but what if they, too, were to rebel in the same way at the same time forty years from now? Would they have learned a different lesson after forty years of nomadic existence in the deserts of Arabia instead of just one year? For the first time since he lived in Midian he felt the burden of his eighty-plus years. All the challenges of Egypt's confrontation, and the responsibilities of leading the two million people of Israel in the deserts of Arabia to and from Sinai, were now a weight which crushed him in futility and despair as his mind multiplied them by the forty years to come. Because of his continuing despondency he was even reluctant to approach the *Tent of Meeting* to speak with God regarding what was to happen next. What could he say that would not sound like the complaints of the people, and which he had already voiced to God on his own behalf when he asked to be delivered from the earlier responsibilities ?

But at this black depth of sickening disappointment, like a fire-fly in the night, he experienced a sudden flash of something too faint to be described as hope or expectation. As he went back over his recent doom-laden thoughts in search of a clue to the dancing light, it slowly dawned on him like the morning star before the rising dawn that perhaps the reason why God had not accepted his request to be freed from his responsibility of leadership of the complaining Israelis was because God knew there would be other occasions of complaints and rejection by the Israelis, just as He had known that Pharaoh would reject Him ten times but He and Moses would eventually triumph. God was the "*I AM*: the "Eternal Presence".

Like the promise of a new day Moses took a deep breath and began

to address the challenges facing him and his fellow-Israelis. It was true, he now realised, that it was highly unlikely God would have gone to all the trouble and drama of Mount Sinai just to accept a requested resignation one month or so later. The *Tabernacle*, the *Two Tablets of the Decalogue*, the *Ark of the Covenant*, all were evidences of God's divine commitment and promise of fulfilment. These would be carried with them for the forty years of exile in the deserts of Arabia as daily reminders of the Presence of God and His promises. Moses was now ready to face God and the future.

When he went to the *Tent of Meeting* and faced the *Cloud of Glory* it was already alight with God's Presence, and His first words dismissed all the previous fears of Moses as He declared:

*"After you enter the land I promised you as your home, and you present your offerings to me as I have described, then you must add two more offerings, one of grain and one of wine, and both with fire like the other offerings . . .*

*"Every native-born Israeli must do this when he brings an offering made by fire as an aroma well-pleasing to the Lord. For future generations when an alien or anyone else living among you presents an offering made by fire as an aroma pleasing to me he must do exactly as Israelis do. **The community has to have the same rules for both you and the alien living among you, for all generations to come.** You and the alien will be the same before me, and the same laws will apply to both of you . . .*

*"Further, and pay close attention, through all future **generations you will make tassels on the corners of your garments, with a blue cord on each tassel. You will have these tassels to look at every day of your lives and each time you see the blue cord you will remember all the commands I have given you that you must obey them and not follow your own ways. Every minute of every day you will remember to obey each detail of my commands. I am the Lord your God.**" (my emphasis)*

Kadesh-Barnea, where the people of Israel were encamped, was eleven miles north of Mount Sinai and about fifty miles south-west

of Beersheba, the nearest town of any note in Canaan. Its major distinction was not just the last adequate springs before the deserts to the west and south, but also because it was the site of the recent major war between the Egyptians and the Hittites, the first and major defeat of Pharaoh Rameses the Second. The confident Egyptians had sent an army of 25,000 to engage the Hittites, only to find that the Hittites were superior in numbers—37,000 and 3000 chariots—and strategy to defeat the Egyptians. Moses had heard that, after signing a Peace Treaty with the Hittites two years later, in 1269 BC, Rameses had produced a lengthy positive record of his version of the battle for posterity, the last mention of the mysterious Hittite empire. It had helped the Pharaoh to cover the embarrassment of his defeat by the Israelite exodus from Egypt.

In turning away from Kadesh and Canaan, their “*Promised Land*,” Moses knew from personal experience that the people of Israel were going to face unprecedented hardships from the deserts of Arabia with their tens of thousands of miles of sand, sandstone, limestone and granite, interspersed with wild and rugged mountain ranges to which God had condemned them.

The Negev, immediately behind them, was a highland made up of sandy plains, rolling hills, small fertile oases, craters and fantastically-shaped mountains arising out of the barren deserts. It was in these desert-lands that Abraham had travelled in his journeys to and from Egypt, and where he had sent his Egyptian maid-mother of Ishmael. It was from here he had journeyed to Mount Moriah to offer up his son, Isaac. It was in these savage mountains that the descendants of Esau, the Edomites, lived and from which they raided the wealthy caravans travelling to and from Syria and Egypt known as “*the Way of the land of the Philistines*”. The places scrolled through Moses’ memory, as barren and undistinguished as when he had visited and then passed through them in his own nomadic wanderings after fleeing into exile from Egypt: Hormeh, Mount Hor, Ezion-Geber, Elath. The group of three springs in Kadesh-Barnea region where they were now were drying up from the demands of the two million people of Israel encamped around the oasis, and the

people were complaining again to Moses about the shortage of water. Their complaints were less militant than on previous occasions but they were still enough to challenge forcefully Moses and Aaron's leadership.

Forty years later a new generation of Israelis arrived once more in Kadesh Barnea. While they were there Moses' sister, Miriam, died; and again, incredibly, the people complained to Moses just like their fore-fathers. There was still no water as on the previous occasion, but when this new generation used the same complaints of their fathers that they preferred the circumstances in Egypt to those in Kadesh Barnea, Moses was furious. When he and Aaron approached God about the matter God told them:

*"Take your staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the people together. Speak to the rock before their eyes and it will pour out water. You will bring water out of the rock for the people and animals to drink."*

This anger was still simmering in Moses and Aaron when, to Aaron's surprise, instead of speaking to the rock as God had ordered, Moses struck the rock with his staff and added angrily to the people who were crowding forward at the gushing flow of water, *"Listen to me, you rebels! Don't think that every time that you complain I will strike a rock for your wishes."*

The words were no sooner out of his mouth than both Moses and Aaron knew he had erred badly, because the *Cloud of Glory* suddenly flared with the light of the Presence of God, and God spoke:

*"Because you did not consider my holiness before you acted as you just did, and you took it on yourself to act differently from what I commanded, neither of you will lead this people into the Promised Land. This is where Aaron will end his life. He will not be permitted to enter the Promised Land because both of you disobeyed my instructions by striking the rock and adding words that I did not command. Put Aaron's high priestly robes on his son, Eleazar, and both go up into Mount Hor, and I will end Aaron's life there."*

God then addressed Aaron directly: “

*You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any share among them. I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelis. I am giving to the Levites all the tithes in Israel as their inheritance in return for the work they do while serving at the Tabernacle. From today other Israelis must not go near the Tabernacle or they will bear the consequences of their sin and will die. It is the Levites alone who will do the work of the Tabernacle and bear the responsibilities for any offence against it. This is a permanent ordinance for future generations. When the Levites receive the tithe from the other tribes they must give a tenth of that tithe to me . . .”*

Moses and Aaron were stunned at the suddenness and severity of their punishments which seemed so disproportionate to the temporary irritation. But as they talked it over, while Aaron handed over his high priest's garments to his son, Moses knew that the punishment was not because of a simple slip of the tongue, or momentary annoyance, but because he had usurped the prerogative of God in substituting his own words instead of those spoken to him by God, and consequently had misrepresented Him in words and attitude to the people of God, Israel. Aaron's sin had been that, as high priest, he had the responsibility to restrain and rebuke Moses at the time, and not imply approval of the action by his silence. No-one was immune from the demands of meticulous obedience to the words of God.

As Aaron and his son, Eleazar, accompanied by Moses, left the encampment for the mountain there was silence, broken by the sounds of weeping which increased to loud wailing as they disappeared from sight. It only ceased when Moses returned with Eleazar, without explanation of what they had seen and done except for announcing thirty days of mourning for Aaron.

It was not just the sadness of family bereavement that afflicted Moses on his return from the mountain, but also the consciousness

that he, too, would die without entering the Promised Land. And it was not just the thought of God's terrifying holiness which bothered him, but also the thought of the level of holiness which God expected from all his people whatever their status. No sooner had Moses grasped the exciting dimension of a God of indescribable love and compassion than he was confronted by a God of equal or greater hatred of the most minor sin. A God jealous for the perfection of holiness in His creatures. A God of consuming fire purging all dross from his sin-attracted creatures.

There God spoke to Moses again:

*"Now proceed across the Zared Valley, beside the Salt Sea and the border between Edom and Moab, and enter the region of Moab at Ar. When you reach the territories of the Ammonites do not provoke them or give them any reason to fight for I have given them their land as descendants of Lot."*

Moses was surprised because he knew that this territory originally belonged to a legendary people known as *rephidim*, similar to, or related to, the notorious *nephilim*, said to be descended from a combination of demons and humans. The legend said they had been destroyed by the Ammonites, which had resulted in the Amorites being given a fearsome reputation, and it seemed that God was saying that He had given them their victory. God continued:

*"When you cross the Arnon Gorge you will be in the country of the Amorite king, Sihon, and you will fight with him. Today, right now, I am already putting them in fear of you, and all the tribes of Canaan as they hear the increasing reports of your victories."*

But when Moses told the people of Israel what God had said there were murmurs of complaints and opposition just like their fathers of a generation before. For punishment God sent a plague of poisonous snakes to afflict them and as a consequence many of them died. Eventually, they appealed to Moses for his help for them to be forgiven by God yet again. When Moses spoke with God he was told: *"Make a snake of brass and put it on a pole, and tell them that*

*anyone who looks at it will live.”*

It seemed a strange command to Moses after God’s strict injunction not to make “*any graven image*” of any creature. Moses had assumed that to be because of the common practice of other nations, such as Egypt, of making idols out of such representations. However, he concluded finally that it must be because it had symbolic significance; namely, that only those who looked at the snake and believed would be healed. But, then, why a snake? The snake in the Garden of Eden was considered a powerful symbol of satanic evil to the Israelis. Unless God meant to demonstrate His own greater power than that of the snake which had caused those afflicted to sin by rebellion? Or, again, had it some future significance for a later generation?

It was a sullen but chastened and obedient community of Israel that followed God’s directions to Moses. They had been given plentiful supplies of water, which refreshed their spirits as well as bodies, but the news of their first approaching battle made them apprehensive despite God’s assurances to them. They left the desert for the hill country of Mattanah, and after travelling northward they reached the territories of Edom and Moab.

With the help of God the people of Israel were able to defeat the borderland tribes of Amalekites, Edomites and Moabites and consolidated the occupation of their territories on the eastern banks of the River Jordan, opposite the infamous fortress-city of Jericho on the Canaan side of the River. With such extensive victories over huge territories Moses now had the task of post-war division of land and spoils among the Twelve Tribes of Israel who had contributed the fighting men for the conquering army. From the heights of Mount Pisgah he could look over the River Jordan and see the notorious walled fortress-city of Jericho, the first and most terrifying obstacle to face Israel after they entered the Promised Land.

He was trying to calculate where and how the recently conquered territories of Heshbon and Bashan fitted into the divisions and jurisdictions of the various tribes of Israel after the conquest of Canaan when God spoke to him:

*“When you cross the Jordan you must get rid of all the inhabitants just as you have done in Heshbon and Bashan. Destroy every evidence of their idolatry—sculptures, gold and silver images, and all their sacred groves and shrines. Divide up the land into lots according to the number of your clans, giving the larger inheritances to the larger groups, and smaller inheritances to the smaller groups. What each group inherits will be according to the names of its ancestral tribes and by lot.*

*“However, I warn you, if you do not get rid of the present inhabitants of the land they will become a source of constant vexation to you; and, more than that, I will treat you as I plan to treat them. You have been warned.”*

With the broad outline of His plans to Moses, God now turned to more specific details

*“When you enter Canaan, these are the boundaries of the territory I have decreed as your inheritance in the Promised Land. The southern border will include some parts of the Desert of Zin along the border of Edom. On the east, the southern border will begin at the tip of the Salt Sea, go south of Akkrabbion and continue to Zin, south of Kadesh Barnea. From there it will go to Hazar-Addar and over to Azmon, where it will turn and join the Wadi of Egypt and and at the Sea. Your western boundary will be the coast of the Great Sea. For your northern boundary, run a line from the Great Sea to Mount Hor, and from Mount Hor to Lebo Hazmath. Then the boundary will go to Zedad, continue to Ziphron and end at Hazat Enan. For your eastern boundary run a line from Hazar Enan to Shepham, and from Shepham down to Riblah on the east of Ain, then continue along the slopes east of the Sea of Kinnereth, and down along the Jordan to the Salt Sea. This will be the land of Israel, my Promised Land.”*

With these specific outlines laid down by God, Moses now had a clear picture of how its territory would be divided—except for the territories of Heshbon and Bashan of Transjordan which they had just conquered, on the eastern side of the River Jordan within the general

region of the Midianites. The problem was intensified when the leaders of the tribes of Reuben and Gad came to Moses with a request that these territories should be allocated to them because they had the largest herds of livestock, and the Transjordan lands were excellent for grazing. Moses' first reacting was to reject outright their request, and he said without hesitation:

*“Are you trying to avoid going to war together with your brothers in the other tribes while you remain here peacefully? To grant such a request would mean that they would also be reluctant to go further. You sound exactly like your fathers at Kadesh when I sent the spies to explore the land and they believed the negative report. You know what happened to them, and even worse will happen to you.”*

They protested that Moses had misunderstood their requests. They meant only to leave their livestock in Heshbon and Bashan, with their wives and children, while they would go together with their fellow-Israelis to conquer the Promised Land. They had no desire to have more territories inside Canaan, and would only return to Transjordan when all the fighting had stopped. Moses had had time to reflect on their request, and it now seemed reasonable with their added explanation; and it certainly solved the problem of what to do with the conquered territories of Heshbon and Basahan. With the ***Book of the Covenant*** completed and kept together with the ***Tablets of the Covenant*** in the ***Ark of the Covenant***, on the last day of his life, Moses spoke to Israel in a natural amphitheatre in the Arabian desert east of the River Jordan, with Mount Pisgah behind him and the walled city of Jericho visible on the other side of the river. It was the first day of Shebat, the eleventh month of the fortieth year since they left Egypt.

*“No other nation has a God who loves as our does. No other nation has a God who provides salvation and peace as our does. No other nation has a God like our God. That is our message to the people of the Promised Land, and to the world when you are settled there. A knowable, lovable, living God.*

*“But before you carry this message to the nations of the world you yourselves must learn the lessons of obedience to the **Covenant**; before you carry the message of holiness to others you yourselves must be holy. Over a hundred times in the Covenant God uses the word “holy”, and His command is clear: ‘**Be holy as your Father in heaven is holy**’. How you can be holy like Him he has given you in specific details and in a multitude of symbols in the Tabernacle.*

*“If you seek the Lord you will find Him, if you seek Him with all your heart and soul. The words should be bound on your wrists and stamped on your foreheads. To do this you must observe the morning and evening sacrifices each day; the offerings of expiation; the weekly, annual and fifty-year Sabbaths. In addition, you must read the words of the **Covenant** every day, discuss them while at meals with the family, when walking with them, and attach them to the doors of your houses to be read when you exit and enter. To be holy as God is holy is to be devoted to Him in every thought and action of every day from today to the end of your lives. That is your **Covenant** with God, as God’s chosen people and His children.*

*“If you do not obey in every detail the words of this **Book of the Covenant**, if you do not display your reverence for the holy Name of the Lord your God, then the same awesome God will scatter you among the nations of the world. There you will find no acceptance. No peace, no permanent place, and you will find other gods and worship them. The God you reject will afflict you with constant anxiety, disillusion and despair. You will be wracked with fears, tortured with suspense, and in constant expectation of death. Each night you will wish for morning, and each morning you will yearn for night, because of terrors both seen and unseen. You will crave to be slaves again just as you were in Egypt.*

*“Today, my last day here and your last day outside the Promised Land, I call heaven and earth to witness that I have presented to you the issues of life and death, blessings and cursings, so that you may fulfil your destiny as God’s chosen people to a lost world. If you do not do all these things I declare to you before God, who hears my voice, that if for any reason you disobey the words of this Covenant*

*you will certainly be destroyed and the Promised Land will be given to others.*

*“Love God. Listen to Him. Embrace Him with all your hearts. Choose life with Him here, and eternal life with Him forever. Amen.”*

With his address ended, Moses lifted both arms heavenward in a final blessing on the people, and then turned towards his rendezvous with God on Mount Pisgah.

#### **Chapter 4**

**will be available on this site on the 1st May 2011**