

Stephen's Speech: The First Eighty Years of Moses' Life (Acts 7:17-29)

Like Jesus, Moses had a humble beginning. He was a Hebrew born in Egypt to an enslaved mother and father. In an attempt to protect him from the Pharaoh's wrath, Moses' mother put him in a waterproofed basket and set him among the reeds of the Nile with the hope that he would be found and raised by an Egyptian. By the will and plan of God, Moses was found by the daughter of the Pharaoh who took pity on him and raised Moses as her own child. The same Pharaoh who sought to have Moses killed was destined to become Moses' adoptive grandfather.

Nothing else is known of Moses' earliest years from the Old Testament canon. Yet, Acts 7:22 suggests that there were traditions circulating at the time of Stephen about Moses' education and public life that are not recorded in Scripture: "And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and he was mighty in his words and deeds." It stands to reason that Moses, as an adopted member of the Egyptian royal family, would have received the highest

possible education with the most well-trained tutors Egypt had to offer. "[A]ll the learning of the Egyptians" no doubt entailed Moses acquiring skill in mathematics, religion, reading and writing, science, rhetoric, and military tactics. The ancient Jewish historian, Josephus, claims that this education was part of the Pharaoh's grooming process, as he was preparing Moses to take his place on the throne (*Antiquities* 2.9.7). This is likely little more than speculation on Josephus' part, but Moses would have indeed known how to lead a people, and his education would have prepared him to pen the Pentateuch, that is, the first five books of the Bible.

— Words to Ponder —

"Moses spent his first forty years thinking he was somebody. He spent his second forty years learning he was a nobody. He spent his third forty years discovering what God can do with a nobody" — D. L. Moody

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Leading a people was what Moses had been trained to do, and lead a people he would. However, things were going to occur according to God's timetable and not Moses'.

— Prayer —

Thank God for allowing us "nobodies" to take part in the great things he has planned for his kingdom people and to his own praise.

The author of Hebrews stated,

"By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward" (Hebrews 11:24-26).

This zealotry for both righteousness and the Hebrews' wellbeing was expressed in Moses killing an Egyptian who he found beating a Hebrew slave. Stephen calls this a case of communal protection and not murder (Acts 7:24); Moses was simply attempting to save the life of his fellow Hebrew, with the hope that the people would see him as the instrument of God's salvation (Acts 7:25). But such would not be the case. In an instant Moses succeeded in alienating himself from both his biological and adoptive people. To the Egyptians, he was a murderer who killed a master to save a slave. To the Hebrews, he was that one lucky, Hebrew

kid who had the chance to grow up in the lap of luxury, while his people toiled and died to supply for the lavish lifestyle he and his new family enjoyed. Yes, now that Moses had grown up he was ready and willing to suffer for and with his people (Hebrew 11:24); yet, it was going to take more than saving one slave by killing one Egyptian to gain the people's trust and loyalty.

To avoid what would surely be the death penalty, Moses ran away to the land of Midian, immediately outside the jurisdiction of the Pharaoh. The man trained to lead a nation would instead lead sheep, and not even his own sheep! Though he had money, fame, and honor, it was now gone. He was a forty-year-old outlaw and social pariah living in an almost inhospitable wasteland using his vast knowledge of mathematics, science, literature, and tactics to guide sheep to water. It is no wonder why the man who was described by Stephen as "mighty in word and deed" prior to running away from the Egyptians (Acts 7:22) would be depicted as both timid and "slow of speech" (Exodus 4:10) some forty years later when God visited him at Mount Horeb in a burning bush.

Moses was a broken man. He had lost more than his wealth and prestige. He had lost his confidence. When he was forty years old, Moses had a grand presumption that the Hebrews would accept him as an agent of God's deliverance when he struck down the Egyptian. But by the time he was eighty, Moses didn't think he could provide salvation for his people even if he carried the very message and power of Yahweh himself. However, as both Moses and the reader quickly learn, God often uses broken "nobodies" to accomplish his purposes.

— Prayer —

Pray that God would humble anyone among our flock who is too prideful to be used by God. It is hoped that in becoming a "nobody" he or she could become somebody who brings glory and honor to God and not to himself or herself (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:27-29).

This is where we are going to stop for now. We will see next week how God used Moses, whose name means "to draw out," to "draw out" his people from captivity in the Land of Egypt.

But before we end this week's study, we need to discuss for a moment how an overview of Moses' first eighty years of life fits into the overall flow of Stephen's argument. We can clearly see one of the major themes in the sermon run through these verses: God was, and has always been, active outside the land of Israel. Although Moses, the great prophet and leader of the Jews, was born a Hebrew, he was born into slavery *outside* the Promised Land and he would never enter the land of Israel. This does not mean, though, that the Lord was not with him. Nor does it mean that the Lord did not care for his condition or that of his enslaved people. God was with Moses from the day he was born. He guided Moses; he protected Moses.

Therefore, the Jews of Stephen's day should not look down on the Hellenistic Jews—of which Stephen was one—or the Gentiles as though they were lesser because they were geographically separated from Yahweh's Temple. Yahweh was not confined to living in houses made by human hands. God created all and reigns over all. A God-fearer in Rome or a Hellenistic Jew in Babylon could be just as close to God in worship as a Palestinian Jew standing before the Jerusalem Temple. Worship was no longer centralized. All people groups of all nations have the chance to worship the Father "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23) now that Jesus opened the covenant to all who call on the name of the Lord.