

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Fourteenth Week - Wednesday

EARLY DEEDS OF MOSES

"And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds" (Acts 7:22).

We know historically that Moses was "mighty in words and deeds" *after* he received his commission to deliver Israel. But the declaration of Stephen clearly intimates that this was the case *before* he was forty years of age--before he visited the Israelites--and therefore while he was still at the Egyptian court and regarded as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. The information furnished by Josephus and other Jewish writers is, doubtless, such as was current at the time when Stephen uttered these words. They must, therefore, be regarded as referring to facts held to be true by all those who heard him.

Indeed, it is not easy to see how Moses could be "mighty in deeds" unless it was rendering important public services--and that probably of a military kind--to the Egyptian crown and people. We are then somewhat inclined to take the Jewish accounts, and especially that of Josephus, as substantially true. They supply an interesting connection to the several parts of the history of Moses. The Scriptures themselves have the objective of setting forth those portions of his history that directly revolve on his high mission with the oppressed Israelites; thus it briefly relates the portion of his life that preceded his call in Horeb; and it altogether omits, or leaves to common sources of information, his life among the Egyptians. It may be added that the account given by Josephus has all the internal marks of authentic history, from whatever source the particulars were derived.

According to this account, the land of Egypt was invaded by the Ethiopians, who at first contemplated only an inroad for the sake of spoil. But having defeated the Egyptians in battle and perceiving that the conquest of the country would be a less difficult enterprise than they had imagined, they continued until they had overrun the land, one city after another yielding to them even to the walls of Memphis and to the sea.

In desperation the Egyptians consulted their oracles, which were constrained by God to declare that their deliverance could only be effected through Moses. Thus the king prevailed upon him to take the command of the army; and it seems to be inferred that the Hebrews acted with the Egyptians under his orders. Indeed, the Jewish historian indicates the difference in the views

with which this appointment was regarded by them: "The sacred scribes of both nations were glad." Those of the Egyptians hoped that the nation would be delivered by Moses, but trusted that in the course of the inevitable conflict he might by some act be slain. The Hebrews, on the other hand, calculated that under Moses as a victorious general they might take their departure with a high hand out of Egypt.

The course followed by Moses was to take the enemy unawares. Instead of marching along the river, he conducted his forces inland through a region none would expect him to traverse, on account of the fierce and venomous serpents with which it was infested. But Moses, by an ingenious stratagem, provided a large number of crates in which were enclosed a multitude of that serpent-slaying bird, the ibis, formerly so abundant in Egypt where it received sacred honors for its useful services to mankind. As the army reached the land of the serpents, the birds were let loose and cleared the way for the safe advance of the troops. Being then enabled to come upon the Ethiopians unexpectedly, the Ethiopians were soon put to the rout and driven out of Egypt, pursued by the victorious army.

The fugitive host at last threw itself into Saba, a royal city of Ethiopia rendered impregnable by strong ramparts and surrounding waters, which in a later age received the name of Meroe. While the Egyptian army lay idle before this place, being unable to bring the Ethiopians to battle, Moses unconsciously won the affection of the Ethiopian king's daughter, Tharbis, who had witnessed his valiant acts from the walls. She caused a proposal to be made to him, through the most faithful of her servants, that if Moses should make her his wife, she would procure the surrender of the city. No sooner was this agreement made than it took effect. The city surrendered, Moses made the Ethiopian princess his wife, and having returned thanks to God he led the Egyptians back to their own land.

It is remarkable that Josephus, who gives this notice of the acquisition by Moses of an Ethiopian wife, says nothing more about it. It is clear, therefore, that neither he nor his authorities devised this marriage to account for that conflict recorded in Numbers 12 between Moses, on the one hand, and Aaron and Miriam on the other. It is a fact of no historical use to him. But the Scripture itself does record it, and without stating how that wife was acquired. This perfectly undesigned coincidence between the Scripture narrative and the Jewish historical tradition does therefore afford a material corroboration.

All our readers have felt some difficulty in comprehending the circumstances under which Moses, who had just before been described as "the son of Pharaoh's daughter," appears among his countrymen in Goshen apparently as an unattended and powerless man. If we turn to Josephus, we at first seem to get no satisfaction, as he passes over this visit altogether and makes Moses withdraw at once from the Egyptian court to the land of Midian. But it is yet possible to connect the reasons he gives for that withdrawal with the actual visit to the Israelites.

Josephus states that the renown Moses acquired in this expedition made him seem more

dangerous in high quarters and roused the fears and envy of the king. Plots were laid against Moses; and the king, being daily pressed by the sacred scribes, had nearly assented to Moses being quietly disposed of. But Moses, having heard all this, withdrew secretly from the court. Josephus says he retired to the land of Midian, but we know that he went first to visit his nation in Goshen. Perhaps he expected to find concealment there until he could persuade them to follow him out of Egypt. That this was his goal is clearly indicated by Stephen, who says, "he supposed that his brethren would have understood that God by his hand would deliver them; but they understood not."

If the Jewish historian is to be regarded as a sufficient authority for believing that they had been prepared to regard him as a leader and deliverer when he appeared as a victorious general against the Ethiopians, then the grounds of Moses' expectation may appear. Yet at the same time it is not difficult to understand why they instead declined to place themselves in revolt under his leadership; for when the Israelites were arrayed in battle under his orders to confront the Ethiopians, and were in their ardor of triumph and invincible might ready to follow Moses wherever he wished, Moses had refused to lead them out.

Now the reason for Moses' conduct under this view is plain. He was the trusted servant of the Egyptians and could not betray the high trust committed to him. However, the ungrateful and base return he experienced upon returning left him at liberty to now act in freedom from the ties of obligation and public trust. He relinquished his connection with the Egyptian court, refusing no longer to be regarded as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He went out to cast in his lot with the people of his fathers, whose sad condition engaged his sympathy and whose great heritage of promises and hopes had more charm for him than all the riches, honors, power and wisdom of Egypt.

But the time was not fully come. Israel refused to recognize in the powerless fugitive, clad only in his inherent greatness, the leader they would have hailed with shouts of praise as the commander of armies and the son of Pharaoh's daughter.

It is in this manner that the Jewish accounts may be made to supply the silence of Scripture, and that the details may be woven into one consistent and harmonious whole.