

## Life in the Midst of Injustices: *Moses and the Desert* (Exodus 2:11-22)

“Moses was 40 years in Egypt learning something; he was 40 years in the desert learning to be nothing; and he was 40 years in the wilderness proving God to be everything.”

~ James Montgomery Boice

### I. Investigation: An Examination of Exodus 2:11-22

#### A. Introduction

By identifying with the Israelites, Moses “gave up position, pleasure, and prosperity, and by doing so he rejected three of the world’s biggest temptations: narcissism, hedonism, and materialism” (Ryken, *Exodus*, 62). One would expect that Moses’ own countrymen would be grateful for, and applaud, these sacrifices he has made on their behalf. Instead, this entire section is full of irony. Moses’ enormous risk in identifying with his own countrymen resulted in rejection by not only the Egyptians, but also with the Israelites. Moses’ willingness to forego the luxuries of the palace resulted in living in the desert. In fact, this future deliverer is unsuccessful in rescuing even one Jew. The forty-year old would have to wait another forty years before he would return to Egypt to deliver God’s people.

#### B. The Murder of an Egyptian (2:11-15)

vv. 11-12 - “his people” - As also noted in Hebrews 11:24-26, Moses identified with the Israelites, not the Egyptians.

“observed” - The term connotes “compassion” or the idea of “watching with intense personal involvement” (cf. Gen 21:16).

The verb “to kill” occurs later in Exodus to describe what the Lord does to the Egyptians (3:20; 7:17, 25; 9:15; 12:12, 13, 29). The problem, however, was that Moses acted, not the Lord, in Exodus 2. As aptly noted by one of his own countrymen, no one has made Moses ruler and judge . . . yet!

“and he looked this way and that” - Either Moses was careful to avoid being detected, or the phrase could suggest that Moses was looking to see if anybody else would come to rescue this Hebrew, and when there was no one else to assist, Moses took matters into his own hands.

Several scholars argue that Moses committed justifiable homicide, a divinely sanctioned act of judgment against God’s enemies (e.g., appeal to the “law of retaliation” in Exodus 21:23-25, acting as an agent of God). However, despite what defense might be given, Moses acted wrongly. He had committed murder. One commentator writes, “It was wrong because it was not Moses’ place to do this [murder the slave driver]—it was abuse of power . . . Rather than appointing himself as judge, jury, and executioner, he should have worked within the system. It was also wrong because it was not God’s will. God had not yet called Moses to lead his people out of Egypt” (Ryken, *Exodus*, 58).

v. 13 - “fighting” - The Hebrew term clearly connotes physical fighting rather than simply a verbal dispute.

v. 14 - "Who appointed you over us?" - Similar to the Sodomites' rebuke of Lot, the question is derogatory.

Sin committed in secret seldom, if ever, remains in secret.

v. 15 - As aptly noted by one scholar, "In acting to defend the Hebrews, Moses was challenging the basic foundations—social, political, and religious—on which Egyptian society had been established. It should come as no surprise that Pharaoh would seek to crush him" (Ackerman, "The Literary Context of the Moses Birth Story," 102).

Note the differences between Stephen's account of Moses in Acts 7:23-29 with what is recorded in Exodus 2:11-15:

### C. Home in Midian (2:16-22)

vv. 16-17 - The location of Midian is uncertain, but it was most likely beyond the Egyptian borders on the east, either in the Sinai or beyond in the Arabah (south of the Dead Sea and east of the Red Sea). The Midianites were descendants of Midian, the son of Abraham and Keturah (Gen 25:1-2).

"Since water was the source of all life and wealth, it is obvious that strife regarding its proper use was common." (B. S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 31). Notice that the men wait until the women have drawn water and filled the troughs before driving them away.

"the hand of the shepherds" - The term "hand" connotes political and military control, often associated with bullying or violence (cf. Gen 32:11; 37:21; Deut 25:11).

v. 18 - Reuel means "friend of God". Elsewhere in the Old Testament, Moses' father-in-law is referred to as Jethro (cf. Exod 18). It was not uncommon for ancients to have more than one name. Another viable explanation is that Reuel is Jethro's father. As the living head of the extended family, Reuel could be called "father".

vv. 19-20 - The seven daughters mistakenly view Moses as an Egyptian. They also fail to ascertain his name.

Contrasting 2:11-15 and 2:16-22, one scholar writes, "Moses is not welcome in the Israelite community, but here is shown considerable hospitality by strangers . . . Israel does not appreciate his acts of justice on its behalf; the Midianites welcome it. Israelites engage in accusations of Moses; the daughters of

Reuel publicly sing his praises. Those who stand within the community of faith are abusive; those without faith in Israel's god exemplify genuine relationships" (Fretheim, *Exodus*, 44).

v. 21 - The particular verbal construct indicates that Moses stayed willingly (cf. Gen 18:27; Deut 1:5; Judg 1:35).

Reminiscent of the Patriarchs, a wife is first met at a well (cf. Gen 24:1-67; 29:1-24). Zipporah is a Semitic name meaning "birth". The name Gershon comes from the Hebrew verb meaning "to drive out or to expel".

A far cry from the luxuries found in Egypt, Moses opts to reside in the lands of the Midianites. In so doing, Moses selects an occupation detestable to the Egyptians—shepherding (Gen 46:34b)! And yet, this "detestable" profession serves as a perfect job for Moses. In preparation for leading God's people, Moses needed to learn how to lead, protect, and care for others. Interestingly, the psalms depict God as a shepherd who delivers His people out of Egypt. Psalm 77:20 declares, "You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron."

## II. Intersect

- A. As believers, we need to be careful not to act in the flesh but according to the Lord's leading. We are not the Lord; He is!

James 4:13-15 -

- B. We are called to identify with the Lord's people, even when it is inconvenient or even costly. Moses could have rationalized his position in Pharaoh's palace; instead, he refused to compromise.

Hebrews 11:26 (also, cf. Phil 3:10) -

- C. Despite our failures, God still chooses to use us.

Isaiah 25:1 -

"I am no longer my own, but yours. Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will; put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for you or laid aside for you, exalted for you or brought low for you; let me be full; let me be empty; let me have all things, let me have nothing; I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal."

~ John Wesley