

One Book to Get Us Into Egypt; Four to Get Us Out

A D'var Torah on *Parashat Sh'mot* (Ex. 1:1 – 6:1)

By Norman J. Harris, M.D.

“Ve'ileh sh'mot b'nei Yisrael....”

“And these are the names of Israel's sons....”

“...and who made you a leader over us?” The first of the next four books of the Torah, *Sh'mot*, introduces us to Moses. The Author has taken us from the creation of the entire universe, the rise and near destruction of man, the rise of language and society, and the descent into Egypt — all in one book, *B'reishit*. Now we begin reading a message so weighty by comparison that four books are needed to carry it. Now we meet the messenger.

Fearing that the growing band of Israelites might prove to be a military liability, Pharaoh enslaves and oppresses the people. Their growth still uncontrolled, he issues orders to the midwives to kill at birth all newborn Israelite boys. Two midwives refuse the order, setting the stage for the birth of Moses — the man destined to become the greatest leader of Israel.

Born to the tribe of Levi, the infant Moses survives his birth and is hidden for a few months. When she can no longer hide him, his mother leaves him in a basket floating on the Nile, watched by his older sister Miriam. He is found by the daughter of Pharaoh, who adopts him and hires his mother as a wet-nurse. Moses emerges from this upbringing as a man living in two worlds: the world of the Israelite slaves in which he was born, and the world of Egyptian royalty, in which he was raised.

As a young man, seeing a taskmaster beating an Israelite slave, Moses kills the Egyptian and flees to Midian. He is welcomed by a priest of the Midianite religion and is given the priest's daughter Zipporah as a wife.

The circumstances of Moses' birth, his upbringing, his violent, impetuous action, and his marriage are very much at odds with the Way — the Torah which is to come. Why has the Author chosen such an unlikely person from among all the Israelites to be the courier of His precious message?

We have spent much of our history exiled from our Promised Land. We have traveled far in space and time from our origins. It would be easy for us to dwell on this distance and say, "The Way was for them then and

there, and no longer speaks to us now and here." Yet, when we look at who it is who brought us the Law, we see someone very much like ourselves. The Author begins his His message with an address. We recognize this Moses from our own family and the community around us. The Story to follow is addressed to us. It is directly and immediately relevant to us who wrestle with it. We are all here now and were all there then. The Author is speaking. We must listen.