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PHILIP YANCEY

THE BIBLE JESUS READ



Zondervan Publishing House

Grand Rapids, Michigan

A Division of HarperCollins Publishers

To Buck Hatch,
who first opened up to me
the delights and mysteries
of the Old Testament

The Bible Jesus Read
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Requests for information should be addressed to:

 Zondervan Publishing House
Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

International Trade Paper Edition ISBN 0-310-23186-8

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Portions of Chapter 3 were published in *Destiny and Deliverance*, a collection of essays interpreting the life of Moses and the Dreamworks film *The Prince of Egypt*. Portions of other chapters appeared in different form in *Christianity Today* and *The Reformed Journal*.

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Interior design by Sherri L. Hoffman

Printed in the United States of America

99 00 01 02 03 04 05/4 DC/ 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

THREE

Deuteronomy: A Taste of Bittersweet

*There are two tragedies in life. One is to lose your heart's desire.
The other is to gain it.*

—GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

When Communism fell in 1989, small countries in Eastern Europe and Central Asia suddenly found themselves free of the long shadow of the Soviet Union. No one gave them orders anymore. No one imposed policies. On their own they had to figure out how to design a flag, train an army, manage foreign affairs, settle border disputes—in short, how to run a country. Each nation's success or failure depended on what kind of leader emerged from the Cold War thaw.

Czechoslovakia instinctively turned to Václav Havel, a playwright who had spent years in prison for his political dissent. Although Havel had no experience and little interest in politics, he accepted the daunting task of fashioning a new, free country. To connect with his people, he began a practice that became a tradition: each week he appeared on television to answer callers' questions. He explained how the new government would work, reviewed the budget, discussed controversial new laws, lectured on morality and responsibility. At times preacher, cheerleader, historian, and coach, this playwright-intellectual against all odds became a media star, presiding over one of the

most popular shows in the country. By sheer eloquence and force of personality Havel ushered the Czech people through a painful split with Slovakia and prepared them for life as an independent nation. It felt, he said, like a parent trying to teach an unruly bunch of children how to behave as adults.

In a nutshell, that is the situation Moses confronted toward the end of his life. A reluctant leader who had spent forty years tending sheep in a wilderness, he was abruptly called by God to emancipate the Hebrews from the most powerful empire in the world. Moses did that and more, coaxing and cajoling the freed slaves through four decades of immaturity in the Sinai desert. Now, just as Moses' own life was ending, the Hebrews stood at the threshold of the Promised Land, eager to take the reins of nationhood.

Moses had one last shot, one last opportunity to pass along historical memory, to purge himself of grievances and pain, to bequeath to them the hope and grit they would desperately need in his absence. To his people, he represented not only a trailblazer like Václav Havel, he was the Liberator—Simón Bolívar, Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, and George Washington all pressed into one frail old body.

"If the various writers of the Bible were composers, the Deuteronomist would be Bach in his utter, majestic confidence," writes Jack Miles. Deuteronomy stands as the last of the five "books of Moses," the grand summation, the first full-blown oratorio in the Bible, and the record of Moses' final words to the children of Israel. In forty tortuous years a stuttering shepherd, shy of leadership and haunted by his crime of passion, has become one of the giants of history whose achievements changed the planet forever. Deuteronomy gives Moses' own account of that remarkable transformation.

The old man clutches his robe and shivers in spite of the desert heat. Assistants help him scramble up the tallest rock. Before him, stretching all the way to the horizon, are the Israelites. He pauses to let the cheers of the crowd die down. His eyes lock onto a few anonymous faces. So young, so innocent. None of them has a single memory of the glories of Egypt, the fabulous land of pyramids and palaces and chariots. These desert kids know only the rigors of Sinai: scorpions, vipers, blazing heat, cold nights, sandstorms, the endless search for water.

None of their parents have survived, save two. The rest proved useless. He dragged them out of Egypt only to find they had kept Egypt inside them. Now he faces their eager young descendants, a nation intact but with all its individual cells replaced. Children, that's what they are, mere children. He'd give anything to lead them across the river into the land he's been crowing about for forty years. He sighs, with a sound more like a groan. It won't work, he knows. Instead, he'll die here, maybe even today. They'll be alone soon, this brood of the desert. He's gathered them together to say farewell.

Like a hive of bees, the mob buzzes with energy. Moses hasn't seen such excitement since the day their parents walked out of Egypt loaded down with the gold of the pharaohs. How quickly the smiles left their faces; how long will they last on these children's? They have heard stories from their parents, he knows—the same parents who grumbled, complained, and outright rebelled against his leadership. This is his last chance to set the record straight, to right the blame and the credit, to get his-story down not just for these children but for all to follow, for all posterity.

Moses' eyes, covered with cataracts, are the color of clotted milk. Eighty years in the desert have carved walrus wrinkles across

his face. He can barely hear the sounds of the multitude blend together into a low, irritating hum. Joshua and Caleb, trusted associates, have quieted the throng and are motioning for him to begin. They've arranged for "shouters" to repeat his words, projecting them out so everyone can hear. "Speak slowly," they advise. "Take your time." But as he begins to speak, his voice cracks and the old stutter starts up again.

Moses is the oldest person any of the Israelites have seen, the only truly ancient person among them, nearly twice the age of Joshua and Caleb. With his snow-white hair and flowing beard, he seems more mythological creature than man. He has dominated their lives from birth. They have heard how he strode past guards in the great pharaoh's palace and surprised the ruler who was once his playmate. The plagues, so traumatic at the time, over the years have become the fodder of jokes: frogs jumping through the kitchen, gnats and flies swarming the soldiers and foremen, boils forcing the Egyptian magicians to roll naked in the sand for relief. Moses the magician stage-managed all that.

Their parents used to speak longingly of the palm trees, the houses piled atop one another so high as to block the sun, the streets crowded with chariots, donkey carts, and long caravans of camels. Of such this throng has no memory. They have only the hope of a new start, a nation where they will serve as masters and not slaves, a land not desiccated but lush with pastures and crops, a land they can call their own.

Moses' life had a single theme: God did it. How many times had his mother recounted the tale of his miraculous survival during the Pharaoh's campaign to exterminate Hebrew babies? "God saved you, Moses," she told him over and over. "He has something very special in mind for you." She laughed that

proud mother's laugh as she reminded him that God arranged for her, his birth mother, to get a royal pension for nursing him. Meanwhile he played in the courts of Pharaoh, acquired a superb classical education, and dined with the elite of the empire.

Secretly knowing his true identity, Moses felt like a person without a country. When other Egyptian princes told crude jokes about the Hebrew slaves, he bit his tongue. When his own people, the Hebrews, taunted him for his uppity manners and palace accent, he bit his tongue again. He loved both families, birth and adopted. He never tired of the peasant family dinners, followed by the old men rehashing the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the God they still worshiped despite the fact that he seemed to have fallen asleep for a dozen generations. Moses especially loved the story of Joseph. "You could be a new Joseph," said his mother as she kissed him goodbye one night. "You too walk in Pharaoh's palace. God may use you to help save us."

On the other hand, he could not imagine life without the training he got every day among the smartest students in the empire. He loved the sports competitions, the feasts, the fine wine, the oiled and perfumed women who taught him art and music. Like a spy, he balanced the two worlds successfully, keeping them in sealed compartments and flourishing in both—until one day the two collided and he had to choose between them.

At the time it seemed a simple matter of justice. Dressed in the full regalia of an Egyptian prince, a gold headpiece and buckle announcing his office, he visited a work site of the Pharaoh. There he saw a mid-level Egyptian foreman savagely beating a Hebrew, one of Moses' countrymen. He gave the tyrant a shove, finished him off, and hid the corpse in the sand, then went on as if nothing had happened. Others had seen the deed, though, and now the cat had escaped the bag.

On that day at the work site, Moses realized what side he was truly on. Egyptians used the word *Hapiru* as a term of scorn for Hebrews: "the dusty ones." If an Egyptian dies, of course someone must pay. But if one of the Hapiru dies, who cares? I care, Moses decided. They may be slaves, but they are my kinsmen. No one deserves this treatment.

To Pharaoh, Moses had crossed a line and got caught on the wrong side. He could not tolerate insurrection. It was he, after all, who had ordered the infanticide campaign against Moses' tribe. Pharaoh issued a death warrant for the impostor prince named Moses.

A fugitive, Moses fled Egypt and for forty years had no contact with either of his families. A new life began that surprisingly suited him, the lonely life of a nomad. He gained a wife, an extended family, and a new set of wilderness survival skills. Out of prudence Moses said little to anyone about his past and had little reason to. No one in Midian cared about the Hebrews, nor about the Egyptians for that matter. His world gradually shrank into a circle of domestic tranquility, and at the ripe old age of eighty he concerned himself mainly with children, in-laws, and sheep.

God, however, had other plans. While Moses was forging a new life in Midian, far from the Hebrew slaves, God had been listening to their groans. All at once the slow, mysterious work of a timeless God came into sharp focus, revealing that nothing in Moses' circuitous life had been wasted. God now had a Hebrew of pure pedigree, expertly trained in Egyptian leadership skills, fully capable of surviving in the wilderness. The time for liberation of God's chosen people had arrived. Now to convince Moses. And Pharaoh.

Moses raised powerful objections to God's plans. First, there was the question of his trustworthiness. Why should the Hebrews trust someone trained by the enemy, let alone a fugitive who had skipped the country for forty years? Besides, both

the Hebrews and Pharaoh would need an articulate leader to stir them into action—why pick someone with a stutter? "O Lord, please send someone else," Moses begged. A few words spoken from a burning bush silenced Moses; convincing Pharaoh was another matter.

Thus did a diffident shepherd become the first intermeddler chosen by God to speak to his people, and also the first person recorded in the Bible to work miracles. Moses' initial fears proved accurate, however. After an Egyptian crackdown doubled their workload, the Hebrews abandoned Moses and his brother Aaron. The Israelites were supposed to believe that a God absent for four hundred years had suddenly decided to take on the Pharaoh and his armies? Dream on.

Moses did not even have the support of his own people as he strode up the massive stone steps to Pharaoh's palace, its gold finials gleaming in the desert sun. He looked around. The Pharaoh had nearly finished his grand construction plans. A city of white limestone, more dazzling than the sun, had grown up around the drab buildings he knew as a boy.

Hieroglyphics carved into the stone walls said it all. Unused in forty years, Moses' first language came flooding back as he studied the accounts of Pharaoh's military conquests. He felt a stab of pain as he recognized the Egyptian symbol for foreigner: a bound man with blood flowing from a wound in his head. The wilderness of Midian had rid him of all nostalgia for the luxuries of Egypt. Sumptuous banquets, orgies, pretentious dress with social rank carefully scripted in hair, armbands, and clothing styles—all this seemed a stench to him now. He knew his proper identity: a foreigner; an alien in a strange land; a *Gershom*, the very name he had chosen for his son. His people, the Hebrews, were the bound ones with blood flowing from their wounds; the Hapiru, the dusty ones who worked in the mud and bore the lashes of the Egyptians. Their only hope, only future, now rested in God's hands alone.

Why on earth would my appointment secretary admit this smelly goatberd thought Pharaoh on seeing but not yet recognizing Moses. The uncouth visitor whispered his words of introduction to Aaron, his interpreter, but no one could understand Aaron's rustic speech. When Moses himself finally spoke up, all the attendants drew back at the sound. Out of the rubes's mouth flowed perfect, aristocratic Egyptian.

A few minutes later Moses the former prince of Egypt and Pharaoh the ruling king were laughing together over the good old days. The Pharaoh's gold necklaces and bracelets jangled as he clapped his hands in joy. To the guards' astonishment, he even allowed the coarse visitor to touch him!

The two had once been playmates, before Moses had crossed the reigning Pharaoh. But the old man, long dead, was now resting in unimaginable splendor in the Valley of the Kings. "We put enough food and furniture in his tomb to keep him in comfort for eternity," said the new Pharaoh, his son. "Already I have fifty thousand workmen preparing my own tomb. You can never be too careful."

Anything Moses wanted, he could have—for himself, that is, not for the rest of the Hebrews. "Think about it, Moses. Put yourself in my place. No monarch would let his main work force just walk away. I have cities to build, and aqueducts, and forts." Though the Pharaoh did not say it, they both knew the Hebrew slaves did all the dirty work, at minimal cost. "Come back to the palace and enjoy life," he urged. "Don't worry about the incident at the construction site, just as Father promised. I am now Egypt—the morning and the evening star. If I say day is night, it will be so written. Join me and forget the Hebrews."

God had not forgotten the Hebrews, however: "I have seen the oppression of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry," he told Moses from the burning bush. Neither could Moses forget his people. At one time Pharaoh's offer might have tempted him, but not now. He looked back in shame on the days when

he called "Father" the man who had slaughtered the Hebrew children. After forty years in the wilderness, he had been unprepared for the sight of slave labor again. It felt like a kick in the gut. Moses in effect flung down a gauntlet, challenging the mightiest empire in the world to a form of cosmic combat, with the very heavens choosing sides.

Soon Moses and the Pharaoh were engaged in a great tug-of-war, not so different from the games they used to play in the courtyards although now with stakes raised higher. "I will not be dictated to! I will not be threatened!" shouted the Pharaoh in a tone Moses had never before heard. "I am the morning and the evening star. I am Pharaoh!"

Egypt and its mighty gods stood in splendid array against the invisible God of the Hebrews. To the Egyptians, the Hebrews' notion of a single, invisible God seemed ludicrous. They worshiped an elaboration of gods who could be visually celebrated in the splendid temples: Horus the hawk, Thot the ibis, Khnum the ram, Apsis the sacred bull. Each possessed mysterious characteristics known only to the priests. What good was a god you could not see or even represent in sculpture or painting?

As for the Hebrews' request to withdraw into the desert to offer sacrifices, that seemed an obvious escape ploy. Did not the temple of Karnak down the river employ 70,000 full-time priests and acolytes? If the Hebrews wanted to sacrifice, why not hire the experts?

Yet one by one the Egyptian gods fell to the plagues unleashed by Moses' God: the river god turned to blood, the sacred fly became a swarming pest, the sun-god Ra disappeared behind a cloud, the great bull failed to protect his livestock. Finally, in the last and worst plague, the Pharaoh, along with every other Egyptian, lost his firstborn son. At last he conceded defeat; the invisible God had won. The very next day Hebrew slaves, loaded down with Egyptian plunder, walked away in a

huge, ragtag mob, at the head of which marched Moses, Prince of Israel.

Moses himself would have resisted the title, of course. From the moment he first saw the bush that would not stop burning, he had learned one lesson above all others: the mission was God's, not his. Moses merely played the role God assigned him. He tried to drum that lesson into the Israelites every year at Passover, when they remembered that last, murderous night in Egypt, when no Israelite armies faced the mighty Egyptians. Freedom came in the blackest night while Hebrew families huddled around the Passover table, their bags packed, waiting for deliverance. God alone did it. Later, when the Pharaoh changed his mind and set his chariots loose upon the fleeing tribes, and all the Israelites whimpered like cowards, God came through again. God even designated the Exodus as a way of describing himself: "I am the God who brought you out of Egypt."

That same pattern of abject dependence would continue all through the wilderness wanderings. When the Hebrews ran out of water, God provided. When food supplies failed, God provided. When raiders attacked, God provided. Liberation was God's act, and he alone deserved the credit.

Years of sheep-herding during his exile in Midian had mellowed Moses, preparing him for his leadership role in the Sinai. In the old days he took matters into his own hands. All three scenes from his youth involved violence: murdering an Egyptian foreman, breaking up a fight among his brethren, chasing a bunch of shepherds away from some vulnerable women (and impressing his future wife in the process). Now the famous temper had softened.

Once only did it rear up strongly enough to defy God himself: when Moses smashed his walking stick against a rock in anger. "You want water? I'll give you water!" he had screamed at the thirsty whiners. That lapse cost him the dream of his life, the chance to set foot in the Promised Land. For a moment

Moses forgot it was God's work, not his own, and for this reason he now stood on the tall rock before the anxious multitude on the wrong side of the Jordan river.

Keeep it positive, old man, he mumbles to himself. Remember, this is their big day. Don't take it away from them. It was their parents who angered God, not these kids here today. Give them hope. Let them celebrate.

Try as he might, he cannot help lasting out. Footsore and weary, as he thinks back over the last third of his life, all he feels is disappointment. "You are too heavy a burden for me to carry alone," he says and waits for the shouters to repeat it. Well, it's true, they are a burden—a bleating, squirming mess of ingrates he has pulled across the desert like a donkey dragging a cart up a mountain. No sooner had he got them out of Egypt than they started pining for the fruits and spices they left behind. Ingrates! God gives them manna and they want steak. God makes rocks bleed water and they beg for rivers.

They're stiff-necked, like the ox that used to resist his yoking in Midian. Unless the stupid beast relaxed, he could never get the yoke to settle tight across its neck. The dumb ox wore sores all day because of its own stubbornness. This tribe has been wandering for forty years in a wilderness with a yoke bouncing up and down their stiff necks. It should have taken eleven days, the miserable journey, not forty years.

"You were unwilling to go up; you rebelled against the command of the Lord your God. You grumbled in your tents.... You have been rebellious against the Lord ever since I have known you."

Easy, old man. Let it go. Remember, these are kids standing here. Their parents did all that, not these kids. But he can't help

it. He's got forty years worth of bile to unload, and the parents are no longer here to dump it on.

"Because of you the Lord became angry with me also and said, 'You shall not enter it, either.'" That's what really sticks in his craw. How come these kids get to prance into the land of milk and honey while the great liberator, the one who bore them like a burden, who stuck up for them when even God abandoned them, has to stand at the very edge of happiness . . . and die. It's not fair. None of it is fair. "I told you, but you would not listen. You rebelled against the Lord's command. . . ."

The speech is not going well. Moses can sense it in the crowd: the women talking among themselves, the men looking down and shuffling their feet, the children drifting off to play. This is his last shot, and he's blowing it. Still, doesn't he have a right to his say? Hasn't he earned it? Who cares how they respond right now. They've got to listen. One day they'll understand. One day they'll know how much they hurt him.

"I pleaded with the Lord, 'Let me go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan—that fine hill country and Lebanon.' But because of you the Lord was angry with me and would not listen to me."

No doubt the crowd understood the dyspeptic raves of the old man. Every last one of their parents lay buried in the Sinai sand and soon Moses would join them, a shabby end to his life of service. He had known few joys, and surely they had not made it easy, bringing him their long list of problems each day. They had gossiped about him, mistrusted him, envied him. No one really liked Moses—how can you relate to such a man, forty years your senior, a man who prefers tending sheep to tending people, who meets with God alone in a tent?—and he must have known it.

It was a long speech Moses gave, three speeches in all, and despite his tendency to lapse into rancor against his own ill fortune, he did pull himself together enough to get across the main message, which could be summarized in one word: Remember! With the speeches in Deuteronomy, Moses established the great tradition of historical memory, a tradition his people, who became known as the Jews, have cherished ever since: "Never forget." Try as we might, we can never undo the past, but still we must honor it by bearing witness, by remembering so as not to allow it to repeat.

One would think in view of all that had transpired—the centuries of slavery, the Ten Plagues, the Red Sea miracle, the victories over surrounding tribes—the Hebrews would not need such a pedantic reminder. Forget God one generation after the Exodus? How could they ever again doubt such a God? Yet Moses knew by intuition that the simple act of remembering would require daily acts of concentration.

Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe his commands, his laws and his decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. He led you through the vast and dreadful desert, that thirsty and waterless land, with its venomous snakes and scorpions. He brought you water out of hard rock. He gave you manna to eat in the desert, something your fathers had never known, to humble and to test you so that in the end it might go well with you. You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives

you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your forefathers, as it is today.

Nothing, apparently, bothers God more than the simple act of being forgotten. During the years of wilderness wanderings, forced to depend on God daily, the Hebrews did not have the luxury of forgetting. God fed the Israelites, clothed them, planned their daily itinerary, and fought their battles. No Hebrew questioned the existence of God in those days. For he hovered before them in a thick cloud and a pillar of fire.

Soon, however, God would withdraw from that smothering parental role. On the first day they ate produce from the Promised Land, the manna would stop. From then on they must cultivate their own land and plant their own crops. They would build cities, fight wars, appoint a king. They would prosper and grow plump. They would trust their armies and chariots instead of their God, forgetting the lesson inflicted on almighty Egypt. They would discriminate against the poor and the aliens, forgetting they were once both. In a word, they would forget God.

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

When the Lord your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you—a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant—then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the

Lord, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

Success, not failure, is the greatest danger facing any follower of God, as Moses knew well. He had tripped around a desert for forty years as a penalty for the Hebrews' inability to handle the success of the Exodus. Every significant downfall in his own life came when he seized power for himself—killing an Egyptian, smashing a rock in the desert—rather than relying on God.

In contrast, perhaps his greatest military victory came when he played an almost slapstick role. No general at the head of his troops, Moses stood apart, atop a nearby hill, raising his hands high like a religious zealot. As long as he reached out toward God, the Israelites won; whenever his hands sank down, the Amalekites won. By the end of the day an exhausted Moses was sitting on a rock with each up-stretched arm supported by a helper. God's strength is perfected in weakness.

Somehow, just talking about the bitterness softens it a little. There have surely been good times. Moses reminds himself. He's had God by his side each step of the way, and even when it feels as if God alone supports him, that is enough. The time when Korah and the gang rebelled against him—in the old days he would have grabbed a sword and run them through. Instead, he simply waited for God to settle it. Later, when his own siblings turned against him and mocked his African wife, then too he stood aside and let God work out the justice. And God did, giving Aaron and Miriam the dressing down of their lives. "With him I speak face to face," God said of Moses in a voice like thunder. "How dare you speak against my servant?" Moses had hung his head and blushed.

Once, Moses overheard someone talking about "the meekest man on the face of the earth," and to his astonishment he learned they were talking about him! His mother and Pharaoh would certainly never have used that description. Moses had chuckled to himself. Probably not God either. Meek? Humble? Imagine.

Over the years Moses has learned something so sweet and strange and mysterious that only one word can begin to capture it: *grace*. God's free, undeserved gift. He has learned that God loves him despite his failures, with a pure, stubborn, everlasting love. After more than a century of life, Moses has given up trying to figure out what God sees in him. Or sees in the rest of the Hebrews for that matter. He just accepts it and gives thanks.

Moses takes a long draught of water from a goatskin bag, moistens his lips, clears the phlegm from his throat. "Listen up. Pay attention. Here's what I want you to remember. Even if you forget everything else I say, think on this." Another pause, another swallow. The crowd stills, detecting a change in Moses' voice. An expression of bliss crosses his face so that it almost glows. They know that expression; they've seen it whenever Moses emerged from the sacred tent after his meetings with God.

The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know, therefore, that the Lord your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands.

He is warning to the message now, his weary voice ascending in both pitch and volume.

To the Lord your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. Yet the Lord set his affection on your forefathers and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations, as it is today. . . . He is your praise; he is your God, who performed for you those great and awesome wonders you saw with your own eyes. Your forefathers who went down into Egypt were seventy in all, and now the Lord your God has made you as numerous as the stars in the sky.

"As the stars in the sky"—he likes that. Didn't God promise as much to Abraham? Now here it is, prophecy fulfilled before his very eyes. They may have murmured and rebelled and driven the older generation to an early grave, but here they stand, the Israelites, God's chosen people, his "peculiar treasures" assembled at the very border of a new land.

He drinks again from the goatskin bag, letting the words sink in. They are responding to the positive tone. Who doesn't want to hear that God loves them?

The first time Moses encountered God up-close it took his breath away. He hid his face in shame and fear. Yet after forty years of such encounters, he and God have grown to be—could he say it?—friends. He argues with God, even bargains with him. He loses sometimes, as with his request to enter the Promised Land, but sometimes he wins, like the time God nearly called off the whole project until Moses talked him out of it.

Moses ignores his noles and begins to ramble, reminding the crowd of that, his finest hour. Three days' journey from Egypt and they were complaining about the water; a month later they had forgotten the bullwhips and were mewling about Egypt's figs and pomegranates; then, a month after that, the holiest moment in Moses' life, he descended from the cloud to find a scene that made him retch. He had been meeting with God on the sacred

mountain, getting the stone tablets inscribed by God's own hand. When he came down, his face shining like a lantern, he found them cawtoring around a golden calf, an Egyptian idol. It was too much. He would have divorced his people on the spot had not God reached that decision first.

Suddenly Moses was the only thing preventing the annihilation of every last Hebrew. God meant business. Moses threw the sacred tablets to the ground, shattering them, then threw himself down. He lay there prostrate for forty days and forty nights, a day's penance for each day he had spent with God on the holy mountain. He ate no bread and drank no water, and all day long the Hebrews warily circled his still body, wondering if he had died, wondering if they would now die. They certainly would have, had Moses not pleaded their case before God.

"Leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation." A tempting offer God made him. But Moses would not leave God alone. He argued, pleaded, whined. He appealed to God's mercy, to his pride, to his reputation. He begged God to take him, Moses, instead and let the others live. He reminded God of his favorites: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. At last God relented. He allowed Moses to see a visible glimpse of him such that no one on earth had ever seen. He made a new covenant, agreeing to accompany his people to the Promised Land.

Though reared among the Egyptians and their animal-shaped gods, Moses rediscovered a fundamental fact about God forgotten during the four hundred years of silence: God is a person. During the years of silence, the Hebrews thought of God, if at all, as a distant, unapproachable, ineffable mystery who showed little concern over what was transpiring on earth.

Moses reminded the Hebrews that God is as personal as they themselves; indeed their own "personhood" was a faint reflection of what God is like.

When God makes a list of commandments, *Love* takes first place, the basis of his whole relationship with humanity. God meets in a tent and discusses policy, as a man speaks to a friend. He listens, and he argues back. God also feels pain. When jilted, God suffers like any wounded lover. He makes threats, then backs down from them. He negotiates and signs contracts.

This last fact, above all, separated the Hebrews from their neighbors. Even the haughty Egyptians lived in fear of their capricious gods. The Canaanites sacrificed children to appease their unpredictable gods. But the God of the Hebrews proved willing to sign a contract detailing exactly what he expected from his people, and what he promised in return.

Except for Orthodox Jews, not many people today devote time to the legal code recorded in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. The laws seem repetitious and generally irrelevant to modern society. Yet, as Deuteronomy shows most clearly, these laws simply set the boundaries of a vastly unequal relationship: between an awesome, holy God and an ordinary people prone to failure and rebellion.

Years later, Moses knew, some would question specific laws in the contract. Moses anticipated such a question:

In the future, when your son asks you, "What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the Lord our God has commanded you?" tell him: "We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. Before our eyes the Lord sent miraculous signs and wonders—great and terrible—upon Egypt and Pharaoh and his whole household. But he brought us out from there to bring us in and give us the land that he promised on oath to our forefathers. The Lord commanded us to obey all these decrees and to fear

the Lord our God, so that we might always prosper and be kept alive, as is the case today. And if we are careful to obey all this law before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us, that will be our righteousness."

In short, God gave the laws for the Hebrews' own good. Their prosperity, their very survival depended on this contract. Moses spelled out God's end of the bargain in vivid detail. Israelite wives would have many babies, all their crops would produce bountifully, cattle and sheep would multiply. He even included this extraordinary promise: "The Lord will keep you free from every disease." For the Israelites to receive these benefits, God asked only one thing in return—a big thing, as it turned out: follow the covenant agreement set forth in the contract.

God had an unprecedented relationship with the band of refugees who roamed the Sinai for forty years. Moses, for one, could not seem to get over it: "Ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation . . . like . . . the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?"

Later, the nation would go through Job-like times that called the contract itself into doubt. Their faith would confront questions of unfairness and feelings of abandonment. Now, however, at this moment, the wondrous plan was being fulfilled. God the sovereign chooser, the steadfast promise-maker, was bringing his chosen people into the Promised Land.

Moses' voice is tiring. He pauses more and more frequently. There is so little energy left, so little time. When he began the speech, he had the feeling he could stave off death by talking. Now he hardly cares. Fatigue has numbed life. He has said it all

and more, rambling, repeating, breaking down in tears in all the wrong places.

What, really, will they remember? Scribes are writing down the words for posterity, but against the enemies the Hebrews will soon meet, words make frail allies.

An idea. Back in Egypt they used stones for monuments. On columns, obelisks, and rock walls they wrote of Pharaoh's exploits and recorded the laws of the empire. When a criminal pled ignorance, they merely dragged him to the stone and pointed to the law he had broken. What if the Hebrews do that?

"Do it!" Moses commands. "When you have crossed the Jordan into the land the Lord your God is giving you, set up some large stones and coat them with plaster. Write on them all the words of this law . . . And when you have crossed the Jordan, set up these stones on Mount Ebal, as I command you today, and coat them with plaster."

A start, at least. What else? How can he impress on these people the meaning of a contract with God Almighty? Another idea. Moses assigns the tribe of Levites to shout out the laws. "Cursed is the man who moves his neighbor's boundary stone," they yell. Then all the people must say, "Amen!" so they'll have no excuse. Make them ratify this covenant point by point, aloud.

Next Moses appoints two antiphonal "choirs." They carry no melody but the discordant tones of the words they shout. Across the Jordan River, two mountains form a natural amphitheater. On Mount Gerizim six tribes of "optimists" will stand to recite the blessings.

The Lord will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven.

The Lord will open the heavens, the storehouse of his bounty, to send rain on your land in season and to bless all the

work of your hands. You will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. The Lord will make you the head, not the tail. If you pay attention to the commands of the Lord your God that I give you this day and carefully follow them, you will always be at the top, never at the bottom.

More assurances along that line: victory in war, good weather, a boom economy, health, prosperity. Every leader promises such, of course, but in this case God himself has signed the contract. That should make an impression.

Knowing these people, they'll need some warnings as well. Many more warnings, in fact. Let loose with the curses. Don't hold back; let the curses rain down. Blast away. Scare the sin out of them.

The Lord will strike you with wasting disease, with fever and inflammation, with scorching heat and drought, with blight and mildew, which will plague you until you perish. The sky over your head will be bronze, the ground beneath you iron. The Lord will turn the rain of your country into dust and powder; it will come down from the skies until you are destroyed.

The Lord will cause you to be defecated before your enemies. You will come at them from one direction but flee from them in seven, and you will become a thing of horror to all the kingdoms on earth. Your carcasses will be food for all the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and there will be no one to frighten them away. The Lord will afflict you with the boils of Egypt and with tumors, festering sores and the itch, from which you cannot be cured. The Lord will afflict you with madness, blindness and confusion of mind. At midday you will grope about like a blind man in the dark. You will be unsuccessful in everything you do; day after day you will be oppressed and robbed, with no one to rescue you.

God, could it be? Could you possibly abandon your people like this? Moses sees it so clearly that his knees sag and his heart

skips beats. But he can hardly believe these things will happen to the people God loves.

All these curses will come upon you. . . . Because you did not serve the Lord your God joyfully and gladly in the time of prosperity, therefore in hunger and thirst, in nakedness and dire poverty, you will serve the enemies the Lord sends against you.

Because of the suffering that your enemy will inflict on you during the siege, you will eat the fruit of the womb, the flesh of the sons and daughters the Lord your God has given you. Even the most gentle and sensitive man among you will have no compassion on his own brother or the wife he loves or his surviving children, and he will not give to one of them any of the flesh of his children that he is eating. It will be all he has left because of the suffering your enemy will inflict on you during the siege of all your cities. The most gentle and sensitive woman among you—so sensitive and gentle that she would not venture to touch the ground with the sole of her foot—will begrudge the husband she loves and her own son or daughter the afterbirth from her womb and the children she bears. For she intends to eat them secretly during the siege and in the distress that your enemy will inflict on you in your cities.

He sees the enemy siege as if it is happening before him. He sees the piles of bodies, the parents fighting over their children's corpses, the beautiful Jewish maidens turned into haggard witches. Oh, if only his eyes would fail and spare him this sight. If only the Hebrews would go deaf and not hear these curses. But they must, they must. Knowing is their only chance of preventing.

Then the Lord will scatter you among all nations, from one end of the earth to the other. . . . There the Lord will give you an anxious mind, eyes weary with longing, and a despairing heart. You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life. In the morning you will say, "If only it were evening!" and in the evening, "If only it were morning!"—

because of the terror that will fill your hearts and the sights that your eyes will see. The Lord will send you back in ships to Egypt on a journey I said you should never make again. There you will offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but no one will buy you.

Moses cannot go on. What else can he say? A horror grips him as he sounds the words: the horror of truth. His voice has fallen to a whisper. What he delivers as dire warnings to keep his people from sin are, he knows, direct prophecies. He is giving an advance history of a people who will break their covenant with God, not once but time and again.

"See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction," Moses cries, almost shrieking into the air that has grown suddenly still. "This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life! For the Lord is your life."

Spent, voiceless, the tottery old man collapses into the arms of his assistants, and no one in that vast throng makes a sound as they gently hand him down from the rock to others waiting on the ground.

More than anything, God longed for the covenant with the Hebrews to succeed: "Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!" he told Moses. The repeated rebellions in the wilderness took their toll, however. After Sinai even God spoke of the future with a tone of resignation approaching fatalism, like the parent of a drug addict helpless to stop his own child from self-destruction.

Two staged memory lessons were not enough. Despite Moses' exhausted state, God required one more task of him, an

odd assignment indeed. Write down a song, God said, and make the Israelites learn it as a witness to history. Laws written on stone and plaster, curses and blessings broadcast from the mountaintops—these sights and sounds will fade away. Make them, every one of them, learn my words by heart. Drill the message inside them.

The song that appears in Deuteronomy 32 sets to music God's own point of view: the story of a parent grieved to the point of desertion. Thus at the birth of their nation, euphoric over the crossing of the Jordan River, the Israelites premiered a kind of national anthem, the strangest national anthem that has ever been sung. It had virtually no words of hope, only doom.

They sang first of the favored times, when God found them in a howling wasteland and measured them as the apple of his eye. They sang of the awful betrayal to come, when they would forget the God who gave them birth. They sang of the curses that would afflict them, the wasting famine, deadly plague, and arrows slick with blood. With this bittersweet music ringing in their ears, they marched into the Promised Land.

"I have been to the mountain top," said Martin Luther King Jr. in his final speech, making a haunting allusion to Moses. "[God's] allowed me to go up to the mountain, and I've looked over, and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And so I'm happy tonight. . . . Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." After that speech King returned to his motel room, was hit by an assassin's bullet, and died in a pool of blood.

On the same day that Moses taught the Israelites the melancholy song of their future, he climbed Mount Nebo, squinted against the sun, and gazed in every direction as far as he could see. He had climbed the mountain. He had seen the Promised Land. There at its frontier, Moses died.

Deuteronomy adds this eulogy: "Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, who did all those miraculous signs and wonders the Lord sent him to do in Egypt—to Pharaoh and to all his officials and to his whole land. For no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel."

He was their preacher, historian, soldier, prophet, judge, politician, priest. Centuries later another Jewish writer, Elie Wiesel, elaborated on Moses' contribution:

Moses, the most solitary and most powerful hero in Biblical history. The immensity of his task and the scope of his experience command our admiration, our reverence, our awe. Moses, the man who changed the course of history all by himself, his emergence became the decisive turning point. After him, nothing was the same again.

It is not surprising that he occupies a special place in the Jewish tradition. His passion for social justice, his struggle for national liberation, his triumphs and disappointments, his poetic inspiration, his gifts as a strategist and his organizational genius, his complex relationship with God and His people, his requirements and promises, his condemnations and blessings, his bursts of anger, his silences, his efforts to reconcile the law with compassion, authority with integrity—no individual, ever, anywhere, accomplished so much for so many people in so many different domains. His influence is boundless, it reverberates beyond time. The Law bears his name, the Talmud is but its commentary and Kabbala communicates only its silence.

—*Messengers of God*

After Moses, nothing was the same again. One man came to stand for his people, and with good reason. Adopted by an imperial parent, punished for his rashness, sentenced to wander forty years in the wilderness, forgiven, restored, hand-selected

for an impossible task, accompanied by the overwhelming presence of God at every step—Moses' personal history replays, in miniature, the history of his people.

Modern readers, excited by the thrill of the Exodus, pay little attention to the four hundred years of misery that preceded it, or to the abysmal failures in the Sinai and in the Promised Land that succeeded it. Which is why the Bible includes Deuteronomy in the first place, and why optimistic Americans especially ought to pay it more mind.

Others have borrowed parts of Moses' message, but none have quite got it right. Liberationists of all stripes, from Marxists to American slaves to base communities in Latin America, have appropriated the language of Exodus, yet all lack Moses' unflinching realism. They drift into utopian promises of a Promised Land that has never been, and will never be, realized this side of eternity:

O Canaan, sweet Canaan,
I am bound for the land of Canaan.

Gonna lay down my sword and shield,
Down by the riverside,
I ain't gonna study war no more.

Often these utopians end up creating a political system more tyrannical than the one they sought liberation from. African colonies drive out the imperialists only to face new crises of tribalism and independence. Small countries escape the dark shadow of the Soviet Union only to disintegrate into civil war. The Old Testament should come with a warning: Don't read Exodus without also reading Deuteronomy. It would save a lot of disillusionment, for politicians and preachers both.

Pietist Christians have also borrowed Moses' language to describe a Victorious Christian Life on the other side of the Jordan River:

On Jordan's stormy banks I stand,
And cast a wishful eye
To Canaan's fair and happy land,
Where my possessions lie.

No chilling winds, nor poisonous breath
Can reach that healthful shore;
Sickness and sorrow, pain and death,
Are felt and feared no more.

Such visions paint Egypt as a dark land of seductive "flesh-pots," and the wilderness as a trial by ordeal necessary to pass through before arriving in the sun-drenched Promised Land at last. The last seven chapters of Deuteronomy should forever disabuse that notion. Life with God is never so easy, so settled, for any of us. Not for the Hebrews then, and not for us living today. The pilgrim must ever progress, uphill, meeting new enemies around every bend.

Moses was the single greatest realist about life with God. A proto-prophet, he gave God's message to the people, never diluting or belying it. A proto-priest, he represented the people to God with passion, conviction, and love. He made no promises of happy endings—his own life had none—yet never did he look back with regret. The luxuries of Egypt and the solitary comfort of a nomad's life had both lost their appeal. He belonged with his people, the whole swarming, cantankerous lot of them, and with his God, the One he had come to know as a friend, face to face.

"The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love," sang a psalmist years later, quoting the sacred *Shema* that Moses had first given to his people. That prayer is still prayed every morning and every evening by Jews around the world. God has bound his love in a covenant, so that even though emotions will rise and fall, in the end the love will always prevail.

He will not always accuse,
nor will he harbor his anger forever....

For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;

as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

As a father has compassion on his children,
so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him;
for he knows how we are formed,
he remembers that we are dust.

Dust, *Hapiru*, "the dusty ones," the old Egyptian slang word for the Hebrews—God remembers that we are dust. As Moses taught so clearly, evil is unpreventable and punishment inevitable. But we have a God who consciously forgets our sins and consciously remembers our frailty. We have a God who travels by our side, who *tabernacles* among us through the vast and dreadful wilderness. We have a God of grace, who loves even the dusty ones—especially the dusty ones.



There are two postscripts to Moses' sad, eloquent speeches in Deuteronomy. The first involves an event that occurred after Moses' dire predictions about his people had come true. Following Moses' death, the Hebrews crossed the Jordan, conquered Canaan, built cities, grew strong and prosperous, and promptly forgot about God. The nation split into two, invaders came, Jerusalem fell under siege, and the horror scenes that Moses foretold—parents eating their own children—became a matter of historical record. Once again God intervened with miraculous deliverance, giving his people another chance.

Two kings later the child-king Josiah had the nostalgic notion to repair the temple and renew some of the ancient religious practices. God's holy city had sunk to historic lows. The

temple featured idols, male shrine prostitutes, and carved horses dedicated to sun worshippers. In a nearby valley, people burned their children in sacrifice to the god Molech. All sacred records had disappeared; the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the God of Moses—was a faint memory. While numbing through the rubble, the high priest found the “Book of the Covenant,” which most likely consisted of portions of Deuteronomy.

Second Kings 22–23 tells the dramatic story of what followed: a spiritual house-cleaning and revival that has few precedents in history. The king wept, tore his robe, and ordered that Moses’ law be restored in the nation. At the end of this revolution of belief, Josiah called the whole nation together and celebrated the Passover. “Not since the days of the judges who led Israel, nor throughout the days of the kings of Israel and the kings of Judah, had any such Passover been observed.” Moses may have never made it to the Promised Land, but his spirit lived on, bringing renewal, hope, and literal salvation to the descendants of those he led to the border.

The second postscript appears in the New Testament. Jesus knew Deuteronomy well: during his own wilderness sojourn, he quoted from it three times to counter Satan’s temptations. Later, at a hinge moment in his ministry, Jesus climbed a high mountain to meet with God the Father. As when Moses met with God on the sacred mountain, Jesus’ appearance changed too. “There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun; . . . his clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.”

Peter and John shrank back, dazed by the scene. A voice rumbled from heaven and suddenly, there on the mountaintop before them, stood two giants of Israelite history. At once they recognized Elijah, the fierce, wonder-working prophet whose return every Jew anticipated. Just to the side—it could be no one else—stood Moses, engaged in casual conversation with Jesus.

Peter grew so excited that he clumsily proposed erecting tents to entice the celestial visitors to stick around. Jesus calmed his two disciples, then led the pair down the mountain back to earth. The miracle gave him new energy and boldness to face difficult days ahead.

The scene of Jesus’ transfiguration contains a fact often overlooked by Christians, but poignant for any Jew. At that moment of tender mercy, Moses finally realized his life dream. He stood on a mountaintop smack in the middle of the Promised Land. Indeed, God remembers the dusty ones, the meekest and the greatest.