

Meek Leadership: The Mosaic Model

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Introduction

Among history's preeminent leaders, secular or religious, ecclesiastical or political, social and practical or theoretical and intellectual, ancient Israel's slave-born son Moses occupies the rarest of rare ground. He stands, perhaps, without equal, in his witness to the value and practice of great leadership, so transcending in his time, so compellingly impacting the millennia since his birth, that he is now freely acknowledged as the human fountainhead of three great world religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Centered on a single virtue, meekness, this paper highlights seven significant leadership principles conspicuously demonstrated in his life and administrative practice.

Not out of requirement, but out of choice, we focus on seven, a number most reasonable, if not also arbitrary. Reasonable, of course, because Moses himself has taught us its value (Gen. 2:1-4; Exod. 20:8-11; 23:10-12; Lev 23:1-3, 15, 24, etc.). But arbitrary too, in that we must deprive ourselves of so much more that we might learn from the nobility of his example. Acknowledging him as the one who introduces the world to the sacred Scriptures of the Hebrew Bible, considering the way he dominates the Old Testament,¹ furthermore, the prevalence of references to him in the

¹ Credited with authorship of the Pentateuch, foundational books of the OT and all Scripture, as well as Job, on which last: "Moses wrote his own book, and the passages about Balaam and Job" (*Baba Bathra*, 14b; though rabbinic discussion cited here [4b through 15b] would locate Job anywhere between Moses and Ahasuerus).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

New,² it would be hard to exaggerate either the power or the value of Moses' life and example.

Peter's words after the healing at the Gate Beautiful supply a most compelling demonstration of this fact. We know that during his ministry, Jesus' liberal use of OT Scripture at times included comparisons of his actions to those of various Old Testament personalities. When challenged about Sabbath breaking he referred to David's law breaking (Matt. 12:3, 4; Mark 2:25; Luke 6:3, 4), or priestly Sabbath work in the temple (Matt. 12:5). Jonah's time in the belly of a great fish was a sign, he said (Matt. 12:39; Luke 11:30). And his acclaim elsewhere, compared to his rejection at Nazareth, is reminiscent of the success of Elijah and Elisha in territories and with persons outside of the land of Israel (Luke 4:24-27). But nowhere in his evocation of Old Testament Scripture do we find any reference as remarkable as that of Acts 3:22-26, and 7:37. In an astonishing reversal of roles, Moses had predicted that people would recognize Messiah when he came because Messiah would be like Moses (Deut. 18:15-18). And so it is, with Peter and Stephen citing the text from the book of Deuteronomy to argue that Jesus is the fulfillment of Moses' words (Acts 3:22-26; 7:37). There surely are other arguments, but Jesus here is recognizable as Messiah, because of similarity to Moses. In such an exalted context it becomes most unlikely that any discussion of Moses' greatness and contribution as a leader would transgress the bounds of reason and fairness.

From among the multiple foci one might select on Moses' life and example we here zero in on a non-compelling, yet unsurpassable leadership trait, which, apart from its perfect representation in the life of Jesus, the Son of Man, is best exemplified by no other human being in the way it is witnessed to in the life and work of the son of Amram and Jochebed. I refer to the practice of meek leadership. Not the limits of the subject, but practical finitudes of space and time, constrain against more extensive and informative work than we have here undertaken.

Moses' Beginnings

Despite the power of his influence upon history, Moses has still not been adequately characterized. For all that he is remembered for, he is still

² He is mentioned 80 times in the NT. For authoritative NT references to Moses see, e.g., Matt. 8:4; 19:7, 8; 22:24; 23:2; Mark 1:44; 7:10; 12:19-27; Luke 16:29; 24:27; John 1:17; 5:45, 46; the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15; Paul in Rom. 10, etc.

CAESAR: THE MOSAIC MODEL

not remembered for enough, and history has still not bestowed him his due. To begin with, his aspect of terrible awe bequeathed to the ages through Michelangelo's medieval artistic conditioning³ strongly contrasts with the legacy of Scripture. The biblical Moses, whether so known or not, deserves to be remembered as beguilingly attractive. Scripture represents the future liberator's birth as immediately confounding to the tyranny of Egypt's pharaohs, and disruptive of the burden of oppression under which his parents and people were being compelled to struggle. Heb. 11:23 expresses the inspiration that the very sight of this infant brought to his parents' hearts. They could see that their baby was special, "no ordinary child" translates the NIV;⁴ "exceptional" renders J. B. Phillips.⁵ The author of *Hebrews* represents him, in his infancy, as possessed of "an attractive comeliness that is uncommonly striking."⁶

Abraham Even-Shoshan identifies 495 occurrences of the term (*tob*)⁷ that describes Moses' appearance when he is introduced in Exod. 2:2: "And the woman conceived and bore a son; and . . . saw that he was beautiful (*tob*). . . ." More than anything else, *tob* means "good," in contrast with evil (Gen. 2:16, 17; Prov. 31:12), as applicable to human character (Prov. 14:14), or to God Himself (Psa 136:1); or as applicable to things—good fruit (Judg. 9:11), good land (Josh. 23:13, 15), good gold (Gen 2:12), good ideas (Deut. 1:14). It also may mean cheerful or contented (Prov. 15:15), or even, in the metaphor *tob leb* (Judges 16:25; 1 Sam 25:36; 2 Sam. 13:28), intoxicated. It is also recognized as a signifier of beauty, outstanding physical attractiveness. Selectively, only seven times in the entire OT, it is specifically employed to qualify named individuals as good looking. Through the ages, almost all of those so described have become legendary

³ According to Exod. 34:29, Moses' face shone when he descended the mountain from spending time with God. Hebrew *qrn*, means both "shine" and "horn." The latter meaning entered the well known Latin Bible translation, the Vulgate, and led Michelangelo to depict Moses with horns.

⁴ Texts credited to NIV are from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*. Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

⁵ Bible texts credited to Phillips are from J. B. Phillips: *The New Testament in Modern English*, Revised Edition. Copyright J. B. Phillips 1958, 1960, 1972. Used by permission of Macmillan Publishing Co.

⁶ Fritz Reinecker, Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), p. 710, s.v. $\alpha\sigma\tau\epsilon\iota\omicron\nu$.

⁷ Abraham Even-Shoshan, *A New Concordance of the Bible* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sepher, 1982), s.v. *tob*.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

for their comeliness, their names inseparably bound up in our minds with celebrations of irresistibly attractive physicality. The list runs through Rebekah (twice—Gen. 24:16; 26:7), David (1 Sam. 15:12), Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11:2), Queen Vashti (Esth. 1:11), Esther who would become her successor (Esth. 2:7), and Israel's first king, Saul, than whom none more handsome could be found in all Israel at the time of his coronation (1 Sam. 9:2).

One other in OT history receives the epithet bestowed upon those six, and that other is Moses, of such engaging charisma, even in babyhood (Exod. 2:2), that he could inspire first resistance, then boldly rebellious confidence in Amram and Jochebed. Looking into his lovely countenance moved his parents to fearless defiance of the nation's supreme monarch, and the edict that some imagined insecurity had driven him to articulate. So they hid him first in secret, then out in the open. Hiding out there in the open he won the heart of the woman of the palace, and found his place and life next to the throne of the empire, where he would become "educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, . . . a man of power in words and deeds" (Acts 7:22).⁸ Thus God used Moses' beauty, even in infancy, to engender and nurture a seed of rebellion in his parents' hearts. That rebellion he himself would harness for God eighty years later, and it would climax in national deliverance for all of his parents' people, though Amram and Jochebed would not live to see the end and triumph of their daring.

The remaining portions of this chapter first set forth the case for Moses as meek, and articulate the theoretical core of meekness as leadership principle, followed by the discussion of seven areas of Moses' ministry as illustrative of his meek leadership.

Moses the Meek

"Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3). This superlative testimony has been quite uniformly rejected by commentators as the word of Moses' mind. Calvin recognizes it as an inserted parenthesis.⁹ Perhaps Moses, like Paul much later (2 Cor. 11:5; 12:11, 12), might be seen as "forced to it by the

⁸ Except as otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard Bible (NASB)*, copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

⁹ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, trans., ed. by John King, (n.d.), s.v., Num. 12:3.

CAESAR: THE MOSAIC MODEL

insolence and contempt of opponents.”¹⁰ But Jamieson, Faussett, and Brown commentary suggests Ezra as author of the gloss, adding alternatively that the rendering may be a mistranslation.¹¹ The most basic of reasoning supports belief that the statement could not be original with Moses, for the virtue of meekness is indisputably incompatible with self-celebration. Personal proclamation of one’s humility may prove stupidity, or arrogance, or both, but surely not meekness. Moses the meek would not therefore be expected to declare himself so.

Against this view is the simple fact that Num. 12:3 need not be read as Moses’ celebration of personal superiority. The literary and historical context of Num. 12 is that of episodes (Num. 11-21), and a period, during which one man, Moses, is subjected to more undeserved and ungrateful assault and insult than any other would bear, at least in the biblical record, but Jesus Christ Himself: The sequence opens with fugitive slaves mouthing off about wanting to return to the good life of bondage (11:4, 5). Next his own brother and sister get hostile and insulting, baptizing their racism in a rhetoric of holiness (chap. 12) that God sees through. After which, the entire nation—in the incident of the spies, refuses, now more specifically than in chapter eleven, and this time at the edge of victory, the goal towards which they had set out, ranting and clamoring that they prefer to be losers (chaps. 13, 14). They even threaten to murder the leaders who continue to claim God’s word can be trusted (14:10). There is method to their outrageous madness: the leaders who get killed for believing, will be replaced with new ones who will oblige the congregation by helping them be enslaved again (v. 4); over two hundred and fifty brilliant leaders of the congregation raise a new challenge, more clearly rationalized than before, followed again by close to the entire assembly (chaps. 16, 17). The incident at Meribah (chap. 20) is a case of a human snapping under pressure. But chapter twenty-one shows that anger and self-pity are not the solution, for Israel is soon back to their murmuring and complaining ways, and it is Moses who must first enquire, and then execute to rescue them from the ravages of another plague. For its multifaceted and sustained hostility to

¹⁰ Robert Jamieson, A. R. Faussett, David Brown, *A Commentary Critical, Experimental, and Practical on the Old & New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, n.d.), vol. 1:544.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 545; W. J. Dumbrell comments that the verse is “. . . regarded as non-Mosaic by even the most conservative scholars,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis [NIDOTTE]*, vol. 3:454-64, “*anaw*, ‘*ani*’; p. 455.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

God's chosen leader there is no section of all Scripture or segment of all Israel's history equivalent to that covered by the narratives of Numbers 12-21. Only Jesus, in proportion, and by virtue of who he is, may be seen to go through more than Moses does in this regard.

Repeatedly, through these incidents both Moses' leadership authority, and more fundamentally, his spiritual credentials, are called into question. For Miriam, whom God shames and castigates as chief instigator, and her brother Aaron, Moses, the youngest in the family, is clearly out of place. Scripture does not report all the respective ages. What is known is that Aaron is older by three years than his brother (Exod. 7:7), while their sister Miriam, is probably the first of the three, being already mature enough at the time of Moses' birth to be his wise and alert protector. The cause of their grievance is social displeasure with Moses because of his Cushite [Ethiopian] wife (Num. 12:1).¹² The terms of the complaint are more elevated, and Miriam is the speaker. The Hebrew verb in v. 1 is feminine singular, showing that Aaron, already known to be a follower (Exod. 32:1-6, 21-24), is an accompanist even when they both speak in v. 2: "Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses?" It is alarm at Moses' conceited posture of divine spokesperson that inspires their intervention. God, who knows their true motivation, summons them to the tent of meeting (v. 4), stands before them and the whole congregation gazing now in frightened awe at the numinous cloud (v. 5), speaks judgment against their unscrupulous insolence (vv. 6-8), and strikes Miriam, ironically, white as snow (v. 10), silencing Moses' pleas on her behalf, and demanding that she remain unclean and ostracized for a full week (vv. 13-15).

But the nation does not well learn its lesson from this private family feud turned by God to public rebuke of Aaron and Miriam, and public affirmation of his servant Moses. For Israel's next major historical moment, following this will be the rebellion of the entire nation against Moses' leadership. Regrettably, the incident of the twelve spies is not often enough read in such terms. But taken together, Num. 13-14, and Deut. 1:19-36 show that the very selection of spies was a failure of faith, and a

¹² Efforts to diminish the embarrassing truth about this incident include the claim that Moses' wife was not really the issue: "Miriam and Aaron are envious of Moses' leadership, but they use an occasion — his marriage — to criticize him. Often the immediate criticism is simply a surface issue for a deeper matter" (NET Bible, on Num. 12:1). This is interpretive gymnastics. The text baldly states that Moses' wife was the issue. Racist sentiment is here clothed in garments of "spiritual" conversation.

CAESAR: THE MOSAIC MODEL

contradiction of Moses's first instructions: "Then the LORD spoke to Moses saying, send out for yourself men so that they may spy out the land of Canaan (Num. 13:1, 2)." Taken alone, Num. 13 appears to show God and Moses as initiating the selection of tribal representatives who will review Canaan's territories and bring back their report to the congregation waiting in the wilderness of Paran at Kadesh (Num. 13:26). The parallel account in Deut. 1:19-36 tells a more complete, and very different story: "I said to you, . . . 'See, the LORD your God has placed the land before you; go up, take possession, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has spoken to you.' . . . Then all of you approached me and said, 'Let us send men before us, that they may search out the land for us . . . (vv. 20-22).'" Taken together, Numbers and Deuteronomy show God and his human representative as dedicated to the support of people bent on perversity that directly insults and disgraces the divine name and purpose.

True, Moses' humanity allows him to appreciate and accept the recommendation for spies (v. 23). But this does not negate the character of his leadership, the virtue of it we here highlight. It is the message of his meekness. Moses is right. And subsequent events incontrovertibly declare that he was right at the beginning. But it is the deference of spirit here exhibited that creates the space for Miriam's attack, and the tribes' contradiction, and the uprising of Korah and his brilliant friends, men of name, and fame, and renown (Num. 16:1-3).¹³ It is because Moses no longer knows how to assert himself on his own behalf, how to contend for rights and fight for justice, as he once did (Exod. 2:11, 12). This is the message of Num. 12:3. And because he does not, and because he will not, every one may rise up against him, his sister and brother, the rabble and the geniuses, the spiritual leaders and the laity, Levite and Reubenite, individual, and whole congregation (Num. 12-17). Until, at the climax of it all, Moses is constrained to speak for God in judgment against Korah, Dathan, Abiram, and On: "'If these men . . . suffer the fate of all men, *then* the LORD has not sent me. But if the LORD brings about an entirely new thing and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that is theirs, . . . then you will understand that these men have spurned the LORD.' Then . . . the ground that was under them split open; and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, . . . (Num. 16:29-32)."

¹³ The Hebrew literally means "men of name."

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

But that settles nothing. When God does a new thing and turns the earth into a devouring monster to prove that Korah's rebellion has not been against Moses and Aaron but against Him, then the congregation, more amenable to bombast and brilliance than to meekness, seethes in protest at their dead heroes. The next day "all the congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron, saying, "You are the ones who have caused the death of the LORD's people." (v. 41). To trust themselves rather than stand with Moses and humble trust in God was a congregational misconception, the incipient stage of national rebellion that concluded in national tragedy.

Meek Leadership: Its Theoretical Core

That God, and his servant Moses, were willing to carry the burdensome consequences of that rebellion, and write themselves down in Numbers 13 as responsible for the flawed choices, is itself an effective exposé of the theoretical core of meekness as leadership principle. Double and distinctive records on the incident of the spies is not proof of Scripture's self-contradiction. Respect for *Tota Scriptura* and the fact that both accounts are Mosaic lets the reader access an exceptional lesson on the virtue of meekness. The integrated message of the two accounts discloses as compellingly as meekness might the nature and heart and character of the God who condescends to work with, and wait for, and listen to sinners, neither tyrannizing them into conversion, nor throwing up His hands in despair. For He knows better than we will ever understand, that it is only because He is willing to be the God of sinners, that He will reign over us all one day as the God of saints.

It is apparent that multiple other admirable elements of Moses' character are significantly dependent on this fundamental trait of meekness. His ability, as leader of a nation, to listen to the counsel of his father-in-law, and his disposition to do "all that he said" (Exod. 18:13-24), are surely witness to the truth of Numbers 12:3. His respectful consideration of the radical unorthodoxy of five courageous, fatherless women (Num. 27:1-4), his taking their request to the Lord (v. 5), and his willing implementation of God's new word on the matter (vv. 6-11) speak eloquently to willing deference to God and others, including, significantly, women, a deference that was part and parcel of Moses' makeup. His final farewell up Nebo's flanks, heavy-hearted and obedient, denied his life's dream because a myriad provocations had brought him to one flash of intemperate anger

CAESAR: THE MOSAIC MODEL

(Num. 27:12-14; Deut. 34:1-4), is only the reasonable end of a journey of submission that Moses learned to walk while minding Jethro's sheep in the wilderness of Horeb-Sinai (Exod. 3:1).

That path of submission was the irreconcilable opposite of the road he was trained to follow during his days of youth in the Egyptian palace. Our anachronistic reading of meekness as virtue develops and survives despite our anxiety to join in Stephen's boast. Stephen speaks these words in a calculated attempt to win over his hostile audience by appealing to their point of pride. He reminds, "Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds" (Acts 7:22). That which human nature most readily admires, emphasized, here by Stephen, emphasized too in the narratives and history that are context for Numbers' twelfth chapter, is not deference that leads to, allows for, and even invites personal affront. It is its opposite, the courage of aggression, in self-defense perhaps, certainly for God and country. On the other hand, Moses' inaccessibility because he is in the mountain with God can hardly be interpreted as assertiveness. It irritates the crowd and breeds the golden calf: "we do not know what has become of [Moses]," the people complain (Exod. 32:1). Dynamic public action from the front stands over against private communion with God, and wins the day. But Moses is meek. Not because meekness was deemed admirable at the time. But because Moses, however despised and readily insulted because of it, was meek.

Numbers 12:3 is not a parenthesis. It is necessary introduction to, and explication of so much that follows. And we would not read this third verse of Numbers twelve as a gloss by another hand if we properly understood it, or if we recognized, as we ought, that meekness is mostly celebrated by Christians—despite our continued preference for its alternative—because Jesus, who is like Moses, declares Himself to be "meek and lowly in heart" (Matt. 11:29, KJV). Projecting that sentiment backwards through fifteen hundred years, we have determined that Moses could not have pronounced himself as meek.

However, properly appreciated, Jesus' embodiment of meekness, as well as His self-identification as meek and lowly in heart (Matt. 11:28-30), might teach, more than is sometimes recognized, the consistency of Moses' statement in the book of Numbers. Jesus is of course not faulted for declaring Himself to be meek. This is primarily because gospel believers accept Him as Holy Ghost anointed from the outset (Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:21, 22; John 1:32-34; Acts 10:38), and living exclusively by every

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

word from the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4). But categorical distinction between Jesus' credibility and that of an ordinary human such as Moses may possibly deny the Spirit the freedom to use a surrendered servant of God to teach a critically necessary lesson. Moreover, read in proper context our controverted text seems not to deserve interpreters' major effort at reconstruction.

Review of the biblical use of the term *'anaw*, that qualifies Moses (Num. 12:3), provides good insight into OT significance of this quality, so differently esteemed among today's followers of Christ than it evidently was in biblical context. Though at times synonymous (and even confused) with the related *'ani* (poor, afflicted),¹⁴ the term's eighteen most certain occurrences never represent high social standing or popular esteem.¹⁵ Nor is it clear why Moses should be deemed arrogant or unspiritual for confessing that he did not, or could not defend himself, his rights, or his personal causes. Though the *'anaw* is often the object of divine succor and blessing, benefits received in no way relate to their standing or duties in the community. The God who commits to sustaining Davidic scions or the Aaronic or Levitical priesthood has no such covenant with the *'anaw*. Rather it is the need of the needy that makes them the object of His protection. He sees that evil ones, if allowed, will destroy the *'anaw* and the needy (*'ebyon*) by slander (32:7), twist their way (Amos 2:7), and even completely wipe them away (8:4). They are the focus of divine solicitude precisely because they are otherwise helpless. And one needs but to read the six chapters of Numbers 12-17 to recognize this is an accurate description of Moses' situation before Miriam and Aaron, the returning spies and their mass audience, and the two hundred and fifty famous men who stand up and speak up in Numbers 16. It is this last incident, the political insurrection that unites Korah of the first and largest Levite clan, with powerful Reubenite personalities, Dathan, Abiram, and On, that lifts the narrative of wilderness rebellion to its climax, in the contrast between Moses and the men of fame. Moses, the *'anaw*, will only act exactly as the Lord commands

¹⁴ As "poor"—to be lent money but not exploited with interest charges (Exod. 22:24); to be allowed to gather fallen sheaves and gleanings of vineyard (Lev. 19:10; 23:22); as "afflicted"—Ishmael to be so called because God has heard (*shama'*) Hagar's affliction (Gen. 16:11); God has seen His people's affliction in Egypt (Exod. 3:7).

¹⁵ This is equally so if disputed cases are included.

CAESAR: THE MOSAIC MODEL

him. He is incapable of accomplishing anything except the Lord does it for him. And this is the core of meekness as leadership principle.

For meekness as leadership principle is neither dependent on popular permission, nor on personal whim and preference. It is controlled neither by perceived social status nor by strength of personal will. It is the simple conviction that this is what God, unique and supreme authority, has required and would will. It is doing what God says to do regardless. Patience with human perversity is part and parcel of such leadership, for the crowds do eventually follow, however reluctantly. But however unwilling the multitude may prove to be, God will still lead, and his meek human agent will lead by following Him (Psa. 25:9). Such single-minded, shame-despising commitment was and is the leadership of Jesus (Heb. 12:2), and such, of His servant Moses.

Over against such a mentality of submission, self-denial, and self-sacrifice, are allied, in the case of Numbers 16, men and units who nurse recent and long cherished convictions of privilege denied—Reubenites deprived of a birthright, and Levites who know themselves to be as godly, holy, competent, and gifted, as any who claimed that they served by divine election. The geniuses orchestrate their prime time confrontation against Moses specifically in context of their confidence that they control, and can count on, the crowd's affections. Moses, and the *'anaw*, have nothing of which to boast. And they lack all human or material recourse.

Perhaps because of their vulnerability and sense of need, it is to them that Zephaniah directs his call to seek the Lord, that they may be protected in the day of the Lord's wrath (Zeph. 2:3). For the Lord does care about them. He hears their cry (Ps. 10:17), He will guide them with judgment, and will teach them His way (25:9). Evidently, the *'anaw* is a teachable individual. Such willingness to be taught, and the openness that is its necessary element, easily invite acts of aggression against the meek person. Affronts by those who are 1) his seniors—Aaron and Miriam, 2) many—the whole congregation, and, or 3) celebrated for their brilliance—Korah and company, are reasonable consequences that Moses reports suffering for his meekness.

The close relationship between *'ani* and *'anaw*, the semantic range they share (“poor,” “afflicted,” “humble”), and divine warnings and action

against those who would exploit individuals thus labeled,¹⁶ all taken together, scarcely suggest that anyone so self-described, would, in his time, be heard as boasting. Israel is under unqualified injunction to open their hand to the poor (*'ani*), who will never cease from the land (Deut. 15:11),¹⁷ and God Himself can be counted on to rise in judgment to save all the meek (*'anaw*) of the earth (Ps. 76:10). Biblical usage gives them no other possibility of deliverance. Simply told, Moses' self-description as *'anaw* is no word of braggadochio, for the *'anaw* did not occupy a position of stature, are totally dependent on God, and never possessed any title or social position generally celebrated as a thing to be desired.

We proceed now to specific and practical illustration of Moses' meek leadership, dealing at times in more depth, and greater length, with elements of his life experience mentioned in the last two sections.

Meek Leadership

Of the one hundred and twenty years of Moses' life (Deut. 34:7), he has left the greatest detail on the last third, the forty years during which he may be said to have fulfilled the promise of his early days when gifted brilliance presented him to the world as the adoptive Asiatic prince who would be pharaoh though the Hyksos had been expelled,¹⁸ "educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and . . . a man of power in words and deeds" (Acts 7:22). Decades would elapse before this man of learning and power would undertake and carry through that daunting task that would cause him to be memorialized in Jewish, biblical, Ancient Near Eastern, and world history, as the greatest liberator the ages have ever documented. The book of Numbers contains most information on those last forty years of Moses' life experiences. Its Hebrew name, *Bemidbar*, highlights the venue of its occurrence, the wilderness.¹⁹ And the wilderness story of Numbers teaches

¹⁶ Deut. 24:14: "Do not oppress a hired servant who is poor (*'ani*);" 2 Sam 22:18: "You save afflicted people (*'am 'ani*)."

¹⁷ "You absolutely must" (*pato^ah tiptah* —author's translation).

¹⁸ By Ahmose I, founder of Egypt's 18th dynasty, 1550-25 B.C.

¹⁹ Following Ancient Near Eastern [ANE] document-naming patterns, Hebrew names of pentateuchal books depend mostly on the text's first words, rather than on nature of contents, though such a relation is also still observable. Genesis is *Bereshith*, first word in the Hebrew text ("In the beginning"); Exodus is *Shemoth* ("Names"), from the opening nominal clause *we'elleh shemoth* ("Now these are the names"); Leviticus is *Wayyiqra'*, ("and He called"); Numbers, *Bemidbar* ("In the wilderness"), is from the book's first line where God calls to Moses in the wilderness [of Sinai]; Deuteronomy, *Debarim*, begins

CAESAR: THE MOSAIC MODEL

in more detail about Moses' story and character than any other book of the Pentateuch.

In context of the book and the wilderness, eleven chapters (chaps. 11-21), do more than all the rest of the book to illustrate Moses' trials as leader of a recently released gaggle of not quite stabilized, and sometimes quite intemperate ex-slaves. Particularly because of the episodes there reported, we come to see that their greatness notwithstanding, Moses is not to be confused with history's celebrated Julius Caesars, Napoleons, Churchills, and such. Gracious discrimination may permit, upon occasion, the idolization of those who in other context would not deserve as much, because in them some admirable trait hews so closely to some other we know deserves no equivalent appreciation. But the military mastery of these mentioned heroes cannot more starkly contrast with the meekness of Moses. The flaw of his youth, intemperate passion for justice, is the sin of youthful idealists through a thousand generations to the present. But that which drives him to exile in the morning of his years is turned to almost flawless victory in the evening of his days.

Almost, but not quite. And of all Scripture's example stories the tragically painful disappointment that closes Moses' earthly sojourn declares as finally as any that God will not immortalize a flawed heroism. The ideal He holds out will always be higher than our highest human thought can reach.²⁰

Nevertheless, Mosaic meekness, once given a more deserving clarity, may provide the world with a leadership model as close to the manner of Jesus Christ Himself as has ever been witnessed here on earth. We proceed now, to seven aspects of this meek leadership that Moses' life exemplifies. They are:

1) *Teachable Leadership*. Moses reports for us perhaps the most conspicuous example of teachable leadership in his life, when he describes the meeting between Egypt's recent liberator and his father-in-law in Exodus 18. The report of this meeting is quite dense with significance, communicating the courtesies of desert hospitality (Moses providing a meal—v. 12), generational respect (bowing and kissing—v. 7), paternal pride (Jethro's joy and praise—vv. 9-11), and family affection (welcoming,

similarly to Exodus, *'elleh haddebarim* ("These are the words").

²⁰ Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1952), p. 18; Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Teachers* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1943), p. 365.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

exchanging greetings, enquiries of well-being, sharing and rejoicing over experiences—vv. 5-11). Yet these do not exhaust its import. For outstanding among its messages is the principle of teachable leadership that lets the prince of Egypt learn from his desert dwelling father-in-law.

That God has just used Moses to deliver His people from the world's most powerful and braggart monarch by His mighty power and stretched out arm (Ps. 136:12), that he has been God's agent for silencing the pharaoh's power, consigning his host to the bowels of the Yam Suph (v. 15), that he has stood and spoken as God before the Pharaoh (Exod. 7:1), none of this qualifies Moses, in his own mind, as omniscient, or prevents the one who once had the run of the palace, and stood on the edge of running the world, from taking instruction from another whose area of expertise is living in the desert.

Omniscience may suggest itself in his answer to Jethro's query: "Why do you alone sit *as judge* and all the people stand about you from morning until evening?" (Exod. 18:14). To which Moses answers: "Because the people come to me to inquire of God" (v. 15). And he continues, "[I] make known the statutes of God and His laws" (v. 16). But Moses' stress does not fall on the pronoun "I." What drives him is not deluded conceit, but self-forgetful consecration to God and the service of His people. Jethro knows this, and can help. His insight is that Moses' earnestly inadequate administration threatens both him and his people (vv. 17, 18). His counsel:

. . . select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place *these* over them, *as* leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens. And let them judge the people at all times; and let it be that every major dispute they will bring to you, but every minor dispute they themselves will judge (vv. 21, 22).

And Moses is a leader happy to be rebuked, and happy to be helped: He "listened to his father-in-law, and did all that he had said" (v. 24). Did it work? It most surely did. "You will surely wear out," Jethro had warned of his previous management style (v. 18), but if you do as I say, "and God *so* commands you, then you will be able to endure" (v. 23). And because Moses could accept the word of God from a desert chieftain, he would come to the end of his days possessed of his full powers: ". . . one hundred and twenty years old when he died, his eye was not dim, nor his vigor abated" (Deut. 34:7). God give us more teachable leaders.

CAESAR: THE MOSAIC MODEL

2) *Open-minded Leadership*. Open-mindedness is certainly related to teachability. But it does involve more, as our exemplary episode will show. For whereas teachability allows one to accept instruction, open-mindedness in his leadership permitted Moses to do the unprecedented, and on behalf of those for whom such action was not simply overlooked before, but held to be improper. Moses the open-minded leader could listen to, and initiate in favor of disenfranchised women. The man to whom Zelophehad's daughters brought their gendered request would be remembered 1500 years later as "educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, . . . a man of power in words and deeds" (Acts 7:22). And more thousands of years later he is still seen as unique in history in five different areas of human endeavor: "As historian, poet, philosopher, general of armies, and legislator, he stands without a peer."²¹ Moreover, besides his vast competence in all these areas, Moses stood supreme in Israel as their authority on divine revelation.

When Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah approached him with a request to change the nation's laws and practices for the sake of fairness (Num. 27:1-4), he had already twice spent 40 days and nights in the mountain with God (Exod. 24:18; 34:28). It was he who had brought down to them and to all the rest, the tables of holy oracles written with God's finger (Exod. 31:18; Deut. 9:10). The second of those tablets Moses himself had carved for God to write on (Exod 34:1, 4). Moses might have dismissed those women for history's sake—he knew his history books; or for culture and custom's sake—he was an international, with experience in what his own people were accustomed to, what practices obtained in neighboring countries where he had lived and linked himself by marriage, and he knew how they would react to something so radical. He could have argued that after he had shared the data from his two 40 day-and-night sessions in God's law-giving company, it was likely inappropriate for the women to even raise such a question. It could amount to questioning the adequacy and reliability of revelation.

Instead, "Moses brought their case before the LORD" (Num. 34:5). It did not seem to him that his God who had already spoken as clearly as He had, would mind another consultation. And Mahlah and company did not believe that the God of past revelation was now exhausted. It would be reasonable and proper to ask Him new questions. And God? He might have

²¹ Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs & Prophets* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1958), p. 246.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

reproved Moses for not properly appreciating already communicated revelation. “But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, that shines brighter and brighter until the full day” (Prov. 4:18). There is, and there will always be, new truth to comprehend. And because Moses was an open-minded leader, he could take a new case to the Lord. And God could speak categorically: “The daughters of Zelophehad are right” (vv. 6, 7). And things changed, and old and long and established discrimination was confronted, and better justice prevailed. God give us more open-minded leaders.

3) *Obedient Leadership*. Given the celebration of charisma and intellect that Moses amounts to, it is remarkable how willing he shows himself to be in paying attention to the wishes and counsel of those who were far from being his administrative equals. But if Moses was respectful to his fellow humans and their concerns it was because he was first respectful to his God. As already noted, this is the theoretical core, the essence of meek leadership—the confidence that whatever God requires is to be done to the limit. And the true totality of obedience to God never excludes respect for humans created in the image of God.

Nowhere is Moses’ devotion to total conformity to God’s instructions more consistently underlined than in the account of the sanctuary’s establishment. The report of setting up the sanctuary belabors the admirable Mosaic leadership trait of cooperative obedience. Though the assignment demanded generous assistance and the particular gifts bestowed on Bezalel and Oholiab, Moses is represented as personally performing all tasks involved. Throughout the setting up of the structure the phrase, descriptive of his obedience and conformity, is seven times repeated, “just as the Lord commanded Moses” (Exod. 40:19, 21, 23, 25, 27, 29, 32).

4) *Stand-the-consequences Leadership*. At a place that would be cursed with the labels of Massah (test) and Meribah (quarrel), Moses was charged to honor God before a desperate congregation. He was to speak to a mountain that would thus spring a fountain of water enough to quench the thirsty ingratitude of the whole congregation, and water their beasts as well (Num. 20:1-8). Instead, Moses vented his indignation at the people’s gracelessness by denouncing them as rebels who would now demand of him and his brother that they bring water out of flint. Whereupon he slammed his shepherd’s stick against the rock, from which, in that instant, a river of water burst forth before his and the people’s incredulous eyes (vv. 9-11).

CAESAR: THE MOSAIC MODEL

God's answer to Moses' rage was firm and unalterable: "Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them" (Num. 20:12). God had ever intended to give the complainers water. Not Moses nor Aaron could do what God could, and bring water, or honey and oil for that matter, out of the flinty rock (Deut. 32:13). Moses had desecrated God's wonder-working bit of dry stick by striking the rock twice with it. He had arrogated to himself responsibility that belonged solely to God by his irritated query "shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?" (v. 10). And he had confused the people by the bewildering context he had given the miracle: Was God now to be represented as (or pleased and persuaded by) frothing at the mouth?

God's uncompromising response to Moses' Meribah anger weighed heavily on the patriarch's soul. Leading Israel into Canaan was what he had meant to do as a youth, what he had given up on ever doing as he tended Jethro's sheep, and what he finally undertook and had sacrificially labored to do for the last forty years of his existence. Accepting that he would never accomplish the only thing he lived for accomplishing was hard to accept. He begged his God about it until, after the conquest of Sihon and Og, God spoke categorically to him, "Enough! Speak to Me no more of this matter" (Deut. 3:26; see also 31:1, 2). The Moses who speaks on the plains of Moab is a disappointed man. But he is one who has accepted the consequences of his actions. Though he knows of the people's guilt in the matter (1:37; 3:26), he neither curses God nor throws up his hands and refuses to go on. Even on Moab's plains his mind and counsel are ever turned towards Israel's success, and distressed about their future failures—after he is gone, after they enter the land of promise (31:26-29; 32).

But there is more than disappointment in God's uncompromising position towards Moses. For it must also be recognized as a powerful confirmation of his practice of meek leadership. By stern rebuke of that single instance, God Himself witnesses to innumerable occasions when his servant did not fail: to times, reported and unreported, when he bore large insults with grace of manner and countenance—though we have no photographs; to the ways and days he drew on strength from nights in the mountain with his God, and persevered because he knew that tonight when the roar of their tumult and the whine of their complaining was momentarily stilled he would be able to go again to his mountain or his desert secret

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

place and share another hour with his God, drawing one more day's worth of strength from his unfailing source of spiritual and physical sustenance.

5) *Praying Leadership*. Perhaps we need no further comment on this aspect of Moses' leadership. For him, God immersed, God saturated living was a privilege and pleasure. And so it was for God too: "the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend" (Exod. 33:11). Leadership that spends days, weeks, and months alone with God is not necessarily the best in the congregation's eyes. There are people at the foot of the mountain who resent the absenteeism of such sustained private devotion. They believe in action, and do not know what to make of leaders who disappear because they must have time alone with God: "As for this Moses," they complain, "the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him" (Exod. 32:1). They do. But prayer is not their priority. God give us more praying leaders.

6) *Shared Leadership*. It is leadership that as per Jethro's advice, already noted (Exod. 18:17-23), appoints captains of tens, fifties, hundreds, and thousands, rather than micromanage the entire operation. And it is leadership that respects the people's abilities and allows them to serve in the areas of their gifts. It both refreshes the larger group, and preserves leaders' energies, so they may continue to share the accumulated wisdom of their years even after they have passed their command to others and retired to less demanding schedules of service.

Moses also stumbles backwards into another aspect of shared leadership and teaches us at least three lessons in the process. They are lessons on a) the shortsightedness of flawed humility, the flawed humility that complains to God about His wisdom in assigning us a task, the frightened humility that, looking to the self, knows then that God has erred in entrusting to us as much as He has. This is the error of Moses' protested inadequacy in Numbers 11:11-13. We learn too, of b) the impetuosity of irritated humanity, when Moses blurts out his mistaken conviction that his assignment is not a task for which God has fitted him (vv. 14, 15). This is not the meekness that Numbers 12 eventually celebrates. Instead, it is but a stage in the process of his growth and sanctification, even as it may be ours. It is a stage where too many too long linger, in perpetual dismay over the humanly perceived and creaturely designed dimensions of divinely appointed assignments. His work on earth would never be completed were it to be apportioned to us based on human assessments. For then the proud

CAESAR: THE MOSAIC MODEL

would never be satisfied about their portion of work, and their more modest companions would forever be terrified of the mountains they were expected to move.

A third lesson learned from Moses' backward stumble into shared leadership is c) God's disappointment when His children's faith fails. His response to Moses implies that disappointment, as he will relieve Moses' burden, not by a new impartation, but by taking what Moses has and sharing it with others (vv. 16, 17).

7) *Next Generation Leadership.* The final aspect of meek leadership touched upon is next generation leadership, leadership that respects and plans on continuity. Such was Joshua. You must have wondered, like I have, about God's picking Joshua as Moses' successor:

Moses spoke to the LORD, saying, "May the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation, who will go out and come in before them, and who will lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the LORD may not be like sheep which have no shepherd." So the LORD said to Moses, "Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him" (Num. 27:15-18).

Was God now choosing Joshua? Or was He, rather, confirming Moses' original selection? For it is quite evident throughout Israel's peregrinations that Moses' closest human companion is the young man Joshua. Like Elisha, who poured water on Elijah's hands and succeeded him in the prophetic ministry in the northern kingdom (2 Kings 3:11; 2:9-15), so Joshua is Moses' servant, his perpetual companion, serving an apprenticeship that will prepare him to lead the people in the spirit and power of Moses (Josh. 1:1-5). His spirit is not at first as discriminating as his master's. He hears debauchery as war (Exod. 32:17), and prophecy in the camp as spiritual insubordination (Num. 11:25-29). He is protective of his master Moses. But he is teachable and a leader, and a man of faith who passes the Moses test at Kadesh when he stands almost alone against the rebellion of the faithless multitude (14:2-9). If he can stand and be a leader for God in such circumstances, then he is ready to follow Moses' footsteps. He has learned well. And at the appropriate time, he receives the divine approval, and becomes the new Moses who leads God's people into the land of promise. God give us more leaders with a vision that reaches beyond their day in office.

Conclusion

The life of Moses contributes much to the study of leadership theory besides model meekness. From him we may learn of relational leadership, leadership as stewardship, leadership as servanthood, or more on the critical importance of practicing tolerance, being teachable, and deferring to deity. Beyond these we might further elaborate on such other issues of good leadership as thorough organization (Num. 2), foresight (Deut. 31:27-29), careful documentation (vv. 9, 25, 26), faithful obedience (Exod. 39:26, 29, 31, 42, 43; 32:16, 19, 21), delegation of duties (Exod. 17:8-10; Num. 1:50; 3:25, 26, 30-32, 36, 37), appropriate outrage (Exod. 32:15-20), or even planning for the next generation, exhibited in effecting a smooth leadership transition from himself to his successful successor Joshua (Deut. 31:7, 8). But the trait of meekness that we have chosen to highlight, that trait that is a mark of Jesus Christ Himself, is perhaps just as uncelebrated, and just as desperately needed among us, as it was in Moses' day.

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