

Trinity College Cambridge  
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**God and Israel**  
**Israel and the Promised Land: Moses and Joshua**  
Deuteronomy 34  
Romans 9: 1–18

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Some years ago now I found myself in Jordan, standing on a promontory on Mount Nebo, perhaps on the very spot that Moses stood all those centuries before as he looked out on the promised land – the land of Canaan that was to become that land of Israel “a land flowing with milk and honey”. Our guide turned to me on that promontory and asked me to read the passage we have just heard – Deuteronomy 34. To stand in that place and read the words: “And the LORD said unto him, This *is* the land which I sware unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, saying, I will give it unto thy seed:” was a very moving moment. But then comes the stark ending, “I have caused thee to see *it* with thine eyes, but thou shalt not go over thither.”

We were able, of course, to “go over thither” easily on a coach back to Jerusalem. But Moses was denied the chance – that was left to his successor Joshua. Despite having been a great leader, Moses disobeyed God such that his final moment of glory was denied. From the top of Mount Nebo there was indeed a superb view – it was a clear sunny day and one could see terrain, mountains and lush vegetation stretching into the far distance. Coming across the desert from Egypt, through barren lands, this must have looked like everything one had ever dreamed of. Despite the small fact that this land was inhabited by someone else, this is the vision of hope that the Old Testament portrays. This was a new future for the people of Israel.

Scholars have debated keenly whether what the Old Testament relates was actually so. Was there essentially an influx of Hebrew peoples that turned the country from Canaanite to Israelite or was it a more complex picture of a small band of those who made the Exodus journey but essentially a conversion of already settled Canaanites into Israelites? Theories abound, but the Old Testament tells the story its own way and in today’s sermon that is the way I shall tell it too.

We are all perhaps a little familiar with the figure of Moses. The most famous story is of him as a baby, sailing down the Nile in a reed basket and picked up by an Egyptian princess who not only saves his life and gives him an opulent one, but even, ironically, employs Moses’ own mother to look after him. We then encounter him later on seeing the oppression of the Israelite people in Egypt and gradually coming to the realization that his mission is to save his people. After his murder of an Egyptian he flees to the land of Midian where he meets his future wife and where he has the astonishing encounter

with God in a burning bush. It is then that God reveals his true name 'Yahweh' – I am who I am. No longer is God simply Elohim, a generic name for God, rather he has a personal name summing up his nature and greatness. This is a momentous time in Moses' journey and he returns to Egypt stronger and closer to God. We all probably know too the story of the plagues and then eventual release of the Israelite slaves by Pharaoh, the last straw being the terrible slaughter of first-born sons at the Passover. Then the events of the Exodus really begin, with the crossing of the Red Sea and escape into the desert.

The revelation of the divine name to Moses is then a decisive moment. It is arguably also the moment that the true nature of God as 'one God and no other', reiterated in the ten commandments given to Moses on Mount Sinai. This is a momentous development of thought from polytheism – the worship of many gods – to an early form of monotheism – the worship of just one God emerges. Admittedly at this stage this was essentially the 'one God' of the Israelites rather than anyone else and God was perceived in rather tribal terms as the One fighting wars on behalf of Israel alone. Only later were ideas of God as universal saviour, redeemer and even creator to emerge.

My trip to Israel included, I should add, a visit to the Sinai desert. We camped under the brightest stars I have ever seen and we rose at dawn to climb Mount Sinai. Up to Elijah's plateau on a camel and then the rest of the way by foot, right up to the chapel of Moses. The scenery was magnificent – dry, brown mountains baked in the heat. An imaginable place for a theophany. It was here that tradition relates that Moses was the only one allowed to see God face to face. He came down the mountain with arguably the most important documents of the Israelites – the ten commandments, written on two tablets of stone, five commandments on each. There the famous injunctions not to murder or steal, to honour one's parents and so on are joined by essential information on God's nature, on his jealousy and on his desire for relationship with his people. Moses returns of course to find a golden calf set up and being worshipped by the recalcitrant people and flies into a rage. It is a constant battle it seems to keep this people on the straight and narrow. The exodus wanderings are said to have taken 40 years – that would be a long time in the desert, nowadays traversed easily in jeeps, albeit a bumpy ride across the sand dunes. There is much debate as to the actual route of the Exodus but at last they came up through the land of Moab, modern day Jordan, to get that inspiring view of the promised land that I remember myself so well.

So it was up to Joshua, Moses' successor, to take the people into the land and help them to settle there. He had the task of conquering Canaanite cities, and perhaps the most famous story that we all remember about him is when he "fought the battle of Jericho" and, as the song has it, "the walls came tumbling down". Archaeologists have had a good dig around Jericho and found some walls although, annoyingly they do not quite seem to date from the right period. Does this disprove the event? Has a story grown in the telling? Or is the absence of a precisely dated wall really so important in the light of the theological message that the story conveys? God defeated the Canaanite gods and goddesses and his people established their promise. That is the deeper meaning behind the story. And are we right anyway to try to 'prove' the bible with archaeology?

We read in the Old Testament much that is ostensibly 'history' and yet it is also 'story'. A story usually has a point, or a number of points, where history tends to be a sequence of events. It is in the good yarns that make up the story of Israel that the colour and excitement is often found. This is history written up after the event. When it came to Joshua those writing the history with hindsight – the Deuteronomists as they are called – had a concern to portray him as a kind of second Moses. Already by their time, in the 6th century BC, the importance of Moses as a key figure was known and he is portrayed as directly blessing his successor – we read that “Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom; for Moses had laid his hands upon him: and the children of Israel hearkened unto him, and did as the LORD commanded Moses.” We find then in the emergent portrayal of Joshua that he seems to be a man in Moses' shadow. History is seen as a continuous whole with a guiding purpose – just as Moses' hand guided Joshua, so the whole of Israel's story is guided by that that of Yahweh himself.

It is interesting that when we get to the New Testament we find the great figures of Israel's past also recalled. This time the new element is the revelation contained in the life and work of Jesus Christ. It is interesting that the New Testament refers 80 times to Moses in its pages and only 15 times to Joshua – it seems then that the prioritizing of Moses was passed on. There were also seen to be similarities between the lives of Moses and Jesus – birth in difficult circumstances and rescue by God for example. Great leadership skills and a purpose mapped out by the Deity. In the Romans passage we have heard the question is raised of God's authority to do as God wills. The message here then is a slightly surprising one that God pleases himself and has done throughout the history of Israel. There is a concern by the New Testament writers to stress the continuity of the Israelite God with the Christian God. This is one and the same God whose nature it is to have mercy – but only on whom he will have mercy, not to just anyone.

It seems that for Moses, when he got as far as Mount Nebo, an old man whose 'eye was not dim nor his natural force abated', God's mercy was not to allow him to take that last step into the promised land. I couldn't help feeling, as I stood on Mount Nebo, a sense of that sadness that both Moses and his people must have felt as the great man fell to his knees and died. We are told that the children of Israel wept and mourned for 30 days at the loss of their great leader, a prophet like no other. The bible itself leads us on from this moment to Moses' shadow man – Joshua – who was to carry on his work and ultimately to the one who was to be greater even than Moses – Jesus Christ himself.