Moses biography

Moses (1391–1271 BC) – An Egyptian prince who became the leader and prophet of the Jewish people – taking them from slavery in Egypt across the Red Sea to Mount Sinai. On Mount Sinai Moses received the Ten Commandments, which form an important basis of the Old Testament. and the Torah.

The life of Moses is subject to historical debate. There are limited sources, such as independent written accounts and archaeological evidence. The Biblical narrative of Moses’s life is found in Exodus.

According to Exodus, Moses was born during a time when the Egyptian Pharaoh was oppressing the Isrealites. This was roughly 1000 years after the first prophet Abraham. At the time, the Egyptian Pharaoh feared the Israelites would grow in strength and compete with his power. The Pharaoh had declared that all male born Hebrew children would be drowned in the River Nile. Legend states that his mother Jochebed concealed her new born son in an ark of bulrushes and let her baby float down the river. Her newborn son was fortuitously found by the Pharaoh’s daughter who adopted him and gave the Egyptian name of Moses meaning to “be born” a son.

As the adopted son of the Pharaoh’s daughter, Moses was accorded Royal status and he became a powerful prince. However, he was sympathetic to the plight of the Hebrew slaves. One day, he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, Moses in turn killed the Egyptian. After this, he feared for his safety and fled into the desert (Midian). In the desert Moses lived a relatively ascetic life, working as a shepherd. He married Zipporah, the daughter of the Priest of Midian.

Whilst working as a shepherd, Moses heard the voice of God – coming from a flaming bush, that did not burn. The ancient scriptures say Moses was told by God that he should return to Egypt to bring his chosen people out of slavery and into the promised land. Moses expressed reluctance – fearing people wouldn’t believe him and it would be too difficult.

“Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?” 3:11 (KJV).

But, Moses did return to Egypt to demand the freedom of the Israelites.

“Fear not: for God is come to prove you, and that his fear may be before your faces, that ye sin not.” 20:20 (KJV).
When the Pharaoh refused to grant freedom to the Isrealites – 10 plagues were sent to Egypt. On the last plague – ‘the plague of the firstborn’ – All first born sons would die, unless the door was marked with a red cross – a cross drawn with the blood of a sacrificed lamb.

Only after this last plague did the Pharaoh relent.

As Moses was leading the Hebrews away from Egypt, the Pharaoh had a change of heart and sent his army to destroy the Hebrews. It seemed that the Isrealites would be trapped by the Red Sea. But, according to Exodus, the Red Sea was miraculously parted, allowing Moses to lead the Isrealites to safety and then the sea closed in – destroying the Egyptian army. This escape from Egypt is celebrated by Jews in the festival of Passover.

Moses led Isrealites to Mount Sinai where he received, on behalf of Isreal the Torah or ‘law’. It renewed the Isrealites’ covenant with God, originally begun with Abraham. From these laws, Moses instituted religious customs, laws and the priesthood. To Orthodox Jews, Moses is called Moshe Rabbenu, – defined as “Our Leader Moshe”, “Servant of God”, and “Father of all the Prophets”.

It is from the time of Moses, that Judaism became a more clearly defined organised religion with set religious practises.

Moses is honoured as the lawgiver of Israel and he is responsible for the Covenant (Exodus 19-24) which includes the Ten Commandments as well as other laws and customs.

The Ten Commandments is given in Exodus chapter 20 and Deuteronomy chapter 5.

1. Thou shalt have no other gods before me
2. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image
3. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain
4. Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy
5. Honour thy father and thy mother
6. Thou shalt not kill
7. Thou shalt not commit adultery
8. Thou shalt not steal
9. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour
10. Thou shalt not covet any thing that is thy neighbour’s

Moses’ Laws and customs are also included in the Book of Leviticus, Deuteronomy and the Book of Numbers. These books of the Old Testament have been dated to approximately 538 – 532 BC.

Whilst Moses was on the mountain receiving commandments from God, the Isrealites feared he would not return. Because of this fear, Moses’ brother Aaron made a golden calf to symbolise God’s presence and the people start worshipping this. On his return, Moses symbolically smashed the stone tablets which contain the Ten Commandments and burnt the golden calf. He insisted that God be worshipped without form.
A key aspect of Moses’ religious leadership was the promotion of a monotheistic religion. The Roman historian Tacitus (56-120 AD) later stated that Moses was influential – because of Moses, Tacitus writes that: “pagan mythology fell into contempt.”

Moses wanted to lead his people into the fertile area of Cannan, but initially they refused out of fear. Moses responded that this generation would never enter the Promised Land, but would wander in the wilderness for forty years, until that generation had died. After 40 years, Moses led a new generation into Canaan, where he killed the Midianites who were living there.

It is said Moses died aged 120 after ascending Mount Nebo – East of the river Jordan.

Moses is also an influential figure in Christianity. He is frequently mentioned in the New Testament – when Jesus Christ experiences a divine transfiguration – he speaks with the prophets Moses and Elijah. Moses is considered a saint, in Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions.

Moses is also an influential figure in Islam – he is considered as both a prophet and messenger.

Thomas Paine has criticised the historical character of Moses by stating that he seemed to order the killing of many men and children. in – Numbers.