

# Moses

by

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All Waldorf schools teach the Old Testament in the third and fourth grades. Why is this material especially suitable for ten-year-olds? Naturally you must choose parts of it. If we concentrate on the five books of Moses they are neither in form nor content suitable for children. Even shortened versions contain a lot of indigestible stories for children, but if you leave out certain parts, you do harm to the total picture and you leave a lot hanging in the wind. You will not be satisfied with just a selection of stories, in addition you have to tell the stories to the children as has been educational practice for hundreds of years.

In 1824 the author and priest Johan Peter Hebbel presented the Old Testament for small children in his *Biblische Geschichten*. The stories are in line with the *Bible* but also presented in simple terms for folks as we see on their "walls and chest of drawers." In his stories we meet the patriarchs and the prophets in their local, rural surroundings and the relationship between God and human beings is presented in its timeless, broad truth.

Yet the Old Testament is a historical document. Many people have asked me if the Old Testament is of any historical interest at all and whether it should no longer be presented to children. They mention scary and immoral motives such as Abraham's sacrifice or Jacob's tricks. In that respect the Old Testament is no different than any other people's recorded bloody history.

Decisive for any pedagogical material is that the teacher knows what he is speaking about and what he wants to attain. The teacher must present the material in such a way that the children have a positive experience no matter what grade they are in. Hebbel places emphasis on the religious aspects; the Norwegian Folk School version edited by Volrath Vogt presents a dogmatic version. For the Waldorf school's presentation of the Old Testament in the third and fourth grades we let the historical aspect stand in the foreground.

The Old Testament needs no pedagogical defense. Its pictures have enlivened and enriched generation after generation and many adults remember the lessons in *Bible* history as their best memories from school. You notice it the moment you begin to tell the stories: the children become completely occupied with the material, they can barely get enough of it, and their excitement for recreating the stories in paintings and drawings is shown in wonderful pictures.

So why is the material especially relevant for ten-year-olds? As teachers and parents we have to ask that question so we, to some degree, know what we are doing.

The opening chapters of the Old Testament are saturated with the elements of mystical-imagery. They are closely related to fairy tales and sagas. We are not dealing with documented, historical presentations or with plain facts in a scientific respect. We are dealing with pictures and visions; the stories are based on inspiration and god-like revelation. From a very broad perspective the *Bible's* descriptions relate to the pictures we create of the creation of the world and mankind's historical development on a purely scientific basis, but everything is wrapped in a dreamy veil. This vague contour is what makes the material so accessible for children. The children's spiritual development follows the same path as mankind: from the mystical to the concrete consciousness of things on the earth.

We should not feel obliged to rip aside the veil for our children, as continually happens, in for example Vogt's *Bible* history description of the parting of the Red Sea. Children do not expect, nor is there any reason to add, a natural scientific interpretation of the picture of the sea that parts at God's command. If such questions are asked in class, you may use the explanation that the wind parted the waters, but when such questions arise we must view them as symptoms that the child has hatched too early from its egg, or the teacher has not been able to guide the children into the appropriate "soul-space" where *Bible* history belongs for that age group. In other words: in the *Bible's* half mystical form the children in the third class meet the earth's and mankind's history for the first time, and they meet in a deep, meaningful way, providing a clearly moral, spiritual direction. Our sense for the moral-spiritual can subside over the years, but the child's is normally not weakened and therefore dominates over the so-called real and objective orientation in the world.

In another third grade subject, regional studies, we study the local environment as it is today. But also regional studies for ten-year-olds should take into consideration their mystical orientation: it should never be objectively realistic.

I have indicated the way to teach third graders using the *Bible's* original style. The next question is: What do we give children when we move to other stories—

from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to the pictures of Joseph and his brothers, the judgments of Moses, to the kings and the prophets?

It is so rich, comprehensive and unlimited that we hesitate to emphasize one story over the other. It is a feast but we can only mention a few things. We start with the patriarchs: Abraham leaves the powerful Babylon, a little flock trustingly enter the unknown following the message from God. We follow the flock, more like a family, for three generations down to Joseph. There is a strange atmosphere surrounding the patriarchal times. It has something comparable to the paradise of childhood. God sits at the table with Abraham, challenges him and provides eternal promises. The figures in the story are so to say, “carved into trees,” clear and simple. They rest in God and in his destiny.

It is totally different for Joseph and his brothers. The twelve brothers, a familiar motif of the twelve wild geese of the fairy tales, no longer represents something well casted. They create a rough group with very earthly faults. First with them and their descendents can we speak about a folk, and that particular folk, due to Joseph, is taken in by another folk, the Egyptians.

This strange genesis story, that begins with the emigration from Babylon and ends with the immigration to Egypt, is the genuine expression of a historical process. But what is more important is the historical expression of a soul transformation: a little flock of people is dependent on themselves in the tension between two world cultures, homeless on the earth, foreign wherever they move. For a short while they are allowed to feel at home in Canaan’s land, in the tent camp of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in the land of childhood, then out in the unknown again.

But the Jewish people forgot their fathers’ God and worshipped the Egyptian animal-shaped gods and became servants under the Egyptians. It is at this point that Moses appears, the central figure in the entire Old Testament, he who gives his name to the religion of the Jewish people, the mosaic.

If we consider the pure Jewish tradition a lot will become clearer for us and easier to present to the children. There is a wonderful collection of legends and wisdom books within that tradition, especially Ben Gurion’s collection and Edmond Fleg’s book, *Moses*. Fleg begins his book with descriptions of the activities surrounding the birth of Moses:

It is written: A new king came to Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph. And he spoke to his people: Look, the Israelites are greater and more populous than we. To that our elders spoke: In the three hundred and fifty-third year after the Hebrews came to Egypt, the pharaoh had a dream. In the dream he sat on his throne and looked at the sky. Two

fingers came out of the night, and between the fingers shone a staff, longer than the sun's rays, and from the staff hung two cups, like a weight. The one way below was as big as the world and made of gold; the other, way above, was as small as a bird nest and woven in straw. He saw that out of the the golden cup came a flood, and out of the flood arose the crops of the field and workers, warriors arose and wagons, cities and pyramids and out of the pyramids arose kings and queens.

“Then he saw in the straw nest a little newborn child.

“And the golden cup with the flood and the crops, warriors and cities, pyramids and kings rose while the straw nest sank, sank as if the child were heavier than all of Egypt's land with workers, warriors and kings.”

Fleg's telling is filled to the brim with wonderfully poetic pictures and is in accordance with the words of the scriptures. It is just as meaningful for the Jewish people then as for us now, but this folk, who by their laws were not allowed to paint artistic pictures, created an incredibly beautiful world in its religious poetry.

Considering our children in the Waldorf school once more, we must use this poetry carefully in the lessons.

The history of how Moses was taken in from the river and grew up as one of the great Egyptian princes, how he defended his Hebrew brothers and killed an Egyptian slave driver, how he came to the priest Jethro and wed his daughter, how God spoke to Moses in the burning bush and sent him to Egypt to lead his people out, the departure, wandering through the Red Sea, through the Sion desert to the foot of the mountain—all of that is wonderful for children. The history contains creative motifs but also a serious theme: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob's descendants had become a people of doubt. Moses barely convinced them to follow him. They were discouraged and more doubtful with every new difficulty, they complained, threatened, and even stoned some of his leaders when crisis set in. Even some people wanted to return to Egypt.

Only Moses was steady, he disciplined his people and continually prayed to God for them. Only at the end of his life, after uncountable trials and forty years of desert journeys did Moses become, according to God, unreasonably strict and needed to be reminded of his own vulnerability.

The people thought of returning to the land of childhood, to the land that flowed in milk and honey. They were counting on a good life, in which they could live out all their desires. Only Moses understood that they must first earn it, that the people must submit to the law that God revealed at Mount Sinai. Moses embodied a moral principle, and the land to which the Jewish people journey lies somewhere between law and desire.

When Moses came down from the mountain with the tablets of laws, he found the people in ecstatic dance around a golden calf icon, for Aaron had given in to their wild threats. Moses had to discipline his people, convince them, and create new wonders. When the scouts return from Canaan's land with reports of horrible drought, pestilence and terrible giants, the people rebelled, everyone wanted to return to Egypt.

God threatened to eliminate the rebellious and leave Moses alone to guide the tribe, but Moses prayed for the them. So God decided that no one over twenty years of age shall reach the Promised Land: "In this desert your dead bodies will fall, everyone among you who serve and are over twenty years of age, you have angered me." Finally even Moses and Aaron were found unworthy; they also must die in the desert.

The Jewish sagas provide a dramatic description of Moses dying at the foot of Mount Nebo. He does not accept death because then he could not lead his people over the Jordan River. As a final blessing, he was allowed to see into the Promised Land, his eyes received the power to see from the Jordan to the sea, he saw all of the mountains and valleys and it was a beautiful sight. He also received the power to see into the future: David placing a stone in his sling and dropping Goliath, Solomon building the Lord's temple and much, much more. He cried out: "Lord, Lord you keep your promises, and your children keep their promises. You have led them to the land you chose, and they have followed you so you may live among them!"

But he saw even more: he saw their decadence, their loss of faith, their evil, and all the punishment and disaster that followed in the path of sin. And Moses moaned in his heart's torment: " Lord, Lord, how can you watch in peace the wretchedness you have brought over them? Why have you lead them out of slavery, opened twelve paths through the sea for them, transformed sand to earth and the cliffs to spring water, why set your mountain on fire and call your message to your people, if you want to destroy yourself on the earth by destroying them?"

Look: before the prophet's eye the world was filled by a huge temple. Its walls were of onyx and beryl, its doors of jasper and sardonyx, its rafters of smaragd, its roof of topaz, its columns of agate, crystal and amethyst, its altar of rubies, carbuncle and sapphire. Before the temple waited the Messiah.

And Moses whispered: " Is this a temple of heaven? Is this a temple of the earth and not a temple of heaven, but a temple of heaven that the earth will build?"

Moses saw all the people of the earth wander towards the temple, all the living and all the dead, and the Messiah spoke to the prophet: " Moses, my

father, how could you enter the Promised Land? Look, it lies not only beyond the Jordan, it lies beyond love, beyond hope. Look, it is the whole earth with all mankind.”

When Moses saw this and more, he accepted his death, and God spoke to Gabriel and said: “Go and bring his soul.” But Gabriel could not give such a powerful soul over to death. Nor dared Michael to consider it, but the angel of death, Samael offered and was allowed to try.

Moses rose in anger and with the force of the holy name that only he knew, he forced Samael to his knee. But God interceded for the angel of death, saying: “Moses, my son, do not kill death, for the world needs him.” And Samael disappeared and the Eternal appeared. The Eternal pulled the soul of Moses from his mouth and in this way the prophet died with a kiss from God. At the end of the fifth book of Moses we read: “But there no longer stood a prophet like Moses in Israel, he who knew the Lord face to face.”

We should not miss this opportunity to describe these figures to the children in their tenth year. These figures of supernatural dimension cannot be understood through reason, but rather through story pictures. Plato says that to understand something is to recognize it. And children recognize something in the stories of the patriarchal times and of Moses and the Jewish people. They can identify with the presentations; they can understand Moses and the obstinate, forever dissatisfied and rebellious people. Their inner capacity to resonance with the processes we describe is significant. It is not only the Jewish peoples’ and mankind’s history that is conveyed, but the history of every human’s soul. In their tenth year children are ready to take a huge step out of childhood, driven by resistance and challenges. A large part of the unease and rebellion that children feel at this stage can be transformed into a deepening of the forces of comprehension, understanding and reconciliation with the world through an appropriate presentation of history recorded in the Old Testament.