

Prophet Moses: The Islamic Narrative

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Introduction:

This paper attempts to reconstruct and reflect the story and status that Prophet Moses¹ (Peace be upon him) has occupied in the Islamic worldview. It is based primarily on the Qur'an where most of the narrative exists fragmented in different chapters. In essence, he had two roles to fulfill. The first was similar to all prophets and messengers; propagation of monotheism or *Tawhid*. The other was to deliver the Children of Israel from the bitter bondage and servitude that they endured in Egypt. Destination: The Holy Land.

It is important to maintain a certain healthy distance when dealing with the story of Prophet Moses because it is organically related to the story of Children of Israel. The challenge is to read the narrative covering the distant past in its own historical perspective and not to allow it to color the contemporary scene. The other problem is allowing the present to color the reading of the past. At relevant junctures, I shall entertain some problems that emerged from mixing both worlds. I would like to mention here one verse that hopefully would help in creating a psychological buffer zone against generalizations and misconceptions:

“Of the people of Moses there is a section (ummah) who guide and do justice in the light of truth.” Qur'an, 7: 159

The story of Prophet Moses and the Children of Israel in Egypt goes back to the days of Prophet Joseph when he became part of the authority, assuming the responsibility for the economy of Egypt which was about to experience a severe famine. He had a plan to face this situation which he shared with the king and after the he was assured that his “rank was firmly established”, he asked to be entrusted with the task of managing the granaries in preparation for the “lean years”:

“[Joseph] said [to the King]: Set me over the storehouses of the land: I will indeed guard them, as one that knows [their importance]” Qur'an, 12: 55

While the Egyptians trusted Prophet Joseph's administration and practical wisdom, his call to monotheism essentially faced the same fate like that of Prophet Moses. The latter formed the context for the following verse:

“And to you there came Joseph in times gone by, with Clear Signs, but ye ceased not to doubt of the [mission] for which he had come: at length, when he died, ye said: ‘No Messenger will God send after him.’ Thus doth God leave to stray such as transgress and live in doubt.” Qur'an, 40: 35

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Prophet Joseph did well enough to bring his parents and brothers:

“Then when they entered the presence of Joseph, he provided a home for his parents with himself, and said: **“Enter ye Egypt [all] in safety, God willing.”**”² Qur’an, 12: 99

Therefore, Prophet Jacob and all the twelve tribes were in Egypt; Prophet Moses was one of their descendants. Yet, the days of good living for the Children of Israel were numbered. The Qur’an reminds them of the bad times when they were persecuted:

“And remember, We delivered you from the people of Pharaoh: they set you hard tasks and punishment, slaughtered your sons and let your womenfolk live; therein was a tremendous trial from your Lord.”
Qur’an, 2: 49

The story of persecution was reiterated in another chapter in the Qur’an:

“Truly Pharaoh elated himself in the land and broke up its people into sections, depressing a small group amongst them: their sons he slew, but he kept alive their females: for indeed he was a maker of mischief.”
Qur’an, 28: 4

This Infant was Destined to Survive!

Prophet Moses, as an infant, was about to face the same fate like the other Israelite male infants, yet Allah SWT had a different plan for him. His mother received divine inspiration to put him in a box and to put him in the water:

“So We sent this inspiration to the mother of Moses: “Suckle (thy child), but when thou hast fears about him, cast him into the river, but fear not nor grieve: for We shall restore him to thee, and We shall make him one of Our Messengers.” Qur’an, 28: 7

Ironically, the waves carried Prophet Moses to the very people who threatened his life; he landed in front of the family of the Pharaoh:

“Then the people of Pharaoh picked him up [from the river]: [it was intended] that [Moses] should be to them an adversary and a cause of sorrow: for Pharaoh and Haman and [all] of their hosts were men of sin.” Qur’an, 28: 8

It appears that the Pharaoh’s wife, not being aware of the destiny of this infant, was crucial in preserving the life of Prophet Moses:

“The wife of the Pharaoh said: “[Here is] a joy of the eye, for me and for thee: slay him not. It may be that he will be of use to us, or we may adopt him as a son.” And they perceived not [what they were doing].”

Qur’an, 28: 9

The Qur’an narrates how Prophet’s Moses’ mother was about to disclose the identity of the baby, for she had a broken heart. She asked his sister to keep track of what was happening to him. It was the will of God that he would not accept to suck from any other woman. His sister, who was acting as if she was in the vicinity as a coincidence, suggested that she knows a household who were ready to take care of him on behalf of the Pharaoh’s family. He was back in his mother’s care and this was a Sign from God to her about the future of her son:

“Thus did We restore him to his mother, that her eye might be comforted, that she might not grieve, and that she might know that the promise of God is true; but most of them do not understand.” Qur’an, 28: 13

Prophet Moses Reaching Maturity:

There aren’t many details about Prophet Moses’ adolescence in the Qur’an. In fact, the scene in the Qur’anic narrative shifts from infancy to maturity directly:

“When he reached full age, and was firmly established [in life], We bestowed on him wisdom and knowledge: for thus do We reward those who do good.” Qur’an, 28: 14

Despite Prophet Moses’ prolonged relationship with the house of the Pharaoh, his character was neither tainted with their beliefs nor reflected a shift in his loyalty to his people. That he was on the side of his people surfaced when a fight took place between an Israelite and another man:

“And he entered the city at a time when its people were not watching: and he found there two men fighting –one of his own people, and the other, of his foes. Now the man of his own people appealed to him against his foe, and Moses struck with his fist and made an end from him...”
[Qur’an, 28: 15]

He immediately realized that what he had done was evil and that he wronged himself. He repented and asked God for forgiveness:

“...He said: “This is an [evil] work of Satan: for he is an enemy that manifestly misleads.
He prayed: “O my Lord! I have indeed wronged my soul! Do Thou then forgive me! So [God] forgave him: for He is the Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.” Qur’an, 28:15-16.

Yet, this was not the end of the story. Apparently, as a result of what happened at the hand of Prophet Moses, though not intentional, led the leaders of the city to conspire against him. It seems that his fears of reprisal were justified. There was only one more test to go through before he became aware of the dangers surrounding him, which led him to flee the city:

So he saw the morning in the city, looking about, in a state of fear, when behold, the man who had, the day before, sought his help [again]. Moses said to him: “thou art truly, it is clear, a quarrelsome fellow!”

Then, when he decided to lay hold of the man who was an enemy to both of them that man said: “O Moses! Is it thy intention to slay me as thou slewest a man yesterday? Thy intention is none other than to become a powerful violent man in the land, and not to be one who sets things right!”
Qur’an, 28: 18-19

At that particular moment, Prophet Moses received a warning which sounded like a verdict in his case was reached. They intended to kill him:

And there came a man, running, from the furthest end of the city. He said: “O Moses! The chiefs are taking counsel together about thee, to slay thee so get thee away, for I do give thee sincere advice.” Qur’an, 28: 20

Prophet Moses took the news seriously and he ran for his life:

“He therefore got away therefrom, looking about, in a state of fear. He prayed: “O my lord! Save me from people given to wrongdoing.””
Qur’an, 28: 21

A “Decade” of Preparation in Exile:

The next stage in Prophet Moses’ life could be described as the years of preparation for his great role as a prophet who will be entrusted with the liberation of the Children of Israel. So the question is: What kind of preparation a prophet gets?

When Prophet Moses left the Pharaoh’s territory and arrived in Madyan, he had no plans. He was now in a safe haven and among a different people. It is customary for travelers of old times to follow roads that have stations at sources of fresh water such as wells, especially when one lives on the edge of the desert. Upon his arrival at the watering place of Madyan, he saw two women who were keeping back their flocks. He inquired why they do not water their flocks and the answer was that they do not water the animals until the other [male] shepherds do so, and that their father was an old man. He watered their flocks and sat in the shade. He prayed to God for a way out of his difficulties. His supplication was reflected a desperate situation:

“So he watered [their flocks] for them; then he turned back to the shade, and said: “O my Lord! Truly am I in need of any good that Thou dost send me!” Qur’an, 28: 24

He was hardly done with this supplication when one of the two women returned. She informed him of her father’s intention to reward him for his help. This invitation rescued him from his worries and proved to be the beginning of a new life:

“...My father invites thee that he may reward thee for having watered [our flocks] for us...” Qur’an, 28: 25

Prophet Moses was comforted by the old man who told him, after listening to his story, that he has no reason to fear for he escaped from the unjust people. One of the daughters suggested to her father to hire him as a shepherd. The offer, in the old man’s words, was as follows:

“...I intend to wed one of these my daughters to thee, on condition that thou serve me for eight years; but if thou complete ten years, it will be [grace] from thee. But I intend not to place thee under difficulty: thou wilt find me, indeed, if God wills, one of the righteous.” Qur’an, 28: 27

Prophet Moses accepted the offer without specifying which one of the two terms he would fulfill; he retained the freedom to fulfill either of them. Muslim scholars differed in determining which of the two terms Moses fulfilled. No number of years was mentioned in the Qur’an regarding the end of Prophet Moses’ end of service. The verse that addressed this part speaks of “*the*” term (*al-ajal*):

“Now when Moses had finished *the* term...” Qur’an, 28: 29

In a tradition narrated in *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, Sa`id bin Jubair said:

“A Jew from Hira asked me which one of the two periods Musa (i.e. Moses) completed. I said, "I don't know, [but wait] till I see the most learned 'Arab and enquire him about it." So, I went to Ibn 'Abbas and asked him. He replied, "Moses completed the longer and better period." Ibn 'Abbas added, "No doubt, an apostle of Allah always does what he says." ³

While I am spiritually inclined to accept that Prophet Moses fulfilled the longer term as it is in the best interest of his father-in-law, I find myself giving more weight to the first of the two terms (i.e. eight years) as it is the only binding one and fulfills Prophet Moses obligation. One can argue that what is best could be understood in the light of the mission that Prophet Moses was prepared for. It could be that it was in the best interest of the Children of Israel that he would become a prophet and hasten to their rescue two years “earlier”! Therefore, it would seem as if it was a choice between two “bests”; yet, the benefit of the community at large comes first.

The question remains: what is the significance of this period in his life?

To explain this period I am going to use a tradition of Prophet Muhammad in which he stated that every prophet was a shepherd. The question is how does this tradition help in understanding this particular period of Prophet Moses' life and, in fact, of any other prophet?

Few years back I was at Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem during the potentially "Night of Power" (*Laylat-ul-Qadr*)⁴ which is traditionally anticipated on the night of the 27th of Ramadan. After performing the night prayer and the special *Tarawih* prayers that are performed during Ramadan, I sat in a circle of learning in which a man from the *Jama'at Al-Tabligh* group was preaching. Drawing on his own personal experience as a shepherd he explained the impact this job has on the personality of the shepherd. He said that one learns to take care of the animals to the degree that if a lamb is born when it is cold, the shepherd would take off his jacket to cover the lamb. Taking care of animals is the first step in the direction of taking care of people. In another tradition, Prophet Muhammad said: "All of you are shepherds and all of you are responsible for your flocks"

This period of preparation sounded like a pre-requisite course before becoming a prophet. One might add the patience that one has to learn in such a profession which appears to be a good exercise in endurance. In addition, when ever I observed shepherds with their flocks, they were usually alone and sometimes at a distance. But, are the shepherds really alone? A certain connectedness must be established with the cosmos, raising questions, marveling at the vast creation and natural phenomena, and ultimately bringing a spiritual dimension to the picture.

Becoming a Prophet:

When Prophet Moses fulfilled the terms of his contract with his father-in-law, he took his family and left. It is not apparent where he was heading and it is unlikely that he was going back to where he could be persecuted for killing the Egyptian. One might sight Prophet Moses' concern regarding this aspect when he was informed of his new mission and vocation as a Messenger who should face the Pharaoh:

"He said: "O my Lord! I have slain a man among them, and I fear least they slay me." Qur'an, 28: 33

At any rate, while traveling he perceived a fire in the direction of Mount Tur. It seems that he was neither in a familiar territory nor he knew the way. This is why he included the possibility of finding guidance. He asked his family to stay behind telling them that he might get information from the people surrounding the fire, or at least he will bring them a burning firebrand so that they may warm themselves. He went to the fire as a normal person; he returned a Prophet:

“But when he came to the [fire], a voice was heard from the right bank of the valley, from a tree in hallowed ground: “O Moses! Verily I am Allah, the Lord of the World” Qur’an, 28: 30

All this was in the Divine plan. In another chapter the same story is repeated with the following words that stress the sense of destiny:

“...Then didst thou tarry a number of years with the people of Madyan. Then didst thou come hither as ordained, O Moses! And I have prepared thee for Myself [for service]” Qur’an, 20: 40-41

Prophet Moses became aware of the miracles that he was empowered with. The nature of some of the miracles, which God granted to him, presented a challenge to the prevailing culture that boasted sorcery and magic:

“And what is that in thy right hand, O Moses?”
He said: “It is my rod: on it I lean; with it I beat down fodder for my flocks; and in it I find other uses.”
[God] said, “Throw it, O Moses!”
He threw it, and behold! It was a snake, active in motion.
[God] said, “Seize it and fear not: We shall return it at once to its former condition” Qur’an, 20: 17-20

His reaction was that he was afraid. Another narrative showed his emotions and movement:

“Now do thou throw thy rod!” But when he saw it moving [of its own accord] as if it had been a snake, he turned back in retreat, and retracted not his steps: “O Moses!” [It was said], “Draw near, and fear not: for thou art of those who are secure.” Qur’an, 28- 31

Prophet Moses, who had a dark complexion, was granted another miracle; his hand would turn white upon moving it to his bosom. These two miracles were his credentials; he would present them later on to the Pharaoh and his entourage. There will be other miracles associated with saving the Children of Israel and destroying the Pharaoh.

Prophet Moses’ subsequent words reflected his fears as a human being; he was still not aware of what prophecy entails! Every prophet was protected and until the message is delivered and the mission accomplished. Prophet Moses was worried about two things: the first is that he killed an Egyptian and he feared revenge, and the other is that he was not eloquent in speech and wanted his brother Aaron to be on his side to help him present his case and to defend him if he was discredited:

“[God] said: “We will certainly strengthen thy arm through thy brother, and invest, and invest you both with authority, so they shall not be able to

touch you: with Our Signs shall ye triumph-you two as well as those who follow you.” Qur’an, 28: 35

The Nature of Revelation:

Prophet Moses’ trip in the direction of the fire in the “Holy Valley” was not the only time that God spoke to him. He would return and he would receive the Torah. There are different references to the nature and content of this revelation. It is interesting to realize all those who were targeted with the Torah:

“It was We who revealed the Torah: therein was guidance and light. By its standard have been judged the Jews, by the Prophets who submitted themselves [to God’s], by the Rabbis and the doctors of Law: for to them was entrusted the protection of God’s Book, and they were witnesses thereto...” Qur’an, 5: 44

The Qur’an provides examples of what is revealed in the Torah:

“We ordained for therein for them: “Life for life, eye for eye, nose for nose, ear for ear, tooth for tooth, and wounds equal for equal.” But if anyone remits retaliation by way of charity, it is an act of atonement for himself. And if any fail to judge by [the light of] what God hath revealed, they are [considered] wrongdoers.” Qur’an, 5: 45

The status of the Torah can be seen in describing the mission of Prophet Jesus Christ (Peace be upon him) who, in addition to receiving the Gospel (*Al-Injil*), confirmed the validity of the previous revelation:

“And in their footsteps We sent Jesus the son of Mary, confirming the Torah that had come before him: we sent him the Gospel: therein was guidance and light, and confirmation of the Torah that had come before him: a guidance and admonition to those who fear God.” Qur’an, 5: 46

The relationship of the Qur’an to all previous revelation, including the Torah and the Gospel, manifests itself in the following verse:

“To thee [O Muhammad!] We sent the Book (i.e. the Qur’an) in truth, confirming the Scriptures that came before it, and *muhayminan`alayh...*” Qur’an, 5: 48

It might look strange to end the English “translation” of the verse, which is in fact an interpretation, with the a transliteration of the Arabic wording of these two words. I think that there is no direct equivalent to ‘*muhaymin*’ in English. The etymology of the word revolves around the notion of a superceding authority. The meaning indicates that the Qur’an has the authority to guard the original messages, hence the ‘confirmation’, against

corruption and human editions. This explains the Qur'anic position that such changes took place already:

“Can ye entertain the hope that they will believe in you?- seeing that a party of them heard the Word of God, and perverted it knowingly after they understood it.” Qur'an, 2: 75

“Then woe to those who write the Book with their own hands, and then say: “This is from God,” to traffic with it for a miserable price!-Woe to them for what their hands do write, and for the gain they make thereby.” Qur'an, 2: 79

In addition to mentioning the Torah by name, the Qur'an mentions the Tablets (*Al-Alwah*), which will be mentioned subsequently in the story of the Golden Calf. The Torah is also described as the 'Book' (*Al-Kitab*):

“We gave Moses the Book, and made it a Guide to the Children of Israel, [commanding]: “Take not other than Me as Caretaker [of your affairs].” Qur'an, 17: 2

“We did reveal to Moses the Book after We had destroyed the earlier generations, [to give] insight to people, and Guidance and Mercy, that they might receive admonition.” Qur'an, 28: 43

Furthermore, the Qur'an uses the word 'Scriptures' to refer to what Prophets Abraham and Moses received:

“Nay [behold], ye prefer the life of this world; but the Hereafter is better and more enduring. And this is in the Scriptures (*Suhuf*) of the earliest [Revelations]-the Scriptures of Abraham and Moses.” Qur'an, 87: 16-19

Face to Face with the Pharaoh:

Strengthened by God's assurances and equipped with the miracles, Prophets Moses and Aaron set for the Pharaoh:

“[God] said: “Fear not: For I am with you: I hear and see [everything]”
“So go ye both to him, and say: “Verily, we are Messengers sent by thy Lord: Send forth, therefore, the Children of Israel with us, and afflict them not: With a Sign, indeed, have we come from thy Lord! And peace to all who follow guidance!” Qur'an, 20: 46-47

Prophets Moses and Aaron were instructed to speak with the Pharaoh softly so that he may heed and accept their message, which would save him and his people:

“But speak to him mildly; perchance he may take warning or fear [God]”
Qur’an, 20: 44

In addition to the politeness, the Pharaoh witnessed all the Signs that God sent with Moses, yet his heart and mind could not recognize the truth anymore:

“And We showed Pharaoh all Our Signs, but he did reject and refuse”
Qur’an, 20: 56

The Pharaoh proved to be the ultimate in human defiance against God. Prophet Moses’ call invited the powerful Pharaoh to accept the monotheistic message and to set the Children of Israel free, a call that would have changed the status quo in Egypt, yet to no avail. Blinded by a worldview at the center of which the Pharaoh presented himself as the only god, he rejected Prophet Moses’ call to believe in the One God:

“When Moses came to them with Our Clear Signs, they said: “This is nothing but sorcery faked up: never did we hear the like among our fathers of old!”
Qur’an, 28: 36

The Pharaoh entertained ideas that reflect the mindset of a classical despot. He thought that he could get rid of the problem by getting rid of Prophet Moses:

“Said Pharaoh: “Let me slay Moses and let him call on his Lord! What I fear is lest he should change your religion, or lest he should cause mischief to appear in the land!” Qur’an, 40: 26

Prophet Moses was saved by a believer from among the family of the Pharaoh who kept his faith secret. He warned them against harming Prophet Moses for if he is really a prophet then calamities will fall on them. It seems that these words scared the

Pharaoh who stopped for the meanwhile the call for his death. Nevertheless, he did not recognize the transcendental and he limited the possibilities to what he can verify within the material sphere. He ordered Haman, who presided over the quarry to build a high structure from which he can observe Prophet Moses’ God:

“Pharaoh said: “O Chiefs! No god do I know for you but myself: therefore, O Haman! Light me a [kiln to bake bricks] out of clay. And build me a lofty palace that I may mount up to the god of Moses: But as far as I am concerned, I think [Moses] is a liar!” Qur’an, 28: 38

The Pharaoh tried to soften Prophet Moses’ position by playing on emotions. He reminded him of the fact that he was raised in the house of the Pharaoh. Prophet Moses responded by questioning his favors when he enslaved the Children of Israel at the same time. When this line did not work, the Pharaoh resorted to the use of *ad hominem* arguments, the specialty of autocratic regimes against voices of dissent, against Prophet Moses:

“And Pharaoh proclaimed among his people, saying: “O my people! Does not the dominion of Egypt belong to me, [witness] these streams flowing underneath my [palace]? What! See ye not then? Am I not better than this [Moses], who is a contemptible wretch and can scarcely express himself clearly?” Qur’an, 43: 51-52

Furthermore, he accused Prophet Moses of magic. This is how he interpreted the miracles. He thought that he could simply undo this “magic” by inviting the best magicians in his country to a competition; one side only will win:

“He said: “Hast thou come to drive us out of our land with thy magic O Mose?

But we can surely produce magic to match thine! So make a tryst between us and thee, which we shall not fail to keep-neither we nor thou-in a place where both shall have chances.” Qur’an, 20: 57-58

And that is exactly what happened. The Pharaoh gathered his magicians on the Day of the Festival and they agreed that they would go first. They threw their ropes and rods; they seemed as if they were lively and moving. Prophet Moses began to worry. He again received revelation that assured him of victory:

“We said: “Fear not! For thou hast indeed the upper hand” Qur’an, 20: 68

Prophet Moses was encouraged and he threw his rod; it swallowed up their magic. The result stunned the magicians and the Pharaoh. The magicians recognized that what Prophet Moses brought has nothing to do with magic. This was their field of expertise and they threw themselves in prostration. They believed in the Lord of Aaron and Moses. The Pharaoh, on the other hand, could not accept the stunning results. His ego was hurt and rather than believing like they did, he fabricated a lie:

“[Pharaoh] said: “Believe ye in him before I give you permission? Surely this must be your leader, who taught you magic! Be sure I will cut off your hands and feet on opposite sides, and I will have you crucified on trunks of palm trees...” Qur’an, 20: 71

The former magicians now were not deterred by the severity of the punishment. They were hopeful that God would forgive them what they have done under the influence of the Pharaoh. That was one round that the Pharaoh had lost.

The Children of Israel Fleeing Egypt:

Following the defeat of the magicians, only few of Prophet Moses’ people believed in his message. They were still afraid of the Pharaoh, which is typical of any people who suffer from persecution and live under oppression and for a long time:

“But none believed in Moses except some of his people’s progeny, because of the fear of Pharaoh and his notables, lest they should persecute them, and certainly Pharaoh was tyrant on the earth and one who transgressed all bounds.” Qur’an, 10: 83

There is evidence in the Qur’an that there was a period that lapsed before fleeing Egypt and that Prophets Moses and Aaron settled down for a while. This time was probably used in empowering the Children of Israel and increasing their faith in preparation for the day when they would take that bold step and escape tyranny:

“We inspired Moses and his brother with this message: “Provide dwellings for your People in Egypt, make your dwellings into places of worship, and establish regular prayers: and give Glad Tidings to those who believe!” Qur’an, 10: 87

This period was marked by more calamities and hardships for the Children of Israel. They probable expected that the presence of Prophet Moses amongst them would bring and abrupt end to their ordeal. They complained about the systematic harm that they endured. This was the result of continued state persecution:

“Said the chiefs of Pharaoh’s people: “Wilt thou leave Moses and his people to spread mischief in the land, and to abandon thee and thy gods?” He said: “Their male children will we slay; [only] their females will we save alive; and we have over them [power] irresistible.” Qur’an, 7: 127

This call from the chiefs was translated into public policy vis-à-vis the Children of Israel. Prophet Moses asked his people to have patience, to have trust in God and to seek His help. They told him that they were harmed before and after his arrival. He gave them the Glad Tiding that the end result might be favorable; God will destroy their enemy and they will inherit the land. God sent a total of nine Signs to the Pharaoh and his people so that they may heed:

“We punished the people of Pharaoh with years [of draught] and shortness of crops; that they might receive admonition.” Qur’an, 7: 130

It seems that this was not enough to teach them a lesson. They remained defiant for a while until different punishments befell them. They have ridiculed the Signs and accused Prophet Moses of magic and sorcery:

“But when he came to them with Our Signs, behold, they ridiculed them.” Qur’an, 43: 47

Then they could not tolerate the punishment anymore, they would negotiate with Prophet Moses an end to it, that he would pray to God to stop the punishment in exchange for their belief in him. They did not keep their promises:

“So We sent [plagues] on them: Wholesale Death, locusts, lice, frogs, and blood: Signs openly self-explained: but they were steeped in arrogance, a people given to sin. Every time the Penalty fell on them, they said: “O Moses! On our behalf call on thy Lord in virtue of His promise to thee: If thou wilt remove the penalty from us, we shall truly believe in thee, and we shall send away the Children of Israel with thee.”

“But every time We removed the Penalty from them according to a fixed term which they had to fulfill-Behold!- they broke their word!”

Qur’an, 7: 134-35

It became apparent that the Pharaoh and his people neither wanted to believe in Prophet Moses’ message nor they wanted to set the Children of Israel free. After some time, Prophet Moses received inspiration to go ahead and take the Children of Israel away from the miserable life that they endured for a long time. After they were subjected to a humiliating life for a long time, they were ready to take that bold step and leap into another phase of their history:

“We sent an inspiration to Moses: “Travel by night with my servants, and strike a dry path for them through the sea, without fear of being overtaken [by Pharaoh] and without [any other] fear.” Qur’an, 20: 77

By traveling at night under the cover of darkness, Prophet Moses and his people had a head start. Yet, their movement would still be considered slow compared to the army that does not include elderly, women and children. The Pharaoh and his army followed them at sunrise. There was a point when both parties could see each other. This led the Children of Israel to believe that they were about to be caught. Not only the speed of the Pharaoh and his army that worried them; they were facing the sea, which would have prevented them from going any further. This was the time and place where Divine Providence manifested itself in the miracle of splitting the sea. A path was miraculously created when Prophet Moses received revelation to hit the sea with his rod:

“So they pursued them at sunrise. And when the two bodies saw each other, the people of Moses said: “We are sure to be overtaken.” [Moses] said: “By no means! My Lord is with me! Soon will He guide me!” Then We told Moses by inspiration: “Strike the sea with thy rod.” So it divided, and each separate part became like the huge, firm mass of a mountain.” Qur’an, 26: 60-63

That newly created path was their way to safety, but for the Pharaoh and his army it was the end of their mischief on earth. They were lured into that path in order not to leave alive; the sea closed on them:

“And We made the other party approach thither. We delivered Moses and all who were with him: but We drowned the others.” Qur’an, 26: 64-66

“Then Pharaoh pursued them with his forces, but the waters completely overwhelmed them and covered them up.” Qur’an, 20: 78

Once the Pharaoh realized that death was inevitable he had a “change” of heart:

“...At length, when overwhelmed with the flood, he said: “I believe that there is no god except Him Whom the Children of Israel believe in: I am of those who submit [to God in Islam].” Qur’an, 10: 90

Is repentance when death is eminent accepted? The answer that he received was negative. His superficial belief was in vain:

“Now! But a little while before wast thou in rebellion! And thou didst mischief [and violence]! This day shall We save thy body as a Sign to those who come after thee! But verily, many among people are heedless of Our Signs!” Qur’an, 10: 91-92

The answer that the Pharaoh received is in line with the declared general position in the Qur’an regarding those who repent when they come face to face with death:

“Of no effect is the repentance of those who continue to do evil, until Death faces one of them, and he says: “Now have I repented indeed”; nor of those who die rejecting Faith; for them have We prepared a punishment most grievous.” Qur’an, 4: 18

But for what reason the Pharaoh’s body was saved? There is a need to have an overview of the dialogue that took place between him and Prophet Moses when the latter returned to Egypt. It reflects the personality and the worldview of the Pharaoh and, therefore, the rationale for saving his body.

When Prophet Moses was chosen as a prophet, his immediate mission was to reach out to the Pharaoh:

“Go thou to Pharaoh. For he had indeed transgressed all bounds; and say to him ‘Wouldst thou that thou shouldst be purified [from sin]? And that I guide thee to thy Lord, so thou shouldst fear Him?’ Then did [Moses] show him the Great Sign. But [Pharaoh] rejected it and disobeyed [guidance]. Further, he turned his back, striving hard [against God]. Then he collected [his people] and made a proclamation, saying, “**I am your Lord, Most High.**” Qur’an, 79: 17-24

It was such a proclamation -the essence of which was reiterated in other verses⁵- in which the Pharaoh presented himself as God that explains why his body was saved. The message to his people is that this “god” is dead. How could they believe in a god that dies? His body was saved as a Sign for those who come after him. Subsequent

generations of human beings should refrain from the divinization of other human beings. Apparently, not all of humanity grasped this message!

A Liberated People: Prophet Moses and the Children of Israel:

The “end” of the Pharaoh’s story simply marked the beginning of a new episode of the history of the Children of Israel. That flight from the Pharaoh brought one major obstacle to an end. They were free to pursue two paths at once, one spiritual and the other physical: belief in the One God and going to the Holy Land:

“O my people! Enter the Holy Land which God hath assigned (*kataba*) unto you, and turn not back ignominiously, for then will ye be overthrown to your own ruin.” Qur’an, 5: 21

What is the meaning of this verse? What are the political implications? What is the message for Muslims? After all, it is mentioned in the Qur’an?

This verse could be read in two very different ways, each one arriving at a very different meaning. The first way as shown above divides the verse into two parts, the first of which ends after “years”. This way of dividing the verse indicates that the Children of Israel were forbidden to enter the Land temporarily because of their disobedience. The second also divides the verse into two parts, the first of which ends after “reach”. Some scholars interpreted this way of dividing the verse to mean that the Children of Israel were forbidden to enter the Land in an absolute sense, again as a result of their disobedience. I am personally inclined toward the first reading, which considers the prohibition temporarily, and the entry to the Holy Land conditional.

Sayyid Qutub stated in *In the Shade of the Qur’an*, a contemporary Qur’anic exegesis, that the reason for this prohibition is to allow room for a new generation of Israelites to be brought up.⁶ I would add that the new generation was ready to submit to the will of God, and therefore qualified for the entry to the Holy Land as “submitters”; those who submit their personal wills entirely to the will of God.⁷

Prophet Moses, like all prophets, was sent with the message of *Tawhid* or pure monotheism. He and his followers were Muslims in the universal sense (i.e. Submitters to the Will of God). That verse was addressed to the Children of Israel qua believers and not qua cultural or political group. In addition, there is no weight whatsoever could be attributed to their genetics.

The subsequent events that cover more than forty years are all indicative of the no special status. The same applies to Muslims at any point in the history of humanity, including Muslims who are followers of Prophet Muhammad. One is elevated in the sight of God through her deeds:

“O human beings! We created you from a single male and female [pair], and made you nations and tribes, that ye may know each other [not that ye may despise each other]. Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of God is [the one who is] most righteous of you. And God has full knowledge and is well-acquainted [with all things].” Qur’an, 49: 13

Muslims in the universal sense (i.e. the true followers of any of the prophets) form a continuum of the line of believers that began with Adam. They are all subjected to the same criterion. That is why it is important to highlight the second part of the verse that invited the Children of Israel to enter the Holy Land; they were warned about turning their back. While part of them remained steadfast in their religion and faith, others allowed themselves to divert from the right path. The latter, in their relationship with God and Prophet Moses, reflected moments of weakness and defiance. In between the fleeing Egypt and entering the Holy Land, many important events took place.

Once the Children of Israel were delivered from the people of the Pharaoh, Prophet Moses went away for an appointment with his Lord:

“And remember We appointed forty nights for Moses, and in his absence ye took the calf [for worship], and ye did grievous wrong.” Qur’an, 2: 51

After fleeing Egypt, the Children of Israel passed by a pagan people who worshipped idols. The Qur’an emphasizes the fact that they witnessed the Signs that were sent with Prophet Moses. They know better, yet they wanted to have an idol like those people:

“We took the Children of Israel [with safety] across the sea. They came upon a people devoted entirely to some idols they had. They said: “O Moses! Fashion for us a god like unto the gods they have.” He said: “Surely ye are a people without knowledge.” Qur’an, 7: 138

Needless to say that Prophet Moses reprimanded them for such a request. He reminded them about the true God whose favors were bestowed on them and that no other nation received. Their chance came when Prophet Moses went to the appointment with God. He asked his brother Aaron to remain behind in order to take care of them. Once they were on their own they made an idol:

“The people of Moses made, in his absence, out of their ornaments, [an idol for worship in] the image of a calf; it seemed to low...”
Qur’an, 7: 148

Before his return from his appointment, Prophet Moses was informed about their affair:

“[God] said: “We have tested thy people in thy absence: the Samaritan has led them astray.” Qur’an, 20: 85

Prophet Moses was very upset. He returned to his people in a state of indignation and sorrow. He reprimanded them and thought that his brother might have disobeyed him, for Prophet Moses thought that his brother should have followed him when the idol was created. Prophet Aaron's position was against this act of theirs:

“Aaron had already, before this said to them: “O my people! Ye are being tested in this: for verily your Lord is [God] Most Gracious. So follow me and obey my command.” Qur'an, 20: 90

Not being aware of all this, Prophet Moses shook his brother in disbelief. Prophet Aaron defended his position saying and explained his rationale for not following him. It was the unity of the Israelites which was at stake:

“[Aaron] replied: “O son of my mother! Seize [me] neither by my beard, nor by [the hair of] my head! Truly I feared lest thou shouldst say, ‘Thou hast caused a division among the Children of Israel, and thou didst not respect my word!’” Qur'an, 20: 94

There was yet another practical reason. The Children of Israel threatened to kill Prophet Aaron:

“When Moses came back to his people, angry and grieved, he said: “Evil is that ye have done in my place in my absence: did ye make haste to bring on the judgment of your Lord?” He put down the Tablets [that contain God's Message], seized his brother by [the hair of] his head, and dragged him to him. Aaron said: “Son of my mother! The people did indeed reckon me as naught, and went near to slaying me! Make not the enemies rejoice over my misfortune, nor count thou me amongst the people of sin.” Qur'an, 7: 150

What Prophet Moses did next was questioning the motives of the Samaritan as to what he did? Ultimately, Prophet Moses destroyed the idol bringing that episode to an end:

“[Moses] said: “Get thee gone! But thy [punishment] in this life will be that thou wilt say, ‘Touch me not’; and moreover [for a future penalty] thou hast a promise that will not fail. Now look at thy god, of whom thou hast become a devoted worshipper: We will certainly [melt] it in a blazing fire and scatter it broadcast in the sea!” Qur'an, 20: 97

The last step was a precautionary measure against the possibility of retaining anything of the idol that might still create problems for those whose faith is weak. It was a thorough uprooting of the idol from the physical world. To uproot it from the hearts is a more difficult task. Prophet Moses asked his people to repent and he requested that

they should kill themselves in order to atone for their grave sin of worshipping the Golden Calf.

It could be stated that these problems emerged from being raised in a cultural milieu dominated by idolatry. A god is something touched and seen. This might explain the next out of the ordinary request; the Children of Israel demanded to see God as a condition for believing:

“And remember ye said: “O Moses! We shall never believe in thee until we see God manifestly,” but ye were dazed by thunder and lightning even as ye looked on. Then We raised you up from after your death; ye had a chance to be grateful. And We gave you Manna and quails...”
Qur’an, 2: 55-57

The sequence of the events could be described as follows: creating the calf, destroying it, knowledge of the punishment, seeking forgiveness and being forgiven. Regarding the punishment, a verse stated that:

“Those who took the calf [for worshipping] will indeed be overwhelmed with wrath from their Lord, and with shame in this life: thus We do recompense those who invent [falsehood].” Qur’an, 7: 152

This verse was followed by another one reflecting on the possibility of repentance and forgiveness, and that God is Oft-Forgiving and Most Merciful. Subsequently, the narrative goes on to describe what Prophet Moses did to attain forgiveness for his people. He selected seventy men to go with him to ask God for forgiveness:

“And Moses chose seventy of his people for Our place of meeting: when they were seized with violent quaking, he prayed: “O my Lord! If it had been Thy Will Thou couldst have destroyed, long before, both them and me: wouldst Thou destroy us for the deeds of the foolish ones among us? This is no more than Thy trial: by it Thou causest whom Thou wilt to stray, and Thou leadest whom Thou wilt into the right path. Thou art our Protector: SO forgive us and give us Thy mercy; for Thou art the Best of those who forgive.” Qur’an, 7: 155

The “violent quaking” was a result of asking to see God. They were still skeptical despite being witnesses to all the Signs that God sent with Prophet Moses to the Pharaoh and later on as favors such as the Manna and quails...etc. Prophet Moses himself, in a different context, asked to see God. The difference is that it was a *bona fide* request; he did know that humans cannot see God:

When Moses came to the place appointed by Us, and his Lord addressed him, he said: “O my Lord! Show [thyself] to me, that I may look upon thee. God said: “By no means canst thou see Me [direct]; but look upon the mount; if it abide in its place, then shalt thou see Me.” When his Lord

manifested His glory on the mount, He made it as dust, and Moses fell down in a swoon. When he recovered his sense he said: “Glory be to Thee! To Thee I turn in repentance, and I am the first to believe.” Qur’an, 7: 143

It seems that Prophet Moses went through different stages of learning. He was required to go and learn from the Good Servant. This parable took place in Chapter 18 (verses 60-82). This was part of the preparation of Prophet Moses and also the preparation of his young companion, whom the hadith describes as Prophet Yosha` Ben Noon (i.e. Joshua).

Going back to the story of entering the Holy Land, we find that the Children of Israel were reluctant to go ahead. In fact, they were afraid of the people who lived there because of their reputation of being very strong:

“They said: “O Moses! In this land are a people of exceeding strength: Never shall we enter it until they leave it. If [once] they leave, then shall we enter [the Holy Land].” Qur’an. 5: 22

Yet, this was not the position of all of them. Two men, who are described as God-fearing, intervened and advised the Children of Israel against defying God and that they only need to put their trust in Him. Yet, to no avail; they remain defiant and reiterated the same position using a language that is disrespectful:

“They said: “O Moses! While they remain there, never shall we be able to enter, to the end of time. Go thou and thy Lord, and fight ye two, while we sit here [waiting for the outcome].” Qur’an, 5: 24

What did they reap as a result of being rebellious? Forty years freeze on entering the Holy Land:

“God said: Therefore will the land be out of their reach for forty years: in distraction will they wander through the land: but sorrow thou not over these rebellious people.” Qur’an, 5: 26

By the time these forty years lapsed, a new generation emerged. They were qualified to enter the Holy Land. The older Israelites, including Prophets Moses and Aaron, did not make it, though they were roaming all these years around the Holy Land.

One of the Signs that took place during this period was that God sent down Manna and quails so that the Children of Israel may eat. Prophet Moses asked God for water:

“And remember Moses prayed for water for his people. We said: “Strike the rock with thy staff.” Then gushed forth therefrom twelve springs. Each group new its own place for water. So eat and drink of the

sustenance provided by God. And do neither evil nor mischief on the [face of the] earth.” Qur’an, 2: 60

The Children of Israel complained against the God-given sustenance:

“And remember ye said: “O Moses! We cannot endure one kind of food [all the time]. So beseech thy Lord for us to produce for us of what the earth growth- its pot-herbs, and cucumbers, its garlic, lentils and onions.” He said: “Will ye exchange the better for the worse? Go ye down to any [other] region (*Misran*), and ye shall find what you want. They were covered with humiliation and misery; they drew on themselves the wrath of God. This because they went on rejecting the Signs of God and slaying His Messengers without just cause. This because they rebelled and went on transgressing” Qur’an, 2: 61

There were other instances of transgression. This is story of those who violated the Sabbath:

“And well ye knew those amongst you who transgressed in the matter of the Sabbath: We said to them: “Be ye apes, despised and rejected.” So We made it an example to their own time and to their posterity and a lesson to those who fear God.” Qur’an, 2: 65-66

There are several issues attached to these verses: What is the nature of this apeness? Was it a physical or spiritual metamorphosis? What is the moral meaning of the story?

It is my understanding that God metamorphosed them into real apes. There are two different kinds of pronouns used in the above two verses in relation to those who were metamorphosed. In the first instance, a plural masculine pronoun was used to refer to them before the change took place. After they were metamorphosed, a plural feminine pronoun was used to refer to them. The word ‘monkeys’ (*qiradah*) in Arabic is feminine.

At any rate, those who were metamorphosed did not have progeny. Therefore, it is not acceptable to refer to human beings, who are dignified by God, as their children or grandchildren. Stories of Divine punishment are intended for their moral message to all of us. There is a continuous challenge to sincerely conform to Divine Will while enjoying outward and inward peace at the same time.

Another issue is that these verses are clear about who violated the Sabbath. It was the *few* amongst the Children of Israel. The verse refers to “those amongst you” (*minkum*). This means that no stereotyped generalizations could be made.⁸

Prophet Moses had to endure the reaction of the Children of Israel when had another request. He informed me that God was asking them to slaughter a cow. There were no specific details regarding the cow and had they slaughtered any cow it would

have fulfilled the requirement. Yet, they made a jest out of it in the form of a lengthy litigation:

“And remember Moses said to his people: “God commands that ye sacrifice a heifer. They said: “Makest thou a laughing-stock of us?”

He said: “God save me from being an ignorant!”

They said: “Beseech on our behalf thy Lord to make plain to us what [heifer] it is!”

He said: “He says: the heifer should be neither too old nor too young, but of middling age: now do what ye are commanded!”

They said: “Beseech on our behalf thy Lord to make plain to us her color.”

He said: “He says: a fawn-colored heifer, pure and rich in tone, the admiration of beholders!”

They said: “Beseech on our behalf thy Lord to make plain to us what she is: to us are all heifers alike: we wish indeed for guidance if God wills.”

He said: “He says: a heifer not trained to till the soil or water the fields; sound and without blemish.”

They said: “Now hast thou brought the truth. Then they offered her in sacrifice, but not with goodwill.

Qur’an, 2: 67-71

The reason for slaughtering the cow in the Qur’an was simply to revive someone who was killed in order to testify about the assassin. The previous questions were all frivolous.

What might be described as non-submitting ethos that prevailed at the time made future communications to take a different twist. It reached the stage where God established the Covenant with the Children of Israel, under peculiar circumstances:

“And remember We took your Covenant and We raised above you [the towering height of] Mount Tur [Sinai]: “Hold firmly to what We have given you and bring [ever] to remembrance what is therein: perchance ye may fear God.” Qur’an, 2: 63

Prophet Moses’s name is the most mentioned in the Qur’an, and there are many additional contexts where his name appears. As is the case with the Qur’anic narrative in the case of every prophet, the moral lesson is the most important. I believe that this paper had already put together a somewhat ‘unified’ narrative out of the numerous and fragmented story of Prophet Moses. He remains, as one interpretation goes, one of the Messengers who had strived hard (*Uli Al-`Azim min Al-Rusul*). It remains that he stood his grounds against the Pharaoh, the unjust super of power of that time.

I would like to conclude this story by yet another very meaningful verse (37:120):

“Peace and salutation to Moses and Aaron”

¹ Arabic: Musa.

² This beautiful supplication of Prophet Joseph is probably the first thing that could be read in Arabic at the main entrance of Cairo's International Airport.

³ *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, Volume 3, Book 48, Number 849:

⁴ This is the night in which the Qur'an was revealed. See Qur'an, chapter 97 (i.e. *Al-Qadr*) which is dedicated to this theme for other details. Muslims attempt to spend the whole night in prayers, recitation of the Qur'an and learning.

⁵ Cf Qur'an, 26: 28

⁶ Sayyed Qutub, *Fi Zilaal Al-Qur'an*, 12th edition (Beirut: Dar Al-Shuruq, 1986) vol. 2, p. 871.

⁷ Mustafa Abu Sway, "The Holy Land, Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa Mosque in the Islamic Sources"; *Journal of the Central Conference of American Rabbis* (CCAR) Fall 2000, 60-68

⁸ Muslims who use slogans that connect this ancient story with contemporary Jews are not being faithful to the Islamic worldview. Frankly, I feel ashamed when these slogans are used. It is imperative for Muslims to be just with everyone, friend and foe. Muslims should exhibit magnanimity in their pursuit of justice and in their attempt to resolve modern conflicts.