

The Failure of the Hero: Moses as A Model for Ministry

GEORGE W. COATS

Modern culture requires that heroes who set their mark for members of the society to imitate must be successful. The corporation executive who maintains a position in the modern world of business can continue in that position only if that position basks in the rich light of success. The modern coach, whether responsible for the work of junior high squads or the leader of a National Football League team, remains a modern coach only if the won-lost record breaks in the coach's favor. The minister of a modern congregation marks the character of ministry by the number of additions to the congregation's membership. In the world of success drives, the failure can find no room at the inn. The person who fails finds no continuation from the board of executives who tolerates only signs of success. The person who fails finds no disciples who imitate the failure's particular pattern of work.

Yet, failure is a realistic factor of modern life. Businesses in today's world will occasionally close because of bankruptcy. Ministers in today's churches will occasionally face a move because of poor support. Marriages will occasionally end in divorce. Students will occasionally drop out of school. Some students even flunk out of school. Nations struggle to find excuses for policies gone awry. Even presidents struggle to cover procedures that have obviously failed.

In the literature of the ancient world, the hero carries the banner for success in leading the people who respond to heroic leadership. The hero successfully defends the people against enemies who would reduce the people to slavery, against hunger or thirst that would drive the people to the edge of death, and against confusion that would capture the people in aimless wandering through endless wilderness. If the hero were unable to lead the people to the end of the wilderness, if the hero failed to defend the people against the dangers of life in the wilderness, then the hero would hardly be heroic.

Yet, failure is a realistic factor in the life of leaders for the modern world. In the face of failure, a typical procedure for a leader is to direct blame for the failure to some other person or even to claim no knowledge or responsibility for the event of failure at all. Some other official must have been responsible for the failure. "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." Will a leader accept responsibility for a military failure like the Bay of Pigs? Or will

Dr. George W. Coats is professor of Old Testament at Lexington Theological Seminary. He is currently preparing *Numbers* for The Old Testament Library series to replace Martin Noth's volume.

a leader deny any responsibility for the sale of arms to one faction seeking to overthrow another faction when once that sale becomes public knowledge?

Moses appears in the Old Testament narrative as a hero who commits his life to the task of leading the Israelites out of the oppressive bondage in Egypt.¹ The narrative captures the dynamic task assumed by Moses as a task so overwhelming that from the beginning Moses must struggle with its gigantic portions. "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" God responds to this self-abasement from Moses by promising Moses that the divine presence would accompany him in the process of executing the commission.² Moses apparently feels the enormous proportions of the task as a seal for failure, given the understanding of himself that controls the response. The promise for presence in executing that kind of ministry must certainly be a promise for success. And indeed, the presentation of plans for this ministry to the people brings an initial mark of success. "And the people believed; and when they heard that the Lord had visited the people of Israel and that he had seen their affliction, they bowed their heads and worshiped."

Exodus 5 is, however, an account of heroic failure. Opening with a single transition word, *w^eahar*, a word that ties the chapter to the preceding narrative, this brief tale reports the execution of the divine commission that sent Moses and Aaron to the Pharaoh. "Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, "Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness." ' ' " According to the pattern of success, particularly success in presenting God's word for people to obey, the Pharaoh should have acquiesced immediately to God's demand. Or at least the Pharaoh should have opened negotiations in order to work out a compromise. But the Pharaoh responds to the demand in a way that creates immediate tension for the plot of the story. "Who is the Lord, that I should heed his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover, I will not let Israel go." Moses and Aaron continue the negotiations by offering a compromise. "The God of the Hebrews has met with us; let us go, we pray, a three days' journey into the wilderness, and sacrifice to the Lord our God, lest he fall upon us with pestilence or with the sword." The compromise offer fails, however. Indeed, the Pharaoh not only refuses the request of Moses and Aaron that the people be allowed to go into the wilderness for a short period in order to sacrifice to their God, but he also increases their burdens of work. In verses 7-9, the text notes the Pharaoh's commands for the taskmasters and foremen, "You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as heretofore; let them go and gather straw for themselves. But the number of bricks which they made heretofore you shall lay upon them, you shall by no means lessen it Let heavier work be laid upon the men that they may labor at it and pay no regard to lying words." The Pharaoh strongly rejects the efforts of Moses and Aaron to achieve release of the people by negotiations. Indeed, the text paints a picture of the Pharaoh as a man of power who believes that Moses and Aaron are lying to him. He knows that if he permits the Israelites to go a three-day journey into the wilderness to sacrifice to their God they will not come back. They will continue their march away from Egypt. And, in fact, he is right in his impression.

The appeal to the Pharaoh for permission to go into the wilderness a journey of only three days is clearly an excuse to get out of Egypt. Indeed, even if they do in fact hold a feast to the Lord at some point in the journey, it is clear for the storyteller that they would have no intention for coming back. They would continue their journey. The Pharaoh is thus right in his suspicions that the appeal to God's demand for a festival in the wilderness is an excuse to escape the power of the Pharaoh. The plot depends on deception.

But even worse, the Pharaoh responds to the negotiation with an insult to the Lord. In v. 2, "Who is the Lord, that I should heed his voice and let Israel go?"³ I do not know the Lord, and moreover, I will not let Israel go." The question implies that the Lord, the subject of the question, does not demand enough authority to meet the goal of the negotiations to let Israel go. Thus, with an insult to God, the Pharaoh rejects the petition of Moses and Aaron.

Vv. 10-14 demonstrate the intensification of the Egyptian oppression against the Israelite people. In v. 14, "the foremen of the people of Israel, (who were Israelites themselves) who Pharaoh's taskmasters had set over them, were beaten. . . "The effort to carry out the commission of God for securing the release of the people thus ended in failure. Indeed, it ended with increased oppression against the Israelites. In this case, failure facilitates even greater tension.

The plot of the tale continues its progression by intensifying the crisis even beyond the mark of heavier oppression. Vv. 15-19 depict the efforts of the Israelite foremen to secure some softening of the labor. "Why do you deal thus with your servants? No straw is given to your servants, yet they say to us, 'Make bricks!' And behold, your servants are beaten; but the fault is in your own people." But the Egyptians reject the appeal with a stubborn repetition of the demand to meet the quota of bricks. In v. 19, "You shall by no means lessen your daily number of bricks." The negotiations end not only in failure to achieve the goal of freedom from oppression, but also in an increase in the oppression.

The failure scene comes to a pitched focus in v. 20. The storyteller describes the anticipated confrontation between the Israelite foremen and Moses/Aaron. Their immediate attack is an appeal for judgment against Moses and Aaron. "The Lord look upon you and judge " The effort by Moses and Aaron to resolve the oppression of the people ends in a lawsuit by the people against Moses and Aaron.⁴ No more forceful sign of failure could appear. The very people the heroes intend to lead to freedom turn on them and reject them with a lawsuit.

Moses and Aaron have now made an initial effort to win the release of the people. And that effort ends in failure. But the irony in the failure is that the lawsuit depicts the efforts of Moses and Aaron to save the people from their bondage as an attempt to kill them. ". . . Because you have made us offensive in the sight of Pharaoh and his servants, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us." The people see the move to save them from oppression as a move to kill them. The image of failure in the scene is not simply a rejection of the hero. It is a rejection of the hero's principal work, the heart of Moses' identity as the hero of the people. The irony in this tragic rejection develops another level of tension. With the rejection by the people heavy on the shoulders of Moses and Aaron, with the

failure of the negotiations to win the freedom of the people still sharp in the pericope, Moses turns the rejection on God. In v. 22, "Then Moses turned again to the Lord and said, 'O Lord, why hast thou done evil to this people? Why didst thou ever send me?'" Again, the question is in the form of an accusation. Formally, it calls for some kind of response from the addressee. Moreover, Moses states the case for the accusation, ". . . since I came to Pharaoh to speak in thy name, he has done evil to this people, and thou hast not delivered thy people at all." The hero recognizes his own failure in delivering the people. The foremen of the people make the point clear. But now Moses makes a similar accusation against God. In Moses' eyes, God has also failed. Thus, the issue for the pericope arises from the pressure of failure. Moses, the hero, failed to win the freedom of his people by negotiations with the Pharaoh. And that failure Moses places under God's responsibility. When Moses fails, for Moses that means that God, the God who commissioned Moses for the task, also fails. Now what will God do? And as a part of that issue, what will Moses do?

The pericope in Exodus 5 is not structurally a part of the cycle of scenes in the long narrative about Moses' repeated negotiations with the Pharaoh in tireless efforts to win the release of the people. In fact, the tale in Exodus 5 contains the narrative tradition in its most primitive form, a form that provides the tradition-historical roots for the larger negotiations narrative. In Exodus 7-12, an expanded narrative elaborates the kernel of tradition in Exodus 5. Indeed, the end of the negotiations as a narrative motif, Exod. 10:29, puts the issue of tension in the narrative at the very point left hanging in Exodus 5. The complicated process of negotiations between Moses and the Pharaoh ends in failure for Moses. And that failure implies failure for God. In the face of that failure, what will Moses do next? In the face of failure, what will God do next?

The cycle of scenes about Moses' repeated negotiations with the Pharaoh develops in a specialized form. The storyteller constructs the cycle as a palistrophe, a pattern that sets the first scene as a structural parallel with the tenth scene, but not with any other scene. In the same way, the second scene parallels the ninth scene. The third scene follows the pattern with the eighth scene. The fourth scene parallels the seventh, and the fifth parallels the sixth. In the palistrophe, the Passover has no place. It is not a part of the tight structure in the story and thus not an original account of the climax for the narrative. Rather, the narrative in the palistrophe comes to an end in Exodus 10:28-29. "Then the Pharaoh said to him, 'Get away from me. Take heed to yourself. Never see my face again. For in the day you see my face, you shall die.' Moses said, 'As you say! I will not see your face again.'" With that exchange, the negotiations between Moses and the Pharaoh end.⁵ But the Pharaoh has not agreed to release the people. At this point, the negotiations process stands clearly as a failure. And the failure characterizes not only Moses but also God.

At least one exegetical problem arises just at this point. The storyteller notes, just before reporting that the Pharaoh dismissed Moses with a death sentence as the penalty for continuing the negotiations, that the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he would not let them go. With that comment, the storyteller

announces that the repeated failure in the negotiations process was the result of God's design for the event. With this element in hand, the exegete can conclude that Moses and God did not fail after all. It was all a part of God's design. When one asks about the tradition history of the negotiations narrative: the problem with the pattern sharpens. In some sense, the motif is a narrative technique designed to enable the storyteller to move from one scene in the sequence to the next. And, indeed, the movement sets up the Passover scene. If the initial audience between Moses/Aaron and the Pharaoh has ended in success, the narrator would have lost the story. There would be no reason for the Passover scene. The hardened heart motif allows the narrative to move from one stage to the next, with the Passover at the end. But the process also depicts the narrator's view of Moses' reaction, indeed, God's reaction to the spectre of failure. When the failure occurs, the hero goes back to the drawing board and creates a new plan. And then he tries again. Indeed, the hero receives a new plan from the hand of God. When God's plan for saving the people fails, then God tries a new plan. The hero demonstrates the tenacity of God to pursue the plan of salvation despite repeated failures in the plan.

The point can be pursued a step farther for this tradition. Exodus 5 shows the traditio-historical basis for the narrative as a tradition about failure. The negotiations cycle ends in Exodus 10 with failure. Where does a resolution for this narrative tension appear? In every respect, the Passover event marks the climax of the tension in the narrative as it now stands. God resolves the issues of failure in the process by creating something new. In a dramatic strike against all of the Egyptians from the poorest to the Pharaoh himself, God kills the first-born of every Egyptian family. But by proper preparation of the ritual, the Israelites protect their first-born from the plague that puts Egyptians in their place. It is a scene of rank violence. But the violent attack forces the Egyptians to submit to the demands of the Israelite hero. They free the Israelites from their dehumanizing slavery, indeed, they drive them away. Finally, in one fatal blow, the Israelite hero and the God he serves win success in delivering the people from their slavery. The issue of the violent means remains a problem at tangent with the design of this paper. The principal point here is that failure did not thwart the work of the hero.

The traditio-historical complexity in the cycle adds to this picture of response to failure. A part of the tradition brings the cycle of negotiations between Moses and the Pharaoh to a conclusion without success in convincing the Pharaoh to release the slaves. The roots of that tradition shape the narrative in Exodus 5. The narrative moves beyond the failure in order to depict Moses' return to the people, prepared to develop a new and quite different plan. In Exod. 12:35, the narrative notes that "The people of Israel had also done as Moses told them, for they had asked of the Egyptians jewelry of silver and of gold, and clothing "The point of this motif emerges with a different description of the exodus event itself, a description unrelated to the Passover, ". . . the Lord had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. Thus they despoiled the Egyptians." The same motif appears in Exod. 3:21-22 and 11:2-3 (cf. also Ps, 105:37). This depiction of the exodus assumes that all of the efforts of the

heroes and even the efforts of God end in failure. In the face of the failure, this tradition shows Moses preparing a new plan. He will lead the people out of Egypt in a secret escape, without the permission of the Pharaoh.⁶ To escape in the middle of the night would require preparation for movement at a moment's notice, ". . . your loins girded, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it in haste" (Exod. 12:10). Indeed, the picture of the people with dough for the bread on their backs, before it had time to rise in response to leaven, sets the pattern for a Feast of Unleavened Bread (12:34). That this event might have been originally distinct from the Passover seems clear.⁷ Yet, in both cases, the narrative describes procedures of the hero in the face of failure. When the first plan fails, then the hero tries again. Whether the try appears as the Passover event or as the event celebrated during an originally distinct Festival of Unleavened Bread, still the tradition depicts the hero as the servant of God who does not give up in the face of failure. Rather, when one who does not succeed with an initial plan responds to the failure in the manner of the hero Moses, that one develops a new plan and tries again.⁸

This pattern of failure and renewed effort to gain success by approaching the issue from a new direction marks the entire history of God's efforts to save the people. In the wilderness, Moses fails again. The people murmur against Moses and God. They rebel against Moses' leadership and threaten to execute him. At the Mountain, God establishes a covenant with the people through the hand of Moses. But the people fall from the covenant in a rank act of apostasy with the Golden Calf. Joshua leads the people across the Jordan into the land of the promise. The ark of the covenant symbolizes God's presence in this Holy Land at the event of a covenant renewal at Shechem (so, Josh. 24: 12). But the people fall from that covenant again and again. The tragedy at Baal Peor is only a prime example of repeated failures. Moses, Joshua, the judges of the tribal confederation, Samuel, all experience leadership for the people of God under a constant threat of failure. And each searches for new ways to meet the challenge of leadership.

A radical new plan to meet the failure in salvation history emerges with the rise of the kingship. David would be God's special envoy. From the perspective of tradition in Jerusalem, David would be the Son of God, the heir of Melchizedek. And with David and his dynasty in Jerusalem, God would rule the world with justice and righteousness. Yet, even here the ideal world of peace as the place for God's salvation for all people under the authority of a Davidic king, such as the Messiah described in Isa. 11:1-9, seems to fail. David corrupts the rule of God in Jerusalem with Bathsheba and a rank failure to show compassion in his dealings with her husband, Uriah.⁹ Solomon demonstrates wisdom in administration of the kingdom. But at his death, his son Rehoboam shows no wisdom. And his failure leads to the division of God's people between the north and the south. The Deuteronomistic historian looks for a king in the line of David that would correct the failure in the ranks of the Davidic dynasty. Indeed, the model for that successful king would be a Davidic heir who would match the model of leadership for Israel provided by Moses.¹⁰ Josiah almost completes the job. His move to unite

the north and the south under the aegis of a Deuteronomic reform opened the door for a pattern in his own leadership that stands out for its Mosaic qualities, its new law and new covenant. But Josiah failed through no fault of his own. On top of a lonely mountain, he met an untimely death, and the dream of success, so close to realization, ended in failure effected by an Egyptian king. The New Moses, the Davidic King Josiah died in the midst of apparent success. How could God avoid another tragic failure? In the face of so many failures, it is remarkable that God has continued in a constant pursuit for salvation of the world's human creatures.

Another new Moses, another Davidic Messiah, brought hope for God's salvation for all the world. Under the reign of Jesus of Nazareth, God's Kingdom of peace comes in a new form to the world. Yet, even here apparent failure dominates the scene. Where is this new kingdom, a kingdom that will mark God's rule of peace for the world? "My kingship is not of this world." Is that not a false promise? What other world is there for experiencing the success in God's redemption, in God's rule of peace? But the marks of a kingdom uncontrolled by a political king do emerge. Political kings sell arms to two sides in a war, just to see how much destruction money can buy. The king in the Kingdom of God does other things. "The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them." Each year, the Christmas celebration marks the hope for God's success in delivering the people of the world from their petty wars. But the apparent success meets the same tragic failure that met Josiah. On a lonely hill, the New David, the New Moses met the callous lack of compassion that belongs to a world of hostile people. They killed him, just as the Egyptians killed Josiah, just as the people threatened to do with Moses. Thus, God's plan ended again in failure. The hope offered by Christmas ends in the despair of Dark Friday. What will God do now in the face of still another failure?

"Now, after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the sepulchre."

Notes

1. George W. Coats, *Moses: Heroic Man and Man of God* (JSOT Monograph 19; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987). A principal goal for the monograph is to show that the Moses narrative should be understood as heroic saga.
2. George W. Coats, "Self-Abasement and Insult Formulas," *JBL* (1970) 89: 14-26.
3. So, "Self-Abasement and Insult Formulas."
4. Hans Joachim Boecker, *Redeformen des Rechtslebens im Alten Testament* (WMANT 14; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1964) p. 25-34.
5. Dennis J. McCarthy, "Moses' Dealings with Pharaoh," *CBQ* 27 (1965): 336-347.
6. George W. Coats, "Despoiling the Egyptians," *VT* 18 (1968): 450-457.
7. Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel. Its Life and Institutions*. Trs. John McHugh (New

York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1961) p. 484-493.

8. As a model for ministry, the Moses figure functions for the modern church in much the same way that it functioned for the Deuteronomistic historian in a critique of the kingship. Modern ministers might profit by developing Mosaic characteristics as marks of their ministry. One mark would be the pattern of response to failure. In the face of failure, the temptation is strong to give up. But the challenge of the model calls the minister confronted by failure back to the drawing board. The admonition is clear. "Get up! Dust yourself off, and start all over again." But the model goes a step farther. In the discouraging and often very lonely setting that emerges in the wake of failure, how can the minister find enough courage to try again'? "Fear not! I am with you."

9. George W. Coats, "2 Samuel 12: An Exposition," *Int* 40 (1986): 170-175.

10. Gerald E. Gerbrandt, *Kingship According to the Deuteronomistic Historian* (SBL Dissertation 87; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986).

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