

Toward the Land of Milk and Honey



Reliving a thrilling story of Sunday-school days, the author follows the wanderings of Moses and the Israelites in their flight from Egypt to Mount Sinai . . . An inspiring and unique vacation experience

by Robert Deardorff

WHEN YOU TRY to make a dream come true, you never know what will happen. I tried it recently and found myself in Egypt, following the fabulous trail that Moses blazed when he led the children of Israel from Pharaoh's bondage. Since it was *my* dream, I thought I knew what I'd find there. Well, I couldn't have been more surprised.

You see, I'd been in Egypt before in my imagination on one of those sparkling spring days when anything seems possible. I sat then, a kid of 7 or 8, on a brown varnished chair in a Chambersburg, Pa., Sunday school, and for a while I really lived in the time of Moses.

The class had been restless because the weather was so inviting outdoors, and Miss Katherine Evans, our teacher, kept us quiet by telling us the amazing story of Moses' life. She explained that the Israelites were living in captivity in Egypt, and, because they were multiplying faster than the Egyptians, the Pharaoh ordered all their male children drowned in the River Nile. When Moses was born, his mother made an ark of bulrushes and hid him on the river bank. Moses' sister stood nearby, guarding it, when one of Pharaoh's daughters found the baby, adopted him, and he grew up in her father's court at Memphis, an ancient city about 15 miles from modern Cairo.

One day when Moses saw an Egyptian strike an Israelite, he killed the Egyptian, and then he had to flee for his life. He went to the Sinai Peninsula, just east of Egypt, separating it from the Holy Land, and there, near Mount Sinai, he married a daughter of the shepherd priest Jethro and settled down. But one day, when he was 80

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years old, God spoke to him from a bush that seemed to burn with fire and urged him to go back to free the Israelites. So Moses set out for Egypt.

There was a new Pharaoh now, named Mineptah. When Moses tried to persuade him to set the children of Israel free, Mineptah called his magicians, and Moses bested the magicians with tricks of magic. (At that point the story had me on the edge of the chair, for in those days my ambition was to become a magician. For a long time I'd wanted a rabbit; I already had a hat.)

Pharaoh promised to free the Israelites, but almost immediately he broke his promise, and the great contest between Moses and the magicians continued, until at last God killed the first-born of all the Egyptians but passed over the houses of the Israelites—the Passover.

Freed at last, the children of Israel left their homes, assembled at Ramses, an ancient town about 80 miles northeast of Cairo, and set out for the “land of milk and honey,” which is the modern Holy Land; but Pharaoh, changing his mind once more, pursued them and caught up with them by the Red Sea. There Moses divided the water, and the Israelites escaped to the other side, while the pursuing Egyptians were drowned.

HOLDING up a map, Miss Evans traced the route the Israelites took, guided by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night—south along the Red Sea to Marah, an oasis known today as the Wells of Moses, because he made their brackish water sweet, then on to the Wilderness of Sin, which, the Bible says, they reached on “the 15th day of the second month” of their wanderings. Here they became discouraged and rebelled against Moses, and God provided quail and manna for them to eat.

At last, in the third month after they left Egypt, they reached Mount Sinai on the southern tip of the peninsula, where for 40 days and 40 nights Moses talked with God on the mountain and received the Ten Commandments.

“You can go there today,” she explained, “and climb up the mountain, just as Moses did.”

I was drinking in every word. *You could actually go back there today!*

Miss Evans put away the map. To my regret, the lesson was finished. But not quite finished. She told us how God kept the Israelites in the Wilderness for 40 years as punishment for their rebellions and their lack of faith, and Moses himself was not allowed to enter the Promised Land. Just before they reached it, when he was 120 years old, he died.

“We all make a trip like that,” she astonished me by

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adding. "Through the wilderness of life in search of a promised land."

But how, I wondered? Especially, how could Moses, a man who started when he was 80 years old, possibly lead more than 600,000 people—over 40 times as many as there were in Chambersburg—for 40 years and more than 700 miles through a wilderness? It seemed to me that this was *really* magic.

One day not long ago when I was in Italy, I remembered my boyhood question. I'd just learned that Egypt was only three days away from Naples by boat, and I could get there for \$50 third class on the Turkish Maritime Lines. What would it be like, I wondered, to go back—really go back this time and make the journey I'd already taken in imagination?

Since I had the money and two weeks to spare, I went chasing off after my daydream. As often happens when you follow a dream, I discovered a new and exotic world. I've seen a lot of remarkable places, from languid equatorial islands to arctic wastes, but I've never seen anything as fantastically different as this ancient land of the Bible.

And—to top it all—I even discovered the secret of Moses' magic. I know now how he did it. . . .

RIDING on the train from Alexandria, where the ship docked, to Cairo, I had my first taste of what it's like to travel back into Old Testament times. As I looked out the window at the Nile Delta, I saw tiny houses built with Biblical bricks of mud—low, flat, dirt-brown structures with small windows to keep out the blinding sunlight, and narrow, archless doorways—the same style of architecture that has been popular in this land for 5,000 years or more. Nearby, small flocks of sheep were grazing, tended by bearded shepherds dressed in the same long, colored robes that I'd seen in the church windows in Sunday school.

The villages, I thought with astonishment, must have looked the same to Moses as they did to me now. Time really did stand still here! But that was only the beginning.

Later, in Cairo, the excited feeling of living in two worlds at once grew stronger, for the city, largest in Africa, is a bedlam of old and new. I saw Cadillacs share the streets with camels padding softly along on the asphalt, their faces amusingly smug. Donkey carts, the taxis of the poor, clopped past, filled with veiled, crouching women dressed from head to toe in black, with only their eyes uncovered. Barefoot men in desert robes and neat white turbans hurried along beside girls who balanced boxes of everything on their heads.

In the narrow, twisting lanes of the Khan Kalili bazaar in one of the old sections of the city, craftsmen worked in sidewalk stalls with wood and metal and leather, using timeless hand techniques to produce souvenirs for tourists to buy—gold bracelets, small statues of ancient Egyptian animal gods, and brightly colored scarves. Everywhere I looked, past and present jostled each other, and my excitement rose.

SUDDENLY I was actually living in a world as old as recorded time. The mystery and wisdom of ages seemed to be in the very air I breathed, and I began to believe that I really would find the answer to my question buried somewhere here in the past, the way archaeologists discover hidden treasure covered by the sand of the desert.

In order to travel into the past, retracing the fabulous journey that Moses took, I had to sign up with a caravan. When I learned that, I had a happy vision of camels and Arab tents, but that dream ended quickly. This caravan consisted of a specially equipped car carrying water,

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food, and spare parts in case of a breakdown. The only equipment I required was a flashlight, though I also bought a Bible to reread the Book of Exodus.

The afternoon before I left I visited the place on the Nile where Pharaoh's daughter found Moses some 3,300 years ago. It lies on the southern tip of the island of Roda, opposite the old section of Cairo, marked today only by a few ancient trees along the riverbank. There are no bulrushes now; that plant, also called papyrus, is extinct in lower Egypt. Thirty *(Continued on page 86)* yards or so away from the spot stands an abandoned house. That's all. There's no sign of the ancient drama. I felt a surge of disappointment.

But after a while the disappointment ebbed away, for it is quiet there, in contrast with the African exuberance of the city, and quiet had magic, too. When I was a child, alone in a silent room with a clock ticking comfortably in the stillness, I used to believe that the past was alive and everything that had ever happened in the room was there, keeping me company. I discovered then that if you listen hard to stillness, you can hear astonishing things.

So it was now. As I watched the sleepy river slowly flowing past, that feeling of being close to the past returned—the feeling that nothing is ever lost. I could imagine the bank thick with papyrus reeds, and I began to re-create the Biblical drama. How many times in Egypt today had I observed people going down to the Nile to bathe, just as the princess had done the day she discovered the baby Moses! There is a flow of life and custom in this ancient land, as steady and unchanging as the river. I stared at the water, my disappointment gone, happy that I was here at last on the spot where such a great event happened—an event that changed the course of history and became, so many centuries later, a part of my own life one morning in a Pennsylvania Sunday school.

The trip itself started uneventfully, as magic usually does. The following morning, just before 7 at the travel agent's office, I met my companions for this journey through the wilderness—Bill Richman from San Francisco and Andy Collins from Los Angeles, a pair of crew-cut young painters who were touring the Middle East, and the Egyptian



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driver, a grinning young man called Ahmed, who sat grandly behind the wheel of the car wearing a long red-and-blue-striped robe and a white turban that made him resemble a Biblical prophet—the Moses of *our* journey. Thinking about the rough trip ahead and remembering stories I'd heard about cars that broke down in the blinding desert heat, miles and miles from nowhere, I wondered about *his* powers of magic.

Leaving the early morning confusion of Cairo, we shot along a road through the desert to Suez at approximately the speed of a magic carpet. Paradoxically, though Ahmed lived surrounded by antiquity, his eyes were on the future, and he seemed to exist for the day when he could hurtle his car through the sound barrier. At every stop he raised the hood and tinkered hopefully with the engine, trying to wheedle an extra mile or two of speed from it, as if we were being pursued by Pharaoh's legions, as the Israelites had been.

Ahmed was an optimist, and as we sped along I tried to be one, too, holding on to the back seat as the desert streaked past, scorched and far more forbidding than anything I'd imagined in Sunday school. At that, it was better than walking in a caravan like Moses, carrying all my possessions with me.

It was through barren land like this that the children of Israel escaped from Egypt in one of the greatest mass movements of people in history, leaving all that was familiar behind and moving into an unfriendly wasteland, seeking a brighter future. The landscape was so dead and lifeless that I began to appreciate Ahmed's desire to hurtle over it as fast as possible. It took Moses three months to reach Mount Sinai. We were scheduled to make it in two days; I was positive we wouldn't be late.

AROUND midmorning we came to Suez, and there, as always, I had it easier than the Israelites. Tradition says they crossed the Red Sea north of here—no one knows exactly where. Instead of getting wet by trying to follow their trail through the water from Africa to Asia, I took a safer route and crossed the Red Sea's modern extension, the Suez Canal, on a tiny ferryboat. On the Asian side we set off once more over the bare, baked earth into the wilderness.

On my right I caught a glimpse of the Red Sea stretching away to the south, glittering in the sunlight, the water looking exactly as it must have looked to the Israelites when they saw it from the African shore. But what a difference there was! For me it was beautiful, its red color produced by the reflection of the raw, red hills on either side. For them it was a fearful, blood-red barrier that blocked their escape as Pharaoh's chariots pursued them. They stood on the shore, more than half a million frantic, milling people, unable to run any farther.

And then Moses, acting out of his 80 years of faith and wisdom, stretched his hand over the sea—such a beautifully simple, trusting gesture in the midst of

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hysteria. *"And the Lord caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided."* They streamed through then, a solid wall of water on each side. When the Egyptians tried to cross, the water closed and drowned them.

For several minutes we drove in silence, awed by the gaunt, treeless country that quivered with heat waves from the blistering sun. We were all hot and dusty, each scanning the landscape for some reassuring sign of life. Then, abruptly, Andy broke the silence. "Look!" he cried, pointing to an astonishing spot of green on the burnt horizon straight ahead. It seemed to dance in the heat as we stared at it. Was this a mirage? I wondered. Would it fade away as we approached?

Instead, to my relief, it grew larger—grew into a group of palm trees in the midst of the wilderness, their green leaves made extra vivid by the gauntness all around them.

We stopped in their welcome shade—a miracle for *us* in the parched, blinding land—and it struck me how much we take for granted in our comfortable modern life back home. When I was there I never would have believed what a wonderful blessing a simple shadow can be!

Although there were wells of water all around us—twelve of them, I counted—Ahmed warned us not to drink from them. "They're bitter," he said, and brought out one of the canteens we carried with us. "These are the Wells of Moses."

I looked up at the cool, green trees—such a reassuring sign that life *could* grow in the desert—trying to make myself believe that I was actually here at last, on the very spot where Moses had performed another of the astonishing miracles that had fascinated me long ago. My dream *was* coming true! I could imagine the joy the Israelites must have felt when they arrived, for they had been wandering for three days in this ovenlike land without any water at all! When they did discover the oasis at last, their joy was followed immediately by despair upon finding that the water was bitter:

"And the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink?"

"And he cried unto the Lord; and the Lord shewed him a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet."

Although by our standards the water isn't good, even today one of the wells is sweeter than the rest, Ahmed explained.

We lingered for a few moments longer before we had to move on. "They sure must have hated to leave," Bill said when we climbed into the car once more. As we drove off and the trees vanished, I kept looking back, as they must have done, trying to keep the green leaves in sight as long as I could.

After lunch the desert disappeared, along with the road. The Israelites had a pillar of cloud to guide them by day and a pillar of fire by night, but now we had only an uncertain trail that led past

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mountains of gaunt, naked rock to Abu Zeneima, an Arab village by the Red Sea where the Egyptian government maintains an overnight guesthouse.

THE following morning, our second, we came to the Wilderness of Sin, a flat, desolate plain about 12 miles long, which the Israelites reached only after 45 days. I remembered the Sunday-school story I'd heard about how the people had rebelled here once more because they were hungry and discouraged—so beaten this time that they accused Moses of having led them into this wilderness to kill them with hunger, and they longed for their slavery in Egypt, where at least they'd had bread to eat.

But even though more than half a million angry, bitter people ranted against him, Moses somehow held fast to his faith and his courage, and produced another bit of magic that had astonished me long ago. That evening quails came up and dropped upon the camp, and in the morning, *"behold, upon the face of the wilderness there lay a small round thing, as small as the hoar frost on the ground."*

"And when the children of Israel saw it, they said one to another, It is manna: for they knew not what it was. And Moses said unto them, This is the bread which the Lord hath given you to eat."

"It was like coriander seed, white," the Bible explains, *"and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey."*

As I watched the heat waves rising from the stones, I was sure there couldn't have been a better place for such a miracle than that forlorn strip of land.

We drove across it and in a short time came to the Valley of Writings. Every block of granite on the right side of the road was covered with inscriptions. Some of them have been translated, and are the names of early Christian pilgrims who long ago had shared my wish to retrace the journey of the Israelites to Mount Sinai. They scratched their names on the hard surface, and scratched a cross as well, and went on. Other inscriptions have never been deciphered, and some scholars believe that a few of them may have been made by the Israelites themselves. No one knows. They stand enigmatically in the silent, deserted land, their message lost in the centuries, a reminder of the eternal longing in men to change the world around them and leave a record of their lives.

TOWARD evening far in the distance I noticed a series of naked, rocky peaks standing out, sharp and distinct against the cloudless horizon. The setting sun glittered on the bare rocks, turning them into a high, jagged red-and-orange mass jutting up into the bright-blue sky. "Like a pillar of fire!" I thought with astonishment.

Leaning forward, I asked Ahmed, "Is that the mountain?"

He nodded.

Staring at it, I suddenly understood why it is that mountain peaks have so often been associated with God in ancient literature. The opening words of

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the 121st Psalm echoed in my mind: "*I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.*" Mount Sinai in the twilight, with the fire of the sun upon it, conveys an enormous impression of strength and permanence. It was old and solid and enduring when the Israelites first saw it some 3,300 years ago, and I'm sure that it has lost none of its majesty. The massive rock, soaring into the high, clear air 3,500 feet or more above the plain, where people have passed with their troubles for tens of centuries, pointed like a finger into eternity.

I settled back in the car feeling happy and triumphant. I had seen my goal at last! "*You can go there today and climb up the mountain, just as Moses did.*" In two days I'd brought my long-ago dream to life, traveling some 200 miles from Cairo and retracing a journey which it had taken the Israelites three months to complete.

The trail climbed slowly now. Suddenly we turned into a valley, and there was Mount Sinai completely revealed in front of us, and at its base was the Monastery of St. Catherine—a collection of white-roofed buildings, some of them erected in 527 A.D. by the Roman Emperor Justinian. Today they are maintained by the Greek Orthodox Church.

The monastery stands on a small hill in the midst of a clump of giant cypress trees, surrounded by a huge fortified wall, 50 feet high. Nearby, paradoxically, is a modern parking lot. A long-robed Bedouin came toward us and shouted unceremoniously to a monk on top of the wall, who let down a basket into which Ahmed placed a letter, written by the Archbishop of Sinai in Cairo, introducing us. Shortly afterward a gate about 3 feet wide opened in the wall.

"The gate's been there only about 100 years," Ahmed told us. "Before that, visitors were pulled up in a basket; that was the only way to get inside."

I looked at the grim fortress wall; it didn't exactly suggest that I'd find any milk and honey behind it, as I'd been hoping I would after the rugged trip. However, I took comfort from the fact that at least *my* journey through the wilderness had ended; the Israelites had had to travel for 40 years more before reaching the Promised Land, inching their way up the other side of the peninsula, twisting and turning back, wandering first one way and then another along a trail which modern travelers can't follow because there are no roads. And I'd sleep in a building tonight, protected from the cold which comes quickly here when the sun goes down. They had had only their tents. In the quiet, growing darkness I fancied I could almost see them, spread out around the base of the brooding mountain.

Dead-tired, I walked forward slowly and went through the narrow, forbidding gate, grateful that I didn't have to be hauled up in a basket. Later on, I realized that the hot trip through the desert was necessary for understanding the Biblical story and appreciating the courage of Moses. After all, what's the point of *easy* magic?

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Since I'd never been in a monastery before, I wasn't prepared for some of the surprises that lay ahead.

I DIDN'T see much of my new home that night, for we went to bed immediately after eating, sleeping in tiny cells like those the monks use. I gazed drowsily around the bare, narrow room, wondering how many people had slept here since it was built so long ago. The deep silence of the place made it seem almost alive, as if it were waiting for something. I thought of the mountain outside in the starlit quietness, and of the great events which had happened there—events which, reaching over so many centuries, touched my life even today.

I awoke with a start. It was still dark, but outside church bells broke through the stillness. Sleepily, I groped for my watch; it was 4 A. M. So this was life in a monastery! I tried to go back to sleep.

About half an hour later another noise brought me to my feet. I was beginning to understand that, under its stern exterior, this was a fairly lively establishment, with a night life all its own. The noise came again. It sounded as if someone were knocking on wood.

Peering out my door, I saw a monk scurrying along in a short, black stove-pipe hat. He stopped dead when he noticed me, and I felt as if I'd been caught making off with one of the rare manuscripts that the monastery houses. But then he smiled and said, "Not you," and I stumbled back to bed, not knowing what was happening but grateful that I wasn't included.

Later on, at breakfast, I learned that someone *had* been knocking on wood—an old Mount Sinai custom that goes back to Justinian's time and is used to call the monks to pray. In fact, they still knock on the original 6th-century plank. After all, waste not, want not.

With that 4 A. M. introduction to monastic life, I braced myself for a grim two-day visit. I couldn't have been more mistaken. Those monks, living behind a fortified wall in the middle of a forlorn wilderness, have a friendly, happy time of it, and before I left I realized that this was the biggest paradox of all in this ancient, unusual land—a bit of magic I wasn't prepared for.

My first surprise came after breakfast when, flanked by Bill and Andy and led by a round-faced, smiling monk called Brother Theodore, I followed a narrow, winding street and discovered that a tiny village existed behind that forbidding wall. We hadn't gone far before I smelled fresh bread, and, sure enough, there was a bakeshop, where another monk had just brought some round, flat loaves out of the oven.

Brother Theodore took a basketful of them, and we all climbed to the top of the wall. There, 50 feet above the desert, I looked down and saw a group of Bedouins waiting patiently. Brother Theodore lowered the basket, the Bedouins lifted out the free bread—two loaves to a customer—and then disappeared into

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the landscape. Every morning around 9 o'clock the monks feed these nomads, providing manna, if not from heaven, at least from the top of the wall, for any wanderers who appear.

Down in the monastery village again, we passed two wells that supply the water, a mill for grinding corn, a stable, a chapel, and even a mosque. Moslems venerate the Old Testament, too, and believe that Mohammed, who was born in 570 A.D., is the last in a line of prophets which includes Jesus, Moses, and Abraham.

BY THIS time I was prepared for anything except what I saw next—an artist wearing a paint-encrusted smock. Except for his stovepipe hat and the black robes that peeped out below the smock, he might have stepped out of a Paris garret for a drink at a sidewalk café. His name was Alexis, and his job was touching up icons and other religious pictures. In between such tasks, he confessed, he sometimes knocked off a portrait or two. Life here, it appeared, was more diversified than I'd thought.

Next, Brother Theodore showed us the Church of the Transfiguration, by a beautiful Byzantine building that was begun in 342 A.D. The walls were covered with Alexis' icons in gilt frames and with pictures of saints and martyrs. On either side of the altar a flight of steps led down to the Chapel of the Burning Bush. Before entering it, Brother Theodore asked us to take off our shoes, as the Lord had told Moses to do.

Here the drama of the Exodus began, when God spoke to Moses from the bush and persuaded him to return to Egypt and lead the children of Israel through the wilderness I'd crossed. The roots of the bush are inside the chapel, and the thick stems, gnarled and twisted and looking incredibly old, climb through a hole in the wall into the sunshine outside, where, carefully protected by the monks, they grow over a lattice frame. The leaves are small, vividly green, and shiny.

Brother Theodore pointed out that the plant looks like a blackberry bush, but he didn't know what it actually was. Later, I asked several others. Nobody gave it a name. It never blooms nor produces any fruit. Brother Theodore said that it is the only one of its kind in the whole peninsula—an enigma like so many things in this fantastic country. Staring at the ancient, growing roots, I thought that they provided one more symbolic link to the past, a bridge into the age-old drama of magical deliverance from bondage that had fascinated me as a child.

THE following morning Brother Theodore led us up Mount Sinai to the spot where Moses received the Commandments. For almost two hours we climbed, part of the way struggling up a series of 3,000 huge, uneven steps made of enormous slabs of granite, past the shady grotto where Moses tended the flocks of Jethro, his father-in-law, before the Lord sent him back to Egypt.

At last we arrived at the top. The view is awe-inspiring. In the distance I could

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see the Red Sea shimmering in the sunlight. Everything else was a chaos of bare, desolate mountain peaks thrusting up into the brilliant blue of the sky.

"The roof of the world," Bill murmured.

I nodded, feeling a surge of exultation, as if we'd conquered the wilderness. We stood above it at last, completely free of the desolation, with only the sky over us.

Here, on top of the world, I saw two buildings of huge granite stones—a church and a mosque. In the rock which serves as the foundation of the mosque is a small cave with a flight of steps leading down into it. This is where Moses rested during his long stay on the mountain. Nearby is a low cavern. There, Biblical scholars believe, is the spot where the Lord *"gave unto Moses, when He had made an end of communing with him upon Mount Sinai, two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God."*

Silently (it isn't a place where you feel inclined to chatter) I moved forward to touch the rock. I felt the warm, rough surface that had been there, as secure and unchanging as truth, for so many centuries. Wasn't this the magic I'd wondered about as a kid? I remembered now that at every point of the ancient story, from the moment when the Lord appeared in the burning bush, through the trials and terrors of the court of Pharaoh and the bitter anguish of the wilderness, whenever spiritual guidance and help were needed, the conversations in the Bible always read *"as a man speaketh unto his friend."* I had actually seen the places where these dialogues occurred.

I looked out over the raw, timeless world of stone and sky, feeling elated and a little ashamed. The answer was so simple. I'd read it so many times.

And then I remembered something that Miss Evans had said one Sunday morning far away in Pennsylvania! "The big things—the great, big ones—are always simple when you understand what they really mean."

Like all good magic, I thought.

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