

# St Moses the Black

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Among the picturesque figures of the Fathers of the Desert this Moses stands out like a silhouette against the white glare of the desert of Scete. In his youth he was a slave in the household of an official of the Egyptian government but was dismissed because of the flagrant immorality of his life, but more particularly because he was an inveterate thief and this of course would be harder on his master's purse and property than any spare-time debauchery.

It is extraordinary that Moses escaped with his life and all his limbs intact, since in those days justice for a slave was summary and brutal. Perhaps even in his unregenerate years he possessed some engaging quality which softened his master's heart and so he was allowed to escape punishment. He was an Ethiopian, black as the tents of Cedar and enormous as Og the king of Basan and he gathered around him a company of thieves, wastrels and villains and led them in so many sorties of robbery and violence that the whole district was terrorised. One night the success of his plans was foiled at the last moment by a sheepdog who was not on Moses' side and barked the alarm that brought armed men running to defend their property. Moses swore he would kill the shepherd even though he had to swim the Nile with a sword in his teeth. The shivering shepherd, forewarned, dug himself into the sand and had disappeared from view by the time the brigand chief arrived.

Unwilling to waste time excavating sand-dunes and crawling about rock-holes Moses made the best of a bad job by killing four rams, lashing them together and towing them behind him across the river. On the further bank he skinned the rams and quartered them; cooked and ate the best joints, sold the skins and then walked fifty miles to join his gang. He was indeed a man of parts and it is more than unfortunate that there are no details of his conversion. He just reappears later at the monastery of Petra in the desert of Scete.

It would be too easy to connect him with the incident of the old hermit set upon in his cell by a band of brigands, who finding they had overlooked a small bag ran after them calling 'My sons, you have left this behind'. Whereat the brigands were overcome with shame and said, 'This indeed is a holy man'. It is tempting to make Moses the leader

of these men and date his conversion from this time, but there is no evidence that such a thing ever happened to him. It may well be though that he had fled from the law and hidden among the solitaries and been converted by their example.

One day he himself was set upon in his cell by four robbers, four foolish fellows who only woke up later on to wonder what had hit them. Moses overpowered them, strung them together as he had tied the rams, flung them over his massive shoulders and made his way to the church. Here he dumped his burden on the floor saying to the gaping monks, 'I am not allowed to hurt anybody, so what do you want me to do with these?' The brigands had not been exactly cushioned in comfort on their journey to the church but since they still possessed life and limb, according to the tenets of the fourth century they were, I suppose, unharmed. It is said that they were converted and themselves became monks and considering the spiritual renaissance of the redoubtable Moses, it may be true in their case even though it sounds like pious embroidery.

Moses himself did not become perfect in a day and on one occasion being overcome by despair and feeling himself an eternal prisoner of his violent passions he went to St Isidore for counsel. The latter taking him to the top of his house at dawn pointed to the east and said gently, 'See, the light only gradually drives away the darkness. So it is with the soul'. And Moses went away consoled and strengthened to resume his programme of asceticism, hard manual work, serving the brethren in humble tasks, persevering prayer. God worked in him such a transformation that the Archbishop of Alexandria heard of his holiness and ordained him priest, saying afterwards with a rather blunderbuss lack of tact, 'Now Moses, the black man is made white'. The big negro was not offended. Looking down at his white vestment he smiled a little ruefully and said 'Only on the outside. God knows that I am yet dark within'.

He did not welcome the renown his virtue brought him and one day when a notable Egyptian arrived and asked to see Moses he said, 'What do you want with him? The man is a fool and a heretic'. The visitor was puzzled and enquired further telling other monks how he had been received and what he had heard of the famous Moses. The monks were indignant that anyone should speak so of the holy Ethiopian and asked, 'What did he look like, this uncharitable elder?' 'A tall old man in an old black robe' 'Why that was Moses himself.' And the notable went away much edified. It is not an anecdote which edifies the modern

mind as it smacks of artificiality but with the years Moses dropped this kind of thing and we see him cooking a vegetable stew for his visitors during the week of strict fasting before Easter.

When the 'clerics of the church' saw the wisp of smoke rising from Moses' cell they took umbrage saying, 'Well look at that! There's Moses breaking the rule and cooking food in his cell. Just let him come here and we'll tell him a thing or two'. But when the Sabbath came and Moses arrived, his holiness was so apparent, and probably his visitors' also, that he received no admonitory lecture but, 'O Abbot Moses, you have broken the commandment of men but have strongly bound the commandment of God'. Was it after this incident that Moses expounded one of the *Verba* that have come down to us: 'A man ought to be like a dead man with his companion for to die to one's friend is to cease to judge him in anything.'

At this time Scete and Nitria had developed into monastic strongholds governed by laws and penalties. A palm tree outside the church in Scete was decorated with three whips, one for thieves, one for vagrants and the other for delinquent monks and any of the latter who were caught out were summoned before a council of elders who passed judgment and decided on a suitable punishment.

One day Moses was called upon to join one of these councils and he came, his big shoulders bowed and reluctant, a basket of sand in his hand. 'What's this? What's this?' asked the assembled elders. 'My sins are running out behind me like this sand and I do not see them', said Moses, 'and you ask me to judge another'. Needless to say the delinquent monk in question was pardoned on the spot and the whip remained on the palm tree.

When Moses was seventy-five some Arabs raided his monastery and he urged his monks to run away and save their lives. He himself with seven others stayed behind. This time he had no thought of doing battle but remembering perhaps the man who had swum the Nile sword in teeth so long ago, he said, 'All that take the sword shall perish by the sword' and he and six of his companions were murdered by the raiders. Moses, the one-time gang-leader left seventy disciples of a very different calibre from the companions of his ferocious youth to mourn him and to pass on his wise and gentle words and to tell the story of his battle with himself and his final victory.