

# BIBLICAL ECONOMICS TODAY

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## LEADERSHIP AND DISCIPLESHIP

### Part 7: Wilderness Training for Victory

by Gary North

*And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and in deeds. And when he was full forty years old, it came into his heart to visit his brethren the children of Israel. And seeing one of them suffer wrong, he defended him, and avenged him that was oppressed, and smote the Egyptian: For he supposed his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them: but they understood not. And the next day he shewed himself unto them as they strove, and would have set them at one again, saying, Sirs, ye are brethren; why do ye wrong one to another? But he that did his neighbour wrong thrust him away, saying, Who made thee a ruler and a judge over us? Wilt thou kill me, as thou diddest the Egyptian yesterday? Then fled Moses at this saying, and was a stranger in the land of Madian, where he begat two sons. And when forty years were expired, there appeared to him in the wilderness of mount Sina an angel of the Lord in a flame of fire in a bush (Acts 7:22-30).*

Moses fled from Egypt because he feared the Pharaoh. News of Moses' execution of the Egyptian overseer had spread in just one day. This news had spread rapidly because of the loose tongues of his fellow Israelites. They were unwilling to submit to his rule. They preferred continued bondage to Egyptian overlords rather than submission to a highly placed Israelite. God honored their preference. They remained in slavery for another four decades.

Eventually, God heard their cries. He decided to deliver them from their afflictions (Ex. 2:24). Who was God's choice to serve as their deliverer? Moses, the man who had been driven out of their presence a generation earlier.

Where had Moses been all this time? Living inconspicuously as a free man in a foreign land, tending sheep. For forty years, he had been a nondescript shepherd, invisible to the Egyptian empire. He had dealt daily with some of the most stupid and vulnerable creatures on earth. He had learned how to move them from place to place, round up strays, and protect them from predators. This was an ideal job training program for his future role as Israel's deliverer.

Shepherders learn patience. Moses needed all the patience he could acquire. Forty years of herding sheep were necessary as an assignment preliminary to a much more important role: forty years of herding Israelites.

#### Marking Time

At the time of his execution of the Egyptian overseer,

Moses had spent four decades in the household of the Pharaoh. He could have enjoyed the trappings of illegitimate State power had he wanted to. He chose another path: "By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season" (Heb. 11:24-25).

He did not suffer their affliction side by side with them. He suffered through exile from the house of the Pharaoh. The price of his decision to intervene on the side of his brethren was forty years of shepherding in a strange land. By the time God called him to play the most important civic leadership role in the history of mankind, Moses was eighty years old: two-thirds through his lifetime. Six decades into his adulthood, Moses was still tending sheep.

Think about what might have gone through his mind at, say, age seventy-five. "What am I doing here? My talents are being wasted. I possess the wisdom of Egypt, although it's fading somewhat after all these years. I was willing to use this wisdom to intercede for my people, but they resented me and my elevated position. They preferred Egyptian bondage to rule by one of their own. So here I sit with all these sheep. Another few decades and I'll be bones in the wilderness. Who will remember me? Who will care that I was ever here? Not these sheep, certainly."

Perhaps he was content with his station in life. Maybe he worried from time to time about the condition of his brethren, but what could he do about it? Nothing. "Surely it's better to herd sheep in Midian than to serve as a representative of Egyptian tyranny. These sheep give me a decent living. That's better than what my relatives in Egypt have. I'm married; I have a son; my father-in-law is a man of wisdom. Things could be a lot worse. I don't need fame or fortune. I only need three square meals a day and a tent. I've got what I need."

Whichever it was – even if it was both – at age eighty everything changed. People would remember Moses after all. But there would be no more quiet evenings under the stars, sitting by the campfire with his wife, son, and bleating sheep. God made him a herdsman over bleating Israelites.

Moses had bided his time. He remained out of the line of fire. Whatever he learned during his years as a shepherd, he did not learn under the kind of daily pressure that he experienced from age eighty to age one hundred twenty. Biding his time in Midian, Moses had no inkling of what lay ahead. God did, of course. God had placed Moses in the wilderness and let him ponder whatever came into his mind. He gave him a kind of rest and recreation period before the

forty-year war began. Moses was never again to experience anything like it.

### When Your Draft Notice Comes

Moses was drafted into that war. He did not volunteer. In fact, he gave an excellent imitation of a young man standing in front of his local draft board. He kept offering excuses for not serving.

And Moses said unto God, Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt? (Ex. 3:11)

And Moses answered and said, But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice: for they will say, The LORD hath not appeared unto thee (Ex. 4:1).

And Moses said unto the LORD, O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant: but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue (Ex. 4:10).

God, like most draft board members, was not impressed with excuses. Eventually, God overcame every objection. At that point, Moses decided to face at least some of the music. He would at least take a hesitating first step. "And Moses went and returned to Jethro his father in law, and said unto him, Let me go, I pray thee, and return unto my brethren which are in Egypt, and see whether they be yet alive. And Jethro said to Moses, Go in peace" (Ex. 4:18). When he left Egypt, he had not uttered a promise, "I shall return." Egypt was not the Philippines, and Moses was not General MacArthur. He was not ready to call on his brethren to expend blood, sweat, and tears, although this is exactly what they would experience over the next four decades, and always of their own making - not much blood (Num. 14:44-45), but a lot of sweat and tears. (Churchill's famous phrase included "toil," but the Israelites generally did escape that burden.)

Hesitatingly, Moses answered the call to duty. He gathered together his belongings, took his wife and son, and departed for Egypt. He was going to challenge the leader of the most powerful empire on earth. Whatever knowledge Moses had, whatever leadership abilities, this would have to suffice. There was no more time remaining to prepare for leadership. He had spend four decades in an Egyptian prep school followed by four decades in a Midianite boot camp. It was time to launch a frontal assault. General Moses marched off to war - a general without an army. That he had a Commander-in-Chief and marching orders was sufficient.

### No Turning Back

God sent Aaron to meet Moses in the wilderness (Ex. 4:27). Aaron did not hesitate to accept his assignment as Moses' mouthpiece (Ex. 4:14-16). "And Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the children of Israel: And Aaron spake all the words which the LORD had spoken unto Moses, and did the signs in the sight of the people" (Ex. 4:29-30).

The elders who represented the people also responded in faith. "And the people believed: and when they heard that the LORD had visited the children of Israel, and that he had looked upon their affliction, then they bowed their heads and worshipped" (Ex. 4:31). They had required little initial persuasion. But unlike Moses, they did not maintain this faith. Whenever pressures were brought to bear on them, they retreated from their earlier commitment: "And they met Moses and Aaron, who stood in the way, as they came forth from Pharaoh: And they said unto them, The LORD look upon you,

and judge; because ye have made our savour to be abhorred in the eyes of Pharaoh, and in the eyes of his servants, to put a sword in their hand to slay us" (Ex. 5:20-21). This was to become their familiar response over the next four decades: retreating under fire. They preferred always to turn back:

But the Egyptians pursued after them, all the horses and chariots of Pharaoh, and his horsemen, and his army, and overtook them encamping by the sea, beside Pi-hahiroth, before Baal-zephon. And when Pharaoh drew nigh, the children of Israel lifted up their eyes, and, behold, the Egyptians marched after them; and they were sore afraid: and the children of Israel cried out unto the LORD. And they said unto Moses, Because there were no graves in Egypt, hast thou taken us away to die in the wilderness? wherefore hast thou dealt thus with us, to carry us forth out of Egypt? Is not this the word that we did tell thee in Egypt, saying, Let us alone, that we may serve the Egyptians? For it had been better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness (Ex. 14:9-12).

And all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron: and the whole congregation said unto them, Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt! or would God we had died in this wilderness! And wherefore hath the LORD brought us unto this land, to fall by the sword, that our wives and our children should be a prey? were it not better for us to return into Egypt? And they said one to another, Let us make a captain, and let us return into Egypt (Num. 14:2-4).

The main difference between Moses and his brethren was in his steadfastness. He had not volunteered. He had resisted the whole idea of returning to Egypt. But eventually, he went. The Israelites did the opposite. As soon as they heard of their coming deliverance, they volunteered. They even bowed their heads and prayed. But when push came to shove, they ran. Only by God's grace did they run in the right direction. This became the recurring pattern of behavior for Israel throughout its history. Jesus warned the Pharisees:

But what think ye? A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to day in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went. And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not. Whether of them twain did the will of his father? They say unto him, The first (Matt. 21:28-31a).

Jesus made it clear: "No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62b). This is what leadership involves: what you begin, finish.

### One Campaign at a Time

Had God told Moses that the deliverance of Israel and their entry into Canaan would be interrupted by forty years of wandering in the wilderness, which Moses would be required to supervise, we can imagine Moses' response. It would not have been positive. But God did not lay out the entire scenario in advance. The war's forty-six-year strategy - from the exodus through the conquest - was God's business, not Moses'. God initially instructed Moses only to go before the Pharaoh and repeat God's demand that the Israelites be allowed to sacrifice to Him. That would constitute the first volley in God's war with Egypt. God did not tell Moses how

much beyond this first volley would be required. Moses was in charge of organizing, launching, and leading a series of campaigns, one at a time. He was not in charge of developing long-term strategy.

This principle of one step at a time is a good one. Begin a project. Finish it. Then use any excess revenues generated by the first project to begin another. The system should be as close to self-perpetuating as possible. Each project is part of a larger plan, but none permanently drains the others. If one project fails, this does not bankrupt all the others.

This strategy is linear and cumulative: step by step, line upon line (Isa. 28:13). The church should move forward analogously to the Netherlanders' centuries-long war against the sea: one dike at a time, windmills pumping constantly. Never voluntarily surrender an inch of conquered territory.

Given the psychological limitations of such a strategy, it takes a very special person to serve as a leader. Most people want a fast payoff. They are present-oriented. They do not think as a Pope does: in terms of centuries. In the Vatican, victory is determined by who remains standing when the shooting stops. Roman power, *romanità*, rests on one principle, writes ex-Jesuit Malachi Martin: "If you can outwait all, you can rule all." He explains: "Essential to it are a sense of timing reamed with patience, a ruthlessness that exceeds the hesitation of emotions, and an almost messianic conviction of ultimate success. Few are born with it." (Malachi Martin, *The Jesuits* [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987], p. 80.)

Victory is like great wealth: best accumulated one piece at a time. A victory that comes too easily or too rapidly is like great inherited wealth: easily squandered. It is better for victory to be a process rather than an event. Continuity is crucial to success, and continuity rests on repeatability and transferable skills. The principles that undergird an overnight victory are unclear; they cannot be taught.

### Acceptance of Delayed Victory

The Israelites of the exodus generation never did achieve the promised victory. They did not inherit the Promised Land. Only Joshua and Caleb entered Canaan, not as representatives of the exodus generation but as representatives of the generation of the promise. The exodus generation did experience some military victories, but these were not sufficient to overcome God's curse on their original lack of faith (Num. 14).

Moses understood that the original exodus generation would not enter Canaan. He was the leader of an historically defeated generation. He himself was under this same negative sanction because of his disobedience at the rock (Num. 20:11-12). He had trusted in procedure - ritual - rather than God's command and promise. He had struck an earlier rock once, and water had come forth. This time, God told him not to strike it at all. Instead, he struck it twice: a double witness against him.

He understood the consequence of disobedience, and he accepted it. He did not resign from his position as national leader. God had not relieved him of command, so he remained on duty. He recognized that another commander would lead another generation into Canaan. To them would come the victory and the spoils of war. This did not reduce his responsibilities in the present. He was compelled to look to the future and interpret its military blessing as his own. It would be his victory, for it was Israel's. What was promised to future Israelites was already the definitive possession of the present generation, just as God's definitive promise to Abraham transferred the ownership of Canaan to him, though not its legal title. What was delivered to Abraham's seed four generations in the future (Gen. 15:16) was merely the

fulfillment of what had been already been delivered definitively to Abraham by God's promise through Abraham's obedient faith. "By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:8-10). So it should be in every generation: the vision of God's heavenly city at the end of time should motivate Christians to work toward comprehensive cultural and judicial victory in history (Isa. 65:17-25). This vision is the basis of world conquest. These are our marching orders.

### Training Up the Next Generation

The covenantal principle of continuity requires that each generation invest time and capital in training up the next generation. This of necessity involves training in leadership. Hierarchy is inescapable; there must be leaders. If covenant-keepers refuse to instill the covenantal principles of leadership in the next generation, then others will lead: those who are (1) outside the ranks of the faithful; or (2) self-learners who rise up from within the camp; or (3) men who are recruited into the camp from the outside.

Covenantally faithful leadership is grounded in a vision of victory. The elders of the exodus generation were not trained in terms of such a vision. They responded to it when Aaron announced it, but they abandoned it when pressures came. They could not impart it to their children, since they never possessed it. Their children gained it from their experiences in the wilderness: the manna, the military victories, and the leadership of Moses. Their parents resisted all three.

The exodus generation had lost the skills of leadership. Decades of slavery had eroded all traces of victory-driven leadership. They turned against Moses and Aaron, siding with their Egyptian masters. They did this repeatedly, long after the military representatives of those masters had perished in the Red Sea. Moses represented victory. They could not stomach victory. They could not stomach the manna, which represented God's preserving grace in their lives - God's earnest (down payment) on the coming victory in Canaan. "And the mixt multitude that was among them fell a lusting: and the children of Israel also wept again, and said, Who shall give us flesh to eat? We remember the fish, which we did eat in Egypt freely; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlick: But now our soul is dried away: there is nothing at all, beside this manna, before our eyes" (Num. 11:4-6).

### Wilderness Eschatologies

Christianity's victory in Christ is assured in history because of Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension: events that took place in history. God gave His Son definitive victory. "And when they saw him, they worshipped him: but some doubted. And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth" (Matt. 28:17-18). Jesus' announced this definitive transfer of power to Himself in order to allay those doubts. People with doubts regarding this transfer of power will always be hampered in their participation in history's Great Commission: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen" (Matt. 28:19-20).

Today, almost all people who call themselves Christians still retain grave doubts regarding the historical outcome of

the Great Commission. They in principle deny the relationship between Christ's definitive historical accession to power in heaven and on earth and the gospel's guaranteed progressive accession to power in history. They argue that the Great Commission cannot be completed in history: all nations will not be baptized. Premillennialists deny the progressive aspect of the fulfillment of the Great Commission: Jesus must return physically and discontinuously to set up His earthly rule. In contrast, amillennialists affirm historical continuity, but they deny that the gospel will ever become the basis for Christians' accession to power in history. But with respect to the Great Commission, both views offer a continuity of defeat. The Promised Land is supposedly beyond the church's inheritance in history. Either the processes of history must someday be transcended in order to complete the Great Commission (premillennialism) or else the processes of history successfully resist the Great Commission (amillennialism). With respect to the fulfillment of the Great Commission, both of these outlooks are wilderness visions.

Premillennialism and amillennialism are fraternal twins. They are eschatologies of guaranteed historical defeat. They have undermined Christians' faith in the Bible's mandated program for training for earthly leadership. Those Christians who have no faith in the earthly future of the institutional church as the mountain of Zion to which the world will come to worship, and from which God's law will be exported (Mic. 4:1-5), are incapable of systematically imparting to their children the mindset that is required for the exercise of cultural leadership. Only through their own obvious inconsistencies – political activism, for example – do pessimillennial leaders impart the skills of leadership to the next generation. This is why political activism is rejected by those who defend full-orbed traditional premillennial dispensationalism (e.g., Dave Hunt) and full-orbed traditional Calvinist amillennialism (e.g., Herman Hanko). They equate such involvement with the Social Gospel. Their motto is: "Heal souls, not cultures!"

Premillennialism and amillennialism present the Promised Land as post-church era: beyond the daily affairs of this dispensation. Those who defend such views do not want to cross over the Jordan and fight the giants in the land (Num. 14). God's curse is on the church because of this. He will keep us wandering in the wilderness until a generation arises that is willing to march forward.

### Savoring and Digesting Small Victories

The problem with a child is that he cannot wait for his reward. He would eat dessert first and leave no room for the main course. Like the person who refuses to diet because the payoff is so distant and the donut is so close, so is the modern evangelical Christian. Evangelicals are afflicted with short time perspectives. Some are premillennialists: "Let's eat all the ice cream we want; God will rapture us before it hits our hips." Some are amillennialists: "Let's eat all the ice cream we want; we'll need extra fat to survive the famine which is so near at hand." Nobody wants to eat a well-balanced meal: salad first, then the main course, then dessert.

There are Christian activists – inconsistent premillennialists,

mainly – who want desperately to be elected to high political office. Sometimes I think they are motivated by the same quest for personal glory that motivates those who run for high school student body president: all form and no substance. (Having done so myself, and having won, I lost the illusion early.) They want to start their political careers no lower than the House of Representatives. No time for lower offices! Victory now!

But it will be lonely at the top, as they freely admit. Their wilderness eschatologies assure them that there is no hope of gaining a majority of votes before Jesus comes again, either to rapture His church or to bring final judgment. They are ready to enter the bedlam of Congress all by themselves. But what do they expect to accomplish as members? To be outvoted every time. Outvoted for Jesus! Life's daily personal defeats that they experience today in obscurity will then be translated into daily public defeats on some Congressional tally. Perhaps someday they can even be elected President and then be vetoed for Christ! Praise the Lord!

Then what is the point of running and winning on this basis? This is the wilderness strategy of the modern evangelical activist: to send few spies into the foreboding land who will then come back and tell us that we just cannot defeat all those giants.

The wilderness experience was intended by God to train Israelites to defeat the Canaanites by first defeating Moabites and Midianites on a regular basis. So it is with us. We should be content to run for local office, start local charitable ministries, launch local day care centers, and do whatever else we can to gain experience in defeating our enemies and holding conquered territory (unlike Moses' wilderness experience). Until some generation abandons both of the wilderness eschatologies, Christians must remain in the wilderness.

Small victories are like a dinner salad. They do not constitute the main course. After small victories come larger victories: the main course. Dessert comes late in the meal: the Presidency and other high offices that symbolize cultural conquest. Without the undergirding reality of comprehensive cultural conquest, winning high political prizes is irrelevant except to fill large egos with irrelevant political recognition. It is time for Christian activists to learn to finish their salad, their roast beef, and their broccoli. "Clean your plates, and then you'll get ice cream and cake."

### Conclusion

We need to be patient, even as Moses was patient. We need to accept obscurity for a season. We need to work long and hard, absorb small defeats, achieve small victories, bide our time, and train up the next generation. We need small victories to persuade us that our faith in Christianity's long-term comprehensive victory is correct. We need a vision of long-term victory. What we do not need is a series of visible political defeats for which our representatives have enthusiastically volunteered. Visible defeats will only confirm Christians' faith in their wilderness eschatologies. Wilderness training is mandatory; wilderness eschatologies are not.

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