

AARON

Egypt-born Hebrew priest

According to biblical tradition, Aaron, with his brother Moses, led the Hebrews out of Egypt. During the forty years they wandered in the desert, Aaron served as high priest, teacher, and peacekeeper.

BORN: c. 1395 B.C.E.; Egypt

DIED: c. 1272 B.C.E.; Mount Hor, Edom (now in Jordan)

ALSO KNOWN AS: Aharon

AREA OF ACHIEVEMENT: Religion

EARLY LIFE

Aaron (A-ruhn) remains a figure surrounded by mystery and seeming contradiction. Even his name is questioned. Is it of Egyptian origin? Does it derive from the Hebrew word for the ark of the covenant (*arōn*) located in the Holy of Holies, that inner sanctum closed to all but the high priest? Or is it the phrase his mother, Jochebed, uttered at his birth as she lamented bearing a son: “A, harōn” (woe, alas)? (Only a few months before Aaron’s birth, Pharaoh had issued his decree condemning to death all male children born to the Hebrews in Egypt.)

His parents seem to have made no effort to hide Aaron, as they would three years later with his brother, Moses, when he was born. Indeed, tradition maintains that Aaron’s father, Amram, was one of Pharaoh’s councillors and that the boy himself grew up in the palace before filling his father’s post. Aaron was also emerging as a leader of his enslaved people, urging them to remain faithful to the God of Abraham and to hope for delivery from bondage. His marriage to Elisheba, daughter of Amminadab, allied Aaron with a distinguished family from the powerful tribe of Judah—his brother-in-law, Nahshon, was that tribe’s leader—and so enhanced his already prominent position.

Consequently, when God instructed Moses to return from his self-imposed exile in Midian and lead the Jews out of Egypt, Moses urged that Aaron be assigned this task instead. Here, after all, was someone familiar with the Egyptian court and trusted by his own people, whereas Moses, having lived in another country for forty years, was a stranger. Moreover, Moses regarded his brother as the better orator. Although Moses finally accepted the primary responsibility, Aaron, too, would play a large role in the Exodus.

LIFE’S WORK

Just as God appeared to Moses and told him to return to Egypt, so he informed Aaron of his brother’s imminent

return and instructed him to meet Moses at the border of Midian. Together they appeared before the leaders of the Hebrews, Aaron speaking and performing signs to establish the legitimacy of their mission. Together they also appeared before Pharaoh to demand the release of the Jews. Once again, Aaron offered a sign of their divine ministry: He threw his rod onto the floor of the palace, and the stick turned into a snake. Pharaoh’s magicians duplicated this feat, but Aaron bested them when his rod devoured theirs. Pharaoh remained unmoved, though, and the ten plagues began with Aaron’s stretching his hand over the waters of Egypt, turning them to blood. Aaron would bring on the next two plagues—frogs and lice—as well, and with Moses he created the sixth, boils.

After the Exodus, the eighty-three-year-old Aaron seems to have become one of the triumvirate of leaders, sharing power with Moses and Hur. When the Amalekites attacked the Hebrews at Rephidim, Aaron stood on one side of Moses, with Hur on the other, to hold up Moses’s hands and so ensure the victory for Joshua and his troops. When Moses ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, Aaron and Hur remained behind to govern.

The strangest episode of Aaron’s life occurred about this time. Moses’s lengthy absence—he would be gone forty days—persuaded the Hebrews that their leader was dead, so they demanded an idol to replace him. Hur refused to comply and was killed, as were the elders opposing this wish. Alone and unsupported, Aaron instructed the people to bring him all of their gold. Was he hoping that they would be unwilling to part with their treasure? If so, he was disappointed, for they readily complied. According to the account in certain rabbinical commentaries, he cast the gold into a furnace, apparently intending only to melt it, yet a golden calf emerged, seemingly of itself. The Hebrews responded by acclaiming the calf as the god that had led them out of Egypt. Perhaps to delay any worship of this idol, Aaron declared that the next day would be a festival for the graven image; by the time Moses returned, though, the celebration had already begun.

According to some accounts, only the intervention of Moses saved Aaron’s life from divine retribution. Shortly afterward, however, Aaron was designated high priest. Was he being rewarded for his efforts to delay the idolatrous worship? Might the golden calf, in fact, have

represented a deity worshiped by the Hebrews in Egypt? Was Aaron's role in its creation the cause of his elevation to the priesthood? In later Jewish worship, the temple altar had two horns, and after the division of Israel into two kingdoms, Jeroboam erected golden calves at Bethel and Dan to compete with the Temple in Jerusalem. The choice of this animal suggests lingering loyalty to a bull as deity, or at least as representative of the deity.

The consecration of Aaron to the priesthood, whatever its cause, divorced religious leadership from the secular and placed priests under the power of the latter. God was to appear only to Moses in the desert, never to the high priest, and it was Moses who dictated the laws and rituals that Aaron and his sons were to follow. This subordination would become even more pronounced as political power passed from the tribe of Levi (to which both Aaron and Moses belonged) to Benjamin and then Judah after the conquest of Canaan and the establishment of the monarchy. That elevation to the post of high priest removed Aaron from political leadership did not escape his notice; with Miriam, his older sister, Aaron protested against Moses's emergence as sole leader. For her criticism, Miriam was afflicted with leprosy for seven days. Aaron escaped with a divine rebuke.

A more serious challenge came from Korah, a kinsman of Moses and Aaron. Organizing many of the tribal leaders, he attacked the brothers for assuming undue power, but this rebellion was quickly suppressed by an earthquake that destroyed the ringleaders and a plague that killed more than fourteen thousand others. The toll would have been higher had Aaron not taken his censer and arrested the plague by standing between the living and the dead.

To reinforce the message that Aaron was the divine choice for the priesthood, Moses instructed each tribal elder to bring his staff to the tabernacle (the tent of worship), and Aaron placed his own among them. The next morning they found that Aaron's staff had flowered and had produced almonds. The others removed their rods, while Aaron's remained in the tent as a warning against further rebellions.

Despite such challenges, it is clear that Aaron was popular—more popular, in fact, than the sometimes stern



Aaron. (Library of Congress)

and irascible Moses. Aaron must have been an impressive figure in the camp—his flowing white beard, his priestly garments, and the breastplate of twelve precious stones commanding reverence. He was not only respected but also loved. The famous Jewish rabbi Hillel urged his students to imitate Aaron, “loving peace and pursuing peace, loving one's fellow men and bringing them nigh to the Torah.”

Freed from the role of judge and lawgiver, Aaron could devote himself to teaching and making peace. Legend says that he would go from tent to tent to instruct those unfamiliar with the law. In a similar way, when he heard that two people had quarreled, he would go to one and say, “The person you argued with deeply regrets his hasty words and actions and seeks your forgiveness.” Then he would go to the other party and say the same thing, thereby effecting a reconciliation. He was famous