

San Antonio People of Faith Historical Museum

The Other Moses

Egypt, circa 345 A.D. The Ethiopian slave called Moses stood staunchly in front of his master, a highly placed government official who most likely rued the day he had purchased Moses as a household servant. The young man cut an imposing figure, a black giant with a fierce, foreboding glare that did not waver. He'd been nothing but trouble, stealing from the house and its occupants and, it was rumored, had even committed a murder during one of his tirades. Now, despite facing punishment and possibly death from his owner for these charges, Moses showed no fear or remorse. He'd never heard of his namesake, the Moses of the Old Testament, the holy man of God--in fact had never heard of God. He knew only that rage boiled within him and that violence was his savior. History does not record his reaction when, rather than punishment, his master chose to banish Moses forever from his household. Thus abandoned, it didn't take Moses long to not only join a roving gang of bandits in the Nile Valley but to also become its leader. To the families that he and his men robbed and brutalized, it would have been inconceivable that the steel-hearted Moses would one day be revered as a Desert Father and saint.

Legends abound regarding the journey of Moses the Abyssinian (aka Moses the Robber and Moses the Strong) to Saint Moses the Black. One story recorded most frequently by early historians such as Palladius of Galatia, who wrote a biography of Moses the Black in 420 A.D., indicate that perhaps in an attempt to elude authorities after a particularly heinous crime, Moses took shelter with a colony of monks in Scetes (the desert now known as Wadi El Natrun) near Alexandria, Egypt. Between the 4th and 7th centuries, this desolate area was one of the most sacred on earth and home to monastic communities as well as hermit monks. Although Moses knew nothing of God or Jesus Christ, in Sozomen's *Ecclesiastical History* written about 70 years after Moses' death, it is noted of his conversion: "So sudden a conversion from vice to virtue was never before witnessed, nor such rapid attainments in monastical philosophy."

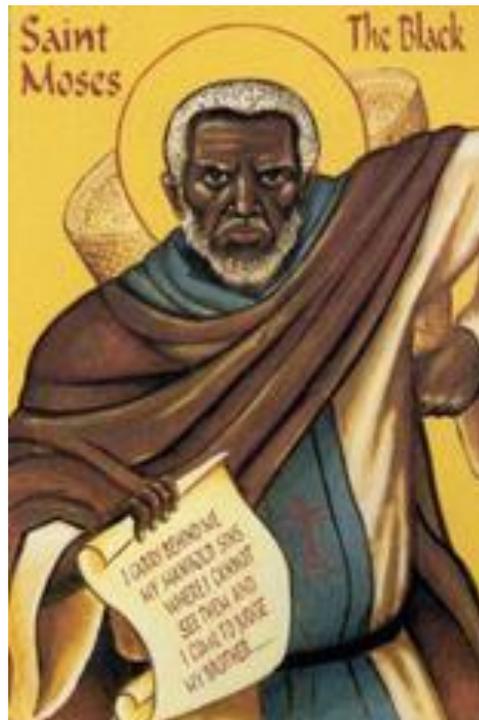
Moses designated himself protector of the monks, which he carried out with his usual ferocity and strength. But his biggest obstacle to assimilating into the monastic community was his own sense of unworthiness due to his past life. He sensed himself constantly besieged by demons condemning him of sin. He practiced self-discipline to the extreme, including for one period refusing to leave his cell for six years and fasting to the point of endangering his life; he became so ill he needed a year to recover his strength. He then sought counseling from the monks in Scetes. One, Isidore, suggested that Moses "stop struggling with the demons," but Moses replied, "I will never cease until the appearance of the demons ceases." Eventually through prayer and self-discipline, he did overcome the shadow of his past sins and master his soul. He so impressed the Archbishop of Alexandria that he ordained Moses a priest.

Moses became a highly respected counselor, teacher and defender of the desert priests and monks. By 407 A.D. he had become Abba, spiritual leader, to a colony of hermits in the desert. Then one day word reached Moses of an imminent attack upon him and his followers by a

group of renegade Berbers. Moses ordered all except seven of the monks to retreat, opting to remain and citing the fact that he, as a former robber, deserved a violent death and that “all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” He and seven Brothers took no weapons themselves but rather met the invaders with the open arms of hospitality. All eight were killed. Historian Hermias Sozomen summed up Moses’ legacy following his martyrdom as, “Hence God rendered him an object of dread to the demons and he was ordained presbyter over the monks at Scetis. After a life spent in this manner, he died at the age of seventy-five, leaving behind him numerous eminent disciples.”

St. Moses the Black is venerated as the patron saint of non-violence by Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Coptic churches, as well as in some Anglican and Lutheran churches. His feast day is celebrated on August 28. Many of the ancient monasteries that existed in the desert of Scetes are still in use today. In the United States, the Catholic Church of St. Moses the Black serves a vibrant, largely African-American congregation in the heart of Detroit. Sandia, Texas, is home to St. Mary and St. Moses Abbey, a Coptic Orthodox church.

The San Antonio People of Faith Historical Museum is always interested in stories of the saints and martyrs we celebrate. Come visit at 1201 Donaldson or call 210-733-7152 for further information.



Traditional icon of Saint Moses the Black, 330 A.D. - 405 A.D.