

What if Moses didn't actually die on Mt. Nebo?

What if a small band of Israelites, accompanied by Moses, secretly returned to the wilderness looking for a very different Promised Land?

And what if there is much more to the man and the story than we have been told?

Community of Promise is the untold story of Moses in the voice of Eliezer, his mystical second son. He offers it as a counter-balance to the "official" account, written by Gershom, Moses' concrete-thinking first son and stenographer of mystical experiences.

*Community of Promise is fiction
that behaves like non-fiction!*

While raising social, economic, political, theological/religious, and community issues, the story follows Moses and the fledgling community through their exploration of emerging identity and ultimate destination.

*The study guide included at the end of the book makes *Community of Promise* a welcome resource for book study groups.*

Moses' humanity discovered beneath the "Mantle of the Prophet" will touch you deeply.

Community of Promise

The Untold Story of Moses

A Novel

Wayne E. Gustafson

Entos Press



Entos Press
Ithaca, NY
www.entospress.com

This book is a work of fiction. The words and actions of all characters, including those named in the Biblical story, are products of the author's imagination.

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Cover design by Megan Pugh
BlinkDigitalGraphics.com

Manufactured in the United States of America

ISBN 978-0-9826338-0-9

For Jo Dunn
whose timely question to me about Moses’
prohibition from the Promised Land
inspired this story.
Happy 100th birthday, Jo!

Acknowledgments

If I were a highly organized person, I would have noted, in writing and at the time they gave their help, all of the people who have supported the writing, editing, and printing of *Community of Promise*.

But, I’m not that organized! Besides, I think there are perhaps hundreds who have contributed to this process.

Still, I want specifically to acknowledge a few people, while recognizing that however many names I include, I am sure to leave out other equally important people. To those not specifically named, I hope you know who you are and that you will accept my gratitude for your contributions to this book.

I want to thank my very first reader Alan Parrish who encouraged me to keep writing. Thanks also to Krishna Ramanujan who taught me the basic elements of self-editing. And thanks to Aileen Fitzke whose thoughtful critique provided the foundation for the first major rewrite of the story. Thanks to the book study group participants who were willing to try out the novel in that setting, and whose useful feedback about the novel and about their experience in the group laid the foundation for the Study Guide.

Finally, thanks to my wife, Phebe, and son, Luke who have put up with my frequent tendency to “disappear” while working on this project. Further thanks to Luke for creating the “interview with the author” video.

Wayne E. Gustafson
January 2010

Dramatis Personae

Characters from the Biblical Story of Moses

Moses – Son of Amram and Jocabed, and Brother of Aaron and Miriam.

Jethro the Midianite – Father-in-law of Moses

Zipporah – Daughter of Jethro the Midianite and Wife of Moses

Gershom – Elder Son of Moses and Zipporah

Eliezer – Younger Son of Moses and Zipporah

Milcah – Daughter of Zelophehad and Wife of Eliezer

Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, and Tirzah – Daughters of Zelophehad

Joshua – Successor to Moses as Leader of the Israelites

Principal Fictional Characters

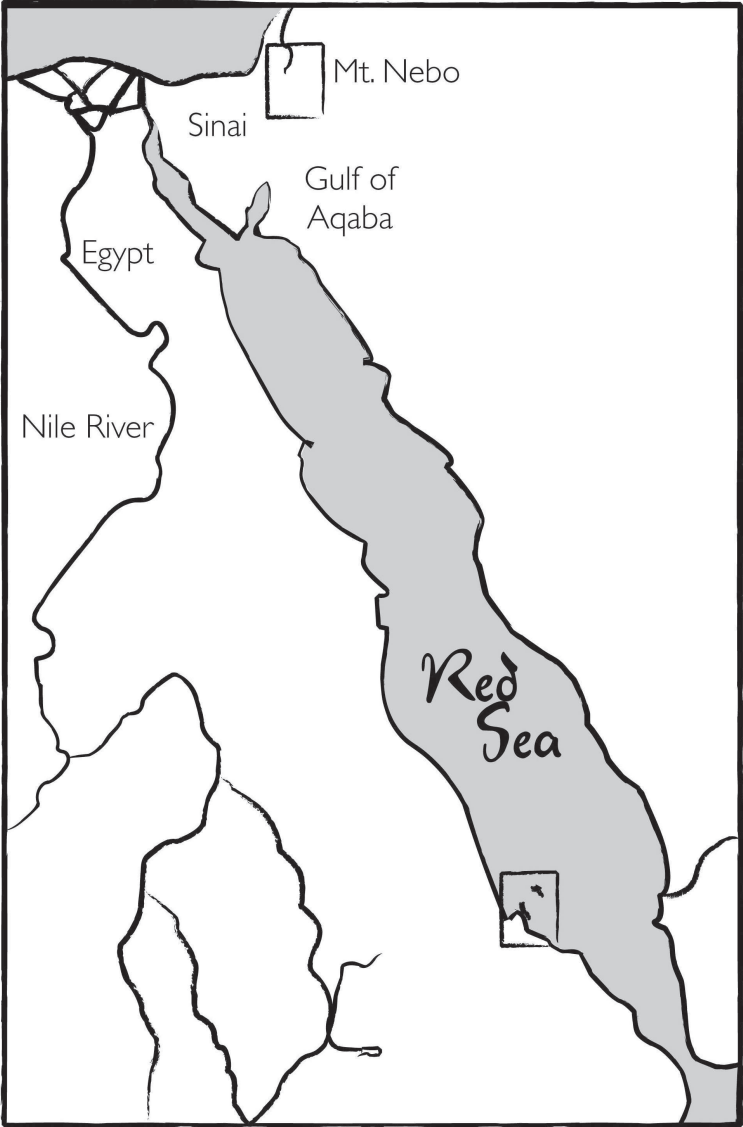
Jethro – Husband of Noah and Member of The Community of Promise

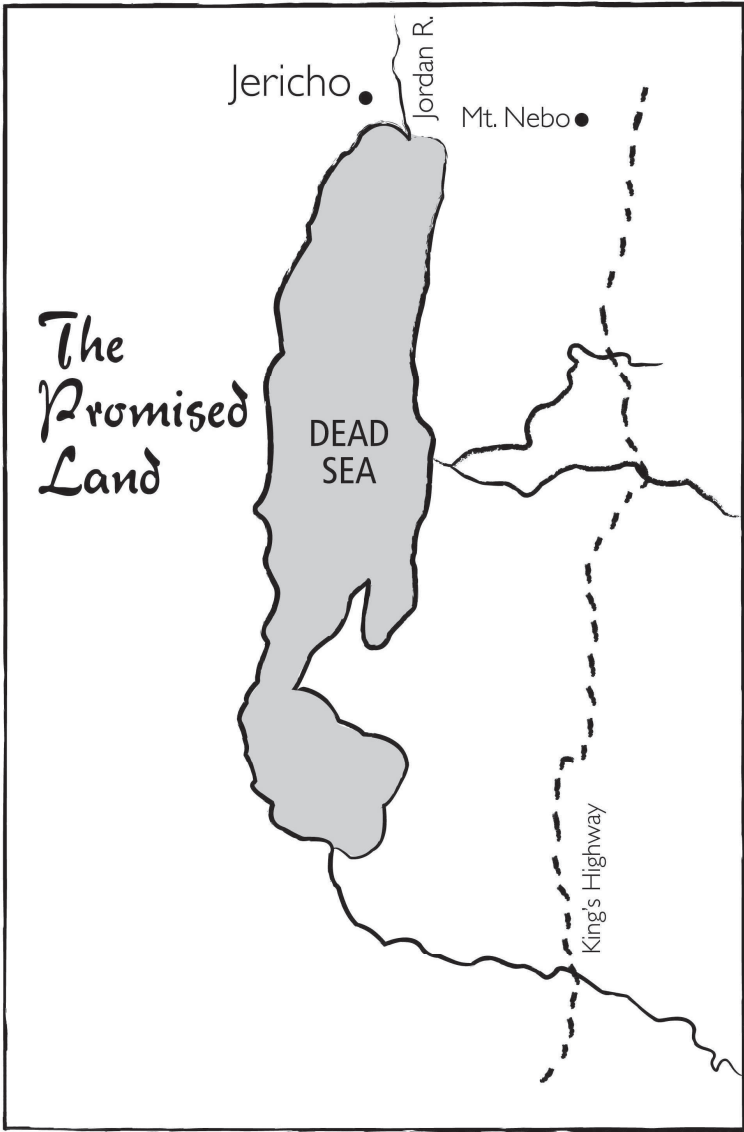
Sarah – Member of the Community Leadership Team

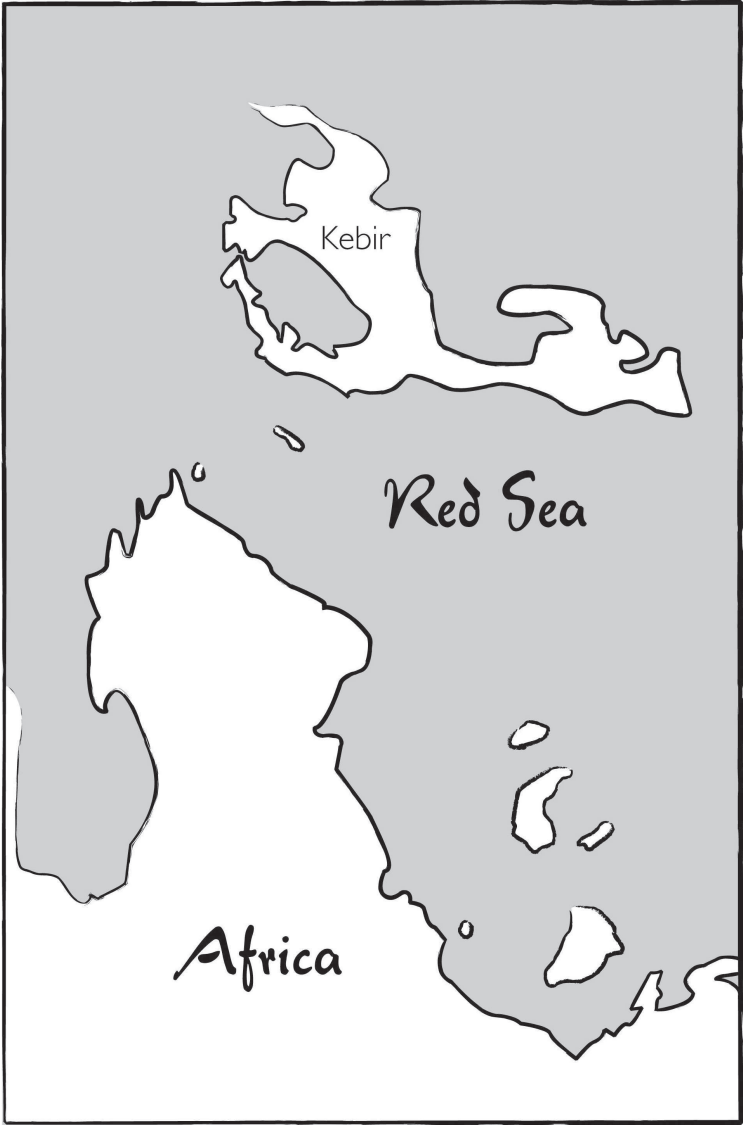
Asher – Husband of Sarah

Kenan – Member of the Community Leadership Team

Enosh – Soldier and Member of the Community Leadership Team







Eliezer

Every person who ever met my father, even once, could tell immediately that he was an extraordinary person. I have always known that. Truthfully, I half-expected floods and earthquakes to trouble the world when he departed, but now I simply celebrate his life and his full passage into Divine Presence. I'm grateful that nothing will ever again interfere with his intimate relationship with the Holy One. I miss him already, but I'm sure I will adjust eventually to this emptiness where he once lived so boldly.

His rough, but beautifully carved walking stick sits across my lap. Moses cradled it in his arms during his last days. No, it's not the one that he used to find water for the Israelites or helped him impress Pharaoh so many years ago. That one passed into the hands of his successor, Joshua. The handle of this staff still has some roughness remaining, not like that other one that had been smoothed by more than forty years of Moses' touch. This one lacks the scars from hitting rocks or wadi beds to expose springs of water or from more than a generation of wilderness wear. Still, from the moment he received this new one, he cherished it. For Moses, the first staff symbolized holy power. This one represents the fulfillment of our other Promised Land, the one that we call The Community of Promise. By means of this staff, I will forever honor his rich life and the brave journey he made to join this community.

My memories of my father could by themselves have satisfied my heart forever if only my elder brother hadn't authored and systematically institutionalized the story of Moses, Prophet of God. Many will read "The Book" but, few, if any, will ever know who actually wrote it. I must admit that Gershom has written quite a story, and if I know my brother, he will promote it so that everyone throughout the generations will be acquainted with Moses. They will

grow up reciting how Pharaoh's daughter rescued a little Hebrew boy named Moses from death or a lifetime of slavery, from drowning, and from the wrath of her own father, who would have killed him had he known the young boy's true identity. They will learn how she brought him up and surrounded him with the greatest luxury and power in the known world; how as a young man he had to flee to a far country; how he settled down to wife and family, only to meet the god of the mountain who sent him back to Egypt to save his people in dramatic fashion from their slavery; how he led their ungrateful and recalcitrant selves for many years through the wilderness, right up to the brink of the ultimate prize – only to die without himself setting even one foot in the Land of Promise. Yes, it's quite a story that Gershom has pieced together¹.

As context for his story, let me tell you a few things about my brother. Gershom prefers to live his life at the center of the action, though he usually works in the background. Hence, readers will be convinced that Moses wrote his own book. But I know the truth. I know that Gershom crafted the words to record the tale for posterity, and I know that he transformed a mere, if dramatic story into the foundational document of Israelite identity and law.

Of course, Gershom's version presents more than the story of Moses. It also introduces Jehovah² (as Gershom refers to the Holy One), a god of power beyond imagining who, incredibly, has chosen this reluctant band of ex-slaves to become the one great nation by which all others will know the true God – if only the people will obey the rather detailed and specific divine law (as articulated by my brother, of course).

Believe me, I know him pretty well. His ingenuity and single-mindedness (however unimaginative) can propel him to any length necessary to attain his goals. Years of watching him have convinced me that he will surely find the means for his "holy" words to be known throughout the ages.

I ask myself why Gershom's version of the story doesn't satisfy me – a fair question that I feel compelled to answer, if only to put my own curiosity to rest. Any observer would readily agree that Gershom has his own particular bias. Still, I want to give him his due. My brother alone, while still new to manhood, dared to sit with a divinely transformed Moses immediately after he had descended from his encounter with I AM on the mountain. All the others, paralyzed by their fear, wouldn't come near him. Bravery and intelligence by themselves, however, cannot ensure accuracy or guarantee a

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comprehensive account. I know from my own observations that Gershom's written words don't quite tell the whole story.

But that's only part of my problem. My brother may have known "The Prophet of God" but he never really got to know his father. Of course, larger-than-life-prophets don't easily avail themselves in intimate relationships, even (especially?) with their own families.

Now that Gershom has written his book, I see no other option but to tell another version of the story according to my understanding and perspective. I will have my own bias, to be sure, but the world needs access to the whole story of Moses. And I want posterity to know the part of the story that transcends even Moses.

I am motivated by an additional sacred obligation to record the exploits of a small group of brave (some would call them foolish) people who chose to join Moses on a quest for a radically different Promised Land, one that forever lives within and among them. Moses spent his life trying to teach us to know the Holy One. I pray that this writing will honor and carry forth his work.

Just for the record, none of the latter part of my account can be found in Gershom's writings. There are two reasons for this. The more intimate story of Moses, the man, could never fit with my brother's picture of reality, so he wouldn't have written it down even if he had known about it. As far as he believes, (and here is the second reason) Moses died on Mt Nebo.

My brother was wrong.

Toward the end of his life, Moses told his story to his younger son, Eliezer (that would be me). When I put it together with my own experiences and with those of the others who journeyed with us, you will understand how we found a very different, but equally authentic Promised Land.

Prologue

Such a subtle change in the density of the darkness would have escaped his notice were the man not sleeping. Perhaps all darkness contains a heaviness that slips into the void, featherweight by featherweight, just barely hinting at the remote possibility of a new day. That infinitely minute photonic alteration, however, carried sufficient force to nudge the sleeper's sense toward his awakening.

Vague stirrings of questions slowly surfaced, floating just out of the mind's reach—specks in an ocean of sentience. Like a bubble of air burped out by a deep-sea creature, the thought floated up through the murky depths toward the much-filtered light of the nascent morning.

Somewhere in his memory lived an image—no idea where he picked it up—of human consciousness: a raft, often adrift, but buoyed up by an infinitely deep sea. And at the bottom, birthing, carrying, and animating all creation resides The One – I AM – I WAS – I WILL BE – I AM BECOMING – YHWH – The Holy One. The man pictured no substantial image of the divine, although somehow he knew that nothing could be more real.

This particular ephemeral bubble had many times before begun the journey from the divine depths, wending its way through denizens and detritus, as it rose through the sea of unconsciousness. Each time, it would break through the surface into consciousness, this tiny bubble of an idea, merely adding its small pop to the oceanic hiss of awakening thoughts. No one knows why some thoughts attract notice while others merely blend into the hiss, lost to consciousness forever.

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But this time, front and center in his dawning awareness
shone the divine message:

“The Promised Land is within you and among you.”

Chapter 1

The feather of a thought tickled Moses awake. He yawned and shook his head as if to dislodge the tiny but intrusively authoritative idea like a sandy irritant to be smacked out of an old sleeping skin.

“Honored One, what is it? How may I serve you?”

“It’s nothing... Go back to sleep, Zipporah.”

The manservant chuckled softly, honored by Moses’ sleepy mistake. He, too, missed the constant grounding presence of Moses’ wife. “Was it that dream again, Honored One?”

Dream? No, he couldn’t quite call it a dream, though certainly it came from the same place. “I just woke up with a strange thought, that’s all. I’m fine. Go back to sleep. I’m going out for a walk.”

He reached for his staff and used its stout length to cantilever his body off the sleeping mat. He ran his free hand through his thick hair, donned his outer coat, and picked his way through the dark tent toward the heavy tent flap. Moses stepped out to face the inky and still star-filled sky that stretched above the pinking dawn. Absent the moon, he could sense but not quite see where foot met sand. The cool air brushed his cheek like a chaste kiss that whispered the promise of sunny heat and enough passion to turn sand and rock into desert fire.

Moses loved his old companion, the wilderness, adorned in any outfit. Her satiny morning garb with its signature tang of cool air belied his age and convinced him that he could live forever.

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The farther he walked away from the tents, the more the familiar immensity caressed him. Perhaps others found the wilderness to be harsh, but Moses had thrived here for the last forty years. And nothing calmed him or reminded him of the ever-present Holy One more than a walk in the glory of daybreak. As long as he attended to sacred dawning, he could avoid thinking about his band of Israelite nomads. Before long, they would come to life, certain to intrude into his early morning delight with their inevitable complaints, unrest, and chaos. All of the people he had rescued from Egypt were now dead, but their children, the ones who followed him now, were just as ornery and contentious as their parents had been.

Moses stretched to unkink the knots in his aging back. Holding the tribes together through their decades of wandering and journeying had almost broken it. He hoped, at least for the sake of his back, that the journey was finally at an end. He worried though about the good life they might lose when they stopped being simple wanderers. Nevertheless, they had finally arrived at the brink of their hope. Just across the river the Land of Promise stretched out before them.

Well, Divine One, he thought, I hope you know what you're doing.

The question brought back the stray (or was it?) thought that had so abruptly snatched him from sleep. "The Promised Land is within you and among you."

He wasn't sure what it meant, but somehow it echoed his concern about the soul-dangers that hid, waiting, across the river. Still, this new land was reported to be flowing with milk and honey. It was all the people could talk about.

Their impatience was understandable enough. The Promised Land shone out as their reward after all the hardship. They could hardly contain their joy. They were sure that Jehovah would never be stopped by the mere detail that Canaan was already occupied. They would just move in, kill them, kick them out, or enslave them. Nothing would stop them from taking possession of their god-given reward.

Well, Moses thought, at least that's what they expect. And then, like a shifting desert wind, the sadness flowed back into his breast.

He reached down to grab a handful of coarse sand and threw it in frustration. "What's wrong with me?" he said aloud. He wanted to be able to rejoice with them. He was trying, really he was. But the burdensome sadness filled his heart, and there, hidden in that neglected corner of his soul, was the pall of dread that turned his breath to sand and his bowels to water.

He had been so sure of himself, so filled with the Presence of the Holy One. Not even the might of Egypt had been able to prevail against that divine authority when Moses led the Children of Israel out of their generations of bondage. They still have their faith, he thought. I seem to be the one who's lost it. I hear them talking and planning all the time. "We're going to be a great nation. People from everywhere will flock to pay respect to Jehovah's chosen people. If Jehovah is for us, who can prevail against us?"

But something isn't right. Oh, why can't I just dream and celebrate with them. Maybe I've led them for so long that I can't avoid seeing danger behind every rock and bush. That's it. I'm just being a foolish old man who's lost his faith.

When did that happen? I think I had plenty of faith when we started, but all the worry and responsibility has gotten to me. Only the Holy One could have known how much responsibility I would end up taking on their behalf. Maybe I'm just tired.

Moses leaned on his staff and felt immediate comfort flow into his body through its smoothed grip. With a great sigh he turned to retrace his steps toward the tents and his ever-present responsibilities.

"May the Holy One bless you this day, father."

"Eliezer," a startled Moses replied. "I often come out here alone in the hour before dawn. But what brings you to life so early in the day?"

"Father, I had a dream..." And, as he spoke, the first direct ray of sunlight spilled over the horizon to envelop them in divine radiance.