

## **America's Prophet**

How the Story of Moses Shaped America

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Before beginning I must point out, the working drawing of "Liberty Enlightening the World" (the Statue of Liberty) on page 182 looks just like my daughter Katy.

Feiler's thesis is that much of what America is, much of what it values, and much of how it sees itself is based on Moses. The first question one might ask of *Christian America* is "Why not Jesus"? This is answered late in the book, on pages 296-7.

"The themes of Jesus' life -- love, charity, the alleviation of poverty, forgiveness, spreading the good news of salvation, developing the kingdom of God -- certainly echo throughout American history, but they would not make many lists of the defining characteristics of Americans. By contrast, the themes of Moses' life -- social mobility, reluctance to lead, standing up to authority, forming a persecuted people into a nation of laws, dreaming of reaching a promised land, coping with disappointment of falling short -- would be at home on any short list of America's defining traits."

In addition, Jesus "evolved, from his near absence during the Revolution to a more approachable, feminized savior in the nineteenth century, to a manly, aggressive redeemer in the early twentieth century, to a friendly superstar in the celebrity culture of the twenty-first century."

Jesus was divine. Moses was a family man. With whom do we Americans more readily identify?

The original Americans read the Bible as the story of the liberation from slavery. The English were the oppressors, the Pharaoh. The settlers fled oppression and came to America, and destroyed the natives (the pagan Canaanites) that they found there.

On the other hand, they brought their own slaves, and enshrined the institution into the Constitution. Does the Bible really reject monarchy? Of King George? Of David? Of Jesus? Is the Exodus a model for revolution such as the American Revolution? It depends on how you read it. To Americans, the instrument of Moses is his staff, the Rod of God. To Africans it is the Rod of Terror, a very different positioning with respect to the same events.

Different readings of the Bible, of what God commands and expects, of what is emphasized, led to a crises of faith in America at the time of the Civil War. How could it happen that God was

against God, the God of freedom versus the God who created the slaves and masters each to fulfill their place in the social order? How could that happen?

Maybe that is why though Washington and Lincoln were both men of faith, neither was institutionally religious. Back in Philadelphia, Washington had illegally owned slaves. Lincoln thought that after his Presidency he might travel to Jerusalem.

Biblical literacy peaked in the 19th century. Before that the sacred texts belonged mostly to the elite. After that, as more books than just the Bible were published, read, and popular, matters of faith became more pluralistic. This led in the 1890s the Prosperity Gospel on the right versus the Social Gospel on the left. It does all depend on how you read it. This tension continues today.

A strong theme in the leadership and laws of Moses was treatment of immigrants. He was radical. The Hebrews had been aliens among the Egyptians and had borne the brunt of racism at its worst. The Hebrews were not to follow this example. They were to make space in their lives and culture for the resident alien who was to be treated the same under the law as the Hebrews.

America was built on immigrants and immigration. It is not mono-ethnic. There have always been those who didn't get the memo and who despised and rejected those who were different, or in our case, newer.

Most people's image of Moses is of Charlton Heston in *The Ten Commandments*, Cecile B. DeMille's cold war epic. The point of his reading of Exodus? Godless countries (like godless communist countries) lose, DeMille, even in the 1950s, was a conservative in a town of liberals.

Martin Luther King is clearly seen in the role of Moses in America, further advancing the work of freedom for an oppressed people. His preaching was dominated much more by the Exodus than by Jesus. And he was martyred and as a result there is now a national holiday in his name and in the name of his cause. Feiler concludes on the themes of the dream and the promised land: "[T]he ultimate lesson of Moses' life is that the dream does not die with the dreamer, the journey does not end on the mountaintop, and the true destination in a narrative of hope is not this year at all. But next." As is said at the end of the seder, "Next year in Jerusalem." (Even when spoken in Jerusalem.)

From whom do the philosophical underpinnings of what is America arise, all those things that we take for granted as "common sense"? Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Hobbes, Montesquieu, Marx, Darwin, Freud, and Einstein, yes all of those, but none so much as Moses.