



Bible-study: 2020/08/30 (St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, McMinnville) – Exodus 3:1-15

[Ask for a volunteer to read the passage.]

Today's session will be shorter than average because of the need to extract ourselves from this room and get situated outside for worship. But there's still a lot here worthy of discussion. One question, for example, is where, *exactly*, the action takes place? 'Midian': [Ex. 3:1]. In the Sinai peninsula? Saudi Arabia? Moses had fled to this place, of course, when another Hebrew threatened to alert the Egyptian authorities to a murder he had committed: [Ex.2:11-15]; an intervention that, seemingly, had not been appreciated by the community-at-large, who had probably learned to fear heavy-handed reprisals by skittish authorities.

In my own "mind's eye" – and I'm not alone in this, I picture Moses' action as having been against a man wielding a whip against a helpless, emaciated slave, and the situation in which it took place is described (in the text) as being that of Hebrews enduring 'forced labor': [2:11], which, presumably, demanded guards and, on occasion, involved violence. But, as the commentator Terence Fretheim observes, Moses' victim is said to be only – and I quote – 'an Egyptian...beating...one of his kinsfolk'. And so was 'not necessarily a taskmaster'.¹ Indeed. So though we may feel safe to assume as much, and will have been accustomed to thinking this way, other scenarios are perfectly possible; *permissible*. They are possible because the details about Moses' early life, even altogether, are, let's face it, a 'sparse text';² told 'in very sparse language'.³

Why is this? It should, I think, strike you as odd, especially in this context: it has been said that Moses 'is America's true founding father'.⁴ A 'symbol' of the nation more so than the bald eagle,⁵ 'inspiring generation after generation... from the slave girl Eliza carrying her son to freedom across the Ohio River in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to an orphaned Superman being drawn out of a spaceship from Krypton... from the Ten Commandments in public places to the role of the United States as a beacon for immigrants. Even a cursory review of American history indicates that Moses has emboldened leaders of all stripes – patriot and loyalist, slave and master, Jew and Christian, fat cat and communist.⁶ Moses was invoked on the *Mayflower*, by Thomas Paine, Benjamin

¹ *Exodus (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Volume II)* (2010), Louisville, K. Y.: Westminster John Knox Press, 42.

² Kirsch, Jonathan (1998), *Moses: A Life*, New York, N. Y.: A Ballantine Book, Random House Publishing Group, 25.

³ Fretheim (2010), 82.

⁴ Feiler, Bruce (2009), *America's Prophet: How the Story of Moses Shaped America*, New York, N. Y.: HarperCollins Publishers, 4.

⁵ *Supra*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams. By Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson. Martin Luther King, Jr., Hilary Clinton and Barack Obama.⁷

He is truly one of history's (few) "Great Men." (Notice that capitalization.) Which is to say, he belongs to a small and *extremely* exclusive group of exceptional individuals about whom it can genuinely be said that they changed the world. By being possessed of a unique vision; and, well, to put it bluntly, *abundant* 'testosterone'.⁸ Thus, in book after book, essay after essay, you will find Moses being compared alongside almost mythical figures like Sargon, Caesar, Napoleon, Alexander, Churchill, and Gandhi: The captains of captains; giants among dwarves. All enjoy *countless, exhaustive* biographies; in which every moment, every encounter is dissected and analyzed for the lessons that might benefit the rest of us.

George Washington – another likely member of this tiny club, himself 'strongly believed', in particular, '...that the first transactions...of an individual upon his first entrance into life, make the deepest impression, and are to form the leading traits in [his] character.'⁹ *But in Exodus*, we "skip" from Moses' birth into a Levite family and unusual adoption – discovered in 'a papyrus basket' floating on the Nile, by Pharaoh's daughter [2:1f.] – to the aforementioned murder, which Saint Stephen – the first martyr – says took place when Moses was 'forty years old'[Acts 7:23]. *Forty!* (Or, as the author of the matter itself says – who was probably Moses: '[o]ne day, after [he] had grown up': [Ex. 2:11]. But again, why be vague? Just tell us everything we want to know already!)

Then, this morning's incident from *Exodus* [chapter] three transpires, we're told: 'After a long time.' [2:23] Stephen, again, is more specific. He tells that Moses was eighty when he returned to Egypt [Acts 7:30] following the described miracle of 'the bush...blazing, yet...not consumed.' (Stephen, of course, is a *New Testament* personality, re-telling the tradition *thousands* of years after the fact. He's not an eye-witness, but drawing, it is guessed, on what was taught in the Palestinian synagogues of the First Century *A.D.*. Bear this in mind. Though my saying as much shouldn't be assumed as my meaning to sow doubt on its reliability.)

The question naturally occurs, therefore, what happened? What are we *not* being told? 'Self-exile in an empty desert [with just some scruffy goats for company] is an appealing way to explain the missing years of Moses for those who prefer to see him as a pristine figure, a man wholly given to perfecting his better nature.'¹⁰ But is this adequate preparation for leading an entire nation back to its homeland? And in defiance of an evil empire? This is *Star Wars* scale stuff, here. *Joseph* – in *Genesis* – makes explicit that what *he* endured; his experiences were 'sent' by God: [45:7]. They were preparatory. God had *trained* him to be the leader that was required. Can we same the same about a pampered life of luxury? And about four decades of shepherding? Is there really

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⁸ Goodall, Wayne (2005), *Why Great Men Fall: 15 Winning Strategies to Rise Above It All*, Green Forest, A.R.: New Leaf Press, 75.

⁹ Washington, Austin (2014), *The Education of George Washington: How a Forgotten Book Shaped the Character of a Hero*, New York, N. Y.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 3.

¹⁰ Kirsch, Jonathan (1998), *Moses: A Life*, New York, N. Y.: A Ballantine Book, Random House Publishing Group, 89.

not more? Maybe Moses was simply a very poor diarist? After all, we do hear in *Numbers* that Moses had married a ‘Kushite woman’: [12:1]. It says so *twice* in that single verse. And this was *in addition* to Zipporah, married in the verses immediately prior to those suggested in the Lectionary. When had this happened? Where and how? “Kush” was a region in the Horn of Africa, more-or-less coterminous with what is today the (modern) country of Ethiopia. It was *hundreds* of miles from ‘Midian’. And in completely the opposite direction from Egypt. (South rather than north.)

To explain this sort of thing, and, more generally speaking, Moses’ long absence from important events: ‘The rabbis supplied....a rich and strange accretion of legend and lore about Moses...[wherein he was] not merely lolling about in the desert...’¹¹ This “accretion” is found in what’s known as “the Midrash.”

Essentially, at its heart, “Midrash” refers to the body of commentary about the Hebrew scriptures that the Pharisees began to develop in the early synagogues (in Jesus’ day).¹² But it [did] not only contain clarifications of difficulties on a linguistic or textual level.¹³ Oh no. Says Rachel Barenblat: it ‘expands the universe’ depicted in the Scriptures by wilful speculation.¹⁴ And she likens it to the contemporary phenomenon of “fan-fiction.”¹⁵ As such, Midrash ‘is not’, strictly speaking, “objective” professional exegesis.¹⁶ That is to say, it hasn’t been the prerogative of just *theologians*: The Jewish-Roman *historian*, “Josephus,” a contemporary of Christ’s, was a practitioner for instance. And about Moses in particular.¹⁷

The apocryphal material pertaining to him may be summarized in this way: ‘According to the *Midrash*, Moses’ escape was a difficult one. [Unable to quietly “slip away” – because, presumably, of his very public status as a member of the royal household, he] had been easily surrounded and apprehended by Pharaoh’s ubiquitous militia, and he was taken to the palace dungeon to be slaughtered. Divine intervention placed the archangel Michael at Moses’ side, the angel altering his own form and features so that he became the double of the royal executioner. Simultaneously, the angel caused the royal executioner’s face and form to transform into that of the prisoner Moses! Without hesitation, the archangel lifted the executioner’s own sword [and slayed] him, appearing to all observers to have slain the prisoner Moses. In the ensuing confusion[,] the archangel led the real Moses out of the palace dungeon, through the gates..., and deposited him in the desert beyond the Egyptian border, at a distance of a three-days’ journey on foot.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 88-89.

¹² Rossel, Seymour (1981), *Journey through Jewish History: Abraham to the Sages*, Springfield, N. J.: Behrman House, 80.

¹³ Venter, Pieter M. & Chan, Man K. (2010), ‘Midrash as Exegetical Approach of Early Jewish Exegesis, with Some Examples from the *Book of Ruth*’, *HTS Theologiese Studies*, Volume 66, No. 1, p.6, 1.

¹⁴ ‘Transformative Work: Midrash and Fanfiction’ (2011), *Religion and Literature*, Volume 43, No. 2, pp. 171-177, 172.

¹⁵ See: Barenblat (above).

¹⁶ Strack, Hermann Leberecht and Stemberger, Günter (1996), *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash (Second Edition)*, translated by Markus Bockmuehl, Minneapolis, M. N.: Fortress Press, 237.

¹⁷ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chronicle_of_Moses.

In a fury at having harboured a traitor in his midst and then having allowed him to escape punishment and death, the Pharaoh redoubled the burdens heaped on his Hebrew slaves, embittering their lives and increasing their suffering a hundredfold.

During that same time frame, the desert kingdom of Kush was at war with the Kingdom of Kedem. B[a]laam, the biblical sorcerer [– who later appears in (the Book of) *Numbers* with the talking donkey, is here given a “backstory,” having] insinuated himself into the Kingdom of Kush as advisor to King Nikonos. When King Nikonos left Kush with his armies to fight a protracted war against Kedem, B[a]lamm aroused the Kush populace to install him as monarch, with his two evil sons as officers over the people. As king, B[a]laam caused a great wall to be erected around two sides of the city of Kush, and a great moat to be dug on the third side. Guarding the fourth side was a ditch filled with poisonous snakes and scorpions, effectively closing off the [capital] city of Kush from invaders. In addition, no person was permitted either to enter or leave the city.

Upon the successful conclusion of the war of Kush against Kedem, King Nikonos and his victorious armies returned home. At the Kush city limits they were greeted by the new fortifications, and they mistakenly thought their Kushite countrymen had built the defenses against [the] potential [of] invasion [had they lost]. It was only when the Kushites [inside] prevented entry even to King Nikonos and his soldiers on the orders of “King B[a]laam” that King Nikonos understood that his kingdom had been stolen from him, and that he would have to fight a bitter and protracted battle to regain it. He and his soldiers fought fiercely but B[a]laam’s Kushites had the fortification and the advantage, and Nikonos’ troops were war-weary, and were unable to take back the[ir] city. Still, Nikonos lay siege to Kush for nine years.

It was during this nine-year siege that...Moses effected his escape from Egypt. On his flight through the desert [with the archangel] he encountered King Nikonos’ army as they lay siege against Kush. They generously offered to share their rations and water, so Moses tarried among them and quickly gained their favor. [Of course he did!] Moses eventually spent a period of years in the camp of King Nikonos, who grew to love Moses. The two spent many hours in discussion, each treating the other as a comrade and fellow member of exiled royalty. Moses gained the trust and admirations of king and soldiers alike, so that the king eventually appointed Moses as commanding officer of his militia. This state of affairs continued until King Nikonos took ill and died.

The [loyal] Kushite militia consulted among the officers and men and decided to elevate Moses to be their king, reasoning that there was no one like him among the Kushite people. They conferred upon Moses the honor of wedding the Kushite queen, widow of King Nikonos [who had gone campaigning with the men?]. The *midrash* states that...on the third day of Moses’ reign he was approached by the Kushite soldiers, who explained to him that after nine years of siege they desperately missed their families and their homes, and they sought his advice. So Moses, whose heart went out to his men, devised a military strategy for an audacious, lightning attack to regain Kush[:] He cautioned the soldiers to follow his directives precisely, hoping that with luck they would soon be sleeping in their own beds once more. Moses instructed his men to climb the nearby mountains and gather the hatchlings of the white stork, who nested in the heights above Kush. Clad in full armor and mounted

on war-horses, Moses led his army into the vile snake pit that guarded the fourth entrance to Kush. He had his men toss the stork hatchlings into the snake point as they rode through it, diverting the snakes and allowing their army safe passage. As Moses had predicted, he and his army were thus able to breach Kush's defenses [in this way,] and retake the city in fierce hand-to-hand combat. [But cowardly] B[a]laam[,] the sorcerer, the usurper king, magically disappeared [at the last moment] from Kush and resurfaced [decades later as Moses' nemesis once more 'in the plains of Moab', [Num. 22:1ff.] when the Israelites were passing that way during their wilderness wanderings].

[Meanwhile t]he liberated and elated Kushites showered their devotion onto Moses, and he lived [happily] among them... The years passed... [Then, one day,] Moses' generals approached him, saying, "Sire, you are our beloved king and commander, and no one can replace you in our hearts and on the battlefield. But...[w]e need to continue the Kushite monarchy through the [ancient, legitimate] line of [old] Nikonos. So please, help yourself to the riches and booty of our kingdom, and return to your home in peace. So Moses, in essence a stranger and [an] interloper even to the Kushite people whom he had befriended, championed and ruled wisely for nearly half a century, accepted his destiny and left their midst, an exile once more."¹⁸

Whilst this is fanciful, far-fetched stuff, undoubtedly possessing the "whiff" of fairytale, there must be, it seems to me, almost certainly more to the *Biblical* story. And it is harmless fun to speculate about what things Moses may have seen and survived to become such a pivotal person in God's plan. But I want to go further: I find myself wondering to what extent the truth may hover somewhere in-between. Between the mysterious silence of our text, which suggests nothing noteworthy occurred, and the tall-tales that have circulated for so long. "No smoke without fire," as it is said. What are your thoughts?

¹⁸ Tuchman, Shera Aranoff and Rapoport, Sandra E. (2008), *Moses' Women*, Jersey City, N. J.: KTAV Publishing House Inc., 91-93.