

Missing Moses ... Online now for Lent and throughout 2011

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A long time ago – in the time we call the late Bronze Age - there were many immigrants in Egypt. Today they would be called Jews but then they were Hebrews and we sometimes call them Israelites, because of their ancestor. Whatever their name the Egyptians thought there were too many of them. They forced them to be slaves and to build cities for Pharaoh, the Egyptian king. But the more the Hebrews suffered, the more their birth rate increased. So the Egyptians started to work them to death. Pharaoh said to the Hebrew midwives, "When you help the Hebrew women on the birthing stool, if it is a boy, drown him; but if it is a girl, let her live." The midwives told Pharaoh, "Hebrew women are vigorous and give birth before we have time to arrive."

So Pharaoh gave an order: "Every boy must be thrown into the Nile."

DISCUSSION STARTERS

1. "Moses is still a very important character ...in particular for black Christians," says the Revd Rose Hudson-Wilkin. Why? When?
2. Here is what someone has said about the story of Moses. "There is a cry that rings out in this story more powerfully than that of the oppressed slave, more powerfully even than God's resounding 'Let my people go'. It is the cry of the abandoned baby, of the infant left in a carrier bag outside a hospital or a police station – or, as in the Moses story, in a basket on the banks of a river. Who is it who hears the helpless cry of this child and who takes pity on him? Not God, but a nameless Egyptian woman, a woman who years later will see this same boy she saved become the instrument of the slaughter of her father, her oldest brother, and multitudes of her country's menfolk." Is this a fair comment?
3. The Bible does not conceal how indiscriminate was the slaughter of firstborn. It's not just the firstborn of Pharaoh who perishes. "The firstborn of the female slave who is behind the handmill" perishes too (Exodus 11.5); so too do "the firstborn of the prisoner who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock (Exodus 12.29). One of the commentators in the film says, "Freedom is never bought at a cheap price." Was the price paid for the freedom of the Israelites bought at too high a price?
4. We are told in the film that "God is present with those who are marginalised and oppressed. He hears their cry." Does he?
5. What qualities are required in a leader? Does Moses display those qualities or lack those qualities?

6. One of the film's Jewish commentators says, "The fact that we have stories of divine intervention in a very specific set of circumstances does not mean that every time there is a catastrophe it is a punitive divine intervention". Can a natural event – whether a disaster or a blessing - ever be understood as a divine intervention?

7. The Bishop of London suggests that what we find in "the Old Testament" is "a sense of the perils and fragility of the created order" and that if we disobey "the maker's instructions" what follows is chaos and destruction, decay of human relations, and of civilisation itself. In what ways might it be said that we are ignoring "the maker's instructions" in the way we treat the natural world and our human environment?

8. Are you happy with the natural explanations that are offered to explain some of the miracles we have in the story of Moses, for example that what actually happened when Pharaoh's army pursued the fleeing Israelites was that his chariots got bogged down in the Sinai swamps - the "Reed Sea", not "the Red Sea"?

9. At the celebration of the Passover, the afflictions of the Egyptians are recalled. What more might we do in our liturgies, whether as Jews or as Christians, to remember in grief and penitence the suffering that is invariably the context in the narratives of our salvation?

10. In what ways are the Jewish Passover and the Christian Eucharist similar and in what ways do they differ? Is it helpful or is it dangerous for Jews and Christians to compare the two rites as they seek to learn from each other?

11. Is it potentially fruitful ground to explore with Moslems the role of prophet Moses. How might this exploration be taken further?

12. "Let my people go". How should we hear those words today? In Tahir Square?

13. Moses never enters "the Promised Land". He is allowed only a distant glimpse of it. That is God's punishment for his disobedience (Numbers 20.11-13; Deuteronomy 34). In what sense is he a tragic figure?

14. God promises Moses that he will deliver his people from the Egyptians and that he will bring them to a land, "flowing with milk and honey" to be sure, but a land also already populated by "Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites". The price of freedom for the Israelites would be not only the death of Egypt's firstborn but also the conquest and slaughter of the inhabitants of "the promised land". Were they of no account?

15. Does the story of Moses have any relevance or application to contemporary conflicts in the territories where his story first unfolded?

16. Does God still speak directly to individuals and give them jobs to do?

SOME “MOSES QUOTATIONS”

*How do we know that Moses was grown up? Because he went out to his brethren, and was ready to bear the burdens and share the plight of his people. Maturity is sensitivity to human suffering. **Julius Gordon***

*I have wondered at times what the Ten Commandments would have looked like if Moses had run them through the US Congress. **Ronald Reagan***

*If Moses had been paid newspaper rates for the Ten Commandments, he might have written the Two Thousand Commandments. **Isaac Bashevis Singer***

*If Moses had gone to Harvard Law School and spent three years working on the Hill, he would have written the Ten Commandments with three exceptions and a saving clause. **Charles Morgan***

*Let me tell you something that we Israelis have against Moses. He took us 40 years through the desert in order to bring us to the one spot in the Middle East that has no oil! **Golda Meir***

*While waiting for a Moses to lead us into the promised land, we have forgotten how to walk. **Wendell Johnson***

WHY MOSES?

We have made this film because Jews and Christians share the Moses-story word for word. But we don't forget that to all the oppressed people of the world whatever their religion (or none), Moses has always been an inspiration; to slaves and to those who fight for them, as to the Jews themselves in too many situations

And we don't forget that Moslems acknowledge Moses as their prophet and great hero. He has more lines in the Holy Quran than anyone else. In Egypt today his story is an inspiration to all who pray "Let my people go!"

ADVERSUS MARCIONEM

Eighteen centuries ago – at the beginning of the Christian era - a wealthy anti-semitic ship-owner from Turkey arrived in Rome. He gave the young Christian community a great deal of money but also pushed his personal obsession to "Get rid of everything Jewish – and Moses in particular".

His name was Marcion and he believed Christianity to be a standalone religion, unconnected in any way with the children of Israel. He could not accept that the God of the Hebrew Bible and God of the Christians could be the same God.

Marcion even had trouble with the Christian New Testament and rejected most of it as "too Jewish". He claimed that Jesus, "son of a completely different God", can

only be seen in Luke's gospel (minus the "Jewish" references) and in some of Paul's letters.

It was touch and go but eventually Marcion lost the argument. His money even got returned! But, like bad pennies, his ideas keep coming back. And today a reduced-Marcionism has infected the church.

How often do Christians read the Hebrew Bible? In a Moses-quiz, how would Christians score against Jews and Moslems? Yet the words of our two most important sacraments lose their meaning without Moses.

MISSING SYNAGOGUES

It's easy to see churches and mosques in most European cities. As for synagogues, they are not as numerous, or as old, as they should be.

In England in the 13th and 14th centuries, the Jews had to wear a badge and were finally expelled by Edward the First, (the Hammer of the Scots and of just about everyone else as well). The Jews were only allowed back by Oliver Cromwell. But even after their return, a synagogue had to be built behind other buildings so as not to upset the natives!

Moses was already an old man when he led the great escape from Egypt - but he still had much to do.

The Israelites learned to live rough – to find food in the desert and water in the rocks.

As God had promised, Moses brought his people to the foot of the holy mountain and Moses began to announce God's commandments about how the Israelites must live and eat and work. There were 613 commandments, 248 of these were "Do's" and 365 were "Don'ts".

Once, when Moses was alone on the mountain, the people rebelled. They preferred a golden idol. But Moses returned and, although he dropped the tablets on which the ten most important commandments were carved, his leadership was restored and the long journey to the Promised Land began.

God ordered a special ark – a great casket carried on long poles. The ark rested in the camp every night. It had its own elaborate tent - the tabernacle. The ark contained God's presence and his power. It was the Israelites' secret weapon. Battles were won when the Ark was paraded. City walls fell. Men died if they approached it carelessly. In years to come a great Temple would be built simply to contain the Ark.

Moses himself never set foot in the land of milk and honey. For forty years in the desert, Hebrews were schooled in the worship and law of God. And it is what defines them still.

John Pridmore and Peter Elvy