

Holy Moses?

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UCOT 7/3/22

Rags to Royalty is a common motif in folklore. A character of common birth discovers that they are actually of noble descent. The ugly duckling turns out to be a swan. The servant lad sent to fetch a weapon ends up pulling a sword from a stone, revealing himself to be rightful King of England. The beggar at the door turns out to be an angel in disguise. You get the idea. A seeming nobody is actually somebody special.

Much more rarely, the somebody turns out to be nobody. But that is the case with the greatest character of the Hebrew Bible, Moses, the son of a slave girl. In an early version of the Great Replacement theory, Pharaoh worries that the descendants of Joseph, who had entered the land centuries before, were becoming too numerous and would soon outnumber native Egyptians. He doubles their workload of making bricks. But the Hebrews still multiply. Finally Pharaoh calls for every man-child delivered by the Jewish midwives to be thrown in the river. And Moses' mother, fearing for the child's life, sets the baby afloat in a basket on the Nile, where he's rescued and adopted by a daughter of the royal household. Moses is raised as an Egyptian princeling, in luxury and refinement, according to Jewish Midrash. The much later Book of Acts says that he "was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians," which might have included medicine, mathematics and hieroglyphic writing. He was a somebody, part of the elite, at least until he wasn't.

Every nation, every tribe has an origin story. Usually the narratives glorify the illustrious ancestors, painting them larger-than-life. But in the Bible, the tables are turned. The Jews trace their ancestry to an illegal alien, a child whose very

existence had to be hidden from the authorities. Because at some point Moses reclaims his identity as an outcast and fugitive. Witnessing an Egyptian overseer beating a Hebrew slave, Moses slays the man and buries him in the sand, fleeing into the desert to avoid arrest. It's there that Moses has his epiphany, his encounter with Yahweh. God gives Moses his great commission: "I will send you to Pharaoh and you shall bring my people Israel out of Egypt." And Moses responds with incredulity. "But who am I, that I should go" and accomplish all this?

Who am I? This is the central question that origin stories try to answer. Am I an Egyptian, of the race of divine kings and Pharaohs, or do I belong among the marginalized, the overlooked, the nobodies who rate merely a footnote in the long annals of history? For those on the bottom, for those struggling for dignity and freedom, the story of the Exodus became the paradigmatic tale of liberation. It was woven into the imagination of the Western world.

It was on the minds of America's founders, for example, as they were weaving our country's creation story back in 1776. Asked to design a great seal for the United States, Benjamin Franklin suggested an image of Moses leading the Israelites across the Red Sea, with Pharaoh's chariot sinking beneath the waves, bearing the slogan "Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God." Jefferson liked the motto but preferred an image of the children of Israel in the desert, led by a cloud in daytime and a pillar of fire at night. That same year, John Adams wrote to Abigail of what he saw as "a parallel between the Case of Israel and America, and between the conduct of Pharaoh and that of George," the British monarch. The Founding Fathers saw themselves as spiritual inheritors of Moses, freedom fighters against the yoke of oppression.

The Exodus tale was emblematic for another important category of Americans, also, for the enslaved Africans who were kidnapped and came to these shores as

forced labor. Reverend Lewis Lockwood first heard runaway slaves singing the hymn “Go Down Moses” and jotted down the lyrics in 1861, but the song’s roots as a freedom anthem are probably older. This and similar spirituals like “Didn’t Old Pharaoh Get Lost” contained coded references to the journey north to Canaan or the Promised Land. Nat Turner, who led an unsuccessful slave rebellion in Virginia in 1831, was probably able to envision an alternative to his life of toil because he was able to read and write, and Turner’s Bible is now a featured exhibit in the Smithsonian’s Museum of African American History. Denmark Vesey, a pastor in the African Methodist Episcopal Church who had instigated a slave revolt in Charleston, focused on passages of Exodus that specified slaves should be held for a limited term, seven years and then emancipated. Harriet Tubman adopted the nickname Moses as she made thirteen forays below the Mason-Dixon line to bring dozens of her comrades to freedom, then liberating another seven hundred in a raid at Combahee Ferry where she became the first woman to lead an armed expedition in the Civil War.

Slaves and slave-holding colonists alike could see their hopes and dreams reflected in the story of the Exodus because it was a tale of role reversal. It declared that God, the motive force and moral arc of the universe, was on the side of the have nots, the dispossessed, the downtrodden.

Of course history is more complicated than myth. There is archeological evidence that Semitic peoples were living in Egypt three thousand years ago, not lineal descendants of Abraham or Isaac but probably trickling in during times of famine or food insecurity, somewhat as the Bible suggests. These migrant workers aspired to something better and, when their lot became too hard, began drifting back to their kinfolk north around the present day state of Israel, much as Moses found his wife in Midian, the place where he took refuge after fleeing Egypt, a land that might have included parts of the Sinai Peninsula and Jordan. There was no crossing of the Red Sea, only a gradual resettlement and to some degree a reconquest as the twelve tribes or loosely related clans jostled for water rights

and real estate. These same migrants and refugees were undoubtedly the ones who, swapping yarns around campfires at night, invented the figure of Moses: consolidating their own fears and fantasies into a single man who could epitomize and explain their own partially forgotten origins and presence in the land of Israel, the Promised Land

That land was and is, the Lord said to Moses, “a fine broad land; it is a land flowing with milk and honey; the home of Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites,” already occupied in other words, much as America in 1776 was already occupied by Cherokee, Penobscot, Iroquois, Commanche, Navajo, Ute and hundreds of other indigenous tribes. Among these were the Columbia Indians of the Pacific Northwest where in 1829 a boy who came to be called Chief Moses was born. His father Half-Sun named the infant Loolowkin but learned when his son was still a child that a Christian missionary named Henry Spalding possessed a powerful medicine in the form of the written word. Loolowkin spent three years in the mission school learning to read the Bible, acquiring English in addition to the Nez Perce language. Spalding baptized the boy, christening him with the name of the Israelite hero, hoping he would become a powerful leader of his people. Moses retained a lifelong affection for his tutor and the Bible stories of his youth, but eventually went back to his people to become a warrior and chieftain, resisting white intrusion into his territory, as enunciated in a speech delivered to a government agent in 1870:

I fear the ruin of my people is coming. Now you tell me to cultivate and fence my land [and that] after a time the government will give me a deed for it and then it will be mine. My parents gave birth to me here and I fancy that this is my country.

Traveling to the nation's capital to meet the U.S. President and bargain for a reservation, the *Washington Evening Star* reported that Moses had all "the powers of leadership, if not the meekness, of his Biblical namesake."

Moses is therefore a complex, many-sided figure. Who am I? Egyptian or Israelite? Conquered or conquerer? White, or black, or native? If the Exodus is a tale of liberation, it's also one of subjugation, making for a confusing and sometimes contested origin story, part fact, part fiction, part inspiration and part propaganda.

Does that mean we should stop telling it? I think not. Because all nations and peoples need some common myth that connects them to a shared past and a shared plot. People need to feel that history is not just an unrelated sequence of dates and names and places but an unfolding drama in which they themselves have some important role to play. For folks of many times and races, the Bible and especially the book of Exodus have provided such a narrative.

Now, as we approach the fireworks and festivities that surround America's Independence Day, some question whether our national epic is still credible, worth telling or celebrating. Critics like Nikole Hannah-Jones in her *1619 Project* assert that the primary cause and purpose of our Revolution was to protect and promote the reach of slavery across North America, a claim that reputable historians dispute. Yet she's right when she says that landmarks like Mount Vernon and Monticello probably shouldn't be called plantations at all but rather slave labor camps, which more accurately describes the reality for the multitude of human beings who lived and worked and died there. America's story is one of liberation and enslavement, one of Pilgrim Fathers and occupiers, one of Conquistadors and bold explorers and of genocide and ethnic cleansing. The truth doesn't lie somewhere in between. The truth is in the contradictions, in the unresolved tension between the ideal and the actual.

But that doesn't mean we need to abandon the myth. For just as the tale of the Exodus inspired other uprisings like Nat Turner's, the rebellion of 1776 directly inspired revolutions in France, in Haiti, in Mexico and Latin America. Simon Bolivar, who won independence for the countries we now call Venezuela, Columbia, Panama, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, admired men like George Washington, to whom he was often likened, and even sent his nephew to the University of Virginia. Our American Constitution, with its popular assemblies and checks and balances, became the model for more than a hundred other democracies around the globe, and our Bill of Rights became the foundation for the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. With its eccentricities like the Electoral College, the U.S. Constitution has been losing favor as a template for emerging republics in recent years. Still, these are achievements worth a sparkler or even a Roman candle.

The United States has a heritage that is revolting, in the best and worst sense of that word. But we cannot abandon that heritage nor disown the myth of democracy simply because it has at times been hollow, or abused, or applied as a bludgeon. Our task rather is to live into that myth and make it viable for all those who have been left out and left behind. Justice is our Canaan Land. Jordan is our river to cross. Freedom remains our pillar of fire. And who am I? Who are we? We must collectively become the Moses we've been waiting for.