



5 notes on Moses

Richard Friedman, a contemporary Torah scholar, writes, *“Moses is profoundly a lone figure. Although he has a family, Exodus is not about family relations and does not develop them in Moses’ case. Coming on the heels of Genesis, with its long stories of families, this is striking.”* (Commentary on the Torah, p.172)

Ponder this comment as you proceed with Exodus in the weeks ahead. Here are five observations for starters...

Parents. What do we know about Moses’ mother? Very little, and even less about his father. Nor do we have any evidence that they named him! Rather, he is named ‘Moses’ by Pharaoh’s daughter when ‘the boy grew older’ (1:10).

Adoption. Moses’ survival on the Nile River (a place of death for other male Hebrew children) plus his adoption by Pharaoh’s daughter only accentuates the strangeness of his beginnings and his disconnect- edness from his biological family.

Brother. Moses’ brother, Aaron, has a key part in the story, but even here the sibling relationship

seems irrelevant. They could be two collaborators without being brothers and the story would proceed.

Sister. Miriam, Moses’ sister, has a pivotal role in Ex.2. Yet, over the course of the book of Exodus, she and Moses never exchange any words. And later, in 15:20, she is identified as ‘the sister of Aaron’ rather than of Moses.

Wife and sons. Moses marries and has two sons. Yet they play no special role, and quite likely you won’t even remember their names without looking them up (2:21; 18:4). Later in Ex.18, however, Moses’ father-in-law will have a significant influence on Moses as a leader.

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

“The Old Testament is not simply a piece among others in the Christian Bible. It is the base, the fundamental part. If the New Testament was established on another basis, it would have no real value. Without its conformity to the sacred Scriptures of the Jewish people, it could not be presented as the accomplishment of God’s project.”

— Cardinal Albert Vanhoye
speaking at the 2008 Synod of Bishops

This Torah portion normally coincides with or falls close to the Christmas season. At first glance this might seem an awkward ‘fit’ for Christians who are committed to their church’s lectionary while also learning from the Jewish cycle of readings. What do the opening chapters of Exodus have to do with our Christian Nativity celebrations?

We need only remind ourselves that amidst the startling originality of the gospel message, its proponents always pointed to its continuity with the Hebrew Scriptures. Underlying the whole New Testament is the conviction that the liberating hand of Almighty God, evident in the Exodus story and throughout salvation history, is ‘at work again’ in a new and wondrous way...



Exodus 1:1—6:1
Shemot: ‘names’



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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar
of Torah readings:

Exodus 1:1—6:1

Today we begin the book of Exodus, that foundational story of God's liberation of the Israelites from slavery and their formation as a nation. Exodus opens with the descendents of Jacob groaning under the yolk of oppression. Their long period of slavery in Egypt is never clearly explained in the Torah and we may well ponder the 'why?' of this prolonged suffering. Did no divine/prophetic voice urge them to leave Egypt before it was too late? The Torah's silence on this is indeed perplexing....

But let's begin our exploration of Exodus with Chapter 1, digging into the biblical text in search of gems of ancient wisdom.

Tasting Torah

Read Chapter 1 of Exodus slowly, carefully, at least twice, and preferably with a friend. Pay particular attention to details such as i) recurring themes, ii) connections with stories we have read previously in Genesis, iii) the use of names (and the absence of names), iv) surprising elements in the text. Beneath the surface of the narrative, what is God's Word 'saying' to you? How do these ancient, sacred writings speak to your life, to your faith?

Touching Torah

No doubt you noticed that this chapter is permeated by a theme of fertility, birth, abundant life, unstoppable growth. The chapter opens by listing Jacob's progeny. It goes on to describe their descendents, the children of Israel, using language found also in the creation account in Genesis 1: 'fruitful,' 'teemed,' 'multiplied,' 'the land was filled with them.' Note, too, the explicit references to the scene of birth in vv. 16, 19. And how surprising it is that the centre-stage figure in this chapter is not the most powerful man in Egypt (for 'Pharaoh' remains unnamed) but two heroic 'Hebrew midwives' (who are named in v.15). Their role in facilitating Israelite births successfully dismantles Pharaoh's murderous plans, and they are twice praised as being 'God-fearing' (vv. 17, 21). What else caught your attention in this chapter?

Depthing Torah

Recall God's command—'be fruitful and multiply'—to Adam and Eve (Gen. 1:28) and to Noah (Gen. 9:7). Recall, too, God's promise to the patriarchs that their descendents would be as numerous as the stars (Gen. 15:5) and as the dust of the earth (13:16). The Exodus story tells the story not only of a growing race of people, but of the unfolding of a covenantal relationship. God blesses his people and holds out a future of great promise. Indeed, they live, grow and thrive in great numbers! And not only do they thrive, they do so amidst oppressive conditions and despite the systematic attempts of Pharaoh to destroy their male young. What can we conclude? Right from the start, the book of Exodus presents a dramatic confrontation between the powers of life and death, between the living God of the Israelites and the deathly paranoia of an earthly king. This is the backdrop against which Moses, as a defenceless baby, enters the picture (Ex.2), survives against all odds, and is destined to become a saviour, a liberator to his people.

Continue to ponder this Torah portion, sharing your insights and questions.

Doing Torah

Reflect upon a painful period of your life in which, despite hardships, you were able to recognize God's enduring, lifegiving presence. How were you shaped by this experience?



Faith & Life

While battling the limitations of illness and old age, Fr Pedro Arrupe (a Superior General of the Jesuits) was able to perceive the enduring faithfulness of God's presence in his life, which he expressed in these words:

More than ever, I now find myself in the hands of God. This is what I have wanted all my life, from my youth. And this is still what I want. But now there is a difference: the initiative is entirely with God. It is indeed a profound spiritual experience to know and feel myself so totally in his hands, in the hands of this God who has taken hold of me.

Bibliography: Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (NY, 2001). Scripture: Friedman's translation.