

Connecting Moses and the Fourth of July

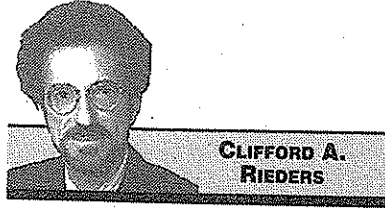
What do Moses and July Fourth have in common? Bruce Feiler, in America's Profit, Moses and the American Story, thinks he knows the answer. Feiler is something of a publicity hound. He made a name with Walking the Bible, rather a silly display, when Feiler purported to live in conformity with Biblical standards alone. The problem with the author's book sales related stunt is that he ignored the reality of the Biblical life. From its inception, the Bible was lived through the interpretive works of others, whether they were Moses, the prophets or Jesus. All of these familiar personalities lived the Bible not in a literal way but through the process of interpretation.

Bruce Feiler's latest book contributes worthwhile information to the understanding of Moses in America. "As the Continental Congress gathered in Philadelphia in 1776, comparisons with the Exodus filled the air." Feiler is correct that our ancestors linked the life of Moses and the travails of the Israelites to the founding of the Republic. Thomas Payne invoked the analogy in Common Sense, and Samuel Sherwood stretched the analogy with The Church's Flight Into the Wilderness.

Often forgotten in our national embrace of the First Amendment and freedom of religion is the Great Awakening, which began in the 1730's. This religious movement was an Evangelical revival which relied heavily on the language of the Exodus story to spread its message. George Whitefield, according to Feiler, cofounder of Methodism, preached that Moses experienced a "new birth" at the burning bush and himself was a Methodist. Whitefield's considerable number of followers described him as "another Moses." The Great Awakening provided the incendiary language, first in churches, but which later spread like a wild fire throughout the civil discourse. Benjamin Franklin was a major fan of Whitefield's.

The bell which the Pennsylvania Assembly voted to purchase in 1751 was inscribed with the words "Proclaim Liberty Thro' all the Land to all the Inhabitants Thereof. Levit. XXV.10. Legend merged with reality and this marvelous symbol became known as the Liberty Bell.

Bruce Feiler delivers a warm and positive Bible lesson, but more than that his aim is to show how the lofty ideals of the Mosaic code found in the first five books



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of the Bible influenced American ideals of freedom, self-destiny, and political independence. Although the author does not so state, there is no inconsistency between the virtues thus enunciated and the First Amendment freedom of religion. A good argument can be made, as I always have done in my own lectures on the subject of the Bible and American law, that the lawgiver Moses and the lawgivers of the American Revolutionary era had a great deal in common.

It is correct to note that by "rallying so intently around the words of Leviticus 25, Americans were reaffirming their commitment to the country's moral foundations and its roots in the Hebrew Bible." Americans, it should be noted, were nearly universally literate from a Biblical sense, unlike today. They recognized the Bible as the call of the Divine to free the enslaved, salve the sick and uplift the poor.

It is little known that when the delegates to the first Continental Congress met in Philadelphia on September 6, 1774, a lawyer from Boston made a motion that the assembly open with a prayer. Delegates from New York and Charleston objected. There were too many different religious groups, and whatever was said might offend someone! Today, we would call that bending to political correctness. Samuel Adams suggested that the Assembly invite Jacob Duche, Director of the most important church in America at the time, as a "Friend to his Country." Duche read that day's appointed Psalm from the Book of Common Prayer, the thirty-fifth. "Plead my cause, O Lord, with them that strive with me: fight against them that fight against me." Duche then went off on an extemporaneous impassioned plea for liberty that left his listeners crying in the aisles.

Duche was a partner with the revolutionary founders, not a contestant. The vestry unanimously agreed that Duche could strike out all homages to the king from the Book of Common Prayer.

Later, as the war with the British grew increasingly bloody, Duche asked

Washington to call off the war. Washington found the letter a "ridiculous, illiberal performance" and released it to Congress. Many years later, Duche returned to Philadelphia, where he was buried, disgraced, in an unmarked grave. The man who was compared to Moses, fell from grace in what seemed almost like a moment for the sin of opposing the hero of the Revolution.

The intermingling of religion and the American Revolution is no easy study. While America was frequently referred to as a land flowing with milk and honey, comparisons drawn from Exodus were also utilized to stress American independence from the imposition of a rigorous regime. The Founding Fathers of our country both used religion and were used by it. Feiler closely studied the literature and concluded that the pace of Mosaic references escalated as independence drew closer. George III was compared to Egypt's Pharaoh. Jethro's advice to Moses that he lead Israel by appointing a council of leaders, was cited by the Reverend Samuel West, addressing the Massachusetts legislature. The revolutionary heroes used the Biblical narrative to build a case that they were justified in standing up to the Crown. The enlightenment saw religion as both liberal and liberating, in the words of the day, although a tiger that at all times needed to be tamed.

On this July Fourth, let us celebrate our magnificent independence built upon many strains of thought whether they be religious, rationalist, Deist, or simply patriotic. This summer there will be steak cooked on the outside grill with plentiful quantities of beer, and for others it will be a reflective look at the past and where the future will lead us. Whichever path you take on July Fourth, just remember that John Adams, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson proposed that the Great Seal of the United States show Moses standing on the shore, extending his hand over the sea, causing the same to overwhelm Pharaoh who was sitting in an open chariot. Franklin included the motto, "Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God."

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