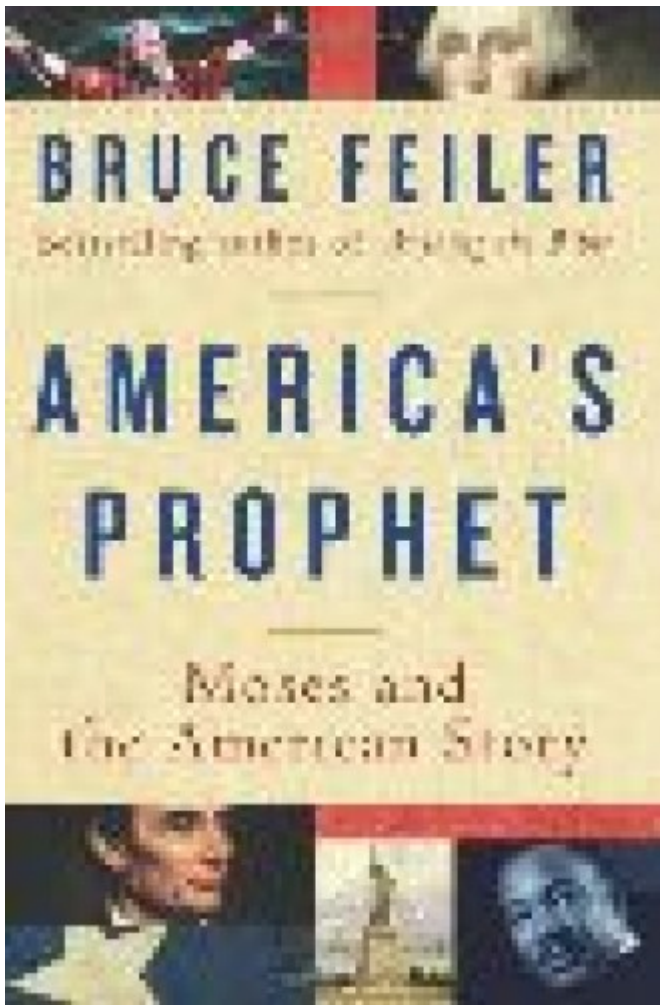


America's Prophet: Moses and the American Story

reviewed by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [April 6, 2010](#) issue

In Review



America's Prophet: Moses and the American Story

Bruce Feiler
HarperCollins

Feiler is already well known for his readable account of the stream of faith derived from Father Abraham. Now he has written a page-turner on public rhetoric in U.S. political history. As before, he writes in a journalistic way, interweaving his personal experiences and observations with his careful historical research, and the result is a report that is compellingly interesting and sometime wonderfully gossipy.

The well-established thesis of the book is that from prerevolutionary times to now, the biblical figure of Moses has been central to U.S. political rhetoric, well beyond any appeal to Jesus. Columbus compared himself to Moses, as did George Whitefield during the Great Awakening. In *Common Sense* Thomas Paine compared King George to Pharaoh, and several of the nation's founders proposed that Moses be on the seal of the United States. Harriet Tubman, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. were likened to Moses, while wartime presidents tapped the Moses story, and Cecil B. DeMille made Moses "a hero for the Cold War."

Feiler's historical reportage falls roughly into three periods as he moves from one topic that interests him to another. In the first three chapters he focuses on the founding of the republic. He begins with a foray into the earliest settlements of Europeans in America. He pays a visit to Clark's Island, a competitor to Plymouth Rock, where he meets a present-day member of the "Thanksgiving Protection Society." With a glance toward John Winthrop, he finds here the rhetoric of deliverance and covenant in the biblical terms of Exodus and Sinai—or, as Feiler puts it, freedom and responsibility. In this articulation, the beginning of the nation is seen as a fulfillment of the Mosaic venture.

This is followed by a focus on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, with its inscription from Leviticus 25, "Proclaim Liberty throughout all the Land unto all the Inhabitants thereof." The appeal to Leviticus and to the Mosaic offer of God-given liberty leads to an "exceptionalism that pervades the thinking of the Founders." Feiler recounts a chatty conversation with the chief curator of Independence Hall, who declares: "The Enlightenment may give you intellectual credibility, but the Bible gives emotional credibility."

The voice of Moses served the cause of emancipation from the British Empire, Feiler observes, and the Bible served even Thomas Paine. He "hated Scripture but quoted it relentlessly, showing the enduring power of the Bible even for deists." By the time he finishes with the Liberty Bell, Feiler reports that "Moses was America's true

founding father.” To that he adds a derivative from a companion of Nelson Mandela at Robben Island, who said of the bell, “We always knew it was true.”

The second large section of the book concerns the Civil War. This account begins with a visit to Ripley, Ohio, and Maysville, Kentucky, important stops on the Underground Railroad. As he revisits this geography of freedom, Feiler celebrates conductor John Rankin, who fell back on Mosaic texts to sustain his moral courage in the risky liberation of slaves. Feiler quotes Princeton professor Eddie Glaude, who writes that by the 1840s the Exodus metaphor had become “the predominant language of African Americans,” and the Exodus story had become “the covenant of Black America.”

As follow-up Feiler considers Harriet Beecher Stowe and her family in Cincinnati, notes the centrality of the Exodus for Harriet Tubman, hears Daniel Boone described as “the Moses of the West,” and discusses the “exegetical contest” between North and South to see which side could claim the Bible for its cause. Then comes Abraham Lincoln, who in his greatest speeches—the Emancipation Proclamation, the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural Address—laid full claim to the biblical rhetoric of slavery, freedom and covenant for the emergent nation. Placing the Exodus tradition at the center of his moral argument, Lincoln made the case for emancipation irreversible. The force of these pages from Feiler are so powerful and compelling that they defy summary.

In the third section of the book, Feiler moves his theme toward contemporary usage. He observes the way in which the Masons employed the image of a pyramid to keep the rhetoric of freedom central. In some pages of justifiable pride in his Jewish heritage, Feiler judges that it was exactly the Jewish tradition that provided the deep themes that permitted U.S. development. He visits the Statue of Liberty and probes its links to Moses as an icon of freedom for the “tired, poor, huddled masses.”

As interesting as anything in the book is Feiler’s extended reflection on Cecil B. DeMille and his film *The Ten Commandments*. Feiler observes that DeMille’s ideological intention was to redefine the United States and in the process to save the world. Indeed, in response to a court ruling, it was DeMille who initiated the process of placing the Ten Commandments in prominent public places: he “persuaded Paramount’s promotion department to pay for granite monoliths of the Ten Commandments to be placed on courthouse lawns, in city halls, and in public squares in every city where the film played.” Over 4,000 monuments were made,

and stars of the film attended the dedications. DeMille had made Moses a “projection not just of American strength but also of American pluralism.”

Before he finishes, Feiler offers an extended reflection on Martin Luther King Jr.’s use of Moses:

He once more used his talk to collapse time, linking the American South with ancient Egypt, the muddy flats of Memphis, Tennessee, with the sandy plains of Memphis, Egypt. He telescoped American history, connecting the Pilgrims’ errand into the wilderness with the patriots’ flight from the oppression of King George, weaving Lincoln’s emancipation of the slaves into the march of the sanitation workers for greater rights. All these disparate moments became intermingled in the unity of divine cosmos, with King boldly placing himself at their lead, before he, too, is swept off the precipice to allow God’s children to march forward, fatherless and full of fear.

There is no mention in this book of Robert Bellah’s civil religion. But of course the book is all about civil religion. It occurs to me that those who now care about freedom, justice and neighborly transformation might best tap into this mighty legacy that places the theme of emancipatory justice in the center of national identity. I do not recall, for instance, that Moses has been invoked in the health-care debate; but of course Moses understood the God of the Exodus as “the Lord who heals you” (Exod. 15:26). One might also observe that the religious right wing that focuses on “Jesus” and a narrow sectarian read of national faith just might be outside the mainstream of Mosaic possibility that is genuinely American.

Feiler’s book is an invitation for a rebirth of a narrative that has always impelled the United States to its best. As the author of Deuteronomy would have understood, when we suffer amnesia about this narrative, everything goes amiss. This book is a compelling call to remember in a way that continues to transform.