

The patron saint of in-between things

Having grown up as a Black-mixed kid, I can relate to Moses' upbringing as not quite Hebrew and not quite Egyptian.

by [Brian Bantum](#) in the [February 2024](#) issue

Published on January 24, 2024



(Illustration by Luisa Jung)

Moses has always been a special figure in my life. I like to think of him as the patron saint of in-between things. He is a child of Israel, nursed by his own mother, falling asleep to the songs of her God, hearing the hum of her prayers in his bones as he feels her chest rise and fall—it's just enough for him to know there is something of Hebrew life in him, that in some way they are his people. But he doesn't know the name of their God, nor can he form complex thoughts in their tongue.

He is also a child of Egypt, of empire. He wants for nothing, and he doesn't fear the slave driver's whip or the constant question of how hard to work. Too much and you work yourself to death, too little and you bring on a beating or worse. That is not Moses' life. And yet he knows he looks more like the slaves than the Egyptians. He knows that he is not really one of them and that everyone knows it. How many ways each day is he reminded of what he isn't?

In the earliest moments of my walk with God, this sort of neither/nor marked much of my life. I was a Black-mixed kid raised by a White mother and extended family, in predominantly White schools. Like Moses, I had a mother and aunties who sang love into me, who tried their best to swaddle me in a life where I could just be me. But sometimes I had to go into the world.

The experience of mixed kids—of anyone whose body and identity sit in multiple places—is always a little different. It isn't inherently tragic or angst filled. But for me, a tan kid with straight brown hair and full lips—a kid who was shy and uncertain and insecure, whose father was in and out, whose mother did her best—all I wanted was to belong.

So when I read of Moses' time in Midian (Exod. 2:15–4:19), I feel something of myself in him: the constant alien, the one who looks from outside and holds together some sense of home in Midian, where he doesn't have to be the not quite Hebrew or the not quite Egyptian. I didn't want to be a not quite kid, and in the midst of a profound conversion I found a home, a church, a place where I could just be Brian. In my little Southern Baptist enclave, "Christian identity" was the belonging that erased all other difference. I thought I was free.

I wonder if the outsidersness, the in-betweenness, ever really leaves Moses. His first child—Gershom, or "stranger"—is named not for Moses' new home but for his remembrance of in-betweenness, of life as an always alien.

I was the Christian of all Christians in my Southern Baptist enclave. I believed in a color-blind Christianity where everyone could just be themselves. But it was also a Christianity with thick lines of difference—of holiness and damnation, good and bad—and belonging meant I needed to keep myself on the good side of the line and remind others that they were not. But the more I tried to convince others, the more little cracks emerged in me, slivers of a life and a history and a way of life where we can be whole.

Isn't it always the way that God meets us and presses those little doubts into the open? God tells Moses to leave his little corner of comfort, where he's just a husband and a father and all he needs to do all day is get some sheep and goats from point A to point B. He is not a Midianite, but in Midian he has found more belonging than ever before, and all he wants is to stay.

At the burning bush, Moses outlines all the points of outsidersness he has felt his whole life (Exod. 3:11–4:10). You can feel his wrestling with God—but also the pull he feels, his desire to be a part of his people. And in the midst of it all, God finally tells Moses his name.

God does this in part as a practical matter, to offer Moses some semblance of a touch point with his people. But I wonder if God also feels Moses' uncertainty: his lack of a sense of home, caught between worlds, always with a thin veil between him and a world whose cultural identities seem so clearly defined. And in response God says, *I am who I am. I will be where I will be.*

This name of course indicates God's transcendence, that God is not contained by place or time. But it also reveals God's placedness, her particularity. She is where she is. She is here but not contained by here; she is a name, but it is not spoken; she is one, and she is many.

I wonder if in revealing this name, God is saying to Moses, *You are like me. In all your multiplicities, in all your indefiniteness, in all the fluidity of seeing yourself in so many people—that isn't a not-enoughness. That is me. You will be where you will be. It is not an erasure. It isn't just a name. It is not "just you." It is a you bound to all of those people and stories and lands—even if they don't always see it. Your home is with all of them in the uncertainty, the ambiguity, the check-all-that-apply. You don't know it yet, but your people will be free because of you.*

I wonder what our faith looks like when it is defined by not the certainty of boundaries but the expansiveness of the all-of-the-aboves that permeate our lives. What might it mean to embrace the messy mixtures?