

Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

MOSES: *The Mystic Prophet Like No Other*

By: Reverend Charles Brock

June 2020



“There has never yet risen in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face.” (Deut. 34.10). And that is the highest praise biblical writers could make. The reasons are obvious. It was Moses, along with his brother and sister, who forced Pharaoh to “let his people go” and defeated the Egyptian army at the Red Sea when Pharaoh went back on his word. It was Moses whom God chose to reveal the Law on Mt. Sinai. And it was Moses who led the people for a generation through the wilderness to the Promised Land.

In what senses was Moses a mystic? First, there were the three theophanies of the Presence of God at the burning bush when he was told by God to go to Egypt to free the people; second was Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai; and third, it happened again when God visited Moses and spoke with him “face to face” at the Tent of Meeting (Exodus 33).

The latter is a bizarre story not often told in church – God said to Moses he will not join the Hebrews in the wilderness: “I shall not journey in your company, for fear that I should destroy you on the way, for you are a stubborn people.” (33.3) Moses panics, and begs God to come along for, without his power, they will perish. And “How can it ever be known that I and your people have found favor with you, except by your going with us?” (33.16) Moses must have got it right, because God relents and says, “I shall do whatever you ask.” (33.17)

Then Moses begs to see God’s glory.[1] God agrees and says I shall “make all my goodness pass before you, and I shall pronounce in your hearing my name Yahweh.” But when push came to shove, all Moses saw was God’s back! (33.23) Whether this was

a slight, or a slight of hand (or of back) I do not know.[2] There is in later Judaism the notion of *devekut* or attachment to God. It is not “union” as in Eastern mysticism or some rare classical Christian or Islamic mystics because in Kabbalistic theology that is denied to mankind.[3]

A second mystical understanding is that God spoke to Moses much of the time especially in the Wilderness of Sinai and Canaan, and the Torah is filled with “God said” from Exodus to Deuteronomy. Moses had visual and auditory experiences of God.

There is a third sense that Moses was a mystic. He sought the will of God and fulfilled, for the most part, God’s purposes. This need not involve visual or auditory experience or experiencing a physical or spiritual transforming presence of God but is a cooperation of wills. “God and I are (at) one.” He walked with God and tried to find his will. You find yourself in a mindset where you can discern what God wants for you or for the world. This is a strong meaning of prayer – seeking what God wants, not what you want.

A fourth way is demonstrated by Pesach 10.5 from the Mishnah: “In every generation a man is obligated to regard himself as though he *personally* had gone forth from Egypt, because it is said, “And you shall tell your son on that day [the Feast of Passover], saying: ‘It is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt.’”[4] This I call “Identification Mysticism,” pointing out that one equates, associates, relates, links with a subject, a special history, a person, even an object. You relate to that person, a story, or an important aspect of *heilsgeschichte* or holy history.

This is an important category and will help explain why I can include Abraham Lincoln, not normally considered a mystic, and others similar to him as part of the contributors to this series. And indeed, therefore, many of us might also be considered mystics, even though we never had overwhelming mountain-top experiences such as Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and the others. The point is to experience in one way or another the awareness that you and God are, for the most part, of the same mind or will and that by your humble or magnificent efforts are working for God’s purposes, and that it is a transforming fact of life.

There is a fifth sense of mysticism that is common to most all the figures that I studied, including me and you I suspect, and that is the experience of dereliction and distance from God. Sometimes God appears to be absent or that both of you are not getting along.

Two examples from the life of Moses. The first was one of the many instances that the Hebrews “murmured” at Moses – i.e. they objected to his leadership. Due to a lack of water, the people complained to Moses, and God told him to command a large rock for water to emerge. He was so angry that he hit the rock twice. The water flowed, but according to the rest of the story this was enough of a sin to keep Moses out of the Promised Land. (Numbers 20)

The feeling of dereliction must have been tremendous when at the end of his life he was not allowed to enter the Promised Land, but only to see it from the top of Mt. Nebo. All his effort at freeing the people, giving the Law, and going through the wilderness for a generation and not to have the climax of crossing the Jordan. Yet his eyes were not dimmed, and his natural juices were still flowing. (Deut. 34) There is dereliction for you.

A sixth level that comes from the Hebrew Scriptures and generations of Jewish mysticism not necessarily related to but influenced by the Moses story is the overpowering relation to objects or expressions of God, for example the Shechinah (light and/or name of God), the throne of God, and Ezekiel's chariot of fire. There are many examples of the Shechinah from rabbinical and Kabbalistic literature. "The Shekhinah is referred to as manifest in the Tabernacle and the [Temple in Jerusalem](#) throughout rabbinic literature. Some examples:

- While a person (or people) study [Torah](#), the Shekhinah is among them.
- "Whenever ten are gathered for prayer, there the Shekhinah rests."
- "When three sit as judges, the Shekhinah is with them."
- Cases of personal need: "The Shekhinah dwells over the head of the sick man's bed," "Wheresoever they were exiled, the Shekhinah went with them." [5]

This can take place in non-Hebrew ways, such as D.H. Lawrence's "sun mysticism" and those who love the ocean's lure, and in many other ways through nature or other people. [6]

Two classic Hebrew Scripture texts, the first known as "throne mysticism," refer to objects of God: "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings, with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew." (Isaiah 6.1-2) and the second refers to Ezekiel's partial vision of the Divine: "Over the heads of the living creatures there was something like a dome, shining like crystal, spread out above their heads. Under the dome their wings were stretched out straight, one toward another, and each of the creatures had two wings covering its body." (Ezekiel 1)

Moses did not have all these mystical experiences, as many were developed over the centuries by prophets, theologians, and believers; but he was a mystic prophet like no other. He heard, saw, walked, and identified with God. And though forbidden to enter the Promised Land, he was loved by God. He died at Mt. Nebo. "Moses was 120 years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired, and his juices [7] had not abated." (Deuteronomy 34)



Pope John Paul II at Mt. Nebo with a reconstruction of Moses' Serpent (Numbers 21)

[1] Not an easy concept to describe. Post-biblical Jews had the term “Shekinah,” which was the splendiferous light of God’s name.

[2] There are obvious contradictions in the Scriptures about “seeing God.” Some passages say that no one, including even Moses presumably, can ever see God (Exodus 33.20), which contradicts with Exodus 33.11. “God spoke with Moses face to face.” There are many other Scriptural contradictions on this matter.

[3] Ignatian retreats devised by the Jesuits emphasis identification with stories about Jesus. In contemplation you put yourself with him, imagine the ambiance, the mood, the tone, meditate on what the actions were, and apply to today’s issues. You were there. And he comes to be with you now.

[4] Italics mine

[5] *Shekhinah*, Wikipedia

[6] See later chapter on Martin Buber

[7] Translation by Rev Dr Rex Mason, Regent’s Park College, Oxford

Michaelangelo's Moses: <https://shop.getty.edu/products/michelangelo-s-tomb-for-julius-ii-genesis-and-genius-978-1606065037>

Pope with Moses Serpent: <http://www.taqarobtours.com/prog1.php>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Charles Brock, an Erie native, is an Emeritus Fellow, Chaplain, and Director of Ministerial Education at Mansfield College, Oxford, UK, where he taught for 35 years. He serves as the Director of the Institute on the American Dream at Penn State Behrend. Rev. Brock is acting minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Girard, Pa., and he is a Founding Member of the Jefferson Educational Society. Rev. Brock serves as the Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education at the Jefferson and serves as Secretary of the Jefferson Educational Society’s Board of Trustees.

