

Study 4: Moses' Cultural And Identity Confusion

Exodus 2

Moses was 40 years old when he escaped from Egypt and became a political refugee wanted for murder. There was a price on his head.

After Moses had been found in the Nile River by Pharaoh's daughter and adopted in defiance of her father's wishes, he lived the first 40 years of his life as a Prince of Egypt. He had access to the halls of power in that great nation which was one of the super powers in its day. Moses received the best education Egypt could provide and he evidently mastered it all for it was said of him, "Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds." (Acts 7:22)

This son of Hebrew slaves who was trained in the courts of the king could have been in line to become the Pharaoh of Egypt. Could he? We do not know if this was possible or not. But it is an interesting idea to consider.

Somehow even though he lived in the affluence and trappings of the power that surrounded him, Moses seems to have kept in touch with his roots in the Hebrew slave community. (Exodus 4:14 indicates he knew Aaron was his brother.) Perhaps his adopted mother permitted him to keep in contact with his family. It is clear that by the time he was 40 (Acts 7:23), Moses' heart and mind were moved to explore and develop his relationships with the Israelites who he considered to be "his brethren" (Exodus 2:11, Acts 7:23-25). This raises a question. Is this how Moses received his understanding that there was only one God? How did he maintain this knowledge as he lived in the middle of the Egyptians' view of the world?

As Hebrews 11:24-26 informs us, Moses by this time has already rejected his Egyptian heritage. He was identifying himself with the Hebrew slaves. He saw himself as a Hebrew. One day he saw an Egyptian beating an Israelite and in defending the slave, Moses killed the Egyptian. The next day he tried to settle a fight between two Hebrews and was shocked to be coldly rejected by these men. Moses in their eyes was no different than other Egyptians who were oppressing them. They did not see him as their savior. His attempt to identify with the Hebrews failed.

When Pharaoh found out about the murder of the Egyptian, Moses was to be arrested and killed as a traitor.

Moses lost everything he had. The Hebrews rejected him. And in attempting to reach out to the slaves he lost his adopted Egyptian heritage as well. He was a wanted for murder. All of his bridges to personal cultural identity were burned and he had no place to go. His unplanned escape took him east across the desert to the land of Midian.

Moses was now a foreign political immigrant refugee when he met the daughters of Reuel, a priest of Midian. Moses still desperately wanted to be known as a Hebrew but instead he was consistently seen as an Egyptian (2:19). As days, months and years went by he felt like a "stranger in a foreign land" (2:22). He was separated from his Hebrew and Egyptian roots. So strong was

this sense of lostness, he named his son Gershom (literally-“Stanger there”) as an expression of his loneliness.

When Moses married into Reuel’s (or Jethro’s) family of women, he interacted with:

- A new religion and worship forms
- New foods
- New customs
- New life style
- New vocation
- New language
- New personal experiences
- New expectations
- New emotions
- New family
- New view of the world

Egyptians found shepherd’s to be an abomination to them. It was the most disgusting work one could do for a living (Genesis 46:34). But now without a choice Moses became one of those abominations he had been taught to reject as he married into a shepherding family (3:1). Imagine the gut emotional distress he had to overcome just to accept this new situation he was now living in. There must have been voices within him crying out “it’s wrong, wrong, wrong to live this way.” He had been an Egyptian ruler but now he married into a family of shepherds. I wonder what happened to his self esteem and identity as a person?

Forty years later, Moses was an old man of 80. He had been a shepherd for all that time working along side his father-in-law, Reuel. When God appears to him in the “burning bush,” he had a long time ago resigned himself to a life of taking care of the family’s sheep and goats. Gone were the visions of political greatness and power that he had in Egypt. He enjoyed his children, his wife and extended family. He was now, after these 40 years, simply a Midianite living out his life within the community which had rescued and adopted him. He was not looking or dreaming of anything more than this.

Even his gifts in Egypt as being “mighty in words and deeds” (Acts 7:22) were only vague memories. When God challenged Moses to act, he could only weakly respond and say, “I am not eloquent, neither before nor since ... I am slow of speech and slow of tongue” (4:10).

Had Moses forgotten who he had been? 40 years could do that. Was he lying because he was afraid? Or could it be that the Midianite language was so different from the Egyptian or the Hebrew? If so, could Moses’ adopted language be the cause of him not being eloquent and instead slow of speech? Learning a new language after the age of 40 is not easy as many of us know from personal experience. Most immigrants who enter other countries understand the immense difficulties new languages cause as they struggle to express themselves. Perhaps Moses after all of these years only saw himself through his adopted Midianite language. Maybe he could

no longer conceive of what he had been as a Prince of Egypt. I think he was just being honest with God as he now viewed himself. He was Moses, the simple Midianite shepherd.

God's work seems often to be so strange to us. God's timing does not seem to make practical sense in our minds.

Rather than using the younger, powerful Moses of Egypt, God comes to this 80-year old man wandering after his sheep in a desert land. It is this man that God calls to bring "the children of Israel out of Egypt" (3:10). Why did God refuse to use the powerful ruler in Egypt? Why call this broken down old man who time and circumstances had beaten down? Moses had no vision for change. He had lost his roots in Egypt and in the family of Israel. He simply expected to do what he was doing even if it did not meet his deep inner emotional needs. But there was a change in him. He was now a man of three different ethnic cultures that to him never seemed fit together into a whole personality.

Instead his Egyptian, Hebrew and Midianite experiences were at war within him. He had consciously rejected his Egyptian upbringing to become a Hebrew. But the Israelites rejected him for they could only see him as an Egyptian. He had become a Midianite simply to survive. He had had no other options. Early on he felt desperately alone inside, "a stranger in a foreign land" (2:22).

For reasons only God can explain, Moses was now ready to be used by Him. Ready? Moses does not even know who He is. His identity confuses him. Now he is ready?

As said earlier, God's timing does not often make sense to us. God does not call the strong mature 40-year old Moses who knew what he wanted to do; who had great visions and who was at the height of his political power to be the deliverer of Israel. No, God calls the weak Moses who is confused by what has happened to him. He has given up his dreams and is now content to end his life caring for his sheep.

But God knew what He was doing. He was calling this Moses who has a unique gift of being a tri-cultural man:

The Egyptian-Hebrew-Midianite Moses.

God's plan was to use all that Moses had become to accomplish this deliverance of Israel from Egypt's slavery. God never wastes any part of our life experiences. God needed the whole Moses. The Egyptian Moses was not enough. The Hebrew Moses was not enough. The Midianite Moses was not enough. None of these three parts of Moses was enough to accomplish the task God planned to do. God needs all of Moses, not just part of him. Moses, like us, did not understand what God had been doing in him and what God was now doing in him. But God patiently worked with Moses to accomplish His goals. All Moses had to do was to obey. But obedience is very hard for Moses and for each of us.

Take a look at yourself, your family, or the people in the work place or who live in your neighborhood. Do you see people rejecting part of who they are to embrace another part of their

identity? What does it mean to be an Italian American, an African American, a Japanese American or a Latino American? To be an American do you have to reject your ethnic heritage to be accepted in the United States? The pressure seems to say yes to this question. But should it be like this?

What tensions do you see in the wide range of cultures that surround us? How can God help us to be whole people instead of split personalities?