



Book Review

Feiler, Bruce. *America's Prophet: Moses and the American Story*. New York: Harper Collins, 2009. Pp. 335. Hardcover. \$26.99.

Reviewed by James W. McCarty III

Introduction

Fans of the *National Treasure* movies and Dan Brown novels will thoroughly enjoy reading *America's Prophet: Moses and the American Story* by Bruce Feiler. In this *New York Times* bestseller, author Bruce Feiler travels across the country, from Plymouth Rock to Sunset Boulevard, searching for the footprints of the biblical character Moses. He discovers Moses in the backrooms of Freemasons Lodges, the songs of slaves on the Underground Railroad, the imagery of the Statue of Liberty, the pages of Superman comics, the speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. and in dusty Hollywood warehouses. After discovering Moses around every corner of the country Feiler boldly declares, "Moses...is our true founding father. His face belongs on Mount Rushmore (p.296)."

Those looking for a text on Moses as a historical or religious figure will not find this book helpful. It is not explicitly a text about the biblical character and is not helpful in teaching the biblical stories he is a part of. It is very helpful, however, for those who want to know more about the ways the Bible, and ideas about Moses in particular, have influenced American history and culture.

Many will be surprised by the different places Moses appears throughout the book. Thomas Jefferson is as comfortable using him as Harriet Tubman, and she as comfortable as Cecil B. DeMille; what's more, all three use him for different reasons. Some will see this text as an affirmation of a glorious Christian heritage the United States has lost. Feiler, however, discovered a profoundly Jewish influence on American history. It seems that Moses in America remains, as he has been throughout history, open to multiple interpretations. Interestingly, Feiler believes this diversity of interpretations means Moses can be the unifying figure needed in contemporary American society.

How Can *America's Prophet* be helpful in a high school curriculum?

There are two ways I see this book being helpful for those using it in a secondary classroom: in demonstrating some ways biblical stories have been “performed” throughout history, and as a starting point for discussing “American Civil Religion.” One of the most interesting things about religious texts, and one of the most important insights of Feiler’s book, is that people “perform” the stories of the texts that inform their lives. People “perform” religious texts by attempting to relive them or act them out in their present situation (sometimes this is consciously done and sometimes unconsciously done); and when the characters whose roles they are enacting happen to be the people on “God’s side,” the “performers” assume that the theological lessons embedded within the texts apply in a literal way to their lives. The stories of the Bible have remained powerful throughout history, because people often identify with the characters in a visceral way and therefore “perform” its stories. For example, the first European settlers in the United States and refugee slaves escaping to the North both believed they were reliving the stories of Moses and the Exodus. People have literally attempted to live the biblical stories and these attempts have profoundly shaped human history. *America's Prophet* demonstrates this clearly and accessibly.

Robert Bellah famously introduced the idea of American Civil Religion in the 1960's.¹ American Civil Religion, according to Bellah, is the “religious dimension” of American public life that has its own set of beliefs, rituals, symbols, sacred texts, saints and holidays. *America's Prophet* positions Moses as the central symbol in the American civil religion. Feiler presents Moses as a religious, cultural and political figure, and symbol that has had immeasurable influence on American history. His text is a valuable starting point for discussing the ways religious figures, language, rituals and symbols can function in the “nonreligious” public sphere.

Would *America's Prophet* be a good textbook?

I do not recommend *America's Prophet* as a textbook. There is too much conjecture and the author reaches several conclusions that need more verification than he provides. It would simply be too cumbersome to correct or explain these claims to students. (For instance, on p. 47 Feiler accepts without criticism the claim of an interviewee that many of the founding fathers were not Deists who did not believe in God and insinuates they were religiously orthodox. This person clearly misunderstands Deism and makes claims that are historically tenuous; Feiler, however, accepts her statement as reality.)

I do recommend the book as a resource for educators, however. It is a valuable starting place to understand the ways in which the Bible has influenced American history and culture. It also provides several compelling personal anecdotes and descriptions of historic locations that would be useful in teaching American religious history.

Finally, while acknowledging that Moses has not always played a positive role in American thought, his portrayal is nonetheless a triumphalist and laudatory one and ignores the ways the figure of Moses and the story of the Exodus have been and can be used in harmful ways. For example: while extolling the early settlers’ self-identity as the “chosen people in the promised land” as a virtue that enabled them to build a new society, he ignores the ways they used that identity to justify the genocide of the native peoples. His story is not a complete one, and its missing pieces make it one that is not completely true to the facts. An educator can more easily fill in the gaps by presenting the valuable material in this text along with material from other

¹ See Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” http://www.robertbellah.com/articles_5.htm.

texts rather than combating the overly triumphant tone of the book. While his presentation is an interesting commentary it is not appropriate for the classroom without an alternative voice.

Additional Resources

Feiler provides an appendix with suggestions on further reading about the various historic figures, locations and stories contained within the book. This is a valuable starting place for more research into these topics.

I also suggest that those interested in the ways Americans have “performed” the Bible, and ways this has not always been positive, read Sylvester Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens, and the People of God* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). This text is not intended for secondary students, but would be helpful to educators wanting to learn more on this subject.

Those interested in researching American civil religion would do well to read Robert Bellah’s essays “Civil Religion in America” and “The Revolution and the Civil Religion.” These are most easily found online here (http://www.robertbellah.com/articles_5.htm) and here (<http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=1657&C=1653>). Another valuable resource for beginners studying American Civil Religion is Richard T. Hughes, *Myths America Lives By* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

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<http://www.sbl-site.org/educational/teachingbible.aspx>