

I've been undergoing a deep dive into Exodus since Pentecost.

Our nation is engaged in struggle over two very different readings of Exodus. First reading goes back to British colonizers who came to the Americas, thinking they were the new Israel coming out of Egypt, and James, then King George was Pharaoh. They felt entitled to a Westward land grab like it was their manifest destiny, their wealth now fueled by the labor of enslaved Africans. But the enslaved Africans in America read Exodus differently. The colonizers are the Pharaoh-led Egyptians, and they are the Hebrews in bondage. And God is the one who hears their cries. Today, for white-washed Christianity, Exodus is a Disney cartoon; for the black church it's liberation theology. And many of us are the rich young man who comes to Jesus, saying, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit the life of the New Age?" And he replies, "What does the Law say (Torah (five books of Moses, including Exodus)? How do you read it?" How indeed?

Maybe it's all this social distancing, but recently when I take some time to pray, my late wife Nancy is sitting there next to me, or my old friend Phyllis Tickle. Sometimes Glen or Blanche Wilson seem to sidle up. And lately, Moses is among them. I think what we call transfiguration, where Moses and Elijah are with Jesus on the mountain in a cloud, is probably just an unveiling of what sometimes happens when ordinary people pray. Recently, I asked Moses, "What was it like that time God tried to kill you?"

Now that I have your attention, I should say I have a teacher who has been helping me read Exodus, Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg, introduced to me by Caroline Kittle [Moses: A Human Life] Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg reads Torah in a Jewish way, which I find far superior to the way I learned. Because the Jewish way is informed by Midrash—stories about the stories in Torah that earnestly and playfully embellish the stories, fill in gaps, interpret, poke at, ask questions only allowed when you step into the glorious liberty of the children of God—a phrase in Paul who must have been thinking about Exodus.

In the glorious liberty of the children of God we get to disagree with God in Torah sometimes. We can be a conscientious objector. We challenge what we read, protest, wrestle though—and in that process we grow and come to know God. The Bible is not a "here's how to think" book. It's a book to get you thinking, feeling, undergoing God.

Before we get to the time God tried to kill Moses, I should mention a key to reading Scripture with the glorious liberty of the children of God: How to engage Scripture when it comes to us in myth-mode. Like us, the ancients had different kinds of stories: stories about things that happened to them (which are always interpretations of things that happened to them) stories passed on from the ancestors, stories in the form of poems, pithy sayings used in stories, and of course mythic stories.

Exodus is a patchwork of stories that had been circulating in oral form for a long before and editor put it all together in a coherent narrative. There is no constant/single vision of God that we can call

“biblical”—there is an evolving vision drawing from many sources as God becomes known. Including sections/fragments that are mythic.

Mythic doesn't mean “false.” That's how modern people think of old myths. No, myths are ways of telling certain truths experienced by certain people that often defy other tellings. Origin stories are almost always in the form of myths. The Noah flood is certainly a myth. And the time God tried to kill Moses has many marks of the mythic.

The way to engage a myth is not to say, “Those childish ancients and their myths. We know better!” Because we have our myths too, called dreams, and our dreams sometimes know better than we do. We don't ask our dreams, “Did this really happen? Did I show up in my pajamas and then had to get that bear out of the house?” But our dreams often mean something, reveal something that daytime thinking doesn't. So the way to engage myth is not to ask, “Did this really happen?” A better way is to ask, “What would this mean if this were a dream?”

When I was praying and it seemed like Moses was nearby and I asked him, “What was it like when God tried to kill you?” owing to influence of Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, I knew it was time for me to engage this bizzarro story, as I've learned to from my teacher.

Here's the set up. Moses is born Hebrew (Israelite) but raised Egyptian in Pharaoh's household, As a young man, perhaps he knows he was born a Hebrew, maybe not. But like someone who learns he was adopted from another country; he is drawn to the people of his biological origin—for deep issues of identity.

His early interactions with Hebrews in slavery are messed up. He's got his version of the white savior complex, a function of privilege. Moses kills an Egyptian abusing a Hebrew. That puts all the Israelites at risk. Moses thinks no one from Egypt saw this. But when he visits the Hebrews again, they all know what he did, want nothing to do with him, and he realizes, Pharaoh must know by now. In fact, Pharaoh is looking to kill Moses.

Moses flees to Midian, beyond Egyptian borders, to live as a nomad for years. He goes to a well where 7 Midianite sisters are drawing water. A group of Midianite shepherds harass the women. With his new-found savior complex, born of privilege, Moses rescues them. But he endears himself to these sisters and marries one named Zipporah.

Then Moses has his epic encounter at Burning Bush—a classic mystical encounter. This is the turning point. Whatever human empathy Moses can muster for the Hebrews is inadequate—I mean how can he understand their experience having been raised in such privilege? This understanding can only come by virtue of a divine encounter with the God of the 4 LETTERS too holy to NAME. A Name that means “I AM WHO AM” As if to say, from a place of privilege we cannot know the suffering of the oppressed without

Divine Encounter. From the Burning Bush, God reveals his anguish over the suffering of the Hebrews and calls Moses to return to Egypt and to confront Pharaoh.

First, Moses has to get his father-in-law Jethro's permission to return, because as a foreigner, Moses is under Jethro's protection. Permission is granted and he begins the journey with his wife Zipporah and their son. And there follows one of the strangest portions in all of the Bible:

**On the way, at a place where they spent the night, the LORD met him and tried to kill him. But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son's foreskin, and touched Moses' feet with it, and said, "Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!" So he let him alone (Ex. 4: 24-26)**

Marks of mystical-mythic encounter. It happens at night. Was Moses asleep and this is a dream encounter? The day-time rules are suspended as happens in dreams. And what's this, "the Lord met him and tried to kill him?" Mere mortals have to *try* to kill someone and are often successful when they try. Here it's God trying, without success. "God tried to kill him?" Dreamland rules not waking ones.

Robert Alter: the Hebrew of this portion appears much older than the rest of Exodus, an archaic fragment, borrowed by the Exodus storyteller from an earlier era—as is the case many mythic stories in the Bible, borrowed from the region. God tried to kill Moses one night echoes another mystical encounter in Genesis, when Jacob (founder of Israel) was on the way back to his homeland after a long absence, with wives, and permission granted from a father-in-law to leave—and there's a nighttime encounter with God, or an angel, and Jacob wrestled with God at the Jabok. (Jabok is Jacob with 2 inverted letters, implying Jacob may be wrestling with himself, or with his own projection of God.) Either way, the normal rules of the waking are suspended there as in Exodus.

Zipporah cuts off the foreskin of their son's male member, using an archaic phrase even for a book as old as Exodus: "you are a bridegroom of blood to me"—Israel didn't invent circumcision, it was a practice adapted from others, given its own meaning, this phrase seems to be from that earlier non-Israelite practice. But, remember, as different as it sounds to us Gentiles, in the Jewish imagination circumcision is a practice with mystical meaning, well beyond the literal.

What might that be? In his encounter with the UnNamable God at the Burning Bush, when God calls him to confront Pharaoh, Moses objects: "I am slow of speech, of uncircumcised lips." He can't speak what God wants him to speak. He is raised in privilege; how can he speak of the suffering of the Hebrews?

To be white in America is to participate in the inherited sin of white silence. Those of us who are white suffer from slowness of speech and an uncircumcised tongue. How can a white American know what a black or brown or indigenous person lives with, without having their white privilege removed, like the foreskin of a male child? Which is a kind of death. Is "God tried to kill Moses," a way of saying, in the

language of a dream, that something in Moses, core to his identity, his privilege, has to die? All of this, possible.

Is this the kind of dream we have if God should call us to proceed at great risk to ourselves? We know Martin Luther King didn't sign up to be Martin Luther King. The bus boycotters needed a church basement to meet in and he was a new pastor in town and let them use his church basement, and he was the only pastor who showed up which made him their leader. One night he gets a call at home, "Leave Montgomery unless you and your family want to die" That's when he felt the call of God at the kitchen table: "Lord this boycott seems like a bad idea" That's when God spoke to him for the first time, just like Moses at the Burning Bush, saying: "Martin Luther, stand up for justice, stand up for truth stand up for peace, and I will be at your side forever!" Eventually, his house was firebombed. Could Martin Luther King, thus called, or Malcolm X thus called, or the founders of BLM thus called, fearing the inevitable hostility of the threatened white power structure, identify with the mystical encounter Moses had that night?

But remember this started for me when I was having my evening prayers, with Nancy and Blanche and Glen and Phyllis were hanging around my awareness, while I had a glass of wine and ate my chips, and then I was aware of Moses there, so I asked him, "What was it like when God tried to kill you?" The way Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg taught me to do. In that space, my mind turned to Zipporah, the Midianite wife of Moses.

Moses the liberation theologian owed his life to the quick wits and courage of six women: To the Hebrew midwives Shiphra & Puah who disobeyed Pharaoh's "kill the male babies" edict. As if women were not a threat to his power, a strategic error on Pharaoh's part. Then Moses owed his life to his mother who hid him 3 months, placed in a basket to be found. To his sister Miriam who stood by, at risk to herself, to make sure he was found. Then to Pharaoh's daughter who took him in at no risk. But now, in the most remarkable demonstration of insight and quick wits, wits that outmatch God! Zipporah knows what to do and acts swiftly—takes a flint, circumcises her son, and places the bloody foreskin on Moses feet (euphemism) So God left him alone.

Moses, who would become Israel's great intercessor, with no one among the Israelites to intercede for him, now knows first-hand what it is to have a powerful intercessor, his quick-witted Midianite wife who steps in to save him, in mythic dreamscape, from God.

This awareness causes me to remember the women in my life who have saved me in some way---been there for me: Blanche Wilson, my sisters, my now late wife Nancy, Julia. I think of the things I've learned—faith saving things—working with Emily, Diane, Caroline, Cassie, Penny, Susan. All this provoked by pondering the time God tried to kill Moses and Zipporah stepped in.

The hero of this story is not Moses, and it's certainly not God. It's Zipporah.

I'm watching the DNC—whoa! This reminds me of Zoom church! I'm asking, where is the spiritual energy to stand up to this wanna-be strongman scapegoater in chief? I'm speaking with more personal candor as the times allow it. It's Michelle Obama, oh the chills the night she spoke, Kamala Harris, of course ... I remember how boldly Maxine Waters spoke up early on with the new president shenanigans ... this is where the power is coming from!

The one demographic group that did not lift a finger to vote for 45 in 2016? Black women—Pew Survey, 45 got 8% of black vote; 14% of black male vote, but percentage of black women who supported his rise to power is designated by an \*. The asterisk means “We needed an electron microscope to find it” Who gave birth to the movement that is the most powerful call for justice in our time, uniting the call for racial justice to the call for justice for gender and sexual minorities? We pray for them every Sunday and have for quite some time, Alicia, Patrisse, Opal.

Malcolm X said, “The most disrespected woman in America, is the black woman.”

No president has disrespected women in publicly available statements than this president. His greatest venom reserved for black women because this is flat out white supremacy. In this he's just channeling our original sin. He's the symptom not the cause.

Jesus said, “The first will be last, and the last shall be first”—sign of inbreaking new age.

Did I mention that Zipporah, the last woman to save Moses, the liberator—and with the hardest task, to save him from God, was a black woman? As we learn later in Numbers 12: when Miriam & Aaron complain to God their brother married a black woman (Cushite—ethnic Ethiopia) God rebukes them, not Moses

What I've offered today is Midrash—a more free-association way of engaging Scripture, with stories about stories, speculations, loose ends, connections to my inner and our outer world. I invite you to try it yourself sometime. When we think the task is to find the one right interpretation, it puts us in a bind with Scripture. Because if there's only one right interpretation there must be many wrong ones. And that creates fear which quenches love and creativity and spirit. Maybe it's not about the one right interpretation, but the many good ones—waiting for us to discover.