
Lisa Wiseman

From Red Oak, Texas, Lisa is entering her senior year majoring in Social Studies Education. In high school, she was a member of the National Beta Club and valedictorian of her graduating class. She is currently a member of Phi Alpha Theta and Vice President of the service club Iota Kappa Phi. She has plans to go on to graduate school to obtain her Master’s Degree in Library Science.

Almost every person in America knows the Old Testament story of the man who let God’s people go, the lawgiver: Moses. However, the impact of Moses on America is not common knowledge. Author and religious historian Bruce Feiler recently wrote the book America’s Prophet: How the Story of Moses Shaped America, which climbed on to the New York Times Best Seller list, to enlighten on this interesting account. Feiler argues that Moses is the true founding father of America in that he influenced iconic individuals throughout American history and continues to be a driving force in today’s society. He supports this statement by drawing on his intensive research and interviews through his travels to famous American sites, such as the nation’s capital, Washington D.C., and the state of Ohio where the Underground Railroad was formed. Feiler has written over a dozen books, mostly dealing with religion. He has an extensive job history, including being a columnist for the New York Times, host of the PBS miniseries Walking the Bible, and contributing frequently on news networks such as CNN and Fox.

Feiler uses ten chapters to construct his narrative of Moses throughout American history. Feiler, within each chapter, presents the reader an American figure, event, or
object and introduces how it relates to Moses. He tells the story of the American icon and a portion of Moses’s life and then weaves the two together in a fresh, compelling manner. In Feiler’s work, he states various themes of Moses in American culture based on certain points throughout American history: the discovery and establishment of this land, the controversy of the slave trade, and restoring moral values.

Feiler brings to light the first concept of how the colonists and Founding Fathers of America related to Moses. Feiler says that America was seen as a promised land: “God’s New Israel.” Therefore, the settlers compared themselves to Moses because they were coming to this new world. Feiler points out that Moses failed and never made it to the Promised Land, which made him even more appealing. He was seen as very human, which gave people peace, knowing even the greatest of men fail. Feiler continues with the early American era by stating that Moses was looked up to by these framers because they were fighting for their religious freedom. They rebelled against the King of England, just as Moses stood up to Pharaoh to lead God’s people to freedom where they could worship Him. This relation to Moses standing up to Pharaoh was also greatly revered in the times of slavery.

Feiler’s research told him that slaves were taught the Bible by their owners as a means to control them; however, the slaves took the stories presented to them and created their own religious ideas, which gave them a hope for individuality and freedom. Feiler writes that the story which they gravitated towards most was Moses’s. The whites were seen as Pharaoh, and the slaves dreamed of the day when their Moses would come and liberate them. When the Underground Railroad was formed and Harriet Tubman lead slaves to freedom, she was hailed as the “Moses of her people.” Feiler points out that this
allegory was so strong that Tubman even adopted the name Moses herself to keep her identity anonymous. Feiler names numerous other leaders of the fight for African American freedom of the nineteenth century as a Moses of their day such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, who gave assurance of freedom with her writings just like the writings of Moses and Abraham Lincoln who was praised with the title of “America’s greatest Moses.”

Feiler continues his analysis of how Moses has helped form America by looking at Moses in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In these ages, Moses has been seen as the figure who could restore America’s values. Feiler writes about Moses being brought to the big screen, which was meant to revive the passion people had towards him, with epic versions of his life entitled The Ten Commandments in both the 1920s and 1950s. Feiler also points out that, like in all times of war in America, bits of Moses were seen in leaders of the great World Wars, such as Woodrow Wilson’s effort of the League of Nations and Franklin Roosevelt gallantly saving Europe from fascism. Feiler further argues that Moses influenced other leaders, covering the Civil Rights powerhouse, Martin Luther King Jr. Feiler ends his work by posing the question of how Moses’s likeness is seen in America today. Feiler establishes that Moses is still a predominant force in America because his presence is desperately required in today’s broken society. Feiler concludes that Moses will continue to stand in America as long as he is needed to bring hope and unity to all.

Feiler creates a book that is both interesting and original. The way Feiler connects politics, revolution, and popular culture to the Moses story is eye-opening. The reader can clearly see Feiler’s passion for his topic with every printed word. Feiler, in
almost every other page, includes a simile or metaphor, which truly brings his book to life. However, at times, Feiler’s descriptive language seems to drive the book more than his commentary on how Moses influenced America. Feiler focuses a greater amount on his scenic sightseeing through his research rather than his argument for Moses being “America’s True Founding Father.” A bias can be sensed throughout Feiler’s book by knowing his Jewish background. The reader can tend to feel that Feiler’s writings is not just about educating America on the impact of Moses, but trying to convince predominately Christian America that the Old Testament was and still is influencing our country. America’s Prophet: How the Story of Moses Shaped America, with its weaknesses in mind, is more for the masses and leisurely reading than for historical research purposes. Nevertheless, Feiler’s narrative is still an insightful read.