

# Responses to our Socio-Political Context as Acts of Faith

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The central focus of this article is on the practical aspects of a life of faith and not on faith as a belief system. It is about the faith that is required as we encounter life and its challenges each day. Barring a few exceptions, much of the church teaching encourages a spirituality, which is individualistic, and a theology that prioritizes a very inward looking and self-absorbed journey. While personal salvation and piety are of great importance, such a focus has contributed partially to the neglect of the fact that Biblical narratives evolve from real life contexts and there are far greater prospects for application than what is generally derived. By and large we have limited our takeaways from the Scripture. Therefore, it is important for us to ask the following questions. Would our credible responses to the current contexts that we find ourselves in be factored as faith? Is our faith independent of such underpinnings?

It is in this realm that Moses' life offers us interesting insights where his responses to the socio-political context were considered as acts of faith. Moses' family lived in extremely difficult times. Law was at its cruellest worst. The Egyptians intensified their own record of wickedness with every new edict. As the Israelites increased in number the Egyptian leaders were clearly scared. So, all the might of the Egyptians was channelized to crush the Israelites. Moses' family stood up together in tough times, as many other Israelite families. His story, right from the outset, is set in defiance. His family defies the ruler's order and saves his life. The rest is history.

Against this backdrop, this article unpacks faith and the power of narratives in the next section. The third section examines the imperative to have a faith that is validated by God. Fourth section maps the contexts that demand a response. The last section summarizes the key lessons for our lives.

## II. FAITH AND THE POWER OF NARRATIVES

The power of a narrative to shape and direct our lives cannot be discounted. Acts of faith emerge from narratives that appeal to us. A vibrant faith intersecting with a captivating narrative inspires actions in our context. There are several parallel narratives that we hold together.

The impact of these narratives is evident in our decisions and the choices we make. How are narratives developed or how do we come to hold on to one narrative and reject other narratives? It could be our shared or individual experiences or the impact of our upbringing or education. Some narratives are compelling and powerful while others just coexist with the many memories. The dominance of these narratives is evident at some point or the other in the course of our life's journey.

While growing up, Moses was exposed to two very powerful narratives, Israeli and Egyptian. The former was part of his undeniable identity from birth and the latter the acquired identity of privilege from his palace upbringing. One narrative revolved around pain, poverty and oppression while the other narrative indicated power, wealth and honour. One narrative was of the oppressed and the other of the oppressor. In the narrative of the oppressors, their own image of themselves is normally good and clean unlike the opinion of others about them.

Moses was marginally part of the Israeli narrative for a few years of his early life. The favour from the palace might have eased the labour requirement for Moses' mother during the years Moses was being nursed with them, which probably might have been several years of his impressionable age. A child was weaned at a

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much later age in ancient times and culture unlike our modern practices. However, personal goodwill and kindness experienced did not distance them from the agony of their people nor did they approve or look away from the highhandedness of the Egyptians. They did not stop at the thought that God has been good to them and therefore they will be forever grateful to God. The collective distress of the community made its way to their home, which is evident from Moses' decisions later in his life. Hope and freedom also rang alongside as significant themes and the assurance that Yahweh would one day deliver them. The pain, the promise, the understanding of God and his identity left an indelible mark on Moses. The narrative of misery and suffering of his people stayed on as a gripping reality even after two decades.

A greater part of Moses' life till he was forty years old was soaked in the second narrative of wealth, luxury and power. It was shaped by the Egyptian upbringing since he moved to the palace. Being a prince, it was easy in many ways. The narrative from the palace provided him comfort, security and safety. The Egyptian rulers would have constantly vilified the Israelites and explored strategies and plans of organizing labour, enforcing better output, work, expansion, growth, monuments, structures of the state and many other similar refrains. These issues would have reverberated as part of Moses' Egyptian narrative right through the years of his training as a prince. In fact, he had the inside information pertaining to socio-economic policies and enforcement. Riding on the backs of the poor and on cheap labour the kingdom was thriving, and Moses was at the centre of the ruling narrative.

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What Moses encountered was two diametrically opposed worlds, one of the Israelites and the other of the Egyptians. But the narrative of the palace could not swallow up Moses or lull him to apathy. When he went out to visit the sites of labour as a prince, he identified himself with the narrative of the Israelites. All those years of training only ended in Moses being critical of the Egyptians. Moses could have justified the rulers' position, having lived and trained in the palace for many years. Moses did not allow his conscience to be shaped by the comfort or the security that the Palace narrative provided. The narrative of oppression rang louder and it compelled his allegiance. The time of reckoning had arrived, and Moses had to decide as to where he is going to align himself.

Powerful as the narrative from the Israeli camp was, it was ultimately the intersecting of that narrative with his understanding and knowledge of God that enabled Moses to take the call. Moses saw him who is invisible as he chose to leave the palace (Hebrews 11: 27).

### III. A FAITH VALIDATED BY GOD

Biblical scholars, preachers, and students of the Scripture have generated powerful and compelling images of Moses over centuries drawing from various accounts in the Scripture. Moses is greatly applauded for his leadership skills. He depended on God and led the people out of slavery and through the desert for forty years. We draw a lot of leadership lessons from his 40 years of leading the Israelites. Thus a summary of Moses' life of faith should include the time when God provided water, or got manna from heaven or the quails or even God's protection for the entire camp of Israelites from the heat of the day and the cold night in the wilderness. That is how we have generally come to appreciate the experiences of the people of great faith. The usage of the word faith in most times covers only certain actions which include, among many others, the depth of one's trust, faith for healing or receiving a miracle. Faith is mostly used when we want God to do something in our life, which limits our understanding, and expression of faith is mostly personal experiences. But Moses' record of faith lays out an entirely different picture, which is quite contrary to our commonly understood images.

The passage in Hebrews 11 focuses on Moses' life in the hall of fame of faith heroes. The writer of Hebrews under the guidance of the Spirit of God captures the most significant parts of Moses' faith journey. In the seven verses dedicated to Moses' life a common thread that runs across them is its direct or indirect link to Egypt. The forty years of journey through the desert is given a pass. Egypt, as a repetitive theme, resounds

strongly in the details laid out. All the verses that capture Moses' faith, are in reality, acts of confrontation against the mighty power of the Egyptians either by Moses or his parents or the people of Israel whom he led.

Faith begins at Moses' home. An act of civil disobedience is classified as faith (Hebrews 11: 23). God was at the centre of their action because they were able to discern that Moses was no ordinary child. How else

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were they to figure out that Moses was special? They were also not afraid of the King's edict because they were confident that their protection was from God. Factoring God at the centre of our response to the powers that be is what it takes for our action to be considered as faith. When justice and righteousness are the foundations of God's throne (Psalm 89:14) how can anyone be party to following or implementing an unjust law, particularly when the law discriminates and is aimed at decimating a particular race?

The listing of Moses' acts of faith continues and the next record is that of Moses' decision to leave the palace (Hebrews 11: 24-26). Moses was determined to turn his back on a nation that was brutally wicked. The reference to sin is instructive here from the two words of mistreatment and pleasure held together in verse 26. This may not indicate sin in the conventional understanding such as lust or moral depravity. But pleasures of sin in this context could have been the valuing and safeguarding of personal comfort and luxury in the midst of slavery and atrocities and turning a blind eye to injustice and oppression. The compulsion to look away and ignore the plight of those suffering must have been real. Placing a right value on things in a difficult context was what Moses actually did. Who walks out of the palace particularly when you are aware of where you are walking away from and walking right into? Moses was embracing pain, insecurity, hardship and he was antagonizing the powers with whom he could have conveniently sided. He was one of them and he could have worked out numerous ways of helping his people sitting right there in the palace. Walking out of the palace was a disgrace and also not the easiest decision to make, but he esteemed something else as far greater. Moses counted his disgrace as that which he bore for Christ.

Moses had to make tough decisions and it was God who propelled all his choices. He had no fear though he had much reason to be terrified when he was antagonizing the throne. It was faith that prompted Moses to leave Egypt and enabled him to persevere in his efforts. The account of Moses in Exodus gives us the impression that Moses ran away in fear and yet in Hebrews the account is of faith and assurance. Is there absolutely no fear in faith? How do we blend the entire picture? The major decision of leaving, turning away fearlessly and persevering is affirmed as faith in Hebrews. This was how God viewed the situation that Moses had found himself in.

Moses continued to be God's instrument of inflicting loss on the Egyptians (Hebrews 11: 28-29). God acted and it was credited to Moses as his acts of faith. Moses punctured the mighty power of Egypt. The loss of all the Egyptian firstborns and the loss of their mighty warriors were irreplaceable and God caused these setbacks. Moses was just a willing partner in God's mighty work. Moses needed the courage to stand and it was faith alone all the way. That is why in recounting of Moses' faith dissent, disdain and destruction become significant themes.

#### IV. CONTEXTS THAT DEMAND A RESPONSE

The life of Moses is an outstanding illustration of the integration of faith and political action. A response to the context was part of the story of faith and spiritual journey. Moses had absolute clarity and fine judgement about his context, he knew exactly what God wanted him to do and he had the courage and conviction to carry it out despite the threatening circumstances. Moses learnt his lesson of political defiance from his home as a little child, which formed the bedrock for a God-centred socio-political analysis. Imagine how the entire family would have navigated through their initial context. They

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risked just about everything, even their lives to make a choice. Young Miriam was coached so well that she was able to do the right things at the appropriate times and also communicate properly. Children were not shielded from the pain, hardships and compulsions of the times. The safety of the little baby brother, the possibility of his loss, being caught by the Egyptians was traumatic and painful experiences the young girl had to endure. But she weathers through them and ensures her brother is back at home with permission just to be nursed. These habits continued as Moses grew up and his parents made the best use of their time with him. Young as he was, Moses was instructed on his identity, his God, troubles, oppression and Egyptians. He had an encounter with God that was so powerful and strong that it stayed on long after. The early years of his stay with his family had a major impact on Moses' life and his political consciousness. It was far more powerful than all the learning that he acquired growing up as Pharaoh's daughter's son.

Every socio-political context is an outcome of the political decisions and policies besides other factors, which may be immediate, or that which evolve over a period of time. Politically the Egyptians had decided that they must obliterate an entire race of people slowly but surely. They worked out different ways of carrying it out. Their action plans of elimination gave birth to their social policy and the corresponding socio-political context. It is how Moses responded to this socio-political context that becomes the highlight of his faith. Moses could have been in their camp without oppressing. But staying in their camp was no option at all.

What does the socio-political context have to do with our faith and spirituality? Are they parallel trajectories or are they meant to intersect? All events that we read in the Scripture unfolded in a specific socio-political context and the response of God's people is instructive for our context even today. We distil lessons for personal piety from every passage in the Bible and the responses of the characters within their varied

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contexts becomes inconsequential. We have sanitized the Scripture of its socio-political linkages and limited its instruction, focus and impact. Prophets responded to the events in their socio-political context. When plans and policies stifled people, they held the leaders to account. They were voicing out God's view on the particular domestic context and the impact that it had on the people at large. Punishments on nations were the result of how they ruled their people, related to their neighbouring countries or conducted themselves in war and the prophets brought this message to the nations. Reading the Biblical texts without their socio-political, economic or cultural contexts has robbed us of a spirituality and engagement with our contexts, which goes beyond the confines of our churches and individual piety. What lessons do they hold for us besides just gleaning out promises for personal comfort?

The recovery of the Scripture to constantly inform our worldviews and shape our perspectives is an exercise of utmost importance. We must have a faith, which transcends the personal and makes an expression in the larger socio-political context and to know that it is a faith which God validates. An integration of our spirituality and context is critical. The religious and public life divide has limited our ability to read the Scriptures in a way that it is able to instruct and direct our everyday response to the varied contexts. In fact, much of

our Christian upbringing does not facilitate such reflection. When it comes to questions about the state our scope is very limited. We have a few verses to refer mostly pointing to submission and obedience to state authorities. Or, we promote personal excellence in service, which is bereft of any critical thinking or questions about the morality of policies. While any models and passages of Scripture cannot be negated, they should find their rightful place in the spectrum of how we engage the state as Christians. The verses must be rightly juxtaposed to the socio-political context and its implications. The alternate models of political engagement from the many examples in the Scripture must instruct our current focus. Every verse or passage of Scripture and the form of engagement that emerges from it has its specific and compelling context. Thus, there is an urgent need for a growing sensitivity among God's people to respond to their context in the light of God's word and its reflection.

## V. CONCLUSION

What are the lessons for us from Moses' life for the contexts we find ourselves in today? Parallel narratives coexist and it is a choice as to which narrative becomes our greater or decisive reality. What are the narratives that grip us, and which are the ones we choose to respond to or live by? Do we care to explore the multiple narratives that are present in our times? We have the narratives of the powerless and the powerful, the oppressed and the oppressors and the discriminated and the discriminators. We have narratives from the core and the margins. We have narratives of the ones who have access and opportunity and of others who are totally deprived. Some bear the brunt of the context more than others. For some their voices are not heard for others their labour is cheap. With such opposite narratives one can also choose to look away and say that one has no active part in the state of affairs. Can we cocoon ourselves at this time?

Many of us are secure and shielded from difficult narratives. Our Christian life has limited focus. Do we care to explore beyond our immediate reality. Our spirituality should motivate us to look beyond our personal concerns and interests and take definite actions because God favours actions that oppose brute power against the poor and the voiceless and counts our action as great faith.

Let Moses and his life be an example for us in our times. Our contexts may greatly vary and yet it is indispensable that we understand our context adequately and respond appropriately using the various models in the Scripture as a lens. In our society today we have admirable examples of people and institutions including a few Christians and Christian institutions who are turning their back on a divisive and insensitive system and choosing the path of positive engagement with those on the margins. For some it has taken a tone of dissent and resistance. What will be our reasonable response to our contexts beyond awareness and prayer? Like Moses let us expand the horizons of our faith for a greater engagement with the society.

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