

"Interview With Moses"

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Fr. Keith Streifel

After a recent opinion article in the newspaper I had in my mind an interview with Moses (you know, of "The Prince of Egypt" and Exodus). I am not claiming a vision or a hallucination, just imagining what Moses might say.

Me: Hello, Moses. Thank you for taking the time to visit with me. I've always admired the way you led your people and even prayed for them when they were disobedient. You are famous for giving the Ten Commandments. Which commandment of the Law did people have the hardest time accepting?

Moses: They are all hard, people are always stiff-necked when it involves change or inconvenience. Tell a guy "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods or thy neighbor's wife," and he says, "That's right, nobody should mess with my stuff." Tell him that it applies to him looking desirously at a new car or an attractive woman and he'll say, "Just because I'm on a diet, doesn't mean I can't look at the menu." People are funny like that.

Me: So, that's true of all the Commandments? What about "Thou shalt not kill?" That probably was a bit more cut and dried in your day.

Moses: Well, we didn't have carpet-bombing in our day. But, look, you're talking to a guy who killed a task-master because he was abusing one of my people. I've got a certain ...perspective, you could say. We had all the usual questions. "What about self-defense? Is war allowed? What about stoning?" Some of the questions are reasonable, point to the purpose of the law, and help to define the boundaries. Then there's, "What if I had a choice between killing an innocent and the end of the world?" That last one is just inflammatory, as if to say, "Well, we certainly

can't have that law. It's impossible to enforce because it might doom the whole world." Fear-mongering.

But the law is still a good one. I spent a lot of time judging, that's what we called our first leaders in the Promised Land. If, as a judge, I can't see every human being as a unique and significant puff of God-breath, I'm at a disadvantage when someone waves money at me or winks at just the right time. If, as a lawgiver, I only make laws about things without reference to the principle that human life is the basic right, I will soon be adrift in the minutiae of tax law and tent construction. If, on the other hand as a believer or citizen or official, I never lose sight of this self-evident truth, then justice for the whole tribe will follow.

We also had some things in ancient times that you don't have today, things our people learned from our neighbors when we started to forget our own story. So they would go to a foreign god to sacrifice their children hoping for prosperity. They thought it was a good choice, but this was definitely covered both by "Thou shalt not kill" and "Thou shalt have no other gods," which should have informed their choice.

Me: Oh, yes. That reminds me of how early Christians opposed the pagan Roman practice of exposure. If the father of the family didn't like the look of a child, thought there were too many, thought the paternity was questionable, or whatever, he would just command the child to be left out on a rock to die.

Moses: Speaking of rocks, if you read my books, you'll see that the penalty for child sacrifice was stoning. Some people are always opposed to a law that might get in the way of a good stoning. Without your big penal system, having a death penalty was a grim reality for the survival of the people and the functioning of the society. We had to keep both laws. Can you imagine a jail tent? What a fiasco!

Me: There are certainly advantages to not camping in a desert for forty years. With all these difficulties, how did you ever get the Law passed?

Moses: There are also advantages to living in a Prophetic Theocracy. When the Finger of God writes something in stone, you go with it. I think the pyrotechnics from Mount Sinai also helped. We still had some setbacks, like the unfortunate golden calf and miscellaneous murmuring. But on the whole, the Ten Commandments make sense not just because God said so. "Thou shalt not kill" and, in fact, the whole second tablet of the ten make sense for human beings even when, like I was saying before, we selfishly think they are best applied to everybody else.

Me: I guess that's why your picture appears on so many courthouses.