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The Prophet Moses

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Since one of the purposes of apologetics is to help unbelievers make sense of the faith, the great temptation of this enterprise is to reduce the components of the faith to concepts that make sense without faith. (Read this sentence again, if you need to, for it is the absolute nub of what follows.)

Suppose, for instance, I am arguing the merits of the Prophet Moses to someone who does not yet acquiesce in the message of the Torah. There may be a considerable temptation, in this case, to deal with the content of the Torah simply as a body of truths that recommend themselves to a sympathetic hearing by their internal symmetry, logical coherence, and other attractive features. That is say, I might try to advance the cause of Moses pretty much the way a Buddhist might recommend Gautama, or a Neo-Platonist put in a good word for Plotinus.

If such a procedure seems improbable today, this was not always so.

Consider the case of another Moses, whose patronymic was Mendelssohn (1729-1786). In recommending Judaism to the Rationalists of his day, Moses Mendelssohn was modest; he did not set himself to convert them. (Although conversions to Judaism were not unknown at that time, they were few and generally unannounced---cf. Mulsow and Popkin, *Secret Conversions to Judaism in Early Modern Europe*). He had in mind, rather, to procure normal civil and political rights for Jews in modern society. I sum up his message to his contemporary Rationalists: "Act rationally toward the Jews. Judaism is, after all, a rational religion."

In *Jerusalem, or on Religious Power and Judaism*, Mendelssohn's most enduring work (available in paperback everywhere), he argued that the Torah professed no metaphysical truths other than those of natural religion---truths, that is, accessible through the strenuous efforts of Reason. Therefore, the Jews---he went on---notwithstanding their unique history and particular legal observances, adhered to a rational faith, a faith wonderfully suited, moreover, to a modern, enlightened age.

Although this argument apparently influenced a few non-Jews (Kant and Hegel come to mind), I am less certain the original Moses would have appreciated Mendelssohn's effort. As I think on this, my mind struggles to picture Moses, as he descended from Sinai and beheld the commotion around the golden calf, summoning the children of Israel: "Whoa, guys, hold on a minute. Let's sit down together and calmly go over this covenant thing again."

Although the message from the Burning Bush would, in due course, alter the history of Metaphysics, it is unlikely that this thought crossed the mind of Moses at the time. It is not plausible to imagine that the Prophet, as he bent over to unstrap his sandals, was thinking to himself, "This is perfectly reasonable. I'm sure Pharaoh will understand."

It is significant that Moses never invited the Israelites to "think things through" with him. Indeed, this is one of the reasons it is difficult to compare him with men like Gautama and Plotinus.

Take Plotinus. Although he contributed significantly to the Porphyrian Tree, Plotinus picked no fruit from the Burning Bush. He went to great trouble in the pursuit of Wisdom, traveling around the Mediterranean and much of the Middle East. Unlike Moses---who seems never to have said, "On the other hand"---the great thinker from Lycopolis was fond of going over the enduring philosophical questions from different perspectives.

Take Gautama. Although he received enlightenment as he sat under the Bodhi Tree, that famous plant had little in common with the Burning Bush. Unlike the discourse of Moses on Mount Nebo, Gautama's sermon in the Deer Park made no appeal to faith. When he proclaimed his Four Noble Truths, they were not propositions requiring assent. They were---and were intended to be---simple assertions which anybody, Gautama believed, could test for himself. Accordingly, he explained the Chain of Causation by a direct appeal to empirical evidence. Gautama essentially said, "Try this, guys. It worked for me."

Not Moses. He did not tell the Israelites, "Okay, everybody, take turns. Each of you, go up the mountain and check things out. Don't take my word for it. Anybody can learn this stuff. Even Pharaoh could have picked it up, if he had paid attention."

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