



# Dis-Disabling Moses

[Matthew J.M. Coomber](#); St.  
Ambrose Univeristy



While I didn't read any reviews of Ridley Scott's *Exodus: Gods and Kings* before walking into the theater—so as to be as free from outside critique as possible—a significant concern arose from the moment I saw the trailer: Moses, played by Christian Bale, would not have a stammer. What's more, Moses was going to be a sort of superman.

I'm not a big fan of Superman. It's not that I have anything against the man, I just can't relate to him. Superman's *too* good. Take a bank robbery as an example. First, Superman can use his x-ray vision to see through the walls to locate the bad guys. Than after smashing through the walls with his super-strength, Superman can rely on his heat vision to disarm the criminals and free the captives' from their bindings. And should Superman somehow mess it all up, he can simply fly around the world—against the earth's rotation—to turn back time and attempt the rescue as many times as he needs to. Plus, Superman's moral compass is super-tuned. What can't Superman do... well, aside from kryptonite-related activities? I'm not a big fan of Superman because Superman blazes a path that I can't follow. I can admire him, but how can I put his example to use? I'm just a tall flat-footed clumsy guy who hits his head on doorways and the occasional ceiling fan. And as for my moral compass, it's a constant work in progress. Rather than going through life with bold certainty, I struggle with questions of good, evil, and justice, and what each of these things mean: on a *good day* I get it right more than I get it wrong. Perhaps that's why the Bible isn't filled with characters like Superman, but with very

real people who do super things: people to whom we can relate. This brings us back to the character of Moses in *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, and how his is so very different from the Moses of the Bible.

Whereas Scott has portrayed Moses as a superman—bursting with self-confidence—the Moses off of whom he's based couldn't be more different. The Bible's Moses was no superman. Moses is born into and continually revisited by the types of challenges and tragedies that can break a person. The Bible's Moses is a frightened and pathologically insecure man. The Bible's Moses is also disabled.

While the book of Exodus gives scant information on Moses' early years, his birth narrative is set in a royal infanticide-campaign that made sending babies down rivers in makeshift baskets a viable survival strategy; amazingly, Moses is rescued by Pharaoh's daughter and raised in the Egyptian royal family. But after murdering a slave driver—resulting in a death warrant issued by his adopted family—Moses flees into hostile wilderness where he marries and starts a family. It's after finding peace, belonging, and acceptance in the land of Midian that God taps him to return to the land from which he'd fled to save a people who see him as an oppressor. As one might expect from any rational human being, the Bible's Moses refuses to go.

Unlike Ridley Scott's Moses, who responds to God's charge as a bold—albeit initially confused—general who's ready to die in battle, the Bible's Moses is terrified and delves into a litany of excuses as to why he shouldn't go. The Bible's Moses believes himself to be insufficient. The Bible's Moses is certain that there must be a Christian Bale-like Moses out there—with perfect muscular structure and an effortless command of self-confidence—who can do the job much better than he could...but God disagrees. Rather than lashing out at Moses' refusal, God tries to comfort him, assuring Moses that God will be with Moses every step of the way. But it

isn't until after Moses runs out of excuses that he finally addresses the issue that God—and anyone who'd ever known Moses—was well aware of; Moses has a speech impediment: he struggles with a stammer (4:10). Now, *this* is a hero to whom I can relate. This is an aspect of the story that has a very important message to convey!

I've never been challenged with a stammer, but I did struggle with Attention Deficit Disorder—from childhood on through my early twenties—which had its own challenges. At the start of the school day I would promise myself that I'd pay attention in class and concentrate on what the teacher was saying. But within minutes of the first bell my mind would jump from one thing to another, whether the color of a car passing by the window or a crack in the ceiling. It wasn't a disability that could be seen or heard, but it was one that was perceived by my peers, some of who bullied me on a frequent basis. At that age and in those circumstances, I would have seen Ridley Scott's Moses as the kind of kid to get picked first on the playground. I would have walked out of the cinema thinking, "of course God picked him! We pick the noticeably strong and skilled, and so does God." But where's the great story in that? What the book of Exodus does is far more powerful.

In chapters 3–4 of Exodus, God is making a huge choice; God chooses God's voice on earth—the voice that will confront the mighty Pharaoh and his councilors. But unlike the aforementioned playground mentality, God's choice cuts across our expectations. Rather than a god that chooses those amongst us who exhibit great strength and power, we find a god that seeks people's potential in order to draw out the strength and power that they never knew they had. This god doesn't seem to get tripped up by skin-deep concerns that cause us to erect self-imposed limitations. Rather, we find a god that sees past the surface, through our defenses, and helps us discover strengths and powers we never realized we had. Perhaps, like most of us, Moses couldn't see his own potential. Stammers become most severe when confronted with

anxiety, and what could be more stressful than returning to Egypt, confronting a family that had called for your head, and telling them that a shrubbery sent you to release the backbone of their economy? After suffering ridicule for his stammer, maybe Moses assumed it was all just a rouse, and that God was just the next in line to make a cutting joke. But with God's encouragement, Moses does go back. And while his brother Aaron handles some of the talking, Moses gains his footing and discovers his ability to speak truth to power...with his stammer. Now *this* is a Bible hero that people can relate to and learn from. Here is a god that subverts the way our world's power structures work. What a difference it would have made for me to have been introduced to Moses' disability when I was young and struggling with ADD. What a difference it could make for any child or adult as they wrestle with the challenges they face. And what a value it could have for challenging our societal perceptions of disability. So why is the Bible's Moses and this god missing from *Exodus: Gods and Kings*?

Ridley Scott was never going to—nor should have tried to—make everyone happy. There's no way a film can address every aspect of Moses' story. But how can an aspect of his story that would have so profoundly affected Moses' character and mission be left out? When we turn biblical characters into supermen, we not only strip them of the reliability that their original authors gave them, we also reinforce dysfunctional social constructions of power, prestige, and ability. While there were aspects of the movie that I did enjoy, Scott missed an opportunity to help us question the popular fallacy that it takes superhumans to face super challenges.

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