



Reading

*The Red Sea Between Us
And something has allowed me
To get from there to here
Some miracle of passage
Some magic that has parted the sea
Between us and carved a dry path
From among the waves and formed
A wall of water on my right
And on my left
And the power of Pharaoh behind me
Is washed away and I Am has delivered me
On this distant shore
My old life fades from memory
Like a dream that is only half-remembered
And seems unreal and somehow
Unattached from me as if I were born anew
This very moment*

Doug Tanoury <http://home.comcast.net/~dtanoury1/ExodusPoems.pdf>

Sermon

Some time ago I was surfing the channels and happened upon one of those shows claiming to unlock the mysteries of the Bible. This particular show focused on the plagues that convinced Pharaoh to let the Israelites go, and the parting of the Red Sea that allowed them to escape the oncoming Egyptian army. Their goal was to use scientific proof to show that these miracles actually could have happened. Perhaps a strong wind blew half the Red Sea against one of its banks so that the Israelites could cross on dry ground. Perhaps the Israelites crossed over at low tide leaving the Egyptian army stuck when the tide rolled back in.

In the last two hundred years or so, Biblical scholars, historians, and archaeologists have offered ongoing proof that many of the stories in the Bible couldn't possibly be literally true, and this leaves many people who consider themselves religious in a bind. Does their faith mean nothing? Is it all a lie? And rather than look at the possibility that faith might mean something different, that faith is about much more than simply believing, the Discovery Channel looks for scientific proof for the stories in the Bible. The fact is that it's highly unlikely that there ever was a literal exodus from Egypt, there was likely no actual Moses so he couldn't possibly have written the book of Exodus. The timelines are wrong, the history is

wrong, the politics is wrong, and Biblical literalists are usually completely oblivious to the religious tradition that created the Scriptures they take so literally – and that is the tradition of Judaism.

This is what we know about the book of Exodus where we find the story of Moses. The Book of Exodus comes from stories that used to be told orally, and by that I mean that these stories were not written down. In Ancient Times, most people were illiterate and wisdom, truth and knowledge was passed on through the telling of stories. Most of the stories you see in Exodus had been passed down generation upon generation, and what do we know about stories that are told orally rather than written down – they change based on who is telling the story, and they change based on who the story is told to and why the story is told.

We see this in our own lives every day. Look at the different ways the shooting in Tucson has been covered this week. MSNBC, CNN, Huffington Post, and FOX news have their own angle. The story is different based on who is telling it and who they think is listening. Stories also change depending on how many people are telling it. How many of you used to play a game where you sit in a circle and one person whispers a sentence in someone's ear, who then whispers it to the next person, until you go all around the circle, and then the last person shares what they heard? What happened? The sentence changed by the time it got to the last person. What happened to the stories of the Israelites is kind of like that. Things got added, things were left, and over centuries the stories kept growing and changing and becoming different kinds of truth. The story of Moses and the Egyptians and the wandering in the Desert and the arrival in the Promised Land happened this way.

There are different theories about how these stories came to be written down to become the Jewish Scriptures we know today. One theory is that Exodus came to be written during a time when the Jewish people were in incredible transition. About 2400 years ago, the Babylonians invaded Israel and forced the Jewish people into exile in the hopes that they would weaken and assimilate into Babylon. The Babylonians were truly hated by the Jewish people who resisted in any way they could.

One way to resist was to make sure that they were able to protect the stories that told them who they were. They did this in two ways. First, the stories were told over and over again to help make sense of their painful circumstances. The Babylonians became the new Egyptians. The exile was their slavery. And the Promised Land was the land they had been thrown out of. The Jewish people were waiting for a new Moses to part the Red Sea and take them home. The second way they resisted was to begin writing down their stories so that no matter what happened, and no matter how many people died or how long they were in exile, their sacred stories, the stories that defined them, would live on.

When the Persian Empire beat back the Babylonians, their prayers were answered. They got to go home. And when they got there, once again, as the walls of the Red Sea closed behind them, they found themselves in a desert, the desert of their hopes and dreams.

Everything had changed; nothing was the same, and their foremost desire was to rebuild their traditions and their culture and society. So they took all those stories, the fragments that had been written while in exile, and brought them together to create a unified Jewish Scripture. And how that happened was amazing. These scholars were like weavers on a loom, weaving themselves out of the desert of hopelessness, drawing together threads of stories that had been spun over centuries, and over decades and centuries they created what we know today as the Torah, the first five books of the Jewish Bible, that tell the story of the beginning of the world, the creation of the people of Israel, the laws that would bind them together, and the journey through the desert to the Promised Land. These scholars considered themselves to be channeling the God that had led them out of slavery and into freedom not once, but twice. This was an organic complicated slow creative painstaking process and we really have no idea how many people or groups of people were involved in its creation, who decided what was included and what wasn't, and exactly how long it took. But somewhere along the line, it was considered finished.

Now there are some people who would look at this and say, well that proves it, the Bible is a lie. It has no meaning and no truth. It's just a bunch of stories written by a bunch of ancient guys a long time ago and it has nothing to say to us today. But I think that's missing the point. That's falling into the trap of the Discovery Channel.

The Jewish Bible developed as a sacred tool of cultural and spiritual survival. It was an ongoing relationship between the Jewish people and between them and the God they believed walked with them. The stories were brought together to recreate a people and a way of life, and their Scripture was written with the expectation that no matter what the world did to them, no matter how beaten down they were, they never need be in the desert again because their home was in the Torah. They could turn to their scriptures and re-enter that sacred relationship, thus finding the wisdom, truth and knowledge they needed to give their life circumstances meaning and direction and understanding. When the Scripture was considered finished, it remained profoundly alive.

The creation of the Jewish Bible has offered the world one of the most compelling and powerful stories we have, a story that has shaped human history for almost 3000 years. It's not just a story. It's a way to see the world. It carries the universal truth that for all of human history, we have been a species that seeks both freedom and home. Let me give you some examples of how this story has been used.

American Revolutionaries used the Exodus story to argue that the war to overthrow the British was a religious war. Britain was Pharaoh and the American people were its enslaved subjects. America under British rule was Canaan. Freed from British oppression, it would become the Promised Land.

During the Civil War, white southerners saw the North as their Egypt, with Lincoln as the evil Pharaoh who denied them the freedom to secede from the Union and secure their Promised

Land. At the same time, African American slaves made those same southerners their Pharaoh and the Mason-Dixon line their Red Sea. The Underground Railroad used many phrases from Exodus as code words. Canada was the Promised Land. The Mississippi River and the Ohio River were the Jordan, and Harriet Tubman was Moses.

When the Civil War ended and reconstruction began, it became painfully clear that African Americans would continue to find themselves in the desert. They had crossed the Red Sea. Slavery was over and they were free. No one could ever own them again. But slavery had been replaced with segregation. So they would open their Bibles to the book of Exodus, and see their lives in the lines of Scripture. They would read about the plagues that God sent to convince Pharaoh to let the Israelites go, and they would ask, what will it take to convince white people to end segregation? They would read about the attempt to break the Jewish people by killing their sons, and the story of Moses' mother sending her baby down the Nile in a basket of reeds, and then finding herself as a nursemaid to Pharaoh's wife, and they would see how many African American women kept their families fed and clothed by serving white women and taking care of white children.

Martin Luther King would read the story of how the Israelites, tiring of their endless wandering in the desert, would say to Moses, "This is terrible! It would have been better to stay in Egypt!" and he would see that not only were African Americans enslaved by the prejudice around them, they had internalized the slavery and it lived in their hearts. They had left Egypt but Egypt hadn't left them. He and many others were beginning to understand that you could get to a place where the discrimination you knew felt safer than the freedom you didn't. How much of his preaching was about building up the spirit of all people so they could come to know their inherent worth and dignity? And through all this, they waited for their Moses, the leader who would take them out of their oppression and into the Promised Land.

Martin Luther King was seen by many as the African American Moses. Perhaps his march on Washington would convince Egypt to let its people free. Perhaps he would lead his people to the Red Sea and perhaps the waters would part for them and they would cross to the other side, leaving behind not only the prejudice that oppressed them from the outside, but also the internalized racism that oppressed them from within. Perhaps they would stand by the River Jordan and the walls of Jericho would come crashing down and they would be home.

When Martin Luther King was killed, it was clear that we weren't out of the desert yet, that like the Israelites wandering the desert, freedom was not something that would come in an instant, that it wouldn't magically appear as the walls of water came crashing back over the Red Sea, drowning the Egyptian army and all it came to represent. For some, being thrust back into the desert was too much, and they erupted into violence whose repercussions still shake through our country today. There were some who saw the riots erupting in the streets, and thought to themselves, we have made our Golden Calf. We have lost our way. Others

did what the Jewish people did thousands of years ago, return to the Scriptures that gave their lives meaning, and see that their Promised Land could not be just what the world would give them – land, rights, freedom - but it would live in their own hearts so that no matter what happened, and they would be home.

Even though the words of the Jewish Scriptures haven't changed in 2000 years or more, they continue to be alive. Millions have seen their lives in the stories painstakingly woven many years ago by a people who came to understand deeply that survival isn't just about food and water, and home isn't just about walls, a roof, and land to put it on, but about an inner worth and dignity and assurance that you are loved, and then, you are always home and you are always free. Amen and blessed be.

Sources

The Book of Exodus, *NRSV*

The Exodus in American History and Culture, Scott M. Langston