
Reading the Bible and Letting the Bible Read You

Exodus 1:8-2:10

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on August 21, 2011, by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

I wonder if you've ever had the experience of realizing that you and another person have both been reading the same story, but have been interpreting it in a very different way. 25 years ago I went to see the film *The Mission*. The film is set in South America in the eighteenth-century. It portrays a group of Spanish Jesuits who go into the Paraguayan rainforest to convert the local Guarani people. One of the Jesuits is a recent convert who goes as a penance for having killed his brother in a passionate duel over a woman they both love. The mission is a miraculous success: we're given an idyllic picture of Catholic teaching blended with indigenous culture. But a sinister treaty signed in Europe transfers sovereignty of the territory from Spanish to Portuguese hands. Suddenly, the mission is in serious danger. Unlike Spain, Portugal has no law against slavery. So there's nothing to stop a horde of rapacious Portuguese plantation-owners who descend upon the mission, determined to enslave the population. The Jesuits are divided as to how to respond: some train the local people to take up the sword; others simply walk toward the attackers holding the blessed sacrament. The ruthless Portuguese slaughter both groups with equal vigor. The film ends with local children rescuing precious relics from the mission and taking them deeper into the jungle, and with the words of John's gospel: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

After I'd seen the movie, a friend asked if I liked it. I said, "It's beautiful and affecting and tragic, but I thought as a religious film it left a bit to be desired." "Oh," she replied, quite taken aback. "I never thought of it as a *religious* film." There was I, thinking it was all about repentance and evangelism and the sacraments and Christian nonviolence. And there was she, thinking it was about colonialism and slavery and popular struggles and injustice. I thought she was ridiculous. It was obviously a film about Christianity. But she thought I was being ridiculous, because it was obviously a film about colonialism. In truth, we were both right.

I want to suggest that reading the Bible is very much like watching that film. What I'm going to do today is to read with you the opening verses of the Book of Exodus and see what happens to us as we read them. Remember that this is the beginning of one of the most influential, formative, and explosive stories in the whole of world literature.

Let's read this awesome and electric story. Pharaoh sets his heart against the Hebrew people and makes them slaves. Getting increasingly nervous, he determines to kill all the Hebrew males at birth. Thwarted by the local midwives, he orders his people to throw every baby Hebrew boy into the Nile. But one Hebrew woman floats her son down the river in a papyrus basket. Pharaoh's own daughter spots the baby, adopts him, and hires his real mother to be his nurse. She calls the child Moses.

Think about what's happening here. Life coming up out of the chaos of the waters. It's a new creation story. A little boat, floating on a dangerous piece of water, containing the destiny of God's promises. It's a new Noah's ark story. One human being, through whom God plans the blessing and deliverance of a particular people. It's a new Abraham story. So already, by chapter 2, Exodus has woven together the themes of the Book of Genesis—the beginning, the new beginning after the Fall, and the beginning of Israel. We're about to witness the fourth beginning. We've gathered for the breaking of the waters. We've come to see a birth.

And look at how the story of Moses and his basket is a microcosm of the story of the exodus as a whole. Moses and his mother are dangerous dwellers in Pharaoh's court just as the Hebrews are a threatening presence in the land of Egypt. Moses is set among reeds; later, he leads his people through the Sea of Reeds—the Red Sea. Moses comes up out of the water just as the children of Israel will later come up out of the water. Moses' unnamed sister plays a vital role in this watery rescue just as Moses' sister Miriam plays a vital role in

the crossing of the Red Sea. The midwives of the Hebrew boys' deliverance anticipate the way Moses becomes the midwife of God's deliverance of Israel.

And look at how many themes from this story reappear in the story of Jesus. King Herod becomes a latter-day Pharaoh, seeking to destroy every young boy in Bethlehem. Jesus' rescue involves Egypt, just like the Hebrews' rescue does. Jesus goes down into the place of death and emerges, miraculously, as the first of many to find new life.

This is how we read the Bible – noticing layer upon layer of repetition, correspondence, added significance, and extra dimensions. The closer you get to the story, the more you see, the richer the resonance of every phrase. You become practiced at discerning God's hand at work. How do you learn to do this? Well, think carefully how you hold the Bible. When you open the Bible you always hold it in two hands. When you hold it in two hands it's always an offering you're giving to God, and it's always, more importantly, a gift *from* God that you're receiving as carefully as you can. In other words, by holding the Bible in two hands you're always remembering that reading the Bible is an act of worship. Opening the Bible is opening your heart and life up to be touched and changed by God. It's saying to the Holy Spirit, "I'm expecting you to do something right now. Surprise me."

But think also about your left hand and your right hand. In your left hand you hold the Old Testament; in your right hand you hold the New. Christians read the New Testament in the light of the Old and the Old Testament in the light of the New. In your left hand you carry Israel, the Jewish people; in your right hand, you carry the church. Christians never read the Bible alone: they always read the Bible through the eyes of the Jews and in the company of the church.

But reading the Bible is only half the story. It takes time, and practice, and patience, and care – but it's still the easy part. I'm now going to tell you what the difficult part is. The difficult part is letting the Bible read *you*. What on earth could that mean?

Let's go back to the conversation I had with my friend 25 years ago about the movie *The Mission*. We both thought carefully about the film. I thought it was about evangelism and she thought it was about colonialism, and earlier I said we were both right. In fact, we were both wrong. Why? Because we both pondered the plight of those wonderful Jesuits and how they should respond to the rapacious Portuguese. In other words, we both *read* the story. But neither of us *let the story read us*. If we had, we'd have realized that in this story we two educated Westerners weren't the Jesuits and we weren't the Spanish and we certainly weren't the local people. *We were the Portuguese*. We were the exploiters, we were the slaveholders, we were the invaders, we were the ruthless murderers.

If you read between the lines of the movie, you see that the twentieth- and twenty-first century rape of the rainforest in the same region of South America has been far more damaging and far-reaching than the actions of the eighteenth-century Portuguese. Then what seemed at first to be a sad, poignant, beautiful film that leaves us moved and touched turns into an uncompromising, devastating exposé of the way we in the West make the rest of the world pay for us to maintain our comfortable lifestyle. We Westerners leave the cinema angry, defensive, searching for excuses and wishing we'd never been made to feel so uncomfortable and guilty. We are the Portuguese. Ouch. That's what happens if we allow the film to read us.

Let's get back to the exodus. When Western Christians read the story of the exodus of course we identify with the Hebrews. We've known hardship, we've known oppression, we've known despair. And God hears our cries, sees our distress, rages against injustice, and comes to set us free. Sure, there's bound to be a few Egyptian casualties, but this is a story of God meeting us in our experience of slavery and parting the Red Sea to give us freedom and joy.

That's what it's like to read this story. But what would it mean to let this story read us? By this time I hope you're beginning to feel angry, and defensive. I trust you're beginning to feel that sense of a knot in your

stomach and the fury that comes from seeing something that you thought belonged to you being carried off by the bailiff or the burglar. I'm not surprised if you feel like that, because that's what it feels like to let the Bible read you. When we let the story of the exodus read us we realize to our horror and dismay that in this story we're not the innocent Hebrews. We're the Egyptians.

Notice what Pharaoh says in the part of the story we read today. "Look," he says, "Egypt is crawling with immigrants. There's too many of them. If we're not careful they'll outnumber us. They're unEgyptian. They have too many children. They're at fault for everything that's wrong round here." That's the kind of thing we say. Pharaoh believes he's rich and powerful because he's worked hard, and he thinks, "I'm not going to let the weak, the immigrant, or the underclass take away my entitlement." That's the kind of thing we think. Pharaoh makes up a story, a story of fear and mistrust and suspicion. He says "They might outnumber us, there might be a war, they might fight with our enemies, they might run away." That's the kind of story we make up, and then we run to politicians who stoke our fears and play on our mistrust.

That's what we discover when we begin to let the story read *us*. So you can see why we don't do it. We keep the story in a pious cocoon. Yes it's about oppression and deliverance, and not many of us are actually slaves or suffer under merciless taskmasters. So we spiritualize the story and say it's really about deliverance from fear, or temptation, or loneliness, or illness. Don't get me wrong, these spiritual things are real and important. But put yourself in Paraguay right now, and see what it looks like when we Western Christians watch *The Mission* and it doesn't occur to us that *we're* the Portuguese. Put yourself on the Gaza Strip right now and see what it looks like that we Western Christians are reading the Exodus story and yet it doesn't occur to us for one moment that *we're* the enslaving Egyptians – that *we're* the oppressive Pharaoh.

Of course we don't want to read the story that way because it makes us feel miserable and embarrassed and guilty and wrong. And we quite happily tell everybody "Oh yes, I read my Bible" – until we come across someone whose life really does look like that of a Hebrew slave, who says to us, "I bet you do: but do you ever allow your Bible to read *you*?"

On the face of it this is terrible news. We read the Bible and we're inspired and liberated. And then we let the Bible read *us*, and we're exposed and full of guilt. But wait a moment. When we open the Bible it's not just an enacted prayer that God may open our hearts; it's also a prayer that the Holy Spirit may tell us something we didn't already know, may show us someone we hadn't ever taken notice of, may give us what we need to live penitent, renewed lives as forgiven sinners. So let's now read this story a third time, sobered and humble as it's left us. It turns out we're Egyptians in this story, and we're feeling pretty sore about it.

Here's the surprising good news, Egyptians that we are. There's more than one way to be an Egyptian.

Look at Pharaoh's daughter. She's got privilege. She benefits from the policies of the oppressor. (He's her dad, after all.) But in her own flawed, but beautiful, way, she imitates God. She sees the child in the basket. She hears the cries of this infant in peril, just as God at the burning bush later says to Moses, "I have seen your suffering and heard your cries." Pharaoh's daughter *incubates the exodus*. She's an Egyptian, sure, but she can still be on the side of the kingdom. Maybe, so can we. Could you incubate an exodus? Could you be an Egyptian on the side of the kingdom?

And look at the midwives. It's not clear whether they're Hebrews or Egyptians. But they fear God, and they refuse to carry out their orders. Going against the Pharaoh's instructions, they let the Hebrew boys live. It's been called the first recorded act of civil disobedience in world literature. The midwives may have been Egyptians, but they found a way to subvert the oppression they were ordered to be a part of. Maybe, so can we. Could you orchestrate divine disobedience? Is that what you're being called to do right now?

Here's the beginning of the exodus, the pivotal story of the Old Testament, the template onto which the early church imprinted the death and resurrection of Christ. Read it, and enjoy all its dimensions of liberation. And then, if you dare, *let it read you*, and repent of where we, Christians in the West, truly belong in this story. But

don't despair. Find the humility and the hope to *read it one more time*, and let it show you how to be a subversive Christian in our Egyptian culture. Let it show you how to see suffering. Let it reveal how to hear the cry of those we oppress. Let it portray how to incubate liberation in its infancy. Let it demonstrate how to fear God. And let it call you to exercise God's civil, but divine, disobedience.