

## RELATING THE EXODUS TO OUR PERSONAL LIVES

This material is for Fr. Craig Townsend's class on April 6, 2022 about the exodus. Please do not distribute the material for any other purpose without my consent. The material is being prepared for a forthcoming book and is protected by copyright laws.

The book is tentatively titled *Living Better: Inspired by the Story behind the Bible*. To help you relate the Bible to your own experiences, I focus on a key point of each biblical narrative and show why the point mattered to the Israelites writing the story. To bring the story into our world today, I relate it to my life, and I put it in a broader context by including experiences of friends and relatives and views of social scientists. The discussion blends religious and historical observations with memoir, psychological insights, sociological perspectives, and self-help.

The book begins with the creation and flood along with Abraham and his progeny in Genesis, then it considers the deliverance of the Israelite slaves in Exodus, and it concludes with the vision of the promised land in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The following material about the exodus is attached:

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Besides the class discussion, I would appreciate hearing any of your comments before or after the discussion. Below is my contact information.

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## INTRODUCTION

### TELLING OUR STORIES

On a leisurely Saturday morning a while after my grandparents had died, I was browsing through a bookstore near my home in New York City. Ever since my childhood on their farm in Minnesota, they had anchored my life. Now that they had passed away, I was searching for another anchor.

In the bookstore that Saturday morning, I was drawn to the religion section, looking at books on the Bible. Although the Bible had been a lifeline to my grandparents, it had brought me nothing but disappointment. I had hoped that scripture would comfort me during my troubled relationship with my mother and stepfather after they took me from the farm to live with them in Minneapolis. But it never did. By the time I left for college, law school, and a long career as a lawyer in New York City, I felt the Bible had little connection to my life.

As I pulled one book after another off the shelf, a study Bible caught my attention. It was the first book I had seen that explained how the Bible was written. It described who wrote the stories and when, where, how, and why they wrote them. I learned that biblical writers often told the stories to help people cope with problems in their communities. Once I understood this, I could see ways that their problems were like mine and stories helping them would benefit me too. Instead of getting bogged down by archaic language, ancient cultural norms, or an overly literal approach, we can relate the fundamental points raised by the stories to our lives now.

Take the exodus, for example. As told in the Bible, the exodus is a story about God rescuing the Israelites from bondage under an Egyptian pharaoh. Before I looked at how the story was written, I knew that it was about freedom and justice for the Israelite slaves, it was key to Jewish identity, and it

was part of the Christian story of salvation. But I had difficulty relating the exodus to the world I knew. After studying the story's origins, I was able to empathize with the Israelites freed from slavery and found inspiration to prevail over hardships of my own. When we struggle with adversity, the story offers hope that we can break free. It can help us find the strength to overcome troubled pasts, broken relationships, economic hardships, and other barriers to becoming the person we were meant to be.

If we look at the origins of the exodus story, we can see that it was based on real events. The archaic language at the core of the story indicates that it is one of the oldest in the Bible. Its significance to the Israelites since early times, its historical context, and details like the Egyptian name of Moses all suggest the story actually happened. But no written records or archaeological evidence back up the huge exodus of the Israelites recounted in the Bible. Given the lack of evidence for the biblical count, the actual exodus probably involved a smaller number of people who had been captured by Egyptians and were working as slaves in fields and military installations.

After the exodus, the Israelites kept telling the story because it resonated with their community just as it does with us today. Upon leaving Egypt, the escaped slaves settled in villages in what is now Israel and praised God for saving them. Their story inspired other villagers who likewise had been dominated by Egyptian and other powerful groups. Eventually all the villagers adopted the story as their own, giving them confidence to resist attacks and overcome setbacks. Throughout many centuries, the story was originally passed along by word of mouth, later written down, expanded, and revised, and finally included in the Bible.

Just as the Israelite community did, we can make the story of divine deliverance our own. The origins of the exodus story help me connect the story to my personal experience of redemption. Redemption can mean deliverance from sin as Christians tend to emphasize or deliverance from harm as the exodus story emphasizes. I relate the exodus to God saving me through my grandparents' love

from the damaging effects of parental abuse. They provided a refuge from my parents and encouraged a better direction for my life. But for their love, my parents' mistreatment would have had far worse consequences.

This book is intended to provide a springboard for you to relate the Bible to your own experiences by looking at how the text was written. To help you relate the Bible to your life, I focus on a key point of each biblical narrative and show why the point mattered to the Israelites writing the story. To bring the story into our world today, I relate it to my life, and I put it in a broader context by including experiences of friends and relatives and views of social scientists. The discussion blends religious and historical observations with memoir, psychological insights, sociological perspectives, and self-help.

My quest to embrace the Bible with this kind of enthusiasm was driven by nostalgia for my grandparents' farm. Since I was a young child, the farm was a safe haven where I felt God's love and learned to cherish scripture. While I lived there with my grandparents, my grandfather's parents, and my uncle and aunt, they kept their Bibles on top of their dressers in the bedrooms and took them down to read in quiet times of grief, anxiety, or devotion. On a nearby farm, my grandmother's father kept his Bible on the side table next to his armchair in the living room. There he alternated between scripture passages and *Newsweek* magazine, watched the news on television, and talked with visitors about political and religious matters of the day. With enormous pride, my grandmother said that he had read the entire Bible several times and "even the ministers in town marvel at how well he knows it."

If I had stayed on the farm while growing up, the Bible might have become my bedrock in the same way it had been for my grandparents. But my life changed dramatically when my mother and stepfather took me to live with them in Minneapolis during the school year. At first, they seemed aloof in a house that lacked any warmth, and then they became increasingly abusive. Looking for

consolation, I spotted a Bible next to the knickknacks in the living room and read all 50 chapters of its first book, Genesis. By then, I was overwhelmed by the massive effort I had made and how little it had helped me. So I turned to schoolwork to distract me from the chaos at my house, and after high school, I left home for Carleton College 50 miles away. Eventually I attended law school at New York University and became a lawyer in New York City.

Many years later, after my grandparents had died, I tried to rekindle the reverence I once had for scripture. First I attended a few Bible study classes, but just like my childhood attempts at reading the Bible, the people, places, and events in the stories seemed so removed from my experience that I could not yet see their relevance to me. Trying a different approach, I organized a discussion group to talk about the spiritual side of life with my Christian, Jewish, and secular friends. I was looking for background reading for the group when I discovered the study Bible that described how the Bible was written.

Finding this way to read the Bible was so enthralling that I reduced my law practice and enrolled in a Master of Divinity program at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Back in 1893, the Presbyterian Church's trial of a Union professor for heresy was a dramatic instance of the culture wars over the Bible's origins that continue to this day. Intrigued by European scholars, Union's professor Charles Briggs disagreed with the traditional Jewish and Christian view that Moses wrote the Bible's first five books. Briggs contended that these books were written by several authors, resulting in repetitions and inconsistencies, and reflecting cultural views at odds with scientific and historical facts. Even though Briggs considered the Bible infallible on matters of faith, the Presbyterian Church found him guilty of heresy for teaching that scripture may have errors.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this setback, Briggs's views prevailed. In the twentieth century, the Presbyterian Church (USA) along with many other Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish groups accepted historical studies of

how the Bible was written.<sup>2</sup> They recognized that the biblical writers reflected the culture of their time and place, and consequently, learning about the culture of these writers gives us a better understanding of the Bible. Yet accepting the Bible's origins from a historical perspective does not mean rejecting scripture as "the Word of God." Many people of faith believe the text is divinely inspired even though the writers were influenced by their historical setting.

In this book, we consider the biblical stories in the order they appear in the first five books of the Bible traditionally assumed to be written by Moses—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These books are known to Jews as the Torah (Hebrew for "teachings") and to Christians as the Pentateuch (Greek for "five books"). They are a key part of Hebrew scripture, which was renamed the Old Testament by Christians. Since Jesus lived in a Jewish community, the Torah shaped his religious upbringing as well as the perspective of people writing the New Testament.

Even though we look at the stories in the order they appear in the Bible, we know these stories were composed at different times and places before they were arranged in this sequence. The Israelite tribes initially told stories about their escape from Egypt and the feats of their ancestors. After the monarchy was formed, the royal court began adapting creation and flood stories of the ancient Near East to Israelite views. When the Assyrians later threatened the Israelites, the surviving Israelites expressed their allegiance to God alone in what Jews call the Shema and Christians call the Great Commandment. In a devastating blow, the Babylonians subsequently destroyed Jerusalem and marched the Israelites to live in exile in Babylon. In one of the most fruitful periods of the Bible's development, its writers comforted the exiles by conveying divine assurance of a promising future. To help you keep this sequence of events in mind, the Appendix includes a timeline connecting Israel's history with the origins of the Bible's first five books.

During my time at Union, my professor David Carr, a leading specialist on how the Bible was written, explained why he thought these biblical stories remain so compelling. The Israelites were underdogs surrounded at first by the great empires of Egypt, Assyria, and Babylonia and later by the Persians, Greeks, and Romans. Israel was besieged, destroyed, and rebuilt, and its people lived through slavery, exile, and oppression. When we read their stories today, we can see how they found hope to survive and thrive despite their difficulties.<sup>3</sup>

My description of the Bible's development is not intended to be definitive but rather suggestive of a likely way it occurred. The translation of Hebrew in the Old Testament and Greek in the New Testament is based on the New Revised Standard Version of Christian scripture unless otherwise noted. To protect the privacy of my personal acquaintances, I change their names and identifying details.

If you assume God dictated the Bible word by word, you may want to consider a broader view of divine inspiration. If you are spiritually curious or downright skeptical, studying the origins of the biblical stories is a good introduction to the text. Whether you attribute the stories to the human spirit or divine inspiration, you can consider their relevance to your life. For further insights relating the text to your life, the Appendix has questions for personal reflection and discussion and pointers for organizing a discussion group.

For me, learning how the Bible was written led to deeper faith. It gave me greater appreciation for my grandparents' religious heritage and strengthened my interest in helping the disadvantaged. Whatever your religious views, I hope that you discover in a new light the Bible's relevance to your life.

## **PART III -- FINDING REDEMPTION (Exodus)**

### **CHAPTER NINE**

#### **OVERCOMING ADVERSITY**

*What helps you overcome adverse circumstances in your life?*

Exodus 1:8-22 (oppression of Israelites), 3:1-15 (Moses at burning bush)

After Thanksgiving dinner, Grandma, then in her early 70s, asked me to pick one of her things as a keepsake. I knew immediately I wanted the picture that hung above my bed in the farmhouse. It showed a rundown bridge over a raging river during a fierce storm. On one side, an angel watched over a small girl making her way across the broken planks of the bridge. Under divine care, the girl headed toward a tranquil homestead in the horizon on the other side. To me, the angel was my grandmother saving me from my mother and stepfather by providing a safe haven on the farm.

When I consider my life story, I feel as though a divine presence rescued me from the detrimental consequences of parental abuse through my grandparents' love. Social scientists confirm the significance of their role. Decades of research has considered why some children overcome significant adversity and others do not. The studies have covered numerous hardships including poverty, neglect, violence, and parental mental illness and substance abuse. Regardless of the hardship, the single most common finding is that children who end up doing well have had at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver, or other adult. That adult buffers them from more severe disruptions and helps them build the skills to respond to adversity and thrive.<sup>4</sup>

No matter how big I dreamed, I could count on my grandmother's encouragement. In third grade, I wanted to be the first woman president of the United States. I was too embarrassed to tell

anyone because the other girls in my class wanted to be nurses, teachers, and homemakers, and the boys wanted to be police officers and fire fighters. One afternoon I found my grandmother alone in the farmhouse, kneading dough to bake the week's bread. I blurted out, "Grandma, what would you think if I became the president of the United States?" Without a moment's hesitation, she responded as if she had been expecting this question all along, "I would be like any grandmother. I would be so proud." From then on, I knew I could pursue whatever I wanted.

Because I found refuge on my grandparents' farm, I identify with the Israelites rescued from bondage by divine love. Their redemption dramatizes the fundamental idea that God saves people who are suffering or oppressed. In Hebrew scripture, the Israelites repeatedly look to God to deliver them from distress as God had done in the exodus, and future redemptions of Israel are regarded as reiterations of the exodus. In modern times, God as Israel's redeemer continues to strengthen Jewish belief in redemption when facing oppression.<sup>5</sup>

To Christians, Jesus Christ as our redeemer overcomes sin and death and restores us to new life. Although Christians sometimes stress spiritual welfare, both the Old and New Testaments show divine concern with all aspects of our lives. The exodus story illustrates how much God cares about our physical, social, and economic well-being.<sup>6</sup>

God's deliverance of the Israelite slaves along with Christ's life, death, and resurrection are the Bible's great stories of redemption. By looking to the past, both Jews and Christians live with hope for the future. They can see how divine love helped us in earlier times and will guide us through future difficulties. Even if we are not religious, redemption is such a pervasive concept in our culture that it shapes social movements and affects the way we tell our personal life stories. By looking for ways that we have overcome past problems, we maintain hope of overcoming our current difficulties.

## The Bible's Story

As reported at the beginning of the book of Exodus, the pharaoh was hospitable to Jacob and his family when they joined Joseph in Egypt. But after Joseph died, his name meant nothing to the new pharaoh. Faced with the enormous growth of the Israelite population, the pharaoh feared that the Israelites would align themselves with Egypt's enemies, fight against the country, and escape from the land. To limit the population growth of the Israelites, taskmasters oppressed them with forced labor, making them build Pithom and Rameses as supply cities in border areas for military purposes.<sup>7</sup> As the Israelites continued to multiply, the Egyptians became more ruthless in their demands for hard work on construction and agricultural projects. When forced labor was not enough to ease the pharaoh's concern about the growth of the Israelite population, the pharaoh commanded his people to throw every Israelite baby boy into the Nile.

As told in Exodus 2, after an Israelite mother gave birth to Moses, she placed him in a basket among the reeds along the bank of the Nile, while Moses' sister, Miriam, watched to see what would happen. When the pharaoh's daughter went down to the river to bathe, she discovered the Israelite baby and felt sorry for him. Miriam offered to find an Israelite woman to nurse him and after the pharaoh's daughter agreed, Miriam returned him to his mother. When the baby was done nursing, his mother took him back to the pharaoh's daughter, who adopted him as her son.

Despite his royal upbringing, Moses identified with the Israelite people. When he saw an Egyptian beating an Israelite, he killed the Egyptian. As news of the murder spread, Moses feared for his life and fled the country. He married a woman whose father was a priest in the land of Midian in northwest Arabia. While Moses was tending his father-in-law's sheep, he came to "Horeb, the mountain of God," perhaps named as an indication of its sanctity for the Midianites.<sup>8</sup>

In Exodus 3, at Horeb, also called Sinai in the Bible, an angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in flames of fire within a bush. Moses saw that the bush did not burn up though it was on fire. When he went over to look at the strange sight, God called from within the bush: “Moses! Moses!” And he responded, “Here I am.”<sup>9</sup> God told him to come no closer and take off his sandals for he was standing on holy ground.

Identifying himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Lord said he had seen the misery of the Israelites and would send Moses to the pharaoh to bring them out of Egypt to a fertile land flowing with “milk and honey.”<sup>10</sup> When Moses questioned how he could do this, God said, “I will be with you.”<sup>11</sup> Since people at that time believed in many gods and the generic term “god” could refer to any of them, Moses asked what to say if the Israelites wanted to know the name of their ancestors’ God. The Lord responded, “I AM WHO I AM” and told Moses to say “I AM” had sent him. As a third response, God said his name forever was “Yahweh.” Interestingly, all three of these puzzling names of the divine were based on a root not for a noun but for a verb meaning “to be.” They have been interpreted to mean “I will be whatever I will be,” suggesting in this context “being there” for Moses and the Israelites.<sup>12</sup>

In a dramatic account of God’s power, the rest of the story shows how Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt to Israel. They included six hundred thousand men on foot, together with women, children, and the elderly. Based on this description, the exodus saved more than two million people.<sup>13</sup>

### **Writing the Story**

The origins of the exodus story have been highly debated. No historical records or archaeological finds provide evidence for the movement of such a large group out of Egypt through the

wilderness to Israel. Yet many biblical scholars believe an exodus of a smaller group actually occurred. When this group told their story, it was so inspiring that it was passed along by word of mouth from one generation to the next. At some point, the story was written down so that the entire community could keep reliving the experience.<sup>14</sup>

Egypt would be a realistic setting for the exodus story. Foreigners from western Asia periodically migrated to Egypt especially during famines. Others were forced to go there as military captives of the Egyptians or human tribute sent by Canaanite rulers. Even if foreigners came voluntarily, they were often required to work on government projects. While most foreigners were integrated into Egyptian society, in at least one known instance, several workers escaped into the Sinai wilderness.

Details of the exodus story and sources outside the Bible add credence to the exodus account. Even though the Bible says Moses' mother gave him his name because she drew him out of the water, Moses is actually an Egyptian name that means "is born."<sup>15</sup> Both of the cities Pithom and Rameses have been associated with Egyptian locations. Rameses was commissioned by Pharaoh Rameses II, who reigned from 1279 to 1213 BCE. During the subsequent reign of Pharaoh Merneptah from 1213 to 1203 BCE, a granite slab extolled his military victory over a group identified as "Israel" in Canaan. This inscription is the first mention of Israel outside of the Bible. It coincides with archaeological evidence that indicates the Israelites were living in Canaan around the same time. For such reasons, the exodus is often linked to the reign of Rameses II or Merneptah.

The venerable history of the exodus story and its significance to Israelite tradition further suggest that it really happened. Some of the oldest passages in the Bible recount the story, and key Israelite traditions such as Passover have celebrated the occasion from early times. In addition, the humble position of the Israelites in the story supports its credibility. While many national myths stress

noble origins, the exodus was about slaves who escaped to another land with God's help. Such a story seems unlikely to be invented by people to describe themselves unless it was based on some set of facts.

Considered from a historical perspective, the exodus probably involved a small group of people who had been living in Egypt and escaped from forced labor. When that group settled in the hill country of what became northern Israel, they praised God for rescuing them from slavery and told the people living in their new community about the Lord's intervention on their behalf. The local Canaanite residents were inspired by the story because they too had suffered from domination by Egyptian and other powerful groups. When these residents adopted the story as their own, it helped them fight their enemies and overcome adversity. Along with the descendants of ex-slaves, these local residents became the people known as the Israelites. Together they worshiped Yahweh and shared the exodus story as their common heritage.

Eventually the exodus story was written down as the collective memory of the community. In doing so, the primary focus of the writers was not to record accurate details of the escape but rather to recreate the intense emotional experience of freedom from bondage. The significance of the event was further enhanced by incorporating agricultural festivals of the Israelites into the Passover celebration. As the community commemorated the past, the experience of the few became a collective story that shaped its identity, helping the Israelites survive the Babylonian exile and other traumatic experiences.

Just as the exodus story inspired the Israelites in ancient times, it has continued to inspire people seeking freedom and justice throughout the centuries down to the present time. When the Puritans sailed for the Massachusetts Bay in 1630, they believed their New World settlement would be like a new Israel. They felt that they had escaped their tormentors just as the Israelites had escaped the Egyptians and compared their leader John Winthrop to Moses.<sup>16</sup> More than two centuries later, the

night before Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, escaped slaves gathered in Washington, D.C. to sing “Go Down Moses,” adding another verse: “Go down, Abraham, Way down in Dixie’s land, Tell Jeff Davis, Let my people go.”<sup>17</sup> For the escaped slaves, Lincoln was the new Moses and confederacy head Davis was the new pharaoh. To this day, the exodus continues to inspire oppressed people fighting for civil rights and social justice.

### *Living by the Story*

As part of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the exodus story has been so significant in our culture that it influences how we understand our personal experiences. From Hollywood movies to self-help books, we like to hear about people surmounting difficulties and making good on second chances. When we tell our life stories, we often describe redemptive experiences that change unfavorable conditions into a better future. That is the same way I tell my own story.

Dan P. McAdams, a psychology professor at Northwestern University, confirms that many Americans tell life stories with redemptive themes.<sup>18</sup> As a narrative psychologist, he studies personal stories we construct to give meaning, unity, and purpose to our lives. We talk about where we have been, where we are going, and what were the turning points. From time to time, we change our stories in light of new experiences or personal goals. Although our stories are not objectively verifiable, they form our identity, and they help us understand and cope with reality.

When Americans tell their life stories, McAdams finds a common theme of redemption, which he defines in the broad sense of deliverance from suffering to a better place. While he acknowledges the influence of redemption in the Judeo-Christian tradition in this country, he notes that the concept of redemption can be found in all the world’s major religions and many cultural traditions and has both religious and secular meanings. The people he studies describe many kinds of redemption: they find

freedom from oppression and abuse; they experience forgiveness for their sins; they struggle out of poverty to achieve educational, economic, and social standing; they overcome disabilities and mental and physical illness; they recover from alcoholism and addictions; they develop psychological maturity and moral character; and they gain insights into the person they feel they were meant to be.<sup>19</sup>

In McAdams's studies, the people who tell life stories with redemptive sequences moving from suffering to enhancement are more likely to enjoy better overall psychological well-being. They tend to have greater self-esteem and find their lives more meaningful and satisfying. Other studies help to explain why. After people suffer from a loss, illness, or other painful experience, talking about that experience often has a positive impact on health and well-being by lessening pain and leading to better psychological and physical health. Many people see ways in which the suffering they experience leads to positive changes in their lives. And the people who see or imagine good things coming from bad events in their lives tend to cope better with those events and find ways to move forward in life.<sup>20</sup>

Besides improving personal well-being, redemptive life stories correlate with helping others have better lives. McAdams is intrigued by people who are highly involved in making the world a better place for future generations. They may do so by parenting, teaching, mentoring, volunteering, participating in religious, political, and civic organizations, or a variety of other activities. When such people talk to McAdams's research team, their life stories tend to have redemptive themes, and telling their stories this way may help them sustain their involvement with others. They often indicate that they were raised in religious homes, and early on, typically in adolescence, they developed beliefs and values rooted in religious tradition. Throughout the rest of their personal stories, these beliefs sustained their commitment to improving the world.<sup>21</sup>

Like the people McAdams studies, my friend Emily considers redemption a key theme in her life. After she was diagnosed with polio at age five, her parents brought her to one of the best medical centers for treatment. Two years later, a world-famous surgeon operated on her spine. Still Emily struggled with the debilitating effects of polio throughout her childhood. In her twenties, she sought help from a therapist. Emily asked, “Why me?” And her therapist responded, “Why not you?” Emily explained, “I always wanted to know who I’d be if I hadn’t had polio.” To her surprise, the therapist said, “You’re exactly the person you were meant to be.” At that moment, Emily realized that she had a good life with good medical care, and she could help others overcome adversity. She said, “I feel my soul was put in the right body at the right time and place.”

My friend Ben compares the Passover meal to Thanksgiving dinner commemorating the Pilgrim’s harvest at Plymouth, Massachusetts. Just as Thanksgiving is a time for families to get together in their homes to celebrate an American tradition, Passover is a time for families to get together in their homes to affirm their Jewish identity. He feels that hearing the exodus story again and again makes Jews “hard wired for social justice.” Another Jewish friend, Josh, calls the story “important to every Jew and to the world because it means we will always be free.” When I questioned how this could be true, he answered, “That’s why we say, ‘Next year in Jerusalem,’ at the end of every Passover. If not now, then. We keep hoping.”

My most moving encounter with a Christian version of the exodus story occurred in a prison in Haiti. I went to the country with a church group to help my cousin Amy who was there as a missionary after her husband Matt died of kidney failure. During our stay, we taught farmers better techniques for growing crops and visited people in their homes, school, hospital, and prison.

The prison was more squalid than I had imagined. Centered around a courtyard, it had three small, unfurnished, one-room buildings with prison bars on the side facing the courtyard and solid walls on the other sides. A tiny room housed a couple of young teens including a boy who had

murdered someone; another tiny room housed a few women; and a somewhat bigger room housed about a hundred men. During the day, the men stood shoulder to shoulder, crowded together in the dark space. At night, they took turns sleeping on the ground because the area was not big enough for everyone to lie down at the same time. Left without a toilet, they passed around a garbage bag for body waste.

My cousin took the church group and me to stand in front of the prison bars to talk, pray, and sing with the prisoners. We ended our visit by singing to the men in Creole a song with a refrain about the power of Jesus' name "to break every chain."<sup>22</sup> To our surprise, virtually every man in the room responded by singing the words back to us in English. They told us, "It's a very good song."

What makes the exodus story so significant to me is its relevance to real life. Like many people of faith, I believe it shows how God intervenes in our lives to make them better. But even if you are skeptical about divine intervention, the story may inspire hope during unfavorable circumstances. Hope enables us to keep going, to believe that somehow things will get better—perhaps by a spiritual force, or our own efforts, or divine help underlying our efforts. Inspired by the exodus story, we may find ways to overcome our difficulties by changing our situation, or we may find ways to accept, at least for now, what cannot be changed. If we cannot change things immediately, we can still live with the hope that our struggles for freedom, fairness, and fulfillment will eventually succeed, and the longer the struggle, the more we need hope to get through our difficulties.

## CHAPTER TEN

### CELEBRATING A PEACEFUL VICTORY

*How can you protect yourself and others while you struggle against abuse and injustice?*

Exodus 6:2-7 (redemption of God's people), 12:1-13 (Passover), 29-30 (Egyptian deaths); 14:21-29 (crossing the sea); 15:1-21 (Song of the Sea)

Every time I saw Grandma, she took my picture. Years later, she explained why. She said my stepfather “would run around like a jackass” taking pictures of my half-sister and “never cared if you were in the picture or not.” But Grandma’s efforts were in vain. My mother later destroyed all the photo albums containing pictures of me.

Mom could not stand attention on anyone other than herself. When I got married after law school, I wanted a small wedding on my grandparents’ farm, and I planned to cover any expenses. Grandma was thrilled to host the wedding. She immediately started sprucing up the farmhouse by replacing the dingy wallpaper room by room and repainting the chipped cabinets. But Mom put her foot down, demanding the wedding be held at her house. The idea repelled me because I had such bad memories of the two years I had lived there in high school. Still my fiancé did not want to rock the boat so I acquiesced.

Mom charged ahead, inviting people I had never met or hardly remembered. During the reception, one person after another told Mom how wonderful she and my stepfather had been to pay for my college and law school education. As she beamed at each of them, she never admitted that I had supported myself without parental help. After the wedding was over, my husband said, “We knew it would be bad. We just didn’t know it would be this bad.”

When we divorced some years later, I returned to the farm for a respite, stopping at my parents' house for a short visit along the way. My mother and stepfather barely acknowledged my presence because they were feuding by telephone with some relatives. Mom was so upset that she said she would kill herself and ran into the bedroom, as she had often done when I lived there. But now my stepfather did not run after and plead with her as he had done in the past. He just sat there across from me at the kitchen table, his head down, saying he wished he were dead. Absent his overtures, Mom quickly returned to the kitchen. Then they went into another room to continue yelling over the phone at the other relatives.

As I sat by myself at the kitchen table, I felt more convinced than ever before that my parents had nothing but misery to offer me, and as the prime target of their abuse, I was in the worst position of anyone to help them. Every time I tried to discuss my parents' mistreatment of me, Mom would scream and leave the room, and if I put my thoughts in a letter, she would refuse to read it. She was so intent on blocking any inheritance to me that she even brought a lawyer to my grandparents' farm to take out of their will a small bequest they had made to me. Now that she and my stepfather were not disparaging, hitting, molesting, or defrauding me, they had nothing else to say.

For the despair I felt that day, the exodus story has meant more to me than any other story in the Bible. Just as the God of the exodus freed the Israelites, the story gives us hope that we may break out of oppressive situations. The Israelites never relied on unrealistic dreams of reconciliation with the Egyptians or debilitating efforts to forgive their slave masters. For people in troubled families, the story is a bold endorsement of leaving behind destructive relationships. Instead of living with misery, the exodus extols a victorious escape from torment. With great joy, it celebrates freedom from a lifetime of abuse.

## *The Bible's Story*

As described in Exodus 5:1, after Moses was called from the burning bush, he went to the pharaoh with this message from the God of Israel: “Let my people go.” But the pharaoh refused to acknowledge Yahweh. The mighty deeds in the rest of the story convinced the Egyptians of Yahweh’s power and caused the Israelites to affirm their belief.

As Moses learned in Exodus 6, God had made a sacred agreement called a covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to give them the land of Canaan, but had not made himself known to them by his name Yahweh.<sup>23</sup> After hearing the Israelites groan under Egyptian slavery, God remembered this covenant and wanted the Israelites to know: “I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God.”<sup>24</sup>

To convince the pharaoh to free the Israelites, God sent one plague after another against the Egyptians as told in Exodus 7 to 12. The waters of the Nile turned to blood; frogs, gnats, and flies successively swarmed the country; livestock died; people and animals festered with boils; hail followed by locusts destroyed the land; and the nation was covered in darkness. Still the pharaoh refused to free the Israelites.

In Exodus 12, before the last plague struck the firstborn dead, God told Moses and his brother Aaron how to spare the Israelites. Each household took a lamb, slaughtered it at dusk, and put its blood on the doorframe of the house. That night the people roasted the meat over a fire and ate it along with bitter herbs reminiscent of slavery and unleavened bread made in haste without yeast so they could make a quick departure. In giving these instructions, God protected the Israelites from harm in what would become an annual ritual in remembrance of their departure. The ritual would bind the community together by reliving the experience in one generation after another.<sup>25</sup>

When God moved across Egypt to strike the firstborn, the Lord saw the lamb's blood as a sign of Israelite homes and passed over them. But every firstborn Egyptian male died, from the firstborn son of the pharaoh on the throne to the firstborn son of a prisoner in a dungeon to the firstborn son of a slave at her hand mill. Across the land there was loud wailing: someone had died in every Egyptian home. The plague was so terrifying that the pharaoh and his people drove the Israelites out of Egypt.

Shortly afterwards, as told in Exodus 14, the pharaoh changed his mind and pursued the Israelites with his horses and chariots, chariot drivers, and army. When they cornered the Israelites against the sea, the Israelites were terrified. But Moses assured them, "Yahweh will fight for you."<sup>26</sup> Driving a strong wind, God parted the sea to let the Israelites walk through it on dry land with the waters forming a wall to their right and to their left. When the pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers pursued them, God clogged the chariot wheels. Then the sea returned to its normal depth and covered all the chariots and chariot drivers, along with the army following them. None of the Egyptians survived.

Moses and the Israelites were ecstatic about their miraculous rescue from disaster. They praised God for their salvation in a victory hymn called Song of the Sea in Exodus 15:1-21. In the song, the Israelites proclaimed: "Yahweh is a warrior; Yahweh is his name."<sup>27</sup> They recited how Yahweh hurled into the sea horse and rider, chariots and army, taking them down like stones and sinking them like lead. The hymn begins with Moses and the Israelites singing to Yahweh about his glorious triumph and ends with Miriam leading the women with tambourines and dancing.

### **Writing the Story**

The dramatic deliverance of the Israelites from slavery shows how God intervenes to save people who are suffering. God did more than identify himself for the first time by his name Yahweh. He revealed a different aspect of divine nature: Yahweh was a warrior who fights for the oppressed.

From a historical perspective, the name Yahweh seemed to be first used to identify a local god far away from Israel's eventual homeland in Canaan. The name was originally known in the wasteland south and east of Canaan, inhabited by nomadic desert-dwellers. Moses was around this area when God called him from a burning bush while he was tending the flock of his father-in-law, a Midianite priest. Quite a few other biblical passages, some of them going back to the oldest layers of the Bible, say Israel's God came from the same region. Aside from these passages, two temple inscriptions from 1500 to 1000 BCE refer to nomads in this area as desert-dwellers of Yahweh.<sup>28</sup>

In the passages that locate Yahweh in the region southeast of biblical Israel, his principal function at such time is warfare.<sup>29</sup> As a divine warrior, he fought for Israel on high while calling his people to fight on earth below. At least initially, he did not appear to be associated with sending life-giving rain during droughts, or assuring fertility, or providing other benefits for which ancient people turned to their gods. He was more focused on waging wars.

After the Israelite slaves arrived in Canaan, they described how Yahweh rescued them in the poetic language of the Song of the Sea. The archaic language of the poem suggests it is one of the oldest biblical passages, perhaps from the twelfth century BCE.<sup>30</sup> Like other ancient biblical passages, the Song of the Sea extolls Yahweh's role as a divine warrior.

To enhance Yahweh's role, the Song of the Sea draws on myths about the Canaanite god Baal.<sup>31</sup> If the exodus occurred during the reign of Rameses II or Merneptah, the Israelites would have arrived in Canaan around the time Baal was usurping El as the supreme Canaanite god. El was considered the father of other gods, the creator of earth and humanity, and an old, wise, kindly father figure. He was

being supplanted by a youthful, vigorous, powerful, and sometimes violent god called Baal. Baal controlled the storm clouds and life-giving rain and was known as the cloud-rider heralded by thunder and lightning.

Like Yahweh, Baal was considered a divine warrior. But Baal was victorious in battling watery chaos often depicted as a sea monster. In the Song of the Sea, Baal's cosmic battles with watery chaos were changed to show instead Yahweh's power to save Israel in a historic sea battle against the pharaoh's army. In the narrative version of the sea crossing in Exodus 14, the biblical writers likewise emphasized Yahweh as a divine warrior by transforming Baal's battles with watery chaos into divine power used to save Israel.<sup>32</sup>

During the Babylonian exile in the sixth century, the Israelites found inspiration in the exodus story because they again were living in a strange land and forced to work on its building projects. At first, the exiles expected God to make a quick, dramatic rescue as portrayed in the Song of the Sea and its narrative version. But the Israelites stayed in Babylon for more than five decades before a small group was allowed to return to Jerusalem. To help the exiles cope with this delay, Israelite writers most likely added the plagues to the exodus account. The plague stories explained that God delayed the rescue of the Israelite slaves in order to demonstrate divine power to the Egyptians and Israelites. These stories assured the exiles that God would deliver them from Babylon just as God had delivered the slaves from Egypt even though it could take a long time.<sup>33</sup>

During the exile, Israelite writers also developed the Passover celebration in the exodus account. The festival was especially significant to the exiles because their traumatic survival during Jerusalem's destruction mirrored the survival of the Israelites during the Egyptian deaths. To celebrate the survival of the Israelite slaves, exilic writers combined a festival of shepherds with a festival of farmers. In the springtime when sheep and goats were born, shepherds would sacrifice and eat an

animal from their flock to assure divine favor for the rest of the flock. To ward off evil, the shepherds daubed the animal's blood on the doorframe of their house. Around the same time of year, when the winter's barley crop was ready to harvest, farmers would celebrate a festival by eating quickly prepared unleavened bread.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the joyful celebration of Passover, the exodus had a troubling undercurrent of violence. The rabbis recognized this when they considered the deaths of the Egyptian army in the sea. According to rabbinic commentary, the angels started to sing a hymn praising God as the Egyptians were drowning. But God rebuked them, saying, "While my creatures are drowning in the sea you would sing a hymn?!" According to the rabbis, God showed that he does not rejoice in the death of the wicked.<sup>35</sup>

### **Living by the Story**

God as a divine warrior is certainly a powerful and provocative image. We can take comfort in knowing God is on the side of the downtrodden in the fight for freedom and justice. This aspect of God offers us hope when we are mistreated and oppressed, and it encourages us to join the fight against injustice. But the destruction of the plagues and sea battle are sobering reminders of the high cost of battling for justice. If a peaceful solution in everyone's best interest is not practical, we need to guard against getting harmed as well as harming others.

From a political perspective, Josh and Ben, both Jewish men who told me how much Passover meant to them, illustrated this dilemma. Although each of them felt affinity for Israel, Josh focused on its security while Ben was concerned about its inequitable treatment of Arabs. In his view, the harm to Arabs contradicts the principles of social justice that made him proud to be Jewish. When Josh justified Israel's military operations to control terrorism, he was taken aback by Ben's response: "One person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter."

Our personal struggles to overcome domestic violence and abuse can bring similar anguish. When Evelyn heard about my childhood experiences, she was eager to tell me of her own. As a child, she was repeatedly beaten by her mother. Then years later, to Evelyn's horror, she was so overcome by fury from the humiliation of past abuse that she hit her elderly mother while she was sitting in her wheelchair. Throughout Evelyn's life, she had been disparaged by her relatives, and after hitting her mother, she became the family's outcast.

Christine Ann Lawson, a clinical social worker, would understand Evelyn's rage toward her mother. Lawson wrote a book for adult children of abusive mothers with borderline personality disorders.<sup>36</sup> Such mothers often identify one child as bad, vent their rage by emotional and physical abuse of that child, and follow any gesture of compassion with another attack. The father frequently is dominated by but distant from the mother and does nothing to protect the child.

Lawson encourages adult children of abusive mothers to keep enough emotional and physical distance to prevent either the adult children or their mothers from turning to violence. In her view, no one should ever urge an adult abused as a child to continue a relationship with the abuser. For the adult child, she suggests these precautions: Never force yourself to get together with your parents, and if you do get together, keep the visit short, avoid being alone with them, do not expose vulnerabilities, stick to impersonal topics, and plan ahead for a quick exit if needed. Instead of dwelling on a troubled relationship, she says, build your own life, break a cycle of abuse with your own children, and avoid taking revenge against your parents.

Judith Herman, a Harvard Medical School professor who wrote a classic book on trauma, suggests a similar approach for battered spouses as well as adults who were abused as children.<sup>37</sup> Since adults in both groups often remain entangled in destructive relationships with their abusers, the key to recovery in her view is breaking free of these relationships. But freedom can be costly because of the

loss of financial support from the abuser and the loss of family members and friends who take the abuser's side. A survivor needs the courage to provide for her own physical safety and economic well-being, to seek out relationships with trustworthy people, and to develop a more meaningful, expansive life.

Herman warns that the survivor's recovery from trauma will stagnate if she avoids facing the monumental loss caused by her abuse and diverts her attention instead to revenge or forgiveness.<sup>38</sup> While revenge clearly would be detrimental to both the survivor and abuser, transcending the rage and loss of trauma by forgiving the abuser at first glance seems appealing. But it is unlikely to be feasible for the survivor unless the abuser confesses, repents, and makes amends, which in Herman's view is "a rare miracle." She says that healing depends on discovering restorative love in the survivor's own life. It does not require extending this love to the abuser. After the survivor mourns the traumatic event and builds her own life, she may be surprised to find the abuser no longer interests her. She may even feel sorrow and compassion for the abuser. But Herman does not consider this disengaged feeling the same as forgiveness.

When considering Lawson's and Herman's views, my friend Hannah recalled her experience with alcoholics and addicts in recovery. After Hannah's misguided affair with a married man, she stopped drinking and tried to help others find sobriety. Many of the alcoholics and addicts she has known were abusive to friends and family, but once sober, made amends and improved their behavior. Before that happens, she said their friends and family need to learn they cannot make another person change. "Once they stop clinging to false hopes of changing the person," she said, "they may realize they aren't holding onto very much in the relationship, and they should figure out what to do to take care of themselves."

I feel Lawson and Herman know exactly what it was like to grow up with my mother and stepfather. Although I came to Lawson's and Herman's conclusions by trial and error, I would have had an easier time if they had been there to guide me in my younger years. In contrast to some sermons I heard about forgiveness, their advice is more attuned to the well-being of the abused.

When Clifton Black, a biblical theology professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, gave a talk at a local church a few years ago, I was eager to hear what he had to say about forgiveness. Based on his book about the Lord's Prayer, his talk considered the prayer's request to our heavenly father to forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors.<sup>39</sup> When I asked about repeated wrongs like parental or spousal abuse, his response was emphatic, "Get out." He explained, "God doesn't want anyone abused, harmed, or mistreated. If you're mistreated, get out. Forgiveness is for later."

At a later point, perhaps the abusers will repent, particularly if they are alcoholics or addicts in recovery, or the survivors will have the extraordinary grace to forgive people who show no remorse and continue to harm them. More likely the survivors will feel the sorrow and compassion I felt toward my mother and stepfather but not the warmth of forgiveness or reconciliation.

After the visit to my parents' home where I sat alone at the kitchen table while they yelled at other relatives over the phone, I only went to their house on limited occasions. Their vindictiveness and indifference were just too draining. When I told my grandparents my decision, I was overjoyed by their response. Even though they maintained a close relationship with my mother, they fully supported me.

Picturing God as a divine warrior gave me a more multi-dimensional understanding of the exodus story's meaning for my life. Because I had always considered my grandparents' farm a safe haven, I readily linked the exodus to salvation by divine love expressed through my grandparents. When I thought about God as a divine warrior, I saw another aspect of the story. Given the detrimental effects of child abuse, I now imagine the warrior God helping me break free of the destructive

relationship with my parents. Like the Israelites leaving Egypt, I left my parents' house for a better life free of their abuse.

In our imperfect lives, I feel God wants us to seek a realistic approach to destructive relationships, whether by reconciling, staying on guard, or leaving. Reconciliation is only possible if the destructive party wants to change. Staying on guard from the person who has harmed us may be a viable approach if we succeed at maintaining emotional distance and stopping unpleasant interactions. If staying on guard is draining or ineffective, leaving may be the best option. Under these circumstances, it can be an exhilarating experience of great joy.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### MAKING IT THROUGH THE WILDERNESS

*When you have overcome difficulties, how has it changed the way you see yourself, your life, and your spiritual views?*

Exodus 19:3-6 (holy nation), 20:1-17 (Ten Commandments)

I was near the top of Great-Grandpa's bucket list. He told me many times, "I hope I live long enough to see the day you become a lawyer." One of sixteen children, he went to a single-room country school through third grade. Then he bought the farm, married Great-Grandma, and raised Grandpa and his siblings. When I was in ninth grade, Great-Grandpa was delighted to hear I wanted to be a lawyer. He told me no one in our "entire relation" had ever been a lawyer.

Although Great-Grandpa died before I became an attorney, Grandpa, who like Grandma had an eighth-grade education, was just as proud. After I graduated from law school, Grandpa took me to the bar in town to ask each man sitting around the counter, "Have you met my granddaughter the lawyer?" When my grandparents and I went to a local restaurant on my next visit, Grandpa was wearing the hearing aids I had bought him with my first paychecks. He announced to all the people at the tables around us, "My granddaughter the lawyer bought me these hearing aids."

Every week during college, I counted on a letter from Grandma with a dollar inside the envelope. Then as now, a dollar did not go far. But it meant a lot to know she was on my side when others refused to help. To finance my education, one summer I pushed corn onto a conveyor belt at the canning factory near the farm from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. seven days a week unless it rained. Another summer I worked as a playground leader on weekdays, a film processor on weeknights, and a waitress in a pancake house on Sundays. Exhausted, I went to the financial aid office of my college again and

again to plead for more aid. But my requests met a cynical response: “If we give you more financial aid, then everyone will start working long hours and claiming they were abused so they could get more money too.”

My experiences are typical of the long and difficult period it often takes to overcome adversity. Leaving my parents’ house was not enough. I had to see myself in a different light with a new way of life. To do this took grit and hard work. I needed the encouragement of people who believed in me and wanted me to succeed. I also needed a new perspective that helped me make sense of the hardships of my past and move beyond them. By the time I established myself as an attorney, I was well on my way to a better future.

I appreciate the Israelites’ journey through the wilderness because it highlights the difficulty of breaking free from bondage for a new life. After God rescued the Israelite slaves, they celebrated their release with unrestrained enthusiasm. But escaping slavery was just the first step of a radical transformation. Instead of seeing themselves as slaves, they needed to become God’s people living God’s way. The exodus story is not only about changing our physical location or circumstances; it is also about an inward change in who we are and how we see ourselves.

### **The Bible’s Story**

The book of Exodus expands the story of God’s special relationship with the Israelites. The redemption of the slaves led to an agreement called a covenant that sets the terms of the relationship. Prior to their deliverance, the Lord had told them in Exodus 6:7 the key aspects of this relationship: “I will take you as my people, and I will be your God.” As God’s chosen people, the Israelites would have a special obligation to carry out God’s will and exemplify how to live God’s way.

After the Israelites left Egypt, the Lord protected them on a harrowing journey through the wilderness to the foot of Mount Sinai. There, in Exodus 19, the Lord reminded them that he had borne

them on “eagles’ wings,” an image of parental protection recalling an eagle training its young to fly, catching them on its back when they tire or fall.<sup>40</sup> If the Israelites obeyed the Lord’s voice, out of all the earth’s people, they would be “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” Like priests in the ancient world, every Israelite would be intimate with God and responsible for moral and physical purity.<sup>41</sup>

At Mount Sinai, the Lord gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments as the key stipulations of the covenant. Although the Bible refers to ten words or sayings, the commandments are not numbered. These are the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:2-17 as they are numbered in many Protestant traditions:

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;

[1] you shall have no other gods before me.

[2] You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. . . .

[3] You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, . . .

[4] Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. . . .

[5] Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

[6] You shall not murder.

[7] You shall not commit adultery.

[8] You shall not steal.

[9] You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

[10] You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”<sup>42</sup>

The Ten Commandments are so essential that the Bible repeats them with some variation in Deuteronomy 5:6 to 21. They are like a constitution setting forth basic principles of the community. The belief that God provided the laws was a distinctive feature in the ancient Near East. Mesopotamian kings claimed to learn about truth and justice from the gods, but the kings themselves declared the specific laws. In Israel, God took the place of a king and revealed the laws to everyone.<sup>43</sup>

After giving the Israelites the Ten Commandments, God spelled out the terms of the covenant in greater detail in the Covenant Code in Exodus 20:19 to 23:33. The Code provides for religious, civil, and criminal matters enforced by financial compensation, capital punishment, and other consequences for violations. By contrast, the Ten Commandments are brief mandates and prohibitions that rely on God's authority and the people's obedience for enforcement.

After the deliverance of the Israelites from bondage, the laws helped them make the profound transformation from slaves to God's people. They had a special relationship with the Lord, they were nurtured like a parent would nurture the young, and they were taught the best way to live. The Lord even told them how to build a wilderness tabernacle as an earthly home for the deity to dwell among them.

Despite these advantages, Exodus 32 to 34 illustrates the difficulty that the Israelites experienced when making the transition from life as Egyptian slaves to life as God's people. While the Lord was speaking to Moses on Mount Sinai and giving him two tablets of the covenant, the Israelites became so anxious about his absence that they asked his brother Aaron to make gods for them. In response, Aaron made a golden calf, which the people worshipped with much revelry. When Moses returned, he was so angry that he smashed the tablets, and God's wrath burned so hot that the Israelites were almost destroyed. After Moses pleaded with God, the covenant was restored, and the tablets were replaced.

Following the book of Exodus, the Bible describes how the Israelites continued learning how to embrace their new identity as God's people. After they embraced this identity, they were finally ready to enter the promised land.

### **Writing the Story**

As told in the Bible, Mount Sinai was the dramatic setting where God established a covenant with the Israelites and gave them the Ten Commandments and Covenant Code. But the Israelites' understanding of the covenant and laws probably evolved after they arrived in Canaan during the tribal period and monarchy. Long after the events at Mount Sinai, the Israelites finally wrote down what had happened, and when they did, they incorporated their understanding in later years of these events. If we look at the development of the covenant and laws from a historical perspective, it helps us appreciate the profound transformation of the Israelites from Egyptian slaves to God's people.

As a likely scenario, the escaped slaves from Egypt told the Canaanite residents about Yahweh's miraculous rescue, and the descendants of these slaves along with some Canaanites eventually became the Israelite tribes. As these tribes were forming, settlers built numerous small hilltop villages in the central highlands. The villagers may have left cities in the lowlands due to political turmoil, or they may have been semi-nomads who settled down as farmers. In either case, most of the settlers seemed to come from Canaan.<sup>44</sup>

The villagers lived on a subsistence level by growing crops and raising a few sheep, goats, and other animals. A father, one or more mothers, their children, and perhaps other relatives if enough space, lived together with a few animals in a small house with three to four rooms. Individual houses were grouped together in compounds for extended families, and possibly all the villagers shared some kinship ties. For defense against raids from nearby areas or foreign invaders, a village occasionally

banded together with other villages in the same tribe. Faced with a military crisis, the villages of multiple tribes joined together in a temporary military alliance under a leader who rose to the occasion.<sup>45</sup>

As the Bible itself indicates, tribal life without a king could be turbulent. Some tribes refused a call to arms when needed to fight a common enemy. Besides inadequate defense, no laws were accepted and enforced to maintain order among the tribes. Although kinship norms prevailed within a village, they did not extend beyond it. In an egregious case, a traveler was threatened with gang rape and his concubine was gang raped and died. Yet tribal groups were reluctant to support a king for military protection and civil order because kings demanded high taxes and drafted people for military and work projects.<sup>46</sup>

To solve these difficulties, tribal leaders may have turned to the warrior god Yahweh as their divine king.<sup>47</sup> In the absence of an earthly monarch, the Israelites' identity as the people of God would have been a way to unite tribal groups. Yahweh could wage wars by fighting for his people and summoning them to battle. He could also declare laws that extend minimal kinship obligations to a broader group. The selection by the tribal chiefs of Yahweh as their king seems to be confirmed by a particularly ancient verse in the Bible: "There [thus] came to be a [divine] king in Jeshurun [Israel], when the heads of people gathered together, all the chiefs of Israel."<sup>48</sup>

Eventually the Israelites viewed their relationship to God as a covenant. This view appears to be influenced by ancient Near Eastern treaties between a local king and a powerful foreign king.<sup>49</sup> Upon dominating or conquering a country, the foreign king would recite how he had benefitted the country, demand exclusive loyalty, and extract tribute and other obligations. Like a foreign king from afar, the warrior god Yahweh seemed to come from the area around Mount Sinai, a long distance away from the hill country of Israelite tribes. Just as a foreign king recited how much he benefitted the weaker king's

country, Yahweh reminded the Israelites how he had led them out of slavery to Israel. Although allegiance to only one god was unusual in the ancient Near East, Yahweh's demand that the Israelites worship no other gods was like the demand for exclusive loyalty made by a foreign king.

Once the Israelites considered their relationship to God as a covenant, they made the Ten Commandments stipulations of the covenant. The Ten Commandments likely reflected straightforward, commonly accepted ethical standards of the tribal period. Their format also suggests their use for instruction. The short dictates were easy to memorize and could be readily recalled by individuals counting them on their fingers. Their key values, simple form, and easy memorization have made them a core part of the educational curriculum in synagogues and churches down to the present day.<sup>50</sup>

The Covenant Code may have been a later stipulation of the covenant. While the Ten Commandments were sufficient for small, family-based settlements in the tribal period, the Covenant Code addressed a settled society of farmers and herders. Its provisions include a judicial system, non-Israelite residents, loans to the poor secured by property, and penalties for thieves breaking into houses. Its similarity to portions of the Mesopotamian Code of Hammurabi suggests it developed during the Israelite monarchy when ancient Near Eastern literature became more available.<sup>51</sup>

As told in the Bible, the events at Mount Sinai were a dramatic revelation of divine power. From a historical perspective, the Israelites may have experienced a spiritual presence in more gradual ways during the tribal period and monarchy. When they were beaten down by foreign enemies, God seemed to help them unify their community so they could better resist attacks, and when their community suffered from a lack of ethical standards, God seemed to help them define obligations to each other. However written, the biblical account of the events at Mount Sinai shows a remarkable transformation from a life of slavery to a life close to God.

### *Living by the Story*

The transformation of the Israelites from slaves to God's people reminds me of the profound changes we need to make whenever we overcome adversity. To leave the past behind, we need to change the way we see ourselves, and our new identity becomes part of a new way of life. When we update our life story, it reflects our adverse experiences and how we have moved beyond them.

Judith Herman, the Harvard Medical School professor who wrote the classic book on trauma, describes the difficult path to recovery for adults who have been abused as children.<sup>52</sup> The guiding principle of recovery is restoring the power and control of the survivors. As the first step, they free themselves from physical, emotional, and financial entanglements with their abusers. Next they mourn the enormity of their loss so they can move on with their lives. After acknowledging their trauma, they are ready to develop a new self with new relationships, and if they decide to confront their families, they prepare for a response of fury or denial. As part of their recovery, they leave behind their faith to the extent it has been badly damaged by the betrayal of people of utmost significance to them. The survivors find instead a spiritual path that makes sense of moral guilt, undeserved suffering, and justice and order in the world. As they continue to heal, they integrate their trauma and recovery in an updated, optimistic version of their life story.

As a recovering alcoholic, my friend Hannah had a different understanding of her life story. Espousing the twelve-step approach, she began by confessing that her life had become unmanageable, she was powerless over her addiction, and she surrendered her will to the care of a higher power. As she took a moral inventory, she reviewed the ways her addiction had harmed her family, friends, and co-workers and tried to make amends. In her view, she could not have made such drastic changes until her life had gone so far downhill that she "hit bottom." From this perspective, hitting bottom gave meaning to the years she had lost by drinking.<sup>53</sup>

The contrast between Hannah's story and Herman's approach is striking. While alcoholics are urged to surrender to a higher power, Herman encourages abuse victims to exercise greater control over their lives. Far from surrendering to a higher power, they need to reassess their religious beliefs in light of the tragedy they have suffered. While recovering alcoholics make amends for the wrongs they have done to family members, Herman advises abuse victims to decide whether to confront their abusive families and, if so, to prepare for an angry and evasive response. Recovering alcoholics often believe hitting bottom is a necessity before they are ready to turn around their lives. Abuse victims are encouraged to mourn instead the enormous loss they have suffered.

Despite the different experiences of Hannah and me, each of us has a personal story of recovering from adversity. When we found ourselves in adverse circumstances, we struggled to turn around our lives. During this struggle, a spiritual presence seemed to lift us up from our despair. But an approach that works for one of us would not work for another. We need to find a path that meets our individual needs for concrete steps to a more fulfilling life.

Most people are not abused or alcoholics. But everyone has times when they feel overcome by difficulties in their lives. They may be stymied by roadblocks to their education or career; devastated by a divorce; obsessed by a poor relationship with their in-laws or boss; betrayed by family, friends, or co-workers; guilt-ridden about their mistreatment of someone else; fearful of a life-threatening illness; or increasingly handicapped by old age.

In these situations, we may find inspiration in the story of the Israelites freed from bondage to make a better life for themselves. Sometimes we may feel a divine power helps us in the dramatic way the Israelites experienced at Mount Sinai. More often we may feel a spiritual presence helps us in the gradual ways the Israelites may have experienced during the tribal period and monarchy. Even if we

are not religious, their experiences remind us of the kind of real life problems we still hope to overcome by some combination of our own efforts, the help of others, and a force beyond ourselves.

As illustrated by the golden calf episode, when we are trying to make a better life for ourselves, many obstacles might interfere with our intent. To overcome these obstacles, the books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy described in the final part of this book suggest how to draw closer to the divine, live with courage rather than fear, center our lives on our deepest values, and live with gratitude and generosity. Such guidance helps our journey past our difficulties to a more fulfilling life.

That is why I like my grandmother's picture of an angel guiding the little girl across the broken bridge in the storm. It illustrates how we can get past the turbulence to become the person we were meant to be.

## **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION**

### **CHAPTER 9. OVERCOMING ADVERSITY**

1. What does the exodus story mean to you?
2. How have you overcome challenges in your life?
3. How have you helped others overcome adversity?
4. When you struggle for freedom and justice, what discourages you, and what gives you hope?

### **CHAPTER 10. CELEBRATING A PEACEFUL VICTORY**

1. How do you respond to the image of God as a divine warrior?
2. How have you avoided, left, or protected yourself in toxic relationships?
3. How have you encouraged fair and peaceful resolutions to conflicts in your relationships, and which approaches have been the most successful?
4. If you ever had to choose between reconciling, staying on guard, or leaving a destructive relationship, what did you choose and why?

### **CHAPTER 11. MAKING IT THROUGH THE WILDERNESS**

1. When you have overcome challenges, how has it affected your view of yourself, your way of life, and your faith?
2. How have other people helped or hindered your efforts to develop a better way of life?
3. To what extent have your spiritual views, the Ten Commandments, or other ethical standards influenced your life story?
4. What are the most powerful spiritual and community resources you have found to overcome adversity in your personal life?

<sup>1</sup>Edwin Gaustad & Leigh Schmidt, *The Religious History of America: The Heart of the American Story from Colonial Times to Today*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2002), 291; James L. Kugel, *How To Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 2-5. Beginning in the nineteenth century, the documentary hypothesis posited that the Bible's first five books were composed from four main strands: (1) J from the period of David and Solomon during the tenth century BCE, (2) E from the northern kingdom of Israel after Solomon's death, (3) D from Josiah's reforms during the seventh century BCE, and (4) P for a priestly source during the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE. Now many scholars consider J and E to be a single, composite strand from a variety of sources. All the strands tend to be seen as trajectories developing over time. Marc Z. Brettler, "Introduction to the Pentateuch," in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., edited by Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 3-6.

<sup>2</sup>The Presbyterian Church (USA) provides this rationale for studying how the Bible was written: "The Scriptures, given under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, are nevertheless the words of men, conditioned by the language, thought forms, and literary fashions of the places and times at which they were written. They reflect views of life, history and the cosmos which were then current. The church, therefore, has an obligation to approach the Scriptures with literary and historical understanding. As God has spoken his word in diverse cultural situations, the church is confident that he will continue to speak through the Scriptures in a changing world and in every form of human culture." "The Bible" in Part I, Section C.2 of "The Confession of 1967" in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A), Part I, Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly).

<sup>3</sup>For a discussion of this perspective, see David M. Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 1-6.

<sup>4</sup>Jack P. Shonkoff, M.D., Chair, National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2015), "Supportive Relationships and Active Skill-Building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience," Working Paper 13, Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, [www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu).

<sup>5</sup>Greenstein, "Exodus," in *HarperCollins Study Bible*, 83-84; Carol Meyers, "Exodus," in *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 83; Jeffrey H. Tigay, "Exodus," in *Jewish Study Bible*, 98-99.

<sup>6</sup>Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 212-214.

<sup>7</sup>Meyers, "Exodus," in *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, note to Exodus 1:11; Tigay, "Exodus," in *Jewish Study Bible*, notes to Exodus 1:8 and 11.

<sup>8</sup>Meyers, "Exodus," in *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, notes to Exodus 2:15b and 3:1.

<sup>9</sup>Exodus 3:4.

<sup>10</sup>Greenstein, "Exodus," in *HarperCollins Study Bible*, note to Exodus 3:8 (first reference to Israel as a land of milk and honey in the Bible); Meyers, "Exodus," in *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, note to Exodus 3:8 (milk and honey as vision of fertile land).

<sup>11</sup>Exodus 3:12.

<sup>12</sup>Greenstein, "Exodus," in *HarperCollins Study Bible*, note to Exodus 3:14; Meyers, "Exodus," in *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, notes to Exodus 3:14 and 15; Tigay, "Exodus," in *Jewish Study Bible*, note to Exodus 3:14-15.

<sup>13</sup>Greenstein, "Exodus," in *HarperCollins Study Bible*, note to Exodus 12:37.

<sup>14</sup>The historicity of the exodus and the development of the exodus story as described in this section of this book rely on Michael D. Coogan, "Cultural Contexts," in *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 2292-2293; Meyers, "Exodus," in *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 81-82; Tigay, "Exodus," in *Jewish Study Bible*, 95-99.

<sup>15</sup>Meyers, "Exodus," in *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, note to Exodus 2:10.

<sup>16</sup>Dan P. McAdams, *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By*, revised and expanded (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9, 85.

<sup>17</sup>Mary Beth Norton, et. al., *A People and a Nation*, Volume 1: A History of the US: To 1877, 9<sup>th</sup> edition, 407.

<sup>18</sup>McAdams, *The Redemptive Self*.

19<sup>¶</sup>Ibid., xiv, 24-25.

20<sup>¶</sup>Ibid., 12-18, 26-27.

21<sup>¶</sup>Ibid., xiii, 31-39, 134-139.

22<sup>¶</sup>Will Reagan, "Break Every Chain," United Pursuit Music and Capitol CMG Genesis (administration Capitol CMG Publishing), 2009.

23<sup>¶</sup>Attributed to a priestly source, Exodus 6:3 says God's name was unknown to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. According to other sources, Genesis 4:26 says God's name was invoked at the time of Adam and Eve's grandchild and Genesis 13:4 says Abraham called God's name. See Kugel, *How To Read the Bible*, 214-216.

24<sup>¶</sup>Exodus 6:6-7.

25<sup>¶</sup>Meyer, "Exodus," in *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, note to 11.1-13:16.

26<sup>¶</sup>Exodus 14:14 inserting "Yahweh" in place of the usual translation "LORD."

27<sup>¶</sup>Exodus 15:3 inserting "Yahweh" in place of the usual translation "LORD."

28<sup>¶</sup>See Meyers, "Exodus," in *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, notes to Exodus 2:15b (Midianites based in northwest Arabia led caravans across Sinai to Egypt) and 3:15 (temple inscription of Yahweh's name linked to desert-dwellers including Midianites). See also Kugel, *How To Read the Bible*, 424-428, referring to temple inscription and citing Deuteronomy 33:2 (Sinai, Seir, and Mount Paran); Judges 5:4-5 (Seir, Edom, and Sinai); Habakkuk 3:3 (Teman and Mount Paran); and Psalm 68:7-8 (Sinai). Sinai is believed to be south and east of ancient Israel, Mount Paran is south of Israel and west of Edom, Seir is a mountain in Edom, and Teman is a synonym for Edom.

29<sup>¶</sup>Kugel, *How To Read the Bible*, 414-415, 528, citing Exodus 15:3-6, Deuteronomy 33:26, Judges 5:4, 20, 23, Habakkuk 3:11-13, Psalm 68:7-8 (Psalm 68:8-9 in *Jewish Study Bible*).

30<sup>¶</sup>Meyers, "Exodus," in *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, note to Exodus 15:1-21.

31<sup>¶</sup>For comparison with El and Baal, see Hayes, *Introduction to the Bible*, 105-110, 116-118; Kugel, *How To Read the Bible*, 422-424.

32<sup>¶</sup>Meyers, "Exodus," in *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, notes to Exodus 14:14, 15:1-21, 3.

33<sup>¶</sup>Carr, *Holy Resilience*, 110-116.

34<sup>¶</sup>Ibid., 117-120; Kugel, *How To Read the Bible*, 322-325.

35<sup>¶</sup>Tigay, "Exodus," in *Jewish Study Bible*, note to Exodus 14:20.

36<sup>¶</sup>Christine Ann Lawson, *Understanding the Borderline Mother: Helping Her Children Transcend the Intense, Unpredictable, and Volatile Relationship* (Lanham, MD: A Jason Aronson Book/ Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., copyright 2000, publisher's first edition 2004), 121-149, 271-290.

37<sup>¶</sup>Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992, 1997, 2015), 168-172.

38<sup>¶</sup>Ibid., 189-190.

39<sup>¶</sup>C. Clifton Black, *The Lord's Prayer, Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018).

40<sup>¶</sup>Tigay, "Exodus," in *Jewish Study Bible*, note to Exodus 19:4.

41<sup>¶</sup>Meyers, "Exodus," in *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, note to Exodus 19:6.

42<sup>¶</sup>Jewish tradition designates the opening statement as a commandment, and combines into a single commandment the first and second ones above. For Catholics and Lutherans, the opening statement combines with the first and second commands above to form a single commandment, and the last command above is divided into two. Meyers, "Exodus," in *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, note to Exodus 20:1-17.

43<sup>]</sup>Tigay, “Exodus,” in *Jewish Study Bible*, note to Exodus 20:1-14.

44<sup>]</sup>For the settlement of hilltop villages and the emergence of Israel on these hilltops, see Kugel, *How To Read the Bible*, 383-385.

45<sup>]</sup>For a description of village life, see Carr, *The Old Testament*, 35-36.

46<sup>]</sup>See Judges 5:15-17, 23 (refusal of call to arms); Judges 19 (gang rape and death); 1 Samuel 8:10-12 (king’s demand for taxes and labor).

47<sup>]</sup>For the relationship of Yahweh to tribal life, see Kugel, *How To Read the Bible*, 413-416, 430.

48<sup>]</sup>Deuteronomy 33:5 as translated in Kugel, *How To Read the Bible*, 414. See also Bernard M. Levinson, “Deuteronomy,” in *Jewish Study Bible*, notes to Deuteronomy 32:15 (*Jeshuran* referring to Israel) and 33:5 (God as divine king).

49<sup>]</sup>For the relationship of covenant to a treaty with a foreign king, see Carr, *Holy Resilience*, 34-37; Kugel, *How To Read the Bible*, 240-249.

50<sup>]</sup>For the Ten Commandments as ethical standards of the tribal period, see Kugel, *How To Read the Bible*, 248-249, 413-416. For the Ten Commandments as teaching material, see Carr, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 139, and *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart*, 137.

51<sup>]</sup>Carr, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 79; Kugel, *How To Read the Bible*, 248-249, 273.

52<sup>]</sup>Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 155-213.

53<sup>]</sup>For more personal stories of recovering alcoholics, see McAdams, *The Redemptive Self*, 198-202.