

## MY TWO FAVORITE SUBJECTS IN SCHOOL

Exodus 14:19-31

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, September 14, 2008, at the 11:00 service at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

### Focus Text

*The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.*

*Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, 'Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt.'*

*Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers.' So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.*

*Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.*

As I have shared with you before, I grew up in a Presbyterian household, a suburban church similar to, though smaller than, Westminster. The cornerstones of our family's life in Germantown, Tennessee, in the late sixties and early seventies, were

- Sports
- School
- And the Presbyterian Church.

In those days, the only sports we had were baseball, football, and basketball – I played them all. And my favorite subjects in school were history and literature. I only took what was necessary in science and math to graduate.

In the Presbyterian Church, I was blessed to hear good preachers who knew their Bible, who were part of the movement afoot in our land bring black and white together, and who appreciated the Bible as a great book with which to spend your life rather than a tool for drawing hard and fast boundaries to keep people out.

As far as I know, none of the ministers to whom I listened seriously doubted the basics of the Christian faith:

- the existence of God
- the creation of the earth
- God's leading the people from slavery to freedom in the exodus

- and the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

But once I became a minister, I soon realized that even some of the most active and committed members of the church have basic questions as to the factual basis of the Christian faith.

For example, wise and intelligent members might read the story we read today, and wonder:

- Did an angel of God really go before the Israelite army?
- Did the waters form a wall for them on their right and on their left?
- Did God clog the chariot wheels of the Egyptians so that they turned with difficulty?

Whenever I would preach or teach, members might ask of the story I was teaching: Is there scientific or historical verification of these events? Others might send me articles claiming such verification, while still others could simply not get themselves to believe because they felt the verification was doubtful.

Personally, I have always believed the basic events of the faith.

- I have always accepted that God exists, that God created us, that somehow we fell into this human condition we now know, and that after numerous centuries and several attempts to reach us, God chose to become a human being and dwell among.
- It has also made sense to me that if in fact God exists, God would have the power to create, to become a human being himself, to be raised from the dead. “Once you accept the existence of God,” I’ve always thought, “the rest is not that hard to accept.”

While I accept these as factual, where I draw energy from my faith is seeing what the Biblical writers do with these basic facts. I am fascinated by how songwriters, chroniclers, poets, spinners of parables, legal scribes, liturgical artists, wise sages, and mystics have taken the basic set of facts at the heart of the Christian faith and created wonderful literature that over time has made its way into the Bible, a book the church has canonized for its faith. Whenever I preach or teach or read scripture in any form, I feel I am joining a centuries-old conversation that appropriates the basic facts of the faith and makes them fresh and new in our time.

So if my favorite subject as a young person was history, my favorite subject as an adult is literature. What I teach and preach today takes the literature that has grown out of the history and seeks to let it sing in our world.

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I say all this because, in my summertime reading, I came across a book to which one of you had pointed me that confirms this basic instinct of mine. (And there’s nothing like reading a book that agrees with what you already think!)

The book goes by the almost grammar school title *How To Read the Bible*. It is written by James Kugel, an orthodox Jew who has just retired from teaching Bible at Harvard. Some of you may have had him as a teacher. I am told that he is a marvelous in the classroom and that his classes draw hundreds of students.<sup>1</sup>

Listen to what Kugel asks about the Exodus, the story before us today.

Can [the events of the Exodus] be pieced together into some plausible historical narrative?

About this [he says] there is no general agreement [among scholars]. Some scholars...feel the whole story of the exodus is an invention...But...many reject this idea.

Those who argue that there is some historical basis to the Exodus point to two aspects of the story:

- First, they argue, it is improbable that anyone would make up such a national myth in which the people being identified appear so weak and halting, and later, unappreciative.
- Second, they maintain, there are enough authenticating names and other details that make it appear to be authentic.

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<sup>1</sup> James L. Kugel, *How To Read The Bible: A Guide To Scripture, Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007). The pages from which I specifically quote in this sermon are 231-232.

Kugel then concludes: “It seems more likely that there is a kernel of historical truth in the exodus account than that it is all fiction.”

To summarize then:

- It is likely that something happened in the Exodus.
- What happened may not be as historically significant as is described.
- But still, something happened.

If we take Kugel’s conclusion about the Exodus and spread it to other main events in the Bible, it can lead us to believe that what we have in the Bible is both *history* and *literary reflection* one history. But we have greater access to the reflection than to the events themselves. In other words history is present, but literature takes front and center stage.

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All this leads me to say the following:

- When we come to worship at Westminster Church, most of what we hear in hymns, anthems, sermons, children’s sermons, and prayers, is some use of Biblical writings and stories.
- What we encounter is our appropriation and expression of Biblical literature.
- I believe that lying beneath and behind this literature is a basic history that it is factual.
- But this history is only basic and rudimentary; what gives inspiration and wisdom to our faith is the literature.

I will go on to say, because I think it is relevant:

- If you are a person who accepts the basic history, then I would classify you as an “orthodox” Christian. This is how I classify myself.
- If you have trouble accepting the basic history without some verification, you can still be shaped and formed by the literature in profound ways; and I will leave it to God to determine your formal status in his Kingdom.
- But I ask you to consider this:
  - The more you live with the literature of the scriptures, the richer your life will be.
  - In addition, it has been my experience that the more you get caught up in its power as literature, the less your heart or mind is likely to need verification; and you just might find yourself genuinely believing, which is, of course, my hope.

As for me, there just aren’t enough hours in the day, days in the year, years in a life, to try to prove the accuracy of the Bible. There is too much life in the scriptures to get caught up in what can be verified and what cannot.

So of my two favorite subjects in school,  
History and literature,  
I ask you to open yourselves to literature.  
I believe enough of the history will follow  
For you to be satisfied,  
And for you to have faith.

Amen.