

STORYTELLING IN THE BIBLE

Our brains seem uniquely adapted to making sense of experience through stories. We tell stories and listen to them not just in our daily conversation but on the news, in the movies, and in novels. Even a sacred text such as the Bible seeks to make sense of the world through stories. Thomas Hardy, the great English novelist, greatly admired biblical stories. “They are written with a watchful attention (though disguised) as to their effect on their reader,” Hardy remarked in his diary on Easter Sunday, 1885. “Their so-called simplicity is, in fact, the simplicity of the highest cunning” (*The Mayor of Casterbridge*). Hardy is quite right. Biblical stories aim to have an effect on the reader, and we know they have succeeded when they stick with us. Eve chooses wisdom over Paradise and is expelled from the Garden of Eden. Cain kills Abel, whose blood cries out from the ground to accuse him. Abraham prepares to sacrifice his son at God’s request. The Egyptian-raised Moses becomes the greatest prophet of ancient Israel.

As children, we’re entertained by such biblical stories; returning to them as adults, we discover their power anew. They offer us a mirror into both a distant time and our own time. Perhaps even more than the stories we tell in our daily lives, a biblical story invites us to reflect on our deepest experiences, whether of God, of our families, of our community, or of the terrors and pleasures of life. In other words, these stories aim to make us think about important, even urgent matters. But rather than telling us how or what to think, they force us to find out what we think and how to respond. If we’re lucky, we are rewarded with insight and perspective we would otherwise miss, engrossed as we usually are in more commonplace matters. Such stories, when studied together or chanted aloud, help join us to others and shape our identity as a community.

Of course some biblical stories might be based on events that “really happened.” Many refer to historical events on a grand scale—the appointment of kings, victories and losses in battle, the destruction of the First Temple. But rather than give us an eyewitness account of a historical event, a biblical story reflects on an event and what it might mean for the People of Israel. Biblical stories are less concerned with facts and details than in the “truth” of experience, whether of a moral, spiritual, or psychological nature. They teach us about the human condition and the many ways in which human beings have encountered God. They teach us how we might best respond to God in our own lives.

Major Narratives in the Bible

The following are some of the most well-known stories in the Hebrew Bible, stories that have helped shape Jewish and Christian consciousness and ideas about God.

(Note: when a single verse is cited, it is the start of the narrative.)

The Beginning of the World

The creation of the world and Adam and Eve (Gen. 1:1)
 The first murder (Gen. 4:1)
 The great Flood (Gen. 6:9)
 The tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1)

The First Jewish Family

Abraham and Sarah leave their native land (Gen. 11:27)
 The birth of Ishmael (Gen. 16:1)
 Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:16)
 The birth of Isaac (Gen. 21:1)
 The binding of Isaac (Gen. 22:1)
 Jacob's dream of the ladder (Gen. 28:10)
 Jacob marries Leah and Rachel (Gen. 29:1)
 Jacob wrestles with the angel (Gen. 32:4)
 Joseph and his brothers (Gen. 37:1)
 Joseph in Egypt (Gen. 39:1)

Slaves in the Land of Egypt

The birth of Moses (Exod. 2:1)
 The Burning Bush (Exod. 3:1)
 The Ten Plagues and the first Passover (Exod. 7:14)
 The splitting of the Sea of Reeds (Exod. 13:17)

Forty Years in the Wilderness

The giving of the Ten Commandments (Exod. 19–20)
 The Golden Calf (Exod. 32:1)
 Miriam and Aaron challenge Moses (Num. 12:1)
 The scouting of the Land and the punishment of wandering (Num. 13–14)
 Moses bids farewell (Deut. 31–32)

In the Promised Land

Joshua and the battle of Jericho (Josh. 1–4)
 Deborah (Judg. 4–5)
 Samson (Judg. 13–17)
 Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 1–4)

The Founding of the Kingdom of Israel

Hannah and the birth of Samuel (1 Sam. 1:1)
 Samuel appoints Saul king (1 Sam. 8)
 Saul loses his kingdom (1 Sam. 15)
 David and Goliath (1 Sam. 17)
 The struggle between Saul and David (1 Sam. 24)
 David conquers Jerusalem (2 Sam. 6)
 David and Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11:1)
 The judgment of Solomon (1 Kings 3)
 Solomon and the Queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10:1)

Israel Splits in to Two Kingdoms

The kingdom divides (1 Kings 11)
 Elijah and the priests of Baal (1 Kings 18)
 Elijah ascends to heaven in a fiery chariot (2 Kings 2)

Exilic Period

The fall of Jerusalem and the First Temple (2 Kings 24)
 Ezekiel and the valley of dry bones (Ezek. 37)

Post-Exilic

Jonah and the great fish (book of Jonah)
 Esther saves her people (book of Esther)
 Return from exile (Ezra 3)
 Daniel in the lion's den (Dan. 6)

The Bible contains many kinds of writing besides stories. Biblical writing includes poetry, laws, family trees, wise sayings, and prophetic messages; and different kinds of writing interact with one another. For instance, a story might lead to a victory poem. A law might be made more concrete by a story in which an Israelite violates that law and is punished. Not only is there a variety of writing in the Bible with different purposes, but even within the category of “story” we find different stories that serve different purposes.

The Many Functions of a Story

A story may entertain or delight us. The lad David, equipped only with a slingshot, defeats the giant Goliath in 1 Samuel 17, in spite of the Philistine’s threatening size, mighty armor, and weaponry. While entertaining us, this story also serves

another, more political purpose, introducing us to David, the future king of Israel, in the best possible light. We have legends of mighty figures such as Samson, who in Judges 16 pulls the pillars of a whole temple down upon Philistine idolaters, killing himself at the same time.

We have stories that retell and transform the stories of other cultures. For instance, in the book of Genesis, Noah builds an ark and saves a remnant of the human race. The biblical story of the Flood draws on a Mesopotamian myth of a great flood, and while the two stories have many details in common, the biblical story has its own unique ending. Noah enters into a covenant with God, who introduces a law prohibiting murder, God's solution to the violent and troublesome behavior of human beings.

A biblical story may provide an explanation for pain or joy, such as the tale of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2. When things begin to go wrong after the couple eat the forbidden fruit, God informs Eve that she will experience suffering when giving birth. This punishment provides an explanation for the pains of labor. Adam will work the ground with great difficulty, providing the origin for a different kind of hard labor. Other stories explain why a place is named the way it is or why we avoid eating certain foods. Many tales teach us right from wrong, providing moral lessons or warning us against certain behavior. Adultery is punished, obedience rewarded.

Some stories demand to be remembered. The most important story that the ancient Israelites must remember is described in the book of Exodus, in which God frees the People of Israel from oppression in Egypt. This collective memory provides Israel with an explanation for its beginnings in slavery, how they managed to escape with God's help, and the motive for continued loyalty to God. It helps shape the community and strengthen it over time. In fact, the entire community of Israel participates in retelling the story of the Exodus year after year, and God even commands parents to tell the story to their children. Once they leave Egypt, the People of Israel accept God's offer of a covenant (a binding contract). The covenant obligates them to serve God, who in turn will care for them by giving them laws that will help them create a good and just community. A story told about the past demands actions in the present in order to build a better future.

The Bible also contains many stories about individuals who face the difficulties of life, leaving home to travel long distances alone to meet uncertain futures. Some flee to escape the murderous rage of brothers or the abuse of mistresses. Others are abandoned by lovers. These individuals are recognizably flawed, and we are meant to identify with them. How these characters handle the events of their lives and God's role in supporting them through such trials are among the key lessons of the story for the reader.

Finally, and perhaps most important, biblical stories describe encounters with God that are personal and private or public and communal. An entire people, Israel, witnesses God's presence on top of Mount Sinai, in thunder and smoke. An individual, Jacob, alone and frightened, is suddenly attacked by a mysterious wrestler; he manages to beat that wrestler, only to exclaim that he has seen none other than God, face to face. Such stories allow us to glimpse and be moved by the remarkable religious imaginations of the biblical storytellers.

How Biblical Stories Engage Us

The reader of a biblical story cannot remain passive; biblical stories demand their readers participate "in an unfolding conversation with the text" (Joel Rosenberg, in *Back to the Sources*, Barry W. Holtz, ed.). There are many reasons a reader gets involved. For one, biblical stories never give us enough details; our curiosity is constantly triggered, and we are left to supply the missing details ourselves. Not knowing until the very end of Genesis 32 who Jacob wrestles with throughout the night, we consider the possibilities. Is it a river demon? A messenger from God? Jacob's brother? His own guilty conscience confronting him in a dream? Only when Jacob announces that he has seen God face to face do we realize the identity of his opponent. We put aside our guesses and modify our view.

Sometimes we are certain what we think about an event or a character, but then we are proved wrong. In the opening chapters of 1 Samuel, Eli the priest fails to recognize real piety in front of him, mistaking Hannah's profound prayer for a drunken stupor. Soon after that encounter, a messenger from God informs this same priest that because he is too forgiving of his corrupt sons, they will be killed and a new priesthood established. By this point we have enough information about Eli to consider him in a strongly negative light. Yet in the midst of these problematic events, Eli continues to lovingly instruct his young protégé, the future prophet Samuel. He does so even after realizing that God has commanded Samuel to announce Eli's tragic fate to him. Eli's gentle response to the difficulties of his life forces us to reevaluate him, and we exchange contempt and scorn for pity and surprise. The process of adjustment keeps us involved.

Uncertainty also keeps us interested. Are we to consider the David of 2 Samuel 11 a solicitous king or a duplicitous adulterer as he deals with the husband of a woman David just got pregnant? The Bible does not tell us what to think or what moral we should carry away with us, instead forcing us to form our own opinion after reading its stories. Remarkably, we may reread a story at a different stage of our life and discover something that we never noticed before or perhaps never understood. That sense of discovery also invites us to reread biblical stories year after year.

Techniques of the Biblical Storytellers

If we learn to recognize the techniques of the biblical storytellers, we will better appreciate and understand their creations. For instance, as first proposed by Martin Buber and elaborated on by Robert Alter in *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, a key word may be chosen and repeated enough times for the reader to realize that it conveys the meaning of the larger story. For instance, in chapter 1 of Genesis the word “good” appears so often as to convince us that everything God creates is good. When God first speaks to Abraham in Genesis 12, God uses a form of “blessing” five times in just two verses, leading us to understand that Abraham will be a source of blessing in the world. In the concluding chapters of Numbers, the word “inheritance” appears frequently, reminding us that the tribes of Israel are about to leave behind the wilderness in which they have wandered for 40 years and indicating that they are ready to begin their new lives in the Promised Land. Years later the People of Israel approach the prophet Samuel to demand that he appoint a king over them, and he tries to warn them against such a plan by unmistakably repeating the word “take” to argue that a king will rob them of their children and much of their wealth.

Words may also allude to other stories. When that happens, we need to consider the connection between the two stories. For instance, Joseph brings his father “bad reports” of his brothers in Genesis 37. Events that follow eventually lead the entire family to settle in Egypt, where Pharaoh enslaves their descendants. Four hundred years later, having escaped with God’s help, the Israelites fall under the spell of another “bad report,” this time about the Promised Land (Num. 13). Even after suffering so much in Egypt, the descendants of Joseph immediately long to return to Egypt. Such a desire has disastrous results for their entire generation.

A great deal of repetition occurs in biblical stories, but we should not consider the writer who uses repetition as careless. The writer purposefully triggers our attention through repetition. We can spot small but very meaningful differences when a conversation or scene is repeated. (Robert Alter calls this type of repetition a “type-scene.”) A man meets a woman at a well, and this leads to a proposal of marriage. Such an encounter at the well takes place in the tales of Rebekah and Isaac (Gen. 24), Jacob and Rachel (Gen. 29), and Moses and Zipporah (Exod. 2). Yet in each scene, in spite of the familiar pattern, subtle changes exist that convey a great deal about the characters involved. Isaac does not meet Rebekah himself, but a servant finds her and enters into negotiations on his behalf, suggesting the passivity that is part of Isaac’s character. Unlike his father, Jacob exhibits superhuman strength in rolling the stone away from the well so that his beloved Rachel may water her herd. The stone provides an obstacle that he overcomes, but it also hints at the obstacles that lie in store for him before he can marry Rachel. Before Moses can water Zipporah’s flock, he must fight off bandits, anticipating his future role as liberator. Through small variations, each scene illustrates some aspect of the character or of the character’s future.

Repetition also occurs within the same story. For instance, in 1 Samuel 3, after God first calls to Samuel in the middle of the night, the young prophet fails to recognize God's voice. Instead he mistakenly goes to his mentor, Eli the priest, three times in a row! Each time Samuel announces, "Here I am, for you have called me." The repetition unifies the entire scene and communicates Samuel's utter obedience to his master Eli as well as his perplexity about who is calling him and for what reason. But there are also small differences in each encounter. The second time, instead of running, Samuel walks to his mentor, less eager to answer the call. When Eli sends him back to bed, he adds, "my son," acting like a parent who wants to calm Samuel, while revealing his own fondness for the young boy. In the third interaction, Eli finally realizes that it is God who has been calling Samuel and, instead of merely sending Samuel back to his bed, instructs him on how to respond to God's call. The change in the pattern highlights both Eli's selfless role as mentor and the momentousness of Samuel's new role as prophet. (See Uriel Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives*, on this particular scene.)

Repetition sometimes occurs in a phrase or even within a verse in a special structure called a "chiasm." God announces the prohibition against murder to Noah at the end of the Flood story in the following words: "Whosoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed" (Gen. 9:6). The structure is *A, B, C* and then reversed, *C, B, A*. Each letter represents a word: *A* = shed, *B* = blood, and *C* = man.

sheds blood man
 man blood will be shed

The writer uses this special structure to communicate an important principle or message to the reader.

A different kind of repetition involves repeated images. For instance, "fire" haunts the story of Samson. The divine messenger who announces Samson's birth goes up in a flame from the altar. The name "Samson" includes the Hebrew word for the sun, a great fire in the sky. He is born near a place that includes "fire" in its name, Eshtaol. He has a fiery temperament, expressed in the destructive burning of Philistine fields (Judges 15:5), and he escapes from the Philistines when the cords that bind him melt away like fire (15:14). At the end of his life, he is buried in Eshtaol. The many uses of "fire" reinforce the destructive and unpredictable side of Samson.

Another way in which the biblical writer conveys meaning to the reader is through the use of dialogue. Often when characters speak to each other, or about each other to a third party, they repeat each other's words. Yet a second character might make a slight change in the words of the first speaker that often surprises the careful reader. Those changes may distort the original meaning or may add a twist that conveys something new. Sometimes the altered repetition

lets us know that the second character is “on to” the first. In another use of dialogue, two characters may be defined by a contrast in tone, style, or substance. The panicked Saul can’t think of what to bring the seer in the town up ahead as an offering and anxiously quizzes his servant. The servant calmly informs him that the situation is well in hand. Such a contrast in temperament highlights the emotional roller coaster that is Saul’s personality, an instability that makes him less than suited to be king of a struggling new nation.

Naming speeches can also characterize a biblical figure. When a woman gives birth in the Bible, she often names the child and supplies a special meaning that usually involves a pun on the name. Not only are we introduced to a new character but we gain some insight into the experience of the mother in question.

Often the Bible will give us a seemingly extraneous detail that turns out to anticipate what will come. For instance, we learn in the very first chapter of 1 Samuel, in verse 3, that Eli has two sons, Hofni and Pinehas. They do not reappear in the story until 2:11. At that point they become very important to the story, as their corrupt behaviors lead to their deaths and to the death of their father, Eli. Repeatedly in the books of Samuel, sons gravely disappoint their fathers or lead them into catastrophe. In addition to the sons of Eli, we need only think of Jonathan’s loyalty to David rather than to his father, Saul, or of Amnon, son of David who rapes his half-sister Tamar, David’s daughter. In consequence, a second son of David, Absalom, rebels against his father in a civil war. Even the prophet Samuel, whose birth occurs in the very chapter that introduces us to the corrupt sons of Eli, must eventually face the fact that his own two sons are equally as corrupt.

Techniques That Convey Special Meaning

- Repetition of key words
- Words that connect one scene or story to another
- Repetition of events and encounters
- Repetition of images
- Careful use of dialogue
- The meaning of a name
- A detail that foreshadows, or anticipates, something to come

Putting Biblical Stories Together

In the Bible, not only does a story have a writer, but also an editor. The editor places different stories together and does so in a careful and creative way (Joel

Rosenberg suggests that we consider the editor an artist in his own right in *Back to the Sources*). On the surface, two stories may seem to contradict one another, but if the reader pays attention, one discovers that these stories have different points of view that complement each other. For instance, in chapter 1 of Genesis, God appears from the heavens to create the creatures of the world, including the human. In chapters 2 and 3 (considered to be written by a different author), God appears to have a much closer relationship with the human being, even sharing the Garden of Eden with the first woman and man. Thus we can appreciate God both as a transcendent being and as a figure who is quite close to the human. Later in the Bible, David is introduced to us in 1 Samuel 16 as a simple shepherd boy, chosen by God, and in the very next story David wins popular praise, thanks to his daring and skill with a slingshot. These stories also complement each other. David is chosen by God, who loves him, but at the same time he earns a reputation due to his exceptional gifts. (See Robert Alter, *The David Story*, for a translation and commentary on the relevant chapters.)

Sometimes different stories disagree. In Genesis 1, all that God creates is good. But in Genesis 2, God creates a tree of knowledge of good and bad. Is God the source only of good or of both good and bad? (See Israel Knohl, *The Divine Symphony*, for a fuller discussion of the differences between these stories.) In the book of Numbers, memory is seen as both positive and problematic. Chapter 10 reports that the priests designed specially hammered trumpets to be used first in the wilderness and later in the Temple. If blown in the Land, the trumpets will remind the people of that long-ago journey through the wilderness when God accompanied the people until they successfully arrived in the Promised Land. That memory unifies the people and reinforces their loyalty to God and to the priests. Yet in chapter 11, memory proves to be very destructive. The people are overcome with memories of Egyptian delicacies and want to abandon God and their leaders and immediately return to Egypt. In consequence, an entire generation will not enter the Land.

In each example, the editor has placed two stories next to one another to challenge us to think about such important matters as the nature of God, the origins of evil, the complex personality of King David, and the unreliability of memory. These stories represent different viewpoints, written by different authors in different times, and then placed together by yet another figure, the editor. The Bible does nothing less than preserve the collective wisdom and religious experiences not just of one writer but of generations of writers.

Moses and the Story of Israel

I conclude this chapter by looking at one story in some detail—the early life of Moses, found in Exodus 1:3. It is an example that illustrates many of the points made earlier. Though about an individual, Moses, the narrative anticipates and introduces the story about the community Israel. We can also glimpse the

religious imagination of the writer in the depiction of the Burning Bush. (See Moshe Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*, for more discussion about this.)

Every good story has a context that provides the reader with the needed background. Our context begins with the very beginning of Exodus, chapter 1, even before Moses is born. We are told: “But the Israelites were fertile and prolific; they multiplied and increased very greatly, so that the land was filled with them” (Exod. 1:7). Right away we have several allusions to chapter 1 of Genesis. The word “prolific” (often translated as “swarming”) appears three times in two verses (Gen. 1:20–21). In 1:22, God creates the creatures of the planet and blesses them: “Be fertile and increase.” In 1:28, God blesses the humans the same way, “Be fertile and increase,” but then adds, “fill the earth.” The first three terms come together in 9:7 (as they do in Exodus). At the end of the Flood story God announces to Noah, “And you, be fertile and increase and swarm [be prolific] all over the earth ...” (translation mine). Why does Exodus open with such clear allusions to the creation of the world and to the Flood’s aftermath? Both of the earlier stories in Genesis are about beginnings, the very first beginning and then, after the Flood, a new beginning. At that time God offers humanity a second chance after the near destruction of the world. By using allusion, our writer in Exodus is proclaiming another beginning: the creation of the People of Israel. The birth of Moses and the birth of Israel as a people are connected to one another.

In fact, there are repeated references to birth in the opening chapters of Exodus. The Egyptian Pharaoh seeks to kill off newborn males, but heroic midwives thwart his plan. Then Moses is born, and part of the plot involves finding a nurse to suckle him. Eventually, the image of a birth canal is symbolically re-created in the narrow path that the Children of Israel must take through the waters of the Sea of Reeds. The opening chapters of Exodus also emphasize the crucial role of women in caring for the infant Moses. In addition to midwives, we read about Moses’s mother and sister and even the daughter of the Pharaoh, who saves him from the Nile River. Moses is repeatedly saved by the actions of women.

Let us turn to the brief story of Moses’s early years. We are told very specific details about Moses. After he is born, his mother sees that he is “good” (Exod. 2:1)—a clear echo of God’s creation of heaven and earth in Genesis 1. When Moses is too old to be hidden from the Pharaoh, his mother places him in a little basket (*teivah*). This is the same term used for the ark of Noah, the only other time the term is used. The allusion suggests that just as the world’s survival depended on Noah, now the survival of the Israelites depends on this one vulnerable infant, Moses. After the baby is saved by the Pharaoh’s daughter, she names him in a speech that explains why she chose “Moses”: “I drew him out of the water,” in which the Hebrew verb for, “I drew him out” is a play on words (a homonym) on the name “Moses” in Hebrew (Exod. 2:10). In so doing, she has

reversed her father's intention that all Israelite males be drowned in the river. Unknowingly, the Pharaoh's daughter also anticipates God's future saving of the people by means of water as they leave Egypt.

Time passes. The narrator zooms in on a particular event in Moses's early life in Exodus 2:11–15. As readers, we need to consider why the narrator focuses on this one event and no other. What does the event teach us about Moses? Moses leaves the Pharaoh's setting and discovers the suffering of his "brothers" the Israelites. It is not clear that Moses knows he is an Israelite, but he recognizes oppression when he sees it and stops an Egyptian from beating a Hebrew. He then has to run for his life. The story suggests that Moses has to leave the confines of the Egyptian royal court before he can confront injustice and cruelty in the world. It also suggests that Moses still identifies with the People of Israel, despite having been raised in the palace. Before long he leaves his Egyptian loyalties behind him.

After this episode Moses arrives in Midian. Once married to Zipporah (the Midianite he encounters at a well), he has a son. Moses names this son Gershom, literally "a stranger there." He proclaims, "I have been a stranger in a foreign land" (Exod. 2:22). In this way we learn that Moses has come to see himself as a stranger in Egypt. So concludes the early years of Moses.

The narrator temporarily interrupts the next chapter in the life of Moses to announce the main concern of Exodus, the story of the birth of the People of Israel. God hears the cries of the enslaved Israelites and remembers the covenant with the Patriarchs and Matriarchs. At this moment, the story of the individual, Moses, becomes completely involved in the story of the People of Israel. It is only after God decides to act on behalf of Israel that Moses encounters God (Exod. 3:1–6). The wilderness setting is very important, as Moses finds himself in a place far removed from his family, left to face God alone. The very wilderness, in its stark majesty, reinforces the vulnerability of this one single human being.

As he tends to his flock in the vast wilderness, Moses happens upon a miraculous sight. He sees a bush burning that is not consumed by the fire, and Moses turns aside. "Seeing" is a key word of the story of Moses. His mother sees that he is "good" when she gives birth to him. The daughter of Pharaoh sees him and rescues him. Moses sees the oppression of his brothers. Now Moses sees a vision of God. Only after Moses turns aside does God speak to him.

As readers of biblical stories, we must always pay careful attention to the details. For instance, why does God appear in a fire that does not consume the bush? Such a fire, especially in a wilderness, overturns the natural course of things. Fire is a substance that is both positive and negative. It can harm us, but it can also warm us and provide us with light. God can be destructive and out of control,

and in those moments God's fire can burn us (Lev. 10, Num. 11). At other times, God offers us wisdom that can enlighten us and illuminate our lives. "Fire" identifies something profound in our experiences of God.

The name of the bush, *seneh*, in Hebrew, is another important detail. At first *seneh* creates a link through sound to Mount Sinai, but then God instructs Moses to bring the people to Sinai "to this mountain," and we realize that the two sites are identical (Exod. 3:12). God plans to appear to the entire people at Mount Sinai after having freed them from Egypt. It is at this moment in our story that God sends Moses away from the *seneh* back to Egypt on a mission to do just that. In other words, Moses will lead the people out of Egypt to this very site.

The story of the People of Israel, we realize, exactly parallels the story of Moses. They literally follow in his footsteps. Moses is rescued from death despite a royal decree, and so are the People of Israel, who escape certain death when the Egyptians chase them into the Sea of Reeds. Just as Moses is rescued from water, so too are the entire people as God miraculously parts the sea. Just as Moses flees to the wilderness and encounters God, so too do the people flee to the wilderness. They arrive at the very spot in which God first appears to Moses, the bush (*seneh*) that is Mount Sinai.

The people also share Moses's long journey to faith. It takes Moses quite some time to realize that he is an Israelite. He has to figure out who he is and what he is meant to do. Even after encountering God at the Burning Bush, Moses is reluctant to accept God's instructions. The people hesitate in the same way. Even after God reveals God's self at Mount Sinai, the people take quite some time to understand God's greatness and to implement God's plans for them. They complain and rebel. So it is that the story of the individual Moses and the story of the People of Israel are intertwined. The opening chapters of Exodus introduce us to the story of the birth of the People of Israel by helping us see their story reflected in the story of Moses in the most human and personal of terms.

Because Bible stories are timeless, they provide us with an ongoing source of strength. They help us make sense of our lives, connecting us to one another and to those who lived long ago. As biblical characters come to understand the truths that give their lives meaning, so, too, do we.

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