

Delivered out of Empire

Pivotal Moments in the Book of Exodus,
Part One

Walter Brueggemann

Discussion questions by Julie Mullins

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Series Foreword

Pivots in Scripture

Not long after arriving in Atlanta for my first tenure-track job, still very green in my field and profession, I somehow found the courage to invite Walter Brueggemann, who taught a few miles away at Columbia Theological Seminary, to lecture in my Introduction to Old Testament course. To my great delight he accepted, despite the fact that the class met at eight o'clock in the morning and Atlanta traffic is legendary. (Those who know Walter better than I did at that time know what I discovered only later: that such generosity is standard operating procedure for him.) I either offered, or perhaps he suggested, that the topic of his guest lecture should be Jeremiah. And so it was that a few weeks after the invitation was extended and received, my students and I were treated to eighty minutes of brilliant insight into Jeremiah from one of the masters of that biblical book, not to mention the larger Book to which Jeremiah belongs.¹

Even now, almost twenty years later, I remember a number of things about that lecture—clear testimony to the quality of the content and the one who gave it. In all honesty, I must admit that several of the things I remember have made their way into my own subsequent lectures on Jeremiah. In this way, Walter's presence could still (and still can!) be felt in my later classes, despite the fact that I couldn't ask him to guest lecture every year. One moment from that initial lecture stands out with special clarity: Walter's exposition of a specific text from Jeremiah. I suspect I knew this particular text before, maybe even read about it in something Walter had written, but as I recall things now it was that early morning lecture at Emory

for *I have dealt* you the blow (v. 14),
I have done these things to you. (v. 15)

Like the original audience, contemporary readers are left no time to ponder this double-agency since immediately after the second ascription of this wound to the Lord's hand, the text pivots both suddenly and drastically. From verse 16 on, we read that those whom the Lord used to punish Israel will now themselves be punished; we also learn that what had before been a terminal illness turns out to be treatable after all (v. 17a). The reason for this dramatic shift is given only in verse 17b: God will cure the incurable wound because God will not stand by while Israel's enemies call it "an outcast," claiming that "no one cares for Zion."

Now in truth, what God says to Israel/Zion in verse 13 sounds very much like "no one cares for you," but as Walter memorably put it in his lecture, while it is one thing to talk about your own mother, it is another thing altogether when someone else talks about your mother! God, it would seem, claims privilege to say certain things about Zion that others are simply not allowed to say. If and when they ever do utter such sentiments, God is mobilized to defend and to heal. Zion, it turns out, is no outcast, after all; there is, after all, One who still cares for her.

The space between verses 15 and 16 is a pivot, explained most fully in verse 17. This, then, is a turning point that changes everything in this passage—a passage that can be seen, more broadly and in turn, as a pivotal moment in the larger book of Jeremiah, coming, as it does, early in a section that shifts decidedly toward consolation and restoration.

And Jeremiah 30:12–17 is not alone in the Old Testament. Another remarkable pivot takes place in the space between the two lines of Psalm 22:21:

Save me from the mouth of the lion!
 From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.

In the first line, there is an urgent plea for immediate help: "Save!"; in the second, testimony to past deliverance: "You *have rescued* me." Something drastic, something pivotal has taken place here, in between

two parallel lines of Hebrew poetry. Before this pivot, the psalmist knew only of *God-forsakenness* (v. 1). But after it, the psalmist is full only of *God-praise* (vv. 22–24) that extends to the most remarkable and unexpected corners of the world and underworld (vv. 25–31).²

Spiritual writer and humanities professor Marilyn Chandler McEntyre has written recently of “pausing where Scripture gives one pause.” She comments on memorable biblical phrases like “teach me your paths,” “hidden with Christ,” and “do not harden your hearts.”³ Phrases like these, she writes,

have lives of their own. Neither sentences nor single words, they are little compositions that suggest and evoke and invite. . . . They are often what we remember: “Fourscore and seven years ago” recalls a whole era, triggers a constellation of feelings, and evokes an image of Lincoln. . . . In the classic film *A Bridge Too Far*, one soldier, rowing for his life away from an impending explosion, repeats again and again a fragment of the only prayer he remembers: “Hail Mary, full of grace . . . Hail Mary, full of grace . . . Hail Mary, full of grace . . .”—and somehow we believe that such a prayer at such a time suffices.⁴

So it is that phrases are “powerful instruments of awakening and recollection for all of us.”⁵ McEntyre goes on to note that the spiritual practice of meditative reading known as *lectio divina* encourages readers to pay attention to specific words or phrases:

Learning to notice what we notice as we move slowly from words to meaning, pausing where we sense a slight beckoning, allowing associations to emerge around the phrase that stopped us is an act of faith that the Spirit will meet us there. There is, we may assume, a gift to be received wherever we are stopped and summoned.⁶

Pivotal moments in the Old Testament like the ones in Jeremiah 30 and Psalm 22 aren’t exactly the same thing as the practice of pausing commended by McEntyre, but the two seem closely related. Pivotal texts are precisely the ones that arrest us, demand our attention, change everything:

- Suddenly, *healing*—Jeremiah 30:16–17
- Suddenly, *deliverance*—Psalm 22:21b

Of course, the pivots found in Scripture are not always so benign. One may think, alternatively, of these:

- Suddenly, *trouble*—as in 2 Samuel 11:5, Bathsheba’s report (only two words in Hebrew) to David: “I’m pregnant.”
- Suddenly, *judgment*—as in 2 Samuel 12:7, Nathan’s statement (also only two words in Hebrew) to David: “You’re that man!”

Now one could, especially in a more skeptical mode, wonder just how many pivotal moments, how many *suddenlys* like these, might actually exist in Scripture. But before we assume that the list is quite finite—more of a curiosity than a persistent call to attention—and take our leave to attend to some piece of distracting drivel on our electronic devices, we should stop and remember the Gospel of Mark, which makes a living on *suddenlys*. Jesus is always doing something or having something done to him *suddenly* or *immediately* (*euthus*), and the same is often true for those gathered around him.⁷

What Mark shows us is that, in the end, *suddenly* can aptly describe an entire Gospel, an entire life lived toward God—indeed, a life lived most perfectly toward God. The same may be true for the gospel of God writ large, across both testaments of the Christian Bible. And so, along with the practice of pausing where Scripture gives us pause (McEntyre), pivoting where Scripture itself pivots does the same: it turns us toward something new, something deeper, something *transformative*. These texts are places where the Bible, and we who read it, may pivot toward another world—another *divine* world—that can change our own for the better, forever. In contrast to McEntyre’s pauses, which anticipate that the Spirit will reach out to us through the text, these pivotal moments in Scripture are not acts of faith but *places* of faith, established sites where the Spirit has *already* met the faithful. They are gifts *already* given, though they seem largely still waiting on us to receive them. The goal of the present volume, and this series dedicated to pivotal moments in the Old Testament, is to mediate those gifts. We are fortunate to have Professor Brueggemann lead the way.

Brent A. Strawn, *Series Editor*

Preface

What follows here is not a commentary on the book of Exodus. We have an ample supply of reliable commentaries, including my own.¹ Rather, this is more like a reader's guide to the book of Exodus suitable for individual or group study. It is divided into two volumes, of which this is the first.

Readers of the book of Exodus are confronted by the text with two sorts of problems. On the one hand, the book of Exodus is constructed in a quite complex way, as critical study has made clear. The complexity consists first in multiple layers of tradition generated over time, a multiplicity factored out in established critical study as "documents" or "sources." The complexity consists, second, in the problem of the interface of *narrative* that tells of Exodus emancipation, wilderness sojourn, covenant-making, and the episode of the golden calf, and *prescribed commandments* that include both the familiar requirements of Sinai and the very different provisions for the divine presence in the cult. It is not at all obvious how the narrative and the different collections of prescribed commandments fit together or operate in each other's presence. For the most part, commentators have not invested much energy in this problem.

On the other hand, the reader is confronted with a mass of detail, so much so that it is difficult to sort out where the accent should fall in our reading. What I have done in this study is simply to indicate what I think are the pivotal moments through which the detail of the text can be organized and understood in some coherent way. In the end I hope this series of textual expositions amounts to something of a canonical reading of the book, in two parts. The first volume covers

chapters 1–15, tracing the intervention of YHWH to emancipate the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, through their passage through the Red Sea. The second volume will examine the rest of the book of Exodus, from the Israelites' wilderness wanderings to the covenant of Sinai, its attendant commandments, and the prescriptions for and construction of the tabernacle, in which the presence of God was to dwell. The book of Exodus in its entirety is arranged according to distinct themes:

- The Exodus deliverance (1–15)
- The wilderness sojourn (16–18)
- The covenant of Sinai (19–24)
- The authorization of the tabernacle (25–31)
- The violation of the Sinai covenant (32–34)
- The completion of the tabernacle (35–40)²

Throughout, my own bent in interpretation is to attempt to read through a liberationist hermeneutic that I believe is required both by the text and by our own demanding interpretive context. Most often a liberationist reading of the book of Exodus does not extend to the later more didactic and prescriptive materials. I suggest, however, that these later texts attest that it is precisely the God of emancipation who takes up an emancipatory presence in ancient Israel. The “glory” that comes to occupy the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34–38) is the very “glory” that God has gained over Pharaoh (Exodus 14:4, 17). Thus the God who inhabits the tabernacle is the God who has prevailed over slavery and who intends, for all time to come, to oppose and defeat the powers of bondage. The priestly materials, to be sure, tilt toward the domestication of the emancipatory God. In the end, however, that tilt cannot and will not violate the deep resolve of God. Thus later on, in the tabernacle-become-temple, God's massive capacity for sovereignty is on exhibit, so much so that the observers-participants in worship are struck with awe and must exclaim, “Glory!” (Psalm 29:9). This exclaimed glory in the liturgy is again the same glory gained over Pharaoh and situated in the tabernacle (40:34–38). It is my hope and intent that my exposition will

make clear this coherence (albeit voiced in fragmentary ways) that amounts in sum to the book of Exodus.

As always, my debts in the completion of this book are very great. They include on the one hand a great company of teachers and colleagues who have helped to situate me in a liberation trajectory of interpretation. On the other hand, they include, as so often, David Dobson and his colleagues at Westminster John Knox Press, who patiently and skillfully turn words into books.

I am near the end of my work. Near the end is a good time to mark my passion for my grandchildren, who face such a vexed world for time to come but a world over which the God of glory faithfully presides.

Walter Brueggemann

Chapter 1

The Cry That Begins History (Exodus 2:23)

After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God.

Scripture Passages for Reference

Genesis 47:13–26
Exodus 1 and 2
Exodus 14:10
2 Kings 8:1–6
Mark 10:47
Luke 18:1–8

The book of Exodus begins with a story about slaves. It is a story told with specificity, but one that is familiar and recurring among us. This story of enslavement begins in Genesis 47:13–26. In the midst of the food crisis caused by famine, the peasants (cheap labor!) must sell their land and their bodies to the economic monopoly (Pharaoh) in order to secure food enough to survive. The food monopoly of Pharaoh (stylized as a “pyramid” in which all money and power flowed to the top) left the peasants helpless and vulnerable. It did not occur to Pharaoh (or to Joseph) to give food to the hungry peasants, because both the food and the peasants are viewed, in royal purview,

as tradable “commodities.” Thus the report concerns a trade of land and bodies for food, a trade managed by and for the benefit of the people on the top of the pyramid.

It does not surprise us that the economic arrangements of slavery lead to abuse: “The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them” (Exodus 1:13–14). There were no restraints on the administrators who served the monopoly. As a result, work conditions became inhospitable and work quotas became heavier. The narrative witnesses to an unbearable situation.

Chapters 1 and 2 report that the “Hebrews” engaged in resistance to Pharaoh’s economic system. That resistance, however, had to be surreptitious, so aggressive and complete was the brutalizing control of the pyramid system. The midwives among the Hebrew slaves resisted by refusing Pharaoh’s dictum that all Hebrew male babies be killed—so anxious is Pharaoh (1:15–22)! In defiance of the edict, the midwives continued to assist in births that strengthened the slave community. The resistance of Moses was not at all covert. He acts as a freedom fighter (or as a terrorist!) and kills an agent of the exploitative system (2:11–15). His is an act of violent resistance, a symbolic act that refused the unbearable rule of the aggressive regime.

All of that resistance, evoked by pain, was conducted in silence. The midwives had never said a word but had quietly gone about their business. Moses does not speak a word as he kills the agent to the regime (2:11–12). He does speak in 2:13, but only in the presence of other Hebrew slaves, not in public, not in any address or challenge to the regime. The slaves suffered mightily, but we may believe they did so in silence—a silence imposed by a vicious regime. Such a regime does not mind at all if people suffer. It is simply the “cost of doing business,” the necessity of the production schedule. It fears only that such pain will become public data, sounded and heard in the public domain. It fears pain brought to speech, because such uttered pain becomes dangerous to the oppressive order.

But we are told that when Pharaoh, the administrator of the exploitative pyramid system, died, everything became unglued. The remarkable turn in the narrative in 2:23 is that the slaves sounded their pain out loud. They “groaned . . . and cried out.” They broke

the silence of the regime. They engaged in defiant action that no longer pretended that imperial exploitation of cheap labor was “normal.” Their suffering bodies made unmistakably clear that such pain imposed by work requirements was abnormal.

- The slaves broke the imposed silence and so refused the absolutism of the regime. In their long period of silence, they had ceded all initiative to the regime—but no more.
- The slaves announced their vigorous presence in the historical process after a long season of default. The regime specialized in totalizing silence. It knew how to manage cheap labor. It knew how to deliver bricks. It knew how to provide the materials and the machinery for such economic productivity. Its competence in the technological, however, had completely and deliberately voided any prospect for political engagement. That voiding served to deny that the potential political participants existed at all. The producers are reduced to nothing more than a statistic, a “workforce.” They are unnamed and held nameless by the regime.

But they had names! We know of “Moses”; we also know of Puah and Shiphrah (1:15). They all had names. They all belonged to the community. They all had political awareness, even though Pharaoh never knew it. And now this sound! The ones with names, albeit unrecognized names, are present and now have to be dealt with as historical agents. What now begins, only now with the cry, is a narrative of strenuous political engagement and contestation. Pharaoh does not want to participate in such a negotiation. But he has no choice, because the cry has evoked political possibilities that can no longer be silenced and disregarded.

- More than political presence, the slaves announced their entitlement, as lively human bodies, to participation, protection, and well-being. This is the most elemental, most irreducible of all entitlements, not grounded in any political theory or any religious affirmation. It is an entitlement that comes from being a bodily agent situated in the political economy. Because of that entitlement that is bodily, there are limits to

abuse, exploitation, and oppression. And Pharaoh has transgressed those limits. Thus the groan of human existence, the cry of political possibility, and the assertion of self-awareness and self-consciousness as a body in pain finally must defy Pharaoh and his pyramid of control.

- The voice of presence and the cry of entitlement assert that the situation of endless production in ruthless circumstance is unbearable and will not be tolerated. Its unbearable quality is indicated by the insistence that the body hurts, and such hurt, thought by Pharaoh to be politically legitimate and economically required, is not permissible.

It is no wonder that such an assertion changes everything in the narrative. Pain brought to voice in public speech so that it is heard out loud promptly rearranges all power realities that are thought to be settled. The cry changes circumstance for the slaves, for the shut-down slaves have been displaced by voiced possibility. The cry changes matters for Pharaoh, because now the reductionisms of manageable technology and administrable labor have been altered by the fresh insistence that the slaves are not mere statistics but are named historical agents.

But most of all, the cry changes YHWH. It is astonishing that for two full chapters at the beginning of the book of Exodus, chapters filled with abuse and violence, YHWH has not yet made a narrative appearance. The cry changes that. The cry is not addressed to YHWH—or to anyone else. It is a cry addressed to no one—and to anyone who would listen. But it “rose up to God.” The cry not addressed to YHWH arrived there anyway. It arrived there because YHWH, the God of the narrative, is like a magnet for the cries of the abused. The cry impinges upon YHWH. It is like a wake-up call to the creator of heaven and earth, the one who had disappeared from the narrative, who had perhaps been unmindful or uncaring about the unbearable aggression of Pharaoh.

All of this, in this instant of cry, is decisively changed. Now YHWH responds. Now YHWH announces readiness to engage. Now YHWH accepts a new work to be performed: “God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac,

and Jacob. God looked on the Israelites, and God took notice of them” (2:24–25; see 3:7–9). What follows is the exodus narrative wrought by YHWH. YHWH, for whatever reason, has not until now taken any initiative. The initiative, rather, has been taken by the Israelites who have found their voice. It is the cry that begins the narrative of rescue and salvation. We are free to imagine that if Pharaoh had been able to sustain his imposed silence, there would have been no exodus narrative. That imposed silence, however, cannot finally refuse or resist the insistence of human bodies that refuse to bear pain in silence. Such voiced pain will finally break the force of Pharaoh.

The Bible that follows from this cry is, among other things, a collage of episodes in which the cry sounds and a response is evoked:

- In Exodus 14:10, the Israelite slaves fear they have asked too much and overplayed their hand. They cry out in their desperate situation, but Moses responds with his magisterial “Do not be afraid.”
- In 2 Kings 8:1–6, the woman bereft of home and property cries out (“appealed”) to the king and gains redress.
- Indeed, the cry becomes the normal gesture of Israel in need:

When the righteous cry for help, the LORD hears,
and rescues them from all their troubles.

Psalm 34:17

Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress.

Psalm 107:6; see vv. 13, 19, 28

- The blind beggar Bartimaeus cries out (Mark 10:47). Even though Jesus’ well-meaning companions try to silence him, “he crie[s] out even more loudly” and is healed.
- In Luke 18:1–8 Jesus counsels his disciples to pray like the widow who is relentless in insisting upon justice and so cries out to the judge incessantly.

And of course the cry continues to make human history. In recent time we have witnessed the cry for justice in the Civil Rights

Movement in the United States, in apartheid South Africa, in the Velvet Revolution of Eastern Europe, in the Occupy Movement, and, in most recent days, in Black Lives Matter. Sometimes the cry can be silenced for a while; it does not always prevail. The exodus narrative nevertheless attests the claim made in our faith that the cry cannot be defeated. It is not defeated simply because Pharaoh cannot resist. It cannot be finally defeated because it evokes YHWH. When the cry “rose up to God,” those who broke the silence became allied with the transformative, emancipatory power of the creator God. What follows from the cry is the emergence of new historical possibility that characteristically subverts old settlements of power and of certitude.

Questions for Discussion

1. The beginning of this chapter describes how a famine directly gives rise to slavery in Egypt. What kinds of assumptions about economic systems and people must Pharaoh and Joseph have held in order to exchange food for people’s land and bodies, rather than giving freely to the hungry?
2. Why do regimes like Pharaoh’s call for silence? The author says on p. 4 that “pain brought to voice in public speech so that it is heard out loud promptly rearranges all power realities that are thought to be settled.” How does the voicing of pain in the public domain threaten those in power? What “political possibilities” does this open for those who cry out? What does it mean to be entitled to “participation, protection, and well-being”? If you already enjoy these basic rights, how can you use that privilege to magnify the voices of those in pain?
3. The witness of Exodus and the biblical narrative shows how the cry of human pain again and again provokes a response from someone in power to act to address that pain. This cry for justice cannot ultimately be defeated because it appeals to “the transformative, emancipatory power of the creator God” (see above). How is that cry being heard today? Where does God seem to be in the midst of this?