

Open the Bible, find yourself

Without its stories, people cannot know who they are

Moses was forbidden by the Lord from entering the Promised Land, but he was offered the consolation prize of giving a long farewell address. Moses said: "The Lord our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. Not with our ancestors did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today" (Deuteronomy 5:2-3).

The words that Moses proclaimed to the people were at once among the most obviously counterfactual words in Scripture and, at the same time, among Scripture's most poignantly true promises. The book of Deuteronomy is Moses' farewell speech to the people as they stood poised to enter the Promised Land. Of the people whom he addressed that day, only three—himself, Joshua and Caleb—were present at Mount Sinai (here called "Horeb") when God made the covenant with the people. What happened to everyone else? They had died during the wilderness-wandering years. So the people left standing in front of Moses were the children and grandchildren of the Exodus generation. They had not been present at Sinai.

But at a theological level, Moses' words are among the most powerful in Scripture. His message to the people, poised as they were to walk into a new land, was that the promises God had made to the people at Sinai were still in effect. Moses did not, of course, mean that the covenant relationship God had initiated did not include the people's parents and grandparents who had died. Rather, the message was that the covenant into which God had entered with the parents was still valid, still alive. The covenant did not end as the people crossed the boundary into a new land. Because the living God was walking with them. Indeed, God had already gone ahead of them.

"Not with our ancestors," Moses said, "but with us, who are all of us here alive today." It is almost impossible to convey to a modern audience how emphatic this promise is in Hebrew, which is an adverb-poor language. So when a writer of Hebrew wants to express something that we would normally use a bunch of adverbs to convey in English—*really*, *extremely*, *very*, *everlastingly*—Hebrew will often pile up the nouns and adjectives. And that is what happens here, as the emphatic, staccato insistence of Moses cascades its way to the end of the sentence. A literal translation might say something like, "But with us. We. These. Here. Today. All of us. Living!"

The import of Moses' ancient message for today is unmistakably clear.

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The Bible is not a book primarily about the past. Rather, the Bible is a book of faith about today. It is worth studying, its witness to God is worth knowing because it is about the here and now and the soon and very soon. Not just about the past.



In a word, when we open the Bible—whether the Old Testament or the New Testament, we should expect to find ourselves in the stories, laws, songs, poems and parables.

The Bible does not tell the stories of our ancestors. It does not tell the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Peter, Paul and Mary. It tells our stories. And if we want to know who we are, we have to know those stories. The Scriptures are worth teaching and preaching to other people because without the stories of the Bible, people cannot know who they are. Because the Bible is not about God's love and care for a people long dead but about God's love and care for us.

Us! We! These! Here! Today! All of us! Living! □

Jacobson is associate professor of Old Testament, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Minn. He is editor of Crazy Talk: A Not-So-Stuffy Dictionary of Theological Terms and Crazy Book: A Not-So-Stuffy Dictionary of Biblical Terms (Augsburg Fortress).

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