

## Tales from an “Antique Volume” Retold by a “Warbling Teller” Emily Dickinson’s Poems on Biblical Texts

A talk given by Bruce M. Penniman as part of the  
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Good morning. I’m delighted to have the opportunity to share some thoughts with you about Emily Dickinson’s poetry. I come to you today not as a Dickinson scholar but as an admiring and sometimes puzzled reader of her verse. During my last several years at Amherst High, I had the privilege of teaching a course called “The Bible and Related Literature,” and the related literature included poems by Emily Dickinson, including several that you have in front of you. There won’t be time to discuss all of them this morning, but I thought you might be interested in reading pieces based on a variety of biblical stories. I’ve listed the poems in biblical order rather than the order in which they were written. These are only a few of the many poems Dickinson composed on biblical themes.

Emily Dickinson famously wrote that while “some keep the Sabbath going to church,” for most of her life she kept it “staying at Home.” But that didn’t prevent her from wrestling with the biblical texts that were the subjects of sermons across the street from the Homestead at First Congregational Church. Indeed, I think it may have been those sermons that she had in mind when she wrote “The Bible is an antique Volume,” read this morning. When she mentioned the “faded Men” who wrote the Bible “at the suggestion of the Holy Spectres” – I love the choice of words there – she may have been thinking of the Calvinist ministers of her era who preached on the “distinguished Precipice” of Sin and described life as a holy war between good and evil much like the popular hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”

It’s important to remember that there was a conservative religious revival going on in Amherst during Dickinson’s lifetime. As William Tyler wrote in his *History of Amherst College*, after the American Revolution “irreligion, immorality, skepticism, and infidelity came in like a flood,” and this was nowhere more evident than at Harvard College, which had been “captured” in 1805 by – dare I say it? – the Unitarians. Amherst College was founded in part in reaction to this trend. According to Tyler, it was among the first of “a new species of Christian colleges,” founded “by the united and spontaneous efforts of evangelical Christians.”

So when Emily Dickinson wishes that the biblical Tale had “a warbling Teller,” one that “captivated” rather than “condemned” its audience, I think she was referring to its interpreters more than its authors. As my high schools students can tell you, the Bible has plenty of captivating stories – one student told me that he thought the course should be renamed “Sex and Violence 101.” Emily Dickinson clearly saw the human dramas enacted in Bible stories, and her poems “warble” with the emotions she felt as she connected her own life to them.

It’s interesting, for example, that in poem 1577, she refers to Eden not as a garden but as “the ancient Homestead,” and again in number 1734 as “that old fashioned House / We dwell in every day.” For her, as for many others, Eden seems to signify the safety of the childhood home, once forsaken, never truly recovered.

Other Bible passages are much harder to comprehend, much less accept. One of the toughest is Genesis 22, in which God asks the unthinkable of Abraham: “Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of” (KJV). Abraham—the same man who just a few chapters

earlier bargained with God to try to save Sodom from destruction—silently obeys, and only the last-minute intervention of the angel of the Lord saves Isaac.

This story, known as the *Akedah*, or the binding of Isaac, has elicited a range of interpretations over the centuries—from a prohibition of human sacrifice to an exemplar of perfect submission to God’s will to an Oedipal struggle between father and son. In Christian typology it prefigures God’s willingness to sacrifice Jesus on the cross. Artists and writers have presented the story in light of their own circumstances. Rembrandt, at age 29, rendered it as *The Angel Stopping Abraham from Sacrificing Isaac to God*, depicting an all-too-willing Abraham holding down the son he is about to kill. At age 49, Rembrandt, who by then had lost three children, returned to the story in *Abraham’s Sacrifice*; this time a distraught, unwilling Abraham holds his son in a loving embrace. Wilfred Owen, in the World War I poem “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young,” made Abraham a prideful leader who “slew his son,/And half the seed of Europe, one by one,” and George Segal used the story in his sculpture commemorating the 1970 Kent State killings.

Dickinson’s commentary on the *Akedah* notes Isaac’s innocence and Abraham’s compliance, but focuses more on the persona of God:

1332    *Abraham to kill him*  
           *Was distinctly told –*  
           *Isaac was an Urchin –*  
           *Abraham was old –*

*Not a hesitation –*  
           *Abraham complied –*  
           *Flattered by Obeisance*  
           *Tyranny demurred –*

*Isaac – to his Children*  
           *Lived to tell the tale –*  
           *Moral – with a Mastiff*  
           *Manners may prevail.*

This poem may send you running for your dictionary, but one point is abundantly clear: God is portrayed as a bully. Though not the only place that Dickinson calls God hard names (“Burglar! Banker—Father!” comes to mind), this depiction is especially bitter. Flattered by Abraham’s cowardly deference, God, presented as tyranny personified, rescinds the death order—not, it seems, out of compassion, but as another display of power. To drive the point home, Dickinson ends the poem by comparing God to a mastiff, evoking the fear and helplessness that everyone feels when facing a snarling, ferocious dog.

By the time Dickinson wrote this poem (c. 1874), she had suffered many painful losses that she clearly felt were arbitrary and cruel. Little did she know that the cruelest, the death of her eight-year-old nephew Gilbert, was yet to come. Like so many before her, she found in Genesis 22 the perfect expression of the eternal and perhaps unanswerable question: “Why does a loving God demand such terrible sacrifices?”

Another kind of injustice that Emily Dickinson made frequent reference to was life’s tendency to tantalize us with things we cannot have. You may remember her poem that begins, “Success is counted sweetest / By those who ne’er succeed.” In that poem it’s the dying soldier in the defeated army who understands best the meaning of the victory celebration he hears in the distance.

In the Bible, Dickinson found the perfect expression of this feeling in the story of Moses – not the Exodus story, when he triumphs over Pharaoh, but after the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, leading his “stiff-necked” people. On the verge of death, the old man climbs to the top of Mount Nebo, from which he can see the Promised Land. He can see it, but because he disobeyed God many years earlier, he will not be allowed to enter. This is the passage that Martin Luther King prophetically quoted in his last speech, on the night in which he was killed. Here’s how Emily Dickinson renders the story:

521 *It always felt to me – a wrong  
To that Old Moses – done –  
To let him see – the Canaan –  
Without the entering –*

*And tho’ in soberer moments –  
No Moses there can be  
I’m satisfied – the Romance  
In point of injury –  
Surpasses sharper stated –  
Of Stephen – or of Paul –  
For these – were only put to death –  
While God’s adroiter will*

*On Moses – seemed to fasten  
With tantalizing Play  
As Boy – should deal with lesser Boy –  
To prove ability –*

*The fault – was doubtless Israel’s –  
Myself – had banned the Tribes –  
And ushered Grand Old Moses  
In Pentateuchal Robes*

*Opon the Broad Possession  
‘Twas little – he should see –  
Old Man on Nebo! Late as this –  
My justice bleeds – for Thee!*

Why did Emily Dickinson, in her thirties, identify so closely with Moses? Was it love – experienced then denied? Was it the less-than-enthusiastic response to her poems that she had received from Thomas Wentworth Higginson a few months earlier? We’ll never know, but she clearly felt Moses’ pain, as we all do when we read his story – and so many other stories of frustrated dreams much closer to home.

Not all of Emily Dickinson’s poems about biblical tales focused on negative emotions. Some were upbeat, even triumphant, such as number 1206:

1206 *Of Paul and Silas it is said  
They were in Prison laid  
But when they went to take them out  
They were not there instead.*

*Security the same insures  
To our assaulted minds –*

*The staple must be optional  
That an Immortal binds.*

Dickinson actually got the story from the book of Acts of the Apostles wrong in this poem. Paul and Silas *were* imprisoned, and an earthquake destroyed their jail during the night, but they did not escape. They stayed and converted the awestruck guards. She may have mixed this story up with that of Peter, who *was* freed by an angel, causing “no small stir among the soldiers” when they found he was missing.

But whatever the story, the point is that the human mind is more powerful than any shackles placed upon it. Dickinson sounded this theme again and again. “They shut me up in Prose,” she wrote, “Because they liked me ‘still’” – but

*... could themselves have peeped –  
And seen my Brain – go round –  
They might as wise have lodged a Bird  
For Treason – in the Pound –*

“Captivity is Consciousness – / So’s Liberty,” she said in another. “The brain is wider than the sky,” she claimed, and her brain certainly was. She may have lived a life constrained by strict social norms and parochial ideas, but her imagination ran wild.

She poured her imagination into language, which brings me to the last poem I’ll talk about this morning, “A word made Flesh is seldom” (number 1715). This is a dense and challenging poem based on the equally puzzling opening verses of the Gospel of John. Here are some excerpts: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. ... And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.” This passage refers, of course, to the coming of Jesus.

When alluding to this text, Dickinson also evokes the Communion, one of only two sacraments observed in the Congregational Church, celebrated then just a few times each year. So, indeed, “A word made Flesh” – the body of Christ in the ritual – *was* “seldom / and tremblingly partook” with the familiar admonition, “Be it unto you according to your faith,” which she renders as “To our specific strength.” But in saying that “Each one of us has tasted” it “With ecstasies of stealth,” she makes the Communion sound like a secret, sensual pleasure.

What is she getting at? The answer is in the enigmatic second half of the poem, which begins, “A word that breathes distinctly / Has not the power to die.” I think she’s talking about poetry here. Language infused with imagination and spirit is as immortal as the Christ celebrated in the Communion, and the poet has the creative powers of God: “... the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Like her contemporaries Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, she seemed to be almost consciously creating an American scripture with her words. It’s no small ambition, but then, this is the poet who wrote, in the poem I alluded to earlier,

*The brain is just the weight of God –  
For heft them – Pound for Pound –  
And they will differ – if they do –  
As syllable from Sound –*

The last line of “A word made Flesh” sums up the poem beautifully: “This loved Philology.” “Philology” refers to the study of language, the study of ancient texts, and the study of literature in general, but a

literal translation of its Greek roots is “love of the word.” Emily Dickinson certainly felt that love, to the point of reverence.

So what was the Bible for Emily Dickinson? More than “an antique Volume / Written by faded Men.” More than a treatise on sin and redemption. Its stories were exemplars not of virtue or vice but of the human condition, with all of its agonies and exultations. And it was food for thought. And a source, along with the Congregational hymnal and her observations of the natural world, of the rich language of her “warbling” poetry, thankfully now ours to enjoy.