

Stretch Your Biblical Muscles

Those parts of the Hebrew Scriptures ('Old Testament') that are filled with repetitive ritual detail can be intimidating to many Catholics, sending them to seek refuge in the familiar sounds and images of the Gospel stories.

Yet if we give up too easily we will never discover the ancient wisdom on which the New Testament is built. For a biblically rich life, we need to step out of our comfort zone and work on our biblical muscles!

In Jewish tradition (from which came these sacred texts) we find skilled coaches to help. Generations of sages have honed their creative skills at interpretation. They have much to teach us about the importance of patient, inquisitive and creative reading of Torah (God's Word).

Let's take an example, from the final chapters of the Book of Exodus: 38:21—40:38. It is now one year after the Israelites came out of Egypt, and the Israelites have just completed the building of the Tabernacle (a portable shrine which represents the presence of the Lord who dwells among them). Read these chapters at a leisurely pace. It takes about 13 minutes. Set aside time for this. Read aloud. Resist the urge to skim the text. Sink yourself into God's Word, attentive to its rhythms and repetitions, so essential to oral tradition. Do the intricate descriptions of material items play on your thought patterns? Do you notice the colours of those yarns, the name of each precious stone...? Does any detail in particular catch your attention? If so, why? In the detail can you taste the immense importance and effort of building the Tabernacle? Does it remind you of a great work—involving countless details—in your own life?

"As the Lord had commanded Moses." This phrase, like a drumbeat, punctuates the text 18 times. What is the effect of this repetition? At no place are we allowed to forget that it is the Lord's desire and design that underlies all this complex

human activity. The drumbeat keeps us focused on what is essential. It is a beat that we need to hear in our 21st century world. Our lives are filled with activity; perhaps activity of great importance. Yet to what avail are our efforts if we become lost in the detail, losing sight of fidelity to the Lord's desires and commands? The Bible's drumbeat anchors the rhythms of our daily work.

What else do you notice in the text? While the Israelites (i.e., all the people) bring the completed components to Moses, *he* (Moses) puts them all together. Puzzled? Why would this collective effort suddenly become a one-man task? According to the midrash, none of the Israelites knew how to assemble the pieces.

"So what did they do? Each took his finished piece of work to Moses, saying: 'here are the boards, here are the bolts'; and as soon as Moses beheld them, the Holy Spirit settled upon him and he set the Tabernacle up. You must not say that it was Moses who set it up, for miracles were performed with it and it rose of its own accord." [Exodus Rabbah 52, 4]

See how the midrash invites us to ponder a human effort from a spiritual perspective. Even a construction site is permeated by divine presence. A structural task is worthy of the language of miracles. We are reminded that the Lord is deeply involved with his people, with their work of service in creating the Tabernacle, and with Moses, a faithful servant who is especially close to the Lord.

Perhaps the Torah is starting to speak to your own life. Perhaps you are recalling where you saw God's hand at work, or pondering your efforts to stay focused on the Lord amidst activity. Allow this ancient text to engage your thoughts, questions, conversation. •

Sources: *Etz Hayim* (New York: JPS, 2001); Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York, 1995); Freedman & Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Exodus* (New York, 1983). Scripture: JPS.

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