

The Bible as an Instrument of Reconciliation

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The biblical story commences in an idyllic garden setting in Genesis, with God creating the world and breathing life into the first human couple. The Bible concludes in Revelation in an envisioned future utopian paradise where all of humanity is gathered around the throne of God in perfect unity. Between creation and eternity the biblical story juxtaposes human alienation and God's desire for reconciliation. For us who live in a post-biblical, pre-paradise world, the Bible still remains a powerful source for understanding separation and God's hope for reconciliation.

The Hebrew Scriptures illustrate the story of God's relationship with the entire human family by highlighting a particular relationship between God and the Hebrew people. The narrative emerging from the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures describes the cycle of separation and reunion in the Hebrew peoples' relationship with God. Yet God never gives up on humanity and constantly pursues a relationship with the peoples of the earth.

One of the most powerful stories illustrating God's love for the Hebrew people is found in the writings of the prophet Hosea. Hosea's relentless pursuit of his unfaithful



wife serves as a prophetic parable of God's constant pursuit of a relationship with humanity. This theme of relational reconciliation with God, or atonement (at-one-ment), is found throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. There are also many examples of alienation and reconciliation within the human family itself, including Adam and Eve, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, Queen Esther (representing the Jews) and King Ahasuerus (the Persians). The Hebrew Scriptures offer insights into the dynamics that produce just relationships among people.

In the New Testament Gospels, Jesus of Nazareth is the model of reconciliation with God and others. The Gospel writers went to great lengths to present Jesus as a radically inclusive person and an exemplar of reconciliation. Their accounts of his birth and upbringing describe a relevant preparation for his reconciling task. Mary gave birth to Jesus in a livestock barn (Luke 2:7). Poor and despised shepherds in Palestine witnessed the event (2:8-20). Rich magi from Asia went to Bethlehem to see the infant Jesus, and the family escaped to the continent of Africa as refugees (Matt 2:1-15). Jesus the Jew was raised in Galilee of the nations (NRSV: "Gentiles," Matt 4:15). While Jesus maintained his own Jewish cultural and religious identity, he was enriched by various cultural elements from many nations.

The ministry of Jesus was also radically inclusive, beginning with his choice of disciples. He selected both a tax collector who collaborated with the Roman Empire and a zealot who called for the violent revolutionary overthrow of Rome (Matt 10:2-4; Luke 6:14-16). Jesus took the unheard of step of including a number of women in the circle of his followers (Matt 27: 55-56; Mark 15:40-41; Luke 8:2-3). His broad table fellowship reached to individuals outside of his socioeconomic class and ethnic/cultural world. Even at the death of Jesus, an African named Simon of Cyrene carried his cross (Matt 27:32; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26) and a Roman centurion uttered words of faith (Matt 27:54; Mark 15:39).

In Acts and the apostolic writings Jesus the Christ, by virtue of his death and resurrection, is presented as the mediator between God and humanity, person and person, group and group. The apostle Paul and his circle of disciples were the theologians of reconciliation for the first-century church. The Greek words for "reconciliation" or "reconcile," *katallassō*, *katallagē*, *apokatallassō*, are used only a few times (Rom 5:10, 11; 11:15; 2 Cor 5:18, 19; Eph 2:16; and Col 1:20, 22), but are a powerful way of



expressing the meaning of the life, death, resurrection, and abiding presence of Jesus Christ. Biblical reconciliation implies friendship with God and each other, radical change and the transformation of a relationship or of a society, and the restoration of harmony.

The biblical discussions are not limited to embracing a loving God in relationship or affirming a good theology of reconciliation. Those of us who read the Bible as Scripture understand biblical reconciliation as a message we must announce and a ministry we must pursue. We are called to become God's "ambassadors" of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5), working as catalysts for inclusive community, peace among nations, social transformation in society, and unity amidst religious diversity. The following biblical resources can empower us in that ambassadorial work.

Reconciliation and Inclusive Community

Congregations in the first century, as described in the Acts of the Apostles and in the Pauline letters, present an inviting possibility for developing a community that is inclusive. The mother church in Jerusalem (Acts 2–6) was a multilingual congregation of Jews from Jerusalem, Galilee, and the broader Roman Empire. The community was also diverse socioeconomically. The faith community in Antioch of Syria (Acts 11, 13; Galatians 2) was founded by Greek-speaking Jewish leaders originating from North Africa and Cyprus. From its beginning the Antioch congregation was multiethnic, including not only Jews raised in different cultural settings but Greeks and others. They had a multicultural and multiracial leadership team and survived a possible schism along ethnic lines through a courageous confrontation by the apostle Paul (Galatians 2). In Acts 13 and subsequent chapters, the author narrates the founding of many other congregations launched on the model of multiethnic inclusiveness found in Antioch. In many first-century congregations, women also emerged as leaders. (See Rom 16:1-15, where Paul mentions thirty-four church leaders, sixteen of whom are women.)

The congregations in the first-century church offer insights for reconciliation and creating inclusive communities through their empowering ministry with the poor, spiritual disciplines, courageous social action, and bilingual, multicultural, and gender-inclusive leadership teams. The New Testament details both the successes and failures of these faith communities in their efforts to be ministers of reconciliation.



Reconciliation and Peace among Nations

The Bible not only portrays the possibility of unity in faith communities; it also offers a vision for peace among nations. The prophet Isaiah proclaimed, “They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up a sword against a nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Isa 2:4). The author of Revelation saw a time when “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” would be gathered together (Rev 7:9).

One of the most dramatic biblical episodes of two nations reconciling is the reunion of Jacob and Esau (Genesis 32–33). At the surface this seems to be only the reconciliation of two estranged brothers. And it is that. But by the time they met, after years of separation, they were no longer just individuals but growing communities—soon to be nations. The meeting of these leaders of two large tribal groups provides clues to the possibilities of peacemaking among nations in our own day.

Before the meeting, Jacob, the offender, sent gifts ahead to symbolically replace what he had taken from his brother Esau. He surmised, “I may appease him with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterwards I shall see his face; perhaps he will accept me” (Gen 32:20). Then Jacob spent the night prior to the meeting wrestling with God, purifying his motives, and preparing for the worst. The encounter with God left him wounded and ready to meet his brother with humility and repentance—“I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved” (32:30). On the appointed day Jacob went ahead of the others and led his nation to meet Esau “bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother” (33:3).

It seems that Esau, the offended, had also met with God. When he saw his brother Jacob he “ran to meet him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept” (33:4). Jacob came to the meeting with humility and a demonstrated willingness to make reparation. Esau came to the meeting ready to forgive and seek a new future for the relationship. Esau at first refused Jacob’s gifts, saying he already had enough. But Jacob insisted, “If I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God (for) God has dealt graciously with me” (33:10–11).



Peace in the world becomes a greater possibility when the leaders of nations embrace the spirit of Jacob and Esau. Too often kings, queens, prime ministers, presidents, and other leaders approach the table of international dialogue with an agenda that is informed by a sense of ethnic or racial superiority, a punitive desire for revenge, self-centered arrogance, and an apparent lack of interest in an inclusive view of humanity or of social justice. These two biblical leaders of emerging nations had such a strong desire for reconciliation they set aside real and rightful feelings of hurt, anger, shame, fear, vengeance, and the like. A biblical framework for peace among nations requires leaders and citizens who emulate the attitudes and actions of Esau and Jacob.

Reconciliation and Social Transformation

Another key component of reconciliation is a focus on social transformation for justice. As noted above, 2 Cor 5:1—6:2 calls us to be ambassadors of reconciliation. “As we work together with [God], we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, ‘At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.’ See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!” (6:1-2). Paul’s quote from Isaiah 49 echoes Jesus’ quotation of Isaiah 61 in Luke 4:18-19. The language of the “day of salvation” and “the year of the Lord’s favor” speaks of the year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25)—that great ideal placed in the legal code of the Hebrew people to ensure that social justice defined their community and nationhood. (Unfortunately, there is no record of it ever having been practiced.) In Luke 4, Jesus appeals to this divine intention in his opening sermon. In 2 Corinthians, Paul links the ministry of reconciliation with the prophetic call to social justice. Our reconciliation with God leads to reconciliation with each other. This means on the macro level the creation of a society that practices social justice.

Paul makes the link between social justice and reconciliation even clearer in Galatians 3:28. “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” These words were part of a baptismal formula from the earliest days of the first-century church. This creedal statement was used to initiate new members into a reconciling faith that removed socially constructed boundaries and hierarchies and replaced them with relationships and societal interactions based on social justice.



Too often people of faith choose to focus on reconciliation with God but not with others. Others reconcile relationally across human boundaries but do not address the societal issues that created the boundaries. A biblical perspective calls for an integrated approach to reconciliation that includes our relationship with God, our relationship with other people, the dismantling of oppressive social structures that cause division, and the creation of just societies and nations.

Reconciliation and Religious Diversity

The biblical writers focus primarily on the story of the Hebrew people and then of Jesus and the first-century Christians. Therefore, there is little in the Bible that speaks directly to interfaith reconciliation. Given the extreme conflicts in the twentieth century and beyond that involve the three major Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—there is one biblical story that might symbolize the needed reconciliation. Jews and Christians claim Abraham as their father through Isaac, and Muslims claim Abraham through Ishmael. The story in Genesis 25 of Ishmael and Isaac coming together to bury their father could serve as a catalyst for reconciliation among these monotheistic religions. The story is simple. Upon Abraham's death at 175 years, "His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre, the field that Abraham purchased from the Hittites. There Abraham was buried, with his wife Sarah" (vv. 9-10). Ishmael, the older son and spiritual ancestor of Islam, joined together with his brother, Isaac, spiritual ancestor of Judaism and Christianity, and they buried their father Abraham in Hebron.

The biblical stories of Ishmael and Isaac reveal a history of favoritism, prejudice, manipulation, rejection, victimization, and mixed blessing. Yet the death of Abraham provided a reason for setting aside problematic histories and convoluted relationships to focus on a shared love and responsibility. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam share much in their understanding of faith, the importance of peace and social justice, and God's love for humanity. They also share a problematic history and convoluted relationships. The story of Ishmael and Isaac together burying their father, Abraham, offers a message to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in our day: Set aside histories and present animosities in order to focus on a world that desperately needs the values of compassion, reconciliation, social justice, and peace at the core of your respective faiths.



Reconciliation and Community

Usually the work of reconciliation is complex and multifaceted. Reconciliation issues are often intertwined and not easily separated. The Bible also offers scriptural resources for this reality. Paul's admonition in Gal 3:28 implies that race, gender, and socioeconomic class are all intertwined justice issues and that reconciliation cannot succeed without a strategy to address each that is simultaneous and interlinked.

A good biblical example of the complicated and multifaceted nature of reconciliation is the story of Jesus in conversation with a woman from Samaria by Jacob's well (John 4:4-42). This interchange represented differences in culture, gender, socioeconomic class, status, religion, and more. As the story is read, it becomes evident that Jesus arrived at the encounter unashamed of the differences and well prepared for the nuances of such a conversation. This allowed reconciliation to occur rather than for alienation to fester further. Jesus engages with this Samaritan woman in public. As a Jewish male and itinerant rabbi, Jesus rejected social norms when he spoke publicly to a woman, requested a drink from a Samaritan, and was seen with a person of questionable moral standards. This single act of welcoming the woman from Samaria to a relational encounter meant Jesus had to cross at least three social boundaries. He could not decide to focus only on ethnic reconciliation, or gender inclusion, or moral questions. Jesus had to embrace all of who this woman was and he did it publicly, without any embarrassment or hesitation.

Not only was Jesus bold in a public display of his reconciliation intentions, he was also well prepared for the encounter. Most likely Jesus did not know that he was going to meet a Samaritan woman on this day. What Jesus did know was that his call to be a reconciler would lead him to all kinds of encounters, so he had to prepare himself even before the event. Given the proximity of Samaria, it seems that Jesus was likely familiar with their culture and religion. This is apparent in how he presents himself and his messianic mission to the woman. The Samaritans were seeking a messiah who would reveal truth and restore belief. When Jesus told the woman things about her life that he would have no way of knowing, he was not saying something about her. Rather, Jesus was revealing something about himself. He was informing her that he was the Revealer (*Taheb*), the Messiah. The woman told her neighbors, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can



he?” (John 4:29). Jesus’ knowledge of Samaritan culture and religious beliefs hurried the process of reconciliation at Jacob’s well that day.

The theme of reconciliation runs throughout the Bible. Reconciliation calls us to inclusive communities, peace among nations, social transformation, and relationships across religions. Jesus said to the woman in Samaria, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem” (John 4:21). Reconciliation calls us to such a time: a future era when neither race, culture, gender, socioeconomic class, religion, nor any other designator will serve as our primary identity or the identity we ascribe to others. Biblical reconciliation propels us to embrace our ultimate identity as humans created in the image of God, that is, as children of God.