

**People of the Word**  
2 Chronicles 34:15  
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A few years ago a Bible was rediscovered here in America. As the collection of the National Museum of African-American History and Culture was being formed, the curators were contacted by a white family in Virginia who said they had the Bible of Nat Turner and would the museum like it.

Nat Turner was the rare enslaved person who could read, and he read the Bible, which turned him into a prophetic preacher. Fired by his dreams of freedom, he led a revolt of enslaved persons in 1831 that was violently suppressed but deeply rattled the slaveholding states of the nation.

Turner had been carrying the Bible when captured. It then was on display in the Southampton county courthouse until 1912 when it was given to the Person family, descendants of some of the slave holders killed in Turner's rebellion. A century later the family realized the Bible belonged to the nation and in the new museum of African-American history.

It is now a centerpiece of the exhibit.

Last year when I was in Washington, I was unable to get into the new museum—it is that popular—but during a winter snow storm Fred Nielsen and Sue Epperson were able to. I asked Fred this week for his thoughts on seeing Nat Turner's Bible.

The museum is filled with exhibits that conjure deep feeling -- of thoughtfulness, sorrow, anger. Nat Turner's Bible stands out because of its particularity, its influence, and its size.

Fred points out that it is quite small. Roughly 5 inches by 3 and half by 1 and a half.

Fred came upon the Bible shortly after the exhibit on Thomas Jefferson and the tension between his owning slaves and his views on human freedom. Fred wrote of the experience:

Turner's Bible is close by, a rebuke to anyone who thinks the Founders bequeathed full freedom to their descendants. When I came upon it, though, it was almost disappointing at first. Everything about the Jefferson exhibit was big and shiny and new. Now, here was an old book, badly worn, a Bible smaller than expected, smaller certainly than its place in American history would seem to warrant. And yet. There's a power in it, a surprising power given how small it is. Or maybe its smallness is part of its power. Mangers aren't big, either. I stood there a while, walked on, and then walked back, drawn by this small battered volume. This wasn't a safe Bible, one that had been stored in a hotel room drawer, or placed on a lectern in a church sanctuary or on a bedside

table. This book of the ages, containing old words of freedom, had been a direct inspiration to the man who owned it. It's all of him that remains. I was in a museum, but this was a book that radiated life.

And then you remember what happened to the man who owned it, and you cry again.

In today's scripture lesson we have a story of a rediscovered Bible and the transformation it brings about. Let's look at this story in three parts. First a little background, then let's examine some of the details in the story, before we raise some critical questions. After we've examined the story, then we'll think about what we might learn from it.

First, the background.

Last week I preached from the book of the prophet Hosea. Hosea was a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel in the 8<sup>th</sup> century Before the Common Era as the nation was besieged by the empire of Assyria. Not long after Hosea's time, the nation of Israel was defeated.

That left the southern kingdom of Judah. Judah too was attacked by Assyria. According to Bible scholar David Carr, "The Judeans lost approximately 70 percent of their population and 85 percent of their towns and villages." I don't think we can even begin to imagine that kind of loss and destruction.

Yet, the nation of Judah survived. The Assyrians devastated the nation, but did not capture the capital of Jerusalem. The Bible gives us four different accounts of that siege and how it failed. Clearly the people were determined to understand this significant historical event. The Biblical understanding of the episode came to be that God had rescued the people because of their faithfulness to God's covenant and because they were governed by Hezekiah, descendant of David. It was during this time that the nation began to develop an understanding of God's covenant with the house of David and the idea that a descendant of David would forever reign upon the throne.

History is, of course, probably more complicated than this. The Assyrians kept good records and according to their chronicles the siege of Jerusalem ended when King Hezekiah paid a heavy tribute and swore allegiance to them. And every year after the kings of Judah had to reaffirm their loyalty to the invading power and pay the heavy tribute.

In the time between the surprising survival of Jerusalem and Josiah, the nation was under the boot of Assyria. The children of the elite would be taken away from home and educated in Assyrian schools and returned to Judah having lost their native culture, all in an attempt to assimilate and destroy the Judean people.

And Judah was governed by kings that the Biblical chroniclers judged as unfaithful to God and God's covenant.

And so we come to the time of Josiah. Suddenly, as he came of age, Josiah benefited from a great change in the world situation—Assyria's power was waning. Egypt had overthrown the Assyrian overlords and was leading a coalition of nations pushing back the Assyrian powers. Also Babylon was on the rise in the east, challenging Assyrian hegemony. So, Josiah benefited from the opportunity to spread his wings, throw off Assyrian domination, and reaffirm the culture of the Judean people.

This story of the discovery of the Book of the Law, presumably Deuteronomy, is a great story. One of those I learned in Sunday school as a child. Josiah has entered into a renovation of the temple. The workers find a book that had been hidden during the years of foreign occupation and wicked kings.

When they need to understand the book, they go ask for a prophet to interpret it for them. Interestingly, this is the first biblical commentator in our tradition, and it is a woman, the prophet Huldah. Of course, as a Southern Baptist kid, we didn't learn that part in Sunday school. I only learned that in college. The very first interpreter of the biblical tradition was a woman, which should have easily settled all those debates about the role of women. Also interesting to note, some of the famous guy prophets, like Isaiah, were alive at this time, but they don't get called upon to interpret the book.

When the book was read, the people were shocked to realize that they had broken the covenant and therefore would be judged by God. They were frightened that what had happened to the northern kingdom of Israel would happen to them, so immediately Josiah engaged in nationwide reform of religious practices. The people returned to faithfulness to the law of God.

This is a great story.

Of course, it's probably more complicated than this. Modern scholars wonder how much of the Book of Deuteronomy was discovered at this time and how much of it was simply written at this time, as the book bears the cultural markers of the eighth century.

Scholars wonder how authentic this story is or whether it is mostly royal propaganda to get the people to go along with Josiah's policies.

For Josiah's reforms were not innocuous. The Bible presents them as ending polytheism and reinstating a clear monotheism. But it seems that some of what Josiah was doing was centralizing worship at the royal-controlled temple in Jerusalem, ending ancient practices. The Judeans had long worshipped at local shrines and altars. Some of these were devoted to gods and goddesses other than Yahweh, but some of them were shrines to Yahweh.

Imagine if the President suddenly closed down all worship sites except the National Cathedral in Washington and commanded that all of our religious rituals should occur only in that one place, and with a tax of course. This is similar to what Josiah was doing, and this centralization of worship under state control is among the reasons that Jesus spoke out so strongly against the Temple.

The Jewish historian Simon Schama writes, "The Josiah story is a fable of recovered innocence." In his two volume *The Story of the Jews*, he gives this story a prominent place for it did succeed in shaping the identity of the Jewish people, who became a people of words, a people of the book. And this identity shaped around words and stories is one reason that Jews have survived through human history. So, over the very long term, Josiah's reform and storytelling worked to give shape to the identity of the people and give them resilience through trauma.

Theologian Shelly Rambo writes,

Modern studies of trauma speak to the impact of violence on each of us—interpersonally and collectively—and challenge assumptions of linear time, progress, and interpreting events in isolation. Trauma teaches us that we live precariously in the world. It tells us that the effects of violence and violent histories live on in ways that deeply inform the present and blur the lines we have neatly delineated as past, present, and future. Trauma tells us that our bodies hold pain and that it will take a multisensory intervention to release these body memories. Events that we thought were “over-and-done” live on within us, long after a traumatic event.

One of the tools that helps build resilience is storytelling. The imagination of a traumatized person often gets trapped in a playback loop, reliving the moment of violence and trouble. Serene Jones, in her book *Trauma and Grace*, writes that recovery and healing can occur through storytelling and witness. There are three basic steps.

First, the person or persons who have experienced trauma need to be able to tell their story. . . . Second, there needs to be someone to witness this testimony, a third-party presence that not only creates the safe space for speaking but also receives the words when they finally are spoken. . . . Third, the testifier and the witness must begin the process of telling a new, different story together: we must begin to pave a new road through the brain.

Jones believes that church people are particularly skilled at this, as we have already been trained to be those who testify, those who witness, and those who “reimage the future by telling yet again the story of our faith.”

We are, of course, a people of the book. A people shaped by words and stories.

In a Smithsonian magazine article by Victoria Dawson about Nat Turner’s Bible, I read the reflections of museum curator Rex Ellis.

How . . . did [Nat] Turner come to imagine—to believe in—something more than the confines of his particular time, place and lot in life? “When you are taught every day of your life, every hour of work that you produce, that you are there to service someone else, when every day you are controlled by the whims of someone else, and you are instructed to do exactly what you are told to do, and you do not have a great deal of individual expression—how do you break out of that?” Ellis asks.

But, atypically for an enslaved person, Turner knew how to read and write, and in the Bible he found an alternative: a suggestion that where he had begun was not where he needed to end. “That Bible didn’t represent normality; it represented possibility,” Ellis says. “I think the reason Turner carried it around with him, the reason it was dog-eared and careworn, is that it provided him with inspiration, with the possibility of something else for himself and for those around him.”

Fred Nielsen had a similar reaction seeing the Bible in the museum. Fred wrote, "Turner's Bible shook the nation. Words matter. Those words mattered. They meant freedom to Turner, and for them he was willing to risk all."